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BUILDING AN OMANI NATIONAL IDENTITY: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES IN TRANSITION

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Abstract

Are economic policies strong enough to impact how citizens view themselves? Under the reign of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Oman has been transformed from a state with disputed boundaries and tribal sheikhdoms to that of a modern nation-state with progress towards a cohesive national identity. However, while progress is notable, this process is challenged by the persistence of sub-national identities across Omani society. While Oman has been blessed with very little sectarian violence and strife following the end of the Dhofar Rebellion, the concept of an "Omani" identity has not formed a unified sense of civic responsibility between citizen and state, but rather has been dominated by the value of loyalty to Sultan Qaboos. Moreover, while Muscat's current-day policies of inclusion have seemingly resulted in a successful, overarching Omani identity, there are still factors that compete with this identity, such as ethnic, religious, and familial ties. While most Middle Eastern countries have trouble persuading their citizens to identify with the state and the regime, Oman has been seen as largely successful. As a means to foster this identity, government-enacted economic policies have sought to account for the changing nature of the Arabian Gulf's social contracts between the citizen and state. But, has Omani economic policy been successful in fostering a national identity? Our research shows that within the past decade Omani economic policy is attempting to change the relationship between Omanis and the Sultanate, moving away from the former model of subject and ruler to that of citizen and state. While this shift has been taking place incrementally under Qaboos, Sultan Haitham has put further emphasis on this shift, ultimately requiring Omani identity to adapt much quicker than under his predecessor. To answer our question, we discuss the historical importance of identity in Oman, followed by a look at the impact of employment policies and economic reform from the Arab Spring of 2011 onward, utilizing a comparison between the border region of al-Buraimi and the capital, Muscat. Finally, we ponder the implications of the post-Qaboos era and how the rule of Sultan Haitham may affect Omani identity going forward.
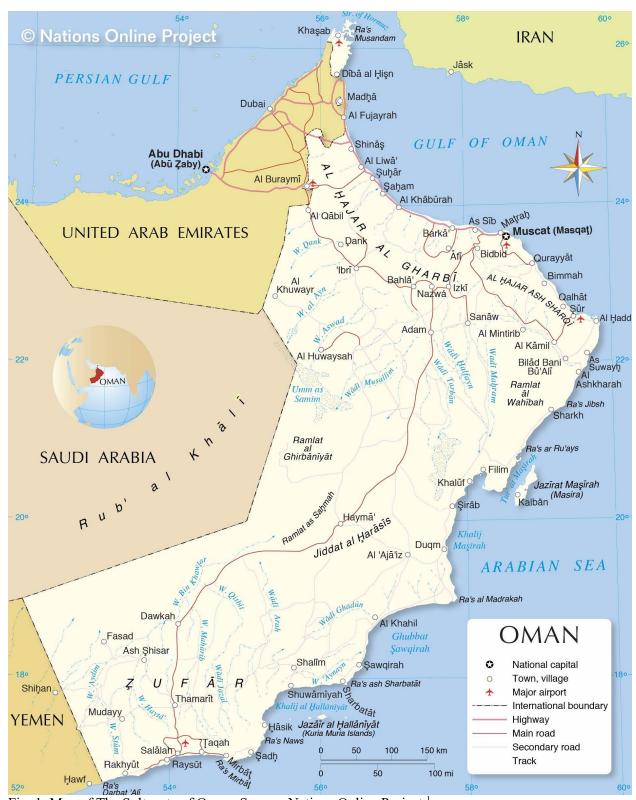
Fig. 1. Map of The Sultanate of Oman. Source: Nations Online Project.[1]

[1] Nations Online Project, "Map of Oman," 2020, https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/oman-map.htm.

The Importance of National Identity in the Arabian Peninsula

The issue of national identity in the Arabian Gulf is a critical component of regional

governments' efforts to reconstruct the relationship between citizens and the state. Gulf

governments are all grappling with how to establish a comprehensive sense of national belonging

through a variety of means. The Sultanate of Oman, in particular, is an important case study due

to its unique history as the oldest continually existing political entity in the region, one that has

had to build a national community with a diverse population and limited fiscal resources. By

evaluating Omani nation-building policies, internally and relative to other Gulf nations, we hope

to understand their effectiveness and their limits. More broadly, this research intends to evaluate

how economic reform programs impact nation-building. Due to the gap in literature on Omani

nation-building policies, this research provides valuable insight for both academics and

policymakers, highlighting the potential effectiveness of economic policies in creating resilient

national identities across the Arabian Gulf.

Identity has been a topic of great discussion and debate for scholars that focus on the

Arabian Gulf for the past several decades, due to its history of absolute monarchy and

experiences with British protectionism. Debate has largely focused on the inherent adoption of

this identity, whether it is purely state-created or organic. With the institution of a strong national

identity, states in this region receive greater legitimacy, and therefore, greater influence among

their citizens. With this goal in mind, Gulf states have enacted robust nationalization policies and

economic reforms that foster a formation of identity and national pride.[2] In regard to the

Sultanate of Oman, the concept of an "Omani" identity has not always been uniform, which has

historically caused a series of rifts within the country, ultimately leading to the civil war of the

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[2] Anh Nga Longva, "Citizenship in the Gulf States: Conceptualization and Practice," in *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications*, ed. Nils A. Butenschon, Uri Davis, and Manuel Hassassian (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 179-180.

1970s and the subsequent consolidation of the state under the former sultan, Qaboos bin Said. Sultan Qaboos, whether intentionally or not, created a widespread identity based on his persona - making a cult-of-personality the link between most Omanis, which continues to be fostered by nationalization (or "Omanization") programs, policies, and holidays.[3]

However, as was the case in the country about fifty years ago, the peripheries are seemingly less linked to this strong Qaboos-based identity, leaving an opening for neighboring nations to take advantage of their disenfranchisement, as we see in towns like al-Buraimi, which borders the United Arab Emirates and the bustling city of al-Ain. The onset of protests in Oman during the 2011 Arab Spring showed shortcomings in government policy - challenging what it means to be an Omani citizen in the rising shift of citizen-to-state social contracts. As a direct result, the Omani government enacted a series of economic policies that pushed for greater nation-building and higher levels of inclusivity. As states across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) shift away from the traditional rentier model of governance, economic reforms and nationalization policies have made it necessary to "rewrite" each nation's social contracts, ultimately testing the efficacy of the nation-building policies of old.

With the death of Sultan Qaboos bin Said on January 10th of this year, questions about the difference in rule between the former, revered sultan and his successor Haitham bin Tariq has led to questions regarding a change in identity for Omani citizens. With Qaboos physically out of the picture, the cult-of-personality that has served as the glue in Omani identity could be challenged. Additionally, while economic policies such as Omanization and Vision 2040 were years in the making before Qaboos's death, the turning point for these policies has been seen in Haitham's reign so far. By addressing the realities of these policies' effects, Haitham's focus within Vision 2040 has been the public's contribution as the key to this economic program's

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[3] Marc Valeri, "Identity Politics and Nation-Building Under Sultan Qaboos," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (Oxford University Press, 2014), 179, 184-187.

success. At the time of this writing, Sultan Haitham has only been in office for just over three months, so concrete evidence of how identity in Oman has changed can only be postulated. However, Haitham's focus on economic policy is shifting the mentality of Omanis regarding their identity; changing it from one based on subjecthood to one of active participation. Arguably, this process is taking place faster than what was occurring under Sultan Qaboos. With this in mind, can we conclude that Oman's economic policies have been successful in upholding a cohesive national identity as the region's, and Oman's, social dynamics evolve (see footnote)?[4]

Methodology

In order to understand how government-created policies foster an Omani national identity, we look to two main sources of information: interviews with experts on Oman and the Arabian Gulf, and data on employment in Oman for the last decade. Because of travel restrictions instituted due to COVID-19, our research team was unable to travel to Oman to conduct on-the-ground interviews, and thus, our research instead incorporated expert-based interviews. For these interviews, we reached out to former ambassadors and scholars on Oman and the Gulf to gain an understanding of how and why nationalization policies have come about, in addition to the impact of the Arab Spring on Oman, and what the death of Sultan Qaboos will mean moving forward with Haitham's more expansive economic outlook. Unfortunately, the information learned throughout these interviews is mostly speculative in regards to the impact of economic policies on identity, since we were unable to interview Omanis. These interviews occurred both in person and virtually, depending on when they were scheduled, as per social-distancing recommendations.

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[4] A cohesive national identity, for the purposes of this paper, is one in which the primary means of self-identification among citizens is that of a national, and not a form of sub-national, conceptualization.

In order to understand how these policies impact citizens on the ground, employment data was sourced both from the Omani government's records and the World Bank, focusing on 2009 through 2018. Several recorded factors were looked at in order to reach our data-related conclusions. This included looking at the number of government and private sector workers, the breakdown of these workers by country of origin (nationals vs expatriates), as well as a look at the unemployment rate in Oman. The years picked for employment data analysis were chosen in order to look at the situation in Oman since the Arab Spring in 2011. However, a few years were included on the front-end in order to have a few points of comparison pre-Arab Spring. By looking at employment data from the Sultanate's Supreme Council for Planning, we hope to understand how the government is attempting to reconfigure its relationship between the citizen and the state using programs such as "Omanization."

