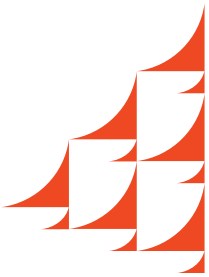
The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding

Is Oman the "Switzerland of the Middle East"?

Giulia Daga



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About the Author

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Executive Summary

The concept of neutrality has legal and political meanings that derive from its historical and geographical genealogy. However, the term is often stretched and its meaning diluted to describe behaviors that go beyond a strict definition of neutrality. This is especially true for Oman. International media has described the country's foreign policy as hedging, omnibalancing, or asserting neutrality, and sometimes Oman is referred to as the "Switzerland of the Middle East."

The Omani government has never declared neutrality through international law tools, and the term "neutrality" does not appear among Oman's foreign policy principles on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This paper considers whether Oman's behavior can usefully be described as falling within the definition of neutrality, despite a lack of formal declaration, by testing theoretical definitions of neutrality and their gradations against Oman's courses of action over recent decades. The concepts of pragmatism (small state self-preservation), facilitation (between disputing parties), noninterference (through military means in military conflicts), and hedging (between security providers), taken together, probably represent a more precise description of Oman's policies and the positions it has taken in different contexts and times.

Introduction

Oman is often described by the international media as a neutral,[1] mediating,[2] tolerant,[3] and peaceful exception[4] in the turbulent Middle East.[5] Sometimes, the country is referred to as the "Switzerland of the Middle East."[6] This raises questions regarding whether Oman's foreign policy has evolved differently from the foreign policies of other small Gulf states and if the county is truly neutral.

This paper uses theories of neutrality and small state behavior to conceptualize Oman's security policy approach. First, the paper outlines the main elements of small state theory, which offers an analytical framework particularly suited for analysis of Gulf states' policy patterns. Then, the paper demonstrates how the Gulf states' foreign policies have adapted to changes in regional structures and identifies contrasting behaviors among the Gulf countries. Last, the paper delves into Oman's security policy approach, testing it against traditional definitions of neutrality, nonalignment, and other political concepts typically used to describe its foreign

1 Camille Lons, "Oman: Neutrality Under Pressure," *Orient XXI*, May 29, 2018.

2 James Worrall, "'Switzerland of Arabia': Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 56, no. 21 (August 12, 2021).

3 Ahmed Youssef, "The Secret Behind Oman's Culture of Tolerance," *Anadolu Agency*, January 11, 2022.

4 Ben Hubbard, "Sultan Qaboos, 79, Is Dead; Built Oman Into Prosperous Oasis of Peacemaking," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2020.

5 Linda Pappas Fusch, "Oman's Renaissance—and What Will Follow," *Foreign Policy*, January 14, 2020.

6 Nidal Morrison, "Oman: The Switzerland of the Middle East," *Harvard International Review*, January 9, 2020; Giorgio Cafiero, "Oman's Diplomatic Agenda in Yemen," *Arab Center Washington DC*, June 30, 2021.

policy, such as "Omanibalancing" and hedging.[7] Ultimately, the paper assesses whether the concept of neutrality – and its gradations – can accurately be applied to the Omani case, in efforts to help reduce misinterpretations regarding the country's foreign policy.

Traditional Foreign Policy Options of Small States

Academics have yet to come to a consensus on a definition of "small states," and the concept is evolving. In her review of the literature on small states, Jelena Radoman identified two prevailing definitions, an absolute and a relative one.[8] According to the absolute definition, a state is considered small if it meets material thresholds, such as the number of inhabitants, level of gross domestic product, or extent of military capabilities. David Vital,[9] for example, set very specific material limits for a state to be considered small: 10 million to 15 million inhabitants for an economically developed country and 20 million to 30 million for an underdeveloped one. Since Vital's contribution, many scholars, especially from the realist camp, have relied on such absolute criteria to categorize countries.[10]

Other scholars adopt a relative definition: Rather than evaluating power by the material base and resources of a state, their assessment considers the capacity to be effective and achieve results.[11] Using this definition, a state would be considered small in its relational power, for example, if it perceives itself as such or if it is considered noninfluential or irrelevant in the international system.[12] "Minor powers can be defined as states whose diplomatic and material resources are so limited that their leaders focus mostly on the protection of their territorial integrity rather than on the pursuit of more far-reaching global objectives."[13] However, a country may be "small" in some issue areas but "great" in others, especially if the concept of power is demilitarized and emphasis is given to economic or soft power.[14]

7 Marc J. O'Reilly, "Omanibalancing: Oman Confronts an Uncertain Future," *The Middle East Journal* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 70-84; Mohammed Binhuwaidin, "Oman's Response to a Rising Iran: A Case of Strategic Hedging," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1-12.

8 Jelena Radoman, "Small States in World Politics: State of the Art," *Journal of Regional Security* 13, no. 2 (2018): 179-200.

9 David Vital, *The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1967).

10 Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1981); Jean-Marc Ricki and Khalid Almezaini, "Theories of Small States' Foreign and Security Policies and the Gulf States," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 8-30.

11 Franz von Daniken, "Is the Notion of Small State Still Relevant?" in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, ed. Laurent Goetschel (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media, 1998), 43-48; Tom Long, "Small States, Great Power? Gaining Influence Through Intrinsic, Derivative, and Collective Power," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2017): 185-205.

12 Matthias Maass, "Small Enough to Fail: The Structural Irrelevance of the Small State as Cause of Its Elimination and Proliferation Since Westphalia," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2016): 1,303-23.

13 Volker Krause and J. David Singer, "Minor Powers, Alliances, and Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns," in *Small States and Alliances*, eds. Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2001), 15-23.

14 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 255-70; Tom Long, "Small States, Great Power? Gaining Influence Through Intrinsic, Derivative, and Collective Power," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2017): 185-205.

