

Fragmented Regionalism and the Limits of Peaceful Initiatives: Oman's Intermediary Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf

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Abstract

Decentralized regionalism emphasizes the strategic diplomacy of small states in securing their interests in the surrounding region. The intermediary diplomacy of Oman focuses on preventing conflict spillover in the Persian Gulf region through a variety of approaches, such as refraining from taking sides in conflicts, respecting state sovereignty, and engaging in ongoing negotiation and backchannel discussions. The present study examines the intermediary diplomacy of Oman in the Persian Gulf, a place in which there is a lack of a comprehensive regional security agreement, as well as the role of decentralized regionalism in this context. Oman's strategic objectives and tactics are achieved through promoting good relations with neighboring countries, mediating and facilitating dialogue among conflicting states, establishing trade and transit centers with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and emerging powers, as well as collaborating on defense and intelligence with traditional powers. These interconnected and intricate principles can be better understood through the lens of decentralized regionalism, as conventional methods may not fully capture this evolving dynamic.

Keywords: Fragmented Regionalism, Oman, Persian Gulf, Intermediary Diplomacy

1. Introduction

The importance of regionalism in the study of international relations is its capacity to depict the special character of varied regional security architectures. The study of regionalism and regional security architectures can allow for a better understanding of states' behaviors beyond the notion of an international system dominating over its member states and instead constituting the fundamental elements of this complex. A detailed study of the international system necessitates the study of member states located in different regional sub-systems.

How do states' power dynamics evolve in their regional equilibrium? Fragmented and decentralized regionalism provides us with a detailed and comprehensive analysis of state performance in its regional proximity. Realist theories of international politics neglect states

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and their internal structures. They believe states express uniform behavior based on an organizing principle of hierarchy (Kumar, 2023, p. 115). Decentralized regionalism, on the other hand, empowers researchers with an equipped methodological integrity to understand the constant power equation.

Oman, according to a decentralized regionalism framework, plays an important role in the decentralized Persian Gulf Security architecture. The region represents an important phenomenon due to the divergent interests of its member states and the absence of a comprehensive security organization or collective security treaty. Oman, in the absence of such collective security mechanisms, plays an important role through its multi-layer foreign policy, which addresses each state according to the Sultanate's priorities. Oman is a respected partner among both the states of the Persian Gulf and foreign powers outside the region. It is trusted for its intermediary role and for reaching out to conflicting partners with an aim at seeking durable security and economic prosperity. Oman has branded itself with the principles of constructive dialogue and avoiding prejudice to any partner in a particular conflict. The Sultanate has also achieved diplomatic mastery of back channeling for complicated cases. Track two diplomacy is embodied by Omani foreign policy, and the state has shown itself able to establish durable partnerships among various states with diverging interests. Oman's intermediary diplomacy challenges conventional regional organizations' performances and reflects how a state can represent an intermediary role in the absence of a collective security mechanism. This model appears well-suited to serve the Persian Gulf region, yet institutional regionalism cannot explain how, in this constantly evolving environment, the Sultanate is able to serve as a bridge for peace and stability among conflicting partners, while also serving its own interests.

Regionalism and regional policies of countries are generally structured based on specific models, which influence the development of security and economy, the projection of regional power, and the balance of power within a particular region. In other words, each country employs region-specific models to formulate its foreign policy within a regional context. The decentralized architecture of world power allows small regional powers to frame their policies according to their needs and to avoid being challenged by prominent regional states and foreign powers. Foreign and regional powers are reassured by the good offices of emerging small regional powers, and their trust is achieved in this way. The diffusion of power and its asymmetric elements beyond classical power equations reflects an understanding of a combination of national and international factors affecting each country and its neighbors. The study of the regional and international foreign policies of small powers has enabled international relations researchers to understand hybrid policy-making frameworks based on the complexity of material and ideational power. The multi-polarity of power in international politics' regional security complexes and differences of interests among those regional states, whether prominent regional states or emerging small powers, has highlighted the importance of a detailed study of small powers' behaviors. The emerging small powers achieve prestige and build durable confidence with their regional counterparts as well as foreign powers by mediating between them while aiming for settlement of their hostilities. The emerging small regional powers are constantly incorporating varied capabilities to enhance their power from multiple sources.

The model that has enabled European countries to transform the European Coal and Steel Community into the European Union over more than six decades originated in the regional

circumstances of Europe in particular periods. This model was rooted in the desire of Western European countries to accumulate power and establish collective mechanisms to counter the adverse outcomes of the Second World War and the Cold War. The European mechanisms of collective decision-making highlight how those states differ from each other in terms of power and interests. In this sense, even the EU model cannot be regarded as a truly collective body of homogenous states. For example, between 2007-2011 the Norwegian government, despite not being an EU member, was invited to 69% of unofficial meetings of the EU at a ministerial level and participated in 40% of those meetings (Haugevik, 2017, p. 282). The Norwegian model of regionalism within the EU is an indicator of alternative regionalism for states that opt to be a partner to a comprehensive collective decision-making body, rather than a member. The Norwegian model depicts how Norway, as a non-EU member, pursues its interests outside a functionalist framework of regional cooperation by implanting a diplomatic workforce in the EU member states' capitals and strengthening its relations with the various EU presidents. Norway has empowered this strategy with participation in the budget and advisory arms of the European Union. This suggests that small and medium-sized powers should be analyzed according to their asymmetrical power sources.

