The impact of Identity in the Omani Foreign Policy and the Future of the Omani Role in the region

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Introduction

After many years of practicing politics and diplomacy, the Omani foreign policy started to be understood within the region. Positive neutrality reflecting in the rejection towards the cases that could produce problems or conflict and total support for the humanitarian issues. For example, in Palestine and Yemen. The foreign Omani policy was shaped through identity, tradition, practice, and culture. Which give the Omani position the strength and sustainability. It is not sudden or random, Omani decision is wise in its weight and effectiveness. This give Oman the opportunity to practice more role in the Middle East, especially the Gulf, as a future formal mediator.

This paper will look briefly to the historical content of Oman as a great civilization., trying to trace the bases of the current Omani attitude and how it will create the current state of Oman. The experience of statehood is very old in Oman, it’s older than the other Gulf states. So, the role of Oman in the international community is before the establish of the community itself and the emergence of the new states. The special status of Oman represented by the values, traditions, and the Omani identity. It helps to shape the structure of the peaceful basis in the country towards the world, reflected from the peaceful society. The relationship between the inside and the outside and one united country enhanced the Omani role within the region. Later the paper will highlight the current situation in the Middle East and the possibility of Oman to become a model for the region. By addressing the intangible powers of Oman, which is enough for now. Tangible powers could be discussed in the issue of regional leadership of the Middle East. The most important section in this paper is the futuristic expectation and the recommendations. This paper is more practical than historical, trying to bring solutions and procedures will strengthen the Omani position, regionally and globally. The recommendations are limited within specific period and directed to some important institutions in Oman. For example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Eventually, the conclusion, which is a total summary of the Omani positions so far.
I. Historical Background

The history of Oman back to 8000 BC, while some existence of human settlement activities that lived in Oman back early ages of 10,000 BC. This was confirmed by the discovery of many stone pieces and artifacts that indicate the existence of mining and navigational activities. Also, similar designs of graves in different geographical regions between east and west of Oman which indicate that these regions were parts of a single civilization, known today as Oman. Sumerians and Mesopotamia civilizations used to call Oman the Kingdom of Majan, which means copper land. It’s related to the rocky nature of Oman. The old region of Majan was very active in cooper and mining trade between the other civilizations that days, including Delmon, now is Bahrain.  

Oman faced a lot of challenges that have threaten its existence, but succeed to overcome all of them. One of the biggest challenges was the Portuguese’s invasion of the Omani coasts. Nasser bin Murshid, the founder of Yarabah dynasty, was the main actor in the Omani fighting against the Portuguese. The tribes of Oman were in conflict and fight with each other, even within Nasser bin Murshid family. The interior was unstable which was the main reason that enable Portugal to invade the coast from the first place. Nasser’s biggest effort was his many attempt to unify the region and to gain the support of other tribes. After that he built a large naval fleet that enabled him to conquer the Portuguese forces. The liberation of Oman from the Portuguese colonization led to stability, prosperity, and peace and safety within the various regions of the Gulf, including the Coast of Oman, now are the seven Emirates of United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah.  

This invasion increased Oman’s experience to deal with the outside and the inside. Also, it was a historical lesson that Oman experienced also during the Persian invasions, if the inside is unstable, a potential threat will hit the state from the outside.

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There was many irredentism towards Oman, due to the strategic location and natural resources. However, after the conflicts, peace and prosperity comes. The most glorious period in the history of Oman was during Said Bin Sultan’s rule. The Omani empire established by Syeed Said Bin Sultan composed of two capitals, Muscat in Oman and Zanzibar in Africa. Omani Empire expansion was part of 12 countries now, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Pakistan, Iran, Yemen, Somalia, Tanzania, Kenya, Comoros, and Madagascar.

