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NATION AND STATE IN OMAN: THE INITIAL IMPACT OF 1970

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The emergence and consolidation of the Omani state after 1970 can be explained by exploring basic concepts that define the country, nation, state, and government. This approach provides insights into the initial development of the post-1970 Sultanate under Sultan Qaboos. The first few years of the 1970s were pivotal, formative, and transitional. This was the time when Oman changed from being an undefined nation searching for a serviceable state to a new capable state elaborating a cohesive national identity.¹ The new Sultan, Qaboos bin Said, was at the heart of this transformation, stepping into the new experience and role as ruler of a country still divided and fragmented.

The Contemporary Omani Nation

At the root of modern Omani identity lies the concept of the nation, one shared by Omanis from diverse backgrounds. Concepts such as “national origin,” “nationality,” and “nation-state,” were new to the Gulf States and Oman, emerging around the beginning of the oil era in the mid-twentieth century. Their impetus can be termed “legal” rather than “ideological” or “emotional,” in that the emergence of these ideas was the consequence of two roughly simultaneous impulses: the consolidation of a primary political role by certain tribes and sheikhly families and the impact of the British. While citizenship or nationality confers Omani legal identity, the sense of who is an Omani and who is not extends well beyond formal citizenship.

There has long existed in Oman a common identity that, although blending into ties beyond the Oman of today, created a sense of being Omani or non-Omani. Over the course of the twentieth century and especially after 1970, this commonality gradually intensified into a fuller feeling of nationalism, of a distinct Omani identity tied to the Sultanate with the Sultan as its symbol. The term “nationalism” has often acquired a rather pejorative connotation, particularly due to its association with the more specific concept of integral nationalism, where individual rights of the citizens are subordinated to the needs of the state, as in the fascist regimes of the twentieth century. The use of the term here, in contrast, relies on the concept of liberal nationalism, whereby a group or groups of people assume a shared identity on the basis of common history, ethnicity, religion, culture, or other self-perceived unity to form a “nation” that ideally is expressed politically within a nation-state. Thus, the emergence of nationalism is a prerequisite for the creation of a nation-state.²

What constitutes a nation? Ernst Renan, in his nineteenth-century essay, “*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*” concluded that a nation is based not on racial, ethnic, or language affinities as much as shared memory and forgetfulness.³ Later, in the 1980s, Benedict Anderson remarked, “Nation, nationality, nationalism—all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse.” He goes on to describe the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁴ Eric Hobsbawm notes that just as the concept of a nation is relatively new, its elaboration “must include a constructed or ‘invented’ component.”⁵ The traditions that sustain and bind the new nation together not only rely upon “remembered” elements, but also embody newly invented rituals and practices. The development of the Omani “nation” can be described in two ways: as a more amorphous, “traditional,” sense of what made the people of Oman distinct from their neighbors; and as a product of more universalist human ideals of the “modern” nation-state.

Conceptions of Oman

Perhaps the most fundamental element of the traditional notion of nation is geography. For centuries before the twentieth century, the essence of Oman was often an amorphous geographical entity with indeterminate borders. An

anecdote by geographer and former oil company employee in the Gulf, J. C. Wilkinson, illustrates this point:

In 1959, when the writer was transferred from Doha to work in Abu Dhabi, he was somewhat surprised when a Qatari remarked to him, "Ah, so at last you've got your wish and you're going to Oman." Shortly after taking up this new appointment, some urgent business arose which required discussion with the Ruler. Inquiries revealed that he was no longer in Abu Dhabi, but had "gone to Oman." Here, at last, seemed to be a perfect excuse for visiting this forbidden land. But it was not to be, because "Oman" turned out simply to be the local name for Sheikh Shakhbut's territory in the so-called "Buraimi Oasis"! . . . [H]ere also the writer was able to talk with those who really knew the area, for the group of men with brightly-coloured head-dresses whom he found waiting in the Sheikh's *majlis* were, it appeared, "visitors from Oman." Some years later when the opportunity did at last come to make the journey along the foot of the mountains southwards from Buraimi, the writer called on one of these "Omanis" at his home at 'Ibri. As he took his leave to carry on towards Nizwa he almost anticipated his host's remark, "Ah, so you're going on to Oman!"⁶

Wilkinson's account demonstrates that borders and claims on geography have changed dramatically since the middle of the twentieth century. The idea of Oman geographically was not the same thing as the present nation-state of Oman. Until very recently, that which was regarded as Oman included the Oman Coast, later known, by outside observers, as the Pirate Coast, then the Trucial Coast, and now the United Arab Emirates. But traditionally it did not include the Sultanate's southern region of Dhofar (with its historic links to the eastern regions of what is now Yemen). The melding of Oman with the Sultanate is a recent phenomenon and in some ways is the consequence of the accession of Sultan Qaboos.

