

Oman's Foreign Policy and Its Mediating and Balancing Role in the Middle East

Umman Dış Politikası ve Umman'ın Ortadoğu'da Arabulucu ve Dengeleyici Rolü

Abdulgani BOZKURT*

Muhammed Hüseyin MERCAN**

Abstract

Oman, with its geographical location and ancient tradition, is a country that has succeeded in being a balancing factor, despite its distance from the central tensions of the Middle East and its ineffective appearance in regional politics. Especially during the 50-year reign of Sultan Qaboos that began in 1970, Oman was able to establish strategic relations with regional and global actors and adopted an exceptional foreign policy understanding in the Middle East during the Cold War period. After the death of Sultan Qaboos, Haitham bin Tariq took over the rule of the country as the new sultan of Oman. Under the new Sultan's power, a pragmatic status quo approach has become the main pillar in the country's foreign relations, as the traditional foreign policy understanding has been built on independence and moderation at a level that matches Oman's will and capacity. This study presents a perspective on Oman's foreign policy approach of Haitham bin Tariq, the Sultan of Oman, based on the analysis of traditional foreign policy framework and practices developed during the reign of Sultan Qaboos who was the architect of the country's international relations. In this regard, this article examines in chronological order the continuities and ruptures of Omani foreign policy, which has been able to pursue effective policies, despite its low profile in the Middle East, by especially the mission it has assumed in the Gulf since Sultan Qaboos assumed power in 1970. The article also discusses the successful policies of Sultan Qaboos to remain moderate under all conditions and preserve the status quo in the Gulf. The study discusses in detail the exceptional case of Oman in the region using process tracing.

Keywords: Oman's Foreign Policy, Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Haitham, Mediation, Balance

Öz

Umman, coğrafi konum ve kadim geleneği ile Orta Doğu'nun merkez gerilimlerinden büyük oranda uzak kalmasına ve bölge siyasetindeki etkisiz görünümüne rağmen bir denge kurmayı ve genellikle denge unsuru olmayı başarmış bir ülkedir. Özellikle 1970'te Sultan Kabus'un 50 yıl sürecek iktidar

* Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Rize, Turkey, E-mail: abdulgani.bozkurt@erdogan.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-2049-4760

** Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey, E-mail: huseyin.mercan@marmara.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0003-4699-0700

döneminde önemli açılımlar gerçekleştirerek, bölgesel ve küresel aktörlerle stratejik ilişkiler tesis edebilmiş ve Soğuk Savaş dönemi Orta Doğu'sunda istisnai bir dış politika anlayışı benimsemiştir. Sultan Kabus'un ölümünün ardından ise yerine Heysem bin Tarık gelerek ülkenin yeni yöneticisi oldu. Yeni Sultan'ın yönetimi altında, geleneksel dış politika anlayışı Umman'ın irade ve kapasitesiyle örtüşecek düzeyde bağımsızlık ve ılımlılık üzerine bina edilerek pragmatik bir statükocu yaklaşım ülkenin uluslararası ilişkilerinde ana sütun haline dönüştü. Bu çalışma Umman'ın yeni sultanı Heysem bin Tarık'ın dış politika yaklaşımına dair ülkenin uluslararası ilişkilerinin mimarı Sultan Kabus'un dış politika çerçevesi ve pratiklerine atıfla bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, makale Sultan Kabus'un 1970'te iktidara gelişinden günümüze kadar Umman dış politikasındaki süreklilikleri ve kırılmaları kronolojik bir zeminde ele almakta ve ülkenin Orta Doğu siyasetindeki zayıf görünümüne rağmen nasıl etkin politikalar izleyebildiğini açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Makalede ayrıca Sultan Kabus'un Körfez'deki statükonun korunması ve Umman'ın her koşulda ılımlı bir aktör olarak kalmasında izlediği başarılı siyaset tartışılacaktır. Çalışmada Umman'ın bölgedeki istisnai örnekliliği süreç takibi yöntemiyle detaylı bir şekilde incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Umman Dış Politikası, Sultan Kabus, Sultan Heysem, Arabuluculuk, Denge

1. Introduction

Despite being one of the important centers in the Middle East due to its advantageous geographical location, Oman is an often-overlooked actor in regional politics. Main reason for Oman's low profile in international politics is that major events leading to changes in the global balance of power or in the strategies of the global powers towards the region take place outside of Omani territory. In addition to remaining outside of the main conflict zones of the region, Oman's unique religious and cultural codes contribute to its privileged as well as secondary actor status in the Middle East. Despite this, Oman's political practices should not be overlooked bearing in mind its exceptionally important status especially in the Gulf.

