

Oman's Quiet Diplomacy

By Jeremy Jones

There was some surprise in Geneva in November 2013 when a 6-month deal was rapidly agreed between Iran and the P5+1. It may have been the swift pace of developments that led French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius to drag his feet somewhat.

Soon after, Associated Press broke the story: secret talks between the United States and Iran had been held in Oman in March 2013. This, and subsequent secret meetings, had prepared the ground for the quick deal in Geneva.

Oman has long espoused quiet diplomacy, and so it was that the secret talks had remained secret until November. Interestingly, in the first public Omani comment on the Associated Press story, the Omani minister responsible for foreign affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, said that reports about Oman's role in the deal were 'exaggerated.'¹

An important aspect of Omani culture is what anthropologist Fredrik Barth has called an *ideology of politeness*.² Barth argues that in Oman it is customary to model one's behaviour according to a code of honour that inhibits the articulation of public opinion about a person's worth, expressed in judgments of either criticism or praise. It is this politeness, combined with normal diplomatic discretion, that lies behind Yusuf bin Alawi's assertion that talk of the role played by Oman in the months prior to the Geneva talks had been 'exaggerated'. Cultural norms required the first Omani comment on these events to depreciate the Omani role³.

This norm is also evident in Oman's active cultural diplomacy, be it funding professorships or mounting exhibitions, in the East and in the West. Such activities are always described as intended purely to promote scholarship, education and cultural exchange. The more

¹ Asharq Al-Awsat, 26 November 2013.

² Fredrik Barth, *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1983.

³ <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/oman-says-role-in-iran-deal-exaggerated-1.1261831>.

political the activity is, the more vigorously will the fact that it is political be denied: my politics is to say I am not political.

Certain consistent features of Omani foreign policy mesh with this culture of politeness. Above all, Oman accepts and works with the underlying geopolitical realities. This is most plainly reflected in policy towards Iran. As His Majesty Sultan Qaboos would put it, Persia is Persia.

There is also a deep-rooted pragmatism, hence Oman's close relations with the USA. When Britain left the Gulf there was a need to look elsewhere for security guarantees. Then, the criticality of the Straits of Hormuz as regards global oil supplies, a criticality exacerbated by anxieties about the Iranian Revolution, led to the Carter Doctrine, announced by the US President in his State of the Union Address in January 1980: any interference with oil supplies in the Straits would be a matter of vital interest to the United States. Omani pragmatism encouraged the view that if the USA is going to be in your backyard anyhow, it may as well be there as a friend.

Then there is the aversion to sectarian or ideological conflict. Uniquely in the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is neither Shia nor Sunni but Ibadi – and what characterises Ibadism above all is that it is a non-sectarian sect. Ibadis worship happily in any mosque and welcome those of other sects to their places of worship. I myself have enjoyed an Iftar in a Sunni house located in a Shia district with prayers led by an Ibadi. This is not unusual.

Finally, there is the principle of tolerance. Archaeological discoveries have shown that the Omanis have been trading on the Indian Ocean rim for at least five thousand years. A look at the map of the Indian Ocean shows it is possible to travel from southern Africa up the East African coast, across the Bab el Mandeb to Arabia, then across the Straits of Hormuz to Persia, around the sub-continent and South East Asia and eventually to the Malacca Strait – all the way from Cape Town to Indonesia, without losing sight of land. With archaeological substantiation, we may reasonably infer that Omanis have been doing this from the earliest time of human migration. As a result they have a thoroughly ingrained tolerance for the 'other', whether in religion or ethnicity or culture. There has been a Christian church in Muscat since the late 19th century and a small Jewish population in Muttrah until the mid-20th century, when poverty led many, of all faiths and none, to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

These principles of Omani foreign policy are explicitly stated on the Foreign Ministry's website as follows⁴:

- the development and maintenance of good relations with all Oman's neighbours,
- an outward-looking and internationalist outlook, as befits Oman's geographic location and longstanding maritime traditions,
- a pragmatic approach to bilateral relations emphasising underlying geostrategic realities rather than temporary ideological positions,
- the search for security and stability through cooperation and peace, rather than conflict.

Together these principles produce a deep resistance to taking sides, to the point where any discussion of personalities in politics is generally avoided. In conversation His Majesty Sultan Qaboos takes care to avoid any mention of an individual. Proper nouns are simply absent. Such are the requirements of Omani grace and tact.⁵

Further, Sultan Qaboos' preference for taking the long-term view means he can table an idea and then stand back patiently, to wait for people and events to catch up. This can often be seen in Omani domestic politics. For instance, there is the widespread canard that political parties are banned in Oman. While it is the case that no parties exist, there is no legislation prohibiting their formation; furthermore, Article 33 of the Basic Statute of the State 1996 grants to all citizens *'the freedom to form associations on a national basis for legitimate objectives'*. Sultan Qaboos has himself confirmed that Article 33 creates a space within which political parties may develop at some point in the future. In his view, when and if they do is not a matter for him: rather, in the fullness of time it is a matter for the country as a whole. Further, although Sultan Qaboos says he has been thinking about the need for women to play a full role in society since the 1950s, and he brought women into the Royal Oman Police in the early 1970s, he did not introduce women into the cabinet until 2003. He is a very patient ruler.⁶

These principles and this measured approach have long informed Oman's Iran policy. In the 1970s in the separatist Dhofar war in the south of Oman, Iran provided troops in support of the Omani

⁴ <http://mofa.gov.om/?cat=159&lang=en>

⁵ audience granted to the author, 3 November 2008.

