



# Oman Succession Crisis 2020

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This essay was written before the death  
of Sultan Qaboos on 20 January 2020.

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**STRATEGIC MULTILAYER ASSESSMENT**

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Mr. Liebl has a Bachelor's degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Master's degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Master's degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with "Highest Distinction" and focused on Islamic Economics). He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2. Current projects are chapters for a book on Strategic Culture and a book on Environment and Security, as well as a series of historical articles on conflict between the Ottoman, Mughal, Safavid, and Abdali empires.

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# Succession Crisis in Oman

Vern Liebl, CAOCL, Marine Corps University<sup>1</sup>

*Note: This assessment was written before the death of Sultan Qaboos on 20 January 2020.*

While the death of Sultan Qaboos is inevitable, the succession will likely fall well within the purview of the Basic Law and will be done with minimal national or regional disturbance. Who that successor will be and the ability to navigate and lead as Sultan Qaboos has done for 49 years is at this time unclear. It is very likely that the people of Oman will express a desire for greater local and regional self-governance as well as more freedom of expression and the rolling back of restrictions on the cybersphere, but for actual internal violence, there is no way to predict this.

According to the Basic Law of Oman<sup>2</sup>, Article 6<sup>3</sup> states:

The Royal Family Council shall, within three days of the throne falling vacant, determine the successor to the throne. If the Royal Family Council does not agree on a choice of a Sultan for the Country, the Defence Council together with the Chairman of Majlis Al Dawla, the Chairman of Majlis Al Shura, and the Chairman of the Supreme Court along with two of his most senior deputies, shall instate the person designated by His Majesty the Sultan in his letter to the Royal Family Council.

Therefore, post-Sultan Qaboos selection may simply come down to a name written on a piece of paper currently in a sealed envelope kept in the royal palace in the capital of Muscat. However, that is only if a convened meeting of members of the Al Said family (designated as the Ruling Family Council [RFC]—all cousins as Sultan Qaboos was an only child) fail to select the successor within three days of the death. In case the envelope in Muscat cannot be located (lost or deliberately destroyed?), there is a second sealed envelope in another royal place, 650 miles away by car in. Each envelope reputedly

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<sup>2</sup> The Basic Law of the Sultanate of Oman, promulgated as Royal Decree 101 of 1996, holds a unique place in Oman's pantheon of laws. All other royal decrees are statutes that govern a particular area of law, setting out specific rules and providing guidance for governmental authorities to enact further regulations. The Basic Law is different. It forms the bedrock of all Omani law. As its name suggests, the Basic Law is a foundational document that is very broad in scope. Although the Basic Law does contain specific directives, such as on succession procedures for the position of Sultan, it mainly addresses the overall structure of Omani government, including the legislative and judicial framework. The Basic Law enshrines the fundamental rights of the citizens and the guiding principles of the State.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/om/om019en.pdf>

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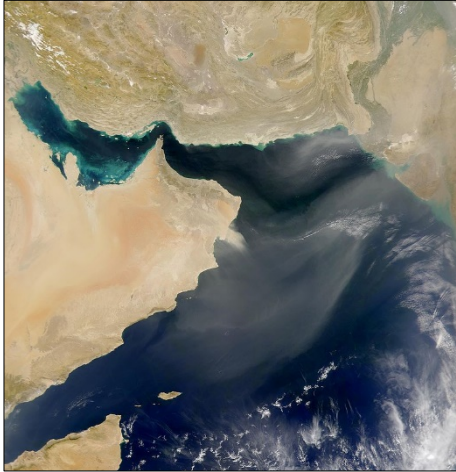
contains two names: Qaboos's first choice as designated successor and then his second choice. The Basic Law further stipulates that three days of mourning must be observed once the Sultan dies. During that time, the National Security Council—presently headed by General Sultan bin Mohammed al-Nuamani of the Royal Office, who is effectively Qaboos' second in command—assumes responsibility to ensure that law and order are upheld.

