In its commitment to detente in various parts of the globe, Russia is increasingly focused on the complex situation, in danger of transforming into an armed conflict, in the Persian Gulf region. It has, therefore, come up with a concept aimed at ensuring collective security. And we are not simply referring to an attempt to avoid a flare-up in the region here, but to a plan to mitigate the risks that could lead to an outburst of hostilities. The establishment of an organization for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf by the nations in the region is a key part of the Russian proposal. In connection with this, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov has said that unlike, for instance the USA <...>, Russia did not complicate matters with its own geopolitical agenda aimed at pitting one country against another. Instead, he added, the country has supported dialogue as the only effective means of resolving all conflicts. Russian President Vladimir Putin elaborated on Russia’s plans as follows "We offer to put aside our differences and mutual claims and to establish an organization for security and cooperation in the region basically from scratch, which would include the Gulf States and which could involve Russia, China, the US, the EU, India and other interested states as observers.”

As we analyze the complex situation in the region and review efforts made by a number of nations to resolve it peacefully, it seems worth focusing on the special role played by the Sultanate of Oman in all of this. The nation is situated in the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula and its southern exclave gives it partial control over the Strait of Hormuz, a fairly important shipping route for many countries of the world. This is why Oman’s contribution to various negotiations is quite important.

It is no accident that, recently, Muscat (the capital of Oman) became the venue of choice for different behind the scenes meetings and secret negotiations between representatives of the East and the West. It is for this very reason that the Sultanate was more and more often referred to as Oman - the mediator. It would suffice to mention it was in Muscat that Iran and the United States, during their talks, came to their initial agreement on the so called nuclear deal. Earlier, in 2011, the Sultanate helped free American mountaineers, imprisoned in Iran, by paying $1 million for their release. In 2017, Oman chose not to take sides during the Qatar–Saudi Arabia diplomatic conflict. Instead, it had made several attempts to reconcile the two nations by playing the role of mediator and intermediary between them right up until the end of 2019, when plans for the first informal talks between Doha and Riyadh were finalized. Muscat is where Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran were and are engaged in a negotiation process. It is also where talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel were and are being held.

It is thus worth reminding our readers about the fact that, at the end of 2018, Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara paid an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman. He was accompanied by Director of Mossad Yossi Cohen, National Security Council Director Meir Ben-Shabat, Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yuval Rotem, Prime Minister’s Office Director-General Yoav Horowitz and Military Secretary to the Prime Minister Brigadier General Avi Balut during the trip. The joint statement released at the end of the visit said that their discussions covered approaches promoting a peaceful resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, and a number of issues of mutual interest to ensure peace and stability in the region. Focusing on Israeli advances in the spheres of security, technology and economics, media outlets in Oman reported that the Prime Minister’s visit to the Sultanate was a significant step on the path towards closer ties between Israel and the rest of the countries in the region.

Key events in recent years such as the coup attempt in Turkey; the five-year civil war in Syria; the de facto collapse of Iraqi state; the battle of the international community against the Islamic State (banned in the Russian Federation),
and the conflict in Yemen all seemingly passed Oman by. Still, its involvement is perceptible to varying degrees in all of the above. It is also worth noting that Oman plays the role of peacemaker and mediator between conflicting parties everywhere.

Owing to Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said’s efforts, the relationship between the Russian Federation and Oman improved and can even be described as friendly at present. After Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov met with Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi in Moscow, they both expressed the view that strengthening ties in various spheres between Russia and Oman was in line with long-term interests of both nations. The talks covered topical issues concerning further steady development of all aspects of traditionally friendly Oman–Russia relations, including broader cooperation in the trade and economic as well as cultural and social spheres.

According to the statement issued by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the two politicians expressed the common view that the strengthening of bilateral ties on many levels was in line with Russia’s and Oman’s long-term interests and would help “ensure security and stability in the Middle East.” The document also says that the participants of the meeting “praised the high level of Oman–Russia political dialogue that is invariably characterized by similar or identical approaches of Moscow and Muscat to important regional and international issues.” The Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation also emphasized the need for a speedy resolution to the existing crises in the Middle East via political means by reaching national-level consensus and by strictly adhering to the principles of international law and the UN Charter.

It was a great tragedy for the international community when Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who had ruled Oman for 50 years and earned heart-felt respect of his entire nation and the rest of the world, died recently at the age of 79. As anticipated, Haitham bin Tariq bin Taimur Al Said (the 65-year-old cousin of Qaboos bin Said) became the new ruler of the Sultanate. He graduated from the Foreign Service Program at the University of Oxford, and was a civil servant for 30 years serving in the capacity of the Undersecretary and then Secretary General for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and subsequently, as the Minister of Heritage and Culture. He was also the Chairman of the committee for the future vision of “Oman 2040” (the nation’s strategic development plan). The new Sultan has already stated that he would continue to follow his predecessor’s policies.

Any ruler of Oman wields unlimited power and influence but, at the same time, bears great responsibility. As Sultan, he also serves as the Prime Minister, the Minister Responsible for Defense, the Minister Responsible for Financial Affairs, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chairman of Central Bank of Oman. Immediate members of the royal family have limited political influence and occupy only several posts in the Cabinet of Oman. Such an approach to ruling the country means that none of these members of the family have the necessary skills or experience to successfully and effectively govern Oman after the death of the Sultan.

In November 1991, the Consultative Assembly (Majlis ash-Shura) replaced the State Consultative Council (established in 1981). Majlis ash-Shura was created in order to systematize and broaden public participation in government. This lower house of the Council of Oman has 84 members and exercises some legislative powers. The Consultative Assembly provides a link between the nation’s citizens and its ministries, and has the authority to review draft legislation (drawn up by the ministries) in economic and social spheres and to make appropriate recommendations.

Sultan Qaboos bin Said left his successor in charge of a modern nation judging by its political and economic sectors. However, the latter is in worse shape in comparison to the former. The main threat to Oman’s economy is low crude oil price since proceeds from its sale account for 90% of the nation’s export earnings. Starting last year, the world’s Big Three credit rating agencies have been lowering Oman’s sovereign rating. The main reason for the downgrade has been the country’s inability (i.e. its lack of a safety net), in comparison to its neighbors, to handle crises similar to the ones that had occurred in 2014 when fossil fuel prices had decreased two-fold.

With every passing day, the country’s dependence on oil becomes more apparent. For instance, unemployment in Oman has risen to circa 15%. It is not surprising that the nation’s leadership is considering limiting the number of migrant workers within its borders in order to offer citizens of Oman more jobs. Year-on-year, the Sultanate’s government budget deficit increases, thus forcing the authorities to resort to tougher economic measures. Recently, the country has experienced increases in corporate tax rates and fuel prices; a cut in subsidies for electricity and water, and a freeze on salaries and bonuses of government employees.

Still, despite economic difficulties and other issues, for now, Omanis remain calm and trust in a better future.
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