Oman, which developed basically a consistent strategy during the fifty years of Qaboos bin Said's rule, did not stay away from following a sustainable policy of balancing global and regional powers. Qaboos was able to maintain close relations with both Iran and the US after 1979 Islamic Revolution increased tensions between these countries. Similarly, Oman's policies reflected its ability to remain within its foreign policy parameters by not choosing sides during the Palestine-Israel conflicts, civil wars in Yemen and Syria, the blockade of Qatar by the Gulf countries. Thus, remaining moderate under all conditions seems to be Oman's foreign policy understanding. Haytham bin Tariq, who became the new ruler of Oman after the death of Sultan Qaboos, has given messages signaling efforts to maintain traditional foreign policy understanding of Oman. This suggests that Oman's foreign policy in the new period will continue the previous one.

This study presents a perspective on the foreign policy approach likely to be followed by the new Sultan of Oman based on the analysis of traditional foreign policy framework and practices developed during the reign of Sultan Qaboos. Focusing on the period starting from 1970 when Qaboos assumed power to the present, this article examines in chronological order the continuities and ruptures of foreign policy of Oman, which has been able to pursue effective policies, despite its low profile in the Middle East, by especially the mission it has assumed in the Gulf. The study discusses in detail the exceptional case of Oman in the region using process tracing.

2. Oman's Foreign Policy during Sultan Qaboos' Rule

Over the past 50 years, Oman has followed a foreign policy that differs considerably from other Arab states in the region. In July 1970, with the support of British military advisers, Qaboos bin Said, who took the throne by overthrowing his father Said bin Taimur in a bloodless coup, gave up the irrelevant and isolationist foreign policy followed by his father and took action to become a regional actor by active politics (O'Reilly, 1998, p. 73). In order to lay the groundwork for this foreign policy, as soon as he came to power, the young sultan started the process of economic development on the one hand, and social, educational and cultural reforms named as "Oman Renaissance" on the other (Lefebvre, 2010, p. 99). As a result of these efforts, large infrastructure investments were made in Oman by 1975; schools, hospitals, clinics and roads were built and the country began to prosper (Rabi, 2005, p. 536). Undergoing a radical domestic transformation under the leadership of the new sultan, Oman also became a member of the United Nations (UN) and the Arab League in 1971, which is an important indicator of opening up to the world and the country's integration into the regional-global system (Colombo, 2017, p. 63). Besides these, Sultan Qaboos suppressed the uprising in the Dhofar¹ region, which started during his father's time, with the support of England and Iran. Thus, by the end of the 1970s, in addition to the economic and social progress, internal stability was also ensured in the country. With the establishment of stability within the country, Sultan Qaboos had the opportunity to pursue a more active and confident foreign policy in the region. Three main principles make up the framework Qaboos' foreign policy, which he has followed steadily for nearly 40 years: Independence (maintaining the freedom to act), Pragmatism (acting flexibly to gain a place among global and regional powers) and Moderation (avoiding extreme positions and supporting the political-military status quo of the region) (Lefebvre, 2010, p. 99).

In order to better analyze Oman's foreign policy-making process, it is necessary to explain the principle of moderation, one of the three principles of the country's foreign policy framework. Although the "moderation" principle, pointed out by Lefebvre (2010; p. 99) and widely mentioned in the academic literature on Oman's foreign policy, has meant not being a party to a direct conflict and avoiding extreme positions as stated above, it has given way to pragmatism when there has been a development against national interests. Accordingly, the Oman regime has an image that prioritizes pragmatism and does not hesitate to move away from its moderate position when faced with a situation that is inconsistent with its national interests. As a matter of fact, the foreign policy pursued by the Omani regime during both the Gulf Crisis and the Yemeni war – while confirming the reflex of avoiding extreme positions – clearly revealed the potential of the state to compromise the principle of moderation by prioritizing independence and pragmatism. In summary, moderation, one of the three important foreign policy principles of the Omani regime, is valid when national interests are not affected, and the state does not feel threatened.

It is possible to see this foreign policy approach, which can also be considered as a strategy of maintaining and consolidating the regime, towards almost every event that took place in the region from the 1970s to 2020. In what follows, Oman's foreign policy towards the critical developments in the region is discussed.

