

Report

Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union

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Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (R) greets Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said (L) at the presidential palace in Tehran, Iran on August 25, 2013. Media reports at the time indicated Sultan Qaboos was mediating between Iran and the United States after three decades of stagnant diplomatic ties. [EPA/Abedin Taherkenareh]

Abstract

Geography and common interests have bound Oman and Iran despite sometimes unfriendly relations. Their strategic relationship indicates that while Oman is aware of the threat Iran poses to the region, it does not believe antagonizing Tehran is useful to Gulf security. Rather, Oman has pursued a pragmatic approach of cooperation and dialogue under the assumption that this is more useful for Gulf security. Oman also considers confrontation with Iran as the key reason for a GCC Union proposal at the top of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) summit agenda in December 2013 in Kuwait. The summit closely followed the deal between Iran and the P5+1 states, indicating that the GCC Union proposal was largely a product of Gulf fear of Iran, a fear Oman does not share. This report examines the nature of Omani-Iranian relations which led to Muscat's latest stance and identifies reasons for Omani rejection of a GCC Union.

Introduction

Gulf countries were angry and shocked by Oman's objection to joining a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Union in the event that one is established. The objection was particularly surprising given Oman's typical soft diplomacy approach and the severity

with which the country responded, even hinting at withdrawal from the GCC in the event that the Gulf states forged ahead with the union. Agitating other Gulf countries was further rapprochement between the Sultanate and Iran and Oman's recent role as a mediator between Iran and the US. The mediation process resulted in the Geneva nuclear deal between Tehran and the P5+1 states in November 2013. This paper examines the nature of Omani-Iranian ties and their influence on the latest Omani stance as well as identifies reasons for Omani rejection of a GCC Union.

Omani-Iranian relations

Geography and common interests have bound Oman and Iran, but relations between the two countries have not always been friendly.⁽¹⁾ The ties took shape in mature political cooperation after Sultan Qaboos bin Said took power in 1970 and received military support from Iran, Jordan and Britain to counter a rebellion in Dhofar supported by other Arab states.⁽²⁾ In 1976, Sultan Qaboos attempted to hold talks between Iran, Iraq and the Gulf nations to mend fences and remove historical misunderstandings, but the talks did not achieve success. When the Iranian revolution broke out and the Islamic Republic emerged in the late 1970s, Muscat maintained relations with Tehran despite growing hostility against Iran internationally and in the region. Omani-Iranian relations also continued despite the decade-long Iraq-Iran war in 1980 in which the Gulf states supported Iraq.

Oman historically kept channels of communication open with Iran as well as acted as a mediator between Tehran and Arab states and between Tehran and Western powers such as Britain the US. During the Iraq-Iran war, Muscat hosted secret cease-fire talks between the parties and rejected calls for Iran's boycott and diplomatic and economic isolation in 1987. The country refused to allow Iraq to use its territory to attack Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs islands.⁽³⁾ Oman was also instrumental in reconciliation talks between Iran and Egypt as well as between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UK.⁽⁴⁾

While the second Gulf War resulted in strained relations between Muscat and Tehran due to intensified military presence in strategic areas by both countries,⁽⁵⁾ the two sides soon overcame these tensions and normalized relations. As time has passed, Oman has continued to act as a mediator, helping release British sailors held by Iran in 2007 and US hostages in 2011.⁽⁶⁾

Indicators of Oman's role in the Geneva agreement between Iran and the P5+1 were publicized as early as 2012, when Sultan Qaboos urged Iran and the US to "sit and talk" during an interview with the American press.⁽⁷⁾ It later became clear that Muscat had

hosted secret meetings between the US and Iran since 2011 to reach common ground – ground that was realized in the November 2013 Geneva agreement.

Omani interests are served by its involvement with Iran in four ways:

1. Keeps spectre of war and military confrontation away from the region, in turn serving Oman's internal security and stability.
2. Adds to Oman's international arena track record and deepens its image as a country of political weight in the region.
3. Enhances Oman's relationship with Iran and the US.
4. Creates new prospects for economic cooperation between Oman and Iran, which will boost the Omani economy.

Omani-Iranian relations extend beyond political and diplomatic spheres, including military and economic cooperation. In September 2013, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance military cooperation by conducting joint naval exercises in the Strait of Hormuz.⁽⁸⁾ Oman is seeking to import gas from Iran through a marine pipeline to be constructed between the two countries as well as discussing joint projects to develop offshore gas fields. In addition to frequent visits between senior officials from both countries, Sultan Qaboos visited Iran in 2009 and more recently in 2013 soon after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's election.

Oman has taken a pragmatic approach to dealing with Iran – they know there lies a strategic threat posed by Tehran but also do not view antagonizing Iran as the proper tactic to maintain security in the region. The country has kept its distance with Iran, maintaining its full independence while also sustaining alliances with the US and UK, as well as deep ties with Arab Gulf states. Oman's cautious balance has allowed it to stand firmly in the face of the Iranian threat to close the Strait of Hormuz (which would have disrupted global oil supplies) when Tehran's nuclear dispute escalated with the West.⁽⁹⁾

Internal stability and national unity are the key determinant dictating the Sultanate's foreign policies and its criteria for distinguishing enemies from friends.⁽¹⁰⁾ Historically, Oman has firmly stood against parties threatening its stability, such as its delay in diplomatic relations with Syria because it historically supported the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Gulf. Oman also delayed an agreement to normalize relations with Yemen until the latter removed all the front's dens on its territory.⁽¹¹⁾

To conclude this section, regional confrontation with Iran would be a direct threat to the internal stability and security of Oman. Furthermore, Iran has never posed a threat to

Oman's internal stability or undermined its national unity. Other Gulf states do not seem to grasp Oman's historical tendency toward independence, while Iran has respected this. For example, the Salafist tide threatening to penetrate Omani society and Saudi Arabia's attempts to impose influence on other Gulf states have been sources of concern for Oman. Oman's 2011 announcement that it discovered an Emirates spy ring raised further concerns about inter-GCC ties and influenced Oman's decision to reject the GCC Union proposal.