It is at this point where uncertainty emerges. If the members of the RFC manage to meet within those three days, they might ask (the National Security Council, basically the head of the Palace Office:<sup>4</sup> General al-Nuamani) to see the names in those envelopes before they make any decision, especially if they cannot agree on who the successor should be. If they do manage to make a selection within the allotted time, what if envelopes contain different names? Do they revoke the decision or demand a revote? What about the elected successor, what if he does not want to defer? What would be the role of General al-Nuamani? What if there are competing candidates who are selected, what then? Assuming no outside interference or structural resistance by non-ruling family government officials (first and foremost, General al-Nuamani), would this cast doubt on the legitimacy of the next sultan?

Are there potential destabilizing alternate foci for leadership/governance within Oman, aside from the Defence Council? After all, Sultan Qaboos had to create an effective bureaucracy to run his state, and he has refused to select a Crown Prince or openly name a successor for 49 years. Assuming the RFC selects a new Sultan or by default the envelope(s) are opened, there might be those within Oman who might not want to accept the new Sultan, who might want to devolve power to a bifurcated Sultan/Imam-style government as was traditional for hundreds of years, or even overthrow the Sultanate and establish a civil government, such as a republic or even a religious government (of course this brings a clash between Ibadis and Sunnis, assuming Sunni Muslims would be the major conflicting element).

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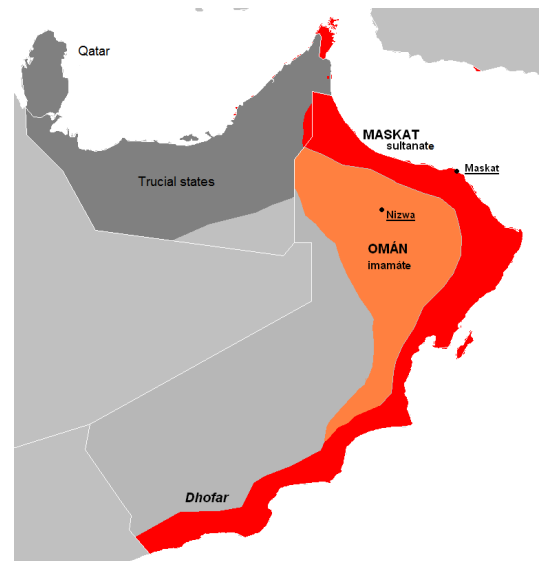
<sup>4</sup> The Palace Office (*maktab al qasr*) is one of the most senior and, therefore, powerful ministries in the Sultanate of Oman. It is a government body that has most influence in national security and intelligence issues and the minister in charge has been the de facto national security advisor to the Sultan. The Palace Office also acts as a foreign liaison focus on all international intelligence and security matters. The minister holding the post has the full title Minister of the Palace Office and Head of the Office of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The Palace Office Minister currently serves as the chair of the Defence Council (on behalf of the Sultan). The Defence Council is an extra-parliamentary body tasked with coordinating the actions of the country's various security and armed forces.



Yet, in examining Oman and any potential post-Sultan Qaboos scenarios, context is very much necessary as Oman is unlike any other state on the Arabian Peninsula. Oman is largely isolated from the rest of the Peninsula by the great erg, the Rub' al Khali (Empty Quarter). There is a northern way around but travel is greatly hindered by the massive and rugged Hajar Mountains. While the southern route out to the west of Salalah—itsself isolated within the semi-circle of the Dhofar Mountains—is a very narrow path between the encroaching erg and the Arabian Sea over extremely rugged mountains climbing in excess of 6,000 feet literally just inshore of any beaches. Today that point is the town

of Dhalkut, roughly 100 miles west of Salalah. The traditional way for Omanis to communicate beyond their land is by sea. In fact, Oman is far more involved in maritime history and trade than almost any other Arab nation.

Yet Oman itself has historically been divided, with a traditional majority of the population found along the coastal regions stretching from the northern Musandam region on the Strait of Hormuz, southeast along the al-Batinah, Muscat-Matrah, and al-Sharqiyah areas, then a long desolate coastal strip with no particular name but dominated off-shore by the island of Masirah, until the Dhofar area and Salalah are reached. These areas have long been knit together by coastal trade and traffic, traditionally ruled/governed from Muscat and therefore called “Muscat.” The less populated interior, often called Central Hajar, is dominated by Jebel Akhdar, Wadi Samail (the main link between the interior and Muscat), and Az-Zahirah. It is at a much higher elevation, largely depends on oases, and is often called “Oman.”



