**How Oman managed to achieve the difficult equation in establishing close relations with opposing countries Iran and Saudi Arabia**

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# Chapter 1.0 Introduction

Neutralism can be a pragmatic choice for a nation’s foreign policy in that taking such a stance can enhance their social and economic prosperity. Neutralism as a state policy connotes a policy of choosing to avoid political and ideological alignment with major power blocs so as to remain independent. Clear association with power blocs can be detrimental to some nations because it may inhibit them from developing relationships with those from other blocs—relationships that can otherwise prove beneficial for them. The term ‘neutralism” does not gravitate into a single definition and could also cover other popular political philosophies such as, “non-alignment’, "active and peaceful co-existence", "active policy for peace" , "independent policy" , "positive neutrality" , "positive neutralism" (Lyon, 1961). This indication of independence does not however prevent neutralist states from exercising their prerogatives in international affairs or issues.

Among the countries in the Middle East region, Oman is known has having taken a neutral position to preserve its cooperative relationships and ties with other countries while promoting its own independence over political matters of other states. This neutral stance also allows the country to keep itself from a paroxysm of ideology against its neighbors or any other nation. The country utilizes a balancing strategy where its foreign policy is “neither East nor West”, where the “enemy of my friend may still be my friend”, and where it finds military alliances an unnecessary part of state-building and foreign policy.

From the work of various scholars, it can be gleaned that Oman’s positive relations with most nations in the Middle East is one that has been cultivated through the years as an extension of their policy of neutrality. This is in contrast with the other more evident alliances in the region that have had their periods of fracture and realignment. This means that, temporally, not much time has been invested by these states to reinforce the ties that bind them. Moreover, factors such as geopolitical disparities have been relevant in developing opposition between countries, with most of the conflicts stemming from perceived geographical benefits. Importantly, each of the countries have developed foreign policies that seem to attract relationships with each other (Calabrese, 2016). Investor relations have also been a factor of consideration since it determines economic interactions and the proceeds from such engagements. Studies on economic perspectives between Iran and Oman, it was evident that these countries have created favorable legislation, allowing trade ties between the countries. From such baselines, it is evident that relationships have been imported through adopting frameworks favoring interactions between the countries, even with the historical opposition between these countries.

Disparities within the region have been significant in the past years where each of these countries has developed foreign policies that complement each other to create favorable relationships among them (Calabrese, 2016). The economic perspectives of Iran and Oman have allowed trade between these countries and built relationships from frameworks that favors these interactions despite oppositions occurring in the past. These opposition and conflicts among Middle East countries have stimulated the development of certain political platforms that makes it inevitable for these countries to interact. Some studies show that these oppositions have increased in number and intensity and depended on the political will of its leaders. This paper will elucidate on the issues in the region that has prompted Sultan Qaboos to take on a neutralist stance (O'reilly, 1998). It looks into Oman’s history, religion, politics, geographical location, domestic, as well as foreign policies to bring forth justifications on having a neutralist foreign policy and how it has worked for the country.

The policy of neutrality that Oman has taken is especially curious amidst the current geopolitical context of the Middle East. On one hand, there is Saudi Arabia and on the other is Iran. These two nations have had a long history of grievance and conflict and this has been exacerbated recently after taking opposing sides in the Syrian Civil War. The larger context of this study, therefore, is to consider Oman’s policy of neutrality amidst its relationship between the geopolitical behemoths of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Oman currently has built an amicable relationship with both nations even amidst the tensions that the two countries have had. The success of their neutral stance is analyzed both in terms of its historical context; that is, in how it was built and in terms of how it continues to shape Oman today. The study specifically considers the leadership of Sultan Qaboos and the rationale behind such choice of upholding a neutralist foreign policy, including what has been achieved so far in improving the internal affairs of his country.

This study recognizes neutralism as the foreign policy of the Sultanate of Oman and takes it into a deeper breadth of understanding with the use of relevant theoretical frameworks to describe how Oman has managed to achieve the difficult equation of establishing close relations with the opposing countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism are also held in scrutiny so as to provide explanations on how Oman’s foreign policy has enabled Oman to sustain its relations between the two disparate countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia without any form of alignment. The analysis of the topic covers the macro level, the divisions of the Middle East, and elements of Ibadism, as well as all other factors that could best explain how neutralism has been chosen as Oman’s foreign policy for so many years now. The aforementioned theories are defined and explained in the backdrop to best explain the reasons behind the neutralist policy of Oman, pointing out how the country is able to maintain its harmonious relations with two opposing countries; Iran and Saudi Arabia. Its geographical location, size, political beliefs and economic resources are also examined in this study as they may serve as determinants or root causes in Oman’s decision to adopt a neutralism as its foreign policy and how it is able to preserve its relations with these countries.

This paper begins by providing a historical context of their relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran along with further explanation on the current implementation of neutrality as a foreign policy in Oman. Having laid out this background information, the thesis proceeds to cover the underlying theoretical and pragmatic concepts of the topic through a critical literature review. From this, the methodology of the thesis is presented, and this is followed by the discussion of the main points of insights and analysis. The thesis ends with a synthesis and recap of the key points uncovered.

## 1.1 History of Oman’s Relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia

To provide further context on the topic, it is helpful to lay down the fundamentals of the relationship that Oman has with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the Middle East, the struggle for political stability continues with the ever-changing balance of power manifesting instability, vulnerabilities, bouts of extremism, and identity crises (Ikerd, 2015). Being caught in between the two “warring” countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia could both be an opportunity and threat to security and stability of a country like Oman. The disunity caused by different stances on the Syrian Civil War threatens to foster more violence and political and economic instability through increased radicalization and the potential levying of trade sanctions. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was bent on disassembling al-Assad’s rule in Syria while Iran contemplated the opposite; that is, to keep the regime alive. As such, King Abdullah declined to work with the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei to fight with the ISIS group.

Despite both seeking to gain a foothold and eventually eliminate ISIS, Iran and Saudi Araba have opted to work on their own. The late King Abdullah had forewarned the United States that the ties between the US and Saudi Arabia would be severed if the former supports Iran in fighting the ISIS group. This has placed the US in a difficult political situation. They also have the elimination of ISIS as a primary geopolitical interest; however, they are unable to support the Iranian effort as doing so would not be agreeable to their “largest Arab ally” and most fervent supporter in the region (Ikerd, 2015). Although these two countries vary in terms of their military capability and resources, the possibility of actual war is not remote. In comparing the two, Iran has a modest budget when it comes to defense spending compared to Saudi Arabia, which has one of the top defense allocations in the world, spending $63.7 billion in 2016 and $69.4 billion in 2017 (Ostovar, 2018). Iran, on the other hand, has been consistent when it comes to the maintenance and upgrading of its military armaments. The military capability of these two nations means that should war break out it would prove to be disastrous for the region. Even a nation that is neutral will inevitably be stranded in the crossfire of what would ensue. Historically, one can look at Sweden, the oldest known neutral country in the world, as it has now gone through preparations for war or for the emergencies that might occur during war between its neighbors given the scale of potential damage that can happen to it even if one were to only consider the extraneous impact of other warring states (Apps, 2018).

## 1.2 Contextualizing the Relationship of Iran and Saudi Arabia

For many decades, the Iran and Saudi Arabia tension has led to increased conflicts between the two neighboring countries. Despite each of them having a close relationship with Oman, their engagements have been based on the advancement of opposing interests, with no significant constructive policy dealings between them. Iran and Saudi Arabia, just like many nations in the Middle East, share the common characteristic of having the Islam as the dominant religious influence in both their social and political context. One would assume that this commonality would be a bridge to better relations but as the Middle East has shown, sharing the Islamic religion is insufficient in quelling conflict and building alliances. In the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, they are on opposing ends of Islamic sects. Whereas Shia Muslims dominate Iran, Sunni Muslims comprise most of Saudi Arabia and this divergence is one of the predominant stumbling blocks in improving the relationship between the two nations (Niblock, 2015). In terms of socio-religious models, the need to have one’s religion has being dominant in a particular geopolitical region is one of the major causes of international conflicts, especially when there are two or more nations seeking to advance their own religions (Berti & Guzansky, 2014). In this case, the competition for dominance heightens conflict and, in some cases, can lead to security and military issues in the region.

