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# DEMARCATING THE OMANI- YEMENI BORDER

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A Border Perspective on Shifting State-Society Relations in the Sultanate of Oman



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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores from a theoretical border studies perspective the political dynamics of the construction of a fence along the Omani Yemeni border initiated in 2013. Drawing on the concept of the nation as an imagined community, I argue that the construction of a border fence reveals the increased identity politics the Omani state, embodied by Sultan Qabus, engages in since the uprisings in 2011-2012 that marked a shift in Omani state-society relations. These relations are unpacked through exploring Qabus' pre-2011 state- and nation-building efforts and two Omanization channels characterizing the post-2011 period. Through reinforcing the symbolic and physical boundaries of the nation and the territory it is associated with, Qabus enforces a fixed set of characteristics on his subjects, promoted in a national identity narrative, in order to instill loyalty to his authority. This thesis thus sheds light on the issue of increased oppression within the Sultanate, which has gone largely unnoticed among academics and the international community due to the strongly promoted Omani reputation of a stable beacon within a volatile region. This research is conducted from a political-anthropological angle, exploring the political dynamics embedded in the socio-cultural context of Oman. It draws on existing literature from political science, history and the anthropological discipline, popular media reports and official government websites, documents and NGO reports.

**Keywords: Identity politics, identity narrative, Omanization, state-society relations**

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## Introduction

*“Everyone in this nation is equal. There isn’t any difference between big and small, rich and poor; for equality mandates, everyone to be siblings under the umbrella of social justice.”*

- Sultan Qabus of Oman, 3rd National Day 18 November 1973.

Standing in stark contrast with adjacent countries being plagued by a variety of disturbances - particularly those in Yemen -, the Sultanate of Oman has appeared to be a stable beacon in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from the 1970s onwards, characterized by diversity, neutrality and friendly relations with a broad variety of states and actors (Barrett 2015). The promotion of these characteristics of the Omani state and its society and the contrast with other states have contributed to the Sultanate’s recent domestic events going largely unnoticed by the international community as well as academics.

Political research on post-1970 Oman tends to focus on establishing why the Sultanate has been spared the sectarian conflicts that have arisen in its neighboring states (Leon Goldsmith, 2015) and Oman’s foreign policy approach labeled as Omanibalancing (Marc O’Reilly, 1998; Cafiero, Giorgio and Coates-Ulrichsen, 2018). The few instances that attention has been focused on domestic politics, are mostly concerned with the petty, appeasing measures the Omani regime implemented in response to the suppressed 2011-2012 protests against corruption and unemployment (Seikaly and Mattar 2015; Valeri 2015).

Anthropological research on Oman has primarily focused on the population’s diverse cultural and ethnic make-up. Ali Modarres (2010) and Alexandra Parrs (2011) highlight the influence of migrants’ identities living and working in Oman and changes in discourses on identity and citizenship that result from inequality between migrants, expats and Omani citizens. Similar to their investigating understandings of what can be designated as ‘Omani’, Mandana Limbert (2014) explores alternative notions of ‘Arabness’, which is understood more commonly in Oman to lie in a person’s descendance from a free person - non-slave - rather than entailing an ethnic or linguistic essence. Writing from a different perspective, Khalid Al-Azri (2013) sheds light on social, economic, political and gender inequality by discussing the concepts of *Ka’fa* (marriage) and *Talaq* (divorce), thus characterizing Omani identity as being shaped by a negotiation of modernity and tradition. Similarly writing on this negotiation between modernity and tradition, is Scott Weiner et al. (2016) who argues shifts in the identity of the state and the Omani population are related to kinship-identity and -authority in the context of modern state-building and the politics accompanied with allocation of water resources. This

connection between identity, politics and location - with which kinship and water resources are entangled - is akin to Gretchen Nutz' (2013) exploration of how spatiality relates to Omani identity, which reveals the national identity of tolerance and diversity to be rooted in geographic characteristics (location, environment, nature) of the Sultanate.

These works tend to highlight particular aspects of Oman that align with the reputation of the Sultanate entailing tolerance and diversity as the ultimate characteristic defining the Omani state, culture and population. One particular recent move by the Omani Sultan, Qabus bin Said Al Bu Said, which fits less neatly within the dominant narrative of tolerance and diversity, is the construction of a fence on the border with Yemen, a project initiated in 2013 and still under construction at the time of writing. While the demarcation of borders by means of walls and fences as physical barriers has been effectuated increasingly in the post 9-11 decades (Vallet and David 2012, 113), the situation in Oman is particularly interesting due to the state's self-created and promoted identity of neutrality, tolerance and diversity, the historical ties with Yemen and the negative effects the construction of a wall on the UAE – Omani border resulted in, as described by Marc Valeri's research on the former twin cities Al-Ayn and Al-Buraymi (Valeri 2018, 599). The construction of an exclusionary, material barrier on the border with Yemen thus seems to stand in contrast with the prevalent, inclusive identity narrative of tolerance and diversity and suggests a shift has taken place in Omani state-society relations.

In order to grasp what this shift in Omani national identity and state-society relations entails, I will explore Omani national identity and its boundaries through the lens of border studies, focusing on the border with Yemen. The value of this multidisciplinary focus on issues relating to borders, is that it turns attention to the margins of state territories and of populations, whereas the tendency in existing literature is to focus on the northern or central region of Oman (Nutz 2013; Valeri 2015; Kessell et al. 2017). The framework of border studies will be elaborated on more thoroughly in the third chapter.

Writing from a political-anthropological angle, I will look at the political dynamics embedded within the socio-cultural context of Oman. In order to illuminate these dynamics, the emergence of the contemporary Omani state and the domestic challenges it faced in the past and present will be investigated. The national identity narrative and the border between Yemen and Oman will be analyzed as they point to the efforts of the Omani state to establish the boundaries of the imagined community of the nation that has been created by Qabus during the first decades of state-building. The 2011-2012 uprisings that went largely

unnoticed internationally due to their immediate suppression by the Omani Sultan, and the construction of the border fence between Yemen and Oman seem contradictory to the more inclusive characteristics of tolerance and peaceful coexistence the sultanate promotes through a national identity narrative. In this thesis I aim to explore this narrative and how it works within Omani state-society relations, in order to analyze the shifting state-society relations after the 2011-2012 uprisings and how this plays out at the Omani-Yemeni border. The research question of this thesis is therefore the following: How does the construction of a border fence in 2013 reflect the power dynamics of the national identity narrative at work within shifting state-society relations of the Omani Sultanate?

In order to explore the national identity narrative and its relation to the construction of a border fence, I will provide an understanding of the concept of identity as it will be investigated in this thesis. Identity is understood here from a constructivist relational angle, perceived to be fashioned through interaction and thus constantly being reshaped and negotiated. Similarly, group- or collective identities are constructed through interactions that create categories or classifications, perceiving oneself (internal identification) or another (external identification) as belonging within this or that category. These categories shape one's perception of the world and organize the social relations that are embodied in social spaces (Jenkins 2014). Social space is understood here as referring to the whole of identities and relations between them in a relational sense: as being constructed by interactions, constituting a structure that gives shape to relations between actors whilst being shaped by them. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of social space, this approach accounts for a constructivist relational understanding of identities as the entities that occupy multiple positions according to the relations they are engaged in at a given time (Grenfell 2014, 229). Social spaces are where identities are being constructed, through relations, and these relations construct the social space. This way identities are connected with and within a social space. The national identity explored within this thesis is understood as a collective identity as it promotes to entail all people belonging to the Omani nation. However, as it is an identity forged by the state and disseminated through a variety of institutions, it falls within Jenkins' designation as external classification. This thesis will look at this institutionalized identity promoted through a narrative and the objective of nation-building and reorganization of the social space it serves. Moreover, the institutionalization and instrumentalization of the identity by the state shape not only social relations, but also state-society relations and vice versa. This thesis thus analyzes the national identity narrative enforced by the Omani state, in order to

illustrate the shift in state-society relations, marking a difference in how the narrative works among the population after 2011-2012.

The national identity will be investigated through analyzing the national identity narrative the government promotes through institutionalizing it, which roots the characteristics and development in the Omani territory, its history and the Omani nation. The concept of national identity reveals the identity politics increasingly pursued by the Omani state, consisting of the enforcement of a fixed Omani identity. In order to analyze this national identity as promoted by the government, it will be approached in light of Benedict Anderson's (2006) conceptualization of imagined communities. Anderson's conceptualization of nations and communities in general is that they are imagined groups. Despite the fact that members of a community will never meet every other member of the group, the nation is imagined as a deep, horizontal companionship. It is imagined as limited since a community cannot comprise the entire world population, meaning it always excludes other communities. Moreover, nations and communities are imagined as sovereign because the authority ruling a community is not necessarily ordained by divine order or hierarchical succession (Anderson 2006, 6-7). The efforts of Sultan Qabus to build a nation reveal a conception of nation and communities to be present in his approach that is similar to the imagined community conception of Benedict Anderson. Qabus has aimed to create a nation out of a culturally, historically, ethnically and linguistically diverse population. It is imagined since the Sultanate spans a total population that comprises too many individuals for them to know each other. The imagining of the Omani nation as a community is the objective of Sultan Qabus. This nation-building, the creation of an imagined community, is effectuated through a variety of channels created in his state-building efforts (the state apparatus serving nation-building objective). Interestingly, the issue of sovereignty is understood in Anderson's conception of the nation as being no longer legitimized by divine ordinance or hierarchical succession. However, Sultan Qabus is the last member of the Al-Busaidi dynasty that ruled the Omani territories for one-and-half century before his ascendancy. This fact points to the twofold function of Qabus' nation-building efforts: it not only serves to create a unified nation over which he exerts sovereignty but also serves to legitimize his rule since his ascending the throne does not necessarily legitimize him as ruling the total of Omani territories. This objective of legitimizing his rule, maintaining sovereignty and authority over the entire population, is what characterizes Omani state-society relations and will be investigated in this thesis. The establishment of the national identity narrative legitimizing his rule is effectuated through a variety of channels, some of



which entail the arms of the state apparatus, while more recent initiatives of the Sultan aim at reinvigorating the narrative in order to strengthen the community feeling of the nation to which his authority is tied. Anderson's Imagined Community concept is particularly relevant for understanding the relationship between borders and identity due to its attributing a constructive role to territorial space in the construction of identity. Moreover, as nations are created through establishing the boundaries of the community – designating who belongs within or outside the nation -, borders as physical boundaries of the nation's territory are of significant importance in nation-building due to their power to shape the imagination of states as “specific, tightly bounded territorial units” (Anderson 2006, 175). As identities entail a social organization of the world - through maintaining boundaries that categorize the world and organize social relations -, borders influence this categorization and thus the social spaces established through interaction. As the thesis turns attention to the Yemeni-Omani border of the Sultanate through effectuating a border study of this underrepresented area, the link between territorial space and identity formation is crucial in understanding the dynamics at work in the construction of the border fence.

Due to the limited period of time designated for this project and the therefore necessarily limited scope of this thesis, research will be conducted based on existing literature. In order to formulate an answer to the main research question, I will draw on both primary sources (official government websites and documents) and secondary sources (existing political, historic and anthropological studies and NGO and media reports). The first chapter entails a historical overview of the emergence (pre-1970), development and politics (post 1970) of the Omani Sultanate, in order to provide a historical and political context for post-2011 developments. As it is a historical overview serving as the framework within which the uprisings and aftermath are situated, I will employ historical and political science sources and media reports to account for socio-political events before and after 2011-2012. It thus engages with the state-building efforts of the Omani sultans and state-society relations. Hereafter, the second chapter addresses the topic of national identity in Oman and will build upon official government websites about Omanization efforts and existing ethnographic work on Omani society in order to highlight how the identity narrative constructs a fixed identity in Qabus' nation-building efforts through establishing the nation's symbolic boundaries. An analysis of two Omanization efforts the Sultan instigated after the 2011-2012 uprisings will reveal how Qabus instrumentalized the narrative as response to shifting state-society relations. Consequently, the third chapter introduces the lens of border studies and its anthropological

dimension relating borders to identity construction, which serves as the framework for the focus on the territorial border with Yemen, in order to disclose the power dynamics of the physical boundary of the territory that the nation is associated with and how this reflects Omani state-society relations. To this end I will employ political as well as anthropological border studies sources, which will be supplemented with popular media reports and official government sources. Finally, the conclusion entails an analysis of the results of this research in order to provide an answer to this thesis' main research question, a few final remarks and suggestions for further research.

