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Oman's mediatory efforts in regional crises

By Marc Valeri

■ Executive summary

Oman's role in facilitating the conclusion of the Iran-P5+1 nuclear deal in November 2013 and its announcement a few weeks later that it would not join a proposed Gulf union can be understood within a recent history of conciliatory efforts intended to promote negotiated solutions to regional crises. Oman has always perceived political instability in the Gulf and West Asia as a factor threatening the country's own internal stability. This perception of political vulnerability also explains the sultanate's determination to prevent foreign actors from interfering in its internal affairs. The price for this independent foreign policy towards its neighbours has been the country's unquestioned political and military dependence on Britain and the U.S. Given Oman's strategic importance to the security of the entire Gulf, controlling as it does the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately one-third of the world's seaborne trade in crude petroleum passed in 2013, Britain and the U.S. have shared Muscat's aversion for any disruption of its internal status quo and wish to prevent any contamination of Omani territory by unwanted foreign influence.

At the end of 2013 the Sultanate of Oman, whose long-standing credo has been to attract limited attention in the global arena, made the international affairs headlines on two occasions. In November, when the interim Geneva Agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme was signed between the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia and the U.S., plus Germany) and Iran, the U.S. media revealed that secret meetings between U.S. and Iranian officials had taken place in Muscat since March 2013. A few days later, in preparation for the 34th Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit on December 10th-11th 2013, the Omani minister responsible for foreign affairs, Yusuf bin 'Alawi, declared that Oman would not prevent the upgrading of the GCC into a union of six countries, but would simply "not be part of it" if it happens.¹ These successive revelations can be understood as part of Oman's track record of mediation initiatives in regional crises and, more generally, in the perspective of Oman's pragmatic foreign policy towards its neighbours.

A history of conciliatory efforts to preserve regional stability

The Omani authorities have always perceived political instability in the Gulf and West Asia as a factor threatening Oman's internal stability. This perception of political vulnerability in a region disrupted by recurrent convulsions explains Omani pragmatism in the international arena, leading it to emphasise underlying geostrategic realities and promote consensus-oriented solutions. Omani initiatives to encourage diplomatic rapprochement between Pakistan and India in 1985 and to open negotiations during the Qatar-Bahrain crisis in 1986 demonstrated this approach. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 Oman disapproved of this as a violation of international law. However, it was not willing to agree to a military solution and did not break off relations with Baghdad. Oman attempted to mediate in the crisis when in November 1990 the then-Iraqi minister of foreign affairs, Tariq 'Aziz, made the first official Iraqi visit to a GCC state other than Kuwait since the invasion.

¹ This was the second such statement by Oman, following Yusuf bin 'Alawi's clarification in June 2012 that "the GCC union project exists only among journalists".

As for the Arab-Israeli conflict, Sultan Qaboos, the ruler of Oman, welcomed the 1978 Camp David agreement and the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and refused to participate in the March 1979 Arab League summit that expelled Egypt. This support promised closer ties with the U.S. and Egypt, which undertook to respond to any request from Oman for military aid. In April 1994 the then-Israeli deputy minister of foreign affairs, Yossi Beilin, participated in talks in Oman.² In 1996 Oman and Israel opened trade offices (which were closed in 2000). Omani and Israeli foreign affairs officials have regularly met unofficially since then.

This pragmatism was also present throughout Oman's relations with its Yemeni neighbours. Diplomatic and economic exchanges were started with South Yemen from the late 1980s and Oman's first informal contacts took place with the Soviet Union in November 1985. Not only did the sultan consider Moscow as an instigator of détente in South Yemen, but this was also an occasion for him to strengthen stability in Dhofar and demonstrate the independence of his diplomacy vis-à-vis the GCC. In 1994, when the civil war broke out again in Yemen, the sultan initiated talks between the two sides in Salalah.

In 1976 Qaboos invited the Gulf countries' ministers of foreign affairs (the future GCC states, plus Iraq and Iran) to discuss a regional joint security policy. At the Abu Dhabi summit that established the GCC in 1981 Oman reiterated its proposal for close security and defence collaboration among the six countries that would be based on a special partnership with the U.S., but said it opposed any transformation of the organisation into an anti-Iran coalition. Sultan Qaboos's eternal gratitude for the shah's decisive military effort during the Dhofar war was clearly a crucial factor here. Less inclined than his GCC counterparts to see in his domestic Shia minority an Iranian Trojan horse, Qaboos did not break diplomatic relations with Tehran after the 1979 Iranian revolution. He considered that he had no interest in presenting Iran as the sole source of regional tensions, because such an attitude could not lead to long-term stability and mutual cooperation. In 1987 the sultan's special representative acted to smooth the way for diplomatic contacts between Iran and Iraq, and later Oman tried to convince Tehran to approve the UN resolution putting an end to the war between the two countries. It also offered to act as a go-between to help improve U.S.-Iran relations in 1987. In March 1991 Oman hosted a meeting at which Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations were restored. In September 1992 this led to an agreement between Oman and Iran to increase trade and economic cooperation. A memorandum of understanding was signed in June 1998 to combat smuggling activities across the Strait of Hormuz. Since the 1990s official visits at ministerial level and below between the two countries take place on a semi-monthly basis.

Oman's increasing dependence on Iran for gas has given it a particular interest in maintaining good relations with Tehran. In May 2006 accords on oil and gas cooperation were signed, allowing for Omani investment in Iran's hydrocarbons sector, the construction of a gas pipeline between Iran and Oman, the joint development of the Henjam/Bukha gas field, and the establishment of a joint oil company. In August 2009 Sultan Qaboos paid a three-day state visit to Tehran to promote trade between the two countries and possibly dialogue with the West. This first visit by the sultan to Iran since the overthrow of the shah was followed by another one in August 2013. In August 2010 Oman signed a defence cooperation agreement with Iran.

Oman also acted as a go-between in securing the release of U.S. nationals held by Iran, as well as Iranian nationals detained by Britain and the U.S. In 2010 and 2011 Oman successfully negotiated the release of three U.S. tourists arrested by the Iranian security forces for allegedly crossing into Iran illegally. In 2013 Oman mediated the release of an Iranian diplomat held in Britain for five years and an Iranian scientist detained by U.S. authorities. These cases illustrate Oman's value to both the U.S. and Iran as a discreet and neutral intermediary. In an interview with a U.S. journalist in January 2012 Sultan Qaboos contended that Iran was not seeking conflict with the U.S. Oman supports Iran's use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and opposes the use of force against that country. However, Muscat does not support Iran's claims to sovereignty over Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands. Following the closure of Iranian and British diplomatic missions in London and Tehran in November 2011, Oman represented Iran in Britain from June 2012.³

Preservation of national territory from any foreign interference

This conciliatory approach has gone with an unfailing resolve to prevent any foreign actor from the region from interfering in Oman's internal affairs. Just as "communism" was for long used as a label to discredit any people questioning the current political model, nowadays it is the "fight against Islamism" that is invoked by the regime to condemn without distinction every "breach of national security". Contrary to its GCC neighbours, Oman has been reluctant to grant work permits to Nepalese, Palestinians, Syrians and Yemenis because of its obsession with the danger of the country being "infected" by socialist ideas. This "war on communism" even led Oman to establish unofficial diplomatic relations with what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) before 1980 (a number of former Rhodesian officers served in the sultan's forces during the Dhofar war) and to buy weapons from apartheid South Africa despite the embargo.

² This constituted the first official visit by an Israeli minister to a Gulf Arab state since 1948.

³ On February 20th 2014 a British Foreign Office spokesperson announced that Britain and Iran had agreed that diplomatic ties would again be established between the two countries and "Oman will cease to be Iran's protecting power in the UK".

