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"Switzerland of Arabia": Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Oman has been recognised as a key mediator in the Gulf and the wider Middle East. The successful completion of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, in particular, firmly cemented its reputation as a peacemaker. To fully understand Omani mediation practices in the region, Muscat's mediation must be placed within the context of the Sultanate's wider foreign policy, and all known mediations must be assembled in one place in order to develop a typology to better understand forms and patterns. Ultimately, mediation both serves and is enabled by the Sultanate's foreign policy. This was not an inevitable outcome. Over the course of Qaboos' reign, Oman has developed into an 'Interlocutor State', in which the practice of mediation has become an important tool in furthering the central goals of preserving Oman's independent foreign policy, and thus ultimately the Sultanate's sovereignty and security itself.

KEYWORDS

Gulf crisis; mediation; Oman; Iran; Yemen; Persian Gulf; foreign policy; Interlocutor State

On Friday 26 September 1980, only five days after Iraq's invasion of Iran, Hugh Tunnell of the British Embassy was summoned to meet Qais al Zawawi, Oman's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. He was informed that an Iraqi delegation had visited Sultan Qaboos in Salalah and requested permission to use Omani facilities for airstrikes against the Iranian-occupied Emirati islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs. In addition, the airstrikes, using helicopters fitted with Exocet missiles, would "take care of" Iranian naval units in and around the Strait of Hormuz. Tunnell was told that a decision had been taken "in principle" to allow this to take place, since "Oman had come to the conclusion that, such was the degree of instability in the Gulf area caused by the Khomeini regime that they felt obliged to give help to the Iraqis" (PREM 19/278, TELNO268, 27 September 1980). Iraqi aircraft soon arrived in Oman and over the coming days their presence became subject to much local gossip. Meanwhile London and Washington embarked on a frantic round of diplomacy over the following 72 hours to avert the attacks. In the end, in large part because the Iraqis were slow to launch the mission, this pressure led to the assault not going ahead. In a further telegram on 29 September, Tunnell observed:

> For the future I believe that the Omani handling of this potentially grave crisis (which has to a large extent reinforced misgivings over their "shoot from the hip" approach to previous problems, e.g. the initiative on protection of the straits of Hormuz last year) indicates a need

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> for reassessment of our handling of this regime. The other Gulf States whatever our misgivings about their policies in general, from here appear to be handling this particular crisis in a much more realistic manner (PREM 19/278, TELNO2276, 29 September 1980).

This was not the first time that London had tried to restrain Qaboos from this kind of seemingly reckless action. Even though the context was markedly different, during a critical phase of the Dhofar war[1] in 1972, Qaboos had wanted to launch airstrikes and a ground raid on Hauf in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Despite significant British pressure the assault on rebels at Hauf proceeded with no noteworthy blowback and a clear reinforcement of deterrence against the use of PDRY regular troops against Omani territory (Worrall 2020, 160-3). These incidents form an interesting contrast to Oman's current reputation as the 'Switzerland of Arabia', indicating that in the first phase of his reign and in the context of Marxist and Islamist threats, Qaboos' solutions were not always to reach for diplomacy.

Today, Omani foreign policy is frequently characterised as being uniquely peaceful, with Omanis depicted as 'friends to all and enemies to none'. While there is much to agree with in this rosy picture, the reality is clearly much more nuanced. Oman, like every other country, has enduring national interests and the foreign policy which underpins the attainment of those interests is much more sophisticated than simply trying to be friends with everyone, for there are gradations of friendship and multiple pathways to securing core interests. One of these pathways, pursued more vigorously in the past two decades, has been the mediation of disputes and active facilitatory diplomacy to reduce regional tensions.

This article explores the trajectory which has enabled the Omanis to occupy a quiet but important role as mediator in the region.[2] It seeks to make a contribution, not only in terms of its specific focus on mediation but also in placing Omani foreign policy within a wider set of logics. The analysis builds on and broadens Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout's (2012) cultural explanation for Omani foreign policy. They argue that Omani culture has fundamentally shaped the nation's foreign policy. While this argument has clear merits, there is a need to contextualise and nuance this ideational approach. Thus, while accepting the logical inference that Oman's increased regional mediation emerges from Omani culture, the article also utilises the academic literature on small states and draws upon neo-classical realist conceptualisations of how foreign policy is shaped, especially in terms of the role of leadership, to enable a better balance of multiple influences which flow from both national interests and national culture. Ultimately, while the recent increase in Omani activity in regional mediation was not inevitable, there are a number of factors – geostrategic, political, economic *and* cultural – that came together to make it significantly more likely.

