**Opening Speech by**

**H. E. Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi, Secretary General of Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs,**

**Bundestag - Berlin**

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Thank you very much for inviting me to speak. It is a great honour to address you here at this historic institution "the Bundestag". I would like especially to thank its President, the honorable Professor Norbert Lammert, for opening this event. I also thank Mr Kaiser, President of the German Oman Association as well as the honorable Mrs Schmidt, for moderating this session.

The Sultanate of Oman values its relationship with Germany for many reasons. It is a longstanding friendship, with multiple achievements. It is a relationship that has successfully extended beyond government to government cooperation, and has been embraced by private sector businesses, educational and cultural institutions as well as civil society in both Oman and Germany. For many years Omanis have travelled to Germany for education, business, healthcare and tourism.

We are delighted to have signed a bilateral reciprocal visa waiver for official passports recently, and we eagerly await your Parliament’s ratification.

Already all Germans can travel freely to Oman, getting their visas on arrival, and we hope German tourism to our country will continue to grow. As you know, Oman is a peaceful country, with a deep tradition of tolerance and hospitality, something which many tourists find very congenial.

We hope to have German support for a Schengen visa waiver arrangements for our citizens very soon.

The economic dimension in our relations is of course very important. Trade between Oman and Germany is significant, and, for our part, we are very pleased to be able to purchase high quality manufactured goods, especially those in which German design and engineering capacities are strongly in evidence.

But perhaps even more important to us is the investment and practical involvement of German business in Oman's economic development, such as Siemens' contribution to the construction of power plants and the role of Munich Airports in the current projects to develop and expand our airports.

What I want to emphasise, however, is the way the Omani-German relationship is flourishing in the fields of education and culture. The education of the new generation of Omanis is an absolutely important part of our work, because it contributes to development and prosperity.

Germany is justly celebrated for the strength of its commitment to education. It is hard to come to Berlin and not be struck by the prominent role played by universities in the public life of your country. The legacy of individuals such as Alexander von Humboldt is evident in the continued centrality of the university sector for Germany's economy and society.

This legacy contributes directly now to the education of Omanis: through the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, through the work of German teachers and researchers in Oman, and through the opportunities Omani students have enjoyed to experience education in Germany.

I would like to mention the excellent work of the German-Omani Association, who have been organising student exchange programmes between our two countries since 2010, designing and supporting exhibitions, sponsoring research and hosting research events. I really appreciate the work of the leadership and members of this association: it is a practical contribution to enhancing understanding.

I would particularly like to note the association's role in developing, along with Oman's Ministry for Religious Affairs, a touring exhibition on Islam in Oman, which carries a vital message about religious tolerance, and which began in Germany and Austria, but has since been seen in the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece, Malta, Pakistan, Canada, Brazil and many other countries worldwide, with exhibition materials now available in sixteen languages.

It is a splendid example of what the work of the association can do. More generally, it is the kind of work that can be done within the framework of the Germany - Oman relationship. It makes a tangible contribution to an important dimension of Omani diplomacy. Because Oman is deeply committed to encouraging a deep and constructive dialogue on questions of religion and culture. It is a contribution, however modest, we are determined to make in a world where misunderstanding and suspicion on such questions is sadly increasing.

This is also why Oman values Germany's broader contribution to the international community and finds itself in very frequent agreement with the actions and policies of successive German governments. The consistency of Germany's positions, on some of the most difficult issues facing us today, especially in the Middle East, is hugely important and we want to take this opportunity to recognise that.

I will touch on three areas where I think Germany and Oman share an approach to some of these problems.

First, in its engagement with a long series of crises in our region, from Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s, to Syria and Yemen today, Germany has always prioritised a search for solutions based on a full and patient understanding of the situation, and underpinned by a desire to avoid military solutions wherever possible. This has meant that the German government has taken clear public positions, such as their opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. That involved a difficult decision to resist requests for support from a powerful and important ally. It is a testimony to the quality and care of German diplomacy that this was done in such a way that German-US relations were not seriously impaired. Of course, where the case for military intervention is compelling, Germany is prepared to commit itself to such action, as shown by its decision to participate in NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia back in the mid 1990s. Oman takes a very similar view: we will contribute to military action when the case really demands it, as we did in 1991, to the coalition that liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. But we are much more inclined to take whatever alternative steps we can to avoid it. In our present efforts to help secure a peaceful solution to the war in Yemen, for example, it is Oman's view that military intervention is more likely to prolong the conflict and make it worse than it is to bring any meaningful end to it.

Second, Germany's commitment to patient diplomacy has also been evident over decades in its policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. Germany helped shape European Union opinion on this issue, and thus contributed to building a global political climate that we believe helped prepare the way for the partial, but potentially historic rapprochement between the United States and Iran as represented by the 2015 Vienna Agreement. Germany's contribution to the implementation of this agreement is consistent with a long-established foreign policy stance. Oman, for whom the importance of this agreement simply cannot be overstated, is deeply appreciative of the work of the German government in this respect.

Third, Germany assumed a leading role in the international response to the Syrian refugee crisis. I must acknowledge, of course, and I am sure you are all very aware of this, that the biggest burden from this crisis, aside from that carried by the refugees themselves, has been that taken on by some of Syria's neighbours, like Lebanon and Jordan. But Germany's very prominent and principled stance in 2015, based on a commitment both to humanitarian values and to the network of international agreements in which we all play our part, set an example to others.

Standing up for hospitality, tolerance, openness and justice is absolutely vital, now more than ever, in a climate when many others seem to be driven instead by feelings of fear and hostility. I hope that Germany will continue to offer leadership in this regard.

