



Indian Council  
of World Affairs



# Changing Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States

A Case Study of Oman



**DR. LAKSHMI PRIYA**





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# ABSTRACT



The Gulf is changing fast, and the smaller GCC countries are moulding external behaviour accordingly. This is the third in a series of papers analysing the changing foreign policy of smaller Gulf states and focusing on Oman. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the determinants of Oman's foreign policy including geography, demography, society, politics, economy, security and aid, regional environment and international environment. The second section describes the evolution of Oman's foreign policy. The third section discusses the changing dynamics of the foreign policy of Oman. Lastly, the paper provides policy recommendations on India-Oman relations in the conclusion section.

*Keywords: Foreign Policy, Small States, Oman, India*





# INTRODUCTION



Small states form an essential and integral part of the international and global order, constituting more than half of the United Nations member countries. The World Bank lists fifty countries as small states.<sup>1</sup> Small states can be defined in a quantitative as well as qualitative manner. For instance, the Commonwealth considers demography (1.5 million or below) as a criterion to be listed as small state and constitutes 33 small countries.<sup>2</sup> The Forum of Small States (FOSS), a voluntary and informal grouping at the UN, defines small states as those with populations of less than 10 million people, and 108 countries are members of this grouping.<sup>3</sup> With limited territory and resources, small states face distinct concerns and often form groupings for specific causes. For example, the Alliance of Small Island Groups was formed in the 1990s. It focuses on influencing international environmental policies to address the detrimental socio-economic and environmental effects of global climate change on small island states. In 2009, Singapore set up an informal grouping called the Global Governance Group (3G) of 30 small and medium-sized members of the United Nations.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are a distinct group of 39 states and 18 associate members of United Nations regional commissions that face unique social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities

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and are located in the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (AIS).<sup>5</sup>

In international relations, the study of small states can be categorised into three phases: 1959–1979, 1979–1992 and 1992–present. In the first phase, scholars studied small states through the theoretical paradigm of classical realism, defining small states by their military and economic weaknesses and arguing that small-state policies can be understood as a function of the behaviour of larger states in the international system. During this time, small states were largely seen as marginal actors in the arena of international politics. During the second phase, the scholars examined small state issues broadly from a neo-realist perspective while arguing that the structure of the international system needed to be given analytic primacy. Small states continued to be seen as marginal actors, unable to meaningfully impact the choices of larger actors in the international system. The third ongoing phase witnesses the reinvigoration of small-state studies driven by the emergence of a new theoretical paradigm of constructivism. There is a widespread feeling that practical political developments in small states are outpacing the ability of international theory to explain them.<sup>6</sup>

A number of studies have been done on small states, and Hey's book discusses the foreign policy behaviour of states like Paraguay, the Caribbean, Panama, Luxembourg, Austria, Gambia, Jordan and Laos.<sup>7</sup> As per Tom Lang, small states can be categorised into three types: derivative states relying on the relationship with a great power, collective states that build coalitions of supportive states sometimes through institutions, and intrinsic states relying on

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Small states tend to manage intimacy and become experts at muting hostility, deferring their own views, containing disagreement, and avoiding dispute in the interests of stability and compromise.

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the assets for influencing decisions.<sup>8</sup> Small states tend to manage intimacy and become experts at muting hostility, deferring their own views, containing disagreement, and avoiding dispute in the interests of stability and compromise.<sup>9</sup> Ksenia Efremova argues that within a “buffer system”, small states may affect the behaviour of great powers in a way that mitigates the latter’s rivalry.<sup>10</sup>

Alfred Marleku’s work on the foreign policy of smaller states (Kosovo) focuses on their tendency to secure multinational agreements and join multinational institutions, along with an inclination to rely on larger states, especially the United States, in order to ensure protection, partnership and resources.<sup>11</sup> As per Idris Demir’s study on the national security of smaller states, the security perceptions of the Baltic States provide a logical ground for the security calculations of small states.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that Thorhallsson and Wivel opine that being a small state is tied to “a specific spatio-temporal context” as they look at small states free from rigid definitions.<sup>13</sup> Mirium Fendius Elman has tried to look at the foreign policy behaviour of small states in Eastern Europe through the eyes of a dominant power like the United States.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Susi Dennison has worked on the European Union’s foreign policy towards small states.<sup>15</sup> Also, Lai Yun Yi has examined the foreign policy behaviour of small states like Cambodia, Singapore and Vietnam from structural realist perspective and used

the South China Sea dispute as a case study.<sup>16</sup> Baker Fox's (1959) study is significant as it looks at how the governments of relatively small and militarily weak states can resist the strong pressure of great powers even in periods of crisis. The inquiry is based on the experiences of Turkey, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Spain in the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> A number of studies have been done on the smaller states of Europe; for example, Gezim Villasi has worked on the smaller states in the European Union and beyond.<sup>18</sup>

As far as the characteristics of small-state behaviour are concerned, according to Thorhallsson and Steinsson, small states show a preference for multilateral organisations as it is difficult for them to get favourable outcomes as compared to bigger states.<sup>19</sup> While presiding over the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly informal high-level roundtable on “Small States, Multilateralism and International Law” in April 2022, Mr. Abdulla Shahid, former Foreign Minister of the Maldives, said that small states strengthen multilateralism through the primacy of international law.<sup>20</sup> As per Giorgi Gvalia, David Siroky, Bidzina Lebanidze and Zurab Iashvili, state and individual level variables can play a greater role in explaining the foreign policy behaviour of small states, and small states like Georgia sometimes choose to balance rather than a bandwagon, especially when elite ideology is deeply embedded in formulating foreign policy.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Archie W. Simpson states that neutrality or non-partisanship is commonly

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used by small states as a means to opt out of the power politics of other states while explaining ad-hoc, de-jure and de-facto neutrality.<sup>22</sup>

However, all small states do not behave in the same manner; Haugevik, Kuusik, Raik and Schia have worked on the different approaches of Estonia and Norway to the UNSC.<sup>23</sup> Jesse and Dreyer have worked on seven focused case studies from around the world in the 20th century. Through an examination of the foreign policy choices of Switzerland, Ireland, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ethiopia, Somalia, Vietnam, Bolivia and Paraguay, they concluded that realist theories built on great power politics cannot adequately explain small state behaviour in most instances. When small states are threatened by larger, belligerent states, the small state behaves according to the predictions of social constructivist theory; when small states threaten each other, they behave according to realist predictions.<sup>24</sup>



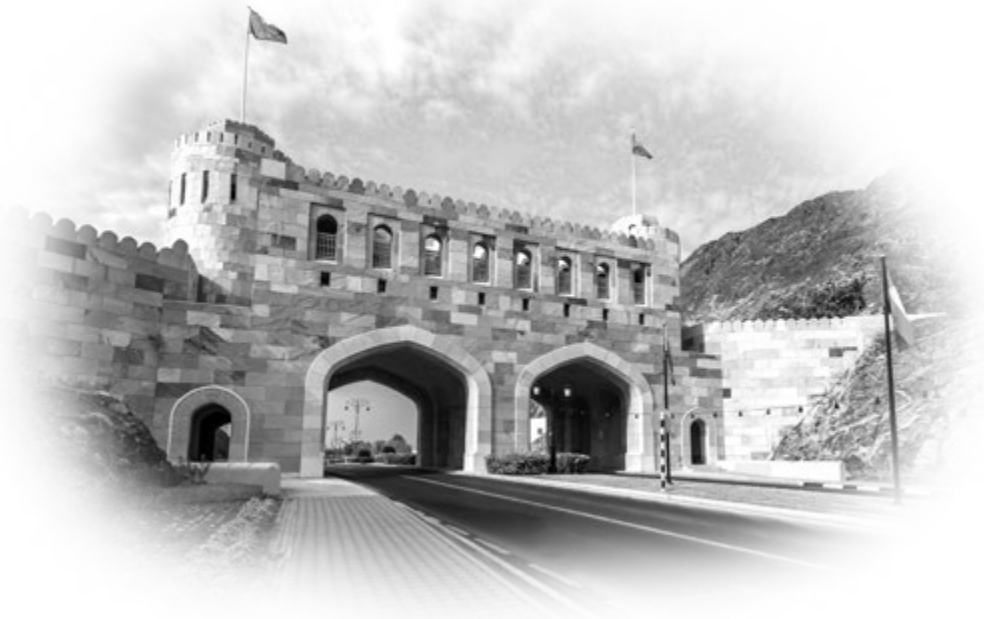
- Geography
- Society and Demography
- Politics
- Economy
- Security and Aid
- Regional Environment
- International Environment





**Fig 1: Map of the Sultanate of Oman, 2023**

Source: Ministry of Oman, 2023, available at <https://fm.gov.om/about-oman/state/map-of-oman/>





A decorative geometric pattern, likely a traditional Islamic or Arab motif, consisting of interlocking lines forming various shapes like stars and polygons, with intricate floral and arabesque details inside. The pattern is rendered in a light gray color and occupies the right half of the page, fading towards the left.

## SECTION I

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# **DETERMINANTS OF OMAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

## ■ Geography

Geography defines a state's foreign policy behaviour and has immense significance in foreign policy formation in the volatile region of West Asia. It not only decides the inter-regional and intra-regional geo-political manoeuvrings but also plays a decisive role in shaping the geo-economic strategies. As per Nicholas J Spykman, regional location plays an important role in the foreign policy decisions of a country. He says that the man who formulated the foreign policy of Manchuria did so with one eye on Japan and the other on Russia, and every international gesture of Belgium is conditioned by the fact that she lies between France and Germany and across the channel from Great Britain. The states of Central America can never for a moment forget that the territory north of it is occupied by one large power and not by several, whom they may play off one against the other as their European counterparts, the Balkan states, have been able to do from time to time with their northern neighbours.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, geography has played an important role in the foreign policy formulation of countries within the West Asian region and small states. There are a number of ongoing territorial disputes within the region. For Israel and Palestine, land boundary and territorial integrity are of paramount significance and have been a cause for the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. The smaller

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countries of the GCC are engaged in territorial disputes among themselves as well. For example, Bahrain and Qatar are in dispute for control over *Fasht al Dibal* and *Qit'at Jaradah* and Oman and Yemen are engaged in a dispute over the *Khuria Muria* islands. It can be easily said that the foreign policy of Iran and the GCC countries cannot be decided without taking into account the safety and security of the Persian Gulf. Similarly, a major factor in deciding the foreign policy behaviour of smaller GCC countries is the presence of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia in the vicinity.

The oldest independent state in the Arab world, Oman is located in the south-eastern quarter of the Arabian Peninsula and is surrounded by the Sea of Oman to its north and northeast and the Arabian Sea to its south and southeast. Along with these waterbodies, the *Rub al Khali* (the empty quarters) of Saudi Arabia is inaccessible even with modern means, which led to the isolation of Oman from the interiors of the Arabian Peninsula and probably helped in the shaping up of an independent foreign policy. *Al Hajar*

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Mountains form a belt between the coast and the desert from the *Ras Musandam* peninsula to the city of *Sur* at Oman's easternmost point and are another geographic barrier keeping the interior of Oman free from foreign military interventions. Also, bordering Saudi Arabia and sharing the Strait of Hormuz with Iran, Oman has been aware of the presence of two strong neighbours and has maintained a softer foreign policy. However, its strategic geographical location has caught the attention of external powers; for instance, the barren island of *Masirah*, near the entry point to the Gulf of Oman, became the site of military facilities used by the British and then by the United States.<sup>26</sup>

Stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea, Oman oversees the Strait of Hormuz, which is one of the world's most important oil chokepoints, and the tankers carry approximately 17 million barrels of oil each day through the same. Surrounded by water bodies on two sides, Oman has a rich maritime history; its nautical connections led to the establishment of a maritime empire across Asia and Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries, spanning the *Makran* Coast from modern-day Iran and Pakistan, the south-eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, and much of the east coast of Africa. Oman's regional influence also led to interactions with European colonial powers, such as Portugal and the British Empire.<sup>27</sup> Renewing the ancient maritime history, it established the Royal Navy of



Oman in the early seventies and is currently known for its artistry in shipbuilding. Oman owned the largest naval and commercial fleet in the area between the Gulf and the Island of Madagascar,<sup>28</sup> and the Omani sailor Ahmed bin Majid bin Mohammed Al-Saadi, the most prominent historical figure in navigation and marine science, discovered the maritime route connecting the east coast of the African continent to India, Ceylon and Java.<sup>29</sup> With a history of being a strong maritime power, Oman has emerged as a strong force in the region. Despite being a small power now, it cherishes and has preserved the Ibadi tradition of tolerance and is a centre for multiculturalism.

