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Oman: The Gulf's Go-Between
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By Sigurd Neubauer

Introduction

On November 18, 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry took the highly unusual step of attending the Omani national day celebration in Washington, DC. This rare recognition underscores the Obama administration's deep appreciation for Sultan Qaboos bin Said's leadership in helping bring Iran and the United States to the negotiating table, which ultimately led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the U.S.-led nuclear deal with Iran. This sign of respect for Qaboos coincided with his 45th anniversary on the throne, making him the Arab world's longest serving monarch. After decades of his rule, Washington clearly appreciates the unique role Oman has carved out for itself as both facilitator of quiet dialogue and mediator on sensitive issues such as the release of prisoners.

In October 2015, for example, Oman briefly entered the frontlines of diplomatic efforts in Syria, as Qaboos dispatched his close aide and Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi to Damascus to convey a message from Kerry to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In early February 2016, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov traveled to Muscat to emphasize what a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman called "the need for a speedy political and diplomatic settlement of current conflicts in the region."¹ Syrian peace talks dominated the agenda for the meetings. There was also some speculation that conversations might have touched on Assad's future, and whether to find a home for him and his family, even possibly in Oman. The sultanate has already given refuge to several members of the family of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, a move that, in line with Oman's neutrality-based foreign policy, it has described as a humanitarian gesture.²

Qaboos' preferred role appears to be that of a go-between. That said, Oman has taken a proactive approach to help facilitate negotiations in neighboring Yemen, viewing the instability the war there is spawning as an existential threat, although rising Saudi-Iranian tensions may limit Oman's role in efforts to resolve the conflict.

¹ "Russia's Lavrov to Visit UAE, Oman on February 2-3," *Tassnim News Agency*, January 30, 2015.

² Damien McElroy, "Muammar Gaddafi's family take refuge in Oman," *The Telegraph*, March 25, 2013.

Oman's Foreign and Defense Policies in Context

Oman's increasingly active regional role is facilitated by its policy of careful neutrality. Under Qaboos, who has governed as absolute monarch since 1970, Muscat has focused on maintaining friendly relations with its immediate neighbors, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, while avoiding interfering in the internal affairs of any state. This strategy has not only protected Oman from regional turmoil but also allowed it to focus on its own economic development. Over the past 40 years, the country has grown from an impoverished state into a modern economy. Omani authorities view protecting the country's \$80 billion economy and sustaining its hard-won growth as fundamental to political stability.

While Oman has the most ethnically diverse, and second-largest, population in the Gulf, it is the only Gulf Cooperation Council member to have undergone a civil war (the Dhofar Rebellion). This experience helps explain the Omani determination to maintain a unified nation, free of sectarian and tribal strife. Hence, Oman is the only GCC member that opted out of the Saudi-led military campaign against Yemen's Houthi rebels for fear that the war could spill over its southern border, either by means of terrorist attack, especially by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or via a massive influx of refugees fleeing the war. Both fears help explain Muscat's recent decision to close its two border crossings with Yemen.

Given Oman's aim of keeping the competition between Riyadh and Tehran at arm's length, it was not surprising that Muscat was also the only GCC member that declined to join a

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Saudi-led counterterrorism alliance of 34 Muslim-majority countries. Oman likewise refrained from participating in the Saudi intervention in Bahrain in 2011, again the only GCC member to do so. By avoiding these Saudi initiatives, Oman is prioritizing its interests over those of its mighty neighbor, while maintaining close security and intelligence cooperation with Riyadh through the GCC antiterrorism treaty.³ Muscat's defense and security approach reflects selective engagements within the GCC. Oman participates in the alliance's Peninsula Shield and joined in the liberation of Kuwait in 1990. But Oman never involves its forces outside of the GCC, including in Yemen, and Qaboos has rebuffed numerous U.S. and British requests to dispatch troops for U.N. peacekeeping missions during his reign.

Oman-Iran Dynamics: Qaboos the Facilitator

Oman's unique relationship with Iran can partially be explained by geography, as the two countries share the strategic Strait of Hormuz through which an estimated 35 percent of all crude oil carried by ship passes annually. This and the fact that all navigational sea lanes within the strait lie in Oman's territorial waters help explain why Muscat is committed to working with Tehran to ensure that the waterway remains open. Geography aside, the two countries also share a unique history as the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, along with King Hussein of Jordan, were the two principal regional leaders to initially support Qaboos' bloodless palace coup against his father in 1970. The shah also came to Oman's rescue by dispatching 4,000

³ Author interview with a senior Omani Defense Ministry official in Muscat, October 2012.

troops to help quell the Dhofar Rebellion, a communist insurgency from 1962-75. Iran lost more than 700 soldiers in the conflict, a sacrifice that Qaboos has not forgotten. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Qaboos maintained cordial relations with the new Iranian regime, though the close relationship was lost. Oman's Royal Office, seat of the state's intelligence services, has since kept a close eye on Iranian activities, and it is far from clear to what extent Muscat trusts the Islamic Republic and its policies.

