



SULTAN QABOOS AND MODERN OMAN

1970–2020

Edited by ALLEN JAMES FROMHERZ
and ABDULRAHMAN AL-SALIMI

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CONTRIBUTORS

Calvin H. Allen Jr. is Emeritus Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Shenandoah University, Virginia where he was also Professor of Middle East History.

Javier Guirado Alonso is a PhD Student and Teaching Assistant in Gulf and Middle East History at Georgia State University.

Juan Cole is Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan.

Maria F. Curtis is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Houston, Clear Lake, Texas.

Sean Foley is Professor of History at Middle Tennessee State University.

Allen James Fromherz is Director of the Middle East Studies Center and Professor of Gulf, Mediterranean and Middle East History at Georgia State University, Atlanta.

Victoria Penziner Hightower is Professor of Middle East and Gulf History at the University of North Georgia.

Valerie J. Hoffman is Emerita Professor of Religion at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer is George and Barbara Dales Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Salim al-Kharusi is Assistant Professor of Law at the College of Law, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat.

Jeffrey R. Kinnier is a PhD student in Indian Ocean History at Georgia State University.

Krista Lewis is Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Appalachian State University in North Carolina.

Mandana E. Limbert is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Queens College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Francis Owtram is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, UK.

J. E. Peterson is Historian and Political Analyst on the Contemporary Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf.

Barbara Michalak-Pikulska is Professor of Arabic Literature and the Head of the Arabic Department, Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

Jody Pritt is Director of International Student and Scholar Services at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

Uzi Rabi is Director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Abdulrahman al-Salimi is an Omani scholar and the author of several works on Ibadi and Omani history.

James Worrall is Associate Professor in International Relations and Middle East Studies at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

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INTRODUCTION
SULTAN QABOOS, OMANI SOCIETY,
AND THE “BLESSED RENAISSANCE”,
1970–2020

Allen James Fromherz

Sultan Qaboos made nearly 100 official speeches and various pronouncements throughout his reign from 1970 to 2020. These were awaited, social events, especially in the early years, with Omanis gathering around the one TV in town or hearing his voice over the radio.¹ In addition to moments of soaring rhetoric, his conversational style and engagement, detailing means of increasing oil production, or drip irrigation systems for date palms, seemed to involve the public even in the minutiae of governing. He reached out to Omanis on both a practical and emotional level by speaking to the people, addressing their concerns in their everyday lives, much as he would during his many driving trips around the country when he met with Omanis from various backgrounds one-on-one. He also created a sense of a shared plan, a common framework, especially during longer national day speeches that went into great detail, committing government departments in ways that would be remembered by the people. A message seemed to unite all his speeches: he could not do this alone. He empowered Omanis in the building of modern Oman a process of social transformation that he and Omanis labeled “The Blessed Renaissance.” In 1974, “the success we see in the sectors of both our local and international policies is the true reflection of the efforts of our people . . .”² Sometimes, his speech seemed familiar, relatable. In 1975, as

if to speak directly to Omanis who were experiencing the marvels of color vision, he said, “Today I am happy to be addressing you on Oman Color TV . . .”³ In 1980, on the tenth anniversary of National Day, he reiterated that the achievements of the Omani Renaissance, the building of roads, schools, and hospitals, the creation of opportunities when “we were poor in everything except in the strength of our Omani traditions . . .” was not his effort, or that of his government alone. Rather, “every Omani can hold up his head with pride at our achievements. The benefits of modern medicine are available to everyone; schools have been built. We now have 100,000 boys and girls receiving education.”⁴ In 2001, “Shura (consultation) is firmly rooted in the life of the Omani community . . . Nations are being built solely by the hands of the citizens . . .” In 2009, he made clear the involvement of women, “Since the beginning of this era we have given absolute priority to the participation of Omani women in the Blessed Renaissance.”⁵ The message was clear each time. Omanis could not be passive recipients of the state’s largess, or mere subjects of the Sultan. Instead of merely imposing change from above, the Sultan sought their cooperation in the building of modern Oman.



Figure I.1 Oman’s Sultan Qaboos chairs the opening session of the annual summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Muscat on December 29, 2008. Credit MARWAN NAAMANI/AFP via Getty Images.

Through these speeches and his moderate and peaceful demeanor, Sultan Qaboos became, to Omanis, the embodiment of an integrated Omani ideal. He modeled pursuing change, and choosing elements of European society, while preserving Omani tradition and identity. He spoke in various venues, from universities, to consultative council chambers, to police academies and the United Nations. Even his style of dress, wearing the traditional Omani headdress, the *muzzar*, which distinguished him as an Omani, set him apart from other Gulf leaders as seen here at his opening of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2008 (Figure I.1). Other Arab rulers commonly wore the *bisht*, a black robe with gold trim, over *dishdasha* (white inner robe) with a checkered *shumagh* (often red and white) head covering. Sultan Qaboos, in contrast, wore the *bisht*, the *dishdasha* as well as his *muzzar*, not the checkered *shumagh*. This visually proclaimed his Arab and distinctively Omani identities simultaneously. In other speeches, he was in full military uniform (1990 National Day). In still others he wore a simple and humble, white *dishdasha* at his desk (2007 after a massive storm, Bait al-Barakah). Finally, he was seen “at ease,” but still militarily ready, wearing army combat camouflage during one address (1981 National Day). Choice of dress reflected the subject and audience addressed. Through his multiplicity of roles, Sultan Qaboos bin Said also saw himself as a bridge between the cultural, religious, and ideological divides in Oman; divides that were tearing apart other regions of the Middle East.

In 1970, the year he came to power, Oman was, like many of its neighbors, riven by geographical, religious, and social chasms. Of course, there were still supporters of his father and the world itself was vulnerable to turf wars between Soviet and U.S. cold warriors. In 1980, ten years after he came to power, the Sultan cited “unbridled ambitions of the Soviet Union” as one of the main threats facing the region and the world.⁶ A split along any one of Oman’s many divides could have threatened insurrection, civil war, and intervention by outside powers, especially those in the region hungry to take advantage of Oman’s new-found petroleum resources which were only beginning to be fully exploited in the late 1960s. The Sultan maintained a baseline of order and defended the borders of the Sultanate during a crucial period when borders were only just being drawn through sand and sea. He used force effectively when it was seen as necessary, putting down Oman’s many insurgencies that were funded to a large extent by outside powers. The Omani Renaissance was about more than building bridges, it was

proclaimed as a way to defeat the threat of communism. In 1972, on the second national day, he noted:

We are waging a battle for building our country in various fields of development, we are also waging a sacred and armed battle against the enemy of Islam and the country, supported by Marxist Aden . . . active international communism is working there to achieve its ambition in the Arab Peninsula to transform it into a huge communist camp . . . Oman is not a target (of the so-called Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf) in itself but is the door to the rest of the countries in the region, to sink them in a sea of blood, subversion, chaos, poverty, atheism and looting, as the Popular Front has done to the people of South Yemen.⁷

Development projects in Oman were part of a strategy encouraging the people of Dhofar and the Southern Province to join “their brothers, men of our Armed Forces, to fight for the sake of their faith, country, and dignity.” After all, as the Sultan stated in 1971, “we clearly affirm that Dhofar is an integral part of the Sultanate of Oman, to precisely the same extent that Muscat [the capital] is part of this dear Omani land.”⁸ As such, the expansion of infrastructure and development outside the capital was a matter of national survival and urgency. The acts of building and defending the nation were equated in 1975 in one of the Sultan’s main speeches addressed not to a council, but “to the people.” In speaking to the armed forces, he praised the situation of Dhofar and the remote mountain villages where healthcare and education infrastructure was being built. The Salalah–Thumrait road over the mountains became a “vital artery” in the region and helped to stabilize the gains against rebels in the region.⁹ Yemen was not the only source of trouble for Oman. Sultan Qaboos also defended Oman against attempts to consume valuable territory, such as at the border in al-Buraimi.

Emerging out of the 1970s with few of the immediate threats that had once destabilized its borders, Oman built an experienced, highly respected military, navy, and security system that helps to maintain its neutrality. Oman, however, was very careful about deploying its armed forces, rarely used outside national borders; Operation Desert Storm to liberate Kuwait being the major exception.¹⁰ Consensus, not force, was his most convincing, and most important, tool. Even as fighting raged in Dhofar, Sultan Qaboos focused on

creating and supporting a new vision of Oman's modernization, the Omani Renaissance (Ar. *Nahda*), which sought to repair existing social dichotomies. This creation of a stable social and governmental infrastructure, more than any military success alone, caused a domino effect that helped even in areas of fighting. Prioritizing development created a virtuous cycle. Oman's modernization program was implemented through consensus in a way that fed stability throughout Oman. That stability, in turn, led to more opportunities for careful modernization. He chose a path of moderation tailored to Oman's specific circumstances. This was a policy, in effect, that allowed pragmatic integration, the construction of a new Omani way between two opposing paths of change and continuity.

