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EDUCATION AND CONTINUITY IN OMANI FOREIGN POLICY:
WHY THE NEXT GENERATION MATTERS

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Introduction

Much of the scholarship written on the Sultanate of Oman revolves around its unique foreign policy, which is inextricably linked to its ruler of forty years, Sultan Qaboos ibn Sa'id. At the same time, not much has been said about the future trajectory of Omani foreign policy. This absence of speculation is attributable to the direct connection between Oman's policies and its leader, concomitant with the uncertain nature of succession in the Sultanate.¹ That said, Omani youths represent an alternative demographic worthy of study, given their role as executors of future foreign policy and as a constituency with great potential to influence government decisions.

It is well-known that Omanis generally hold the Sultan in high esteem. However, approval of a leader and approval of that leader's policies are separate matters. The extent to which the youth population has internalized and approved of Sultan Qaboos's strategic vision is therefore indispensable when forecasting the future of Omani foreign policy. This research shows that Omanis graduate from secondary school with a collective sense of Oman's role in the world and an appreciation for the principles that underlie its current foreign policy. In accordance with these findings, the next generation of Omanis would be expected to respond negatively if the next leader of Oman drastically shifted the Sultanate's foreign policy. To fully appreciate the significance of these findings, this paper will first explain why the next generation has the potential to influence the country's foreign policy. This explanation is followed by a brief review of what exactly Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy principles are and a short overview of curriculum in

¹ The Sultan has no children and because of this he delegated the task of choosing a successor to a council of royal family members. Several envelopes are also hidden around the country, each containing the name of his choice for successor. These envelopes are to be opened by a military council only if the royal family cannot reach a decision (O'Reilly 83).

Oman's educational system. Also addressed is the methodology used in this research and original findings acquired through extensive interviews. Counterarguments are considered and a conclusion is offered as well.

The Role of Omani Youth

This paper contends that the degree to which Omani youths internalize and agree with Omani foreign policy will be a decisive factor in its continuity beyond Qaboos. Indeed, Sultan Qaboos himself has identified the youth as such. Most of His Majesty's speeches include an international dimension. In 1996, Sultan Qaboos spoke during National Day celebrations in the city of Sur—a port “renowned for its glorious seafaring traditions in which all sons of Oman take pride.” The Sultan emphasized the key principles of his foreign policy, these being: positive relations, commercial enterprise, tolerance, and an historic willingness to reach out to foreign populations. In addition to principles outlined in his speech, the next generation is addressed specifically. The youth are reminded that progress hinges on whether or not they adhere to the logic that served previous generations:

“As we celebrate here the twenty-sixth Anniversary of our glorious National Day, in an atmosphere redolent of our ancient maritime past, we express our great pride in Oman's seafaring history, which was written by those great ships that traversed the broad oceans carrying the pride and power of our country and its desire to foster friendly relations with all nations. We wish to remind the new generation of the high purpose of their forefathers who braved the storms of the violent seas in order to provide us with a wholesome standard of living.”

However, let us not take Qaboos's word on the importance of the youth. In more concrete terms, the youth's appreciation for Qaboos' doctrine matters for two reasons: first, some members of the Omani youth will become future employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the executors of Oman's foreign policy; and second, this same generation will influence policy directly or indirectly—either through the ballot box if Oman becomes semi-democratic, or indirectly by maintaining a level of consensus that

future leaders cannot ignore. One may ask how a population can influence an absolute ruler. Admittedly, the Omani people currently have no say in the conduct of Omani foreign policy since the Sultanate has no influential democratic institutions. But there is no guarantee, however, that the system will remain stagnant. A democratic transition is possible, and in private conversation many Omanis express real expectations of such a transition.

Despite uncertainty about a future system of governance, Omani youth have great potential to influence future policy. This potential is evidenced by the recent success of Omani protesters in achieving their political demands in recent youth protests; the likelihood of such potential being exercised is further exacerbated by the youth's expectations of more influence in a post-Qaboos government and Oman's youth bulge. Although foreign policy is generally not a topic of vital interest in the Sultanate, Omanis do talk about issues of regional interest, and certainly talk about these topics with a greater degree of openness than they do domestic politics.² Indeed, according to one student, the youth in Oman are aware of international events, actively discuss these issues, and are influenced by them (Halal).

The fact that the Omani youth are already making their voices heard and grievances felt is therefore significant. The idea that these voices could one day be raised in protest of strategies related to foreign affairs is not far-fetched. The protests that have taken place in Oman, following the pro-democracy revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, have demanded change from the government such as more job opportunities, an end to corruption, more political freedoms, and the appointment of ministers from the elected Majlis As-Shura (Pattarini; Fuller). Following these protests the Sultan swiftly moved to

² This phenomenon was confirmed in several different interviews with Omanis and non-Omanis alike.

address demands. These moves have not quelled unrest entirely and may create subsequent demands for change since the government proved so responsive to the needs of citizens. Although the protests to date have all demanded change on the domestic front, strong reactions to a change in foreign policy would not be surprising given the interest expressed by many Omanis in regional events. The youth's marked approval of current foreign policies, as detailed below, also increases the likelihood that a dramatic shift in the Sultanate's approach would draw widespread criticism.

