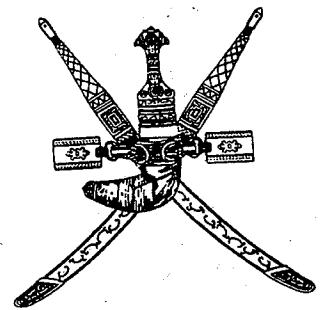
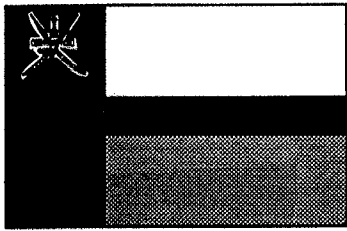


**US-GCC  
CORPORATE  
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COMMITTEE INC**



**OMAN: GIRDING AND**



**GUARDING THE GULF**

*by*

*John Duke Anthony*

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# The U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee

One of the United States' most important international commercial relationships is with the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Although America has experienced international trade deficits overall in recent years, U.S. trade with the GCC countries has frequently yielded a surplus, strengthening the U.S. economy and supporting thousands of American jobs.

The U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee is composed of more than two dozen major U.S. corporations committed to developing the private-sector relationship with the GCC countries. Its objective is to increase awareness of the benefits to the United States from strengthened and expanded relations with the GCC countries through publications, seminars, and a variety of other educational programs.

The Committee's Secretariat, the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, is an American non-profit educational organization that sponsors programs and activities designed to educate Americans about the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

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1140 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 1210  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel: (202) 293-7499  
Fax: (202) 293-0903  
E-mail: gcc@ncusar.org

# T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

## Oman: Girding and Guarding the Gulf

**Foreword by Dr. Ralph DiSibio**

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## Foreword

A measure of how few Americans appreciate the Sultanate of Oman is that specialists in the Arabic language sometimes translate Oman from Arabic to English as Amman, the capital of Jordan. Fortunately, this happens less and less thanks to Oman's growing role in regional and world affairs and its decision in recent years to open the country to what can be called selected or educational tourism. For the hearty traveller interested not only in Arabian exotica but one of the most stunning landscapes and attractive people in all of Arabia or in much of the world, the rewards are many. Indeed, hardly anyone has been known to leave the Sultanate without a piece of its culture and the warmth of its people imbedded deeply in their heart.

The author of this monograph, no stranger to Oman, is one of the few Americans to follow the modern Sultanate's path of progress firsthand. When he first visited the Sultanate a quarter of a century ago, the country had only three elementary schools, one doctor, and less than ten miles of paved roads. Nine tenths of the country's southernmost province of Dhofar was in the throes of a guerrilla war the likes of which, in terms of complexity and longevity, the Arabian Peninsula had never seen.

The Dhofar civil war, over time, would become a veritable case study in the limits of insurrection and foreign intervention, not least because the insurgents were led by a group of Marxist-Leninists supported by the then Soviet Bloc and China. It was in the midst of this conflict, in 1970, that the present ruler of Oman, Sultan Qaboos bin Taimur Al Bu Said, came to power. In 1995, that event is being commemorated as Oman's Silver Jubilee, marking twenty-five years of the most far-reaching, ambitious, and continuous development in the country's history.

A backward glance in the rear view mirror lends insight into what has occurred in Oman in the intervening years. The Sultanate in 1970 was a member of neither the League of Arab States, the United Nations, or the World Health Organization. To be sure, several countries recognized its government, including the United States, but the Himalayan states of Assam, Nepal, and Sikkim enjoyed easier access and greater recognition. The number of countries with which Oman maintained active diplomatic ties appeared, at first glance, to be a typographical error. They were countries with which the country's history and much of its destiny had long been intertwined — Great Britain, India, and Pakistan.

