



MIDDLE EAST TODAY



Constructing Oman's Peaceful Identity

Alignment Strategies and Discursive
Identifications Under Sultan
Qaboos bin Said

Giulia Daga

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Middle East Today

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PREFACE: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before proceeding, I would like to spend some lines to clarify the ontological and epistemological premises of the book. I adopt a constructivist ontology and an interpretive epistemology to understand meaning-making processes around the concept of identity—and its relations with alignment strategies—in a context-specific situation. This means that I share the poststructuralist assumption that there is no objective social reality but only social constructions, which exist through the meaning attributed to them by social actors. This view goes together with the book's objective of trying to understand meaning-making processes without aiming to find universal truths outside the specific context of reference. Most importantly, this work rejects the vision of the analyst as an objective observer completely unbiased by their own personal and societal constraints (Della Porta and Keating 2008).

Against this backdrop, this book looks at how artifacts (texts and text-analogues) are filled with meaning. The interpretation of meaning is done following an approach based on the *hermeneutic circle*: the understanding process is not perceived as linear but as a continuous adjustment of the provisional interpretations thanks to the evolving contribution of knowledge gathered during the research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Regarding the social critique-oriented aspects of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (i.e., text or discourse-immanent critique, prognostic/prospective critique, and socio-diagnostic critique), this work

is in line with the latter, with the aim of exposing the “possibly persuasive or ‘manipulative’ character of discursive practices” (Wodak 2001, 65; Catalano and Wough 2020).

However, this work does not embrace the highly critical engagement of the DHA, especially in its prospective critique and focus on evaluating the status quo to provide practical alternatives based on the research results (Reisigl 2018a). The choice not to embrace the prognostic/prospective critique comes from an attempt to counter Eurocentric views of non-Western political histories which often tend to propose a most ‘appropriate’ alternative political evolution. With this book, I am explicitly not trying to offer solutions in an attempt—I don’t know how successful—to avoid falling into the same mechanisms that the book tries to demystify.

By analysing texts produced by the Omani government, this work tries to understand meaning through an open process that keeps informing the entire research, including the research questions. Through a combination of a deductive and inductive approach, the research process did not proceed with linearity from the question to the results, but it adopted an approach based on *abductive reasoning*, i.e., a spiralling process which constantly went back and forth from theory to experience (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). This provided the research with the openness to both test theoretical concepts to the Omani case and introduce new ones.

The interpretive approach thus presupposes three main caveats, that need to be kept in mind throughout the reading of this book. First, the interpretation cannot be fully objective; the results will be inevitably based on the researcher’s situatedness. Second, the interpretation does not aim for absolute truth and causal explanations: it seeks to increase the in-depth understanding of a process. Third, the use of content analysis in visual support of the discourse analysis is mainly for contextualisation purposes: no causal statements are inferred from the code-counts.

Rome, Italy

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This book grew from a seed of curiosity about Oman's 'peaceful' foreign policy, something I stumbled upon in the news and academic papers as a student. My journey began as an undergraduate student in 2011, thanks to a course which sparked the idea for my BA dissertation and profoundly shaped my academic path. I'm first grateful to the University of Trieste, especially for the chance to spend ten months at INALCO in 2014–2015. There, I met Silvia Neposteri and others who nudged me further into further studying Oman's history and politics.

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Introduction

Situated on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, its position at the mouth of the Persian Gulf¹ has historically contributed to render Oman a crucial player in regional and international politics. Despite its strategic importance, Oman has often been overshadowed in academic research by its more economically and politically dominant neighbours. Its apparent stability and lack of involvement in regional disputes and conflicts have contributed to its underrepresentation (Hunt and Phillips 2017). While remaining understudied, Oman has increasingly developed a reputation for pursuing a foreign policy characterised by pragmatism, nonalignment, and a predilection for diplomacy over confrontation. This persistent approach, even in the face of changing regional dynamics, raises questions about how to interpret Oman's foreign policy choices from a

¹ The denomination of this basin—and the corresponding sub-region—is still disputed, e.g., between Persian Gulf, Arab Gulf, Arab-Persian Gulf, Muslim Gulf (Coutau-Bégarie 1993). For simplicity, the term Gulf will be used in this work. When adopting the longer form, the term “Persian Gulf” is employed for its historical usage. The term Gulf Arab states is sometimes used to indicate the Arab states with a coast on the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf Arab monarchies to indicate the countries that are part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (i.e., Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA], Kuwait, Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]).

historical perspective. It suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding that transcends conventional frameworks to seriously investigate Oman's adherence to a path of conciliation and peace.

