STRATEGIC LITTORALS: CONNECTIVITY AND HERITAGE IN NORTHERN UAE AND OMAN

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Differently from neighbouring Abu Dhabi, Dubai or Qatar, the northern emirates of the UAE (Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al Khaimah and Fujairah) and the Sultanate of Oman form a critical sub-region which has entered globalized modernization at a later stage. In the eyes of the ruling elites, current urban development projects, logistical infrastructures, port expansion and tourism should consolidate economic growth, reduce social inequalities (in the northern emirates of the UAE), and design sustainable post-oil paths (in Oman). Trying to balance continuity and change, the northern emirates of the UAE and Oman are renewing their maritime traditions in the context of state transformations that combine national heritage (as trade culture) and connectivity (infrastructures, urban areas, industrial poles) thanks to national ”Visions” and the ”project-ization of identities”. In fact, new projects do not only aim at attracting investments and create job opportunities, but also at promoting top-down recalibrated values of the new citizenship which in the eyes of the governments, should be business-oriented and community-serving. Tracing the evolution of the northern Emirati and Omani sub-region, which risks to be affected now by the consequences of the US-Iran escalation, this analysis aims to assess economic transformation trends, emerging security issues and geopolitical implications.

THE NORTHERN EMIRATI AND OMANI SUB-REGION: GLOBALIZED MODERNIZATION AT LAST

In the northern emirates of the UAE (Ajman, Umm al Quwain, Ras al Khaimah and Fujairah) and in the sultanate of Oman, a wave of investments and projects has started to redesign the political, security and symbolic landscape of these strategic littorals. Free Economic Zones (FEZs), urban developments, logistical and maritime infrastructures, ports expansion and tourism impact on the consolidated balances of this sub-region at the strategic crossroads between Africa, southern Asia and South East Asia. As a result, these Gulf littorals have become even more strategic than before, not only for their natural geographical location (Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea), but also for their growing geopolitical weight and global aspirations.

In this area of the Arabian Peninsula, globalized modernization has been occurring later if compared with neighbours such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi or Doha, reflecting a slower, less convulsed pattern of modernization echoing local rhythms and traditions. Moreover, this sub-region was originally inhabited by tribes with a prevalently maritime vocation related to the awala tradition, historically open...
to trade and cross-cultural exchanges: this is the “continuity bridge” linking the merchant past to the current economic transformation based on connectivity. In fact, the infrastructural, urban and industrial projects that are modifying how the northern emirates and Oman present themselves to the world (likely affecting national self-perception in the long-term), all have to do with heritage, intended here in its broader version. Indeed, heritage has to be understood not only as something related to past legacies, implying the conservation and promotion of yesterday’s cultural production: it also includes a future dimension, since today’s top-down projects and investments (urban areas, new/expanded ports, industries) contribute to building the heritage of tomorrow, influencing the ongoing process of nation-building. Not by chance, ruling elites are trying to convey and spread social engineering messages of dynamic citizenship also through new infrastructural, urban and industrial projects (for instance, private sector jobs for nationals, civic duty and community responsibility).

This “project-ization of identities” is the main implicit content of many of the “Visions” (for instance, “Vision 2021” and “Vision 2071” in the UAE, “Vision 2040” in Oman), the national programs tasked with transforming the economic structure of their countries, thus updating the relationship between connectivity and heritage in the XXI century. In fact, globalization is not something new in this sub-region: through the centuries, the popular culture of the Gulf “has been global, if not globalized”, but with “each ethnic group preserving its own cultural identity” despite continued interaction with one another.

Currently, the challenge of globalized modernization in these strategic littorals recalls the “proto-globalization” phenomenon experienced by many port nodes (like Zanzibar, Julphar i.e. Ras al Khaimah, Sohar), which managed to combine flourishing connectivity with recognizable local identity in the past. In this sub-region, state transformation plays both an economic and a nation-building role.

First of all, the state transformation path embraced by the northern emirates of the UAE and Oman has structural economic reasons: the sultanate must find post-oil ways to increase state income and create job opportunities, especially for nationals, while the northern emirates – which never relied on
hydrocarbon revenues, given their limited or inexistent oil/gas resources – have to consolidate financial growth and mitigate social inequalities in order to also acquire more political leverage in the Emirati federation vis-à-vis the leading emirate, Abu Dhabi.

Secondly, economy-driven state transformation plays a subtle but powerful role in nation-building processes. In the northern emirates of the UAE federation, post-1971 state-building was indirectly driven by the energy revenues redistributed by Abu Dhabi to the less wealthy peripheral areas, as in the case of Ras al Khaimah: this unequal relationship allowed the leading emirate of the UAE to monopolize Bedouin-centred identity narratives within the federation. Although presenting a historical feeling of nation, the modern state of Oman had to find a balance between coastal and interior people, economies and identities. In fact, "the idea of Oman is not the same thing as the present nation-state of Oman", since "Oman has existed as a recognized geographical and cultural entity encompassing eastern Arabia for several millennia". From the 1970s onwards, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said has been the dominant force behind the elaboration of a recognized Omani state identity: Oman, as a state, is structurally built on the personality of Qaboos, the leader who was able to unify a varied society in which the Ibadi branch of Islam is still prevalent. As a result, this multifaceted trajectory of change occurring in the northern Emirati and Omani sub-region produces economic transformation trends, new security issues and geopolitical implications that need to be assessed.