The author of the current work, then a scholar based at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C., put the knowledge and understanding of Oman gained from his early field researches in the Sultanate to good use. In 1973, he designed and implemented the first year-long university course in the United States on the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf States. Simultaneously, he authored the works, The Sultanate of Oman and The Emirates of Eastern Arabia: A Cultural and Historical Dictionary and Arab States of the Lower Gulf: People, Politics, and Petroleum, both of which appeared in 1975. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos visited Washington, D.C. that same year and, in a formal ceremony at the Blair House, presented him and the president of Johns Hopkins University with a check for \$100,000 in recognition of the author's contributions to American awareness of

Oman's culture, history, and heritage. The grant, the first of its kind, was used to further develop the program by making it possible to include as guest scholars individuals who had spent the better part of their lives studying the Peninsula's peoples and societies.

From those early ties with the Sultanate, the author served as a bridge between SAIS and what began as an Oman-supported annual Summer Arabic Program in the nation's capital. These Arabic language institutes were administered in alternate years by SAIS and Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. The Arabic language program continued and evolved over time to include annual, first-ever Winter visits to the Sultanate by outstanding American university students specializing in Arabian Peninsula area studies. A decade later, those early exchanges expanded still further to include cooperation of another kind: SAIS' involvement in the professional development of a new generation of Omani diplomats at the Diplomatic Training Institute of the Sultanate's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The author, in the midst of these developments, supervised the first empirically researched American doctoral dissertation on the Sultanate, Oman: The Emergence of a Modern State in the Twentieth Century. The scholar who produced that work was subsequently retained by the Omani Ministry of Defense to write the definitive history of the Sultanate's armed forces. Throughout these years, the author, through repeated visits to the Sultanate, remained in close touch with what has rightly been termed Oman's renaissance. In 1980, he attended the tenth anniversary commemorating the Sultan's accession to the rulership and, subsequently, has been invited to observe each of Oman's hostings of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Heads of State Summits since the GCC began in 1981.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the author, with the support of the Director of the Sultan's Office for External Liaison, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Information, the Omani Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, has brought a dozen delegations of American congressional, corporate, military, university, student, and public affairs leaders to Oman to participate in cross-cultural study programs in the country. Through these and other ways, Oman has not only been increasingly discovered but in important and positive ways uncovered by a growing number of American leaders who, though involved with Omani-U.S. affairs, had never before been exposed to the country and its people.

The U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Corporate Cooperation Committee is proud to have been associated with these and other ventures that have broadened American appreciation of one of the United States' oldest Arabian friends. Indeed, as far back as 1833, Oman and the U.S. signed a far-reaching Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and in 1840, the Sultanate was the first Arab country to send an Ambassador to the United States. Nearly a century and a half later, in 1980, the two countries signed an Access (to Facilities) Agreement, for which no precedent then existed between the United States and any other Arab country.

The purpose of the agreement, which has since been renewed and its term extended, was to enhance Omani, American, and other allied capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defend against external threats to the Sultanate. That four additional agreements of this nature have been signed subsequently between Oman's fellow GCC members and the United States speaks volumes about the Sultanate's far-sightedness and courage. The agreements demon-

strate Muscat's and Washington's joint commitment to enhance the defense structure of the Sultanate and other GCC countries. In this way, each of the signatories is better able to contend with potential foreign aggression against a still embryonic and rather fragile system of regional peace, security, and stability.

The U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee takes special pleasure in introducing a work that provides context, background, and perspective on Oman, a country little known and even less understood by a great many Americans.

The Committee publishes this monograph in the spirit of all of its publications, programs, and activities, as a contribution to the national dialogue on U.S. interests and involvement in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Dr. Ralph DiSibio  
President, Parsons Development Corporation and  
Chair, U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee

## **OMAN: GIRDING AND GUARDING THE GULF**

by

John Duke Anthony

"Oman". Is there a more evocative name to contemporary Gulf Cooperation Council, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean strategists? For much of the past two centuries, its mere sound has conjured up images of the "great game" —superpower competition, the jockeying of giants. Oman clearly holds a fascination for strategic analysts. Among area studies specialists and serious students of the Sultanate, admiration for Oman's people, culture, and history is coupled with a keen appreciation of the effect that the country's policies and actions have on the well-being of others far beyond its shores. Who are its people and what has projected them into a position of such importance on the international scene? This brief essay on some of the distinguishing features of its history and recent developments provides a synopsis of why Oman, globally and regionally, really matters.