Despite the disagreement on what makes a country "small," most scholars agree that being small affects a country's ability to simultaneously exercise influence and autonomy[15] and that a small state generally needs to prioritize one or the other.[16] This "power deficit" can be both a product of material and ideational factors, and it inevitably leads to a dilemma regarding the best foreign policy options among the limited strategies available, especially in relations with more powerful states.[17]

To maximize influence, a small state can choose to align with a greater power through formal or informal cooperation or a more general endorsement of its foreign policy objectives.[18] Through this strategy, a small state has more room to express its interests to the greater power, therefore exercising influence, but it risks remaining entrapped in a relationship that could become uncomfortable if not dangerous.[19] Conversely, a small state can decide to maximize autonomy and independence through a defensive strategy based on neutrality or nonalignment. The drawback of such a strategy is the risk of abandonment and isolation in cases of need.[20]

To maximize influence, a small state can choose to align with a greater power through formal or informal cooperation or a more general endorsement of its foreign policy objectives.

15 This approach is based on the definition of power as the capacity to modify the behavior of others – i.e., influence – and the ability to prevent others from affecting one's own conduct – i.e., autonomy. Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe" in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, ed. Laurent Goetschel (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1998), 13-31; Tom Long, "Small States, Great Power? Gaining Influence Through Intrinsic, Derivative, and Collective Power," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2017): 185-205.

16 Robert O. Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics," *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 291-310; Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe" in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, ed. Laurent Goetschel (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1998), 13-31.

17 Volker Krause and J. David Singer, "Minor Powers, Alliances, and Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns," in *Small States and Alliances*, eds. Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2001), 15-23; Jean-Marc Rickli, "European Small States' Military Policies After the Cold War: From Territorial to Niche Strategies," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 21, no. 3 (August 2008): 307-25.

18 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Alyson J. K. Bailes, Bradley A. Thayer, and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Alliance Theory and Alliance 'Shelter': The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behaviour," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016): 9-26.

19 Heinz Gartner, "Small States and Alliances," in *Small States and Alliances*, eds. Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner (Berlin: Springer-Verlag 2001), 1-10; T. V. Paul, *Restraining Great Powers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

20 Christine Agius and Karen Devine, "'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?' A Reprise," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265-84; Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

As the most immediate threats for a small state derive from its relations with surrounding powers, one of the main concerns in crafting its foreign and security policies is how to deal with its neighbors.[21] This is particularly true in the Gulf, as most of the smaller states' threats and concerns in the region have derived from their relations with their immediate neighbors and the global powers operating in the region.[22]

Small Gulf States' Foreign Policy Approaches

In addition to sharing the same regional environment, the small Gulf Arab states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) have many domestic similarities both in their state formation and current socioeconomic and political structures.[23] Indeed, all Gulf Cooperation Council states (including the larger Saudi Arabia), share similar histories: tribal tradition and long-standing monarchic rule with a highly personalized decision-making process; a delicate oil-dependent social pact between the rulers and society based on acquiescence in exchange for economic wealth; and a long history of foreign presence and external security protection, which left the small Gulf Arab states without the incentives to develop strong autonomous security sectors and armed forces.[24]

As the most immediate threats for a small state derive from its relations with surrounding powers, one of the main concerns in crafting its foreign and security policies is how to deal with its neighbors.

Because of the instability of the environment and the "unconsolidated"[25] nature of their domestic systems, many scholars agree that regime survival and preserving the regional status quo have been the main strategic objectives of the small Gulf Arab states since the 1970s.[26] To achieve these goals, for a long time they all adopted a similar style of foreign policy based on "omnibalancing": a strategy of "overlapping alliances … for safeguarding security and maximizing autonomy" through discreet actions, pragmatism, and a preference for conciliation

21 Jelena Radoman, "Small States in World Politics: State of the Art," *Journal of Regional Security* 13, no. 2 (December 2018): 179-200.

22 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Victor Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies" in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 31-46.

23 Anna Sunik, *Middle Eastern Monarchies. Ingroup Identity and Foreign Policy Making* (Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

24 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Explaining International Politics in the Middle East: The Struggle of Regional Identity and Systemic Structure," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship With Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 243-56; Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

25 Steven Wright, "Foreign Policy in the GCC States," in *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 74.

26 F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Steven Wright, "Foreign Policy in the GCC States," in *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 72-93.

over confrontation.[27] With almost the same meaning as omnibalancing, some other scholars have defined the small Gulf Arab states' behavior as strategic hedging[28] when describing the multilevel security arrangements that the small Gulf Arab states have made with several external powers to reduce the risk of entrapment into an uncomfortable alliance.[29]

In practice, until the late 2000s, this meant a combined use of bandwagoning[30] and balancing[31] toward the main powers operating in the region. On one hand, these states aligned with Saudi Arabia and the United States in the "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran in the 1980s.[32] On the other, they tried to appease Iran and Iraq to avoid entrapment in their relations with the Saudis, while relying on various Western countries to counter U.S. hegemony.[33] The increase in the perceived level of the Iranian threat after the Islamic Revolution played a crucial role in this autonomy-alignment game.[34] Indeed, the countries that felt a more pressing Iranian danger were more willing to bandwagon with Saudi Arabia (Bahrain is the most emblematic case and in some cases the UAE and Kuwait).[35] Conversely, Qatar and Oman, with their more

27 Abdullah Baabood, "Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy, With Special Reference to the EU," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship With Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 145-73; Steven Wright, "Foreign Policy in the GCC States," in *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 72-93.

28 Binhuwaidin, for example, considers "omnibalancing" and "hedging" synonyms describing the same strategy available to small states. Mohammed Binhuwaidin, "Oman's Response to a Rising Iran: A Case of Strategic Hedging," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1-12. The term "hedging," originally applied to finance, refers to an ambiguous policy of state relations consisting of "bandwagoning with a regional power while simultaneously balancing the latter through bilateral alliance with the hegemon or the superpowers in the international system or with the regional power's adversaries." Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159-85; Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid Almezaini, "Theories of Small States' Foreign and Security Policies and the Gulf States," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 15.

29 Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 112-22; Jean-Marc Ricki and Khalid Almezaini, "Theories of Small States' Foreign and Security Policies and the Gulf States," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 8-30.

30 Alignment with the perceived threat. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

31 Alignment against the perceived threat. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

32 Martin Indyk, "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 18, 1993; Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006); David Goldfischer, "The United States and Its Key Gulf Allies: A New Foundation for a Troubled Partnership," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 64-88.