There were many choices and opportunities, as well as many limitations and existential risks, before the new Sultan on July 23, 1970, the date of his accession. His father, although he made important steps toward unification, including ending a parallel Imamate state, relied often on force and personal acquisition, not on building coalitions. Said bin Taimur was from a different generation of rulers. He seemed to see oil wealth as his to keep and he resisted the full deployment of new resources. He lacked a vision of modern Oman that involved the Omani people themselves. Sultan Qaboos, unlike his father, immediately began a program of distributing resources, including society in the process, and building webs of consensus and consultation based on new and traditional institutions and means of communication. Avoiding some of the downsides of so-called rentier states where oil wealth is merely given out and there is no, or little, investment in the state by those who receive that wealth passively, Sultan Qaboos actively and consistently called for the sustained involvement of Omani society and the Omani people. The concept of the "Blessed Renaissance", one that would keep aspects of both the past and the future, allowed the Sultan and his government to frame modernization in a way that avoided the backlash seen in other parts of the Middle East.

While his father saw the state as an extension of himself, and while some other rulers in the region distributed resources mainly to their own family, Sultan Qaboos, with no children of his own, made the Omani people his heirs. Sultan Qaboos and Omanis, through the Renaissance program, achieved what many outside observers considered impossible: a stable multi-sectarian, multiethnic, multi-religious state in the Middle East based on a

balance of tradition and modernity, local heritage and external ideas. Oftentimes, he made decisions for the benefit of his country, such as the nationalization of oil, that were diametrically opposed to the external interests of major Western oil companies. Other times, he encouraged new interpretations and modernizations of Islamic law that caused some rumblings of opposition within. Each time, these decisions were portrayed as a social effort, justified by a mission he laid out at the beginning of his reign: to create the social, governmental, and cultural conditions necessary for a stable and prosperous country. Like every good bridge-builder, he knew the importance of stabilizing the foundations of both banks, both sides of the bridge. Only when both sides are supported can the infrastructure of understanding bridge the span between them. Instead of choosing between East or West, modernization or tradition, Ibadi Islam or Sunni Islam, the interior of Oman or the ports, traditional Omani culture or European culture, Sultan Qaboos, with the backing of Omani society, supported the use of elements from each, turning dichotomies into opportunities for bridge-building. Sultan Qaboos actively sought out the consensus, something that went beyond the mere obedience or reverence of the Omani people. He realized that a sustainable, peaceful modernization could not occur without the distribution of the country's wealth to its people and the active and interested involvement of those people in the process of development. The Omani Renaissance, the name given by Qaboos to this program of modernization and renewal, was not a program imposed or distributed only from above, but a new and Omani-specific social attitude to modernization, an approach to the future, a national ideal that required Omanis from all backgrounds to come on board.

The social and cultural history of modern Oman, the change and adaptation within the many layers of Omani society from 1970 to 2020, the reign of Sultan Qaboos, is the focus of the studies in this book. With chapters on changes and continuities Omani society, law, health, religion, and even literature and poetry during the reign of Qaboos and based on the active efforts of Omanis at every level, not just a mandate from on high, this volume explores the extent and depth of Oman's successful modernization process. In addition to being a new approach with new perspectives, the book also serves as a corrective to certain trends in most studies of the Middle East. Oftentimes, Western observers have viewed Middle Eastern and, in particular, Gulf states

as “black boxes.” The exterior-facing sides of the boxes, the form of government, the source of their resources, their external alliances being prioritized as the most important aspect. The contents of the box, that is, the actual nuances of Gulf and Middle Eastern societies themselves, are treated as more or less irrelevant or even unknowable. This categorizing method, when taken to the extreme, has led to serious misunderstandings and highly inaccurate predictions. This book calls for looking inside the box, and a more nuanced understanding, one that puts the society and culture at the forefront, not as passive recipients of change but as active participants in modern history.

In addition to social factors, the specific character, decisions, and policies of the Sultan himself were also crucial to the rapid success of Oman. Aspects of the Sultan’s public image were tailored to a program of pragmatic integration between change and continuity. Here was a man rooted proudly in Oman and Arabia, but also educated in the West, capable of appreciating and fostering beauty from many cultures. Anecdotes about the Sultan from those who met him confirmed this remarkable aspect of the Sultan’s character. He embodied and bridged many worlds and possibilities.

One example of this bridging was Sultan Qaboos’ interest in classical music. Sultan Qaboos, throughout his reign from 1970 to 2020, loved Western classical music. In 1985, the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra (ROSO) was established as the first of its kind: composed of Omani musicians trained in classical music.¹¹ When he sponsored the playing of Mozart or Verdi, he also wore the clothes of a respected Ibadi Omani. In 2011, long before other Gulf states would open similar world-class cultural institutions, Sultan Qaboos inaugurated the Royal Opera House Muscat, the first in the Gulf open to the public. (Riyadh had an opera house, but it was private.) Although the project was met with some protests by Islamic scholars, the Opera House, a project close to the Sultan, opened after a decade of careful craftsmanship. Building it required a program of training in the lost arts of traditional Arabic woodworking and stonemasonry. The message communicated by the Arab–Western architecture of the Royal Opera House was both subtle and convincing. At first glance, the building has some of the same design features of a typical, European concert hall. Looking closer at the extensive and elaborate designs, traditional Arabic patterns from Oman and around the Middle East emerge. The building is a combination and celebration of the traditions

of Arabia and Europe and their capacity for dialogue. Opera House programming, which includes concerts from traditional Omani dance and music to the famed youth symphony orchestra of Venezuela, reflected Oman's status as a showcase of culture in a part of the world, the Gulf, more famous for skyscrapers and oil wells. A philosophy of diversity through unity, and change through continuity applied to the highly varied contours of Omani society, geography, and religion.

The Opera House, although opposed by some more conservative voices at first, was only one architectural legacy of the integration of cultures and styles during the Sultan Qaboos period. The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, a modern, architectural highlight of Muscat, Oman's capital, symbolized unity within the Islamic community as well a desire by the Sultan to follow a modernizing approach within his faith as an Ibadi Muslim. Sultan Qaboos ordered the construction of the Opera House only after 2001, the year of the official opening of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. The mosque was built purposefully as a celebration of many different Islamic styles, Islamic arts, and heritage from around the world, with multiple niches representing typical mosque decorative designs from Al-Andalus to Central Asia. For Sultan Qaboos, this was not just an Ibadi or an Omani mosque, even if he and most Omanis were Ibadi Muslims. Instead, the mosque was dedicated both to Islamic unity and to modernizing Islamic thought: ". . . We decided to make this blessed mosque a center of culture and thought that, with God's good grace and assistance, would contribute to the revival of the Islamic heritage—God willing—and highlight the civilized values of the Muslim nation while modernizing its approach to dealing with Islamic affairs and issues."¹²

The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque and the Royal Opera House, despite initially being challenged by some more conservative religious opinions in Oman, now stand as symbols of Sultan Qaboos' explicit, rhetorical program of unity across divisions pursued from the beginning of his reign. In each case, the message is both clear and subtle, divisions and diversities within Islam and within Oman need not be a source of intractable divisions. The Royal Opera House and the Sultan Qaboos Mosque are emblematic of a deeper, difficult, and challenging process of integration, unification, and bridge-building, pursued quietly, but persistently, throughout the reign of Qaboos.

From the beginning, in the far more turbulent 1970s, Qaboos realized he could not pursue this process of integrating supposed dichotomies on his

own; a sustainable project of national renewal could not be based on symbols or buildings alone. When he first arrived in Muscat after coming to power in 1970, Sultan Qaboos did not pursue an ideological approach, or make a pledge to a particular power or influence, even though southern Arabia was then a battlefield for the Cold War. Instead, he appealed to the people of Oman—calling for a program of integration and development that would require Omanis, and not just their ruler or new government, to participate. This Omani program of pragmatic integration and modernization would soon be called the Renaissance, or Rebirth. Of course, at an early stage many Omanis may have been apprehensive. What did this program of rebirth really mean? Will we need to abandon our culture, our identities and way of life as this new ruler opens the gates of our country to the outside world? Will the government really provide the services we need or will resources mainly be held by a few? What will happen to those who once fought against the Sultan’s father? By the end of the 1970s, however, enthusiasm among Omanis for “the Renaissance” was so strong that it became known as the “Blessed Renaissance.” There are several reasons for this; as the name “Renaissance” implies, the modernization of Oman and the power of the Sultan was not about forcing Oman and Omanis into the modern age from the top down. Unlike other Middle Eastern states where modernization was primarily a destructive process of secularization that pitted the state against society and religion, modernization in Oman did not mean the destruction of the particularities of Omani society and history. Instead of an imposed system or program brought in from outside and instituted purely from above, Sultan Qaboos explicitly encouraged all Omanis to join in a rebirth of Oman’s historical heritage, harkening back to an idealized history when Oman was a global center and crossroads of diversity. Importantly, Qaboos did not simply “take power” from his father or from the oil companies, who famously wanted to hoard the wealth of Oman’s oil reserves, which he later nationalized. Instead, he also handed power over to Omanis as a whole. He knew meaningful change could emerge from the cooperation of Omanis themselves. He admitted, from the beginning, the limits of his own power. In his first official address he stated:

We hope that this day will mark the beginning of a new age and a great future for us all . . . unless there is cooperation between the government and the people, we will not be able to build our country with the speed required to

free her from the backwardness she has endured for so long. The government and the people are as one body. If one of its limbs fails to do its duty, the other parts of the body suffer.

