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The role of Ibadi Islam in the shaping of Omani national identity

Introduction

The initial years of Sultan Qaboos bin Said's reign were marked by a period of dynamic economic growth, the rule of a young and widely respected Sultan, and the establishment of a promising future for Oman. However, the country's trajectory is significantly influenced by its internal ethnic diversity. Oman's complex social structure, characterized by a mosaic of religious and ethnic minorities concentrated in various regions, has a substantial impact on the country's domestic policies and societal dynamics. Therefore, Sultan Qaboos has been instrumental in orchestrating a fundamental transformation of the state, successfully lifting it out of poverty, modernizing its infrastructure and governmental institutions, and repositioning Oman as a stable, modern, and strategically significant actor on the international stage (Allen, 1987: 212).

The purpose of this article is to analyze how the doctrine of Ibadism not only legitimized the rule of Sultan Qaboos but also played a pivotal role in shaping national unity and the state's modernization strategy, while positioning Oman as a mediator in regional and international affairs. The author argues that this phenomenon should be examined within the historical context of the Ibadism's emergence as a distinct tradition, diverging from the radical doctrines of the Kharijites. The present article aims to delineate the function of the religious dimension as a foundational element in the formation of state policy. The study is situated within the domain of the political science of religion, a sub-discipline of political science that, in this context, investigates the political dimensions of the Ibadi Islamic doctrines and ritual practices. In addition to the interplay between Sultan Qaboos' governance and religion, it is crucial to emphasize the efficacy of his approach to integrating religious tradition with modern state structures. Furthermore, it examines the domestic and foreign policies of his successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, as well as his pivotal role in sustaining the splendor of Oman.

The methodological framework adopted in this study commences with a chronological historical analysis of the emergence and evolution of the Ibadi school of Islam, utilizing a comprehensive review of relevant literature and historical sources. Additionally, the comparative method will be employed to identify the key factors shaping the Ibadi

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doctrine in conjunction with the Omani sultanate and its political environment. This will be analyzed through a case study of Oman's political and social reforms, focusing on the comparative assessment of various policies and initiatives implemented under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos.

The primary dilemma of this research is to ascertain how the Ibadi doctrine has contributed to Oman's emergence as a mediator state, while maintaining its religious identity and concurrently embracing modernity.

Ibadism as a religious-political system – origins, doctrine, and historical evolution in Oman

The Ibadi doctrine maintains that the first four caliphs, Abu Bakr (632-634), 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (634-644), 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (644-656) and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (656-661), ascended to power based on their religious merit rather than tribal or familial affiliations, thereby rendering their political legitimacy consistent with the Islamic law. In particular, Abu Bakr and 'Umar are regarded by the Ibadis as just rulers whose governance remained free from significant moral transgressions. The Ibadi perspective on the caliphate of 'Uthman is divided into two phases: the first six years are regarded as a period of righteous rule, whereas the latter half of his reign is deemed illegitimate (Hoffman, 2012: 7).

The Ibadīyya, one of the most enduring schools of the Islamic thought, emerged from the profound power struggles within the Muslim community that intensified during the reign of the third caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (644-656). The assassination of 'Uthman in 656 led to a significant political and religious crisis within the Islamic world. His successor, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, encountered escalating opposition, which ultimately led to the Battle of Siffin in 657 between his supporters and the forces of Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. Within this historical context, the Kharijite movement emerged, rejecting the legitimacy of both 'Ali and Mu'awiya, and accusing them of violating the fundamental principles of Islam (Ghubash, 2006: 11-12).

Ibadism is frequently, albeit erroneously, historically associated with the Kharijite movement. However, the Ibadis themselves reject this classification, emphasizing fundamental ideological differences. While the Kharijites adopted an extreme exclusivist stance, engaging in *takfir* – the practice of declaring other Muslims as non-believers – the Ibadis developed a more moderate theological and political doctrine. The founder of Ibadism is widely regarded as 'Abdullāh ibn Ibād, who distanced himself from the radical factions of the Kharijites and established a distinct school of thought. This doctrine was founded on principles of socio-political justice and a selective concept of leadership, asserting that authority should be granted based on piety and competence rather than being determined solely by genealogical or tribal affiliations (Wilczyński, 2014: 9-10).