[1]The Dhofar War was an insurgency in Oman's southernmost province, which commenced in 1962 and ended in the late 1970s after transmuting from a nationalist insurrection into a communist insurgency supported by the neighbouring PDRY and a host of communist powers including Maoist China, East Germany and the Soviet Union. The counter-insurgency, largely fought by Omani troops but with significant British logistical and technical support, prevailed after a close-fought struggle (see Worrall 2014).

[2]The region here refers to the Gulf itself as Oman's primary security environment but also extends to the wider Middle East. There is evidence of Omani attempts at facilitation and mediation in conflicts outside of the Middle East but these are limited.

Beginning by exploring Omani foreign policy, the article uses this as a prism to understand why the Omani government has (mainly) chosen to become a backchannel – enabling very specific forms of mediation in very specific circumstances. It specifically links the increased prominence of mediation in recent decades back to the core of Omani foreign policy by asking why, when and where the Omanis choose to mediate and how this supports both specific foreign policy outcomes and the more general direction of foreign policy aims. Through the examination of the breadth of known Omani mediation, rather than high-profile cases, such as the well-known Omani facilitation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) "nuclear deal" with Iran (Ignatius 2016), the research builds a comprehensive picture of Omani activity in the broad field of mediation.

The article offers the first systematic study of Omani mediation practices in the region: it draws together all known mediations, develops a typology to better detect patterns, triangulates existing data for greater accuracy and roots Omani mediation within the Sultanate's wider foreign policy discourses and practices. It draws on a range of theoretical perspectives and literatures to facilitate understanding and analysis. In doing so, it provides not only an in-depth study of Omani mediation activities but adds to our wider understanding of Omani foreign policy, while also offering additional context to the disputes that the Omanis have mediated over the decades. Oman has increasingly become a key player in supporting peace and dialogue efforts in the region for both ideational and practical reasons, linked to its wider foreign policy interests. Indeed, its position in this regard was enhanced by its pre-existing foreign policy orientation, its unique networks, changing circumstances and threats in the region, as well as an increased demand from larger powers for mediation and problem-solving services.

The context of mediation as a key pillar of Omani foreign policy

The frequent analogy of Oman being the "Switzerland of the Middle East"[3] (see for example McEniry 2017; Khalid 2018; Sherlock 2019) or the "Switzerland of Arabia" (see for example Engel 2016; Gorvett 2018; Kerr 2020) is a key media trope, it is reflective of modern Oman's relative internal stability and its perceived neutrality in foreign relations. While undoubtedly peaceful internally, and taking an even-handed approach in its foreign policy, the analogy with Switzerland is far from exact and belies a far more complex set of realities.

It is important to recognise that the current peace and stability which Oman enjoys is the exception in its history, rather than the norm. From the Wahhabi invasions of the 19th century (Risso 1986) to the rivalry between the Imamate of the interior and the Sultans of the littoral regions, which resulted in ongoing tensions and a series of conflicts extending well into the middle of the 20th century; coupled with the largely Marxist Dhofar insurgency beginning in the early 1960s and not ending until the late 1970s, it is evident that Oman's recent and longer history has been marked by violence and periods of deep instability (Peterson 2007). Indeed, more recently, the disruption and chaos

[3]Historically, of course, Lebanon was frequently compared to Switzerland in the 1950s and 1960s but given the civil war and Lebanon's subsequent troubles, the title has been reallocated to Oman (Kanso 2005).

brought about by the 'Arab Uprisings', during which underlying societal and political tensions broke out into protests and dissent even in Oman (Worrall 2012; 2015), demonstrate that nothing can be taken for granted.

In the post-2011 era, as its fellow Gulf states became embroiled in ongoing regional rivalries, direct interventions and proxy wars, with civil wars destroying Syria, Libya and Yemen, Oman could once again be seen as an oasis of relative calm within the wider region. As younger Omanis, in particular, nervously observed the regional situation they became more thankful and aware of the peace and stability they enjoyed at home. In conversation, Omanis increasingly referred to the dire situation in Yemen in comparison to the calm in Oman. The difference was largely ascribed to the leadership of Sultan Qaboos with the idea that "without Sultan Qaboos we would be Yemen" becoming widespread (Phillips and Hunt 2017). More reflective Omanis tried to understand more precisely why Oman had not ended up in the same situation given its previous historical track record. This history of instability and conflict is important for understanding modern Omani foreign policy and priorities, its approach of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, attempts to maintain communications with all sides and its desire to try to create a more stable and predictable regional environment which best secures its interests.

