

A MONTHLY REVIEW OF EURO-GULF RELATIONS

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Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword The Targeted Assassination of Qassem Soleimani



As though governed by irony, the US conducted a target assassination operation against the commander of Iran's elite Al Quds Force — General Qassem Soleimani — less than 24 hours after Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Ali Khomeini, boasted that there was nothing the US could do to stop Kata'ib Hezbollah's — Teh-

ran's key proxy in Iraq — siege of the US Embassy in Baghdad. There is no mystery behind the killing; with haste, the US located and eliminated Soleimani signaling a major shift in US strategic thinking vis-a-vis Iran. While most discourses related to Iran focus on the failed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, re: nuclear

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Protests in Lebanon and Iraq: The Legacy of Iran

Over the past few weeks Lebanon and Iraq have been swept by popular protests, stemming from years of governments' disregard for peoples' grievances, poor governance and Iranian meddling. Although, the domestic situation and reasons for the protests in the two countries differ in many aspects, there are some similarities that connect them, and their outcomes have the ability to reshape the established regional power

balance. For long, Iran has entrenched its support of the local Shia constituencies within respective state institutions. In Lebanon the current protests represent a rare but significant domestic challenge to Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran, which are usually left out of the country's protests. Strained by the costly involvement in the Syrian war and US sanctions, Hezbollah is unable to meet its constituency's socio-economic needs,

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Succession in Oman and the Emergence of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq

The Sultanate of Oman, the oldest independent state in the Arabian Peninsula, has a new ruler: Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said, cousin of the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said, who died of illness on 10 January 2020, aged 79. Haitham's accession to the throne was very different from that of late Qaboos'. Angered by the isolationism, governmental restrictions, and inability to effectively use Oman's newfound oil reserves for the country's development, Qaboos toppled his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur (1932-1970), in 1970 and initiated the process of modernisation and opening to the world, earning the country a role as an important regional actor, safeguarding the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Sultan Qaboos himself did not have any children and the uncertainty over the successor threatened to create a political vacuum. Considering Oman's history of coups and power struggles within the royal family and the complex regional geopolitical situation, the Sultan decided

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THE REPORT

Russia in Syria

Spotlight on the Kremlin's Intervention

The event was held on 17 December 2019. Further information is available at www.egic.info

Media polarisation has been a key feature throughout Syria's civil war. Many broadcasters in the West are deeply critical of Moscow's intervention while the Russian media routinely denounces US and European interference. Information wars often undermine public understandings of key issues that shape the situation on the ground. In the case of Syria it is a fact that Russia's military intervention was decisive in tipping the balance in favour of Syria's President, Bashar Al-Assad. At the same time, Russia's economic, military and political commitments to support the Syrian government made Moscow the most powerful stakeholder in the country. To better understand the logic behind Russia's intervention and Moscow's vision for the future of Syria, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), hosted Marija Chodynskaja Goleniš eva, author of the book *Syria: The Tormented Path Towards Peace*. Chodynskaja Goleniš eva served for seven years as a member of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations and currently works as a Middle East expert for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to Chodynskaja Goleniš eva, there are two main reasons which prompted Moscow's military intervention. The



first is related to the government's fears. Having recently experienced the jihadi threat 'Moscow decided to intervene in Syria because it had 5000-6000 Russian speaking foreign fighters who had joined Daesh and other Islamist organisations inside the country. Russia's government believed that the threat of their return was serious and high.' Second, public opinion was acute following the US-led Western military interventions in the Middle East which toppled regimes in Iraq and Libya. Significant segments of Russia's population favoured a more interventionist approach to ensure regime—ally—stability in Syria—a country strategically vital to Russia since the 1971 opening, in Tartus, of Moscow's only military naval base outside the former Soviet Union. Chodynskaja Goleniš eva noted that, together with Moscow's large-

