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Laurent Bonnefoy, Ahmed Al-Rabaani

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# Exploring Narratives on Omani Peace Culture

Laurent Bonnefoy and Ahmed al-Rabaani

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## Introduction

- 1 The Sultanate of Oman has often been portrayed as a haven of peace in a most turbulent region. Internal stability embodied by the close to five decade-long reign of Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'îd who passed away in January 2020 is not the only dimension of such a specificity. The period has been widely discussed by researchers and analysts, many emphasizing both the concentration of powers and the subtle political imbalances, in particular with traditional actors be they religious or tribal<sup>1</sup>. International relations and the diplomacy of the Omani state are also seen as remarkable features that, both inside the Omani intellectual field and outside the country, have been valued in a wide range of publications and discussions. The projection of a peace-loving country is at the core of many narratives that this article intends to study, looking at how they are constructed and how they face certain challenges, most of which are tied to matters of sustainability, development, and the economy. How has this country, its society and institutions, come to be associated so consistently to peace in the minds of many ranging from media outlets and experts to Omani citizens?
- 2 The image of a society and state that place specific value in co-existence and moderation are often supported by academics, historians, institutions, citizens and expatriates, leaving little space for counter-narratives. Omanis themselves widely cherish this image which remains at the core of the legacy of Sultan Qaboos, a feature of his reign that remains unchallenged. The new ruler, Sultan Haytham bin Târiq as he arrived on the throne on January 11, 2020 instantly stated that he would be following the same path as that of his cousin and predecessor. He then claimed "Peaceful coexistence (*al-ta'âysh al-silmi*) and good neighbourliness (*ḥasan al-juwâr*) are among the stable features of our policy (*thawâbit siyâsatna*)". As an illustration of the value placed

in Qaboos bin Sa'îd's heritage, during his first televised speech after the forty day mourning period, the new ruler directly referred to him as the "Symbol of coexistence (*ramz al-tasâmuḥ*)", lauding his various achievements.

- 3 The purpose of this article is certainly not normative. We do not aim to test the reality or operationalization of such discourses or projections on the allegedly pacific nature of Oman as a state and society. Rather, our purpose is to understand how this dimension has come to be considered a natural feature of contemporary Oman and what arguments, images and figures they mobilize. In that sense, we aim to build on the approach developed by Sarah Phillips and Jennifer Hunt in their analysis of the "renaissance narrative" of Oman published in 2017 as well as Corina Lozovan's article in this same issue of *Arabian Humanities* on historical discontinuities, and also in a wide range of publications by Omani authors<sup>2</sup>. In these publications, the various authors looked in particular at the way the achievements of the state and the political settlement established after 1970 were mobilized in a variety of discourses. Our first ambition will thus be to identify the structuration of the narrative focusing on Omani peace and its various dimensions, be they historical, religious, political or diplomatic. We will finally delve into discourses regarding the sustainability of the feature of Oman as a peace-loving country and the challenges it faces.
- 4 Studies on narratives have grown in importance over the last decades. Theories, many linked to constructivism, highlight the processes through which speeches, along with acts, generate images in international relations. These stress how images of states have a form of resilience that impacts diplomacy and bilateral interactions. Yet, the shaping of images and narratives goes beyond what states say or do at a given time as Robert Jervis highlighted in his seminal study published five decades ago<sup>3</sup>. History is increasingly portrayed as a field in which narratives compete and become means to forge national identities. In the Arabian Peninsula, work by Madawi al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis published in 2004 can be considered as particularly influential, engaging with sociological and historical discourses shaped by institutions and showing how counter-narratives can be developed. More recently, critical work on Saudi Arabia's archives has highlighted the competition that structured the production of history as well as the erasure of certain episodes since the Gulf war of 1991<sup>4</sup>. Museums, including private ones<sup>5</sup>, generally shed light, although at times implicitly, on certain competitions for heritage and legitimacy. Simultaneously, cities in the Arab Gulf, dynamic as they are, have become objects of interest. Focus on the images produced around them, and the narratives that they project, informs us on mechanisms of "branding", but also of subversive mechanisms developed in the margins<sup>6</sup>.

