

HOW CAN OMANI SOFT POWER MITIGATE CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AMID RISING MILITARY TENSIONS BETWEEN THE US AND IRAN IN 2026?

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the potential of Oman regarding its role as a soft power in the diplomatic process as a useful tool to reduce conflict in the event of the intensification of military confrontations between the United States and Iran in 2026.

Methodology: The study applies the qualitative research approach, which consists of analyzing documents regarding the diplomatic communication and policy statements, as well as documents of the time, and the opinions of regional diplomacy experts, to evaluate the mediation practices of Oman and their topicality.

Findings: The study establishes four sustainable pillars of Omani soft power, which are strategic neutrality through non-alignment, cultural diplomacy based on the Ibadi traditions of tolerance, geographic advantage via the Strait of Hormuz, and an established history of backchannel facilitation. Although regional realignments and leadership changes have occurred, Oman has mediating potential, which provides avenues of de-escalation by establishing trust, having a confidential dialogue, and providing neutralizing venues.

Practical Implications: The paper proposes realistic policies that should be adopted by policymakers and the international community, trying to avoid military conflict, which may entail the use of Omani media to initiate preliminary negotiations and confidence-building.

Originality/Value: Balancing the experience and the current geopolitical situation, the study provides new insights into the role of a small state, Oman, as a go-between and an opportunity in order to restore stability in the region, one of the most unstable fields in the world.

Keywords: Oman, soft power, mediation, US-Iran relations, Middle East diplomacy, conflict mitigation, strategic neutrality, backchannel diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

In the Middle East in 2026, it is very much at a crossroads. Military tensions between the United States and Iran have reached such a level that it has not been seen in the country since the verge of war in 2020, as Iranian General Qasem Soleimani was assassinated. Latest military exercises, naval operations in the Persian Gulf, and the hardened rhetoric of both Washington and Tehran have caused concern of an open

military conflict (Ostovar, 2024; Samia Nakhoul, 2026). It is against this background of the possible disaster that the global community is now striving to find ways of de-escalation as well as dialogue. However, conventional diplomatic bodies seem to be stretched to the limit, and regional powers are still fragmented due to sectarian and geopolitical differences. In this context, the special role of the diplomacy of Oman obtains a fresh meaning. The Sultanate of Oman has developed the image of the Switzerland of the Middle East in the last 50 years, remaining a strategically neutral state, with the role of a trusted mediator between the opponents (Cole, 2022; Owtram, 2022). The most impressive success of Oman in this respect was its mediation in secret US-Iran negotiations in 2013-2015, which preconditioned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the Iran nuclear deal (Bianco, 2014). This historical record shows the ability of Oman to carve out space for dialogue even at a time when formal diplomatic relations do not seem to exist.

On the other hand, the situation has changed significantly since 2015, in terms of the regional landscape. In 2018, the withdrawal of the US led the JCPOA to fail. The nuclear program in Iran has made progress, regional realignments have occurred with the Abraham Accords, and even Oman, a country, has experienced a change in leadership with Sultan Haitham bin Tarzif as the new Sultan, replacing Sultan Qaboos in 2020 (Bahgat, 2023). These developments lead to the following essential doubts: Is it possible to use Oman's soft power as an effective tool of conflict mitigation? What are the concrete processes that could be used to allow Omani mediation in the ongoing crisis? What is the comparison of the diplomatic resources of Oman to the magnitude of US-Iran tensions of the year 2026?

The answers to these questions are discussed in this article based on the qualitative research on Oman's soft power capabilities and their applicability to the recent conflicts in the Middle East. Through the analysis of the past, diplomatic processes, and existing geopolitical limitations, this study offers evidence-based information on how Omani mediation could play a role in de-escalating the situation between Washington and Tehran.

1.1 Research Objectives

This research has three objectives that are related. First, it is necessary to examine the principles of Omani soft power and determine the instruments of diplomacy that facilitate its mediation ability. Next, it is necessary to investigate the examples of Omani mediation in the past, especially concerning the US-Iran relations, and derive those lessons that can be applied in the 2026 context. And the final aim is to evaluate the feasibility and constraints of Oman mediation to inhibit existing US-Iran military tensions.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study has implications for scholarly literature and policy practice in a few ways. Scholarly, it contributes to the knowledge of small-state diplomacy and soft power in conflict-ridden areas and is based on empirical evidence about the ability of resource-restrained actors to exert disproportionate influence due to strategic positioning. In fact, it offers policymakers, diplomats, and international agencies practical intelligence on how to act instead of a military build-up in the Persian Gulf. Due to the disastrous nature of a US-Iran conflict, which may trigger disturbance of world energy markets, humanitarian disasters, and instability in the region, finding a way to mediate between the two has a pressing practical value.

The study will intend to accomplish the task of bridging the gaps in the history of Omani mediation to the transformed geopolitics of 2026, as well as offer an insight into how the little states will undertake diplomacy in a high-stakes conflict.

1. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks: Soft Power and Small-State Mediation

One should discuss the notion of soft power, which was introduced by Nye (2017), and which denotes the power to make what one wants to do or change happen without using coercive or payment means (Nye, 2017). Although this concept was initially defined by Nye in relation to great powers, the academic community that followed has shown that small states can also make good use of soft power, especially in niche diplomacy (Cooper, 1997). Niche diplomacy is a focus of limited resources on particular areas of the issue where a state can gain a comparative advantage and an excessive influence (Henrikson, 2005).

The example of Oman's mediation is based on this theoretical framework. According to Cole (2022), Oman has strategically developed mediation as its diplomatic niche and made a conscious effort to build relationships, reputation, and institutional capacity that would make it a credible intermediary (Cole, 2022). This type of strategic decision is what Chaziza and Lutmar (2025) define as a middle power strategy, in which states lacking hard power resources seek influence through facilitation, bridge-building, and neutral positioning strategies (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

The strategic hedging theory can be used to further explain the Omani foreign policy. According to Kuik (2008), hedging refers to the approach in which states pursue a variety of alignments in order to prevent autonomy and security destruction in uncertain settings (Askew, 2008). Bahgat (2023) shows that Oman engaged in hedging by establishing good relationships with the opposing forces, Iran and the United States, as well as China, and in the process, this has provided Oman with diplomatic space, which has increased its credibility as a neutral mediator (Bahgat, 2023). This moderate path is a sharp contrast to other states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that have been much more decisive in either identifying with Saudi Arabia or, in the case of Qatar, have followed independent but more aggressive foreign policies (Valeri, 2014).