Youth empowerment may also be boosted due to changes brought by succession. While Omanis generally admire Sultan Qaboos, their expectation is that whoever leads the country next must accept more input from the Omani people, regardless of what political system is in place (5 male graduates). The students interviewed for this paper all spoke of the future leader of Oman needing to deliver as much or more to the Omani people than did Sultan Qaboos (Faisal; Kawthar). They also expressed the opinion that a future leader will need to accelerate democracy (Khaled). There is little reason to doubt that these expectations could lead to criticism of future policies that do not reflect Qaboos's vision of foreign policy, considering the willingness of citizens to discuss such issues among themselves. The newly empowered youth will not hesitate to make their voices heard. And thus, the next generation will likely find themselves with great potential to influence the direction of future foreign policy in Oman, whether or not a transition to democracy occurs.

Magnifying the potential for influence as described above is the sheer size of the youth population. Oman finds itself in a similar situation to many countries in the Middle East and North Africa with respect to this demographic youth bulge. In Oman, half of the

population is under the age of 24 and 30 percent are under 14 years old (Central Intelligence Agency). Past academic works have argued that there is a correlation between youth bulges and a propensity for civil conflict and severe economic development issues (Beehner; Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi). The large proportion of young people in a society creates enormous pressures on the government to provide services and opportunities for this portion of society. In addition, while the demographic shift is tied in some cases to civil conflict, the wider problems of providing sufficient economic opportunities can translate into a large pool of citizens expressing their dissatisfaction with the political status quo. In Oman, where the Sultan has emphasized “Omanization” and tried to diversify an oil-dependent economy, economic issues can become internationalized and affect the interests of the common Omani.³

The size of the younger generation in Oman, along with their heightened expectations for political influence and newfound voice, ensure they will play a critical role moving forward. Given this potential for influence, whether or not the guiding principles of His Majesty’s foreign policy have been “sold” to the next generation is of critical importance. The following section explores the contours of Omani foreign policy as well as specific episodes that illustrate its principles.

Omani Foreign Policy and the Vision of Sultan Qaboos

Oman’s foreign policy shifted drastically upon Sultan Qaboos’s ascent to power in 1970. Under his father, Sultan Sa’id bin Taymur, Oman had suffered from a long period of international isolation. Only fifteen months after Qaboos took power, however, the Sultanate of Oman was admitted to both the League of Arab States and the United

³ “Omanization” refers to the deliberate employment of native Omani workers as compared to neighboring Gulf states which rely heavily on foreign labor.

Nations. Qaboos's reign is best understood as a return to a traditionally outward-looking Omani foreign policy to which his father's approach had been an exception, and a uniquely defined foreign policy that balanced strategic principles with tradition (Kechichian). In his seminal work on Oman's foreign policy, Joseph A. Kechichian relates Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy vision: "From his early formulations in 1970, Sultan Qaboos stated that he would follow specific foreign policy principles, which included nonintervention in the affairs of other countries, respect for international law, strengthening relations with other Arab countries, and following a nonaligned policy" (9).

As the Sultan also acts as the Foreign Affairs Minister and has the final say on foreign policy, the principles listed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its website can be considered an accurate description of His Majesty's vision. These principles include: "the development and maintenance of good relations with all Oman's neighbors; an outward looking and internationalist outlook, as befits Oman's geographic location and longstanding maritime traditions; a pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, emphasizing underlying geostrategic realities rather than temporary ideological positions; and the search for security and stability through cooperation and peace rather than conflict" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Over the last forty years, Sultan Qaboos has remained true to this foreign policy vision and the supporting principles he originally presented in 1970.

Bearing in mind Qaboos's consistency, it is no surprise that various academics' descriptions of his foreign policy coincide neatly with both his own description and the analysis of those who have worked with Oman in a foreign policy capacity first-hand. According to Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, Oman's foreign policy is characterized by "independence, pragmatism, and moderation" (100). J.E. Peterson describes the essence

of Oman's foreign policy as "moderation, balance between opposing viewpoints, and a rejection of breaking ties to anyone" (132), while Marc J. O'Reilly believes "Omani pragmatism should be viewed as sensible realpolitik" (74). For Gregory Gause, Oman's is the purest realist policy one can find. And finally, Michael Slackman, a Middle East correspondent for the *New York Times*, describes Omani foreign policy as "insistently pragmatic" as well. The application of this vision is particularly evident in several areas, especially Oman's approach over time to the Arab-Israeli conflict and Persian Gulf security issues.

