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MUSCAT NEGOTIATIONS

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The study is devoted to a comprehensive analysis of preventive diplomacy as a modern and effective mechanism for the prevention and peaceful settlement of international and internal conflicts in a globally changing world. Preventive diplomacy is considered as “modern diplomacy with a feature” – a tool aimed at the most effective and rational use of diplomatic means to reduce tension before it develops into an open military conflict. Unlike traditional approaches that focus on resolving existing crises, preventive diplomacy emphasizes early detection of potential threats and timely diplomatic intervention.

The work demonstrates that conflict prevention is significantly cheaper and more effective compared to subsequent costs for military operations, peacekeeping missions and post-conflict reconstruction. In addition to economic feasibility, preventive diplomacy has a deep humanitarian dimension – it allows saving human lives, preventing mass population displacement and humanitarian disasters.

The study reveals practical mechanisms and forms of preventive diplomacy: monitoring electoral processes and preventing electoral fraud as a trigger for conflicts; protecting minority rights as a means of preventing discriminatory practices; an early warning system based on big data analysis and monitoring by international organizations; negotiations and mediation at the local and national levels; exchange of factual information and diplomatic consultations between the parties to a potential conflict.

The analysis of specific cases illustrates how timely diplomatic intervention by the UN and regional organizations prevented crises from escalating into armed conflicts. Particular attention is paid to refugees as an indicator of instability - a mass outflow of population often signals a critical deterioration of the situation and the need for urgent preventive measures.

The study contains a critical analysis of current international practice, which often does not respond sufficiently to early signs of crises, and justifies the need to strengthen the preventive component in global security strategies.

Key words: preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, international security, peaceful resolution of disputes, conflict studies

Казем Т.А. Переговори в Маскаті.

Дослідження присвячене комплексному аналізу превентивної дипломатії як сучасного та ефективного механізму попередження та мирного врегулювання міжнародних і внутрішніх конфліктів у глобальному мінливому світі. Превентивна дипломатія розглядається як «сучасна дипломатія з особливістю» – інструмент, спрямований на найбільш ефективне та раціональне використання дипломатичних засобів для зменшення напруженості до того, як вона переростає у відкритий військовий конфлікт. На відміну від традиційних підходів, які орієнтуються на розв'язання вже наявних криз, превентивна дипломатія акцентує на раннього виявленні потенційних загроз і своєчасному дипломатичному втручанні.

Робота демонструє, що попередження конфліктів є суттєво дешевшим та ефективнішим порівняно з подальшими витратами на військові операції, миротворчі місії та постконфліктну реконструкцію. Окрім економічної доцільності, превентивна дипломатія має глибокий гуманітарний вимір – вона дозволяє зберегти людські життя, запобігти масовому переміщенню населення та гуманітарним катастрофам.

У дослідженні розкриваються практичні механізми та форми превентивної дипломатії: моніторинг виборчих процесів та запобігання виборчому шахрайству як тригеру конфліктів;

захист прав меншин як засіб попередження дискримінаційних практик; система раннього попередження на основі аналізу великих даних та моніторингу міжнародних організацій; переговори та медіація на локальному та національному рівнях; обмін фактичною інформацією та дипломатичні консультації між сторонами потенційного конфлікту.

Аналіз конкретних кейсів ілюструє, як своєчасне дипломатичне втручання ООН та регіональних організацій запобігло переростанню криз у збройні конфлікти. Особлива увага приділяється біженцям як індикатору нестабільності – масовий відтік населення часто сигналізує про критичне погіршення ситуації та необхідність невідкладних превентивних мір.

Дослідження містить критичний аналіз поточної міжнародної практики, яка часто недостатньо реагує на ранні ознаки криз, та обґрунтовує необхідність посилення превентивного компоненту у стратегіях глобальної безпеки.

Ключові слова: превентивна дипломатія, врегулювання конфліктів, міжнародна безпека, мирне вирішення спорів, конфліктологія

Question statement

Preventive diplomacy is a modern approach to international relations aimed at the peaceful resolution of conflicts before they escalate into armed confrontations. The main thesis is that preventing conflicts is significantly cheaper and more effective than resolving their consequences through military interventions and long-term peacekeeping operations. However, current international practice often demonstrates insufficient attention to early signs of potential crises - from electoral fraud and discrimination against minorities to mass refugee flows. The question is relevant: what specific mechanisms and tools of preventive diplomacy can be effectively used to de-escalate tensions at the local and national levels before the situation gets out of control?

