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The Omani Model

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Introduction

Since 2001, the focus of American foreign policy in the Middle East has been on counter-terrorism, with actions mostly taking the form of military assistance. However, many of the root causes of terrorism have been ignored in the action plan for counterterrorism. Extremism and terrorism stem directly from instable, intolerant governments, lack of human rights, and poor socioeconomic conditions, amongst other factors, and until these primary factors are addressed, military action will have little long-term affect other than destabilization. ISIS has used propaganda advertising greater stability and more rights under the new caliphate, which has attracted over 3000 men and women from Saudi Arabia alone. Since then, the number of foreign fighters world-wide has increased by 71%, adding 5,000 to ISIS alone¹. They have used aggressive social media campaigns to highlight the extensive faults of Middle Eastern governments and use this to encourage violent extremism under the guise of religious martyrism. With such extensive online and physical campaigning, it is nearly impossible to stop the flow of foreign fighters without beginning to address the root issues, which can only be resolved by established governments. It is crucial to recognize that Islamic governments are different in structure and nature, and American or European advisors will not be able to credibly guide these governments towards reform. What is often overlooked, however, is that there are Middle Eastern countries that have remained free of terrorism and have maintained political stability even with absolute monarchies and Islamic governments. Oman is the primary example of this, retaining a rating of zero on the Global Terrorism Index and enjoying high levels of political stability, along with strong political positioning in the region and fair economic conditions.

Within the Gulf, United States foreign policy has primarily concentrated on Saudi Arabia, which has a poor record on terrorism and human rights, as well as a completely oil-dependent economy. The United States' economic and political cooperation with Saudi Arabia has only increased Saudi Arabia's power in the region, furthering its desired position as a model for political and religious framework in the Middle East. Instead, the United States should advance its relationship with Oman to help it grow its economic and political influence in the region in order to encourage the Omani Model to be used across the Middle East to improve the security, encourage economic diversification, and support positive human rights policies.

Comparing Oman and Saudi Arabia on the Root Issues

Governing Structure and Religious Tolerance

The Sultanate of Oman is ruled by Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said. Although the sultanate is an absolute monarchy, Sultan Qaboos has made great efforts to placate the different factions present in the nation by continuously consulting regional leaders from throughout the nation. They are also represented in the *Majlis al-Shura*, or the Consultative Council, which is tasked with consultative tasks related to domestic issues such as the economy and social legislation². Each *waliyah*, or region, is given at least one representative, and more can be added according to population, for a total of 84 members.

¹ (Thorp and Sharma)

² (Oman Politics)



As of 2002, all citizens over 21, men and women, were given the right to vote for their representatives in the *Majlis al-Shura*³. Although this body was established in 1991, there have been several restructurings of state institutions in 2011 and 2012 due to protests inspired by the Arab spring. These include changing the *waliyahs* into governorates and regulating the functions of these governors, which introduced a greater degree of decentralization in the governmental organization⁴.

There also exists the *Majlis al-Dawla*, or the Council of State, which is comprised of 83 chosen advisors to the King⁵. Although this body is not elected, there are a diverse range of members, from tribal leaders to academics to previous military advisors. Qaboos has made great efforts to include and consider feedback from every region of the country, allowing for greater consent as to how the country should be run. Although there is severe censorship and self-censorship in the media⁶, Oman is an example of an absolute monarchy which has not crossed the line to becoming an oppressive regime.

Saudi Arabia officially claims a constitution called the “Basic System,” which sets down laws and standards of human rights practices⁷. However, this is mainly a formality, as the royal family controls most of the positions of power within the government⁸ and rules based on the King and his family’s decisions. The Basic System is not followed as it should be; one such example is that the government is technically required to provide healthcare for all citizens, but women are not allowed access to health care facilities without being given permission by male relatives. Saudi Arabia also has a place-holder *Shura* Council with 150 non-elected members, chosen by the King, who are generally scholars and men of learning. The *Shura* Council’s main purpose is to serve as an oversight committee, but in reality, it passes *suggestions* for laws and amendments, which then require a 2/3 vote to pass before being sent to the King for approval. Only then may these laws be implemented.

There is no separation of powers, especially between the legislative and executive branches of the government. There are 285 powerless municipal councils across the nation which holds 1632 seats, of which only two-thirds are elected positions. The only body with tangible political power is the Council of Ministers, which is headed by the King, who acts as the Prime Minister. This Council is the directive executive authority in the Kingdom and sets down the nation’s domestic, foreign, and economic policies⁹.