THE MARITIME FACTOR: LINKING BUSINESS AND HERITAGE

In the northern emirates and in Oman, the relationship between business and heritage is emphasized by the maritime dimension, which is a longue durée vector of politics for these littoral societies. In fact, the maritime component has traditionally boosted economic development, geopolitical-commercial projection and national identity in the northern UAE and Oman. In both cases, business oligopolies drive state transformation. However, the northern emirates of the UAE don't have financial infrastructure or merchant family networks able to support investments: this strengthens Abu Dhabi, Dubai or foreign leverage on them. Conversely, Oman's decision-makers actively
participate in developing business, with a number of royal family members financially involved in post-oil initiatives.\(^8\)

Nowadays, coastal projects and investments are the pillars of the social-economic transformation of the northern emirates and of the sultanate. Since the 1970s, the port modernization policy implemented by Oman has favoured the renaissance (nahda) of the Omani state after the defeat of the insurgency in Dhofar and the following war (1963-75), strengthening trade and maritime relations with distant countries. Current post-oil investments and maritime infrastructural projects, like port construction and expansion, foster Oman’s new renaissance: state transformation is also functional to the recalibration of the Omani national identity, projecting the sultanate into a future in which Omanis will have inevitably to accustom themselves to a post-Qaboos state.\(^9\) Differently from the Al Nayhan (Abu Dhabi) and to the Al Maktum (Dubai) families, who are of bedu genealogy and both belong to the Bani Yas tribal confederation, the Qasimi family of Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah (plur. Qawasim), is part of the hawalah Arabs “nomads or semi-nomads from the sea” and has a prominent commercial history amid both the Arab and Persian shores of the Gulf.\(^10\)

It must be noted that the bedu and maritime dimensions can coexist and be interdependent in the same tribe, with one aspect prevailing over the other; therefore, it is the hawala feature that distinguishes the original population of northern emirates, such as the Qawasim.\(^11\) Northern emirates’ identities are marked by cultural openness and cosmopolitanism: these are relatively different from inland Emirati tribes and, for some features, closer to Omani coastal societies.\(^12\) However, after the 1971 federal unification, the northern tribes of the federation have generally aligned with the leading force of the UAE, accepting (despite intermittent relucancy by Ras al Khaimah), some sort of “Abu Dhabi consensus” especially in foreign policy and in most recent years, given the dependency relationship established since the 1970s with Abu Dhabi.\(^13\) Today, new investments and projects allow the northern emirates of the UAE to consolidate economic niches within the federation (in sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, education), opening to international investments which could offer the smaller emirates of the north an occasion for reviving local peculiarities and identities.
RAS AL KHAIMAH AND THE NORTHERN EMIRATES: ABU DHABI’S “UNEQUAL BROTHERS” SEEK GROWTH

As members of a federation, the northern emirates of the UAE have to combine local decision-making with federal decision-making processes. This sheds light on the constant political negotiation that is required between peripheral emirates and the federal power based in (and driven by) Abu Dhabi. For instance, the UAE’s Vision 2021 mentions, among its national priorities, infrastructures, cohesive society and preserved identity: but the northern emirates’ “ecosystem” is definitely different from that of Abu Dhabi or Dubai.

As a matter of fact, Abu Dhabi and Ras al Khaimah really are “unequal brothers”: at a social level, the local northern communities, which host the highest number of Emirati nationals in the federation, used to register lower life-indicator standards with respect to Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Emirati nationals make up 40 percent of RAK’s population (1700 km² of size) the highest density of nationals in the UAE. Although recent estimations would register an increase of expatriates also in RAK (58 percent in 2005, 76 percent in 2012), this is still lower compared with Abu Dhabi, which is 67340 km² of size (74 percent of expatriates in 2005, 81 percent in 2016); on the eastern coast, Fujairah has the lowest number of expatriates, only 61 percent as of 2016. Differences are also marked in terms of GDP per capita, with Abu Dhabi reaching $44,269 in 2007 and RAK only $16,624 in that year. According to the UAE National Statistics Bureau, unemployment estimations are higher in the northern emirates compared to the federal average of 14 percent, with 16.2 percent in RAK and Fujairah reaching 20.6 percent in 2009.

In 2008, the Dubai financial and real estate crisis blocked the northern emirates’ ambitions of development and economic expansion: they – and most of all Ajman – were affected by the unexpectedly burst bubble of their major neighbour. As a result, many projects, especially in the construction and real estate sectors, stalled or were downsized due to the high economic dependency of the smaller emirates on Dubai. In the last few years, the northern emirates of the UAE have progressively returned to financial growth: in Ras al Khaimah, two industry giants mainly contribute to the local economy, RAK Ceramics, founded by the current ruler Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi in 1990, and Julphar (RAK Pharmaceuticals).
Because of their limited energy resources, the northern emirates' economies are not typically rentier ones, although benefitting extensively from federal revenue redistribution: but nowadays, these non-hydrocarbon economic structures are called upon to integrate new projects in infrastructures, construction and tourism. The northern emirates depend largely on the federal government: for instance, they partially rely on the national grid system for the generation and distribution of electricity. Sporadic protests against the lack of extensive welfare, electricity shortages and youth unemployment erupt in northern urban areas, as occurred in Ras al Khaimah in 2011. For this reason, too, the federal government has been increasing the frequency and amount of financial aid to peripheral emirates. In 2011, Abu Dhabi delivered a development package to Ras al Khaimah and the northern emirates to prevent further dissent: the bulk of the 1.6 billion dollar additional funding17 was planned for investments, infrastructural projects, housing loans, food subsidies and increased pensions for soldiers. Moreover, the ministry of infrastructural development of the UAE has been implementing a 2017-2021 five-year plan for the eastern coast (Fujairah emirate).

OMAN'S POST-OIL HORIZON: REFORMING A CENTRALIZED AND PERSONALIZED STATE

In Oman, post-oil economic diversification is de facto entrenched with ongoing nation-building dynamics and the looming, but still unclear, process of succession to the sultan. Two events have contributed to accelerating Oman's economic diversification strategy: the popular protests that broke out in 2011 in many urban centres across the sultanate (Sohar and Sur in the northern Batinah governorate, Salalah in the southern Dhofar, and also in the capital Muscat) and the decline of oil prices since 2014.

