



Department of Political Science

Chair Islam, Culture and Politics

POLITICAL STABILITY AND
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN THE
SULTANATE OF OMAN

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Francesca Corrao

CANDIDATE

Gaia Saffioti 630982

CO-SUPERVISOR

Prof. Andrea Ungari

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Introduction

When speaking of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is certainly not the first country that comes to one's mind. It is an absolute monarchy ruled by a secretive and discrete Sultan, soberer than its luxurious oil-rich Arab neighbours, with less tribal rivalries than the war-torn Yemen and with a neutrality stance towards regional crises. Yet, Muscat was also able to show independence and pragmatism in its unique diplomacy and to attract the international attention and acclaim for its mediatory efforts in multiple critical occasions.

The purpose of this dissertation is precisely to shed light on this forgotten corner of the Gulf. The analysis involves reviewing the history of Oman with its traditions, the socio-political structure and its relations of power, its foreign policy and the construction of the modern Sultanate of Oman in order to assess its strengths and weaknesses and the consequent stability of the country.

Because of its strategic geographical position overlooking the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea, Oman has been trading with the Indian Ocean Rim for at least 5000 years, and Omani people have always been exposed to a certain openness of mind and lenience towards the neighbour. This cultural and economic openness is somehow also visible in the religious sphere. The majority of the population belongs to Ibadism, the Islamic school considered to be a third way between Sunnism and Shiism and predating both since its origins date back to the early years of Islam. Ibadis gave rise to an austere but not intolerant Islam, based on moral integrity and sense of identity and able to peacefully coexist with other minorities by sharing their places of worship. If once Ibadism was personified by the figure of the Imam who shared power with the Sultan, to date the latter is the absolute ruler.

Qaboos bin Said Al Said has been ruling the country since the coup he leaded in 1970 with the help of the British. From then on, the frightening

backwardness of the kingdom he inherited from his father undertook a glorious national awakening through unprecedented development projects, a broad inclusive policy, and the consequent identification of the state with himself through a strong consensus. He succeeded in overcoming all the traditional historical territorial divisions, tribal conflicts and the Imam's claims to power by bringing together all the different Omani souls. This was possible thanks to his forward-looking ruling and above all to the modest oil rents that financed the construction of the new state, allowed the provision of social services and their reallocation to the citizens by even exempting them from the tax payment. Today, however, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, this paternalistic system is showing the first cracks. The policy of ensuring a safe job for everyone, which guaranteed the stability of the country, is not effective anymore. The public sector is almost completely saturated, and the private sector employs mostly immigrants from Asian countries. Welfare is no longer guaranteed for free to all and the *Omanization* of some economic sectors required by law is not sufficient to contain a discontent that risks exploding.

Given its role discreetly relevant in the region, the future of a post-oil and post-Qaboos Oman raises some concerns since a possible crisis would be dangerous for a region already on fire.

1. The relations of power within the modern Oman

Oman is one of the eight Persian Gulf countries¹ located in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Yemen to the South-West, Saudi Arabia to the West, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Gulf of Oman to the North and the Arabian Sea to the South-East². The official name of the Sultanate of Oman was given to the country in 1970, when with a coup that overthrew his father, Sultan Qaboos—who has since then been ruling the country and just entered his 48th year on the throne—seized the power and started a radical development of the country.

In order to better understand its functioning and characteristics, it is worth to analyse the roots of the Sultanate and outline its tribal tradition, and religious, economic, political structure.

1.1 Historical background: Muscat and Oman

In the period prior to the arrival of the current Sultan, the country has always been made up of two parts, one inward (Oman, the *interior*) and the other outward (Muscat, the *exterior*)—a division which clearly appeared in the name that the country bore until 1970, “Muscat and Oman”. This separation did not correspond to fixed geographical boundaries, but rather to autonomous boundaries derived from the isolation of the mountainous core, a more or less autarkic economy, a particular tribal structure divided into two factions, the Hinâwî and the Ghâfirî, and a religious and political ideology of its own, Ibadism. None of these features overlap exactly with one another,

¹ Together with Bahrein, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

² The territory comprehends also the Musandam Peninsula, overlooking the Strait of Hormuz, an exclave that together with Madha constitute part of the Omani territory surrounded by the UAE. This strategic position, as a crossroads between Africa, Asia and the Middle East, did guarantee a flourishing and privileged trade.

which makes the problem of a precise definition of Oman difficult; but there is no doubt that this country nevertheless possessed its regional, economic, social and political identity. Muscat, territorially, was located as a crossroads, within a network of maritime exchanges. Its existence was based on contacts with the outside world, and its survival depended as much on the good relations it had with the foreign powers as on those which bounded it to the local government. Muscat, or its predecessors as international ports, Qalhat and Sohar, formed only part of the coastal area facing outward; the other consisted of the Strait of Hormuz, which was of even more strategic importance and contended by local and foreign powers for its control.

The relations between these two parts of Oman thus derived fundamentally from their interdependence. The minimal need of the interior was to maintain free access to Muscat, which was the centre of control of trade with the Indies, where dates, dried fruits and dried fish were exchanged for rice and weapons.³ However, Oman's ambition was to control its international outlets, to enable its citizens to exercise the potential power, both strategic and economic, that geography had conferred on this region.

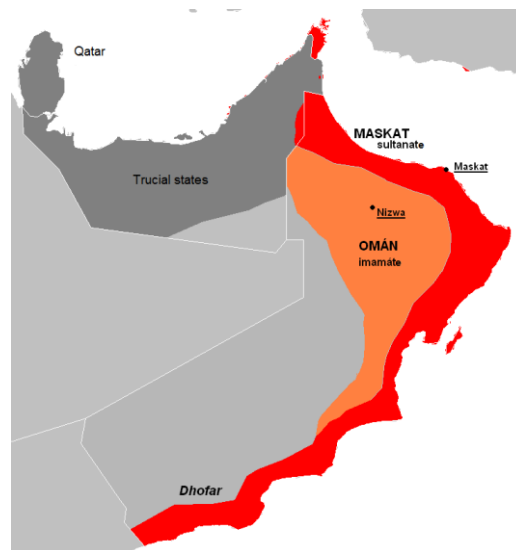


Fig. 1 - The traditional division of Oman (the interior) and Muscat (the exterior)⁴

³ Owen, R. P. (1970).

⁴ Source: http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Muscat_and_Oman (28/09/2018)



Fig. 2 - The Sultanate of Oman⁵

This is why one of the most constant themes in the history of this country is the struggle with foreign powers. Abbasids, Qarmatians, Buyyids, Seljuks, the Kingdom of Ormus, Portuguese and, even if limitedly, the British with a protectorate, succeeded in obtaining the control of the Omani territory. Nevertheless, the most glorious and celebrated moments are those in which the Omanis became a major naval power, as during the first Imam⁶ in the 9th century, under the Yaruba dynasty from 1624 until 1742, or during the reign of Said bin Sultan Al Said in the first half of the 19th century.⁷

Therefore, Oman is often identified with the interior, while Muscat represents the coast, but this definition is still inadequate, since most of Omani coastline,

⁵ Source: <https://www.mapsofworld.com/oman/> (28/09/2018)

⁶ Imam in Arabic means guide. The term is often referred to the person who leads the common ritual prayer in the mosques—a role played by any Muslim who knows the ritual movements of the Salāt, the canonical prayer. However, in this case it is referred to the highest political authority. For the Sunnis, the Imam is the Caliph of Muslims. According to the Shiites, on the other hand, Imams are only those who descend in direct line from Muhammad. In the end, in Oman the Imam is Ibadi and is chosen by an agreement between the religious leaders and the heads of the major groups, belonging in particular to the two tribes of the Ghāfirīs and the Hināwīs.

⁷ El-Ashban, A. A. (1979).

especially the highly dense of population coastline Al-Batina and a major portion of the Truce Coast⁸ were traditionally linked with the interior⁹.

Muscat needs with respect to Oman's were very different and can be summarised in a desire for non-interference. Regional trade was not essential, since food could be imported or produced in the immediate hinterland; indeed, in the course of history, local ports have often been separated from international ports such as Diba and Suhar, Sur and Qalhat, Matrah and Muscat. Political independence could be achieved by an attitude of aggression, but the invasion of the interior was made very difficult by the nature of the terrain and the resistance of its population. A total conquest was rare and occupations have always been very short. Thus, at times of strong foreign influence, a *modus vivendi* was created quickly between the two areas of the country with local dynasties being the vassals of whoever was in power in Muscat¹⁰. Thus, for example, in the eyes of the Ibadis of the interior, the vassal position of Said bin Sultan Al Said—and that of his sons when after his death the empire was divided¹¹—towards the British, between 1890 and 1970, differed little from that of the Mukramides towards the Buyyids¹² a thousand years earlier. Both had sold themselves to a foreign power in order to ensure the continuity and survival of the community when were actually using strangers for the benefit of their own interests. However, the resistance against them remained strictly limited and neither their life nor their property were taken away from them after they had been overthrown.¹³

In short, these rules stem from the basic principle that every Muslim is a part of the community, and that the Ibadi state is a part of *dar al-Islam* (the land

⁸ The Trucial States were a group of emirates, or sheikhdoms, on the shores of the Persian Gulf under the British protectorate from 1820 until 1971. A series of agreements was signed regulating the relationship between the British and the sheikhs. Their ties were increasingly strengthened, with the aim of containing the expansionist ambitions of the European states and limiting the diplomatic relations exclusively with the United Kingdom, in exchange for an English protection by land and by sea of the emirs.

⁹ Cf. Wilkinson (1982).

¹⁰ *Ivi.*

¹¹ After Said bin Sultan Al Said died, two of his sons became Sultans, one of Muscat and Oman and the other of Zanzibar.

¹² The Mukramids were a local family governing coastal Oman that were presumably appointed by the Buyyids of Persia cfr. Bosworth, C. E. (1996).

¹³ Peterson, E. (2006).

of Islam). According to them, the ideal solution would come from a general reform to recreate the true Muslim state founded by the Prophet. In the meantime, they must live with their neighbours and find arrangements with their unconstitutional leaders. There are, therefore, two states of affairs which govern their relations with them: that in which Ibadis live openly in a state constituted according to the rules, and the one in which their Imamate is suspended and limited rules of concealment come into play.

1.2. The tribal structure

The dryness of the Omani climate has favoured strong a tribal fabric. The desert, which occupies more than 80% of the territory and the scarcity of rainfall required a distribution of available water resources, as well as the establishment of an extensive system of the water supply. One of the most important aspects of Omani traditional way of life was indeed the organization of the village, based on the old *Falaj* (pl. *Aflaj*)¹⁴ irrigation system. This system was based on a horizontal gallery, which could reach a length of ten kilometres, and which preserved the water in a permanent groundwater, located at a depth of about 25 meters.¹⁵

This *falaj* network developed mainly under the Persian rule in the pre-Islamic era, when slave labour exploited the land for a semi-bureaucratic, semi-feudal administration. With the institution of Islam and the ousting of the Persian

¹⁴ The *Aflaj* irrigation systems are UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2006 and include only five out of 5000 different places of *aflaj* in Oman. This type of installation probably dates back to the 6th century, although there are archaeological evidence showing that some similar artefacts already existed in 2500 BC. *Aflaj* is, in the Arabic language, the plural of *falaj*, which indicates the channels through which a fair division of water is ensured. Thanks to gravity the water is often channeled for many kilometers starting from the source and is used mainly for agricultural purposes. Along the *falaj* route, many observation towers have been built to control irrigation systems and water pipes. The management of *falaj* and the distribution of water resources between the various villages has been managed for centuries by a very precise legal system in which every landowner is expected to pay for the right to water. Currently the irrigation system is at risk due to the low water level of underground aquifers.

¹⁵ Wilkinson, J. C. (1977).

ruling classes, the males of the Arab tribes suddenly found themselves promoted from second-class citizens to rulers, which resulted in the development of a sort of anarchy and a noticeable deterioration of the village economy for almost a century and a half.¹⁶ When Ibadis finally succeeded in establishing the Imamate at the end of the 8th century, a new order emerged in which the Arabs really began to settle and the differences between the *Persianized* peasant classes and their new masters began to fade. From then on, the Arabs became farmers and the original villagers became members of the tribes. The organization of institutions in Oman developed according to a series of compromises established during the first cycle of Imamate.

The socio-political organization is traditionally based on two basic structures: tribe and religion. The tribal structure is itself intimately linked to the territorial establishment and the alliances between the small groups to maintain a political balance within a hierarchy of geographical units, the first of which is the village. The main mechanism for the functioning of this system is the affiliation of the minority groups of a village to the rival clans of the majority, so that in case of aggression the former has allies ready to intervene and guarantee for their independence. Such polarization towards a neighbouring population fraction—translated in terms of obligations of loyalty between clans—is observed everywhere in Oman anytime rival elements share common economic resources. It functions according to tribal mechanisms either in larger units of regional organization and in basic territorial units, as that of *falaj*. There is indeed a hierarchy among the groups. Thus, in mountainous areas where *falaj* settlement is often concentrated in valleys separated from each other by high ridges, the inhabitants must reach a certain compromise with regard to access, communications, strategic problems, the supply of water and the transport of goods.

Since the advantages of Oman's maritime position could only be exploited by local populations when they were sufficiently united to resist foreign powers, the people of the interior were sometimes forced to subordinate the interests

¹⁶ Wilkinson, J. C. (1982).

of their own groups to the rather loose organization of the institutional Imamate.¹⁷ The tribal hierarchy implied that alliances transcend geographical boundaries. The political balance of the Imamate progress depended not only on the tribes living in the very heart of the country, but also on those living in the most remote areas, close to the border areas. Even though these people were living completely apart, direct alliance kept linking them together. On the other hand, the tribes living beyond the border areas did not have direct links with those living in the centre and their quarrels only affected the populations of Oman occupying the desert regions: consequently, they did not consider themselves Omanis and were not involved in the tribal Hinâwî and Ghâfirî alliances of this region.¹⁸

It can therefore be said that the uniqueness of Oman, from a geographical point of view, rest on a tribal organization in which alliances are present not only within the clan but also with the neighbour groups. It is this duality that maintains the regional equilibrium, so that a breaking of relations at one point would automatically trigger reactions from the level closest to the tribe, to the regional hierarchy, until committing the whole territory and involving the superior hierarchical level of Hinâwî and Ghâfirî. Precisely, the fear of provoking an escalation dragging everyone in chaos plays a moderating role in preventing the spread of conflicts.

The organization of rights and duties within these tribal groups formed the basis of the power of a small tribal elite. The role of this elite of elders, or sheikhs, extended well beyond the control of common property, since they were also the mediators of other tribes from the outside world.

Historically, the Omani tribes are divided into two rival blocks, the Hinâwî and the Ghafiri. In the second century of the Hegira¹⁹, northern tribes invaded Oman, resulting in two alliances, composed respectively of local tribes and invaders. The southerners were mostly Ibadi, while the northerners were

¹⁷ *Ivi.*

¹⁸ Carter, J. R. L. (1982).

¹⁹ The Hegira corresponds to the abandonment of Mecca by Muhammad, in September 622 AD, and his transfer to Medina. Under the Caliph 'Omar this event, decisive for the origins of Islam, was taken as the beginning of the Muslim era.

Sunni. In the following centuries, tribal loyalty to both covenants changed. At the beginning of the 18th century, the blocks were completely remodelled during a civil war whose succession to the Imamate was at stake. The affiliation of the tribes to one or other of these covenants is today independent of descent or confession. But the split into two rival alliances continues to divide Oman. Loyalty to the respective alliances is expressed especially when the collective honour is threatened.

To be able to effectively reign, an Omani sovereign must be accepted by both confederations. The reigning family since 1744, the Al Bû Saïd dynasty, does not belong to any of them. It is therefore easier for both covenants to accept a ruler from this family than from the opposite group. But at the same time, the power of the Sultan is thus intrinsically threatened, since he cannot rely on historical family ties to gain political support, and can only buy his legitimacy.²⁰

1.3. The religious community and the territorial divisions

The influence of the *ulamâ* scholars (sing. '*âlim*') has a similar function to the tribal organization, since the possession of the '*ilm*' confers authority for the arbitration of disputes.

'*Ilm* (religious authority) is an acquired personal quality, which cannot be transmitted by direct line of descent. Although a family that regularly dispenses *ulamâ* receives general respect, its members do not enjoy a group charisma; this is why, in Oman there are no families who inherit religious recognitions, or who enjoy the special status usually granted to the descendants of the Prophet. A leader who owns the '*ilm*' therefore benefits from something of his own, of a quality that elevates him above his fellow believers. This means that his authority is not undermined by the kind of family rivalry found in *amirs* or *sheikhs*. Nevertheless, the quality of

²⁰ Peterson, J. E. (2003).

impartiality which makes an *‘âlim* recognized as such by all depends on the detachment that he displays from the internal politics of the groups, and this automatically weakens certain other aspects of his authority in tribal life.²¹ This is why the pure *‘ilm* is of little value without the temporal power. Only by developing these two aspects of power can a leader succeed in curbing the divisive tendencies typical to all large tribal groupings, and in this way securing the permanent support of an important tribal unit as a prerequisite for its success at the national policy level.

It is this mutual dependence between *‘ilm* and *imara* (temporal power) that serves as a guide for understanding the complexities of the relationship between religious and temporal powers in the Oman constitution.

In official documents, it is stated that the Muslim community is led by an Imam—chosen by those to whom *‘ilm* is conferred—gifted with wisdom, courage and outstanding competences. The Imam has absolute power to apply the Islamic law, *shari’a*, which is in turn determined by the *ijmâ’* (consensus). If he happens to break the precepts, he is removed from office, unless he formally disavows his past mistakes. Since his community is obliged to obey him, he does not need a permanent army; indeed, he cannot have one because this could lead him to the slippery path of despotism.

This political theory has to compromise with the tribal organization. Indeed, frequently the concept of Imamate represents itself a religious transformation of the tribal concept; it is the same for the principles of association and dissociation which determine the membership of the community and the fundamental relations between its chiefs and its ordinary members.

As a result, there is no centralized government in Oman’s Imamate. The power remains rooted in the tribal system and there is no military caste, courtiers, or structured bureaucracy.²² The siege of the Imam is nothing but a fort, while its administration is limited to judges, *qâdîs*, and governors, *wâlîs*, in the main villages. This means that no urban transformation has occurred in the interior. There was therefore no growth in consumption leading to changes

²¹ Gaiser, A. R. (2010).

²² Wilkinson, J. C. (1982).

in the agricultural system or increasing trade with the outside world: these exchanges would have inevitably led to a break in the isolation of the interior and to the disruption of the traditional relations between Oman and Muscat.

The social system just described, however, was not static, because the relations between the various elements were subject to regular evolutions within the Imamate cycle. At the top of this cycle people are united under a strong Imam, Omanis benefit from the control of their coast and the maritime trade feed the economic system of the region. Part of this wealth is invested in the country, but in such a way that agrarian capitalism grows while, at the same time, the government of the Imamate degrades into a dynastic power. The ideological base of the Ibadi Imamate weakens, and the competition for the control of power and wealth increases. In doing so, the tribal divisions retake strength and can even lead to a large-scale civil war, as at the end of the first Imamate (end of the 9th century) or during the Yaruba dynasty (between the 17th and the 18th century). The central authority of the *Imam* eventually collapses and is replaced by the power of some local pseudo-imams or princes (*émirs*, *mulûk*) who are unable to maintain the cohesion of the state.²³ Once divided, the Omanis lose control of their maritime trade, the economy of their villages declines and foreign competitors begin to conquer the territories. Until they have had enough of abuses and destructions, the Ibadite ideology remains latent in the heart of the country; to the point that it wakes up slowly and suggests to tribesmen to support an Imam capable of restoring a strong government.