One might argue that this balanced approach to foreign policy is not an innovation under Qaboos' leadership but rather a much longer-term foreign policy strategy through which Oman was able to maintain significant autonomy as the European powers entered the Indian Ocean. This older system of agreements and networks, treaties and engagements with Britain, France and the US helped to carve out space for Oman to remain an independent power in the Indian Ocean for much longer than would have been anticipated (Bhacker 1992). This practice, coupled with its history of maritime empire, multi-sited government and diffuse bureaucratisation, undoubtedly creates a different worldview, interests and set of practices. At the same time, as we have seen, it also made the country vulnerable to internal schisms which then weakened it externally.

Given this context, the comparison of Oman with Switzerland is apt in some senses but deeply problematic in others as it obscures some key differences in foreign policy between the two countries. Unlike Switzerland, which refrained from joining the United Nations (UN) until 2002, despite Geneva being the UN's second hub, Oman sought to join both the Arab League and the UN within months of Qaboos' accession to the throne on 23 July 1970. For Oman, participation in the Arab League was crucial to its regional and domestic legitimacy, as an Arab state in the context of the region's passion for Arab Nationalism. Indeed, it is noticeable that the annual addresses to the nation by Sultan Qaboos made frequent mention of Arab causes and the Sultanate's Arab identity (Qaboos 2010; Kéchichian 2008). While joining the UN to some extent mitigated Oman's dependence on Britain and later the US (Colombo 2017, 63), it is also clear that membership in both organisations conferred crucial legitimacy benefits, as well as key protections within international law (Worrall 2014, 129-58). Not only this, but membership of these organisations plugged Oman into crucial diplomatic fora and signalled a clear re-engagement with the world after a long period in which Sultan Said bin Taimour had sought to seclude the Sultanate as much as possible and had requested that Britain handle Oman's foreign relations. In other words, diplomacy was a critical tool from the outset for Qaboos' Oman.

One of the key similarities between Oman and Switzerland is not that they are neutral, indeed Oman does not follow the same kind of neutrality as Switzerland, but rather that both countries take matters of defence extremely seriously. Being small states surrounded by much larger and more aggressive powers has necessitated a focus on trying to make yourself too difficult to easily swallow, what might be called the 'hedgehog strategy'.[4] What is noticeable about Oman is that, for a country which is regularly noted as being one of the most peaceful, both internally and in its foreign policy engagements, the percentage of its GDP that it allocates to defence expenditure is consistently among the very highest in the world. Indeed, in 2020, Oman allocated 12 per cent of GDP to defence (IISS 2021), the highest of all nations, and this was not an anomaly; on average, between 1971 and 2019, Omani defence spending amounted to 12.26 per cent of GDP.[5] Oman not only invests a significant proportion of its resources in defence but is well known not simply for spending on weapons systems but also for the skills, competence and discipline of its armed forces (Bahgat 1999). The focus on training and regular military exercises makes the Omani military a far more formidable and multi-faceted fighting force than its relative size in numbers or actual dollars spent might indicate in comparison with its neighbours.

This position of relative strength is important not only as a deterrent but also as an enabling element. In other words, Oman's particular foreign policy stance, perhaps best described as 'friend to all, enemy to none', is facilitated by a position of strength as much as one of weakness. This slight paradox of having a history of internal conflict and being situated in a geostrategically important position in a turbulent region with much larger and aggressive neighbours, while at the same time seeking to remain engaged with and on good terms with all sides, also diversifies Oman's thinking about security and its roots. The 'hedgehog strategy' therefore buys time and space for other policies to function and create other forms of security.

Spending so much on defence and having such capable armed forces might usually be seen as a threat by neighbouring states, even perhaps leading to the negative spiral of the security dilemma (Booth and Wheeler 2007). In this instance though, Oman's particular form of foreign policy diffuses any thoughts of Muscat representing a military threat, while also making it harder to coerce the Omanis, which creates some latitude to pursue a more independent foreign policy. This independent foreign policy, which balances interests and threats within a framework of engagement, builds up a series of layers of security and creates a virtuous circle whereby the longer Oman can continue with its approach to foreign policy, the more its reputation as an engaged but relatively impartial participant in the region's foreign policy is strengthened. This creates a broad assumption that Oman is a trustworthy actor looking for long-term win-win outcomes rather than rapid gains, and makes it more likely that neighbouring states will tolerate actions which might seem problematic in another context, in part also because the Omanis are recognised as having a different role, one which might also have particular uses during times of crisis or tension. A good example of this is the relative lack of pressure applied to Muscat by Riyadh to take part in *Amaliyyat ʻĀṣifat al-Ḥazm* (Operation Decisive Storm), the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen begun in 2015 (Cafiero and Karasik 2017).

[4]The hedgehog strategy here is not to be confused with Isaiah Berlin's 1953 essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, which itself draws on the ancient Greek parable of the fox knowing many things and the hedgehog knowing one big thing.
[5]Author's calculation based on World Bank Data (2021) figures.