European regionalism has progressed to the extent that EU states now share their competencies in multiple regional organizations. In addition, the experience of Norway's partnership with the EU has shown the need for new approaches based on decentralized regionalism, which allows for understandings that go beyond functionalism and neo-functionalism theories. Functionalism and neofunctionalism fail to explain the constant and rapidly changing regional dynamics in the wider Middle East and Persian Gulf region. The states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have successfully formulated multipolar foreign policies to pursue their interests by devising hybrid relations with a vast group of states with different power levels (Afterman & Urhová, 2024, p. 134). The evolving regional power and security equilibrium in the Persian Gulf necessitates an analysis of each country's regional foreign policy based on a spectrum of influential factors such as various national political conflicts and their subsequent impacts on the power status of the country. In addition, these factors include a country's ability to overcome national instabilities; leverage regional capacities for national stabilization; reduce tensions in relation with their neighboring countries; enhance efficiency in international arrangements; and gain advantages in a wide array of interactions with diverse players. Emerging mediators in the Persian Gulf have begun prioritizing their national identities to protect themselves against the destabilizing effects of regional upheavals. Those states have less hard power and rely on their national identities to diffuse their bigger neighbor's threats. The Qatar crisis of 2017 proved that these emerging mediators could be successful at diffusing tribal politics. Qatar diffused the destabilizing effects of tribal politics, which had been provoked by Saudi Arabia, and it did this through cementing its national identity (Al-Etaibi, 2022, p. 96).

Revising conventional concepts of regionalism is more essential than ever due to the increasingly regionally oriented foreign policies of GCC countries. The GCC states challenge the conventional concept of regional blocks by avoiding bloc commitments to high politics. Therefore, any harmonious position of member states necessitates a high level of intermediary role among those states. Unlike official negotiations of member states in regional organizations, the GCC states employ backchannel communications among themselves and via third parties. The key asymmetrical capabilities of those emerging regional players are related

to various diplomatic skills such as reaching consensus and making compromises among divergent players, along with avoiding old conflicts. Moreover, the GCC states' practice of Sheikhs' dialogue at high-level summits and back channeling over sensitive political issues, has set a precedent for a study of decentralized regionalism. Those states, in addition to their ministries of foreign affairs, benefit from their tradition of settling differences through tribal leaders' discussion as an alternative to modern and conventional diplomacy. Sheikhs' dialogues and reaching out to third partners as means of diplomatic communications, have been practiced in the Persian Gulf, in absence of a multilateral security cooperation treaty. These practices take place in a highly complex regional security architecture, one in which the Iranian Saudi rivalry has been a determining element. Gause rightfully points out that the security dilemma in the Gulf area raises concern among GCC states. Meanwhile, the threat from the US and Israel has framed Iran's defense policies, which have in turn increased the concerns of a military encounter and drastically persuaded these states to outsource their security in the regional multipolar power dynamics (Gause III, 2022).

All GCC members showed their eagerness to play a prominent regional and international role following the fall of the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad. They embarked on independent foreign policies which did not exactly match Riyadh's desires. The UAE and Qatar's participation in opposing military fronts in Libya in 2014 without warning to Saudi Arabia was a clear sign of these states taking different paths despite their membership in the GCC (Legrenzi & Lawson, 2020, p. 377). Furthermore, the traditional tribal foreign policy in the GCC opposed the accession to power of Hamad as Emir of Qatar and resisted the political change that was occurring in that country, which ignited a crisis, culminating in the 2017 boycott of Qatar by the GCC (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020, p. 8).

Decentralized regionalism implies a form of diversified-regionalism in which full convergence among states in a region is not achieved. This type of regionalism contrasts with centralized regionalism, where all players in a region act in unity under the guidance of a central regional organization. Thus, decentralized regionalism focuses on two key features: first, the presence of an inclusive regional organization where all actors in a region maintain friendly and constructive relations; and second, states in the region, despite competition, come together for a common objective. In general, the Persian Gulf region has only one such organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in which major regional players like Iran and Iraq are absent (Coates-Ulrichsen, 2018). Additionally, countries along the southern edge of the Persian Gulf only underwent a process of foreign power-led state-building and decolonization under British influence in the latter half of the 20th century, so governments in this region have historical differences despite being GCC members, as can be observed in the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as the UAE and Qatar (Coates-Ulrichsen, 2024).

The foreign policy of the Sultanate of Oman, as an influential country in the Persian Gulf regional subsystem, has opened a new area of research in regional politics. This subsystem represents Oman's diplomatic role as an intermediary striving to maintain stability by considering the absence of a regional organization that encompasses all Persian Gulf countries. Recognized as a compelling case in regionalism studies, Oman exemplifies a shift in regionalism theories from functionalism and neofunctionalism to state-led regionalism. This perspective emphasizes the roles of a set of rising new regional powers, analyzes the evolution of statehood, and addresses disputes among neighboring countries. International

visibility, independence, and immunity from foreign threats are considered as the incentives for states seeking new roles in regional security architectures (Jordaan, 2003, p. 178).

The present study analyzes Oman as an emerging advocate with more effective soft elements of power in the Persian Gulf region by examining the central tenets of decentralized theories in regionalism. In addition, it focuses on the developmental models of countries, particularly the roles of emerging advocates with broader soft elements of power in volatile regions. To this aim, the study uses analytical reasoning from decentralized theories of regionalism to assess Oman's role as an intermediary in the absence of a comprehensive regional organization in the Persian Gulf. The decentralized regionalism approach, as it is adopted by Oman, highlights the significant roles of states incorporating smart mediatory and diplomatic capabilities in fostering regional stability. This study emphasizes Oman's intermediary role in safeguarding its interests and promoting stability in the Persian Gulf through its foreign policy. Oman tasked itself as a mediator when it became successful in dealing with its internal instability by, with the help of Britain, sealing a peace deal between Imam militias in the Dhofar Mountains and the Sultan of Muscat. Oman was not only successful at achieving internal political stability but also initiated early diplomatic approaches among the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf toward other states, including Britain and the United States (Bismarck, 2013, p. 11). Consequently, Oman has achieved national stability after years of internal strife and is now progressing towards stabilizing relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors. Oman has thus been navigating a variety of diverse yet disparate interests in its foreign policy, aiming to leverage these differing perspectives to enhance its stability and promote economic growth.