### **Arabia's Easternmost Rim and Its People**

The Sultanate comprises one of the oldest communities in Arabia. A distinguished ethnic and political entity as far back as two thousand years, its people were trading with distant lands as early as the third millennium B.C. From the second century B.C. onward, Oman's Arab population has played especially important roles in shaping the country's culture and in influencing its history and development.

In more modern times, Oman's global and regional significance has derived in large measure from its geographic location. The Sultanate has a 1,200 mile coastline along the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Oman is adjacent to the sea lanes to Europe and Asia, to Iraq and Iran, and to Oman's fellow members in the Gulf Cooperation Council —Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

Oman was one of the first countries to accept Islam, and its mariners helped to spread the faith to faraway places. In the process, the country pioneered in establishing Arab and Islamic links with Asia, with eastern and central Africa, and with the Indian subcontinent. Oman was also the first Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with the United States — in 1833 — and in 1840 was the first Arab country to send an ambassador to the United States.

The Sultanate has often been contrasted with the Imamate of Oman, an institution out of which the Sultanate grew and which existed parallel with the Sultanate at various periods during the past two centuries. As a result of his success in driving the Persian invaders out of Oman in 1744, the founder of the current ruling family, Ahmad bin Said Al Bu Said, was elected "Imam." Over time Al Bu Said rulers dropped the title of Imam and became known first as "Sayyids" and then as "Sultans."

With the death of Sultan Said in 1856, the fortunes of the Sultanate diminished and did not revive until 25 years ago. Although Sultan Said bin Taimur, who acceded to the rulership in

1932, was able to reunite the coast and interior in 1955, and to suppress a rebellion in the late 1950s, he was unable to cope effectively with an externally supported rebellion in the country's southernmost province of Dhofar that began in the mid-1960s and lasted for nearly a decade.

In 1970, midway through the Dhofar rebellion, Said was deposed by his son, Qaboos. Since then, the Sultanate has undergone drastic transformation, bursting out of its isolation with an ambitious development program financed mainly by oil revenues, which in 1994 totaled just over \$1.5 billion dollars.

Throughout the 1980s, Oman's geopolitical importance was heightened further by its location between two of the Middle East's most radical regimes: the Marxist-oriented People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) to the immediate south and the revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran across the Gulf to the north and east. During the same period, the former USSR invaded and occupied Afghanistan, and outposts of a Soviet interventionary force, eventually numbering close to 100,000, were positioned a mere 300 miles — less than an hour's flying time — from Oman's borders.

### **Taking the Lead in Regional Defense and Diplomacy**

Within a year following his accession to the rulership in 1970, it became clear that Sultan Qaboos was anxious to inaugurate a new era in Oman's relations with the world beyond its shores. By the early 1970s, Oman became a member of most of the more pertinent international bodies, i.e., the U.N., the League of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the World Health Organization. In this way, the Sultanate obtained greater leverage inside international fora on matters relating to its interests.

Sultan Qaboos also sought to improve relations with Oman's neighbors. His early efforts in late 1971 were successful in establishing a degree of political and diplomatic rapprochement with most of his fellow Arab dynasts. Parallel efforts to win from these governments a comparable degree of economic and military assistance for the Sultanate's fight against the rebels in Dhofar, however, proved far less productive. In the end, it was mainly Omani forces on the ground, aided by British, Pakistani, Jordanian, Indian, and Iranian advisors, plus a limited degree of assistance from the United Arab Emirates, that brought the insurrection — the longest in modern Arabia's history — to an end.

Scarcely had the Dhofar war ground to a halt than the Omani government set about making preparations to host a major conference aimed at enhancing defense cooperation among the Gulf states themselves. The foreign ministers of all the Gulf states attended, but the delegates to the November 1976 meeting in Muscat came away empty-handed, unable to reconcile the competing agendas for regional leadership that were being pursued at the time by some of the larger states, most notably Iran and Iraq. Oman's active role in sponsoring the conference nevertheless served notice of the Sultanate's serious interest in helping to forge a credible regional defense mechanism.

