

Omani Perspectives on the peace process in Yemen

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1 Introduction

Oman has played an important role in supporting mediation efforts since the conflict in Yemen began. The country's amicable relations with Saudi Arabia, Ansar Allah, Iran, and other Yemeni and international conflict stakeholders has allowed it to facilitate negotiations in a manner few other countries are able or willing to realise. This comes in the context of Oman's established history of attempting to bring conflicting parties from its immediate western neighbour to the table at critical junctures. These efforts were again reactivated in early 2021 with the facilitation of talks between belligerents in the current conflict and international representatives in Muscat. To better understand the motivations behind these recent attempts, a more comprehensive examination of Oman's priorities and interests in Yemen within the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context is required, as well as an exploration of the country's positions on achieving a sustainable peace settlement for Yemen.

In this framework, this paper assesses the general perspectives of Oman on achieving peace in Yemen. It examines the key aspects of Omani foreign policy, the history of bilateral relations between Oman and Yemen, and the current factors that determine Oman's position in the ongoing Yemeni conflict. The paper's main argument is that Oman, as it has done historically, views the situation in Yemen primarily through a combination of its ideational lens of peaceful co-existence, its realist calculation of national and regional security, and its careful policy of strategic hedging and omnibalancing.

2 Oman's Policy of Non-Involvement

In order to advance its vision for a peaceful resolution to the Yemen crisis, Oman has facilitated mediation and dialogue between Yemen's warring parties, hosting official and non-official talks between the Hadi government, the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) as well as regional countries involved in the conflict such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and international powers like the United States (US) and some members of the European Union (EU). Furthermore, Oman has acted as a diplomatic bridge between the

Houthi movement and United Nations (UN) peace efforts, an arbitrator in prisoner and hostage exchanges and a provider of vital humanitarian assistance to Yemen helping to alleviate the worsening humanitarian crisis in the country. Nevertheless, in comparison to the main external actors in Yemen, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, Oman's influence in the country is largely constrained by its relatively limited financial and military assets, its geographical proximity to the conflict, its foreign policy ideals and, perhaps most importantly, its increasingly challenging task of delicately balancing relations with the US, Iran, and the GCC. In line with the traditional Omani foreign policy principles of non-involvement and political neutrality, it was hardly surprising that Oman was the only the GCC member state not to join the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen – launched on 26 March 2015 – to reinstate the ousted Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and defeat the Houthi militias, which had seized control of Sana'a, Aden and most of northern Yemen. Although Saudi Arabia's campaign received widespread regional support, Oman broke the GCC consensus by refusing to militarily intervene in Yemen and by calling for an immediate end to hostilities.

Moreover, on 24 April 2015, Oman unveiled a seven-point peace plan for Yemen, which called for a Houthi withdrawal from all Yemeni cities, the restoration of Hadi's government, early elections involving the conversion of the Houthis into a political party, and Yemen's accession to the GCC.¹ Saudi Arabia rejected Oman's proposals, and Muscat has remained a vocal critic of the war in Yemen, calling for a political solution of the conflict. While the Houthis supported the peace terms proposed by Oman, the Saudi-led coalition declined negotiations, while holding out for a swift military victory. However, with the conflict entering a stalemate and the Houthis cementing themselves in northern Yemen, they will now be unlikely to agree to a military withdrawal. On the other hand, the Saudi-led coalition may be more willing to compromise to extricate itself from the prolonged and costly conflict. By bringing the two sides to the negotiating table, Muscat intends to foster dialogue, de-escalate tensions, and, eventually, reach a political solution to end the war.