1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF OMAN

When Sultan Qaboos bin Said² took power in Oman in 1970, little was known worldwide about the country due to decades of isolation and indirect external control. In 1971, following the British withdrawal from their positions 'east of Suez', the Sultanate of Oman was officially recognised as an independent state and gained membership in the United Nations. Prior to this, Oman's borders remained undefined or contested, and the notion that the Sultans of Muscat held legitimate authority over the entirety of present-day Oman was still under dispute. Two significant political rivals to the Sultanate persisted and were actively contesting power in the second half of the twentieth century—supporters of the Imamate and the Dhofar revolutionaries. These groups represented the latest vestiges of a long history of cyclical shifts in power and foreign interventions.

Dating back to 5000 BCE, communities that initially emerged as modest fishing villages along the coast developed into flourishing societies deeply integrated into the ancient world's trade networks, with a particular emphasis on maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. Coastal cities such as Muscat and Sur rapidly became crucial hubs within the complex web of oceanic maritime commerce, political rivalries, and cultural exchanges. Oman's strategic location along the maritime route to India and East Asia quickly drew the attention of European powers, initially the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, followed later by more substantial interests from the British.

The advent of Islam in the seventh century and its evolution into a political system marked another turning point in the political history of Oman, particularly following the establishment of the first Ibadi Imamate in the eighth century. Ibadism (*Ibadiyya*) represents the sole existing third branch of Islam beyond Sunna and Shia, originating from the *Khawarij* movement during the time of the first *fitna* (civil war). Among its peculiarities, Ibadi Islam places significant emphasis on the community's role in selecting its leader, the Imam, who is, in principle, both a religious and

² Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Bu Saidi or Al Said (1940–2020), from hereafter referred to also as 'Sultan Qaboos' or 'Qaboos'.

political figure. Theoretically, the Imam is chosen based on personal qualities such as piety, knowledge, and leadership ability and can be removed if he fails to uphold his duties or loses the community's trust.

Historically, the Imamate political system found fertile ground in the interior regions of Oman and it experienced periods of significant power and influence, particularly when it succeeded in uniting tribal confederations and in challenging external occupation. These periods alternated with others of decline and dormancy, depending both on the emergence of competitive sources of power originating within Oman, such as the Sultanate system, or coming from abroad, such as the Persians or the British.

Initially entrenched around the mountainous internal areas of the territory, particularly around the city of Nizwa, the Imamate expanded its influence on the coast in the seventeenth century, when the Yaruba dynasty successfully expelled the Portuguese, ultimately gaining control over key ports like Quriyat, Sur, and Muscat, with the Portuguese relinquishing Muscat to Omani control in 1650. The acquisition of Muscat and other coastal towns marked a significant shift in the nature of the Imamate rule in Oman, as it expanded from focusing primarily on the interior regions to controlling strategic coastal areas as well, and later further extending Oman's political influence on the shores of East Africa.

1.1.1 *The Imamate and the Sultanate*

The relationship between secular and religious sources of power has been one of the defining features of Oman's internal dynamics, revolving around ideological dimensions such as the dynastic versus elective nature of power, and tribal rivalries, particularly between the two main tribal confederations, the Hinawi and Ghafiri. These dichotomies often led to conflict and competition for resources and legitimacy. An emerging leader would frequently exploit the personal moral qualities dear to the Ibadi Imamate's system to gain legitimacy, something that would diminish once their personal rule transformed into a dynastic one. In moments of civil war and/or external occupation, another leader would often emerge by appealing to the same Imamate's legitimation, and a new cycle would commence (Wilkinson 1987; Jones and Ridout 2015; Valeri 2017).

