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Oman's Niche Diplomacy: Middle Power Strategies in a Shifting Middle East

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Abstract

Despite being located in one of the world's most unstable regions—characterized by persistent tensions, turmoil, and conflict—the Sultanate of Oman has successfully maintained a policy of neutrality and adeptly assumed the complex role of mediator, both within the Arabian Peninsula and more broadly across the Middle East. This study examines Oman's mediation efforts in the Middle East during the 21st century through the lens of niche diplomacy, providing a fresh and timely perspective. Middle-power diplomacy is typically associated with foreign policy activism, particularly in a constrained international environment. Given their limited resources, middle powers often adopt niche diplomacy by concentrating on specific issue areas. The key contribution of this study lies in its novel application of niche diplomacy theory to examine and interpret Oman's mediation strategy.

Keywords: mediation; Middle East; middle powers; niche diplomacy; Oman



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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Oman has earned global recognition for mediating disputes and proactive diplomacy to ease regional tensions. Positioned in a geo-strategically critical and volatile region, surrounded by larger and more aggressive neighbors, Oman has managed to maintain positive relations with all parties. Mediation has emerged as a key instrument in the Sultanate's middle power niche diplomacy, particularly within the Middle East and its immediate surroundings. Nonetheless, several Arab media outlets reported that Muscat, the Omani capital, hosted three dialogue sessions between Iranian and Ukrainian representatives to discuss Tehran's alleged support for Moscow in the Russian–Ukrainian war ([U.S. Department of State 2023](#)).

The Middle East is increasingly seen as one of the international system's most dynamic and unstable regions. Within this context, the survival of states is far from guaranteed, with power dynamics often characterized by conflict. The hegemonic ambitions of great powers have drawn Middle Eastern states into contested spheres of influence, underscoring the evolving nature of traditional balance-of-power concepts. As a result, the region has experienced forms of fragmentation, and Middle Eastern states can no longer rely on the protection of great powers.

"Middle powers" frequently receive scant attention in the international system, and research on their foreign relations strategies is limited. To address this, many successful middle powers employ "niche diplomacy," focusing their resources on specific areas to

maximize returns, enhance international recognition, and achieve global leadership roles. Oman's niche diplomacy leverages its comparative advantage and unique expertise as a facilitator and mediator, strengthening its diplomatic reputation and increasing its influence and visibility. The Sultanate's mediation efforts have become vital to its foreign policy, both emerging from and reinforcing its long-term objectives. Through its mediation and backchannel diplomacy, Oman has played a key role in facilitating some of the Middle East's most significant agreements, solidifying its position as a crucial diplomatic force in the region and beyond.

This study seeks to contribute conceptually and empirically to the expanding literature on middle powers' niche diplomacy and their influence on regional affairs and agendas. By applying this alternative conceptual framework, this study offers a novel perspective on the foreign policy and mediation practices of middle powers in the Middle East.

Traditionally, Middle East security research has been dominated by discussions of great powers, with middle-power states receiving limited attention. Furthermore, while the concept of "middle powerhood" has been widely explored in countries like Canada and Australia, it still lacks sufficient conceptualization/theorization and empirical examination in the Middle Eastern context. Thus, this study seeks to fill these research gaps by analyzing Middle Eastern middle powers, such as Oman, through the lens of niche diplomacy. It also underscores the growing importance of middle powers during a period increasingly defined by the rising China–US great-power rivalry. Additionally, this study contributes toward filling this gap in the comparative knowledge base concerning the role of Oman and the Gulf States in conflict mediation and theories of middle powers as mediators.

This study explores the following questions: How have Oman's mediation efforts allowed it to project influence and pursue its foreign policy objectives in the competitive international arena of the 21st century? To what extent is niche diplomacy a viable strategy for advancing Oman's foreign policy goals? This study argues that, from a middle power perspective, Oman's mediation efforts in the Middle East exemplify the use of niche diplomacy to support its broader foreign policy strategy. As a middle power with unique resources and strategic advantages, Oman has sought to increase its global influence, safeguard its core interests, diversify its economy, and assert regional leadership by focusing on mediating Middle Eastern disputes. By concentrating on this area, Oman has actively assumed international responsibilities and substantially contributed to regional stability. This approach has enabled Oman to enhance its national image, gain greater influence in global affairs, and protect its national interests.

The following section reviews the literature on middle powers and niche diplomacy, tracing the evolution of these concepts within international relations scholarship. This is followed by an analysis of Oman's foreign policy and its mediation practices. The final section summarizes the key findings and offers both theoretical insights and practical implications.