In addition to first-hand interviews and data analysis, the bulk of our research depends on secondary sources, including books, chapters, and articles regarding identity formation, nation-building, and the nationalization policies of other Gulf states. By taking a look at the employment data and comparing it to what we learned from our interviews and secondary sources, we were able to come to certain conclusions. This analysis, while not conclusive, does seem to indicate that Omanization has been a method used by Oman to foster a stronger sense of national identity in a period of socio-political change. While this process was fully underway under Sultan Qaboos, Haitham is adapting this approach to potentially rewrite what it means to be an Omani.

Broader Gulf Nation-Building Policies

The concept of identity-building is based on "the realm of illusion," where a sense of belonging or adherence to a social group is created through community - or even national - myth-

making. This sense of "belongingness," or *'asabiyya* in Arabic, is deemed as "the basic linkage of human society and a motive power that shapes history," which is determined as the principal driver behind how individuals assert themselves in society. According to Ibn Khaldun, identity is debated as "having no real basis," meaning that "communal actors may develop or experience a strong sense of belonging to their respective community through a social utopia, myth, illusion, or imagination."[5] In his book titled *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson expounds on the same concept, stating that the modern concept of the Nation, and nationalism by extension, are imagined communities.[6] Looking at broader Gulf nation-building, one can view the outward appearance of a "unified" nation as one that is imagined – creating a semblance of an identity formed on the basis of human ingenuity.

Considered a historical melting pot, the Arabian Gulf has a long history of different ethnic groups, religious sects, and tribal factions mixing and moving throughout the region. In the Gulf today, we still see the remnants of different heritages from a time without borders. Prior to the modern nation-state formation of today, the Arabian Gulf was ruled by sheikhs and tribal emirs, along with monarchs and dynasties that shifted and changed from one ruler to the next. Ultimately, the concept of a shared identity is one that is tied to the state. On the other hand, challenges to this identity are usually found in sub-national identities under the umbrella of ethnic and religious ties. With this reality, nations across the GCC have strived to create shared national identities, leading to stringent top-down approaches in nation-building.[7] These policies aim to increase the importance of the state to their national identities while moving away from fixating either on ruling families, tribal lineages, or folklore.

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[5] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, 1980), Chapter 2.

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*: *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2016), Chapter 1.

[7] Lawrence G. Potter, "Introduction," In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (Oxford University Press, 2014), 11-12.

Qatar's nation building efforts are similar to Oman's due to the lack of substantive power outside of the Emir and his immediate family, but are different due to the substantial economic resources available to the country's rulers in accordance to its massive natural gas reserves. The ruling al-Thani family's prominence came from the collapse of other historical industries, such as pearling, making their control over oil rents effectively control the entirety of the nation's budget and economy.[8] Qatar's primary means of inspiring a sense of national unity comes from its disbursement of oil rents to its population through guaranteed public employment and unparalleled financial assistance. All male Qatari nationals receive a plot of land at no personal cost and assistance in acquiring a loan for building a house. Those who do not wish to receive a plot of land can receive cash to buy a home in the amount of 219,780 USD.[9] There exist other allowances afforded to Qatari citizens – including a one-time cash payment of over 10,000 USD for furniture. These guaranteed cash allowances are in addition to the heavily subsidized gas, water, and electricity afforded to citizens.[10]

Qatar practices norms of exclusion to drastically limit eligibility for citizenship. These policies stipulate that Qataris are only those who can prove that their ancestors inhabited Qatar before 1930 – making it an exceedingly difficult task due to the general lack of extant official paperwork from this period. Qatar institutes policies to promote national unity such as the celebration of National Day and the veneration of historical Qatari figures, but the 2005 denaturalization of 5,000 members of the al-Ghufran tribe show its concern over tribal loyalties to its neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.[11] The Saudi Arabian-led blockade on the Qatari state led to a renewed sense of nationalism in the nation, with elaborate public displays on

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[8] Fromherz, Allen James. *Qatar: A Modern History* (Tauris, 2017), 112-128.
[9] Zahra R. Barbar, "The Cost of Belonging: Citizenship Construction in the State of Qatar," in *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 3 (2014), 416, https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/551180.
[10] Ibid.
[11] "Qatar/Saudi Arabia: Allow Man Trapped at Border to Enter," Human Rights Watch, 2 July 2017, www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/01/qatar-saudi-arabia-allow-man-trapped-border-enter.

national holidays. Large stylized posters of Emir Tamim bin Hamad are plastered on buildings across the country to show support for their leader. Although, whether this rally around the flag effect during a crisis will continue following the blockades resolution remains uncertain.[12]

On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is unique among its Gulf neighbors for being a federation with a history of multiple sources of military, political, and financial power; however, it too is enacting policies to create a unified sense of national identity with an emphasis on national service. The primary policy enacted by the UAE is called *Watani* or "my homeland," which is a policy that envisions creating a new sense of Emirati national identity through the concept of shared values, rather than a focus on folklore and lineage.[13] These policy changes are necessary in the minds of policymakers to move beyond focusing on the veneration of historical figures, such as Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, to participatory engagement in nation-building.[14]

To achieve the goal of national unity through shared experiences, the UAE began a policy of mandatory conscription for all males between the ages of eighteen and thirty in 2014 for one full year of service.[15] The impetus behind the institution of mandatory national service came both from the desire for the development of civically minded national consciousness, but also from the recognition that the UAE faces military challenges in the region – particularly following its involvement in the ongoing war in Yemen alongside Saudi Arabia.[16]

Therefore, as certain nations across the GCC are enacting policies and programs to solidify their citizens' ties to the state, it is important to note that each Gulf country has its own

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[12] "A Renewed Sense of Nationalism Takes Root in Qatar" Stratfor, 29 December 2017, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/renewed-sense-nationalism-takes-root-qatar.
[13] Kristin Smith Diwan, "National Identity and National Projects in the Arab Gulf States," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 9 June 2016, 3-4, https://issuu.com/agsiw/docs/national_identity_event_report_issu.
[14] Ibid, 6.
[15] John Alterman and Mago Balboni, "Citizens in Training: Conscription and Nation Building in the United Arab Emirates," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017, 11, https://www.csis.org/analysis/citizens-training-conscription-and-nation-building-united-arab-emirates.
[16] Ibid, 12 -13.

set of problems in nation-building. In turn, as the traditional rentier model of citizenship - and therefore identity - becomes less viable, it now has become more crucial than ever for states to rewrite their social contracts, ultimately shifting from an identity focused on subjecthood to that of inclusivity.[17]

Traditional Identity Formation in Oman

The Absolutist State

The establishment of the modern Omani state relied on Sultan Qaboos's assumption of total military, economic, and political power in the country allowing him to shape the definition of its original social contract. The foundation of the absolutist notion of national identity in Oman derives from three fundamental historical paradigms. The first is the British intervention on behalf of Sultan Qaboos to install him in power – taking over from his father, Sultan Said bin Taymur, in the midst of the Dhofar Rebellion. This event is central to the development of the absolutist system due to British preference for his style of rule as a result of expediency over the constitutionalist rhetoric espoused by Oman's first Prime Minister – who was also Qaboos's formerly exiled uncle. The second paradigm is the use of mercenaries to create the original Omani state that historically had been governed by a variety of actors, including the Ibadi Imamate. Sultan Qaboos had to create a narrative and pageantry over the establishment of the Omani state, carried out largely by foreign mercenaries from Pakistan, India, and the United Kingdom, as well as Iranian and Jordanian direct military intervention, to turn it into one of national triumph. The third, and final, paradigm is the consolidation of Omani identity into a more uniform standard that could be promulgated through ministerial activities and education.

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[17] Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "The Gulf's New Social Contract," Middle East Institute, 8 February 2016, https://www.mei.edu/publications/gulfs-new-social-contract.

These efforts were made possible due to the complete consolidation of political, financial, and military power under the person of Sultan Qaboos.

The Dhofar rebellion was the first test of Sultan Qaboos as a leader establishing his tendencies as a ruler and charting a course for the development of the nation. During the Dhofar Rebellion, prior to and during Qaboos's reign, British officers were running the entirety of the Sultanate's military operations against communist rebels in the south of the country. Many of the officers serving in the Sultanate's Armed Forces (SAF) were British, and served on retainer for the Sultan personally, but answered to the British Foreign Service and Ministry of Defense.[18]Additionally, all of the pilots of Oman's nascent air force were British, and flew British aircraft loaned to the Sultanate.[19]

The spread of sabotage operations by insurgent forces in the north of the country was the catalyst for British intervention in Oman, leading to the deposition of Said bin Taymur and the accession of Sultan Qaboos as their preferred leader.[20] British policy makers felt, at the time, that Qaboos would be a more effective and proactive leader, while also willing to safeguard British interests in the country due to his Sandhurst education and close relationship with British government officials.[21] The coup that put Qaboos in power was not planned or executed by him – the entirety of the plot was planned by British military officials and the foreign office with the assistance of SAF forces to create the illusion that the operations were led by Qaboos personally.[22] Following the success of the coup, Sultan Qaboos pledged to defend British colonial interests in the country in extension of his father's service.