Source base analysis

The methodological basis of the study should be international documents of the UN and regional organizations on preventive diplomacy, theoretical developments in the field of conflict studies and international law. Empirical data will be based on the analysis of specific cases: electoral processes in which fraud prevention prevented conflicts; minority rights situations where timely diplomatic intervention prevented mass protests; refugee flows as an indicator of instability in regions. A comparative analysis of the costs of preventive measures and the subsequent costs of military operations and post-conflict reconstruction will demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of such an approach. Reports of international organizations, scientific publications and case studies of successful diplomatic interventions will also serve as sources.

Research purpose

The purpose of the research is to substantiate the theoretical and practical foundations of preventive diplomacy as a tool for the peaceful settlement of international and domestic conflicts. The specific tasks are: (1) to reveal the essence and principles of preventive diplomacy as an alternative to military intervention; (2) to analyze the mechanisms and forms of preventive diplomacy – from election monitoring to negotiations on minority rights; (3) demonstrate with concrete examples how early diplomatic signals and international observation can prevent the outbreak of conflicts; (4) substantiate the economic and humanitarian effectiveness of the preventive approach compared to post-conflict peacebuilding; (5) develop recommendations for strengthening the role of preventive diplomacy in the system of international security and global crisis management.

Main material

Preventive diplomacy is modern diplomacy with a twist. A basic definition describes it as “the most desirable and efficient employment of diplomacy is to ease tensions before they result in conflict” The idea is simple: use different diplomatic tools to prevent disputes from arising – or to prevent existing disputes from escalating into violent conflicts. Preventive diplomacy can take on many different forms including fact finding missions, early warning based on big data analysis, legal advice, negotiations or other diplomatic exchanges.

Preventive diplomacy is flexible. It's the diplomatic equivalent to what architects know as ‘form follows function’. The intended diplomatic outcome defines the scope of how to engage in preventive diplomacy [1].

But what is *so* special about preventive diplomacy?

Prevention is better than cure. It's usually much cheaper to prevent conflicts than to pay for post-war reconstruction or invest in several years of peacebuilding. Preventive diplomacy can also reduce

the need for military interventions. This is why the UN described it as one of the most efficient ways to engage in diplomacy.

This sounds a bit abstract...

Yes, let's look at a few examples. We know that rigged elections often trigger violent clashes after polling day. But election fraud is usually well documented and problematic issues are often known to all involved parties. The aim of preventive diplomacy would be to make sure elections are carried out without massive fraud – or to help different parties to deal with the outcomes in a peaceful way.

Or look at refugees. Slow but steady increases of refugees from a certain country is usually an indicator that something is not quite right. A similar example could be the state of minority rights. Bad treatment of minorities is often a first sign that a conflict is about to break out. Would it be possible to solve these issues at the local or national level before the situation escalates?

Another example: We know that simmering disputes about territories or access to resources can easily escalate into violent conflicts. Would it be possible to identify not only the 'root causes' but also the degree of escalation? Based on such an exercise it may be possible to deal with the problem before a violent conflict breaks out. Or look at demographic changes in some countries. A youth bulge in places with high levels of unemployment is likely to cause some problems at some point [2] “

OK, but we can't predict the future...

We may not be able to predict the future but with the help of various early warning systems we can identify risk factors that may result in violent conflicts. It's true, preventive diplomacy – like all conflict prevention – is uncertain. But with a combination of sophisticated intelligence gathering and solid early warning systems we may be able to identify when and how to engage.

So how is this different from traditional diplomacy?

Diplomacy is an all-encompassing concept that is about managing international relations. Prevention is part of diplomacy. However, traditional modes of diplomacy are used to build stable relationship between state actors or engage in multilateral and bilateral diplomatic exchanges. In other words, diplomacy takes time and perseverance. Preventive diplomacy, on the other hand, is a more disruptive version of diplomacy. It does not replace other forms of diplomacy but it can be more targeted and less formalised. Preventive diplomacy is about this one well-timed initiative that can make a real difference.

Who does 'preventive diplomacy'?

Preventive diplomacy is carried out by states, international organisations, NGOs, foundations and other non-state actors. Especially the UN have been a promoter of preventive diplomacy (see for example the 1992 UN Agenda for Peace or this Secretary General report from 2011) The European Union also started getting involved in preventive actions through various political initiatives and large funding programmes. However, large institutions – foreign ministries, international organisations etc – often struggle to develop an effective preventive diplomatic strategy as bureaucracies are not necessarily well equipped to deal with uncertain and risky scenarios.

So, there are quite a few obstacles?

