



From Quiet Diplomacy to Attempted Maritime Security Governance: Oman's Role and Limits in the 2026 Strait of Hormuz Crisis

Author: Prof. Dr. Abdullah Hemmet Abdullah

Affiliations: International Islamic University Malaysia, ISTAC-IIUM, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Islamic University of Gaza, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Gaza, Palestine; London Dialogue (LD), London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article revises the conventional image of Oman as a neutral or quiet mediator by examining its attempt to convert diplomatic access into operational maritime governance during the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis. The argument is deliberately bounded. Oman did not autonomously create a new security order, and the arrangements it helped implement did not endure. Rather, Muscat produced identifiable institutional outputs under varying degrees of external sponsorship: it translated the June United States-Iran understanding into a joint working agenda, coordinated a temporary corridor with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), participated in an evacuation framework, activated a bilateral committee, and later advanced a Gulf-backed, Malacca-inspired regional mechanism. The crisis also revealed a rival governance project. Iran formalised a Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA) to administer permits and passage-related charges, while the Security Council failed to adopt a stronger April resolution on navigational security after vetoes by China and Russia. These developments help explain why Oman's arrangements reached a ceiling. Drawing on process tracing, a transparent event-coded dataset, official Omani, IMO, United Nations, treaty, and Security Council records, Reuters reporting, international legal analysis, and descriptive maritime-energy statistics, the article develops the concept of attempted mediatory maritime governance. The concept separates five stages—access, translation, institutionalisation, implementation, and durability—and treats failure at later stages as theoretically informative rather than as evidence that earlier outputs were fictitious. The analysis also distinguishes a 28 per cent reduction in observed oil flow from the more than 90 per cent collapse in vessel transits, the latter being the more direct indicator of the corridor-governance problem. The article concludes that Oman's model is viable only when embedded in multilateral technical authority, reciprocal security guarantees, transparent service funding, and a political arrangement capable of restraining coercive actors.

Keywords: Oman; Strait of Hormuz; Maritime Governance; Mediation; Maritime Security; International Law.

الملخص

تحلل هذه الدراسة محاولة عُمان تحويل دبلوماسيتها الهادئة إلى ترتيبات عملية لحوكمة الأمن البحري خلال أزمة مضيق هرمز عام 2026. وبدلاً من افتراض نجاحها في إنشاء نظام أمني مستقل، تبين الدراسة أن مسقط استطاعت الانتقال من الوصول الدبلوماسي إلى الترجمة المؤسسية والتنفيذ الجزئي، لكنها واجهت قيوداً حالت دون تحقيق الاستدامة. فقد أسهمت عُمان في تنسيق ممر بحري مؤقت، ووضع ترتيبات للإجلاء، وتفعيل آليات ثنائية، واقتراح آلية إقليمية مدعومة خليجياً. غير أن إنشاء إيران هيئة منافسة لإدارة العبور والرسوم، وتعثر مجلس الأمن في توفير ضمانات تنفيذية، كشف حدود الوساطة العُمانية. وبالاستناد إلى تتبع العمليات، والوثائق الرسمية، والبيانات البحرية والطاقة، والتحليل القانوني الدولي، تطور الدراسة مفهوم «محاولة الحوكمة البحرية القائمة على الوساطة» عبر خمس مراحل: الوصول، والترجمة، والمأسسة، والتنفيذ، والاستدامة. وتخلص إلى أن نجاح النموذج العُماني يتطلب دعماً فنياً متعدد الأطراف، و ضمانات أمنية متبادلة، وتمويلًا شفافاً، وترتيباً سياسياً يحد من السلوك القسري.

الكلمات المفتاحية عُمان؛ مضيق هرمز؛ الحوكمة البحرية؛ الوساطة؛ الأمن البحري؛ القانون الدولي.



1. INTRODUCTION

The Strait of Hormuz is commonly framed in terms of Iran's strategic leverage, the United States' naval reach, and the exposure of global energy markets. Oman is present in these accounts, but usually as a geographical fact or a diplomatic adjective: the state on the southern shore, the discreet intermediary, the Gulf actor that speaks to all sides. The 2026 crisis made that treatment analytically inadequate. Repeated attacks occurred near Musandam, Khasab, Limah, Sohar, Shinas, Muscat, Masirah, and other points adjacent to Oman. Commercial crews required evacuation; routing instructions had to be issued; international organisations needed a coastal-state partner; and the design of any temporary passage necessarily engaged Omani territorial waters. The crisis therefore converted Oman's diplomatic relevance into an immediate problem of maritime governance.

An earlier formulation of this argument overstated the extent of the transformation. It treated the June corridor, the bilateral committee, and continued diplomacy as evidence that Oman had evolved into a provider of governance. A closer reading of the record requires a more exact claim. Oman's temporary corridor was expressly presented as consistent with outcomes reached between the United States and Iran. The large-scale evacuation framework was paused after an attack on 25 June. In July, the sponsoring ceasefire memorandum frayed, attacks struck Omani territory, and Iran rejected regional joint management while preserving discussions over a temporary route. At the same time, Tehran institutionalised a competing model through the PGSA, a permit-and-fee apparatus that treated the Strait as an object of sovereign administration rather than a shared international corridor. These facts do not extinguish the conceptual contribution. They change its object from successful governance to an attempted and externally conditioned form of governance whose ceiling is itself explanatory (Reuters, 2026a, 2026d, 2026e; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2026).

This article asks two questions. First, through what mechanisms did Oman attempt to translate quiet diplomacy into rules, procedures, and operational arrangements for the Strait? Second, why did those arrangements produce visible outputs but fail to become durable? The central argument is that Oman practised attempted mediatory maritime governance: a coastal state's conversion of diplomatic access and legal standing into institutional and operational arrangements among adversarial actors, without possessing hegemonic control over the maritime space. The attempt progressed through access, translation, and partial



institutionalisation; it generated brief implementation; and it failed at durability. The failure resulted from interacting conditions: dependence on an unstable great-power bargain, insufficient coercive leverage, contested legal authority, incompatible governance objects, the absence of an agreed guarantor, information deficits, and role conflict created by Oman's simultaneous identity as mediator, coastal state, Gulf actor, and defence partner of the United States.

The article makes four contributions. Empirically, it reconstructs an Oman-centred chronology that includes both confirming and disconfirming evidence. Conceptually, it distinguishes hedging as an alignment posture from governance as the production of institutional outputs, then disaggregates governance into stages so that committees and corridors are not confused with compliance and endurance. Legally, it moves beyond a simple invocation of UNCLOS by confronting Iran's status as a signatory that has never ratified the Convention, its 1982 declaration on transit passage, the historical precedent of the 1968 Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS), the institutional challenge posed by the PGSA, and comparative approaches to service financing in the Turkish and Malacca straits. Methodologically, it deposits the coded event dataset rather than treating official statements as an invisible evidentiary base.

The temporal scope runs from the opening of the conflict on 28 February 2026 to 3 August 2026. Earlier institutional and legal precedents are used to explain the conditions under which the Omani attempt unfolded. The study does not attempt to adjudicate every contested attribution in the war. It distinguishes verified incidents, official claims, and inferential conclusions, and it treats confidential diplomacy as an unavoidable but bounded limitation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Oman's Foreign Policy: Autonomy, Hedging, and Interlocation

The literature on Omani foreign policy provides a strong foundation for understanding why Muscat could enter the Hormuz negotiations but a weaker account of what happened after entry. Lefebvre (2010) emphasises moderation, pragmatism, and autonomy in a regional environment dominated by larger powers. Binhuwaidin (2019) interprets Oman's relations with a rising Iran as strategic hedging: Muscat preserves cooperation with Tehran



while maintaining security relations with Western and Gulf partners. Worrall (2021) advances the more specific image of Oman as an 'interlocutor state,' showing how mediation serves not only conflict resolution but also the preservation of sovereignty and independent foreign policy. Owtram (2022) traces quiet diplomacy as a persistent practice, while Cole (2022) demonstrates its use across crises in which formal negotiation channels were blocked. Valeri's (2009) political analysis likewise situates foreign-policy flexibility within the vulnerabilities of the Omani state.

These works correct the simplistic label of neutrality. Oman is not equidistant from all actors, and it does not remain passive when its interests are threatened. Its relationships are issue-specific and asymmetrical. The United States remains a central defence partner, while Iran remains an unavoidable neighbour and diplomatic counterpart. The 2019 Strategic Framework Agreement expanded United States access to Salalah and Duqm, with Duqm capable of handling aircraft carriers (Sharp, 2025). This relationship matters because the 2026 coercive environment made military logistics part of the conflict's geography. A mediator can retain channels with adversaries while simultaneously hosting facilities used by one side, but this dual role entails credibility and exposure costs that a 'low-threat profile' formulation obscures.

Hedging explains Oman's reluctance to choose a single strategic camp, but it does not account for the emergence of concrete institutions. A state may hedge without creating a committee, a corridor, or a traffic-management protocol. Conversely, a state may produce such outputs without changing its underlying alignment posture. The 2026 case therefore requires a move from positional concepts—neutrality, balancing, hedging—to output concepts that identify what the state actually constructs.

2.2 Small-State Diplomacy and the Problem of Leverage

Small-state scholarship has moved beyond the assumption that material weakness reduces states to rule-taking. Small states can exercise influence through institutions, specialisation, reputation, agenda control, and brokerage (Keohane, 1969; Long, 2022; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Wivel, 2023). Their diplomatic advantage is often relational rather than coercive: they can offer access, information, legitimacy, and services that larger powers cannot credibly provide. Oman's niche in mediation fits this pattern. Its

value lies less in imposing outcomes than in enabling contact and reducing the political cost of indirect bargaining.

