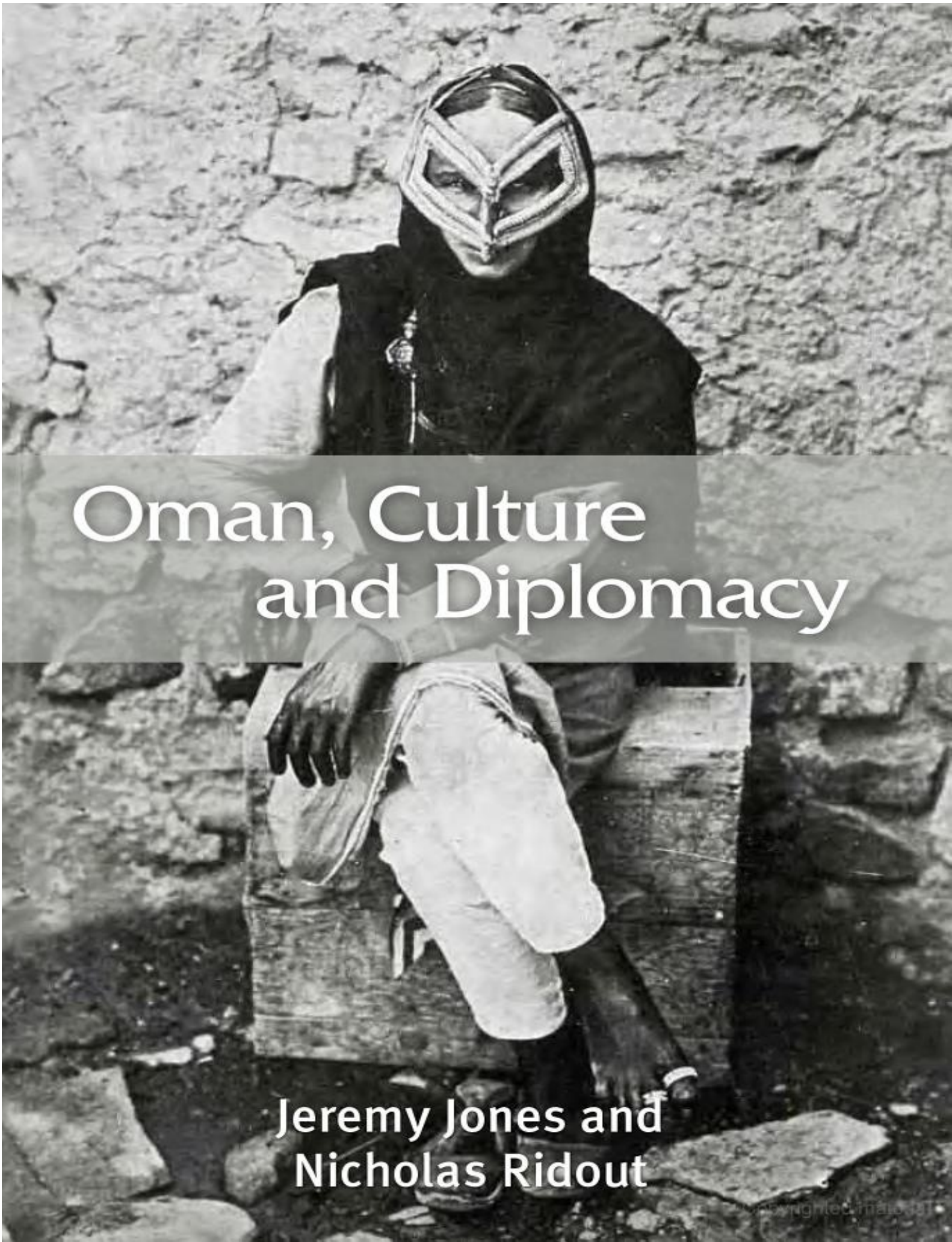

Oman, Culture and Diplomacy

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In memory of Wilfrid Knapp

Introduction

On the southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, lies a country that rarely makes international news headlines, even though its strategic location, at the Strait of Hormuz – through which it is estimated around 40 per cent of the world's oil imports pass – confers upon it some considerable significance. This country is Oman and, just across the Strait of Hormuz, lies Iran, a neighbour with a long history as a major regional power and one that, over the last thirty years, has experienced strained and sometimes sharply hostile relations with some of the most powerful nations in the world, including, of course, the United States of America. The United States places great importance upon the security of the Gulf oil supply, and the possibility that Iranian actions might imperil this security has been a major factor in American policy in the region ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Over the same period, Oman has developed an important strategic partnership with the United States while continuing to maintain good relations with Iran – relations that date back centuries, rooted in shared geography and culture.

The fact that Oman so rarely features in the global news – in an era in which crisis and conflict tend to be at the heart of the media's focus – is itself worthy of some reflection. In Oman, where a culture of politeness still governs everyday life and interaction, where deference to another is a source of honour and pride, there is little room for self-promotion. The increased privatisation occurring over the last forty years, has, of course, occasioned the adoption of advertising in the business realm, but the fact remains that publicity – most particularly when it relates to an individual – remains slightly incongruous with the Omani way. It is not merely cultural humility, however, that lies beneath Oman's position beneath the radar, so to speak, of world media, or even outside the awareness of the average European or American citizen. Nor is it simply because of Oman's modest size, or its rank as the 41st most peaceful country among 153 in the world,

