

In fond memory of a visionary

A tribute to His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Sultan of Oman, 23 July 1970 – 10 January 2020

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The philosophy that guided His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos over the course of his half-century at the helm of Oman is perhaps best encapsulated in his oft-quoted maxim: *“make progress and safeguard tradition,”* an inclusive approach that served his country well as it underwent a steady, measured process of economic, political and social transformation that emphasised retaining a national identity rooted in the family, a tolerant interpretation of Islam and strong cultural traditions.

In 1970, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos took over the reins of an impoverished, overlooked backwater on the Arabian Peninsula riven by armed insurrection and tribal divisions. Furthermore, it was wholly dependent on its relations with Britain, with no diplomatic ties with Arab neighbours or international bodies.

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos, aged 29, educated in the United Kingdom and a recent graduate of the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, England, embarked on a daunting task: laying out a vision for Oman’s future development and progress. In pursuit of his goals, he combined charisma and political acumen, uniting disparate factions throughout the country in the common cause of what would become known as the Omani Renaissance, or Al-Nahda.

At that time, Oman had barely 10 miles of paved roads and only three schools, with a total of 900 students, all of them boys. Two-thirds of the adult population (and nearly 90 per cent of women) were illiterate. One in five children did not live to celebrate their fifth birthday; life expectancy was 49 years. Today, bridges, roads and highways, dams and desalination plants, public utilities, high-speed internet, world-class sports and cultural centres, and hundreds of education and health care facilities, both public and private, attest to the success of his modernisation program. Life expectancy exceeds 77 years and literacy is estimated at 96 per cent of the adult population.

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos also encouraged women to play their role in driving the development of their country, opening education and the labour market to girls and women in increasing numbers, while at the same time taking the lead in promoting women to positions of influence in the government and ensuring representation in popularly elected legislative councils. As a result, in 2013, Oman was recognised as the most advanced country in the Arab world in terms

of the participation and rights of women.

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos understood that central to modernising Oman was a strong institutional framework, and in the early 1990s he was the driving force behind drafting a new Constitution, creating the Council of Oman (Majlis Oman), a bicameral parliament – consisting of the State Council (Majlis al-Dawla) an upper, appointed, house; and the Consultation Council (Majlis al-Shura), a lower, elected, consultative assembly – along with ministries to manage the effective functioning of a modern state. And while, in the strictest sense, he served as absolute monarch, holding a number of portfolios (including head of the armed forces, minister of defence, minister of foreign affairs, and chairman of the Central Bank), he also surrounded himself with trusted advisors and travelled throughout the land regularly to meet with his people and help frame priorities and respond to their demands.

Enhancing its citizens’ participation in the political process and undertaking public sector management reforms, Oman underwent several restructurings of state institutions in 2011 and 2012, creating an electorate that would play a major participatory role through the Council of Oman. Further legislation transformed the country’s regions into governorates, regulated the functions of governors, and introduced a greater degree of decentralisation.

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos’s commitment to economic diversification and political reform was underscored by recognition that the country’s relatively limited oil and gas reserves would not last for long and had to be used wisely to lay the foundations of a modern state. To this end, a series of five-year plans focused on strengthening the private sector, speeding up privatisation, public-private partnerships, improving human resources, diversifying sectoral and production bases and including social safety nets for the vulnerable. Further, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos pushed for investment in income-generating projects in industry, mining, agriculture, and fisheries, while modelling business advisory services and frameworks for its banking sector on those of leading international financial institutions.

Navigating regional and international diplomacy

For the wider world, perhaps His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos’s most enduring legacy will be his

foreign policy, based on principle and pragmatism. Independent since 1650 and mindful of its history and the realpolitik of the region, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos understood that his diplomatic skills, military training and his engaging personality could allow him to give Oman a regional role based on policies of moderation and dialogue. His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos doggedly pursued a path of independence and nonalignment – “*friend to all, enemy to none*,” – even at the risk of reproach from his neighbours.