## Incarnations of peace

- 5 By all standards, the contemporary Omani state has not been exempt from such processes of identity construction<sup>7</sup>, be it through cultural institutions like the national museum (SACHEDINA, 2020), the Royal Opera House, more daily processes like the diffusion of a national attire and heritage, marriage<sup>8</sup>, or a "reinvented political tradition"<sup>9</sup>. Franck Mermier writes that the reign of Sultan Qaboos served to "homogenize the frameworks and modes of belonging of a population that is diverse in matters of culture, religion, languages, and even ethnicity"<sup>10</sup>. Public policies over the decades have put specific emphasis on territorial matters, reshaping the equilibriums

between the coast and the interior, the north and the south, and on the “branding” of Oman as a privileged destination for tourism<sup>11</sup>.

- 6 In that sense, these processes are comparable to those experienced elsewhere across the Arab Gulf among rentier states which have witnessed rapid economic growth, the progressive development of state institutions, and the rise of very significant expatriate populations which arrived over the last five decades<sup>12</sup>. Yet, Omani institutions for long and consistently have interestingly pushed forward a less common aspect, that of tolerance, moderation and peace whose incarnations are multiple.
- 7 While the state has not gone as far as to establish a Ministry of Tolerance (*wizârat al-tasâmuḥ*) or dedicate in 2019 a full year to it – which culminated in February with the visit of the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, as the United Arab Emirates, Oman has for decades pushed forward this matter in its public policies, setting a pace that is of great interest and that others have recently tried to follow. One may find that points of comparison exist with another Gulf state. Indeed, Kuwait, has long been eager to portray itself as a peace broker. The dense relationship between Sultan Qaboos and Emir Şabâḥ al-Aḥmad (who passed away the same year as the sultan of Oman) can also be understood as a variable that has shaped a shared image within a Gulf Co-operation Council that is otherwise replete of tensions and rivalries<sup>13</sup>.
- 8 In Oman, education has been seen as an important pillar of such a narrative. Curricula in Omani social studies and Islamic education have in particular played a significant role<sup>14</sup>, fostering specific values depicted as that of religious and cultural tolerance, and a form of “awareness of the advantages of social unity for stability, security, peace and development”<sup>15</sup>.
- 9 In late 2019, upon arrival at Muscat International Airport, visitors would be greeted with a large poster quoting Sultan Qaboos (translation is that of the airport authority): “Oman Civilization, was and still living with the approach of tolerance (*minhaj al-tasâmuḥ*), moderation (*al-i’tidâl*) and civilized coexistence (*al-ta’âyish al-hadhârî*).” Elsewhere in the airport, before the counters of emigration, a hadith in Arabic and translated in English, printed next to the welcoming face of a young Omani boy, claimed “If you were to come to the people of Oman, they would have never insulted (*sabbûk*) nor abused you (*ḍarabûk*).” These speeches, intended both for visitors and nationals, were evidently meant to highlight an almost natural characteristic of Omani culture, one that had been acknowledged by Prophet Muhammad more than a millennium ago, had been reasserted and modernized by the ruler through the Omani *Nahḍa* (revival) which followed the rise to power of the Sultan in July 1970, and is further being continued by the “Renewed renaissance (*al-nahḍa al-mutajaddida*)”, which serves as the official moto of the era of Sultan Haytham.
- 10 Sultan Qaboos himself was presented as being at the forefront of his nation’s image construction. Both his personality and decisions embodied the country’s desire to maintain peace inside and favor it outside as efficient ways of preserving stability within, and to enforce certain specific values<sup>16</sup>. This narrative pushed forward by the state as well as by analysts appears to have emerged gradually, in the context of the resolution of the war in Dhofar in the mid-1970s and then later as Oman integrated in the Gulf Co-operation Council, without yet seeking to antagonize the Islamic Republic of Iran nor to engage in sectarian divisions. Dale Eickelman, for instance, notes that in 1982, the state decided to unify Friday sermons in mosques as a way of escaping religious prejudice that developed elsewhere in the region<sup>17</sup>. The Sultan’s regular

speeches frequently highlighted the ambitions of his diplomacy<sup>18</sup>, stressing the general objective of peace. In line with these statements, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its website still depicts the mission of its diplomats as follows: “Establishing and maintaining peace in the world are two crucial elements for the good of humankind (*khayr al-bashariyya jami’an*). Peace can only be preserved if it is based on solid principles of justice and understanding among all nations. [...] In conducting its international relations, the Sultanate has always been keen to pursue an open-minded policy with the world in harmony, in its essence, with the Omani tradition, which is known for its distinctive tolerance and interaction with others on the basis of mutual respect (*al-ihtirâm al-mutabâdil*) and consideration of the geo-strategic realities and avoidance of convulsive and temporary ideological positions.<sup>19</sup>” In 2019, when asked by American journalist Dennis Wholey what he thought was the philosophy of Oman, then minister in charge of Foreign affairs, Yûsuf bin ‘Alawî replied: “peace... and peace<sup>20</sup>.”