Yes, we often find it difficult to build a conflict prevention strategy despite having a good understanding of the root causes of a conflictual situation. We also struggle to measure stages of conflict escalation. Plus, preventive diplomacy can be politically sensitive, it is often perceived as an abstract concept or an ill-defined strategy. Practitioners have not developed a common understanding on how to measure the success of preventive diplomacy. Another obstacle is political: Building a consensus around it can be challenging as preventive action never considered to be a priority for policymakers. And last but not least, the 'international community' is also not known to be a proactive force when it comes to dealing with conflicts.

Ok, but is this really the future of diplomacy?

Well, it may be. Politicians want to tackle the 'root causes' of conflicts – but unfortunately there is little investment in early warning systems or preventive diplomacy. At the same time the nature of conflicts is changing. New types of conflicts emerge and they tend to spread more rapidly. Everyone agrees that we do need new innovative diplomatic approaches to deal with these conflicts – so why not give 'preventive diplomacy' a chance? [3]

U.S.-Iran Relations: Background and 2025 Nuclear Talks

U.S.-Iran relations have been mostly adversarial since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, an authoritarian monarch who was a close U.S. ally, and led to the

establishment of the Islamic Republic. The United States and Iran have not had diplomatic relations since 1980, following the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis [4]

U.S.-Iran tensions continued in the following decade, punctuated by armed confrontations in the Gulf and Iran-backed terrorist attacks (including the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut). U.S. sanctions, first imposed in 1979, continued apace with the U.S. government designating Iran as a state sponsor of acts of international terrorism in 1984, an embargo on U.S. trade with and investment in Iran in 1995, and the first imposition of secondary sanctions (U.S. penalties against foreign firms that invest in Iran's energy sector) in 1996 [5].

Bilateral relations briefly improved during the late 1990s, but tensions rose again in the early 2000s amid reports of heightened Iranian armed support for Palestinian groups and the revelation of previously undisclosed nuclear facilities in Iran. The United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran's nuclear program in response to concerns that the program could enable Iranian nuclear weapons development. Also, during this time frame, Congress enacted major legislation significantly increasing sanctions on Iran, particularly on its oil exports. U.S. officials credited sanctions with bringing Iran to the negotiating table; multilateral talks around Iran's nuclear program culminated in the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) that placed limits on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for relief from most economic sanctions [6, 7].

President Donald Trump announced on May 8, 2018, that the United States would cease participating in the JCPOA, reinstating all sanctions that the United States had waived or terminated in meeting its JCPOA obligations. In articulating a new Iran strategy in May 2018, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that due to "unprecedented financial pressure" through reimposed U.S. sanctions, U.S. military deterrence, and U.S. advocacy, "we hope, and indeed we expect, that the Iranian regime will come to its senses. He also laid out 12 demands for any future agreement with Iran, including the withdrawal of Iranian support for armed groups throughout the region. Iran's leaders rejected U.S. demands and insisted the United States return to compliance with the JCPOA before engaging on a new or revised accord [8].

From mid-2019 on, Iran escalated its regional military activities, at times coming into direct military conflict with the United States. Several Iranian attacks against oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and a September 2019 drone attack against Saudi Arabian oil production facilities further increased tensions. Those tensions spiked with the Trump Administration's January 3, 2020, killing of IRGC-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, and Iran's retaliatory ballistic missile strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq and subsequent attacks by Iran-backed forces in Iraq against U.S. targets. Iran also began exceeding JCPOA-mandated limits on its nuclear activities in 2019, per the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)[9] "

The Biden Administration initiated indirect talks with Iran over its nuclear program but discussions petered out amid other developments, such as nationwide unrest in Iran (see text box, "2022-2023 Protests" below) and Iran's provision of weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine. In September 2023, Iran and the United States concluded a prisoner exchange, in connection with which the United States facilitated the transfer of \$6 billion of Iranian funds from South Korea (where they had been held as payment for pre-2019 exports of Iranian oil to South Korea) to Qatar. In the wake of the October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel, the House passed legislation (H.R. 5961) that would have, among other provisions, directed the President to impose sanctions on any foreign financial institution that engages in transactions with the \$6 billion in Iranian funds. In testimony the following month, a State Department official said of the funds, "Not a penny of this money has been spent and these funds will not go anywhere anytime soon." Iranian officials continue to press Qatar to release the funds [10].

Developments under the Second Trump Administration: 'Maximum Pressure' and Negotiations

In February 2025, President Trump signed National Security Presidential Memorandum 2 (NSPM-2), which directs U.S. officials to impose "maximum pressure" on Iran to compel it to abandon its nuclear program and support for terrorist groups. NSPM-2 directs the imposition and enforcement of sanctions, issuance of guidance to industry, pursuit of Iran's diplomatic isolation, and legal steps against Iranian activities inside the United States. In signing NSPM-2 in February, President Trump said that he was "torn about" it, adding "hopefully, we're not going to have to use it very much" and reiterating his preference for a "deal." President Trump also indicated that month that he would "much prefer a Verified Nuclear Peace Agreement" with Iran over military action, and that "We should start working on it immediately [11, 12].