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[18] Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 163.
[19] "Who Runs the Sultanate of Oman?" Central Intelligence Agency, 1972, 2. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-01601R000800070001-9.pdf.
[20] Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976*, 169-170.
[21] "The Mountain and the Plain: Rebellion in Oman," Central Intelligence Agency, 1972, 7. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00875r001100130079-6.
[22] Takriti, 195-198.

Sultan Qaboos's ability to establish an absolutist state depended almost entirely on the use of foreign mercenaries, avoiding the need for a give-and-take relationship with local constituencies that could oppose military service. Research on absolutist monarchies suggests that foreign mercenaries are essential to their establishment. The lack of developed state institutions among 15th century European kingdoms and, similarly, in Oman during the Dhofar Rebellion, prevented the establishment of an effective, disciplined military force drawn from local populations. The use of mercenaries obviates the need to build a local consensus on the necessity of the war and avoid the possibility of any mutiny or domestic military coup. Mercenaries also fight for their own financial interests, guaranteeing a certain degree of loyalty. In the absence of a better funded opponent, mercenaries form a critical vanguard for monarchs establishing absolutism.[23] Qaboos follows this practice, as is seen in his reliance on British, Baluchi, Indian, and other mercenaries which formed the bulk of the SAF during and after the Dhofar rebellion. This pattern would continue until the mid-1980s when British officers and pilots were gradually phased out for Omani-born personnel.[24]

The Al Bu Said family was, in general, poor and not particularly powerful; Oman is a regional exception in that the extended royal family has little direct political power or substantive influence over policy matters – this role was reserved for Sultan Qaboos alone as an absolute monarch.[25] Muscat merchants welcomed Qaboos and spent lavishly on ceremonies commemorating his assumption of power. They supported Qaboos due to his repeal of strict financial controls put in place by his father, becoming a substantial portion of his initial power base. The tribal power behind Qaboos came both from genuine hope for change following the

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[23] V. G. Kiernan, "Foreign Mercenaries and Absolute Monarchy," in *Past & Present*, no. 11 (1957), 71, www.jstor.org/stable/649741.
[24] Takriti, 198.
[25] Ibid, 199-202.

repressive rule of his father, and through direct financial contributions to tribal leaders. Qaboos's assumption of all effective military power also coerced tribal sheikhs against opposing his rule.[26]

Qaboos's absolutism was not an inevitability following his assumption of power, but a purposeful decision by his foreign backers over alternatives that might have created representative political bodies. British officials entrusted him with control over the military, ministry of finance, and foreign affairs before pushing for the establishment of the Office of Prime Minister to be filled by Qaboos's uncle Tariq bin Taymur.[27] Tariq advocated for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and renaming the country the Arab Kingdom of Oman. He intended to transition the country towards a constitutional monarchy, where the National Assembly and prime minister would gradually be granted the majority of political power, while the King, instead of a Sultan, would retain a mostly ceremonial role.[28]

There were doubts about the genuineness of Tariq's political project, but the British granted Qaboos total political control and British political and military support because they believed he would be more reliable defending the regional interests of the British crown. Tariq was also older and more ideologically committed to his own set of ideals. The purpose of Tariq's assumption to the office of Prime Minister was to build a new bureaucracy to cement Qaboos's authority and begin development of the country and add to Qaboos's legitimacy by having him paired with a more experienced political figure; however, his constitutionalist ideals were not taken seriously by Qaboos or his British backers.[29] The consolidation of political power under Qaboos by the British prevented the establishment of representative political bodies in Oman.

Sultan Qaboos's absolutist state created a national identity through his efforts to legitimize his rule. The creation of a novel "Omani" identity follows Eric Hobsbawm's view that

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[26] Ibid, 202.
[27] Ibid, 209.
[28] Marc Valeri, *Oman - Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*, 92.
[29] Takriti, 215.

"nations are more often the consequence of setting up a State more than they are its foundation."[30] The concept of a uniform Omani identity did not exist prior to Sultan Qaboos's assumption of power, with newly created rents from expanding oil production supporting unprecedented nation-building. The massive expansion of education across the country created a space for the dissemination of a uniform narrative promulgated by the absolutist state. The rapid urbanization of the country weakened the regional identities of the country. With a majority of working-age citizens employed by public institutions, citizens gained a shared experience working alongside other people from different regions, who they traditionally would not interact with on a daily basis. The state made a deliberate effort to also standardize the meaning of "Omani" traditions, dress, and language.[31] These efforts would trickle down to traditional handicrafts, such as the *khanjar*, or curved dagger. Craftsmen specializing in khanjars are gradually eschewing region-specific designs and using previously distinguishing characteristics of the daggers simply for aesthetic purposes.[32]

Establishing an absolutist identity also relied on "ceremonies of submission" to the sultan that fundamentally changed citizens' perception of their relationship to the ruler as subjects. These ceremonies included Qaboos's trips around the country to various governorates and towns at a scale and frequency unknown for his predecessors. These trips even included visits to tribal sheikhs with a history of opposition to the rule of the Al Bu Said tribe.[33] The sultan typically came to address local concerns and promise projects or services residents demanded. The simple presence of the sultan was a new concept for Omanis who traditionally never saw the previous Sultan Said bin Taymur – who typically spent the majority of his time at the palace in Salalah.

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[30] Marc Valeri, *Oman - Politics and Society in the Qaboos State,* 119.
[31] Ibid, 121-122.
[32] Khalid H. Al Busaidi, "An In-depth Investigation into the Traditional Design of Omani Khanjar (Dagger)," Curtin University, 2014, 97, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2f64/06d3216f774f9e3acbaf9231685809c5c1c6.pdf.
[33] Takriti, 204.

Qaboos's purposeful attempts to grant citizens his "presence" was a means of personalizing his rule, directly attaching a sense of national unity and loyalty around him and him alone. These efforts were coupled with coercion in the form of arrests and exile – tribal sheikhs were no exception to these policies.[34] The absolutist state paired these activities with the rewriting of Omani history to fit official narratives. Oman's "year zero" starts with Sultan Qaboos's assumption to power, lifting the country out of a "dark age" symbolized by his father Sultan Taymur's despotic rule – moving to an age of enlightenment, or *Nahda*.[35]

Fundamentally, the establishment of an Omani national identity centers on the absolutist rule of the former Sultan Qaboos and his nation-building efforts. These policies were only possible due to the absolute monopoly on state power granted to him by his British supporters and his early adoption of a mercenary force, removing any possible checks on his authority. These historical trends question the ability of future leaders to create a greater civic sense of responsibility that does not center on the veneration of the former sultan and his contributions to the creation of the modern Omani state. However, there is an observable trend that Omanis are rallying around their understanding of the nation's role in the region and internationally. The decision to forgo participation in the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in Yemen is seen as an expression of Omani exceptionalism, characterized by a commitment to peace, dialogue, and religious tolerance.[36]

Sultan Qaboos's Legacy

Today, the legacy that Sultan Qaboos created within his country is found throughout all aspects of Omani life. From renaming the country that was "The Sultanate of Muscat and Oman"

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[34] Ibid, 205-207.
[35] Marc Valeri, *Oman - Politics and Society in the Qaboos State,* 131.
[36] Diwan, Kristin "National Identity and National Projects in the Arab Gulf States" Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 26 February 2016, 4 https://agsiw.org/national-identity-and-national-projects-in-the-arab-gulf-states/

to just "The Sultanate of Oman" and changing the design of the national flag to that of the current one, every new development was associated with Qaboos. By harnessing the nation's oil and gas wealth, intense development took place, creating major roads, hospitals, schools, and mosques, all of which are developments the Omani people will wholeheartedly state their gratefulness for. Peppered across the country are "Sultan Qaboos" mosques and institutions, giving tribute to the man who is deemed responsible for bringing Oman into the modern day.[37] While other Gulf nations have a cult-of-personality centered around a ruling family and its members, Oman is different in that it is centered around one individual. The concept of the *Nahda* only strengthened this cult-of-personality, which saw Qaboos as single-handedly bringing Oman out of a reign of darkness and into one of light.[38]

Within his coronation speeches, Qaboos's terminology created a psychological effect upon the people by stating that the "Old Oman" was diametrically opposed to that of the "New Oman," which would be considered synonymous with terms such as "modernity" and "tolerance," versus that of "backwardness" and "close-mindedness."[39] From day one, Sultan Qaboos sought to gain legitimacy among his people, and in order to do this in a nation torn by ideological, sectarian, and ethnic differences, Qaboos had to change the nation's mentality.[40]

Within his speeches, Sultan Qaboos emphasized the importance of identity within nation-building, harkening on the *Nahda* in stating, "[w]e have maintained and preserved our identity and intellectual inheritance, and we have adopted every means for development and modernization." Qaboos's vision for Oman and its development started from day one of his rule

[37] Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa'id bin Taymur, 1932-1970* (Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 216-218.
[38] John E. Peterson, "Oman: A State Elaborating A Nation," in *Identity Seekers: Nationhood and Nationalism in Gulf Monarchies,* Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 16 May 2019.
[39] Joseph A. Kechichian, "A Vision of Oman: State and the Sultanate Speeches by Qaboos bin Said, 1970-2006," in *Middle East Policy*, Volume 15, no. 4, Middle East Policy Council, https://mepc.org/journal/vision-oman-state-sultananate-speeches-qaboos-bin-said-1970-2006.
[40] Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa'id bin Taymur, 1932-1970*, 216-218.

in 1970, calling on Omanis to use their imaginations and have "high expectation[s] and hope."[41] Sultan Qaboos's legacy is one that sets itself apart from that of other Gulf rulers, encapsulating his vision, personality, wisdom, and foresight into a cult-of-personality that will long outlive him.