- 11 During the 2020 Muscat book fair organized days after the end of the forty day national mourning that followed his passing away on January 10, 2020, a number of public events and publications willingly emphasized the vision of Qaboos bin Sa’îd and his role in encouraging peace and stability in the region. Lebanese-American scholar, Joseph Kechichian who had in the mid-1990s studied Omani foreign policy for the Rand Corporation, lectured on the philosophy of Sultan Qaboos, stressing his contribution to regional stability over the years. Throughout the two week bookfare, Omani poets were also invited to public recitation sessions (*umsiyat*) on Qaboos, thereby labelled the Sultan of peace (*sultân al-salâm*) in one of them held by poet Aḥmad al-‘Azrî. The Book fair, undeniably one of the highlights of the cultural season in Muscat, set a few days before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and the closure of schools, was attended by many, eager to see intellectuals pay tribute to the former Sultan. Yûsuf bin ‘Alawî, minister in charge of Foreign affairs between 1997 and 2020, lectured on February 26, 2020 on “Peace in the thought of Sultan Qaboos<sup>21</sup>”. Foreign publishers and Omani ones also widely presented books that focused on the political heritage of Qaboos bin Sa’îd. Among the most surprising was the Arabic translation of the long study of Hatice Cengiz, the famous fiancée of Saudi journalist Jamâl Khashuqjî murdered in 2018, on the link between Qaboos’ political heritage and coexistence<sup>22</sup>.
- 12 The narrative on Omani peace was not only exemplified through discourse. Public policies also intended to embody in a concrete way the idea of a state and society that favors peace. Omani diplomacy is widely depicted as based on neutrality. Attempts to facilitate negotiations between parties in conflict soon became a national hallmark as much as a symbolic resource<sup>23</sup>. Oman’s international relations were pro-actively aimed at maintaining good relations with all parties. This feature has been at the core of much scholarly analysis be it by foreign academics<sup>24</sup>, or Omani and Arab ones<sup>25</sup>.
- 13 Research on the ideational or normative aspect of Omani foreign policy is generally convergent, and has focused on a number of case studies which highlight an interesting, if not rather unique, political consistency based on “moderation” and “independence”<sup>26</sup>. From the early 1980s, Oman was recognized as developing a singular approach, that distinguished it from the other monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, giving rise to a number of studies focusing on its diplomacy<sup>27</sup>. As a scientific object, Omani diplomacy is by many standards the most covered of all those dealing with Omani society and history. Abdallah Baaboud and Ahmed Baaboud sum up the convergent scholarly or expert depiction writing: “Oman traditionally followed a

pragmatic foreign policy in which it avoided taking a high-profile position, instead favoring non-aggression, non-intervention, and the promotion of mediation, political dialogue, and negotiation.”<sup>28</sup>. Such a practice of diplomacy was coined “Omanibalancing” by political science scholar Marc O’Reilly, looking into a delicate balancing between internal and external threats<sup>29</sup>.

