The Process and Limits of Small State Neutrality:

The Case of Oman between 1980 and 2022

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Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a nuanced explanation of the birth, evolution and consistency of Oman's foreign policy of neutrality. Over the last five decades, neutrality has been a core feature of Omani foreign policy. Departing from its Arab Gulf Neighbours, Oman decided to adopt neutrality in various conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War in 1980–88, the Syrian Civil War and the recent War in Yemen, 2015–2022. Even in conflicts where it could not be neutral, Omani leaders would express their preference to maintain a neutral stance. To guide my analysis, I developed a conceptual framework, which I denominate as the processual model of neutrality (PMN), that conceives neutrality as a process of three phases: 'strategic', where the country decides to adopt neutrality for strategic reasons; 'passive', when the country adopts neutrality but lacks the recognition of external powers; and 'active', when the country adopts neutrality and has wide recognition for this policy, enabling it to play active neutral roles such as hosting peace negotiations and supporting humanitarian efforts.

On this basis, this dissertation explores Omani foreign policy towards two major conflicts, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the War in Yemen (2015–2022), demonstrating that these cases are crucial to understanding the emergence of Omani neutrality and its consolidation and recognition. Furthermore, this thesis explores the period between 1988–2015 in order to scrutinise how the Omani position varied during other major conflicts, such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

Using data drawn from interviewing key Omani decision-makers and visiting several archives in the UK, US and Oman, this thesis concludes that Oman's neutrality started as a strategic decision resulting from a complex interaction of different domestic and external factors during the Iran-Iraq War. This thesis also argues that Oman was not able to adopt neutrality in cases such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 due to various reasons, including the influence of its security guarantors and serious threats perceptions. Finally, factors such as the wide recognition of Omani neutrality and diplomatic reach enabled Oman to exercise active neutrality during the War in Yemen.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this university or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Omran Al-Abri
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Acknowledgements

Turning the pages back, I remember the time when I was striving to get PhD offers from different universities. I was talking to Prof. Houchange Hassan Yari when he said, *'Do not look for universities; it is all about supervisors'*. Now, I can certainly tell he was right! I cannot emphasise enough how much I am indebted to my supervisors: Dr Alejandro Pena and Prof. Graeme Davies. Alejandro, *Gracias para todo y por todas los comentarios que pacientemente me diste. Ahora me gusta Argentina por algo mas que el fútbol!* Graeme, in addition to the invaluable comments and feedback, thank you for all the time you alleviated the stress by starting our meetings talking about Liverpool and their chances of winning something.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

On a Thursday night, the 12th of March 2015, after a long and heated secret meeting that lasted around six hours, representatives of the six Arab Gulf Countries left the Prince Sultan Airbase in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. As the Omani team was climbing the stairs of their plane, a senior diplomat remarked, 'I think the neighbours will interfere in Yemen with more than financial and political support'. During their two-hour flight back to Muscat, the members of the Omani team discussed different scenarios for the potential intervention, the instability in the region and the reaction of great powers. Still, no one among the members of the Omani envoy questioned whether Oman should support one party in Yemen or another. Less than two weeks after the secret meeting, a coalition under the leadership of Saudi Arabia that included all the Arab Gulf countries apart from Oman, militarily intervened in Yemen to support the Hadi government against the Houthi movement. As Abu Jassem, a senior Omani diplomat who was part of the envoy to Riyadh, explained to me in a personal interview, the Omani decision-makers agreed that Oman must play a neutral role in regional wars – regardless of what its neighbours decided to do.

This story, and the overall foreign policy behaviour of Oman, reflect the interesting and puzzling nature of Oman's position of neutrality, especially as a departure from the foreign policies of the other Arab Gulf states. All Arab Gulf countries share a similar language, religion, environment and economic structure, yet Oman, on numerous occasions, has behaved differently from all the others in its efforts to adopt neutrality, especially since the 1980s. The distinct character of Omani foreign policy began when Qaboos bin Said became the ruler of Oman in 1970 and in his first speech said, 'I want to look at the map and see that all countries are friends to Oman, and none are foes'. One of the first signs that Oman was keen to adopt this position came in 1977, when Anwar Al-Sadat, the president of Egypt from 1970–1981, visited Israel. While all other Arab Gulf countries, and most Arab countries in general, decided to sever their relations with Egypt, Omani decision-makers argued that the visit is an internal Egyptian matter, and Oman cannot interfere in the internal issues of other countries. A few years later, Oman adopted neutrality towards the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), openly declaring this policy position for the first time. In the second half of this war, Oman even started to play out its neutral role by hosting negotiations between Iranian and Iraqi officials. Although the talks were not successful, they indicated that other countries had begun to view Oman as a neutral venue for negotiations.

These demonstrations of Omani neutrality continued, and the roles Oman played were not limited to wartime, as some sources suggest that Oman played an important role in facilitating the negotiations between Qatar and Bahrain in 1986. In 1991, Iran and Iraq restored their diplomatic relations after a series of discussions held in the Omani capital of Muscat, in March 1991. In the same year, Oman was also successful in negotiating the release of several Egyptians who were held in Iran after serving in the Iraqi army during the eight-year-long war. Between 2007 and 2013, Oman was very active in facilitating other talks and the release of hostages. The country was successful in releasing 15 British sailors captured by Iran, a US Hiker (Sarah Shroud) detained by Iran, three French citizens held in Yemen and a scientist from Iran held in the US. In 2013, Oman played a key part in facilitating the negotiations that led to the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal (known as JCPOA). The first round of negotiations was held secretly in Muscat during the second half of 2013. Following these experiences, Oman's role as a neutral state became recognised by most regional and international countries. Thus, when the War in Yemen started in March 2015, Oman was able to host negotiations between the Houthis and both US and Saudi officials. Oman's continued neutrality and the roles it played resulted in the signing of the April 2022 truce in the war between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. The neutrality of Oman has become a key feature of its foreign policy and has greatly influenced the politics of the region.

The literature on Oman's foreign policy behaviour, especially neutrality, is still limited. Thus, this thesis seeks to provide an in-depth study of the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality. This policy of neutrality, I will demonstrate, has evolved due to Oman's interactions with the surrounding international environment. On various occasions, Omani neutrality has been difficult to achieve as serious conflicts and belligerents have challenged it. Nonetheless, this thesis will show that internal politics and the interactions between Omani decision-makers and the geostrategic environment, other regional players and external powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom have resulted in Oman succeeding in adopting neutrality in some conflicts and failing to adopt it in others. This unique case of a small country in a turbulent region trying to adopt an independent and neutral foreign policy is worth studying. However, it has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

This thesis will explore neutrality as a dynamic practice that interacts with various factors in the external environment and evolves due to this interaction. Taking Oman as a case study, this thesis will argue that Oman went through three phases of neutrality evolution – strategic, passive and active – and will unpack conceptually and empirically the diverse

mechanisms involved in this evolution, from 1980, when Oman started to act neutrally in the context of the Iran-Iraq War, until 2022, when Oman acted as the main player in facilitating a truce between Saudi Arabi and the Houthis in the context of the War in Yemen. In addition, studying the case of Oman will contribute to the under-researched topic of the efforts of small neutrals during conflicts. This research will show how small countries can use neutrality to influence relatively large-scale conflicts. Examining the Omani case led me to question the nature of the neutrality of small states and how it evolves.

Despite its long history and current relevance as an international relations concept and a foreign policy instrument, neutrality has been an under-researched (Müller, 2019, Simpson, 2018). Most foreign policy analysis studies focus on explaining the behaviour of the great powers' belligerents during the conflicts (Toft, 2005, Snyder, 2002). Conversely, little attention has been devoted to the countries that adopt neutrality, especially in exploring neutrality as a process and dynamic concept (Czarny, 2018). The stance of neutrality is often misconceived as indifference or passivity (Bischof et al., 2018). However, I argue that neutrality can be active in different situations, and the efforts of neutrals can positively influence the trajectory of conflicts. In today's world, where complex conflicts continually threaten the peaceful coexistence between states, comprehending and appreciating the practice of neutrality is vital. Understanding neutrality and the roles played by neutrals can increase the chances of facilitating peace in today's major issues such as those between Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine.

In practice, neutrality can take different forms and types. In its simplest definition, neutrality is abstention from participating in armed conflicts (Den Hertog and Kruizinga, 2011, Rubin, 1987). This policy can be adopted towards a particular conflict, where the neutrality will be referred to as ad-hoc or temporary neutrality (Müller, 2019). In other cases, a country can announce that it will formally adopt neutrality towards all future conflicts. This type is called permanent neutrality (Neuhold, 1982). Adopting neutrality can influence a country's identity, relations with belligerents, relations with the international community and possibly the trajectory of conflicts (Czarny, 2018, Agius, 2013). Studying neutrality goes beyond understanding foreign policy decisions as it helps in understanding how the identities of long-term neutrals are formed and how they affect foreign policy decisions in later stages. It also affects how we view conflicts, the ways we de-escalate them and the possible paths for facilitating peace processes. Thus, to fully grasp the benefits of studying neutrality, it is essential to examine it in relation to the political environment and the factors it interacts with, the outcome it creates and its overall influences.

Despite the lack of attention given to neutrals, some of them have gripped researchers' interest. Switzerland, for example, has been neutral since 1615, and it is considered the traditional and successful example of neutrality, though the recent Russo-Ukrainian War has convoluted this stance (Dreyer and Jesse, 2014, Kunz, 1936). On the other hand, Sweden, despite being a relatively new neutral compared to Switzerland, has received a lot of attention from researchers (Sundelius, 2019, Hedberg and Karlsson, 2015). Far away from Europe, other neutrals are significantly under-researched, such as Costa Rica, which adopted neutrality in 1949, Botswana in 1966 and Turkmenistan in 1995. While these cases are worth studying, the case of Oman, due to the location of the country, is more complex and represents a unique case. Despite being in the Middle East, which has experienced numerous large and medium-scale conflicts, the neutrality of Oman has received little attention compared to other cases, especially those in Europe. It has also received little attention compared to the attention and research given to neighbouring countries that are more interventionist, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE. (Rahman, 2023). This thesis directly addresses this gap by thoroughly examining the Omani case of neutrality since its birth in the 1980s.

1.1 Research Questions

This thesis examines the unique case of Omani neutrality. It seeks to answer the following main research question: What explains the development and consolidation of Omani neutrality? To answer this question and comprehend Omani neutrality in greater detail, this thesis further investigates the following sub-questions:

- What factors and dilemmas led Oman to first adopt neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)?
- How has Oman's policy of neutrality evolved? What factors have shaped the evolution of Oman's neutral stance between 1980 and 2022 and its role in major regional conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the invasion of Kuwait (1990), the invasion of Afghanistan (2001), the invasion of Iraq (2003) and the War in Yemen (2015–2022)?
- What are the limits of neutrality? In which circumstances was a neutral stance not adopted by Oman, and why?

Answering these questions about Omani neutrality will lead to a more nuanced understanding of Oman's unique and under-researched case. The examination of Omani neutrality has led me to question the nature of neutrality in international relations and to explore a theoretical framework to explain the behaviour of neutrals, especially small neutrals. Omani neutrality has changed between the time it started and its later stages. For Example, as I will explain in more detail, the nature of neutrality (passive or active), the roles Oman has played and the views of other countries are very different when comparing between the 1980s and 2022. Understanding what and how these aspects have changed is vital.

Therefore, a second main research question regarding the concept of neutrality is as follows: How can neutrality in international relations be conceptualised and represented as a dynamic process? This framing underscores neutrality's evolving nature and highlights the importance of examining how it changes based on its interaction with the internal and external environment. To delve deeper into the neutrality process and answer this question, this thesis has three sub-questions:

- What determinants lead states to initially adopt neutrality?
- What are the different phases of neutrality, and what are the main features of each phase?
- How does a state transition between different phases of neutrality, and what factors contribute to these shifts and evolvements?

Examining the above three sub-questions will enhance our understanding of neutrality in different ways. The first question will reveal the factors that lead a country to initiate the neutrality process. As this thesis explains, these factors are a mix of internal and external influences with complex interactions between them. The second question will explore neutrality and how it develops and evolves over time, elaborating on what has changed in the neutrality between one event and another or between one year and the next. The third question will explain how the interactions between the neutral, different internal factors, the external factors and the trajectory of a particular conflict lead to transitions from one phase of neutrality to another. The two sets of questions, regarding Oman and neutrality, are studied together in this thesis, and the results of one inform the explanation of the other, as I will explain in the theoretical framework chapter. Answering these questions will result in a greater understanding of the case of Oman and the nature of neutrality in international

relations. However, before discussing the implications of this thesis, it is crucial to provide some background on the interesting case of Oman and outline its unique features.

1.2 The Case of Oman

For a long time, rivalries, tension and conflicts have been disturbing the Middle East region. Despite this, the Sultanate of Oman, a small monarchy, has remained neutral in many of these conflicts in recent decades. This has led some scholars and commentators to describe Oman with terms such as 'an oasis of tranquillity', 'the Switzerland of Arabia', 'the outlier' and 'an interlocutor mediator' (Worrall, 2021, Sherwood, 2017, Neubauer, 2016, Echague, 2015). This section will elaborate on several factors that make the case of Oman fascinating and worthy of close examination. To date, there is a significant gap in the literature about Oman's foreign policy in general and Omani neutrality in particular. In this section, I will provide some background by examining four factors that set Oman apart as a unique case in the eyes of many commentators: its geographical location, unique and rich history, sectarian and tribal social structure and distinctive political system.

The location of Oman is considered strategic for three main reasons. First, it shares control of the Strait of Hormuz with Iran, which puts Oman in a unique situation in the region. This strait is crucial to the world economy due to the huge quantities of crude oil passing through it daily (Jafari, 2012). During the late 60s and early 70s, more than 60% of the oil consumed by Western countries passed through the Strait of Hormuz (Ardemagni, 2018). As of 2020, Western imports from the region have dropped compared to 1980, but they remain significant as 30% of the world's oil consumption still travels through the strait (Lott and Kawagishi, 2022). These vast amounts of oil must travel along the Omani side of the strait due to the depth of the water. Although the strait is 33 km wide at its narrowest point, oil vessels can only pass through a three-kilometre-wide area located very close to the Omani border (Jafari, 2012). Thus, the stability of Oman and the strait is crucial to the stability of the world economy. Secondly, Oman has a coastal line that is 3165 km long, most of which borders the Indian Ocean. These coasts and openness to the sea give Oman a path to the ocean to export its oil far from the potentially unstable areas close to Iran in the North and Yemen in the South (Al-Sayegh, 2002). This competitive advantage has captured the eyes of external powers for decades, such as the Portuguese, the British and later, the Americans (Sherwood, 2017).

Figure 1: Map of Oman and its surroundings

The open coasts to the Indian Ocean have also attracted another external actor who would like to benefit from this advantage, the Saudis. Before signing border agreements with Yemen, archival documents show that the Saudis have declared their interest in having access to the Indian Ocean, away from the Red Sea or the Arabian Gulf. In the early 1970s, and again in 1990, before Oman and Yemen had signed a border agreement, the Saudis proposed having a narrow line of territory cut for them between Oman and Yemen. Both the Omanis and Yemenis refused this proposal and resisted Saudi pressure. A border agreement between

Oman and Yemen was signed on 1 October 1992. (Masyhur, 2021). Hence, Oman's location is immensely strategic and its cooperation is vital, especially when there is instability in Yemen or Iran.

The location of Oman is also important due to its geographical proximity to countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. This feature is even more critical, bearing in mind that Oman has active relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Western countries and all parties in Yemen. Oman's location and its relations have proven to be critical on multiple occasions, such as during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Yemen Civil War (1994) and the invasion of Kuwait (1990), along with the War in Yemen (2015–2022), in which the country has used its territorial proximity and good relations to support humanitarian and diplomatic efforts, as will be discussed in significant detail in Chapter 7 (Kadhem and Sultan, 2018, Sherwood, 2017, Baabood, 2016, Funsch, 2015a).

While the geostrategic location of Oman makes it interesting, the country's rich history is equally compelling. The history of Oman shows a country that was sometimes expanding into other territories while, at other times, was occupied or highly influenced by other imperial powers. For example, the Portuguese occupied Oman during the 14th and part of the 15th century (Al-Busaidi, 2019). During this period, the Omanis lived under different tribes before they began to gather around the Yarubi tribe and its Imam, Nasser Bin Murshid Al-Yarubi. In the 1620s, they began to attack the Portuguese forces stationed in the territory, until they regained control of Muscat in 1650 (Biedermann, 2021, da Costa, 2020). At this point, Nasser Bin Murshid Al-Yarubi became the Imam of Oman. During his era, most tribes in the area came under his control, and thus, he decided to continue fighting the Portuguese outside Oman. The Omani forces attacked the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and along the East African coasts (Al-Busaidi, 2019). These attacks resulted in Oman taking control over different strategic locations on the East African coast, including Zanzibar in 1652, Mombasa in 1661, Diu in 1668 and Mozambique in 1671 (Razik, 2022). With these expansions, Oman experienced stability and prosperity under the Yarubi Dynasty. The situation changed with the passing of Imam Sultan bin Saif in 1718, as his poor management of the country and eventual death caused internal struggle and conflicts between the various tribes (Funsch, 2015b).

The conflicts and instability gave the Persians a chance to control some parts of Oman beginning in the late 17th century (Beckingham, 1941). This lasted until the early 1740s when Ahmed Bin Said gathered Omani tribes around him and started to rebel against the Persians. He restored Omani control over all territories occupied by the Persians (Bhacker, 2002). In 1748, Ahmed Bin Said was crowned as the new Imam of Oman, marking the start of the Al-

Busaidi Dynasty, which has continued to rule Oman until today. Under Imam Ahmed Bin Said (also known as Sayyid Ahmed Bin Said), Oman restored all its previously controlled territories in East Africa (Onley, 2005). It also expanded its control in the mid-17th century to include today's UAE, Bahrain and places in Iran such as Bander-Abbas, Hurmuz and Qashm. Between 1806 and 1856, Oman was ruled by Said Bin Sultan (the grandson of Imam Ahmed Bin Said), and during his era, Oman reached its peak in power and territorial expansion (Turner, 2010).

During the era of Sultan Said, Oman established formal diplomatic relations with the United States in 1833 and France in 1844 (Landen, 2015). In addition, it cemented its control over its territories in East Africa. However, this situation changed dramatically in 1856 when Sultan Said passed away, leaving two sons who both wanted to be the next ruler (Wilkinson, 1981). Amid their disagreement over who should be the next ruler of Oman, Great Britain found an opportunity to weaken Oman and exert an influence over it. It mediated a deal between the brothers to divide Oman into two independent states, Oman and Zanzibar, with two independent rulers (Valeri, 2009). This incident marked the beginning of the fall of Oman's power and the start of Britain's increasing influence over the country. The decline of Oman's power continued, and in 1901, another turning point occurred when opposition leaders from the interior regions announced their independence from Oman, threatening the ruling family (Peterson, 1976). The rift between the opposition and the regime continued until they agreed to sign a treaty in 1920, known as the Al-Seeb Treaty (Mühlböck, 1995).

The Al-Seeb Treaty gave the interior regions, under the leadership of Imam Talib Al-Hinaie of Oman, some form of autonomy (Al-Hinai, 2000). The regime of the Al-Busaidi continued to have complete control over the coastal areas; however, the treaty's terms could have been clearer over what were the rights and duties of each party (Owtram, 1999). The country experienced some stability until the mid-1950s when the conflicts started between the Imam and the Sultan again. Britain supported the Sultan's regime while the Imam was mainly supported by Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Peterson, 1976, Bannerman, 1976). This conflict and its implications are discussed in Chapter 4 in the context of Britain's influence in Oman. The last and most critical conflict was the Dhofari revolution, which broke out in the mid-1960s (Casula, 2021). It was supported by communist countries such as the Soviet Union, China, Iraq and Yemen (DeVore, 2012). The Al-Busaidi regime won the war against the Dhofari revolution and announced its victory in 1976, ending the last civil war in Oman (Jones, 2011). As explained in detail in Chapter 4, this victory was heavily supported by Britain, Iran and Jordan (Due-Gundersen and Owtram, 2022). These historical conflicts, which are

referenced in the discussions in the empirical chapters, are essential to understanding current policymaking.

Another factor that positions Oman as a unique case in the Middle East is its religious and cultural diversity (Yenigun and Baig, 2021). The Islamic religious landscape in Oman consists of three main sects: Ibadi, Sunni and Shia (Al-Salimi, 2011). The presence of the Ibadi sect and its predominance in Oman distinguish it from other Middle Eastern countries, where either the Sunni sect dominates, such as in the cases of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, or the Shia sect dominates, such as in the cases of Iran and Bahrain. In Oman, Shia constitute around 5% of the population, Sunnis 40% and Ibadis around 55% (Bierschenk, 1988). The three sects, along with other religions, coexist peacefully together. Different researchers consider the principles and beliefs of Ibadism as the main reason behind the harmony in the Sultanate of Oman (Due-Gundersen and Owtram, 2022, Worrall, 2021).

Ibadism is one of Islam's oldest branches, tracing back to the early 7th century and the so-called First Fitnah, the first civil war in Islam (Bierschenk, 1988). During this conflict, a small group decided to isolate themselves and pledge not to support any party. They were considered Kwarij (translated as outsiders). Within the Kwarij, a small group later became the Ibadis. This group continues to exist today, mainly in Oman, with a smaller population in Libya (Allen Jr, 2016). Due to their early characteristics and continued presence in Oman today, various studies on Oman have linked its current foreign policy behaviour to the principles and beliefs of the Ibadi sect (Ghubash, 2014). However, as this thesis will explain in later chapters, the neutrality of Oman is the result of a different complex set of factors beyond the ideology of the Ibadi sect.

The diversity in Oman is interesting; it is not only limited to religious diversity as the culture in Oman is very diverse for such a small country. This diverse culture can be categorised into at least three main regions: the coastal areas, the interior and the South. First, the coastal area includes big cities like Muscat, Sur and Sohar. People living in these places have diverse backgrounds, including indigenous Omani, Al Balushi originally from Pakistan, Persians from Iran and Swahili from East Africa, especially Zanzibar (Ghubash, 2014, Alhaj, 2000). This diversification is a result of Oman's long maritime history. Secondly, the interior regions include the towns of Nizwa, Al Rustaq, Bahla and Ibri. The culture of these places has distinct features from the coast, as many of them are Bedouin and tribal. The role of the tribes, especially before 1970, was crucial in political life. The tribal leaders had extreme power and leverage over their followers (Jones and Ridout, 2015, Jones, 2013). Thirdly, in the South, the Dhofari culture boasts distinguishable tribal and linguistic features. Moreover,

their identity and livelihood are centred around the Khareef, or monsoon season, which creates unique agricultural and economic opportunities (Risso, 2016, Skeet, 1992).

Lastly, the political system in Oman is a very centralised absolute monarchy. Despite having some consultative features through Al-Shura and the State Council, the ultimate power lies in the hand of the Sultan (Jones and Ridout, 2015). During almost all of his reign (1970–2020), Sultan Qaboos held the following positions: The Head of State, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Finance and the Head of the Central Bank and the Commander of the military forces (Kéchichian, 2023). This grip of positions shows how the power was centralised in the hands of the Sultan. In this highly centralised system, foreign policy decision-making is concentrated in a few hands along with the Sultan. Elaborating on their relations and the background of Omani elites is crucial to understanding Omani neutrality.

Sultan Qaboos Bin Said is the first and most important figure in the decision-making of Omani foreign policy (Kéchichian, 2023, Worrall, 2021). Qaboos was born in 1940 and was surrounded by private teachers of politics, religion, history, culture and language. In 1956, Qaboos went to Britain to attend Sandhurst Military Academy and graduated in 1962 (Gardiner, 2007). To further his experience, he served in the British Army and was stationed in Germany for one year. After that, he went on a world trip for another year before returning to Oman (Plekhanov, 2004). Regarding his thinking, a declassified report sent from British officers in Oman to the British Foreign Minister described Qaboos as ‘a potential reformer’, ‘Western Oriented’ and a ‘Highly disciplined officer’. During his era, Sultan Qaboos had an interesting way of making decisions based on reports from different researchers working in governmental bodies, most notably the ‘Royal Office’.

The public information about the functions and structure of the Royal Office (or the ‘palace office’ until 1996) is limited. It was the principal advisor for Sultan Qaboos in matters of foreign affairs and internal security (Kéchichian, 2023). It was officially established in 1985, but it is believed that its functions were carried out by British and Omani advisors as early as 1972 (Jones and Ridout, 2015). During an interview with a former diplomate, he described the work of the Royal Office as follows:

> *‘The decisions of Qaboos are not made without prior research and studies. In addition to his knowledge and love of reading and researching, he got continuous reports and updates to read. In the Royal Office, there are many researchers whose only job is conducting research and writing conclusions and policy recommendations about their opinions on certain matters.*

Each group of researchers specialised in one issue or country, such as the War in Yemen, the situation in x country, relations with y country, etc. These research reports are sent to Sultan Qaboos, who allocates a specific time to read them every single day'. (Diplomat3, 2022a)

These reports were not only sent to Sultan Qaboos but also a very few high-ranking decision-makers received copies of them. For example, Yousif Bin Allawi, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1994–2020), also had access to most of them (interview 7, 2022). Yousif Bin Allawi is arguably the second most crucial figure in the making of modern Omani foreign policy. He was born in 1940 and raised in Salalah, in the South of Oman (DeVore, 2012). After studying at school in Bahrain and higher education in Kuwait, he returned to Oman and joined the Dhofari Revolution against the regime. Interestingly, he left the revolution after Qaboos took power in 1970 and joined the Omani government (DeVore, 2012, Jones, 2013). A former diplomat described Oman's modern foreign policy as 'The outcome of the understanding of two people, Qaboos and Bin Allawi'. The influence of these two figures cannot be overestimated. However, as will be explained later, this thesis will treat them, and other decision-makers, as factors that influence the making of Omani neutrality, among several other influential factors.

In conclusion, the case of Oman is unique and interesting to study due to several features, such as its unique geography, foreign policy, political system and unique sectarian and tribal structure. Different commentators have identified these features as the reasons behind Omani neutrality. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in the literature, as I explain in detail in the following section and the literature review chapter.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This thesis is significant due to two main sets of reasons: its contributions to the literature about the region, especially about Oman, and its contribution to the literature about neutrality in the field of foreign policy analysis. As I discuss in detail in Chapter 2, the literature chapter, these two areas have significant gaps that this thesis will fill. First, it contributes to filling the gaps in the literature on the Middle East, specifically the Arabian Gulf. This will be done by studying the major conflicts between 1980 and 2022. Among these, two are conflicts

treated as the main case studies, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the War in Yemen (2015–2022).

The literature on the Iran-Iraq War is rich. Still, the majority of it focuses on the trajectory of the war, Western interests and the foreign policies of Arabian Monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Razoux, 2015, Murray and Woods, 2014, Takeyh, 2010, Johnson, 2010, Tarock, 1998, Karsh, 1989, Segal, 1988). The literature on the foreign policy of Oman towards the war is minimal and usually exists as a sidenote within bigger studies examining the Arab Gulf foreign policies towards the war. My thesis will fill this significant gap in the literature by studying Omani neutrality towards the war. On the other hand, the literature on the War in Yemen, while not very limited, is still developing. Oman has earned some attention from scholars due to the roles it has played, but the literature still needs to be improved. Most relevant research has focused on Oman's mediation and humanitarian roles towards Yemen. No study examined Omani neutrality specifically or its roles in Yemen as a phase of its neutrality evolution that goes back to the 1980s. This thesis fills these gaps and offers a new understanding of Omani neutrality.

Thirdly, this thesis is significant in that it provides a track record of the consistency and inconsistency of Omani neutrality since 1980 and explores the factors affecting this behaviour. This is done by studying Omani foreign policy towards regional conflicts in the above time frame and reasoning why Oman adopted or did not adopt neutrality. This analysis will increase our understanding of the factors that have influenced the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality. A primary example is the considerable influence of the security guarantors on Oman's behaviour and ability to adopt a particular foreign policy stance, such as neutrality.

In the second set of contributions, the fields of International Relations and Foreign Policy analysis focus mainly on the behaviour and policies of great powers, and to a lesser extent, the medium powers. The foreign policy behaviours of smaller actors, such as small neutrals, have drawn less attention despite their long history (Lord and Mearsheimer, 2002). The concept and practice of neutrality, as explained in detail in Chapter 2, has a history as old as that of wars. Understanding the behaviour of neutral states, especially those of active neutrals, is crucial to understanding international relations and the trajectory of wars. Thus, this thesis aims to increase our understanding of neutrality by conceptualising it as a dynamic process rather than a static policy. Examining neutrality as a dynamic process enables the understanding of how all stakeholders evolve and not only the neutral. These stakeholders include the neutral state with all its components, the belligerents, the security guarantors

during war and peacetime, the regional environment, the wars' trajectory and so on. Through this process of examining neutrality, this thesis makes two important contributions.

First, contrary to current studies on neutrality that present it as a static policy position, this study will delve deeper into the neutrality process and how it evolves. This exploration will include presenting neutrality as a process with three main phases: strategic, passive and active. This structure accounts for the ups and downs neutrals experience through their interactions with domestic and external factors. As presented in this thesis, the development of neutrality is a two-way process; states may move from the strategic phase to the active phase and vice versa. This movement depends on different factors, such as leadership perception, threats, security guarantees, domestic limitations and the recognition of belligerents. The interaction of these factors and the resulting phases of neutrality are the main theoretical contributions of this thesis and are presented as the processual model of neutrality (PMN), which is explained in detail in Chapter 3.

In addition to the dynamism of this model, this thesis contributes to the theoretical literature on neutrality. I argue that the current theoretical literature is insufficient to explain states' neutrality evolution, and thus, my thesis will resolve this shortcoming and present a theoretical model that explains this evolution. The existing literature focuses on explaining neutrality using either constructivist theories, such as in the studies of (Agius, 2013) and (Morris and White, 2011); realist theories, such as (Simpson, 2018); or liberalist theories, such as (Jesse, 2006). Studying neutrality by depending on these models, as the theoretical framework (Chapter 3) explains in detail, will result in focusing on one set of factors and forgetting other influencing elements of others. For example, the classical realist view tends to focus on material aspects and largely ignores ideological and conceptual characteristics. Thus, the result is an incomplete explanation of neutrality. In contrast to these studies, my thesis offers a model derived from three main sources: neoclassical realism theory, the role theory of international relations and empirical observations. Instead of focusing on the reasons behind taking neutrality or the ways of applying this neutrality as in previous studies, my thesis examines the early decision to adopt neutrality, how it evolves and its limitations. Through this thorough examination, my thesis's theoretical model will fill the gaps in the current literature.

In sum, this thesis offers four main contributions: it presents a new model to explain neutrality, contributes to the theoretical literature on neutrality, contributes to our understanding of Omani foreign policy by explaining the birth and evolution of its neutrality and contributes to the literature on the Middle East, especially the Arab Gulf Countries. This

makes it significant and crucial for scholars interested in foreign policy, Arabian Gulf politics, Omani foreign policy and the neutrality of small states.

1.4 Neutrality Concept in International Relations

A simple way to define neutrality in international relations is "not taking sides in conflicts" (Den Hertog and Kruizinga, 2011, Rubin, 1987). However, neutrality is a complex concept in international relations with different contested definitions and views. Neutrality is a practice that can be studied in different ways and from various political, legal, and ethical perspectives. In this section, I will explore the different definitions of neutrality in international relations and give a background about its history. In this section, I will also show foundational principles and key treaties about neutrality. The goal of this section is to establish what acts constitute neutrality.

1.4.1 Definition of Neutrality

Despite the lack of studies on neutrality in international relations, different scholars examined and defined neutrality. The definitions of neutrality can also be grouped under at least three main themes: strategic definitions, Legalistic definitions, and political and ethical definitions. First, some scholars define neutrality based on security and pragmatic incentives. For example, Kenneth Waltz defines neutrality as not taking sides in military conflicts between greater states to maximise smaller state security (Waltz, 1990). Another definition that views it from power and security is Geir Lundestad. He defines neutrality as the policy of not taking sides adopted by small states in great power competitions. While he defined neutrality in general, his examination focused on the Cold War and the neutrals of that era (Lundestad, 2013).

Secondly, some scholars define neutrality relying on the political and ethical angles of this foreign policy position. Andrew Cottey views neutrality as the avoidance of military conflicts or alliances of great power but with diplomatic engagement with all sides (Cottey, 2018). Other than this, Efraim Krash, in his book "Neutrality and Small States" added political detachment to his definition and viewed neutrality as the military and political non-involvement in great power competition and conflicts (Karsh, 2012). Furthermore, some scholars also view it from the moral and ethical viewpoint. In this regard, Michael Walzer defines neutrality as the non-involvement in military conflict driven by moral and ethical

considerations. In this definition, Walzer rejected the mainstream arguments that neutrality, and foreign policy in general, is driven by security and material considerations (Walzer, 2015).

Third, neutrality can be defined using legalistic lenses. In this regard, Hedley Bull understands neutrality as a legal status generated by the state's foreign policy commitment of not supporting or engaging in military conflicts (Bull, 2012). Neutrality is also defined, by Hugo Grotius, as an international obligation of not to participate in conflicts that states deliberately choose to adopt in their interaction with other states in the international arena (Grotius, 2012). These definitions added the international law aspect to the practice of neutrality and suggested some rights and duties as I will explain in more detail in the next section.

Neutrality is a foreign policy stance that is defined differently by different scholars using strategic, Legalistic, political, and ethical aspects. Before establishing a definition that will be used for neutrality in this thesis, I will examine the principles and key treaties of neutrality in international relations.

1.4.2 Key Treaties and Foundational Principles of Neutrality

In this section, I will review four main treaties that affected the practice of neutrality in international relations. Other than this, depending on the literature and the treaties, the second part elaborates on the rights and duties of neutrals. Lastly, I will establish what constitutes a practice of neutrality and follow it in the rest of the thesis.

There were different attempts, in the forms of signing treaties and establishing international organisations, to organise the interactions between states in international relations. First, after the end of the Crimean War in 1856, the belligerents signed the Treaty of Paris which mainly focused on maritime law. This treaty is considered one of the very first attempts to protect neutrals especially their trade with belligerents. The treaty signatories also promised to respect the ships of the neutrals on the high seas and provide safer routes for them (Müller, 2019). This presented the first attempt to organise the practice of neutrality and recognize their legal rights in the international arena.

Second, series of negotiations between the great powers resulted in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. In Netherlands in Hague, the first international law that fully specifies the rights and duties of neutral countries was concluded (Gavouneli, 2012). These conventions determined the rights of neutrals such as the territory of neutrals is inviolable,

cannot be used to transit troops, and cannot host military bases of belligerents. On the other hand, neutrals' duties were determined. Firstly, the belligerents should use all available means to protect their neutrality. Furthermore, neutrals should have an active diplomatic and humanitarian role during the conflicts. These conventions were signed by all major powers and many other smaller powers. Neutral powers put much faith on the conventions and they expected great powers to respect and adhere to what they signed (Goetschel, 1999). The Hague Conventions become the main source to make international law in organisations such as the League of Nations and later the United Nations (Gutttman, 1998). The Hague Conventions got their first major challenge in less than 10 years with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Third, the creation of the United Nations created troubles for neutrals (Agius, 2012). The United Nations was built on the concept of its predecessor LoN; collective action, a concept incompatible with neutrality. In its charter, different articles support this argument. For example, Article 41, Article 43 and Article 45 states that the UN may require members to take collective actions (United Nations , 1945). Even though these articles did not mention the word "neutrality", it is very clear that these actions are incompatible with it. Thus, Orvik argued, with the codification of the United Nations charter, neutrality became no longer part of International Law (Orvik, 1971). However, Orvik allegation was not very accurate as there was still a room for adopting neutrality in some situations. To start with, states are free to make their own choices when the UN failed to issue a decision regarding a certain conflict. This situation will give member states the room to adopt neutrality policy towards that conflict and continue their normal relations with both sides of belligerency (Taubenfeld, 1953). Other than this, the UNSC has the right to exclude states from adopting measures taken against the aggressor (Verdross, 1956). Thus, neutrality could be exercised under international law in at least these two situations. In both situations, the neutrality committed would be ad-hoc or temporary neutrality and permanent neutrality – Like Swiss neutrality- would not be feasible under the charter of UN.

With the growing power of the UN, Switzerland tried to join the UN while getting itself a special treatment (Vetschera, 1985). It tried to be a member of the UN but in the same time continue its active neutrality which was not possible according to UN charter, specifically articles 5&6 that states; member countries cannot violate resolution taken by UNSC such as adopting economic measures against aggressors (Ross, 1989). After this failed attempt, Switzerland preferred to continue its active neutrality independent from the UN

(Vetschera, 1985). Despite these effects on neutrals, some of them such as Norway saw it as a platform that allows them to speak (Vetschera, 1985).

The review of the main treaties that affected neutrality shows that the concept and practice of neutrality are contested. The rights and duties of neutrals are not agreed upon and the current international system, in the age of the UN, does not clearly organise the practice of neutrality. Thus, depending on the literature, the past treaties especially the Hague Conventions and UN Charter, I will elaborate on the rights and duties of neutrality. This will be used to establish what constitutes a practice of neutrality and will be used consistently in the rest of the thesis. I argue, that based on the previous sources, neutrals have different rights and duties.

The first, and probably most important, right of neutrals is territorial integrity. The belligerents, based on international law, are supposed to respect the territorial integrity of neutral countries. This right is secured by Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter which prohibits the use the force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state (Vetschera, 1985). The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 also support this right for neutrals and prohibit belligerents from using the territory of neutrals for any military activity or threatening its integrity. Neutrals are also entitled to get equal treatment from the belligerents, and they must not be forced to support one belligerent or lean towards it. The Hague Conventions 1899 and 1907, and the Declaration of London 1909 enforced this right for neutrals in international law. Furthermore, neutrals have the right to trade with both sides of the conflict. The commerce of neutrals is protected by all parties, and it is prohibited to attack their commercial vessels (Den Hertog and Kruizinga, 2011, Sherman, 1914). This is based on the Treaty of Paris (1856), the Hague Conventions and the UN Charter. These treaties and laws support the rights of neutrals, but they also expect neutrals to perform some duties.

Neutrals are expected to perform four main duties during conflicts (Müller, 2019, Simpson, 2018, Waldron, 2018, Kruizinga, 2016, Pierik and Van der Burg, 2014). First, neutral must not participate in the hostilities of the conflict. This prohibits neutrals from using their territory in supporting the military activities of neutrals. It also prohibits troops of neutrals from engaging in any kind of combat with belligerents except for self-defence. Secondly, neutrals are obliged to deal impartially with both sides of belligerents. Thus, they must not provide aid such as military aid or facilitate the passage of belligerent troops from the territory of the neutral. Third, the territory of the neutral can be used as a military base for belligerents to support the war efforts. These duties are derived from the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 and the Charter of the United Nations.

Reviewing the different treaties, rights and duties of neutrals shows that they are expected to behave in a certain way during conflicts. Based on these reviews I establish that countries can be called neutrals when having four features toward the conflict: non-participation in hostilities, dealing impartially with belligerents, and abstaining from allowing belligerents the use of territories for military use. In this thesis, I will use these elements to argue when the country is called neutral and when it is not.

1.4.3 Conclusion

Different scholars defined neutrality in different ways depending on the angle they view it from such as strategic definitions, political and ethical definitions, and legalistic definitions. The practice of neutrality evolved and was influenced by different treaties that established a non-official framework for it in international relations. The Treaty of Paris 1856, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, and the Charter of the United Nations are among the treaties that influenced the shaped the practice of neutrality. The practice of neutrality and the treaties mentioned established, I argue, expectations that neutrals have different rights and duties in international relations. While the behaviour of neutrals is not the same and difficult to be categorised, I will argue in the theoretical framework chapter that neutrality can take three forms: permanent, traditional and temporary.

1.5 Overview of Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This section provides a brief overview of the theory and methods used in this thesis. The details of the theoretical framework will be explained in detail in Chapter 3, while the methods will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 4. To start with, this thesis offers a new theoretical model to explain the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality from the 1980s until 2022. To achieve this goal, an abduction method was adopted to build a theoretical model. This method builds a theory by relying on theoretical observations and refines it using observations from the empirical data (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021, Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). The model in this thesis, which I call the processual model of neutrality (PMN), is derived from three sources: neoclassical realist theory, role theory and empirical observations. The three parts are integrated to increase the model's explanatory power and enable it to explain the dynamic nature of neutrality.

First, neoclassical realist theorists argue that incorporating domestic factors with systematic factors can boost our understanding of states' foreign policy behaviours, such as adopting a neutrality policy (Ripsman et al., 2016, Schweller, 2004, Rose, 1998). In the PMN, the neoclassical realist element explains the first stage of neutrality: the strategic stage. This phase reveals how complex factors drive certain countries to adopt a neutral position towards a conflict. At this point, the belligerents and other international powers may or may not view the country as neutral.

Second, the PMN also draws on some notions from role theory. This theory argues that states in the international arena play different roles depending on how they conceive themselves (Harnisch, 2011, Thies, 2010). This explains why neutrals tend to adopt the same policy towards future conflicts. After their first experience of neutrality, the decision-makers of these countries may start to believe that adopting neutrality is their new role in international politics (Walker, 1987). At this point, I argue that neutrals enter the second phase of neutrality (as passive neutrals), whereby their leaders conceive themselves and their country as neutral and are ready to act based on this self-conception. During this phase, the neutral country has adopted a low-profile foreign policy and is incentivised to perform neutral roles, such as hosting negotiations and providing humanitarian support due to the lack of external recognition, especially by the belligerents.

Thirdly, I drew from various empirical observations, which contributed to developing the PMN in different ways, such as quantifying the influence of security guarantors, underscoring the importance of recognition of neutrality by belligerents and identifying the roles of active neutrals and the value of these roles. First, I argue that a neutral country can only perform the most active neutral roles by having good relations with both sides of a conflict. For example, bringing belligerents to the negotiation table requires active communication and trust between the neutral and belligerents, and this can only be done with the belligerents' recognition of the neutral stance. Other than this, empirical observations show that small states require security guarantees, especially when adopting neutrality towards a conflict between countries much stronger than the neutral. The security guarantor can (but may not necessarily want to) influence the behaviour of neutrals during the three phases of neutrality. Furthermore, empirical observations show that neutrals can play different constructive roles during the third phase of neutrality, the active phase. These roles, when successful, can influence the perception of various stakeholders and increase the value of neutrality. For example, when the international community, such as great powers or the UN, see the value of roles played by neutrals, they will tend to support this neutrality.

To apply the PMN, I explore the case of Oman in depth from 1980 until 2022, focusing on two main case studies and some intermediary cases between them. The examination of Oman's positions in these cases will validate the dynamic and evolving nature of neutrality described by the PMN. The first main case study is the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), a major conflict between two great regional powers. This large-scale conflict, among other factors in the regional political environment, drove Oman to adopt neutrality. The choice of this case study is crucial as it shows when Oman first adopted neutrality and how it started to conceive itself as neutral during and after this conflict. The second main case study is the War in Yemen, which happened almost 27 years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War. This case is critical as it shows how Omani neutrality has changed and transited through phases since the 1980s. Having these two cases as the bookends of this thesis enables us to show how Omani neutrality has matured during this time. The period between the two main case studies – 1988 and 2022 – is addressed by studying Oman's foreign policy regarding the following secondary events: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War in 2011. This examination shows the consistency (or inconsistency) of Omani neutrality and the causes behind it.

To apply the PMN to help in understanding the case of Oman's neutrality, as explained above, an extensive range of data is required. Thus, as the methods chapter details, this thesis collected data from many different primary and secondary sources to develop these case studies. To start with, I collected data from the archives of three different countries. I began by collecting various documents from the two British archives: the British Library and the National Archive. I accessed these two archives using the University of York Library subscription, Qatar National Library and the AGDA platform. The data from these archives included reports from British Diplomats working in Oman and minutes of meetings between British diplomats and diplomats from Oman, Gulf countries, the US and Yemen. It also includes the reports of UK ambassadors in the Gulf States and the US. Additionally, I used some data from documents extracted from the US archives, including the Library of Congress and de-classified CIA reports. Thirdly, I examined several documents from two archives in Oman: The Omani National Archive and the Centre of Omani Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. The documents extracted from these archives revealed different incidents and perspectives and helped understand the policies in a way that is not available in the current literature.

Beyond the archival data, I extracted many insights by interviewing different Omani decision-makers. During my study, I travelled to Oman and conducted 27 interviews with

high-ranking Omani officials. These officials included former ministers, former ambassadors, senior diplomats and foreign policy analysts. All these face-to-face interviews took place in Oman in three different cities: Muscat, Sohar and Salalah. The insights extracted from these interviews are important and were used to complement the data from other sources. Finally, I examined hundreds of secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, media reports and so on. These sources were crucial in both situating the insights of the primary data into their context and completing them. The triangulation and analysis of the data from the various sources were then applied to the PMN in the case studies.

In conclusion, this thesis has constructed a new theoretical model to explain neutrality, which is called the processual model of neutrality (PMN). The importance of PMN lies in its ability to explain why small countries adopt neutrality and how this neutrality evolves. To achieve these goals, the PMN requires a rich set of data to apply to it in explaining specific cases. Thus, I collected relevant data from archives, interviews with decision-makers and secondary sources on the various case studies discussed in this thesis. In the following section, I present the structure of the thesis.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters in addition to the introductory and concluding chapters. Following this introduction chapter, in Chapter 2, I examine the literature to identify the gaps and draw some insights to build on. The literature review chapter covers three main areas: the literature about neutrality, Omani foreign policy and Omani neutrality. This examination shows a significant gap in three areas. To the best of the author's knowledge, no major project has studied the evolution of Omani neutrality from the 1980s until recently. Moreover, most research on Omani foreign policy is either part of a larger research project about Oman or the GCC, or it is outdated. Thirdly, the concept and practice of neutrality in international relations are under-researched. Thus, this thesis intends to fill these gaps by studying the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality since the 1980s and provide a theoretical framework to guide the study of small states neutrality.

In Chapter 3, the theoretical framework, based on the needs identified through examining the literature, I introduce a theoretical model, the PMN, to guide the study of the behaviour of neutrals in international politics. The model is derived from three main sources: neoclassical realist theory, role theory and empirical observations. The model presents

neutrality as evolving in three phases: strategic, passive and active. In all three phases, neutrality is affected by different factors, including domestic and external factors.

Chapter 4, the methods chapter, begins by explaining the suitability of using case studies and process tracing methods to apply the PMN. I argue in this chapter that applying the PMN utilising the case study method requires the accumulation of rich information. Thus, I used the process tracing method due to its ability to unpack complicated relationships, as in the case of PMN. To achieve this objective, I collected information from various archives in the UK, the US and Oman, twenty-seven interviews with Omani officials and different soft sources such as political speeches and statements and secondary sources, including journal articles, books and newspapers. All of these sources were triangulated and analysed by me using NVivo software as a tool to ease the qualitative analysis.

In Chapter 5, the first empirical chapter, I examine the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality towards the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Guided by the PMN, I argue in this chapter that Omani neutrality was born during the early stages of this war. This neutrality went through three phases. First, the strategic phase reveals the reasons and the overall environment that led Oman to adopt neutrality seven days after the war started. Second, the passive phase shows how Oman tried to establish its neutrality during the first four years of the war, 1980–1984, but it was only passively neutral because Iran did not view Oman as neutral. Third, the active phase between 1984 and the end of the war in 1988 was achieved when both belligerents considered Oman neutral, which enabled it to play some limited diplomatic roles during the war.

Chapter 6 examines Oman's foreign policy between 1988 and 2015. This chapter introduces the period between the two main case studies of the thesis and shows the consistency (or inconsistency) of Omani neutrality and what caused it during this period. In this chapter, I examine Omani foreign policy in relation to five events: the invasion and liberation of Kuwait in 1990–1991, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War that started in 2011. I show that Oman's behaviour was inconsistent and question the reasons behind this inconsistency. This chapter explains that neutrals have systemic limits irrespective of their perception of their roles.

In Chapter 7, the final empirical chapter, I examine Omani neutrality towards the War in Yemen from March 2015 until April 2022. In this chapter, I show that Omani neutrality was expected from the beginning. During almost the whole war period, Omani neutrality reflected the active neutrality phase. Despite facing challenges, I explain in the chapter that Oman played different active roles, including humanitarian and diplomatic roles. To reach the

April 2022 truce, I show that Oman played a pivotal role in facilitating the peace discussions between the Saudis and the Houthis.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the main research questions and issues that this thesis intends to resolve. It began with an overview of the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality. This examination produced three sub-questions about the factors behind Omani neutrality, the evolution of Omani neutrality between 1980–2022 and the consistency of Omani neutrality and foreign policy in this period. Studying these points led me to question the concept of neutrality in international relations. Thus, this thesis will also examine how neutrality can be conceptualised and presented as a dynamic practice that evolves over time.

In this chapter, I also explained why the case of Oman warrants further scrutiny. I showed that within the region, Oman is unique due to its geographical location, unusual religious and tribal structure and political leadership. Oman's case is also significant due to the gaps in the literature. There are significant gaps in the literature concerning Omani foreign policy, Omani neutrality and theoretical frameworks of neutrality. I explained in this chapter why I am introducing a new theoretical model to guide in examining the neutrality of small states. This model, the PMN, presents neutrality as a process of complex interactions between different sets of factors. The policy of neutrality evolves in three phases: strategic, passive and active, and it continues to be influenced by the factors that produce it.

To achieve its goals, this thesis is structured in six chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. In the first three chapters, I reveal the gaps in the literature, introduce a theoretical framework and elaborate on the methods used to apply this framework. The second three chapters are empirical, where I examine the case studies of this thesis. The next chapter, Chapter 2, discusses the literature on Omani neutrality, Omani foreign policy and the neutrality concept.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores the literature related to neutrality in international relations and Omani foreign policy. It identifies gaps in the current literature and outlines existing insights that provide a foundation for the thesis. The structure of this chapter is based on the three fields my thesis contributes to theoretical literature on neutrality, literature on Omani foreign policy and literature on Omani neutrality.

Although many scholars have discussed Oman's foreign policy, the subject has still received very little attention compared to the foreign policies of other Arabian Gulf monarchies. Within the region, scholars are generally attracted to studying Oman's more influential neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and countries that have experienced contemporary wars such as Yemen and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait. The available studies on Omani foreign policy are either part of more extensive studies about the foreign policies of the GCC or part of general studies on Oman, with perhaps one chapter devoted to foreign policy. Despite these limitations, some studies, such as Josef Kechichain's book, Oman and the World: The Emergence of Independent Foreign Policy and Al-Khalili's book, Oman's Foreign Policy: Foundation and Practice, can help in drawing insights to support answering the research questions in this thesis (Kechichian, 1995, Al-Khalili, 2009).

Examining the literature on Omani foreign policy reveals that scholars tend to focus on certain themes, such as security perceptions, conflict experience, the importance of history and the influence of external relations. To start with, the literature has identified the importance of the security perception of Omani decision-makers and how previous events have constructed it. Moreover, the literature emphasises the significance of the recent history of Oman and its influence on the current perception, relations and thinking of Omani decision-makers. Thus, I intend to further explore the perception of Omani decision-makers (by interviewing them to understand their thinking) and revisit the period before the start of the main case studies of this thesis. In addition, the literature highlights the importance of Oman's relations with other regional players such as neighbouring GCC countries and Iran, as well as with great powers such as the US and the UK. Therefore, this thesis will examine the relations between these factors and their influence on the making of Omani neutrality. This examination will be used along with the insights extracted from other literary sources and empirical research to construct a theoretical framework to help in understanding Omani neutrality in particular and the neutrality of small states in general.

Next, after examining the literature on Omani foreign policy in general, I narrow my focus and review the literature on Omani neutrality. There is an apparent and noticeable absence of discussions in the literature on Omani neutrality. This review shows that the literature contains only a few studies that either focus on Omani neutrality in the context of a single event or focus on studying the influence of one factor in the making of Omani neutrality. To the author's best knowledge, no major study has examined the evolution of Omani neutrality and how it has progressed since it started. This chapter also explores the concept of neutrality in international relations and how it is explained by various international relations theories.

The goals of the third section are to understand neutrality and uncover some theoretical insights that inform the process of developing a theoretical framework of neutrality for this thesis. The extant literature shows that neutrality can be categorised into three types: permanent neutrality, as in the case of Switzerland; traditional neutrality, such as in Sweden; and ad-hoc neutrality, such as in the case of Spain during WWII. As this review will show, while offering some explanatory power, the primary international relations theories have clear limitations in explaining neutrality. For example, the explanations of realist scholars tend to overlook the influence of domestic factors. On the other hand, liberal arguments generally focus on the idealistic aspects and ignore the influence of systemic factors while the constructivist explanation is very abstract, and using it to offer policy recommendations has been shown to be challenging because the links between the factors it relies on, such as ideas, identity and belief and policymaking, are vague.