While Muscat has held that the Iraq-Kuwait crisis should be a lesson for the GCC to prevent the emergence of future conflicts by strengthening multilateral links, it has always made sure to preserve its independence of decision in the name of national interest. The sultanate usually starts the month of Ramadan one day later than Riyadh. The *fatwas* fixing the date, proclaimed by Omani highest religious authorities, are officially justified by the country's longitude and have a clear political significance. Similarly, Muscat has never joined OPEC, out of a desire to keep Oman's – more symbolic than real – independence in working out its energy and budget needs. More generally the historical obsession of Omani rulers with direct Saudi involvement in Omani politics (inherited from the Saudis' recurrent interests in the al-'Ayn-Buraimi oasis since the end of the 19th century and Riyadh's active support of the Ibadi Imamate against Muscat authorities in the 1950s) is still present under Qaboos's rule.

In January 2009 Oman announced that it would not join the GCC monetary union. Given the gap in living standards and wages between Oman and its GCC neighbours, a monetary union would have dramatic effects on the Omani economy. This position had no substantial damaging effects on Oman's relationship with its neighbours, however, as both the GCC's plans to set up an aid package worth \$10 billion to help Oman cope with protests in March 2011 and Oman's concomitant support for the Saudis' and Emiratis' decision to send troops to Bahrain demonstrated. In January 2014 Sultan Qaboos also ratified by decree the security pact signed in Riyadh by GCC interior ministers in November 2012, which strengthens cooperation and mutual assistance in security matters. It allows the hunting down of those who are outside the law or the system, or who are wanted by party states, regardless of their nationalities, and the taking of necessary measures against them. It also allows the integration of signatories' security apparatuses to provide support during times of security disturbances and unrest in a signatory state.

“Britain's oldest friend on the Arabian Peninsula”⁴

The inescapable corollary of the desire to perpetuate an independent regional policy has been that Oman has never questioned its privileged partnership with Britain and the U.S. This close relationship with Britain in particular was responsible for the decision by Tariq bin Taimur, Qaboos's uncle, to resign from his position of prime minister in December 1971.

Although British forces officially left Omani bases in 1977, a few months after Iran's withdrawal of its forces, the regular renewal of the military cooperation agreements with both Britain and the U.S. and joint Omani-British military exercises – such as the one in 2001, which was the largest deployment of British troops abroad since the 1980s – only confirmed Oman's alignment with U.S. and British priorities, which is closer than any other GCC countries.

After the attacks in the U.S. on September 11th 2001 the U.S. military presence in Oman dramatically increased to 4,300 personnel in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. In 2002 Oman advocated a diplomatic solution to the escalating crisis, but hosted up to three U.S. Air Force expeditionary wings supporting military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the Masirah and Seeb bases were the only ones in the Arabian Peninsula used in 2003 as operational bases by the coalition during the air offensive against Iraq (as had also been the case in 1991).

Until 2011 Oman had been particularly successful in preventing the convulsions of the region from impacting on its internal political dynamics. A necessary condition of the country's independent foreign policy towards its regional neighbours and the preservation of its sovereignty from foreign interference by the latter in its internal affairs has been the maintenance of a special relationship with Britain and to a lesser extent the U.S., together with their regional allies (Iran before 1979; Egypt and Jordan currently). Even if it causes recurrent criticism or frustration in other GCC countries and inside Oman, this partnership is the key that has granted the Omani ruler freedom of action in the region and at home. However, this policy comes at a huge cost. In December 2012 British prime minister David Cameron announced that Oman had signed a \$4.1 billion contract to buy 20 aircraft from BAE Systems. The third visit of British secretary of state for foreign and Commonwealth affairs Alistair Burt to Oman in February 2013 was an occasion to remind the world that Britain remains the largest foreign investor in Oman. Another \$1.5 billion deal with the U.S. manufacturer Raytheon for the acquisition of an air-defence system received formal approval from the Omani government when U.S. secretary of state John Kerry visited Muscat in May 2013. Defence and national security forces consumed 35% of the state's expenditure in 2012, and consumed 11.7% of the country's gross domestic product in 2013 – one of the world's highest rates. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oman increased its defence spending by 51% in 2012 – the largest such increase worldwide. ■

⁴ A statement that appeared in *The Times* (London) in 1974.

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