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Omani Diplomacy and Prospects for Trump's Presidency

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Oman, an oasis of peace and stability in the turbulent Middle East, largely attributes its foreign policy's success to its neutrality. Omani diplomacy has the potential to help President Donald J. Trump fulfill his 2024 campaign pledge to become a peacemaker in the Middle East.

Omanis stress that their neutrality is not about being indifferent to regional disputes. To the contrary, Oman promotes a form of “positive neutrality” or “constructive neutrality” in which the Sultanate generally avoids taking sides in conflicts and then plays an active role in regional and international dialogue and mediation—a role that statesmen worldwide praise Muscat for playing.

The Omanis have a rich history of such diplomacy, making them exceptionally experienced and skilled in this practice, which requires patience and a deep regional understanding. There have been many instances of Oman's “positive neutrality” proving effective, including the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the Yemeni crises (2015-present), the blockade of Qatar (2017-21), and Saudi-Iranian renormalization talks (1988-91 and 2021-23).

What Trump's second term means for Oman's “positive neutrality” is an important question, particularly vis-à-vis Yemen and Iran. With Trump restoring “[maximum pressure](#)” on Tehran and [intensifying](#) the US bombing campaign against Yemen's Ansar Allah (a.k.a. the Houthis), Muscat has a unique role to play in terms of reducing tensions in the Middle East while assisting Washington achieve some of Trump's stated foreign policy objectives such as securing another nuclear deal with Tehran.

Officials in Muscat caution about how instability in Yemen, which shares a [187](#)-mile border with the Sultanate, can spillover into Oman. Above all else, Oman's main interest in Yemen is the

promotion of stability, which largely explains Muscat's commitment to helping the Yemenis find diplomatic solutions to their conflicts, assisting with humanitarian challenges, and working with Yemeni authorities to counter violent extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State's local offshoots.

A concern in Oman is that the Trump administration's militaristic approach to the Houthis and Red Sea security will exacerbate Yemen's political, social, economic, and humanitarian crises with destabilizing reverberation effects felt in Yemen and other countries. Within this context, Muscat [expressed](#) concern about the ongoing escalation of violence in Yemen, beginning on March 15, with the US bombing of Sana'a and other parts of the country. A general view among Omanis is that such strikes targeted Yemen as a nation-state, rather than the Houthis as a non-state actor.

Oman advocates for dialogue and diplomacy as an alternative to bombing Yemen. Moreover, the Omanis see the road to lasting Red Sea security going through a sustainable Gaza ceasefire and a lifting of restrictions on humanitarian assistance to the war-torn enclave, not military action against any Yemeni actor. Although Omani policymakers have opposed Houthi attacks on international trade, Muscat has remained committed to maintaining communication channels with the Houthis. The Sultanate hosts the spokesman of the movement in Muscat, making Oman the location for Houthi engagement with the US, [UK](#), and other countries.

Muscat advocating for diplomatic solutions to crises in Yemen is consistent with Oman's foreign policy traditions and ethos. As the only Gulf Cooperation Council ([GCC](#)) state to not join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen a decade ago, Oman quickly established itself as an effective diplomatic bridge between the Houthis, on one side, and Saudi Arabia and the US, on the other. At the time, Riyadh and some other Arab capitals saw Muscat's refusal to join the anti-Houthi coalition as a sign of negative neutrality on Oman's part, suspecting that the Sultanate's cordial relationship with Iran was a key factor. But as the campaign turned into a costly quagmire that harmed Saudi national security interests, Riyadh began viewing Oman's relationship with the Houthis as positive and useful. The Saudi-Houthi [truce](#) that went into effect in April 2022 was in no small part an outcome of negotiations held under Omani auspices. Today the Saudis are grateful that for all the violence in Yemen the Houthis are not

firing missiles and drones at targets in their kingdom. The same goes for the Emiratis and their country, which the Houthis famously [struck](#) in January 2022.

All GCC states, with the arguable exception of Bahrain, share Oman's concerns about US strikes against the Houthis threatening to harm Gulf security given the risk of Houthi retaliation against US military bases in GCC countries. Rather than viewing Oman's relationship with the Houthis as a threat to their own security, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab monarchies see Muscat's diplomatic engagement with the Houthis as constructive from the standpoint of promoting peace and stability in Yemen.

Muscat has leveraged its diplomatic cards in manners that have served Washington's interests in Yemen—from negotiating the ceasefire that brought the Houthis' attacks on Saudi Arabia to a halt and [securing](#) the freedom of American citizens detained in Houthi-controlled areas, and [mediating](#) the release of the Galaxy Leader's crew. In general, Oman's balanced foreign policy vis-à-vis Yemen can continue serving US interests by keeping a trustworthy and effective backchannel open between Washington and the Houthis. To compel Muscat into severing all links with the Houthis would compromise this diplomatic bridge and make Iran and Russia the only two states through which the US could engage the Houthis.

In the wider context of Trump's quest to negotiate a new nuclear deal with Iran, Oman is playing a critical role in engagement between the White House and Tehran. Notably, the Trump administration [sent](#) a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei via the United Arab Emirates (UAE). But the Iranian response came through [Oman](#), which was unsurprising mindful of the fact that Oman is the most trustworthy GCC state in Tehran's eyes. Moreover, there are no Iranian-Omani territorial disputes—unlike the UAE and Iran which [dispute](#) three Gulf islands. Under the leadership of the late Sultan Qaboos, Oman became the first GCC member to fully demarcate all its land and maritime borders, which Muscat understood as necessary from the standpoint of peace and security in Oman that would only be possible if the Sultanate enjoyed conflict-free relationships with neighboring countries. Additionally, Tehran supports Muscat's refusal to join the Abraham Accords, which is an important factor considering the extent to which Iran [perceives](#) Bahraini and Emirati normalization with Israel as a threat to the Islamic Republic's security.

It is now confirmed that Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, US envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, and their respective delegations will meet in the Sultanate for talks on April 12. Oman’s Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi will serve as the [mediator](#) in what will be the [first](#) of such diplomatic engagement between Tehran and Washington since Trump’s second term began.

Navigating the Middle East requires the US to engage actors such as the Houthis and Iran. Working with countries like Oman, Qatar, and Switzerland is critical from the standpoint of credible and reliable backchannels which make such dialogue possible.

While providing a venue for talks with the Houthis and Iranian officials, Oman’s “positive neutrality” can help Trump fulfill his 2024 campaign pledge to become a peacemaker who prevents the US from being pulled into another war in the Middle East. Despite [accusations](#) of Oman being a nefarious actor, the Sultanate is, to the contrary, a regional player that aligns with the West on numerous issues, collaborates closely with Washington and London on counterterrorism issues, and plays a valuable role as a diplomatic bridge to Sana’a and Tehran.

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