Oman's foreign policy is based on the fact that it shares a land boundary with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen on the one hand and has Iran situated across the Strait of Hormuz on the other. Sharing boundaries with these countries, Oman had territorial disputes with Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the *Al Buraymi* Oasis (1952–1955). The oasis was inhabited by tribes from Oman and Abu Dhabi, but the followers of the Wahhabi religious movement had occupied and collected tributes from the area for a long time. Keeping in mind the prospects of oil exploration in the area, Saudi Arabia sent a small force to establish its claim over the oasis. However, following the failed attempts at arbitration and with

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the help of crucial Oman scouts sent by the British, a settlement was reached in which Saudi Arabia recognised the claims of Abu Dhabi and Oman over the oasis. Similarly, Oman is aware of the importance of the conflict-ridden neighbouring country, Yemen. Earlier, Oman and Yemen had a partially defined border, but when North and South Yemen merged in May 1990, Oman settled its border disputes with the new United Republic of Yemen in 1992. In addition, the physical separation of the southern portion of Oman from its enclave on the Musandam Peninsula was a source of friction between Oman and the various neighbouring emirates that became the UAE in 1971. However, the differences over the disputed territory appeared to have subsided after the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980,<sup>30</sup> and in 2002, Muscat and Abu Dhabi delineated their frontier between the enclave and the remainder of the UAE.

## ■ Society and Demography

Oman is one of the most diverse countries in the Gulf in terms of ethnicity, language and religion. Its ethnic demographic composition consists of Arab, Baluchi, South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi) and African ethnicities and in terms of linguistic composition, Oman hosts people speaking Arabic, English, Baluchi, Swahili, Urdu, Malayalam and Bengali. In terms of religious composition, Oman has 85.9 per cent Muslims, 6.4 per cent Christians, 5.7 per cent Hindus and 2 per cent other communities as per the 2020 estimates.<sup>31</sup> Ahmed Al Ismaili's study



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Tolerance and patience are the strong suits of Omani society,  
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on Oman's ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism states that the collective mindset promotes a culture of tolerance, even though the concept became popular only in the last decade. The Omani society does not discriminate based on religion but is ridden with other fault lines; the Omani collective mind differentiates slaves from free people, Arabs from foreigners and Bedouins from urban communities. The study also says that Omani society is changing, and its implications are apparent in political decision-making.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, J. E. Peterson states in his article that the growth of Muscat as an urban centre with mixed neighbourhoods has led to intermixing among the communities and a rise in the level of tolerance.<sup>33</sup> Oman's society and demography have impacted its foreign policy formation; the country is relatively open and tolerant of expatriates as compared to other countries. As per the HSBC Expat Explorer Survey 2016, Oman ranks fourth in the tolerance sub-criteria for the expatriate population.<sup>34</sup> Tolerance and patience are the strong suits of Omani society, clearly reflected in its foreign policy formulation. Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Rideout<sup>35</sup> have discussed this aspect of foreign policy formation in Oman in detail.

However, Oman is going through a demographic transition; annual population growth in Oman has accelerated since 1970 due to increased immigration of the working-age population.<sup>36</sup> In February 2023, Oman had a 57.75 per cent native population, while expatriates constituted 42.26 per cent of the total population. The 2.1 million workforce comprises Omani (0.7 million) as well as expatriate workers (1.3 million)<sup>37</sup> engaged in private as well as

government sectors, and the country has been facing the challenge of providing employment for its native citizens without banning the migrant workforce. In addition, Oman's economy contracted by 2.8 per cent during the pandemic,<sup>38</sup> and the country is experiencing a slow pace of recovery in the post-pandemic years; the International Monetary Fund predicted 2.7 per cent economic growth for Oman in 2023.<sup>39</sup> Like other Gulf countries, Oman wants to ensure employment for its growing young population and has resorted to the *omanisation* of jobs. In 2021, Oman adopted various measures to reserve several jobs for its nationals in the financial sectors, including accounting, auditing, brokerage, insurance, money exchange and property.<sup>40</sup>

Oman has issued the new labour law through Royal Decree 53/2023; prior to this, the labour sector of Oman was governed by the laws issued through Royal Decree 35/2003. As per the new law, employment is an intrinsic right for Omanis, and each establishment has to disclose its annual plan for localisation and replacement of non-Omani workers by Omani citizens. Further, the plan has to be published at the workplace and on its official website with detailed information on the total number of Omani workers employed in the establishment, salary structure, gender balance, and information about job openings. In order to ensure that Omani citizens are also engaged at the upper levels of the workforce pyramid, the law instructs them to devise a plan incorporating the appointment and training of Omanis for

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leadership roles and ensuring its effective implementation. In order to promote *omanisation* of the labour force, the new law permits an establishment to terminate the services of a non-Omani employee if an Omani worker is available to replace them in the same position.<sup>41</sup> The 2003 labour law mentioned that an employer can employ a foreign national after receiving a permit from the Ministry of Manpower, and the permit will be granted only if there is the unavailability of Omanis for those positions. Also, the employer would have to comply with the prescribed percentages of *omanisation*.<sup>42</sup> There is also a provision for penalties for employers who do not abide by the promotion of the Omani workforce.

Since Oman has a large percentage of the native population as compared to the other GCC countries, the challenge of engaging them in the workforce is greater. As per Vision 2040, Oman aims to increase the percentage of native citizens in the private sector to 35 per cent by 2030 and 40 per cent by 2040 from 11.6 per cent in 2016.<sup>43</sup> In January 2018, Oman introduced a six-month ban on hiring expat workers across 87 positions through the Ministry of Manpower's decision no. 38/2018. In 2020, Oman announced that the state-owned companies could employ only Omani nationals. In June, the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries took regulatory measures to reserve delivery jobs only for their nationals. Earlier in May, the country announced that more nationals are to be recruited in the private health sector

and shall replace expats in the public sector.<sup>44</sup> Through decision no. 235/2022, Oman's Minister of Labour announced a ban on hiring expats for 207 professions.<sup>45</sup> Recently, Oman has been clamping down on work visas for female expat workers.<sup>46</sup> The Gulf country is aware that these measures are detrimental to the labour-sending South Asian and South East Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, but has prioritised the domestic concerns over diplomacy. Between October 2017 and 2018, the number of expats in the Omani labour force decreased by 3.4 per cent.<sup>47</sup>

## ■ Politics

Politics is another determinant for the foreign policy of the Sultanate of Oman, and as per the foreign ministry, dialogue and tolerance are the guiding principles. The Gulf country envisions peace in the region and is willing to strengthen relationships, assuring security and stability while fostering economic growth and cultural development. Oman's vision is founded on the political thought of Qaboos bin Said, the Sultan of Oman, who is also known as the father of modern Oman. Dialogue, tolerance, security and stability are the key words of diplomacy for Oman, and it is not a surprise

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It maintained cordial relations in the neighbourhood, including countries with opposing political alignments like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and managed to do so by adopting neutrality on a number of issues and establishing itself as the trusted mediator in the region.

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Sultan Qaboos held the portfolio of foreign minister for the five decades of his rule and formulated the policies with the help of his deputies Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said (1971–1979), Qais Bin Abdul Munim Al Zawawi (1979–1995) and Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah (1997–2020). His successor, Haitham bin Tariq al Said, is the current Prime Minister and is steering foreign relations along with Badr Al Busaidi, the Foreign Minister of Oman; Sheikh Khalifa Al Harthy, the Undersecretary for Political Affairs; and Khalid Al Muslahi, the Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs. Sultan Qaboos, who received his education in England, emphasised on the modernisation of Oman and led several projects pertaining to infrastructure development, the promulgation of Oman’s first constitution, granting universal suffrage for Omani citizens and ending Oman’s isolation in the neighbourhood by seeking membership in the Arab League and the United Nations and becoming a founding member of the GCC. It maintained cordial relations in the neighbourhood, including countries with opposing political alignments like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and managed to do so by adopting neutrality on a number of issues and establishing itself as the trusted mediator in the region.

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Sultan Qaboos steered the external behaviour of Oman with the assistance of his deputies Sayyed Fahd, Qais al Zawawi and Yusuf bin Alawi, and it was evident in his foreign policy formulation.

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Jeffrey A Lefebvre argues that currently Oman pursues a policy characterised by independence, pragmatism and moderation, and it began to be shaped as soon as Sultan Qaboos took over the rule after his father, Said bin Taimur, in a July 1970 palace coup in Muscat.<sup>48</sup> He also states that Oman's pragmatic foreign policy derives its basis from its alignment with the United States as a great power patron and avoiding making enemies; implying that Oman's evolving foreign policy is based on factors including its strategic location, focus on the post-oil economy and the Ibadi culture of conservatism and tolerance. Another point that he raises is about the absence of a long-term direction in the foreign policy of Oman; however, it is to be noted that the foundation of Oman's foreign policy was laid by Sultan Qaboos, who nurtured it and gave it direction and function for half a century. The future course of Oman's foreign policy will depend on Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al Said's ability to adapt according to changing regional and global dynamics without diverging from the guidelines or the core points devised by Sultan Qaboos.

Sultan Qaboos steered the external behaviour of Oman with the assistance of his deputies Sayyed Fahd, Qais al Zawawi and Yusuf bin Alawi, and it was evident in his foreign policy formulation. His first deputy, Sayyed Fahd, was married to a French national and was aware of modern-western values, while his second deputy, Qais Al Zawawi, is the founder of the Zawawi group and was educated in Bombay. It is likely that he imbibed the spirit

of tolerance prevalent in India. Zawawi believed in the power of modernisation and renaissance for Oman and worked tirelessly to achieve the new vision for Oman. He also appreciated the dynamics of a new economy and aimed to build a diverse core of businesses for growing Oman.<sup>49</sup> Sultan Qaboos's third deputy, Yusuf bin Alawi, had communist leanings, making it apparent that the Sultan was inclusive in his approach. Sigurd Neubauer's interview with Yusuf bin Alawi reflects the various facets of his personality, originating from his humble origins, admiration for the Pan-Arab values of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and being inspired by the weekly column of Muhammad Husain Haykal. He had contacts with socialist leaders from Salalah and participated in the Dhofar rebellion (1963–1976). Later, he played a crucial role in the building of modern Oman.<sup>50</sup>

## ■ Economy

Foreign policy is crucial for a country's role in the global economy and international trade, but more importantly, a country's economic conditions and capabilities are a determining factor for its domestic and external behaviour. For instance, when the father of Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Said bin Taimur, assumed power in 1932, Oman's economy was in poor shape due to a number of factors, including the decline of Oman's naval power after the invention of steam vessels, limited commodities for export and irregular payments of subsidies by Zanzibar.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, two decades later, Sultan Said bin Taimur sought help from Britain, which aided Oman by building up the Sultan's armed forces, civil aviation, Royal Air Force Facilities and economic development in Oman. Other

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The current Sultan Haitham bin Tariq states that the Vision 2040 of Oman focuses on reshaping the functions of the public, private and civil sectors to ensure effective economic management and achieve a developed, diversified and sustainable national economy

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countries with which Oman signed treaties during this period were the United States, Germany and France.

