



US Secretary of State John Kerry stands with Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawai of Oman, Baroness Catherine Ashton of the European Union and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif of Iran before the beginning of three-way negotiations about the future of Iran's nuclear program in Muscat, Oman, on 10 November 2014.

Understanding Oman's Foreign Policy by Leah Sherwood

As an absolute ruler, Sultan Qaboos (1970–present) is the dominant actor within the Omani state.¹ Driving the Sultanate's foreign policy orientation, Sultan Qaboos has been markedly consistent through both times of major regional upheaval and relative calm.² At the core of this consistency has been the Sultan's effort to promote unity (domestically and regionally) and policy independence. While these goals are partly the result of Oman adopting classic small state security strategies, these alone fail to fully explain Oman's autonomous foreign policy. It is therefore necessary to appreciate the influence that Oman's political history has had on its threat perceptions.

The historical lack of Omani unity and independence caused great insecurity for the Sultanate. From the beginning of Al Busaidi rule in 1749, successive Sultans essentially relied on Britain for protection against Imamate challenges to its authority.³ The Imamate is at least a thousand-year-old system of governance established by the Ibadi religious leaders of Oman.⁴ The Sultanate's historical leitmotif for nearly two centuries centered upon Imamate revolts and dependence on British assistance. This created vulnerability, economic hardship and entrenched domestic divisions.

The foreign factor

Looking back, the period between Oman's first Ibadi Imamate in 799 AD and Al Busaidi rule in 1749 was marked by persistent tribal conflict.⁵ Internal discord had long made Oman vulnerable to external inter-

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ference, which was precisely why both the Portuguese (1508–1648) and Persians (1743–1749) were able to occupy Oman.⁶ Tribal warfare was indeed common across the Arabian peninsula in those ten centuries, but British policy in Oman hardened and cemented divisions in ways unique to the country.⁷

British influence in Oman began in 1798 with the first Treaty of Friendship.⁸ Signing it fed the Imamate's rejections of the Sultan's legitimacy to rule.⁹ In 1819, after years of conflict, Britain took responsibility for the Trucial Coast territory and disconnected it from the Sultanate of Oman.¹⁰ In 1861, the Canning Award also separated Muscat from Zanzibar, ensuring a subsequent economic collapse and dependence on British "payments" to govern its territory with effect.¹¹ This ensured a dualistic Oman, which was institutionalized again in 1920 with the Treaty of Al-Sib. It was a British-brokered solution to the Sultanate-Imamate conflict that cut Oman in half by giving the Imamate interior greater autonomy.¹²

The root conflict between the Sultanate and the Imamate was over the Imamate's rejection of the Sultanate's hereditary system—election by consensus is an Ibadi tradition.¹³ Muscat's seaborne influence of trade and colonization competed with the Imamate's tribal and Islamic influences, which also lent the conflict a philosophical dimension.¹⁴ The net effect was that the Sultanate remained economically weak, politically toothless and reliant on a foreign power for its regime security. This internal conflict created divisions that legally existed until the late 1950s.⁵

Unquestionably, domestic insurgencies during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s in Al Buraimi, Jebel Al Akdar and Dhofar were modern manifestations of the historic divisions between the Imamate and the Sultanate.¹⁶ But Egyptian, Iraqi and Saudi support for these Imamate rebellions added a regional dimension that amplified these conflicts.¹⁷ The vulnerability of Oman's divided domestic environment was further complicated by the addition of international factors, with the USSR and China perpetuating Muscat's conflict by providing financial and materiel support for their own Cold War efforts.¹⁸ The historical lesson is that foreign interference amplified the country's domestic divisions, which is why it must be avoided, and Oman's independence is therefore integral to state stability.

Sultan Qaboos, the student of history

Sultan Qaboos' emphasis on independence and unity can be seen in the Sultanate's foreign policy outcomes. Oman's behind-the-scenes mediation role in the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran was meant to minimize regional divisions,¹⁹ secure new economic opportunities and avoid dependence on the Gulf states by hedging.²⁰ Moreover, Sultan Qaboos consistently treats contentious foreign policy issues separately to preserve political relationships and stresses good ties with all parties as a means of promoting harmony.

Muscat's neutral stance on territorial disputes in the region are an illustration of the gains it acquires by adopting such an approach to foreign policy. Oman protects its political relations with the Gulf states while safeguarding the advantages of its bilateral ties with Iran.²¹ As well, Oman promotes its independence by hedging between Tehran and Riyadh to avoid either state imposing policy constraints on it.²² Muscat follows similar balancing strategies with its "neither East nor West" policy.²³ Sultan Qaboos' foreign policy stance is that the "enemy of my friend may still be my friend," which attempts to use neutrality as a means to unite states through dialogue and mediation.²⁴

Sultan Qaboos' emphasis on diplomacy is not just a small state survival strategy—Oman's diplomacy often diverges from other small Gulf states. As early as the late 1970s, amid discussion on forming the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Muscat warned its future co-members that becoming an anti-Iran alliance would be counterproductive to the Gulf's long-term security interests.²⁵ Oman has consistently refused to isolate Iran since the 1979 revolution; it remained neutral during the long 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.²⁶ Attempts to forge regional unity explain why Sultan Qaboos even wanted Iraq, Iran and Yemen to be members of the GCC's security architecture when early discussions on the GCC were occurring.²⁷

Oman's reputation as a neutral GCC outlier has continued into more recent years.²⁸ In 2014, Oman did not sideline Qatar for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood and chose to keep its ambassador in Doha.²⁹ Nor did it support the 2017 boycott of Qatar; it has preserved its relations with the country, but refused to criticize the actions against Qatar.³⁰ In 2013, Muscat also opposed GCC military integration, an idea that was initially supported by all others, but is now widely considered unattainable.³¹ Oman is also the only GCC state to have offered to send peacekeepers to Yemen.³²

What about succession?

Ultimately, Oman's foreign policy can be read two ways. It is a reflection of its limited power as a small state trying to cope with insecurity. Yet, when it behaves differently from other regional small states it shares much in common with, one must look to the role that domestic factors play in threat perceptions. It is Oman's national identity—an outgrowth of its political history—that underpins its distinctive foreign policy.

Concerns about Oman's upcoming succession should therefore be assuaged by recognizing that Oman's deeper contextual framework will always have a bearing on its foreign policy. The next leader will have the advantage of witnessing the success of Sultan Qaboos' stress on unity and independence as a means of achieving national security. Disregarding history's lessons and departing from a highly-respected foreign policy approach would be an unwise (and fortunately unlikely) path for the incoming Sultan of Oman to take.

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II. Analysis

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