# **1. Modern Omani History and Politics: The Creation of a Unified State**

While Oman's designation as the last remaining Sultanate in the Middle East and North Africa region seems to imply an extensive history, only part of the Omani territory has existed as a sultanate since two centuries. After centuries of foreign influence on parts of its contemporary territory by a variety of empires (from the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, to the Portuguese and British), the Sultanate's boundaries were established quite recently. Inhabited by a variety of tribes and clans, ethnicities and linguistically defined groups, the territory has been and still is characterized by a diverse population. In order to disentangle Omani state-society relations I will explore the emergence and development of the contemporary state apparatus. Firstly, the history of the Omani territories under the Al-Busaidi dynasty will be investigated in order to illustrate the history of contestation prior to Qabus' rule. Subsequently, the second section will analyze Sultan Qabus' reign, providing an overview of his state-building efforts that created the circumstances that would become increasingly criticized from 2011 on. The uprisings in 2011-2012 will be elaborated finally, as the events illustrate a shift in Omani the state-society relations.

## **1.1. Pre-1970: The Rise of the Al-Busaidi Dynasty: A Fragmented Past**

Many efforts have been made by foreign actors to influence and/or dominate the Omani territory throughout its history due to its strategic location (Valeri 2009, 13). However, at the beginning of the seventeenth century an imam – Nasir bin Murshid al-Yarubi - was chosen as leader, whom was understood by the ulama to be able to unite the territory under the guidelines of the Islamic faction Ibadhism and redeem autonomy from foreign actors by creating The Yarubi State (Valeri 2009, 13). Under the leading imam, the Omani Imamate initiated an effort to expand its territory by occupying parts of the Western African Coastal territories (Jones and Ridout 2015, 23). When the fifth Yarubi Imam passed away in 1712 and his son was deemed incapable of ruling the Omani territories, a civil war disrupted the territory and led to the formation of two camps of which all tribes were to choose sides. Despite Persian efforts to reinstall the position of imam starting in 1737, the conflict continued until 1745, when governor Ahmad bin Said Al-Busaidi took advantage of the weakened position of the Persians due to their domestic situation. He declared himself imam, which was confirmed by his election in 1753, thus ending the civil war and marking the beginning of the dynasty that would last up until the present (Valeri 2009, 18).

While the al- Busaidi hereditary dynastic succession in the Imamate has been unsuccessfully contested multiple times by advocates of a more traditional conception of imamate succession – through election instead of heredity -, fragmentation concerning this issue remained persistent within the territory (Jones and Ridout 2015, 33). After the death of the third Al-Busaidi imam - Hamad bin Ahmad - in 1792, power over the territory was split and divided among three Al-Busaidi members due to succession quarrels, resulting in a degrading of the title of Imam due to its limited influence (Jones and Ridout 2015, 34). Moreover, the seeds for the future official split between Oman and Muscat and Zanzibar were planted when Said bin Sultan designated his position as *Sayyid* (highness) instead of Imam in order to emphasize who presided over authority over the territories (Valeri 2009, 24). This marked the beginning of the designation of his territories as a sultanate.

While particularly Muscat under the authority of Said bin Sultan increased its influence by means of maritime expansion from 1806 on, throughout the nineteenth century Britain extended its influence in the Gulf region as well. Despite Said bin Sultan's efforts to secure trade relations and his designation of Zanzibar as the new capital in 1832, British influence increased to the extent that autonomy was downplayed by British meddling in Omani political affairs (Valeri 2009, 18). In 1861, the Canning Awards officialized the split between Oman and Zanzibar, granting authority over the separated territories to two heads of state (Jones and Ridout 2015, 67). While Zanzibar was designated a protectorate of the British, the Sultan of Muscat was coopted by the British by means of signing friendship and mutual support treaties and economic agreements (Jones and Ridout 2015, 88). The territory located on the Arabian Peninsula was characterized by division between Muscat and the south-eastern coastal areas, and the interior and western territories in which an imam ruled an imamate based on the tenets of Ibadhism. In order to create stability despite this division, the Seeb Agreement was signed in 1920 by the Sultan and the Imam, entailing the agreement to abstain from attacking or interfering in one another's affairs (Jones and Ridout 2015, 95).

However, the close relationship between the British and the Sultan would eventually play its part in the increasing level of discontent among Omanis, contributing to the eruption of a widespread protest movement after World War One that was triggered by anti-colonial sentiment and degrading economic circumstances (Jones and Ridout 2015, 72 & 93). Due to the lack of specificity concerning the demarcation of regions and rules regarding access to exploitable oil reserves - in combination with the degrading British influence from the 1940s on -, the Seeb agreement failed to forestall the conflict that led to the opposition of the

Imamate to the Sultan's efforts to capitalize the oil reserves located in the interior region (Jones and Ridout 2015, 104). Between 1955 and 1959 the Jebel Akhdar War was fought between Sultan bin Taimur - backed by the British - and the Imamate - garnering support from abroad-, with the eventual loss of the latter, thereby ending the existence of the Omani Imamate and officializing the unification of Oman (Valeri 2012, 113). However, despite the defeat of these defenders of the Imamate and the unification of the two territories, the Sultanate would again face opposition from the southern interior region in the subsequent decennium during the Dhofar rebellion.

The Dhofar rebellion (referring to the south-western region where the opposition was concentrated) was motivated by widespread discontent and increasing anti-British sentiment in the interior region. While one explicit objective was the re-establishment of an Imamate independent from the Sultan of Muscat, the economic and social development of the region and a variety of other objectives played its part in the conflict as well (Jones and Ridout 2015, 117). The Sultan refrained from developing and integrating the Dhofar region, instead imposing highly delimiting restrictions and regulations that would lead to mobilization of the widespread discontent in the 1960s (Jones and Ridout 2015, 135). The issues of unemployment and poverty had led many Dhofaris to work abroad, creating a community of exiles that established the Arabic-nationalist Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) in 1962 that orchestrated the rebellion (Jones and Ridout 2015, 138).

With the conflict ongoing, on July 23, 1970 the son of the Sultan of Muscat - Qabus – forced his father to abdicate with the support of the British, aiming to change course and reign a unified Omani state by incorporating coastal and interior areas of the territory under the authority of a new sultan (Jones and Ridout 2015, 149-150). In order to create loyalty to himself and establish his authority, Sultan Qabus made efforts to integrate defectors from the DLF into the state administration. Moreover, he was backed by the British, Egypt, India, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka in his military advances to eradicate opposition in the southern region (Jones and Ridout 2015, 152-156; Valeri 2009, 63). Moreover, high oil revenues in the 1970s enabled the Sultan to invest significantly in the Dhofar Development program and recruit local leaders (Jones and Ridout 2015, 158). Due to these factors and particularly due to British air strikes, Qabus was able to declare the Dhofar rebellion to be finished on December 11, 1975 (Jones and Ridout 2015, 159).

This summarizing overview of one-and-half century preceding Sultan Qabus' reign reveals the foundation on which the unified Sultanate would be created and developed. The territories

comprising the contemporary Sultanate of Oman are marked by a diverse population with different histories, cultures and interests. This has contributed to the dynasty of Al-Busaidi leaders having been plagued by challenges to their legitimacy from within and outside the Sultanate's boundaries. Moreover, it reveals the division and diversity in terms of political allegiance, with the northern and coastal areas being already accustomed to rule by a sultan, whilst the southern and eastern areas challenged the legitimacy of the Sultan of Muscat. State-society relations were characterized by an undeveloped state apparatus and lack of authority of the Al-Busaidi leaders due to succession quarrels, absence of the state in the daily life of Omanis, foreign influence and domestic contestation. However, the rule of Sultan Qabus is often marked as designating the start of a new phase for Oman, in which divisions have been bridged and stability created and successfully maintained, as opposed to the image of the fractured past. The following section will pay attention to the reign of Qabus and his development of the Sultanate into a unified state and concludes with an analysis of the 2011-2012 uprisings in order to illustrate the socio-political circumstances that contributed to altered relations between the state and society.

## **1.2. Post-1970: The Qabus State**

In the following section the development of the Sultanate under the reign of Qabus will be elaborated as the creation of the nation-state was effectuated on the foundation of a rentier system that created the political and economic circumstances that motivated the uprisings emerging in 2011-2012.

At the time of his ascending the throne, Sultan Qabus redistricted the Omani territory into five regions and three governorates and changed the name of the territory from Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, to Sultanate of Oman (Valeri 2012, 114). In order to abide by international law, the territorial borders needed to be established in order to demarcate the Omani territory (Valeri 2009, 74). This redefining of the Omani territory contributed to a strengthened sense of a new, unified state and to recognition of the Sultanate's new territorial shape among the international community.

Similar to his father Sultan Bin Taimur, Qabus faced the challenge of obtaining legitimacy among a deeply divided and diverse population. However, contrary to his father, he encountered this challenge by incorporating local leaders and traditional social structures into the new state apparatus in order to replace the previous foundation Omanis depended on for survival, with a rentier system that employs local authorities as distributors of the nationalized

wealth of oil revenues (Valeri 2007, 480; 2013, 268; Jones and Ridout 2015, 166). The cooptation of religious authority was effectuated by means of establishing the Ministry for Religious Endowments and Affairs in 1971 and the installment of a Grand Mufti (Islamic jurist) (Jones and Ridout 2015, 176). Through institutionalizing the highest religious authority, the ministry and mufti-position, the Sultan aimed to control all religious affairs (Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs n.d.).

In addition to these cooptation efforts and the increasing dominance of the state as the provider of work, resources and services on which people depended due to the rentier system, the regime under Qabus aimed to absorb powerful elites and local leaders by means of granting favors in return for loyalty to the Sultan. By making influential individuals part of the state apparatus, the Sultan aimed to align their interests with those of the state, minimizing the possibility for protest to emerge (Valeri 2012, 120). This cooptation strategy served to immobilize political and religious sentiment from being instrumentalized against the state's authority.

Besides these tools which Qabus used to consolidate his authority and integrate possibly revolting groups into the new state apparatus, he established the Council of Oman, comprising the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council, elected by the Omani citizenry) and *Majlis al-Dawla* (State Council, appointed by the Sultan) by royal decree in 1991. These bodies enable Omani citizens to engage with politics to the extent that they can elect the members of the *Majlis al-Shura*, albeit it is limited due to the council's mere advisory nature and its opening up for election by all adults only in 2003 (Valerie 2013, 273). As Qabus remains the one authority governing all affairs of the state, power is thus vested entirely in his own hands, while he maintains the illusion of citizens' participation by means of the Council of Oman and alternative consultative bodies based on Arabic and Islamic political and legal tradition, that exist alongside official institutions (Valeri 2012, 118; Sulaiman 2010, 4).

The first decades of Sultan Qabus' rule have been designated as a renaissance period due to his efforts to develop the country and particularly the previously underdeveloped regions of the state in the interior. Whereas the Sultanate had lagged behind neighboring states in terms of development when Qabus ascended the throne, the Sultan invested in the development of infrastructure, education and healthcare, which was financed with the revenues coming in from oil rent (Brandenburg 2013, 292). Since large numbers of Omanis had gone abroad looking for work under Said bin Taimur's unpropitious rule, Sultan Qabus appealed to the large Omani diaspora for them to return to the Sultanate in order to contribute with their

knowledge and expertise to the creation of an ‘awakened,’ prosperous state (Valeri 2007, 481). This phase of state-building, where Qabus developed the country and took care of its citizens, contributed to the high standing he has enjoyed over time among its citizens. Not only among his subjects, but also abroad the Sultan garnered widespread support for his developmental policies widely conceived to be transforming the - once perceived as backward - Sultanate for the better. Due to its increasing wealth after the 1970s oil-boom and the removal of Said bin Taimur’s limitative border regulations, Oman developed into one of the popular destinations for migrants to look for work opportunities (Pradhan 2013, 114). In addition to appealing to Omanis abroad to return and contribute to the rebuilding of the country, the Sultan initially relied on migrants and expatriates for the process of state-building and development (Roper and Barria 2014, 37). Attracting migrants initially from Middle Eastern states and later particularly from East-Africa and India, Oman came to be characterized by large numbers of migrants, expats and returnees (Pradhan 2013, 118).

Furthermore, the Sultan’s approach to foreign politics has been praised by the international community as it entails an attitude of friendliness to everyone and hostility to no one. This attitude of openness, tolerance and friendliness stands in stark contrast with his father’s, who displayed little interest in diplomatic relations and imposed limitations – and even prohibitions in the last decade of his reign – on the possibility to travel outside the Sultanate (Valeri 2009, 67). Qabus’ foreign policy is based on peacemaking and maintaining stability and therefore establishing amicable relations with all states. Furthermore, this foreign policy approach has created many opportunities to cooperate with various states, granting the Sultan a unique position to serve as mediator or broker in various conflicts (e.g. between Iran and the United States) (Jones and Ridout 2015, 180; IRAM Center 2016).