- 14 Being a peace broker constitutes a significant asset in international relations as it can serve the purpose of building national identities in neutral states and can protect small ones confronted with an unstable environment<sup>30</sup>. It can also, through its ideational dimension transform states in “norm entrepreneurs”, in particular ones related to human rights or to the environment. Oman appears to have scarcely taken that path over the years, preferring to project itself as a state that explicitly rejects meddling in other states’ affairs as a way of preserving internal stability<sup>31</sup>.
- 15 Among the most notorious interventions in which Omani diplomacy set itself as a facilitator were negotiations between Iran and the United States on the nuclear file<sup>32</sup>. These, discretely organized in Muscat by Omani diplomats and envisioned in the early years of the Barack Obama presidency, set pace for the Nuclear agreement signed in 2015 in Vienna between Iran, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Germany and the European Union<sup>33</sup>. Narratives regarding the functional role of Omani facilitators behind the scenes have circulated in the memoirs of American diplomats<sup>34</sup>, and/or journalists<sup>35</sup>. These also emphasized how much Oman could build on a long-lasting relationship with Iran since 1970 to serve its purpose<sup>36</sup>.
- 16 Oman also set itself apart in the Yemeni war that began in March 2015, initially being the only member of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) to not take part in operation Decisive Storm (*Aṣifa al-ḥazm*) led by Saudi Arabia against the Huthi movement<sup>37</sup>. Omani diplomats have persistently advocated in favor of a peaceful resolution, hosting informal meetings or ‘indirect talks’ between the belligerents or with the United Nations envoys. Such a role was acknowledged by Antonio Guterres, secretary general of the UN, in July 2020 during a diplomatic conference on Yemen as he claimed, “the Sultanate represents a unique model, not only in the Middle East, but also in the world.” Such an acclaim was widely circulated in the Omani media<sup>38</sup>. Abdallah Baaboud and Ahmed Baaboud in their study of the Omani role in the Yemeni crisis also state that “Oman continued to extend humanitarian assistance to Yemen, most notably in in hosting refugees, medically treating injured people, and opening a safe corridor for people fleeing the Yemeni conflict”<sup>39</sup>.
- 17 Building on this specific stance of neutrality and behind the scenes activism, Omani diplomats, have over the last decade played a central part in freeing a few Western hostages or prisoners held in Iran or Yemen, by state or non-state actors. Such a function has generally been acknowledged by the authorities of the countries of origin of the individuals freed thanks to the intercession of Omani authorities, or at times directly of the sultan. This was the case of Americans, Sara Shourd, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, in 2011 held in Tehran on accusations of spying, and of French nationals Isabelle Prime and Nourane Houas in 2015 and 2016, both kidnapped by armed groups.

## Multiple roots

- 18 All these diverse incarnations and the multiple discourses they entail, explicitly or not, are at times accompanied by attempts to explain the alleged Omani appetite for

peace. Narratives highlighting the roots of such a national hallmark, widely broadcast by the institutions as much as in the academic and intellectual fields, are equally interesting and should often be seen as complementary rather competing with one another. Indeed, it would be somewhat an over interpretation to consider that these discourses or narratives are self-conscious and directly coherent, or that each one builds on an explanation produced in an explicit manner by a central authority. On the contrary, and in line with postmodern approaches to narratives that stress complexity and fluidity, most of these discourses are to be considered as implicit and generally compatible with others, made visible in discussions, through publications or various statements which highlight an explanation over others<sup>40</sup>. Among the multiple narratives that this article investigates, one can spot three main roots or variables to explain the permanence of a specific so-called Omani appetite for peace, and what is projected as a national hallmark or specificity.

- 19 The first explanation links such a characteristic to the history of the country and society. It stresses a structural variable, implying an alleged essence that finds its roots in the geography. Contemporary equilibriums of power in the region of the Arabian Gulf, with Oman sharing land borders with Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and sea ones with Iran may have served as a strong incentive to develop a specific diplomacy based on neutrality. However, root causes allegedly dig much deeper. The country's situation on the globe, at the crossroads of various regions established Oman as a seafaring country long before, including during the antiquity, that needed to be at peace with others to thrive. Global trade implied pacific relations that became rooted in the way Omanis interact with others, and still live on through diplomacy.
- 20 This narrative, which regularly mobilizes figures like Sinbad the sailor<sup>41</sup>, as well as 15<sup>th</sup> century sailor Aḥmad Ibn Majīd, also states that such a geographic position explains the mixed ethnicity of the Omani population. Genealogy has been affected in particular by the Omani presence in East Africa and the Indian subcontinent for centuries. It continues to be so through the presence of a large expatriate population, drawing interesting narratives on what it means to be Omani<sup>42</sup>. Such an experience has apparently fostered tolerance and thus moderation that remains at the core of the so-called Omani peace culture. Such an approach structured a vast project carried out in the 1990s by 'Abdul 'Azīz al-Ruwās under the guidance of the Ministry of Information to present a detailed history of Oman, highlighting a number of cultural continuities, linking history and geography to the way society interacts with the wider world<sup>43</sup>.
- 21 Evidently, these portrayals of Omani society and history, largely favored by public institutions in the country, may at times be contested, in particular by historical or ethnographic accounts which willingly highlight a number of blind spots or invisible issues of these narratives. Nevertheless, our task here is not primarily to draw attention to these counter-narratives or revisionist accounts, but to highlight the figures and references mobilized by dominant narratives that many take for granted and that, quite surprisingly have remained out of academic scrutiny.
- 22 Discussions on the link between diplomacy and Omani culture has been at the heart of various publications either in Arabic or European languages. Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout have explored the matter in a consistent way, searching for what they describe as a "habitus" that builds a "characteristic Omani diplomatic mode" along with "a general contemporary awareness that historical experiences and cultural preferences



