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Pakistan's Relations with Oman: An Important Gateway to the Gulf

From 11-14 January 2017, Oman's Chairman of the Council of State (Upper House), Dr. Yahya bin Mahfoodh Salim Al-Manthri led an eight member parliamentary delegation to Pakistan. Among other initiatives discussed, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Dr Yahya agreed to start a ferry service shuttling between Karachi, Gawadar and Muscat (Oman). Pakistan and Oman share a very close bilateral relationship linked through historical ties, ethnicity, culture and commonalities in foreign policy. This paper is an analysis of the implications of Dr Yahya's visit and provides an overview of Pakistan-Oman relations as well its benefits to the entire Gulf region.

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The Sultanate of Oman is Pakistan's closest Arab neighbour. It has a population of 4.4 million, smaller than Singapore.² 75 percent of Omani citizens belong to a branch of Islam known as the Ibadiyaa, thus making Oman the world's only Ibadiyaa-Muslim majority state.³ This sect

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² The World Factbook: OMAN." Central Intelligence Agency, USA
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mu.html>

³ Ibid

has its origins predating the mainstream Shia and Sunni Islam, it has a reputation for being orthodox while it places heavy emphasis on the values of tolerance, peace and co-existence with other faiths .As such non-Muslim migrants have been permitted to construct Hindu temples and churches to cater to their religious practices. Oman borders the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia & Yemen. Both Oman and Pakistan share very deep rooted relations with UAE and Saudi Arabia. Oman is a member state of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) alongside UAE and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan and Oman hold similar positions in their foreign policy framework. This can be inferred from the ability of both countries to tackle the challenges of sustaining cordial relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In the 2015 Yemen Civil war, a battle between the legitimate government forces of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and Shia Houthi rebels allegedly back by Iran; Saudi Arabia with the support of the United States led a multinational coalition to fight on the side of President Hadi. Saudi King Salman called for Pakistan's military support in the provision of warships, aircraft and ground troops.⁴ This request was struck down by the Pakistani Parliament, passing a resolution declaring that "Pakistan should maintain neutrality in the Yemen conflict."⁵ It was feared by Pakistani lawmakers that as this was a Sunni led coalition versus Shia outfits; Pakistan's involvement could spill over into the country and worsen its own domestic sectarian extremism.⁶ They also argued that "the country was already busy with major operations against its own Islamist rebels, including the Pakistani Taliban, and could not afford to get ensnared in Yemen."⁷ The risk of upsetting bilateral relations with Iran was also a factor that Pakistan had to take into consideration in its decision of rejecting King Salman.⁸

Oman was the only GCC country that chose to remain neutral in the Yemen conflict.⁹ It offered instead to play the role of a regional mediator, taking advantage of the relations it had with Saudi Arabia and Iran. This shows the convergence of Pakistan and Oman on its Middle East policy, thus identifying common ground between the two countries.

Oman also shares common historical linkages with Pakistan's province of Balochistan. In 1784, the overthrown Omani ruler Sultan bin Ahmed al Busaidi sailed to Balochistan to seek

⁴ "Pakistan's parliament votes against entering Yemen conflict."The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/10/pakistans-parliament-votes-against-entering-yemen-conflict>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ "Yemen's war wounded find comfort in 'brotherly' Oman." Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/yemen-war-wounded-find-comfort-brotherly-oman-161120065419274.html>

assistance from the Khan of Kalat, Nasir Khan I to conquer his lost kingdom.¹⁰ This request was turned down however, the Sultan and his family was granted asylum and was made the *jagirdar* (Custodian) of Gawadar then an insignificant fishing village¹¹. Later when he had reestablished himself on the throne in Muscat, Gawadar was annexed as part of the sultanate of Oman until it was purchased by Pakistan in 1958 and was declared a separate district of Balochistan in 1977.¹² This facilitated free movement of the Baloch people into Oman. Today they comprise of 20 percent of Oman's settled population.¹³ Even the Oman royal family has traces of Baloch ancestry due to intermarriages. The first modern army unit formed in Oman was entirely Baloch and in the present day Oman army 40 percent of its forces are of Baloch origin.¹⁴ Therefore they form a larger portion of the army in Oman than in Pakistan. Oman frequently conducts official recruitment drives for its army in Balochistan's districts of Gawadar, Kech and Panjgur.¹⁵

Oman is also host to a 250,000 strong community of the Pakistani Diaspora.¹⁶ In order to meet their educational needs, seven schools have been set up in Oman under the Pakistan School System¹⁷. These schools admit not only Pakistanis but also students of other nationalities.¹⁸ Therefore, this is a contribution of Pakistan to the vibrant migrant society flourishing in Oman. Given its status as a wealthy Gulf state Oman provides higher wage employment for Pakistanis, both in the field of unskilled labour and professional services. In the fiscal year ending July 2016 Pakistanis working in Oman remitted US\$819 million back home.¹⁹ This makes Oman a lucrative source of remittance crucial to the uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the growing middle class in Pakistan.