In addition to these economic and political strategies – the shift to an economy created and maintained by oil revenues and cooptation and favoritism - to legitimize his rule and create a state apparatus, Qabus has aimed to create a unified nation. This nation-building – designated from here on as *Omanization* - entailed two dimensions: efforts to nationalize the labor force and an ideological or cultural campaign intended to ingrain the population with the state-crafted Omani identity. Major pillars in Qabus’ cultural Omanization were the establishment of an educational system, the Education Council, and laws concerning citizenship and naturalization, among others. These efforts institutionalized the identity narrative the Sultan promoted through aligning the school curricula that shape young Omanis’ development with the state’s objectives (Education Council n.d.) and defining the boundary of who is Omani in



the Omani Citizenship Law through establishing when citizenship is to be granted or revoked (Omanuna n.d.). This ideological Omanization will be discussed in the second chapter, where it will be explained in light of the establishment and diffusion of the national identity narrative that attributes a set of characteristics to the Omani people and land and serves as the foundation of many elements of Qabus' rule.

The Omanization of the labor force entails the Sultan's endeavor of reducing the high levels of unemployment among Omanis by reducing dependence on foreign workers and making Omani nationals more attractive to employ than foreign workers. This was to be effectuated through Omanizing particular sectors (the profession of nursing and teaching among others), meaning these sectors are required to increasingly employ Omani nationals instead of foreign workers (Zerovec and Bontenbal 2011, 366). Additionally, Omani nationals have been granted privileges (benefiting from public sector employment, enjoying public services and subsidies) whilst the rights of foreign workers have been curbed (Zerovec and Bontenbal 2011, 368; Das and Gokhale 2010). The labor Omanization thus entailed multiple efforts to nationalize the labor force in the private sphere. While this complex topic cannot be unpacked in detail to the extent it deserves, it is briefly mentioned here to point out its continuing contribution to the building of an Omani nation through shaping Omani social spaces and constituent identities. While the efforts are economically oriented, they account for the growing division between Omani nationals and foreign workers manifested in more competitive attitudes toward each other (Parrs 2011, 35-36). As the large influx of migrants into the Sultanate resulted in almost half of the Omani population entailing migrant workers, this development led to increasing tension in terms of negative attitudes toward non-Omani workers among Omanis. These tensions and attitudes continue to be exacerbated by the *Kafala* system in which migrants are granted minimal rights and effectively put under the authority of an employer, making them easily exploitable by employers (Begum, 2018). Not only does this result in migrants' situation in Oman being up to this day highly unfavorable, it also contributes to tension between Omanis and migrants through competition in labor (Roper and Barria 2014, 34). Moreover, as they led the aspect of nationality to play a role in labor opportunities and beforementioned privileges and thus the means to give shape to one's life, they influenced relations within Omani society. This development strengthens a national group feeling and relevance of nationality in categorizing those who reside within the Sultanate. On the construction of the nation will be further elaborated in the second chapter.

This overview of Qabus' reign reveals the initial phase of state-building to be the foundation of the centralized power of the state embodied by Qabus. The state apparatus developed by Qabus is subjected to his power, which makes the Sultanate an absolute monarchy. State-society relations, comprising the relation between Sultan Qabus and Omani society, can be characterized based on the previous description of state-building efforts as one of dependency. Due to the rentier system and cooptation strategy of Sultan Qabus, his rule was legitimized and enabled him to exert control of people's everyday lives. As the benefactor of the Sultanate, Qabus enjoyed a high status among the population as all profited from the development brought about. Similar to the cooptation of powerful (religious) elites, former opponents of the regime, and local authorities, the expansion of the state apparatus contributed to the state's control through the arms of the state reaching deep into the lives of Omanis. Not only through increasingly providing services financed with oil revenue, but also as provider of most jobs for Omanis through the public sector, the state apparatus was instrumental in making most affairs dependent on the state's provisions and people's daily lives closely tied to the state. This stimulated obedience to the Sultan as it was beneficial for one's own wellbeing and thus secured the population's loyalty to the regime. However, the state apparatus being built on a rentier system led to circumstances that motivated protests emerging throughout the Sultanate in 2011 and 2012 in which the high standing of Sultan Qabus as the benefactor of the state became challenged. These circumstances will be elaborated and analyzed in the subsequent section in order to identify the shift in state-society relations.

### **1.2.1. Post-2011: The Omani Uprisings and Shifting State-Society Relations**

Despite the development and progress Sultan Qabus' reign has brought to the Sultanate, the rentier system enabled the creation of an absolute state that is unaccountable due to its providing resources and services for the population and characterized state-society relations as such. As Qabus has unlimited power and is unaccountable, the Sultan's strategy of cooptation and favoritism and the public sector being the primary provider of jobs led to widespread corruption practices and unemployment due to the limits to the number of jobs the state could provide. These challenges were among the circumstances that inspired the beginning of widespread popular resentment toward the status quo.

Initiated in the northern city of Suhar in February 2011, the protests arose from a group of citizens that addressed the issue of unemployment, the rise in prices, corruption and favoritism among government officials and elites and the neglected effects of the pollution

brought about by the rapid development of the Suhar port and free zone (Valeri 2015). Rapidly spanning a movement active in multiple cities across the Sultanate, the uprisings addressed these issues that had created widespread inequality and discontent. Comprising one of the youngest populations in the world, the Sultanate has been estimated to be plagued by unemployment rates varying from 15-25 % among youths, which accounts for the significant number of youths involved in the protests (Valeri 2012, 127). The development of the educational system during Qabus' state-building efforts led to significant numbers of Omani nationals being highly educated and awaiting a fitting job after completing their education. Due to the rapid and sudden reforms in this sphere, it became difficult to encounter this sudden rise in terms of offering suitable employment. The primary source of employment was the state rather than private enterprises, but it was limited due to its size (it cannot employ everyone) and the impending exhaustion of its primary source of income (with the prospect of oil revenues decreasing relatively soon, diversification of the economy is needed). Moreover, while on the one hand low-skill level jobs are often filled by foreign workers since they are cheaper, and on the other hand large numbers of high-skilled expatriates reside within the country, a situation persists in which unemployment and underemployment among Omanis are widespread phenomena (Pradhan 2013, 119; Brandenburg 2013, 289; Jones and Ridout 2015, 172; Das and Gokhale 2010). The Sultan addressed this issue already before 2011-2012 through the National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification (*Tanfēdh*), aimed at diversification in order to reduce dependence on oil revenues and privatization to create jobs outside the government employed sector (Omanuna n.d.). However, un- and underemployment continued to dominate the lives of large parts of the population. In addition to widespread unemployment, corruption among high officials has been a target demanded by the protesters to be effectively eliminated. Qabus' cooptation efforts had created an environment in which the granting of gifts – material or immaterial privileges as job appointments – played a crucial role, forging the basis for favoritism and corruption (Valeri 2015). Furthermore, the growing gap was criticized, which existed between expatriates benefiting from the wealth brought about by economic developments aimed at diversification (the establishment of a port in Suhar for example) and the majority of the Omani population which only experienced rising living costs (Valerie 2015).

The protests manifested themselves in Suhar, Muscat and Salalah and entailed predominantly peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins before important official government buildings. Government forces responded to these protests with force, pursuing an aggressive approach to

contain the threat the protests posed. As the uprisings spread throughout the Sultanate and continued to emerge, Qabus appeared to respond more empathetic to the protestors' demands, occupying his role as the one person that was able to rectify the issues these protesters addressed. He did so by raising the minimum wage, allocating a monthly payment to the unemployed, creating 50.000 new jobs and reorganizing the state administration through firing and hiring employees in order to forestall the possibility of corruption taking place in the public sector, among others (Valeri 2012, 128; Al-Azri 2013, xv).

As the protests turned increasingly violent, the government continued to respond with physical force excessively. With protest participants being arrested, the demand for the government to release those detained during the protests was added to the array of objectives of the intensified uprisings. Furthermore, as the friendly measures failed to appease the protestors and the state's aggressive approach aggravated the grievances that formed the impetus for protesting, they took to the streets again in 2012, organizing major sit-ins and this time questioning the all-encompassing authority of the Sultan more openly (Valeri 2012, 131; Al-Azri 2013, xvii). Youths increasingly criticized the limited space for participatory opportunities. Qabus' efforts to instrumentalize local sheikhs' authority to discipline protesting youths backfired and revealed the deteriorated amount of acquiescence with the established order these youths were prepared to display (Valeri 2015; Al-Azri 2013, xvi).

While Qabus thus responded with some measures that aimed to soothe the protestors in terms of their economic and labor-related demands and simultaneously used excessive force to silence pro-democracy advocates - thus pursuing a carrot-and-stick approach -, the political space is still very much locked up and arguably got even more so since the uprisings (Al-Azri 2013, xvi). Whereas a restructuring of the state administration swiftly took place in response to criticism on corruption, the fact that this could happen reveals that the ultimate authority is still entirely in the hands of the Sultan. Furthermore, the opening up of the political sphere hasn't come forth yet due to the limited role of the sole institution through which individuals are able to engage with politics - the Council of Oman- despite the Sultan's pledge to have a committee explore the possibility to grant the Council legislative powers (Vaidya 2011; Al-Azri 2013, xvii). Moreover, restrictive regulations imposed on civil society organizations and the prohibition of associations engaging with political affairs, the police-state-akin practices of imposed militarization of protest regions and the regime's framing of any form of criticism on the state and its leader as incitement of disorder or violation of the law, have led to an impermeable political realm (Valeri 2012, 129; 2015).

Not only do large numbers of protesters continue to be arrested and detained, but also many other activists and human rights advocates, as multiple reports by human rights offices and NGO's reveal (Human Rights Watch 2017; Amnesty International 2018; Gulf Center for Human Rights 2019). The 2018 report on political rights and civil liberties in Oman by Freedom House reveals the extent to which the Sultanate can be perceived as an unfree state in which few political rights and liberties are granted and any form of opposition to the (head of) state is criminalized and might lead to suspension of citizenship (Freedom House 2018, para. B1). Freedom of expression and assembly is limited, freedom of press is virtually nonexistent due to strong government control and punishment in case of failure to censure (Freedom House 2018, para. D1).

In addition to the prohibition to create or join political associations, strict regulations and requirements result in limited opportunities to set up NGO's and other civil society organizations. While CSOs had been strained to flourish freely before the uprisings already (Rishmawi and Morris 2007, 21), particularly after the protests opportunities have become very limited. The only organizations that can address the prohibited topics of politics and human rights are those that are based outside the Sultanate, as the Omani Centre for Human Rights has done. From abroad, they continue to shed light on the human rights violations effected in the Sultanate, which – as their 2018 report reveals – continue to manifest themselves up to this day in the arrest, arbitrary interrogation and administrative detention (being held without charges or trial) of individuals though to be provoking, criticizing or contesting the government (Oman Centre for Human Rights 2018; Civicus 2017). Appearing to suggest at least some space for CSOs, some organizations have continued to exist with the approval of the Sultan himself, among others the thinktank *Tawasul* and the Omani Women's Association. However, despite their continued existence they have nothing to say in the decision-making process nor have any other influence in terms of addressing injustices and protecting people's rights, making them docile instruments of the Sultan's desires (Zerovec and Bontenbal 2011, 369-370).

### 1.3. Concluding Remarks

The Omani uprisings have shown the limits of Qabus' legitimization strategies and revealed the unrest and discontent that fueled the protests. These enduring protests reveal the system of cooptation and rentier distribution to no longer suffice to justify the autocratic character of the Sultan's rule (Valerie 2012, 126).

The relationship between Sultan Qabus and large parts of the Omani population has worsened particularly since the uprisings due to the earlier mentioned increasingly overt questioning of the Sultan's authority by Omanis and the harsh performance of Qabus toward anyone thought to be involved in the uprisings – whether through social media or physically taking part.

Khalid Al-Azri describes the status quo before the 2011 events as being characterized by a culture of fear for the state and its security (Al-Azri 2013, xv). The uprisings mark a shift in state-society relations in terms of this sentiment being more outspoken and manifested in the demands no longer concerning only unemployment and corruption, but also the status quo that stood under absolute supervision of Qabus since 1970.

