



# Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy

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## Summary

The Sultanate of Oman is a long-time U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf; it has allowed U.S. access to its military facilities for virtually every U.S. military operation in and around the Gulf since 1980. It also has fully supported U.S. efforts to achieve a Middle East peace by accepting Arab compromises with Israel. Partly in appreciation, the United States has forged a free trade agreement (FTA) with Oman.

Sultan Qaboos has been opening the political process slowly, and too slowly for some Omanis, while managing an economy lacking vast oil reserves. The slow and uneven pace of political liberalization has not drawn substantial U.S. official criticism, to date.

To some extent incongruous with its alliance with the United States are Oman's relatively close relations with Iran. Oman has always been less alarmed by the perceived threat from Iran than have the other Gulf states, and it views possible U.S. military action against Iran's nuclear facilities as potentially more destabilizing to the region than is Iran's nuclear program or Iran's foreign policy. Still, this relationship has not affected close U.S.-Omani relations.

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## Introduction

Oman is located along the Arabian Sea, on the southern approaches to the Strait of Hormuz, across from Iran. Except for a brief period of Persian rule, Omanis have remained independent since expelling the Portuguese in 1650. The Al Said monarchy began in 1744, extending Omani influence into Zanzibar and other parts of east Africa until 1861. A long-term rebellion led by the Imam of Oman, leader of the Ibadhi sect (neither Sunni or Shiite and widely considered “moderate conservative”) ended in 1959; Oman’s population is 75% Ibadhi. Sultan Qaboos bin Sa’id Al Said, born in November 1940, is the eighth in the line of the monarchy; he became Sultan in July 1970 when, with British support, he forced his father to abdicate.

He is considered popular, but his brief marriage in the 1970s produced no children and therefore no clear successor. Succession would be decided by a “Ruling Family Council” of his relatively small Al Said family (about 50 male members) or, if they fail to reach an agreement, by a succession letter written by Qaboos prior to his death. The United States signed a treaty of friendship with Oman in 1833, one of the first of its kind with an Arab state. Oman sent an official envoy to the United States in 1840. A U.S. consulate was maintained in Muscat during 1880-1915, a U.S. embassy was opened in 1972, and the first resident U.S. Ambassador arrived in July 1974. Oman opened its embassy in Washington in 1973.

### Some Key Facts on Oman

Population	3.4 million, which includes 577,000 expatriates
Religions	Ibadhi Muslim, 75%; other 25% (Sunni Muslim, Shiite Muslim, Hindu)
GDP (purchasing power parity, PPP)	\$67 billion (2008)
GDP per capita (PPP)	\$22,000 (2008)
Unemployment Rate	15%
Exports	\$33.9 billion. Main export markets: China, South Korea, Japan, Thailand, UAE, United States, Iran
Imports	\$13.3 billion. Main import sources: UAE, Japan, United States, Germany, India
Foreign Exchange and Gold Reserves	\$11.11 billion

Sources: CIA World Factbook, June 2009; Middle East Economic Digest, June 5, 2009

Figure I. Map of Oman



Source: CRS

## Defense and Security Ties

Sultan Qaboos, who is Sandhurst-educated and is respected as a defense strategist, has long seen the United States as the key security guarantor of the region, although he also advocates expanding defense cooperation among the Gulf states. Oman was the first Gulf state to formalize defense relations with the United States after the Persian Gulf region was shaken by Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution; Oman signed an agreement to allow U.S. forces access to Omani military facilities on April 21, 1980. Three days later, the United States used Oman's Masirah Island air base to launch the failed attempt to rescue the U.S. embassy hostages in Iran. Partly because of the close defense relations, Qaboos was accorded a formal state visit in April 1983 by President Reagan.

Oman later served as an intermediary between the United States and Iran for the return of Iranians captured in clashes with U.S. naval forces in the Gulf during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Under

the access agreement, which was renewed in 1985, 1990, and 2000 (for ten years), the United States reportedly can use—with advance notice and for specified purposes—Oman’s military airfields in Muscat (the capital), Thumrait, and Masirah Island, and some U.S. Air Force equipment, including lethal munitions, are stored at these bases.<sup>1</sup> During the renewal negotiations in 2000, the United States acceded to Oman’s request that the United States fund a \$120 million upgrade of a fourth air base (Khasab) at Musnanah (50 miles from Muscat).<sup>2</sup> Many observers expect the agreement to be renewed again at next expiration in 2010, although Oman might again request additional U.S. assistance to upgrade Omani facilities or try to place some new limitations on U.S. use of the facilities.

