Oman: Partisan Non-Intervention

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ROBY C. BARRETT AND LEAH SHERWOOD, JUL 13 2024

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Since the end of the Cold War, foreign policy experts have often labelled Oman as neutral. While Oman often adopts non-interventionist positions, it is an oversimplification to call Muscat neutral. Indeed, the notion fails to capture the complexity of Oman's policies and the tangled internal historical experience that informs its foreign relations. Contemporary Omani policy results from Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Bu Said's (who ruled from 1970–2020) perceptions of regime vulnerabilities in the sultanate's post-independence era. These perceptions are a direct product of Oman's past and, if the present under Sultan Haitham bin Tarik (who has ruled from 2020–present) is a measure, they will continue to provide the guiding principles for the future. Oman's external behaviour cannot be described as neutrality, as Oman has used non-aligned or non-interventionist policies as a tactical façade since the 1980s. It does this to manage conflicts and relationships that could pose a threat to the Al Bu Said regime or Oman's territorial integrity, all the while being fully aware that its existential, strategic security is inextricably linked to its relationship with the West and the United States (US).

If not neutral, then how should we define Omani foreign and security policy? For the purposes of this effort, the term 'partisan non-intervention' provides a useful umbrella for discussing not only Oman's contemporary security behaviour, but also the internal and external perceptions from which it flows. Oman's partisan non-intervention is best described in three parts. First, an explanation of contemporary policy highlights the duality of Al Bu Said's policies since 1991. Far from any ideological attachment to the norms underscoring neutrality, such as a foreign policy commitment to not taking sides, Oman's position on any given regional or international issue is first and foremost partisan and at times disconnected from the preferences of Oman's erstwhile partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These policies also provide a degree of separation from US official policy as well. Instead, the Omani regime perceives these policies as supporting its own interests, namely the preservation of the Al Bu Said dynasty, and the territorial integrity of the Omani state. Non- intervention also allows Oman to play a niche role as a conduit for diplomatic dialogue. Non-intervention is not a doctrinaire commitment on Oman's part; it is realpolitik, and as such does not preclude self-interest-based confrontation or intervention. Thus, Omani non-intervention is situational and as such can be best understood through an examination of its unique historical context, and state formation process.

Secondly, at a fundamental level, the tribal, sectarian, and geographical realities of Oman created a challenging tableau for its state creation and stability. What the Al Bu Said, and more specifically Sultan Qaboos, faced in 1970 was nothing less than new state formation – prior to that, the British dominated and defined the Sultanate's options within the British imperial context. Qaboos not only inherited the domestic problems that intensified during his father's rule, but also the handicaps bequeathed to the Muscat regime by British colonial policy and the dynastic Arab rivalries across the region. Due to regional and internal political fragility, and recognizing the limitations of Oman's small state reality, Qaboos formulated security relationships that protected the integrity of the state and safeguarded the Al Bu Said dynasty. This reality, combined with the historical experience dominated by the British imperial system, illuminates the present, and provides an informed glimpse into its future, foreign policy. In short, the complexities of Oman's policies of pragmatic non-intervention are coupled with the fractious givens of the geopolitical and socio-cultural environment, the ongoing challenges of state formation, and the exceptionalist nature of Sultan Qaboos' rule. The future will likely be awash in political, economic, socio- cultural, and security challenges, and

attempts to renationalize the succession process may or may not prove to be a stabilizing factor. These complications constitute a looming challenge for changes in the application of pragmatic non- intervention.

Modern Oman: Self-Interest and Non-Intervention

Three critical factors shape Oman's interlinked foreign and domestic policies: (1) its strategic location, (2) its modern adaptation of Ibadi "conservatism and tolerance," and (3) its fractured ethnic, sectarian, and tribal identity. These factors explain Oman's preference for balancing policies of non-intervention and compromise regarding regional and international issues. To offer a more nuanced analysis, this section examines Omani policy from 1991 to 2020 and addresses the problematic use of the word 'neutral', when, in fact, Oman is decidedly partisan in its policy preferences. Oman recognizes there is no replacement for its strategic alliance with the US and the West. Given its own history of conflict resulting from foreign interventions inside Oman, Muscat is highly attuned to the pitfalls of poorly conceived intervention. Oman only acts when threats to its dynastic and/or state survival exist, basing its fundamental policies on an independent and reliably pragmatic national security approach rooted in the logic of prioritising the *longue durée* over open-ended and even petty quarrels.

