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PolicyWatch 3426

# Oman's Sultan Caps First Year by Appointing Heir and New Military Leadership

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Jan 28, 2021

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Brief Analysis

**Sultan Haitham's latest decrees elevated his son to heir, sacked commanders, and spotlighted his brother's influence, but the government's main focus is still squarely on economic reform.**

One year into his rule, Sultan Haitham seems to be putting the final touches on reshaping Oman's government and royal family hierarchy to meet his view of the challenges ahead. These changes are monumental for the country, even if they have received little outside attention.

[Last August](#), he apportioned the sultan's traditional titles of defense minister, foreign minister, finance minister, and chairman of the Central Bank to other people, including non-royals. He also formed a new cabinet, with most of the changes focused on the economic and finance portfolios.

Five months later, he has rewritten swaths of the constitution (including new language that creates a formal heir for the first time), clarified the law governing the legislature, replaced most military leaders, and issued a budget in line with the economic goals of Oman's "Vision 2040" plan. More decrees are expected in the coming weeks to cap off this overhaul. So far, the sultan's reforms suggest a preference for professionalizing the government, clarifying responsibilities, and delegating duties more broadly.

## Burn the Envelope?

**T**he most eye-catching change is the fundamental restructuring of the succession system to one based on primogeniture. Under the late Sultan Qaboos, succession was based on royal family consensus or, failing that, the opening of an envelope wherein the sultan had written his choice for successor. When Qaboos died on January 10, the family opted to have the Defense Council open the envelope, and Haitham's name emerged. Omanis and regional players alike have long been anxious about this envelope system—which was only created after Sultan Qaboos narrowly avoided death in a 1995 car accident, sparking fears of a leadership vacuum. Citizens and foreign diplomats no doubt welcomed Haitham's move to a more transparent system.

According to the new constitution, the sultan's eldest son is to be the designated heir. If the heir is under twenty-one years old, an advisory council is to be established within the royal family. In the absence of a son, the heir is to be the sultan's eldest brother.

The constitution is clear that the title of heir does not come with specific duties; instead, "the sultan shall choose his heir's duties and position." This language suggests some similarities with the British system, wherein the title does not carry formal power until the holder of the crown passes away or abdicates, but the ruler may grant that person certain responsibilities in the meantime.

Under these rules, Haitham's eldest son Theyazin is now heir to the throne. The question is whether he will be given a new position/title in addition to being named heir, similar to crown princes in other Gulf countries. More likely, he will maintain his current minor government portfolio for now (minister of culture, sports, and youth) and move up the ranks over time. He just received that portfolio a few months ago; future royal decrees will likely add responsibilities.

Even before Theyazin's designation as heir, Omanis often cited him as the most likely successor, and his ministerial appointment in August was seen as the first step to burnishing his credentials. A thirty-year-old Oxford graduate with a political science degree, he joined the Foreign Ministry in 2013 and was posted to the London embassy as second secretary in 2018. Following his father's ascension, Theyazin returned to Muscat and joined Haitham in several symbolically important meetings, including meet-and-greets with tribes and important Omani constituencies last fall.

Many Omanis will likely welcome a move toward younger leadership. Moreover, primogeniture is neither alien nor radical to them, as sons often followed fathers into leadership in the past even if that practice was never codified into law. The decision to officially appoint an heir suggests that Sultan Haitham does not share his predecessor's concerns about creating alternate sources of power or popularity in Oman.

## **A Brother's Rise**

**T**he fingerprints of Haitham's full brother Shihab bin Tariq also appear on some of the latest decrees. Shihab was appointed deputy prime minister for defense last year, taking over the duties of defense minister from the sultan. In the rewritten constitution, Haitham clarified that it remains his duty to appoint and remove military commanders. He put that power to far-reaching use on January 18, decreeing that the heads of all military branches except the army would be replaced. The former navy commander was promoted to chief of staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces—a decision that Shihab surely had a say in given that he once headed the navy himself. Over the course of the week, Haitham also replaced the secretaries-general of three entities—the Defense Ministry, the Royal Office's national security council, and the Royal Office's military affairs bureau—as well as the commanders of the Royal Guard and the Sultan's Special Forces. In monarchical systems, such full-scale turnover of top brass is typically as much about creating loyalty as putting one's own team in place.

In his role as deputy prime minister for defense, Shihab will also be joining the National Defense Council alongside

the newly minted chief of staff of the Armed Forces, while the commanders of individual armed services were removed from that body. And as is often the case in the Gulf, Shihab's importance has been further solidified through marriage—his daughter is engaged to Theyazin.

Haitham and Shihab's half-brother Assad—who, as the eldest, was a leading contender for the role of sultan—remains deputy prime minister for international relations and cooperation affairs and a personal representative of the sultan. But this role appears nominal at present.

## Professionalization of the State

**A**midst the changes in government, Oman's economic problems remain paramount. The 2021 budget and five-year plan released on January 1 demonstrate a renewed focus on Vision 2040, which Haitham led prior to his ascension. The budget creates caps for government agencies, lowers expenditures, and assumes a lower oil price (\$45 per barrel). The five-year plan similarly emphasizes fiscal sustainability. Combined with the August cabinet shuffle, which focused on creating a solid economic team, this suggests that implementation of Vision 2040 and the economic changes that technocrats have been quietly pushing for years are finally underway.

Moreover, the new law governing the legislature clarifies the council's procedures, delineates its responsibilities for advising and promoting government policy, and codifies a ministerial oversight function with direct reporting to the sultan. Omanis will welcome such accountability, even if the body falls short of Western ideals regarding legislative power.

February 20 will mark the anniversary of the beginning of Haitham's agenda as ruler, and in that time he has put his stamp on the government by devolving power to ministers, reshuffling the cabinet and military, codifying a new succession system, and facilitating desperately needed economic reform. The sultan may be betting that he can accomplish more by delegating. This bet seems worth taking given that the country's major economic problems are unlikely to be resolved by a handful of ministers, but will instead require efficiency throughout the bureaucracy.

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