From 11th -14th January 2017, Oman's Chairman of the Majlis al-Dawla (Council of State/Upper house) Dr. Yahya bin Mahfoodh Salim Al-Manthri led an 8 member parliamentary

¹⁰ Nicolini, Beatrice, and Penelope-Jane Watson. Makran, Oman, and Zanzibar: three-terminal cultural corridor in the western Indian Ocean, 1799-1856. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp 32-33

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Long, Roger D., Yunas Samad, Ian Talbot, and Gurharpal Singh. State and Nation-Building in Pakistan: Beyond Islam and Security. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, pp 129

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ "Oman army to recruit 350 Baloch youths." DAWN, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1146956>

¹⁶ "Visit to Oman - Adviser on Foreign Affairs meets Pakistani Community." Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Islamabad, Pakistan, <http://mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDIzNQ%2C%2C>.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

delegation to Pakistan.²⁰ Before flying off, the delegation met with Pakistan's Ambassador to Oman Mr Ali Javed at the Royal Lounge of Muscat Airport, "they exchanged views on the visit as well as matters of mutual interest including inter-parliamentary and political cooperation."²¹ This comes just 4 months after Pakistan's de facto Foreign Minister Mr Sartaj Aziz's visit to Oman.²²

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated that "Pakistan and Oman are natural allies due to geographical proximity and the leadership, Government and the people of Pakistan hold His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said and the brotherly people of Oman in high esteem"²³

Pakistan shares a maritime boundary with Oman. Based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) coastal countries are allowed economic control of the waters and seabed up to 200 nautical miles from their shores.²⁴ In March 2015 Pakistan became the first country in the North Indian Ocean region to be granted an extension by 350 nautical miles of Continental shelf by the United Nations.²⁵ This added 50,000 Sq Km of seabed territory to the already existing 240,000 sq Km of Pakistan's exclusive economic zone²⁶. Hence, this brought Pakistan physically closer to Oman. The extension received by Pakistan would have not been possible without bilateral understanding with Oman as a portion of that territory overlapped with the Omani claim.²⁷ During Sultan Qaboos visit to Pakistan in April 2001, there had been an agreement on this with the then Chief Executive of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf.²⁸ Hence, leading up to the Muscat Agreement on the Delimitation of the Maritime Boundary between Oman and Pakistan signed two months later.²⁹

In a meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Dr Yahya proposed to start a ferry service between Karachi, Gawadar and Muscat.³⁰ This idea was welcomed by the Prime Minister. He

²⁰ "Chairman Majlis Daula (Upper House) Leaves for Pakistan." Embassy of Pakistan, Muscat, Oman <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/oman/pr-details.php?prID=4661>

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ "PM for increasing exchange of expertise between Oman and Pakistan." Prime Minister's Office, Pakistan http://pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=1647

²⁴ "Pakistan seabed territory grows by 50,000 square kilometres." DAWN, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1170986>

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Mahmood, Tehmina, and Nausheen Wasi. "Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Quarterly Survey: April-June 2001." *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2001, pp. 1-11. www.jstor.org/stable/41393997.

²⁹ "Muscat Agreement on the Delimitation of the Maritime Boundary between the Sultanate of Oman and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan,." United Nations, <http://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/OMN-PAK2000MB.PDF>.

³⁰ Same as in source 23

articulated that “this initiative will start a new chapter of friendship between both countries and the service will provide an affordable alternative source of movement for a large number of people who move on these routes on regular basis.”³¹

Once implemented this development would have great geostrategic potential. It would link not only Oman but the entire Gulf region to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). If the ferry service were to include vehicular carriage, it would be possible to drive from Karachi to Dubai via Muscat. This could boost the tourism sector of both Pakistan and the Middle East. Trucks from Oman could be loaded with goods and transported using the ferry service to Pakistan from where it could be linked to CPEC. It would also enhance the unique position of Pakistan in the vicinity. In effect this will deepen Pakistan’s foreign relations with Oman. As such this ferry service should be taken on a serious note as it could prove to be a major game changer bridging Pakistan and Oman.