Finding a post-oil balance is even more challenging given the problematic figures of Omani finances: fiscal deficit and public debt are booming, youth unemployment is rampant among nationals (estimated at 49 percent by the World Bank). The introduction of the VAT (value added tax) will likely be postponed to 2021 in order to mitigate social reactions. As in neighbouring monarchies, the public sector is no longer able to absorb workforce, and nationals (who have traditionally aspired to securing a well-paid public job), still don't have the technical expertise to satisfy private sector demand.
In this context, Oman’s power structure further complicates the implementation of deep economic and social reforms: Oman is not only the most centralized state in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, but state-building has been anchored to a one-man charismatic leadership, that of Sultan Qaboos. Nowadays, the sultan still maintains direct control over the most prominent roles and portfolios of Oman: he serves as prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, defence and finance, and governor of the central bank, although he appointed a deputy prime minister for international relations affairs in 2017 (the cousin Asad bin Tariq Al Said) and Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah has been the minister responsible for foreign affairs since 1997.

Looking for gradual reform, in 2016 the sultanate launched the Tanfeedh (“National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification”), a government-led five-year plan which should pave the way for the implementation of the overarching “Vision 2040”, unveiled by the government in early 2019 under the banner of “Moving Forward with Confidence”. Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, the Omani minister of heritage and culture, another cousin of the sultan, is the chairman of the main committee for Vision 2040 and one of the possible candidates for succession to Sultan Qaboos, thus synthetizing the prominent relationship between connectivity and heritage in current state transformation. Tanfeedh aims to integrate the development of Oman’s most strategic sectors, which are manufacturing, tourism, transport and logistics, mining and fisheries: not by chance, most of them are tied to the maritime dimension. The program stresses the public-private partnership goal, with no less than 80 percent of non-government capital to be invested to finance the program’s initiatives. Tanfeedh presents itself as a flexible program to be pursued through extended and continued interaction with the Omani community. Therefore, public relations play a central role in project implementation. For instance, venues for mutual interaction are the “Tanfeedh labs”, gatherings among stakeholders, partners and participants to share ideas on topics like practical obstacles and timeframes; social media interaction is also present to outreach youth and a survey measures community awareness and expectations regarding the program. More broadly, Vision 2040 focuses on education, health, social justice and a “flexible” labour policy to transit the sultanate towards a post-oil future. The
Sultanate has been trying to present this overarching reform as a national participated effort: the latest National Conference for Vision 2040 was held in January 2019 with the participation of officials, economists, foreign experts and a forum with 350 young Omani people from various governorates, plus another 50 Arab youths living in Oman.

**NORTHERN EMIRATES AND OMAN: TRENDS OF STATE TRANSFORMATION**

Among the new projects developed in the northern emirates and Oman, some trends can be identified: all shed light on how these strategic littorals are attempting to balance economic opening and diversification, although preserving local economies and heritage.

Infrastructures also boost internal connectivity. Infrastructures (roads, highways and ports) are not only vectors of external projection. In fact, these projects also aim to achieve better integration between peripheral areas and the interior (like for the northern emirates and the Abu Dhabi-Dubai heartland of the UAE), or between the coast and the interior (as occurs in Oman). This represents a historical continuity: in the past, the prosperity of local coastal regions also benefitted the interior lands. For instance, a highway connecting the northern and southern areas of the emirate of Ras al Khaimah ("RAK Ring Road") has been under construction since 2018; new roads will be built to link Al Zohra, the new sea port of Ajman, with the rest of the emirate; Emirates City, the residential project still under construction and downsized after the Dubai crisis in 2008, should help to connect Ajman with the rest of the UAE. The four manmade islands of Al Marjan in Ras al Khaimah are located 15 minutes from the local international airport to better link the emirate with the UAE’s main centres of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Abu Dhabi is consistently investing in the development of the eastern Emirati coast: the Abu Dhabi Ports Company (ADPC) owns Fujairah Terminals and an expansion plan was signed in 2017 when ADPC obtained a 35-year concession agreement to operate the port. In the Omani government’s eyes, the port and industrial area of Duqm should increase social and economic opportunities for the whole Al Wusta eastern governorate.
Mixed-use projects for tourists and residents. Most of these residential/commercial projects have a double target: residents and tourists. In fact, new urban spaces are designed for mixed communities comprising national and expatriate residents, as well as Arab and international tourists: this mixed-use implies finding a balance between international-style hospitality and respect for local habits. In the northern emirates, this is the case of three projects in Ajman emirate: Emirates City, Al Zohra (a mega-development with marinas, hotels and resorts) and the Ajman Square Project. In Ras al Khaimah, Al Marjan Island Project, started in 2013, comprises hotels, residential units, retail stores and theme parks. In Oman, the flagship urban project in the Muscat capital district, Madinat al Irfan (“the city of knowledge”), to be developed in six phases by 2044, “will establish an integrated, inclusive and sustainable community” to encompass “different ages, income groups and nationalities”. In Duqm, port infrastructure, residential complexes and industries are part of the same multi-purpose area.

Jobs for nationals, but in the private sector. Growing sectors like infrastructure, tourism and industries can reduce unemployment among nationals both in the northern emirates and in Oman. Strict quotas for the Omanization of the labour force were introduced in industry and the tourism sector, with the government allowing partial labour exemptions only within free zones: the number of expatriate workers and remittances has been significantly decreasing (almost 100,000 fewer active foreigners in the first half of 2018); conversely, restrictions were eased in the UAE on a selection of expatriates. However, these mostly private-public partnerships require a mind-change for young nationals, accustomed to fill roles in the public sector: during a Vision 2040 forum, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said publicly exhorted young Omanis not to wait for a public job, but to personally create job occasions in the private sector. In Ajman, the Al Zorah project was also presented as a work opportunity for young Emiratis; in Oman, the Khazaen Economic City for the logistics industry (a mega-project in the northern region of Batinah including also a dry port, a truck terminal plus food and auto markets) is designed to bring development in the area of Sohar, the most affected by the 2011 popular protests.