The discovery of hydrocarbons in Oman in 1962 led the country to expand its economy in the early years, and under the able leadership of Sultan Qaboos, Oman's economy went through phases of expansion (1970–1986), retrenchment (1986–1989) and stabilisation (1990 onwards). The country has been able to transform from being the poorest Arab state to a middle-income country. Sultan's economic development and modernisation programmes through the creation of much-needed infrastructure in the form of roads, schools, colleges, hospitals, low-cost housing, a deep water port, an international airport, electricity generation plants and desalination plants led to the development of Oman. Despite being a late entrant, Oman's development was funded by the oil revenue generated from the hydrocarbons; however, in light of the dwindling resources, the country is diversifying its economy.<sup>52</sup>

Oman's economy was based on agriculture, fisheries and trade before the discovery of oil in the sultanate in 1962. Currently, Oman is the 21st country in oil production and holds the 57th position in oil consumption. Hydrocarbons accounted for 26.2 per cent of Oman's GDP in 2020. As per the Oman Ministry of Energy and Minerals, the Gulf country had 5.2 billion barrels of crude oil



reserves and 24 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves<sup>53</sup> in June 2022, when Oman discovered new oilfields that would boost its oil production by 50,000 to 100,000 barrels in the next 2–3 years.<sup>54</sup> Though Oman was not originally part of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), it joined OPEC+ in 2017. The current Sultan Haitham bin Tariq states that the Vision 2040 of Oman focuses on reshaping the functions of the public, private and civil sectors to ensure effective economic management and achieve a developed, diversified and sustainable national economy.<sup>55</sup>

In recent decades, Oman has diversified its economy and energy dependence and is going big on renewables. It seeks to derive 30 per cent of the electricity from renewable energy by 2030. To that end, the country has embarked on a number of projects, including a wind farm in Dhofar, two solar independent power projects in Manah, and 11 solar-diesel hybrid facilities in the country.<sup>56</sup> In 2015, the state-owned Petroleum Development of Oman launched the 7-megawatt (MW) pilot project for one of the world's largest solar plants, Glass Point Miraah, based in the United States. Oman has begun its first waste-to-energy WtE plant with the capacity of treating 4500 tonnes of municipal solid waste per day, producing an electricity output of 130–150 megawatt hours, and supporting Vision 2040 by diverting 80 per cent of the solid municipal waste from landfills.<sup>57</sup>

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In its quest to increase the focus on renewable energy, Oman is cooperating and collaborating with countries like China, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

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Oman understands that investing in other countries has the potential to forge stronger foreign relations, and to that end, it pursues economic diplomacy within as well as outside the region.

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In its quest to increase the focus on renewable energy, Oman is cooperating and collaborating with countries like China, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It has led the GCC countries to independent water and power plants since 1994. Oman aims to build a hydrogen-centric economy by 2040, and the Haitham government has announced a number of green hydrogen projects, including a 14 GW facility powered by 25 GW of wind and solar energy. As per the Middle East Economic Digest (MEED), Oman has plans for over US\$ 45 billion worth of green hydrogen and green ammonia projects. The Gulf country has established a Directorate General for Clean Energy and Hydrogen at the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and a subsidiary called Hydrogen Development Oman in order to manage the hydrogen projects.<sup>58</sup>

Oman understands that investing in other countries has the potential to forge stronger foreign relations, and to that end, it pursues economic diplomacy within as well as outside the region. Oman's direct investment abroad has expanded by US\$ 944.1 million in December 2022.<sup>59</sup> Oman is investing in other countries; for example, an Omani project financing fund, Anwar Asian Investments, has shown interest in funding a train line linking the port town of Gwadar with Pakistan's main railway system.<sup>60</sup> Oman has also expressed an interest in investing in the Sri Lanka oil refinery project at the Hambantota port through Oman Oil Co.<sup>61</sup>



The foreign ministry officials of Oman mentioned at a bilateral consultation meeting in 2022 that the country is interested in investing in Bangladesh, and there is a possibility of the Gulf country investing in sectors such as food security, information technology, hi-tech parks, shipbuilding and tourism.<sup>62</sup>

In June 2023, Muscat inked a 10-year gas export deal with Dhaka.<sup>63</sup> Oman is ramping up its investments in African countries; the Oman Investment Authority has signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) with Tanzanian counterparts to promote investment and financial sustainability in logistics, food security and tourism. Likewise, Oman Oil Marketing Company has signed an agreement with Alexandria Petroleum Additives and Misr Petroleum to establish a sale of oil and lubricant products in Africa.<sup>64</sup> There is also an opportunity for Oman to invest in the industry and cement manufacturing sectors of Syria<sup>65</sup> and the hydropower, agriculture, infrastructure and industry sectors of Nepal.<sup>66</sup>

Another dimension of economic diplomacy is to pursue warm ties while seeking investments in Oman. The country has sought investments in green hydrogen from Italy and Switzerland,<sup>67</sup> and in the halal food, healthcare, construction, tourism and oil and gas sectors from Malaysia.<sup>68</sup> Qais bin Mohammed Al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in Oman, said that the country aims to attract quality investments to the Sultanate of Oman through the Economic Stimulus Plan and the National Programme for Investment and Export Development

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“Nezdaher”. The programme evaluates the local and foreign investment environment, analyses the challenges and suggests suitable mechanisms for improving them. In 2022, Oman and the United Kingdom (UK) established a Sovereign Investment Partnership (SIP) in order to enhance their economic ties and increase high-value investments in clean energy and technology.<sup>69</sup> The United Kingdom is the largest foreign direct investor in Oman, followed by the United States. Oman has taken various measures in promoting a conducive domestic investment environment; it has created the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) to oversee and facilitate investment in the Special Economic Zones at Duqm, *Al mazuna* Free Zone, Salalah Free Zone and Sohar Free Zone. It has promulgated five laws to promote investment in the country, including the Public-Private Partnership Law, the Foreign Capital Investment Law (FCIL), the Privatisation Law, the Bankruptcy Law and the Commercial Companies Law.<sup>70</sup>

## ■ Security and Aid

Security and aid form an important determinant of the foreign policy formation in Oman, which has one of the best-trained defence forces in the region<sup>71</sup> and had the highest defence budget (11 per cent) in the world in 2020.<sup>72</sup> Major arms exporters for Oman are Poland, the US and South Korea, while it is one of the three largest importers of arms from Turkey, constituting around 13 per cent

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of its total exports in 2022.<sup>73</sup> Sultan Haitham bin Tariq is further focusing on the diversification of Oman's defence partners and strengthening defence ties with countries like India. Also, the UK is an important defence partner for Oman. The two countries share a historic relationship dating back to 200 years, when the Anglo-Omani treaty was signed in 1798.

Britain's main interest in Oman was the prevention of slave trade, but it gradually increased its influence in the Gulf country. Post-1895 rebellion, (British) Indian army troops were posted for defence of the capital area from 1913 to 1921, and later, Britain appointed a political agent at Muscat, who was placed under the Commonwealth Office for a year after India achieved independence in 1947.<sup>74</sup> The peak of British influence in Oman was reached during the reign of Taimur ibn Faisal al Said (1913–1932). Other countries that had ties with Oman were the US, France and the Netherlands, but the connections with the UK are still strong. The British Joint Logistics Support Base in Duqm opened in 2017, and UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson announced that a new joint military training area will be established in Oman in 2019. The United Kingdom is committed to the development of Duqm Port to ensure smooth and agile operations. The UK and Oman aim to build a world-class military force based on their joint learning from the military exercise Saif Sareea 3.

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Like other GCC member countries, Oman understands that providing aid is one of the ways to maintain good ties within the region and beyond.

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Like other GCC member countries, Oman understands that providing aid is one of the ways to maintain good ties within the region and beyond. Recently, in November 2023, it provided US\$3 million in aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to support Palestinians in the Gaza strip.<sup>75</sup> Oman has committed humanitarian aid to Yemen in March 2023<sup>76</sup> and sent 80 tonnes of flood relief to Libya in September 2023.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, Oman also sent around 20 tons of life-saving medicines to Lebanon.<sup>78</sup> It also sent a relief team and more than 1000 tonnes of medical aid for the famine displaced in Somalia in 2012.<sup>79</sup> Oman provided humanitarian aid to Pakistan after the devastating flood of 2022 through the military transport ships of the Royal Navy of Oman.<sup>80</sup> The Gulf country also announced plans to set up an air bridge to transport relief and medical aid to Syria in the wake of the February 2023 earthquake.<sup>81</sup> Oman issued royal orders to dispatch rescue teams and urgent relief in support of the efforts of Morocco in dealing with the effects of the devastating earthquake that hit the African nation in September 2023.<sup>82</sup> Overall, in 2023, Oman dispatched over 975 tonnes of aid, including relief materials, medical provisions and assorted food, to nations struck by disasters and upheavals.<sup>83</sup>

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The global public observes which nations step up in times of crisis and which are absent. The countries that are deemed the most altruistic stand to gain the most.

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As per Naomi Leight, the distribution of aid has been a staple component of the public diplomacy strategies of various countries. Aid diplomacy exemplifies hard power based on economic capability but is, in fact, a soft power-enhancing tool of public diplomacy. The global public observes which nations step up in times of crisis and which are absent. The countries that are deemed the most altruistic stand to gain the most.<sup>84</sup> Along with being an aid provider, Oman has been receiving aid from a number of countries. It received US\$ 1 billion in aid from Qatar in 2020 as it tried to survive an economic crisis worsened by the coronavirus and lower oil prices.<sup>85</sup> In 2021, Oman received US-\$ 1.8 million in international military education and training assistance and US\$ 1 million in financing for anti-terrorism assistance from the United States.<sup>86</sup> Small businesses in Oman are set to benefit from a US\$ 53.33 million finance agreement signed by the country's development bank and the Saudi Fund for Development. In 2017, Oman received a loan of US\$ 3.55 billion from China to invest in infrastructure and industrial projects.<sup>87</sup>

## ■ Regional Environment

Oman's foreign policy formation also depended on the regional environment and approach of the neighbouring countries. In order to counter the dominance of Iran in the Persian Gulf and particularly to limit the impact and possible domino effect of the 1979 Islamic revolution, Oman, along with the other five Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, founded the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Oman's ties with the GCC have been smooth with occasional hiccups; Muscat's independent foreign policy has been an irritant in the Saudi-led Council. Oman

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Oman's perception of Iran as a difficult but crucial neighbour rather than an existential threat has impacted its policies to the region.