This study examines Oman's foreign policy approach by considering different aspects such as adopting good neighborliness policies, engaging in intermediary efforts, latent unofficial diplomacy, sustained intelligence, and military collaborations, along with expanding economic relations with the emerging powers. The question raised in this study is based on how Oman, as an emerging prominent state, along with asymmetrical power sources, interacts in the decentralized regional security of the Persian Gulf. In this regard, new theoretical frameworks are highlighted along with new empirical findings about the decentralized regionalism in the Persian Gulf. These frameworks provide the researchers with the newest trends of addressing cooperation and conflict by GCC states, especially in Oman.

Although Oman maintains promising collaborations within the GCC, it exercises independence in critical regional affairs, not exclusively adhering to the Council's framework. Oman's foreign policy goals navigate a complex landscape of diverse interests, which necessitate the adoption of this foreign policy framework within the context of the Persian Gulf. This study aims to develop a model for representing Oman's foreign policy by examining its historical evolution, civil and regional conflict patterns, and statehood experiences. In addition, this model represents how decentralized regionalism can guide Oman's actions in a conflict-prone region like the Persian Gulf, which lacks a comprehensive regional organization.

2. Theoretical Analysis: Regionalism and Back Channeling

2-1. Foreign Relations of States from a Regional Perspective

The states of the Persian Gulf possess different levels of power and interact with each other in a multi-format regional security architecture. The GCC security cooperation format and a parallel Iranian preferred security architecture, form existential and not separable elements of the Persian Gulf region. Those parallel formats highlight the importance of decentralized regionalism in any study of the Persian Gulf .

The GCC security format is rooted in the idea of Arab federation in the 1950s, when the United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria) and the Arab Union (Hashemite Iraq and Hashemite Jordan) emerged to provide a conceptual background for an intra-state identity. The GCC monarchies, facing increasing influence of the Iran-Iraq conflict in the 1980s (Lust, 2020, p. 696), participated in the construction of an exclusive security cooperation system in the Persian Gulf. Those monarchical states provided a sound impetus for a unique example of the GCC security cooperation mechanism. The mechanism embodies how decentralized regionalism is practiced in the Persian Gulf. The mechanism, in addition to its practical implications for member states' security, aimed to initiate a public sense of collective security identity. The collective security identity itself challenged the states' national identities and persuaded member states to cement their national identity at the expense of a collective security identity. The Qatar crisis of 2017 highlighted the significance of state identity over a collective security identity, which had been promoted by member states in the previous decade (Battaloglu, 2020, p. 27).

Katzenstein categorized regions according to their degree of cooperation and conflict. In this regard, he championed the study of new forms of regionalism other than European, especially those in Asia. Further, he pointed out that any regional arrangement is a societal and cognitive contract (Katzenstein, 2000, p. 353). The rise of the New Economic Geography introduced the political economy of cooperation and conflict in the Persian Gulf and proves the necessity of broader studies of the states with smart elements of power that do not represent usual definitions of power sources (Krugman, 2010, p. 4). The GCC states have forged economic, cultural, and transport interconnectivity in spite of their degree of divergence over foreign policy and defense issues. Such regionalism interconnectivity was suggested by Lombaerde and his colleagues when they addressed regionalism based on a comparative perspective (De Lombaerde et al., 2013, p. 735).

2-2. Functionalism and Regionalism: Decentralized Concepts of Cooperation

States prioritize their interests, considering neighboring countries and regional proximity, as an existential part of their foreign policy decisions. Neofunctionalism aims to understand regional cooperation in less problematic areas but fails to explain how states address conflicts in their neighborhood (Aydın, 2019, p. 48). The persistence of decentralized regionalism in the Persian Gulf cannot be fully explained by the European model of functionalism, in which cooperation is formulated in a more institutional way and is not limited to the member states, but is related to the regional institution itself. European regionalism has progressed to the extent that EU states share their competency in multi-regional organizations (Panke & Stapel, 2021, p. 388). These states prioritize stability as the primary objective, which influences the

dynamism of regional and cooperation arrangements (Ayoob, 1999, p. 249). In the Persian Gulf, the absence of an agreed-upon definition of public goods and their providers has led to various interests. Further, recognizing the significance of regional diplomacy and its impact on the power equilibrium has prompted new studies, which portray regionalism as a process that continues even during state hostility, highlighting a decline in regional cooperation (Riggirozzi & Ryan, 2021, pp. 604-5). Recent research elaborate on a lack of literature on understanding emerging regional small and middle powers (Garzon, 2024, p. 173).-States living in hostile neighborhood employ different tactics in their strategic diplomacy based on the level of material power, the main causes of conflict and cooperation, and existing mechanisms for conducting diplomacy with their neighbors. Back channeling is used for negotiating important issues discreetly during times of hostility. The absence of a trusted partner such as a functional regional organization, and high stakes, often lead to secret negotiations. Britain has been a pioneer in secret diplomacy, having banned any unauthorized disclosure of diplomatic correspondence in 1889. Back channeling is necessary for settling disputes among its client states in the Persian Gulf (Maley, 2016, p. 452). The process involves a group of elites, engaged in secret diplomacy for the purpose of avoiding any oversight and scrutiny. In addition, persuasion power and confidence building are required. Small powers face less opposition in their intermediary roles and are more protected from internal spoilers, making them more likely to resort to back channeling. The need for political cover prompts states to be engaged in secret negotiations to reduce hostility and resolve conflicts. Negotiation teams are typically more cohesive when focusing on special topics. In addition, the chances of obtaining tangible results increase when negotiation teams include officials who are close to key decision-makers (Pruitt, 2008, p. 42). Furthermore, small powers acting as intermediaries can facilitate contact between hostile states, crossing redlines that are typically observed by medium and great powers in official diplomatic relations, while not being opposed by the conflicting parties.