Heritage as a bridge between local economies and state transformation. In the northern emirates and Oman, heritage becomes a top-down driver of
economic transformation, since it plays a bridge role between tradition and future. Not by chance, Tanfeedh and Vision 2040 are led by Haitham bin Tariq Al Said who is the minister of heritage and culture. In this sense, local economies, like fishing, are integrated into wider projects to support community development. In Ras al Khaimah, the traditional fishing village of Al Jazeera Al Hamra, once abandoned, is the object of a renewal process based also on water conservation and environmental sustainability. In Umm al Quwain, the harbour development project launched at Al Maidan in 2018 aims to encourage Emirati nationals to continue fishing activity thanks to the establishment of a modern market and the accommodation of bigger boats. The Fujairah Cultural Coral Reef Gardens project, announced in 2019, is going to develop the longest artificial coral reef in the world, in the protected marine area of Dibba: this fish sanctuary should have a positive impact on local food security and on the fishing sector, also attracting eco-tourism. Post-oil transition is openly tied to nation-building: in its program, Vision 2040 stresses the goal of a strengthened education system “for building the Omani citizen, confident of identity and committed to social values”. In prominent urban projects such as Madinat al Irfan, heritage plays also an iconic role: for instance, the traditional wadi stands at the core of the master plan for the downtown district, with connection bridges crossing the wadi to link different areas of Madinat al Irfan together.

National branding campaigns: “Made in Oman” and “I found Ras al Khaimah”. Oman and the northern emirates of the UAE are promoting communication campaigns to stress the value of local products/manufacturing (Oman) or to attract specific targets of the tourist market (Ras al Khaimah). “Made in Oman” ("Origin Oman") aims to promote Oman-made products and services, also to engender national pride: in this case too, business and heritage go hand in hand since in 2019 Madayn (the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates) signed an agreement with China’s Ministry of Commerce in Guangzhou that also foresees the possibility for investors to participate in local and international exhibitions as part of the Made in Oman campaign. In 2018, Ras al Khaimah launched a global promotional campaign, “I found Ras al Khaimah”, to promote itself as a leading adventure and leisure tourism hub, transforming rural lifestyle and local culture into drivers of international marketing.
STRATEGIC LITTORALS: ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION RAISES NEW SECURITY ISSUES

Economic projects and infrastructures, developed also with foreign capital, raise new security issues for the northern emirates and Oman. The protection of flourishing infrastructures becomes critical; in the medium-long term, foreign partnerships in commercial ports could pave the way for new security arrangements and/or military outposts. By now, economic transformation strengthens the geopolitical relevance of these littorals even more.

Policing in new urban spaces: prismatic security and community-policing. Security provision and law enforcement in new cities, maritime infrastructures and expanded ports have to adapt to developing realities in which the habits of tradition blend with the codes and rhythms of post-modernity. These areas can be analysed as local security complexes, since they present, in the same local setting, various security concerns interdependent on each other: demographic growth and the rise of expatriate communities; ethnic and religious coexistence; sustainability in terms of energy, water and services; the fight against violent extremism, human and goods trafficking; cyber threats potentially affecting highly digitalized spaces. Therefore, police forces must find here a viable balance between the “monitoring and enforcing” security side and the need to preserve the openness of these cosmopolitan and interconnected public spaces. In this sense, community-policing initiatives, which are on the rise in the Gulf monarchies, reflect a prismatic view of security which acknowledges hard and soft tools of policing, with an eye to community-building initiatives aimed at strengthening local feelings of belonging and civic duty among residents.

Protection of critical infrastructures from asymmetrical maritime threats. Infrastructures, new urban and industrial areas must be protected from the rise of unconventional weapons (like rockets and ballistic missiles, improvised explosive devices-IED, water-borne improvised explosive devices-WBIED, water mines), more and more employed in asymmetrical attacks throughout the Middle East. The enhancement of coastal and shallow-waters security represents an additional but necessary cost to mega-projects, especially in this sub-region.
Asian capital drives local development. Foreign investments, mostly from Asia, are driving the expansion of mega-projects and maritime infrastructures, thus contributing to converging Gulf-Asia security interests. China has become the top trade partner of Oman and the main importer of Omani crude oil. In 2017, the Asian Investment Bank agreed to provide a loan of about 300 million dollars for infrastructure development and, in the same year, Beijing covered Oman’s budget deficit with a 3.55 billion loan negotiated by the newly established Omani debt management office: in the long-term, commercial and industry-oriented business could turn into closer cooperation also in sensitive areas like the defense industry, procurement and military facilities. In the northern emirates, the main developing ports in Ras al Khaimah, Ajman and Umm al Quwain are all operated by a Hong Kong-based company, Hutchinson Ports, as in the case of the Sohar port in Oman. In 2017, the company obtained a 25-year concession for operating the Saqr port in Ras al Khaimah, Ahmed bin Rashid port in Umm al Quwain and the Ajman port. In 2019, Ras al Khaimah Ports attended the 6th China Silk Road International Logistics Expo and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chinese Guangzhou Port to establish formal trade links. In 2019, the Ajman Free Zone sponsored the fifth UAE-India Economic Forum. In Oman, the Duqm port project receives investments from China (the building of an industrial park) and India (with the latest edition of the Omani “Invest in Duqm” recently held in New Delhi).

Fujairah, Khor Fakkan and the UAEs “beyond-Hormuz” strategy. The emirate of Fujairah stands in a critical, beyond-Hormuz location which bypasses the strait, which is the closest point to Iran. In a tense geopolitical context, investments have been rising in the area: Abu Dhabi’s financial commitment is driven by energy security interests and freedom of navigation goals. The Hasbhan-Fujairah pipeline is the only Emirati one conveying crude oil from Abu Dhabi beyond Hormuz, and thus is a cornerstone of the UAE’s national security. Petrochemicals, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), refineries for bitumen and oil are among the developing sectors, as well as projects for a medical facility, a business centre and the Shaykh Mohammed bin Zayed City; the expansion of the Fujairah International Airport is a joint venture between Egypt’s Orascom and the UAE’s Al Sahraa Group. Fujairah has been increasing bun-
kering activities\textsuperscript{3} at a global level, thus eyeing competition with the Duqm port in Oman: moreover, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) in 2019 signed a contract with the South Korea’s SK Engineering and Construction (SKEC) to build what should become the largest crude oil storage facility in the eastern emirate. Next to Fujairah, Khor Fakkan (which is an enclave of Sharjah on the eastern coast) is also a rising investment hub. The local port, operated by the UAE-based Gulftainer, aims to consolidate its transhipment role: in 2018, the company also announced funds for the construction of the internal highway linking the Sharjah emirate with its eastern coast enclave.