Geopolitics in the Middle East has also been influential in developing enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There are third party political influences prevalent in the Gulf, most of them coming from the west, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. Both nations have established spheres of influence in the Middle East and they seek to advance certain countries and regimes under the guise of altruistic intensions but, upon closer analysis, is revealed to have a subtext of proffering their own interests. The sustained intervention of other nations, often carrying conflicting interests, have ignited many conflicts in the Gulf region (Cafiero & Yefet, 2016; Katzman, 2015). While Saudi Arabia has a large number of oil reserves and Islam’s holiest cities, Iran’s high population also has a significant contribution to nationhood. This means that each of them tends to have conflicts of interest when it comes to the development of bilateral ties with other nations

The tension between the nations as a result of geopolitical factors stems from the assassination of Saddam Hussein, who was a Sunni Arab, whereby Saudi Arabia was seen to be in support of this move. Despite the initial rivalry based on dominance, instability in Iraq was a major contributor to relationships between these two countries. In fact, most scholars recognize that the political impact of this event intensified collision between these two countries (Chubin & Tripp, 2014). For this reason, the unsolved conflicts have piled up, coupled with common opposition noted in the Gulf region.

More recently, instability in the countries of Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have also been vital in escalating rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In analyzing the situation based on international relations, the inevitable movement of nations towards supporting competing parties in these states undergoing instability has itself precipitated even more tension (Krieg, 2016). That is, countries that found themselves in opposing interests in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain are themselves now in conflict. However, countries such as Oman have maintained a neutral approach, which has reduced possible conflicts within other nations in the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia have taken a different approach. They have, instead, focused on expanding their influence by using the civil wars and instability in these regions as proxy arenas for their display of geopolitical dominance. In proffering Assad and ensuring his reign continues, for instance, Saudi Arabia seeks to establish itself as more dominant than Iran given that Iran has chosen a different group to support in Syria. Generally, international politics usually affect national stabilities based on the policy approaches used. Furthermore, studies carried out with regard to problems facing Iran and Saudi Arabia cite external influence as a substantial factor that has affected the country’s stability (O’Brien et al. 2018). This is especially based on partnerships that each of the countries engages, and the perceived intention, given that each of the countries has trust issues when it comes to dealing with conflicts at their borderlines (Moed, 2016).

The increasing conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia could place Oman in a challenging situation as it has to protect its territory from the crossfires albeit having territorial disagreements with UAE over Musandam Peninsula. Over the years Saudi interference has been inevitable, considering the Sultanate’s proximity to Saudi Arabia. Intereference escalated further as oil was discovered in the region has Saudi Arabia has disputed the claim over the Buraimi Oasis, which was later supported by the opposition in the Jabal al-Akhdar Warfrom 1954-1959. This was unsurprising givent that Saudi Arabia was the main sponsor for its munitions and supplies. Saudi Arabia also financed Omani opposition forces during the Dhofar War from 1963 to 1976. With its dependence over Saudi’s intervention, Oman’s oil locations are vulnerable to attack.

Analyzing how Oman sustained the balance between the two opposing countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, means looking into the political structure in the Middle East (Albrecht, 2010). That is, understanding where political opposition arised has emerged and how it has influenced and has been influenced by varying social, cultural, and organizational structures. This includes but is not limited to Islamic movements, politcal parties, disagreementes among professional organizations and the academe, and the intervention of local and international non-government organizations. In many cases, conflict in the Middle East has become an integral consideration in the political systems of these countries. At the same time, it can be viewed as an instution existing within its political system but beyond the realm of its governance where each country has its own capacities, competitive advantages and interractionts based on the mutual recognition or approval between rulers or incumbents and with the opposition.

## 1.3 Understanding Oman’s Policy of Neutrality

Since the change of policies in 1970, Oman has been keen to promote neutrality, especially when handling cases of Gulf countries (Drysdale, 2015). For instance, the current disputes in Yemen and Syria have triggered reactions from Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Oman adapting a neutral position. Despite the increasing divergence in the Middle East, Oman continues to strive to balance its relations with belligerent countries in the expanse by leveraging both its strategic location and size. It has been consistent in its support for regional cooperation and has been a neutral site for dialogues, often serving as mediator among Arab states while it maintains its foreign policy independence. Remarkably, the Sultanate of Oman is the only country that is able to keep its ties with the Assad regime, and has declined any affiliation with the Saudi-led alliance in Yemen, turning away from any alignment with Saudi and the Emirate’s position against Qatar. Oman also strongly holds its position in turning the GCC into as an anti-Iran coalition. More recently, Oman hosted a conference between the Saudis and Houthis to put the Yemen conflict into finality.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Persian Gulf War are among the historical factors that have influenced the relationship between Iran and Oman. During this period, countries were fighting against each other. Beyond this, however, there were external mediators that supported each country and the identity of these mediators, the Soviets or the Americans for example, affected how Middle Eastern countries eventually negotiated themselves into political blocs. Oman, however, has always strived to maintain its relations with Iran notwithstanding the increasing animosity that it has faced with its neighbors. Since 2014, Iran and Oman have staged joint military exercises in the Strait of Hormuz in addition to signing several trade and energy agreements. To reaffirm the country’s commitment, Sultan Qaboos has met with the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and foreign minister, Javad Zarif. Oman has historically been able to play up its role as mediator between Iran and the other Arab countries, even during the talks that happened as the Iran-Iraq War waged on in the 1980’s (Lons, 2018). In fact, studies point to the mediating role that Oman played during this war as the precursor to the amicable relationship that they currently have with Iran (Beydoun & Zahawi, 2016; Al-Bolushi, 2016).

With his leadership, Sultan Qaboos proposed the development of a collective defensive force to improve security in the region. This is typically viewed as a sign of goodwill and cooperation as it promotes dialogue and a commitment towards the stabilization not just of one country but of the entire region. Nevertheless, the proposal was met with some level of opposition and this was primarily precipitated by a general apprehension by Gulf countries to the establishment of collective regional policies especially ones that are seen as affecting Iran (Walker, 2017). Even with this, however, Oman was able to maintain its neutral stance among both Saudi Arabia and Iran. In many cases, Oman is not just viewed as a mediator that liaises across these two countries. The sultanate is also viewed as an active participant is shaping the sociopolitical context of the region while still being adamantly neutral and pragmatic in its foreign policy (Aggestam & Sundell-Eklund, 2014).

For the Middle East, much of the contention comes from competition to gain influence in the region, a factor that has also affected the nature of foreign policies. For instance, problems between Iran and Saudi Arabia come from the strategies these countries use to extend their sphere of influence in the Middle East, with their actions in countries such as Yemen and Syria having a significant effect on the current relationship (Katzman, 2015). The Middle East is a particularly fickle region, a powder keg of alliances and tensions which is viewed as being the “epicenter of world crisis” and “a region of anarchy and insecurity” (Hinnesbusch, 2003). Theories like realism, structuralism, constructivism, and pluralism best explains the kind and level of interaction in the Middle East where war and instability are its most exceptional features.

While neutrality has paid dividends for Oman thus far, their policy of being “friends to all and enemy to none” could prove to be challenging in the long run. Balancing its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia could place the country in a compromising situation. This is aggravated by the fact that the tension between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims is also intensifying. This means that Oman’s foreign policy of neutrality will be put to a test and although the usefulness and feasibility of such policy has proven itself. It showed this when it mediated clandestinely between the US and Iran in 2013 and the historic nuclear deal signed in Geneva in 2015. It has also played an important role in freeing the American hostages in Yemen. The changing geopolitical context, however, along with increasing tensions has placed the future of the efficacy of this policy in limbo. As this happens, Oman continues to uphold its belief that it has to remain neutral in order to save the Middle East from further sinking into chaos.

The inevitable consequence, however, is that Oman must endure all the other repercussions of staying neutral. With its budget deficit caused by the lowering of its oil exports in the world market, Oman struggles to raise its trade relations with Iran to ramp up its economy. In 2017, the country joined a Saudi-led coalition to fight ISIS and similar militants suspected to serve Tehran in the Muslim world. Oman’s struggle to satisfy its wealthier neighbors in the Gulf while balancing both its political goals and economic interests has become more evident in recent years. It is also being laid bare as the Arabs are becoming more outspoken in their disdain for neutrality in the face of war. Internally, Oman also faces uncertainty with no known successor for Sultan Qaboos, the primary architect and advocate for the sultanate’s stance of neutrality.

The foreign policy of neutrality that Oman has taken for several decades is now showing its limits. Given the extent of the tension existing within the region, the overarching question, therefore, is how exactly Oman can maintain this neutral stance particularly in its relationship with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This pragmatic approach to foreign policy and the success that the sultanate has had thus far is a lesson to other states seeking to avoid chaos and mediate across geopolitical behemoths in their respective regions. The long-term analysis of this situation, therefore, can help in developing strategies not only for Oman but elsewhere.

## 1.4 Rational and Purpose of the Research

With opposition and conflicts continuously manifesting within the Gulf, the challenge of unifying and stabilizing the region has become more difficult. Amidst all of this, the Sultanate of Oman has maintained close relations with conflicting countries, with most of its interactions involving trade deals and programs of economic development. For a Gulf country, this may be unnatural as countries in the region normally choose a political and ideological alliance and stand by them; this adamant adherence to political blocs is the same reason why conflicts are rife in the region. Oman’s attitude towards these conflicts and tensions has always been one of neutrality and non-interference in the affairs of others and respect for the decisions of their neighbors (Al-Bolushi, 2016).