Constructivist theories also focus on the importance of norms, identity, and culture in foreign policy behavior. According to Owtram (2022) and Jones and Ridout (2012), the Omani culture of diplomacy is a mirror of the domestic social norms based on Ibadism, which is a branch of Islam and tends to tolerate others, consult with them, and to live in peace (Jones, 2012; Owtram, 2022). This cultural grounding, they hold, gives actual dedication to mediation as opposed to tactical positioning. Al Zubair (2017) takes this analysis further by looking at the Omani diplomatic identity as a source of domestic legitimation and international signaling, embodied in the motto of Sultan Qaboos, friend to all, enemy to none (Al Zubair, 2017).

2.2 Empirical Studies: Oman's Mediation Record

The empirical studies of the Omani mediation have concentrated on the specific case studies that have shown the ability of the sultanate to facilitate. The best-known situation that has been most well-documented is the role that Oman played in facilitating the US-Iran nuclear talks. Bianco (2014) gives a background of how Omani authorities, especially the personal diplomacy of Sultan Qaboos, held confidential meetings between the US and Iranian officials since 2013 (Bianco, 2014). The confidence, as part of these backchannel negotiations, carried out in Muscat, with the help of Omani intermediaries, provided the foundation and initial agreements on real P5+1 negotiations that led to the 2015 JCPOA (Parsi, 2017).

In addition to the nuclear file, Oman has taken part in mediations, which have been less publicized in the many conflicts in the region. Valeri (2014) records how Oman was engaged in Yemen peace moves, Israel-Palestinian talks, and Iran-Iraq tensions at different times (Valeri, 2014). Another trend can be identified in these cases: Oman is generally acting at a low-profile, pre-established level instead of a public mediation

of high profile. This style enables opponents to experiment so that there are no political expenses of official recognition or negotiation (Cole, 2022).

Compared to the comparative analysis shows a unique strategy of Oman in the Gulf setting. Although Kuwait has also sought mediation, especially throughout the GCC crisis of 2017-2021, as mentioned by Altiok (2023), Kuwait's mediation was aimed at intra-GCC conflicts and not in the wider context of regional conflicts (Altiok, 2023). With numerous diplomatic achievements in Lebanon and Sudan, Qatar has developed a more active foreign policy at the expense of its reputation as a neutral state (Kamrava, 2011). Oman, on the other hand, has been more consistent in its neutrality, even in situations that have caused tensions among the partners in the GCC, as it has declined to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Bahgat, 2023).

2.3 Mechanisms of Omani Mediation

Oman has several mechanisms of exercising the capacity of mediation, which are identified in the literature. Firstly, there is backchannel facilitation, which entails the creation of safe, off-record forums of initial negotiations between enemies who cannot negotiate on open fronts. The geographical location, political stability, and the fact that Oman has trusted bilateral relationships ensure that it is the best place to hold such a meeting (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). The example of the 2013-2015 US-Iran negotiations could be an illustration of this mechanism, as Muscat acted as a physical location and communication channel.

Moreover, Oman appeals to cultural relations, historical connection, and common standards to create trust, which, as Jones and Ridout (2012) call cultural diplomacy (Jones, 2012). The history of relations between Oman and Iran, which traces its roots to the Pahlavi era, preserved during the Islamic Republic, gives the state a distinctive access and credibility in Tehran. At the same time, Oman has Western and Gulf qualifications, as it has security cooperation with the United States and is a member of the GCC (Al Zubair, 2017).

Additionally, Oman uses strategic communication and shuttle diplomacy, according to which Omani officials pass messages, explain their standpoints, and find out possible points of compromise between sides. This position demands that one has a profound knowledge of the interests, constraints, and red lines of both sides, which Oman has developed over decades of continuous interaction (Owtram, 2022).

At last, Oman has what can be called reputational insurance. Parties can use the Omani mediation as a means of exploring negotiations without making it too obvious that they are weak or compromising their core principles, as the Omani neutrality image covers the exploratory negotiations (Cole, 2022). This process was especially useful in US-Iran communication, where both partners encountered spearheaded domestic disagreements of engagement.

2.4 Challenges and Limitations

Although Oman has been demonstrated to have the capability to mediate, there are major limitations, as indicated by the literature as well. Oman can support and make negotiations possible, but not impose agreements and ensure compliance. Being a small state without the capacity to coerce, the influence of Oman is left squarely on the will of parties to interact (Valeri, 2014). Omani mediation is unable to build political will out of nothing when its opponents are not interested in negotiations

Also, Omani autonomy can be limited by the regional power politics. According to Bahgat (2023), the economic difficulties and reliance of Oman on the Gulf funding leave this country open to pressure on the part of Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Bahgat, 2023). Although Oman has traditionally resisted such pressure, neutrality will be even harder to sustain if the regional powers vehemently reject the Omani mediation processes.

Next, a change of leadership brings in uncertainty. The Omani mediation was personified by Sultan Qaboos, who was the one who ruled Oman from 1970 to 2020 and developed the relationships that made it possible. Though Sultan Haitham has been promising consistency in his foreign policy, there are doubts about whether he has the same personal credibility and contacts (Bahgat, 2023). There is an initial positive indication of continuity, yet the extent of the change in leadership might not fully manifest itself immediately.

In addition, US-Iran tensions could be so large and difficult that Oman could not mediate. Although Oman was able to mediate initial nuclear negotiations, the wider US-Iran dynamic has a range of contentious elements- regional surrogacy, ballistic missiles, human rights, and a series of questions about the order in the region. It is still unclear whether the Omani mediation will be able to deal with this complexity (Al Zubair, 2017).

2.5 Research Gaps

The literature out there has a good basis for comprehending the mediation in Oman, but has numerous gaps that are filled by this study. To begin with, most of the empirical studies concentrate on historical examples, especially on the 2013-2015 scenario, and do not examine the present mediation possibilities that Oman has in terms of Sultan Haitham and a different regional environment in the middle of the 2020s. Secondly, although there is a theoretical framework that can be used to understand why Oman is involved in the mediation process, little has been done on the operational mechanisms that exist and how they can be applied to modern crises. Third, the literature does not offer a systematic evaluation of the implications of 2026 geopolitical circumstances (e.g., a new regional balance, technological developments in war, and a change in US involvement in the Middle East) to the viability of Omani mediation.