2. Theoretical Framework: Middle Power and Niche Diplomacy

In international relations, the concept of middle powers is vague (A. F. Cooper 2011; Maitre 2018; Mantzikos 2010; Chapnick 1999). It refers to countries that are not great powers but still influence global affairs, shape their regional environment, and resist great powers. Defining middle powers is challenging, as metrics like population, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or land area still need to capture their essence fully. Middle powers, lacking traditional forms of power, must specialize in how they use their resources and relationships. Due to the need for a precise definition, understanding middle powers as an analytical tool is difficult (Patience 2014). Studies often explore their characteristics in quantifiable or behavioral terms and focus on specific case studies of middle power

activities. Typically, middle powers have notable economic, geographic, demographic, or military attributes, but some small states are recognized as middle powers due to their international influence and activism. Consequently, the list of countries identified as middle powers varies (Sweijjs and Mazarr 2023).

Scholars identify several defining key traits of middle powers, including their commitment to multilateralism, peacekeeping, and moderate international influence. They are known for their tendency to compromise, adopt balanced stances in global disputes, and actively contribute to solutions for global challenges. Middle powers often act as mediators, demonstrate self-interest balanced with activism, and promote stability and order in the international system. They advocate international law, donate generously to aid initiatives and pursue reformist policies. They emphasize “good international citizenship” as catalysts for addressing specific global issues, building coalitions, and fostering moral foreign policies (Lee et al. 2015). These attributes position middle powers as stabilizers in world politics, as they lack global and ideological ambitions. Their relatively limited power compared to great powers drives them to adopt bridging and mediatory roles (D. A. Cooper 2013). Unlike great powers, middle powers maintain their independence and focus on defending limited yet vital interests within the global system.

Since the concept of middle power is vague, scholars suggest three types: functional, behavioral, and hierarchical. The functional approach suggests that middle powers can influence specific circumstances, shifting their status based on the issue. Small states can temporarily attain middle power status when opportunities arise in the international system, but they may lose this status if they no longer contribute to a particular issue. In this view, middle powers engage in multilateral forums, lead in niche areas, and act as mediators (Lee et al. 2015; Öniş and Kutlay 2017). The behavioral approach emphasizes a country’s actions, such as multilateralism, coalition-building, and mediation, rather than its material power. Countries displaying these traits and a commitment to “good international citizenship” are often regarded as middle powers (Hynek 2004; A. F. Cooper et al. 1993; Özkan 2006). The hierarchical approach classifies states based on their position in the international system. Middle powers, such as countries with solid diplomatic networks or membership in key international organizations, hold a recognized position of influence in global politics (Chapnick 1999).

Middle powers are characterized by their unique roles in international relations, often acting as stabilizers in a world dominated by great powers. They engage in multilateralism, peacekeeping, and mediation, emphasizing compromise and collaboration to enhance global stability. Their strength lies in niche diplomacy, addressing secondary issues rather than pursuing global dominance. By leveraging soft power, middle powers act as catalysts in multilateral forums, promoting peace and broader global interests while maintaining their independence and avoiding the ideological rigidity often associated with superpowers. This nuanced role underscores their significant contributions to diplomacy and conflict resolution (Özkan 2006; Oosterveld and Torossian 2018).

Niche diplomacy is a foreign policy strategy in which a state focuses its resources on specific international issues or domains to enhance its influence and visibility on the global stage. This approach is efficient for small and middle-power states, which may have a limited capacity to influence all global issues but can substantially impact specialized fields where they possess a comparative advantage or unique expertise. These countries aim to increase their global influence and contribute to broader international discussions by focusing on these niche areas (Henrikson 2005; Smith 1999).

In practice, niche diplomacy is closely tied to ‘middlepowermanship,’ which involves becoming a leader in international affairs and agendas (A. F. Cooper 1997a, 1997b). A foreign policy domain is considered a niche if it meets three criteria: it provides specialized knowl-

edge in high global demand and is scarce or competitive; it requires long-term investments, sustained activity, and a vast network within the relevant policy area; and it receives formal recognition through institutional responsibility (Van Genderen and Rood 2011).

Middle-power niche diplomacy is based on two fundamental principles. First, it involves identifying unique strengths, such as commodities, resources, geographical advantages, or other distinctive features that set them apart from great powers. Second, it entails adopting multiple roles—forming alliances as coalition builders, facilitating collective action as bridge builders, and promoting international norms as catalysts. Once these roles are established, a middle power aligns its international and domestic interests, integrating its strengths to address global challenges. This hybrid strategy allows middle powers to act innovatively, swiftly, and strategically, leveraging their status to collaborate effectively with other international actors. As a result, niche diplomacy provides a framework for middle powers to pursue foreign policy that reflects their unique strengths and characteristics (A. F. Cooper 1997b).

Niche diplomacy is a targeted strategy that enables middle powers to exert influence within specific areas of international relations. This approach demands alignment with national interests and the broader global agenda, requiring consistent efforts to achieve and sustain relevance (Fritzler 2023). For success, middle powers must focus on areas that align with their national priorities, ensuring ongoing engagement to maintain international recognition (Henrikson 2005). Niche diplomacy is not a one-time effort; it requires ongoing investment in resources and strategic partnerships to adapt to changing global dynamics (Smith 1999; A. F. Cooper 1997b).