33 Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

34 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

35 William A. Rugh, "The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates," *The Middle East Journal* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1996), 57-70; Michael S. Casey, *The History of Kuwait* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007).

consolidated economic and security cooperation with Iran, kept greater independence from Saudi Arabia.[36] In any case, all small Gulf Arab states, even the most Saudi-aligned Bahrain, insisted on diversifying their security providers through a multilevel alliance network.[37]

This hedging model, based on appeasement, cautiousness, and pragmatism, was used to characterize the foreign policies of all small Gulf Arab states for a long time, despite changes in the region and some differences in single practical decisions of each state.[38] However, since 2003 (and most evident since 2011), changes in the regional structures have coincided with changes in some of the small Gulf Arab states' foreign policy approaches.[39]

The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq simultaneously increased Iran's hegemonic ambitions and the Saudi role as the leading Gulf Arab country. It also triggered a growing mistrust of and discomfort with the United States by the Gulf states, aware that increasing domestic anti-U.S. forces could have devastating impacts on their regime security.[40]

This hedging model, based on appeasement, cautiousness, and pragmatism, was used to characterize the foreign policies of all small Gulf Arab states for a long time, despite changes in the region and some differences in single practical decisions of each state.

With the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the region experienced the collapse of other leading regional powers (Egypt, Libya, Syria), paving the way for more non-Arab active engagement (Turkey, Iran, and Israel).[41] Moreover, the Gulf Arab states have started to feel a sense of abandonment from the traditional U.S. security umbrella because of a perceived U.S. disengagement from the region.[42] At the same time, between 2002 and 2008, the Gulf Arab states experienced unprecedented gains in oil revenue due to major oil booms.[43]

36 Kenneth Katzman, "Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, April 11, 2022.

37 Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 112-22.

38 Victor Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies" in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 31-46.

39 Valentina Kostadinova, "The Gulf Arab Countries' Foreign and Security Policies Post-Arab Uprisings: Toward Greater Regional Independence of the Middle East," *Gulf Research Center Cambridge*, August 2015.

40 Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); J. Matthew McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution," *American Enterprise Institute*, May 2015.

41 Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, and Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa After 2011," *MENARA Final Reports* no. 1, February 2019.

42 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). President Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s visit to the region in July 2022 was intended to create the preconditions to overcome this sense of mistrust of U.S. foreign policy that has grown in the past 10 years. "What Did Biden's Trip Achieve for the United States and Its Middle East Partners?" (webinar, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 19, 2022).

43 Ibrahim Saif, "The Oil Boom in the GCC Countries, 2002–2008: Old Challenges, Changing Dynamics," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 2009.

These simultaneous shifts have provided more room for regional action for the richer small Gulf states – namely Qatar and the UAE – in the economic and, more important, military spheres.[44] Indeed, until 2011, external military activity was only connected, when present, to peacekeeping and conflict resolution operations. However, since 2011, the UAE and Qatar have assumed more offensive postures, consisting of "actual projection of hard-power capabilities along specific interests," in this way challenging their very categorization as small states.[45] Conversely, since its 2011 domestic uprisings, Bahrain has more closely aligned with Saudi Arabia in its regional endeavors, such as the military intervention in Yemen.[46]

Unlike their neighbors, Kuwait and Oman have kept adopting the same cautious pragmatism. For Kuwait this also meant selective participation in military actions in line with Saudi Arabia, including initial air support for the intervention in Yemen. Instead, Oman's persistent calls for nonintervention and impartiality in military and political crises raise some questions regarding whether the country is shifting from the traditional omnibalancing (or "Omanibalancing") to a more structured policy of neutrality.[47]

The Concept of Neutrality

According to small state theory, neutrality is the maximization of autonomy at the expense of influence.[48] However, there are both legal and political interpretations of neutrality. The legal interpretation defines neutrality as a set of rights and duties a state is bound to according to international law. Political interpretations consider neutrality a "foreign and security policy doctrine and practice,"[49] an "institution,"[50] or "a number of state attitudes and policy practices"[51] that reflect "political, military, and psychological judgments about the opportunities and dangers of the contemporary political configuration."[52]

44 Máté Szalai, *The Foreign Policy of Smaller Gulf States: Size, Power, and Regime Stability in the Middle East* (Oxon: Routledge, 2022); Marwan Kabalan, "Actors, Structures and Qatari Foreign Policy," *AlMuntaqa* 2, no. 2 (October/November 2019).

45 Emma Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 123-43; Andreas Krieg, "The UAE's New Leader Is Turning the Tiny Kingdom Into a Major Power Player," *Time*, June 3, 2022.

46 Lars Erslev Andersen, "Bahrain and the Global Balance of Power After the Arab Spring," *Danish Institute for International Studies*, January 1, 2012.

47 Marc J. O'Reilly, "Omanibalancing: Oman Confronts an Uncertain Future," *The Middle East Journal* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 70-84; Ibrahim Jalal, "Five Years On, Has the Arab Coalition Achieved Its Objectives in Yemen?," *Middle East Institute*, April 2, 2020.

48 Jelena Radoman, "Small States in World Politics: State of the Art," *Journal of Regional Security* 13, no. 2 (December 2018): 179-200.

49 Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

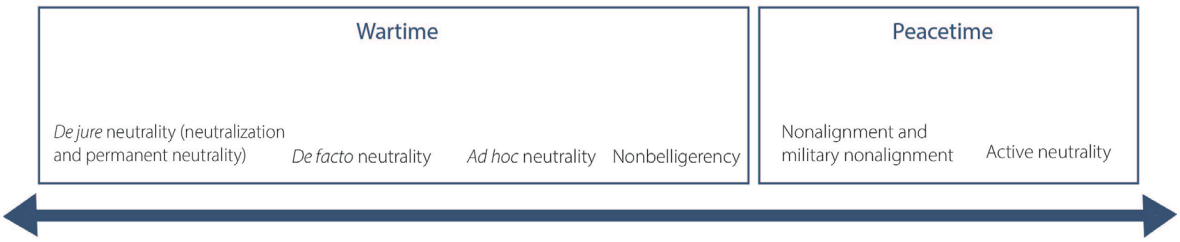
50 Archie W. Simpson, "Realism, Small States and Neutrality, Realism in Practice: An Appraisal," *E-International Relations*, February 5, 2018.

