

EU-Oman: All roads lead to Oman

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Opinion

Oman is a unique country, in a unique location that bridges Africa and Asia and is increasingly building relations with Europe, explains David McAllister.



David McAllister | Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

Last December, as Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, I had the opportunity to lead an official visit of MEPs to Muscat, immediately followed by a visit to Baghdad.

The Sultanate of Oman is located at the crossroads of some of the toughest geopolitical interests, in a region troubled by conflicts for far too long. Yet from the moment we arrived, we immediately felt the kindness of the Omani people and saw the beauty of the country, in a preserved and protected environment.

With this in mind, it is important to highlight the country's crucial role in helping to stabilise the

region. Oman is playing a key - and neutral - role in helping to resolve the conflict in Yemen.

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It is supporting the UN political and humanitarian efforts to end this catastrophic war and brokered several sets of talks among the different warring factions in the conflict. The Sultanate acts as a facilitator in the region.

The EU values and supports Oman's efforts, particularly given the region's geopolitical role as a diplomatic bridge between Riyadh and Tehran.

Muscat has also been important in bringing the Iran nuclear agreement to fruition, hosting initial talks between the US and Iran. In addition, Oman's recent efforts in working towards a solution for the Middle East Peace Process have also been highly valued.

The recent visits of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to Oman last October are an important example of the country's pivotal role.

For the European Union, the Sultanate is also an honest broker and a key partner; Oman's actions are complementary to the EU's diplomatic efforts.

However, the current situation in the Gulf region remains worrying. Since the beginning of the crisis, the EU has taken a neutral position. We continue to support an intra-Gulf negotiated solution.

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This ongoing crisis is contributing to the destabilisation of the entire Middle East. Cohesion in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is critical for fostering regional cooperation, as unity within the GCC helps to promote regional peace and stability.

I also believe that cohesion promotes investor confidence in the region. Again, I would like to welcome Kuwait and Oman's work in mediation and facilitation in seeking to solve the crisis.

A stabilised region will boost prosperity and will bring further investments; De-escalation in the region is vital. dialogue among key players must be preserved and encouraged.

Oman is a country at the crossroads. The Sultanate is an Arab country, situated in the Gulf region but it also maintains relations with Iran. It is important to highlight the international openness of this country, sitting as it does at the convergence of key international trade routes.

Oman has developed very important connections with Africa, particularly in the Horn, through the Gulf

of Aden. Indeed, its strategic position at the intersection of Africa and Asia combines seamlessly with its desire to build peaceful relations with regional powers. Therefore,

In that region of Africa, piracy is one of the most widespread problems; it is crucial to unite in the fight against this threat. This why, since 2008, the EU and Oman have had an ongoing cooperation in the form of the EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta Somalia (EU NAVFOR Atalanta) in the Gulf of Aden and the Somali Basin. in the region.

"The Sultanate is seeking to become a key logistics hub for the Middle East region and it has turned towards Asian development models for inspiration"

In Oman, one can also sense the strong connection with Asia. For centuries, Oman has developed strong trade partnerships with Asian countries such as India and China.

The Sultanate is seeking to become a key logistics hub for the Middle East region and it has turned towards Asian development models for inspiration.

Currently, China and other important Asian countries are investing extensively in the developing the port facilities in Duqm, Salalah and Sohar as well as in additional infrastructures projects.

Oman was the first country among its GCC neighbours in the region to develop forward-looking plans and visions for reducing its dependence on hydrocarbons and diversifying its economy.

The Vision 2020 has formed the backbone of an economic diversification plan that focuses on promoting growth in five key sectors: manufacturing, transport and logistical services, tourism, fisheries and mining.

2020 is now just around the corner, so the country is now launching its new long-term plan, Oman 2040.

This forward-looking plan will pose challenges for the country; it will question the social contract granted by hydrocarbon revenues combined with running a persistent fiscal deficit. Citizens have benefitted for many years from financial advantages and subsidies.

The authorities are working to get more Omani nationals to working in order to reduce dependence on foreign workers.

Creating jobs will be crucial for next generation. These models now need to be revised and implemented to reflect the new realities of reducing the country's dependence on hydrocarbons.

About the author

David McAllister (DE, EPP) is the chair of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee

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