have shaped the way in which national interests are identified and international relations maintained”<sup>44</sup>. Their study then “seeks to offer an account of how Omani diplomacy may be understood as a practice, as a kind of social activity that cannot be separated altogether from other social activities. We are therefore interested in understanding to what extent Oman’s modern diplomatic practice might have a distinctively Omani character, without, of course succumbing to such essentialism as ‘national character’”<sup>45</sup>. In doing so, both authors, among other sources and facts, mobilize renowned Norwegian anthropologist Fredrick Barth and his seminal work on Şuḥâr in the late 1970s which explored “the standards of behavior and the management of self”, tracing an “ideology of politeness” which appears as a robust feature of all social interactions<sup>46</sup>, and may well have repercussions on the way diplomacy is carried out.

- 23 Joseph Kechichian’s *Oman and the World* pushes further the narrative of an Omani essence built on history and cultural features: « In conducting their country’s foreign policy, Omani officials have transcended the difficulties of time and display harmonious characteristics, seldom seeking to align their country with passing trends or momentary causes. Whatever consistency exists in Omani foreign policy must, therefore, be traced to this fundamental characteristic”<sup>47</sup>. The scholar ends up depicting the “spirit of moderation” as “the true characteristic of Omanis”<sup>48</sup>, thus considering it as a natural and consistent feature. Such had also been the impression broadcast early on by European visitors<sup>49</sup>. 18<sup>th</sup> century Danish traveler Carlsen Niebhur or British Gifford Palgrave lauded a significant feature of Omanis; a form of moderation and politeness that structured social and political interactions. On Oman’s population, in 1865, Palgrave writes: “In disposition they are decidedly, as far as my experience goes, the best-tempered, the most hospitable, in a word the most amiable of the Arab race. Toleration to a degree not often attained even in Europe, exist here to all races, religions, and customs”<sup>50</sup>.
- 24 The second variable can also be seen as a structural one, albeit adding an ideational dimension by putting specific emphasis on the role played by religion. It stresses the fact that as much as a heritage of geography and history, Omani peace is simply the enactment of Islam, or more specifically of the dominant version of it in Oman, Ibadism. Public institutions like the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in its publications willingly highlight the moderate nature of this branch of Islam, a claim that is seldom contested by scholars specializing in the History of Islam. Since 2003, the ministry of Endowment publishes two quarterlies incidentally called *al-Tasâmuḥ* (Tolerance) and *al-Tafâhum* (Understanding), whose moto is “towards a balanced preaching of Islam (*naḥû khiṭâb islâmî mutâwazin*)”. These ideas of balance and moderation are ones that appear as central in the development of the narrative regarding Omani exceptionalism and claims to be a peace-abiding society and state. In March 2020, Egyptian business weekly updated such a depiction in an explicit manner: “The Omani way (*minhaj*) in the culture of peace (*thaqâfat al-salâm*) is a special way that requires consideration and contemplation to know all its dimensions. Peace is one of the most beautiful and great names of God. Oman has realized since its inception that the message of peace is God's message”<sup>51</sup>.
- 25 Narratives regarding the islamization of Oman or its first centuries are themselves consistent with discourses on moderation. The emergence of Islam in Oman, serves as a case in point with society converting to the new religion spontaneously and peacefully,



following a letter delivered by one of the companions of the Prophet, ‘Amar bin al-‘Âṣ, to local tribal leaders. Historian Hussein Ghubash writes: “Through this voluntary adherence, Oman distinguished itself once and again from other Arab and non-Arab lands. Hence, Oman and Omanis would play a specific role in the History of the early stages of Islam”<sup>52</sup>.

