

Ibādism and the Tradition of Tolerance in Oman

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Introduction

The central question the research investigates is whether a government can promote a desired behavior through its national identity. I investigate the case of Oman, a country whose people have a reputation for peacefulness and tolerance, and whose foreign policy has drawn academic attention for its commitment to nonviolent solutions to conflict. The Omani government attributes Oman's peacefulness to both Islam and cosmopolitanism as a result of trade. This article asserts that while based on real aspects of history, Omani peacefulness constitutes an invented tradition that serves the interests of the ruling regime.

The empirical puzzle arises when contrasting Omani peacefulness with the territory's turbulent history. Like most premodern systems, for much of its history Oman lacked a state that could impose direct rule,¹ and conflict between regions and tribes was the norm. Until 1970, the Sultanate's present territory was known as 'Oman' on the interior and 'Muscat' on the coast. These regions, while interdependent, were distinct.² When Sultan Qaboos assumed power in 1970, two predictors of conflict undermined Oman's potential for stability: ethno-religious diversity, and the precedent for armed secession.³ Yet under the rule of Qaboos, Oman has become unified, stable, and prosperous. This appears to be a victory for state-led development and the tools of economic growth, education, and national identity. However I argue that the apparent transformation will be short-lived because it is the result of a tradition invented by the regime and funded by petroleum revenues. Oman's reputation for stability, tolerance, and peacefulness is unlikely to survive a post-oil transition, despite the alleged origins of these traits in Oman's religious heritage and economic history.

The case of Oman illustrates both the power and limitations of an invented tradition.⁴ While drawing on real aspects of Oman's religious and economic history in order to promote the image of a peaceful, tolerant, and

politically quietist nation, the regime's official narrative can only last for the duration of the regime's performance legitimacy. Oman demonstrates that a regime may be able to promote a specific set of behaviors associated with a given identity, yet only when citizens receive material incentives to do so.

To clarify, Oman's invented tradition of peacefulness is similar to all other national narratives both in its constructed nature as well as its power. National identities are inventions, yet this does not undermine their salience nor their basis in (certain) historical realities. Governments select specific events from history that exemplify the desired narrative: in Oman's case, events that reinforce the projected image of peacefulness and tolerance. Like all official histories, the narrative focuses less on events or themes that do not match the desired narrative. This is common to nation-building projects, as their purpose is to forge a shared sense of identity based on a shared history. My argument is not that the Omani identity of peacefulness is unusual because it is a construction, in this it is quite typical. Instead I seek to explain why the regime selected this specific narrative as opposed to others. I conclude by considering whether the invented tradition can influence Omanis' behavior, thereby addressing the opening research question regarding the ability of a government to promote a desired behavior through a national identity.

The government narrative about Oman's reputation for peacefulness and tolerance combines two main themes: the influence of the Ibādī religious tradition and that of Oman's historic reliance on trade. According to the official narrative, Ibādism is a 'moderate' and 'tolerant' form of Islam.⁵ The second component of Oman's national identity focuses on its mercantile history and highlights the cosmopolitanism and tolerance that characterize merchant economies. The official narrative is not inaccurate: around the Arabic-speaking Middle East, and especially in the Gulf, Omanis have a reputation for friendliness and tolerance. Omani interviewees tend to

identify with the narrative of peacefulness and tolerance as a core component of what it means to be Omani (see below, section 'Embracing the Tradition?'). Historical accounts from British visitors in the 19th and 20th centuries frequently depict the inhabitants of Omani territory as peaceful and tolerant.⁶ To refer to a tradition as invented is not to imply that it is unfounded. However, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger discuss, traditions are invented for political purposes.

I argue that the purpose of the national narrative of peacefulness is to consolidate the rule of Sultan Qaboos. By trying to inculcate a peaceful national identity, Oman's ruling regime hopes to promote quietist behaviors that reduce the likelihood that Omanis might rebel or make greater political demands. Instances of armed rebellion in the mid 20th century arguably influenced Qaboos' perception of the possibility of resistance to Muscat's rule.⁷ I argue that these experiences incentivized the promotion of a peaceful national identity. While the possibility of armed rebellion seems less troublesome in the early 21st century, the narrative of peacefulness now serves to reduce the possibility of sectarian violence. The Omani government has leveraged its narrative of Ibādī peacefulness and tolerance as both Muslim and non-Muslim countries have sought means of counteracting the potential for violent extremism.