Oman’s facilities contributed to U.S. major combat operations in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF) and, to a lesser extent, Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF), even though Omani leaders said that invading Iraq could “incite revenge” against the United States in the Arab world. According to the Defense Department, during OEF there were about 4,300 U.S. personnel in Oman, mostly Air Force, and U.S. B-1 bombers, indicating that the Omani facilities were used extensively for strikes during OEF. The U.S. presence fell slightly to 3,750 during OIF; other facilities closer to Iraq, such as in Kuwait, were more extensively for OIF. There are now about 35-50 U.S. military personnel in Oman, below the pre-September 11, 2001, figure of 200 U.S. personnel. Since 2004, Omani facilities reportedly have not been used for air support operations in either Afghanistan or Iraq.

### Oman’s Capabilities and U.S. Security Assistance<sup>3</sup>

Oman’s 43,000 person armed force is the third largest of the Gulf Cooperation Council states (GCC, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar). Its force is widely considered one of the best trained; its arsenal is being modernized with purchases from the United States but is not large. Qaboos early on relied on seconded British officers to command Omani military services, and much of its arsenal is British-made, but British officers are now mostly advisory, particularly in Oman’s navy.

In an effort to modernize its Air Force, in October 2001, after years of consideration, Oman purchased (with its own funds) 12 U.S.-made F-16 C/D aircraft from new production. Along with associated weapons (Harpoon and AIM missiles), a podded reconnaissance system, and training, the sale was valued at about \$825 million; deliveries were completed in 2006. Oman probably made the purchase to keep pace with its Gulf neighbors, including UAE and Bahrain, that had bought F-16s. In July 2006, according to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), Oman bought the JAVELIN anti-tank system, at a cost of about \$48 million. Some major U.S. sales to Oman are expected as part of an estimated \$20 billion sales package to the Gulf states under the U.S. “Gulf Security Dialogue” intended to contain Iran, although most of the sales notified thus far are to the much wealthier Saudi Arabia and UAE. One potential Omani purchase

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<sup>1</sup> Hajjar, Sami. *U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects*. U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute. P. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Finnegan, Philip. “Oman Seeks U.S. Base Upgrades.” *Defense News*, April 12, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Section 564 of Title V, Part C of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY1994 and FY1995 (P.L. 103-236) banned U.S. arms transfers to countries that maintain the Arab boycott of Israel. As applied to the GCC states, this provision has been waived each year on the grounds that doing so is in the national interest.

discussed by observers is the U.S.-made C-17 “Globemaster” transport aircraft. In the past two years, Oman has continued to buy some British equipment, including Typhoon fighter aircraft and patrol boats, and it has also bought some Chinese-made armored personnel carriers and other gear.

U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF)—recent amounts of which are shown below— has been used to help Oman buy U.S.-made coastal patrol boats for anti-narcotics and anti-smuggling missions, as well as aircraft munitions, night-vision goggles, upgrades to coastal surveillance systems, communications equipment, and de-mining equipment. The proposed increase in FMF for Oman for FY2010 appears to reflect additional planned sales to Oman of such gear. The International Military Education and Training program (IMET) program is used to promote U.S. standards of human rights and civilian control of military and security forces, as well as to fund English language instruction, and promote inter-operability with U.S. forces. (The United States phased out development assistance to Oman in 1996. At the height of that development assistance program in the 1980s, the United States was giving Oman about \$15 million per year in Economic Support Funds (ESF) in loans and grants, mostly for conservation and management of Omani fisheries and water resources.)

Oman is eligible for grant U.S. excess defense articles (EDA) under Section 516 of the Foreign Assistance Act. It received 30 U.S.-made M-60A3 tanks in September 1996 on a “no rent” lease basis (later receiving title outright). There have been minor EDA grants since 2000, particularly gear to help Oman monitor its borders and waters and to improve inter-operability with U.S. forces. In 2004, it turned down a U.S. offer of EDA U.S.-made M1A1 tanks. Some Omani officers say they need new armor to supplement the 38 British-made Challenger 2 tanks and 80 British-made Piranha armored personnel carriers Oman bought in the mid-1990s.

**Table I. Recent U.S. Aid to Oman**  
(In millions of dollars)

	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009 (estimate)	FY2010 (request)
IMET	0.75	0.83	1.14	1.14	1.11	1.43	1.45	1.65
FMF	80.0	24.85	19.84	13.86	13.49	4.712	7.0	16.62
NADR		.40	0.554	0.4	1.28	1.593	0.95	2.0

**Note:** IMET is International Military Education and Training; FMF is Foreign Military Financing; NADR is Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, De-Mining and Related Programs, and includes ATA (Anti-Terrorism Assistance); EXBS (Export Control and Related Border Security); and TIP (Terrorism Interdiction Program).