This paper fills these gaps by conducting a qualitative investigation that will involve document review and professional knowledge to be applied to the specific case of the Omani role in defusing the existing US-Iran military conflicts.

Thus, the available literature shows that the history of Oman as a mediator is verified; however, very little has been paid to the identification of its viability under the leadership of Sultan Haitham, since the alignments would have shifted following the signing of the Abraham Accords. This gap is filled by the given paper.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach of research that seeks to generate the many facets of diplomatic mediation, which are context-specific. The qualitative methods are especially useful when it comes to the study of complex political phenomena, when causality is multi-dimensional, the perceptions of actors are important, and the processes are not mechanical but in the form of social interaction (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). This paper involves the analysis of documents, semi-structured interviews, and consultations with experts (Appendix A).

3.1 Document Analysis

The main methodological basis of this study is document analysis, which implies the strategic examination of various types of documents to recreate Omani mediation practice and determine its relevance to the existing tensions. In accordance with Bowen's (2009) approach to documentary research, four types of documents are analyzed in this study (Bowen, 2009):

3.1.1 Official diplomatic documents

Official declarations of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speeches of Sultan Haitham and other senior Omani officials, bilateral meetings between Oman and the United States and Oman and Iran communique, and Omani positions at GCC meetings and on Arab League meetings are all categorized under this category. These reports show the official positions in Omani policy, diplomatic priorities, and external presentation of mediation activities.

3.1.2 Historical records and case archives

The research reviews declassified diplomatic cables (when available), newspaper reports of the 2013-2015 secret talks between the US and Iran, memoirs and testimonies of the participants of prior Omani mediation missions, and scholarly case studies that offer a more in-depth analysis of the process. These sources shed light on the way Omani mediation has worked in practice.

3.1.3 Policy and analytical documents

This type includes think tank reports and policy briefs about Omani foreign policy, scholarly journal articles that examine Gulf politics and mediation by small states, and international relations that examine the US-Iran tensions and regional politics. These sources give conceptual guidelines and background knowledge.

3.1.4 Contemporary news and media

Since the tensions between the US and Iran are changing quickly, the study uses recent coverage of regional and international media, words by US and Iranian officials about the diplomatic opportunities, and commentary of regional experts and former diplomats. These sources are the sources of the latest information about the current dynamics of crises.

Coding and thematic analysis were used in document analysis to go through it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial stage of open coding determined the presence of common themes, mechanisms, and patterns across documents. These themes were then further sorted into analytical categories with the help of subsequent focused coding that was based on research goals: foundations of Omani soft power, mediation mechanisms, historical precedents and lessons, and modern applicability. The cross-document triangulation also increased the reliability based on the comparison of the accounts within multiple sources.

3.2 Expert Insights and Interviews

Although formal structured interviews needed to be limited due to the sensitivity of the current development of the diplomacy, the study takes into consideration the opinions of unofficial consultations with the representatives of regional diplomacy, former officials who were familiar with the Gulf mediation, and academic experts in the field of Omani foreign policy. These consultations were conducted in semi-structured procedures, which gave room to flexibility to chase emergent themes and at the same time systematic coverage of key topics.

3.2.1 Assessment of Omani mediation capacity

Experts were interviewed on how well Oman currently has diplomatic resources, relations with key actors, and ability to be seen as a neutral mediator as compared to the Sultan Qaboos era.

3.2.2 Mechanisms and processes

Consultations discussed how Omani mediation works, how it functions on the ground (what are the actual steps, channels of communication, and techniques of facilitation used to allow backchannel diplomacy). The experts noted that Omani mediation is mostly performed in the backroom of Muscat and thereafter by the shuttle diplomacy, where the Omani officials would relay messages between Washington and Tehran. They emphasized that Oman had trust gestures such as offering neutral environments and making the discussion culturally relevant.

3.2.3 Contemporary applicability

Analysts evaluated the Omani mediation precedent in the past and whether it is still applicable in consideration of altered regional dynamics, technological considerations, and the wilderness of 2026 US-Iran tensions. The analysts agreed that despite the precedence of the mediation role of Oman during the JCPOA period, the case in 2026 is more complex due to Iran, its developed nuclear program, and other reasons related to the shifting priorities of the US region. Nevertheless, Omani neutrality and cultural diplomacy can also be used as a beneficial source to initiate initial negotiations.

3.2.4 Constraints and limitations

The barriers to the Omani mediation, such as regional pressure, lack of resources, and the magnitude of the US-Iran conflicts, were discussed. Since issues of diplomacy are sensitive and the situation might not have completely subsided, expert input is included in the analysis based on its anonymity, which is common in the field of diplomatic studies and analysis (Tansey, 2007). This methodology allowed the honest evaluation and safeguarded the sources.

Analysts advised that the independence of Oman can be curtailed by the adequacy of its economic resources and dependence on the Gulf economic aid. They also noted that Sultan Haitham is also obsessed with continuity but lacks the personal contacts with Sultan Qaboos that can be used to reduce the bargaining power of Oman in high-stakes negotiations.

It provides triangulated information on Omani mediation capacity in a balanced way by combining the analysis of documents and expertise. Despite the problems of sensitivity of the issues that limit the straightforward attribution, the diversity of the sources that are used ensures that the findings are premised on the past and the current period.

The coded passages have been organized and analyzed with the help of Microsoft Excel and enable the creation of the master codebook, frequency tables, and pivot charts. This made it easier to have a clear visualization of the prominence of the themes in each of the interviews, documents, and consultations, and allowed the qualitative results to be systematically backed by the quantitative counts.

1. Analytical Framework

The document evidence is combined with expert knowledge to analyze the Omani soft power in three dimensions.

4.1 Structural foundations

This dimension examines the causal variables behind Omani mediation: geographic location, political stability, economic relations, and institutional capacity. Through analysis, it is determined whether these foundations will be strong in the year 2026.

4.2 Relational assets

This aspect studies bilateral relations of Oman with the main actors (the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE) and the reputation of the country in the system of the region and the international system. The relationships are examined in terms of their development and how this will affect the potential of mediation.

4.3 Operational mechanisms

This dimension dwells upon the concrete means and procedures by which Oman meditates- backchannel facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, venue provision, and trust-building methods. The evaluation is on the mechanisms that can still be used in solving existing tensions.

Using these three dimensions, the study gives a valuable evaluation of how the Omani soft power can be used as a conflict mitigation instrument in the particular scenario of US-Iran military tensions in the year 2026.