consistently among the best in its region, according to the 2011 *Global Peace Index*.[1] Rather, it is because of the quality of Oman's contribution to a rather fragile situation. Simply stated, the explosive potential of Iran's position at the mouth of the Gulf, in the context of its fraught relationship with the United States, has not yet sparked a newsworthy conflagration. Naturally, this would seem to be a source of some satisfaction, not only to Omani diplomats, but to Omani citizens and residents more generally. The consequences of tension and conflict around the Strait of Hormuz could be very damaging indeed, placing Oman right at the centre of highly destructive and unpredictable forces and events. Keeping out of the headlines – that is, maintaining a quiet stability – is in the clear and pressing national interest, enabling Omanis simply to go about their lives.

But Oman will be quick to shun any attention to its role in this balance, and fittingly so, given its culture of politeness. But more than that, it is perhaps operationally necessary to downplay such a role in order to retain the ability to continue working in this manner. In international relations, a middleman is a confidant, of sorts; no person or group of people or nation, for that matter, will trust a confidant who publicises his work. It is perhaps paradoxical, and even risky, then, that this book should draw attention to its subject matter – the nature and practice of Omani diplomacy – when its very practitioners prefer not to do so. There are several reasons we have embarked on such a project. We hope to contribute something to the understanding of all three of the words in this book's title: Oman, culture, diplomacy. More than that, however, we want to explore the ways in which an understanding of each might enhance and be enhanced by an understanding of the others, and it is in the bringing together of material and ideas usually treated as separate and more or less unrelated fields, that we aim to offer something distinctive to the reader.

There exists a modest but growing literature on the history of Oman, from John C. Wilkinson's work on the imamate, to accounts of the sultanate's twentieth-century development by scholars such as John E. Peterson, Marc Valeri, Carol J. Riphenburg, Uzi Rabi and Calvin H. Allen. Few accounts of contemporary Oman can avoid engaging with questions of foreign policy, and all these authors, as well as a number of others, have done so. There is, additionally, a body of literature that looks directly at Oman's international relations, most notably Joseph A. Kechichian's 1995 survey. There is also valuable research conducted on an anthropological basis, from Fredrik Barth and Unni Wikan's work from the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the more recent