The current ruling family, the Al Bu Saidi (or Al Said), rose to power in the mid-eighteenth century in this political context, after a period of civil war that had concluded with the Persian occupation of portions

of the territory. By expelling the Persians, Ahmad ibn Said Al Bu Saidi was able to consolidate tribal support to be formally elected Imam and to commence a reign that cemented Oman's reputation as a maritime empire, controlling portions of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The consensus around the legitimacy of Ahmad as Imam perished with him, followed by his descendants' rivalries which soon translated into fratricide wars and into the establishment of contested power sources between an Imamate that retreated in the interior, and coastal rulers based in Muscat, known to their subjects as 'Sayyids' until the end of the nineteenth century, when the term 'Sultans' started to be increasingly used. The Al Bu Saidi rulers of Muscat, during the nineteenth century, progressively concentrated on the maritime dimension of the empire, eventually relocating the capital to Zanzibar in 1840 and becoming irrevocably embroiled in British strategic interests in the Western Indian Ocean.

1.1.2 The British Role and Forms of Contention Against the Sultanate

The British succeeded the Portuguese and the Persians as the most challenging external force meddling with the power dynamics of the Persian Gulf and the Western Indian Ocean. Their interest in the region was primarily focused on securing trade routes through regional stability, which, by the early 1900s, was further increased by the aim to safeguard oil interests in the area. Throughout the nineteenth century, the British progressively appropriated the Omani political positions along the maritime route to Zanzibar, interfering with the Sultans' autonomy to engage with both their Omani and foreign counterparts, especially in the context of the British-French rivalries in the Indian Ocean. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British signed multiple treaties with the Sultans in Muscat and Zanzibar, transforming their domains into de facto protectorates by asserting control over their foreign policy.

The escalating presence of the British soon became entwined with the internal cyclical struggle between the Sultanate and the Imamate. British interference was particularly evident when a newly elected Imam in the interior of Oman in 1914 challenged the Sultan's authority over a disputed portion of territory. The 1920 Seeb Agreement, mediated by the British, recognised the Sultan as the formal ruler of the entire country, but his authority did not extend to the governance of the inner part of Oman.

However, the boundaries of the Imamate's jurisdiction remained undefined. The ambiguity led to a military confrontation in the 1950s around oil exploration rights, which resulted in the *Jabal Akhdar* (Green Mountain) war between the Imamate forces, supported by Saudi Arabia, and the Sultanate forces, backed by the UK. The war quickly drew international attention in an era characterised by self-determination movements worldwide. The question of the legitimacy of the Imamate rule over inner Oman translated into an international debate at the UN between 1957 and 1971, framing the issue of self-determination over that portion of territory as the 'Question of Oman'.

The other significant source of contention against the Sultanate's power in the twentieth century was not directly linked to the Imamate-Sultanate dispute but originated from the southern region of Dhofar. The Dhofar Revolution³ started as a tribal conflict in the early 1960s but swiftly escalated into a full-blown insurgence. The revolution sought to overthrow the Sultanate and establish a republican socialist state. The conflict was characterised by guerilla warfare with substantial foreign ideological and material involvement, with Iran and the UK backing the Sultanate and various republican and Marxist movements supporting the insurgents. Both regional (the Arab world) and international (the UN General Assembly) actors, since the 1960s, had supported the struggle against the Sultanate, which was described as a colonial 'unrepresentative regime' (UN GA Resolution 2238/1966). Both the Jabal Akhdar war and the Dhofar revolution soon became entwined with the broader context of decolonisation struggles and Cold War dynamics, eventually culminating in a British-led coup d'état that replaced Sultan Said bin Taymur⁴ with his son Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 1970.

1.1.3 *The Reign of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said (1970–2020)*

Qaboos bin Said ascended to the throne in a moment of very low internal legitimacy for the Sultanate system, facing material and ideological challenges from both the Imamate supporters and the ongoing

³ Following Abdel Razzaq Takriti (2016), the term Revolution is preferable to describe the armed struggle, because for eleven years the region of Dhofar was effectively ruled by a revolutionary government.