Historically, this geographic dichotomy and the resulting governance differences has led to the interior of Oman being overwhelming devout Ibadi, loosely governed under an elected Imam who diligently navigated his governing authority upon and among a strong tribal society. Along the coastal littoral, external influences, primarily economic but leading to important ethnic, political, and societal factionalization, emphasized leadership by consensus. The interior was long ruled by Imamate

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dynasties,<sup>5</sup> the first being the Nabhani (1406-1624) and then the Yaruba (1624-1749). The Nabhani (Bani Nabhan tribe) fought a long conflict against the Portuguese, who imposed a protectorate upon coastal Oman beginning in 1515. The Yaruba (who as Imams also carried the title of Sultan) in 1624 supplanted the Nabhani and completed the driving out of the Portuguese in 1650, from which Oman's National Day annual celebration is based.<sup>6</sup>

In 1744, Nader Shah's Persian naval and military forces invaded Oman, responding to a request for assistance from one of the rival claimants in the Yaruba (al-Yar'ibi tribe) dynasty to the office of Imam. The city of Sohar, invested by the invading Persians, held out for nine months under the leadership of Ahmad bin Said Al Busaidi, who forced the Persian commander of Nader Shah's army to come to terms and leave the country by 1749. Al Busaidi, taking advantage of the ongoing succession struggle for Imam in the Yaruba dynasty, managed to have himself elected as Imam, defeating all the Yaruba claimants and in 1749 declaring himself the Sultan of Muscat and Imam of Oman (two different titles and offices). He also established the Al Said ruling dynasty, which still rules today in the person of Sultan Qaboos.

Since 1749 there has existed a tension between the interior, called Oman, and the coastal regions, collectively referred to as Muscat. On occasion, open warfare has broken out as the interior tried to resurrect an independent Imamate, the last being the Jabal Akhdar War (1954-1959), although the Sultan of Muscat often had little power in the interior (focused on what was essentially a thalassocracy) and it was at times de facto autonomous. In September 1920 an agreement was reached between then Sultan of Muscat, Taimur bin Feisal, and the Imam of Oman (it had long separated from the Al Said family since the late 1800s and reverted to Ibadi Imamates of the interior tribes), called the Treaty of Seeb (Sib or As Sib, a town located roughly 20 miles west of Muscat).<sup>7</sup> The treaty granted autonomy to

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<sup>5</sup> Prior to the establishment of the Nabhani dynasty of Imams, there were at least 27 Imams (from 741 to 1406) rotating among the various tribes of the interior, normally using as the capital the oasis city of Nizwa (although occasionally it was Bahela/Bahla or Izki).

<sup>6</sup> The al-Yar'ibi tribe, continuing the resistance against the Portuguese, agreed to a treaty with the British East India Company to allow them rights to Omani ports, especially Muscat, the Portuguese stronghold. Thus, garnering British support, the Portuguese were driven out, and on 18 November 1650, Oman was finally both free of the Portuguese and recognized as independent by the British. This made Oman the oldest current independent state in the Arab world, so the holiday currently celebrates Oman's independence from the Kingdom of Portugal. It also celebrates the official birthday of Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who was born 18 November 1940.

<sup>7</sup> Text of the treaty of Seeb: "This is what has been agreed upon in the settlement between the Government of the Sultan Saiyid Taimur bin Faisal and Shaikh Isa bin Salah bin Ali Al-Harhi on behalf of the Omanis who sign their names here through the mediation of Mr. Wingate, I.C.S Political Agent and his Britannic Majesty's Consul, Muscat, who is authorised by his Government in this respect to be a mediator between them. The conditions are stated as follows. Four of them concern the Government of the Sultan and four of them concern the Omanis. What concern the Omanis are these.

Firstly. On all commodities brought from Oman of all kinds to Muscat, Matrah, Sur and all the coast towns nothing more should be taken than 5 percent.