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left the GCC monetary union in 2006, followed by the UAE in 2009.<sup>88</sup> Giorgio Cafiero and Adam Yefet mention that in 2016, there were speculations about the future of Oman's membership in the GCC. Ishaq al Siyabi, former Vice President of the Oman Shura Council, indicated in 2016 that Oman would hold a Brexit-like vote, or OXIT, to determine Oman's future in the GCC, as the Council has not been able to deliver due to differences among members on various issues.<sup>89</sup> Oman retracted that statement soon and declared that the GCC is moving in the direction of unified processes and the strengthening of ties for the longer term. Also in 2013, Oman bluntly rejected the Saudi call for upgrading the GCC into a union. Speculations for OXIT were not unfounded, as Oman's divergent stand on regional issues and the proactive mediation efforts have been a cause for discomfort for Saudi Arabia. The towering figure of Sultan Qaboos, who enjoyed respect throughout the region, has kept the differences in check, but the same cannot be said with certainty about Oman under Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

Oman's perception of Iran as a difficult but crucial neighbour rather than an existential threat has impacted its policies to the region. Its approach towards Iran is not as harsh or intense as that of other countries. It believes dialogue and diplomacy are better and more efficient tools to deal with Iran as compared to aggression and hostility. Oman learned very early that siding with a particular country has associated risks and has shaped its foreign policy accordingly. Neutrality is a defining feature of its foreign policy,

and it was evident from its stand on the Iran-Iraq war. Similarly, maintaining warm ties unless it threatens the national interest is an important characteristic of Oman's foreign policy. Oman neither severed its ties with Syria after the Arab Spring<sup>90</sup> nor became part of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen.<sup>91</sup> It also did not intervene in the Libyan crisis, unlike Qatar and the UAE, and instead hosted talks between the warring factions and gave a call for intervening through the Arab League.<sup>92</sup> Oman, under Sultan Qaboos, understood very early about the futility of being influenced by regional geopolitics and has taken the risk of averting the middle path in foreign policy. Oman did not join the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt when they isolated Qatar in 2017 and instead signed an agreement with Doha on bilateral trade and investment.<sup>93</sup>

## ■ International Environment

Despite being situated in the Persian Gulf, Oman does not share the sensibilities of its neighbouring countries. Instead, it shared experiences with South Asian countries that were British colonies. It had suffered atrocities at the hands of the Portuguese and was a British protectorate for over six decades (1891–1951). It had also become an issue of contention between Britain, which objected to the trade of East African slaves, and France, which enjoyed the 'Most Favoured Nation' status for Oman through the Treaty of 1844. Britain had an all-pervasive influence on Oman even after becoming independent, and Sultan Qaboos was well aware of the need for British military assistance to defeat the Dhofar rebellion. Consequently, he authorised a close military relationship with

Britain and gave concessions to British firms competing for lucrative contracts in Oman. Later, Britain encouraged Oman to modernise its military equipment and strengthen its defence capabilities. Oman-UK military ties were strong for a long time, only to be dampened by the process of omanisation. British General Sir Timothy Creasey, former commander of British Land forces, was the Chief of Army Staff for two years in the 1980s.

Sultan Qaboos was well aware of the significance of France in international politics and understood that it was important to maintain a functional relationship. The lesson was relevant for other countries as well in the later years. Oman maintains a functional relationship with most of the countries, handling contentions, if any, in a delicate manner. The fact that France refused to curtail Oman's naval strength at the behest of the Shah of Iran formed the basis of good bilateral ties between Muscat and Paris. Similarly, despite signing an accord with Oman as early as 1833, the United States interests in Oman gained momentum after the fall of Shah in Iran in 1979, and in a quest to diversify its dependence on Britain, Sultan Qaboos allowed the US personnel to manage the development projects in Musandam Peninsula and Al Buraymi Oasis. Prior to that, the United States opened an embassy in Oman in 1972, and Muscat opened its embassy in Washington in 1973. Oman supported the US-led peace initiative, the Camp David Accords, signed by Egypt and Israel. The facilities access agreement brought the United States and Oman together, and the air bases at Sib, Thamarit and Masirah were upgraded with US assistance and personnel training. The Joint US-Oman Commission was established in 1980 to fund and administer economic assistance programmes





in Oman.<sup>94</sup> For Sultan Qaboos, the security of the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies facing multi-pronged threats required the military assistance that only the United States was capable and willing to provide.<sup>95</sup> In the 1980s, US-Oman relations became sophisticated as there were a number of visits by leaders of the two countries, and the talks revolved around politico-military issues. In response to the October 1983 car bombings of US troops in Beirut, Sultan Qaboos called for the renewal of the Camp David Accords as a model for peace talks in the region.<sup>96</sup> Oman's importance for the United States can be ascertained from the fact, that for a while, Washington considered it a substitute for Egypt and Saudi Arabia.<sup>97</sup> Currently, the friendship and relationship between the United States and Oman continue with a bilateral free trade agreement, signed in 2006 and put into effect in 2009, promoting trade and investment in both countries. In 2016, the United States and Oman signed the US-Oman Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement further expanding bilateral cooperation.<sup>98</sup> In 2019, Oman and the United States signed a Strategic Framework Agreement, expanding the US-Oman facility access agreements by allowing US forces to use the ports of Al Duqm and Salalah.<sup>99</sup>

Oman's ties with the USSR could not be inculcated for a long time due to Britain's active dissuasion by portraying it as anti-monarchical. Despite that, imamates as well as the rebels had faith in the USSR, hoping to receive support during the 1957–1959 imamate revolt in Oman. During the Dhofar rebellion, the USSR supported the rebel-led Dhufar Liberation Front and was optimistic that they would topple the leader representing British imperialism. Later, realising that the rebellion was doomed to fail,

the USSR mentioned that the rebellion began due to local causes and had nothing to do with the world communist movement. The USSR's approach towards Sultan Qaboos softened after Oman and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), the only communist state in the region from 1967 to 1990, normalised their ties in 1982 with support from Kuwait. It began to perceive Oman as a victim of western imperialism. With the coming of President Mikail Gorbachev to power in 1985, Soviet foreign policy shifted away from its ideological tendencies and began to focus on pragmatism and economic cooperation. In this scenario, Oman established ties with the USSR in September 1985 with the help of Jordan. Sultan Qaboos's decision was speculated to be based on considerations such as membership in the non-aligned movement, balancing east and west, and the need to keep PDRY in check. But the common issues that bound the two countries together were a peaceful solution to the Palestine question, the spillover effects of the Iran-Iraq war and the militarisation of the Indian Ocean. The USSR reiterated its commitment to support a negotiated settlement of the border issue with the PDRY, as it was wary of the spillover effects of the Iranian revolution in Central Asia. In the post-Soviet phase, Russia looked at Oman to gain hard currency through the sale of BTR 80 armoured personnel carriers and other economic contracts. Currently, Russia-Oman ties focus on enhancing trade relations, maintaining pro-active political dialogue, strengthening inter-parliamentary contacts, exchanging delegations and stepping-up cooperation between the business communities of the two countries. During a visit to Moscow in 2023, the Foreign Minister of Oman discussed issues of importance, including Yemen,



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Russia insists that Oman holds the chairmanship of the GCC now to push for shaping a collective security system in the Persian Gulf.

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Syria and the Middle East settlement process, with his counterpart. Russia insists that Oman holds the chairmanship of the GCC now to push for shaping a collective security system in the Persian Gulf. It formed a major point of discussion at the 6th ministerial meeting of the Russia-GCC strategic dialogue held in Moscow in July 2023.<sup>100</sup>

Oman shares a historical relationship with China dating back to the 8th century, with accounts of Omani merchants visiting China and Omani commercial ships docking in Guangzhou at regular intervals.<sup>101</sup> During the Dhofar rebellion, China supported the rebels, as for Beijing, the Arab People's mass movements against imperialism, the Palestinian people's armed struggle, and the rebellion at Dhofar converged into a revolution striking at imperialism, revisionism and reaction.<sup>102</sup> After the rebellion, China extended its ties with Oman, and Sultan Qaboos agreed, considering Beijing's potential to contribute to regional stability and the need for trust-building before forging political and economic relations. While China was concerned about the safety of the Strait of Hormuz and considered an important actor, Oman and other Gulf countries were concerned about the threat to the infrastructure facilities posed by the acquisition of surface-to-surface missiles from Beijing by Iran as well as Iraq. High-level bilateral visits strengthened Oman's ties with China and Muscat became an intermediary for the other Gulf countries. It got introduced to the Chinese defence capabilities and prevented China from going overboard in supplying arms to either Iran or Iraq, later leading to

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Oman stands to gain much from the transforming Sino-Omani friendship and potentially achieve a win-win outcome, largely due to Oman's unique bargaining position in comparison to other countries involved in the BRI.

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the end of the war. The current Sultan and the then undersecretary at the Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs appreciated Beijing for playing a positive role in ending the war.<sup>103</sup> China again played an important role during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and immediately became a 'true friend of the Arab nation and people'.<sup>104</sup> After that, trade and cultural ties between China and Oman got enhanced; China was interested in fulfilling its oil requirements from Oman. China and Oman have held annual strategic meetings since 2005 to discuss mutually related international and regional security issues.<sup>105</sup> Currently, China is a major trade partner and is acting to engage the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Oman has enthusiastically embraced China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative and expressed an eagerness to leverage China's growing influence in the Middle East to transform itself into a centre of global trade and manufacturing.<sup>106</sup> Oman stands to gain much from the transforming Sino-Omani friendship and potentially achieve a win-win outcome, largely due to Oman's unique bargaining position in comparison to other countries involved in the BRI.<sup>107</sup>





## **SECTION II**

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# **EVOLUTION OF OMAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

## ■ Post-Independence Oman

Oman became ‘The Sultanat of Oman’ on 9 August 1970 under the rule of Sultan Qaboos, who deposed his father and became head of the state with the promise of a modern, efficient and just government. For the first 17 months, his uncle Tariq bin Taimur served as the Prime Minister and anchored the foreign policy of Oman on the national character of pragmatism and consistency. Joseph A Kechichian writes in his book *Oman and the World* (1995) that Tariq bin Taimur pursued the foreign policy of Oman actively and ensured the entry of Oman into the League of Arab States as well as the United Nations. He went to the extent of attending the conciliatory meeting with the exiled Imam Ghalib, who claimed the Imamate of Oman at the League. After Taimur’s resignation in 1972, Sultan Qaboos got full control over Oman and began to pursue diplomacy, establishing dialogues with neighbours like Saudi Arabia, which abstained from the UNGA vote to admit Oman to the United Nation. He expanded Oman’s contacts, establishing diplomatic ties with more than 60 countries. Today, consistency and discreetness are integral parts of the foreign policy of Oman; the more things change in Oman, the more they remain the same. Consistency is valued in Oman, and subtle changes are introduced in a principled manner. For instance, following his quiet and smooth succession after the demise of Sultan Qaboos in 2020, Sultan Haitham bin

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Tarik introduced a new law for succession and appointed his son Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tariq Al Said as the Crown Prince of Oman. Along with this, Oman maintains discreetness and keeps a low profile in its foreign policy manoeuvrings; it provided asylum to some members of the immediate family of Libyan leader Muammar Al Gaddafi in 2012. In December 2023, Oman mediated talks with Houthis over operations in the Red Sea.

In the very beginning of his rule, Sultan Qaboos outlined the principles of the foreign policy of Oman, including non-intervention in the affairs of other countries, respect for international law, strengthening relations with other Arab countries and following a non-aligned policy. Pragmatism defined Oman's foreign policy; Muscat backed the establishment of a new economic world order while expressing support for western positions on security issues in the 1970s and 1980s. Secondly, Oman demonstrated its capability to perform a perfect balancing act, maintaining good ties with Anwar Sadat's Egypt, which reconciled with Israel, and the Shah's Iran, which flexed its muscles, occupying the Emirate's Abu Musa and Tunb islands. Muscat explained its warm policies towards Jews in light of the Ibadi policy of tolerance. Thirdly, Oman's approach towards Iran formed the basis of its future foreign policy. Despite being the weaker one, it approached Iran as an equal partner; Tehran assisted Oman in the Dhofar war and expected Oman to build a soft cushion for Iran on the Arabian Peninsula.

Negotiating from a position of strength and compromising as required not only led to Sultan Qaboos's emergence as an apt negotiator but also projected the image of Oman as a strong country that would not bow to even Iran. It expressed its concerns

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It is interesting to note that under Sultan Qaboos, Oman was one of the few Gulf countries whose successes in foreign policy helped it introduce domestic reforms and inspire internal unity.