⁴ Sultan Said bin Taymur Al Bu Saidi or Al Said (1910–1972), from hereafter referred to also as 'Sultan Said' or 'Said bin Taymur'.

Dhofar revolution. This was coupled by an even lower international legitimacy, due to decades of isolationist policies and a British *de facto* protectorate that associated the Sultanate regime with an outdated colonial era that was crumbling worldwide. Once in power, the new Sultan thus faced two primary challenges: securing the population's allegiance amidst the backdrop of war and gaining international recognition as the legitimate representative of the Omani people.

The new Sultan countered the revolution in Dhofar by increasing the military effort, with the support of external countries like the UK, Iran, and Jordan. The British played a crucial role in advising and supporting the Omani forces. By 1976, the Dhofar Revolution was effectively over, with the insurgents either fleeing, surrendering, or integrating into the Omani society under a general amnesty offered by the Sultan. The end of the revolution marked a significant victory for Sultan Qaboos and solidified his rule. At the same time, Qaboos bin Said used the newfound oil wealth to fund infrastructure, health, education, and welfare projects.

The demise of Sultan Qaboos in January 2020 marked the conclusion of an era for Oman. His reign, spanning nearly fifty years, was among the lengthiest worldwide. The power transition was smooth, with the royal family promptly appointing Qaboos' cousin Haitham bin Tariq Al Said as the new ruler, in line with the late Sultan's wishes. Sultan Haitham, already recognised for his role in the previous administration, has been expected to persist on the trajectory of domestic and foreign policies set by his predecessor, while confronting the challenge of diversifying Oman's economy beyond its oil reliance and addressing the needs of a young, increasingly connected, population.

The conclusion of Sultan Qaboos' reign presents the possibility to examine fifty years of Omani history following the end of the *de facto* British protectorate, and to reflect on the country's foreign policy in a diachronic manner that can provide both closure and perspective. Sultan Qaboos oversaw Oman's integration in the international community in the post-1945 international system, and the first establishment of official diplomatic relations with states beyond the UK and the British Raj. In fifty years, his administration was able to design a foreign policy that is now frequently described by the international press as a peaceful exception in the turbulent Middle East. This exceptionalism is often attributed to the country's national identity, which is in turn interpreted as deriving from Oman's Ibadi tradition, the cosmopolitan character of its maritime history, and its delicate geostrategic location. Despite the extensive use

of the terms like ‘nonaligned’, ‘independent’, or ‘neutral’ foreign policy, connected to a ‘tolerant’ or ‘peaceful’ identity, both by academics and journalists, a careful reflection on the genealogy of these concepts and their suitable application to the Omani case is still missing. This book seeks to investigate the complex relation between the Sultanate’s conduct of foreign relations and its alleged ‘peaceful’ national identity, in the context of a changing regional and international historical context that followed the fifty years of Sultan Qaboos’ reign from 1970 to 2020. By adopting a Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), the book analyses and compares speeches made by Sultan Qaboos and Omani diplomats, to look at how discourse changed based on the time, issue, and audience of reference. In terms of methodology, it offers an innovative integration of discourse analysis with the study of alignment strategies,⁵ proposing a framework that can be replicated in studies that look at the link between foreign policy and identity in other states. More broadly, this book seeks to provide an underexplored perspective on Oman’s foreign policy, at the same time contributing both to the debate on small states’ alignments and the discussion on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states’ foreign policies and identities.

1.2 A REVISED DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is a multidisciplinary initiative aimed at examining the formation, stabilisation, and transformation of discourse (including discourse on national identity) from a historical viewpoint. The DHA emphasises the historical development of discourse, viewing history as ‘post-hoc rationalisation’ constructed by narratives with particular political aims. It explores processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation by examining intertextual and interdiscursive relationships within texts, and employs a triangulation of data and methods (Heer and Wodak 2008; Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Posch 2018; Reisigl 2018a; Catalano and Waugh 2020). This comprehensive analysis begins with the text, extends to the extralinguistic social variables linked to the text, and then considers the wider socio-political and historical context.