A central feature of middle-power niche diplomacy is the advancement of international policy initiatives through multilateral engagement. Middle powers frequently serve as mediators, facilitators, bridge-builders, and intermediaries between great powers and smaller states. They often exercise leadership on specific global issues in collaboration with other states or within international organizations. This strategy enables them to manage limited human and financial resources while aligning with the interests of like-minded states. Niche diplomacy thus allows middle powers to play a constructive role in global governance, particularly in an era where transnational challenges disproportionately affect middle and small states, requiring coordinated multilateral responses (Bennis 2020). Moreover, middle powers often assume mediating roles by leveraging their “positional power,” which emerges from structural power vacuums in the international system. By strategically occupying these gaps, they demonstrate leadership in issue areas where they can influence the broader configuration of power dynamics (A. F. Cooper 1997b).

Up until recently, the role of the great powers dominated the literature on Middle East security (Hoffman 2021; Telhami et al. 2009; Bekkevold 2019; Bilgin 2019; Mangold 2013; Efrat and Bercovitch 2020), while little attention was given to the perspective and influence of local middle-power states (Szalai 2021; Edström and Westberg 2020; Saouli 2020; Miller and Cardaun 2020; Chaziza and Lutmar 2025). This study addresses these research gaps by examining the behavior of Middle Eastern middle powers through the lens of niche diplomacy. Diplomacy can either facilitate or hinder how middle powers leverage their resources in global affairs. Every state, especially middle powers, must determine the type of diplomatic service they should/can develop to effectively manage issues of interest.

3. Oman’s National Interests and Foreign Policy

Any thoughtful analysis of Oman’s niche diplomacy must be anchored in the national interests that shape its foreign policy choices. Oman’s long-standing tradition of strategic autonomy, rooted in its history as an Indian Ocean maritime power and consolidated under Sultan Qaboos, has fostered a diplomatic culture defined by independence from regional

blocs, aversion to entanglement in rivalries, and reliance on discreet, consensus-oriented engagement (Jamet 2021; Worrall 2021). This continuity helps explain why Muscat has consistently assumed the intermediary role between adversaries rather than aligning as a partisan actor.

At the core of this approach lies the imperative of regime survival. Oman's small population, diverse social fabric, and proximity to more powerful neighbors have made internal cohesion and political stability overriding priorities for its rulers. Mediation thus serves not only as a foreign policy instrument but also as a safeguard for the regime; by reducing the risk of conflict spillover and gaining recognition as a constructive actor, Oman cushions itself against the destabilizing dynamics that have afflicted other states in the region. Neutrality in this sense is less a posture of passivity than an existential necessity (Valeri 2015).

Economic vulnerability further underscores the centrality of niche diplomacy to Oman's interests. Unlike its wealthier Gulf counterparts, Oman's limited hydrocarbon reserves expose it to energy market volatility. National development strategies, most notably Vision 2040, hinge on diversifying the economy and attracting sustained foreign investment, objectives that require a reputation for political stability and reliability (Dione and Al Jabri 2025; Chaziza 2020). By positioning itself as a trusted mediator, Oman mitigates security risks and reassures external partners that it offers a dependable environment for economic engagement.

Geography amplifies these imperatives. Straddling the Strait of Hormuz, Oman sits at the heart of US–Iran tensions and faces direct exposure to maritime insecurity and regional escalation (Dauletova et al. 2024). Its diplomatic interventions in nuclear negotiations, naval security initiatives, and conflict de-escalation are driven less by altruism than by national survival. At the same time, Muscat harbors ambitions of sustaining international visibility and recognition as a constructive middle power, even if its aspirations remain more modest than those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Qatar. Niche diplomacy provides the vehicle; it enables Oman to exercise influence disproportionate to its material base while safeguarding its statehood's economic and political foundations.

This nexus of historical tradition, regime security, economic vulnerability, and geographic exposure forms the backdrop against which Oman's recent mediation initiatives, whether in nuclear diplomacy, regional conflicts, or maritime security, must be understood.

4. Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Practices

Oman's swift transition from a quiet nation to a high-profile state within regional diplomacy has sparked increased academic and policy analysis of its mediation and foreign policy drivers and dynamics. The Sultanate exemplifies middle-power diplomacy, earning regional influence through its focused mediation policies that have garnered international respect. Over the past two decades, the Sultanate has played a crucial role in conflict resolution across the Middle East and beyond, engaging in mediation, humanitarian assistance, and post-conflict reconstruction. It has facilitated talks, secured prisoner releases, hosted discreet meetings, and served as a discreet back channel in sensitive situations. This aligns with Oman's core foreign policy principles, which emphasize stability and peace.