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over the Iranian occupation of the Emirate's islands and the overbearing approach of the Shah in the region while lamenting the Iran-Iraq war and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait without breaking diplomatic relations with the Baath regime of Iraq. Kechichian says that adapting to changing circumstances, surviving them and prospering without becoming victims of the threatening and often dangerous ramifications became the key to Oman's foreign policy. Oman's foreign policy, with the aim of maximising interests and minimising threats permanently, was guided by the decision to avoid instantaneous reactions, never to break diplomatic relations and never to harbour confrontational intentions. Oman never confronted Iran but was at the forefront of the formation of the GCC in the wake of the Islamic revolution in 1979. It is interesting to note that under Sultan Qaboos, Oman was one of the few Gulf countries whose successes in foreign policy helped it introduce domestic reforms and inspire internal unity. Syria is another country in the region that witnessed a similar phenomenon, and former President Hafiz al Assad (1970–2000) used foreign policy successes to foster legitimacy and introduce reforms in the domestic sphere. Sultan Qaboos signed accords with the Gulf neighbours in the third decade of his stable rule.

## ■ Evolution of the Oman's Foreign Policy

Oman's foreign policy has evolved in its own way over decades. During the initial decades of his rule, Sultan Qaboos realised





that domestic harmony was the key to a prosperous Oman with successful foreign policy, and consequently, he focused on increasing women's participation in public spheres in order to deal with the burden of a growing and large expatriate community.<sup>108</sup> Omani foreign policy evolved through four major phases of consolidation, transition, maturity and progress, owing majorly to the interactions between domestic and external factors.<sup>109</sup> Years 1970–1975 denote a period of consolidation when Oman faced the challenges of containing the Dhofar rebellion and required economic assistance from Arab and non-Arab states to improve the living standard of the population. During 1976–1980, Oman entered a phase of transition when, after stabilising its domestic situation, Sultan Qaboos focused on strengthening ties with the neighbouring countries. The Iran-Iraq war persuaded Oman to forge ties with the Gulf monarchies while maintaining functional ties with both warring countries.

Years 1981–1985 signify the period when Oman gained maturity in its external relations and agreed to unite with the Gulf monarchies in creation of the GCC, participated in regional security activities, maintained a neutral stand on the Iran-Iraq issue, sustained security ties with western countries, and supported the Camp

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David accords as a framework to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. From 1986 to 1990, Oman entered a progressive phase, with Sultan Qaboos having acquired an eminent status as a leader in the region, focusing on mediation activities. Oman helped resolve the Bahrain-Qatar dispute for Hawar Island and the *Fasht-al-Dibal* reef and sought to bring Egypt back to the Arab fold in the aftermath of the Egypt-Israel peace accords. Sultan Qaboos warned the Arab countries of the long-term negative impact of the Baghdad Summit rejecting Egypt's peace accords and surmised that there was an undergoing shift in the international sphere with the potential to have unforeseen consequences for the region. Being farsighted, he improved Oman's ties with the neighbouring countries, signing border agreements with Saudi Arabia and Yemen while pursuing an independent foreign policy. Post-1990, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the soviet disintegration, increasing western dominance, Iran coming to the rescue of Kuwait, and other such developments led Oman to realise that it should focus on its national interests as there were visible shifts within the region and at the international level. Taking the middle way, Sultan Qaboos criticised both pro- and anti-Saddam forces, allowed western military deployments, received both Kuwaiti and Iraqi delegations, assessed that neither Iran nor Israel were immediate threats to the region and urged the regional countries to ensure that the war for Kuwait be the last and that the focus should rather be on eradication of poverty.

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Oman made bold moves in foreign policy by willing to have warm ties with Israel independent of the stand of other GCC members, as evident from its decision to help settle the Yemen civil war of 1994.

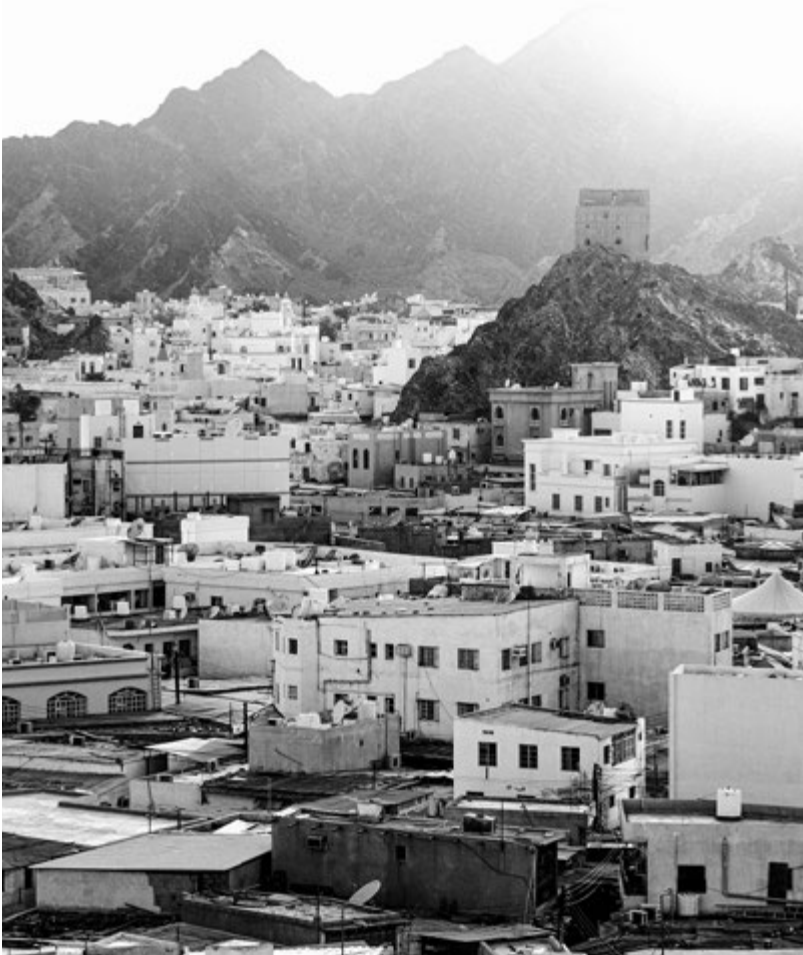
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Also, Qaboos maintained an independent and pragmatic foreign policy, fighting communist-inspired Dhofar rebellions while establishing ties with Moscow and maintaining close ties with Britain but diversifying its arms purchases. Similarly, unlike other Arab countries, it did not break its relations with Egypt after the Camp David accords. Oman played a crucial role in the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, even when other GCC countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain opposed the deal. Also, Oman has not signed the Abraham Accords despite having a softer approach towards Israel. Oman has also played an important role in strengthening intra-GCC ties while contributing a significant perspective on security. Sultan Qaboos was made head of the GCC security committee for his leadership capabilities and knowledge of security issues. Oman suggested the GCC create a large standing army of 100,000 troops for regional security after a small peninsula shield force failed to protect Kuwait. In this context, Robert Mason's work on Oman's pursuit of a large Peninsula Shield Force in its quest for security as a small state is significant.<sup>110</sup> Oman made bold moves in foreign policy by willing to have warm ties with Israel independent of the stand of other GCC members, as evident from its decision to help settle the Yemen civil war of 1994.



**SECTION III**

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**CHANGING DYNAMICS OF  
OMAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

## ■ Oman's Foreign Policy Goals

The foreign ministry of Oman mentions that the policy is founded on a vision of being a friend to all, and to that end, Muscat embraces dialogue and tolerance as guiding principles in addressing all issues. Sultan Qaboos envisioned the active participation of Oman in the region and beyond for the promotion of peace, security and stability while fostering economic growth and cultural development, and Haitham bin Tariq is taking the vision forward. Oman believes in maintaining warm ties with its neighbouring countries, including GCC countries, Iran, Yemen, India and Pakistan, characterised by friendship, mutual respect, non-interference and understanding. One of the notable principles of Oman's foreign policy is its emphasis on maintaining good relations with the neighbours, while helping them maintain the same with one another. For Oman, the stability of the immediate neighbourhood is a vital element for its own security and long-term economic prospects. The second principle is tolerance, and Oman is ready to stand up to whoever attempts to undermine tolerance and dialogue or interfere in its internal affairs. Thirdly, Oman believes in dialogue and does not believe in closing any avenue of communication, even during a crisis. Oman's foreign policy does not look for a security structure favouring the interests of any individual power but rather a security structure

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accommodating the long-term and common-interest of countries that are economically and strategically engaged with the region.

Fourthly, Oman is committed to looking outward in its engagement with the world. Oman's internationalistic outlook is based on its long tradition of trade with seafaring nations. Going a step further, the country shares warm ties with a wide range of states across the Gulf, West Asia and the Indian Ocean, even as longstanding associations take new forms in a fast-changing world. Oman is an advocate of economic globalisation and aims to play a prominent role in both regional and international trade in the decades ahead by establishing itself as a key international hub for logistics and trans-shipment. Lastly, Oman believes in having a pragmatic foreign policy emphasising geostrategic realities rather than temporary ideological positions. But the Gulf country resists the temptation to allow passing events to determine its foreign policy, as it is aware of its geo-political significance and the associated responsibilities that emerge from the Sultanate's location overlooking the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Oman considers the safety and security of the strait its responsibility and, in turn, is in favour of maintaining conversation with neighbours and all parties at all times. It realises that neighbours cannot be changed, and in the long term, mutual interests will outlast short-term difficulties.

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As a small state, Oman's foreign policy is changing, and some trends are emerging through its recent external behaviour. For instance, despite its historical and current linkages with western countries, Oman believes that the international community has not come to terms with the rise of a multipolar world order and still has a binary perception about the axis of evil and the guardians of prosperity. Many countries still have a Cold War mentality of binary oppositions, zero-sum games and selective non-communication, which acts as a serious impediment and a self-inflicted disability. Speaking at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies on Diplomacy in a Multipolar World, Oman's Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi<sup>m</sup> said that communicating with diverse actors for the common good is the key to practical diplomacy in the multipolar world. He gave concrete proposals for international action recognising multipolarity and advocated reforms in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), stating its current structure is a Cold War artefact. He added that the reforms will make the institution fit for today's purposes rather than only offering solutions to yesterday's problems. Secondly, Oman supports multilateralism and is part of a number of multilateral organisations, including the GCC, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations. It is part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, promoting sustained growth and balanced development within the Indian Ocean region.



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Under the able leadership of former Prime Minister Sultan Qaboos and his successor, the current Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Oman has emerged as a deft mediator for its successful negotiations within the region and beyond.

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## ■ Mediation

Under the able leadership of former Prime Minister Sultan Qaboos and his successor, the current Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Oman has emerged as a deft mediator for its successful negotiations within the region and beyond. Its mediation skills have been recognised rightly, and it has been labelled as a ‘discreet architect of peace for brokering the Saudi-Iran deal’<sup>112</sup> and as the ‘Switzerland of Arabia’<sup>113</sup>/ Middle East<sup>114</sup> for mediating the Iran nuclear deal of 2015. James Worrall<sup>115</sup> who studied the mediation activities of Oman in detail, states that it has developed into an ‘Interlocutor State’, using mediation as an important tool in furthering the foreign policy goals of Oman, including its sovereignty and security through the reputation for trustworthiness developed over time. Broadly, Oman has emerged as a mediator state due to its pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, emphasising long-term geostrategic realities rather than temporary or ideological positions.<sup>116</sup> Worrall’s study emphasises that Oman’s emergence as a mediator is not a simple phenomenon; the mediation market is crowded with other players like Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, etc. Oman’s mediation endeavours follow a pattern rather than being random acts. For instance, it mediates

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The neighbourhood is a priority for Oman.