Sultan Qaboos's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict is perhaps the best example of Oman's non-aligned policy and internationalist outlook, as well as its independence and moderate stance in foreign affairs. Despite pressure from its Arab neighbors, Oman has consistently maintained an independent approach towards Israeli issues. For example, after the Camp David Accords were signed in 1978, followed by the Egypt-Israel Peace treaty in 1979, Oman refused to break diplomatic relations with Cairo despite pressure to do so (Lefebvre). According to former U.S. Ambassador to Oman, George Cranwell Montgomery, when other Arab countries were seeking to form a rejectionist conference protesting Cairo's actions, Sultan Qaboos's response to an invitation was that Oman was not "into" rejection. Oman's independent streak in this case was not limited to its maintenance of ties with Cairo—it also included reaching out to Israel. After the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords, Oman began exploring the establishment of economic and even limited political relations with Israel. Oman remained supportive of the peace process after the second intifada; the government continued to meet with Israelis in an official capacity through 2008, at which time the

Omani Minister responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah informed Israel that the Israeli trade office located in Oman would be closed until an agreement to create a Palestinian state was reached. Even then, the fact that Oman informed Israel of this decision in a direct meeting was interpreted as a respectful gesture not characterized by the usual emotions that divide Arabs and Israelis (Lefebvre). Uzi Rabi cites this “frank, unapologetic stance of accepting Israel as a permanent state in the Middle East” and the official Omani line that all the states of the region would benefit if only they could all work together as one of the factors that made Oman’s policy so unique (543). Thus, in the case of Israel, Oman stood firm in its adherence to Sultan Qaboos’s foreign policy vision of non-alignment despite Gulf and Arab critics of Omani policies.

The pragmatism and outward looking posture of Oman’s foreign policy has been further demonstrated through its approach to security issues in the Persian Gulf. One of the key examples is Oman’s maintenance of its relationship with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Ambassador Montgomery describes this decision as a pragmatic defensive move, and recalls being told that the Omanis simply could not afford *not* to pursue this course of action. Given Oman’s status as a small country caught between two warring powers, this was indeed a pragmatic move. During this period, Oman opposed the 1987 decision to re-flag Kuwaiti oil tankers, fearing this could lead to war. However, the Omanis ended up playing a go-between role in which they provided logistical support for U.S. navy escorts, but also helped repatriate Iranians captured in clashes with the U.S. Navy (Lefebvre). Omani pragmatism and the emphasis it places on maintenance of strong international relations allows the Sultanate to play a similar role between the U.S. and Iran today, both in terms of Iran’s nuclear program and ad hoc instances such as negotiating the release of

U.S. hiker Sarah Shourd. Similarly, Amer Al Hajri, a Professor at Arab Open University in Oman believes that Sultan Qaboos's refusal to take a definitive stand against Iran's nuclear program (despite pressure from suspicious neighbors) is a boon in today's volatile Gulf. This stance has allowed the Sultanate to preserve peace while other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries send troops to Bahrain to deal with the uprisings that many fear are being encouraged by Shi'ite Iran.

There are countless further examples of Oman's pragmatism and outward looking approach in terms of regional security, ranging from key agreements like the access agreement first signed with the U.S. in 1980, which continues to this day, to smaller decisions, such as the choice to continue programs on tourism and investment with the United Arab Emirates, even after border clashes between the two countries in 2000 (Al Sayegh). While the latter demonstrates both an understanding of the necessity of maintaining good relations with neighbors and the desire to gain stability through cooperation and conflict, the former concedes the importance of underlying geostrategic realities over temporary ideological positions.

Oman has exhibited similar behavior in terms of foreign policy worldwide—from normalizing relations with the Soviet Union after just having signed a defense agreement with the U.S. during the Cold War, to supporting development projects in Zanzibar, to developing relations with India, China, Europe, and even South America (Peterson; Kechichian correspondence). Despite a carefully crafted foreign policy that enables such a wide spectrum of relationships—or maybe because of this well-crafted policy—Oman “stays out of the newspapers” (Gause). And yet over the last forty years, from Oman's role in the Tanker War to its hand in negotiating the release of Sarah Shourd, Sultan

Qaboos has demonstrated that a peaceful country dedicated to “positive dialogue, respect, understanding, and cooperation” can enjoy great status by befriending all parties (Badr, “Remarks”). Given Oman’s positive role in the region and beyond, one might ask how the Omani education system teaches its own students about Omani foreign policy.

Education and Curriculum in Oman

Sultan Qaboos made significant and immediate efforts in implementing universal education in Oman. The anecdote is widely told in the Sultanate that before His Majesty came to power, there were only three schools in the entire country. When Sultan Qaboos acceded the throne, he was so intent on providing universal education that students from rural areas were flown to school by helicopter until adequate roads were built. Thus, as the Omani Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi noted, speedy development of a basic educational system took priority at the expense of quality. The goal was simply to get people to “read and write” (Badr, “Interview”). Nonetheless, today’s education system in Oman is unrecognizable when compared to its humble beginnings.

