

Sultan Qaboos ushered in Oman renaissance, quiet diplomacy

Author:

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DUBAI: Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who died late on Friday, transformed Oman during his 49-year reign from a poverty-stricken country torn by dissent into a prosperous state and an internationally trusted mediator for some of the region's thorniest issues.

He became sultan in July 1970 in a palace coup with the aim of ending the country's isolation and using its oil revenue for modernization and development.

Qaboos, 79, never publicly named a successor but secretly recorded his choice in a sealed letter should the royal family disagree on the succession line.

"I have already written down two names, in descending order, and put them in sealed envelopes in two different regions," he said in a 1997 interview.

His successor

State television said his cousin Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said was named sultan on Saturday after the high military council called on the ruling family council to choose a successor. The family had followed Qaboos' written recommendation, believing in "his wisdom and vision," a military council statement said.

State media did not disclose the cause of death. Qaboos, who has dominated decision making in the Gulf state for decades, had been ailing for years and was in Belgium in December for treatment.

"The immediate danger, perhaps, is that regional players may try to influence the outcome of succession or the chosen new leader," said Simon Henderson, director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"Iran will likely be opportunistic in how it plays its cards."

Analysts worry about royal family discord, and a resurgence of tribal rivalries and political instability, now a new ruler was chosen at a time when young leaders have assumed power in neighboring Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Qaboos healed old rifts in a country long divided between a conservative tribal interior and seafaring coastal region. He became known to his countrymen as "the renaissance," investing billions of dollars of oil revenues in infrastructure and building one of the best-trained armed forces in the region.

While brooking no dissent at home, Qaboos charted an independent foreign policy, not taking sides in a Gulf rivalry.

Muscat kept ties with both Tehran and Baghdad during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, and with Iran and the US after their diplomatic falling out in 1979. Oman helped to mediate secret US-Iran talks in 2013 that led to a historic international nuclear pact two years later.

SPEEDREAD

- Sultan Qaboos healed old rifts in a country long divided between a conservative tribal interior and seafaring coastal region.
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The white-bearded Qaboos met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2018 on a rare visit to Oman. While other Gulf states have made overtures to Israel, none of their leaders have openly met with Netanyahu.

Al-Said dynasty

Qaboos, the eighth ruler of the Al-Said dynasty that governed Oman since 1744, was born on Nov. 18, 1940 in Dhofar.

In 1958, he headed to England to complete his education, strengthening historic ties between Britain and the Omani royal family. He studied for two years at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst and served six months in the British army in West Germany, returning to England in 1962 to study local government.

When oil exports began in 1967, Sultan Said, accustomed to tight financial constraints, was reluctant to spend on development.

Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution directed Qaboos' attention to the Strait of Hormuz, through which almost a fifth of global oil passes. He pledged to keep the strait open and in 1980 signed a deal to let US forces use Omani facilities for emergencies. In 1981, Qaboos began widening political participation and free elections for an advisory council were held in 2003.