The mediation literature nevertheless warns against equating access with success. Kleiboer (1996) shows that success and failure depend on how goals, timing, conflict characteristics, and mediator resources are specified. Beardsley et al. (2006) distinguish short-term conflict management from long-term settlement and caution that mediated agreements can suppress violence without resolving underlying incompatibilities. Rauchhaus (2006) explains how information asymmetry can make mediation valuable, while Heemsbergen and Siniver (2011) emphasise that mediation is also a route to power and political position. These insights are central to the Hormuz case. Oman reduced information and transaction costs, but lacked the leverage to ensure compliance when the broader United States-Iran bargain deteriorated.

A further distinction is required between mediator autonomy and mediator sponsorship. An initiative may be implemented by a small state but enabled by an agreement among larger adversaries. Sponsorship does not render the intermediary irrelevant; implementation often requires a trusted local actor. Yet sponsorship changes the causal claim. The 24 June corridor was not evidence that Oman independently generated a new order. It was evidence that Oman could translate an externally negotiated political opening into an operational option. When the opening narrowed, Oman's room for governance narrowed with it.

2.3 Security Governance and the Maritime Domain

Security-governance scholarship directs attention from unitary command toward dispersed actors, rules, and coordinating practices. Krahmann (2003) conceptualises governance as the fragmentation and coordination of security functions across public and private actors. In the maritime field, Bueger (2015) shows that maritime security is not a single threat category but a field organised around national security, marine safety, economic development, and human security. Bueger, Edmunds, and Ryan (2019) identify the sea as a political space in which legal authority, operations, information, and infrastructure intersect. Bueger and Edmunds (2024) accordingly treat information sharing, coordination, capacity building, and operational cooperation as part of the maritime-security toolbox.

This literature helps explain why a naval interpretation of the Hormuz crisis is incomplete. Commercial passage depends on more than the absence of hostile fire. It also

depends on verified risk information, deconfliction, mine warnings, navigational instructions, search and rescue, crew confidence, insurance, port access, and predictable legal rules. These functions are distributed among coastal states, flag states, navies, shipping companies, insurers, the IMO, and international organisations. The 2026 crisis exposed the limits of this fragmented architecture; it also created an opportunity for Oman to connect some of its parts.

Recent work on UNCLOS and maritime-security governance argues that the Convention must be understood within an assemblage of legal, technical, and operational practices rather than as a self-executing code (Bueger, Edmunds, & Stockbruegger, 2025). This is particularly relevant where one central actor disputes the treaty-based character of the legal regime. Legal rules may structure legitimate proposals, but implementation requires institutions capable of sustaining behaviour under coercive pressure.

Table 1. Literature Traditions, Limitations, and the Article's Analytical Use.

Literature tradition	Principal insight	Limitation for the 2026 case	Use in this article
Omani quiet and diplomacy interlocation	Explains access, discretion, autonomy, and relations across rival camps	Often stops at mediation identity and does not measure institutional output	Explains why Oman could convene and translate proposals
Strategic hedging	Explains diversified alignments and avoidance of exclusive dependence	Conflates position with what institutions a state produces	Separates alignment posture from governance output
Small-state diplomacy	Shows how niche expertise, institutions, and brokerage create influence	Can overstate agency when larger powers sponsor the opening	Makes sponsorship dependence an explicit variable
International mediation	Distinguishes entry, process, agreement, and settlement outcomes	Usually focuses on conflict settlement rather than maritime operations	Disaggregates output, implementation, and durability

Literature tradition	Principal insight	Limitation for the 2026 case	Use in this article
Security governance	Centres coordination among fragmented public and private actors	Can underplay coercion and contested sovereignty	Identifies institutional components of maritime governance
Law of international straits	Defines passage rights, coastal regulation, and cooperation	Treaty participation and custom remain contested in Hormuz	Treats law as both resource and field of contestation

Source: Author's synthesis of the scholarly literature.

2.4 Attempted Mediatory Maritime Governance

Mediatory maritime governance is defined here as a coastal state's use of diplomatic access, legal standing, and coordinating capacity to produce shared rules or operational arrangements among adversarial actors without exercising hegemonic control. The modifier 'attempted' is analytically important. Governance claims should not be inferred from intention or diplomatic activity alone. They require observable outputs, and those outputs must be assessed at separate stages.

The framework identifies five stages. Access refers to the ability to communicate with relevant adversaries and institutions. Translation occurs when broad political understandings are converted into navigational principles, proposals, or legal formulations. Institutionalisation requires an identifiable working group, committee, protocol, or organisational procedure. Implementation exists when vessels, crews, or authorities actually operate under the arrangement. Durability requires the arrangement to survive renewed pressure and to generate compliance beyond a brief window. Oman advanced furthest through the first three stages, achieved partial implementation during the evacuation period, and failed to secure durability.

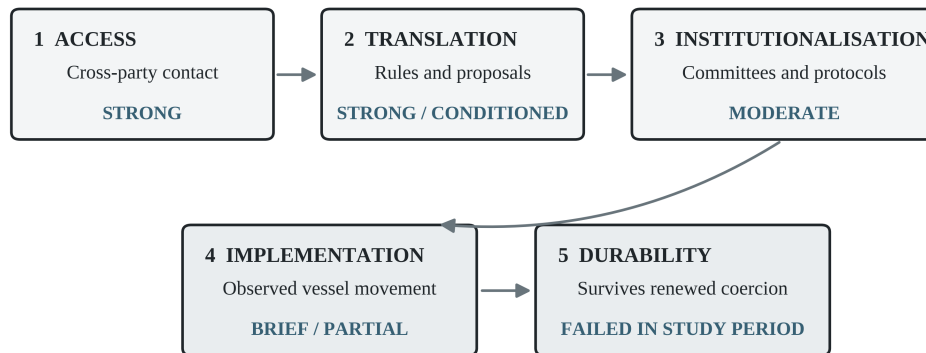
This staged approach avoids two opposite errors. The first is triumphalism: treating a statement, corridor announcement, or committee as a settled security order. The second is nullification: treating institutional failure as proof that no governance occurred. The Omani case contained real rule production and operational coordination. It also exposed the conditions under which such outputs collapse.

Table 2. Operationalisation of Attempted Mediatory Maritime Governance.

Stage	Observable indicators	Evidence in the Omani case	Assessment
Access	High-level contacts with adversaries, GCC partners, external powers, and IMO	Repeated Oman-Iran and Oman-partner contacts; established mediation role	Strong
Translation	Political principles converted into routing, legal, service, or cost proposals	Joint statement; interim arrangements; no-fee corridor; later voluntary-contribution proposal	Strong but externally conditioned
Institutionalisation	Working group, committee, formal protocol, or designated organisation	Joint working group; bilateral committee; IMO evacuation procedures	Moderate
Implementation	Actual vessel movements, evacuation, deconfliction, or verified services	136 vessels and about 2,900 seafarers evacuated before pause	Brief and partial
Durability	Sustained compliance under renewed coercion; accepted allocation of authority	Attacks resumed; evacuation paused; regional management rejected	Failed within study period

Source: Author's conceptual framework and Supplementary Data S1.

AN EVIDENTIARY SEQUENCE, NOT A LINEAR CLAIM OF SUCCESS



Failure at durability does not erase earlier outputs; it identifies the ceiling of the governance attempt.

Figure 1. The Staged Model of Attempted Mediator Maritime Governance.

Source: Author's conceptual construction.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN, SOURCES, AND DATA

The article uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design that combines process tracing, structured event coding, doctrinal legal analysis, and descriptive statistics. Process tracing is appropriate because the central claim concerns a sequence: political access had to be translated into institutions, those institutions had to generate operational effects, and those effects had to survive renewed coercion. The analysis therefore evaluates not only whether an event occurred but also where it fits in the proposed mechanism and whether it confirms or challenges the argument.

The principal source hierarchy prioritises official records for institutional facts and verified incidents. Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements establish the government's public position and the existence of meetings, committees, and protests. IMO statements establish verified incident totals, evacuation plans, vessel movements, and the status of routing frameworks. United Nations and Security Council records establish the multilateral and legal context. The UN Treaty Collection supplies Iran's declaration on UNCLOS. The U.S. Energy Information Administration provides data on maritime energy flows. Reuters is used for negotiations and positions not fully disclosed in official Omani statements, particularly the late-July regional proposal, Iran's rejection, and the status of talks on 3 August. The Congressional Research Service documents Oman's defence relationship with



the United States. Claims by belligerents are attributed as claims unless independently verified.

Supplementary Data S1 contains coded events from the 1968 TSS precedent and the 2019 United States-Oman facilities agreement to the 2026 crisis sequence. For the core process-tracing window, events are coded by date, actor, action, governance function, degree of external sponsorship, legal basis, immediate outcome, and evidentiary role. 'Confirming' events demonstrate access, translation, institutionalisation, or implementation. 'Disconfirming' events reveal coercive spillover, operational failure, legal contestation, or rejection. 'Mixed' events combine continued dialogue with absence of settlement. This coding prevents the empirical narrative from selecting only events favourable to the concept.

The statistical figures are descriptive, not causal. The incident series uses verified IMO benchmarks rather than circulating estimates. The seafarer figure distinguishes different populations: approximately 20,000 seafarers reported stranded or affected in early April, more than 11,000 targeted by the June evacuation plan, about 2,900 evacuated before the plan was paused, and nearly 6,000 reported still stranded on 8 July (IMO, 2026b, 2026f, 2026g, 2026h). The energy figures distinguish observed oil-flow volume from the number of ship transits. The latter fell by more than 90per cent after the late-February escalation and is the more direct indicator of the governance failure confronting corridor and evacuation arrangements (United Nations, 2026b).

Three limitations remain. Confidential diplomacy cannot be fully reconstructed, and the public record may understate both cooperation and disagreement. Attribution for attacks is often contested; the causal argument does not depend on attributing every maritime incident to a specific actor. Finally, the crisis remained unresolved at the cut-off. The article therefore describes a failed attempt at durability within the observed period, not a final judgment on Oman's long-term diplomatic role.