Partisan Non-Intervention and Situational Neutrality in Contemporary Policy

Oman's 'partisan non-intervention', or 'situational neutrality', is not *de jure* neutrality. In fact, Oman pursues an alliance-based security strategy, and has since the late 1700s. However, while allying with Britain for 200 years ensured the survival of the Al Bu Said regime, it also brought the loss of Muscat's political independence. Lacking 'hard power', Oman still has to rely on more powerful allies for its ultimate security today. However, since independence in 1970, Muscat has not only focused on retaining the benefits of an alliance-based security, but has worked to curb its impact on its political autonomy. In this regard, Muscat utilises soft power, which often gives the illusion of neutrality. For example, during the Cold War, despite declaring its non-alignment, Oman launched cross-border raids into Yemen and relied on Western support to fight a bitter war against a Soviet and Chinese-sponsored insurgency (Gunther 2020; Tètreault 1991, 567). Upon closer inspection, Oman's membership in the Non-Aligned Movement shielded it from some political consequences related to its Western alignment at a time of rising Arab nationalism (Casey 2007, 12; Kochan 1972, 508–510). Another tactic is for Oman to differentiate between politics and ideology. In Arabic, the equivalent of 'non-alignment' is commonly translated as *hiyad al-ijabi* meaning 'positive neutralism' (Agwani 1981, 371). Officially, this means that Muscat conducts relations 'without reference to position' to deprioritise politico-military affiliations and ideological positions (Sayegh 1964, 64). This translates into a series of situational positions on sensitive topics keyed to the prioritisation of Omani interests. The ongoing Iran-UAE territorial dispute is one example. Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs states, 'the current dispute between the UAE and Iran over Abu Musa and the Tunbs should not be allowed to impede the continuing development of Omani– Iranian relations' (Jones and Ridout 2012, 158). Oman is not neutral on the issue of the islands, but rather sees nothing to be gained given its perceived *fait accompli,* and Oman's desire to maintain diverse cooperative relationships, especially with Tehran.

In this regard, Oman has negotiated security arrangements with various regional and international powers, and yet Oman's relationship with the US, which includes bases, joint operations, security cooperation, remains the backbone of Muscat's defence policy (US Department of State, POLMIL, June 15, 2021). The other arrangements mostly pertain to limited intelligence sharing, training, and facility access to advance regional security cooperation. (Cafiero 2016, 49–55). This diversification is a method to hedge against over-reliance on any one partner, while simultaneously building political bridges that let it better negotiate the boundaries of its power to pursue its own interests. Another tool Oman also uses to offset the constraints an alliance-based security imposes is by using its constitution to limit the use of force, which enables it to avoid military interventions (Cafiero and Karasik 2017a).

Oman attempts to project the image of itself as a 'helper' whose 'good offices' are useful during mediation of regional conflicts. This distinction between support and neutral non-involvement is key, and it distinguishes Oman from those that aspire to a more doctrinaire neutralist stance. In 2003, the Omani Foreign Minister explained, 'we have room for maneuver that the big states themselves do not enjoy. We can operate without attracting too much attention, conduct diplomacy discreetly and quietly' (Badr Al Bu Said, 2003). Under Qaboos, Oman's foreign policy was thus infused

with his adaption of Ibadi principles, stressing dialogue, tolerance, unity, cooperation, and diplomacy (Sherwood 2017a, 11). This pragmatic use of soft power to offset potential threats has proven to be effective. At times, it has increased Oman's influence, moderated pressures on Muscat extending from Gulf political discourse, and improved regional security cooperation while obfuscating Oman's dependence on Western security guarantees for its strategic survival to some degree.

Non-intervention and the Complexity in Intra-GCC Relations

Although the GCC states share common security challenges, mutual distrust and suspicion impede strong levels of intra-GCC strategic cooperation. This is hardly surprising given that the dynasties have in fact been often bitter rivals at one time or another since the eighteenth century. From the Omani perspective, the GCC states have been ineffective in defending GCC interests, and, more importantly, they have often represented greater threats to Oman than Iran. These Arab threats to Oman's sovereignty, and Muscat's recognition that GCC states' threat perceptions and interests frequently differ, made Muscat leery of greater GCC political and military integration. This aversion to integration has manifested itself in several ways. Much to the chagrin of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Oman made it clear that it would 'not be part of' a military alliance that was primarily anti-Iranian in nature. Bin Alawi expressed Oman's expectations of a Western security umbrella: 'It is a Western responsibility [*to provide security*] because they have their [*oil*] interests here […]' (Hamidaddin 2013). Oman's approach is to work with major powers, and to try to stay on the sidelines as much as possible in the context of GCC political and security conflicts by offering to play constructive roles such as providing conflict resolution services.