Another important aspect to consider is the influence of religious authority on governmental practices. Oman is the only nation which officially practices Ibhadi Islam, a moderate conservative sect of the Islamic religion. It has historically been tolerant of other forms of Islam as well as other religions. The Omani government consistently pursues interfaith policies. Records show that the government has donated land for Christian and Hindu places of worship¹⁰, and has funded the salaries of some Ibhadi and Sunni imams.

³ (British Broadcasting Corporation)

⁴ (Wasty and Martin)

⁵ (Wasty and Martin)

⁶ (Heritage)

⁷ (Ansary)

⁸ (Engel)

⁹ (Ansary)

¹⁰ (Grappo)



Although they have not funded salaries of Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders, no rules have been placed on the construction of their places of worship. The Omani embassy staff in Washington DC has also spoken regularly with minority religious groups, and the MERA (Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs) is an active body in Oman¹¹. Additionally, the Grand Mufti (or the head religious cleric) does not have notable influence on Omani policy, although the courts follow Sharia law.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia practices Wahhabi Islam, a fundamentalist offshoot of Sunni Islam which follows scriptures word for word and allows for little to no flexibility in interpretation. Followers are held to strict standards of practice and the religious police, or the *mutawa*, are strong enforcers of these rules. Public worship of any faith other than Wahhabism is prohibited; Shias are forced to pray in few mosques and gather in informal places of worship called *housseinas*. Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world without a church, and citizens are barred from hosting large gatherings for worship in their personal homes¹².

The root of these restrictions on religion go back to the of the founding of the state, during which Ibn Saud set Wahhabism as the Saudi state official religion in order to gain control and unite the nation. In this way, strict religious rhetoric has become integrated into the country's governmental policies, making it very difficult for outside forces to pressure the Saudi Arabian government into any relaxation of these rules. In addition, Saudi Arabia contains the two holiest cities in the Muslim faith, Makkah and Madinah, and therefore holds enormous religious influence. Saudi Arabia is credited with leaning the faith towards its conservative trends, especially concerning women's dress. These religious values are also enforced by law due to the exceptional influence of the *Grand Mufti* in the government, as well as the Senior Council of the *Ulama*, which holds the religious authority in Saudi Arabia. The *Ulama* issues *fatwas* (religious legal opinions) which have the final say on legislation¹³. The Grand Mufti is looked to for legitimizing the actions of the Saudi Arabian government, commenting on war and political relationships in a way which is unseen and looked down upon in Oman.

Biased educational systems have also been attributed to encouraging extremist ideals across the Middle East. For example, *madrasas* across Pakistan have lured hundreds of thousands of students by providing free education, room, but have been a direct cause of radicalism. These schools were established in the 1980s in the wake of Islamization, which was a Saudi Arabian Wahhabi push to fund mosques and *madrasas* which conveniently created *mujahedeen* fighters to counter the Soviets¹⁴. Naturally, religious education regarding Islam (and mostly Sunni/Wahhabi Islam) is a major part of the K-12 education system within Saudi Arabia as well. It is not an optional course for any student. This is a main avenue for instilling the strict Wahhabi Islam in citizens from a young age. By contrast, in Oman, non-Muslim students are exempt from Islamic studies in K-12 schools, which is an important indication for the government's respect for other religions. This acceptance of other religions greatly contributes to the peace that Oman experiences.

¹¹ (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs)

¹² (Grappo)

¹³ (Ansary)

¹⁴ (Pillalamarri)



Inequality

Lack of equal rights is the second tenet that contributes to violent extremism, a condition that exists throughout the Middle East and is frequently justified through religion. Saudi Arabia is one of the most prominent and extreme examples of countries in which women face obstacles in almost every aspect of life. Women are not allowed the same educational, political, or healthcare opportunities and require male relatives to consent on every activity. Only 1/3 of girls were able to achieve the basic educational requirements¹⁵. Although women were recently allowed to vote and stand as candidates in Saudi Arabian elections, only 130,000 women registered as compared to 1.35 million men¹⁶, and it is generally held, as established previously in this paper, that elections are mostly placeholders and have little effect on actual policy within the country.