4. CONFLICT, HUMANITARIAN, AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

4.1 The War and the Institutional Context

The maritime crisis cannot be separated from the war that began on 28 February 2026. Attacks on merchant shipping accompanied a broader United States-Iran confrontation and severe disruption of the Strait. On 11 March, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2817

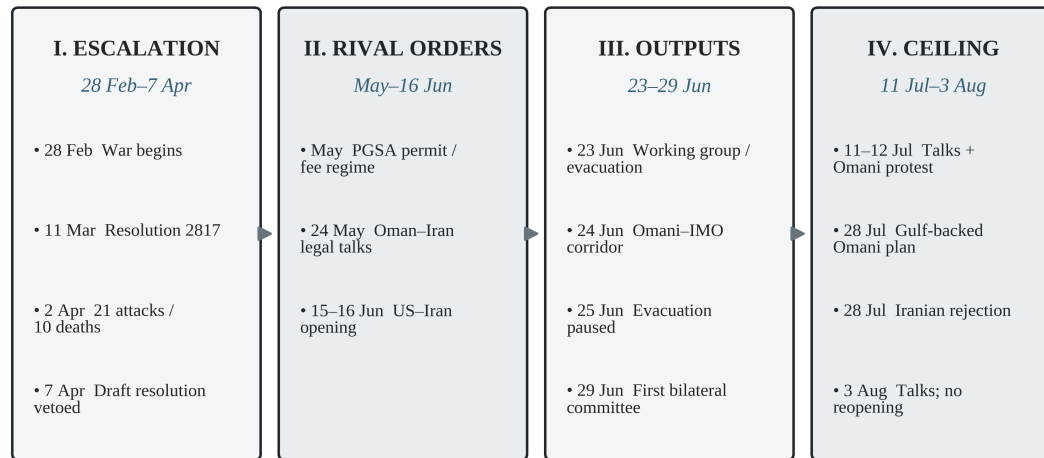
by 13 votes to 0, with 2 abstentions. The resolution condemned attacks against several regional states, including Oman, and situated the crisis within the Council's formal security agenda (United Nations Security Council, 2026a). Subsequent statements by the United Nations and the IMO invoked the resolution to defend freedom of navigation and protect civilian shipping.

The Council's intervention did not result in an agreed-upon enforcement architecture. On 7 April, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates sponsored draft resolution S/2026/273 on the safety and security of maritime navigation in the Strait. It received eleven votes in favour, two against, and two abstentions, but failed because China and Russia used their vetoes (United Nations Security Council, 2026b; United Nations Web TV, 2026). The sequence matters. Resolution 2817 created a broad normative framework, but the vetoed April draft revealed disagreement over the operative question of coordinated action. Oman's later mechanisms therefore lacked a generally accepted Security Council guarantor.

An April ceasefire temporarily reduced hostilities, but the maritime problem persisted. On 27 April, the United Nations Secretary-General reported that more than 20,000 seafarers were stranded and more than 2,000 commercial vessels were caught in navigational restrictions and risks (United Nations, 2026a). A new United States-Iran understanding was announced in mid-June. The Islamabad Memorandum declared commercial traffic open and reportedly required best efforts for safe, no-charge commercial passage for a limited period (Reuters, 2026b). The agreement created the political aperture through which Oman and the IMO attempted operational measures. Its ambiguity and later deterioration also set the ceiling on those measures.

The chronology in Figure 2 demonstrates that Oman's most visible governance outputs were compressed into the period after the June agreement and before renewed July escalation. The corridor, evacuation framework, working group, and first committee meeting were not isolated Omani inventions; they formed the implementation layer of a wider bargain. The chronology also inserts two missing institutional facts: the April Security Council deadlock and Iran's May formalisation of the PGSA.

CONFLICT AND OMANI MARITIME-GOVERNANCE CHRONOLOGY



Visible governance outputs were concentrated in a short window between external sponsorship and renewed coercion.

Figure 2. Conflict and Omani maritime-governance chronology, 28 February–3 August 2026.

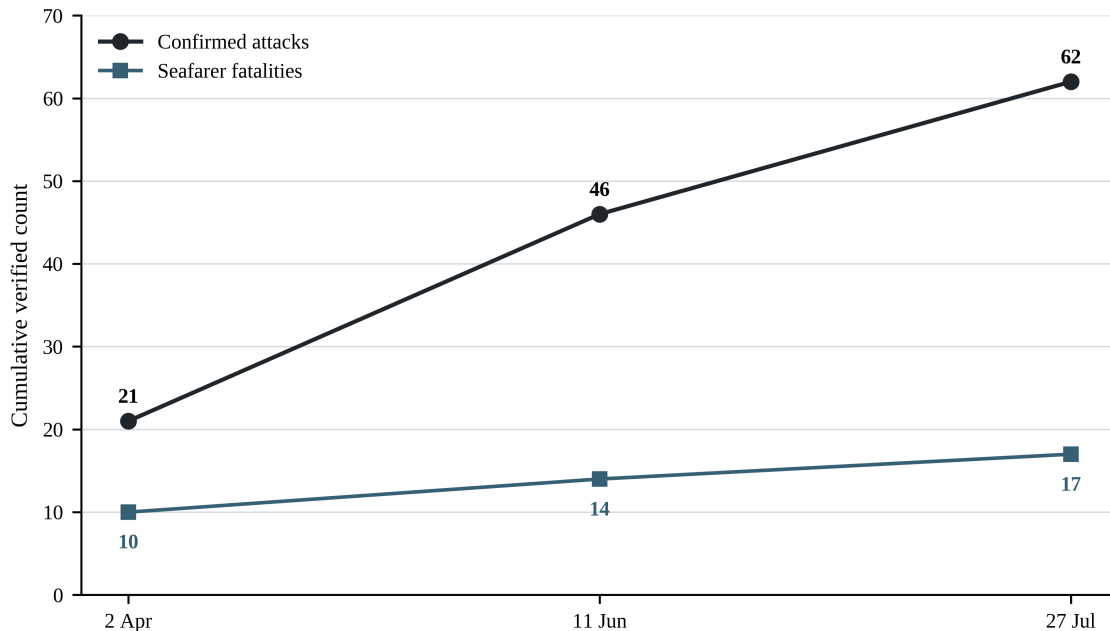
Source: Author's compilation from OMFA, IMO, United Nations, Security Council, U.S. Treasury, CRS, and Reuters records; details are deposited in Supplementary Data S1.

4.2 Verified Maritime Escalation

The evidentiary baseline requires precision because initial statements and later incident ledgers record different stages of verification. The contemporaneous IMO statement of 1 March reported at least one fatality. The later flag-state-confirmed ledger records four deaths across three incidents dated 1 March: one shipyard worker on STENA IMPERATIVE, one seafarer on MKD VYOM, and two seafarers on SKYLIGHT. A separate attack on MUSSAFAH 2 on 6 March killed four seafarers. The two four-death totals therefore concern different dates and must not be conflated (IMO, 2026a, 2026c, 2026k).

The most reliable cumulative benchmarks are 21 attacks and 10 seafarer fatalities on 2 April, 46 attacks and 14 fatalities by 11 June, and 62 confirmed incidents and 17 fatalities by 27 July (IMO, 2026b, 2026e, 2026k). The 2 April benchmark is tied to the UK-hosted ministerial meeting involving more than forty countries; it is not a late-April figure. The revised analysis uses the statement's actual publication date and does not rely on unsupported or retrospectively inferred totals.

The human cost was concentrated around civilian shipping rather than abstract strategic assets. Several incidents in July occurred near Oman: vessels were damaged east of Musandam, near Limah, northwest of Kumzar, east of Khasab, and off the Omani coast. This spatial concentration meant that Muscat faced search-and-rescue, port, environmental, and sovereignty risks even when attacks were not attributed to Oman itself.



Benchmarks are dated IMO cumulative totals. The two series use the same count scale but represent different phenomena.

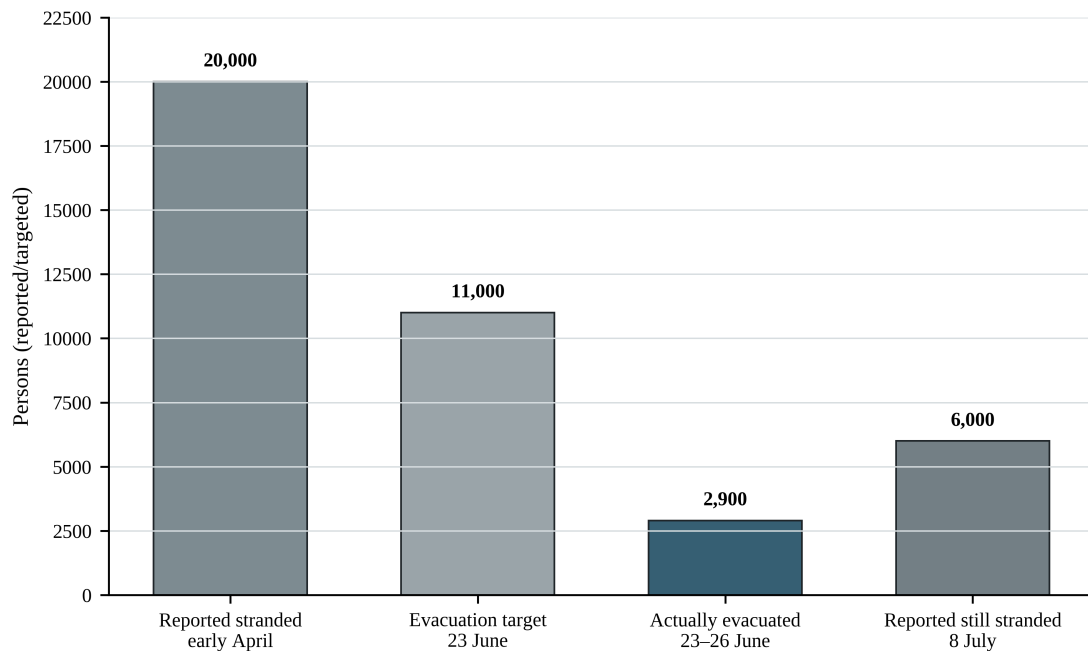
Figure 3. Verified escalation of attacks on commercial shipping.

