

UNDERSTANDING OMAN'S POLICY TOWARD REGIONAL CONFLICTS*

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Abstract

The study of Oman's foreign policy attracts scholars because of its unique features. It undoubtedly differs from the foreign policies of other countries in the region. This paper focuses on Oman's policy in three cases of regional conflicts: the Syrian war, the war in Yemen, and the crisis in Qatar in the context of regional changes and Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Oman pragmatically manoeuvres to mitigate threats emerging from the crises and wars in the countries of the Middle East.

Keywords: Oman, foreign policy, Syrian war, Yemen, Qatar, Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

In the Middle East where states make enormous efforts to protect their sovereignty, security, and stability the smaller and weaker ones find themselves in the most vulnerable position. Both domestic and external factors cause substantial or even insurmountable problems for those countries. Those countries use a wide range of instruments and strategies to protect their security and sovereignty. However, there is no guarantee that those efforts will be fruitful as bigger and stronger neighbors are ready to intervene.

Even though Arab nations constitute the majority of the Middle East and North Africa, they do not have a proportionate amount of power or influence there. Particularly since the 2010s, only Saudi Arabia with its allies, the UAE and Egypt, has been a dominant regional power, along with three non-Arab countries: Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, the traditional leaders of the Arab world, have all suffered from substantial political setbacks, and several are now struggling to retain their integrity. Instead, Iran and Turkey have stepped in to fill the void left by the decline of the Arab states. The Arab monarchies have managed to survive, whereas the republican regimes were the first to collapse under the pressure of the revolutionary processes. Due to the accumulated wealth and energy resources, the Arab states of the Gulf region had already begun to assume a more prominent role in regional affairs in the early years of the 21st century [17:232]. Wealth and survival predetermined who would become the leading force in the Arab world [50: 420].

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According to Yossef, the Arab Spring and further developments have led to the redistribution of power in the Middle East towards the Gulf region. It has weakened the status quo alignment and empowered the revisionist camp. The Gulf issues dictate the future struggle in the Middle East between two versions of Islamism [68: 76].

The post-Arab spring order is characterised as a situation where all are against all forming fluid coalitions. Some regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, seek to form their blocs, while other actors struggle to preserve their autonomy [55]. Compared to the pre-2011 order, Sunni - Shia dynamics have broadened involving more actors in the region [38:146]. While in recent two decades Iran largely benefited from geopolitical shifts in the Middle East and extended its influence, the other heavyweight of the region has been less successful [30:7].

Iran and Saudi Arabia, two hegemony in the Gulf region, are archrivals, while other smaller countries have become embroiled in this rivalry. Saudi Arabia is the leading force in the GCC. It claims leadership in the Arab world. It asserts dominance in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia views Iran as its principal foe and views its allies and proxies as security threats. Saudi Arabia's support of various countries and factions is not strongly based on ideology. Iran supports the Shia populations and factions in the Arab countries like Hezbollah, Houthis, Alawis, among others.

According to Kamrava, Saudi Arabia and Israel sit at the top of the pyramid of the hierarchy in the MENA region seeking to preserve the regional status quo, as well as two challengers, Iran and Turkey. In the second row of the pyramid, the middle powers are situated some of whom are closely aligned and allied with the status quo powers (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE), while others (Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia) try to conduct more independent policies. In Kamrava's view, the countries in the second group are more pragmatic, and less based on ideological and identity factors in their foreign policies [29:13]. However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, especially under Muhammad bin Salman, has changed toward a more proactive stance and pursues to form its broader alliance and new status quo which confronts the efforts of Turkey and Iran.

Oman is a country with a population of roughly 4.5 million and is situated along strategic trade routes, between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On one hand, Oman is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain; on the other hand, it maintains friendly relations with Iran.

Oman is well known for its distinctive foreign policy, which seeks to counter-balance the risks resulting from the Middle East's inherent instability. In order to maintain a balance between the regional powers and provide extremely beneficial services to both regional countries and other powers engaged in regional affairs, it has assumed the role of mediator and friend to all.