In 2011, Qaboos refused to participate in the Arab Spring effort by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to quash the Shi'a rebellion in Bahrain. Muscat argued that the Al Khalifah should treat the Shi'a with respect, as they are Bahraini citizens, and the regime should find a political situation based on compromise. He likewise refused to support their 2015 intervention in Yemen against the Houthi-backed regime in Sanaa (Neubauer 2016a; Chatham House 2015). When a Saudi- led military intervention in Yemen occurred, Oman declared its neutrality and offered diplomatic good offices (Cafiero 2015a). Qaboos hosted a meeting between Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, and Houthi, Saudi, and US representatives in Muscat. By credibly serving all the aforementioned, Oman became a valuable back channel for warring parties (Baabood 2017, 120). In 2018, Qaboos told the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that military action in Yemen would perpetuate power struggles and societal disintegration (Byman 2018, 142). Oman emphasised 'political settlement through dialogue is the only way to achieve peace' (Cafiero and Ulrichsen 2018). Oman conveyed that it sees Yemen's stability as a strategic interest at the UN by stating, 'given our geographic proximity and deep historical, social and cultural ties with Yemen, we emphasise Oman will provide our brother people of Yemen […]' (UNGA 2019). Oman's diplomatic approach served Qaboos' interest to preserve Oman's soft power in Yemen, and to balance Yemen-GCC relations without sacrificing Oman-Iran relations or Oman-GCC relations.

These non-conformist policies are not without risk. Oman's non-intervention was perceived as a political act by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. They view Houthi rebels as Iranian proxies and termed Qaboos' policies as 'negative neutrality'. In response, Qaboos attempted to persuade his GCC partners that his 'bridge' role promoted 'positive' contributions that were 'good for all.' Playing 'the Islamic card,' he argued that these roles were 'natural' for Oman given its constitution and its Ibadi heritage. As might be expected, a senior member of Oman's Shura Council chimed in: '[he] couldn't have participated in this coalition. It's in our constitution. We don't send troops or artillery anywhere, unless requested by the United Nations' (Cafiero and Karasik, 2017). The Omani regime believed that Saudi and Emirati activities were destabilizing in Yemen, and allowed 'several terrorist organizations to use Yemen as a base … [which] poses direct threats', and ran counter to Muscat's interests (UNGA 2015). Muscat's history of internal religious, ideological, and political grievance, and its fundamental distrust of the Saudis, drove its independent policies. In addition, Muscat's suspicions were further heightened by Emirati interventionist meddling in Mahra, Musandam, Sohar, and Zanzibar – traditional areas of Omani influence (Ardemagni 2019; Mtumwa 2018).

In the case of the Qatar Boycott of 2017–2021, Qaboos judged the effort to be counter to Omani interests. Oman adopted the symbols of impartiality by maintaining full relations with all parties and publicly offering to support Kuwait-led diplomatic talks (Baabood 2017, 30). Oman accrued strategic rewards through cooperation with Iran and

proximity to the Qatar-Iran-Turkish alignment. Secondly, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's actions set a precedent for arbitrary aggression against another Arab state, which fuelled views about a need to protect Oman's sovereignty (Kinninmont 2019). Third, given Oman's close relations with the Al Thani in Qatar, Oman backed Doha and its right to pursue policy independent from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Next, Oman saw concrete economic advantages in the situation. Muscat opted to give Qatar access to its ports for trans-shipment of food and supplies, it opened up its sea lanes for the export of Qatari LNG, and opened its airspace, allowing Qatar Airways a lifeline – thus bypassing Emirati territory (Economist 2017; Dudley 2017). In return, Oman enhanced its energy, trade, and investment situation by attracting new deals, and it secured more defence cooperation. Finally, Oman's commercial cooperation with Qatar and Iran also reflected a political strategy that emphasizes Muscat's maritime independence. The Duqm port facility, located at a strategic maritime intersection on the Indian Ocean, is designed to attract new cooperating partners to its port. Oman's history imparted beliefs about interconnections between autonomy, regime security, commerce, and geography. This neutral port business model provides opportunities to cooperate with 'user' states like China, India, Japan, South Korea, the US, and UK – thereby potentially enhancing Oman's utility to more powerful states.