On assuming the throne, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos acted quickly to reverse his country’s isolation by joining the League of Arab States and the United Nations. His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos’s reign was also shaped by his determination to keep the country firmly oriented toward the West while following a path of moderation and peaceful co-existence with its neighbours. Oman welcomed the Camp David Accords in 1978, ending the Egyptian-Israeli conflict and was one of the first countries in the Arabian Peninsula to open lines of communication with Israel while maintaining firm support for an independent Palestinian state.

Equally, after the 1979 revolution in Iran, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos insisted that Oman would respect its long-standing ties to Tehran. The Sultanate under His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos became a trusted and respected third-party that could provide a diplomatic back channel and neutral platform for talks between players with very different agendas. As he explained to an Egyptian newspaper in 1985: “*There is ultimately no alternative to peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Persians, nor to a minimum of agreement in the region.*”

While maintaining Oman’s neutrality, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was also one of the founders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, formed in 1981 at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. He understood clearly that the states of the Arabian Peninsula could only prosper if they built reliable institutions of political, economic, and security cooperation. Recognising his strong background in military and security affairs, Gulf leaders asked His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos to take the lead in promoting integrated military

structures for the GCC organisation. In 1984, the Sultan’s leadership culminated in the creation of the Peninsula Shield Force.

In the early 1990s, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos showed his support for US Middle East policy by inviting Israel’s prime minister Yitzhak Rabin to Oman – the first public visit by an Israeli leader to an Arab state. In late 2018, he hosted Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu in Oman for talks.

After the attacks on America in September 2001, Oman was a major NATO logistics base during operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with cargo airlifted to Afghanistan on a daily basis via Muscat.

Following the Syrian unrest and violence that broke out in 2011 on the heels of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies lined up with the rebels and armed and funded their war against Iran’s ally President Bashar al-Assad. Seeing the potential for a long-running conflict that would destabilise the region, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos again opted for strict neutrality.



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His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos

That year, Oman was largely spared the widespread conflict that shook the Arab world. There were protests, but demonstrations in the Sultanate were largely confined to two areas of the country, focused on corruption, salaries, and employment. His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos responded rapidly, shuffling his cabinet, dismissing ministers, increasing wages, and promising to introduce 50,000 public sector jobs.

The following year, Oman's reputation for discreet diplomacy and as a mediator in the arch-rivalry between the Gulf Sunni monarchies and Iran led it to host bilateral talks between the US and Iran from 2012 that produced the interim deal over Iran's nuclear programme and the first signs of a rapprochement between Iran and the US since the 1979 revolution.

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was the first world leader to visit the newly elected President Hassan Rouhani in Iran in August 2013. In the same year, Oman signed a billion-dollar gas pipeline deal with Iran. In early 2017, Rouhani made his first visit to the Arab world to Muscat, where he met His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos.

A country well-prepared to face the future

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was determined to preserve the best of Oman's traditional society while incorporating it into a modern framework. In economic development, too, he made sure that Oman pursued a measured pace and resisted those aspects of development, like opening the country to mass

tourism, that he believed would undermine Omani social and cultural values.

It will now be up to Omanis themselves to complete the journey begun by His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos half a century ago. His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos's legacy will endure, yet challenges lie ahead: how to meet the expectations of a growing population of a young, tech-savvy population; the traditional Middle Eastern social contract between a generous state and an appreciative populace, is being challenged. The aspirations of the next generation are clear: greater freedom of expression, a loosening of controls on media, robust political debate, meaningful participation in the legislative process, greater employment opportunities, and economic reform.

Thanks to His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos, in 2020, Oman is in a better position to address these challenges than many of its neighbours. He remains the only leader the majority of Omanis have ever known, and is rightly remembered for having led their country from poverty and relative obscurity to prosperity and international recognition. His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos built the infrastructure of a modern state. The transition to power of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos's first cousin and personal choice for succession, has been swift and smooth. The new Sultan, with the support of his fellow Omanis, has a unique opportunity to continue on the path established by his predecessor and further enhance Oman's global standing.

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Her Majesty The Queen and His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos