

Oman's Foreign Policy: From Gulf Security to the Peace Process

May 10, 1996



Brief Analysis

To celebrate twenty-five years of Sultan Qaboos' reign, Oman has begun a strategic effort to develop social and economic programs for the coming twenty-five years. According to this project -- "Oman Visions for 2020" -- the sultanate will emphasize a balanced budget, private sector development, and heavy investment in human and intellectual resources; all this is needed to develop a diversified economy independent of its oil industry. As part of the program, the private sector has been encouraged to invest in science and technology-based industries. To further bolster this effort, the government of Oman is promoting a free-market, business-oriented approach to establishing cooperative economic links with other countries of the region and the international community.

Oman and the Peace Process

From the Omani perspective, outstanding issues of justice and security can only be resolved through a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. As a result, Oman has consistently supported the Arab-Israeli peace process and denounced terrorism. In order to combat terror, Arabs and Israelis must faithfully execute the commitments made at the Sharm al-Sheikh anti-terrorism summit and must work to resolve the remaining political and diplomatic issues of the conflict. Progress in this area is in Muscat's national interest as Oman's own development can most effectively be realized in the context of peace.

There are numerous barriers which currently hinder the peace process but as attitudes change and partnerships develop, these barriers are breaking down. Through the multilateral working group on water, the Middle East Desalination Research Center was established in Muscat to help resolve one of the regions most pressing long-term problems, the scarcity of water. The center is a training site for research and technology development for use in the Middle East and beyond. This effort is building a core of scientific experts in the region and hopes to provide a tangible model for regional cooperation.

Relations with Israel

Oman and Israel recently exchanged trade representatives as a way to promote the most practical, tangible avenue of cooperation between the two countries. Exchanging trade representatives also reflects Oman's belief that business will be the engine of regional cooperation and that focusing on the economic aspects of emerging Arab-Israeli ties is more beneficial than emphasizing abstract political issues, such as levels of diplomatic representatives.

On Iran and Iraq

Iran and Iraq both pose potentially serious threats to Oman and the GCC countries. Although Muscat recognizes the danger Tehran and Baghdad represent, Oman has maintained relations with the two regional powers. While Oman understands the rationale for the United States' policy of "dual containment," Oman believes that dialogue is almost always preferable to enforced isolation. As a result, Oman retains a political dialogue and important economic relations with Iran. On the other side of the Gulf, Iraq remains a source of instability and must implement the UN resolutions as required by the Security Council. This firm stand, however, does not preclude dialogue between

Baghdad and Muscat. Oman's embassy in Baghdad remains open today as it was during the Gulf War.

Oman and the United States

The U.S. presence in the Gulf -- especially an "over-the-horizon" presence -- is vital to peace and stability in the region. Traditionally U.S. troops have had a role in the Gulf and the rationale for a U.S. presence remains strong and convincing. It would be short-sighted to criticize the U.S. presence, given that a U.S. withdrawal would open a vacuum that some other less friendly, less reliable power will surely seek to fill.

Bahrain

Oman and Bahrain maintain close relations and Muscat is hesitant to muddle in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In response to Shi'i unrest, the Bahraini government is currently attempting to preserve law and order in its country. Shi'i groups, claiming to express solely political views, have crossed the line and are using violence and destroying public property to express their opinions. This sort of destructive behavior qualifies as terrorism and every government has the responsibility to take all measures at its disposal to counter a terrorist threat.

Bridging the Gap Between Rich and Poor Countries

"Conventional wisdom" has mistakenly accepted the concept of "rich" and "poor" countries. Countries are not poor, they are simply poorly managed. In reality, all countries are endowed with the natural and human resources to care for their people and be contributing participants in the international community. The UN has a special role to play in helping these "poor" countries to upgrade their political and economic management skills. Even the United States, the richest country in the world, cannot tackle all of the problems around the globe on its own. Oman has traditionally assisted East African countries, for example, in building airports and roads, developing the tourism industry, and assisting in other sectors of the economy. By solving political and economic management problems, we vastly improve our standards of living.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Rossman.

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