Through the mechanisms of the Imamate cycle, Oman maintained his isolation and limited the influence of Muscat. Isolated from the rest of the world, Oman's problems remained unchanged throughout his history, with the aim of keeping a balance between tribal power and religious power, as well as to repel the tyrants. Depending on whether the ideology of Ibadism was becoming stronger or weaker, so were the organization of the state and its territorial influence.

²³ *Ibid.*

The heart of the Ibadite state began to spread from the mountains within the interior until gaining the coast. Progressively it could expand to border areas: on land, towards the neighbouring Bahrain and the country Mahra²⁴; overseas, to India, along the coast of Makran, and to the Swahili Coast until Zanzibar.



Fig. 3 - Omani Empire 1856²⁵

Oman did not have natural limits, but only a nucleus and some boundaries. This idea of a nucleus exists in the traditional use of the name Oman, to express that things are more Omani as one gets closer to the nucleus to the Jabal Al-Akhdar. This centre was not only the geographical heart of the region, but it was also home to Ibadism and the only knot in the tribal system that could trigger reactions in the entire network of Hinâwî and Ghâfirî confederations. At the beginning of the Islamic period, this nucleus was much larger, the tribal allegiances much less limited geographically and its ideology much more widespread. But in the aftermath of the civil war at the end of the first Imamate (late 9th century), tribal allegiances became more and more aligned with northern Oman or central Oman, while at the same time Ibadism was assimilated to the latter. In order to defend their position, northern

²⁴ It was a region located between Hadramawt and Oman which is nowadays part of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

²⁵ Source: GeoCurrents <http://www.geocurrents.info/geopolitics/insurgencies/dhofar-religion-rebellion-and-reconstruction/attachment/omani-empire-1856-map> (28/09/18)

Omanis tended to ally themselves with outside powers, either the neighbouring Bahrain or Persia, or even to foreigners who had taken possession of the coast, a process which led them to abandon Ibadism. Nevertheless, the Sunni religious schools they adopted sometimes competed with the religious influence of Bahrain. The ancient incursions of Qarmatism, following the first civil war, had in the 19th century a correspondence in the incursions that Wahhabism made, under the aegis of the Saudis, to the north in Tuwâm and to south-east in Ja'lân. The religious and territorial Wahhabi influence on the bordering regions of Oman was to form the basis of the famous conflict with Abu Dhabi and the Saudi occupation of Al-Buraymi in the 1950s (see 2.5.). Moreover, the two border districts of Tuwâm and Ja'lân also represented two areas where immigration from neighbouring areas tended to concentrate.

The result was a continuous change in the composition of their populations and tribal groups, while there was little change in central Oman. Thus, traditional Oman was divided into several sub regions. The heart, had its ancient tribal structure and a keen awareness of its national identity, rationalized in Ibadite ideology. On its periphery, the native population was mixed with immigrants of recent origin, and Ibadism virtually did not exist. Further afield, the population of the mountainous area became more heterogeneous turning towards the Gulf.²⁶ This was largely due to traveling and trade related to the organization of pearl fishing. Around the mountainous core, there were still nomadic tribes whose connection with the mountainous area was strengthened because of the common interests in the field of land ownership and the fishing of fish and pearls, and consequently the exchange of products between the inhabitants of the oases and shepherds.

On the political front, there were originally three primary divisions in Oman. The first, on the northern coast, was oriented towards the Gulf in order to exercise control over the Strait of Hormuz. Political relations with Persia and Bahrain were as important as with the rest of Oman, but the population living

²⁶Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2015).

outside the ports was fundamentally integrated into the economic organization of the region as a whole. The second division was the Omani nucleus and the third was the coastal centre overlooking the Gulf of Oman.²⁷ Three intermediate regions bordered these divisions: the coastal Al-Batinah, the Sirr and the bordering deserts. The Al-Batinah had first of all links with the Imamate, but its territory was neutral when the Imam and Muscat were deeply separated. The Sirr had links with either Al-Batinah, Northern Oman and the Imamate, but it fell rather quickly under the control of the latter when the Ibadite State was firmly established. From the 18th century, a group originating from Bahrain began to distress the edge of northern Oman: it was the family Al Bû Falâh around which the modern state of Abu Dhabi began to exist. In South-Eastern Oman, semi-nomadic elements living in the Ja'lân also played an important role in border policy: the Bani Bû 'Ali had the same right to be considered independent as one of the Trucial states. Unfortunately, Great Britain's reasons for selecting the entities to be officially recognized were not based on local considerations, but on safeguarding its maritime interests. This is why the Bani Bû 'Ali had to be subordinated to the Sultan of Muscat.²⁸

1.4. Ibadism's third way between Sunnism and Shiism

Oman is a Muslim country, where neither Sunnis nor Shias prevail one over the other and with—even if very small—percentages of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. The majority of people, indeed, belong to the Ibadi doctrine of Islam²⁹, the last existing branch of Kharijism which is considered as a third way between the Sunnism and the Shiism, and whose roots date back to the early Islam, just about two decades after Prophet Muhammad's death.

²⁷ Wilkinson, J. C. (1964).

²⁸ Wilkinson, J. C. (1982).

²⁹ Ibadites worldwide are less than 1%. However, just in Oman, they count for three quarters of the entire population.

Ibadism is spread mainly in North Africa³⁰ and Tanzania³¹ but Oman is the only country where this sect represents the majority.

Oman's own religious environment is an important element for the Basic Law. In particular, Ibadi conceptions of government have exerted their influence. They dominate the centre of the country, while Sunni people live scattered throughout the country. It follows that Ibadis have had a great impact on the development of legal thought in Oman.

In an Ibadi state, the Imam is elected among the *'ulamâ*, and becomes the highest secular and religious leader after proper religious consultations. For this reason, and because of the electoral process, Ibadis call themselves the people of the consultation (*ahl al-shûrâ*). As a result, the consultation process is also an important element in the Basic Law. However, the *Imam* is not omnipotent: his actions are subject to the divine law and according to the Ibadi doctrine, he can be deposed whenever he breaks the rules of *shari'a*. Since every Muslim must support the Imam in time of war, there is no need for a permanent army and taxes are limited to legal almsgiving (*zakât*).³²

The Ibadi conception of a minimal and collectively-owned government was fundamentally transformed by the Sultans gaining power in Oman. In the 1740s, Ahmad bin Said drove the Persians out of Oman and was elected Imam, although he did not have the *'âlim* qualifications. In 1793, his son Sultan bin Ahmad acquired the title of Sultan following a misunderstanding, his first name 'Sultan' having been taken for a title.

Already since the 11th century, the title of Sultan had a negative connotation, which suggests a separation between religious power and secular power. This separation threatens the legitimacy of the Sultan and the Basic law had therefore to address this issue. Sultans and Imams coexisted in Oman until 1954: the first dominating the coast while at the second the interior of the country was recognized under the formal Treaty of Seeb. After the death of

³⁰ In the Mzab region in Algeria, the Gebel Nefusa in Tripolitania (Libya) and in the Tunisian island of Jerba.

³¹ Mainly in the island of Zanzibar.

³² Hoffmann, V. J. (2004).

the last Imam, the Sultans dominated the entire territory, but did not claim any religious power.

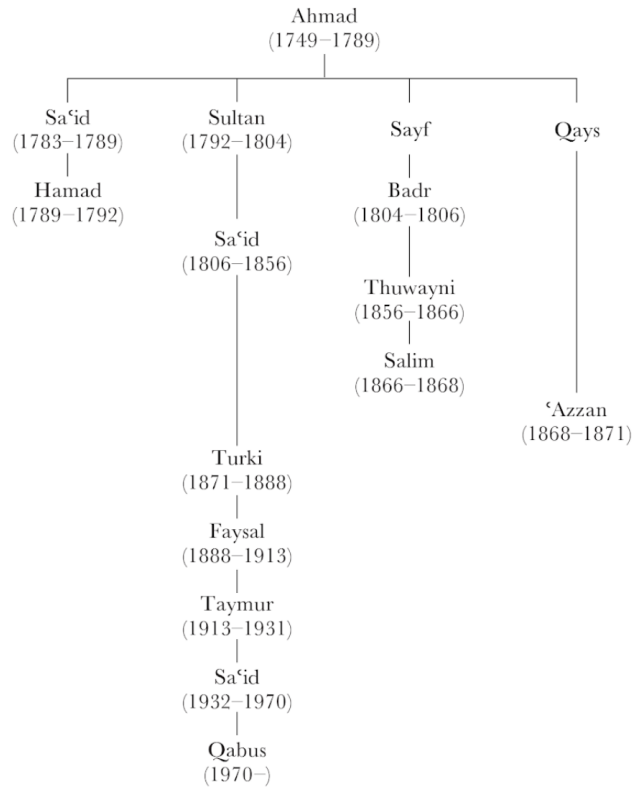


Fig. 4 - The Āl Bū Sa'īd dynasty³³

From the beginning of his reign in 1970, Sultan Qaboos put an end to this clear division between state power and religious influence. In the Imamate tradition, only the Imam can conduct the prayer, and there were only two mosques in Nizwa and Rustaq. Sultan Qaboos interfered in the religious sphere by building mosques bearing his name, thereby attributing himself to a religious dimension.

The legitimacy of the Sultan if weakened by religion was also questioned by the role of the British in Omani history. Since the first contract between the British East India Company and the Sultan in 1798, Britain has been increasingly interfering in Oman's domestic politics and cut France

³³ Source: Peterson, J. E. (2006: 25).

completely out of this area. The British armies supported the Sultan against the Imam in the interior of Oman, they abolished the slave trade and mediated multiple times starting with the division of the empire into the two principalities of Zanzibar and Muscat and Oman. In 1891, Said bin Turki extended these concessions, accepting that neither he nor his successors would lend, sell, or lease the land to anyone other than the British. Moreover, several other agreements were signed involving recognition, friendship, commerce and navigation. When, in 1949, the United Kingdom took over the payment of the Zanzibar grant, the Omani funds became totally dependent on British aid.³⁴ After the discovery of oil, British interests from the Swahili coast passed to the Northern part of the country, where most of the oil fields were located and where the Sultan was helped to face the Saudi ambitions, until the protectorate will finally be interrupted by Qaboos.

1.5. Political elite and participation

Political participation in Oman was initiated by Sultan Qaboos who has the ultimate word over domestic and foreign issues and more in general depend on the traditional elite that plays a fundamental role, since democratic institutions do not actually exist. Oman is an absolute monarchy where all the powers are concentrated in the hands of the Sultan and no system of check and balances with separations of powers exist.

Qābūs bin Sa‘īd Āl Sa‘īd overthrew his father with a palace coup on July 23rd, 1970 with the help of the British. By then he had led a life enriched with studies and travelling abroad that allowed him to have an in-depth picture of the backward state of his country and an open mind that would allow him to overturn it by embracing a modernization line. He was born in 1940 in Salalah, in Dhofar, the only son of Sultan Said Bin Taymur and belonging to the 14th generation of Imam Ahmed bin Said Al Busaidi who in 1744 had

³⁴ Peterson, J. E. (2009).

founded the Al Bû Saïd dynasty. At the age of 16, after spending some time in India in secondary school, he was sent to the United Kingdom to continue his studies in a private school and then in 1960 he joined the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where he graduated to enter the British army. He did some military service in Germany for a one year operation until returning to the United Kingdom to complete his studies in government. Later on, he travelled all over the world before coming back home, where for six years he studied Islam and history for a deeper understanding of his country. He was kept isolated in Salalah (it is believed that his first time in Muscat was the day of the coup) where he could only see the palace staff and have contacts with some expats who would later support him in the rebellion against his father.³⁵

The British allegedly helped him implementing his coup and start his long path of power as a Sultan: he is the most long-lived monarch of the modern Middle East.

What he had inherited was a backward state, with a system of patriarchal, autarchic and absolute power and a poor, illiterate and affected by endemic disease population. Qaboos profoundly reformed his country: he granted amnesty to many opponents who had been forced to leave the country and that following their forgiveness were welcomed to come back; he suppressed measures that increased the number of expats; reformed the institutions and built new infrastructures among which schools and hospitals and began to build a long-lasting relationship of trust with his people. This relationship was based on a direct appeal from the common people to the Sultan in order to solve problems and fulfil requests.

The system he was revolutionizing was only possible by virtue of a fair, respectful, wise, cultured and sensitive soul and was facilitated by a procedure that he himself launched, unique of its kind, which allowed a direct administration of the country. He organized annual tours, which generally took place in March, and which covered the whole territory. During these journeys the Sultan was accompanied by his most trusted advisers, ministers

³⁵ Peterson, J. E. (2011).

and other officials. The aim was to shorten the distance between the elite and the ordinary people, allowing the latter to enjoy the right to express themselves with complaints and suggestions. In November 1996, the Basic Law came into force. While it does not regulate democratic elements such as parties, unions or direct elections, this lack of democracy is offset by the possibility of turning to local authorities and personalities for an indirect interface with the authorities in power in order to influence the decision-making. The greater the influence of the authority and its links with the highest powers, the greater the efficiency of the results required by the citizens. These local authorities are appointed by the Sultan and are the *wali* (local governors) and the tribal *sheikhs*.³⁶

In Oman, the political elite, or that part of the population with a reputation for decision-making, has undergone change due to the economic and social development of the last 50 years. Before the oil was discovered in 1964, the society was divided into different groups: the Sultan's family, who alone constituted the traditional political elite; the merchants of the main towns, the noble tribal families, the landowners, the warriors belonging to Bedouin nomadic tribes and the Ibadi *ulamâ* (religious *sheikhs*) who exercised enormous political influence. All of them formed the highest class. Then there was the middle class made up of traders, civil servants, small businessmen, owners of merchant vessels and mosque Imams. Finally, the lowest layer was made up of fishermen, peasants, farmers, and workers in the smaller towns and in the oases of the hinterland, those who worked for the ship-owners and the shepherds (of goats and sheep) of the tribes who were not warriors.

After oil revolutionized the coffers of the state, its revenues served for the social development and the members of the most popular classes began to be recruited in the higher circles. That very diverse political elite was now composed of the Sultan and his relatives, the Council of Ministers and the Members of the Advisory Councils. A part of the then high social groups still continues to exert its influence because they are included in political

³⁶ Wilkinson, J. C. (1982).

leadership contexts such as councils of representation and councils of ministers, others like religious figures, *sheikhs* of the interior tribes and the merchant families of Muscat have maintained a predominant role.

New entries included people with an academic background who converged into a cultured elite. The advisory councils, designed around the scheme of Western institutions, have allowed to contribute to political change by granting elitist status to social groups with little power such as Bedouin tribesmen or other middle-income people.

In general, this system enjoyed consensus, people were satisfied with their positions within the representative councils and there was an overall preference to collaborate rather than undertaking the opposition path. However, social inequalities with the advent of the oil industry were accentuated by Islamic nationalistic and religious tendencies, challenging the legitimacy of the policies of the government and of the traditional political elite and accelerating a change within it.

Within the Gulf Countries Cooperation (GCC), with no exception for Oman, a gap is perceived on the one hand between modernity due to economic growth and social transformation, and on the other, conservatism aimed at preserving tradition and the political system.³⁷ This situation leads to an underdevelopment of the institutions that would in turn need change. In modern societies, political institutions are established if there is: a legal structure that makes it possible to convert the public will into activities that conform to the general policy; if citizens participate in the political process; if the purpose of the elite is to achieve the integration of the country with the reconciliation of tribal, religious, cultural and ethnic structures; if there is a meeting point between the desire of the people to participate in political processes subject to an effective judicial system and an elite with a responsible administrative knowledge. The contemporary states also separate the three legislative, executive and judicial powers to whom three distinct

³⁷ *Ibid.*

authorities correspond who cooperate without exceeding the limits of their responsibilities and invading the other's field.

The problem is that in Oman, these functions overlap by creating serious issues. The elite is willing to improve social welfare and the distribution of wealth but not to accommodate an expansion of political participation in decision-making processes. The old order and traditional structures are firmly safeguarded by the idea of cohesion and tribal power, by a dignified heritage of the people, a respectful struggle for a whole and independent country.

In his first ten years, Qaboos achieved formidable results in modernizing the country and the objectives in the social and economic sphere were harmonized with works to broaden political participation and reform the government. The society did obtain modern state structures but remained trapped in a tribal mentality that isolates the elite from civil society and can provoke clandestine activities or armed struggles. From 1952 to 1964, Oman suffered a religious based rebellion by the Imamate of the interior (see 2.4.) and a political based revolution in Dhofar from 1969 to 1975 (see 2.5.).³⁸ The prosperity of the Qaboos years occurred at the same time of the flourishing oil years and involved a social transformation bringing out a new group of educated and more aware people whose backgrounds were heterogeneous, and who share the awareness both of not belonging to the traditional elite and of not being able to replace it.

Whether this new social group may or may not constitute a probable political opposition is difficult to predict, but they are certainly doing their own in the modernization of Oman, starting to occupy important government positions. The current internal politics is therefore divided between the traditional and autocratic elite and the emerging politically aware non-elite. The first perhaps will be forced to reconsider its position and adopt measures to change the traditional political structures.

³⁸ Peterson, J. E. (2011).

To date, the system is still an absolute monarchy with all the power in the hands of Qaboos who performs as Prime Minister, Minister of foreign affairs, finance, defence, Commander in chief of the armed forces, President of the central bank.³⁹ However, he established a council of ministers and two consultative bodies regulated by the Basic Law which came into force in 1996. His cabinet is composed of 30 ministries, whereas the two consultative bodies are the State Council and the Consultation Council which together form the *Majlis Oman*. The latter is a sort of bicameral Parliament, accessible also to women, but without legislative power, that can review the laws and discuss on matters regarding mainly social services.

Political participation in the country developed in three stages of a parliamentary experiment which started with the State Consultative Council (SCC) in 1981, continued with the Oman's Consultative Council (OCC) in 1991, until the most recent Council of Oman or *Majlis Oman* in 1997 which was reformed in 2011 following the Arab Spring. The State Consultative Council was established by Sultan Qaboos in 1981 with the aim of giving a voice to the people on the state of work of the government and on new policies regarding economic and social development. The council consisted of 45 members chosen by the Sultan of whom 17 represented the government, the same number represented the *Wilayat*, and 11 represented the private business sector overlooked by a president who would act as an intermediary between the members and the Sultan. Although it was a marginal institution because its function was only to provide suggestions and advice, it was the first step of distancing itself from the traditional tribal structure and anyway it was a way to represent a considerable portion of society.⁴⁰ Membership expanded in 1983 (25 representing the *Wilayat*, 18 the government, 12 the entrepreneurs) including the government undersecretaries of the main Ministries (education, industry, health, economy, social affairs and housing), the business community members selected by the Commerce Chamber, and

³⁹ Valeri, M. (2015).

⁴⁰ Al-Haj, A. J. (2000).

local representatives nominated by the *Walis*. Notwithstanding that the Sultan had the last word on all the appointments. Money was provided by the government as well as the committees, an executive office and a general secretary, while remaining outside any executive and judicial issue. However, it seems that the impact of the SCC had been quite superfluous and had rather a ceremonial significance. The objectives of the Council on the one hand were limited to the power to give advice, it did not have any authority, and few Omanis were aware of the purpose of the SCC whose functions were similar to *Sibah*, a public meeting as a discussion forum known in traditional political culture. Moreover, each member did not represent his region but the entire Oman. This situation was perhaps foreseeable given the complex tribal relations and the consequent difficulty of circumscribing its territory and the absence of an official census that did not allow a proportional representation. The SCC was not intended to survive in the political scene and the elite realized the urgency of an evolution that would take into account the strengths and weaknesses experienced. The SCC was reformed and strengthened, its functions were increased and membership expanded into smaller strata until nine years later it was replaced by a Majlis Al-Shura (Oman Consultative Council).

