

Oman's Sultan Visits Saudi Arabia on His First Official Overseas Trip Since Taking Power Last Year

In recent days, Oman's Sultan visited Saudi Arabia on his first official overseas trip since taking power last year. Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said met with Saudi King Salman, with the leaders prioritizing talks on economic ties and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen but also discussing environmental issues, food security, and bilateral cooperation efforts. Analysts highlight that Sultan Haitham's visit to Saudi Arabia demonstrates some of Oman's main priorities when it comes to regional and international affairs. Oman's new Sultan rose to power after the death of his predecessor, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, and inherited both the global health pandemic and an oil price spike. The former sultan visited foreign nations less often as he aged, and the nation adopted a position of neutrality within the region. The meeting between Sultan Haitham and King Salman displays Oman's goals of establishing closer economic ties with Saudi Arabia and emphasizing regional security, as both nations addressed relations with Iran.

Oman has had difficulties with debt, and it has recently jumped 65% to a total of 80% debt-to-GDP ratio. One of the main points in the discussions between Oman and Saudi Arabia was the construction of a major road between the two countries which would stimulate development, infrastructure, and investment. This economic integration would aid Oman with their debt concerns as well as enable tourism and create opportunities for cultural and sporting events. The two nations also discussed environmental concerns and security. Both agreed to the Green Middle East Initiative, which would drop carbon emissions in the region by 60%. They also concurred that cooperation is necessary to maintain food and energy security. Oman has tried to situate itself as a neutral negotiator between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and as such, the easing of tensions with the latter was pinpointed as a key priority.

While Saudi Arabia expresses a desire to ease tensions between themselves and Iran, they still view the regime there as a significant threat to the prospects of stability. In the talks with Oman, there was a clear acknowledgement as to the importance of the Iran subject to overall regional security. Saudi Arabia also believes that it benefits from these discussions because it may enable a more diplomatic approach with Iran. Engaging in negotiations with Oman allows Saudi Arabia to demonstrate a willingness to do so. Ultimately, Iran has worried Saudi Arabia because of its involvement in regional conflicts, the dangers of its ballistic missile program, and the controversy surrounding its nuclear program.

With the Sultan's trip, Oman has conveyed respect to Saudi Arabia's role in the region and tried to boost its ties by deciding to visit the country first. In the past, Oman has not been especially active when visiting other countries, making this week's development even more noteworthy. Sultan Haitham has shown an intent to bolster Oman's role in regional affairs, while also reaping the economic benefits that result from strengthened relations with Saudi Arabia.