At the same time, Trump Administration officials have consistently stated, as did their counterparts in previous Administrations, that “all options are on the table,” potentially including direct U.S. military action. In March 2025, President Trump threatened Iran with “bombing the likes of which they have never seen before” if “they don’t make a deal.” Throughout spring 2025, the United States reportedly dispatched a “record-breaking” amount of U.S. military assets and materiel to bases across the region, including B-2 stealth bombers [13].

In March 2025, President Trump said that he had sent a letter to Supreme Leader Khamenei saying “I hope you’re going to negotiate, because if we have to go in militarily, it’s going to be a terrible thing for” Iran. According to one media report, the letter included a two-month deadline for Iran to reach a new nuclear agreement. Iranian officials sent mixed public signals regarding negotiations: some expressed openness to talks under certain conditions, while others cast doubt on the viability of negotiating with the United States. In an April 8, 2025, opinion editorial in the *Washington Post*, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi pointed to Iran’s affirmation in the JCPOA that “under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons,” and argued that “the scope for trade and investment in Iran is unparalleled [14, 15].

On April 12, 2025, U.S. and Iranian diplomats met for the first such reported engagement in nearly three years. The talks were mostly indirect, with the host government of Oman as an intermediary. The meeting also included a reported face-to-face interaction between U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Foreign Minister Araghchi – the first such direct meeting between U.S. and Iranian diplomats since 2017. The two sides met again in Rome (with Omani mediation) on April 19 and in Oman on April 26 and May 11 [16].

While both sides criticize, and deny analyses that compare current engagements to, the JCPOA (see text box below), talks appear to center on the same issues: Iran agreeing to potential restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for the United States agreeing to reduce sanctions pressure on Iran. Iran’s enrichment capability appears to be a crucial point: Special Envoy Witkoff said in May that “we have one very, very clear red line, and that is enrichment. We cannot allow even 1 percent of an enrichment capability.” President Trump in a May 2025 interview said his goal was “total dismantlement” of Iran’s nuclear program but that he’d be “open” to Iran having a “civilian” nuclear program. Members have expressed a range of views, with some expressing support for the elimination of Iran’s enrichment capability. In May 14, 2025, letters to President Trump, 52 Senators and 177 Representatives argued against “any deal that allows Iran to retain any enrichment capability.” For his part, the Iranian foreign minister has said “the issue of enrichment is non-negotiable,” while a close advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei said (in comments highlighted on social media by President Trump) Iran could agree to restrictions on its stockpiles of highly enriched uranium and on its enrichment levels as part of an agreement [17].

As of May 2025, the two sides have reportedly exchanged written proposals, and President Trump said in his visit to the Middle East that month that “I think we’re getting close to maybe doing a deal” but also said “we don’t have a lot of time to wait.” The pace and progress of negotiations could shape the Trump Administration’s calculus regarding diplomacy and military action; the President has consistently expressed that he prefers the former but is prepared to carry out the latter. Congress has not explicitly authorized the use of military force against Iran. Negotiations, and the contours of whatever agreement emerges from them (if any), could also have implications for U.S.-Israeli relations, given some Israeli officials’ reported preference for a military strike (see “Outlook” below). In May 2025 testimony, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, referencing INARA, said “Congress has a right to weigh in on any deal and could actually reverse any deal [18, 19].

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015)

Many observers assess that U.S. and multilateral sanctions contributed to Iran’s 2013 decision to enter into negotiations that concluded in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between China, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The JCPOA imposed restraints on Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for relief from most U.S. and UN Security Council economic sanctions. The agreement restricted Iran’s enrichment and heavy water reactor programs and provided for enhanced IAEA monitoring to detect Iranian efforts to produce nuclear weapons using either declared or covert facilities. The nuclear-related provisions of the agreement, according to U.S. officials in 2015, extended the nuclear breakout time—the amount of time that Iran would need to produce enough weapons-grade HEU for one nuclear weapon—to a minimum of one year, for a duration

of at least 10 years. In addition to the restrictions on activities related to fissile material production, the JCPOA indefinitely prohibited Iranian “activities which could contribute to the design and development of a nuclear explosive device,” including research activities. President Trump announced in 2018 that the United States would “withdraw” from the JCPOA and begin reimposing formerly-lifted U.S. sanctions. The IAEA reports that Iran began to diminish implementation of its JCPOA commitments in May 2019 until Tehran “stopped implementing them altogether” in February 2021.

