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**A Diplomatic History**  
**of Israel's Relations with Oman:**  
**From Clandestine Ties to the Abraham Accords**

**Dr Jonathan Ghariani**

**The Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies – Concordia University**

## **Abstract**

In contrast to the Arab League policy of not negotiating with Israel, Oman (bordering Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen) established clandestine ties with the Jewish state in the 1970s in order to obtain military assistance against the Dhofar Marxist rebellion. A few years later, the country went against the Arab consensus when it became one of only two Arab countries to support the Israel-Egypt peace treaty and maintain diplomatic relations with Cairo. Oman always advocated a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement, as demonstrated by the prominent role it played during the Madrid multilateral peace process, which took place during the 1990s. However, it was only after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1994 that Oman would ultimately establish formal - albeit partial - diplomatic ties with Israel. Although it broke off diplomatic relations with Israel at the start of the second *intifada*, informal ties remained in place, as demonstrated by the official visit of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Muscat on October 26, 2018.

## **Introduction**

Oman's relations with Israel date back to the mid-1970s, when the Jewish state aided Muscat, its capital, in curbing an insurrection launched by a Marxist group known as the Dhofar Liberation Front. A few years later, Oman (along with Morocco) supported the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Muscat was also a leading participant in the Madrid multilateral forum and played a major role in the Middle East water desalination project, known as the Middle East Centre for Water Desalination Research (MEDRC). Despite the closeness of Oman and Israel's covert relations, these two countries only established partial diplomatic ties in 1995. Oman would sever relations with Israel in October

2000 given the extent of the violence that took place during the second *intifada*. Nevertheless, covert channels of communication between the two countries remained intact, as demonstrated by the official visit to Muscat made by former Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu on October 26, 2018. Nearly two years after Netanyahu's historic visit to Oman, Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords on September 15, 2020. Oman was supportive of the agreement, but chose not to normalize ties with Israel, stating that it would only do so if Israel acquiesced to the Arab Peace Initiative (API) and accepted the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Many researchers and diplomats have speculated that since Oman was one of the first Arab countries to support peace between Israel and Arab states and played a prominent role in the Madrid multilateral forum, it could potentially facilitate negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). To address this issue, this paper will discuss the diplomatic history of Oman's relations with Israel from the establishment of clandestine relations in the 1970s to the current geopolitical context.

### **Israel and Oman, 1975-1981: Unofficial Allies?**

At the end of the 1948 war, the Arab states signed separate bilateral armistice agreements with Israel but refused to sign peace treaties with it as such agreements would have entailed recognition of the Jewish state. Nevertheless, a few Arab states maintained clandestine relations with Israel. Omani-Israeli covert ties can be traced back to 1975 when an Israel military advisory group assisted the sultanate against the Soviet-backed Marxist Dhofar rebels. Ephraim Halevy, then head of Mossad, went to Oman to aid the suppression of the revolt<sup>1</sup>. Given the sensitivity of these ties, Israel's presence in the sultanate was hidden from the British.<sup>2</sup> Although the Israeli-Omani relationship was mainly centred around issues pertaining to security, it did

address other areas as well.

For instance, in the 1970s, Israel provided Oman with advanced technologies and know-how in the areas of water desalination and drip irrigation.<sup>3</sup> The convergence of interests between Israel and Oman at this time bears resemblance to the partnership established between Morocco and Israel in the early 1960s. Oman's interests consisted of leaning towards the United States and Great Britain and maintaining an independent foreign policy from its regional Arab neighbours. Muscat's desire to be independent was perhaps best demonstrated by its refusal to follow the Arab states' collective stance on the Camp David Accords. While most Arab countries denounced these accords, Muscat (along with Morocco) supported them.

