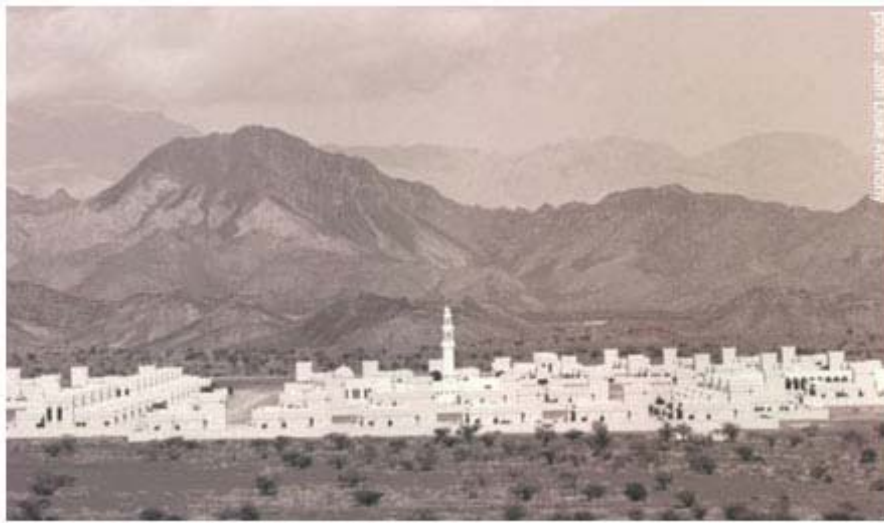


Oman in Focus:

Reflections from a February-March 2003
National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations'
Malone Fellows Study Visit
to the Sultanate of Oman

By
John Duke Anthony



Village amidst the Hajar Mountains, Ibri, Oman.



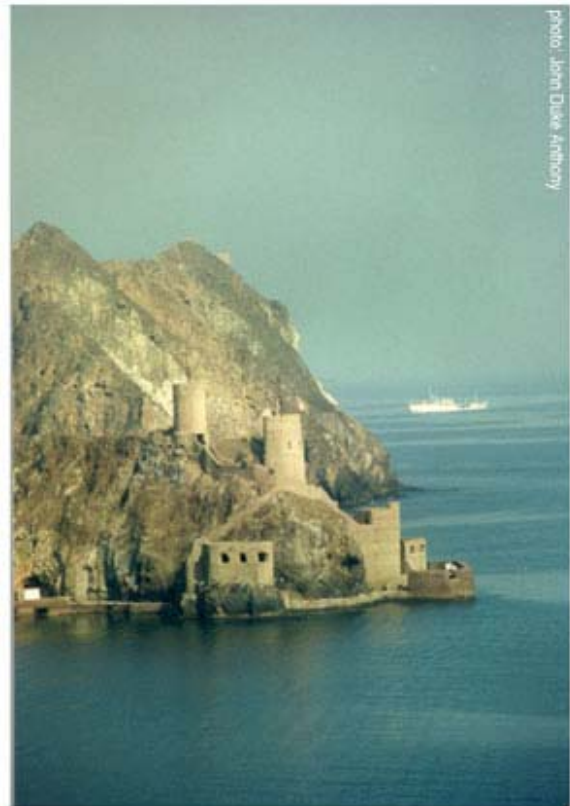
As the heated international situation related to Iraq continues to accelerate, or degenerate, depending on one's perspective, a delegation of National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' Malone Fellows has just concluded a visit to Oman. We met with some of the country's highest foreign policy and domestic leaders, along with key American officials posted here. In the process, no subject of current interest pertaining to the bilateral, regional, and multilateral relationships of Oman and the United States has been spared examination and analysis.

ISSUES AND INTERESTS

The scope and substance of the discussions have been extraordinarily rich and timely. Uppermost among the topics addressed have been the standoff between the United States and most of the United Nations Security Council members regarding Iraq; the worsening conflict between Israelis and Palestinians; and the recent installation in Israel of a new, harder-line, and more anti-Palestinian cabinet than in recent memory.

Regarding the latter phenomenon, there is considerable concern over the Sharon government's continuing attempts to weaken the influence of American, European Union, Russian, and United Nations efforts to bring peace and stability to the eastern Mediterranean.

No less disconcerting is the unease rooted in how, as a direct outgrowth of the situation related to Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what was near universal goodwill towards the Bush Administration 18 months ago in the wake of 9-11 continues to erode. Indeed, to a degree that is more obvious to anyone traveling outside the United States than within it, anti-Bush Administration sentiments internationally are becoming more and more deeply rooted and pervasive.



