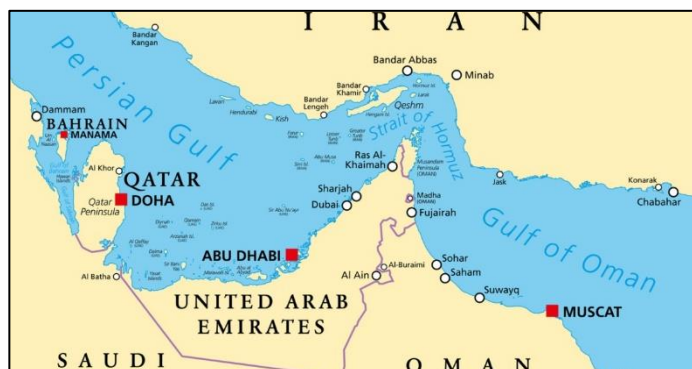


## An unsettled Middle East: analysing the Muscat attack and broader implications

---

July 2024

In the early hours of 17 July 2024, a horrific terrorist attack occurred in Muscat, Oman, reminding all that persistent threats remain in the Middle East. The attack, a shooting which saw 6 people killed – 4 Pakistanis, 1 Indian and



1 police officer – and 30 wounded, was claimed by IS (Islamic State). The date of the attack coincided with Ashura, a day of mourning for Shia Muslims to commemorate the seventh-century battlefield martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. IS are also responsible for recent attacks in Iran and Russia. In January, two explosions in Kerman killed nearly 100 people and in March, over 140 people at a concert hall near Moscow were killed in a mass shooting.

### The Muscat attack: unpacking the why and the how

IS, a radical Sunni militant group, are known for its extremist beliefs. Its members consider themselves the only true believers of Islam and regard the rest of the world to be “unbelievers” seeking to destroy Islam, be they Muslim or non-Muslim.

Oman is a country of religious toleration with a population comprising an estimated 45% Ibadi Muslims, 45% Sunni, 5% Shia, with Hindus, Buddhists and Christians making up the remainder. This unique position has seen Oman acting as mediator in regional disputes, a role for which it is well-known. During the incident, three attackers, all eventually shot dead by Oman police, are said to have begun shooting at significant urban centres near the Imam Ali Mosque, aiming to instil fear and chaos.

The ensuing scenes have been described as grim, as emergency services did their best to aid the casualties and keep people calm. The response from the Omani authorities was quick and firm, with armed forces mobilising and securing the area to prevent further casualties.

Given that Oman is considered one of the most stable countries within the Middle East, the location of the IS attack in Muscat was unexpected, but the rationale behind the attack was not, given that IS attacks are typically directed against Shia groups and even Sunnis, who conform to a less strict ideology.

The fact that Oman was targeted, given its reputation for being a neutral mediator in Middle Eastern issues, indicates motives that go far beyond sectarianism. One school of thought is that by attacking Oman, IS are seeking to disrupt the balance of power in the Middle East and extend its own influence to parts of the region where previously it had none.

### **The sectarian puzzle: Sunni-Shia dynamics and beyond**

Shia is a term that comes from *shi'atu* Ali, which is Arabic for “partisans of Ali”. Shias believe that Ali and his descendants are part of a divine order.

Sunnis, meaning followers of the *sunna* or “way” in Arabic, of Muhammad, are opposed to all political succession based on Muhammad’s bloodline.

The Sunni-Shia issue has been the cause of much unrest and violence in the Middle East, influencing political thinking and directing the actions of militant groups including IS. In the past, IS has taken advantage of these divisions and sought to use them as a device to sow uncertainty and take control. Brutal campaigns orchestrated by IS have targeted Shia communities and other Sunni groups, seen as dissenting from extremist Sunni ideology, and who oppose IS tactics and strict ideological interpretations.

The Muscat attack in Oman can be seen as a departure from IS’s historic sectarian motives, which has the potential to impact Sunni-Shia relations internationally, by encouraging sectarian retaliation. Each violent deed adds another layer of complexity to an already precarious situation.

## Conclusion

The attack in Muscat, for which IS has claimed responsibility, underlines the evolving landscape of a terror that refuses to be confined by political borders. This landmark violation in Oman, challenging its role as peacekeeper, is indicative of a new IS agenda looking to destabilise previously neutral territories.

It demonstrates the extreme acts that fanatical groups are prepared to engage in to further their reach and gain influence.

### **KCS Group Europe – Strategic Intelligence & Corporate Security**

KCS Group Europe is a leading provider of security and intelligence services, operating in some of the world's most difficult environments on complex cases of fraud, theft, corruption or market dynamics. We gather intelligence through the discreet use of human sources to level the playing field and help our clients identify and deal with any risks, weaknesses and threats which could impact on their business, financially or reputationally.

Our key areas of expertise include: Corporate Intelligence Services – New market or sector entry research – Know your customer screening.

In addition, we offer a unique service in the areas of Cyber Security and Cyber Risk. This covers penetration testing, vulnerability assessments, intelligence gathering and cyber security audits – providing unparalleled analysis, contingency planning and implementation.

To find out more or to arrange a meeting to discuss your business needs, please email the team at [info@kcsgrroupeurope.com](mailto:info@kcsgrroupeurope.com) or call (00 44) 20 7245 1191 – [www.kcsgroup.com](http://www.kcsgroup.com)