



The Cambridge Security Initiative

OMAN'S NEW SULTAN CHOSEN TO FACE MODERN CHALLENGES

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Haitham bin Tariq al-Said was not the obvious choice to succeed his recently-deceased cousin Qaboos as the Sultan of Oman. The new sultan's half-brother, Asaad, served as Qaboos' 'special representative' while he was ill, and his [appointment as deputy Prime Minister](#) in 2017 led to speculation that he would inherit the throne upon the Sultan's death. Whether Haitham's accession is derived from the fact that he is the son of his [father's first wife](#), or whether it was due to Sultan Qaboos' final sealed envelope, the family's quick and unanimous support for Haitham's accession was intended to reassure the world: Oman remains stable.

Sultan Haitham's [recent statements](#) confirm Muscat's commitment to steer Oman with the Swiss-like neutrality and discretion for which Sultan Qaboos was known. However, the new sultan will also need to drive Oman toward greater prosperity to avoid popular unrest resulting from rising unemployment and the political entanglements that come of seeking loans to cover budget deficits. As of 2019, Oman's revenue was still [over 70 per cent reliant](#) on the oil and gas industry, despite [Oman's Vision 2020](#) goals to boost the non-oil economy in five sectors (manufacturing, logistics, tourism, fisheries, and mining), leaving Oman seeking a [\\$5.2 billion](#) loan to bridge the bulk of its 2020 budget gap.

In addition to his most recent service as Oman's Minister of Culture, Sultan Haitham understands Oman's economic challenges thanks to his position as the head of the National Development Committee since 2013. As such, he's unlikely to make drastic changes to Oman's Vision 2040 plans; rather, he is likely to make sure that the diversification strategies laid out in the document are enacted in order to move Muscat away from its reliance on the fickle oil and gas sector. The British-educated sultan also comes with diplomatic credentials, thanks to prior service in the Foreign Ministry; and his eldest son, Theyazin bin Haitham, is serving at the Omani embassy in London.

OUTLOOK

In the near term, expect Sultan Haitham to seek increased privatization to off-set public expenditures, as well as to attract foreign investment, such as that already on-going at the [Duqm port](#). Given Sultan Haitham's close ties to the United Kingdom, evidenced by the prompt arrival of Prince Charles in Muscat following Haitham's accession to the throne, there is reason to anticipate further opportunities for investment and trade between London and Muscat.