The “South Arabia Linchpin”: Oman and the puzzle of military facilities. As a consequence of wider economic opening, the US, the UK, India and China have in recent years acquired or strengthened their strategic presence in the sultanate thanks to: the extension of the defense agreement between Oman and the US (2019) granting access to ports and airports in the sultanate, as well as the airfields of Muscat, Thumrait, Masirah Island, Musnanah and with a specific focus on the Duqm and Salalah ports; the opening of a permanent UK military base for logistics and training in Duqm, as part of its “East of Suez” comeback (2019); access to the port of Duqm both for the British and the Indian navy (2017 and 2018); possibility for the China navy to replenish in the port of Salalah during counter piracy operations. With regard to business, the Chinese have invested in the area also as part of the China-Oman industrial park in Duqm. Moreover, Iran signed a security pact for patrolling cooperation in Hormuz (2010) and a MoU for military cooperation and combined naval exercises (2019).

Not only mega-projects: the development of small and medium-sized ports in Oman. The local Asyad Group (Oman Global Logistics Group) is going to commission an assessment study on the commercialization of small and medium ports in Oman, with an eye to trade and tourism perspectives. Potential sites to develop include Daba (Musandam), Liwa and Al Khabourah (Batinah north), Musannah (Batinah south), Sur (Al Sharqiyyah), Mahout (Al Wusta), Al Shuwaymiya, Sadah and Mirbat (Dhofar). The island of Masirah, base for a former UK military airfield, is also on the list: the strategic island is set to become a multipurpose port comprising a fishing harbour as well as tourism and touristic facilities.
Musandam, from bottleneck to hub? The Musandam Peninsula, linking the Gulf with the Indian Ocean through the Hormuz Strait, is not only the greatest bottleneck of the region, but is also an Omani enclave in the north of the UAE, less developed and with higher unemployment with respect to Oman’s main urban centres. Traditionally known as a smuggling hub between the Arabian and Persian shores of the Gulf, Musandam is now at the centre of government’s efforts to transform the area into a hub for cruise and leisure tourism: a 2019 royal decree allows tax breaks for new investors in the tourism sector of the governorate. In November 2018, Sultan Qaboos issued a Royal Decree to ban non-Omani citizens from owning agricultural land and real estate properties in strategic border areas, including Musandam and Dhofar (except for the port city of Salalah), plus heritage sites. This step was reportedly taken to cope with the frequent purchases by Emirati nationals of properties within Omani borders, especially in Musandam and northern Oman, thus giving the sense of a subtle Emirati-Omani competition in border areas. Marafi Asyad (the operative and managing arm of the Asyad Group) started to operate the port of Khasab in 2019 to develop a harbour facility integrating tourism and trade capacities: the main goal is to increase by 25 percent the number of cruise ship arrivals in Khasab. Roads and highways are also crucial to connecting the peninsula with the interior and main coastal centres, thus supporting the fishing sector: technical bids for the construction of the Dibba-Lima-Khasab dual carriageway have just been opened and the Khasab-Bukha coastal road improvement is underway. The US-based PetroTel Energy is going to invest $300 million for oil and gas explorations in Musandam, also investing in local community facilities for education and health; moreover, the company pledged to employ hundreds of local Omanis from the area.

Strategic Archipelagos: Zanzibar and the Seychelles in the Current Emirati and Omani Maritime Projection

The northern emirates of the UAE and Oman’s renewed maritime projection is not limited to driving domestic state transformations. As a matter of fact, current Emirati and Omani maritime-oriented strategies also focus on the archipelagos of the western Indian Ocean, especially Zanzibar (Tanzania) and the Seychelles: this area has historically been at the crossroads between Africa, the Gulf and Asia’s human and commercial dynamics.
In the case of the archipelagos, too, investments and economic projects are potential tools of political change. In fact, growing partnerships and soft power are able to shape new connections leading to noteworthy security implications in the medium-long term. For 2019-2021 the UAE took over the chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, a group focused on maritime security and trade. In the archipelago of Zanzibar (Zanzibar/Unguja in swahili, Pemba, Latham and Mafia islands), Oman is traditionally a prominent player. While Arabs mostly left during the 1964 Zanzibar revolution to reach the Omani mainland and contribute to its development, some of Oman’s major present-day businesses in the archipelago are Indian-owned, thus testifying to the living legacy of the sultanate’s political authority: the Omani capital was even moved from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1832 by Sayyid Said bin Sultan Al Bu Said (1804-6-1856), ruler of Muscat, Oman and of Zanzibar.

But in recent years the UAE, and especially the northern emirate of Ras al Khaimah, have been increasing their economic presence in Zanzibar, thus engaging in a latent competition with Oman also in this area (as already occurs in the Yemeni border governorate of Mahra and in Musandam). In November 2018, the Ras al-Khaimah government’s wholly-owned gas company, RAK Gas LLC, signed the first-ever oil and gas production-sharing agreement with the semi-autonomous government of Zanzibar to explore the Pemba Zanzibar Block. The contract was personally signed by the ruler of Ras al Khaimah, Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi, during his visit to Zanzibar. The UAE is to open a consulate in the archipelago, which confirms the rise of Emirati planned investments. In September 2019, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE armed forces, hosted in Abu Dhabi the Zanzibari president, Ali Mohammad Shein: the bilateral meeting focused on trade, investments and tourism. The UAE’s Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development will finance about 2000 projects in Zanzibar, as a result of a 10 million dollar MoU signed with the ministry of finance and Tanzania’s plans to fund micro, small and medium enterprises in the archipelago: the goal is to create 9000 new jobs for Zanzibaris, with 35 percent of targeted projects for women.