Source: IMO (2026b, 2026e, 2026k). The figure uses cumulative verified benchmarks reported on the stated dates.

4.3 Seafarer Protection and the Evacuation Ceiling

The seafarer record provides the clearest test of operational governance. Early reporting described approximately 20,000 civilian seafarers stranded in the Gulf. The 23 June evacuation plan targeted more than 11,000 seafarers and was designed in cooperation with Iran, Oman, other coastal states, the United States, and industry. Between 23 and 26 June, 136 vessels carrying an estimated 2,900 seafarers were evacuated. The operation was therefore not merely rhetorical. It moved a significant number of vessels and persons under an agreed framework (IMO, 2026f, 2026j).

Yet the plan also revealed the model's vulnerability. On 25 June, after an attack on a vessel that had transited outside the evacuation framework, the IMO paused the operation to reconfirm safety guarantees. By 8 July, renewed attacks had left nearly 6,000 seafarers still stranded (IMO, 2026g, 2026h). A humanitarian corridor should therefore remain part of any future institutional design, but only with pre-agreed suspension criteria, renewed guarantees, verified mine information, and an incident-command structure. The crisis supplied both partial implementation and a documented failure mode.



These categories refer to different populations and dates; they are not a continuous time series.

Figure 4. Distinct Seafarer Populations Reported During the Crisis.

Source: IMO (2026b, 2026f, 2026g, 2026h, 2026j). Categories refer to different populations and dates and should not be read as a single continuous series.

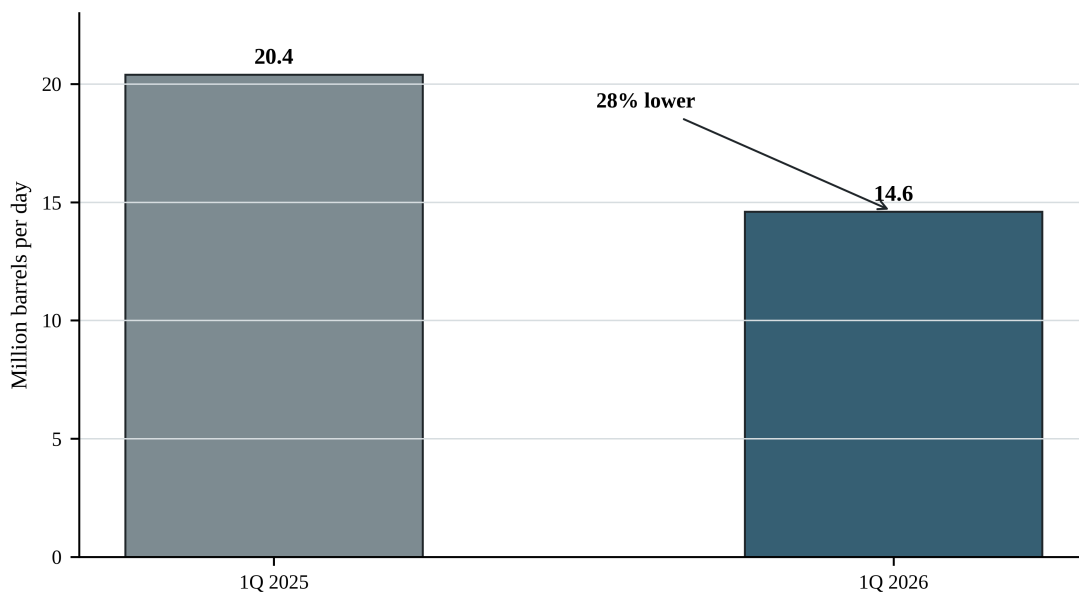
4.4 Energy Flows, Ship Transits, and Governance Exposure

The global importance of the Strait magnified the consequences of institutional failure. EIA data show that oil flows averaged 20.9 million barrels per day in the first half of 2025, approximately one-fifth of global petroleum-liquids consumption and about 26 per cent of world maritime oil trade. Around one-fifth of global LNG trade also passed through Hormuz. In the first half of 2025, 89 per cent of crude oil and condensate transiting the Strait were

destined for Asian markets, with China, India, Japan, and South Korea accounting for 74 per cent of the total (EIA, 2025a, 2025b, 2026a).

The crisis produced a visible contraction in energy flow. EIA's quarterly series records oil flows of 20.4 million barrels per day in the first quarter of 2025 and 14.6 million barrels per day in the first quarter of 2026. This 28 per cent decline is an observed flow difference, not a claim that every barrel of reduction was caused by a single mechanism (EIA, 2026b). It captures the quantity of oil moving through the corridor, but it understates the operational collapse of the corridor itself.

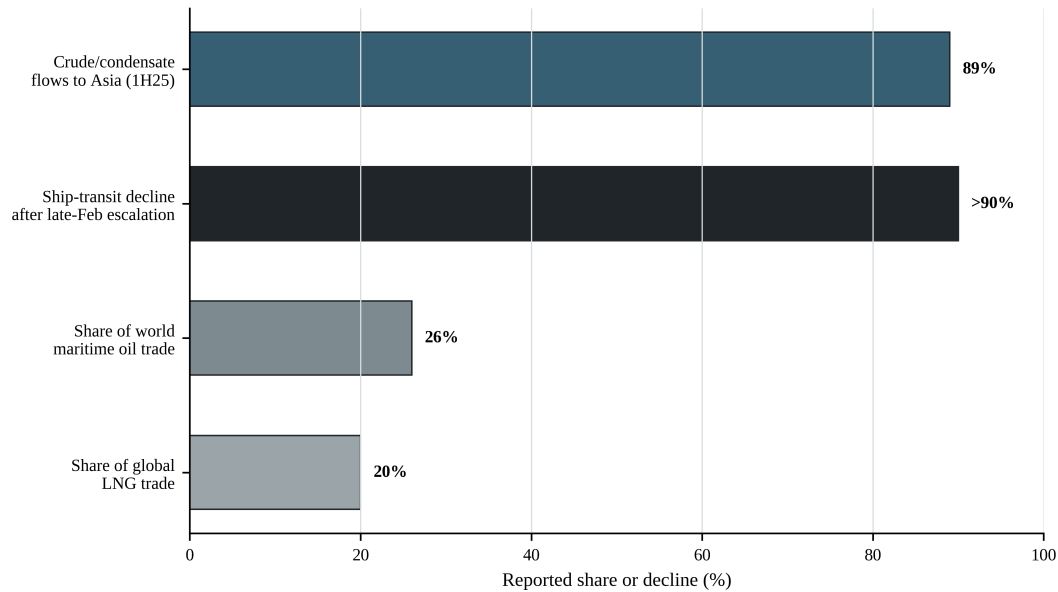
Vessel traffic fell much more sharply. United Nations reporting stated that ship transits dropped by more than 90 per cent after the crisis escalated in late February (United Nations, 2026b). This distinction is central to the governance argument. A relatively small number of large or specially authorised tankers can preserve some energy volume even while ordinary commercial movement collapses. The Omani corridor, humanitarian evacuation, traffic assignment, and insurance problem were responses to the disappearance of normal vessel circulation. Transit volume, rather than aggregate oil flow alone, is therefore the more direct measure of the institutional task.



Observed quarterly flow difference; it should not be interpreted as a single-cause estimate.

Figure 5. Oil Flows Through the Strait of Hormuz, 1Q25–1Q26.

Source: EIA (2026b), based on Vortexa tanker-tracking data and EIA calculations.



Indicators have different denominators and are not additive. Transit collapse measures vessel movement, not energy volume.

Figure 6. Structural Exposure and Operational Collapse in Hormuz Transit.

Source: Author's visualisation of EIA (2025a, 2025b, 2026a) and United Nations (2026b).

The 26per cent value is calculated from 20.9 million b/d divided by 79.8 million b/d of global maritime oil trade in 1H25.

5. OMAN'S ATTEMPTED GOVERNANCE SEQUENCE

5.1 Pre-June Groundwork: Access Before Sponsorship

Oman's role did not begin with the June United States-Iran agreement. On 24 May, Omani and Iranian legal and diplomatic delegations discussed principles governing freedom of navigation, safe and sustainable passage, and the development of relevant capabilities (OMFA, 2026a). This episode establishes that Muscat possessed an agenda and bilateral channel before the great-power understanding. It supports the access and translation stages of the framework.

The pre-June record, however, did not yield an operational regime. It produced consultations and principles rather than a corridor or evacuation mechanism. The difference matters. Oman could maintain the channel autonomously, but the shift from dialogue to implementation required a broader political opening and security guarantees that Muscat could not provide on its own.

5.2 June Outputs Under External Sponsorship

The decisive opening came with the mid-June United States-Iran understanding. On 16 June, the Omani and Iranian foreign ministers renewed their commitment to safe and free passage explicitly in light of that understanding (OMFA, 2026b). On 23 June, Oman and Iran issued a joint statement supporting the Islamabad Memorandum, reaffirming the right to safe passage under applicable international law, and establishing a joint working group to address future administration, services, and associated costs (OMFA, 2026c). The statement combined sovereignty language with an institutional agenda. It was a genuine act of translation and institutionalisation, but it was nested in the wider memorandum.

The 24 June corridor is the clearest case. Oman's announcement stated that the temporary corridor was coordinated with the IMO, would be available without transit fees, and was consistent with the outcomes of efforts and initiatives reached by the United States and Iran (OMFA, 2026d). The appropriate interpretation is neither autonomy nor irrelevance. Oman did not originate the political bargain; it performed the indispensable implementation function of converting that bargain into a coastal routing option and an institutional point of contact through the IMO.