51 Christine Agius and Karen Devine, "'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?' A Reprise," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265-84.

52 Robert L. Rothstein, "Alignment, Nonalignment, and Small Powers: 1945-1965," *International Organization* 20, no. 3, (Summer 1966): 397-418.

The term neutrality derives from the Latin *neuter*, which means "neither of the two," and, according to Pertti Joenniemi,[53] it is "designed to restrict and regulate the use of force in international relations." The differences in interpretations relate to how binding, permanent, and peacetime applicable these kinds of restrictions and regulations should be. Figure 1 shows some of the most used variants of neutrality grouped in a continuum of small states' nonaligned[54] foreign policy options, from a stricter and more binding definition to a more active and diluted interpretation.[55]

Figure 1: Range of Nonaligned Strategies in Wartime and Peacetime



The most articulated kind of neutrality is regulated by international law (*de jure*), and it refers to the behavior of a state in times of war, establishing a set of rights and obligations the neutral state is bound to observe. These include the duty of impartiality regarding the belligerents in a conflict, abstention from starting a conflict or from any policies that may lead to a conflict, and the need to defend neutrality through the construction of a credible defense system.[56] This kind of neutrality may be imposed by an external treaty (neutralization) or declared voluntarily by the state (permanent neutrality), and it requires recognition by the international community through a multilateral treaty or tacitly.[57]

53 Pertti Joenniemi, "Neutrality Beyond the Cold War," *Review of International Studies* 19, no. 3 (July 1993): 289-304.

54 The term "nonaligned" is used here to describe the entire group of strategies that privilege autonomy over influence, while the concept of "nonalignment" is afterward used to define a specific nonaligned strategy.

55 Pertti Joenniemi, "Neutrality Beyond the Cold War," *Review of International Studies* 19, no. 3 (July 1993), 289-304; Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe" in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, ed. Laurent Goetschel (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1998), 13-31; Natalino Ronzitti, *Diritto Internazionale dei Conflitti Armati* (Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore, 2006); Christine Agius and Karen Devine, "'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?' A Reprise," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265-84; Ryszard M. Czarny, Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018); Archie W. Simpson, "Realism, Small States and Neutrality, Realism in Practice: An Appraisal," *E-International Relations*, February 5, 2018.

56 Natalino Ronzitti, *Diritto Internazionale dei Conflitti Armati* (Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore, 2006); Antonio Papisca, "Active Neutrality With the New International Law. Reflections From a Politics of Law Perspective," *Peace Human Rights Governance* 1, no. 3 (November 2017): 395-404.

57 Christine Agius and Karen Devine, "'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?' A Reprise," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265-84; Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

De facto neutrality has an entirely political meaning, as it is not defined by international law. In this case, the state simply decides to pursue a policy of neutrality, which in the case of war binds it to follow the rules of neutrality if it chooses to remain neutral. Yet, during peacetime, the state has no legal obligations, and its behavior is simply the result of doctrine and practice, which might change without any legal repercussions.[58] *Ad hoc* neutrality is an even more limited political concept, indicating the temporary choice of abstention and impartiality during a specific conflict. It is a policy option and, as such, it does not create obligations – nor expectations – for the state to behave similarly in the future.[59] The concept of *nonbelligerency* describes a behavior of nonparticipation in a conflict, without however entailing impartiality, therefore there is a greater scope of permitted actions. A state may declare nonbelligerency even if it is part of a military alliance, "unless the conflict involves an attack on one of the signatories of the treaty."[60]

Oman and Neutrality

Oman has never declared neutrality through international or domestic law instruments. Among the principles of foreign policy listed by the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is the will to develop and maintain "good relations with all its neighbors," through a policy driven by understanding, noninterference, tolerance, dialogue, commitment to being outward looking, and pragmatism.[61] Despite the lack of a formal declaration of neutrality, Oman's behavior is however often referred to as neutral with regard to its approach toward regional crises.[62]

Despite the lack of a formal declaration of neutrality, Oman's behavior is however often referred to as neutral with regard to its approach toward regional crises.

Since 1979, Oman has never participated militarily in a conflict (acting in essence in accordance with the principle of abstention) and has always kept open relations with all competing parties (embracing the principle of impartiality), except for the 1991 U.N.-led liberation of Kuwait, though Oman did not break relations with Iraq.[63] In some cases, however, Oman's behavior could be characterized as nonbelligerency.[64] A nonbelligerent state is not formally a party in a conflict,

58 Jessica L. Beyer and Stephanie C. Hofmann, "Varieties of Neutrality: Norm Revision and Decline," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 285-311.

59 Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018); Archie W. Simpson, "Realism, Small States and Neutrality, Realism in Practice: An Appraisal," *E-International Relations*, February 5, 2018.

60 Christine Agius and Karen Devine, "'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?' A Reprise," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265-84.

61 "Principles," Foreign Ministry of Oman, accessed July 28, 2022.

62 Camille Lons, "Oman: Neutrality Under Pressure," *Orient XXI*, May 29, 2018; Austin Bodetti, "Oman Strives for Neutrality in the Middle East," *YaleGlobal Online*, January 7, 2020.

63 Abdullah Baabood, "Oman's Independent Foreign Policy," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 106-22.

64 Natalino Ronzitti, *Diritto Internazionale dei Conflitti Armati* (Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore, 2006).

but it nonetheless favors one or more actors through logistic or other kinds of support.[65] This is particularly true in Oman's approach toward U.S. interventions in the region. For example, after 9/11, Oman hosted U.S. personnel as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, and its bases were used to launch bomber strikes.[66] In 2003, Oman did not express verbal support[67] for the U.S.-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, but it nonetheless allowed U.S. military personnel to operate from its soil.[68] Also, during the Iran-Iraq War, while remaining more impartial than the other Gulf Arab states, Oman seemed to favor the Iraqi side in efforts to resolve the conflict.[69]

During these conflicts, Oman straddled ad hoc neutrality and nonbelligerency – showing discreet support for a foreign power's intervention – in a very similar manner to the other small Gulf Arab states.[70] However, in the post-2011 regional conflicts outside the Gulf, Oman has emerged as more neutral compared to its neighbors. It did not intervene in Libya, neither militarily nor indirectly, and it has not armed any of the factions in the Syrian civil war.[71] It has also maintained diplomatic relations with Syria throughout the conflict and periodically sent senior officials to Damascus or hosted Syrian officials, including in the extended period before other Gulf countries began normalizing relations with Damascus.