3 Omani-Yemeni Relations in Historical Context

To understand contemporary Omani-Yemeni relations, it is crucial to address the Dhofar Rebellion of 1962-1976. This event was a formative experience in the development of Oman's foreign policy and a defining moment in its bilateral relations with neighbouring countries. Dhofar, Oman's southernmost province, witnessed a violent Marxist-backed secessionist insurgency supported by the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), or South Yemen, and its political patron the USSR. Upon seizing power from his father in a bloodless coup in 1970, Sultan Qaboos' first priority was to suppress this rebellion that was threatening to divide the country, which he achieved with the military backing of the United Kingdom (UK), Jordan, and Iran. Despite an end to the fighting in 1976, the two countries did not exchange ambassadors until 1987.² Maintaining constructive neighbourly relations with a stable Yemen has since become one of the main Omani foreign policy objectives.

Following the unification of Yemen in 1990, bilateral relations between Oman and Yemen have remained friendly. During the Yemeni Civil War of 1994, Oman refrained from taking sides and Sultan Qaboos invited Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh to Salalah, the capital city of Dhofar province, for negotiations. After the talks stalled, Oman remained impartial and offered asylum to the defeated al-Beidh after Saleh's commanding victory.³ Since the unification of Yemen, Oman's has primarily been concerned with the presence of extremist factions in southern Yemen such as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In 2015, it emerged that Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, French nationals who

¹ "Oman Offers Seven-Point Peace Plan for Yemen," *The New Arab*, April 24, 2015, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/bf783337-4eff-4c8f-bcf9-fbbf2e99eac7>.

² "Instability in Yemen Fuelling Concern in Oman," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, February 26, 2015, http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1492901733&Country=Oman&topic=Politics_1.

³ Calvin H. Allen and W. Lynn Riggsbee II, *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970-1996* (Routledge, 2014), 189.

perpetrated the attack on the French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo, had travelled to Yemen via Oman in 2011 to receive weapons training. This highlighted Oman's vulnerability to potential terrorist activities and the need to secure its border with Yemen.⁴ Oman is generally less worried about the Houthi expansion than its GCC neighbours, who view the Houthi movement as an Iranian proxy that poses an imminent threat to the security of the GCC. Oman has learned over time to manage its relations with Yemen and Iran to ensure that neither country pose a military threat to the Omani homeland. Muscat is determined to do all that it can to prevent Yemen becoming a failed state.

4 Oman and the Saudi-led Military Intervention

The Omani leadership opposes foreign military intervention in Yemen. It prefers to promote reconciliation among the warring factions while maintaining good relations with the key protagonists – the US, Iran and its GCC partners – in ways that do not compromise the neutrality that has served it so well. Oman's peacebuilding role in Yemen is evidence of its ideational factors and the pragmatism of its foreign policy. Muscat's opposition to the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen underscores the Sultanate's long-standing foreign policy preference for resolving conflicts through diplomacy and dialogue and its disapproval of military solutions or use of force, which features prominently in Omani culture and official discourse. In April 2015, former Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi explained, "Oman is not part of that campaign for simple reasons – Oman is a country of peace."⁵ Oman's opposition to regional military interventions synthesises cultural and normative factors. Oman's history, leadership perception and its sociocultural system favours peaceful resolution of conflicts. Ibadism, the belief system of a large segment of the population of Oman's population, encourages a practice of "agreeable disagreement with friends and peaceful compromise with enemies."⁶ This worldview readily extends to Oman's foreign policy conduct and interpretations of international law as explained by Jeremy Jones. He contends that the principle of "good neighbour relations" is engrained in Oman's foreign policy identity, and that Muscat views its diplomatic activities as a means of contributing to an international system "grounded in right," instead of might.⁷ Oman's dialogue facilitation efforts in Yemen can be framed as merely the latest incarnation of its ideational, cultural and normative opposition to regional military interventions.