Twentieth-Century Nation-building in Oman

The appearance of the Omani nation-state owes much to the creation of the Al-Bu Said state in the eighteenth century. But, more directly, the full formation of the modern Omani state was accelerated with the accession of Sultan Qaboos and the *Nahda* (Renaissance) or *sahwa* (awakening) he set in motion.

This process was comparable to the emergence of the independent emirates of the Gulf around 1971. An important aspect of the change was the creation of a modern national identity coterminous with the Sultanate of Oman.

For Sultan Qaboos and his government to create this national identity among the Omani people, it was first necessary to reconstitute the Sultanate in the 1970s from the foundations laid by their predecessors. Omani culture has revolved around Arabness, Ibadism, tribal affinities, and reactions to outside interference or conquest. A sense of Arab identity has existed perhaps ever since immigrating Arab tribes toppled Persian suzerainty during the Islamization of Oman in the seventh century CE.

Another element of identity in Oman is Ibadi Islam, predominant in Oman since the early Islamic period and given political, as well as religious, representation through the Ibadi Imamate and Ibadi legal structures. Ibadism is distinctive to Oman. Although not all Omanis are Ibadi and there are substantial Sunni and Shiite communities, it is the only country in which Ibadis form a significant part of the population. Doctrinal and practical differences between Ibadis and Sunnis are not substantial, allowing Ibadism to provide a common source of religious and cultural feeling among many Omanis.

A third element is that of tribes, which constituted the constellation of constituencies that formed the backbone of the Ibadi Imamate. Furthermore, Omanis collectively supported broad proto-national responses to invasions by the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by the Persians in the eighteenth century, and by the Wahhabis in the nineteenth century.

At the same time, however, Omani unity was challenged by internal divisions. The political fissure between coast and interior began shortly after the first of the Al-Bu Said rulers was elected Imam in the mid-eighteenth century, even though he did not fulfill the religious requirements of an imam. It only took a few decades for subsequent Al-Bu Said leaders to abandon any pretense of being imams and, equally importantly, move their center to Muscat and their primary objectives to maritime expansion. While some (fitful) authority was exercised over the interior during the nineteenth century—and an interregnum of three years when an imam of a cadet branch of the Al-Bu Said family controlled Muscat—all control over the interior was lost in the early twentieth century. Similar divisions took place in Dhofar with the outbreak of rebellion in the 1960s.

The rulers of Muscat, by now styled sultans, acknowledged the division in their adoption of the name of their dominion as the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, thus implying a political as well as geographical disconnect between the two. But the people of both coast and interior did not consider themselves Muscati but not Omani or vice versa. It was not until the military deposition of the Imam in the 1950s that the Sultan was able to exercise authority over the core of Oman. Nevertheless, the minimalist government of Sultan Said bin Taimur, his reputation for parsimoniousness and enforced isolation, as well as his absence from Oman in southern Dhofar for the last twelve years of his reign (and his hostile attitude toward the needs of the Dhofari population), did little to advance any sense of national identity.

Contemporary National Identity in Oman

The trappings of contemporary national identity, formal legal citizenship, passports, rights and obligations and legal standing of citizens, and determination of national identity only fully developed after the accession of Sultan Qaboos in 1970. The present Sultanate (i.e., the state of the Al-Bu Said dynasty) encompassed the proto-national identity from its beginning. But its inherent difficulty in doing so was due to conflict with the Ibadi Imam (accompanied by persistent attempts by religious and tribal leaders to restore the Imamate in Oman) and dependence on outside backing.

Even though the present Oman was physically unified during the reign of Said bin Taimur (r. 1932–1970), it was not unified in a coherent national identity until the post-1970 period. In this sense, the reign of Said's son Qaboos, even as it inherited some earlier stirrings, marked the beginning of a true primary national identity, of a sense of nationalism, building on and transforming existing tribal and regional identities. As Ernest Gellner put it, "It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way around."⁷

Several elements were involved in the development of a primary national identity. One of these, aided by Oman's reintegration into the international arena, was the consolidation of a feeling of belonging to a larger Arab and Muslim community, thus reinforcing the connectedness between Omanis of different tribes, regions, or sects, as well as their connections to the wider Arab world and fellow Muslims.⁸ Closer to home, the interconnections between the

six GCC states helped to build both a commonality and a closer understanding of what it meant to be a citizen in a state. Even the development process contributed. State education and curriculum reinforced the concept of citizenship and belonging, as did state-owned television, radio, and print media. Some scholars have emphasized the deliberate adoption of “identity engineering” to create a unitary and pliable population.⁹

Meanwhile symbols of the state kept focus on a national identification. Soon after Sultan Qaboos’ accession, a new national flag was introduced, incorporating the old white flag of the Sultanate and the red flag of the Imamate. Portraits of the Sultan adorned offices and homes throughout the country. Sultan Qaboos’ full beard soon gave way to one neatly trimmed and he was frequently portrayed in uniform. This was perhaps not surprising given both his military training and his role as leader of the Dhofar war effort. Nevertheless, it projected a young, competent, and dedicated ruler in sharp distinction from his predecessor. As Muscat built up, an impressive row of government ministries lined the main highway—the tangible manifestation of the power and orderliness of government combined with the modern urban setting of the capital to create national pride. The adoption of a comprehensive corpus of law and a set of regulations emphasized the role of the state in fashioning the new Oman. Omani sports teams wearing the national colors competed in Gulf competitions and farther afield.