In his way of appealing to the power of the people, and in creating a particularly Omani program of Renaissance, a program that was not controlled by outside, ideological influences, but was homegrown, Sultan Qaboos did not hoard power or try to force Oman into a preordained ideological vision. The first address was brief, perhaps one of the shortest of his reign. But it was also one of the most important. The message was clear. This was the start of a new era for Oman that could be built only by Omanis themselves, not by intervention by outside powers, not by a process brought in from the outside or managed purely from above. By focusing on Oman and the Omani people, not on the British or the Soviets, not just on communism or capitalism, not on a false dichotomy of Islam or on Western ways, he avoided the typical conflicts between identity and unity, tradition and modernity, Islam and the West, ruler and ruled, that inflicted other states in the Middle East. Of course, there may have been some who may have wanted him to act more like a traditional strongman, to establish military rule, to force over the divisions within his country. Instead, the Sultan appealed not to the West or to technocratic secularization but to an Islamic, Arab, and particularly Omani tradition of authority through consensus. In the 1970s, there were tremendous pressures to impose either Soviet-supported and state-sponsored communism or Western-supported capital-sponsored democracy. Either choice was often a losing bargain for states forced to choose between the extraction of their resources by multinational corporations or the relinquishing of their sovereignty and identity to communist ideologies. Oman, instead, created its own system or model of modernity, called the Omani Renaissance.

Oman's modernization deserves study as a potential model of careful planning and pragmatic integration that avoided the ideological ruptures and upheavals of other modernization projects. By proclaiming the Renaissance as a bridge between memory and desire, past and present, Oman was not simply following the West or abandoning its own culture. Since the end of the Second World War, Western political scientists and sociologists alike

have predicted the inevitable end of traditional government systems. As societies became more educated and economies more developed, and as the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s seemed to lay bare the limits of Soviet-style communism, the assumption was that the “Washington Consensus,” a term for a set of policy proscriptions based on neoliberal ideas coined by Carnegie Endowment fellow Moisés Naím, would prevail. Francis Fukuyama famously called this the “end of history.”¹³ Capitalist democracy based fundamentally on superior Western ideas and the liberal model, with perhaps some local flavor or culture allowed, was believed to be the only and inevitable way forward. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the assumption was that Western-style, democratic systems based on modern, liberal capitalism were inherently superior and more stable. These systems would inevitably replace kings, sultans, and sheikhs. Neoconservatives in the United States and Europe, as during the George W. Bush administration, even favored direct intervention against some rulers and regimes to speed what they viewed as an inevitable process along. By 2002, Naím himself, however, was calling the Washington Consensus, a “damaged brand.”¹⁴ Later, the approach to democratization became much more subtle. In an address to the University of Cairo, President Obama promised support for democratic movements and, at least according to some interpretations, the United States became less concerned with the risks of Islamist democracy. In 2011, the so-called “Arab Spring” erupted in Tunisia and spread throughout the Middle East. In the end, however, only Tunisia itself was profoundly transformed from a dictatorship to a functioning democracy where power was, for a time, shared by Islamic and secular parties. Non-monarchies and dictatorships where power was based on force and fear and where social divisions and inequalities are much more prevalent, such as Libya and Syria, fell into periods of profound instability and their divisions became bait for outside powers to fight destructive proxy wars. Traditional monarchies, although rattled somewhat, remained relatively unscathed. Along with the kingdoms of Morocco and Jordan and the sheikdoms of the Gulf, the Omani Sultanate remained and even strengthened in the midst of these external destabilizing influences. The Sultan did not seek to divide and conquer his people into camps, or to crush dissent as the military-based dictators Assad or Mubarak tried to do. He listened to concerns from cities

such as Sunni-majority Sohar, which was a center of protest during the Arab Spring. Instead of tanks or bombs to crush dissent, he sent resources to Sohar and to other parts of Oman that felt less included in recent development and opportunities. The Sultan also kept open a steady program of gradual, constitutional, and governmental reform throughout his reign, culminating in the writing of a formal constitution and the promise of more representative rights and democratic governance. For some, this process is too slow. There was dissent within Oman under Sultan Qaboos about the speed and extent of institutional reforms and power-sharing. However, instead of merely suppressing that dissent, the Sultan's informal bridge-building and quiet, albeit often secret and informal, consultation and negotiation, reached out, listened to concerns and tried to bring dissenters into the fold as happened at the beginning of the Sultan's rule. Of course, there remain groups within Oman that still do not accept this contract, who demand further reforms and Western democracy at a more rapid pace. Or, on the other side, there are some who want to see the establishment of a pure, Islamic state. Nonetheless, they are not driving Oman into an abyss of civil war or intractable conflict due not only to the unifying message of the Sultan or his leadership, but by the genuine social cohesion he built around the idea of the Renaissance as a bridge between tradition and modernity, Islam and the West.

Wrongly conflating absolutism with monarchy, and assuming that Arabia's monarchs are in many ways the same as Western ones, scholars in the West have puzzled over this "persistence of monarchy" in the Middle East.¹⁵ As I argued in *Qatar: A Modern History*, a new model needs to emerge to understand the success of the Gulf states and other monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco, one that acknowledges the power and persistence of local traditions of consultation between tribes, social groups, and governments.¹⁶ The traditions of the *majlis* (tribal council) and the *diwan* (place for locals and others to meet with the ruler) were not merely seen as window-dressing. Qataris themselves mattered for the success of Qatar's Emiri system. For Oman, the need for consultation was even greater. Unlike Qataris, who are primary Sunni Muslims and a relatively small population of merchant and nomadic tribes, Oman is an even more complex mosaic of cultures, interpretations of Islam, geographies, and even faiths. Nonetheless, the Sultan, through a

program of active social engagement, not top-down rule, was able to recruit Oman's highly diverse population in the distinctively Omani Renaissance. This social engagement, more than the form of government itself, explains the success and persistence of Sultan Qaboos. Unlike Western monarchs, before constitutional monarchy, who believed "I am the state" and who created state institutions as a means of centralizing power, the Sultan shared the resources of Oman and built a state in cooperation with many sectors of society even as he remained, legally, a final arbiter.

One reason for Western befuddlement over the "persistence of monarchy" in countries such as Oman is a profound case of cultural and historical confusion about the meaning of monarchy and traditions of rulership, especially among many Western political scientists who study the Middle East. First, Western monarchy is profoundly different from Arabian monarchy. Western monarchy was established in agricultural, land-based economies. The centralization of kingdoms and their transformation into nations was based in medieval history, in Europe's long, contentious history of controlling land as the source of power and economic resources.¹⁷ European monarchy and its institutions created the modern Western state, which grew out of an ever-expanding process of centralizing land grabs by local notables, becoming lords, becoming monarchs. Until well into the Industrial Revolution, agriculture, not trade, comprised most of the Western economy and basis of power. The sultan in Muscat, Oman, however, almost always relied on trade and duties from the customs house, not on agricultural or land-based taxation. In Europe, eventually, the Western monarch became Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Louis XIV, the Sun King, created an apparatus of central power and control over estates. Napoleon showed a path that could metastasize, over several wars and upheavals and imperial breakups, into the dictatorial, nationalistic, military or technocratic regimes of the twentieth century. Industrialization, although it brought people from the farms to the cities, and lowered the importance of agricultural revenue, did not effectively limit the potential power of Western-style rulers, who were increasingly hobbled as constitutional monarchs. Hitler used many old tools and symbols to consolidate power, to eliminate diversity, and to concentrate a national socialist ideology around himself. Later, dictatorial rulers in the Middle East, some supported by the Soviets, others by the United States, used the apparatus of the modern state and military as a

personal extension of themselves, forcing modernization, industrialization, and centralized state-building on their people. Some non-Western, Middle Eastern monarchs, however, grounded themselves in deeper, local traditions of consensus and rule that predated the modern state. The counterexample of the Shah of Iran, who was also technically a monarch and who fell in 1979, only reaffirmed the need for other Middle Eastern monarchies to share their resources and modernization process with their societies.