Besides this preference for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, Oman has opposed the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen over concerns regarding the security implications of a prolonged conflict in Yemen. In particular, Oman fears a resurgence of extremist factions in Yemen due to the power vacuum caused by the continued instability.⁸ This is substantiated by Bin Alawi's official statement in February 2015 that Sana'a is an "area of chaos and chaos gives a chance for every group, extremists, terrorists, whatever."⁹ Oman has been supportive of counterterrorism operations in the region and has allowed allies to use its airspace and military facilities. In particular, Oman cooperates closely with the US in counterterrorism training and procedures, with a focus on securing the Omani border. However, despite being a member of several counterterrorism coalitions, Oman refrains from taking part in counterterrorism operations on foreign soil. The presence of coalition forces and the establishment of the Security Belt Forces (SBF), backed by the UAE, has helped to stabilise certain areas of

⁴ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Both Brothers behind Paris Attack Had Weapons Training in Yemen - Sources," *Reuters*, January 11, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/france-shooting-yemen-idINKBNOKKOGY20150111>.

⁵ Noah Browning, "Yemen Combatants Not Ready for Talks, Says Neighbour Oman," *Reuters*, April 2, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-oman-idINKBN0MT22X20150402>.

⁶ Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 1 (March 12, 2010): 99–114, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00429.x>.

⁷ Jeremy Jones, *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 7–8.

⁸ Abdullah Baabood and Ahmed Baabood, "Omani and Qatari Roles in the Yemen Crisis," in *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, ed. Stephen W Day and Noel Brehony (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 169, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-35578-4_11.

⁹ Saleh Al-Shaibani, "Oman Border Prepared for Yemen Chaos," *Times of Oman*, February 4, 2015, <https://www.pressreader.com/oman/times-of-oman/20150204/281479274831371>.

southern Yemen, alleviating some of Oman's security concerns. Nevertheless, the increasing foreign involvement in al-Mahra is perhaps equally concerning for Oman. This military presence on its doorstep is not something to be taken lightly, particularly given the Omani authorities' alleged discovery of a UAE-directed spy network in 2011.¹⁰

5 The Importance of Al-Mahra

While much of the conflict in Yemen is focused in the north of the country, one of Oman's key concerns is the recent instability in Yemen's easternmost and second-largest province, al-Mahra. A large portion of the province was granted to Yemen by Sultan Qaboos in the 1992 Oman-Yemen border treaty as a gesture of goodwill.¹¹ As a result, many of al-Mahra's residents hold dual Omani and Yemeni citizenship, allowing them to move freely between the two countries. Oman views al-Mahra's security and stability as a pivotal factor in its national security agenda and has begun naturalising hundreds of tribe members in the province to offset the growing influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Strong cultural and tribal ties remain between al-Mahra and Hadhramaut with the neighbouring Omani province of Dhofar. Oman has maintained the loyalty of al-Mahra's tribal elites through a robust patronage network, allowing Muscat to exert a significant degree of influence over the province. By granting nationality to Mahri tribesmen, including prominent tribal figures such as Sheikh Abdullah Issa al-Afrar, the son of the last Sultan of al-Mahra, Oman has demonstrated the strategic importance of al-Mahra to its national interests. Muscat has supported members of the General Council of the People of Mahra and Socotra, a body of tribal and community leaders formed in 2012, which is headed by al-Afrar. Other council members, such as Sheikh Ali Salem al-Harizi, former deputy governor, and Ahmed Qahtan, former security director, were also granted Omani nationality. Oman has also backed the National Salvation Council, which was formed in 2019 during the protests against the growing Saudi and Emirati military presence in al-Mahra. By maintaining ties with influential Mahri tribal leaders, Oman has developed a degree of leverage over the situation in a province, which is ultimately seen by Oman as a buffer zone to prevent the conflict spilling over its 294 km border with Yemen. The relative stability of the Oman-Yemen border region from 2015 to 2017 suggests that the Sultanate has successfully avoided violence crossing over into Omani territory.¹²