Clearly, the Omanis understood that non-cooperation with the blockade offered greater potential benefit than participation. Oman also refuses to participate in personalised political disputes. Oman would likely have equally appreciated the absurdity of Abu Dhabi blockading Qatar and yet buying Qatar/Iranian natural gas through the Dolphin pipeline to power its electrical generators. Plus, after a US policy wobble due to President Donald Trump's idiosyncratic leadership, US pressure to end the dispute soon ramped up as splitting the US-backed Sunni alliance that keeps Iranian aggression at bay was not in the interest of any state involved. For these reasons, the blockade was a failure before it even began (Fahim and DeYoung 2017; Calamur 2016). Furthermore, in Qaboos' defence of his unaligned position, he was able to argue that by cooperating with all GCC states, he indirectly supported the collective Gulf security by not participating in divisive policy toward Qatar. Oman pursued its strategic parochial interests while hiding behind the fig-leaf of 'recogniz[ing] the [GCC's] importance for regional security and economic cooperation' (Baaboud 2017, 30). Oman's policy was neither neutral or even non-interventionist – Muscat sided with Qatar and intervened on behalf of Qatar for its own strategic interests.

Ibadi Islam and Political Pragmatism

The political structure of the Arab Gulf states is authoritarian. They do not reflect (and likely never will reflect) post-French Revolution notions of a national state (Barrett 2016, xxiv–xxvii). The effect of this condition is that the 'regime' or dynasty is the core unit of analysis in an assessment of Gulf states' threat perceptions and national interest (Darwish and Kaarbo 2019, 5). Further, modern national states traditionally create their identity around the concept of nationalism. 'Imagined' or not, it is a potent force that has provided the rationale for unity and justified state coercion to enforce it since the French Revolution (Anderson 1983). Gulf rulers claim Islamic legitimacy but sit atop a dynastic state maintained through tribal patronage. In the Arab Gulf, state- based nationalism remains superficial despite ongoing attempts to artificially manufacture it with infusions of oil revenue through an ancient tribal patronage system. Qaboos embraced the tribal system in Oman as a foundational pillar of stability through which the government flowed jobs, affordable housing, modern healthcare, and educational opportunites. Any serious attempt to transition away from the tribal patronage system, particularly with the post-hydrocarbon world on the horizon, will undoubtedly create challenges to political, economic, and social stability that will be unacceptable to the Al Bu Said regime.

Western-educated, Qaboos understood these linked challenges. He utilised Oman's unique Ibadi heritage to articulate an idealised ideological justification to govern Omani society, but also for domestic and foreign policy that allowed his regime to justify policies based on self-preservation. To avoid conflict, Qaboos' definition of an Ibadi state emphasised consultation, negotiation, tolerance, and avoidance of conflict within an Islamic context. In regional and foreign policy, the Ibadi heritage provided the option of saying that Oman is different from the other regional states and above petty Sunni versus Shi'a arguments. Yet, this religious ideology has frequently been used to justify Oman's refusal to engage in conflicts and to maintain relations with Iran and others. While 'State Ibadi Islam' as conceived by Qaboos represents the politization of a 'manufactured ideology' designed to support Al Bu Said's rule, it is also an ingenious adaptation of Oman's distinct cultural heritage that supports the state's ability to deal with

foreign and domestic threats to stability and security.

From 1991 to 2020, Qaboos' policies were coherently structured to safeguard a stability rarely experienced for centuries prior. From the perspective of institutions, history, culture, democracy, and general conceptions of mature anarchy, the Western state milieu is therefore simply not applicable. It cannot accommodate the conditions that correspond to the regional dynamics, historical experiences, governance models, and statehood found in the Arabian Gulf. Oman's present can only be understood within the context of its past – a past that echoes in the present. More importantly, those same echoes will no doubt shape the future as well. Oman is too important to the Gulf security system to ignore, and by appreciating the relevance of its historical and socio- cultural context, scholars and foreign policy practitioners can capture glimpses of the future.