Ethnic and Historical Narratives

Apart from the legacy of Sultan Qaboos, Oman's historical uniqueness from the rest of the Arabian Gulf has contributed to an encompassing identity among Omani nationals. For millennia, Oman proper has existed as a recognized geographical and cultural entity, having a rooted identity that sets it apart from the other Gulf states.[42] Whether of Baluchi, East African, Persian, or Arab heritage, all Omanis value the history of the nation as a major sea-faring power and adhere to these ancient feelings of being a nation. Oman's strategic location has allowed it to serve geographically as a sentinel at the intersection of major sea routes, ranging from the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea. Sustained interaction with peoples of different lands, creating robust trade relations, and having had extensive imperial exploits all contribute to a "melting pot" narrative shared among Omanis.[43]

Upon looking at Oman as a long established, geographic entity, the idea of "Oman" is very much different to that of today's nation state. Historically, "Oman" constituted various regions that today are either included in the state, or have become autonomous regions and countries entirely. In ancient Oman, the geographical borders would have included "Trucial Oman," which now is under the umbrella of the UAE, and would have excluded the Dhofar

[41] Joseph A. Kechichian, "A Vision of Oman: State and the Sultanate Speeches by Qaboos bin Said, 1970-2006," in *Middle East Policy*.
[42] John E. Peterson, "Oman: A State Elaborating A Nation," Italian Institute for International Political Studies.
[43] Linda Pappas Funsch, "The Lure of Oman," in *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9-11.

region, which has had long ethnic ties to neighboring Yemen. The rise of the Al Bu Said family in Muscat in the 18th century, of which both the late Sultan Qaboos and current Sultan Haitham are linked to, brought the dawn of the nation state to the idea of Oman, which is a much more recent phenomenon and brings a different source of identity to this ethnically diverse population.[44]

While ethnic heritage can serve as a divisive mechanism in identity formation, with evidence of this "sub-identity" shown most notably within the Dhofar Rebellion of the 1960s and 70s, today most Omanis will say that while there are different ethnic backgrounds represented across the state, all nationals will include "Omani" as a central facet of this identity. Ethnic differences are celebrated in Oman and are shown in food, dance, dress, and even dialect, but come every November 18th for Omani National Day, all citizens will plaster Omani flags and images of Sultan Qaboos to their cars, houses, and even on their person in order to celebrate the umbrella of identity that is "Omani."[45]

However, while it is important to note that this notion of ethnic equality as ultimately "Omani" is widespread across the country, Oman's recent history tells us that this collective identity might not be uniform in all areas. Historically, ethnic (and even religious) differences in the country have led to armed conflict, which is still locked into the minds of past generations of Omani citizens. While Sultan Qaboos's rhetoric of uniting all citizens as "Omanis" remains strong amongst the population, it is important to realize that this might not be shared in all portions of the country, even today.[46]

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[44] John E. Peterson, "Oman: A State Elaborating A Nation."
[45] Ibid.
[46] Dr. Richard Schmierer, Former United States Ambassador to Oman (2009-2012), Interview, 26 February 2020.

Religion and Sectarianism

In addition to historical narratives as a crucial element in formulating identity, religion is yet another aspect that contributes as either divisive or unifying for citizens of a nation. For the Sultanate, the Ibadi school of thought has dominated the religious scene in the country, holding fast to the conviction that all believers are equal in the sight of God. This has manifested itself into democracy in action at the most basic level, meaning that for Ibadis, all Muslims (Shia, Sunni, or even Ibadi) are considered equals and are expected to pray, eat, greet, and deal with one another with the same courtesy and acceptance. As an evolved main tenet of Ibadism, moderation and inclusivity, particularly vis-a-vis other Muslims, has grown to become a national characteristic for all people, regardless of their faith and background. This is a facet of Omani identity that has given pride to nationals country-wide.[47]

The Omani regime presents the society it governs as distinctively tolerant and this is found as a general opinion of Oman among its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors. Described as "tolerant and hospitable people," former interviews of other GCC nationals harken to this notion found in Oman's dominant religious sect. Omanis themselves also note that religious sects are not a dominant factor in identity, since all Muslims in Oman pray in the same mosques. Among younger generations, many Omanis state that the exact sect of their neighbors is both unknown and not important, making other factors of identity potentially more noteworthy.[48] As the cornerstone of this notion of tolerance, many Omanis will point to the naming itself of the political body that handles religious affairs - notably the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and not "Islamic Affairs."[49]

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[47] Linda Pappas Funsch, "The Lure of Oman," *Oman Reborn*, 22-24.
[48] "Al-Akhlaq," *Sowar Shaeeb*, YouTube video, 18 March 2018 (in Arabic), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqrSevSy2xc.
[49] John E. Peterson, "Oman: A State Elaborating A Nation."

While the characteristic of "tolerance" in Omani identity is considered widespread, adherence to religious sect as a divisive identity factor has been rooted in Omani history. During the 1950s, the Jebel Akhdar War was the result of a long-standing contest between the political authority of the Al Bu Said family and the religious authority of the Ibadi imamate,[50] which was fueled by a desire for independence and was backed by Saudi and Egyptian support.[51] Additionally, the Dhofar Rebellion of the 1960s-70s was also based on religious (and ethnic) differences, seeking independence on the grounds of being different from those that ruled in Muscat.[52] Therefore, while the overarching theme of toleration and unity among the sects has been presented by the government as characteristic to Oman's history, there have been instances where religious and ideological differences in identity have fueled separatist insurgencies.[53]

Familial Ties and Tribalism

Another possible factor that contributes to identity is familial and biological ties; however, the strength of such ties is not well-known. After all, does one need to be biologically tied to a family member for such relationships to matter, or is it enough to be raised in the same community? This question of the strength of biological ties is the main debate regarding identity formation of this type.[54] The two sides come down as follows: either identity formation is predicated on biological ties, whether defining oneself as part of or opposed to these ties, or biology has little to do with identity. If one subscribes to the first theory, then only one's

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Christopher Paul, Collin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, "Oman (Imamate Uprising), 1957-1959," in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Rand Corporation, 2013), 111-117, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.19?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[52] Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[53] Marc Valeri, "Identity Politics and Nation-Building Under Sultan Qaboos," In *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, Lawrence G. Potter (Oxford University Press, 2014), 184-185.

[54] Rhys Price-Robertson, "Ancestry, identity and meaning: The importance of biological ties in contemporary society," in *Families, policy and the law: Selected essays on contemporary issues for Australia* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014).

biological family can affect and shape their identity. If one believes in the second theory, then kinship and community ties can also have a shaping effect on one's identity.

In the case of Oman, both theories hold weight. Through these theories, one understands that Omanis view their identity as based on the blood ties that exist among Omanis, as well as the relational ties that Omanis share, through marriage, culture, etc. This version of identity is especially relevant in the context of border cities like al-Buraimi. Those who live in al-Buraimi have a greater likelihood of viewing identity as it pertains to their ties with those in the neighboring Emirati town of al-Ain as they share a common tribal heritage, and have on-going blood and kinship ties through intermarriage.[55] These tribal ties, and their interplay with the state, were integral to the formation of modern states in the Middle East.[56] However, in the context of cities like al-Buraimi, the cross-border ties that exist could outweigh those of national significance. So, it may be that residents of al-Buraimi believe themselves to have closer ties to those of al-Ain, across the border, than with fellow Omanis.

In addition to questions of biological and kinship ties, another factor to consider more closely when it comes to identity formation is marriage. True, marriage can be seen as a kinship tie. However, marriage can become a political question. Who one can marry has an effect, especially when allowances in marriage are dictated by the state. If Omani nationals cannot marry non-Omanis, then that affects how citizenship and identity is passed on. As Mandana Limbert states, "the physical space and territorial exclusivity of Oman takes shape not only through map making and the control of migratory labor, but also through the legalities and experiences of marriage."[57] This is also true because marriage directly affects who becomes a

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[55] Marc Valeri, "So Close, So Far. National Identity and Political Legitimacy in UAE-Oman Border Cities," 588.
[56] P. S. Khoury & J. Kostiner, "Tribes and state formation in the Middle East," (University of California Press, 1991).
[57] Mandana E. Limbert, "Marriage and the Management of Place in Southern Arabia," in *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places,* E. Tagliacazzo, H. Siu, & P. Perdue (Eds.), (Harvard University Press, 2015), 303.

citizen through birth. For example, if Omani men are able to marry foreigners, but citizenship is a right granted through the mother, then the state is immediately excluding any children from those partnerships. In this way, the state gets to play a role in dictating what kinship ties are allowed, and how Omaniness is determined. Therefore, keeping in mind policies like those linked to marriage and citizenship, one can gain a greater understanding of who the government considers "Omani."