Oman's influence over al-Mahra's tribes was a major motivation for Saudi Arabia's and UAE's military reinforcement in the province. The UAE has been increasing its presence in southern Yemen by attempting to build several military bases in the province, and by forming its own security services who are not accountable to the Yemeni government. Muscat is concerned that these military operations, upon which it has not been consulted, represent a threat from the UAE to its border security. The UAE's efforts to secure the loyalty of officials in Aden and Hadhramaut, and to deliver aid provisions via the Emirates Red Crescent heightened Oman's concerns about its activities along the Oman-Yemen border.¹³ Oman's concerns about a Saudi-UAE destabilisation of southern Yemen heightened after both countries deployed troops to al-Mahra. In November 2017, Saudi forces entered al-Mahra province, seizing vital facilities, including al-Ghayda airport, Nishtun port and the ports of Srfet and Shihen on the border with Oman. The Saudis also stationed their forces in more than 12 locations along the coast of al-Mahra and dismissed airport employees, worrying al-Mahra's inhabitants enough to pushing thousands to join protests in April 2018 demanding the withdrawal of Saudi troops.¹⁴

¹⁰ "Oman Uncovers 'spy Network' but UAE Denies Any Links," *BBC News*, January 31, 2011, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12320859>.

¹¹ Joseph A. Kechichian, *Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy* (Rand Corporation, 1995), 96.

¹² "Oman - The World Factbook," accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/oman/>.

¹³ Dua'a Suwaidan, "رسائل عُمانية للإمارات: حدود نفوذكم خارج المهرة" [Oman's Message to the Emirates: The Limits of Your Influence Outside of the Skilled], *Al Akhbar*, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://al-akhbar.com/Yemen/235875>.

¹⁴ Ahmed Nagi, "Oman's Boiling Yemeni Border" (Italian Institute for International Political Studies, March 18, 2019), <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/omans-boiling-yemeni-border-22588>.

Oman viewed such moves as a geo-strategic threat and aligned with local tribes in al-Mahra to counter the influence of the UAE-aligned Mahri Elite Forces and preserve the region's existing balance of power.¹⁵ Concerns were also expressed about the true purpose of deploying forces in the south of Yemen rather than on the frontline with the Houthis. Oman was worried about the potential division of the country and any meddling in the Yemeni state's future, which would undermine its security. Saudi-UAE-aligned media outlets also promoted conspiracy theories alleging Omani-supported weapons smuggling¹⁶ and accusing the Sultanate of aligning with Hamoud Saeed al-Makhlafi, a Muslim Brotherhood figure from Taiz, to discredit Omani policies in al-Mahra. This disinformation stoked Oman's fears about the true intentions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has attempted to establish Salafi madrasas in al-Mahra as a means of gaining religious sway over the province. Furthermore, both Saudi Arabia and UAE have been involved in the militarisation of the province. While the UAE no longer maintains a direct military presence in al-Mahra, it continues to support the secessionist STC, which remains at odds with the internationally recognised government and some tribal factions of the population, despite several agreements. As Oman share a border with Yemeni territories that are dominated by the Hadi government and the STC, Oman remains vigilant about the prospect of threats emanating from Yemen, like the cross-border spill over of radical groups and violence, mass migration of Yemeni refugees into Omani territory, and the potential for the Omani military to be dragged into a costly quagmire in al-Mahra to maintain stability on its borders.

6 Oman as a Diplomatic Bridge

Oman does not wish to oppose its GCC partners in Yemen, however, it also values its constructive relations with Iran. Rather than taking sides in the conflict, Oman has acted as a diplomatic bridge, bringing the conflict's main belligerents to the negotiating table in pursuit of a political resolution. Although the war in Yemen remains unresolved, Oman's status as a neutral party with ties to the key stakeholders in the conflict has been invaluable. As Saudi Arabia has no official ties with Iran or the Houthis, Oman has served as a critical backchannel for communication between the warring sides, providing a neutral venue for negotiations to take place. As a result of its dialogue facilitation initiatives in Yemen, Oman has established cordial relationships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE's Yemeni allies, cemented itself as an indispensable bridge between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, and received international praise for the constructive nature of its diplomatic efforts.

