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# **STRONG LIKE AN ORYX**

Omani Exceptionalism:

A Successful Story of Development

Estudiante: **Jorge Alarcón Martín**

Director: Alberto Priego Moreno

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## Abstract

Oman seldom catches international headlines. Yet, its spectacular transformation has turned a poor, isolated, and conflicted country into a thriving, peaceful and confident nation actively engaged in the international stage. “Omani exceptionalism” can in fact explain the uniqueness of the Sultanate’s success story, grounded on the four factors of inclusive socio-economic development, a stable autocracy spearheaded by the brilliant sultan Qaboos, a diverse ethno-religious fabric shaped by the tolerance of Ibadi Islam, and an independent and pragmatic foreign policy. Thus, Oman stands out from its neighbours UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Yemen thanks to this unique combination of determinants that underpin an exceptional nation with exceptional prosperity.

## Keywords

Oman, Omani exceptionalism, sultan Qaboos, prosperity.

## Resumen

*Pocas veces figura Omán en los titulares de los medios internacionales. Y sin embargo, su transformación espectacular ha convertido un país pobre, aislado y en guerra en una nación próspera, en paz y segura de sí misma que se involucra activamente en el plano internacional. El “excepcionalismo omaní” puede de hecho explicar el carácter único de la historia de éxito del Sultanato, a partir de cuatro factores como son un desarrollo socio-económico inclusivo, una autocracia estable liderada por el brillante sultán Qaboos, un tejido etno-religioso diverso moldeado por la tolerancia del islam Ibadí y una política exterior pragmática e independiente. De este modo, Omán destaca sobre sus vecinos EAU, Qatar, Baréin y Yemen por su combinación única de factores que apuntalan a una nación excepcional con una prosperidad excepcional.*

## Palabras clave

*Omán, excepcionalismo omaní, sultán Qaboos, prosperidad.*

## List of abbreviations

AQAP: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

CBO: Central Bank of Oman

EU: European Union

FDI: Foreign Direct Investment

FRIDE: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior

FTA: Free Trade Agreement

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

HDI: Human Development Index

HHRR: Human Rights

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies

ICV: In-Country Value Policies

IMF: International Monetary Fund

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

LAS: League of Arab States

LNG: Liquefied Natural Gas

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

OIC: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

OMR: Omani Rial

PDO: Petroleum Development Oman

RUSI: Royal United Services Institute

SEZs: Special Economic Zones

SMEs: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

UAE: United Arab Emirates

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

US: United States of America

USD: United States Dollar

WB: World Bank Group

WEF: World Economic Forum

WTO: World Trade Organisation

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	III
Abstract .....	IV
Keywords.....	IV
<i>Resumen</i> .....	IV
<i>Palabras clave</i> .....	IV
List of abbreviations .....	V
1. Methodological and Theoretical Framework.....	1
1.1. Introduction .....	1
1.2. State of the Art.....	2
1.3. Research Questions.....	22
1.4. Purpose and Objectives.....	23
1.5. Hypothesis.....	24
1.6. Theoretical Framework .....	24
1.7. Time and Geographical Frameworks.....	25
1.8. Methodology.....	26
2. Analysis of Omani Exceptionalism through Four Case Studies .....	27
2.1. Oman and the UAE: glitzy success at a cost.....	27
2.2 Oman and Qatar: the price for independence.....	35
2.3 Oman and Bahrain: the aftermath of the Arab Spring.....	44
2.4. Oman and Yemen: hell at one’s doorstep.....	51
3. Conclusions.....	56
4. Bibliography .....	57

# 1. Methodological and Theoretical Framework

## 1.1. Introduction

Nestled between the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf, Oman stands at a crossroads of Arab, Persian, and Indian identities. Its unique melting pot underpins an age-old nation that takes pride on its convoluted past as a thalassocratic and commercial empire. Being the only country where a social majority practices the Ibadi branch of Islam, Oman happily embraces its “oddness”. Furthermore, what makes Oman remarkably unique is not just its polity or its society, but its transformation as well. In 1970, 3 primary schools, 1 hospital, 10 kilometres of paved road, and an average life expectancy of 50 years of age made the Sultanate of Oman one of the poorest countries in the world (Phillips & Hunt, 2017, p. 646). In dire contrast, the accession of sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said after deposing his father Said bin Taimur Al Said in a bloodless coup d’état, has ushered in the fastest progress in human development ever achieved: from 0.36 in the HDI in 1970 to 0.79 in 2010” (United Nations Development Programme, 2010, p. 54).

Indeed, Oman has become a success story with a lot to teach to other nations, rebutting the resource-curse determinism of oil exports destroying education and health standards. Some commentators (Oficina of Información Diplomática, 2015, p. 3) (Valeri, 2011, p. 145) (Brown & Sheline, 2017) have restricted this resounding success to oil extraction that catapulted the country to wealth, but fail to mention that most oil-exporting economies have in fact plunged into disarray. A notable exception includes the stable GCC countries, where Oman again stands out for starting much later and achieving similar if not better results than its peers. Hence that the idea of an “Omani exceptionalism” might prove useful in understanding why and how has Oman succeeded where others have failed, how its success compares to GCC fellow states and what makes it remarkably unique. Thus, the refocus on Oman, be it on the academic or diplomatic realm, could grant this tiny and discreet country the credit it deserves for its exemplary transformation as well as its benign influence as a factor of peace in a region riven by conflict and radicalism.

## 1.2. State of the Art

The roots of Oman's development have been traced back by Phillips & Hunt (2017) and Peterson (2004). Both provide an insightful amendment to the Omani State narrative that credits Qaboos as the sole endorser of the country's prosperity. As these authors accurately recognise, the legitimisation of Qaboos rule necessarily passed through a reinvention of the nation. By labelling his reign "The Renaissance" (*Al Nahda*) and contrasting it with his father Said's stagnant and neglected rule, Qaboos has managed to reconstruct Oman around himself as the embodiment of the contemporary nation state. Phillips & Hunt (2017, pp. 656-658) point that development became an urgent necessity for Qaboos to legitimise his autocratic rule vis-à-vis his father's mismanagement, and especially in his early years as the Dhofar War directly challenged his power. For his part, Valeri (2015, pp. 4-6) notes that Qaboos also used development to link the State to himself, thereby stripping political alternatives of any credibility.

In line with Phillips & Hunt (2017, pp. 648-650), oil rents were crucial in fuelling socio-economic development, especially after the 1973 crisis that allowed Qaboos to obtain the majority stake in PDO. However, equally important were the continued British support both during and long after the 1970 coup that brought sultan Qaboos to power, as well as the emigration of Omani Zanzibaris after the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution, in response to Qaboos's "call" to all Omanis abroad to shoulder together the reconstruction of the country. Phillips & Hunt (2017, pp. 649-655) but also Kechichian (2010, p. 245), underline the expertise and education of Zanzibaris as the "technocratic backbone of the country", which was applied to the policies and institutions that gradually lifted the Sultanate out of poverty. Simultaneously, Zanzibaris assisted Qaboos in the centralisation of the State, upon which rests his legitimacy, and allowed the Sultanate to take ownership of its development agenda and mitigate its dependency on foreign labour.

Looney (2009, pp. 2-10) agrees that natural endowments are just part of the story, with integration policies and quality institutions playing another key role. In line with Peterson (2004, pp. 125-130), the author recognises that Oman's thorough development planning has steadily steered the country towards prosperity, first through



strong government expenditure and then through gradual diversification and integration into the world economy. Sustainable investment and saving ratios, the promotion of human capital and education, top infrastructure networks, resource allocation tackling regional gaps, and a responsible financial policy with tight inflation controls have all resulted in a sound, balanced and inclusive development process. In addition, continuous FDI increases, the sustained growth of the non-oil sector, and a slow rollback of the public sector from its dominant role in the economy are helping the Sultanate face future challenges shaped by dwindling oil reserves (Looney, 2009, pp. 3-9, 17-21).

As a resource-based economy, Oman shares many similarities with its GCC counterparts. A general trend is that of rentierism, linked to traditional patterns of “sheikhly rule” founded on patronage and clientelism that crystallised under the wing of a nascent state-formation process (Kamrava et al., 2011). These authors also cast light on the disruptive effect of oil rents on productivity, rendering the GCC’s wealth counterproductive due to its relative inefficiency and lack of innovation and competitiveness. Finally, these authors suggest that meagre levels of intra-GCC trade translate into a sluggish process of economic and monetary integration (Kamrava, 2011, pp. 5-6, 13, 16). In fact, East Asia and especially China continue to be the main trading partners for GCC states, and the tendency is growing steadily for Oman, Barron (2017) reports. As another GCC pattern, intense defence expenditure is particularly pronounced in Oman, who boasts the biggest army in the GCC. The reason partially hinges on the defence and security establishment being one of the biggest public sector employers for Omanis, as Peterson notes (2004, p. 133)

In line with the idea of Oman as a rentier economy, Al Musalami (2016, pp 50-52) notes that admittedly, Oman might suffer revenue instability due to world oil price fluctuations, resulting in highly variable public spending and vulnerable current and fiscal account balances. Yet, Oman cannot qualify as a resource curse<sup>1</sup> thanks to two

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<sup>1</sup> The “resource curse” refers to the paradox of countries rich in natural resources (usually fossil fuels) that nevertheless remain unable to exploit it to foster growth and development (The Economist, 2005).

circumstances. First, Oman has avoided slipping into the Dutch disease<sup>2</sup> by pegging its currency to the USD at a fixed exchange rate of 1 USD = 0.385 OMR and tightly controlling inflation. Second, its stability, peace and regulatory quality ensure an adequate management of resource rents despite faults in corruption control, accountability, and rule of law (Al Musalami, 2016, pp. 53-60). The Economist (2005) disagrees, although the presence of “rotten democratic institutions” throughout the Gulf should not become the sole reason for qualifying states as resource-cursed. Interestingly, Mayol (2005, pp. 164-165, 177) points at a “rentier schizophrenia” that combines diversification efforts with entrenched rentier behaviour, and technocratic ultramodernity with socio-religious traditionalism.

Indeed, The Economist (2016). provides a more critical view of economic developments both in the Sultanate and the GCC more broadly, by for instance dismissing the employment quotas (Omanisation) imposed upon private employers to strengthen hiring of nationals as “textbook examples of bad policymaking”. Nevertheless, Peterson (2004, p. 143) highlights that “unlike elsewhere in the Arab world, Oman has been careful not to swell government ranks with disguised unemployment”, even if national populations still feel entitled to jobs and the *kafala* (sponsorship) system to hire foreign labour, a prone-to-abuse scheme that gives excessive power to national employers, remains in force. Despite the exploitation suffered across the Gulf, the influx of foreign workers has not receded, due to disproportionately higher wages compared to home countries: around 300% more, The Economist reports (2016). For its part, national populations tolerate such high levels of migration provided that the basic deal (“you can come in, but you will never become one of us”), remains unchanged (The Economist, 2016). Finally, the recent oil glut has led not only to spending cuts, but also to the foreign reserve dips and debt increases, and hence The Economist’s warning of a credit shortage when the Sultanate can afford it the least (2016).

Building on the WB’s Governance and the WEF’s Global Competitiveness Indicators, the IMF (2016, pp. 17-20, 27-29) suggests that, by following in the footsteps of the UAE and

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<sup>2</sup> The Dutch disease refers to the economic disruptions caused by resource exports, and includes: currency appreciation, growth of the service sector at the expense of the tradable sector and labour shift from the industrial to the service and extraction sectors (The Economist, 2005) (Al Musalami, 2016, p. 53).

Qatar as top performers, Oman could push forward in those areas where it lags behind the GCC, namely corruption control and government effectiveness within the governance and innovation sections and technological readiness within the competitiveness section. Ample room for improvement is also found on the WB's Doing Business Report on Oman (2017), with huge disparities between dimensions: from ranking 12<sup>th</sup> globally on paying taxes to 118<sup>th</sup> on protecting minority investors and 133<sup>rd</sup> on getting credit. As the IMF notes (2016, pp. 7-16), Oman's most pressing issues include: lack of economic transparency, tightening liquidity, and above all, the public budget deficit, the GCC's biggest and riskiest since Oman's resource depletion will arrive the earliest. Despite so, the IMF predicts a gradual adjustment thanks to fiscal consolidation and diversification policies already underway. These encompass hiring freezes and streamlining in the public sector, price reforms and subsidy cuts to contain explosive energy consumption draining the economy, the creation of debt-management and liquidity-enhancement public entities, and relaxed reserve requirements to mitigate credit risk (International Monetary Fund, 2016, pp. 7-16, 25).

The Sultanate's diversification efforts, which along with Omanisation constitute the two cornerstones of its 5-year Development Plans and of its blueprint strategy to get ready for a post-oil era (Oman Vision 2020), have been lauded by many experts. Strolla & Peri (2013) celebrate the adoption of policies that have been recommended by the WB, WEF, and IMF and/or successfully implemented in other GCC countries. Further, as a crucial part to Vision 2020, the expansion of Oman's industrial fabric has materialised in industrial estates in Sohar, Sur, or Salalah. Shepard (2017) reports the recent deployment of Oman's current flagship project of industrial development: the construction of a Sino-Omani Industrial City out of the dusty fishing village of Duqm. By capitalising on China's burgeoning commercial diplomacy under its One Belt, One Road strategy and excellent bilateral relations, the cash-stripped Sultanate has secured the financial support it needs to push forward its all-out mission of diversification.

Accordingly, Strolla & Peri (2013) conclude that Oman's targeted efforts to tackle its economic deficiencies are bound to succeed. They underline the high levels of government spending on infrastructure, education, and healthcare that, if maintained, will nurture virtuous cycles of a sustainable growth pattern solidly grounded on:

expanding non-oil sectors like construction and tourism, In-Country Value policies<sup>3</sup>, a smooth and effective taxation system and the upgrading of human capital and technology. Indeed, the diversification mantra has benefited from the WB's technical assistance in promising sectors like fisheries (Setlur, Banu; World Bank Group, 2017). With the potential to become a sustainable and long-term source of revenue for the Sultanate, fisheries will, like all other diversification initiatives, ease the pressure of Omanisation by creating jobs, especially for Oman's sprawling youth (Setlur, Banu; World Bank Group, 2017)

Another noteworthy initiative towards diversification is e.oman, vital to reduce the Sultanate's technology shortage. As its main sponsor Salim Sultan Al-Ruzaiqi (World Bank Group, 2015, pp. 3-4) acknowledges, the engagement of government stakeholders and patience to await results are being crucial in ensuring success. This ambitious digital strategy identifies the development of human capital and of an ICT industry, the improvement of e-government services, and the promotion and awareness of digital use and lifestyle as the cornerstones to transform Oman into a sustainable knowledge economy, in line with Vision 2020. Moreover, e.Oman harnesses SMEs and start-ups to foster competition and innovation, thereby creating industry clusters that will thrust economic growth. It also focuses on cybersecurity through training and capacity-building, as well as on the promotion of e-services in the private sector (Al-Ruzaiqi, Salim Sultan; World Bank Group, 2015).