On 25 June, the Omani and Iranian foreign ministers discussed a joint mechanism for cooperation to achieve the objectives of the United States-Iran memorandum. On 29 June, the Oman-Iran Committee on the Strait held its first meeting (OMFA, 2026e, 2026f). These events indicate that the arrangement moved beyond isolated statements. Yet the public record provides little evidence about delegated authority, enforcement, incident attribution, or dispute settlement. Institutional form developed faster than institutional depth.

5.3 Partial Implementation and Immediate Reversal

The evacuation framework offers the strongest evidence of implementation. Ships and seafarers moved under a coordinated plan, and the operational guidance assigned responsibility for the northern and southern routes to Iran and Oman, respectively. The plan recognised degraded navigational conditions and reported mines, meaning that the pre-existing TSS could not simply be used. Coastal-state instructions temporarily replaced ordinary routing (IMO, 2026f, 2026l).

The attack of 25 June exposed the fragility of guarantees. The IMO's decision to pause the plan was prudent from a safety perspective, but it demonstrated that a corridor



announcement did not create a protected space. The mediator and the international organisation remained dependent on assurances from actors able to threaten shipping. This is the first observable ceiling: implementation could begin but could not be sustained once violence resumed (IMO, 2026g).

5.4 July Impasse, Coercive Spillover, and Role Conflict

July should not be narrated as uncomplicated continuing coordination. Political and technical discussions continued on 11 July, but the wider memorandum was already in crisis. Reuters reported renewed hostilities to disagreements over the Strait and other unresolved issues, and recorded mutual accusations that the June arrangement had been violated (Reuters, 2026b). Continued talks therefore coexisted with a deteriorating security environment.

On 12 July, Oman summoned the Iranian ambassador and delivered a formal protest after drone attacks targeted sites in Musandam and Al Wusta (OMFA, 2026g). This directly challenged the assumption that Oman's balanced diplomacy produced physical insulation. Oman remained able to communicate with Iran, but it also had to defend sovereignty and signal that mediation did not preclude protest. The episode transformed the mediator from facilitator into an affected party.

Oman's defence relationship with the United States intensified this role conflict. The 2019 Strategic Framework Agreement expanded United States military access to Salalah and Duqm, and Duqm can accommodate aircraft carriers (Sharp, 2025). Iranian accounts and regional reporting linked some July attacks to facilities allegedly supporting United States operations. The article does not treat every belligerent claim as verified. The structural point is independent of attribution: Oman's territory combines mediation infrastructure, sovereign maritime responsibilities, and military-logistics access for one belligerent. That combination increases its usefulness to Washington while complicating perceptions of impartiality in Tehran.

The July record also shows why 'neutral mediator' is an inadequate description. Oman protested attacks, defended the legal principle of freedom of navigation, and advocated integration rather than containment (OMFA, 2026h, 2026i). It was balancing several roles: intermediary, coastal regulator, sovereign target, GCC member, and United States security

partner. The resulting policy was active and principled, but the roles could not be made costless.

5.5 Late-July Policy Design Under Medium Sponsorship

The late-July proposal is best coded as medium sponsorship, not as autonomous Omani entrepreneurship. Reuters reported on 28 July that Oman had designed and presented a regional mechanism, backed by Gulf states, under which users could make voluntary contributions to navigation, environmental protection, search and rescue, and related services. The proposal drew explicitly on the cooperative mechanism in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (Reuters, 2026c). Its institutional design was identifiably Omani, but its regional backing and convergence with the United States preference against mandatory passage fees mean that sponsorship cannot be treated as absent.

Iran's rejection was part of the same negotiation cycle. The proposal was presented and rejected on 28 July; Reuters's detailed follow-up was published on 29 July. A senior Iranian official said that the Strait should be managed by Iran and Oman according to their respective areas of control, without other powers, and insisted that the entire inbound route and part of the outbound route fall under Iranian control. The official rejected an equal management model and attributed pressure on Oman to the United States and Saudi Arabia (Reuters, 2026d). The source date and event date are therefore different, not evidence of two separate rejections.

The correct conclusion is an impasse, not a definitive end to diplomacy. On 3 August, Iran stated that it remained in discussions with Oman over a temporary safe route but that an agreement with Muscat would not be sufficient to reopen the Strait while United States aggression continued (Reuters, 2026e). Oman preserved access, but access could not substitute for a political settlement among the principal coercive actors.

Table 3. Process-Tracing Summary: Outputs and Counter-Evidence.

Date	Omani or related output	What it demonstrates	Disconfirming or qualifying evidence
24 May	Oman-Iran legal and diplomatic discussions on navigational principles	Autonomous access and agenda setting before June agreement	No operational regime resulted

Date	Omani or related output	What it demonstrates	Disconfirming or qualifying evidence
23 June	Joint statement and working group on administration, services, and costs	Translation and institutionalisation	Explicitly tied to Islamabad Memorandum
24 June	Temporary corridor coordinated with IMO and no transit fees	Concrete coastal and multilateral implementation option	Officially framed as consistent with US-Iran outcomes
23–26 June	136 vessels and approximately 2,900 seafarers evacuated	Actual implementation	Plan paused after renewed attack
29 June	First Oman-Iran committee meeting	Formal bilateral mechanism	Authority and enforcement remained unclear
11–12 July	Talks continue; Oman protests attacks on Musandam and Al Wusta	Access survives coercion; sovereignty defence	Mediator becomes directly affected party
28 July	Malacca-inspired regional mechanism proposed and rejected in same negotiation cycle	Omani policy design under medium sponsorship	GCC-backed; convergent with US no-mandatory-fee preference; Iran rejects regional model
3 August	Temporary-route talks continue	Diplomatic channel remains open	Iran says Omani agreement alone cannot reopen Strait

Source: Supplementary Data S1, based on OMFA, IMO, Reuters, United Nations, and CRS records.

6. THE LEGAL ARCHITECTURE: RULES, CONTESTATION, AND PRECEDENT

6.1 UNCLOS Part III and Omani Treaty Obligations

Part III of UNCLOS governs straits used for international navigation. Article 38 recognises transit passage for continuous and expeditious navigation and overflight. Articles 39 and 40 prescribe duties for transiting ships and aircraft. Article 41 allows states bordering

a strait to designate sea lanes and traffic-separation schemes, but proposals must be referred to the competent international organisation for adoption. Article 42 permits coastal regulation of navigation safety, pollution, fishing, and customs while prohibiting discrimination and rules that have the practical effect of denying or impairing transit passage. Article 43 calls for cooperation between user states and bordering states in navigational and safety aids and pollution control. Article 44 prohibits the hampering or suspension of transit passage (United Nations, 1982).

Oman is a state party to UNCLOS and publicly reaffirmed its treaty obligations during the July crisis (OMFA, 2026h). For Oman, Part III is therefore not merely persuasive custom; it is binding treaty law. Its opposition to compulsory transit fees and its cooperation with the IMO are consistent with the Convention's structure, particularly the combination of non-impediment, international routeing authority, and cooperative service provision.

6.2 Iran's Signature, Non-Ratification, and the Customary-Law Dispute

Iran signed UNCLOS on 10 December 1982 but has never ratified it. Its declaration upon signature stated that several provisions, including the right of transit passage in Article 38, were contractual *quid pro quo* products and that only states parties were entitled to benefit from those rights (United Nations Treaty Collection, 1982/2026). This is not a peripheral technicality. It is the central legal disagreement in any attempt to base Hormuz governance exclusively on UNCLOS Part III.

The opposing position holds that the core transit-passage regime has become customary international law, at least in substantial part. The literature remains contested. Mahmoudi (1989) questioned whether the extension of territorial seas to twelve nautical miles automatically transformed transit passage into custom, and his later work examined the particularly sensitive position of warships in the Strait of Hormuz (Mahmoudi, 1991). Moore (1980) argued for the necessity and broad acceptance of a straits regime emerging from the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. Caminos and Cogliati-Bantz (2014) demonstrate how contemporary straits practice combines treaty rules, custom, and institution-specific arrangements. Kraska (2014) describes a legal vortex created by the non-party status of both Iran and the United States, while Lott and Kawagishi (2022) distinguish the rights of UNCLOS parties from the more contested position of non-parties and analyse the continuing relevance of Corfu Channel.

At a minimum, customary international law preserves a non-suspendable right of innocent passage through straits used for international navigation, as affirmed by the International Court of Justice in the Corfu Channel judgment. Whether the full UNCLOS transit-passage package—including submerged navigation by submarines and overflight—binds all non-parties remains debated. The policy implication is that an Omani mechanism cannot assume that repetition of 'UNCLOS' resolves the disagreement. It requires a legal-reservation clause under which participants cooperate operationally without prejudice to their positions on treaty and custom.

6.3 The 1968 Traffic Separation Scheme: Precedent and Path Dependence

The 1968 TSS is a direct historical precedent for joint Omani-Iranian regulatory production. The scheme was proposed by Iran and Oman and adopted by the IMO to separate inbound and outbound traffic and reduce the risk of collisions (IMO, 2026i). It qualifies any claim that joint rule-making in Hormuz began in 2026. It also strengthens the deeper argument: the littoral states have already demonstrated that sovereignty can be reconciled with internationally adopted routeing measures.

The precedent has limits. A peacetime collision-avoidance scheme does not manage missiles, drones, mines, coercive charges, or wartime deconfliction. During the 2026 evacuation framework, reported mines and degraded conditions meant that the ordinary TSS could not be used; specific routes had to be assigned to the coastal states (IMO, 2026l). The historical scheme is therefore a legal and institutional foundation, not a ready-made solution. It shows path dependence and a recognised role for the IMO, while the crisis shows why additional security and verification layers are necessary.