Secondly. For all the Omanis there should be safety and freedom in all the coast towns.

Thirdly. All restrictions on entry to and exit from Muscat, Matrah and all the coast towns should be removed.

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the Imamate in the interior of Oman (with its capital at Nizwa) but recognized the over-all sovereignty of the Sultanate of Muscat. Relations were fairly quiet until 1945 when Sultan Said bin Taimur (ruled 1932-1970, Sultan Qaboos's father) professed a desire to occupy the Imamate during the illness of Imam Al Khalili, but was restrained by the British. In October 1954, after the death of Imam Al Khalili, Sultan Taaimur sent in troops to occupy land around Fahud, where oil had been discovered. The Omanis of the interior believed this breached the Treaty of Seeb and triggered the Jabal Akhdar War. In 1955, Muscati forces occupied the capital, Nizwa. Saudi Arabia (following the Buraimi Dispute of 1952-1955), Egypt, and Iraq supported the Imamate's cause; however, Great Britain provided effective political and military support (direct intervention), which led to the defeat of the Imamate forces. The Imamate rebel leaders fled to Saudi Arabia, the last Imam dying there in 2009.

This conflict fundamentally restructured governmental rule in Oman, rejoining the Sultanate with the Imamate (the Imamate lapsing) and uniting the country politically. Even the Dhofar War in western Oman, initially a tribal mountain (jebelis) revolt over lack of resources and as a means to register that discontent, adopted by Yemen as a distraction to its own problems and then exploited first by the Chinese and then the Soviets as a Cold War superpower contest, did not duly disturb the new equilibrium created by discovery of oil. In 1970 young Qaboos bin Said Al Said, enduring the fourth year of internal isolation by his father, overthrew Sultan Taimur and assumed the throne. Depending on British advice and support, Sultan Qaboos continued the fundamental restructuring of Oman societal and political leadership.

Sultan Qaboos, an only child, had no royal rivals. His father had eclipsed the power of the Imamate and the British (along with the Iranians and Jordanians) supported him in his struggle in the Dhofar. Moving forward, Sultan created something never seen before in Oman, an absolute monarchy. In this way, Sultan Qaboos is ahistorical in Omani history and this emphasizes the issue of what happens after his death. It can be argued as to whether or not a cult of personality has been created in Oman by Sultan Qaboos, but his presence is everywhere. One cannot move in Oman without constant reminders of him; there is Sultan Qaboos University, Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Sultan Qaboos University

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Fourthly. The Sultan's government should not protect criminals who flee from the justice of the Omanis and that they may be returned to them if asked for and that the Sultan's Government should not interfere in their internal affairs.

The four which concern the Government of the Sultan are stated as follows: -

Firstly. All the tribes and Shaikhs should remain in peace and amity with the Government of the Sultan and that they should not attack the coast towns and should not interfere in his Government.

Secondly. All travelers [sic] to Oman on their lawful business should be free and there should be no restrictions on trade and travellers should be safe.

Thirdly. All criminals and evil men who flee to them should be turned out and should not be protected.

Fourthly. The claims of merchants and others against the Omanis should be heard and decided as is just according to the Shariah.

Written at Sib on the eleventh day of Moharram one thousand three hundred and thirty nine Hijrah, corresponding to twenty fifth day of September one thousand nine hundred and twenty."

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Hospital, Port Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Qaboos Road—the list goes on.<sup>8</sup> This is not sheer vanity alone, rather it reflects the very successful modernization program that he embarked on upon assuming the reigns. Sultan Qaboos, who is also the Prime Minister, Defence minister,<sup>9</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, and chairman of the Central Bank, overseeing the transformation of a desert backwater with only a few miles of paved roads into a thriving, stable economy realizing the wealth from its gas and oil reserves.

For a majority of the country's decidedly young population, Sultan Qaboos is the only leader they have ever known. Almost 90% of the people of Oman have known no other leader than Sultan Qaboos.<sup>10</sup> It is easy to ascribe to him the prosperity of the country and call him "the much-loved Sultan." However, despite having smothered most of the potential political and economic disaffection in the country with a program of infrastructure construction, free education, and medical care, basically vastly improving the lives of all the peoples of Oman<sup>11</sup> (a strategy he freely admitted to in ending the Dhofar War), there have been consequences to this prosperity.

