



**The influence of Ibadi Islam on the domestic and foreign policy
of the Sultanate of Oman**

Simon Gureshidze

PhD in Humanitarian Science, History
Research assistant at G. Tsereteli Institute of Oriental
Studies of Ilia State University. Georgia. Tbilisi, G. Tsereteli 3.
+9995 595-56-61-23. Simon.gureshidze@iliauni.edu.ge
ORCID: 0000-0002-9545-8238

Abstract

After the terrorist attack organized by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, in response to which the military operation started in the Gaza Strip, which still continues with more or less intensity after half a year, and which turned into extreme tension between Iran and Israel due to the subsequent events, the world faces the risk of a new large-scale regional conflict. Due to the mentioned factors, there are still questions about whether there is the smallest possibility of resolving the conflicts that arise periodically for various reasons in the Middle East region in a diplomatic way, or whether we have visible examples of the mentioned phenomenon in the recent history of the countries in the region. How open is the Muslim world to peaceful conflict resolution? Which country represents the most successful precedents in this regard, and which of the main branches in Islam are more flexible in dealing with these challenges?

Events in the recent history of the Middle East are changing with kaleidoscopic speed. There are frequent examples when yest-

erday's opposing parties manage to normalize their relationship, e.g., the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan (a little bit later), initiated by the administration of former US President Donald Trump. There are cases when partnership relations are temporarily interrupted and strained. For example, the contention between the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2017 on the basis of accusations of Qatar's connection with Iran and support for terrorism, which lasted until 2021 (1).

Keywords: Conflicts; Union; Diplomacy; Oman; Ibadia/Ibadism

Contents

In the Arab world Some form of unification is particularly difficult to achieve, and there have been a series of failed attempts: a political federation between the Hashemite kingdoms of Iraq and Jordan known as the Arab Federation in 1958 that collapsed in the same year due to the coup in Iraq. (2) The political union between Egypt and Syria known as the United Arab Republic existing in 1958-1961. (3) The Federation of Arab Republics created by the initiative of Muammar Gaddafi, one of the most prominent representatives of the commitment to the idea of Arab unity who came to power in Libya in the 1970s. (4,5,6) A trade agreement signed in 1989 by Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia known as the Arab Maghreb Union, which was also intended to serve broader political goals later (7,8). The United Arab Emirates can be considered as a separate successful example (9).

It is necessary to note that in the circles of experts interested in the issue and in a certain part of the scholars, in addition to political motives, confessional motives are often considered as the causes of conflicts, among which the Sunni-Shia conflict and its vicissitudes are mentioned most often. The Sunni-Shia conflict has its own history, which is a separate issue, and based on the situations developed in the

background of the Syrian civil war, I support the opinion that the mentioned conflict is more political than confessional, Sunni-Shia fundamentalism has many common features. In this regard, the editor of Iraq Pulse section of Al-Monitor, researcher, professor and strategic communication adviser to the Prime Minister of Iraq in 2020-2022, Ali Mamour provides us with a very interesting analysis in his article (10).

Methodology

In order to discuss the mentioned issue once again and to answer the raised questions, the materials available in open sources and the book of Valerie J. Hoffman, Professor Emerita at the Illinois university, specialist in Islamic thought and practice, *The Essentials of Ibadī Islam*, helped me to understand not only about the history of Ibadism, its role in the Islamic world and the chronology of its development, but also as a phenomenon. The author herself is considered one of the most competent contemporary researchers of Ibadī Islam. In this book, the author does not neglect any researcher and specialist who has worked on the mentioned issue. On the basis of comparing and contrasting the materials and on the example of Sultanate of Oman, I tried to outline how the factor of Ibadism contributes to the formation of a unique domestic and foreign policy. Also what challenges can be overcome unlike other Muslim states.

After taking all the above-mentioned into account, in parallel with Qatar, the example of Oman as a successful mediator between the opposing parties is one of the most interesting events and in order to see the created picture as a whole, the role of Ibadī Islam (Ibadism) in the internal and foreign policy of Oman formed by Sultan Qaboos attracts our attention.