Several writers, many reading from Marxist theory, have assumed that Middle Eastern monarchies, with modernization, would fail. The idea of a sultanistic, oriental, or patrimonial state has dominated conceptual categories. Some historians and political scientists have labeled the system of government in Oman, and elsewhere in the Middle East, as merely a species of this same, imposed state.¹⁸ Many of these studies provide important insights, and Uzi Rabi addresses these contributions and approaches in his literature review. Nonetheless, a misunderstanding of the specific realities of Oman persists in many studies of the modern Omani Sultanate, even in some of the more serious studies of Oman's history. Western sociological and political models, from Marx to Durkheim to Weber, might need to be abandoned to fully understand the nature of the modern Omani Sultanate.

While studies of modern Oman have noted the development of infrastructure, literal bridge-building and modern services, or focused on external diplomatic overtures and peacemaking by the Sultan, the main accomplishment of Qaboos was far less tangible and visible. It was his reconciliation of the different tribes, interpretations, ways of living and being that defined Omanis and their histories in separate ways from Salalah to Musandam. In a matter of a few short years, Sultan Qaboos unified the Sultanate and brought stability. He brought the Ibadi religious establishment into the fold as supporters of the Sultan, as well as those who once supported a rival imam in Nizwa. As the studies in this volume confirm, commitment to modernization of Islamic law often happened without the full prodding of the state. He went out into the country regularly and established constant means of communication through his governors with local tribes and leaders. The government compiled information about his people, a list of tribes and names, not for the purposes of imperial control, as Britain had often done in India, but to ensure that various traditional leaders would have a voice and be heard as

modernization rapidly brought new services into the vast hinterlands.¹⁹ Of course, there were limits to this process and resistance by those who felt left out of the government's sorting. Even so, by identifying them the state did not try to eliminate dissent or division by the tribes. Rather, the effort was focused on bringing different tribal groups into the fold, to provide them with access to services, education, and healthcare. This, in turn, allowed many tribal groups to coexist with state and government authority. The Sultan also appeared as a symbol of unity himself, on the new media of television and on radio, a regular voice that could form the basis of a new social contract. Instead of sending in modernizing bulldozers to tear down the past he actively preserved the built cultural environment, and intangible heritage, even as people were often desperate for services after decades of isolation from the outside world under his father. While some elements of traditional life were inevitably impacted, previous ways of life and heritage were never vilified as enemies of progress. Unlike the models of the Pahlavi Shah in Iran or the Atatürk in Turkey, the Omani Renaissance project was not based on military enforcement of modernity that pitted the state against Islamic or traditional elements of society. Instead, it embraced a type of heritage modernism that actively sought the support and involvement of many social sectors. Why destroy the benefits of tradition for the sake of modernity or the benefits of modernity for the sake of tradition when both can be had at once? Instead of rejecting Islam, or Ibadism, the Sultan highlighted its modern elements and quickly gained the support of both Ibadi and non-Ibadi Muslim leaders. He did not use Ibadi identity as a wedge issue or try to favor Ibadis as loyalists. The fact that Ibadis are the majority, but not an overwhelming majority in Oman, may have helped him since Ibadi leaders would not welcome a take-over or external intervention in Islamic matters by Sunni states. Of course, not all development, and not all reconciliation of different elements of Omani society was easy or perfect. Some initiatives failed. Some attempts to bring services were not implemented as quickly as needed. Some heritage was not preserved as well, or as perfectly, as it could have been. But these shortcomings became the basis of doing things better in other parts of the Sultanate. The main lesson from Oman's success is that states and societies cannot be fit easily into taxonomies. The particularities of Omani culture and history and the specific decisions of its ruler matter as much as, if not

more than, the formal category of government: Sultanate. Oman's particularities explain the success of Sultan Qaboos in modernizing Oman.

Monarchy in Oman has a different etiology from that in the West, or even from other Middle Eastern states such as Iran or Jordan. First, there was a very different relationship between land and economy in Oman. Although there are fertile regions, known for date-growing, such as the Batinah, much of the Omani economy and most of the revenue provided to the sultans who ruled from the ports, was based on international trade. Instead of centralizing land power and increasing taxation to accumulate more power, as was the pattern of the monarchs in the West, the Sultan's wealth was based on the setting of reasonable customs duties that did not drive trade or merchants away to other ports. The interior of Oman, in contrast, was ruled mainly by Ibadi Imams. In Ibadi tradition, these were elected, religious rulers who governed only through consensus and often through very light and decentralized means of control. Even if, in practice, the Imamate became hereditary, in the mountainous regions, tribes, chiefs, and families maintained a great deal of independence from the imam, scattered and sheltered in dispersed valleys of the interior. A primary way for the imam to gain influence was through *hikma* or the traditional role as arbiter of disputes between different tribal chiefs and families that saw themselves as equals. Occasionally, a head chief or even an imam would emerge, someone who could rally Omanis when their independence was challenged by outside powers. The Persians or the Portuguese barely made a dent in the deeper, interior history of Oman. At the same time, the Omanis of the interior did not stay in the hinterland, locked in a box. During Oman's first, nineteenth-century period of reform, also called a "Renaissance," Omanis left the mountains and internationalized Omani culture and Ibadi law. They ventured far abroad, taking advantage of commercial opportunities throughout the Indian Ocean and forming cooperative networks with other Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Peoples from throughout the Indian Ocean formed the navy of the Sultan and Omanis effortlessly blended into the cosmopolitan markets and ports of the Indian Ocean littoral. Omani merchants relied on cooperation with members of the Banyan Hindu merchant community, for instance, who often manned the custom's house for the Sultan—then a main source of revenue. At the same time, the Ibadi Omanis maintained their cultural particularities in

far off ports, becoming a migrant merchant community. There was a consolidation of Ibadi Islamic law within this community, a profoundly global process based on letters across the sea.²⁰ In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Sultan Sayyid Said bin Sultan (d. 1856) embraced his role as chief merchant and first among equals, building his capital in Zanzibar. Consensus, not centralized power, consultation, not monopoly of violence, was the means to influence. As much as Western monarchs encouraged exploration and became the heads of expanding empires, it would be hard to imagine the King of England transferring his main palace and capital to Virginia or Australia. Crucially, although Britain was always a major influence and various treaties did give the British a great deal of leverage, Oman was not under the direct control of an outside power. It was not a colony, mandate, or protectorate. The father of Sultan Qaboos was famously upset if the proper diplomatic protocol, which should have treated him as an equal or peer to the monarch of England, was not properly followed. The building of modern Oman and the national program of integration pursued by Sultan Qaboos, cannot be seen as merely a predictable postcolonial process, as a reaction to or embrace of an outside, imperial power. His father, with the help of British forces, had defeated the imam and consolidated claims over the interior. Sultan Qaboos, however, knew it was necessary to create a unified nation based upon both the historical traditions of Oman and those aspects of the Western economic, social, and educational model that were most useful. Remarkably, and building off its global history, Oman's policy of integrative pragmatism and building of bridges between dichotomies worked not just for resolving disputes within Oman, but as a means for dissipating conflict between Oman's neighbors as well. After securing stability at home through consensus, Sultan Qaboos became a peace-builder abroad, using his skills at mediation, which ultimately is the traditional source of power and respect in an Arabian cultural context, to lower the temperature of conflict between regional adversaries.

Sultan Qaboos, drawing on the positive aspects of the Ibadi Imamate of the interior, its basis on consensus, and the Sultanate of the ports, its openness in reaching toward the outside world to establish a new, combined Imamate and Sultanate models of rulership and brought both into the modern world. While many other Middle Eastern states languished in ideological

battles between Islamists and secularists, Shiites and Sunnis, rural tribes and central governments, Oman through those divisions, emerging from profound poverty to become one of the most successful and stable states in the world. What explains the persistence of the Omani system of government, which has steadily liberalized and shared more legal, constitutional power formally, is a network of historical, cultural, and informal factors that made the Omani Renaissance possible. In fact, as the Omani Renaissance implied, it was through the continuation of Omani traditions of consensual, cooperative governance and that the Sultanate found success.