This chapter reveals a lacuna in the literature regarding Omani neutrality and limitations in the studies of Omani foreign policy and neutrality in international relations. The review of the extant literature also shows that some elements are important and need further explorations in projects aiming to understand Omani neutrality. Thus, I have identified several elements for further exploration, including security perceptions, the influence of history and domestic politics, the influence of external relations and the need to develop a new theoretical framework.

2.1 Literature on Omani Foreign Policy

The literature about Omani foreign policy is limited compared to the literature on the foreign policies of neighbouring Arabian Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia. The available literature is mostly journal articles and books about the GCC or Omani politics that devote

one chapter to Omani foreign policy while very few books focus solely on Omani foreign policy. Furthermore, there is even less literature focusing on Omani neutrality, and, as I will explain, this literature only focuses on Omani neutrality towards one event or the influence of certain factors – most notably Sultan Qaboos – on the making of Omani neutrality. This section, which aims to draw some insights from the literature and identify the existing gaps, is divided into three parts. First, to appreciate the similarities and differences between Oman and other systems in the Middle East, I start by discussing the politics in the Middle East, with a focus on the Arabian Gulf Countries. Secondly, I discuss the literature on Omani foreign policy and thirdly, I explore the literature on Omani neutrality.

2.1.1 Politics in the Middle East and Arab Gulf Countries

After the demise of European imperialism post-1945, most Middle Eastern countries embarked upon a process of state-building, which incorporated (a) a strong central state system and (b) ideological creeds imported from the West (most notably, nationalism) (Hinnebusch, 2009). Militaries performed a crucial role in state formation across the Middle East, thereby embedding the seeds of political authoritarianism and, in particular, the myth of the strong leader as the authority of the new state (Hinnebusch, 2014).

The trajectory of political development in the Arabian Gulf bears many similarities to the formation of the post-colonial state in the Middle East. Most notably, as in most Middle Eastern countries, Arabian Gulf countries are characterised by a strong centralised state that retains political authority and power in the hands of authoritarian leaders (Ulrichsen, 2018). However, unlike in the Middle East in general, the hereditary monarchy (rather than the party and the military) represents the key institutional site of political authority in the Gulf. This, as Ulrichsen explains, has yielded a more traditional 'top-down' model of authoritarianism, where all social, economic and cultural groups except a very small elite with direct links to the monarchy are excluded from the political sphere (Ulrichsen, 2018).

Two additional features of Arabian Gulf politics are distinct from the politics of the wider Middle East. Firstly, the Arabian Gulf monarchies are rentier states in which, following the discovery of huge quantities of oil and gas, the development of the state has been funded by revenue acquired through the extraction and sale of natural resources by foreign clients (Beblawi, 2015). The oil monarchs of the Arabian Gulf have used the immense wealth that this has yielded to pay for extremely generous social welfare systems, which provide employment and health care to the vast majority of the local population without recourse to

taxation (Beblawi, 2015). Arabian Gulf monarchies have consequently inherited a social, political and economic system that is unrecognisable from liberal Western democracies and characterised by (a) a lack of any formal class structure or private sector; (b) an absence of any form of meaningful political participation or constitutional checks on political authority; and (c) economic systems that have become overly dependent upon global patterns of supply and demand in the energy sector (Herb, 2009). As a result, political, economic and social interests are organised hierarchically according to the distribution of rents (Herb, 2005).

Secondly, political authority and social and economic rights in the Arabian Gulf monarchies have historically been shaped by religious identities (Ulrichsen, 2018). While this has also been the case in other Middle Eastern countries (most notably Syria), in the Gulf, religious and sectarian identities are intricately interwoven into the institutions of the state (Monshipouri, 2019). Most oil monarchies are Sunni regimes, which claim to advocate adherence to orthodox Sunni Islam and denigrate as heresy any other religious doctrine (Ehteshami, 2013). State institutions are exclusive, and minority religious and ethnic identities are afforded differentiated citizenship and rights (Ehteshami, 2013). Religious identifications have become increasingly important determinants of the political development of the Gulf states in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which heralded the advent of a Shia autocracy in Tehran. Since 1979, the Iranian government has sought to export its radical Shia doctrine across the Middle East to rival Saudi Arabia as the spiritual and moral leader of the Islamic world (Mabon, 2015). Tensions between Sunnis and Shias have risen in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the more recent Arab uprisings which, in the Arabian Gulf, were fuelled by hitherto excluded Shia minorities' calls for greater political and social equality in Sunni-dominated Arab states (Ehteshami, 2013). The Shia uprising and its brutal suppression in Bahrain in 2011 is testimony to, on the one hand, the fragile and inherently fragmented cultural, ethnic and religious fabric of the Arabian Gulf societies and, on the other, Gulf rulers' capacity to enforce hegemony through coercion in the absence of consensus (Haseeb, 2014).

These aspects have affected the way in which Arabian Gulf states conduct their foreign policies and the way researchers understand them. However, it is not accurate to generalise the presence and effects of these factors across the various states. Religious identity, for example, while present in all Arab countries, is different from one country to the other. Also, the influence of these factors evolves and changes from one time to another. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the influence of religion and traditional culture in policymaking was very different in the 1980s when compared to the era of King Salman and the Crown

Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, since 2014. Thus, to understand foreign policymaking in the Arabian Gulf countries, each case must be studied separately and in detail. In the next section, I will review how researchers have viewed Omani foreign policy and then narrow down and focus on Omani neutrality.

2.1.2 Omani Foreign Policy

The literature on Omani foreign policy, as I will elaborate on in the following sections, mostly relies on unit-level analysis. Scholars on Omani foreign policy argue that various factors influence the making of Omani foreign policy. Examples include the influence of history (Al-Khalili, 2009), culture (Jones and Ridout, 2015), the Ibadi religious sect (Wilkinson, 1981, Jones, 2013, Ghubash, 2014) and leadership structure (Baabood, 2016, Kechichian, 1995). Based on a thematic analysis of the literature on Omani foreign policy, the following sections review three influential elements: leadership, historical determinants and the Ibadi Islamic sect.

2.1.2.1 Leadership and Political Structure

Different scholars on Omani foreign policy have emphasised the role played by the political leadership in Oman in the making of the country's foreign policy. Almost always, as I explained in greater detail in the introduction chapter, the most prominent figure in Omani foreign policy is the former Sultan of Oman, Qaboos bin Said, who ruled Oman following a bloodless coup against his father in 1970 until his death in 2020. For example, Joseph Kechichain, a prominent scholar on the GCC and Oman, argues in his book, Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy, 1995, that the characteristics and vision of Sultan Qaboos were one of the main reasons behind the independence and uniqueness of Omani foreign policy (Kechichian, 1995). He elaborates that, due to the vision of Sultan Qaboos, Oman has focused more on security and long-term goals instead of short-term gains. Thus, it always prioritises its security and independence and avoids entering into regional conflicts and military alliances. Kechichain's book about Oman is considered by many as the primary source on the topic; however, I argue it is now outdated, and Omani foreign policy has evolved significantly since then.

Another scholar who shares Kechichain's perspective is Abdullah Baabood. In his article, 'Oman's Independent Foreign Policy', Baabood argues that the nature of the Omani political system gives Sultan Qaboos complete control over the strategic decisions and

accordingly makes him the leading figure in Oman's foreign policy decisions (Baabood, 2016). It is worth mentioning that Sultan Qaboos was the absolute leader in Oman as he solidified his power by holding multiple positions, including Head of State (the Sultan), Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defence and Head of the Omani Central Bank. Baabood explains that Sultan Qaboos' independent foreign policy was mainly shaped by his security perception. According to Baabood, internal historical events, especially the war in Dhofar, which represented an existential threat to the Sultan's regime, greatly influenced this perception. Oman's experience of internal instability and the military background of the Sultan drove him to always prioritise dialogue and peaceful means in achieving foreign policy goals. The work of Baabood insightfully explains the relations between the power of Sultan Qaboos and the influence he posed in the making of Oman's foreign policy. However, it does not examine how the power of the Sultan evolved or how it changed from one issue to the other.

Nikolas Gardner also focused on studying the background, vision and thinking of Sultan Qaboos to understand Omani foreign policy. In his article, 'The Limits of the Sandhurst Connection: The Evolution of Oman's Foreign and Defence Policy, 1970–1977', Gardner argues that the perception of Sultan Qaboos was a primary factor in shaping the Omani foreign policy (Gardner, 2015). He contends that learning and training at Sandhurst Military College gave Sultan Qaboos leadership skills and shaped his perception of the regional conflicts and how best to deal with them. He also argues that in the early years of his reign, Sultan Qaboos aimed and succeeded in controlling the most critical positions in the cabinet in order to apply his visions. Gardner offers an exciting and crucial explanation to understand the influence of Qaboos and how this influence materialised after the coup of 1970, but it has some shortcomings. First, while being important, his focus on Qaboos' experience at Sandhurst overshadows other factors such as internal politics, culture and realpolitik. Moreover, the article, written in 2015, focuses on examining the first seven years of Qaboos' role, ignoring the evolution of Omani foreign policy in later years and how the influence of Sultan Qaboos increased or decreased during his reign.

The literature that focuses on the influence of Sultan Qaboos is informative. It shows the importance of understanding Sultan Qaboos' personality and political practices. However, most of the scholarship ignores the influence of various other factors and how they may have impacted Sultan Qaboos and his foreign policymaking.

2.1.2.2 Historical Determinants

The year 1970 is seen as the year that the history of the new Oman started. This is due to the transformation, known as the Renaissance, which Oman experienced during the era of Sultan Qaboos. While scholars also recognise a shift in Omani foreign policymaking after 1970 that coincides with Sultan Qaboos's rise to power, they also see it as very related and heavily influenced by past events. As I will explain in this section, these scholars argue that the current Omani foreign policy can be understood only by examining different historical factors such as the experience of Oman's long history, its history as an empire and the late civil wars.

To start with, Majid Al-Khalili, in his book Oman's Foreign Policy: Foundations and Practice, argues that researchers cannot understand Omani foreign policy by only relying on systemic factors (Al-Khalili, 2009). He emphasised the importance of studying the historical events that shaped the current perceptions of the decision-makers, such as the conflicts between the Imamate of Oman and the government in 1913 and the 1950s, the Dhofari rebellion, Oman's historical experience as an empire – especially in East Africa – and the loss of these territories. Al-Khalili tries to give a holistic view of the evolution of Omani foreign policy and its historical determinants. While beneficial, his work is very general and lacks depth in its analysis. His book offers claims without providing a clear explanation or concrete support for its claims. For example, he argues that the Jabal Al-Khader War, which occurred in the mid-1950s between the Imamate of Oman and the Sultan government (see Chapter 6 for more details), was the cause of the government's independent foreign policy after 1970. While appreciating that there may be a link between the two, Al-Khalili offers little explanation for this claim or clear evidence for it.

Rene Rieger is another scholar who uses historical events to understand the current foreign policy of Oman. In his book, The Foreign Policy of Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990, Rieger compares the foreign policies of Gulf monarchies towards the Iran -Iraq War and the Arab-Israel conflict (Rieger, 2013). He maintains that the Gulf monarchies have similar characteristics and share the same external threats when viewed with realist lenses. Despite this, Oman has shown different behaviour towards these two cases compared to the rest of its neighbours. Rieger argues that this behaviour can be understood only by examining the Dhofar rebellion and its consequences on the Omani regime. This war represented an existential threat to the Omani regime and lasted for almost ten years. He elaborates that the security perception of the decision-makers in Oman, characterised as leaning towards being independent and avoiding conflicts, was constructed during the war in Dhofar. Rieger

explains that, due to this war, Omani decision-makers made sure their country established and kept good relations with adversaries such as Iraq and Iran.

According to Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Rideout's examination of the relationship between Omani foreign policy, history and culture, A History of Modern Oman, the country's long history and rich culture have influenced how Omanis view themselves and accordingly, shaped their foreign policy (Jones and Ridout, 2015). Jones and Rideout claim that Oman has followed an independent foreign policy and acted differently than other Arabian Gulf monarchies, and this unique behaviour is a result of its rich and unique history. For example, as the book explains, Oman's long experience of controlling different territories in the past caused the thinking of the Omanis to be more outward and open-minded. The book offers an excellent descriptive analysis of Omani history and diplomacy; however, it has some shortcomings. First, the relationship between history, culture and foreign policymaking is not explained adequately, especially in articulating how the legacy of an experience that occurred more than 100 years ago can form the thinking of current decision-makers. In addition, while the book briefly mentions Oman's relations with external actors such as the US, Iran and the GCC, there is a total absence of examination of the relations between Oman and the United Kingdom.

Another work that emphasises the important role of historical legacy in making current Omani foreign policy is Allen and Rigbsee's book Oman under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970–1996. They argue that the current Omani foreign policymaking can be understood by studying several unit traits such as cultural history and that Oman's contemporary culture and society resulted from its long history of expansion into areas such as East Africa, Baluchistan and territories in Iran (Allen and Rigsbee II, 2014). This resulted in a diverse society, including Omanis of Arab origin as well as Farsi, Baluchi and Africans. This mix makes the decision-makers more accommodating of different views and adversaries. Thus, Oman, as the book argues, decided to adopt an independent foreign policy of accommodating relations with all conflicting parties.

The above examination of different pieces of literature is very important for this thesis. Various insights can be drawn that can contribute to this thesis, such as the importance of past events, like the war in Dhofar, on the security perception of decision-makers. While the relationship between the two is not clearly explained in the literature, it is an area this thesis intends to explore and consider in the evolution of Omani neutrality. Next, I will review the literature exploring the influence of the Ibadi sect in making Omani foreign policy.

2.1.2.3 Ibadi Traditions

Different scholars have studied the impact of the Ibadi beliefs and traditions on the making of Omani foreign policy. They argue that the principles of the Ibadi religious sect have influenced the thinking of the Omani decision-makers to follow an independent and peaceful foreign policy. To start with, Jean-Marc Rickli and Almezaini (2017) argue that the style and conduct of Omani foreign policy differs from the foreign policies of similar states due to the influence of Ibadi traditions. Their article titled 'Theories of Small States Foreign and Security Policies and the Gulf States' explores the foreign policies of Oman, Qatar and the UAE (Rickli and Almezaini, 2017). In their examination, they explain that due to the acceptance of others and the peaceful teachings of the Ibadi sect, Oman's foreign policy is different from those of the UAE and Qatar.[1] While Qatar and the UAE pursue an active foreign policy, Oman has leaned towards following low-profile foreign policy in regional conflicts and issues.

Another scholar who has examined the influence of the Ibadi sect on Omani foreign policy is Steven Wright. In his book chapter, 'Foreign Policy in the GCC States', Wright argues that Oman adopted an independent foreign policy to protect the existence of the Ibadi sect (Wright, 2011). Most people in Oman follow the Ibadi school of thought, making it the only country in the world with an Ibadi majority. As Wright argues, this has caused the Omani government to worry about being dominated by its more prominent Sunni or Shia neighbours. Thus, it decided to be independent and have peaceful relations with different countries and rivals.

Some scholars also argue that certain traditions, such as Al-Shura— the practice in the Ibadi school of thought of consulting before making a decision—have contributed to making Omani foreign policy. For example, Hussain Ghabash argues in his popular book, Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition, that the practice of Al-Shura in different aspects of the life of Omani has influenced the thinking of decision-makers and diplomats (Ghubash, 2014). He believes that, for centuries, this practice has been a core influence on different levels of interaction in Oman, such as in governmental conduct, in the relations between tribal leaders and their followers, and between people in day-to-day life. Thus, as Ghabash argues, it influenced the Omani decision-makers to maintain relations with adversaries and gave them the skills to conduct diplomatic initiatives such as facilitating and meditating. The importance

[1] The ideas, beliefs, particularities and ideology of the Ibadi sect are explained in detail in the introduction chapter.

and influence of Al-Shura were also examined in the work of Jeremy Jones, specifically his article 'Oman, Culture and Diplomacy' (Jones, 2013). Jones argues that the current conduct of Omani foreign policy and the skills of its diplomats were hugely influenced by the Ibadi tradition of Al-Shura.

Other scholars also highlight the influence of the Ibadi political thinking in making Omani foreign policy. For example, Jeffrey Lefebvre (2010) argues that the current independent, moderate and pragmatic Omani foreign policy is a continuation and application of the code of Ibadi political thought. The Ibadi sect followers have always been independent having fought for independence from the influence of Sunni and Shia countries (or other entities before) (Lefebvre, 2010). Thus, the current independence is a continuation of past conduct. Moreover, maintaining relations with adversaries is also based on the political teachings of the Ibadi ideology. One of the pillars of this ideology is the rule of 'agreeable disagreement with friends and peaceful compromise with enemies'. According to this tenant, if a country has differences with another friendly country, these differences should not affect their good relations. On the other hand, countries should always try to find a middle ground with their enemies and then build on that ground.

The studies that argue the Ibadi thoughts and ideology influence the making of Omani foreign policy offer an interesting argument. However, this argument needs more exploration and support. These arguments need to demonstrate how the Ibadi sect represented in the Imamate system, which was against the Sultan's government in the 20th century, has influenced the thinking of the Sultans. In addition, these studies need to consider other important factors such as culture, leadership and material factors. In the following section, I will examine the studies that have touched on Omani neutrality.

2.1.3 Literature on Omani Neutrality

In this section, I will examine the literature about Omani neutrality, with the aim of establishing the niche of my thesis in the literature. First of all, there is a dearth in the literature examining Omani neutrality. No big project has focused on the evolution of Omani neutrality. Despite this, there are some works about Omani neutrality to be found in book chapters, journal articles and non-academic articles. While these articles offer some insights regarding Omani neutrality, they do not provide an in-depth analysis of why and how Oman has adopted neutrality.

Some scholars argue that history and culture have played the primary role in driving Oman to adopt neutrality and be diplomatically active. First, Richard Schirmer, the former US ambassador to Oman (2009–2012) and a prominent figure in the US team that negotiated the nuclear deal with Iran, argued in his article 'The Sultanate of Oman and the Iran Nuclear Deal' that history is the key to understanding Omani neutrality and mediation (Schmierer, 2015). Oman's long history and experience as an empire that once controlled areas from East Africa to cities in today's Pakistan and Iran, Schirmer argues, has allowed the Omanis to understand different perspectives. This acumen is derived from their long dealings with different nations as empires, along with their longstanding work as sea traders. He argues that this understanding and openness qualified Omanis to adopt neutrality and have the skills to play facilitating and mediating roles (Schmierer, 2015). While his work offers an interesting theory, it falls short of providing an empirical explanation of how these qualities can influence decision-makers to adopt neutrality in current world affairs. The relationship between the factors he mentions and policymaking is vague. He argues that traits such as past experience in trade, have enabled Omanis to play better roles as a neutral country and to mediate between adversaries. However, he does not elaborate on this claim, leaving the influence and relation between trade and current neutral policies unresolved.

The elements of history and culture are also discussed in Linda Pappas Funsch's book, Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization. Funsch argues that Oman's unique culture and religious ideology played a main role in driving Oman to adopt neutrality and always seek more peaceful paths (Funsch, 2015a). She focuses her analysis on highlighting the importance of the Ibadi religious school of thought. The presence of the Ibadi sect in Omani is predominant and thus different from other Middle Eastern countries, which are Sunni dominant, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, or Shia dominant, such as Iran and Bahrain. In this regard, Pappas explains that Ibadis are known for their tolerance and acceptance of others. This, as she argues, has influenced the thinking of Omani decision-makers to be neutral and play roles in promoting peace and negotiations (Funsch, 2015a). However, her work, as in the case of Ricard Schirmer, lacks an empirical explanation of how these traits of culture and ideology actually influence decision-making in Oman. She also does not explain how the Ibadi sect influenced the current regime in Oman despite having repetitive conflicts with its leaders, such as the 1913 Rebellion and the Jabal Al-Akhdar War in the mid-1950s, as previously mentioned.

Other scholars, such as Marc Valeri, have also touched on some aspects of Omani neutrality. In his article 'Oman's Mediation Efforts in Regional Crises', Valeri explains that the perception of Omani decision-makers of how external threats can create internal threats was the main driver of Omani neutrality (Valeri, 2014). He also argues that Oman views any participation in regional wars and conflict or providing support to one side over the other can motivate external players to interfere in Oman's domestic affairs. Thus, Oman's active neutrality and mediation efforts aim to stabilise the region and prevent external intervention in Omani domestic affairs (Valeri, 2014). Although Valeri's analysis offers a clear explanation of the relationship between external threats and external powers interfering in domestic politics, it has two main shortcomings. First, while he explains how the perception of threats has been the main driver for Omani neutrality, he does not explain how this perception has evolved or why this perception differs from the perceptions of neighbouring Arabian monarchies, who share similar environmental threats. Secondly, Valeri argues that Omani decision-makers also search for regional influence by adopting active neutrality. Still, he does not explain why some countries adopt neutrality for influence while others follow different means to gain the desired influence.

Other scholars have combined different factors in their work to explain Omani neutrality. For example, Abdullah Baabood, in his articles, presents a few alternative factors as critical influencers of Omani decision-makers to adopt a neutral foreign policy (Baabood, 2021, Baabood, 2016, Baabood and Baabood, 2020). First, he suggests that geography plays a vital role in this regard. According to Baabood, Omani control over the strategic Strait of Hormuz entails acting neutral and avoiding any conflict that may cause instability in the strait. Thus, the best foreign policy for Omani is the adoption of neutrality towards regional conflicts (Baabood, 2016). Secondly, Baabood presents Oman's unique ability to maintain relations with regional and international adversaries has resulted in respect and trust from different conflict players. This has qualified Oman to play an active neutral role and play different facilitating and mediating roles (Baabood and Baabood, 2020, Baabood, 2016). Additionally, Baabood highlights the influence of Oman's position as the only non-Sunni government in the GCC, which makes it unique and qualifies it to play the roles traditionally played by neutrals (Baabood, 2021). Baabood's work is persuasive as it explains clearly the influence of geography on the making of foreign policy and the urge to be neutral. However, it still has some shortcomings that need further exploration. For example, while he argues that Oman's relations with different parties are respected, he does not explain from whom or why Oman gained this respect. Moreover, Baabood, while elaborating on how geography drove

Oman to adopt neutrality, does not consider other factors or how Oman's policy of neutrality has evolved over time.

The literature on Omani neutrality, while limited, points to a few significant factors influencing Omani neutrality, particularly the importance of security perceptions and the country's strategic location. These two factors present a starting point for understanding why Oman has adopted neutrality. However, the literature, to the best of my knowledge, fails to explain how Omani neutrality has evolved, nor does it fully explain the environment that has caused Oman to adopt neutrality in the first place. Furthermore, no work has studied specific cases where Oman has adopted neutrality and compared them with others in which it did not adopt neutrality or questioned the reasons behind this inconsistency. In addition, the literature does not offer a theoretical framework that can be used as a guide in explaining Omani neutrality. Thus, this thesis intends to explore these areas and fill the gaps in the literature. To draw more insights, I will next explore the theoretical literature of neutrality in international relations.

2.2 Literature on Neutrality in International Relations Theories

The literature on Omani foreign policy suggests that several factors, such as security perceptions, domestic determinants and historical legacy should be studied to understand the making of Omani foreign policy positions, including neutrality. However, further research on the literature on neutrality itself is needed in order to draw more insights and to build a framework that can guide the understanding of Omani neutrality. Thus, in this section, I intend to explore the literature on the main international relations theories that are used to understand neutrality. Before delving into the different explanations of neutrality, it is important to note that this concept has different definitions and types. As (Goetschel, 1999) explains in 'Neutrality: A Really Dead Concept?', there are three types of neutrality: permanent neutrality, classic neutrality and ad hoc neutrality.

First, permanent neutrality is when a country pledges itself to follow neutrality towards all future conflicts. The primary model of permanent neutrality is Switzerland, which adopted neutrality in 1815 after the end of the Napoleonic Wars (Agius and Devine, 2011). By the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the great powers agreed to give Switzerland the status of permanent neutrality and promised not to violate this neutrality (Müller, 2019). The second type of neutrality, traditional neutrality, refers to countries that normally adopt neutrality towards international or regional conflicts but do not declare their permanent

neutrality or legally confine themselves to it (Goetschel, 1999). An example of this is the case of Sweden, which has a track record of adopting neutrality since its first official declaration of neutrality by King Gustav XIV in 1834 but has not declared itself to have permanent neutrality. Thirdly, some countries only adopt neutrality towards certain conflicts, which is called ad-hoc neutrality (Goetschel, 1999). Cases of ad-hoc neutrals include Spain during the Second World War and the Arabian Gulf monarchies towards the Russia-Ukraine War.

Neutrality today has become very contested, even for permanent neutrals such as Switzerland and Sweden. The neutrality of Sweden has been questioned since it joined the EU in 1995. While the country claims to remain neutral, its strong relations with NATO and its economic commitments with the EU have raised different questions regarding the purity of its neutrality. In the case of Switzerland, which claims to still have neutrality, this status is now being contested, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine when Switzerland decided to follow other Western countries in imposing economic sanctions against Russia. Therefore, the concept of neutrality needs further examination and explanation. To draw some insights about how to understand the behaviour of these neutrals, I will explore how the literature behind the main international relations theories views neutrality.

2.2.1 Realist Explanations

2.2.1.1 Realist Theories of International Relations

Realist thinking about international politics is centralised around several foundational concepts. First, for realists, the state's primary goal is to survive in the international system. States are also the main actors in the international system, aiming to maximise their power and security (Lobell, 2010). Furthermore, the system where states interact is anarchic, with no central authority (Bell, 2017). Thus, small or large states must only depend on themselves for survival (Williams et al., 2005). The realists have different branches, such as classical realism, defensive realism and offensive realism. Classical realism focuses its analysis on the nature of humans. Classical realist thinkers argue that humans are, by nature, lusting for survival and power. Thus, these traits are reflected in the states and their behaviour in the international system. This perspective is influenced by three main writers.

The first is Thucydides, whose book titled The History of the Peloponnesian War describes the events of the war between Sparta and Athens (431–404 BC). This book greatly influenced the thinking of classical realism as it emphasises the roles of self-interest, power, fear and honour as the drivers for war. Thucydides argues that morals have no place in

influencing the trajectory and realities of wars. Another influential book, The Prince, which was written by Niccolò Machiavelli, also aligns with the thinking of classical realism. In his book, Machiavelli argues that rulers should focus on the state's survival and ignore morality unless it leads to achieving the interests of the state. In addition to these, Mans Morgenthau, who is considered a foundational figure in classical realism, published an influential book in 1948 titled Politics Among Nations. In his book, Morgenthau claims that states seek power as it is an inherent element in human nature. He also argues that the main goal in international relations must be the survival of the state. Furthermore, he emphasises that in terms of power and influence, national interests must drive the behaviour of the states instead of any moral considerations.

The second branch of realism derives from the defensive realist theory. This theory departs from the classical realism focus on human nature and shifts the focus to states' security concerns. Defensive realist scholars emphasise the argument that the international system is anarchic – not in a chaotic way – but in its absence of a central authority that leads and enforces the rules in the international system. Defensive realism also differs from classical realism in its emphasis on the balance of power in ensuring security instead of relying on maximising only the hard power of the state. Thus, states may rationally seek to balance power between themselves instead of relying on the accumulation of hard power that can lead to costly wars. The balance of power, however, is not a guarantee of security, as states may misread the intentions of other states, especially those accumulating power. Defensive realism offers a perception that can lead to a policy calibration that could end in an arms race or even costly wars.

The main influential figure in the thinking of defensive realism is Kenneth Waltz, whose book Theory of International Politics was published in 1979. This book outlines several of the core arguments of defensive realism. First, Waltz emphasises that states are the main unitary actors in the international system, and their interactions shape the system. Second, the states' goal must be to ensure security instead of maximising their power. Third, Waltz argues that the balance of power in the international system it is the result of the distribution of power among the states and the interactions between them. Fourthly, Waltz elaborates on the different international systems and the implications of each one. In this regard, he argues that the distribution of power can result in three different systems: unipolar, where one state has the most power; bipolar, where two states share the most power; and multipolar, where three states or more are competing for power. He claims, using the Cold War as an example, that the bipolar system is the most stable.

Beyond the classical and defensive branches of realism, John published a book in 2001 introducing a new branch of realism called ‘offensive realism‘. Mearsheimer’s book presents several core arguments about the states’ behaviour and power dynamics in the international system. First, Mearsheimer emphasises the argument for the anarchy of the international system. In this system, he argues that states can only rely on themselves to ensure their survival and security. Second, he claims that states in this anarchic international system lack certainty about the intentions of other states and must, therefore, aim to accumulate military power. This accumulation, while not necessarily offensive, is a necessary measure to deter the potential offensive intentions of other states. Third, great powers must invest in building offensive military capabilities and aim to dominate the balance of power – which he called hegemony – to ensure their ultimate security and survival. Fourth, Mearsheimer contends that the geopolitical competition between great powers may result in some sort of balancing behaviour, such as bandwagoning and aligning. However, he emphasises that the aim of these behaviours is merely to ensure the security of the state and to increase its power in the long term. Fifth, offensive realism theory views war as a natural outcome of the interaction between states in the anarchic international system. Thus, from the offensive realist viewpoint, it is sometimes necessary to wage wars if they result in an increase in power or the deterrence of future threats.

The three main strands of realism – classical, defensive and offensive – have some core similarities but still diverge in other assumptions. On the one hand, they all agree on four core principles: 1) states are the main actors in the international system, 2) the international system is anarchic, 3) power is centralised and 4) morality comes second to idealism. On the other hand, they disagree on three main issues. First, while classical realism focuses its analysis on human nature, defensive and offensive realism shift the focus to the nature of the system. Second, offensive realists view power as an objective that ensures survival and achieves hegemony, while defensive realists view it as a potential tool that ensures security by balancing power between states. Third, the three strands diverge in their views of conflict and cooperation. While offensive realists view conflicts and wars as most likely, defensive realists suggest that states can achieve a balance of power. Based on these core similarities and despite the differences, researchers can make some generalisations about the realists’ explanations of neutrality. In the following section, I will discuss how realists view neutral states and explain neutrality behaviour.

2.2.1.2 Realist View of Neutrality

By carefully looking at the realists' view of neutrality and highlighting its potential shortcomings, it is possible to draw some insights that are useful in formulating a theoretical framework that helps in understanding neutrality. First, realists accept the existence of neutral states despite their lack of explanation for neutrals' influence (Simpson, 2018, Devine, 2006). This realist position towards neutrality can be explained by elaborating on the following three points: the centrality of states in the international system, the anarchic nature of the international system and the role of neutrality as a tool in the anarchic international system. As explained above, realists argue that states are rational actors that behave in a way that maximises their security and power (Scheuerman, 2009). Thus, they view neutrals as rational actors who adopt their position to serve the same interests in international relations. However, based on offensive realism logic, for example, this position is for the short term and is used only when a neutral state views its power as too small to compete with the potential foes. Therefore, it will opt for neutrality until it builds greater power to ensure its survival.

Second, realists argue that the international system is anarchic with no central authority; therefore, states can only rely on themselves to survive (Kirshner, 2012). As a result, some states, especially small ones, opt to adopt neutrality during conflicts between other powers. From the realist perspective, this position of neutrality is merely a tool to protect the neutral state from being part of conflicts, especially between strong states. While not discussed directly by the main realist writers, based on their logic, this position can be understood using the defensive realist arguments. Neutrals may opt for this position to deter threats and avoid being dragged into a costly war with much stronger states. Despite accepting the existence of this position, the realists view it as very risky since states are not bound by international institutions that claim to protect neutrals' rights.

Thirdly, realists view neutrality as a product of the balance of power in the international system (Hamilton and Rathbun, 2013). For realists in general, and neorealists in particular, the rivalry between great powers and their interactions in the international system can result in some space wherein smaller states can adopt neutrality (Simpson, 2018). This space allows the neutral state to stay unaligned within the great power rivalry without jeopardising its sovereignty and security. An example of this is the case of Belgium before WWI. Belgium was guaranteed a status of neutrality in the London Conference in 1839, when several great powers, including Britain, Germany and France, signed a treaty to spare Belgium from their competition and respect its neutrality. However, according to the realist

view, the promises of great powers will last as long as they serve their interests. Thus, Germany violated the neutrality of Belgium and invaded it at the start of WWI.

While realist thinking has provided some explanations of neutrality that are mainly based on power and the anarchic nature of the international system, it fails to explain several cases of neutrality. Despite its great explanatory power, realists' explanation of neutrality has some limitations. First, the realists concentrate mainly on the influence of systematic factors and usually ignore important domestic factors such as public opinion, party politics and the ruling system (Williams et al., 2005). Overlooking these domestic factors negatively affects the explanatory power of realist theories when they are used to analyse neutrality positions (Zakaria, 2008). An example of this is the case of Sweden. The realist explanation partly explains how Sweden was guaranteed neutrality to avoid being dragged into rivalries between the great powers in Europe. However, Sweden's ability to achieve and sustain its neutral status cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of domestic factors. Public sentiment about not taking part in wars, internal politics and the tradition of social democracy in Sweden played important roles in sustaining its neutral position (Czarny, 2018).

Secondly, the realist view fails to account for the influence of cultural factors, norms and values in making neutral foreign policies (Anderson, 2018). The cases of countries such as Finland and Switzerland clearly show that norms and values, which realists overlook in their explanations, played an essential role in shaping these states' foreign policies. Focusing only on power politics and ignoring all these ideational factors decreases the explanatory power of the realist theories. The third drawback is that the realists overlook the influence of international institutions (Button, 2013). They either view international institutions as ineffective or as serving the interests of great powers (Anderson, 2018). While history has proven that great powers have repeatedly violated the sovereignty of neutrals, fully ignoring these institutions may result in an inaccurate analysis. An example of a successful international institution that helps preserve the neutral status of a country is the case of Austrian neutrality. Austria was granted its neutrality status in 1955 following its occupation by the Allied powers after the end of WWII. In this case, America, the Soviet Union, Britain and France, signed an agreement to give Austria its independence and grant it neutrality. The Austrians solidified their neutrality in their state constitution in 1955 after the Austrian parliament passed a law that pledged the government to not give up its neutrality or enter into military alliances. The Austrian case shows that international treaties and institutions can play a role in shaping the behaviour of neutrals.

In conclusion, realists' theories focus on systematic factors in explaining neutrality, such as states' sovereignty, security, power and national interests. While focusing on these factors provides good explanatory power in some cases, it cannot fully explain the behaviour of neutrals in many other cases. Realists' theories fail to explain the influence of domestic politics, norms and culture or the effect of international institutions on the behaviour of neutrals. Based on the analysis above, this thesis recognises the importance of systemic influences and includes them in the analysis of neutral behaviour. In addition, it also includes the domestic factors that have been shown to be important. As will explained in the next chapter, this thesis borrows from neoclassical realist theory in building its model. Before doing this, I will examine liberal and constructivist explanations to look for any possible insights that may help in resolving the limitations in the realist understanding of neutrality behaviours.

2.2.2 Liberal Explanations

Liberal thinking about international politics has several underpinnings. To start with, liberals emphasise the importance of international cooperation between states. They argued that cooperation will always suppress the potential of conflicts and help solve global issues such as poverty, global warming, diseases and terrorism (Doyle and Recchia, 2011). Hence, liberalists believe that international organisations such as the UN play a constructive role in increasing cooperation between states (Van de Haar, 2009). Secondly, liberals argue that free trade between nations can help states to develop and prosper. Fewer constraints on trade between states leads to higher volume and more robust relations between them. Thus, the possibility of conflicts will decrease through free trade, as the liberals view it (Doyle and Recchia, 2011). Thirdly, the liberals promote individual freedom and democracy. They argue that countries with democratic systems rarely go to war with each other (Gismondi, 2007). Finally, liberals argue that states should always prioritise diplomacy over other means to solve problems between themselves. Diplomacy will lead to stability and prosperity in the long term (Keohane, 2012). These foundations of liberalism, which are different from those of realism, result in liberals having a different understanding of concepts like neutrality.

The liberals' understanding of why states adopt neutrality in international relations can be understood in their four different reasons for adopting a neutral position: promoting international cooperation, promoting diplomacy, free trade and growth and protecting sovereignty and independence (Goodin and Reeve, 2018). First, for several reasons, states

that adopt neutrality contribute to promoting international peace and cooperation. For example, during conflicts or misunderstandings between states, countries that adopt neutrality are more likely to play a role in decreasing tensions (Mason, 1990). Neutrals, liberals believe, will help to find a peaceful resolution to conflicts by providing a positive environment for negotiations. In addition, liberals believe that neutrals promote peace since neutrality, according to their understanding of world politics, encourages dialogue. This is done in two ways: by helping in peace negotiations and by spreading their ideas of peace and cooperation (Kunkeler, 2016).

An example of this is the case of Switzerland and its advocacy for peace and negotiations. Switzerland has played an important role in supporting the peace negotiations to solve the Syrian Civil War. It hosted a series of talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. These negotiations were not successful in reaching a peace agreement, but they succeeded in easing the restrictions on international humanitarian aid to civilians. Switzerland has also played important roles in other peace negotiations, such as the Iranian-American negotiations and Yemen Civil War negotiations.

Secondly, liberals argue that neutrality promotes diplomacy and decreases aggressive actions such as conflicts and economic sanctions (Mouffe, 1994). Again, neutrals, as liberals view it, tend to promote diplomacy in different ways. They act as facilitators or mediators in conflicts. Their efforts to ease the communication between conflicting parties make it more likely for them to consider choosing diplomacy over continuing the conflict (Goodin and Reeve, 2018). Third, states adopt neutrality to promote trade and development (Neff, 2022). The neutrality policy helps states in their trade in different ways. For example, the neutral state can keep its economic relations and trade with both sides of a conflict. On the other hand, it is more difficult for countries that take sides in conflicts to continue trading with all belligerents. Thus, economic factors play an important role in states' decisions to adopt neutrality (Stapelbroek, 2011).

Lastly, states, especially small states, adopt neutrality to protect their sovereignty and independence. By adopting neutrality, states prevent themselves from being entangled in alliances (Gismondi, 2007). Moreover, the neutrality position, as liberals view it, will protect states from the external pressure exerted by more powerful states. This is because, under international law, neutrals have the right to decide on foreign policy and trade without being pressured by foreign countries (Neff, 2022).

Despite the several good explanations of neutrality offered by the liberal view, it fails to account for different factors and scenarios of neutrality. First of all, liberalist theorists

focus mainly on what neutrals do and on their roles, such as promoting peace and hosting negotiations, and largely ignore the trajectories that led them to adopt neutrality. They also tend to focus on the internal and ideational drivers that influence states to adopt neutrality, as explained above (Calhoun, 2012). This focus means that liberal theories overlook systemic and political factors, such as the influence of more powerful states, the power dynamic between states and the anarchic nature of the international system. Overlooking the systematic influences decreases the explanatory power of the liberal theory and makes it unable to explain the cases where small neutrals have been forced by more powerful states to align with them during conflicts (Anderson, 2018). Furthermore, the liberals' argument that neutrality is a way to preserve the independence, sovereignty and growth of states that adopt it has repeatedly been proven to be untrue (Sørensen, 2006). The liberals' argument is based on the view that international law protects neutrals' rights, such as the inviolability of neutral territories and the rights of the neutral to conduct trade with both belligerents (Neff, 2022). However, Belligerents, especially great powers, usually do not respect international law when it does not serve their interests (Stapelbroek, 2011). An example of this is the case of Belgium, which was overrun by Germany during WWI and destroyed despite announcing its neutrality at the start of the war (Hyde, 1937).

The liberals' thinking and understanding of international politics and neutrality have been proven to have some explanatory power in cases where factors such as free trade, cooperation and diplomacy are the main drivers. However, it has shown that it cannot account for many other instances in which the main factors are systematic factors and power politics. Additionally, the liberals' main focus is on what neutrals do and what roles they play, and not on the trajectories that led them to adopt neutrality.

2.2.3 Constructivist Explanations

Constructivist thinking about international politics is fundamentally different from both realism and liberalism. The main focus of constructivists is on non-material factors such as norms, ideas, language, identity and beliefs. They believe that states' actions and behaviour are constructed by these factors (Adler, 2013). Thus, to understand states' behaviour in the international system, researchers need to study these factors instead of focusing on the materialist factors or the anarchic system of the world. The anarchic system is 'what states make out of it' (Wendt, 1994). With their different understanding of international politics and states' behaviour in it, constructivism offers a new explanation of the practice of neutrality

(Onuf, 2013). To understand their thinking and explanation of neutrality, I will elaborate on the importance of the following points: ideas and norms, social structure dynamics, discourse and language, identity and the perception of international relations.

First, constructivists argue that ideas and norms are among the main factors influencing neutrals to adopt their foreign policy. They argue that states can adopt neutrality because they believe in the ideas of non-impartiality or non-interference in other states' affairs (Hoffmann, 2010). They also believed that norms and beliefs can change with time due to events and experiences (Nugroho, 2008). Furthermore, states' identity is crucial in determining their foreign policy behaviour, such as adopting neutrality (Zehfuss, 2002). As is the case with ideas and norms, identity is constructed and can evolve based on international and historical events (Zehfuss, 2002). Thus, states that have had a neutral identity in the past may not necessarily have the same policy in the future. An example of this is the identity and public opinion of Swiss people about their neutrality, especially towards Russia in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War. Many Swiss are now advocating for abandoning neutrality and siding with the West against Russia, a trend that has not existed before in Switzerland (Post, 2023). If this continues, it may lead to a change in the identity of neutrality that Switzerland has built over decades. Furthermore, with identity changes and evolution, neutrals' understanding of their neutrality and role in the world evolve. Thus, they adopt different states of neutrality with time, such as switching from passive (low-profile) neutrality to active neutrality (Adler, 2013). The roles of ideas, norms and identity are interrelated and understanding them can help explain why states adopt neutrality. The case of Ireland's neutrality can be seen as an example of a country's identity influenced by its historical experiences. The long history of the British colonisation of Ireland has influenced, and to some extent shaped, the national identity of Ireland (Hunt, 2024). The constructed national identity tends to lean towards independence, especially from aligning its foreign policy with British foreign policy, and in adopting non-engagement policies. Thus, during WWII, Ireland announced its official neutrality.

Thirdly, neutrals' historical experiences and context are crucial to understanding their current behaviour. Based on constructivist thinking, the current foreign policies of states are a result of their past experiences and interactions with the international community (Nugroho, 2008). Thus, states' foreign policies are continuously evolving as they keep interacting with other states and learning how to best 'construct' their foreign policies in the future (Adler, 2013). In the context of neutrality, the historical context directly affects their decisions to adopt neutrality and how they adopt it. For example, small states that align with great powers

and then end up dominated by them are more likely to adopt neutrality to prevent any future domination. The same goes for small states involved in past destructive conflicts (Nilesh, 2014). They are more likely to adopt neutrality later to avoid being pulled into future conflicts. As explained before, the case of Ireland can be seen as a country that was dominated by a great power, Great Britain, and then it chose to adopt neutrality so as not to be entangled in future conflicts or pulled in by its rivals.

While constructivism offers a new reading of world politics that explains neutrality to some extent, it has some limitations. First, theoretically, constructivism is very abstract, making it difficult or impractical to be utilised for policy recommendations (Hopf, 1998). While constructivists can argue that cultural and social factors influence decision-makers to adopt neutrality, they offer little insight into how these policymakers should or would respond to a specific event (Nugroho, 2008). Thus, constructivism can be criticised as being detached from policymakers' concerns. Moreover, the factors that constructivists argue are shaping states' foreign policies, such as neutrality, are usually difficult or impossible to measure (Guzzini and Leander, 2005). Thus, terms such as norms, ideas and culture are more difficult to operationalise.

The above three streams of international thinking offer different explanations of neutrality. Each one has its own explanatory power but still has some limitations. Thus, to provide a theoretical framework that can overcome these limitations, I will consult the views of neoclassical realism and the role theory of international relations in the following chapter.

2.3 Conclusion

The examination of different kinds of literature, such as the literature on the Arabian Gulf countries, the literature on Omani foreign policy and the literature on Oman neutrality, shows that there is a scarcity of studies about Omani politics, especially about Omani neutrality. To contribute to the literature on Omani neutrality, some takeaways must be considered from current writings. First, the Arabian Gulf countries, while having similarities, still, interestingly, behave differently in the regional and international arena. This shows that each case should be analysed separately, and scholars should delve into the details of each country.

Second, the literature on Omani foreign policy shows several factors affecting the making of Omani foreign policy, and considering each of them will help to answer the research questions of this thesis. The political structure and leadership of Oman, which are mentioned repetitively in the literature, are important factors in understanding Omani foreign

policy behaviour. Sultan Qaboos, who was the ruler of Oman from 1970 to 2020, has been the single most important decision-maker in Omani leadership. Thus, this thesis will examine the Sultan and how he influenced the making of Omani foreign policy during his rule. The literature also points to the importance of Oman's geographical location. This location is strategic and attracted the attention of the colonialist powers in the past, including the Portuguese, the Persians and the British. It has also attracted great powers such as the Soviets and the US since 1980. Furthermore, this thesis will consider various historical determinants and experiences and how they influence the foreign policy decision-makers in Oman. These experiences will be studied in relation to how they formed the perception of Omani decision-makers, especially the security perception constructed during the last few decades.

Different scholars have also pointed to the importance of studying the influence of the Ibadi Islamic sect in the making of Omani foreign policy. While this claim is contested, and scholars do not offer clear explanations, I will look for pieces of evidence that may support or challenge this claim. Also, in the thesis, I will expand on and explore how the Ibadi sect and the overall diversity in religious sects have influenced foreign policy decision-makers. This exploration is important, especially in the early 1980s, during the first few years of the Islamic regime rule in Iran, when Arabian Gulf countries were nervous that Iran may influence the Shia communities inside their borders. This study will discuss any potential effects of religion on the making of Omani foreign policy, including the adoption of neutrality.

The literature on Omani neutrality is very scarce, but examining it was also crucial as there are some important points to consider before moving forward. First, the few studies on Omani neutrality focus on the question of why Oman adopted neutrality. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, studying the evolution of Omani neutrality, how it changed from one event to the other and the causes of these changes will enhance our understanding of neutrality. Tracking change in neutrality and how it evolves opens the door to questioning the concept of neutrality in international relations and how it can be explained theoretically. Thus, I explored the theoretical literature on neutrality, which is also important and has provided different takeaways.

Reviewing the theoretical literature on neutrality and exploring how the main theories of international relations explain this concept shows that there has been a lack of attention to this topic. Most scholars lean towards studying the foreign policies of great powers and more adventurous countries. Despite this scarcity, there are some theoretical observations to take from this review. First, there is a lack of a theoretical framework that presents neutrality as a

process that changes from time to time or from one event to the next. Looking at neutrality as an evolving concept will enhance our understanding of not only neutrality but also how the factors influencing it and the overall environment change, and thus how their influence changes accordingly. Second, the three main streams of international political thinking offer different explanations of neutrality that have their explanatory power but also some limitations. Thus, based on the observations of the literature and empirical observations, this thesis intends to construct a new model to help explain neutrality. The following chapter will explain this theoretical framework.

This chapter also explored the concept of neutrality in international relations and how different international relations theories explained this concept. The reasons behind this are to understand neutrality and get some theoretical insights that inform the development of a theoretical framework about neutrality and triangulate them with the insights extracted from the literature about Oman. The literature shows that neutrality can be categorised into three types: permanent, as in the case of Switzerland; traditional neutral, such as in Sweden; and ad-hoc, such as in the case of Spain during WWII. As explained in this chapter, while offering some explanatory power, the leading international relations theories have limitations in explaining neutrality. For example, the explanations of realist scholars overlook the influence of domestic factors. On the other hand, the liberalists only focus on idealistic aspects and ignore the influence of systemic factors. Finally, the constructivist explanation is very abstract and cannot offer policy recommendations. The link between the factors they rely on, such as ideas, identity and belief and policymaking is vague.

This chapter shows that the literature, while being limited in the three fields of neutrality, Omani neutrality and Omani foreign policy, still offers some insights. The analysis and the comparisons of the extracted insights indicated that some elements are crucial to consider in building a theoretical framework that guides us in explaining neutrality. Thus, in the following chapter, I argue that combining insight from neoclassical realism theory and the role theory of international relations is very beneficial in building a promising framework to guide in understanding Omani neutrality in particular and the neutrality of small states in general.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The literature review chapter has identified some gaps in the literature concerning neutrality and Oman. These gaps include the lack of studies on Omani neutrality, the lack of studies on the evolution of neutrality in international relations and the lack of a theoretical framework that offers a robust explanation of neutrality. This thesis will contribute to filling these gaps. Regarding the theoretical literature on neutrality, this chapter will fill the gap by introducing a new theoretical model, which I call the processual model of neutrality (PMN). Contrary to current theoretical models that explain neutrality as a static policy, this model conceptualises neutrality as a dynamic policy that evolves and interacts with the surrounding political environment. To explain this model and how it was derived, this chapter is structured in three parts.

The first part of this chapter will discuss the neoclassical realism theory. I will explain in this section how neoclassical realism combined two levels of factors – systemic and domestic – to study foreign policy (Rose, 1998). It considers systemic level factors such as threat and change in relative power. In addition, it assesses the decision-makers' perceptions and explains the importance of understanding them. This theory also includes domestic factors and explains how they can limit decision-makers' abilities in foreign policy-making (Dyson, 2015). This section will also show how neoclassical realists argue that the interaction of these different levels of factors is complex. Understanding these complex interactions is crucial to offering reasonable explanations of why states adopt certain foreign policies, such as neutrality.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss role theory in international relations. This theory was initially developed for the sociology and anthropology fields and was later used to understand states' behaviour in international relations (Thies, 2010). Role theory scholars argue that the roles played by states in the international arena reflect their self-conceptions. These self-conceptions are a product of an interplay between domestic and external factors (Walker, 1987). I will show in this section that the roles played by states are not static but are evolving. Role theory offers two main concepts to understand the changes in states' roles: learning and adaptation (Thies and Breuning, 2012). Learning is the process of continuously assessing states' roles and the factors affecting them. On the other hand, adaptation is the process of states modifying or changing their roles in the international arena (Harnisch, 2011). Role theorists argue that foreign policy positions, such as neutrality, could be

understood by studying the views and self-conceptions of states (Harnisch, 2011, Thies, 2010, Walker, 1987).

In the last section, I will integrate the previous insights into one theoretical model, the PMN. I will also outline how this neutrality model can better explain why states adopt neutrality and present neutrality as a process by examining it in three phases: strategic, passive and active. The initial, strategic phase is where a neutral foreign policy is first adopted as a result of the interaction between systemic and domestic elements, such as interest groups, societal structure and religious forces. If this policy is sustained over time and institutionalised, I posit that neutrality will move to a passive phase, wherein the country views itself as neutral but lacks the widespread recognition of others, including belligerents, great powers and international organisations. Thirdly, if a country is recognised as neutral by relevant international actors, the country can move to a more consolidated phase of active neutrality, allowing it to pursue activities such as hosting negotiations and providing humanitarian support. Along with the three phases, the model shows that a country navigates different mechanisms and processes, such as role activation, role adaptation, national identity formation and the complex influences of security guarantees.

3.1 Neoclassical Realism

The PMN model developed in this thesis is built mainly upon the neoclassical realist theory, with considerable additions from role theory and empirical observations. Thus, in this section, I begin by discussing the neoclassical realism theory by examining its theoretical foundations, the primacy of power, the role of domestic factors and decision-makers' perceptions and adaptive behaviour. The aim is to elucidate neoclassical realism and then extract some insights that can inform the creation of a model to explain neutrality later in this chapter.

3.1.1 Theoretical Foundations

Neoclassical realism is a relatively new theory that was born in the early 1990s as a critique of classical and structural realism. As discussed in the literature review chapter, scholars such as Hans Morgenthau prioritised the role of human nature and power while ignoring the influence of systemic constraints and domestic factors on states' behaviour (Anderson, 2018). Contrarily, Kenneth Waltz developed neorealism to argue that states' behaviour is mainly

derived from the anarchic nature of the international system and power distribution among states (Waltz, 1993, Waltz, 1990). Despite its explanatory power, neorealist theory ignored essential factors such as domestic politics and the role of leaders (Anderson, 2018).

In the early 1990s, a group of scholars tried to resolve the abovementioned limitations, and as a result, neoclassical realism emerged, claiming it addressed the limits of structural and classical realism. The term neoclassical realism first appeared in Gideon Rose's 1998 article 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy'. In this article, Rose contended that integrating domestic and systemic factors in one model is necessary to explain the behaviour of states (Rose, 1998). He argued that reading states' behaviour without considering the influence of the perception of decision-makers and the limitation that domestic politics impose on the decision-makers will result in an inaccurate assessment. Rose emphasised the importance of the perception of decision-makers of systemic influence, as will be explained later in this chapter (Rose, 1998). Therefore, when studying foreign policy stances, such as neutrality, researchers need to include systemic factors, such as the influence of great powers, the threat of regional powers and the change in relative power.