The Ibadis adopt an intermediary position between Sunnism and Mu'tazili² regarding the moral status of sinners, rejecting the radical doctrine of the Kharijites who considered those guilty of major transgressions to be apostates deserving of capital punishment. However, they also diverge from the Sunni perspective, which maintains that a sinner retains full membership within the Muslim community. In the Ibadi theology, individuals who commit grave sins are classified as "people of ingratitude" (*ahl al-kufr al-ni'ma*), a condition understood as a state of hypocrisy rather than formal exclusion from Islam. The Ibadi teaching shares many similarities with the Mu'tazili teaching, including a strong emphasis on *tawhīd* and a categorical rejection of any anthropomorphization of divine attributes. They categorically reject the attribution of physical characteristics to God, a concept found in some Sunni theological traditions, particularly Hanbalism. In relation to the doctrine of predestination, the Ibadis adopt a position that is at odds with Ash'arism, which is predicated on a mediated form of determinism. Instead, they align with the perspective that human beings accept complete responsibility for their actions. In this regard, their theological stance closely parallels that of the Mu'tazili (Madelung, 2016: 245-246).

The Ibadis are distinct from both the Sunnis, who adhere to the principle of hereditary caliphate, and the Shi'as who recognize the divine legitimacy of imams descended from the lineage of 'Ali. The Ibadis advocate for the model of imamate selection, a system in which the imam is elected. In the political thought of the Ibadi, imam is not considered a sacral figure, rather, his authority is derived from his piety, justice, and administrative competence. His power is not absolute, he should govern unjustly, the community retains the right to depose him. In contrast to the Sunni tradition, which has historically emphasized the central authority of the caliphate, the Shi'a have advanced the doctrine of the Hidden Imam. This doctrine conceptualizes Imam as the metaphysical leader of the Muslim community. In this framework, the anticipated return of the final Imam is interpreted as the advent of the Mahdī, an event posited to precipitate a transformative reordering of both spiritual and political authority within the Islamic world (Mazur, 2019: 24). The Ibadis, on the other hand, have adopted a more pragmatic approach to political organization. In contexts where the exercise of direct political authority was unfeasible, they embraced the doctrine of *taqiyya* – the concealment of religious beliefs and adaptation to prevailing political conditions – which enabled them to survive as minority communities in diaspora (Hoffman, 2012: 12).

² The Mu'tazila was an Islamic school of speculative theology (*kalām*) that emerged in the 8th century in Basra and Baghdad. The school is known for its emphasis on reason and rational thought, with its adherents holding that human reason is capable of discerning ethical truths independently of divine revelation. A further tenet of the Mu'tazila was that the Quran was created rather than eternal, a belief that brought them into conflict with the orthodox Sunni theology of the time (Hourani, 1976: 59-60).

In contrast to the other major Islamic schools of Sunnism and Shi'ism, the Ibadi doctrine is unique in its historical insistence on preserving the principles of *al-ijmā' wal-taāqud* (consensus and contract) through the institution of the imamate. The Ibadi concept of governance is grounded in a strong ethical foundation, viewing the imamate as a form of social contract that obligates the ruler to govern justly and uphold religious principles. In the event of the ruler becoming tyrannical, his legitimacy is forfeited, and the community holds the right to depose him. Authority in the Ibadi political thought is neither hereditary nor conferred based on lineage, rather, it must be granted strictly on the basis of merit. This principle distinguishes Ibadism from other Islamic traditions, as it categorically rejects dynastic legitimacy. The Ibadis have played a significant role in the Islamic history, establishing several independent states, including the Rustamid Imamate in Algeria (8th-10th century) and the Sultanate of Oman, where Ibadism remains the dominant religious tradition to this day (Ghubash, 2006: 20-23).

The initial endeavour to institute an imamate in Oman transpired between 750 and 752, marking a period of transition following the dissolution of the Ibadi structures in Hadramawt. In this context, al-Julanda ibn Mas'ūd ascended to authority. Nonetheless, his reign proved ephemeral, as an Abbasid military intervention effectively dismantled the Ibadi system of governance in the region. A notable turning point occurred in 793, with the establishment of an imamate that endured for nearly a century (Hoffman, 2012: 17). This political system was predicated on the principles of a theocratic community, in which the imam governed through social consensus, thus distinguishing it from the Sunni caliphate model, which emphasized centralized authority, as well as from the Shi'a doctrine of the imamate, which was predicated on hereditary succession and divine legitimacy. The political history of Oman over the subsequent centuries was marked by cycles of imamate continuity and decline (Nonneman, 1989: 205-207). The imamate of al-Salt ibn Malik (852-879) ended with his overthrow, triggering a prolonged power struggle between the two key centers of Ibadism – Nizwa and Rustaq. It was not until the 11th century that the imamate was reestablished under the rule of al-Khalil ibn Shadhan (1016-1034), ushering in a new era of intensified religious and political exchange between Oman and Hadramawt. Through these developments, Ibadism solidified its position as a resilient political doctrine capable of adapting to the shifting dynamics of the Islamic world (Hoffman, 2012: 14).

