

OMAN: BRIEFING NOTES

Geography

- Oman lies in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Its boundaries to the northwest are largely undefined, but its territory includes the tip of the strategically important Musandam Peninsula, which juts into the Strait of Hormuz. Through this strait passes two-thirds of the world's oil exports.
- Oman's part of this peninsula is separated from the rest of the country by territory of the United Arab Emirates. Oman faces the Gulf of Oman on the northeast and the Arabian Sea on the south, with a coastline stretching almost 1,000 miles (1,690 km). To the southwest, Oman borders the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The Sultan of Oman exercises jurisdiction over villages in the northwest Buraimi area, though his claim is disputed.
- Oman has a narrow coastal plain up to 10 miles wide, a range of barren mountains reaching 9,900 feet, and a wide, stony, mostly waterless plateau, with an average altitude of 1,000 feet.
- Oman's climate is extremely hot and humid. Annual rainfall averages 1.5 to 3.5 inches.

People

- About a third of the country's population lives in Muscat and the relatively narrow Barinah coastal plain; over half live as nomads or in small towns in the interior; some 60,000 live on the southern Province of Dhofar; and only about 5,000 live in the remote Musandam Peninsula. Significant minorities of Iranians, Baluchis, Indo-Pakistanis, and East Africans live along the northeast coast and are primarily merchants, soldiers, civil servants and laborers.
- Since 1970 the government has given especially high priority to education. The overall goal is to give every child a basic education. Students who wish a university degree must study abroad.

History

- Although its early history is somewhat obscure, it is known that Muscat and Oman (as the country was called before 1970) was converted to Islam in the 7th Century, during the lifetime of Muhammad. Contact with Europe was first established in 1508 when the Portuguese conquered parts of the coastal region.
- By the early 19th Century, Muscat and Oman was the most powerful state in Arabia.
- The judicial system is based mainly on the Sharia (the Koranic laws, and oral teaching of Muhammad). Jurisdiction is exercised by qadis, men versed in the religious code. In the less populated areas and among the bedouin, tribal custom is often the only law.

Religion

- Although the ruling house and the majority of ordinary Omanis are Ibadi Muslims, the population also includes Indian Muslims and several tribes who profess at least nominal loyalty to the Sunni persuasion. These include the Shihuh and Qara of the interior and the Kathiri and Mahrah of Dhofar. The merchant class contains a number of Hindus as well.

Family

- Muscat and Oman remains the last major bastion of traditional life in the Arabian Peninsula. The old ways survive to a remarkable degree because of isolation, because of official policy, and also due to tribal social structure, which is buttressed by Omani Ibadism. Strong bonds of kinship together with religious beliefs and practices are two great influences shaping social values.
- Social values continue to be shaped primarily by religious beliefs and bonds of kinship. A man is judged by the manner in which he fulfills his religious obligations and his duties toward family, clan and tribe. Loyalty and generosity toward kinsmen are highly praised and, in the interior, marital virtues still command respect. Women live as they have for centuries, circumscribed by home, family and tribe. Traditional social constraints on women are reinforced by the strict ethics of Omani Ibadism.

David W Fletcher, February 1999

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Government: Monarchy (Sultanate)

Sultan: Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id Al Said

Defense: 16% of GDP (1993 est.)

Troop Strength: 42,900

Political Parties: None

Population: 2,125,089

Ethnic Groups: Omani Arab 74%
Pakistani, 21%

Languages: Arabic (Official) 68%, Baluchi 19%, Mehri 6%, Farsi 3%, Urdu 2%,
Swahili 2%

Religions: Ibadhi Muslim 75%, Other Muslim 20%, Other 5%

Major Cities: Muscat (Capital), pop. 85,000
Matrah, pop. 17,000 (1990 est.)
Salala, pop. 10,000 (1990 est.)
Nizwa, pop. 10,000 (1990 est.)