This paper examines Omani foreign policy in the context of the Syrian War, the Qatar Crisis, and the Yemen War in an attempt to understand how the nation has positioned itself. For the study, I have selected the cases of conflicts in three Arab countries where Saudi Arabia and Iran are antagonists. Iran firmly backs Ba-

shar Assad's government in Syria, including militarily. Saudi Arabia has provided financial aid to the Syrian opposition. In the case of the crisis in Qatar, Iran backed the regime of Qatar while Saudi Arabia led the boycott campaign. Iran provides military backing to the rebel Houthis in Yemen, while the Saudi-led alliance has been actively engaged in hostilities.

The foreign policy of Oman: what we know so far

Numerous studies have been devoted to comprehending Oman's foreign policy and evaluating its advantages and disadvantages. The Sultanate's foreign policy is examined and explained using a variety of theories and methods. Discussing the problem in the framework of the neutrality strategy is one of the typical approaches. Oman is occasionally referred to as the Switzerland of the Middle East or Arabia for its efforts to keep neutrality [42]. Neutrality comes in a variety of forms, including non-alignment, temporary, de jure, and de facto neutrality [54]. Under Sultan Qaboos, Oman chose to voluntarily become a neutral state and refrain from taking part in conflicts. It is worth mentioning as well that Oman's foreign policy uniqueness is associated with Qaboos's name.

According to Sultanate's foreign policy vision, it is aimed at building strong relations with all neighbours based on mutual respect and non-interference. Oman perceives the members of the GCC, Yemen, Iran, India, and Pakistan as neighbouring countries. Oman understands that neighbours may enter into conflict with each other and takes an obligation to maintain cordial relations with the sides and help to overcome the disputes, because the conflicts between the neighbours may jeopardize its own security. Oman defies exclusions, and boycotts, and insists that dialogue is key in addressing any issues. In its foreign policy, Oman takes a pragmatic stance that emphasizes geostrategic realities rather than flimsy ideological beliefs. The pragmatism of Oman is based on the conviction that long-term interests will outlast temporary difficulties [48].

Mediation is Omani foreign policy's key tool. Oman has been a successful mediator in a number of negotiations and incidents over the years, including the negotiations over the Iran nuclear deal signed in 2015, mediation or facilitation efforts between the Arab countries, and between Iran and the Western countries. Oman has effectively mediated a number of situations, building a reputation that other powers highly praise. Despite Saudi Arabia and the UAE occasionally pressuring Muscat to abandon its neutral posture, Oman is strong enough to resist. [33]. The policy of neutrality, on the other hand, can be effective as long as the GCC states and other players profit from Muscat's "friends to all and enemies to none" stance [44].

One of the concepts applied to explain the Sultanate's foreign policy is omnibalancing. According to David, leaders seeking to resist internal and external threats to their rule practice omnibalancing [20: 236]. When discussing Oman's unique strategy of balancing internal and external threats, O'Reilly suggested the

term *Omanibalancing*. In its efforts to mitigate threats, Oman befriends traditional Arab enemies, Israel and Iran [45: 70].

Other scholars address the issue in the scope of hedging – a strategy when options are created in relations with other countries in order not to become over-dependent on one party. Hedging is perceived as something between balancing and bandwagoning and pursues the goal of mitigating the risks emanating from the latter two. The basic motivation for “hedging” is to reduce the risks and uncertainties associated with balancing or bandwagoning [35: 637]. According to Kuik’s definition, hedging is “a behavior in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes” [36: 163]. Oman develops political, security, and economic relations with the US, the GCC states, and Iran and hedges against overreliance on any of these countries by diversifying its alliances. In Binhuwaidin’s view, hedging explains Oman’s political response to the increasing power of Iran [12: 10]. Oman hedges against Iran and the KSA, as the Gulf sub-complex of the Middle East region remains bipolar. Oman’s friendly relations with the US and UK, and political, economic, and military cooperation with them contribute to the country’s improved security and increased opportunities as well.

Colombo tags Oman as a “swing” country for its foreign policy. “Swing” states are flexible, trying to balance conflicting interests and countries pragmatically [18: 60]. Kliman and Fontaine note that the mixed political orientation of “swing” countries gives them greater advantages than just size, population, or economic output [34].

Numerous publications claim that Oman's foreign policy is based on the vision of Sultan Qaboos, the country's challenging past during the civil war, the desire to avoid it, the need to strike a balance between the strong regional powers, and the unique features of the Ibadi branch of Islam practiced in Oman.