Results

Based on the research methods used in the article and the conclusions drawn as a result of the processed literature, I believe that the following factors have been highlighted in the example of the Sultanate of Oman: 1) The influence of Ibadī Islam on the ruling elites and the majority of the believers of the country to a certain extent

influences the fact that the followers of different branches in Islam and the followers of other denominations peacefully live in one state; 2) the country conducts successful diplomatic relations in almost all directions; 3) In the complex geopolitical region of the Middle East, along with Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman is not only a successful mediator but also a connecting bridge at a certain level between states with different interests in the region.

Discussion

Two main branches of Islam are known to the general public: Sunni and Shia Islam. There is the third group, the Ibadis, separated from the Muslim community as a result of the conflicts that began after the Prophet Muhammad. They are mostly mentioned in footnotes by various authors as a division of the Kharijites since 657 AD. Today, not a small number of Ibadis live in Oman, Zanzibar, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. They represented an important political and theological force in the period after the apostle (11). Ibadis do not identify themselves with any of the above-mentioned branches and consider their sect to be the oldest and most genuine form of Islam, which is shrouded in mysteries for the rest of the Muslims and many scholars. Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars often refer to them as moderate Kharijites. Modern Ibadis consider it an insult. However, they admit that their branch was created as a result of the separation from Kharijites. In the last decades, the signs of convergence of Ibadism with Sunnism at a certain level have been revealed, and at the same time, the mentioned branch shows considerable interest in Kharijism as well. Unlike Sunnis and Shias, the followers of Ibadism believe that becoming a Muslim caliph should not be determined by family or tribal affiliation, or even by divine selection, but rather by the choice of distinguished individuals representing the Muslim community. They consider the first four caliphs chosen by this sign. They accept Abd Allah b. Wahb al-Rasibi as their imam, who was an early leader of the Kharijites after the separation from the camp of Ali. The Ibadis named their sect after Abd Allah b. Ibad (Abad), who broke a

link with the Azariqa, the extremist branch of the Kharijites. The first Ibadi state was established in 128/745 in Sana'a, northern Yemen by Abd al b. Yahya al-Kindi (aka Talib Alhaq) and existed for three years. Omani al-Jiandi b. Mas'ud, a follower of al-Kindi who was killed in 139/748, became the imam of the new Ibadi state, which was overthrown by the Abbasids in 132-134/750-752. However, the Imamate of Oman, founded in 177/793, has endured through centuries (12). In the article, Oman attracts special attention in the sense that Muslims following Ibadism make up 72% considering not only the followers of other faiths but also the two most famous branches of Islam mentioned above, and it was Sultan Qaboos, the highest ruler following Ibadism who not only made the country one of the brilliant examples of religious tolerance, but also established a visible example of the policy of balance in terms of foreign political activity in the recent history of the region and the political life of the country (13).

The Sultanate of Oman that is strategically located between the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, has had a history of unique, independent, non-aligned, pragmatic and moderate foreign policy since July 1970, after Qaboos bin Said came to power in a bloodless coup in Muscat with the secret support of the British and succeeded his father Said bin Taimur (b. 1910-d.1972, reign: 1932-1970) on the throne.

In addition to successful domestic reforms, the sultan at the head of the country turned Oman into an active regional player and thus ended his father's isolationist policy. First, he established control with the help of Iranian, Jordanian and British military forces in the southwestern part of the country, where a rebellion inspired by communist ideology broke out in the 1960s. In addition, in a few decades, Oman became a modern and stable state where the followers of all three streams of Islam - Sunni, Shia and Ibadi live peacefully together with people of other religious confessions. The constitution is the main statute of the country, which prohibits discrimination on religious grounds, and according to the data of 2019, Oman was the

only country in the Middle East in which there was no threat of terrorism. Sultan Qaboos was an absolute monarch who held the posts of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Minister of Defense and Governor of the Central Bank. However, he had a circle of trusted people and advisers. Along with the monarch, the bicameral parliament was involved in the governance of the country - an appointed upper house and a lower elective consultative assembly, as well as various ministries. Such a governance system ensured turning the population of the multiethnic country having different tribal characteristics into a cohesive national civil society. The stable domestic political situation allowed Sultan Qaboos to pursue a foreign policy characterized by the following characteristics: independence policy (acting freely), pragmatism (maintaining flexibility in reaching agreements with major regional and global actors), moderation (avoiding any kind of radical positions, and supporting a stable regional military-political status quo), which in turn ensured Oman's foreign policy interests. During the reign of Sultan Qaboos, the saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" common in the Middle East changed into "the enemy (Iran) of my friend (the United States of America) may still be my friend" in the politics of Oman. During his rule, there were also frequent cases when Muscat maintained an independent and pragmatic position in regional and global affairs, which contradicted the interests of its partners, the Gulf Cooperation Council, other Arab states, and the United States of America. The foreign policy vectors of the Sultanate of Oman were also focused on three main directions: 1) Gulf security, 2) Arab-Israeli conflict and 3) threats to global security.