Fort Mirani, 16th century. Muscat, Oman.

PRO-AMERICANISM ON THE DEFENSIVE

It is hard to imagine how a sitting president of the world's most powerful nation, for reasons stemming directly from how he and his advisers are perceived by millions the world over as reeking of arrogance, abrasiveness, and an antagonistic attitude seldom

associated with any previous American head of state could have fallen any faster or further in international esteem.

And this, even the president's critics are quick to emphasize, with a full scale U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq not yet launched. Fortunately, in stark contrast to these sentiments, no one among the delegation's participants has experienced here any comparable degree of anger and disappointment expressed towards the American people.

Two additional subjects have been repeatedly discussed in meetings between the delegation members and their hosts here. One relates to the state of popular participation in Oman, pan-GCC, and other Arab states' national development processes. The other centers on the mounting challenges imbedded in these countries' educational systems, high population growths, and limited employment opportunities for an increasingly youthful citizenry.

To a lesser degree, there have also been far-ranging discussions on other topics. One is the effects of climate change upon individual countries' water resources pertaining to supply, management, and conservation. The other is the potentially irreversible damage that many see being inadvertently inflicted by Washington's Mideast policies upon a range of people-to-people relationships between Americans and Arabs and Muslims generally.

FRAYED PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

A frame of reference for the latter phenomena is the continuing setback being dealt the previous decades-long trend among Arabs to pursue their higher education and medical treatment, and to take their vacations, in the United States.

In this regard, here as elsewhere, it is apparent that the American losses resulting from Bush Administration restrictions post 9-11

on visitation to and study in the United States by Arabs and Muslims generally have been to the gain of Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland. The evidence is plain to see.



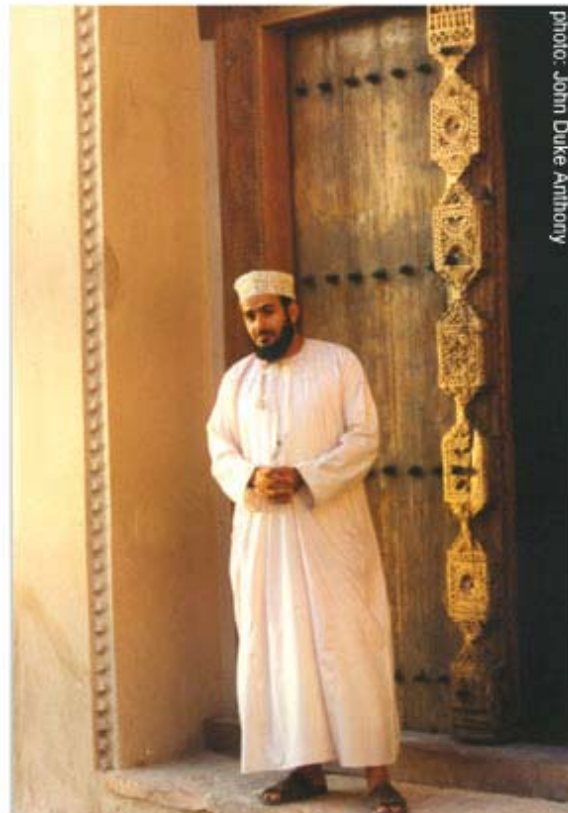
Schoolchildren at Shatti School, Qurum, Oman.

Arabs and Muslims in large numbers are increasingly opting to travel to and study as well as receive medical treatment not in the United States but elsewhere.

In the eyes of some, the irony is that this is happening just as these and other Arab and Islamic countries are becoming more open to discourse with Western countries in general, and with Americans in particular. In contrast, the United States is seen to be drawing in upon itself and limiting rather than strengthening and expanding dialogue, tolerance, and reciprocity of respect for other people's cultural values, moral principles, and religious beliefs.

Even at this early stage in assessing only two aspects of the damage wrought by various American policies since 9-11, the effect has been to slow down what would likely have been a more robust exchange of peoples and ideas between Arabs and Americans. To be fair, no one here argues against the need to tighten and streamline American procedures that had long left United States national security at risk. But it is a measure of how fixing what was in need of repair can result in unintended damage to the American and Arab relationship. This is what is happening in the present instance. Already an early consequence has been to reverse an earlier American generation's accomplishments that have time and again enabled the Arab-U.S. relationship to survive in tact amidst periodically tumultuous political seas.