In 1998-1999, schools began making a gradual transition to the Basic Education System. The structure and curriculum is thus pertinent for the analysis at hand, since all interviewees graduated afterwards. The Basic Education System is a ten-year program divided into two stages of four and six years each. This is followed by a two-year Post-Basic Education system, which allows students to choose an arts or science track (Ministry of Information). Those students who choose art are able to study literature, history and language; science track students are required to study math and a variety of

sciences. All students are exposed to basic history even if their specializations differ later in school.

Higher education in Oman has also expanded considerably under Sultan Qaboos. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, one of the key accomplishments of this expansion was the establishment of Oman's first public university, Sultan Qaboos University, in 1986. In addition, the number of private colleges and universities in Oman has dramatically increased and now stands at twenty-six. Sultan Qaboos University encompasses nine colleges today: Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education, Science, Arts, Commerce and Economics, Law, and Nursing (Ministry of Education).

Although an Arts College exists at SQU as well as at other colleges or universities in Oman, political science and international relations courses are not offered at any level. While "national variation in how scholars teach international relations, think about the discipline, view their role in the policy process, and approach critical contemporary foreign policy debates" has been identified by scholars, the complete absence of instruction is interesting in light of the system's relative completeness (Jordan). Indeed, Sayyid Badr expressed an interest in creating an international relations or political science curriculum at Omani universities. He noted that His Majesty has developed a unique doctrine and that in Sayyid Badr's opinion, this should be taught to Omanis; a university degree or curriculum based on this would afford an opportunity to nurture students interested in these topics, while teaching them with an Omani focus. According to Sayyid Badr, while efforts were made to establish such a program, its development was halted by lack of financial resources. Until such a program is created, university students may be exposed to these disciplines while studying abroad, an opportunity of

which many top Omani students avail themselves, and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Institute (both to be discussed below). Today's Basic Education System and (and its predecessor, the General Education System) teach a curriculum that relays important aspects of Omani culture and history, which subsequently inform students of the principles that have guided His Majesty's foreign policy, albeit indirectly.

The U.S. Assistant Public Affairs Officer in Oman, Daniel Pattarini, noted that there is a "glaring hole" in Omani education, in that degrees in political science are not offered. At the same time, his opinion is that when students learn about Oman's history and certain characteristics of the Ibadhi sect Islam during their early education (such as the emphasis it places on peaceful dialogue, non-interference, and tolerance), students are in fact learning the principles that underpin Oman's foreign policy under Sultan Qaboos. Former students' interpretations of current events, to be discussed later, do indeed demonstrate an ability to apply such principles to analysis of foreign policy decisions. Pattarini further argued that since so much has changed in Oman over the last forty years, recent history is a blur for many. Nevertheless, what students are learning about in history class, such as Oman's tradition of tolerance rooted in Ibadhism, is a "reflection of what's really important" for Omanis (Pattarini).

This analysis coincides with what recent Omani graduates recollect about their own educational experience, and the observation of several former students who insisted that Omanis come out of school with a collective sense of Oman's historical role in the world. One recent Omani university graduate who pursued the science track recalled learning basic geography and history during early education, and specifically recalls classes about Omani history that focused on matters like Oman's Imams and their

actions, and the founding of the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty in 1749 (Faisal). Lessons on Oman's Imams fits in with Pattarini's analysis of learning about Ibadhism. Curriculum based on the founding of the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty focuses on a period in which Oman was a leading maritime power. The latter is a tradition deemed so important to Omani foreign policy that it is mentioned in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official statement on what forms the basis of the Sultanate's foreign policy. Another recent university graduate pursued the arts track in secondary school, and thus studied world history further in grade ten, and Islamic history and Omani history during the time of the Ottomans in grade eleven (Kawthar). A third graduate also recalled learning about Omani trade and its subsequent influence in East Africa and Southeast Asia. He also recalled being taught that Omanis were the first Muslims to bring Islam to various regions, and that Oman sent the first Arab ambassador to the U.S in 1840 (Halal). These examples confirm that Omanis are learning about the country's historically internationalist outlook, and the importance Oman places on developing strong international ties across the globe.

The Ministry of Education lists several relevant principles under the goals of its education system. These include: "confirming a sense of belonging to Gulf society, the Arab nation, and the Muslim world; affirming faith principles of Islam and the consolidation of faith and spiritual values among learners [although not stated, this probably refers to values of Ibadhi Islam]; attaining adequate competence of a language of international communication; and gaining an awareness of global trends" (Ministry of Education). Thus, it is clear that the values and principles that guide Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy are transmitted in early education in the form of historical instruction: Omanis learn about their identity and its historic inclination towards internationalism,

whether it be as imperialists, merchants, or purveyors of Islam. Interviewees provided further insight but before more findings are addressed, research methodology deserves close attention.

Methodology

Qualitative interviews were used to understand the degree to which Omanis have internalized and approve of Sultan Qaboos' strategic vision. This method allowed researchers to discuss issues more thoroughly through conversation. It also gave interviewees the chance to explain their logic without the formalities of surveys. Prior to the first set of student interviews on March 11, 2011, non-Omanis advised the researchers that honest answers would hinge on whether or not the group established a "connection" with interviewees (A. Brown; L. Brown). In order to guarantee more personal exchanges and honest responses, the research group chose qualitative interviews even though quantitative analysis may have yielded more data.

