

# Oman – A vital regional hub

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is a trustee of the Anglo-Omani Society, Chairman of the New Generation Group and Managing Director of Blake Evans & Co, through which he advises several CEOs of large international companies who operate and invest in the Sultanate of Oman. He is also Vice Chairman of the Omani British Business Council and a non-executive director of IDU, a UK drone solution company. Born in Muscat, he grew up in the Middle East and was educated in Scotland. After commissioning from Sandhurst, he went on to join the Light Dragoons, a long-range reconnaissance unit. He holds a Master's degree in Public Policy from Oxford University.

As I write this, most countries around the world are imposing various states of lockdown with policies of minimal movement, social distancing and self-isolation in the hope of reducing COVID 19 infection rates. The sense of fear and uncertainty makes me think of the difficult domestic circumstances that existed when His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos acceded to the Omani throne in 1970. Faced with few resources, very basic infrastructure and limited national income, he led the country towards lasting peace and reconciliation, built roads, hospitals and schools and created a unified nation driven by a successful economic engine. Under his direction, Oman developed strong institutions from the judiciary to the police, upper and lower houses of parliament, the armed forces, civil service, the Diwan, press and broadcast agencies amongst many others. These are all pillars that will continue to support the country long after his sad and recent passing. In 2010, the UN Human Index ranked the Sultanate as number one in the world for the development of its health and education sectors over a forty-year period and more recently, Oman was given the top global position for having had no acts of terrorism. Beyond the Sultanate's domestic development and its foreign policy positions of neutrality, peace and mediation, is the world-renowned reputation of its people. His late Majesty led by example and personified the deep characteristics of the Omani people – kind, compassionate, patient, humble, humorous and generous.

The father of the nation chose His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to lead Oman into this new decade and new era. With strong diplomatic skills forged in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with a deep understanding of the country's cabinet and political systems from his time as Minister of Heritage and Culture, HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has spent decades promoting Oman's international relationships. He has also simultaneously supported the nation's beating heart of traditions, customs and legacies. Over the last seven years, his Chairmanship of Vision 40 has given the new Sultan an intimate, informed and technical understanding of the economic changes required for diversification in Oman's post oil world.

Through Blake Evans & Co, I advise international firms entering the Omani market on domestic policies, regulation and the commercial environment. We also

facilitate stakeholder engagement, interaction and a wider understanding of Oman's unique culture. Whilst the Sultanate has long been the most popular country in the region for executives and their families to live and work in, potential investors have historically flagged succession related concerns. Allaying those fears, the world recently witnessed an incredibly smooth, seamless and transparent changeover. His Late Majesty Sultan Qaboos's wishes were communicated on live television naming His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik as the country's new ruler. In the weeks and months since that transition, our company has been privileged to introduce some of Britain and America's largest institutional investors and sector leaders to the Sultanate. As Oman looks to privatise a number of energy, telecommunication and wider infrastructure assets – the international appetite for inward investment has immediately stepped up for a country that remains safe, stable and open for business.

Whilst the Omani market is small comparative to the wider region, its policies, location and stability make it a natural choice for conventional and technology firms wishing to establish a Middle Eastern hub for expansion into the Gulf and East Africa. With a highly educated bilingual workforce of Arabic and English speakers, the Sultanate enables technology firms to 'Arabise' their products and scale whilst also providing significant opportunities for collaboration as the country diversifies. Through the Tanfeedh initiative, Oman is now heavily focused on its Agricultural, Tourism, Mining, Fisheries and Logistics sectors – all areas attracting inward investment given the geopolitical advantages of being positioned beyond the Straits of Hormuz.

Overlooking the Indian Ocean, Oman's ports are fast becoming the most attractive docking points as ships seek to save time and reduce cost. With some of the most promising solar and wind statistics for the entire region, the Sultanate's comparatively small population will increasingly pivot to renewables for domestic consumption in a low oil price world. And with peaceful polices, domestic stability and safety, Oman will carry on competing and attracting talent in an era of continued technological disruption. In spite of the many global economic challenges that lie ahead, the Middle East will remain one of the world's key regions, and Oman, its gateway.