The national narrative solves an additional problem faced by Qaboos, that of the division between the coastal region and the interior. While these regions had a long history of interaction and mutual reliance, in the early 20th century the Treaty of Seeb formalized their separation, and by the mid 20th century they were at war. Qaboos needed a means of creating an Omani identity based on points of commonality between the two, as well as an identity that made future rebellion and conflict less likely. By combining the Ibādī heritage of the former Imamate with the seafaring history of the coast, and describing both of these as the sources of Omani peacefulness, the national narrative promotes both unity between the previously separate political units.

Theorizing a National Narrative

The Omani case offers insights for scholars of nationalism interested in the potential for national identity to influence behavior. Existing theories demonstrate the effects of instilling a national identity, from increasing loyalty to the state,⁸ to producing an industrial labor force,⁹ to enhancing military effectiveness.¹⁰ Some scholars have examined the possibility for a state to shift the official national narrative in the face of political realities.¹¹

Yet few scholars of nationalism have examined state efforts to infuse a national identity with a specific character. Analyses of Kemal Atatürk's campaign to encourage a secular and modern Turkish identity, and of Reza Shah's similar goals in Iran, offer potential insights. However, Atatürk and Reza Shah's efforts to promote Western modes of modernization were met with resistance. In contrast, Qaboos' regime grounds its narrative in Oman's heritage with apparent success. Even so, Anthony Smith reminds us that, "A national identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional; it can never be reduced to a single element ... nor can it be easily or swiftly induced in a population by artificial means".¹²

As a state with a relatively small population and significant oil wealth, Oman appears to offer a potentially easy context for a state-imposed identity. However as research in other Gulf states indicates, these wealthy monarchies tend to overestimate their ability to shape their populations' identities.¹³ Oman's petroleum reserves are insufficient to afford its citizens the state-sponsored luxury of the Kuwaitis, Qataris, or Emiratis, therefore the failure of these states to successfully impose their desired narrative indicates that Oman may be even less capable of doing so.

Scholars of nationalism may note that peaceful national identities are relatively rare. While certain European countries like Sweden and Switzerland have relied on neutrality in order to avoid damaging wars,¹⁴ and unusual cases like Costa Rica have chosen to disband their military,¹⁵ a national narrative that draws on a religious justification for national peacefulness is unusual. That Oman is Muslim is especially relevant for scholars that entertain questions of whether Islam contributes to certain behaviors, such as violence.¹⁶ At the surface, Oman's narrative of peacefulness grounded in Islam offers a promising alternative to Islamophobic depictions of the religion. Yet to depict Ibādī Islam as promoting peaceful behavior essentializes the religion to the same extent as those that see it as promoting violence.

Governmental claims often bear examination, in particular for the insights they can offer about leaders' agendas. Some existing research on Oman interrogates the claims of the Omani government, especially the narrative that attributes Oman's economic development to Sultan Qaboos, rather than petroleum.¹⁷ This research builds on such works by investigating Oman's reputation for peacefulness, an aspect of the official narrative that has often been treated uncritically.

Research that examines Oman's reputation for peacefulness tends to focus on Oman's foreign policy, and generally accepts the government's narrative about the influence of Ibādism and trade. Numerous works high-

light Oman's role as a the government's heritage of peacefulness.¹⁸ The Sultan's efforts of maintaining positive relations with neighbors, including with Israel,¹⁹ and even Israel's support for negotiated conflict.²¹ Evidence of Oman's neutrality towards Iraq during the Gulf War and more recently during the Arab Spring that produced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to curtail Iran's nuclear program and national sanctions. In the context of negotiations between belligerents in both Syria and Yemen, Oman's role in Middle Eastern states tending to avoid Arabia's war on Yemen, and its role in the Arab Spring.

Explanations for Oman's peacefulness in the government's narrative of peacefulness. Jeremy Jones and others have argued for a better understanding of foreign policy through consideration of the culture of the state that, in turn, it may be possible to understand a culture by studying its history and identity.²² They echo the idea that the combination of Ibādī Islam and a liberal mercantile culture in Oman, as Hussein Ghubash argues, is the reason for the Sultan's emphasis on the peacefulness and democratic selection of Islamic democracy, which influences Omani political culture.