A seminal moment in the history of Oman occurred in the 12th century, when the Nabhani dynasty seized power, thus marking a departure from the traditional principles of the Ibadite theocracy. The new rulers implemented instead a governance model predicated on the manipulation of tribal structures. This period is regarded by the Ibadite historians as an era of political degeneration and despotism. Nevertheless, the Nabhani rulers in fact continued many administrative practices characteristic of the earlier imamate system. The fundamental distinction, however, lay in the fact that their author-

ity did not emanate from a religious consensus within the community but was based on force and political pragmatism. A significant realignment of the power structure occurred in the 16th century when, in response to external threats, Oman was reunited under the rule of the imamate once again, this time through the Ya'rubī dynasty (1615-1741). During this period, the Ibadite Oman consolidated its position as a regional power capable of effectively opposing the expansionist ambitions of the Portuguese and Persian empires. This final phase signified the full functionality of the classical concept of the imamate as the dominant model of governance in the region (Wilkinson, 1987: 12).

The definitive end of the traditional imamate was brought about by the Bu Sa'idi dynasty, which gradually transformed the governance structure from an elective imamate into a hereditary monarchy. Ahmad ibn Sa'id, the founder of the dynasty, was the last ruler to formally bear the title of imam, yet his successors, although they nominally retained the title, effectively abandoned the imamate conception of leadership in favour of dynastic succession. This transition marked a significant shift in Oman's political landscape, transitioning from an Ibadite system of imam election by the community to a more centralized monarchical structure (Nicolini, 2004: 18).

Notwithstanding Oman's gradual transition to a monarchical system, the political relevance of Ibadism was not wholly eradicated. In the 19th century, an attempt was made to restore the imamate under the leadership of 'Azzan ibn Qays (1868-1871). At the dawn of the 20th century, another attempt to re-establish Ibadite governance was initiated by Salim ibn Rashid al-Kharusi, who in 1913 declared the reconstitution of the imamate. This development led to the conclusion of the Treaty of Sib in 1920, which formally divided Oman into two distinct political entities: the interior, administered by the imams, and the coastal Sultanate. However, the definitive cessation of the imamate occurred in 1955 following British military intervention, which facilitated the complete consolidation of authority by the Bu Sa'id dynasty. While the newly established monarchy was committed to the principles of hereditary succession, it also assimilated certain elements of the former imamate system, integrating them within the framework of the emergent political order (Clements, 1980: 45-50).

As a political system, Ibadism was distinguished by its unique approach to the legitimization of authority, wherein piety and competence constituted the primary criteria for governance. This principle was fundamentally distinct from the Sunni conception of a hereditary caliphate and the Shi'a model of the imamate, which was predicated on the notion of divine right. Despite the dissolution of its central state structures, Ibadism demonstrated a remarkable capacity for endurance, sustained by its robust doctrinal and communal foundations. Its influence remains discernible, particularly in Oman, where it continues to shape the local religious and political identity and plays a significant role in the sociopolitical framework.

Sultan Qaboos and the construction of a modern state

Upon assuming power, Sultan Qaboos was faced with the challenge of reconstructing a state that, in practice, did not function as a unified and cohesive political entity. His legitimacy within Omani society was initially fragile, further complicated by the ongoing military campaign in Dhofar, which carried significant geopolitical implications. In response to these challenges, the Sultan's primary objective became the consolidation of internal stability and the restoration of public trust in the government. This process entailed a comprehensive re-evaluation of conventional governance mechanisms and the establishment of social cohesion, thereby positioning the state as the pivotal reference point in the daily lives of Omanis (Valeri, 2009: 71).

Sultan Qaboos effectively employed Ibadism as a means of consolidating his power by integrating its values and institutions into state mechanisms. This contributed to the strengthening of the legitimacy of his rule and the maintenance of social cohesion. By emphasizing the principles of moderation, consensus and tolerance, Ibadism became a fundamental pillar of Omani national identity, enabling the government to foster societal unity while efficiently managing the country's diverse social structure (Valeri, 2009: 72).

A fundamental element of this strategy entailed the integration of values considered to be traditional into state institutions. Sultan Qaboos sought to diminish the autonomy of tribal solidarity mechanisms, known as *'asabiyyāt*, by subordinating them to central authority. Consequently, traditional sources of legitimacy, which had been rooted in tribal affiliations and the protection of lineage-based interests, were replaced by a narrative centred on economic and social achievements. Consequently, the state assumed the role of the primary guarantor of welfare and security, thereby enabling the Sultan to consolidate his position as the supreme authority and the central actor in the redistribution of oil revenues (Migdal, 2001: 257-258).