Thirty-one qualitative interviews were conducted to better understand Omani foreign policy and the experiences of recent graduates from the country's secondary schools. In total: twenty-nine interviews were conducted in person; one extensive interview was completed over the phone; and another was completed via e-mail. Thirty interviews were done in English—one was completed in Arabic. Twenty-four interviews were completed in Oman and seven occurred in the United States prior to the trip.

A wide range of individuals were interviewed for the purposes of this project, including: sixteen native graduates of Omani primary and secondary schools, some of whom were still at university; American officials currently associated with Omani foreign policy; officials representing the Omani foreign policy establishment, including

the current Omani ambassador to the United States, Her Excellency Hunaina al Mughairy; former American ambassadors to Oman, Richard Baltimore and George C. Montgomery; Omani and American academics specializing in the country; a former British Consul to the Sultanate; and others. Interviews lasted from thirty to ninety minutes, with one interview lasting several hours. Officials and academics were most often interviewed alone, while students were interviewed in small groups because of convenience and opportunity.

The interviewing style employed naturally depended on the subject and interviewee(s). American and Omani officials were addressed directly on complicated topics related to education and foreign policy because of their experience. Omani students, however, who represent the critical sample and more than half of all interviews completed, required a very different approach.

To gain the most thoughtful comments and establish a comfortable atmosphere for the sharing of ideas, the research group committed to lengthier discussions that focused on experiences in primary and secondary school. “Discussions” is a conscious distinction from “interview” because these exchanges were often informal. For instance, when speaking with students at Nizwa University, interviews were conducted in a dusty parking lot outside a gymnasium, with one student offering comments from his car window. Other students were interviewed casually in the cafeteria. Omanis also proved curious about their interviewers. This led to more circular but still useful discussions.

Graduates were asked to recall what topics were emphasized and how Oman’s role in the world—historic and current—was explored in the classroom. They were also asked to explain the sources of Oman’s unique foreign policy in their own words. The

research group was especially sensitive to the dangers of this exercise and avoided leading students toward specific conclusions. In order to gauge the level of consent and the likelihood of continuity beyond Qaboos, questions were sequenced in such a way that any mention of succession was delayed until the very end.

The sixteen recent Omani graduates interviewed for this project represented diverse backgrounds and academic interests. Some were educated in Muscat, the most cosmopolitan city in the country; others completed their primary and secondary education in the rural interior. Interviews were conducted in the capital and approximately half were completed at Nizwa University, which is situated in a rural community hours away from Muscat. Unfortunately, it was impossible to fully explore the north-south divide in Omani society because of time and mobility constraints. Interviewees still offered the perspective of rural and urban youths, however, even though they were limited to northern Oman. The graduates also represented a variety of specializations. These included math, science, arts, literature, and language studies. Each student had previously graduated from secondary school in the past ten years. And all students were able to convey, in English, their experience studying general Omani history, which functions as the baseline for understanding Oman's posture as it relates to foreign affairs.

Youth Internalization of Foreign Policy Principles

Because of its staggering size, Oman's youth population will ultimately inform policy decisions directly, if the country becomes democratic or semi-democratic, or indirectly, if popular expectations narrow options for the next sultan. As discussed above, both possible outcomes suggest that the opinions of Omani youth are important even if systemic change does not happen soon. The Omani youth interviewed for this project

expressed appreciation for and approval of the principles of their country's foreign policy, which they explained as a natural outgrowth of Oman's uniquely tolerant and conflict-averse culture. Even when those interviewed were unaware of specific details, Omanis demonstrated an appreciation of their country's international posture. One gentleman spontaneously explained Oman's unique outlook and positive international approach to the research group—although he was unaware of the subject and goal of this project (Ahmed). Students were also asked whether or not they expected Oman's foreign policy to endure, be it beyond the Sultan or beyond the Sultan's successor. Nearly all agreed that the country's approach was not dependent on the Sultan; indeed, common answers suggested Oman's orientation was linked to its overall success and the culture that produced it. Genuine pride was expressed when young Omanis were asked about how their country has conducted itself in the international arena (5 female Nizwa University Students; 3 male Nizwa University Students; 5 male graduates).

The students who were interviewed often expressed their appreciation for and pride in Oman's foreign policy principles by explaining their interpretation of current events. Several students noted their approval of Oman's peaceful and non-confrontational relationship with Iran. One student specifically stated, "I was so proud of my country," when Oman maintained that a peaceful approach toward Iran should be pursued, although three other GCC countries were demanding that the U.S. attack the Islamic Republic (Kawthar; Faisal; Khaled). Clearly, this demonstrates an internalization of and appreciation for the Sultanate's stated policy to "search for security and stability through cooperation and peace rather than conflict." While some students who were interviewed were naturally less interested in politics or less aware of current events than others, even

these students replied to questions about foreign policy with answers like, “Being friendly with everyone is good,” which confirms the Sultan’s vision enjoys traction even if the terms are simpler (5 female Nizwa University students).