## Cooperation Against Islamic Militancy

Since September 11, 2001, Oman has cooperated with U.S. legal, intelligence, and financial efforts against terrorism. According to the State Department report on global terrorism for 2008, released April 30, 2009, Oman “proactively implemented counterterrorism strategies and cooperated with neighboring countries to prevent terrorists from moving freely throughout the Arabian Peninsula.” This language was very similar to that used in the same report the year before. Among Oman’s recent steps was a January 2007 law establishing a National Committee for Combating Terrorism, a December 2006 agreement with Saudi Arabia to control cross-border

transit, and the establishment of a financial intelligence unit of the Directorate of Financial Crimes of the Royal Omani Police. In September 2008, it strengthened its anti-money laundering program by requiring non-banking establishments to verify the identify of their clients and document financial transactions.

On November 22, 2005, Oman joined the U.S. “Container Security Initiative,” agreeing to pre-screening of U.S.-bound cargo from its port of Salalah for illicit trafficking of nuclear and other materials, and for terrorists. **Table 1** includes U.S. aid to Oman ( Non-Proliferation, Anti-Terrorism and Related Programs funds, NADR) to help it establish effective export controls, to sustain its counter-terrorism training capabilities, and to help control movements of illegal immigrants across its borders.

## Democratization and Human Rights<sup>4</sup>

Oman remains a monarchy in which decision-making still is largely concentrated with Sultan Qaboos. Some Omanis, particularly younger, well-educated professionals, consider the pace of liberalization too slow, but many older Omanis compare the current degree of “political space” favorably with that during the reign of the Sultan’s father. Some Omanis, even some within the government and official establishment, complain that the pace of reform has been slow and they note that some top positions are now filled by former security officials, replacing academics or other professionals. Others saw progress in the holding in April 2009 of a two-day workshop in Muscat to discuss freedom of speech.<sup>5</sup>

As in the other Gulf states, formal political parties are not allowed. Unlike Bahrain or Kuwait, there are no evident groupings or factions within the (now) elected Consultative Council (Majlis As Shura), and Qaboos has constrained the Council’s authority to mostly public works and social benefits issues. It does not draft legislation, lacks binding legislative powers, and some Omanis say the Council’s influence over policy has diminished over time—to the point where many experts now say Oman lags the other Gulf states on political reform. In a 1996 “Basic Law,” Qaboos made the “legislature” bicameral by appointing a “State Council” to serve, in part, as a check and balance on the elected Consultative Council. Together, the two bodies constitute the “Oman Council.” The State Council, still entirely appointed, now has 70 seats, up from the original 53 seats.

Qaboos embarked on gradual political liberalization in the 1980s, believing that Omanis would ultimately demand political reform. In November 1991, he appointed a 59-seat Consultative Council (expanded to its current size of 84 seats in 1993), replacing a 10-year-old advisory council. In a move toward a popular selection process, in 1994 and 1997 “notables” in each of Oman’s districts chose up to three nominees, with Qaboos making a final selection for the Council. The first direct elections to the Consultative Council were held in September 2000

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<sup>4</sup> Information in this section is from several State Department reports: The Human Rights report for 2008 (February 25, 2009); the International Religious Freedom Report for 2007 (September 19, 2008); and the Trafficking in Persons Report for 2009 (June 16, 2008). See also: Carpenter, J. Scott and Simon Henderson. *Democracy in Slow Motion: Oman Goes to the Polls*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 1298. October 26, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Slackman, Michael. “With Murmurs of Change, Sultan Tightens His Grip.” *New York Times*, May 15, 2009.

(three-year term), but the electorate was limited (25% of all citizens over 21 years old). In November 2002, Qaboos extended voting rights to all citizens, male and female, over 21 years of age and the October 4, 2003 Consultative Council elections—in which 195,000 Omanis voted (74% turnout)—resulted in a Council similar to that elected in 2000, including the election of the same two women as in the previous election (out of 15 women candidates).

Qaboos appoints the Consultative Council president (he appointed a new president in September 2007, replacing a 16-year incumbent), although the Consultative Council chooses two vice presidents. In the October 27, 2007 election, Qaboos allowed, for the first time, public campaigning. Turnout among 388,000 registered voters was 63%, including enthusiastic participation by women, but none of the 21 female candidates (out of 631 candidates) won. The State Council appointed following the 2007 election has 14 women, up from nine previously.