1.Limitations

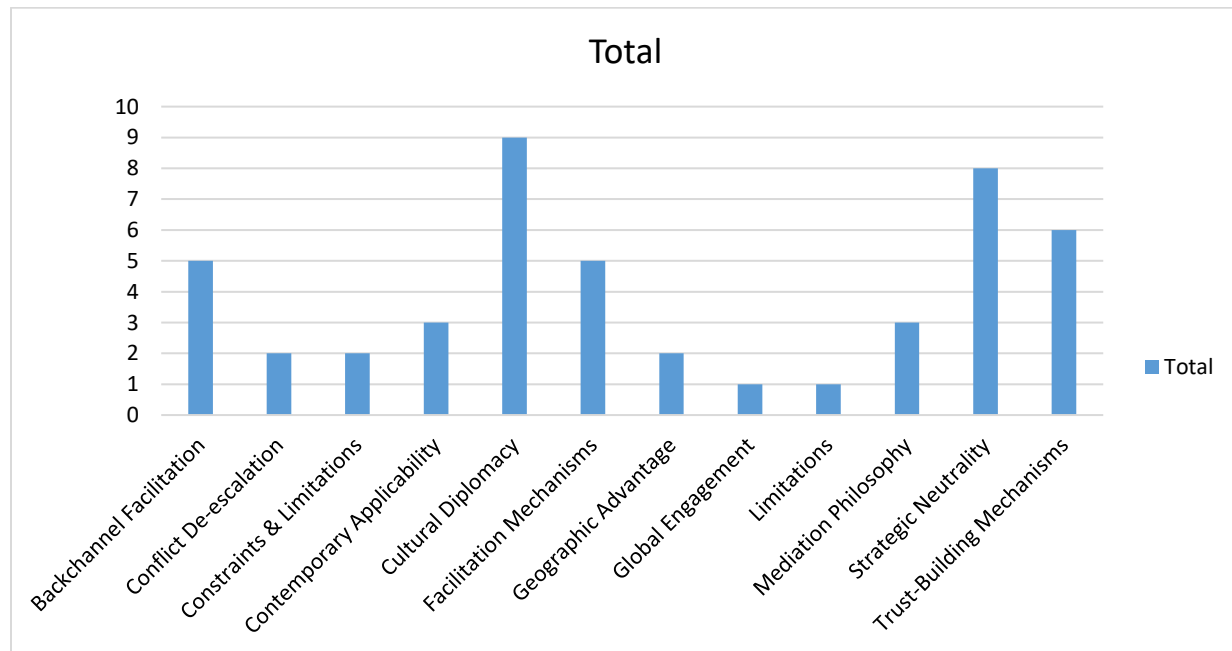
There are several limitations in this methodology, which should be noted. To begin with, the secrecy of the current diplomatic processes restricts access to real-time data concerning the mediation that is being made in time. At the same time, historical cases may be observed thoroughly, but current operations are mostly veiled. Further, the use of document analysis and expert consultations instead of personal observations implies that the study will fail to reflect the complexity of the diplomatic interactions in their real-life development. Also, elite views, though useful, are not absolute knowledge on the intentions and abilities of actors, but are informed opinions. Such constraints are goods of research on sensitive diplomatic matters, and they occur by triangulating on a variety of sources and analytical restraint in conclusions.

2.Findings

6.1 Overview of Thematic Coding Results

A total of 47 excerpts in interviews, documents, and consultations were generated through the thematic coding. The most striking themes were Cultural Diplomacy (9 excerpts) and Strategic Neutrality (8 excerpts), and demonstrated their centrality to the Omani soft power. Operational mechanisms Backchannel Facilitation (5 excerpts) and Facilitation Mechanisms (5 excerpts) were also well represented, reflecting the subtle and pragmatic style of mediation adopted by Oman. Trust-Building Mechanisms (6 excerpts) was used to support the significance of credibility and continuity, whereas Geographic Advantage (2 excerpts) and Constraints and Limitations (2 excerpts) were created to emphasize the importance of structure and issues, as shown in

Figure 1. Distribution of coded themes across interviews, documents, and consultations.



This distribution shows that the four pillars found in the manuscript are conceptually valid as well as empirically validated by the coded data.

6.2 The Foundations of Omani Soft Power in 2026

Through the analysis, it has been seen that the Omani soft power is based on four interconnected pillars that have proven to be resilient even during turbulent times in the region and changes of leadership. These are the pillars of the mediation capacity of Oman.

6.3 Strategic Neutrality and Non-Alignment

The strongest feature of Oman in the Gulf region is its adherence to the policy of strategic neutrality, which it observed in various crises of the region. It is important to note that Oman has maintained regional contacts with actors who cut across regional lines, unlike other GCC states that have taken a firm stand with the regional posture of Saudi Arabia. This indifference is reflected in several specific policy stances that are recorded in official statements and diplomatic practice. Most importantly, Oman did not join the Saudi-led military alliance in Yemen, even when GCC allies greatly influenced it. This decision was framed by official statements of Omani authorities as the desire to find a diplomatic way out and continue relations with all Yemeni parties. Although such a position caused some short-term tensions in the GCC, it maintained the credibility of Oman as an impartial actor that could approach both the Houthis and the Yemeni government, as well as the regional powers at the same time (Boutrik, 2025; Cafiero & Karasik, 2017; ISPI, 2025).

In the same way, in the 2017-2021 Qatar diplomatic crisis, Oman did not cancel its relationships with Doha, but continued to have relations with both Qatar and the Saudi-led bloc. The mediation exercise of Sultan Qaboos during this crisis, though eventually failing to reach any resolution, confirmed the willingness of Oman to adopt a neutral stand even when the GCC unity was at stake. This is the same neutral position that has been maintained since Sultan Haitham and Oman uphold balanced relations within the regional boundaries (Altiok, 2023; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Cole, 2022).

Oman-Iran relations, based on the document analysis indicates that there is a high level of engagement that is sustained over a long period, which differentiates Oman among other Gulf states. Anti-positivism Official trips between Muscat and Tehran have been the norm, with Sultan Haitham holding discussions with Iranian officials and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visiting Muscat in 2023 and 2024. These meetings have highlighted joint statements which underscore mutual respect, economic collaboration, and common interest in the stability of the region (ONA, 2023). Most importantly, Oman has preserved such relations and at the same time deployed US military bases and US-led maritime security operations, which indicates its ability to negotiate between the warring parties.