3. Oman's Diplomacy: Conflict Resolution in Historical Perspective

3-1. Prosperity, Isolation, and Sovereignty: Internal Conflict Mitigation and Stability

The pillars of Oman's intermediary diplomacy lie in its interaction with British colonial power. Oman was deprived of its overseas trade, due to the Britain's takeover of its colony in the Zanzibar, and its economic recession in the 1850s and onward was the result of the acquisition of its naval trade routes in East Africa. This acquisition led to the loss of the main sources of Oman's trade-based economy. The economic recession as the result of decline in foreign trade brought the Sultanate to a period of uncertainty and heightened instability and conflict among the Imam and Sultan (Speece, 1989, p. 501). The Ottoman support for Imam and British concerns over the Ottoman Empire's plan for Aden led to a series of treaties at the end of 18th and during the 19th century that secured British interest against foreign powers, including France and the Ottoman Empire and provided assistance to the Omani government. It also paved the way for Oman to devise an intermediary role of Britain that led to the settlement between Muscat and Imam. The Ottoman Empire's support for Fadhli Bin Alavi Alhosseini as an Indian Shia and critical of British Empire in India, in his efforts to create an independent region of Dhofar in Oman, was neither in British, nor in Oman's

interest (Takriti, 2013, p. 25). The Sultanate initially resorted to cooperation with the British East India Company to receive immunity from rebellions in the mountainous areas and from the threats of the Ottoman Empire. Oman concluded a pact with the company committing to free trade, reduced customs duties, religious freedom, extra-judicial jurisdiction, and antitrust provisions. What was agreed between Muscat and the East India Company were continued during British government takeover of British East India Company and provided Oman with the security guaranty.

The modalities of British-Muscat diplomacy, embodied in extra-judicial privileges granted to British nationals through agreements in 1798 and 1800, addressed the vital need for security and stability and prevented the potential revolt from the Imam and his followers who positioned themselves in the inaccessible and mountainous area of Dhofar. Britain, in response to commitment from Muscat, settled the internal conflict in Oman and revived Omani traditional intermediary policy. Britain successfully achieved the Imam's approval in preventing foreigners, including French and Dutch citizens to enter its territory, and to support the British forces against the French navy in the event of a possible war in the Persian Gulf (Skeet, 1974, pp. 211-212).

Internal instability and power rivalries between the coastal and mountainous areas was repeated in the aftermath of Second World War in Oman. Britain played its traditional role of a peacemaker in preventing the conflict spillover, emanated from the emergence of antiimperialist movements, and protected his base in Aden and the Sultanate in Muscat against revolutionary movements (Halliday, 2001, p. 266). The instability in Oman, during the Cold War, could transcend revolutionary movements to the rest of Britain's colonial administration East Africa. Therefore, the traditional pattern of settlement of internal conflict would empower Britain and Oman to a stable transition to the new geopolitics of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea region.

3-2. Sovereign Oman: Revival of Omani Foreign Policy and the Birth of Intermediary Policy

Sultan Saeed was the first Omani ruler who was successful in centralizing political and religious power, which was partly obtained through post-war British diplomacy with small independent states in the Persian Gulf, as the clients of the British Empire. Britain aided Saeed by negotiating a power-sharing solution to establish a religious Imam in tribal and central areas and gain tribal acceptance of the unique political power of the sultan. Sultan Qaboos bin Saeed, Sultan Saeed's successor, built on his predecessor's political reconciliation efforts and diffused the Dhofar uprising by seeking assistance from the United States and its Iranian imperial clients. He gained the trust of the British and American allies by not allowing the Yemen crisis to spill over into Omani territory. Further, Qaboos initiated administrative and political reforms in the early 1990s by establishing a consultative assembly and granting voting rights to Omani citizens. The consultative assembly, though lacking legislative power, was mandated to hold ministers accountable to the nation, along with allowing women entitled to be elected. The publication of royal decrees was also permitted. The Sultanate responded to the nation's demands by allowing partial political and administrative transparency and incorporating new policies to address the challenges of economic liberalization (Atallah, 2011, p. 170).

Oman's desired intermediary role necessitated foreign economic engagement with major powers through increasing market openness and competitiveness. Oman was ranked as one of the pioneering GCC member states to reduce state commitments and fostered privatization which aimed at promotion of economic diversification (Freedman, 1998, pp. 267-268). Oman adopted a non-confrontational policy for dealing with crises and mediating among states in the Persian Gulf (Herzog, 2021, p. 301). Intermediary as an element of Oman's diplomacy has been achieved through the religious culture of Ibadism, according to which judging a person's belief is not easy. Thus, judgment is suspended and is recommended instead to "leave it to God to decide" (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 138). Oman achieved a modality of intermediary in its foreign policy, based on what Ibadism preaches about flexibility and reaching out to all partners in a conflict. Moderation in decision making and avoiding taking radical decisions in foreign policy by the Sultanate, can be attributed to Ibadism. Moderation, as an important principle of Oman's foreign policy is rooted in the said notion of Ibadism.

4. Oman and the GCC: Two-Track Diplomacy of Partnership for Stability, Trade, and Transit

Historical internal instability among the GCC states has motivated them to seek stability through a web of bilateral and regional agreements to settle territorial disputes and determine official borders. From the 1980s onward, these states' foreign ministers gradually negotiated an agreed terms of settlement and legal mechanisms for resolving territorial disputes and their leaders sealed the negotiated agreements (Börzel & Risse, 2019, p. 1231). For decades, territorial waters, maritime rights, and legal mechanisms for the shared extraction of resources on the sea surface and seabed were considered among the most important issues and were discussed and addressed bilaterally via the Convention on the Law of the Sea or agreed principles (Amin, 1981, p. 29). The GCC member states' understanding of how to conduct diplomacy with their neighbors originated from their traditional bilateral negotiations aimed at securing national interests without causing dramatic changes in regional stability (Al-Zaabi, 2004). These states negotiated their borders and shared resources based on a sheikhdom model of consultations and good offices, which are established on mutual respect and avoiding conflict.

