

Oman's Facilitation Efforts with the Houthis on Hold

by [Jonathan Campbell-James \(/experts/jonathan-campbell-james\)](#)

Feb 26, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tthr-jhwd-uman-altysyryt-m-alhwhthyn\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Jonathan Campbell-James \(/experts/jonathan-campbell-james\)](#)

Jonathan Campbell-James served in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Oman with the British Army's Intelligence Corps, and finally as Deputy C2 at Headquarters Multinational Force-Iraq in Baghdad. He then worked for financial firms in Dubai and Riyadh, and now runs his own Gulf-focused political risk and due diligence consultancy.



Brief Analysis

While Qatar mediates with Hamas over Gaza, Oman's facilitation efforts with the Houthis appear to be in abeyance pending recognition that a broader settlement is needed to secure regional stability.

As skirmishes continue to spill out from the war in Gaza into the broader Middle East region, Omani diplomats might be expected to be filling their usual role in Gulf conflicts: speaking to everyone and seeking to draw parties in conflict into negotiations in an attempt to secure regional stability. But current circumstances are different, and Muscat is signaling that their renewed involvement requires movement from other actors.

Omani facilitation efforts form part of a long tradition of tolerance and restraint, manifested when the Ibadi strand of Islam was first formed by those who did not want to take sides in what then became the split between Shia and Sunni. In conformity with this Ibadi tradition, during his reign Sultan Qaboos successfully and discreetly acted as a facilitator of settlements between numerous foreign parties at loggerheads with each other, notably hosting a visit from Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2018. His successor [Sultan Haitham](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/khtab-alsltan-altarykhy-amam-mjls-uman-nafdht-ly-alaslahat-alaqtsadyt-fy-alblad>) pledged to continue this good offices role in his first speech from the throne when he succeeded in 2020, and in wide range of situations Oman has continued to do so.

In the current Gaza conflict, however, Qatar is the more natural negotiating partner between Israel and Hamas—especially given that Doha has hosted and subsidized a Hamas presence for many years. Doha-controlled media has taken a Hamas perspective in reporting the situation in Gaza, and the Hamas leadership has unsurprisingly developed a degree of dependency on its host. In contrast, Oman has had issues with Hamas in the past, having disrupted a Hamas cell in in Oman in the mid-1990s. Whilst relations have improved, the Qataris remain best positioned to facilitate dialogue with Hamas.

Omani-Iranian Relations

In contrast, Oman is probably better positioned to engage with the Iranians and Houthis. Omani diplomats have close working relationships with their Iranian opposite numbers. Senior Omani officials describe their bilateral relations with Iran as being friendly and based on trust built up over many years. In November, a senior Omani official described the Iranian desk—the focal point for coordinating dealings with Iran—as the busiest in the Omani foreign ministry.

Moreover, the strength of this relationship is by design. Whilst some senior Omanis recall instances of Islamic Republic interference in Omani domestic affairs, most seek to bolster the relationship with Iran and focus instead on the long historical relationship between Persia and Oman. Omanis also point to Iranian military assistance given to Oman during the 1970-1976 war against Yemeni-supported separatists in the Dhofar province of Oman, a war which cost the Shah's army [700 fatalities](#) (<https://defenceindepth.co/2016/06/06/all-the-shahs-men-the-imperial-iranian-brigade-group-in-the-dhofar-war/#:~:text=The%20IIBG%20augmented%20an%20overstretched%20SAF%2C%20its%20helicopters,over%20intervention%20by%20the%20insurgency's%20sponsor%2C%20Sou>). The two countries also have shared interests in the Straits of Hormuz.

Unspoken and rarely acknowledged, these relations are also bolstered by the reality that Oman is comfortable sitting between a Shia Iran and the Sunni GCC heavyweights of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It must also be said that Oman's positive approach to Iran reflects the Gulf's geopolitical realities: Iran is a dominant force, and its regional influence strategy is largely uncontested by those with sufficient clout to effectively do so.