The Oman Consultative Council (OCC) was announced in 1990 and initially it was envisaged that each member would represent the 59 *Wilayat* of Oman. A Royal Decree established that membership was decided by election, but this did not happen, since the deputy Prime Minister of legal affairs did actually choose them among three candidates previously indicated in caucuses in the *Wilayat* where hundreds of prominent citizens among local dignitaries participated.⁴¹ The 59-selected people were then offered to the Sultan for his final approval. Unlike the SCC, state officials could not be nominated. The OCC would meet four times a year in plenary and the specialized Council Committees (in economic, health, legal, social, cultural and educational matters plus one on local communities) instead met weekly. The OCC distributed the citizens' requests to the various committees on the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

basis of their competences, and the committees prepared reports to submit to the whole council.

In 1994, some reforms widened the seats to 79 and allowed the *Wilayat* with more than 30,000 citizens to elect 4 representatives of whom then 2 would have been part of the OCC ensuring a greater representation. With the increase in population for the 1998 elections, the number of seats was extended to 82 and 3% of the population, or about 50,000 citizens, were eligible to vote. These candidates presented themselves spontaneously and had their criminal history controlled by the government and even if they had obtained the majority of the votes the final decision was still up to the Sultan. Although the OCC did not enjoy legislative powers, it was responsible for public policies because it reviewed the draft law before being finally approved.⁴²

The Council of Oman or Majlis Oman was then the third experiment, regulated by article 58 of the Basic Law of the state which arranges for its organization. The elite, therefore, according to the law, envisioned an upper house similar to the House of Lords: the Majlis al-Dawla or Shura⁴³ Council (SC). Its members are appointed by the Sultan from former state employees, ambassadors, ministers, general secretaries, judges, scholars and academics, scientists, art and culture experts, men from the business world, or anyone with an honourable career and outstanding skills. The SC is therefore an exclusive chamber of eminent, virtuous and talented people who are not authorized to hold other public offices. The office is renewable for three years only once to allow a transparent renewal. The precise role and the relationship with the OCC are not well outlined, however the government has requested the SC to carry out in-depth analysis regarding the resolution of socio-economic issues, the promotion of investments, the implementation of administrative reforms, the drafting of laws proposed by the government and the promotion of amendments.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Shura meaning Consultation.

When the SC was inaugurated, Qaboos expressed satisfaction in having conceived this bicameral system (State Council and Shura Council) as the utmost institutions at the base of the Islamic Shura, which in turn finds its roots in the history of Omani marrying at the same time the modern world, and he reaffirmed the need for the two to cooperate and express themselves freely.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the political participation of the Omani people presents strong restrictions. The reason lies on the awareness that an effective democratic system could take root only after a complete political maturity and a more responsible exercise of the citizens' rights. Moreover, the importance of traditional ideals of national resilience, political cohesion, economic development, social harmony and social solidarity play their role. The idea was that of a gradual reform in a context of stability and continuity with the tradition and in compliance with the legitimacy of the Sultan. Western democracy would have been a risky experiment for a still illiterate society and would have caused rivalry, destabilization, and a diversion of energy and natural resources from their goal of building national resilience.

In a Sultanate like Oman where the top of social hierarchy is the only one holding power, this, even if minimal, reform towards a greater political participation is still a relevant historical moment. The decision came after a weighting of the population literacy rate. If on the one hand the rate had risen too quickly there would have been the risk of taking anti-modernization movements that would have demanded a return to religious fundamentalism. A rapid rate is also kept at bay by the awareness that the social differentiation created by economic development would result in the attempt to express the upgraded social status through greater political participation until reaching and becoming the centre of power. If on the other hand the rate had been too slow, economic progress would not have met the high expectations and a more violent demand for modernization would emerge as well as a resistance from traditional elements to accept the new differentiation. Therefore, the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

tensions between the needs of modernization and traditional values have led to new beliefs that give space to a new emerging class (involving the new bureaucracy, the educated people and the new middle income class) sensitive to resistance to change.⁴⁵

1.6. An economy based on the rentier system

The Omani economy, even if enjoying good figures in terms of GDP and human development index, is nevertheless inferior to all the other Gulf countries except Yemen. Industry and agriculture count only for 1% of total exports, with agriculture spread mainly in the areas of Nizwa, Dhofar and Al-Batina—and based on the historical *falaj* canalization systems—where vegetables, dates and cereals are cultivated. However, overall very few are the suitable fields throughout the country which in fact remains an importer of foodstuffs. Agriculture is therefore destined to the direct consumption of peasant families and employs a low percentage of the population (10%). The subsistence crops are arranged within the *falaj* system on a three-level crop that allows the cultivation of three crops at different heights within the same plot, with date palms above; lime, banana or mango in the middle level; and alfalfa, wheat and sorghum at the ground level. Vegetables, melons, bananas and dates are the main crops of the country, while the limes are grown in the inner oases to be traded with fish from coastal areas and exported abroad. Grapes, walnuts, peaches and other fruits are grown on the high mountain plateaus.⁴⁶ Dhofar, instead, produces coconuts and papayas and is famous for rearing the cattle. Nevertheless, among the rural families, it is common to breed goats but the country, in general, is well known for breeding camels.

Before 1970, there was a strong emigration of Omanis to the neighbouring countries that led to the abandonment of land and irrigation systems with

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Oman/Economy> (28/09/18).

many fields remained uncultivated. The government has tried to reduce the country's dependence on food imports, trying to stimulate agricultural production with the establishment of farms and research stations along the coast of Al-Bāṭinah and Dhofar, as well as plants for the treatment of dates in Al-Rustāq and Nizwā. It has also engaged in the development of commercial fishing by supplying boats and engines, cold storage facilities and transport. In addition to agriculture, therefore, fishing definitely completes the primary sector being fundamental for the coastal areas but oil is certainly the engine of the Omani economy. Moreover, other activities differentiate the economy but to a minimum extent. Copper mines and a foundry were opened in the early 1980s in an ancient mining site near Ṣoḥār. To generate electricity, coal deposits are exploited in Al-Kāmil. Projects to discover more natural gas were started in the mid-1980s and pipelines were built from gas fields in Yibal to Muscat, Ṣuḥār and Izki in order to increase the natural gas reserves. Furthermore, a facility for the liquefaction of natural gas has been opened in Qalhāt and is exported since 2000.

Nevertheless, industrial development started after 1970, with projects improving the country's infrastructures, such as electric generators, desalination plants and cement factories outside Muscat and Salalah. The five-year government plans have given new life to the development of the private sector and the joint ventures with the government. Meanwhile, the practice of traditional crafts (weaving, ceramics, shipbuilding and gold and silver work) is inevitably in decline.

As far as finance is concerned, in 1974 the Central Bank of Oman was established, the main monetary and banking regulatory body in the country issuing the national currency, the Omani rial.

Most of the exports consist of crude oil, refined oil and natural gas, while imports mainly consist of machinery and equipment for transportation, basic goods and foodstuffs. Oman's main trading partners are China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, India and the United Arab Emirates. In 2000, Oman became a member of the World Trade Organization.

Among the priorities of the government there is certainly economic diversification, aimed at facing a future scarce of resources and at making the labour market more fluid and accessible to the youths.⁴⁷ Diversification plans have already been endorsed for twenty years and have increasingly led to the inclusion of new sectors such as tourism.

The most profitable sector is the oil one and even if Oman does not have the same amount of oil as its neighbouring Arab rulers, it is considered likewise a rentier state. When the oil companies arrived in the 1950s, the *sheikhs* negotiated security in their respective areas of influence with the Omani Oil Company, and were thus able to consolidate their power. However, the rise in oil prices in the 1970s reduced their influence considerably, giving the government the financial means to employ a police force capable of providing security.

The discovery and exploitation of oil wells not only increased the financial resources of the government, but it also introduced the concept of territorial state in Oman. Until then, tribes regularly changed their loyalty sometimes alternated between Saudi kings, the Sultan or the Imam. The concept of territorial power did not exist. The powers of the state extended within the limits of the personal ties of each sovereign. Only conflicts because of the oil contributed to the government's interest in the land, leading to this concept of the territorial state. The Saudi King and the Omani Sultan both tried to present themselves as the legitimate rulers of the territory. Following the occupation of the Al-Buraymi oasis by Saudi troops in 1952, Riyadh and Muscat took up their positions in an international court. Through the newly introduced concept of territorial state, petroleum moves subjects away from government in two ways. On the one hand, the government is less dependent on its subjects, as oil revenues provide the financial basis to be more autonomous. On the other hand, the government is more vulnerable, since the group spirit is substituted by the geographical reference, and so the loyalty of the subjects is restricted. In a territorial state, governments continuously need to

⁴⁷ Kamrava M., Nonneman G., Nosova A. & Valeri M. (2016).

strengthen alliances with their subjects to legitimize their authority.⁴⁸ In rentier states, this is often done by the redistribution of oil revenues to the subjects, but the fall of these revenues requires the development of new alliances.

The oil in Oman was discovered in 1964 and three years later extractions with the resulting exports began. Before the economy was revolutionized by oil, it suffered from stagnation due to poor subsistence farming and fishing. The proceeds obtained up to 1970—a turning point with the deposition of Saʿīd ibn Taymūr—were spent in defence and only later on the public expenses will be devoted to the development of the country.⁴⁹ In 1996, the government, in anticipation of the exhaustion of oil reserves, launched a program that focuses on the development of natural gas resources of the country exported in the form of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Crude oil production was intense during the oil boom of the 1970s and even more intense in the 1980s due to lower prices to keep revenues high. This direction, however, was reversed in 1986 when Oman followed the directives of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to maintain high prices levels while cutting production to reduce global disbursement. In the 90s the production has risen so much to become, at the beginning of the 21st century, three times as much as that of the 70s. Oman, however, still remains far behind the world's largest oil exporters.

Oman has been trying to reduce the dependence of the national economy on oil with numerous government plans. The Sultanate is indeed considered as a rentier state, in which the gains from the export of oil and gas are relocated in privileges granted to the citizens in the form of exemption from taxes and a very generous welfare system. This system also allows the public sector to guarantee to a large portion of the population a well-paid, mild and undemanding job. The rentier state model, which applies to all GCC countries, was then revised in the past ten years with the Sovereign Wealth

⁴⁸ Levins, C. M. (2013).

⁴⁹ Al-Farsi, S. H. (2013).

Fund, which invested oil revenues in real estate, international financial markets and impressive projects.⁵⁰ This strategy marked a new capitalism aimed at national development, a 'revised rentierism'. While the country has launched this activity and other plans of economic diversification it is also true that recent discoveries (March 2018)⁵¹ testify to the presence new oil fields that would prolong the dreaded fear of ending crude by 2030.

The diversification of the economy should still be a priority for Oman, which is trying to revitalize the private sector and include the Omani citizens in new job positions. The privatization scheme that the country is planning, compared to the other Gulf countries, is quite advanced and includes the expansion of the country's stock market, the sale to private individuals of some government-owned companies generating around 700 millions of Omani rials⁵² by 2021 and the stimulus to a more liberal investment environment.⁵³ Oman could exploit irrigation systems to increase agricultural production whereas road construction and maintenance would also reduce transport costs by improving services and tourism. Since the mid-70s there has been an exceptional increase in the demand for electricity from citizens in large cities and the authorities are looking for an alternative and less costly way of coping with this exponential growth. Although the school system has undergone exceptional improvements with Qaboos, a strategy to fill gaps in each sector, to address the problem of a lack of skilled labour and to develop an institutional framework geared towards economic development is needed. This strategy should prioritize the development of non-oil sectors, and this is actually what Vision 2040 is envisioning.⁵⁴

Tourism could be a source of considerable income considering the potential in general of the Gulf countries and in particular of Oman which offers hot temperatures even in the winter months, sun, sea, desert, and archaeological

⁵⁰ Naser, H. (2016).

⁵¹ Source: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/energy/392306-omans-pdo-reports-large-gas-find> (29/09/18).

⁵² Source: <https://www.albawaba.com/business/privatization-oman-raise-omr700-million-2021-1155934> (29/09/18).

⁵³ Hvidt, M. (2013).

⁵⁴ Cfr. <https://2040.om/en/> (29/09/18).

and cultural sites of historical importance. The Sultanate is also in a strategic position on both a commercial and a touristic level, being halfway between East Asia and Europe. However, the international data reveal a not promising picture, probably due to factors such as poor tourism, little variety, presumable obstacles that tourists can encounter traveling in conservative countries with a culture very different from the western one, the poor efficiency of services and public transport and restrictive measures in terms of access to the country (visa). The country that is enjoying the tourism industry more efficiently is Dubai: its tourism managed to overcome oil in the GDP figures. Oman is trying to take a cue from the experience of the neighbouring country, striving to address the policies of *Omanization* in order to integrate the work of the Omani citizens into the tourism industry.⁵⁵

The 9th five-year plan issued with the Royal Decree n.1/2016 is now underway. The Sultanate of Oman has announced the plan that will guide the economic policy action that goes from 2016 to 2020 and aims to halve the dependence of the economy on the oil industry and to implement a model of diversification that will favour the sectors of manufacturing, mining, transport and tourism, a path already successfully undertaken in the previous five-year plans.

A new trend among the Gulf countries is also to invest in first-class cultural centres, because they are considered promoters of growth. One example is the Royal Opera House built in 2007 and completed in 2011 at the behest of the Sultan Qaboos, who has always been an enthusiast of culture and classical music.⁵⁶

1.7. Freedom of press, literature and education

⁵⁵ Bianco, C. (2014).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Freedom of press and expression is strongly limited by the central government; indeed, very little free journalistic activity is found throughout the country, even less in languages other than Arabic. Anything criticizing the Sultan is strongly forbidden and harsh censorship is applied. In addition to the press run by the government itself there are other private companies, but they still receive subsidies from the government and follow strict directives on contents. In case of transgression, the press would suffer from consequences such as the permanent shutdown of newspapers (Al-Zaman since 2016⁵⁷ and Mowaten in 2017⁵⁸) and arrest as in the recent cases of Abdullah Habib⁵⁹, a well-known activist who wrote on Facebook some posts on human rights and other political issues and Mansour al-Mahrazi⁶⁰, the author of two books on thorny topics such as corruption.

Censorship is obviously also applied to literary activity and constitutes the main reason why very few books are attainable on the market and are unlikely to be translated into English. The first evidence of literature dates back to the 9th century and concerns manuscripts dealing with religion, culture, history and genealogy. Among the most ancient texts are found “Lives of Oman” (*al-Siyar al-Umaniya*) by Abu al-Muthir al-Salt al-Bahlawi and “Arab Genealogies” (*Ansab Al-Arab*) by Salama al-Awtabi reconstructing the history of the Omani tribes. Other influential authors were Sirhan ibn Sa'id and Salil ibn Raziq who were respectively attributed to “Annals of Oman to 1728” and “History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman”. To date, the most famous writers are Abdulaziz Al Farsi who wrote one of the most popular novel “Earth Weeps, Saturn Laughs: An Omani Novel” and Jokha Mohammed Al-Harhi, who received the International Prize for Arabic Fiction⁶¹ in 2011. Attempts to found an organization of writers were done in

⁵⁷ Source: <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/oman-court-orders-permanent-shutdown-of-al-zaman-daily-1.2101321> (29/09/18).

⁵⁸ Source: <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1582> (29/09/18).

⁵⁹ Source: <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1426> (29/09/18).

⁶⁰ Source: <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1600> (29/09/18).

⁶¹ The IPAF is an award established in 2007 thanks to the Emirates Foundation of Abu Dhabi in association with the Booker Prize Foundation in London, with the aim of rewarding Arabic fiction writing, promoting a wider audience of readers and encouraging the translation into other languages.

the 70s giving birth to the National Cultural Club in 1975 and later in 2008 with the Omani Society of Writers and Literati. Poetry is perhaps considered as the highest literary form dominating literature and the esteem and respect enjoyed by the poets are a reliable proof. Among the best known contemporary poets are Abdullah al-Taiey—who was Minister of Information in the '70s—Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali al-Khalili, Abu Surur Humayd al-Jamii, Mahmud al-Khusaybi, the bin Hilal Badr and Muhammad Amin Abdullah. Poetry is also encouraged by an annual festival promoted by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. In general, for the Omanis, as well for all the Arabs, oral tradition is very important, particularly for poetry and genealogical roots. Indeed, the Ministry of Information, through radio and television programs, tries to revive this tradition.

The education system in Oman is rather young, not compulsory but completely free of charge until the end of the secondary school. Students start with primary school, followed by the preparatory one, whose academic results will influence the choice of the secondary school. The education system has been radically improved and expanded in the last 50 years. Before 1970, there were only three schools with 900 students in the whole country; whereas at the beginning of the 21st century about 20,000 students were attending private schools and more than 560,000 students were going to more than a thousand public schools. In 1986 the first public university, the Sultan Qaboos University, was opened near Muscat counting nine different colleges and hosting mainly Omanis. Since the number of students finishing secondary school is incredibly increasing, private sector has been encouraged by the government to form new universities, the first of which opened in 1994, in an attempt to contain the excessive demand that was provoking an outflow of college-seekers abroad, especially in UAE, Jordan and Egypt. This surprising increase of schools and students has allowed to significantly lower the rate of illiteracy throughout the country, especially for women⁶².

⁶² Rassekh, S. (2004).

However, Oman has outdated education methods that are unable to meet the needs of today's youth in order for them to easily find a job. During the Arab Spring the issue of the gap between what the education system offers and the demand of the labour market emerged. It is therefore necessary to reschedule the school system and at the same time to innovate the work system that nowadays is always more creative, technologic and globalized. The planning of Vision 2040 is on progress and hopefully it will include an education and job reform, among other innovations for Oman.

2. Oman and the contemporary world

Oman is well known in the world of diplomacy for its prudent and pragmatic attitude toward international relations and the unmatched role of mediator it plays in the region. The foreign policy adopted is therefore characterised by a peaceful non-intervention that was and is still crucial in manoeuvring within international crises to avoid regional and therefore domestic instability. This approach was endorsed by Sultan Qaboos as soon as he seized power in 1970. By then he had to challenge the legacy of economic, political and human costs of civil wars, extreme backwardness, sensitive domestic policy issues and a profound isolationism. He soon drove his country away of this isolationism⁶³ and the reactionary policy that his father had preferred and turned Oman into a significant player within international diplomacy. The main reason why this was possible is an evident pragmatism that has allowed either to have an aware and prudent measure of both the capabilities and opportunities of Oman without under or overestimate them, simultaneously with a conscious attitude towards the intentions of other countries. If these were former enemies, contacts would not be cut off but on the contrary these states would be considered as potential partners even if receiving criticism from neighbouring Gulf countries. Such courageous initiatives have been undertaken many times in order to guarantee economic, political and military stability and security.

The pillars characterising the Omani foreign policy are found in the respect for international law, the non-intrusion into the affairs of other countries, the support of an unaligned policy, the compromise and the peaceful resolution manifested in mediations between warring states in the attempt to find mutually beneficial solutions. This diplomatic attitude allows fluid international relations avoiding abrupt and dangerous interruptions.