Partisan Non-Intervention in Content

Given the fractured historical context of Oman, the reality of the post-1945 Gulf required a new political structure if Al Bu Said's Oman was going to survive. The Sultanate had no credibility in the area controlled by the Imamate or in Sunni tribal Dhofar. The British were no longer capable of unilaterally defending the Al Bu Said, and new radical Arab nationalist forces offered new ideologies that threatened all traditionalist regimes. Oman's contemporary domestic and foreign policies constituted the informed response to these conditions by a strictly authoritarian leader, Qaboos, who had the ability to design state policy himself. He understood the need to prevent any actor (internal or external) from leveraging Oman's fractured political, economic, and socio-cultural environment. Contemporary Oman simply did not exist prior to 1970 and, despite independence, statehood was in fact not cemented until the 1980s. Qaboos' success in developing and implementing an effective security strategy is the reason why successors are following his policies today.

Fractured Geography and Socio-Cultural Realities

Contemporary Oman is an Arab and an Indian Ocean state composed of conflicting social and cultural traditions complicated by layered tribal conflicts. During the first century CE, Hinawi tribes, claiming Ghatani or pure Arab origins, migrated from Yemen and found themselves in conflict with the Persians and another Arab tribal group, the Ghafiri, or so-called Adnani, of mixed Arab origin (Phillips 1962, 4–7). With the advent of Islam, Hinawi tribes eventually adopted the Ibadi form of Kharijite Islam, viewing it as 'an ancient community rooted in Quranic revelation' that rejected both Sunni orthodoxy or Shi'a sectarianism (Wilkinson 2009, 12). The Ghafiri tribes were largely Sunni, inhabiting the coastal areas. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Omani Yaaruba Dynasty (1624–1743) expanded into a vacuum created by the collapse of the Portuguese empire (Wilkinson, 2009, 12). With a powerful navy, the Yaaruba dominated the Arabian and African coasts. In the 1730s, Ghafiiri and Hinawi feuding brought collapse and the re-emergence of the Persians under Nadir Shah (who ruled between 1736–1747), and the emergence of the First Saudi State (1744–1818) fractured Omani power. Then in 1748, a new dynasty emerged, the Al Bu Said, led by Ahmad bin Said bin Mohammed Al Bu Said. Allied with the Ghafiri tribes of the coast, he expelled the Persians, eliminated the Hinawi Yaaruba Imamate entirely and then demanded that the Ibadi *ulema* recognize him as the Al Bu Said.

After the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), involving most European great powers, the British became the dominant power on the Omani littoral and a synergy of interests developed between the Sultanate and British East India Company-ruled India. This confluence of interests centered on threats posed by the rise of the First Saudi State (1744–1818) and its various maritime allies in the region, particularly the Qasimi tribes of Ras al-Khaymah and Sharjah (Risso 1986, 179–180). By 1798, to enhance their control, the British had dictated a treaty with Muscat entrenching themselves in Sultanate affairs (Phillips 1962, 70–72). The Sultan in Muscat had little choice but to acquiesce. British India's control steadily increased. In 1856, the British intervened in a succession crisis with the Canning Award dividing Oman from its African holdings, impoverishing the former (Al-Maamiry 1979, 63–68). Concerned only with the coast, the British failed to understand the implications of their policies on the interior (Badger 1874, 3). Due to British intervention, Ibadi *ulema* (religious authorities), who represented the population of the interior, now viewed the Al Bu Said rulers to be 'little better' than non-believers (Kelly 1980, 110). Despising the British and their Al Bu Said allies, Ghafiri and Hinawi tribes united and declared Sultan Faisal (who ruled between

1888–1913) deposed. Their intent was to establish an 'ideal of the true imamate' (Scholz 1976, 89; Peterson 1978, 30). A century of Al Bu Said political subservience to the British played into the hands of the Ibadi revivalists (Wilkinson 2009, 249–251). The British agent admitted, 'permitting them [*the Sultans*] to misrule without protest has done more to alienate the interior' (Wilkinson 2009, 251).

