

Cameron Wilson
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Professor Mekay
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Oman and its Unusual Stability

Oman is a small country located on the southeastern corner of the Arabian peninsula. It shares borders with Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Its small population, weak military, and generally pacifist tendencies ensure that it receives little coverage in the western media. Oman's government, based in the capital city of Muscat, has been remarkably stable over the last several decades, with Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said coming to power in 1970 --when he seized power from his father-- and ruling as a dictator ever since. The stability he has created is even more impressive given the recent Arab Spring uprisings in countries such as Egypt and Libya and the fact that al Said holds almost complete power over Oman. This paper will analyze the strategies that the Sultan has used to create stability and avoid the fate, thus far at least, of other dictators in the Arab world. Through these strategic moves, he has successfully maintained relations with western powers such as the United States, while keeping cordial relations with his neighboring countries, among the most powerful in the Middle East. In contrast to other dictators of the region, Al Said has earned the respect and loyalty of his people by improving quality of life and expanding human rights. This has resulted in al Said easily maintaining, in some cases even consolidating, his power throughout the course of the Arab Spring.

The roots of Oman's friendly relations with the United States were cultivated nearly 200 years ago. In 1841, Oman was the first country in the Middle East to recognize the newly formed United States as a sovereign nation. From this beginning the two countries have forged a successful record of diplomatic cooperation. Since al Said came to power in 1970 Oman has

supported US initiatives in the Middle East. Most notably, Oman was the only country in the region to support Egypt in ratifying the Camp David Accords in 1978. At the time, other nations in the Arab League were pushing to expel Egypt for this act of diplomacy which they saw as a betrayal of Arab principles. Oman supported Egypt in signing the accords while arguing for their continued inclusion in the Arab League. Al Said also allows the United States the use of an air base in southwest Oman. The base in Thumrait has become a hub for reconnaissance aircraft that are used to monitor activities in nearby Iran.

In recent years, Oman has been influential in securing the release of western travelers from complex judicial systems in other Middle Eastern nations. In late 2009, three American hikers mistakenly crossed from Iraq into Iran. They were arrested and two were later sentenced to eight years in Iranian prison on counts of espionage. In the fall of 2011, Omani officials brokered their release and flew the hikers from Iran to Muscat before ultimately returning them to the United States.¹ President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton both issued statements in which they thanked the Sultan for his country's role in securing the safe release of the American hikers. A similar situation arose in November of 2011 when three French aid workers were taken into custody by a Yemeni affiliate of al-Qaeda. Omani officials were able to negotiate with a Yemeni businessman so that he could pay the ransom demanded to recover the aid workers.² Upon their release, they were driven to Muscat before taking flights to France. Then president of France Nicolas Sarkozy quickly issued a statement thanking Oman for its role in the aid workers' safe recovery. Through these acts of diplomacy, Oman has been able to maintain strong alliances with several western powers.

¹ *U.S. Hikers Released From Iranian Prison, Arrive in Oman*. Fox News

² Friedman, Uri. *Oman: The World's hostage negotiator*.

Oman also keeps cordial relations with powerful countries in the Middle East. It doesn't share a border with Iran, but the two countries are a mere 21 miles apart at the all important Strait of Hormuz. Nearly 20% of the world's crude oil passes through the Strait, making its security crucial for every major world power. Iranian leaders periodically make threats of closing the Strait, but generally speaking these are hollow warnings. It is unlikely that Oman, a country so close to the United States, would allow this to happen. It is worth noting that the deepest sections of the Strait, which are required by super-tankers for safe passage, are controlled entirely by Oman.³

Oman and Iran do engage in shared military exercises so that they may more easily retain control over the area. As recently as February of 2011, the two countries participated in war games in the Sea of Oman. It is also not uncommon for Iranian warships to dock at Omani ports during travels around the Arabian Sea. Oman has made several other overtures towards Iran in recent years. Much to Iran's delight, the Sultan has not yet released a statement of concern regarding Iran's fledgling nuclear program. Many other leaders in the region have expressed reservation over this issue and called on the United Nations and western powers to stabilize the situation.

Further strengthening the ties between Iran and Oman are several economic agreements instituted quite recently. One such project involves a joint investment between both governments in oil fields located in the Persian Gulf.⁴ On the whole, Oman enjoys favorable relations with Iran as well as the United States. Sultan al Said has done an impressive job walking what is surely a narrow diplomatic tightrope.

³ Kaplan, Robert. *Oman's Renaissance Man*.

⁴ Fulton, Will. *Oman-Iran Foreign Relations*.