The main purpose of this research is to examine the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia with focus on how Oman has been negotiating its position within this conflict based on its own foreign policy of neutrality that it has long adopted. At the same time, this paper will explore how Oman manages to maintain its good relations with the two dominant countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia even in light of the animosity across the two states. In addition, the thesis seeks to provide the logic and framework behind Oman’s initial conceptualization of its foreign policy of neutrality. In doing so it provides a deeper understanding of this particular foreign policy stance and explores its value in volatile conflict situations and regions.

In the midst of nations that are locked in conflicts, it is challenging to calibrate a foreign policy that balances a nation’s own interests and the interests of the two nations that they are in the middle of. Much of the difficulty lies in the ease with which the nation can be implicated to be siding with one party more than the other especially because turmoil breeds paranoia (Cafiero & Yefet, 2016). Understanding how this balanced and neutral foreign policy approach can be taken by considering the factors that were emergent in the way that Oman negotiated its position between Iran and Saudi Arabia through the years while maintaining the visage of neutrality.

## 1.5 Research Question

In this study, the overarching research topic that is to be explored is to determine how the Sultanate of Oman is able to maintain its close relations with the opposing countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia requires deeper understanding of the development of opposition in the Middle East region. Stemming from this, main research question is as follows: How does Oman manage to maintain good relations with the two regional hegemons, Saudi Arabia and Iran? Understanding the main strategy behind such policy can be critical to maintaining long term peace not just with the two major powers in the region but can also be a lesson to other states in the region and worldwide.

## 1.5 Scope and Limitation

The scope of the research is confined on the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the interactions of Oman with these countries given its neutral stance in their disagreement. It covers how Oman is affected and influenced by the factor and political strategies of these countries to gain dominance over each other. It includes the current and initial foreign policies adopted by countries that determine the kind of relationships that they have (Niblock, 2015). In the current study, the main aim is to understand the factors considered by neutral countries that have enabled them to overcome the tendency to take sides to the extent of having close relationships with opposing countries where certain gains can be derived from both ends.

The study evolves only on the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia although mention is also made on historical data that may have led Oman to adopt a neutral foreign policy. As such, specific theories are discussed to build up the rationale behind the adoption of a neutralist stance, at the same time factors such as geopolitical, economic, social, policies and cultural factors will also form part of the discussion to come up with an in-depth analysis on how Oman is able to achieve close ties with the opposing countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia. In addition, the study excludes the discussion of its relationships with other Gulf countries but will also include other possibilities for developing an alliance with countries where Iran and Saudi Arabia are associated with.

## 1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is will be composed of five main parts. In this first chapter, the highlight was in laying down the fundamentals of the research question as well as in setting the parameters of the discussion. In particular, it was shown that Oman has adopted a policy of neutrality in its foreign affairs and has managed to do this through the years even amidst the difficult and tense context of Middle Eastern geopolitics. It was underscored that the thesis will aim to understand how this has been possible with emphasis on the positive relationship that the sultanate has between the conflicting states of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

To expand on the discussion, the second chapter of the thesis will be a review of related literature. A broader discussion of the topic will be covered, highlighting the historical context of Oman’s foreign policy, particularly its precursors. In addition to this, more details on how it built its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran will be covered as well.

Having set the foundations of the thesis, the third chapter presents the methodology of the research; that is, the approach through which the study seeks to answer the research question that has been established. Details on the research approach and the primary framework of analysis of the study is presented in this chapter.

The fourth chapter expands on the knowledge that has been gathered in from the literature review and utilizes the established analytical framework to answer the research question posed. The discussions and findings presented in this chapter is to be compared and contrasted with established literature on the matter so as to better highlight the lessons learned from the case study of Oman.

The thesis ends by providing the main conclusions of the study and presenting policy recommendations in line with the stance of neutrality taken by Oman based on the lessons learned from engaging with conflicting nations. Points for future research are also provided in this final chapter.

# Chapter 2.0 Literature Review

This section contains a description and evaluation of relevant writings from articles, journals, books, conferences, reports, electronic sources, websites, and similar sources to provide and add understanding to the topic. At the same, it draws ideas and interpretations on various theories, approaches, and perspectives regarding the study to shed light on how Oman is able to manage the difficult equation in establishing close relations with opposing countries Iran and Saudi Arabia. The analysis laid down in these writings also points the direction towards further research regarding the study.

The topics included in this part of the research include historical events pointing out primarily to the divisions in the Middle East which can be according to their geographical locations, size, and other social and economic variables, including Ibadism, that may have led to the divisiveness in the region; how the animosity as between Iran and Saudi Arabia has evolved; the choice over neutrality as a foreign policy for Oman; different theoretical frameworks on neutralism. This literature review especially looks into relevant factors such as the extent and prevalence of opposition in the region, the precursors to the conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia and how they have shaped Middle Eastern geopolitics, and the various relational variables that exist across Oman, Iran, and Saudi Arabia These are covered to provide answers to the research questions raised in this study. In other words, the collection of writings in these topics will be the basis of analysis and rationalization for Oman’s foreign policy and how it is able to balance the difficult equation in establishing relations with opposing countries Iran and Saudi Arabia.

## 2.1 Oman’s Foreign Policy

A country’s foreign policy reflects its principles and beliefs, as well as the personality of its leader and the characteristics and limitations of its sociopolitical system. Despite having its own problems at home, the Sultanate of Oman has distanced itself from any regional quarrels, and is considered by many as the “Switzerland of the Middle East” (Alkhereiji, 2018). The Sultanate of Oman has balanced its relations between opposing countries in the Arab World, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran, acting as a mediator between the two. This indication of independence, however, may be compromised by the growing political tension especially with the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear program of Iran, which dashed the hopes of mediation with Oman while reigniting the tension between the two countries (Lons, Oman, 2018). Since Sultan Qaboos came into power, he has made obvious attempts to appease relations of Gulf countries making neutrality and mediation as the core of Oman’s foreign policy.

Scholars describe the 20th century as one of the key periods in history when countries developed definitive policies that delineated both their ideological stance and politcal alliances. In doing so, nations have calibrated both their internal and external sociopolitical orientation (Zahlan, 2016). In the Gulf region, national policies have become a source of relationship factors, based on how respective countries define their relationships with others (Almezaini & Rickli, 2016). Over the years, the modernization and adoption of globalization has seen regional integration, which have been influential in the adoption of national foreign policies. Globalization is integral because it encourages open doors and increased collaboration between states in ctrast to more protectionist policies in both trade and politcs.

The development of a nation’s foreign policy is subject to the specific regional context that they are in. That is, they have to negotiate the myriad of dealings and relationships that exist within nations in their regions and then move towards crafting a foreign policy that fits in the puzzle while benefiting their interests. In the case of the Middle East, given that the region is rife with tensions and conflicts across states, nations craft foreign policies in view of individual interests while also being cautious about infringing upon and causing further conflict with other nations. It is this pragmatic and neutral approach that has been adopted successfully by Oman so far (Cordesman, 2018).

One of the major determinants of Oman’s foreign policy is its relationships with its neighbors. The bone of contention emanates from the presence of conflicting borderlines, as well as disputes and issues that would destabilize communities along these lines like the dispute between Oman and UAE. On the inception of the new government in 1970, the border dispute was resolved, which led to the incorporation of the agreements in a subsequent foreign policy. From such considerations, it is evident that countries embarked on deriving policies that promote peace, especially with the neighbors, since it encourages social and economic development (Zahlan, 2016). Notably, the Gulf region has been one of the regions experiencing massive and rapid changes in foreign policies in the recent past, where most of them are shaped by regional ties. In the case of Oman, the country has adopted practices that embrace neutrality and peace. Despite changes in leadership over the years, Oman has embarked on a move towards ensuring that all foreign policies adopted promote regionalism (Al-Bolushi, 2016). This is despite existing opposition between the countries in the Gulf, which have led to reduced interactions between these regional countries.

During the the two World Wars, foreign policies determined how countries would participate in international affairs. In the case of Oman, the approach of neutrality and adoption of Ibadism was influential in changes made in the foreign policies (Walker, 2017). Moreover, its view towards providing support to other countries without compeltely shunning relations from other nations was also established. The uncorporation of inputs from both domestic and international environment also have a significant impact on policies formulated by the first ministry of affairs. Importantly, aspects of national security and stability means that countries that caused issues were the only ones that Oman had full difficulty in engaging with because of the direct harm these countries placed on the sultante’s best interests and national soveriegnty (Akpınar, 2015). Even though some of these have been altered, the original foreign policies seem to have had an impact on engagement with countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In the 1980s, Oman embraced a dual track form of regional policy, in an effort to reduce any forms of conflicts with the countries in the Gulf. During this period, this policy was effective in building a positive and peaceful reputation, in the midst of opposition and disunity. From a social perspective, such an approach is critical in improving international and regional ties, especially with countries that are willing to have effective regional development (Chubin & Tripp, 2014). Changes and the diversification of sources of conflicts and terms of engagement have been among the factors influencing changes to the sultante’s foreign policy approach and overall relationshup with other countries in the region. In a survey on current foreign policies across the Gulf, it was revealed that most countries have embraced globalization and regional development, even though the level of acceptance differs (Barzegar, 2014). In the case of Oman, the current foreign policies are a factor of promoting the variables of neutrality, security, and peace across the region.

