

# Turkish Public Perceptions About Oman

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

*Public Perception*

*Public Diplomacy*

*Oman's Global Image*

*Oman-Turkey Relations*

*Oman's Public Policy*

## ABSTRACT

Oman has long lasting peaceful relations with its neighbours and the world. It is a small size Arabian Gulf state with very rich natural resources. Relations between Oman and Turkey was very pleasant in 15-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A century of interrupted relations has started to resurrect in the recent years with the new economic, political treaties and socio-cultural relations between two nations. Turkey and its policies, TV serials, and political leaders are very well known in Oman, whereas Oman is not very familiar to the Turkish people. In this research, to understand the level of Oman's image in Turkey, a survey was orchestrated on more than 500 respondents and striking findings demonstrate that Oman is not well-known well in Turkey. The survey was conducted physically in the shopping malls in Istanbul and virtually via online questionnaire. Social representation of the survey overlaps on the Turkish social facts. In comparison with Europeans and Asians, the Turkish public knows Oman more than double of the world public opinion. For example, the location of Oman is known 51.9% in Turkey, but 38.2% in the world; the existence of general elections in Oman is known in Turkey on the level of 32.7%, whereas in Europe 16.3%. This study, as a primary resource, shares and interprets the result of conducted survey and then suggests some policy alternatives to Oman to be known better in Turkey and the world as a public diplomacy tool.

## 1. Introduction

Oman is a long-lasting peaceful country in its region for decades. It solved five border issues with its neighbors in the last fifty years and it has been successfully struggling to follow "active neutrality in its regional and world politics. On the one hand, it has put a reasonable distance with GCC states about the understanding "union" plans, on the other hand, it has implemented very constructive, mediating and silent policies with its neighbors. Oman has located itself in a position of equal distance with Iran, GCC counties, and the Euro-Atlantic zone. This position provided it to be a natural mediator within this triangle.(Yenigun, 2020) Sometimes it played a very active and positive role between UK-Iran, US-Iran, Iran-US, and 5+1-Iran negotiations respectively. As known several 5+1 – Iran secret (back-channel) pre-negotiations and official negotiations were held in Muscat between 2013 and 2014 November and 2015.

Despite very rich and active historical relations between Sultanate of Oman and Sultanate of Ottoman, Oman, and Turkey relations were not on a desirable level in the last century. Contemporary relations after the Cold War were also weak, but they started to accelerate their relations specifically in the last decade. Turkey as one of the most developing counties economically, one of the G-20 members, and one of the potential regional powers in the Middle

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East, did not give enough attention to Oman's relations until five years ago. Oman also did not give big importance to Turkey's relations. But now especially in the last years, both regional actors have noticed each other, and economic and political relations started to develop dramatically.

In a wide view, Oman and Turkish foreign policies show the same similar specific features in third-party policies, such as Qatar relations, Iran perspectives, and good relations with the West and the US. Despite better relations at the governmental level, learning the level of relations at the people level is the main purpose of this study. Main research objective of this study is to show the (low) level of public diplomacy and to accelerate international public relations between two countries' two people.

## **2. Research Method**

In this study, it is used the social style of qualitative method and conducted several interviews with the ministerial officials in both countries. The numerical supposition method was used during the study to understand the level of relations. During this research, two countries' Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Omani Ministry of Defense (MoD) were visited and some decision-makers were interviewed to prepare survey questions before it is launched in Turkey. A workshop was conducted in MoD to discuss Omani Turkish public relations. Then, two surveys were conducted in the streets and shopping centers in Turkey physically and by online survey virtually. At the end of the survey, both surveys were combined and reached the number of 508 respondents. Selection was done randomly in accordance with the respondents. At the same time, another parallel survey was conducted in 63 countries. Those countries are scattered almost in all continents equally, Africa, America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, Australia. The Gulf countries were not involved in the study as to be preserved from tending information. It is counted as a high representation of the world average in terms of gender, education, age, and country distribution. Then, the two conducted surveys, the world survey, and the Turkey survey, are compared in this study to measure and understand the level of Turkish knowledge about Oman.

