



Sultanate of Oman's Foreign Policy: Pragmatic but Ethical

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ABSTRACT

Even though states' sovereignty, security, and national interests are the main political priorities that inform and instigate the state's foreign policy, the factor of the responsibility of political leaders is the main driver of ethical foreign policy. As an effective foreign policy strategy, pragmatism brought security, stability, social cohesion, and growth to Oman. The ethical dimension of foreign policy attempts to reunite and reconcile interests and ideals in politics; however, ethics need a democratic environment to operationalize the issues of consensus and consultation. This paper argues that the Sultanate of Oman has an ethical and pragmatic foreign policy developed and shaped by its leader's idea of and approach to responsibility. This paper asks why Oman pursued such a pragmatic foreign policy with an ethical dimension during the leadership of Sultan Qaboos.

Key Words: Democratic process, Ethical dimension of foreign policy, Foreign policy, Ibadism, Leader's responsibility, Pragmatism, Sultanate of Oman.

Introduction

The relationship between ethics and politics is less contested or contradicted if it happens inside a given political network tied together by common commitments (Chandler & Heins, 2007). The emergence of the notion of an ethical dimension of foreign policy is not new; it has been an issue of contention between realists and liberals in academia. Equally, from Hobbes to Gramsci, the ethical dimension in politics has been recognized and acknowledged through the 'political community' as well as 'hegemony' (Durst, 2005). Even though states' sovereignty, security, and national interests are the main political priorities that inform and instigate the state's foreign policy, the factor of the responsibility of political leaders is the main driver of ethical foreign policy (Chandler, 2003; Nye, 2008; Hill, 2016). Although the Palestinian–Israeli conflict has been the central foreign

policy issue for Middle Eastern countries, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the fact remains that security and natural resources are the main determinants of the GCC's foreign policy orientation (Dorraj, 2017). Foreign policy is simply the externally oriented actions of a state, or what Holsti called the conscious behavior of a nation-state towards her external environment (Holsti, 1977). Whereas foreign policy orientation is the state's "general attitudes and commitments toward the external environment, its fundamental strategy for accomplishing its domestic and external objectives and aspirations and for coping with persisting threats" (Holsti, 1977, p. 109). This paper argues that the Sultanate of Oman has an ethical and pragmatic foreign policy developed and shaped by its leader's idea of and approach to responsibility. This paper asks why Oman pursued such a pragmatic foreign policy with an ethical dimension during the leadership of Sultan Qaboos.

Determinants of Oman's Foreign Policy

The legacy of history and the strategic geopolitical location of Oman has shaped its internal political dynamics and foreign policy (Lefebvre, 2010; Kechichian, 1995; Skeet, 1992). Oman is located in the southeastern region of the Arabian Peninsula, surrounded by the Arabian Gulf, with the Strait of Hormuz to the northeast, and the Gulf of Oman to the south. This position has provided Oman with strategic importance in trade networks and for cultural connections with East Africa and the subcontinent of India through the Indian Ocean. To secure these networks of trades and connections, Oman was and continue involved in open, genial, active, and independent foreign relationships and cultural connections with these communities (Skeet, 1992). Due to this geostrategic location, Oman has been subject to invasion by the Portuguese to secure their maritime routes to India. Oman has a territory outside its de jure border in Musandam Peninsula in the Arabian Gulf, separated from the rest of the country by the United Arab Emirates. However, this strategic location and its importance necessitated and created security and geopolitical concerns for Oman's survival (Rabi, 2005). The reasons for these concerns are the politically volatile situations in the Gulf region as well as its economic importance as a leading region in global energy production (mainly oil and natural gas). Therefore, Oman's strategic location created realistic security threats as well as opportunities for cooperation and growth. To balance these possibly conflicting inter-

ests, Oman pursued and developed an independent, engaged, and pragmatic foreign policy mainly guided by its late leader, Sultan Qaboos (Gardner, 2015). As a small state in the Gulf region, Oman secured its pragmatic foreign policy because “a major extra-regional power could provide the sultanate with guarantees for its future survival, or at least tip the balance in its favor when a crisis erupted” (Rabi, 2005, p. 538). Oman is small state that is trying to cope with its insecurity and modest economic and military capabilities (Katzman, 2019; Kechichian, 2004). Avoiding making enemies in a volatile region and obtaining protection from a superpower patron with the condition of not alienating this patron were the originating factors of Oman’s pragmatic foreign policy (Lefebvre, 2010). Thus, Oman entered into a strong military relationship with the United States when it became the first country in the region to sign the Facilities Access Agreement of 1980 with the United States, and Oman also has impressive engagement with its neighbor Iran (Sherwood, 2017). Oman effectively balanced the challenges of maintaining good relations with two countries that are not always on friendly terms with each other.