By April 2000, Sultan Qaboos and Omanis had much to celebrate. It had been three decades of the Omani Renaissance that began when the Sultan came to power in 1970: “. . . We have endeavored to ensure that every step taken by Oman’s Renaissance springs from our deepest reality, that it is inspired by our heritage, religion and values, and that incorporates those aspects of modern civilization that are useful. That has been our aim, whether this means involving citizens in public affairs in which they take part . . . or whether it means improving our economy and raising the living standards of our people.”²¹ The Sultan was making it clear to all who heard his speeches that the Omani Renaissance could not be about him alone. It had to involve Omani society. It also had to combine elements both intrinsic to Oman and from the outside world. Through the rhetoric of Renaissance, Sultan Qaboos linked and harmonized otherwise competing forces of tradition and modernity, conservatism and progressivism, diversity and unity, Islam and the West, central planning and individual capital. Other groups throughout the world were embracing ideologies of liberalism versus communism, Salafism versus military secularism, monarchy versus democracy. Sultan Qaboos and Omanis turned their focus not on external ideology but on what Omanis have called the “Blessed Renaissance.” This may sound nationalistic to Western ears. In many ways there was a profound sense of national purpose, especially during the first decades of the Renaissance when progress on infrastructure, in education, health, and other areas was happening at an exponential pace, transforming the landscape of Oman in profound ways, seemingly overnight. However, this was not an ethno-nationalism based on one group or people who alone held the keys to Omani identity or Omaniness. In downplaying divisions, both in

himself and in Oman, and in representing the Renaissance as a program of national renewal, Sultan Qaboos helped to provide the glue necessary for keeping Oman together.

Although there were issues, challenges, and conflicts throughout his reign, even his Opera House and Mosque had detractors, Sultan Qaboos did not deal with dissent or difference by merely attempting to crush it or any alternatives to the state. While some in his government may have attempted to suppress some dissent, Sultan Qaboos himself was clear when it came to freedom of thought. In 2000 he stated that: “The suppression of ideas, thought and intellectual effort is a major sin . . . Ideas cannot be suppressed. Our religion stands for ideas and the intellect, the suppression of thought. Never. Our religion is tolerant, ethical and receptive to ideas . . .”²²

The Omani Renaissance, as a bridge identity between tradition and modernity, helped to build an overarching sense of “Omaniness,” of being Omani. There is a genuine belief and pride among Omanis that the Omani Renaissance was possible not only because of the Sultan alone, but also because of a combined effort by Omanis as a whole. Omaniness is a bridge identity within Oman, one with the capacity to expand and include multiple premodernization or non-national identities. Omaniness is also about more than the past, even as the past is not rejected. Omaniness embraces of modernity and tradition, of Western and Arab, of Ibadi, Sunni, and Shia, and African Swahili, there are Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. The oldest surviving Hindu temple in Arabia is still in Old Muscat, not far from the Royal Palace. Several hundred Hindus are citizens of Oman. While Yemen is riven by conflict, Saudi Arabia has wrestled with dynastic challenges, and the Gulf is split between those who want to call it Persian and those who want to call it Arabian, Oman stands apart as an island of unity and a keystone of stability. Since the mid-2000s, the world has seen the rise of new, decentralized media and cultural environments in which categories and subcategories of fractured identities are privileged over integrative ones such as nations. The succession to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said in 2020 and the embrace of a new set of steady reforms show that the current generation of Omani society is on board with the program or pragmatic integration established by Sultan Qaboos and his generation of Omanis.

Chapter Summaries

In 1972, a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) team of four young women researchers arrived in Oman in the midst of transformation. They flew into Othaiba Airport, which, before Seeb International Airport, was just a gravel runway and a terminal, which "consisted of a large hangar that provided basic services . . .," to conduct a field study in Oman on the conditions of children and families in the Sultanate.²³ They stayed at al-Falaj Hotel, "one of only two hotels in the city." They had to buy supplies in Muscat since they were on their way through the mountains. The dirt road to Nizwa required a Land Rover and when they arrived in that capital of the interior, they were covered in a layer of dust after almost four hours of driving. There was not yet a bridge over the Wadi Abydah, so they were required to cross the riverbed. During rains, it seemed, the city was virtually cut off from the road to Muscat. Little did they know that in a few short years, the country and the people they came to help would transform into a stable, unified nation that formed a pillar of progress in the heart of a troubled region. When the UNICEF workers arrived, it had been only two years since the accession of a new, young Sultan, who had been educated in the West, but who was also acutely aware of the value and potential of his own culture. When they returned thirty years later in 2003, Oman was a different world. It had rocketed from near the bottom to the top rankings in the UN Human Development Index. Instead of steamrolling or forcing Oman into the future, the Sultan and his government made the Omani Renaissance a national project, seeking the cooperation and mutual effort of a variety of tribes, cities, and peoples throughout the Sultanate. He focused on relationships and coalitions, schools and hospitals, as well as just roads and bridges, preserving heritage sites instead of simply tearing them down for everything new, the social and cultural heritage and, in marked contrast to his predecessor, eagerly embraced investment in education, infrastructure, healthcare, and social development. What these UNICEF visitors did not fully realize was that they were witnessing one of the most rapid, extraordinary, and, for some observers, unexpected, social changes in the history of the modern Middle East. When they came back to Oman thirty years later, they were astonished, like modern Rip Van Winkles, at the visible and less tangible transformations. The chapters of this volume are organized to highlight the

impact of those changes, as seen on the ground by outside observers and Omanis themselves.

The first chapter addresses the important work already done by scholars of modern Oman. Uzi Rabi discusses the existing, Western literature on the Sultan Qaboos era. While recognizing the valuable insights of various scholars and observers, Rabi, in his overview of works by prominent political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and observers of Oman, argues against the “black box” approach to modern Omani history. Explaining how the Sultan created a “national ethos” through the Renaissance, Uzi Rabi shows that Omani society, not just the Sultan, was involved at many levels in the sustained success of Oman’s modernization process from 1970 to 2020. Unlike regimes in other parts of the Middle East, Sultan Qaboos did not concentrate all power in himself or rely primarily on the monopoly of violence. The successful and stable transition to Sultan Haitham is presented as further proof of this deeper social consensus around shared ideas such as the preservation of heritage.

Heritage

As new resources poured into historical research, archaeology, and heritage development, Oman’s balanced modernization project led not only to the creation of future possibilities, it also lengthened the chronological imagination, the sense of a shared past stretching deep into the historical archeological record. The Omani Renaissance, based on the concept of rebirth not on destructive modernization, sought to bridge tradition and modernity, heritage and development. The next chapters show how archaeological discoveries sponsored by the reign of Sultan Qaboos deepened and lengthened Oman’s and Omanis’ conception of their own past. J. Mark Kenoyer, an archaeologist who specializes in the Indus civilization as well as southern Arabia and Oman, shows how a vast new corpus of scholarship about the deep past of Oman emerged after 1970. Even 4,000 years ago, global interactions between Oman and distant cultures were common. By opening Oman to international trade, the message was that Sultan Qaboos was simply returning Oman to ancient roots. Of course, archaeologists and historians are fully aware that aspects of ancient trade were very different from modern systems, but the symbolism was still important. Krista Lewis, another archaeologist, focuses on an ancient Omani commodity that was traded throughout

Eurasia: frankincense. The establishment of UNESCO recognition and the creation and modern administration of heritage sites in Dhofar have provided opportunities to link heritage with economic development. Victoria Hightower and James Worrall's chapter provides a periodization of heritage activities pursued during the era of Qaboos. Preserving heritage while providing for the divergent needs of tourists and local stakeholders is not always an easy process. Sultan Qaboos, his ministries and the bureaucracy developed heritage policies that changed over time becoming more inclusive and flexible, celebrating local traditions while also telling a national story. Private non-state institutions, working from the ground up, such as Bait al-Zubair, emerged and linked themselves to the heritage narrative.