Another key scholar in neoclassical realism is Fareed Zakaria, who contributed to neoclassical realist thinking in his book From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role (Zakaria, 1999). In this book, Zakariya studied the case of America's rise as a great power and argued that this rise cannot be explained by merely examining the systemic factors. Instead, to adequately explain its foreign policy, researchers need to take into account the perception of individual leaders and domestic political institutions. Zakaria argued that leaders' policies and actions are driven by their perception of their country's interests and systematic factors. Hence, the policies of the same state with the same characteristics can be different under two leaders who have different perceptions. In addition, Zakaria highlighted domestic politics and how they can either impose limitations or push a leader to adopt certain policies. Nevertheless, despite highlighting the importance of domestic politics and the perception of leaders, Zakaria argued that any analysis should start with the systemic influences as a state cannot exceed the limits drawn by systemic factors (Zakaria, 1999).

Neoclassical realists argue that an analysis combining these factors possesses a strong explanatory power (Lobell et al., 2009). They also claim that the influence of systematic factors needs to first travel through the intervening factors. The systemic factors include relative power and threat perception, while the intervening variables include the leader's perception and domestic politics (Ripsman, 2011). These factors and their complex

interactions should be thoroughly investigated to understand foreign policy decisions, such as adopting neutrality. In the following section, I will delve deeper into explaining the three main pillars of neoclassical realism: the primacy of power and systemic constraints, the role of domestic politics and the decision-maker's perception.

3.1.2 The Primacy of Power and Systemic Constraints.

While neoclassical realists emphasised the importance of incorporating domestic factors into theoretical frameworks, they still insisted on the primacy of systemic influence. States, irrespective of the nature of their domestic power or the perception of their decision-makers, cannot exceed the limits of the system (Zakaria, 2008). Thus, the neoclassical realist framework should begin analysing states' foreign policies by examining the influence of external or systemic factors (Rathbun, 2008). There are two crucial determinants of systemic influence: the threat and changes in relative power.

First, identifying the type of threat is critical to understanding the external political environment and its security implications (Schweller, 2004). Threats to a state are usually derived from different sources, such as an imbalance in the distribution of power, the military capabilities of rivals or neighbours and the intentions of rivals (Darwich, 2017). To start with, an imbalance of power distribution in an international system or region means having one or more states with the potential of domination. This results in weaker states feeling insecure towards the more powerful ones and perceiving them as threats (Dyson, 2013). Secondly, the threat level can increase or decrease depending on states' intentions. Despite being complex to assess, states' intentions can be explored by examining different factors such as the history of their foreign policy actions, military capabilities (defensive or offensive) and political rhetoric (Schweller, 2004). Thirdly, the military capabilities of states present a threat to their neighbours. As mentioned above, this threat increases if the military's nature is more offensive. When a country increases its focus on improving its military capabilities, it is more likely that other states start to view this as a threat. This sometimes drives other states to do the same and trigger an arms race (He, 2017). It is crucial to note that the decision-maker's perception will alter the influence of these factors, as I will explain in more detail in section 3.4.

The second key factor in setting the limits and potential of a country in the international system is any change in its relative power. Relative power is the place of the state relative to other states in the international system (He, 2017, Rose, 1998). This place is

crucial for states for various reasons, and any relative power change can affect how states formulate their foreign policies. First, any decline in a state's relative power will make the state more vulnerable to more powerful states (or states with increasing relative power) (Schweller, 2004). Secondly, a change in relative power, whether a decrease or an increase, redefines a state's national interests, international opportunities and constraints. For example, when a state's relative power increases, in some cases, it will try to enlarge its sphere of influence. At the same time, an established power may try to resist the growing country, which may result in tensions between the two countries (Sørensen, 2013). Thirdly, a change in relative power can lead other states to recalibrate their foreign policy. For example, when a state is a neighbour to a rising power, it will need to form a strategy to respond to this growing power. Usually, states have options such as adopting neutrality, forming a coalition to check the rising power or aligning themselves with the rising power. During the 1930s, for example, the Allied powers formed a coalition in response to the rise of Adolf Hitler. This coalition can be seen as a direct reaction to their perception of the rising power and threat of Germany under Hitler.

The influence of systemic factors such as threats and changes in relative power is essential but cannot be understood without the decision-makers' perception and influence or the limits of domestic politics (Rose, 1998). The threat of other states or a change in relative power will not directly influence the foreign policy of particular states unless the decision-makers perceive it. They will calibrate their foreign policy towards the change but need to consider domestic politics (Zakaria, 1999). Thus, I will examine domestic politics in the following section and then explain the decision-makers' perceptions.

3.1.3 The Role of Domestic Factors

Neoclassical realist thinkers argue that states are not black boxes; researchers must open and examine them to understand their behaviour (Rose, 1998). The influence of systemic factors is not translated directly into foreign policies; they have to go through domestic politics, institutions and decision-makers' perceptions. Domestic politics differ from state to state (Smith, 2018). Therefore, no general framework for studying domestic politics can be applied to all states. For example, the domestic politics of democratic states are affected by the voters' and political parties' interests. This cannot be applied in non-democratic countries as they usually lack voting and political parties. In the neoclassical realist framework, the study of domestic politics is tailored based on the specific case study (Gvalia et al., 2019). I will

examine several common domestic factors in the following section; however, is important to note that many other factors exist in other case studies.

One of the most important domestic factors highlighted is state capacity. It refers to an administration's ability to mobilise resources to serve its foreign policy goals (Götz, 2021). Different factors can affect a state's capacity to mobilise resources to serve its foreign policy goals, such as governance institutions, economic robustness and societal unity. Having robust and efficient institutions could increase a state's capacity and better serve its foreign policy goals (Tang, 2009). Moreover, a state with a stable and robust economy, for example, increases its capacity as the administration will be more likely to use its resources to serve its foreign policy goals. On the other hand, a state with a fragile economy will be more reluctant to use its resources to serve its foreign policy goals (Gvalia et al., 2019). It is important to note that the effects of these factors are not straightforward, and the same elements can have different influences in different states. Furthermore, state capacity interacts with other domestic factors and the perceptions of decision-makers (Fiammenghi et al., 2018). This interplay makes such examinations complex, but the framework offers strong explanatory power.

Another crucial domestic factor affecting state capacity is the type and distribution of interest groups. These are non-state actors such as labour unions, businesses, religious organisations and cultural and ethnic groups (Meibauer et al., 2021, Foulon, 2015). These groups are worth examining separately as they also influence how states form their foreign policy goals. Therefore, they have a dual influence in many cases, which makes studying them and their influence crucial (Götz, 2021). Different interest groups apply different mechanisms (or strategies) in their attempts to influence governments to tailor foreign policy to serve their interests. For example, domestic interest groups can lobby a policy or political parties who share the same ideas as the group to affect foreign policymaking (Taliaferro, 2006). The influence of these interest groups varies from one state to another depending on different factors, such as the type of the regime. Other domestic groups, such as religious groups, may influence policymakers by controlling public opinion. In some countries, religious groups greatly influence the public; thus, understanding them, their power over public opinion and their influences on foreign policy is crucial (Kitchen, 2010). In some cases, where the interest groups are very influential, such as religious groups in some countries, the government of that country may cooperate and even form a coalition with the groups to serve the interests of each other (Götz, 2021). In other cases, different interest groups can support each other or align against the government to push for their agendas.

Understanding the interests of these groups and the mechanisms they use is key to understanding the influence of domestic politics on state behaviour (Henne and Nexon, 2013).

The influence of domestic factors on foreign policy is complex but crucial. Different domestic actors interact both with each other and with the policymakers. Their interaction affects the state's capacity to mobilise its resources to serve its interests and sometimes influences the government to modify its foreign policy goals. Next, I will examine the perception of decision-makers.

3.1.4 The Decision-makers' Perception

Decision-makers form the foreign policy of their states depending on their perception of the systemic influences, such as threats to the state and changes in its relative power (Rose, 1998). In addition to the systemic influences, their perceptions can be limited and sometimes changed by domestic factors (He, 2017). After explaining the systemic and domestic factors, this section will examine the decision-maker's perceptions. While it is clear that the decision-makers' perception is essential, it is complex to assess it due to the number of different factors affecting this perception (Rathbun, 2008). I will discuss several cognitive factors affecting perception in the following.

First, values and beliefs influence how the decision-makers read the systemic factors and determine the best way to respond to them. Leaders who believe in peace and cooperation can be expected to react differently from those with more aggressive ideas. While the former will prioritise negotiations and cooperation, the latter will more likely prioritise militaristic solutions (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999). Secondly, the perception of decision-makers affects how they interpret and respond to systemic influences (Meibauer et al., 2021). The experience of the decision-makers can be categorised into personal and professional experience. Personal experiences include the decision-makers' early life events, education and family background. For example, decision-makers who grew up during wars and were affected by them may be more likely to try to avoid military solutions to systemic pressure. Based on their lived memory, they would appreciate the negative effects and destruction caused by wars (Kaarbo, 2015). In addition, the professional experiences of the decision-makers affect how they interpret and react to systemic influences. Professional experiences include their past work in political and governmental positions that have shaped their experiences and sharpened their knowledge (Cheng, 2022, Kaarbo, 2015). Together,

these experiences will affect how they understand and respond to events in the international political environment.

The perceptions of decision-makers are also affected by their cognitive biases. Cognitive biases take different forms, such as confirmation bias, mirror imaging and group thinking (Rapport, 2017, Ehrlinger et al., 2016). First, confirmation bias is when a decision-maker leans towards the explanations or the perceptions that go along with his/her previous hypothesis or expectation. This bias can lead to forming a foreign policy based on a false reading of the systemic signals, such as perceiving a relative power change when no such change exists (Levy, 2003). Mirror imaging means that the person thinks others have the same intentions and beliefs as the one himself/herself. In the case of state decision-makers, this happens when the decision-makers perceive the intentions of other states to be the same as theirs. This may cause a misperception and lead to forming a foreign policy based on wrong calculations (Mintz and DeRouen Jr, 2010). Thirdly, decision-makers may misperceive systemic pressure due to group thinking, which can occur when decision-makers confirm whether the group's perceptions are correct or wrong (Ehrlinger et al., 2016). Assessing decision-makers' perceptions is also complex. The factors affecting the perception of decision-makers of one country generally differ from those of another country. It is essential to identify the elements of each case in order to study and examine them.

With these complexities and interplays, neoclassical realism offers a robust explanatory power. Applying neoclassical realism provides an understanding of why some states behave in a way that cannot be explained using systemic material factors alone. For example, a recent study by Hunter Marston examined the behaviour of some South Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines and suggested that the variation between their foreign policies can largely be explained using a neoclassical realist framework (Marston, 2023). This study examined how East Asian countries approach the competition between the United States and China. For Vietnam, their security perception of the great powers necessitates them to have warm relations with China despite the current hostilities and their good relations with the US. On the other hand, someone would expect the Philippines to fully align with the US and have hostile relations with China based on material factors. However, due to its security perception, the Philippines has decided to have warm relations with China while keeping strong security ties with the US. Thus, the study concluded that the security perception of the individual leaders was a critical factor in each country's policymaking, and it cannot be understood by examining the material factors alone.

In conclusion, using neoclassical realism helps us to unpack and understand the complex interaction between internal and external factors. This makes its framework effective for explaining foreign policy decisions such as neutrality (Rose, 1998, Zakaria, 1999). Nevertheless, neoclassical realism does not clearly explain how decision-makers view their roles in international relations and how this view changes over time. Thus, in the following sections, I introduce the role theory of international relations to fill this gap and integrate the two in building the model proposed in this thesis.

3.1.5 NCR and Neutrality

Neoclassical realism was born as a response to the shortcomings in the classical realist theories such as offensive and defensive realism. When analysing neutrality, neoclassical realism adds extra explanatory power to the framework utilizing it. At least three main reasons make using the neoclassical realist framework essential for analysing neutrality, in comparison to defensive or offensive realism. First, neoclassical realism takes into account the influence of domestic factors in the making of foreign policies such as neutrality. While the systemic factors are crucial to understanding neutrality, the whole picture cannot be understood without taking the domestic factors into account (Rose, 1998). For example, the endurance of the Swiss neutrality cannot be understood without considering the domestic factors of Switzerland, especially the public opinion and identity (Dreyer and Jesse, 2014). Switzerland was able to maintain its neutrality in face of changing systemic factors was due to the public support and the Swiss identity that supports the polices of neutrality. The understanding of the this endurance cannot be complete by only relying on systemic factors.

Second, neoclassical realism offers more robust explanatory power by emphasising on the importance of studying leaders' perceptions (Götz, 2021). This factor, leadership perception, is crucial to understanding the policy of neutrality and why some countries behave differently to others that face similar systemic pressure. The Finish foreign policy during the Cold War is an excellent example of the importance of studying leadership perception. The perception of Urho Kekkonen, the president of Finland from 1956-1982, was a key factor in adopting the Finish neutrality towards the Cold War between the US and the Soviets. Urho believed that the security interests of Finland could be best preserved by adopting strict neutrality and assuring the Soviets and the US of the intentions of Finland (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi, 2016). The use of defensive or offensive realism to analyse this policy can be challenging as they ignore the influence of leadership perception.

Third, the neoclassical realism framework has the ability to assess the limitation of the state's capacity to support the preferred foreign policy choice (Fiammenghi et al., 2018, Foulon, 2015). This assesses how much a state can mobilize in order to implement its foreign policy. An example of the ability of state capacity to influence the adoption of neutrality is obvious in the case of Costa Rica. It extracted its resources and use them to adopt its neutrality. This has enabled it to adopt strict neutrality, race for human rights, and ensure international status higher than its relative power. This ability to adopt strict neutrality cannot be understood without understanding the domestic system that enables Costa Rica to utilize its resources to support neutrality (Bird, 1984). Thus, defensive, and offensive realism would struggle to explain Costa Rican neutrality.

These three factors make the use of frameworks that utilizes the neoclassical realism is very important to get the full picture of neutrality policy. To appreciate the importance of using neoclassical realism in framework that explain neutrality, I will also explain the relation between neutrality and both systemic pressure and relative power position. The aim of this is to understand the importance of material power in international relations to the making of neutrality policies.

First, one of the main factors in shaping states foreign policies is the systemic pressure, a concept that is rooted in structural realism, and represents a corner stone in neoclassical realism. The anarchic nature of the system and the pressure it creates is the first and main factor in shaping the state's neutrality, as structural realists argue (Lobell, 2010). This factor influences neutrals differently depending on the type of international system. The unipolar system, the domination of a single hegemon make the decision to adopt neutrality, especially when not serving the hegemon's interest, very challenging.

In a bipolar system, such as during the Cold War, the pressure on the neutrals comes from the superpowers that want other states to align with them. Despite this pressure, the system may create a room for state to manoeuvre in and adopt neutrality (Rainio-Niemi, 2014). Furthermore, the multipolar system provides more opportunities and rooms for state to adopt neutrality but also could represent the riskier to adopt neutrality in this system due to the nature of competition between different great powers (Goetschel, 1999). Thus, framework that examine neutrality should take the importance to study systemic pressure and study this influence in its context.

Second, the position of the country in the system affects how it can adapt and endure neutrality as a foreign policy position. While the relative power position and systemic pressure, which was discussed previously, analysing them separately is crucial to increase the

explanatory power of the potential framework. There are at least three points to consider when analysing the influence of the relative power of the country on its neutrality position. To start with, the distinction between the state power and the state's capacity to extract its power to support its foreign policy is key (Götz, 2021). As discussed before, researchers should focus on the power that the government can access and use for neutrality. Other than this, the neutrality of small and medium powers is more complicated. For these neutrals, the choice of neutrality could be motivated by the goals of achieving relevance and maintaining autonomy in the international system. However, the adoption of this is more complex and enduring this can be tricky. Researchers should take these complications into account.

Furthermore, small and medium neutrals may be in riskier positions depending on their relative power and the political environment they operate in (Den Hertog, 2010). The calculus of these neutrals take into account the risks of non-alignment with great powers, and accordingly the interests of these great powers and how the neutrals positions can affect these interests. These neutrals also calculate these risks and compare them with the expected returns of adopting neutrality (Acosta and Braun, 2022). The complication of the relationship between the neutral and great power lead researchers to also study the concept of security guarantees separately, as I will study in the following.

The relationship between the security guarantor (or guarantees) and the neutral (client state) is key to understand neutrality behaviour. To explain the importance of this relation, I will elaborate on two points: the theoretical foundations, scholarship on neutrality, and shaping the theorization of client state neutrality. To start with, while scarce, there are some theories that studies the relationship between the security guarantees and neutrals such as the Patron Client State Theory, and Small State Theory. First, the Patron-Client State theory argues that smaller states that face different threats trade some of their autonomy with the promises of the guarantor to provide security for them (Carney, 1989). While this relation makes the adoption of neutrality more complex, it provides the client state some degree of confidence to adopt neutrality in conflicts that are not directly harming the interests of their security guarantors (Baabood, 2016). This interesting relationship should be part of potential theoretical frameworks to study neutrality.

Second, the small state theorists argue that the relationship between the security guarantor and the small neutral is asymmetrical (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). This relation, and the overall systemic pressure, limit the choices of the small neutrals to fewer choices in comparison to larger states. This complex relation could have five main features. First, a

small neutral would lean to sign implicit, instead explicit, agreements with security guarantors for protection. The goal behind this is to keep neutrality appearance in the international stage (Karsh, 2012). Second, the small neutral would seek a favourable terms by utilizing their strategic value. For example, small states that are located in strategic locations, would try to sell the value of this location to the potential security gurantor in exchange for better terms in the security agreements (Akseki, 2010). Thirdly, small neutrals tend to be very active in international institutions, especially those that champion peace and justice. The reason behind this is to increase the value of the small neutral in the international arena (Czarny, 2018).

The relationship between the security guarantor and the small neutral, while not being a main subject in international relations scholarship, was mentioned in some of them. The scholarships that studied these relations can be categorized, depending on their perspectives, into three groups: Conditional Neutrality, Armed neutrality and neutrality in alliance structure. First, conditional neutrality refers to the relationship that neciessiate small neutrals to secure security agreements that allows them to move in the lines and conditions drawn by the guarantor in return of security promises. The scholars, such as (Agius, 2013) and (Karsh, 2012) argue that small neutrals cannot have an absolute non-alignment due to their limited ability to defend themselves.

Second, armed neutrality scholars examine the small neutrals that focus their spending on building their military capabilities. The reason behind this, while knowing their military limitations, they sought to increase the cost of any intervention against their country. The increase of the military capabilities can be combined with the assurances provided by the security grantors. Scholars such as (Ogley, 1970) and (Morris and White, 2011) studied this form of relationship and argue that it allows small neutrals to adopt neutrality, ensure security and maintain their independence. Third, neutrality in alliances structures studied that countries that has neutral identity but still participate in alliances arrangements. The main focus of these scholarships is the neutrals within European security structures. (Jesse, 2006) for example argued that challenge of new alliances and structure in the international system drove traditional neutrals, such as Ireland, to adopt new understanding for neutrality that include the participation in the alliance arrangements. These different scholarships with different perspectives and understandings shows that the relationship between security guarantees and neutrals is complex yet key to understanding. The complexity of this relation is crucial in the making of neutrality in different examples as I will understand in the following section.

There are different neutral cases where their behaviour was crucially altered by the relation with the security guarantees such as the cases of Austria, Belgium Pre-World War I, and Finland during the Cold War. First, the Austrian neutrality was directly born as a result of security guarantees given by great powers to Austria in 1955. Thus, the relationship between the security guarantees and the neutrality was direct in this case, and the later (neutrality) is a direct result of signing the agreement which promised independence and protection in return for implementing neutrality (Bischof et al., 2018, Kunz, 1956). Secondly, the case of Belgium behaviour before World War One shows a country's neutrality that was influenced by guarantees given by the great powers to preserve its neutrality. In the treaty of London in 1839 Britain, France, Russia, Austria and Prussia all guaranteed its protection in return of implementing permanent neutrality (Hyde, 1937, Zuckerman, 2004).

The third case is the Finland case which was influenced by the security guarantees as explained before. The Finish president, Urho Kekkonen, believed that getting promised from the Soviets and promising them the adoption of neutrality was the best was to protect Finland against the Cold War threats. In this scenario, the perception of president Urho of the importance of security guarantees with the Soviets influenced their decision to adopt neutrality (Kirby, 2006). These examples of neutrals and their relations with security guarantees shows the importance of this relation. Thus, any framework that aims to study neutrality must explain the influence of security guarantees on the behaviour of neutrals. The presence of security guarantees also affects the conceptualization and analysis of neutrality, as I will examine in the following section.

The presence of security guarantees affects the conceptualization and analysis of neutrality in at least three ways: Confidence for strategic flexibility, credibility of neutrality, and neutrality in regional subsystems. First, for small and medium states pursuing neutrality, the presence of security guarantees give them the ability and confidence to pursue different strategic options, especially in complex regional environment. The security guarantees are viewed by small neutrals as an insurance policies against the aggression of greater powers (Reiter, 1994). For example, the Case of Finland and Sweden after the Cold War represents an example of neutrals keeping ties with alliances and viewing them as security guarantees without either signing a formal alliance agreement with them or still keeping their neutrality stance (Wivel, 2005).

Secondly, the presence of security guarantees affects the credibility of neutrality. The credibility of neutrality in international society is built through at least three factors as explained by Karsh 1988: consistency in the application of neutrality, the capacity to defend

neutrality policies and the ability to resist great power influence. The presence and strong ties with security grantors can seriously undermine these factors (Karsh, 2012). Other than this, the neutral, when depending on the protection of security grantors, may be viewed by belligerents as leaning towards these guarantors or serving their interests with neutrality policies. These effects on credibility must be included in potential frameworks analysing neutrality.

Thirdly, the play of neutrality in regional systems is affected directly by the presence of security guarantees. The neutral, in this case, may adopt neutral policies towards the regional conflicts where the interests of the security guarantors are not seriously harmed. Researcher when analysing the behavior of neutrals must consider the concept of "regional orders" (Lake and Morgan, 1997). They argued that the dynamics of regional systems can differ from the dynamics and order of the international system. This may result in countries adopting regional neutrality but still aligning with a great power in some international issues.

3.2 Role Theory

The discussion above shows that while using neoclassical realism can offer robust explanatory power, it still cannot fully explain the behaviour of neutrals. There are at least two limitations that NCR has that make the use of Role Theory is essential: the focus on material capabilities and structural constraints, and the inability to clarify the roles of conception and identity in the endurance of neutrality. First, NCR focuses on the material factors limiting its capture of the influence of non-material factors or leaders' perception of these factors (Meibauer et al., 2021). Despite considering the importance of decision-makers' perception, NCR only focuses on the perception of the international system and material factors. This focus limits its explanatory power to go cover cases where the policy choices are influenced or altered by non-material factors. For example, Switzerland after World War Two increased its relative power in the European and International system. Relying on the NCR only may suggest that leaders may perceive this as a change in the relative power that may result in changing the foreign policy into aligning with the NATO for example. However, due to non-material factors such as identity, Switzerland sticks to its neural policy (Morris and White, 2011).

Second, the use of NCR alone can't explain the continuity in adopting neutrality stances. In different cases, the change in the relative power or the systemic pressure is not

reflected in the behaviour of neutrals. Traditional neutrals (or neutrals who already developed a neutral identity in the international society), often tend to keep their neutrality despite the changes in the international structure (Harnisch, 2011). For example, Austria which adopted neutral stance since 1955, joined the EU in 1995 and was affected by the structural changes in the international system after the Cold War (Kunz, 1956). Researchers depending on the NCR may suggest that Austria would abandon its neutral stance and fully align with the West. However, at least for some time, the Austrians kept their neutral identity and stance, arguably with different understanding of neutrality. These cases shows that the use of Role Theory in potential frameworks to explain neutrality is important. Thus, in this section, I introduce the role theory of international relations and explain how it can fill this gap by providing some background about role theory, discussing its main concept and outlining how it can help explain foreign policy decisions such as neutrality.

Role theory is an interdisciplinary theory that scholars have used in foreign policy analysis since the early 1970s. It was originally used in psychological, sociological and anthropological fields. Role theory scholars argue that in social groups, depending on the group's purpose and structure, different people play different roles or 'social positions' (Thies and Breuning, 2012). In 1970, Holsti published his article 'National Role Conception in the Study of Foreign Policy', which argued that the logic of role theory could be used to understand states' foreign policy behaviour (Holsti, 1970). While he did not specifically mention the name of the theory, he argued that states form their foreign policies based on their 'self-conception', which is the same as role theory's main hypothesis about people. This self-conception – or role – that states see themselves playing, is a product of international and domestic factors (Holsti, 1970).

The term conception is critical to understanding role theory. It is how states, or more specifically, decision-makers, perceive their state and its regional and international role (Harnisch, 2011). Role conception is a product of complex interactions between domestic and international factors. Domestic factors include ideology, political institutions, culture and history. On the other side, international factors include the system's structure, historical relations between states, states' expectations and states' behaviour (Thies, 2010). The interplay between domestic and external factors is always active, resulting in states modifying, emphasising or changing their roles in the international arena. States also try to change the expectations and behaviour of others through means such as signalling diplomacy and pressure (Malici and Walker, 2016). These interactions result in different states playing different roles.

Some states conceive themselves as leaders in the international arena. These states can be international hegemons, regional hegemons or great international or regional powers. They act according to their conception and form foreign policies to direct and shape the course of international relations (Grossman, 2005). Similarly, some states conceive themselves as followers. In this case, decision-makers believe their country is less powerful and less influential. Thus, they may align their foreign policies with the more powerful countries and ensure their actions do not harm the great powers' interests (Thies, 2010). Furthermore, some states see themselves as challengers to the status quo and act accordingly. In this case, the leaders of these countries will adopt foreign policies that try to change the status quo and assert dominance in the region or beyond. Finally, states may perceive themselves as mediators or as neutrals. In such situations, decision-makers believe their role is to facilitate negotiations and help solve conflicts. These states tend to prioritise negotiations and peaceful resolutions based on their role (Grossman, 2005).

The role conception of states can change based on the interplay between domestic and external factors (Thies and Breuning, 2012). The change in the role happens due to the processes of learning and adaptation. Learning involves continually analysing information, experiences and feedback about the current foreign policy and international politics. This process can cause a state to reassess its current self-concept, which may result in adopting new roles. Different factors affect the learning process and self-conception accordingly (Malici and Walker, 2016). First, international events and crises, such as a new alliance formation, the rise of new great powers, economic crises and wars can change the decision-makers' self-conception. One of the most influential events among these is wars, especially tremendous and large-scale wars. Japan is an example of such an alteration. After its defeat in WWII, decision-makers in Japan stopped viewing their country's role as an expansionist great power. Even though it happened against their will, this change still demonstrates how a state's self-conception can change due to international events.

Secondly, changes in domestic politics also play a role in the learning process. Domestic changes include changes in the ruling system, economic crises and social transformation. The change in South Africa can be seen as an example of how social movements can change a state's self-conception and its roles accordingly. The success of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa not only ended the apartheid in the country, but the decision-makers in the country changed their self-conception and started to view their country (whether truly or not) as a defender of human rights. Thirdly, normative changes affect states' self-conception and their roles. Normative changes can be domestic or

international. For example, an increasing interest in climate change can directly affect states' foreign policies and their roles in advocating for these issues (Thies, 2017).

The second process is adaptation, which refers to changing a state's roles (Thies and Breuning, 2012). This type of change or adjustment is usually based on the learning process. States adjust their roles in three ways: incremental adaptation, punctuated adaptation and role conflict resolution (Thies and Breuning, 2012). Incremental change occurs when states gradually adapt to new events or evolutions. In this case, the adaptation is slow and takes relatively more extended periods to complete. It usually occurs due to changes that take longer, such as societal transformation (Malici and Walker, 2016). On the other hand, punctuated adaptation occurs at a very fast pace compared to incremental change. The triggers of this change are more dramatic, such as wars and regime change. When wars break out, some states are affected and need to change their roles quickly, such as by supporting one side or adopting neutrality. When there is a change in a state regime, especially through revolution, the new regime tends to come up with new conceptions and adopt new roles. These roles are adopted in a punctuated manner (Harnisch, 2011). Finally, role conflict resolutions occur when a state faces two or more contradictory expectations or conceptions, resulting in contradicting roles. This happens in at least three different cases: when the expectations of international actors are contradictory, when there is a shift in the international system that results in new players with contradicting expectations and when there is domestic pressure from two contradicting domestic actors (Thies, 2010). Policymakers must examine these conflicting roles in these cases and form their foreign policy accordingly.

Role theory offers interesting and beneficial explanatory power in analysing states' foreign policies. It is influential in understanding how countries, or more specifically, decision-makers, view their role in international relations and how they are seen by others. This aspect is important for constructing a theoretical model to explain neutrality and apply it to this thesis. It helps understand how neutrals view themselves and how this view (and self-conception) changes over time. Thus, integrating the neoclassical realist theory, which explains the relations between different external and internal factors, with role theory, which explains the roles of states in international relations, along with considerable empirical observations, forms the basis of the PMN.

Despite the different benefits that result from adding Role Theory to potential frameworks to explain the neutrality, ther are still some issues such as the potential epistomlogical conflict between role they and NCR. In this section I will explain two points: Ontological assumptions and approach to causality. First, the stances of Role Theory and

NCR on ontology are very different. On one hand, the NCR's scholars assume that the material nature is the basis of international relations (Götz, 2021). On the other hand, scholars of Role Theory are heavily influenced by the constructivist thinking that assumes reality is socially constructed (Harnisch, 2011, Nabers, 2011). These differences would reflect on the potential frameworks explaining neutrality.

Second, the two theories have different approaches to causality. The positivist approach of neoclassical realism scholars aim to explain the causal relation between three variables: systemic variables (focusing on material systemic factors), intervening variables, and foreign policy outcomes such as neutrality (Dyson, 2015). On the other hand, the interpretivism approach of role theorist tries to understand foreign policy outcomes such as neutrality by interpreting the meanings, understanding the identities, and the contexts that shape the behaviour of neutrals (Thies, 2010). The two approaches, while seemed on the two sides of a spectrum, can still be combined in one theoretical approach.

The ontological and approach to causality differences between role theory and NCR can work together to increase the explanatory power when combined in the same theoretical framework. By focusing on different sides, the potential framework can explain the effects of both the material factors on one side and the ideational factor on the behaviour of neutrals. This thesis intends to utilize both approaches to increase the explanatory power of the potential framework. As I will explain the Processual Model of Neutrality, each theory is necessary to understand state behaviour at different phases of neutrality.

3.3 The Processual Model of Neutrality (PMN)

The above examination of neoclassical realism and role theory shows a robust explanatory power when used to examine foreign policy positions such as neutrality, especially if combined. Thus, in this thesis, I introduce a new model to explain neutrality derived from a combination of neoclassical realism, role theory and some empirical observations. This model, which I call the processual model of neutrality (PMN; shown in figure 1), can guide our understanding of neutrality by explaining why countries adopt this position and how their neutrality evolves over time. In the PMN, neutrality develops three phases: strategic, passive and active. First, the initial decision to adopt neutrality results from a complex interaction of systematic factors, domestic factors and leadership perception. In the model, this decision phase is called the strategic phase. This decision to adopt neutrality, that this phase examined

is affected by different external factors that include but are not limited to, the influence of security guarantors and external threats, while the internal factors include interest groups, the societal structure and the country's leadership. First, the influence of security guarantees has immense effect, as will be discuss in different cases later, in the beviour of neutrals. It can, theoretically, push states to adopt neutrality in at least to different cases. To start with, small states could feel more secure when they has strong security gurantors which make them adopt neutrality without the fear of being punished by the regional belligerents (Waltz, 1990). Other than this, Jervis argue that states without security guarantee, including small and medium states, may adopt neutrality as a way of self-preservation against great power conflicts (Jervis, 2017). Second, the external threats can constitute a situation where neutrality is the favourable foreign policy option. The existance of different opposing threats in the external environment is likely to drive smaller countries to perceive neutrality as a less dangerous options (Ripsman, 2011).

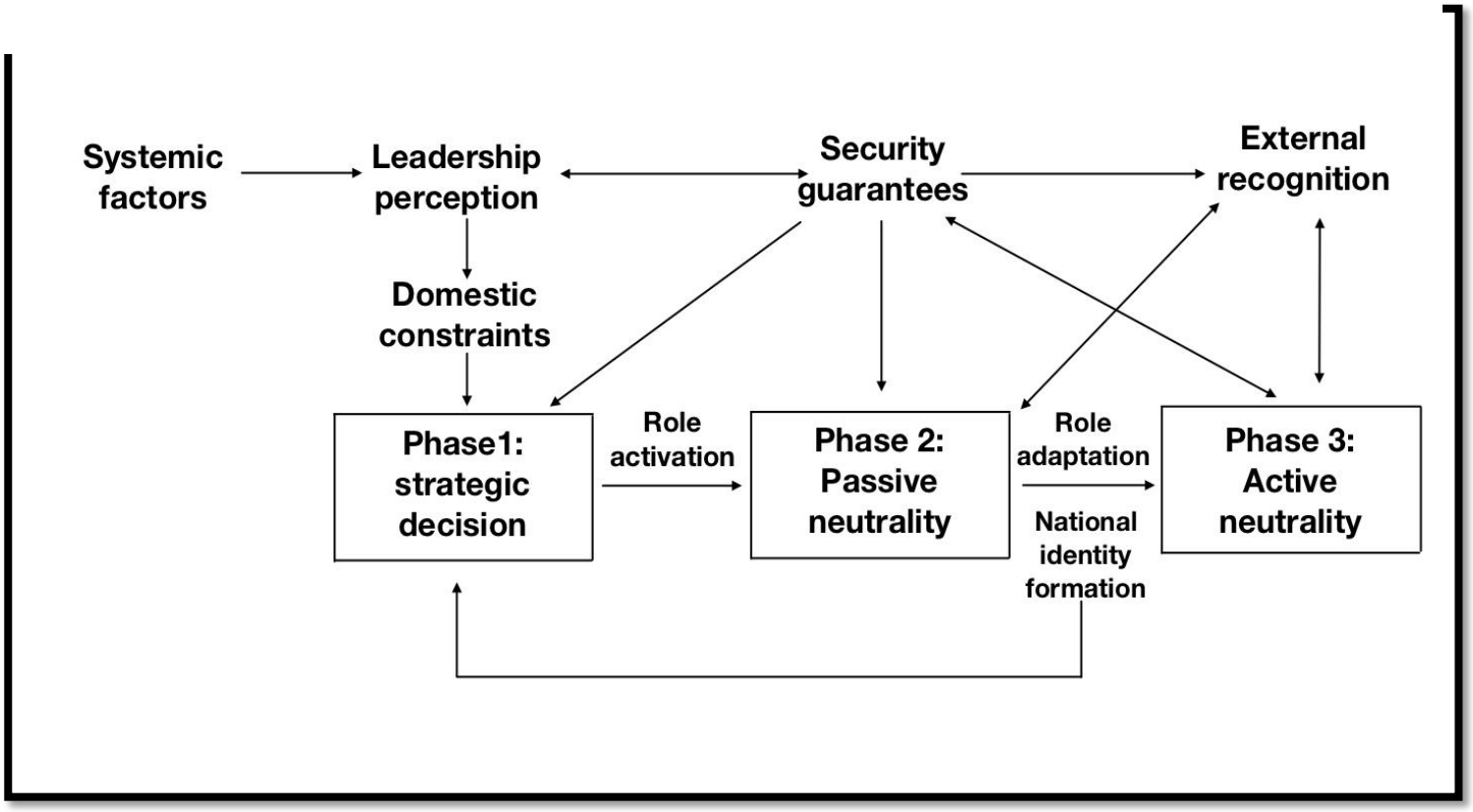
For the internal factors, there very different from one country to the other depending on the political system and environment. Despite this, some theoretical insights may be used to indicate favourable conditions for neutrality with different factors. First, Societal structure can play important part in driving the country to lean towards neutrality. Theoretically, neutrality can be a favourable policy if the society has different and diverse structures and neutrality towards external conflicts support the unification of these groups (Hopf, 1998). The societal structure also set condition favouring neutrality when the identity of this society has a culture of non-alignment (Valeri, 2009). Other than this, the country's leadership can also be a condition that favours neutrality. The country is likely to favour neutrality when its top decision makers view it as the best policy to response to the internal and external factors. Neutrality, as discussed on the first phase of the PMN, is the result of the interactions between these internal and external factors.

After deciding to adopt neutrality, a country may start to perceive itself as neutral, which is referred to in the model as role activation. At this point, a country will be passively neutral, and this is the second phase. However, a country will be able to adopt active neutrality, reaching the third phase, only after receiving external recognition – especially the recognition of the belligerents. This transition can be understood by discussing the main condition that cause it such as: international recognition, credibility, and capacity. To start with, the international recognition is a key factor that cause the transition. This recognition can be from three different sources: belligerents, international society, and international organizations. When the belligerents accept the country as a neutral, it is more likely to play

active roles (transit to active neutrality) towards the conflicts they are involved in. Karsh argued that neutrals would not play active roles towards conflicts without the recognition main stakeholders in conflicts (Karsh, 2012). The recognition of the international society of a country's neutrality also drive to play an active role towards the conflict. This is due to the legitimization and the confidence it get from this widespread recognition. Finally, the recognition of powerful international organization, such as the United Nations, also legitimize the country's neutrality and pushes it to adopt more active roles towards conflicts (Morris and White, 2011).

During this transfer from passive to active neutrality status, the country will start forming a new national identity, which may be a long-term process, that reflects its neutrality on its citizens. It is important to note that not all countries go through all of the phases, and the transitions between the phases can be forward or backward, as some countries can go from the active phase to the passive phase.

Figure 2: The Processual Model of Neutrality (PMN)



To explain the interaction and mechanisms in the PMN, this section is divided into two parts: key variables and concepts, and mechanisms and processes of the model.

3.3.1 Key Variables and Concepts

The PMN is constructed of different variables that interact and influence each other. These variables are derived from three main sources: neoclassical realism theory, role theory and empirical observations. First, the variables derived from neoclassical realism theory are either systemic, such as external material factors and security guarantees, or intervening variables, such as domestic constraints and leadership perception (Rose, 1998, Dyson, 2015). As explained previously, systemic variables include threats or changes in relative power. Threats, as illustrated in detail in the previous section, are dangers (either actual or perceived) that a certain state perceives. These dangers can be military, ideological, or economic threats (Foulon, 2015). On the other hand, a change in relative power happens when there is a shift in relative power between two or more states. The two variables are related because when the relative power of a country increases, other countries usually start to view it as a threat (Ripsman, 2011). In addition, leadership perception and domestic constraints, discussed in detail in the previous section, may also be involved.

Security guarantors are another crucial variable in the PMN. This element refers to the security relations between great and small powers, where the great powers or groups of powers pledge to preserve the security and sovereignty of another state against external –and internal – threats (Gervais, 2016). There are two main types of security guarantees: alliances and bilateral defence treaties. NATO is an example of a military alliance where all member states provide security guarantees for each other based on Article 4, which considers an attack on one as an attack on all (Kovác, 2003). On the other hand, bilateral defence treaties are treaties where a powerful state obliges itself to provide guarantees to another state. Examples include the US defence agreements with Arab Gulf monarchies, Japan and South Korea (Tertrais, 2009, Huysmans, 1998). For the PMN, the second type of security guarantee is more relevant because neutral states are not usually part of military alliances.

External recognition, another important variable, refers to the acceptance and acknowledgement of other states or organisations of a particular state's foreign policy, such as neutrality. I argue that there are three important types of recognition in the context of the PMN: the recognition of belligerents, the recognition of great powers and the recognition of

international organisations such as the UN. As I will explain in the next section, each recognition, or the lack of it, affects the behaviour of the neutral state in different ways.

The interaction of all these factors leads to the first phase of neutrality, the strategic phase. The strategic phase refers to the time when the country decides to adopt neutrality towards a certain conflict. During this phase, the country does not yet have a neutral identity or neutral tasks. In most cases, this would be the first time, or the first time in a while, that the country adopts a position of neutrality. The term role activation is derived from the role theory of international relations. It refers to a country that has adopted a new role (from its viewpoint) in international relations (Harnisch, 2011). As explained in the discussion on role theory earlier in this chapter, this activation can be described as incremental or punctuated, or as the consequence of a conflict resolution (Thies, 2010).

In the theoretical literature, role activation is discussed by several scholars such as Thies who argued that role activation is "the transition from role conception to role performance" (Thies and Breuning, 2012). Other than this, role activation is "the process through which actors make behavioural choices based on their roles conceptions and the expectations of others" (Harnisch, 2011). Also McCourt discussed the concept and argue that role conception is about the actors understanding of the situation and their choice of the roles to play (Dyson, 2015). These different theoretical understandings point out that role activation is a kind of response, depending on the understandings, to outside events. Thus, it makes sense to explain this, in PMN, in the early stages, before the passive neutrality phase.

Furthermore, role adoption refers to changing the nature of a state's role in international relations. This differs from role activation, in which the change is slight and sometimes means only changing how a state performs a certain role (Thies, 2017). In the context of the PMN, role activation refers to starting to adopt active neutrality after receiving external recognition. The concept of role adaptation was also explained in theoretical literature by several scholars. Role adaptation is "process by which national role conceptions change over time due to socialization, learning, or environmental pressures" (Harnisch et al., 2011). This represent a change in a certain policy, such as neutrality, a change that "can be gradual process of adjustment or a more dramatic shift in response to significant events or crises" (Thies, 2017). Thus, I would use this concept to study the change in neutrality from the passive to active phase as explained in the PMN.

The last concept is national identity formation. In the context of the PMN, national identity formation refers to the construction of a shared understanding of what it means to be neutral and the formation of a sense of distinguishment from other nations (Steele, 2008). Theoretically, national identity formation was discussed by some scholars including (Wendt, 1994) who explain it as the product of social interaction that are not fixed and continually evolving. He argued that these identities "are the basis of states interests" and accordingly supporting the endurance of preferred policies such as neutrality. This indicate that strong national identity can influence and support the continuation of adopting neutrality even when there is a change in the systemic pressure. Thus, this interplay is an important aspect of the PMN.

Thus, the PMN has different sets of variables, phases and concepts. These variables are derived from neoclassical realism, role theory and empirical observations. In the following section, I will explain the mechanism and process of neutrality resulting from the complex interactions between these variables.

3.3.2 Mechanisms and Processes in the PMN

The PMN involves a number of mechanisms and outcomes that, as mentioned, distinguish the three phases in the neutrality process. These mechanisms result from the interaction between different variables, including role activation, adaptation, national identity formation and external recognition. To start with, role activation is a process that begins in the first phase – making the strategic decision (to adopt neutrality) – and continues during the second phase of neutrality, passive neutrality. I argue that role activation has two main steps: role conception and signalling. First, role conception is the process where decision-makers develop an understanding of their country's role as neutral in the international system or towards a certain conflict (Dyson, 2015). This process of developing a self-conception, role theorists argue, takes time and varies from one case to the other (Malici and Walker, 2016, Harnisch, 2011). I argue that the development of self-conception happens during the first phase and can extend – or develop – during the second phase of the model. The second step of role activation is signalling the state's new role to the outside world (Kruizinga, 2016). Usually, neutral countries communicate their role through speeches and political statements. This

communication is the official announcement that a country is adopting neutrality towards a certain event.

When a country communicates its stance and new role as neutral in the international system or towards a particular conflict, it enters the second phase, passive neutrality. In this phase, the country views itself as neutral, but, in some cases, belligerents and the international community do not recognise this neutrality (Agius, 2011). I argue that the recognition of neutrality by belligerents and some important international actors, such as great powers and major international organisations such as the UN, will lead the country to enter the adaptation process. This refers to a country changing from adopting passive neutrality to adopting more active neutrality (Dreyer and Jesse, 2014). During the adaptation process, the prospective neutral state is affected by three main factors: the recognition of belligerent states, the recognition and expectations of other actors and the opportunities for engagement (Lennard and Golson, 2018). As I argued before, a country cannot adopt active neutrality unless it is recognised by the belligerents as a neutral actor. For example, a neutral state will find it challenging to host the fighting parties for peace negotiations unless they both recognise it as a neutral actor (Müller, 2019). In addition, the recognition and expectations of other actors, such as the great powers and international organisations, can help and support the state to preserve its foreign policy and play a more active role as a neutral party. Furthermore, a state's adaptation of an active neutral policy towards a certain conflict is limited by the diplomatic opportunities for engagement (Wróbel et al., 2020). Even when the belligerents recognise the neutral position of a state, they may not be willing to allow it to play a humanitarian or diplomatic role (Papisca, 2017). This results in the neutral state staying in phase two.

One of the most important factors in the PMN is security guarantees. Security guarantees are the security relations between a great power (or security guarantor) and a less powerful country. In this relationship, the security guarantor is expected to play an important role in protecting the smaller country from external, and sometimes internal, threats. In the PMN, security guarantees are part of different mechanisms that have various effects. First, they directly impact both the leadership perception and the strategic decision. In this thesis, I argue that small states cannot adopt neutrality if this position seriously harms the interests of the security guarantors. Secondly, security guarantees influence external recognition. When a great power provides a security guarantee for a small power adopting neutrality, there is a higher chance that the belligerents will recognise that neutrality. In addition, if the neutrality of the small power is serving the interests of the security guarantor, then it is more likely the

security guarantor will pressure the belligerents to recognise this neutrality. Finally, security guarantees can influence the neutral during the active phase and vice versa. The neutral country can influence the security guarantor and push it to support its neutrality by showing how this neutrality can be beneficial. An example of this is when the neutral can mediate the release of hostages or the evacuation of the citizens of the guarantor from war-affected areas. It is important to note that while the security guarantor can have these influences, they may not necessarily want to exert them, depending on the circumstances.

Another important process in the PMN is national identity formation. In this model, I argue that when states adopt a neutral position, and the decision-makers start to self-conceive this policy as their new role, it gradually influences the national identity (Kowert, 2015, Bruner, 2005). In cases of successful neutrality, such as in Switzerland, this process affects the nation's identity slowly (Agius, 2013). The nation's new identity (i.e. neutral) will have two main influences, as the model shows. First, it will support the country's efforts to adopt active neutrality and play roles such as hosting peace negotiations and supporting humanitarian efforts. This will allow the decision-makers to utilise more resources (state capacity) to support the active neutral role. Secondly, it will influence the decision-makers to adopt neutrality (phase one) towards future conflicts. This is due to the self-conception created by individuals as neutrals (Thies and Breuning, 2012).

The PMN is a solid theoretical tool that guides our understanding of neutrality. It mainly explains two aspects of neutrality: the factors that lead to the adoption of neutrality and how this neutrality policy evolves over time. This model is complex as it contains different sets of variables that interact with each other to produce and evolve neutrality. The next part of this thesis will explain the evolution of Omani neutrality guided by the model introduced in this chapter.

3.4 Conclusion

The theoretical literature on international relations does not offer a comprehensive framework to explain the formation, evolution and limitations of a state's neutrality policy. Thus, in this chapter, I introduced a new model, the processual model of neutrality (PMN), that I claim can guide scholars in understanding neutrality in two different ways: by unpacking the complex set of relations that led to adopting neutrality and explaining the evolution of neutrality. The PMN developed in this thesis is significant as it allows researchers different advantages that do not exist in the current theoretical literature. To start with, it allows researchers to capture

how neutrality can be more temporary and strategic (without generating identity) but can also become more resilient and long-term, which leads to generating identity. Moreover, the PMN allows for the exploration of how longer-term neutrality generates identity, and how this identity leads to leaning to adopt neutrality but is still heavily conditioned by external factors, such as security guarantees or broader external pressure. In addition, the PMN is significant due to several aspects that are directly related to the three sources used to build it.

The PMN is derived from three sources that complement each other, and each one makes the model practical and interesting. The first source is the neoclassical realism theory. The use of neoclassical realism allows this thesis to build a model that can capture the influences of external factors but still consider the limitations and influences that domestic politics can pose. It also allows the PMN to emphasise the importance of the decision-maker's perceptions in leaning to adopt neutral positions. The use of the insights of neoclassical realism is especially important for the first phase of neutrality. The PMN is also useful because it extends its explanations beyond the phase of making the decision to adopt neutrality. In this manner, it has borrowed some insights from role theory.

Concepts derived from the role theory of international relations give the PMN importance in two different ways. First, they allow the PMN to explore how the self-conception of decision-makers can change as they start to view the roles of their country as neutral. This is significant as it explains why long-term neutrals are expected to keep adopting neutral roles in future conflicts. Thus, role theory gives the PMN the ability to explain how self-conception can heavily influence decision-makers to adopt neutrality – regardless of material calculations – and the limit of this influence. Secondly, the data derived from role theory allows the PMN to explore how neutrals' self-concepts – and therefore their roles – are evolving through two processes: learning and adaption. As explained in the chapter, learning is the process of continuously studying and assessing states' roles and the factors constructing them. On the other hand, adaptation is the process of states modifying or changing their roles (Thies, 2017).

The third source of insight is the empirical data. These data are important as they allow me to build a model that categorises neutrality in three different phases: strategic, passive and active. This categorisation is important as it gives the PMN the ability to explore neutrality as policymaking (in the strategic phase) and as a long-term process (for the three phases of neutrality). The PMN is also significant in that it allows researchers to explore the interactions between the different factors in relation to the neutral country in its different

phases. This model, with all these features, required the collection of dense data from various sources. In the following methods chapter, I explain where I collected the data and the methods, I used to apply them to the PMN.

Chapter 4: Methods

The last chapter introduced a new theoretical model, the processual neutrality model (PMN). As explained, the model was derived from a combination of neoclassical realism theory, the role theory of international relations and empirical observations. The model, as shown in diagram 1 in the last chapter, reveals the complex relationship between the different variables and the resulting phases of neutrality. This thesis has acquired rich data and adopted nuanced research methods to apply the PMN to understanding and explaining Oman's foreign policy position of neutrality. The current chapter is devoted to explaining the methodologies of this thesis.

This thesis uses the case study method to answer two proposed research questions. To recap, the first question is, what explains the development and consolidation of Omani neutrality? Exploring this issue led me to question the nature and evolution of neutrality in international relations. Thus, this thesis's second main question is, how can neutrality in international relations be conceptualised and represented as a dynamic process? The case study method was chosen because it is the most suitable for an in-depth examination and analysis of a particular phenomenon or event (Bennett & Elman, 2007). Thus, this thesis presents case studies of concrete historical conflicts affecting Omani foreign policy. Within these case studies, I utilised the process tracing method to trace and explore the effects of specific factors and decisions (George & Bennett, 2005). There are two main case studies and several smaller cases included in this thesis. The first main case study is the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), while the second was the War in Yemen (2015–2022). The first case study reveals how Oman came to adopt neutrality in the first place. Thus, this case explains the birth of Omani neutrality and the surrounding variables and environment that led to this choice. Secondly, the War in Yemen shows how Oman has reached the phase of active neutrality and is able to play different diplomatic roles with more confidence. Thus, this case study was presented to show how neutrals, such as Oman, can mature in their neutrality policies and why they can play more sophisticated diplomatic roles.

While these methods and cases work best in applying the PMN to explain Omani neutrality, they require rich data. Thus, this thesis relies on a vast range of sources, as this chapter explains in detail. First, I interviewed different Omani elites, including former ministers, former and current ambassadors and members of Oman's foreign and defence ministries. Secondly, I studied the archives of three different countries. I extracted and

analysed hundreds of documents from the UK's National Archive and British Library. US Library of Congress documents and declassified CIA reports were also studied to extract more information. Additionally, I researched the Omani National Archive and the archival documents in the Omani Studies Library at Sultan Qaboos University. I also studied secondary and soft sources, such as political speeches and statements, to enrich the research and situate the extracted data in their proper context. These different data sets were triangulated and synthesised and then applied to the PMN to explain the case studies. In the following two sections, I explain the research methods and data collection process in detail.

4.1 Research Methods: Case Studies & Process Tracing

This thesis used different case studies to test and explore the PMN introduced in the last chapter. The case studies were explored in depth using the process tracing method. In this section, I explain process tracing and the selection of the case studies.

4.1.1 Case Study Method

The case study method is 'an approach to research that facilitates exploring phenomenon within its context using various data sources' (Bennett & Elman, 2007). This thesis used different case studies to examine the evolution of Omani neutrality since 1980. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the War in Yemen (2015–2022) were used as the primary case studies. In addition, different cases from the period between the main case studies were explored, including the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

The Iran-Iraq War and the War in Yemen were chosen to be the primary case studies for several reasons. Firstly, these case studies are the chronological bookends that answer the first two sub-questions related to the evolution of Oman neutrality: 1) What factors and dilemmas led Oman to adopt neutrality in the first place during the Iran-Iraq War? and 2) How has Oman's neutrality evolved, and what factors influenced the evolution of Omani neutrality between 1980 and 2022? The deep exploration of Omani neutrality towards the Iran-Iraq War is essential as it was this case that directly led to Omani taking up its position of neutrality. Moreover, the length of this conflict allowed for the gradual evolution of Omani neutrality and helped shape it into different phases. The Iran-Iraq War represents the beginning of Oman's adoption of neutrality. Thus, it is necessary to begin with it to follow the evolution of neutrality in Oman.