Oman has pursued its national interests in the conflict in Yemen, particularly in the Mahra region, which has prevented it from remaining fully impartial.

Regarding crises in the Gulf since 2011, Oman has thus on the surface expressed "political neutrality,"[72] however it has not adhered in practice to the neutral principles of abstention and impartiality.

Oman is the only GCC country that has not provided any military support to the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen, and its role in facilitating dialogue between the warring parties has been in line with the traditional third-party role of neutrals. However, Oman has pursued its national interests in the conflict in Yemen, particularly in the Mahra region, which has prevented it from remaining fully impartial. Oman's strong economic and political involvement in the region has historically aimed at avoiding any spillover of the Yemeni

65 Natalino Ronzitti, "Italy's Non-Belligerency During the Iraqi War," in *International Responsibility Today: Essays in Memory of Oscar Schachter*, eds. Oscar Schachter and Maurizio Ragazzi (Leidan: Brill | Nijhoff, 2005), 197-207.

66 Kenneth Katzman, "Oman: Politics, Security, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, June 1, 2022.

67 "That war created a new reality, characterized mainly by the collapse of the former regime, the creation of a huge political and security vacuum and deterioration in basic services for Iraqi society." Yousef bin Alawi, United Nations General Assembly Plenary Meeting, October 1, 2003.

68 Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 99-114; Marc Valeri, "High Visibility, Low Profile: The Shia in Oman Under Sultan Qaboos," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 251-68.

69 Joseph A. Kechichian, *Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy* (RAND: Santa Monica, 1995).

70 Barry Rubin, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War," in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, ed. Efraim Karsh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 121-32.

71 Giorgio Cafiero and Adam Yefet, "Oman and the GCC: A Solid Relationship?," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 3 (September 2016): 49-55.

72 Abdullah Baabood, "Omani Perspectives on the Peace Process in Yemen," *Berghof Foundation*, 2021.

instability across the permeable border Dhofar region of Oman.[73] Indeed, in Mahra, Oman's objective since the 1970s has been to defuse any resurgence of communist and extremist ideologies. This has been done through the provision of assistance – including health care, electricity, schoolbooks, and food – and through projects of economic integration, such as the jointly constructed Shahn-al-Ghaida highway.[74] Moreover, Oman has invested in the creation of an economic free zone in the Omani border city of Al-Mazyunah.[75]

The country's security and economic concerns are therefore important elements to understand Oman's position toward the conflict in Yemen, where Oman's main interest is to protect its borders.[76] This attitude has been reflected in Oman's approach since the beginning of the conflict, in increasing development and trade assistance, including the easing of customs and offering Omani citizenship to tribal leaders from the Mahra region.[77]

In the Gulf crisis with Qatar, Oman also was not fully impartial. Despite proclaiming noninterference, Oman took a position by helping Qatar bypass the diplomatic and economic boycott imposed by Gulf neighbors.[78] Oman offered shipping services at the ports of Sohar and Salalah, as entrepots for Qatari imports and exports. Also, it allowed Qatar Airways to transit its flights through Muscat International Airport while opening a new direct route between Qatar and Oman at Sohar International Airport.[79] These examples suggest Oman's approach cannot be characterized within the traditional meaning of neutrality. However, the concept has been increasingly stretched from its traditional meaning to include other nonaligned strategies.

Oman and Other Nonaligned Strategies

After World War II, several terms deriving from neutrality, such as nonalignment, military neutrality, and active neutrality, emerged. Their meanings and applicability evolved, reflecting the political contexts of the Cold War and the post-Cold War, and they are especially applicable to peacetime behavior. Nonalignment is often used to describe the approach of the Non-Aligned Movement, created in 1955 with strong anti-colonial stances and a position of equidistance from the two Cold War blocs.[80] In line with this interpretation, some authors

73 Helen Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen: An Overview of Relations," in *Yemen and the Gulf States: The Making of a Crisis*, eds. Helen Lackner and Daniel Martin Varisco (Berlin: Gerlach Press: 2018), 7-28; Author interview with a Sultan Qaboos University researcher, May 19, 2021.

74 Edward Burke, "'One Blood and One Destiny'? Yemen's Relations With the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States*, LSE 23, 2012; Author interview with Abdullah Baabood, April 24, 2021; Author interview with a senior Omani official, May 24, 2021.

75 Edward Burke, "EU-GCC Cooperation: Securing the Transition in Yemen," *GRC Gulf Papers, Gulf Research Center*, 2013.

76 Author interview with a senior Omani official, May 24, 2021.

77 Casey Coombs, "Al-Mahra: Where Regional Powers Define Local Politics," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, December 18, 2020; Author interviews with Sultan Qaboos University researchers, May 16, 2021 and May 23, 2021.

78 Giorgio Cafiero, "Qatar and Oman's Shared Interests," *LobeLog*, September 12, 2017.

79 "Qatar Airways Launches Inaugural Flight to Sohar – Its Third Destination in the Sultanate of Oman," Qatar Airways, August 8, 2017; Imad K. Harb, "Determinants of Oman's Strategic Position on the Gulf Crisis," *Arab Center Washington DC*, January 23, 2018.

80 "4th Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement," Algiers, Algeria, September 5-9, 1973.

define nonalignment as a policy of "non-participation in military pacts with great powers."[81] According to Robert L. Rothstein,[82] nonalignment is a "tactical principle" of noninvolvement in any dispute, which allows a state to play a more active role in world politics rather than restricting its choices as was the case with traditional neutrality. Ryszard M. Czarny characterizes nonalignment as a diluted form of neutrality, which did not prevent states from taking part in conflicts that were outside of Cold War dynamics.[83] Indeed, nonalignment is more viable in situations of bipolarity and "cold war" – i.e., "when great-power relationships have neither sunk to war nor risen to peaceful cooperation"[84] – because in those situations the small powers are most likely to be the object of the competition rather than the victims of war. Some authors use nonalignment and neutrality synonymously when describing a strategy of independence or equidistance between different poles.[85]

In the 2000s, the current minister of foreign affairs, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, described Oman's behavior as reinterpreting the Cold War nonaligned principle of "neither East nor West" with "neither Washington nor Tehran."

