

Oman Positions on the Regional Crises

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The Middle East region has faced monumental challenges in recent times. It all started with the political upheavals in Iraq in 2003, affecting as it did the various economic, political and security spheres, and which some observers believe gradually spread into neighbouring countries of the region; leaving in their wake profound changes to the structure of the societies of the Middle East. In some of these countries, the upheavals resulted in sectarian and ethnic divisions; whilst in others it prompted efforts to repel and confront these challenges in order to limit their effects. Yet still, some of the countries in the region exploited the situation and embarked on a path of interference in the internal affairs of their neighbours, thus not only exacerbating and worsening tensions but were in fact also a direct contributory factor to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

When discussing the response of these countries to these developments, it is important to consider Oman's foreign policy. Despite the numerous developments that have occurred, and which continue to take place, at the Gulf countries/Arab-wide/Regional levels, Oman's policy towards these challenges has remained clear and transparent. Oman took it upon itself to engender and encourage peace and stability whenever possible, particularly in the Gulf region and more generally, in the Middle East. The Sultanate of Oman participated in bolstering the efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in meeting security challenges, adopting a firm stance at both regional and international level, and calling for the need to spread peace¹.

1. Hatem bin Saeed bin Mohammed Masen; The Pillars of Omani Foreign Policy in Light of Regional Changes 2005-2016, Master's Thesis (unpublished), Department of Political Sciences - Middle East University, Jordan, 2017, p57.

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Oman also called for the need to confront the phenomenon of global terrorism, which had already struck several countries in the region, and to coordinate the joint efforts of the members to combat terrorism through shared intelligence.

In many international and regional incidents, the Sultanate called for the need to preserve the security of the region, to spread peace, to combat terrorism and to eliminate it by fighting extremist ideology in the Arab region. Oman also supported other Arab countries in their efforts to serve humanity and to avoid their citizens becoming the victims of conflict and war; since terrorism had already claimed several Arab countries and to some extent, the whole of the Middle East Region without exception. The Sultanate warned against the spread of extremist ideology and expressed concern about it “and called for confronting it and addressing the causes and working to achieve the greatest possible regional and international cooperation; to contain the phenomenon of terrorism, and to limit its spread; hence the reassertion of peace, and the realisation of security and stability in the region.”²

Political developments in a number of countries of the Middle East soon escalated towards street demonstrations and the demand for some political and civil rights. It began in 2011 in some Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya and Yemen, resulting in security vulnerabilities; and in some instances, even led to serious security breaches. These countries witnessed the emergence of armed factions who took up arms against the state, in stark contrast to the situation in the Sultanate which, “distanced

2. Abdullah Al-Shammari, The Sultanate of Oman and Yemen: The Position on Operation Storm of Resolve: A Strategic Reading, Available at: www.sautalyemen.com.

itself from any role supportive of extremist groups and groups engaged in or accused of terrorist activities, and did not have any extremist groups within or outside its territory, a position quite different from some of the other Gulf states.”³

The Sultanate of Oman sought to preserve its regional and international standing by not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and by cooperating with international and regional organizations in containing the spread of extremist ideology and terrorism in the Gulf region as a whole. “It increased public awareness of the dangers of terrorism and terrorists to the security and stability of the country through the use of all available media, educational and social means; in order to protect the younger generations from being recruited in the wrong direction.”⁴ Oman has participated in international and regional conferences and agreements related to the fight against terrorism and has augmented its financial control over bank deposits and all financial aid which is transferred internally to companies, individuals and charities; as well as criminalising sectarianism(*) in accordance with Omani law. These measures distinguish Oman from the other the Gulf States, along with its reluctance to participate in any military

3. Mohammed Ezz Al-Arab, Internal Immunity: Why Oman remained immune to the threats of terrorism, Al-Ahram newspaper, No. 47139, 2015, p14.

4. Hatem bin Said bin Mohammed Musen, *ibid* p.62.

(*) Article 130 of the Omani Penal Code, following the criminalisation of community practices of a sectarian nature, states that “anyone who incites civil war in the country shall be punished with life imprisonment. Anyone who promotes or incites religious or sectarian strife or incites hatred or resentment among the people of the country, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years.” For more, see: Basma Mubarak Saeed, A Reading in Oman’s Vision of Rapprochement with Iran and the Gulf Union, Aljazeera Centre for Studies; <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2014/01/2014189038704848.html>

campaign outside its borders which in its view would threaten the security and stability of the region.