1 For more detail regarding the Rebellion in Dhofar that threats interest of the West in the Region, see; (Owen, 1973)

Under the rule of Sultan Qaboos, Oman has assigned itself an exceptional role since the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 1970s, at a time when the conflict between Palestine and Israel was intense, Oman, unlike many states, argued that a Jewish state was necessary for “regional peace”. This meant that Oman permanently accepts Israel’s existence, unlike other Arab states that reject Israel’s presence in the region (Rabi, 2005, p. 535).

As a requirement of this policy, Oman supported the peace negotiations of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, which continued between 1977 and 1978 and ended with the Camp David Peace Agreement (Colombo, 2017, p. 63). Sultan Qaboos became one of the three countries (along with Morocco and Sudan) that did not cut ties with Egypt, which was expelled from the Arab League after the signing the peace treaty with Israel and its leader Sadat (and later Hosni Mubarak). Persisting in this policy, which led to a discord with its Gulf neighbors, Oman made great efforts for Egypt to be accepted back into to the Arab League throughout the 1980s. As part of these efforts, Oman participated in the 1987 Arab League Summit held in Amman, with the motto that there cannot be a collective Arab consciousness “without Egypt” – with the intension to ensure the return of Egypt. Assuming a mediator role between Arab states and Egypt, Oman declared its intension not to attend the Casablanca Summit in 1989, arguing that not resolving the problem is undermining “common Arab aims”. In the same year, Sultan Qaboos had a one-on-one meeting with King Hussein of Jordan to resolve the Egyptian problem (Rabi, 2005, pp. 538–539).

Although accepting Israel’s right to exist, Oman did not have official contacts with Israel until the 1990s. However, since the 1970s, there has been interaction between the two states on commercial issues, especially on water desalination, drip irrigation and other agricultural techniques. According to the claim of the Israeli press, the relations between the two countries on military equipment and training were maintained in secrecy. Between 1970 and 1990, Oman took a more moderate and mediator role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict compared to many states, expressing that Israel’s right to exist should be respected and the political rights of the Palestinians should be recognized by Israel. Oman’s first serious contact with Israel began with the 1991 Gulf War and the Madrid Peace Conference. As the peace process continued, Sultan Qaboos began to have the conviction that his country’s national interests would be best pursued through open interaction with Israel despite angering his neighbors in the Gulf. To this end, Oman declared its readiness to actively participate in peace talks and subsequently attended the Madrid Peace Conference. As a result of this foreign policy, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin visited Oman, albeit for less than 24 hours, while many Arab states were clearly against Israel at that time. One year after the visit, as a result of Rabin’s murder in 1995, the Oman government condemned the assassination and sent a delegation to attend the funeral. A year later, “trade representation offices” were opened in the two countries (Rabi, 2005, pp. 541–543).

Oman defends Israel’s right to exist in the region, on the one hand, while defending the rights of Palestine, on the other. Although the Palestinians were not supported during the reign of Sultan Taimur until the early 1970s – due to his handling of the Dhofar revolt – after Sultan Qaboos came to power – and especially after Dhofar was brought under control – the Oman regime have begun

to defend the rights of Palestinians without being in direct contact with the Palestinian Authority (PA). By the 1980s, the rhetorical support increased and began to be reflected in practice. In 1988, Qaboos declared Oman's recognition of the State of Palestine, and a year later, in January 1989, hosted Yasser Arafat in Oman for the first time (Allen & Rigsbee II, 2013, p. 206). It should also be noted that after this date, the Oman regime provided financial support to Palestine. In the 1990s, Oman promised to give the PA 7 million USD to overcome the economic difficulties caused by Israel's border closures. There was also strong support for the PA's peace process with Israel in the 1990s. In 1998, Sultan Qaboos hosted the first ambassador of the PA in Muscat, and in the same year hosted the PA leader Yasser Arafat in the capital Muscat to discuss peace talks with him. Welcoming Ehud Barak's election as Prime Minister of Israel, Oman conveyed its support for peace talks to both sides (Rabi, 2005, p. 545). However, Oman's support for Israel has not been unconditional. Al-Aqsa Intifada that broke out in 2000 and the election of Ariel Sharon as PM in 2001 influenced Oman's relations with Israel leading the country to take a stance similar to other Arab states in the region towards Israel. However, even during this period when the diplomatic missions were shut down by both countries, Oman made a statement that its interest in the inclusive peace process and negotiations would continue (Rabi, 2005, p. 546). Oman has consistently maintained its historical role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, even though it has shown its reaction in important events. Sultan Qaboos hosted the Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas in Oman for three days in 2018 in order to resolve the ongoing conflict as well as the Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu in the same year within the scope of peace negotiations ('Israeli PM Netanyahu Makes Rare Visit to Oman', 2018; *Netanyahu Yezur Sultana Umman*, 2018). Such a visit by an Israeli Prime Minister to one of the Gulf states could be described as "rare". The fact that Oman hosted both countries' leaders in the same year, despite the statement by the country's foreign minister to the contrary (*After Netanyahu and Abbas Visits, Oman Offers Help in Israeli-Palestinian Peace Efforts*, 2018), can be considered as a very important indicator of the continuity of Oman's role as a mediator since the 1970s (*Hakeza Kane Red Abbas*, 2018).