scale military intervention, it was also Russia's pragmatic diplomatic approach that ensured its dominant position within Syria. For instance, 'Russia and the US formed a de-facto coalition against Daesh while constant coordination avoided incidents between Moscow and Washington inside Syria.' As another example 'Russia's pragmatism made cooperation with Turkey and Iran possible and is ensuring the continuation of the Astana Process despite difficulties in accommodating the often non-compatible objectives that Ankara, Moscow and Tehran have on the ground.' This was most evident during Turkey's latest military operation in Northern Syria. Turkey's latest military push demonstrated how problematic it is for Russia to deal with a country that aims to expand its influence in Northern Syria and that can rely on the affiliation on an array of Islamist militias already inside the country. For Russia dealing with Iran is, arguably, even more difficult. Despite that Moscow and Tehran have both been supporting government forces throughout the war, Iranian and Russians are now fiercely competing for influence in Syria. Russia fears that Iran's ability to infiltrate the state will lead to an increasingly weak and Tehran-dependent Syrian govern-



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ment while the Ayatollahs' sectarian agenda continues to keep the entire Levant on the brink of another major escalation of violence. Moscow is fully aware that sectarianism undermines stability and Russia's success in Syria is also related to keeping the peace in areas previously hit by heavy fighting. As Marija Chodynskaja Goleniš eva remarked 'the experience gained by Moscow's troops in Chechnya was key to establish a framework by which some rebel armed groups dropped weapons in exchange for patrol by the Russian military police of those areas that surrendered

to the government peacefully.' This largely avoided revenge attacks by government and Iran-affiliated militias against civilians in areas previously held by rebels.

EGIC will continue to monitor Russia's role on the security and geopolitical situation inside Syria with a particular focus on the situation on the ground in Syria's Idlib province—the country's region where currently most of the fighting is concentrated. A Russian-backed Syrian government offensive in Idlib is likely to produce major collateral effects. These include in-

creased instability throughout the Middle East and, potentially, a new wave of refugees towards the borders of the European Union.

*This article is a reflection on EGIC's latest event, held on 17 December 2019 in Via Gregoriana 12, Rome in which the centre hosted Marija Chodynskaja Goleniš eva—Middle East expert for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Further information about the event is available at www.egic.info.

By Antonino Occhiuto

Protests in Lebanon and Iraq: The Legacy of Iran

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causing people in its traditional strongholds, such as Nabatieh, to turn against it and even attack its leaders' offices. Similarly, in Iraq, where the local Shia community is rising against its Iranian-backed leaders, demanding their accountability, while being met with a harsh crackdown from the Iraqi security forces and Tehran-backed militias. Eyes now turn to the protests in Iraq and Lebanon as a litmus paper for Iran's enduring influence in the Middle East.

Breaking the Sectarian Shackles in Lebanon

Over the past two weeks, hundreds of thousands of people have united under the Lebanese flag to protest chronic government corruption,

economic mismanagement, lack of basic services, such as electricity and water, piling waste, growing inequalities and a failing economy, that leaves many of the country's large young generation unemployed and the country enormously indebted. From north to south, people chant against the political establishment that failed them, demanding resignations. The 'everyone means everyone' slogan is ever-present, highlighting that the Lebanese see the entire ruling political elite, Sunni, Shi'a, Maronite, as one collective failure, stepping out from the established sectarian boxes, that have for so long determined the country's political life. Although still powerful militarily, Hezbollah is no longer perceived as

the proponent of the fight against injustice. The measures proposed by Sa'ad Hariri's government to calm down the protests are not considered to provide feasible solutions to the deep rooted crisis and only exacerbated peoples' frustration. Having lost the people's trust, the current Lebanese government finds itself in a difficult position and struggles to justify its hold on to power. While Hariri's resignation prompted many, domestically and internationally, to voice concern about the descent into further violent instability, the reality on the streets is that the protests have, so far, been held in a peaceful and largely festive atmosphere, except for some attacks by Hezbollah and Amal members. The country's security forces have not yet intervened against the Lebanese protesters. That said, Hariri's resignation represented a symbolic first step rather than causing the protests to disperse. The Lebanese public will not settle for anything less than reshaping the country's political system that favours old faces and nepotism, and hinders the country's progress.