To maintain its status as a neutral arbitrator, Oman has approached the situation in Yemen with caution. Muscat cannot afford to be perceived to be too close to any particular faction, and the allegations of weapons smuggling against Oman were certainly damaging. Nevertheless, the Sultanate has continued to host figures from all parties involved in the Yemeni conflict, both local and external. While Oman has hosted STC officials, it is careful not to alienate the Hadi government in doing so. Furthermore, the STC's alignment with the UAE is a matter of concern for the Omani government, which has misgivings over the UAE's intentions in southern Yemen. The issue of southern independence is certainly a key geopolitical consideration for Oman, as this would grant the UAE a greater degree of influence in southern Yemen's future. However, Oman's focus is the proxy war between its allies Iran and Saudi Arabia and the subsequent destabilising impact on Yemen. Oman is adamant that any decision on the future of Yemen must involve both the Houthis and the Hadi government, while also having the backing of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US. Accordingly, Muscat strives to preserve and develop relations with all of these parties while encouraging dialogue in a neutral setting.

¹⁵ Eleonora Ardemagni, "Emiratis, Omanis, Saudis: The Rising Competition for Yemen's Al Mahra," *Middle East Centre* (blog), December 28, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/12/28/emiratis-omanis-saudis-the-rising-competition-for-yemens-al-mahra/>.

¹⁶ "Arms for Houthis Found in Yemen Trucks with Oman Plates," *Reuters*, September 18, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKCN110084>.

7 Oman's Humanitarian Efforts

As the Yemeni conflict drags on, Oman has sustained its neutral role in Yemen while continuing to promote dialogue between the conflicting parties and providing much-needed humanitarian assistance. While Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not disclosed official figures regarding humanitarian assistance, Oman is believed to have hosted over 25,000 Yemeni refugees who fled the conflict, mainly from Yemen's southern provinces of Hadhramaut and al-Mahra.¹⁷ Yemen has also benefited from essential humanitarian aid from Oman, including financial aid, food, water, medical supplies and assistance, and shelter. Oman's friendly relationship with Iran has been vital in allowing it to transfer Iranian humanitarian aid to Yemen, as the Saudi-led coalition's air and naval blockades have prevented Iran from doing so due to concerns over possible Iranian weapons deliveries to the Houthis. Oman has also helped secure the release of foreign civilians detained by militant groups in Yemen. An American journalist and a Singaporean national in June 2015, a French national in August as well as three Saudis, two Americans and a British national captured by Houthi rebels in September,¹⁸ were all freed with Omani assistance.

8 Peace from an Omani Perspective

In terms of a potential power-sharing arrangement for Yemen, Oman has not displayed any particular preference. What is clear, however, is that Oman envisions a political solution to the conflict that includes both local and foreign stakeholders. In particular, Oman would prefer a peace arrangement that involves national reconciliation and an agreement on power sharing among the Yemeni warring parties and concessions from both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Additionally, an ideal outcome for Oman would include the cessation of conflict, the removal of foreign forces from Yemen, and a return to the Stockholm Agreement of 2018. Achieving a lasting peace for Yemen is Oman's foremost priority, and Muscat would likely support any initiative that works towards this goal, even if this were to involve southern independence or federalism. While Oman believes that a political solution to the Yemeni conflict would have to come from Yemen itself, it is also aware that any decision would require the backing of the main foreign patrons, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia. Oman has supported various UN initiatives on Yemen, and Oman's ideal outcome for Yemen would likely be one reached through UN mechanisms and backed by the US.