- 26 The Islamic, or alternatively Ibadi heritage, root cause is pushed forward in a number of instances that forge an almost unchallenged narrative. Studies on Omani diplomacy have also been eager to analyze the significance of such a variable. Majid Al-Khalili has shed light on the importance of the religious heritage to understand foreign policy before 1970, in particular during the foundational years of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>53</sup>.
- 27 The amount of present-day mass-media reports, many of which intend to present Oman as a destination for tourism or investment, is impressive. These widely portray a specifically Omani way of practicing religion in a moderate, and peaceful way. Images of mosques, in particular the Sultan Qaboos mosque in the country’s capital, references to the Ibadis as the “democrats of Islam<sup>54</sup>”, or to the country as the “Switzerland of the Gulf<sup>55</sup>” serve as points of entry to brand Oman as an appealing exception. In his study of Christianity in Oman, Andrew David Thompson, which focuses among other things on the ecumenical Christian church complexes build in the 1980s in Muscat, and develops his viewpoint as an Anglican clergyman, stresses what he sees as a heritage of Ibadi Islam as providing “a religious narrative for the identity and culture of the Omani people”<sup>56</sup>. He also highlights how Christian missions, along with the historic presence of other religions, in particular drawing from the Indian subcontinent, have a long history in Oman, generally meeting the indulgence of society and authorities. In a similar vein, Reverend Douglas Leonard, which manages the al-Amana Center for interfaith dialogue, based in Muscat, asserts: “Islam, as expressed in the Ibâdî school, informs and supports [...] Oman’s approach to religious tolerance”<sup>57</sup>.
- 28 This type of assertion is at the core of para-public discourses such as those of the Islamic Information Center (*Markaz al-ma’lûmât al-islâmî*) located in Muscat inside the premises of the Sultan Qaboos Mosque inaugurated in 2001. It explicitly intends to showcase Islam as shaped by values of tolerance and hospitality. Debates or public lectures are organized in foreign languages to serve such a purpose, and then frequently broadcast on Youtube. Employees or volunteers, many with an impressive command in English, German, Urdu, Tamil or French, most politely discuss matters related to Islam with tourists or expatriates, doing their best to promote a positive image of it, and “remove misconceptions about Islam”.
- 29 Similar narratives are broadcast through an exhibition sponsored by the Ministry of Endowments. Since 2008, the traveling exhibition “The Omani message of Islam (*Risâlat al-islâm min ‘umân*)” has been presented in 34 countries, offered in 26 languages and claims more than 400,000 visitors around the world. Imagined in Germany in 2008 by a then Omani student, Muḥammad al-Mi‘marî, it gradually gained momentum and its inceptor became employed by the ministry of Endowments, becoming its under-secretary (*wakîl*) in August 2020 and then minister in June 2022. Subtitled “Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence”, the exhibition features panels explaining the foundations of Islam (and more or less explicitly of Ibadism). It presents contemporary Omani artists inspired by such alleged pacific features of Omani Islam. It has been offered in cultural centers, libraries, at the United Nations in New York as well as in churches

abroad, and is resolutely aimed at foreign audiences. It was nevertheless presented in Oman for the first time in 2019 at the Nakhal fort, a prime tourist destination recently rehabilitated. According to its organizer, its intention is to transmit the "Omani soul (*al-rûh al-'umânî*)" and to promote an experience of managing pluralism and religious dialogue, presented mainly as based on an open understanding of the Muslim religion<sup>58</sup>.