While it may seem that the narrative of cultural explanation is typical enough, their refutation. Arguments that are even less plausible when applied to the Omani society that have a rentier economy. Finally, the narrative of its culture is prominent in its policies that maintains full control of the state, and therefore policies reflect the national character. All of these are likely when their similarities to the Omani regime is noted.

In critically examining the Omani regime, I build on previous works that have sought to provide a new interpretation of its history, including an early critique of the notion of Islamic democracy, a narrative of the Imamate,²⁴ and which the

light Oman's role as a mediator in the region and echo the government's heritage-based explanation for Omani peacefulness.¹⁸ The Sultanate maintains an explicit policy of maintaining positive relations with regional neighbors, including with Egypt after the Camp David Accords,¹⁹ and even Israel.²⁰ Sultan Qaboos has expressed support for negotiated rather than violent solutions to conflict.²¹ Evidence of Oman's irenic tendencies include its neutrality towards Iran, such as during the Iran-Iraq War and more recently, in facilitating the negotiations that produced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to curtail Iran's nuclear program and lift international sanctions. In the same period, Oman hosted negotiations between belligerents in the ongoing conflicts in both Syria and Yemen. Oman was one of only two Middle Eastern states that refused to participate in Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen, launched in 2015.

Explanations for Oman's peacefulness tend to adopt the government's narrative about Oman's peaceful heritage. Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout argue that "an understanding of foreign policy can be enhanced by a consideration of the culture in which it develops, and that, in turn, it may be possible to understand something of a culture by studying the way it conducts its diplomacy."²² They echo the government's narrative regarding the combination of Ibādī religious tradition and a cosmopolitan mercantile culture. Taking a similar perspective, Hussein Ghubash argues that the Ibādī religious tradition's emphasis on the principles of consultation (*shūrā*) and democratic selection of the Imam constitutes a tradition of Islamic democracy. He argues that this heritage influences Omani political and social behavior.²³

While it may seem tiresome to raise the straw man of cultural explanations of behavior, such characterizations are typical enough in scholarship on Oman to merit their refutation. Arguments of cultural continuity appear even less plausible when considering the vast changes to Omani society that have accompanied the transition to a rentier economy. Finally, attributing Oman's foreign policy to its culture is problematic because Sultan Qaboos maintains full control over all political decisions, therefore policies reflect the Sultan's character rather than a national character. All such arguments appear even less likely when their similarity to the official discourse of the regime is noted.

In critically examining the narrative promoted by the Omani regime, I build on the works of other scholars that have sought to problematize the regime's preferred interpretation of its history. John Wilkinson offered an early critique of the notion of Ibādism as a form of proto-democracy, a narrative embraced by the proponents of the Imamate,²⁴ and which the regime continues to promote.

A key component of the regime's official history portrays Sultan Qaboos as the central agent in Oman's economic transformation, which is known as 'The Golden Renaissance'. According to the Qaboos regime, Qaboos' father Sultan Sa'īd deplorably neglected the Omani people. This is contrasted to Sultan Qaboos' valiant efforts to provide the population with roads, jobs, hospitals, and schools. The role of petroleum revenues is minimized. The ubiquity of the narrative is reflected in often uncritical scholarship or accounts by visitors to Oman.

Several scholars have questioned this narrative. Dale Eickelman writes, "The major transformations in Omani society and polity have been incremental and cumulative, not readily reduced to the ahistorical 'big bang' theory advanced by government publicists in which all substantive change in Oman began in July 1970."²⁵ According to Brian Pridham the regime went so far as to not include Qur'ānic schools in the official count of schools available in Oman in 1970, and then included them in the count the following year in order to inflate Qaboos' magnanimity.²⁶

More recent scholarship by Uzi Rabi and Marc Valeri also questions the centrality of the figure of Qaboos.²⁷ According to Rabi, the absolute dichotomy contrasting Qaboos' rule from that of his father's is a fiction in service of Qaboos' prestige. Valeri states that:

It was crucial for Qaboos to build his own legitimacy at the expense of alternative political and social allegiances offered to his subjects. To do that he endeavored to promote an original Omani identity for which his own person has constituted the keystone.²⁸

The present article contributes to this and similar scholarship that treats the narratives of the Omani regime, and all authoritarian systems, with skepticism.