The deteriorated relationship continues to manifest itself in the aggressive suppression of any form of dissent. Besides suppression efforts, preventive measures continue to be effectuated in order to avoid dissent from gaining support and being mobilized to challenge the regime, of which the suffocating of civil society organizations and harassment of activists and critics as recorded by non-governmental organizations are the most extensive. Increasing distrust from the population toward the regime and vice versa has led to enduring tensions throughout the country and occasional protests erupting before being crushed by the state police (Middle East Eye 2019). Furthermore, the regional conflicts unfolding from the 2011 uprisings on instigated Sultan Qabus to be cautious for the danger of conflict spill-over. While Qabus already engaged to some extent with the demands made in 2011-2012 before the uprisings - through superficially opening up the political sphere by means of granting the right to vote and addressing unemployment through labor Omanization and the *Tanfeedh* -, the uprisings posed a bigger threat through the regional character of the uprisings. While the uprisings throughout the region entailed unique situations in each country, the Omani protests are likely to have gained momentum through the unfolding of similar events throughout the MENA region. These threats to the status quo that is the product of Qabus' state-building efforts and to his legitimacy and authority led the Sultan to adopt increasingly oppressive strategies and efforts to tighten his grip on the Omani territory and its population.

Since Qabus' legitimacy, authority and way of governing are rooted in the formation of a unified nation-state, the process of state-building and development has been analyzed in this

chapter and leads to the concluding remark that the dependency marking the state-society relations was no longer sufficient to maintain loyalty among the population. This was particularly an issue among the youths, who didn't experience Qabus as benevolent as they did not experience the benefits of being taken care of by the state. As many participants in the protests of 2011-2012 – and more generally the Omani population - fell within the age category of the youth, large numbers of them never experienced a sense of progress effectuated by Qabus since they never experienced the situation prior to him. Being confronted with the contemporary challenges of unemployment and a very much closed and corrupt political sphere, the Sultan that embodies the ultimate authority and created the contested situation became increasingly questioned. The following chapter will explore the element of nation-building - Omanization – that is aimed at instilling a feeling of connectedness with the national identity narrative invented by the state. It will appear that the Sultan has not only effectuated the promotion of the narrative in the process of nation-building that created the symbolic boundaries of the nation, but also increasingly instrumentalized it in order to tighten his grip on his subjects through reinvigorating and enforcing these boundaries through various Omanization channels after the uprisings. The subsequent chapter will explore this national identity narrative and its instrumentalization by Sultan Qabus.

## Chapter 2. The Omani National Identity Narrative

The brief historical overview of the Omani territory in the first chapter reveals fragmentation and contestation to the legitimacy of the sultans prior to Qabus. Despite the Sultan's successful unification of the territory in terms of militarily controlling both the interior and coastal areas, he suffered the same lack of legitimacy as his predecessors at the time of his ascendancy. Therefore, Qabus aimed at forging the Omani population into one nation under the leadership of his authority through the process of nation-building, in order to consolidate his power (Valerie 2007, 480). As the influential work of Benedict Anderson (2006) on nationalism explicates, nation-building requires a firm, clearly delineated national identity in order to develop a shared sense of connectedness. This conceptualization of national identity will be used in the following section in order to analyze the narrative Qabus has created (in Anderson's words: *invented*) for the Omani people to identify with, in order to establish the symbolic boundaries of the imagined community of the nation.

### 2.1. The National Identity Narrative

Despite the created nature of the national identity Qabus advocates, it is rooted in the history of the Omani territories by means of a narrative. It entails a number of characteristics that are attributed to the Omani nation as being an inherent part of it. In order to unpack this narrative, the official websites of a variety of ministries will be analyzed, as they are among the instruments appropriated by the government to propagate the narrative domestically and internationally. They reveal the national identity narrative to be defined by the government as entailing the following characteristics: diversity, tolerance, Ibadhism, and the centrality of Sultan Qabus.

The first characteristic the narrative attributes to the Omani population is diversity. This entails the great variety of geographical origins of Omani citizens (East-African, Indian, Pakistani) and, related to this, communities defined along linguistic lines (Swahili, Arab, Indian), along religious lines (Hindu, Sunni, Shii, Ibadhi). Furthermore, the Omani territories have been inhabited by large numbers of tribes and kinship groups: '*assabiya*' (Pradhan 2013, 115; Valerie 2007, 480, 495; 2009, 72). These continue to serve as a reference point in identifying oneself and one-another, despite these groups' authority being coopted and minimized in the state-building process (see chapter 1) and urbanization having led to Omanis relocating in different places. In the national identity narrative this diversity is linked to the



historical role of the Omani territories in maritime affairs and trade in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean as one of the few non-European countries to have established a colony. This colonization and trade relations have contributed to fluctuating streams of migration from and to the Sultanate throughout its history. The strategic location of the territory is thus linked to its historical role and diversity:

*“Like the diversity of the environments and terrains in Oman, Omani people’s features differ as well. The desert dwellers’ features are different from those of mountain dwellers, and the features of the urban population are different from those residents of remote villages who depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood”* (Oman Ministry of Tourism n.d.).

The second characteristic of tolerance is related to this diversity. It is argued that the multifaceted diversity has led to a culture of tolerance due to Omanis being accustomed to coexisting with differing communities. This attitude is promoted in the Basic Statute of the State (1996) as one of the social principles characterizing the population:

*“Collaboration and compassion are intimate bonds amongst the Citizens. The reinforcement of the national unity is a duty. The State shall prevent anything that might lead to division, discord or disruption of the national unity”* (Oman Ministry of Information n.d.).

This principle thus enforces collaborative and compassionate relations among citizens and stresses the necessity of maintaining unity among the population.

Additionally, the extensive relations with other countries resulting from the Sultanate’s maritime and trade affairs are clarified as the foundation of practices of tolerance toward people of other cultures, religions and places. This attitude of peacemaking is articulated in the foreign policy the Sultanate has maintained under Qabus’ reign, and explicated in the introduction of Royal Decree No. 101/96:

*“Consolidating the international status that Oman enjoys and its role in establishing the foundations of peace, security, justice and cooperation among various states and people;”* (Oman Ministry of Information n.d.).

It is re-emphasized in the second of the Political Principles guiding the policy of the state:

*“Reinforcing ties of cooperation and reaffirming friendly relations with all states and nations on the basis of mutual respect, common interest, non-interference in the internal affairs and adherence to the international and regional charters and treaties and the generally*

*recognized principles of international law conducive to the advancement of peace and security among states and nations”* (Oman Ministry of Information n.d., ch. 2 art. 10).

Furthermore, Ibadhism is linked to Omani tolerance due to its *shura* principle inspiring to consultation and cooperation (Valerie 2012, 118). Despite the government aiming to avoid enforcing Ibadhi Islam on different groups of the population and despite ibadhis making up only half of the Omani population (Dietl 2013, 280), in the identity narrative this branch of Islam is asserted by the government and attributed to the Omani identity through the *shura* principle:

*“Laying suitable foundations for consolidating the pillars of genuine shura emanating from the heritage of the Nation, (...)”* (Oman Ministry of Information n.d., ch. 2 art. 10).

As it is a branch of Islam that is primarily located at the southern brink of the Arabian Peninsula, it is geographically linked to the Omani territories (Nutz 2013, 27). Not only does the Qabus profess this branch of Islam himself, the state’s assertion of Ibadhi identity has been institutionalized in the creation of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs and the authority of the Grand Mufti (Jones and Ridout 2015, 175). Moreover, rules regarding social and moral conduct are defined based on Islamic principles (Oman Ministry of Information n.d., ch. 1 art. 1). Finally, the Ibadhi identity is asserted and actively promoted domestically and abroad through an exhibition that tours internationally to promote inter-faith dialogue (Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs n.d.).

In addition to these characteristics which are entangled in the history of the Omani territories, the final element of the narrative is the centrality of Sultan Qabus as the father of the nation. Not only is he the creator of the narrative, he is also the central pillar around which the other characteristics revolve:

*“His Majesty the Sultan is the Head of State and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, his person is inviolable, respect of him is a duty, and his command is obeyed. He is the symbol of national unity and the guardian of the preservation and the protection thereof”* (Oman Ministry of Information n.d., ch. 4 art. 41).

Presented as the one person to which the Sultanate owes its current existence, level of development, prosperity and stability, the Sultan figures as the founding father to which all citizens owe their allegiance. Within the narrative, his authority is legitimized through his genealogy being rooted in different parts of the country: his mother from Dhofar, his father

from Muscat. This dual connection with diverging parts of the territory enabled him to be identified with communities in these formerly divided and rivalling regions (Barrett 2015). Furthermore, the historical lineage of the Al-Busaidi dynasty is instrumentalized to legitimize the rule of the contemporary Sultan. The narrative omits the issue of contestation, division and rebellion that continued to characterize the Omani territories during the Al-Busaidi dynasty, through pointing out that “several attempts were made to restore the rule of the Imamate in Oman in the mid-fifteenth century, but did not succeed”, thus ignoring the 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to restore an imamate. It thus presents the reign of the Al-Busaidi family as marking the beginning of an era of peace and particularly emphasizes Qabus’ rule as the beginning of “the prosperous era” (Oman Ministry of Tourism n.d.). This reframing of the history of the Sultanate is visible in the clarification of the national flag colors as well (see Figure 1):

**Figure 1. Sultanate of Oman National Flag, Screenshot Website Oman Ministry of Information**



*“The white color depicts the conviction of the Omani people in peace and prosperity. The red color has been adopted from the old Omani flag (which was all red) and this symbolizes the battles fought by Omanis for the eviction of foreign invaders from the country. The green color represents the fertility and greenery of the land”* (Oman Ministry of Information 2014).

It is argued that the color red represents the Omanis’ struggle to expel foreign forces (Oman Ministry of Information 2014). This implies a uniformity and cohesiveness that has not characterized the divided population before 1970, framing the Omani people as an entity that stood up communally to defend the sultanate. Furthermore, foreign invasion hasn’t been a threat in the decades before Qabus ascended, which leads to think the British might be presented as the invaders here. However, these have never been forcibly evaded and were as matter of fact the primary force that supported Qabus’ ascending the throne and contributed to ending the Dhofar rebellion. This reframing of history thus serves the legitimization of Qabus’ authority. While many factors contributed to the development and prosperity of the Sultanate from 1970 on, it is exclusively attributed to the Sultan and presented as a natural given, to be unavoidably accepted (Philips and Hunt 2017, 646). The power of this way of framing the history and emergence of the Sultanate lies in its narrativity, which enables the linking of the characteristics together and rooting them in history.

Territory is in all these characteristics a significant locus of emergence. It is connected to all these characteristics due to the narrative relating them to the Omani territories. The strategic location is often stressed as the foundation of the narrative:

*“Oman’s strategic location has played a major role in many campaigns and regional conflicts in this region. Oman overlooks the Arabian Sea, the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. It also controls the Strait of Hormuz, which is one of the most important facilities in the region, linking the Sea of Oman with the Arabian Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz is a gateway to all ships coming from the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. (...) Because of the coastal location of Oman, the Omani navy occupied a leading position regionally. This sparked the ire of the Portuguese, who did not forget their devastating defeat. Fierce battles erupted between the Portuguese Navy (which had made India its base after the liberation of Oman) and the strong Omani navy. After a fierce battle, the Omani fleet was able to defeat the Portuguese fleet.”* (Oman Ministry of Tourism n.d.).

The emphasis on the geographic location as explanation for the role Oman has played throughout history, and the defense of the territory granting the Omani people an elevated status, serve to bind the Omani nation to the territory.

Gretchen Nutz (2013) argues in her dissertation that the characteristics of diversity and tolerance are rooted in the geographical place and territory. However, she puts focus on the northern and urban coastal areas in her fieldwork and she argues the government’s national identity is one of the national identity narratives, seeming to overlook the oppressive nature of the imposition of the national identity, excluding other narratives to be expressed and framing them as threat to the national interest (however vaguely defined). On this enforcement of the identity narrative will be elaborated in the following section in which multiple channels, reaching deep into the lives of Omanis, are revealed to impose this particular identity narrative.

## **2.2. Omanizing the Sultanate**

In order to create a sense of connectedness, an imagined community, Qabus aims to disseminate the national identity narrative through a variety of institutions, projects and campaigns. As article 12 of the Basic Statute of the State (1996) states: *“The reinforcement of the national unity is a duty. The State shall prevent anything that might lead to division, discord or disruption of the national unity”* (Oman Ministry of Information n.d). These efforts are understood as channels of Omanization. A number of these channels have already

been pointed out in the state-building efforts discussed in the first chapter: the establishment of an educational system, the establishment of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs and laws concerning citizenship and naturalization, among others. As these institutions served the nation-building project from the 1970s on and aimed to diffuse the national identity narrative, they institutionalized the identity narrative. While these arms of the state apparatus and others not mentioned here have contributed to the nation-building process through diffusing the national identity narrative, they will not be further analyzed here as they are not unique to the Omani Sultan's efforts to invent a national community. However, two Omanization efforts effectuated by Qabus after the uprisings in particular are the instrumentalization of the Ministry of Information and the Vision 2040 campaign. As argued in the previous section, the centrality of Sultan Qabus is a major component in the narrative that binds the Sultan's authority to the Omani territories and nation. However, the uprisings in 2011-2012 have marked a shift within state-society relations, which in Oman entails Sultan-society relations due to all power effectively being in the Sultan's hands. This shift has led Qabus to reengage with identity politics in order to strengthen the connection between the Omani population and his authority through ideological Omanization. The combination of these efforts reveal that both aim at controlling popular imagination through disseminating the set of characteristics promoted in the national identity narrative. The subsequent section will thus explore these channels of Omanization that have been effectuated forcefully after the uprisings in order to analyze the Sultan's effort to face this challenge of deteriorated state-society relations: the Ministry of Information and the Vision 2040 campaign.