Omani foreign policy is often misconstrued as being one of neutrality but in reality (and unlike Switzerland) Oman is not neutral in the classic sense (Joenniemi 1988; Agius and Devine 2011). Instead, it is enmeshed in a series of alliances and agreements, as well as a web of networks. All of these overlapping foreign policy engagements create and reinforce multiple layers (and types) of security, enabling the Sultanate to assure its security in multiple ways. This ‘security web’ has, at its core, the Sultanate’s relationships with London[6] and Washington, both of which have extensive security agreements with Oman that include basing and access rights but stop short of being full formal alliances. Having clear security arrangements with two global players gives Oman a critical further shield, which additionally ensures weapons and training flows which in turn strengthen Oman’s hedgehog strategy. These include the long-standing integration of British Loan Service Personnel into its armed forces, as well as allowing the use of key sites in Oman for electronic surveillance and the important 1980 facilities access agreement with the US (Kéchichian 1995, 147-9), alongside more recent developments such as the British “joint logistics support base” at Duqm, announced in 2016, which was tripled in size in an agreement in September 2020 (Khan 2016; HMG 2020), all of which have led to a complex enmeshing of Oman into security commitments, both implicit and explicit, that provide considerable benefits.

The fact that these arrangements with the US and Britain fall short of full formalised military alliances is useful for Muscat. It creates just enough uncertainty about the exact nature of the relationship such that Oman retains a degree of freedom of movement in its foreign policy. Through these arrangements, the Sultanate is able to have close and trusting relations with two leading powers, as well as a clear further deterrent against invasion because of the presence, but not permanent basing, of US and British military personnel and assets on its territory.[7] From the perspective of Western great powers, Oman is useful because it is in a key geostrategic position and allows access to its facilities, while at the same time its independent foreign policy also brings benefits to the great powers through Oman’s role as a key interlocutor.

As well as these key relationships, Oman is also a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It is often seen as one of the more reluctant member states having, especially in the 21st century, resisted a number of initiatives to create a tighter form of integration among the GCC states. Withdrawing in 2006 from the planned GCC single currency, declining to contribute its troops from the Peninsula Shield Force to assist Bahrain during the Arab Spring and stating that Oman would not participate in the proposed Gulf Union in 2013 all show Oman’s reluctance to be subsumed into a Saudi-dominated GCC ‘state’. The reluctance to participate in the Gulf Union is also seen by some as an unwillingness to be involved in something with an image of being an anti-Iranian alliance (Crompton 2013). It should perhaps be noted, however, that the very origins of the GCC are widely perceived to be rooted in Omani efforts to create a more united Gulf against the perceived threat from Iran in the immediate aftermath of the 1979

[6]The relationship with the UK is becoming ever wider and more codified, with two key treaties signed recently: the Joint Defence Agreement of 21 February 2019 and the wide-ranging but still secret Comprehensive Agreement of 22 May 2019: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/oman-uk-and-oman-sign-comprehensive-agreement.

[7]The subtlety of this is important, whole units/regiments are not permanently based in the country, instead they might visit on exercises, for example the semi-regular *Saif Sareea* (Swift Sword) large-scale combined arms Anglo-Omani exercises of 1986, 2001 and 2018, and technical and training advisors will be dotted around the country embedded with Omani forces permanently.

revolution (Worrall 2017, 102-3). Additionally, Oman has been, historically speaking, one of the most activist states within the GCC when it comes to working for more shared defensive structures (Guzansky 2014) and, in particular, a much larger Peninsula Shield Force, around 100,000 strong (Mason 2014). This can be seen to complement the relationships with the Western powers and create a further layer of security. It also indicates further that Oman is far from neutral in its foreign policy. Muscat has undoubtedly aligned itself within the Western camp both during and after the Cold War, but this has not been allowed to affect its ability to pursue foreign policy initiatives or to steer a course which creates a different sense of Omani foreign policy. For example, the Sultanate joined the non-aligned movement in 1973, while it was still facing the Marxist insurgency in Dhofar. Likewise, through its membership of both the GCC and the Arab League, Oman is clearly within the broader Arab political space, yet at the same time it seeks to avoid being fully aligned (Al-Khalili 2009). It is thus responsive to regional pressures and realities, for example, at the end of 2016, belatedly joining the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, originally established in December 2015 (*Reuters* 2016).[8] Oman also seeks to navigate a balanced path wherever possible that keeps lines of communication open. Oman, for example, voted to suspend Syria from the Arab League in 2011, while at the same time being the only Gulf state to maintain its Embassy in Damascus throughout the conflict, as well as being, in October 2020, the first Gulf state to reinstate its Ambassador (*Al Jazeera* 2020).

