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Oman, Iran, and the United States:

An Analysis of Omani Foreign Policy and Its Role as an Intermediary

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Abstract

In a world where power is equivalent to water for the thirsty, foreign policy plays a key role in every country's strength. Today, the Middle East is a battleground for several struggles for power, with civil unrest, sectarian divisions, and proxy wars found throughout the region. In this volatile area, foreign policy has the potential to protect a country from regional political vulnerability. But for such policy to work best, internal affairs must be prepared in order to serve well. One country that has succeeded notably in maintaining a balanced foreign policy, even amid complex regional situations, is the Sultanate of Oman.

This thesis analyzes Oman's foreign policy under the reign of Sultan Qaboos. It examines Oman's positions on regional events that led to creating Oman's favorable reputation for dealing with and mediating between sides, most notably between Iran and the United States. My research determined that Oman takes a pragmatic approach to issues, which has resulted in a foreign policy of non-intervention and non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, while working to bring a viable solution to each issue for which Oman is requested to participate.

The thesis begins with a historic overview of Oman that provides a basic understanding of the factors contributing to Omani foreign policy. Oman's decisions on regional issues are analyzed in the light of its pragmatism in foreign policy decisions. My goal is to determine how and why Oman is trusted to take the role of intermediary, with a special focus on its role between Iran and the United States.

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Chapter I

Introduction

"International power struggles have always been about spheres of influence, capitulations, and privileges."[1]

Oman's current foreign policy has been shaped gradually over the four decades beginning with Sultan Qaboos bin Said's accession to the throne on July 23, 1970, which marked what Omanis regard as "the Renaissance." Since 1970, Oman's decisions concerning major regional events have resulted in shaping a neutral and pragmatic approach to its foreign policy, which, throughout the decades, has ultimately led to Oman's role as an intermediary. Oman has cultivated friendly relationships with both Iran and the United States, so it is no surprise that the Sultanate has been of key importance in mediating between the two adversaries during discussions about Iran's nuclear program.

My research question asks how Oman not only managed to maintain good relationships with Iran and the United States, but also on occasion acted as an intermediary between them. In order to analyze the research question, there are several ancillary questions that I will also examine:

[1] Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, "Albusaidi State." Retrieved from: https://www.mofa.gov.om/?p=758&lang=en.

- Why did Oman pursue this approach to foreign policy?
- How did it maintain that approach given the continuing regional challenges?
- What factors contributed to Oman's foreign policy?

I hypothesize that Sultan Qaboos's decision to take a pragmatic approach stems from several contributing factors: Oman's geography, history, economy, political leadership, and its lack of any political or ideological interests in other countries. By approaching situations pragmatically, Omani foreign policy seeks to accommodate changes in the region while safeguarding its own geopolitical security and stability. It is not fixed on a certain ideology, such as sectarianism, but remains flexible in order to accommodate changes. This flexibility has helped the country maneuver through major challenges by making decisions with an eye to the longer term, rather than the short term. Policies of non-interference and non-intervention supported Oman's neutral stance, both regionally and internationally, and is a major factor underlying Oman's occasional role as an intermediary. Omani foreign policy uses public diplomacy as a type of "soft power." This approach secures Oman's relationship with other countries by keeping communication and dialogue open—another factor that adds to the country's credibility as an intermediary.

I will test my hypothesis by analyzing the steps that Omani foreign policy has taken under the reign of Sultan Qaboos. History has laid the foundation of Omani foreign policy and therefore it is essential to analyze historical events that led to this type of policy.

With this research, I hope to add to the body of Middle East foreign policy studies by highlighting the interrelationship of internal and foreign policies that sustain a

country's security and stability. Considering Oman's location and internal complexities, my research shows how internal conditions affect the pursuit of a certain foreign policy approach that, if managed well, creates internal conditions that support the viability of the chosen foreign policy. In return, foreign policy acts as a shield from regional vulnerabilities.

Definition of Terms

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): the political, economic, and security cooperative council of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. The GCC was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 1981, for the purpose of achieving unity among its members based on their common objectives and similar political and cultural identities. Oman was one of the founding members.

Ibadiyya (Ibadi): a sect of Islam, practiced mainly in Oman and Libya.

Imamate of Oman: a community that is tribal in its organization and governed by an elected Imam according to Ibadism.

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO): the leading exploration and discovery company in Oman. PDO is owned by the Omani government, Royal Dutch Shell, Total and Partex.

Chapter II

A Brief History of Oman

This chapter provides a historic overview of Oman to give the reader an understanding of Oman's modern foreign policy because Oman's history is one of the major contributing factors to the evolution of its current foreign policy. Oman was once called Muscat and Oman to distinguish between the coastal region where commerce thrived (Muscat), and the interior where the conservative tribes lived (Oman). A long range of mountains called Jibal Al Hajar divides the coast and the interior. For purposes of brevity, I have combined historic Muscat and Oman and refer to them together as Oman. Further, Musandam, an Omani enclave on the Strait of Hormuz, is separated from the mainland Sultanate by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but remains part of Oman. Sultan Qaboos bin Said simplified the country's name to Oman when he came to power in 1970, aiming to form a united identity that included all Omanis living in every part of the country.

The Sultanate of Oman is one of the oldest independent states in the Arab world.[2] Sharing borders with Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and maritime borders with Iran and Pakistan, Oman's strategic location in the Arabian Peninsula made it a historic center for maritime trade. With approximately 35% of all seaborne petroleum trade passing through the 29 nautical miles of its narrowest point, the Strait of Hormuz is one of the

[2] Linda Pappas Funsch, *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

world's most strategically important choke points.[3] Oman's eastern coastline faces the Indian Ocean, which gives the country an advantage in pursuing its "long participation in global trade networks,"[4] enabling it to build a trade history with the outside world dating back to pre-Islamic times.[5]

As a maritime country whose sailors reached China as early as the 8th century, Omanis were a pioneering people who established links well beyond the country's borders.[6] They navigated through the Indian Ocean and were notable for their strong trading presence on the maritime silk route. Oman's open and multicultural interactions led it to become a multi-ethnic hub, which resulted in Oman's longstanding tolerance of religions, sects, cultures, and ethnicities.

Muscat, Oman's capital, was occupied by the Portuguese from 1507 to 1650. Iranians occupied the coasts of Oman from 1737 to 1744 until Imam Ahmad bin Said defeated them at a battle in Sohar,[7] a port city in Oman. Ahmad bin Said was the founder of the Al Busaidi state, the family of the current Sultan. According to Linda Pappas Funsch, "Ahmed bin Said managed to unite various tribes within Oman but he also expanded the country's power and infuence throughout the Gulf region… by establishing

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[3] UNESCO, "Silk Road: Dialogue, diversity & development—Oman." Retrieved from: http://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes/oman.

[4] Jeremy Jones, and Nicholas Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

[5] Giorgio Cafiero, "What the Arab World Can Learn from Oman." Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/giorgio-cafiero/what-the-arab-world-can-learn-from-man_b_8074584.html.

[6] Paul Dresch, and James Piscatori, *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf* (London: I. B. Touris, 2005), 96.

[7] Majid Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy: Foundation and Practice* (Westport, CT: ABC CLIO-Greenwood, 2009), 10.

Oman's preeminence in the Gulf through the formation of a powerful regular navy, Imam Ahmed held foreign ambitions in that region in check, elevating Oman to the level of an independent and formidable Indian Ocean power. His leadership and success, including the stability he brought to Oman, won him the respect of European powers. Their merchants were eager to establish commerical ties with Omani cities."[8]

Oman's strategic location placed it in a complex position at the time of European colonial expansion in the 17th century, especially when Britain and France conflicted over power in the Indian Ocean which inevitably meant that Oman would be subject to the effect of this conflict. Britain took part in a European monarchies coalition to defeat the republican government in France, which was established a result of the French revolution that began in 1789.[9] After the death of Imam Ahmed, Sultan bin Ahmed came to power. His ascension to power gave Oman considerable control and influence over the Arab and Persian coasts, as he strengthened Oman's position at the Strait of Hormuz. This, as Jones and Ridout explain, would be "the basis for subsequent Omani efforts to secure a dominant position in the region… it was also the grounds for the intensification of both British and French interest in securing an alliance with Muscat."[10]

Britain succeeded in signing a treaty with Muscat on October 12, 1798, and according to Jones and Ridout, the British achieved their objective of a treaty with Muscat at the expense of the French because of "the combination of intense French-British competition and the complications and divisions on the French side in the throes

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[8] Funsch, *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization,* 44.

[9] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 42.

[10] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 41.

of revolution."[11] Jones and Ridout attribute Sultan bin Ahmed's decision to sign a treaty with the British as "a response to a set of more immediate and pragmatic considerations, many of them commerical."[12]

Zanzibar came under Omani control in the 17th century, and that lasted until the mid-20th century, during which time Zanzibar became a trade hub and expanded Oman's foreign relations with the West, including the U.S. Britain watched this expansion, and perceived Oman's commercial development as a threat to Britain's own dominance in the Indian Ocean.[13] Britain intensified its involvement in Oman's affairs, and managed to limit Oman's position at the time.[14]

In 1790, an American sailing ship reached Oman,[15] but it was not until 1833 that Oman and the United States signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, the first accord between the U.S. and an Arab gulf state. In 1840, Oman became the first Arab country to send a diplomatic envoy to the U.S. After Sultan Qaboos came to power, the U.S.-Omani relationship shifted to a more strategic one, with Oman being the first Gulf state to formally allow the U.S. military to use its bases, in 1980.[16]

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[11] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 42.

[12] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 44.

[13] M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: The Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 2002), xxix.