Students also voiced their approval for specific policies. One student related that as an Omani, he does not feel threatened by Iran, but he would feel threatened by the U.S. if it were not for the Sultan’s policies (Halal). This statement and others like it clearly express approval of Oman’s “pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, emphasizing underlying geostrategic realities rather than temporary ideological positions.” Several students also endorsed the government’s refusal to take aid from the UAE following a massively destructive 2007 cyclone. According to the students, the government said no because this aid “seemed like charity,” and Omanis “like to show we’re independent” (Faisal; Kawthar; 3 male Nizwa University students; 5 female Nizwa University students). This too demonstrates a high degree of internalization of another key cornerstone of Oman’s foreign policy: independence.

Most remarkable were the parallels in vocabulary used by students and that on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ English-language website. Some of the young interviewees even used the English word “non-intervention” to describe Omani foreign policy and subsequently argued for its merits (Faisal). It should be noted that responses sometimes included language used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but that Omanis interviewed for this project explained it in fuller terms during interviews that often lasted longer than one hour. Indeed, some offered nuanced explanations for policies—arguing, for example, that conflict and ideological battles are not worth the disruption of vital markets upon which Omani progress depends (Halal). If students were merely regurgitating

government statements, then they surely would not have been able to discuss these topics with such depth over the course of lengthy interviews often lasting more than one hour.

Once young Omanis proved they were aware of their country's foreign policy and its underlying logic, they were subsequently asked how they learned about it. Interviews revealed that in addition to formal schooling, informal education at home and Sultan Qaboos's widely disseminated statements all combined to create popular agreement around a specific set of principles. Educational experiences were particularly instructive. As discussed above: graduates of secondary schools all confirmed that the system stresses Oman's great empire, maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, and Islamic history—all of which combine to link Oman's identity and fortune with internationalism.

Beyond school, the home and royal palace function as the two most important sources of informal education in Oman. In the words of one twenty-two year old student at Nizwa University: "You know we don't just learn about our country in school. We learn from our families and our fathers" (Khaled). Other students also confirmed the importance of the home as a place of instruction (Halal; 3 male Nizwa University students). When appropriate, students were asked how they would teach their children about Oman's role in the world. Answers were, as expected, couched in religio-cultural terms that reflected the guiding principles of Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy. And, most importantly, interviewees stressed continuity: many agreed they would share their conclusions about Oman's international approach with their children, just as they had learned about it.

The kind of appreciation and pride described here does not in any way suggest that foreign policy is a vital topic for the average Omani. However, according to native and expatriate residents of Oman, regional politics are a frequent topic of conversation. If this is so, then the country's policies will have to be explained to future generations precisely because it is unique when compared to the activities of its neighbors. It should also be noted that discussing foreign affairs is a safer exercise than talking about domestic politics, which some Omanis said was a very sensitive issue given the relatively benign but still authoritarian system that dominates the Sultanate. Considered cumulatively, interviews suggest that Omanis educated within the Sultanate are capable of and willing to pass along their appreciation for Sultan Qaboos's vision.

Outside of the classroom and private residences, Sultan Qaboos plays a key role in transmitting the logic of Omani foreign policy and legitimizing it in cultural terms. Official connections drawn between past and present, glory and worldly exposure, non-intervention and prosperity, all reinforce formal education in state schools and informal education experienced at home. Sultan Qaboos's celebrity also greatly enhances his message. His statements and annual speeches are disseminated, reproduced, and cited relentlessly in the kingdom, be it in newspapers or on television. Qaboos is also a source of wisdom for his people (A. Brown; Harper). They even quote him in casual conversation (Harper). Therefore, his ability to create, contextualize, transmit, and legitimize Omani foreign policy in cultural terms is especially important because of his status, perhaps more so than the conditioning experienced at home and in school.

One could dismiss the Sultan's speeches as propaganda or as an attempt to legitimize policies that had no precedent before 1970. Certain interviews, however,

suggest that the Sultan’s vision is quite durable even though state-controlled media is becoming irrelevant in the Middle East. During the course of interviews, Omanis who expressed an interest in foreign affairs also emphasized the importance of alternatives to state media—including the Internet and satellite television stations (Faisal; Kawthar). In spite of this exposure to foreign views, news, and analysis, they remained enthused with Omani foreign policy. Some said that exposure to new information only deepened their appreciation for their country’s international posture. This would suggest that broad approval of the country’s orientation is due to cultural and logical appeals rather than a closed market of ideas. Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, BBC, and CNN are readily available in the Sultanate and, in spite of this, today’s foreign policy appears incredibly popular.