⁶ These remarks build on the author's audience, see previous note.

government. Once Iranian blood was spilt there it would not be forgotten. Throughout the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s Oman's position, uniquely in the Arab Gulf, remained carefully balanced. At the time Omani diplomats kept in mind that the war had not been begun by Iran; furthermore, attacks on neutral shipping in the Gulf came more from Iraq than Iran, at a ratio of roughly 2 to 1, whatever the media may have said at the time.⁷

Good relations with Iran have not overshadowed the Omani passion for balance. During the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait 1990–91, Oman was the only Gulf State to maintain diplomatic relations with Iraq.

In 1991, after the liberation of Kuwait, Sultan Qaboos chaired a Gulf Cooperation Council committee to consider future Gulf security. Here he argued for collective security, for engaging all the regional states (including Iran) and the international community (including the USA), and for the formation of a joint GCC force of 100,000 to be stationed on the Iraq/Saudi and Iraqi/Kuwaiti borders.⁸ This proposal quickly fell victim to opposition from GCC colleagues who saw it as an Omani job-creation scheme. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that such a force would have made it politically far more difficult, if not impossible, for the USA to invade Iraq in 2003.

Sultan Qaboos chose to make his second foreign visit as Head of State to Iran, to attend the Persepolis Festival in October 1971. He visited again in 2009, in the aftermath of President Ahmedinajad's second election victory, despite active discouragement of Western interlocutors. Whether it is the Iran of the Shah or the Revolution makes no difference.

That said, Sultan Qaboos is not afraid to take difficult decisions, or to challenge received wisdom. The ideology of politeness does not inhibit this. In 1978 Oman was the only truly independent Arab country to support Egypt in making peace with Israel. With the benefit of hindsight, most would agree that was the right thing to do.

The December 2013 Manama Dialogue, an annual international security conference, offered a vivid example of Oman's determination to stake out its own course.

Nizar Bin Obaid Madani, Saudi Arabia's State Minister for Foreign Affairs, pressed for the Gulf Cooperation Council to become a union as an urgent matter 'Moving to the union has become a necessity imposed by the great importance of the Gulf region and the strategic political

⁷ Unpublished Ministry of Foreign Affairs research paper, 1988.

⁸ Unpublished Gulf Cooperation Council paper, 1991.

and economic aspects that have also brought numerous risks and problems', he stated, as one of the panellists in the first session.

Yusuf Bin Alawi was present in the audience, and requested to comment. His extempore intervention was so unusual, given that Omani diplomacy almost always takes place in private not public, as to merits quotation at length:

I was not scheduled to give a speech at this Manama Dialogue, but when I listened to my dear colleague and friend Madani, I felt I needed to present the other view on the issue of the Gulf union.

We in Oman understand the current situation of the GCC. We believe that when the GCC was founded, the agreement was to preserve security and stability in this region and to support the international community with the independence of the six countries in the region.

Now more decades later, we find that we have achieved a lot within the goals for which the GCC was established. We all have bigger and larger ambitions for the GCC, but there is a fact that all Gulf nationals know and that is that we as governments did not agree on the main pillars of the GCC, especially in the economic area.

I would like to say clearly that the failure of the GCC to build a genuine economic system that would be a more important platform for the future is because of the views held by some of us to leave it to the future and it was left to the future.

However as a result, when events unfolded quickly and new requirements emerged, we wanted to look into various forms and patterns of common action at a time of conflicts.

We are not at all with the union. But if the union does happen, and there does not seem to be a wish from the other brothers at least on an agreement on steps at a time when there are strong winds, we are part of the region and we will deal with it.

We are internationally at a historical crossroads that requires action for peace and security. We realise that youth make up 60–65 per cent of our citizens. This growth in demography requires establishing a new culture that can be part of the world heritage.

We must not enter in any conflict with anyone, be they close or far. We cannot go back to the past century. We must keep our region away from regional conflicts.

With respect for all view on the future of the region, we believe that might does not mean that people should be militarised to enter into conflicts or to face conflicts. (*Gulf News*, 8 December 2013)

The rather idiosyncratic language apart, this is a clear statement of Oman's unwillingness to take sides – in particular against Iran.

Finally it is important to recognise that Oman does not fear Iran. Iranian troops withdrew from Dhofar in the late 1970s unproblematically. Indeed, the Albusaidi dynasty itself had been founded in the 18th century following the departure of Persia from Omani shores. That is the last time Oman fell under the sway of a foreign invader.

In a recent comment, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was somewhat un-Iranian in his praise: 'Oman, particularly Sultan Qaboos and Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi, have played an outstanding role in helping resolve regional and international issues and problems, and we value this precious role.'⁹

And dividends were to follow. On 10 February it was announced that Iran will invest \$4 billion in Oman's new transshipment port at Duqm, and implement several mega-projects in the Sultanate, including a gas pipeline – of great importance, given Oman's acute need for gas.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Oman will remain assiduously quiet in the coming months, abstaining from any comment on the P5+1 deal and the subsequent processes that might rock the boat.

⁹ <http://www.tasnimnews.com/English/Home/Single/276926>

¹⁰ Oman Observer, 11 February 2014.