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NATO Parliamentary Assembly

**SUB-COMMITTEE ON
NATO PARTNERSHIPS**

VISIT TO THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

SECRETARIAT REPORT

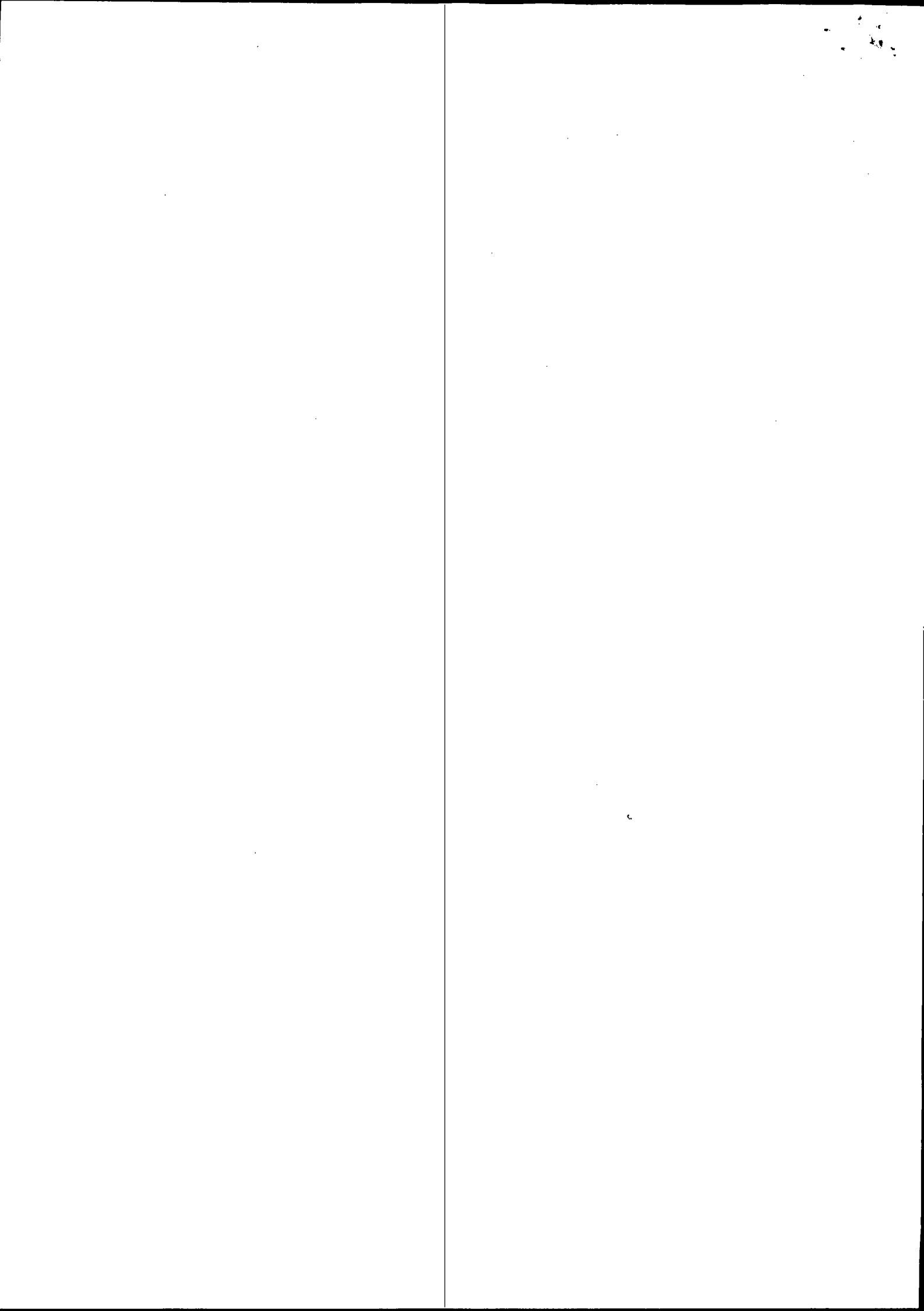
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1. The Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships visited the Sultanate of Oman on 1-3 April 2006. The legislators, led by Karl A. Lamers (DE) and Pierre Lellouche (FR), President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, discussed Oman's foreign and security perspectives and security in the Persian Gulf. Interlocutors included, among others, the Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, **Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah**, as well as the heads of the State Council (Majlis A'Dawla), **Yahya bin Mahfooth Al-Monthery** and of the Consultation Council (Majlis A'Shura), **Abdullah bin Ali Al-Qatabi**.
2. Host country speakers emphasised the domestic perspective of Oman's foreign and security environment. Oman's history, they said, makes clear the need for internal security and stability. The Dhofar separatist rebellion in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought the country to the 'verge of collapse'. The rebellion was eventually quelled with British and Iranian (under Shah Reza Pahlevi) military assistance. Speakers emphasised the eminent role that Sultan Quabus bin Said al Bu-Said played both for the country's stabilisation and modernisation and for Oman's increasingly active foreign policy.
3. Omani interlocutors, including the Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs **Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah**, repeatedly stressed the independence of Muscat's foreign policy. Given the country's geographic location and internal religious and tribal peculiarities, Muscat is primarily preoccupied with developments on the Arabian peninsula as well as with Iran and Iraq. Consequently, the country's foreign and security policy is geared towards promoting regional stability and fostering good relations with all its neighbouring states. The delegation was informed that Oman has traditionally pursued a policy of keeping the area free of 'superpower rivalries.' Omani foreign policy is designed 'to aim to achieve what is possible and neglect what is impossible', according to Ambassador **Talib Al-Raisi**, Head of the Department for International Organisations and Conferences at the Omani Foreign Ministry.
4. In a meeting with diplomatic representatives of NATO member countries a number of Ambassadors, including French Ambassador **Marc Barety**, stressed the contribution of Oman to regional stability. In this context he highlighted the logistical support the country has given to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan.
5. The Delegation also discussed general military aspects of the Sultanate's security with Lieutenant General **Ahmad Al-Nabhami**, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Sultanate of Oman. He and other Omani speakers stressed that there is no direct security threat to the country. Asked about key security challenges to their country, the General considered terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and their means of delivery as the most prominent security challenges.
6. With regard to Iran, Omani speakers pointed to the Sultanate's good bilateral relations with Teheran dating back to the Shah Reza Pahlevi's military support to defeat the Dhofar guerrilla forces in the early-to-mid 1970s. There are also strong economic and commercial links between the countries, the delegation learned. Ambassador Al Raisi said that Oman has traditionally tried to engage Iran and to avoid isolating it, not least to ensure the safety of the Straits of Hormuz.