Qaboos has given major speeches on the equality of women and their importance in national development, and they now constitute about 30% of the work force. In March 2003, he named a woman to the rank of minister, giving that rank to a woman in charge of the national authority for industrial craftsmanship. In 2004, he added three female ministers—of higher education, of tourism, and of social development—and these ministries remain headed by women. In April 2004, Qaboos made five women among the 29 appointees to the public prosecutors office. However, allegations of spousal abuse and domestic violence are fairly common, with women finding protection primarily through their families. Omani women also continue to face social discrimination often as a result of the interpretation of Islamic law.

The 1996 Basic Law affirmed Islam as the state religion, and the State Department's religious freedom report for 2008 notes no change from the previous year on restrictions on religious rights. Non-Muslims are free to worship at temples and churches built on land donated by the Sultan, but there are some limitations on non-Muslims' proselytizing and on religious gatherings in other than government-approved houses of worship. Members of all religions and sects are free to maintain links with coreligionists abroad and travel outside Oman for religious purposes.

On related human rights issues, press criticism of the government is tolerated, but criticism of the Sultan is not. In December 2004, the government arrested 31 Ibadhi Muslims on suspicion of conspiring to establish a religious state, but Qaboos pardoned them in June 2005. Private ownership of radio and television stations is prohibited, but the availability of satellite dishes has made foreign broadcasts accessible to the public. The State Department notes improving workers' rights, in conjunction with the U.S.-Oman FTA, and the labor laws permit collective bargaining and prohibits employers from firing or penalizing workers for union activity.

On November 17, 2008, Oman set up its first human rights commission as an "autonomous body" attached to the State Council (upper body of the legislature). The move came one month after President Bush determined (P.D. 2009-5) that Oman be moved from "Tier 3" on trafficking in persons (worst level, assessed in the June 4, 2008 State Department report on that issue), to "Tier 2/Watch List." In the latest such report, issued June 16, 2009, Oman's "grade" further improved to Tier 2, based on an assessment that Oman is making significant efforts to comply with minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and its completion within the past year of prosecutions for those trafficking in persons. U.S. funds from the Middle East Partnership Initiative have been used to fund civil society and political process strengthening, judicial reform, election management, media independence, and women's empowerment.

## Regional Relations

Oman's leader, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, has often pursued foreign policies outside an Arab or Gulf consensus. Some of its stances, such as that toward Iran, have appeared at odds with U.S. policy, while on other of its positions, such as on the Arab-Israeli dispute, Oman has been perhaps the most supportive Gulf state.

### Iran

Of the Gulf states, Oman is perceived as political closest to and the least critical of Iran. Qaboos is slated to visit Tehran some time in July 2009, although post-election unrest in Iran might delay the visit. Qaboos sees no inconsistency between Oman's alliance with the United States and its friendship with Iran. This relationship has proved useful to the United States in the past; Oman was an intermediary through which the United States returned Iranian prisoners captured during U.S.-Iran skirmishes in the Persian Gulf in 1987-1988. Oman's attempts to steer a middle ground caused problems for Oman in April 1980 when, within days of signing the agreement allowing the United States military to use several Omani air bases, the United States used these facilities—reportedly without prior notification to Oman—to launch the abortive mission to rescue the U.S. Embassy hostages seized by Iran in November 1979.<sup>6</sup>

Some accounts say that Oman is in the process of drawing closer to Iran than it has previously. Oman, as do the other GCC states, publicly opposes any U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, but Oman has furthermore rebuffed efforts by the other Gulf states to persuade Oman to distance itself from Iran politically. Oman reportedly is discussing a security pact with Iran, although the scope is as yet undefined.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Oman's government is said to turn a blind eye to the smuggling of a wide variety of goods to Iran from Oman's Musandam Peninsula territory. The trade is illegal in Iran because the smugglers avoid paying taxes in Iran, but Oman's local government collects taxes on the goods shipped.<sup>8</sup> Iran and Oman are in discussions about a potential investment to develop a natural gas field on Iran's Kish Island.

The question many observers ask is why is Oman not as wary of Iran as are the other GCC states. Oman has no sizable Shiite community with which Iran could meddle in Oman, so the fear of Iranian interference is less pronounced. There are also residual positive sentiments pre-dating Iran's Islamic revolution. Oman still appreciates the military help the Shah of Iran provided in helping end a leftist revolt in Oman's Dhofar Province during 1964-1975. Others attribute Oman's position on Iran to its larger concerns that Saudi Arabia has sought to spread its Wahhabi form of Islam into Oman, and Oman sees Iran as a rival to and potential counterweight to Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>6</sup> CRS conversations with U.S. Embassy officials in Oman. 1995-2003.