Oman’s foreign policy differs remarkably from its neighbors in the Gulf region and the Middle East. Although the Palestinian–Israeli conflict has been one of the determinants of the foreign policies of Middle Eastern countries, Oman has an independent position on this conflict (Katzman, 2019; Dorraj, 2017). As a responsible leader, Sultan Qaboos supported the peace talks of the 1979 Camp David Accords, and pursued an open foreign policy with Israel that sparked controversy and rejections from Arab and Islamic countries. Likewise, Oman is one of the only countries in the region that refused the rejectionist camp against Egypt and maintained its diplomatic and foreign relations with Egypt, joining Sudan, Somalia, and Morocco (Katzman, 2019; Szalai, 2018; Lefebvre, 2010; Rabi, 2005).

One of the other determinants of Oman’s foreign policy is its internal social and political dynamics. Oman has the most ethnically diverse society that constitutes the second-largest population in the Gulf region. Oman is also the only country in the Gulf region to have experienced a civil war, the Dhofar Rebellion between 1962 and 1976 (Neubauer, 2016; Skeet, 1992). Moreover, what could be the most essential way in which Oman is distinct is its historical endurance as both a nation and a state (Jones, 2007). Oman succeeded in crushing the Marxist

rebellion in its western province by obtaining military support from both the British and Iranian governments. However, the internationalization of the security of the Gulf region after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 had a profound influence on shaping Oman's foreign policy of tolerance and non-interference (Kechichian, 1995). Further, Sultan Qaboos's special and distinctive approach to foreign policy has been characterized by its *modus operandi* in decision making and consultation (Neubauer, 2016). This characteristic is recognized as the reason why Qaboos is considered a responsible leader.

Pragmatism at Work: Domestic Affairs

The 'idea of Oman' is the vision that Sultan Qaboos pursued during his state-building project. This vision was intended to make Oman a regional actor rather than a competitor in the Gulf region by following a distinctive policy of being an interlocutor among friends and foes (Funsch, 2015; Kechichian, 1995). Therefore, a major development and transformation that created social cohesion and prolonged stability after the Dhofar revolt was owed exclusively to the individual agency of Sultan Qaboos (Hunt & Phillips, 2017; Funsch, 2015). Primarily, the inclusion of women in public spheres has had positive impacts on Oman's national development, and it has considered a major step in employing pragmatism internally (Katzman, 2019; Skeet, 1992). Women now constitute over 30% of the workforce. However, as a patriarchal society ruled by conservative traditions of Islam, many Omani women are still marginalized, and Omani nationality only can be passed on by the male parent (Katzman, 2019).

Regional Pragmatism

Oman implemented friendly and cooperative relations with its immediate neighbors and other foreign countries to secure economic opportunities and to avoid dependence on the Gulf countries (Sherwood, 2017). Qaboos's stance of the "enemy of my friend may still be my friend" (Lefebvre, 2010, p. 100) is a clear illustration of his regional pragmatism to balance between the country's limited resources and dependency on its neighbors. As with other Gulf region countries, Oman is a rentier country that depends on its income from oil production. Oman's oil reserves are limited compared to other GCC countries, and it ran a budget deficit of \$13 billion in 2016 (Katzman, 2019). For this reason, Oman pursued a pragmatic regional policy by hedging for the future and

establishing stable and strong economic, security, and political relations with Iran. In addition, Oman's extensive mediation in the making of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in July 2015 aided in the creation of a successful agreement between the United States, the European Union, and Iran to minimize regional divisions (Sherwood, 2017). As aforementioned, due to the volatility of the political situation in the Gulf region, Oman's foreign policy is characterized by pragmatic *khususiyya* (particularity), which reflects and explains the country's foreign policy of pragmatism (The Economist, 2015). *Khususiyya* is "often cited by monarchs in the Gulf to justify their ways (like the idea of exceptionalism in America). They use it to mean the unique character of a culture, and also to dismiss demands for political and social reform" (The Economist, 2015).