In a region such as the Middle East, it is difficult to find effective economic and political actors who have radically changed their internal reality. The chaos that struck the Middle East and affected the economies of these countries, brought into prominence Oman's achievements of economic growth, the raising of the standard of living of its citizens, coupled with economic and cultural prosperity; while preserving and sustaining all this growth and prosperity without being dragged into the chaos of the region; all served to make Oman an oasis of stability in a volatile region. Oman also distinguished itself as a diplomatic intermediary in the Middle East through the adoption of a neutral and balanced foreign policy of resolving regional conflicts.

There are those who criticised the role played by Oman in the region; for in certain situations it steered away from taking a leadership role and avoided assisting other countries except through negotiations. In addition, there was the boycott of Saudi Arabia's wishes regarding the two issues of the proposed Gulf Union, which King Abdullah bin Abd Al-Aziz called for in 2011, and the rebuffing of certain decisions of the Gulf Cooperation Council; and the thorny issue of its rapprochement with Iran, which Saudi Arabia sees as a threat to the security of the region on the one hand, and Iranian expansion and influence over the Gulf states, on the other. This latter issue is perhaps pivotal to the nature of Omani-Gulf relations, as it also reveals Oman's fears over Salafi expansionism through the Gulf Union, whose citizens are predominantly Salafi; and Oman's apprehensions as to how this will reflect on Oman's social fabric. Additionally, there is the divergence of visions and objectives between the GCC countries and the

priorities and interests of Oman.

As regards Iran, Oman believes that geopolitical and commercial pragmatism not only dictate the nature and strength of its relations with Iran, but also necessitate the avoidance of any conflict. This is coupled with a reluctance on the part of Oman to engage in any military hostilities against its neighbour. Oman shares territorial waters with Iran, as well as jointly operating a number of oil and gas fields. All this has fuelled Saudi Arabia's disagreements with the Sultanate, who has called on it to adhere to the principles of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) because "the Sultanate of Oman adopted a unilateral approach on a number of issues that were at odds with general Gulf policy, coupled with a reluctance to engage with certain critical issues witnessed by the Gulf region in particular; thus, presenting itself as the model intermediary state between conflicting parties."⁵

Oman's stance on the Yemeni crisis

The Sultanate of Oman has always been and continues to be an advocate for maintaining political stability in the Middle East region, as this impacts directly on its own internal stability. Furthermore, the Sultanate is politically sensitive to any interference by any of the dominant regional players in its internal affairs and with it, the potential for the destabilisation of its national security. Oman made its position very clear during the crises that developed in the Middle East in 2011, when it took a very different view on matters to that of the other Arab Gulf countries. When dealing with the Yemeni crisis, Oman demonstrated its credentials as a responsible, neutral and even-

5. On the Road of Disagreement between Oman and the Gulf Cooperation Council, where to? The Monitoring and Political Analysis Unit, Think Tank Centre for Studies and Research, 11 January 2016, p2.

handed player. Yemen shares a 288 Km stretch of border with Oman and the possibility of hostilities spilling over into Oman and threatening the whole region was all too obvious. Hence, Oman's decision not to cut off diplomatic relations and its refusal to declare war against Yemen.

“Although the GCC countries moved their embassies from Sanaa to Aden, the Sultanate did not do so and remained committed to the principle of non-alignment to any side whatever the cost.”⁶ This position stemmed from the fundamental principles of the Sultanate's foreign policy, which calls for non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and self-sufficiency in conflict. It is worth noting that the political vision of Sultan Qaboos at the time mandated a state of non-alignment and neutrality; and called for constructive dialogue to defuse the crisis and to end the conflict. Unfortunately, this did not happen, as the Gulf states, with the exception of Oman, launched a military offensive in Yemen against Houthi forces and the supporters of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

In response, the Sultanate of Oman held all the parties fully accountable, and called on them to end the conflict before it was too late. Oman hosted several round-table talks; received delegations from both the Houthis and the United Nations, all done in order to prevent the Yemeni conflict from spilling over into other countries of the region, including the Sultanate itself. Oman also supported any initiative by the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to find a solution. Despite all this, the Sultanate did not escape accusations from the Saudis of being sympathetic towards the Houthis. However, Oman's take on the situation in Yemen was completely different from what was being claimed by Saudi Arabia. The Sultanate, through its involvement in the Yemeni affair, revealed, as declared by the

6. Hatem bin Said bin Mohammed Musen, *ibid* p49.

Foreign Minister, Yusuf bin Alawi, that “The media dressed the Houthis in a uniform that was not of their making; for they cannot control Yemen alone, so they formed alliances with others in Yemen after they got fed up with the situation, and that the Gulf states believed that the situation was under control and that the Gulf initiative was sufficient. This could not be further from the truth.”⁷

