

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## As the U.S. Restores Credibility in the Middle East, It Should Not Ignore Oman

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The U.S. and the Sultanate of Oman have been partners for almost two centuries. Because of its strategic location on the southeastern section of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman and the U.S. share many of the same challenges such as Iran, Yemen, transnational terrorism, and piracy. For decades, Oman's important diplomatic role in the region has benefited the U.S. In addition, the U.S. has access to Omani military facilities.

Although multilateral organizations like the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) exist, it is in America's interest to maintain close bilateral relations with countries in the region. Often overlooked in U.S. Middle East policy is America's bilateral relationship with Oman. The Trump Administration should build on existing relations by conducting senior-level visits to Muscat, restoring America's credibility in the Gulf, and viewing Oman as a trusted partner in meeting many of the challenges facing the region.

### **An Old Ally**

Oman, a relatively small oil-producing kingdom with one of the Arab world's smallest populations, is one of the oldest countries in the region. Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said has ruled since taking power from his father, with the help of the British, in

a bloodless palace coup in 1970. Approximately 75 percent of Oman's population observes Ibadi Islam—different from Sunni and Shia Islam, which dominate the region.

The Portuguese occupied Muscat, the modern-day capital, from 1508 to 1648 with the exception of a few years when the Ottomans controlled the region. After the Portuguese were expelled, various regional tribes controlled the area until 1741 when a local tribe, whose descendants still rule Oman today, came to power. Other than a brief period of Persian rule, Oman has remained independent since 1741.

The first contact between the U.S. and Oman was in 1790, but the relationship became formalized in 1833 after the U.S. and Oman signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, the first bilateral trade deal between the U.S. and an Arab Gulf state. In 1840, Oman sent the first diplomat from the Arab world to be accredited to the U.S. Oman became regionally important in a military sense in 1980 when it became the first Gulf state to welcome a U.S. military base.

Today, the U.S.–Oman relationship is broad. The United States and Oman share Oman's only bilateral free trade agreement, which has been in force since 2009. The United States (albeit with advance notice and for specified purposes) can use Oman's military airfields in Muscat, Thumrait, and Masirah Island. There is also a close military relationship. The Royal Air Force of Oman operates F-16s, and other defense export deals are in the pipeline.

### **Geostrategic Importance**

While it is important that the U.S. work with multilateral organizations like the GCC, it should also maintain strong bilateral relations with individual

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MAP 1

## Oman's Strategic Location

In 1980, Oman was the first country in the Persian Gulf to sign a basing agreement with the U.S. Today, the U.S. has access to airfields in Muscat, Thumrait, and Masirah Island (left), supporting its military presence in the region. One of the main reasons Oman is geographically significant is because its northernmost region, the Musandam Governorate, borders the Strait of Hormuz, opposite Iran (below).



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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countries in the Middle East. Oman is a preeminent example, and Muscat brings many important—and in some cases unique—attributes to the table. Specifically:

- **Oman has served as an important interlocutor for the U.S. in the region.** This brings an important dimension to U.S. engagement in the region. Since a majority of its citizens are Ibadi, Oman able to avoid the sectarian Sunni–Shia fault line that has been the origin of so much violence and conflict in the region. This position has allowed Oman play a unique behind-the-scenes role in facilitating many diplomatic initiatives in the region.
- **For historical reasons, Oman has a very close relationship with America's closest ally, the United Kingdom.** The current sultan owes his

rule to the British. In addition, the U.K. helped Oman to quell the Dhofar Rebellion (1962–1975). There is already very close Anglo–American cooperation in the Gulf, and trilateral U.S.–U.K.–Oman cooperation in the region brings strategic benefits for the U.S.

- **For historical and geographical reasons, Oman has a unique relationship with Iran.** Under certain circumstances, this could be beneficial to the U.S. Over the years, Oman has helped to secure the release of U.S. hostages in Iran (and also in Yemen). Often, Oman's relationship with Iran is misunderstood in the West. Publicly, Oman maintains cordial but pragmatic relations with Iran. Privately, senior officials express the usual concerns heard around the Gulf region about

Iran's activities. Oman and Iran are the two countries on either side of the Strait of Hormuz. Like Britain, pre-revolutionary Iran provided 4,000 troops to help Oman defeat the Dhofar Rebellion.

