

# The Omani Succession Envelope, Please

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## Sultan Qaboos is ailing, and no one knows who will take over his role as the last word on all aspects of Oman's regional policy.

**T**he name of the next ruler of Oman is written on a piece of paper in a sealed envelope kept in the royal palace in the capital of Muscat. It sounds like a bizarre Arab variation of an American television game show, but it isn't. There is also a second envelope, held in a different royal palace in the southern city of Salalah. Apparently, it contains the same name, in case the first envelope cannot be found when the ruling incumbent, the ailing 76-year-old Sultan Qaboos bin Said, dies.

At this point, the question of how succession in this Arab Gulf sultanate will unfold becomes more than a little uncertain. The most common version is that each envelope contains two names, the first and second choices of Sultan Qaboos on who should replace him. But another version suggests that the Muscat envelope contains one name and the Salalah envelope contains another. According to the generally accepted wisdom, when Qaboos dies -- and he has been suffering from colon cancer since at least 2014 -- a council made up of his relatives will meet to choose his successor. Only if they can't agree on a choice after three days do the envelopes come into play. Wags suggest that members of the ruling family will be so concerned about the post-mortem legitimacy bestowed by the late sultan that they will ask to see the envelopes before making their selection.

The Al Bu Saidi dynasty in Oman has ruled for 14 generations. Surprisingly for such a long-lived dynasty, the succession mechanism is not well-established. Qaboos himself came to power in 1970 when the British backed a coup against his clinically paranoid father, Sultan Said bin Taimur. According to the [obituary \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1557161/Brigadier-Tim-Landon.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1557161/Brigadier-Tim-Landon.html) of one of the plotters, when told he had to go, the sultan angrily tried to pull a gun from under his robes, accidentally shooting himself in the leg. He was flown to London to live in luxury at the Dorchester hotel, where he died two years later. Sultan

Qaboos, briefly married to a cousin in the 1970s, has no heirs. Hence the envelopes.

Oman has relished a quirky policy independence under Qaboos. The sultanate is clearly not a major player by virtue of size or wealth, but its ruler has endeavored to make Oman relevant. Although a member of both the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, Oman positioned itself as a mediator between Iran and the United States, first brokering hostage releases and then becoming the venue for the initial talks that led to the 2015 nuclear deal. According to some accounts, it was the peripatetic Omani minister in charge of foreign affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi, who unintentionally tipped off the Israelis that the contacts were occurring, not realizing that Israel wasn't at that time in the loop.

How much of Oman's diplomatic straddling is attributable to the character of Qaboos rather than his country's broader national interests is debatable. Qaboos and many Omanis are Ibadi Muslims, which puts distance into the relationships with Sunni Arab Gulf states. However, especially if expatriates are included, the majority of Oman's population is Sunni. Shiites are a small but commercially successful minority.

This month may have seen the emergence of a front-runner in the race to succeed Qaboos. On March 2, it was announced that the sultan's cousin Asad bin Tariq, whose name is widely assumed to appear in the envelopes, had been appointed deputy prime minister for international relations and cooperation affairs. Further indication of Asad's rising stature came this week, when Qaboos sent him as the Omani representative to the Arab League summit in Jordan. Once commander of the Omani army's tanks and already the sultan's "special representative," Asad's new position as deputy prime minister has no obvious responsibilities -- but it may put him ahead in the succession stakes.

Asad's rivals are judged to be his half-brothers, Haitham bin Tariq, the heritage and culture minister, and Shihab bin Tariq, a former commander of the Omani navy. All three men are in their 60s, and it was their sister who was once married to Qaboos.

Reading the mind of Sultan Qaboos is complicated. When he came to power, there were just three schools and a few miles of paved road in the country. Now his nation of around 3.3 million people, with modest oil and gas reserves, is widely judged one of the better places to live in the Persian Gulf region. Provided you don't want political power, it is good to be an Omani: The country provides strong education and social services, and some favored Omanis have become fabulously rich while developing the economy.

Qaboos is no democrat. Even within the cabinet, he concentrates power in his hands, serving as prime minister, defense minister, foreign minister, finance minister, and governor of the central bank. He decides on every shift in policy. In his absence -- last year he went to Germany for two months of medical treatment and then became a recluse in one of his palaces in Oman for another three months -- no decisions of significance are made.

His closest advisors are security and intelligence professionals in the so-called Royal Office, headed by Gen. Sultan bin Mohammed al-Numani. According to the envelope theory, the general will lead the army council that will rule for three days while the family council works out who is going to be the next leader.

Sultan Qaboos has taken a strategic view of the region and Oman's role in it and hasn't neglected his ties with foreign intelligence officials, either. At one point, he used to send his personal jet to London to collect a retired Middle East director of the British foreign intelligence service, MI6, whose analysis he particularly valued. When Prince Charles, the British heir apparent, visited Muscat last November, he brought the current head of MI6 to his four-hour meeting with Qaboos. Washington's contacts are also good but lack that sort of intimacy.

Yet the sultan's worldview can appear eccentric and often infuriates Oman's notional allies in the Gulf and the West. When suicide bombers attacked the law courts in the Syrian capital of Damascus two weeks ago, leaving scores of dead and injured, Muscat sent a message of condolence to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad -- a step that

many in Washington and other capitals saw as an unnecessary normalization of relations with a despot they would like to see overthrown. Muscat has also been irritated by the Saudi and Emirati war in Yemen and has provided (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/oman-neutral-saudi-war-iran-houthis.html>) some diplomatic, and perhaps material, support to Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. A late arriving member of the anti-Islamic State coalition, Oman is actually much more concerned about the safe havens for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in parts of southern Yemen.

The sultan was probably hoping for a payoff for enabling the Barack Obama-era U.S. diplomacy with Iran to secure a nuclear deal. But nothing significant has come from Tehran other than a visit in February from President Hassan Rouhani. And not even a telephone conversation between President Donald Trump and the sultan has yet to be reported. (Memo to the White House: Oman is on the southern side of the strategic Strait of Hormuz and provides air bases and logistical hubs to the U.S. and British militaries, and the new port at Duqm is capable of handling U.S. aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.)

There is a sense that Sultan Qaboos judges all his potential successors as much lesser men and is said to fear meddling in the process by outsiders. He is particularly suspicious of the United Arab Emirates, which, despite its reputation in Washington as being the regional adult, has been accused by Muscat of running spy networks (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12320859>) in the Omani military.

If Sultan Qaboos is not impressed by the possible successors within his family, could he perhaps cast a wider net? He could potentially look to one of the three pillars of Oman's political infrastructure -- the tribal sheikhs, the security establishment, or the business community -- for a candidate. Even if he doesn't, these groups will seek to exert influence on the family council by backing one of the current contenders or suggesting another person entirely, possibly a next-generation member of the Al Bu Saidi family. A 2007 U.S. diplomatic cable ([https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MUSCAT1126\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MUSCAT1126_a.html)), released by WikiLeaks, pondered the strengths of Asad's 37-year-old son, Taimur, describing him as "personable, affable...[and] markedly overweight but apparently vigorous."

Such a choice would imitate events in Qatar, where the 36-year-old Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad is emir, and Saudi Arabia, where Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, 31, seems likely to be the next king. Having often regarded his neighboring Arab states with near disdain, it would be suitably ironic if Sultan Qaboos judged their systems worthy of trying at home.

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