



# The Go-Between

Although he and Obama have never met, the Sultan of Oman has emerged as a trusted and discreet intermediary between Washington and Tehran.



BY JUDITH MILLER

The Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter sits down with the Sultan — his first interview with a western reporter in almost 15 years.

**H**IS NUMBER MAY NOT YET be on President Barack Obama's speed dial, but the president spent an hour on the phone in early February with Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the ruler of Oman. The topic: whether Iran's avowed interest in resuming talks with Washington and the West on its nuclear program is serious.

How badly are the American-led sanctions hurting Iran? Is Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei really willing to suspend his uranium enrichment program, the most ominous part of Iran's nuclear push, to get crippling sanctions lifted? Or is Tehran merely playing for time to enrich more uranium in a covert effort to develop a nuclear weapons capability?

The telephone call, which officials described to Newsmax on condition of anonymity, was prompted partly by the sultan's interview with Fox News in late January in which Oman's ruler asserted that the sanctions were biting badly and that Iran was seriously

seeking to end its financial and political isolation. Western reporter in almost 15 years — White House officials decided they needed to know more about why he was so convinced the Iranians now mean business.

Though Obama and Qaboos have never met, they have spoken by phone several times since Obama has taken office, officials say. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has visited Oman twice in the past year.

Ruling an Arab state the size of Colorado with only 2.8 million people



and less oil and gas than its Persian Gulf neighbors, Qaboos has long punched well above his weight.

His strategic location, 30 miles across the Strait of Hormuz from Tehran, and his longstanding policy of cultivating good ties with all his neighbors give him access and clout that have served both Omani and American interests well.

“Oman has been a linchpin, a trusted impartial partner of America in the Gulf,” says Brian Katulis, an analyst with the Washington-based Center for American Progress.

Qaboos, who celebrated his 40th year in power last November, has for years been a trusted, discreet intermediary between Washington and Tehran, and he has also helped resolve humanitarian and political challenges throughout the region.

American officials credit Oman with having helped free three American hikers from Tehran's notorious Evin prison. The sultan is said to have paid a total of \$1.5 million — \$500,000 each — to free Sarah Shourd, and then a year later, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, all of whom had been held since July, 2009 and sentenced to eight years in prison for espionage.

The sultan also sent planes to bring them back to his capital after their release. P.J. Crowley, the former State Department spokesman and



**TIES THAT LOOSEN BONDS** Secretary of State Hillary Clinton thanks Sultan Qaboos for his role in the release of U.S. hostages.

now a professor at Pennsylvania State University, said that while Iraq, Switzerland, and other nations had also lobbied for the hikers' release, the "key interlocutor" was Oman.

Nor was this the first time that Oman has helped persuade Iran that holding Americans hostage, in Crowley's words, "was no longer gaining yardage for them." Oman had pressed Tehran in 2007 to release Haleh Esfandiari, the Iranian-born scholar and head of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Middle East Studies program, whom Tehran had also accused of spying. Oman also helped secure the release of three French aid workers who were kidnapped and held by al-Qaida in Yemen.

American officials say that Oman was key in persuading Yemen's long-

standing president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to cede power to his vice president and leave the country, a move that brought Yemen back from the brink of civil war. Qaboos then hosted Saleh for nearly a week en route to medical treatment in New York.

Oman's foreign minister, veteran diplomat Yousef bin Alawi bin Abdullah, has been active in Arab League efforts to persuade Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to end the bloodshed in his country by accepting a similar political transition.

The first Arab state to recognize Egypt's peace accords with Israel and the only Gulf state to have opened a trade office in Tel Aviv, Oman closed that office to protest Israel's "Operation Cast Lead" bombing of Gaza.

But it maintains ties with Israel

by chairing the Middle East Desalination Research Center, (MEDRC) a Muscat-based operation that shares technology and expertise on desalination to supply fresh water to all Middle Easterners. Israeli experts visited Oman earlier this year.

Oman's international credibility and respect are due almost entirely to Sultan Qaboos' steady, enlightened stewardship. Until 1970, Oman was virtually cut off from the world. It was ruled by an eccentric autocrat, Said bin Taimur, who tried to isolate Oman by, among other things, closing the gates of the capital each night and severely restricting education and foreign travel.