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Sultan Haitham bin Tariq is continuing the mediation activities started by Sultan Qaboos.

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in countries situated in its neighbourhood like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, or in countries with core significance for its foreign policy, like the United States and United Kingdom, especially in cases with high chances of success. The neighbourhood is a priority for Oman; responding to appeals by the governments of the United Kingdom, Indonesia, India and the Philippines, the Sultanate of Oman facilitated the release of 14 foreigners held hostage in Yemen in April 2022.<sup>117</sup>

Sultan Haitham bin Tariq is continuing the mediation activities started by Sultan Qaboos. He is following a pragmatic status quo approach, having served as Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1986–1994) and Secretary-General of the Ministry (1994–2002). In his first speech<sup>118</sup> after he assumed power, Sultan Haitham stressed that he would follow the foreign policy legacy of his predecessor, and under his rule, Oman would make an intense effort to establish peace in the region, increase the solidarity and cooperation among the Gulf countries, and reduce the crises in the region by working together with the members of the Arab League. In addition, he stated that Muscat would actively contribute to the UN's mission of ensuring peace and stability in global politics and declared that Oman would not deviate from

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Sultan Haitham bin Tariq is determined to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy.

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the balanced and moderate foreign policy understanding of his predecessor Qaboos.

The poor economic conditions and the ongoing instability in the region pose challenges for the new regime; however, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq is determined to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy and does not shy away from benefiting from the expertise of practitioners. Unlike Sultan Qaboos, who held the official position of Minister of Foreign Affairs, the new ruler has appointed Badr al Busaidi as the foreign minister of Oman, signifying decentralisation in policy formation. For Haitham bin Tariq, strengthening relations with other energy-rich Gulf countries, reducing existing tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and creating a rational balance between Israel, the United States and Iran form the goals of foreign policy. Badr al Busaidi explains the impartial status, saying Oman's neutrality is not passive but rather constructive, positive and proactive.<sup>119</sup> Oman's mediatory role can be explained by its quest to preserve regional stability and alleviate political vulnerability with the potential to impact Muscat. It is as much a defensive approach on the part of Oman as it works in pursuit of regional stability and national security.

## ■ Moderation in Foreign Policy

Along with mediation efforts, the Sultanate of Oman depends on positive interdependence in pursuing its ties with other countries in the region and beyond. Continuing the soft and moderate approach of Sultan Qaboos in dealing with other countries, Oman looks at forging economic ties with other countries and securing its national interests while avoiding confrontation. As early as 1970, Oman aimed to maintain a safe and stable Persian Gulf and secure its

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Along with mediation efforts, the Sultanate of Oman depends on positive interdependence in pursuing its ties with other countries in the region and beyond.

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borders with Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Yemen. Aware of its strategic location, Oman portrays itself as a dependable gatekeeper of the Persian Gulf, and to maintain this position, it needs a safe neighbourhood. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the most important dominant neighbour and their cordial relations are significant for Oman as well as the region. Consequently, Oman played an important role in brokering the deal between the two neighbours—Iran and Saudi Arabia—thanked Iraq and Oman for hosting talks between the two sides in 2021 and 2022.<sup>120</sup> Oman was able to host talks as it has cordial relations with both countries now; however, Oman did not have warm ties with both countries earlier.

Saudi Arabia provided support to Imam Ghalib, the second leader of the Imamate of Oman, and did not recognise the Omani Sultan's rule as long as the talks with the Imam were not initiated. The reconciliation took place only when the two countries got concerned about the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Gulf. Sultan Qaboos and King Faysal of Saudi Arabia met in 1971 on equal footing, and Saudi Arabia began to perceive the Soviet-inspired

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Oman mediated between Saudi Arabia and Iran after a break of three years in 1991, and it did not come as a surprise when it hosted several rounds of confidence-building talks between the two Gulf countries before the deal was finally brokered by China in March 2023.

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threat of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) to Oman as a threat to itself owing to its growing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for the free flow of oil. However, during the Dhofar rebellion, Omani troops were trained in Saudi Arabia, and the Sultanate received light weapons and 12 million grants for development projects. By 1975, the total amount of Saudi aid to Oman had reached US\$ 150 million.

Later, Saudi-Oman relations improved with the signing of an economic cooperation agreement and Saudi Arabia providing humanitarian aid to Oman. Riyadh mediated a ceasefire between Muscat and Aden, and the two countries were in consensus on opposing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. They were also concerned about the growing presence of the Soviets in the PDRY and the Horn of Africa. They went on to sign an internal security agreement and ratify the border agreement.<sup>121</sup> Oman mediated between Saudi Arabia and Iran after a break of three years in 1991, and it did not come as a surprise when it hosted several rounds of confidence-building talks between the two Gulf countries before the deal was finally brokered by China in March 2023.

It is to be noted that Oman did not share the same level of relations with Saudi Arabia as other smaller GCC countries owing to its independent approach and focus on sovereignty. It did not abandon its ties with Iraq, as Saudi Arabia did during the Iran-Iraq war, and maintained neutral relations with Baghdad as well as Tehran. Oman neither responded to Saudi King Abdullah's call for forming a Gulf Union nor did it participate in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen or join the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt in boycotting Qatar. It was one of the few countries in the Arab world that did not cut diplomatic

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Oman is the UAE's second-largest GCC trading partner, accounting for 20 per cent of total Emirati trade with GCC countries.

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ties with Syria during the crisis and maintained ties with Iran despite Saudi Arabia and others severing relations with Tehran 5 years ago. Also, in a way, Oman has been engaged in balancing its ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran; it facilitated talks between Iran and the United States prior to the signing of the JCPOA and, at the same time, joined the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to fight terrorism.

Moreover, Haitham bin Tariq's first foreign trip as Sultan of Oman to Saudi Arabia in July 2021 reviewed opportunities for cooperation through partnerships among the private sector<sup>122</sup> and since then, relations have been on an upswing. In December 2021, the Saudi Crown Prince visited Oman as part of his Gulf tour, and the two countries signed deals worth US\$ 30 billion.<sup>123</sup> Currently, bilateral relations are improving with the opening of the land bridge and the establishment of the Omani-Saudi Coordination Council in 2021. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman said that the bridge will lead to the smooth movement of the citizens of the two countries and the integration of supply chains. In 2022, the Saudi Crown Prince pushed the Public Investment Fund (PIF) to establish the 'Saudi-Omani Investment Company' with a US\$ 5 billion fund to take advantage of investment opportunities in different sectors.<sup>124</sup> In July 2023, the Kingdom's PIF inked a deal with the Oman Investment Authority in a move that will help its portfolio companies unlock investment opportunities in Oman.<sup>125</sup>



Oman also joined Saudi Arabia in allowing Israel to use its airspace in February 2023.<sup>126</sup>

Oman's relations with the UAE can be understood by the fact that Sultan Said of Oman and Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi had close ties, and the latter was the only head of state to have visited Oman after Sultan Qaboos came to power. Oman warmly welcomed the creation of the UAE in 1971 and received an offer to build roads connecting the UAE to the Musandam Peninsula, with the assistance of US\$ 200 million. In 1985, the two countries signed the bilateral security agreement; however, it was much later that the two countries signed the border agreement concerning the boundary sectors from eastern *Uqaidat* to *Al Dara* in 1999,<sup>127</sup> and the two countries signed the final demarcation of borders agreement in 2008.<sup>128</sup> In 1991, a joint committee was established, and it allowed citizens to enter both countries by using their Emirates ID instead of passports.<sup>129</sup> In recent decades, the ties have improved; they supported and welcomed the UAE's signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020,<sup>130</sup> and 2 years later, in 2022, the UAE President Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed al Nahyan visited Oman, affirming the beginning of a new phase in bilateral relations under the leadership of Haitham bin Tariq. During the visit, Abu Dhabi investment fund ADQ and the Oman Investment Authority agreed to establish a 592-million-dirham venture capital fund to invest in technology companies in Oman and explore 30 billion dirhams of investments in sectors across renewable energy, food and agriculture, communications, logistics and healthcare.<sup>131</sup> The two countries stressed the optimal image of strong relations of cooperation among the GCC.<sup>132</sup> Oman is the UAE's second-largest GCC trading partner, accounting for 20 per cent of total Emirati

trade with GCC countries.<sup>133</sup> The UAE joined Oman in celebrating the 53rd national day in November 2023 as Oman pursues the goals of the Oman Vision 2040 with plans to diversify and strengthen the national economy, achieve sustainable economic growth of 5 per cent per year, increase the average income per person by up to 90 per cent, build a high-quality education system and develop a national system for scientific research, innovation and creativity that will help create a knowledge-based economy. The vision also aims to create a favourable environment for the labour market and employment and enable the private sector to lead a competitive national economy integrated with the global economy.<sup>134</sup>

Oman's relations with Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar have been based on the divergence of opinion on the influence of western actors in the Gulf. While Oman still maintained its ties with the United Kingdom, the other GCC countries emphasised limiting their role in the region. Kuwait provided significant financial aid to Oman, which welcomed the Kuwaiti call for a regional political union and the opportunity to host the Muscat Summit (1976) examining Gulf security matters. But in the 1980s, Oman's engagements with these countries became more structured under the umbrella of the GCC and bilateral ties took the shape of group meetings on security issues and the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>135</sup> Oman did not shy away from taking the help of external actors, as evident from Sultan's Qaboos speech on the 10<sup>th</sup> National Day, where he said that Oman had no choice but to take any help available for maintaining regional stability. He agreed and justified taking US support in the wake of the Russian presence in South Yemen, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, etc., in an interview with *Al*





*Majalla*, saying the area will need US air and there must be facilities for rendering it.

Sultan Haitham has shown openness to all neighbouring countries and started building close relations with all Arab Gulf states, putting an end to an era when the sultanate was viewed as an isolated and secluded country.<sup>136</sup> Currently, Oman has warm ties with Bahrain; more than 800 Bahraini companies have invested in the Sultanate. The private sector in the two countries agreed in March 2022 to establish Oman-Bahrain Investment Holding Company for investment in the field of food security, among other areas.<sup>137</sup> Sultan's keenness to adopt a balanced foreign policy has so far proved successful, especially in light of the current regional and international situation marked by unprecedented turbulence. Since the establishment of the Omani-Bahraini Committee in 2006, 28 areas of cooperation and memoranda of understanding, in education, environment, economy and municipal affairs, have been explored.<sup>138</sup> Sultan Haitham bin Tariq visited Bahrain in 2022, and the two sides stressed the need to secure the solidarity of the GCC and ensure the collaboration of its countries and peoples so that they could confront all current challenges and realise the GCC's economic unity.<sup>139</sup> The two countries signed agreements on security, economy, investment, space science and technology, air navigation, maritime transport, ports, culture, tourism, studies, research and the environment. King Hamad commended the efforts of Sultan

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Haitham in promoting relations between the two countries, lauding comprehensive development in Oman and its pioneering role in boosting the GCC and pan-Arab work. King Hamad then bestowed upon the Sultan of Oman the Order of Sheikh Eisa bin Salman Al Khalifa—Excellent Class—in appreciation of his efforts to bolster Bahraini-Omani relations and develop joint cooperation. In turn, Sultan Haitham conferred the Oman Order on the Bahraini King—First Class—in recognition of his pioneering role in strengthening brotherly ties and developing Bahraini-Omani cooperation.<sup>140</sup> The Crown Prince of Oman, Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, visited Bahrain in January 2024.