Oman, which had taken a stand in favor of a peace agreement in the Arab-Israeli conflict from the 1970s to the 2000s, also has developed a unique relationship with other actors who could be considered as parties to this struggle. On the eve of the Iraq-Iran War, Oman maintained good relations with both Baghdad and Tehran to avoid unnecessary risks. In order to minimize the negative consequences of the war in the Gulf, Oman also encouraged and welcomed the establishment of a regional security organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (O'Reilly, 1998, p. 74). Prior to this initiative, Oman tried to organize a meeting of foreign ministers, including Iraq and Iran, in 1976, in order to ensure Gulf security because during this period, it held a clear definition of threats that could disrupt regional security: the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets, the presence of Soviet bases in South Yemen, the presence of Cuban soldiers in Ethiopia and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz with mines (Mason, 2014, p. 5). Unsuccessful in this attempt, Oman did not directly confront Iran unlike other GCC members such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and maintained its position of neutrality despite these countries' political stances throughout the war (O'Reilly, 1998, p. 74). Moreover, Oman held the view that the GCC

member states should not be openly hostile towards Iran in order not to endanger the security and future of the Gulf. Thus, Oman, which had been opposed to isolating Iran since 1979, sought to maintain contact with both countries of the conflict, but also did not neglect to sustain good relations with the many GCC member states holding anti-Iran stances (Sherwood, 2017, p. 13). In a move that could mean one step beyond neutrality, the Oman government also played a mediator role in order to end the war between Iraq and Iran in 1987 (O'Reilly, 1998, p. 74).

In the post-Cold War era, Oman relied on its usual strategy to secure its interests. It has improved its connections with the Arabian Peninsula, as well as sought ways to establish closer relations with Iran. While distancing from Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 crisis, Oman avoided recalling its Iraqi ambassador. Muscat government emphasized the plight of the Iraqi people during this period and, while being in favor of the expulsion of Saddam Hussein's soldiers, emphasized that Iraq should be included in any regional security formation/structure (O'Reilly, 1998, p. 74).

It is possible to say that Oman has maintained the impartial and mediating foreign policy pursued from the 1970s to the 2010s since the changes in the region that began in 2011. Sultan Qaboos, who successfully ended the protests that did not turn into mass demonstrations in his own country², acted in favor of the status quo in the Middle East and wanted to avoid the chaos that change would bring. In this context, at the very beginning of the Syrian War, in January 2012, Oman Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi communicated to the Syrian regime their desire for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. He argued that the only way to achieve this goal was to authorize the League of Arab States (LAS) and stated that a peace plan should be agreed upon by all Arab countries. Oman's foreign policy towards Syria that had been clearly defined in 2012, continued in the same way until 2015. Oman has insistently emphasized that it would not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. In the fight against the humanitarian crisis caused by the war, Oman has focused on humanitarian aid, unlike other Gulf countries that provide arms and ammunition support to groups close to them. In 2015, Oman started to follow a more proactive foreign policy in order to solve the crisis. As a first step, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem was invited to Muscat in August 2015. Just like the exceptional visit of Yitzhak Rabin, a high-ranking Syrian official was hosted in the Gulf for the first time since the start of the war. Moreover, even though Oman had voted to suspend Syria from the Arab League in November 2011, it did not break contact with the Syrian regime and continued its relations with the Syrian regime, just as it had maintained its relations with Iraq while acting with the UN mission in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (Colombo, 2017, p. 64).