Worral says that flexibility, pragmatism, and cultural roots serve as a considerable legacy for the foreign policy of Muscat, and according to him, the status of ‘Interlocutor State’ suits Oman best [65: 50]. Kechichian observes that Oman developed a role for itself under Qaboos by pursuing a pragmatic policy, forging allies, and adhering to regional obligations 31: 25].

Although Oman’s strategy has been successful for decades, some researchers are skeptical of its prospect, given several factors, including the death of the long-time Sultan Qaboos, who held a high authority, and the decline in hydrocarbon revenues, which has made the country even more exposed to economic and political challenges. Neither neutrality, nor mediation are not ends in themselves. In general, Oman's foreign policy is pragmatic and flexible. In its foreign policy, Oman operates in an extremely balanced and calculated manner, trying not to interfere in regional disputes as much as possible. Such an approach allows not only ensuring security but also gaining prestige in international relations.

Case 1 - the War in Syria

In the early days of March 2011, the demonstrations in Syria quickly evolved into a bloody war between government forces and foreign-backed opposition forces. As of 2012, a full-scale war had already been unleashed. Almost all the Arab countries supported the opposition, advocated for the exclusion of the Syrian government from the Arab League, and isolated it. Some of those Arab countries supported anti-government forces militarily, financially, and politically. Among those Arab states, Oman's stance was milder compared to the others, although, in November 2011, Muscat voted to suspend Syria from the Arab League [53].

While Saudi Arabia and Qatar were at the forefront of Arab countries leading the anti-Assad camp, Oman, as it happened in many other cases, refused to follow its partners in the GCC, as well as this, it did not close its embassy, did not denounce Assad's rule, did not cut its ties with Damascus and did not support the opposition. Oman only downgraded its mission, and in 2020 was the first state of the Gulf region to send its ambassador back to Damascus [39].

In the early months of the conflict, Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi called for a peaceful solution mediated by the League of Arab states, "the aim of the Arab League is to get Syria out of this crisis through an Arab plan and mechanism" [1]. In October 2012, Alawi addressed both the Syrian government and the Syrian National Council urging them to stop killing and displacing Syrian civilians and stressed that Oman's role in Syria's conflict would only lie in providing humanitarian assistance [14].

Oman's previous foreign minister, bin Alawi, visited Damascus in 2015 at the height of the military conflict, and the second visit took place in 2019. The initial visit took place shortly after Russia launched its military operation to support its ally, Assad [21]. According to Syria's official SANA news agency, the minister discussed with Assad ways to "resolve the crisis in Syria" [4]. During the second visit of the Omani minister, the parties discussed bilateral relations and regional security [59].

Those visits were not unilateral. In 2015, Oman received Syria's foreign minister Walid al Muallem, a rare foreign visit of a Syrian official, apart from Russia and Iran [2]. Muallem paid another visit to Muscat in 2018. During this visit, he inaugurated the headquarters of Syria's new embassy in Muscat [25].

In March 2021, the visit by Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad to Muscat renewed hopes for Syria's readmission to the Arab League [57]. In July 2021, Omani foreign minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi told the *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper that his country supported Syria's return to the Arab League [49]. Egypt, the initiator of Syria's return to the Arab League, launched its campaign from Oman hoping to convince the Gulf states to re-admit Syria to the Arab League [40].

In May 2021, Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tarik was the first Gulf leader to congratulate Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on his re-election as president of Syria [43]. Oman and Syria regularly negotiate on the level of foreign ministers and discuss the promotion of joint interests and cooperation. Oman describes the

relations between the two countries as fraternal [47]. At the beginning of the conflict, Oman froze communication with Syria waiting for an appropriate moment to revive the relations. That happened when Oman successfully participated in reaching the nuclear deal between the 5+1 group (UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany) and Iran in 2015 and after the start of Russian intervention in the war that changed the balance in Syria.

The approach of Oman was later followed by other GCC countries, the UAE and Bahrain. Particularly, the UAE dramatically changed its approach to the Syrian authorities. It was the first Gulf country to invite Bashar Al-Assad to visit Abu Dhabi in 2022. The Emirati authorities would prefer to engage with the current government of Syria rather than various radical factions, which are assisted by Qatar, and Turkey with whom the UAE's relations had been rather tense. The rift in the Gulf region and controversies between the regional actors play in hand with the Syrian government. In this context, Oman could play an important role in the rapprochement between Syria and the GCC countries. Given the colossal finances necessary for the restoration of the war-torn country, the GCC countries are the only real source of possible investments.

