

Historic ties and shared interests

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The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Wilayat Bawshar, Muscat

When, 50 years ago, the United Kingdom welcomed the accession of a 30-year-old Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said to the throne of Oman, the two countries had already enjoyed official bilateral relations dating back to 1800. For more than two centuries, Britain and Oman have established bonds that include security cooperation and trade, as well as a close relationship between the respective royal families. The Al Said family, of which His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was a direct descendent, has ruled Muscat and Oman since 1749.

In the 18th century, as Oman began establishing colonies in the Indian Ocean as far north as present-day Pakistan and down the coast of East Africa to Zanzibar, Britain was also strengthening its presence in the region, challenging that of France and Holland, eventually emerging as the dominant naval power in the Indian Ocean. The East India Company reached agreement in 1798 with the Al Said family to advance British political and economic interests in Muscat, in return for military protection.

Oman was primarily a commercial staging post between Europe and the Indian sub-continent and shipping companies and businesses were content to work in the relatively peaceful framework of the Omani empire. Ships from the British Indian Navy would regularly call

into the ports of Oman on their way to and from Europe and as part of anti-piracy or slavery missions.

A second treaty was signed in 1800, this time requiring the full-time presence of a UK representative at the port of Muscat, tasked with overseeing relations with other states. These treaties stand out from others signed with neighbouring territories, and gave considerable autonomy to the Al Said family, more along the lines of a special relationship than that of a protectorate, providing Oman with commercial, political and military advantages.

That special relationship was put to the test with the death of Said bin Sultan in 1856: in the subsequent succession dispute, the British effectively split the Omani empire into two; one based on Muscat and the other on Zanzibar. This weakened the Omani economy and made the ruling family more dependent on the British, who provided successive leaders with political and military support. The two states further strengthened their relationship through treaties in 1891, 1939 and 1951.

Meanwhile, Britain's curbing of Omani economic activities meant successive sultans were unable to pay subsidies to the influential tribal sheikhs of the interior, which led to a series of rebellions and attacks on Muscat by those tribes. As a result, in 1895, the British committed to protecting Sultan Faisal bin Turki in Muscat and Muttrah from attack, a move that allowed the British to exert informal imperial control.

Less than 20 years later, the British were required to intervene after the crisis prompted by the death of Sultan Faisal Bin Turki, in 1913, when tribes from the interior attempted to take Muscat. A fragile truce was reached between the Sultan, whose powerbase lay on the coast, and the Imam, who claimed to rule the interior.

A few years later, the British would be called upon again to protect Omani territory, this time from Saudi Arabia's Ibn Saud, in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Desert borders were difficult to agree upon, which would cause problems after oil was discovered in the region in the 1950s. Following the siege of Muscat, between 1913 and 1920, the British-brokered Treaty of Sib in 1920 recognised the Imamate as the de facto authority in the interior of Oman.

In the 1920s, the British implemented reforms created a Council of Ministers with Bertram Thomas



as Financial Adviser. In effect, Thomas ruled the Sultanate during the long absences of Sultan Taimur bin Faisal, who continued to express a desire to abdicate and reside in India, visiting Muscat only sporadically. It was only when Sultan Said bin Taimur took the throne, leading the country from 1932 until 1970, that the coast and interior of Oman was reunited with British-organised military forces.

The Buraimi crisis in the 1950s saw a standoff between Oman and Britain on the one hand and the Saudis and tribes from the interior on the other. In return for oil concessions, the British provided Sultan Said Ibn Taimur with political and military support to eject the Saudis and to destroy the powerbase of the interior tribes once and for all.

In the 1950s, in order to allow further oil prospecting in the interior, British officials helped create and coordinate military forces to reinforce the Sultanate's authority in those regions, culminating in the military occupation of the mountainous interior. Specifically, the British firm Petroleum Development (Oman) helped finance the Muscat and Oman Field Force that occupied Nizwa in December 1955.

Some historians have argued that during this time, Oman became overly dependent on Britain, and that Sultan Said failed to implement development policies, leading to political and economic stagnation.

In 1967 oil exports finally came on-stream, but it was already too late for the rapidly disintegrating regime. Said bin Taimur's cautious approach to development had engendered ill-feeling among the populace, which led to further rebellion against his rule in the southern province of Dhofar in 1968. The rebellion spread to the north, triggering the various

forces opposed to his rule to seek to overthrow him. The pressure of the rebellion was too much for the regime: with British backing, his son, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos, who had served in the British army and attended Sandhurst and the RAF officers' college at Cranwell, replaced him in 1970.

Following the end of the Dhofar conflict, in 1977, the RAF air bases at Salalah and Masirah Island were officially handed over to the Sultanate. However, the United Kingdom retained its influence, with British personnel continuing to work alongside the Sultanate's armed forces. The relationship with Britain remains of vital importance: the UK and Omani armed forces regularly train together.

In 2016, Britain announced the development of a large new military base at the Duqm Port complex in central Oman. The new Omani base will sit alongside a new platform in the region, the British military base established at Mina Salman port in Bahrain, another long-standing British ally. Bahrain already houses the largest permanent detachment of the Royal Navy outside Britain as part of the Combined Maritime Force, which includes the US Navy 5th Fleet in Manama. Together, these bases will provide the United Kingdom with its largest military intervention capability in the region since the late 1960s.

Separated from the rest of Oman by a 50-mile strip of the UAE's eastern coastline, the Musandam Peninsula offers Oman an important strategic position overlooking the Strait of Hormuz. Situated some 6,500 feet atop the Jebel Harim is a telecommunications/intelligence station established by Britain that allows Oman to monitor activities throughout the Gulf region as well as into the Indian Ocean.