6.4 Passage Charges, Specific Services, and Rival Institutionalisation

The fee dispute requires more precision than a simple statement that 'fees are illegal.' A compulsory charge imposed solely on account of transit is difficult to reconcile with unimpeded passage and with the IMO's position that international straits cannot be subject to tolls or discriminatory conditions. That was also the position reflected in Oman's 24 June announcement. Yet international practice distinguishes passage tolls from payment for optional, directly rendered services and from voluntary contributions to shared infrastructure.



Iran did not leave its position at the level of legal argument. In May it formalised the Persian Gulf Strait Authority, a public-facing administrative body for vessel authorisation, documentation, routing, and passage-related payments. The PGSA converted a sovereignty claim into an institutional apparatus. It therefore provides the missing referent for the article's claim that the parties were pursuing incompatible governance objects. Oman and its partners treated the object as safe international navigation supported by shared services; the PGSA treated it as a permit-based corridor subject to Iranian administration. The IMO Council subsequently urged states not to recognise unilateral Iranian control, and the United States sanctioned the PGSA on 27 May (Reuters, 2026a; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2026).

The Montreux regime is a useful but limited comparator. The convention governing the Turkish Straits provides commercial vessels freedom of navigation without tax or charge, except for services directly rendered such as pilotage, lights, or towage; pilotage remains optional (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1936/2026). Montreux is a treaty-specific arrangement with its own historical and strategic context, and it cannot be transplanted to Hormuz. It nevertheless demonstrates the legal intelligibility of separating compulsory passage charges from defined services.

The Straits of Malacca and Singapore provide the more relevant functional comparator. The 2007 Cooperative Mechanism links littoral states, user states, industry, and the IMO through a Cooperation Forum, project coordination, and an Aids to Navigation Fund. Contributions are voluntary and directed toward navigational safety and environmental protection (Beckman, 2009; Ho, 2009; IMO, 2017). Ba (2018) shows that non-state and industry actors can be central to sustaining such governance. Oman's late-July proposal drew on this model. Its advantage was that it framed payments as voluntary burden sharing for specified services rather than as sovereign tolls for passage.

The analogy also reveals why the Omani proposal failed in the short term. Malacca's cooperative mechanism emerged from years of negotiation in a non-war setting, among littoral states that accepted a shared institutional framework and with user-state support channelled through the IMO. In 2026, Hormuz featured active warfare, disputed control of the route, sanctions, and incompatible sovereignty claims. The comparator is best used as a long-term design template, not evidence that a similar mechanism could be installed immediately.

6.5 Security Council Authority, Deadlock, and the IMO

Resolution 2817 adds a legal and political layer. Adopted on 11 March 2026, it condemned attacks against regional states, including Oman, and provided a Security Council framework for subsequent demands to protect waterways and civilian navigation (United Nations Security Council, 2026a). The resolution does not erase treaty disagreements, but it makes the crisis more than a bilateral coastal-state matter. Any arrangement must operate within the Council's demands and the wider Charter framework.

The vetoed draft S/2026/273 is equally important because it demonstrates the limit of that framework. The April text sought a stronger response on safety and security of navigation, attacks on merchant vessels, mines, illegal tolling, and the humanitarian corridor. Eleven Council members supported it, but vetoes by China and Russia prevented adoption (United Nations Security Council, 2026b; United Nations Web TV, 2026). The deadlock helps explain why Oman's mechanism had no accepted multilateral guarantor. Normative condemnation existed; a common enforcement mandate did not.

The IMO provides the indispensable technical layer. It adopted the 1968 TSS, maintains the incident ledger, coordinated the evacuation plan, and supplied routing and safety procedures. It also publicly rejected attempts to convert Iranian control into an accepted international regime (Reuters, 2026a). Yet the organisation lacks coercive enforcement. Its ability to operate depends on member-state guarantees and on belligerent compliance. The 25 June pause demonstrates both its institutional value and its vulnerability. A viable Omani model must therefore be IMO-centred but not expect a technical organisation to supply security guarantees that only states can provide.

Table 4. Legal Positions and Comparative Straits Regimes.

Issue or comparator	Legal or institutional rule	Relevance to Hormuz	Limit
UNCLOS Part III	Transit passage; coastal regulation cannot hamper passage; Article 43 cooperation	Core legal framework for Oman and most user states	Iran signed but did not ratify and disputes contractual benefits for non-parties

Issue or comparator	Legal or institutional rule	Relevance to Hormuz	Limit
Customary international law	At least non-suspendable innocent passage; scope of full transit passage contested	Possible common legal floor for non-parties	Does not eliminate disagreement over warships, overflight, or submerged passage
1968 Hormuz TSS	Joint Iran-Oman proposal adopted through IMO	Historical precedent for joint routeing and IMO authority	Designed for navigational safety, not active warfare or coercive control
UNSC Resolution 2817	Formal Council condemnation and Charter-based framework	Adds multilateral authority to protection of navigation	Does not provide a detailed traffic-management or enforcement regime
Draft S/2026/273 (vetoed)	Proposed stronger action on navigational security, mines, attacks, tolling, and humanitarian passage	Shows demand for a guarantor and coordinated action	China-Russia veto exposed Council deadlock
Persian Gulf Strait Authority	Permit, routing, documentation, and payment apparatus linked to Iranian control	Concrete rival governance institution	Unilateral, contested, sanctioned, and incompatible with non-impediment baseline
Montreux Convention	No passage tax; charges for directly rendered services; pilotage optional	Clarifies toll/service distinction	Treaty-specific and not legally transferable to Hormuz
Malacca Cooperative Mechanism	Voluntary user contributions for navigation and environmental services	Best model for cooperative burden sharing	Developed gradually outside active interstate war

Source: United Nations (1982); UNSC (2026a, 2026b); UN Treaty Collection (1982/2026); IMO (2017, 2026i); Reuters (2026a); U.S. Department of the Treasury (2026); Türkiye MFA (1936/2026); Beckman (2009); Ho (2009).

7. EXPLAINING THE GOVERNANCE CEILING

7.1 Sponsorship Dependency and the Missing Guarantor

The first ceiling was dependency on a bargain Oman did not control. The United States-Iran understanding supplied the security guarantees and political authorisation that made evacuation and temporary routing possible. Oman's comparative advantage lay in local translation and implementation. When the memorandum frayed, the derivative arrangements lost their political foundation. This finding refines small-state scholarship: brokerage can create significant influence, but influence may be conditional on the persistence of a larger bargain.

The Security Council deadlock compounded that dependency. Resolution 2817 did not mature into a commonly accepted mechanism for coordinated protection, because the stronger April draft was vetoed. Oman consequently lacked an external guarantor that combined political legitimacy, technical support, and credible enforcement. Sponsorship dependency should not be confused with puppetry: Oman had prior bilateral work, shaped legal language, opposed compulsory fees, and later advanced a distinct regional proposal. The point is causal rather than normative. Autonomy varied by stage: access and proposal design were comparatively autonomous; implementation and durability were highly dependent.

7.2 Leverage Deficit and the Security-Guarantee Problem

The second ceiling was insufficient leverage. Oman could offer access, legitimacy, geography, and technical cooperation. It could not independently deter missile, drone, mine, or fast-craft attacks. Nor could it compel acceptance of a regional-management formula. The evacuation pause was therefore not merely a technical interruption; it revealed that operational governance required credible negative and positive incentives beyond Oman's unilateral capacity.

This does not make exclusive militarisation the answer. Naval reassurance can create its own security dilemma and may make commercial routing appear part of a belligerent strategy. The requirement is a division of labour in which coercive actors provide bounded guarantees while Omani and IMO institutions manage civilian procedures.

7.3 Contested Authority and Incompatible Governance Objects

The third ceiling was not simply disagreement about legal interpretation but disagreement about what was being governed. Oman and the Gulf-backed proposal treated the object as a safe international navigation route, along with associated services, environmental protection, and rescue. Iran's position treated the object as territorial control and strategic leverage, particularly over the inbound route. The PGSA gave that position an institutional form: vessel passage was framed as authorisation by an Iranian body rather than use of a shared international corridor. A cooperative service mechanism and a sovereignty-centred permit regime are not alternative administrative details; they embody different political orders.

The UNCLOS dispute amplified this incompatibility. Oman and the IMO treated non-impediment and the absence of compulsory passage tolls as the legal baseline. Iran's declaration and wartime practice preserved a narrower conception of obligations and a broader conception of coastal control. Without a reservation clause and an agreed practical floor, legal argument became part of the contest rather than a neutral solution.

7.4 Oman's Multiple Roles

The fourth ceiling arose from role conflict. Oman was simultaneously a mediator, a sovereign littoral state, a member of the GCC, a defence partner of the United States, and a territory exposed to attack. Each role supplied resources and constraints. Defence ties increased Oman's strategic value and possibly its influence with Washington; they also provided Tehran with grounds to question impartiality. Littoral sovereignty gave Oman legal standing; direct attacks required protest and reduced the distance expected of a mediator.

Role conflict is not necessarily disqualifying. Many mediators have interests and alliances. What matters is transparency, procedural fairness, and whether the parties believe the mediator can deliver benefits. Oman's problem was not that it lacked neutrality in an abstract sense; it was that the war progressively made its multiple roles harder to compartmentalise.

Table 5. Why Attempted Mediatory Maritime Governance Reached a Ceiling.