- 30 In a recent book, Hatice Cengiz, who has developed wide access to the media in late 2018 in the context of the Khashuqjî murder, analyses what she depicts as the Omani example of coexistence and tolerance, linking the Islamic dimension with what can be depicted as the third root cause of so-called Omani peace culture: the personality and vision of Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'îd. Throughout her book, she extensively refers to his speeches<sup>59</sup>. One in particular, held on the occasion of the 24<sup>th</sup> National day in 1994, serves as a basis for her interpretation: "Peace is a doctrine (*madhhab*) we believe in (*âmanâ bihi*), and a demand that we strive to achieve without negligence nor excess"<sup>60</sup>. Such a dimension has been at the core of the state narrative and connects frequently with the other two sources, establishing the Sultan as an embodiment and a paragon of a wider culture and heritage.
- 31 The death of Sultan Qaboos in January 2020 gave numerous opportunities to explicit, either on social media or in more formal instances, such a narrative which traces Omani exceptionalism with the country's leadership<sup>61</sup>. Joseph Kechichian in an op-ed published in the English language daily *Oman Observer* explained: "The architect with a dream left his footprints in the tradition of his predecessors though his emphasis on "friendships with all and enmities with none" distinguished HM Sultan Qaboos like no other. In securing his realm, the leader served a nation that, in turn, saw in him a true philosopher-king"<sup>62</sup>.
- 32 The narrative of a proactive and enlightened leader had already been largely developed years before in the Sultan's biography written by Sergey Plekhanov. The book, *A Reformer on the Throne* was initially written in Russian and targeted at international audiences but was translated into English and then Arabic and remains distributed by Omani public institutions. On numerous occasions, the book stresses the choices made by the ruler and his sagaciousness, having direct effects on the political and diplomatic outcomes, and on the image of Oman as a state actor. For example, at the beginning of his reign, Plekhanov writes: "Sultan Qaboos believed that in the new, post-colonial era one should not allow rivalry to escalate: the interests of all countries should be considered and the positions of all countries should be coordinated"<sup>63</sup>. As such, decision making, built on a specific vision and understanding, is built through such a narrative as a powerful variable that has forged the diplomacy of the country and established both a philosophy and a lasting culture of peace, setting a few public policies.

## Conclusion: Making sense of narratives on challenges and sustainability

- 33 However, the depth and consistency of the Omani peace narrative and the variety of its incarnations do not imply that it is a stable and permanent feature. Omani public discourses themselves highlight several challenges, consequently adapting strategies and public policies. Emphasis put on the economy, including in the framework of Vision 2040<sup>64</sup>, and on Omanisation<sup>65</sup> highlight such shifts, stressing the "renewed" centrality of economic growth, and of redistribution of wealth in order to answer

demands of the population, in particular of the younger generations who are confronted to unemployment. Sultan Haytham bin Ṭâriq's first televised speech on February 23, 2020 stressed that the priorities of his reign would be employment and innovation. Changes in the lyrics of National Anthem announced a few days earlier added a new reference to prosperity (*al-rakhâ'*), hinting at the objective of such priorities.

- 34 A game changer for all across the world, the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly appeared as in the capacity to question what many saw as stable and sustainable. For Oman, the period coincided with low international prices of hydrocarbons and consequent budgetary difficulties. Some experts called the crisis a “perfect storm” for Oman<sup>66</sup>. In dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the Omani state has projected novel discourses focusing on the centrality of science, modernity and care<sup>67</sup>. State institutions, in particular through the establishment of the Supreme Committee for Monitoring the Coronavirus (*al-lajna al-'ulyâ li-ta'âmul ma'a fâyrûs Kûrûnâ*) which was established on March 10, 2020, have projected themselves as the guarantors of their population's health, projecting a technocratic and rational form of power. Such a feature was embodied for example by the Minister of health, Dr. Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Sa'îdî who held regular press conferences in Arabic and English. Much like elsewhere in the region where the health care sector was until recently undergoing privatization, renewed attention put on care implied a new narrative. It imposed a new form of technicity and agility for powers which promote their capacity to adapt to the crisis<sup>68</sup>.
- 35 The failure of western democracies to curb the pandemic during the second trimester of 2020 implicitly highlighted the comparative advantage of the Sultanate which claimed to care for its citizens (for example through the organization of repatriation flights of Omanis stranded abroad) as well as foreign expatriates on its soil. Indeed, discourses did not abandon the ambition guided by the alleged “peace culture”. As a means to highlight its maintained engagement in favor of tolerance and against discrimination, communication on equal medical treatment of foreigners, including illegal aliens, was central. In the early stages, claims to provide free testing and treatment for all were even made by the government. Renewed criminalization of hate speech was also a characteristic<sup>69</sup>. The Omani narrative during the pandemic also imposed a centralization of the responses given to the crisis, even in the humanitarian aid distributed to foreign workers who had lost their revenues and who were unable to fly back home because of closed airports. Individual initiatives of distribution of food have been frowned upon, leaving para-public authorized organizations, such as *Dâr al-'Aḥâ'*, in a position to answer people's needs.
- 36 Beyond the Omani state's projections, narratives constructed by others seemed to address the issue of sustainability of the alleged Omani peace culture embodied by the country's diplomacy. For many years, academic and expert discourse have questioned the capacity of the state and diplomats to sustain a neutral stance and independence. Such has been a common feature of many reports which claim to decipher Omani foreign policy and make predictions. Issues of the bilateral relations with Oman's neighbors has in particular been the object of many interrogations, some of which emerged more than twenty years ago and have in fact hardly delivered (O'REILLY, 1998). They developed a geopolitical approach or one that is “realist” in perspective, focusing on matters linked to power, pressure and interests and has little consideration for the significance of ideas, culture, history, perceptions, and narratives.