After the Iran-Iraq war broke out, Oman responded positively to Gulf-wide discussions

concerning the urgent need for a central coordinating body. At a meeting in Amman in November 1980, the Sultanate communicated its wish to be an integral part of an organization in which the political system and the goals for defense and economic coordination of the other would-be members were broadly similar to its own. Indicative of Oman's efforts to hasten the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) existence was the Sultanate's decision to host the final preparatory meeting in Muscat prior to the formal founding session in May 1981 in Abu Dhabi.

Sultan Qaboos, speaking before his colleagues at the end of the GCC's inaugural summit, was the first head of state to stress openly that defense and security coordination among the members should proceed hand in hand with their cultural, economic, social, and political cooperation. Oman pressed the point home by lobbying hard, and in the end successfully, to ensure that a key position in the formative period of the GCC hierarchy — assistant secretary-general for political affairs, a post that also oversees the GCC's diplomatic and defense policies — should be held by an Omani.

Omani officials were subsequently as diligent as their counterparts in other GCC member-countries in drafting a series of working papers on Gulf security and defense questions. The Sultanate understood the numerous benefits that could be gained from even the most limited integration of its economy with those of its neighbors; no less important was its emphasis on how increased intra-regional cooperation in economic development, industrialization, and planning, in general, would yield benefits in the military sectors.

### **Advantages of GCC Membership**

Oman's achievements from having participated in the GCC, like those of each of its fellow members, are mixed. From one perspective, Oman, together with Bahrain, was unable to persuade the Council that the GCC's \$2.1 billion Gulf Investment Fund, agreed to in 1982, should be established along developmental instead of commercial (i.e., profit-oriented) lines. This precluded the prospect of Oman's receiving the desired amount of development-related investment funds from a potentially important GCC economic institution. Council membership has also meant that Omani policies and actions have been exposed to more extensive and intensive criticism from some of its neighbors than the government would have preferred.

Such disappointments pale, however, in comparison to the benefits gained. These include: the downgrading of Oman's territorial disputes with its neighbors to a Council procedural and administrative issue rather than a source of interstate conflict; the amplification of Oman's voice in regional and international affairs; the enhancement of the Sultanate's defense and security cooperation with its neighbors; the strengthening of Oman's hand, and that of other moderate governments, against radical movements in the area; the bolstering of its diplomatic and political position vis-a-vis the countries comprising the former Soviet Union, as well as Iran, Iraq, and Yemen; the opening up of neighboring markets to Omani goods and services; the savings accrued on costly industrial and development projects from coordination with fellow GCC members; and the increased revenues from tourists who have discovered the beauty of the Sultanate's stunning landscapes, seascapes, and cultures which

combine to form a fascinating and exotic blend of ancient and modern.

Oman's GCC experience, as with that of its fellow members, has lessened the Sultanate's previous vulnerability that often came from standing still or acting alone. At the same time, the potential for great power conflict in the area has diminished. Moreover, in sharing the lessons of its considerable experience with externally sustained instability, Oman has helped to bring about a perceptual adjustment among some of its neighbors on regional defense and internal security cooperation. Certainly, the Sultanate has spoken as consistently and convincingly as any GCC member about the need for financial and military backing to increase the region's internal and external security.

The most all-pervasive benefit from Oman's membership in the GCC is that it has allowed the Sultanate to cooperate with others in economic, security, and military fields in ways that would have not been possible if the Council did not exist.

### **Regional and International Security and Defense**

Oman's military forces are small. All three services number only 36,000 men, including 3,700 expatriate personnel. Even so, they are reckoned by most defense analysts to be one of the most capable in the Arabian Peninsula. Their stature is the outgrowth of the land forces' experience in the Dhofar rebellion from 1965 to 1975, of the accelerated training and arms purchases programs made possible by increased oil revenues dating from the 1970s, and of the extensive exercising of Oman's armed forces within the country and in bilateral and multilateral maneuvers with its fellow GCC members, the United States, and Great Britain. The Sultanate, nevertheless, has not yet reached the point of being able to deter an attack by one or more of its neighbors on its own, a fact that remains a source of considerable concern to Omani military planners.