While the Ministry of Information was established in 1970 already, it will be discussed more thoroughly here since it is one of the institutions that reaches into people's daily lives most deeply and has been one of the instruments used to silence dissent severely and characterizes the state-society relations after the uprisings. The website of the ministry states its objective clearly on the *Vision & Mission*-page:

*“To develop the Omani media so as to enhance the status of the Sultanate of Oman internally and externally, through regulating the media work, improving the performance of the media professionals and showing commitment to providing highly effective and efficient media services.”*

Not only does it promote the narrative through its regulating all information distribution channels, but also through banning everything that is deemed contrary to the public good. Particularly the Royal Decree No. 49/84 on the promulgation of the Publications and

Publishing Law (1984) grants the state a monopoly on the right to control distribution and circulation of information, and decide who is granted or revoked a license to distribute news (Oman Ministry of Information n.d.). This enables the state to promote the national identity narrative, as exemplified in the high emphasis on the exceptionality of Oman's location and its role as mediator on the ministry's website page *Sultanate of Oman*:

*“The Sultanate of Oman occupies a vital strategic location, which has always been a major factor in determining its politics, options and approach to a wide range of issues and developments.”*

Simultaneously, the ministry has the authority to prevent circulation of unwanted information and possibly mobilizing people. Particularly the fourth chapter on publication bans reveals the wide array of topics that are prohibited to write about and publish. The following articles from this section of the law are particularly interesting as they are open for interpretation since some terms remain undefined.

*“Article 25: It is prohibited to publish anything that explicitly or implicitly defames the person of his Majesty the Sultan or members of the Royal Family, by speech or images. It is also prohibited to incite (rebellion) against the system of government in the Sultanate or abuse it or disrupt the public order or call people to embrace or promote anything deemed in contravention of the principles of the Islamic religion. (...)*

*Article 28: It is prohibited to publish anything that might prejudice the public code of conduct, moral norms or divine religions. (...)*

*Article 35: Without prejudice to any severer penalty stipulated in any other law, anyone who acts in violation of Article (25) of this law shall be punished by imprisonment for a period not exceeding “three” years or a fine not exceeding “two thousand Omani Riyals” or by both penalties” (Oman Ministry of Information n.d.).*

While leaving no doubt about the criminality that is implied in the violation of these prohibitions as visible in the severe punishment for doing so stipulated by article 35, what constitutes defaming the Sultan (article 25) and the public code of conduct (article 28) is not specified any further. These undefined terms enable the state to categorize anyone who is critical of the status quo or the Sultanate or government as a threat and silence their voices. While criticism of the state has not been accepted before the uprisings, the effectuation of the laws and penalties concerning this topic have been implemented more rigorously after 2011. This is supported by the heavy handling of large numbers of (human rights and other) activists

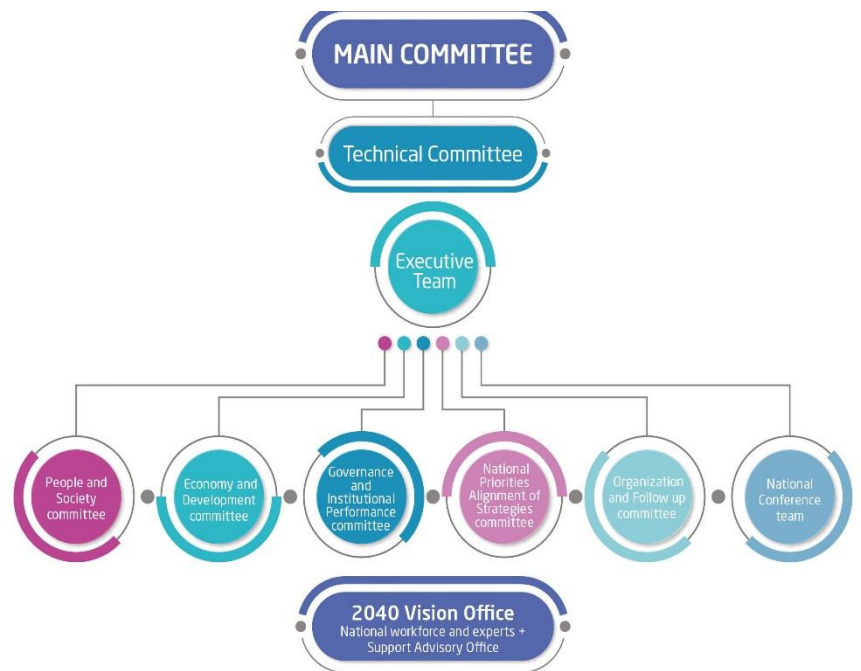
and the crackdown on protestors, as discussed in the first chapter: detaining, harassing and criminalizing those that address topics the state designates as defaming the Sultan and deems prohibited.

The ministry thus institutionalizes the national identity narrative through emanating it, serving as nation-building tool and since 2011-2012 instrumentalizing it to enforce the narrative. Through controlling the popular imagination of the Sultan and the world more generally, the instrumentalization of the Ministry of Information and laws concerning publishing and publication enables the state to promote the positive characteristics attributed to the Sultanate and its ruler. Moreover, it serves as a control mechanism, banning what is contrary to the national identity narrative, as visible in the crackdown on voices of dissent on regular or social media.

After the Omani uprisings, the government initiated an overarching campaign in 2013, envisioning what Oman should look like in 2040 in economic, social, political, educational and cultural terms (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 2). Designated as the Vision Oman 2040, the campaign instrumentalized a variety of ministries and established state organs to realize its objectives. As noted earlier, the campaign is particularly interesting to analyze due to the time its development started: shortly after widespread discontent throughout the country in 2011-2012. An analysis of the Preliminary Vision 2040 Document and preparatory organization reveals the campaign to be an answer to the protestors' demands of addressing unemployment and opening up the political space and addressing corruption, whilst aiming to instill a feeling of connectedness with the national identity narrative.

The campaign started in 2013 at the imperative of Sultan Qabus and was to be implemented by a set of committees under the guidance of the Main Committee. The committees are categorized according to the predetermined themes the plan aims to enhance, which are “People and Society”, “Economy and Development”, “Governance and Institutional Performance.”

Figure 2. Organizational Chart Vision 2040, Screenshot Website Vision 2040



As the *About the Vision*-page of

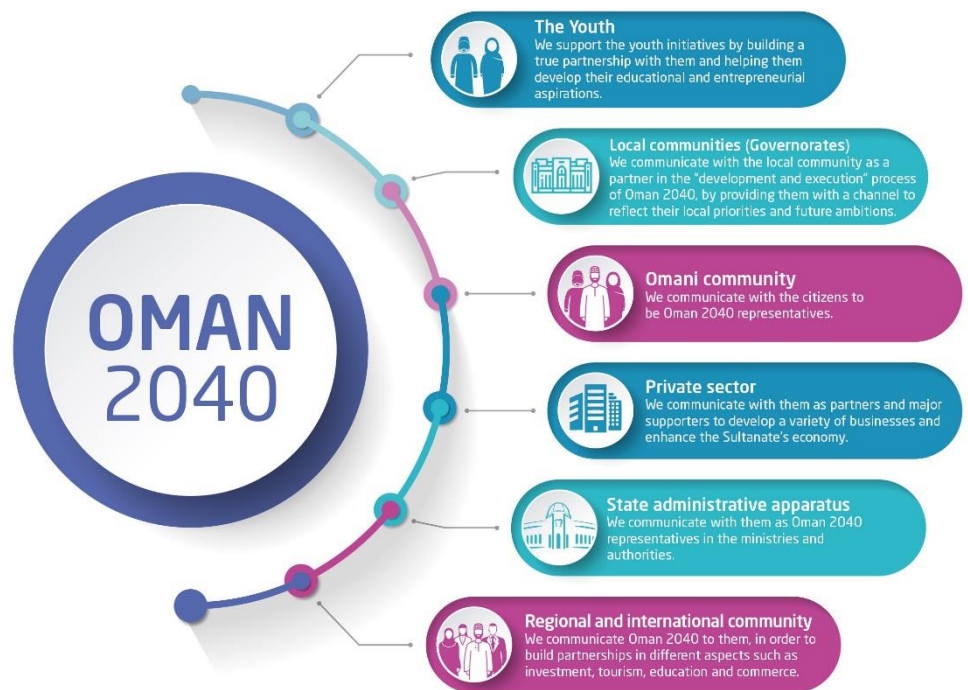
the official website of the campaign states, the vision is supposed to be developed by all segments of society and stresses its participatory approach, aiming to involve all by integrating different groups with different backgrounds and interests into the committees displayed in Figure 2:

*“The Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said stipulate that the future vision “Oman 2040” will be thoroughly developed and precisely formulated in the light of wide community consensus and participation of the different social groups, so that the vision is fully integrated into the economic and social realities and objectively orientated towards the future foresight, as a key guide and reference for planning in the next two decades. (...) Members of these committees comprise more than 100 people from various stakeholders, representing all segments of Omani society. The main committee therefore founded Oman 2040 Office, run by Omani work force to offer the needed technical and administrative support to the project” (Oman Vision 2040 n.d.).*



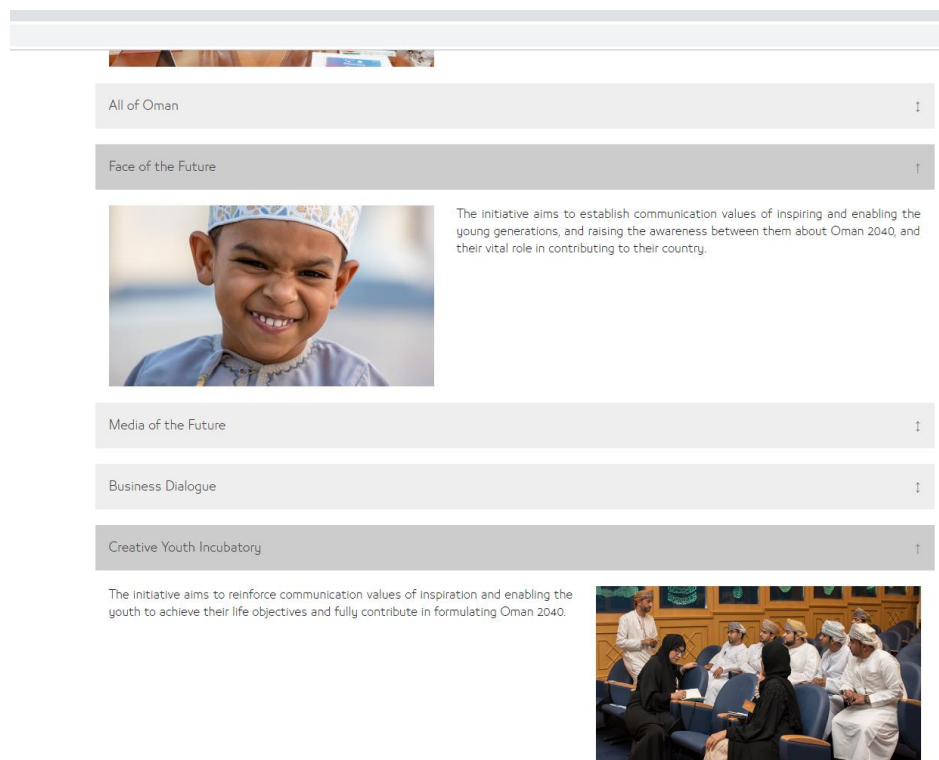
This nationwide participation by all parts of Omani society in the formulation of the Vision was realized through the organization of workshops in all governorates in which participation aims at “discussing the issues, sharing the views and creating a real societal dialogue around such issues, in order to formulate the results that will shape a prosperous future for Oman” (Oman Vision 2040 n.d.).