This severe inequality holds back the development of a country both economically and socially, and provides groups like ISIS with propaganda to use in recruitment. Reports have shown that women in ISIS are targeting Saudi Arabian women with messages that advertise ISIS as treating women with respect and giving them more power. They also mention allowing them to serve their religiously appropriate roles without being treated inhumanely. Although there certainly is no mention of equality, this is still a powerful rhetoric which has attracted hundreds of women.¹⁷

By contrast, all records confirm that Oman has no male or female foreign fighters joining the ranks of ISIS, which is an important nod to Oman's reputation as a tolerant and inclusive nation. Women are given the same voting rights as men, and are not restricted from conducting their own economic activity. For example, a royal decree in 2008 gave women the right to own land, and programs have been implemented to increase job opportunities for women¹⁸. The government has made progressive steps in the last two decades to close the gap between men and women in the country, rather than exaggerate it. Oman appointed the first female minister in the GCC in 2004. Saudi Arabia has yet to appoint a woman in the Council of Ministers.

Economy

Economy is a major contributor to decisions made in regards to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and the United States have a strong economic relationship, which is based in over 1 million barrels of oil per day being sent from Saudi Arabia to the United States¹⁹. Oil contributes to 80% of Saudi government revenues and makes it the largest contributor to OPEC. However, projections show that Saudi Arabia may become a net oil importer by 2030, which would destabilize not only the Saudi Arabian economy, but the whole Gulf and Middle East's as well. The drop in crude oil prices to around \$30 a barrel (where Saudi Arabia requires \$85 per barrel in the long term²⁰) but resistance to reduce production to counter Iran's newly opening economy will

¹⁵ (Index Mundi)

¹⁶ (BBC News)

¹⁷ (Baker)

¹⁸ (Bureau of Democracy)

¹⁹ (Department of State)

²⁰ (Bowler)



cause a loss of \$300 billion dollars for OPEC²¹. Although they have a reserve fund of \$700 billion, these funds will not last for a significant period of time.

This only highlights the need to diversify the economy. There has been no full-fledged effort to diversify, although the government has encouraged growth of the private sector in the fields of power generation, telecommunications, natural gas exploration, and petrochemicals. Significant government ownership in the financial sector continues and there have also been declines in labor treatment, business, and management of public spending in Saudi Arabia in the last year. Additionally, oil wealth is systematically appropriated by members of the royal family²², which gives the regime very little reason to diversify the Saudi Arabian economy. This corruption and lack of diversity sets the Middle East for an impending crisis in the face of oil depletion.

On the other hand, Oman has done a considerably better job in diversification of the economy. Through a plan called Vision 2020, the goal is to reduce oil contribution to the GDP to 9% by 2020²³. Oman has developed multiple 5 year plans which focus on business incubation and spurring the private sector. Public-private partnerships have increased, as well as investment in industry, mining, agriculture, and fisheries, and privatization of power and water companies is an encouraging step. In an international minded environment, Oman has been modeling the frameworks for its banking sector from the International Finance Corporation and the World Bank. Additionally, it has been investing heavily in major infrastructure projects to increase tourism²⁴. There has been a massive crackdown on corruption and the market is favorable to foreign investors, which helps to encourage diversification efforts. This has directly contributed to rapid economic growth rates, improved social indices, and enhanced availability of commercial energy.

Although the Saudi Arabian government makes announcements about its efforts to combat financing of terrorism, foreign charities with links to terrorist groups were still able to leverage social media to solicit funds from Saudi citizens²⁵. This lack of activism from the government to stop the corruption of wealth is an especially troublesome sign, coupled with little effort to diversify. Some forecasts predict Saudi Arabia becoming a net oil importer by 2030, which could create even greater instability in the Middle East. On the other hand, Oman's intensive efforts to diversify and combat funding of terrorist groups are exemplary for the rest of the Middle East.

Peace brokering and neutrality on an international stage

On multiple occasions, Oman has acted as the peace broker on large international deals and stayed neutral on Middle Eastern conflicts. Oman is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council but has simultaneously maintained good relations with Iran, which puts Oman in between the two regional rivals of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Oman and Iran agreed upon a \$60 billion sub-sea gas pipeline deal in March of 2014, a study of which was officially signed in September after the Iranian nuclear deal had gone through²⁶. Oman was

²¹ (Krauss)

²² (Heritage)

²³ (The Economist)

²⁴ (Wasty and Martin)

²⁵ (Bureau of Counterterrorism)

²⁶ (Times News Service)



instrumental in the nuclear deal between the P.5 + 1 and Iran, hosting secret talks between the United States and Iran and easing the tensions between the two by negotiating and returning hostages to both nations²⁷.