Indeed, after the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty on March 26, 1979, the bulk of the Arab states broke off relations with Egypt, and Cairo was expelled from the Arab League. The Arab League's headquarters was then moved from Cairo to Tunis.<sup>4</sup> Deviating from the Arab states' consensus, Muscat was one of only three Arab countries (the other two being Morocco and Sudan) which did not cut relations with Egypt in the aftermath of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Oman called for reinstating Egypt in the Arab League and advocated a regional peace process based on the Camp David Accords. Muscat was very active in its efforts to convince the Arab states to restore diplomatic relations with Cairo. Furthermore, following the Arab League's decision to renew diplomatic ties with Egypt at the 1987 Amman Summit, Oman pressed the Arab states to reinstate Egypt's membership into the League.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to interpret Oman's support for the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in the context of Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al's policy of balancing foreign relations, allowing him to gain as many allies as possible.<sup>7</sup> That Oman not only maintains relations with Israel and the United States but also with Iran corroborates this argument. Much like Israel, the Shah of Iran provided military assistance to Muscat against the Dhofar rebels. Almost forty years later, and in sharp contrast to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Muscat has maintained cordial relations with Iran, enabling it to facilitate talks between the United States and Iran on the

Iranian nuclear programme.<sup>8</sup> In 1980, Sultan Qaboos established a channel of communication with the Mossad and met regularly with a Mossad operative. The talks focused on Soviet influence in the Middle East and the Iranian revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Although security was the main driver behind Muscat's decision to covertly engage with Israel, this cooperation was not restricted to the realm of security. While no formal ties existed between Israel and Oman until the early 1990s, Muscat was interested in Israel's agricultural know-how. Both countries cooperated in the field of agriculture, such as the use of drip irrigation technology.<sup>10</sup> The policy undertaken by Sultan Qaboos *vis-à-vis* Israel and the peace process has been recognized as revolutionary and the antithesis of other Arab states' dogmatic positions regarding diplomatic engagement with the Jewish state. Oman's position in the region is unique as the Sultanate has relations with all the parties in the Middle East and is maintaining a neutral and independent foreign policy, often differing from the other Gulf countries' policies.

### **Oman: The Regional Facilitator, 1991-2018**

Despite these clandestine ties, Oman and Israel did not hold direct talks until the 1991 Madrid multilateral forums, where they discussed the issue of water desalination in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> As the United States wrapped up the Madrid peace conference, Muscat was eager to further its engagement in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Much like in the aftermath of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, Muscat's policy acutely differed from the other Arab states, which had a near consensus of not establishing relations with Israel until a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace had been achieved.

Indeed, not only did Oman disregard the Arab policy of non-engagement, it accelerated the process of establishing ties with Israel. Muscat rebuffed criticism by the Arab states, justifying its choice to establish low level ties with Israel as a sovereign decision.<sup>12</sup> Oman's rapprochement with Israel was underscored by Muscat's proposal for a regional desalination

project during a water group working session that took place in Geneva in April 1993, months before the signing of the Oslo Accords.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, several meetings took place between Omani and Israeli officials at the UN Headquarters in New York. After the Gulf War, the Gulf states became predominantly concerned with their security. As the peace process gained momentum with Madrid and Oslo, the GCC states started to regard Israel as a potential ally and considered establishing economic and security ties with it.<sup>14</sup> The GCC states took advantage of the Madrid multilateral forums and used it as a cover to establish relations with Israel.<sup>15</sup> In April 1994, Oman hosted the multilateral group on water and for the first time invited the Israeli delegation headed by then Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin.<sup>16</sup>

Oman was interested in gaining access to Israel's technical know-how on water desalination and this therefore gave Muscat an incentive to establish formal relations with the state. As a result, Oman was the first Arab country to support a regional desalination centre led by Israel.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, Israel announced that it would participate financially in the Middle East Centre for Water Desalination Research (MEDRC) dedicated to combating water insecurity in the region.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Muscat's decision to break diplomatic relations with Israel in 2000, Israeli scientists continue to participate in the MEDRC, and the site serves as a venue for covert meetings between Israeli and Omani officials.<sup>19</sup> The post-Gulf War era bears many similarities to the post-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) geopolitical context. After the signing of the JCPOA – or Iran nuclear deal, as it is otherwise known – many Arab countries no longer saw Israel as an enemy but rather as an indispensable ally against Iran. This strategic shift enabled the normalization of ties between Israel and four Arab states.

The signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 and the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in October 1994 bolstered efforts to establish diplomatic ties. This rapprochement was highlighted by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's first official visit to Muscat in December 1994. Similar to in 1979, when Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty, Oman was supportive of the

Israel-Jordan peace treaty signed a few months prior to Rabin's visit to Muscat.<sup>20</sup> After this historic visit, talks intensified between the two sides and focused on the establishment of formal diplomatic ties. However, Oman was reluctant to open liaison offices as it wanted Israel to make progress in the peace process with the Palestinians before establishing partial relations with the Jewish state.<sup>21</sup>

Despite Muscat's reluctance to establish formal liaison offices with Israel, respective trade missions were established in Tel Aviv and Muscat in September 1995, and a month later, Oman and Israel reached an agreement on the establishment of reciprocal trade missions between these two cities.<sup>22</sup> This rapprochement between the two countries raised expectations that they would soon fully normalize relations. After Prime Minister Rabin was murdered by a Jewish extremist on November 4, 1995, Oman sent a delegation headed by Foreign Minister Yusuf Ibn Alawi to attend Rabin's funeral.<sup>23</sup> The following year, Oman accelerated the process of normalization with Israel, and the new prime minister, Shimon Peres, was invited to Oman for an official visit. Peres only met with low-ranking officials and the meeting took place in Salalah in lieu of Muscat. Nevertheless, shortly afterwards, Israel opened its trade office in the Omani capital.<sup>24</sup> While the direct boycott of Israel remained in place, the tertiary and secondary ones were repealed by the GCC states.<sup>25</sup>

The nascent Omani-Israeli relations changed however with the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister in 1996.<sup>26</sup> This was largely in part due to the decision by the Netanyahu government to open the northern exit of the Western Wall tunnel, resulting in condemnation by the Arab states - including Oman. In response, Oman opted to postpone the inauguration of its trade office in Tel Aviv, while maintaining relations with Israel.<sup>27</sup>

As Oman had by this point developed extensive ties with the Jewish state, it came under significant pressure from other Arab countries to sever its relations with Israel. At this point in time, Oman and Israel were actually finalizing negotiations concerning a trade and customs agreement and thereby making progress towards normalization of relations.<sup>28</sup> In order to

appease its Arab neighbors, Muscat decided to break all diplomatic ties with Israel in December 1996.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, in spite of its openness towards Israel and its support for Arab-Israeli peace, Oman had to take into consideration the opinion of Arab states, prompting it to balance its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by demonstrating its support for the Palestinian cause.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Oman initiated a rapprochement with the PA and pledged to provide Ramallah with \$7 million. In May 1998, Oman elevated the PA's diplomatic representation to embassy level and Sultan Qaboos welcomed the first Palestinian ambassador to Muscat.<sup>31</sup> Throughout Netanyahu's tenure, Oman became more critical of Israel's policies and questioned the Israeli prime minister's commitment to the peace process in spite of Netanyahu's repeated reiterations of it.<sup>32, 33</sup>

While relations between the two countries became frosty during Netanyahu's time as prime minister, ties began to thaw with Ehud Barak's election in 1999. Oman welcomed Barak and expressed its desire for restoring relations with Israel.<sup>34</sup> However it maintained that any steps towards improved relations was contingent upon progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Sultanate thus became more proactive in his support for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, and Oman's stance on the Israel-Palestinian issue became more aligned with other Arab states. In this regard, Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah met with his Israeli counterpart David Levy in September 1999, at the UN Headquarters in New York. The talks focused on the Arab-Israeli peace process. Alawi expressed his support for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement, which would not only cover the Palestinians but also Syria and Lebanon.<sup>35</sup> While there was hope for progress, Oman, Tunisia, Morocco and Qatar all severed diplomatic relations with Israel in accordance with the Arab League's decision after the failure of the Camp David summit (July 2000) and the outbreak of the second *intifada*.<sup>36</sup>