7. While there was agreement on the need to actively engage Iran, members of the delegation and their Omani hosts held considerably different views on Teheran's nuclear policy. A majority of Muscat officials were less concerned about Iran's nuclear programme than their counterparts in other countries of the region. Some considered the need to engage Teheran in a settlement of Iraq as more relevant than finding agreement on Iran's ambiguous nuclear programme. However, describing Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's election as a 'coup of the ballot box' that allows the Pasdaran (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps) to 'run Iran', one Omani official said he understood that this made the international community worried. Another point of concern is Iran's advancing ballistic missile programme that may soon gain a credible second-strike capability.

8. Some interlocutors viewed the US and European 'campaign against Iran' as 'hypocritical'. Israel, they said, supposedly has approximately 200 nuclear warheads. Omani speakers also criticised as a double standard the US administration's offer to India of a civilian nuclear deal while it demands that Iran ratify a restrictive additional protocol on safeguards. However, members of the delegation, including Mr. Jan Petersen (NO), reminded host country interlocutors that Iran is not abiding by its commitments to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The IAEA repeatedly found Iran in non-compliance with its commitments to the Safeguards Agreement. In contrast to Iran, India and Israel have not signed the NPT. Moreover, the tone of President Ahmedinejad towards Israel does not build confidence. Mr Petersen stressed that the key issue now is to solve Iran's nuclear programme in a way that advances regional stability and strengthens rather than undermines the existing non-proliferation regime. Members of the delegation added that the EU-3 have already offered a comprehensive package of economic, scientific and diplomatic incentives to Iran but Teheran rejected them as insufficient. Nonetheless, EU and NATO member countries remain open to talks. Mr Lamers stressed that the Sub-Committee has been trying to visit Iran for a fact-finding mission but that Teheran's response is still pending.