Oman and GCC Union proposal

Gulf observers are not surprised by Oman's refusal to join the GCC Union, but they are shocked by the decisiveness of the position – Oman went so far as to threaten withdrawal from the GCC during its foreign minister's speech to the Gulf Security Forum in December 2013. The unity proposal was previously pitched during the GCC 2011 summit, and Oman refused then, but likely felt it had to be more vocal in its rejection given the GCC's insistence on pitching the project again.



View of the most recent session of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit held in Kuwait on December 11, 2013. [AP Photo/Gustavo Ferrari]

The rejection was expected for the following reasons:

1. Omani foreign policy can be described as peaceful, dialogue-based, non-interventionist and cautious – a stark contrast from other Gulf countries like

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE who forayed into the Egypt and Syria conflicts with monetary, media and arms support to influence parties to the conflicts. This intervention was not even calculated on the basis of cooperation between the Gulf states, with each country acting unilaterally and in their country's best interests. Oman sees no reason to engage in the proposed GCC Union in the name of the common good as advocated by other Gulf states given this contradiction of foreign policies.

2. Regardless of other justifications, confronting Iran was the most immediate and pressing reason for presenting the GCC Union at this time. This is particularly clear given that the creation of the GCC was partially in response to an Iranian threat to export its revolution across the Gulf years ago. Gulf states have continued to interact with Iran as the threat they saw many years ago, not pausing to reassess the situation or the context.⁽¹²⁾ Oman's stance has been different – it believes turning Iran into a strategic, political and economic ally is more feasible than continued hostility and thus refuses to partake in a GCC Union.
3. Oman views the GCC Union as premature, lacking essential steps which would render it a future success as well as lacking synchronized fiscal, economic, social, political and constitutional policies and arrangements. The GCC itself has not even achieved goals it set out during its inception in 1981, making it difficult to imagine that a union would result in anything but failure and subsequent heavy losses for the GCC's countries at the national and interstate levels.
4. Growing differences between GCC countries on a number of issues make it difficult to imagine that a union would succeed. For example, Qatari-Saudi conflicts and the UAE spy network Oman says it discovered in 2011 are indicators of deep differences within the GCC.⁽¹³⁾ A unified currency, a GCC joint project, is another example of an ambitious project which failed as a result of disagreements and competition within the council.
5. There are very real differences among the Gulf states in terms of levels of openness, political experience, balance of power and relationships between the state and the public. The so-called Arab Spring has also shown that GCC countries, Oman included, are politically volatile. The level of violence used by some Gulf regimes to maintain control over the situation increases daily. Bringing together states which differ in this regard as well as the lacklustre climate of freedoms and human rights in the Gulf in general means failure of a union is highly probable.

6. Oman, like other Gulf states, is weary of Saudi influence and sovereignty, another incentive for it to keep a distance and protect its own sovereignty. Oman is particularly concerned about expanding Salafi influence and its potential impact on tolerance and religious coexistence in its country.

Conclusion

While the Omani position is highly inflexible, it is subject to change if the premises on which it was built no longer exist. The reality is that the GCC Union cannot be rejected on principle given that Oman is a founding member of the GCC and signatory to the council's Articles of Association. Article IV clearly stipulates the ultimate goal of the establishment of the bloc is unity, and Oman cannot overlook its role in a successful and sustainable union of the Gulf peoples' aspirations.

It is important to note that Oman's current position should not be perceived as a stand against closer GCC ties or a bid to drive a wedge into the GCC. In fact, the Sultanate continues to comply with decisions and programs of the council as well as seek common ground despite diverging views among the member states. In 1991, Muscat even went so far as to propose a unified Gulf army in response to the second Gulf War, a bid rejected by member countries.

To conclude, Oman has always been keen on exercising an independent foreign policy, taking decisions it deems necessary to protect its national security and stability. Its recent rejection of a GCC Union should be considered in light of this key fact.

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Endnotes

- (1) The northern regions of Oman sporadically fell under Persian occupation until they were finally freed in the 18th century by Imam Ahmed bin Said, founder of the Bu Said dynasty to which Sultan Qaboos bin Said belongs.
- (2) Ibrahim Nawar, (1992), "Omani foreign policy from isolation to diplomatic mediation", retrieved 27 December 2013, <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/articles.aspx?Serial=217392> &.
- (3) Mohammed Ezz El Arab, (December 2004), "Arab-Iran relations: The limits of detente and future prospects", retrieved 28 December 2013, <http://acpss.ahram.org.eg/ahram/2001/1/1/C2RN78.HTM>.
- (4) Library of Congress, Country Studies: Oman, retrieved 28 December 2013, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/omtoc.html>, call no. DS247.A13 P47 1994.
- (5) Ibrahim Nawar, 1992.
- (6) Library of Congress, Country Studies: Oman.
- (7) Judith Miller, (2012), "The Gulf landscape", retrieved 2 January 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/01/31/view-from-gulf-americas-quiet-go-between-speaks/>.
- (8) Times of Oman, 18 September 2013 issue.
- (9) Judith Miller, 2012.
- (10) Mohamed Ezz El Arab, 2004.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Zahir Mahrooqi, (2013), "Farewell GCC", retrieved 3 January 2013: <http://alroya.info/ar/citizen-journalist/visions/80506---->.

(13) Ibid.