Policy and Its Impacts on Omani Identity

Challenges of the Past and Culmination in the Arab Spring

As a rentier state, Oman's oil rents contributed to an abundance of material resources, public sector jobs, and other benefits, which helped to moderate claims based on local or ethno-linguistic identities and stem the need for stringent nationalization policies until the mid-1990s. Since then, the sultanate has faced a series of social and economic challenges, ultimately throwing into question the previous identity based on subjecthood in exchange for material benefits, and creating a greater need for effective Omanization policies.

The Omani population is one of the youngest in the world, with approximately 33% of nationals being younger than fifteen years old, and 45% being younger than twenty. Since the Omani economy remains largely dependent on oil-derived revenue, as these young people enter the labor market there will be greater pressure on the government to provide public sector jobs. As part of the traditional rentier-state social contract, provision of jobs by the government has become less viable as oil prices remain relatively low, meaning that the government has less revenue to spend on job creation. Oman also has substantially smaller oil reserves compared to

its neighbors, meaning that the government will either go further into debt or will have to "rewrite" this social contract.[58]

When the regional events of the 2011 Arab Spring spread into Oman, a generation of young Omanis took to the streets with expectations for achieving a lifestyle similar to that of their GCC neighbors. Discontent in the nation, however, was different than sentiments expressed in other Middle Eastern countries. As other regimes have weakened and crumbled in the wake of the Arab Spring, citizens in Oman were met by a government that listened and responded with reforms. As the youth bulge in Oman has led to a "restless" generation with broader expectations, Sultan Qaboos had emphasized the ongoing importance of their role in securing the "motherland's" future prosperity, with the government claiming that Oman's "Arab Spring" happened not in 2011, but in 1970.[59] This mentality fostered under Qaboos's leadership has made Omanis more prepared than their GCC counterparts to view themselves as more than just subjects, understanding that while a semblance of rentierism applies, their participation in the country's development is vital.

As the rest of the Middle East witnessed widespread protests and unrest, challenging their respective regimes and calling for overthrow along with reforms, Omanis chose not to take this route. Despite widespread conversation through mobile technology and outbreaks in certain areas of the country, most notably in Sohar - a port city where a supermarket was set afire - there was never any serious political challenge to Sultan Qaboos's authority. Protesters did not call for his overthrow, rather economic issues are what brought Omanis to the streets in national unity. Concerns over rising unemployment, personal debt, and perceived corruption within certain ranks of government were at the heart of Oman's protests. In a country that is highly subsidized,

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[58] Marc Valeri, "Identity Politics and Nation-Building under Sultan Qaboos," 193.
[59] Linda Pappas Funsch, "Challenges and Opportunities in a New Century," in *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*, 177-178.

much like its GCC counterparts, Omanis demanded larger allowances for amenities like housing, water, and electricity.[60]

Effectively diffusing a "potentially destabilizing bombshell," Sultan Qaboos reacted immediately and went to work addressing citizens' concerns. Over a period of several days, Qaboos released a series of six royal decrees, including specific promises of jobs and reforms after sending a delegation to protesters across the country to listen to their grievances. This effort in hearing the people directly has continued to be valued by Omani citizens to this day, marking the Arab Spring in Oman as different from that of events elsewhere. Therefore, in light of the changes that were made from 2011 onward, the role of economic policy in the lives of Omani citizens has proven much greater. In turn, the Omani government has sought to augment citizens' role in the country's prosperity, ultimately changing the social contract for everyone's benefit and marking the Arab Spring as the first major shift towards rewriting Omani identity.[61]

Economic Policy Historically

I. Nationalization Policies

Understanding the role of economic policy on its citizens, programs and campaigns to nationalize the workforce have been rampant across the Gulf since the 1970s. High levels of unemployment remain a key factor in underlying nationalization policies, and broad labor reforms across the Sultanate have been taking place for decades. Termed as "Omanization," the ultimate goal of this agenda is to improve the quality and quantity of jobs available for Omani nationals, especially as the expatriate population has been traditionally high, and the amount of unemployed youth has skyrocketed. According to the World Bank, youth unemployment estimates for Omanis are as high as 49%, which highlights the urgency of employment initiatives

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

not only in the Sultanate, but for all other Gulf countries that are suffering from similar challenges.[62]

While Oman is the GCC country with the lowest expatriate population, amounting to approximately 40%, the Sultanate has significantly lower oil and natural gas reserves, meaning that Omani public expenditures are relatively lower than that of their neighbors. This is a cause for concern regarding sustainability in traditional approaches to mitigating unemployment issues in the country, which have often been increasing public sector wage bills by absorbing citizens into government jobs and providing generous social benefits for its citizens. This rentier-state approach has dominated all GCC nations, leading to an influx of issue-pacification that has not been a viable solution for the long term. With nations depending less on oil and gas revenues and attempting to diversify their economies, public debt has been soaring. With a new generation coming into the workforce and oil prices dwindling, pressure on the government to provide jobs is growing.[63]

In order to remedy this problem, sweeping economic reforms in 2011 were added to the more gradual preceding policies - directly as a response to the Arab Spring protests. During that year, the government pledged to create 55,000 new jobs by 2012, with an additional 56,000 promised for 2013. New employees would mostly serve in the military or state security sectors and unemployment benefits were raised to 150 Omani riyal (390 USD) per month. In an attempt to offset government spending, mandated wage hikes for Omanis were instituted by the government for the private sector, attempting to attract more Omanis to these jobs. In July 2013, the minimum wage was also raised by 60% to 325 Omani riyal (844 USD). As part of ongoing

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[62] Robert Mogielnicki, "New Omani Initiatives Reflect Gulf States' Push to Nationalize Labor Force," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 10 January 2019, https://agsiw.org/new-omani-initiatives-reflect-gulf-states-push-to-nationalize-labor-forces/.
[63] Ibid.

Omanization practices, the government called for the doubling of quotas for Omani participation in the labor force - from a previous 15% to a high of 30% in 2013.[64]

Additionally, Oman has taken policy measures since 2011 to make the country less attractive to expatriate residents. In February 2013, the government voted to restrict the number of expatriate workers in Oman to 33% of the total population, in an attempt "to create an employment balance."[65] Later in January 2018, the Ministry of Manpower launched a ban on expatriate work visas - which was originally designed for six months but ultimately was extended - impacting eighty-seven professions. Later in November 2018, this ban was expanded to include more professional roles, producing more than 26,000 jobs for Omani citizens. Similar policies have been found to be implemented across the GCC, as the push to employ and benefit their respective nationals becomes more acute.[66]

Apart from these efforts, the government increased Omanization quotas in the industrial, tourism, and travel sectors as well. In the near future, other segments of the economy are expected to see tougher labor regulations. By 2020, firms operating in the logistics sector were supposed to boost their Omanization rates to 20%, which would be up from 17% in 2017. While other Gulf states allow firms to evade workforce nationalization requirements in free zones, Oman has much stricter laws, and only permits partial labor exemptions within these zones.[67]

Part of the challenge that plagues not only the Sultanate but the entire GCC is the lack of qualified citizens to fill these opened positions. While efforts in workforce nationalization by Gulf governments are for the benefit of their citizens, industry stereotypes, social stigmas, and

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[64] Linda Pappas Funsch, "Challenges and Opportunities in a New Century," in *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*, 178-179.
[65] Ibid.
[66] "Expat Visa Ban May Be Extended: Ministry of Manpower," Times of Oman, 9 December 2018, https://timesofoman.com/article/569772.
[67] "Oman to Hike Nationalisation Quotas in the Industrial, Tourism Sectors for 2019," Gulf Business, 20 December 2018, https://gulfbusiness.com/oman-hike-nationalisation-quotas-industrial-tourism-sectors-2019/.

lower wages often discourage Gulf nationals from filling these lower-end jobs. While some may be discouraged by these notions, many others simply lack the skills and qualifications to adequately fill these roles, putting greater pressure on educational institutions to bring nationals up to speed. Gaps in the labor force could lead to broader ramifications across the region, and while Oman decreased the number of expatriates by 96,000 between January and July 2018, there is little proof to show that these positions are being completely filled by Omanis. This will impact economic growth and diversification processes in the long-run, and therefore, must be addressed in the near future.[68]

While the Sultanate has taken great steps to alleviate unemployment across the country, it seems that these efforts have not been enough to stymie unpopular sentiment. In January 2019, Omanis took to the streets in Muscat, Dhofar, and Salalah to protest the lack of jobs and unemployment aid. Congregating in front of the Ministry of Manpower in Muscat, and its offices in the other two governorates, Omani citizens pressured the government not just in 2019 but in 2018 as well, subsequently leading to the creation of 25,000 public sector jobs. Following the protests of 2019, the Omani government declared that it would allocate five billion Omani riyal (thirteen billion USD) to the sectors of education, health, housing, and welfare. In addition to this, the government declared that it would open a national center for unemployment, addressing issues in both the public and private sectors.[69] In regards to the private sector, Omanization policies have yielded limited results in years past, showing the slow pace in the process of diversifying sources of revenue.[70]

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[68] Robert Mogielnicki, "New Omani Initiatives Reflect Gulf States' Push to Nationalize Labor Force," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

[69] "Omani Government Promises to Address Unemployment After Nationwide Protests," Middle East Eye, 3 January 2019, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/omani-government-promises-address-unemployment-after-nationwide-protests.

