

The Middle East peace process: From devastation to reconstruction

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Opinion

Oman can play a vital intermediary role in the Middle East Peace Process, writes Rio Praaning Prawira Adiningrat.



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“The enemy of my enemy is my friend. And I use this to strengthen my own position.” The behavioural patterns of virtually all countries around the Gulf and in the Middle East reflect this traditional adagio.

The Jamal Khashoggi case, including the response of US President Donald Trump, demonstrates its application to rulers or wannabees.

Two examples include the position of Israel versus Iran to switch the US from allegiance to the Iran-deal to dropping this as shared goal with the Saudi Government, and to partner with Russia to keep Syria's Bashar Al-Assad in power and Saudi Arabia versus Iran - at the expense of the Houthis in Yemen, and to promote regime change in Qatar if the US would also have followed that alley.

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Other examples include the US versus Iran - to secure hundreds of billions of income for the US defence industry through President Trump's multi-layered deals with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and to secure the Crown Prince's position both in his own House and versus Iran- and Turkey versus Syria - to fight the Kurds and to establish new relations with both Russia and China, even to the point of becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

A modest analysis of these self-centred and authoritarian foreign and security policies highlights their obvious limits and potential counterproductive effects.

Saudi behaviour in Syria and Lebanon priced Riyadh out of these political markets. Israel confronts the EU over Iran. Islamist Turkey must address anti-Muslim policies in, for example, China's Xinjiang province.

The consequences for all involved are devastating in terms of millions of innocent civilian deaths and billions of US Dollars in material destruction.

“But more telling are the pictures of Sultan Qaboos receiving Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu”

The most horrifying effect is now seen in the Saudi war in Yemen where four million children are close to starvation. Save The Children have warned that another million could now face famine as the Hodeida city battle escalates - the sort of escalation occurring before a ceasefire is agreed.

“In one hospital I visited in north Yemen, the babies were too weak to cry, their bodies exhausted by hunger,” warned the organisation's CEO Helle Thorning-Schmidt.

These sickening images and the CIA verdict that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman did order Khashoggi's killing spell an end to the current conflict.

If the crown prince survives these credibility and legitimacy crises he certainly cannot continue his costly foreign adventures. Nor can his Western allies continue to support either him or the deadly conflicts he has helped create. Change will have to occur.

It may be the kind of change that happened on the eve of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear issue.

US President Barack Obama sent his emissaries first to Oman's capital, Muscat. Oman's experienced and inspirational leader Sultan Qaboos decided to travel to Tehran right through Washington's ban, with CNN covering every step of his way. No un-transparency. No backroom play. As the only Arab country supporting the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David accords, as the peacemaker between Iran and Iraq and as the negotiator between Saudis and Yemenis after the first Gulf War, Oman's Sultan Qaboos opened the door to the Iran nuclear deal.

Two days after Thorning-Schmidt's dramatic Save the Children statement, EU high representative Federica Mogherini and Oman's minister for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, met in Brussels.

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Hardly noticed by the international media, they signed a new Cooperation Agreement. The content? "Regional issues of common interest, including the crisis in the Gulf, Iran, Iraq and the Middle East Peace Process".

They also "exchanged views on the ongoing war in Yemen and on the need to renew the international community's support to the UN-led process."

Indeed the EU has a political and trade problem with the US withdrawal from JCPOA; and with US support for the devastating war in Yemen.

How to deal with Iran against the will of an unpredictable US President? How to prepare Arab and non-Arab leaders for a ceasefire? How to act when peace gets a chance and a massive reconstruction can start?

The Chinese, with their \$10bn investment in Oman's new Duqm Port, seem to have already anticipated this. But more telling are the pictures of Sultan Qaboos receiving Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu just a few weeks later.

As a senior Omani official indicated, one cannot make peace unless all parties recognise each other.

An interesting detail was that there was no automatic rejection from Tehran but a low-profile wait-and-see response. Sultan Qaboos' gesture must now be followed through.

Oman, friend of all and enemy of none, is optimally positioned to host any next step, politically and materially.

In a rather unstable and unsafe region, the Sultanate operates three strategic ports, in Sohar, Salalah and Duqm, controlling access to the Gulf.

The country scores global top rankings: the fourth safest country on earth (before Switzerland), the highest scores in domestic stability, investment security, top infrastructure. An Omani delegation just departed for the Yemen talks in Stockholm.

Leading by example is perhaps a good recipe.

About the author

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