Violent Protests in Iraq

Similar grievances as in Lebanon—

corruption, poor governance, power outages, worsening economic situation and overall disenchantment with the government's performance—brought Iraqis to the streets since early October. There, the protests quickly turned violent due to the harsh crackdown by the Iraqi security forces, the Iran-backed militias' snipers and mysterious, black-clad men, who routinely attack protesters, leaving hundreds dead and thousands wounded. Iraq's Prime Minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who was selected as a compromise candidate between the two largest parliamentary blocs—the Fatah Alliance, representing the Iran-backed militias, and the Saairun Alliance, promoting Iraqi nationalism—promised reforms and a Cabinet reshuffle to appease the protestors, but, as in Lebanon, this was largely seen as an insufficient cosmetic change by the protestors. Angered Iraqis have continued to burn Iranian flags and target offices of Iran-allied militias and political parties, which they blame for creating a back-up economic empire for Iran to help it during the US sanctions, while disregarding peoples' needs. Influential Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr called for early elections under United Nations' oversight earlier this week. The government's response to the protests prompted the Saairun Alliance, led by Al-Sadr, to move to the opposition in support of the reforms. However, Mahdi is determined to avoid early elections and promised to resign if the two rival Alliances' leaders agree to form a new government.

Iran: Losing the Fight for Popular Legitimacy?



Threading through the protests in both Lebanon and Iraq is the popular resentment toward Iranian interference in the domestic affairs. The substantial Shia communities in both Lebanon and Iraq have been instrumental for Iranian power projection in the Middle East as part of the 'Axis of Resistance'. The power-bases in both countries seemed solid for a long time, reinforced with electoral victories of Hezbollah in the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections and the Tehran-allied parties in the Iraqi elections that same year. Iran's strategy in Lebanon and Iraq proved to be successful in penetrating state institutions through its proxies but insufficient for maintaining their position long-term due to the prioritisation of Tehran's interests over the locals' needs. Losing popular legitimacy in those two countries is a major blow to the Iranian regime's regional influence. Against the carefully built perception of Iran as the champion of all Shia Muslims and the oppressed, the Iranian proxies are increasingly perceived by the locals as part of the problem, siding with

the political establishment and attacking the protestors. Tehran is able to hold its popular support base across the Middle East only as long as it provides and currently, it is failing to do so. Well-aware of the pro-tests' threat, Iran actively encouraged its proxies to suppress them with force.

What's Next?

The protests in Lebanon and Iraq represent a significant step for the development of national identities, taking precedence over sectarian narratives, putting the country's progress first, while refusing foreign interference. The outcomes of the protests remain to be seen, however it is clear that there is no way to overcome the deep rooted crises without serious wide-ranging political and economic reforms that would mirror the people's demands. In the meantime, Iran and its proxies will continue to stir violence and discredit the protests as foreign powers' creation, which will prove costly in the long run.

By Nikola Zukalová

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Succession in Oman and the Emergence of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq

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to design a unique succession process, specified in the 1996 Basic Law, to avoid domestic infighting and external pressures on the candidate and prevent descent into instability. The Royal Family Council members would meet and select the successor after Qaboos' death from the eligible candidates. The vague criteria (male descendant of Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan, Muslim, mature and rational, and a legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents) narrowed down the number of candidates to several dozen, although it was widely spoken about three main candidates—Qaboos' first cousins and sons of Tariq bin Taimur. In case that the family could not reach consensus within three days, the Defence Council would unseal an envelope containing a name of the new ruler chosen by Qaboos himself. On 11 January, a few hours from Qaboos' death, the Royal Family Council decided to go immediately with the late Sultan's will, appointing Haitham bin Tariq as the new Sultan. Given that Qaboos reigned for 50 years, about 88% of the country's 2.3 million Omanis have not lived under another ruler, which increases the pressure on Sultan Haitham's performance.

Who is the New Sultan and What is his Experience?



Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said, born in 1954, was one of the three persons seen as the most probable candidates for the throne. Unlike the other two candidates — his two brothers, Asad and Shihab, — Haitham does not have a military background. Shihab, former Commander of Oman's Navy, became Sultan's advisor in 2004, while Asad is Brigadier-General, shortly commanded Sultan's Armoured Corps, before being appointed Sultan's Special Representative in early 2000s and Oman's Deputy Prime Minister in 2017. Their grandfather, Taimur bin Faisal, ruled Oman between 1913 and 1932. Haitham's father, Tariq bin Taimur, served as Qaboos' first Prime Minister and formed the Sultanate's first Cabinet before becoming the Governor of the Central Bank in

1974. Until 1970, Oman did not have any diplomatic representation abroad. Tariq's popularity and contacts helped Oman to establish relations with Arab neighbours and other countries and gaining international diplomatic recognition, which came with its swift admission to the United Nations and Arab League in 1971. Haitham has had a long diplomatic experience. A 1979 graduate of Oxford's Foreign Service Programme, he rose through the ranks as Undersecretary for Political Affairs at the Foreign Ministry in the mid-1980's (1986-1994), becoming the Secretary General (the Ministry's second most senior official) in 1994 (1994-2002). During his career at the Foreign Ministry, Oman's foreign policy approach was tested and shaped by some watershed

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events, including the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War (1990/1), the collapse of the Soviet Union, rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 1990's, the Yemen civil war, and the beginning of the Global War on Terror. Recognising Beijing's influence in the Gulf, Haitham for example discussed steps to deescalate regional tensions following the Iran-Iraq war with China's Foreign Minister, Wu Xueqian, in September 1988. Under Haitham's leadership as Minister of Heritage and Culture, Oman was able to inscribe two cultural sites, Aflaj irrigation systems (2006) and Ancient City of Qalha (2018), to the UNESCO World Heritage list. Additionally, he has overseen the implementation of the Sultanate's 20-year economic and social reform plan as Chairman of the Main Committee of Oman's Vision 2040. The hands-on involvement in the Sultanate's reforms as well as rich diplomatic experience in times of tension will prove valuable for Sultan Haitham's reign.

External and Domestic Challenges

The new Sultan will be confronted with numerous internal (economic) and external (diplomatic) challenges. He takes over at a time of heightened tensions between Iran and the United States, following the US airstrike which killed Iran's Al Quds Force Commander, Qassem Soleimani, in Iraq and Tehran's missile response, which threatened to turn Iraq into a battleground for

a US-Iran conflict. Under Sultan Qaboos, Oman assumed the role of neutral interlocutor in regional crises, able to open backchannels due to fostering relations with all regional actors. Sultan Haitham vowed in his inaugural speech continuity of Qaboos' foreign policy of pragmatic balancing. Oman will continue to act as an interlocutor between regional foes. In the past few years, Oman hosted leaders from Israel, Iran, United States, secret US-Iran talks that led to the Iran Nuclear Deal, and along with Kuwait it tried to mediate in the Qatar crisis. Oman has developed strong historic relations with the United Kingdom, sealed by the signing mutual defence pact in February 2019, and the United States, with whom it has sealed the relations with the Strategic Framework Agreement a month later. Muscat has also played an important part in facilitating the efforts to find political resolution to the war in Yemen, which represents a serious security threat, lending backing to the United Nations' led initiatives. Domestically, Sultan Haitham will need to embark on delivering economic and social reforms. Although, the current domestic situation in Oman is much more stable than when Qaboos inherited the rebellion in the southernmost Dhofar Province (1963-1976), it is vulnerable to the effects of the civil war in neighbouring Yemen. Yemen's easternmost Mahra governorate has largely managed to stay out of the conflict, shielding the Sultanate from direct contact with

the fighting, but Yemeni refugees, aid and medical treatment provision is financially challenging. This adds to Oman's already precarious economic situation. The Sultanate desperately needs economic reforms as it relies on hydrocarbon resources for about 75% of its revenues. Sultan Haitham will need to push for shifting the Sultanate away from oil, continue the privatisation efforts, while also addressing the needs of the large young generation and navigating potential social upheaval in case of decreasing oil revenues. The smooth succession process sends a positive message to the international community that will translate well in Oman's reputation as a politically stable country, attractive for tourists and foreign investors. Yet, Sultan Haitham will inevitably be constantly compared to the late Sultan and although being Qaboos' choice gave him legitimacy, he will still need to prove himself to the people and earn their trust. If Qaboos' legacy is a modern Sultanate built from the oil wealth and independent neutral foreign policy, Sultan Haitham may take on building his legacy on the implementation of socio-economic reforms and navigating Oman towards a post-oil economy. However, only time will tell how will Sultan Haitham takes on those responsibilities.