## **3. Literature Review**

There is a limited amount of study and scientific literature related to Omani-Turkish relations. Therefore, one of the study's aims is to fill some of the literary voids on international relations. When searching for the research sources separately, one can find specific Turkish foreign policy resources and their relationship with the Sultanate of Oman. Lefebvre (2010), in his article entitled "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-first Century," the focal point in this paper is Oman's foreign policy in the contemporary era. He indicates that Oman's foreign policy is more systematic and flexible. However, Omani-Turkish relations accounted for only a small portion of the study. At the same time, Gardner (2015) talks about the active role of Sultan Qaboos with the West, in which he affirms that the Sultanate of Oman enjoys great oil wealth. In showing the Sultan's attempts to consolidate his authority since the beginning of his reign, this paper presents a case study of the limited Western influence over the Gulf region leaders. Schmierer (2015) discusses Oman's role in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The main point is mentioned in the article, namely Oman's maritime empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also studies Oman's relations with the West, but not Turkish relations specifically. Haas (2015) talks about general issues and the current state of Oman's foreign policy. His book is very classic, about relations between Oman and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, relations with the West, relations between communist countries, the Iran-Iraq war, and Oman reflections. Still, it does not present an idea or a new perspective on the relations between the two Omani-Turkish peoples.

Adisonmez (2012) also argues that from 1980 to 2012, Turkey's foreign policy has rested largely on a Kantian approach that supports the idea of non-violent methods in bilateral relationships and emphasizes the importance of cooperation as a foreign policy tool. His argument reveals that Turkey's approach had adopted a Lockean culture in its foreign policy for almost six decades. Moreover, this approach forced Turkey to ignore Arab and Gulf countries. Nevertheless, in the last two decades, Turkey's social and inter-regional economic relations were redefined by the globalization trend that helped Turkey increase its export-based economy while making its society more liberal.

Ruma and Celikpala (2019) claim that Russian and Turkish relations will positively reflect Turkish and Arab concerns. They were on the opposite sides until recently on the regime change's essential question in that country. Overall, one can only hope for a peaceful and democratic life for Syrians who tremendously suffered because of an imbroglio of all these global and regional powers' policies.

Demir (2017) investigates in his book the influence of the "Arab Spring," political transformation, on Turkish foreign policy employing a multidimensional approach that draws on a wide range of disciplines from international relations to sociology and economics. The dynamics and focus of the Arab Spring varied across countries where large-scale demonstrations were held, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Bahrain. While protests in Jordan and Bahrain had few consequences, they brought about government changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. As a counter-stance against the Middle East's status quo, the Arab Spring has stimulated many discussions, which has led to the emergence of new regional actors.

Ozhan (2016) points out Turkish foreign policy's transformation towards the Middle East since 2002, after Akparti. It argues that the change in Turkish foreign policy was gradual and based on different country dynamics for the past decade. The three cases under study demonstrate Turkish foreign policy's changing identity, from a Western perspective, status quo-oriented, and passive foreign policy towards a more independent, pro-active foreign policy. According to him, this new Turkish foreign policy approach will positively affect Turkish- Gulf relations including Oman.

#### **4. Findings and Interpretations**

As above-mentioned, a survey has been conducted in Turkey in physical and virtual ways in 2016 and updated 2019 and 2020 to gather the current results as a comparative study. The main purpose of the project is to understand and explore the public opinion and knowledge of the Turkish people about Oman's general information, history, economy, politics, and international relations. To investigate general information, very simple questions were asked such as Oman's location, the capital city, currency. To see the level of people's knowledge about Oman's politics, questions that are more specific were asked, such as the head of state, existence of general elections, bicameralism of the parliament. The historical question was deeper and anchor question, such as about Oman's maritime empire in the 19th century. International relations questions were also asked to understand Turkish people's knowledge about Omani foreign policy such as Oman's mediation role in the 5+1 Iran nuclear deal in 2015, or again mediation on releasing some prisoners from Iran and the West.

The initial target for the survey was to reach minimum 450 people and it is achieved with 508 respondents. The survey was conducted in Turkish to reach everybody on the street, that's why explanations in the figure is Turkish. Gender distribution of survey has come out as 49% female and 51% male as seen in Figure 1. Age group is distributed, as young people were majority like Turkey's general age distribution (excluding the age of 15); it came out as ages of 15-24: 35.8%, 25-40: 34.8%, 41-55: 17.5%, 56-65: 9.4% and 65+:

2.4%. The average education level is very high among the respondents: 5.5 of the respondents have a Ph.D. degree, 7.7% have a master's degree and 53.9% have a bachelor's degree, in total 67.1% have a bachelor + degree. Only 25% of respondents hold high school and 7.9% hold a middle school certificate

