

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4950 | APRIL 5, 2019

Oman: America's Unique Arab Ally in the Middle East

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The United States and Oman share many geopolitical challenges, and have had good relations dating back two centuries. The recent announcement that Oman has given the U.S. Navy access to two of its strategic ports at Duqm and Salalah is a timely reminder of the importance of the U.S.–Omani relationship.

What U.S. policymakers often overlook in 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, placing a renewed focus on ending the war in Yemen, and recognizing Oman as a trustworthy 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 otherwise dominate the region.

The first contact between the U.S. and Oman was in 1790, and 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 accredited diplomat from the Arab world 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.–Omani relationship is broad. Oman's free trade agreement with the U.S.—its only bilateral trade agreement—has been in force since 2009. In addition to the recently announced port agreement giving the U.S. access to Duqm and Salalah, the U.S. (albeit with advance notice and for specified purposes) has permission to use Oman's military airfields in Muscat, Thumrait, and Masirah Island. There is also a close military relationship. For example, the Royal Air Force of Oman operates U.S.-built F-16s, and each year around 100 Omani officers are trained at military schools in the U.S.

Although multilateral organizations, such as the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), exist, it is in America's interest to maintain close bilateral relations with individual countries in the region. Oman is a pre-eminent 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 has been 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

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4950>

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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. can use Oman's military airfields in Muscat, Thumrait, and Masirah Island and the ports at Duqm and Salalah. One of the main reasons why Oman is geographically important is because its north most region, the Musandam Governorate, border the Strait of Hormuz, opposite Iran.



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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has allowed Oman to 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.–Omani cooperation in the region has strategic benefits for the U.S.

- **For historical and geographical reasons, Oman has a unique relationship with Iran.** Under certain circumstances, this relationship 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). 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. Often, Oman's relationship with Iran is misunderstood by policymakers in the West. Publicly, Oman maintains cordial and pragmatic relations with Iran because of the geographical and historical links. Privately, senior officials express the concerns about Iran's malign activities—which are concerns around the Gulf region. Last year Oman was credited by U.S. officials for enforcing re-imposed U.S. sanctions against Iran.
- **Oman tends to offer an alternative and important point of view inside the GCC.** With the Gulf crisis among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar not ending anytime soon, Oman's regional views should be seen by the U.S. as a strength, not a weakness. Oman is very cautious, continuously balancing its relations with all countries in the region including both Oman and Saudi Arabia.
- **Oman sees Israel as an important actor for regional stability.** This is why Sultan Qaboos hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Muscat last year even though Oman and Israel do not have diplomatic relations. Oman's foreign minister also met with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Warsaw in February. It is likely that Oman will play a key role behind the scenes in any Israel–Palestinian peace proposal coming from the Trump Administration.
- **Oman is a regional and Islamic leader in preventing radicalism and stopping the flow of foreign fighters.** Not a single Omani citizen was known to have joined the ranks of ISIS.¹ The Australian-based Institute for Economics and

Peace's *Global Terrorism Index* for 2018, which assesses the impact of terrorism on countries using a scale of zero to 10, ranks Oman a zero, making it one of only 26 countries in the world—and the only country in the Middle East and North Africa—to achieve this score.²

Building the Relationship

President Donald Trump has stated a preference for stronger bilateral relations with countries around the world rather than dealing with 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.** Then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis visited Oman in March 2018. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited in January 2019. But 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. Also, U.S. congressional delegations to Oman are few and far between. More U.S. congressional engagement with Oman would benefit and strengthen the U.S.–Omani relationship.
- **Pursue a free trade agenda.** The current steel and aluminum tariffs in place by the United States not only negatively impact the relations with notable American allies like Canada or the U.K., but also smaller ones, like Oman. Over the years, Oman has done much to diversify its economy, and the steel and aluminum sectors have played a key role. Not only are these tariffs bad for the American consumer, they also needlessly complicate America's bilateral relationships—especially with Muscat.
- **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 in Yemen. However, there is no evidence of Omani authorities assisting

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 March 27, 2019).

2. Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2018*, November 2018, p. 9, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2019).

Iran in its weapons smuggling, or of knowingly allowing it. Anyone who has traveled to the region knows how remote and destitute some areas are. If weapons are in fact making their way to Yemen via Oman, that is an affront to Omani sovereignty. The United States should help Oman with its border security and counterterrorism capabilities.

- **Request that Oman collaborate on freeing U.S. hostages from Iran.** Currently, four U.S. citizens are being held hostage in Iran—including Robert Levinson, who has been held since 2007. 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.
- **Explore ways to include Oman in America’s Indo-Pacific thinking.** Because of its strategic location on the southeastern section of the Arabian peninsula, Oman sits at the northwestern periphery of the Indo-Pacific region. Historically, Oman has played a key role in the western section of the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. should explore military training opportunities with Oman and other friendly Indo-Pacific partners, such as India, who are focused on security in the region.
- **Push for a political settlement in Yemen.** Oman shares a 180-mile border with Yemen. Yemen’s eastern Mahra province is culturally and economically linked to Oman’s western

Dhofar province—so Muscat has legitimate concerns about the situation in Yemen. Neither the Houthi–Saleh alliance nor the Hadi government is capable of scoring a decisive military victory in the grueling war of attrition. The longer the Yemeni conflict persists, the more that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) will benefit from the chaos, and the more dependent on Iranian support the Houthis will be. The Trump Administration should throw its diplomatic weight behind a political settlement that can halt the fighting, meet legitimate Saudi, UAE, and Omani security needs, avert a humanitarian catastrophe, and allow Yemeni factions and the Arab coalition to focus more intensively on fighting AQAP.

Conclusion

In a region where many issues are dangerously viewed starkly as “black or white,” Oman’s nuanced and deliberate approach to regional challenges makes Muscat an important voice in the Gulf. As the Trump Administration continues to advance U.S. interests 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. Good relations with Oman will benefit not only the U.S., but also Israel and other allies in the region.

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