Although Israel and Oman lacked formal ties, former Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Mossad Director Yossi Cohen met with Sultan Qaboos in Muscat in October 2018.<sup>37</sup> It

was the first official visit by an Israel prime minister to an Arab state – except for Egypt and Jordan – since the collapse of the Oslo process in October 2000.<sup>38</sup> Omani foreign policy remained neutral, contrasting significantly from that of the other Gulf states such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>39</sup>

Another way Oman differed was it maintained good relations with Iran. In 2013, it even acted as a facilitator between the United States and Iran over the latter's nuclear program.<sup>40</sup> This was not the only area in which Sultan Qaboos was at odds with Saudi Arabia however, as highlighted by Muscat's opposition to the war in Yemen which provoked Qaboos to threaten to pull Oman out of the GCC.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Netanyahu and Cohen's visit would not have been possible without Saudi Arabia's tacit approval, as evidenced by it allowing Israel to fly over its airspace on its way to Oman.<sup>42</sup>

A further important point concerned the official Palestinian stance towards Netanyahu's trip. Ramallah did not condemn this visit, even though it went to great lengths to denounce the Abraham Accords. The Palestinians' lack of response could be attributed to the fact that Oman reiterated its commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative (API) and stated that it would refrain from normalizing relations with Israel at this stage.<sup>43</sup> The fact that PA President Mahmoud Abbas met with Sultan Qaboos in Muscat shortly before Netanyahu's visit, however, suggests that Oman intended to facilitate talks between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>44</sup> While the meeting with Netanyahu did not lead to the establishment of formal ties between Oman and Israel, it underscored Muscat's unique position in the Middle East as a facilitator with all the parties. As a result, the Sultanate could in principle facilitate talks between Israel and the PA in the context of a regional peace process. Oman's active participation in the Madrid multilateral forums during the 1990s is further evidence that Muscat could potentially play a central role in future peace negotiations between Arabs and Israelis.

## **The Abraham Accords: A New Regional Landscape?**

Two years after Netanyahu's historic visit to Oman, Israel normalized relations with four Arab countries, namely the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Two months prior to the announcement of the Abraham Accords, UAE's ambassador to the United States, Youssef Al Otaiba, wrote an op-ed in the popular Israeli newspaper *Ynet*, where he acknowledged and praised the blossoming ties with Israel.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, he warned that Israel would have to make a choice: it could either scrap annexation of part of the West Bank and embrace a normalization of relations with the UAE, or, it could move ahead with its annexation plan and irreversibly damage its ties with the UAE.<sup>46</sup> In response, Israel decided to postpone its plan for partial annexation of the West Bank, which eventually paved the way for the official announcement of the normalization of ties between Israel and the UAE on August 13, 2020.

On September 15, 2020, Israel, Bahrain and the UAE made history by signing the Abraham Accords, normalizing relations between these two Arab countries and the Jewish state. There was much hope in this agreement for making inroads in resolving Arab-Israeli tensions and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was all the more so as there was a good chance that other Arab states would follow their actions, evidenced by the attendance of the Sudanese and Omani ambassadors at the signing ceremony in Washington.

Although not the only main focus, the Iranian threat played a major role in this normalization of ties between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel. Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem are in agreement on their perceptions of Iran's belligerence in the region – whether in Yemen, Lebanon or Syria.<sup>47</sup> This accord enabled the creation of a formal alliance between Israel and the moderate Arab countries to counter Iran's nefarious involvement in the region. Sudan and Morocco would join the circle of peace, partially normalizing their relations with Israel.