The War in Yemen is also a suitable case study as it demonstrates Oman's progression through the PMN. The War in Yemen began 27 years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Thus, it is useful for explaining how foreign decision-making and Omani neutrality were different in 2015 compared to 1988. This case also shows how each variable has changed over the period between these two events. The case of Yemen shows how Omani neutrality has matured and how it is now able to play different diplomatic roles, such as being a key diplomatic facilitator, which was not possible when it started adopting neutrality in the 1980s.

In addition to these reasons, the two main case studies in this thesis deserve greater scrutiny because they stand out as puzzling and unique. Over the course of the two cases, Oman's foreign policy behaviour resulted in regional neutrality, which is an interesting phenomenon. In the first case study, which is explored in Chapter 5 in greater detail, Oman followed a unique path in response to the Iran-Iraq War. Although it was actively pushing to form a security framework by helping to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Oman followed a path different from its GCC neighbours. It adopted neutrality towards the war and maintained its active relations between the two sides of the conflict (Binhuwaidin, 2019; Jones & Ridout, 2012). In the second case study, the War in Yemen, Oman also followed a policy independent of its Arabian Gulf neighbours. It declared a neutral position towards the war while all the other five Arabian Gulf states joined the war when it started (Shield, 2017). Oman's divergence from its neighbours in adopting these independent and neutral positions is unusual and warrants a detailed investigation. This dissertation will unpack and explain the variables behind this behaviour using a within-case-study process tracing.

While the two main case studies provide essential answers to the research questions, it is also necessary to explore the decades between them. Additional case studies that occurred between 1988 and 2015 were required to study as they were critical in answering the third sub-question: What are the occasions in which Oman adopted neutrality or could not adopt it between 1980 and 2022? What were the main drivers of Oman's inconsistency in adopting neutrality? The examination of these case studies (see Chapter 6) is essential for several reasons. First, they provide a bridge between the two primary case studies and thus elaborate on the consistency of Omani neutrality (and foreign policy) during this time. Secondly, they explain the weight of some factors in the adoption and evolution of neutrality, especially for small states' neutrals. Among these variables is the influence of the security guarantor, which is determinantal to understanding Oman's ability or inability to adopt neutrality towards different conflicts.

Finally, to apply the case study method and get its full expected advantages, it is essential to specify the start and end date the study will cover for each case (Bennett & Jeffrey T, 2014). In the first case study of this dissertation, in Chapter 5, I cover the period between 1979 and 1988. Even though the war started in 1980, two major events happened the year before and – arguably – contributed to the war: the Iranian Islamic revolution and Saddam Hussain's ascension to power in Iraq (Monshipouri, 2019). In addition, I went back to the early 17th century to explain the relationship between Oman and Great Britain and how this relationship influenced Oman's decision to adopt neutrality. In the case studies between 1988 and 2015, I provide some contextual background and discuss Omani neutrality during each conflict. For the second primary case study, I studied the period starting from 2011 up to 2022, even though the war, or more specifically, the coalition intervention, began in March 2015. The events in Yemen led directly to the intervention of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia, as will be explained in the next section of this chapter (Ehteshami, 2018). I argue it is difficult to get a complete picture of Omani foreign policy without examining Oman's reaction to the events that led to the war itself. The examination of these case studies was enabled by the use of the process tracing method as I explain below.

4.1.2 Process Tracing

George and Bennet (2005) defined process tracing as 'the use of histories, archival documents, interview transcripts, and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesises or implies in a case is, in fact, evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case'. This method is used to unpack and explain the complex relationships between different variables and delve deeper into how and why these relationships and variables evolve. Usually, the process tracing method works well with explaining a case study and delving deep into it. Thus, this thesis uses process tracing while applying the PMN to explain Omani neutrality cases.

There are three types of process tracing – test a theory, build or explore a theory and explain an interesting outcome – and each one serves a different purpose (Beach & Pederses, 2013). This thesis uses process tracing to both explain an interesting outcome and further explore the theoretical model. To do this, the researcher needs to study the current literature and build a hypothesis to test it against empirical evidence (Derek, 2016). This process is not straightforward as it can be deductive and inductive. It is important to keep the hypothesis

flexible to accommodate any unexpected findings and thus, it is crucial to remain 'open to surprises' during the fieldwork (Derek, 2016).

For this thesis, I developed a hypothesis depending on researching the body of literature on Oman. The hypothesis states, as stated in the introduction, that Omani neutrality is a product of the complex interaction of different external factors (including the threat of Iran, the threat of Iraq, the influence of great powers, and the relations with neighbouring countries) and internal factors (including the societal and religious structure, leadership perception and culture). The null hypothesis is that the single-issue explanation would be insufficient to explain the evolution of Omani neutrality such as pure realist, pure constructivist or pure rationalist explanations. The literature shows that different scholars argued single variable caused Omani neutrality or single approach can explain the evolution of Omani neutrality. These included scholars arguing that factors such as the Ibadi Sect, the leadership of Sultan Qaboos, or the colonial British influence can explain the evolution of the Omani neutrality.

Process tracing to explain an outcome begins with looking for a theory to explain the phenomena (Beach & Pederses, 2013). The use of theory in this type of process tracing is 'pragmatic', and it works as a 'heuristic instrument' to help explain the outcome (George & Bennett, 2005). Establishing a theory is pragmatic as it helps in unpacking and explaining the complex relations that led to a particular outcome. As a heuristic instrument, a theory provides process tracing the ability to discover and learn about the related insights. These two features require the use of different sources of data. In this thesis, as shown in Chapter 2, I reviewed the current literature, extracted valuable insights from it and then, in Chapter 3, constructed a theoretical model to explain neutrality. Applying process tracing to study different cases will enable this thesis to test the model and show how the causal mechanism between independent variables and intervening variables led to the adoption of neutrality. It will also show how this neutrality evolved through the different phases outlined in the PMN.

A good process tracing will go beyond testing the associations between the different variables. It 'opens the black box' and explains the mechanisms at work and how each variable influences the other (Beach & Pederses, 2013). My thesis went beyond testing the causal relations that caused neutrality. By developing the theoretical model, which I called the PMN, I elaborated on the relationship and the different mechanisms that lead states to adopt neutrality and how this neutrality evolved. The PMN doesn't explain only one mechanism, but rather a set of mechanisms and causal relations that produce outcomes and explain the evolution of neutrality. The PMN, as I explained in the theoretical framework,

there are several causal relationships as shown in Figure 2. These causal relations were derived from NCR, role theory or empirical observations. For example, the PMN shows that security guarantees influence and alter the behaviour of neutrals and constrain their ability to adopt neutrality.

To investigate this, I looked for indicators in the different sources such as the meeting minutes (between the officials of the security grantor and the neutral), and the decisions made by the neutral and compared them with the perception of the decision-makers in the neutral country. Some cases show that the perception of the decision-makers is different from the decisions they make, indicating a huge influence from the security guarantor. This investigation is repeated with every causal process in the PMN. The examination of the mechanisms and the processes in the PMN leads to the understanding of the overall evolution of neutrality.

This feature makes process tracing a suitable tool for operationalising the PMN. The operationalisation of variables is defining each variable and the way it is assessed in order to explain its effect on the proposed causal relation (Babbie, 2020). There are different variables in the PMN that I operationalised to study in this thesis. First, systemic factors, which are the external structural factors in the system (Waltz, 1979). For the case of Oman, I specified different external variables such as the threat of Iran, the threat of Iraq, the Soviets threat and the external relations with the UK, US and Arabian states. These factors were measured to indicate how each one is affecting Omani behaviour towards the different case studies. The study included looking for information in the archive, interviewing decision makers of that time and extracting information about their view, etc.

Another variable is security guarantees which refers to the agreement between Oman and the security guarantor (the US in this case). To assess this variable, the referred to the formal agreement between the US and Oman which called the “access security agreement”. I studied the details of the agreement, the potential US commitment to Omani security and the Omani perception of this agreement and overall security gurantees. This was studies by visiting the archive to understand the context and details of the agreement, interviewing Omani officials, and studying the literature. Furthermore, the leadership perception which explains how the decision makers in Omani view and perceive the issues I am studying. I explained their perception by interviewing the decision makers, reviewing the official

statements and speeches, and analysing the documents from the archive, as I will explain in more detail later.

Furthermore, the dependent variables in the PMN such as passive and active neutrality were also operationalised. In the thesis, I claim that Oman is adopting neutrality when it meets the conditions of neutrality (as explained in the introduction) without playing any active role towards the conflict. Secondly, I claim that Oman is adopting active neutrality when it plays roles such as hosting negotiations and supporting humanitarian efforts, along with meeting the conditions of neutrality. Other than this, I refer to the existence of the recognition when the other party is endorsing the Omani neutral stance and keep its relations with it. When there are no active relations between Oman and a belligerent, and especially when there are also accusations that Oman is leaning to the other side, this indicates a lack of recognition.

The model not only explains the relations between the different variables, it also helps explain why and how each variable interacts with all other variables and the processes resulting from these interactions. This is only achieved by focusing on depth over breadth and avoiding generalities in the research. As the following sections will show, depth is achieved by applying this method and delving into multiple types of sources.

In this thesis, I used the process tracing method within each case study to do at least three specific jobs. First, process tracing was used to identify the specific sequence of events inside each case study. For example, in the first case study, the Iran-Iraq War, I used it to trace the sequence of events, both of the war itself and of Oman's decision-making about the war, to build the full picture. Pieces of evidence from the various sources of data were collected to fill the gaps in this sequence. Secondly, I used process tracing inside each case to link the evidence to the model. When applying the PMN to guide in explaining Omani neutrality during one case, I collected different pieces of evidence and connected them to the PMN. The goal of this process was to support the relations shown in the model or to challenge them. For example, the PMN suggests that security guarantees have an immense influence on the behaviour of the small neutral. Thus, when conducting the interviews and researching the archives, I looked for evidence to support or challenge this hypothesis.

Thirdly, process tracing was used inside each case to identify the key decision-making points. Within each case study in this thesis, there were some moments when the decision-makers, such as the Sultan and his inner cycle, made a critical decision that is crucial to understanding the foreign policy, or neutrality, of the country. For example, during the first case study on the Iran-Iraq War, I identified Oman's agreement to allow the Iraqis to use its

military facilities as critical to the war. Thus, I heavily researched this decision to understand how it affected the overall evolution of Omani neutrality. I looked for pieces of evidence related to the incident and put them together to have the full story. As Chapter 6 explains, understanding this critical moment and how it turned out was crucial to understanding the overall evolution of Omani neutrality during the war. Therefore, process tracing was instrumental in identifying such critical moments and going deeper into exploring them.

When used to delve deeper into studying cases, the process tracing method results in different advantages, as explained above. However, it still has some limitations, in terms of making generalisations and the huge amount of information required. Regarding the first limitation, this thesis does not try to generalise the exact outcomes of Omani neutrality to other cases. However, as explained in the theoretical framework chapter, I argue that the PMN itself can be used to explain cases of other states, particularly for smaller nations that rely more on external recognition. On the other hand, the second limitation did not constitute a significant problem for this thesis as I relied on data extracted from different archives, interviews with elites and plenty of secondary sources, as explained in the following section.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Conducting a within-case-study process tracing requires an in-depth analysis that includes data from a variety of sources (Beach & Pederses, 2013; Bennett & Jeffrey T, 2014; George & Bennett, 2005). This thesis has gathered data from different sources, such as interviews with Omani officials and experts, archival research and secondary sources, to apply the within-case-study process tracing. In the following sections, I will highlight the data collection methods used to gather this data and discuss how I analysed them.

4.2.1 Interviews

Data collected from interviews are of vital importance to adopting the process tracing method. The main goal of conducting interviews for process tracing is to collect observations from the interviewees' recollection of events or cases under investigation (Beach & Pederses, 2013). The observations collected from this kind of interview represent either primary data or secondary primary sources. An example of primary data is when interviewees are the elites who participated directly in the investigated case study (Bennett & Elman, 2007). On the

other hand, Interviews can also be secondary primary sources where the interviewee gained knowledge about a topic from other primary or secondary sources. Experts and elites who were not participants in the case investigated are examples of the second kind of interview (Collier, 2011). This thesis drew information from both types of interviews.

In this thesis, I conducted twenty-one interviews with two different categories of people. All the interviews took place in Oman, in three cities: Muscat, Sohar and Salalah. I conducted the interviews in two languages; 20 interviews were in Arabic and one in English. I first travelled to Oman to conduct the interviews in September 2021. During September, I conducted six interviews. Unfortunately, on 24 September, the Sultanate of Oman was hit by cyclone Shaheen. The damage from the cyclone was catastrophic, especially in one of the regions close to Muscat. I had to postpone the rest of the interviews. The decision was made after contacting three interviewees, who said they would only meet after life returned to normal in the affected areas. Thus, I returned to the UK in early October with the intention of returning to Oman a few months later.

The second round of interviews took place in March, April and May 2022. In this period, I conducted 17 interviews in Muscat, Sohar and Salalah. The average time of each interview was three hours, with one interview that lasted five hours. I only was able to record six individuals as the rest of the interviewees declined my request to record the interviews. Thus, I wrote as many notes as I could during the interviews that were not recorded. While most of the interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees, this setting was not always ideal for writing and taking notes. Following each unrecorded interview, in addition to the notes I wrote during the interviews, I immediately got out of the house of the interviewee, went to the nearest coffee shop and spent some hours writing further notes and editing the notes I already wrote. On the other hand, the recorded interviews were transcribed in a file that I kept until the empirical chapters were completed. The file was deleted in November 2023.

These interviews were with two different groups of people. First, I interviewed current and former Omani diplomats who were direct participants in one or more of the case studies. To get insights into the Omani position towards the two case studies, I interviewed several former diplomats who used to work in the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs or were part of the decision-making circle of that time. These interviewees included former ministers, former and current ambassadors and former and current diplomats. The memory of these primary sources is essential for within-case-study process tracing. As explained before, the process tracing method starts with making a hypothesised model; I used the PMN to construct

the relationship between different variables. This model can leave some gaps that cannot be understood by relying only on secondary sources (Beach & Pederses, 2013). Thus, the interviews were critical to filling the gaps in the theoretical model. This kind of interview, while helpful, has some pitfalls that will be discussed later in this section.

Other than these primary sources, I interviewed different Omani diplomats who were not participants in the two case studies. These interviewees are considered 'secondary' primary sources (Richards, 1996). Their knowledge about the cases is acquired from their interactions with other diplomats directly involved or from reading the minutes of the meetings and other primary sources (Ripsman, et al., 2016). In the case of Oman and other countries, very few people have access to these minutes, making the interviews I conducted with them essential for different reasons. First, they can put the observations extracted from various sources in their proper context (Beach & Pederses, 2013). This is because of their vast knowledge of Omani foreign policy, their understanding of international relations (both as theory and practice) and their access to information not available to the public or researchers in many cases. In addition, these sources helped explain the perception of other primary sources who could not be reached for interviews. For example, the data extracted from these interviews helped me understand the perception of Sultan Qaboos bin Said about Omani regional neutrality.

It is important to note that, in this thesis, I used semi-structured interviews instead of structured or open interviews due to the privileges this kind of interview offers. First, compared to fully structured interviews, semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to ask open-ended questions, which is essential in social science subjects such as politics (Kvale, 2011). For instance, the interviewee (e.g. a policymaker or expert) cannot express political views by answering only yes or no questions. Second, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. Asking these follow-up questions is vital in politics as it clarifies views and helps gain more understanding (Flinders, 1997). Third, in comparison with unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews help keep the discussion on track by having pre-set themes and points to touch on. These pre-set themes were built on the gaps in the literature review and the theoretical model of this thesis. Thus, it is essential for a within-case study process tracing to have interviews with pre-set themes to touch on (Beach & Pederses, 2013). Additionally, this feature is essential to decrease the bias of interviewees (Kvale, 2011). By touching on the same themes with most interviewees, I was able to compare the data from different interviews.

For the interviews, I intentionally had five different topics covering 17 points. These points were:

- Oman's relations with different stakeholders in 1979–1980
- The Omani perception of Saddam Hussein
- The Omani perceptions of the new Islamic regime
- The Omani perception of the US involvement in the region in 1980
- The Omani perception of the GCC's relations with Iran and Iraq
- The proposed Iraqi operation in the early days of the Iran-Iraq War
- Oman's active roles during the Iran-Iraq War
- The initial reaction of Oman to the Iraqi invasion
- The nature of Omani participation in the Iran-Iraq War
- The Omani perception of the Afghanistan invasion
- The Omani perception of the Syrian Civil War
- The reasons behind Oman's involvement with the Syrian government
- The initial reaction to the War in Yemen
- The pressure of Oman's neighbours on Omani decision-makers before and during the War in Yemen
- The details of Oman's involvement with the Houthis
- The hostage issues in Yemen
- The arms smuggling issue and the US view of Omani neutrality during the War in Yemen.

During the interviews, and depending on the profile of the interviewee, I added or deducted some points or questions.

Interviews are an essential source of observations for within-case-study process tracing. However, the researcher must appreciate and suppress their pitfalls (Richards, 1996). Initially, elites tend to overestimate their role and centrality to the events (Beach & Pederses, 2013). For example, several elites I interviewed were part of the negotiations during the event under investigation, and some of them may have exaggerated the role they played. Moreover, elites tend to forget the details of the events under investigation unless it is very recent. For this thesis, one of the case studies started in 1980, more than forty years ago (Richards, 1996). When I interviewed the Omani officials who were in charge during the Iran-Iraq War, most of them tended to forget some details, especially the dates of events. However, when I reminded them of the dates and some details, most remembered and provided crucial insights

about the events discussed. Finally, some elites' perceptions and understandings of the event changed after the events took place. This might be due to their readings about the event in other sources (Kvale, 2011). To limit the influence of these pitfalls in the interviews, I diversified and triangulated the sources used. In the following section, I will discuss the other data sources, including archive research, soft primary sources and secondary sources.

4.2.2 Content Research

4.2.2.1 Archival Research

Another source of data this thesis has used is the information collected from archival research. Archives are 'repositories of some kind' (Moore, et al., 2016). These repositories have different kinds of documents, such as printed materials, recorded materials, pictures and written documents (Ventresca & Mohr, 2017). The use of archive data is crucial to this thesis for several reasons. Firstly, in most cases, observations extracted from archival documents such as official letters between diplomats and confidential letters tend to be very reliable and highly unbiased (Crowley, 2012). Hence, these data can fill the shortcomings in interviews that may result from elite bias and memory loss. In addition, archival research can reveal new observations about the events that might help clarify the relations between the different variables examined during process tracing or suggest new variables. An archives researcher needs to keep an open mind and expect surprises (Ventresca & Mohr, 2017); therefore, as explained previously, I used the abductive research method to construct the PMN as it was developed based on two theories and then further refined using the data collected from different theoretical and empirical sources. In other words, the process tracing method, when used inside each case, was open to accommodate such surprises. Finally, good archival research will prepare the researcher to ask better questions when interviewing the decision-makers (Cambria Press, 2012). Thus, I conducted the archival research before travelling to conduct the interviews. While examining the archival documents, I uncovered relevant information that helped me ask better questions and investigate new issues.

This thesis uses pieces of evidence collected from archives in three different countries: the UK, the US and Oman. To start with, I used data from the UK's National Archives at the Adam Mathew Digital Institute as I had online access from the University of York for two months, starting in May 2021. The access included two main collections:

Foreign Office Files for the Middle East, 1971–1981 and Confidential Print: Middle East, 1983–1969. This was crucial to my thesis as these collections contain relevant and rich documents about Oman from the UK's Foreign Office, the British Defence Intelligence's staff records, the Colonial Office and the Prime Minister's Office. The documents used from the UK National Archives are various and include the minutes of meetings between British diplomats and diplomats from Oman, Gulf countries, the US and Yemen. They also include reports of UK ambassadors to the Gulf states. These reports contain descriptions and analyses of the events during the last years. Finally, they also include briefings given to the PMs before they meet with diplomats from Oman or other Gulf countries.

In addition, I accessed the British Library and National Archive documents through databases outside the UK, such as the Qatar National Library, where I had access for three months, and the Arabian Gulf Archives by Agada. The governments of Qatar and the UAE fully fund these two databases. Thus, some documents are entirely unavailable, while others have some pages hidden. Sometimes, the three databases included the same documents. However, I noticed that in Agada and the Qatar National Library, many documents are missing. While I do not have solid information about the reasons, I suspect the governments of Qatar and the UAE are censoring them in order to hide some information that may raise questions against them. I accessed to Qatar Library for two months in June and July 2021. I also opened an account for the Agada database in June 2021, and I still have access to the documents it offers. Despite visiting it to look for specific information for more than a year and a half, most of my research on it was between June 2021 and October 2021.

Outside the UK, I used archival documents from two different places. First of all, I extracted data from the US Library of Congress archive. Getting access to the Library of Congress was relatively easier than the archives in the UK. However, the available information was much less than the case of the British Archive. In this library, I used two online tools: digital collections and the online catalogue. The digital collections helped to narrow my searches and filter the documents that are relative to the Middle East. On the other hand, the online catalogue helped me to filter the search using specific places or persons, such as Oman or Saddam Hussein. The two tools mostly led to the same documents in the archive, but the online catalogue was more user-friendly.

This archive contained some data about US relations with Oman and the events around 1980. An example is the insights I got about the US perception and interests before signing the military access agreement with Oman in 1980. I also tried to compare the

perception of the US and the perception of the UK about the access agreement and the US's new foot in the region.[2] These reports also included the minutes of meetings between Omani and American officials, especially in 1979 and 1980, which took place in Muscat, Washington and London. Understanding the content of these meetings was crucial to making sense of how both Oman and the US had mutual threat perceptions of the new Iranian regime and the Soviets' expansion in Afghanistan.

Also, in the US, I used some declassified CIA reports to understand their perception of the developments in the region, especially about the events of the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf countries' participation in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. These reports were not fully unbiased as they were written by different CIA officials, and each one contains the viewpoint of its writer. However, they were important to understand the overall context of the events in the region. An example of this is understanding the importance of the Strait of Hormuz to the US administration and the change in the plans of the US to secure the flow of oil in it before the signing of the access agreement compared to after signing it.

Finally, I reviewed some documents from two archives in Oman: the National Archive in Muscat and the archive at the Centre of Omani Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. First, I accessed the National Archive on three trips (comprising three full days) in September 2021. Secondly, I visited the Centre of Omani Studies at Sultan Qaboos University seven times, three times in September 2021, and then four times during my second trip to Oman in March 2022. In both archives, all the documents were in Arabic except for some letters that were translated from English to Arabic. While I retrieved some information about the perceptions of Sultan Qaboos in these archives, the documents in them are highly censored and biased towards the government. In both archives, I could not get a single document that criticises the government on any issue. Thus, I was extra careful before extracting any insights from these documents, and I only used them for situating some issues in their larger context.

Despite these benefits, archival research still has its shortcomings. First, the documents in the archives I studied lacked context and were not comprehensive. The minutes of meetings merely transcribe what happened in the meeting without putting things in their broader context (Beach & Pederses, 2013). In the process tracing method, the researcher must conduct archival research to look for evidence to test the a priori set model (Ripsman, et al.,

[2] Some documents from the UK and the US show that the British were not happy about the way the Americans were negotiating with the Omanis. In the British confidential annual report on Oman 1980, they claimed the US was being harsh, and the UK may lose all of its interest in the country after investing too much. Although this dispute is not directly related to my thesis, 'British-American soft competition in Oman in 1980' is an interesting topic for future research.

2016). Due to the large number of collections available in the archive, the researcher might not find the needed documents because many collections are not yet fully processed. This will result in gaps in understanding the event under investigation (Cambria Press, 2012). However, I overcame these shortcomings through the triangulation of sources. Additional secondary sources helped me in putting the archive documents in their context. Furthermore, the interviews with the Omani decision-makers and researchers resolved the shortcomings by filling in the gaps. Finally, to close the gaps I found in one archive, I was able to locate the required information in other archives.

4.2.2.2 Soft Primary Sources

Soft primary sources can take different forms, such as leaders' speeches, political statements, the diaries of participants and private letters (Farr, 2008). The main feature of soft primary sources is that they are usually constructed for public consumption or reach the public later. When conducting a within-case-study process tracing, these sources can be helpful, especially in identifying the sequence of events, but they can have a significant drawback in terms of reliability (Beach & Pederses, 2013). Relying on soft primary sources to collect evidence to test the a priori set model in process tracing is therefore risky; however, these sources were helpful as I complemented them with other primary and secondary sources.

For this thesis, the political discourse and speeches of Oman's leading political figures during the two case studies were gathered and analysed. To start with, I collected the political speeches of Sultan Qaboos that took place both before and during the first case study, from 1975 to 1988. I gathered them using two main sources: the website of the Oman Ministry of Information and the published materials released by the government. The main source was the book titled The Royal Speeches of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, 1970–2005. The speeches and statements of Sultan Qaboos were important to understanding the Omani perspective during the first case study and the case studies between 1988 and 2015. However, during the timing of the second case study, since 2015, Qaboos did not mention foreign policy or Oman's stance towards the War in Yemen in any public speech.

Along with Qaboos's speeches, I gathered the discourse of other political figures during the two case studies. Examples are the interviews and political statements of current and former foreign ministers that occurred during or in the years before the two case studies. The main figure after Qaboos was Yousif Bin Allawi, the former minister of Omani foreign

policy (1982–2020). I gathered his political statements in three different places: the official account of the ministry on Twitter, online newspapers and YouTube. Finally, I gathered the speeches of Omani representatives at the UN, the GCC and the Arab League that touched on the issue. While they did not contain surprising information, these statements and speeches were important to understanding the messages the Omani government wanted to send to the public. For example, the Omani statements about the War in Yemen were mainly targeting the Omani public and aimed at assuring them that Oman would not be part of any fighting in Yemen.

4.2.4 Secondary Sources

I extracted data from a large number of secondary sources in addition to the different primary sources. There are various reasons for the use of secondary sources. First, as explained in the literature review chapter, I used secondary sources to identify the gaps in the literature and to extract insights to use in building the narrative this thesis is telling. The secondary sources were also important for triangulating and complementing the primary sources. The use of secondary sources helps put the data extracted from the primary sources in their context (George & Bennett, 2005). For example, the researcher needs secondary sources to understand the broader picture when analysing a leader's speeches. The speech itself may not give details about what was happening at that time or what other factors may be affecting the country. For example, suppose a speech is about how the leaders view a regional conflict. In that case, the secondary sources will help put these views in their context by explaining extenuating factors and how they may have affected the leaders and, accordingly, their views.

Furthermore, the use of secondary sources is important to scrutinise the insights extracted from the primary sources as these are not always without bias (Bennett & Elman, 2007). For example, one kind of document I extracted from the British National Archives is the letters between the UK government and its officers in Oman. While these documents are vital, they represent the viewpoint – and understanding – of the officers who wrote them (Crowley, 2012). Thus, to overcome any possible bias, I used many secondary sources along with different kinds of primary sources to find inconsistencies and bring different viewpoints. The use of secondary sources thus helps in filling the gaps. The data extracted from the primary sources may not cover everything needed to explain a case study (Bennett & Elman, 2007). Thus, in this matter, secondary sources can help in two ways. Firstly, some secondary sources, such as papers and books, may be built on primary data that are not available

anymore. For example, their data could be extracted from interviews with political figures who are not around anymore (e.g., politicians who passed away). Also, secondary sources can help fill the gaps in areas not covered by the primary data.

This thesis triangulated different sources, including interviews of different elites and experts, archival documents from three countries, soft sources such as political statements, and numerous secondary sources. This triangulation helped overcome some sources' shortcomings and strengthened some arguments by confirming them with more than one source.

4.3 Data Analysis

The vast amount of data collected from different primary and secondary sources was analysed using two ways: thematic analysis and discourse analysis. In the analysis stage of my research, I mainly relied on NVivo software (where access was granted through the University Library). The use of a combination of qualitative methods of analysis supports unpacking complex issues in international relations such as neutrality (Lamont, 2020). First, thematic analysis is the use of data collected from primary and secondary sources to identify patterns and categorizations across the collected data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). I applied this method by going into five different steps after I completed collecting the data from its different sources.

First, I re-familiarized myself with the data collected by scanning and re-reading them. This included revisiting the archive to make sense of some of the documents and re-reading some sources which I draw information from.In the thematic analysis, I secondly, draw initial codes that were mainly derived from the different variables in the theoretical model, as I explained previously in this chapter. In this step, I started using NVivo to log the codes as it was easier to deal with instead of classic methods of handwriting. Thirdly, I studied the codes collected and along with adding more information inside each code I started to notice and upon it I draw themes. During this step I logged most of the information I collected from interviews, archive documents, and political speeches of Omani and regional politicians into the respective codes (and themes) in NVivo.

Fourth, I reviewed all the themes and the codes, and studies the relation between them and how the drawn themes fit with the codes I initiated. I also, in this step, amend some codes and a signed them to different themes were possible. Finally, in the last step I started to draw some conclusions depending on the themes and the patterns I got. These steps allowed me to support some arguments (or confirm some incidents) by being able to look for information

from different sources that points to the same argument. As I explained before in this chapter, I was able to make sure that Oman lent towards Iraq in the early days of the Iranian-Iraqi war by gathering information from: the British archive, the US archives, newspapers from the archive and interviews with Omani decision-makers. This allows me to make some arguments with high confidence. However, I still needed to add one analytical tool to support the analysis which was discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is the use of language (written and spoken), such as in political speeches and statements, to examine and understand behaviours in international relations such as neutrality (Howarth and Griggs, 2016). In my thesis, I used discourse analysis for three main aims: First, to examine how the Omani decision-makers justify their policy choice (in neutrality) and how they articulate it to other players. This was done by collecting and examining the speeches of Sultan Qaboos, the Sultan of Oman 1970-2022, the speeches and political statements of Yousif Bin Allawi the long-standing Omani foreign minister, and the political statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Oman. The second reason is to examine and understand how other countries perceive and deal with Omani neutrality. This was done by trying to collect other countries' statements (especially belligerents during conflicts where Oman was neutral) on Omani neutrality. This was very important as the evolution of Omani neutrality largely depends on the perception of others, as explained in the PMN in the context of the transition between the passive and active phase of neutrality.

The use of discourse analysis aims to complement and build on the thematic analysis used in this thesis. It goes beyond understanding the meaning of the words in the statements and political speeches which was easy I am influent in both Arabic and English. Thus, I conducted further research to understand the context of the statements and how, the decision maker for example, is trying to communicate their understanding of the neutrality policy. The understanding of this communication and the context behind it was important as neutrality is a policy that is communicated between neutrals and belligerents and the way they understand it directly affect the state of this policy. For example, during the early years of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian officials were claiming that Oman was leaning towards Iraq, and they would not trust its neutrality due to its Arabic ethnicity which make it behave in that way. However, this language, as I explained in detail in chapter 5, changed, indicating a change in the war Iranians view Oman from a country leaning towards Iran to one adopting neutrality. These deep analysis were key to understand the complext variables in the model.

The understanding of the complex variables such as role activation, role adaptation and national identity formation used the vast amount of data gathered from different primary and secondary sources. For the role activation, for example, I gathered data and looked for indication that shows when the country started to adopt neutrality. The data that shows these were mainly from two sources, the interviews and the archival documents. During the semi-structured interviews with decision makers from Oman, I tried to indicate some lingual signs to show the change in their perception about the new role they are adopting (role activation). The same was adopted to understand other concepts such as role adaptation where I looked for some signs that shows the understanding of the does the role means. In the context of the PMN introduced before, I looked for how the decision makers are viewing the roles they play towards a certain conflict. If their perception changed from being inactive towards a conflict to playing more active role such as hosting negotiations and supporting humanitarian works, then this is a likely indication of role adaptation.

Finally, the national identity is the most complex to assess and fully understand and the most difficult to follow as it is a slow process. Despite this, due to the vast amount of data gathered I was able to elaborate on how this variable is influencing the decision makers to adopt neutrality. The indication I was looking for, in the interviews and meetings' minutes, included how the elites are articulating the role that Oman should play in the region. In different occasions, elites were arguing the "Omanis" should play neutrality role because it is in their culture to be neutral and peace makers. These understandings, I argue, indicate a neutral identity that was formed over time.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter explained the methodologies used in this thesis and the reasons behind using them. The methodology was based on the theoretical framework the thesis applied. Thus, this thesis examined Omani neutrality by examining different case studies from 1980 until 2022. Using the case study method enabled me to dig deeper into the Omani neutrality during these cases. A process tracing method was applied to allow the thesis to use the PMN to explain the

Omani neutrality behaviour. The goal of using the process tracing method within case studies was not only useful in unpacking the complex relations between variables; it also enabled me to dig deeper and explain how each variable influenced others to result in the different phases of neutrality. The use of process tracing within case studies required the collection and analysis of massive amounts of data.

To enable process tracing for the case studies, I acquired data from a vast range of sources. First, different important insights were drawn from interviewing Omani elites. The interviews included former ministers, ambassadors, diplomats and practitioners in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence. The data extracted from these interviews were synthesised and complemented with the data I retrieved from the archives of three countries: the National Archives and British Library archives in the UK, the Library of Congress Archives and the CIA declassified reports in the US, and the National Archives and the Centre of Omani studies in Oman. These data were also triangulated with data from other sources, such as political speeches and secondary sources. This rich data enabled me to apply the within-case study process tracing in the best possible way.

This chapter showed how nuanced methods such as case studies with process tracing may be used to enable the application of a complex model like the PMN, which requires rich data. Moreover, the choices of methods and sources complement its suitability, but it is still necessary to acknowledge some of its limitations. First, the case study method limits the ability to generalise the results to cases concerning other states. Thus, the exact results of my thesis cannot be used to interpret the neutral behaviour of other states. However, the PMN may be applied to study the behaviour of other small neutrals. This model, with the above-explained methodologies, was adopted to study Omani neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988.

Chapter 5: Learning to be Neutral: The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)

The Iran-Iraq War was one of the longest and deadliest conflicts in recent history. It posed a threat to all the neighbouring countries during its eight-year duration, especially the Arabian Gulf monarchies (Rubin, 1989). Oman, a small Gulf monarchy, was one of those countries located 'within the crossfire' of the warring parties – Iran and Iraq. Along with Iran, Oman borders the Strait of Hormuz, one of the most important straits globally due to its economic importance as explained before. This war posed existential challenges to the leadership in Muscat as the capabilities of either warring party were much more than those of Oman or its six Gulf neighbours combined (Kechichain, 1995). However, the six Arabian Gulf Monarchies adopted different policies towards the war. Three Gulf countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar – supported Iraq while the UAE and Bahrain adopted a position of passive neutrality (Huwaidin, 2015). It is important to note that, different to Oman, the UAE and Bahrain's position did not result in adopting neutrality in the long term. I argue in this chapter that Oman's position gradually changed from leaning with Iraq to adopting passive neutrality to adopting active neutrality. This evolution can be explained using the processual model of neutrality introduced in the theoretical framework chapter.

Before discussing Oman's position of neutrality during the war, I will begin by exploring the background behind Omani relations with the key players of the war along with the history of Omani relations with Britain. The goal of this discussion is to set the scene and understand the regional context in which Oman found itself before the war began. Firstly, I will outline the trajectory of the British colonial involvement in Omani politics since it started in the seventeenth century and up to 1979, the year of the Iranian Islamic revolution. Elucidating the relations between the two countries and the degree of British involvement in Omani politics will help in understanding Britain's influence on Omani foreign policy in three key areas: its decision-making process, its ideology and its external relations. Secondly, I will review Omani-Iraqi relations during the 1970s. In this section, I will show how Oman's perception of the Baathist regime in Iraq was affected by their support of the Dhofari insurgency in the Southern part of Oman. In addition, I will show how the Omani and Iraqi governments held opposing views about Western involvement in the area and how this division negatively affected their relations as well as the Omani perception of the Iraqi threat during its war with Iran.

Thirdly, I will explore Iranian-Omani relations during the 1970s and how the pro-Western ideology held by the rulers of the two countries contributed positively to the relations between them. I will also argue that the Iranian support for the Omani government has solidified the ties between the two. Studying and understanding this period can help shed some light on the Omani reaction to the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. This section will show how the government in Oman dealt with a revolution that changed the government in Iran from a very close ally with the same interests and ideology to a new government with controversial interests and ideologies that have caused uncertainty in the region. This chapter will also explore the Omani government's security agreement with the US that was signed a few months after the Iranian revolution to protect it from external threats. As I will argue in more detail, this agreement was very controversial in the Arab world as it gave the Americans a foothold in the area for the first time in recent history.

After reviewing the background and setting the scene, I use my processual model of neutrality to argue that Omani neutrality during the war evolved through three phases. In the first phase, known as the strategic phase, I will show how initially Oman struggled to adopt a clear position and gave the Iraqis the right to use Omani soil and facilities to attack Iran, an operation that did not materialise. Based on the conditions I established in the introduction chapter; I argue that Oman adopted neutrality during the war. During the war Oman met the three conditions of neutrality: abstain from participating in hostilities, deal with both sides impartially and not allow the troops of belligerents to use its lands. Very early in the conflict, Oman did not view itself as neutral; however, different external and internal factors drove it to adopt neutrality. In the second phase, which lasted from 1980 until 1984, I argue that Oman adopted passive neutrality and tried to keep its relations with the two belligerents, Iran and Iraq. In this phase, Oman viewed itself as neutral but could not adopt active neutrality because of the lack of recognition of its neutrality by Iran. Finally, in the third phase, between 1984 and 1988, Omani neutrality matured into a position of active neutrality. During this phase, Oman was able to act as neutral because the warring parties recognised it as neutral and enabled it to act as such, for example, by hosting peace talks and treating the war's causalities.

5.1 Background on Omani Foreign Policy

Omani decision-making during the Iran-Iraq War cannot be understood without examining historical relations with some key external players, in particular, Iraq, Iran and the United

Kingdom, which has had the most influence on Omani politics in the last few centuries. This first part aims to show how British influence increased in Oman, peaking between 1920 and 1970, and how this relationship affected the threat perception, decision-making and alliances inside and outside the country. In the second part, I will review the relationship trajectory between Iraq and Oman before the 1980s and the onset of the war, particularly in relation to events in the 1960s and 1970s. This examination aims to show the events and environment before 1979 that helped strengthen relations between the two countries. The Iranian revolution and its effect on Oman's perception of Iran will be explored in a separate section later in this chapter.

5.1.1 Colonial Legacies and Influence: The Role of Great Britain

Britain has had a long history of involvement in Omani politics. Although this involvement has varied from time to time, Britain remained one of the leading external powers influencing Omani foreign policy from its arrival in 1645 until 1967, when it decided to withdraw from the Middle East (Worrall, 2018). However, as we shall see, even after this period, when the regime in Oman was facing insurgents in the south of the country, until 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution, Britain retained their influence on the decision-making in Oman.

In 1645, British officials were contacted by Imam Nasser Bin Murshid, who offered them some trading facilities in Sohar on the Coast of Oman.[3,4] At the time, the British were very interested in getting a foot in the Omani Sultanate and having some influence (AlShuaili, 2014) while the Omanis saw British involvement as a way to weaken the Portuguese, who had been occupying parts of the country since 1507 (Hussein, 2020). In 1646, Oman signed a trade agreement with the British East India Company that gave the British exclusive trading rights (Al-Futaisi, 2018). The Portuguese were fully expelled from Oman in 1650 after intense fighting with Omani troops (Hussein, 2020). These incidents marked the beginning of British influence in Oman.

Between 1646 and 1968, Britain's influence on Omani politics increased until it fully controlled Omani foreign policy and was the main player in Omani domestic politics. The British solidified their influence through two traditional colonial tactics: divide and rule, and asymmetrical relations. During this period, Oman signed four treaties of 'peace, friendship

[3] Sohar is an Omani city with a historically vital port. This port was a trading hub, and most ships travelling from Asia to Africa and Europe used to stop in it.

[4] 'Imam' was the title given to rulers of Oman during that time. It was not until 1783 that the official title was changed to 'Sultan'.

and navigation', in 1798, 1800, 1891 and 1951. The first two treaties showed some equality between Oman and the British. However, as time passed, the British started to involve themselves more in Omani politics and gain more influence. The British worked to increase their influence in Oman by 'studying the Omanis, finding the differences between them, exaggerating the effects of these differences to create conflicts and then working to divide them by arbitrating these conflicts (Diplomat1, 2022).[5] An example of this occurred in 1856 when Oman lost its control of Zanzibar after a conflict between the sons of Sultan Said bin Sultan (1806–1856) over who would rule after his death.[6] The conflict was arbitrated by Britain and resulted in the split of Zanzibar from Oman (AlShuaili, 2014). At the time, Zanzibar Island was wealthier and more prosperous than Oman due to its natural resources. Thus, losing it was a significant blow to the Sultanate. After this incident, the British realised that they could have more influence in Oman and its decision-making, which they took advantage of (Bhacker, 1991). The treaties of 1891 and 1951 were very asymmetrical and favoured the British. For example, in one clause of the 1891 treaty, the Sultan at the time, Faisal Bin Turki (1888–1913), pledged himself not to 'cede any territory to a third party' and 'not to give any trade concessions to any third party', such as the French (AlShuaili, 2014).[7]

Despite not being an official colony of Britain, the British influence on Oman between 1891 and 1970 has been described as 'the closest thing to a colony' that it could be (Rathmell, 1996). During this period, the British supported the Sultans of Oman to preserve their regimes over any internal or external threats. This situation continued until 1967 when Britain announced its plan to withdraw from the Middle East (Gause, 2014).[8] The decision to withdraw was announced on 16 January 1968, and the withdrawal was planned to be completed by the end of 1971. Despite this, Britain had pledged to not leave Oman before stabilising the area and defeating insurgents in the region of Dhofar (Takriti, 2013). The primary reason behind this was to leave an allied regime whom they had influence over.

[5] Oman has three different sects of Islam (Ibadi, Sunni and Shia), along with some minorities from other religions. In addition, the Omani people come from very distinct tribes with different cultures and traditions. These are some of the incongruencies that the British capitalised on to create conflicts between Omanis.
[6] In 1698, Oman gained its control over Zanzibar Island in the Eastern African Coast after a series of victories against the Portuguese, who were controlling the area. Zanzibar became very important to Oman as it was much richer with natural resources than Oman as well as located in a very strategic location for trade routes.
[7] The French and the British were competing over influence in Oman, and thus one of the main clauses of the 1891 agreement between Oman and Britain was to prevent the Omanis from giving the French any trading privileges in Oman.
[8] There are different and controversial explanations behind the withdrawal. On the one hand, some argue that Britain's withdrawal was due to the high cost of maintaining its presence in the region. On the other hand, some argue that the goal of the withdrawal was for the Tory government to use it as an excuse to promote new reforms domestically.

The Dhofar Rebellion started in 1962 when Omani dissidents living in Iraq formed an organisation called the Dhofar Liberation Front (جبهة تحرير ظفار), with the aim of establishing an 'Independent Dhofari State' (Jones & Ridout, 2012). However, their operations were limited and did not gain any attention until the late 1960s when the British were driven out of Yemen. This development led to the creation of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a Marxist state and a close ally to the Soviet Union and Communist China, and subsequently, the Dhofari rebellion fighters received massive inspiration and material support. The organisation changed its name from the Dhofar Liberation Front to the Popular Front for Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) (الجبهة الشعبية لتحرير الخليج العربي المحتل), and they changed their goal from 'liberating Dhofar' to 'liberating the Gulf and beyond' from the Western imperialist powers (Gawlik, 1982). The PFLOAG also received support in the form of arms and money from China and the Soviet Union (Takriti, 2013).

By the start of 1970, British intelligence was 'very gloomy' about the situation in Oman. They concluded that Oman would fall under the rebels' hands without the proper external support, which would then open the Arabian Gulf to the Soviets (Takriti, 2013). Their main strategy in Oman was to keep the current regime as they had the most influence over it. Thus, the British decided to stay and support the Sultan of Oman despite their announced withdrawal. They advised Sultan Said Bin Taimoor, who ruled from 1932 until 1970, to invest in civic projects to improve the situation of the people and gain their support (Al-Futaisi, 2018). However, Sultan Said disagreed with them and elected to only invest in enhancing the military might of his army. Thus, the British decided to oust him and replace him with another ruler (Kechichain, 1995). The British intelligence concluded that the best candidate was Said's son, Qaboos Bin Said. According to British Intelligence reports, Qaboos was the ideal candidate because he was a 'British Sandhurst Academy graduate' who was 'open-minded with Western thinking' and a 'potential reformer with Western orientation' (FCO 8/3962, British National Archives, 1980). In a bloodless coup orchestrated by MI6 agents and politicians in London and carried out with the help of British officers in Oman, Qaboos ousted his father and became the Sultan on 23 July 1970 (Takriti, 2013) (Cobian, 2016)[9].

[9] Qaboos was twenty-nine years old when he came to power. Before that, he was educated in Britain since he was 16 years old and was a graduate of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. For two years, he served in the British army in Britain and Germany before returning to Oman in 1966. He spent four years in Oman with his private tutors learning about history, language, and religion in the palace in Salalah until the coup in 1970 AL-KHALILI, M. 2009. *Oman's Foreign Policy: Foundation and Practice: Foundation and Practice*, ABC-CLIO.

Domestically, the situation improved after the coup as the new Sultan invested more in civil projects and the British mobilised their colonial influence to help preserve the new Sultan's regime. As I illustrate in more detail in the next section, the rebels were defeated in 1976. Nevertheless, this victory was not solely due to the direct support of the British; they also helped to convince Mohammed Rea Shah Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran (1941–1979) and Hussein Bin Talal, the King of Jordan (1952–1999), to send their troops in support of the Sultan (Al-Futaisi, 2018). In 1972, Donald Hawley, the British ambassador in Oman (1971–1974), met with the Shah and gave a presentation explaining the threats involved if the communist agents in the South of Oman were to win the war against the Sultan (Kechichain, 1995). As a result, the Shah agreed to send his troops and fighters to support the Sultan. Due to both external and internal support, the Sultan's forces won the war against the forces of the Dhofari revolution and announced their victory in 1976.

In 1977, one year after the victory over the rebellion in the Southern part of Oman, the UK decided to fully withdraw its military from the country (Worrall, 2018). The British troops were stationed on two bases: one on Masirah Island (overlooking the Indian Ocean) and the other in Salalah (in the Southern part of Oman), as map 5.1 shows (Jones, 2015). Despite their withdrawal, British involvement in Omani politics continued (Arbuthnott, et al., 2008). As discussed in Section 5.4 below regarding Omani foreign policy towards the Iran-Iraq War, the British influence on Omani foreign policy lasted beyond 1979.

5.1.2 Omani-Iraqi Relations, 1960s and 1970s.

Relations between Oman and Baathist Iraq were ambivalent during most of the 1960s and 70s. There were at least two main interrelated reasons behind this problematic relationship during this period: Iraqi support for the Dhofar rebellion in the south of Oman and Iraqi disapproval of Oman's close relations with the West. The roots underlying these two factors mostly stem from the ideology and geopolitical trajectory of the Iraqi Baathist regime. Baathism started in Syria when the Baath party was first formed in 1947.[10] The party had the goal of liberating all Arab states from imperialism. It also aimed to unite all Arabs under one state (Al-Kayassi, 1998). In Iraq, the Baath party was first established in 1952 and was treated as a branch of the main party in Syria. In 1958, the Baath party supported Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim in leading a coup against the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq. The coup

[10] In Arabic, 'Baath' means renaissance.

succeeded in ousting the monarchy, and Abd al-Karim Qasim became the first president of Iraq. However, he was more nationalist than pan-Arabist and thus did not collaborate with the Baath party in Syria and disagreed with the goal of uniting Iraq with Syria and Egypt[11] (Devlin, 1991). Due to their conflictual relations with Iraq, Baathist Syria and Baathist Egypt attempted to remove Abd Al-Karim Qasim's regime. They succeeded in 1963 with a coup that resulted in placing Officer Abd Salam Arif as the head of the new government. This coup caused instability and resulted in several additional coup attempts over the next five years (Devlin, 1991). Eventually, in 1968, Ahmed Hassan Al-Baker became the new president of Iraq after leading a coup along with other senior officers, including his main partner, Saddam Hussein (Al-Kayassi, 1998).

Following his takeover in 1968, Al-Baker appointed Saddam Hussein to be in charge of security matters inside Iraq. Hussein increased his influence and power quickly, and by the mid-1970s, he was the country's de facto ruler. Both Al-Baker and Hussein were Arab nationalists who claimed to reject all forms of imperialism. Based on this ideology, Iraq supported the insurgency in the Southern part of Oman in order to help it create an independent Dhofari State with an Arab nationalist orientation (Worrall, 2018). Baathist Iraq's support for the PFLOAG insurgency came in two forms. Firstly, Iraq hosted the fighters of the rebellion and trained them inside Iraq. Secondly, the rebel fighters received financial and military support from Iraq (Takriti, 2013). According to a declassified secret CIA report, the Iraqi embassy in Aden was giving the PFLOAG thirty-seven thousand pounds monthly, plus arms. As a result of this support, there were almost no diplomatic connections between the Omani and Iraqi governments during this period aside from rare attempts from the Omani side (Kechichain, 1995). For example, in 1971, Qaboos sent a delegation from Oman to Iraq headed by Abdullah Al-Taei, the minister of information (1970–1973). The delegation's goal was to start some sort of dialogue and build friendly relations with Iraq. However, Ahmed Al-Baker, the president of Baathist Iraq (1968–1979), refused to start any discussion or consider any offer from the Omani government. Thus, the Iraqi support for the PFLOAG continued until it was defeated in 1976 (Al-Futaisi, 2018).

The Iraqi government was also critical of the Omani government's close relations with Western countries, especially Britain. They saw this close cooperation as a form of imperialism and considered the Omani Sultan a 'puppet' of Britain. When the Sultanate of

[11] Egypt and Syria united under one Baathist country named 'The United Arab Republic' in 1958. The Baath party plan was to unite all Arab nations under this name. However, Syria announced its independence again in 1961, and Egypt kept this name until 1971.

Oman tried to get a seat in the Arab League, the Iraqi government opposed and tried to block the application. Iraq declared that its opposition was due to 'Omani-Western relationships' (Kechichain, 1995). The rift – fuelled by the differences in Oman and Iraq's ideologies, continued – and the Iraqi government continuously criticised Omani foreign relations. On this issue, Sultan Qaboos once remarked, 'If Iraqis were so concerned with the superpowers' presence in the Persian Gulf, then they could start by severing their umbilical cord with Moscow' (Ministry of Information, 2015). This comment by Sultan Qaboos was
in reference to the 'Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation' between Iraq and the Soviet Union and the Iraqi's overreliance on the Soviets' military arms (Kechichain, 1995). The relations between the Soviets and Iraqis were strong, especially after the latter provided the Soviets with port facilities access in 1972 (Gause, 2010).

The relations between Oman and Iraq, on the other hand, did not improve until Iraq's ally in Oman, the PFLOAG, was defeated in 1976 (Al-Futaisi, 2018). After the stabilisation of Oman, the two countries moved to establish diplomatic relations relatively quickly, and the relations were officially restored in late 1976 (Lefebvre, 2010). However, this did not mean that they resolved all of their differences. The two leaderships in Oman and Iraq still had very different ideologies. This difference in orientation manifested later when Qaboos received an invitation from Iraqi President Ahmed Al-Baker to attend what was called the 'rejectionist summit' in early 1978. This summit was held to sever relations with Egypt after its president, Anwar Al-Saadat (1970–1981), visited Israel in November 1977. Qaboos rejected the invitation, and Oman did not cut its ties with Egypt, even after all of its Gulf neighbours and most Arab states cut theirs. This rejection affected the Omani-Iraqi government negatively despite Qaboos's claim that keeping relations with Egypt and rejecting the invitation was based on the Omani view that President Saadat's visit to Israel was an Egyptian matter that should not be interfered in (Hinnebusch, 2014). A few years after this, Saddam Hussein came to full power in 1979, but this did not alter the orientation of Iraq or its external relations as he had been the de facto ruler in Iraq since the mid-70s (Al-Kayassi, 1998).

By the end of the 1970s, Omani-Iraqi relations were very cold. The Omani side perceived Saddam Hussein's aspirations as a threat and dealt with him cautiously. Omani-Iraqi relations after 1979 will be discussed later in the context of Omani foreign policy towards the Iran-Iraq War.