[14] Bhacker, *Trade and Empire,* xxix.

[15] "Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center." Retrieved from: https://www.sqcc.org/About/U002ES002E-002D-Oman-Relations.aspx.

[16] Kenneth Katzman, "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy." Retrieved from: https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21534.pdf.

Sultan Taimur bin Faisal faced many internal issues during his reign, some relating to the interior tribes. In 1920, Sultan Taimur and the interior tribes were brought together to sign a treaty mediated by the British. The Treaty of Seeb laid down conditions concerning governance between the Sultan and the tribes: settling the safety of the interior tribes in coastal towns, and non-interference of the Sultan's government in their affairs.[17] In return, the interior tribes agreed not to attack coastal towns and to respect the Sultan's government.

When Sultan Taimur stepped down in 1932, his 22-year-old son, Sultan Said bin Taimur, assumed power. Sultan Said did his best to control matters, seeking to ensure that his authority was not undermined by any external interference in domestic affairs, and acutely aware of the "humiliation that both his father and grandfather had suffered at the hands of the British, primarily as a result of the financial condition of the state."[18] However, when Sultan Said found oil in the Imamate run by Imam Ghalib Al Hinai, the Treaty of Seeb broke down. That resulted in a strong request from the Imamate to separate from Muscat.

In 1954, the Imamate contacted the Arab League requesting recognition as a state. The request failed because members of the Arab League perceived the matter as an internal Omani problem, so the League referred it to the United Nations.[19] The "Question of Oman" was raised in the United Nations in 1957. In 1965, after a UN mission visited

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[17] Joseph A. Kechichian, *Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1995), 273.

[18] Calvin H. Allen, *Oman: The Modernization of the Sultanate* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 62.

[19] Majid Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy: Foundation and Practice* (Westport, CT: ABC CLIO-Greenwood, 2009), 38.

Oman, an ad hoc committee was established to highlight the issue of the rebels. The committee articulated that the Question of Oman was a "serious international problem, requiring the special attention of the General Assembly; that it is derived from imperialistic policies and foreign intervention in Muscat and Oman."[20] The Question of Oman was not resolved until Sultan Qaboos came to reign in 1970.

The struggle between Sultan Said and the Imamate lasted for more than a decade. Saudi Arabia supported the Imamate with weapons and soldiers.[21] In 1952, Saudi Arabia began to pressure the Imamate's western frontier.[22] Resolving that conflict was a major event during the reign of Sultan Said.[23] The revolt dissolved when Imam Ghalib fled to Saudi Arabia in 1959.

In 1959, Sultan Said moved to Dhofar after the revolt.[24] There was no freedom of movement from one part of the country to another; there were only three primary schools throughout the entire country. Consequently, many Omanis fled to other countries to pursue work and educational opportunities because of Sultan Said's restrictive policies. The Sultan also isolated Oman from its fellow Arab neighbors and the outside world, eventually even isolating himself from his own subjects.[25]

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[20] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 40.

[21] Salim Aqeel Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976)* (Salalah: Oman, 2007), 208.

[22] Allen, *Oman*, 64.

[23] Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

[24] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 237.

[25] Mary Kwak, "Oman: Building a New Dawn," *Harvard International Review* 6, no. 1 (1983): 28-30. Retrieved from: http://www.jstor.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/42759633.

Soon many Dhofaris began to meet with Sultan Said's opponents, notably Imam Ghalib bin Ali. In 1962, Dhofari rebels blew up an oil exploration field and shot at military installations.[26] These events marked the emergence of the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF). The DLF wanted to eliminate the British presence from the country as well as the regime of Sultan Said. When the British withdrew from Aden at the end of 1967, it led to the rise of a Marxist regime in South Yemen, which influenced the Dhofari insurgents to adopt a new ideology: a shift to Marxist-Leninist ideology in the organizational dynamics of the DLF, which was renamed to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG).[27]

South Yemen played a crucial role in offering PFLOAG direct diplomatic channels, military training bases, and media offices.[28] In early 1970, PFLOAG controlled over 80 percent of Dhofar. Christopher Paul et al. note that while the insurgency's military capability improved, its popularity did not because its Marxist-Leninist dogma, which repudiated Islam.[29] In June 1970, the insurgents attacked an area close to Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), resulting in an immediate call for action. The British attempted to persuade Sultan Said to change his policies but failed. They saw only one way to change the situation in Oman: change the nation's leadership. On July 23,

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[26] Allen*, Oman*, 98.

[27] Stephen A. Cheney, "The Insurgency in Oman, 1962-1976," Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1984. Retrieved from: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/CSA.htm.

[28] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 274.

[29] Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, "Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies" (Washington, DC: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2013), 278. Available from: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/ RR200/RR291z2/ RAND_RR291z2.sum.pdf.

1970, Qaboos bin Said, then twenty-nine years old, came to power after overthrowing his father in a *coup d'état* coordinated by the British.

Sultan Qaboos

Sultan Qaboos bin Said was born on November 18, 1940, in Salalah to Sultan Said and Maizoon Al Mashani; he is their only child. Growing up, Sultan Qaboos received private tutoring of the Arabic language and Sharia studies. At the age of eighteeen, he was sent to Britain by his father to continue his eduction at a private school for two years and in 1960 he joined the Sandhurst Military Academy from which he graduted in 1962.[30] He joined the British Army and served in Germany for one year in 1962. Before returning to Oman in 1964, he toured the world and observed the modernization of other countries, which he wanted to see in his own country, and it was for this reason that his father put him under house arrest.

According to Muqaibel, Sultan Said prevented his son from reading any newspapers during the time of his house arrest, but his mother, Maizoon, used to give her son newspapers without Sultan Said's knowledge.[31] Sultan Qaboos's interaction with people was limited to only a few Omanis and British who worked in his father's government and the palace workers. Some of those Omanis and British were instrumental in the coup d'état planned against Sultan Said. It is important to note that the British were key in the change of leadership. Subsequently, some of Sultan Qaboos's advisors were British. On the contrary, in a British Broadcasting Channel (BBC) radio show with Mike

[30] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 286.

[31] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 287.

Thomson in 2009, Dr. Christopher Davidson, a specialist in Gulf Affairs at Durham University, stated that "there is no real admission that Britain was directly involved. Most would seem to believe that Britain's advisors to the Sultan had pretty much switched to his son and decided his son should take over and engineer this palace coup."[32]

A record of Sultan Qaboos explaining why he overthrew his father was made public immediately after the coup. In Sultan Qaboos's words: "I thought my father was not leading the country in the right way… he should have been leading it." Afterwards, the interviewer asked how Sultan Qaboos organized the coup so efficiently despite living a restricted life in Salalah. Sultan Qaboos's response was: "I have some friends. I have some friends and they help me."[33] It is important to note that Sultan Qaboos holds the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Finance, and Minister of Defense.

On the BBC show, Thomson interviewed a former Guardian reporter who was asked by Britain's Foreign Office to fly to Muscat just after the coup. The former reporter mentioned that he realized the situation was not ordinary and that "the Foreign Office knew about it and wanted us to cover it for its own purposes." The key person there, as mentioned by the former reporter, was Colonel Hugh Oldman, the Secretary of Defence. Thomson stated that Oldman "modestly denied any knowledge of the coup. It was, as he said, all done behind walls, kept within the family."[34] Prior to becoming the Defence Secretary, Oldman was Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), which was

[32] BBC Radio, "Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman." 2009. Retrieved from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/player/b00ny7nb.

[33] BBC Radio, Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman.

[34] BBC Radio, "Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman."

formed in 1958 as a formal agreement between Britain and Oman. The officers of the SAF were all British. Oldman was not under the British Army. As a contract officer his directions came from Sultan Said and later from Sultan Qaboos.[35]

According to Sir Ranulph Fiennes, an English explorer who served in the British Army during the counter-insurgency in Oman, Sultan Said kept his son under house arrest because Sultan Said suspected that his son would oust him. As aforementioned, Sultan Qaboos's contacts were limited, and as Sir Ranulph mentioned in the interview, Sultan Said did not allow Dhofaris to meet with Sultan Qaboos as they might have had influenced him with ideas. On the other hand, Sultan Said allowed the British to meet with Sultan Qaboos at the palace, most notable from those allowed was Tim Landon. Tim Landon was a British intelligence officer and a good friend of Sultan Qaboos at Sandhurst. Eventually, Landon with Howard Wilson's government, PDO, and Sheikh Baraik, the Mayor of Salalah, plotted to overthrow Sultan Said.

Thomson found a file stamped "secret" covering events in Oman around the time of the coup in the British National Archives with some sections of the documents blanked out. On the BBC show, Professor Marc DeVore, an American historian, spoke to Thomson about the missing sections from "file FCO 46-609", which he had made copies of when working on his PhD in 2005. As Thomson states: "the documents within it show for the first time just how far the British were prepared to go to ensure that Qaboos successfully overthrew his father."[36] Professor DeVore explains that the documents go

[35] BBC Radio, "Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman."