By Nikola Zukalová

**Notes to this article are available at www.egic.info*



Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword

The Targeted Assassination of Qassem Soleimani

The original version in Italian is available at Formiche.net: L'Iran paga i suoi errori. Belfer (Egic) spiega i nuovi scenari nel Golfo"

FROM PAGE 1

deal), Tehran's paramilitary role in the region (and beyond) went largely unreported. That should not imply that it was minor. On the contrary. From the battlefields of Yemen, to the ethnic cleansing of swathes of northern Syria, a decade of sectarian warfare in Iraq and to his own spate of targeted assassinations across Europe, Iran bears responsibility and Soleimani was notorious. He acted with impunity—and for good reason. For nearly a decade, Iran was on a seemingly unbeatable winning streak. It captured the Iraqi state via its Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), used its phantom war with Daesh — others (re: Kurds) did the heavy lifting while Tehran claimed victory — to snatch an assortment of strategic positions across Syria and its proxies in Yemen and Lebanon successfully brought those countries into Iran's revolutionary orbit. Even the Arab Gulf states of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia had to face down Iranian-backed terrorist cells. Iran attacked Aramco, it targeted international shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, it divided opinion in transatlantic relations. The view from Iran was that the US was checked. This misunderstanding of US power, confusing its strategic patience with the lack of capabilities, would lead Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) under both General Mohammed Ali Jafari and then General Hossein Salami to unleash Soleimani as the pointman to consolidate Iran's regional position. He did so swiftly and with great zeal. But he misunderstood both his own and his adversary's power—and it cost him dearly. In the early hours of 03 January 2020, a week into the Kata'ib Hezbollah siege of the US Embassy and hot on the orders to deploy



deadly force against Iraq's rebel-ling south, Soleimani rode together with PMU commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, to Baghdad airport, passing close to the US base as if to further snub supposed US impotence. His arrogance turned out to be fateful. Whether due to the looming US election, the heightened threat to the US Embassy and personnel or a long overdue response for Iran's wanton use of violence against the US and its regional allies, the decision was taken to give Iran a black eye. Already a chorus of condemnations against the US has been on replay. These seek to hoist responsibility on Washington for assassinating Soleimani rather than on Iran for its international operations which cost thousands of lives. Soleimani died because he killed. He was targeted because his death will send a message to Iran and its proxies: the US is not only deployed as fodder for Iranian guns, that it can also be unmoored and that its retribution will be comprehensive. Among the US's Gulf allies, while there is fear that they will be targeted as an arms-length revenge by the IRGC, Hezbollah, the Houthis (etc) the threat level is not significantly

higher than before. Iran was already conducting acts of ballistic warfare against Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah was already bombing Bahrain. The only thing that has changed is that the restraints will be lifted and the US will fight back for its allies. What happens next is anyone's guess. However, if the Islamic Republic is even half as prudent as it claims to be, then the Ayatollah ought to stand his country down or else face increasing punishment from the US. With continuous civil unrest across Iran, with pushback in Lebanon and Iraq and now with thoughtful US retaliation, 2020 may very well spell the end of Khomeini's revolutionary ideal, just as it started with the killing of a mass murderer.

By Mitchell Belfer

Read also:
"Iran, Soleimani and the Regime's Vendetta"



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Turkey- Libya Maritime Agreement: A Further Threat to East Mediterranean Stability?