[70] Marc Valeri, "Identity Politics and Nation-Building under Sultan Qaboos," 193.

II. Employment Statistics and Analysis

In an analysis of Oman's statistical yearbooks pertaining to employment, ranging from 2009 to 2018, a number of conclusions can be reached. Critically, if the goal of the government is to shift away from expatriates and employ more Omanis, then we have not seen a clear indication that this has taken place. For the most part, there have been more jobs created, but they are relatively consistent in the employment ratio of expatriates to Omani nationals over the years, both in the public and private sector. This is also true of data regarding civil service jobs in al-Buraimi, which could be due to the idea that more Omanis may be going across the border to receive jobs in the Emirates. Another possibility is that while employment is being increased across the board, government policies to discourage expatriates have not been as efficient as expected.

Additionally, these policies, which effectively come across as bans, have been enacted in certain sectors, but it is difficult to determine if they are being enforced properly. Two of the targeted sectors in these policies are oil and gas. The oil and gas sector met its target for 86% Omani employment, but this does not apply to the numerous contractors that service their operations. These contracted positions, particularly involving construction, utilize cheaper labor from South Asia. These jobs are not typically where the majority of expatriates are employed within the Sultanate. It is possible that nationalization policies do not substantially alter the employment rates between Omanis and expatriates due to the amount of low-skill, contracted labor that supports industries targeted for Omanization.[71] For example, the construction industry has an Omanization rate of only 10%.[72] For the sectors that are considered undesirable to

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[71] "Developing the Workforce: Omanisation Has Created Both Challenges and Opportunities," Oxford Business Group, 2013, https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/developing-workforce-omanisation-has-created-both-challenges-and-opportunities.
[72] "Job Training and Incentives to Support Development of Oman's Workforce," Oxford Business Group, 2018, https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/empowering-citizens-continuing-develop-local-workforce-through-incentives-training-and-regulatory.

Omanis, it will be difficult both for the state to provide adequate incentives to employ a greater ratio of Omanis, or for business owners to pay salaries that will attract Omanis to this type of work.

In addition to the employment data found in the statistical yearbooks, the World Bank provides information on unemployment in Oman. Overall, unemployment seems to be dropping consistently over the same time frame of 2009 to 2018 (see fig.2).[73] The few years of unemployment data provided in the statistical yearbooks seems to indicate that unemployment in al-Buraimi tracks closer to general unemployment in Oman than the data for Muscat. This might indicate that as a town on the periphery, employment in al-Buraimi is much harder to come by than a city in the center like Muscat.[74] Because the lack of employment opportunities in al-Buraimi is relatively high, this might explain the need to find employment across the border in al-Ain. However, unemployment information in these yearbooks has only been available since 2016, which makes it difficult to ascertain how accurate the numbers from the World Bank projections might be. Additionally, as Oman is an authoritarian state, it is also likely that the data being provided is not completely accurate. Therefore, it is essential to take the statistics as indicators rather than as objective information.

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[73] World Bank Group, "Unemployment Rate: Oman," https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?end=2018&locations=OM&start=2009&view=chart.
[74] Scott J. Weiner, "The Muscat Commute: A Young Generation's Journey Between Tradition and Modernity," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2015, https://agsiw.org/the-muscat-commute-a-young-generations-journey-between-tradition-and-modernity/.
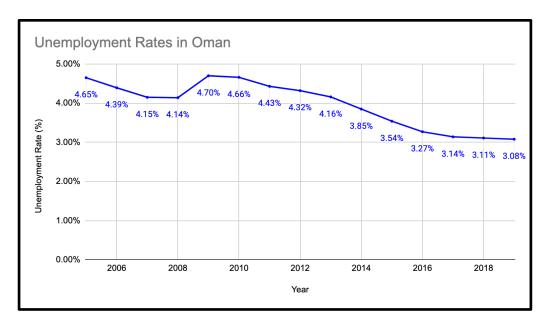
Fig. 2. Graph showing unemployment rate in Oman from 2005 to 2019. Source: The World Bank.

III. Sustainable Development 2030 and Oman's Vision 2040

As the Sultanate's economic woes put pressure on the Omani government to act,

employment nationalization policies are just one means by which to solve the nation's financial

burdens. Since 2011, the Omani government has attempted to remedy the nation's economic

grievances in order to prepare the nation for a future less dependent on oil revenues and also to

eliminate the chance of another round of unrest. By incorporating the United Nations'

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 into Oman's ninth five-year plan (2016-2020),

the Sultanate's Supreme Council for Planning made a drastic change in Omani economic policy

by including community participation. This novel inclusivity in the decision-making process

included over forty panels and workshops, with an aim of introducing the community to the

ministries' plans and receiving feedback for tailored development.[75]

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[75] "Broad Community Participation: Oman's Approach to Achieving the SDGs," in *First Voluntary Review of the Sultanate of Oman 2019*, United Nations, July 2019, 18. https://www.scp.gov.om/PDF/2030Report.pdf.

As a forward-thinker, Sultan Qaboos set in motion the plans for "Vision 2040" before his death; a planning program that is designed to further develop Oman through social, political, and economic means past the UN's goals for 2030. In his words, "[we are] developing the future vision with mastery and high precision in light of broad societal consensus and with the participation of all segments of society. The vision should be relevant to the socioeconomic context and objectively foresee the future, to be recognized as a guide and key reference for planning activities for the next two decades."[76]

 In order to develop each aspect of society, Vision 2040 is separated into several committees in charge of themes, such as "People and Society" and "Economy and Development," among others. Under the direction of former Chairman Haitham bin Tariq - now His Majesty Sultan of Oman - Vision 2040 has become a more in-depth way to include citizens in the development of the country while having each theme work hand-in-hand to reach this goal.[77] For Haitham, "Oman Vision 2040 is the Sultanate's gateway to overcome challenges, keep pace with regional and global changes, generate and seize opportunities to foster economic competitiveness and social well-being, stimulate growth, and build confidence in all economic, social and developmental relations nationwide."[78]

The key challenges to be addressed by Vision 2040 are providing for demographic growth in services such as jobs, education, and healthcare, in addition to diversifying the economic base, which is needed in order to fund future development projects and sustain a high economic growth rate. As the slogan of Vision 2040 states, "Moving Forward with Confidence," this development program is considered by the Omani government as a "game changer" for the country, relying on investments, production, and exports. More than forty thousand participants -

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[76] "Royal Directives," in *Vision Document,* Oman Vision 2040, 11 September 2019, 7, https://www.2040.om/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Oman2040Vision-Document-–-Arabic-FinalENC.pdf.
[77] "About the Vision," Oman Vision 2040, https://www.2040.om/en/oman-vision-2040/about-the-vision/.
[78] "Address by His Majesty Haitham bin Tarik," in *Vision Document*, Oman Vision 2040, 11 September 2019, 9.

or "stakeholders - from across the country were part of the process in planning this vision, giving way to a push for equitable development across Oman's governorates under the stated themes.[79]

As for Oman's commitment to the United Nations' SDGs, Vision 2040 aligns with these goals for 2030, in seeking to provide a diversified economy that benefits "All of Oman" (see footnote),[80] in addition to fostering "a society proud of its identity and culture and [is] committed to its citizenship." For both the 2030 SDGs and Vision 2040, the biggest challenge for policymakers in Oman is the issue of employment for Omani nationals, especially youth, with an overly dense supply of nationals in the public sector and a collective unwillingness by Omanis to enter the private sector. Aligning with SDG commitments, Vision 2040 aims to address this issue.[81]

Under the umbrella of the "Economy and Development" theme, the general aim is to "continue the policy of building a diversified, dynamic, globally interactive and competitive economy that meets the present and future needs of the citizens, in which the private sector has a prominent role." In order to achieve this goal, economic diversification is key, with a push away from a dependency on oil as the main source of revenue. With this in mind, this theme goes further to promote balanced and sustainable development within all Omani governorates, diluting the social differences between them and optimizing the utilization of their individual natural

[79] Dr. Yousuf Hamed al Balushi, "Oman Vision 2040: Moving Forward with Confidence," Oman Observer, 10 February 2020, https://www.omanobserver.om/oman-vision-2040-moving-forward-with-confidence/.
[80] The "All of Oman" initiative consisted of a one-day meeting in each governorate attended by 200-300 targeted men and women (total 3040), during which the general context of Oman Vision 2040 was presented. This meeting was followed by a dialogue session led by natives of the concerned governorate with the participation of representatives of Oman Vision 2040 committees. These community brainstorming sessions aimed at exchanging ideas and devising a vision that captures the ambitions and aims of all groups of society. See *First Voluntary Review of the Sultanate of Oman 2019*, United Nations, July 2019, 34. and *All of Oman*, Oman Vision 2040 (translated from Arabic), 11 September 2019, https://www.2040.om/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/All-of-Oman-Report.pdf.
[81] "Broad Community Participation: Oman's Approach to Achieving the SDGs," in *First Voluntary Review of the Sultanate of Oman 2019*, United Nations, July 2019, 24.