In this competitive framework, Oman has relaunched its partnership with China in Tanzania as a way to maintain leverage in this area, thus countering...
Emirati expansionism: the Chinese-Omani investment for the construction of a container port (with FTZ) in Bagamoyo is a 10 billion dollar project funded by China’s Exim Bank and Oman’s Sovereign Wealth Fund. Like Zanzibar, the Seychelles archipelago (comprising about 115 islands), was already known centuries ago to merchants and explorers, but reportedly remained uninhabited until the arrival of European colonisers in the 1700s.\(^27\)

Differently from Zanzibar, the UAE and Oman don’t have historical connections with the Seychelles: however, given its strategic location, the archipelago can play a critical role in the Gulf monarchies’ commercial and military penetration in eastern Africa, with the UAE in the forefront, since new party politics in the Seychelles now opens space for external influence.\(^28\) In 2019, Sultan Qaboos of Oman wished to strengthen tourism linkages with the Seychelles, as a result of a MoU in the field of tourism education first signed in 2002 and renewed in 2013. In recent years, the UAE has increased the frequency and fields of cooperation with the Seychelles, combining economic and security relations. In 2011, the Emiratis supported the building of the local Coast Guard (at Ile Perseverance) through the donation of five patrol vessels and training activities; the Seychelles signed visa waivers for the UAE in 2015, also boosting bilateral airline connectivity; in 2016, the president of the Seychelles, Danny Faure, visited Abu Dhabi (and later Dubai) agreeing on cooperation in renewable energy (solar and wind); in 2018, the first session of the joint committee on cooperation was held in Abu Dhabi, also strengthening security, infrastructure and transportation ties.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY-BUILDING:
THE “PROJECT-IZATION” OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES

In an age of recalibrated social pacts and state transformation, the northern emirates of the UAE and Oman’s governments also work to foster a strengthened sense of national cohesion and belonging, for the purpose of building a national community above tribal, ethnic and local diversities. Such a dynamic also impacts economic diversification projects. Not by chance, “community” is one of the most mentioned words in master plans and presentations related to new urban areas, mixed-use developments and infrastructures: a port is not only a “geographical harbour”, but can broadly also mean a “human
urban or quasi-urban environment located on or near the coast”, thus emphasizing its ecosystem nature.29

Nation-building is a complex and ongoing process in both cases. In the northern emirates, nationals may fear a double identity dilution, despite their high population density: dilution, given the rising number of expatriates and because of the perceived hegemony of the Abu Dhabi-driven Bedouin mythology, which conveys the message of a supposedly homogenous Emirati identity that, however, is different from the merchant and hawala legacy of the northern communities.29 In Oman, interior and coastal provinces, as well as Omains, Omani Baloch, Baloch from Balochistan, Zanzibaris with Omani ancestry, Persians and the consistent Indian expatriates group, are bound together by the charismatic leadership of Sultan Qaboos, who was able to craft the sense of an Omani state identity thanks to his unifying but personalized rule and economic networks. However, the 2011 protests and the next succession to the sultan make clear that the time has come to symbolically distinguish between leader and nation, anchoring ‘Omanhood’ to a long-lasting set of shared values. In recent years, social engineering has been emerging as a widespread top-down device accompanying state transformation in the Gulf monarchies: social engineering is “an intrinsically political effort to reshape citizens and their perceptions of the social contract”, stressing in this case concepts like civic responsibility and duty, community engagement and patriotism to better cope with diversified and post-oil economic balances.31

In this zeitgeist, new urban projects, theme parks and infrastructural areas turn into physical venues in which “new citizenship” values are ideationally implanted by governing elites: as a matter of fact, ‘new citizens’ should be “innovative, achievement-oriented, conscientious, civil, hard-working, risk-taking, business-starting, community-serving and patriotic” in order to advance state transformation and sustainability.32 In this sense, social engineering also works through new infrastructural, industrial, urban projects, since these initiatives should drive identity-recalibration: the phenomenon of the “project-ization of identities” emphasizes the maritime dimension as a bridge between today’s connectivity (infrastructures, urban areas, industrial poles) and yesterday’s heritage (trade and merchant societies, cultural crossovers, diasporas) in both the northern emirates of the UAE and in Oman.
In the eyes of local governments, new projects are vanguard examples of how ruling powers imagine and plan to orient the evolution of littoral societies: these should be dynamic and globalized although attached to historical roots and heritage. This is the reason why connectivity is a vector of economic diversification and growth, but also supports community-building and stronger national identities.

CONCLUSION. STRATEGIC LITTORALS TRANSFORMED: TRACING GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Investments for infrastructural, urban and maritime projects alter local balances and play a role in the nation-building process. Ambitious projects require consistent investments not only by international players, but also by local governments; for this reason, mega-projects can be modified in case of financial constraints. A stable and conducive environment is also necessary in order to attract capital and support long-term projects implemented in sequenced phases: this sub-region remains a geopolitical incognita, especially given the role of Iran and the escalation with the United States. Without a doubt, state transformation has long-term implications, since it strengthens and/or redesigns regional and international alliances; in this framework, shared economic interests contribute to forging common security perceptions, tightening defense cooperation prospects.

China’s economic penetration boosts long-term security convergence. As the most prominent foreign player in investments (in northern UAE and Oman) and financial loans (Oman), Beijing has indirect but growing security interests in the Emirati-Omani sub-region; in the same way, local recipients are likely to align strategic choices to foreign partners’ politics, thus triggering convergence also in the defense domain. The UAE has comprehensive strategic partnerships with China and India (since, respectively, 2018 and 2017), and Oman since 2015 with India and since 2018 with China. For this reason, in the medium-long term, the Chinese navy could obtain military access to local ports. The unprecedented joint maritime exercises held by China, Russia and Iran in the Indian Ocean and in the Gulf of Oman (December 27–30, 2019) signal the rise of naval constellation in this sub-region.
The northern emirates of the UAE can decrease financial dependency on Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The rise of infrastructural, urban and industrial projects in Ajman, Umm al Quwain, Ras al Khaimah and Fujairah, also involving foreign capital, contribute to decreasing the northern emirates’ cash dependency on the leading emirates of the UAE. Doing so, they can develop new external relations - although not necessarily contradictory – with Abu Dhabi, based on merchant tradition and business-oriented pragmatism.