In 1913, a massive tribal revolt proved to be an eye-opener. Only British intervention saved the Sultanate. The British Resident wrote that the 'government is so bad that to continue to support it in its existing condition is nothing short of immoral'. In July 1920, the British negotiated the Treaty of Sib between the Sultanate and the Imamate whereby the coastal Sultanate was recognised as sovereign, but pledged non-interference in the affairs of the Imamate (PRO, FO 371/114578: 15–16). The jurisdictional ambiguity between Sultanate and Imamate may have served immediate British interests, but it would create future problems. In 1932, Sultan Said (who ruled between 1932– 1970) succeeded his father and attempted to consolidate Muscat's authority by reconciling the interior Ibadis with the coastal Sultanate through subsidies to interior tribes, which undermined the Imam's influence (Bierschenk 1989, 123). Stability would prove temporary.

In the 1930s, the discovery of oil and Saudi claims on the Omani and Trucial State interiors upset regional stability. In 1949, Saudi Arabia with ARAMCO's support occupied the disputed Buraimi Oasis. The Foreign Office worried that the extension of Saudi territorial ambitions to central Oman had given rise to 'religious extremists' in the Imamate (PRO, FO371-104294, EA1081/519/G). In 1952, when Said united the Omani tribes to eject the Saudis, the US State Department pressured Britain to pursue talks in Geneva and force Said to stand down (FCO8/62 1967). At this point, the Foreign Office warned Whitehall that Britain 'could not be certain of succeeding in a court of international law' (PRO, FO371/104294, EA1081/518). For Said, the consequence was that the Imamate launched the 1955 and 1957 rebellions to overthrow him (Townsend 1977, 62). Both Saudi Arabia and Nasserist Egypt backed the tribal opponents of the Al Bu Said and supported Ghalib bin 'Ali Al-Hinai (1912–2009), the last Ibadi Imam. The latter declared an independent imamate and applied for Arab League membership (PRO, FO371/114613, EA1081/603). In 1955, the British forcibly removed the Saudis from Buraimi and began acting against the Imamate (PRO, FO371/114578, EA1015/21). Largely suppressed by 1959, unrest continued into the 1960s. Nevertheless, the situation destroyed Said's credibility (Holden 1966, 107). The entire episode provides another example that supports contemporary Oman's obsession with protecting their prerogatives for independent decision-making.

It was at this point that a rebellion broke out in Dhofar. A badly administered personal holding of the Sultan, Dhofar had stronger ethnic and tribal ties to Yemen than Muscat. Said had failed to address economic grievances that interacted with ideology and religion (Peterson 1978, 13). Oman was so divided it was officially called 'Muscat and Oman … and Dhofar' (Beasant 2013, 61; Hiro 2003). In 1965, multiple opposition groups formed the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF), and declared that 'the hireling regime under its ruler, Said bin Taymour, will be destroyed'. In 1967, the DLF transformed into the 'Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf', replete with leftist slogans and policies (Al-Maamiry 1979, 115, 218–225). For years, members of the Al Bu Said had called for the Sultan's removal (Peterson 2013, 233–234). On July 23, 1970, with British support, Qaboos and his allies mounted a coup and forced Said to abdicate (Rigsbee and Allen 2014, 238–241). By then, Oman had a ruler with new ideas about the future.

Qaboos, Independence, and the Way Forward

In 1970, Qaboos' accession to the throne created a bridge to a new synthesis that more accurately reflected the reality of the Oman, both old and new. Born in Salalah to the daughter of a Dhofari paramount sheikh and Sultan Said, Qaboos physically embodied the most diverse components of state. He was also the beneficiary of a formal education in Britain and a graduate of Sandhurst Military Academy. After service with the British Army and additional studies in government, Qaboos returned to Oman in 1966. Sultan Said correctly surmised that the British were grooming his successor and put Qaboos under virtual house arrest. Qaboos' perspective was not that of a cloistered heir. From 1970 to 1972, Omani and British forces, joined by Jordanian and Iranian units, curbed the revolt (Peterson 2013, 325–333). Horrified by Iranian forces on the Arabian Peninsula, Riyadh increased financial support (Gause 1990, 128). Qaboos clearly grasped the advantages of triangulation and multiple sources of security cooperation.