Motivated by ideological values and pragmatic interests, Oman's mediation efforts reinforce its broader diplomatic goals. The Sultanate's security measures—including its GCC membership, efforts to balance relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, its use of mediation in foreign policy, security support from the US, and increased military spending—are not sufficient to fully guarantee its security and stability, or eliminate all risks. With a small population and heavy reliance on hydrocarbon trade, Oman is vulnerable to global market fluctuations, which can also lead to internal social issues. Unlike the UAE and Qatar, which have limited resources, Oman cannot finance costly and ambitious foreign

policy initiatives to shield itself from external challenges (Ghahriyan 2022). Thus, through consistent involvement in complex disputes, Oman has established itself as a key player in the Middle East, promoting regional peace while maintaining its independent foreign policy and long-term objectives (Worrall 2021).

To fully understand Oman's unique diplomatic status in the Middle East, it is important to consider its geography, dominant religion, historical ties, friendly relations with certain global powers, and the foreign policy pursued by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said (Đorđević 2021). In a region where states invest heavily in protecting their sovereignty, security, and stability, middle powers, like Oman, face significant challenges from both domestic/internal and external factors. The Sultanate has employed various strategies to safeguard its security and sovereignty, earning a reputation for its distinctive foreign policy that mitigates the risks of the Middle East's instability (Ghahriyan 2022). By balancing regional interests and offering valuable services to neighboring and external powers, Oman has evolved into an "Interlocutor State" and a "friend to all, enemy to none," with mediation as a key tool in advancing its core foreign policy objectives (Worrall 2021; Leonard 2017).

Since gaining independence in 1970, Oman has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy rooted in non-intervention and the balancing of competing interests of regional states. This approach, aimed at maintaining amicable relations with neighbors and solidifying Oman's role as a regional diplomatic broker, reflects its security interests as a middle power in a strategically crucial location. These principles were the cornerstone of Sultan Qaboos bin Said's foreign policy. His successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, has further enhanced Oman's diplomatic influence, securing its position as a key interlocutor in many of the Middle East's most pressing conflicts (Emirates Policy Center 2022).

Oman's foreign policy established the Sultanate as a key regional player (Hussain 2023). Furthermore, Oman's diplomacy is shaped by domestic, regional, and international factors, with its national identity influenced by tribalism and Ibadism, distinguishing it from its neighbors (Emirates Policy Center 2022). Its strategic geographic location in the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, with access to the Strait of Hormuz, heavily influences the Sultanate's foreign policy decisions and practices (Dauletova et al. 2024). Situated at the heart of the Sunni-Shia rivalry, Oman has leveraged this precarious environment to conduct an independent foreign policy, positioning itself as a buffer state (Mazzucco 2022).

Historically, Oman has avoided entanglement in political-military conflicts that do not pose an immediate threat to its national security. The Sultanate's approach—preserving diplomatic ties with opposing factions and advocating negotiation as the preferred method of conflict resolution—has been recognized as the most effective way to uphold its strategic priorities (Mazzucco 2022). Oman's foreign policy is shaped by its history of conflict, with mediation efforts typically discreet, emphasizing "quiet diplomacy," which has been central to its success as a trusted mediator (Ghahriyan 2022). Mutual economic and security interests, good neighborly relations, long-term geostrategic considerations, stability, conflict transformation, and a non-aggressive diplomatic approach drive Oman's mediation. This has earned Oman the moniker "Switzerland of the Middle East," enhancing its reputation as a stabilizing force, both regionally and globally (Daga 2023).

Oman's foreign policy, with mediation as a key tool, is guided by principles, such as maintaining good relations with neighbors, fostering mutual economic and security interests, holding an internationalist outlook, engaging in a pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, believing that security and stability are achieved through cooperation, and being committed to persistent dialogue and consensus-building (Jones and Ridout 2013). Although often labeled as a "mediator," Oman functions more accurately as a "facilitator."

tor,” focusing on facilitating discussions and agreements rather than direct negotiation (Dauletova et al. 2024). As Yusuf bin Alawi, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, noted regarding mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia following a series of strikes on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, Oman has consistently downplayed its role as a mediator. Instead, he emphasized, “What we choose for ourselves is the role of facilitator,” reflecting Oman’s focus on creating channels for dialogue rather than directly negotiating between the two parties (Castelier and Müller 2019).

In a 2024 interview with Diplomatic World Magazine, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, Oman’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, articulated the core principles guiding Omani mediation and its broader foreign policy approach in the Middle East. He emphasized that Oman’s international engagement is rooted in a commitment to listening to and understanding the interests of others, expressing its own views with honesty, and maintaining credibility through consistent transparency. According to Oman’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Omani diplomacy avoids hidden agendas or manipulative tactics, instead prioritizing mutual trust and open dialogue—even in the face of disagreement. As he stated, “We are very honest in what we believe in, and we speak with our friends frankly, even if we disagree with each other. We cannot be hypocrites.” Furthermore, he explained that Oman’s foreign policy is based on constructive neutrality and non-interference in the affairs of other nations, and rejects external interference in its internal matters. He emphasized that “pragmatic” realism, openness, and good neighborliness are key principles within Omani foreign policy, consistently promoting inclusive dialogue and ensuring that all opposing parties are engaged, without marginalizing or favoring any side (Times News Service 2024).