- **Oman tends to offer an alternative and important point of view inside the GCC.** This should be viewed by the U.S. as a strength, not as a weakness. Oman is very cautious, continuously balancing its relations with all countries in the region. In a region where many issues are dangerously viewed as either “black or white,” Oman’s nuanced and deliberate approach to regional challenges makes Muscat an important voice in the Gulf.
- **Oman is a regional and Islamic leader in preventing radicalism and stopping the flow of foreign fighters.** Not a single Omani citizen has been known to join the ranks of ISIS.<sup>1</sup> The Australian-based Institute for Economics and Peace’s *Global Terrorism Index* for 2016, which assesses the impact of terrorism on countries using a scale of zero–10, ranks Oman a zero, making it one of only 33 countries in the world and the only country in the Middle East and North Africa to achieve this score.<sup>2</sup>

### Building the Relationship

President Donald Trump has stated a preference for stronger bilateral relations around the world in preference to multilateral organizations. He has also committed to restoring America’s credibility in the Middle East. Building on America’s relationship with Oman is an important part of accomplishing these goals. This can be done by:

- **Regular senior-level engagement.** The last U.S. President to visit Oman was Bill Clinton in 2000. Muscat should be considered a must-stop

location for any future Middle East trip by President Trump. Although former Vice President Dick Cheney visited Oman three times, he is the last Vice President to do so. Also, U.S. congressional delegation visits to Oman are few and far between. More U.S. congressional engagement with Oman would also benefit and strengthen the U.S.–Omani relationship.

- **Expand U.S.–Omani defense cooperation to the security sector.** Oman has a long and porous border with Yemen, and there have been concerns that Omani territory has been used by Iran to smuggle weapons to the Houthis illegally.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. should help Oman with border security and counterterrorism capabilities. This would benefit both countries.
- **Request that Oman get involved with freeing U.S. hostages from Iran.** Currently, there are four U.S. citizens being held hostage in Iran—including Siamak and Baquer Namazi, father and son who were recently jailed for 10 years.<sup>4</sup> Because of Oman’s standing in the region, it has been able in a legal and honorable way to arrange the release of U.S. hostages in the past. The U.S. should continue to work with Oman on this very important issue.
- **Prepare for succession in Oman.** Sultan Qaboos is 76 years old and spent almost a year in Germany in 2014–2015 undergoing an undisclosed medical treatment and another two months there last year undergoing a further checkup. He has no children and no heir apparent. Instead, there is a unique process in place to name his successor upon his death.<sup>5</sup> Stability and continuity in Oman are important for U.S. interests in the region. There are three likely candidates to succeed Qaboos,

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1. Mirren Gidda, “How Much Longer Can Oman Be an Oasis of Peace in the Middle East?” *Newsweek*, January 28, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/2017/02/10/oman-sultan-qaboos-terrorism-isis-al-qaeda-548682.html> (accessed April 24, 2017).

2. Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2016*, IEP Report No. 33, November 2016, p. 95, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2017).

3. Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Supply to Yemen’s Houthis via Oman—Officials,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX> (accessed April 24, 2017).

4. Josh Siegel, “Son, Brother of American Hostages in Iran Pleads for Trump’s Help,” *The Daily Signal*, March 9, 2017, <http://dailysignal.com/2017/03/09/son-brother-of-american-hostages-in-iran-pleads-for-trumps-help/> (accessed April 24, 2017).

5. Sigurd Neubauer, “Succession in Oman: Clues But No Clarity,” *Arab Gulf States Institute* in Washington, March 31, 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/succession-in-oman-clues-but-no-clarity/> (accessed April 24, 2017).

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and the U.S. should start building relations with possible successors now.

### **Conclusion**

As President Trump aims to restore U.S. relations and credibility in the Middle East, America's relationship with Oman should not be ignored. For centuries, Oman has been a friend of the U.S. while serving as an important diplomatic actor behind the scenes in the region. Good relations with Muscat will benefit not only the U.S., but also the UK and other allies in the region.

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