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Oman and US Relations

Alunood Ali Mohammed Alfarsi

International Relation and Security Studies Program

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**Introduction**

Since the first time an American ship visited an Omani port in 1790, and although thousands of miles separate the two countries, it's amazing how the relationships between Oman and the United States have grown from being exclusively commercial at the beginning to end up as we see it today in all different aspects, either between the states governments or there people. In this paper we will be discussing some of the most important of these aspects and concentrating on the diplomatic, political, economic and social-cultural relations tying the two nations since the beginning and up to date.

**I. Historical Diplomatic Background**

**A. The First Connection Between Oman and the US**

When the U.S first declared it's independency in 1778, American vessels started roaming the far-east seas looking for new markets and trade. The first commercial vessel to reach Muscat port was the Boston Rambler in September 1790 led by Captain Robert Folger. Since then American ships came to Muscat every now and then carrying sugar, tea, spices and other Indian merchandise to start the first ties of non-official commercial relations between the two countries.

By the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century many political changes affected the trade in the east Indian Ocean ports, such as the Napoleon war 1793-1814 and the English war 1812-1814 in Europe, The Qawasim raids in the Arabian peninsula, and US president Thomas Jefferson banning the trade with the region between 1807-1809. All this instability caused trade recession for Muscat port and huge losses to the Omani trade.

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1Herman Frederick Eilts, *A Friendship Two Centuries Old, The United States and the Sultanate of Oman* (Washington, 1990), P. 3
In 1820 American vessels started returning to the Indian Ocean and especially to the African ports of Madagascar and Zanzibar\(^2\). By that time the Omani empire grow wider and Oman controlled most of the important ports in east Africa and west India\(^3\). It was then that American merchants found themselves in competition with the great Omani navy vessels of Sayeed Said bin Sultan (1804-1856), whereas a fleet was in charge of transferring goods between east Africa and India, and another fleet was in charge of securing the ocean and protecting the ships.

One of those merchants was Edmund Roberts who sailed to Zanzibar in 1827 hoping to find a fortune\(^4\), but instead got into competition with the Omani merchants and navy which led him to write a letter addressing Sayeed Said bin Sultan expressing the difficulties he was facing, and the reply came fast from Sayeed Said bin Sultan that "Any challenges and difficulties can be defeated if Oman and the United States signed a treaty"\(^5\)

**B. The First Diplomatic Relations**

With all the pressure the American merchants put on their government to cooperate and coordinate with the Omani government over the trade in the Indian ocean, the chance came to Edmund Roberts when the American president Andrew Jackson appointed him as a special envoy if the unites states government to China and Siam and the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman (Oman's name at that time) making him the first American diplomat sent to Oman. On the 18\(^{th}\) of September 1833 Mr. Roberts reached Muscat\(^6\) and started negotiating with Sayeed Said bin Sultan on the terms of the treaty and ended up signing the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" on the 21\(^{st}\) of September 1833\(^7\), the first bilateral treaty between the US and an Arab Gulf country and the first diplomatic act of engagement and recognition.

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\(^4\) Herman, p 12  
\(^6\) Bennet Norman, p 31.  
\(^7\) Treaty of Amity and Commerce, p. 458. U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875
between the two states. In my opinion this treaty was important to Oman not just in terms of economic growth, but a proof of its independence and recognition of the state sovereignty away from the colonist countries that where dominating the area at that time either British, Portuguese or the Persians. The American government welcomed the treaty by signing and ratifying it by the president and the congress specially after reading the official letter sent by Sayeed Said bin Sultan with Mr. Roberts expressing the importance of the friendship between there states and his sincere desire to abide by the treaty himself and the generations to come, and reassuring them that the American ships will be well treated at Omani ports as the Omani's will at the American\textsuperscript{8}.

The treaty stated that American merchants have economic and judicial privileges across all the Omani empire such as:

- American merchants only paid 5\% toll for goods they brought to Omani ports
- American merchants paid no toll for all there imports and exports at Omani ports
- Navigation guidance was free of charged for the American merchants in Omani ports.
- The American consul had the jurisdiction over any conflict concerning an American citizen in the Omani empire, as well as the Omani consul had the same jurisdiction over any conflict concerning an Omani citizen in the US\textsuperscript{9}.

This treaty deepened the commercial relations between Oman and the US as American merchants became more familiar with the Omani empire ports on the east and west of the Indian Ocean and they brought along different types of goods such as bringing a type of cotton cloth that became popular in Africa, along with rifles, gunpowder, watches and shoes.

On the other hand there ships left the ports with clove, ivory, coconut and spices.