- 37 Interestingly, reflections on sustainability have somehow focused mostly on matters that are allegedly in the government's reach, often neglecting the international nature of most issues. Focus on security (through anti-terrorism) and on the economy (through budgetary policies and the need for taxation) underestimate trends that necessitate a shift from a military or national oriented approach to one that takes into account human security or what has been labelled "commons" such as the environment, climate change<sup>70</sup>, health and peace<sup>71</sup>. These will require new approaches which value co-operation and multilateralism. Threats being as global as they are, governments can hardly only expect to mitigate these challenges and prepare society, not solve them entirely on their own. In that context, a departure from hard politics through the value placed by Omani narratives on peace can be seen as a functional starting point. Discourse is thus in itself a resource that needs to be understood so it can also be preserved.

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61. Interestingly, personalization of diplomacy was also embodied (albeit in less direct and prominent terms) in the tribute former minister in charge of Foreign Affairs, Yûsuf bin ‘Alawî, received as he left office in August 2020 after 23 years of tenure in the Omani press. See for example the poetic text by editor in chief of *Atheer* media, Mûsâ al-Far‘î, which depicts the former minister as the “perfect weapon of peace (*silâh al-salâm al-shâmil*), the true Omani dagger (*al-khanjar al-‘umânî al-aşîl*)”.

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## ABSTRACTS

The Sultanate of Oman has often been portrayed as a haven of peace in a most turbulent region. The projection of a peace-loving country is at the core of many narratives that this article intends to study, looking at how they are constructed. The purpose of this article is certainly not normative. We do not aim to test the reality or operationalization of such discourses or projections on the allegedly pacific nature of Oman as a state and society. Rather, our purpose is to understand how this dimension has come to be considered a natural feature of contemporary Oman and what arguments, images and figures they mobilize.

Our first ambition will thus be to identify the structuration of the narrative focusing on Omani peace and its various dimensions, be they historical, religious, political or diplomatic. We will finally delve into discourses regarding the sustainability of the feature of Oman as a peace-loving country and the challenges it faces.

Le Sultanat d'Oman a souvent été décrit comme un havre de paix dans une région des plus turbulentes. La projection d'un pays épris de paix est au cœur des nombreux récits (narratives) que cet article se propose d'étudier, en s'intéressant à leur construction. L'objet de cet article n'est aucunement normatif. Nous ne cherchons pas à tester la réalité ou l'opérationnalisation de tels discours ou projections sur la nature prétendument pacifique d'Oman en tant qu'État et société. Notre objectif est plutôt de comprendre comment cette dimension en est venue à être fréquemment considérée comme une caractéristique naturelle de l'Oman contemporain et quels arguments, images et figures elle mobilise.

Notre première ambition sera donc d'identifier la structuration du récit centré sur la paix omanaise et ses différentes dimensions, qu'elles soient historiques, religieuses, politiques ou diplomatiques. Il conviendra enfin de se pencher sur les discours concernant la durabilité de la caractéristique d'Oman en tant que pays épris de paix et les défis auxquels il est confronté.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Omani foreign policy, narratives, peace, decision making, public policies, international relations, Islam

**Mots-clés:** Politique étrangère omanaise, récits, paix, processus de prise de décision, politiques publiques, relations internationales, islam

## AUTHORS

**LAURENT BONNEFOY**

CNRS – CERI/Sciences Po

**AHMED AL-RABAANI**

Director of the Omani Studies Center, Sultan Qaboos University