From his accession, Sultan Qaboos was enormously popular in the north (Oman) since he embodied change and progress. Additionally, he was regarded by the people of the south (Dhofar) as one of them since his mother was from the Bayt Qatan *jibali* tribe and he was born and raised in Salalah. His visage, visible everywhere, served as a tangible symbol of the growing pride that Omanis felt in their suddenly flourishing country.

The figure of Sultan Qaboos was an important element in the process of strengthening national identity and building a state. Lisa Anderson suggests that “The relative strength of monarchy in the Middle East monarchies [is due] to its affinity with the projects of nation building and state formation . . .”¹⁰ With a weak ruling family and few truly national symbols of unity, the presence and inviolateness of the Sultan was key to rallying public sentiment around Sultan Qaboos. From the beginning, the decision was made that the new ruler should be addressed as “His Majesty” rather than as “His Highness”

as his father and grandfather had been. Early discussion even contemplated changing his title from sultan to king.

Certainly, Omanis were sincerely grateful to Sultan Qaboos for the changes sweeping the country: in the early years of his reign, Omanis spontaneously remarked that before Qaboos there was nothing and that everything happened after his accession. This approach was similar to the other Gulf monarchies, where streets, airports, hospitals, and universities bore the names of various senior figures in each family. In Oman, this was directed at only one personality and so there are Port Sultan Qaboos, Madinat Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Qaboos Highway, and other examples with his name.

While Arabic usage pertaining to the ruler retained the adjective “*sultani*,” increasingly emphasis was placed on “royal” in English, such as Royal Hospital, Royal Opera House, Royal Guard, Royal Air Force of Oman, and Royal Office. Royal rituals soon became entrenched. The National Day celebrations (Sultan Qaboos’ birthday was selected as National Day) included the Sultan’s tea party, following the same lines of Queen Elizabeth II’s tea party on her birthday. The crossed swords with a *khanjar* (dagger), the traditional “emblem” of the Sultanate, were surmounted by an elaborate crown when used to indicate royal connections. The religious credentials of Sultan Qaboos as national leader were bolstered by the construction of modern Qaboos mosques in towns throughout the country and the erection of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in the capital.¹¹

At the same time as these concepts laid the ground for Omaniness in national identity, simultaneous perceptions were being inculcated of the unique identity of citizens of the Sultanate of Oman. As more Omanis traveled out of the country, their passports, national dress, and accents reinforced their sense of togetherness in the Sultanate. Internal travel and migration for work and education assisted in bringing a new layer of primary identity overlaying tribal and regional identification. As the government provided more services and intruded into people’s lives, the sense of common identity deepened.

From another viewpoint, a major push for tourism seems intended, in addition to economic benefits including diversification and employment, to call the Gulf and the world’s attention to Oman’s attractions. These actions not only boost Oman’s competitiveness with the other Gulf States but they

also help to redress a lingering resentment by Omanis from the 1970s of how they perceived that other Gulf nationals viewed them.¹² This bonding in national pride is a nation-building exercise too.

The projection of the Sultan as the sole father figure of the country was coupled with his absolute supervision of the apparatus of state, and thus his personal role (either directive or adjudicative) in the political and socio-economic development of the country. A regular occasion to connect on a personal level with his people was the meet-the-people tour, an annual occurrence for a few weeks in a selected region of the country—the exercise was abandoned only in the last few years of Qaboos' reign due to the Sultan's health. Even during the 2011 economic protests, the demonstrators emphasized their loyalty to the Sultan. How much this constituted allegiance to the Sultan as a specific figure and how much to the symbol of the “new” Omani nation-state is an important question.