As per the Ministry of Oman, relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait stand as a regional and international role model. Characterised by sincere brotherhood and cooperation, these ties have been strengthened and go beyond the traditional good relations between states to reach new heights based on the history, social heritage and common political positions that bring the two countries together. Relations between Oman and Kuwait have ancient roots, the most significant of which is maritime communication through their ports. Kuwaiti commercial ships used Omani ports as a starting point towards East Asia, East Africa and many other destinations. This communication helped create the positive social relations between the Omani and Kuwaiti people that continue today.<sup>141</sup> The awarding of national honours, such as the ‘Order of Mubarak the Great’ by Kuwait to the late



Sultan Qaboos bin Said and the reciprocation with the ‘Civil Order of Oman of the First Class’ on the late Emir Sheikh Sabah al Ahmad al Jaber al Sabah in 2009, further symbolises the profound respect and admiration between the two countries. The oil sector, a vital component of both economies, has seen significant collaboration, notably with OQ8, a joint venture that marks a significant step in economic cooperation.<sup>142</sup> The Duqm refinery is a US\$ 9 billion joint venture between Oman’s OQ Group and Kuwait Petroleum International in Oman’s Duqm Industrial Zone. The refinery represents a valuable addition to the global energy market by providing high-quality oil products and enhancing Oman’s refining capabilities by up to about 500,000 barrels per day.<sup>143</sup> The state visit of the Kuwaiti Emir to Oman in February 2024 is his second external visit.<sup>144</sup> The strongest moment for the two countries was when Oman supported Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation of 1991 and in 2020, when both countries lost their heads of state and new rulers came to power.<sup>145</sup> Economic and trade relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait are witnessing remarkable growth due to the efforts made by the leaderships of the two countries to activate the agreements and MoU signed between them. The private sector in both countries seeks to take advantage of the investment opportunities available in lucrative

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The awarding of national honours, such as the ‘Order of Mubarak the Great’ by Kuwait to the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said and the reciprocation with the ‘Civil Order of Oman of the First Class’ on the late Emir Sheikh Sabah al Ahmad al Jaber al Sabah in 2009, further symbolises the profound respect and admiration between the two countries.

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sectors to expand and deepen areas of cooperation and mutual investment to achieve their common interests.<sup>146</sup>

The Oman-Kuwait joint committee welcomed the joint tripartite statement issued by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the People's Republic of China on restoring ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran. They affirmed that this step is essential to maintain security and stability in the region.<sup>147</sup> The Ambassador of Kuwait to Oman, Mohammad Al-Hajri, congratulated Oman on the 53rd anniversary of National Day, commending the deep-rooted Kuwaiti-Omani ties.<sup>148</sup> The new, still-unsteady leaders of Kuwait and Oman cannot afford to take the same risks as their predecessors.<sup>149</sup>

As far as the Oman-Qatar ties are concerned, the embassy of Qatar in Oman states that the State of Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman have close bilateral relations. These relations were consolidated in all areas after the independence of the State of Qatar. In 1973, Emiri Decree No. (2) was issued to appoint the first ambassador of the State of Qatar to the Sultanate of Oman. The bilateral relations between the State of Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman are characterised by stability and growth.<sup>150</sup> Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said paid a visit to Doha in November 2021, underscoring the longstanding ties between these two Gulf Arab countries. The two countries signed agreements regarding taxation, ports, tourism, defence, labour and investment. With Oman facing grave economic challenges amid the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and a fall in oil prices, these agreements will help the Sultanate's debt-burdened economy.<sup>151</sup>

Yemen is another important neighbour for Oman, with the potential to jeopardise its stability anytime. Oman has good



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Oman and Iran share diplomatic and economic ties dating back to the Pahlavi period.

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relations with both the Yemeni government and the Houthis rebels; it also hosts direct talks between the rebels and the United States. Oman views Riyadh's intervention in Yemen as a mistake and dismisses the narrative that portrays the Houthis as Iranian puppets. Instead, Muscat perceives the group as part of the Yemeni community.<sup>152</sup> It is important to mention the significance of the *al-Mahra* coast for Saudi Arabia and Oman. The former perceives it as an important strategic area on the Arabian Sea, far from Iran's control of the Strait of Hormuz, and considers it a potential threat for drug and arms smuggling activities. It was also intended to build an oil pipeline that would carry oil from Saudi Arabia to the coast of *al-Mahra* and the Nishtun seaport, providing direct access to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean in wake of the uncertainty surrounding the Strait of Hormuz. On the other hand, Oman believes that the presence of Saudi and Emirati forces in *al-Mahra* holds a threat to its national security.<sup>153</sup>

As per Kechichian, Yemen turned out to be a strategic ally rather than an ideological foe. Sultan Qaboos strengthened the bilateral relations when the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen united in May 1990 and signed the border agreement in 1992. Currently, Yemen represents for Oman both a humanitarian burden and a security challenge.<sup>154</sup> Yemeni refugees and injured have been benefiting from Oman's efforts to absorb them and provide free medical care. With the number of internally displaced people standing at 4.5 million, Yemen is a potential source for an influx of refugees into Oman, which would

certainly weigh heavily on the Sultanate's weak economy. In terms of national security, militarisation and possible terrorist activities in Yemen's *al-Mahra* Governorate pose a major security concern for Oman. Afrah Nasser writes that its involvement in the Yemen conflict has gone through several phases: firstly, it chose to present a prospective peace deal instead of participating in the conflict militarily, and in the second phase, it quietly led covert mediation efforts between the parties. Currently, Oman has been hosting direct talks between the Houthi armed group and Saudi Arabia ever since a United Nations-sponsored truce ended in October 2022 without an extension.<sup>155</sup>

Similarly, Oman and Iran share diplomatic and economic ties dating back to the Pahlavi period. Oman considers Iran not to be a threat perceived by the other Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Sultan Qaboos agreed with Iran's proposition that regional security is paramount and that collective cooperation is a pre-requisite. Qaboos recognised Iran's superior military power and entered into a continental shelf de-limitation agreement in 1975. Keeping in mind the significance of the need for safe passage through the Strait, Oman considers Iran an important partner country. Oman-Iran relations entered a critical phase at the beginning of the 1980s as Tehran began to appreciate Muscat's strategic position during the Iran-Iraq war and Oman felt that only Iran could balance Iraq. Oman had taken Iran's military support in putting down the Dhofar rebellion. In 1989, a joint economic-industrial committee was formed, and MoU on the security of straits was signed in 1995. Iran-Oman relations were damaged after Iran began running attacks on tanker movements in the Persian Gulf and placed anti-ship missile launchers along the Strait of Hormuz during the Gulf war.<sup>156</sup> Later, Oman came closer to Iran by brokering the release



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of 15 British sailors in 2007, exchanging US prisoners in 2011 and trying to bring Iran to the JCPOA in 2015. The two countries also signed an agreement to prevent smuggling in the Gulf of Oman. In 2022, the Iranian President visited Oman, and the visit was reciprocated by Sultan Haitham's visit to Tehran in May 2023. An important pillar of Oman-Iran relations has been the Muscat's balancing with its Western neighbours and allies on the one hand and Tehran on the other. Also, regional security and energy are the main axes of Iran-Oman relations.<sup>157</sup> Oman does not consider Iran's nuclear programme a threat to the security of the region and can play an important role in the complete resolution of the nuclear agreement. The joint statement of Oman and Iran in May 2023 emphasised the active role of the private sector in expanding the horizons of economic cooperation.<sup>158</sup> There are speculations that Oman will be able to bring Iran and the United States together for the revival of the JCPOA.<sup>159</sup> The two countries have exempted travel visas, leading to the facilitation of tourism, an increased number of flights and a 41 per cent increase in trade volume in the first 8 months of 2023. Iran and Oman are considering signing a preferential trade agreement and using national currencies in economic cooperation soon.<sup>160</sup> Iran considers Oman as a station to

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deliver its gas to Asian countries, and to this end, the two countries will build a pipeline of 260 kilometres from the Iranian province of Hormozjan to the Omani port of Sahhar. It is reported that Oman will export the gas to international markets as well as be able to use it in its domestic market as well.<sup>161</sup> Trade exchange between Oman and Iran grew by 27.9 per cent to reach OMR320.8 million by the end of 2022.<sup>162</sup> Around 2700 Iranian companies have invested in Oman.<sup>163</sup> As per Mohammed Binhuwaidin, Oman responds to the rise of Iran through strategic hedging<sup>164</sup> while according to Marc Valeri, Shiite groups in Oman have traditionally been invaluable allies of the rulers and have vested interests in maintaining the existing political order.<sup>165</sup> The expansion of Oman-Iran ties is evident from the fact that the two countries expect the total trade figure to reach US\$ 5 billion in the near future, and non-oil exports to Oman reached US\$ 916 million from March 2023 to January 2024.<sup>166</sup>

On the contrary, Oman remained at ideological odds with Iraq, which supported the rebels in the Dhofar rebellion. Iraq championed the cause of Baathist politics, alleging cordial relations with western powers were akin to being part of neo-colonialism, and as mentioned earlier, Oman had maintained good ties with western powers. Iraq had opposed Oman's entry to the Arab League, but in 1976, Baghdad established diplomatic ties with the Sultanate. During the Iran-Iraq war, Oman took a neutral stand and did undercover mediation, while during the Kuwait crisis, Oman supported the war effort against Baghdad while pressing for





a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. Oman was among the first few countries to talk about rehabilitation in Iraq. Oman closed its embassy in Iraq after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. On 12 May 2019, Oman announced that it would reopen its embassy in Baghdad.<sup>167</sup> Currently, Oman will be the third country to hold part of the funds Iraq owes Iran, which should be used for non-sanctionable goods. Iraq and the Sultanate of Oman have been meditating to restore relations between Egypt and Iran.<sup>168</sup> Iraq and Kuwait were Oman's allies in ending the seven-year suspension of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran.<sup>169</sup>

Despite pursuing a moderate and soft approach, Oman has faced and continues to face certain challenges in its foreign policy. It has had disputes over Al Buraymi Oasis, the Musandam Peninsula, and its border with Yemen. Omani enclave Madha is within UAE territory, while the UAE territory Nahwa is surrounded by Oman. Currently, Oman finds itself in a tricky situation over the nationalisation of jobs and the expatriate issue. The slow economy and growing population have led it to focus on omanisation of jobs, cutting down on the number of expats coming from South Asian and other countries. In recent times, it has become difficult to balance its ties with the major powers. On the one hand, it has signed a strategic framework agreement allowing US forces to use Al Duqm and Salalah ports, while on the other hand, it does not want to completely do away with Russia and China. It did not levy any sanctions against Russia for its operation in Ukraine and has embraced China's BRI.

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Oman has faced two major protests in the last decade: an industrial worker's protest demanding social reforms during the Arab Spring and protests for economic reforms in 2018–2019.

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Also, Oman has faced two major protests in the last decade: an industrial worker's protest demanding social reforms during the Arab Spring and protests for economic reforms in 2018–2019. The economic reforms and nation branding exercise through investments and promotion of tourism have helped to an extent; there is a need to enhance the exercise in lines of the UAE and Qatar. Along with the internal concerns, Oman has security concerns in the region; the safety and security of the Strait of Hormuz are of paramount significance for Oman, and the fallouts of the Israel-Hamas war are affecting it negatively. It is to be noted that maintaining neutrality is not easy, and Oman walks on a thin line in difficult situations, especially on issues related to Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudi-Iran deal has eased the situation to some extent. Oman balances its long-term need for a stable neighbourhood by maintaining neutrality. Oman has infiltration threats from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, while regional instability poses a risk for the country. The focus on Oman's position as the nucleus of a strong neighbourhood and its ability to manage controversies, such as the Syrian issue, highlights its nuanced approach to diplomacy and its efforts to remain neutral. Oman's approach to foreign policy differs from that of its neighbours due to the unique challenges it faces in maintaining national security amidst regional complexities.