Oman believes that restoring stability in Syria requires maintaining a productive relationship with Damascus. The country has promised to participate in the reconstruction of Syria when peace is restored in the country [15].

Thus, Oman has yet to play its role in the Syrian case. Its patience in Syria seems to be justified, and Oman's gamble has won [37]. Oman could position itself as a facilitator between Syria and the West. In addition, Oman may become an important diplomatic actor in the process of reintegrating Damascus into the Arab world and the international community [15].

Case 2 - the War in Yemen

Yemen, which is situated in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula, has long been renowned for its strategic location between Asia and Africa, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea. Rarely has the nation experienced times of peace, and it is not a coincidence that Yemen's fragile stability vanished during the early months of the Middle Eastern revolutions. The country was completely wrecked and divided between warring parties after ten years of civil war and external interference, which were also accompanied by the most horrific forms of humanitarian catastrophe. Yemen is a neighboring country of Oman, unlike Syria and Qatar, and the conflict there poses a number of challenges and contains multiple dangers. Moreover, that factor explains the interest and active involvement of Muscat in peace brokering.

In 2011, protests broke out in Yemen, forcing President Ali Abdullah Saleh to quit. followed by a transition of power with the support of Gulf states. Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi became the interim president. In the new phase of instability in the country, Al Qaeda launched military operations and occupied part of the country. In 2014, the group Ansar Allah, widely known as Houthis, an Iranian-backed movement, captured the capital city, Sanaa, demanding to share power. The ad-

vance of the Houthis in 2015, and the support of Iran prompted the Saudi-led coalition to launch a military operation.

In March 2015, the Saudi coalition launched airstrikes aimed at pushing back the Houthis and restoring Hadi's government. The Saudi coalition received intelligence support from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France [11]. In August 2015, ground forces entered Aden, and drove the Houthis out, but were unable to force them to withdraw from Sanaa. The Houthis reached an agreement with former President Saleh on the rule of the territories under their control, but in 2017 Saleh changed the camp. The Houthis killed Saleh and defeated his army. In 2018, Saleh's supporters and Saudi forces attacked Hodeida port on the Red Sea coast. After several months of fighting, the parties reached a ceasefire agreement. As of early 2022, the war is still going on, the Houthis have recently started to attack targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Saudi forces have intensified airstrikes on their positions [6].

The coalition led by Saudi Arabia included the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco. The only country of the Gulf Cooperation Council that did not participate in the coalition was Oman. Muscat, faithful to its foreign policy tactics, tried to provide a platform for dialogue between the conflicting parties. Fear and a search for new opportunities are the main drivers of Oman's foreign policy in Yemen, Tveit argues. Oman fears that conflict in Yemen may penetrate into the country, but on the other hand sees possibilities to transform challenges into opportunities by projecting its own influence in Yemen [62]. In April 2015, former Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi explained the position of the country. "Oman is not part of that campaign for simple reasons – Oman is a country of peace. We cannot work on peace efforts at the same time we would be part of a military campaign. Those two things do not meet" [13].

In the conflict in Yemen Oman is an essential mediator. It has hosted meetings and negotiations between the warring parties, and the external actors as well.

On 24 April 2015, Oman unveiled a seven-point peace plan for Yemen, which called for a Houthi withdrawal from all Yemeni cities, the restoration of Hadi's government, early elections involving the conversion of the Houthis into a political party, and Yemen's accession to the GCC [60]. Saudi Arabia rejected Oman's proposals [9]. In May 2015, Oman hosted peace talks between the US diplomats and Houthi representatives [16]. In 2016, the country organised a meeting between former US Secretary of State John Kerry and the Houthi delegation headed by Mohammad Abdul Salam where a ceasefire was agreed upon [61]. Muscat also organised low-level meetings between the Saudi-led Arab coalition and the Houthis, and hosted a series of meetings between international and Western officials and the Houthi delegation [56].

Oman believes it has a special diplomatic role to play in helping the warring factions move toward peace. In 2019, bin Alawi bin Abdullah, stated: "We always facilitate any attempt for parties to talk to each other ... or bring parties from Yemen to meet in Oman" [7]. In March 2021, after Saudi Arabia offered the Houthis a

cease-fire, the Omanis encouraged them to accept the proposal [5]. The Sultanate of Oman has revealed that it is working jointly with Saudi Arabia to reach a comprehensive settlement of the Yemeni crisis [56].