<sup>7</sup> Slackman, Michael. "Oman Navigates Risky Strait Between Iran and Arab Nations." *New York Times*, May 16, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Iraq**

On Iraq, and generally in line with other GCC states, Omani officials say that the Omani government and population are dismayed at the Shiite Islamist domination of post-Saddam Iraq and its pro-Iranian tilt, and at the inability of the United States to prevent substantial civilian deaths. Yet, despite moves by most of the other GCC states to normalize relations with Iraq, Oman has not appointed an ambassador in Baghdad. (Saudi Arabia also has not opened a full embassy in Iraq.) Oman has provided about \$3 million to Iraq's post-Saddam reconstruction, a relatively small amount compared to some of the other Gulf states.

## **Arab-Israeli Issues**

On the Arab-Israeli dispute, in a stand considered highly supportive of U.S. policy despite potential Arab opprobrium, Oman was the one of the few Arab countries not to break relations with Egypt after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. All the GCC states participated in the multilateral peace talks established by the 1991 U.S.-sponsored Madrid peace process, but only Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar hosted working group sessions of the multilaterals. Oman hosted an April 1994 session of the working group on water and, as a result of those talks, a Middle East Desalination Research Center was established in Oman. In September 1994, Oman and the other GCC states renounced the secondary and tertiary Arab boycott of Israel. In December 1994, it became the first Gulf state to officially host a visit by an Israeli Prime Minister (Yitzhak Rabin), and it hosted then Prime Minister Shimon Peres in April 1996. In October 1995, Oman exchanged trade offices with Israel, essentially renouncing the primary boycott of Israel. However, there was no move to establish diplomatic relations and the trade offices have remained closed since the September 2000 Palestinian uprising.

In an April 2008 meeting in Qatar, Omani Foreign Affairs Minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah informed then Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni that the Israeli trade office in Oman would remain closed until agreement was reached on a Palestinian state, although the meeting itself represented a level of diplomatic outreach by Oman to Israel. There was little follow-up thereafter and Oman, like many other Arab states, considers Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who took office in February 2009, opposed to a fair settlement for Palestinians. Oman did attend a January 2009 meeting in Qatar called to support Hamas, then at war with Israel in the Gaza strip, which Hamas controls. Oman's attendance, to certain extent, defied a boycott of the meeting by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which considered the meeting a political boost to Iran, which is among Hamas' staunchest regional supporters.

## **Yemen**

Oman's relations with neighboring Yemen have traditionally been troubled, but there are signs of stability over the past decade. The former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), considered Marxist and pro-Soviet, supported Oman's Dhofar rebellion in the 1960s and early 1970s. Oman-PDRY relations were normalized in 1983, but there were occasional border clashes between the two later in that decade. Relations improved after 1990, when PDRY merged with North Yemen to form the combined modern day Republic of Yemen. In September 2008, the two countries began discussions to form a regional center to combat piracy.

## Economic and Trade Issues<sup>9</sup>

Despite Omani efforts to diversify its economy, oil exports generated 62% of government revenues in 2007. Oman has a relatively small 5.5 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, enough for about 15 years, and some energy development firms say that production at some Omani fields is declining.<sup>10</sup> Oman exports about 222 million barrels per year of oil (less than 3% of internationally traded oil), of which about 11.5 million are imported by the United States. The United States is Oman's fourth largest trading partner, and there was about \$2.25 billion in bilateral trade in 2008. Oman has balked at a Gulf state plan to form a monetary union by 2010.

Oman is not a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Recognizing that its crude oil fields are aging, Oman is trying to privatize its economy, diversify its sources of revenue, and develop its liquid natural gas (LNG) sector, for which Oman has identified large markets in Asia and elsewhere. Oman has about 30 trillion cubic feet of proven gas reserves, and in November 2008 it signed a 20-year agreement with Occidental Petroleum to develop existing gas fields and explore for new ones. Oman is part of the "Dolphin project," under which Qatar is exporting natural gas to UAE (by replacing Omani gas supplies, at 135 million cubic feet per day, to the UAE). Oman was admitted to the WTO in September 2000. The U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement was signed on January 19, 2006, and ratified by Congress (P.L. 109-283, signed September 26, 2006).

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on Oman's economy and U.S.-Oman trade, see CRS Report RL33328, *U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement*, by Mary Jane Bolle.

<sup>10</sup> Gerth, Jeff and Stephen Labaton. "Oman's Oil Yield Long in Decline, Shell Data Show." *New York Times*, April 8, 2004.