Sultan Qaboos has no heirs and as noted earlier, has not designated a Crown Prince nor a successor. He has worked hard to minimize participation of his extended family in responsible positions in the government. He has concentrated significant leadership positions in the military and police with ethnic Baloch and Omanis from the interior, minimizing Muscati presence. Qaboos has also diversified business and economic leadership, focusing on Omani's of South Asian descent (Zadjalis, Khojas [Shia from Hyderabad originally]), those who still profess Hindu faith, and those of Baharinah and Persian descent. He has created a significant reservoir of loyalty among these various Omani groups, who have benefited greatly from Omani economic success and entirely buying into the current political situation.

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<sup>8</sup> This author was present in Oman in November 2019 and witnessed the incredible profusion of pictures of Sultan Qaboos, not only billboards but as sunscreens on vehicle windows, as collar pins on clothing, paintings on vehicle doors, and as dedications on almost every piece of art, building and park.

<sup>9</sup> He is also Field Marshal of the Royal Army of Oman, Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal Navy of Oman, Marshal of the Royal Air Force of Oman, Supreme Commander of the Royal Oman Police and an Honorary General of the British Army (he was trained at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and after graduating in September 1962, he served a year in the British Army of the Rhine, posted to the 1st Battalion The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles).

<sup>10</sup> The population of Oman is just over 5 million people, of whom roughly 4.27 million live in urban areas, primarily in the coastal regions. Of this 5 million, just over 2.74 million are Omani citizens, meaning around 2.26 million are foreign workers or expatriates (of these, nearly 40%, or over 1 million, are specifically from India – Omanis prefer workers from India and generally avoid hiring Pakistanis). Of the native citizens, roughly 515,000 are of Baloch descent and almost 800,000 are of South Asian descent.

<sup>11</sup> Before Qaboos assumed power, Oman was one of the poorest countries in the world. Roughly 66 per cent of the adult population was illiterate, and there were only three schools. Worse still, 20 per cent of children died before the age of five, while everyone else was lucky to live beyond the age of 50. Today, there are 1,230 schools and adult literacy has increased to 94.8 per cent. Most impressive, the average life span is 76 years and the GDP has skyrocketed from \$256 million in 1970 to over \$80 billion. Unlike other countries in the Middle East – where political elites often syphon off the national wealth – the quality of life for all Omanis improved substantially as the country became richer.

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While the conflict with the Imamate has apparently withered away, there remains a difference between the Omanis of the interior and the Omanis of the coastal regions. Sultan Qaboos has told Omanis that the oil will not last forever and that tourism will be focused on as part of the diversification of the economy to sustain them. As part of that is an ongoing and massive rehabilitation of historical structures, which means rebuilding many of the forts and the old governing palaces of the interior, which could awaken local pride in the past. To ensure it does not get out of hand, there are also constructed large and numerous police posts in the interior. It is, however, the uplifting of the population via education which has wrought the greatest changes. Many Omanis are openly wondering what will come after Qaboos and have articulated a desire for something other than a Sultanate, like a republic. In light of the “Arab Spring” of 2011 and some unrest within Oman, the Sultan did make some concessions to popular input into local governance but also increased police and security surveillance and presence throughout the country and most importantly, in the cybersphere.

The secrecy in which Sultan Qaboos covers any issue relating to succession has left many of these educated Omanis very dissatisfied. However, the extreme personalization of power in Oman and its long period of stability has provided many of those same Omanis with an aversion to change and a predilection to accept the imperfections of the current political and economic system. Many Omanis have looked west to their neighbor Yemen and fear that is what Oman would look like without the Sultan, for which they fervently hope Sultan Qaboos lives much longer.