Serious constraints in the area of human resource development and education account for part of the challenges that are imbedded in Oman's security and defense concerns. These, in turn, are compounded by the fact that Oman's national income is substantially smaller than any other GCC state except Bahrain. With a population of only two million in the GCC's second largest country, Omanis are limited in their ability to command, control, and operate the Sultanate's four main airfields and its several naval facilities without external assistance.

### **Yemen**

The external variables influencing Oman's regional policies are also substantial. Progress, however, continues in certain areas. For example, the former Soviet-assisted People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), also known as South Yemen from 1967 to 1990, long ranked at the top of the Sultanate's major foreign policy challenges. The Omani government, as it faced South Yemen, confronted the daunting reality that its forces were outnumbered and outgunned.

The Sultanate's apprehensions were heightened by its awareness of its less-than-perfect air defense system and by the Soviet use of PDRY naval facilities at Aden and on the Indian

Ocean island of Socotra. The frequency of Soviet access to PDRY land bases near the Omani border was also cause for concern. From a military perspective, Omani strategists had little choice but to strengthen the Sultanate's southern defenses and elevate and intensify the level of their defense cooperation with Great Britain and the United States in order to block the expansion of Soviet and PDRY influence into the Gulf.

In September 1982, however, as a result of a mediation effort within the GCC led by Kuwait and supported by the UAE, Oman and Yemen agreed to settle their long-standing border and political disputes, and relations improved steadily throughout the 1980s. Oman, immediately prior to the 1994 Yemeni civil war, was as active as any Arab country in trying to prevent the conflict from occurring. Upon its termination, Oman has been second to none in supporting the government in Sana'a in its efforts to reunify the country's northern and southern sectors.

Omanis and Yemenis, once adversaries, are now closer than at any time in living memory. Indeed, Muscat and Sana'a are interested in joining hands with other Indian Ocean countries to explore the merits of a possible new regional association — the League of Indian Ocean Nations (LION) — that would enhance the ability of its members to cooperate on issues of mutual interest and concern.

### **The Hormuz Strait**

The ongoing situation around the Strait of Hormuz is a constant among the Sultanate's other major defense concerns. The Iran-Iraq war, increased maritime insurance rates, and a lower level of Middle East oil production, reduced the volume of traffic through the Strait from 70 tankers and other large ships a day in the mid-1970s to 50, and often less, in the mid-1980s as a result of the "tanker war" phase of that conflict.

The Strait has not been seriously threatened since the 1980s. Nonetheless, the stakes for those who are dependent on unimpeded passage through this vital maritime artery remain exceptionally high. Just under half of all the oil produced by the OPEC countries leaves the Gulf through Omani waters along the Strait, which acts as a gateway to oil reserves estimated to be in excess of 600 billion barrels. The United States and Great Britain have their own sources of energy that could help provide a cushion to any catastrophic closing of the Strait, but the same cannot be said of most Asian and European countries, the majority of whose oil originates west of the Strait.

Oman, on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz, faces the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the heyday of its radical and revolutionary phase, Tehran declared all of the governments on the western side of the Gulf, including the Sultanate's, to be illegitimate. As nearly all of the Strait's shipping passes through the Omani and not the Iranian side of the waterway, Oman's role as guarantor of safe passage into and out of the Gulf has been heightened. However, neither Oman's own small force of 8 patrol and 4 missile boats nor the fleets of all the other GCC states — which combined are fewer than Iran's navy — can guarantee safe passage. Rather, Western ships augmenting Oman's and the other GCC countries' naval forces have helped to deter Strait-related adventurism by Iran and others.

## **Iraq**

Oman was officially neutral during the Iran-Iraq war. However, from 1981 when the regime in Baghdad actively sought to negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict, Oman and its fellow GCC members clearly favored Iraq. Oman, along with most other countries, chose to back the forces seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict in opposition to Iran, Israel, North Korea, and Communist China, which showed little inclination to see the war come to an end.