## 2.2 Geographical Location

Several authors argue that Oman’s geographic location is serves as a reason for its good relations. For example, Lons argues that, Oman’s geographical location on the Strait of Hormuz and just a few kilometers from the Iranian coastline has made the Sultanate more vulnerable to regional strains and the lures of land grabs from its neighbors (Lons, 2018). Oman’s control of the Musandam Peninsula which is just outside its lawful territory, is divided by the UAE and by its entrance to the sea. This is a choke point on the strait, whichis a factor in Saudi Arabia’s productin of oil since much of its production is derived from the eastern provinces and Strait of Hormuz, the passage of many tankers to its foreign markets.

Oman’s geographic location also makes it a key partner when it comes to trade relations as it is positioned in the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, surrounded by the United Arab Emirates in northern part, Yemen on the West, and in Saudi Arabia in the northwest. Its inner part is demarcated by Muscat, Oman proper, and a coastal plain spanning Al-Hajar Mountains. Historically, Oman’s location in the Arabian Sea has made it a major destination for trade where traders would convoy from Syria and Iraq when going down to Oman prior to their journey to the East African and Indian markets. Notwithstanding its deep-water ports, Muscat was once captured by the Portuguese in 1552 in pursuit of its colonial goals then gained its independence in the middle of 1600. In the 1700s, Omani merchants established a strong presence in the trade in the Indian Ocean with Oman becoming a colonial authority in Eastern Africa. Its strategic position near Iran where the operations of British Petroleum is located led to British interference in the affairs of the state and this lasted till the 1970s.

Despite Oman’s current stance and foreign policy approach of neutrality, some of its geographical neighbors are not completely on board. The sultnate has lately been at the receiving end of political and economic pressures from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to kowtow to their interests. This is evidenced by the UAE slowing down the construction of the rail line between Oman and its GCC neighbors, which has led to negative effects on Omani businesses. Added to that is the increased military activity of UAE throughout the Middle East area where their troops have made their presence felt with their remarkable advances in Yemen, Mahrah region near Oman’s border and the cities of Mocha, Aden, Mukall and Sccotra. The UAE has also been making more investments in the Sultanate, particularly in the Al Batinah border region which has had some economic and political repercussions (Lons, 2018).

Despite the attempt at political and economic pressuring extended by the Emirates, it is still feasible for Oman to take advantage of its strategic location and turn to other countries to overcome competition and control of trade routes in the region to Asia and Europe. It can, for instance, establish a better relationship with China and India to capitalize on their huge oil investments. Considering China’s harbors in the region it can ably create the new Silk Route, in addition to the investments already made for the development of Dubai, Pakistan, Gwadar, and Chabahar in Iran, Duqm, and Sohar. China has a heavy dependence on hydrocarbons and is the chief buyer of oil and gas in the Middle East region along with India. Oman’s geographic location is strategic wherein it can connect to outside markets through its ports and even directly by rail through the Arabian Peninsula.

## 2.3 Understanding Ibadism

Ibadism is a philosophical school of Islam that is sometimes considered as a traditional sect of Muslims. It is observed in Oman, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya and is the most dominant form of Islam in Oman. It has, as such, been a factor in shaping the common beliefs, practices, and cultures of the country. Given that religion influences foreign policy by shaping the social mores that a country abides by, it can be argued that Ibadism has had an influence on Oman’s foreign policy stance (Rabiee et al. 2015). In fact, inasmuch as Ibadism is considered as a sect, it has maintained good values that are aligned with the agenda of Oman in maintaining peace and security. One of the notable values of Ibadism is tolerance and this has embedded itself not just in the national psyche but also across sociopolitical approaches. Oman, for instance, oes not encourage the use of violence to attain political goals. Largely, this has promoted the values of patience and reduced social vices, making the country a peaceful and attractive destination to its neighbors (Colombo, 2017). The virtue ofIbadism is clearer whencompared to the case of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, which is decidedly more aggressive in its orientation and less tolernant towards divergent views. It could be argued that Ibadism is a strong force of influence in the conception of Oman’s foreign policy of neutrality and non-intervention and it has allowed for the temperament needed to maintain good relations with conflicting countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It was in the eigth centruy when Omanis first adopted Ibadi Islam, a sect that preceding both the Sunni and Shi’ite denominations. Oman is the first country where majority of people has adopted Ibadism with 3.4 miullion of the Ibadis composed of Omanis and with only 25% of Oman’s population are non-Ibadis. Ibadism is the major pillar for Oman’s national identity and thus, its neutral foreign policy is largely enmeshed with its Ibadi beliefs. Ibadism put upfromt an “agreeable disagreement with friends and peaceful compromise with enemies.” The country’s legal system also protects religious minorities like the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Sunnis, and Shi’ites. This is manifested in the fact that defamation of any religion or sect is a crime in the Oman.

In accordance to Ibadist tradition, everyone in Oman has the freedom to practice their own religious rites for as long as they are not disruptive to public order. Posting messages online that signify disparagemnt of any religious values is meted with imprisonment and fine of US$2,600 (Cafiero, 2015). In contrast to Saudi Arabia that resorts to public beheadings for apostasy and corporal punishment for blasphemy, Oman stands as more accommodating and tolerant. Oman also allows the building of temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras, and allows different Muslim sects to pray in the same mosque or temple.

National security entails peaceful internal and external coexistence towards the goal of reducing the propensity for instability and outside the country. Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have all embarked on strategies to ensure their own relative security and this is influenced by social mores. This means that Ibadism permeates across the policies developed by Oman as well. It has to be emphasized, moreover, that regional security and national security are not mutually exclusive concepts. That is, as nations work towards securing themselves they inevitably influence the balance of power and level of security of the region that they are a part of (Rabiee et al. 2015). As such, the close relations between Oman and Iran have seen the development of defense forces that have helped in offsetting terrorism in both countries. Aspects of border and community resolutions have also been part of Oman’s national and foreign policy, further improving security from within and outside the country (Aggestam & Sundell-Eklund, 2014). The conclusion here is that the Ibadist values of tolernace and finding the middle ground has beene extended by the sultanate not only to position itself safely within the region but also to influence regional security.

## 2.4 Relational Factors between Oman and Iran

At the onset of the leadership of Sultan Qaboos, much of the achievements came in reducing national conflicts, making Oman a peaceful country. The policies used to mitigate issues and disputes affecting certain regions were effective in bringing peace and stabilizing the region. To some extent, Oman was perceived to be a peaceful country in the midst of conflicts from surrounding countries, including Iran. In a study carried out to determine the prevalence of opposition in the Gulf region, it was established that most neighboring countries tend to have the highest conflicts (Aggestam & Sundell-Eklund, 2014). For this reason, the presence of peaceful and close relations between Oman and Iran has been a factor of consideration, with different scholars looking into the possibilities of the countries having such close ties. Globally, engagements between neighboring countries are influenced by engagements at the borderline, whereby there is a high possibility of conflicts in the communities available (Chubin & Tripp, 2014). For this reason, the generation of peace and stability and solving issues affecting Oman’s border was one of the gestures of intended good relations with Iran. This aligns to models of international relations which recognize the mandate of each country in showcasing the desire to have and maintain good relations with their neighbors.

According to a recent publication by the Center for Iranian Studies, Oman is the closest to Iran, when compared to the countries in the Gulf (Al-Bolushi, 2016). Due to the good historical interactions, the countries share common structures such as the gateway of oil and gas transfer. Despite these modern developments that have intensified the relationships between these countries, studies recognized the non-intervention philosophy of Oman’s foreign policy, which has enabled its diplomatic interactions with Iran. Through the non-intervention approaches, Oman acted as a mediator for Iran in most of the wars, a factor that brought stability to the country. Combining this with the fact that Oman had already embarked on stabilizing and maintaining peace in her country, it enabled bilateral developments that have continued to cement these close ties. This includes in the maintenance of security through military cooperation, which contrasts its relations with other neighboring countries in the region (Akpınar, 2015).