This brings me to Oman's policy, again, which, as I have already said, places great emphasis on dialogue, on the necessary but often difficult work of talking until a solution can be found. Omani foreign policy is also committed to thinking about the long term. By this I mean that we try to avoid allowing our policy to be shaped by every short term twist and turn of political fortunes. We prefer to focus on some underlying geo-strategic realities. Things that we cannot avoid. Realities that will always be there, even as governments and ideologies come and go.

One key geostrategic reality for Oman is its location at the point at which the Gulf and the Indian Ocean meet. I would like to focus on two aspects of Omani foreign policy that spring from this location.

The first is the fact that the point at which the Gulf and the Indian Ocean meet, the Strait of Hormuz, is the waterway through which perhaps 40% of the world's oil exports have to pass.

While the exact percentages may have shifted a little, this was true in 1978, when the Shah led Iran, and it has been true under each successive leadership of the Islamic Republic. Oman and Iran share responsibility for the security of this vital part of the global economy, and Omani policy towards Iran, and as regards the security of the Gulf region more generally, has to recognise this.

Now you might say: "But there hasn't always been oil and there won't be oil for ever. Once there is no more oil in the Gulf the Strait of Hormuz will no longer matter." But even without oil, the Strait is still the narrow and shallow waterway through which trade will pass. It still requires that Iran and Oman work together. In other words, the oil may run out, but Iran will still be there.

This is one reason – not the only one, of course – why Omani foreign policy has consistently focused on maintaining good relations with Iran, and indeed, on assisting Iran and other friends and allies in understanding one another better. Our relationship with Iran, as with all of our other neighbors, also arises from a more general principle that says that we should be good neighbours in whatever way we can.

Part of this involves recognising shared interests, including the very particular shared interest of maintaining what we might call the quality of life in our neighbourhood: threats to the security, prosperity and environmental health of a neighbourhood are threats to everyone living in it, so we should work together when we can to counteract them, and to collaborate on making it a better place for us all to live in.

For this reason, Oman has consistently argued for decades that the security of the Gulf can only be properly managed if all parties who have a genuine and deep-rooted interest in it are working together. This means that we believe that Iran needs to be included, not, as has been the case for so long, deliberately excluded from the conversations and formal arrangements that seek to establish and maintain that regional security, on the basis of mutual respect, mutual trust and cooperation.

We will continue to argue that this is the case: that Iran shares with the rest of us an interest in maintaining security and that it is not a threat, as it is often painted. Certainly there are differences and possible areas of conflict that might make it hard for Iran and some of our other neighbours to work together, but our conviction is that we are better off trying to overcome or put to one side those differences, in order to focus on what matters to us all, the security of the Gulf region, its stability and prosperity.

The second foreign policy priority arising from this understanding of our location, is the enormous importance we attach to the development and expansion of ties across the Indian Ocean. I think the future of the Gulf is intimately related to that of the Indian Ocean. I shall say a little more about this in a moment. But even were we not in the Gulf, the Indian Ocean would matter to us in its own right.

It is an area of historical importance to Oman. From Mozambique to Indonesia, it is a world in which Omanis have travelled and traded for centuries, and our own culture is deeply shaped by interactions with the many other cultures Omanis encountered along the way. In the twenty-first century it is also a region of increasing dynamism, both economically and culturally, and Oman's future prosperity and social development depends upon our participation in it.

It is also a region of key strategic importance for the world's largest nation, China. This is one way in which the security of the Gulf and the future of the Indian Ocean are related. China is clearly interested in securing its own position, protecting its trade and investments by embedding itself in key locations across the Indian Ocean and beyond. Oman is confident to working constructively with China in this context, rather than seeing its activities as a problem. To that end we seek cooperation in areas such as maritime security, action against piracy, for example, and in the development of the next generation of container ports and other lines of transport and communication. The construction of this new network in the Indian Ocean will necessarily involve connections in the Gulf, and will draw China, too, into the Gulf because its security will increasingly be a concern for Chinese policy-makers and businesses.

As Oman looks ahead to the days when oil will no longer be our principal source of income, the restructuring and diversification of our economy has to be a major priority. This means that we will be seeking to develop the natural resource of our own citizens, encouraging them to create a new economy in which technology, communications and other knowledge and services-based industries will play a substantial role.

In order to do this, Oman will continue to seek international partners for projects that integrate science and technical education with industry, with business and commerce, and with design and communication skills. I have already spoken about the strength of the university sector in Germany, and we are also very aware of German innovation and capacity in science and technology. Some strategic collaboration with German partners would be of great interest to Oman's public and private sectors.

On the international diplomatic stage, I have already spoken about the leading role Germany has taken recently in upholding certain humanitarian values. There is, of course, grave concern in the Middle East, and among Muslims more generally, about the way these values have come under threat from an American government that appears to be shifting from its traditional support and embarking on a foreign policy approach that is likely to encourage prejudice and possibly incite conflict.

Oman and Germany are longstanding friends and allies of the United States and both view these trends with concern. However, in our on-going engagement with the US, we hope to encourage and promote an understanding that will maintain the best traditions of American internationalism.

There are huge dangers in the rise of prejudice – including Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and racism of various kinds. We must make full use of our capacities for quiet, discreet and patient diplomacy, to counter these alarming developments and phenomenas in the global landscape.

Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to be with you today. It is always a pleasure to visit Berlin and to have such opportunities to share thoughts with our German friends. And finally let me reiterate that Germans will always be welcome in Oman.

Thank you