Many in Iran argued that Oman and its fellow GCC members should have acted differently. But the Sultanate's and the other GCC countries' options were not dissimilar to those faced by the United States in the early 1940s in the heat of World War II. At that time, Washington and the capitals of many other Western countries, for comparable reasons, reluctantly realized that they had little choice but to support Stalin's USSR against Hitler's Germany.

During and since the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis, Oman's relationship with Iraq has been mixed. Muscat's policies have ranged from solid opposition to Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait, which resulted in the death of Omani soldiers in the forcible reversal of Iraq's aggression, to a sustained effort, in the aftermath of the conflict, to maintain diplomatic relations and an ongoing dialogue with the regime in Baghdad.

The Sultanate's policy on Iraq has been and remains an irritant to some in Washington. Oman's critics, oblivious to the dynamic balance of tension that characterizes international relations within the Gulf, would have the Sultanate and every other GCC country lend their maximum support to forcing Iraq to comply fully with the UN-mandated sanctions.

Often overlooked, however, has been Oman's role during the past two years as a key member, and at one point the president, of the UN Security Council. The Sultanate was alternately a leader or an active participant in virtually all of the Council's deliberations on whether and when to lift or relax the sanctions regime against Iraq. Oman has consistently stated its insistence that Iraq be made to comply fully with all the relevant UN resolutions as a precondition for lifting sanctions.

Oman has simultaneously recognized the need for sustained dialogue with Iraq and acknowledged the challenge of alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people, most of whom, after all, are Oman's fellow Arabs and Muslims. A seamless cloak of mourning wraps the pain that a great many Omanis feel as a result of the forcible deprivation visited upon millions of innocent Iraqis in the wake of their government's invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

As Oman assumes the chairmanship of the Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council in December 1995 for the following year, there is likely to be no relaxation by the members concerning their individual and collective unfinished business with the Baghdad regime. Indeed, no single item on the six countries' agenda will be higher than renewed commitment to bring about Iraq's full compliance with the UN resolutions pursuant to lifting the sanctions. Only then, argue many within Oman and the GCC countries, can Iraq begin to be reintegrated into the emerging new Arab order occasioned by the Kuwait crisis, the Arab-

Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the continuing need for regional cooperation on economic development, defense, and security issues.

## **Iran**

Oman's concern about Iran is real. The Islamic Republic represents a twin challenge to the Sultanate and the other GCC countries. Tehran's more radical extremists would like to export the Iranian revolution to Oman and its GCC neighbors. Given the separatist tendencies of some of Iran's sub-regions, Oman is also concerned with the "unknowns" of what might occur in the event that the regime or the revolution falters. Additionally, any number of scenarios evolving from the future situation in Iraq or elsewhere in the region could provoke Iran to intervene in the affairs of one or more of its neighbors and push Tehran closer to Moscow, Peking, and/or North Korea, thereby upsetting the existing strategic and military balance in the area.

Oman's and other GCC countries' unstated strategic need vis-a-vis Baghdad is for Iraq's geopolitical support in the event Iran should threaten their sovereignty, political independence, or territorial integrity. Such a prospect is neither fanciful nor ridiculous. Iran, in the eyes of the GCC as a whole, continues to violate all three of these criteria in the case of the UAE, Oman's neighbor. This makes the Iran-UAE dispute the second most important issue on Oman's and its fellow GCC members' foreign policy agenda.

In 1993, Tehran also unilaterally pronounced the extension of the Islamic Republic's territorial waters across the Hormuz Strait into Omani waters. Equally ominous for Omani defense needs vis-a-vis Tehran at present and in the future is the positioning of Iran's Silkworm missiles. The missiles dominate the Hormuz Strait and Omani sea lanes through which the bulk of the world's oil trade flows. Moreover, Tehran opposes Oman's and other Arab countries' proactive support for the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Oman's and other countries' apprehensions regarding the Islamic Republic's capabilities and intentions are further heightened by the expansion of the Iranian navy's submarine program, the Iranian armed forces' annual staging of military maneuvers in the vicinity of the Strait of Hormuz, and Tehran's quest for acquiring and developing ever greater amounts of nuclear facilities, materials, and technology. These factors illuminate the unease surrounding the delicate tightrope that Oman and other neighbors of Iran walk above the shoals of intra-Gulf power politics.