Generally, Oman acts cautiously and patiently in Yemen to preserve its position as a neutral arbiter. Nevertheless, it was blamed for allowing the Houthis to use its territory and enhance the smuggling of weapons to Yemen. In its turn, Oman is suspicious of the UAE's involvement and intention in the south of Yemen, where Abu Dhabi backs the Southern Transitional Council [9:6].

Oman applied its diplomatic abilities in the Yemeni crisis as well, using the reputation it accrued during the negotiation of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. In addition to declining to join the coalition led by Saudi Arabia, Oman expressed its opposition to it by denouncing the military action and characterizing it as a sectarian effort to attack Iran. Oman urged the international community to strengthen the diplomatic approach and emphasized that it was the right of the Yemeni people, not outside parties, to resolve the situation conflict. Oman urged the GCC members to refrain from meddling in Yemeni affairs.

Case 3 - Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

Qatar, a tiny peninsula state in the Gulf with ambitious goals and projects, has occasionally been irritating other Arab nations for its excessive independence in foreign policy as Doha's own agenda and initiatives may conflict with those of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It unavoidably entailed the severance of ties between those countries. Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt led to a diplomatic crisis in 2014: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Doha. The trio accused Qatar of not following the November 2013 commitment not to sponsor someone posing a danger to GCC states' security and stability [41]. After Qatar demonstrated a readiness to accede to the demands of its neighbors, the ambassadors were reinstated in November 2014. This minor crisis served as a precursor to the larger one, which began in 2017.

In the summer of 2017, four Arab states - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt - announced the severance of their relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism. In addition to it, these countries-imposed land, water, and air blockades on Qatar. These countries presented 13 demands to Doha, including the weakening of ties with Iran, the closure of the Turkish military base in the country, the cessation of interference in the affairs of other countries, among others [3]. Two other regional powers, Turkey and Iran, expressed support for Qatar in the conflict [51]. Doha refused to comply with the demands [10]. Its financial capabilities allowed it to mitigate the economic consequences of the blockade, and reorient its trade to other countries. Diplomatic relations between the four countries and Qatar were restored in early 2022 [52].

In both cases, Oman and Kuwait did not unite their efforts with the Saudi-led camp and even benefited economically from the crisis. Kuwait, which played a primary role in managing and resolving the 2014 dispute, again offered its services

to bring the sides around the negotiating table [64]. The ending of the crisis and restoration of the unity of the GCC was in line with its national security strategy [24:80]. Oman's involvement in mediation was marginal, entrusting Kuwait to take on that role [27]. Nevertheless, Kuwait's primacy in the process did not mean that Oman distanced itself: it made efforts to mediate in the frames of the Gulf Cooperation Council [66].

In January 2021, when the parties announced the resolution of the dispute, the UN Secretary-General expressed his gratitude to the late Emir of Kuwait and late Sultan of Oman, "who worked tirelessly towards resolving the Gulf rift" [63].

Initially, Doha hoped that Muscat would mediate the dispute, and Oman first agreed. However, realizing that it cannot play the role of principal mediator, Oman returned to its typical strategy of quiet diplomacy [8]. Kuwaiti and Oman's position was not a surprise at all considering certain factors. Oman does not consider that it shares the same threats with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, first, with regard to Iran. Kuwait and Oman see the best service for their interests by balancing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran [16].

Muscat aided Doha to circumvent the blockade and benefited financially from strengthened business ties between the two countries [46]. Throughout the crisis, Oman remained politically neutral but economically strengthened its cooperation with Qatar. Oman opened its sea access and airports for Qatari companies and expressed opposition to attempts to exclude Qatar from the regional cooperation framework [67: 655].

In January 2018, Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding with Oman on the development of bilateral investment and trade. The agreement covered a wide range of cooperation sectors including the production and export of food products from the sultanate to Qatar [19]. Construction materials, consumer goods, and food products from Oman replaced those of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Oman served as a transshipment point for Qatari ships that were forbidden from entering the airspace and waterways of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates [27].