Valeri (Oman, 2011, p.145-150) joins in the applause and cites "selective quality tourism" aimed at wealthy Westerners or the creation of SEZs (Buraimi and Sohar) and development of ports (Muscat and Salalah) to foster comparative advantages and trade hubs. Lefebvre (2009) adds that such tourism strategy, devoid of Dubai's spectacular glitz, features a willingness to keep a more cautious profile while preserving traditional culture and architecture, rather than supplant it with omnipresent high-rise glass and steel. The liberalisation drive of the Government, supported by the Sultanate's business and merchant elites as the main beneficiaries, has provided respite to a private sector wary of nationalisation requirements. As Lefebvre (2009) notes, these policies are

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<sup>3</sup> In-Country Value (ICV) policies aim at the promotion of local production and manufacturing while ensuring that the wealth generated by local economic activities stays within the country.

aligned with the Government's intention to increase the weight of trade in the Omani economy through the 2000 accession to the WTO or the FTA signed with the US. Privatisation processes have promoted competition and transparency, like the case of Omantel, the state's telecommunication company, and have helped guarantee copious inflows of FDI. In addition, Valcárcel (1994, p. 131-132) highlights the timid production of LNG which, albeit another resource, can financially cushion the budget deficit and temporarily relieve the Government while it seeks further sources of diversification. Lefebvre lauds diversification initiatives targeting sustainability, such as wind power facilities or Indian-sponsored high-tech water purification plants (2009).

A less optimistic voice come from Perniceni (2017), who stresses the unsustainability of current development patterns in the GCC and strongly recommends investment in renewable energy (seeing great potential in solar and wind power) to cater for booming domestic demand and obtain a diverse energy mix. Following similar lines, Kerr (2017) dismisses a "flagging and poorly defined privatisation programme" and "moribund local markets" jeopardised by heavily borrowing to finance a budget deficit of 17% of GDP. Kerr (2017) also alerts to mounting pressure on Oman's currency peg due to the largest current account deficit in the GCC and to a potential shortage of foreign assets in the near future. Furthermore, Moore & Kerr (2017) warn of a deterioration of credit worthiness in line with rating agencies' concerns. Despite all, they acknowledge that investors remain remarkably sanguine so sovereign bond and *sukuk*<sup>4</sup> issuance has so far succeeded in ensuring the requested levels of financing.

The swelling public deficit is also a matter of concern for The Economist (2017), in such a way that mounting pressure upon the Government to renew its legitimacy and balance its books, risked by a spending spree and rapidly-emptying coffers, has resulted in a firm crackdown on rising dissent and dissatisfaction. Still, expert Luiz Pinto from the Brookings Institution (2017) remains optimistic about the currency pegs, highlighting their great job in armouring the six GCC economies against Dutch disease, inflation, capital flight, or exchange rate volatility; along with a fiscal policy appropriately rebalancing the economy and thereby filling the void of a null monetary policy. Further,

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<sup>4</sup> *Sukuks* are Sharia-compliant bonds. In this case, the term refers to sovereign bonds issued by CBO to finance Oman's public debt.

he notes that Oman, despite suffering the biggest currency pressure within the GCC, holds sufficient reserves to defend it.

So, despite the difficulties, Oman's economy remains firmly grounded as the cornerstone of the Sultanate's prosperity. As the economic forces sweeping the Sultanate, diversification and Omanisation are crucial because they preserve the sultan's mandate to govern. This is so because the legitimacy of autocratic dynastic power in the Gulf rests upon the so-called "ruling bargain": full-fledged welfare states whereby dynastic largesse in the form of cradle-to-grave benefits buys people's quiescence (Davidson et al, 2011). As a result, Mayol (2005, pp. 164-166) warns, the rent shortfall caused by low oil prices has forced the GCC's ruling families to finetune this social contract, making economic tweaks necessary to hedge the ruling bargain when the oil windfall falters. Mayol (2005, pp. 164-175) adds that his "ruling bargain" consolidates entrenched rentier behaviour tainting political structures and thereby hindering any democratic tendency.

Specifically for Oman, Valeri (Oman, 2011) posits that the extreme personalisation of rule under Qaboos' absolutism relaxes the pressure on the "ruling bargain", since Oman lacks both a burdensome royal family to pamper (Saudi Arabia) and influential rival tribes to keep satisfied (Qatar, UAE or Kuwait). Indeed, the current Omani State emanates from an accelerated process of nation-building spearheaded by sultan Qaboos and centred around himself. According to Valcárcel (1994, p. 129), contemporary Oman is built upon the dichotomy of two states that coexisted from the 17th century until 1954: the agrarian and isolationist Ibadi Imamate in the Interior and the British-supported trading and cosmopolitan Sultanate on the Coast, and it was Qaboos who spared no time in integrating both dimensions under the aegis of a renewed concept of "Oman".

Siegfried (2000, p. 366) also notes how the lack of a territorial notion of the state directly impacted Qaboos' frantic process of nation-building. At the same time, tribal allegiances remain at the core of political institutions, although they are not so important denominators of political influence as the sultan's long term allies are (Valeri, Oman, 2011, pp. 140-144). In fact, the Al Said royal family holds few positions and instead of any tribal power-sharing, top government ranks are mostly filled by families that owe

personal loyalty to Qaboos only, like the al-Maamari, the al-Sultan, or the al-Zawawi. What's more, not only these families benefiting from privileged access to the oil windfall but also former adversaries of the Al Said regime, like Dhofari rebels and the al-Khalili family linked to the historical Imamate leadership, have been co-opted by the system. In short, Qaboos has "turned the most powerful societal forces into unfailing allies" (Valeri, Oman, 2011, p. 143).

A non-conventional approach to state formation in Oman is provided by Ghubash (2006, pp. 3-11). This Emirati author advocates that the Ibadi Imamate existing in Oman since the early Islamic times until the 1950s, is proof of democracy of an Islamic type and unique to Oman. Accordingly, the Imamate derived its policies from "democratic principles" like consultation, consensus, or wealth redistribution through legal alms, as well as pacifism, the free election of the Imam, and the independence of and equality before the law. In addition, there was the explicit social contract between the Imam and its community, as well as the meritocratic system to elect the Imam and able to depose an incompetent candidate, Valcárcel notes (1994, p.130). Even if the Imamate cannot qualify as a democracy in the contemporary Western sense, the value of Ghubash's work lies in both its recognition of the damage inflicted by Britain's colonialism upon Oman's political structures (both the Imamate in the interior and the Sultanate on the coast), and its exhaustive account of Ibadi principles of government and how they shape the history of Oman and its contemporary paradigm of foreign and domestic politics.

Indeed, Ibadi political values crystallised in the Basic Law of the State which, issued in 1996 through Royal Decree 101, remains at the heart of Oman's political system (Siegfried, 2000). As a constitution of sorts, the Basic Law enshrines a paternalistic autocracy by recognising sultan Qaboos as the symbol, guardian and defender of the nation, the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Finance, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, and the Chairman of the Central Bank. Peterson (2004, p. 134) details that Decree 101 guarantees freedom of religion and expression, of course excluding affront to the sultan, endorses the Ibadi principle of consultation (*al-Shura*), declares the independence of the Judiciary, and establishes a free-market economy. Siegfried (2000, pp. 360-371, 375) advocates that the Basic Law freezes the status quo by recognising the tutelage of the sultan over life in the country

(he is sole legislator and his person is inviolable), and further notes that Ibadi consultation does not make a democracy of Oman on account of inexistent political transparency and division of powers, as well as the impotence of directly-elected institutions like the Majlis al-Oman<sup>5</sup> or the provincial councils. Mayol (2005, p. 171) asserts that the Basic Law serves as an instrument to renew Qaboos's legitimacy through democratic tweaks to satisfy demands for popular participation in decision-making. What's more, the Basic Law underpins the construction of the modern Omani state around Qaboos by reinforcing a common national identity and downplaying ethnic and religious heterogeneity

The most important product of the Basic Law is the *Majlis al-Shura*, as it provides the single input of popular participation which Qaboos slyly leverages to contain liberalisation pressures (Valeri, Oman, 2011) (Peterson, 2004, p. 134). Incorporating 5 women and (until 2013) 3 protesters from the 2011 demonstrations, the Council acts as a stabilisation factor, a link between Qaboos and his people, but certainly not as an instance of democratisation due to the absence of party competition or electoral campaigns (Mayol, 2005, pp. 169-175). Truly, the Council can summon ministers to explain their policies, even if it lacks legislative power, reviews only socio-economic issues<sup>6</sup> and its recommendations are not binding to the sultan, who retains the power to dissolve it. In line with Siegfried (2000, p. 367), the Council also plays a key role in severing local sheikhs from their power base in Oman's regions, and replacing them with *walis*<sup>7</sup> loyal to Qaboos. Thus, Mayol (2005, pp.169-175) and Siegfried (2000, p. 377-379) agree, the Council is meant to become a forum for debate and mediation, and ratifies rather than changes the current political order as the electoral process showcases. In short, continuity with past political practice prevails and top-down political openness

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<sup>5</sup> In line with Mayol (2005) and Peterson (2004), the Council of Oman (*Majlis al-Oman*) comprises:

- a lower chamber, the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*), which evolved in 1990 from previous consultative councils. Its 84 members are elected since 2003 by universal suffrage (initially restricted suffrage), with women allowed to vote and stand as candidates since 1997.
- an upper chamber, the State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*), set up in 1996 as a counterweight to the Consultative Council. Its 73 members, of whom 14 are women, are directly appointed by the Sultan.

<sup>6</sup> The ministers involved in national sovereignty (foreign affairs, finance, interior, defence and oil) cannot be requested before the *Majlis al-Shura* (Valeri, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> A *wali* is the governor of one of the 61 provinces (*wilayat*) making up Oman's territorial administration.



remains meaningless because there is no civil society that can push for democratisation and provide alternative narratives.

For his part, Valeri (Oman, 2011, pp. 139-144) stresses the personalist nature of rule in Oman, observing that Qaboos has linked the modern Omani state to himself in a framework of weakened tribal identities. In fact, tribal sheikhs are paid by the Government as intermediaries between individuals and the public administration, thus consolidating their embeddedness into a system to which they are tied by dependence and co-optation (2013, pp. 118-119). An illustrative example of this personalist absolutism is the Diwan of the Royal Court, an institution acting as a super-ministry above all state cabinets. Even further, Valeri (Oman, 2011, p. 140) identifies a personality cult around Qaboos and a national identity rested upon the negation of the country's pre-1970 history, whereas Kaplan (2011) warns against its potentiality. Nevertheless, Qaboos enjoys widespread and genuine popularity among Omanis, and as Kaplan (2011) notes, he stands among Middle Eastern autocrats in that he has provided for health and education services, together with a gradual process of political openness. Valcárcel (1994, 132-134) goes beyond in suggesting such top-down liberalisation drive might signal an incipient division of powers and popular representation that stand in sharp contrast to Oman's neighbours. On the contrary, Siegfried (2000, pp. 377-379) argues that only the Judiciary has achieved a level of independence parallel to those of Western democracies, since the Sultan still nominates judges and is above all laws.

In his landmark interview with Judith Miller (1997, pp. 16-17), sultan Qaboos himself recognises that "the man in the street doesn't want or know how to deal with foreign governments or defend the country. He trusts me to do it.", and hence the necessity of an autocratic power that introduces slow, careful and tightly-controlled change. Accordingly, Valeri posits (2015, pp. 7-20), the 2011 Arab Spring turbulence meant not only an explosion of simmering popular dissatisfaction, but a challenge to Qaboos' vision of himself and the country too. Al-Jamali (2011) adds that rallies against corruption pose a challenge to the status of the Qaboos Administration as the best guarantor of the people's interest within the accommodating narrative of an Omani exceptionalism. Featured by peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations in major cities like Muscat, Sohar and Salalah, the "Omani Spring" evidenced the feeling of neglect in areas like Al Batinah's

economic poles, where social disparities have shot up due to mega-projects seemingly benefiting a few privileged ones. Specifically, Salisbury (2012) points at an irreconcilable clash between an entrenched security, economic, and political establishment sponsored by Qaboos and a politically-engaged jobless youth yearning for change. Furthermore, in accordance with expert Marta Saldaña Martín from Real Instituto Elcano (2011, pp. 13, 15), extensive social benefits through the “ruling bargain” have not prevented the eruption of criticism of the government, thereby jeopardising the delicate balance between demands for reform by young urban populations and the defence of the status quo by merchant and tribal elites.

Albeit overly gloomy about the 2011 Omani Spring, Valeri (2015, pp. 20-38) rightly decries its disappointing progress, seeing that the regime met protesters’ demands with economic concessions, like more public sector jobs and a rise in allowances, and modest political tweaks, like the biggest cabinet dismissal to date or the creation of municipal councils in every *wilayat*. Protesters’ demands focused on unemployment, corruption, an expansion of powers for the *Majlis al-Shura*, and a solution to the uncertainty of Qaboos’s succession, aiming at the reform (not the overthrow) of the regime. Most importantly, Saldaña Martín (2011, p. 13) notes, some protesters defended a constitutional monarchy but none questioned the leadership of sultan Qaboos, given his role as the rallying point for the Sultanate’s heterogeneous ethnic, confessional and social fabrics. Still, Valeri cautions (2015), most reforms were cosmetic and waves of arrests and subsequent pardons in the following years point at the regime’s inability to tackle dissent. In fact, if the Omani Spring has made something clear, that is that total democratisation, and more specifically division of powers and freedom of expression, are red lines not to be crossed.

Indeed, Qaboos’s Government felt besieged by the Omani Spring and responded in the way deemed the most appropriate to guarantee its survival, which necessarily included HRRR violations. Despite Ibadi principles like consultation encouraging balance and power-sharing (Ghubash, 2006) and the modest reforms that the Omani Spring triggered, political openness may have stalled. The aftermath of the 2011 turmoil included: warrantless arrests, police harassment, excessive and increasing jail terms, an expansion of the Government’s repressive powers via a new cybersecurity law, and the

amendments to the Penal Code. There were also growing charges of *lèse-majesté* against journalists, social media users and even members of the *Majlis al-Shura*, reinforced by the 2014 New Nationality Law that enables the Government to strip “dissidents and traitors” of nationality (Salisbury, 2012).

Remarkably, the highest penalties fell upon those who allegedly insulted the sultan, most of them through social media: they were subject to espionage, invasion of privacy upon their personal devices in search of legal grounds for their incarceration, and according to certain personal testimonies, even physical and psychological torture (Salisbury, 2012). As of 2016, Amnesty International (2017, pp. 282-283) reports that freedoms of expression and association continue to be restricted and the death penalty is in force albeit seldom applied. The NGO simultaneously acknowledges advancements in money laundering and the power of judicial courts to overturn government decisions, like the failed attempt to close a newspaper critical of the regime. Nevertheless, HHRR progress remains hindered by twofold discrimination toward women and especially migrant workers, deprived of any legal protection and prone to exploitation and abuse practices like passport confiscation and inadequate living conditions.