The Sultan had a nuanced view of history and discouraged an uncritical approach to the past or to any received information. In one of his speeches, he noted that “history which was written down centuries ago is sometimes highly embroidered and distorted . . . History needs to be looked at critically, so that when we read history, we read it thinkingly and apply our intellects . . .” Sounding like a modern Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) the North African historian who encouraged a critical reading of the past, the Sultan directly encouraged reading sources. “Turning to Omani history, when they talk about aspects of history and say there were ninety thousand—or a hundred thousand—horsemen, where did they all come from? Where did they get their food? Should we accept these things at face value? No . . . I say to students of history: be critical . . .”²⁴ For Sultan Qaboos, heritage, history, and even religion, should not be accepted blindly, “You must avoid letting anyone take away your freedom of thought in any way. People must use their minds and think . . .”²⁵

Certain types of infrastructure rapidly facilitated the ability of Omanis in isolated areas to think differently, to quickly realize much broader horizons. The establishment of modern postal services, for example, allowed for a massive expansion of the geography of information, the speed and extent by which messages could be sent and received. In their book, the UNICEF researchers described how important supplies originally arrived in Nizwa via horseback. The post office was close to the sidr tree where merchants gathered. It was in an old building outside the city wall. The postman came only three times a week and post was not delivered to houses but to the

post office where residents picked up their mail. The only telex machines were in the *wali's* office and urgent messages were sent by horse or, later, by Land Rover. By the middle of the 1970s a transitional office had been built. By 2003, a brand-new post office had been built, with a traditional Omani wooden door and architecture. It also contained all the modern amenities and means of communicating with the outside world.²⁶ Links to Nizwa from Muscat were particularly important since the town was once the capital of the imam and is considered the most important town in Ibadi tradition. The Omani postal service revolutionized communication and commerce, connecting parts of Oman that had previously required long and arduous journeys. Messages could also be sent and received from throughout the world, an extraordinary change from the profound isolation of inner Oman under the Sultan's father. In 1972, the Sultan celebrated Oman becoming a full member the Arab Postal Union, the Arab Telecommunications Union, and the International Postal Union in the same list as UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and the Islamic Conference.²⁷ Chapter 5 shows how stamps and the official images used on them became a way of celebrating the heritage of Oman and portraying the Omani Renaissance as an effort led by the Sultan but shared by various sectors of society. The stamps used by Omanis during the Renaissance were symbols of a new, competent system, assured by the government, and government institutions, which was only just beginning to reach into villages and towns outside the main centers. The colorful and diverse images described by Calvin Allen, many from his own collection, were like small windows, used to glimpse the hundreds of exciting changes and developments occurring not only in their backyard but also throughout the Sultanate. Sultan Qaboos took a keen interest in the establishment of new post offices, even mentioning specific locations in his national addresses, for example, the Central Post office in Ruwi was announced in 1975. He knew they would be the first step in creating an efficient communications infrastructure. He reflected on this opening of Omani society in his 1975 speech, "Oman today is not the Oman of yesterday. Its lackluster face has changed. It has shaken off the dust of isolation and stagnation, opened its doors and windows to the light and declared to the world it is ready to communicate directly with it, interact with the changes taking place in it . . ."²⁸

Religion and Society

One of the remarkable characteristics of modern Oman is the relatively apolitical nature of religion in the Sultanate. While the postage stamps and archaeological sites described above might be easily used to unify and create a sense of national purpose, religious differences are often harder to shape into bridge identities. Remarkably, and unlike most Middle Eastern states where there is an explicit and an implicit tension between the religious establishment and the state, Sultan Qaboos and his government was able to achieve the cooperation of the Ibadi religious establishment quickly and in a sustained way. The stabilizing role of religion in Oman is even more extraordinary considering that Oman had been divided just decades before into two systems of rule, with the Ibadi Imam in power in Nizwa and the Sultan in power in Muscat. Also, Oman is divided by Shiite, Sunni, and Ibadi interpretations of Islam, as well as a minority of Hindu citizens, let alone the multifarious religions, from Catholicism to Buddhism, practiced by Oman's non-citizen resident population. The ministry in charge of religious affairs eventually evolved from one dedicated to Islam to one that embraced all the varied religions practiced within Oman. Three chapters in this volume address the question of religion in Oman and the successful integration of religious leaders and religious reforms in the Omani Renaissance agenda.

First, Abdulrahman al-Salimi, co-editor of this volume, provides an in-depth, historical account of the Sultanate–Imamate system in Oman. Tracing the history of Oman from the Islamic period to the first “Ibadi Renaissance” in the nineteenth century, Abdulrahman al-Salimi makes a compelling argument that Sultan Qaboos successfully combined elements of both the Sultanate and the Imamate, creating a fusion rooted in Omani tradition and history but also allowing for a bridge between old dichotomies. Valerie Hoffman, a scholar of Ibadism, provides a useful guide and summary of history of Ibadi Islam before showing how Ibadism under Sultan Qaboos became a part of the Renaissance agenda. Specifically, Ibadi leaders, such as Sheikh al-Khalili, did not always agree with everything the government proposed. Nevertheless, and perhaps as a result of being given leeway to express differences, many scholars came on board with the Sultan's modernization agenda, modifying aspects of Ibadism and responding to external accusations, mainly from the mufti in Saudi Arabia. In this way, the Ibadi leadership became defenders

not only of Ibadism but of Oman and the Sultanate. The anthropologist Mandana Limbert, in her study of Ibadism in the Omani town of Bahla in the “Middle of a Reign” in the 1990s, discusses the growing interest in elaborating religious heritage at the time. With the opening of a local library and the popular circulation of everyday *fatwas* or legal opinions, she explores how Ibadi religious scholars were also engaging in a form of heritage work, cognizant too of the complex generational relationships and transformations they were addressing and shaping.

Law, National Identity, and Literature

A main reason for the success of Sultan Qaboos was the establishment of the rule of law and the gradual opening of governance and governing decisions to Omanis as education slowly spread throughout the Sultanate. Salim al-Kharusi, an assistant professor of law at Sultan Qaboos University, outlines the constitutional history of the reign of Sultan Qaboos. From an “unwritten constitution” to the establishment of the first Omani constitution in 1996, the middle of the Sultan’s reign, and its subsequent updates, Omani constitutional law integrated what was useful from multiple models and sources, from modern law to Ibadi and non-Ibadi Sharia. This legal approach was achieved alongside the building of national identity in Oman. John Peterson, in his chapter, provides an excellent overview of the challenges of creating a sense of Omaniness and the way the Sultan, with the involvement of society, created the necessary conditions for a stable, national identity that pragmatically integrated internal divisions.

The Omani renaissance influenced far more than religion or the creation of an overarching national identity, it also transformed cultural expression, leading to a burst of literary creativity with many authors addressing modern, challenging topics. Sultan Qaboos repeatedly supported freedom of thought and expression, rejecting many of the assumptions and structures of more traditional, patriarchal culture. While still recognizing the Sultan as a symbol of their country’s progress, Omani poets and writers wrote past the panegyric style typical in other Middle Eastern states. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska writes a fascinating chapter on the cultural and literary flourishing in Oman from 1970 to 2020, showing how Sultan Qaboos’ education, literacy, and freedom of thought allowed writers to explore issues of family,

identity, and change that may have been hidden or suppressed elsewhere. Not all of the culture of Oman was sponsored from above. While the state provided support, literary and cultural civil society, in the form of clubs and publications, flourished in Oman.

Infrastructure and the Environment

Many of these cultural achievements would not have occurred without a stable and functioning health infrastructure. Sean Foley, in his chapter, shows how the founding of hospitals and the creation of healthcare infrastructure, often from scratch, throughout the Sultanate had a dramatic impact on wellbeing. This remarkable healthcare system, which increased life expectancy dramatically, was built with the support of Ibadi religious leaders and all sectors of society. Higher education requires a critical approach that welcomes international scholarship. Establishing Sultan Qaboos University and other institutions throughout the Sultanate, was a keystone achievement of Sultan Qaboos. Jody Pritt demonstrates how Sultan Qaboos also envisioned higher education opportunities for Omanis beyond the immediate horizon in Oman. In her interviews with Omani scholars in the United States on exchange programs she shows how their experiences and training are being used to contribute to Oman after their return to the Sultanate. In fact, as early as 1975 Sultan Qaboos spoke of sending Omanis “abroad to gain expertise” with fifty-nine students completing English-language courses in Britain to allow them to study in the United States.²⁹ Education at all levels was a major concern of the Sultan and the Renaissance project.