Omani foreign policy is well aware of its history, geography, population, religion, economy and strategic position and is aimed at finding positive long-

⁶³ Kechichian, J. A. (1995: 9).

term solutions. Sultan Sa'id ibn Taymur, in comparison with his son, had favoured the maintaining of diplomatic relations exclusively with Great Britain and India, neglecting neighbouring Arab rulers. Only with Qaboos did Oman obtain a relevant position as a regional power, beginning with the admission⁶⁴ to the League of Arab States (LAS)⁶⁵ and to the United Nations in 1971.

2.1. From isolation to an independent and pragmatic foreign policy

Since 1970 the long process of abandonment of isolationism was undertaken together with the embarking of a pragmatic and well-defined foreign policy that Kechichian has described identifying four phases⁶⁶.

The first phase goes from 1970 to 1975 and is characterised by a consolidation of relations with the Arab world, the achievement of an internal unity, the overcoming of political unrest both in the north and in the south with the end of the Dhofar War and an increase in the standard of living of the population. In these years, the relations with Iran were of particular importance. Iran was enjoying a powerful role at the regional level and Qaboos secured its military assistance to counter the communist rebellion while obtaining a border agreement in the Strait of Hormuz thus ensuring help, visibility and recognition⁶⁷.

The second phase will end in 1980 and is a transitive period in which greater financial attention was given to the internal needs of the war-torn country and the cultivation of closer ties with the Omani neighbours which helped providing fundamental economic aid. However, the received financial assistance did not prevent Qaboos to show public support of Sadat's peace

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p.8.

⁶⁵ The Arab League is a regional forum that brings together 22 Arab countries among Northern Africa, Arabia and the Horn of Africa. It was established in Cairo in 1945.

⁶⁶ Kechichian, J. A. (1995).

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

agreements with Israel in 1977 and the negotiations of the Camp David agreements. Egypt was severely criticized by most of the Arab states, but Oman decided to preserve relations with Cairo and, despite disapprovals by the Gulf states, did not to participate to the Baghdad Rejectionist Summit of 1978⁶⁸ condemning Sadat's behaviour⁶⁹.

The 1979 marked another important episode shaking the already fragile regional stability. Iran was hit by a revolution that changed the political system from the monarchy of the last Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to the Shiite Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Khomeini. If the ties between Oman and Iran remained unchanged, however, Qaboos proposed a protection plan for the Strait of Hormuz that was not accepted by the other Gulf states and forced Oman to turn to the United States. In 1980, the Facilities Access Agreement was signed, a military agreement once again demonstrating how far Qaboos was willing to act for the long-term security interests of his country.

The third period is identified with a maturation phase from 1980 to 1985. During these years, Oman witnessed the progress of the war between two fundamental players in the region: Iran and Iraq. The conflict was one of the reasons that pushed Qaboos to convince himself to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a forum that brought together the six conservative Gulf countries in an effort to ensure joint security within the Arabian Peninsula. While participating to all regional security activities as a member of the GCC, Oman remained neutral during the Iran-Iraq war, preferring to maintain all relations with regional actors and its security ties with the West. Meanwhile, efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict did not dissipate and the Sultan continued to promote direct talks⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ The summit in 1978 was the 9th meeting of the League and was held to reaffirm the position of the members in condemning Sadat's decision to reconcile with Israel by ignoring Palestinians rights. The Arab states cut diplomatic relations with Egypt and after the ratification of the peace treaty (March 1979), they revived in Baghdad to expel the traitor from the organization and move the headquarters to Tunis. Relationships resumed during Hosni Mubarak presidency.

⁶⁹ Kechichian, J. A (1995).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

In the fourth progress phase, ending in 1995, the figure of Qaboos as ruler is eventually considered as a reference point to be addressed with confidence in matters of security. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990⁷¹, Oman joined the UN initiative to free the attacked country and granted the United States with access to supplies and facilities through the Facilities Access Agreement that had been renewed in 1990. The diplomatic ties with both Iraq and Kuwait were preserved while opportunities for the resolution of the war were created, or at least they tried. The efforts to solve the crisis failed and the principle of non-alignment in foreign policy was abandoned. In these years, Muscat tried with no results to bring Iran and Iraq to the negotiating table.

Moreover, in 1994, Qaboos invited Israel to a conference on water desalination—an episode that preceded a second invitation of the Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in Oman—the first visit by an Israeli public political figure to an Arab Gulf state⁷². All of this occurred at a time when the GCC had no relationship with Israel and did not intend to have any in the future but Oman did not hesitate to take its own path, albeit alone.

The pillars underneath Oman's foreign policy are well defined on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website⁷³ and can be summarized in the establishment, development and maintenance of positive relations with neighbouring countries; an international line well-informed of the geographical position of the country and its tradition of maritime relations; a pragmatic approach to external relations that takes into account geostrategic realities and not short-term ideological positions; the preference for peace and cooperation in the conflict in an effort to achieve stability and security.

These principles are expressed in an evident resistance to take positions, avoid discussions and mention individuals⁷⁴. The choice to foster long-term relationships nurtures the opportunity to allow the necessary time for people

⁷¹ Grammas, G. N. (1991).

⁷² Rabi, U. (2005).

⁷³ Source: Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs <https://www.mofa.gov.om/?p=796&lang=en> (29/09/18).

⁷⁴ In Qaboos official speeches and discussions, references to people are often absent: he simply avoids pronouncing proper nouns.

and events to reach a certain idea, a preference that Sultan Qaboos has not only adopted for the foreign policy but also for the domestic one⁷⁵. As discussed in the previous chapter, there are no political parties in Oman. However, they are not forbidden as commonly believed, there is no legislation prohibiting them. Article 33 of the Basic Statute of the State 1996⁷⁶ guarantees freedom of association for legitimate purposes to all citizens. The same Sultan Qaboos admits that there is room for a possible future creation of parties. Also, as far as women condition is concerned, he was extremely cautious and patient. He introduced female figures in the Royal Oman Police in the early years of his reign, but only in 2003 they were joining the cabinet.⁷⁷ Beyond these pillars, the already mentioned tolerance and animosity to sectarianism need to be born in mind. Oman is indeed the only country in the Gulf to be predominantly Ibadi, overcoming the historical conflict between Shiites and Sunnis. Ibadi pray serenely in any mosque and are happy to invite other sects to their places of worship. This tolerance is observed since the very first human migrations and is confirmed by archaeological discoveries. Oman has been trading with countries overlooking the Indian Ocean for at least 5000 years. Taking a look at the maps it is easy to see how it is possible to reach Indonesia from Cape Town without ever losing sight of the land and covering the entire east coast of Africa, going through the Strait of Bab el Mandeb and then reaching the Arabian Peninsula, crossing Persia to then continue to South and Southeast Asia. It seems inevitable that as for ethnicity, culture and religion, Oman has always been exposed to a certain openness of mind and lenience towards the neighbour.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ According to Peterson, Oman has limited political participation and the relative rights have been conceded from the top down on a gradual timescale because “people are not ready for serious political change”. Cf. Peterson, J. E. (2013).

⁷⁶ Royal Decree No. (101/96).

⁷⁷ Jones, J. (2015).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*



Figure 5 - Indian Ocean Rim⁷⁹

2.2. Mediatory attempts in the Middle East

The aforementioned pillars in foreign policy translate into the Sultanate acknowledged and pragmatic practice of mediation. Oman's mediatory efforts were performed in an attempt to bring Pakistan and India closer together in 1985, Qatar and Bahrain in 1986 and also Iraq and Kuwait in 1990 when Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq 'Aziz visited the first state of the GCC different from Kuwait starting from the invasion⁸⁰.

Muscat has always been willing to overcome the Arab-Israeli conflict by welcoming the 1978 Camp David agreement and the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and refusing to participate in the Arab League summit in March 1979 that expelled Egypt. This policy strengthened the ties with the United States and Egypt, which were committed to providing military aid to Oman.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Source: IORA <http://www.iora.int/en>. (29/09/18) The coastal states bordering the Indian Ocean represented in the figure are part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, an international organization established in 1997 aimed at strengthening economic cooperation and development.

⁸⁰ Valeri, M. (2014).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The relations with Israel were positive too, as demonstrated by the regular meetings of the foreign affairs officials of the two countries⁸².

Pragmatism was also manifested with South Yemen, with which economic and diplomatic exchanges have been initiated since the late 1980s. The Soviet Union was considered by Muscat as a provocateur of detente in Southern Yemen and an opportunity to increase stability in Dhofar as well as a way of demonstrating diplomatic independence from the other GCC countries. When the civil war broke out in Yemen in 1944, Qaboos began talks between the two sides⁸³.

On the occasion of the Syrian conflict, started in 2011, Oman again distanced itself from the GCC, by maintaining diplomatic relations with Damascus (the embassies are currently operational) and by refusing to align with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar in supporting the opposition of Bashar al-Assad. Yusuf bin Alawi even reaffirmed to Bashar al-Assad, on a visit to Damascus after the outbreak of the war, that Oman was interested in preserving the unity and sovereignty of Syria and would have done anything to peacefully solve the ongoing war. On the other hand, however, the Sultanate's position is perceived as ambivalent⁸⁴ because on the occasion of the recent missile attacks in March 2018 by United States, United Kingdom and France against the Syrian military installations that were believed to contain chemical weapons for a poisonous gas attack, Oman declared its support.

If Oman has always wished not to be in the spotlight on the wake of a quiet and discreet diplomacy, two events in 2013 attracted the attention of the newspapers concerning first the nuclear deal and then the GCC upgrade.

Muscat played a secretive mediation role in the negotiations between Iran and the P5 + 1. In November 2013, a provisional agreement was signed between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto power—China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States—plus

⁸² Dubroff, J. (2018).

⁸³ Valeri, M. (2014).

⁸⁴ Source: <https://timesofoman.com/article/132145> (02/10/18).

Germany and the European Union, preceding the final international agreement on nuclear energy reached in Vienna two years later⁸⁵. The deal in Geneva was concluded rather quickly, partly thanks to the secret meetings—remained so from their beginning in March until November—held in Oman between the US and the Shiite Republic. This is not so surprising since Oman has always embraced a quiet and discreet diplomacy to the point that the then foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, when the role of Oman’s mediator came out into the open, reported that its weigh had been praised exaggeratedly⁸⁶. According to the anthropologist Friedrik Barth, this attitude goes back to what he calls an *ideology of politeness*⁸⁷:

“in which tact and tolerance manifest themselves even more acutely in certain social graces, namely the practice of seeking to place the other before oneself, as well as the sense of personal honour attached to avoidance of public expression of disagreement, criticism or disapproval. For Barth, these common [shared between Oman’s different communities], ideals of poise, grace and politeness play significant roles in muting divisions and sustaining relationships”⁸⁸.

According to Jeremy Jones it is exactly this politeness that is hiding behind the statement depreciating Omani mediatory efforts.

The other event making the headlines shows Oman’s avoidance to taking sides against Iran. During the Manama dialogue in December 2013, an annual conference on international security, Foreign Minister Yusuf Bin Alawi, although not scheduled to give a speech, was asked to comment on the intervention of Saudi Foreign Minister Nizar Bin Obaid Madani. The latter

⁸⁵ The final agreement is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iranian nuclear agreement. The agreement lifted international economic and financial sanctions imposed on Iran because of its controversial nuclear program. In return, Western countries obtained limitations by the Shiite state of its nuclear program and periodic checks by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to its nuclear facilities that Iran claims to use exclusively for civilian purposes whereas the West fear they have a military scope.

⁸⁶ Source: <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/oman-says-role-in-iran-deal-exaggerated-1.1261831> (29/09/18).

⁸⁷ Barth, F. (1983).

⁸⁸ Jones, J. & Ridout, N. (2012: 51).

pressured the GCC to become a union urgently⁸⁹. Yusuf Bin Alawi replied gracefully that Oman was not in favour of a union and instead, he focused on the need not to enter into conflict with anyone, to have peace and security as a priority to safeguard the youth generation and he concluded that keeping the region out of regional conflicts that does not mean militarize people⁹⁰.

Omani's policy towards Iran takes into consideration the past events and the help that Persia has provided to the Omani government during the Dhofar war. In 1980, when the war between Iraq and Iran broke out, Oman tried to come across as judiciously impartial by keeping in mind that the invading country was Iraq and that in the same way it was Iraq itself launching attacks on the Gulf to neutral ships much more frequently than the Persian counterpart. Nevertheless, good relations with Iran did not prevent the Sultanate from being the only Gulf state to maintain diplomatic relations with Iraq once invading Kuwait in 1990. A year later, when Kuwait was freed, a committee of the Gulf Cooperation Council was held having Sultan Qaboos as president. He proposed to involve all the states in the region—including Iran—and the international community—including the United States—in a collective security initiative envisioning a large army to be allocated to the most fragile borders between Iraq and Saudi Arabia and between the former and Kuwait⁹¹. This initiative was abandoned because criticized by the other members for being a manoeuvre aimed at increasing employment in Oman⁹². Several visits as head of state were done by Sultan Qaboos in Iran, both in 1971 at the Persepolis Festival and in 2009 after President Ahmedinajad's second victory for the elections, despite the discouragement of Western powers and showing equal interest both in the Iran of the Shah and the Iran of the Revolution.

⁸⁹ Jones, J. (2015).

⁹⁰ For the full text of the speech see: <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/divergent-views-on-gulf-union-emerge-1.1264558> (28/09/18).

⁹¹ Jones, J. (2015).

⁹² Nowadays, some scholars affirm that such a force would have hindered at the political level the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

It is important not to run into the mistake of thinking that Oman can fear Iran. At the end of the Dhofar war, the Iranian troops withdrew from the territory without problems. Last time Oman was invaded dates back to 1744, when the Albusaidi dynasty was founded following the departure of the Persians. To date, Omani role in the resolution of international and regional crises is publicly recognized by Iran⁹³, which has invested substantial financial means in the new port of Duqm and supported huge projects including a gas pipeline which to date is finalizing to deliver gas to Oman under the sea and transform it into liquid natural gas (LNG).

In addition, Oman is trying to replace the role that Dubai used to have until 2012, that of re-export regional hub for financial transactions and international trade. With the deterioration of relations between Iran and the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Tehran needs to undertake new routes. With Muscat, in March 2018, in the context of banking cooperation, important agreements have been forged and future joint investments between the companies of the two countries have been discussed, especially for petroleum projects. Finally, Iran is the meeting point that Oman has with the European Union.

To date, relations with the EU are not particularly relevant to deserve a discussion in this thesis. But it is worth mentioning that both the EU and Oman put their efforts in improving relations with Iran and this is also reflected in the EU Global Strategy⁹⁴ and this could lead to a future more relaxed cooperation.

The mediation efforts have gone hand in hand with the determination to prevent external actors from intervening in the national territory. If communism has long been considered problematic to the Omani political model, to date the regime invokes the fight against Islamism to condemn any violation of national security. Oman is obsessed with a socialist contagion and, unlike the other GCC countries, is definitely unenthusiastic to allow

⁹³ Source: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2014/02/08/276926/president-urges-iran-oman-joint-efforts-to-improve-regional-security> (29/09/18).

⁹⁴ Cf. The EU Global Strategy (2016).

people from Yemen, Syria, Palestine and Nepal to enter and have a work permit⁹⁵.

On the one hand, Muscat affirms that the Iraq-Kuwait crisis is a lesson the GCC should learn towards greater cohesion; on the other hand, Oman looks at its national interests with its decision-making independence. This is also demonstrated by the fact that the *fatwas* on Ramadan in Oman fixed the beginning date one day after Riyadh and this has a clear political significance. Oman wants to be independent also in the energy field and this explains why OPEC was never an option. Historically, Saudi Arabia has interfered in Oman already in the 19th century because of its interests in the oasis of Al-Ayn-Buraimi, and later with the support, in 1950, to the Ibadi Imamate against Muscat⁹⁶. Even within the GCC, Oman excludes the possibility of reaching a monetary union on the belief that the member countries are too heterogeneous in terms of living standards and wages and therefore dangerous to the national economy. Fortunately, these convictions did not cause relational damage, indeed, in order to cope with the Arab springs, Oman received \$10 billion in economic aid from neighbouring Arab governors and supported Saudi Arabia and Emirates in sending troops in Bahrain⁹⁷.

Last year, in 2017, the most critical and sensitive threat for the stability and security of the Gulf since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the war between Iraq and Iran was about to come to light. The internal balances of the GCC were being overwhelmed by the Qatar crisis that inevitably involved external actors, such as Turkey, Russia, the U.S. and Iran and gave a blow to the partnership with the Western powers.⁹⁸

The diplomatic crisis began in June when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates together with Egypt⁹⁹ launched a blockade by sea, land and air against Qatar, accused of financing and sponsoring terrorism and of

⁹⁵ Jones, J. (2015).

⁹⁶ Valeri, M. (2014).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Ulrichsen, K. C. (2017).

⁹⁹ Other countries such as Chad, Maldives, Comoros, Mauritania, Senegal and the Hadi Government of Yemen cut their diplomatic relations with Doha.

maintaining relations with Iran. The Saudi-led coalition demanded the cutting of diplomatic ties with Iran, the shutting down Al-Jazeera and the interruption of military coordination with Erdogan. Qatar replied by rejecting all the requests, judged them as violation of its sovereignty and demanded the international intervention for the resolution of the crisis. Kuwait figured as a mediator and received the support of Oman which did not join the anti-Qatar initiative and has worked behind the scenes to help Doha to overcome the crisis at the same time benefiting from the strengthening of their economic and commercial ties. Trump had given his open support to Saudi Arabia in the occasion of the Riyadh Summit, by praising the Arab counterpart for his fighting against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. This caused the strengthening on the one hand of the GCC and on the other hand the concern of Kuwait and Oman which understood how reacting to Saudi's will lead to a severe condemnation by the international opinion. Unlike Kuwait, Oman remained neutral only at the political level, as trade with Qatar was boosted by economic agreements and helped countering the weakening of the Sultanate due to the fall in oil prices. Non-oil exports to Qatar tripled and the Sultanate became Doha's largest non-oil importer. Positive effects came also from the air ban which favoured the Omani airline allowed to fly all over the Gulf. However, this situation weakens the position of the Sultanate within the GCC and Saudi Arabia and UAE are accusing the Sultanate of supplying weapons to the Houthi rebels of Yemen.¹⁰⁰

The diplomatic crisis also involved a new form of war; a cyber war was soon fought and the Qatari institutional websites and press agencies were the targets. The hackers attributed false declarations to the Emir Al Thani that spurred his support for Iran, Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah. After several investigations carried out also by the FBI and alleged accusations of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Qatar released that 5 hackers, without mentioning their nationalities, were investigated and detained in Turkey.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Source: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/14/kuwait-and-oman-are-stuck-in-the-arab-no-mans-land/> (29/09/18).

¹⁰¹ Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-cyber-idUSKCN1B608L> (29/09/18).

These events inevitably hampered mediatory attempts and for the moment the blockade is far from being lifted.

2.3. The relationship with the Western powers

Oman has always been afraid of being domestically shaken by political instability in the Gulf and West Asia. This perception of political fragility helps to explain the determination in adopting a policy of non-alignment and non-interference whose price is the political and military dependence on the Western powers of the United Kingdom and the United States.