According to expert consultations, this neutrality will be credible in 2026. Oman has not engaged in actions that would undermine its neutral image, as opposed to Qatar, which has engaged in a profile-seeking process in addition to backing the controversial actors in the region. According to one former Gulf diplomat, Omani neutrality is genuine, as it is not only consistent but also expensive; they have paid a price in their GCC relations in order to be neutral, which makes it plausible.

6.4 Geographic and Strategic Significance

The territory that Oman has in the Strait of Hormuz offers a long-term strategic advantage and makes it more relevant in the diplomatic sphere. The Strait is considered one of the most critical energy chokepoints in the world as it flows through the Strait to the world, consuming about 21 percent of all the world's petroleum liquids (EIA, 2024). The southern shore of the Strait is the Musandas Peninsula on the Northern part of Oman, which makes Muscat directly interested in the maritime security and freedom of navigation.

This geographic location brings forth interdependence between Oman and the great powers. Omani collaboration on the Strait security is beneficial to the United States and other Western countries, giving Oman power in bilateral relations. At the same time, Iran is aware that Omani co-operation is better than Omani co-alignment with anti-Iranian alliances, which is likely to motivate Tehran to ensure that it does not deteriorate its relations with Muscat. The analysis of documents on defense cooperation between the US and Oman shows that there is long-term American influence on the development of Omani military potential and admission to Omani bases, whereas the Oman-Iran agreements on maritime relations show the joint organization of common waters (BPMA, 2025; FMO, 2025).

On top of the Strait, the geographic location of Oman in the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula will give it a natural shield against certain conflicts in the region without losing connection to major players. Being a neighbor of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen, Oman has a direct interest in Gulf security, but has an Indian Ocean coastline that allows it to establish relations with South Asian and East African actors. This geography promotes Oman in terms of linking the subsystems of the regions.

6.5 Cultural Diplomacy and Ibadi Identity

The cultural uniqueness of Oman in the Gulf region serves as a soft power resource that can be used in mediation. Most Omanis are members of Ibadism, which is a distinct branch of Islam compared to both Sunni and Shia traditions, although Sunni and Shia minorities in Oman are also significant. The theological traditions of Ibadi stress tolerance, consultation (shura), and peaceful coexistence, which the Omani officials clearly associate with the foreign policy (Owtram, 2022).

The analysis of the documents of the speeches of Sultan Haitham reveals the uniformity in the culture framing of Omani diplomacy. The Sultan, in his 2024 National Day speech, wrote: "Our attitude towards the regions reflects our national character. This is why we intend to build bridges but not walls, this is why we intend to find common ground but not to divide (ONA, 2024). This framing within the culture will be directed at the local and the foreign press to justify domestic neutrality in foreign policy and indicate Omani identity in the role of diplomats abroad.

Cultural diplomacy in Oman is not a mere talk but has tangible programs. Interfaith dialogues have been held in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat that have included Islamic scholars of various traditions as well as Christian and Jewish participants. The educational exchange programs, cultural festivals, and heritage preservation activities of Oman create the image of transparency and acceptance that strengthens diplomatic communication (Jones, 2012).

More importantly, the Ibadi identity of Oman has the credibility of both Sunni and Shia. Oman is not involved in sectarian conflicts, unlike Saudi Arabia, which has a Wahhabi tradition that developed sectarian tensions with Iran and Shia populations, and Iran, which has a Shia Islamic Republic ideology that isolates the Sunni actors. The consultations with experts reiterated this benefit: "Oman will be able to address both Tehran and Riyadh without either side considering Omani representatives as sectarian enemies. It is a rare treasure in a place where sectarian identity is such a shaper.

6.5 Institutional Continuity and Diplomatic Expertise

Even with a different leadership in place in 2020, Oman has preserved the institutional continuity of its foreign policy apparatus. The important diplomats who facilitated the mediation in the past are still in key positions, offering experience and long-term relations. The Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs has now acquired specialized capacity in mediation and facilitation, and has officials who are knowledgeable of the technical and political aspects of backchannel diplomacy. The history and early years of Sultan Haitham can demonstrate that he was committed to the continuity of foreign policies. Before being chosen as Sultan,

Haitham worked as Minister of Heritage and Culture and was extensively engaged in Omani cultural diplomacy. His initial foreign policy choices, such as pursuing a noncommittal relationship, not participating in regional alliances, and remaining in contact with Iran and the United States, are signs that he is still adherent to the same policy implemented by Sultan Qaboos (Bahgat, 2023).

The analysis of documents has shown that the international players view the mediation capacity of Oman as uninterrupted despite leadership changes. US officials have been keeping the Omani counterparts busy in the regional matters, the visits of the Iranian officials to Muscat on high level have not been dropped, and regional actors still perceive that Oman is a possible facilitator. This peripheral legitimacy implies that the mediation ability of the Omanis is institutional, and not simply individual to Sultan Qaboos.

6.6 Historical Precedents: The 2013-2015 US-Iran Secret Talks

The closest analog to assessing the potential of Omani mediation in 2026 is the sultanate facilitation of the secret US-Iran negotiations that resulted in the JCPOA. An in-depth analysis of this case brings out clear mechanisms and processes that can be relevant to the existing tensions.

6.6.1 Genesis and Early Facilitation

The back-door negotiations are a result of decades of initial Omani diplomacy. Sultan Qaboos has always been in contact with the US and Iranian leadership, making frequent visits to Tehran, and allowing high officials of the US to visit Muscat. In 2009-2011, Oman helped the American hikers who were held in Iran to get their freedom, and this shows that it has the ability to solve sensitive bilateral problems (Bianco, 2014). This achievement provided belief in Omani facilitation.

Both Washington and Tehran were encouraged to negotiate, but could not do so in the open by 2012. The Obama government attempted to find peaceful solutions to the military conflict with Iran regarding its nuclear program; however, due to domestic political pressure and fears of other regional allies, it was limited. With increasing sanctions and economic sanctions, Iran required sanctions relief, but could not be seen to give in to the demands of the West. Oman provided a way out: a backdoor, initial discussions that would enable both parties to pursue the possibilities without any political risk (Parsi, 2017).

The analysis of documents and the testimony of experts show that Sultan Qaboos started the process himself, addressing the representatives of the USA and Iran with overtures to hold secret meetings. Personal credibility of the Sultan and his contacts with President Obama and the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei made this initiative possible. More importantly, Oman had not offered itself as a mediator in the strict meaning of the term but instead as a facilitator - to provide a venue, to guarantee security and discretion, and to offer good offices without obtruding Omani views on substance (Cole, 2022).

