

Democracy Promotion in Oman

By DIANA M. HOLLAND

Cooperation with and support from the strategically positioned Persian Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are critical to America's stated national interests: security, prosperity, human rights values, and international order.¹ In the Gulf region, Iranian hegemonic ambitions, piracy, and violent extremism pose threats to those interests. The United States has spent billions on military assistance and foreign aid programs in the past decade to ensure the stability and cooperation of Gulf governments. Nonetheless, as the "Arab Awakening" demonstrated in 2011, some of these governments face significant internal opposition and could be at risk. If these states devolve into chaos, or if anti-American regimes come to power, the United States could face greater challenges in the region.

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Al-Shamikh, one of three *Kahreef*-class Corvettes under construction for Royal Navy of Oman at Portsmouth, England

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One way to sustain stable and friendly governments in the Gulf is to increase democracy promotion programs designed to encourage timely and peaceful transitions to more representative forms of government.² In fact, the 2010 National Security Strategy contends that the United States must promote democracy because governments that respect democratic values “are more just, peaceful and legitimate” and ultimately protect America’s national interests.³ The United States does not currently have many democracy promotion programs in the Gulf, but if a threat to stability is internal dissatisfaction with autocratic governments, then stronger efforts toward reform supported by the United States could foster a more peaceful political transformation. This process should begin with the Sultanate of Oman because many of its citizens desire reform and are willing to work with the existing government

of the 1980 hostage rescue attempt in Iran, as well as more recent combat operations in the region. The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2006, which assists with economic diversification in preparation for the depletion of Oman’s oil reserves in the next 15 years. In 2010, the United States provided Oman \$1.5 million and \$8.9 million under the International Military Education and Training and Foreign Military Financing programs, respectively. Oman aligns with American positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict more frequently than other Arab states do.⁶ The United States and Oman are strong friends, and through this relationship America can encourage substantive reforms in that Gulf state.

To appreciate the potential for change in Oman, it is important to understand its recent history. Discussions about modern Oman focus on Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al

Ibadism encourages leaders to make decisions through consultation and consensus. It stresses moderation and toleration toward fellow members of Omani society, as well as foreigners and those of different belief systems. Finally, Ibadism dictates that communities choose leaders through elections. These tenets are deeply rooted in the Omani conscience and over time have established conditions conducive to democratic principles.⁸

Despite Oman’s potential receptiveness to liberalization, U.S. policies toward the Sultanate, like those toward the rest of the Gulf, normally focus on security and defense capabilities rather than governance. Yet the dearth of democracy programs in this region is also due to the extraordinary wealth of the oil monarchies. They are not dependent on American aid and, therefore, the United States cannot use financial incentives to leverage them to accept democracy promotion programs.⁹ However, Oman is not as wealthy as the other Gulf states and faces economic uncertainty because of its dwindling oil reserves.¹⁰ Thus, economic incentives might be more effective in achieving political change in Oman than in the other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The major entities that employ such programs in the Middle East are the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its affiliates,¹¹ and the Department of State’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). A survey of these U.S.-sponsored democracy programs confirms that Oman is largely overlooked; the United States provides negligible support and incentives to Oman through these organizations. USAID does not allocate any funding toward governance.¹² NED and its affiliates have little engagement in Oman, especially when compared to their efforts in other parts of the region. One of the affiliates, the International Republican Institute, sponsors a single program that provides training in legislative procedures. The other NED affiliate with the mission to train and educate citizens on democratic principles is the National Democratic Institute; however, it has no ongoing programs in Oman.¹³ Finally, MEPI sponsors 17 programs in Oman, but they generally focus on economic development and opportunities made possible by the 2006 Free Trade Agreement.¹⁴

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to that end.⁴ Furthermore, Oman has unique potential for democratic development and could serve as a model of reform for the other Gulf states.

Foreign policy discourse about the Middle East and American national security interests there often neglects Oman. The omission is surprising considering the state’s geographical position vis-à-vis Iran, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Arabian Peninsula. One reason for the neglect is that the Gulf region, aside from its role in exporting oil, is overshadowed by the dysfunction of the rest of the Middle East. Regional policymakers and commentators devote much of their attention to palpable tension or outright conflict between Israel and its neighbors, the Palestinian refugee problem, and Iranian nuclear ambitions. Moreover, the other Gulf countries eclipse Oman because the former have large oil reserves, host major U.S. military headquarters, and control substantial financial assets. Finally, the Omanis themselves downplay their ties with the United States in order to maintain a close relationship with Iran.⁵

Though the U.S.-Omani relationship is inconspicuous, the two countries cooperate in many areas. Oman authorized the use of its military facilities by U.S. forces in support

Said and the remarkable transformation of the country during his rule. Sultan Qaboos replaced his father in 1970 following a palace coup. The new sultan immediately confronted and ultimately defeated a 14-year insurgency. He then turned his attention to economic and social development, as well as national unification. He enacted policies that improved infrastructure, education, and health care for all Omanis. In the 1990s, Qaboos instituted significant political reforms. He created a bicameral legislature under the Basic Law in 1996. Omanis elect the members of the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Assembly), and the sultan appoints members of the Majlis al-Dawla (State Assembly). Women also gained additional rights under Qaboos including the right to vote in 2003.⁷ Compared to their neighbors, Omanis enjoy considerable religious toleration and economic interaction with the outside world. The country is relatively safe even without the trappings of a police state. It also attracts tourists, who can freely and independently traverse most of the country.

Ibadism is the dominant form of Islam in Oman, and its effect on development is important in any assessment of the country’s potential for political reform.