The foreign military presence in Yemen is one of Oman's gravest concerns, in particular the involvement of the UAE in southern Yemen. In 2019, Foreign Minister Bin Alawi highlighted Oman's opposition to Emirati involvement in Yemen, claiming, "[w]e disagreed on the question of the war in Yemen (...) [o]ur position was clear as we declared before: we don't push forward and cause wars or disputes,"¹⁹ Despite this, Oman acknowledges that, like the Houthis, the STC is a legitimate voice in Yemen that cannot be excluded from any peace agreement. Oman may also support a GCC-led initiative for Yemen, presuming that this initiative provides for a withdrawal of foreign forces from Yemen and, potentially, Yemen's accession to the GCC. Such an initiative would also require the consent of Iran, and Muscat could effectively serve to facilitate such an agreement given its close ties to both Iran and the GCC. Furthermore, Muscat's relations with all of the principal local and foreign actors in the Yemeni conflict afford it a unique role in coordinating between them and working towards defusing tensions.

In this respect, Oman has continued engaging with the Hadi government to reaffirm its roles as a constructive actor that wishes to end the Yemeni civil war and maintain Yemen's unity, while simultaneously reaching out to

¹⁷ Baba Umar, "Yemen's War Wounded Find Comfort in 'Brotherly' Oman," *Al Jazeera*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/16/yemens-war-wounded-find-comfort-in-brotherly-oman>.

¹⁸ "Danny Burch: American Oil Worker Freed after Captivity in Yemen," *BBC News*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47365273>.

¹⁹ Ali Abo Rezeg, "Oman, UAE Disagree on War-Torn Yemen: Minister," *Anadolu Agency*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/oman-uae-disagree-on-war-torn-yemen-minister/1397225>.

the STC.²⁰ On 26 December 2018, the Vice President of the STC, Hani bin Brek, visited Muscat to court Oman's support for southern Yemen's self-rule aspirations. Yahya Ghaleb al-Shuaibi, a member of the STC delegation in Muscat, praised southern Yemen's relationship with Oman as "no less important" than that with its "great neighbour" Saudi Arabia and its "most prominent ally," the UAE.²¹ Oman has maintained close ties with STC leadership figures, as a large community of south Yemeni separatist leaders followed al-Beidh's departure to Muscat in 1994. Oman welcomed Saudi Arabia's efforts to bring together the Yemeni government and STC to sign a power sharing agreement on 5 November 2019. Oman's foreign ministry said at the time that it hoped "the agreement will pave the way for a comprehensive settlement in Yemen."²² The Sultanate has tried to express either outcome – a united or a separated Yemen – would be palatable. Some would go further and argue that, given its concern with border security, Oman would be very comfortable if Yemen split again into two separate entities, north and south, and the STC has welcomed signals to this effect. However, others argue that a secession of southern Yemen could potentially pave the way for further Saudi and Emirati interference near Oman's borders.²³

Oman would also favour any agreement that entails humanitarian relief for Yemen and the revival of the Yemeni economy. Joe Biden's reversal of the Trump administration's decision to list the Houthis as a terrorist organisation and his withdrawal of US support for the Saudi-led military offensive in Yemen are welcome developments for Oman. The humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen represents a considerable security threat to Oman, and restrictions on humanitarian aid to Yemen would only have worsened the deepening crisis. Furthermore, Muscat would prefer to avoid the incursion of additional foreign actors into Yemen. Qatar and Turkey have both increased their activities in Yemen, a development which threatens to escalate the ongoing proxy conflict. Oman has also supported UN initiatives toward Yemen and any peace initiative that it would be willing to back would almost certainly require the endorsement of both the UN and the people of Yemen. With the Biden administration intent on resolving the prolonged Yemeni conflict, there is little doubt that Oman will find itself playing a central role in bringing together the key stakeholders in the conflict to reach a lasting political solution. Any sustainable settlement for Yemen would require some form of agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whether reached directly or through a multilateral organisation such as the UN.

