Backgrounder on Oman: History

The Sultanate of Oman is located on the southeastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, bordering Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates. Due to its strategic location at the entrance of the Gulf, Oman has long benefited from trade across the Indian Ocean.

Oman adopted Islam in the 7th century and, by the 8th century, Ibadism became the dominant sect of Islam. Today, Oman is the only country in the world with a majority Ibadi population. During the early period, Oman was controlled by various foreign powers including the Qarmatians, the Iranian Buyyids, and the Seljuk Empire. The Portuguese ruled parts Oman from the early 16th century until 1650 when the native Yarubid dynasty regained control. Under the Yarubid dynasty, Oman extended its reach into East Africa, as far as Zanzibar. Plantations were developed for the cultivation of exotic African spices, such as cloves, nutmeg, ginger, peppers, cardamom, and cinnamon, which were then traded throughout Asia. Zanzibar under Oman’s rule was also a key hub of the slave trade, and it is estimated that 50,000 slaves passed annually through Zanzibar’s slave markets. By the early 19th Century, Oman was the most powerful state in Arabia.

A turning point for the Oman Sultanate came in 1856, when Sultan Sa’id bin Sultan Al-Busaid died, leaving his two sons fighting over his succession. The British government mediated their dispute by dividing Oman into two territories for the brothers—Zanzibar as one territory, and Muscat and Oman as the other. Zanzibar remained a territory of Oman until 1964.

During the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries, the sultan of Oman faced internal discontent from the Ibadis who wanted to be ruled by their religious leader, the Imam of Oman, rather than the sultan. This conflict was resolved by the Treaty of Seeb in 1920, which granted the Imam autonomous rule in the interior, while recognizing the sovereignty of the sultan elsewhere. However, following the discovery of oil in the interior in 1954, the Sultan attempted to extend his control into the interior and the conflict was reignited. The Sultan terminated the Treaty of Seeb and eliminated the office of the Imam and sent the Imam into exile.

In 1964, a separatist revolt broke out in the Dhofar Province. The revolt, led by the Dhofar Liberation, was supported by various communist and leftist governments. This group, which became the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf (PFLOAG—later shortened to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman) eventually transitioned to a political rather than military approach to gaining power.

In 1970, Sultan Qaboos bin Sa’id, the current ruler of Oman, assumed power in a bloodless palace coup against his father. Sultan Qaboos did away with many of the harsh restrictions of his father’s rule and launched programs to modernize education, healthcare, industry and infrastructure. Confronted with the Dhofar insurgency, he also granted amnesty to surrendered rebels and obtained military support from the UK, Iran, and Jordan to put down the rebellion. The rebels were defeated in 1975 and new civil programs put in place to secure the loyalty of the populace.

Sultan Qaboos is the latest in a line of the Al Sa’id dynasty that was founded over 250 years ago. His successful attempts to modernize and reform the sultanate of Oman have been met with praise from both inside Oman and out. The Omani government is an active participant in the Middle East peace process as well as US- and UN-sponsored anti-terrorism efforts. It maintains friendly diplo-
matic relations a variety of countries, even those with competing interests, including the UK, US, other Gulf countries, and Iran.

**Key Terms:**

- **Ibadism:** Ibadism is a sect of Islam that is not Sunni or Shia. Ibadis are the majority in Oman and Zanzibar though small communities can also be found in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Ibadis are considered conservative, yet moderate. To learn more about the Ibadis, click here
  - Compare: sects of Islam with sects of other religions
  - Discuss: religious minorities

- **Sultan:** A Sultan is the title used for a secular ruler in a Muslim land. The land ruled by a sultan is called a sultanate

- **Separatist:** Someone who advocates for a racial, ethnic, religious or other political separation from the majority group.

- **Coup d’état:** A sudden and illegal overthrow of a government or government leader, usually by a small group
  - Compare: Bloodless coup in Oman to other non-violent coups
  - Discuss: Modern-day coups in the Arab World (ex: Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, etc.)

**Did you Know:**

- Oman also has a long history of friendship with Great Britain. It has signed several treaties with the British government and its trading companies, beginning as early as the 17th century.

- In 1836, Oman became the first Arab state to establish diplomatic relations with the United States, when Sultan Sayyid Said dispatched a ship laden with precious gifts to New York.

- Despite its attractiveness to foreign invaders, Oman remains the oldest independent Arab state.