The Invented Tradition of Peacefulness

Concerning Omani peacefulness there exists conflicting evidence. Historic and contemporary accounts confirm Omanis' reputation for openness and tolerance. However, like all societies, Oman's history also includes numerous instances of war, conquest, and violence. I argue that Oman's contemporary reputation for tolerance and peacefulness is the result Sultan Qaboos' leadership, foreign policy, and his desire to promote domestic stability through an invented tradition of Omani peacefulness. I draw on Hobsbawm and Ranger and their definition of an invented tradition as "a set of practices ... which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with

the past".²⁹ In my assessment, the frequent references to peacefulness as an inherent aspect of Omani culture constitutes an invented tradition.

Although Oman's foreign policy has received attention for its emphasis on mediation, Oman's arms purchases belie an absolute commitment to non-violence. In 2012 the Omani state increased its military purchases by 51 percent.³⁰ The fact that Oman and Saudi Arabia constitute the only two Gulf countries with a viable military reinforces what Sultan Qaboos has referred to as 'the peace of the strong'.³¹ Oman's military takes pride in having defeated two insurgencies in the mid 20th century, and considers itself battle-tested, in contrast to the militaries of most of the other Gulf states. However Oman's military strength is not seen as incompatible with its commitment to non-violent conflict resolution, and indeed Omani peacefulness is only possible in the context of power, due to its position between Iran and Saudi Arabia.³²

Despite the realities of the Omani security sector, most of the other components of state power in Oman ascribe to the narrative of Omani peacefulness. Yet these appear challenged by history. Claims of Ibādism as encouraging non-violence are undermined when considering the conquest carried out by the Omani empire in East Africa and southern Pakistan (Baluchistan). Later, the violent overthrow of Omani control in the bloody Zanzibar Revolution by their East African subjects, some of whom were converts to Ibādism, also undermines the claim that Ibādism inspires peaceful behavior.³³ The armed rebellion of the al-Jabal al-Akhḍar War and the Zūfār War also contradict assertions of Ibādī peacefulness. Oman does not exhibit unusual levels of violence, only typical patterns of pre-modernity in the absence of a powerful modern state. However historical evidence undermines claims that Omanis are unusually disposed to peacefulness.

Regarding allegations of Oman's religious tolerance, the fact that the sectarian division between Ibādī and Sunnī Omanis remains minor, constitutes another example of Sultan Qaboos' impressive state-building. This divide is suppressed in part by coercion: the Press and Publishing law forbids anyone to publish or circulate anything sectarian.³⁴ Religious education promotes a generic, non-sectarian Islam.³⁵ Although more recently the regime has begun to emphasize Ibādism more heavily, the discourse seeks to minimize sectarian tensions.³⁶

Omani Peacefulness: Supporting Evidence

Concerning supporting evidence for Omani peacefulness, I argue that the narrative of Omani peacefulness comes primarily from Sultan Qaboos. Since ousting his father

and ascending to the throne in 1970, Sultan Qaboos has reiterated the narrative of Omani peacefulness and tolerance. Each year around his birthday, Oman's National Day, the Sultan gives a speech to the nation regarding the country's progress that year and goals for the next. References to peacefulness and tolerance constitute a common theme: the following quotes are from 1993, 1998, and 2005, respectively: "We tirelessly work to contribute to the building of peace"; "Peace is the goal of the state"; "It is something that we have always called for through the dissemination of the culture of tolerance, peace, cooperation, and understanding between all nations". The following excerpt from 2005 demonstrates the consistency of the message of peacefulness and noninterference:

*Oman has a deep-rooted history and firm principles established ages ago and, praise be to God, what we have done is to confirm these principles, and express them in modern-day language. One of Oman's firm principles is co-operation with all states and nations on the basis of mutual respect, mutual interest and non-interference in the affairs of others as well as our non-acceptance of interference in our affairs by others.*³⁷

The Sultan emphasizes the continuity of tradition, in keeping with Hobsbawm and Ranger's expectations. Concerns about fanaticism appear to have risen: an article from 2013 quoted Sultan Qaboos as saying that "The more thought becomes diverse, open and free from fanaticism, the more it becomes a correct and sound basis for building generations and achieving the progress of nations", during the opening of the Omani parliament's fifth term on October 31.³⁸