On 8 January 2020 the Foreign Ministers of France, Greece, Egypt and the Republic of Cyprus issued a joint statement in Cairo where they declared 'null and void' the Libya-Turkey maritime agreement and called for the 'full respect of the sovereign rights of all states in their maritime zones in the Mediterranean.' The Libya-Turkey agreement claims rights over an area of the eastern Mediterranean that overlap the territorial waters of Greece. To put this into context, in November 2019, the Republic of Turkey signed a maritime deal with the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) under Fayeaz al-Sarraj, which would extend Turkey's maritime rights from its southwest coast to the Libyan Derna-Tobruk coast. The agreement further heightens tensions in the region since it does not consider Greece's internationally recognised territorial waters, proximate to Crete. It is important to note that Turkey has also become a military ally of the GNA and has recently sent a first-wave of paramilitary forces to support Tripoli against the eastern forces of General Khalifa Haftar, known as the Libyan National Army (LNA). The Libya-Turkey maritime agreement is yet another defiant act by the government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vis-à-vis its Mediterranean neighbours. Beginning in May 2019, Ankara sent drilling ships into the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of another sovereign state and European Union (EU) member, namely the Republic of Cyprus, claiming that the contested waters are part of Turkey's continental shelf, while also declaring that other contested waters around Cyprus are part of the territorial waters of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a republic that no state recognises except Turkey.

Currently, the EU has imposed economic sanctions on Turkey for its drilling activities in Cyprus' EEZ, while Cyprus has petitioned the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to protect its maritime rights. Tensions have risen sharply between Turkey and neighbouring states in the Eastern Mediterranean since the discovery of large oil and gas reserves over the past decade. As a result, countries such as Egypt, Israel, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus have formed a clique in this new gas and oil regional landscape. The energy potential in the East Mediterranean is indeed tremendous. Cyprus' Aphrodite gas field, discovered in 2011, has the potential for yielding 129 BCM of natural gas, whereas the potential is the same or even greater in other fields discovered in Israel (Tamar, Leviathan) and Egypt (Zohr). On 2 January 2020, the leaders of Israel, Cyprus and Greece officially signed an agreement to build an almost 2000 Km East Mediterranean pipeline that would transport gas from Israel and Cyprus, to Greece and ultimately to Italy—bypassing Turkish pipelines. Although the deal is economically costly (estimates revolve around €6 billion euro) its energy generation potential and geo-

political importance are staggering. By supporting the GNA government, Turkey has also managed to seal a maritime deal that would halt the passage of the East Mediterranean pipeline close to Crete. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the GNA remains under attack by the contesting LNA forces, though a fragile ceasefire has been reached on 12 January 2020. If the GNA does fall, so does Turkey's maritime deal. Perhaps, President Erdogan has considered this possibility and has chosen all the same to use this situation to exert pressure on his east Mediterranean counterparts, rather than truly investing and believing in the effectiveness of the uncertain maritime deal with Libya. Only time and further unraveling developments in this volatile region will tell.

By Melissa Rossi

Melissa Rossi is an EGIC fellow from the Brazilian Naval College in Rio de Janeiro.

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Sultan Qaboos Obituary



On 11 January 2020, the longest serving Arab ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said of Oman died aged 79. Qaboos, who ruled the country for 50 years, is credited for turning Oman into a prosperous, modern and unified state and for playing a key role in regional mediation. The Sultan spent his early life and education in the UK, educated at Bury Saint Edmunds, Suffolk and at Sandhurst, the Royal Military Academy, in Berkshire. Following a British-supported bloodless coup in 1970, in which Qaboos seized power from his father, the Sultan immediately focused his efforts on roads, hospitals, schools, communications systems, and industrial and port facilities. The deceased Sultan leaves a country with a landmark literacy rate close to 90%. On the political level, in 1996, he promulgated Oman's constitution, which formalised both a consultative legislature, a cabinet and the Sultan as the unifying symbol of the state. His early rule was characterised by the suppression of an insurgency supported by the Soviet Union in the southern region of Dhofar. The

