

Book Review: *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. By Robert D. Kaplan (NY: Random House, 2010).

'Robert Kaplan's Monsoon: The View from Oman'

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The Indian Ocean has long been a strategic frontier in international trade, the mixing of civilisations and the main stage for imperialism and colonialism. Oman, being at the head of the Indian Ocean has long been taking advantage of the monsoon rains and trade winds to establish itself into a vast trading empire; from the Pakistani port city of Gwadar, to the Swahili Coast of East Africa. Thus, Oman's geography on the Indian Ocean has been favourable to say the least.

The prominent American geo-politician, Robert Kaplan, underscores the importance of Oman's geographical importance and historical significance in shaping the international relations and geopolitics of the "Asian Century" in his 2010 publication "Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power". Kaplan is quick to note how the influences of East Africa and the Arabian Sea littoral states have long shaped the culture and traditions of Oman. Kaplan praises the localisation of the forces of globalisation in Oman; that has allowed for all the ethnic groups in the country to fully assimilate and integrate into the Omani way of life.

In antiquity, Oman's southern province of Dhofar was a strategic and significant transshipment hub for goods roaming the Indian Ocean, North Africa and Southern Europe. The ancient Egyptians, the Romans, the Persians and the people of the Levant were all highly mesmerized by frankincense; as it became highly important in their cultures. Being the land of Frankincense and facing the vast Indian Ocean, Dhofar became a major hub of commerce and trade over 4000 years ago and saw African, Indian and European traders visiting the region to trade in luxury goods from abroad as well as to buy the prized jewel of frankincense. Kaplan notes that this led to the establishment of ancient civilisations along the Dhofari coast, including those of Sumuhram and Al Baleed. These civilisations were later known to exports hundreds of pounds of frankincense to the various Chinese empires and dynasties. Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo also frequented the port; further highlighting the significance of the Dhofari Coast. Kaplan also mentions the great Omani sailor

Ahmed bin Majid, who Kaplan suggests was Vasco De Gama's main navigator from Kenya to India – as the Europeans found extremely challenging to navigate through the currents of the monsoon rains. It is no surprise that Dhofar has once again reawakened and its logistical power is currently being utilised; another indication that geography shapes the tides of history.

Despite connotations in the West about Arabs mainly being desert-dwelling nomads, Kaplan refutes this by mentioning the great seafaring expeditions of Omanis; who have been in contact with Indian and Indonesian merchants for centuries. Oman's relationship with the sea, Kaplan argues, was the clear and decisive magnifier of Omani power in the Indian Ocean in past centuries. Oman, before the advent of transport technology, was mainly isolated and cut off from its land neighbours due to the mountain and desert barriers that lie between them; this is what Kaplan sees as being the prime determinant of Omanis braving the high seas in search of trade and influence.

“Monsoon” dedicates two entire chapters to Oman in the early part of the book, and the Omani presence is also felt in almost all the other chapters. A chapter on the former Omani capital of Zanzibar paints a rather vivid picture of the days of Omani rule as well as the Omani influence over the Swahili language, Zanzibari architecture and the local customs.

What makes this book stand out, is that the author has visited all the places on the Indian Ocean mentioned in the book; from Zanzibar to Muscat and Kolkata to Burma – the reader is given a firsthand account into all these fascinating places. Robert Kaplan, named amongst Foreign Policy magazine's “Top 100 Global Thinkers” in 2012, has been known for his deft political analysis, and the way in which he combines and related the different historical, political and geographical factors into his understanding of the world. The Wall Street Journal once commented that “[Kaplan] has a gift for geopolitical imagination”; they wouldn't be wrong. Kaplan's Monsoon is indispensable reading for students of modern day international relations or anyone interested in the Indian Ocean rim. The book almost feels like a travel journal at times yet still manages to magnificently grasp, analyse and predict future political and economic trends in the regions discussed. “Monsoon” provides extraordinary depth and insight into one of the most dynamic and culturally diverse regions on the planet.