Prudence and elementary strategic wisdom, therefore, drive Omani policies and attitudes vis-a-vis Iran and Iraq. In the tradition of the famed Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiyya more than a thousand years ago, Muscat places great value on holding onto its diplomatic strings to Baghdad and Tehran. Imbedded in such policies is the maxim that nothing be allowed to break or harm Oman's ties to either of these two countries lest the bilateral relationship degenerate to a stage beyond repair.

Oman's strategic reasoning and national security interests often entails turning a deaf ear to Iran's or Iraq's heated rhetoric or hints at intimidation. Realistically, given the extraordinary

power discrepancies, it is difficult to foresee Muscat pitting its population of two million against those of Iraq or Iran, which are, respectively, ten and thirty times greater. Oman, initially alone, subsequently with others, and more consistently and clearly than anyone else from the outset, has never hesitated to point out to its fellow GCC members the foreign policy and defense implications of their demographic and military weakness vis-a-vis the much more populous and heavily armed Iran and Iraq.

### **Oman and its Fellow GCC Members**

Oman not only ranks at the forefront of Gulf countries keen to emphasize the necessity of combining diplomacy with power. It has also been more open than most of its fellow GCC states in stating unequivocally that, in the absence of sufficient power to deter or defend against a hostile neighbor, they have no choice but to borrow such power from their friends, allies, and strategic partners. Hence, the Sultanate was the first to sign an Access (or Facilities) Agreement with the United States in 1980. Ten years later, in the aftermath of the Kuwait crisis, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates entered into similar arrangements with the U.S., known as Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCA).

The DCAs are not the same as treaties, but they obligate the signatories to consult and cooperate in whatever ways necessary to enhance Gulf security. To this end, the agreements permit the pre-positioning of U.S. military equipment on the signatories' territory and the staging of joint exercises to enhance the parties' combined capabilities to deter and defend.

Part of the rationale for such agreements is the need to remove any ambiguity in the mind of a would-be aggressor about international resolve to support the inherent right of a DCA's signatory to self-preservation. The agreements are also predicated on the notion that defense equipment and systems not in place have never succeeded in deterring anyone.

Oman's experience in administering such agreements a decade longer than any other Gulf country has not been lost on its GCC partners. In this regard, the Sultanate occupies a position of *primus inter pares* vis-a-vis the more recent signatories, especially with respect to how the agreements' operative provisions can truly contribute to a country's deterrence and defense capabilities.

Likewise, Oman's more extensive experience in mobilizing and deploying its armed forces in the course of conducting exercises so as to hone the forces' command, control, and communications systems, is being studied more and more by other GCC countries. Gone are the days when Oman's critics within the GCC argued that the Sultanate was going too far and moving too fast in emphasizing the imperatives of a strong national and intra-regional defense structure and in cooperating so openly with its Western friends and partners in pursuit of these objectives.

Oman, within the GCC, has also become a leading proponent of linking the external and domestic variables of national and regional security. Oman has devised its own model for gradual political change that has favorably impressed others in the region — a model which pre-dates the Kuwait crisis and its aftermath. During the 1989 Summit in Muscat, Sultan

Qaboos argued at length that the forces driving political change in Central and Eastern Europe were of direct relevance and concern to the GCC countries. Few in the GCC other than the Kuwaitis agreed with the Omani ruler at the time, but virtually all do now.

The positive impact of the Sultanate's experience has been not only on the nature and pace of political transformation that is occurring amidst tradition within the region. It has also been on the extent to which the GCC states' citizenries as a whole are increasingly involved in their countries' governments and national development process.

One of Oman's greatest contributions to GCC defense strategy has been its emphasis on linking the horizontal dimensions of regional security —strengthening the GCC's collective defense force, conducting increased numbers of joint and, where possible, multilateral maneuvers, etc. — to a vertical dimension. The latter component seeks to ensure that outside would-be meddlers in the GCC countries' internal affairs confront the least fertile soil for their destabilizing ideas and political movements.