Time Zone: GMT+4

Phone Code: 968

Ham Radio Prefix: A4

Currency: Rial Omani (May 95: .38=\$1US)

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Finance: \$16.4 bln GDP (1993), \$10,000 per capita GDP, \$3.7 bln imports (1993), trading partners are Japan-27%, UAE-14%, and UK-19%, \$5.0 bln exports, \$5.2 bln national budget with \$85 mln in tourism.

Transport: 175,000 passenger and 91,000 commercial vehicles in use, 6 airports with 1.2 bln passenger miles, chief ports are Matrah and Muscat.

Communications: 1 TV per 1.3 persons, 1 radio per 2.2 persons, 1 telephone per 6.1 persons.

Health: Life expectancy: male-68, female-72, 38 births & 5 deaths per 1,000, 1 hospital bed per 380, 1 physician per 1,078.

Education: 41% literacy, 80% attendance primary, and 30% secondary.

Economy: Dates, fruits, vegetables, wheat, bananas are chief crops. Crude oil accounts for 85% of exports. 4.7 bln bbls of crude oil reserves (1994). 112,000 metric tons of fish catch (1992). Major industries include cement, furniture, aluminum products, electrical products, utensils, fertilizer, fiberglass products, petroleum products, copper products.

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Cultural Items:

*NOTE that the following items were adapted from a briefing about Saudi Arabia. Some of the local customs of Oman may vary. Check with personnel in country about practices distinctive to Oman.

*Generally, the people are generous and hospitable. Personal and family honor can easily be offended by any perceived insult to that honor. Privacy is important.

*The people are very religious. Islamic customs play an important role in determining cultural practices.

*Men and women wear traditional Arab dress. Depending on the location, women in public have veiled faces and wear a black robe covering the entire body. Modesty is of utmost important. Visitors are expected to dress conservatively. Tight fitting or revealing clothing is unacceptable.

*The most common form of greeting is a handshake with the right hand and saying the phrase *As-Salaamu 'Alaykum* ("Peace be upon you"). Women, who traditionally wear veils in public, will not be introduced, nor does one expect to shake hands with her. A casual hello is *Marhaba*.

*It is impolite to point with the finger or signal to another person with the hand. A person also avoids use of the left hand for gesturing. All objects are passed with the right hand or both hands, never with the left hand alone. It is an insult to point the bottom of one's foot at another person. It is also impolite to cross an ankle over the knee, although crossing one's legs at the knees is acceptable and common.

*Invitations to homes are usually given to a man alone. It is appropriate to take a small gift to show appreciation for hospitality. Tea or coffee is usually served. When a person has had enough to drink, he will cover the cup with the hand or shake it gently from side to side and say *bes* (enough). Otherwise, an empty cup is quickly filled. Islamic law prohibits consumption of alcohol.

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*In general, food is eaten with the fingers of the right hand only. The main meal of the day is mid-afternoon. Conversation is enjoyed before and especially after the meal, seldom during the main course.

*The family is male-dominated, although women exercise influence in the home. The extended family is important. They generally live close together, and commonly in the same dwelling. The family is the key unit of society. Infidelity is a crime.

*Strict separation of male and female in everyday activities is a way of life. Rules governing the conduct of women are designed to respect and protect a woman's modesty and honor. Women do not socialize in public with men. Usually they are accompanied by a male relative in public. Women are forbidden to drive a car or even ride a bicycle. Many of these laws apply to foreigners.

*Because of this separation of sexes, dating is not practiced. Marriages are arranged, and according to custom, men pay a dowry for their brides. Chastity is the most important thing a woman can bring to marriage.

*Main dishes include rice with lamb or chicken. Rice with vegetables and salad is also popular. Fruits are enjoyed for dessert. Seafood is popular on the coasts. Coffee or tea is served before all meals. Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

*During the Islamic month of *Ramadan*, Muslims do not eat, drink, or smoke from sunrise to sunset each day. Meals are in the evening. No eating is permitted in public, even by foreigners.