The question of royal succession looms large too. According to Peterson (2004, p. 134), the Basic Law restricts the leadership of Oman to the sultan, who has to be a male descendant of Sayid Turki bin Said bin Sultan (reign 1871-1888). To ensure stability and peace, the Ruling Family Council must agree upon a successor and, should they fail in their endeavour, then the Defence Council will choose the sultan between two names written down by Qaboos in descending order, and kept in two sealed envelopes in two different places, as Qaboos himself explained in his interview with Judith Miller (1997, p. 17). Qaboos’s cousins are regarded as the most likely successors as they represent continuity in both domestic and foreign policy (Neubauer, 2017). This opaque process, even if clear to all Omanis, has aroused some anxiety. Given the fusion of the contemporary Omani nation and its prosperity with sultan Qaboos, his disappearance from a system tailored by and for himself deletes a crucial part of the equation (Mayol, 2005, p. 172). For many, the Government missed the opportunity given by the Omani Spring to make succession (and the whole political system) more transparent, and thus to dispel unease over the lack of institutions giving guarantees of “life in Oman after

Qaboos” (Salisbury, 2012). In other words, the next sultan will need both to reconstruct his legitimacy and to live up to the challenge of some very large shoes to fill (The Economist, 2015).

With its many shortcomings, Oman’s political system nonetheless scores a goal when it comes to social cohesion and ethnic inclusion. Phillips & Hunt (2017, pp. 648-650) highlight that the expansion of public finance thanks to oil rents allowed Qaboos to co-opt diverse ethnic groups and link them to the state as the only economic powerhouse; and it was this policy of integration of diversity that underwrites the unique inclusiveness of Oman’s development. Valeri (2010, pp. 252-259) finds a paradigmatic example of this policy in the Sultanate’s prosperous Shiite community, which is not only actively engaged in political and economic life but widely respected in Omani society as well. Unlike other GCC states where turbulent Shia communities are systematically excluded and discriminated against with appalling consequences (as in Saudi Arabia and especially Bahrain), Omani Shiites are granted considerable leeway in managing their own affairs, since for instance their mosques are not liable to the Ministry of Religious Endowments and tend to be financed internally. What’s more, powerful Shia clans like the Lawatiya and Baharina merchants or the Ajam security officers boast a long-standing monopoly over certain lucrative activities that Qaboos has respected, as expressed by the overrepresentation of the Lawatiya in key technical and intellectual posts thanks to their expertise and socio-professional clientelism (Valeri, 2010).

Valeri shows how sultan Qaboos has succeeded in keeping potential Shia unrest at bay via a weakened politicisation that dilutes Shia transnational networks ultimately tied to Iran (2010, pp. 260-265). Although the French author warns of prejudices against groups outside the Arab-Ibadi core of the Omani nation, like the Baluchi Sunnis or the Swahilis from Zanzibar, he stresses the irrelevance of sectarian differences compared to socio-economic grievances. Admittedly, Ibadi Islam pervades political life with the sultan assuming the former role of the Imamate in interpreting Sharia, sponsoring mosques and leading prayers (Siegfried, 2000, pp. 371-373). Still, the pressure upon other religious groups to prove their “Omaniness” is nuanced by the Sultanate’s proud, long-standing tradition of tolerance, inspired by Ibadism and trade-based cosmopolitanism. Willingly enforced by the Qaboos regime, religious tolerance has been deeply embedded

in the country's national thinking, to the extent that the population overwhelmingly embraces it as a tenet of their "Omaniness"; and this buttresses the success of Oman in terms of religious peace, according to Brown & Sheline (2017). As these authors note, even if Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs performs the same functions as others across the Arab world (regulation of mosques and education centres and payment of imams and preachers' salaries), it stands out for its monopolisation of religious discourse to promote tolerance.

Such Omani "oasis" where all religions flourish and extremism perishes has also banished the spectres of fundamentalism and terrorism, according to Del Campo Cortes (2016), in light of the zero Omanis recruited to any terrorist organisation as of 2017 or the occasional jail sentences imposed upon fanatic proselytism. Caputo (2016) quotes a recent poll according to which Omani youth identify Daesh as the biggest challenge for Oman, while Gupta (2015) cites Oman's score of zero in the 2015 Global Terrorism Index. This second author recognises the value of Oman as a counter-terrorism model for the Middle East and points at a successful "anti-terrorism mix" composed of six main hurdles to sectarian radicalisation: (1) a modernisation drive balanced with the respect for traditions, (2) the non-interference of the State in citizen's lives as expressed by the freedom of religion and the Hindu temples or Christian churches mushrooming in Muscat, (3) the influence of Ibadi values of tolerance and openness, (4) specific anti-terrorism laws to combat money laundering, (5) a cautious foreign policy based on dialogue and mediation, and (6) political stability. For his part, Kristof (2010) underlines the positive effect of education in Oman in curbing extremism, in line with studies showing how education enrolment can reduce the likelihood of conflict.

Another indicator of Oman's prosperity is the irreversible progress achieved by women, which Qaboos calls his "proudest accomplishment" (Al Said & Miller, 1997, pp. 17-18). Examples of successful women range from the first Law graduate, who conducted negotiations with Shell to export Oman's oil reserves (Del Campo Cortes, 2016); to the seven Omani women featuring in Forbes's lists of most powerful Arab Women, including the long-serving Minister of Education (Times of Oman, 2017). However, Amnesty International (2017, pp. 282-283) reports the persistent discrimination toward women, lacking equal rights in family or criminal law. Chatty (2000) points at the example of an

income-generating cooperative run by rural illiterate women who, despite their families' support, clashed with the Government's reluctance to grant them permission on the grounds of their lack of education. As a result, besides traditional roles that tie women to their homes and neglect their work ("housewife" label), women's access to the education, health, or labour systems is unequal to men's due to a deprivation of opportunities, and particularly for rural remote areas in southern and central Oman and certain ethnic groups like nomadic Bedouins. Despite all, Chatty concludes (2000, pp. 245-250), women have consolidated their gains and many are pushing the boundaries of culturally appropriate behaviour to shoulder the country's impressive transformation.

Crucially, the socio-economic development, political tranquillity, and ethno-religious inclusion featuring the transformation of Oman steered by Qaboos can only be understood in the framework of a new and unique brand of foreign policy-making. Kwak (1983) highlights the dramatic change with the previous years of isolation and backwardness, while advancing the inextricably link between Oman's prosperity and its open and successful foreign policy. Neubauer (2017) reports that the uniqueness of Oman's foreign policy has even given rise to the concept of "Omani exceptionalism", which this work will expand from the foreign realm to encompass the economic, political, and socio-ethnic dimensions of the Omani polity as well. According to one of the most learned experts in Omani foreign policy, Joseph A. Kechichian (2010, pp. 2-5), successful diplomacy has always been, and continues to be, the linchpin to Oman's prosperity. He also stresses the remarkable consistency of successive Omani regimes thanks to a sustained long-term approach based on neutrality, moderation and pragmatism; which finds its roots in the thalassocratic empire built by Omani sultans in the 1800s as far as East Africa with its focus on trade, along with the tolerance and openness of the Ibadi Imamates (2010, pp. 2-3, 37-38). Namely, the four main pillars of this distinct diplomacy encompass: rejection of meddling in other states' affairs, non-alignment, respect for international law and reinforcement of Arab ties (Kechichian, 2010, p. 9). This neutral and moderate foreign policy is even enshrined in the Omani Constitution, which forbids the sending of troops abroad except at UN request (Umar, 2016).

Such principles are subordinated to the most important goal of Oman's foreign policy, the one pushing the country to forge an independent path for itself: its relentless quest for security amid regional insecurity (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 58-63). Oman has always perceived external political stability in the Middle East as a determinant of its own internal stability, given the outside nature of most threats like migratory pressures or security dilemmas (Valcárcel, 1994, p. 137). The result is a deep awareness of the inseparable bond between foreign and domestic policy, between external prestige and internal prosperity. Such linkage also preserves Qaboos' legitimacy vis-à-vis the Omani people, given that they not only credit Qaboos for the Sultanate's peace and prosperity, but also for a prudent and sound foreign policy that they wholeheartedly support (Neubauer, 2017).

Consequently, sultan Qaboos felt compelled by the Dhofar War and the catastrophic effects of his father's isolationist policies to give priority to an effective yet quiet diplomacy. Thus, he rushed to break Oman's isolation through a proliferation of embassies and the accession to the UN, aware as he was that without such international assistance he could never have launched the transformation of Oman (Lefebvre, 2009). Mindful of Saudi meddling in his early years in the throne and the dismal example of Yemen, ravaged by internal strife and external interferences, Qaboos also strove to conclude border agreements with all of Oman's neighbours so as to safeguard the Sultanate's territorial integrity and soothe tensions, especially with Saudi Arabia by settling a historic border contention over the Buraimi oasis (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 11-12, 37-44, 70-76).

Key to this independent foreign policy is a strategy of diversification of allies, according to Kechichian (2010, pp. 249-257). By relying on multiple partners whether close or afar, Qaboos keeps Oman's security guaranteed and gains considerable leeway to pursue Oman's long term objectives. Thus, while persuaded of its Arab and Islamic affiliations as expressed by its hard-fought integration into the LAS and OIC and its founding role in the GCC (Al Said & Miller, 1997, pp. 13-16), the Sultanate has nonetheless been adamant about the inviolability of its friendly relationship with Iran. As Cafiero & Yefet (2016) and Esfandiary & Tabatabai (2017) affirm, even though the GCC was created precisely to contain the threat of Iran, Oman believes in engagement rather than retaliation, and has

managed to find a *modus vivendi* with its troublesome neighbour. Muscat and Tehran's symbiotic ties point at growing interdependence in the economic and security levels, evidencing the Omani conviction that Iran is not only a "force to be reckoned with", but also a reliable partner that simply cannot be isolated (Cafiero & Yefet, 2016). What's more, RUSI expert Mahfoodh Al Ardhi (2014) highlights the lack of a unified approach to Iran for GCC states, despite a shared understanding of Tehran's nuclear capabilities as the direst threat to them all, which saves Oman from being singled out for its Iran links, given the Qatari-Iranian cooperation to exploit shared gas fields.

Thus, the primacy given to long-term interests overcomes petty discrepancies and avoids the brinkmanship so prevalent elsewhere in the region (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2017), seeing that Oman has not broken diplomatic relations with any State since 1970. Equally remarkable, Oman has always maintained an open door to dialogue with Israel and supported the peace process on equal terms because, in Qaboos' words, "we have walked so many kilometres towards peace that it would be tragic to start going backwards now." (Al Said & Miller, 1997, p. 16). Indeed, the Sultanate has carved a mediator role for itself, earned through years of respected neutrality and impartiality, becoming a channel between the Arab world, Iran, the West, and Israel. From Syria to Yemen, Oman has always interceded to approach positions, as the conclusion of the JCPOA<sup>8</sup> exemplifies (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2017). This policy of balance and mediation between uncompromising enemies is reinforced by Oman's strategic position as the gatekeeper between the Arab Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Given that around one third of world oil travels through Oman's more navigable waters and that the other side of the Strait of Hormuz belongs to the fickle Government of Khomeini, the Sultanate has always guaranteed safe passage while exploiting it to strengthen its image as a *bona fide* go-between and a factor for peace and stability (Lefebvre, 2009).

While embracing pragmatism and escaping the regional whirlwind of bashing and predatoriness, Oman has effectively promoted economic and commercial ties in order to foster its development (Bowring, 1993), with three main fronts in Central, South, and

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<sup>8</sup> The JCPOA, also Iran nuclear deal, is the agreement reached between Iran on one side and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of UNSC UK, US, France, China and Russia + Germany) and the EU on the other, whereby Iran agreed to cut its nuclear programme while the P5+1 lifted sanctions against the country. Omani mediation proved vital in reaching the final 2015 agreement.



East Asia. Kechichian (2010, pp. 175-212) reports that its largest trading partners include China, Japan and South Korea, based on oil exports, technology imports, and infrastructure projects; as well as intense investment and labour flows with Thailand and Australia, thriving joint ventures in Kazakhstan and even diplomatic coordination with Russia and China in multilateral forums (Bowring, 1993). More importantly, Oman cultivates intense links with India and Pakistan, harking back to the powerful Indian merchants monopolising economic power and up to the large expatriate communities of nowadays. Oman has eschewed the India-Pakistan legendary rivalry in a delicate balancing act emblematic of its diplomatic prowess, strengthening security cooperation and trade exchanges with New Delhi while trying to overcome political differences with Islamabad, like tensions over Gwadar<sup>9</sup>, through further economic interdependence. Also, the Sultanate is gingerly coming back to Africa, where its commercial empire reached its apogee, with a strong focus in overcoming the uncomfortable legacy in Zanzibar given enhanced investment and cooperation with Tanzania, while containing next-door security threats like unstable Somalia and promoting business exchanges with South Africa (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 239-246) (The Economist, 2014).

Albeit such motley foreign relations, Oman remains deeply anchored to its Arab identity seeing that upon accession, Qaboos endeavoured to overcome a lukewarm Arab reception, with resounding success as the creation and upgrade of the GCC proves (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 82-92). Admittedly, Oman's divergences with GCC policies range from disappointingly slow security integration to firm opt-outs from several initiatives running counter to its foreign policy, like Saudi-dominated projects or adventurist interventions in other states be it Bahrain's unrest or the Syria and Yemen Wars (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 65-66, 75, 86-92, 114-119) (The Economist, 2015). Cafiero & Yefet (2016) report rumours of a potential "Oxit" from the GCC that the Government is quick to dismiss. Esfandiary & Tabatabai (2017) point at Riyadh's irate sense of betrayal about Oman's participation in the secret negotiations culminating in the JCPOA. The Economist (2017) highlights perceptions of Oman as the black sheep in the group, as well as GCC

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<sup>9</sup> This Baluchi port was since the 19<sup>th</sup> century an Omani enclave that provided Muscat's Indian and Pakistani merchants with copious earnings from customs levies. After much pressure from Pakistan, Oman agreed to sell it, even if trade and human capital links remain strong between this former imperial colony and the Sultanate (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 213, 226-237).

rage towards Oman allegedly turning a blind eye to the contraband of weapons and vital supplies between Iran and its Houthi proxies in Yemen.

Admittedly, the GCC has been flagging since its inception due to half-baked projects like the failed currency union or the inoperative Peninsula Shield Force, RUSI expert David Roberts (2011) argues. He also stresses the organisation's role as a rallying point against Iran's "Shia Crescent", a bulwark of monarchs vying for Arab hegemony versus regional powers like Egypt and Iraq, and finally a bastion of status quo stability against Arab Spring turmoil. Anyhow, aware of such mixed blessings and mindful that the GCC is the main market for its products and the main source of its financial and military assistance, Oman will likely remain careful not to alienate its allies, given that the country neither wants nor can afford to do so (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2017). Popular support for the GCC in Oman remains strong, in line with the findings of Qatar University experts Mark Tessler and Justin Gengsler (2016): 82% and 77% of Omanis hold a positive view of or feel a personal connection to the GCC, respectively. For its part, Brookings expert Bruce Riedel (2017) even points at some gestures of re-alignment with the Saudis on account of two facts. First, Oman has joined the Islamic military alliance spearheaded by Riyadh that targets Iran and its ally Iraq. Second, a state visit led by the powerful heir Mohammed bin Salman signals the necessity to sum efforts in finding a way out of the quagmire of the Yemen War, which Muscat considers a stalemate that the Kingdom blundered into without a clear strategy.