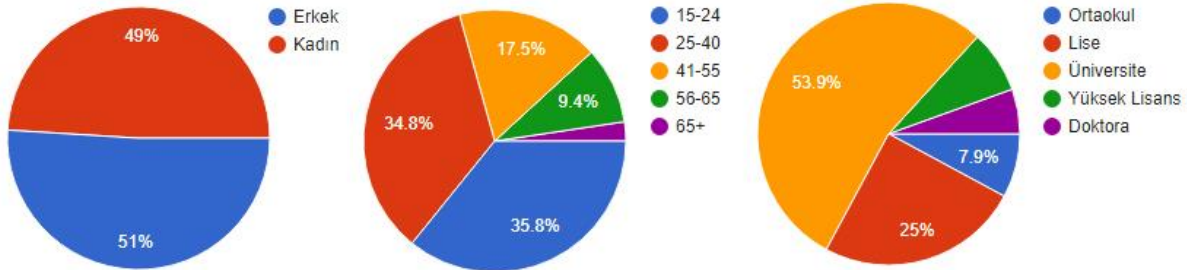


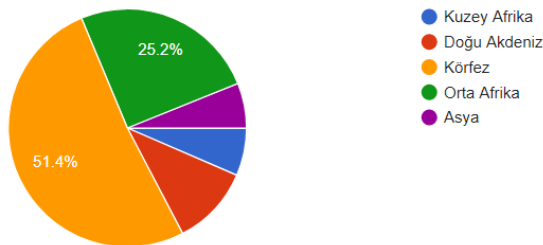
Figure 1. Social Distribution of the Survey, "Oman's Global Image"

On the other hand, under the other project, a parallel survey was conducted in the other 63 countries from all continents and regions except the Gulf region about Oman's global image. In the following paragraphs, sometimes comparative figures and data will be given to comparing Turkey and the world average about the knowledge of Oman.

The purpose of asking some simple questions about Oman is to explore the general information level of the Turkish people about Oman. For example, the geographical region of Oman, the capital city, and the currency of Oman were very simple braces to understand Oman's general information among the Turkish people 51.4% of respondents answered that Oman is located in the Gulf region. It looks low at first sight but in reality, it is slightly higher than the world average, which is 49.4%.

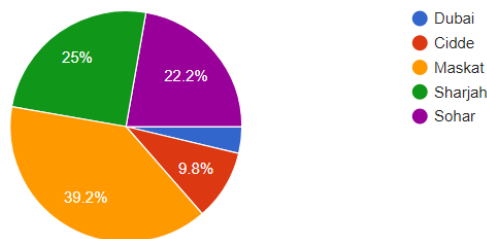
Umman nerede bulunuyor?

508 responses



Umman'ın başkenti neresidir?

508 responses



Umman'ın para birimini biliyor musunuz?

508 responses

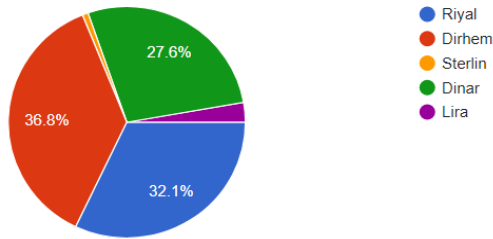


Figure 2. Simple Questions; Location, Capital and Currency of Oman

39.2% of the Turkish respondents could give the right answer about the capital of Oman. Interestingly 22.2% has answered “Sohar” which is the former capital city of Oman. In comparison with the world average, 30.4%, Turkish people’s knowledge about Oman’s capital is almost 9% is higher. The Turkish people's knowledge of the currency of Oman is also lower than the expectation with a ratio of 32.1%. However, it is still 7% higher than the world average on this topic, which is 25.1%. One of the highest right answer was taken on the location of Oman. More than the half of the respondents (51.4%) answered as in the Arabian Gulf.

Umman'ın devlet başkanı kimdir?

508 responses

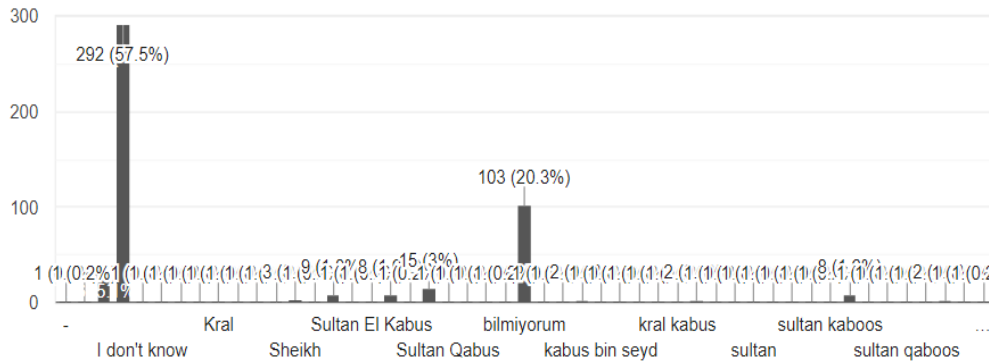


Figure 3. Result(s) about the Oman’s Head of State

Regarding political questions, the Turkish people’s knowledge about the head of state of Oman is very low. While this project and survey started Sultan Qaboos was alive; when the survey concluded Sultan Haitham was in power. That’s why, any answer as “Sultan Haitham” “Sultan Qaboos” “Sultan Kaboos”, “Sultan” and similar answers were accepted as the right answer. Under those circumstances, only 9% answered correctly. 77.8% responded as “I do not know” and the others responded with wrong answers as seen above figure.