The Yemeni crisis is one of the most prominent causes of disagreement between the Sultanate of Oman and other Arab countries. The Sultanate staked its position on the crisis very early on in Sana’a. “Although the Yemeni crisis is one of the most important issues affecting Gulf security today, prompting Saudi Arabia to form far reaching Arab alliances and launching the “Operation Storm of Resolve” military campaign against the Houthi fighters in Yemen, in cooperation with the Joint Arab Alliance; the Sultanate of Oman exercised its traditional policy of positive neutrality and non-interference in the internal affairs of other Arab countries, and refused to allow its armed forces to participate in the offensive; thereby preventing the conflict from crossing over into its territory by virtue of being neighbours, and by virtue of the tribal kinship between the Omani and Yemeni peoples.”⁸

Muscat’s strategy of neutrality made it an important player in the efforts by some of the international and regional powers to resolve the crisis in Yemen peaceably; to restore stability and security to the region, and non-militarization of the crisis beyond its current boundaries; especially in light

7. Official website of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016, available at: www.mofa.gov.om

8. Mustafa Shafiq Allam, *An Independent Approach: Oman’s Foreign Policy in Polarized Regional Contexts*, Rawabet Centre for Strategic Research and Studies, 2015, available at: <http://rawabetcenter.com/archives/13449>

of what appeared to be - according to some analysts - a proxy war between some of the dominant Arab powers and Tehran, being waged within the territory of Yemen. The Sultanate advanced a seven-point initiative to resolve the conflict in Yemen, aimed at securing a political consensus between the Yemeni factions, without the need for regional or international military intervention.

It is worth mentioning at this point that there are a number of reasons why Oman, in its role as peacemaker, held a different view from that of the other Gulf States. The Sultanate enjoys a deep relationship with the United States of America, which has sought to resolve the conflict peacefully. Moreover, the Houthis placed a great deal of trust in the Omanis and considered Oman as the most appropriate venue for dialogue to take place between them and the other Yemeni political factions. Oman's own conviction in its ability to manage the dialogue in ways that serve the region's best interests and thereby bring about peace and cooperation at all levels, is yet another factor in the prominent role played by the Omanis in the Yemeni crisis. Oman's decision to distance itself from Operation Storm of Resolve enhanced the neutral and balanced role it took upon itself to manage and steer the Yemeni issue towards a solution that satisfies the rival factions and maintain relations between them. This approach indicates or at least explains the pragmatism of the Sultanate in its foreign relations with the countries involved in the crisis, in stark contrast to the other GCC countries. In addition, Oman declined to participate in Operation Storm of Resolve in order to leave a window for negotiation between the parties to the conflict. It would not be possible for one side to the conflict to ask Oman to mediate an end to the crisis if Muscat was part of the coalition.

The Omani position on the Syrian crisis

The Sultanate of Oman took a firm stand towards the crisis in Syria since its outbreak in 2011 by denouncing the military operations aimed at toppling the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It called for dialogue between the various factions and to reach a peaceful solution that guaranteed the rights of all concerned. It encouraged exploring all available avenues to resolve the conflict peacefully; through diplomacy and without the intervention of parties from outside of Syria; on the basis that the crisis was internal. In view of the Sultanate's espousal of the principles of neutrality and resolution through dialogue, it found itself at odds with the remaining GCC countries regarding the Syrian crisis. Oman kept its Embassy open to verify its neutrality. In addition, "it also tried to reach a peaceful solution through holding talks between the Omani Foreign Minister Yousuf bin Alawi and his Syrian counterpart Walid al-Moallem in Muscat in 2015."⁹

Oman's experience in restoring security and stability to the Sultanate and preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity after being subjected to a rebellion by the Dhofar Front in 1975, following Sultan Qaboos ascension to power, and its belief in the necessity of confronting terrorist groups throughout the region; has enabled it to grasp the dimensions of the Syrian crisis and the possible ramifications if it spread to neighbouring countries in the region, and to earn the trust of Damascus as an honest broker in the peace process. Muscat subscribes to the view that the security threats faced by a number of countries in the region, including Syria, have

9. Islam Times, Oman's performance in the Syrian crisis between mediation and the preservation of political relations, Noor Centre for Studies and Research, 2016, available at: <http://alwaght.com/ar/>

reflected badly on the rest of the region. Therefore, the Sultanate called on the parties to the conflict in Syria to make every possible effort to reach a peaceful solution.

The distinction enjoyed by the Sultanate of Oman as a neutral, even-handed and rational broker in crisis management, earned it the role of mediator in Syria's thorny issue. It was not deemed or seen to be biased towards the Russian-Iranian axis that supported the survival of the political system in Syria, on the one hand; nor seen as aligning itself with the Western-American axis which sought to depose President Bashar al-Assad, on the other. Although the Sultanate is not predisposed to axis politics, it nevertheless played an important and pivotal role, especially since the two opposing axes -for Asaad and against him- shared a common ground on many matters at the political, economic, and military levels. Notwithstanding, the Sultanate insisted on finding a diplomatic roadmap which would render its role as a mediator in the Syrian crisis acceptable both regionally and internationally; and in a manner that would also allow it to maintain regular contact with the two axes and eventually bring an end to a conflict that had started in 2011.