5.1.3 Omani Iranian Relations During the 1970s.

During the early 1970s, three key issues solidified the relationship between Oman and Iran: the Cold War context, Iranian assistance for the Omani government and regional geography. First, the context of the Cold War drove Iran and Oman together. At this time, both countries were allies of the Western camp and the leadership of the United States. The Shah of Iran was the closest ally of the US in the region and was considered the US's policeman in the Middle East (Alvandi, 2016). On the other hand, Oman was the closest ally of the UK and the last state in the Middle East where the UK had a physical presence after its official withdrawal from the region in the early 70s. Oman and Iran considered themselves 'under the US umbrella of protection from the Soviet presence in the region' (Binhuwaidin, 2019).

Secondly, during the rebellion in the Southern part of Oman (1964–1976), which was discussed in more detail previously in section 2.1, the Omani government requested the Shah of Iran to intervene to help defeat the insurgency. The Shah agreed to assist Oman (Takriti, 2013). In August 1972, the Iranian government sent its first shipment of military aid to the Omani government, including arms and munitions. Shortly after this, the first unit of Iranian fighters arrived in Oman in late 1972. The number of Iranian soldiers reached more than four thousand at its peak. The number remained at around two thousand between 1973 and 1975 (Hughes, 2017). However, the fighters were rotated every three months to give more exposure and experience to a higher number of soldiers. Besides troops, Iran had positioned several vessels close to the Omani coast in Dhofar. These vessels were vital in attacking the rebels' positions before the land forces invaded them. With this help (along with some help from other states such as the UK and Jordan), the Omani government defeated the rebellion (Goode, 2014). During the conflict, more than 100 Iranian fighters were killed in Dhofar. Most Iranian troops returned home after defeating the insurgents. However, the two countries agreed to keep several hundred Iranian troops in Oman. This was to help the Omani forces preserve the status quo and prevent any possible return of the insurgents. The few remaining Iranian troops were quickly withdrawn after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Takriti, 2013). This support from the Iranian government has solidified the relations between the heads of the two states. As Al-Futaisi (2018) argues, Qaboos felt indebted to the Shah of Iran, and he admired the Shah's cooperation and support.

Thirdly, Oman and Iran share the strategic Hormuz Strait. This strait, at its narrowest point, is 33 km. However, due to the low depth of the water, large oil tankers can only pass through a 3 km wide area. This area is close to the Musandam peninsula on the Omani side (Cordesman, 2007). In economic terms, the Strait of Hormuz is the most important oil chokepoint in the world, especially for the Western camp. During the late 60s and early 70s,

more than 60% of the oil from the Arabian Gulf States flowed through the Strait of Hormuz on its way to Western countries (Jaffe & Barnes, 2006). As a result of this importance, the two states' leaders considered themselves to be 'the guardians of the Hormuz Strait' (Kechichain, 1995). The two countries were conducting joint operations to ensure the Strait's safety, free trade and oil flow. These shared operations and the shared perception of responsibility for the smooth trade flow in the Strait of Hormuz have positively affected the relationship between the two countries (Al-Futaisi, 2018). However, as will be explained in the following section, the situation changed in the wake of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979.

5.2 The Regional Environment Between the Iranian Revolution and the Start of the War

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, therefore, Oman has poor relations with Iraq and very solid ones with Iran. However, the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the gradual restoration of Omani-Iraqi relations changed the relations between the three states. This change has influenced the behaviour of Omani decision-makers towards the two countries. This section examines the Iranian Islamic revolution and how it impacted Iranian-Omani relations. In addition, it explores Omani-US relations and the signing of the 1980 access agreement in the context of US foreign policy towards the Middle East, which is essential to understanding the change in the positioning of relations after 1979 and Oman's position during the Iran-Iraq War.

5.2.1 The Iranian Revolution

With the Iranian Islamic Revolution's success, the Shah's Western-friendly government was replaced by Khomeini's Islamic government in 1979.[12] This turn of events naturally raised some concerns in Oman. At least three issues inflamed Omani's concerns during the early weeks of Iran's new Islamic government. First, the new Iranian government decided to stop joint patrol operations with Oman in the Strait of Hormuz. These operations had been carried

[12] Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, was a long-time opponent of the Shah's rule and was a main figure in the White Revolution in 1963 that failed and resulted in his exile. He then worked from exile trying to motivate Iranians to rise against the Shah's government, and the tension between him and the Shah increased in 1977. This led his followers in Iran to hold demonstrations against the government. These demonstrations escalated and forced the Shah to leave Iran for exile, which opened the door for Khomeini to return. Khomeini formed a new Islamic government in Iran and became the Supreme leader in December 1979.

out between Omani and Iranian navies during most of the 1970s, with the goal of ensuring the safety of the ships passing through the strait (Al-Futaisi, 2018). In response, the Omani government announced that it would continue conducting the operations to ensure the safety of the strait from one side (Al-Khalili, 2009). The second issue that raised Omani concerns was Iran's repeated violations of Omani airspace and marine territory (Ehteshami, 2013; Jones & Ridout, 2012). The third cause of Omani concern was Iran's rhetoric about exporting the 'Iranian revolutionary model' to the Arabian Gulf monarchies (Binhuwaidin, 2019).

Despite the genuine concern, it is essential to note that the concern in Oman differed from its Gulf state neighbours. While other countries in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, feared that the Iranian calls to export the revolution would find responsive ears in their Shia populations, the Omani government did not have such a concern (Kechichain, 1995). Instead, the situation of religious sectarianism played a role in calming the concerns in Oman because the problem was different from that of the other states for three main reasons. First, in Oman, there are three religious sects: Ibadi, which constitutes the majority; Sunni (around 30%) and Shia (approximately 5%; (Katzman, 2011). These three sects have historically coexisted peacefully (Jones & Ridout, 2013). In Oman, the Shia population was not deprived and had much better living conditions than other groups, as most of them were urban, highly educated businesspeople. Thus, it would not make sense for them to lead a revolution in Oman to increase their living standards, which were already high. Secondly, the Shia community did not constitute the majority as it did for example in Bahrain, nor was it neglected as in Saudi Arabia's case. In this sense, the Omani government was more concerned about the potential Iranian support for the PFLOAG than any potential Shia uprising (Diplomat4, 2022a).

Despite these concerns, Oman has reacted to the revolution by issuing a careful statement welcoming the new regime and hoping that good relations continue (Al-Futaisi, 2018). Iran reacted positively after this; in 1979, the new Iranian regime declared it would honour all agreements signed between Oman and the previous Iranian regime (Al-Khalili, 2009). The Omani government established a cautious but calm position after Iran's declarations. However, Omani concerns about Iranian intentions peaked again after a visit to Iran from leaders representing the PFLOAG in late 1979 (Jones & Ridout, 2013). The Omani government feared that the new Islamic government in Iran would support the PFLOAG and

help it to carry out a revolution, especially given the Iranian rhetoric of exporting its revolution to neighbouring countries.[13]

According to Joseph Kechichain, no one knows for sure what happened in the meeting between the two parties (Kechichain, 1995). No statements were released after the meeting, and the silence only served to increase the Omani government's uncertainty about Iranian intentions towards Oman (Al-Futaisi, 2018). However, these concerns were placated after Yousif bin Allawi, Oman's Foreign ministry undersecretary (1974–1997), visited Tehran and met with Khomeini himself. Khomeini assured Yousif bin Allawi that Iran's new Islamic regime would not support the PFLOAG or discard any Omani agreement signed with the Shah (Jones & Ridout, 2013). After this visit, the Omani government issued the following statement in the government newspaper, Al-Watan:[14]

> *'Iran is our neighbour, we have close historical, religious and geographical links with her, and we are eagerly looking forward to expanding our relations with her in all fields in order to make the region a safer place to live in' (Alwatan, 1979)*

Despite this statement, which was designed for public consumption, the Omani government was very concerned about the intentions of the new government in Iran. This was made clear in a confidential letter sent from J. C. Moberly, the British Under-Secretary for Middle East affairs (1979–1983) after he met with Mr Habib, the Chief of Political Affairs in the Omani Ministry of Foreign Policy (1979–1981). The letter cited Mr Habib as saying: 'the Iranians might even try to occupy the tip of Musandam peninsula'[15] (FCO 8/3539, British National Archives, 1980). In addition to this letter, in a confidential 1979 annual review of Oman written by Ivor Lucas, the British Ambassador to Oman (1979–1981), the ambassador stated that 'Oman's reaction to the [fall of the Shah] was to confirm its worst fears about the dangers of Soviet encroachment in the region…' (FCO 8/3532, British National Archives , 1980). Furthermore, a senior Omani diplomat working in Omani foreign affairs said in an

[13] Unconfirmed information claims that Sultan Qaboos had contacted Khomeini before the success of the Islamic revolution and told him that Oman is happy that 'things are moving in the right direction in Iran'. According to the same source, the main concern that drove Qaboos to contact Khomeini was to make sure that the new regime would not support the insurgents in the South of Oman (Interview 17). I argue that, if this is true, it demonstrates the practicality and pragmatism of the Omani regime.

14 Al-Watan is an Omani newspaper that is fully owned by the government. The word 'Al-Watan' means 'motherland' or 'homeland'.

[15] Musandam is an Omani region that overlooks the Strait of Hormuz, and it is of vital importance. If Iran were to control both sides of it, then it would control the flow of ships coming in and out of the Persian Gulf.

unstructured interview that the government in Oman and other Gulf countries were 'panicking' after the Iranian revolution.

In the Omanis' eyes, as put by an interviewed local academic, the Islamic Revolution was a coup that 'replaced a friendly regime in Iran with an Islamic revolutionary regime that wants to export its ideology' (Expert3, 2022). I argue that this uncertainty about the intentions of the Iranian regime changed the Omani perception of Iran, which they had come to regard as a major threat. Thus, one result of the Iranian revolution was the Omani's readiness to sign an access agreement with the US, as will be discussed in the following section.

5.2.2 The Access Agreement: Adding a New Security Guarantor for Oman.

In April 1980, the United States signed a security and access agreement with Oman. This '10-years renewable arms-for-access military agreement' (Katzman, 2019) gave the United States a foothold in the Arabian Gulf area for the first time in recent history (Lefebvre, 2010). In this section, I argue that this security relationship with the US and Oman's relations with the UK, as discussed before, gave Oman the confidence to follow a regionally neutral foreign policy, independent from its Gulf neighbours. To do this, I will unpack the details of the security agreement, the Omani and American motives for signing it and the reaction it generated regionally.

For Oman, the agreement had three main pillars: facilitating the sales of US arms to Oman, modernising Omani military facilities and educating and training Omani military personnel (Katzman, 2012). The agreement states that the Omani government would be eligible to buy advanced US arms to help it combat regional threats (Katzman, 2016). However, this was not a game-changer, as the Sultanate had already become eligible to purchase US arms in 1973 to fight communist threats in the southern part of Oman (Takriti, 2013). Furthermore, up to the mid-1980s, Oman depended almost entirely on purchasing British arms (Cordesman, 2018). Depending on British arms was the personal preference of Sultan Qaboos at that time. A confidential report which was sent from the British Embassy in Oman to the British Foreign Ministry in the UK on 3 December 1981 claimed that 'Sultan Qaboos has instructed his government to only 'buy British' wherever possible' (FCO 8/3953, British National Archives, 1981).

For the United States, the agreement gave it access to Omani military facilities and allowed the full use of four strategic sites on Omani soil: Masirah Island, Thumrait, Al-Seeb and Khasab (see map 5.1). The United States would be required to modernise these facilities

and, accordingly, would be eligible to access them. The location of these facilities was vital to the United States (Kechichain, 1995). For example, the Kasab military facility in Musandam 'controls the access to the Strait of Hormuz'. During the 1980s, 30–40% of world oil exports were passing through the Strait of Hormuz (Katzman, 2016). As will be discussed in this section, ensuring the flow of oil from the Arabian Gulf was one of the United States' primary foreign policy goals (Gawlik, 1982).

Oman and the US had different motivations for signing the agreement. For their part, the Omanis were mainly motivated by threat perceptions. In 1979, there were three major existential threats to Omani security: the Iranian revolution, Saddam Hussein's hegemonic aspirations and a possible Soviet presence in the region (Binhuwaidin, 2019; Jones, 2015; Kechichain, 1995). The first two of these were discussed in the last two sections. The third, Oman's perceived threat by the Soviets, arose especially after the invasion of Afghanistan and their previous support of the rebellion in the Southern part of Oman (Kechichain, 1995).

While Oman was motivated to sign the agreement to deter these rising threats, the US motivation can be understood in the context of US foreign policy towards the Middle East during the Cold War (Jones, 2012). Until 1979, the US had applied the 'Nixon Doctrine' to protect its interests in the Arabian Gulf region. This doctrine implied that the US would not participate in conflicts directly and would support regional proxies instead, with Iran being their main ally (Emery, 2013). Among the main threats rising in the region in the mid-1960s were the Soviet support of the Marxists in the South of Yemen and the communist insurgency in the southern part of Oman (Gawlik, 1982). With their victory, the new South Yemeni regime granted the Soviets naval and landing facilities in the region. Getting this access significantly increased the Soviets' aspirations in the region and positively affected Dhofar, their ally in the Southern Omani region. As a result, the insurgents became an existential threat to the government of Oman (Takriti, 2013). While the US did not intervene directly to suppress the Soviet ally in the region, other regional partners, such as the UK, Iran and Jordan, had a hand in helping Oman's government defeat the insurgency (Al-Futaisi, 2018).

In 1979, the events of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan drove the US to abandon the Nixon doctrine and look for an actual presence in the area (Katzman, 2016). With the ousting of the Reza Pahlavi monarchy and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US administration became concerned that the Soviets might increase their support for Southern Yemen to destabilise Oman. They were also worried that the Soviets might invade Iran and gain access to the Arabian Gulf (Yodfat, 2012). If any of these possibilities were to succeed, the Soviets could control the flow of oil in the Strait of Hormuz,

which was the primary US policy concern in the region (Kaussler & Hastedt, 2017). To prevent this possibility, the United States adopted a new policy and sought out a new partner in the region (Kechichain, 1995). Thus, the access agreement with Oman provided the US with a foothold in the area to serve its interests. Regarding the US's new policy towards the Middle East, President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) made the following statement:

> *'Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force'.*

Regionally, the signing of this agreement resulted in angry reactions from the surrounding states. First, Saddam Hussain accused Oman of bringing the colonisers to the region (Binhuwaidin, 2019). Kuwait's reaction to the agreement was harsh too. The Kuwaiti foreign minister and then the Kuwaiti prime minister both 'demanded' that Oman cancel the agreement and call all foreign troops to withdraw immediately (Gawlik, 1982). Similarly, the United Arab Emirates claimed that even though they were against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, it did not mean they were willing to allow the other superpower a foot in the area. They also called on Oman to undo the agreement (Al-Khalili, 2009). The Saudi's public statement was even harsher. They argued that foreign troops were forbidden from using the Arabian territories. The Saudi government said, 'Any regime that fails to comply with this shall be proscribed and boycotted both economically and politically as well as politically opposed by all available means' (Gawlik, 1982). However, other documents acquired by the British National archives show that many of these statements were only for public consumption and that different regimes shared similar geostrategic concerns, especially regarding the Iranian and Soviet threats.

First, the Saudi government was actually on the same page as the Omani government regarding the access agreement and they did not have a problem with Oman giving the US a foothold in the area. A confidential telegram, which was sent from the British Embassy in Washington to the British Foreign Ministry on 2 December 1981, claimed that 'The State Department kept the Saudis informed at every stage of their negotiations with Oman on the access agreement and the Saudi government raised no objection' (FCO 8/3963, British National Archives, 1981). Additionally, in a meeting between US and British officials in London on 9 December 1981, a senior American diplomat said that 'the Saudis, whom the Americans kept closely informed about their relationship with Oman, seemed content' (FCO

8/3967, British National Archives, 1981). Thus, it appears that the reason behind this disconnect between the public statements and the Saudi government's position was a fear of the public reaction to allowing foreign troops access to the area. As one American official claimed:

> *'The attitude of the Al-Saud to the American connection is a function of the basic tenet of Saudi foreign policy – that it should not do anything to undermine the security of the regime. Anything that dis-trusts Saudi public opinion or prompts other Arab states to disturb Saudi public opinion will not easily find favour with Al Saud' (FCO 8/3704, British National Archives, 1980)*[16]

The disconnect between the public statements and actual government positions was also manifested in the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain, as documents from the British National Archives show (FCO 8/3954, British National Archives, 1981). Hence, I argue that different writers relied on these public statements to conclude that the Omani government was the only Arab government in favour of giving the US a foot in the region. All Gulf countries, including Oman, were concerned about public opinion regarding the presence of foreign troops. In a meeting between the Omani Foreign Minister Qais Zawawi (1973–1982) and Ivor Lucas, the British Ambassador in Oman (1979–1981), Qais said, 'Sultan Qaboos insisted that any photographs taken of Bright Star exercises in Oman should be for domestic use in the US only and not for local publications' (FCO 8/3962, British National Archives, 1980). [17]

In spite of the concerns over public reaction, Oman emphasised that all Gulf States' capabilities could not deter the threat posed by the Soviets, Iraqis, or Iranians (Al-Futaisi, 2018). Thus, Oman decided to take a step forward and sign the access agreement with the US. On this decision, British Ambassador Ivor Lucas said in a confidential report: 'Omanis are, for Arabs, remarkably relaxed about foreign presence' (FCO 8/3953, British National Archives, 1981).

I argue that this agreement and the close military cooperation with the United States had given the Omani government the confidence to follow a foreign policy independent of its Gulf neighbours. The Omani government viewed the US and the UK as security guarantors that gave it the confidence to play its role as a neutral country in regional conflicts. In an interview, Sultan Qaboos argued that 'Muscat recognised the possible threats to its security

[16] Al-Saud is the name of the Saudi royal family, which has ruled Saudi Arabia since 1932.
[17] Bright Star is the name of the American military exercises that were planned to be held in Oman in 1982.

and wished to obtain US assistance in modernising its military facilities, an assistance that was not forthcoming from our wealthier neighbours' (Ministry of Information, 2015).

At this point, in 1980, the events of the last five years showed some indications of Omani independent thinking in foreign policy, which included 1) its refusal to join fellow Arabs in boycotting Egypt over the Sadat Visit to Israel, 2) its refusal to follow antagonistic policies towards Iran and 3) the signing the access agreement with the US despite public dissent and the strong condemnation from neighbouring Arab states. In the following section, I will discuss the birth and evolution of Omani neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War.

5.3 The War and the Formation of Omani Regional Neutrality

On 22 September 1980, the Iraqi forces invaded Iran to start eight years of war between the two countries. The Omani government explicitly declared its neutrality seven days after the start of the war, and there is a broad agreement among secondary sources that Oman was neutral during the war (Al-Khalili, 2009; Al-Futaisi, 2018; Binhuwaidin, 2019; Ehteshami, 2013; Jones & Ridout, 2012). However, I argue in this section that Omani neutrality was not adopted from the beginning, nor was it a straightforward decision. The Omani foreign policy behaviour during the war is best explained using the processual model of neutrality, which was introduced in the theoretical framework chapter. To do this, this section proposes that Omani neutrality was born as a result of an influential mix of external and internal factors. The evolution of this neutrality went through all three phases of the processual model of neutrality: the strategic phase where I explain why Oman adopted neutrality, the passive neutrality phase through the first four years of the war and the active neutrality phase from 1984 until its end in 1988. The structure of this section is based on the three phases of neutrality.

5.3.1 The Strategic Phase (22 September – 30 September 1980)

On the first day of the Iran-Iraq War, secret talks between Omani and Iraqi officials gave the Iraqis access to Omani military facilities. The two parties agreed to allow Iraqi aeroplanes to use these Omani facilities to launch attacks on Iran (FCO 8/3966, British National Archives, 1980). However, the proposed operation did not materialise due to various reasons, which are discussed later in this section. The period of this proposed operation and the environment

around it represent the strategic phase of the neutrality process. Thus, this section will examine the proposed operation and how it led to adopting neutrality by examining the following four points: the background to the proposed operation, the reasons behind accepting it from the Omani side, the reasons behind calling it off and what it tells us about the Omani foreign policy decision-making.

At the outset of the war, the Iraqi government requested permission from Oman to use Omani soil to attack Iran. The operation had two main targets: the Bander Abbas port and the islands of Tunbs and Abu Musa (FCO 8/3706, British National Archives, 1980). The two goals were very strategic to Saddam Hussein's government. Bander Abbas was the busiest Iranian port. It is also located in a strategic position, looking directly at the Strait of Hormuz. Furthermore, it hosts one of the largest bases of the Iranian Navy (Takeyah, 2010). Thus, harming it would weaken the Iranian position in the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran was threatening to close. At the same time, attacking Iranians on the Islands of Tunbs and Abu Musa would bring huge support to Hussein in the Arab world. Following the British withdrawal from the region in 1971, the Iranians had been in full control of these islands, and the Emiratis, who argued that the islands belonged to them, had been trying to use international legal means to restore them. Thus, any attempt by Saddam Hussein to remove Iran from them would correspond with his pan-Arabism propaganda. Iraqi officials moved quickly to negotiate and plan the proposed operation to achieve these goals. On 26 September 1980, four days after the start of the war, a delegation arrived in Oman asking to use its Khasab facilities in Musandam to launch their attacks against Iran, to which the Omanis agreed (FCO 8/3953, British National Archives, 1981).

Two factors, I argue, influenced the Omani government's agreement to the Iraqi-proposed operation. Firstly, the Omani government was influenced by the growing perception among Arab countries that it was adopting policies that contradicted regional interests. This perception was built due to at least three events that were discussed previously in this chapter: Omani's refusal to cease its relations with Egypt after Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, Oman's close relations with the UK and the signing of the access agreement with the US (Kechichain, 1995). This influence increased with the success of Saddam's pan-Arabism propaganda. On this perception, a former senior Omani diplomat stated in a personal interview that,

> *'At that time, Oman was seen by many Arab fellow states as the country that brought the US imperialist power to the region. They didn't consider us Arabs even though they did the same*

thing ten years later.[18] The leadership thought dealing with Iraq would get us back to the Arab club, but it was an uncalculated risk; Alhamdulillah, it didn't materialise' (Diplomat3, 2022a).

Moreover, in a confidential record of a conversation between American and British officials in London, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Newsome (1978–1981) said, 'The Omanis appeared to be caught up in the general Arab euphoria over Iraq's success and saw this as an opportunity of getting back into Iraqi favour' (FCO 8/3696, British National Archives, 1980).

The second source of influence was the pressure from King Hussain bin Talal of Jordan (1952–1999), who had sent a message asking Sultan Qaboos to accept the Iraqi request to use the Omani facilities to attack Iran (FCO 8/3706, British National Archives, 1980). During the Iran-Iraq War, Jordan supported Iraq politically and economically. The King of Jordan's attempt to convince Sultan Qaboos to allow the Iraqis to launch their attacks from Omani soil was a reflection of his support for Saddam Hussain.[19] On the other hand, Al-Futaisi (2018) has argued that Sultan Qaboos admired King Hussein, and the two held a solid personal friendship. Jordan was one of three countries, along with Iran and the UK, that participated directly with the Omani government in defeating the PFLOAG insurgency in the Southern part of Oman (Takriti, 2013). The third factor was the unfriendly actions of the Iranian government after the revolution. As discussed in the preceding section, the Iranian government under Khomeini ended the joint Omani-Iranian operations in the Strait of Hormuz and continually violated Omani water and airspace. These unfriendly actions, I argue, helped to push the Omani government closer to the Iraqis and accept the proposed operation. With the Omani acceptance, the Iraqis quickly moved aeroplanes to Oman. However, the proposed operation did not materialise and was called off shortly due to several reasons.

There were three reasons behind calling the operations off: practical considerations, the perception of Qaboos and the expected pressure of external powers. To start with, when the two sides agreed to conduct the operation, they travelled to Musandam, the Omani

[18] This is in reference to the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, when the Gulf states called for US assistance and gave them a permanent foot in the area. Oman, as he argued, was protecting its interests in 1980 as well as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 1990, and 'there is nothing wrong in both situations!' (Interview 9).

[19] Jordan was arguably the closest Arab ally to Saddam Hussein during his war against Iran. There are a few reasons behind their alliance. First of all, Jordanian-Iranian relations deteriorated after the fall of the Shah's regime in Iran at the expense of the Islamic revolution. Previously, King Hussein had very close personal and political relations with the Shah. Secondly, Iraq offered Jordan discounted oil prices in exchange for Jordan's political support. Thirdly, King Hussein's political closeness to Saddam reflected domestic pressure as most Jordanians were attracted to Saddam's pan-Arab model (Takeyah, 2010).

province bordering the Strait of Hormuz. The Omani team was headed by Colonel Erik Bennett, the Commander of Omani Air forces and Qaboos' personal advisor (1974–1990).[20] As a secret report from the British embassy in Oman revealed, the team concluded that 'the proposed operation was a non-starter' for practical reasons (FCO 8/3696, British National Archives, 1980). Unfortunately, there is no available information detailing the kind of practical reasons mentioned in the archival documents. However, according to one senior Omani official with military experience I interviewed,

> *'It may not be very smooth to fly old Soviet fighters from the facilities in Musandam. However, it was doable, and this couldn't be counted as the reason behind calling it off. If it is mentioned in the documents, then it means they mixed between the real reasons and the excuses given to Iraqis to call it off' (Expert3, 2022)*

Secondly, the perception of Sultan Qaboos contributed to calling off the operation quickly. Despite being the one who accepted the operation in the first place, some indicators show that Qaboos was not convinced about taking sides with the Iraqis but was hugely influenced by the factors discussed previously. In a confidential letter from Ivor Lucas, the British Ambassador in Oman (1979–1981), to Peter Alexander Carrington, the British Foreign Secretary (1979–1982), Lucas claimed that 'The Sultan had realised all along that this cheque was unlikely to be cashed' (FCO 8/3539, British National Archives, 1980). On this, a former Omani politician has claimed that Qaboos gave the Iraqis the green light even though he 'was not convinced that giving Iraq access is the best way, but he wanted to be practical and not to say straight 'no' to the hasty Saddam'[21] (Diplomat4, 2022b). Thus, the alleged practical problems gave Sultan Qaboos the means to call off the proposed operation. In another confidential report that recorded a conversation between Qaboos and a British official, Qaboos commented on the Iraqi operations by saying: 'Some people here had fool opinions' (FCO 8/3962, British National Archives, 1980).

Besides these considerations, the Omani leadership also had to consider the interests of its security guarantors. Any involvement in the conflict would not serve the US or the

[20] Sir Erik Bennett was one of the most influential British-loaned officers in Oman. He was appointed the Commander of the Oman Air Force in 1974 during the war in Dhofar. He later became the most trusted advisor to Sultan Qaboos and one of his closest friends (FCO 8/3539, British National Archives, 1980).

[21] The interviewee used the following exact words: 'لا في وجه عراق صدام المندفع'
In Arabic, when you say 'في وجه' it is generally translated as 'in the face', which indicates that something was said in a harsh way by a confident person and without any hesitation. This was not the case in Oman during the early 80s, as the interviewee argued.

UK's interests, and Oman understood the importance of its bilateral security relations. Thus, Oman was 'keen not to anger their external security partners' (Ambassador3, 2022). As explained before, one of the main goals of the US foreign policy towards the Middle East was to ensure the flow of oil and trade from the Arabian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz. Any involvement by Oman in the conflict would risk creating instability in the strait, which would potentially disrupt the oil flow. A top-secret letter revealed that the US had warned Oman that they would not come to rescue it if Iran decided to retaliate (FCO 8/3953, British National Archives, 1981). This secret cable was sent on 28 September 1980, 24 hours before the last Iraqi fighter left Oman.[22] Despite this, at least one Omani former senior politician has argued that Oman decided to call off the operation before the cable arrived although he claimed that the perception that this operation would hurt the US and the UK interests played a significant role in its cancellation. The US's position and concerns can be understood from a secret letter sent from the US Department of State to Qais Al-Zawawi:

> *'We recognize the particular pressures on Oman to be supportive of Iraqis in this situation, but we urge that Oman consider carefully its particular and key role in regional security in connection with the vital nature of the Strait of Hormuz'.*

The same letter also urged Oman to 'follow a strict neutrality' as it would help in the 'freedom of navigation in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz' ((FCO 8/3953, British National Archives, 1981).

On the other hand, the British were concerned that Iran would retaliate by attacking some major infrastructure in Oman as well as main population centres. If these attacks materialised, they would not serve the goals of the British foreign policy towards Oman, which was mainly to keep a stable Western-allied regime in the country. Qais Al-Zawawi claimed in a meeting with the British ambassador in Oman that the retaliation danger was eliminated as Oman called off the operation and announced its intentions to be on 'good terms with both countries' (Iran and Iraq) (FCO 8/3539, British National Archives, 1980). Fortunately for Oman, there were no retaliatory actions from Iran as the Iraqis understood the reasons behind the Omani decision (Diplomat1, 2022).

[22] In a meeting between Qais Al-Zawawi and senior officials from the UK, he claimed that the last Iraqi fighter left Oman 48 hours before the meeting took place. As the meeting took place on 30 September 1980, it means that there were 24 hours between the US warning letter and when the last Iraqi fighters left Oman. This makes the argument that Oman made the decision to call off the operation before the letter 'most likely true'.

Finally, despite lasting a very short amount of time, this incident is vital in understanding the influence of the main stakeholders in Omani foreign policy. The incident demonstrates that the argument that the British fully controlled foreign policy decision-making in Oman is not iron-clad. It shows the Omani government's ability to make an independent decision at that time. Furthermore, it affirms that the British loaned services personnel (LSP) were loyal to the Sultan.[23] Different sources have argued that these LSP controlled Omani foreign policy and defence. A confidential minute of a meeting between Ambassador Ivor Lucas and officials in the British Foreign Ministry indicated that the terms for loaning the British personnel to Oman were in favour of the Sultan and did not always serve the interest of the UK (FCO 8/3966, British National Archives, 1980).[24] Lucas believed that Sultan Qaboos could make a major independent decision like this. In a confidential letter sent to Peter Alexander Carrington, the British Foreign Secretary (1979–1982), Lucas said, 'The "Iraqi incident" has shown that the Sultan is fully capable of acting independently of our advice' (FCO 8/3535, 1980). However, this independent position did not mean a lack of influence from other external factors, such as neighbouring Arab states. There were some indications, as explained before, that Qaboos was influenced by other external players such as King Hussein, the King of Jordan. Other than this, the Omani leadership was influenced by the interests of the security guarantors and was keen not to harm them as shown in the discussion above.

On 30 September 1980, Omani Foreign Minister Qais Zawawi confirmed to Ivor Lucas that the operation was off, and Oman would maintain neutrality towards the war (FCO 8/3696, British National Archives, 1980). On the same day, eight days after the start of the war, Oman announced its neutrality towards the war. With this, Omani foreign policy entered a new phase – the passive neutrality phase – where it tried to follow a regionally neutral foreign policy and balance its relations between Iran and Iraq. This phase is the second phase in the processual model of neutrality and is explained in the following section.

[23] LSP are British officers who are loaned from the British government to work in the Omani army. Their main objective is to assist the Omanis to build a modern army. The process of training Omani soldiers to fill the high-ranked services is called the 'Omanisation of the army' in the literature.

[24] According to the same archival documents, the British government decided to review the clauses of loaning the officers to Oman. The main aim was to ensure that they report any similar incidents in the future and prevent any possible harm to the interests of the United Kingdom in Oman. In an interview with a former Omani diplomat, he claimed that the officials in the British Foreign Ministry were 'very angry at the Loaned officers in Oman' following this incident.

5.3.2 The Phase of Passive Neutrality, October 1980–1984

I argue in this section that the position of Oman during the first four years of the war was one of passive neutrality. Despite announcing neutrality, a neutrality policy cannot be active without recognition from the belligerent parties. In the case of Oman during this period, the Omani leadership was concerned about the intentions and actions of the Iranian regime towards Oman (Ambassador2, 2022). Thus, the Omani policy was mainly reactive to the Iranian actions towards Oman. This section will examine Omani passive neutrality, which I argue was in the period between the announcement of its neutrality and 1984. To examine this phase of neutrality, I will discuss three key points – unfriendly Iranian actions, Oman's leaning towards Iraq and the Omani position in the GCC – and finally, I will draw a conclusion on what this phase tells us about the evolution of Omani neutrality.

To start with, Iran caused significant concerns in the Omani government due to its unfriendly actions in the first few years of the war. In late 1980, for example, the Iranian navy continually violated Omani territorial waters (Baabood, 2016). These violations resulted in tensions between the two countries in December 1980 that nearly escalated into clashes. The Iranian actions decreased during 1981 with minimum tensions between the two navies. Oman called Iran and Iraq to de-escalate the conflict and offered to host negotiations between them (Al-Khalili, 2009). However, these calls and offers were not productive due to Iran's lack of will (Kechichain, 1995). Other than this, Oman supported initiatives such as the Fez Summit resolution in 1982. The Fez summit declaration offered for Iraqis to withdraw to the internationally recognised borders in order for Iran to accept a cease-fire. Despite the optimism, Iran rejected the Fez resolution, and the Omani-Iranian relationship deteriorated again (Jones, 2015). To show its dissatisfaction, Oman withdrew its chargé d'affaires from Iran and supported Iraq with 'a token' of $10 million (Al-Futaisi, 2018). While this support was relatively small and unlikely to affect the Iraqi efforts in the war; neither was it considered a shift in Omani foreign policy towards the war. In 1983, the relations between Oman and Iran worsened again when Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and oust the Arabian rulers (Kechichain, 1995). Oman condemned the Iranian threat of closing the strait as the Omani ambassador in Kuwait noted in a public statement to the Gulf News Agency: 'The Strategic Strait of Hormuz is Omani territory, and neither Iran nor any other country has the right to interfere in Oman's internal affairs. We will not accept this nor allow it to occur'.

The Omani government was also concerned that the Iranians would attempt to occupy the tip of Musandam and control the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, Oman increased its military presence in Musandam (FCO 8/3535, 1980). In addition, Oman increased its cooperation with the US and the UK. Despite these actions, Oman did not seem to fully lean to Iraq (FCO 8/3953, British National Archives, 1981). The reason behind this was the Omani perception of the Iraqi government, especially in regard to Iraqi regional aspirations. Despite its unfriendly actions, Qaboos was trying to maintain Oman's relations with Iran to counterbalance the growing Iraqi influence in the region (FCO 8/3962, British National Archives, 1980). Moreover, Oman was supporting the formation of a cooperation council between Arabian Gulf Countries.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is an inter-governmental council between six countries: Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. The council was created in May 1981, less than a year after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. One of the main reasons behind establishing the GCC was to combat common threats, such as the Iranian threat after 1979 (Pradhan, 2011). While Oman strongly supported creating a common force in principle, it disagreed with other GCC members on core issues. For one, Oman disagreed with the idea of creating a common force directed against Iran. Instead, it emphasised that a common force should only be defensive (Al-Futaisi, 2018). Another issue that Oman disagreed with its GCC fellow members on was the security arrangements in the region. Oman advocated the idea of including Iran in any security negotiations and argued that excluding Iran would only increase its threat (Al-Khalili, 2009). The Omani position was explained by Sultan Qaboos in his speech in November 1983:

> *'To be perfectly frank, I say that here in Muscat, we do not believe it to be in the interest of security in the Gulf that Iran feels we intend to establish an Arab military pact that will always be hostile to it, or that we are about to form a joint force, whose main task is to fight Iran' (Ministry of Information, 2015)*

During this phase, Oman could not follow active neutrality due to the unfriendly Iranian actions towards Oman. As discussed, the reason behind the Iranian actions was its perception of Oman as another 'Arabian Gulf monarchy siding with Saddam', which held them back from trusting Oman and establishing good relations with it (Ambassador5, 2022). The Omani leadership knew and understood that Iranians could not trust Oman easily, especially after the proposed Iraqi operation from Musandam. As one Omani diplomat put it, the proposed Iraqi

operation ‘won Oman the support of its Arab neighbours for a while, but it caused four years of headache with Iran’ (Diplomat2, 2021). The Omani and Iranian relations only improved after 1984 as Iran changed its perception of Oman. This change opened the door for Oman to adopt more active neutrality, as will be discussed in the following section.

5.3.3 Early Active Neutrality, 1984–1988

The improved relations between Oman and Iran resulted in increased communication and visits, all while keeping good relations with Iraq (Bahgat, 1999). These improvements and the already good relations with Iraq indicated that both belligerents perceived Oman as a neutral country. I argue that these perceptions enabled Oman to reach a state of active neutrality towards the war, which represents the third phase of the processual model of neutrality. To examine this phase of neutrality, which occurred between 1984 and 1988, this section will examine four main points: the reason behind the change in Iran’s perception of Oman, the Omani position towards the Tanker War, Omani’s role as a neutral and the importance of active neutrality to Omani foreign policy.

The Iranian perception of Oman changed gradually between late 1983 and 1984. One of the main reasons driving the change in Iranian perception of Oman was the Omani position towards the GCC (Al-Futaisi, 2018). As discussed previously, Oman advocated for the defensive nature of GCC joint forces and called for the inclusion of Iran in security negotiations in the region. As a result of these positions, Iran started to perceive Oman as different from its fellow GCC members and changed its policy towards it (Jones, 2015). During this time, Oman was keen to communicate its positions and views to the Iranians despite their lack of responsiveness. The Omani leadership made it clear to Iran (and its Gulf neighbours) that they ‘don’t agree with the Iranian approach in the region’, but they did not intend to be involved in any adverse security arrangement and preferred to follow strict neutrality (Ambassador4, 2022). After Iran started to view Oman as neutral, the leadership in Oman welcomed this change and worked to invest in it. Thus, Oman increased its communication and visits with Iran. The Omani leadership argued that any improvement in its relations with Iran was the best way to address its threat (Gause, 2010). These developments in relations also coincided with the start of ‘the Tanker War’.

The Tanker War started when Iraq and Iran began attacking each other’s ships, especially those carrying oil. These attacks began in 1984 and lasted until the end of the war in 1988. When it started, the targets were only the ships belonging to the belligerents, Iran

and Iraq. However, Iran eventually began to attack the vessels of Iraqi allies such as Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait was the country that suffered the most damage to its ships (Leckow, 2008). Thus, Kuwait started to call on international powers to raise their flags on Kuwaiti ships to protect them. In 1985, Kuwaiti oil ships began to raise the American flag. This came after Ronald Reagan, the president of America (1981–1989), announced that the US accepted the Kuwaiti request to reflag its ships with the US flag to deter Iran from attacking them (Ramazani, 1988). The Omani government opposed the move and argued that this move could complicate the conflict and may lead to a war between Iran and America. Omani ships were not affected by the Tanker War as Omani oil was exported through the Al-Fahel port located in the capital Muscat, far from the Strait of Hormuz. Oman's main goal was to ensure oil flow through the Strait of Hormuz (Kechichain, 1995). During the Tanker War, Oman maintained its relations and active communication with both Iran and Iraq. In late 1984, Oman's confidence to act as impartial and neutral towards the war increased due to improved relations with Iran, Iraq's acceptance of Omani's new role and the US's presence in Oman. As the American presence in the region grew, it gave Oman a sense of having a security guarantor that could deter any Iranian or Iraqi aspirations in the country (Katzman, 2019). By the end of 1984, there were around 5000 American personnel and experts in Oman (Miller, 1985). Thus, Oman started to play the traditional neutral roles with more confidence.

As explained in Chapter 2, traditional neutrals like Switzerland have certain rights and duties. Hosting negotiations and treating wounded civilians are among the primary duties' neutrals are expected to play (Neff, 2000). Oman played these two roles during the war. Firstly, in late 1984, Oman held secret negotiations between Iraqi and Iranian officials to discuss possible ways to end the war. These negotiations did not result in the signature of any agreement between the two (Al-Futaisi, 2018). As explained by an Omani official, the reason behind this was the mistrust between Iraqi and Iranian officials (Diplomat3, 2022a). Despite their failure to reach a ceasefire, these talks still produced unintended good results. They increased the confidence of almost all players in Oman's ability to act as a go-between to Iran and Iraq and potential future belligerents in the region. The leadership in Oman started to view itself as an 'accepted neutral' that should play a more diplomatic role in the war (Ambassador3, 2022). Secondly, Oman helped in transferring the Iranians captured or killed in naval clashes with the US in the Gulf close to the Strait of Hormuz (Kechichain, 1995). Thirdly, Oman welcomed and treated some Iranian civilians who fled Iran during the war (Al-Futaisi, 2018). It is important to note that Oman only received Iranians because of its geographical proximity. Because Iraq is located on the other side of the Gulf, its citizens were

expected to flee the war to geographically closer countries such as Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia instead of travelling to a relatively distant country such as Oman. With these developments, Omani foreign policy became more active. The Omani officials constantly called the belligerents for negotiations to reach a peace deal (Jones & Ridout, 2013). In Qaboos's speeches and Omani officials' statements in GCC meetings, the League of Arab Summits and the UN, Oman emphasised two main ideas: facilitating the flow of oil and trade through the Strait of Hormuz and peace. These two ideas were used to build Oman's identity in the international community as a regionally active neutral country (Baabood, 2016).

5.4 Conclusion

Omani behaviour during the Iran-Iraq War shows that neutrality is a practice that usually results from the interaction of complex internal and external factors. Understanding this practice requires the use of theoretical tools such as my model, the PMN. Guided by the PMN, Omani neutrality was born as a result of the interaction of external factors such threat of the belligerents, the influence of great powers, the relations with the neighbouring countries and geographical location, along with domestic factors such as leadership perception and the domestic politics. The examination of these required a deep analysis of each factor and how it affects other factors and eventually neutrality.

Guided by the PMN, Omani neutrality during the war progressed through three phases: strategic, passive and active. The first phase lasted only a few days, but it was still important as it showed that Omani decision-makers were not sure about the best policy and did not have a clear idea about the role they should play. Next, Omani neutrality entered the passive phase, where the decision-makers started to conceive Oman's role as neutral, but its position was still passive as Iranians did not recognise this neutrality. In the third and final phase, the Iranians recognised Oman as neutral, which enabled them to fill the roles traditionally played by neutrals.

This analysis of Omani foreign behaviour was made possible by synthesising various sources. For example, the archival documents were determinantal in revealing untold stories, such as the state of affairs during the first days of the war and the Omani readiness to allow the Iraqis to use Omani facilities to attack Iran. This story, for example, was cross-checked, and its details were corroborated using the insights I extracted from interviewing Omani officials. Despite this, some details may not be available in the archives I consulted. Thus,

more research may result in revealing new stories that are still untold. I intend to do this in coming research projects.

Thus, this chapter offered a clear explanation of the trajectory of Omani neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War from its genesis in the early days through its evolution in the following years. In the following chapters, this thesis will show that Oman faced different regional challenges, starting with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The next chapter addresses Omani foreign policy between 1988 and 2015.

Chapter 6: The Limits of Small Neutrals: The Inconsistency of Omani Foreign Policy between 1988 and 2015

By the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Oman was the only Arabian Gulf monarchy to have good relations with both belligerents (Al-Khalili, 2009). The war's end gave the Omani administration 'a moment to breathe' (Diplomat3, 2022a). However, this moment did not last long. It was followed by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which drastically changed the political landscape in the region and drove different Arab Gulf countries to recalibrate their foreign policy and security positions (Eilts, 2021).

This chapter examines the regional behaviour of Oman in response to the events that happened between the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and the start of the Yemen War in 2015. These two wars are the main case studies of this thesis, and thus this chapter works as a bridge between the two. This chapter, while utilising the PMN, focuses on two certain elements of the model, the influence of the security guarantor and serious threat perceptions, considering the position of the United States and the genuine external threats as the main determinant factors shaping Omani neutrality from 1988 to 2015.

To unpack this argument, this chapter examines four conflicts: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War that started in 2011. To examine the Omani behaviour I refer to the four conditions established in the introduction chapter to indicate if Oman was adopting neutrality or not towards the conflict: abstaining from participation in hostilities, dealing with both sides impartially and not allowing the troops of belligerents to use its lands. First, Oman's behaviour towards the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and its eventual liberation (1990–1991) shows Oman abandoning its prior neutrality after it granted the US and the UK access to Omani military facilities to support the liberation of Kuwait. In addition, Oman sent troops to support Kuwait (Arafat and SpringerLink, 2020). While Oman had perceived Saddam Hussein as a threat since the Iran-Iraq War, its behaviour in 1990 was hugely influenced by the interests of its security guarantors, the US and the UK. The consistent influence of the security guarantors becomes even more apparent after examining the remaining cases in this chapter.

Second, I argue that Oman abandoned its neutrality again when it allowed the US to use its military facilities to support the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. As I will show, even though Omani decision-makers expressed their support for the US war on terror, they did not view Afghanistan as a threat to Oman. The main factor in Oman's behaviour towards the

invasion was the influence of the security guarantors. The US and the UK were allowed access to the Omani military facilities to support their operations in Afghanistan (Sherwood, 2017). These military bases were used to launch air strikes and as logistical hubs for the British and American militaries.

The same behaviour occurred again in 2003 when the US used Omani facilities to support its invasion of Iraq (Jones and Ridout, 2015). The data gathered suggest that this Omani support happened despite Oman's reservations about the invasion (see Section 6.3). Omani decision-makers were against the possible invasion for two main reasons. First, as they argued in meetings with US officials, a weakened Iraq would give Iran the chance to grow stronger. This scenario posed a threat to the Arabian Gulf monarchies from the Omanis perspective (Diplomat3, 2022b). Moreover, but perhaps less importantly, Oman did not want to support an invasion that had not been given the green light from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Ambassador3, 2022). Nevertheless, the US and the UK used the military facilities inside Oman to support their invasion of Iraq (Foley, 2003). This indicated, as I will argue, that the interests of the security guarantors were more influential than the perceptions of the decision-makers of the small neutral.

In the fourth case – the Syrian Civil War that started in 2011 – Oman adopted a position of neutrality and has had an active diplomatic role to play, especially in the early stages of the conflict (Adrdemagni, 2015, Bennett, 2013). In this conflict, Oman has been able to maintain neutrality and keep its relations active with the Syrian regime even after all other Arabian Gulf countries cut their relations with the Syrian regime (Echague, 2015). However, unlike the cases examined before, Omani neutrality in this conflict had no impact on the interests of the security guarantors. In other words, the US did not need Oman's facilities to support its operations in Syria. Thus, Oman could adopt a neutral position and managed to play an active diplomatic role in this conflict, as this chapter will explain in detail.

6.1 The Iraq Invasion of Kuwait and Kuwait's Liberation, 1990–1991

This section will explain why the Omani government abandoned its neutrality after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. I argue that Oman could not continue to sustain its neutrality position for two main reasons: the interests of its security guarantor and its perception of Saddam Hussein's hegemonic aspirations. As argued before, the problem is that small countries cannot adopt neutrality if this policy directly clashes with the interests of their

security guarantor. Other than this, small neutrals tend to abandon their neutrality when they perceive another country as an existential threat. To unpack this argument, this section explores 1) the background of the war and 2) Oman's foreign policy towards it.

6.1.1 Background of the War

With the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq from 1979–2003, started to market himself as the protector of Arabs from Persian aspirations (Kramer, 1993). Along with this propaganda, he started verbally attacking Kuwait and the UAE. First, he accused the UAE and Kuwait of deliberately trying to harm the Iraqi economy by increasing their oil production, which lowered its prices. He later called Kuwait's oil policy 'economic warfare' against Iraq and threatened to use all available means to fight it (Hinnebusch, 2014). Next, Iraq requested the Gulf countries that lent it money during the Iran-Iraq War to forgive all its loans. It justified this request by claiming that money from 'Arab brothers' cannot be considered loans. The primary lender was Kuwait, with almost 14 billion US dollars (Jaffe & Barnes, 2006). Furthermore, the Iraqi government accused Kuwait of stealing its oil from the Rumaila oil field and explicitly threatened to use military force against Kuwait[25]. Kuwait denied these allegations and argued that they acted according to the law. Besides this, Kuwait demanded that Iraq pay all its debt on time (Hinnebusch, 2006).

By mid-July 1990, Iraq started deploying its forces along its border with Kuwait. The Gulf countries, other Arab states and different international states actively tried to convince Saddam to withdraw his military forces (Hassan1999 ،). According to Turkey Al Faisal, a Saudi politician and head of Saudi intelligence (1977–2005), Saddam claimed that he would not invade Kuwait. The military build-up on the borders, Saddam assured Al-Faisal, was just a way of convincing Kuwait to drop its debts. He also claimed that during a meeting in Baghdad in late July 1990, Saddam assured him the invasion was not an option in the Iraqi plans (Taqi, 2020). Despite this, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in the early hours of 2 August 1990. Due to the asymmetrical balance of power between Iraq and Kuwait, Iraqi forces quickly captured and occupied most parts of Kuwait. Sheik Jabir Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait (1977–2006), fled to Saudi Arabia with his family and most government ministers. Within two days, Iraq captured all of Kuwait and declared it as the 19th Iraqi province, with a new governor appointed by Saddam Hussein (al-Fijawi, 2018).

[25] The Rumaila oil field is located inside Iraq, just a few kilometres from the Kuwaiti border. It is considered one of the biggest oil fields in the world. Saddam's accusations were built on his claims that Kuwait was using Western technology that could extract oil located in this field from inside Kuwait.

The international community quickly denounced the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. On the same day of the invasion, the UNSC issued Resolution 660, condemning Iraq's actions and requesting an immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. Over the next two weeks, the UNSC issued resolutions 661, 662, 664 and 665, demanding that the Iraqi government immediately withdraw from Kuwait without any conditions (UN, 1990). In addition to the UNSC resolutions, different world powers reacted quickly to the invasion. To start with, on the second day of the invasion, the US president, George Bush Sr, announced that the US had deployed Navy ships in the Arabian Gulf. Then on 7 August, the US deployed almost 15,000 troops along with helicopters, destroyers and fighter planes (Khadduri & Ghareeb, 2001). Following the US deployment of troops, France and the UK also announced troop deployments to the Arabian Gulf (McNamara & Brigham, 2014). Meanwhile, the Arab Gulf monarchies, who were surprised by the Iraqi invasion, amended some of their long-standing policies to allow the presence of the foreign troops. Firstly, the UAE amended its policy of not allowing foreign forces on its land and announced its willingness to welcome Western troops from 19 August 1990. The invasion also convinced Saudi Arabia to host US and other Western troops to defend the Arabian Peninsula from Saddam and to use its territory to liberate Kuwait (Alnajjar, 2000). By mid-October 1990, there were around 200,000 US, 15,000 British and 11,000 French troops stationed in Arabian Gulf countries (Rovner, 2014).

On 29 November 1990, the UNSC issued resolution 678 demanding that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait or face military action. This resolution set 15 January 1991 as the deadline for Iraqi withdrawal (UN, 1990). By this deadline, a coalition of 580,000 troops from 35 nations had been created under the leadership of the United States. Two days after the deadline, the coalition started Operation Desert Storm against Iraq (Rovner, 2014). Without getting into the details of the operation, Iraqi forces were rapidly driven outside Kuwait, and on 28 February 1991, Kuwait was declared fully liberated (McNamara & Brigham, 2014). Shortly thereafter, the Iraqi government announced its acceptance of all UN resolutions (UN, 1990).

6.1.2 Omani Foreign Policy Towards the Conflict.

The Omani position, I argue, can be divided into two phases: the diplomatic phase, which lasted from August 1990 until late October of the same year, and the second phase supporting the military action from October 1990 until the liberation of Kuwait on 28 February 1991. In the first few days after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Oman, through its foreign ministry,

condemned Iraq's actions and demanded that it unconditionally withdraw from Kuwait (Al-Futaisi, 2018). To support the international efforts, Omani Foreign Minister Yousif bin Allawi visited Washington and met with US President George W. Bush to discuss the issue (Al-Khalili, 2009). During the meeting, Bin Allawi shared Oman's concerns about starting a major war in the region, especially after the long war between Iran and Iraq, and the importance of trying diplomatic solutions first. He urged the officials in the US to reserve the military solution as the last option (Diplomat3, 2022a, Ambassador6, 2022). After the meeting, the Omani foreign minister said in a public statement that he 'hoped Saddam Hussein would be courageous enough to withdraw his troops from Kuwait and apologise for his mistake' (Al-Futaisi, 2018). During the same time, Tom King, the British defence minister, visited Oman to discuss ways of responding to the Iraqi invasion (Bowman, 2008). Regarding these two visits, a former Omani diplomat said in an interview with me:

> *'The Americans and the British were laying out plans for military actions and were discussing them with their Omani counterparts. The meetings included discussion about the use of the military bases in Oman' (Diplomat4, 2022a).*

During these discussions, Oman tried to push for a diplomatic solution. However, Omani officials knew their 'influence on Iraq is minimal' (Expert3, 2022). At the same time, Oman was sending messages to the Iraqi government that the situation was dire and would lead to the destruction of Iraq (Diplomat4, 2022a, Expert3, 2022). These messages were totally ignored by the Iraqis. Other than these efforts, Oman announced its support to Javier Perez, the UN secretary-general from 1982 to 1991, in his efforts to convince Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait (Rovner, 2014). The UN offered Saddam Hussein the opportunity to withdraw his troops from Kuwait without facing any actions (UN, 1990). After Saddam refused the UN offer, Yousif bin Allawi, the Omani foreign minister, said: 'The Iraqis are losing an opportunity that they will regret for the rest of their lives' (Al-Watan, 1990). Additionally, Sultan Qaboos said in October 1990 that: 'he is very sorry that Iraq has chosen the wrong way and he, now, sees the diplomatic efforts less likely to succeed' (Ministry of Information, 2015). According to one Omani diplomat, by the time Sultan Qaboos said this, the Omani government had already prepared some troops to support the coming military action against Iraq (Diplomat1, 2021b).