So, back to the potential successors. The Basic Law also stipulates that the next Sultan must be a male descendant of Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan, the Sultan of Muscat and Oman from 1871-88, and be over 40 years of age. Qaboos has no children; there are other male members of the Omani royal family including several paternal uncles and their families. Using same-generation primogeniture, the successor to Qaboos would have to be the children of his late uncle, Sayyid Tariq bin Taimur. Among those who qualify are his three sons:

- Sayyid Haitham bin Tariq al-Said (born in 1954)
- Assad Tariq al-Said (also born in 1954)
- Shihab bin Tariq al-Said (born in 1955)

Complicating the matter of hierarchy within Oman’s royal family is that, up until Assad’s appointment, Haitham (believed to be a month older than his half-brother Assad) had long been considered the frontrunner to succeed Qaboos in view of his long career in government. In fact, in the absence of Deputy Prime Minister Sayyid Fahd, Haitham used to chair meetings of the Cabinet. With Assad’s elevation to deputy prime minister, that presumably is no longer the case, a change closely watched for evidence of whose star is in the ascendance. Prior to Haitham’s current position as minister of heritage and culture, he served as undersecretary of the ministry of foreign affairs for political affairs and the secretary general for the ministry of foreign affairs before that, experience that was considered to have provided him with the necessary political gravitas and foreign policy expertise to help steer Oman into a post-Qaboos era. Assad was born in 1954 and is a graduate of Britain’s Royal Military

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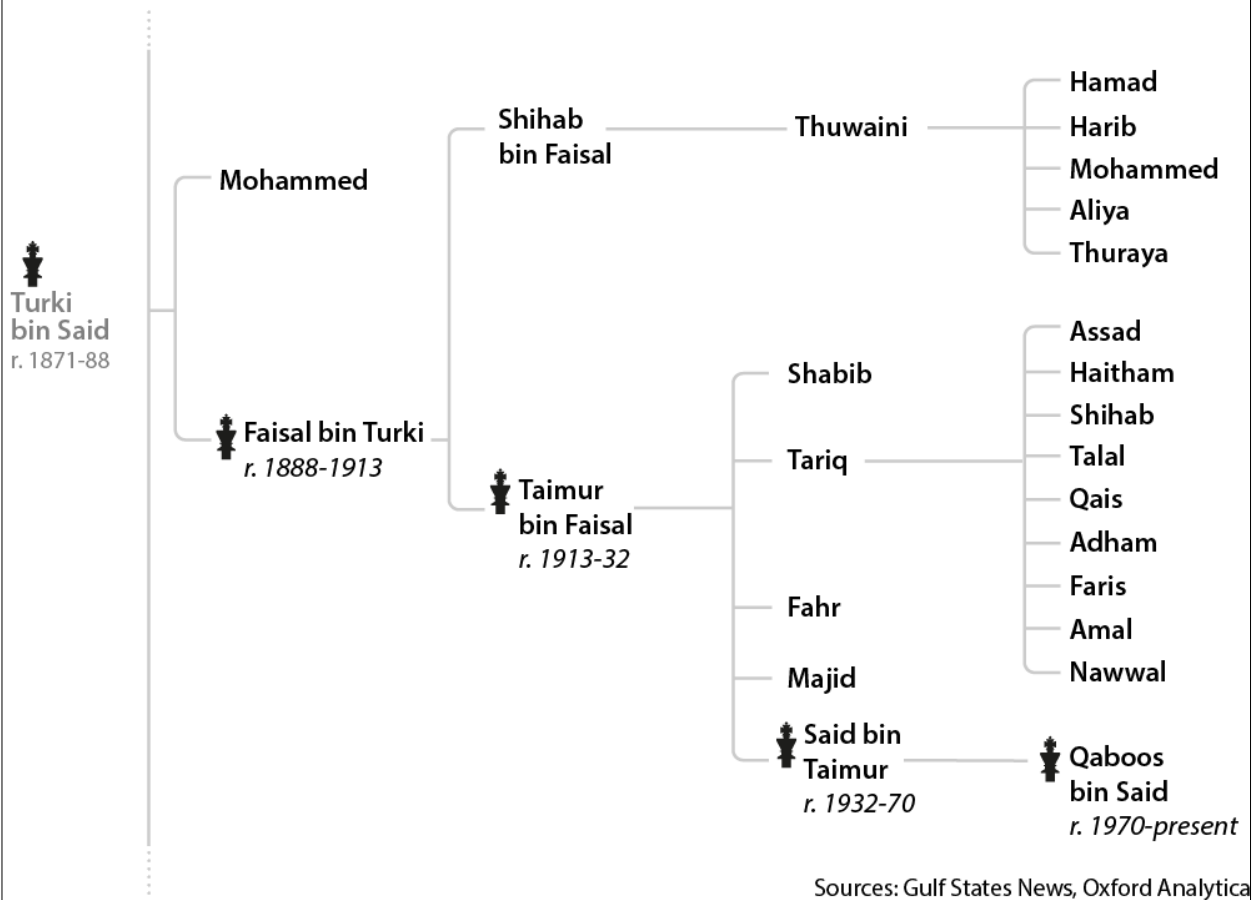
Academy Sandhurst. Following 20 years of military service, he became a top army commander in the 1990s, and he has served as personal representative of the Sultan since 2002. He served as chairman of the board of the University of Nizwa, Oman's first private university. He runs his own company, Assad Investment Company, which is reported to control assets of about \$1 billion. While Shihab also remains an advisor to Qaboos and was the head of Oman's Royal Navy until 2004, for now he appears to be a distant third in line for the throne as he is not a member of the Council of Ministers.