Understanding Omani foreign policy

In his 1998 article "Omanibalancing", Marc O'Reilly took the concept of omnibalancing developed by Steven David (1991) to explain Third World states' alignment decisions in the Cold War and applied it to Oman. The original theory focuses more on threats to a state's leadership than to the state itself and, as such, examines both internal and external threats. David (1991, 235) argues that "the most powerful determinant of Third World alignment behaviour is the rational calculation of Third World leaders as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep them in power". Whether the original theory is useful for explaining Omani approaches to foreign policy is open to question. In adapting this theory to the Omani case though, O'Reilly's focus on the way in which foreign policy and domestic policy become enmeshed because of the nature of regional politics and the danger of outside powers encouraging dissent within neighbouring states is important. This also relates closely to the need to maintain ruling bargains and keep the economy running in order to make the soil less amenable to the sowing of internal dissent. Here we can again see that avoiding external entanglements wherever possible, whilst encouraging trade and investment through regional and extra-regional ties, becomes a rational response. Oman's history of engagement, agreements and networks means that diffusion is a form of protection, but to offset a lack of deep ties that being friends with everyone can engender, the Sultanate has cultivated deeper ties with selected extra-regional powers, especially the US and UK.

[8]It should of course also be noted that the Omanis were the only GCC member state not to join the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen, even after Kuwait and Qatar belatedly joined in September 2015.

Much of the initial literature on small states diplomacy would have us believe that the only options open to small states are to bandwagon or to balance, that is to throw in their lot with a larger power or to seek to switch between the stronger or weaker alliance in order to avoid the risk of war by maintaining the balance of power (Gvalia *et al.* 2013). While the precise processes which cause states to choose between these strategies are debated, these two are broadly seen to be the main choices of foreign policy. Oman, however, is widely believed to navigate a different path (Redman 2018; Baabood 2016). Its ongoing relations with all sides, and especially with states like Iran (Binhuwaidin 2019; Al-Bolushi 2016), are key in enabling it to choose a different kind of path, what might perhaps best be termed an 'Interlocutor State': that is to say a country which maintains relations with all sides, develops a reputation for trustworthiness and uses these assets to become a trusted go-between for other states, thus carving a more secure and independent niche in an otherwise contested system.

Others have taken a different approach. Kristina Kausch (2016), for example, applies the concept of the "swing state", originally developed by Daniel Kliman and Richard Fontaine (2012), to the Middle East. The perception is that dispersal of power in the region allows more latitude for smaller states to take action. These swing states, a bizarrely mixed bag in which she includes Qatar, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Egypt, "can tilt the balance of power in the Middle East, for better or worse". But this conceptualisation of Oman as a swing state seems rather problematic because it implies taking clear sides, which does not fit well with Oman's foreign policy philosophy.

Despite this, Silvia Colombo (2017, 60) argues that the swing state concept

> [I]s useful for conceptualising and explaining Oman's foreign policy track record in the Middle East [...]. [N]ot only has its foreign policy always displayed a certain degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the regional hegemon, namely Saudi Arabia, but it has also undergone a process of accentuation of its flexibility in the last six years, which largely explains Muscat's success in positioning itself as a key regional actor.

This observation poses a problem, however, in that it is not clear why Oman should have undergone a process of accentuation of its flexibility in recent years, and indeed the expression "key regional actor" could be interpreted in many different ways. To what end, and in what ways, is Oman a key regional actor? It certainly does not seem to act as swing state theory would imagine.

Certainly, Oman is able to "balance competing and conflicting interests and allies in a pragmatic way" (Colombo 2017, 60), but Oman's foreign policy seems to be about more than just a management exercise. It increasingly seeks to, carefully and quietly, reduce tensions and attempts to solve problems in order to proactively create a more stable environment. Oman clearly benefits from more stability in an unstable neighbourhood, as well as cementing its position and maintaining greater room for manoeuvre.

The complexities of the regional situation undoubtedly escalated dramatically after 2011, creating greater uncertainties and potential spillovers, as well as an enhanced need for diplomatic solutions and de-escalation mechanisms. Perhaps not coincidentally, particularly over the last decade, Oman appears to have sought to 'lean in' to this process of trying to promote and facilitate dialogue; while this can make it a "key regional actor" it is only on certain issues and in certain ways that the Omanis seem to use mediation

approaches as a particular tool. We should bear in mind that the 'mediation market' is already quite crowded, with Kuwait and Qatar both utilising mediation as a foreign policy tool, and outside actors such as Sweden, Norway and Switzerland itself also seeking a mediatory role in the Middle East, which means that Oman must carve its own niche.