In addition to the Sultan's explicit annual references to peacefulness as the goal of the state, specific ministries actively promote the narrative of Omani peacefulness and toleration. The Ministry of Tourism, most directly tasked with presenting Oman to the rest of the world, offers information in both Arabic and English about the three threads of the narrative of Omani peacefulness: nonviolent acceptance of Islam (which occurred prior to the fracturing of the Muslim community after the death of Muḥammad), the tradition of tolerance in Ibādism, and the cosmopolitan heritage of seafaring.³⁹

In recent years, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs has taken an increasingly central role in presenting Oman's religious heritage as traditionally tolerant and nonviolent. I interpret this as a response to efforts by non-state actors to promote alternative interpretations of Islam, in particular since the political openings of the Arab Spring in 2011, the rise of Islamist political parties in several Middle Eastern states, and the rise of the so-called Islamic State. While the message of peace and toleration

advanced by the Ministry with the regime's long-increased activism appealing to a less tolerant international audience beginning in 2004 the Ministry's publication entitled "The Omani Heritage" gathered pieces in Arabic, English, and Persian in Islam, and in Oman. The Ministry changed the name to "The Omani Heritage" as a reflection of a hoped-for understanding.⁴⁰

The Ministry of Tourism, Endowments and Religious Affairs has collected sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad in the narrative of Oman's history on the website of the Ministry. The Ministry believed to have said, "I am a man of Al Ghubaira [people of the desert] who had not seen me".⁴¹ The Prophet Muḥammad had come to spread the message of Islam on the territory of Oman, the Ministry sought to convert to the new religion. The website does not cite a *ḥadīth* from Oman's peaceful entrance into Islam.

Another *ḥadīth* regarding tolerance comes from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, accepted collections of *ṣaḥāba*, Chapter 57, the Prophet said to one of his disciples after you gone to the people of the desert: "Do not sulted or beaten you". The Omani were already tolerant even before their conversion to Islam.

2014 witnessed several exhibitions of Endowments and Religious Affairs including messages of tolerance. The ministry launched an exhibition of Omani embassies in 70 countries about the Islamic tradition of Religious Tolerance in Oman. The exhibit was in Arabic and English. At the Ahmad bin Hanbal in November 2015, the Ministry of Endowments and Arabic, and included a message such as "Wish people of the world the Qur'anic verse XLII: 'And the tribes that you may know in 2014 the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs 'actfortolerance' to demonstrate through the exhibit.

advanced by the Ministry of Religious Affairs is consistent with the regime's long-running narrative, the Ministry's increased activism appears to be directly focused on combatting less tolerant interpretations of Islam. For example, beginning in 2004 the Ministry began to produce a quarterly publication entitled *al-Tasāmuh* ("Tolerance"), which gathered pieces in Arabic about the tradition of tolerance in Islam, and in Oman specifically. In 2013, the Ministry changed the name to *al-Tafāhūm* ("Understanding"), as a reflection of a hoped-for transition towards greater understanding.⁴⁰

The Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs both draw on *ḥadīth*, or the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, to corroborate their narrative of Oman's historic peacefulness. According to the website of the Ministry of Tourism, the Prophet is believed to have said, "God's mercy be on the people of Al Ghubaira [people of Oman], for you believed me and had not seen me".⁴¹ The *ḥadīth* is based on the fact that Prophet Muḥammad had not travelled to Oman in order to spread the message of Islam, but that the rulers of the territory of Oman, the brothers 'Abd and Jayfar, decided to convert to the new religion and their population followed suit. The website of the Ministry of Religious Affairs does not cite a *ḥadīth*, but reaffirms the narrative of Oman's peaceful entrance to Islam.⁴²

Another *ḥadīth* regarding Omanis' reputation for tolerance comes from *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, one of the most widely accepted collections of *ḥadīth*. In the Book 31, *Faḍā'il al-ṣaḥāba*, Chapter 57, the Prophet is believed to have said to one of his disciples after an unwelcome reception, "Had you gone to the people of Oman, they would not have insulted or beaten you". This *ḥadīth* is used as evidence that the Omanis were already known to be a peaceful people even before their conversion to Islam.

