

Challenges Await Oman's New Sultan as Mourning Period Ends

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Brief Analysis

Sultan Haitham will now be free to put his own stamp on the country's government and foreign policy, and a recent dust-up on the Yemeni border could provide the first indicator of his approach.

On February 20, Oman will begin its next era in earnest. The new sultan, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, was officially sworn in on January 11, but he has remained quiet and mostly out of sight during the forty-day mourning period that followed the death of his cousin, Sultan Qaboos. Now that this period is drawing to a close, he is free to put his stamp on Omani policy.

Notably, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will lead the first international delegation to see Sultan Haitham in the post-mourning period. When the meeting was first scheduled, the secretary likely saw it as a chance to get to know the new leader, and also as a symbolic visit to make up for sending [such a low-level delegation](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/death-of-a-sultan-oman-matters-so-why-such-a-slow-u.s.-response>) to offer condolences. Yet the two may have more to talk about now. Earlier this week, a flare-up occurred between Saudi forces and Omani-backed locals in the Yemeni border province of al-Mahra. The confrontation may be Sultan Haitham's first regional test, and identifying the actors who help him get through it could help Washington discern future power centers within Oman's often opaque government.

THE MAHRA DISPUTE

On February 17, [a group of local protestors claimed](#) (<https://www.facebook.com/almahrahYouth/photos/a.190833314962683/497572840955394/?type=3&theater>) that new Saudi-backed security forces had arrived at the Shahn border crossing between Oman

and Yemen, sparking renewed conflict with those who oppose a Saudi presence in al-Mahra province. This viewpoint was traded widely on WhatsApp and reported by Al Jazeera. Other locals suggested the protestors themselves had sparked the confrontation.

The context for the incident dates back to late 2017, when Saudi Arabia deployed forces to al-Mahra for anti-smuggling operations, citing concerns that the Houthis were obtaining advanced Iranian missile parts and other weaponry from over the border. Omani officials have denied that such smuggling occurs.

Led by Gen. Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, the Yemeni commander formerly in charge of local border operations, the Mahri protest group argues that Saudi force levels are well beyond what is necessary for anti-smuggling operations. In their view, the dominant Saudi presence encroaches on their way of life and may be a prelude to Riyadh building an oil pipeline through the province. Indeed, the kingdom has asked Yemen and Oman for access to the open seas in past decades, and Mahri protestors believe that this remains the Saudi goal, pointing to leaked documents and reports of engineering activity in 2018 as indications.

In its official statement on the current confrontation, Riyadh said the following: “Some well-known personalities that head organized crime and trafficking groups attempted...to obstruct the efforts...to put a stop to smuggling operations” in al-Mahra. Yet Oman would contest the description of these “personalities”—a clear reference to Hurayzi and his camp—as criminals. Muscat has traditionally viewed the Shahn area as part of its sphere of influence; just as the Saudis have granted passports and freedom of travel to Mahris near their border at the province’s northern tip, the Omanis have long granted Mahris the same privileges along the province’s eastern frontier, along with significant economic and humanitarian support.

The last major flare-up between Saudi forces and Mahri protestors occurred in May 2019. That flame went out in a few days, and the same may happen this time—indeed, some Mahris are not aligned with Hurayzi despite their frustration with the Saudi presence. Yet rumors that the Saudis are bringing in Yemeni forces from other provinces to aid them, if true, could exacerbate anti-Saudi sentiment and bolster Hurayzi’s position.

As such, the situation has the potential to create a conflict between American partners in the region, whether now or down the road. Both Saudi Arabia and Oman may see such a conflict in existential terms: for Riyadh, alleged smuggling over the Omani border equips the Houthis with missiles that they have repeatedly fired into Saudi territory; for Muscat, having a Saudi military force sitting on its border during a fragile leadership transition is disquieting. Neither government wants a conflict, but neither is likely to back down from protecting its interests.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE UNITED STATES

To the chagrin of Gulf watchers, the delegation that the Trump administration sent to deliver condolences last month not only missed the three-day window set for such visits, but was led by the secretary of energy rather than a more senior, well-known official. In contrast, Britain and other countries sent top-level delegations. The Omanis no doubt noted the slight, though the timing and substance of Pompeo’s latest visit could go a long way toward mending it.

When the secretary arrives this weekend after his trip to Saudi Arabia, one issue that may come up is the recently released Trump plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Omani ambassador in Washington attended the January 28 unveiling ceremony [along with her Emirati and Bahraini counterparts](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-peace-plan-attracts-some-gulf-states-but-not-consensus-backing>, but her attendance was more likely due to Gulf custom than support for the plan. Thus, Pompeo will likely try to suss out the new sultan’s view on the issue.

The situation in Yemen is sure to be on the agenda as well, including the tensions in al-Mahra. If the Saudis and Omanis do not raise the latter issue directly with Washington, then U.S. officials should bring it up themselves. Gulf

ties are already dangerously frayed due to the ongoing Qatar rift, so allowing Omani-Saudi tensions to fester could erode regional security and impede efforts to resolve the Yemen crisis. Riyadh is currently well-positioned to steer Yemen's Hadi government and southern factions toward talks, while Muscat may be able to influence the Houthis in positive ways. U.S. officials should therefore make every effort to ease tensions.

FAMILY MATTERS

The Pompeo visit may also provide insight into the new sultan's foreign policy and the machinery behind his decisionmaking. With the mourning period over, he may soon begin making structural or personnel changes along those lines. Accordingly, Washington should keep an eye on top brass such as Munthir al-Said, head of liaison and coordination at the Royal Office; Sultan al-Numani, head of the Royal Office; Yusuf bin Alawi, the minister of state for foreign affairs; and Badr al-Busaidi, the minister responsible for defense affairs. These officials were key to carrying out Sultan Qaboos's regional agenda and would likely be among the first consulted on matters like al-Mahra and the Trump peace plan—assuming they retain their positions under the new sultan.

Another pressing question is what role Haitham might carve out for his family. Sultan Qaboos famously sidelined the family with one exception: he appointed Tariq bin Taimur—Haitham's father—as prime minister early in his tenure. Tariq was **rumored (<https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/Gulf+State+News+Issue+710+-+16%2fMay%2f2003.aspx?date=20030516&docNo=20&qid=4&page=2>)** to have contemplated a coup before Qaboos beat him to it in 1970. After the prime minister died in 1980, Qaboos took over that post himself and ruled in a hands-on manner that involved few family members. Upon his own death last month, he had no wife, brothers, or children.

By contrast, the new sultan is more likely to empower rather than sideline family members, including his two brothers: Assad bin Tariq, who is reportedly close to Haitham and was also in the running to be named sultan; and Shihab, his younger sibling. His wife, Sayyeda Ahad, received condolences from the prominent spouses of several Gulf rulers on behalf of her husband. Will she remain behind the scenes or take a more visible role similar to that of Qatar's Sheikha Moza? As for their four children, the two sons are likely to become more prominent: Gulf expert Kristin Diwan **reports that (<https://agsiw.org/omans-new-sultan-unlikely-to-pursue-qaboos-monopoly-of-power/>)** Theyazin (born 1990) has returned home from London to aid his father since the succession; it is unclear if Bilarab (born 1995) will return as well.

Who the sultan brings to the meeting with Pompeo's delegation may help Washington identify some of the key actors in Oman's future decisionmaking. Ultimately, however, many of the roles that the old guard and Haitham's immediate family play could take longer to ascertain, since the sultan may roll them out carefully as he gets his footing over time. How he handles the increasingly tense al-Mahra situation with Saudi Arabia could be a faster indicator of what his rule will look like, and whether he will rely on the United States.

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