Even if U.S. policymakers decide to increase democracy programs, it is important to ask whether Oman wants such attention. Clearly, the Omani people, and especially the younger generation, desire reform. The citizens participate in elections in large numbers, the Shura continuously presses for more legislative authority, and protesters in early 2011 articulated the desire for change within the existing institutions.¹⁵ Additionally, although the sultan is personally popular, there is concern that he is over 70 years old, has no children, and has not announced an heir.¹⁶ Upon his death, there will certainly be questions surrounding future reforms. If Qaboos's successor is not viewed as legitimate, or does not demonstrate the intent to reform the government, the opposition could become more aggressive.

The sultan himself has stated in numerous forums throughout his reign that Oman must become more democratic, though at its own pace and according to its own traditions.¹⁷ Within those guidelines, future democracy promotion programs should be specifically designed to encourage gradual adjustments rather than dramatic transformation. Programs must be inconspicuous and not associated with the U.S. Government because of Oman's relationship with Iran and the danger of antagonizing radical groups in the region. This means that private, non-governmental organizations such as NED, rather than USAID or MEPI, should sponsor democracy promotion in Oman.¹⁸

Steady reform in Oman could stabilize the country and serve as a model for other Gulf states that face potent opposition forces. The Sultanate's history suggests that it has unique potential for democratic reform, and recent events confirm that its citizens desire it. Furthermore, Oman is in a position to positively impact U.S. interests in the region. With these considerations in mind, American policymakers should designate Oman as a priority recipient of democracy promotion efforts. Ultimately, if such programs are successful, the region may avoid a violent "Gulf Awakening" and, in turn, deliver the additional benefit of preserving America's national interests. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010), 17.

² There are several definitions of *democracy promotion*. Because the definition of the concept is not the focus of the argument, the author uses Peter Burnell's simplified description: "a wide range of largely non-coercive attempts to spread democracy . . . a kind of political intervention in the domestic affairs . . . to affect the distribution of power." See Peter Burnell, *Promoting Democracy Abroad* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 1–2.

³ *National Security Strategy*, 37.

⁴ Kenneth Katzman, *Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, RS21534 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 26, 2011), summary.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7–15. For example, Oman did not end diplomatic relations with Egypt after the latter concluded the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Sultan Qaboos hosted working groups to support the Madrid Peace Process. Israel is allowed to participate in the Desalination Research Center located in Oman. Finally, Oman expressed interest in renewing trade ties with Israel if the latter would halt settlement construction in the West Bank.

⁷ Additionally, the sultan has appointed 14 women to the Majlis al-Dawla since its founding. See Marc Valeri, "Liberalization from Above: Political Reforms and Sultanism in Oman," in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, ed. Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacoko Luciani, 189–193 (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006). Omanis elected one woman to the Majlis al-Shura in October 2011. See "Omani Elections Leaves Questions Unanswered," *The Financial Times*, October 17, 2011, available at <www.ft.com/cms/s/0/33e00b18-f893-11e0-ad8f-00144feab49a.html#axzz1dQnSF7hM>.

⁸ Hussein Ghubash, *Oman—The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, trans. Mary Turton (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2–3, 200–203.

⁹ Tom Pierre Najem, "Good Governance," in *Good Governance in the Middle East Oil Monarchies*, ed. Tom Pierre Najem and Martin Hetherington, 14 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁰ Ranked 78th of the 226 countries in the world in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), Oman is the poorest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Bahrain has a lower GDP than Oman, but it has one-third of Oman's population and therefore a much higher GDP per capita. Oman's GDP per capita ranks in last place along with Saudi Arabia, but the latter's overall GDP is nine times that of Oman and the wealth greatly empowers the Saudi ruling family. See Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *The*

World Factbook (Washington, DC: CIA, 2012), available at <www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

¹¹ The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has four affiliates: the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). Each is aligned with a political party or major U.S. interest group and promotes reform in other countries in accordance with the agendas of those parties and interests. ACILS (now termed the Solidarity Center), for instance, conducts training and education on unions and labor; CIPE designs programs that facilitate small business.

¹² U.S. Agency for International Development, "Middle East Countries," available at <http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/middle_east/countries/index.html>.

¹³ International Republican Institute, "Gulf Program Overview," Washington, DC, 2010, 1; National Democratic Institute, "Where we work," available at <www.ndi.org/wherewework>.

¹⁴ Middle East Partnership Initiative, "Oman Country Profile," March 20, 2010, available at <www.abudabi.mepi.state.gov/currentprojectsbycountryoman.html>.

¹⁵ Reform groups consist mostly of younger Omanis, many of whom are unemployed and largely motivated by the country's economic conditions. The unemployment rate was last measured at 15 percent in 2004. The overall GCC average is 4.2 percent. See Elizabeth Broomhall, "Bahrain and Oman have highest Gulf unemployment rates," *Arabian Business*, July 7, 2011, available at <www.arabianbusiness.com/bahrain-oman-have-highest-gulf-unemployment-rates-409116.html>; and Angus McDowall, "Protests in Oman Sputter," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2011.

¹⁶ Katzman, 2–3. The sultan has established a succession process. The "Ruling Family Council" will meet to designate a successor within 3 days of Qaboos's death. If it fails to select someone, it will unseal a letter left by Qaboos in which he names the next sultan. This process is controversial in Oman because it contradicts the Ibadi idea of consensus and election. See Valeri, 192–193.

¹⁷ Joseph A. Kéchichian, "A Vision of Oman: State of the Sultanate Speeches by Qaboos bin Said, 1970–2006," *Middle East Policy* 15 (Fall 2008), 17; Judith Miller, "Creating Modern Oman: An Interview with Sultan Qaboos," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (May–June 1997), 14.

¹⁸ Madeleine K. Albright and Vin Weber, coauthors, *In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How*, Independent Task Force Report No. 54 (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005), 4–9.