2014 witnessed several new initiatives by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs geared at promoting messages of tolerance to an international audience. The ministry launched a traveling exhibition that visited Omani embassies in 70 different countries highlighting the Islamic tradition of religious tolerance entitled 'Religious Tolerance in Oman', and then renamed 'Message of Islam'. The exhibit has also been taken to schools in Oman. At the Aḥmad ibn Mājid private school in al-Sīb in November 2015, the exhibit was presented in English and Arabic, and included *ḥadīth* in English and Arabic, such as "Wish people what you wish to yourself",⁴³ or the Qur'anic verse XLIX:13: "We have made you races and tribes that you may get mutually acquainted".⁴⁴ Also in 2014 the Ministry launched a Twitter handle called '#actfortolerance' to document the outreach conducted through the exhibit.

When interviewing Omanis about the government's narrative of tolerance, some acknowledged that it has received increased attention in recent years. Although statements about Oman's commitment to peace appear early in the Sultan's speeches, the focus on religious tolerance became more pronounced after 11 September 2001.⁴⁵ More recently, the rise of the so-called Islamic State has only added fuel to Islamophobia, and increased the urgency of efforts to offer a counter narrative. Yet can a government use an invented national identity to actually shape citizens' behavior?

Embracing the Tradition?

Interviews with Omanis reveal a duality, in which they both identify with the official narrative of Omanis as peaceful and simultaneously attribute Oman's peacefulness to the leadership of Sultan Qaboos. When asked whether or not Omanis view peacefulness as an inherent component of their identity, I was told that, "Oman's peaceful entrance into Islam is taken as truthful by the majority of Omanis".⁴⁶ One individual said, "We [Omanis] are peaceful, not fighting others". However, when asked why Oman does not engage in conflict with other states, the same interviewee replied, "We have a good leader. If there is any problem he solves it immediately. Our relations with all countries are based on respect. If you respect others they will respect you. And Omanis are very nice people".⁴⁷ Some Omanis believe that peacefulness is both inherent in the Omani character and also recognize that it is the result of government policy.

Some interviewees acknowledged that Oman's lack of conflict was the direct result of the Sultan's rule: "His Majesty has the policy to be peaceful. You never hear about problems between people, even tribes". The interviewee went on to say that: "If it changed, yes there would be problems",⁴⁸ indicating that peacefulness is not an inherent character trait of Omanis.

The facebook page "Support Nobel Peace Prize for His Majesty Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said" had received 74,396 'likes' as of 8 August 2014. This had risen to 92,845 as of 23 September 2015, and 133,124 as of 30 April 2016.⁴⁹ This seems to demonstrate both the breadth of support for recognition of the Sultan's efforts as a regional moderator as well as awareness that the Sultan himself is the key agent responsible for Omani peace, despite the regime's statements to the contrary.

The general sentiment among Omanis seems to be one of gratitude to the Sultan for his efforts to develop Oman: as Marc Valeri points out: "No political system can show such durability and stability as Sultan Qaboos' without the

trust or support of at least part of the population it leads?⁵⁰ Despite Qaboos' maintenance of almost absolute control, his rule has undeniably brought peace and prosperity. The question now is whether Oman's stability can persist after Qaboos. The elderly Sultan spent much of 2014 receiving medical treatment in Germany, and many wonder about the prospects of the Sultanate in a post-Qaboos era of declining oil production and low oil prices. In particular, as voices of intolerance grow stronger across the region, can Oman's invented tradition of peacefulness persist?

The awareness demonstrated by Omani interviewees that peacefulness is the result of government foreign and domestic policy rather than an inherent character trait of Omanis appears to indicate that efforts to inculcate a peaceful national identity have not been fully successful. Although to this point, the Omani government has managed to uphold its end of the rentier social contract, whereby citizens' political rights are exchanged for government-sponsored employment and social services. Yet sustained low oil prices and Oman's falling oil production leave the regime with little largesse to distribute. Based on evidence, I do not expect Omanis to maintain political quietism without material incentives to do so.

In critiquing the government's narrative, I wish to draw attention to the achievements of the Omani people and their leader in maintaining stability and prosperity in a tumultuous region. This article is not intended to undermine the project of Omani nation-building, but instead to acknowledge the unlikelihood of Oman's achievements.