It is the fruits of previous American pioneers' hard work and dedication to build strong people-to-people ties between Americans and Arabs, linkages that were among the more enduring, that now stand frayed.



Omani guide at Nizwa Fort (al-Yaruba Dynasty era), Nizwa, Oman.

This said, the emphasis in many of the discussions here has been only partly on assessing the perceived negative impact of American foreign policies upon regional stability flowing from U.S. approaches towards not just Iraq and the Palestinian conflict. The focus of numerous discussions to date has also been on two other developments that, by any measurement, suggest that the substantially heightened stress and tension in American-Arab relations is unlikely to subside anytime soon.

OTHERNESS *VERSUS* US-NESS

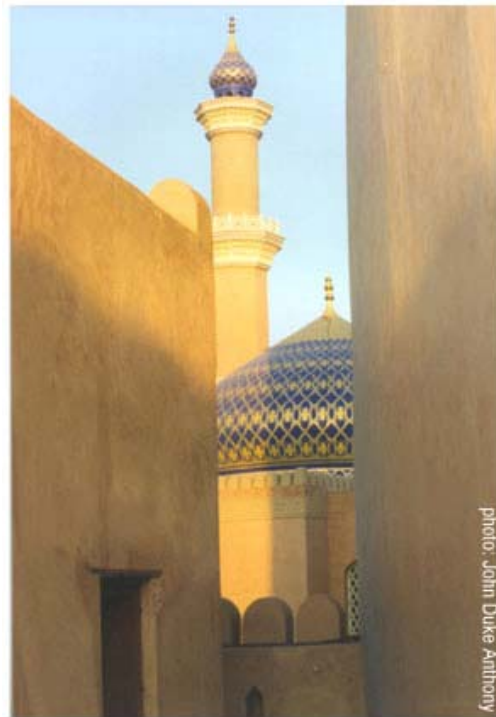
One development that is laced with anxieties stems from perceived shortcomings in a range of Bush administration stances toward terrorism, Afghanistan, India, Iran, and Pakistan. A common denominator to the perceptions of many in this area is that Washington sees the people associated with these phenomena not as co-equal human beings but, rather, as “other,” “those,” “them” - as “objects” rather than as “actors” with legitimate needs and interests worthy of respect and accommodation in their own right.

Another worrisome development is centered on the implications of various U.S. officials’ stated intentions to “help democratize” and reconfigure the geo-political boundaries of the Mideast. In the eyes of many in Arabia and the Gulf, the perceived purpose of the last two objectives is to make the actions and policies of the region’s governments more accommodating to American and Israeli interests regardless of the consequences.

Even so not every experience by the delegation’s members has been intellectual. Nor has the tone of the intellectual exchanges across the two countries and cultures been bereft of delight at the vast array of common ground that exists between Americans and Omanis.

EMPIRICAL EDUCATION

In addition to meetings with policymakers and international affairs analysts, there have been numerous visits to many of Oman’s legendary cultural and historical sites. Of interest in this regard is that none of these visits have been to inanimate relics of the past. All have been interspersed among meetings with Bedouins, tribal and community leaders, men and women, and citizens ranging from children and students to representatives of the country’s elders in town, desert and village. Veteran visitors to the Sultanate will hardly find some of the observations conveyed here and below either new or difficult to comprehend. Many will recognize and agree that such empirical educational experiences, not only here but elsewhere in the GCC region, are of exceptional interest and value to anyone seeking to better understand the inner workings and international relations of individual Arab countries.



Mosque and Fort, Nizwa, Oman.

photo: John Duke Anthony

As with previous National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' delegations that have visited Oman, the mix of firsthand experiences afforded the present group has been unique. This is the more so for reasons owing to the relatively small number of Americans who have steeped themselves in the culture and heritage of Oman. This is understandable given that until as recently as a generation ago the sultanate was one of the most remote and forgotten corners in the Arab world.