Over time, Oman’s mediation efforts have become more ambitious, with a pragmatic approach that engages in cases in which success seems most likely, often on familiar issues in specific locations. Oman’s conflict resolution style combines traditional diplomacy and cultural wisdom, prioritizing mediation and non-interference. As a back-channel facilitator, Oman maintains the confidence of all parties involved and builds strategic partnerships with key allies, such as the US (Mladenov 2024).

Omani foreign policy is rooted in long-standing principles of good neighborly relations, mutual respect, tolerance, non-interference, dialogue, understanding, and pragmatism, with a strong emphasis on adapting to geostrategic realities. The Sultanate’s unique approach is shaped by its strategic location at the crossroads of key trade and energy routes, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea, as well as its historical ties with both Eastern and Western powers and its deep-rooted presence on the Arabian Peninsula. Over the past five decades, Oman has consistently pursued a policy of neutrality amid many of the Middle East’s most contentious political disputes and violent conflicts. While Oman is often portrayed as a neutral mediator, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of regional geopolitics. Absolute neutrality is rare, as all states, including Oman, inevitably act in accordance with their national interests (Jalal 2023).

5. Omani Mediation Efforts in the Middle East Conflicts

Mediation has become a central pillar of Omani foreign policy, with the Sultanate deliberately positioning itself as an intermediary in the Middle East. This reflects a strategically crafted form of niche diplomacy, enabling Oman to project itself as a credible and reliable peace broker on the global stage. By engaging in mediation efforts across a range of regional disputes, Oman asserts its relevance in international politics and enhances its diplomatic influence, despite the structural limitations it faces as a small state. Mediation thus serves as a tangible tool for expanding Oman’s foreign policy reach and increasing its power projection within and beyond the region.

As a small member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Oman has in recent years emerged as one of the most proactive mediators among middle powers. Omani policymakers have carved out diplomatic space that allows them to address regional challenges on their own terms, capitalizing on their comparative strengths. As Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi observed, “We try to make use of our intermediate position between larger powers to reduce the potential for conflict in our immediate neighborhood” (Bin Hamad Al Bu Said 2003). This approach is driven by a combination of strategic geographic positioning, aspirations for international prestige, and a pragmatic focus on regime and state survival. In high-profile cases such as Iran, Qatar, Syria, and Yemen, Oman has played a constructive role in de-escalating tensions, though not necessarily in resolving conflicts, thereby reinforcing its image as a neutral and pragmatic peacemaker in a volatile region.

Thus, mediation has become central to Omani foreign policy, with the Sultanate intentionally adopting the role of facilitator and mediator in a region known for its conflicts and wars. This approach is part of a strategic plan to meet various diplomatic and foreign policy goals. At its core, mediation helps Oman build a reputation as an impartial and altruistic broker dedicated to peace and stability. As a middle power navigating a volatile region, Oman’s diplomatic efforts, including its mediation activities, are driven by a broader strategy to safeguard national security. Through these efforts, Oman has crafted an image of itself as a proactively neutral state amidst the Middle East’s numerous national and cross-border conflicts. At the same time, Oman seeks to maintain open lines of communication between disparate disputants to ensure that its regional and global opponents remain as few as possible.

Oman demonstrates how a middle power can effectively enhance its global appeal and broaden its foreign policy influence through diplomatic mediation. Since the 1990s, Oman sought to build a reputation as a neutral mediator committed to regional peace and stability. A notable example is Oman’s role in mediating the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Oman’s neutrality and balanced relationships with Iran, GCC countries, and the Euro-Atlantic zone make it a natural mediator in this triangular dynamic (Yeniguna et al. 2020; Bozkurt and Mercan 2022). The Sultanate has been actively involved in negotiations involving the UK–Iran, US–Iran, Iran–US, and 5+1–Iran. From 2013 to 2015, Oman hosted several rounds of back-channel and official talks, culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015, marking the peak of the Sultanate’s mediation efforts in the Middle East (Ignatius 2016). After the official signing of the accord, past Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, commended Oman’s mediation efforts. Kerry noted that Oman hosted several critical meetings and was crucial in initiating the talks between Tehran and Washington (Đorđević 2021).

Moreover, Omani financial institutions, including Bank Muscat, which reportedly held approximately USD 5.7 billion in Iranian funds, played a facilitating role in the financial arrangements associated with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Between 2016 and 2019, Iran exported heavy water to Oman as part of its efforts to comply with JCPOA requirements concerning stockpile limits. Despite the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement under the Trump administration in 2018, the Sultanate has remained committed to supporting diplomatic efforts to revive the deal. Oman has actively encouraged Iran to make the necessary concessions to reach a renewed agreement, aligning its mediation strategy with its broader commitment to regional stability and dialogue (Congressional Research Service 2022).