Figure 3. Participatory Approach Vision 2040, Screenshot Website Vision 2040



While the participatory approach aims to include all segments of society, the importance attributed to involvement of the youth is most significant, as Figure 3 explicates and is emphasized even more on the *Communications Initiatives*-page as Figure 4 illustrates. Active involvement of youths is expected in order for them to realize their potential. They are being given space for their personal objectives, while contributing to the wellbeing of the Sultanate.

Figure 4. Communications Initiatives Vision 2040, Screenshot Website Vision 2040



The preliminary document that is available on the website of the campaign, is the result of several years of preparation of the plan by the committees and offices, and through workshops organized in 2018, as specified on the Oman 2040 *Workshops*-page. It serves as a guideline for the execution of the plans and sets out the strategies for multiple sectors, which are organized according to the earlier mentioned themes or pillars. The document is preliminary and aims to serve as the foundation for the further development and final discussion in the National Conference that took place in January 2019 (Oman Vision 2040 n.d.).

The introduction of the document clarifies the motivations behind the campaign to be development and prosperity and integrates the characteristics of the national identity narrative:

*“Standing by our side are the deep history, the civilization enshrined with legacy, and the unique geographical location. They inspire us by memories of construction, the present of the Renaissance, and the future of development, prosperity and building a modern state (...)”* (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 7).

The participatory approach is explicated through attributing responsibility to realize the objectives of the Vision to the Omani people, thus pressuring the population to actively engage with the project. Partnership with civil society is stressed as necessity for a deepened partnership and in accordance with a transparent governance system (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 10). Moreover, the participation of all branches of society is linked to maintenance of stability:

*“Community participation extended through all the stages of Vision development and across the different regions of the Sultanate, thus expressing the consensual will of the political leadership and all social groups. This will ensure the achievement of gradual transformation in all areas, preserve and reinforce the stability the Sultanate enjoys, and allow today’s vision to realistically pave the way for fulfilling the objectives of the future we aspire”* (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 11).

The connection made here between stability and community participation in the multiple phases of the Vision implies the wellbeing of the Sultanate and its population depends on the active involvement of the people in the formulation and implementation of the plan. However, the participatory approach is limited to the extent that the themes were predetermined and in the workshops discussions only entailed *“the main issues that were narrowed down after diagnosing the current situation and fore sighting in the future”* (Oman Vision 2040 n.d.).

Moreover, the emphasis on the necessity of partnership with civil society is particularly interesting due to the limited opportunities for CSOs to flourish, as pointed out in the discussion of the changing state-society relations after 2011-2012 in the previous chapter. While this may seem contradictory, it indicates the strategy the Sultan maintains to coopt critical voices, as will be elaborated in the final section of this chapter.

Figure 5. Screenshot Vision 2040 Preliminary Document Illustrating the National Priorities



The three themes encompass twelve national priorities illustrated in Figure 5, designating the instruments operated to realize the objectives. The theme People & Society aims to create “A society of creative individuals, proud of its identity, innovative and globally competitive, and enjoying a decent life and sustainable wellbeing,” effectuated through the four national priorities illustrated in Figure 5 (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 11-12). The theme Economy & Development aims to realize “A competitive Economy, Productive and Diverse; adopting integration of roles and equal opportunities; driven by the private sector, and achieving comprehensive and sustainable development.” The national priorities concern methods to face the related challenges of unemployment and slow progress in diversifying labor and serve development in the economic sphere (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 11).

The final theme Governance & Institutional Performance turns focus on developing a “State with responsible apparatus, adopting comprehensive governance, effective oversight, swift judiciary, and efficient performance.” The pillar’s national priorities focus on decentralizing the state apparatus and increasing transparency and partnership (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 11). While the national priorities are stated to be aimed at development of the three themes the Vision entails, they serve an additional purpose that can best be understood in light of the shifted state-society relations as result of the 2011-2012 events. The Governance & Institutional Performance and Economic Development themes address the demands that were initially made during the uprisings, unemployment and corruption, while the People & Society theme serves to instill pride in the Omani identity. The former two address these demands and enforce participation of all citizens in improving these themes. The latter aims to create loyalty among citizens to the Omani heritage as explicated in the identity narrative and stresses it as the motivation for actively contributing to the enhancement of the other themes. The national priorities thus reveal the themes that construct the Vision 2040 to be concerned with the post-2011 shifted state-society relations and to be aiming at reconfiguring them in terms of strengthening citizens’ involvement in the state’s and society’s wellbeing and loyalty to it.

The Preliminary Vision Document is concluded with a final word motivating to “Moving forward with confidence.” It emphasizes the characteristics entailed in the national identity narrative as discussed in section 2.1, and elaborates the narrative through a historical account of how the Omanis made civilizations, their moral reputation, their renaissance, their Ibadhi *Shura*-practices, peace-making attitude and tolerance (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 41).

Moreover, the final word states that oil revenues would not have enabled the Sultanate to prosper as it has “without the determination of Omani men and women, who have kept their trust with their leadership and have been supportive to the fundamentals of development. They go hand in hand, otherwise no progress or development could be possible.” While the Omani people is emphasized mostly as the actor realizing development, the subtle connection between development and trust with their leadership serves to instill loyalty to the Sultan among the Omani people (Oman Vision 2040 2018, 42).

This final word elevating the Omani people and territories serves to create a sense of community, a unified society that shares a common history and will face contemporary challenges as it has faced those in the past communally, operating as a unified body under the head of the Sultan. The relation with Qabus lies in the connection that is made between

development and trust in the Sultan. Similar to this connection in the final word, the relation between participation in the Vision 2040 and maintenance of stability seems to operate as control mechanism. Presenting loyalty to the state and participation in the Vision as prerequisite for development and stability, the document addresses an issue the Sultan has faced increasingly since the 2011-2012 uprisings: citizens criticizing the status quo created by Qabus and resulting challenging of his all-encompassing authority.

### **2.3 Concluding Remarks**

An analysis of the website of the Ministry of Information and Vision 2040 campaign revealed the apparent paradox present in the Sultan's approach (crackdown on dissent whilst promoting participation of protestors) to explicate the strategy Qabus effectuates in order to face and prevent and challenges to his sovereignty, as they function as mechanisms to maintain control through the authoritarian framing of popular imagination of historical and contemporary socio-political affairs.

While a constructivist relational understanding of identities entails them being fluid and even multiple, the institutionalized national identity the government diffuses is presented as a fixed attribute of the Omani nation that has always characterized them, as explicated in the narrative that promotes it. This narrative links together a set of fixed characteristics with the Omani nation and territory through various institutions disseminating it in order to strengthen cohesiveness among members of the nation and loyalty to the Sultan as the father of the nation. The enforcement of this fixed identity draws a boundary that is not negotiable and contributes to reorganization of Omani social spaces through shaping relations, limiting some and stimulating other interactions of Omani society.

While the national identity narrative aimed to create a unified nation at the time Qabus ascended the throne, it continues to serve unification of different segments of Omani society after the 2011-2012 uprisings under the authority of the head of state. This imposition of the narrative and resulting reorganization of social and state-society relations of the Omani population, illustrate the identity politics Qabus increasingly engages in. The analysis of the instrumentalization of the Ministry of Information revealed it to serve as the instrument through which the state diffuses the national identity narrative and particularly after 2011-2012 enforce it. Similar to the Ministry serving as control mechanism through checking the media, the Oman Vision 2040 campaign aims at controlling Omani society in order to avoid contestation to the regime personified in Qabus. The control is pursued through the emphasis

on the national identity narrative and the subtle connection created between the narrative and the necessity to participate in the Vision and maintain trust with the leadership. The pillars of the Vision constitute an answer to the demands made in the widespread protests in 2011-2012 that addressed unemployment, corruption practices and political participation. Through the emphasis on the necessity of participation of all segments of society – and particularly the youths –, Qabus pursued a cooptation strategy, effectuated similarly in the initial years of state-building: absorbing those groups that might contest his rule in order to minimize the threat they pose. In addition to the themes that the Vision comprises, the emphasis on the involvement of the youths and their responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of the Sultanate, reveals the campaign is intended to integrate those that protested in 2011-2012. While the Ministry of Information's instrumentalization to silence dissent seems contradictory to the inclusive and participatory approach stressing "real societal dialogue" (Oman Vision 2040 n.d.), the above analysis shows both to be mechanisms that serve to control voices of dissent. Both define the limits within which only particular issues may be addressed, creating an illusion of participation whilst simultaneously maintaining complete control in the hands of the head of state.

Similar to this controlling who resides within the territory is the construction of the border fence on the Yemeni-Omani border, a project initiated in 2013. Paying attention to the border reveals the dynamics of state power in the borderland and more broadly the Omani nation, as territorial borders define the physical boundaries of the territory in which the national identity narrative that characterizes the Omani nation is rooted. Since borders as state institution represent the presence of the state, an investigation of the border separating Oman and Yemen sheds light on state-society relations within the region in which the border is located and more broadly within the Sultanate. Moreover, as mentioned before, studying the border serves to obtain insight in a region that has been underrepresented in academia and the national identity narrative. This will be discussed more elaborately in the subsequent chapter, in which the political dynamics present in the institution of the border not only appear to explicate the increasing extent to which the Sultan engages in identity politics but also reflect the shifting state-society relations in the post-2011 period.

### **3. A Border Study of the Omani-Yemeni Border**

The national identity narrative as discussed in the previous chapter omits the history of the Dhofar region's insurgency in the twentieth century through simply leaving the episode out of the official account of the state's creation. Parallel to this blank space in the narrative, is the predominant focus on the northern and coastal areas of the Sultanate in academic work on Omani national identities. Therefore, the lens of border studies will be used in this chapter to illuminate the politics at work at the margins of the Sultanate's territory and to analyze what is happening at the boundaries of the Omani nation.

A study of the Omani-Yemeni border will be pursued as it is the area most distanced from the center of power and urbanized coastal areas, contributing to it being set apart as the periphery of the state territory. Moreover, the construction of a fence along the border with Yemen was initiated simultaneously with the preparation of the Vision 2040, both projects characterizing the post 2011-2012 period this thesis focusses on. In the first section of this chapter the theoretical framework of border studies will be elaborated, expanding on its emergence and development through discussing the spatial turn, clarifying a set of border studies concepts and terminology, and discussing studies of the Middle Eastern region through the lens of borders. Subsequently, in the second section the Omani-Yemeni border as state institution will be analyzed, revealing the power dynamics at work in borderlines, -zones and lands. The chapter will be concluded with a discussion of these power dynamics, drawing on the border studies concepts elaborated in the first section.

#### **3.1 Border Studies**

The multidisciplinary lens of border studies entails a focus on the symbolic and material boundaries that demarcate territories and communities. The framework explores everything that is related to borders, which are always established and negotiated through social interactions and is thus understood as a human process and technology (Meier 2018, 496; Newman 2003, 14). Within border studies a distinction is made between the borderline as the line that demarcates and separates territories, the border zone as the small strip of land in which the borderline and control-posts are located and the borderland as the peripheral area in which the borderline and -zone are situated (Meier 2018, 501; Newman 2013; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2001). The term border will be used in this thesis to refer to the whole of

institutions and interactions that constitute a border.

While the framework of 'the border' was developed for analyzing the US-Mexico border, it gained popularity globally after the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the twentieth century and again after 9-11, when, as noted earlier, borders started to increasingly become hardened through the establishment of walls and fences (Meier 2018, 499). As opposed to expectations that globalization would lead to decreased significance of borders, border studies reveal the inequality borders contribute to and sustain, enabling some to cross freely and others to be barred passing. International cooperation in this field has led to identity (belonging to this or that nation) and security to be increasingly connected in border areas. Moreover, the connection between spatial territory and identity formation - a *spatial turn* - contributed to increasing awareness of the multiple dimensions and far-reaching influence of borders and borderlands (Meier 2018, 500-501).

This spatial turn is significant in understandings of national identities since territory and the boundaries defining it, are constructive in defining who belongs within the nation and who falls outside its boundaries. Territory appears to be a foundational principle in defining the nation, since the identity of a nation is often rooted in the territory the nation inhabits as its home, its place of belonging, by means of a national identity narrative. Territorial borders thus serve as the physical boundaries of nation's territories, whilst simultaneously carrying a symbolic meaning through defining who belongs within or outside the nation and who can enter the territory and who cannot. Whereas groups and their identities are defined by boundaries that are constructed through interaction, states may make efforts to institutionalize identity, designating its boundaries through manifold institutions of which the territorial border is one example (Migdal 2004, 12; Newman 2013, 14).