9. The delegation and host country officials agreed that a solution to the Israeli-Palestine issue is very important, not only for the Middle East but also for the security and stability of the Gulf. Discussions also briefly touched upon the developments in Palestine after Hamas' election victory. Scepticism about the prospects for reaching a Palestinian-Israeli agreement prevailed among Omani speakers. Fatah is considered 'dysfunctional' and it is an open question whether Hamas will renounce the 'bullet for the ballot box'. An aggravating factor, according to Al-Raisi, has been the publication of prophet Mohammed caricatures in Danish media. This unfortunate episode has had a dramatically negative impact on the reputation of Nordic countries in the Arab world. These countries, particularly Norway, have previously played very positive, albeit discrete, role in the region. Moreover, they have been the biggest donors to the Palestinian authority in the past.

10. Recognising that WMD destabilise the Gulf and the Middle East, a number of Omani interlocutors argued for establishing a WMD-free zone that specifically included Israel. But no new ideas emerged about how a nuclear Iran could be prevented. Some host country speakers were sceptical that a referral of the Iranian nuclear programme to the UN Security Council will solve the problem. A majority of speakers indicated instead that we should now focus on damage limitation rather than prevention. There was strong agreement that a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear programme should be achieved.

A. IRAQ

11. Omani hosts expressed concern about the situation in Iraq. Speakers in Muscat agreed that Iraq is, at present, a 'highly unstable' neighbour and that this instability poses a challenge to the security of the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). **Ms Ibtesam Al-Kitbi**, Professor in the Political Science Department of the UAE University in Abu Dhabi, argued that Iraq is 'teetering on the brink of civil war' and that the US-led invasion 'has made terrorism more rather than less likely'. Calling the management of the domestic and regional environment following Saddam Hussein's ouster by the US 'disastrous' she warned that sectarian conflict could spread from Iraq.

12. Ms Al-Kitbi considered the US administration's insistence on limiting direct dialogue with Teheran to the subject of Iraq a mistake. She cautioned that a US-Iranian 'partnership over Iraq' could be seen as "legitimising" Iran's mingling in Iraqi affairs. What is more, it would provide the latter with ample opportunity to pull the rug out from under the feet of the US. In her view, Iran does not want the US to fail in Iraq. Rather, it wants the US to succeed in eliminating every possibility of a new Sunni-dominated regime being installed in Baghdad. But Iran wants the US to succeed at the highest possible cost, both in blood and treasure. Therefore, the Islamic republic will continue doing whatever it can to make life difficult for the US-led coalition, she said. In a similar vein, an Omani official suggested that it is in Teheran's interest to have Iraq fragmented as a means of keeping the US occupied. Limiting this dialogue to the Iraq issue is also a slap in the face of Arab states surrounding Iraq and Iran because it excludes them from the dialogue.

13. Al Raisi identified three separate but inter-related conflicts, namely Shia versus Sunni, Kurd versus Arab, and the international coalition versus Iran and Syria. A majority of speakers viewed the country's immediate future rather sceptically. One Omani interlocutor said there are indications that Iran and Syria are trying to destabilise Iraq. According to Al-Raisi, the best case scenario for Iraq now is the formation through successful elections of a national unity government that could both provide a degree of stability and hand security responsibilities over to indigenous forces. The worst-case scenario is a civil war. A Kurdish declaration of independence would provoke Turkey and Iran. This would turn Iraq into a black hole 'sucking the whole region into a deep and nasty future'.

14. Providing a more detailed look, Al Raisi said that the sources of violence are relatively complicated and the diverse groups that form the insurgency have little in common. There is no single spokesperson, no long-term political aim nor any religious zeal or desire for economic gain. Estimates about the number of insurgents vary greatly from between 30,000 to 200,000. Although their profile is rather high, Al Raisi estimated the influx of Sunni (jihadist) fighters into Iraq to be limited to perhaps 3,000 fighters.

B. GULF SECURITY

15. Security in the Gulf region will also depend on other factors, including demographic economic, and environmental conditions. Al Raisi said that regardless of whether the Gulf

is a more benign or 'malign' region, US presence in the Middle East is 'inevitable'. Neither Iran nor Iraq should be isolated, he said vehemently. It is crucial to find a role for both.