This process extended beyond the economic sphere to include symbolic measures, such as the reshaping of Oman's historical narrative around the figure of the Sultan and the promotion of the concept of national unity. Through these endeavours, Qaboos effectively linked the process of state-building with the construction of Omani national identity, thereby establishing a cohesive vision of governance that was rooted in social integration and political centralization. Since 1970, a key factor in Oman's political stability has been the redefinition of the role of *'asabiyyāt* within the modern political system. On the one hand, the state assumed full control over these tribal solidarity structures, imposing its own rules of governance. On the other hand, these traditional networks adapted to evolving political and social realities by actively integrating into state mechanisms. This resulted in a dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity, wherein the state not only shaped *'asabiyyāt* but was also influenced by them (Migdal, 2001: 258).

Sultan Qaboos effectively employed this process to consolidate the legitimacy of his rule, whilst concurrently establishing a contemporary Omani state and fortifying the national identity of its citizens. His strategic equilibrium between modernization and tradition facilitated the establishment of a stable political system, adept at responding effectively to both domestic and international challenges (Valeri, 2009: 72).

Despite the absence of official statistics from the Omani government regarding the religious composition of the country, Ibadism is widely recognized as the dominant religious tradition. According to data from the CIA in 2020, approximately 85.9% of the population identifies as Muslim, 6.4% as Christian, and 5.7% as Hindu, while the remaining 2% consists of adherents of other religions and the non-affiliated. The data further reveals that Omani citizens, constituting approximately 56.4% of the total population, predominantly identify as Muslims. Among the Omani Muslim population, the two main branches are the Ibadis and the Sunnis, each accounting for approximately 45% of the total, while the Shi'as represent around 5%. The remaining 5% of the population consists of religious groups other than Islam, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (CIA, 2025).

Despite the predominance of Ibadism, Oman is a religiously diverse state. This pluralistic composition poses a significant challenge to the government in effectively managing religious diversity to maintain social and political stability. For an extended period, the Omani state has pursued stringent oversight of religious discourse, seeking to insulate it from political influences and external interference. The government relied on the authority of local scholars, who served as custodians of the traditional Ibadi knowledge, allowing for the regulation of theological debates and the preservation of religious discussions within the framework of local traditions. In 1997, in response to escalating tensions within the Islamic circles, the first Faculty of Islamic Law and Sharia was established in Muscat under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. It was recognized by the authorities that traditional mechanisms for controlling religious discourse were becoming less effective. The younger generation increasingly sought religious content outside officially sanctioned spaces, including materials prohibited by the state. While the Ibadi doctrine does not explicitly advocate for segregation from other religious traditions, the challenges posed by effective engagement in a globalized world and the maintenance of strong international relations are significantly compounded by a lack of adequate education and access to a broader theological context (Valeri, 2009: 127-129).

Sultan Qaboos effectively employed Ibadism as a means of consolidating his power. Upon assuming the throne in 1970, he confronted the challenge of unifying a country characterized by a complex tribal and religious structure. Ibadism, being the predominant branch of Islam in Oman, played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's social and political identity. The Sultan strategically integrated the Ibadi values and institutions into state administrative mechanisms, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of his rule and ensuring both political stability and social cohesion (Sherwood, 2017: 14).

Sultan Qaboos was an active proponent of the Ibadi principles of moderation, tolerance, and consensus, which facilitated the construction of a national unity narrative, thereby effectively mitigating potential tribal and sectarian tensions. To consolidate his political dominance, Sultan Qaboos strategically integrated religious elites into the state structures, thereby securing their support. As Marc Valeri observes, this strategy not only served to enhance the Sultan's authority but also contributed to the maintenance of social cohesion and political stability in Oman (Valeri, 2009: 124). It is imperative to emphasize that Sultan Qaboos' engagement with Ibadism extended beyond mere symbolic promotion, encompassing active endeavours to consolidate its institutional foundations. He allocated funds to the development of religious infrastructure, including the construction of places of worship such as the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat, and the implementation of educational programmes grounded in the theological principles of the Ibadi doctrine. These initiatives have been instrumental in consolidating his position as the guardian and custodian of Oman's religious heritage, while concurrently ensuring the allegiance of the religious elite and broader segments of society (Kugiejko, 2021: 220).