Ceiling mechanism	Observable evidence	Effect on governance stage	Institutional repair
External sponsorship dependency	Corridor tied to US-Iran memorandum; memorandum later frayed	Implementation and durability	Separate technical arrangements from ceasefire where possible; automatic review clauses
Missing multilateral guarantor	Draft S/2026/273 vetoed; no accepted Council enforcement mechanism	Implementation and durability	Designated guarantors outside unanimity rule; bounded guarantees and transparent mandate
Leverage deficit	Evacuation paused after attack; no capacity to compel acceptance	Implementation	Reciprocal guarantees; verified suspension and restart rules
Contested legal authority	Iran non-party declaration; dispute over transit passage and route control	Translation and institutionalisation	Without-prejudice legal clause; agreed minimum rules for civilian shipping
Role conflict	US facilities access; attacks on Omani territory; mediator becomes affected party	Credibility and durability	Transparent role disclosure; independent technical co-chair
Incompatible governance objects	PGSA permit/fee system versus regional service model	Institutionalisation	Begin with safety, rescue, pollution, and incident reporting before route allocation
Information and attribution deficits	Uncertain attack attribution, mine risk, conflicting instructions	Implementation	Joint incident ledger, third-party verification, common navigational picture

Source: Author's causal synthesis from the process-tracing record.

8. A REVISED HORMUZ MARITIME SECURITY MECHANISM

The policy implication is not to abandon an Omani-led mechanism but to reduce its ambition, clarify its legal basis, and build it in stages. A workable Hormuz Maritime Security



Mechanism should begin with functions that are urgent and less sovereignty-sensitive: verified incident reporting, search and rescue, environmental response, navigational warnings, and humanitarian movement. Route allocation and financial contributions should follow only after these functions generate a record of compliance.

The mechanism should be hosted in Oman because of geography, established channels, and administrative capacity, but it should not be exclusively Omani. An IMO-appointed technical co-chair would reduce role conflict and provide continuity when bilateral politics deteriorate. Iran and Oman would retain lawful coastal-state responsibilities, while GCC states, user states, shipping associations, and insurers would participate through defined technical and funding channels. Security guarantees should be provided by named states or a small group of guarantors under a transparent civilian-protection mandate, rather than made wholly dependent on Security Council unanimity.

The financial rule should be explicit and tripartite. First, there should be no compulsory payment by reason only of passage. Second, genuinely optional and directly rendered services—such as requested pilotage, towage, specialised escort, or emergency assistance—may be charged transparently at published cost. Third, longer-term navigational public goods should be financed through voluntary, project-specific contributions audited through an IMO-supported fund. This structure preserves the legal distinction among tolls, services, and cooperative funding and prevents a service mechanism from becoming a disguised sovereign levy.

The PGSA cannot simply be ignored, because it is an operating rival institution. A negotiated mechanism should neither recognise unilateral Iranian sovereignty over the entire Strait nor pretend that the PGSA has no practical capacity. The appropriate response is a transition clause: vessel safety information may be exchanged through designated liaison points, but authorisation to exercise transit rights is not conceded, compulsory fees are excluded, and any Iranian participation in service funding is channelled through the common audited mechanism.

Implementation should be phased. The first phase would establish the incident ledger, hotline, protected humanitarian windows, and common navigational warnings. The second would add pollution response, search-and-rescue exercises, and voluntary project financing. Only in the third phase, after verified compliance, should route allocation or a revised traffic-

separation scheme be addressed. Automatic pause and restart rules are essential: a single incident should trigger a defined safety review rather than indefinite collapse or politically improvised suspension.

Table 6. Revised Hormuz Maritime Security Mechanism.

Pillar	Revised design	Lesson from 2026	Legal or institutional safeguard
Joint incident and verification cell	Omani host with IMO technical co-chair; Iran, GCC, flag-state, insurer, and industry liaison officers	Conflicting claims and attribution undermined confidence	Common evidence standards; confidence ratings; public incident ledger
Humanitarian movement protocol	Pre-listed vessels, protected windows, sequencing, medical and crew priorities	2,900 seafarers moved but operation was paused after attack	Written safety guarantees; automatic pause/restart criteria; independent verification
Navigational safety layer	Temporary routing notices linked to hydrographic, mine, and GNSS information	Ordinary TSS could not be used under degraded conditions	IMO adoption/notification; without-prejudice clause on legal positions
Service and resilience fund	Voluntary contributions for aids to navigation, pollution response, rescue, and training	Compulsory charges became a legal and political obstacle	No charge by reason only of passage; audited project-specific funding
Optional direct services	Published charges for requested pilotage, towage, escort, or emergency assistance	Fee debate conflated transit tolls with actual services	Service must be optional, directly rendered, non-discriminatory, and cost-based
Gulf-Iran maritime hotline	Political and operational channels with 24-hour duty officers	Access survived but lacked rapid operational authority	Defined notification timelines and escalation ladder
Bounded guarantor arrangement	Named external states provide limited protection for civilian procedures	Council deadlock left no accepted enforcement guarantor	Transparent mandate; no command over civilian governance; periodic review

Pillar	Revised design	Lesson from 2026	Legal or institutional safeguard
PGSA transition and liaison clause	Exchange safety data without recognising unilateral transit authorisation	Iran created a rival permit-and-fee institution	No prejudice to passage rights; no compulsory fees; common audited channel

Source: Author's institutional design based on the process-tracing and comparative legal analysis.

9. Discussion

The revised evidence changes the theoretical meaning of the case. Oman did not move in a straight line from quiet diplomacy to durable governance. It progressed unevenly through a sequence in which access and translation were strong, institutionalisation was partial, implementation was brief, and durability failed. This is more analytically useful than either a celebratory account of Omani mediation or a conclusion that failure erased all earlier institutional production.

The case refines small-state scholarship by making sponsorship a variable rather than a binary judgment. The June corridor was highly conditioned by the United States-Iran opening. The late-July regional proposal contained more Omani design elements but remained GCC-backed and aligned with Washington's opposition to mandatory charges; it is therefore coded as medium rather than autonomous. This approach permits a more exact account of agency. Small states can shape institutional form without controlling the political conditions that enable implementation.

The PGSA sharpens the governance argument. Iran did not merely bargain over fees or advance an expansive legal interpretation. It attempted to institutionalise a rival order through permits, routing requirements, documentation, and payments. The contest was therefore between institutions as well as between legal principles. Oman's proposal and the PGSA sought to govern different objects: one organised shared services around an international corridor; the other organised authorised passage through an Iranian-administered zone.

The Security Council sequence exposes a second institutional limit. Resolution 2817 established condemnation and a Charter-based frame, but the vetoed April draft showed that

the Council could not agree on the stronger operational response. That deadlock helps explain why technical organisations and mediators were asked to perform functions without a corresponding enforcement guarantee. The IMO could verify incidents, coordinate evacuations, and structure routes, but it could not prevent attacks. Naval actors could provide deterrent capacity but risked militarising civilian passage. Oman could bridge these domains but could not collapse them into a single command. A viable regime requires deliberately plural architecture and clear role separation.

The two economic metrics also reveal different dimensions of crisis. The 28per cent fall in oil flow demonstrates a large energy shock; the more than 90per cent collapse in vessel transits demonstrates the breakdown of ordinary maritime governance. The persistence of some energy volume does not mean that the corridor was functioning normally. Large cargoes moved through exceptional arrangements while the wider population of ships, crews, charterers, and insurers remained exposed or immobilised.

The legal analysis yields a similar conclusion. UNCLOS provides the strongest general framework, especially for Oman and most user states, but Iran's non-ratification and declaration cannot be ignored. The 1968 TSS shows that joint coastal-state regulation through the IMO is historically possible. Montreux clarifies the distinction between passage tolls and direct services, while Malacca demonstrates how voluntary contributions can support navigational public goods. None of these precedents automatically solves the wartime Hormuz problem; together, they identify components of a more credible design.

10. Conclusion

The 2026 crisis placed Oman at the intersection of diplomacy, sovereignty, international law, and operational maritime safety. Muscat attempted to convert its established diplomatic access into governance. It helped translate the United States-Iran understanding into a joint work agenda, coordinated a temporary corridor with the IMO, participated in an evacuation framework, convened a bilateral committee, and later proposed a Gulf-backed regional service mechanism inspired by the Strait of Malacca. These were real outputs.

They were also externally conditioned and fragile. The evacuation was paused after renewed violence; the wider memorandum deteriorated; drone attacks struck Omani territory; the Security Council failed to agree on a stronger operational response; and Iran institutionalised a competing permit-and-fee regime before rejecting regional joint



management. The most defensible thesis is therefore not that Oman became a maritime-security governor, but that it attempted mediatory maritime governance and reached a ceiling within weeks.

That ceiling is theoretically productive. It shows that small-state brokerage is strongest in access and translation, weaker in enforcement, and dependent on the durability of broader political bargains. It shows that maritime governance must be measured by implementation and endurance rather than declarations alone. It also shows that international law in Hormuz is both a resource and a source of dispute: Oman is bound by UNCLOS, while Iran contests the treaty-based transit-passage regime for non-parties and has attempted to embody its competing claim in the PGSA.

An Omani-led mechanism remains the most plausible regional foundation, but it should begin narrowly. Incident verification, humanitarian movement, rescue, pollution response, and voluntary funding for specific navigational services are more feasible than immediate agreement on sovereignty or route control. The IMO should provide technical authority; Oman should host and broker; coastal states should retain their legal responsibilities; and external powers should provide bounded guarantees without commandeering the civilian system. The lesson of 2026 is not that quiet diplomacy failed. It is that diplomacy becomes governance only when institutions can survive the return of coercion.