4-1. Security and Intelligence Cooperation: GCC Unified Anti-Terrorism Policy

The GCC itself is a product of the security concerns of Arab states in the Persian Gulf regarding their survival from internal and external threats. In addition to the diplomacy of bilateral good offices, these states established the Council as a multilateral participatory mechanism. Oman's security challenges in the 1950s exposed the Sultanate to the post-colonialist revolutionary waves in the region. Decades later, the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Iraqi invasion of Iran encouraged the GCC states to align their policies with their own internal and external security needs. The complicated nature of the crisis in the Persian Gulf necessitated security cooperation within the Council. In this regard, Oman proposed a joint defense command in the 1980s, which was established a decade later. Qaboos' government increased its interaction with other GCC states by proposing the Peninsula Shield Force, to be combat-ready for the defense of the GCC members by the 1990s. The Sultanate was only partially successful due to some members' hesitation to send a contingent in defense of other

members. Oman achieved degrees of support for a few joint combat forces as it mediated among divergent political interests of the members (Mason, 2014, p. 355). GCC member states structurally followed a similar pattern to Oman and preserved degrees of independence when foreign policy issues were at stake. This strategy was placed at the heart of their foreign policy and framed their regional cooperation on non-critical matters.

The GCC intelligence-sharing mechanism became fully functional in 1987, and member states agreed to coordinate their activities to contain transnational threats through monitoring radical elements across their territories (Cooper, 2003, p. 314). The member states accepted to collaborate within the Comprehensive Security strategy of 1987 and its updates in 2008 and 2015; the Joint Defense Agreement of 2002; the GCC Counter-Terrorism Pact in 2004; the Defense strategy of the GCC 2009; the Joint Peninsula Shield Force of 2006; the Unified Military Command of Council States 2013; and the Unified Maritime Operation Centre 2014, which have mostly focused on internal security and counterterrorism. The importance of Oman's participation in the GCC security cooperation mechanism is related to the emergence of public uncertainties over state-led policies aimed at economic progress, accompanied by the gradual erosion of subsidizing nationals of the GCC. Oman and other GCC states have been participating in security and intelligence cooperation while trying to monitor their economic progress and allocate more funds for improving their national life (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012, p. 18).

In spite of progress toward security cooperation within the GCC through coordinated action, Oman did not favor a military alliance, which would reflect the offensive nature of the GCC towards outside states. The bitter experiences of regional instability emanating from the Iraqi Baath regime aggression against Iran during the 1980s persuaded Oman to reject supporting Saddam Hussein and instead assist in mediating a ceasefire (Bianco C. , 2020 a, p. 21). Under the 2000 Joint Defense Agreement, GCC member states retained full authority over their own security and defense policies, reflecting the fact that divergent foreign policy priorities among them limited the feasibility of a unified defense posture against external threats. Accordingly, it confirmed the authority of sovereign member states to act according to their national interests (Grabowski, 2018, p. 82). Currently, Oman welcomes collective action on internal security and counter-terrorist activities by the GCC, but it does not favor the evolution of the GCC into a union that limits its intermediary foreign policy. Oman places internal security cooperation and counterterrorism joint actions at the epicenter of its diplomacy towards the GCC (Bahgat, 2023, p. 99). Oman's intermediary role in the Qatar crisis of 2017 and Iran's nuclear issue highlights the Sultanate's priorities in its foreign policy conduct. Those priorities lead Oman to set intermediary activities independent of its GCC cooperation and commitments.

The security and intelligence cooperation, along with business and investment partnership with the GCC member states are not contradictory to Oman's principle of good neighborliness since it participates in matters which do not challenge its intermediary goals. In addition, it has resulted in settling disputes with other GCC members through the good offices of its rulers rather than the GCC secretariat. The Sultanate initiated a policy of dispute settlements to decide how to approach critical issues with other member states, whereas the secretariat is tasked with technical matters and coordinates communications rather than offering solutions (Worrall, 2021 a, p. 48). This mechanism has provided Oman with ample room to maneuver according to its bilateral issues.

4-2. Oman Policy for Trade and Transit for the GCC, India, and China

The GCC states embarked on economic reforms during the early 1990s aimed at boosting the growth of their economies and benefitting from the international financial markets. Oman, along with other GCC members, prioritized absorbing investment from multinational financial institutes and other GCC member states. Adjustment Policy and fiscal reforms were recommended to the GCC states by international financial institutions and foreign banks, and the Sultanate followed trade facilitation and economic mobilization. Since the 1990s, Oman and Saudi Arabia have pioneered national development programs for economic and fiscal reforms to achieve economic competitiveness (Bazoobandi, 2020, p. 12 & 18). Oman has formulated a sound policy of cooperation with GCC members in recent years for the durable procurement of its needs for goods and services. Oman has embarked upon a vibrant economic policy that includes mobilization of all sources of national revenues. The Sultanate has favored a more diversified economy to avoid overdependence on oil, by introducing a state-promoted but not oil-centered economic policy, in areas such as ecotourism (Al-Riyami et al., 2017, p. 152). Oman's non-oil value added activity grew by 4.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024 and amounted to 28.32 billion Omani Rials, while the value-added of the oil sector declined by 4 percent at the same time (Foreign Ministry of Oman, 2025).

In addition, Oman possesses a higher rate of national workforce in its private sector while having low-paid public sector employees (Oxford Business Group, 2013). In addition, state-led economic reforms have provided Oman with better economic opportunities. Business partnerships with the UAE made the UAE the third-largest source of inward FDI to Oman in 2022, totaling 1.0834 billion OMR (Arabian Business, 2023). Additionally, Oman concluded a memorandum on joint investment opportunities with the UAE totaling 30 billion Dirhams in 2022 (Economist Intelligence, 2022). These financial cooperation mechanisms have offered Oman the needed financial power to support its citizens and enrich social and educational programs, since a highly skilled national workforce is required (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018, p. 185). In 2017, Oman imported 89% of its domestic food needs (Al-Handhali & Miniaoui, 2020, p. 76). The Sultanate has prioritized the diversification of national income from oil exports to manufactured goods, FDI, and positioning itself as a transit hub. Price Waterhouse Coopers estimated that 68% of Oman's national revenue was achieved from oil and gas exports, totaling 7.2 OMR in 2022 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2022).