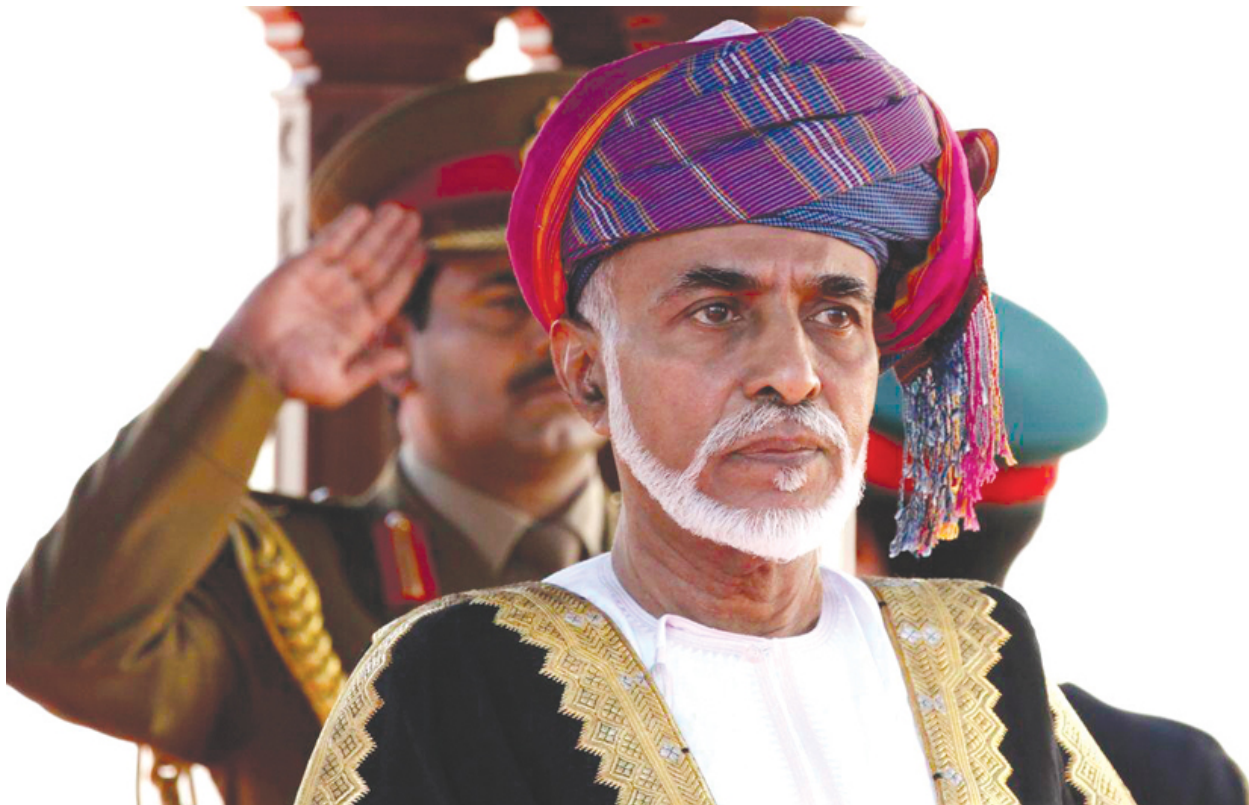
Charismatic authority

When the "Arab Spring" protests started to threaten – and eventually topple – the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Qaboos took note and defused his own potential bombshell as protests broke out in Oman with promises of jobs and reforms.

He sacked more than a third of the Cabinet, created thousands of public sector jobs and paid a dividend to the unemployed, which the IMF said amounted to a quarter of Omanis.

However domestic challenges remain with high unemployment and the state increasingly relying on external borrowing as oil prices fell, pushing its credit rating to junk status.

"Sultan Qaboos had such charismatic authority and became so synonymous with Oman as a modern nation-state that it will naturally be difficult for any successor to replicate that, at least at the beginning," Kristian Coates Ulrichsen of the Texas-based Rice University's Baker Institute told Reuters.



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Saudi Arabia, Arab countries and global leaders mourn death of Oman's Sultan Qaboos
Sultan Qaboos of Oman dies

[Planes brought down by missiles since 1973](#)

Sun, 2020-01-12 01:36

Here is a recap of planes hit by missiles over the past four decades:

- **July 17, 2014:** Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 is shot down over rebel-held eastern Ukraine en route to Kuala Lumpur from Amsterdam. All 298 people aboard the Boeing 777 are killed, including 193 Dutch nationals. The Kiev authorities and separatist pro-Russian rebels, who are battling for control of eastern Ukraine, accuse each other of firing the missile that downed the flight.
- **March 23, 2007:** An Ilyushin Il-76 cargo aircraft belonging to a Belarusian airline is shot down by a rocket shortly after takeoff from the Somalian capital Mogadishu, killing 11 people. The plane was transporting Belarusian

engineers and technicians who had traveled to the country to repair another plane hit by a missile two weeks earlier.

- **Oct. 4, 2001:** 78 people, mostly Israelis, were killed when their Siberia Airlines Tupolev Tu-154, flying from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk, exploded mid-flight over the Black Sea. The crash happened less than 300 km from the Crimean coast. A week later Kiev admitted that the disaster was due to the accidental firing of a Ukrainian missile.

- **July 3, 1988:** An Airbus A-300 belonging to Iran Air, flying from Bandar Abbas in Iran to Dubai in the UAE, was shot down in Iran's territorial waters in the Gulf shortly after takeoff by two missiles fired from a US frigate patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, apparently mistaking it for a fighter aircraft. The 290 passengers on board were killed. The US paid Iran \$101.8 million in compensation.

- **Sept. 1, 1983:** A Boeing 747 belonging to Korean Air (then called Korean Air Lines) was shot down by Soviet fighter jets over the island of Sakhalin, after veering off course. All 269 people on board were killed. Soviet officials acknowledged five days later that they had shot down the South Korean plane.

- **Feb. 21, 1973:** A Libyan Arab Airline Boeing 727 flying from Tripoli to Cairo was shot down by Israeli fighter jets over the Sinai Desert. All but four of the 112 people on board were killed. The Israeli air force intervened after the Boeing flew over military facilities in the Sinai, then occupied by Israel. Israeli authorities said fighters opened fire when the plane refused to land.



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World demands full account after Iran admits downing Ukraine jet

Iran police disperse student protesters

Sun, 2020-01-12 01:54

TEHRAN: Iranian police dispersed students chanting “radical” slogans during a Saturday gathering in Tehran to honor the 176 people killed when an airliner was mistakenly shot down, Fars news agency reported.

AFP correspondents said hundreds of students had gathered early in the evening at Amir Kabir University, in downtown Tehran, to pay respects to those killed in the air disaster.

The tribute later turned into an angry demonstration.

The students chanted slogans denouncing “liars” and demanded the resignation and prosecution of those responsible for downing the plane and allegedly covering up the accidental action.