The New State of Oman

The emergence of Oman's primary national identity after 1970 could not have occurred without the structure of a modernizing state upon which to build it. The previous Omani state, that is, the Sultanate before 1970, possessed the necessary criteria of statehood such as territoriality, formal sovereignty, an administration even if primitive, and some measure of control—in Weberian terms, “an effective monopoly of legitimate force over a given territory.”¹³ But the post-1970 state added depth and new elements of services and legitimacy. The modernizing state involves “the process by which the state not only grows in economic productivity and government coercion, but also in political and institutional power. It is thus closely linked to the process of the bureaucratization and the centralization of the state.”¹⁴

Furthermore, as the theorist S. N. Eisenstadt has written, “The emergence of the first modern states in Europe entailed administrative centralization and relatively clearly defined territorial boundaries. The political community was conceived as autonomous, no longer subsumed under a broader ‘religious’ canopy. [T]he state was now defined in secular terms . . .”¹⁵ Independence and sovereignty were key components in the development of the nation-state. “The transformation of the basic premises of the social and political order became interwoven with a parallel transformation and institutionalization of

the conceptions of sovereignty, of citizenship, of representative institutions, and of accountability of rulers.”¹⁶

It was a long haul from a minimalist to a modernizing state. Oman’s independence has been recognized for more than a thousand years, despite having been challenged at times and then falling within the orbit of British India’s informal empire. The Ibadi Imams in the mountains could call upon the support of the tribes when external threats appeared. While the Al-Bu Said Sultans in Muscat found it difficult to maintain authority over many parts of the country, they did treat with foreign powers as diplomatic equals and sometimes extended their dominions to overseas territories.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muscat was recognized as their capital apart from a few brief periods. The last armed incursion into Muscat from the interior took place in 1895. Since then, it has been a secure and sovereign base for five sultans. Repeatedly challenged as the voice of the Omani nation, their limitations were epitomized by the inability to fashion a state capable of governing all of Oman. Said bin Taimur was able to assert authority over interior Oman in the 1950s and 1960s but his control over Dhofar steadily decreased. In large part, this was a consequence of his extremely personalized style of ruling and the near absence of any form of viable government.

As there can be no state without a government, the type of government utilized by the state helps to define the viability and effectiveness of the state. In recent history, Oman has produced three types of government: traditional (the Ibadi Imamate and the Al-Bu Said dynasty); neotraditional (the reign of Said bin Taimur); and post-traditional (Qaboos bin Said and Haitham bin Tariq).¹⁷ The minimalist Ibadi Imamate consisted of little more than the figure of the Imam and a small circle of religious advisors. The Imam was generally, except when dynasties appeared, selected and bolstered by the powerful tribal chieftains of the day.

Administration was largely limited to the appointment of *walis* (personal representatives of the leader in significant settlements) and *qadis* (Islamic judges), and enforcement depended on the appearance of tribal forces when called upon. The structure of the Al-Bu Said state of the Sultanate was not much more complex, even after the restoration of Sultanate authority over the interior in the 1950s–1960s. There was still no hint of an effective central

state or anything beyond bare-bones institutionalization, that is, utilization of long-adopted institutions such as the *walis* and *qadis*, the collection of *zakat* (alms-giving), and the employment of a rudimentary guard.

The Al-Bu Said state operated on similar terms to the Imamate as described above, not particularly surprising since the first of the line was an elected Imam and several of his successors claimed the office. The secularization of leadership involved a move from a religious-based Imamate to a kingly dynasty, encouraged at least in part by the diversion of much Al-Bu Said attention abroad. Still, the dynasty's hold over Oman continued to be exercised essentially as it had been under the Imams.

This remained true until the accession of Said bin Taimur as Sultan. In 1929, the British Government of India imposed a four-man council of ministers on the Sultanate with a British financial advisor (the second of whom was the explorer Bertram Thomas) essentially in charge of the state. Upon becoming Sultan in 1932, Said's goal was to restore the "traditional" nature of his rule. This meant both eliminating British interference in the state and restoring Al-Bu Said control over the interior. The first required the eradication of debts owed to the British, which Said managed to do by the end of the Second World War through the application of British war subsidies to outstanding debts and the simple expedient of extreme parsimony in state spending. The second objective had to await the disappearance from the scene of respected Imam Muhammad bin 'Abdullah al-Khalili. The Imam died in 1954 and was succeeded by a weaker Imam dominated by his brother and a strong tribal sheikh.

But regaining actual control over the interior required extraordinary measures. Principal among them was the formation of permanent armed forces, an arrangement alien to Oman. Immediately prior to this development, Sultan Said had permitted an oil exploration team to move into the interior of Oman, accompanied by a protective force for which the company had paid. While Britain set up the Sultan's Armed Forces in 1958, and subsidized and provided the officers for it, it also forced a development subsidy and department on the Sultan. Sultan Said also introduced a new currency to replace the confusing use of the Indian rupee and the Maria Theresa dollar, among others. This was the *riyal sa'idi*, which later was renamed the Omani *riyal*.

By his acceptance and use of these innovations, Sultan Said was no longer a "traditional" ruler. His aim was to preserve the existing traditional society,

values, and goals by enhancing or enlarging the capability to control the state and counteract the effect of change. In so doing, however, he altered the nature of the decentralized political system, transforming the basis of authority from traditional to neotraditional.

The emergence of a new Omani nationalism, that is, the creation of a primary national identity, was dependent on the introduction of a new type of state. The state-building that followed the 1970 coup embodied a modernizing emphasis with socioeconomic development and institutionalization of a government as its goals. While the changeover in 1970 was momentous and far-reaching, the result was not a modern state but instead a post-traditional one.