This approach not only facilitated the effective consolidation of power but also ensured the long-term political stability of Oman. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize the challenges that accompanied the integration of Ibadism into the state institutions. Valeri highlights the tensions between traditional religious structures and the modern administrative apparatus, which required Sultan Qaboos to skillfully navigate competing social and political interests (Valeri, 2019: 115-120). Despite the intricacies involved, the Sultan demonstrated a remarkable ability to maintain a delicate balance, showcasing both his political acumen and his profound understanding of Oman's socio-political dynamics. The Ibadi doctrine has enabled Omanis to shape a relatively diverse national society that has successfully resisted the influence of dominant Islamic currents in the region, such as Wahhabi Sunnism and Shi'ism. Consequently, despite its ostensibly limited economic and demographic potential, Oman has, for the past four decades, steadily consolidated its position as a pivotal political, cultural, and commercial hub in the region (Wilczyński, 2014: 15).

Neutrality and diplomacy - interconnections

The Oman Vision constituted a conceptual framework that Sultan Qaboos systematically implemented as part of his state-building project. The objective of this initiative was to establish Oman as a significant regional actor, as opposed to a direct competitor within the geopolitical dynamics of the Persian Gulf region. This objective was realized through the implementation of a distinctive foreign policy approach, which was characterized by the engagement in dialogue with both allies and adversaries. Consequently, the developmental and transformative processes that fostered social cohesion

and long-term stability following the Dhofar rebellion were primarily the result of Sultan Qaboos' individual agency and strategic vision (Hilal, 2020: 1985).

Notwithstanding the regional tensions that ensued in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Oman continued to cultivate close diplomatic relations with Tehran, entering into a series of economic and military agreements that served to further enhance their mutual interdependence. Leveraging its robust diplomatic relations, Oman assumed a pivotal mediating role in Iran's interactions with other states, notably facilitating crucial negotiations, including the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and the covert diplomatic talks between Iran and the United States in 2012. The latter ultimately led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which resulted in the easing of economic sanctions on Iran, contributing to the stabilization of its economy (Uysal, 2016).

A pivotal element of domestic policy pertained to the enhanced integration of women within the public sphere. This integration exerted a favourable influence on the nation's socio-economic advancement, signifying a pragmatic approach to modernization. The contemporary scenario is such that women constitute over 30% of the workforce. Nevertheless, Oman remains a profoundly patriarchal society, where conservative Islamic norms continue to constrain women's full participation in political and social life. Moreover, citizenship laws continue to favour men, as Omani nationality can only be inherited through the paternal line (Al Aghbari, Hassan, Al Mamari, Musa, 2024: 46-47).

Ibadism is a distinct tradition within Islam, neither affiliated with Sunnism nor Shi'ism. Its adherents are characterized by a commitment to peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and mutual respect. The Ibadi doctrine places a strong emphasis on the acceptance of religious and cultural diversity, as well as intra-Islamic pluralism, considering these principles fundamental to its spiritual, ethical, and social framework. This religious tradition has played a pivotal role in shaping the social and political structure of Oman, where the Ibadis constitute a significant portion of the population. Oman demonstrates a notable degree of resilience to sectarian divisions, religious intolerance, and violence driven by doctrinal differences. Consequently, the state does not perceive its Shi'a minority as a potential threat, nor does it identify any significant security risks stemming from its diplomatic and geopolitical relations with Iran. The Ibadi imamate system is founded on the fundamental principle of consensus, both in decision-making processes and in the selection of leaders. A core component of Omani political culture is the interwoven concepts of *shūra* (consultation) and *ijmā'* (consensus), which collectively foster inclusivity and ensure broad societal participation in governance mechanisms, irrespective of an individual's social status. The Ibadi tradition has played a pivotal role in shaping Omani culture, which is characterized by tolerance and social cohesion. It can also be argued that the core principles of Ibadism, such as mutual respect and acceptance of diversity, are reflected in Oman's domestic and foreign policy strategies, which prioritize diplomacy, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence with other states (Funsch, 2015: 105-108).

Oman is distinctive in the religious landscape, as its Ibadi theology, while inherently conservative, simultaneously upholds an unwavering commitment to tolerance. The transition towards a more secularized system of governance may appear challenging, given the historical association of Ibadism with the imamate and religious rule (Elliott, 2018: 146). However, the continuous reinterpretation of the Quran to address contemporary issues distinguishes Ibadism from other Islamic traditions, as it adopts an ideological framework that enables Islam to adapt to evolving circumstances, including modernization. The reconfiguration of Ibadism to accommodate secular leadership without a designated imam is particularly evident in the reforms introduced by muftis within the judicial system. Presently, Omani judges are obligated not only to specialize in Sharia but also to acquire comprehensive knowledge of the state's secular legal framework. This reflects a broader shift toward legal and institutional modernization (Al-Salimi, 2011: 151).