Qaboos understood that Oman's ethnic, sectarian, and tribal divisions required reform which could be supported by strong security services that could neutralize threats to the authority of the Sultan. Oman was also the beneficiary of the dramatic oil price increase resulting from the 1973 Arab oil embargo. The new Sultan also comprehended the relationship between Oman's internal stability, economic well-being, and the role a carefully orchestrated non-interventionist foreign policy played in both. By coupling a subset of carefully selected Ibadi principles with its multicultural Indian Ocean maritime openness and Gulf Arab heritage, Oman charted an independent path within the regional and international context that suited its partisan requirements. The Sultan rejected with equanimity Kharijite, Sunni, and Shi'a doctrine as a justification for sectarian or political strife. He linked Salalah and the cities and towns of the old Imamate to Muscat with economic and transportation infrastructure improvements. The Sultan focused on the role of tribes in society as 'an essential element to promote national unity and political legitimacy' (Dekmajian 2001, 308). Qaboos shrewdly gave each group a stake in his integrated state. This inclusiveness, the bedrock of post-independence internal stability, mirrors Oman's external 'friend to all' approach, underscoring its underlying philosophy on non-aligned stances.

This process did not occur overnight. The Dhofar issue only fully disappeared with the 1986 South Yemen Civil War and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. The problems associated with neo-Ibadi fundamentalism flared from time to time in the interior, which have been followed by various Sunni Islamic fundamentalist threats. In this case, the Sultanate followed a zero-tolerance policy for dissent or political Islamic movements. Yet, Qaboos created the*Majlis al-Istishari li al-Dawla* (State Consultative Council, or SCC) in 1981 to allow 'a larger measure of participation for the citizens in the economic and social plans'. Although closely controlled, the SCC won the right to review social and economic legislation prior to the Sultan's approval. In 1991, the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council, or CC) replaced the SCC. Apportioned based on population with a high degree of 'urban' tribal representation, some believed that it would eventually lead to direct elections (Rigsbee and Allen 2014, 48–56). But that was never going to happen. Sultan Qaboos took the lessons of Oman's history of instability, strife, and foreign intervention, and tailored a set of policies – both foreign and domestic – that suppressed centrifugal forces that had always plagued Omani rulers, whether imams or sultans. Under Qaboos, Omani policy eschewed intervention of any kind in the internal affairs of other states and focused on an independent path in the region governed by pragmatic self-interest. This was not neutrality – it was recognition of the limited ability of Oman's small state to affect external events, and the challenges of maintaining its own territorial integrity. In addition, survival of the state ultimately depended on the backing of a capable superpower willing to support the Al Bu Said – the US.

The Al Bu Said and the Future

Upon Sultan Qaboos' death in January 2020, his first cousin, Haitham bin Tariq bin Taymur Al Bu Said, inherited Oman's contradictions and potential for instability. He accepted a modern state whose foreign policy linked Oman's strategic security posture to the US' without surrendering its range of partnerships across regional political divides, making Oman a useful option for many seeking to have difficult dialogues. Sultan Haitham also retained the tight-lipped opacity and discretion that Qaboos' regime was famous for, and his authoritarian control exercised through highly efficient internal security services. Haitham's lack of hands-on experience in the military or the security services did not appear to detract from his stature. The new Sultan promised to 'preserve' what Qaboos had created and 'build on it' (Aman 2020). However, it is difficult to imagine that he wields anything close to the absolute authority of his predecessor (Fisher 2013). He is thus more collegial and needs consensus- based arrangements that involve buy-in from key officials and tribal leaders.

Under Sultan Haitham, Omani foreign policy efforts focus on economic growth and deeper levels of rapprochement between Muscat, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi after ties were strained by issues like Qatar and Yemen, the 2011 intervention in Bahrain, rejecting the 2013 Gulf Union proposal as well as perceptions that Muscat went 'behind their backs' in 2015 by helping negotiate the 2015 nuclear deal. On one hand, Sultan Haitham's pursuit of better relations with Riyadh and the UAE are designed to help Muscat contribute to peace in Yemen, which Oman seeks for its own security. On the other hand, Oman stands to benefit from reduced tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on various other fronts such as Oman's border regions, but also from economic development opportunities. For example, there is a new desert highway linking Ibri in Oman and al-Ahsa in Saudi Arabia that bypasses UAE territory and the Straits of Hormuz, creating new prospects for developing port facilities at Duqm on the Indian Ocean (Cafiero

2021).