During the Iran-Iraq War, when the Gulf Cooperation Council members - Saudi Arabia and Kuwait sided with Iraq, the Sultanate of Oman maintained positive relations with both sides in the war. In 1987, Reagan's initiative to change the registration and flags of Kuwaiti oil tankers to allow the US Navy to escort them in the Persian Gulf was resisted by Oman. That was to avoid a possible US-Iran war on the one hand and human tragedies on the other hand. However, Muscat

agreed to provide the United States with logistical support for its naval escort, while at the same time they helped to repatriate Iranians captured by the US fleet. After the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, Oman, together with the Gulf Cooperation Council cooperated with the United States of America openly, actively and willingly for the liberation of Kuwait, and at the same time, Muscat sought to strengthen political relations with Baghdad. In 1997-98, during the period of UN-Iraq crisis over weapons inspections, they opposed the use of military power by the US for forcing them to allow the United Nations Special Commission to inspect their weapons potential. Oman has maintained normal diplomatic and trade relations with Tehran amid sanctions imposed by the Clinton administration against Iran and Libya in 1996 and extended by George W. Bush in 2006. The main principle of Oman's foreign policy was not to have unnecessary enemies in the Gulf. Therefore, in 2003, Muscat openly opposed the implementation of a military operation in Iraq by George Bush Jr., but at the same time, as in the 80s of the 20th century, they provided military logistical support to the United States of America quietly. As for the Arab-Israeli conflict, Sultan Qaboos did not intervene in it directly and frequently. He first took part in the issues related to the mentioned problem in 1978-1979, when the Camp David Agreement (1978) and the Egypt-Israel Peace Agreement (1979) were signed. In this case, along with Sudan and Somalia, the Sultan of Oman opposed the Arab League's call for its members to sever diplomatic relations with Egypt. In the 1990s, along with the Gulf Cooperation Council, he opposed the 2nd and 3rd economic boycotts against Israel. It was also the first country among the Gulf states to host Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 and Shimon Peres in 1996. During the 2nd Intifada in 2000, despite the closure of Omani trade offices in Israel and Israeli ones in Oman, Muscat came out in favor of the peace process.

In 2015, Oman was the site of secret Iran-US talks to resolve issues related to Iran's nuclear program. A little later, in order to

maintain relations with Iran, Muscat did not get involved in the military operation launched by Saudi Arabia and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Yemen and preferred to play the role of a mediator (14,15,16,17,18,19).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that unlike other Middle Eastern countries, which rely on different ideologies and mainly make calculations on short-term prospects with rare exceptions, Oman's foreign policy principles are based on the need for the development of peaceful processes and negotiations. The following factors allow the Sultanate of Oman to do this: First of all, Sultan Qaboos managed to effectively eliminate polarization in the country. Unlike some leaders of other Arab countries, he did not maintain internal stability through terror, repression and dictatorship, but he was a popular leader among the people of the kingdom of all confessions and political tastes. The country had no opposition managed from outside, and had no territorial disputes with neighboring states. The minorities living in Oman did not look for allies outside the country, as, for example in Afghanistan. Based on the above-mentioned, considering the fact that the Muslims following Ibadism in their settlement areas even in Zanzibar, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, have never been involved in any kind of large-scale armed conflict and have not done any radical-extremist activities (we mean civil conflicts in Algeria and Libya, as well as political vicissitudes developed in Tunisia, the homeland of the "Arab Spring"), it can be said that the government composed of Ibadi Muslims, with the support of the followers of the same branch, makes it quite possible to answer the research questions that were asked at the beginning of the paper. In particular, resolving conflicts in the Middle East through diplomatic means is possible by maintaining relations with partners with different political tastes and interests.