contributions of Mandana Limbert.[2] In the preparation of this book, we have drawn upon this work, as well as other scholarship; to these syntheses by others, we have added our own personal and professional associations with Oman and Omanis, gathered over a period of over thirty years. Our relationship with Oman has afforded us, we think, a somewhat unique perspective, straddling worlds as native outsiders, but with intimate access to Omani life. The insights of numerous Omani diplomats, scholars, teachers, officials, private citizens and residents have enriched our understanding of the Omani landscape: nonetheless, we continue to suffer the limitations of our own cultural perspective as foreign observers. In seeking to draw these various perspectives into one book, we have proceeded from the twin premises that the understanding of foreign policy and diplomatic activity can be enhanced by a consideration of the culture in which it develops, and that, in turn, it may be possible to understand something of a culture by studying the way it conducts its diplomacy. So, while this is primarily a book about diplomacy and foreign policy – with the primary aim of elucidating Omani foreign policy in the present day – it is also a book that seeks to offer new insight into Omani culture and society, as a consequence of the attention it pays to Omani diplomacy.

Modern Omani diplomacy displays a number of consistent and distinctive characteristics – in addition to its preference for discretion – many of which we shall trace to the history of interactions of Oman's people internally, and also externally, with other peoples throughout the world. We have derived these characteristics from comprehensive consideration of a range of sources. These include documents directly related to the development of foreign policy, such as the research papers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; our own and others' analyses of the conduct of Omani foreign policy; as well as conversation with Omani diplomats and their interlocutors. In some cases, therefore, these aspects have previously been more or less articulated as official policy. Others, however, have been more implicit; we are undertaking to put these 'guiding principles' into new words. Among the key characteristics of Omani diplomacy we have identified are: (1) a tendency to focus on enduring geopolitical considerations (hence the priority given to maintaining good relations with Iran); (2) to abstain from ideological or sectarian conflict (which, as we shall see, arises in part from Oman's unique religious heritage); (3) to work towards achieving consensus (consistent with social and political practices in other spheres); (4) to emphasise tolerance for the customs and

practices of foreigners (a function of a long history of cosmopolitan interaction). With some reflection, these definitions map nicely onto the 'principles' of Omani foreign policy explicitly stated on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> Oman's foreign policy is based on four principles:
>
> - The development and maintenance of good relations with all Oman's neighbours.
> - An outward looking and internationalist outlook, as befits Oman's geographic location and longstanding maritime traditions.
> - A pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, emphasising underlying geostrategic realities rather than temporary ideological positions.
> - The search for security and stability through cooperation and peace, rather than conflict.[3]

In our effort to account for these characteristics or principles of modern Oman's diplomacy and foreign policy we have organised this book in three parts, each of which differs in scope, scale and approach. Part I forms an attempt to develop background understanding of those aspects of the history and culture of Oman which, we will argue, have shaped the development of today's distinctive foreign policy. Chapter 1 situates Oman within the culture of what we are calling 'Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism', while Chapter 2 explores aspects of Omani social and cultural life, which, within the wider framework of cosmopolitanism, we argue, make a significant contribution to the way in which Omanis today think and practise diplomacy. Here we will attempt to synthesise material and ideas from a range of sources and disciplinary perspectives: we are not ourselves anthropologists, archaeologists, religious scholars or Indian Ocean historians, but we seek to combine some of the fruits of our own personal and professional associations with Oman with the insights of those offering more scholarly approaches. Our aim will be to indicate certain continuities without insisting upon the persistence of an unchanged and unchanging 'tradition', and also to suggest that these continuities shape the practice of diplomacy by constituting what Pierre Bourdieu has called a 'habitus'.[4] By this, Bourdieu refers to an ensemble of deeply habituated behaviours and attitudes embodied, rather than actively or consciously promoted, by its participants. A 'habitus' might be best understood as the expression of an accumulated cultural history, materialised in an approach to living in the present. It is our suggestion that the relationship between Oman, its culture and its diplomacy is more than simply an abstract analytical observation: it is

a network of connections that are felt, sensed and understood in the daily and professional life of the Omani diplomat.