As tensions between Tehran and Riyadh remain notably high, Oman would seek to deescalate the situation by encouraging communication between the sides, and by potentially arranging an official or non-official meeting. In order for talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia to be held, certain conditions would have to be met, such as a ceasefire in Yemen or the cessation of attacks on Saudi territory from Yemen. If both sides are indeed open to talks, Muscat is the most logical candidate as a mediator and is the ideal venue given its proximity to Yemen and its relations with the main belligerents in the conflict. An agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia would benefit the security of Yemen as well as that of the wider region, and could pave the way for a more comprehensive regional security arrangement including Iran. Oman prioritises regional security and would commit itself to upholding such an agreement by coordinating with local actors in Yemen and acting as a neutral observer. Despite not having a direct military presence in Yemen, Oman does hold some influence over certain tribal factions in the south, which could be used to build support for a potential peace initiative. After the unification of Yemen in 1990, Oman had deployed peacekeepers to Yemen to monitor the ceasefire. While Muscat may now prefer the UN to fulfil such a role, it would likely accept this role if requested.

²⁰ "Oman Supports Hadi as President of Yemen," *Middle East Monitor*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170515-oman-supports-hadi-as-president-of-yemen/>.

²¹ ما دلالات زيارة وفد الانتقالي الجنوبي في اليمن لسلطنة عُمان؟," *Erem News*, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.erenews.com/news/arab-world/yemen/1620391>.

²² "Oman, UAE Praise Saudi Arabia for Reaching a Deal between Yemeni Parties," *Arab News*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1583021/saudi-arabia>.

²³ Oxford Analytica, "Oman Will Defend Its Interests on the Yemen Border," *Emerald Expert Briefings*, January 10, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB227972>.

9 Recent Developments

Oman has intensified its efforts in recent months to encourage the warring parties in neighbouring Yemen to seek peace. Muscat has been busy with diplomatic traffic aimed at finding a way to end the six-year war in Yemen. Both UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths and US Special Envoy Tim Lenderking have been shuttling between Muscat, Riyadh and Aden since Saudi Arabia proposed its peace initiative. The Sultanate welcomed the initiative announced by Saudi Arabia on 22 March 2021 to reach a political solution for the crisis in the Republic of Yemen. Oman asserted that it will continue to work with Saudi Arabia, the UN and the Yemeni parties concerned to achieve a political settlement that will restore Yemen's security and stability and establish peace in the region.²⁴

The official visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to Muscat on 24 February 2021 has signalled a potential shift in Saudi Arabia's stance on the conflict, amid reports that Riyadh will seek Oman's mediation efforts. Bin Farhan's visit was followed by a meeting in Muscat on 26 February between Lenderking, Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, and the Houthis' chief negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam.²⁵ The resolution of the Yemen conflict is a principal foreign policy and national security priority for Oman and it would signify a major foreign policy triumph for the newly crowned Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

10 Conclusion

In terms of its pragmatic realism, Muscat is well aware that it cannot compete with the hard power of its regional neighbours, namely the vast financial resources of Saudi Arabia and the UAE or the military capabilities of Iran. Moreover, Oman's leadership recognises that the tribal nature of Yemen's political discord cannot be solved by military means. The scope for Omani involvement in Yemen, therefore, is limited by its diplomatic dilemma of balancing relations with Riyadh and Tehran. The Sultanate's non-alignment has been explained as being the product of its desire to balance "historically good relations with Iran and a stressed relationship with Saudi Arabia."²⁶ Indeed, Oman is conscious that the Yemeni conflict is multifaceted and goes far beyond local divisions, especially considering its history with the Marxist-oriented PDRY and PDRY's involvement in the Dhofar Rebellion. The involvement of foreign actors in Yemen's internal struggle is nothing new, and Oman's position on Yemen has remained relatively unchanged for decades.