A decorative geometric pattern, likely a traditional Islamic or Indian motif, consisting of interlocking lines forming various shapes like stars and polygons, with intricate floral or arabesque details inside. The pattern is rendered in a light gray color and occupies the right half of the page.

## **CONCLUSION**

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# **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIA**

Oman is a natural partner for India, which extended an invitation to the Sultanate of Oman to participate in the G20 Summit as a guest country during its Presidency in 2023. The Strait of Hormuz is important for both countries; for Oman, it's a matter of security and stability, while for India, it is vital for energy security. India relies heavily on oil imports from this region and any disturbance leads to a disruption in its supply. India's energy needs will witness consistent growth in the future, keeping in mind its upward trajectory of development, and the Strait of Hormuz will become even more significant for India. Also, India and Oman are diversifying their energy dependence and investing in green hydrogen. Both countries are cooperating in this sector, and there is further potential for joint ventures and projects in the electrolyser industry. An Indian electrolyser company, Greenzo Energy, is to help light up Oman Airport by using green hydrogen. An Indian Maharatna company, REC, has a sanctioned green hydrogen project in Oman, as it aims to finance green projects within the framework of the India Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEEEC) and the 'One Sun, One World, One Grid' initiative. As much as India looks at Oman for investments in this sector, Oman is focusing majorly on renewable energy. In this context, an Indian company, ACME Group, has signed an agreement with Norway-based Scatec ASA to invest in its Ammonia Project in Oman.

Secondly, India and Oman have strong defence cooperation, and there is scope for it to be taken to the next level by assisting Oman

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The Strait of Hormuz is important for both countries;  
for Oman, it's a matter of security and stability,  
while for India, it is vital for energy security.

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India and Oman have strong defence cooperation, and there is scope for it to be taken to the next level by assisting Oman in creating an indigenous defence capability.

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in creating an indigenous defence capability. Oman is the first Gulf country with which all three wings of the Indian defence forces hold joint exercises. In 2022, a 13-day joint military exercise Al Najah IV and air exercise Eastern Bridge VI were held in Rajasthan, and the 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the bilateral naval exercise Naseem al Bahr was held off the Oman coast. The two countries have regular defence-related visits, and in January–February 2022, Oman’s top defence official, Mohammed Nasser Al Zaabi, made an official visit to India.<sup>170</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC) meeting delved into newer areas of cooperation in the fields of training, joint exercises, information sharing, oceanography and shipbuilding. The two countries have signed an MoU for the procurement of defence material and equipment, providing a new framework for cooperation in the defence sector. There is potential for India to aid in the development of an indigenous defence industry in Oman. In turn, Oman has given India access to the key Port of Duqm for military use and logistical support. The Port of Duqm and dry dock are available for providing maintenance to Indian naval vessels, allowing India to expand its footprints in the Indian Ocean Region. Thirdly, India and Oman cooperate in ensuring maritime security and connectivity in the Indian Ocean region. India and Oman have a long history of maritime trade. Reflecting on the significant role played by dhows in facilitating trade and cultural exchanges, the Indian Ministry of Culture has proposed to recreate the maritime

voyage, showcasing the ancient and historical connections between India and Oman. India and Oman have signed an agreement for the exchange of white shipping information and to boost maritime security cooperation in 2021 and had their first meeting of the Joint Maritime Committee in February 2022. In order to strengthen the maritime safety and security framework in the Indian Ocean region and to increase bilateral cooperation in combating transnational illegal activities, the Coast Guards of the two countries held their fifth annual high-level meeting in April 2024. Both countries are part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and can cooperate on green shipping focused on minimising the environmental impact of maritime operations. Oman is also a member of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which is an Indian initiative to gain access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. It is to be noted that before selling Gwadar port to Pakistan in 1958, Oman offered Gwadar port to India in the 1950s. In the recent context, Oman, Iraq and Turkey are not part of the IMEEEC despite their suitable geographical locations, and it would be beneficial for India to convince Oman to be part of the connectivity project, looking at it as an alternative to the INSTC. Oman is a maritime power, and India needs its support in the region to counter the growing Chinese foothold in the region. India is concerned with China's acquisition of strategic assets in the region, including setting its base at Port Doraleh in Djibouti. On the other hand, Oman is interested in India to diversify the presence of external stakeholders in the region. By giving a major stake to India, Oman ensures the presence of a South Asian actor with a huge physical presence (in the form of a migrant population) in the region.



Fourthly, India and Oman have strong economic ties; the two countries became part of a Joint Investment Fund in 2011 with an initial seed capital of US\$ 100 million. Also, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited and OQ SAOC of Oman incorporated BINA oil refinery as a joint venture in 1994, and the refinery set up a 6 million tonnes per annum grassroots petroleum refinery to process Arab crude in Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh. India was the 2nd largest market for Oman's crude oil exports after China and the fourth largest market for Oman's non-oil exports after the UAE, the United States and Saudi Arabia in 2022. 'India-Oman Joint Vision – A Partnership for Future', adopted by the two countries in December 2023, reflects the synergy between Oman Vision 2040 and India's development objectives under 'Amrit Kaal', affirming commitment to harnessing these complementarities for deepening the bilateral partnership.<sup>171</sup> The two countries are moving swiftly to sign the India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA); negotiations on the text of the India—Oman CEPA have been largely completed, and an Oman Desk would be created by 'Invest India' and an India Desk would be created by 'Invest Oman'. The economic and commercial relations between India and Oman have been robust and buoyant. The bilateral trade between the two countries touched US\$ 9.9 billion in 2021–2022, an increase of nearly 90 per cent from the previous year. India's exports in 2021–2022 are US\$3.1 billion, while India's imports are US\$6.8 billion. India and Oman have also invested in a third country, i.e., Sri Lanka. For Oman, which has a slowing economy and is dependent on India for food security, India is an important partner. Similarly for India, Oman is a reliable and dependable partner, and the signing of CEPA will bring gains for both in terms of enhancing exports through a reduction of duties.

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India and Oman share common liberal values of tolerance  
and have a common concern about terrorism.

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Indian manufacturers will be able to set up businesses in Oman and export green products to Europe.

Fifth, India and Oman share common liberal values of tolerance and have a common concern about terrorism. The liberal Ibadi traditions strike a chord with religious and social tolerance, a value deeply cherished by India.<sup>172</sup> Counter-terrorism is an issue of common concern between India and Oman. Since 1994, when a plot to overthrow Sultan Qaboos by the Muslim Brotherhood was uncovered, Oman has strongly condemned terrorism and radicalism in all its forms, and India, given its difficult history with terrorism, also condemns it in the strongest terms. The two countries also share common political values, showing a strong commitment to support endeavours promoting peace and stability in the region. India and Oman emphasise the need for all countries to abide by international law, respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and resolve conflicts peacefully through dialogue and diplomacy. The two countries have also signed an MoU between the Financial Intelligence Unit and National Center for Financial Information on cooperation in the exchange of intelligence related to money laundering, associated predicate offences and terrorism financing. India and Oman condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, agreeing that there cannot be any justification for any act of terror for any reason whatsoever. The two countries are committed to enhancing cooperation to combat terrorism and underscore the significance of fostering the universal values of





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Along with being strategic partners since 2008, India and Oman share a rich and deep soft connection.

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peace, moderation, coexistence and tolerance while highlighting the imperative of renouncing all types of violent extremism.

Along with being strategic partners since 2008, India and Oman share a rich and deep soft connection. People-to-people contact between the two can be traced back to 5000 years, while diplomatic relations were established in 1955. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley civilisation has been found in Oman, and Omani traders depended on the shipbuilding skills of Gujratis in the 7th century.<sup>173</sup> There are more than 700,000 Indians in Oman, and some Indian families have been living there for more than 150–200 years. Beginning from Khojas from Eastern India and Bhattias of Sind to the current generation of professionals, the Indian expatriate community has played an important role in building Oman, as often acknowledged by the Omani Government.<sup>174</sup> Despite introducing the policy of ‘Omanisation’ in 1988, Oman has warmly received Indian expatriate workers. In June 2018, Oman announced its policy to grant visas on arrival to Indians who have a valid visa from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Schengen or Japan.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, a number of Omanis have lived and studied in India. Sultan Taimur bin Faisal came to India in 1932 and lived there till he died and was buried in Mumbai. Sultan Saeed bin Taimur and Fahd bin Taimur studied at Mayo College in Ajmer.

India and Oman are also looking forward to enhancing these ties; the two countries have released the Joint Commemorative Postage Stamp and have discussed the possibility of Oman becoming

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There is an opportunity for India and Oman to cooperate in the space sector, rare earth minerals, and cyber security.

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a central hub for Ayurveda in the Middle East. Yoga is another important factor connecting India and Oman; India launched the Yoga Marathon titled “Muscat Yog Mahotsav – 75-day, 75-events” in April 2022 and released a short video titled ‘Soulful Yoga-Serene Oman’ in collaboration with its counterpart, utilising yoga as a medium to promote tourism.<sup>176</sup> India and Oman also strive to enhance cooperation in tourism through sharing best practices in sustainable tourism. An MoU has been signed between the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Dhofar University on the establishment of the ICCR Chair of Indian Studies in Hindi. Oman has been optimally availing the allocated slots under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme.<sup>177</sup> As far as thinktank cooperation is concerned, the two countries have signed MoUs for cooperation between Oman’s National Defence College (NDC) and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) of India; the Omani Diplomatic Institute and Foreign Services Institute of India; the State Audit Institution of Oman; and the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

Lastly, there is an opportunity for India and Oman to cooperate in the space sector, rare earth minerals, and cyber security. Underscoring the shared interest between India and Oman in the space sector, the two countries have recognised the vast potential for collaboration in areas including remote sensing, satellite launch and communication, and the practical applications of space technology. A delegation from Oman visited the Indian Space Research Organisation in August 2023, when its web-



based GIS Portal for incorporating satellite data, geospatial layers, and value-added services pertaining exclusively to Oman was launched. India proposed the building and launching of satellites for Oman. The space sector can open a number of opportunities for India, which is moving ahead in space science, and Oman, which aspires to collaborate and reap the benefits of this sector. India offered its assistance to Oman in the development of its capabilities in training, human resource development, for the use of space technologies and applications for developmental and other purposes. India and Oman signed an MoU on space cooperation in 2018 and an agreement for the exploitation of mineral resources in 2021. The two countries have also agreed to share data about investment opportunities, the exploration of modern methods of excavation and enhancing cooperation in technical research and geological surveys. More than 50 per cent of the land in Oman is covered with rocks rich in minerals, and India is keen on exploring minerals associated with the fourth industrial revolution. India and Oman may look at cooperation in cobalt, copper, nickel and vanadium.

In December 2023, Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq made an official visit to India and signed a vision document to significantly expand bilateral cooperation in around 10 key areas in a range of areas, including maritime sphere, connectivity, green energy, space, digital payments, health, tourism and agriculture and food security. It was the first trip by the Sultan of Oman to India in 26 years, and

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There are endless opportunities and possibilities for India and Oman to explore, and the soft connection ensures that the potential will be utilised to its fullest in the coming decades.

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as per the joint statement signed during Haitham's visit to India in December 2023,<sup>178</sup> civil aviation and air connectivity are emerging as another area for cooperation. Oman has expressed an interest in working together for airspace and air traffic management system optimisation for mutual benefit. The two countries have more than 400 direct flights per week. There are endless opportunities and possibilities for India and Oman to explore, and the soft connection ensures that the potential will be utilised to its fullest in the coming decades.





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