Oman joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1973 and strongly supported its political and economic positions at the U.N., especially during the Cold War.[86] In the 2000s, the current minister of foreign affairs, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, described Oman's behavior as reinterpreting the Cold War nonaligned principle of "neither East nor West" with "neither Washington nor Tehran."[87]

With the reduction in threat of direct wars involving European states, concepts like military nonalignment and military neutrality emerged after the end of the Cold War and were especially used by the European neutrals, such as Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, and Ireland, to describe a peacetime policy of simply not joining military alliances "that may lead the country to engage in a war."[88] Most of the post-Cold War permanent neutrals have also increasingly affirmed that collective security measures are not against neutrality.[89] For example, Switzerland joined

81 Muhammad Badiul Alam, "The Concept of Non - Alignment: A Critical Analysis," *World Affairs* 140, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 166-85.

82 Robert L. Rothstein, "Alignment, Nonalignment, and Small Powers: 1945-1965," *International Organization* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1966): 397-418.

83 Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

84 Robert L. Rothstein, "Alignment, Nonalignment, and Small Powers: 1945-1965," *International Organization* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1966): 397-418.

85 Zivile Marija Vaicekauskaite, "Security Strategies of Small States in a Changing World," *Journal on Baltic Security* 3, no. 2 (2017): 7-15.

86 Fahad Al Said, "Speech by Mr. Al-Said (Oman)," United Nations General Assembly 2,133rd meeting, 19-21, September 28, 1973.

87 Badr bin Hamad Al Bu Saidi, "Small States' Diplomacy in the Age of Globalization: An Omani Perspective," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship With Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 257-62.

88 Christine Agius and Karen Devine, "'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?' A Reprise," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 265-84; Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

89 Natalino Ronzitti, *Diritto Internazionale dei Conflitti Armati* (Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore, 2006).

the U.N. in 2002 and established cooperation with the European Defense Agency in 2012.[90] Because of the reduced scope of these countries' neutrality, their policies are sometimes referred to as post-neutrality.[91] These steps are increasingly departing from the concept of neutrality and getting closer to those of hedging and omnibalancing, with the only distinction of generally avoiding military pacts and the abstention from military interventions outside of the U.N. framework.

Oman joined the U.N. in 1971, and it is part of several security arrangements with regional and international powers, including the United Kingdom,[92] India,[93] Pakistan,[94] Iran,[95] and the United States.[96] However, most of the arrangements it has signed are related to regional security cooperation through exchange of information, training, and facility access.[97] In the case of more binding multilateral agreements, such as the NATO Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Oman decided to opt out.[98] Oman has never entered a defense agreement that would bind it to ally with a specific power during a war, though it has repeatedly called for collective Gulf security arrangements.[99]

Oman has long been in favor of Gulf multilateral security arrangements, however, only if both its Arab neighbors and Iran are included, indicating that the country is against military alliances that could lead to a war against one of the other regional actors. In 1976, Sultan Qaboos bin Said called for a collective security and defense policy to include both Iran and Iraq, with the

90 "Frequently Asked Questions: Switzerland and the UN," Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, accessed July 27, 2022.

91 Ulrika Moller and Ulf Bjereld, "From Nordic Neutrals to Post-Neutral Europeans: Differences in Finnish and Swedish Policy Transformation," *Cooperation and Conflict* 45, no. 4 (December 2010): 363-86.

92 The two countries signed a joint defense agreement in 2019, providing the United Kingdom with access to Omani facilities in a common effort to ensure the country's stability and Gulf maritime security. "UK and Oman Sign Historic Joint Defence Agreement," U.K. Ministry of Defence, February 21, 2019.

93 Oman and India signed a renewable memorandum of understanding for defense cooperation in 2005, mainly directed at exchanges in training activities, information, and formal visits or observers. Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 99-114.

94 Oman and Pakistan signed a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation in 2020. "Oman, Pakistan Sign Military Cooperation MoU," *Times of Oman*, October 20, 2020.

95 Of particular relevance is the cooperation started in 2010 for coordinated patrolling of the Strait of Hormuz.

96 In April 1980, Oman and the United States signed a historic arms-for-access agreement, through which Oman would receive $100 million annually in security assistance in exchange for U.S. access to Omani military facilities. Oman was the first Gulf state to sign such a comprehensive military agreement with the United States, and it was eventually followed by the other GCC members after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 99-114. Oman is also part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and in 2019 it signed a Framework Agreement with the United States, expanding U.S. "access to facilities and ports in Salalah and Duqm." Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Oman," U.S. Department of State, June 15, 2021.

97 Giorgio Cafiero and Adam Yefet, "Oman and the GCC: A Solid Relationship?," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 3 (September 2016): 49-55.

98 Eleonora Ardemagni, "NATO's Gulf Partnerships: Betting on Military Education," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, July 6, 2018.

99 Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

aim of protecting the Strait of Hormuz.[100] The late sultan's words were particularly clear in this sense: "to be perfectly frank, I say that here in Muscat we do not believe it to be in the interest of security in the Gulf that Iran feels we intend to establish an Arab military pact that will always be hostile to it, or that we are about to form a joint force, whose main task is to fight Iran."[101]

At the GCC level, Oman was an active supporter of the development of the Peninsula Shield Force, which was founded in 1984 to combat external military aggression against, and domestic destabilization in, the GCC states. In 2011, Oman even supported the decision to send the Peninsula Shield Force in support of the Al Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain. However, it provided support only at a political level without sending any troops.[102] Oman's position on the GCC's role, however, shifted over time from a statement expressing active support for "greater and more effective security and military coordination" in 2005[103] to a statement by the secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017 that Oman did "not see an expansion in the GCC's mandate" at that time.[104]

In parallel to expanding its security ties, Oman has invested in creating its own credible armed forces. Oman has the highest military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product in the world.[105] Joseph A. Kechichian's content analysis of Sultan Qaboos' speeches from 1970 to 2006 shows that the sultan persistently referred to the armed forces as the "backbone of the nation."[106] Even when Oman's security relations with external powers had been consolidated, and the reliance on external security provision was deemed necessary and unavoidable by the other small Gulf states, Sultan Qaboos kept underlining the crucial importance of military self-sufficiency, declaring that lacking in this regard "would be the grossest folly."[107]

Oman has the highest military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product in the world.