Oman has made efforts to revive its old business with the Indian Ocean rim and the Far East. The Sultanate was the first GCC member to export oil to China in the 1990s, and since that time has been cooperating with the emerging superpower for finance and technical support of its infrastructure projects. Oman is focused on China as a destination of its growing oil exports and, in return, channeled Chinese FDI to its projects totaling 2 billion dollars in 2021 (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Oman showed its interest in being a part of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative of China, aiming to financing its infrastructure projects. China is going to designate Oman as one of its hubs in the Persian Gulf (Chaziza, 2018, p. 49).

5. Oman Good Neighborliness Policy: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran

5-1. Diffusing the GCC Boycott: Oman's Intermediary Role among Parties of the Qatar Blockade

The boycott of Qatar in 2017 is considered a major example of a GCC member pursuing an independent policy regarding one of the group's other members in spite of its organizational commitment of policy coordination. Oman's emphasis on its independent foreign policy aimed at avoiding being isolated by other powerful members of the Council, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as happened during the boycott of Qatar. Sultan Qaboos of Oman disagreed with the united front proposed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE against the Houthis in Yemen, since he was concerned about the regional impact of conflict spillover (Mabon, 2023, p. 234). Furthermore, Oman benefited from the shared identity of the GCC and initiated an intermediary between Qatar and other members, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Kinninmont, 2024). However, the Sultanate was concerned about the fact that it could itself be the next target in a Saudi project of isolation if their efforts towards Qatar were successful. Instead, Oman provided port and logistics facilities to Qatar, which was boycotted by the GCC members and Egypt through land, sea, and air. Oman and Kuwait remained neutral for the purpose of reaching a settlement among GCC states during the Qatar crisis (Naheem, 2017, p. 266). Kuwait, alongside Oman, mediated to diffuse the rift among council members (Jacobs, 2023).

Oman saw the GCC as an important hub for internal security, intelligence, and trade cooperation, and did not want to break apart the council and support the boycott of one of its members. The Sultanate prevented formation of any consensus-based boycott by all GCC member states against Qatar and provided logistical support to Qatar. In turn, Qatar supported Oman with a massive cash injection (Financial Times, 2020). Oman sought to preserve a delicate balance to keep up with its GCC counterparts and lower the chances of a repetition of the boycott policy in similar cases in the future. The continuation of the Qatar blockade was seen as empowering Saudi Arabia and the UAE as the architects of this strategy. Qatar's boycott also allowed Saudi Arabia to formulate a unified tribal front against Qatari national identity to preserve a balance of power against the so-called "divergent state" (Al-Etaibi, 2022, p. 96). Qatar was therefore offered port and logistical facilities by Oman to avoid being crippled by the boycott, and Oman's ports of Salalah and Sohar came to serve as Qatar's maritime gateways to the world (RFI, 2017). The Qatar blockade revealed a lack of initiative among major foreign powers like the US to mediate among its allies in the Council to diffuse the crisis (Vuković & Martin, 2022, p. 266). Oman, however, played a significant role in diffusing tensions among Council members and resolving the conflict.

Oman as a GCC member provided logistical support to prevent Qatar from being disturbed by the GCC blockade. The Kuwaiti efforts centered on intermediary with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The position of Oman and Kuwait in this GCC complex portrays how they distanced themselves from the three other members and tried to diffuse the conflict by being helpful to Qatar working inside the GCC. The US support for conflict resolutions are represented in outside arrows, which depict the foreign powers' efforts made outside the GCC complex by indirect measures.

5-2 Oman-Saudi Arabia: Good Neighborliness for Transit Cooperation and Yemen Conflict Resolution

Oman's somewhat rocky relations with Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s can largely be traced to their different views on Yemen.

The Sultanate cautiously formulated its policy towards the new Yemen Republic, while Saudi Arabia, along with the British resident in Aden, vocally supported the monarchic regime in Yemen (Gandy, 1998, p. 264). Throughout the 1960s, Oman remained cautious about the power dynamics in Yemen and favored a policy of containing revolutionary spillover without being seen as anti-revolutionary. Relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia improved however in the 1970s, initiated by Sultan Qaboos (Cordesman, 2003, p. 70), and continued to improve both bilaterally and within the GCC framework during the 1980s. The progress in these relations paved the way for establishing coherent intermediary diplomacy within the GCC. Saudi Arabia had prioritized regime preservation as a part of its security concerns since its establishment as an independent state. Along with their policy of preserving monarchical states in the GCC, the Saudis offered Oman and Bahrain 20 billion dollars to address economic public demands and strengthen their security forces during the Arab Spring unrests (Richter, 2014, p. 177). Oman and Saudi Arabia ultimately agree on the necessity of stability in Yemen, despite their differences in diplomatic approaches.

The Omani Saudi Coordination Council, as a new arrangement initiated by Sultan Haitham during his first official foreign trip to Saudi Arabia in 2021, highlights the significance of cooperation between the two states on key issues and regional security affairs (Hameed et al., 2022, p. 263). Additionally, Oman's proximity to the Indian Ocean has opened up new opportunities for economic ties with Saudi Arabia. The secure supply of Saudi oil through Oman's territory necessitates stable relations with the Sultanate, considering tensions in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea. However, a proposal from the 1970s for using Oman's territory as an oil terminal for exports has recently been revived. The proposed new terminal will transit Saudi oil via Oman's territory and provide access to the Arabian Sea (Prabhu, 2021). Oman can be seen to be focusing on the consensual aspect of relations with Saudi Arabia while avoiding being overshadowed by Saudi hegemonic interests.