## 2.5 Relational Factors between Oman and Saudi Arabia

Being neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Oman have been through various procedures that have determined and influenced the nature of the relationship that they currently have. The two countries have a history of conflicts, especially during the period when Oman utilized the policies based on isolationism (Niblock, 2015). One of the achievements of Sultan Qaboos was in dealing with conflicts arising from Oman’s territorial disputes that had seen the acquisition of nine villages belonging to Saudi Arabia. From a global perspective, territorial disputes take the highest percentage when it comes to creating enmity between neighboring countries. Scholars identify sanity reconciliations as the baselines for eradicating such disputes, in addition to having definite territorial rules and regulations (Akpınar, 2015). In this case, the borderline agreement of 1990 was an indication of the end of a conflict, which also promoted the relationships between these two countries. The historical engagements can also be derived from the Dhofar rebellion, whereby Saudi Arabia was part of the countries that helped Oman on financial matters. Therefore, most of the preceding happenings acted as reciprocals of such engagements, which scholars argue could be among the factors influencing the current close relations despite having to be oppositions in the past (Almezaini & Rickli, 2016).

The close proximity between these two countries makes them share similar geopolitical factors, despite having different leadership structures. According to a comparative study between these two countries, religious heritage, language, Bedouin culture and rapid social and economic developments are the common similarities between these countries (Aggestam & Sundell-Eklund, 2014). The research cites the fact that both of these countries have faced transformation at similar times as part of the reasons why they have been experiencing such commonalities (Cafiero & Yefet, 2016).

Globally, neighboring countries have always indicated differences in growth rates, unless there is a common policy guiding trade and other social developments. In this case, these similarities seem to be favorable for the maintenance of close ties, given that both of these countries utilize national policies that are almost similar. Such measures make it easy to have interactions that would have otherwise been mitigated through contrasting requirements between the policies of these countries (Beydoun & Zahawi, 2016).

With a common goal of economic development, trade ties are functional tools in improving ties between various countries. In this case, Oman and Saudi Arabia have developed foreign policies and guidelines that have opened up trade within their countries. Trade development requires expansions, with regions being important tools in providing room for expansion. In relation to study on trade ties in the Gulf, most of the issues have been on marketing non-oil products, which is a factor considered in the case of Oman and Saudi Arabia (Cafiero & Yefet, 2016). In that regard, the current increase in trade between the two countries could also be part of the reasons for the close ties. Bilateral engagements across the world were embarked on mutually beneficial factors, which in turn created close and better relations between the countries involved. For this reason, scholars believe that the fact that these two countries have a similar growth rate would further intensify the relations in the future.

## 2.7 The Role of the Leadership in Oman’s Foreign Policy

When considering significant developments in Oman, the 1970s presents a period of many transformations that influenced national and regional ties. Qaboos bin Said assumed power in 1970 with a focus on developments that would place Oman in a position to incorporate changes experienced across the globe. For the previous rule by Sultan Said bin Taimur, the country had adopted isolationism which meant that most of the policies embarked on benefits carried for the country. Isolationism leads to specialization on matters of national interest, which usually promotes the cultural perspective of individualism.

During such tenures, countries tend to lose regional and international ties, given that there are no frameworks for interactions. Therefore, the transition by the new Sultan in 1970 was a great move to open up the country in an effort to increase regional and international interactions. In relation to studies on regionalism, it is one of the significant influencers of policies that countries adopt, given that the aim is to derive a functional criterion to maximize good relations (Barzegar, 2014).

Geopolitical factors were among the main items that influenced relations and policies that Oman adopted before the 1970s. Studies identify these factors in relation to their significance to the leadership agenda, which in the case of Oman, changed with each Sultan. This is because of the need to consider all policies that would place Oman at the helm of achieving suitable geopolitical derivatives, without considering regional or even international impact. While addressing historical significance in determining current opposition in the Gulf region, scholars consider such approaches of leadership as part of the influencers (Drysdale, 2015). Social and political divisions were part of the geopolitical era, factors that affected national unity. In relation to studies on the impact of the change of leadership, adopting inclusivity and synergetic polices was a critical factor in the changing regional ties of Oman since 1970. Importantly, the unity developed through this change of leadership promoted good cultural values, all which have been critical in the countries relations over the past years.

On the onset of the 21st century, Oman had transformed most of its leadership cultures and policies, due to factors of modernization. According to a study on sources of international conflicts, leadership structuring and adoption of mediation factors have been considered as quite substantial (Aras & Falk, 2015). In this case, the development of government structures to handle various sources of conflicts was an important factor in influencing relations with other countries. Due to aspects of sovereignty, countries only engage through foreign policies which promote the introduction of the ministry of foreign affairs that was to handle all issues affecting international deals (Zahlan, 2016).

Across the globe, interactions between countries have been effective through these ministries, which extend into determining what form of engagements and opportunities may be availed from these countries. In a research targeting the understanding of all the policies and strategies that have influenced the current state, it recognizes inputs from the leadership and adopted cultures that have focused on changing isolationism (Aras & Falk, 2015).

Through globalization and modernization, social and economic development has been part of Oman’s main focus, in an effort to maintain competition within and without the Gulf region. During the 1970s, the country was operating without the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), meaning that all policies adopted were based on national interest. Over the years, oil has become a critical factor in determining the development of Oman, including the nature of regional and international ties that the country adopts (Barzegar, 2014). This is in relation to the need of having a comprehensive approach that would generate competitive deals across the region. Evidently, growth in social and economic factors tends to promote the need for expansion which could be a factor in close relations between Oman and hegemony countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia (Al-Bolushi, 2016). In fact, scholars evaluating trends in Oman’s social development indicate the adoption of practices that promote relations with friendly countries in the region.

## 2.8 Summary of Literature Review

From this section, it is evident that Oman has been in close relationships with the hegemonic countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The sources of these relationships differ, with much emphasis been on reciprocating historical ties and concept of neutrality that the country has adopted. Foreign policy has been critical in placing Oman in a core position to develop these relationships, through posing as a neutral country with a commitment to security and peace. Ibadism, a religion that dominates the country has also contributed to these good relations, due to impact on social values. The change of leadership in 1970 introduced regionalism, which is part of the reasons for the close relationships. In addition, mediation roles in each of these countries have been important in determining how foreign policies are designed, which forms of the historical ties. At the same time, it is clear that Iran and Saudi Arabia are rivals based on geopolitical factors and the competition for dominance, which is largely influenced by external factors. It also illustrates how Oman maintain its good relations with the two opposing countries from a pragmatic perspective.

# Chapter 3.0 Methodology

This chapter of the study presents the methodology used to answer research questions and evaluate “how Oman is able to achieve the difficult equation in establishing close relations with opposing countries and Saudi Arabia”. The choice of methodology is primarily laid down in the chapter to determine the approach to use in the study.

The paper focuses on the period between 1970, when the reign of Sultan Qaboos began, until the present time. Since the 1970s, Oman has been facing a number of transformations that have influenced the relationship with regional countries, as well as interactions within the country. Importantly, the changes made in developing the foreign policy since this period have been instrumental in the good relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia. The relations between Oman and the two hegemonic countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia is one that presents unique characterization, considering that both of these countries have not been in good terms (Rabiee et al. 2015). Since the 70s, modernization of the foreign policy has focused on addressing any upcoming issues that would influence bad relations with other countries. Neutrality in the current foreign policy dates from this period of the 70s, since it is during that time that the country launched the concept of regionalism into the foreign policy under the rule of Sultan Qaboos.

## 3.1 Choice of Methodology

Choice of a methodology is initiated by first collecting relevant data and information concerning Oman’s neutral foreign policy and how it is able to maintain the difficult equation with its relations with the opposing countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia. As such, the basic aim of the analysis is to first gain an understanding and conceptualize Oman’s neutral policy and how it is able to sustain good relations between two opposing countries; Iran and Saudi Arabia. In as much as focus is on Oman as the case being studied, a systemic approach is considered to conduct an analysis in different levels; that is, within its domestic environment and international environments. Thus, the method chosen for this research is a case study approach. The use of several empirical studies has provided the intellectual context that is needed to rationalize Oman’s choice for a neutral foreign policy.