C. Opening a US Consulate in Oman

This treaty deepened the commercial relations between Oman and the US as American merchants became more familiar with the Omani empire ports on the east and west of the Indian ocean, and they brought along different types of goods such as bringing a type of cotton cloth that became popular in Africa, along with rifles, gunpowder, watches and shoes. On the other hand there ships left the ports with clove, ivory, coconut and spices.

With the large number of Americans coming to Oman and residing in it, the US government took the next step in developing its diplomatic relations with Oman and opened an American consulate in Zanzibar in 1836 with Richard Palmer Waters as the first American consul in Oman, followed by opening another consul in Muscat in 1838 and choosing Henry B. Marshal to be the consul.

In return Sayeed Said bin Sultan sent his first diplomat Ahmed bin Alnu'man Al-kaabi for an official visit aboard the "Sultana" to New York in 1840, and sent with him two Arabian horses, jewels, perfumes and a golden ward. The Omani envoy was honored and well greeted and returned with promises of friendship and amity between the two states, and with that being the first Arabic diplomat to be accredited to the US.

II. Political Relations

A. The Nineteenth Century and Until 1938

Since the nineteenth century and up until the beginning of WWII The political relationship between Oman and the US have always been affected by the British influence in the Gulf Area. No one can deny the British role in the Arabian Gulf at that time, as it was controlling

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10 Norman R. Bennet, A History of the Arab State of Zanzibar, (Great Britain, 1978), P. 31
the area and the foreign policies of the Gulf States and Imarat, and it handled the gulf communications with the rest of the world, as well as providing British advisers to most rulers of the region.

The irony is that Omani rulers at that time where struggling to get rid of the British control and saw the US as the solution, but on the other hand the US didn't want to act as a rival to Briton in the region and always recognized its authorities.

The Omani policy was to strengthen its relations with the US to lessen the British influence, going by the principle of having a new strong friend to get rid of the old one. Sultan Said bin Taimoor approach was to establish good relations with the US, being it's ally and benefiting from its situation in the international arena on the international level, and benefiting from its expertise and help on the domestic level. The most important for the Sultan was to control the limits of the American intervention in his country's policy and sovereignty and never allow the US to get too close or give it any authority over his country to avoid what happened with Briton from happening again.

The American Policy on the other hand was to have an ally in the gulf region which was exclusively under the British control, without jeopardizing its British relations. Therefore US president Franklin Roosevelt approached Sultan Said bin Taimoor in the 18th of March 1934 by sending a diplomatic mission headed by Paul Knabenshue in the 100 years anniversary of signing the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" and confirming the friendship between the two countries.

That was followed by an official visit that was of major importance to Oman on the political level where Sultan Said bin Taimoor visited Washington in 1938. On one side the communications to arrange this visit where made directly between the Omani and American side without involving the British side although it was part of the Sultans trip to India, Japan and the US that was arranged by the British. Sultan Said discussed many issues with President Roosevelt including the possibility of granting American oil companies permeation to work in Oman oil fields regardless the fact that the only companies working
in the area where British. This was a clear challenge to the British presence and control over Oman and a clear message that Oman will handle its own matters from now on without getting back to the British as it is an independent state with sovereignty that will not allow another to interfere with its actions and business any more. On the other side the US did not want to get into a confrontation with Briton over Oman, so it informed the British ambassador in Washington of the communications with the Sultan and the possible visit and informed it that the purpose of the visit is just of courtesy away from any political purposes.

B. During WW II

When the was first started in Europe 1939 the US didn't get involved in the field fights and settle to providing financial aid and military services the Briton. But after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 it interred the war with the allies. It was then that the US needed air facilities in the gulf and the best choice was Oman given its location in the Middle East and being the closest to Soviet Union.

At that time the US policy concentrated on getting access to military bases in Oman and special the bases of Salah in the far south of the Arabian Peninsula and facing the Indian Ocean to transfer equipment and men, and the base of Ras Ilhad at the far east and closest to the Soviet Union.

The Omani policy on the other hand was to assist the US as much as possible to strengthen the ties between the two states, but without getting involved directly in the war or enduring any loses, and proving the importance of Oman on the international level and the geopolitical power of the location that got some saying it's (the Arabian gulf bottle stopper12).

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C. After WW II

After 1945 and till today the US successfully became the greatest power in the international arena and earned this position after winning WW II with the allies and ending the cold war by the division of the Soviet Union, leaving the rest of the developed world healing its wounds and suffering under the debts caused by the long years of war.

Oman on the other hand started a new era under the reign of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said and with his wise vision Oman gained international respect and weight in the international arena. Always neutral facing conflicts of others and respecting other states sovereignty, solving its conflicts with others wisely and peacefully witch gave Oman a high prestige among other countries and helped it become a mediator in several international conflicts and crises.