Conclusion

The central question the research investigates is whether a government can promote a desired behavior through its national identity. I investigate the empirical puzzle of Oman, a country whose people have a reputation for peacefulness and tolerance, and whose foreign policy has drawn academic attention for its commitment to nonviolence. Yet when considering Oman's turbulent history, the fact that Oman and Omanis appear peaceful seems remarkable. I argue that the government has sought to inculcate peacefulness and tolerance as a key component of Omani identity. I assert that the regime has invented a tradition of peacefulness based on two aspects of Oman's history: the Ibādī religious tradition of the interior and the trade-based economy of the coast. While the government has achieved remarkable success in the short-run, we should not expect long-term peacefulness. Oman's peacefulness is due to its leader and its oil revenues, and without these, Oman's peacefulness will not last.

These findings have implications for scholars of nationalism who examine the possibility for a state to promote a desired behavior through a given national identity. I draw on Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger to highlight the ways in which Omani peacefulness, while based on some historic facts, is an invented tradition. Like all nation-builders, Oman's ruler has drawn on familiar elements of the territory's heritage to fashion the Omani national narrative. While interviewees do appear to identify with Omani peacefulness, we should not expect peaceful behavior to persist after the regime's performance legitimacy declines as a result of insufficient government revenue. For nationalism studies, the article contributes to efforts to examine the specific content of national identities and the effects these can produce. The argument that a ruler has used a peaceful national identity to keep power suggests that other rulers may have done the same, opening new avenues for research. Peaceful nationalism as a strategy of power maintenance is also relevant for scholars of authoritarian stability.

In the context of the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS, as well as instances of violence carried out by individuals who claim to act in the name of Islam, the article provides a counter example: a state where Islam is promoted as the embodiment of peace and tolerance. For scholars of the Middle East, scholars of religion, scholars of political violence, or anyone who studies the implications of intolerant expressions of Islam, the article offers an examination of a state-sponsored narrative of religious peacefulness. Possible avenues for future research include more systematic evaluation of the success of the imposed peaceful national identity, an

analysis of neutrality and foreign existential narratives of peacefulness.

Given that regimes promote religious iderant narratives advocating violence allegedly in the name of peacefulness, the success of other states is a key question.

Although the Omani regime is a source of optimism, unfortunately, it is not without some skepticism. The theoretical standpoint of the Omani regime is entirely peaceful conveyance of those that see Islam as a source of stability. The regime has undertaken an image of Islam that, as I assert, Omani people or its oil reserves, Oman's Islamic peacefulness, and Oman's post-oil instability are important 'message of

analysis of neutrality as a rational response to domestic and foreign existential threats, and a comparison of the narratives of peacefulness in neutral states.

Given that regimes across the region are attempting to promote religious identities that counterminimize the intolerant narratives advanced by those who commit acts of violence allegedly in the service of Islam, Oman's promotion of peacefulness offers a useful case to predict the success of other states' efforts in this regard.

Although the Omani case appears to offer a reason for optimism, unfortunately its efforts should be viewed with some skepticism on the empirical level. From a theoretical standpoint, characterizing Islam as inherently peaceful conveys the same essentialized message as those that see Islam as inherently violent. The Qaboos regime has undertaken a global campaign to spread an image of Islam that refutes Islamophobic fears. Yet if, as I assert, Omani peacefulness cannot outlive its ruler or its oil reserves, Oman's efforts to promote an image of Islamic peacefulness will ultimately be countered by Oman's post-oil instability, thereby undermining Oman's important 'message of Islam'.