A few days after the rift began, Qatar started transporting goods via Oman to bypass the Gulf countries that had blocked the sea routes to Doha. Typically, cargo for Qatar is loaded onto smaller boats and sent to Doha after stopping at the massive deep-water Jebel Ali port in Dubai or the capital of the UAE, Abu Dhabi. [28] Qatar has launched two new shipping lines between Hamad Port and Sohar and Salalah ports in Oman [26].

The Sultanate deepened its economic ties with Qatar, where the mutual trade between the two countries reached \$702 million, a 2000% rise during the first three months of the crisis, between June and September 2017. Moreover, Oman's non-oil exports to Qatar increased by 144% during the first nine months of the year 2017. Furthermore, by December 2017, the Sultanate of Oman had become the foremost destination for Qatari non-oil exports, receiving about 35% of Qatari's total exports [67]. Apart from it, Oman received \$1billion in direct financial support from Qatar to support its economy worsened by COVID-19 and lower oil prices [32]. Oman

and Qatar also signed agreements on military cooperation, taxation, tourism, ports, labour and investment [58].

Oman does not share the worries of Saudi Arabia and the UAE over security matters and does not believe that Doha has broken the GCC agreement. Oman declined to play a significant mediating role. Instead, Muscat did not hesitate to benefit of the crisis. In this instance, collaboration between Qatar and Oman was advantageous to both parties since Muscat helped Doha overcome the blockade and Doha gave Muscat more funds and more trade prospects. The Omani position in this issue was more pro-Qatari than neutral. Nevertheless, Muscat has contribution in bridging its GCC allies and partners. Instead, Muscat did not hesitate to benefit of the crisis. In this instance, collaboration between Qatar and Oman was advantageous to both parties since Muscat helped Doha overcome the blockade and Doha gave Muscat more funds and more trade prospects. The Omani position in this issue was more pro-Qatari than neutral. Nevertheless, Muscat has had its contribution in bridging its GCC allies and partners. Instead, Muscat did not hesitate to benefit from the crisis. In this instance, the collaboration between Qatar and Oman was advantageous to both parties since Muscat helped Doha surpass the blockade and Doha provided Muscat with more funds and more trade prospects. The Omani position in this issue was more pro-Qatari than neutral. Nevertheless, Muscat has had its contribution in bridging its GCC allies and partners.

Conclusion

This article discusses Oman's stance on three cases of regional conflicts that ensued as a result of well-known developments in the region. In this turbulent time, the stronger regional powers compete with one another in an effort to improve their positions, while the weaker ones strive to preserve their sovereignty.

In the scholarly literature, it is generally agreed that Oman's foreign policy is more pragmatic and less dogmatic. The country manoeuvres between regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia and Iran, to ensure the best possible outcome for itself. In this struggle, Oman's most valuable card is neutrality, and the key tool for neutrality is mediation. Oman's mediation is acknowledged and valued by other regional states as well as the United States due to its numerous successful cases. In addition, it is crucial to remember that the Omani mediation is founded on its soft abilities rather than its physical force.

Oman's security layers, including its GCC membership, balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia, its use of mediation as a tool for foreign policy, the security support the US provides, and the increase in military spending are insufficient to totally ensure its security and stability and eliminate risks. Oman has a small population; the state depends heavily on the trade of hydrocarbons and is therefore subject to the volatile prices on the global market, and hence social issues can also destabilize the country's internal order. Unlike the UAE and Qatar, the Omani government, with its limited resources, is unable to fund expensive, ambitious foreign policy efforts as a method of keeping challenges away from its frontiers.

The following chart shows the positions Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Oman toward the conflicts discussed in this article.

	Saudi Arabia	Iran	Oman
The Syrian war	Assistance to the opposition, isolation of Bashar Assad, advocacy for the change of the regime	Support to Assad's regime, including military	Refusal of joining the demand of Assad's government overthrow, recognition of its legitimacy
The war in Yemen	Direct military confrontation against the Houthis backed by Iran	Direct military support to the Houthis	Mediation efforts, condemnation of the military operation by Saudi led coalition
Qatari crisis	Boycott, isolation and blockade	Political and logistic assistance to Qatar	Assisting Qatar to overcome isolation, strengthening of trade relations

