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YEMEN-SYRIA: OMANI NICHE DIPLOMACY IN GULF'S POWER TRANSITION

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In this summer of geopolitical realignments, Oman confirms to be the subtle centre of Middle Eastern diplomacy: in these days, Muscat has been hosting informal talks on the Yemeni crisis and seeks to find a minimum room for dialogue about Syria. Oman is the first Arab country that has received Damascus' foreign minister since 2011.

The fluidity of current Gulf politics magnifies the *omanibalancing* traditionally pursued by the foreign policy of the Sultanate: since decades, Muscat tends to cultivate good relations with its powerful and rival neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran. After the signature of the Iranian nuclear deal between Teheran and the 5+1, the Gulf resembles a "white page" that needs to be colored: all regional scenarios, from diplomatic de-escalation to military escalation, seem to be possible in such re-open framework.

It is not by chance that Oman has now been enhancing its diplomatic efforts on Yemen and Syria, the two main battlefields where Riyadh and Teheran fight indirectly their so-called Middle Eastern Cold War (covered with the mask of sectarianism); the Sultanate would like to capitalize the precious and unexpected window of op-

portunity opened with the Iranian agreement.

In Yemen, on mid-July, anti-Houthi forces (which encompass interim president Hadi's loyalists, local tribal militias, the Southern secessionist movement) regained Aden and then seized the strategic al-Anad air base, in Lahj province, and Zinjibar (Abyan). For Saudi Arabia, who heads the Sunni air coalition which has been hitting Shiite militias and former president Saleh's army units since March 2015, this is the first, significant success on the ground, after months of ineffective war. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have trained some units of the Yemeni regular army, providing military equipment to composite loyalist forces. Moreover, Saudis and Emiratis could have envoy special military units in Aden.

As usual, Oman has instead opted for neutrality. It decided not to take part in the intervention, maintaining - the only Gulf Cooperation Council's member to do it - the embassy in Sana'a (occupied by Houthis) and so avoiding to move it to Aden. Weeks ago, pre-informal talks in Muscat among Saudis, Yemeni Shiite rebels and American representatives paved the way for the first round of (failed) UN-led negotiations in Geneva, be-

tween the international recognized government and the Northern insurgency.

Omani authorities know very well the Yemeni tribal structure. Behind the stage, the Sultanate has been uninterruptedly working alongside the United Nations special envoy, Ismail Ould Sheikh Ahmed, to build consensus on a durable ceasefire proposal, to be monitored by Arab League's observers. New informal talks between UN and Ansarullah's delegates were held in Muscat last week. In front of a wave of jihadi attacks claimed by the Islamic State in the Arabian peninsula (the last targeted a mosque inside the special police headquarter in Abha, Asir, killing 15 persons), Saudi Arabia has realized how much the Yemeni conflict has been dangerously fueling sectarian spirits at home, weakening its southern border and threatening Saudi Shia community. In this context, the Omani mediation can play a constructive role, fostering Riyadh to begin political discussion, now that their forces seem to have the upper hand in Aden.

The Syrian file appears to be surrounded by renewed international activism (which includes Russia too): political signals that pass through Muscat. On August 6th, Syrian foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem, met with the Omani chief of diplomacy, Yusuf bin Alawi, in the Sultanate capital: they agreed about the necessity to find a negotiated solution for Syria, spreading rumors about next Saudi-Syrian-Iranian talks in the country. Oman has never broken up diplomatic relations with Damascus since the start of the popular uprising in 2011, then turned into multilayered civil war.

In summer 2013, Sultan Qaboos' vanguard diplomacy was decisive for the *détente* between Teheran and Washington: following the nuclear deal, the Iranian foreign minister, Muhammad Javad Zarif, travelled to Kuwait City, Doha and the Omani capital. In a recent interview, the Oman's foreign minister spoke about the opportunity to launch Saudi-Iranian talks to cope with regional crises, first of all Syria. The impact of Turkey's strikes against the "caliphate" (and the PKK) could change the landscape, while Saudi Arabia has already strengthened the Sunni axis (Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood) *vis-à-vis* Iran. On the other side, Bashar al-Assad recognizes, for the first time, the frustration of his army, combined with the impossibility to fight on a wide national scale.

The Gulf has been experiencing a moment of double power transition, which nurtures potential conflicts. For a series of factors, the United States' power cycle declines (military withdrawal from Iraq, energy autonomy, "pivot to Asia" strategy) just while Saudi Arabia, in its critical point, perceives whether the fear to be abandoned by the American security guarantor, as the strategic, transnational rise of the Iranian rival. In this context, the Sultanate of Oman remains a unique resource of regional security and niche diplomacy, due to its skill to put "the eggs in all baskets", the most politically equipped country to deal with Middle Eastern moving complexity. Moreover, this kind of foreign policy has always internally strengthened the Sultanate: all neighboring powers (and Washington) want to preserve this corner of stability, sometimes turning a blind eye with respect to Omani voices of discontent.