5-3. Oman and Yemen: Good Neighborliness Policy of Intermediary for Peace and Conflict Resolution

Oman's policy on Yemen is focused on an active role in preventing crisis spillover to Oman's territory and preservation of friendly ties with all parties involved in the conflict (The Arab Weekly, 2023). The Sultanate's policy in Yemen seeks to be an intermediary for long-term opportunities. Historically, Oman has acted as a hub for Yemeni negotiations, particularly during the 1990s and the country's unification process between then-President Saleh and his vice-president Ali Salem al Biedh. In addition, Oman is trusted by all Yemeni parties since it successfully facilitated peaceful settlements of border disputes with Yemen during Saleh's presidency. In 2015, Oman offered a seven-point peace plan for a ceasefire to the conflict parties in Yemen. The Sultanate hosted talks between the US and the Houthis in May 2015, leading to the release of Western nationals in Yemen, and Oman acted as a trusted mediator when successfully brokering a six-month truce between April and October 2022. Furthermore, Oman supports the Quartet +1 format of talks, reiterating its stance on Yemeni

negotiations in the political sphere. Oman thus supports a constructive multi-party modality in the Yemeni conflict. This stems from the fact that the Sultanate's own security is tied to the stability of the Al Mahra region in Yemen, the tribes of which region were granted Omani nationality for the purpose of stabilizing Al Mahra (Ibrahim, 2023).

In connection with the Yemen crisis, the Sultanate has acted as an intermediary by initiating negotiations and consensus-building efforts between the conflicting parties in Yemen. This intermediary for conflict resolution has occurred in the absence of a regional security cooperation treaty in the Persian Gulf. Complicating issues is the fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia are pursuing two different strategies in Yemen. Iran focuses on training and coordinating local forces for a national unity government, while Saudi Arabia supports the former Yemeni government and participates in a US-backed regional coalition (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016, p. 460). Oman has sought over the years to rectify this lack of effective intermediary by fostering constructive dialogue among these prominent states.

Oman successfully mediated a ceasefire between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Yemen, earning the trust of all Yemeni factions. As far back as 1982, a Kuwaiti-sponsored intermediary effort led by Oman succeeded in improved relations with South Yemen (The New York Times, 1982). Oman hosted Southern Yemeni leaders following Al Beidh's departure to Yemen in 1994 and engaged with the broader Yemeni political community. Hani Bin Brek, Vice President of the South Yemen Transitional Council, visited Oman and commended the Sultanate for its neighborly relations with South Yemen (The Berghof Foundation, 2021). Currently, Oman prefers a united Yemen, as a divided Yemen, due to its proximity, endangers Oman's security and stability. Despite its preference for a united Yemen, Oman pragmatically has expanded its relations with all sides of the various Yemeni political factions.

5-4. Oman and Iran: Good Neighbor as an Intermediary for Confidence Building

Oman and Iran have experienced four different chapters in the history of their bilateral relations, a history which is very much intertwined. During ancient times, the Persian Empire ruled Oman for centuries, until Malek bin Fahm of the Al-Azdi tribe successfully pushed out the Persian Governor of Sohar and Persian residents to the northern shore of the Persian Gulf in Fars province of Persia. (Funsch, 2015, p. 36). The second chapter of Iran and Oman relations continued for subsequent centuries, with Oman, as an independent state, maintaining stable relations through active diplomacy, trade, and maritime transport with Persia. The third chapter of bilateral relations commenced in the 20th century through involving great power influence in the region and relations during the Iran-Iraq war. Oman sought joint defense policy cooperation within the GCC in the early 1980s due to regional uncertainties, (Jones & Ridout, 2015, p. 193), and in 1984, Oman requested naval support from GCC member states which was not well-received. This negative reaction led Oman to reformulate its foreign policy with a focus on reconciliation with Iran (Mojtahedzadeh, 2003, p. 81). Recognizing the seriousness of regional tensions, Oman pursued economic relations with both Iran and Iraq while maintaining a peace-oriented stance (Nonneman, 1986, p. 79). Unlike other GCC members, Oman prioritized trade in its cooperation with Iraq, increasing it to three billion dollars in the 1980s (Cordesman, 1997, p. 130). Sultan Qaboos understood the potential consequences of taking sides in the Iran-Iraq war and advised Arab states against aligning with Iraq. He perceived that Iran would view Arab states' support of Iraq's invasion

as signs of them being Iran's enemies (Han & Hakimian, 2019, p. 497). Oman's successful intermediary in the resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia after the Iran-Iraq war demonstrated the effectiveness of its multidimensional diplomacy. Oman has historically opposed a confrontational approach towards Iran and rejected to follow other GCC states' boycott of Iran in 1987 (Al-Khafaji, 2018).

The fourth chapter of Iran and Oman relations is currently flourishing, as Oman has prioritized continuous dialogue with Iran as a trusted mediator. Oman has successfully mediated among Iran, the US, and Saudi Arabia on multiple occasions, maintaining a constructive and impartial role (Binhuwaidin, 2019, p. 4). The Sultanate mediated between the two partners in conflict during Iran-Saudi Arabia tensions over an attack against the Saudi embassy in Tehran (Bianco C. , 2020 b, p. 101), and Oman's flexibility in facilitating communication between Iran and the US has allowed for indirect talks to revive the nuclear accords. EU states were unable to act as intermediaries due to their ties with the US and NATO (Austrian Center for Peace, 2024). Oman's interest lies in mediating between Iran and the P5+1 for the nuclear accord to diffuse regional tensions that threaten its security, trade, and maritime shipping interests in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz (NIAC, 2024). The Sultanate has facilitated the nuclear talks by providing a secure and confidential venue for talks and communicated in a trustworthy manner aimed at resolving disputes among the parties (Burns, 2019, p. 572).