Sultan Qaboos was acutely aware of Oman's historical tradition of tolerance, and sought to establish a Muslim state that, while maintaining conservative doctrines and social structures, would be non-sectarian, peaceful and open to diversity. While the state's role in the construction of modern Oman is indisputable, the establishment of a particular balance between conservatism and tolerance has been the result of centuries of social processes. Even prior to the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Oman's strategic location and its robust maritime traditions, which facilitated extensive interactions with diverse cultures and peoples, were instrumental. This prolonged exposure to external influences compelled the development of social flexibility and openness, which, over time, influenced the formation of the state's political and religious identity. The role of external contacts in shaping Oman as a politically independent and socially distinct state from its Arab neighbours has been a matter of considerable academic interest. Following a prolonged period of sovereignty and maritime development, Oman's integration into the Islamic world posed a challenge to its autonomy, as the dominant Islamic currents necessitated submission to external leadership – the imam in Shiism or the caliph in Sunnism. To preserve its political and religious autonomy, the Omani elite established a distinctive system of governance that enabled it to uphold its sovereignty whilst preserving its Islamic identity. The adoption of Ibadism facilitated Oman in achieving a harmonious equilibrium between religious independence and the safeguarding of economic interests, thereby ensuring the sustained political and economic stability of the state (Elliott, 2018: 174).

The Sultanate of Oman has adopted a political strategy of avoidance of direct involvement in key regional disputes, a course of action which has distinguished it from other Middle Eastern states since the 1970s. The policy of Sultan Qaboos was predicated on the principle of neutrality, a strategy which enabled Oman to maintain a distance from both conflicts and rivalries in the region. Despite its membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Oman has refrained from aligning with regional blocs or in-

terfering in the internal affairs of other states. This approach has been instrumental in establishing Oman's reputation as a mediator, a role that has enabled it to serve as an intermediary in pivotal diplomatic processes in the Middle East (Razavi Mehr, Mohammadi, Shojaiyan, Farrahi, 2024: 271).

Sultan Qaboos pursued a pragmatic and impartial policy, prioritizing the interests of the state over personal gain, thereby consolidating Oman's standing as a significant regional actor. Through the strategic avoidance of both Arab and international conflicts, he fostered a climate of stability, security and domestic tranquility within the nation. The Sultan's ability to inspire public confidence amongst the populace served to foster a sense of national unity, with Oman's domestic and foreign policies being oriented towards the promotion of political stability, security and economic development. The cornerstone of foreign policy became neutrality and diplomatic dispute resolution, enabling Oman to maintain its independence and cultivate broad international relations. Oman sought to cultivate cooperative relationships with Arab and Islamic states, emphasizing the pursuit of diplomatic conflict resolution. Constructive neutrality was identified as a priority for its foreign policy, as evidenced by the initiation of mediation initiatives and the dispatch of diplomatic missions. The active expansion of international relations, the opening up of embassies and consulates abroad, and the dispatch of political representatives have collectively enabled Oman to emerge from its period of isolation and consolidate its position as a stable and secure state. Consequently, Oman has strengthened its role in the regional diplomacy and contributed to economic development (Razavi Mehr, Mohammadi, Shojaiyan, Farrahi, 2024: 272).

Oman after Sultan Qaboos

In the majority of Arab monarchies, the principle of dynastic succession is based on primogeniture. A similar principle is observed in the Sultanate of Oman, where, according to Article 5 of the Constitution, the right to the throne is reserved exclusively for the male descendants of Sultan Turkī bin Sa'īd bin Sultan, who ruled from 1871 to 1888 (Basic Statue of the State, 2021). Sultan Qaboos is known to have led a life marked by solitude and the absence of offspring, and his advanced age has given rise to significant questions regarding the matter of succession. However, it is not possible to assert that members of the royal family were excluded from holding public offices. Two cousins of Sultan Qaboos, Fahad and Haitham, held significant positions in the state administration – the former as Deputy Prime Minister for Cabinet Affairs and the latter as Minister of Culture and National Heritage. Haitham bin Tariq Al Said ascended to the throne, with his nomination reflecting the will expressed by Sultan Qaboos prior to his demise. The royal family's decision, motivated by both adherence to tradition and concern for the state's welfare, was a natural choice – Haitham, alongside his brothers As'ād and Shibab, was regarded as one of the most likely candidates to become Oman's future

ruler. It is also noteworthy that Sultan Haitham is the son of the first, and effectively the only, Prime Minister of Oman since 1970 (Oliwa, 2020: 126).