[36] BBC Radio, "Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman."

into considerable depth in showing "how the United Kingdom decided to back a coup d'état, what types of forces could be used to back it, and for what motivations."[37]

As aforementioned in the previous section, Britain had commerical interests in Oman as well as political. Althought Britain was attempting to withdraw its presence from the Gulf during that time, the events occuring in Oman, specifically in Dhofar, were alarming. The fear was that the whole Gulf would fall into Communist hands if the Marxist insurgents succeeded. Thomson says: "with Britain's significant commercial and political interests at stake, something it seems had to be done about Oman's failing ruler (Sultan Said)." In one of the documents Thomson read he found that Britian's decision to support Sultan Qaboos's plan for a coup stemmed from protecting its own interests, including the air base on the island of Masirah. The public position hoped for by Britain was that Britain had no direct involvement in the coup and that it was an internal matter of Oman, and as insisted by Sir Antony Acland of the Foreign Office, the Foreign Office was simply responding to rather than intiating developments in Oman.[38]

Sultan Qaboos's time under house arrest was spent on extensive reading and studying Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic, and Omani history.[39] Sultan Qaboos's other interest is environmental matters, and his hobbies are horse riding and archery. In 1989, the Sultan Qaboos Environmental Prize for Environmental Preservation was introduced by UNESCO with the purpose of recognizing "outstanding contributions by individuals,

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[37] BBC Radio, "Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman."

[38] BBC Radio, "Mike Thomson Investigates Britain's Role during the 1970 Coup in Oil-Rich Oman."

[39] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 287.

groups of individuals, institutes or organizations in the management or preservation of the environment."[40]

An enthusiast of classical music, Sultan Qaboos founded a classical music orchestra, known as Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra, in 1985. In 2011, the Arabian Peninsula's first opera house was opened in Muscat, the Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM), under the Sultan's order. A ROHM official guide contains an address penned by the Sultan describing the inauguration of ROHM as "a moment in the long history of our nation when it is time to embrace the concept of world culture and take part in its development on a wider scale."[41] The opening of a house of the arts is symbolic to the balance that is brought to Omani culture, where Oman preserves its traditional identity as an Arab Muslim country and is receptive to modernization in fields, such as music and theatre.

In an interview with Anne Joyce in 1995, Sultan Qaboos attributed his influences as an "enlightened leader" to the insistence of his father, Sultan Said, on studying religion, history, and the culture of Oman, as well as his exposure to the Western world in terms of education, military service, and philosophy. As quoted from the interview with Anne Joyce:

> My father's insistence on my thoroughly studying my religion and the history and culture of my country were a profound help in forming my consciousness of my responsibilities towards my people and to humanity at large. Also, I had the benefit—one might say as a counter-balance in a sense—of a Western education

[40] UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize. Retrieved from: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/man-and-biosphere-programme/awards-and-prizes/sultan-qaboos/how-to-apply/.

[41] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, Mariam Ibrahim Al-Mulla, and Victoria Hightower, *Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives, and Identity in the Arab Gulf States* (London: Routledge, 2016) 152.

> and exposure to the discipline of life as a soldier. Finally, I have had the advantage over the years of reading the political and philosophical views of many of the world's foremost thinkers. In some cases, of course, I have found myself in disagreement with the ideas they have expressed, but this disagreement in itself has proved valuable in the evolution of my formed opinions and in my recognition of the need to consider all sides of a question.[42]

This excerpt of the interview tells the background of the Sultan that ultimately contributed to his shaping of foreign policy, as well as internal policy, where all sides of a question must be considered. This point is significant in viewing Omani foreign policy under Sultan Qaboos as it has to an extent reflected on his character and this could be an explanation to how this type of foreign policy was formed.

Foreign Policy (1970 to Present)

Oman always opts for peaceful resolutions rather than armed conflict. Oman does not have political interests in other countries that would cause it to interfere in another country's domestic affairs. With limited financial resources, Oman has its own borders to protect, and the current regime has had to overcome numerous internal issues to get Oman to where it is today.

Following his accession as Sultan, one of Qaboos's first official foreign visits was to Saudi Arabia in 1971, which had supported the Imamate and had already expanded its borders into Omani land. During his visit, Sultan Qaboos suggested that Saudi Arabia is Oman's neighbor, and for Oman to protect its borders, it is best for Oman to be at peace with those it shares borders with, regardless of political differences. The visit resulted in

[42] A. Joyce (January, 1995). Interview with Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said.

Saudi Arabia withdrawing its support for Imam Ghalib bin Ali, and the Saudis sent financial aid to assist Oman in the fight against South Yemen.

Other countries in the Middle East region struggle for power and clash politically to assert themselves as shapers of the region. Some GCC members expand their interests beyond their national boundaries in order to increase their influence, and they have the resources to do so. For example, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and for Islamist-leaning rebel groups in Syria, at times puts it at odds with fellow GCC members.[43] In 2014, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain temporarily withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, "accusing it of jeopardizing GCC security, after Qatar refused to commit to a security agreement signed by every other GCC member."[44] Oman did not withdraw its ambassador.

More recently, in a Saudi-led move in Yemen called Operation Decisive Storm, Oman was the only GCC country that declined to join—another instance in which Oman demonstrated that it is the most independent GCC member within the Saudi sphere of geopolitical influence and the country, according to Giorgio Cafiero, "most committed to cooling regional sectarian tensions."[45] The Saudi-led coalition supported an ousted Yemeni regime; on the other side, Iran supported the Houthis who are Shia. The Houthi rebellion is based largely on socio-economic issues, in particular calling attention to

[43] Stratfor website, *The GCC: Shared Goals, Different Approaches,* April 4, 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/gcc-shared-goals-different-approaches.

[44] Stratfor, *The GCC*.

[45] Giorgio Cafiero, "Oman Breaks from GCC on Yemen Conflict," *Al-Monitor*, 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/oman-response-yemen-conflict.html.

inequalities imposed by the Yemeni government against the Houthis. These issues festered for some time until conflict erupted in 2011.

Yemen ranks as one of the most impoverished places in the world.[46] It is torn by tribal conflicts, sectarianism, attacks by Al-Qaeda, corruption, unemployment, and food insecurity.[47] Although North and South Yemen united in 1990, various factions and economic weaknesses made the country vulnerable to conflicts and proxy wars as it became a base for radical groups. According to Corinne Graff, dissatisfied citizens respond more willingly to offers that address their grievances, even when such offers come from violent extremist groups because the central government failed to deliver basic services.[48] The situation in Yemen has not yielded sufficient economic benefits to meet the needs of Yemenis, thereby resulting in internal divisions that continue to hinder internal stability.

Oman is concerned with protecting its own borders from violent radical groups rather than joining a coalition that intervenes militarily in a neighboring country. Oman already has some history with what was once South Yemen, and intervening in Yemen could make Oman vulnerable to attacks. It is most beneficial to Oman to stay out of any military confrontation with Yemen rather than provoke hostile actions from factions within Yemen. Oman would rather mediate between opposing factions, or offer

[46] Corinne Graff, "Poverty, Development, and Violent Extremism in Weak States," The Brookings Institution, 2010. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/2010_confronting_poverty.pdf.

[47] BBC Middle East, "Yemen Crisis."

[48] Graff, "Poverty, Development, and Violent Extremism."

humanitarian and medical support to wounded Yemenis who may also be treated in Omani hospitals.[49]

Sultan Qaboos put forward his foreign policy approach from the early stages of his accession. In 1973, he stated a plan for the country: "to expand its strong desire for maintaining peace and stability between the various countries of the world and the establishment of friendly and mutual relations with every country which extends a hand of friendship to us on the basis of mutual respect."[50] During the fourth summit conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Algeria in 1973, Sultan Qaboos outlined Oman's foreign policy, which was "non-interference in the affairs of others and the rejection of any interference in the affairs of our country."[51] Today the Sultan continues to pursue this policy in an effort to prevent foreign interference in Oman's affairs, especially having witnessed how such interference could potentially aid rebellions.

In 1975, Jordanian forces were dispatched to assist Omani forces in fighting the Dhofar rebels. At the end of 1975, the Sultan's forces, along with British advisors, Jordanians, Iranians, and Baluchis, gained control over Dhofar, thus ending the decade-long war. One of the first steps the Sultan took to end the Dhofar Rebellion was to pardon the rebels who surrendered and offer governmental assistance, a step that also paved the

[49] Ashraf Al-Falahi, "Just How Neutral Is Oman in Yemen War?" *Al-Monitor*, 2016. Retrieved from: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/oman-neutral-saudi-war-iran-houths.html.

[50] Ministry of Information, *The Royal Speeches of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, 1970-2010* (Oman: Ministry of Information, 2010), 28.

[51] Ministry of Information, *The Royal Speeches*, 28.

way for the country's foreign policy of "friends to all, enemies to none."[52] Sultan Qaboos further resolved the rebellion by giving the people their right to basic human needs, an education, and medical assistance. Sultan Qaboos opened the doors for dialogue, an element that did not exist under the previous regime. This exemplifies another feature of Oman's foreign policy: a preference for dialogue and diplomacy rather than military intervention. Its internal policies during this time contributed to building Oman's current foreign policy. In 1976, Sultan Qaboos granted a pardon to all who joined the rebellion. The war resulted in victory for Oman as "the first to be achieved by an Arab country over world communism in the battlefield in a war which lasted long years, and the second victory by an international state" in the words of Sultan Qaboos.[53]

According to Allen and Rigsbee, the impact of the Dhofar War affected the nature of Omani development and in defining Sultan Qaboos.[54] Oman had been a fragile state, divided by ideological factions that were supported by external groups. After this experience, the Sultan's policies were formed in ways that prevented the likelihood that any anti-regime group might form. Jeffrey Lefebvre noted that the stabilization of the domestic situation in Oman allowed Sultan Qaboos

> to devote more attention to foreign policy and to implement his policy of independence (maintaining freedom of action), pragmatism (demonstrating flexibility in reaching accommodation with regional and global powers), and moderation (eschewing extreme positions and

[52] Conversation with Omani government official. Interview conducted by thesis author, January 2016.

[53] Ministry of Information, *The Royal Speeches,* 62.