Mediation as tool and strategy

Given Oman's foreign policy more generally, it is easy to see how mediation would be a key tool in supporting a wider foreign policy strategy. Yet in reality, while mediation was present in Qaboos' foreign policy from quite early in his reign, it did not develop as a hallmark until the 21st century, when a gradual but nonetheless rapid expansion of Omani engagement behind the scenes led to more and more public successes and a growing reputation as a mediator.

Mediation can certainly be a purposive foreign policy strategy. The approaches taken by states in attempting to mediate are shaped by both domestic and international influences (Touval 2003). In the Omani context, then, Jones and Ridout (2012) are correct in highlighting the importance of culture in Omani foreign policy. The culture of mediation, derived in part from the Ibadi branch of Islam (Wilkinson 1987),[9] can be seen to permeate Omani society, with traditions such as *shura* (consultation), *ijma'a* (consensus), the *sablah* (council), as well as the everyday practice of politeness and avoidance of interpersonal conflict (Jones and Ridout 2012; Tahmizian Meuse 2018), all of which clearly influence practices within Omani approaches to foreign policy (Leonard 2017). Of course, the paradox here is that, as we have seen, Oman has experienced such turbulence in its internal politics over the course of its history despite the existence of these mechanisms for mediation, dispute settlement and consensus building. It is clearly then not the existence of this cultural dimension alone that makes Oman's regional role as a mediator inevitable but the confluence of a range of enabling factors – regional, domestic and international, expressed through both structural and agencerial dynamics.

The key principles which underpin modern Omani foreign policy and diplomatic practice in general are undoubtedly important in both enabling and encouraging mediation as a foreign policy strategy. The Sultanate's focus on the importance of sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of others is important. Alongside this, elements of an agenda of justice and humanitarianism which broadly align with global human rights norms create an important impression. Thus, for example, Oman's medical treatment of the injured on all sides in fighting in Yemen and its provision of aid improve both its global image while helping to facilitate access and trust in achieving larger foreign policy aims in Yemen (Castelier 2020). This humanitarian agenda, however, is tempered with ongoing pragmatism; for example, the Sultanate signed a letter to the UN's Human Right's Council in support of China's policies in Xinjiang (Hassanein 2019) clearly because of China's significant investment in Oman (Chazzia 2019).

[9]Ibadism is often seen as the third main branch of Islam after Sunnism and Shiism with roots in the Kharijite movement. Oman is the only country with a sizeable population of Ibadis, perhaps 45-50 per cent of the native population, as well as containing the majority of Ibadis worldwide. Other notable populations are in the Nafusa Mountains of Libya, Djerba Island in Tunisia and parts of East Africa that were part of the Omani Empire.

While there are many studies of the circumstances that increase mediation incidence (Hellman 2012), debates about why states mediate, and in what ways, are more limited. It is clear that mediation can be a foreign policy signal and a particular orientation. Oman is a member of the UN "Group of Friends of Mediation" founded in 2010 (UN 2021) and, in 2019, signed a memorandum of understanding on mediation and peacebuilding with Switzerland (FDFA 2021), thus reinforcing this 'mediation identity'. Broadly speaking, Jones and Ridout's (2012) description of the core principles of Omani foreign policy, reinforced by the statements of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs and key officials (Al Bu Said 2003), offer a clear indication of why mediation has become important to Oman's foreign policy.

(1) The development and maintenance of good relations with its neighbours.
(2) The cultivation of mutual economic and security interests.
(3) An internationalist outlook, symbolised through tolerance of other cultures and engagement with international organisations.
(4) A pragmatic approach to bilateral relations that emphasises long-term geostrategic realities rather than temporary or ideological positions.
(5) Recognition that security and stability come through cooperation and peace, rather than conflict.
(6) Refusal to break off relations and to persist in dialogue.
(7) Consensus building between parties, rather than taking sides (adapted from Leonard 2017).

All of these core principles certainly facilitate mediation as part of Omani foreign policy but, as this article demonstrates, it does not guarantee, *per se*, that mediation is more than a tool. As the next section highlights, however, the practice of Omani mediation in the region has grown substantially in recent years. Breaking down the array of Omani engagements in this sphere enables better insights into whether mediation has gone beyond a tool into a core strategy of foreign policy itself.