In addition to literature, healthcare and education, the building of practical infrastructure was crucial, especially in the ports, was crucial to the economic success of Oman. Javier Guirado examines the role of Muscat, which became the center of the web of communication and transportation for the whole Sultanate. Greater Muscat, with its various neighborhoods, was a symbol of the unification of the Sultanate. In 1975, a renewed road between Muscat and Mutrah was expanded with street lighting. A dual carriageway was being built between Ruwi and Seeb as well as the Bidbid road and the Mutrah, Quriyat road and the Qurm road were a part of the second five-year plan laid out by the Sultan in 1975.³⁰ No longer were passengers arriving on a gravel track as the UNICEF workers had experienced in 1972. The runway at Seeb

International Airport was extended. Also, a seawater desalination plant and power plant were built at Ghubrah to meet rapidly growing energy needs in the Muscat region. Land distribution and reform was a crucial part of the Sultan's planning. The Sultan discussed the ways land was being divided and distributed to citizens. This required the creation of a legal structure for land and property rights almost from scratch. Land would no longer be acquired via force or be subject to amorphous claims. Reflecting the importance of land distribution, this was a highly regulated process requiring several departments. "Land is distributed to citizens via six main departments—the Land Distribution Department, the Property Register Department, the Survey Department, the Town Planning Department, the Judicial Committee and the Technical Committee. Each of these departments has specific responsibilities and each of them is designated to regulate distribution, protect the citizen's legal title and define the boundaries of his property . . ." ³¹ This building of institutional legal systems, meant to create fairness and transparency, was almost as monumental as the bridges across the mountains. Sultan Qaboos was careful to add that there should be buffers between houses and factories, schools and suqs. The Social Affairs department was tasked with building 500 new houses for citizens in the Muscat–Mutrah area, with the Sultan proposing that "those on limited incomes will be provided with large housing units." ³²

Even after basic needs were met, infrastructure planning continued unabated into the twenty-first century. Jeffrey Kinnier provides an economic and technical analysis of the great port infrastructure projects of Sultan Qaboos, at Salalah and Duqm, showing how "free trade zones" have provided Oman with opportunities to reach out into the trade networks of the Indian Ocean. Maria Curtis shows how the environment was not neglected in the pursuit of economic development. Instead, Sultan Qaboos equated the environment with national heritage and identity and encouraged the Omani people to preserve a fragile balance.

Diplomacy

The final two chapters examine the ways in which Sultan Qaboos extended his bridge-building skills to the outside world, expanding the reach of his stabilizing influence. Juan Cole focuses on the last decade of the Sultan's reign showing how the personality and convictions of the Sultan, which were also

shared by his people, allowed him the flexibility to reach across divides and sponsor agreements between adversaries. Unlike the 1970s, when the Sultan was clearly on the side of the United States and Britain versus the Soviets, in the last few decades Oman has been able to pursue an independent foreign policy due to its relative social cohesion and the fact that it faced no serious internal threats. Although not unconditional, the support and trust of most Omani people toward the Sultan freed him and his diplomats from many of the restraints and prejudices that prevented other leaders from pursuing peace. Francis Owtram examines the history of Oman’s “quiet diplomacy,” a strategy that allowed the Sultan and the Sultanate to maintain open channels of communication between rival powers while ensuring the security of Oman’s borders.

According only to internationally recognized data, the modernization of Oman since 1970 has been a major success. In 2019, the last year of Sultan Qaboos’ reign, Oman had a high UN Human Development Index of .813, a great improvement from the early 1970s when Omanis faced low quality of life, high infant mortality, and lack of access to education and basic services. Other measures of success are less tangible, but also important. Early commitment to culture and heritage in Oman, for example, has made Oman stand apart from its neighbors. Also, Oman achieved a level of unity and national identity despite internal divisions that have troubled other, wealthier states in existential ways. The Omani Renaissance was about more than just the building of hospitals, roads, and schools. In terms of cultural expression, literature, preservation, embrace and preservation of traditions and intangible heritage, recognition of environmental standards, even diplomacy, it has been Omanis, not just their government, who have invested in the renaissance project—a way that bridges change and continuity. The development of Oman from 1970 to 2020 was not simply the result of top-down government imposition by a rentier state. Instead, the Sultan tried, at every opportunity, to call for the cooperation of Omanis. Ultimately, much of the success of the Omani Renaissance was due to the actions of the Omani people themselves.

Notes

1. Mandana Limbert discusses the social aspect of Qaboos’ speeches in Bahla. Mandana Limbert, *In a Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Omani*

- Town* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). By 1990, most homes had televisions and it was not necessary to go to the one television in town or to the *wali's* office to hear national pronouncements and speeches.
2. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, *The Royal Speeches of his Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said 1970–2010* (Muscat: Ministry of Information, 2010), 36.
 3. *Ibid.*, 45.
 4. *Ibid.*, 105–106.
 5. *Ibid.*, 522.
 6. *Ibid.*, 108.
 7. *Ibid.*, 20.
 8. *Ibid.*, 14.
 9. *Ibid.*, 45.
 10. Oman provided Masirah Island as a base and contributed to the Arab contingent of Joint Forces Command East.
 11. The ROSO Facebook page mentions 1985 as the date of founding, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/royalomansymphonyorchestra>, last accessed June 30, 2021.
 12. *Ibid.*, 436.
 13. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
 14. Moisés Naím, “Washington Consensus: A Damaged Brand,” *Financial Times*, October 28, 2002.
 15. Lisa Anderson asked it most succinctly and directly, in her highly cited article, “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 106(1) (1991): 1–15.
 16. Allen J. Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016).
 17. Joseph Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
 18. These studies also acknowledge, however, the nuances of Omani culture and society, but see Western-based predictive models as predominant. Fred Halliday’s tendency to emphasize a Western-style centralization, and inevitable instability of sultanic power in *Arabia Without Sultans* (London: Penguin, 1974), was followed more recently by Marc Valeri’s, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The question of the persistence of Arab monarchies remains largely unanswered by these approaches.

19. See Dale Eickelman, "Counting and Surveying an 'Inner' Omani Community: Hamra al-ʿAbriyin," in Richard Pennell (ed.), *Tribe and State: Essays in Honour of David Montgomery Hart* (Wisbech: menas Press, 1991), 253–277.
20. There now are several works on the *waraka* or papers and network of rules of trade and life, and accommodations of Ibadi law, that formed the basis of the Omani Indian Ocean and networks beyond. See Amal Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s–1930s)* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Fahad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
21. *The Royal Speeches*, 421.
22. *Ibid.*, 411.
23. Nouhad Kanawati et al., *Nizwa and Sohar 30 Years Ago: A Glimpse of the Past* (Beirut: Lebanon, 2003).
24. *The Royal Speeches*, 411.
25. *Ibid.*, 411.
26. Kanawati et al., *Nizwa and Sohar*, 123–124.
27. *The Royal Speeches*, 20.
28. *Ibid.*, 49.
29. *Ibid.*, 47.
30. *Ibid.*, 49.
31. *Ibid.*, 51.
32. *Ibid.*, 51

1

THE LEGACY OF SULTAN QABOOS: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Uzi Rabi

This chapter provides a synthesis and overview of the literature about Oman under the rule of Sultan Qaboos bin Said (1970–2020). It aims to bring the leadership of Sultan Qaboos and his successful modernization of Oman into the proper context, while engaging with substantial scholarly works on the Sultanate during this period.

It would be natural to start with the legendary scholar and analyst of Middle Eastern politics, Fred Halliday. Halliday's wide knowledge of southern Arabia, particularly Oman, was expressed in his work *Arabia Without Sultans*.¹ The book dealt with the peculiarities of "Arabian regimes" and the opposition movements ranged against them. Halliday's intellectual outlook was grounded by the "new left," which was in vogue among academic circles in London, and by his considerable travels in Arabia, particularly in the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). He supported the Dhofari rebels, objecting to the military backing that Sultan Qaboos, the young Sultan who replaced his backward-thinking father, Sultan Said, received from the late Shah of Iran and Britain's Royal Air Force (from its base in Salalah). However, Halliday was comfortable changing his ideas when findings contradicted his beliefs. Two decades later, Halliday realized that Qaboos, who modernized Oman, brought it prosperity, and continued to move it steadily towards the twenty-first century, was on the right side of history.² He also provided political unity and secure borders. When Sultan

Qaboos overthrew his father in July 1970, few expected him to survive long. Educated at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and backed by the British, the young and relatively unknown Sultan took the throne of an extremely underdeveloped country which was plagued by civil war. The “New Oman” (*Uman al-Jadida*) that was created was a united country. Until then, Omani society was split between the Imamate of Oman and the Sultanate of Muscat, and was relatively isolated until Sultan Qaboos’ seizure of power in 1970.

General treatments of post-1970 developments in Oman include studies by John Towsend (1977), Calvin H. Allen, Jr. (1987), and Ian Skeet (1992).³ These studies were well-detailed and served as a point of departure for later studies. They elaborated on the contingent processes that drove the dramatic developmental changes since 1970, and are crucial to providing an answer as to how the young Sultanate coped with the challenges of the time. These studies focus on the transformation of Oman under Qaboos from an impoverished state into a wealthy country with first-world infrastructure, a vibrant tourism industry, and a military alliance with both Britain and the United States.

Later studies on Oman’s politics and economy include those by Mohamed bin Musa al-Yousef (1995) and Calvin H. Allen and W. Lynn Rigsbee II (2000).⁴ These books produced an effective contribution to the scholarly literature. Their writing was on firmer ground while looking at oil as the factor that broke the political balance, serving as the catalyst for economic development. Based on extensive sources, they skillfully illustrated how the Sultan built his power base and constantly renewed them to meet internal as well as external challenges that threatened its perceived stability. Indeed, Sultan Qaboos’ strategies on the international stage have secured Oman’s integrity. The Sultanate has prioritized maintaining autonomy from Saudi Arabia far more than the other smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Such positions were demonstrative of the Sultanate’s guideline of not compromising its geopolitical independence and its ability to maintain a neutral position on regional conflicts. Yet, almost all of these studies treated Oman under Qaboos as a postcolonial laboratory in an attempt to better understand the social and political mechanisms of authoritarianism.