*The workweek is from Saturday to Wednesday, with Thursday and Friday as the weekend. Friday is the day of worship for Muslims. People go to the mosque to pray and hear recitations from the *Koran*. Women often pray at home.

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ISLAM IN BRIEF

About 800 million adherents worldwide, or about 18% of total world population and the second largest of major world religions after Christianity.

Founded: AD 622 in Medina, Arabian peninsula.

Founder: Muhammad, the Prophet. Born about AD 570 at Mecca, died about AD 632 in Medina.

Sacred texts: The *Koran*, written in Arabic. Muslims believe the *Koran* to be the word of Allah, spoken to Muhammad by angels. *Hadith*, collections of the sayings of the prophets.

Organization: Theoretically, the state and religious community are one, administered by a caliph. In practice, Islam is a loose collection of congregations united by a very conservative tradition.

Practice: Every Muslim has five duties: to make profession of faith ("there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet"), to pray five times a day while facing Mecca, to give alms for the support of the faith and of the poor, to fast during the day in the month of Ramadan, and to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca if possible.

Devout Muslims maintain strict rules of conduct. Women are expected to dress modestly, even to cover their faces in public. Sale and consumption of alcohol is forbidden. Eating pork is forbidden. Places of worship are called mosques. The principal weekly worship is on Friday at midday. However, Friday (*Jumuah*) is not a Sabbath comparable to Christian Sundays or Jewish Saturdays. There are no restrictions on work or other activities.

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Divisions: The two major sects of Islam are the Sunni (orthodox) and the Shia. The Shia have about 20 million members (less than 3% of all Muslims), and predominate in Iran and Iraq. The original cause of the break between Sunni and Shia was disagreement about the transferal of power from Muhammad to his descendants. The Shia believe in twelve *imams*, perfect teachers, who still guide the faithful. Shia practice tends toward the ecstatic; however, the Sunni is staid and simple. The Shia affirm human free will; the Sunni are deterministic. The mystic tradition in Islam is Sufism. A Sufi adept is someone who believes he or she has acquired a special inner knowledge direct from Allah.

Beliefs: Strictly monotheistic. God is creator of the universe, omnipotent, just, and merciful. The human being is God's highest creation, but limited and commits sins. Humans are misled by Satan, an evil spirit. God revealed the *Koran* to Muhammad to guide humans to the truth. Those who repent and sincerely submit to Allah return to a state of sinlessness. In the end, the sinless go to Paradise, a place of physical and spiritual pleasure, and the wicked burn in Hell.

KEY DATES IN ISLAM

The Islamic calendar is a lunar reckoning from the year of the *hegira* AD 622, when Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina. All holy days begin at sundown on the date given.

Ramadan 1

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is Islam's holiest time of year. To honor the month in which the Koran was revealed, all adult Muslims observe fasting--denying food, water, even a kiss--between the hours of sunrise and sunset. Exempted from this fast are women in menstruation or childbirth, the chronically ill, persons on a journey, all of whom must make up these fast days at a later time.

al-Fitr (Shawwal 1)

Id al-Fitr, is the day of feasting celebrated at the end of Ramadan. The day begins with Salat-ul-'Id, early worship, at which Muslim give alms in foodstuffs or money of equivalent value.

al-Adha (Dhu al-Hijjah 10)

Id al-Adha, is the day of the feast of sacrifice. This occurs on the tenth day of Dhu'l-Hijja, the last month of the year and the season of the *haj*, or pilgrimage. The ritual slaughter of a sheep commemorates God's ransom of Abraham's son from sacrifice. At least a third of the meat of the animal is to be set aside for charity.

New Year's Day (Muharram 1)

This day marks the beginning of Islam's liturgical new year.

Mawlid (Rabi'l 12)

This is the anniversary of the prophet Muhammad's birthday.