Importantly, the baseline was on the exploratory nature of data collection, given that the research was started with general characteristics of the case under study before diving into detailed criteria that could have affected current relationships of Oman and these countries. Under case study methods the development of literature and content for the current study is dependent on available information regarding Oman and the two hegemonic countries. (Neuendorf et al. 2016). In this case, the conclusions were derivatives of utilizing information from these sources, in addition to interpreting and analyzing some of the concepts derived from these sources where theoretical frameworks were utilized to rationalize the choice of a neutral foreign policy and how Oman was able to achieve the difficult equation of maintaining its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

## 3.2 The Value of Investigating Neutrality as a Foreign Policy

Basically, “neutrality” connotes a “non-involvement” in a dispute; “in the struggle for life and dominance” (Rubin, 1987). In international law, it is considered as a legal status that arises out of nonparticipation in a war between states; it is an attitude of objectivity towards belligerents, at the same time, being able to be recognized of this impartiality by the nations engaged in war and out of this legal standing are rights and duties as between neutrals and war participants. Most of the laws regarding the rights and duties of neutral states can be found in the Declaration of Paris of 1856, the Hague Convention V 1907, and Hague Convention XIII 1907, covering neutrality in land wars and maritime wars; respectively. One of its salient features was the recommendation of issuing a declaration of neutrality when war breaks out between nations. However, such declaration is not considered a requirement in international law, thereby providing neutral states the prerogative to cancel, change or amend it neutral stance without any prejudice to any or all the belligerents. At the same time, territorial integrity is preserved with the disallowance of any of the belligerents to use neutral territory. The neutral state holds the right to defend its territory and preserve its diplomatic communications and ties with other neutral states and belligerents, more so the right to demand compliance towards its domestic regulations and to stay away from its commercial interactions, unless such interventions is defensible or acceptable under international law.

The basic concepts of neutrality were however modified after the coming of the two world wars, and by the middle of the 20th century the traditional area of freedom bequeath to neutrals was sharply reduced. With the modification of the UN Charter, the members of the Security Council no longer have the right to take any military action or coercive measures against an aggressor, and many business enterprises were no longer legally allowed to trade with belligerents as private traders.

Two of the oldest neutral states in Europe; Sweden and Switzerland have successfully embraced neutrality as its foreign policy. Their adoption of the policy has been subject of debates and yet they remain unwavering as they were able to maneuver their countries amidst the course of war among its neighbors, and ultimately have avoided any losses or destruction as a consequence. Sweden, which is the first nation in the world to have declared its neutrality in 1814 and has enjoyed peace for the longest time; although on the part of Switzerland, its “neutrality” was self-imposed, permanent and arms to ensure the maintenance of external security. Both countries have not engaged themselves in foreign wars since their declaration of neutrality. Notably, the preservation of its neutrality has become an ultimate goal for Switzerland to the point of even refusing to join the United Nations back in 2002.

In the Middle East, the struggle for political stability continues with the ever-changing balance of power manifesting instability, vulnerabilities, extremism, and identity crises (Ikerd, 2015). Being caught in between the two “warring” countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia could both be an opportunity and threat to security and stability of a country like Oman. The disunity caused by different stances on the Syrian Civil War, can foster more violence, more political and economic instability and radicalism. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was then bent on disassembling al-Assad’s rule in Syria while Iran contemplates of the opposite that is, to keep the regime alive and declined to work with the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei to fight with the ISIS group. Despite having the same objective to undo the ISIS, Iran and Saudi Araba have opted to work on their own. The late King Abdullah had forewarned even the United States that the ties between the US and Saudi Arabia would be severed if the former supports Iran in fighting the ISIS group. It is remarkable, that these key differences and type of power play has placed the United States in a tight situation; gaining control over a negotiating adversary while trying to be agreeable to its “largest Arab ally” (Ikerd, 2015). Although these two countries vary in terms of their military capability and resources, the possibilities of actual war is not remote. Iran may have a modest budget when it comes to defense spending compared to Saudi Arabia, which is one of the top defense allocation in the world at $63.7 billion in 2016 and $69.4 billion in 2017 (Ostovar, 2018); Iran has never been remiss when it comes to the maintenance and upgrading of its military armaments. It goes to show that the different defense postures of these countries is not guarantee for a neutral country to be caught in the crossfire and not be affected by such consequence. In reality, even Sweden, the oldest known neutral country in the world now prepares itself for war (Apps, 2018) or for the emergencies that might occur during war between its neighbors.

## 3.2 Research Approach

Research approach entails the exact criteria used in developing the information collected for the study. Given the context of the current study, the case study approach was used. Case studies hold that assumptions are created and made by people as they interact with the world, along with their subjective and inter-subjective meanings attached to these assumptions whereby they attempt to understand the phenomena by assessing the meanings that are attached to them. It emphasizes on qualitative data derived from secondary sources and personal observations (Walsham, 2006).

The data collected were utilized to decide on a model for analyzing foreign policy and evaluating the variables involved in the relationship identified which has influenced the nature of interactions between these countries. In particular, the ‘level of analysis model’ was adopted since it depends on individual reasoning “to make informed and calculated decisions that could maximize state-level interactions between nations and government behavior as units of analysis” (Norwich University, 2017) . In this case, rationalizations behind state actions were formulated based on the data and information gathered from secondary sources. The rational actor approach provides understanding to the goals and intentions of a foreign policy even cases of inavailability of complete information to substantiate objective evaluation made with the facts involved.

In other words, while there can be many perspectives on the main topic, the research was conducted with a focus on the stated research questions to come up with the variables that have to be evaluated for the study and acquire better understanding of the relationship between Oman and the hegemony countries; i.e., Iran and Saudi Arabia; at the same, the research made use of historical information from 1970 to the present. This was helpful in defining policy frameworks that were relevant during these periods, as they are deemed to have an influence on the current relations between these countries. All sources of information were recorded after the sources of content were verified as publications of reviewed articles to give factual information for use in the current study. This in turn, has further enhanced the quality of research and its integrity along with the conclusions and recommendations made in the study.

The research considered several literature materials, providing a diverse base of considering and approaching the variables of the research. This included published and academic journals, articles and dissertations. Most of the content used came up with a different perspective on the current variable, which was influential in developing the findings. For this reason, it was possible to come up with graphical analysis-based insignificance of each variable, based on previous researches.

# Chapter 4.0 Findings and Discussion

In this section, the focus is on summarizing the key themes uncovered in the study in pursuit of answering the key research question of understanding how Oman’s stance of neutrality in its foreign policy has influenced its ability to foster good relations between both Iran and Saudi Arabia even amidst the consistent flaring conflicts emerging across these two political powerhouses in the Middle East. Contextualizing this, it is important to understand how, over the years, the Gulf region has been experiencing much conflict between countries, a factor that has affected unity among them (Aggestam & Sundell-Eklund, 2014). Iran and Saudi Arabia has a long history of rivalry in the region. To begin with, they are predominantly composed by two of the major factions of Islam with Saudi Arabia being a stronghold of Sunni Muslims and Iran being primarily composed of Shia Muslims. The main precursor to the modern-day conflict of the two nations, however, was the Iranian Revolution that saw the ouster of the last monarch of Iran and the conversion of the country into an Islamic republic. Two factors are of note here. The first is the fact that Saudi Arabia had long been a close ally of the United States and was, therefore, viewed by the Iranians as being a part of the effort of the US to prevent the revolution from coming to fruition. Second is the fact that Saudi Arabia saw the transformation and rise of Iran as an Islamic republic as a threat to their position in the region as they had been the primary Islamic political body in the Middle East.

Several other factors such as the Gulf War, the US occupation of Iraq, and the controversial nuclear program of Iran has led to tensions waxing and waning through the years. The most recent point of contention of the two nations has been the Syrian civil war with both sides accusing the other of supporting terrorism. In this conflict, Saudi Arabia has been militarily helping rebel groups as is the interest of the United States while Iran continues to prop up the current government of Syria. Whichever side wins will extend the sphere of influence of the supporting nation. This means that Saudi Arabia and Iran is using Syria as a proxy arena of their conflict. Between these two poles of opposition is Oman, which has somehow managed to remain amicable with Saudi Arabia and Iran even if the nations have competing interests. This curious position is the main aspect of investigation that is covered in this thesis.

It is helpful to briefly cover the relationship that Oman has with both parties before going into a more detailed analysis of the situation. With regard to Oman and Saudi Arabia, the relationship has been positive as they share the fact that they were both British territories before the exit of the British from the Middle East in 1971. Since then, this commonality has bonded the two nations. Currently, Oman has two embassies in Saudi Arabia, one in Riyadh and another in Jeddah, while Saudi Arabia has an embassy in the Omani capital of Muscat. This represents an open line of dialogue and communication between the two nations. Where they differ is in their practice of Islam. Oman is an Ibadi nation while Saudi Arabia is Sunni. This has not, however, prevented continued relations between the two nations primarily because there are no strong tensions between Ibadis and Sunnis in the same way that there is a strong rivalry between the Sunni and Shia Muslims. This is likely also helped by the fact that Oman has not actively worked against Saudi Arabia and they share common trade and economic interests that have held their relationship together. Oman’s role as an amicable third party has led it to serving as a mediator for Saudi Arabia and other nations that is has had conflicts with. The most recent example of this is in the diplomatic standoff that Saudi Arabia has with Qatar. Oman is working towards easing the tension across the two nations and reestablishing a constructive line of communication.