Oman has also worked to facilitate the peace negotiation processes between the parties to the war in Yemen. In doing this, Muscat government, which has been aiming at maintaining the status quo in the region, also has pursued a pragmatic policy in a way that maximizes its national interests (Albasoos & Maashani, 2020, p. 161). Calling on the warring parties not to interfere in Yemen's future, Qaboos offered to hold peace talks in May 2015 with the participation of the parties

2 For a discussion on the reasons and consequences of demonstrations in Oman during Arab Uprisings, see; (Worrall, 2012)

involved in the war. Hosted by Qaboos, the meeting of the Houthi delegation, representatives of the Saudi-led coalition, and the US officials in Oman offered a platform for political compromise that could contribute to de-escalating tensions between the parties (Barrett, 2015). At the same time, Oman presented a seven-point plan, called the 'Muscat principles', to the governments of Riyadh and Tehran to end the war in Yemen and ensure peace (Colombo, 2017, p. 65).

Although it tries to play an impartial role between the two countries (SA and Iran) by acting independently, it can be easily said that Oman sided against Saudi Arabia in Yemen. It is possible to see this opposition through the practical results in the field as well as the statements by the Oman officials who blamed Saudi Arabia on the grounds that it considered Yemen "a project of sectarian confrontation with Iran". Moreover, Oman criticized other GCC states that took an anti-Iranian position in this process with similar justifications. Sultan Qaboos thought that this attitude of the GCC members put the security of the region in total danger and caused permanent damage to stability. For this reason, Qaboos pursued politics to clear Yemen of all foreigners and to sign an international peace agreement under the leadership of Yemeni actors as soon as possible (Colombo, 2017, pp. 64–65).

It is not surprising that this foreign policy of the Omani regime caused dissatisfaction on the SA side. So much so that this state of mutual dissatisfaction from time to time leads to an increase in tension between the two sides. In one of these tensions, in 2015, the Oman embassy building in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, was targeted by an airstrike which was allegedly carried out by SA (Yadav, 2017, p. 22). Although Saudi Arabia denied this allegation, the Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Muscat to the ministry and gave him a letter protesting the air strikes ('Saudi-Led Coalition Denies Attacking Home of Oman Envoy to Yemen', 2015).

The civil war in Yemen has been ongoing since 2014 where tens of thousands of people have lost their lives and millions of people have lost their homes. To reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict, Sultan Qaboos hosted some Houthi officials, including chief negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam, in Muscat since 2015 when regional powers joined the war, on the one hand, while continuing contacts with Saudi officials regarding the peace process on the other. In the middle of 2021, the news in the Oman state news agency that "The Sultan hopes that the contacts made to restore security and stability in brotherly Yemen and protect the security and interests of the countries of the region will reach the desired result very soon" highlights the neutrality and mediator foreign policy that the country is determined to follow ('Oman Hopes Ceasefire in Yemen Is Agreed "very Soon" – ONA', 2021).

Another example of Oman's foreign policy built on neutrality is the Gulf (*Qatar*) crisis. While pursuing a policy of neutrality in Yemen, Oman has felt besieged by the UAE's aggressive policies since the beginning of the crisis and the UAE's attempts to invade the Gulf of Aden and Socotra, the gateway to the Gulf. In order to break this sense of siege, Oman opened its ports to Qatari ships after a blockade was imposed on Qatar and provided assistance for the reorganization of the operations of Qatar Airlines. Qatar's trust in Oman is undoubtedly based on Oman's Yemen

policy which is unlikely to change. While the Qatar crisis appeared to be compatible with Oman foreign policy built on the principle of neutrality, it also contributed to the revival of its economy, which is heavily dependent on oil revenues and was going through difficult economic times. It seems that Oman's neutrality in the Qatar crisis, which was difficult to sustain in the long run (Yadav, 2017, p. 23), is no longer a major problem with the softening between SA and Qatar. In June 2021, for the first time in four years after the crisis, Saudi Arabia appointed an ambassador to Doha (Reuters, 2021). This appointment was followed by Qatar's appointment of an ambassador to Riyadh, which he entrusted with more powers than other ambassadors, in August 2021, nearly two months later (*Qatar Appoints First Ambassador to Saudi Arabia since Rift | GCC News | Al Jazeera*, 2021). The restoration of ties between the SA and Qatar will likely allow Oman regime to continue its neutrality policy – at least for a while— in this case/environment.