The Sultanate of Oman had abandoned its neutrality with two main actions. First, it decided to join the coalition created to liberate Kuwait and send its troops to Saudi Arabia to

prepare for the fighting (Cetinoglu, 2010). Secondly, besides participating directly with soldiers in the battle, Oman made its territory available for logistics reasons. The US and British forces used the Omani military bases of Musandam, Masirah, Al-Seeb and Thumrait.[26] These bases were significant for two reasons. First, they are located in the east of Oman, overlooking the Indian Ocean, which made them vital staging and logistical areas for US and British troops (Davis, 2017). Secondly, the US developed these bases during the 1980s, as part of the 1980 access agreement between the US and Oman, which made them ready to be used for US fighters and aeroplanes (Jones, 2015).

My claim is that while Oman took sides in the conflict, the Omani leadership did not see their participation in the war as a change in their thinking about the value of neutrality for Oman's long-term foreign policy positioning. Rather this was a temporary and pragmatic decision, where the Omani leadership concluded that adopting neutrality was not possible for two main reasons. First, as the discussion of the neutrality model revealed, small neutrals cannot adopt neutrality if it harms the interests of the security guarantor. During interviews with different Omani elites, when asked about the role of the US in Omani's decision to abandon neutrality, several of them pointed to the security agreement signed between Oman and the US in 1980 (Diplomat3, 2022b, Ambassador6, 2022 , Diplomat1, 2021a). This agreement gave the US the right to use military bases in six different places in Oman (Seliktar et al., 2020). While this abandonment of neutrality was expected due to the US influence on Oman, the Omani perception of Saddam was another reason that pushed the leadership to support the military operation to liberate Kuwait.

In an interview with a senior former Omani diplomat, he argued that 'Oman had perceived Saddam's regional aspirations as a threat since the early 1980s' (Diplomat1, 2022). As was discussed earlier in Chapter 6, this claim is supported by archival documents showing the Omani leadership's concerns about Saddam's hegemonic aspirations during the Iran-Iraq War, especially if Iraq achieved a clear victory over Iran. During the 1980s, Omani relations with some GCC states, especially Kuwait, cooled off due to the differences in their perceptions of Saddam, but this changed after 1990. On this, one Omani diplomat argued, 'The GCC states finally got the reason behind Omani concerns over Saddam, in a bad way, unfortunately' (Diplomat3, 2022a).

The events of 1990 and 1991 changed the relations between the Arabian Gulf monarchies, Oman and the US in myriad ways. Before 1990, Oman was the only country in

[26] Musandam is a peninsula located in the Hormuz strait close to Iran. Masirah, Al-Seeb and Thumrait are coastal cities overlooking the Indian ocean. Please see map 5.1 in the previous chapter.

the region to have security relations with the US and an actual US military presence, but after the events leading to Desert Storm, US troops were welcomed in almost all Arabian Gulf countries. This had two results. First, the countries pressuring Oman not to accept the US access agreement in 1980, such as Kuwait, followed Oman's path and allowed the US to have a foot in their countries after 1990. This change relieved the pressure on Oman from these countries. Second, the strategic value of Oman decreased in the eyes of the US because, after 1990, it could use its military bases in other countries in the region whereas before it only had the option of Oman.

Following the end of the liberation of Kuwait, Omani troops returned home, and Oman started to invest more in diplomatic efforts. Desert Storm saw Oman abandoning its neutrality just two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War. This behaviour demonstrates the importance of systemic factors and the limits they impose on the foreign policies of small neutrals. In the following section, the importance of such factors is further explored in the case of Omani foreign policy towards the invasion of Afghanistan.

6.2 The Invasion of Afghanistan in 2001

This section explains how Oman further abandoned its neutrality by allowing the US and the UK to use Omani military facilities to support their invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Guided by the processual neutrality model, I argue that Oman's behaviour was mainly derived from the influence of its security guarantors – the US and the UK – on Oman. To explain this argument, this section is divided into two parts: background about the invasion and Oman's foreign policy towards the invasion.

6.2.1 Background to the Invasion

The US invasion of Afghanistan was motivated by the 11 September terrorist attacks on America (Munoz, 2012). Nineteen members of the Al-Qaeda organisation carried these attacks on different sites in the US after hijacking four commercial aeroplanes. These attacks resulted in the deaths of almost three thousand people (Bailey, 2015). Al-Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, which was ruled by the Taliban at the time. Thus, US President George W. Bush Jr (2001–2009) demanded that the Taliban 'hand over all Al-Qaeda leaders or share their fate' (Relations, 2021). The Taliban countered by asking the US for evidence showing the involvement of Al-Qaeda leaders in carrying out the attacks (Bird, 2011). However, Bush

warned them that there would be no negotiations of the US demands, and if they did not fully comply, they would face military action (Munoz, 2012).

On 7 October 2001, American and British fighters began bombing Al-Qaeda and Taliban sites in Afghanistan (Bailey, 2015). This operation was called 'Operation Freedom Enduring' and was the start of what eventually became the longest war in US history. The main players in this operation were the US and the UK, with some support from Germany, France and Australia (Jones, 2008). These airstrikes were combined with attacks by the ground forces of a local ally called the Northern Alliance. This alliance had been fighting the Taliban regime since its establishment in 1996. However, before 2001 it controlled less than 10% of Afghanistan. After the 11 September attacks, the US and UK special forces started backing these forces to fight the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Thus, most of the ground fighting was carried out by the Northern Alliance fighters (Kolhatkar & Ingalls ،2006).

The US-led forces quickly captured most of the big cities controlled by the Taliban. By mid-November 2001, the Taliban had lost more than 90% of its control over Afghanistan (Bailey, 2015). On 14 November, the UNSC issued resolution 1378. This resolution called for member states to send peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan. In addition, it called for a critical role for the UN in establishing a transitional government in Afghanistan (UN, 2001). By December of the same year, the Taliban's fall was nearly complete. On 6 December 2001, the Taliban lost control of Kandahar, their main and last stronghold in the east of the country (Mattox & Grenier, 2015). Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, along with Taliban leaders, fled into hiding in the Bora Bora mountains. Fighting continued over the next few months in different places in Afghanistan, but it was mainly concentrated in the Bora Bora mountains (Kolhatkar & Ingalls ،2006). In April 2002, the Afghanistan transnational government was launched under the leadership of Hamed Karzai in Kabul (Jones, 2008). The detailed events of the war and its consequences are outside the scope of this thesis. Next, I will examine the Omani perception and its policy towards the war.

6.2.2 Omani Foreign Policy Towards the Afghanistan War.

To understand the Omani foreign policy towards the war in Afghanistan, this section will explore three points: the nature of Oman's involvement, the perception of Omani elites, and the impact of the war on Oman's neutrality policy. From the beginning, Oman condemned the 2001 terrorist attacks on the US in a public statement through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Information, 2015). Moreover, the Omani government confirmed that it was ready to

cooperate with the US in its fight against terrorism (Al-Futaisi, 2018). When the US declared its intent to invade Afghanistan, Oman was slower than the other Gulf States to grant the US access to its military facilities (Alnajjar, 2000). However, the military bases in Oman became pivotal in the war in Afghanistan and were used by both the US and British forces (Bird, 2011). First, the US mainly used Masirah Island to support their operations in Afghanistan. Before the US war on terror, there were only 200 US personnel in Oman. A few weeks later, this number increased to more than 6000 personnel (Bahgat, 1999). Masirah Island was important for US operations for at least two reasons. First, the facilities on the island were relatively developed (Allen, 2001). As discussed before, this was due to the 1980 security agreement between the US and Oman. The use of these facilities was vital, primarily because they could accommodate fighters such as B-1 Bombers. Thus, the US fighters were launched from the base to attack their targets in Afghanistan, especially in the first few months of the operation (Jones, 2015). Secondly, the Island was important to the US due to its location as it is only 600 miles from Afghanistan. This made it suitable for refuelling operations. In the first five months of the war, the Masirah airbase provided more than 1,100 refuelling operations (Katzman, 2004). This location also made it a suitable place to store war reserve materials. Five bases in the Gulf were used for military storage, three in Oman (at the Masirah, Thumrait and Al-Seeb bases) and two in other locations in Bahrain and Qatar (Katzman, 2004). While the US was mostly using the Masirah base, the British fighters and forces were primarily using the Thumrait airbase to strike their targets in Afghanistan (Jones, 2015).

The Omani support for the US-led operation in the war represented a departure from the neutrality policy it applied during the Iran-Iraq War. However, guided by the processual neutrality model, this behaviour can be explained. I argue through the model that small countries cannot adopt neutrality if it means hurting the interests of their security guarantor. The US determination to go to war in Afghanistan put small countries, like Oman, in a difficult position to say no or hesitate to offer their support. An Omani commentator argued, ‘It was risky to hesitate to grant the access, especially with the security agreement’ (Diplomat4, 2022b). Despite being a threat in the past, the threat perception of Afghanistan did not play a role in the Omani decision towards the war. When asked about Oman’s threat perception of Afghanistan, a former Omani diplomat argued, ‘Afghanistan used to be a threat to Oman in the past. Now, even though it is a hub for terrorists, I think we have a strong and educated society, not to welcome or collaborate with extremists’ (Ambassador5, 2022). During the Cold War, many citizens from different Arabian Gulf countries went to

Afghanistan and joined the Taliban or later Al-Qaeda. After the end of the Cold War, the regional governments started to view instability in Afghanistan and the groups there as a threat that may attract their citizens. Despite this, no Omani citizen was reported to have joined Al-Qaeda or fought in Afghanistan (Expert3, 2022, Ambassador5, 2022, Expert1, 2021).

Omani leadership abandoned its neutrality and allowed the US and the UK to use military facilities inside Oman during the invasion of Afghanistan. This behaviour confirms, again, the centrality that my PMN gives to the security guarantor. In the following section, I will explain how this influence, again, determined Oman's behaviour during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

6.3 The Invasion of Iraq, 2003

This section argues that Oman again abandoned its neutrality during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 due to the influence of its security guarantors, the US and the UK. Despite being against the war, I explain that Oman allowed the US and the UK to use Omani military facilities to support the invasion. To elaborate on this behaviour, this section first explores the background of the war and discusses Omani foreign policy towards the invasion.

6.3.1 Background to the Invasion

During the Afghanistan war, the US administration intensified its media campaign against the threat of the Iraqi regime under the leadership of Saddam Hussein (Dearsley, 2004). President George W. Bush argued that disarming Iraq was a priority for the United States' national security. He claimed that the current regime in Iraq was cooperating with Al-Qaeda and possessed weapons of mass destruction (Robinson, 2010). On 8 November 2002, the UNSC issued Resolution 1441 demanding Iraq allow UN inspectors to search Iraqi facilities to look for any illegal weapons the Iraqi regime may possess (UN, 2003). The Iraqi government complied with the resolution, and the inspectors searched for evidence supporting US allegations without success (Robinson, et al., 2009). Despite this, in the early days of 2003, President Bush and Tony Blair, the British prime minister, continued to accuse the regime of Saddam Hussein of possessing weapons of mass destruction and hiding them from the UN inspectors (Byman & Pollack, 2007). Without approval from the UNSC, on 17 March 2003, George W. Bush announced that the US was going to use military forces against the regime

of Saddam Hussein unless he stepped down and left the country with his family in less than 48 hours. Hussein refused to step down and remained in Iraq (Allawi, 2007).

In the early hours of the 20th of March, the US and British fighters began bombing Iraq, marking the start of the invasion of Iraq (also known as the Second Gulf War) (Byman & Pollack, 2007). The first few airstrikes were directed towards bunkers in Baghdad as the US intelligence information showed that senior Iraqi military personnel were meeting with Saddam Hussein (Perry, et al., 2015). Along with the 248,000 US troops and 45,000 British troops, the invasion was supported by 2000 Australian army personnel and 194 Polish special forces (Feldman, 2004). The invading troops secured quick and successive wins, which was not expected based on the projected power the Iraqi regime was believed to possess. In three weeks, on 9 April 2003, the Iraqi regime lost its control of Baghdad, and the city fully fell under the US-led coalition's control. After the fall of Baghdad, the Iraqi regime shortly lost its control of other big cities, with the fall of Kirkuk on 10 April, Mosul on 11 April, and Tikrit city, Saddam Hussein's hometown, on 13 April (Ucko & Egnell, 2013). With minimal resistance in some isolated pockets, President Bush announced the end of 'major combat operations' on 1 May 2003 (Feldman, 2004). In fact, the occupation and fighting continued for several years, but this is outside the scope of this thesis.

6.3.2 Omani Foreign Policy Towards the War

The US administration claimed that their invasion of Iraq was a continuation of their war against terrorism that started with the invasion of Afghanistan (Feldman, 2004). However, by Oman's calculations, the US invasion of Iraq was different for at least two reasons. First, the GCC, of which Oman is a founding member, rejected any military operation against Iraq. In their meeting in Doha, the member states issued a statement announcing their rejection of the possible operation just one month before the conflict began. The statement also asked all member states to refrain from providing any support for the possible military operation against Iraq (Al-Futaisi, 2018). According to at least one Omani diplomat, Oman strongly supported the statement and was pushing for it during the Doha meeting (Diplomat1, 2021a). Secondly, the proposed military operation did not have the approval of the UNSC or the backing of several great powers, including some US allies such as France and Germany (Ucko & Egnell, 2013). This gave the GCC countries some space to publicly announce their opposition to the war and base their opposition on 'opposing a war that is against international law' (Expert2, 2022). Other than this, Arabian Gulf monarchies were concerned

about possible unrest if they publicly supported the proposed military operation. The majority of the public in the region was against any foreign intervention in Iraq (Ehteshami, 2013).

To show its position towards the potential war, Oman publicly condemned the US plans to use military actions in Iraq. Yousif bin Allawi, the Omani foreign minister, expressed this on different occasions. For example, Bin Allawi said,

> *'We can't support any military actions against Iraqis now. We think the military action, if materialized, will only help in further destabilising the region' (Al-Futaisi, 2018).*

Oman called for the US and the UK to use diplomatic means to solve their differences with the Iraqi regime (Al-Khalili, 2009). Nevertheless, despite this public rejection and condemnation, Oman granted the US and the UK access to use its military air bases inside Oman in three places: Al-Seeb, Musandam and Thumrait (Mark, 2004). Reports show that there were around 3,750 US personnel in Oman during the first few months of the war against Iraq in 2003. It is believed that these personnel had roles that were very similar to those who were stationed in Oman during the war in Afghanistan (Katzman, 2004). Despite the confirmed use of the military bases in Oman, US reports also show that the Al-Udied base in Qatar was the main military base used for the operation in Iraq (Katzman, 2004).

After the start of the operation against Iraq, the Omani government followed a low-profile policy. There was no public statement condemning the war, like those issued before it started, yet neither did it support it publicly. The government's only statement after the operations began said that the Sultanate 'is following the operations in Iraq with concern. It hopes that the operations end as soon as possible. It appeals to the belligerents to preserve the unity of Iraq and avoid targeting civilians' (Al-watan, 2003). Other than the absence of official statements, the press inside Oman, which the government largely censors, refrained from discussing the topic of providing access to the US and UK to Omani military bases in support of their operations in Iraq. This was to avoid provoking the public who opposed the war (Jones & Ridout, 2012).

Oman's behaviour towards the invasion can be understood using the neutrality model introduced in this thesis. While the Omani decision-makers were against the invasion, they were obligated to give the US and the UK access to the military facilities in Oman. As explained in the previous cases of Iraq in 1990 and Afghanistan in 2001, small neutrals cannot adopt neutrality if it means hurting the interests of their security guarantor. Notwithstanding, based on interviews with different elites, Oman was also against the war

due to its perception of the geopolitical calculations. During a meeting between Omani and US officials in Muscat a few weeks before the war, the Omanis reasoned their objections to the war. They argued that invading Iraq could result in instability, which would be an opportunity for Iran to grow its power by increasing its influence in Iraq (Diplomat1, 2022). The Omani leadership argued that a very strong Iran is a threat to Oman and the Arabian Gulf in general (Expert3, 2022, Diplomat2, 2022). Unfortunately, for the Omanis, the US officials did not take the Omani viewpoint seriously, and Iran's power and influence in the region grew after the conflict.

The Iraqi invasion clearly showed that small countries cannot adopt neutrality even if they want to. Oman's behaviour was not based on the Omani perception of the war or the role they wanted to play but was instead due to the influence of the security guarantors on the country. This behaviour, as explained, is in line with the argument of the processual mode of neutrality model. In the following section, Oman's foreign policy towards the Syrian Civil War is explained.

6.4 The Syrian Civil War Since 2011

This section examines Omani neutrality towards the Syrian Civil War since 2011. Guided by the processual neutrality model of this thesis, Oman followed a neutral position towards Syria as it was not limited by any factors as in previous cases, such as the influence of security guarantors or threat perception. In this section, I will also explain Oman's diplomatic role during the early years of the Syrian Civil War.

6.4.1 Background to the War

The Syrian Civil War started with the wave of Arab Spring protests that took place in different Arab states in late 2010 and early 2011 (Corstange, 2018). The protests in Syria started in February 2011 in the city of Dara. Initially, government forces contained the protests quickly, arresting the organisers and hundreds of participants. On 6 March, Syrian security forces detained several children and tortured them (Can, 2017). This inflamed the citizenry and reignited protests in various cities. The Syrian government responded harshly, especially in Dara city, which it sealed off, banning movement to and from the city. Dozens of protesters were killed, which caused more rage and anger against the government (Littell, 2015). Despite some very minor attempts from the government to implement reforms, the protesters began attacking government forces and buildings, raising the fear that the protests

would erupt into a civil war. The demonstrations saw the first official external involvement when the US ambassador in Syria visited Hama to show his support for the large protests in the city on 7 July 2011.[27] The French ambassador in Syria followed his American counterpart and visited the city of Hama on 8 July. Bashar Al-Assad cited the two visits as proof of an international conspiracy against Syria (Ajami, 2012).

The protests transformed into a military confrontation between the regime and the opposition on 29 July 2011 when the opposition announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (Günther, 2019). The confrontations between the Syrian regime and the Free Syrian Army continued for a few months but were limited. Then, on 23 December, Damascus, the capital of Syria, experienced two powerful bombings that killed dozens of civilians. The government claimed that Al-Qaeda carried out the bombings. On the other hand, the opposition claimed that the regime had orchestrated the bombings to show that it was facing Islamic extremists and thus justified in its use of power against them (Darke, 2014). The government subsequently increased its use of power and heavy arms against the opposition and civilians throughout 2012, despite some UN and Arab League initiatives that only succeeded in decreasing the fighting for very short times (De Juan & Bank, 2015). By the end of 2012, the UN estimated that the fights in Syria had killed more than 60,000 people. This number increased to more than 100,000 by mid-2013, along with some allegations that the regime had used chemical weapons in Homs and Hama (Darke, 2014). The fighting and killings have continued, making the Syrian Civil War one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history.

The Syrian Civil War has seen the involvement of many international and regional actors along with the different local actors on the ground. The Syrian regime has been mainly supported by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah (Akbar, 2017). The Russians supported Assad's regime diplomatically, along with some arms and monetary support in the first four years of the conflict. This changed on 30 June 2015 when the Russians carried out their first airstrikes in Syria (Blanga, 2020). On the other hand, Iran has supported the Syrian regime in two ways. Firstly, Hezbollah, the Iranian agent in Lebanon, have participated directly in the fighting against the Syrian opposition parties (Al-Tamimi, 2017). Secondly, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps has participated directly and recruited fighters, mainly Shia, to fight on the side of the Syrian regime (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2017).

[27] Hama city was important because of its history of protesting the Assad regime. In 1982, the Syrian regime besieged the city and committed the 'Hama Massacre', which, according to some estimates, had as many as 40,000 casualties. Since then, the city has been a symbol of the Syrian regime's brutality.

On the opposing side, the Syrian opposition has been supported by most Western countries, Turkey and all the Arabian Gulf States except Oman (Blanga, 2017). Direct involvement in Syria by the US started in 2014 when it formed a coalition to fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and the Al-Nusra Front (Abadi, 2021). The coalition consisted of the US, the UK, France, Turkey and several other countries. Despite the directive to fight ISIS and other extremist groups, the coalition has targeted the Syrian government a few times in minimal operations. There has been no major confrontation between the Syrian regime and the US-led coalition in Syria (Al-Tamimi, 2017).

6.4.2 Omani Foreign Policy Towards Syrian Civil War

The Omani response to the Syrian Civil War has been very different from all its Arabian Gulf neighbours. While Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait withdrew their ambassadors from Syria on 8 August 2011, followed by Qatar and the UAE a few months later, Oman did not withdraw its ambassador or cut its relations with Syria (Aouf, 2019). During the last 11 years of the Syrian Civil War, Oman has been the only Arab Gulf state to actively maintain its relations with the Syrian regime (Aouf, 2019). Between 2011 and 2016, Oman welcomed the Syrian foreign minister twice in Muscat, and the Omani foreign minister, Yousif Bin Allawi, visited Damascus twice (Dharwish, 2020). In the same period, Oman established contacts with the opposition leaders. At least twice, the Syrian opposition leaders have visited Muscat and met with Omani officials; the visits included two meetings with Yousif bin Allawi, the Omani foreign minister (Atheer, 2018). With both the government and the opposition, these visits and meetings gave Oman the reach to all the warring parties in Syria. One Omani diplomat that I interviewed noted the following:

> *'Oman knew that the solution in Syria was complicated. We appreciate that almost no solution can make all the parties happy. Thus, we decided to keep our relations with the regime as good as possible and establish and maintain active relations with the moderate opposition'. (Diplomat, 2021)*

Regarding the goal of Oman's policy towards Syria, George Cafiero claims an Omani diplomat in Washington said that the Omani foreign policy towards Syria aims to stop civilian deaths and military confrontation, and Oman will always push for a diplomatic solution (Cafiero, 2020). Still, this is not the only argument about why Oman maintains its

relations with Syria. Omani's steady ties with Syria could be understood partly in light of its good relations with Iran. Oman, as Cafiero argues, has always tried to distance itself from diplomatic moves that anger Iran (Cafiero, 2020). However, different elites I interviewed have argued that Omani's position towards Syria 'was built on its long-term policy of regional neutrality' that made Oman a reliable channel for other countries with Syria (Ambassador4, 2022).

Other analysts have argued that the good relationship between Oman and Syria could be viewed with suspicion in Washington, and Oman should be careful not to anger the US (Sudetic, 2020). However, this is not necessarily true, as Omani officials always explain their position to the US. A senior Omani diplomat argued that Oman and the US have very active communications regarding Syria. He emphasised that the Omani officials made sure that the US government is aware that Oman does not have an agenda in Syria other than its efforts to help de-escalate the fighting, which is something that will benefit the region (Diplomat4, 2022a). Evidence suggests that Oman has tried to play a role in resolving the Syrian Civil War. Data collected from interviews with Omani elites reveals an initiative led by Oman and endorsed by other Arabian Gulf countries. In October 2015, Yousif bin Allawi, the foreign minister of Oman, visited Damascus and met with Bashar Al-Assad, the president of Syria. The initiative was also communicated with the US, who did not refuse, but neither did they clearly endorse it. In the meeting, Yousif bin Allawi promised the Syrian president the total monetary and political support of all Arabian Gulf States. This is in return for limiting the Iranian influence and having a transition period followed by 'some form of power-sharing with the opposition' (Diplomat3, 2022b).

The information gathered indicated that Bashar Al-Assad promised to cooperate and was thankful for the Omani role. The two sides agreed that Walled Meqdad, the Syrian deputy foreign minister (2006–2020) would visit Oman within a week to discuss and possibly meet with the other Gulf countries' representatives to agree on a final form of the initiative. In general, the atmosphere during the visit was 'very promising' (Diplomat3, 2022b). Despite this, the Omani and Arab Gulf governments were shocked by the direct Russian involvement in the war less than a week after the meeting. During the meeting, Bashar Al-Assad did not mention anything about possible Russian involvement. He even promised to cooperate and send a Syrian delegation to Oman within a week after the meeting. The Omani envoy was disappointed, but there was no change in the Omani foreign policy towards Syria (Diplomat3, 2022b). Oman continued to make efforts and be a reliable channel to facilitate peace talks whenever needed (Diplomat3, 2022b). Thus, Oman exercised active neutrality towards and

attributed it to the role it should play and its efforts to de-escalate the war. However, the Omani decision-makers were always viewing the Omani role like this even in the cases where Oman had to abandon its neutrality. So, how can this change be explained in the context of the evolution of Omani neutrality?

The Omani foreign policy towards Syria represents a continuation of its neutrality policy. Guided by the processual neutrality model, Oman was able to adopt a neutral foreign policy towards Syria as this position does not hurt the interests of its security guarantors, mainly the United States. Omani decision-makers also view Omani neutrality as a potential asset to the region and the US. Other than this, the Omani leadership perceived the US as less determined to intervene in cases such as the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Thirdly, the Syrian Civil War did not pose a threat to Oman, and adopting neutrality would not result in driving the conflict to harm Oman. In this regard, a high-ranking Omani official claimed:

> *'The first choice for Oman is to be always neutral. If we can adopt this policy until the end of life, we will not hesitate. However, sometimes we have security relations with other countries, such as the US, that require our cooperation with them in certain matters. None of these agreements affected our stance towards Syria. Actually, the Omani stance towards the war gave the region a way for secure and trusted communication with the Syrian regime'.*

By mentioning the security relations with other countries, the Omani decision-maker I interviewed was referring to the influence of the security guarantor and the fact that Oman takes the interests of the US into account when framing its foreign policy. However, the case of the US influence on Oman is different when compared between 1980 and 2011, when the Syrian Civil War started. During the early 1980s, Omani neutrality was not developed, Omani decision-makers did not self-conceive themselves as neutrals, and other powers in the region and beyond were not viewing Oman as a neutral country. All these factors increase the US influence on Oman and decrease the ability to resist this influence. On the other hand, in 2011, Oman was widely seen as a country that leans towards adopting neutrality, a potential peace facilitator and supporting peaceful and diplomatic ways to resolve wars. Furthermore, Oman in 2011 had very good relations with different great powers in the world, such as China and Russia, when it did not have connections with both countries in 1980. All these factors increase the Omani's ability to resist the US influence if they decide to alter the Omani position towards regional events such as Syria.

The decreased influence of the US on Oman does not mean that the security guarantor is not important to consider. Actually, it is still among the determinants of the foreign policy behaviour of Oman. This change means that the influence of the security guarantor should be studied in its context and in relation to all other stockholders. In this regard, several high-ranking Omani officials emphasised to me in the interviews that Oman has been keen to be as clear as possible with the United States and keep the US officials updated with Omani diplomatic efforts in Syria. The behaviour of Oman towards the Syrian Civil War is in line with the argument of the PMN introduced in this thesis that Oman tends to adopt neutrality unless limited by one of the external factors such as security guarantors or serious threats.

6.5 Conclusion

Oman's foreign behaviour during the period between 1988 and 2015 showed inconsistency in the adoption of neutrality. Although the Omani decision-makers during interviews have claimed that Oman's role is one of neutrality in the region, during three major events Oman was not neutral. During the invasion of Kuwait, Oman was not neutral, and the decision-makers attributed this to the existential threat Saddam was posing to the region. Later, during the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Oman allowed the US to use its military facilities to support its operations. In both cases, the Omani decision-makers were influenced by the US and threat perception to make this choice. Despite public denouncement of these invasions, especially in the case of Iraq in 2003, Oman had to allow the US military to use its facilities, which shows the influence the security guarantors can pose. In the case of Syria in 2011, Oman maintained neutrality and, despite not being effective, has played various diplomatic roles due to its reach with both the Arab Gulf states, the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition.

This chapter demonstrates that small neutrals, like Oman, are limited in their choices and behaviour by some systemic factors such as security guarantors and threats. These limits prevent neutrals from adopting the roles they believe should play in the region. Following the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Omani decision-makers believed that Oman should play a neutral role in all coming conflicts. However, in the various cases discussed above, Oman was not neutral and allowed the US to use its military facilities. This behaviour is in line with the argument presented in the PMN, which shows the huge influence of the security guarantor. Despite this inconsistency, Oman has managed to market itself as the Switzerland of the

region, or the ‘Switzerland of Arabia’. In the following chapter, I investigate Oman’s neutrality towards the War in Yemen from 2015 to 2022.

Chapter 7: The Mature Neutral: Omani Neutrality Towards the War in Yemen 2015–2022

The period between the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the start of the War in Yemen showed Oman marketing itself as a neutral country that always supports peace. Despite this, Oman was not neutral in all conflicts that happened in this period. As I argued in the last chapters in detail, small states cannot adopt neutrality if it means hurting the interests of their security guarantors. In the case of Oman, this was shown in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, where Oman clearly wanted to stay neutral but had to allow the US to use its military bases in Oman and support both wars. On the other hand, Oman followed neutrality and supported peaceful resolutions for conflicts where Omani neutrality did not hurt US interests, as in the Syrian Civil War that broke out in 2011 (Neubauer, 2016; Ramani, 2019; Schanzer & Salter, 2019).

In 2015, Omani regional neutrality was tested again when Saudi Arabia decided to form a coalition and enter the ongoing civil War in Yemen on the side of the internationally recognised government. All Arabian Gulf countries, apart from Oman, joined the coalition led by Saudi Arabia (Heinze, 2018). I explain in this chapter that Oman decided to play an active neutral position towards the War in Yemen. I argue, based on the conditions I established in the introduction chapter, that Omani behaviour was neutrality as it was abstaining from participating in hostilities, dealt with both sides impartially and didnt allow the troops of belligerents to use its lands. This neutrality has been observed in the form of hosting negotiations, facilitating the release of civilian hostages and supporting peace initiatives. To understand Omani neutrality towards the War in Yemen and what it means to the overall evolution of its neutrality policy, this chapter first reviews the background of the War in Yemen before discussing Oman's position of neutrality towards the war. The opening section aims to explicate three main areas: the evolution of the Yemeni Civil War, the key players in Yemen and Omani relations with Saudi Arabia.

In the second part of the chapter, I will examine the neutrality of Oman towards the War in Yemen. This examination will cover the time from the coalition's intervention in March 2015 until April 2022, when the fighting parties agreed on a truce, known as the April truce. To understand the neutrality of Oman, this chapter is guided by the PMN. This section aims to elaborate on four important elements of the PMN: the importance of the security grantors' interests, the strategic phase of neutrality, the recognition of neutrality by the

belligerents and the active neutrality phase. Thus, the structure of the second part of the chapter is built on these four elements.

First, I will discuss the Omani elites' views of the US interests in Yemen and how the possible Omani neutrality would not hurt these interests. In this section, pieces of evidence collected from interviews with Omani elites suggest that the leadership in Oman viewed the US as having three main US interests in Yemen when the coalition intervened in 2015: preventing Iran from dramatically increasing its influence in Yemen, ensuring that war would not disrupt oil production in the Arabian Gulf countries and ensuring the war would not harm the trade in the Bab Al-Mandab strait (AlBadi, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022b, Ambassador3, 2022, Expert2, 2022, Diplomat1, 2022). Secondly, despite being expected, the adoption of neutrality by Oman was not straightforward. In this regard, this section examines two events that show the difficulty of being neutral: the coalition's accusation of Oman arms smuggling and the attack on the house of the Omani ambassador in Yemen. Thirdly, I will show how belligerents can recognise a neutral stance during the conflict but still pressure neutrals to abandon their policy or take advantage of it. In this section, I will also explain how the recognition of neutrality can fluctuate during conflicts, affecting neutrals' ability to play their diplomatic roles.

Fourthly, this chapter will investigate the roles Oman has played in Yemen as an active neutral country. This will explain how the recognition of neutrality affects a neutral country's ability to play an active role in the war. Arguably, the neutral state cannot adopt active neutrality before the recognition of this neutrality by the belligerents. Conversely, playing an active diplomatic role influences the recognition of belligerents, as section 3.4 explains in detail. Lastly, this chapter argues that by playing neutral roles, Oman has increased the value of its position in the eyes of four different parties: the belligerents, international powers, the UN and civilians.

7.1 Background of the War in Yemen and the Key Players

This section will examine the genesis of the War in Yemen, the coalition intervention and Omani-Saudi relations. Before going into these points, it is crucial to provide some background about Yemen. The tribal, religious and geographic structures of Yemen are very complex, and unifying them is very hard. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president of Yemen from 1990–2012, described ruling Yemen as 'dancing on the heads of snakes' (Clark, 2010).

Figure 3: Map of Yemen and its surroundings

Between 1967 and 1990, as discussed previously, Yemen was divided into two independent states, the Republic of Yemen was two independent states, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) and the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen).[28] In May 1990, these two states were unified under the leadership of Ali Abdullah Saleh (Brandt, 2017). Geographically, as figure 3 shows, Yemen borders Oman and Saudi Arabia and controls the strategic Bab Al-Mandeb strait that leads to the Suez Canal. In terms of religion, many Yemenis present themselves according to their religious orientations. There are two factions of Islam in Yemen, Sunnis, who are dominated by the Shafi School of thought, and Shias consisting of both Ismailis and Zaydis (Brandt, 2017). Regarding ethnicity, the vast majority of Yemenis consider themselves Arabs (Pridham, 2018). In addition to this, many Yemenis tend to present themselves as either Northern Yemeni or Southern Yemeni. These complex structures have always fuelled Yemen's conflicts (Clark, 2010) as the following section will demonstrate.

[28] As explained in Chapter 4, South Yemen was a communist state that was established in 1967. It was supported by China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, East Germany, and Iraq. This communist support played an important role in increasing the Omani threat perception of Yemen, as discussed before in Chapter 4 in the context of its support of the insurgents' movement in Southern Oman 1964–1975. North Yemen was established in 1962 when the insurgents overthrew the King Muhammed Al-Bader and established their Arab Nationalist government.

7.1.1 The Genesis of the War

To understand the current War in Yemen, it is vital to clarify how it started. The current conflict in Yemen is wrongly portrayed by many commentators as a war that began only in March 2015 between two sides, Saudi Arabia and its allies on one side, and the Ansar Allah group on the other (Roberts & Hokayem, 2016).[29] However, the picture is more complicated, and the causes of the war can be traced back to the events of the Arab Spring. In mid-2011, demonstrations started in Yemen calling for Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president of Yemen since 1990, to step down. An initiative led by six Arabian Gulf Countries forced Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign in exchange for immunity from any possible future investigations (Bonnefoy, 2019).[30] The country was supposed to hold elections to choose the next president. However, power was merely transferred to the vice-president, Abd Rabu Mansoor Hadi, who was the only candidate (Lackner, 2019). The international community recognised the Hadi government, including the neighbouring Arabian Gulf countries, the European Union, the US and the UN. The first duty of this internationally recognised government was to write a constitution that would ensure all the Yemenis' factions were represented in coming elections (Strategic Comments, 2018). Yemen was hugely divided under Hadi, and his government faced challenges and opposition, mainly from the Ansar Allah group and Islamist militias, as will be explained later. In 2013, demonstrations started to rise again against the government, calling for the current cabinet to step down. In March 2013, different Yemeni factions held the National Conference Dialogue to form a government that would represent all Yemenis[31] (Sharp, 2018). Despite wide participation, there was a noticeable absence of some southern groups at the talks (Bonnefoy, 2019).

After passing its initial deadline, the parties at the National Dialogue Conference reached an agreement in January 2014 to write a new constitution (Sharp, 2018). Nevertheless, instability continued spreading across Yemen with the Hadi government's inability to maintain control (Juneau, 2021). The instability in Yemen grew after the

[29] Ansar Allah *'انصار الله'* means the 'partisan of Allah' and is the official name of the Houthi movement. As I will explain in more details in this chapter, the movement rose up against the government in the early 2000s but would only become a main player in the Yemeni politics after the Arab spring.

[30] This initiative was developed by the GCC countries, different Yemeni factions, and UN representatives. The talks were supported by the five permanent members of the UNSC and the European Union. In November 2011, Ali Abdullah Saleh signed the initiative and gave up power in Yemen, ending thirty-three years of rule. BENNETT, C. 2013. The Importance of Regional Cooperation
The GCC Initiative in Yemen. *Planning Ahead for a Postconflict Syria:*. International Peace Institute..

[31] The National Dialogue Conference *(منتدى الحوار الوطني)* was a series of negotiations between the different parts of Yemen that took place in Sanaa, Yemen's capital. The main aim of these negotiations was to agree on a transitional period and then move to a fully democratic government.

government decided to cut energy subsidies, which caused a new wave of demonstrations in July 2014. These demonstrations caused further instability and represented an opportunity for the Ansar Allah group to gain control over new territories from the Hadi government (Lackner, 2019). The events that followed led President Hadi to request the intervention of Saudi Arabia to enter Yemen and support his side (Blumi, 2021). Before discussing the intervention of Saudi Arabia, it is essential to provide some background about the Ansar Allah group and its evolution.

Ansar Allah are an armed movement that originated in Yemen in the 1990s (Barak, et al., 2010). To understand the Ansar Allah movement, it is important to distinguish between the terms Houthis, Zaydis and Ansar Allah, which are often confused. First, the Houthi are a large Yemeni tribe mostly living in the Saada province in the northwest of Yemen. Religiously, the members of this tribe adhere to the Zaydi school of thought, a branch of Shia Islam (Varisco, 2018).[32] However, Yemeni Zaydis are not solely part of the Houthi tribe. Almost 35% of Yemenis are Zaydis, while the Houthi tribe only constitute 5% of the Yemeni population (Lucas, 2020). Thirdly, Ansar Allah is a revolutionary military movement fighting against the Yemeni government. It is usually called the 'Houthis', 'Houthi militia', 'Houthi fighters', or, as they prefer to call themselves, 'Ansar Allah' (Esfandiary & Ariane, 2016). In this thesis, for consistency, I will refer to them as 'Ansar Allah', their official name.

The Ansar Allah movement has a history of fighting against the Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia. Before 1990, they were based in the far North of Yemen, mainly in the mountains of Saada province. They started to attack and rise against the government in the early 1990s, just after the unification of Yemen in May 1990. Until early 2000, the Ansar Allah almost exclusively consisted of fighters from the Houthi tribe (Darwich, 2018). However, fighters from different tribes started to join them for three main reasons. First, many tribes suffered from the government's marginalisation during the rule of Ali Abdullah Salah from 1990–2011 and hence joined the Houthis in their fight against the common oppressor (Lackner, 2019). Secondly, as mentioned before, almost 35% of the Yemenis adhere to the Zaydi school of thought, which is the same school of thought the Houthis adhere to (Freeman, 2019). Thus, many of them joined the Houthis for religious reasons. Thirdly, after 2015, many Yemenis saw the Saudi-led coalition's intervention as external aggression and perceived the Hadi government as a puppet of the coalition (Munteanu, 2015),

[32] Zaydism was established based on the idea of raising against the unjust ruler. They believe that justice is more important than peace. The Ansar Allah movement has used this base in their propaganda to recruit fighters to raise against the government since early 2000s.

which led many Yemenis to join the Ansar Allah movement or at least stay neutral. Most of these newly mobilised citizens came with their arms as Yemen is a heavily armed society. Despite all these factors, it is essential to note that the supporters of the Ansar Allah group do not constitute the majority in Yemen (Zweiri, 2016). Still, the Ansar Allah movement became a critical player in Yemeni politics.

Returning to the events in late 2014, the demonstrations against the government increased and caused further instability, and here the moment of the Ansar Allah came. They used the instability to capture more cities, including Sanaa, the biggest city and the capital of Yemen (Seliktar et al., 2020). These developments forced the Yemeni government to compromise. They agreed to share power with Ansar Allah and sign a 'peace and friendship agreement' (Masyhur, 2021). This deal gave each party the right to rule some parts of Yemen. The peace and friendship agreement did not last long, however, and Hadi fled Sanaa to Aden, announcing that Ansar Allah's control over Sanaa was a coup. He also called for Saudi Arabia to intervene to protect 'the legitimate government' (Al-Otaibi, 2020). As will be discussed below, Saudi Arabia subsequently formed a coalition and intervened in Yemen.

7.1.2 The Coalition Intervention in the War

In the early hours of 25 March 2015, a coalition of ten countries began bombing Ansar Allah group sites in Yemen (Darwich, 2018). The coalition intervened in Yemen on the side of the Hadi government, which had called for an international intervention that was led by Saudi Arabia and included the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan and Jordan. In this coalition, Saudi Arabia participated with 150,000 soldiers, 100 jets and other military units, while the UAE contributed with 30 fighter jets. In addition, Kuwait and Bahrain contributed 15 fighter jets each, Qatar contributed 10 fighter jets and Jordan, Sudan and Morocco contributed six fighter jets each (Bonnefoy, 2019). Other than these, the coalition claimed to have the support of the US, the UK and France. Their contribution was limited to logistical and intelligence support (Darwich, 2018). This large coalition was not a result of the Hadi government's diplomatic skills but rather was due to the incentives that the coalition's leader, Saudi Arabia, had in intervening in Yemen.

Before examining the incentives of the coalition intervention, I will lay out the arguments that each side of the conflict claims to be behind the intervention. According to the official Saudi story, the coalition intervention has several goals to achieve. Firstly, the coalition aims to 'restore the legitimate government of Hadi that was taken by the terrorist

Houthis militia', as they maintain (Musa, 2017). Secondly, the coalition claimed that it aims to fight and curb the Iranian influence in Yemen and Arabian countries in general. They claim that the Ansar Allah movement is an agent of Iran and only serves Iranian interests in the region (Hursh, 2020). Thirdly, the coalition aims to secure the borders of Saudi Arabia from possible 'Houthi terrorist attacks' (Ferro & Tom , 2016). On the other side, the Ansar Allah movement has rejected the Saudi reasoning and offered their own. According to Mohammed Al-Houthi, the official speaker of the Ansar Allah movement, Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen to occupy it and deprive its people of any chance of development. Other than this, Mohammed Al-Houthi has claimed that Saudi Arabia is serving the interests of 'devil powers' such as America and Israel, as he describes them. Thus, according to him, all people of Yemen must unite to 'expel the Saudis and whoever takes with their hands' (BBC Arabic , 2015). The two parties, the coalition and the Ansar Allah movement, continue to accuse each other of causing the war and harming civilians. However, as I will explain, the reality is more complex than the simple reasoning offered by both sides.

When the coalition intervention started, different commentators began to characterise the war as a Sunni-Shia conflict (Al-Muslimi, 2015). They claimed that the Saudi-led coalition intervened as a Sunni coalition to deter the Iranian Shia agents in Yemen (Rafael, 2016). However, this can be challenged due to different reasons. First, I argue that the Ansar Allah cannot be seen as merely an agent of Iran. While it is well known, and I agree, that Iran supports them to serve its interests, it does not have complete control over their decision-making. For example, in 2014, Iran advised Ansar Allah not to overtake Sanaa. However, they ignored the Iranian advice and took over Sanaa anyway (Darwich, 2018). Secondly, While Ansar Allah adheres to the Zaydi school of thought, a branch of Shia Islam, it is different from the Shia branch followed in Iran, called Twelver Shia. The differences between the Zaydi Shia and Twelvers Shia make the Zaydis, ideologically, closer to Sunnis than Shia (Winter, 2021).

Iranian-Houthis relations can be understood based on the growing Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region. Iran is trying to increase its influence in the Arabian world. In Yemen, Iran found Ansar Allah, who had been rising against Saudi Arabia's ally in Yemen and decided to support them and gain some leverage in Yemen as they grow (Juneay, 2021, Juneay, 2016). This was a well-calculated move from Iran as Ansar Allah were already perceived by Saudi Arabia, its regional rival, as a threat (Serr, 2017). Saudi Arabia has perceived the Ansar Allah movement as a threat since the early 2000s (Mirza et al., 2021). Before the events of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia was supporting the previous president of

Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh in his efforts to contain the Ansar Allah threat. With the government's fall in Yemen, the Saudi threat perception of Ansar Allah increased (Freeman, 2019). This threat peaked with the growing Houthi-Iranian cooperation in 2014 and early 2015.[33] Thus, Saudi Arabia had to intervene directly in Yemen to contain this increasing threat on its border. Other than the threat containment, the intervention in Yemen can be seen by Saudi Arabia as a way to boost its status in the region. This intervention, if successful, would assert Saudi Arabia's leadership in the region, especially in its rivalry with Iran (Darwich, 2018).

Unfortunately, for Saudi decision-makers, Ansar Allah became more robust, and the coalition could not achieve a decisive victory (Transfeld, 2022). From the start of the operation, the coalition has claimed complete control of the Yemeni air space and declared it a restricted zone (Tynan, 2020). On the second day of persistent airstrikes on different Ansar Allah-controlled areas, the coalition spokesman claimed they 'destroyed more than 80% of the Houthi's power' (Jazeera, 2015). Despite this, Ansar Allah continued to advance in different areas, including the capital, Aden. On 2 April, they gained control of the presidential palace in Aden, but they withdrew from it after very heavy airstrikes (France24, 2015).

The coalition intervention was mainly an air campaign, but there was a role for both naval and ground forces. First, the navy of Saudi Arabia, along with some support from Egypt, positioned itself next to Bab Al-Mandab Strait (Botelho, 2015). They aimed to prevent ships from porting in Al-Hodeida, which was controlled by Ansar Allah, before being thoroughly searched to ensure they did not contain any arms heading to Ansar Allah.[34] In addition, the navy bombarded different Ansar Allah-controlled areas, but these bombardments were limited and very minor compared to the initial air strikes (Richardson, 2015). Some reports have also claimed that the US Navy supported the operation and ensured that Iranian ships would not port in Yemen (Entous, 2015, Sciutto, 2015). On the other hand, there have been some clashes between the coalition ground forces and Ansar Allah along the southern

[33] Saudi's threat perception of Houthi and Iranian influence peaked due to two main reasons: the increased cooperation with Iran and the Iranian officials' statements about their role in Yemen. Some Iranian officials exaggerated their influence in Yemen, such as Ali Reza Zakani, an Iranian Parliament representative, who said that 'Sanaa would be the fourth Arab Capital to fall into Iran's hands'. TEHSIN, M., ALI, A. & QUMBER, G. 2019. Crisis in Yemen: Causes and Implications. *Journal of Political Studies*, 295-295.

[34] Hodeida city has the most important port in Yemen, and controlling it can be a game changer for the coalition. More than 70% of the Yemeni imports come through this port. After the outbreak of the war, more than 80% of the humanitarian assistance came through Hodeida port. Ansar Allah has maintained their control over the port despite the Saudi naval presence in the sea close to the port.
SHAY, S. 2018. The war over the Bab al Mandab straits and the Red Sea coastline. IPS publications.

Saudi-Yemeni borders. The main aim of the coalition ground forces has been to prevent Ansar Allah from advancing inside Saudi territory (Agency, 2015).

In less than one month after starting the operation and despite limited success on the ground, the Saudi government announced the end of its actions. They claimed that the operation had achieved its goals in Yemen and eliminated the threats. The next phase of the operation by the Saudis was called 'Operation Restoring Hope' (Hamid, 2015). Despite the announcement, the airstrikes continued and intensified from time to time. Also, the humanitarian crisis has worsened due to the war, the coalition blockade, poverty and the spread of diseases such as Cholera and COVID-19 (Sowers and Weinthal, 2021). While the evolution of the military intervention is outside the scope of this thesis, different aspects of it will be highlighted in the context of Omani neutrality towards Yemen throughout Section 3 of this chapter. In the next section, I will examine Omani-Saudi relations, with the goal of understanding Oman's perception of Saudi Arabia.

7.1.3 Omani-Saudi Relations

As put by an interviewed Omani diplomat, 'To understand the Omani perception of Saudi Arabia during the Sultan Qaboos era, researchers need to examine the Saudi-Imamate relations' (Diplomat3, 2022a). During the Jabal Akhdar War (1954–1959) between the government of Oman, which was controlling the coastal areas, and the Imam Ghalib Al-Hinane, who was controlling the interior regions of Oman, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were supporting the Imamate. After his defeat in 1959, Al-Hinane fled Oman to Saudi Arabia and was welcomed by the Saudi government (Al-Ismaili, 2018).[35] Saudi Arabia continued its political and financial support of the Imam until the early 1970s. This Saudi support resulted in the Imam organising some attacks and sabotage operations against Oman during the early 1960s. The Omani government was 'worried' that the Imam's support from Saudi Arabia would drive him to return to Oman and try to control the interior regions again (Adam Matthew, 2016b). This fear spiked again with the onset of

[35] The archival evidence indicates that Saudi Arabia used Imam Ghalib as a card to gain some leverage towards Oman over the issue of Buraimi, in which Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were trying to control the border area between the three countries, called 'Buraimi'. The importance of this area came from the expectation that it was rich in natural resources. With the support of Britain, the area was controlled and divided between Oman and the UAE. A detailed discussion of this incident can be found in the following:
PETERSEN, T. T. 1992. Anglo-American rivalry in the Middle East: the struggle for the Buraimi oasis, 1952–1957. *The International History Review,* 14**,** 71-91, AL-SHAMSI, S. M. 1986. *The Al-Buraimi dispute: a case study in inter-Arab politics*, American University.

the Marxist Dhofar revolution – explained in detail in Chapter 5 – in the mid-1960s, as the Omani government would not have been able to face the two threats simultaneously (Adam Matthew, 2016b). Thus, Sultan Qaboos prioritised establishing good relations with Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring countries.

During his visit to Saudi Arabia in 1971, Saudi support for the Imamate was the main point of discussion between Sultan Qaboos and King Faisal Bin Abdulaziz, the King of Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975 (FCO 353, 1971). Despite the official discourse that describes the visit as very successful, the archival documents indicate the dissatisfaction of Sultan Qaboos. In a meeting between the British ambassador in Oman and Sultan Qaboos, where the two discussed relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia, Qaboos Said, 'I would continue patiently to improve the relations with Saudi Arabia but in general I felt that King Faisal could not forget that he was Wahhabi where Oman was concerned' (FCO 353, 1971).[36] Despite this perception, relations continued to improve between the two countries. The main reason behind this improvement was the two countries having the same perceived threat: the Marxist revolution in Yemen and the South of Oman. For Saudi Arabia, 'victories of rebellions in the South are a threat as their next goal will be other Gulf Countries' (Ambassador2, 2022). This argument is true as the movement had announced that its goal was to liberate all Arabian Gulf countries from Western imperialism. They even changed their name from the National Front for Liberating Oman to the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf to reflect the change in their goal (Katzman, 2011). Thus, the Omani and Saudi governments grew closer and started to collaborate more.

After their rapprochement during the 1970s, relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia went through various ups and downs. An Omani commentator claimed that a significant factor cooling relations between the two is the Saudi's ambition for regional hegemony and the Omani stance of independence and neutrality (Diplomat2, 2021). One indicator of this is the Saudi response to the announcement of the border agreement between Oman and Yemen in 1992. At the time, the Saudis communicated to their Omani counterparts their dissatisfaction with the agreement. They also informed the Arab League and the UN that they opposed the agreement. The Saudis argued that they wanted a passage to the Arabian

[36] Oman suffered from several attacks by the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, mostly during the 19th century. These attacks are known in the Arabic literature as the 'Wahhabi invasion' -الغزو الوهابي-. Sultan Qaboos' comment can be understood in this historical context. See HAJRI, A. 2022. Power transition in Oman: theory and practice انتقال الحكم في عمان ماضياً وحاضراً: التنظير والتنظيم والتطبيق. *Arabian Humanities. Revue internationale d'archéologie et de sciences sociales sur la péninsule Arabique/International Journal of Archaeology and Social Sciences in the Arabian Peninsula*.

Sea, and the border agreement denied them 'their right' (Arafat and SpringerLink, 2020). Omani decision-makers perceived the Saudi's dissatisfaction with an agreement between two sovereign states as striving for hegemony. Therefore, as a former Omani commentator argued, the Saudis also opposed the unification of Yemen in 1990 and continued to inflame the civil war between the South and North of Yemen in 1994 (Expert2, 2022).

