

Congress Approves Flawed Oman Trade Pact

By Stephen Zunes | July 27, 2006

One of the sub-plots in last year's critically acclaimed film *Syriana* tells the story of two young Pakistani "guest workers" in an unnamed Persian Gulf nation who, after years of resentment over miserable living conditions, are taken in by a radical cleric and recruited to be suicide bombers. The film is an all too accurate portrayal of the exploitation of "guest workers" in many Gulf countries, and how these conditions can cause instability.

On July 19, with U.S. public attention focused elsewhere in the Middle East on the unfolding tragedy in Lebanon and Israel, the House of Representatives narrowly approved a free trade agreement with the Sultanate of Oman. The 221-205 vote could very well bring this threat home to the United States. The Senate approved the measure last June on a 60-34 vote.

Over two million people live in the Sultanate of Oman. However, at least 600,000 of these people are guest workers from the Philippines, Egypt, and South Asia, who serve as maids, drivers, and construction workers. Oman bans independent labor unions (as well as many other civil society organizations) and has been cited by the U.S. State Department for human trafficking and abuses of foreign workers.

The Oman Free Trade Agreement will do nothing to improve the conditions for workers, as its labor provisions merely require Oman to enforce its existing weak laws.

Recently, *The New York Times* reported on an expose instigated by the National Labor Committee (NLC), which chronicled the conditions of foreign factory workers in the Kingdom of Jordan since a similar free trade pact was ratified in 2001. The NLC found that the Jordan Free Trade Agreement had resulted in a surge of sweatshops producing clothes for export set up by foreign investors from China and other countries setting up factories. These owners have brought in 25,000

foreigners to work in these factories, many of whom have their passports seized, are regularly denied pay, made to work 20-hour days and are physically abused. When workers complain, they are subjected to jail, beatings, and summary deportations.

The abuse and marginalization of guest workers in countries such as Oman presents a key challenge for the security of this vital region and the United States. James Zogby of the Arab-American Institute has referred to the situation as a "time bomb."



Map courtesy of: <http://www.arabicbible.com/>



It is profoundly disturbing that Congress would approve a free trade agreement that will exacerbate conditions that are likely to trigger a reaction which could threaten the security interests of the United States. Without efforts to significantly improve the conditions of guest workers, primarily from poor Muslim countries, the United Nations and other international observers predict that the Gulf States could see severe political unrest in the years ahead. Trade pacts that create economic incentives for such abuse make the United States a source of the problem. Signs of future unrest can already be seen in last year's protests and riots by foreign guest workers in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar and—in March of this year—in Oman's neighbor, the United Arab Emirates. The climate of anger and alienation created by the current situation facing guest workers is just the type of environment in which radical Islamic groups thrive.

As a strategic ally of the United States, it is important to encourage further economic development in Oman. However, by promoting a trade model that encourages the further import of guest workers without any mechanisms to ensure decent work conditions, the United States is contributing to the instability of the region and undermines efforts to fight Islamic extremism.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, "Congress Approves Flawed Oman Trade Pact" (Silver City, NM and Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 27, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3390>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes

Editor: Emily Schwartz Greco, IPS

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