The new regime has yet to face a crisis on the level of the Arab Spring. Qaboos had the stature to blame ministers and replace them. Assuming a more consensus-driven power structure, it is unclear if Sultan Haitham has that level of unilateral power. In addition, the Omani government will continue to face continued economic pressure, perhaps even more critical than that faced by Qaboos. With a growing percentage of the population under 30 years of age, and an estimated 30 per cent of that group unemployed, the "social pressure" and potential for political unrest remains. Declining oil reserves present an unprecedented challenge. Despite this, there are signs that the immediate economic situation has improved. The deficit fell from 16.1 per cent of GDP in 2020 to 3.4 per cent in 2021. Although half of this decline was due in large part to the increased price of oil, an improvement in non-oil related revenue accounted for the remainder, including cautious scaling back of water and electricity subsidies. Sultan Haitham is credited for maintaining the momentum for economic reform, but he is no doubt mindful that reforms that look good to an economist on paper sometimes have negative effects on stability (Dudley 2021).

Sultan Haitham is following the independent policies that served his predecessor well. In addition to its geographical position, Oman's value also resides in its ability to facilitate dialogue between conflicting entities in the region. As one commentator put it, 'Oman should hold fast to its reputation as a neutral anchor of peace' (Keeler 2020). Sultan Haitham's educational background and ministerial position suggests that he understands that the unity and cohesion Sultan Qaboos' rule brought obscured the historical norm of internal conflict and division. References to Sultan Qaboos as 'the Father of Oman' underscores this stark dichotomy between what came before Qaboos and what came after 1970 (Aman 2020). Sultan Haitham is not Qaboos, nor does he need to be. He merely needs to consolidate his rule and guarantee that the next succession is orderly. During his first year of rule, Sultan Haitham's amendment of the Basic Law (succession) enabled him to designate his oldest son, Dhi Yasan bin Haitham (b. 1990) as Crown Prince. Haitham understands the need for continuity and stability in Omani successions, but the real issue has now become – will the next succession be orderly?

Those hoping for the Council of Oman to acquire the 'power to translate these new articles into law and enforce them with legal guarantees that support and protect public liberties, full political participation for citizens, and an active and free society' will likely be frustrated (al-Zobadi 2021). For Sultan Haitham, the perils of the traditional 'open' Omani succession process outweighed the risks of formalised primogeniture. The potential for instability never disappears – it mutates. Groups shift allegiances, ideologies change, outside support fluctuates, but the underlying sources of instability remain (Ismaik 2022).

For over 250 years, Oman experienced limited periods of stability and extended periods of turmoil and conflict. This left the current regime highly attuned to the role freedom of action and economic self-sufficiency plays in preserving the regime through maintaining internal stability, and external independence of action. It is not an ideological commitment to 'neutrality' as an ideal, but rather a result of hard lessons learned about survival in an unforgiving geopolitical environment. The Omani regime has used every tool at its disposal: the politization of its unique Ibadi religious tradition, a non-interventionist foreign policy, its commitment to diplomacy through openness, and its pragmatic reliance on security ties with the West – the ultimate guarantor of regime and state survival. Derived from lessons from a difficult past, Muscat's pragmatic application of partisan non-intervention were key to Qaboos' success and will likely shape Omani policies in the future.

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About the author:

Roby C. Barrett is a Middle East and North Africa Forum Fellow and a scholar and Gulf expert with the Middle East Institute, Washington, DC. He is a former Foreign Service Officer with a background in intelligence and special operations. He has been a Senior Fellow and Instructor of Applied Intelligence at US Special Operations Command and a briefer and subject matter expert with Special Operations – US Central Command. He provides support to various US government organisations including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Defense University, the State Department, and the intelligence community. He was a visiting professor at the Royal Saudi Arabian Command and Staff School focused on Gulf security (specifically Yemen and Iran), and a featured expert on Iran at the German Council on Foreign Relations and with the Bundeswehr. He holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern and South Asian History from the University of Texas at Austin.

Leah Sherwood has 17 years of experience in the areas of strategic, human and international security, which was largely gained by working in universities, think tanks, and various government and semi-government entities. Currently, she works at the Department of Defence in Canada where she builds upon her earlier experience at the Privy Council. Previously, she worked in the Middle East and Africa in positions such as Nuclear Security Training Specialist with Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Deputy Director of Research at Trends Research and Advisory (an Abu Dhabi-based think tank specialised in security issues), and Senior Officer at Khalifa University's Institute for International and Civil Security. She has also worked at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Pretoria as a Researcher working on good governance and post-conflict management issues. She has a Ph.D. in International Relations from King's College London and serves as a Fellow at the Middle East and North Africa Forum at Cambridge University.