Oman and Saudi Arabia have continued to approach regional issues differently. For example, as explained in detail in Chapter 5, Oman has maintained that the best possible way to respond to the Iranian threat is to engage with Iran. On the other hand, the Saudis have argued that the best way is to strengthen military capabilities and enter military alliances. Thus, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait proposed a military alliance between the six Gulf countries, which Oman refused (Long, 2021). Omani decision-makers argued that such a move would antagonise Iran and increase its threat. After this, the relationship between Oman and Saudi Arabia cooled down. Finally, just before the War in Yemen started, the Saudis declared the Omani role in the Iranian nuclear agreement 5+1 as a 'betrayal for their Arab brothers' (Diplomat3, 2022a). Several elites interviewed for this research have explained the difference between the Omani view of Iranian-Western relations and the view of other Gulf monarchies on these relations. One former Omani diplomat argued that 'any improvement in the Western-Iranian relations is a stabilising factor for the region' (Diplomat4, 2022a). Another former diplomat has claimed that 'you can't have a stable region when one of the biggest countries in the region is the main enemy of the world hegemon' (Ambassador2, 2022). These differences in approaching regional issues have contributed to ongoing sensitivity between the two countries in dealing with each other. However, despite this cool-down, diplomatic relations remain active.

7.2 Oman's Foreign Policy towards the War in Yemen: Expected Neutrality

The coalition of countries under the leadership of Saudi Arabia announced the start of its operation in Yemen, named Decisive Storm, on 26 March 2015 (Tehsin et al., 2019).[37] On the same day, the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in a public statement that it would not be part of the operation in Yemen. The Sultanate's statement also urged all parties to follow diplomatic means to solve the conflict and said that diplomacy is the only way of

[37] Decisive Storm (عاصفة الحزم) was named based on a famous sentence that King Abdelaziz was known to say very often: الحزم أبو العزم أبو الظفرات. It means that decisiveness is the father (or base) of doing and wining. It was widely used in the domestic propaganda to support the war.

solving the Yemeni issue. On the reasons behind the Omani abstention from participating in the Decisive Storm, Yousif bin Allawi, the Omani minister responsible for foreign affairs (1997–2022), said, 'Oman is a country of peace, and we cannot support peace processes if we are part of this operation'. Moreover, bin Allawi said that Oman could not be part of any operation that may cause any harm to 'our Yemeni brothers' (Information, 2015). While these are the Omani government's ways of publicly justifying its neutrality towards the War in Yemen, the factors go beyond this. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, the PMN suggests that Oman would adopt neutrality in this conflict if this position would not harm the interests of its security guarantor. To explain Oman's neutrality, this section will focus on four elements of the processual neutrality model. First, I will explain the influence of the security guarantor by examining the Omani perception of the interests of the security guarantor. Secondly, I will elaborate on the strategic phase of neutrality by reviewing the start of the conflict and how Oman resisted the pressure to join the war. Thirdly, in section 7.3.3, I will examine the difficulty of adopting neutrality, how the belligerent's recognition of neutrality fluctuated and how this affected the evolution of the war. Finally, I will explore the active neutrality role by examining Oman's diplomatic and humanitarian roles in Yemen.

7.2.1 The Perception of the Interests of the Security Guarantor

Since the signing of the access agreement with the US in 1980, Omani decision-makers have perceived the US as their security guarantor (Diplomat3, 2022b, Diplomat1, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022a). The details of this agreement and how US-Omani security relations developed were discussed in detail in Chapter 3. In the years since the signing of the agreement, as discussed in Chapter 6, the interests of the US have been one of the main factors affecting the decision-makers in Oman (Diplomat2, 2021). As I have argued regarding the PMN, decision-makers of small neutral states must always ensure that their positions are not harming the interests of the security guarantor. In this section, I argue that Omani decision-makers viewed Omani neutrality in Yemen as favourable to Washington. To elaborate on this argument, I will discuss the perception of Omani elites concerning US interests in Yemen and what they think of the US perception of Omani neutrality.

When studying foreign policymaking, examining perception is crucial to understanding a state's foreign policy. Jervis (Jervis, 2017) argued that to explain the elite's decision it is a must to study and understand their perception of others and how they predict

the behaviour of other states. With this perspective in mind, this section explains how the Omani elites perceive US interests in Yemen and how these elites understand the US perception of potential Omani neutrality in Yemen. In addition, this section explores the US interests in Yemen, as understood using the literature, in order to compare them with the perceptions of the Omani elite to indicate any possible misperceptions.

Based on evidence collected from different interviews with several Omani elites, Oman's foreign policy decision-makers perceive the US as having four main interests in Yemen. First, to ensure that Iran will not 'dramatically' increase its influence in Yemen (Ambassador5, 2022, Diplomat4, 2022a, Diplomat2, 2021). This claim is in line with the US foreign policy goals in the Middle East, which seek to curb the growing Iranian influence in places such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and in this case, Yemen (Seliktar et al., 2020, Analytica, 2022). Interestingly, while Omani elites argue that their position does not harm US interests, Oman has been the only Arabian Gulf country that has maintained stable and warm relations with Iran during at least the last four decades. In this regard, Omani decision-makers argue that by not antagonising Iran, Omani neutrality enabled the US to reach out and negotiate with it in 2013 – talks that preceded the 5+1 negotiations, which led to the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran (Expert3, 2022).

As Omani decision-makers view it, the second US interest in Yemen is to prevent the war from seriously disrupting oil production in the Arabian Gulf States, especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Diplomat3, 2022b, Diplomat4, 2022a). In this regard, it is essential to note that Saudi Arabia suffered one of its most serious attacks in 2019 on two of its giant oil fields in Abqaiq and Khurais (Tanchum, 2019). The Ansar Allah group has declared responsibility for the attacks. These attacks caused instability in the oil markets as they cut Saudi oil production in half, which amounted to 5% of the global oil production (Singh, 2019). Omani neutrality, as one Omani diplomat argued, cannot be seen in any possible way as an obstacle to reaching the goal of stabilising the oil market (Diplomat4, 2022a). On the contrary, the Saudis turned to Oman after the attack to talk with the Houthis and look for possible ways to end the war, as I will explain in detail later in this chapter (Baron et al., 2019). This perception is in line with the US foreign policy towards the Middle East. The US interest in Middle Eastern oil started with the establishment of the Saudi American Oil Company in 1938 (later known as ARAMCO) (Hoskins, 1950). Later, the US goal became ensuring the free flow of oil from the Middle East (Prifti and SpringerLink, 2017). Despite decreasing its imports of Middle Eastern oil, ensuring oil market stability and the free flow of oil are still core elements of US foreign policy in the region (Yom, 2020).

Thirdly, the American policy towards Yemen aims to prevent the war from seriously harming security and trade in the Bab Al-Mandab strait (Diplomat3, 2022b, Ambassador3, 2022, Diplomat1, 2022, Diplomat4, 2022a). Bab Al-Mandab, shown in map 7.1, is very important for both international trade and international oil markets. It is the world's third-largest oil maritime chokepoint as almost 6.2 million barrels travel through the strait daily (Heinze, 2018, Analytica, 2022). Fourthly, the US wants to fight Al-Qaeda in Yemen and prevent any possible resurgence of it (Diplomat3, 2022b, Ambassador3, 2022, Expert2, 2022, Diplomat4, 2022a, Futaisi, 2021). This has been a long-standing goal of the US foreign policy towards the region, and the US currently wants to make sure that the war will not represent a chance for Al-Qaeda to re-establish itself as a major player in Yemen (Baken and Mantzikos, 2015, Bahri and Malbrunot, 2013, Atwan, 2013). The US has been bombing Al-Qaeda sites in Yemen since at least 2008. In the last ten years, the US has carried out more than 370 air strikes in Yemen, intending to curb Al-Qaeda's power (Data Project, 2020). Thus, as Omani elites view it, Omani neutrality towards the war did not go against any US objectives in Yemen.

7.2.2 A Short Strategic Phase of Neutrality: Pressuring Oman to Join the Coalition.

Despite being expected, the announcement and adoption of neutrality did not go smoothly. Information acquired by the author revealed the details of two meetings between the six Arabian Gulf countries before the coalition intervention (Diplomat1, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022a, Expert2, 2022, Ambassador4, 2022). The first meeting was held in Riyadh, specifically at the Prince Sultan Military base, almost two weeks before the start of the war. The Saudis' main goal was to convince the other Gulf countries to align their foreign policies towards Yemen with Saudi foreign policy (Diplomat1, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022a).

Before the meeting, some intelligence information showed that the UAE had agreed to join Saudi Arabia in its efforts in Yemen, while Bahrain was expected to join. The Saudis were sceptical that Qatar and Kuwait would join. They did not expect Oman to join them, but they tried to pressure the Sultanate to abandon its position (Diplomat1, 2022). The meeting resulted in all Arabian Gulf countries, apart from Oman, promising Saudi Arabia to support it in Yemen. The Omani decision not to support any party in Yemen was straightforward despite the pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to them in Yemen (Diplomat1, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022a, Diplomat4, 2022b). It is important to note here that the Saudis did not discuss any military intervention in Yemen, and the whole discussion was about supporting the

internationally recognised government in Yemen against Ansar Allah (Diplomat3, 2022b). After the meeting, the Omani officials who attended thought that the Arabian Gulf countries would 'intervene similarly to their intervention in Syria' by supporting the Yemeni government with arms, money and political support (Diplomat1, 2022).

The second meeting occurred in Muscat on 23 March 2015, just two days before the coalition intervened in Yemen, as interviews with Omani elites revealed. During this meeting, the Saudis argued that they would do whatever it took to prevent the growth of the Ansar Allah threat. At this meeting, it was clear that all Arabian Gulf countries except Oman would be part of the potential coalition (Diplomat1, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022a, Diplomat4, 2022a). While the Saudis knew they would not convince Oman to be part of any possible coalition, they tried to get its political support. However, the Omanis were very clear that they would not take sides in Yemen. Thus, the arguments during the meeting were heated, and the Saudis were very upset by the Omani stance (Diplomat3, 2022b, Ambassador2, 2022, Diplomat2, 2022). At the end of the meeting, the Omani delegation told the Saudis that 'any military intervention will be costly because it is very late. Military-wise, they should have intervened before Ansar Allah took control of Sanaa' (Diplomat1, 2022). Despite the Omani resistance to supporting the Saudi stance in Yemen, one commentator revealed that Oman collaborated at one point. He argued that the Omanis shared some intelligence information about the location of civilian areas so that the coalition could avoid bombing them (Expert3, 2022).[38]

Based on the pieces of evidence collected from interviews, archives and literature, I argue that three main reasons influenced Oman to resist the pressure and continue adopting neutrality: the previous success of Omani neutrality, the geographical location of the conflict and domestic pressure. First, Oman adopted regional neutrality in the early 1980s in the context of the Iran-Iraq War. This policy was successful from the Omani viewpoint as it prevented it from being pulled into the war (Ambassador1, 2022, Ambassador3, 2022, Diplomat1, 2022). Besides, it enabled Oman to play some traditional neutral roles, such as hosting negotiations between belligerents, treating war casualties and supporting peace processes. As Chapter 6 explained, these roles lasted beyond the war, and Oman started to market itself as 'the friend of all and foe of none' (Schanzer & Salter, 2019). This self-view of a successful neutral country has made it easier for decision-makers in Oman to adopt neutrality in any future conflicts where possible, such as the War in Yemen.

[38] This piece of information was only mentioned by one commentator, and the researcher could not verify it despite asking several other interviewees, who either said that they did not know or it was not true.

Secondly, Yemen's geographical proximity was vital for the Omani decision-makers' calculations regarding neutrality. To start with, Oman shares an approximately 300 km long border with the Yemeni governorate of Mahra (Neubauer, 2016). This long border placed the Sultanate in the face of any regional instability, increasing the Omani sense of threat coming from Yemen. One diplomat told me that the Omani government knew that instability could spill over the border easily, especially if a country is part of the conflict (Diplomat3, 2022a). In addition, this threat was significant in the Omani government's eyes, I argue, due to past experiences with Yemen. Omani relations with Southern Yemen were volatile. As discussed in Chapter 5 in detail, Southern Yemen had supported the insurgents in Oman during the Dhofar War, 1964–1975. South Yemen was a communist state supported by Cuba, the Soviet Union, East Germany, China and Iraq. This support came through the Mahra governorate in Yemen. Thus, this experience increased Omani sensitivity towards Mahra and resulted in Oman constructing a special foreign policy towards it (Katzman, 2004) to ensure long-term security and deter any possible threat. Oman's strategy for achieving this goal was to maintain some influence and ensure the loyalty of the tribes living in the Mahra governorate. I argue that the Omani way of dealing with Al Mahra is drastically different if we compare the 1970s to 2015 (Binhuwaidin, 2019).

Archival data shows that Oman and the UK used to train some Mahri tribal fighters and support them with money and arms during the 1960s and early 1970s. These fighters were directed to attack Southern Yemen, which was supporting the insurgents in Oman (Adam Matthew, 2016a). After the end of the Cold War, the Omani government changed how it dealt with Yemen in general and Mahra in particular. Instead of raising loyal fighters, the Sultanate shifted its approach to providing humanitarian support (Alghoul, 2015). Since the early 1980s, Oman has built different schools, hospitals and residential units in Mahra to increase its soft power in the region. In addition to this, many tribal leaders were given Omani passports (Alghoul, 2015). All these measures have helped in keeping the region stable and decreasing the challenges caused by any potential instability.

Thirdly, two main domestic reasons pushed the decision-makers to hold onto neutrality: the close relations between Mahris in Oman and Mahris in Yemen and the Omani identity.[39] To start with, there are robust relations between the tribes in Dhofar and the tribes

[39] People living in the southern region of Oman are called Dhofaris. People living in the Yemeni region of Mahra, which borders Oman's southern region, are called Mahris. Some people living in the Dhofar region in Oman are also called Mahris due to their family name or 'tribe', which is the same big tribe in Yemen. This shows the complex connection between the two areas.

in Mahra. Many Dhofari families have very close relatives living on the other side of the border in Yemen (Baabood, 2016). As map 7.2 shows, Mahris are located both in the Dhofar region in Oman and the Mahra region in Yemen. In an interview with a previous politician living in Dhofar, he said, 'It is very common for a family in Dhofar to have cousins and uncles living in Mahra' (Diplomat3, 2022b). Thus, it would not make sense to support one party in Yemen to help in fighting another party in Yemen. He added, 'The best path to follow in situations like this is to push the peace by supporting the negotiations process' (Diplomat1, 2022). This stance, I argue, is derived from the threat perception. The Omani government perceived that any involvement in the War in Yemen could inflame domestic unrest, especially in the southern parts of the Sultanate, such as Dhofar (Baabood, 2016).

Figure 4 : Map of the ethnic distribution of people in Yemen and South Oman

7.2.3 The Recognition of Belligerents: Fluctuations and Challenges

Contrary to previous situations, by the time of this conflict, many parties had taken Oman's stance as a neutral country for granted. Thus, as will be explained in Section 3.4 of this

chapter, Oman started to assume some traditional neutral roles from the first week of the war. Despite this, adopting neutrality encountered some difficulties, and these difficulties became more serious whenever the belligerents' recognition of Omani neutrality decreased. Such situations cause problems for neutral countries as the pressure to abandon their position becomes stronger. In the following section, I will examine this argument in the context of two incidents Oman faced during the war: the arms smuggling issue and the attack on the ambassador's house.

To start with, the story of arms smuggling began when Reuters published two reports about possible arms smuggling from Iran to Ansar Allah through Oman. The first report was published on 16 September 2016 and claimed that arms were heading to Ansar Allah in 'vehicles with Omani plates'. In the same report, Reuters also argued that 'there was no evidence of any link to Omani authorities' (Reuters, 2016a). While this report did not result in reactions in the region, a second report led to heated discussions and arguments about Oman's role. On 20 October 2016, Reuters published a detailed report about smuggling arms through Oman. In this report, the news agency claimed that information acquired through 'a Western official' showed that a wide range of arms was being smuggled through Oman (Reuters, 2016b). These included anti-ship missiles, short-range missiles and surface-to-surface missiles.

Different newspapers in the Arabian Gulf and beyond published the Reuters report, such as Ukaz in Saudi Arabia and the National in the UAE (Okaz, 2016, Alhurra, 2016 , Araby21, 2016). Both magazines are pro-government and are seen by many as reflections of the governments' orientations in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After these reports, Oman issued an official statement denying these accusations through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). The statement claimed that Oman had discussed the matter with the coalition countries, the United States and the UK, and they all were assured that these reports were inaccurate. Also, in the statement, the Sultanate affirmed its neutrality towards the war and urged all parties to look for diplomatic solutions to solve their differences and end the War in Yemen (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). While strongly denying the arms smuggling reports, a former Omani diplomat offered an interesting explanation for the reports published by Reuters. During an interview I had with him, he argued that the US government had passed false information about arms smuggling to Reuters to pressure Oman (Diplomat3, 2022b). The story goes back to what was known in the media as the 'Kerry initiative' in the last year of the Obama administration.

During the first two months of the war, the Obama administration came up with a plan for a ceasefire and a peace deal in Yemen. US Secretary of State John Kerry's team contacted the Omanis and asked them for help to reach Ansar Allah and coordinate a meeting with them to discuss the plan. The Omanis agreed, and a team from Oman met with Ansar Allah representatives, which led to later meetings between the US and Ansar Allah in Muscat (Aboudi, 2015). After discussions for several days of discussions, the two sides could not reach a deal, and the meetings stopped (Mudabesh, 2016). With this, my source claimed, the US expected Oman to pressure Ansar Allah to accept the proposal (Diplomat3, 2022b). However, the Omani decision-makers refused to pressure Ansar Allah and argued that their role in Yemen was not to push any party to take action or accept any proposal. As I will explain in more detail in section 3.4, Oman sees itself as a facilitator or a go-between, not a mediator. As the Omani administration understands it, a facilitator only supports the parties who want to connect and makes communication between them easier (Diplomat3, 2022b, Diplomat1, 2022, Ambassador4, 2022, Futaisi, 2021, AlBadi, 2022). Despite supporting Omani neutrality, the US viewed the Omani role in Yemen differently. They wanted Oman to support the US views of Yemen and help it in all its initiatives, something that Omani elites did not agree with. Thus, the US had passed the wrong information to Reuters, according to the information acquired (Diplomat3, 2022b).

It is very hard to be certain about the accuracy of either the above explanation or the reports of Reuters. However, some factors show the difficulty of such potential smuggling operations, which could be seen as indicators that the story the Omani side tells is more truthful. First, the Sultanate's threat perception of the Mahra region is very high (Rahman, 2023, Kéchichian, 2023, Due-Gundersen and Owtram, 2022, Jones, 2013). The government politicians knew that facilitating or even ignoring such operations could inflame instability, which Oman was trying to avoid. It could also harm the positive relations between the tribes in Mahra and Oman (Diplomat3, 2022b). The Mahra region was relatively stable and away from the conflicts, especially in the early stages of the coalition intervention (Freeman, 2019). Thus, Oman applied rigorous inspection of shipments on the borders between Oman and Yemen (Diplomat3, 2022b, Expert2, 2022, Expert3, 2022, Expert1, 2021). Other than this, there are relatively more accessible routes to smuggle arms and munitions from Iran to Ansar Allah, such as through Yemen's coast. While the border with Oman is around 300km long, the coast of Yemen is more than 1000 km long (Lackner, 2019). Thus, monitoring and stopping arms smugglers coming through these coasts is more challenging. Moreover, using the Yemeni coasts is easier than crossing through Omani lands because of the relative

proximity to Ansar Allah-controlled territories (Lackner, 2019). In the case of smuggling arms through Oman, a shipment would need to travel more than 1000 km across Yemen through coalition-controlled territories before arriving in Ansar Allah-controlled territories. Finally, Ansar Allah sees Oman as one of the few reliable channels to the outside world (Diplomat3, 2022b). It would make little sense to anger Oman and avoid losing such a channel by smuggling arms through it. Based on these indications, I argue that it is most likely that these reports were used to pressure Oman to put pressure on the Houthis during the negotiations.

The second incident that represented a challenge to Omani neutrality occurred in October 2015 when the house of the Omani ambassador in Yemen came under fire from missiles. No party has acknowledged responsibility for the attack (AlJazeera, 2015). Firstly, Ansar Allah accused the coalition of attacking the house of the Omani ambassador. In a public statement, they said that Saudi jet fighters had carried out the attack to 'obstruct the Omani efforts to support the peace process' (Mohammed, 2015). On the other hand, the official coalition speaker also accused the Ansar Allah group of attacking the house and said,

> *'One would be able from the beginning to distinguish between a mortar strike and a plane strike'. He added that Saudi Arabia would be happy to open an investigation to identify the groups responsible for the attack' (Dubais, 2015).*

Oman, for its part, protested the attack and handed a letter of condemnation to the Saudi Ambassador in Oman (Heneghan, 2015). Other than this, it issued a public statement saying,

> *'Oman received with deep regret the news of the targeting of the ambassador's home in Sanaa, a clear violation of international charters and norms that emphasise the inviolability of diplomatic premises' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).*

Different Omani diplomats I interviewed claimed that this event, striking the ambassadors' house, put some pressure on Oman to give up its neutral position in fear of more escalations, which is something that did not materialise. They also claimed that such events indicate the difficulty of being neutral and make it challenging to keep playing the neutral role through actions such as hosting negotiations and supporting the envoys of the UN and US to Yemen (Ambassador1, 2022, Diplomat1, 2022, Ambassador4, 2022). Despite these difficulties,

Oman has continued to play the traditional neutral roles, as I will discuss in the following section.

7.2.4 Exercising Active Neutrality

By the start of the conflict in 2015, Oman had active relations with different stakeholders such as the Hadi government, the Ansar Allah group, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and various international powers. This recognition and active relations enabled Omani diplomats to play neutral diplomatic roles from the onset of the conflict (Al-Muslimi, 2017). From this position, Oman has played three key roles: mediating in the release of hostages, supporting peace process efforts and providing humanitarian assistance.

Firstly, Oman has played an important role in freeing and facilitating the evacuation of hostages held by different parties in Yemen. On the first day of the Decisive Storm operation, Oman facilitated the evacuation of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, the president of Yemen since 2012, who was under house arrest by the Ansar Allah group. He was taken from Yemen to Muscat, the Omani capital, wearing a traditional Omani address (Cafiero & Wagner, 2015). An Omani diplomat told me in an interview that the officials in Oman had worked hard to evacuate Hadi from Aden to Muscat. He also said that Hadi wore the Omani dress to hide him from Ansar Allah fighters as Oman was the only Gulf country that was not part of the coalition intervening against them. He claimed that using this tactic with Hadi shows that ‘Oman is a player accepted by all belligerents in the region’ (Diplomat4, 2022a). Additionally, three months after the beginning of Decisive Storm, Oman freed Casey Coombs, an American Journalist who was held by the Ansar Allah movement (Neubauer, 2016). In the same month, June 2015, a Singaporean citizen held by the Ansar Allah movement was freed by Oman (Colombo, 2017).

These successful attempts to free hostages held in Yemen have increased the credibility of Omani neutrality and its role as a mediator. Thus, in August 2015, the French government requested Oman’s help in freeing a French national held in Yemen with an unnamed group. Oman succeeded, and he was released in late August 2015 (Cafiero & Wagner, 2015). Other hostage-freeing operations were carried out by Oman, such as freeing three Saudis, two Americans and one Brit who were held by the Ansar Allah group (Neubauer, 2016). In an interview with an Omani diplomat, he claimed that Oman has played a significant role in freeing other hostages. However, these incidents are not announced to the public due to requests from either the hostage himself/herself, the group holding them, or

their home countries (Ambassador4, 2022). These roles, I argue, increase the value of Omani neutrality in the eyes of the international community and benefit countries such as France, the United States or any other country whose citizens may be captive inside Yemen. I argue that due to this value, it is likely that these countries would support the Omani stance and work to alleviate any pressure from the belligerents to abandon it.

On the practical side, Omani efforts in freeing the captives are made in five steps, as explained by Abdullah AlBadi, the former Omani ambassador in Yemen from 2011–2013, in an interview I held with him. First, the Omanis do not propose any facilitation even if they see an opportunity; they only initiate it when they are asked by the country whose citizen is captive (AlBadi, 2022). The reason behind this is due to the principle in Omani foreign policy of non-interference in the affairs of others (Diplomat3, 2022b, Diplomat1, 2022). Second, the officials in Oman contact the group holding the captive. The contacts are not always through official channels (AlBadi, 2022). Oman has a highly complex set of connections in Yemen, such as with tribal leaders, businesspeople and average citizens. These connections were built during the last four decades (Expert3, 2022, Ambassador4, 2022, Diplomat2, 2021). Third, the go-between person listens to the group's demands and communicates them to the officials in Oman. Usually, in these situations, the Omani officials do not give their opinions about the group's demands or actions (AlBadi, 2022). This is due to the same principle of non-interference in the affairs of others unless asked. Fourth, after listening to the response of the concerned country, the go-between person goes back to the group with the response (AlBadi, 2022). Finally, in the case of a deal, Oman ensures that the freed hostage is transferred to Oman first, and later, they can choose when and how to go to their country (AlBadi, 2022). Usually, the transfer from Yemen to Oman is done using Oman Royal Air Force planes, which are in continuous contact and coordination with Saudi Arabia (Expert2, 2022, Expert3, 2022).

The Second role Oman has played in Yemen is supporting peace processes. This role is done in three different ways: facilitating the move of representatives of various parties, hosting negotiations and working as a go-between among different parties. Firstly, Oman has facilitated the movement of Ansar Allah representatives from Yemen to different places where peace discussions were held (Bahgat, 2023, Johnsen and Juneau, 2023). Besides facilitating the move of Ansar Allah representatives to meet US officials in 2015 and 2016, as discussed before, Oman also facilitated their movement to different events. First, Kuwait came up with an initiative to host peace negotiations between the different parties (Trends, 2022). They requested that Oman take care of transferring the representatives of Ansar Allah from Yemen

to Kuwait (Diplomat4, 2022a). As in previous cases, the Royal Forces of Oman carried out the transfer from Yemen to Muscat. Later they used Oman Airways to fly from Muscat to Kuwait. Unfortunately, the meetings stopped in August without reaching a peace deal (Alkhataf, 2019). Oman, a former Omani diplomat argues, was the only trusted option that has good relations with all stakeholders in Yemen. Thus, Kuwait first contacted Oman for help, and 'we happily provided it' (Diplomat4, 2022a).

Oman has also played an essential role in hosting peace negotiations in Muscat during the War in Yemen. Besides previously discussed cases, Oman hosted a meeting between Ansar Allah and Saudi Arabia in Muscat. While the meetings are not always announced, I have found, based on information collected from interviews and newspapers, that meetings have taken place at the following times: March 2016, June 2017, January to March 2018, April 2019, November 2019 and on several others occasions in 2020–2022 (Diplomat3, 2022a, Ambassador4, 2022, Worrall, 2021, Baabood, 2021). Most of these meetings did not result in game-changer deals; however, as Abdullah AlBadi, the former Omani Ambassador to Yemen, argues in an interview I did with him, talking with each other about issues and differences is always better than non-talking. He added,

> *'No matter how long it takes, Ansar Allah and the Saudis will only solve the issue by talking. Trying to solve the issue by military means will only make it worse, which is why we are always ready to facilitate diplomatic means whenever we are asked to do so'. (AlBadi, 2022)*

On the practical side, Oman facilitates the hosting of meetings in four different steps. Firstly, they only begin their efforts when they are asked to do so. 'Even if we see an opportunity, we don't move as this is an interference in the affairs of others', a former Omani diplomat informed me in a personal interview (Diplomat3, 2022b). For all the meetings Oman has hosted in Muscat, they were asked to do so by either Ansar Allah, Saudi Arabia, the US, or the UN envoy. These parties view Oman as a trusted country that has a reach to most players inside Yemen (Ambassador5, 2022, Diplomat4, 2022b, Diplomat2, 2021). Secondly, after a party expresses interest in meeting another, Oman contacts the other party and communicates this interest. If the other party is willing to do so, then the Omani officials ask them for a preferred place to meet, and usually, it is Muscat. Next, the Omanis ensure the meeting parties have a comfortable and secure place (such as a hotel) to meet comfortably (Ambassador5, 2022, Diplomat4, 2022b, Diplomat2, 2021). During these meetings, it is important to note that Omani officials do not attend unless they are asked to do so by both

parties. In addition, Omani elites do not give their opinion about the trajectory of the discussions (Expert2, 2022, Ambassador4, 2022). In this regard, Abdullah AlBadi, the former Omani ambassador to Yemen, argued during an interview with him:

> *'We consider this an interference in the affairs of the negotiating parties. We are not mediators, and we don't have to do anything with the evolution of the negotiations. As long as the two parties have a comfortable and secure place to meet, then we did the facilitation role'. (AlBadi, 2022)*

Omani elites usually emphasise that Oman is a facilitator and not a mediator in Yemen. For example, in my interview with him, a former Omani diplomat argued that there is a huge difference between a facilitator and a mediator, and Oman cannot be a mediator (Diplomat4, 2022b). There are two reasons behind this, as he argues, which are the principles of Omani foreign policy and the trust Oman has cultivated. Sultan Qaboos established four main principles of Omani foreign policy, as discussed in the introduction chapter, and the most important of them is non-interference in the affairs of others (Baabood, 2016, Al-Khalili, 2009). Mediators tend to offer their opinions without being asked, offer their help and, most importantly, take part in the negotiations (Barsky, 2016). Moreover, as a few elites argued in interviews, Oman wants to preserve the trust and good relations it has with different parties (Ambassador6, 2022 , Diplomat3, 2022b, Expert3, 2022, Ambassador5, 2022). If Oman, for example, during the previously discussed case of the US wanting Oman to press Ansar Allah to accept the Kerry initiative, agreed to intervene, then the result could be very bad for Oman. There is a very high chance that Ansar would turn down the plan with or without Omani pressure. In that case, Oman would be seen as an instrument supporting US interests, and this would be 'the most unwanted result' (Diplomat3, 2022b). From the perspective of Omani elites, the facilitators are trusted more and Oman maintains this policy because it gives it the highest value in the eyes of the international community.

Finally, Oman has provided humanitarian support to the Yemenis affected by the conflict. This assistance comes in two forms: direct assistance and supporting the work of the Red Cross. First, the Omani government is directly supporting the Yemenis in three different ways: treating wounded civilians, direct monetary support and food assistance. To start with, Oman has treated hundreds of wounded civilians from Yemen (Baabood, 2021). Most treatments take place in Salalah, located in the southern part of Oman, due to its proximity to Yemen (Castelier, 2020). While there are no published exact numbers of Yemenis in Omani

hospitals, someone would notice their high numbers when taking a short walk in the hospitals of Salalah. During a chat with an official working in the Ministry of Health in Salalah, he reported that there were 191 Yemeni being treated in the Hospitals in Salalah city at the time.[40] since the total number of hospital beds is 510, Yemenis were filling around 37% of the beds in Salalah. It is important to note that these numbers are not exact and could not be verified, but they still indicate the efforts of Oman to treat wounded Yemenis.[41] Additionally, the Omani government opened the Arabian Prosthetics Centre in Salalah in March 2020 (Alroya, 2020). Since its opening, the centre has treated more than 850 Yemenis who lost a leg or arm due to the ongoing War in Yemen. The treated patients are entered into a rehabilitation programme before they are released and usually have a choice to stay in Oman or go back to Yemen (AlMahria, 2022).

The other form of humanitarian support is direct food and monetary aid. This assistance, especially food, increases during some events, such as during Ramadan, the two Muslim Eid celebrations and during crises (Castelier, 2020). The assistance comes not only from the government but also from citizens in Oman who donate using official channels such as the Ministry of Social Development and Omani charitable organisations. Despite these efforts, there are no detailed reports about the size and beneficiaries of these donations. A few Omani elites argued that the over-publicisation of donation efforts could affect the Omani stance towards Yemen. For example, an Omani diplomat argued that during recent floods that affected Socotra Island in Yemen, the Omani government tried to support the affected Yemenis, but some reports suggested that there were political interests behind this (Diplomat4, 2022a). Thus, Oman started to direct its humanitarian support using international channels such as the Red Cross. On this, an Omani diplomat argued that direct assistance from the Omani government could be understood as leaning towards one party over the other, and thus it is safer to direct all the support to the Red Cross (Diplomat1, 2021b).

The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) was invited to open a logistics centre in Salalah city in the southern part of Oman in 2015, just after the start of the war (ICRC, 2015). While its location, just miles from the Omani-Yemeni border, is perfect for helping Yemen, which desperately needs humanitarian assistance, the centre plays a bigger role. Since opening in 2015 until January 2022, the centre has provided 18,000 metric tons of

[40] I visited Salalah in the summer of 2021, and I had to visit a hospital. While the visit was for non-research purposes, I had this and other casual chats about treating Yemenis. Some staff confirmed that all Yemenis who need health care or are wounded in the conflict were treated in the hospital.

[41] To verify the numbers, I contacted Ministry of Health, the National Statistics Centre and Officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but I could not get any number from them.

goods to affected areas in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa (ICRC, 2022). Other than food assistance, the centre also aims to develop skills for potential humanitarian workers. It is continually organising workshops with different institutions in Oman, such as the ministries of health, defence and foreign affairs, as well as with Omani universities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). These workshops aim to develop skills such as treating wounded civilians, treating trauma patients and dealing with explosive and chemical materials. Six years after opening the logistics centre in Salalah, the ICRC opened a supporting office in Muscat (ICRC, 2022). Ali AlBadi, the former Omani ambassador to Yemen and a current ICRC advisor, argued that this step's primary goal is to 'promote the work of ICRC in Oman and raise more funding for its work' (AlBadi, 2022).

The centre is the official channel that Oman uses to support Yemen. Given the ease of using the services offered by the centre, other countries have tried to use this channel. For example, in late 2015, Qatar and Iran tried to convince Oman to allow them to use its soil to transfer some humanitarian aid to Yemen (Diplomat1, 2022). However, the Omani government, a former Omani elite informed me, made it clear to Qatar and Iran that it would not allow any country to use Omani lands to deliver anything to Yemen, 'even one Kilogram of food' (Diplomat1, 2022).

Oman has continued to play different diplomatic and humanitarian roles in Yemen. After eight years of continued fighting, several meetings facilitated by Oman between the Houthis and Saudi officials resulted in a breakthrough. While these meetings started in Muscat in late 2022, the last one was held in Sanaa. The Saudi officials, for the first time since the war started, were hosted by the Houthis in Sanaa in April 2023 (AlHabashinah, 2023). The meetings were also attended by an Omani envoy, who was working to facilitate the deal. The three parties announced a truce between Ansar Allah and Saudi Arabia (Yaakoubi, 2023). While this truce would not necessarily mean the end of the war, the events that happened since the truce of April 2022 are outside the scope of this thesis.

7.3 Conclusion

The main goal of this chapter was to look beyond where the last chapter ended and examine Omani neutrality towards the War in Yemen from 2015 until 2022. To do this, this chapter was divided into two main parts. In the first part, I provided background information about the trajectory that led to the War in Yemen. In the second part, I examined Oman's position of neutrality during the war and showed the difficulties it has faced in maintaining this policy.

This examination, which was guided by the PMN, shows that the belligerents, specifically the Arab Gulf countries, were expecting Oman to not be a part of any military coalition to intervene in Yemen and to adopt neutrality towards the war. Despite this, they pressured Oman to join or politically support the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The diplomatic roles played by Oman affected the trajectory of the war. The Saudis, who have been leading the coalition, have learned to use the Omani channels when they want to de-escalate with the Houthis. On the other hand, Oman's diplomatic reach has played a key role in this de-escalation and ultimately in the signing of a truce in April 2022 between the Houthi and Saudi Arabia.

In the overall context of the evolution of Omani neutrality, compared to the case in 1980, the situation with Yemen shows that it has evolved at different levels, including the decision-makers' self-conceptions, the recognition of potential belligerents and the diplomatic reach of Omani practitioners. This status of Oman as a potential neutral has enabled it to play a bigger diplomatic and humanitarian role in Yemen compared to the previous cases. In regard to the decision-makers' self-conception, it was very obvious that decision-makers in Oman view themselves (and Oman) as neutral and should only adopt neutrality whenever they can. The story, mentioned at the start of the thesis that the Omani envoy attending the meeting held in Riyadh two weeks before the coalition intervention and the fact that they resisted the pressure from neighbouring GCC countries shows that they are sure about the roles they see Oman playing in Yemen and other regional conflicts.

In the War in Yemen, the relation between the ability to exercise active roles and the recognition of belligerents become clearer. As explained in the PMN, states can play diplomatic and humanitarian roles when belligerents recognise their neutrality. Thus, since the start of the War in Yemen, Oman has been the state that plays the more active brokering role in the conflict, hosting envoys of the UN, the US, the Houthi and the Saudis. Other than this, during the War in Yemen, the diplomatic reach of Oman was a determinant in the hostage issues. Oman has been very successful in getting international hostages out of Yemen, including Americans, French, British, Saudis and others. This track record of success has increased the value of Omani neutrality in the international community, which has, in turn, led them to support it and stop countries that may pressure Oman to abandon its neutrality.

In this thesis, I examined the events until April 2022, when Oman facilitated a truce between the Houthi group and the Saudis. Until the time of this writing, January 2024, the two parties have adhered to the truce without major conflicts re-emerging. At this point,

Oman is widely seen as a regionally neutral country with huge diplomatic reach, especially in Yemen.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this thesis, I embarked on a comprehensive examination of Omani neutrality from 1980 until 2022. During this period, the Middle East region has experienced numerous large-scale conflicts, from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) up to the War in Yemen, which involved the intervention of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia from 2015 until 2022. I treated these two conflicts as the main case studies in this thesis. In the period between the main case studies, the region experienced other pivotal conflicts, such as the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011.

This thesis has examined the interesting evolution of Omani foreign policy and Oman's efforts to adopt neutrality towards regional conflicts since the 1980s. To achieve this goal, this thesis has provided two main contributions. First, given that the current theoretical literature on neutrality does not offer a model that presents neutrality as a process, it developed a theoretical framework, the PMN, to explain neutrality's formation, evolution and limitations. Since the few existing studies on neutrality focus on the neutrality of certain countries towards one event, the PMN is a significant contribution of this thesis. Second, this thesis has shown that there are considerable gaps in the literature on Omani foreign policy, including neutrality. Most scholars interested in Omani foreign policy have merely discussed it as part of a bigger project about the foreign policies of Gulf states or focused on Omani neutrality within a limited context. Moreover, these studies tend to single out one factor or another as the key driver of Omani neutrality, such as the influence of Sultan Qaboos or the Ibadi sect. Thus, studying Omani neutrality as an evolving process with various influences and highlighting its limitations since the 1980s presents a considerable contribution to the literature. These contributions are a result of answering the research questions of this thesis. This thesis started with three main questions that opened the door to expanding the research and discovering more critical but unanswered questions. First, this thesis questioned the factors and the overall environment that led Oman to adopt neutrality in the first place. In this regard, I argued that Oman first adopted neutrality in the early 1980s, in the context of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Studying this necessitated the exploration of the regional events and political environment that preceded this war. Before 1970, Oman had foreign relations with only the UK and India, and domestic politics were highly influenced by the British colonial presence in the region (Worrall, 2021). In 1970, during the revolution against the

government in the south of Oman, Qaboos bin Said became the Sultan of Oman after a coup against his father. In six years, he ended the revolution in the South with the support of three main countries: the UK, Iran and Jordan (Jones, 2011). While Oman previously enjoyed a good relationship with Iran, the situation changed with the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which brought Khomeini to power.

In this year, Oman became suspicious of Iranian intentions, perceived Iraq as a potential threat to its sovereignty and the sovereignty of the Arab Gulf states, perceived the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a potential destabiliser to the region – especially to the Strait of Hormuz – and had a profound misunderstanding with its neighbours regarding Omani-Western relations (Al-Khalili, 2009). Amidst this unstable political environment, the Iran-Iraq War started on 22 September 1980. In this thesis, I revealed through evidence from archival data and interviews with high-ranking Omani decision-makers that initially, Oman was leaning towards supporting Iraq. In fact, during the first week of the war, Oman accepted Iraq's request to attack Iran using Omani facilities in the Peninsula of Musandam in the far North of Oman. However, the Omanis called off the proposed operation, citing 'practical reasons'. This incident showed that the Omani decision-makers were influenced by pressure from neighbouring Arab states and the fear of Iran's intentions. Thus, they made an uncalculated decision and accepted the Iraqi request, but they called it off soon and, for the first time, announced neutrality on the seventh day of the war.

Next, this thesis questioned the evolution of Omani neutrality and explored the different forms or phases of this neutrality. At the same time, it sought answers to a third, interrelated question about what causes the transition from one phase to the other. It was important to acknowledge that the evolution and change that needed examination were not exclusive to neutrality on the Omani side; all stakeholders evolve from one event to another, and the factors that influence them also change over time. To understand and answer these questions, I tracked the evolution of Omani neutrality and other relative stakeholders from the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 until April 2022, when a truce to end the War in Yemen was declared. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, Omani neutrality evolved, going from strategic to active, although its active neutrality was not yet fully developed. During the strategic phase, which was in the early days of the war, the complex interaction of external factors such as the threat of Iraq, the threat of Iran, the geography and the influence of security guarantees and domestic factors led Oman to adopt neutrality towards the war. This neutrality was passive, as Iran did not perceive Oman as neutral until 1984 (Jones and Ridout, 2015). Therefore, Oman's behaviour between 1980 and 1984 can be categorised as passive

neutrality. Following the change in the Iranian perception, Oman started to execute some of the roles traditionally played by neutrals, such as facilitating peace talks and humanitarian roles (Worrall, 2021). Hence, I placed the Omani foreign policy between 1984 and 1988 in the very early active neutrality phase.

The evidence presented in this thesis showed that, by the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Omani decision-makers began to view neutrality as a success and a beneficial policy to maintain. In other words, they started conceiving themselves (and Oman itself) as occupying a neutral role in the international arena. Despite this, the period between 1988 and 2015 showed inconsistency in Oman's application of neutrality towards the main conflicts in the region. I found two main reasons behind this inconsistency: the influence of Oman's security guarantors and the perception of a serious threat. For example, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Oman abandoned its neutrality and sided with Kuwait. The Omani decision-makers, such as the Sultan and his inner cycle, viewed Saddam and his behaviour as a threat to the region and even to the sovereignty of Arab Gulf countries.

Moreover, Oman did not adopt neutrality in two other events in the early 2000s: the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. After the events of 9/11, the US administration decided to invade Afghanistan as a part of its war against terror. The research shows that although Oman was leaning towards adopting neutrality, it could not refuse the request of the US to use its military facilities to support the invasion of Afghanistan. Thus, Oman was not neutral, as countries that announced neutrality must refrain from allowing belligerents to use their territory in any military operations that support their war efforts. In 2003, before the invasion of Iraq, Oman made it clear that it was against any military operation in Iraq. The Omani decision-makers insisted, both publicly and in meetings with the US officials, on refusing to support any military operations against Iraq. Despite this, when the operation started, Oman allowed the US and the UK to use its military facilities to support the operations in Iraq. These events demonstrate the limitations of small countries in adopting neutrality.

Two main factors prevented Omani neutrality in these cases: the influence of the security guarantor and the threat perception. First, I argue in my thesis that neutrals may abandon their neutrality when they perceive that it will hurt the interests of the security guarantor and, by extension, the relationship they have with them. This was obvious in the case of Omani behaviour towards the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Before the invasion, it was apparent that Oman was against it. However, the influence of the US (i.e. the security guarantor) was more determinant and caused Oman to allow the US to use its military

facilities to support the invasion. Second, countries tend to abandon neutrality when they perceive this neutrality as an existential threat. This was the case of Oman during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Since the 1980s, Omani decision-makers had viewed Saddam's aspirations as a threat to the sovereignty of the countries in the region. Despite abandoning neutrality in these instances, Omani elites still argue that neutrality is the main feature of Omani foreign policy, and the identity of Oman is built around it. These events show that neutrals, especially small neutrals, still have certain limits, even when that identity highly influences their behaviour.

In 2011, the Arab Spring started in countries such as Syria, where, within months it became a civil war. At the onset, all Arab Gulf monarchies decided to side with the Syrian opposition against the regime except Oman, which preferred to keep formal relations with both sides. The research shows that Omani decision-makers were conceiving themselves as neutrals who should play this role whenever possible. During the war, Oman played different diplomatic roles that, while unsuccessful, showed Oman's diplomatic reach to other parties and the wide recognition of Omani neutrality in the region. Oman was able to play the neutral role again after it had to abandon it in the previously mentioned cases in 2001 and 2003, where Oman viewed the US determination, in the context of its war against terror, as a limiting factor. The Omani high-ranked diplomats argued, in interviews I conducted with them, that it was risky to go against the US at that time, and the region was worried about the overreaction of the US. In the case of Syria in 2011, the conflict and the US involvement were different. The US was less determinant than before, according to the Omani elites I interviewed.

The Arab Spring also affected Yemen in 2011, which, after a series of events over the following three years, resulted in the Houthi movement gaining power in late 2014 at the expense of the internationally recognised government. A coalition under the leadership of Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen on 25 March 2015 in support of the internationally recognised government. This coalition included all Arab Gulf countries except Oman, which adopted active neutrality towards the conflict. During the conflict, Oman played active diplomatic and humanitarian roles, such as hosting peace negotiations, helping with hostage issues, providing humanitarian aid and treating injured civilians. The behaviour of Oman during the war showed a country with widely recognised neutrality and solid diplomatic reach. The roles played by Oman before the war, such as secretly facilitating and hosting the negotiations that eventually led to the Iran nuclear deal and helping in getting hostages from countries such as Yemen and Iran, contributed to the acceptance of Oman as an active neutral

country. In addition, unlike other cases where Oman abandoned its neutrality, such as Iraq in 1990 and 2003, Oman did not view its neutrality in Yemen as either hurting the interests of the US or as an existential threat. Thus, Oman exercised an active neutral policy during the War in Yemen.

Examining Omani neutrality led me to question the concept and practice of neutrality in international relations and foreign policy analysis. Despite being an ancient practice, as neutrality is as old as wars, the literature on neutrality remains very limited (Müller, 2019). To the author's best knowledge, no framework presents neutrality as a process, enabling the exploration of its evolution in changing historical and political environments. Most studies view neutrality as a static policy towards one event without delving into detail about how this policy evolves from one event to another. This thesis appreciates the importance of tracking the changes in neutrality over time and how this helps to explain the behaviour of neutral states or states seeking to remain outside a given conflict. Thus, a major contribution of this thesis is the development of a theoretical model that guides the examination of neutrality as a process. I called this model the Processual Model of Neutrality (PMN).

The PMN I proposed conceives neutrality as a process that can develop through three phases: strategic, passive and active. The initial neutrality is adopted in the strategic phase as a result of a complex interaction between different external and internal factors. The external factors include but are not limited to, the influence of security guarantors and external threats, while the internal factors include interest groups, the societal structure and the country's leadership. This policy of neutrality, when adopted for a more extended period, will cause the country to start to view itself as neutral, but this position may lack widespread recognition. Thus, it would be in the passive neutrality phase. When the neutral country gains wider recognition of its policy, it will be able to adopt active roles and accordingly be in the active neutrality phase. As I suggest in the PMN, the transition between these phases can move forward from strategic to active or backward, depending on the factors that continue to influence the trajectory of neutrals' policy. In cases like Oman, the application of the PMN shows that neutrals can adopt neutrality due to strategic factors. Still, continuing this policy is highly influenced by their self-conception and the country's identity. These findings offer several implications and suggestions for future research directions.

8.1 Omani Neutrality in Comparative Perspective

The available literature on Omani foreign policy in general and Omani neutrality in particular is scarce. While some studies and scholars have touched on Omani foreign policy, none have focused solely on examining the evolution of Omani neutrality from its genesis in the 1980s until the present era. Thus, in this thesis, I filled this critical gap by providing a detailed examination of the birth, evolution and limitations of Omani neutrality. The lack of attention to Oman's foreign policy also contrasts with the greater focus in the current literature on more extensive and more adventurous Arab Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. My thesis, by concentrating on the pivotal role of Oman, especially in the context of its active neutrality, calibrates the current literature and argues that regional conflicts can be more fully understood by examining the roles played by neutrals such as Oman. In this section, I will situate the contribution of this thesis within the literature of Omani foreign policy and other regional actors and show where it diverges or agrees with it.

During the last four decades, neutrality has been a central feature in the practices of Omani foreign policy. While limited, the existing literature has focused on certain elements and factors that influenced the making of Omani foreign policy. Most of these factors are unit-level influences such as leadership, political structure and the Ibadi sect. As explained in detail in the literature chapter, most of the studies have focused on one determinant and ignored others or have studied a group of them but only with generality or towards one event. My thesis, in contrast to the studies in the current literature, focused on a set of unit-level (domestic) factors and external factors and followed their interaction and evolution with the evolution of Omani neutrality since the 1980s. In addition, my project has diverged from the understanding of the influence of some of these factors in making Omani foreign policy and agreed with others. Next, I will explain the areas of agreement and divergence and their reasons.

First, some studies focus on the importance of Omani leadership and its perceptions towards regional events (Allen and Rigsbee II, 2014, Valeri, 2009, Plekhanov, 2004). The main figure among the decision-makers in the making of Omani foreign policy in the last four decades was Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, as rightly agreed upon by almost all studies. Among the scholars who have appreciated the importance of Sultan Qaboos in the making of Omani foreign policy are Joseph Kechichain (Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy), Abdullah Baabood (Oman's Independent Foreign Policy) and Nikolas Garden ('The Limits of the Sand Hurst Connections: The Evolution of Oman's

Foreign and Defence Policy: 1970-1977'). These writers, among others, attributed a large part of their projects to explaining the influence of Sultan Qaboos. While my project agrees with them and specifies an exemplary portion of the research to understand the thinking and perception of Sultan Qaboos, I demonstrate that some other factors are as important as the Sultan or even more critical, and therefore must be studied.

One of the factors that must be considered when studying Omani neutrality is the influence of its security guarantors. As I explained in the empirical chapters, the impact of the security guarantor can limit how much domestic factors, such as the perception of the Sultan, influence foreign policy decisions. A clear example of this is Oman's behaviour towards the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Before the war, the Omani decision-makers made it clear, publicly in political statements and in private meetings with US officials, that Oman was against any potential military operations in Iraq. Moreover, the interviews I conducted with high-level Omani decision-makers revealed that Oman kept sending messages to the US that any invasion of Iraq would destabilise the region. Therefore, Oman was against it and did not want to be part of it by any means (Ambassador5, 2022, Diplomat3, 2022a). Despite this, when the US decided to invade Iraq, Oman was compelled to allow the US and UK forces to use the military facilities on Omani soil in support of their operations in Iraq. This shows how studying the perceptions of the decision-makers, such as the Sultan, will only result in part of the picture when analysing Omani neutrality, as these perceptions will not necessarily translate to a policy if there are other priority factors at play. Thus, while I agree with the importance of studying the impact of Sultan Qaboos, exaggerating his influence and ignoring the material factors and domestic politics will result in an incomplete understanding.

The literature also shows some scholars arguing that the tradition of Ibadi religious thought has hugely influenced the making of Omani foreign policy. Many scholars have used this argument, such as Hussain Ghabash in his famous book Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition (2006), Jeremy Jones in his book Oman, Culture and Diplomacy (2012), Jean-Marc Rickly and Almezinin in their article 'Theories of Small States Foreign and Security Policies and the Gulf States' (2016) and Steven Wright in his book Foreign Policy in the GCC States (2015). While these studies argue that the thoughts and ideology of the Ibadi sect hugely influenced the making of Omani neutrality and independence, I say that this argument can be challenged. As I explained in detail in Chapter 5, the Sultanic regime in Oman had a long-standing fight with the Imamate (which was mainly basing its thoughts and rule on the principles of the Ibadi sect) for most of the first half of the 20th century (Peterson, 1976). This rift even resulted in two governments ruling Oman between 1920 and the mid-1950s, the

government in the coastal areas and the Imamate in the interior regions of Oman (Razik, 2022).