rebellion was quelled with the support of British, Iranian and Jordanian forces. Events in Dhofar allowed Qaboos to demonstrate his outstanding diplomatic and political skills on a local-domestic level. Following his military victory over the rebels, the Sultan dubbed-down on reconciliation efforts and led the successful integration of the southern region with the rest of Oman. As often the case in autocratic political systems, in Oman the ruler's convictions shaped the direction of the country's domestic and foreign policy under Qaboos. The Sultan firmly believed that Oman's only way forward in a volatile region such as the Middle East was to keep out of trouble by engaging diplomatically and economically with all its neighbours, without siding with a camp or the other and, when possible, leading diplomatic initiatives to ease tensions and resolve conflicts. The Sultanate engaged with all major international actors. Despite developing strong ties with the Soviet Union and China, Oman's military partnership with Britain remained firm

while Muscat's relationship with Washington became increasingly important. In both 1991 and 2003 Oman's military facilities played an important role as a staging area for the movement of coalition troops against Iraq. When it comes to Gulf and Middle East politics, under Qaboos, Oman joined Saudi Arabia's efforts to create the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. Muscat also maintained good relations with Iran, a potentially threatening presence across the Straits of Hormuz. The decision to maintain cordial relations to Tehran allowed Oman to lead back-channel communication efforts between Iran and the US, facilitating the talks that led to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Currently, Muscat is also the ideal candidate to promote a de-escalation in the conflict between the UN-recognised government of Yemen—backed by Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies—and Iran-backed Houthi rebels. With the Sultan not having children or brothers, following the ruler's death, Oman could have been left in an institutional chaos with an array of potential candidates for the throne. Qaboos took the succession matter into his hands to avoid foreign interferences in the succession process and to guarantee continuity and stability in the country. The Sultan left a sealed letter addressed to the Defence Council and the Royal Family Council, in which he named his choice for successor— Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said—to be opened following his death.

By Antonino Occhiuto

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BAHRAIN

Monday, 23 December—Manama was named the Capital of Arab Tourism 2020 at the 22nd Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism meeting in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Bahrain, along with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco and Tunisia, was elected to the Executive Office of the Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism for the period 2020-2021. The 25th session of Executive Office focused on tourism security challenges and reviewed the draft of the Arab Tourism Strategy.

QATAR

Tuesday, 31 December—Qatar's Permanent Representative to the Arab League, Ambassador Ibrahim bin Abdulaziz Al-Sahlawi, participated alongside other Arab Gulf countries in the Emergency Meeting of the Arab League Council at the level of Permanent Delegates in Cairo to discuss Turkey's plan to send troops to Libya. The meeting considered the impact of Ankara's military intervention on local and regional security, due to its potential facilitation of terrorists' movement. The common Arab position stressed the need to prevent foreign interference in Libya. On Friday, Qatar's Foreign Ministry, along with Turkey and Libya, expressed reservations to the statement of the Arab League Secretary-General, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, on the issue.

KUWAIT

Tuesday, 10 December—Kuwait hosted the 5th biannual Gulf Defence & Aerospace (GDA) exhibition and conference, under the patronage of Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Naser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, where over 200 companies from all over the world showcased the latest technology in defence, aerospace, homeland security as well as safety and security. The three-day event also provided an opportunity for military representatives to exchange views and experiences.

SAUDI ARABIA

Wednesday, 11 December—The world's largest oil producer, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Saudi Aramco), was officially listed on the Saudi Stock Exchange (Tadawul), marking its successful Initial Public Offering (IPO). Its shares began trading at 32 Saudi riyals and quickly rose by the 10% maximum daily limit to 35.2 Saudi riyals (9.38 US dollars). On Thursday, the shares value increased by another 4.5% and closed at 36.8 SAR (9.81 USD), valuing Saudi Aramco at 1.96 trillion USD.

OMAN

Sunday, 15 December—The State Grid Corporation of China, the world's largest electricity utility company, acquired a 49% of the state-owned Oman's Electricity Transmission Company, the Sultanate's main transmission network operator, from Oman Electricity Holding Company (Nama). The move, which came as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and part of the Sultanate's first major privatisation, valued close to \$1 billion (USD), will be the Beijing's largest single investment in the Sultanate. The agreement was signed by State Grid's President, Xin Baoan, and Oman's Minister Responsible for Financial Affairs, Darwish bin Ismail Al-Balushi, in Muscat.