Finally, Oman encounters many risks in its unique foreign policy. In line with Valeri (2015, p. 21): there is a paradoxical price for independence: that of dependency, since to become independent, a small State like Oman cannot but rely on security support from external patrons, as well as on one of the largest defence expenditures in the world. Most of this military assistance comes from Western powers, namely the US and Britain, with whom Oman has cultivated intense ties bypassing vocal opposition by many Arab states and the GCC's stalled initiatives (Kwak, 1983). For instance, aware as he was of Britain's capital role in overcoming the challenge of the Dhofar War, Qaboos has maintained a thriving security cooperation, but making very clear that the years of colonial oppression where London dictated and Muscat complied are banished to a painful past (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 123-134). According to expert Ana Echagüe from

FRIDE (2007), Oman's relations with European countries are conducted as per the EU and GCC blocks, featured by underexploited but growingly interdependent exchanges (case of the suspended FTA), a general unwillingness to deepen the relationship, and delaying disagreements over the EU's tax on GCC petrochemicals and its insistence on human rights and migration requirements deemed unacceptable for GCC states.

What's more, Valentina Kostadinova from the Gulf Research Centre (2013) notes that the EU is interested in securing energy supplies and unyielding about liberalising reforms whereas the GCC seeks a strategic partnership to ensure the EU's stake in their survival and soothe its military dependency on the US, but neither party seems willing to deliver on the other's expectations. In fact, Oman clearly tilts to the US above any EU linkage, as evidenced by a discreet yet thriving relation articulated through military access-for-assistance agreements that have served both countries well (Bowring, 1993). Oman has exploited American military support to ease its dependency on arms purchases while the US has often resorted to Omani facilities (the most crucial in Masirah Island). Most importantly, Washington consistently leans on Muscat to navigate the Middle East's rowdy waters especially with regard to Iran and its regional proxies, thereby enhancing the country's pre-eminence as a bridge between East and West, in line with Kechichian (2010, pp. 139-158) and Gupta (2015).

In any case, the biggest risk for Oman might be the challenges to its mediator status that has worked so well for most of its history. Internal rifts within the GCC have always concerned the Sultanate, because the organisation emerges as a beacon of solidarity and stability amid regional turmoil (Al-Atiqi, 2016). In fact, as Cafiero & Karasik (2017) note, the ongoing Qatari row<sup>10</sup> threatens the unity of the GCC and with it may come the entire collapse of the paradigm that has driven Omani diplomacy for the last forty-seven years. More critically, Brookings Institution experts (Kabbani et al, 2017) warn of the looming breakdown of the GCC as the blockade upon Qatar becomes the norm and Kuwaiti and Omani endeavours to reach a compromise languish at the reluctance of both sides to solve the impasse. Particularly, there is a parallel Saudi-Emirati partnership

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<sup>10</sup> The 2017 diplomatic crisis pitting Qatar against Saudi Arabia and UAE, and even dragging other Arab states close to them like Bahrain and Egypt, stems from sharp policy differences, as explained in detail in the "Analysis" section of this dissertation.

that runs the risk of institutionalising and thereby rendering the GCC irrelevant. As expert Kristian Ulrichsen from Chatham House (2017) puts it, ruling circles in Oman are growing wary toward the potential risk that the GCC may degenerate into a “hawkish assertive core of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi”.

The danger of conflict spillovers splashing Oman’s foreign policy is acute indeed. Sometimes accused of undermining GCC collective security because of its friendship with Iran, the Sultanate has underwent considerable pressure as the rest of the GCC is more vocally questioning its sacrosanct status as an impartial mediator, having occasionally withheld financial assistance to bargain with Muscat (Gupta, 2015). Furthermore, Oman became disillusioned with the scant economic dividends from Iran’s international rehabilitation, and has slanted toward Riyadh even though Tehran soon took up many unfinished joint projects and has repeatedly provided evidence that it sees Oman as its top regional partner (Cafiero & Yefet, 2016). In accordance with all this, the balancing of unyielding enemies in the framework of a neutral, pragmatic, moderate, and independent foreign policy is Oman’s biggest strength, but runs the risk of becoming its biggest weakness as well.

### 1.3. Research Questions.

The main question guiding this paper refers to the idea of “Omani exceptionalism” as per the development process and prosperity of Oman:

- What are the drivers of Oman’s astonishing development? How do economic, political, socio-religious, and foreign-policy factors work together to account for Oman’s inclusive prosperity and peace? Can an ideological framework of “Omani exceptionalism” accurately explain the uniqueness of Oman’s current prosperity?

Crucially, the answer to such questions within the general framework “Omani exceptionalism” must be split into separate answers for separate research questions that are particular to each of the determinants of Oman’s prosperity (the economic, the political, the socio-religious, and the foreign-policy factors), in order to grasp the full picture of Oman’s success story:

- What are the economic drivers of Oman's development? To what an extent is oil responsible for Oman's exit from poverty? How does economic success underpin the legitimacy of the regime vis-à-vis the population? What are the challenges lying ahead for Oman's economy and how is the country preparing to tackle them?
- What is the role of a political system centred on sultan Qaboos in spearheading development? What is the impact of the Arab Spring on a liberalising autocracy and the sultan's legitimacy to rule? What are the engines and obstacles deep inside Oman's political system that boost/constrain its peace and stability?
- How do Oman's unique ethnic and religious heterogeneity and its official policy of openness effect its prosperity? How has sultan Qaboos co-opted different social, religious and ethnic groups to ensure their stake in the contemporary Omani nation? How does such inclusive model of tolerance differ from the divisive policies and fragmented societies of fellow Arab states?
- What is the role of Oman's independent, pragmatic, and moderate foreign policy in armouring the country against external threats? What is the connection between foreign and domestic policy success in Oman? How does Oman's mediator status tally with its national identity and sultan Qaboos's legitimacy?

#### 1.4. Purpose and Objectives

Given the scant academic attention devoted to Oman, and that few studies of the country have managed to interweave its economy, polity, society, and foreign action to explain its success story, this paper will aspire to humbly help fill that void. Thus, the purpose of such research is to ascertain which elements unique to Oman's economic and political systems, its social and religious fabric, and its foreign policy, account for its unrivalled speed of development and its hard-fought prosperity by forging a peaceful, inclusive, and satisfied society.

Accordingly, the general objective of this dissertation may be formulated as the following: define the network of factors driving Oman's prosperity and their interactions under the ideological umbrella of "Omani exceptionalism". This may then be unfolded into several field-specific objectives:

- Examine the economic drivers of Oman’s development, with particular emphasis on the limitations of oil revenues. Explain how economic success underscores the regime’s legitimacy and detail the main economic challenges of the Sultanate and how it is preparing to tackle them.
- Assess the impact of Oman’s political system centred on sultan Qaboos in the development and nation-building processes. To that effect, focus on how and why Oman emerged largely unscathed from Arab Spring turmoil and the checks and balances between the sultan, the Government, and the people in such hybrid political system.
- Analyse the integration of Oman’s social and ethnic heterogeneity to ensure an inclusive prosperity, in contrast to the exclusionary politics of other Arab states. Highlight how Oman becomes an “oasis” of tolerance and peace amid regional fanaticism and conflict.
- Address the crucial role of Oman’s unique brand of foreign policy in shielding the country against external threats and safeguarding its prosperity. Underline the inextricable link between domestic and foreign policy in sparing Oman the conflict, interferences, and adventurism plaguing other fellow states and in buttressing the nation-building process.

### 1.5. Hypothesis

In line with the previous sections of this dissertation, the hypothesis of this dissertation consists in the following: Oman’s prosperity as a peaceful, wealthy, and viable nation derives from a cluster of economic, political, social, and foreign-policy drivers that are unique to the Sultanate. This will prove the validity of “Omani exceptionalism” as an ideological framework to explain what makes Oman’s success story exceptional in comparison to other Arab stories of both success and failure.

### 1.6. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this dissertation comprises economic liberalism theories. Such International Relations paradigm stresses the beneficial effects of international cooperation, rather than rampant competition where the winner takes it all (Nye, 2011).

Indeed, Oman has effectively exploited international cooperation to underpin its success, as its foreign policy exemplifies day after day. In particular, the Sultanate materialises the liberal tenet that diplomacy and mediation should take precedence over the crude quest for power amid security dilemmas, on account of its status as a factor of peace and stability in the Middle East's pandemonium. Even if trapped in a volatile region, Oman's resort to diplomacy to solve its problems (and those of others) and to advance its interests clearly feeds on a liberal understanding of international relations as a positive-sum game with absolute gains, instead of realist calculations of relative gains in a zero-sum game (Nye, 2011).

Furthermore, the liberal advocacy of trade and globalisation as forces diffusing the likelihood of conflict squares well with Oman's interest on expanding its economic relations rather than militaristic adventurism (Kant, 2010). The liberal conception of economic interdependence as a determinant of peace finds a living example in Oman's foreign action, seeing that the country's opt-out from conflict and the expansion of its trade links with other countries have significantly buttressed its internal prosperity. What is more, the Oman of Qaboos is persuaded of the prolificacy of their liberal, commercial, and pacifist approach to International Relations, because it dovetails suitably with Ibadi traditions of openness and moderation that shape internal policies of balance and negotiation.

### 1.7. Time and Geographical Frameworks

The time framework for this paper will be restricted to approximately 5 years, spanning from 2012 until 2017. Although in the "State of the Art" section developments in Oman since the enthronement of Qaboos in 1970 have been thoroughly discussed, the analytical part to which the second chapter of this dissertation is devoted will begin after the Omani Spring of 2011 and spread to 2017, last year for which there is enough information to guide research. Furthermore, the recurrent references to the Arab Spring are intended to explain its long-lasting aftermath, even if the actual turmoil took place in 2011. This will be especially important in the subsection that deals with Bahrain, as will be explained later.

For its part, the geographical framework will, logically, stay close to Oman, since the purpose of this paper is to examine the drivers of its unique prosperity and peace. Nevertheless, the analysis will inevitably resort to a comparison of Oman to other countries via the compared method, in order to ascertain those factors unique to the Sultanate which account for its transformation and inclusive development. In this sense, the geographical framework may be extended to include not only Oman, but also four other fellow states of the Arabian Gulf, with which Oman shares the most similarities and/or disparities: UAE, neighbour and a GCC member; Qatar and Bahrain, GCC members close to, but not neighbouring Oman; and finally Yemen, a non-GCC Arab state with which Oman shares a volatile border and a long history of convoluted relations.

### 1.8. Methodology

This dissertation will be firmly grounded on recent literature about the Oman of Qaboos and its transformation after 1970. The approach will remain interdisciplinary in that the sources consulted and employed range from the economic analysis to the sociological and religious assessment, seeing that no single field can explain the development of Oman without resort to the others. Such wide-ranging research basis is deemed the best in serving the analysis of how “Omani exceptionalism” underpins the country’s prosperity via a comparative study. In this way, the comparative study will deliver two main benefits. On the one hand, it will help explain the “exceptionality” of Oman by identifying those prosperity drivers unique to Oman, and subsequently comparing them to other similar countries. On the other, it will contrast the Sultanate’s success story to three other success stories of very similar countries: UAE, Qatar and Bahrain, with whom Oman shares membership of the GCC. Further, the comparative study will also target a fourth country, with which Oman shares some similarities too, but which constitutes a story of failure: Yemen, not part of the GCC and the poorest country in the Middle East. This analytical comparison will assess the validity of the hypothesis, unravelling the exceptionalism of Oman in terms of the four drivers of its unique, multipronged prosperity.



## 2. Analysis of Omani Exceptionalism through Four Case Studies

Once the foundations for the analysis have been laid, it is time to dive into the analysis of Omani exceptionalism. To that purpose, four countries have been selected to compare Oman with: two success stories (UAE and Qatar), a story of mixed blessings (Bahrain), and an utter failure (Yemen). Each will be compared to Oman in a separate section, where the unique determinants of Oman's prosperity that each country lacks and that make the Sultanate's case exceptional will be highlighted. Namely, comparison to the UAE and Qatar, widely considered the GCC's top performers, may reveal that not all that glitters is gold. The analysis of both cases will largely focus on the structural weaknesses of the seemingly flashy economies of the UAE and Qatar, the richest states of the GCC, as well as the management of their Shia minorities, and the shortcomings of their foreign policies. Then, the analysis will target Bahrain, where the stress will lie on the Arab Spring and its related Shia policy, as well as the troublesome political and foreign policy ramifications of the conflict. Lastly, comparison to Yemen will yield a sort-of contrafactual of what Oman could have become but avoided thanks to its "exceptionalism", tackling the poverty, disintegration, foreign meddling, and chaos of Yemen as a failed state that stands in sharp contrast to Oman's prosperity and independence.

### 2.1. Oman and the UAE: glitzy success at a cost

As the most competitive and business-friendly economy in the GCC (World Economic Forum, 2017), the UAE tends to figure as the region's top performer. Its glitzy success in crafting one of the most affluent states in the world is certainly example-setting. Yet, no less spectacular has been Oman's development process, which started later and had to overcome greater hurdles. Abu Dhabi or Dubai were already economic poles when the UAE federation was formed, and the first was already awash with foreign earnings from swelling oil exports. For its part, Oman remained at the mercy of a neglectful and incompetent ruler (Qaboos's father) and Britain's clout that prevented the country from truly developing and seizing the full potential of its oil reserves. Only when Qaboos acceded to power was Oman able to fully overcome the deliberate policy of impoverishment perpetrated by the British and take ownership of its future (Ghubash,

2006). What is more, the UAE federation had few of the diplomatic difficulties that afflicted Oman in the 1970s, and most remarkably it did not have a civil war to resolve (Kechichian, 2010, pp. 37-44). Hence lies a source of merit for Oman that makes its prosperity unique, thereby strengthening the assumption of this dissertation of an “Omani exceptionalism” that singles out the Sultanate from its better-prepared and better-helped-out neighbours.