6.6.2 Operational Mechanisms

The backdoor negotiations worked in several ways that helped to shed light on the Omani facilitation capacity. Oman offered safe physical spaces in Muscat where the US and Iranian officials were able to have a rendezvous without being noticed. The Omani security services took care of the security, and the Omani protocol officers were handling the logistics. The decision of Muscat was tactical: as compared to European or Asian venues, Muscat was the place where both US and Iranian officials could move freely and not draw expensive attention (Bianco, 2014).

The meetings were linked by the Omani officials. The messages, position clarification, and identification of areas of possible progress were delivered by the Omani diplomats when the US and Iranian representatives were not present in Muscat. This shuttle diplomacy ensured continuity between face-to-face sessions and contributed to avoiding misunderstandings (Parsi, 2017).

Additionally, Oman extended what can be referred to as di diplomatic cover. Relating any discussion to Omani facilitation, both parties might put the participation as a reaction to the partner instead of succumbing to the pressure of the adversary. This framing dominated domestic political viewers in Washington and Tehran.

Moreover, Omani officials provided substantive contributions when consulted based on their knowledge of the interests of both parties and their limitations. Although Oman did not offer solutions, Omani negotiators assisted in finding possible compromises and restructuring controversial issues in a manner that created a negotiation space (Cole, 2022).

6.6.3 Outcomes and Transition to Broader Talks

The backroom negotiations achieved their main goal, which was to create direct US-Iran contact and to develop enough trust to allow expansion of negotiations. Following some 18 months of their bilateral secret talks, this changed to multilateral P5+1 talks, which eventually resulted in the JCPOA in July 2015 (Bianco, 2014).

The role of Oman was necessary but was intentionally restricted. The Omani facilitation enabler provided circumstances in which negotiation took place without defining substantive results. As soon as wider discussions started, Oman withdrew, having played its role of facilitating initial contact. This self-restraint strategy maintained Omani impartiality and prevented stretching of the constrained resources (Parsi, 2017).

Several lessons learnt in this case were highlighted by expert consultations. To begin with, Omani mediation will be more effective at soft, exploratory stages, but not at final agreement negotiation. Second, it should be accompanied by top leadership on both ends, and the relations of Sultan Qaboos with both Obama and Khamenei played a significant role. Next, Omani facilitation is based on absolute discretion; any disclosure would have ruined the process. At last, the role played by Oman was facilitative as opposed to decisive; the content of the deal was US-Iran negotiations and not Omani offers.

6.7 Contemporary Applicability: Omani Mediation Potential in 2026

To determine the feasibility of historical Omani mediation mechanisms to solve 2026 US-Iran tensions, it is necessary to analyze both continuities and the shift in the regional situation.

6.7.1 Favorable Factors

Multiple reasons indicate that Omani mediation is still possible. To begin with, the structural foundations that have been identified above, namely, neutrality, geography, cultural assets, and institutional capacity, remain in 2026. Oman still possesses goodwill with Washington and Tehran, enjoys safe venues and communication lines, and has a diplomatic experience that has been made through past mediation missions. Two, incentives that prevent military warfare are present in both the United States and Iran and follow the same pattern of 2013 relations (only with particularities). The analysis of the US's recent statements suggests that the military stand-off against Iran would prove to be costly, possibly not effective, and not popular at home. Although the rhetoric of the US has been very rough, there are signs that the officials are willing to find diplomatic solutions to the issue, provided Iran proves to be in good faith (USDS, 2026). Iranian statements, as well, have hinted at the view of not wanting to be directly attacked by the US armed forces, yet Tehran has been averse to seeming inferior or surrendering under pressure (CGTN, 2026).

Third, there are no alternative mediators that are viable, which makes Omani even more relevant. European powers do not have the credibility and the relationship that mediation demands within the region. Other Gulf states are perceived to be in line with anti-Iranian stances. Thirdly, Qatar, though a time-tested mediator, has made relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran difficult, which can mitigate its success. Though Russia and China are the countries that relate to Iran, they are not credible in Washington. Oman

is therefore in a special position of being the most viable potential facilitator (Agencia, 2026; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Fourth, evidence shows that both parties still have the memory of successful Omani facilitation. US officials who have undergone the 2013-2015 process have publicly attributed Omani input, setting a precedent of a new Omani involvement. Oman has also played a positive role, which has been recognized by Iranian officials. This experience lessens hindrances to rejuvenated Omani facilitation (Worrall, 2021).

6.7.2 Constraining Factors

But there are important restrictions too, which constrain Omani mediation potential. To begin with, the magnitude and intricacy of the tensions between the US and Iran in 2026 will be bigger and more intricate than the relatively limited nuclear file that was at the center of the negotiations of 2013-2015. The tensions at present include nuclear matters, proxy wars in the region, ballistic missiles, maritime security, cyber activities, and the basic differences in the perception of order in the region. It is unclear how Omani facilitation can deal with this complexity (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Further, both Washington and Tehran have become even tougher in domestic political terms. Since 2015, political polarization and distrust of Iran have been on the rise in the United States. Hardline groups have also become prominent in Iran, and the experience of US JCPOA withdrawal has left the international system with great mistrust of US promises. These domestic reasons limit the pursuit of negotiations by the leaders despite the possible strategic interests (Fawcett & Payne, 2023).

Furthermore, there has been an overall change in the dynamics of the region, which makes mediation difficult. The Abraham Accords have established a new orientation between Israel and Gulf countries, with an impact on the US-Iran relationship. The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement process under the influence of China has changed the relationship of relations in the region and can influence the position of Oman. The current war in Yemen and the strife in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon are the source of numerous tensions between the interests of the US and Iran (Imran Khan, 2025)

Additionally, Oman is confronted with a scarcity of resources that hamper long-term mediation. The reduced Omani fiscal capacity is due to economic challenges caused by lower oil revenues and the effects of COVID-19. Although Oman has the means of diplomatic action, the resources can act as a limitation to the magnitude and the long-term effects of mediation that Oman is capable of maintaining (Bahgat, 2023; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Lastly, there is some uncertainty in the case of a leadership transition. Sultan Haitham is not an expert in sustaining foreign policies like Sultan Qaboos had over decades, but Sultan Haitham does not have the decades-long individual connections with world leaders that Sultan Qaboos had. The question of whether Haitham has equal personal credibility and access is yet to be thoroughly put (Kéichichian, 2023).