Pakistan is already well connected to Oman by Air, “the Pakistan International Airlines, Shaheen Air and Air Blue operate 26 flights per week between Muscat and Pakistan.”³² This facilitates business travelers plying across Pakistan and Oman.

Pakistan is currently in a process of negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) with the GCC. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that “Pakistan is grateful to Oman for its support in connection with Pakistan-GCC FTA.”³³ He also proclaimed that “Pakistan would welcome our Omani brothers to invest in Pakistan, particularly in energy related projects, infrastructure development and consumer based industry.”³⁴ Besides Pakistan, the GCC is also negotiating FTAs with China as well as many other countries. On 1 September 2013, Singapore became the first non-Middle Eastern country to have an operating FTA with the GCC.³⁵ This was followed only by the GCC FTA with the European Free Trade Association (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) which came into force on 1 July 2014.³⁶

On 13 January 2016, Dr Yahya’s delegation met with Mr Sartaj Aziz. In welcoming the delegation he stated that “Commonalities of religion, geographical proximity and shared

³¹ Ibid

³² Same as in source 16

³³ Same as in source 23

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ "Gulf Cooperation Council – Singapore Free Trade Agreement (GSFTA)." INTERNATIONAL ENTERPRISE SINGAPORE, http://www.iesingapore.gov.sg/~media/IE%20Singapore/Files/Publications/Brochures%20Free%20Trade%20Agreements/FTAs_GCCGSFTA_FA.PDF

³⁶ “EFTA-GCC Free Trade Agreement." European Free Trade Association, <http://www.efta.int/free-trade/free-trade-agreements/gcc>.

perceptions on regional and global issues provided a strong foundation for further strengthening existing cooperation³⁷. Mr Aziz also “invited Omani businessmen to invest in Pakistan and take advantage of business friendly environment, due to improved security situation, resulting from successful counter-terrorism campaign in the country.”³⁸ In appreciation of the traditionally close and friendly relations between Pakistan and Oman, Dr Yahya “praised Pakistan's achievements in countering the threat of terrorism which has contributed to peace and stability in the region.”³⁹ He also expressed satisfaction on the strength of Pakistan-Oman bilateral relations achieved through multi sectoral cooperation. Both Mr Aziz and Dr Yahya agreed to “promote people to people contacts and enhance mutual understanding.”⁴⁰

The Omani delegation also met with Pakistan’s President Mamnoon Hussain and Senate Chairman Mian Raza Rabbani at the *Aiwan-e-Sadar* (Presidential Palace).⁴¹ In the meeting President Hussain said “Pakistan respected the active role of Oman for international and regional peace and stability, adding that both the countries had commonality of views on various regional and international issues.”⁴² This forms a strong impetus for fostering comprehensive bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and Oman in light of their mutually shared interests. The president called the large number of Pakistani serving in Omani forces a “good omen.”⁴³ He also expressed interest in exporting defense equipment to Oman, saying that “industrial and defense production of Pakistan was of highest standard.”⁴⁴ This would create new jobs for Pakistan’s manufacturing sector. It will also contribute to improving its balance of trade. During the session with Dr Yahya’s delegation, President Hussain urged Oman to play its role in convincing the other Gulf States to finalise the Pakistan-GCC FTA.

Pakistan relationship with Oman has been built on a solid foundation originating before contemporary Pakistan. An introspection of the two countries would highlight strong reasons for further bilateral cooperation in the areas of defense, trade, tourism, human resources, oil &

³⁷ “Adviser Sartaj Aziz welcomes President of State Council of Oman and his parliamentary delegation.”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan. http://mofa.gov.pk/pr-d_etails.php?mm=N_DY2OA

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ "President Mamnoon Hussain Wednesday said Pakistan greatly valued its brotherly relations with Oman." President's Office, The Islamic Republic of Pakistan, <http://202.83.164.28/ministries/pop/gop/index.php?q=aHR0cDovLzE5Mi4xNjguNzAuMTMwOjkwODAvG9wL1ByZXNzX1JlbGVhc2VfRGV0YWlsLmFzcHg%2FaWQ9NTM0>

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

gas, ports, industry, CPEC, Infrastructure and foreign policy. Oman's special spot in the Middle East in terms of its foreign policy maneuvering, ethnic composition, and proximity with Pakistan are factors that will facilitate the strengthening of relations between Pakistan and Oman. It will also provide Pakistan with a strategic partner in the Gulf.

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