Despite the challenges faced by the JCPOA, Oman remains committed to facilitating diplomatic efforts between Washington and Tehran, to ease tensions. While the agreement had flaws, it notably contributed to regional stability and reduced tensions. The Sultanate’s successful mediation, particularly in facilitating the secret back-channel pre-

negotiations and official talks that led to the JCPOA, highlights its strategic role as a regional diplomatic facilitator.

Oman's close relationship with Iran has positioned it as a critical player during crises in the Middle East, particularly in negotiating the release of foreign hostages in the region. These efforts remain a crucial component of Oman's niche diplomacy strategy. As a close ally of the US, and Iran's most reliable partner in the Persian Gulf, the Sultanate facilitated backchannel communications between US and Iranian diplomats, leading to several agreements for the release of American citizens held by Iran and Houthi militias in Yemen ([Reuters 2016](#); [CBS News 2020](#); [Le Monde 2024](#); [Hansler et al. 2023](#)). Additionally, Oman has intensified its mediation efforts in Syria at the request of the US, aiming to secure the release of American hostages detained in the country ([Middle East Monitor 2022](#)).

Moreover, in March 2023, the surprising announcement in Beijing about the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran underscored the significant mediation efforts of Oman and Iraq. The agreement, which followed several rounds of negotiations in Baghdad and Muscat during 2021–2022, was finalized with Chinese mediation ([Cafiero 2024](#)). It restored diplomatic relations between the two nations and reestablished minor security and cultural exchange agreements. The Sultanate played a key role in maintaining the momentum of the Saudi–Iranian détente; it hosted the initial rounds of talks and continued to facilitate discussions, even after the agreement's finalization, ensuring its successful implementation ([Petyur and Aliyev 2023](#)). The mediation efforts of Oman and Iraq were explicitly acknowledged in the trilateral statement by China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, which expressed gratitude for their roles in hosting the negotiations between 2021 and 2022. This recognition emphasized the significance of Oman and Iraq's contributions to the settlement between Iran and Saudi Arabia ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023](#)).

In 2025, Oman emerged once again as a pivotal intermediary in the faltering nuclear diplomacy between the United States and Iran, convening several indirect rounds of talks in Muscat and Rome. Under the stewardship of Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, Muscat facilitated backchannel exchanges between U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, producing modest signs of movement by late May. Shortly thereafter, Oman transmitted elements of a U.S. proposal to Tehran, which in turn drafted a counteroffer in early June. Yet the cancelation of a scheduled sixth round in Muscat underscored the fragility of the process and highlighted the structural limits confronting Omani mediation; while trusted by both sides and indispensable for keeping dialogue alive, Muscat's efforts remain constrained by escalating regional tensions and the wider geopolitical mistrust that continues to obstruct a substantive breakthrough ([Tactical Report 2025](#); [Reuters 2025a, 2025b](#)).

Ultimately, Oman has become a model for how middle powers with modest geostrategic positions can use mediation to become significant actors in international affairs and agendas. The role of a peacemaker requires high credibility, impartiality, and a lack of historical baggage. Middle powers may be particularly well-suited for peace-building because their foreign policies are often less entangled with direct or larger strategic interests in the conflict. Driven more by altruism than substantial strategic gains, middle power mediators can focus on pure mediation, emphasizing communication, reasoning, and learning and proposing alternatives to facilitate cooperation ([Eriksson 2015](#)). Additionally, their absence of historical baggage and threatening power enables them to engage more effectively with various actors, including those considered problematic. Their absence of 'historical baggage' and threatening power, moreover, enables them to engage more effectively with various actors, including those considered problematic ([Hong 2022](#)).

For example, Oman has consistently pursued a quiet and pragmatic approach to diplomacy, focusing on facilitation and mediation between the Palestinians and Israelis. While not as overtly involved as other regional actors, like Qatar or Egypt, Oman has maintained a neutral stance, encouraged dialogue, and served as a discreet intermediary. Under Sultan Qaboos's leadership, Oman sought to bridge divides through indirect communication and back-channel diplomacy. In 2019, the Sultanate actively promoted peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis, advocating a diplomatic and pragmatic settlement (Albasoos and Maashani 2020).

Following the October 7th Hamas attack, Oman has continued its diplomatic facilitation in various forms. A key focus of Oman's mediation is to prevent the escalating crises in Gaza, Yemen, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea from spreading into the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman. As part of these efforts, Oman has sought to persuade Iran to avoid further escalation amid rising regional tensions. This includes relaying messages, keeping indirect communication channels open between rival parties, facilitating back-channel negotiations, and hosting discreet meetings to support dialogue and reduce tensions. Unlike Qatar's prominent mediation role between Israel and Hamas, the Sultanate has quietly worked to prevent regional escalation, often passing messages between US and Iranian officials. For instance, Oman served as a back-channel in 2023 after Houthis launched missile and drone attacks in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (Cafiero 2024). In 2024, Oman hosted indirect talks between senior US and Iranian negotiators to curb Houthi attacks. It later facilitated discussions aimed at reducing tensions between Iran and Israel, preventing further regional conflict (Staff and Magid 2024).