Not all the Arab states shared this opinion, however. Saudi Arabia declared it would not follow the UAE and Bahrain and establish formal relations with Israel unless a Palestinian state

based on the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital was established. Still, given that there are common interests, mainly related to the Iranian threat and the 'Arab Spring', Israel's image in the Arab world is changing in a positive direction. This sentiment is reinforced by articles published in the Saudi and other GCC states' press, declaring that Israel is not the enemy and criticizing the Palestinians for having rejected peace proposals put forward by previous Israeli prime ministers.<sup>48</sup>

While these are meaningful and hopeful changes in the Arab outlook to Israel, the prospect of a major shift in Saudi Arabia's relations with Israel is slim. What is the incentive for Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel if it has already received what it wants in terms of intelligence cooperation? Moreover, although Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman (MBS) seems keen on cooperating with Israel, it is doubtful that the Saudis would normalize ties with Israel considering the volatile situation in the Middle East, further complicated by internal divisions on this issue.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud told senior White House adviser Jared Kushner that normalization with Israel would only take place after Israel accepted the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital.<sup>50</sup> He remains committed to the Arab consensus set out in the API.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to his father, Crown Prince MBS is not politically attached to the Palestinian issue and is eager to follow the UAE and Bahrain in normalizing ties with Israel. He aims to create a broad anti-Iranian coalition that would include Israel and most of the GCC states.<sup>52</sup> Corroborating MBS' views regarding Israel, former Saudi ambassador to the US Bandar Bin Sultan, stated that the Palestinians over the years have historically missed many opportunities to establish an independent state of their own.<sup>53</sup>

In keeping with its support for earlier Arab-Israeli peace agreements, Oman publicly praised the Abraham Accords.<sup>54</sup> This support was highlighted by the attendance of the Omani ambassador to the United States at the signing ceremony at the White House. It nonetheless reinforced it would not join the Abraham Accords, emphasizing that it would only normalize

relations with Israel if it accepted the API and acquiesced to the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital.<sup>55</sup> Although less dogmatic than Saudi Arabia on the issue of normalization – as proven by Muscat's strong support for the Abraham Accords – Sultan Qaboos (and his successor) remained committed to this 'old' Arab position. Oman also differed from Saudi Arabia in that it maintains cordial relations with Iran and remains a neutral actor in the region. The country is careful to balance its ties with all actors in the region. As a result, Oman's position in the Middle East is unique and bears much potential for fostering meaningful change in the region; ultimately addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has evaded so many.

## **Conclusion**

The establishment of covert ties between Israel and the Sultanate of Oman in the mid-1970s was historically significant, given that most Arab states shunned Israel at this time. Both countries faced common threats and challenges in the form of pro-Soviet Marxist groups and the rise of Soviet influence in the region. As such, Oman and Israel secretly cooperated on issues pertaining to security and later, agriculture and trade. When Oman was facing insurrection from the Dhofar Marxist group, Israel provided military assistance to the Sultanate in the form of intelligence sharing, and allegedly arms sale.

On the diplomatic level, Oman was one of the first Arab countries committed to supporting peace between Israel and the Arab states. This was demonstrated by Oman's support for the 1978 Camp David Accords and the Israel-Egypt peace treaty. The current geopolitical context bears many similarities to the circumstances in the 1970s which enabled clandestine ties between Oman and Israel to develop. Both Israel and the GCC states are facing Iranian intervention in the region and Iran's effort to obtain nuclear weapons is regarded by Israel and the GCC states as a threat. Following the signing of the JCPOA agreement

between Iran and the P5+1, Israel's covert cooperation with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain grew tenfold. This cooperation culminated in the Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab countries.

With regards to the issue of Middle East peace, Oman – along with other Arab countries such as Egypt, the UAE, Jordan, Morocco and Saudi Arabia – has much potential as a peace broker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Oman's support for the Camp David Accords, its active involvement in the multilateral negotiations between Israel and the Arab states on the Middle East water desalination project, and the fact that it enabled discussions between the United States and Iran on the latter's nuclear programme, offers further evidence of Muscat's ability to facilitate talks between divergent parties. In that regard, there is much potential for meaningful advances and coexistence in regards to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, led by Oman along with other Gulf countries.

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