When studying the Omani foreign policy and neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), which marked the first time Oman announced its neutrality in modern history, the analysis of diverse archival materials and dozens of interviews with high-ranking Omani decision-makers shows no concrete evidence of decision-makers being influenced by Ibadi thought. As I argued before, different factors affected the Omani foreign policy behaviour during that time, such as Iraqi threats, Iranian threats, security guarantors such as the US and the UK, domestic factors such as leadership perception and societal structure, and geographical location. The documents in the archives, which I studied extensively, show that the decision-makers and external players were discussing the above factors without any evidence of any influence, discussion, or mention of Ibadi beliefs. Additionally, the interviews I conducted with the high-level Omani decision-makers revealed that Ibadi thought was not in the minds of the Omani leadership but rather that strategic considerations were taken seriously when the decisions regarding the war were made. Therefore, I argue that the thoughts and ideas of the Ibadi sect did not play a pivotal role in the making of Omani neutrality.[42]

The contributions of my thesis to the literature on Omani neutrality, Omani foreign policy and Arab Gulf politics are significant for different reasons. First, this thesis fills the evident gap in the literature about Omani neutrality. To the best knowledge of the researcher, it is the only big project that has studied the formation, evolution and limitations of Omani foreign neutrality from the 1980s until 2022. Secondly, it contributes to the limited literature on Omani foreign policy by filling gaps and challenging different arguments, such as the importance of Ibadi thought in the making of Omani neutrality. Finally, examining Oman's active neutral roles towards the events in the region, especially the War in Yemen since 2015, shows that neutrals such as Oman are core elements in the trajectories of conflicts and

[42] It may be observed that the Omani government has pushed the narrative that Oman's foreign policy is hugely influenced by Ibadi thought, especially by the idea of coexistence with other religious sects, such as the Sunni and Shia. While it is difficult to deny the peaceful co-existence between the three sects in Oman, it is difficult to fully attribute it to the ideas and tenants of the Ibadi sect alone and even more difficult to link Ibadi thought to foreign policy. Many researchers are influenced by the government's version of the story. The story may be supported by the government in pursuit of its interests, such as stabilising society and supporting foreign policy. While I argue this could be the case, and my suspicion about it being government propaganda is exciting, it needs further research, which I intend to undertake in the future. The same could be said about the debate regarding the importance of Sultan Qaboos in the making of Omani neutrality. The government has been known to push propaganda that highlights the success of Omani neutrality and has entirely attributed this success to the 'wise thinking' of Sultan Qaboos.

politics in the Arab Gulf and beyond, rather than peripheral or unimportant actors. The importance of my thesis goes beyond contributing to the literature of the Middle East, as it also provides a theoretical contribution to the concept of neutrality in international relations.

8.2 Theoretical Implications

Countries have been practising neutrality in international relations for a very long time. As discussed before, neutrality may be as old as wars. Despite this, studies on neutrality and practice in international relations are very limited (Czarny, 2018). Scholars tend to focus more on the behaviour of great powers in international relations and on the more adventurous countries rather than smaller or neutral countries (Lord and Mearsheimer, 2002). Thus, my thesis fills an essential gap in the literature by offering a theoretical model to help understand the birth, evolution and limitations of neutral nations. The PMN presents neutrality as a three-phase process: strategic, passive and active. The transition from one phase to the other is influenced by and subject to different factors, such as security guarantors, internal politics, the trajectory of war and the recognition of belligerents. The PMN explains that countries, while heavily influenced by the roles they want to play, have severe limitations that sometimes prevent them from adopting neutrality. In this section, I will elaborate on the significance of the PMN, compare it with existing theoretical literature and explain where they agree or diverge.

The PMN is a significant contribution to the theoretical literature on neutrality. It fills some gaps in the existing literature by achieving two main goals: integrating diverse factors (to reveal the relationships between them and presenting neutrality as a process. First, the PMN examines the diverse factors influencing states and driving them to adopt neutrality. This part of the model is mainly derived from the neoclassical realist foreign policy theories. It aims to explain why states adopt neutrality in the first place without overlooking essential factors. The neoclassical realist theory is influential due to its ability to take into account the different sets of factors, including domestic and external factors. The interaction of these factors, while complex, enhances our understanding of neutrality and the effects of certain elements in the model. For example, one of the most important elements in the model is the security guarantor, and its influence cannot be overestimated; however, its influence must also be considered in relation to other factors, such as threat perception and domestic politics. The first phase of the PMN, the strategic phase, can be used on its own if one's goal is to determine the reasons and the overall environment that lead a country to neutrality.

Nevertheless, the PMN offers more value than just determining the reasons behind adopting neutrality towards a certain event; it also helps in tracking and understanding the evolution of neutrality.

The PMN also presents neutrality as an evolving practice that can go through three phases: strategic, passive and active. In the passive phase, a country adopts neutrality but usually lacks external recognition for this policy. The research shows that when a country does not have recognition for its neutrality, it becomes very hard for it to perform diplomatic and humanitarian roles during a war. For example, the neutral would find it challenging to convince belligerents to host them if they do not view the venue as neutral. Furthermore, delivering aid to civilians is much easier when belligerents view players performing this job as impartial and neutral. Thus, the perception of belligerents is very important to understanding how neutrals can influence the trajectory of wars.

When the belligerents start to view a country as neutral, it will enter the active neutrality phase. This will allow it to exercise active neutrality, and if it is willing to perform positive roles towards the war, such as facilitating peace negotiations and humanitarian roles, the value of its neutrality will increase in the international arena. An example of this is when the neutral helps in rescuing the hostages of different countries from unstable or unfriendly countries. The Omani's successful efforts in getting hostages out of different countries, such as French, British, American and Japanese citizens from Iran and Yemen is an example of this scenario. Thus, understanding this scenario and other potential scenarios that increase the value of neutrals explains why some great powers support neutrals when they are not involved in the conflicts, such as when France and Japan praised the Omani policy in Yemen.

After practising neutrality for some time, decision-makers usually start conceiving themselves as neutrals who should keep playing this role in international relations. With time, this will influence the country's identity, especially if neutrality becomes more successful, ultimately influencing decision-makers to lean into adopting neutrality in future wars. This role conception, role adoption and identity formation are derived from the role theory of foreign policy. The longer the neutral identity is maintained, the deeper it is rooted as the country's identity, which results in more influence over the decision-makers to keep following the neutral path. For example, the identity of Switzerland as neutral has more influence over the decision-makers than of another country that has more recently adopted neutrality towards one or more conflicts. Despite this, the PMN suggests that even neutrals who are heavily influenced by their identity face limitations in adopting this policy. This is done by tracking the influence of factors such as security guarantors throughout the different

phases of neutrality. This aspect of the PMN is derived from the role theory of international relations and extensive empirical research.

The PMN is a significant addition to the theoretical literature of neutrality in international relations. While it has various strengths and represents a robust tool for understanding neutrality, it still has two main limitations. First, as it integrates a diverse set of factors, it requires a vast amount of data to operationalise all the elements in the model. Therefore, in this thesis, I gathered data from various sources, such as the archives of the UK, US and Oman, interviews with high-level Omani decision-makers and the existing literature. In the following section, I explain and reflect on the methodological implications.

8.3 Methodological Reflections and Evaluations

This thesis has used qualitative research methods. The PMN has been applied to understand Oman's neutrality through different case studies between 1980 and 2022, including two main case studies examined extensively and four explored thoroughly but in less detail. I used the process tracing method to delve deeper and unpack the complex sequential and casual relations suggested by the PMN. In this section, I will explain the rationale, importance and limitations of the methodological choices made in this thesis. To achieve these goals, this section covers four areas: the rationale for methodological decisions, an analysis of method effectiveness, an evaluation of sources and limitations and ethical considerations.

The case study method is 'a research approach that facilitates exploring phenomenon within its context using various data sources' (Bennett & Elman, 2007). The choice of the case study method in this thesis is appropriate due to its ability to allow an in-depth examination and analysis of particular events or phenomena. The case study was applied to two main events that bookend the time period covered in the thesis: the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the War in Yemen (2015–2022). Starting the analysis with the Iran-Iraq War (1980–198) was suitable for three reasons. First, the war represented the first time Oman announced its neutrality towards a major regional war in modern history. As explained in detail in Chapter 4, Oman's foreign policy was entirely overshadowed by British colonial influence until 1970, when the British withdrew from the region and their influence started to decrease. Furthermore, until 1976, the Omani government faced an existential challenge represented by the revolution against the Sultan's regime in the country's south. Between 1976 and 1980, there were some challenges and regional events, but the Iran-Iraq War

represented the first major war where Oman announced its neutrality. Thus, it was logical to start the examination with the case study showing the birth of this policy.

The War in Yemen was a suitable main case study for two primary reasons. First, various countries and entities widely acknowledged and recognised Omani neutrality during the war, including the main belligerents, the UN, the regional governments and great powers. During this war, which came 27 years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Omani neutrality matured, and its roles were very different from those played during the Iran-Iraq War. Thus, examining both wars in detail made it possible to track and understand how Oman's neutrality has evolved and changed. Finally, the two wars represented puzzling behaviour from Oman, which has been under-researched. Thus, examining the two case studies fills a gap in the literature. The period between the two main case studies was addressed by examining different case studies in less detail but thoroughly. The case studies were the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The reason behind choosing multiple case studies was to examine the variations in Omani foreign policy towards these events and explore the reasons behind any detected variations. By examining these cases, different lessons were learned. First, Oman's neutrality, while evolving and influencing its identity, experienced major limitations. This was obvious in cases such as Iraq in 1889, Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 when the country abandoned its neutrality. While these cases were treated in less detail, exploring them still required the use of vast amounts of data.

I used the process tracing method to delve into the details of each case study and unpack the complex interactions between the different factors and their influences. Process tracing is 'the use of histories, archival documents, interview transcripts and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesises or implies in a case is, in fact, evident in the sequences and values of the intervening variables in that case' (George & Bennett, 2005). Thus, process tracing is suitable for uncovering the causal and complex relations suggested in the PMN and assessing if they can explain the Omani behaviour towards each case study. The tracing process also enabled me to understand each factor inside the case studies and track its continued influence on Oman's foreign policy. For example, with this method, I could track the impact of the security guarantors, how it changed between 1980 and 2022 and how it affected the different case studies. While giving all these benefits, using case studies and process tracing methods required collecting data from various sources. Hence, I will assess and reflect on the sources used to collect data for this thesis.

This thesis has contributed to the literature by extracting vast amounts of data from different sources and bringing them to life. In this regard, I first collected and examined various documents in the UK, the US and Oman archives. The records in the British archives, such as the National Archive, included minutes of meetings between British diplomats and diplomats from Oman, Arab Gulf countries, the US and Yemen. They also contain ambassadors' reports, briefings and UK annual reports on Oman and other regional countries. These documents were very valuable as they included unrevealed information about the events in the region, the details of decision-making in Oman and the influence of other countries, such as the US influence on Oman. These documents corrected some inaccurate stories about the region in the literature. For example, in the context of signing the access agreement between the US and Oman in 1980, most sources claimed that all Arab countries were against signing this agreement and refused to allow the US a foothold in the region. However, the documents, including the minutes of meetings between US officials and high-ranking diplomats from Arab Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, pointed out very clearly that the officials of these countries had no problem with Oman signing the agreement even though they had to oppose it publicly.

Outside the UK, I examined documents from different archives in the US, including the Library of Congress and the CIA's declassified reports. The CIA reports, for example, were very beneficial, especially in understanding the context of some events during the 1970s and 1980s. An example of this is the proposed operation by Iraq to use the Omani military facilities to attack Iran, as I discussed in detail in Chapter 5. The archives in Oman were less beneficial as the government has highly censored them, and they did not include any surprising information. Examining the archives in Oman and the British archive offered by the UAE and Qatar (as they purchased the right to use and publish it) revealed that the Arab Gulf countries highly censor their archives and delete various documents that go against their agenda. This observation, while outside the scope of this thesis, raises the question of how much research can depend on databases like the AGDA (which is fully funded by the government of Abu Dhabi) or the Qatar National Library (which is fully funded by the Qatari government). To circumvent this problem, I used the original documents provided by Mathew Digital Institute and only used the AGDA and Qatar National Library to complement them or download certain documents.

I also interviewed high-ranking Omani officials to collect more data and synthesise them with data from other sources. The interviewees included former ministers, ambassadors, high-level diplomats and practitioners in the Ministry of Foreign Policy and the Ministry of

Defence. The interviews were very beneficial and revealed many untold stories that helped me understand Omani neutrality better. For example, one interviewee revealed the details of different diplomatic roles played by Oman in the Syrian Civil War, including an initiation from the Arab Gulf Countries to de-escalate the war in 2013, as discussed in full detail in Chapter 6. Conducting interviews with high-level Omani decision-makers required ethical approval and careful consideration and planning. Thus, in order to conduct the interviews properly, I got ethical approval from the University of York after I explained all the considerations and issues I might face.

The information extracted from the interviews became a crucial part of the thesis, but there were still some complications in conducting and analysing the data. For example, some interviewees initially agreed to be mentioned by their names but later contacted me and requested to be anonymised. Some of them even asked me to delete their interview and not to mention anything they said in the interviews. Thus, I had to omit some information extracted from these interviews to make sure my research fully adhered to the standard ethical code. This complication and sensitivity towards some aspects of the topic, especially in non-democratic countries like Oman, represented a challenge. Still, the quality and quantity of data extracted were worth the effort. Another observation in this regard is the benefit of having personal connections with politicians to be able to conduct interviews with them. Reaching these high-ranking decision-makers through email or social media is very difficult. Being an Omani with some family and friend connections made it easier to secure these interviews.

This thesis collected its data from various sources. The methods used and the different sources, while being beneficial regarding data quality, yield other lessons. While the interviews were the hardest to secure, they revealed the most valuable information regarding the perception of Omani decision-makers, especially about recent and current events. The archival data revealed many untold stories and challenged the accuracy of stories in the literature. However, it should be pointed out that a vast amount of data can be used to review the events of the Middle Eastern region, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, when the British left the region. In the future, current technological developments will make it easier to access these documents. Still, governments in the region can also use these tools to censor the content in their favour. The amount of data and the unanswered questions in the region represent an opportunity for future scholars to make valuable contributions to the literature. Below, I discuss the future research directions.

8.4 Future Research Directions

Exploring Oman's neutrality and neutrality in international relations resulted in significant insights and contributions to the literature. The contributions can be categorised into two parts: contributions to the literature of Oman and the Middle East and contributions to the theoretical literature of neutrality. First, the literature on Oman is limited. Most of the studies in the region focused on larger and more adventurous countries such as Saudi Arabia, The UAE and Qatar. The studies that examined Omani foreign policy are either part of bigger projects studying the region with one chapter devoted to Oman or Omani foreign policy. Thus, my thesis filled this gap. Second, my thesis contributed to the literature of neutrality, especially the theoretical literature. Currently, to the author's knowledge, no theoretical framework explains the formation, evolution and limitations of neutrality. Thus, the PMN is considered the first of its kind in foreign policy and international relations literature. These contributions have opened my eyes to new research areas and generated some unanswered questions related to the topic but outside the scope of his thesis. Hence, I will discuss two of these research areas: the Middle East and neutrality.

My thesis has generated questions about several unresearched areas in the Middle East. First, archival research has revealed that around the 1980s, there was a soft competition between the US and the UK over the influence on Oman. When the UK withdrew from the Middle East after 1968, it still wanted to keep soft power in the region, especially towards decision-makers, such as in the case of Oman. However, when Oman and the US agreed to sign their access agreement, as explained in Chapter 5, the UK lost most of its influence to the benefit of the US. The archival documents show that the British decision-makers were unhappy about the new deal between Oman and the US and tried pushing Oman to negotiate a more favourable deal to them. They tried to influence Oman through the British advisers and loaned officers who used to work with the Sultan of Oman. This competition to gain influence in Oman is interesting as it may shed light on the current competition for influence in the region between the US and China, but this requires more research. It can also be compared to the British and the French competition to gain influence in Oman during the 15th century. The influence of great powers in the region has moved from one great power to the other without direct clashes between them. Studying why this is the case may enhance our understanding of how great powers replace one another in the Arab Gulf region. This would be beneficial in understanding the current competition between the US and China in gaining

influence in the region and making predictions about the possible trajectory of this competition.

Second, the research revealed Saudi Arabia's interest since the 1970s in acquiring land that connects it directly to the Indian Ocean, away from the uncertainties of the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea. This potential research could be studied in the context of the recent Houthi attacks on the ships related to Israel passing the Bab Al-Mandab strait as a response to Israel's War on Gaza. Other than this, it could be studied in the context of Saudi relations with the Houthis, Yemenis, the US, or Oman and how these interests and dangers influence these nations' perceptions of each other in the context of the escalation of Israel's War on Gaza. Finally, this Saudi interest could be studied in relation to its incentives to enter the War in Yemen and if this interest changed after the Houthi's de-escalation, which was agreed upon in the April 2022 truce, as discussed in Chapter 7.

My research also raised some questions about neutrality in foreign policy. First, the PMN can be tested and further developed by studying neutrality cases in other countries. This can be done on some traditional neutrals, such as Switzerland and Sweden, or more contemporary neutrals, such as Kuwait, which recently claimed to act neutrally. Second, some elements of the PMN can be studied separately. For example, the change in the security perception of the neutrals can be examined in relation to the development of conflicts and how they affect each other. Furthermore, recognition of neutrality by belligerents, or potential belligerents, can be studied separately and tracked, as well as its evolution and how its influence on different stakeholders may even create wars. An example is to potentially study how Russia's perception of Ukraine, its neutrality and its desire to abandon its neutral position to join NATO have influenced the trajectory of the relations and the war between the two. On the other hand, Israel's War on Gaza shows that many countries seek to be neutral in different ways, for example by upholding international law, as in the case of South Africa's genocide case against Israel. This situation raises the question of the effectiveness of international institutions as a tool for neutrals to pursue their agendas.

My thesis is significant not only because it contributed to the literature on the Middle East and the theoretical literature on neutrality. Its importance also stems from asking new questions that may enhance our understanding of Oman's neutrality, the region and even other complex topics such as the potential neutrality of Ukraine in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War.

8.5 Conclusion

This thesis explored the case of Oman's neutrality, a crucial yet under-researched subject in the Middle East. The case was investigated from the birth of Oman's neutrality in the 1980s in the context of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) until 2022 when Saudi Arabia signed a truce with the Houthis to halt the War in Yemen. The exploration of Oman's neutrality led to delving into the concept of neutrality in international relations and its theoretical implications. Thus, this thesis also contributed to the theoretical literature on neutrality by offering a model, the PMN, that helps explain neutrality's formation, evolution and limitations.

In this thesis, I argue that Oman's neutrality was first formed in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. By applying the PMN to explore this neutrality, I suggest that Omani neutrality went through three phases of neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. In the first stage, the strategic stage, various external and internal factors led Oman to adopt neutrality towards the war despite leaning towards Iraq in the first week of the war. In the second phase, during the first four years of the war, Oman adopted passive neutrality due to the lack of widespread recognition of this policy, especially from Iran. In 1984, Iran gradually changed its perception of Oman and acknowledged its neutrality. This recognition by Iran and the already positive relations with Iraq enabled Oman to adopt more active neutrality between 1984 and the end of the war in 1988.

The findings of my thesis also explained that between 1988 and 2015, Omani foreign policy behaviour was not consistent, and its ability to adopt neutrality was limited by external factors such as existential threat perceptions and the influence of security guarantors. During this period, Oman abandoned its neutrality during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 but returned to adopting active neutrality towards the Syrian Civil War in 2011. This variation in Omani foreign behaviour shows the limitations of some neutral countries in adopting neutrality. Finally, the findings also illustrate that Oman adopted active neutrality towards the War in Yemen since the start of the coalition intervention in 2015.

My thesis has multiple contributions that make it significant and also open the door to question new areas in the Middle East region and the field of neutrality. The questions of Oman's foreign policy behaviour and neutrality in international relations will always be relevant to understanding the politics in the region and beyond. Finally, the answer to the question, 'Is neutrality really a dead concept?' is now clear: It is definitely not!

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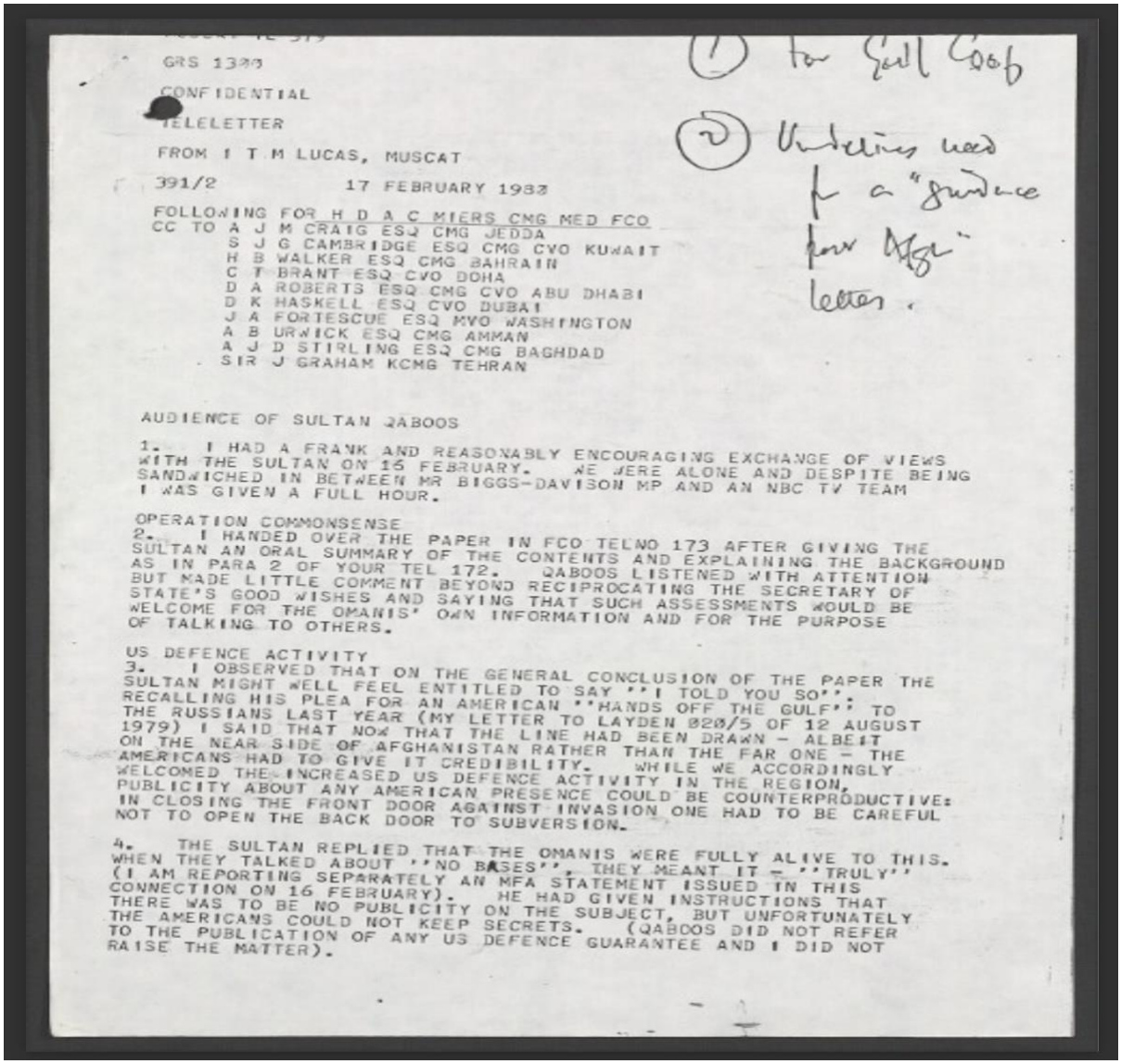
10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix: Samples of Archive Documents

10.1.1 Sample of a document from the British National Archive

Conversation between Douglas Hurd, the British Foreign Minister 1979–1995 and Sultan Qaboos, the Sultan of Oman 1970–2022.



GRS 1380

CONFIDENTIAL

TELELETTER

FROM I T M LUCAS, MUSCAT

391/2 17 FEBRUARY 1983

FOLLOWING FOR H D A C MIERS CMG MED FCO
CC TO A J M CRAIG ESQ CMG JEDDA
S J G CAMBRIDGE ESQ CMG CVO KUWAIT
H B WALKER ESQ CMG BAHRAIN
C T BRANT ESQ CVO DOHA
D A ROBERTS ESQ CMG CVO ABU DHABI
D K HASKELL ESQ CVO DUBAI
J A FORTESCUE ESQ MVO WASHINGTON
A B URWICK ESQ CMG AMMAN
A J D STIRLING ESQ CMG BAGHDAD
SIR J GRAHAM KCMG TEHRAN

AUDIENCE OF SULTAN QABOOS

1. I HAD A FRANK AND REASONABLY ENCOURAGING EXCHANGE OF VIEWS WITH THE SULTAN ON 16 FEBRUARY. WE WERE ALONE AND DESPITE BEING SANDWICHED IN BETWEEN MR BIGGS-DAVISON MP AND AN NBC TV TEAM I WAS GIVEN A FULL HOUR.

OPERATION COMMONSENSE

2. I HANDED OVER THE PAPER IN FCO TELNO 173 AFTER GIVING THE SULTAN AN ORAL SUMMARY OF THE CONTENTS AND EXPLAINING THE BACKGROUND AS IN PARA 2 OF YOUR TEL 172. QABOOS LISTENED WITH ATTENTION BUT MADE LITTLE COMMENT BEYOND RECIPROCATING THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S GOOD WISHES AND SAYING THAT SUCH ASSESSMENTS WOULD BE WELCOME FOR THE OMANIS' OWN INFORMATION AND FOR THE PURPOSE OF TALKING TO OTHERS.

US DEFENCE ACTIVITY

3. I OBSERVED THAT ON THE GENERAL CONCLUSION OF THE PAPER THE SULTAN MIGHT WELL FEEL ENTITLED TO SAY ''I TOLD YOU SO''. RECALLING HIS PLEA FOR AN AMERICAN ''HANDS OFF THE GULF'' TO THE RUSSIANS LAST YEAR (MY LETTER TO LAYDEN 020/5 OF 12 AUGUST 1979) I SAID THAT NOW THAT THE LINE HAD BEEN DRAWN - ALBEIT ON THE NEAR SIDE OF AFGHANISTAN RATHER THAN THE FAR ONE - THE AMERICANS HAD TO GIVE IT CREDIBILITY. WHILE WE ACCORDINGLY WELCOMED THE INCREASED US DEFENCE ACTIVITY IN THE REGION, PUBLICITY ABOUT ANY AMERICAN PRESENCE COULD BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE: IN CLOSING THE FRONT DOOR AGAINST INVASION ONE HAD TO BE CAREFUL NOT TO OPEN THE BACK DOOR TO SUBVERSION.

4. THE SULTAN REPLIED THAT THE OMANIS WERE FULLY ALIVE TO THIS. WHEN THEY TALKED ABOUT ''NO BASES'', THEY MEANT IT - ''TRULY'' (I AM REPORTING SEPARATELY AN MFA STATEMENT ISSUED IN THIS CONNECTION ON 16 FEBRUARY). HE HAD GIVEN INSTRUCTIONS THAT THERE WAS TO BE NO PUBLICITY ON THE SUBJECT, BUT UNFORTUNATELY THE AMERICANS COULD NOT KEEP SECRETS. (QABOOS DID NOT REFER TO THE PUBLICATION OF ANY US DEFENCE GUARANTEE AND I DID NOT RAISE THE MATTER).

ISLAM AND PALESTINE

5. THE SULTAN AGREED THAT ISLAMABAD HAD BEEN ENCOURAGING, WHILE ADDING THAT IT REMAINED TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE WORDS AT THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE WOULD BE TRANSLATED INTO ACTION. HE HIMSELF HAD TAKEN THE OPPORTUNITY OF A ''SERMON'' AT THE OPENING OF A NEW MOSQUE AT NIZWA ON 15 FEBRUARY TO URGE THE IMPORTANCE OF ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY.

6. QABOOS ALSO AGREED THAT PALESTINE WAS CRUCIAL AND HOPED THAT KING HUSSAIN'S RECENT TALKS IN LONDON HAD HELPED IN THE DIRECTION OF ACHIEVING THE SIMULTANEOUS RECOGNITION BY ISRAEL OF PALESTINIAN SELFDETERMINATION AND BY THE PLO OF ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST.

GULF CO-OPERATION

7. IN THE COURSE OF A DETAILED DISCUSSION QABOOS MADE THE FOLLOWING POINTS

A) HE WOULD CERTAINLY INVITE GULF NAVIES TO SEND SHIPS TO THE OMANI BASE ON GOAT ISLAND. HE HAD ALREADY SUGGESTED JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES WITH THE UAE - SO FAR WITHOUT RESPONSE. A PRE-REQUISITE OF WORKING COLLABORATION AMONG THE GULF FORCES WAS A SINGLE COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK. I FELT SURE THAT WE COULD HELP WITH THIS AND MENTIONED THE FORTHCOMING VISIT OF ADMIRAL SIR DEREK EMPSON OF EMI, WHO MIGHT HAVE SOME IDEAS:

B) HE WOULD ''THINK ABOUT'' THE QUESTION OF AN OMANI AMBASSADOR IN ABU DHABI, BUT PERHAPS A PALACE LIAISON OFFICER AT ZAID'S COURT WOULD BE BETTER. HE DID NOT WANT TO BUREAUCRATISE THE EXISTING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EMIRATES. HE NEVER USED THE UAE CHARGE HERE. I ARGUED THAT CLOSE THOUGH THE RELATIONSHIP MIGHT BE IT STILL DID NOT SEEM CLOSE ENOUGH TO AVOID MISUNDERSTANDINGS WHICH A GOOD AMBASSADOR COULD PREVENT. QABOOS THOUGHT THAT THE UAE BELIEVED THAT THE OMANIS HAD SOME ULTERIOR MOTIVE IN NOT APPOINTING AN AMBASSADOR - EG RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE FEDERATION ITSELF. HE ASSURED ME THAT THIS WAS NOT SO. I COMMENTED THAT IT WAS CERTAINLY MOST UNUSUAL FOR TWO SUCH CLOSE NEIGHBOURS IN EVERY SENSE NOT TO HAVE FULL DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATION:

C) OMAN HAD GOOD SECURITY LINKS WITH BAHRAIN AND QATAR. THE KUWAITIS HE DID NOT UNDERSTAND, WHILE THE SECURITY APPARATUS IN THE UAE WAS INADEQUATE. THOUGH RELATIONS WITH PRINCE TURKI WERE GOOD, SAUDI INTELLIGENCE NEVER SEEMED TO HAVE ANY INFORMATION:

D) THERE SHOULD BE CLOSER COORDINATION ON THE INFORMATION FRONT SO THAT ONE COUNTRY DID NOT INADVERTENTLY OR OTHERWISE PUT OUT PROPAGANDA WHICH HELPED THE COMMON ENEMY. ONE OF HIS PROBLEMS HERE WAS THAT CERTAIN OF THE GULF GOVERNMENTS EMPLOYED SUBVERSIVE ELEMENTS IN THE BROADCASTING SERVICES:

E) THERE WAS SCOPE FOR FURTHER ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN THE WAY OF AVOIDING PROJECT DUPLICATION, ENCOURAGING DIVISION OF LABOUR ETC. THE SULTAN AGREED THAT THE PROPOSED EC/GULF DIALOGUE MIGHT HELP TO PROMOTE THIS PROCESS. IT WOULD ALSO RATIONALISE THE COMPETITIVE NATURE OF EUROPEAN COMMERCIAL EFFORTS IN THE AREA BY CONCENTRATING ATTENTION ON NECESSARY AS DISTINCT FROM MERELY PROFITABLE PROJECTS.

SAUDI ARABIA

7. I ASKED THE SULTAN FOR HIS REACTIONS TO CROWN PRINCE FAHD'S ''HAWADITH'' INTERVIEW FOLLOWING THE MECCA MOSQUE INCIDENT, ESPECIALLY HIS REFERENCE TO REVIVING THE IDEA OF A CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL AND RESTRICTING THE BUSINESS ACTIVITIES OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS. QABOOS THOUGHT THAT THERE WERE LESSONS IN THIS FOR ALL OF US. HIS ANALYSIS OF WHAT LAY BEHIND THE INCIDENT TOUCHED ON FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT (ON THE ORGANISATIONAL SIDE) BUT CONCENTRATED ON THE VARIOUS STRANDS OF DISSATISFACTION WITH THE REGIME. HIS COMMENTS FOLLOWED FAMILIAR LINES, BUT EMPHASISED PARTICULARLY THE DISCONTENT OF YOUNGER OFFICERS IN THE ARMED FORCES WHO SAW THEIR PROMOTION BARRED BY THOSE WHO OCCUPIED TOP POSITIONS ON THE BASIS OF LOYALTY OR TRIBAL AFFILIATION RATHER THAN ABILITY. LOYALTY, SAID QABOOS, WAS NECESSARY: BUT IT WAS NOT ENOUGH.

ANGLO/OMANI RELATIONS

8. THANKING THE SULTAN FOR THE AUDIENCE, I REITERATED THAT THE SECRETARY OF STATE WAS KEEN TO BUILD UP OUR CONSULTATION AND TO EXCHANGE IDEAS MORE BROADLY ON FOREIGN POLICY QUESTIONS. I ADDED THAT I MYSELF HAD BEEN A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED THAT, DESPITE OUR EXCELLENT RELATIONS AND HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, THE MFA SELDOM TOOK THE INITIATIVE IN INVITING US TO DISCUSS PROBLEMS AND OFFER ADVICE. I REALISED THAT HM HAD PLENTY OF BRITISH ADVICE AT HIS DISPOSAL, BUT IT WAS NOT ALWAYS BRITISH GOVERNMENT ADVICE. QABOOS REPLIED THAT THERE HAD BEEN ''SOME PEOPLE IN LONDON'' WHO PREFERRED TO AIR THEIR CRITICISMS OF OMAN IN PUBLIC RATHER THAN PRIVATELY AND CONSTRUCTIVELY, WHICH WOULD BE WELCOME. BUT THAT WAS NOW PAST, AND HE WOULD ENCOURAGE THE MFA TO INCREASE CONTACTS WITH US.

COMMENT

9. ALTHOUGH QABOOS SAID NOTHING PARTICULARLY STRIKING OR ORIGINAL, I CAME AWAY ONCE AGAIN FEELING THAT HE WAS AT HIS BEST IN A (NEXT THREE WORDS UNDERLINED) TETE A TETE DISCUSSION. HE WAS ANIMATED, SEEMED INTERESTED AND REQUIRED NO STIMULATION TO PRODUCE HIS VIEWS. THESE WERE MUCH IN LINE WITH OUR OWN ON THE TOPICS WE DISCUSSED. EVEN DISCOUNTING THE ELEMENT OF POLITENESS, IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND THOSE WHO SAY THAT QABOOS IS BETTER THAN SOME OF HIS ADVISERS. AT ALL EVENTS, I FELT THAT THIS WAS ONE MORE STONE IN A FOUNDATION ON WHICH WE CAN HOPE TO BUILD.

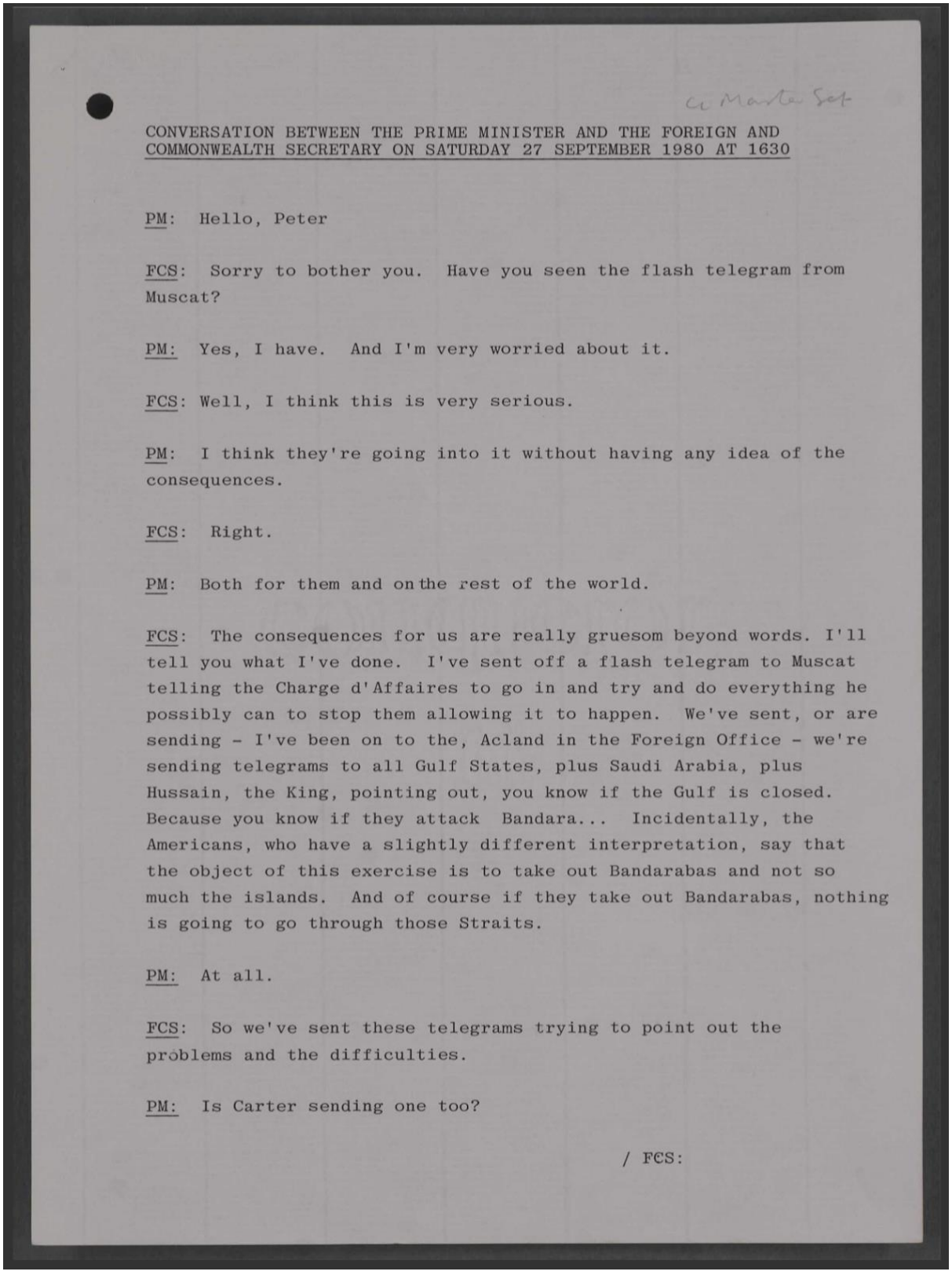
MED REGISTRY PLEASE PASS A COPY OF THIS TELELETTER TO WASHINGTON.

I T M LUCAS

NNNN

10.1.2 Sample 2: British National Archive

Conversation between Hurd Douglas and Margret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister 1979–1990, in regard to the potential use of Omani facilities by Iraq in striking Iran.



cc Master Set

CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY ON SATURDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 1980 AT 1630

PM: Hello, Peter

FCS: Sorry to bother you. Have you seen the flash telegram from Muscat?

PM: Yes, I have. And I'm very worried about it.

FCS: Well, I think this is very serious.

PM: I think they're going into it without having any idea of the consequences.

FCS: Right.

PM: Both for them and on the rest of the world.

FCS: The consequences for us are really gruesom beyond words. I'll tell you what I've done. I've sent off a flash telegram to Muscat telling the Charge d'Affaires to go in and try and do everything he possibly can to stop them allowing it to happen. We've sent, or are sending - I've been on to the, Acland in the Foreign Office - we're sending telegrams to all Gulf States, plus Saudi Arabia, plus Hussain, the King, pointing out, you know if the Gulf is closed. Because you know if they attack Bandara... Incidentally, the Americans, who have a slightly different interpretation, say that the object of this exercise is to take out Bandarabas and not so much the islands. And of course if they take out Bandarabas, nothing is going to go through those Straits.

PM: At all.

FCS: So we've sent these telegrams trying to point out the problems and the difficulties.

PM: Is Carter sending one too?

/ FCS:

FCS: Well, they're all away. Muskie's playing golf in Maine, I don't know what Carter's doing. But I've just talked to Warren Christopher.

PM: I really think it shouldn't only be us.

FCS: Oh they've got the skids on. I've suggested that we get hold of the French and I will get hold of Francois-Poncet who's in New York who must want the Gulf closed rather less than anyone else and see if they can do anything with the Iraqis.

PM: Iraqis, yes.

FCS: Antony Acland's getting on to the Elysee and I'll get on to Francois-Poncet here. And the last person we think might be useful is Aga Shari, whose been mounting this mediation exercise and won't want to see it collapse around his ears, and therefore might be prepared to take some action. But I would judge that it's very unlikely that we shall bump the Iraqis and Omanis off this. And I think it's going to happen.

PM: Yes, I know.

FCS: Really I do think there ought to be, we ought to be thinking about how to pick up the pieces and localise it.

PM: Yes. The whole strategy, Peter, was to isolate it. And I thought we'd succeeded.

FCS: I mean this is a lunacy. I've asked Douglas Hurd and Michael Palliser at Oxford I gather and I've suggested they all get back to London and have a talk before you see them tomorrow morning. There really is an urgency about it.

PM: Who would be most likely to bring pressure to bear on the Sultan?

/ FCS:

FCS: I think Hussain but there is evidence that Hussain has not been entirely blameless in this.

PM: But I thought that I had read telegrams or something in the paper to the effect that both the Kuawaitis and Saudi Arabia were slightly on the side of Iraq.

FCS: Well I think all the Arabs are.

PM: Yes, but that's different from enlarging the area of conflict.

FCS: Well I think it is, don't you?

PM: Yes, I think so.

FCS: Well because surely they don't want the Straits of Hormuz closed and no tankers coming in to the Gulf.

PM: Well Kuwait certainly would find it extremely difficult because of desalination.

FCS: That's right. They'll be all right for a bit but the food I think will be very difficult for them. I've read a telegram today. But in any event we've sent telegrams hoping they can do something.

PM: Well thank goodness. I was so very alarmed indeed when I read it.

FCS: Well I think this is the worst news so far.

PM: It upsets the entire strategy.

FCS: More than that at the moment we can't do. But I hope that they will be doing some thinking and you will have a chance of talking at Chequers tomorrow. I think I'll hang around here for a bit and see what's happening.

/ PM:

PM: In view of the latest development I think you should. How to stop it starting.

FCS: That's right. And then when it starts it may mean even more necessary to Iran. The last bit of the telegram which is also rather worrying is this business of the loan service personnel.

PM: Indeed yes. Because it involves us.

FCS: I think the position is that the loan service personnel are required to obey the orders of the Sultan under an agreement made in 1971 provided what they're asked to do is legal and not, I've forgotten exactly what the words are, are not contrary to, not putting Her Britannic Majesty in danger or something. But it seems at first brush that the implication is that they have to do what they are told.

PM: Yes. We've done it very badly if that is so. I mean are they actually seconded from us or are they independently employed?

FCS: No there are two sorts. There are the contract officers who are in effect mercenaries and there are the loan service personnel ..

PM: I would have thought that the loan service personnel operated only so long as it was not contrary to the fundamental interests of HMG or if in peace-time operations.

FCS: Well I don't think it's written like that. And you see it would have been difficult to write it like that because they were there originally because they were fighting a war against the PDRY. That was the problem I think. But anyway they're looking up the agreement.

PM: Yes, and they will come with advice? But even so the main thing is to stop the proposed event, isn't it?

/ FCS:

FCS: That's right. But I think it's going to be extremely difficult to do. I really do.

PM: Who else could bring pressure on Iraq?

FCS: The French are the only ones immediately to mind.

Mr. Alexander: Should the Prime Minister speak to Giscard?

FCS: Either that or I'll talk to Francois-Poncet here in New York.

PM: Quicker to talk to Francois-Poncet. But who else ...

FCS: I think on the whole I'd better do that. If I get nowhere perhaps you could go in to Giscard.

PM: Yes. Look, as I told you the Yugoslav PM is in Delhi with Mrs Gandhi. Yugoslavia gets 45% of their oil from there. They're non-aligned, Mrs Gandhi's non-aligned, is there nothing that the non-aligned movement can do in connection with Iraq?

FCS: I should think it's a bit too ponderous to get into action ...

PM: Yes, certainly the Yugoslavs are too ponderous altogether.

FCS: But we might consider, the Yugoslavs and the Indians might, the Indians do have quite a close relationship with Iraq.

PM: They're a very big country too.

FCS: I'll have a think about that, Margaret, OK?

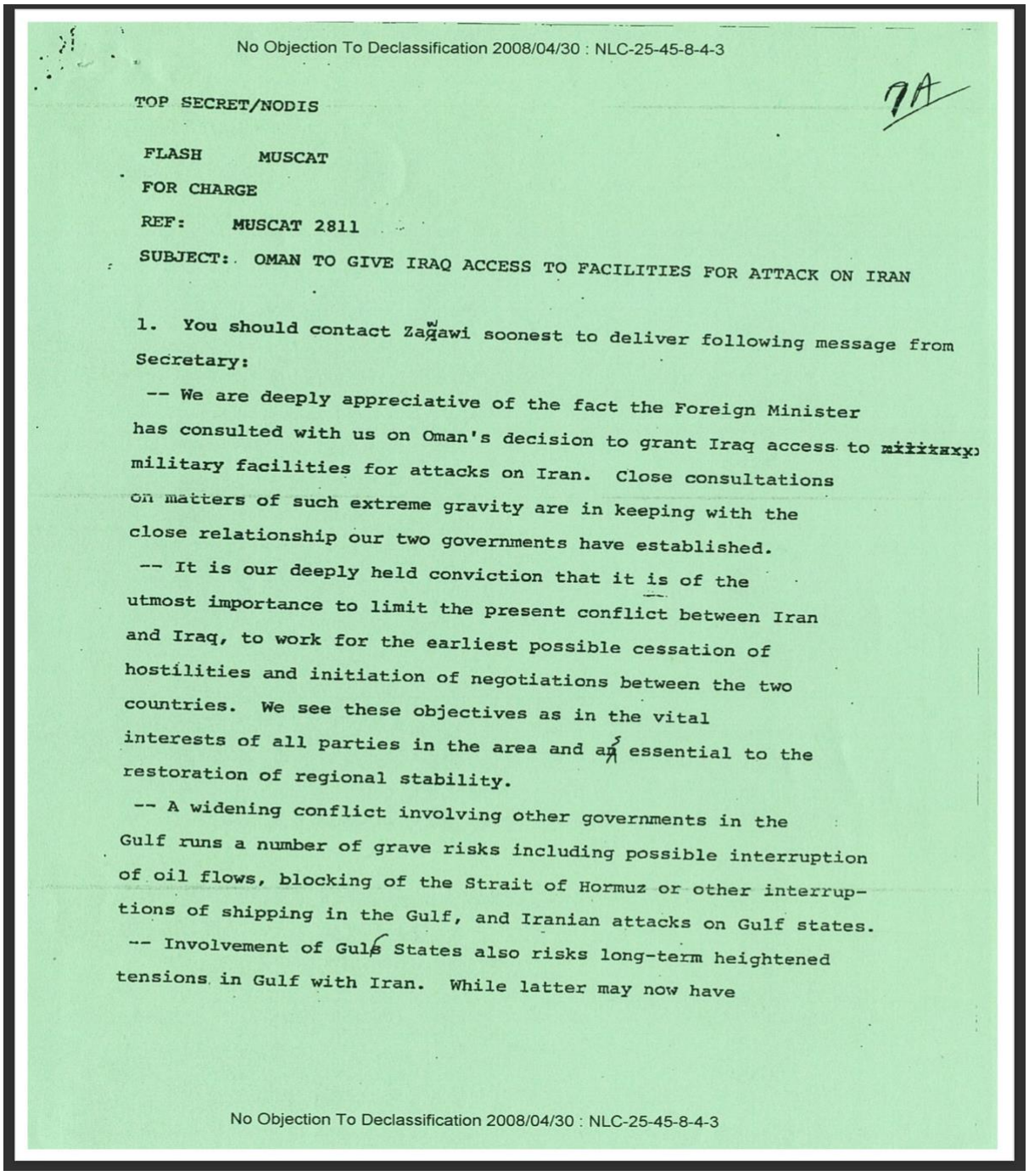
PM: It's just that the more people who bring pressure to bear the better. All right Peter.

FCS: I'll keep in touch. What's the time with you now then?

PM: The time with us now is about a quarter to five. I'm here all the time.

10.1.3: Sample 3: US Wilson Center (US declassified documents)

Telegram from the US Foreign Ministry to their Ambassador in Oman in regard to a proposed operation for Iraq to use the Omani lands to attack Iran. September 1980.



7A

TOP SECRET/NODIS

FLASH MUSCAT

FOR CHARGE

REF: MUSCAT 2811

SUBJECT: OMAN TO GIVE IRAQ ACCESS TO FACILITIES FOR ATTACK ON IRAN

1. You should contact Zaẅawi soonest to deliver following message from Secretary:

-- We are deeply appreciative of the fact the Foreign Minister has consulted with us on Oman's decision to grant Iraq access to [illegible] military facilities for attacks on Iran. Close consultations on matters of such extreme gravity are in keeping with the close relationship our two governments have established.

-- It is our deeply held conviction that it is of the utmost importance to limit the present conflict between Iran and Iraq, to work for the earliest possible cessation of hostilities and initiation of negotiations between the two countries. We see these objectives as in the vital interests of all parties in the area and as essential to the restoration of regional stability.

-- A widening conflict involving other governments in the Gulf runs a number of grave risks including possible interruption of oil flows, blocking of the Strait of Hormuz or other interruptions of shipping in the Gulf, and Iranian attacks on Gulf states.

-- Involvement of Gulf States also risks long-term heightened tensions in Gulf with Iran. While latter may now have

No Objection To Declassification 2008/04/30 : NLC-25-45-8-4-3

limited means to retaliate, its strong resource base and large population assure its resurgence in time as a powerful regional force.

-- We are also concerned over two other dangers from prolonged or widened conflict; (1) if such conflict leads to a greatly weakened Iran, the opportunities for enhanced Soviet influence or direct intervention in Iran increase proportionately; (2) the safety of American hostages in Iran could be seriously threatened, especially if states Iran considers close to US become involved in conflict.

-- We recognize the particular pressures on Oman to be supportive of Iraqis in this situation, but urge that Oman consider carefully its peculiar and key role in regional security in connection with vital nature of Strait of Hormuz.

-- Gravest concern of international community now focuses on freedom of navigation in the Gulf and the Strait. The present measured response of international community to the conflict reflects to significant degree the fact that Iran has taken no significant action to intervene in Omani waters by harrassment of shipping or other actions which would escalate international concern about the current situation.

-- Thus Omans continued neutrality in the conflict is vital to maintain regional and indeed international security. Were Oman to abandon a neutral position by providing support to Iraq, Iran would have justification to intervene in Omani water

and take action which could cause most serious escalation and spreading of the conflict.

-- We believe it is in the interests of Oman's Arab neighbors in the Gulf, including Iraq which has vital interest in continued free passage in the Strait, for Oman to remain strictly neutral and that such position would be fully understood by other Arab states.

-- We urge that Oman take no action in support of Iraq which would violate neutrality or invite ~~Omani~~ Iranian retaliation.

-- We hope that Oman is in closest consultation with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in dealing with Iraqi pressures for support and that Oman will in particular consult with these states about the ~~particular~~ special role Omani neutrality plays in Gulf security.

-- We urge that Oman take no steps without most careful consideration and we want to stay in closest consultation.

-- As Oman can fully appreciate the role of U.S. military forces with respect to the current Iraq-Iran conflict is a critical factor in maintaining global peace. If Omam were subjected to Iranian retaliation for its military support of Iraq, we would consult immediately but(we cannot give prior ~~higher~~ assurance at this time that U.S. Navy or other forces would automatically respond to such retaliation.)

~~Alternative language: (they should understand that there would be a serious question of U.S. protection in the event the Omanis provoked such an attack).~~

10.2 List of Interviewees (sorted by the date of interview)

Number	Anonymised	Name/Code	Position	Date of interview	Place of interview
1	No	Mohammed Al-Futaisi	Researcher	7 September 2021	Sohar/Oman
2	Yes	FD1	Former diplomat	10 September 2021	Muscat/Oman
3	Yes	FSD1	Senior Diplomat	11 October 2021	Salalah/Oman
4	Yes	FSD2	Senior Diplomat	12 October 2021	Salalah/Oman
5	Yes	FME1	Military expert	15 October 2021	Muscat/Oman
6	No	Dr Ali Al-Essaei	Senior Diplomat	23 March 2022	Muscat/Oman
7	No	Abdullah Al-Badi	Ambassador	28 March 2022	Muscat/Oman
8	Yes	FA1	Ambassador	1 April 2022	Muscat/Oman
9	Yes	FA2	Ambassador	19 April 2022	Muscat/Oman
10	Yes	FME2	Military expert	25 April 2022	Muscat/Oman
11	Yes	FME3	Military expert	28 April 2022	Muscat/Oman
12	Yes	FD2	Senior Diplomat	1 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
13	Yes	FA3	Ambassador	3 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
14	Yes	FA4	Ambassador	4 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
15	Yes	FA5	Ambassador	4 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
16	Yes	FD3	Senior Diplomat	11 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
17	Yes	FD4	Senior Diplomat	11 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
18	Yes	FD5	Senior Diplomat	13 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
19	Yes	FD6	Senior Diplomat	15 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
20	Yes	FD7	Diplomat	16 May 2022	Muscat/Oman
21	No	Houchang Hassan Yari	Researcher	18 May 2022	Muscat/Oman