Oman was opened to all countries for the sake of trade and diplomatic relations, which is the same strategy that Oman is following now. One of the main important example is the relations between Oman and the United States. The Relations have existed between the two countries since the early 1830s. The main commercial motivation for this relationship was the desire of United States to open its market in the rich Zanzibar, where the source of coffee and cloves. Oman was the first Arab country to recognize the independence of America in 1783. Relations between the two countries became formal after the conduct of the first agreement between Said Bin Sultan and the United States on 21 September 1833. The treaty confirmed the strong friendly relations between the two countries and free trade for nationals, enjoying of all trade advantages. Said bin Sultan sent a special envoy led by Ahmad Bin Al-Nu'man, aboard the Sultana ship as the first Arab diplomat of an Arab country to the United States. He carried valuable gifts to the American president, which included two Arabic horses and a beautiful golden sword.³

It’s clear that the practice of statehood in Oman was very old, which explain the important weight of the current Omani position.

II. Current Situation

Nowadays, the situation in the Middle East is unstable. Many states in the region is either facing a war or participating in war against other. The impact of the Arab Spring of 2011 is still going in Syria. The struggle between great powers in Syria have a bad effect in the Syrian stability. Iraq is destroyed since 2003, the existence of ISIS makes things more

worst. Also, there is the issue of Independence of Iraqi Kurds that the Iraqi government have to deal with it. Egypt lost its power as regional leader from long time ago. The Egyptian financial interdependent of the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, make it difficult to Egypt to be politically and economically independent. There are two more powers in the region, Iran and Turkey. Both have a political experience of Statehood, former centers of empires, economically independent, oil in Iran and domestic products in Turkey, and active foreign policy. But there are not Arabs. Which open the door for the Gulf to compete for regional dominance in the Middle East. The main power in the Gulf is Saudi Arabia, in terms of tangible and intangible powers. Tangible powers include, economy, territory, population, military capability, and natural Resources. Which Saudi Arabia is number one in all of these among the other Gulf States. According to United Nations estimation, Saudi’s total land area is 2,149,690 Km2 occupied by population of more than 33 million. It’s the world's largest oil producer, spending more than 10% of its GDP in its military. However, tangible powers are not enough to establish prominent role of the state over the region. Intangible powers include, national morale, governmental skills, diplomatic skills, and culture.  

A strong evidence for the poor diplomacy is the Saudi attack on Yemen. Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the young crown prince and the minister of Defense, started the war two years ago in order to reduce the Iranian influence in Yemen, represented by Houthis. However, the civilian was the main loser in this war. Human rights are violated in Yemen and thousand died till this day and the war still going. According to United Nations, 10,000 people were killed. UN officials estimate that nearly 19 million people, which are 80% of the population, are in need of humanitarian aid, and more than 3 million have been displaced. War in Yemen is one of the strategic failures of Saudi Arabia. It is a fact that Saudi Arabia is strong in terms of military and economy, but this strength is practiced against the weakest state in the region.  

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states are excluded, because they are depending on Saudi Arabia either politically, United Arab Emirates, or economically Kuwait, Or both, Bahrain. Qatar has a unique position because of their different position in terms of foreign policy, supporting Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, while Saudi Arabia is not. Also, in terms of economy, mainly oil and gas. However, Qatar experience as state is new, it’s recently gained the independence from British in 1971. Another thing is Qatar is small in territory and population. They are totally 2.6 million, the Qatari citizen are only 313,000, others are expatriates.

However, the gap of regional power in the Middle East opens the door for Oman to play more role in the region. Although it’s difficult to become a regional power, but it can be a model for the Middle East.

**Omani Contribution to Peace**

The National Council on US-Arab Relations led a group of the largest and most prominent American non-governmental organizations and universities to coordinate the procedures for peace award, former US President Jimmy Carter handed over the International Peace Prize in Washington on 16 October 1998 and received it on behalf of His Majesty, Yousef bin Alawi bin Abdullah Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs. Also, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said receives the Peace Prize from the Russian International Association in recognition to the efforts of His Majesty to achieve peace and cooperation. He has received the award on behalf of His Majesty Yousuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, Minister In charge of foreign affairs, at a ceremony held in Moscow on July 18, 2007.