Moreover, the UAE’s much touted prosperity is in fact driven by the two Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, masking pronounced asymmetries with regard to the other five emirates, relatively isolated, poor, and uninfluential. As Abu Dhabi and Dubai explosively developed into world-class cities, the other five Emirates remain deeply cognizant that they are still lagging behind and barred in their ability to partake in the windfall. For example, the feeble cooperation between the seven Emirates in labour or immigration issues highlights this clear need for more internal cohesion and equity (Malit Jr. & Al Youha, 2013). In contrast, the Qaboos Administration deliberately tackled Oman’s regional disparities, with a specially delicate consideration for the Dhofar Governorate, where separatists had waged a civil war against Qaboos and his father until the 1980s (Valeri, 2011, p. 143). In fact, the Oman of Qaboos was built upon the dichotomy of two separate states: the rural isolationist Ibadi Imamate of the interior and the urban cosmopolitan Sultanate on the coast, among which gaps have been successfully bridged (Valcárcel, 1994, p. 129). Furthermore, Oman’s tribal fabric is better integrated into the Qaboos regime than the UAE’s scattered Bedouins, which exert more pressure on the Government to fulfil its political commitments (Valeri, 2013, pp. 118-119). Thus, the combination of a more inclusive and equalised development process and a political system that more effectively dilutes tribal allegiances justifies Oman’s cohesion versus the UAE’s deep federal imbalances (Looney, 2009, pp. 10-20)

Albeit the most diversified economy in the GCC, the UAE possesses a number of structural weaknesses that Oman’s more oil-dependent economy lacks. In particular, the diversification of Dubai into a services-driven metropolis has translated into a heavy reliance on trade with its GCC partners, which has exacerbated its vulnerability to regional and world shocks. For instance, the 2007 financial crisis shed light on a dangerous indebtedness trend by both the public and private sectors in Dubai,

eventually resulting in a bailout of the Dubai economy by the richest Emirate of Abu Dhabi (Kerr, 2016). The ensuing belt-tightening climate saw companies downsizing and even shutting down, while regional governments delayed projects and slashed spending, even if the federal government continues splurging on the latest weaponry. Dubai has intermittently suffered from high inflation, real estate price volatility and, most gravely, a general drain in jobs, driven by the stagnation of private sector hiring and the leak of blue-collar workers out of the Emirate (Kerr, 2016). As consistently low oil prices and the Qatar blockade perpetuate the strain on the UAE's economy, the much-talked diversification away from oil is demonstrated to require a careful management that goes beyond the free-wheeling promotion of business and trade.

Arguably, the biggest challenge for the UAE economy lies in its overreliance on foreign and cheap labour. The UAE shares with Qatar a severe population imbalance featured by a proportion of 1 national for every 9 immigrants (Gulf Research Center, 2016), data which highlight the unsustainability of the current paradigm. The tiny and relatively skilled Emirati workforce remains uncompetitive compared to the much less picky and more efficient foreign workforce (Malit Jr. & Al Youha, 2013). As a result, the lack of opportunities and steady unemployment of Emirati nationals are mounting political pressure upon their Government. Hence the strong Emiratisation campaigns to redress employers' tendency to opt for Western expatriates rather than Emiratis, which differ from Oman's much milder Omanisation policies. Furthermore, it is in the UAE where the abuses and flaws of the *kafala* sponsorship system are most patent, despite a recent attitude that more proactively tries to cover the loopholes and improve enforcement (Malit Jr. & Al Youha, 2013). Seeing Emirati problems with its overflow of foreign workers and the complications they bring in, Oman's policy of restricting foreign immigration seems wiser in armouring its labour market against such disruptions.

If on the one hand immigration from all over the world makes UAE society a melting pot of cultures, on the other its national citizens remain a cohesive and homogeneous community, with an overwhelmingly Sunni and Arab identity. Conversely, Oman's national population encompasses quite a more motley mix of Ibadi, Sunni, Shia, Arab, Baluchi, Indian, and Zanzibari identities. In particular, Omani Shias, albeit a scant 5% of

the population<sup>11</sup>, wield disproportionate power; whereas Emirati Shias, representing between 10 and 15% of the population, are a well-off community with some, but not outstanding, participation in the country's affairs (Khalid Majidyar, 2013, pp. 3-4). Both the UAE and Oman have adopted a laissez-faire but vigilant approach towards Shias: they are allowed to congregate in their own mosques, to conduct their affairs independently, and even to seek financial assistance from the Government. Albeit to a lesser extent than Omanis, Emirati Shias have benefited from the country's explosive development, especially Dubai's economic boom (Khalid Majidyar, 2013).

However, according to leaked US diplomatic cables, the UAE remains deeply wary of its Shia community, regarded as a potential Iranian fifth column that menaces the entire federation and especially, the Sunni ruling families of the seven emirates (Khalid Majidyar, 2013, pp. 3-6). Iran's vigorous soft power campaigns to garner support among beleaguered Shia communities worldwide have found greater echo among Emirati than among Omani Shias, given that only the first cherish long-standing transnational links to their Iranian motherland. The result is a policy of schizophrenic surveillance and external scolding of Iran's ambitions that only adds up to the discomfort of Emirati Shias, who feel the heat from both sides dangerously soaring. The UAE's distrust of its Shia population is made patent by their exclusion from strategic sectors like the national security and diplomatic corps, which pushes Emirati Shias to relatively "inoffensive activities" like business. Even there, the pressure to cut trade links with Iran is negatively impacting the burgeoning and abiding trade between Dubai and Iran that made of most Emirati Shias a well-off and satisfied community (Khalid Majidyar, 2013, pp. 3-6).

In contrast, the thriving Shia minority of Oman is deeply and inexorably embedded not only in society, but also in the State's political and economic apparatus (Khalid Majidyar, 2013, p. 1). Two main reasons account for this. On the one hand, the majority of Omani Shias belong to one of three clans that settled in the Sultanate between two and three centuries ago, having since then become one of the main economic and trade engines of the country, as well as an invaluable source of political support for the sultans (Valeri,

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<sup>11</sup> Religious affiliation and ethnicity figures are always estimated for Oman, since the Government provides no definite data in this regard, probably to eschew attention on the issue and reinforce the "Omaniness" of all sectors regardless of their religion and ethnicity (Valeri, 2010).

2010, pp. 252-257). On the other hand, sultan Qaboos eagerly confirmed this historical prosperity and prominence of Omani Shias, ensuring their uncompromising support in his nation-building endeavours. Particularly remarkable are the vibrant Shia businessmen of the Lawatiya clan that put their valuable commercial expertise and multilingualism at the service of the Qaboos's state, obtaining stakes in big corporations, key political positions, and the personal trust of the sultan in return (Valeri, 2010, pp. 258-266). The result is a highly effective symbiosis by virtue of which Omani Shias overwhelmingly identify themselves with the Omani nation and endorse the Qaboos regime. Accordingly, whereas the UAE's angst over its Shia community feeds a vicious cycle of distrust and exclusion that so far has narrowly avoided unrest, Oman's trust in its Shia community as a crucial actor in ensuring the success of the Omani nation dispels any fear over potential treachery due to Iran's machinations.

However, it might be in foreign policy where Oman can teach the UAE its most valuable lesson. The death in 2004 of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founder of the UAE Federation and Abu Dhabi's emir, triggered a radical veer in the UAE's foreign policy. If Sheikh Zayed had focused on building a low-key reputation for the federation as both an impartial mediator and a collection of tranquil and vibrant commercial hubs, Abu Dhabi has triggered a swerve by meddling in its neighbours affairs to advance an Emirati agenda, just what it criticises Qatar and Iran for (The Economist, 2017). This radical departure from a risk-averse country to a militant and aggressive regional power was facilitated by the new faces at the helm, especially the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan and the powerful Emirati Ambassador to the US Yousef al-Otaiba. An example of the UAE's vying for more influence lies in its policy of overflowing developing countries like Seychelles with aid, leveraging a strong financial muscle to slowly infiltrate clientelism in small, weak states (The Economist, 2017).

This growing assertiveness tallies with the conviction within Emirati ruling circles that the country must become self-reliant in its security (England & Kerr, 2017). After 9/11, the UAE became deeply aware of the failure of its counterterrorism efforts, seeing that two hijackers were Emirati and Emirati cities had been used as transit hubs (McLaughlin, 2017). The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood globally and its Emirati offshoot Al-Islah, US disengagement in the Middle East under the Obama Administration, and raging conflict

from Eritrea to Iraq, have all exacerbated the UAE's frantic endeavours for security self-sufficiency. Despite an improvement of relations under the Trump Administration, all GCC countries, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular, remain adamant about the urge to become militarily autonomous from US sponsorship (McLaughlin, 2017). The result has been sweeping militarisation that, driven by the country's renewed leadership, has earned the country the nickname "Little Sparta". Indeed, the federal government is for the first time enforcing military conscription upon a population long pampered with peace and wealth (The Economist, 2017). With the invaluable assistance of Western advisers and industrious perseverance, Emiratis can safely boast the best-equipped and best-trained army in the Middle East (save Israel), as well as the most advanced intelligence system in the region (England & Kerr, 2017).

Moreover, the shift in the UAE's foreign policy paradigm has witnessed a teetering to the Saudis facilitated by the personal connection between Sheikh Mohammed in Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud. Both share a willingness to modernise their nations and a hawkish stance on Iran and political Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood (England & Kerr, 2017). Still this rapprochement, with its subsequent aggressive assertiveness, undermines the UAE's former role as a mediator and enmeshes the country in regional fault lines as never before. For example, in Libya the UAE is launching heavy airstrikes in support of an anti-Islamist military strongmen targeted by the UN, awkwardly violating both an international arms embargo on the country and UNSC resolutions that protect the UN-backed Tripoli Government (England & Kerr, 2017). However, it is in Yemen where UAE's reputation has been most tarnished, in light of the widespread international condemnation of the coalition's intervention, the high civilian toll it has caused, and the reported torture and abuses perpetrated by the Emirati Army. The UAE has committed considerable ground forces and imported highly-skilled mercenaries from South America to fight on its behalf, signalling its inexorable engagement in the conflict (Reimann, 2018).

Despite the territorial gains, the Yemen War has become a grim quagmire for the UAE, on account of the clashes with Saudi Arabia over Emirati support to Southern separatists in Aden opposed to President Mansour Hadi, supposedly backed by the coalition and internationally regarded as the legitimate head of the Yemeni Government (Reimann,

2018). In fact, the UAE has seized virtual control over Southern Yemen, behaving like an occupying power: it has trained Yemeni militias that only swear loyalty to Abu Dhabi, denied President Hadi entry into Yemen, and transformed the strategic island of Socotra into a virtual Emirati colony (Reimann, 2018). Thus, as the UAE moves to consolidate its *de facto* free rein over Southern Yemen and deliberately ignores Saudi pressures to turn its eye back to the original goal of defeating the Houthis, Saudi ruling circles are looking increasingly askance at the insatiable ambitions of their Emirati counterparts (The Economist, 2017).

In fact, Emirati sway over Yemen responds to a thoroughly-planned strategy to extend control over the string of trading posts in the highly lucrative oil routes that tie the Gulf's ports (among which Dubai's Jebel Ali is the biggest) with the voracious European markets through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea (Reimann, 2018). Likewise, the UAE's bold moves to skew the Saudi royal succession in favour of Mohammed bin Salman, highlighted by a recent leak of emails from the UAE Ambassador to the US, reinforce the aggressive assertiveness of Emirati foreign policy that is even replacing the Saudi behemoth as the region's hegemon (Hearst & Swisher, 2017). Problematically, the UAE's creeping imperialism is creating problems: in Somalia, the Saudi-backed President has declared the Emirati base in Berbera unconstitutional, and continues to fight Somaliland rebels backed by the UAE. Further, Emirati cooperation with Israel has aroused the fury of some Arab League members, and likewise with Turkey over its diplomatic recognition of Cyprus (The Economist, 2017).

Ditto with the ongoing boycott of Qatar, where the Emirati-Saudi core within the GCC again rushed into a conflict overestimating their chances of success and realising too late the evitable blunder (Tharoor, 2017). The intermittent and poorly enforced blockade of Qatar by land, sea, and air is in fact harming its enforcers. The Emirate of Dubai, one-hour away from Doha by air, is being hit the hardest, given that most of Dubai's exports are services destined to Qatar. Indeed, Qatar's imports experienced a drop of 40% in June as the boycott kickstarted, largely driven by plunging Emirati exports to Qatar (Kerr, 2017). Furthermore, despite the mixed messaging typical of the Trump Administration, the US has expressed its support for conciliation to overcome the crisis, unpersuaded of the Quartet's struggles to raise sympathy that are all the more awkward

in light of recently analysed intelligence that confirms the UAE's responsibility behind the crisis' trigger (Tharoor, 2017). Most crucially, so far the blockade has failed miserably in its main goal of bringing the "unruly Qatari child" back into the Saudi-Emirati fold, given that Qatar has managed to survive relatively unscathed and without submitting to the Quartet's unworkable demands (Tharoor, 2017). What seemed an all-out blockade has turned out into a sporadic boycott as vital supplies of Qatari LNG still flow to the UAE, whose ports remain open to Qatari gas tankers. The counterproductive nature of the blockade for the Quartet is further highlighted in the golden opportunity that it provides to Iran, namely to leverage Qatar's alienation from the Saudi-Emirati axis to disrupt GCC unity and enhance its regional influence (Livingston & Saha, 2017).

In contrast to the UAE's foreign policy blunders, Oman has leaned on its sacrosanct policy of non-interference, peace, and mediation that has fruitfully kept it out of every conflict for over forty years. Regarding Yemen, the Sultanate modestly opposed the illegal and flawed Saudi-Emirati-led intervention, proclaiming its neutrality in the conflict as a necessary precaution. In accordance with its long-term foreign policy paradigm, it has focused on mediation by trying, so far without success, to bridge the differences between President Hadi and the coalition on one side and the Houthi insurgents on the other. A challenging blot in Oman's otherwise unblemished reputation comprises the whispering accusations that the country is turning a blind eye to the smuggling of Iranian supplies of arms and staff to the Houthis through its territory. This suspicion, that Oman vocally denies, is nonetheless shared by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, their allies in the Yemen Coalition, and most Western powers (Yara & Stewart, 2016). Given the high Saudi and Emirati stakes in the conflict, any hint that Oman is drawing an advantage or even worse, tilting to the detested Iranian nemesis, is likely to strike a severe blow in a GCC already fractured by the boycott of Qatar.

Nevertheless, Oman has so far managed to emerge unharmed from those conflicts where the UAE has brashly dove into. Cognizant of its strategic value for Saudis and Emiratis in their potential dealings with Iran, Oman has concentrated on reaping the benefits of its neutrality. As regards the Qatar crisis, the Sultanate has benefited from Qatar Airways' reliance on its airspace and from the increase in a lucrative re-export trade previously dominated by Dubai (Kerr, 2017). Shortly after the crisis erupted,



Sohar's cargo volumes increased by 30%, while the next months have seen a multitude of business deals being inked between Qatari and Omani companies (The Economist, 2017). To that is added the spectacular increase in market share by Oman Air, eager to fill the void left by the flagship carriers of Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways in connecting Gulf cities. Yet, with Qatar's maverick diplomacy as one of the main points of contention in the quarrel, Oman remains deeply aware that it could be the next to have its allegiances tested. Hence a discreet strategy to provide Qatar with whatever it needs while keeping the profitable rise of trade links with both Qatar and Iran as low-profile as possible, because the country cannot afford to be seen as benefiting from the strategic miscalculations of its blinkered neighbours (The Economist, 2017).

Thus, while the UAE has radically departed from a neutral to an interventionist diplomacy, Oman has stuck to its long-term commitment to pragmatism, moderation, and peace. Even if the UAE's aggressive assertiveness is catapulting the formerly discreet nation into world limelight, one might wonder at what cost, in particular given Emirati discomfort towards their Shia. Indeed, the UAE's adventurism plays with fire in Yemen and Qatar at the expense of a thoroughly-built reputation, while the glitzy economic success that singled out the UAE in the Middle East dangerously deteriorates. Contrarily, Oman has so far navigated the crises proliferating at its doorstep with its emblematic diplomatic prowess. Acknowledgedly, the Sultanate will be the first to feel the heat from the disputes between its allies over Qatar or Yemen, and it stands to lose much from the disintegration of Yemen and the breakdown of the GCC alliance (Cafiero & Karasik, 2017). Yet, Oman can count on the independent path that it has painstakingly charted to keep it out of conflict and, consequently from an Omani point of view, ensure its peace and prosperity.