Oman’s parallel alliances may weaken its third-style foreign policy. In times of global polarization (US vs China; China vs India; US vs Iran; Saudi Arabia vs Iran; Saudi Arabia–UAE vs Qatar), Oman’s main challenge is preserving a neutral, third-style foreign policy, despite a puzzle of parallel alliances, growing economic needs and the uncertain succession issue. Interferences and competition coming from the UAE and, to a lesser extent, from Saudi Arabia in areas of traditional Omani influence such as bordering Mahra (Yemen), the Musandam peninsula and the archipelago of Zanzibar (Tanzania) further complicate Oman’s foreign policy continuity goals, also challenging its direct national interest. This may push Muscat towards a more reactive and assertive foreign policy to preserve its strategic positions.

Strategically-located ports remain under national authority. In areas of rising strategic interest (“beyond-Hormuz” ports like Khor Fakkan and Fujairah) and of geopolitical tensions (Khasab), commercial ports are still operated by national companies; development projects in highly sensitive rimlands (Musandam peninsula, Fujairah emirate) are also still driven by central governments.

Rising port competition between the UAE and Oman for transhipment and oil bunkering. The port of Fujairah (UAE) and the port of Duqm (Oman) are both developing transhipment and bunkering capacities on the western Indian Ocean route, as part of free zones (Fujairah) and special economic zones (Duqm). Gwadar, the Pakistani port in Makran-Balochistan, is also a transhipment competitor of Duqm, Salalah and Fujairah; however, the prominent role of China in developing both Omani and Pakistani maritime infrastructures, as well as the historical ties between Muscat and Islamabad, may also incentivise port connectivity, especially between Duqm and Gwadar.
Zanzibar, the Seychelles and the economic-defense struggle for the archipelagos. The western Indian Ocean’s archipelagos (among them, the Comoros, Mauritius, the Maldives and Chagos), are at the centre of a Chinese-Indian maritime power struggle through investments and defense agreements/facilities. Zanzibar (receiving investments from China) and the Seychelles (hosting an Indian naval facility) are also part of this geopolitical dispute, in which the UAE and Oman play a bilateral sub-competition for leverage, boosted by energy resources and potential military outposts. Both Zanzibar and the Seychelles will hold elections in 2020 and this will also be an indirect test for the Emirati and Omani soft and money power in these archipelagos.

1 This analysis does not include the emirate of Sharjah, widely considered the cultural capital of the UAE. Although a northern and coastal emirate, Sharjah has a remarkable energy-driven economic structure (with 1.5 billion barrels of proven oil reserves according to the UAE Embassy in Washington) and also engaged in successful and timely diversification efforts; for these reasons, the third emirate of the federation is less dependent on Abu Dhabi in terms of revenue redistribution (Abu Dhabi has 92.2 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, Dubai 4 billion barrels, Ras al Khaimah 500 million barrels).

2 For the concept of hawala, see paragraph 2 (p. 3) and note 11.


6 Ibadism is the third Islamic way between the Sunna and the Shia, founded at the end of the VII century by Abdullah Ibn Ibad Al Murri Al Tamimi, who rejected the authority of the caliph while recognizing the legitimacy of an imam elected by the community of believers. In Oman, the imamate-sultanate dialectic was part of the interior-coastal
divide: the root of the conflict between imamate and sultanate can be traced to the imamate's rejection of the sultanate's hereditary system, since election by consensus is part of the Ibadi tradition. See among the others Leah Sherwood, “Understanding Oman's Foreign Policy”, in Foreign Policy Trends in the GCC States, Gulf Affairs-OxGAPS, Autumn 2017, pp.11-15.


10 In the 1500s, the ancestors of the Bani Yas tribal confederation migrated from Najd towards the northern coasts of Oman at that time under Portuguese domination, where they gradually settled: this migration would have anticipated the disaggregation of the ‘Aneza grand tribal confederation and instead would be related to the disaggregation of the Bani Jabr confederation. Conversely, the Qawasim are hawalah Arabs, “nomads or semi-nomads from the sea” belonging to different Arab tribes: they used to move and trade between the Arab and the Persian shores of the Gulf. In the early 1800s, the British forged an alliance with the Al Bu Said tribe who ruled Oman since 1744 to secure the route towards India vis-à-vis the French and this provoked the reaction of the Qawasim, who started to attack British ships. Therefore the British, who named the area “the Pirate Coast”, launched three successful raids against the Qawasim in 1805, 1809, and 1811, destroying their ships and imposing on them a general peace treaty (1820) to end tribal piracy activities: in 1835, the British recognized the formal authority of nine shaykhdoms and provided them protection in exchange of maritime security. In 1900, Ras al Khaimah was incorporated by Sharjah; after clashes within the Qawasim dynasty, Ras al Khaimah was finally recognized as independent emirate by the British in 1921. From a regional perspective, the British assumed the responsibility for the defense of Oman (1829), the Trucial States (the current United Arab Emirates, 1835), Bahrain (1861), Kuwait (1899) and Qatar (1916); the so called “Pax Britannica” ended with the British withdrawal from UAE and Qatar in 1971. See Elena Maestri, La regione del Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Sviluppo e sicurezza umana in Arabia, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2009; James Onley, Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820-1971: The Politics of Protection, CIRS-Center for Regional and International Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Occasional Paper n°4, 2009; for Bani Jabr, refer to Elena Maestri, The Arabian City and its Territory. Historical Identity and Heritage Issues, Milano, EDUCatt-Catholic University of Milan, 2019, chapter 1.

11 For this reflection I am grateful to Elena Maestri.

12 For religious and juridical differences between the northern emirates and Omani societies, refer to the seminal scholarly work of Frauke Heard-Bey and J.E. Peterson.