resources. Essentially, the theme "Economy and Development" is aimed at bringing greater development and diversifying each governorate's economy in an equitable way.[82]

Looking at the separate theme of "People and Society," Oman's Vision 2040 aims at utilizing social inclusion, technical development, and identity in order to promote equitable development across the country. This theme goes hand-in-hand with "Economy and Development," in that it strives to broaden citizens' technical skill sets in order to foster sustainable economic development in each governorate, all while promoting an identity of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial spirit. By harnessing the concept of "Omani identity" in this theme, Vision 2040 is pushing Omani citizens to take development into their own hands by gaining the skills necessary to achieve a sustainable economy.[83]

IV. Impacts of Economic Policy on Identity

Prior to Vision 2040, the slow pace of diversification and limited results of Omanization produced growing frustrations, which were made sharper by the multiple dividing lines of Omani identity. Before promoting this economic program in 2014, the only available channel to express frustrations had been in the "identity" rhetoric, which was due to the government's intransigence about sharing the political decision-making process with the people. No independent trade unions, lobbies, or even political parties were present to help release these frustrations. While many of these outlets are still banned, it is important to note the inclusion of local population actors and community leaders in shaping Vision 2040. Thus, by keeping the general population out of prior economic policy creation, subnational identities became the only alternatives. As the Omani population grew more frustrated with the government and its slow effects in policy, a new

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[82] "Economy," Themes, Oman Vision 2040, https://www.2040.om/en/oman-vision-2040/themes/economy-and-development/.

[83] Dr. Yousuf Hamed al Balushi, "Inspiring Omanis to Become More Entrepreneurial," Oman Observer, 7 March 2020, https://www.omanobserver.om/inspiring-omanis-to-become-more-entrepreneurial/.

social contract was needed, with inclusivity as part of the glue to hold the shared Omani identity together for its citizens.[84]

Pushing self-sufficiency and an entrepreneurial spirit into the all-encompassing melting pot that is considered "Omani identity" is an important component of Vision 2040. In this endeavor, the government is beginning to take an active role in fixing the negative impacts of the rentier-state model by shifting the meaning of "Omaniness." Additionally, with an emphasis on community participation in the decision-making process, the five-year plan for 2020, the UN's SDGs for 2030, and Vision 2040 push for an Omani identity that is both proud of its citizenship and is active in its decision-making process.[85] By changing the social contract between citizens and the state, the goal is that, ultimately, Omanis will see themselves as possessing the capabilities to provide for themselves - thanks to government initiatives - and will become less dependent on state coffers and benefits.[86]

This utilization of identity in Vision 2040 is a clever maneuver by the Omani government under Sultan Qaboos to fix its economic problems with as little social-political blowback as possible. By providing their people with the means to "get off the government's dime" and having a say in the decision-making process, this essentially transforms Omani identity - and that of the rentier subjecthood - into one that is not only typically socially tolerant, but also promotes active participation. While this seems like a step in the right direction for an economically-shifting country, will a government-orchestrated push away from the traditional rentier-subject mentality be successful as time progresses, or will we see friction between citizens and the state?

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[84] Marc Valeri, "Identity Politics and Nation Building under Sultan Qaboos," 193.
[85] "Broad Community Participation: Oman's Approach to Achieving the SDGs," in *First Voluntary Review of the Sultanate of Oman 2019*, United Nations, July 2019, 24.
[86] Dr. Yousuf Hamed al Balushi, "Inspiring Omanis to Become More Entrepreneurial."

V. Sultan Haitham: Economic Policy and Creating a "New Identity"

On the tenth of January 2020, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said passed away, leaving the nation in mourning for the loss of their leader. "Baba Qaboos," as he was fondly known, left in his wake a highly developed country ready to take on the political, social, and economic challenges of the future. Without a direct heir, Sultan Qaboos had designated Haitham bin Tariq Al Said (Qaboos's first cousin) as the next leader for the sultanate, unveiled in a televised government process hours after Qaboos's death. As the former Minister of Culture and Heritage, along with serving as the undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the chairman of Oman's Vision 2040, Haitham was considered the best official to take on the role of sultan. Understanding the meaning of an "Omani identity" and having knowledge to tackle economic and political challenges from his former positions, Haitham is deemed to have successfully taken on the role of sultan, all without stepping on the shoes of Qaboos's legacy.[87]

As the longest ruling Gulf leader, Sultan Qaboos's reputation as a peaceful mediator in matters of foreign affairs was safeguarded, as Haitham has stated in several speeches his intentions to continue this legacy towards the Sultanate's neighbors and partners. However, pertaining to domestic affairs, Haitham has already made his views clear that Oman will take an even more bold approach to economic policy. Like most of its neighbors, Oman is locked into severe financial debt as the impacts of the rentier state model start to decline and oil and gas becomes less economically viable. Sustainability and debt deletion are key for the new sultan, and as he stated in his very first televised speech, a "complete revision" of government companies and policy is necessary to tackle Oman's economic challenges.[88]

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[87] Robert Mogielnicki, "Qaboos Successor Must Focus on Economic Prioritization," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 13 January 2020, https://agsiw.org/qaboos-successor-must-focus-on-economic-prioritization/.
[88] Bobby Ghosh, "Oman's New Ruler Takes A Big Reform Risk," Gulf Business, 7 March 2020, https://gulfbusiness.com/omans-new-ruler-takes-big-reform-risk/.

Willing to break from the more conservative and incremental economic policies of his predecessor, Sultan Haitham's drive for reform could create social challenges within the country, potentially putting his rule in a negative light for his people. Since oil prices have slumped in 2014, posted deficits are expected to reach 8.4% of the GDP, with the International Monetary Fund forecasting no surpluses until at least 2024. As still accounting for more than 70% of the economy, the oil and gas sector continues to be the main source for government revenue.[89] As the new sultan knows, fixing Oman's lopsided economy is crucial to rectify not only its dependency on loans, but also iron out its social problems as well. As the largest employer is the government, the Omani people have been dependent on the promise of jobs within this sector for decades, and have protested most notably in 2011 and 2019 for an increase in government jobs to decrease unemployment levels. As previously noted, this serves as a severe problem for not only Oman, but the entire GCC, as jobs in the government are used as a means to pacify the impacts of a growing population with a dependency on an expatriate workforce.[90]

As the traditional social contract in Oman is continuing to be challenged under Vision 2040 with Sultan Haitham now at the reigns, some argue that this focus on domestic and economic policy is where his leadership successes and failures will be determined. However, there is also the question of identity in Oman - how viable is the identity cornerstone in the cult-of-personality placed around Sultan Qaboos? In an interview with the former U.S. Ambassador to Oman Richard Schmierer (2009-2012), he states that thanks to Qaboos's work in steadily developing the country, Omanis are now ready to move on from this identity dependence rooted in the former sultan, and that the country has reached a "normalized and mature" stage in its statehood. Sultan Qaboos was a "once in a lifetime" leader, and Oman will never "need" to

[89] Robert Mogielnicki, "Qaboos Successor Must Focus on Economic Prioritization."
[90] Bobby Ghosh, "Oman's New Ruler Takes A Big Reform Risk," Gulf Business.

experience this kind of leader again, and thus, Sultan Haitham could not (and should not) ever expect to reach the same level that Qaboos attained in the eyes of the Omani people.[91]

With that being said, there is still a push within the country to solidify Qaboos's role in being the centerpiece of a shared Omani identity. What would normally be the case in other monarchies of replacing the official photographs of one ruler with the next, Sultan Haitham understands what Qaboos means to his people, and has refrained from pulling down the charismatic ruler's portraits, but has only added his own to that of Qaboos's. Side-by-side, one strong beacon of Omani identity now sharing his seat with one who understands that identity, it is doubtful that Sultan Qaboos will be shifted to the background of the factors that make up Oman's unique identity. With this in mind, there could be challenges ahead for Sultan Haitham as he takes a bolder approach to rewriting Oman's social contract, ultimately challenging the remaining elements of rentierism in the nation's identity.

For Haitham, rectifying the Sultanate's economic issues must happen with more austerity, stating in his first royal speech on January 11th that "[o]ur only relief… is to pursue his (Sultan Qaboos's) rightful legacy and derive impetus for the brilliant steps that he treaded in full confidence and determination, to preserve the gains that he made and to build upon them."[92] Marching forward from Qaboos's death, for Haitham the *Nahda* continues with responsibility placed on the Omani people, stating in his second speech on February 23rd, "[w]e call upon all citizens, without exception, to safeguard the gains of the blessed renaissance, and effectively contribute in maintaining the triumphant parade...." As the period of mourning for Qaboos had

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[91] Dr. Richard Schmierer, Former United States Ambassador to Oman (2009-2012), Interview, 26 February 2020.
[92] Omani Ministry of Information, "Speech of His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik," 11 January 2020, https://omaninfo.om/images/library/file/Book953388.pdf.

ended, this second speech marked the turning point for the Omani nation, with economic development as the top priority.[93]

Laid out in Haitham's February speech, new policies were to be enacted that continued the goals of Vision 2040, but required stringent revision. Under these revisions, the employment environment of both the public and private sectors are to be continuously improved, in addition to adopting new employment systems that enable the government to effectively harness the country's natural resources, expertise, and competency. What is most important about this speech is Haitham's statement that "[n]ation building and development are a public responsibility that requires the commitment of all, without exempting anyone from their role…."[94] While Haitham could have continued to follow the original version of Vision 2040 and the nationalization policies under Sultan Qaboos, he instead chose to hit the ground running with more economic reform that pushes for further inclusivity.