Oman’s neutrality within the international system helps to generate a peaceful Oman within the Omani society and the Omani foreign policy towards the region and the world. There are two main examples which clarify the peaceful direction of Oman. First, in the past, Oman did not cut the diplomatic relations with Egypt after the conducting of Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. Although, many Arab countries did, Oman had a unique position to deal with the situation, considering it as a domestic matter of Egypt. However, 

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6 Qatar have world’s third-largest natural-gas reserves.  
7 “Population of Qatar by nationality – 2017 report”.  
after many years, Arab countries understood the role of Egypt in the region and diplomatic relations were returned. This is an indication for the long-term vision of Sultan Qaboos and the heavy political position of Oman. Second example, is the Omani contribution for the nuclear talks between Iran and the western countries. As a proof for the international role of Oman.

**Identity and Omani Foreign Policy**
The Omani foreign policy is the collection of all historical accumulations that Oman went through. Omani foreign policy has been formed according to a set of constant facts. The vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos is to shape a good Omani diplomacy, which can sustain in the present and future. The main aim is to establish friendly relations with the world and promote good and equal relations between everyone. Which is the adoption of a policy of good-neighbors, non-interference in the internal affairs of others and respect for international laws, charters and norms. These policies is deeply rooted in the state, even before the creation of modern Oman in 1970.  

In the past, the Omani society used to practice high technical methods to solve its issues. Although Oman went through civil wars, but could recover by coming together. Reconciliation traditional institutions were practiced in Oman within the Omani tribes. However, these traditional gathering still exist until now in Sablah, it is small council within the villages. The tradition of Sablah made the Omani people experts in solving the problem. Not only to solve issues, but also to negotiate and talk about the village matters. Which represent the Islamic Value of Shura, these concepts and traditions now are defined by rules, legislations, and institutions organized by the government. Moreover, Falaj system, it is the process of distribution of the water canal between the beneficiaries. It consists of complicated process with specific jobs for certain people. The way of

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management in simple issues in the past reflects the current position of Oman and how it
deals with the world.  

The Omani identity played a role to shape the pillars of the current foreign policy. It’s
deeply connected with each other. Which explain the political weight that is enjoyed by
Oman. Foreign Policies including, positive neutrality, effective diplomacy, non-
intervening in other’s domestic affairs, and rejecting the military coalitions if it will affect
negatively Oman’s neighbors. Moreover, the historical memories of the invasions from the
other, civil wars, and conflicts over power all build the deep bases of peace and tolerance.
Although modern Oman was established in 1970, Oman experience of statehood is much
older. So, Oman clearly know how to manage to sustain its position more than the other.
That gives Oman the opportunity to flourish this experience and the priority to be a
mediator within the conflicting region of Middle East.  

Intangible powers of Oman  
Oman’s intangible power is stronger than tangible power. In tangible power including,
governmental and diplomatic skills, culture, and national morale. Which reflected to
Oman’s foreign policies of non-intervention in domestic matters of Other, equal relations
with everyone, policy of no enemy, and the respect of state’s sovereignty. National morale
is high in Oman because it went through a lot of obstacles in the past. For example,
Portuguese and Persia invasion and civil wars. Which made people come together in solid
unity called Oman. Also, the good and attractive charisma of Sultan Qaboos make the
people more closed to each other. Although, the Uprising in Sohar in 2011 was a domino
effect of Arab Spring, Omani people called for mostly economic reformation and some
changes in the government level. They did not call to overthrow the regime like many Arab
countries did.  

2017, 3-5.  

12 Peterson, J.E, “Oman in the Twentieth Century: Political Foundations of an Emerging State (London:
III. Futuristic expectation and Recommendation

The Omani identity played a significant role to shape the current foreign policy. The tradition and customs contribute to the international image of Oman among the world. The Historical great civilization improved the role of Oman as a state, giving it more experience than the other. Eventually, all of this will affect the Omani decisions to become more accurate and even more valid. Moreover, the peaceful status in Oman internationally and externally, which stabilize the system among the conflicting region around.

However, all of this are not enough. Oman should participate more at the regional and international level, in order to make the Omani voice in foreign policy more stronger and hearable. For the recent days, it’s difficult for Oman to play as a regional leader, because there are a lot of strong competitors. However, Oman can be a sample or model in the Gulf and Middle East, and the world. Omanism, which mean the Omani model of peace and tolerance can be established by the following recommendations, which will enhance the role of Oman effectively within 10 years. The following recommendations are directed to Political Science department, College of Economics and Political Science, Sultan Qaboos University’s Administration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Defense.