Unlike his father, Sultan Qaboos sought to use his position to change the state and embraced a strategy of modernization. Gradually, Oman became a state like most others around the world. The state's authority was supreme, its leadership was accepted and legitimated internally while external recognition was provided by various bilateral diplomatic ties as well as membership in the United Nations and other global bodies. The country's inhabitants became citizens of a singular entity, the state took charge of distributing oil income, and it adopted the responsibility of providing measures of social welfare for its people. At the same time, oil income and its impact on the economy, politics, and society became and remained the most important factor in determining the path of the sultanate in the half-century after 1970.

The Early 1970s as a Transitional but Formative Period

The accession of Sultan Qaboos bin Said marked the start of the post-traditional period in Omani politics. The new Sultan communicated his vision to his nation in his first radio broadcast on August 9, 1970. He ended the broadcast by reminding listeners of the words he had spoken on his arrival in Muscat: "the government and the people are one body and if one part fails so will fail the whole body.' Therefore, my brothers, I call upon you to work with us for the future of our country and with God's help we will succeed."¹⁸

The dramatic changes set in motion by the events of July 1970 had an enormous and wide-ranging impact on the organization of the state and the structure of Oman's government. Most importantly, the political and economic structure of the past was incapable of dealing with new demands and new

requirements. The top of Oman's institutional system technically remained the same with a strong Sultan exercising unchallenged power, but the emphasis and vision was transformed almost entirely. A completely new government was necessary, along with a radically different economic system. In large part, the change encompassed an abrupt transformation from a minimalist, that is, decidedly personal, government to a process of institutionalization.

There were two essential aspects to the establishment of the new state: the contrast in personalities between the old and new rulers and the adaptation of old institutions and the creation of new ones. From the very beginning, Sultan Qaboos' role was distinct from that of his father, even though both exercised full authority over the state. Sultan Said sought to be the sole arbiter of matters great and small throughout the state. Orders regarding the affairs of Muscat, the capital, were passed to his cousin, Sayyid Shihab bin Faysal, and he used a more distant relative, Sayyid Ahmad bin Ibrahim, to deal with interior and tribal affairs. F. C. L. Chauncy, his "personal advisor," served (along with the British military secretary) as the liaison with Westerners, such as the commander of the armed forces, the general manager of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), and the director of the small development department. The handful of Omani and British subordinates of Sultan Said who handled the few government functions extant (such as relations with the tribes, governance of the capital, the minuscule development department, and supervision of Muscat port and customs) quickly retired.

For Sultan Qaboos, the changeover of government in Muscat in 1970 went smoothly. The new Sultan spent the first few weeks carrying out a series of tours around the country to introduce himself to his people, traveling by Skyvan to Nizwa, Suhar, and Bahla and Jabrin. He also toured Muscat and Matrah and made a visit to PDO at Mina' al-Fahl as well as the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) headquarters and other units. Further visits by road were made to Izki, Manah, al-Rustaq, al-Sib, al-Suwayq, Barka, and Nizwa.

He also received some of the sheikhs of the Trucial Coast (soon to become the United Arab Emirates), including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah, and other Gulf dignitaries from Kuwait and Qatar. The British special representative in the Gulf and the American consul-general in Dhahran (also accredited to Muscat) stopped in Muscat as well. These visits and meetings served to introduce the Sultan to his people and vice versa, as well as to mark

the beginnings of international recognition of the new leader. The visits by the Trucial rulers may have been the last vestigial recognition of the ancient suzerainty of Oman's ruler over all Oman. Sultan Qaboos called for Omanis abroad to return and released prisoners from the fearsome Fort al-Jalali prison before returning to Salalah two weeks after entering Muscat.

A small interim council had been formed immediately after the coup to deal with immediately pressing matters. But the Sultan soon put together a coterie of Omani and expatriate officials and advisors to set forth new state policies and to initiate the ambitious program of socioeconomic development. One of his first actions was to name his uncle, Sayyid Tariq bin Taimur, who had been in exile, as prime minister. Tariq quickly formed a small council of ministers comprised of four members holding the reins for health, education, justice, and the interior. These positions reflected the initial priorities of the fledgling state: two newly prioritized concerns of health and education and two areas of longstanding responsibilities in justice and the interior. The latter two appointees were from the Al-Bu Said family, while the minister for health was a Pakistani-educated Omani medical doctor and education was placed in the charge of a member of the sheikhly family of a prominent tribe of the interior.

The state gradually added government institutions that began simultaneously to carry out the necessary functions of governing and providing services as well as taking the first steps in development. The nucleus of a small bureaucracy was created, relying on Omanis who had gained experience abroad and expatriates from various countries. In short order, government ministries were established mainly to provide a framework for the provision of social services. A health network was established within weeks after the coup and an agency was formed to recruit Omanis for government service.