Building on Qaboos' long-standing relationship with Iran, the United States requested his assistance in 2009 to help secure the release of three Americans detained by Iranian security forces while hiking close to the Iranian border within Iraq's Kurdish region. Although the release of the hikers did not involve direct U.S.-Iranian engagement, the Omani facilitation of that effort engendered an apparent optimism that this success could be built upon.⁴ In a 2012 Fox News interview, Qaboos said that Tehran subsequently turned to Oman to convey its wishes to commence nuclear talks with the United States.⁵

At the request of the British government, Oman also successfully facilitated the release of 15 British navy personnel captured at gunpoint by Iranian forces in the Shatt al Arab in 2007.⁶ These incidents appear to follow a similar pattern: Rather than acting on his own initiative, each time Qaboos facilitated a diplomatic breakthrough between Iran and Western powers, it was at the request of the parties themselves.

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Although Qaboos' preferred modus operandi appears to be serving as the quiet go-between, the current Saudi-Iranian tensions have put him under pressure to protect his country's neutrality, which in some cases has proven difficult, if not impossible. For example, he could have been perceived as leaning toward Tehran by remaining silent about the attack on Saudi diplomatic missions there, particularly as Oman continues to decline to participate in various Saudi regional initiatives. Hence, Alawi, along with his GCC colleagues, issued a statement condemning the attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad.⁷ In a picture released along with the statement, Alawi stood next to Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, a clear symbolic gesture of Oman's solidarity with Saudi Arabia.⁸ Moreover, without Saudi support, Oman cannot help facilitate a diplomatic process to end the conflict in Yemen.

⁴ Richard J. Schmierer, "The Sultanate of Oman and the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Middle East Policy* XXII, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 115.

⁵ Judith Miller, "The view from the Gulf: America's quiet go-between speaks," *Fox News*, January 31, 2012.

⁶ "British Ambassador Lauds Omani Role in Iran's Release of Captive Sailors," *WikiLeaks*, referencing a cable written by U.S. Ambassador to Oman Gary Grappo, 2007.

⁷ "Sultanate Takes Part in Arab Emergency Meeting," *Oman News Agency*, January 10, 2016.

⁸ "GCC backs Saudi Arabia in diplomatic row with Iran," *Oman Observer*, January 10, 2016.

Yemen: Moving Toward Proactive Engagement?

By taking the lead, along with Saudi Arabia, on the Yemen transition process in 2011, which led to the peaceful transfer of power between President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his successor, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Oman demonstrated that it considers stability in Yemen a core national interest. Although Saleh has subsequently worked to undermine the agreement's implementation in order to guarantee his family's continued access to power, Oman continues to host members of his family as part of its strategy of maintaining close ties to all of the country's competing factions.⁹ Oman also helped facilitate Saleh's travel to New York to seek medical treatment in January 2012.¹⁰

Between Oman's long-standing commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and its desire to promote stability in Yemen, it is not surprising that it fully supported Yemen's national dialogue following the 2011 GCC agreement. In the process, Oman became the only GCC member to engage with the Houthis and encouraged them to fully participate in all national dialogue meetings. Through this process, Oman not only built confidence with the Houthis, but developed some influence over the group, which increasingly needed Muscat as it faced growing tensions with Saudi Arabia and Yemen's various Sunni political factions. That Oman continues to enjoy the Houthis' trust is evident in that the rebels' political leadership has been resident in Muscat for months.

Meanwhile, Oman has brought Yemen's warring parties twice to the table under U.N. supervision, in June and December 2015, although both negotiations failed to end the conflict. Oman has also, over a longer period of time, been heavily involved in Yemen's Mahra governorate by providing humanitarian assistance and other forms of aid. Most Yemeni Mahra residents also maintain Omani (as well as Saudi and Emirati) nationality.

Oman helped establish a diplomatic process laying the basis for a negotiated settlement in Yemen. Prior to the first round of U.N.-sponsored negotiations, Oman facilitated talks between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Anne Patterson and Houthi leaders in the Omani capital. Since the meeting, there has been sporadic diplomatic contact between U.S. diplomats and the Houthis although no formal track has been established. Meanwhile, Alawi is also believed to have brought up Yemen in conversations with Kerry as part of an effort to exert U.S. pressure on Riyadh to help accelerate Yemen's embattled peace process. With U.S. backing and presumed Saudi support, Oman has taken an active role in Yemen's fragile peace process and, in the process, transformed itself from a mere facilitator to a central player in the negotiations.

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Oman's unique niche in regional affairs has been particularly apparent in cases during which it has responded positively to requests to help with prisoner releases. In addition to the case of the three American hikers, three other U.S. citizens held for months by the Houthis in

⁹ "Yemen's Saleh leaves for Oman, US: party," *AFP*, January 22, 2012.