The essence of Oman's diplomacy being discretion, few details of the Omani facilitation in recent months of contacts between Iran and its political adversaries have emerged. But Iran has acknowledged that it has been in regular communication with the United States. Without established diplomatic relations between the two, some traffic will have been channeled either through the British Embassy in Tehran or through the Omanis—or most likely through a combination of the two. Current Omani standing in Iran, in support of such communications, will likely have been enhanced by Omani condemnation of U.S. and British counter-drone attacks on Houthi positions in Yemen, and by messaging from Muscat asserting the Palestinian right to statehood.

Also wreathed in discretion is Oman's role in exchanges between the Houthis and their adversaries. The Houthi's public diplomacy is conducted with megaphones and belligerent rhetoric belted out by defense spokesman Brigadier Yahya Saree and Ansar Allah politburo member Mohammed Al Bukhaiti. In contrast, the [established channel for serious dialogue](#) (https://www.gsn-online.com/search?search=Oman+hopeful+a+Yemen+peace+deal+is+imminent&date_published_from=&date_published_to=&issue_number=&order=) is via Mohammed Abdulsalem, the Houthi's chief negotiator and also a politburo member, often seen in Muscat rather than Sanaa. It is the latter channel of diplomacy that helped nearly land a settlement to the long Yemeni civil war, now apparently thwarted by the fall-out from the conflict in Gaza.

Now, this channel is on hold. On the one hand, Oman clearly has a stake in continuing to pursue its good offices role with the Houthis. The potential settlement of the civil war can be revived; Oman still has a strong security interest in having a stable Yemen on its western border and an economic interest in boosting trade with its neighbor. Like other GCC states, Oman is suffering from the diversion of shipping from the Suez Canal due not just to increased shipping costs but also the loss of Suez-to-Asia traffic calling in at Salalah, which had made it the [second-busiest port](#) (<https://www.archirodon.net/salalah-port/#:~:text=Formerly%20known%20as%20Mina%20Reisut,and%20the%20Arabian%2FPersian%20Gulf.>) in the Middle East. Exports westwards from the newly-expanded refinery at Duqm will likewise be disrupted.

But while there are strong motivating factors for Oman to help calm the Houthis, Muscat evidently feels it cannot do so whilst the recognition of Palestinian statehood remains unresolved. As reflected in state-sanctioned Friday mosque sermons, GCC nations are caught between acknowledging popular enthusiasm for the Palestinian cause whilst guarding against the lateral spread of support for banned domestic Islamist organizations. These considerations also affect the Omani decision-making process on foreign policy; in a [speech in Oxford](#) (<https://www.fm.gov.om/foreign-minister-lecture-at-oxford-centre-for-islamic-studies/>) on February 15, the Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Al Busaidi underlined his strong conviction that a settlement to the conflict in Gaza and achievement of stability across the region was critically dependent on securing—and reconciling—both Palestinian and Israeli

aspirations.

In this framework, seeking to achieve temporary ameliorations to the situation may even hinder achievement of the long-term aspiration of achieving regional stability. Hence at the meeting in Oxford, Sayyid Badr [stated \(https://www.fm.gov.om/foreign-minister-lecture-at-oxford-centre-for-islamic-studies/\)](https://www.fm.gov.om/foreign-minister-lecture-at-oxford-centre-for-islamic-studies/) that whilst he wished he could pretend that back-channel negotiations were taking place, the reality is that they are not. Whilst such a statement from Sayyid Badr might be expected on the record, the off the record story seems no different. The time apparently is not yet right for Oman to consider pushing forward a facilitation effort with the Houthis, and an attempt to so now would expend political capital which will be sorely needed in future. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

A Pathway to Addiction: Tracing Drug-Trafficking Networks in Lebanon's Roumieh Prison

Feb 26, 2024

•
Fatima al-Othman

(/policy-analysis/pathway-addiction-tracing-drug-trafficking-networks-lebanons-roumieh-prison)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Leaving Iraq May Be Washington's Wisest Choice

Feb 26, 2024

•
David Schenker

(/policy-analysis/leaving-iraq-may-be-washingtons-wisest-choice)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

From War to Peace in the Middle East? Observations from a Regional Tour

Feb 23, 2024

•
Robert Satloff

(/policy-analysis/war-peace-middle-east-observations-regional-tour)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)