Given the strategic importance of Oman for the security of the entire Gulf and considered that most of the oil supply passes through the Strait of Hormuz, the U.K. and the U.S. have been supporting Muscat in fighting possible foreign influences. With the United States, Oman has shown profound pragmatism by establishing a close and long-lasting relationship¹⁰². After the British withdrawal from the Gulf territories, the security void that had been previously filled by the United Kingdom now had to be refilled by someone else. Additionally, there was the necessity to protect the Strait of Hormuz, whose strategic importance for the passage of oil supplying the entire world was jeopardized by the bursting of the Iranian Revolution. The anxiety of the Shiite unrest resulted in the decision to welcome the Carter doctrine announced by the president of the USA during the 1980 State of the Union address.¹⁰³ Following the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the doctrine envisioned Carter's intention to use his force—whether necessary—to defend national interests in the Persian Gulf. It was therefore clarified that any interference with the supply of oil in the strait would be a matter of vital interest to the United States. On this occasion, the pragmatism of Oman manifested itself in the awareness of an inevitable US

¹⁰² Lefebvre, J. A. (2009).

¹⁰³ Kechichian, J. A. (1995).

presence in the Arabian Peninsula and a consequent awareness of the need to accept it and become friends.

Not only with the United States, Oman has a privileged relationship but also above all with the United Kingdom, whose link was the cause of the resignation of the uncle of Qaboos, Tariq bin Taimur, as Prime Minister in 1971. Even after the official withdrawal of the British troops from the Omani territory in 1977, military cooperation agreements were soon promoted to the extent that in 2001 the UK deployed the greatest forces abroad since the 1980s. After the 9/11 attacks, the American forces in Oman increased dramatically to support operations in Afghanistan and while Oman was declaring itself in favour of an escalation of the crisis, it hosted US Air Force expeditions for military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2003, as earlier in 1991, the only military bases of the Arabian Peninsula at disposal of the US for the air attacks in Iraq were Omanis.

It is thanks to the privileged link with Great Britain and to a lesser extent with the United States, Iran, Egypt and Jordan that Oman succeeded, until 2011, in the objective of not being infected by regional unrest and in preserving a free and integral sovereignty over its territory, despite internal and regional criticism. The cost has been considerable: The United Kingdom is the main investor in Oman. The latter has pledged to buy over \$5 billion in British aircraft and U.S. air defence technology, proving to be one of the countries experiencing the largest sudden increase in public defence spending¹⁰⁴.

Oman has suffered various invasions from other Arab tribes and countries such as Portugal and Great Britain, but from the last the Arab country also received a noteworthy protection and support—as illustrated in the previous paragraphs—which were fundamental for the Sultanate in the 20th century.

It is worth briefly retracing the steps that have marked Omani territory and people's history in contact with the foreigners until the arrival of the British. After the consolidation of Islam in 632 following the Ridda Wars, the Ibadi established an Imam, precisely in 751, that survived, despite the interruptions,

¹⁰⁴Fleurant, A., Wezeman, P. D., Wezeman, S. T., Tian N. & Kuimova, A. (2018).

until half of the 20th century¹⁰⁵. Among the foreign powers there were the Qarmati in the 10th century, the Iranian Buyyids, the Seljuks and the Nabhani dynasty in the 12th century for about 300 years. The Portuguese arrived in 1515 and left the territory only in 1650¹⁰⁶ with the establishment of the 5th Yaruba Imamate. The latter basically took the place of the Portuguese acquiring their former colonies in East Africa and continuing the slave trade on the Swahili coast and on the island of Zanzibar¹⁰⁷. Meanwhile civil wars between the two main tribes, Hinawi and Ghafiri were triggered in the attempt to drive their candidates to power. The ascent of the Imam Saif bin Sultan II, belonging to the Yaruba dynasty and supported by the Ghafiri, was not much appreciated to the extent that he lost and retook power different times until in order to placate a civil war asked for the intervention of the Persians. Their intent was to conquer and destroy and this was precisely what they did. Even if they had already settled on the coast, the reason triggering the upcoming revolt was their being supported by an unpopular dynasty. The uprising was led by Ahmad bin Said Al-Busaidi who not only expelled the Persians in 1749 but founded a dynasty that is still today in place. He became the Sultan of Muscat and Imam of Oman. However, he was also the last one to perform as Imam because, apart from the usual family struggles, the tribes of the interior rejected the authority of the Sultan and rose up for the reestablishment of the Imamate.

In the first half of the 19th century Oman enjoyed a flourishing economy because of the slave trade in its colonies. When slavery was abolished by Great Britain, prosperity vanished and the country experienced a severe depopulation phenomenon¹⁰⁸ with Zanzibar being the preferred destination to seek refuge.

¹⁰⁵ Ibadi are well distinguished among the different schools for choosing their governor by collective consent. Indeed, the imam would be first chosen by the tribal sheik and then confirmed by the community.

¹⁰⁶ The Ottomans in the meantime were controlling Muscat.

¹⁰⁷ The island became independent in 1964.

¹⁰⁸ In twenty years, from 1850 until 1870 the population decreased from around 60 thousand to 10 thousand people.

In 1856, internal disputes within the royal family over the succession to the throne caused the division of Zanzibar from Muscat and Oman¹⁰⁹. The split reflected a long history of political and cultural divergence and dualism: the exterior was a flourishing, secular, cosmopolitan coastal area, opposed to a closed interior dominated by tribalism and the Ibadite ideology of the Imamate tradition.

Once again, the Imamate demanded recognition and in 1868, without the public support, Azzam Ibn Qais Al-Busaid declared himself Imam. He tried to establish a strong central authority in the attempt to bring the interior tribes under his control but he met the disagreement of Great Britain who interpreted his moves as a provocation and were afraid of a sudden change of the status quo. The British soon got rid of him and backed his rival who succeeded in replacing Azzam.

If Muscat and Oman were quarrelled both by France and Great Britain, it is surely the latter that stood out and this privileged relationship between the Arab country and the British is proved by the multiple agreements they signed involving mutual help, friendship, recognition, protection and trade. As a matter of fact, a real protectorate was established until Oman finally succeeded in taking its own course with Qaboos.

Oman is considered an absolutely safe country in terms of terrorism, to such an extent that together with only 40 other countries in the world it has a risk index of 0¹¹⁰. The Sultanate seems to be a very important partner for the United States in countering terrorism as demonstrated by their close cooperation to ensure that national territories do not become safe heavens. Currently, in the Arabian Peninsula, the greatest concern is given to the civil war in Yemen began in 2015, and the consequent expansion within the

¹⁰⁹ The name “Sultanate of Oman” will be reached only in 1870 when Sultan Qaboos deposed his father.

¹¹⁰ The risk is based on various security criteria that indicate the severity of the threat suffered by each country according to estimates provided by the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland, United States.

country of the AQAP¹¹¹ and the ISIS. The opposing factions claiming legitimacy to power are on the one hand the Houthis¹¹² and on the other the President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi that, although deposed, enjoys recognition by the international community.

The intervention of foreign forces supporting the two sides complicates the situation by turning Yemen into a clash of power and religion between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, Iran supplies weapons to the Houthis and on the other hand the Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia support Hadi. Extremist groups find in this instability the fertile ground to grow stronger, especially in southern Yemen. AQAP is considered by the United States to be the most dangerous branch of Al-Qaeda and is well known to have organized the 2015 Paris attacks against Charlie Hebdo. ISIS is also strengthening its presence and has been hit by U.S. raids since last October 2017 in two terrorist training camps where dozens of jihadists have been killed. Although the security forces in Oman are coordinating with the American ones to carry out anti-terrorist operations, the authorities of Muscat rarely disclose their initiatives in this regard.

As far as anti-terrorism legislation is concerned, the Royal Decree 8/2007¹¹³ provides for specific punishments, such as the death penalty and imprisonment for terrorist activities like the management and the establishment of an organization, the attempt to join one, the recruitment activity and the construction of related devices. Surveys, crisis management and border controls, conducted by local authorities, are limited by the extensive Yemeni border with the Arabian Sea and the border with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the border with Yemen has an insidious mountainous territory constituting a further challenge for the border security forces. The Omani authorities even fenced off the border with Yemen to prevent illegal

¹¹¹ AQAP stands for Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula chiefly acting in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and considered by the U.S. the most dangerous branch.

¹¹² The Houti movement is an armed group primarily Zaidi-Shia led.

¹¹³ Royal Decree No. (30/2016).

entries into Oman and keep engaging in frequent training activities related to border security.

The Sultan's Special Forces and the Royal Oman Police, together with the local Special Task Force constitute the main organs of response to terrorism. As for the fight against terrorist financing, Oman is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force¹¹⁴. The amendment of the Law on the Financing of Terrorism with Royal Decree 30/2016 requires financial institutions, private industries and non-profit organizations to monitor the transactions of money laundering and terrorist financing and to collect customer data for bank transfers. Despite the progress made, some gaps remain, including the adoption of mechanisms for the implementation of the sanctions against ISIS and al-Qaida and the issuing of anti-money laundering measures.

In relation to the fight against violent extremism, the Grand Mufti¹¹⁵ of Oman, Sheikh Ahmed al-Khalili, published an essay in October 2014, inviting all Muslims to reject extremism and promote tolerance. He appears regularly on TV, in a programme where he replies to people's questions about Islam and promotes harmony between religions. Furthermore, the government continues to foster an advocacy campaign called "Islam in Oman", aimed at encouraging tolerant and inclusive Islamic practices. The Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs' program named "Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence", is part of the government's efforts to improve interreligious dialogue in the Great Mosque of Sultan Qaboos¹¹⁶.

In the context of regional and international cooperation, Oman participates in the Strategic Cooperation Forum of the United States and regularly votes in favour of counter-terrorism measures in the UN General Assembly, in the Arab League, in the GCC and in the Organization for Islamic Cooperation.

¹¹⁴ Mena-Fatf (2011).

¹¹⁵ The Grand Mufti elaborates legal opinions and edicts, *fatwā*, with a practical utility value in the application of the law. They interpret the Islamic law and address individuals or judges in their decisions. Whatever the theme is, they are usually not binding.

¹¹⁶ United States Department of State (2016).

Last December 2017, Muscat became the 41st country to join the Saudi-led Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism.

2.4. The Al-Buraymi dispute and the Imamate insurrection

As seen for terrorism which does not constitute an alarming threat and is efficiently countered, security system in Oman is rather efficient. This is partly because, a long time before the Arab Spring, the country has faced two major insurrections with external forces interfering. One was the insurrection of the Imamate, otherwise known as Jebel Akhdar¹¹⁷ rebellion, that affected Oman's internal stability from 1954 until 1959. It was an historical dispute between the Sultan and the Imam whose relationship was ruled by the 1920 Treaty of Seeb which recognized sovereignty to the former and a recognition of internal territories to the latter. When oil was discovered in the Imam territories, Sa'īd ibn Taymūr violated the treaty by taking the lands belonging to the Imamate.

Something similar had happened two years before with the Oasis of al-Buraymi, a strip of land between the Sultanate of Oman and Muscat and the Trucial Shaikdom of Abu Dhabi. These two were fighting with Saudi Arabia for the legitimacy over the territory. The British were summoned by the Sultan in virtue of a treaty with the Shaikdom and intervened both directly in negotiations with King Saudi, and before an international court to curb the Saudi expansionist ambitions.¹¹⁸ Al-Buraymi was known to be a well-watered oasis in the desert, and moreover some assumptions had been made by ARAMCO—the US Saudi Oil Company—its territory could be oil-rich. The commercial interests of ARAMCO were intertwined with the US foreign policy and the UK determination to maintain its influence in the region and avoid external intrusion.

¹¹⁷ Jebel Akhdar meaning green mountain is a mountain range where the war was fought.

¹¹⁸ Kelly, J. L. (1956).

In 1954, a resolution was reached through arbitration¹¹⁹ that required the withdrawal of Saudi forces who had in the meantime occupied the villages and the establishment of a neutral zone around the oasis that prevented access by all the parties.

The dispute finally ended in 1954 after Saudi Arabia, in exchange for territorial concessions elsewhere, suspended its requests and left the territories to Abu Dhabi.

The Jebel Akhdar War was instead a series of battles fought between the interior of Oman, controlled by the Imam and supported by Saudi Arabia and Egypt and the exterior of Muscat, controlled by the Sultan and supported by Great Britain.

If the Imam and the Sultan had collaborated in bringing together forces to expel the Saudis away from Al-Buraymi, they were in 1954 in conflict for the same reasons: territories and oil. At the time Muhammad al-Khalīlī was passing away and Ghālib, under the alleged interference of the Saudis, was elected Imam. He soon declared Oman independent by Muscat after the Sultan granted a concession to drill for oil in the territories of the Imamate. The latter were invaded by Saʿīd ibn Tay who declared the Treaty of Seeb invalid by abolishing the Imam authority.¹²⁰ Ghālib retired but his brother Talib from 1954 to 1957 was preparing for an insurrection with the training of tribesmen and the gathering of arms and support from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He then returned to Oman and declared the Imam restored under the guidance of his brother and fought for the next seven days a battle against the Sultan's forces and the invincible British infantry and air force bombers.

The Imam's forces had to retreat into the Jebel Akhdar, which became their new stronghold for a courageous one-year long resistance in 1958. Here they were first attacked by air by the RAF and then by ground responded efficiently with Saudi weapons until the Special Air Service climbed the

¹¹⁹ Treaty Series 65, H.M.S.O. Cmd. 9272 (1954).

¹²⁰ Peterson, J. E. (1976).

mountain and put an end to the rebellion by giving the interior back to the Sultan in 1959.

2.5. Dhofar War 1965-1975

The other major insurrection involved the province of Dhofar, a region located in the South of Oman, and well detached by the rest of the country for the presence of the Rub Al-Khali desert, a long stretch of sand characterized by very high temperatures and seasonal monsoons, which certainly did not facilitate the unfolding of the battles especially for the Royal Air Force.¹²¹ The rebellion lasted for a decade and was one of the stage of the Cold War. The rebel faction was formed by southern left-wing separatists who formed a liberation front that eventually merged with others to become the PFLOAG¹²². They were officially backed by the socialist former South Yemen with the ultimate goal of overthrowing all the regimes in the Persian Gulf. The Sultan was again supported by Great Britain and indirectly by the US but more importantly, Saudi Arabia, unlike the Imamate insurgency a few years earlier, sided with Oman and provided its weapons to face the war.

In the 1970s, for one reason or another, all linked to delicate international balances, first China, then the Soviet Union and Iraq curtailed their ties with the PFLOAG. The weakening of the liberation front occurred just when Qaboos seized power, giving a new course to the war. He strengthened and expanded the army and granted amnesty to the surrendered rebels, and with the help of the United Kingdom, Iran and Jordan succeeded in suppressing the war. The merit of Qaboos was in conquering the souls of the South, in working with action plans for civilians and in co-opting important tribal

¹²¹ Hughes, G. (2009).

¹²² The Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf were guerrillas organized in 1968 by Marxist and Arab rebels in place of the Dhofar Liberation Front. It was later renamed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf to eventually be split. One dealing with Bahrain and one with Oman.

figures within the central power. The aftermath of socialist threats began to fade also thanks to the opening to the world and the establishment of diplomatic relations with South Yemen from 1983 which led to the reduction of problematic neighbours' subversive activities and the beginning of a new era of relaxation.

2.6. The Arab Spring

Even if the Arab Spring may be categorized as an event of domestic affairs, it has not been randomly discussed in this section on Oman's relations with the world. It is true that the Sultanate had already experienced some protests in the previous years because of the aftermath of unresolved internal issues, but it is also true that the main feature of the 2011 upheavals was precisely that they were organized on social platforms connecting people from all over the Arab countries. The protests have shaken the whole Middle East and North Africa area, and even if Oman, according to the media, seems to have not been hit that much, the scope of the protests has been significant enough to lead to important reflections and changes. The demonstrations did not cause great disarray to the regime and were turned off very quickly. However, the repercussions were profound and prompted the Sultan to undertake some, albeit minimal, reforms in the political, economic and social spheres.

The first protest took place on January 17, 2011, three days after the escape of the Tunisian president Ben Ali in Saudi Arabia, with protesters complaining about corruption, high prices of primary goods and too low wages. Initially the authorities intervened limitedly, perhaps fuelling the protests. The teachers took to the streets to request more promotions, subsidies for electricity, housing, water and benefits. The protests, also called Green Marches, as everywhere in the Arab world, were organized on the

Internet exploiting above all the Omani Internet chat room *Sablat al-Arab*¹²³ but also Facebook.

Although there were previous episodes of upheavals in 2010, in which teachers complained above all of the preference given to expatriates at the expense of the Omanis in being hired, it was only after the resignation of the Egyptian President and the popular uprisings in Bahrain that a state of alarm was perceived in the country. The protests intensified and one of them involved the capital city ending with a petition for the Diwan of the Royal Court¹²⁴ to be addressed to the Sultan.

What is interesting is that the protestants in their demonstrations never stopped supporting the Sultan, their complaints were focussed on the old and corrupt ministers considered to be unworthy to be part of the government.¹²⁵ At the end of February, from Muscat—where protests took place in front of the ministries—the wave of discontent first moved South of the country in Sohar—a port town hosting important industries—and then to the North. The peak of violence was reached precisely in Sohar, where the protesters clashed with the police and blocked roads and trucks heading towards the port; some images in the newspapers¹²⁶ depicted the *Lulu* hypermarket¹²⁷ on fire. Further attacks hit cars, a police station and government offices, provoking the police response with shots in the air, tear gas and rubber bullets. Sohar was certainly the prime example of the violence of the protests, but in general the sit-ins were peaceful and there were clear demonstrations in favour of the Sultan. The Grand Mufti Ahmed bin Hamad al-Khalili, had criticized the protests in Sohar, praising those in Salalah as civil, productive and positive. The population groups involved in the protests included university students and

¹²³ Sablat al-Arab is a forum for political and social debate, alternative to traditional media, which although not completely free or reflecting the totality of the population, offers an overview of the most important current issues affecting the country.

¹²⁴ The Diwan of the Royal Court is one of the highest administrative bodies in the Sultanate of Oman. He manages his property, organizes his public life and can mediate between the Sultan and his people.

¹²⁵ Worrall, J. (2012).

¹²⁶ Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/01/world/middleeast/01oman.html> (28/09/18).

¹²⁷ *Lulu* is a hypermarket chain, owned by Ali al-Maamari, the Minister of Royal Office.

employees in the tourism, aviation, refinery and banking sectors, all demanding for higher wages, subsidies and allowances, but also for investigations into the finances of all ministers. In no way did they have a homogeneous attitude: many even declared themselves horrified by their behaviours.

The reason why these targets had been hit, in particular the *LuLu* supermarket, lies in the Omanis aversion for the rampant corruption among the ministers¹²⁸ and the intolerance towards Indians and Pakistanis, perceived to be “everywhere” in Sohar as in Oman. From the humblest labourer to the entrepreneurial elite, they complain about how the economy is now controlled by expats who take advantage of the locals and export their earnings through remittances.¹²⁹ Actually, migrants earn much less than Omanis and are included exclusively in the private sector. This frustration clearly hides the much more serious issue of unemployment which affects dramatically the youths.

According to the CIA World Factbook, the population in Oman in 2017 counts around 4,613,241 people and 45% are migrants mostly coming from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.



Fig. 2 - Oman population growth¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Twelve ministers were removed from their office by Qaboos after the repeated people’s requests.

¹²⁹ Worrall, J. (2012).

¹³⁰ Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/oman/population> (29/09/19).