¹⁰ Laura Kasinof, "Yemen Leader Leaves for Medical Care in New York," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2012.

the Yemeni capital of Sanaa were freed in November 2015 following Muscat's intervention. Oman similarly negotiated the release of six foreign prisoners, including two Americans, three Saudis, and a Briton held by the Houthis in September 2015. In June 2015, Oman negotiated the release of U.S. freelance journalist Casey Coombs along with a Singaporean national from Houthi captivity.¹¹ In August, this time responding to a request from the French government, Oman secured the release of a French citizen held by an unnamed group. With each successful prisoner release, Oman demonstrates its ability to deliver while at the same time strengthening its credibility as a reliable neutral party. Oman has positioned itself as uniquely capable of moving a diplomatic process forward in Yemen – whether by bringing the various parties to the table under U.N. auspices or facilitating goodwill measures such as prisoner releases.

The Ailing Qaboos: No Major Changes on the Horizon

Amid falling oil prices, regional turmoil, and questions surrounding Qaboos' age and health, uncertainty is lingering.¹² Since Qaboos returned from an eight month medical stay in Germany in March 2015, his public appearances – including on National Day and Armed Forces Day, and for his opening address of the Shura Council, following the October 2015 elections – have been short and highly choreographed. Oman's state media has sought to portray a healthy and smiling Qaboos to reassure citizens about his wellbeing.

This comes as the global price of oil continues to fall, which has tremendous consequences for Oman as its economy remains largely energy dependent. These challenges notwithstanding, Qaboos appears to be sticking with his established governing style. Qaboos and his inner circle rebuffed recommendations by members of the influential Anglo-Oman Society, which in January 2015 called for the appointment of a prime minister as part of an effort to help facilitate a potential transition to a post-Qaboos era. While no major political reforms or appointments have taken place since his return from Germany, the ailing sultan is in the midst of reshuffling a number of key ambassadorships, which may suggest that incremental change is underway. While Qaboos is an absolute monarch not known for delegating responsibilities, he has nonetheless successfully established institutions that will survive him, leaving his successor and the next generation of Omanis in a strong position to tackle challenges ranging from economic uncertainties to regional turmoil.

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¹¹ "Oman evacuates three Americans from Yemen: ministry," *AFP*, November 18, 2015.

¹² A E James, "Oman seeks foreign loans to ease economic pressure," *Times of Oman*, January 9, 2016.

Conclusion

During his tenure, Qaboos has cemented Oman's position as an indispensable Western ally. This leaves Iran with little, if any, realistic prospects of coercing a new Omani sultan to move closer to its orbit, even if it tried. Iran arguably stands to benefit more from protecting the status quo and ensuring that Oman remains a neutral party, as a future sultan could build on Qaboos' legacy as a regional intermediary. Saudi Arabia continues to keep its channels of communication with Oman open, but it remains to be seen how the philosophical divide between the two neighbors can be bridged, especially when both seem so committed to their current policies.¹³

Qaboos continues to enjoy broad popularity, which has afforded Oman the space to focus on its internal economic development and helped transform the country. Given this positive legacy, it is likely that whoever succeeds Qaboos will continue his basic foreign policy approaches, at least initially.

However, while Qaboos has successfully resisted numerous attempts by Saudi Arabia to pull Oman closer to its orbit, the country's neutrality may be strained by widening regional schisms. The next ruler, however, will be able to draw upon Qaboos' senior defense and foreign policy establishment, including General Sultan bin Mohammed al-Naamani, the head of the Royal Office, and Alawi, who will be uniquely positioned to use his personal relationships with regional leaders to ensure international backing for the next sultan and his cabinet.

Within this context, Oman's status quo is likely to prevail as the new sultan will at least initially have good reasons to accept the country's established systems. This could explain why Qaboos does not appear in a rush to begin the transition process as he seems to believe that strengthening the country's institutions is far more important to long-term success than grooming a successor.

On the other hand, Oman's position as a regional mediator could be significantly weakened in a post-Qaboos era as the country's unique foreign policy is directly attributed to Qaboos, the leader, and not Oman itself. A new sultan will inevitably be untested, both by his people and by the region's leaders, and therefore will have to earn the esteem that Qaboos has acquired over his four decades in power. These factors by themselves are unlikely to impact Oman's overall foreign policy approach, but may factor into what kind of role the next sultan will play when it comes to acting as a regional intermediary.

All considered, Oman's neutrality-based foreign policy is likely to continue, especially since the sultanate has cultivated allies within the GCC and the international community who have benefitted from its "friends to all and enemy to none" approach.

Author's Note: For this paper, the author interviewed a dozen former U.S. and Western government officials, who all chose to remain anonymous so that they could speak more freely. Any mistakes, however, should be attributed to the author.

¹³ Fahad Nazer (non-resident fellow, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington), author interview, January 12, 2016.