Global Pragmatism

Oman's foreign policy of pragmatism at the global level has contributed to the country's political stability, security, and enticing foreign investment. To secure its position in the Gulf's long-term security interests, Oman rejected becoming a member of any anti-Iran alliance that sponsored or endorsed by the (GCC) organization, because "Iran is a close neighbor—and a mighty one—neighbors in the past: neighbors in the future," as Qaboos asserted (Funsch, 2015, p. 170). This pragmatic foreign policy with Iran indeed reflects its *realpolitik vis-à-vis* the powerful countries in the region, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, in 1980, Oman signed the Facilities Access Agreement with the United States; at that time, it was the first and only such agreement between an Arab state and the United States (Sherwood, 2017). Oman, remarkably, has managed to sustain decent and cordial relations with both the United States and Iran, even now, when the United States is confronting Iran and trying to isolate it. Oman hosted Israel's Prime Minister Rabin as the first public visit by an Israeli leader to an Arab Gulf state in 1994 (Rabi, 2005). Qaboos's foreign policy of pragmatism "would ensure the territorial integrity of Oman, guarantee the survival of the Al-Bu Said dynasty, and transform his country into a modern, yet culturally authentic, state" (Funsch, 2015, p. 164). This further demonstrates that Oman is seeking global approval, regional security, and recognition of other states' national interests in a reciprocal and mutually respectful manner. Likewise, Oman's foreign policy of pragmatism has proven its effectiveness, but it has an ethical dimension that evolved around its mutual recognition of other states' national interests and non-interference in

other states' affairs. Equally, this ethical dimension originated from Qaboos' 'idea of Oman' his accompanying responsible leadership style.

Ibadism as a Moral Foundation for Social and Political Features

Ibadism is a sect of Islam that is neither Sunni nor Shia, and its followers are characterized by peaceful, tolerant, and respectful attitudes. Ibadism claims complete tolerance of other religions, cultures, and even other sects within Islam as a robust pillar in its spiritual, moral, and cultural orientations (Jones, 2007). This sect and belief have had a major influence on the social and political formation of Oman, where more than half of the Omani people are Ibadi (Sherwood, 2017; Bhacker, 2003). For this reason, Oman is immune to sectarianism and religious intolerance and violence. Therefore, Oman does not perceive any threat from Iran regarding its Shia minority (Szalai, 2018). The Imamate system in the Ibadi sect operates under a strong belief in consensus in decision making and the selection of leaders, and "central to political culture in Oman are the interconnected ideas of shura 'consultation' and ijma 'consensus' combining to invite participation by many, regardless of their station in life" (Funsch, 2015, p. 105). Likewise, the Ibadi sect contributed to Oman's culture of tolerance and social cohesion. Again, it is arguable that the tolerance and mutual respect for other states as guiding principles of Oman's foreign policy are influenced by its moral foundation in the Ibadi sect of Islam.

Challenges for Pragmatism

Domestically, Oman may face a challenge in the transition of power and the legacy of tolerance and independence post-Qaboos (Lefebvre, 2010). Therefore, the important challenge in domestic affairs will be for the Omani people to manage to successfully replace Qaboos after his demise (they succeeded). Likewise, the country's unique foreign policy is ascribed to Qaboos in a way that is similar to the rest of the Gulf countries in that the foreign policy is controlled and personalized by the elites rather than bureaucratic and systematic organizations as in democratic states (Neubauer, 2016). Moreover, Oman has a large population of young people looking for more economic opportunities and employment security within the country's limited economic resources (Funsch, 2015). Thus, the failure to secure long-term economic sustainability may lead to dissatisfaction among the people, which, in turn, affects the legitimacy of the ruler as an expected backlash reaction.

The regional and global challenges facing Oman are: the Yemeni civil war, the Qatar blockade, the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the ongoing Iranian–Saudi rivalry (Tran, 2018; Szalai, 2018). Moreover, Oman’s oil locations are vulnerable due to their proximity to Saudi Arabia, which may constitute a potential security threat, as the relationship between the two countries is characterized by contestation (Tran, 2018). Under Qaboos, Oman has focused on maintaining highly arranged and careful relations with Saudi Arabia, whereas Saudi Arabia, in the past, had instances of interfering in Oman’s domestic affairs (Tran, 2018).

The Rise of an ‘Ethical Dimension’ in the Foreign Policy

Oman’s foreign policy and strategy receive a portion of their characteristics, attributes, and way of dealing with human interaction and collaboration from a long history of cosmopolitanism (Hunt & Phillips, 2017). Furthermore, Hunt and Phillips (2017) have asserted that “Omani diplomacy may be understood as a practice, as a kind of social activity that cannot be separated from other social activities” (p. 39). Therefore, there is a strong link between the culture of the Omani people and the conduct of foreign policy which originates from: the Ibadi principles of tolerance and respect; avoiding ideological or sectarian conflicts; consensus and consultation; and the acceptance of and practices toward foreigners as a result of a long history of interactions and cosmopolitanism (Hunt & Phillips, 2017). Above all, these cultural influences have contributed to forming the element of leadership responsibility of Sultan Qaboos, which, in turn, led to the development of the ‘ethical dimension’ within the country’s foreign policy.