Fars, which is close to conservatives, said the protesting students chanted “destructive” and “radical” slogans.

The news agency said some of the students tore down posters of Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general killed on Jan. 3 in a US drone strike on Baghdad.

Fars published pictures of demonstrators gathered around a ring of candles during the tribute and a picture of a torn poster bearing the image of a smiling Soleimani.

It said that police “dispersed” them as they left the university and blocked streets, causing a traffic jam.

In an extremely unusual move, state television mentioned the protest, reporting that the students shouted “anti-regime” slogans.

A video purportedly of the protest circulated online Saturday evening showing police firing tear gas at protesters and a man getting up after apparently being hit in the leg by a projectile.

It was not possible to verify the location of the video, or when it was filmed.

Iran’s acknowledgement on Saturday that the plane had been shot down in error came after officials had for days categorically denied Western claims that it had been struck by a missile. The aerospace commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards accepted full responsibility.

But Brigadier General Amirali Hajizadeh said the missile operator acted independently, shooting down the Boeing 737 after mistaking it for a “cruise missile”.



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British ambassador to Iran arrested amid protests against Khamenei over plane downing
South Korea summons Iran envoy over diplomatic threat

[UN renews Syria cross-border aid operation but halves crossings, time](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-01-11 02:25

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council on Friday renewed a six-year-long cross-border operation delivering aid to millions of Syrian civilians but the number of crossings and length of authorization were halved to avoid a Russian veto.

The 15-member Security Council allowed cross-border aid deliveries to continue from two places in Turkey, but dropped crossing points from Iraq and Jordan. It also only renewed the operation for six months instead of a year. Russia and China abstained and the watering down of the resolution triggered angry abstentions from the United States, and Britain. The remaining 11

council members voted in favor of the resolution.



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[Ankara using media as government tool](#)

Sat, 2020-01-11 01:38

ANKARA: As Turkey observed Working Journalists Day on January 10, the challenges faced by journalists in Turkey once again came under scrutiny.

According to the latest figures, the number of journalists who have been fired or put on trial over their reporting has increased markedly in recent years.

Over 11,000 journalists are currently out of work in Turkey, and about 12,000 more went on trial between 2003-2018, with 108 currently behind bars. In 2019, 34 journalists were beaten up on the street. And 45 journalists were recently fired from pro-government daily Hurriyet because of their union membership.

In its most recent annual report, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) listed Turkey as the country with the second-highest number of journalists in jail in the world.

In a country where 95 percent of the media is currently under government control, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) also uses financial rewards as a trump card by favoring pro-government newspapers with regular state-sponsored ads, and not outlets that do not toe the government line when reporting news.

The Turkish government also regularly cancels the press cards of “dissident” journalists. After the 2016 failed coup attempt, the press cards of 685 journalists were repealed over “domestic security” reasons. Over the last five years, 3,804 press cards were reportedly canceled.

Sibel Gunes, secretary-general of the Turkish Journalists’ Association (TGC), said there has been a general deterioration in media freedom and freedom of speech in Turkey over the last decade.

“The courthouse has been the second address of journalists in Turkey, who are considered terrorists by those in government circles,” she told Arab News.

HIGHLIGHT

A report released in July last year by pro-government think tank SETA published the biographies and social media contacts of 150 foreign journalists working in Turkey (including some contributors to Arab News), along with some of their social media posts, and went on to suggest that Turkish citizens should contact the authorities if they believed these foreign media outlets were criticizing the Turkish government.

“Although foreign media outlets and alternative media provide a breathing space for the right of information, the journalists who work for these outlets have systematically become targets of the pro-government think tanks,” Gunes said.

She added that although the government has almost total control over the media sector, many pro-government newspapers had shut down in recent months, “showing that biased and (untrue) reporting cannot be translated into reality.”

Former journalist Utku Cakirozer, now a lawmaker in the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), thinks the threat of long prison sentences has been the main tool the government has used to put pressure on working journalists in Turkey.

“The unfair prison sentences have been a sign of the (government’s) intolerance of criticism, paving the way for control over real reporting and efficient criticism,” he told Arab News. “The only way to overcome these restrictions over the media and freedom of speech is to end the one-man-rule of the media, which will be the first step toward ensuring judicial independence and impartiality. Reporting and criticism should not constitute a crime. Turkish courts should follow international jurisprudence on media freedom.”

Cakirozer also underlined that many media outlets are now owned by businesspeople who are closely affiliated with the government, and that many journalists had been dismissed or forced to resign because of their refusal to align their reporting with the government's wishes.

"Those who remain in these outlets have to apply (self)-censorship so that they do not lose their jobs or face punishment," he added.

The restrictions over the freedom of expression in Turkey are not exclusive to the media sector. Online encyclopedia Wikipedia has been blocked since 2017 because of entries that accused Turkey of having links to terror groups. It has still not been unblocked, despite a recent ruling in Turkey's Constitutional court stating that the government was violating citizens' rights.



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Saudi Arabia condemns Turkey's military interference in Libya