Making these and other findings more striking is the pervasive assumption that Oman is on course to ultimately become the Persian Gulf’s first true democracy—even if it is decades away from this realization.⁴ Many of the young interviewees openly expressed a desire for this outcome. They also curbed their enthusiasm by showing deference to the Sultan, who they believe is slowly implementing reforms and overhauling institutions that will provide the foundation for a more participatory state. Omani officials only hinted at this eventuality. However, the argument made above—that young Omanis will have influence on policy at home and abroad—underscores the importance of their appreciation and approval of current policies. In keeping with this trend, a select few will one day be tasked with developing and implementing foreign policy themselves at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their ability to do so in the future and remain true to Sultan Qaboos’s strategic vision is detailed in the next section.

⁴ Every Omani interviewee insisted that Sultan Qaboos is gradually introducing democracy to the Sultanate. One student plainly stated that it will happen “when we [Omanis] are ready for it” (Khaled).

Omani Youth and Direct Execution of the Sultanate's Foreign Policy

As discussed earlier, political science and international affairs courses are not offered at any level of the Omani education system. The lack of educational opportunities in these specific fields is not only of interest from an academic perspective—the expected result would also be a dearth of individuals trained in the theory and practice of foreign affairs. Such a deficiency could possibly endanger Oman's unique foreign policy if there were no alternatives for education. Currently, the Sultanate runs an effective Ministry of Foreign Affairs and executes a remarkably active and successful foreign policy in a complicated regional environment, despite this lack of educational opportunities at home. While relevant subjects are not offered at Omani universities, the Sultan has ensured that the necessary human development takes place through alternative means. The provision of scholarships for study abroad and the creation of the Diplomatic Institute, run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ensures that Oman maintains a diplomatic corps capable of carrying out the international vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos not only today, but through succession.

The Omani government uses foreign institutions as an alternative to the Omani system in order to fill critical skills gaps. According to many Omanis interviewed for this project, students who have studied abroad are viewed by their peers as members of a class separate from the rest of Omani students and are seen as particularly intelligent, as well as more confident and open (Faisal; Kawthar). These qualities are seen as extremely desirable by the Omani government, and most high-level government officials were educated abroad (Pattarini). Through various ministries, the Omani government provides partial and full scholarships to fund students to attend foreign universities. According to

the Omani Ministry of Higher Education, the purpose of these scholarships is to fill skills gaps in specialties not currently offered in Omani higher education institutes (Ministry of Education, “Directorate”).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is one government ministry that provides external scholarships and holds students with study abroad experience in high regard. The ministry is staffed with a mix of personnel including those that were educated within Oman and those educated in foreign universities. Within the ministry, the employees who have studied abroad are viewed as highly effective and superior to their domestically educated colleagues (Badr). A senior official in the Ministry explained that this preference was due to superior education found elsewhere and noted that even English degree holders from Sultan Qaboos University, the most elite university in the country, were not adequate English speakers. The apparent lack of individuals trained in certain fields graduating from Omani universities reveals why the Ministry sends students abroad for some skills, including language acquisition, and prefers employees with international academic credentials. The Sultanate’s emphasis on scholarships abroad therefore mitigates apparent deficiencies in the education system and ensures that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can draw talent from a skilled labor pool capable of carrying out Sultan Qaboos’s vision through succession. While not all students who study abroad will end up as employees for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, students report that their study abroad experiences have made them more aware of and appreciative of the uniqueness of Oman’s foreign policy. Such an appreciation will also reinforce His Majesty’s foreign policy over the long-term.

In addition, the Sultanate developed a domestic capability to train an effective diplomatic corps in 1991. The Diplomatic Institute is a division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and serves ministerial employees. According to the Institute, its objective is to provide government employees with the knowledge and skills to effectively deal with all aspects of diplomacy including political, economic, social, and technological issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Diplomatic Institute”). Intensive courses are offered on the foreign policy principles of the Sultanate of Oman, Omani governmental institutions, international politics and general diplomacy. Since 1991, the Sultanate has proven able to develop personnel at home and through study abroad on a contractual basis (i.e. students are offered scholarships so long as they return to work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

The Diplomatic Institute also instills the principles of His Majesty’s policies in these employees. The practice of ensuring that diplomats conducting foreign policy are familiar with the policy principles of the state is not unique and is obviously necessary for the effective execution of policy. However, in Oman these principles were directly formulated by Sultan Qaboos and are being institutionalized in the government bureaucracy by the Diplomatic Institute, creating a generation of diplomats that are trained to operate on these principles. Clearly, while the general education and university system in Oman may lack programs and courses in foreign affairs, the Sultan has created alternative means to build a competent diplomatic workforce and trained a significant portion of the youth population to understand issues of foreign affairs. The skilled labor pool supplied by students studying abroad and the institutionalization of His Majesty’s

foreign policy principles by the Diplomatic Institute ensure that practical execution of these guiding principles will endure after Sultan Qaboos cedes the throne.

Counterarguments and Possible Pitfalls

Original research and attempts to answer a specific and timely question are fraught with difficulties. There will always be counterarguments to the thesis as well as unknowns and potential shortcomings. While this is an inherent issue, these counterarguments and shortcomings should be addressed. The integrity of this project's conclusion—that the next generation Omani youth will uphold the principles of Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy—is greater than the counterarguments and strong enough to overcome any acknowledged but unavoidable shortcomings in this research.