In the unlikely event that Haitham, Assad, or Shihab are passed over to become the next Sultan, any of their sons (provided both of their parents are Omani) could be selected. It should be remembered that the Defence Council under the leadership of General Al Nuamani retains significant potential veto power on acceptance of any particular new Sultan but will almost assuredly remain within the Basic Law and confirm a new Sultan from the RFC.

External influence is insignificant, barring physical invasion. Saudi Arabia has little influence in Oman, as does Yemen. The UAE has significant economic links but is also an economic competitor with little political influence over Oman. Iran has some influence but will likely moderate any potential to intervene politically as it views Oman as a critical window to the rest of the world. Great Britain retains significant economic and some political influence but has to be careful to restrict its efforts so as to not alienate the Omani people. India has significant economic influence and enjoys good diplomatic relations but no ability to influence the succession. The United States views Oman as a critical regional partner but has no real ability to sway any succession, nor would the United States likely want to, preferring to retain the friendship of the Omanis.

Oman: Select family tree of the ruling Al Busaidi

 Ruler  Successor



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## Recommended further reading

### Articles

Sultan's succession looms large in southern Oman, Sebastian Castelier & Quentin Meunier, 5 Mar 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/03/article/sultans-succession-looms-large-in-southern-oman>

The case of the sealed envelope: Oman's path to succession, Amanda Fisher, 29 Jan 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/case-sealed-envelope-omans-path-succession>

Neutral Oman Braces for Challenges Ahead Amid Sultan's Ailing Health, 5 May 2018, <https://fanack.com/oman/history-past-to-present/neutral-oman-braces-challenges-amid-sultans-ailing-health/>

Succession in Oman: Clues But No Clarity, Sigurd Neubauer, 17 Mar 2017, <https://agsiw.org/succession-in-oman-clues-but-no-clarity/>

How Will Oman's Next Sultan Steer Muscat's Foreign Policy?, Maya Yang, 13 Aug 2017, <https://intpolicydigest.org/2017/08/13/will-oman-s-next-sultan-steer-muscat-s-foreign-policy/>

### Papers

"Without Sultan Qaboos, We Would Be Yemen': The Renaissance Narrative and the Political Settlement in Oman," Sarah G. Phillips, *Journal of International Development*, Volume 29, Issue 5, July 2017

Oman after Qaboos: Challenges Facing the Sultanate, Yoel Guzansky, *INSS Insight No. 924*, 4 May 2017

Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman, Marc Valeri, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2015

Oman's Diverse Society: Northern Oman, J.E. Peterson, *Middle East Journal*, Volume 58, Issue 1, Winter 2004

### Books

Oman, Culture and Diplomacy, Jeremy Jones & Nicholas Ridout, Edinburgh University Press Ltd, Scotland, 2012

The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa'id bin Taymur, 1932-1970, Uzi Rabi, Sussex Academic Press, UK, 2006