Main purpose of international relations questions was to understand the Turkish people's knowledge about Oman’s foreign policies, efforts in the region and the world arena, which are very similar to Turkish foreign policy. The most important question was about the mediator role of Oman in the 5+1-Iran Nuclear Deal Agreement in 2015.

Umman 2015'deki nükleer anlaşmada İran ve 5+1 ülkeleri arasında arabuluculuk yapmıştır.

508 responses

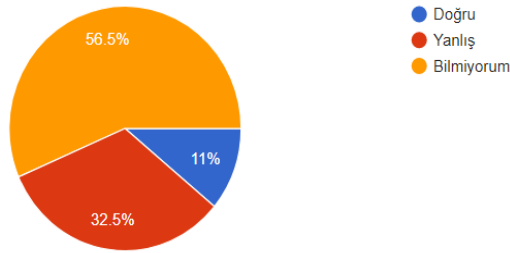
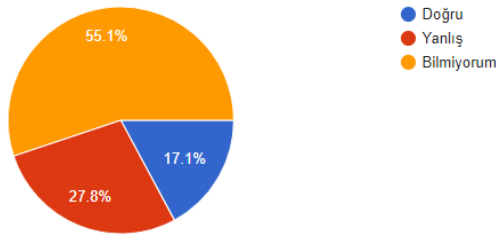


Figure 4. Oman Foreign Policy; Oman's Mediatory in 5+1-Iran Nuclear Deal

Unfortunately, the largest portion of the respondents (56.5%) responded as “I do not know” and 32.5% responded as “wrong”. Only 11% know that Oman had a very crucial role in the mentioned agreement, which was very important for Turkey too as a regional player. At the same time, Turkey was struggling for the same purpose between the West and Iran that year. Oman is the most developed democratic country in the Gulf region, by general elections, a bicameral parliament, elected women's regional elections, and universal suffrage including women's right to vote and be elected. It is taken as a role model in politics by the other regional countries. Nevertheless, Oman's tremendous developments are not seen or known by the world and the Western countries.

Umman iki meclisli bir parlamentoya sahiptir.

508 responses



Umman'da genel seçimler yapılmaktadır.

508 responses

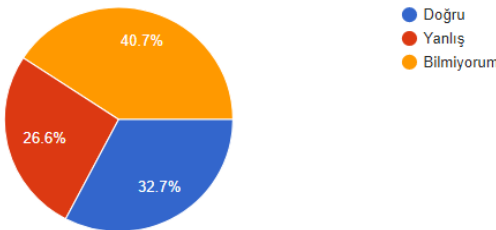


Figure 5. Bicameral Parliament and Elections in Oman

For example, the existence of the bicameral parliament in Oman is not known well in Turkey. Only 17.1% know the right answer, while 27.8% say, “No, there is not a bicameral parliament in Oman” and 55.1% say, “I do not know”. Even in the world survey in 63 countries, only 16.4% know the existence of the Omani bicameral parliament. The Turkish knowledge of the existence of Omani general elections is higher than the knowledge of bicameral parliament with a ratio of 32.7%. It is a low level, but higher than the world knowledge level of 25.3%. Turkish people's knowledge about Oman's history is very low, although the two countries had very intensive and good relations in recent history. For example, the golden era of Oman was

the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when they established a maritime empire from Iran to Mozambique. This fact, unfortunately, is forgotten in Turkey with a ratio of 93.5% separate on four different wrong answers in the survey. Only 6.5% could answer correctly this history question as seen in the following figure.

19.yüzyılda, Umman aşağıdakilerden hangisini kurmuştur?