It should be said that Oman plays the mediator role not only in regional issues, but also in the relations of global powers with the region. It has played a very active and positive role at times in the UK-Iran, USA-Iran, 5+1-Iran negotiations. As it is known, between 2013, 2014 and 2015, back channel preliminary negotiations and official negotiations were held between 5+1 and Iran in Muscat (Yenigun & Baig, 2020, p. 22).

3. The New Sultan and his Foreign Policy Approach

With the death of Sultan Qaboos on January 10, 2020, Haitham bin Tariq took over the rule of the country as the new sultan of Oman. One of the important questions was what kind of changes would occur under his reign in the status quo built by Sultan Qaboos during his 50-year rule. The political atmosphere in the Gulf, the deepening crisis in Yemen, and the fact that the social and economic problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic all over the world were felt more in Oman which has a fragile economy indicated that the new Sultan faced many challenges. Especially the foreign policy practices to be implemented by Sultan Haitham were of great importance both in terms of his country's role in the entire Middle East and in terms of positioning Oman in the changing regional and global equation.

A pragmatic status quo approach has become the main pillar in the country's foreign relations, as the traditional foreign policy understanding has been built on independence and moderation at a level that matches Oman's will and capacity. In this way, Oman, which has assumed a balancing role among the conflicting actors within or outside of the region that to establish their influence within the Middle East, reinforced its position as the exceptional power of the region with the place it gained among the opposing powers and its policies. Thus, how Haitham bin Tariq's handling of Oman's foreign policy would affect the tradition inherited from Sultan Qaboos was one of the most fundamental questions that would determine the fate of the new Oman.

In his first speech after he assumed power, Sultan Haitham signaled what kind of path he would follow regarding the foreign policy of the country. Emphasizing that he would follow the foreign policy legacy of his predecessor in his speech, Sultan Haitham stated that Oman would make

an intense effort to establish peace in the region, increase the solidarity and cooperation among the Gulf countries, and reduce the crises in the region by working jointly with the members of the Arab League. In addition, Haitham stated that Muscat would actively contribute to the UN's mission of ensuring peace and stability in global politics, and thus declared that Oman would not deviate from the balanced and moderate foreign policy understanding of his predecessor Qaboos (*Hitab Celaletu's Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq El-Mua'zzam*, 2020)

The rising tension in the US-Iranian relations during the Trump era made Oman even more important because of the mediator role it played between the two sides, especially during the Obama era. The presidential change in the USA and the Biden administration's tendency to follow a more moderate path, especially regarding Iran, meant that Haitham bin Tariq gained a serious advantage. The new Sultan's emphasis on remaining loyal to the foreign policy understanding of its predecessor can be directly related to Oman's continuing its own approach toward both the US and Iran as well as Israel in the changing regional context (Gozanky & Halevy, 2020, p. 4). In fact, this means that the status quoist and pragmatic approach that Oman has adopted under its own conditions, and which has given the country an exceptional privilege will be continued.

As a country that acts within the framework of the principle of "peaceful coexistence, tolerance and friend to all, enemy to none" at a time when tensions are escalating in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf, Haitham bin Tariq's Oman undertakes a serious mission (Shamshiri-Fard, 2020). In addition, for a country like Oman that has always managed to follow a balanced policy regarding Palestine-Israel issue during a time of increasing normalization tendencies with Israel, continuation of the same approach by the new Sultan Haitham bin Tariq will likely offer more maneuvering capacity within the changing context of regional politics. Considering the positive contribution of Oman's independent foreign policy approach and practice to the regional politics of the USA, the EU, Iran and Israel, and the difficulties these powers would likely face, especially in the Gulf if there is a reversal of its neutral orientation, this privileged opportunity enjoyed by Sultan Haitham is vital for the country's foreign policy in the new period (Winder, 2020).

The two-day official visit of the new Sultan on July 11, 2021, at the invitation of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz, is an important development in terms of opening a new page for Oman with the Gulf, at a time when the country is in financial trouble. The first visit to Saudi Arabia after Haitham came to power and the face-to-face meeting with King Salman, who has not hosted guests from abroad since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, is a sign that the relations between the two countries can gain momentum. The decision to establish a bilateral coordination board to cover all aspects of bilateral relations during the visit, where the issues regarding regional developments, the crisis in Yemen and economic development were brought to the fore (*Hilal Ziyaret es-Sultan Haitham li'l Memleke*, 2021), has the potential to play a transformative role in providing Oman room for maneuver in the Gulf and reducing some tensions.