Other service ministries appeared soon after. These included information, posts, and lands, in addition to education; their ranks were added to existing justice and interior organs. Departments for roads, public works, and labor were established. The duties of the Muscat municipality were expanded. The small existing police force was professionalized and additional security services, such as a royal guard and an intelligence service, appeared.

The *Diwan*, comprising both the Sultan's office and his household, continued uninterrupted from the traditional system into the new one. It contained

three important positions: the head of the *Diwan* (who handled ruling family and tribal affairs); the Sultan's equerry (who dealt with political matters); and the aide-de-camp (who organized the royal household and royal establishments). In 1973, the *Diwan* was upgraded to a ministry. It was also during this time that the Royal Guard, the Royal Flight, and the Royal Yacht Squadron emerged as divisions within the *Diwan*. It was not until 1974 that the *Diwan* split according to its two basic functions: the original *Diwan* took care of the royal household, while the *Diwan* for Royal Protocol was formed to handle government matters. A few years later, the Palace Office (later restyled as the Royal Office) was created as a separate organization to deal with political and security concerns.

Two existing institutions provided a basis to build upon at the time of the coup. SAF was a professional light infantry with air and sea wings dating from the late 1950s. Until the late 1960s, all of its officers were British and a high proportion of its ranks were Baluch, either from Oman or from the formerly Omani enclave of Gwadar in Pakistan (returned to Pakistan in 1958). SAF's principal function was of course combat and it had fighting experience during the Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar War of the 1950s and 1960s. From about 1966 until the mid-1970s, it was engaged in a more serious war in Dhofar and underwent considerable expansion.

But SAF also played other roles that supported state formation. Tribesmen from across the Sultanate were recruited and mixed together, broadening horizons of identity. It also provided education and training for its soldiers, skills that were put to good use after 1970. SAF was not only the face of order in northern Oman from the 1960s, but also served as a major means of liaison between people and the government. It was a major source of income via wages for Omani families during a period of poverty. It carried out civil functions such as medical care and transport, and built and maintained roads. Gradually, Omanis replaced British officers and the proportion of Arabs to Baluch steadily increased.¹⁹

PDO was the other principal pre-1970 institution. At the time of the coup, it was wholly owned by foreign companies, predominantly Royal Dutch Shell, although the government later nationalized 60 percent of the company. From the beginning of exploration, the company provided employment for Omanis although before 1970 this was largely in unskilled jobs.

The company did send small numbers of Omanis to Dubai and the United Kingdom for training as early as the mid-1960s. Like SAF, PDO provided needed income, education, and socialization.²⁰

Finding qualified Omanis to fill the growing number of positions was initially difficult due to the state of the education system. Fortunately, a small cadre of Omanis had been educated abroad in defiance of the old Sultan's strictures. Obtaining education in the West was problematic partly because of the lack of money to pay for it, but principally because Western governments did not wish to anger Sultan Said. The oil states of Kuwait and Qatar, as well as Abu Dhabi a little later, provided primary and secondary education to Omanis, as well as places for a few at Kuwait University. Others received education in countries opposed to the Sultanate, as when Saudi Arabia provided for the children of the Oman Revolutionary Movement members (the Imamate group in exile). The Soviet Union and other Communist countries gave scholarships and several of the first ministers in the new state were Russian-educated. Dhufari revolutionaries received basic education at Popular Front schools in South Yemen and university or medical education in the Communist bloc, particularly Cuba.

A few Omanis had held administrative positions in Bahrain, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi, and returned to senior positions. At the same time, the contribution of "Zanzibaris," a broad term encompassing Omanis who had been born in or lived in a variety of East African countries, was welcomed. A majority of these came from Zanzibar itself, landing in Oman either after Zanzibar's anti-Arab revolution in 1964 or after the 1970 Oman coup. Although the native language of most was Swahili, many also spoke English and had received higher education, especially at Makerere University in Uganda.

By 1976, the number of ministries had increased to seventeen: *Diwan* affairs; interior; land and municipalities; *awqaf* (endowments) and Islamic affairs; social affairs and labor; justice; commerce and industry; communications; health; education; information and culture; agriculture, fisheries, petroleum and minerals; public works; foreign affairs; national heritage; youth affairs; and defense.²¹ Government employment increased proportionately. The foundations had been laid.