Typologising Omani mediation

Perhaps one of the problems with both the popular conception and much of the academic focus on mediation is that they tend to conceive of mediation as efforts that are focused on high-level conflict resolution and thus important events like the brokering of the JCPOA with Iran. This kind of high-level, intensive and engaged form of mediation then becomes the only type that really matters. As we will see below, there is far more to it than that. It is important to go beyond this problematic focus because it distracts attention from ongoing processes and micro-dynamics which both build into larger processes and create better environments more broadly. As Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2020) observes:

> Oman is often, but wrongly, described as a "mediator", especially in international media accounts of the efforts Omani officials have made to encourage dialogue between regional adversaries. In fact, Oman does not engage in mediation (as, for example, Kuwait and Qatar have done) that involves direct participation in negotiations between disputant parties.

There is a debate emerging around whether Oman is a mediator or a facilitator, yet the language of mediation or facilitation is actually more of a gateway into a deeper discussion and a need to classify and map Oman's efforts in this field more broadly.[10] This is needed both to see the whole picture of activity and to understand how mediation fits into the country's broader foreign policy.

Omani mediation is clearly focused very much on the Middle East, and its immediate neighbourhood in particular, although some have referred to mediation work further afield (Valeri 2014). There also appears to be a real increase in the ambition of Omani mediation over time. One of the hallmarks of Omani approaches is their pragmatism; the country clearly engages where it thinks its efforts are most likely to bear fruit and consistently does so on similar issues, in similar places. There is thus a degree of patterning in the activity. The development of a typology based on a thorough examination of all known instances of Omani mediation allows for the collection of the array of instances of mediation in one place. This collection and arrangement of data enables us to see more closely their development over time and the kinds of patterns at play. Table 1 below represents a typology of Omani mediation efforts.

Table 1. Omani mediation types

Number	Type	Description
1.	*Couriering*	The delivery of letters or verbal communications between countries that have no diplomatic relations or communications. This can facilitate the start of talks or be used to send explicit warnings about red lines. Since this is often covert and thus invisible, and tables A1 and A2 do not have the space to capture the scale of these interactions, this type is not collected therein but is clearly a common reality.
2.	*Symbolic Engagement*	More visible Omani attempts to be seen to be promoting regional peace, dialogue and problem solving. Used to send public messages about Omani abilities and priorities or by conflict parties to convey intent to de-escalate to the wider world.
3.	*Backchannel*	More intensive ongoing efforts to facilitate distanced dialogue, often in the context of Omani desire to enable wider discussions rather than on a single specific issue.
4.	*Hosting*	Using the Sultanate as a neutral venue to host formal and informal discussions. Reports can suggest that, in this type, the Omani role is scene setting rather than direct engagement.
5.	*Facilitation*	Facilitation goes beyond mere hosting and involves more active engagement in enabling discussion but stops short of more stylised forms of 'mediation'.
6. 6a.	*Problem Solving* *Humanitarian* *Prisoner Release*	This tends to be focused on solving problems for interlocutors often linked to defusing crisis situations and enabling both sides to de-escalate from incidents that have unwanted potential to spiral.
7.	*Confidence Building*	Similar to problem solving, this form of Omani engagement is however more about removing irritants or obstacles which can obstruct parties' ability to engage with each other in more substantive negotiations.
8.	*Mediatory Efforts*	In this rarer form of engagement, the Omanis are more involved in framing agendas, suggesting ways forward and building dialogue. These can be standalone efforts or those designed to reinforce other international efforts.

[10]The language used by Omani diplomats shifts subtly and includes direct use of the term mediation. The long-term (now former) Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi has however downplayed Oman's role as a mediator in the past and specifically on Iran-Saudi talks said: "What we choose for ourselves is the role of facilitator" (Castelier and Müller 2019).

The typology is derived deductively and comparatively from both the process of the compilation of the data collected in the Online Appendix and consideration of the wider literature on conflict resolution, mediation and negotiation, especially in an Arab context (Yassine-Hamdan and Pearson 2014; Salem 1997).

Table A1 in the Online Appendix provides data, thoroughly triangulated from multiple sources and sorted chronologically, on Oman's mediations over roughly the past forty years.[11] It also includes a separate section on probable Omani mediations where data are incomplete or the precise nature of the mediation is unknown, purely for reference. Table A2 in the Online Appendix presents the same data but sorted by the type of mediation, as per the typology presented in Table 1 in order to better identify patterns through clustering. The numbers on the left in the tables correlate to the main forms of mediation practiced by Oman. In some rare instances in Tables A1 and A2 the entry has two numbers, indicating the potential for an overlap (or combination) in the type of mediation practiced.