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson MP and His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

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A key regional role under His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos

In 1970, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos immediately set about reversing the isolationism of his father's rule by finding a new role for Oman regionally and internationally, characterised by a subtle balance of independence, pragmatism and moderation. The young sultan began modernising Oman's economy, exploiting his country's relatively small but increasingly lucrative oil exports. He also set in motion the so-called "Omani renaissance" by undertaking the social, educational and cultural reforms that continue to this day.

A combination of the country's geostrategic position on the southern shore of the Strait of Hormuz – through which 30 per cent of globally bound oil passes every day – its oil-dependent economy, and the challenges posed by stronger, neighbouring regimes, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, have largely shaped foreign policy, which has meant working closely with the United States and Britain. Formal relations were established with Saudi Arabia following a State Visit by the Sultan to the kingdom in 1971. That same year, Oman joined the United Nations and the Arab League.

Relations between Oman and its Gulf neighbours have been strengthened since 1970 through the resolution of long-standing territorial disputes with the UAE and the former North Yemen, while Muscat signed a treaty in 1981 with Saudi Arabia over the Al Buraimi Oasis, giving Saudi Arabia an outlet to the

Gulf through UAE territory. In 1990, Saudi Arabia and Oman formalised a border pact legitimising the existing line separating the two countries.

Under the guidance of His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Oman's foreign policy was flexible and pragmatic. As the head of a small but influential state, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos strove to make friends and avoided making enemies. Nevertheless, Muscat often took independent positions on regional and global issues. Over the past half century Oman has played a role in three critical arenas: Gulf security; the Arab-Israeli conflict; and global security threats.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the fear of militant Islam among Arab Gulf leaders, combined with the Iran-Iraq War and the potential interruption of tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, catalysed the formation of the GCC in 1981 (which also includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar). The GCC is designed to ensure collective security of the member states.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), unlike Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which openly supported Iraq and opposed Iran, Oman showed its independence by maintaining positive ties with both sides, hosting secret cease-fire talks in Muscat. No formal agreement resulted, but the consultations reduced mistrust between the parties. Similarly, after 1988, Oman acted as mediator as Tehran sought diplomatic relations with Britain and Saudi Arabia.



HRH The Prince of Wales
and His Majesty Sultan
Haitham bin Tarik

Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Oman, along with the other GCC states, cooperated militarily with the United States to liberate Kuwait. Subsequently, Muscat supported the UN sanctions regime against Baghdad during the 1990s. But, at the same time, throughout the 1990s, Muscat moved quietly to improve political relations with Baghdad.

Washington's influence in Oman has been felt more strongly since the 1970s as Britain's disengagement east of Suez in 1971 opened up the region to greater competition for influence. When His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed power, there was no US diplomatic presence in Oman. A US consular officer made a yearly visit, with contacts managed by the British, who had full control of Oman's foreign relations and defence matters.

Following the attacks of 11 September, 2001, Oman quickly and publicly supported the US war on terrorism. That said, reflecting its foreign policy of avoiding making enemies in the Gulf, Muscat opposed the US and UK-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, warning that the allies would get bogged down and find it hard to withdraw from Iraq. But again, pragmatism came into play and Omani officials withheld public criticism of the occupation.

Oman's neutral position has allowed Muscat to play a mediating role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was often ahead of the Arab orthodoxy with respect to supporting the Arab-Israeli peace process, and in the 1990s, worked hard to build diplomatic bridges with Israel.

Oman's 200-mile coastline running from Muscat to the border with the UAE serves as the gateway for maritime trade entering and leaving the Gulf. The main deep-water channels and shipping lanes in the strait lie in Omani waters. For Western powers, in particular, Oman will remain of key strategic importance to the security of the entire Persian Gulf.

Oman's foreign policy of neutrality and non-interference in its neighbours' affairs meant it did not participate in the Saudi-led coalition formed in March 2015 to eject Iranian-backed Houthi rebels who had taken over much of Yemen in late 2014. Though militarily uninvolved, Muscat has supported peace efforts in Yemen as a facilitator and convenor, hosting many meetings between Yemeni parties and Western officials.

As an indicator of Oman's importance in peace-making efforts in Yemen, the foreign minister of Oman was invited to attend a meeting in December 2016 of the so-called "*Quartet*." The group of four countries – the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom – was formed in June 2016 to hold periodic meetings on resolving the crisis in Yemen and coordinate closely with the office of the UN envoy.

Former UN envoy Ismail Ould Al-Sheikh at the time described Oman as being "*part of the solution and [having] a positive role to play by facilitating communication with the Houthis on the Yemeni issue, as well as hosting a number of meetings.*" Since then, Oman has attended several of the infrequent meetings of the group of foreign ministers, which became known as the "*Quintet*."

A trading nation diversifies its economy

Oman's unique geographical position has created a cosmopolitan society and culture in addition to opening up potentially enormous economic opportunities. Oman is closer to India and Pakistan than to the northern Arab Gulf states. The development of Salalah on the Indian Ocean, just 100 miles from its border with Yemen, underlines Oman's key role as the gateway for international trade to South Asia. Geography, history and economics are thus working together to lead Omanis to look outward, not inward.

Oman's modernisation program over the past four decades has been fuelled largely by its oil exports, with revenue from oil and natural gas making up almost half of GDP, more than three quarters of export earnings and up to 80 per cent of government revenues, on average. The Omani government has been working hard to reduce dependence on oil exports through a steady process of diversification of the economy, based on further strengthening trade ties with its oldest ally, Britain. ■

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His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos and Her Majesty The Queen