Apart from giving Oman solid international standing, the Sultan has significantly improved the country's economic situation. The population of three million has solid employment and income statistics, especially when compared to other nations in the region. Al Said has utilized the country's sizable oil reserves to create infrastructural improvements and jobs. Currently 70% of Oman's revenues come from oil, and 12% are derived from gas.⁵ As part of a five year plan enacted in 2011, the Sultan will invest almost \$18 billion to build new hospitals, schools, and a major highway. Omanis make healthy salaries working the oil and gas industries. Oman's per capita income is estimated at \$27,000 which ranks 49th in the world.⁶ The government is able to collect a healthy amount of tax revenue because of the success of the oil industry. In the year of 2011, Oman ran the eleventh largest surplus in the world. Because oil resources are not infinite, the Sultan has recently begun efforts to diversify the economy. Oman possesses sizable deposits of natural resources such as limestone and silicon. So far this has proved to be profitable and has created more jobs. This economic success coupled with a population of less than three million has enabled the government to provide a strong social safety net and make investments in education and infrastructure.

It may come as a surprise that Oman's population is well educated and women enjoy more rights than in most other countries in the Middle East. The female literacy rate is above 70% and women make up the majority of university students. In an interview with an Omani newspaper, the Minister of Education said, "Women of Oman have not hesitated to take advantage... out-enrolling men in private universities and colleges. On average, their academic performance is superior to that of their male counterparts."⁷ As a result women have begun to

⁵ CIA Factbook, Oman.

⁶ CIA Factbook, Oman.

⁷ Kamoopuri, Hasan. *More Women Enrolling in Higher Education Institutes.*

attain important positions in the government. There are three female cabinet ministers, and in 2008 Omani ambassadors to both the United States and United Nations were women.

Unsurprisingly, the government affords its citizens a reasonable amount of social liberties. Most notably, the Sultan strongly encourages religious freedom. The dominant religion in Oman is a form of Islam named Ibadism. It is neither Sunni nor Shia, and thus somewhat removed from many issues of contention that envelop the rest of the Muslim world. Ibadism is one of the most tolerant forms of Islam. People of other faiths practice openly and freely in Oman without creating tension between the various religious groups. Sultan al Said has even donated government lands for the construction of Christian churches and Hindu temples. All of this is in spite of the fact that Oman is officially a Muslim country. In accordance with these substantial civil liberties, the people of Oman are free from the sorts of persecution and police brutality that is commonplace throughout the Arab world.

This is not to say that Oman experienced no turmoil as a result of the Arab Spring. There were indeed some protests against the government. In the northern city of Sohar, several hundred people gathered to protest against political corruption and low government salaries. The protestors blocked off several roads and set fire to a supermarket. The Sultan responded quickly to these protests. Almost immediately he fired twelve cabinet ministers and made amends to the country's already substantial social safety net. He raised monthly unemployment benefits by \$386 for every person in Oman.⁸ This represented a sizable expense, but the government is able to afford these types of measures due to its yearly surplus. When compared to other protests in the Middle East, these were tiny in scale. Demands for higher salaries and a stop to small scale government corruption pale in comparison to calls for regime change. Furthermore, less than a thousand people engaged in the demonstrations, most of which were staged in a port city located

⁸ Bakri, Nada. *Protests in Oman Spread From Port City to Capital*.

more than 100 miles from the capital. At no point did the protesters seek to remove the Sultan from power or cause significant personnel change in his government.

In short, the Sultan has done an excellent job of governing Oman since coming to power in 1970. This is much more than can be said of the former rulers of the Middle East. While dictators such as Hosni Mubarak and Moammar Qaddafi were exploiting their people for economic gain and committing numerous violations of human rights, al Said was responsibly growing Oman's economy and expanding his people's social liberties. He encouraged female education and employment while promoting religious harmony and tolerance. The average income of Omani's has grown tremendously during this time period, resulting in improvements in health across all segments of the population. Furthermore, he did all of this while maintaining friendly relations with powerful countries in the Middle East and West. The United States depends heavily on Oman for the use of its air base in Thumrait and the security of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran similarly requires Omani cooperation so that it can maximize the profit and power it derives from controlling the naval passageway. Famed journalist Robert Kaplan wrote of the Sultan and his reign, "He may arguably be the most worldly and best-informed leader in the Arab world."⁹ There is no question that the Sultan has proved a more competent ruler than his fellow dictators. It is a combination of all these factors that have enabled the Sultan to easily remain in power through the entire Arab spring.

As long as Sultan al Said remains in power, it is unlikely that Oman will be drawn into any sort of armed conflict. It is also improbable that he will lose the support of his people. The main issue facing Oman in the future is that of succession. There are multiple factors that will complicate any exchange of power in Oman's future. The Sultan has never married and has not yet named an heir. This raises the question of who will be the next person to lead the country.

⁹ Kaplan, Robert. *Oman's Renaissance Man*.

The only precedent that exists for a power exchange is that of a military coup, which the Sultan utilized to overthrow his father in 1970. Military coup's are not often seamless and without incident. Both Omanis and foreign leaders would prefer that the next leader instead come to power in a peaceful and uneventful manner. Without a doubt, this is the greatest issue facing Oman and one that will have the attention of world leaders in the next decade.

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