## 2.2 Oman and Qatar: the price for independence

Qatar has harnessed the advantage of a tiny national population and vast foreign earnings to erect the GCC's most affluent society and one of the world's richest countries. With GDP per capita at a staggering 59,324.3 USD (The World Bank Group, 2018), Qatar's economy performs undeniably better than Oman's in terms of innovation and overall macroeconomic stability. For instance, the WEF's Competitiveness Report ranks Oman as 66th worldwide, whereas Qatar is 18th (2017). Yet, both Oman and Qatar

share in restrictive labour regulations their first entry in the to-do list and in fact, the labour problem is likely more critical for Qatar. Admittedly, the seldom-sighted Qataris have quite a bigger share in national wealth than the ubiquitous Omanis. Out of a population of 2 million residing in the State of Qatar, the country shares with the UAE a proportion of 9 foreigners for every Qatari; versus Oman's population of 4 million, roughly divided in two halves for nationals and foreigners (Gulf Research Center, 2016). In this way, the disproportionate inferiority of Qatari nationals in their own country has created many complications. Interestingly, one of those is rising nationalism, emanated from widespread fears that Qataris are becoming a minority in their own country and reinforced by a social opposition to the internationalist embrace of the Qatari Government that sometimes contradicts the overwhelmingly Arab and Islamic identity of the country (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 161-164).

Accordingly, Qatar's heavy reliance on foreign labour will cost the country dear, as the forced Qatarisation policies are already demonstrating. Admittedly, there are not even enough Qataris to fill public sector positions, so the country can relatively relax on its nationalisation requirements. Still, precisely this lack of employment pressures is proving harmful in that Qatar has succumbed to the temptation of swelling public sector ranks with disguised unemployment, whereas Oman has refrained from this damaging policy that perpetuates the uncompetitiveness of the labour force (Peterson, 2004, p. 143). Given the relative evenness between Omanis and foreigners, the Sultanate has less urgency to enforce nationalisation quotas. Oman's biggest problem seems not the nationalisation of the workforce, but rather a sprawling youth rapidly entering a labour market that is struggling to absorb it. Even though youth unemployment looms large, Oman's blossoming labour force has the potential to become a strategic source of strength with regard to its GCC peers. To that effect, the Sultanate has undertaken substantially more labour reforms than Qatar, with an emphasis on skills training and the mitigation of nationalisation quotas, widely deemed by employers as a decisive hurdle in their hiring policies (International Monetary Fund, 2016, p. 24). Oman's labour market remains significantly more balanced than Qatar's as well. For instance, the participation of Qataris in both private and public sector jobs has steadily decreased

since 1995, whereas Omanis have seen their participation increase for both, especially the private sector (International Monetary Fund, 2016, p. 6).

Qatar's much vaunted affluence has also facilitated a frantic and ongoing nation-building process that differs from Oman's in several fronts. Qatar's marginal role in the history of the Gulf has forced the Al Thani to look elsewhere to legitimise their national project. The lack of any sense of cohesive community in the sparsely and scarcely populated Peninsula was addressed by Qatari leaders through an assimilation of national values from other countries (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 146-147). Indeed, the Qatari national identity has absorbed some American attitudes, among them a fixation with cutting-edge technology that features "high modernism" as the linchpin of Qatar's sense of nationhood. Gleaming skyscrapers, world-class venues, diplomatic limelight, and domestic wealth under a benevolent autocracy all point to a ravenous appetite for success that finds it hard to settle for a secondary status behind heavyweights like Iran or Saudi Arabia (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 148-152). Qatar's ambitious high modernism also capitalises on a strategic location to forge a commercial, transportation, and diplomatic hub with Qatar Airways as the rallying point for the country's prestige. Even more, the latest effort in becoming "the best in everything" saw Qatar positioning as a cultural destination through the creation of the Museum of Islamic Art or Education City (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 85-91).

Notwithstanding, two problems arise from this modernist hype masking an intense ambition. On the one hand, despite the endeavours of the Al Thani emirs, the push for modernisation at all costs inevitably clashes with the deeply conservative impulses of Qatari society. Below the flashy layer of ultra-modern cosmopolitanism promoted by the Government, Qatari society remains firmly anchored to its Arab and Muslim identity (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 148-152). On the other, Qatar's nationalism remains blatantly contrived, in stark contrast to Oman's cherished past as a seafaring empire whose flourishing trade promoted tolerance, wealth, and openness. Al Thani speeches and actions reiterate the artificial constructs of a Qatari culture and a Qatari identity, because there is little else that they can cling to in buttressing a common set of national values with which all Qataris can identify (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 151-156). Contrarily, the Oman of Qaboos nurtures its identity as an age-old nation predating the rest of the GCC

in several centuries and rested on powerful long-standing values, such as the Ibadi traditions of socio-religious tolerance and political consultation. Even if sultan Qaboos deliberately contrasts his brilliant administration to the “dark times” of his father’s rule, the contemporary Omani nation remains deeply respectful and proud of its past traditions and its historic identity (Ghubash, 2006). Muscat’s lack of the high-rise of glass and steel so prevalent elsewhere in the Gulf testifies to Oman’s conviction that nurtured traditions remain vital tenets of its national identity.

For its part, Qatar’s management of its Shia minority, albeit so far successful in sparing unrest, can clearly improve when compared to Oman’s policy. As explained in the previous case study, Qatar shares with the UAE and Oman a policy of free rein coupled with careful surveillance with regard to its Shia community: their considerable leeway even extends to a separate court system for issues specific to Shiite law (Khalid Majidiyar, 2013, p. 5). Yet, only in Oman and Qatar do Shias enjoy powerful positions in the State’s main corporations and government branches, including Qatar’s Consultative Assembly that provides the only venue for limited popular participation (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 74-75). Qatar’s Shia population, much smaller than Oman’s, is well-integrated but does not participate in political and economic undertakings to the extent that Omani Shias do. Whereas Qatari Shias tend to conduct their affairs in the periphery of the system, Omani Shias in fact drive many of the state’s affairs. Furthermore, the sense of insecurity of all Gulf leaders regarding their Shia communities and their ties with Iran is understandably acuter in Qatar than in Oman. An important reason for this is the fact that Qatari Shiites retain powerful bonds with their Iranian spiritual homeland and rely on Iran’s spiritual centres for most of their education, whereas Omani Shiites don’t (Khalid Majidiyar, 2013, pp. 2-6).

Moreover, the bond between Qatari Shias and Iran facilitates the pervasion of radical Islamism in Qatari society. Indeed, Doha in the 2000s was a well-known extremist hub with a thriving menagerie of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, in accordance with Qatar’s foreign policy that financed fundamentalist groups like them or the Taliban (Dickinson, 2014). The US State Department has targeted a considerable number of Qatari citizens for different degrees of money laundering and support for terrorism. Unsurprisingly for its long-standing role of playing host to anyone who sought refuge from persecution,

Qatar has harboured a panoply of regional astrays, ranging from Chechen leaders to relatives of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussain (Roberts, 2014). Likewise, it has nurtured a symbiotic relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood to staff and provide content to its education system (and even its State bureaucracy and policies) in an attempt to distance itself from Saudi-sponsored Islam and enable the tiny Emirate to play an outsized diplomatic role. For its part, the Brotherhood profits from privileged access to Al Jazeera to disseminate its ideas, even if institutional constraints limit its proselytising impact to outside of Qatar (Roberts, 2014). Such financial links and personal connections were not selective of the Muslim Brotherhood, but rather the combined product of happenstance and calculated decisions, as proven by the massive influx of other waifs such as Palestinian intelligentsia.

Thus, while the Qatari Government welcomed pretty much every Muslim preacher with a radical agenda, Oman has been adamant about its commitment to countering fanaticism, as demonstrated by the Iranian preachers whose visas got rejected due to their fanaticism (Khalid Majidyar, 2013, pp. 1-3). An official policy of tolerance, openness, and religious freedom distances Oman from Qatar, showcasing the superiority of Oman's counterterrorism model. Countless figures confirm this success, including Oman's score of zero in the Global Terrorism Index that no Arab country can rival (Gupta, 2015), or the fact that no Omani citizen is ever recorded to have joined a terrorist organisation nor identified as a financier of terrorism (Del Campo Cortes, 2016). What is more, this oasis of tolerance and religious moderation emanates from some factors unique to Oman that Qatar has never bothered to replicate (Gupta, 2015). These include: a cautious and balanced foreign policy versus Qatar's maverick diplomacy, specific anti-terrorism and money laundering laws versus Qatar's lax policies, the influence of Ibadi traditions of openness versus Qatar's tradition of giving free rein to Islamic extremism to construct its non-conformist foreign policy, or a modernisation drive respectful of traditions versus Qatar's obsession with becoming the most cutting-edge state that overlooks its society's conservative leanings.

Qatari hyper-modernism clashes with societal trends because of the strength of tribal allegiances compared to Oman as well. The reason for this hinges on historical circumstances of state formation: the relative isolation and underdevelopment of the

Qatari Peninsula found the Al Thani as the sole group vying for power due to the lack of merchant classes and a religious establishment, both of which existed in Oman and have been effectively co-opted by Qaboos. Consequentially, challenges to the emir's power in modern Qatar have necessarily come from within the Al Thani clan (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 112-113). Since the emir's personal position was never secured, royal patronage running along tribal lines soon became entrenched. Hence the proliferation of Al Thani royals in Qatar's Cabinet and top companies, the biggest within the GCC, which masks a distrust on the part of the emir towards his own family (Kamrava, 2013, p. 106-117). In comparison, sultan Qaboos seats in power at ease, confident of the unfailing loyalty of his long-standing allies, as diverse as Lawatiya businessmen, former Dhofari rebels, or technocrats from the civil service (Valeri, 2011). The depoliticisation of the Al Said dynasty in Oman (few have held posts of significance in the government and top corporations) demonstrates two perceptions of the sultan. On the one hand, he does not seem to ever have perceived his relatives as a challenge to his power, and on the other, he seems to rely on personal allies whose loyalty and performance have already been tested rather than on relatives whose only proven worth may be their sultanic lineage.

In connection to that, both Oman and Qatar share a centralisation of power whereby decision-making is restricted to a tiny inner circle of Al Thani relatives and prominent tribal leaders for Qatar, and of sultan Qaboos and his personal allies in Oman. Qaboos's personalist style of rule has nevertheless provided for some venues of limited political participation, the most prominent being the *Majlis Al Shura* that dynamically oversees ministerial policies (Siegfried, 2000). The Omani Spring of 2011 raised awareness in Omani ruling circles that institutionalisation should be resumed. On the contrary, the null institutional development of the Qatari state can generate problems in the future, seeing that Oman's plethora of institutions ensures some sharing of power that contains popular pressures for opening-up and facilitates streamlined, well-thought policies (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 117-122). Acknowledgedly, Qatar's smaller ruling circles may warrant more agile and efficient decision-making and a willingness to take risks. Yet, this also increases the likelihood of precipitated, unchecked decisions (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 70-90). It is then no wonder that Qatar has occasionally blundered by jumping into

action without the adequate reflection. The best example of this might be its foreign policy (Dickinson, 2014).

Indeed, Qatar's foreign policy, intended to overcome the structural constraints of a tiny country with a minuscule handful of decision-makers, has instead backfired due to severe miscalculations. The withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini ambassadors from Doha in 2014 already signalled a simmering wrath with Qatar's contentious foreign policy, eventually bursting out in all its virulence with the ongoing blockade imposed by these three countries and Egypt (Cammack, 2017). Qatar's all-out mission to boost its international sway has relied on what Mehran Kamrava (2013, pp. 47-50) calls subtle powers. This ability to pull the strings behind the scenes through indirect and tangential contacts is firmly grounded on motley networks of proxies infiltrated in every trouble spot in the Middle East. Qatar's policy of pumping colossal sums of money into these proxies with little screening of their actions was supposed to enhance the country's influence by reaping the benefits of acting as a go-between (Dickinson, 2014). Instead, the result was further destabilisation and radicalisation, from the warlord-driven disintegration of Libya to the Gaza Strip's humanitarian plea prolonged due to Hamas's intransigence. Only in Tunisia has Qatar's influence apparently brought about peace and stability (Priego, 2015, pp. 240-243).

The supposed asset of leaning on proxies to sway the outcomes of regional crises soon became a profound liability, as Qatar failed to exert any control over its proxies once resources had been pumped in (Dickinson, 2014). For example, Qatar conducted the negotiations with the Taliban that allowed them to open an embassy in Doha, which did not impede the resurgence of Taliban attacks on the Afghani Government. Qatari leaders believed themselves inviolable in their marble towers while outsourcing their liability to those middlemen, who were the ones actually getting their hands dirty (Dickinson, 2014). They were wrong. Beyond failing to mask the primacy of Qatari leaders in disrupting almost every regional fault line, a huge setback for Qatar's interventions was both the lack of diplomatic results failing to shore up a reputation as an impartial and effective broker and the ever-growing discontentment of Qatar's allies with its troublesome diplomacy (Dickinson, 2014). Accordingly, Qatar's foreign undertakings have not only overreached, but most importantly, countervailed the

policies of its GCC allies. For example, the UAE has reportedly launched airstrikes in Libya to roll back Qatari-funded extremists (Dickinson, 2014).

Nevertheless, the biggest bone of contention between Qatar and its GCC and Western allies has been Qatar's unconditional endorsement of political Islamism in its two main strands of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement. While the GCC strove to contain Islamist movements fearful of their dangerous thirst for power and their disruptive potential, Qatar harboured them under the discreet aegis of its State ministries and granted them an invaluable platform of visibility, finance, and connections (Priego, 2015, pp. 234-239). Qatar placed its bets on a revisionist approach to the window of opportunity of the Arab Spring, understood as the next "big thing" that would pay off. Such policy materialised mainly in a full-fledged support for the Muslim Brotherhood, as part of Qatar's endeavours to differentiate itself from its neighbours and in particular from Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism (Priego, 2015, pp. 233-237). Yet, this was simply too much to bear for the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and surely for Egypt given that its President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power by ousting the Brotherhood.

In particular, Saudi Arabia's role as the guardian of the regional status quo inevitably conflicts with Qatar's revisionist stance that provides an alternative geopolitical outlook, as evidenced by their clashes by proxy in Yemen, Libya, Syria or Tunisia. It was in Egypt where the diplomatic pulse between Riyadh and Doha reached its climax, settling with Qatar's defeat as the Saudi-backed Al-Sisi ousted the Brotherhood. Qatar's friendship with Turkey is another bone of contention with Riyadh in particular, given that it is explicitly named in the Quartet's list of demands for the blockade to be lifted. (Priego, 2017, pp. 572-574). Then, Qatar's leanings on Iran to counterbalance Saudi influence became the last stroke that broke the Saudi camel's back. Hence the roots of a diplomatic crisis that casts light on the Saudi-Emirati block's intentions of dismantling Qatar's foreign policy (Priego Moreno, 2017, p. 40). Likewise, Qatari leaders failed to understand the far-reaching repercussions of its policy of free-rein to heterodox thinking regarding Al Jazeera. The broadcaster's penchant for airing the filthy rags of every country, except of course Qatar, was crucial in deciding the Quartet to "punish" the unruly Emirate through the ongoing boycott (Cammack, 2017).