Why Is Oman Mediating Negotiations for a Trump-Iran Nuclear Deal?

The Sultan’s Palace in Muscat, Oman, December 2006. (Ian Sewell via Wikicommons)

On Saturday, April 12, 2025, representatives from the US and the Islamic Republic of Iran met in Oman for the first set of negotiations between the two nations in more than 10 years. Oman’s Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi played the role of host and mediator as negotiations were conducted in an indirect format. During the talks, he shuttled back and forth between the rooms hosting the US and the Iranian team. The second round of talks is also set to take place in Muscat, the capital of Oman, although an earlier report said they would take place in Rome.

This is not the first time that Oman has played the role of mediator between Iran and the US. It was Omani mediation in 2011 that first brought the Obama administration and the Iranian regime together. This ultimately led to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal. A 2015 article, published just after the JCPOA was ratified, called Oman “The Unsung Hero of the Iranian Nuclear Deal.”

Furthermore, Omani mediation in 2011 led to the release of three US hostages, after they were kidnapped from the Iran–Iraq border in 2009.

How has Oman carved such a crucial and successful role for itself as mediator between the Iranian regime and the US? [20]

Oman’s historic relations with Iran

In 1962, Omani rebels launched a rebellion in the southern Dhofar region. Oman’s armed forces were weak. It only had a total force of 3,000 soldiers, who were mostly mercenaries. Iran’s military support, commencing in 1973, combined with UK assistance, proved instrumental in defeating the rebellion by 1975. The Omani regime of Sultan Qaboos remained grateful to Iran’s crucial assistance, both before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Oman’s independent foreign policy

Oman has always been known for its independent foreign policy stance. Oman was one of only two Arab countries, the other being Morocco, that did not sever ties with Egypt after the Camp David peace agreement

Additionally, since the revolution of 1979, Oman has had more stable relations with the Iranian regime than its neighbors. Oman, unlike other Gulf states, refrained from recalling its ambassador to Iran following the January 2016 attacks against the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Oman’s independent foreign policy stance is one of the major reasons why the Iranian regime has relied on Oman as a mediator.

Oman’s good relations with the US

The Omanis also enjoy good relations with the US. After the fall of the Shah in 1979, Oman played a key role in protecting US interests in the Persian Gulf

The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in January 2009. The US Navy has a logistics center in Muscat, Duqm and Salalah in Oman. According to CENTCOM, “These centers provide logistics support and services to U.S. Navy vessels conducting operations in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations.” The Iranian regime also enjoys close relations with Qatar.

So why does the Iranian leadership trust Oman more as a mediator than Qatar?

First, because comparatively, Iran and Oman enjoy a longer historic relationship.

Second, compared to Qatar, the US military presence in Oman is much smaller (Qatar hosts the biggest US base in the Middle East).

Third, Iran and Oman are not rivals in the region, in contrast with Qatar, which also rivals Iran for influence in the region.

How Oman Became a Mediator Between the US and Iran

At the conclusion of the latest round of nuclear talks between the United States and Iran last Saturday at the Omani Embassy in Rome, a senior US administration official announced that “very good progress has been made.”

Meanwhile, ahead of a third round of negotiations scheduled to take place in Muscat, Oman, Tehran reiterated its familiar claim that “the Zionist entity is the only obstacle to a nuclear-weapons-free Middle East.” Ali Khamenei’s political adviser even posted on X (formerly Twitter) that “there will be no agreement with the US unless the threats stop and Israel is restrained,” with Iran further demanding the immediate lifting of all economic sanctions.

A closer look at the political efforts and diplomatic maneuvers led by the Sultanate of Oman leaves little doubt: the recent discussions between President Donald Trump and Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said have rekindled hopes for renewed ties between Washington and Tehran, focusing squarely on the future of Iran’s nuclear program.

Oman’s mediation strength is deeply rooted in its Solomonic approach, informed by its Ibadi tradition – a particularly moderate stream of Islam – and its pragmatic foreign policy, characterized by maintaining balance and mediating between adversaries, including Iran, the Arab states, and Western powers.

Its strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, and the Arabian Sea, combined with its rich history of diplomatic facilitation, notably during the negotiations leading to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, underscores Muscat’s critical role.

Through bilateral, multilateral, and often discreet negotiations, Oman seeks to reduce tensions, bridge gaps, and lay the foundation for a breakthrough that could diminish the nuclear threat, end decades of hostility between Iran and the US, facilitate the American withdrawal from regional conflicts, and ultimately reshape the geopolitical and diplomatic landscape of the Middle East.