100 Robert Mason, "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, no. 4 (October 2014): 355-67.

101 Mohammed Binhuwaidin, "Oman's Response to a Rising Iran: A Case of Strategic Hedging," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1-12.

102 James Bowden, "Keeping It Together: A Historical Approach to Resolving Stresses and Strains Within the Peninsula Shield Force," *Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 133-49.

103 Badr bin Hamad Al Bu Saidi, "Small States' Diplomacy in the Age of Globalization: An Omani Perspective," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship With Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 257-62.

104 Gulf Affairs, "Interview With H.E. Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sultanate of Oman," *Foreign Policy Trends in the GCC States* 41 (Autumn 2017).

105 Abdullah Baabood, "Oman's Independent Foreign Policy," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 106-22; "Defense Spending by Country," World Population Review, accessed July 28, 2022.

106 Joseph A. Kechichian, "A Vision of Oman: State of the Sultanate Speeches by Qaboos bin Said, 1970-2006," *Middle East Policy* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 112-33.

107 Ibid.

Oman's approach to security agreements and defense capacity building is not in contradiction with the concepts of military neutrality introduced by the small European neutrals. Indeed, defending its sovereignty through the development of a credible defense system is one of the traditional duties of a neutral country.[108]

The literature on "active neutrality" describes more proactive foreign policies, such as "the promotion of peace, international security, disarmament, sustainable development," especially through participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations and other more offensive policies.[109] Indeed, the small Western neutrals have increasingly shifted toward the role of peace entrepreneurs, by supporting peacebuilding operations and providing good offices or mediation services.[110] Oman's approach to facilitation can be understood in this context. Since 2015, Oman has played an active role in facilitating dialogue among the parties in the Yemeni conflict, especially the Houthis, Saudis, and Iranians.[111] This facilitation role has included the delivery of messages between actors that do not formally speak with each other. Also, Oman has been hosting representatives of different groups in Yemen, including Houthi spokesperson Mohammad Abdulsalam, and has provided meeting venues in hotels and private houses.[112] Moreover, Oman has been offering humanitarian assistance, including medical treatment to Houthi representatives, and logistical support to many humanitarian actors – including the U.N. – operating from Salalah and across the Omani border into Yemen.[113] However, Oman's facilitation measures have remained informal and discreet and have never evolved into a formal mediation role.

Since 2015, Oman has played an active role in facilitating dialogue among the parties in the Yemeni conflict, especially the Houthis, Saudis, and Iranians.

The Omani government's official discourse presents the country as a positive actor with a higher moral stature compared to the rest of the region, historically evident in its choices of supporting peace efforts "when it was not fashionable yet."[114] A common example used to explain Oman's approach is the country's choice not to boycott Egypt after the Camp David

108 Natalino Ronzitti, *Diritto Internazionale dei Conflitti Armati* (Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore, 2006).

109 Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe" in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, ed. Laurent Goetschel (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1998), 13-31; Antonio Papisca, "Active Neutrality With the New International Law. Reflections From a Politics of Law Perspective," *Peace Human Rights Governance* 1, no. 3 (November 2017): 395-404; Ryszard M. Czarny, *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

110 John Stephen Moolakkattu, "Peace Facilitation by Small States Norway in Sri Lanka," *Cooperation and Conflict* 40, no. 4 (December 2005): 385-402; Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe" in *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, ed. Laurent Goetschel (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1998), 13-31; Tom Long, "Small States, Great Power? Gaining Influence Through Intrinsic, Derivative, and Collective Power," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2017): 185-205.

111 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Can Kuwaiti Mediation and Omani Facilitation Support Ending Yemen's War?" *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, May 6, 2020.

112 Author interview with Abdullah Baabood, April 24, 2021; Author interviews with senior European diplomats in Oman, March 25, 2021 and May 2, 2021; Author interview with a Sultan Qaboos University researcher May 23, 2021.

113 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Giorgio Cafiero, "Yemen War: How Oman and the US are Finding Common Ground," *Middle East Eye*, March 4, 2021; Author interview with a Sultan Qaboos University researcher May 19, 2021.

114 Author interview with a senior Omani official, May 24, 2021.

Accords in 1978. An Omani senior official described Oman's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as an example of the country's policy to always pursue peace in an unbiased way. Also, by keeping relations with all actors, even when isolated by the international community, Oman has been able to work as an "emergency door" that other actors can use when they cannot deal with one party directly due to their official positions.[115] This idea of having made the "right" choices in the past 50 years of Oman's foreign policy is also used to defend Oman's position in Yemen. Oman is presented as transparently pursuing a peaceful regional setting per se, without any hidden agenda, but as actively and flexibly engaging in the construction of peace through its diplomatic and facilitation activities.[116]

However, like on the Yemen war, Oman's positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have evolved in a pragmatic way. Between 1971 and 1977, Oman strongly aligned with the Arab world against Israel at the U.N., when full recognition from the region was most needed for the new Omani government. In 1978-79, Oman's stance in favor of the Camp David Accords and the Washington treaty can be interpreted as an alignment with the United States rather than as an independent position. In the 1990s, Oman adopted more active positions as a peace entrepreneur in line with the evolution of the peace talks sponsored by the United States. Since 2003, Oman has kept a low profile regarding the conflict, once again following the evolution of the regional environment. Oman's approach to the conflict did not follow a constant path of peace entrepreneurship and active neutrality but one of pragmatism and small state self-preservation.

Conclusion

Nonaligned and hedging or omnibalancing strategies were common elements of all small Gulf Arab states' foreign policies, at least until the Arab Spring period.[117] This common behavior is often described as the result of similar state formation, political systems, and socioeconomic contexts, although with different capabilities in terms of economic power base. Through the lens of small state theory, it can be argued that the small Gulf Arab states have been strongly affected by changes in regional structures.[118] Indeed, the combination of changes in the regional balance of power and stronger economic resources has led the UAE and Qatar toward unprecedented active foreign policies. It can even be argued that the two countries have recalibrated their perceptions of their size, regarding their level of influence and shifting toward more offensive engagements in regional crises.[119] At the same time,

115 Author interviews with Sultan Qaboos University researchers, April 26, 2021 and May 23, 2021; Author interview with a senior Omani official, May 24, 2021.