This paper has addressed the issue of the youth's internalization of principles underlying foreign policy and how this will influence future policies of the Sultanate. Natural counterarguments could point to the nature of the political system, the lack of popular concern over foreign policy, or the fact that very few people work in the foreign policy sector—all of which insinuate that the youth views on foreign policy will be insignificant. In terms of the first argument, the more time that passes, the more plausible it appears that Oman will create democratic institutions. As recently as April 18, 2011, the Omani government was actually considering a package of legislative powers previously unimaginable (Kerr). This means that popular opinion—which has been demonstrated to support the continuation of Qaboos's foreign policy—will likely be more influential. If democratic institutions are not created, youth power will be guaranteed by its sheer size; even if it cannot vote, the next generation will not lose its voice.

In regards to the second argument, the absence of any protests related to international affairs to this point does not indicate a lack of interest in foreign policy. Coupled with the research done for this paper, this absence seems to suggest instead that people approve of the government's international conduct as opposed to certain domestic policies. However, based on the tendency of Omanis to discuss regional or foreign affairs more widely than domestic politics, it is likely that if a change in policy provoked dissatisfaction, it would create debate where there previously was none. Given the recent cracks in Oman's relatively silent domestic scene, one cannot assume that foreign affairs would be off limits.

And finally, it cannot be denied that a relatively small number of people are the actual executors of foreign policy. But the argument presented here did not assume the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would employ a greater number of the next generation in the coming years. Instead, what this project wishes to convey is that Oman's youth population largely agrees with their country's outlook and some will be responsible for maintaining it.

Given a finite period in which to formulate and answer a timely question there are inevitable shortcomings. For instance, less than twenty Omani youths were interviewed for this work and the research relied on qualitative interviews rather than statistical analysis and coded data. The brevity of the research trip and accessibility to young people limited the amount of interviewees. In addition, the lack of quantitative data was due to researcher capabilities, the size of groups of accessible interviewees and the preference for open-ended, qualitative interviews. While this approach should be considered

advantageous and the group is confident in their findings, we acknowledge that further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary.

Another possible shortcoming in the research is the issue of honesty. Observers know that Omanis publicly revere the Sultan and will hesitate to say anything negative about him or his policies. Indeed, rumors in Oman of a vast network of undercover government informers dedicated to reporting critics have the potential to influence interviewees' level of comfort in expressing opinions. The issue of interviewee honesty is therefore legitimate. However, in response to this issue the research questions and methodology were constructed in such a way as to mitigate the problem. As described in the methodology section, questions were raised in a way that prompted open-ended and thoughtful answers. Where more direct questions were necessary, such as asking what interview subjects thought about a certain policy or action of the Sultan, they were subsequently asked to explain why they thought this was good policy. Thus, while a subject may have felt pressured to express general agreement with the Sultan's policies, the researchers were able to analyze the subsequent justification. At no time did the group settle for a superficial declaration of approval. As noted above, subjects regularly gave justifications for supporting such policies that were consistent with the guiding principles of His Majesty's foreign policy. One would not expect this if the interviewees were merely expressing reverence for the Sultan out of fear for doing otherwise.

In addition, the consistency of the answers was remarkable. It is highly unlikely that all the subjects interviewed would point to the same factors as inspiring Omani foreign policy. The findings indicate that this was the result of an internalization of these principles rather than that fear or reverence provoked agreement. Genuine pride and

enthusiasm in conversation all confirmed the sincerity of interviewees although this tendency is difficult to convey in a paper geared towards strict analysis. Thus, while the question of honesty cannot be fully dismissed, the research was conducted in a manner that mitigated this issue as much as possible. In sum, this project aimed to address counterarguments from the very beginning in a conscious and effective manner. Having completed this research, the group readily concedes that some shortcomings remain (e.g. sample size and geographic spread), but the final conclusion is sound: Sultan Qaboos's foreign policy will outlast his reign because the next generation is ready and willing to continue it.

Conclusion

Succession will undoubtedly bring dramatic changes to Oman. However, the youth will contribute to the continuation of current trends in Omani foreign policy. This paper does not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of the opinions of youth or of curriculum in all Omani schools; further research is clearly needed on this topic. Nonetheless, this paper demonstrates the importance of Omani youth as a factor that scholars should consider when speculating about the future of Omani foreign policy. More importantly, this paper shows that despite the absence of a structured political science or international relations curriculum in Oman, Omani youth approve of and appreciate Oman's foreign policy. In addition, the Sultanate has utilized alternative means such as study abroad and the Diplomatic Institute to ensure that the next generation is capable of managing foreign affairs. If the youth have anything to say about it—and, as argued here, they will—the next generation's internalization and approval of

the principles that have guided Oman's foreign policy over the last forty years will contribute to a continuation of the Sultan's approach to foreign affairs after succession.

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