Against the backdrop of US military reinforcements in the Indian Ocean, the provision of additional THAAD air defense systems to Israel, and President Trump’s uncompromising stance – insisting that uranium enrichment not merely be capped at 3.67% but that Iran be entirely denied nuclear weapons capabilities—the Omani Foreign Ministry issued a “reassuring signal” this week, affirming that the talks aim to achieve a fair, binding agreement that would see Iran completely free of nuclear weapons while preserving its right to peaceful nuclear energy development.

From a broader strategic perspective, the mere existence of dialogue between Washington and Tehran—despite profound mistrust, political pressure, and lingering tensions – constitutes an impressive diplomatic achievement.

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Oman’s mediation, particularly amid the escalation of violence in Gaza and Yemen and Iran’s severe economic challenges, including 40% inflation and a 55% currency devaluation over the past year, is invaluable.

Oman’s strategic motives are clear: as a small nation of about 5 million people with a GDP of \$188 billion in 2024, heavily reliant on oil and natural gas (which comprise about 70% of government revenues), Muscat has a vested interest in maintaining regional stability to foster economic development under its Vision 2040 agenda.

Its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz – a vital global oil artery through which roughly 20% of the world’s petroleum passes daily – enhances its strategic relevance.

By positioning itself as an international trade and transport hub, expanding its infrastructure in the Indian Ocean, and attracting billions in foreign investment, particularly from China (its top trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching \$40.45 billion in 2024), Oman has secured an indispensable role.

Furthermore, Muscat’s participation in security arrangements with Britain and the United States, combined with its insistence on neutrality and avoidance of regional conflicts, such as the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, the Arab boycott of Qatar, and anti-Iran alliances, enhances its credibility and diplomatic strength.

This strategic posture, coupled with its deft maneuvering between competing interests and its maintenance of open communication channels with all sides, constitutes a significant geopolitical asset.

Oman’s mediation has already played pivotal roles in restoring Iran-Iraq relations, facilitating Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, and brokering the \$6 billion prisoner exchange between the US and Iran in 2023.

Given Oman’s historical neutrality, geographic proximity, and expanding trade ties with Tehran (a 35% increase in 2024 to \$419 million), its mediation efforts are more crucial than ever.

The nuclear stakes are high: Iran, according to Politico, has dramatically increased its uranium enrichment, amassing 275 kilograms enriched to 60% – enough material for six nuclear bombs.

Thus, Oman's efforts to avert military escalation and forestall a Persian Gulf-wide conflict carry immense significance. A successful agreement would not only impose strict curbs on Iran's nuclear ambitions but would also bolster Oman's diplomatic standing and regional influence.

It would help avert a regional arms race and could even mitigate ongoing crises in Yemen, Syria, and Gaza.

Moreover, Oman's strong ties with both Iran and the United States open doors for expanded collaboration in trade, green energy, infrastructure, and initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and China's Belt and Road project, both of which promise to enhance Muscat's strategic position.

Despite external criticisms regarding its military limitations and economic vulnerabilities, Oman's ability to adapt and elevate its role beyond traditional mediation suggests it could help reshape Middle Eastern geopolitics, redrawing alliances, recalibrating threats, and redefining opportunities across both the regional and global landscape [21, 22].

Why Iran prefers Oman's mediation and Muscat as venue for US talks

Rome will host Iran-US nuclear talks on April 19 instead of Muscat

Tehran has reluctantly agreed to hold the upcoming talks with the United States in Rome rather than Muscat. However, it insists that Oman will continue to play its central mediating role, even as negotiations move to Italy.

In a live televised interview on Wednesday evening, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi downplayed the significance of the venue change. "We should not waste our time on the location and timing of the talks," he said. "We agreed to multiple changes in the location. It's not an important issue."

However, Gharibabadi stressed that Oman would continue to facilitate and mediate the negotiation in the Italian capital [23].

Oman's role as mediator and preferred host

Oman has long served as a discreet and trusted intermediary between Tehran and Washington. Its role dates back to the early 2010s, when Muscat hosted secret backchannel talks that ultimately led to the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). The United States also sees Oman as a discreet and stable mediator with a history of hosting secret talks with Tehran.

Oman played a crucial, behind-the-scenes role in facilitating the September 2023 exchange of five American detainees in Iran, widely regarded as hostages, and several Iranians held in the US who were accused or convicted of sanctions violations. The deal, brokered with Qatar's involvement, included the transfer of around \$6 billion in frozen Iranian funds from South Korea to accounts in Qatar that have not been released to Iran yet.

Geographic proximity – just a two-hour flight from Tehran – and Oman's low media profile also make it attractive to Iran. In contrast, European capitals like Vienna or Geneva pose higher risks of media exposure, diplomatic interference, and intelligence surveillance.