[54] Calvin H. Allen and W. Lynn Rigsbee II, *Oman under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970-1996* (London: Routledge, 2016), xvii.

> supporting a stable regional political-military status quo) in securing Omani foreign-policy interests.[55]

Oman was one of three Arab countries and the only Gulf country that did not cut ties with Egypt when the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty was signed in 1979, following the Camp David Accords in 1978. Sultan Qaboos declined to attend the 1978 Rejectionist Front Summit against Egypt. Iraq responded to Oman's position by stating: "We regard every Arab ruler who does not implement the summit decisions as a traitor. It is therefore our duty to instigate his people against him and to provide them with the necessary means to topple him."[56] Cutting communication with Egypt would not do any good either in the short or long term. Instead, that response would only jeopardize existing regional stability and cause uncertainty in a region that was already facing turmoil. Sultan Qaboos had an objective to establish long-term stability, and to do this meant to look for long-term solutions rather than short-term ones. According to Uzi Rabi, Sultan Qaboos understood that foreign policy required some risky and bold steps in order to pursue long-term interests.[57]

Oman did join the Middle East peace process, which entailed a series of negotiations facilitated by the U.S. The core parties in this process—Israel and the Arab states whose territory Israel had occupied after the 1967 war—were, according to Jones and Ridout, "encouraged to develop bilateral negotiations with the aim of achieving

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[55] Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy Archives*, no. 1 (2010). Retrieved from: http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/omans-foreign-policy-twenty-first-century.

[56] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 83.

[57] Uzi Rabi, "Oman and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Reflection of a Pragmatic Foreign Policy," *Israel Affairs* 11, no. 3 (2005): 538.

individual peace treaties on a 'land for peace' basis."[58] This process meant establishing five multilateral working groups: water, refugees, the environment, arms control and regional security, and regional economic development. Oman took an active role following the announcement of the Oslo Accords of 1993, when the Omani government began to explore pursuing its interests in the Water Resources Working Group and to more generally contribute to the peace process by developing a bilateral relationship with Israel.[59] For instance, in 1994, Oman hosted a meeting of the Water Resources Working Group, which was attended by Israeli government representatives. At the end of 1994, Yitzhak Rabin, then Israeli Prime Minister, visited Oman at the invitation of the Omani government. In 1996, the Middle East Desalination Research Center was established in Oman, as another institution of the peace process. An Israeli Trade Representative Office was opened in Muscat in May 1996, and an Omani Trade Representative Office was opened in Tel Aviv in August 1996. However, Oman closed that office in 2000 after the break out of the Second *Intifada*.

The Omani government also was aware that most of its citizens would be against an Oman-Israel relationship because they supported Arab solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. Consequently, the visits of Israeli officials to Oman were not publicized. The reason the Omani government approached the Israeli matter differently from most of its Arab counterparts is due to its pragmatism. In 1983, the Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi, took the unusual step of calling on Arab nations to

[58] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 215.

[59] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 216.

recognize Israel, particularly by publicly acknowleding Israel's existence.[60] However, the possibility of any official government relationship in the future between Israel and Oman will only develop with the appearance of a Palestinian state.

The principles of non-intervention, non-interference, and respect for the internal affairs of other countries subsequently led countries to reciprocate the same principles toward Oman, which successfully built a platform where there is open dialogue based on the underlying principle of respect. According to Giorgio Cafiero, Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy of maintaining respectful relations with all relevant actors and offering Oman as a third-party mediator is consistent with Oman's strategy of relative neutrality. That same strategy brought American and Iranian diplomats to Muscat in 2012 for talks that led to the historic framework reached by Iran and the world powers in 2015.[61] Oman has been asked by foreign governments to negotiate the release of foreign citizens. Oman negotiated and paid a one million dollar bail for the release of three American hikers who were jailed in Iran in 2009.[62] Since war began again in Yemen in 2015, Oman has negotiated the release of citizens from America, Britain, France, and Canada.

It is important for a country's foreign policy to be respectful of others in order for its own borders and internal affairs to be stable. According to Marc Valeri, the political instability evident in the Middle East has always been perceived by Oman as a threat to

[60] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 83.

[61] Cafiero, "Oman Breaks from GCC."

[62] Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. Hikers Bauer and Fattal are Freed by Iran, Arrive in Oman," *Washington Post,* September 21, 2011. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iran-to-free-us-hikers-says-lawyer/2011/09/21/gIQAbwNPkK_story.html.

its own internal stability, which helps explain Oman's determination to prevent regional actors from interfering in its internal affairs.[63]

[63] Marc Valeri, "Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (January 2015): 20. Retrieved from: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/omani_spring.pdf.

Chapter III

Oman: Mediator and Negotiator

During the past few years, Omani foreign policy has gained a notable reputation for its role as facilitator and mediator between various factions and governments. Earlier, I explained the reasons why Oman chose its unique approach to foreign relations. Its choice of non-intervention, non-interference, looking for long-term solutions, and maintaining a certain degree of flexibility to continuously adjust to the influx of regional challenges has proved fortuitous for Oman's own security and stability.

Oman's current foreign policy began as an outcome of Oman's own internal challenges after Sultan Qaboos took power. However, it is important to remember that over many years Oman has been open to other countries mainly due to its geography, i.e., its outward facing toward the Indian Ocean, thus giving the country multicultural exposure through maritime trade. As shown in the steps taken by Sultan Qaboos when he took power, as he considered the problems facing Oman, he also worked to revive Oman's legacy as a formidable country. That did not mean being a country whose territory stretches through seas and continents, but rather a country that can sustain security and stability through sociopolitical and economic tools. In Oman's case, this was achieved through diplomacy as a means of soft power. Economically, Oman is not as strong as its GCC counterparts so the use of diplomacy is Oman's best tool for sustaining its security and stability in a complex region. Oman's current position as a respected mediator and negotiator is the result of decades of work to maintain a consistency in its

principles. It is this consistency that contributes to Oman's reputation and builds its credentials as a trusted base for facilitation and assistance.

Examples of Oman's facilitating skills abound. For example, Oman facilitated the release of a Canadian citizen from Iran in 2016. In the same year, Oman hosted the Libyan Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA). The draft Libyan constitution was declared from Oman and the Acting Chairman of the CDA, Dr. Al Jilani Abdul Salam al-Jamal, thanked "the Sultanate for hosting meetings and providing the conducive milieu for dialogue and consultations."[64] Since the start of the war in Yemen in early 2015, Oman has secured the release of American, British, French, and German citizens. The request for assistance by foreign goverments is due to Oman keeping communication open with the various sides in Yemen. Blocking communication with a certain side would have made facilitating such actions more difficult.

Oman and Iran

Geography is a determinant in shaping a country's position, and this is an important factor for understanding Oman's relationship with Iran. Oman and Iran are neighbors—a geographic reality that is permanent and cannot be disregarded. For a country to secure its borders, it must secure its relationships with those it shares borders with. Oman shares geographic responsibility of the strategic Strait of Hormuz with Iran,

[64] "Libyan CDA reaches consensus on new constitution at conclusion of meeting in Oman," *Times of Oman*, April 4, 2016. Retrieved from: http://timesofoman.com/article/81048/Oman/Government/Libyan-CDA-reaches-consensus-on-new-constitution-at-conclusion-of-meeting-in-Oman.

through which approximately 35% of all seaborne petroleum trade passes.[65] Sharing these crucial maritime borders with Iran means Oman must find common ground with its neighbor in a way that will maintain secure borders for Oman while also creating domestic and regional stability.

Asha Castleberry argues that Oman's "good neighbor policy" has buttressed its economic interests by expanding the country's ties with key allies regardless of political challenges.[66] Under the reign of Sultan Qaboos, Oman has managed to maintain a balanced and friendly relationship with Iran through its good neighbor policy, despite tensions between its GCC counterparts and Iran.

Economically, Oman and Iran cooperate on many fronts. An underwater natural gas pipeline is being developed between the two countries. According to Cafiero, Oman views the import of Iranian natural gas as a critical geopolitical and economic objective, and Cafiero believes Oman would not compromise this energy relationship with Iran.[67] From this beneficial relationship has come mutual and economic benefits between the two countries, which draw them even closer together.

During the Dhofar rebellion, Iranian forces under the Shah's regime were sent to Dhofar to assist Oman in fighting the rebels, despite the fact that many Omanis and Arab leaders rejected Iranian assistance because Iran had invaded Oman in the past, and

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[65] UNESCO, "Silk Road: Dialogue, Diversity & Development—Oman." Retrieved from: http://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes/oman.

[66] Asha Castleberry, "Oman's Independent Foreign Policy: A Triumph for Global Diplomacy," Project for the Study of the 21st Century, September 18, 2015. Retrieved from: https://projects21.org/2015/09/18/ omans-independent-foreign-policy-a-triumph-for-global-diplomacy/.

[67] Giorgio Cafiero, "Oman, Stuck between Saudi Arabia and Iran," *Al Monitor*, January 10, 2016. Retrieved from: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/oman-saudi-arabia-iran-tension-execution-nimr-mediator.html.

because Iranian troops would then become involved in Omani matters. The assistance of the Shah during the rebellion weighed heavily on Oman. Iranian troops were sent to assist the Sultan's forces in fighting the insurgents, and hundreds of Iranian troops died on Omani soil. The assistance of Iranians is a factor that cannot be disregarded, especially since Iranian troops and air support were instrumental in ending the insurgency.[68] Oman displayed its customary pragmatism by keeping historic rifts in the past, and a new alliance was formed based on the political and economic realities of that time.