This position of Oman made it more important to the US as an ally in the middle east and made it lead a more broad policy towards Oman is it started new relations in various aspects. Therefore instead of the old policy concentrating on commercial and military aspects only, the US started interacting not just with the Omani government, but with the Omani people as well in new public diplomacy aiming to share the American ideology and culture to win the hearts and support of the people as well as the government.

All the efforts paid off as Oman stood beside the US and helped it using its influence and diplomatic relations such as mediating to free American hostages in Iran in 2011, and again in Yemen, and finally mediating to end the conflict between the US and Iran over Iran's nuclear program.
III. Economic Relations

As we said that the Oman-US economic relations go back to the eighteenth century and they kept on growing until the US became the third most trade partner to Oman, after the UAE and Japan\textsuperscript{13} with a trade estimated for about $1 billion in 2005 divided as following\textsuperscript{14}:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oman exports to the US</th>
<th>Oman imports to the US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exports</strong></td>
<td><strong>Imports</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petroleum</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparel</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Gas</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc. Manufacturing</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron and Steel</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>534$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>555$</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A free trade agreement (FTA) was concluded between Oman and the US after seven months of negotiation on the 13\textsuperscript{th} of October 2005, and was signed by US Trade Representative Mr. Bob Portman and the Omani Minister of Commerce and Industry Mr. Maqbool bin Ali Sultan on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of January 2006, and finally been in force since 2009.

In 2014 Oman's exports to the US almost doubled then in 2005 and totaled $975 million while its imports from the US accounted for more than $2 billion recording a 28.2% increase from 2013.

\textsuperscript{14} Mary Jane, p5.
IV. Social-Cultural Relations

As we discussed that after WW II and the cold war the US started a new public diplomacy retching to the Omani people and exchanging cultures and promoting mutual respect between the two nations through different means like scholarships, cultural partnerships, outreach programs, educational resources, lectures… etc.

One of the most impressive gestures was establishing The Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center in 2005\textsuperscript{15} under a joint administration, a dedicated center to educate the Omani and American people of the breadth and richness of the two cultures, history, and heritage. The center offers a variety of Oman oriented programs in the form of workshops, craft demonstrations, music and dance performances, lectures and panel discussions as well as sending American students, scholars, academics, and former government officials to Oman to reach out the audience every year. Along with hosts orientation preparation sessions for students who will be traveling to Oman and the public who would like to learn about Oman, Arabic language, and the history of the Indian Ocean region.\textsuperscript{16}

Conclusion

The contact between US merchants on their trips to Africa and India and the Omani navy in the eighteenth century was the start of almost two centuries of relations between the two nations, starting from the Omani navy helping American merchants in the Indian Ocean region up to signing the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" in 1833, starting diplomatic relations to insure Americans interests along the Omani empire and exchanging official

visits. The British influence in the Gulf Region affected these relations and slowed them down but the two states insisted on strengthening the ties between them, and WW II was the perfect chance, as Omani had the benefit of being geographically close to the battle fields and helped the US military by granting it facilities and access to its bases, the thing that helped the US win the war. The US didn't forget its ally in the gulf and worked to establish more relations not just with the Omani government but with the Omani people as well as a part of its new public diplomacy. No one can forget the economic start of the relations, therefore both states worked towards increasing the economic trade between them and signed a free trade agreement. On the Social-cultural side both states started approaching the people of the other state to introduce its culture and looking to a society where both people can contact and interact together beyond the differences between them.

Omani rulers starting from Sayeed Said bin Sultan anticipated that the US will become a significant power in the international arena, therefore they always had good relations with it and looked after its interests, starting from helping American nationals and looking after them, to developing diplomatic relations with it.

The reason Sultan Said was eager to sign the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" is that conducting such behavior proves the independency of Oman recognition of the state sovereignty, and waves the foreign influence of colonists that where dominating the area at that time either the British, Portuguese or the Persians, and it was a clear message to the European countries that Oman is dancing with the giants now. Aside from the political importance of the treaty, it did well to Omani economy as it provided Americans with commercial facilities that helped widen the range of goods imported by the Americans as they no longer feared of high taxes, and the economic growth helped the development of Oman.

The British influence was so strong to the point of controlling Oman's foreign policy and handling all its communications with other countries in the world, and looking from a colonist eyes Briton did not want Oman interacting with other states because by doing so Briton will lose its importance to Oman.
Following the events that happened we can see the relations between the two states growing in times of need for the other state, but always keeping them at the minimum level of corporation and coordination required to keep an ally at all times.
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