Calling for the Omani people to make "sacrifices" in order to preserve the country's "dignity and strength," Sultan Haitham attributes the people's loyalty to "advancing national interests" over personal interests.[95] While the government itself has always played the most instrumental role in furthering development under Sultan Qaboos, the role of the people themselves was seemingly secondary to the goal of economic development. However, through Haitham's bold rhetoric, the role of the Omani people in successful development is heightened to being the primary, and most crucial, element of this overarching goal.

While Qaboos's version of economic policy and reform was very much a bold step in the right direction for Oman, Haitham's version is much more so. The role of the Omani people in the nation's success has been a main facet of Qaboos's vision since his ascension to the throne in

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[93] Omani Ministry of Information, "Speech of His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik," 23 February 2020, https://omaninfo.om/images/library/file/Book768139.pdf.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

1970; however, oil wealth and rentierism lead to an "arbiter of all" relationship between the government and the people. This relationship, and source of identity for the Omani people, has changed over time - shifting the limelight towards a shared responsibility and rewriting the old rentier-based social contract. With Haitham, this rewriting of identity seemingly takes a step further, and while implementation of his version of economic reforms continues to play out, it is apparent that a primary facet of Omani identity under this new sultan will include a role in the nation's economic success.

Potential Pitfalls in State-Identity Formation: Al-Buraimi

Peripheral communities in Oman will be essential to the state's nation-building policies in light of demonstrations and unrest during the 2011 Arab Spring. he Northern border town of al-Buraimi offers insight into the challenges faced by state social and economic reform. The history of the town starts as a small collection of nine villages surrounding the al-Buraimi oasis as far back as the eighteenth century. This region faced repeated occupations by the Ikhwan soldiers of the Wahhabi movement in 1800 and 1853.[96] Forces from Saudi Arabia occupied the Buraimi region in 1922, showing the continued contests for sovereignty over the area.

The most famous of these disputes was the Buraimi Oasis Dispute in 1955. This incident occurred when Saudi forces occupied part of the al-Buraimi region using historical claims in order to gain control over prospective oil reserves in the area. This resulted in a military and diplomatic dispute between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and the United Kingdom, ending with a British-led military intervention.[97] The subsequent political negotiations demarcated the current boundaries between Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE. Buraimi's

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[96] Michael Morton, *Buraimi: The Struggle for Power, Influence, and Oil in Arabia* (I.b. Tauris, 2014), 6.
[97] Michael Morton, "The Buraimi Affair: Oil Prospecting and Drawing the Frontiers of Saudi Arabia," in *Asian Affairs* 45, no. 3 (February 2014), 12, 13.

historical context is critical to understanding the dilemma faced by residents of the region due to the varying levels of influence different regional powers exerted over the region.

Linking the historical experiences of repeated occupation and the creation of boundaries is important for understanding identity issues in modern day al-Buraimi. The close proximity between al-Buraimi and its Emirati twin city of al-Ain creates identity issues for residents of the al-Buraimi region.[98] The contrast between the development of both cities post-independence under both Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi are stark. Al-Ain grew, in terms of population and economically, exponentially relative to al-Buraimi, with a population of 519,272 compared to 104,073. Al-Ain also retains closer ties to the inner circles of political power in Abu Dhabi, due to many members of the ruling al-Nahyan family originating from the city – including Sheikh Zayed, considered to be one of the founders of the modern UAE.[99]

Al-Buraimi, in contrast, suffered from economic and political neglect. Significant numbers of Omani citizens worked across the border in the UAE – particularly in the military and police – due to the lack of job and educational prospects. Increasing distrust between the UAE and Oman led to tighter border restrictions and expulsion of Omanis from federal Emirati positions.[100] By enacting stricter controls on their borders, both Oman and the UAE are alienating communities on both sides of the border in pursuit of exclusive nationalizing projects, such as Oman's Vision 2040. The differences in governance between the two cities since 1970 represents the priority placed on the local development between the Omani and Emirati governments.

Geographical research on Oman provides insight into the economic and social shifts affecting residents of al-Buraimi and how historical migration affects residents outside of

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[98] Marc Valeri, "So Close, So Far. National Identity and Political Legitimacy in UAE-Oman Border Cities," in *Geopolitics,* Vol. 23 (2018), 592.
[99] Ibid, 594.
[100] Ibid, 595.

Muscat. The region of al-Buraimi, along with many other peripheral governorates in Oman, suffers from a condition known as *littoralization*. Littoralization refers to a broad movement of the population towards coastal regions, with this ongoing process being driven by the transition to an outward-facing economy. In Oman's case, this shift occurred due to an economy dominated by the production and export of hydrocarbons. The demographic shifts led to the capital region of Muscat and al-Batinah comprising 52% of the population.[101] Understanding demographic shifts in Oman's population, and their economic drivers, is crucial to understanding the variety of social and economic issues facing the residents of al-Buraimi and the broader population.

In regards to the outbreak of demonstrations in 2011 during the Arab Spring, demonstrations and rallies led to clashes with security forces in both al-Buraimi and the epicenter of the protests in Sohar. The state fortified both cities through the deployment of the army in May and April of 2011, which continued after the end of the protests, turning both areas into heavily fortified cities dotted with numerous police and internal security bases.[102] The securitization of al-Buraimi shows the Omani state's concern for its peripheral communities and its heightened sensitivity to any public demonstrations of unrest.

Al-Buraimi offers a unique case study to understand how the experiences of its residents connect with the nation-building process undertaken by Sultan Qaboos. How do they reconcile the differences in development between its twin city of al-Ain? How are tightening border controls affecting their perception of their Emirati neighbors? How do Omanis process losing their positions in the Emirati police and military as a result of their own nation-building programs? The ongoing efforts to meet Oman's Vision 2040 plan are important for al-Buraimi especially due to its focus on Omanization of the economy and broader society. Due to the pull

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[101] Mokhtar Balgacem, "Is Littoralization Reconfiguring the Omani Territory?" in Wippel S. (eds), *Regionalizing Oman. United Nations University Series on Regionalism* Vol. 6, (2013) 223.
[102] Marc Valeri, "So Close, So Far. National Identity and Political Legitimacy in UAE-Oman Border Cities," 602

of cross-border services and employment in al-Ain, developments in Al-Buraimi are significant in the context of Vision 2040. All of these questions are important to understanding how Omanis on the periphery of their society engage with the government's construction of an Omani national identity.

Conclusion: Analysis of Economic Policies on Identity

Therefore, can we say that economic policies by way of employment opportunities do impact and, in turn, foster a durable national identity in Oman? Looking at the efforts by the Omani government to hasten the development of the country by various means, economic policy has been shown to have impacted identity formation in both positive and negative ways. Oman's changing social contract under the new Sultan Haitham might cause socio-political kickback in the future, as some citizens might not be ready to give up traditional rentier-state subjecthood. However, as we have seen with the 2011 Arab Spring and other incidents in Oman within the past ten years, there has been a yearning for more involvement in the decision-making processes of the government by Omani nationals.

With the transition in power to Sultan Haitham, there are several possible outcomes in how Omani identity will be impacted. The economic and social reforms currently being enacted by the Omani government may lead to a reconsideration of Omaniness among citizens - particularly if they become included in the political decision-making process. The employment reforms to diversify the workforce away from the public sector places greater agency in the hands of business owners and entrepreneurs, possibly creating a new base of power outside of the government. Moreover, if Sultan Haitham decides to provide the Majlis al-Shura with even limited legislative powers this would be a decisive step away from the previous experiences of subjecthood towards a new system of civic nationalism.

When the government does not meet its citizens expectations, and especially when it alienates them, those citizens lose faith in the government and the identity it stands for. Peripheral communities like al-Buraimi are especially vulnerable to the pull of transnational identities and services abroad without policies that invest in their communities. This lack of investment can strengthen subnational identities in their competition with a national one. Oman's long history of unrest and fragmented identities points to this possibility, showing that while the government has been largely successful in creating a strong national identity under the reign of Sultan Qaboos, this identity can indeed be challenged to some degree.[103] With Qaboos no longer in the picture, Sultan Haitham must strive to hold up a shared national identity. By enacting economic policies that place citizens as the primary designers of the nation's fate, this "new identity" becomes a viable effort to foster a durable national identity in a period of great political and economic transition.

When the government is no longer considered the benefactor and the ruler no longer the "arbiter of all," this takes some pressure off of the government in upholding the national identity. However, if this new social contract is changing the citizens' expectations of government responsibilities, then it is up to the government to ensure that the decision-making process itself does not revert back to exclusivity. For inclusivity to work to the benefit of both the government and the people, maintaining and widening community participation is in the best interest of both parties. This inclusivity allows citizens to become stakeholders in their own future, reducing the attractiveness of subnational identities and making a shared Omani national identity the most viable option.

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[103] Ibid.

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