In order to understand how this dynamic of borders works, a useful concept is that of the boundary, which refers to both the physical and symbolic dimension that borders as socially constructed barriers entail. Boundaries are understood to be barriers that people establish through doing things differently, which are simultaneously meeting points of two different sides and thus replete with tension (Migdal 2004, 6). Borders are also constructed boundaries that separate territories that are governed by different policies and thus comprise different social spaces (Newman 2013, 14). However, since social groups have spatial dimensions that might not correspond to state borders, boundaries of social groups and those set by the state might clash and be contested (Migdal 2004, 7). Moreover, particularly borderlines that are fixed through constructing walls and fences, change the nature of the border as boundary



through making it fixed and no longer fluid; it becomes closed. The notion of the 'boundary' is thus necessary to understand the dynamics of borders in processes of identity formation and when studying the power borders as state institutions can exert.

Related to this space-identity connection, are three processes that borders realize in surrounding borderlands. The first is termed 'bordering', referring to a particular space being redefined and sovereignty being extended over borderlands, which entails a reorganization of the physical and social space through altering the relations within them. In this process the distinction between soft (porous and inclusive) and hard borders (impermeable and exclusionary) emerges and influences the kind of social relations that can be maintained (Vallet and David 2012, 114). The second term, 'ordering', refers to the process of identity construction within the borderlands, the creation of the Self, which defines who belongs within this territory. The final process is that of 'othering', which entails the creation of the foreigner or Other as opposed to the created Self, establishing who does not belong within this demarcated territory (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2001). In the case of territorial borders, these processes reveal borders to be instrumental as tools in state efforts to consolidate authority, mark the limits of the state's sovereignty and categorize who falls within this sphere of control by the state (Meier 2018).

As noted earlier, the lens of border studies puts focus on the margins of state territories: the borderland which is often distanced from the center of power and is essentially an area which is closely connected to its bordering area, setting it apart from the other parts of a territory (Meier 2018, 501). The distance from the center of power makes it an area that needs to be controlled through establishing the presence of the state in the form of powerful institutions in these areas. The second characteristic of the borderlands of state territories - its relations with the other side of the border - is a factor that might lead to loyalty to other - foreign or transnational - actors than the state, representing an additional possible threat to the legitimacy of the state authority. The border is thus the center of power present in the periphery, intended to subjugate domestically and defend against external threats (Longo 2018, 50-51). Depending on the porosity of borders, relations with those on the other side of the border might be present or absent to varying degrees. This implies borders and their possible fences are significant factors in the process of shaping identity (Prokkola 2009, 32).

In the Middle Eastern region, the fences along state borderlines are often argued by their instigators to be constructed as response to perceived threats from outside state borders (Meier 2018, 498). However, border studies reveal lack of control of the margins of these state

territories to be a common rationale behind border control and demarcation as well, making it a domestic sovereignty issue (Del Sarto 2017, 771). In the Middle East many borders continue to be contested due to opposition to the territorial reach of states' authority and sovereignty (Del Sarto 2017, 772). Two recent examples illustrating this dynamic are the contestation by *Daesh* (or Islamic State in Syria and the Levant), disregarding the territorial border between Iraq and Syria, and the Iraqi Kurds that challenge the Iraqi sovereignty over the territory in which they aspire to create a Kurdish state (Del Sarto 2017, 772). As large parts of the contemporary state system and borderlines of the region are significantly influenced by its colonial past, it is based on the Westphalian conception of statehood comprising a demarcated territory, state authority, and a nation. However, as *'assabiya* (group feeling) is a centuries-old common basis of sovereignty in Middle Eastern contexts as well, the system within which these states were established, entailing territorial demarcations in which state authorities rule a nation, continues to be sporadically contested at particular parts of borders (Del Sarto 2017, 775; Jones and Ridout 2015, 106; Meier 2018, 497-498). Additionally, the growing influence of transnational movements and militant groups has contributed to alternative authorities emerging in the region and contesting the state system, borders and/or established political authorities. These threats to states' authorities have fueled the militarization trend visible in the region after the Arab uprisings (Del Sarto 2017, 783). Moreover, sectarianism and securitization of sectarian identities is a trend that is increasingly analyzed as contributing to contestation of territorial borders and the threat of transnational militant groups throughout the region in the post-2011 decade (Battaloglu and Farasin 2017). While the states constituting the MENA region entail diverging histories of state- and nation-building and face these challenges to different degrees, the abovementioned examples illustrate some of the issues border studies of the MENA address.

“Border studies of the Middle East link the territoriality and the sovereignty of the state, the building of a national identity and the type of legitimacy states promote” (Meier 2018, 497). This triangular link between territoriality and sovereignty of the state, national identity building and state legitimacy promotion is visible in the Omani border case, as will be argued in the next section. In the case of Oman, the type of legitimacy that is promoted is exemplified by the centrality of Sultan Qabus in the national identity narrative, in which he is portrayed as the benevolent founding father to whom the state owes its existence and contemporary level of development. The narrative which legitimizes the central authority of Sultan Qabus is diffused in the borderland through the institution of the borderline with its control posts. This

element of state control and sovereignty is present in discussing both the borderline as a demarcation on the ground realized by border controls, fences and/or natural borders and borderlands as the surrounding areas which enshrine the social space that is restructured in the bordering process.

In the following section the Omani-Yemeni border zone and -line will be explored by looking at its materialization starting in 2013, by looking at the Omani borderlands in terms of its relations across the border, distinctiveness throughout history and the present (so its relations with the territories it belongs to) and the results of the wall on the social space that constitutes the borderland. When these two elements are elaborated, one sees how the borderline is a political tool to control the margins of the Sultanate's territory and population, through controlling them physically (restricting spatial movement and relations) and symbolically (maintain loyalty of those margins). The borderline will be investigated through analyzing its establishment, the policies entailed in border controls and its materialization through the fencing project initiated in 2013. The borderland will be explored by looking at who and what resides within this borderland and how the construction of a fence and thus the level of porosity influences the borderland.

### **3.2 The Omani-Yemeni Border Case**

#### *The Borderline and Border Zone*

After the unification of North and South-Yemen in 1990, the 1992 International Boundary Agreement between the Republic of Yemen and the Sultanate of Oman established the physical location of the borderline, specified by coordinates within the world geodetic system. (International Boundary Agreement, art. 2). The agreement specifies that the 288 kilometers long borderline is to be marked by pillars with a measured distance between them. (International Boundary Agreement, art. 4). The first annex to the agreement specifies the border zone to be 5 kilometers from the borderline to each side, making the totality of the border zone 10 kilometers wide. Moreover, it states that “With the exception of installations of official crossing points and border force installations, neither Party may erect or maintain any fortifications, installations, military camps or the like within the limits of the zone” (International Boundary Agreement, Annex I art. 1).

The line has thus been a soft border, characterized by porosity and physical openness due to its only demarcation entailing pillars as markers and border control points.

Additionally, the regulations present in this border regime entail the necessity to obtain a visa for entering the Sultanate, and the Anti-Trafficking Law promulgated in 2008 by Royal Decree No. 126. The former element enables the state to monitor who enters the territory and thus serves as control mechanism. The Anti-Trafficking Law entails regulations concerning what constitutes human trafficking, the illegitimate transportation of people across borders. The first 4 articles specify what constitutes the act of human trafficking and all related phases, when a person is perceived to be complicit in trafficking and when the victim's consent is taken into account. The other articles regard the penalties distributed when the law is violated and awards authority to the National Committee for the Anti-Trafficking of Persons to effectuate the policies (Omanuna n.d.). It thus specifies the often recurring violation of Omani law that is trafficking, for which a committee has been created that aims to enforce these anti-trafficking regulations. The committee represents the state as authority at the border area, enforcing national law. In addition to human trafficking, smuggling is a widespread practice that characterizes the Omani borders and raises concern for national security (Gill 2018). In addition to the National Committee for the Anti-Trafficking of Persons, the Royal Omani Police serves to enforce border control in order to divert other smuggling efforts, thus representing the state's authority in the periphery (ROP n.d.).

However, in 2013 the Omani government stated it would initiate a project to build a fence along the border with Yemen in order to deter the possible threat of conflict spill over from its neighbor, the Republic of Yemen. Despite its finalization initially being planned in the year 2015 and then 2018, it is currently still under construction. The project is overseen by the military in order to guarantee security of the construction workers and deter alleged threats from the other side (The Economist 2015). This reveals the construction of the fence not only to be contested, but also points to the securitization of identity embodied in the fence that aims to keep some out and frame this as serving security.

Part of the construction of the border fence, is the establishment of a hospital right next to the border, that is meant to treat those injured or sick. While Yemenis have crossed the border regularly to receive medical treatment before the construction of the border fence, Qabus initiated a project to build a hospital within the border zone in order to continue taking care of the wounded and sick Yemenis that require assistance, whilst avoiding Yemenis having to enter the Sultanate (Gill, 2018). This dual approach, maintaining the fraternal ties through taking care of them at the expense of the state, while maintaining control of their presence and movement within the Sultanate's territory, reveals the Omani state's approach to Yemenis

within the hospital: they are helped within the limits set by the state, their movements controlled through helping them in this particular created space and dismissed thereafter. Essentially, the contact between Yemenis and Omanis is minimized, reduced to only this particular space.

This element of control is characteristic for border policies in general, as borderlines and control-posts serve a state's authority to monitor and control who enters and leaves a territory. The construction of a border fence reveals the policies at the Omani border to have narrowed in terms of permitting entrance to those coming from the Yemeni territories. While the continued medical treatment of Yemenis might seem contradictory with the construction of the fence aimed to keep them out, these efforts appear to both be part of the Sultan's efforts to control the borderland's social space through reducing relations between the nation and its counterpart on the Yemeni side. In order to further analyze this social space and its restructuring through the construction of a fence, the borderland will be discussed in the following section.

### *The Border Land*

The Omani borderland neighboring the Yemeni Mahra province is located in the Dhofar governorate, of which Salalah is the urban center. The sparsely populated area is characterized by a natural environment that sets it apart from the rest of the Omani territory due to the monsoon that hits the southern areas annually and due to the large swaths of desert that separate it from the western and northern governorates (Jones and Ridout 2015, 133). Moreover, the governorate is culturally different from the other regions due to the predominance of adherence to Sunni Islam instead of Ibadhism, the unique presence of the Semitic *Mahriya* or *Jabali* languages used in addition to Arabic and the tribal ties its communities share with Yemeni neighbors (Nagi 2019).

These ties between the Omani and Yemeni borderlands are shaped heavily by the history of the Dhofar rebellion, in which Marxist Yemenis from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen assisted the Dhofar Liberation Front in their battle against the Omani Sultan. Despite the Dhofar insurgency having been suppressed by Qabus with foreign assistance, this history of Yemeni support for Omani domestic rebellion continues to augment the Sultan's suspicion of the area's inhabitants for possible future insurgency (Jones and Ridout 2015, 140).

The 1992 International Boundary Agreement entailed rules regarding free movement of people and goods, grazing regulations and water resources management. In the first annex the appointment and distribution of authority for both sides of the borderland is established,

emphasizing cooperation between the appointed border authorities in order to guarantee law, order and security. In the second annex regulations regarding water management and grazing rights are laid out. The first four articles specify the depth of the grazing zone to be 25 kilometers from the borderline extending into both territories, the privilege of nationals from either side to use this area for grazing and water resources and their exemption from laws, regulations and taxes imposed on non-nationals. The fifth article concerns the control and imposition of a limitation on transport of weaponry and vehicles, the sixth regards the right to halt movement and export of livestock in case of disease or epidemic and the seventh explicates the right to use health services of those residing in the 25 kilometer grazing zone. (International Boundary Agreement 1992, Annex II). The document specifies that the agreement is based on a relation build on fraternal ties and trust and indicates the friendly relationship the Sultanate has aimed to maintain with the neighboring state. The establishment of friendly ties is a familiar strategy of the Sultan in order to minimize the possibility of contestation through engaging those who might be a threat, as visible in the state-building and Omanization efforts discussed in previous chapters. The Sultan's strategy of cooptation of the Yemeni side of the borderland manifests itself in this open and fraternal approach to the Yemeni authorities in Mahra province and the strengthening of relations with local authorities, heads of kinship groups and '*assabiya* (Nagi 2019).

Moreover, the initiative to create al-Mazyunah free-zone 4 kilometers from the border with Yemen has given shape to the economic character of the borderland. Established in 1999, this free-zone aims to attract foreign investment and boost diversification of the Omani economy through granting privileges to investors (Madayn n.d.). Its location close to Yemen enables it to serve as border control post and gate and facilitates export to Yemen's consumer market. Among the benefits extended to investors, are exemption from taxes and reduction of the 30 % Omanization norm to 10 %. Moreover, Yemenis are allowed to work within the zone without having to obtain visa (Muscat Daily 2013). Similar to the hospital in the border zone, the free-zone thus delimits an area which is set apart from the surrounding borderland through the different policies that govern these areas.