For its part, Iran would not sit back and watch Marxist influences spread through the Gulf, perhaps even spilling over into its own territory.[69] Economically, Iran needed to secure its oil trade through the Strait of Hormuz, which brought $180 million daily into Iranian coffers.[70] Iran saw the withdrawal of the British from the Gulf in 1971 as an opportunity to become the police of the Gulf. Eventually, this position turned into an adversarial competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and today each country tries to assert itself as the major regional power via economic power and sectarianism.

Another factor influencing politics in the region is the sectarianism tool of Sunni versus Shia. Oman does not experience sectarian strife because its multicultural interaction and openness led to tolerance among sects and religions. Oman views the escalation of sectarian strife between the Shias and Sunnis as a tragedy for the greater

[68] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 78.

[69] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 326.

[70] Muqaibel, *Uman bein el tajzi'a wa el wahda (1913-1976),* 326.

Islamic world, Castleberry argues.[71] Another reason for Oman's position is that the leadership is neither Sunni nor Shia; the leadership is Ibadi.

It is important to note that along the current leadership, the past ruling families of Oman were Ibadi, so for most of its post-Islamic history, Oman has been predominantly ruled by Ibadis. Oman is the only GCC country whose leadership is non Sunni, which puts the country in a unique position,and because of its religious tolerance and cultural diversity, sectarianism is not used as an ideological tool to pursue interests on a regional level. Freedom of religion is assured by the state and the facilities needed to practice various religions are provided by the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs.

In an interview with Sayyid Badr bin Hamad, the Secretary General of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when asking him whether Ibadism plays a role in Oman's overall position internally and externally, he agreed stating that Ibadism enshrines the concept of evolution and non-interference, which explains why it is not as widespread because it is not imposed.[72] This factor is also evident in Oman's present interaction with other countries where it does not interfere in their affairs. Also, *ijtihad*, which means independent reasoning or interpretation, is greatly taken into account as part of this concept of evolution where continual interpretation is vital for the progress of society. As Lefebvre states:

> Ibadism is known for its conservatism and tolerance. Ibadis place a great emphasis upon the "rule of the just" and generally have an aversion to political violence. Agreeable disagreement with friends and peaceful compromise with enemies would appear to be consistent with Ibadi thought

[71] Castleberry, "Oman's Independent Foreign Policy."

[72] Interview with Sayyid Badr bin Hamad, Secretary General of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Conducted by the thesis author, September 2017, in Oman.

> in the conduct of foreign policy. This moderating influence on Omani society should shape and constrain the foreign-policy behavior of any future Omani leader.[73]

From the earliest efforts to establish Gulf security in 1975 during an Islamic Conference, Saudi Arabia strove to build consensus on a set of security standards that included the Arab Gulf states as well as Iraq and Iran. At the time, according to Al-Khalili, Saudi Arabia highlighted "the exclusion of the superpowers from the region; denial of foreign military bases; military cooperation among Gulf countries to ensure freedom of navigation; peaceful resolution of regional disputes; and a collective guarantee of the territorial integrity of countries in the region."[74] These standards, according to Al-Khalili, were unacceptable to Oman and Iran, as the removal of foreign troops still in Dhofar was uncalled for, especially since Soviet aid was still moving through South Yemen.[75] Tensions between the Arab Gulf countries over the Oman-Iran relationship were clear from the outset of the conference. Some Arab Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, proposed that security arrangements be worked out within the "Arab Nation," making clear that Iran would not be included in any security arrangements. This came after Oman appealed that some states extend financial support to the joint Iranian-Omani naval patrols in the Strait of Hormuz.[76]

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[73] Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy Archives*, no. 1 (2010). Retrieved from: http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/omans-foreign-policy-twenty-first-century.

[74] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 80.

[75] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 81.

[76] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 81.

Another challenge to Oman's diplomatic relationship with Iran occurred when Iranian naval forces landed on Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa—islands that lie west of the Strait of Hormuz, and in the words of Jones and Ridout, "had been a source of controversy between Iran and the group of emirates that were at that point on the verge for forming the UAE."[77] An agreement to divide Abu Musa into two parts was reached just two days before the formation of the UAE in 1971, but neither side recognized the sovereignty of the other. So, because there was no agreement on the Tunbs, Iran forcefully occupied them.[78] The Arab members of the UN called for a Security Council meeting to condemn Iran's aggression, and at that time Iraq broke off diplomatic relations with Iran.[79] As Jones and Ridout argue:

> To follow Iraq in breaking off relations would have directly contradicted the entire purpose of Omani diplomacy at this time, which was to secure the state by means of establishing formal and proper relations with all relevant parties (a policy that would later develop into the characteristic Omani stance in which an alternative should always be found to breaking off relations).[80]

Oman saw itself having to balance its relationships with the Arab gulf countries on one side, and Iran on the other, without becoming embroiled in the dispute and without taking sides.

In 1976, Saudi Arabia attempted to mediate between South Yemen and Oman to end South Yemen's support for the insurgents. The effort succeeded, with South Yemen withholding all aid to the insurgents, and in return all foreign forces in Oman were to

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[77] Jones and Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, 156.

[78] Jones and Ridout. *A History of Modern Oman*, 157.

[79] Jones and Ridout. *A History of Modern Oman,* 157.

[80] Jones and Ridout. *A History of Modern Oman*, 157.

withdraw.[81] The various factions and governments in the Arabian Peninsula loath the presence of foreign forces, but Sultan Qaboos stated once again that reliable security arrangements had to be made among the Gulf countries before foreign forces could be withdrawn from Oman. It is clear that Sultan Qaboos approached matters pragmatically despite pressure from the Gulf countries and Iraq, and according to Al-Khalili, this "was the beginning of a sense of independent foreign policy initiatives."[82]

Strategic concerns are at the core of the relationship between Oman and Iran. According to Jones and Ridout, "Oman had always recognized that Iran was too powerful a regional power to be excluded from regional security arrangements, and that no regional security agreement would ever be fully operative without Iranian participation."[83] However, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 sparked uncertainty in the region. With a fundamental shift in the Iranian political structure, regional countries feared that effects of the change could spill into their own countries. What countries feared was the spread of fundamentalism, which potentially could trigger Iran-influenced revolutions. This was a challenge for countries in the region, and specifically a test for Oman, which had been on better terms with Iran (under the Shah) than were the other Gulf countries.

How Oman dealt with the regime change in Iran was influenced by its policy of pragmatism. Oman's approach had to be realistic, and whatever happened in Iran—although its effects were potentially threatening to Oman's domestic affairs—was still an

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[81] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 82.

[82] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 83.

[83] Jones and Ridout. *A History of Modern Oman*, 156.

internal matter for Iran. Sultan Qaboos began working to form a new relationship with the new government in order to safeguard Oman's own security and stability, and that of the region overall.

In 1979, an Omani delegation was dispatched to Iran to meet with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Oman was informed by Iran that, in the words of Al-Khalili, "agreements signed by the previous regime would be honored and that Iran would work closely with Oman to ensure regional security."[84] Yusuf bin Alawi, Oman's Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, declared: "Iran is our neighbor, we have close historical, religious and geographic links with her, and we are eagerly looking forward to expanding pure relations with her in all fields in order to make the region a safer place to live in."[85] This statement shows Oman's persistent desire to accommodate regional changes in order to preserve stability in the region. As always, Oman looked for long-term solutions rather than retaliate or resist the change, as retaliation does more harm than good.

In the early 1980s, the Oman-Iran relationship went through a critical period when the Iran-Iraq war started. According to Joseph Kechichian, Iran feared that anti-Iranian forces could use Muscat as a jumping-off point. To avoid getting embroiled in the war, Oman would not allow Iraqi Air Force planes to refuel in Oman.[86] Oman's position was to call for reconciliation, but neither Iran nor Iraq accepted this. Oman and Iran agreed to joint naval patrols in the Strait of Hormuz prior to the Iranian Revolution, and this agreement had been upheld by the new government. This ended, however, when an

[84] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 85.

[85] Al-Khalili, *Oman's Foreign Policy*, 85.

[86] Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, 102.

Iranian helicopter flew undetected into Omani territory, thus forcing Oman to take action by authorizing units of the U.S. Seventh Fleet to use its facilities on Masirah Island—an island that is part of Oman.[87] Even with such actions by Iran, Oman did its best not to react in any way that would cause increased hostility. According to Kechichian, "Qaboos avoided the trap of having to react to Iranian-instigated policies in the area. Instead, he guided them."[88] This point is critical in understanding Omani foreign policy; regardless of the problem being presented, if Oman does not play the rational role, then a bigger problem could arise when different sides react without considering the long-term impacts of such reactions. Omani foreign policy works to avoid unnecessary hostility and problems by using whatever tools it has to maximize its efforts to secure relationships without taking one side over the other.

During the Iraq-Iran war, Oman took a neutral stance. Oman recognized that Iraq, as an Arab country, was entitled to whatever assistance Arab countries could muster against Iran. On the other hand, Oman recognized that Iran, as a Muslim country, deserved similar assistance because of its Islamic credentials.[89] In response, Oman could relate both sides of the conflict to its own national identity of being Arab and/or Muslim as a way to justify its neutral position. However, involvement in the conflict could be harmful to Oman, as it has more to lose in its relationship with Iran due to their shared responsibility for the Strait of Hormuz. Oman asserted that rather than engage in conflict,

[87] Kechichian. *Oman and the World*, 103.

[88] Kechichian. *Oman and the World*, 102.

[89] Kechichian. *Oman and the World*, 111.

it would pursue dialogue with Iran to lessen the potential threat from that country.[90] By taking that position with Iran for the long run, Oman was the only GCC country able to maintain a stable and productive relationship with Iran.