Additionally, over the past decade, Oman has maintained diplomatic relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime and not interfered in the Syrian civil war, unlike many of its Gulf neighbors. In Syria's complex civil war, Oman has remained neutral, striving to keep positive relations with the various Western powers involved, including Iran and Russia, which support the Assad regime, and the US, which supports anti-Assad rebels and maintains a military base in the country. When the Arab League suspended Syria in 2011, Oman was one of the few Arab countries to strengthen diplomatic ties with the Assad government, despite pressure from other Arab states to sever those ties. While the Sultanate withdrew its ambassador, it kept its diplomatic channels open, using neutrality to encourage a diplomatic settlement. In 2020, the Sultanate was the first Gulf state to reinstate its ambassador to Syria, and in February 2023, Sultan Haytham hosted Assad for talks in Oman (Emirates Policy Center 2022; The Soufan Center 2023).

Mediation has emerged as one of the central pillars of Omani foreign policy, with the Sultanate intentionally positioning itself as a facilitator and mediator in a region known for its conflicts and wars. This approach is part of a strategic plan to meet various diplomatic and foreign policy goals. At the most basic level, mediation helps cultivate Oman's reputation as an impartial and altruistic broker dedicated to peace and stability. As a middle power navigating a tumultuous region, Oman's diplomatic efforts, including its mediation activities, are driven by a broader strategy to ensure national security. Through its mediation efforts, Oman has crafted an image of itself as a proactively neutral state amidst the Middle East's numerous national and cross-border conflicts. At the same time, Oman seeks to maintain open lines of communication between disparate disputants to ensure that its regional and global opponents remain as few as possible.

As Yemen's immediate neighbor, Oman has demonstrated a sustained and active role in mediating the conflict since its outbreak in 2015. The Sultanate's longstanding diplomatic ties with various key stakeholders, combined with its prior experience in conflict resolution in Yemen, have positioned it uniquely to facilitate dialogue in ways that few other regional actors can or are willing to pursue. Oman's mediation efforts in Yemen can be broadly

divided into three phases. In the initial phase, Oman distinguished itself as the only GCC member not to participate in *Operation Decisive Storm* (launched in March 2015), signaling its commitment to a political solution. During this period, it put forward a seven-point peace plan proposing a framework for political transition. The second phase was marked by discreet, unofficial talks and informal channels of communication with both the warring parties and other relevant actors. In the third phase, Oman took on a more direct role, engaging in formal negotiations with key stakeholders and facilitating confidence-building measures. Throughout these phases, the Sultanate has maintained its position as a neutral and pragmatic mediator, reinforcing its diplomatic relevance in the region (Baabood 2017; Nasser 2023; Yaakoubi 2022).

Since the outbreak of the war in Yemen, Oman has played a key role in facilitating dialogue and communication and is committed to mediating and supporting confidence-building measures. By maintaining relationships with different parties in the conflict, including the Houthis, and leveraging its good relations with Iran, Oman has positioned itself as a neutral mediator in the political process to resolve the crisis. The Sultanate's efforts have led to agreements that helped ease the conflict and secure the release of many detainees held by the Houthis. Oman also provided humanitarian aid, including medical treatment for the wounded, and supported UN efforts for a ceasefire in Hodeidah (Stockholm Agreement) by hosting parallel dialogue sessions (Bin Ali Al-Sunaidi et al. 2022).

Oman, furthermore, focuses on mediation in Middle Eastern disputes to enhance economic returns and gain broad international recognition. While pursuing recognition and prominence, Oman also places considerable importance on its economic interests. The country aims to leverage its recent success mediating between regional rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, to further its interests. It is also striving to strengthen its debt-laden economy through renewable energy investments, particularly involving Asian countries that import its oil and gas (Hussain 2023). Additionally, Oman focuses on maintaining the freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical maritime chokepoint, for much of the world's oil shipments.

Moreover, Oman's involvement in the Qatar crisis of 2017–2021 also illustrates the economic value of its mediation efforts. Recognizing the complexities involved, the Sultanate understood that taking on a primary mediator role was not feasible (Baabood 2017). Instead, Oman chose to maintain its impartiality and adhere to a policy of non-interference, opting for a more traditional peace approach and engaging in quiet diplomacy to bring the two sides closer to reconciliation. Oman refrained from joining the anti-Qatar bloc formed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, consistently advocating for dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the conflict, consistent with its foreign policy principles. Throughout this crisis, which has lasted nearly, four-years, the Sultanate remained neutral, cooperating with the anti-Qatari bloc and Qatar (Bozkurt and Mercan 2022; Yenigün 2023).