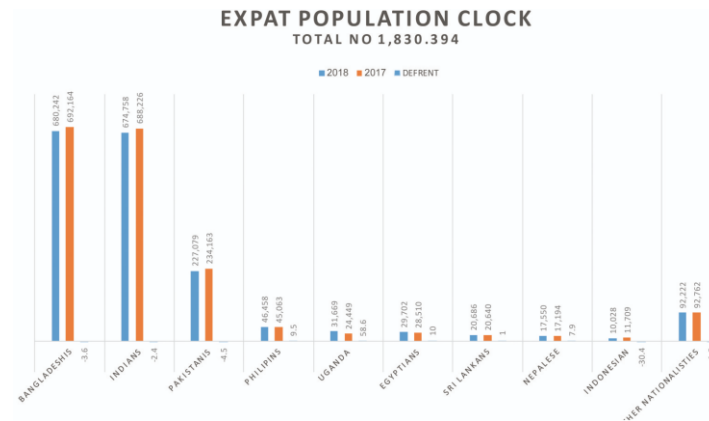


Fig. 3 - Expats in Oman 2017/2018¹³¹

One important origin of the discontent is linked to the previous one and concerns indeed unemployment. In Bahrain, the state most affected by the uprisings in the Gulf, as well as in Oman there is a high unemployment rate of 15% (20% among the youth), which particularly frustrates the youngest population, considering that the average age in Oman is 25 years and the majority's education is limited. If Qaboos had set up a valid education system in the 70s, to date schools and universities are obsolete, facilities are too small in number to welcome the youths and teachers are reluctant to embrace reforms.

Plans for the placement of Omani workers have long been adopted through *Omanization*¹³² policies but its results do not seem successful partly because of the general belief that the population does not put its efforts in working and takes the protection offered by the government for granted.

Too low wages (70% of those working in the private sector have a salary below the minimum wage) and inflation were also fuelling these protests. Oman has a very young population that cannot be absorbed neither by the private sector nor by the public which is already saturated. According to the

¹³¹ Source: Oman Daily Observer (29/09/19).

¹³² *Omanization* is a policy of inclusion of Omani nationals within the private industry and the public sector at the expense of expatriates. The non-nationals that converged in Oman, as well as in other Gulf countries, are mainly from Asia and were attracted by the discovery of oil and the consequent new jobs that were created. The plan was started in 1988 and it is still in use.

International Monetary Fund, 45000 new jobs should be created each year in order to please the job-seekers, an unthinkable number if we think that this figure already exceeds the jobs created over a five-year period. Again, non-nationals are often preferred, and while Omanis complain about having less opportunities, on the other hand the expats in the lower sectors receive a minimum wage much lower than that of Omanis who are believed to be spoiled by the government benefits. Other requests included the expansion of public infrastructure with reference to schools and universities and the removal of some ministries, the most hated of whom was Economy Minister Ahmad Bin Abdul Nabi Macki, who is believed to have taken advantage of his position for the past 20 years to exclusively enrich himself.

Nevertheless, the ultimate goal was always reform, *islah*, and never liberation nor freedom. A reform that had to involve the removal of some ministers, the fight against corruption, the raising of living conditions, a freed press and independent legislative and judicial powers.¹³³

The petition with these proposals was sent to the Sultan on 23 February and received the symbolic response of convening the Shura Council and reorganize the cabinet by reassigning the ministries already in charge rather than actually firing some old and hiring new ones. As for unemployment, 50,000 new jobs, unemployment benefits and increases in school subsidies were promised, an authority for Consumer Protection to monitor prices and quality was established, and works for the transferring of powers to the Majlis were started¹³⁴.

A month after the petition, various royal decrees were issued providing for the abolition of the corrupt Ministry of Economy, a new public university, the National Audit Committee to combat corruption and the investigation of cooperatives. Welfare was enhanced with pensions and allowances increased (by 50% in the first case and 100% in the second), the minimum wage was increased and direct confrontation was promoted through representatives sent

¹³³ Worrall, J. (2012).

¹³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 106

all over the country with the task of listening to the people and transform their requests in reforms.

The Arab Spring in Oman shared a lot in common with the rest of the region but its distinctive features were certainly the support for the Sultan and the concessions and the active involvement in responding to the people.

According to Worrall, however, requests exceeded the Sultan's capabilities and those concessions cannot be easily repeated in a society with a growing youth population. Oman is a rentier state based on oil exports and large social benefits with no income tax granted to the citizens. Even if the richer neighbour rulers released a \$ 20 billion plan for Oman and Bahrein 10 years valid and opened their labour markets to welcome their job-seekers, a new arrangement is needed.¹³⁵

Besides depending on the rentier system, Oman relies on the fundamental connection between the Sultan and the Ibadite school, the co-optation of tribal figures coming from different regions within the government and on the Omani renaissance, *al-Nahda*, on which the Sultan put its efforts to create symbols in continuity with traditions able to combine people and strengthen the society. The Sultan has enjoyed an exceptional reputation and esteem, but he is 78 years old and the problem of succession is looming together with the popular anxieties of a future Sultan who does not have the same good will, dedication and compassion for the people. Omanis feel grateful to have been governed by a capable, benevolent and progressive man who has radically developed the country. However, most of the population is too young to have experienced the early years of Qaboos and do not realize the extent of the progress made. The youth are more cosmopolitan, interconnected and influenced from the outside world due to globalization and the Internet and maybe more prone to future protests.

¹³⁵ *Ivi.* p. 108.

Furthermore, the Arab Spring has shown how the Omani are ready to make their voices heard and want to participate in the decision-making processes and the political debate.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

3. Assessing political stability

Now that the internal and international dimensions have been discussed it is worth to briefly analysing the contemporary's political stability of Oman with its strengths and weaknesses.

The contemporary Sultanate political model is thoroughly linked to his ruler who won his people's loyalty by constructing a national identity and a state centred on his person. However, this system is not deemed to survive. Sultan Qaboos is turning 78 the next 18th of November 2018 (his birthday was fixed as National Day) and he has been suffering from colon cancer for the past four years. Even if he boasts a long dynastical history by representing the 14th generation of the Al Busaidi dynasty, no clear rules regulate the succession process and Omanis are concerned about their future. In 1996, it was established that only Muslim males descending from Sultan Turki (Qaboos's great-great-grandfather) and sons of an Omani mother could legitimately accede to the throne.¹³⁷ However, even if he was briefly married to his cousin, they had no children. Moreover, Article 6 of the Basic Statute defines the guidelines to undertake upon his death:

“The Royal Family Council shall, within three days of the throne falling vacant, determine the successor to the throne. If the Royal Family Council does not agree on a choice of a Sultan for the Country, the Defence Council together with the Chairman of Majlis Al Dawla, the Chairman of Majlis Al Shura, and the Chairman of the Supreme Court along with two of his most senior deputies, shall instate the person designated by His Majesty the Sultan in his letter to the Royal Family Council”.¹³⁸

Qaboos hid two envelopes containing indications of a possible choice in allegedly the palaces of Muscat and Salalah. It is commonly believed they might contain one of his cousins' names, the three sons of the Sultan's paternal uncle Tariq bin Taimur, but apparently Qaboos is not much impressed by his family nor did he ever have a close relationship with his relatives. Unlike other countries

¹³⁷ Dazi-Hèni F. (2017: 2).

¹³⁸ Royal Decree 101/96 (2011: 3)

in the Gulf where large families not only compete for the throne but have a say before the ruler comes to any major conclusion, Qaboos is the sole leader and he has always taken decisions autonomously. In addition, he is a private person, with a very strict access controlled by the Minister of Royal Office, very few trustworthy advisors and each minister is directly responsible to him. Nowadays, the relations between leadership and society have changed and consequently the regime he has committedly created, in the interests of the country and its people, is no longer suited to the present challenges.

3.1. The regime's positive achievements in preserving stability

Many are the impressive achievements the Sultan boasts and one of this is undoubtedly the fact that despite being an absolute monarch, he was never considered as a despot nor there have ever been attempts to overthrow him. Omani are satisfied and grateful with his ruling and if you ask how they feel about him the majority of them would reply “before Qaboos, there was nothing; after Qaboos there was everything”.¹³⁹

The consensus around him was fostered by the cult of personality broadcasted and portrayed in all the most popular public places. The narrative of *al-nahda*, the Renaissance, has been omnipresent in the lives of the people and in their daily activities and the past before 1970 is never mentioned unless in reference to the glorious present regeneration. Qaboos put all his efforts in building an extreme personalization with the political system and in guaranteeing a strong legitimacy. He modernized a country from scratch, organized a new government, promoted development through infrastructure projects involving roads, hospitals, schools, airports, desalinization and electricity structures. He was able to overcome the historical territorial divisions and face a legacy of tribal contrasts and rivalries within the country by involving important tribesmen in key government positions and giving them a stake in addition to the idea of a cohesive and inclusive identity. The *wasta*, or favoritism—aimed at exploiting one's contacts in order to obtain any advantage or any need or complaint

¹³⁹ Peterson, J. E. (2013: 321)

accomplished, as well as job promotions—did also help in ensuring respect from eminent individuals.¹⁴⁰

The long-lasting territorial split of the interior of Oman with the exterior of Muscat and also the territorial distinction between Northern Oman and Southern Dhofar have been overcome together with the achievement of a territorial state and a shared national identity. As soon as Qaboos ascended the throne, he faced a long and violent separatist rebellion and fought and eradicated it to avoid any future repercussions. The insurgents combating for the Popular Front against the Sultan's forces were encouraged to desert and to work for the government and accept prominent ministerial positions. A striking and living example is the Minister for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, who from being a rebel was at last co-opted until becoming one of the closest dignitaries of the Sultan.

This inclusive policy—involving the majority of the subjects coming from all the regions—has certainly been decisive for providing the regime with solid foundations provided that it could count on a vast crowd of civil servants who depended on the Sultan for their survival.¹⁴¹ He was able to take into account since the beginning the importance of the tribes in the social fabric and of the consequent identification and allegiances, indeed the regime nourished the relationship between the ruler and the sheikhs. It is worth mentioning that Sultan's mother was born in one of the main tribes of Dhofar who had raised the rebellion. The complex of these tribes living in the mountains was known as *jibbali* and the kinship of Qaboos with them entailed their respect and obedience.¹⁴² The security services were also part of this accurate scheme, both for their role of keeping law and order and for their ability to offer a secure job. The Sultan's Special Forces, the Royal Oman Police, the Internal Security Service, the Royal Guard and the Sultan's Armed Forces constituted the largest source of state employment and consequently of money to a large portion of the male population.¹⁴³

Although minimal and contested for the purely ceremonial purpose, attempts to introduce political participation have been promoted with the introduction of the

¹⁴⁰ Valeri M. (2015: 10)

¹⁴¹ *Ivi* 3.

¹⁴² Peterson J. E. (2013: 324)

¹⁴³ *Ivi* 323.

Majlis Oman, a sort of bicameral setting with no power except the review of laws and the discussion on matters of social services (finance, foreign relations and security excluded).

As far as the religious sphere is concerned, the Sultan belongs to Ibadism, the predominant school in the country. His repeated affirmations regarding the legitimacy of this branch of Islam, contested by the Saudis as heretic, has contributed to increasing popular consensus towards the Islamic leader. Ibadi are also very open and tolerant and coexist peacefully with Sunnis and Shiites by sharing their places of worship and prayer.

Moreover, one factor that should not be underestimated is that radical Islamism in Oman has never taken root. In the past, as previously discussed, the Imam and the Sultan constituted two different centres of power and in the 1950s the country had to bear an important insurrection for the restoration of the Imamate. There were also more recent episodes of intolerance, one in 1993 and the other in 2005 that led to the arrest of individuals accused of subversion. However, Oman is the only country in the Middle East to have terrorist risk figures equal to zero. If by and large the jihadi threat is perceived throughout the whole Arab world, in Oman the vulnerability to terrorist attacks is very low and terrorism is not considered to be of domestic relevance to the extent that the media do not even talk about it. This is reflected in the very few Omanis who have joined *Daesh* compared to all the recruits from other Arab countries.¹⁴⁴

Speaking of economy, the conspicuous oil revenues have allowed a distribution of wealth through social services and new employment, contributing to increase the standard of living to the extent that since 1970 the population has grown sevenfold. Economic prosperity was therefore struggled and reached to a limited extent but the oil discovery has certainly filled the coffers of the state and allowed a reallocation to the citizens as well as the important circumvention of tax burdens. A relevant factor supporting stability is indeed the social contract between the people and the state: the latter offers prosperity and welfare but receives allegiance and loyalty in turn. This path seems much more tempting to undertake than being in the hands of a despot or facing a power vacuum gripped by civil wars, as some Arab neighbours have experienced.

¹⁴⁴ Bianco C. (2018: 36)

Last but not least, the regime succeeded in making Oman relevant in the international arena and steered the country among the difficult balances with the ultimate aim of preserving regional and consequently national stability. Substantial diplomatic objectives including the admission as an independent state to the Arab League and to the United Nations in 1971 and to the Gulf Cooperation Countries in 1981, have to be recognized as well the exceptional ability to adapt—without losing political and economic autonomy—to the changing regional conditions and international pressures.

By and large, the long-term principles of non-intervention, non-alignment, respect for the international law and pragmatism have been privileged by the Sultan in order to preserve regional stability and to avoid foreign dangerous contagion.

3.2. Instability and weakness elements

While the regime seems to be stable and legitimized by Omanis, there are still elements of weaknesses and instability. Although Qaboos may have been an enlightened and modernizing ruler, capable of bringing together all the different souls of the country, Oman remains an absolute monarchy with the shortages of an authoritarian regime. If in the short term the concentration of power in the hands of an individual allows a quick, easy and effective decision-making process, in the long run it generates a discontent and instability spillover aggravated by the uncertain heir to the throne.¹⁴⁵ Who will succeed him? Will he have the same forward-looking abilities? Will he guarantee the development of the country?

The Sultan is surrounded by a circle of pre-eminent individuals who are contested for acting only for their personal interests and are considered corrupt. This small élite is perceived as occupying their positions only to increase their wealth and private commercial interests. Business in particular is plagued by an unfair competition that even important merchant families complain about and that creates frustration among ordinary men whose standards of living continue

¹⁴⁵ Peterson J. E. (2013: 324)

to stagnate. It is no coincidence that corruption, *wasta* and unemployment were the drivers of the Arab Spring and to date the solutions adopted have not fulfilled the protesters' expectations.

As for the economy, the rentier system is still predominant. Oman does not boast the amount of resources that the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have, they are more difficult to extract, due to the mountainous and harsh landscape, and above all the Sultanate has not undertaken a valid path to lead the country in a post-oil era as Bahrein did. Still, about 85% of the total government revenues comes from the oil and gas rents that are then reallocated to the citizens avoiding the burden of tax collection.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the recent discovery of an oil field last February 2018 has contributed to slow down urgent reforms that instead should be considered as an urgent matter. Some alternatives, for instance within Oman 2020, have already been promoted to diversify the economy by focusing on non-oil sectors, tourism and the production of liquefied natural gas. However, the latter is still a highly capital-intensive sector and therefore not very influential on the issue of unemployment and tourism is growing very slowly. Oman is a country of unemployed youth looking for a large labor market that can engage them. According to the World Bank, youth unemployment—among 15 and 24 years old—in Oman count for the 48% in 2017 and is highly correlated to political instability.

Moreover, these young people have no memory of the backwardness of the country and the achievements of Qaboos. They feel less indebted to their ruler and most likely will not be willing to accept the same political system from whoever will be the successor.

The 2011 upheavals revealed this sense of frustration for a saturated public sector and a private sector unbridgeable by the youth who do not meet the necessary requirements. All of this was fuelled by an impatience towards the Asian expats community and their often successful economic activities. Overall—thanks to the tremendous development of the country—population has increased in the last four decades, but the labour market is not able to offer opportunities for everyone.

¹⁴⁶ Bianco C. (2018: 29)

Unfortunately, the political sphere enjoys the same inaccessible characteristics. Political liberalization is really weak and most of the times justified to Western counterparts with the difficulties that liberal leaders would face in dealing with a tribal and conservative system under the well-known assumption that “people are not ready for democracy”.¹⁴⁷

Accordingly, a destabilizing factor is the organization of educated youth who, for their high level of education, think should be included in the political process. In order to have a voice they opened online forums where political debate is promoted and sensitive issues are discussed without resorting to anonymity. The inevitable result was the promulgation of ad-hoc laws to counter these critics and the consequent arrest of activists and bloggers accused of defamation. However, many forums are still operational, in the hope to raise awareness of the need for greater political openness.

Nevertheless, the 2011 events taught the Omanis how politics is a field which is more convenient if remained undiscovered and this is reflected in the tacit agreement between the authorities and the demonstrators with the abstention to the use of force by the former if the latter had not interfered in political matters.

As soon as the protests broke out, the Sultan was quick to issue a decree on a cybercrime law that would establish arrest for anyone who used the internet as a vehicle for “violating the public ethics” or for jeopardizing public order or the traditional values of the country.¹⁴⁸ In 2012 and 2013 there were further strikes and crackdowns on civil society with arrests for illicit gathering and defamation, and although Qaboos soon after granted the pardon and the release of all activists and the work reintroduction for those who had lost their jobs, Human Rights Watch reports that basic rights are regularly hampered.¹⁴⁹

The Arab Spring was also in part instigated and fomented by Islamist groups. If as previously mentioned, radical Islamism does not constitute an instability risk for the regime, it is also true that it fuelled popular discontent most likely because it had been seen as an easily identifiable channel of opposition. Clandestine organizations influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood but also by Salafis and

¹⁴⁷ Valeri M. (2015: 5)

¹⁴⁸ *Ivi* 13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ivi* 17.

Ibadis in different areas of the country, succeeded in creating unrest particularly in Sohar.

Speaking of foreign policy, the relationship with the strategic alliances of Oman are undergoing variations. United Kingdom remains a fundamental partner, at the economic and military level, but the British are now very absorbed by Brexit. The relationship with the United States is still relevant but it was stronger under the Obama administration than now with Trump. The most critical issue is the fact that Oman is coming out of the GCC orbit, headed by Saudi Arabia and UAE, and the evidence is Oman's foreign policy. In 2013, Yusuf bin Alawi, during a GCC conference, expressed his disinterest in the Saudi-backed monetary union by pointing at the vast economic differences among all the countries. Qaboos has always felt close to Saudi's most hated enemy Iran and did mediate for a positive outcome of the nuclear deal. Economic agreements with the new boycotted outsider Qatar have been signed and Oman together with Kuwait remained neutral when the GCC imposed sanctions on the emir. Finally, Oman is believed to facilitate weapons smuggling to the Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen fighting against Hadi's Sunni forces. In addition, if now terrorism does not present a threat to the Sultanate, it is highly probable that in the post-Qaboos era the extremist groups of ISIS and AQAP could pose a threat to the security of the country.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, to date, a lot of anxiety is generated by the possibility that Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman could meddle in the urgent issue of succession and favour a candidate of their likely that could align with their stances and be more obedient than Qaboos. This kind of international intrusion in the domestic affairs of a country gives an idea of the blurring of national borders and is sometimes referred to as an *intermestic* threat.¹⁵¹ Besides, Oman seems to have previously experienced a similar situation when the government blamed some protesters in Sohar for being supported by foreign powers, allegedly under Emirati influence.