The rise of the ethical dimension in the foreign policy in general is not new; there have long been philosophical and academic debates around the issue (Nye, 2008; Chandler & Heins, 2007). In Western countries, there was a call for creating a new sense of purpose and identity in social and political environment that triggers the moralizing foreign policy (Chandler, 2003), and there also arose the issue of moral difficulties in practicing effective governance, accompanied by the search for justification of implementing domestic policies in Western democracies known as the ‘legitimation crisis’ (Heins, 2007). The issue of responsibility for action and reaction via policies has been discussed through the concepts of responsibility ‘consequences’ and legitimacy (Hill, 2016).

Likewise, with the rise of these issues, there were political circumstances that paved the way for introducing morality and ethics into foreign policy. For example, after the end of the Cold War and the diminishing of a potential enemy after the fall of the Soviet Union, the theme of the 'crisis of meaning' began to surface, in which the western countries were trying to search for more accommodating or alternate political discourse after their triumph in the Cold War (Laïdi, 1998). Furthermore, the political situation in the aftermath of the Second World War and the United States' commitment to Europe in terms of providing economic assistance and support was a turning point in transforming the narrow understanding of national interests into a broad and comprehensive one of supporting others' interests (Chandler & Heins, 2007). Notably, the demand-driven nature of the problems of the 'failed states' has played a role in the awareness of consequences and ramifications of failed states in the developing countries (Chandler & Heins, 2007). The emergence of the concept of 'moral prestige' in which governing elites began to moralize political agendas that in turn, helped as a basis of legitimacy for the countries' domestic politics (Löwenheim, 2003).

Later, the ideas of idealpolitik, international law, humanitarian intervention, and the concept of 'responsibility to protect' developed by the United Nations began to dominate the foreign policy agendas through states and international as well as regional organizations. The author Nye asserted that the need to support rights and respect others' interests has been introduced by the responsibility of leaders in the foreign policy domain (Nye, 2008). Likewise, these needs have been developed by the political elites (Chandler, 2003). Thus, "As to the choices that policy-makers may have to make, their primary duty is to pursue the interests of their own citizens, but in the context of a set of wider duties towards other states, and, through other states, the rest of humanity" (Smith & Light, 2004, p. 6).

As Smith and Light argued, for ethics to be implemented, there must be a consensus and democratic deliberation (Smith & Light, 2004). However, in order to make a connection between ethics and the foreign policy of Oman, it could be argued that Oman lacks a democratic system, but the political and social culture of consensus and tolerance advocated by Qaboos have a direct impact on forming the ethical dimension in its foreign policy. Likewise, Oman's foreign policy of pragmatism originated in the idea of responsible leadership espoused by

Qaboos, which encompasses an ethical dimension. Being a responsible leader necessitates having awareness of and support for others' interests and rights. For example, Oman's position to reject the GCC's political union was justified as to prevent Saudi Arabia from dominating the GCC, and as a rejection of any alliances that target the sovereignty and security of Iran. Oman rejected joining the Saudi-led Arab coalition forces in Yemen and the boycott of Qatar in 2017. Similarly, Oman refused to supply forces to the GCC's 2011 Peninsula Shield Force deployment to Bahrain. Unlike Qatar and other countries in the region that support the change during the political development of uprising or turmoil around the Middle East, Oman has a view to support the status quo in its foreign policy orientation in the region.

Conclusion

The distinctive and unique foreign policy of the Sultanate of Oman is characterized by tolerance and pragmatism that can be attributed to the notion of responsibility as interpreted by its leader, Sultan Qaboos. Factors of geostrategic location and the legacy of Oman's history, Ibadism, the Dhofar Rebellion, political and security instability in the Gulf region, alliances with Western military powers, and the culture of cosmopolitanism in Oman have determined Oman's foreign policy orientation. As an effective foreign policy strategy, pragmatism brought security, stability, social cohesion, and growth to Oman. The ethical dimension of foreign policy attempts to reunite and reconcile interests and ideals in politics; however, ethics need a democratic environment to operationalize the issues of consensus and consultation. Despite Oman not being a democratic state, Sultan Qaboos, through the notion of a responsible leader, has managed to create an ethical dimension to the country's foreign policy. The ethical dimension of Oman's foreign policy originates from including normative ideals such as tolerance, nonviolent means, responsible leadership, non-interference, and respect for others' national interests that, in turn, made Oman a capable small state and an effective regional actor in the Gulf region. Accordingly, the style of leadership responsibility in its foreign policy has fundamental influences on the development of the ethical dimension within this foreign policy.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank Dr. Afyare Elmi for his constructive feedback and suggestions.

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