Additionally, Oman has remained neutral in the Yemeni conflict and is the only GCC member which has resisted joining Saudi Arabia's military coalition against the Iran-backed Houthi fighters. Oman refused to downgrade diplomatic relations with Tehran over the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, the Shiite cleric executed by Saudi Arabia. The execution fueled violent attacks on Saudi diplomats in multiple cities in Iran, which pushed Saudi Arabia and nine of its allies to sever or downgrade their relations with Iran. Although it spoke out against the attacks on Saudi diplomats, Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah and the ambassador to Iran traveled to Tehran to discuss the crisis.²⁸

The Omani foreign policy is mostly based in non-intervention and peace-making abilities, which has worked well for the Omani government, as they have support from all sides of the table. The United States continues to use its air space and ports for military purposes, the other Gulf nations have not changed their relationships with Oman due to the Saudi war on Yemen, and Iran is a guaranteed partner in the face of instability. In the past year, Oman has even put significant resources into advancing diplomatic dialogue amongst the warring factions in Syria and Yemen, which have been jeopardized by the inflammatory actions of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has led the charge on many of the regional military conflicts, especially in Yemen. The ideological war between the Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran has developed into multiple proxy wars and has led to the relaxation of tracking of terrorism financing. Saudi Arabia has not been particularly instrumental in peace brokerage in the region and has shown little interest in sitting for talks to resolve the Yemeni crisis²⁹. A Human Rights Watch report shows that the Saudi coalition has even dropped American-made cluster bombs in civilian neighborhoods in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in clear violation of the laws of war³⁰. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is the regional lead of the coalition against ISIS. Although they have attempted to host some peace talks with opposition parties, many key fighting parties were left out, such as the Kurdish peshmerga, the Nusra Front, and ISIS, and little to nothing was achieved³¹. A UN Special Envoy for Syria directly accused Riyadh of obstructing a diplomatic end to the civil war by tightly controlling which opposition parties were allowed to participate in the negotiations³². Although there are many opportunities for Saudi Arabia to leverage their political and economic power for peace, few have been taken.

Oman as a Model

The Omani government's dedication to peace and stability is reflected well in the consistently policies they pursue. Creating domestic policies which are inclusive of religious and regional groups with input from representatives around the nation have led

²⁷ (Gupta)

²⁸ (Cafiero)

²⁹ (Alghoul)

³⁰ (Human Rights Watch)

³¹ (McDowall, Davison and Perry)

³² (Lynch)



to a stable, prosperous state in a geographical region which is incredibly vulnerable to the violence and threat of terrorism. Their position of neutrality in the Middle East has also been leveraged internationally, making Oman a friend of every state, a title hard to claim in a politically and ideologically divided section of the world.

The United States has an important role to play in the Middle East. The partners they choose to back with military and economic support have influence and importance in the outcome of conflicts in the region. The United States has generally supported Saudi Arabia in its military endeavors throughout the region, even withstanding the blatant lack of human rights the regime has repeatedly shown. This is largely due to the strong economic dependency one has on the other because of massive oil sales, but also stems from the United States' attempt to ensure that Iran does not have undue influence in the region. However, this relationship only further supports instability and continued violence in the region, and does little to encourage the diversification of the regional economy to prevent future economic collapse.

Oman, on the other hand, has maintained strong relationships with all Middle Eastern nations as well as the Western countries. Their intensive efforts to diversify the economy and prevent terrorism within their state make Oman a successful model of maintaining peace in an Islamic government. Although some of this may be attributed to the specific brand of Islam which Omanis practice, the government actively takes steps to ensure that input is being heard from all factions on domestic policy decisions, and religious tolerance is an enforced policy.

Now, with historically low oil prices and greater U.S. oil independence, the U.S. is at an advantageous position to change its relationship with Saudi Arabia and instead shift a greater focus to Oman. Oman's economic sector has boomed; there are many investment opportunities in the private sector for American companies, in a variety of industries. Additionally, public-private partnerships have also increased in the nation, allowing for U.S. companies to be able to both invest and directly support the Omani government and people. If the United States aids Oman in growing economic influence, Oman will be able to hold greater political power in the Middle East. This will increase the ability for Oman to create peace deals between nations and warring parties, and encourage other nations to remodel their governments after the Omani model.

United States foreign policy is limited to military and economic forums; it cannot criticize or suggest changes to a religious faith, which many blame for the factions that exist in the Middle East. Any changes to the faith itself must come from internal theological debates and discussions, and the United States has no legitimacy in suggesting religiously tolerant policies to its partners such as Saudi Arabia. However, the United States and its international allies *can* help build stronger nations by supporting stable strong regional leaders like Oman, who can become the game-changer in Middle East politics by encouraging stability through skillful diplomacy and fighting violent extremism from its roots.



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