In conclusion, if with political stability the presence of the same figures in ruling positions is meant, then Oman boasts a history of almost five decades with the same Sultan at the pinnacle of power together with his circle of close confidants

¹⁵⁰ Cafiero G. & Karasik T. (2016: 1)

¹⁵¹ Bianco C. (2018: 35)

and ministers and no attempts to overthrow the regime: on the contrary, the people are well aware of his achievements and felt indebted to him. Only after the Arab Spring were there some changes—the main ones being the dismissal of the Minister of National Economy and the Minister of Commerce and Industry because considered corrupt—but they were mostly reshuffles rather than real changes.¹⁵² If instead in the concept of political stability the public discontent is included, most recent events reveal the weaknesses of this political system and suggest future risks of instability. The wave of protests since 2011 has been proving how people are willing to challenge the old paternalistic say that they are not mature for a more consistent political participation and moreover that the conspicuous number of unemployed youth urges an economic reorganization and more effective diversification. From this point of view, with the imminent problem of the succession of Qaboos and with the cooling down of the relations with the Great of the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia, the future of Oman seems rather unstable.

¹⁵² Valeri M. (2015: 11)

Conclusion

The analysis of the first and the second chapters reveals different contrasting characteristics—already partially outlined in the third chapter—that on the one hand show a stable Oman, but on the other hand they highlight its vulnerabilities to be taken into consideration for the near future. Overall, it can be stated that the country boasts a successful example of political stability, albeit with the shortages of an absolute monarchy that are starting to be suffered by Omanis.

As far as the relations of power and the socio-political organization is concerned, Oman has changed profoundly and the multiple and contrasting centres of power have been reduced to a single individual who earned respect, esteem and consensus of all its people. Until the 19th century, the confederations of Hinâwî and Ghâfirî played a decisive role at the political level, supporting Sultans or Imams of their preference, gathering the different tribes spread in the whole territory under their alliance and clashing with each other for power. To date, allegiances among tribes still exist but feuds are almost non-existent and, if any, they take a milder form. Since the Āl Bū Saʿīd dynasty does not belong to any of the two confederations, it was easier for both to accept it. Moreover, claims for power by the Ibadite Imamate—whose ruling was based on *shariʿa* and which exercised spiritual and temporal power over the region—were definitively dissipated in 1959 when the Imamate forces were defeated by the Sultan with the help of the British and its territories were annexed to the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, which will in 1970 turn into the Sultanate of Oman. The regent dynasty belongs to the Ibadi religion, and this legitimizes the Sultan even more in the eyes of his subjects. The only country in the world where Ibadism—which predates both Sunnism and Shiism—is predominant is precisely Oman and this school is known to be particularly tolerant, having helped to promote a climate of lasting coexistence. Among the merits that must be recognized to Qaboos there is certainly the ability to have modernized a backward country, building hospitals, schools and roads, putting an end to rivalries and the territorial divisions by bringing everyone under the same identity. This inclusive policy has involved all the layers of the Omani society, through granting pardon and co-opting rebel individuals and offering safe jobs in the public sector, making the Sultan's legitimacy and consensus much easier. It is also true that Qaboos

enjoyed the luck to happen in a historical period in which the state coffers were filled with discrete quantities of oil and gas that financed its ambitious program, guaranteed a welfare system and the exemption from taxes. Since the '90s, Qaboos committed himself to launch a program of economic diversification and inclusion of the Omani citizens in the private sector, but with little success. The recent discovery of new oil fields further slows down reform projects by the now old Qaboos who does not even have any heirs. The issue of succession and the unresolved problems raised during the protests in the past years since 2011, only increase awareness of an inevitable period of uncertainty that deserves more attention. The unprecedented successes achieved in international politics by Qaboos as a mediator in regional crises could also be obscured by the weakening of relations with the Arabian strongholds, especially the Saudis. Qaboos maintains strong and strategic alliances with important partners and has a reputation of a cautious and discreet player able to mediate in delicate situations, but in recent years he has shown an independence and a deviation from the Saudi Arabian line that could irritate the young Mohammed bin Salman.

In conclusion, the paternalistic system of Qaboos of the last almost 50 years was therefore effective and positive for the country for many reasons and the Sultan was acclaimed by everyone and proved to be receptive when needed. However, to date this regime has to deal with a different society, where the youths do not have memory of a pre-Qaboos country and where unemployment is constantly increasing as are the demands for greater political integration.

Appendix

Interview of the Author with Cinzia Bianco, PhD, Centre for Gulf Studies, University of Exeter, 1st August 2018, Skype.

Questions

1. In your research paper “EU-GCC cooperation”, you highlight the potential of Oman in terms of a pragmatic and peaceful foreign policy and its geostrategic position, and point out the Sultanate of Oman as an ideal interlocutor to start with for a stronger cooperation between the EU and the Gulf. Do you think from 2014 on, there have been any steps forward toward this direction? Was the “Gulf of Skills”, in any way, embraced?

The EU-GCC relations have suffered greatly from the Arab Spring and the way in which the EU handled it and how it was perceived by the GCC including Oman. The EU was perceived as a destabilising factor, and could have had a stabilising effect if it was able to contribute to improve the socioeconomic development stages in the various GCC countries and in particular in Oman. Oman is quite different from the other five GCC countries with respect to the socioeconomic development and the economic status of its population. What happened in the first years following to the Arab Spring was that the EU did not take this approach but was rather perceived as being eager to facilitate human rights situation and political reforms rather than economic. The Arab Spring in Oman, and in the other GCC countries, was a time of high security sensitivity for the regime because it was perceived that the population might be up for a challenge to the stability of the regime itself. The EU, in that context, given the fact that the EU institutions have always been very keen on promoting political liberalization and human rights, was not perceived as an ally by the Omani regime but as standing with the people that were calling for changes and reforms, people considered by the point of view of the regime as problem-makers. There were 2/3 years or even more of really cold relations between the EU and all the countries of the Gulf. What is going on right now, and after the new EU Global

Strategy was published by Federica Mogherini, is that the EU is trying to change its own approach to these issues, and be more pragmatic about handling change and development and reforms in the Arab countries. In this context, there are projects very similar to the Gulf of Skills that have been taken under consideration for a few months and slowly they are building this new role for the EU. In the future, it is possible that there will be a change in this relationship but so far this remains only a potential development. What is actually going on is a time of really cold relationship between the EU and all the GCC countries. On some issues, there is a convergence also at the political level, for instance with the issue of Iran, because Oman is strongly promoting dialogue and the EU is one of the strongest advocate for dialogue with Iran on the international diplomacy but despite this convergence there is very few deep political dialogue between the two.

2. Oman is not the oil richest Gulf countries and it is thought that by 2030 its reserves will be over. A) Is the government effectively able to diversify the economy and free the country from the “rentier system”? B) Are Omanization policies helping the unemployment condition?

While the oil reserves might be very easily over by 2030 there have been new discoveries of new gas fields offshore the southern coast of Oman. This is an important factor to explain why although all the indicators from International Organizations would tell you that Oman is desperately in need of economic reforms, economic reforms are taking place very slowly and absolutely not effectively. Moreover, many argue that Oman is not willing to diversify the economy beyond the rentier system. This is a very complex reform, changing the political economy of a country like Oman where the ruling agreements between the rulers and the people is based a lot on economic considerations. The idea right now at the level of the Omani regime is that this is not the right time to be introducing ground-breaking reforms that might destabilize the economy and the politics of the country. On the long term, ground-breaking reforms might be positive for the socioeconomic development, but on the short term they are deemed to be too risky. The regime thinks this is not the right time to be doing risky operations given that they feel a lot of pressure from the regional

environment: from the Qatar crisis, from a new crisis against Iran, from the Yemen war. Basically, on all the fronts they see geostrategic instability that cause caution with reforms. What is actually being pursued is Omanization, pushed much more strongly now than it used to be before. On the short term this might be a positive development because more Omani citizens get jobs. However, on the long term it can backfire because pushing international companies to hire Omanis too strongly makes them (the companies) want to leave the country. This is an actual problem for FDI and for international companies that operate in Oman. Therefore, Omanization is being pushed and new stake jobs in the public sector have been promised, but unemployment rate is not that improved. All of these initiatives are still not sufficient to absorb all the new job seekers that enter the job market every year. Omanization is one good initiative but it has to go hand in hand with ways to attract FDI and international companies and they are aware of it but the reason why they are not able to do that is partly beyond their control. There is regional political instability and therefore the political risk is too high, many people don't want to invest because of the political risk, they had high hopes for becoming a logistic hub to re-export, to and from Iran, basically the role that used to be filled by Dubai before 2012. Dubai was a regional hub where all the goods coming from and going to Iran transited, and they wanted to fill that place but with the Iran nuclear deal into question they are not able to cash in on this project. So, there are a number of conditions partly due to their own mismanagement of the economy, which is not competitive enough and partly due to external factors that are beyond their control.

3. Speaking of political stability, Oman is considered to be one of the most stable Gulf countries. What makes the difference between Oman and the other Gulf Countries?

Political stability is a broad term. If we are talking about the fact that the regime itself is very stable in the sense that the same people have been involved in the government for a number of years, then it is true to a certain extent. After 2011 people were actually fired from the government and new people came into the government. If we are talking about street protests, Oman is quite stable as a

country because there is this consensus around the figure of the Sultan Qaboos and he has been ruling for more than four decades. This gives a lot of stability to the country since there is this myth/cult of personality built around the Sultan in the regime narrative propagated to the population by different channels. All the different ways in which there is a communication between the authority and the people including in schools or in mosques, there is always this cult of personality of the Sultan being promoted among the population. The first issue is that the Sultan was a formidable modernizer for the country. So, people that were already alive and conscious when he took over, they remember in which dire state was Oman before he took over. There were no roads, no hospitals, no schools, the industry had not been developed. This socioeconomic development that the Sultan brought forward is really very present in the collective memory of the population especially the older part. The other issue is that he made huge efforts of crafting a narrative of unity and cohesion and national identity in the country. So, for example if you take Oman and Bahrein and you look at the differences, you see that the public discourse in Oman speaks of overcoming the differences between the sects, between the different tribes, religions and ethnic roots, uniting all the people behind one Omani identity. The state has made big efforts at the level of the narrative to give this idea of an inclusive national identity. This is one of the main issues of contention in the Gulf, because in Bahrein one of the main problem is that the opposite has happened. A large part of the population feels excluded by the definition of a national identity. This issue of marginalization of minorities are very strong in all the Arab Gulf countries, and have been one of the main reasons for discontent and protests. There are of course differences, there are socio-political groups that are more advantaged than others, but there has been this political strategy of building a cohesive national identity and cohesive national fabric and very cleverly also trying to overcome the differences between the sects and the tribes.

4. What do you think are the internal factors that influence Oman stability? Does the Ibadi religious majority influence tolerance and therefore stability?

The fact that the regime belongs to Ibadism which is a minority group within Islam, made the regime differently behaving versus other minorities. They

behave in an inclusive way of other minorities, and of course because Ibadism is somewhere in between Sunnism and Shiism, the religious rhetoric contributed to overcome the differences between the sects, but the most important thing was actually the political strategy behind this narrative. When he took over, the Sultan basically tried to split the different sects and the different socio-political groups including the tribes by going to the leaders of these groups and involving them directly into government. There were tribes, in the interior of Oman, and these tribes were very strongly opposed to the Sultan. There was an actual civil war taking place in Oman and the same was happening in Dhofar in the South. The first civil war, the one in the interior, was based on religious grounds and the other one was based on political grounds. The dissidence in Dhofar identified with communism and Nasserism while the dissidence in the interior identified with Ibadism and they had a caliphate, so they wanted a more different institution centred around Ibadi political Islam. The political strategy of the Sultan after defeating both insurgencies was to go towards the leaders of these communities and involve them into government by giving them high level positions. The current minister responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, was one of the leaders of the insurgent groups in Dhofar. Tribal structure is still very important in Oman. The idea of the Sultan was to try to co-opt the tribes and to absorb them and give them a stake in the stability of its own regime.

5. Did Sultan Qaboos react properly to the 2011 upheavals, properly meaning actually solving and efficiently responding to the requests and demands of Omani citizens? Or are these protests likely to be repeated?

Sultan Qaboos reacted to the 2011 upheavals in two ways: one was the crackdown because there was a brutal crackdown by the regime against the protesters and the other was the co-optation in the sense that there were a number of reforms introduced, a number of government members were fired because they were identified as particularly corrupt by the people protesting; this would be for example the Minister for Commerce Ahmed Makki who was particularly contested by the population. The roots of the protest are inscribed into these socioeconomic vulnerabilities (unemployment, economic inequalities) of Oman that are not yet resolved. The main root factors of the upheavals have not been

overcome and therefore it is likely that new protests will be repeated especially under the successor of Sultan Qaboos.

6. *In order to have a political system in which all the powers are concentrated in the hands of a single person, an enlightened, educated, open-minded ruler is needed, alike the current sultan. However, Qaboos is 78 and his health conditions have worsened so much that he does not appear in public so often and a general anxiety is perceived on Oman future. How will the country face the post Qaboos era?*

Succession is one of the main issues right now in Oman. There are ideas around who might be the new Sultan and there are candidates, so on that front there isn't much concern in the sense that there is some indication so everything is not up in the air. But at the same time, given the regional situation, there is a lot of anxiety in Oman about regional power trying to influence the succession in a way that is favourable to them. In particular, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as expressed by the alliance between Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman. They are perceived as very hostile to the traditional Omani policies and policy-making, and very active in trying to redesign the entire region to their own liking. Succession will be a very vulnerable time to external influence that might cause a lot of instability and confusion if it will lend to different candidates fighting among themselves for power.

7. *In the "Intra-GCC crises" you mention that Oman and Kuwait did not align with the anti-Qatar block and Oman's position is quite sensitive primarily for its ties with Iran. Is Omani kind diplomacy likely to compromise its GCC membership and turning the country in an opposition target? Would this cautious attitude make Oman an outsider and a weak actor in the international arena?*

Yes, Oman is likely to become considered a hostile actor by UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular because it doesn't align with their own views and it doesn't cave very easily to their own pressure. If you look at what is happening with Kuwait for example, since the Qatar crises erupted, the Saudis have been

pressuring Kuwait in a stick and carrots strategy. And Kuwait has been gradually becoming closer to Saudi positions. In Oman, this strategy hasn't been as successful and therefore it is antagonizing even more the two countries. Especially given the fact that the United States administration with Donald Trump is in close alignment especially with the UAE and Mohammed bin Zayed, Oman's position has been weakened in the international arena. US-Oman relations will always be solid in the ground but they are not as strong as they used to be under the previous administration. This has already weakened Oman in the international arena because Oman has three main pools of alliances: one is Iran and it's as strong as ever; the other one is with the GCC and it used to be very stable but when the new alliance between the two Mohammeds took place this started to have ups and downs more than in the past; and the third one is with the US. After these three the fourth most important line is with the UK, and Oman-UK relations are as strong as they ever been, so there hasn't been any change in that but the UK is very much self-absorbed by Brexit so its own relevance on the international arena is lessened with respect to the past. Therefore, Oman is in a very precarious situation. Three of its four basic points have been put into question or are going through a difficult period. Oman is a very secretive place, so everything takes place a lot behind the scenes. You don't really get a lot of its concerns and issues if you don't dig a lot into the situation on the ground. There are a lot of challenges, internal and external.

8. *What happens when international and domestic factors overlap?*

The *intermestic* dimension can be applied to contemporary politics in the Gulf. One of the main hypothesis is that this is actually the most dangerous and important situation. For instance, in the case of Oman, there is a situation of economic instability in the North of the country, the Batinah region, this is the region at the border between the UAE and Oman. At the same time that there is this economic instability, there is a hostility growing between Oman and the UAE. So, what the Omani government regime thought it was happening was that the UAE has supported protesters in the Batinah region. They believe they paid people to protest against the Omani government. The *intermestic* level is when a hostile foreign power tries to take advantage of an internal vulnerability. The

UAE is pursuing its own interests meddling with the internal politics of the other GCC countries like they have done for example very latently in the Qatar crisis. During the Qatar crises, UAE has chosen a number of people within the royal family of Qatar and they have been arguing that these people were better for ruling Doha than the actual emir. The UAE has a history of doing this kind of operations in the contemporary period. Saudi Arabia has a history of doing similar operations dating back to the civil war between the Sultan and the interior and the Sultan and the Dhofar rebels. Kuwait used to do that by supporting rebels in Dhofar against the Sultan. So, we have a history of these sort of events, we have a context for these events, we have rumours and we have the idea that this might happen again.

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Summary

In this dissertation, the political stability and the contemporary challenges of the Sultanate of Oman will be the object of my analysis. In a historical context, the territorial divisions, the traditional Ibadi identity embodied by the Imam and the tribal structure will be discussed in the first chapter until arriving at the present almost missing political participation. Oman is one of the eight Persian Gulf countries located in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula. Before it was officially named the Sultanate of Oman in 1970, the country was divided in Muscat—a long coastal strip commonly named the *exterior*—and Oman—the harsh and mountainous core otherwise known as the *interior*. The isolated Oman was the centre of Ibadi Islam, with an autarchic economy and a stronger tribal influence, whereas Muscat was located at a crossroads within a network of maritime exchanges with the Indies. This strategic position made the territory vulnerable to foreign influence. Abbasids, Qarmatians, Buyyids, Seljuks, the Kingdom of Ormus, Portuguese, Ottomans and then partially the British with a protectorate, succeeded in obtaining the control of the Omani territory. However, a total conquest was rare, occupations have always been short and a *modus vivendi* was created quickly between the two parts of the country *vis-à-vis* local dynasties being the vassals of whoever was in power in Muscat.

The socio-political organization was traditionally based on two basic structures: tribe and religion. The former is led by a *sheikh*, which in addition to managing the common property has the role of mediator with the other tribes. Every tribe is intimately linked to either the territorial establishment and the alliances between the small groups to maintain a political balance within a hierarchy of geographical units, the first being the village. The main mechanism for the functioning of this system is the affiliation of these minority groups of a village to the rival clans of the majority (Hinâwî and Ghâfirî confederations) spread in the whole region, so that in case of aggression the former has allies ready to intervene and guarantee for their independence. It is this duality (alliances either within a clan and within a region) that maintains the regional equilibrium, so that a breaking of relations at one point at a lower level would automatically trigger a domino effect involving the superior hierarchical levels. The fear of provoking

an escalation dragging everyone in chaos plays automatically a moderating role in preventing the spread of conflicts.

Historically, Omani tribes are divided into two rival blocks, the Hinâwî and the Ghâfirî. Loyalty to the respective alliances has changed over time and is to date independent of descent or confession and expressed especially when the collective honour is threatened. To be able to effectively reign, an Omani sovereign must be accepted by both confederations. The reigning family since 1744, the Al Bû Saïd dynasty, does not belong to any of them. It is therefore easier for both covenants to accept them but at the same time, the power of the Sultan is intrinsically threatened, since he cannot rely on historical family ties to gain political support. He must then buy his legitimacy.