Notes

- 1 See Hechter 2000.
- 2 See Wilkinson 1987.
- 3 See Horowitz 2000; Petersen 2002; Fearon & Laitin 2012.
- 4 See Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983.
- 5 See, e.g., the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs website (English version) which states: "Ibadism attracts the interest of more and more scholars because of its rich history as a moderate branch and independent Islamic School within the Muslim community". The Ministry's website attributes its material to Ziaka (2014). For the Arabic version see <http://www.mara.om/ar/arwdt-tqdemett/aliebadtett/>, accessed April 20, 2016.
- 6 See Hajri 2006.
- 7 See Allen & Rigsbee 2000.
- 8 See Darden & Gryzmala-Busse 2006.
- 9 See Gellner 1983.
- 10 See Posen 1993.
- 11 See Aktürk 2013; Shelef 2010.
- 12 Smith 1991: 14.
- 13 See Janahi 2014; Davidson 2012; Bsheer [forthcoming]; Crystal 1992; Jones 2015.
- 14 See Beyer & Hoffman 2011; Hertog & Kruijzinga 2011; Ross 1989.
- 15 See Bird 1984.
- 16 See Fish et al 2010; Huntington 1996; Lawrence 2000.
- 17 See Rabi 2006; Valeri 2009.
- 18 See Allen & Rigsbee 2000; Jones & Ridout 2012; Kechichian 1995; Lefebvre 2010; O'Reilly 1998.
- 19 See Peterson 2004.
- 20 Greenberg 1994.
- 21 See Qaboos 2010.
- 22 Jones & Ridout 2012: 3.
- 23 Ghubash 2010.
- 24 Wilkinson 1987.
- 25 In Eickelman 1989.
- 26 Pridham 1986.
- 27 See Rabi 2006; Valeri 2009.
- 28 Valeri 2009: 117.
- 29 Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 1.
- 30 See Perlo-Freeman, S., Sköns, E., Solmirano, C., and Wilandh, H.: *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2012* (SIPRI, Stockholm, April 2013). The 2012 increase of 51 per cent brought Omani arms expenditure to a comparable level with its GCC neighbors; Oman spent \$12 billion to upgrade its weapons systems and warplanes (Roula Khalaf and James Drummond: Gulf States in \$12.3bn US Arms Spree. In: *Financial Times*, 10 September 2010).
- 31 In Qaboos 2010.
- 32 Interview with M. Legrenzi, Oxford, May 2016.
- 33 See Plekhanov 2004.
- 34 Interview with journalist, Muscat, November 2015.
- 35 See Allen 1987; Eickelman 1989; Valeri 2009.
- 36 Interview with primary school teacher, Muscat, November 2015; interview with primary school teacher, Ibrī, November 2015.
- 37 Excerpt from a speech by Sultan Qaboos on the 35th National Day, 2005.
- 38 'Prosperous Present, Bright Future', November 2013. In: *Middle East Online*, at: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=62379> (accessed 30 April 2016).
- 39 Omani Ministry of Tourism: *History of Oman* at: <http://www.omantourism.gov.om/wps/portal/mot/tourism/oman/home/sultanate/history/> (accessed 20 July 2015).
- 40 Interview with Ministry of Religious Affairs' official, Muscat, November 2015.

- 41 Taken from the website of the Omani Ministry of Tourism, accessed 26 July 2015, at: [http://www.omantourism.gov.om/wps/portal/mot/tourism/oman.home/sultanate history](http://www.omantourism.gov.om/wps/portal/mot/tourism/oman.home/sultanate%20history).
- 42 Taken from the website of the Omani Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (English), at: <http://www.mara.om/religion-in-oman/islam-in-oman/islam-arrives-in-oman/>, (Arabic) at: <http://www.mara.om/ar/arwdt-tqdemett/alieslam-fe-aman/qdwm-alieslam-iela-auman/> (accessed 7 June 2016).
- 43 Cf., for example, *Şahîb Muslim*, no. 4546.
- 44 Taken from the website run by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which is described as, "The International Messages is one of the international endeavors undertaken by the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs of Oman. It is based on sayings and quotes that have shaped the Omani Citizen' model of behaviors and manners that should be shared with the world" (accessed 30 April 2016, at: <http://www.internationalmessages.com/>).
- 45 Interview with professor, Muscat, November 2015.
- 46 Interview with professor, Muscat, Feb. 2014.
- 47 Interview with student, Muscat, Nov. 2007.
- 48 Interview with student, Muscat, Nov. 2007.
- 49 No other head of state has a facebook page dedicated to his receipt of the prestigious award that has garnered such support: 'Support Nobel Peace Prize for His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said' (at: <https://www.facebook.com/sultanqaboosbinsaid?fref=ts>).
- 50 Valeri 2009: 71.

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The

1. Introduction

This article will endea
tian Community in
those living and meeti
include a section look
the Sultanate. The per
of Sultan Qaboos ibn S
the 23rd July 1970.

The Statutes and
stipulate:

*Article 12: ... Collabor
bonds amongst the Citi
tional unity is a duty. T
might lead to division, a
unity ...*

*Article 17: All Citizens
the same public rights an
crimination amongst th
colour, language, religio*

*Article 28: The freedom
to recognised customs is
late the public order or*

*Article 29: The freedom
through speech, writing
guaranteed within the li*

Thus, framed within
citizens, there has bee
versity, in the spirit
notwithstanding the c
stability for the nation