Marc Valeri’s *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*, at times, fits into this pattern. Valeri produced a comprehensive, well-written book which

is based on extensive local research and many interviews. Valeri touched on important topics and carefully investigated some concerns facing the Sultanate, such as inter-generational conflict; the young population's expectations in a transitory period in which privileges enjoyed by their parents are no longer guaranteed; or, broadly speaking, the challenges of a welfare state which can no longer provide the same benefits for every segment of the population.

Valeri's main insights can be summed up in what he dubbed as the "Sultanistic Regime" (pp. 171–181), which is based on a "combination of arbitrariness and tradition." Drawing on theories gleaned from the work of Houchang Chehabi and Juan Linz's 1998 edited volume, which focuses on states like the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Iran,⁵ Valeri adopted this idiom ("Sultanistic Regime") and fully implemented it on the Sultanate of Oman. Accommodating his writings with a Western-style agenda, or the seeking of democratic participatory politics, Valeri concluded, "Social and demographic changes in Oman for the last decade have not led the regime to give the impression of being ready to concede even a piece of political power".⁶ The mechanisms used by scholars to analyze the Middle East, adhering to the Euro-centric model of the state as a "black box," failed to account for many particularistic characteristics that are prevalent within Middle Eastern societies, the Sultanate of Oman in particular. For Valeri, as for others who seek to better understand Oman's political culture, it might have been much more effective to extrapolate, for example, with Hussein al-Ghubash's *Oman: A Thousand Years of Democratic Tradition*, a thorough study that draws on both Western and Islamic political theory, and brings an in-depth examination of the ingredients that comprise Omani political culture.⁷ Ghubash argues that Oman, with its long tradition of adherence to the institution of the Ibadi Imamate, as well as its geographic isolation from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, went through a different process of national identity formation than other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Oman is not a black box. Ibadism and other cultural and religious particularities continue to shape the formal and informal political expectations and structures of the Sultanate.

Foreign experts, nonetheless, have wondered from time to time if the Sultanate had permanently crushed the Ibadi Imamate, especially as, in 2005, the Omani authorities accused a faction of "Ibadi activists" of pursuing plans

to restore the Ibadi Imamate.⁸ Some observers jumped to the conclusion that this event might signal the start of infiltration of extremist ideas, with rumors circulating that al-Qaeda had already entered Oman by hijacking Ibadi thinking. Delving into Ghubash's arguments and the dialectical process through which the Omani political ethos was to evolve would suggest that extremist groups may not find fertile ground in this country. Although there are some important non-Omani contributions to the study of Oman, including John Peterson's *Oman in the 20th Century*,⁹ which does provide important perspectives.¹⁰ But, until recently, very few books were written (in English) from an Arab perspective, and indeed very little even in Arabic. Hussein al-Ghubash managed to put this deficit right. His book is firmly rooted in Western scholarship, but at the same time he sheds a refreshing light on his subject. Persuasive, thorough, and drawing on Western as well as Islamic political theory, this book analyzes the different historical and geopolitical roles of this unique country. Oman's millennial tradition serves as a background against which Ghubash explains the solid national culture of the Sultanate and its unique sociopolitical situation.

The Sultanate's norms of non-violence and dialogue should be attributed to Sultan Qaboos and most Omanis who adhere to the Ibadi branch of Islam, also known as the "third branch," which was established over 1,300 years ago, predating Islam's split between Sunna and Shia after the Prophet Muhammad's death. Ibadis represent only 0.03 percent of Muslims worldwide, and their brand of Islam is thus unknown to most Sunnis and Shiites in the Islamic world. Ibadism is characteristically tolerant. The Ibadis stress the "rule of the just" and condemn violence in pursuit of political objectives. The influence of such cultural and religious norms in the Sultanate's political and social structures is evident by the extensive protections that the Omani legal system offers to religious minorities, such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Oman has historically maintained a sizeable presence of South Asian minorities, which has contributed to its tolerant culture. Authorities in the country imprison and fine people found guilty of "defaming" any religion or promoting sectarian strife.¹¹

Monarchies and sultanates are not, by definition, parliamentary democracies. The Sultanate of Oman stands as a prime example of a country that has sought a middle ground between "top-down" and "bottom-up" revolutions.

Sultan Qaboos realized that Oman would not be able to depend indefinitely on oil revenues to incentivize the docility of its subjects, at least to the extent of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Instead, he sought out a different formula, which provided a symbiotic relationship between ruler and the ruled, where change and improvements emerge steadily as part of their tacit understanding. Although Qaboos' rule drew on traditional modes of tribal paternalism, the Sultanate introduced mechanisms to gradually promote limited political participation among Omanis. The reasoning behind these attempts derives from the very nature of the Sultanate's socioeconomic structure. As the Omani government gradually lost the advantages of a rentier state, in which power attained through oil revenues is vested only in the hands of the ruling elite and the people's right to political participation is exchanged for welfare, the state is no longer capable of sustaining the population in this manner and must compensate for reduced material benefits by expanding its citizens' role in the political arena. This was an integral and inherent dimension of the "Omani Renaissance." Only few were to observe the inner rhythm of the "Omani Renaissance" and follow the vision Qaboos was portraying from his early days as Sultan. J. E. Peterson (2004) and Joseph A. Kechichian (2005) are worth mentioning in this regard.¹² Following a different perspective, Valeri ends his book with the ultimate question of whether and how the Omani fragility (both politically and economically) is linked to the practice of the politics of survival. To be sure, challenges still lie ahead, as is the case with every state and society, but Valeri's provocative declarations regarding the Sultanate were accompanied by gloomy predictions, as if it is a failed state. Such predictions were to get an ultimate answer throughout the post-"Arab Spring" decade. One need only look at Oman's neighbor, Yemen, for a cautionary example as to what Oman might have been.

A highly important and timely contribution was brought in by anthropologists and ethnographers in the three recent decades. Starting with Dawn Chatty's *Mobile Pastoralists* (1996) and ending up with Mandana Limbert's *In the Time of Oil* (2010), this literature has highlighted the power of ethnography to engage questions that cut across scale and national boundaries and focus on notions of mobility and belonging that exceed national frames.¹³ Limbert's book is certainly a case to the point. A richly textured ethnographic analysis of the transformations and tensions of everyday life in Bahla, a small

town in the interior of Oman (*al-Dakhiliyya*) serves to eschew the simple narrative of rupture and radical change that dominates popular accounts of the oil boom. It also contributed to later debates on the nature of social memory and subjectivity. It therefore paved the way for more voices and plurality and for a better understanding of Omani history through an added field of scholarship on the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, and other fluid transregional spaces.

The Arab Spring served as the catalyst for the breakdown of the Middle East's colonial-created states. Iraq and Syria, whose boundaries were drawn by the Sykes–Picot Agreement at the end of the First World War (and implemented during the San Remo Conference in April 1920), experienced a painful dismantling of their various components. In Iraq, the government failed to fuse the fragmented society and in Syria, the bloody civil war exacerbated tensions between the minority Alawite government and their allies and the Sunni majority throughout the country. But it was not the Fertile Crescent alone that experienced disintegration and de-territorialization: Libya and Yemen, countries with a tribal–sectarian divide, also witnessed the overthrow of autocratic rulers during the events of the “Arab Spring,” and similar processes of state collapse were put in motion.

Some Western observers believed the Sultanate was about to experience a “spring.” They portrayed scenes of ongoing protests and growing discontent as if the Sultan was on the brink of a revolution. While there were slogans such as “The people want the fall of corruption” (*isqat al-fasad*) or “Yes to a new Oman,” there were not the cries of “The people want the fall of the regime” as was the case in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Protesters also called on the Sultan to personally intervene to provide more job opportunities and measures to curb rising prices and inequalities. To be sure, discontent around the country was primarily motivated by social and economic issues, but, for the most part, it fizzled out rapidly. This may be explained in large part by the responsiveness of Sultan Qaboos’ government. The Omani state took several steps to appease the protesters. In mid-February 2011 it was announced that the private sector minimum wage for nationals would be increased by 200 Omani riyals to about \$520 (an increase of 43 percent). These steps were followed up by the introduction of a monthly allowance (150 Omani riyals) for job seekers and the creation of 50,000 new jobs for Omanis in the public