In 2016, a Saudi Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, was executed by Saudi Arabia because al-Nimr supported anti-government protests. Iran opposed the execution because he was a prominent Shia cleric. Regional rivalry based on sectarianism is another means of creating division. Omani foreign policy does not follow a specific ideology that would then hinder it from finding viable solutions that include differing parties. Rather, Omani foreign policy takes the position that to live in a region where vulnerabilities are numerous, it must treat each issue as unique. If Oman cannot find an existing solution for it, then it will seek to create a new solution. Interfering in another country's affairs does more harm than good, so if Oman were to demote its relationships with other countries based on their internal affairs, such action would defer any potential progress in the relationship. Keeping communication and dialogue open is essential to resolve any existing problem.

This policy is also seen in Oman's relationship with Syria, where Oman was the only GCC country to keep its ambassador after the Syrian civil war began in 2011. Maintaining the Omani ambassador to Syria does not mean that Oman agrees with what is happening in Syria; rather, it allows Oman to keep open a direct line of communication. In this way, Oman will be in a position to maneuver between different sides and help whenever help is requested.

[90] Katzman, "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy."

Oman and the United States

The relationship between Oman and the United States goes back to 1790 when the American trading vessel, *Boston Rambler*, reached Oman. The U.S. and Oman signed a Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833, the first bilateral accord between the U.S. and an Arab gulf state. The treaty offered free trade for American traders in all parts of Oman, and American traders were exempt from paying the five percent tax imposed on all traders.

During this time, the U.S. was focused on growing its trade and commerce with the outside world. Edmund Roberts, who was sent by President Andrew Jackson on a peace and trade mission, signed the Treaty. In a letter from Roberts sent to Washington in 1834, Roberts describes the power of the Sultan:

> The Sultan of Muscat is a very powerful prince. He possesses a more efficient naval force than all the native princes combined from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan. His resources are more than adequate to his wants. They are all derived from commerce, running himself a great number of merchant vessels, from duties on foreign merchandize and from tribute money and presents received from various princes, all of which produce a large sum.[91]

The treaty was important to the U.S. because it opened up the markets of Oman and Zanzibar.[92] In 1838 a U.S. consulate opened in Oman, and in 1840, the first Arab diplomat to be accredited to the U.S. was an Omani named Ahmed bin Na'aman, who arrived on the *Sultanah*, a renowned Omani vessel.

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[91] Susan L. Douglass, and Aisa Martinez, updated by Azhar al Fadl, "The United States in Global History—Nineteenth-Century American Merchants in the Indian Ocean: Voyage of the *Peacock*, and the Treaty of Friendship with the Sultan of Muscat" (Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center, 2009), 15. Retrieved from: http://www.sqcc.org/data/pdfs/VoyageofPeacock.pdf.

[92] Quoted in William R. Nester, *The Age of Jackson and the Art of American Power, 1815-1848* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2013).

In 1889, three American missionaries established the Arabian Mission in New Jersey. The Mission's objective was "the evangelization of Arabia."[93] A station was established in Muscat in 1893 which initially sought to convert Omani Arabs to Christianity through "evangelism, preaching, Christian literature, education, and medical work."[94] Mission homes were established in Muscat and Mutrah, where scripture passages were read, Bible stories told, and hymns taught. By preaching the Gospel and reading the Bible, missionaries taught educational subjects along with basic Christian principles. As Hilal Al-Hajri stated, the missionaries "tried to instill the doctrines of Christianity in the minds of the students."[95]

Along with education, the missionaries practiced medicine as another way to reach places where preachers were restricted. Oman lacked sufficient hospitals at the time, so being able to perform as doctors enabled the missionaries to gain access to places they otherwise would not have been able to enter. For Oman, having medical necessities made the missionaries more welcome and their message more attractive.

The American missionaries wrote of the tolerance they saw in Oman as being unlike other parts of Arabia. As Paul Harrison wrote: "There are no Arabs like the Omanees. I doubt if such hospitality could be duplicated anywhere else in the world."[96] They wrote of the welcoming courtesy they received from the Omanis, including Imam

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[93] Hilal Al-Hajri, "Through Evangelizing Eyes: American Missionaries to Oman," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 41 (2011): 121-231. Available from: http://www.jstor.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/41622127.

[94] Al-Hajri, "Through evangelizing eyes," 123.

[95] Al-Hajri, "Through evangelizing eyes," 124.

[96] Al-Hajri, "Through evangelizing eyes," 127.

Muhammad Al-Khalili and Sultan Said bin Taimur, who allocated lands for churches in Muscat. This is a cultural nature that seeds tolerance for religions and different cultures, and it is important to note how this is reflected in Oman's foreign policy.

In 1958, the Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights replaced the 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce. It was not until the 1970s, under Sultan Qaboos, that both countries established embassies in each country. The U.S.-Oman relationship shifted to a more strategic one after Sultan Qaboos came to power because of the U.S.'s increased role in containing the Soviet Union and Communism during the Cold War and because of the Sultan's determination to keep Omani borders secure.

In 1980, Oman became the first Gulf state to formally allow the U.S. military to use its bases, signing a facilities access agreement.[97] This agreement allows U.S. forces to utilize military facilities in Oman, where prior approval from the Sultan must be granted for the facilities to be used. Oman renewed the facilities access agreement in 1985, 1990, 2000, and 2010. The agreement came about because other Gulf countries were reluctant to form a defense cooperation to assist in securing the Strait of Hormuz. Acting pragmatically, the Sultan had to seek defense and assistance from a major power. According to Rabi, Oman, unlike its Gulf neighbors, was unable to "purchase every concievable weapons system that the West could sell. Assessing its situation against this backdrop, Oman must have realized that only a major extra-regional power could provide the sultanate with guarantees for its future survival, or at least tip the balance in its favour when a crisis erupted."[98] Some Arab countries did not agree with Oman's move, so when

[97] Katzman, "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy."

[98] Rabi, *Oman and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 538.

they rejected Oman's proposal for a joint military force, Oman looked for alternative long-term solutions, which led it to turn to the U.S. for such assistance.

The Second Gulf War between Kuwait and Iraq in the early 1990s changed the position of the Gulf countries that earlier had rejected the joint military cooperation proposal by Sultan Qaboos. Not only did they see that a joint military force was necessary, according to Jones and Ridout, but the Arab Gulf states also "confronted the reality that their security would depend, given the present configuration of global and regional forces, on the presence of the United States in the region—a reality which several of them had in the past tried to deny."[99] In 1991 Kuwait signed a security pact with the U.S., and Bahrain followed by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement. The agreements signed by Oman's GCC counterparts allow the U.S. to station its troops in these countries. These agreements are not the same as the Oman-U.S. facilities access agreement, which only allows the U.S. to use Oman's military bases, when needed, upon approval from the Sultan. By accepting a more inclusive agreement as did its GCC counterparts, Oman would have agreed to foreign forces stationed in its territory. As this thesis reiterates, Oman wants to prevent any foreign presence in the country so as to preclude the possibility of furthering foreign interests via domestic channels. Oman and the U.S. entered into a free trade agreement (FTA) in 2005, in appreciation of Oman's support of U.S. peacemaking efforts, which at times ran counter to Oman's GCC counterparts. Oman endorsed these efforts publicly, such as by meeting and hosting Israeli delegations.[100]

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[99] Jones and Ridout. *A History of Modern Oman*, 214.

[100] Katzman, "Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy."

Oman, Iran, and the United States

It is clear that for almost four decades, the U.S.-Iran relationship has been one of enmity. Thus, Oman's role as facilitator and mediator is especially evident in its actions as intermediary between Iran and the United States. For example, in 2009 three U.S. hikers were held in Iran, accused of espionage after they were arrested on the Iraq-Iran border. The release of the hikers was a turning point for bringing the Americans and Iranians to the negotiating table. After the release of the first hiker, Sarah Shroud, Dennis Ross (U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's special adviser on Iran), and Puneet Talwar (a senior official on the National Security Council) traveled to Oman in December 2010 to determine whether Sultan Qaboos thought a channel could be opened for negotiations between the Americans and Iranians. Shortly thereafter, Hillary Clinton stopped in Oman to meet with the Sultan, during which time President Obama called the Sultan "to ask him whether he could deliver Iranians who could speak with the authority of the supreme leader."[101] In 2011, the other two hikers, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, were released. On both occasions, following their release by Iran, the Americans were transported from Iran to Oman.

In another example, President Obama sought to reduce the number of prisoners at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, so it was looking for other countries

[101] Mark Landler, "For Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, Divergent Paths to Iran Nuclear Talks," *New York Times Online*, May 3, 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/politics/for-hillary-clinton-and-john-kerry-divergent-paths-to-iran-nuclear-talks.html.

to which prisoners could be sent. Oman was one country that agreed to accept prisoners, doing so multiple times in June 2015, January 2016, and January 2017.[102]

The Iran Nuclear Deal

One of the most notable examples of Oman's efforts as intermediary came when it helped pave the way for the nuclear deal between Iran, the U.S., and other world powers. The deal was an agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program, and then monitor the program to ensure it was being used for peaceful purposes. When Iran signed the agreement, it lifted the UN Security Council sanctions, plus multilateral and national sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program.[103]

The agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was between Iran and the European Union (EU), and the P5+1: the United States, United Kingdom, China, Russia, France, and Germany, which was finalized on July 14, 2015. In the interim, the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) was reached on November 24, 2013, after the election of the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, which began implementation on January 20, 2014. Yukiya Amano, Director General of the

[102] "US transfers 10 Guantanamo prisoners to Oman," *Guardian,* January 16, 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/16/us-transfers-10-guantanamo-prisoners-to-oman-barack-obama.