The establishment of a sovereign and representative government is critical to achieving a lasting peace in Yemen. Whether this is a unified Yemen or a Yemen divided between north and south will not be decided until the ongoing conflict is resolved. While Oman is prepared for any eventuality, a number of considerations seem to speak for a preference for a single Yemeni state. An independent southern Yemen may exacerbate Muscat's concerns over the stability of al-Mahra, as it could provide the opportunity for the UAE and Saudi Arabia to further entrench themselves in Yemen's south. Furthermore, a north-south divide in Yemen would likely result in continued militarisation of the country, with foreign patrons supplying arms to strengthen their respective proxies. Moreover, a divided Yemen would only pose more problems for Oman in terms of negotiating its relationships with Iran and the GCC, as it would also have to carefully balance its relations with north and south Yemen. With this in mind, Oman may prefer the scenario of a unified Yemen, with a power-sharing arrangement between the Houthis and the Hadi government. This outcome would, however, also require the willingness of Iran and Saudi Arabia to cease the conflict and begin talks.

²⁴ "Oman Welcomes Saudi Initiative on Political Solution for Yemeni Crisis," Oman News Agency, March 23, 2021, <https://omannews.gov.om/NewsDescription/ArtMID/392/ArticleID/29488/Oman-Welcomes-Saudi-Initiative-on-Political-Solution-for-Yemeni-Crisis..>

²⁵ Aziz El Yaakoubi, "U.S Officials Have Met Yemen's Houthis as Washington Seeks End to War - Sources," *Reuters*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBN2AV1VH>.

²⁶ Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Road to War* (Verso Books, 2019), 64.

Given the cooling of relations between the US and Saudi Arabia, including the US withdrawal of operational support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, Oman is in a distinctive position to influence the peace process. Furthermore, under the new Sultan Haitham, Oman is pursuing closer relations with its Gulf neighbours, particularly Saudi Arabia. With Riyadh searching for an exit strategy from Yemen, Muscat has an ideal opportunity to prove its value as a diplomatic bridge between Riyadh and Tehran. Achieving peace in Yemen would represent a big diplomatic victory for Oman's new sultan, while also benefitting regional stability. There is little doubt that resolving the Yemen crisis is a foreign policy priority for Oman, and the worsening humanitarian crisis has increased the sense of urgency for ending the conflict. While Oman cannot offer much to Yemen monetarily, it could support Yemen's accession to the GCC, which could help to revitalise Yemen's devastated economy. Furthermore, Oman is likely to play a proactive role in reinforcing the peace process through its coordination with internal and external stakeholders. Sultan Haitham will certainly look to the Biden administration for support regarding a Yemeni peace initiative, and could suggest a ceasefire in Yemen as a precondition for potential nuclear deal talks between the US and Iran.

Muscat can be expected to play a central role in building support for the peace process both within Yemen and among foreign stakeholders while continuing to host talks between the sides and working towards deescalating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The role of Oman has recently been further recognised by UN Special Envoy Griffiths who expressed his gratitude to Sultan Haitham for his commitment to the peace efforts in Yemen. The US State Department has also thanked Sultan Haitham and Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs for supporting the work of the UN and US special envoys to Yemen.²⁷ In his briefing to United Nations Security Council on 15 April 2021, Griffiths, expressed particular gratitude again to Oman.²⁸

As Sultan Haitham aims to overcome the economic challenges facing Oman and make his mark as Qaboos' successor, he will seek to strengthen relations with regional allies while promoting peaceful solutions to ongoing conflicts in order to stabilise the region. Yemen represents a major obstacle to regional stability and an opportunity for Oman to practice its diplomatic balancing act. As Saudi Arabia seeks an exit to the protracted conflict, Muscat will direct its efforts towards hosting talks and promoting dialogue between Yemen's warring factions. Although Omani policy towards Yemen remains unaltered in the post-Qaboos era, the beginning of Sultan Haitham's reign has been accompanied by renewed efforts to achieve lasting peace in Yemen.

²⁷ Raajeshwari Ashok, "UN Special Envoy to Yemen, US Express Thanks to Oman," *Gulf News*, March 31, 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/yemen/un-special-envoy-to-yemen-us-express-thanks-to-oman-1.78243946>.

²⁸ OSESGY, "Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths," April 15, 2021, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-united-nations-security-council-special-envoy-yemen-%E2%80%93-martin-griffiths-2>.