Additionally, holding talks in Muscat sends a domestic political signal: resistance to Western pressure, particularly from European countries aligned with Washington on contentious issues like Iran's missile program, regional policies, and sanctions [24, 25].

Tehran's concerns over security risks in European capitals

Tehran's reluctance to hold talks in Europe also stems from security concerns, particularly fears of espionage and surveillance. Iranian officials remain wary of cyber-espionage in European cities, where Western and Israeli intelligence agencies are believed to be more active.

They are especially concerned about the heightened risk of electronic surveillance targeting the Iranian delegation in hotels, diplomatic sites, and transportation hubs, as well as the possible interception of sensitive communications.

Cyber-espionage during JCPOA talks

In March 2015, senior US officials told the Wall Street Journal that American negotiators in the talks in Austria and Switzerland had been briefed about the threat of Israeli eavesdropping during the nuclear talks that led to the conclusion of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). There were media reports that then US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's top negotiator Mohammad-Javad Zarif took walks outside the venue of talks to discuss important issues to avoid eavesdropping.

A few days ahead of the final round of the talks in Vienna in June of the same year, the cybersecurity company Kaspersky reported finding a variant of the Stuxnet virus in the networks of three hotels that hosted the negotiations. The company's report said infected computers could be used to control cameras, microphones, and phone systems at these hotels to spy on the talks and delegations. Symantec, another security company, confirmed Kaspersky's findings.

"The disastrous history of Israel spying on its allies and the incompetence of Western surveillance agencies is a major concern for the Iranian delegation," said an article titled "What Makes the Decision on Venue of Nuclear Talks Complicated" published by Fararu on Thursday.

The article added that preventing leaks from European diplomats and shielding the process from Israeli or other cyber sabotage likely explains Tehran's insistence on having the Omani embassy in Rome serve as the host, even if the physical location is no longer Muscat [26, 27].

Dissident protests possible in European capitals

Another factor influencing Tehran's preference is the visibility of exiled Iranian dissident groups in Europe, including the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) and monarchist factions. These groups often mobilize large crowds to protest outside the venue of talks, creating negative optics and media coverage that Iranian officials find politically damaging.

Such protests are far less likely to occur in Oman, where dissident groups have limited reach and the government maintains tighter control over public demonstrations [28].

Expected Developments after the Israel-Iran ceasefire

The whipsaw chain of events involving Iran, Israel and the United States that culminated in a surprise ceasefire has raised many questions about how the Trump administration will approach the Middle East going forward. Yet, the answer to the bottom line question – "what's next?" – remains unknowable and unpredictable. That is because President Donald Trump has essentially sidelined the traditional US national security apparatus and confined advice and decision-making to a very small group of top aides operating from the White House.

While there is uncertainty about whether the ceasefire between Iran and Israel will hold, it opens the possibility of renewed talks with Tehran over its nuclear program and reinvigorating stalled negotiations in other conflicts [29, 30].

Watching for next steps on Trump's social media.

Outside experts, long consulted by presidential administrations on policy, have been forced like the general public to follow Trump's social media musings and pronouncements for insights on his thinking or the latest turn of events. Even Congress does not appear to be in the loop as top members were provided only cursory notifications of Trump's weekend decision to hit three Israeli nuclear facilities and briefings on their impact scheduled for Tuesday were abruptly postponed.

State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce, whose agency has played a key role in formulating Iran policy for decades, repeatedly on Tuesday deferred questions to the White House and Trump's posts.

"The secretary of state was in a dynamic with the president that is a private dynamic as that team was addressing a war and the nature of how to stop it," she told reporters. "I can't speak to how that transpired or the decisions that were made."

Trump's announcement Monday that Israel and Iran agreed to a ceasefire took many in the administration by surprise – as did his post Tuesday that China is now free to import Iranian oil.

It's an apparent 180-degree shift from Trump's "maximum pressure campaign" on Iran since he withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement during his first term. US officials were left wondering if that meant wide-ranging sanctions aimed at cutting off Iran's energy revenue were being eased or reversed [31, 32].

Assessing the damage to Iran's nuclear program. While the extent of the damage from 11 days of Israeli attacks and Saturday's strikes by US bunker-buster bombs is not yet fully known, a preliminary assessment from the Defense Intelligence Agency said the nuclear program had been set back only a few months and was not "completely and fully obliterated" as Trump has said.

According to people familiar with the report, it found that while the strikes at the Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan nuclear sites did significant damage, they were not totally destroyed.