Meanwhile, oil had begun to fuel the economy before 1970, but oil income had barely begun reaching government coffers before the coup. It

was Sultan Said's bad luck that the funds available for even modest development came too late to save him. Nevertheless, he had begun a program of small projects, including a few schools, eight hospitals, town planning for Muscat and Matrah along with some small government buildings, electricity generation and a piped water supply for the capital, work on new roads to Suhar and Nizwa, and, most notably, a new deepwater port in Matrah that was completed after his overthrow and ironically named Mina Qaboos (Port Qaboos).²²

These ad hoc projects were continued and greatly expanded upon by the new government. Inescapably, the process of infrastructural and socioeconomic development required planning and implementation, along with a method for income distribution. Not surprisingly, sophisticated planning was something for the future. Low absorptive capacity dovetailed with rudimentary planning. To build schools and health clinics, it was first necessary to engage architects and suitable construction firms. Then it was necessary to import cement, steel, equipment, and other items. Oman's single port could not keep up with offloading ships. Once landed, goods needed to be transported into the interior and remote locations, but this depended on the construction of viable roads. Once constructed, schools and clinics needed teachers, doctors, and nurses, nearly all of whom had to be recruited from abroad and funds found to pay them. There was little in the way of a master plan to determine which project or which sector was first in line.

It was not until the massive oil price rise of 1974 that the government finally had enough income to pursue a planned development agenda more effectively. Government revenues jumped from OMR 68.6 million in 1973 to OMR 303.2 million in 1974. While the increased income was definitely welcome, low absorptive capacity meant that 1974 saw a budget surplus of OMR 116.6 million.²³ Surpluses were recorded for more than a decade for this reason. The 1970s and the first half of the 1980s constituted the pivotal decades during which the economic emphasis evolved from haphazard reactions to relatively more sophisticated methodology to sustained planning. Oman soon became regarded as an example of a rentier state, similar to the other Gulf States, with its economy and government overly dependent on oil income. At the same time, however, it seemed to escape the "resource curse,"

which posited that economic distortions inhibited liberalization, increased repression, and discouraged populations from modernizing.²⁴

Still, noteworthy accomplishments were recorded during those first years.²⁵ The figures increased enormously in the following years as government ministries became better staffed and operational, and oil provided greater income.

Another aspect of this period was reconnection with the outside world, ending a long slide into isolation. From the end of the nineteenth century, Oman's foreign relations had deteriorated markedly. Apart from Britain, with whom relations had always been close, the only diplomat resident in Oman pre-1970 was that of India. Relations with the United States (which had commenced in 1833) remained semi-active, while ties to France had lapsed. Oman had been nearly completely cut off from the Arab world and even the Gulf. Sultan Qaboos' 1971 visit to Riyadh marked the establishment of the first official ties between the two countries. The Sultan's attendance at the Shah's 1971 Persepolis celebrations formed the basis for Iran's assistance to the Sultanate in the Dhufar War.

Even more importantly for Oman's position in the global community was its membership of international organizations. Admission to the United Nations and the Arab League had faced some opposition by "progressive" Arab republics, led by Marxist South Yemen, but did not succeed in blocking the Sultanate. Oman was soon a member of WHO, UNESCO, IPU, and other organizations.

Starting with the early steps taken at the beginning of the 1970s, the specific role and authority of the post-traditional Sultan gradually assumed tangible form. With the resignation of his uncle Tariq as prime minister in 1971, Sultan Qaboos took over that role, adding it to his formal positions of minister of defense, economy, and foreign affairs. He was clearly respected for his seminal role in developing the state and nation of Oman, as well as establishing the Sultanate's reputation as an impartial mediator in regional disputes. In terms of institutionalization, the experience of the early 1970s was a period of trial and error, marked by uncertain steps regarding the establishment and evolution of government machinery.²⁶ The initial groundwork was laid for the formation of civil society. At the same time, Omani national identity deepened. By the end of the decade or so, a workable pattern had been established that persists until today.

Notes

1. An earlier version of some of these remarks appeared in J. E. Peterson, "Oman: A State Elaborating a Nation," ISPI Commentary, May 16, 2019.
2. For further discussion, see Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1944); Hans Kohn, *The Age of Nationalism: The First Era of Global History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1971); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
3. Renan's translated text is reprinted in Alan Dowty (ed.), *The Israel/Palestine Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 3–8.
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn. (London: Verso, 1991), 3, 5–6.
5. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 14.
6. J. C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia: A Study of the Aflaj of Oman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 4.
7. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 54.
8. Smaller variant communities are not excluded but are enfolded into the ethos by extension. Other ethnic groups are incorporated into the matrix of tribal classification, while religious differences are subsumed by policy and tolerance, as shown by the designation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, not Islamic Affairs. Oman traditionally looked to the Indian Ocean more than it did to the Arab world, and its role as a melting pot is enshrined in its polyglot society with its overseas connections. Undoubtedly, this orientation strongly shapes Oman's relationship to the Arab world today and its interactions with fellow GCC members.
9. "Promotion of the Omani nation has been the occasion to develop what we call identity engineering, in which history, heritage (*turath*) and symbolic references have helped to anchor the awareness of a new political community and to serve the central authority's legitimisation." Marc Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*, rev. edn. (London: Hurst, [2009] 2017), 109–110.
10. Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 106(1) (1991): 4.
11. Dawn Chatty covers these developments in detail in her "Rituals of Royalty and the Elaboration of Ceremony in Oman: View from the Edge," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 39–58. She concludes that "The sultan

remains the national figure of unity, elaborated out of the wealth of invented ceremonies and created traditions” (p. 54). This process was not unique to Oman of course and was paralleled elsewhere in the Gulf where nation-building was a necessary exercise. For example, Jill Crystal dissects the creation of a national identity in Qatar through the presentation of national symbols, the acquisition of international recognition, and the “invention” of a founding myth. Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 162.

12. Author’s observations and interviews during the 1970s and beyond. The construction of the impressive al-Bustan Palace Hotel in 1985 to hold Oman’s hosting of the GCC summit for the first time and the elaborate expensive preparations for National Day just afterwards were widely seen as Oman’s determination to show the outside world how much it had developed since 1970.
13. Guenther Roth, “Personal Rulership, Patrimonialism, and Empire-Building in the New States,” *World Politics* 20(2) (1968): 204.
14. Rolf Schwarz, “The Political Economy of State-Formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier States, Economic Reform, and Democratization,” *Review of International Political Economy* 15(4) (2008): 599n1. Or as Joel Migdal has put it, “the image of the state is of a dominant, integrated, autonomous entity that controls, in a given territory, all rule making, either directly through its own agencies or indirectly by sanctioning other authorized organizations—businesses, families, clubs, and the like—to make certain circumscribed rules.” In addition to the image, Migdal posits that the state also embraces practices: “The routine performance of state actors and agencies, their practices, may reinforce the image of the state or weaken it; they may bolster the notion of the territorial and public–private boundaries or neutralize them.” Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17–18.
15. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Paradoxes of Democracy: Fragility, Continuity, and Change* (Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 14–15. But Eisenstadt goes on to contend that “The development in Europe of modern states and collectivities and the transformation of the notion of sovereignty were closely related to changes in the power structure of society, namely, the emergence of multiple centers of economic and political power and the development of some nuclei of distinctive new types of civil society and of public arenas or spheres. The development of multiplicity of centers of power and of the nuclei of civil society was

closely related to the development of a new type of political economy and of new modes of production, namely the market economy, first of commercial and later of industrial capitalism" (p. 16). This also characterizes Oman's stage as one of post-traditionalism.

16. Eisenstadt, *Paradoxes of Democracy*, 24.
17. S. N. Eisenstadt introduced the concept of a scale with "traditional" society at one end and "post-traditional" at the other. See his *Tradition, Change, and Modernity* (New York: Wiley, 1973). I have modified the idea by introducing a "neotraditional" stage, and first presented it in J. E. Peterson, "Legitimacy and Political Change in Yemen and Oman," *Orbis* 27(4) (1984): 971–998.
18. News release by the Government Information Office, August 9, 1970.
19. There is a surprisingly robust literature, including numerous memoirs, on the Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar and Dhofar wars, as well as a number of first-person accounts of activities in SAF by British officers. For a comprehensive history of SAF and the two wars, see J. E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy* (London: Saqi, 2007).
20. For a company-sponsored history, see Terence Clark, *Underground to Overseas: The Story of Petroleum Development Oman* (London: Stacey International, 2007).
21. Sultanate of Oman, Development Council, *First Five-Year Development Plan, 1976–1981*, 8.
22. For a fuller description of the Sultan's development program, see Barbara Wace, "Master Plan for Muscat and Oman," *Geographical Magazine* 41(12) (1969): 892–905. In an announcement of his plans, Sultan Said made the only public pronouncement of his reign in "The Word of Sultan Said b. Taimur, Sultan of Muscat and Oman, about the history of the financial position of the Sultanate in the past and the hopes for the future, after the export of oil" (January 1968), the English version reprinted in John Townsend, *Oman: The Making of a Modern State* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 192–198.
23. Sultanate of Oman, Development Council, Directorate General of National Statistics, *Statistical Yearbook 1984* (Muscat, November 1985).
24. See Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); and the critique of these theories in Matthew Gray, *A Theory of "Late Rentierism" in the Arab States of the Gulf* (Doha:

Georgetown University, Center for International and Regional Studies, 2011), Occasional Paper, No. 7.

25. Measures of the infrastructural accomplishments during the 1970–1973 period can be found in Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of Development, National Statistical Department, *Development in Oman 1970–1974* (Muscat, n.d.), 66–76, and are reproduced elsewhere in this volume.
26. The term “institutionalization” has various specific meanings in social science literature. My use of the term here refers to the transfer of responsibility from the personal rule and control by the Sultan to state agencies and senior officials. A related meaning refers to the development of civil society.

SULTAN QABOOS
AND MODERN
OMAN

1970–2020

**Edited by Allen James Fromherz and
Abdulrahman al-Salimi**

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