While the Qatar crisis aligned with Oman's foreign policy of neutrality, it also provided an economic boost when Oman, heavily reliant on oil revenues, faced economic challenges. The collaboration between Qatar and Oman proved beneficial for both sides; Oman helped Qatar navigate the blockade, while Qatar's increased investment and trade opportunities strengthened Oman's economy. Despite maintaining political neutrality, Oman deepened its economic cooperation with Qatar by opening its ports and airports to Qatari companies and opposing efforts to isolate Qatar from regional cooperation frameworks (Yenigün et al. 2021; Bozkurt and Mercan 2022).

Economic relations between Oman and Qatar deepened significantly during the Gulf crisis. In 2018, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at boosting bilateral trade and investment, including cooperation in the production and export of food products, construction materials, and consumer goods (Daily Sabah 2018).

Oman also served as a critical trans-shipment hub for Qatari vessels blocked from Saudi and Emirati airspace and maritime routes (Harb 2018). In a notable gesture of solidarity, Qatar provided Oman with USD 1 billion in direct financial support to help cushion the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and declining oil prices (Kerr 2020). The two countries further institutionalized their partnership through agreements covering military cooperation, taxation, tourism, ports, labor, and investment (The Jerusalem Post 2021).

Omani mediation in Yemen has also been shaped by pragmatic considerations and economic calculations. The Sultanate is particularly concerned about the potential spillover of conflict, radical ideologies, and the expanding influence of neighboring powers along its western border. At the same time, Oman views the instability in Yemen, especially in its eastern regions, as an opportunity to position itself as a key player in emerging geo-economic dynamics. Saudi Arabia's interest in developing alternative energy export routes that bypass the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, both vulnerable to regional tensions, has increased the strategic relevance of Oman's infrastructure. Projects such as the Duqm pipeline and investments in Duqm Port stand to benefit from this shift, enhancing Oman's appeal as a logistical and investment hub. This reflects the Sultanate's broader effort to leverage regional instability into long-term strategic and economic advantage (Jalal 2023).

Oman has become one of the most active mediators in regional and intra-national conflicts across the Middle East. Its most notable mediation efforts include those in Iran, Qatar, Syria, and Yemen, as well as additional, though less prominent, initiatives in Palestine and the détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Through these activities, Oman has established a reputation as a sincere and impartial broker committed to peace and stability, showcasing its capability to mediate and alleviate tensions in the Middle East and beyond. As US Department of State spokesman, Ned Price, highlighted, "Oman has played a constructive role across the Middle East and across regions in the past. It has been a bridge-builder between countries that don't always see eye-to-eye" (U.S. Department of State 2023).

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to debates on middle-power foreign policy and niche diplomacy by offering a theoretically informed, empirically grounded analysis of Oman's diplomatic strategy. It expands the niche diplomacy framework beyond its typical focus on democratic, Western middle powers by demonstrating how Oman, a rentier and non-democratic state, leverages issue specialization and regional mediation to exert strategic influence. In doing so, the study challenges prevailing assumptions about the structural and normative prerequisites for niche diplomacy, showing that even authoritarian and resource-dependent states can pursue targeted, high-impact diplomatic roles.

Oman's practice of niche diplomacy is anchored in its sustained neutrality, balanced foreign policy, and strategic use of soft power, which together enhance its credibility and effectiveness as a mediator. The country capitalizes on its geopolitical positioning, historical ties, and non-aligned stance to create diplomatic openings between adversaries, exemplified by its facilitation of backchannel negotiations between Iran and the United States and its mediation efforts in Yemen.

Three key elements underpin this diplomatic posture: (1) the long-term strategic vision of Sultan Qaboos and its continuation under Sultan Haitham; (2) domestic political stability and cohesion; and (3) a deliberate avoidance of entanglement in regional rivalries. These elements enable Oman to maintain autonomy and foster trust among conflicting actors, even amid intense geopolitical polarization, such as in the Iran–Saudi Arabia and Iran–US rivalries. By illustrating how a small, non-democratic state can deploy niche diplomacy to navigate systemic constraints and broker dialogue, this study underscores the value of the niche diplomacy framework for analyzing small state agency. Oman's experience

demonstrates that consistency, neutrality, and regional expertise can allow a middle power to project diplomatic influence disproportionate to its material capabilities.

In sum, Oman's niche diplomacy illustrates how a small and resource-limited state can deploy neutrality and mediation to enhance its strategic relevance in an unsettled regional environment. At the same time, the strategy's limitations are evident. Muscat's influence is confined mainly to discreet facilitation and backchannel negotiations, falling short of shaping regional dynamics more substantively. Its carefully cultivated neutrality, though central to its credibility, risks being dismissed as passivity or self-preservation when crises demand more decisive intervention. Economic vulnerabilities further complicate this position: Oman's dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and its need to attract foreign investment can blur the line between impartial mediation and pursuing material interests, potentially undermining its image as an honest broker. These tensions highlight that Oman's diplomatic posture is less a position of unqualified strength than a continual balancing act, one in which strategic vision is constrained by structural fragility. Acknowledging these trade-offs clarifies the limits of Muscat's foreign policy and underscores the precariousness of niche diplomacy as a middle-power strategy in the 21st century.

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