Although the new Sultan clearly vowed to continue the traditional foreign policy understanding without any deviations, he did not hesitate to make some radical changes in domestically. The

Sultan, who took the first step in transforming the country's administration in August 2020, gave the message that a new era has started with the changes and appointments he made regarding the Council of Ministers (*Sultan Umman Yu'id Teşkil Meclisi'l Vüzera ve Yua'yyin Bedir el-Busai'ydi Veziran li'l Hariciyye*, 2020). In particular, the appointment of Badr al-Busaidi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is an important turning point for the Omani foreign policy tradition. Previously, the fact that Sultan Qaboos held the official position of Minister of Foreign Affairs officially while Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, one of the important figures of Oman foreign affairs was appointed to conduct foreign relations meant that the Sultan was the decision-maker and implementer of the Oman's foreign policy. Haitham's appointment of Badr al-Busaidi, who is knowledgeable about the country's foreign affairs tradition, indicates that the new Sultan will now open up more space for practitioners in foreign policy and his governing philosophy will be built on a decentralized approach (Winder, 2020).

While staying true to the traditional foreign policy approach and conducting international affairs on a more institutional and less centralized basis, Sultan Haitham also attaches great importance to a major development program initiated during Qaboos' reign. Oman Vision 2040 announced by Haitham is built on the idea of moving the country forward and is at least as important as foreign policy topics on the agenda of the new Sultan.³ Having more severe economic challenges and lower level of wealth in comparison to other countries in the Gulf necessitate the new sultan to focus on economic and social development strategy in order not to lose his social legitimacy. Thus, Haitham's development focus is built on the following topics in foreign policy: Strengthening relations with other energy-rich Gulf countries, reducing existing tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, creating a rational balance between Israel, the USA and Iran.

4. Conclusion

Oman, with its geographical location and ancient tradition, is a country that has succeeded in being a balancing factor, despite its distance from the central tensions of the Middle East and its ineffective appearance in regional politics. Especially during the 50-year reign of Sultan Qaboos that began in 1970, Oman was able to establish strategic relations with regional and global actors and adopted an exceptional foreign policy understanding in the Middle East during the Cold War period. Its similar approach to both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Iran's being most important ally in the Gulf while in close contact with the United States or maintaining diplomatic relations after the suspension of Egypt from the Arab League after Camp David, are examples of Oman's pursuit of foreign policy contrary to the general trends in the region. The pragmatic, status quoist, and middle-of-the-road approach developed by Sultan Qaboos through a centralized foreign policy making process is the main factor in Oman's transformation into a vital actor in the region's many crises, even though it does not occupy the daily headlines.

Its role in the US-Iranian negotiations during the Obama era or some attempts to establish peace between Palestine and Israel indicate that Oman undertakes strategic missions when political

3 For details about Oman's 2040 Vision Project, see; (*Oman Vision 2040*, n.d.)

opportunities arise. This shows that the parameters set by Sultan Qaboos make a significant contribution to the foreign policy capacity of the country. The fact that Sultan Haitham, who took over the administration of the country after the death of Qaboos, stated that he would continue the foreign policy understanding of his predecessor as soon as he assumed power, suggests that there will not be any ruptures or deviations from Oman's traditional regional and global political practices. The only noticeable change so far is to transform the policy making and implementation process into a more institutionalized and decentralized administrative structure, unlike Qaboos period, with the newly appointed foreign minister. It seems that Sultan Haitham will continue Oman's foreign policy in the new period without making radical changes in essence, but with small adjustments in the implementation process and strategic moves in line with the changing political dynamics of the region.