In each of the three examples shown in the table, Oman's attitude is more in opposition to Saudi Arabia's and more in line with Iran's. In all the three situations, Oman's position tends to favour maintaining the status quo rather than encouraging the developments taking place in those states. Geographically, Syria is far away from Oman, and it is not a significant trading partner. Thus, Oman was practically equally far away from the opposing sides in the Syrian war. Yemen is not only a neighboring nation, but it is also the scene of Saudi Arabia's military conflict with an Iranian-backed group. For Oman, it has resulted in more difficulties. To maintain relations with all parties engaged in war in Yemen, Muscat has made it explicit that it was distancing itself from the military campaign. Despite not being Oman's neighbor, Qatar is a significant partner and GCC member. The diplomatic rift created two camps, one of which was isolating and applying pressure, while the other was assisting in relieving the pressure. Oman has chosen the second option.

Oman's decisions can be explained by the caution that any significant change carries risks to its security and stability. The potential challenges might easily undermine internal stability or foster an unfavorable environment for the nation. Nevertheless, I do not insist that Oman is in the pro-Iranian camp. Oman has carefully adhered to its foreign policy stance, refusing to isolate or boycott nations and at least maintaining formal connections with all of them.

In any conflict, the opposing sides eventually sit around the negotiation table. Oman should uphold its reputation as a reliable mediator and gain the trust of both parties. It might be necessary to not only maintain strict neutrality, but also to take specific steps, such as assisting Qatar in breaking the blockade or the Houthis in certain circumstances.

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ՕՄԱՆԻ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՏԱՐԱԾԱՇՐՋԱՆԱՅԻՆ ՀԱԿԱՄԱՐՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ՆԿԱՏՄԱՄԲ

Մուշեղ Ղահրիյան

Բանալի բառեր՝ Օման, արտաքին քաղաքականություն, Սիրիական պատերազմ, Եմեն, Կատար, Սաուդյան Արաբիա

Օմանի արտաքին քաղաքականության ուսումնասիրությունը հետաքրքրում է ակադեմիական շրջանակներին նախևառաջ այդ քաղաքականության առանձնահատկությունների շնորհիվ: Այն աներկբայորեն տարբերվում է Պարսից ծոցի տարածաշրջանի այլ երկրների արտաքին քաղաքականություններից: Այս հոդվածն անդրադառնում է Օմանի արտաքին քաղաքականությանը տարածաշրջանային երեք հակամարտությունների համատեքստում՝ Սիրիական պատերազմ, Եմենի պատերազմ և Կատարի շուրջ դիվանագիտական ճգնաժամ և դիտարկում դրանք տարածաշրջանային երկու տերությունների՝ Սաուդյան Արաբիայի և Իրանի դիմակայության համատեքստում: Օմանի յուրահատուկ արտաքին քաղաքականությունը կապվում է երկրի նախկին միապետ սուլթան Կաբուսի անվան հետ: Հաշվի առնելով երկրի ոչ վաղ անցյալի իրադարձությունները, տարածաշրջանին բնորոշ կոնֆլիկտայնությունը և մի շարք այլ հանգամանքներ՝ Օմանը մշտապես փորձել է չեզոքություն պահպանել տարբեր իրադրություններում, ինչպես նաև իր միջնորդական ջանքերն առաջարկել զանազան հակամարտող կողմերի: Այս առումով, Օմանը կարողացել է հաջողություններ գրանցել և դրա շնորհիվ հեղինակություն ձեռք բերել, որը գնահատվում է նաև այլ երկրների կողմից:

Հոգվածում քննարկվող հակամարտություններում Օմանի կայացրած որոշումները կարելի է բացատրել այն բանով, որ տարածաշրջանային անկանխատեսելի փոփոխությունները ռիսկեր են պարունակում երկրի անվտանգության և կայունության համար: Օմանը հետևում է իր իսկ որդեգրած արտաքին քաղաքական սկզբունքներին՝ մերժելով մեկուսացման և բոյկոտի քաղաքականությունը և պահպանելով կապերը բոլոր կողմերի հետ: Միևնույն ժամանակ, այդ քաղաքականությունը չի նախատեսում բացարձակ չեզոքություն: Ընդհանուր առմամբ, Օմանը ձգտում է հավասարակշռված, հաշվարկված և պրատմատիկ մոտեցումներ ցուցաբերել տարատեսակ մարտահրավերների բախվելիս: