



## OMAN: A STATE ELABORATING A NATION

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Oman in the not-too-distant past could be described as a nation searching for a viable state, whereas now it is more a state seeking to deepen the nation. Among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Oman stands alone in enjoying an ancient feeling of nation. The national identity of the smaller states is in large part a creation of the last few decades while Saudi Arabia is a collection of disparate regional identities cobbled together over the course of less than a century. Oman, on the other hand, has existed as a recognized geographical and cultural entity encompassing eastern Arabia for several millennia.

The idea of Oman is not the same thing as the present nation-state of Oman. Until very recently, Oman as a geographical and cultural entity included the Oman Coast, later known as the Pirate Coast, then the Trucial Coast, and now the United Arab Emirates. But traditionally it did not include the southern region of Dhufar (with its historic links to the eastern regions of what is now Yemen), now part of the sultanate. The present nation-state is a much more recent phenomenon and not only owes much to the creation of the Al Bu Sa'id state in the 18th century but, more directly, it also correlates with the accession of Sultan Qaboos and the *nahdah* or "renaissance" he set in motion. This process was comparable to the emergence of the independent emirates of the Gulf around 1971. Thus, the creation of a modern national identity coterminous with the Sultanate of Oman has been only a recent development.

The core of Omani identity through the ages has revolved around several themes. One of these is its Arabness, perhaps ever since immigrating Arab tribes toppled Persian suzerainty during the Islamization of Oman. Another is the Ibadi sect, predominant in Oman since the early Islamic period and given political, as well as religious, representation through the Ibadi imamate. The Ibadi distinctiveness of Oman and the legitimacy of the imamate prevailed even though Ibadis constitute only about half of the population; doctrinal and practical differences between Ibadis and Sunnis are not substantial. A third theme is that of tribes, which constituted the constellation of constituencies that formed the backbone of the Ibadi imamate. These three themes supported broad proto-national responses to in-



vasions by the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries, by the Persians in the 18th century, and by the Wahhabis in the 19th century. These strands of Omani history are indelibly woven into the education and consciousness of all Omanis today.

The present sultanate (as the state of the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty) has sought to encompass this proto-national identity from its beginning. But its inherent difficulty in doing so was due to its loss of Ibadi legitimacy (accompanied by persistent attempts to restore the imamate in Oman) and its dependence on outside backing. Even though the present Oman was physically unified during the reign of Sa'id b. Taymur (r. 1932-1970), it was not unified in a coherent national identity until the post-1970 period. In this sense, the reign of Sa'id's son Qaboos marks the beginnings (even as it inherits some earlier stirrings) of a true primary national identity, building on and transforming existing tribal and regional identities.

The formation of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and its role and presence in both northern Oman and Dhufar in the 1960s and 1970s was one of the first instruments forging national identity. While obviously this involved military action in both northern Oman and Dhufar, its deeper and longer-lasting impact centered on recruitment of soldiers (and civilian support) throughout the country and from all communities. During this period, recruits were socialized by interaction with Omanis from other tribes and regions and most received their first education – including writing and technical skills – from the SAF. Nearly simultaneously, Petroleum Development Oman served a similar role in socialization and education for its employees. The creation of a nascent bureaucracy in the 1970s continued this formative process while the emergence of government institutions providing services and regulation deepened the national process. The end of the Dhufar War in 1975 and Dhufar's true integration into Oman for the first time eroded distinctions between Omanis and Dhufaris and sealed the bond of national identity as Omanis.

The new Qaboos government consciously chose to enhance the burgeoning sense of national identity through a cult of personality. Certainly, Omanis were sincerely grate-

ful to Sultan Qaboos for the changes sweeping the country: in the early years of his reign, Omanis universally and spontaneously remarked that before Qaboos there was nothing and that everything happened after his accession to the throne. An important difference between Oman and its monarchical neighbors is that the latter centered their personality cults upon their ruling families. Thus, streets, airports, hospitals, universities bore the names of various senior figures in each family. In Oman, there was only one personality thus lionized and so there are Port Sultan Qaboos, Madinat Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Qaboos Highway, Sultan Qaboos Mosque (and their iteration in principal towns throughout the sultanate), and other examples with his name.

The projection of the sultan as the sole father figure of the country was coupled with his full control over the apparatus of state, and thus his personal role (either directive or adjudicative) in the political and socioeconomic development of the country. The single regular attempt to connect on a personal level with his people was the "meet the people" tour, once a year for a few weeks in a selected region of the country: the exercise was abandoned only in the last few years due to the sultan's health. Tellingly, the protests starting in Suhar in 2011 and prompted by the "Arab Spring" evinced demands for more employment and the removal of certain government officials. At the same time, however, demonstrators emphasized their loyalty to the sultan. How much this constituted allegiance to the sultan as a specific figure and how much to the symbol of the "new" Omani nation-state he represents is impossible to ascertain.

It does seem clear, however, that the enormous strides taken over the last five decades have created a clear-cut sense of both national identity and nationalism. The Omani ethos has coalesced around Arab, Muslim, Ibadi/Sunni, and tribal themes. Smaller variant communities are not excluded but are enfolded into the ethos by extension: other ethnic groups are incorporated into the matrix of tribal classification; religious differences are subsumed by policy and tolerance, as shown by the designation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, not Islamic Affairs. Oman traditionally looked to the Indian Ocean more than it did to the



Arab world and its role as a melting pot is enshrined in its polyglot society with its overseas connections. Undoubtedly, this orientation strongly shapes Oman's relationship to the Arab world today and its interactions with fellow GCC members.

To a certain extent, Oman has copied the branding strategies of its GCC neighbors. Glitzy hotel and resort projects have mushroomed while attempts have been made to emulate Dubai's Palm and World developments. A lavish new National Museum seems intended to emulate Qatar's museum schemes. Muscat boasts its own winter festival in counterpoint to the Dubai Shopping Festival. A major push for tourism seems meant to call the Gulf and the world's attention to Oman's attractions, in addition to economic diversification and a means of employment. These actions not only boost Oman's competitiveness with the other Gulf states but they also help redress a lingering resentment by Omanis of how they perceive that other Gulf nationals view them. This bonding in national pride is a nation-building exercise too.

The danger in any cult of personality lies in the mortality of the leader. The other Gulf monarchies have robust families to keep their cults alive. Will Sultan Qaboos' stature outlive him? More importantly, has the process of planting national identity and a profound sense of Omani nationalism in the post-1970 sultanate proceeded far enough to withstand any future challenges? That question will demand a definite answer in the near future.

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*