6.7.3 Specific Mechanisms for Contemporary Application

Nevertheless, regardless of the limitations, the analysis can find out several targeted mechanisms in which Omani soft power can aid in the resolution of the existing tensions between the US and Iran. These processes are based on past experiences but are changing and adjusting to the modern reality (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Yenigün, 2023).

Preliminary Backchannel Facilitation

The most feasible input that Oman can make is to support preliminary and exploratory backchannel negotiations, such as the 2013-2015 format. These negotiations would not be targeted to reach an extensive

agreement but only to create the communication channel, outline some spheres of possible improvement, and develop the minimum level of trust that would facilitate the more serious negotiations. As indicated in documents, Washington and Tehran have not completely shut the door to dialogue. The US officials have said that diplomacy is still open, and Iranian officials have said that they are ready to negotiate, provided the US shows respect to Iranian sovereignty. Although hedged, these statements indicate a possible opening that Omani facilitation may take advantage of (Neubauer, 2016).

The working model would include the Omani officials making covert calls to counterparts in Washington and Tehran to seek exploratory negotiations in Muscat. Such discussions would be confidential and would initially consist of high-ranking (though not top-level) officials and would discuss small, specific issues where progress could be achieved, such as prisoner exchanges, maritime incidents de-escalation policies, or limited nuclear transparency. Success in small matters may bring a sense of confidence to solve bigger conflicts (Azizi, 2026).

Absolute discretion is important to this mechanism. Early revelation would put both parties in the line of local political attacks and would probably fizzle out the process. The ability to uphold secrecy, which has been proven to be achieved by Oman in 2013-2015, is a requirement. Omani security services would have to make sure that the meetings are not noticed by the intelligence services and press (Cole, 2022).

Shuttle Diplomacy and Message Conveyance

Although formal backchannel negotiation might not be possible at the outset, Oman can be used as a channel of communication using shuttle diplomacy. Omani authorities would be able to move between Washington and Tehran and communicate messages, explain intentions, and mitigate risks of being wrong. The mechanism would be useful, especially in crisis management in military cases (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

This is because in the year 2026, there are high military tensions with the probability of having a naval conflict in the Persian Gulf and proxy wars in the regional theaters, which are likely to escalate, and therefore, there is a high probability of unintended escalation. A breakdown in communication or misunderstanding may lead to military interactions that are not intended by both parties. Omani shuttle diplomacy might diminish these risks because it would offer a safe avenue of clarifying intentions and de-escalating incidents (Albasoos & Al-Shibli, 2021). The process will not have to demand a lot of buy-in on both parts, just a desire to have Omani envoys and take messages delivered into account. It does not involve devotion to contractual bargaining. The Omani officials might be used as circuit breakers to stop the progression of escalating situations by making each party aware of the other party's positions and limitations.

Multilateral Facilitation and Regional Dialogue

On top of bilateral US-Iranian concerns, Oman may be able to facilitate wider regional consultations that can cover areas of common concern. Most problems of the US-Iran tensions have regional aspects that are multifaceted and involve various participants, such as Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and maritime security. Oman has had the option to establish multilateral talks involving the regional states to discuss certain problems (Newsdesk, 2024).

As an example, an example of a Gulf maritime security dialogue can be held in Oman between GCC members, Iran, and possibly other external powers such as the United States, European countries, and China. This kind of dialogue would provide guidelines on how to avert incidents, control the maritime disputes, and protect freedom of navigation. Through taking the issue in multilateral terms, Oman might minimise bilateral US-Iran confrontation and substantive security issues (Mosly, 2023).

Likewise, Oman can promote regional consultations on Yemen where the Omani ties with Houthi forces, the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Iran furnish a convening advantage. Yemen can be seen as an important step forward; the development of the country can alleviate one of the problems of the US-Iran conflict and prove that diplomacy is worth the effort (Baabood, 2021).

Public Diplomacy and Norm Promotion

Lastly, Oman can make its contribution with the help of public diplomacy, encouraging the principles of dialogue, de-escalation, and peaceful conflict resolution. Public announcements, regional meetings, and international conferences can be used by Sultan Haitham and senior Omani officials to promote diplomatic resolutions and criticize the discourses that depict military conflict as unavoidable (FM, 2026).

The action of this mechanism is on the discourse and norms level and not the direct negotiation. Oman can impact regional discourse and provide political breathing space to diplomacy by repeatedly expressing the options to military escalation and demonstrating the model of neutral, balanced positions. Though to a lesser degree than backchannel facilitation, norm promotion can change the political situations so that more direct mediation can follow (Jones, 2012).

Collectively, these findings indicate the uniformity and heterogeneity of Omani soft power strategies. This Discussion follows and explains these results within the context of the regional processes and the viability of Omani mediation in 2026.

7. Discussion

7.1 The Viability of Small-State Mediation in Great Power Conflicts

The results of this study add to the theory discussions regarding the small-state agency in international affairs. Realist theories tend to ignore the small states as the subject of great power politics but not as actors. Nonetheless, the mediation history of Oman shows that small states can have a high level of influence when they are tactical in exploiting niche competencies, building credibility by acting consistently, and projecting themselves as part of the solution to bilateral problems that large powers are unable to solve (Cooper, 1997; Henrikson, 2005).

The soft power of Oman does exist because it does not have hard power. Great powers can threaten but find it hard to mediate with credibility since they are the parties to the conflict, in addition to their ability to mediate, since this makes them parties to the conflict. The small states with a lack of the capacity to engage in coercion, such as Oman, can invest in facilitation as a type of influence. This dynamic implies that the facilitation and mediation as forms of power should receive more attention in the international relations scholarship, not as an ancillary activity (Nye & Power, 2004).

Nevertheless, the results also show that there are restrictions on small-state mediation. Oman is able, facilitative, and not coercive or imposing. Small-state mediation is incapable of building political commitment when great powers are unwilling to negotiate. In cases where conflicts are multidimensional and complex, the resources of small states might not be enough to engage in the long term. The external mediation is limited by structural constraints when leaders in great powers have limited negotiating freedom due to domestic politics (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

The implication is that small-state mediation is best possible at a time when great powers have strategic incentives to negotiate without having structures that can facilitate negotiations. The success of Oman in 2013-2015 was because the US and Iran were interested in negotiations, but they could not do it publicly.