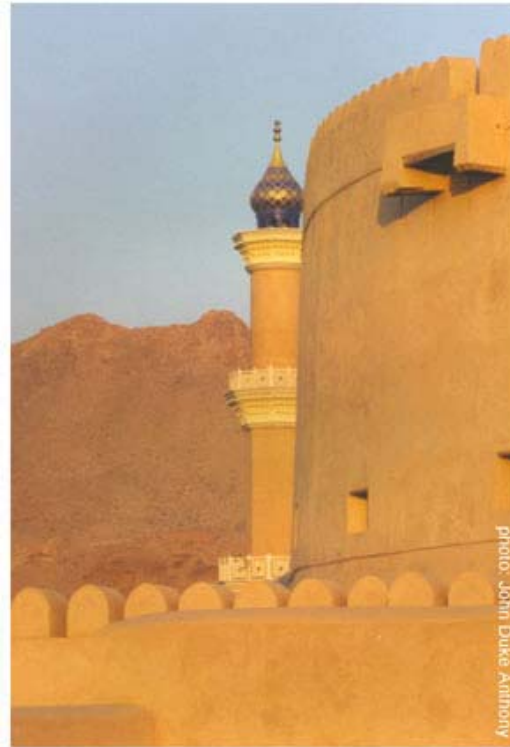
HORMUZ STRAIT

The visit concluded at the end of our overland trek to and stay of several days in the remote Musandam Peninsula region of Oman, which is separated from the rest of the sultanate as Alaska is from the "Lower Forty-Eight" of America's states. With its high mountains and numerous fjords, this region of Oman is rightly likened as Arabia's Norway. On one of our days here, we sailed in an aged dhow [Arab wooden sailing vessel] to the northernmost tip of the peninsula that overlooks the Hormuz Strait.

This was my fifth visit to the jugular of what ranks among the world's most strategically vital maritime and energy export routes, and to areas near Omani defense outposts overlooking the entrance and exit to the Gulf. The latter, like the waist of an hour glass, links the world's most abundant proven resources of petroleum to the engines of international economic growth and the material well being of humanity as a whole.

For most of a morning near the end of our stay in this sub-region of the Sultanate, we visited with families and children of fisher folk in a cove of Kumzar, one of the islands closest to the Hormuz Strait. Given its age-old difficulty of access until the ascent of Sultan Qaboos to the rulership of Oman in 1970, it is only in recent years that Kumzar's inhabitants, still linked to the rest of the country and the world as a whole only by boat, have derived the benefits of electricity, a clinic, and an elementary school.

It is hard to describe the effect upon our group of inquisitive souls who came ashore to interact with this community that, in many ways, seems as though it was hermetically sealed in a bottle from bygone centuries. However well traveled these Americans had been before, their experience here drummed nearly everyone into awe and the prolonged silence that comes from wonder that such places still exist on planet earth. In stark contrast to the oft-used image of an island or an oasis in the midst of a storm or desert, here we encountered the exact opposite, a metaphor turned inside out. For several hours we mixed among an island folk clinging to a traditional way of life the likes of which, among their religious and ethnic counterparts elsewhere, no longer exists except in a handful of the more remote reaches remaining in Arab and Islamic lands.



Mosque in Nizwa, Oman.

TELEGRAPH ISLAND

The capstone of our sojourn to this southeastern rim of Arabia was a late afternoon's sailing visit to and dropping of anchor a tiny spot amidst this ancient archipelago: Telegraph Island. Sheltered in becalmed waters in the midst of a cluster of larger islands, this particular outpost of an earlier empire, deserted nearly a century and a half ago, lies adjacent to the gateway to the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean, to the south, and to the six-country GCC region plus Iran and Iraq, to the north.

The island's barren rocky outcropping stands like a ghostly whisper to a bygone era. Awash by the sea on every side, it is all that is left of a maritime doorstep in a region that since then has become vital for all of humanity. In its heyday, the island's status and role were firmly rooted in a pax-Britannica that helped maintain a semblance of regional order and stability that endured for more than a century and a half.

Telegraph Island's position and role was that of a way station along the telecommunications line that linked London to Iraq's southern city of Basra and onwards to Bombay. Although it took ten years to lay the cable from end to end, the manager's station on Telegraph Island and the island itself were abandoned only five years after the station's construction in 1864.

Even then, the impact of new telecommunications technologies was rapid and far-reaching, rendering obsolescent what only a short time before had been regarded worldwide as one of humankind's pioneering breakthroughs that, in the minds of its inventors and marketers, would surely last a generation.

The experience of visiting and viewing what remains of a once vital communications link that enhanced the quality of life for hundreds of millions of people at the time has not been without effect. Some in the group have pondered the allegorical incongruity of how, in the shadows of the potentially dark and foreboding days at hand, there may be lessons for present-day American assumptions regarding regional paramouncy.

For some, it seems possible that the tattered remains of Telegraph Island, like some English Ozymandias, may soon become emblematic of future Arab-U.S. relations occasioned by the cumulative impact of American arrogance in the Mideast.