Bibliography:

The presented bibliography is complex and is used in a limited amount based on the needs of the questions and problems raised in the

article. Further discussion of these and other issues regarding Ibadism, and far more bibliographical information, is available in the other entries on Ibadi Islam.

- (1) Press Releases for Sessions. [PressReleasesforSessions /Pages/ Home.aspx](https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/Statements/MinisterialCouncilData) <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/Statements/MinisterialCouncilData> Source: ALJAZEERA, 5 Jun 2020, Qatar blockade: Five things to know about the Gulf crisis. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/5/qatar-blockade-five-things-to-know-about-the-gulf-crisis>.
 - (2) Romero, J. (2020), Arab Nationalist Constitutions of 1958 in the Context of the Cold War: the cases of the Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic, the Iraqi-Jordanian Arab Union, and the Republic of Iraq. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56(4), 585–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2020.1731798>
 - (3) Rafizadeh, Majid. 2014, *The Syrian Civil War: Four Concentric Circles of Tensions*. A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy University of South Florida, at web page <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7008&context=etd> p. 30.
 - (4) Chapin, Helen Metz. (ed.), 1987, *Libya and Arab Unity. Libya: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress. Table content. <https://countrystudies.us/libya/32.htm>
- The New York Times Archives. Jan 13 1974, Libya and Tunisia agree to merge; planned referendum. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/01/13/>
- Shalgam, Abdel Rahman. Jul 15 2017, Inter-Arab Ties Remain Bound to Dreamy Intellect. [Opinion/https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/abdel-rahman-shalgam/opinion/inter-arab-ties-remain-bound-dreamy-intellect](https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/abdel-rahman-shalgam/opinion/inter-arab-ties-remain-bound-dreamy-intellect).
- (5) AFP, RABAT. 08 February 2012, Tunisia president in Morocco promote Maghreb Union. <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/08/193416>.

- Bouhars, Anouar. June 30 2018, Maghreb: Dream of Unity, Reality of Divisions. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Aljazeera. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/06/03/maghreb-dream-of-unity-reality-of-divisions-pub-76544>.
- (6) United Arab Emirates country brief Overview. Australian Government/Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/united-arab-emirates/united-arab-emirates-country-brief>.
- Page last updated: July 10 2024, Explore All Countries-United Arab Emirates. The World Fact book. Go to CIA.gov <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-arab-emirates/> United Arab Emirates country profile.
- (7) Ali Mamouri, Ali. October 2013, The Roots of Radicalism in Political Islam. – Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/10/radicalism-political-islam-roots-sunni-shiite-fundamentalist.html>.
- (8) Hoffman, Valerie J. 2012, The Essentials of Ibādī Islam. The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences 31:1. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 344 pages.
- (9) Hoffman, Valerie J. First edition 2012, The Essentials of Ibadi Islam. Syracuse University press. ISBN: 978-0-8156-3288-7 Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data. Introduction, pp: 3-16.
- (10) Sultanate and Imamate in Oman. Scott Erich, September 1, 2016. Institute of Current World Affairs. <https://www.icwa.org/sultanate-and-imamate-in-oman/>.
- (11) Lefebvre, Jeffrey A. February 15-18 2009, Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century. Middle East Policy Council. <https://mepc.org/journal/omans-foreign-policy-twenty-first-century>
- Khechichian, Joseph A. 1995, Oman and the World / The emergence of an independent foreign policy. ISBN: 0-8330-2332-2. 1995

- Rand. Page: 113. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/MR680.pdf
- Khamis, bin Ali Al-Sunaidi, Tarawneh Sahar, Snidi Kamis. Jan./Jun. 2022, The Sultanate of Oman's foreign policy towards the Yemeni crisis: Pillars and limitations. Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations e-ISSN 2238-6912, Vol. 11 No. 21, pp. 101-114. <https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/austral/article/view/124741/85856>
- Castelier, Sebastian. March 2013, 2020. Oman's foreign policy after Sultan Qaboos. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/03/oman-foreign-policy-gulf-sultan-qaboos-haitham.html#ixzz8I1lTia3T>Oman's Renaissance—and What Will Follow.
- Funsch, Linda Papas. January 14 2020, Oman's Renaissance—and What Will Follow. https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/14/sultan-qaboos-legacy-oman-confront-challenges-middle-east/#cookie_message_anchor.