The type of relationship that Oman has with Iran is similar. There is, however, the added fact that the two nations share some level of cultural overlap as a quarter of Oman’s population is composed of the Baloch which are an ethnically Iranian group. There has been a long history of moderation exerted by Oman towards Iran, as well. This has allowed for relations between the two to remain consistent even as Iran has been shunned by many nations in the Middle East that have allied with Saudi Arabia. For instance, in the Iran-Iraq war, Oman was supportive of resolutions in the United Nations and other fora to end the conflict. In another case, this would have led to animosity with Iran. However, backroom conversations held in Muscat between the two nations allowed for their diplomatic relationship to persist even if Oman was outwardly supportive of ending the war. In several cases, Oman has also served as mediator for Iran in talks with Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom. Beyond the political nature of their relationship, there is a strong economic undercurrent as well. Various energy agreements figuring in the billions have been signed between Oman and Iran. Pipelines for natural gas transfer from Iran to the sultanate is also in the works. It is apparent, therefore, that a constructive relationship exists between Iran and Oman and this is even under the constantly tense political situation in the Middle East. Thus far, no signs of strain in the relationship is apparent with Oman even being involved in the nuclear disarmament deal that was signed by the Obama administration with Iran.

All these factors show that here is indeed a strong point of tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran and that Oman is clearly unaffected by the tensions between the nations. The rest of this chapter will highlight the key themes that need to be considered. It begins with a discussion of the common factors that lie across all three nations. There has to be social, economic, and political aspects that are common across these nations in order for this curious web of diplomacy to persist in a region as volatile as the Middle East. Another level of discussion is in further understanding the nature of the neutral foreign policy stance that has been taken by Oman. Important to consider here is how this is borne of the social and cultural factors that are inherent in the sultanate particularly their strong connection with their Ibadi religious roots and how the values of this Muslim sect preach the notion of tolerance and acceptance. The final area of discussion that is covered in this section is a reiteration of the importance of foreign policy to a nation. The goal here is to show why it is important for Oman to preserve its current stance of neutrality and how this has positively affected them. This is a pragmatic analysis of foreign policy as state policy and shows that such a paradigm is effective in state-building.

## 4.1 Common Factors between Oman and Iran and Saudi Arabia

The fact that Oman, Iran and Saudi Arabia are neighbors means that they share common factors that could be affecting their relations. To begin with, they are characterized by similar geographical factors, including climatic conditions. This makes them part of the oil-producing countries, even though their production and size of oil reserve differs. Religion and economic markets are also common factors that have an influence in the region, through helping in the determination of whether there is healthy competition or development of rivalry (Guzansky, 2015). The determination of such common factors is important in establishing reasons why Oman maintains good relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia, despite these factors being sources of conflicts. Mostly, countries dealing with the sale or those depending on a common source of economic development tend to have a rivalry, in an effort to seek market dominance (Gause III, 2014). Such factors can be traced in the historical engagements between Oman and these two countries, even though it has since been solved. However, for countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, such historical experiences are part of the current sources of rivalry.

Geopolitical influence in the Gulf is a common factor influencing opposition and occasional conflicts. From the findings of a research published in Niblock (2015) it is the most prevailing common factor between the three countries. These factors are propagated by both internal and external sources, aimed at developing disunity for the benefit of the perpetrators. When comparing these three countries, each of them has a different size of oil reserve, which means that they have different scales of production. Depending on the existing government structures, political influence is a key determinant of the rate of growth, which in turn influences the propensity of occurrence of opposition (Niblock, 2015). For Iran and Saudi Arabia, geopolitical influence is quite noteworthy when it comes to dealing with issues of dominance and recognition by the world. In which case, external influence is high with countries and other regions taking advantage of the situation and widens the rivalry between these two countries. Looking into the geopolitical influence of Oman and these two countries, it seems to have adopted a positive format. This is because the dispute resolution mechanism used embarked on addressing all issues that could be affecting geographical boundaries, as well as those emanating from the presence of diverse political ideologies in the region (Haynes, 2016).

While placing neutrality, security and foreign policy as common factors between these countries, the findings indicate that they have little significance in establishing any similarity. In most cases, countries come with structures that define the expected stands and guidelines, affecting domestic and international relations. For this reason, national policies tend to have minimal comparative factors, unless the countries are operating under general regional policies. However, some studies appreciate the role of proximity in developing strategies that adopt similar concepts (Guzansky, 2015). This is especially applicable to countries that are in good relations since they tend to have a common agenda in development and dealing with issues of security. Evidently, security dealings between Oman and Iran or Saudi Arabia depend on agreements between the respective countries (Calabrese, 2016). This is due to the need to observe sovereignty as well as maintaining the quality of security, especially for a region such as the Gulf where opposition is high. Largely, the level of neutrality influences the likelihood of a rivalry, with scholars arguing that it is all dependent on the current relationships and expectations of such countries. From these considerations, a combination of all these three variables would provide a reliable approach in determining the nature of relations that countries have.

## 4.2 Comparison of Significance of Neutrality, Security, and Foreign Policy

With the understanding that foreign policy, security, and neutrality influence the nature of relations between Oman and the power countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia, understanding the significance of each variable is critical. Each of the three countries has its own foreign policy that tends to define their status and focus (Calabrese, 2016). Oman rates the highest in all of these variables, followed by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Since all of these findings are based on relativity, consistency is important, especially using time as a factor. Starting with Oman, the high score in these variables emanates from each country’s consistency when dealing with foreign countries.

Since the Iran-Iraq war, Oman has been developing policies that focus on unity, with reduced intentions to cause conflicts. For this reason, the foreign policy it makes is guided by principles of regional security and neutrality, which can be deduced by the acts of silence in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Largely, this has made it the most peaceful country of the three, with no enmity between its neighbors, which could otherwise lead to the development of oppositions or rivalry as in the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia (Beydoun & Zahawi, 2016).

For Saudi Arabia, the various studies indicate that it has adopted various mechanisms and strategies in developing foreign policies. Due to the rivalry with Iran, the aspect of neutrality is reduced significantly, further affecting emphasis on security (Niblock, 2015). However, this significantly increases when dealing with Oman, with its attractive foreign policy. In which case, matters of security and neutrality are dependent on reciprocal deals. This is in contracts with the frameworks used in Oman, which are based on the need to have regional peace and development, as well as reduce security threats. In the development of regional and international ties, models of integration cite domestic policies as key determinants of such ties (Almezaini & Rickli, 2016). Despite the lower scores in these three variables, Saudi Arabia has been able to uphold policies signed with Oman, which is part of its regional integration approach. On the other hand, bad relations with Iran could create a conflict of interests. This is especially true in the case of the foreign policies of these countries since they tend to define how they perceive and interact with each other, on matters of engagements for social, economic or any other forms of development (Smith, 2016).

Iran shows the lowest significance when it comes to the variables used in the current study. This indicates that the country has not embraced aspects of national neutrality, security or impartial foreign policies (Katzman, 2015). To some extent, countries tend to come in defense of those that they have good relations with other countries, a significant factor that affects neutrality. For instance, it could be an indication of respect of sovereignty that Oman is not interfering with the cases of Syria and Yemen, unlike Iran and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Iran has embraced the need for cooperation in security with Oman, thereby creating a platform for developing good relations. In such a scenario, countries engage on a number of selective factors that seem to influence and affect current and future relationships. On matters of foreign policy, the country seems to adopt a selective form of engagement, aiming at engaging with countries such as with Oman that has been supportive in a certain manner (Akbarzadeh, 2015). To some extent, this selective approach has maintained some level of stabilization in the country, even though it has negatively affected engagements with countries such as Saudi Arabia. The basis is on the fact that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have adopted foreign policies that require some forms of reciprocations, to the unwillingness of other countries.

## 4.3 Impact of Foreign Policy

By definition, foreign policy entails regulations designed by a country that determine how they would interact with various countries. Development of foreign policies is a factor of recognizing the nature of intended engagements between respective countries and making them adapt to flexible approaches (Barzegar, 2014). The impact of Oman’s foreign policy is very significant in dealing with issues that would affect national and regional unity. Most of the studies and literature suggested an appreciation of the principles used in formulating any form of policy in dealing with matters that affect unity with a region (Guzansky, 2015). The high significance would, therefore, mean that the development of Oman’s foreign policy is favorable to the neighboring countries. In most cases, suitability of foreign policies comes with agreements between the countries, which could be the case for Oman. However, most of the traditional approaches for policy development focused on upholding certain values, which helped in defining a particular society or country (Smith, 2016).