Eager to develop his country, the British-educated Qaboos, the sultan's only son, overthrew his father in a bloodless coup in 1970. Some four decades later, Oman has been transformed. Despite its good ties to Iran, Oman has long enjoyed a close strategic relationship with Washington. Ties date back to 1833. In modern times, Qaboos permitted the United States to use its military bases in the first Gulf war against Iraq and has been active in combating militant Islamic terrorism.

The two countries "share intelligence," says Sigurd Neubauer, a defense consultant who knows the country well. Though it is the only member of the Gulf Cooperation Council to have conducted joint military exercises with Iran, former Vice President Dick Cheney visited the

sultanate three times during his years in office, Neubauer notes. To shore up its defenses, Oman is purchasing a dozen F-16 U.S. fighter jets for \$600 million. The Pentagon's announcement last December confirms that these will join the dozen F-16 multipurpose planes that Oman has already purchased.

The sultan acknowledges that Washington had sought his help in warning Iran not to carry out its threat to block the Strait of Hormuz.

He predicts that Iran will not close the vital strait through which a quarter of the world's oil flows.

Iran, Qaboos says, wants to end its growing financial and political isolation. "No one in the world today can live on his own."

In our four-hour interview at Hisn Al Shomoukh, his desert castle some 90 miles from Muscat, Sultan Qaboos says he believes Tehran's claim that its nuclear program is for purely peaceful purposes.

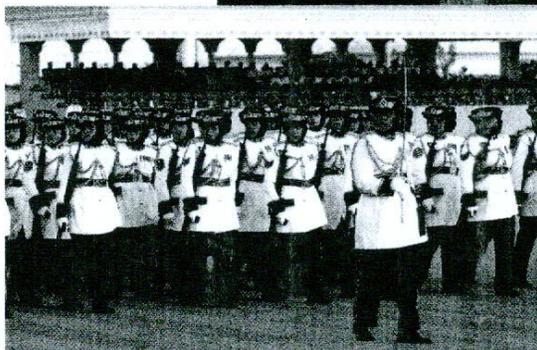
But the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear inspecting body, has accused Iran of engaging in activities that are inconsistent with a peaceful program.

"It is surely easier for the Omanis to believe that Iran is serious," Katulis says. "It's both a wish and a hope."

In such a treacherous neighborhood, however, the sultan cannot afford the luxury of wishful thinking when it comes to his country's internal stability. When Arab Spring protests erupted a year ago in the northern port city of Sohar, demanding jobs

### OMAN ADVANTAGE

Clockwise from right: Tolerated anti-government protest; woman exercising voting rights; women soldiers on parade.



and an end to corruption, the Sultan responded quickly by firing a dozen Cabinet ministers. He also increased government salaries and the minimum wage by 40 percent, and agreed to add 50-70,000 government jobs, at least 20,000 of them to the military and police.

The sultan has advanced the clock, too, on political reform. Last October, over 1,100 candidates competed for 84 seats in the Majlis Ashura, the consultative council he created in 1991.

When only one woman won election to that largely advisory body, Qaboos appointed three women to the Council of State, a 57-member senate. He also attended a national day parade in Nizwa, a highly conservative city, in which all of the participants were women.

His ambassador to Washington is a woman, as is his envoy to the United Nations, her sister. Women were given the right to vote and run for elections in 1994. And in a 2009 speech, he called men and women

additional legislative powers to the Majlis, permitting that body to elect its own chairman. The Majlis can now summon ministers for a grilling. With no political prisoners — a rarity in the region — the country has a long tradition of religious tolerance, due in part to the Ibadhi sect's interpretation of Islam. The sultan says he intends to move deliberately towards more representational government.

What he ultimately favors for Oman, he says, is a "monarchy with a parliamentary system." Qaboos, 71, has no children and has publicly designated no heir. But his immediate worry is not succession, since an elaborate system to assure that has been devised, but avoiding a war between Iran and Israel.

"Inshallah, it will not happen," Qaboos says, using the Arabic words for "God willing." But if Israel does strike Iran's nuclear facilities, America must "do what you can to prevent an escalation." □

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a nation's two wings: "How can this bird manage if one of its wings is broken?" After the elections, he granted

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