References

- After Netanyahu and Abbas visits, Oman offers help in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.* (2018, October 27). France 24. <https://www.france24.com/en/20181027-oman-netanyahu-abbas-visits-offers-help-israeli-palestinian-peace-efforts-conflict-bahrain>
- Albasoos, H., & Maashani, M. (2020). Oman's Diplomacy Strategy: Maneuvering Tools to Face Regional Challenges. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 9(2), 152–163. <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v9i2.627>
- Allen, C. H., & Rigsbee II, W. L. (2013). *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970-1996* (1st edition). Routledge.
- Barrett, R. (2015, June 17). *Oman's Balancing Act in the Yemen Conflict*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/omans-balancing-act-yemen-conflict>
- Colombo, S. (2017). Foreign Policy Activism in Saudi Arabia and Oman. Diverging Narratives and Stances towards the Syrian and Yemeni Conflicts. *The International Spectator*, 52(2), 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932.729.2017.1303965>
- Gozanky, Y., & Halevy, E. (2020). *Oman: The End of the Qaboos Era*. Institute for National Security Studies. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23510>
- Hakeza Kane Red Abbas ala Ard es-Sultan Qabus li'l Vasata mea Israil.* (2018, October 28). <https://amp.dw.com/ar/ليناار-سابع-مخطاسوللسوالباقن-اطلسلا-ضرعى-لعس-باعددر-ن-اك-انكهم-تقيصح/a-46063673>
- Hilal Ziyaret es-Sultan Haitham li'l Memleke: İnşaa Meclis li't Tensik Es-Saudi el-Ummanni fi Kaafet'il Mecalat.* (2021, July 11). <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2021/7/11/للاخ-ااشنا-تكململامثيهن-اطلسلا-تر-ايز-ل-لاخ>
- Hitab Celaletü's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq el-Mua'zzam.* (2020, January 11). <https://omaninfo.om/images/library/file/Book889578.pdf>
- Israeli PM Netanyahu makes rare visit to Oman. (2018, October 26). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-oman-idUSKCN1N01WN>
- Lefebvre, J. A. (2010). Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century. *Middle East Policy*, 17(1), 99–115.
- Mason, R. (2014). The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force: A Case Study of a Small State's Search for Security. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 41(4), 355–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530.194.2014.918801>
- Netanyahu Yezur Sultana Umman fi Evvel Ziyare li Beled Arabi La Tarbutuhu A'lakat mea' Israil.* (2018, October 26). <https://amp.france24.com/ar/20181026-هائينااتنن-بيماينب-24س-نارفة-24France>
- تعبير-علا-ل-ودلا-ل-ليناار-سبا-ديعسب-ن-يس-وباقن-امع

- Oman hopes ceasefire in Yemen is agreed 'very soon'—ONA. (2021, March 30). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-oman-int-idUSKBN2BM1F7>
- Oman Vision 2040*. (n.d.). Portal. Retrieved 16 November 2021, from <https://omanuna.oman.om/en/home-top-level/eparticipation/oman-vision-2040>
- O'Reilly, M. J. (1998). Oman balancing: Oman Confronts an Uncertain Future. *Middle East Journal*, 52(1), 70–84.
- Owen, R. P. (1973). The Rebellion in Dhofar—A Threat to Western Interests in the Gulf. *The World Today*, 29(6), 266–272.
- Qatar appoints first ambassador to Saudi Arabia since rift | GCC News | Al Jazeera*. (2021, August 11). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/11/qatar-appoints-first-ambassador-to-saudi-arabia-since-rift>
- Rabi, U. (2005). Oman and the Arab–Israeli Conflict: The Reflection of a Pragmatic Foreign Policy. *Israel Affairs*, 11(3), 535–551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135.371.20500122644>
- Reuters. (2021, June 21). Qatar Receives New Saudi Ambassador as the Two Mend Relations. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-receives-new-saudi-ambassador-two-mend-ties-2021-06-21/>
- Saudi-led coalition denies attacking home of Oman envoy to Yemen. (2015, September 20). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-oman-idUSKCN0RK0CE20150920>
- Shamshiri-Fard, M. (2020, January 16). Why Oman Loves Iran. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/16/sultan-qaboos-oman-loves-iran-shah/>
- Sherwood, L. (2017, Autumn). Understanding Oman's Foreign Policy. *Foreign Policy Trends in the GCC States*, 11–15.
- Sultan Umman Yu'id Teşkil Meclisi'l Vüzera ve Yua'yyn Bedir el-Busai'ydi Veziran li'l Hariciyye*. (2020, August 18). <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/8/18/11-108>
- Winder, B. (2020, August 26). *Oman's Regional Role in a time of Challenge and Change*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/omans-regional-role-time-challenge-and-change>
- Worrall, J. (2012). Oman: The “Forgotten” Corner of the Arab Spring. *Middle East Policy*, 19(3), 98–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00550.x>
- Yadav, S. P. (2017, October). Oman is a Mediator in Yemen. Can It Play the Same Role in Qatar? *The Qatar Crisis, The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS)*, 31, 22–23.
- Yenigun, C., & Baig, S. (2020). Turkish Public Perceptions About Oman. *European Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 3(4), 22–30.