The data collected show that Oman clearly focuses more on those instances which are closer to its borders and to its core foreign policy relationships. This strongly suggests the strength of its wider networks with its neighbours and the ways in which its foreign policy relationships with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen in particular are crucial in enabling mediation to take place, which, in turn, strengthens those relations. There is also a clear pattern of helping core partners such as the US and UK to deal with problems in the region. Additionally, there is a marked focus on type 6, problem solving, which appears to have become a particular Omani niche. The breadth of Omani mediations, though, is considerable and growing, clearly becoming more ambitious over the past decade but also continuing with more low-key engagements as the basis for ongoing relationships and channels of communication. The pattern above suggests that mediation is more regularised and enmeshed as a practice within Omani foreign policy today and has a strong foundation for further success and a greater likelihood of turning into fuller forms of mediation, as time passes. As we can also see from the data, Sultan Haitham is continuing Sultan Qaboos' commitment to mediation, which is unsurprising – especially given that from 1986-1994 he was Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then Secretary-General of the Ministry from 1994-2002. This focus on mediation and its gradually increasing ambition could, however, bring risks. As the Sultanate's initial lack of success in attempts to encourage dialogue on the Qatar crisis shows, the sides have to be ready to talk and being too proactive can bring unwelcome hostility upon Muscat (Al-Hubail 2020). As a recent crackdown on the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood's presence in Oman also demonstrates, Oman needs to maintain the confidence of all sides in order to be able to mediate (Baidhani 2020). These events show an awareness of the sensitivities of the Saudis and Emiratis on these issues and are clearly an attempt to redress the balance which had perhaps tilted a little too far in favour of Yemeni actors' use of Muscat as a safe haven.

[11]Data was collected from a range of primary and secondary sources including archival materials, news reports and think tank pieces. This was supplemented with conversations in Muscat and London over the past decade. Instances of mediation had to be substantiated by a minimum of five independent sources of different types (with checks on references/links for secondary sources) in order to be included in Tables A1 and A2.

Conclusion

Oman's investment in mediation is now bearing fruit, the Sultanate's ability to facilitate the process that eventually led to the JCPOA further enhanced a reputation which has been slowly built over the past few decades. Mediation is now a key element that both emerges from and reinforces the country's foreign policy. As Oman's reputation as a mediator grows, it is likely that other states will seek Muscat's services, either in trying to facilitate an end to tricky situations, defusing crises or brokering more substantial accords around key geostrategic issues. Indeed, there are clear signs that other nations are beginning to build Oman's mediatory efforts into their own foreign policy in the region. Britain, for example, has been keen to support Oman in its mediation efforts in Yemen in the context of its wider relationship with the Sultanate (Campbell-James 2020).

Despite the current rosy position as an increasingly indispensable foreign policy actor in the region, behind the scenes, Oman's foreign policy independence is never absolute. With significant economic pressures due to low oil prices over the past half a decade, high costs of investment in economic diversification to deliver its Vision 2040 strategy, not to mention the damage wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, economic imperatives might mean that Muscat's freedom of manoeuvre is more constrained. As neighbours seek to draw Oman closer to them, investments might increasingly come with strings attached. Here Oman's diffuse foreign policy networks can offset this risk by drawing foreign direct investment from diverse sources such as Iran, Qatar and the UAE, as well as from China, India and the UK. In this sense as well, the mediator role could be a counterbalance to some of these pressures, enabling the Sultanate to maintain its independent foreign policy – not only because it benefits Oman but also because it increasingly benefits other states too.

The fact that Oman under Sultan Haitham has chosen not to join the rush towards the recognition of Israel as part of the Abraham Accords process (Coates Ulrichsen and Cafiero 2020) demonstrates an ongoing caution and desire not to be seen as taking sides in what was clearly a tacit anti-Tehran alliance (Jones and Guzansky 2017) that was brought into the open. This is a good sign that, while the region has lost two key mediators with the deaths of Sultan Qaboos and the Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah (Bianco 2020), clearly Oman's foreign policy approach and its role as a mediator is unlikely to change. Indeed, with the transition from Qaboos to Haitham, Oman appears to be in a good position to continue its role. Haitham can try new things but also has the benefits of age, deep experience in foreign policy and a well-oiled diplomatic machine (although, importantly, it should be noted that much of Oman's mediatory efforts emerge from the Royal Office rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself). Oman's seemingly enigmatic foreign policy helps both to reinforce the country's strengths and encourages wider stability. Its diffuse sources, flexibility, pragmatism and cultural roots represent an important legacy. Mediation has undoubtedly become a key tool of the Sultanate's foreign policy, one which emerges from, and reinforces, wider Omani strategy, which in turn reflects the Sultanate's reality – thus shifting the Sultanate towards the status of 'Interlocutor State'. For the moment, though, mediation remains a tool of Omani foreign policy rather than a strategy in its own right. Pragmatism suggests that its future development can come with both risk and reward, thus necessitating caution

in its use and the continuance of the careful foreign policy approach which enabled the increased use of mediation as a successful tool in the first place.

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