However, the construction of a fence along the borderline has its impact on the borderlands in multiple ways. Firstly, the construction of a physical barrier is harmful for nature and ecosystems to the extent that it interferes in flora and fauna populations' cross-border diffusion, decreasing diversity and possibly resulting in extinction (Lasky, Jetz and Keitt 2011, 674). In addition to influencing flora and fauna in the borderlands, the establishment of

a border fence exerts influence on those communities that depend on the existing environment, most notably nomads and farmers. This brings a second, related point to the fore, which is the set of limits imposed on nomads' movement. Whereas the 1992 boundary agreement specified a zone with a total range of 25 kilometers across the border in which nomads were allowed to let their animals graze, the establishment of a border fence delimits their space of movement and thereby source of food and maintenance. This has led to particular groups living in the borderland to object the construction of the fence (Adams 2014). This issue of limited movement relates to the final aspect of the construction of the border fence: the reorganization of the social space. As clarified before, social spaces are understood here to be constructed by relations between social actors with multiple identities and give shape to these relations conversely. Building upon this notion, the imposition of a border fence imposing a fixed identity gives shape to the social space through limiting some and strengthening other relations. As social actors' interactions, facilitated by movement, construct a social space, this border fence interferes in the social spaces of communities living in the borderland. While relations between the borderlands entail both tribal ties and a shared history of Marxist-communist forces' dominance, the establishment of a fence impedes these relations to the extent that Yemenis are no longer allowed to enter the Omani territory freely. The obstruction of cross-border '*assabiya*, effectuated through the border fence cutting across the borderland's social spaces, is intended to strengthen the feeling of connectedness with the national identity narrative and maintain Omanis' loyalty. Interestingly, the Sultan created border troops of people living in border lands, making up forces that are attributed power through serving as employee of the state, which enables the state to control them. Moreover, the police and military officers present at the border are from Muscat, while those coming from The Dhofar region are stationed in other regions. This strategy serves to avoid the possibility of their connectedness with the region they come from leading them to subvert state policies. Combined with the cooptation of the borderland population, it is aimed at avoiding rebellion from the communities living in Dhofar as happened in the 1960s and 1970s (Gill 2018). The subsequent section will elaborate on the power mechanism at work in the borderline and borderland, creating the boundary between the Self and the Other.

### **3.3. Institutionalization and Securitization**

The theoretical framework of border studies enables an analysis of the margins of state territories and sheds light on both the physical and symbolic dimension of borderlines, -lands and -zones. The analysis of the border in the Dhofar region reveals the institutions at work in the borderland, of which the border fence and border control posts embody the state's presence in the periphery as the state's control mechanisms on the borderline and border zone, and the free-zone and hospital embody the state's presence through functioning as control mechanisms in the borderland.

The free zone that is created close to the border, provides the area with a set of advantages, as mentioned in the previous section. Related to the exemption from Omanization quota is the fact that Yemenis are allowed to work here without obtaining a visa. This characteristic of the free-zone and construction of a hospital on the borderline encapsulates the Omani government's approach to Yemeni workers: they are not inherently seen as a threat since they are perceived to be fit to be employed within this free-zone and treated when injured or sick. Fraternal ties are maintained and relations are not entirely cut off. However, Yemenis are simultaneously kept away from the Omani population outside the free-zone and hospital. This concealment of Yemenis, hiding them from Omani society by means of a border fence and limited free zone within the borderland, is instrumental in the Sultan's efforts to control popular imagination of the social space in the borderland through framing Yemenis as the Other. Not necessarily demonizing Yemenis, the Other, but controlling Yemenis and Omanis and their interaction is fundamental in the policy governing these exceptional spaces in order to maintain control.

The borderline institutionalizes national identity through border controls; the border fence securitizes identity, categorizing those who are denied entry as threats to national security. Since borders define the territory in which national identity is rooted through a narrative, constructing the Self and the Other, who belongs, and who does not, they function as political instruments utilized to control those social groups that might identify more strongly with a narrative different from the national identity narrative. As identification with alternative identity narratives might lead to loyalty to another authority than the one central in the national identity narrative. Therefore, identification with a social group with boundaries that clash with those set by the national identity narrative, is perceived as posing a threat. In the Omani borderland, this threat lies in the borderland communities maintaining stronger ties with their Yemeni counterparts than with the Omani nation due to their peripheral location,



historical ties with Yemenis and separate cultural and geographical traits, as discussed earlier. Through imposing a fixed border with a wall and separating the territory of the social group that is constructed through multifaceted ties, the Sultan aims to strengthen the identification of the borderland communities with the Omani national identity narrative, while at the same time alienating it from the other social group it shares ties with - but is separated from - due to the fixing of the border. This suggests that in order to divert this threat and maintain loyalty among the borderlands' populations, Qabus aims to strengthen the borderland communities' connectedness with and investment in the social group which the national identity narrative aims to describe.

Oman's bordering practices thus appear to downplay particular identity narratives in order to strengthen the borderland communities' identification with the narrative of the national identity the Sultan aims to diffuse. These practices serve as control mechanisms that are intended to avoid that those areas on the margins will identify more strongly with other narratives, thus binding them to the nation and Qabus as the father of the nation, in order to enforce the Sultan's authority and maintain Omani subjects' loyalty. While the physical dimension of the border might appear to relate primarily to communities in the borderland, its influence stretches beyond the borderland as it institutionalizes the symbolic boundary that defines the nation. Demarcating the borderline with a fence that securitizes alternative identity narratives extends beyond the borderland and contributes to the framing of popular imagination throughout the Sultanate of the Other.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the historical events preceding Qabus' rule revealed the Al-Busaidi dynasty to have struggled with legitimacy issues and rebellion in the Omani territories from its emergence on. After the Omani lands' unification and the confrontation with the Jebel War and Dhofar insurgency, Sultan Qabus ascended the throne and increased development of the Sultanate, starting a thorough process of state- and nation-building. In order to secure regime legitimacy and minimize the possibility of contestation to his rule, the Sultan instrumentalized the arms of the state to absorb the established local authorities and diffuse a national identity narrative. The state-building efforts created a socio-political environment based on a rentier system, heavily shaping the state-society relations as being characterized by dependency of the people on the Sultan and unaccountability of the state. The 2011-2012 uprisings revealed the widespread dissatisfaction with the economic and political circumstances created by the process of state-building, resulting in contestation to the government and later more specifically the Sultan. Qabus' high standing as the person to which the Sultanate owed its contemporary level of development degraded and was no longer accepted among those parts of the population that the state, personified by Qabus, could not provide for and to which he responded with excessive aggression. This shift in Omani state-society relations has been unpacked through analyzing the national identity narrative Qabus diffused to create the imagined community of the nation. The symbolic boundaries of this nation, established through the nation-building efforts of Qabus, have been explored through an analysis of the national identity narrative that appears to promote a set of fixed characteristics: tolerance, diversity, Ibadhism and Sultan Qabus as the father of the nation. However, as this latter element of the narrative is increasingly contested since the 2011-2012 uprisings, Qabus has aimed to reinforce the symbolic boundaries of the nation with the objective of strengthening the relationship between the identity narrative and the Omani people. The analysis of the increased instrumentalization of the Ministry of Information and the Vision 2040 campaign revealed the Sultan's efforts to enforce the nation's symbolic boundaries to be aimed at reinforcing his authority. The seemingly contradictory efforts of the Vision with its participatory and inclusive approach on the one hand and the instrumentalization of the Ministry of Information manifested in a crackdown on protestors and critics on the other hand, are revealed to be part of the Sultan's strategy of framing the popular imagination in order to enforce the nation's symbolic boundaries. The Vision and Ministry of Information thus shed light on the engagement of Qabus with identity politics: not merely

institutionalizing identity as has been effectuated through the state apparatus, but rigorously enforcing it.

The narrative, however, leaves out those that are at the margins of the state territory, as illustrated in the second and third chapters. The study of the Omani-Yemeni border shed light on this underrepresented and diverging region of the Sultanate and illuminated the power dynamics of the state and its presence at the periphery. The analysis of the Omani-Yemeni border in light of the concepts of bordering, ordering and othering revealed the identity politics at work in the borderland and border zone. The borderline and control posts in the border zone effectuate the institutionalization of the Omani national identity narrative, embodying the power of the state present in these peripheral borderlands to control which boundaries borderland communities can maintain within the social spaces that construct the borderland. The construction of a fence along the borderline enforces a fixed boundary on a social group that has maintained multifaceted relations that go back further than Qabus' inventing of the imagined community of the nation and have been stronger than the ties shared with the nation. The fence thus reflects the Sultan's effort to reinforce his authority over his subjects in a time in which his authority is widely contested as manifested in the shift in state-society relations.

An element of cooptation of those who are perceived to possibly pose a threat to the regime's control is present in the creation, institutionalization and securitization of the national identity narrative. The establishment and development of the state apparatus –of which the arms reach deep into the daily lives of Omanis and emanate the narrative - absorbed the local authorities in order to downplay their incentives to revolt against the Sultan. This strategy is visible in the Vision 2040 approach as well, emphasizing the participatory approach to the development of the plan and its implementation and the broad array of participants involved from diverging regions and classes and its focus on youths' involvement. The construction of a border fence involved a similar cooptation, as those living in the borderland have been recruited to constitute a border force that contributes to safeguarding the border, thus becoming part of the state's presence in the periphery. This dynamic of cooptation of those who might pose a threat to the authority of the Sultan thus appears to be a red line throughout Qabus' approach to domestic sovereignty issues. It points to the Sultan's efforts to frame popular imagination, through enforcing the fixed, symbolic boundaries of the identity narrative and enforcing a fixed physical boundary that imposes these symbolic boundaries.

The emphasis in the Vision and Ministry of Information's website on the connection between

the authority of Sultan Qabus and the development and stability of the Sultanate is similar to the working of the border fence in the periphery: through securitizing narratives other than the narrative promoted, presenting alternatives as a threat to the Sultanate's wellbeing, loyalty to the national identity narrative that is forged by the regime is enforced. The securitization of alternative identity narratives effectuated through the enforcement of the national identity narrative's boundaries and construction of the fence, reveals the tightening grip of the Sultan on the Omani population as response to state-society relations having deteriorated since the 2011-2012 uprisings. This securitization trend, the framing of particular group-identities as threat in order to create support among particular groups is a recurring method by both state and non-state actors and not unique within the MENA region. However, in Oman the securitization is primarily effectuated through an emphasis on the national identity narrative embodied and disseminated by state institutions and the border, as the prerequisite for security and development, instead of a focus on demonizing the Other. Moreover, the unique situation of Oman is that the rigorous nature of the enforcement of a fixed identity is concealed by a narrative that promotes a set of characteristics that are not associated with or might seem contradictory to subjugation and enforcement. However, this narrative is imposed while in reality large parts of the population are left out and all who diverge from this narrative (as large parts of the population did during and after uprisings) and presented as threat to the Sultanate's well-being. The quote of the Sultan in the introduction of this thesis illustrates the propaganda of Qabus aimed to instil a sense among Omanis that all are included and fit within this national identity narrative, they are part of it, construct it as such.

In answer to the main research question of this thesis, I argue that the construction of the border fence along the Omani-Yemeni border in 2013 reveals the increased enforcement of the national identity narrative in response to shifting state-society relations since 2011-2012. As the authority of Sultan Qabus is central in the narrative, and loyalty to the Omani national identity promoted in this narrative are tied to security, the enforcement of the narrative, effectuated through strengthening the symbolic and physical boundaries of the nation the territory it is associated, reveal the Sultan's efforts to maintain loyalty among the diverse constituents of the Omani population.

This research thus contributes to studies of Oman in terms of turning attention to some of the domestic issues of the Sultanate, entailing among others the shifting state-society relations that are manifested in the uprisings and the Sultan responding to this through strengthening his grip on the Omani population through reinforcing the symbolic and physical boundaries of

the imagined community that constructs the nation. Moreover, this thesis sheds light on communities living in the peripheral areas of the Sultanate's territory that are often underrepresented in academic research and in the national identity narrative that excludes them. Finally, it contributes to broader discussions of Omani nationalism as it turns attention to the exclusionary nature of the national identity narrative which has been overlooked in many studies.

Further research might be conducted on the issue of local borderland communities' efforts to circumvent the fixed boundary the state has imposed and continue the participation in and identification with alternative narratives and social groups. Due to the limited period of time designated for this thesis, fieldwork has not been a possibility. Therefore, further research substantiated by fieldwork should be conducted to illuminate how daily lives in the borderland are lived and how alternative social spaces continue to be constructed, in order to highlight the local experiences of boundary impositions.

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