Indeed, even if Qatar is managing to survive the blockade, the economic and reputational harm is significant. The country has already burnt 38.5 billion USD of its reserves, while Moody's and Fitch have downgraded their credit quality assessment, besides the IMF's negative outlook (Kerr, 2017). Food and beverage suffer from swelling inflation as Turkey and Iran sluggishly replace the Saudi void in imports. In addition, such reliance on support from these two countries is strategically unsustainable in the long run, given that geographical imperatives dictate that its biggest trading partners be its closest neighbours (Rafizadeh, 2017). Problematically for both sides of the blockade, the tensions between Qatar and its neighbours are tilting Qatar towards closer cooperation with Iran, although in fact Qatar's relations with Iran were precisely one of the reasons why the blockade was invoked. The ideological similarities between Qatar's "neo-Islamism" and Iran's "post-Islamism" render them much closer to each other than Saudi Arabia's geopolitical postulates, only adding to Riyadh's headaches in protecting a seemingly assuaged political and international legitimacy (Priego, 2017, pp. 576-577).

Furthermore, the banning of Qatar Airways from the Quartet's airspace is aggravated by the country's isolation that disadvantages the Emirate to compete with Abu Dhabi and Dubai (Priego Moreno, 2017, p. 40). At the end of the day, the biggest loss for Qatar will rather hinge on the irreparable damage to the confidence and influence that the country has painstakingly nurtured and that requires good relations with its GCC peers. Oman's diversification of allies, on the contrary, would cushion a blockade like the one imposed on Qatar, who is much more dependent on those GCC peers it has alienated. In fact, Oman has even granted Qatar free access to its ports to compensate for the UAE closing theirs, yet another evidence of how the Sultanate reaps the benefits of its neutral stance in world crises (Priego, 2017, p. 570). For Qatar, the choice is between the devil and the deep blue sea, given that the country remains highly unlikely to abandon decades of policy practice in leveraging extra-Gulf alliances. The Emirate will instead "doggedly hold on and play, once again, for the long term" (Roberts, 2014). Qatari citizens have so far rallied behind their leaders confident that their living standards will remain untouched, but should this change, then the Government's entire building of legitimacy to rule based on excellent performance could easily tumble down (Rafizadeh, 2017).

As explained in the previous section, again the policy of non-interference and smooth mediation of Muscat has yielded substantially more fruit than either the UAE's aggressive interventionism or Qatar's maverick welcoming-to-all diplomacy. In fact, both Qatar and Oman have endeavoured to armour their small states by an effective foreign policy. Both seem intent on escaping the Saudi centre of gravity and look beyond the Gulf to advance their interests (Priego, 2015). Yet, while Qatar's hedging strategy injudiciously chose to stir the pot, Oman's opt-out from every single conflict allowed it to leverage its services as an impartial mediator while avoiding a dangerous reputational erosion. Qatar thought the use of far-away proxies to exploit regional conflicts would salvage the country from any potential spillover and outsource its liability (Dickinson, 2014). Still, the many failures of this policy have yet to persuade Qatari leaders of their flawed assumptions. In light of the Quartet's accusations that Qatar is a friend of Iran, Oman knows that its warm relations with Tehran can come under significant pressure. Nonetheless, the Sultanate has been very careful not to have its allegiances mistaken, investing much effort in assuaging Saudi-Emirati frowns and underscoring its diplomatic usefulness as a mediator (Cafiero & Karasik, 2017). Therefore, Oman's independent and prosperous foreign policy, albeit subject to looming menaces as the Middle East slips into further chaos, is likely to continue paying substantial dividends. On the contrary, Qatar is bogged in dead-end negotiations with troublesome ramifications and whose only way-out looks increasingly deleterious and unfeasible.

### 2.3 Oman and Bahrain: the aftermath of the Arab Spring

Bahrain stands as a paradigmatic example Arab Spring failure: a Shia majority systematically subject to discrimination rose up to increase its participation in the affairs of the country, only to be relegated to an even smaller share of the country's cake at an appalling human and political cost. Bahraini Shias are still paying the consequences of their actions, given that the crackdown on dissent remains even direr than during the 2011 protests (Amnesty International, 2017, pp. 77-79). The Government continues to struggle in its management of opposition forces, harassing HHRR defenders, curtailing freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and subjecting any opponent to imprisonment of conscience, unfair trials, travel bans, exile, or stripping of nationality. The deliberate targeting of Bahrain's Shia majority, by arresting its leaders

and demolishing its mosques, is alienating them even further, with the most recent example in Sheikh Issa Qassem, the spiritual leader of main opposition party al-Wefaq, whose Bahraini nationality was revoked in 2017 despite no reported offence (Amnesty International, 2017, pp. 77-79).

The annihilation of the Shia opposition to the Sunni Government has triggered an upsurge in the number of political prisoners, facilitated by the recent ban on al-Wefaq and the execution of three Bahraini Shias, the first in two decades (The Economist, 2017). Indeed, the inability of Bahrain to get rid of Arab Spring-triggered turmoil stands in sharp contrast to Oman's socio-political tranquillity, warranted by a better-calibrated crackdown that addressed key demands of unemployment and corruption while setting clear red lines for dissenters (Valeri, 2015). Despite an expansion of the Omani Government's repressive powers through a cascade of laws and amendments, extensive economic packages sought to redress the plea of a jobless youth yearning for change (Salisbury, 2012). Allegedly, the two-pronged strategy of the Omani Government has been contradictory in its waves of arrests and pardons, legal intransigence and sultanic benevolence (Valeri, 2013). Yet, it "did not stop at analgesics" and marked a radical departure in the political approach to internal pressures, as public prosecutors enhanced their powers, civil society leaders entered the Council of Oman, and constitutional changes were initiated to respond to popular demands (Al-Jamali, 2011).

To be precise, Bahrain's Arab Spring ailments are caused by a centuries-old sectarian cleavage between the minority yet traditionally-privileged Sunnis and the majority yet traditionally-disadvantaged Shias. Even if the sense of martyrdom of Bahraini Shias predates the 2011 uprising, both identity groups actually shared a common ground in their rejection of the monopoly of power by the Al Khalifa ruling family, an unpopular clan whose hoarding of the country's top positions was intensely resented (The Economist, 2017). Yet, the Bahraini Monarchy cunningly turned the Sunni-Shia division into an unbridgeable fracture by painting Shias as the culprit of their authoritarian shortcomings and most prominently, as Iranian fifth columns and traitors to the Bahraini nation (Kinninmont, 2014). To buttress their legitimacy vis-à-vis Bahraini Sunnis, the Al Khalifa Monarchy concentrated state resources on the socio-economic development of Sunni enclaves in the island, while barring Shias from public sector jobs and especially

from the security corps (The Economist, 2017). Further, to chip away at the numeric superiority of Bahraini Shias, the Government also imports Sunni populations from countries like Pakistan or Syria and automatically grants them jobs and citizenship, while the list of Shia Bahrainis waiting for government assistance gets longer and longer.

The Government's policy of favouring Bahraini Sunnis while undermining Bahraini Shias has been made all the more clear with the austerity plans to balance the books in the wake of depressed oil prices (The Economist, 2017). Indeed, while the affluence of Sunnis remains largely untouched, impoverished Shias struggle with the subsidy cuts on basic items like food or petrol. In addition, the flood of foreign aid from the UAE and Saudi Arabia has been channelled in pampering even more the Sunni minority and enticing pretty much any non-Shia foreigner, even Hindus or Christians (The Economist, 2017). Thus, the Bahraini Government is feeding a vicious cycle whereby the policy-induced discrimination against Shias and their intense politicisation become a sure recipe for continued unrest. By enclosing Shia villages, which look increasingly as no-go areas for Sunnis, the Al Khalifa consolidate a virtual apartheid system that perpetuates the Shia's sense of victimhood at Sunni hands (The Economist, 2017).

The torment of Bahrain's beleaguered Shias is exploited by Iran to reinforce the traditionally strong transnational bond between Bahraini Shias and Tehran that the Al Khalifa execrate. Conversely, the insignificant politicisation of Omani Shias and their weak transnational links with Iran stem from their comfortable status in an Omani nation that they uncompromisingly identify with (Valeri, 2013). It must be noted that the main driver of the Omani Spring was not a sectarian rift, but instead socio-economic grievances that had no relation whatsoever to religious and ethnic affiliations (Valeri, 2010, pp. 260-266). The approaches of these two states to their Shia communities could not have been more different: while Bahrain's Shia majority is blatantly discriminated against, Oman's Shia minority wields disproportionate power and enjoys the sultan's friendly support. As a result, while Bahrain continues to be engulfed in a whirlwind of unsustainable political tension and widening sectarian division, Oman has overcome the "Shia problem" in its classic style of unworried and commonsensical pragmatism.

The contamination of this political and sectarian cleavage in Bahrain's economy is equally worrying. Sadly, Bahrain's economy used to be the envy of its GCC counterparts

thanks to its unrivalled diversification away from oil (Looney, 2009, p. 11). The island's development process had focused on industrial development, especially the manufacturing sector, along with the promotion of financial and banking services that even earned the praise of the IMF. Bahrain's former status as the Gulf's transport hub, lately challenged by Dubai and Doha, stands as another example of how the political-sectarian-social turmoil jeopardises the country's efforts at economic improvements (Looney, 2009, pp. 11-15). In the current climate of depressed oil prices, regional instability, and rampant competition from other GCC states, Bahrain cannot afford to ruin its thoroughly built reputation as a trade, transportation, and financial hub. Since 2014, it has suffered from the lowest FDI levels in the GCC (International Monetary Fund, 2016), a worrying trend that highlights the permeability of political and social turmoil in economic development that the Al Khalifa remain reluctant to grasp. What is more, as explained in the previous sections dealing with the UAE and Qatar, the blockade on the last one is making everybody worse off. Bahrain's tiny economy, heavily reliant on trade from its immediate neighbours, cannot afford either to cross out Qatar, one of its top partners.

The Shia problem has not only tainted Bahrain's economy but its political structures too. As a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral Parliament and regular elections, the Island Kingdom used to boast a competitive political climate presumed to help the Al Khalifa in managing dissent by providing a public space for popular inputs (Kinninmont, 2014). Despite the King's ample powers to curb the elected chamber and policies of gerrymandering and covert support to theoretically independent Sunni candidates, Bahrain stood out from other GCC members save Kuwait for its laid-back attitude in politics. However, everything changed with the fateful uprising of 2011, where the Government's iron-fist reaction has consolidated into an authoritarian drive jettisoning the former openness. The Bahraini Government's reluctance to strike up any dialogue with its Shia opposition has strengthened discourses of us-vs-them, in both the Al Khalifa monarchical and Sunni core on the one hand, and the opposition to the political establishment rallied behind the Shia's plea for an end to their exclusion on the other (Kinninmont, 2014). A symptom of this dangerous political deterioration are the successive boycotts of parliamentary elections by all Shia opposition groups that has

resulted in a tame Parliament dominated by Sunni MPs subservient to the Government (Kinninmont, 2014). While the Bahraini Government feels they have given in sufficient concessions, especially with regard to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, or Oman where no political parties exist; the opposition rejects the reforms as meaningless and insufficient to ensure their ability to produce change from within (Kinninmont, 2014).

Therefore, with weak pressure from its UK and US allies, the Bahraini Government has felt emboldened enough to go to unprecedented extents in chasing dissidents, by even expelling critical US diplomats and imprisoning American participants in demonstrations (Abrahams, 2015). In contrast to the international silence, at home the dispute continues to fester, facilitating a rise in radicalisation that poses yet another challenge to the tiny island's unruly politics (Kinninmont, 2014). Over 100 Bahrainis are estimated to be fighting for Daesh and other radical groups in Syria and Iraq, as the Government turns a blind eye and focuses on the more pressing issue of cementing its grip on power (Moore-Gilbert, 2017). More recently, a Sunni terrorist of Bahraini citizenship enrolled in Daesh called for a bombing of the island's Shias, while a group of Shia citizens broke into a prison to release several friends, held as political prisoners. Incidents like these highlight to what an extent is Bahrain in sore need of a political process of mutual dialogue to heal the wounds of 2011 (The Economist, 2017). Therefore, the social exclusion and political alienation of Bahraini Shias have become a hotbed for radicalisation and terrorism, whereas the Omani Government has worked on the opposite direction. Its traditions of openness and tolerance shaped by Ibadi Islam have, together with a deliberate governmental policy of curbing extremism both in domestic and foreign policy, accounted for the Sultanate's oasis of peace and Islamic moderation (Brown & Sheline, 2017).

Thus, as Bahrain's politics slip into permanent strife, post-2011 Oman successfully moved to preserve its legendary stability. The traditionally fickle Bahraini Parliament contrasts with Oman's *Majlis al-Shura*, which acts as a stabilisation factor in linking the Qaboos regimen to ordinary Omanis but also controlling local tribesmen (Mayol, 2005, pp. 169-175). Indeed, the success of Oman's institutional fabric stems from its ability to provide a platform to vent dissent that successfully buffers liberalisation pressures. Even more, since the sultan has steadily enhanced the Council's powers, there are stronger

checks and balances upon the Executive. For instance, the *Majlis al-Shura* pioneered the fight against corruption, a bone of contention in both GCC societies and particularly the Omani Spring (The Economist, 2014). As one of the key demands of the 2011 protesters, the willingness to fight corruption of the Qaboos regime signals an understated responsiveness to popular requests. A battery of reforms where the *Majlis* played a prominent role ushered in the fall of heavyweights in both the public and private sectors, including several Cabinet ministers.

Despite the transparent use of a relatively independent Judiciary, this anticorruption purge has been accused of selectively targeting figureheads to placate the rage of the Omani people towards the enrichment of the political, economic, and security establishment (The Economist, 2014). Still, it is precisely the prosecution of some of the country's top policy-makers and businessmen that demonstrates to Omani citizens that nobody is above the law. Deemed "the best we have ever seen" by Omani analysts, the campaigns against corruption are regarded by Omanis as the most successful post-2011 reform and will very likely crystallise into a public stance that offers zero tolerance for corruption (The Economist, 2014). Again, the insistence of Sultan Qaboos in persecuting graft was a wise move towards preserving his overwhelming popularity, in stark contrast to the intense hatred of Bahraini Shias and the lukewarm support of Bahraini Sunnis towards their Al Khalifa rulers. Even though Oman's newer generations that drove the Arab Spring turbulences in the Sultanate demand some change, most of the population still credits Qaboos as the craftsman of their journey from poverty to prosperity (Kaplan, 2011).