The new generation of political science students will contribute a lot to the future Omani foreign policy. So, because of that more efforts must be achieved in this sense. Political science programs must be increased and specialized in the Omani matters. Now, there are only two courses that are requirements in political science department which talk about Oman, Government and Politics of Oman and Foreign Policy of Oman. The Omani content in political Science courses should be more than the western content, because the practice will be in Oman. I recommend course like The Politics in Omani Empire, which is a course that explain the Omani Empire not in historical perspective, but politically. It shouldn’t be only during the Omani empire, but generally politics before 1970. Because most of the courses are concentrated on the politics of modern Oman, despite the fact that Oman has older role in this matter. Another important thing is to increase the religious content of the courses, especially the Islamic one. Unfortunately, the current degree plan is very poor of the religo-political courses. I recommend courses like, Islamic politics or even more
specific, Ibadi Politics. Oman is an Islamic country, which the foreign policy is highly
effectated by the Islamic and Ibadi’s value. This connection must be known by all student,
because they are the core of the future politics of Oman. However, to achieve all of that,
Political Science department must be separated from Economics and political Science
College and more connected to decision-making centre. For example, Ministry of foreign
Affairs. Also, there should be a cooperation between Political Science department and
National College of Defense. Courses of Strategic Studies must be included in the current
degree plan. Although such a course is existed in College of Art, but as a small office only.
A full department must be established within the college and have connection with Political
Science department. High qualified political science students mean more effective future
policies, eventually rise of Omanism regionally and globally.

Another thing is to establish Youth council, which is connected to decision making process
in Oman. Oman can benefit from the experience of other countries. For example, British
Youth Council operated within the British Parliament. Which works to empower British
young people and make them participate in the process. It’s important to establish such a
council in Oman even more than its existence in Europe. Because most of Omani
population are young. So, it’s essential to include their role in decision making system.
Omani Youth Council can be run by Political Science department and supervised directly
by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense.

Although Oman is peaceful country and globally known by that, it’s is not enough. Oman
should be a formal mediator in the issues of the Gulf and Middle East. In order to legitimize
the Omani claims to play such a role, Oman have to solve a difficult case. For example,
Qatar crisis. The Kuwaiti failure to manage the situation between Qatar and Saudi allies,
UAE and Bahrain, open the door for the Omani intervention as a mediator. For example,
the same role that Oslo played in the Arab-Israeli conflicts. Oman participated in 1+5
nuclear negotiation between Iran and the great powers, which increase the trust given to
Oman to become a formal mediator. I believe if Oman could solve the issue and deescalate
the crisis, it will gain more reputation internationally. Oman represented by Ministry of
Foreign Affairs should request to United Nation to make Oman formally the mediator of
the Gulf and the Middle East. Moreover, it will increase the possibility that Sultan Qaboos
could be nominated to won the Nobel prize. However, Ministry of Foreign Affairs should request to Nobel Committee highlighting the reasons that qualified Sultan Qaboos to gain the prize, including all his efforts to establish peace since 1970.

Conclusion

The historical background of Oman and its long experience of statehood shaped the current role of Oman. Which helped Oman to gain international reputation as effective country within the Middle East. Also, the identity played a significant role to establish a strong base of Omani foreign policy that is known globally. These policies were rooted deep in the Oman, because Omani foreign policy is the result of accumulations of history, identity, long practice, and culture. Intangible power of Oman enables to play more role in international arena. It’s difficult for Oman to become a regional leader, especially these days. However, Oman could improve its situation as a regional mediator in the Middle East. The recommendations that are previously discussed will facilitate the road for Oman internationally. For example, The Youth council will give the opportunity for the young to learn from the most experienced people in politics and other related fields. Which will produce future leadership that could run the country. If the recommendations could be achieved, only in that situation Oman could argue its potentiality to lead the region, which can be discussed in separate research, highlighting the tangible power of Oman and how it
Bibliography