References

- Ba, A. D. (2018). Governing the safety and security of the Malacca Strait: The Nippon Foundation between states and industry. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48(2), 252–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1404116>
- Beardsley, K. C., Quinn, D. M., Biswas, B., & Wilkenfeld, J. (2006). Mediation style and crisis outcomes. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50(1), 58–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002705282862>
- Beckman, R. C. (2009). The establishment of a cooperative mechanism for the Straits of Malacca and Singapore under Article 43 of UNCLOS. In A. Chircop, T. L. McDorman, & S. J. Rolston (Eds.), *The future of ocean regime-building* (pp. 233–250). Brill Nijhoff.
- Binhuwaidin, M. (2019). Oman and the rising Iran: Strategic hedging or a new alignment? *Asian Affairs*, 50(4), 567–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2019.1672429>
- Bueger, C. (2015). What is maritime security? *Marine Policy*, 53, 159–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.005>
- Bueger, C., & Edmunds, T. (2024). *Understanding maritime security*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197767146.001.0001>
- Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & Ryan, B. J. (2019). Maritime security: The uncharted politics of the global sea. *International Affairs*, 95(5), 971–978. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz145>
- Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & Stockbruegger, J. (2025). UNCLOS under fire: Recalibrating maritime security governance. *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, 74(S1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020589325101218>
- Caminos, H., & Cogliati-Bantz, V. P. (2014). *The legal regime of straits: Contemporary challenges and solutions*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511777189>
- Cole, J. (2022). Omani peacemaking and Middle East crises in the 2010s. In A. J. Fromherz (Ed.), *Sultan Qaboos and modern Oman, 1970–2020* (pp. 414–436). Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474493482-021>
- EIA. (2025a, June 16). Amid regional conflict, the Strait of Hormuz remains a critical oil chokepoint. U.S. Energy Information Administration. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65504>
- EIA. (2025b, June 24). About one-fifth of global liquefied natural gas trade flows through the Strait of Hormuz. U.S. Energy Information Administration. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65584>
- EIA. (2026a, March 3). World oil transit chokepoints. U.S. Energy Information Administration. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints
- EIA. (2026b). Short-Term Energy Outlook: Energy security and chokepoint flows, 1Q25–1Q26. U.S. Energy Information Administration. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/steo/report/energysecurity/article.php>

- Heemsbergen, L. J., & Siniver, A. (2011). New routes to power: Towards a typology of power mediation. *Review of International Studies*, 37(3), 1169–1190. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001002>
- Ho, J. H. (2009). Enhancing safety, security, and environmental protection of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore: The Cooperative Mechanism. *Ocean Development & International Law*, 40(2), 233–247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320902864854>
- International Maritime Organization. (2017, November 14). Safe and sustainable Straits of Malacca and Singapore. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pages/whatsnew-951.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026a, March 1). Statement on the Strait of Hormuz. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/statement-on-the-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026b, April 2). ‘Fragmented responses are no longer sufficient’: IMO Secretary-General. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/fragmented-responses-are-no-longer-sufficient-imo-sg-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026c, March 6). IMO Secretary-General: Seafarer deaths in Strait of Hormuz unacceptable. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/imo-secretary-general-statement-strait-of-hormuz-seafarer-deaths-unacceptable.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026d, April 24). No safe transit through Strait of Hormuz: IMO Secretary-General. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/no-safe-transit-through-hormuz-imo-secretary-general.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026e, June 11). Statement on the attack on tanker MT Settebello. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026f, June 23). Strait of Hormuz evacuation framework and operational guidance. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026g, June 25). IMO pauses evacuation in Strait of Hormuz following attack. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026h, July 8). IMO Secretary-General condemns new attacks on ships in the Strait of Hormuz. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026i). Ships’ routing: Strait of Hormuz traffic separation scheme. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/safety/pages/shipsrouting.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026j). Evacuation operation update: Vessels and seafarers moved, 23–26 June. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>

- International Maritime Organization. (2026k). Middle East: Highlighted confirmed incidents. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-highlighted-incidents.aspx>
- International Maritime Organization. (2026l). Operational routing information for the Strait of Hormuz evacuation framework. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>
- Keohane, R. O. (1969). Lilliputians' dilemmas: Small states in international politics. *International Organization*, 23(2), 291–310. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003160X>
- Kleiboer, M. (1996). Understanding success and failure of international mediation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 40(2), 360–389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002796040002007>
- Krahmann, E. (2003). Conceptualizing security governance. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 38(1), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836703038001001>
- Kraska, J. (2014). The legal vortex in the Strait of Hormuz. *Virginia Journal of International Law*, 54(2), 323–366. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2472065
- Lefebvre, J. A. (2010). Oman's foreign policy in the twenty-first century. *Middle East Policy*, 17(1), 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00429.x>
- Long, T. (2022). *A small state's guide to influence in world politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190926205.001.0001>
- Lott, A., & Kawagishi, S. (2022). The legal regime of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks against oil tankers: Law of the sea and law on the use of force perspectives. *Ocean Development & International Law*, 53(2–3), 123–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2022.2096158>
- Mahmoudi, S. (1989). Customary international law and transit passage. *Ocean Development & International Law*, 20(2), 157–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908328909545887>
- Mahmoudi, S. (1991). Passage of warships through the Strait of Hormuz. *Marine Policy*, 15(5), 338–348. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0308-597X\(91\)90089-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0308-597X(91)90089-T)
- Moore, J. N. (1980). The regime of straits and the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. *American Journal of International Law*, 74(1), 77–121. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2200905>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026a, May 24). Minister receives message from Iranian counterpart. <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/46525/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026b, June 16). Minister and Iranian counterpart reaffirm commitment to freedom of navigation. <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/48428/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026c, June 23). Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran issue a joint statement. <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/48943/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026d, June 24). Oman works with International Maritime Organization to provide transit corridor in the Strait of Hormuz. <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/49077/>

- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026e, June 25). Minister in phone call with Iranian counterpart. <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/49243/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026f, June 29). Oman-Iran Committee on Strait of Hormuz holds first meeting. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/tag/iran-en/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026g, July 12). Oman summons Iranian ambassador over drone attacks. <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/50726/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026h, July 14). Oman reaffirms cooperation to restore freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/news/statements/>
- Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026i, July 14). Minister calls for a new Gulf security policy. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://www.fm.gov.om/en/tag/iran-en/>
- Owtram, F. (2022). 'Friend to all, enemy to none': Oman's quiet diplomacy since 1970. In A. J. Fromherz (Ed.), *Sultan Qaboos and modern Oman, 1970–2020* (pp. 437–454). Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474493482-022>
- Rauchhaus, R. W. (2006). Asymmetric information, mediation, and conflict management. *World Politics*, 58(2), 207–241. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2006.0027>
- Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (1936/2026). Convention relating to the regime of the Straits (Montreux Convention). Retrieved August 3, 2026, from https://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii_-convention-relating-to-the-regime-of-the-straits.en.mfa
- Reuters. (2026a, July 10). Countries must reject Iran efforts to control Hormuz, UN agency document says. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/countries-must-reject-iran-efforts-control-hormuz-un-agency-document-says-2026-07-10/>
- Reuters. (2026b, July 13). Why has the Iran-US ceasefire memorandum frayed? *Internazionale*. <https://www.internazionale.it/ultime-notizie-reuters/2026/07/13/explainer-why-has-the-iran-us-ceasefire-memorandum-frayed>
- Reuters. (2026c, July 28). Oman presents Iran with Gulf-backed plan for voluntary fees to use Hormuz. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/gulf-states-back-plan-let-iran-collect-voluntary-fees-use-hormuz-2026-07-28/>
- Reuters. (2026d, July 29). Iran rules out regional management of Hormuz Strait, hitting hopes for breakthrough. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-rules-out-regional-management-hormuz-strait-hitting-hopes-breakthrough-2026-07-29/>
- Reuters. (2026e, August 3). Iran says no current talks with U.S. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-no-current-talks-with-us-2026-08-03/>
- Sharp, J. M. (2025). *Oman: Politics, security, and U.S. policy* (CRS Report RS21534). Congressional Research Service. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS21534>
- Thorhallsson, B., & Steinsson, S. (2017). Small state foreign policy. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.484>
- United Nations. (1982). *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

- United Nations. (2026a, April 27). Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council on maritime security. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-04-27/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-maritime-security>
- United Nations. (2026b). Bahrain and United States float Security Council resolution on the Strait of Hormuz. <https://www.un.org/en/bahrain-and-us-float-security-council-resolution-strait-hormuz>
- United Nations Security Council. (2026a). Resolution 2817 (2026), S/RES/2817. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4105560>
- United Nations Security Council. (2026b, April 7). Draft resolution on safety and security of maritime navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, S/2026/273. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4107740>
- United Nations Treaty Collection. (1982/2026). United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: Status and declarations—Islamic Republic of Iran. Retrieved August 3, 2026, from <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volumeper cent20II/Chapterper cent20XXI/XXI-6.en.xml>
- United Nations Web TV. (2026, April 7). China and Russia veto draft resolution on the Strait of Hormuz. <https://webtv.un.org/>
- U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2026, May 27). Economic Fury targets Iranian maritime extortion: Treasury sanctions Persian Gulf Strait Authority. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0507>
- Valeri, M. (2009). Oman: Politics and society in the Qaboos state. Hurst.
- Wivel, A. (2023). Small state diplomacy. Oxford Bibliographies in International Relations. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780199743292-0321>
- Worrall, J. (2021). 'Switzerland of Arabia': Omani foreign policy and mediation efforts in the Middle East. *The International Spectator*, 56(4), 134–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1996004>

Appendix A. Supplementary Data S1 Coding Rules

The accompanying CSV dataset records the public-event evidence used for process tracing. Each row represents a discrete event rather than a press article. Where several pages report the same event, the most authoritative or complete source is retained. Events are coded by their immediate institutional function rather than by the actor's stated motive.

External sponsorship is coded 'high' where the event explicitly depends on the United States-Iran memorandum, a ceasefire guarantee, or a multilateral framework without which implementation could not occur; 'medium' where the event is regionally backed or enabled but contains identifiable Omani policy design; 'low' where broader politics constrain the event without formally authorising it; and 'none' for autonomous statements, monitoring, or historical context. The 28 July proposal is coded medium because it contained genuine Omani design, had GCC backing, and aligned with the United States' preference for no



article/02/September/2026/London-Dialogue.

mandatory fees. The evidentiary role is coded 'confirming,' 'disconfirming,' 'qualifying,' 'context,' or 'mixed.' The dataset does not code attack attribution unless the source is an official verified incident record or the attribution is expressly identified as a party's claim.