508 responses

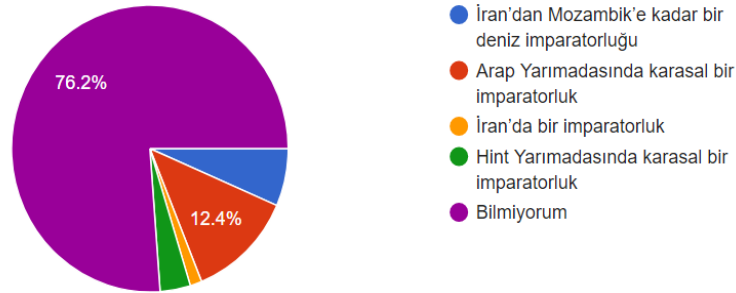


Figure 6. History Question; Oman's Maritime Empire in 19<sup>th</sup> century

It is a fact that Oman's main income question takes the highest ratio of the right answer in the world and Turkey in both surveys. In Turkey, 56.9 respondents answered as "oil", in the world survey lower than Turkish people with a ratio of 49.8%.

Umman'ın en büyük gelir kaynağı aşağıdakilerden hangisidir?

508 responses

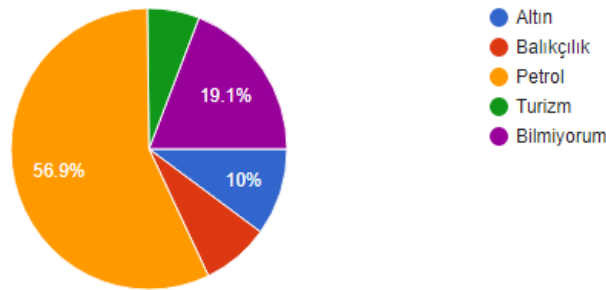


Figure 7. Economy Question; Main Income of Oman

## 5. Conclusion

Even though Oman and Turkey had very good relations in history, contemporary relations are not at the desired level by both actors. Turkey, one of the potential leaders of the Middle East region, did not give enough attention to Oman relations until 2015. Whereas it seems very clear that Oman also did not give high-level attention to Turkey's relations. Although Oman has a very peaceful historical background and active neutrality role in the region and the world, it is not known such as Switzerland or Norway (Nye, 2008) in the international arena. Despite playing a very positive role between the West and Iran during the secret talks in 2013 and 2014 and mediating in the 2015 nuclear deal, again it is not known by the world public opinion and Turkish people.

However in the last five years, two actors have noticed each other, and economic and international relations resurrected. A military-industrial development agreement was signed, some arms sales were conducted and Turkish construction companies have been working in Oman for a long time (Yenigun, 2020). But as political relations have been ameliorated. Oman and Turkish foreign

policies show the same similar specific features with the third parties, such as Qatar relations, Iran policies, and good relations with the Euro-Atlantic zone.

Despite improving relations, Turkish and Omani peoples still don't know each other very well. It is a fact that Omani people know Turkey better than Turkish people know Omani people because of some public diplomacy instruments, such as Turkish serials, military equipment, music, educational exchange, and scholarship programs, and accelerated tourism in the last years. It is a found fact that, especially in recent years Turkish people started to increase their knowledge about Oman, it is seen in 2016 and 2020 surveys conducted in Turkey. Another fact is that Turkish people know Oman more than the world's knowledge about Oman around 7-10% higher level.

Even comparatively, Turkey is almost at the best level among 63 countries, when we take a look at the level of knowledge about Oman, it is still not at the expected level. As indicated above, although they are higher than the world's average, only 39.2% know Muscat, the capital of Oman, 32.1% know the currency of Oman. Again only 11% of Turkish people know that Oman was the mediator in the 5+1-Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Just 17.1% know about bicameral parliament and almost double, 32.7% know about general elections in Oman. Oman's golden history is not known in Turkey with a ratio of 93.5%. 2nd longest-term leader, Sultan Qaboos is known for the 9% ratio. Only well-known (over 50%) two topics about Oman are the regional location of Oman (51.4%) and Oman's main income (56.9%).

To increase Oman's image in Turkey, Oman should implement some policy alternatives in classical diplomacy but especially give pretty much more attention to public diplomacy. (Yenigun et. al, 2020) Some social-cultural events, festivals, and media advertorial could be fruitful to reach Turkish Public. In addition to that, scholastic events, conferences, academic exchange programs, free summer programs, training courses, and joint seminars will be very beneficial as good instruments in public diplomacy, especially among the young generations. Also, some famous TV serials and Omani movies could be exchanged with the Turkish serials which are followed up by almost all people. Some university branches could be opened reciprocally to reach the young generations and future volunteered ambassadors. In general, despite it is not the desired level, Turkish and Omani public relations are getting better and higher than the world's average. As a policy alternative, public diplomacy tools will help the two peoples to establish better relations in the recent future.

### Acknowledgement

This paper is an output of the project of Sultan Qaboos University, Internal Grant: IG/EPS/POLS/20/01-*International and Economic Relations between Oman and Turkey*.

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