In the 1970s, foreign policies in Oman were influenced by values from Ibadism, which is the dominant religion in the country. This meant that all the engagements between the countries were guided by the values accrued from this religion, including intolerance. Since the inception of foreign relations, developing such values was critical in shaping the baselines used for the current foreign policies. Globally, religion has been known to be a source of morals that define a society, even though some of them are considered uncivilized (Calabrese, 2016). Despite the high significance of foreign policies in developing good relations, religious conflict has been part of regional conflicts, especially in the Middle East. Presence of different sects of Muslims has triggered competition for dominance, which would otherwise deteriorate the significance of foreign policies (Vatikiotis, 2016). For instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been fighting for dominance through the two different Islamic sects, a factor that was able to manipulate its foreign policy. This means that foreign policies are affected by stabilities within the country, which can be directed by its cultural values, as in the case of Ibadism and its main values of tolerance and humility resulting to respect towards other people and the community. Fredrik Barth points out to politeness as an ideology an import characteristic of Omani culture; that is, modeling a certain behavior in accordance with a code of honor that prevents the pronouncement of public opinion regarding a person’s worth expressed in criticism or praise. Thus, Oman’s neutrality towards opposing countries can also be attributed to innate values of Ibadism as its main influencer.

Since each of these three countries have their respective foreign policies, the terms stipulated in these policies tend to have the greatest impact when addressing issues of relations. Generally, both Iran and Saudi Arabia should have linking points with Oman, given that the baselines for developing their foreign policies are different. On the other hand, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia can also be traced to their respective foreign policies. In such cases, none of these countries makes adequate emphasis on describing how the countries should engage, mainly due to unresolved conflicts. Due to the high tendency of occurrence of disputes and conflicts, most foreign policies include dispute resolution measures (Hassan, 2015). Such measures are to be applied by either country, in order to come up with a solution before the rivalry intensifies.

# Chapter 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This chapter will revisit the questions earlier raised in this research study. Together with the answers provided for each one, they will be re-invoked and given deeper insights so as to further shed light on the issues involved and prove the worthiness of the research.

Starting with the prevalence of opposition in the Middle East region, the study revealed on the presence of factors that hinder integration in the region. Such factors have affected interactions between specific countries or the entire region, which has been crucial for countries such as Oman, Iran and Saudi Arabia. To some extent, the presence of common economic factors of oil has been a factor of consideration in such opposition. Basically, most of them have embraced historical events that widened the differences between countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. The causes of conflicts include how countries have interacted in the past, especially during struggles for dominance and independence. These kind of thinking sets have accumulated over the years and could assist anyone who strives to understand the logic behind the policy and behavior, expectations’ and preferences of the countries studied,

When comparing Oman, Iran and Saudi Arabia on these matters, geopolitical factors have been influential in establishing conflicts and relations between these two countries. Good relations between Oman and the two hegemonic countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, revealed political factors such as foreign policies as key toward establishing balance in their relations. The presence of common religious aspects between Oman and these countries was also a critical factor in creating common cultural values. This includes presence of common Muslim sects such as Ibadism to which the relations of countries like Oman and Iran towards other countries may also be influenced. In fact, Oman’s foreign policy is interwoven within its religious culture of tolerance, humility and politeness, at the same works with the geopolitical realities, like its policy towards Iran and its pragmatic relations with the United States. Similarly, when the British left the Gulf, the need to for security guarantees had been an imperative for the Sultanate. More so with the critical situation in the Straits of Hormuz where global oil supplies are at stake, This was worsened by the anxieties regarding the Iranian Revolution where in 1980 US President declared that any interference in the supply of oil in the Straits would be a vital concern for the US. Since it is practical enough for Oman to take sides with the US, it has encouraged the view that the USA is a friend and its own backyard as well. In the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is neither a Sunni nor Shia; instead it is Ibadi, and thus adopts the characteristics of Ibadism, notwithstanding that it is considered nonsectarian sect. In addition, Ibadism has allowed tolerance with other countries regardless of their religion, culture and ethnicity.

For Oman, much focus has been on creating good border relations with its neighbors, particularly with Iran and Saudi Arabia. With a friendly foreign policy and interventions in the past focusing on the leader’s commitment to peaceful borders, the country has postured attractive policies for both of these countries to emulate. It is through Oman’s policies that the Sultanate engages with Iran and Saudi Arabia, including available legislations that promote trade and exchanges between these countries. Future legislations will be crucial in maintaining these good relations, especially with the advent modernization where most of these policies must flexibly apply.

## 5.1 Conclusions

In defining Oman’s difficult equation in establishing close relations with opposing countries Iran and Saudi Arabia, a number of factors were considered in the current study. Since the inception of the leadership of Sultan Qaboos, Oman continues to undergo various transformations, including on matters pertaining to its dealings with her neighbors. In addition, it has paved the way for interventions that have to be made in opposing countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia to fulfill its economic and development goals. Given that foreign policies create platforms for interactions, Oman used it as a tool for maintaining peace at her border. By utilizing its foreign policy, Oman is able to develop its own diplomatic approaches in dealing with these countries.

It is through such agenda that Oman has managed to strategize with the handling of issues affecting these two countries, including supporting wars that relate to either Iran or Saudi Arabia. This has been significant in support of neutrality, carrying an impact on the relations that Oman has with her neighbors. On the other hand, the bad relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be traced from historical engagements, as well as opposition between the two arising from Islamic wars, such as the one in Syria.

Geopolitical factors have also been critical in determining how the relations between Oman and the two hegemonic countries have been. The fact that each country has different sizes and levels of oil fields and shared fields at the border requires the existence of ties between each of these countries. Political influence has been critical, as indicated by various leaders in Oman and their roles in promoting peaceful engagements, including military cooperation. This has been among the issues that have integrated these three countries. Especially due to need to have common security measures for counteracting terrorism. Ibadism, as a religious culture, is among factors influencing relations within and without Oman. Values encouraged by this religion has been critical in determining how communities engage, thereby promoting an attractive culture for Oman. With such a culture, countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have been able to interact with the country in a positive manner.

Other facets covered in the current study are economics and strategic location as factors of determining relations between Oman and the two hegemonic countries. Strategic locations embrace concepts of need for relations, on matters of trade and policies that embark on regional development. This is because the promotion of good relations between countries that are within a common region. Since all the three countries have different benefits emanating from strategic locations, it would be an imperative to consider commonalities that would encourage regional integrations and cohesion. In the case of Oman, the study revealed on the creation of channels for engagement with Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has promoted good relations. On the other hand, economic factors have determined the level of engagement for countries, especially when doing businesses with each other. Even though this has not being attained by these three countries, it has been a baseline for Oman’s commitment to ensure that Iran and Saudi Arabia’s economies and trade policies are stable. Commonalities between these three countries have also been considered, even though relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia vary as they have also been influenced by competitive factors.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Considering the factors that have affected good relations between Oman and the two countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, foreign policy and leadership commitment tends to have significant influence. This has been an influencer of neutrality factors, with the country’s commitment to dealing with international issues from a neutral perspective. Regionally, most countries have issues dealing with holistic opposition, a factor that has limited productive interactions between countries in the Gulf, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. Despite good relations with these two countries, aspects of regional or international development have not received much emphasis. Trade ties have been minimal, a factor that has reduced the contribution of each country to regional development. Thus, the findings of the study recommend the formulation of policies that would promote its trade relations between these countries, as well as all the other countries in the region. Oman’s attractive policies should be a key influencer for the establishment of friendly relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia; as it is not an enemy to anyone so it has to take advantage of its neutral position to instill its values and commitments. Such commitments are important in generating regional policies that would help in alleviation of general opposition in the Gulf Region. Lastly, the fact that good relations between these countries have been determined by a difficult equation means Oman has to strengthen these relationships despite being criticize for it in as much as foreign policies can also have its drawbacks. Oman has to pick up lessons from its blunders but not totally abandon its neutral policy.

## 5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

For this research, the analysis starts from the understanding of the nature of opposition in the Middle East, foreign policies, the neutral policy of Oman, and descriptions of its favorable relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is recommended that a wider perspective be attained by considering other factors that could affect the development of good relations. To this end, future research is recommended to point other possibilities that Oman could have to maintain its good relations with the hegemonic countries. Other theoretical frameworks and models on foreign policy analysis may be useful to determine what other factors could affect the development of opposition and build good relations with other countries. This could include trade ties, financial and defense supports or any other measure that could integrate the countries and sustain the good relationship of Oman and these two countries. On the other hand, future research could also look into factors that could lead to bad relations between Oman and the hegemonic countries; Iran and Saudi Arabia, or its other international neighbors within the foreign context as a guiding principle.

Another recommendation for future research will be on the application of Oman’s foreign policy on a wider scale, including the possibility of adoption of principles of neutrality for countries within Gulf and beyond. Since it seems to be successful in the Omani context, it would be imperative to consider its application for countries having any disagreements with another country; within and outside of the Gulf area. From such a study, it might be necessary to incorporate internal factors that affect development of opposition or good relations, for countries across the globe. Largely, such an introduction would help in recommending the best strategies in the promotion of regional integration, as well as reduce opposition in regions such as the Gulf. However, this could be guided by constraints that centers on specific factors unique for a certain region as it deals with regional oppositions, and therefore should be ‘region-specific’.

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