[103] European External Action Service, "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," July 14, 2015. Retrieved from: https://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), stated that the IAEA would continue JPA monitoring activities "until the date on which the JCPOA is implemented."[104]

Iran has a history of being under economic and political sanctions. In 1970, Iran joined in ratifying a nuclear nonproliferation treaty that required non-nuclear-weapon states to accept International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. Iran also agreed to a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the IAEA in 1974.[105]

The U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iran during the 1979-1981 hostage crisis, which occurred when Iranians stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Protesters captured and held American diplomats and citizens for 444 days. An executive order was issued by President Jimmy Carter seizing Iranian property in the U.S. and declaring that the situation in Iran posed an extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the U.S.[106]

Additional U.S. sanctions, established under President Ronald Reagan, were imposed in 1984 when Hezbollah (a Lebanese militant group linked with Iran) was suspected of complicity in the bombing of the U.S. Marine base in Beirut.[107] At that point, the U.S. designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism, a designation that brought

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[104] Kenneth Katzman, and Paul K. Kerr, "Iran Nuclear Agreement" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 10, 2017): 1. Retrieved from: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R43333.pdf.

[105] Paul K. Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Tehran's Compliance with International Obligations," retrieved from: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R40094.pdf.

[106] Gary Samore, ed., "Sanctions against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables," (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, June 2015). Retrieved from: http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Iran%20Sanctions.pdf.

[107] Zachary Laub, "International Sanctions on Iran," *CFR Backgrounders* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, July 15, 2015). Retrieved from: http://www.cfr.org/iran/international-sanctions-iran/p20258.

multiple sanctions, restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance, export controls for dual-use items, and a ban on weapons transfers.[108]

In 1995, President Bill Clinton signed two executive orders banning all American trade with and investment in Iran. In 1996, Clinton signed the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act, which imposed sanctions on firms that invested in Iran's energy sector above a certain monetary threshold.[109] That Act also subjected non-U.S.-based companies to sanctions by "virtue of a threat: if companies chose to do business with Iran's energy sector, they could not also do business with the United States."[110] The EU challenged these sanctions at the World Trade Organization (WTO), contending that such sanctions were outside of U.S. limits; the U.S. conceded the point and agreed to waive sanctions on energy.

In 2003, the EU started multilateral negotiations to alleviate concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program, after the IAEA reported the existence of clandestine nuclear facilities at Natanz, Iran.[111] Iran stated that its use of nuclear energy was for peaceful purposes, but the international community was reluctant to accept Iran's claim, owing to the potential of its enrichment program and heavy water reactor to produce nuclear weapons material.[112]

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[108] Laub, "International Sanctions on Iran."

[109] Samore, "Sanctions against Iran."

[110] Samore, "Sanctions against Iran."

[111] Katzman and Kerr, "Iran Nuclear Agreement," 1.

[112] Katzman and Kerr, "Iran Nuclear Agreement," 1.

Following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in 2005, Iran withdrew its deferment of uranium conversion. This led to the IAEA referring Iran to the UN Security Council after it was found to be non-compliant with its agreed-upon requirements. The EU passed sanctions targeting Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, with the most damaging sanctions targeting Iran's energy and financial sectors.

By December 2006, the UN Security Council voted to impose sanctions on Iran because it was not meeting its obligation to halt all uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities. The UN Security Council passed other resolutions requiring Iran to do whatever was necessary to alleviate international concerns regarding its nuclear program.[113] UN Resolution 1737 (2006) stated:

> All States should prevent the supply, sale or transfer, for the use by or benefit of Iran, of related equipment and technology, if the State determined that such items would contribute to enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy-water related activities, or to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems. [114]

The effect of noncompliance was "blocking the import or export of sensitive nuclear material and equipment and freezing the financial assets of persons or entities supporting its proliferation sensitive nuclear activities or the development of nuclear-weapon delivery systems."[115]

In 2012, Iran's central bank assets were frozen, and the EU severed Iran's lifeline to the international financial system, the SWIFT messaging service, along with putting in

[113] Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program."

[114] United Nations Security Council, "Security Council imposes sanctions on Iran for failure to halt uranium enrichment, unanimously adopting Resolution 1737," 2006. Retrieved from: http://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8928.doc.htm.

[115] UN Security Council, "Security Council Imposes Sanctions on Iran."

place a full oil embargo.[116] These sanctions devastated Iran's economy, which relies on oil exports for about eighty percent of its public revenues.[117] According to an International Monetary Fund report, oil exports dropped almost 50 percent in 2012, bringing down oil production by about 25 percent.[118] Prices became unstable, with Iran's central bank reporting inflation of 22.2 percent, as people's savings began to lose value.[119] This put Iran in a difficult position, as the sanctions hit hard on the daily lives of Iranian citizens. Iranian leaders denied that the sanctions had an economic impact, insisting that the sanctions would make Iran stronger. The West hoped that the sanctions would turn Iranians against their leaders.[120]

When Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini referred to the U.S. as "the great Satan" and the U.S. President George W. Bush called Iran part of the "axis of evil," it was clear that the two countries had clashed for decades. For them to come to the same negotiating table in an effort to resolve the sanctions and embargoes required an important tool: diplomacy. Although an interim agreement was signed in November 2013, talks between the U.S. and Iran had actually begun two years earlier, in 2011. These talks were not publicized; instead, Oman hosted secret talks. This is where Omani diplomacy became apparent. According to Richard Schmierer, U.S. ambassador to Oman from 2009 to 2012, when

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[116] Samore, "Sanctions against Iran."

[117] Sabrina M. Peterson, "Iran's Deteriorating Economy: An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Western Sanctions," *International Affairs Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2016). Retrieved from: http://www.iar-gwu.org/node/428.

[118] International Monetary Fund, "Islamic Republic of Iran: Selected Issues," March 18, 2014: 6. Retrieved from: https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr1494.pdf.

[119] Peterson, "Iran's Deteriorating Economy."

[120] Reuters UK, "Iranians Bemoan Sanctions Hardship as Vote Approaches," February 5, 2012. Retrieved from: http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-mood-idUKTRE8140AH20120205.

Oman successfully facilitated the release of the American hikers from Iran, it created some optimism that perhaps that success could be a stepping stone to something more. It also gave Oman a position from which to explore the possibilities of facilitating dialogue between Iran and the West.[121]

It was a significant milestone for Omani diplomacy as it became a trusted facilitator between two adversaries. That role came from the earlier, established foundation of trust that both countries had in Oman. In an interview with the previous Omani ambassador to Iran, Yahya Al Fannah Al Araimi (2007-2013), he stated that the Iranian leadership's trust in Sultan Qaboos helped to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table, following a request to Oman from the U.S. asking for assistance.[122] This approach by the U.S. to Oman showed a willingness on the part of the U.S. to move forward on this longstanding issue, and recognition that Oman is indeed in a position to mediate such a request because of its special relationship with Iran.

In my interview with Ambassador Al Araimi, he stated that history, geography, and leadership are factors that define the Oman-Iran relationship. Iranians are proud of their long history, and they view Oman as a neighbor with an equally long history. That historic commonality provides a strong foundation of respect. In addition, Iranian leaders trust Sultan Qaboos, as they know he has no hidden agenda. They are aware that he wants peace, stability, and coexistence with others, as he has demonstrated repeatedly through the decades. Ambassador Al Araimi affirmed that the interaction of the Omani leadership

[121] Richard Schmierer, "The Sultanate of Oman and the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Middle East Policy Archives* 22, no. 4 (2015). Retrieved from: http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/sultanate-oman-and-iran-nuclear-deal.

[122] Interview with Yahya Al Fannah Al Araimi, former Omani ambassador to Iran. Conducted by the thesis author, February 2017, in Oman.

with the Iranians is based on geographic proximity and their long history, which makes interaction through friendly cooperation and dialogue crucial. In an interview with Sayyid Badr bin Hamad, he mentioned that after the change in Iranian leadership in 1979, the new Iranian government felt uncertainty towards Oman, but with time, there was a realization on the part of the Iranians that the Omanis were genuinely consistent with their good neighbor policy, on the basis of mutual respect and non-interference.[123]

Iran and the U.S. saw mutual benefit to finding a solution to the nuclear issue. Iran saw that the sanctions would be lifted, thus relieving the country from more years of socioeconomic hardship and isolation. The U.S. sought guarantees that Iran would not acquire nuclear weapons. For both sides, it was better to seek a solution through diplomatic means rather than resort to military confrontation. At the same time, the U.S. also would benefit economically from lifting the sanctions. According to a National Iranian American Council report, the U.S. lost at least $135 billion and as much as $175 billion from lost export revenue to Iran between 1995 and 2012.[124] That translated to between 50,000 and 66,000 lost job opportunities each year.[125] Such losses cannot be overlooked. Overall, a nuclear deal would bring more good than harm to both sides.

Oman also saw a resolution of its own interests in the nuclear issue. Any confrontation with Iran, undertaken through military power, would inevitably pose a risk

[123] Interview with Sayyid Badr bin Hamad, Secretary General of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Conducted by the thesis author, September 2017, in Oman.

[124] National Iranian American Council, "Report: Iran Sanctions Cost US Economy up to $175 Billion." Retrieved from: https://www.niacouncil.org/report-iran-sanctions-cost-us-economy-175-billion/.

[125] National Iranian American Council, "Report: Iran sanctions cost US economy up to $175 billion" (Washington, DC: NIAC Press Release, July 14, 2014). Retrieved from: https://www.niacouncil.org/report-iran-sanctions-cost-us-economy-175-billion/.

to Oman's own security and to the region as a whole. Therefore, it was in Oman's interests to assist in any manner that might bring forth a solution to this situation that continually contributed to regional fragility.