Moving to the religious sphere, the *ulamâ* (religious scholars) have a similar role to the *sheikhs* since they possess the *'ilm* which confers the authority for the arbitration of disputes. However, the authority of the *ulamâ* is not affected by the typical tribal family rivalries. *'Ilm* is a personal quality that cannot be inherited or transmitted and therefore the one enjoying a charisma is the *âlim* only and not his entire family. *Ulamâ* must be impartial and show detachment from internal politics. They have the task of selecting an Imam—gifted with wisdom, courage and outstanding competences— in charge of guiding the Muslim community. The Imam has an absolute power to apply the Islamic law, *shari'a*, and if he happens to break precepts, he is removed from office, unless he formally disavows his past mistakes. Since his community is obliged to obey him, he does not need a permanent army; indeed, he cannot have one because it could lead him to the slippery path of despotism. This system has inevitably to compromise with the tribal organization. Indeed, frequently the concept of Imamate (the first Imamate dates back to the late 9th century) represents itself a religious transformation of the tribal concept. The social system just described, however, was not static, because the relations between the various elements were subject to regular evolutions, wars and changes of power. Oman's aim kept being the maintenance of balance between tribal power and religious power, as well as to repel the foreign influence and to bear local dynasties. Depending on whether the ideology of Ibadism was becoming stronger or weaker, so were the organization of the state and its territorial influence. The maximum splendour was reached in the 18th century with the spread of Ibadism from the mountainous

interior until the coast and progressively expanding towards the neighbouring Bahrain until arriving at the Makran coast on one side, and the Swahili coast on the other. Ibadism today is spread mainly in North Africa and Tanzania but Oman is the only country where this religious sect represents the majority. Its doctrine, the last existing branch of Kharijism, is considered as a third way between Sunnism and Shiism, and its roots date back to the early Islam, just about two decades after Prophet Muhammad's death. The Ibadi conception of a minimal and collectively-owned government was fundamentally transformed by the Sultans gaining power in Oman. In the 1740s, Ahmad bin Said (the founder of the Al Bû Saïd dynasty still in power) drove the Persians out of Oman and was elected Imam, although he did not have the *'âlim* qualifications. In 1793, his son Sultan bin Ahmad acquired the title of Sultan following a misunderstanding, his name having been taken for a title. Already since the 11th century, the title of Sultan had a negative connotation, which suggests a separation between religious and secular power. This separation did threaten the legitimacy of the Sultan who has been challenged by the Imam (1954 Imamate insurrection) alternately to periods of coexistence. Their relationship was ruled by the Treaty of Seeb, signed in 1920, which recognized sovereignty to the Sultan and a recognition of internal territories to the Imam. With the victory of the former he succeeded in dominating the entire territory without claiming any religious power. From the beginning of his reign in 1970, Sultan Qaboos put an end to this clear division between state power and religious influence and interfered in the religious sphere by building mosques bearing his name, thereby attributing himself to a religious dimension and making the figure of the Sultan prevail. Qaboos overthrew his father with the help of the British in a palace coup on July 23rd 1970. The country he inherited was extremely backward, with a system of patriarchal, autarchic and absolute power and a poor, illiterate and affected by endemic disease population. He would thoroughly modernize Oman through development projects and new public infrastructures by also building a relationship of trust and respect with his people. The system remained an absolute monarchy with all the power in the hands of Qaboos who performs as prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, finance, defence, commander in chief of the armed forces and president of the central bank. However, he established a council of ministers and two consultative bodies regulated by the Basic Law which came into force in 1996.

He then initiated a minimal political participation while maintaining the ultimate word over domestic and foreign issues, since democratic institutions (parties, unions or direct elections) do not actually exist and neither a system of check and balances with separations of powers. His cabinet is composed of 30 ministries, appointed by himself, whereas the two consultative bodies are the State Council and the Consultation Council which together form the Majlis Oman, a third experiment following the previous State Consultative Council in 1981, and the Oman Consultative Council in 1991. Majlis Oman was introduced in 1996—its powers extended in 2011 following the Arab Spring—and is a sort of bicameral parliament, accessible also to women, with a mere consultative and reviewing purpose on matters regarding mainly social services. The idea was that of a gradual reform in a context of stability and continuity with the tradition and in compliance with the legitimacy of the Sultan.

The economy of the state is mainly financed by natural resources. In the 1950s oil companies began to arrive and oil conflicts contributed to increase the government's interest in the land, leading to the concept of a territorial state. The regime would thereafter be financed by oil revenues, which made possible the implementation of ambitious development projects, the reallocation of the rents to the citizens, the supply of a public welfare system and the exemption from taxes. In addition, this rentier system, allowed a faster and stronger legitimization of the Sultan who was surrounded by a vast pool of loyal civil servants whose survival depended on him. In anticipation of a scarce future of natural resources and in order to overcome the saturation of the public sector, the Sultanate has also been committed to diversifying the economy through plans focused on improving the private sector, the development of natural gas resources exported in the form of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other non-oil sectors such as tourism. While the country has launched this activity and other plans of economic diversification it is also true that recent and promising oil fields discoveries could prolong the dreaded fear of ending crude by 2030.

As far as fundamental rights are concerned, freedom of press and expression is strongly limited by the central government; indeed, very little free journalistic activity is found throughout the country, even less in languages other than Arabic. Anything criticizing the Sultan is strongly forbidden and harsh censorship is applied also to literary activity. The education system was

revolutionized by Qaboos and is free of charge until the end of the secondary school. However, a deep reform is needed and envisioned within the Vision 2040 in order to ensure a greater access to universities and to efficiently prepare students for the labour market.

In the second chapter, Oman's foreign policy and international relations are discussed in order to understand its stance and consequent relevance and reputation throughout the world with a focus on its main partners: the GCC, Iran, the US and the UK. The last paragraphs of the chapter will instead be devoted to the three main revolutions of the country in the last century: the insurrection of the Imamate, the rebellion of Dhofar and the Arab Spring.

Because of its strategic geographical position overlooking the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea, Oman has been trading with the Indian Ocean Rim for at least 5000 years, and Omani people have always been exposed to a certain openness of mind and lenience towards the neighbour which are quite reflected in today's foreign policy. Nonetheless, before 1970, other than being backward and poor Oman was also totally isolated. As soon as he seized power, Qaboos broke with his father's reactionary politics and began to open up by first entering the League of Arab States and then the United Nations and by establishing friendly relations with neighbouring Arab countries later reunited in the Gulf Cooperation Countries. The pillars of this new foreign policy were and still are promotion of long-term strategical relations, non-intervention in other countries' foreign affairs, respect for international law, support for a non-aligned policy, good relations with neighbouring countries and compromise and peaceful resolution reflected in a unique role of mediator performed in international crises. Therefore, the Sultanate boasts a prudent and pragmatic diplomacy often characterized by an independent spirit of initiative. In 1977, public support was shown to Sadat's peace agreements with Israel and Oman did not participate to the Arab League Summit condemning Egypt's behaviour. When in 1979 the Iranian revolution replaced the Shah with Ayatollah Khomeini, the relations with Teheran remained unchanged but having the Gulf states rejected a protection plan for the Strait of Hormuz, Oman had to turn to the United States with a Facilities Access Agreement that granted military cooperation. When it came to Iraq invasion of Iran in 1980, Muscat remained neutral while keeping relations with both and when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Oman joined the UN initiative

to free the attacked country and granted the United States with access to supplies and facilities. In 1994, prime minister Rabi was invited to a conference in Oman on water desalinization; the first visit by an Israeli public political figure to an Arab Gulf state. On the occasion of the Syrian conflict, started in 2011, Oman again distanced itself from the GCC, by maintaining diplomatic relations with Damascus and refusing to align with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar in supporting the rebels opposing Bashar al-Assad. Furthermore, frequent were the mediatory efforts to bring Pakistan and India closer together in 1985, Qatar and Bahrain in 1986 and Southern and Northern Yemen in 1944. A more recent episode concerned the negotiations between Iran and the P5 + 1 whose agreement was reached partly thanks to the secret meetings between US and Iran held in Oman. Another event, on the wake of the former and in the same year, in 2013, had a certain resonance. Yusuf bin Alawi, Omani minister for foreign affairs, delivered a speech, during the Manama conference, expressing his disapproval for a Saudi-backed further union. He focussed instead on the need to avoid conflict with anyone, to have peace and security as a priority to safeguard the youth generation concluding that keeping the region out of conflicts does not mean militarize people. Oman and Iran also enjoy economic cooperation and Muscat is trying to replace the role of re-export regional hub for financial transactions and international trade that Dubai used to have until 2012. With the deterioration of relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in the context of banking cooperation Teheran signed important agreements and future joint investments with Muscat. Finally, the last noteworthy episode that jeopardized the already precarious regional stability and indirectly involved Oman was the Qatar diplomatic crisis. A Saudi-led coalition imposed a sea, air and land blockade on Doha accused of financing terrorism. Oman, as Kuwait did, remained neutral on the political level while boosting economic agreements with the Emir. However, this (non)-position has further distanced Muscat from its GCC counterparts, if it is also considered that the Sultanate has already been accused of providing Houthi rebels with weapons in Yemen. Oman has always been afraid of being domestically shaken by political instability in the Gulf and West Asia and this partly explain the long-lasting political and military dependence on the United Kingdom and the United States. Even after the British protectorate was suspended in 1977, military cooperation agreements were soon

promoted with both. After the 9/11 attacks, the American forces in Oman increased dramatically to support military operations in Afghanistan and in Iraq even if Muscat had declared itself in favour of an escalation of the crisis. Defence spending in Oman is extraordinarily high if compared to its neighbours and is also considered an absolutely safe country in terms of terrorism, to such an extent that together with only 40 other countries in the world it has a risk index of 0. Although the Sultanate seems to be a very important partner for the US in countering terrorism, the authorities rarely disclose their initiatives in this regard. A small step back will now be done to illustrate past internal crises and their possible present aftermath.

One was the insurrection of the Imamate, otherwise known as Jebel Akhdar rebellion, that affected Oman's internal stability from 1954 until 1959. It was an historical dispute between the Sultan and the Imam who at that time had been elected under the alleged interference of the Saudis (two years before they were expelled from the Omani territory thanks to an international arbitration promoted by the British for their claims over the Al-Buraymi oasis). The Imam declared Oman independent by Muscat after the Sultan granted a concession to drill for oil in his territories. They were in response invaded by the Sultan who declared the Treaty of Seeb invalid. The revenge arrived a year later after the Imam had gathered tribesman, arms and the support of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Although their long and courageous resistance in the Jebel Akhdar mountains, the Sultan boasted the vast support of the British infantry and air force who succeeded in defeating the insurgents. The other major insurrection involved the southern province of Dhofar hosting a decade rebellion (1965-1975). The rebel faction was formed by southern left-wing separatists backed by the socialist former South Yemen. The Sultan was again supported by Great Britain and indirectly by the US, but more importantly Saudi Arabia sided with Oman and provided weapons to face the war sanctioning the defeat of the rebels. Lastly, the 2011 upheavals, even if perceived with less violence and resonance than other Gulf countries like Bahrain, they undermined internal instability and definitely have still repercussions for their unresolved issues that need to be (re)-addressed. The demonstrations were organized on the Internet with protesters complaining about corruption, high prices of primary goods and too low wages and subsidies. *Islah* (reform) was always requested but the falling of the regime was never

asked. Sohar was the centre of the protests that reached the peak of violence but in the rest of the country, especially in Salalah, they were rather peaceful. Apart from the aversion for the rampant corruption that led to the removal of twelve ministers, Omanis showed intolerance towards the Asian expats who count for the 45% of the total population and are blamed for controlling the economy at the expense of the locals. This frustration is a symptom of the much more serious issue of unemployment and reveals dissatisfaction with *Omanization* policies. Qaboos answered to the petition he was given by promising new jobs, unemployment benefits, increases in school subsidies and wages, empowering the Majlis and monitoring prices. However, requests exceeded the Sultan's capabilities who was forced to recur to a \$ 20 billion loan to share with Bahrain by other GCC countries. If the Arab Spring in Oman shared some similarities with the rest of the region, it was differentiated by the support for the Sultan and the concessions and the active involvement he made in responding to the people. Nevertheless, problems have not been solved and it is likely that new protests will affect the country and a more effective response will be needed.

Having analysed the internal and international dimensions, in the third and final chapter, conclusions are reached where strengths and weaknesses are highlighted in order to evaluate whether Oman is stable or not. The Sultanate's contemporary political model is thoroughly linked to his ruler who won his people's loyalty by constructing a national identity and a state centred on his person. However, this system is not deemed to survive. Qaboos is turning 78, he is ill and has no heirs and Omanis are inevitably concerned about their future. There is some indication enclosed in two envelopes hidden in key locations probably containing the names of the Sultan's cousins. However he has never had a close relationship with none of his relatives and the Basic Statute doesn't provide clear instructions. Unlike other countries in the Gulf where large families compete for the throne and have a say before the ruler comes to any major conclusion, Qaboos is the sole leader and he has always taken decisions autonomously. Nowadays, however, the relations between leadership and society have changed and consequently the regime he has committedly created, in the interests of the country and its people, is no longer suited to the present challenges. Many are the impressive achievements the Sultan boasts and one of this is undoubtedly the fact that despite being an absolute monarch, he was never considered as a despot

nor there have ever been attempts to overthrow him. Omanis are satisfied and grateful with his ruling and this consensus was fostered by the cult of personality broadcasted and portrayed in all the most popular public places. The narrative of *al-nahda*, the Renaissance, has been omnipresent in the lives of the people and in their daily activities and the past before 1970 is never mentioned unless in reference to the glorious present regeneration. Qaboos put all his efforts in guaranteeing a strong legitimacy. He modernized a country from scratch, overcame the historical territorial divisions and faced a legacy of tribal contrasts and rivalries within the country by involving important tribesmen in key government positions and giving them a stake in addition to the idea of a cohesive and inclusive identity (a striking example is the minister for foreign affairs Yusuf bin Alawi who was once a rebel of the Dhofar Popular Front and was later co-opted).

The long-lasting territorial split of the interior of Oman with the exterior of Muscat and of Northern Oman and Southern Dhofar has been overcome together with the achievement of a territorial state and a shared national identity. This inclusive policy—involving the majority of the subjects coming from all the regions—has certainly been decisive for providing the regime with solid foundations. He was able to take into account since the beginning the importance of the tribes in the social fabric and of the consequent identification and allegiances. The Sultan's mother belonged to one of the main tribes of Dhofar who had raised the rebellion. Their respect and obedience for Qaboos is a direct consequence of their kinship. Moreover, he belongs to Ibadism and his repeated affirmations regarding the legitimacy of this branch of Islam, contested by the Saudis as heretic, has contributed to increasing popular consensus towards the Islamic leader. Ibadi are also considered as open and tolerant and coexist peacefully with Sunnis and Shiites by sharing their places of worship and prayer. Furthermore, radical Islamism has never taken root in Oman. It is the only country in the Middle East to have a terrorist risk equal to zero and very few Omanis have joined *Daesh* compared to all the recruits from other Arab countries. Speaking of economy, oil revenues have allowed a distribution of wealth through social services and public employment, contributing to increase the standard of living to the extent that since 1970 the population has grown sevenfold. A relevant factor supporting stability is indeed the social contract

between the people and the state: the latter offers prosperity and welfare but receives allegiance and loyalty in turn. This path seems much more tempting to undertake than being in the hands of a despot or facing a power vacuum gripped by civil wars. Last but not least, the regime succeeded in making Oman relevant in the international arena and steered the country among the difficult balances with the ultimate aim of preserving regional and consequently national stability. Substantial diplomatic objectives have to be recognized as well the exceptional ability to adapt—without losing political and economic autonomy—to the changing regional conditions and international pressures.

Lastly, elements of instability must be weighted. While the regime seems to be stable and legitimized by Omanis and Qaboos may have been an enlightened and modernizing ruler, capable of bringing together all the different souls of the country, Oman remains an absolute monarchy with the shortages of an authoritarian regime. If in the short term the concentration of power in the hands of an individual allows a quick, easy and effective decision-making process, in the long run it generates a discontent and instability spillover aggravated by the uncertain heir to the throne. The Sultan is surrounded by a circle of pre-eminent individuals who are contested for acting only for their personal interests and are considered corrupt. Business in particular is plagued by an unfair competition that even important merchant families complain about and that creates frustration among ordinary men whose standards of living continue to stagnate. It is no coincidence that corruption, *wasta* and unemployment were the drivers of the Arab Spring and to date the solutions adopted have not fulfilled the protesters' expectations. As for the economy, the rentier system is still predominant. Oman does not boast the amount of resources that the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have, they are more difficult to extract, due to the mountainous and harsh landscape, and above all the Sultanate has not undertaken a valid path to lead the country in a post-oil era as Bahrein did. Still, about 85% of the total government revenues comes from the oil and gas rents. Oman is a country of unemployed youths who are looking for a larger labor market that can engage them. According to the World Bank, youth unemployment rate in Oman was 48% in 2017 and is highly correlated to political instability. Moreover, these youths have no memory of the backwardness of the country and the achievements of Qaboos. They feel less

indebted to their ruler and most likely will not be willing to accept the same political system from whoever will be the successor.

Unfortunately, the political sphere enjoys the same inaccessible characteristics of the labour market. Political liberalization is really weak and most of the times justified to Western counterparts with the difficulties that liberal leaders would face in dealing with a tribal and conservative system under the well-known assumption that “people are not ready for democracy”. Accordingly, a destabilizing factor is the organization of educated youths who, for their high level of education, think should be included in the political process. In order to have a voice they opened online forums where political debate is promoted and sensitive issues are discussed without resorting to anonymity. The inevitable result was the promulgation of ad-hoc laws to counter these critics and the consequent arrest of activists and bloggers accused of defamation. However, many forums are still operational, in the hope to raise awareness of the need for a greater political openness.

If as previously mentioned, radical Islamism does not constitute an instability risk for the regime, it is also true that it fuelled popular discontent during the 2011 protests most likely because it had been seen as an easily identifiable channel of opposition. Clandestine organizations influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood but also by Salafis and Ibadis in different areas of the country, succeeded in creating unrest particularly in Sohar. Speaking of foreign policy, the relationship with the strategic alliances of Oman are undergoing variations. United Kingdom remains a fundamental partner, at the economic and military level, but the British are now very absorbed by Brexit. The relationship with the United States is still relevant but it was stronger under the Obama administration than now with Trump. The most critical issue is the fact that Oman is coming out of the GCC orbit, headed by Saudi Arabia and UAE, and the evidence is Oman’s foreign policy. Qaboos has always felt close to Saudi’s most hated enemy Iran and did mediate for a positive outcome of the nuclear deal. Economic agreements with the new boycotted outsider Qatar have been signed and Oman together with Kuwait remained neutral when the GCC imposed sanctions on the Emir. Finally, Oman is believed to facilitate weapons smuggling to the Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen fighting against Hadi’s Sunni forces. In addition, if now terrorism does not present a threat to the Sultanate, it is highly probable that in

the post-Qaboos era the extremist groups of ISIS and AQAP could pose a threat to the security of the country. Nevertheless, to date, a lot of anxiety is generated by the possibility that Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman could meddle in the urgent issue of succession and favour a candidate of their likely that could align with their stances and be more obedient than Qaboos. This kind of international intrusion in the domestic affairs of a country gives an idea of the blurring of national borders and is sometimes referred to as an *intermestic* threat. In conclusion, if with political stability the presence of the same figures in ruling positions is meant, then Oman boasts a history of almost five decades with the same Sultan at the pinnacle of power together with his circle of close confidants and ministers and no attempts to overthrow the regime because considered as a successful example in the Gulf. If instead in the concept of political stability the public discontent is included, most recent events reveal the weaknesses of this political system and suggest future risks of instability. The wave of protests since 2011 has been proving how people are willing to challenge the old paternalistic say that they are not mature for a more consistent political participation. Moreover the conspicuous number of unemployed youths urges an economic reorganization and more effective diversification. From this point of view, with the imminent problem of the succession of Qaboos and with the cooling down of the relations with the Great of the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia, the future of a post-Qaboos and post-oil Oman seems rather unstable.

This thesis was completed by an interview in the appendix with Cinzia Bianco, a Middle East analyst from the University of Exeter, specialized in the Gulf countries who I had the pleasure to meet during a cycle of seminars at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre in Rome.