Much of Ruth Wodak’s and Martin Reisigl’s works on identity construction can be coherently integrated with Norman Fairclough’s

⁵ See Annex 1 for a detailed discussion on the Gulf small states’ alignment strategies and their interpretations in scholarly debates.

detailed contributions to text and discourse analysis (in particular, Fairclough 2003). However, this book is not only interested in looking at the discursive construction of national identity. It also seeks to look at the discursive evolution of alignment strategies, from now on referred to as ‘discursive alignments’, and at their relationship with the evolving discourses on identity. ‘Discursive alignments’ can include both ‘aligned’ and ‘nonaligned’ positions.⁶ ‘Discursive aligned positions’ are here defined as those in which, among two parties in a crisis/event, the Omani government explicitly chooses to support one side against the other in the official discourse. The intensity of the alignment is shown by the ‘discursive strategies⁷’ employed to explicitly (de)legitimise one of the parties, for example through *moral (de)legitimation*, *legal (de)legitimation*, or *criminalisation*. ‘Discursive nonaligned positions’ include those instances in which the Omani government, when referring to an international event, chose to employ a language which avoided taking any side, for example through positions of *equidistance*, *military neutrality*, *impartial/collective UN positions*, and *peace entrepreneurship*. These discursive nonaligned positions can be further nuanced in their intensity based on the kind of discursive strategies employed, such as *responsibilisation* or *positive self-presentation*. Table 1.1 summarises the overall framework, which merges the multilevel dimensions of analysis as proposed by Wodak et al. (2009) and Fairclough (2003) with the newly introduced notion of ‘discursive alignment’.

Based on these premises, the National Day/Annual Opening of the Council of Oman speeches (held each year by Sultan Qaboos) and the United Nations General Assembly Plenary Meetings speeches (held each year by the Omani delegation at the UN) were selected for the analysis, according to the following criteria: they follow the entire period of Sultan Qaboos’ reign⁸; they present the official positions of the Omani government and are thus particularly well suited to represent the Sultanate’s foreign policy discourse; they target two distinct audiences (international

⁶ See Annex 1 for a more detailed theoretical discussion on aligned and nonaligned strategies.

⁷ Discursive strategies are the macro-level tools through which identity contents are linguistically constructed. See Annex 2 for a more detailed overview of the methodological framework.

⁸ The domestic speeches however interrupt in 2015, due to the aggravation of the Sultan’s health. Moreover, in 2013, the Sultan did not hold the annual speech.

Table 1.1 Methodological framework integrating discursive alignment in the DHA⁹

<i>Historical context</i>	<i>Domestic, regional, international</i>
Generic structure Macro-level analysis	Generic macro-structure, Genre mixing Identity Contents Discursive Strategies Discursive alignments
External relations of the text	Intertextual References Interdiscursive References
Internal relations of the text	Processes, Participants, Circumstances Speech Functions Meaning Relations, Figures of Speech, Grammatical Relations

and domestic), providing comparative insights into the evolution of alignments and identifications. National Day speeches belong to the genre of commemorative addresses, primarily serving an integrative role in creating and sustaining a ‘shared memory’ (Reisigl 2018b), making them particularly significant for identity references. In contrast, the UN General Assembly serves as an agonistic platform where competing discourses contend over the establishment of international legal norms and the nature and legitimacy of political actors (Saeed 2021). The Omani delegation speeches at the UN GA plenary meeting are thus particularly relevant for identity references.

By looking at the selected texts along three analytical dimensions, i.e., ‘identity contents’, ‘discursive strategies’, and ‘discursive alignments’, this book traces¹⁰ the historical discursive construction of Oman’s identity under the reign of Sultan Qaboos and looks at the links between identity contents and issue-based alignments. The analytical categories were

⁹ See Annex 2 for a more detailed methodological discussion on the DHA, discursive strategies, identity contents, and linguist means and forms of realisation.

¹⁰ The analysis was conducted through an abductive coding of the texts and a consequent qualitative discourse analysis supported by the software Atlas.ti, which helped visualising the historical evolution of discursive alignments and identifications and offered departing points for the qualitative interpretation of the texts. All quotations featured in this book have retained the numbering system originally assigned to them on Atlas.ti.