The roadmap that brought Iran and the P5+1 together was drawn up by Oman in the absence of an agreed regional security arrangement for its security and economic interests. The Sultanate paved the way for trade with Iran, while observing US red lines over its secondary sanctions (Sherwood, 2017). Iran's favorable economic and technical potential, along with its proximity to Oman, encouraged the Sultanate to seek Iran's technical assistance on infrastructure projects in the long term. Further, Oman and Iran held the 19th round of the joint economic commission and concluded several MoUs on various aspects of trade and transit (Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 2022). The two states concluded a MoU within their Joint Chamber of Commerce to increase non-oil trade flows. The Economist Intelligence Unit predicts potential growth in trade volume between Iran and Oman in the future because of their implementing of joint projects.

6. Oman's Relations with the United States and United Kingdom: Deep-Rooted Security and Intelligence Cooperation

Traditionally, the GCC states have prioritized military and intelligence cooperation with Britain and the United States. Oman has emphasized joint training and maneuvers with Britain and the US due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz. Improvement in acquiring military skills and readiness of armed forces to handle regional conflicts is considered a vital part of Oman's defense policy (Worrall, 2021 b, p. 139). Britain, as the most important ally of Oman, protected Sultan Qaboos' throne by providing military advice and training during the 1970s uprising in the Dhofar region. Currently, Oman pursues a more multi-partner policy in defense areas, which poses a challenge to the long-standing superiority of British arms suppliers since they are facing competition from other foreign military suppliers. In recent years Oman has been developing military partnerships with China and India, due to the two emerging powers' growing military superiority (International Institute for Strategic

Studies, 2022). Worthington believes that Oman's need for more affordable weapons and its multifaceted foreign policy present a new challenge for British arms suppliers to cope with and compete against (Worthington, 2022, p. 207).

The Sultanate mediated between the US, GCC states, and the Syrian government during their diplomatic absence in Damascus. The Sultanate negotiated with the Syrian government on several occasions and has observed US reservations and interests in this matter since 2015. Releasing American citizens from Syria highlighted the important intermediary role played by Oman in the absence of a structured regional security arrangement and during Syria's suspension from the League of Arab States (Emirates Policy Center (EPC), 2022). Oman is considered an important mediator for the US due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and also because it has been hosting the US Navy at its Masirah base for decades. However, the US is concerned about Oman's cooperation with Iran. The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) urged US policymakers to offer assistance to Oman on the condition of maintaining a neutral position regarding Iran (Schanzer & Salter, 2019). The US promotes a more unified offensive policy among the GCC towards Iran that would limit Oman's maneuvering capabilities. The Sultanate has adopted a balancing strategy to assure the US that its relations with Iran will not jeopardize US interests in the region. Nevertheless, Oman's stable approach towards Iran has led the US administration to take a cautious policy towards the Sultanate. The Sultanate's economic incentives for broader cooperation with Iran are centered on the North-South transit corridor, trade and industrial cooperation, LNG exports, and port and maritime cooperation.

7. Conclusion: Oman's Mediating Diplomacy and Confidence Building in the Absence of a Regional Security Organization

This research embarked upon an effort to incorporate the concept of fragmented regionalism in its decentralized format in the scattered regional security architecture of the Persian Gulf region. Oman as the focus of this research exhibit its intermediary capacity to pursue its interests among a wide range of conflicting partners without being caught in a web of alliances. Oman as a small power in international politics, highlights how the smart elements of power, including a respect by a spectrum of states could led the intermediary diplomacy into success in a constant destabilized Persian Gulf. Oman incorporated its negotiation skills, back channeling, and confidence building capabilities to achieve trust of its neighbors. Oman's bitter internal conflicts of past century enabled it to pursue the foreign policy of conflict resolution, based on a focus for peaceful means of dispute settlement. The western instrument of resolution of the regional conflicts with its institutionalized character does not assist the researchers in understanding the reality and nature of the conflicts in the Persian Gulf. The decentralized regionalism is best suited to portray how the western and institutionalized model of regional integration is contested in the Persian Gulf region due to the absence of a comprehensive regional organization and the special format of the GCC itself, which leaves dealing with the vital foreign policy issues to the member states.

Oman has practiced a set of these strategies for over the past five decades. Understanding this process leads us to the well suited multi-dimensional set of priorities for Omani foreign policy. Addressing security challenges regarding Saudi Arabia has been achieved through a good neighborliness policy. Oman initiated negotiation rounds over Iran's nuclear issue and

prisoner exchange between Iran and the US. The Qatar and Yemen crises have been addressed by Oman through intermediary and an all-sided negotiation approach. Oman preserves its close relations with the US and UK through intelligence and defense cooperation and coordinates intermediary activities on the most important foreign policy and security issues. The Sultanate has forged new partnerships with India and China as emerging great powers in military and trade issues, and it is in congruence with its relations with the UK and the US. Oman, as a mediator in the absence of a regional organization in the region, has been bridging gaps among hostile states in several instances. The western and institutionalized notion of regional conflict resolution cannot thoroughly address these diverging geopolitical interests simultaneously.

Decentralized regionalism opens a new chapter for research on emerging small powers' diplomacy and is not confined to the role of regional organizations. The Persian Gulf region is an interesting example in which fragmented and decentralized regionalism hinges on the diverged strategies of the GCC member states and Iran. The GCC itself is better understood as a phenomenon of decentralized regionalism and portrays the limited role of the GCC secretariat in the formation of a unified security strategy among its member states. Oman practices a model of state behavior in a fragmented and decentralized regional framework of the Persian Gulf where the absence of an inclusive security organization leads the Sultanate to set its interests and priorities in an intermediary diplomacy. This research proposed a new framework for understanding Oman's multi-dimensional strategy opens a new analytical chapter which can be theoretically enriched by a more detailed research and discussions on regional dynamics of the Persian Gulf region and other regional frameworks.

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