13 Historically, the Qawasim embraced the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. Islam is the Emirate’s branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in 2014), which has traditionally been influential in Ras al Khaimah (RAK) and other northern emirates. RAK is the home of the Islam movement, which has been a prominent player for decades. The Brotherhood’s role in the UAE, and political Islam more broadly, has long been a point of contention between Abu Dhabi and RAK. Local branches of Islam in RAK and Fujairah were founded in the 1970s with the support of Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, then emir of Dubai, to counter Arab nationalism, as other leaders did in the region. Islam received protection and support from the Al Qasimi dynasty of Sharjah and RAK, who enabled their members to gain prominent political positions in the 1970s and the 1980s.


15 More recent estimations are not publicly available.

16 Julphar (RAK Pharmaceuticals) is a subsidiary of RAK Ceramics. In 2014, Samena Capital, an Asia, India, and MENA-focused alternative investments group led by the Indian Shirish Saraf, acquired the 30.6% of RAK Ceramics.


18 Haitham bin Tariq Al Said (born in 1954), the Omani minister of heritage and culture since 2002, is a cousin of Qaboos and one of his most accredited successors together with other two sons of Qaboos’ paternal uncle. Haitham served as former undersecretary at the foreign affairs ministry and is the chairman of National Trading, the holding involved in the construction of the power plants of Manah and Sohar. Asad bin Tariq Al Said (born in 1954), is the deputy prime minister for international affairs and cooperation since 2017: a former top army commander graduated from Sandhurst and the sultan’s special advisor since 2002, he runs several companies, such as the Asad Investment Company. Shihab bin Tariq Al Said (born in
1955) was naval commander of the Royal Navy of Oman till 2004; he now advises the sultan and is the chairman of the Research Council. Among other possible candidates, the youngest is Taymur bin Asad Al Said (born in 1980), son of Asad, married to a Dhofari princess of the prominent Al Maashani family: he is assistant secretary general for international relations at the Research Council and served on the board of directors of Bank Dhofar and currently in the Islamic Alizz Bank. For insight into the succession process, refer to Marc Valeri, Oman and the Succession of Sultan Qaboos, Hurst Publishers, 3 December 2014.


20 Ibid.


22 Not to forget, however, the unclaimed sabotage of an oil tanker near Fujairah waters that occurred in May 2019, likely an Iranian asymmetrical attack: such an event highlights that even the Gulf of Oman’s waters can’t be taken for granted in a tense geopolitical neighbourhood.

23 Bunkering is the operation performed to transport oil and includes three phases: preparation, perform, wrap-up.

24 Zanzibar is an archipelago steeped in ancient trade route history. For centuries, merchants from the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian and Arabian peninsulas found Zanzibar to be a convenient trading settlement for gold, ivory, slaves, and spices: Zanzibar’s etymology derives from the ancient Persian words zanj, a black person, and bar, coast, thus meaning “the coast of the blacks”, a legacy of Persian merchants and seafarers who first set foot in East Africa around the 10th century AD. Inevitably, commercial interests soon turned political: all Indian Ocean rival powers, starting with the Portuguese in the 1500s, tried to take over the archipelago in order to monopolize commercial and maritime power. Zanzibar changed hands several times over the centuries, although the legacy of Oman is the greatest: if, today, Zanzibar could well qualify as the “Samarkand of the seas”, that is due to the remarkable commercial and cultural pre-eminence it secured in the region under Sultan Sayyid Said’s thalassocracy (1806-1856). Refer to Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, A History of Modern Oman, Cambridge University Press, 2015; Beatrice Nicolini, The First Sultan of Zanzibar: scrambling for power and trade in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean, Markus Wiener, 2012. Although Oman exerted direct political authority over the archipelago only until the mid-19th century, when it passed to the British who kept it until the 1964 revolution, its business and cultural influence endured long after Omani authority came to an end after 200 years’ dominance. Since 1964, Zanzibar has been a semi-autonomous region belonging to the United Republic of Tanzania. Despite the archipelago’s renowned multicultural past, the late domestic socio-political reality of Zanzibar shows contentious, or even violent, elections and tensions between the ruling party and opposition parties, which were formed along racial lines and still diverge on autonomy-related positions. Since 2015, the autocratic leadership of John Magufuli has resulted in the growing repression of opposition parties in mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar alike (Tiziana Corda).


26 The deal was possible thanks to implementation of the Oil and Gas (Upstream) Act 2016.

27 The possession of the Seychelles was first claimed in 1742-1756 by the French, who turned it into a trading centre of slaves and deportees: the archipelago was then conquered by the British shortly afterwards. Although French culture has since remained dominant, it was the British Empire that controlled the archipelago for most of its modern history, first as a dependency administered from Mauritius (1814) and then as a separate colony (1903). The Seychelles achieved independence in 1976, but early post-independence political history was marred by successful and failed coups alike, thwarted army mutinies, and mercenaries’ interventions. The introduction of multi-party rule in early 1990s did not end the domination of the ruling party, Parti Lepep/United Seychelles (Tiziana Corda).

28 More than forty years after its ascendance, the ruling party (Parti Lepep) remains at the helm, but the opposition (Lyonin Demokratik, LDS) for the first time won parliamentary elections in 2016.


30 Thanks to Elena Maestri for this reflection.


32 Ibid., p.99.

33 On ports competition in the Western Indian Ocean, see Eleonora Ardemagni, Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean, ISPI Analysis, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, April 2018. Thanks to Elena Maestri for this reflection.

34 op. cit., Introduction, p.9.
2018. Oman has a special relationship with Gwadar, since it was an Omani enclave. In fact, the town, port and surrounding territory of Gwadar were granted as a *jagir* (a temporary land grant exempted from taxation) from the Persian Baloch Khans of Khalat to Oman in 1783. Between 1863 and 1947, Gwadar was administered by an assistant British political agent on behalf of the sultan of Oman. Refer to Beatrice Nicolini, “Peace and Security in Non-State Actors Regions Between Oman, Pakistan and Iran”, in Ahmed Nawaz Hakro (ed.), *Oman in the 21st Century: Issues and Challenges*, Nova Publishers, 2019, chapter 8.