The Sultanate engaged with the reality of the Syrian crisis in a coherent and self-assured manner and in accordance with its own strategic interests of maintaining regional security, on the one hand; whilst reprising its role in the crisis constituted a strategic manoeuvre to press forward with its peace mission in a region immersed in security chaos and mired in the political machinations of the international players, on the other. Consequently, the Sultanate of Oman's practice of realpolitik makes it an equally neutral and influential party in handling regional issues.¹⁰ It balanced its relationship

10. Hatem bin Said bin Mohammed Musen, *ibid* p47.

with Syria on one side, and the Arab countries within the GCC who supported the opposition in the conflict, on the other. Oman achieved this by building friendships with the countries of the region and the rest of world to pursue the principles of dialogue and mutual respect.

There were many indications that the Sultanate was exploring the possibility of a peaceful political end to the Syrian crisis such as pressing for the adoption of the most peaceful and realistic options in order to preserve the integrity of Syrian territory and thereby avoid bloodshed. For example, “the Sultanate exchanged visits with Syria at the level of Foreign Minister, in addition, it participated in the round-table talks on Syria held in Vienna; and the Sultanate’s endeavour to put forward several initiatives aimed at finding a peaceful political solution to the crisis; whilst contributing to the elimination of terrorism”¹¹, because there was an escalation in the crisis and armed groups emerged that were not connected with the de facto resistance, such as: the Nusra Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Shamm (Da’ash) and other terrorist organizations, in which the Sultanate of Oman saw a threat to the security and stability of the region.

The Sultanate of Oman spared no effort, in both the international and regional arenas, to resolve the Syrian crisis by peaceful means. It also called upon all the Syrian factions and the neighbouring countries to support efforts to restore security and stability to the country, and in the process, contribute to the elimination of terrorism that had gained a foothold in Syria, and the impact this terrorism was having on regional and international security. Oman also praised the efforts made by international

11. Muhannad Abu Areef, The Syrian Crisis and Omani Diplomacy .. Indicators and Semantics, Al-Dustour newspaper, November 3, 2015, available at: <http://www.dostor.org>

and regional organizations in support of the Syrian people to overcome their ordeal and stressed the need to do more to alleviate the human suffering of the Syrian people both at home and abroad. The Sultanate also sought to persuade all parties in the Syrian crisis to sit at the negotiating table and to abide by the outcome of any such talks, in order to safeguard the interests of the people of Syria; to preserve the territorial integrity and unity of the country, and to steer away from the military option.

The Sultanate of Oman's method of handling the Yemeni and Syrian crises emanated from longstanding foreign policy goals which aim at establishing grounds for dialogue, based on trust, between the opposing factions of the two conflicts; as well as adopting a mediatory and neutral role, thus increasing the prospects for a unified solution, whatever the crisis. The Sultanate resorted to a two two-pronged approach to deal with two crises: first, the handling of the Yemeni crisis prioritised Yemen's geographical proximity, with whom Oman shares a common border, posing an immediate threat to Oman's internal security if a peaceful solution was not attained. In addition, and as a matter of necessity, it adopted a balanced approach in managing the crisis, because another neighbour, Saudi Arabia, who is also a member of the GCC, leads the Arab Alliance against Yemen, and clashing with Kingdom could potentially sour relations between the Sultanate and Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding, Oman's wise leadership steered a balanced and measured path, and managed not to compromise relations between the two countries.

As regards the Syrian crisis, Oman has so far dealt with it on the basis of removing the threat to the security of the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East region as a whole. The events in Syria are, to a large extent, the result

of a clash between the interests of some of the Gulf states on the one hand, and Turkey and Iran on the other; as well as those of Russia and the United States. The Sultanate's eagerness to maintain the security of the Gulf region has to do with containing the effects of the crisis on the one hand; and its commitment to its foreign policy principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, on the other. Oman has contributed to and supported the peaceful resolution of the crisis, and has worked to keep all channels of communication open between all parties to the conflict to facilitate a settlement of the crisis. It has also sought to extricate Syria from a political impasse that has cost the country dearly in economic, social, scientific and cultural terms. Ultimately, Oman seeks to initiate a new phase in which there is role for everyone, including those directly involved in the conflict, and to build a new Syria, based on the respect for human rights, and the respect of freedoms and multiculturalism. This task cannot be easily achieved without the combined efforts of all concerned.