A key point to understand is that the secret talks leading to the nuclear deal happened with the direct involvement of the respective heads of states. In a speech given by Ayatollah Khamenei in 2015, he said:

> One of the honorable personalities in the region came to Iran and met with me. He said that the American president had called him, asking him to help. The American president said to him that they want to resolve the nuclear matter with Iran and that they would lift sanctions. . . . Through that intermediary, he asked us to negotiate with them and to resolve the matter. I said to that honorable intermediary that we do not trust the Americans and their statements. He said, "Try it once more," and we said, "Very well, we will try it this time as well." This was how negotiations with the Americans began.[126]

That "honorable intermediary" was Sultan Qaboos, and his personal visit to Iran demonstrated the importance of the Oman-Iran relationship and the weight that such talks held for Oman. This speech makes clear that the Iranians accepted the beginning of negotiations with the Americans because of their trust in Sultan Qaboos's advice to try again to work with the Americans. It was the sense of trust in the Sultan that started the negotiations.

Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, was asked why Oman was chosen as a mediator in an interview published in the daily Iran on August 4, 2015.[127] Salehi responded with three points: (1) Iran has very good relations

[126] Ayatollah Khamenei, "Leader's speech in meeting with government officials."

[127] Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details from Secret Iran-U.S. Nuclear Talks." Retrieved from: https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-vp-and-atomic-chief-salehi-reveals-details-secret-iran-us-nuclear-talks-khamenei.

with Oman; (2) Oman is respected by the West; and (3) Oman has already had mediation experience with the U.S. and Iran.[128]

The negotiations began with a letter sent from the U.S. to Iran, delivered via an Omani official.[129] According to Salehi's interview, the letter was given to Hassan Qashqavi, the Iranian deputy foreign minister. Qashqavi was in Oman because Iran was seeking Omani assistance to obtain the release of Iranians held in the U.S. and Britain—yet another example of Oman's importance as an intermediary. During this time, an Omani official gave Qashqavi the letter stating that the Americans were ready to negotiate with Iran and "they were very interested in resolving this Tehran-Washington challenge." According to the interview, Salehi said he did not take the letter seriously because it was handwritten, and he was not familiar with the official who wrote it.[130]

One or two months after the first letter was sent, Mohammed Suri, the director of an Iranian shipping company, came to Oman to promote shipping-related issues and to speak to Omani officials. While there, an Omani official approached Suri to tell him that "the Americans were prepared to conduct secret bilateral talks on the nuclear dossier."[131] Salehi was still unsure of the seriousness of the Americans, but asked Suri to deliver Iran's demands on his next visit to Oman. One of the demands was official recognition of Iran's rights to [uranium] enrichment.[132] Other demands related were: closing the nuclear

[128] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details "

[129] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details."

[130] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details."

[131] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details."

[132] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details."

dossier in the Security Council, official recognition of Iran's right to uranium enrichment, and resolving the issue of Iran's actions under the Possible Military Dimensions (PMD).[133] According to Salehi, the U.S. said it was willing to resolve the issues Iran had brought up. Although officials said that the U.S. would acknowledge Iran's right to uranium enrichment as part of a civil nuclear-energy program, according to Mark Landler, the U.S. denied signaling this to Iran, with John Kerry stating that this was made clear to the Iranians.[134]

After receiving the response, Salehi asked the Omanis to send him an official letter to be presented to Iranian regime officials. Upon receiving the letter, Salehi informed Iranian officials of it and asked them to seek another path to achieve their desired results as it was unlikely that talks between Iran and EU/US would occur. That other path would be the secret bilateral channel between Iran and the U.S, where Oman would be the official mediator.[135] Sultan Qaboos signed the official letter, highlighting the top-level attention and dedication that went into making the negotiations fruitful.

According to Landler, secret channels between Iran and the U.S. go back to 2009 when Omani government official Salem bin Nasser Al-Ismaily visited Dennis Ross, Hillary Clinton's special adviser on Iran. Al-Ismaily had an offer from Iran to negotiate with the Obama administration on a range of issues, including the country's nuclear program.[136] Ross viewed such proposals this way:

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[133] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details."

[134] Landler, "Hillary Clinton and John Kerry."

[135] MEMRI, "Iranian VP and Atomic Chief Salehi Reveals Details."

[136] Landler, "Hillary Clinton and John Kerry."

> Not with a grain of salt, but a small ton of salt, . . . He had gotten to know the Omanis through his work on Middle East peace issues in the 1990s, and he knew their ties to the Iranians were genuine. He said he decided to pass along Mr. Ismaily's proposal, with a caveat-laden cover memo, to Mrs. Clinton. She told Mr. Ross to keep talking to him.[137]

According to Landler, these talks did not progress due to a crackdown on anti-government protesters by the Iranian authorities, which caused the U.S. to shift its strategy from engagement with Iran to pressuring it.

Ross's description of his interactions with Oman shows how Oman has proven itself over the years to be a trusted actor in the international arena through its consistent actions. Indeed, Oman has been careful to follow its long-cultivated foreign policy, and reaping the rewards of international respect and trust.

[137] Landler, "Hillary Clinton and John Kerry."

Chapter IV

Conclusion

This thesis has explained, through analysis of historic events and government decisions, the reasons why Oman chose its unique approach to foreign relations. Its choice of non-intervention, non-interference, searching for long-term solutions, and maintaining a degree of flexibility while continually adjusting to the influx of regional challenges, has worked well for maintaining and ensuring Oman's own security and stability.

Throughout the years, Oman has sought to accommodate the changes that inevitably occur in the region. Oman's flexibility has enabled it to treat each issue and challenge with care and consideration, taking into account the various sides of each issue without undermining the respect due the sovereignties involved. This philosophy is key to understanding why, after the Dhofar war, Oman was not subject to any kind of foreign attack, either tangible or intangible, despite being in a volatile geographic location.

These principle pillars of non-intervention and non-interference in the affairs of others has been reciprocated back to favor Oman. Intervening or interfering in another country's affairs does more harm than good, while it increases vulnerability or hostility toward the party seeking intervention or interference. Hostility is not always tangible; it also can be intangible in the form of emotion and confusion, each of which has the potential to instigate hatred and irrational behavior if not controlled.

This thesis focused on the foreign policies of Sultan Qaboos's government. Although numerous factors contributed to Oman's current foreign policy, it is essential to understand the reasoning behind it. My research found that the political and economic turmoil facing Oman at the time Sultan Qaboos took power in 1970 affected Oman's ability to pursue those foreign policy positions. Today, Oman's cautiously crafted foreign policy is in large part due to the changes that Oman was experiencing when Sultan Qaboos assumed power.

My research analyzed Oman's positions on major regional events that began from the 1970s. I believe it is important to understand Oman's history so that one can see the various phases the country experienced. Those phases are important for understanding Oman's internal and external choices and interactions, in combination with the longevity of the Sultanate. It highlights the importance of the Sultan in leading the country's direction and the affect of foreign interference on the country's policies. I also considered geopolitical and socioeconomic factors that influenced the decision-making process, but as evident throughout history, the influence of these factors on the direction of the country can vary depending on who is leading.

Nations are run by people who often pursue an agenda in order to achieve their own goals or a country's desired position in the global arena. This does not always reflect the desires of the nation's citizens, but more often the desires and views of those in power. Sometimes the agenda favors the country, meaning favorable security and stability for the country; other times the agenda does not.

Underlying it all is the human factor. Oman is run by people who follow and support the vision of the Sultan, and therefore the Sultan holds overall power.

Throughout the course of Oman's history, Oman has chosen to follow the position of its leader. This is not to say that Omani citizens do not play a role in building the country. Citizens are the pillars of any country, and their well-being ultimately contributes to the nation's well-being. But in the case of Oman, the Sultan makes the decisions that concern the country as a whole.

As I have shown in this thesis, Omani foreign policy stems from a number of different factors, but the ultimate decisions regarding Omani foreign policy lie with Sultan Qaboos. It is his pragmatism and vision that built the trust in Oman by other countries. Omani foreign policy is affected by Oman's long-held desire to continue building on this chain, to honor Oman's legacy as an empire it once was, and to continue building on it as a well-regarded and respected negotiator and mediator.

During my research, I looked for a foreign matter in which Omani efforts might have been less than successful. What I learned is that Oman, under Sultan Qaboos, does not involve itself in matters that could pose a risk to its own security or reputation. Most often, Oman mediates and assists when it is asked to do so. As in the Iran-U.S. talks, Oman does not negotiate for the parties; the parties do their own negotiating. Instead, Oman facilitates by providing a location where both sides can meet and then mediates by helping to make the process smoother and easier.

As this thesis makes clear, Oman is chosen for this role because of its good standing with most countries. This positioning has occurred during the reign of Sultan Qaboos. Prior to 1970, Oman was more isolated. When Sultan Qaboos came to power, he learned from the grave issues that had occurred in the country during the reign of his

father, and he cautiously and deliberately crafted the foreign policy that is in force today in Oman.

National and regional decisions have been approached with caution. Oman has a realistic foreign policy, one that takes into account that Oman cannot afford to jeopardize its security, therefore it pursues policies of non-intervention, non-interference, and respect for the sovereigny of others, which ultimately lead to the reciprocation of these principles towards Oman. Ultimately, Sultan Qaboos holds absolute power in Oman, and major decisions concerning foreign policy all go back to him. If he chose another path, then Oman's foreign policy could be different.

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