In the context of the ongoing political developments in the region, the cousin and successor of Sultan Qaboos, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, has demonstrated a consistent commitment to upholding the policy of neutrality that had been institutionalized under Qaboos's leadership. However, his endeavours to implement a range of innovations have been significantly constrained by pressures arising from an unforeseen economic crisis (Gutiérrez de Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024: 218). In view of the worsening economic conditions, there is a possibility that Muscat might be required to relinquish its long-standing policy of neutrality in favour of a more pronounced alignment with Saudi Arabia. This would be a high-risk undertaking, especially in the context of the prevailing tensions between Iran and Riyadh. While Oman is undertaking efforts to mediate between Tehran, Riyadh, and Washington on nuclear-related matters, it is confronted with a significant challenge in Riyadh's insistence on the resilience of Iran's military and nuclear policies. Furthermore, the ongoing financial support provided by Saudi Arabia, in combination with Oman's limited resources, which hinder the attainment of full autonomy, serve to further elevate the risk of a departure from its long-established neutral stance. In the context of efforts to normalize relations with Israel, the violent escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – evidenced by brutal military actions in Gaza – has elicited robust societal and political responses, as demonstrated by both public opinion polls and the reactions of political leaders. These reactions clearly indicate a paucity of popular support for such a measure. It can, thus, be concluded that Oman's ability to sustain independent diplomacy and regional stability is contingent upon its capacity to manage its fragile economic situation, a key factor in shaping the future trajectory of the state's foreign policy. Despite the theoretical potential for Oman to engage in a process of normalizing relations with Israel, the political reality in Oman — reflected in both public opinion polls and the responses of its leaders — clearly indicates a lack of popular support for such a move (Gutiérrez de Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024: 233).

Notwithstanding the prevailing circumstances, declining oil and gas prices and deteriorating financial conditions, Muscat is compelled to adopt a more pragmatic trajectory. Material constraints significantly affect the capacity to implement innovations within the traditional diplomatic model. In his effort to preserve diplomatic independence while meeting rising domestic and international expectations, Sultan Haitham is forced to meticulously balance maintaining a mediatory image with the imperative to adapt to mounting economic and political pressures. Consequently, Oman is likely to be compelled to reconcile its traditional neutrality with Saudi interests in the medium term (Ezzerouali, Al Fatih, 2024: 11788).

In his speeches, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the transformation of Oman into a premier investment destination, with a particu-

lar focus on sectors that contribute to the development of the national economy and the diversification of revenue streams. His remarks underscore a firm belief in the country's competitive strengths, its vast potential, and the promising opportunities that must be fully exploited. The Oman Vision 2040 strategy constitutes a comprehensive transformation plan with the aim of establishing a diversified economy by the year 2040. This framework is built upon four key pillars – institutional management and performance, environmental protection, social development, and economic growth. Formulated initially under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the strategy is now being advanced by Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, with the initiative emphasizing broad societal engagement to enhance the quality of life for all Omani citizens (Foreign Ministry of Oman, 2025).

Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has initiated a series of wide-ranging reforms. A fundamental element of his policy agenda is to reduce the nation's reliance on oil reserves, whilst catalyzing innovation and enhancing the efficiency of the public sector. This is being achieved through the implementation of sophisticated quality management systems and the modernization of administrative processes. The Oman Vision 2040 project, under his leadership, has set ambitious objectives, notably the improvement of global economic indicators. This has been evidenced by a significant enhancement in Oman's standings in international rankings such as the Index of Economic Freedom and the Global Entrepreneurship Index (Oman Vision 2040 Report, 2024: 227). A significant domain of reform pertains to education and scientific research, wherein investments in infrastructure, the formulation of pedagogical programmes, and the internationalization of higher education institutions (as exemplified by the substantial enhancement in Sultan Qaboos University's ranking in the QS rankings) indicate a long-term strategy for human capital development. In the health sector, the implementation of a decentralized healthcare system, the expansion of medical infrastructure, and the digitization of health services are aimed at enhancing the quality and efficiency of healthcare delivery, which is crucial for ensuring societal well-being (Oman Vision 2040 Report, 2024: 9).

In the analysis of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's speeches by Zahir Badar Al Ghusaini and Tasneem Hamed Al Hasani of Sultan Qaboos University, clear intentions emerge to craft a political narrative centred on the vision of a modern, stable Oman. The language of his addresses, rich in present-tense forms, indicates a continuity of modernization processes and a deliberate reference to Sultan Qaboos's legacy. This linguistic strategy is indicative of a concerted effort to consolidate the new sultan's authority, while concurrently mobilizing society around the ideas of national unity and socio-economic progress. Consequently, Haitham's rhetoric functions as both a tool for legitimizing his rule and a mechanism for shaping Oman's political reality, orienting it towards adapting to contemporary challenges (Al Ghusaini, Al Hasani, 2024: 787-798).