UAE

Monday, 30 December—The Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (ENEC) updated government stakeholders on the progress of the construction and readiness preparations of the four units at the UAE's first nuclear power plant, Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant, which is from more than 93% completed. Construction works on three units are close to finishing, while the first unit was completed and is currently undergoing commissioning and testing before it can obtain operating license from the UAE's Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR).



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Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq

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When it comes to Iraq, it is common to assume that all its main, contemporary, challenges are rooted in the aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003. However, the causes of today's turbulence can be traced back to the era of Saddam Hussein, during which the country was riven by internal sectarian divisions. Over the past week, people have again taken to the streets in Baghdad protesting the corruption of public institutions, the high level of youth unemployment, the dysfunction of services and the difficult state of the country's economy. The same causes pushed people to the streets in 2017; yet this time the protests are more widespread, more intense and the crackdown of the government has been significantly scaled-up! People allege that behind the economic dysfunction is a political paralysis whose responsibility lies within the system itself and its key people. Largely exploring the nature of this political paralysis from a historical prospective, Patrick Cockburn's book *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* explains how al-Sadr emerged so prominently in the political arena over the last decade as an important figure who is shaping the present and future of Iraq. The book sheds light on the history of the al-Sadr family – one of the most prominent Shi'a religious families in Iraq – and on how persecution by the Saddam Hussein regime conditioned the future of this family before the US invasion. Cockburn provides comprehensive insights on the cultural and religious context of Iraq in the decade between Baghdad's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the US invasion and occupation after 2003. Despite that several important developments have occurred since the book's 2008 publication, Cockburn's examination remains valid

to understand the steps that led to the ongoing upheaval in Iraq. The work illustrates how Iraq's entire population was deeply affected by the United Nations (UN) sanctions imposed on the country following the Kuwait war, leaving many in conditions of extreme poverty and starvation. Accordingly, the Shi'a community was particularly impacted by the ensuing economic crisis, as they had limited access to the well-paid jobs and already struggled under the regime. Saddam Hussein's repression of protests transformed the forefathers of the Sadrist movement, Muhamad Baqir al-Sadr (Sadr I), and his successor Muhamad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II), into martyrs. This gave the regime's most dangerous opponents a strong ideological and religious base from which to rise. The Sadrist movement, religious and populist in its ideology, received wide support in the poorest Shi'a provinces. This work also critically explains some miscalculation made by the Western coalition at that time. Worryingly, the US and its allies did not consider the socio-cultural and socio-political structures of the country in its historical context and overlooked pre-existing challenges and faultlines at the domestic level. The consequence of Saddam's fall was underestimated in an environment of sectarian politics. The power vacuum led to the increased importance of religious authorities as they attempted to fill the void. Muqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah al-Sistani are the two most prominent Shi'a figures in the arena of religion and politics respectively. The 2018 elections produced a government in Baghdad led by parties identified as Shi'a. However, the Sadrist movement still sits in opposition as a religious-nationalist movement and it is now supporting the protests and calling for new elections,

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while accusing the government of corruption. On the other side, Iraq's most important Shi'a cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, supports a state based on Islamic law in Iraq that would reflect the Iranian *wilayat al-faqih*. Accordingly, during these protests, al-Sistani asked the government to respect the requests of the people before quashing the protests. In this context, the support of the two predominant Shi'a figures for the protests and in opposition to the government's use of force can be particularly meaningful. In a country where religion is so enmeshed with politics, these positions can work as a catalyst to inflame the protests even further. Overall, this book contributes to understanding why it is so difficult for Iraq to achieve internal stability and how poor choices made by previous leaders helped actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr rise from an unknown position to a leading and controversial role. Moreover, Cockburn analysed, already at that time, how central it is to focus on the role of Iran, which controlled and continues to control security and political proxies in Iraq. Although it is a dense, heavy, work, this book is highly recommended for its in-depth explanation of the history of key Iraqi actors over the past decades. In turn, this would be necessary to better contextualise current events and, perhaps, even devise more effective policy choices among the neighbours and the wider international community in relation to Iraq.

*Reviewed by
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