

Responding to the Islamic State Attack in Oman

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Although the mosque shooting was unprecedented in Oman, it fits with the terrorist group's long practice of massacring Shia Muslims in the Gulf and beyond.

On July 15, three Islamic State (IS) gunmen opened fire at the Shia Imam Ali Mosque in Muscat's Wadi Kabir district, marking the first successful jihadist attack in Oman's modern history. Before the three perpetrators were killed by security forces, they murdered six people and injured as many as fifty others. Police later disclosed that all three attackers were Omani nationals and brothers. The following night, IS claimed responsibility for the incident, framing it as part of the group's Sunni jihadist campaign against Shia Muslims worldwide. Why did such an unprecedented attack occur in Oman now? And how can the United States help prevent it from happening again while reaffirming its commitment to the strategic bilateral partnership?

Minuscule Omani Involvement in Jihadism

The main reason why Oman has never previously suffered jihadist attacks is because very few Omanis have been involved with jihadist movements. Most of the sultanate's citizens are Ibadi Muslims, a religious branch that does not seek pan-Islamic government control, unlike certain Sunni and Shia factions.

The earliest known cases of such involvement are Abu Ubaydah al-Omani and Abu Hamza al-Omani, two citizens who joined al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and fought locally until they were killed (al-Qaeda eulogized

them in an August 2012 [video \(https://jihadology.net/2012/08/08/new-video-message-from-fursan-al-balagh-media-the-two-martyrs-of-oman/\)](https://jihadology.net/2012/08/08/new-video-message-from-fursan-al-balagh-media-the-two-martyrs-of-oman/). Later, an Omani named Mutasim bin Sadiq bin Muhammad showed up in the “Sinjar Records (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records/>),” a register of foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State’s predecessor in Iraq around the mid-2000s. In November 2013, an Omani was announced as a “martyr” after fighting and dying for the Saudi-led jihadist group Katibat al-Khadra during Syria’s civil war. Two months later, IS eulogized another Omani fighter who perished in Syria.

In addition, a leaked internal letter suggests that beginning in 2017, the core IS territories in Iraq and Syria [asked \(https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/caliphate-complaint-box-255/\)](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/caliphate-complaint-box-255/) their Yemen “province” to plan attacks in Oman—specifically, against the embassies of countries involved in the “Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.” Although these plans never came to fruition, they illustrate that IS was interested in attacking the country directly as far back as seven years ago, if not longer.

Choice of Target

As noted above, last week’s attack was more sectarian in nature than Oman-specific. It follows a long pattern of IS targeting Shia both inside its former “caliphate” and abroad. The group often refers to Shia derogatively as *rawafidh* (rejectionists), accusing them of “rejecting” the legitimacy of the historical caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman in favor of Ali bin Abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law (among other theological differences).

The attack was also timed to occur on Ashura, which Shia regard as an important annual day of mourning for Husayn bin Ali, grandson of Muhammad and the third Shia Imam. In the late seventh century, Husayn refused on moral grounds to give *baya* (religious allegiance) to the Umayyad caliph Yazid bin Muawiyah and was subsequently killed alongside most of his male relatives at the Battle of Karbala.

Past IS attacks on Shia targets include the following:

- 2014: IS massacres Shia detainees at two prisons in Iraq: Badush (Mosul) and Camp Speicher (Tikrit)
- 2015: IS attacks Shia mosques in Kuwait City, Saudi Arabia (Qatif and Dammam), and Yemen (Sanaa), as well as a market in Iraq (Khan Bani Saad) and Shia neighborhoods in southern Beirut.
- 2016: IS attacks Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia (Mahasin) and Syria (Sayyeda Zainab) as well as Shia communities in Iraq (Samawa)
- 2017: IS attacks Shia communities in Baghdad
- 2018: IS conducts multiple attacks against Shia mosques in Afghanistan (Gardez and Kabul)
- 2019: IS attacks Shia communities in Pakistan (Quetta)
- 2021: IS attacks Shia communities in Afghanistan (Kabul, Kunduz, Kandahar) and Baghdad
- 2022: IS attacks Shia mosques in Afghanistan multiple times (Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul), along with mosques in Iran (Shiraz) and Pakistan (Peshawar)
- 2023: IS attacks a Shia mosque in Pul-i-Khumri, Afghanistan
- 2024: IS attacks a Shia mosque in Guzara, Afghanistan

Against that backdrop, the Oman attack is just another tragic thread in a broader sectarian pattern—an assessment bolstered when the official IS attack claim declared, “Let the apostate *rawafidh* know that the war is ongoing against them in every place.” Similarly, the perpetrators’ prerecorded video testimony explained that they acted “in revenge for Aisha the Mother of the Believers” (the subject of further Sunni-Shia theological disagreements) and “in revenge

for our Sunni monotheist brothers isolated in the prisons of the *rawafidh* in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.” They also warned that “the Islamic State’s soldiers will have an appointment with the *rawafidh* house of worship in Muscat.”

U.S. Policy Considerations

In addition to the sectarian angle, the Oman attack should be seen as part of a **broader trend** (<https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/a-globally-integrated-islamic-state/>) of increasing IS external operations around the world. Despite the citizenry’s minuscule links to jihadism, the Omani government is deeply involved in international counterterrorism efforts, including as a member of the global counter-IS coalition and the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC). Generally, however, it prefers to conduct such measures behind the scenes in order to maintain its appearance of neutrality and frequent role as regional mediator. Oman also has several counterterrorism-related agencies of its own, such as the Sultan’s Special Forces and the Royal Oman Police Special Task Force.

As part of their strong political and defense ties, U.S. and Omani officials hold regular bilateral discussions on countering violent extremism. The United States also **provides** (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21534>) significant border security assistance to Muscat, along with small grants from the State Department’s Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR) account. Yet the Biden administration’s fiscal year 2025 budget request is set to eliminate the NADR funding and reduce overall U.S. assistance to Muscat (though it will provide a **slight increase** (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS21534.pdf>) in the International Military Education and Training account).

In Oman, the attack will likely change how the government approaches the threat of terrorism within its borders given the nature of the incident, the perpetrators, and the chosen target. This presumably includes shoring up its security apparatus to determine how a plot of this magnitude was missed by the intelligence services, as well as reviewing the security response to the incident for important lessons learned.

To reassure the Omani government and public that the United States will remain a stalwart partner in countering such terrorist threats, Washington should deepen cooperation with Muscat in the context of the broader global fight against IS. Notably, the global counter-IS coalition will be meeting within the next couple months. This will provide another platform to discuss last week’s incident and the current status of information and intelligence sharing among member states (including Oman), toward the goal of better detecting mobilized individuals and preventing them from carrying out attacks. In addition, Washington should consider reestablishing the NADR funding and restoring overall assistance to its previous levels, since most of this money is for counterterrorism purposes. Proceeding with reductions at this moment would appear tone deaf; instead, America’s partners in Oman need a signal of solidarity.

Aaron Zelin is the Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and creator of its interactive [Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>). Elizabeth Dent recently joined the Institute as a senior fellow after serving as director for the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula at the Pentagon. ❖

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