Conclusions

Ibadism is regarded as one of the most dynamic traditions of Islam in the contemporary world, particularly during the reign of Sultan Qaboos. In recent decades, this doctrine has undergone significant transformation, gradually emerging from political and social isolation. The profound impact of Ibadism on the political and social history of Oman is particularly evident, as the country remains the only state in the world where Ibadism plays a central role in the structure of governance.

The reign of Sultan Qaboos has been instrumental in the modernization of Oman and the consolidation of Ibadism as both a religious and social doctrine. Contemporary Ibadism has diverged from its historical associations with violence and *takfir*, adopting principles of pacifism and more universally applicable theological and legal foundations. The school of thought under discussion emerged from isolation during the reign of Sultan Qaboos, gaining international recognition and actively participating in the global religious dialogue. The modern political and social vision of Sultan Qaboos enabled Oman, despite its relatively small size, to develop into a prosperous and influential state, playing a significant role in diplomatic conflict resolution at both the regional and global levels. The Sultan pursued a policy of reconciliation towards his opponents, including supporters of the imamate that had been backed by Saudi Arabia. This policy entailed the integration of said opponents into the political framework, as well as the appointment of members of Imam Ghalib bin Ali's family to the government positions. Qaboos' upbringing in the multicultural environment of Salalah is widely regarded as a key factor in shaping his approach to religious and social tolerance. This approach has been instrumental in establishing Oman as a country that is receptive to diverse traditions and religious communities, thereby contributing to the strengthening of its stability and social cohesion (Razavi Mehr, Mohammadi, Shojaiyan, Farrahi, 2024: 284-286).

To conclude, it is evident that Sultan Qaboos played a pivotal role in bringing Oman out of isolation, transforming it into a neutral mediator on the international stage. Through a policy grounded in tolerance, dialogue and consensus, Oman gained recognition as a stable state committed to peace while preserving its religious and cultural identity. The adoption of Ibadism as the foundation of its socio-political system enabled Oman to maintain its autonomy, avoid tribal fragmentation, and circumvent the identity crisis that affected other Muslim nations in the 19th and 20th centuries. The consolidation of power under the reign of Sultan Qaboos further reinforced the country's long-standing tradition of tolerance, successfully balancing religious conservatism with social openness, thus shaping a distinct model of Omani statehood (Elliott, 2018: 177).

The successor bears the critical responsibility of upholding the state's prestige, with Sultan Haitham's role in international politics fundamentally anchored in the perpetuation of a legacy of neutrality and mediatory diplomacy. However, his ability to implement this strategy is significantly constrained by domestic economic challenges. Conse-

quently, the trajectory of his foreign policy may gradually shift toward a more pragmatic approach based on the regional alliances. This poses a serious challenge both to the preservation of Oman's sovereign independence and to the stability of the entire region (Gutiérrez de Terán Gómez-Benita, 2024: 234). In order to continue the legacy of Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq should focus on the following four key areas: (1) the deepening of legal and regulatory reforms that enhance Oman's attractiveness as an investment hub; (2) the promotion of investments in sectors critical for economic diversification, such as logistics, tourism, and renewable energy; (3) the strengthening of specialized courts through systematic training and resource allocation to reduce legal risks; and (4) the development of public-private partnerships that stimulate innovation and economic growth. Such coordinated actions are essential for maintaining effective diplomacy and the economic modernity of Oman (Ezzerouali, Al Fatih, 2024: 11785).

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Abstract: Ibadism, as the dominant religious tradition in Oman, has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's national identity and political trajectory. This study examines the intricate relationship between Ibadism and state formation under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, analyzing how religious doctrine functioned as both a legitimizing force and a framework for governance. Whilst the historical evolution of Ibadism has been explored by previous researchers, there remains a paucity of understanding of its role in contemporary Oman, particularly in the context of political modernization and diplomatic positioning. The present article addresses this lacuna by employing a multidisciplinary methodological approach, including historical analysis, comparative research, and case studies of Omani political reforms. The findings reveal that the integration of Ibadism into the state structures under Sultan Qaboos has facilitated political stability, social cohesion, and Oman's emergence as a neutral mediator in regional affairs. By successfully balancing religious conservatism with modern governance, Oman has maintained its autonomy while promoting a unique model of political and religious coexistence. Moreover, the legacy of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq perpetuates this heritage by further integrating classical Ibadism with contemporary political practice.

Keywords: Ibadism, Oman, Sultan Qaboos, political science of religion, Islam, religious governance, political modernization, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Oman Vision 2040

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