Still, most experts believe the facilities will require months or longer to repair or reconstruct if Iran chooses to try to maintain its program at previous levels.

Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, deputy commander of US Central Command, who has been nominated to lead forces in the Middle East, told lawmakers Tuesday that Iran still possesses "significant tactical

capability” despite the American strikes. He pointed to Iran’s attempt to retaliate with missile launches at a US base in Qatar. In response to a question about whether the Iranians still pose a threat to US troops and Americans worldwide, Cooper replied, “They do.”

Trump, after announcing the ceasefire, boasted that Iran will never again have a nuclear program.

However, there are serious questions about whether Iran’s leadership, which has placed a high premium on maintaining its nuclear capabilities, will be willing to negotiate them away [33, 34].

Restarting US-Iran nuclear talks is possible.

Another major question is what happens with negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. It is not entirely clear who in Iran has the authority to make a deal or even agree to reenter talks with the US or others.

Ray Takeyh, a former State Department official and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said Iranian leadership is at a moment of disarray – making it difficult to return to the table.

“The country’s leadership and the regime is not cohesive enough to be able to come to some sort of negotiations at this point, especially negotiations from the American perspective, whose conclusion is predetermined, namely, zero enrichment,” he said. Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, agreed, saying that “the biggest challenge right now is who is in charge in Tehran.”

“Is there an Iranian negotiation team empowered to make consequential decisions?” he said. “The issue is that (Trump) is dealing with an Iranian government whose longtime identity has been based on hostility toward the United States [35].

Still, a US official said Tuesday that special envoy Steve Witkoff is ready to resume negotiations if Trump tells him to and Iran is willing. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive diplomatic matters.

Witkoff has maintained an open line of direct communication via text messages with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

In the aftermath of the US strikes, Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio both stressed that diplomacy is still Trump’s preferred method for ending the conflict permanently.

“We didn’t blow up the diplomacy,” Vance told NBC’s “Meet the Press” on Sunday. “The diplomacy never was given a real chance by the Iranians. And our hope ... is that this maybe can reset here. The Iranians have a choice. They can go down the path of peace or they can go down the path of this ridiculous brinksmanship [36].

Rubio echoed those comments.

“We’re prepared right now, if they call right now and say we want to meet, let’s talk about this, we’re prepared to do that,” he said. “The president’s made that clear from the very beginning: His preference is to deal with this issue diplomatically [37].

The Israel-Iran ceasefire could affect Trump’s approach to other conflicts. If it holds, the ceasefire could offer insight to the Trump administration as it tries to broker peace in several other significant conflicts with ties to Iran.

An end – even a temporary one – to the Iran-Israel hostilities may allow the administration to return to talks with mediators like Egypt and Qatar to seek an end to the war between Israel and the Iranian-backed militant group Hamas. In Syria, a further shift away from now-weakened Iranian influence – pervasive during ousted leader Bashar Assad’s reign – could open new doors for US-Syria cooperation. Trump already has met the leader of the new Syrian government and eased US sanctions. Similarly, tense US relations with Lebanon also could benefit from a reduced Iranian role in supporting the Hezbollah militant group, which has been a force of its own – rivaling if not outperforming the Lebanese Armed Forces, particularly near the Israeli border.

If an Iran-Israel ceasefire holds, it also could allow Trump the time and space to return to stalled efforts to broker a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine. Russia and Iran have substantial economic and military cooperation, including Tehran providing Moscow with drones that the Russian military has relied on heavily in its war against Ukraine. Russia has stepped up attacks on Ukraine in recent days as Israel attacked sites in Iran, perhaps expecting the world’s attention to shift away from its three-year-old invasion [38, 39].

Conclusion.

A critical example of preventive diplomacy in international relations is highlighted by the Muscat channel. In 2012-2013, discreet talks were held confidentially in Oman between the United States and Iran. For the first time in decades, these talks allowed for the two parties to communicate directly, and

were within a neutral setting away from the public eye. During this period, Iran's nuclear programs were evolving, as well as militarily confrontation seeming more possible. However, Muscat offered an environment where conflict was avoided, and negotiable dialogue was performed instead. This aided in preventing hostility, and instead encouraged diplomacy between the two countries.

These talks were critical in provoking the opportunity for formal consultation which would eventually involve the P5+1 nations as well. The Muscat talks were essential to address misunderstandings and move a step closer to a middle ground, which collectively forms the framework of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). As a result, this reduced the imminent danger of the nuclear proliferation occurring in the Middle East, and postponed the potential military action.

Thus, the Muscat talks must be recognized as they are a clear example of the demonstration of subtle preventive diplomacy which offered international peace and negotiations by resolving conflicts rather than confrontation and conflict.

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