It is unclear whether such circumstances are going to be present in 2026, so the opportunities of the Omani mediation can be limited to great power calculations that are not under the control of Oman.

7.2 Regional Order and the Future of Gulf Diplomacy

The mediation position of Oman is indicative of further concerns of regional order in the Middle East. The system in the region that is post 2011 has been described as fragmented, and having several overlapping conflicts with no effective regional security architecture. The conventional processes, such as the Arab League consensus, GCC union, and US hegemonic control, have shown to be not sufficient to deal with the modern conflicts (Gause, 2014).

The neutral positioning of Oman and its mediation ability in this fractured situation is another form of regional involvement. Oman does not seek alignment with regional blocs or even great power benefactors; instead, it seeks strategic independence by seeking balanced relations and facilitation. The strategy has helped Oman to remain stable and secure despite having conflicts around it (Bahgat, 2023).

In case Omani mediation helps to de-escalate the US-Iran tensions, it would justify this model and possibly prompt other regional players to seek similar approaches. On the other hand, when the process of regional polarization deepens, and the neutral position can no longer hold any more, pressure to abandon the unique strategy of Oman can be observed. Omani soft power is therefore not only viable in bilateral terms but in wider concerns on order in the region.

7.3 Practical Pathways for Operationalizing Omani Mediation

To policymakers and professionals who may want to utilize the Omani mediation capacity, the research indicates that practices directed to Oman need to be unofficial and subtle. Omani intervention may be self-defeating in its effects on politics since Omani mediation will be the target of political attacks and limit the freedom of maneuver by Muscat. Rather, the US and Omani officials, as well as the Iranian and Omani officials, can be engaged in quiet diplomatic consultations to see whether there are conditions in which a facilitation of Omani conditions can be made (Baabood, 2021).

The beginning goals must be small and specific. Instead of simply finding a broad solution to US-Iran differences, initial Omani mediation must aim at limited, solvable problems that are seen to offer progress, such as drawing de-escalation agreements in cases of naval incidents, making exchanges of prisoners, or establishing communication lines in case of crisis. A win over small matters would help to gain confidence in tackling bigger controversies. Besides, Omani mediation should be supported with practical support. The limitations of the resources in Oman imply that the process of mediation must be supported over time with the help of financial and logistical resources. The international players who worry about the de-escalation must be offered some silent support to Omani diplomatic work, such as funding the costs of hosting negotiations, sharing technical know-how, or even offering economic assistance to enhance the ability of Oman to remain neutral (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

Moreover, there should be realistic expectations of what Omani mediation can do. Oman can ease communication, establish trust, and provide the space to negotiate, but cannot endure the solution of basic problems or impose the agreement. Omani mediation is not the exhaustive measure to address US-Iran tensions but rather one of the tools to be used (Albasoos & Al-Shibli, 2021; Talebi & Dorofki, 2023; Worrall, 2021).

Also, other diplomatic activities should go hand in hand with Omani mediation. The functions of regional discussions between GCC countries and Iran, European foreign policy, and multilateral conferences are all useful. The Omani facilitation is effective when it is integrated within broader diplomatic eco-systems as opposed to acting in isolation (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Worrall, 2021).

7.4 Limitations and Uncertainties

A few constraints and ambiguities moderately restrain findings regarding Omani mediation potential. To begin with, this study is unable to get the real-time data on the ongoing diplomatic activities. In the case when Omani mediation efforts are in progress, it would have to be confidential, and the existing efforts cannot be evaluated. Instead, analysis is done based on potential and past history as opposed to established present activities (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

No mediation can be successful without several factors that are outside the control of the mediator; the first one is the political intentions of the parties to negotiate. Assessment of Omani capabilities can be done, and the analysis cannot conclusively state whether the leaders in the US and Iran have the determination to engage in meaningful dialogue. The decision on that would come down to the American and Iranian internal political calculus, which is a secret (Talebi & Dorofki, 2023).

Moreover, the uncertainty is brought about by the fast-changing characteristics of regional trends. The subsequent events that happen, like military events, a change of leadership, or regional shifts, may be of fundamental changes in the context that will have an impact on the Omani mediation feasibility. Analysis also gives a picture of the situation in 2026, but it is not able to foresee the future (Nathan, 2010).

The qualitative methodology, which is suitable in the context of capturing the complexity of diplomacy, restricts the applicability next. The research results are to Omani mediation in US-Iran tensions and might not transfer to other mediators and conflicts. More generalized theoretical propositions regarding the small-state mediation would have to be confirmed with comparative research on a variety of instances (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025).

8. Conclusion

The paper has analyzed how the soft power of Oman can be applied as a conflict mitigation instrument in 2026 in the US-Iran military tension. The research, grounded on the historical analysis and the opinions of experts, attracted attention to the modern origins of Omani mediation that comprise strategic neutrality, geographical advantage, cultural diplomacy, and institutional professionalism. It is these assets that have helped Oman to take a special part in the process of dialogue, most notably with the secret US-Iran talks, which have led to the 2015 JCPOA. The results indicate that Oman has a lot of potential to play a role in de-escalation by use of backchannel indirectly; shuttle diplomacy and provision of neutral fora. Its Ibadi status and its softer neutrality remain the only difference between Oman and other Gulf players that enable it to play with credibility equally with both Washington and Tehran. Meanwhile, the geographical location of Oman at the Strait of Hormuz makes it topical in the context of the energy security of the world states, which strengthens its diplomatic significance. However, the study also has some significant limitations. The complexity of the US-Iran wars that involve nuclear issues, regional wars, and domestic political agitations may be too complex and may require a small state to mediate. The presence of the country of Oman in leadership transitions, resource constraints, and realignments in the region also makes the situation in the country complicated. Finally, Omani mediation can provide the openings for dialogue, but cannot replace the political will among the parties themselves.

Statements and Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest

The author asserts that he does not have any conflict of interest concerning this study.

Ethical Approval

The research will be based on the review of documents and specialist consultations. No direct involvement of human subjects was done, and thus, there was no need for ethical approval.

Consent to Participate

Irrelevant, because the research did not involve direct involvement of human subjects.

Consent for Publication

The author agrees to publish this manuscript.

Data Availability

The evidence that can be used to support the results of this paper is based on the publicly accessible materials, which are the official diplomatic documents, policy statements, historical writings, and media coverage. Further information or data can be obtained by the respective author on reasonable request.

Author Contributions

The author himself just conceived, designed the research, carried out the research, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript.

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