116 Author interview with Abdullah Baabood, April 24, 2021; Author interviews with Sultan Qaboos University researchers, May 4, 2021, May 12, 2021, May 16, 2021, and May 23, 2021; Author interview with a senior Omani official, May 24, 2021.

117 Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2015), 112-22.

118 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

119 Emma Soubrier, "Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 123-43.

Bahrain's increasing alignment with Saudi Arabia can be understood as an influence-seeking strategy for a country whose self-perception of weakness has intensified since 2011. Kuwait, on the other hand, has continued its traditional hedging strategy, alternating selective military interventions with mediating efforts, while Oman has taken positions of ad hoc neutrality in military conflicts, choosing not to send troops in any of the post-2011 crises and preferring a low-profile role of facilitation over mediation.[120] In circumstances in which it tightened alignment with the United States, during a period of intervention, Oman sought to act as discreetly as possible and avoided public statements pointing to such alignment.

Oman's defensive behavior can be interpreted as a function of the small state's fragile stability, inherited by Sultan Qaboos in 1970, which compelled the ruler to seek the dual objective of defending the country and trying to be accepted by as many actors as possible to avoid isolation.

Oman's defensive behavior can be interpreted as a function of the small state's fragile stability, inherited by Sultan Qaboos in 1970, which compelled the ruler to seek the dual objective of defending the country and trying to be accepted by as many actors as possible to avoid isolation.[121] According to an external observer, this led to a position of "accepted marginalization," which translated into keeping the country out of the center of debates in the Arab world.[122] This position is evident in Oman's cautious decisions to "downplay its role," to not be caught in the middle of uncomfortable situations, both in the GCC and Arab League, and to avoid the cost of war, which Oman could not afford because of its economic vulnerability.[123] Both the ideas of "accepted marginalization" and of "downplaying its role" are clear signs of Oman's limitations.

Oman's post-2011 behavior can thus be interpreted as stemming from a perceived increasing economic vulnerability that has compelled the country to pursue a more defensive nonaligned strategy compared to its neighbors. In Yemen, for example, Oman's dissatisfaction with the Saudi and Emirati interference in the Mahra region has never become too loud as Oman has found itself in increased need of financial aid.[124]

120 Victor Gervais, "The Changing Security Dynamic in the Middle East and Its Impact on Smaller Gulf Cooperation Council States' Alliance Choices and Policies" in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, eds. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 31-46.

121 Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Author interview with J. E. Peterson, May 6, 2021; Author interviews with senior European diplomats in Oman, April 21, 2021 and May 2, 2021; Author interview with a Sultan Qaboos University researcher, May 12, 2021.

122 Author interview with a senior European diplomat in Oman, April 13, 2021.

123 Author interview with a senior Sultan Qaboos University researcher, May 15, 2021; Author interview with a Sultan Qaboos University researcher, May 16, 2021; Author interview with a senior Omani official, May 24, 2021.

124 Edward Burke, "EU-GCC Cooperation: Securing the Transition in Yemen," *GRC Gulf Papers, Gulf Research Center*, 2013; Eleonora Ardemagni, "L'Oman Cerca Fondi: una Partita Geopolitica 'a tre Livelli,'" *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, June 23, 2020; Author interview with a senior European diplomat, April 28, 2021; Author interview with a Sultan Qaboos University researcher, May 16, 2021.

The link between perceived weakness and Oman's foreign policy is also visible in its behavior since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. Qatar and Kuwait cautiously aligned with Ukraine, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have refused to join with Western states in seeking to isolate Russia, although, under pressure from the United States, they voted in favor of a U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion. Bahrain and Oman, the poorer GCC countries, have adopted a similar low-profile approach of equidistance and noninvolvement.[125] Oman voted in favor of the U.N. resolution condemning Russian aggression in February but spoke against sanctions and has maintained open relations with Russia.[126]

Oman has for a long time proclaimed a foreign policy of noninterference, on occasion replaced by an active approach to protect its vital interests (mainly its domestic stability and territorial integrity). As it has confronted increasing economic uncertainty since 2011, Oman has chosen low-profile positions of ad hoc neutrality in international and regional military crises outside the Gulf. In the Gulf, namely the war in Yemen and the Qatar crisis, Oman has instead adopted a general equidistant diplomatic stance, but it intervened to promote its security and economic interests. In its facilitation efforts, Oman has acted as a peace entrepreneur, in a way that resembles that of the European post-neutrals, but because of its interference in the Mahra region, Oman's policy cannot be classified as active neutrality. Regarding security agreements, Oman has adopted an omnibalancing or hedging approach in diversifying its security providers but has always resisted signing binding defense agreements, in a way that corresponds to military neutrality.

Many of the concepts presented in this paper can be used to describe specific Omani stances since the country joined the international community in 1971. However, the selective choice for positions that fit in the category of ad hoc neutrality, or military neutrality, does not make Oman a neutral country, nor is this the intention of Omani policymakers. The recently developed concepts of military nonalignment, post-neutrality, active neutrality, and military neutrality have been introduced by the small European neutrals to justify the changes in their foreign policy approaches, and they specifically describe their historical evolution from a position of permanent neutrality.

The international media, when describing Oman as "the Switzerland of the Middle East," thus risks losing track of the Omani peculiarities and actual interests and objectives. The concepts of pragmatism (small state self-preservation), facilitation (between disputing parties), noninterference (through military means in military conflicts), and hedging (between security providers) not only are more precise to describe the positions taken in different contexts and times by Oman, but they are also employed by the Omani government to describe its foreign policy and should therefore be preferred to that of neutrality and its many nuances.[127]

125 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The GCC and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis," *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 22, 2022.

126 Giorgio Cafiero, "Understanding Oman's Stance on the Ukraine War," *Gulf International Forum*, June 9, 2022.

127 "Principles," Foreign Ministry of Oman, accessed July 28, 2022.