

Oman Seeks to Improve Its Coastal Security

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Jonathan Campbell-James served in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Oman with the British Army's Intelligence Corps, and finally as Deputy C2 at Headquarters Multinational Force-Iraq in Baghdad. He then worked for financial firms in Dubai and Riyadh, and now runs his own Gulf-focused political risk and due diligence consultancy.

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Brief Analysis

Oman is actively stepping up its coastal security in light of ongoing challenges from the "axis of resistance."

The activities of Iran's allies in its "axis of resistance" have brought into focus the major challenge that Oman has always faced in securing its 3,175 km coastline. Oman's ability to effectively police its own territorial waters is one half of the problem; the other challenge is its limited authority under international law to control traffic passing through its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which stretches from the boundary of its territorial waters to 200 nautical miles from the coastline. **Whether within territorial waters or in the EEZ, these waters are heavily used in the supply chain between Iran and its axis of resistance allies.** Omani waters have also seen a rise in attacks by pirates based in Somalia. Oman has undertaken a major effort to improve the effectiveness of coastal security. Given that this is a multi-agency problem, this push is being driven by the National Security Council, where all interested parties are represented. The council sees coastal security as falling under its highest priority—homeland security. Responsibility for the Omani sea area is divided between the Navy, which looks after the EEZ, and the Royal Oman Police's Coast Guard Division, which is responsible for territorial waters.

In the exclave of Musandam, bordering the Strait of Hormuz, the coast is rocky and rugged, treacherous to navigate, and easy to infiltrate by small boat. High mountains slope steeply into fjords, usually without any patrollable foreshore, and the population is sparse. The proximity of Iran and the difficulty in monitoring the coastline has long been exploited by traders and by people-smugglers, known to land illegal immigrants with apocryphal promises that the bright lights of Dubai are "just over the hill." Over the years, Oman has dealt with a number of incursions by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy small boats, both by apprehending intruders and more diplomatically, through dialogue in a joint liaison group.



(/sites/default/files/2024-10/oman%20coastline.jpg)

From the Ratinah in northern Oman to Sur, the coastline adjoining the Gulf of Oman that is opposite Iran, the coastal terrain is flatter, with approaches by sea easier to observe from both land and sea. From Sur to the border with Yemen, facing the Arabian Sea, there is for the most part no coastal road, and the area is sparsely populated. The challenge here is to keep eyes on more than 1,000 km of coastline and then to be able to respond in time to any incursion.

The need to improve the effectiveness of coastal surveillance stems primarily from the continued use of the waters off Oman by a smuggling operation orchestrated by the sanctioned IRGC-Qods Force **Unit 190** (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ddbfbab8da63001dc86275/Notice_Iran_270224.pdf). As evidenced by numerous arms and drug seizures at sea and by downloading of GPS course tracks on intercepted dhows—and as described in successive UN Panel of Experts reports (<https://undocs.org/en/S/2021/79>)—Iranian shipments are **normally loaded** (<https://www.vsquds.info/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25DB%258C%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA/weapons-transfer/unit-190-weapons-transfer-unit>) at IRGC dockside warehouses in Bandar Abbas and Chah Bahar onto nondescript dhows manned by stateless crews. The dhows sail down the Omani coast, staying out of territorial waters, before cross-decking cargoes to smaller craft that come out from fishing ports in Yemen, Somalia, or other destination countries. The dhows typically dip into Omani territorial waters when the Omani Coast Guard is not about, and out of territorial waters into the EEZ to exploit innocent right of passage—a right under international maritime law—when the Coast Guard is present and the Navy absent. Cross-decking of cargoes to shift contraband from one ship to another has also been known to take place in territorial waters, especially in the sheltered area of the Kuria Muria Islands.

Oman has come in for some criticism for not curbing the smuggling traffic, even if closing down illicit maritime traffic is extremely difficult within the framework of international treaty obligations, as experience in the Mediterranean and English Channel proves. With the land border between Yemen and Oman now fenced and covered by ground surveillance radar, attempts to smuggle large items of weaponry destined for the Houthis through Yemeni-Omani customs have largely ceased. The land border is now used primarily to smuggle disguised dual-use equipment hidden within ordinary commercial traffic, some of which is bonded TIR transit traffic originating in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere. This puts more pressure on the sea route as the conduit for larger, unmistakably military systems.

The National Security Council's efforts to improve the Omani Coast Guard's interdiction rate have focused on enhancing the effectiveness of the Maritime Security Center in Muscat, whose principal purpose is to bring together all sources of information to create a live maritime picture covering Oman's coastal areas. These sources include sightings by Oman's four CASA C295 maritime patrol aircraft, which operate from the Omani airbase at Musannah, and by the Omani Navy and Coast Guard. A Spanish company is currently installing a chain of coastal radars, and more sites are to follow. Oman can also be expected to acquire a medium-range drone.



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An arms-laden dhow intercepted by the US Navy in 2022



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The Council also collates input from allies, the [Combined Maritime Forces \(https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/\)](https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/), and open-source automatic identification system (AIS) data aggregation services—all merchant vessels are supposed use satellites to report their identity, location and direction of travel, though they tend to turn these systems off if they are smuggling sanctioned Iranian oil or are attempting to slip down the Red Sea without being attacked. Likewise, the Council is interested in improving its ability to communicate with merchant vessels transiting Omani waters.

To enable faster response times across the very long coastline being protected, the Coast Guard has been acquiring additional vessels. This includes <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewjb15PNvJOJAxUiQAEAHXHXHR0QFnoECEQQAQ&url=https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2019/12/ares-shipyard-delivers-first-ares-85-hercules-fast-patrol-craft-to-oman/&usg=AOvVaw02nL7HiW31kFkhibDuO0k0&opi=89978449> fourteen Hercules 26 m fast patrol boats, which are being procured from Turkey’s ARES Shipyard for \$100 million; these boats are equipped with X-band military radar and electro-optic and night vision systems. Abu Dhabi Ship Building is [supplying \(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294252860_Oman_and_UAE_bolster_coastal_protection\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294252860_Oman_and_UAE_bolster_coastal_protection) additional 9.5 m high-speed rigid assault boats under a \$4 million contract, and the existing fleet of patrol craft is being refurbished.

Despite the efforts being made to improve the effectiveness of coastal security, challenges remain. Detection of smaller craft at sea remains an issue, as does the Navy and Coast Guard’s perennial problem of identifying bad actors within a mass of anonymous and innocent sea traffic. The Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea are busy shipping lanes, and the Omanis are actively seeking ways to improve their ability to separate friend from foe.



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