16. Ibtesam Al-Kitbi, Professor at the Political Science Department of the UAE University in Abu Dhabi, provided a comprehensive, if slightly sceptical, analysis of Gulf security. She emphasised the continued fragility of the Gulf's security environment, particularly because Iran has raised international concerns about its nuclear programme. The independent expert anticipated that the strategic significance of the region will increase, not least because of the region's vital role for the world economy. Therefore, Gulf security is not a regional issue, but one where developments have global implications.

17. Ms Al-Kitbi suggested that until now, the basis for Gulf security has been to rely on one big external power - the US - to maintain the status quo, regulate relationships among regional states and provide at least a minimum of security. Given the often hostile attitude of Iran and Iraq in the past toward them, the Arab Gulf states saw their security tied to American military power, making the US a regional actor firmly entrenched in the regional strategic debate. But while she, as well as others, said that the US presence in the Gulf remains indispensable, she also cautioned that the US has not achieved lasting security.

18. Noting that there is a 'strong sense of distrust between the states of the region' she bemoaned that the Gulf states do not engage in any sort of co-operative security exchange. The region needs a more solid framework for Gulf security based on sub-national, regional and international components as outlined by the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal. To that end, 'sub-national' components first and foremost include meaningful political, economic, social and educational reforms and not just 'cosmetic changes'. Regional components consist of "a unified Gulf Co-operation Council, a prosperous Yemen, a stable Iraq, and a friendly Iran". With regard to international components, she argued for increased European and Asian involvement. Both regions have experience with 'overlapping institutions' and, in the case of Europe, a system based on multilateral co-operation. Europe and Asia have something to offer the region. NATO could have a significant role to play in future security arrangements.

C. AFGHANISTAN

19. The current developments in Afghanistan were also discussed during the visit. Ambassador Al Raisi described the country as a 'failed state that is dependent on western aid and drug trade'. Stressing a host of divisive internal factors, including the mix of different ethnicities and religions, poverty, and corruption, he anticipated that instability in Afghanistan will continue. The illicit narcotics trade is expanding and further fuels political instability, particularly as the Karzai government remains weak and eradication programmes have, in Al Raisi's view, failed. The expansion of the ISAF to the South and the increase of NATO troops to 16,000 may improve the overall security situation, the Ambassador noted. However, challenges remain, particularly in Helmand province, which shares a 165 km border with Pakistan and provides ready access for the Taliban from their sanctuaries in the latter.

D. NATO-OMAN RELATIONS

20. The Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, **Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah**, and the heads of both chambers of parliament emphasised the Sultanate's good bilateral relationships with individual NATO member countries, particularly with the UK, France, and the US. Omani officials conveyed the message that for the time being Oman prefers to stay aloof from a closer relationship with the Alliance. This may be partly due to the fact that, except for diplomats at the Foreign Ministry, there appears to be little knowledge of NATO. Perhaps more than in other countries of the region, discussions revealed that NATO as an organisation and NATO member countries must become more active in explaining what the Alliance actually is. NATO's Istanbul Co-operation Initiative (ICI) was 'unclear' and appeared 'merely as just another programme' according to the Minister responsible for Foreign Affairs. In response, Mr Lamers, Mr Lellouche, and Mr Bagis provided some general overview of ICI. The NATO PA President also said that the Assembly is open to establishing close co-operation with nations in the region. In this context, he referred to the partnership the NATO PA has begun with several national Parliaments in the Mediterranean.

21. If a nuclear-armed Iran could not be avoided, the Alliance might provide an additional reassurance for regional security, one diplomat speculated. For example, countries in the region might form a closer affiliation with NATO, which could perhaps adjust its Partnership-for Peace (PfP) programme for the Gulf. Alternatively, NATO could decide on a 'new definition of forward defence', the diplomat went on. However, he raised the question whether the North Atlantic Council would be willing to endorse an extension of its collective security guarantees to include the Arab Gulf countries.

22. Towards the end of its stay the delegation also had the opportunity to visit the Port of Sohar which is one of the largest single industrial port developments in the world today. Current investment plans amount to approximately 13 billion Euros, making it the biggest investment project in the Arab world. The delegation had briefings hosted by Mr Jan H. Meijer, CEO of the Sohar Industrial Port Company.

23. The visit to the Sultanate of Oman follows the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships meetings with senior government officials in Abu Dhabi last year. The talks in Oman have provided different views that draw a more complex picture of the region and its security. The region will remain one of the Sub-Committee's central areas of interest and this visit was certainly not its last.