Similarly, the transnationality of Bahrain's "Shia problem" has also infected its foreign policy. In this regard, Bahrain's situation as a tiny island sandwiched between the Saudi and Iranian behemoths finds in foreign meddling its main problem. The turmoil of 2011 irrevocably tipped the balance in favour of Riyadh, given that to Bahrain's dependency on Saudi trade and the tribal origin shared by Bahrain's Al Khalifa and Saudi Arabia's Al Saud was added the indebtedness of the Bahraini Government to Saudi-Emirati troops in repressing the 2011 uprising (Moore-Gilbert, 2017). Even if Bahrain's foreign policy has hardly ever contradicted Riyadh's diktat, this dependency is all the more clear as the social rift and its resulting political stalemate sink the country into permanent instability.

Saudi Arabia is stepping up its financial assistance to balance Bahrain's troubled public books, as well as its military presence in the island. A collateral effect has been an alarmist hypersensitivity to either alleged or real Iranian meddling that dangerously pushes Bahrain ever deeper into Riyadh's orbit (Moore-Gilbert, 2017).

Whether Bahrain after the Arab Spring has become a virtual Saudi "vassal state" or not, its vulnerability to foreign meddling has clearly worsened. The island nation has surrendered most of its foreign policy to Saudi Arabia, even if its domestic policy can sometimes contradict Riyadh's preferences. Namely, the Muslim Brotherhood's Bahraini offshoot Al-Minbar remains a well-established political force as well as a valuable ally for the Al Khalifa in their effort to expand their base of Sunni loyalists against the Shia opposition (Hatlani, 2014). Problematically for Bahrain, Saudi abhorrence towards the Brotherhood in all its forms translates into significant pressure to suppress Al-Minbar, and even more critically seeing that the Qatar blockade was invoked, among other reasons, on Qatar's sponsorship of the group. The ensuing conflict between either submitting to Saudi demands or reinforcing their fragile power base at home will make the Al Khalifa lose face in whichever decision they opt for. Given the rapid intensification of Bahrain's economic and military dependency on Saudi Arabia, the ruling family is very likely to sacrifice an important domestic ally. Problematically, they seem to have no choice but to shoot themselves in the foot in another suicidal move that adds up to Bahrain's decay (Hatlani, 2014).

All in all, Oman's success in integrating its Shia minority, putting it atop the State, and ensuring its stake in the prosperity of the nation has bypassed Bahrain's turbulence. The latter's Shia policy has become its main bugbear by triggering political repression, social polarisation, religious radicalisation, and foreign dependency all at the same time. Therefore, it is Oman's successful Shia policy that has spared the country all these troubles. The leadership in both countries has taken radically different paths in ensuring support for their rule. On the one hand, the Al Khalifa desperately cling to power and reactively suppress any perceived threat, while trying to undermine at all costs their "enemies" (which for them encompasses the majority of Bahraini Shias, the political opposition they articulate, and their alleged Iranian patron). On the other, sultan



Qaboos has compromised in gradually opening a political system that stands out in the region for the motley array of identities that it tolerantly and pragmatically nurtures.

#### 2.4. Oman and Yemen: hell at one's doorstep

Cruel irony of fate that the territory formerly known as *Arabia Felix* has degenerated into the (arguably) most wrecked place on earth (The Economist, 2017). Indeed, since a long time ago Yemen has earned the dubious honour of being the “poorest state in the Middle East”. Severe water shortages, tribalism, radicalisation, jihadism, and economic mismanagement have condemned the most populous state in the Arabian Peninsula to the perpetual chains of misery. Widespread corruption accounts for much of Yemen's ordeal, given that, as of 2017, it ranked as the 5th most corrupt country in the world<sup>12</sup>, with similar results in the previous years (Transparency International, 2017). Thus, the picture before the 2011 Arab Spring turmoil was already appalling, with 25 million of Yemenis undernourished and 5 million requiring emergency aid (Hincks, 2016). To that was added infighting between the Shia northern insurgents known as Houthis and the Government, while AQAP operated unimpeded in the south (The Economist, 2017). Still, everything seemed better than the current abyss where Yemen has sunk, and from which it remains unable to escape.

The start of Yemen's War can be traced back to the echoes of the Arab Spring, as protests across the country managed to oust the Saudi and US-backed President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Amassing a fortune of 60 billion USD amid abject misery, Saleh had ruled Yemen with an iron fist and rampant corruption for over thirty years (BBC, 2015). Then, with the new President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi failing to garner support beyond GCC countries and the irruption of renewed terrorist attacks, the Houthis seized the momentum and launched an offensive with the support of a vengeful Saleh, rapidly capturing the capital Sana'a (Hincks, 2016). As the Houthis advanced towards Aden in 2015, Hadi fled the country and took refuge in Saudi Arabia, who rushed to form an international coalition to restore his internationally recognised Government and roll back the Houthis (Hincks, 2016). Consequently, Yemen has become the latest pawn in

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<sup>12</sup> Oman ranked 68<sup>th</sup> out of over 180 countries, behind the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, whereas Bahrain ranked by far the lowest of the GCC due to Arab Spring factors already explained in the relevant section (Transparency International, 2017).

the Saudi-Iranian cold war shaking up the Middle East, ravaged by an internationalised civil war with three main players:

- the Houthis, supported by Iran and its proxy Hezbollah with military assistance, as well as by many Yemenis increasingly horrified at the brutality of the coalition's airstrikes,
- former President Saleh, allied with the Houthis to regain his power, and
- the internationally recognised Government of Mansour Hadi, endorsed by a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE that, with support from the UK, US, and France, has since 2015 launched airstrikes to roll back the Houthis (The Economist, 2017).

Smaller players like AQAP or the motley array of Yemeni tribes (which Saudi Arabia used to buy off but whose allegiances shift easily) increase the complexity of this poisonous game of alliances where everybody fights several enemies simultaneously and everything points towards a continuation of hostilities (The Economist, 2017). Ex-President Saleh lost his political gamble when he sought to reach for Saudi Arabia in his typical Machiavellian style, only to be murdered by the Houthis before he could betray them in December 2017. The death of Yemen's only strongman ever leaves a dangerous power vacuum since nobody places a bet on low-key Hadi (Jacinto, 2017). Consequently, Yemen looks increasingly like a failed state up for carving spheres of influence, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia seem to be doing in the south by training an unwieldy web of Salafists, southern secessionists, and tribal militias.

In this sense, the UAE's naked pursuit of its objective of controlling South Yemeni ports has even blocked Hadi from accessing South Yemen, which was theoretically "reconquered" by UAE on his behalf, thereby showcasing how little Yemen's leaders can decide on their country's destiny (The Economist, 2017). What is more, the intransigence of both sides has hampered any attempts at peace. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia will never tolerate the presence of the Houthis at its doorstep, whom the Kingdom regards as Iranian proxies (The Economist, 2017). On the other, the Houthis have undermined UN-sponsored plans for a constitution enshrining a federal system and a parliament split between northerners and southerners on the grounds that they would be relegated to a small region without resources and sea access (The Economist, 2017).

Not even regional mediators like Kuwait and Oman have obtained any result whatsoever (The Economist, 2017). Problematically, the Houthis seem too weak to rule over Yemen and even more now that they have lost Saleh and that their misrule is turning many Yemenis against them. However, they also seem too powerful for the coalition to defeat, and the brutality of the airstrikes indiscriminately targeting civilians is turning Sunni Yemenis against the Hadi Government too. Reportedly, the majority of the assuaged Yemeni people simply wish an end to their suffering and do not care who will rule their country (The Economist, 2017). Notwithstanding, their pain is all too likely to continue unabated as both parties stabilise their fighting and consolidate their territorial gains. To be precise, Yemen's ordeal has been declared the worst humanitarian crisis in recent times. 10,000 civilians have died since the outbreak of the conflict in 2015, although the biggest casualties are actually provoked by the famine and disease that the military conflagration has beget (Jacinto, 2017). Indeed, the death knell for Yemen's chronically malnourished population came with the Saudi blockade on Yemeni ports, intended to prevent the smuggling of Iranian weapons into Houthi territory. As imports dry up, soaring food prices, systemic water shortages, mounting rubbish, failing sewerage, and acute political mismanagement have all combined to trigger the worst cholera outbreak in recent history. The epidemic has claimed more lives than those lost in Haiti in 2010 and, most worryingly, in less than half of the time (Hincks, 2016).

In stark contrast, the success of the Omani nation-state can be exemplified precisely by its beneficial influence upon Yemen. Notably, the Sultanate has led mediation efforts to bring Yemen's war to an end. Concerned about the security threat posed by the conflict and in particular the rise of AQAP and sectarianism, the Sultanate has tightened its border controls and built a fence to contain the flood of Yemeni refugees (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015). The fence has been attacked by Yemenis dissatisfied with the stronger restrictions on their ability to flee to Oman, forcing a wide-ranging deployment of more border officers as well as the Omani police and Army and teams of coastguards. Still, the aim of the fence is not to seal off the border but to ensure an appropriate management of the population movements caused by the conflict as well as to curb the smuggling of qat<sup>13</sup> and other illegal products from Yemen into Oman (Gill, 2018). As it

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<sup>13</sup> *Qat* is a mildly narcotic and addictive plant prohibited in Oman but widely consumed in Yemen.

has consistently done since both countries exchanged ambassadors and forgot about South Yemen's complicity in the Dhofar War, Oman once again reaches out to Yemen. Its good-faith approach has been relentless despite the slackness on the other side, as proved by Omani enthusiasm with a free zone to foster development at the border that has never materialised or its insistence in signing a border agreement that Yemeni reluctance delayed until the 1990s (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015).

Praised by the UN and the EU for its pacification efforts, Oman's foreign policy of "assist thy neighbour" has provided extensive and free-of-charge medical coverage to Yemeni victims of all sides, granting them free pass into the country on humanitarian grounds, building hospitals, transferring the worst cases to Muscat, and even accommodating entire families at the Ministry of Health's expense in Salalah for them to stay close to their hospitalised relatives (Gill, 2018) (Umar, 2016). The temporary suspensions of Yemeni visas to contain the immigration overflow reportedly made an exception with the wounded, who had their injuries checked at the border by Omani doctors and were then transferred to the nearest hospital with their families. Although Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides no data for the sake of neutrality, figures from the Ministry of Health indicate that thousands of Yemenis are treated every day in Omani hospitals and then repatriated (Umar, 2016). Thus, the efforts of the Omani Government to assist beleaguered Yemenis, coupled with the legendary hospitality of ordinary Omanis in helping out Yemeni inpatients, have turned Yemenis in favour of their neighbour. For many of them, Oman's actions speak for its intentions and consequently, all factions in the conflict are persuaded of Oman's genuine interest in peace and trust it to conduct negotiations (Umar, 2016).

Fascinatingly, Oman and Yemen share many similarities as neighbour states, since both boast a long history shaped by the dichotomy between cosmopolitan rulers in coastal trading posts and theocratic Imamates (Shia Zaidi in Yemen and Ibadi in Oman) in the desert interior (Lewis, 2015). Both were amongst the world's most isolated and backward countries in 1970, and yet they have taken radically different paths afterwards. As explained in the State of the Art section, Oman's fortunes with regard to Yemen's misfortunes stem not just from its bigger oil reserves and its smaller population, but most crucially from an effective rule spearheaded by the brilliant sultan

Qaboos Al-Said. For example, despite its more fertile lands and significantly more rainfall, Yemen has suffered from systemic water shortages whereas Oman has not (Lewis, 2015). As opposed to Qaboos's commitment to the welfare of Omani society, the Saleh Administration in Yemen that lingered until 2011 was widely considered an established kleptocracy rested on a precarious balance among the military and security apparatus, the complex web of Yemeni tribes, and even Islamic fundamentalist movements ranging from the Houthis to AQAP. Saleh himself used to equate ruling Yemen to "dancing on the heads of snakes", and in fact it was one of those snakes that eventually bit him to death (Jacinto, 2017). Also, Yemen's entrenched social practice of consuming *qat* is another culprit given its intense water requirements and its addiction potential forcing Yemeni men out of work (Lewis, 2015).

In this regard, Yemen's utter failure has become an ill omen of what Oman could have become were it to lack an effective and committed leadership. More precisely, the model of Omani exceptionalism and its four main drivers that this dissertation aims to build can explain why Oman has avoided Yemen's doom. Oman's inclusive model of socio-economic development diverges from Yemen's clientelist corruption. Oman's nation-building process rallied a heterogeneous web of different identities under the aegis of Qaboos's renewed project for the country, in contrast to Yemen's politics of "whoever is not with us is our enemy". Oman's political system has gradually opened to provide for limited spaces of popular participation, whereas Yemen's currently annihilated political structures never worked for anyone other than the partisans of this or that tribal leader or Saleh agent. Oman's promotion of its talented Shia clans and its Zanzibari diaspora ensured a technocratic rule that lifted the country out of poverty, whereas Yemen's religious hatred soon degenerated into political sectarianism and invited foreign powers to meddle. Last but certainly not least, Oman's independent, moderate, and pragmatic foreign policy has carved a place for the Sultanate in the world, one that is widely respected, deeply appreciated, and bears timely fruit. Conversely, Yemen's unmeasurable depths of horror cannot be separated from the recurrent foreign meddling that the country facilitated with its inability to overcome internal divisions and the corruption and short-sightedness of its weak and devious leadership.

### 3. Conclusions

As the journey through Oman's "exceptionalism" reaches its destination, the worth of the research process must be highlighted. As understated as it has been, the developmental transformation of Oman is a reason to celebrate in the Middle East's dreary outlook. Even more, its social tranquillity, inclusive integration of diversity, and Islamic moderation are among the factors that make it unique in a Gulf awash in oil riches but not in peace or tolerance. The necessity of further study into Oman, its polity, its development, and its beneficial influence upon the world is indeed one of the drivers of this dissertation. Hopefully, the model of "Omani exceptionalism" that this work has endeavoured to construct will stimulate further study into Oman. Amid the GCC's competition over the most ostentatious glass and steel, Oman unworriedly accepts its black sheep status: it is not Sunni, but Ibadi; not exclusive but inclusive of minorities; not biased against its Shia, but supportive of them; not foe but friend to Iran; not militaristic, but peaceful; not prone to meddling, but to mediation; not interested in modernist nationalism, but on a balance between progress and tradition.

At the end of the day, the categorisation of what constitutes the "success" of States remains a contested arena. Still, it remains abundantly clear that Oman has nurtured an exceptional virtuous cycle, whereby inclusive development guarantees political stability as the country's motley social fabric is embedded in a welcoming national project, while Ibadi attitudes like balance and tolerance shape a pragmatic and neutral foreign policy and a domestic policy of negotiation and compromise. The ultimate outcome of these fruitful interdependencies is a confident nation that, proud of its past and optimistic of its future, emerges as a beacon of peace, common sense, and tranquillity in the Middle East's ocean of turmoil. Admittedly, mounting internal and external pressures will continue to assail Oman, and the question marks over life after Qaboos cast a shadow on the preservation of the legendary wisdom of Oman's leadership. Like its national animal the Arabian Oryx, the ill omens of an extinction loom large for the Sultanate. Nevertheless, with the acumen, pragmatism, and prudence it has consistently demonstrated, Oman will undoubtedly overcome the challenges ahead, strong and resilient as an oryx that makes the most of the desolate desert it lives in.

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