The expansion of Omani and other GCC member countries' citizens' participation in their respective national political systems is designed to narrow the gap between governors and governed. It is also intended to increase the latter's stake in the existing, evolutionary system of government, rather than its radical and often violent alternatives.

At the end of the 1994 GCC Summit, Oman also took to heart the call of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia to settle as many intra-GCC border disputes as possible prior to the following summit. The remaining difference stemming from the 1990 agreement between Muscat and Riyadh regarding their countries' respective borders was settled earlier this year; negotiations are ongoing for final border demarcations between Oman and the UAE; and the previous settlement of the Oman-Yemen border has taken on added permanence with the building of a road, financed mainly by the Sultanate, that will further link the two countries' peoples and economies.

In terms of the GCC region as a whole, it is a fact of life that geography, demography, and history tend naturally to link Oman more to its fellow Lower Gulf states of the UAE and Qatar than to Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia at the northern end of the Gulf. The northern GCC states, primarily for reasons of territorial proximity and recent regional developments, are usually more preoccupied with Iraq than the southern GCC states. Another distinction is that the economies and overall development of the GCC's three northern countries have been far more influenced by ties to the U.S. than the three southern GCC countries, which have much deeper and more extensive ties to Great Britain.

This historical and foreign policy dynamic provides insight into why Oman's geopolitical assets within the GCC are often oriented more toward Iran, Qatar, and the UAE than to Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. This said, it is important not to read too much into such phenomena. Of greater relevance is that no other GCC country comes close to having had a comparable experience. The result is that thousands of Omanis have lived and worked in the other GCC countries for decades. The Sultanate as a whole has an unparalleled degree of knowledge and understanding about the inner workings of the government, the economy, and the society of virtually every GCC country.

One of the cumulative effects of all the foregoing enumerated attributes of Oman's geographic position as well as its diplomatic and political style has been its pioneering role in the Middle East peace process. In the aftermath of the 1979 Camp David Accords, Oman, alone among the states that would form the GCC, refused to sever diplomatic relations with Egypt in reaction to the latter's conclusion of a separate peace treaty with Israel.

The thread of Mu'awiyya, noted earlier as characterizing Oman's diplomatic approach to Iraq and Iran, saw its first manifestation at the time of the Camp David Agreements. Muscat argued correctly that, sooner or later, Egypt would have to be reintegrated into the Arab family of nations. Oman warned its fellow Arab and Islamic countries that a policy of rhetorically and politically denouncing Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's actions would weaken the Arab front. Worse, it argued that a policy of ousting Egypt from the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference risked dealing a body blow to pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sentiments and cooperation, entailing costs that, in Oman's view, would be neither wise nor acceptable.

Oman has been exemplary in the degree to which it has worked to further the goals of the current peace process' multi-track components. Together with all the other GCC members, Muscat renounced its secondary and tertiary economic boycott of Israel in September 1994. Subsequently, as Bahrain and Qatar have also done with regard to other issues, Oman hosted in Muscat a conference on water that involved the participation of Israelis alongside Omanis and others among the Sultanate's fellow Arabs, representatives of the GCC Secretariat, and specialists from close to two dozen other countries.

The Sultanate has also agreed to serve as the headquarters of a Middle East center for research on desalination and other water resource conservation, distribution, and development challenges. Oman, moreover, was the only GCC country to host Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin in order to explore possible areas of cooperation. To that end, the two countries have agreed to open offices in each other's capitals for the purpose of promoting future business relationships and possible technical cooperation programs. In November 1995, Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Youssef bin Alawi was one of the half a dozen high-ranking Arab leaders attending Mr. Rabin's funeral.

### **Conclusion**

The Sultanate's regional and global importance cannot be underestimated. If Oman can maintain its present path of economic, social, and political development and of close cooperation with other, like-minded nations in the area, and if its growing defense relationship with the United States, Great Britain, and others, including its fellow GCC countries, proceeds apace, then there is little doubt that the Sultanate will continue to play a crucial role in the maintenance of peace and security in the Gulf region.

*DR. JOHN DUKE ANTHONY, President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, writes frequently on the peoples and politics of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.*