Many, to be sure, are of an opposite view. These, citing the unparalleled international extent of U.S. strategic and technological preeminence, as well as its monetary and military might, believe that this is America's moment in the Mideast.

These appear less concerned than others with what a post U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq may portend for the future of American interests in this region. Those who accept such reasoning uncritically might profit from reading, or rereading as the case may be, the uncommon wisdom of Shelley.

Ozymandias

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed,
And on the pedestal these words appear:
**"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"**
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

OMAN IN FOCUS

Following are some unusually perceptive and incisive comments conveyed by members of the delegation.

"Oman is an oasis of peace in a desert of looming regional conflict. Her gentle people, through timeless negotiations, have settled age-old border disputes and live in friendship

and harmony with all her neighbors.” – T. N. (A 1993 State Teacher of the Year)

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“[Given what the U.S. Government seems intent on doing in this region,] being in Washington, D.C. [for the pre-departure program] made me nervous. Oman makes me feel safe. Not because I am protected, but because there is no danger here.” – T.F. (Radio Talk Show Producer)

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“Oman: if ever there was an island of reason in a sea of doubt; if ever there was a need to reach that far-flung shore.” – P. O. (Author, *Maverick Guide to Oman*)

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“The chance to visit Oman is unique. It affords one an opportunity to meet, enjoy, and learn from a lovely people who have endured a long and tumultuous history and emerged with an enviable dignity and serenity that is firmly rooted in their strong Islamic faith and traditions.” – M.D. (University Publications Director and Malone Fellow Alumna).

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“It’s hard to overstate the meaning of being able to come to Oman at such a troubled time in the U.S.-Arab relationship. To be with the Omani people, to haggle for frankincense in the Mattrah souk [traditional market], to wonder at the marvels of age-old architecture in the form of castles, forts, and watch towers; to gaze at the stars and ponder the roots of monotheism before sleeping in the open in the desert remoteness of the renowned Wahiba sands; to trek in our four-wheel drive through the wadis of the Bani Ghafir and the Bani Hina’ en route to Jabal Shams, at 10,500 feet the country’s highest mountain; and at every step to speak and wave to children; to listen to the wisdom of the country’s shaikhs and to learn so much about the Omanis and their special position in the world ...” – F.F. (National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations’ Morris Arab World Journalism Internship Alumnus).

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“For anyone to have, as we have had, an opportunity to visit in the home of a tribal shaikh, spend time with a Bedouin family in their simple barasti [date tree palm frond] hut in the middle of the desert, play stick ball with children in a village deep in the country’s interior, and have candid dialogues with some of the most prominent public and private sector personalities among the leaders of one of America’s oldest Arab allies -- would, by any standard, be an unforgettable experience.

“Throughout, we have experienced the legendary friendliness and hospitality of everyone we have met. For many, this observation might not seem out of the ordinary considering what it says about a people who are renowned for their moderation and tolerance towards the inhabitants of other countries, including Americans, to whom, in 1840, Oman was the first Arab country to send an Ambassador. Yet it is remarkable to witness the pervasiveness of such attributes especially at this time, when U.S. policies towards Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are seen as being so hostile, dangerous, and potentially destructive not only to the interests of the people throughout this vitally important region, but to American interests as well.” – J.T. (Attorney and Malone Fellow Alumnus).

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“Coming to Oman has provided an incredible range of insights far beyond what I had reason to expect. I’ve been able to experience directly the multifaceted positive results of policies shaped and implemented by one of the world’s most extraordinarily far-sighted leaders; to learn humility in the presence of a peaceful and loving people; to find joy in the smile of the ubiquitous Omani children; to enjoy an ancient and creative way of life infused with a twenty-first century flair for modernization and development amidst the ongoing manifestation of traditional values.” – R.C. (State University Professor of International Relations and “University Teacher of the Year”, Malone Fellow Alumna).

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“Little did I know in deciding to come here at this time that I would succeed in both my objectives - to learn how much progress Oman has made under Sultan Qaboos (since 1970) and how Omanis view the Mideast policies of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair.” – W. F. (Columnist, and Malone Fellow Alumnus).



Dr. Anthony with his friend of 15 years, Hamad Al-Rabbani, Chief Curator, Jabrin Fort, Jabrin, Oman.

[Photo: Peter J. Ochs, II]

Dr. John Duke Anthony is President and CEO, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; Publisher, *GulfWire*; and Secretary, U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. All three are Washington, D.C.-based non-profit and nongovernmental organizations dedicated to educating Americans and others about the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.