If the first part of the book ranges widely across long historical periods, the second seeks to establish a rather narrower focus, largely limiting its consideration of key characteristics of Omani diplomacy to a period of around fifty years, from the accession of Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad to power in Muscat in 1792, to the historic voyage of Sayyid Said's ship, the *Sultanah,* to New York in 1840, with a few glances backwards and forwards along the way. While Part II moves in a more or less chronological sequence through the events at its focus, it makes no claim to represent a comprehensive history of Oman's foreign relations in the period. Its aim is to identify in the interplay of international relations during this formative period some of the ways in which the culture teased out in Part I may help us understand the conduct of more formalised Omani diplomacy as an expression of that culture. A secondary aim is to show how some of the challenges for more recent Omani foreign policy were either already present or starting to take shape during this period. In both these contexts – the relationship between diplomacy and culture, and the shaping of contemporary foreign policy – we will find that the conduct of relationships with Oman's neighbours is a central and enduring feature.

While Part I seeks a broad overview, therefore, Part II strives for a bit more intimacy. We have opted for a format that essentially presents a snapshot series of events and encounters, in hope that it will most helpfully illuminate more contemporary concerns, along with certain consistencies occurring across time in the approach to diplomacy of the Al bu Saidi rulers of Oman. This is not an unconscious consistency: those involved in the formulation and execution of foreign policy in Oman today, from Sultan Qaboos himself to senior government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and elsewhere, work with a very strong sense that they are continuing and contributing to a tradition. This should become evident throughout.

The approach changes again in Part III of the book, which considers the conduct of Oman's foreign policy in the last forty years or so, roughly coinciding with the period of Oman's modern development following the accession to power of Sultan Qaboos in 1970. There remains no ambition, however, to offer a comprehensive history of Oman's diplomacy in this period, nor an exhaustive account of the many relations developed since Oman's admission to the United Nations in 1970. Our aim, rather, in a series of chapters that focus

primarily on Oman's relations either with other countries (such as Iran and the United States), or within global and regional contexts, processes and climates (the Gulf, the cold war, the peace process and globalisation), is to work towards an understanding of Omani diplomacy as it is manifested in the modern era, but ever-underpinned by the key themes identified in Parts I and II. These, you will recall, include the prioritisation of neighbours, attention to long-duration concerns, the search for consensus and inclusion, the maintenance of a cosmopolitan perspective and the mobilisation of culture itself in the service of diplomacy.

Although, as we have already suggested, the interaction between culture and diplomacy may be understood best in terms of a 'habitus' rather than an ideology or a policy, that is not to say there does not exist a high degree of consciousness associated with what we are calling a characteristic Omani diplomatic mode. A number of conversations, formal and informal, have indicated a desire to situate contemporary practice as part of a longstanding way of doing things; this desire motivates decisions, plans and programmes in certain ways, on both macroscopic and microscopic levels. In Oman, there exists a general contemporary awareness that historical experiences and cultural preferences have shaped the way in which national interests are identified and international relations maintained. Like most Omanis, Oman's diplomats and policymakers tend to conceptualise their work in relation to a sense of continuity and tradition.

A range of research papers and other documents in the possession of Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has graciously granted us access, reveals that responses to both particular issues and general situations strongly reflect this attitude. Far less common is its public articulation, attributable to a number of factors: partly, as discussed, because of the tendency towards discretion that characterises the Omani public sphere; partly because diplomats tend to focus on practice, rather than on extended theorisation; partly because published discussion of Omani foreign policy has been largely the preserve of either American or European observers, rather than Omanis. We neither wish, nor could we hope, to make up for any of these factors. We can, however, point to a rare public articulation of the Omani approach to diplomacy, by the diplomat who is now Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al bu Saidi, in which he identifies opportunities available to diplomats of a small nation such as Oman, in contributing to international relations in ways outside the spotlight: 'In the space between the big states, the major

powers, both regional and global, we have room for manoeuvre that the big states themselves do not enjoy. We can operate without attracting too much attention, conduct diplomacy discreetly and quietly.'[5]

Badr bin Hamad goes on to identify four specific areas in which this 'room for manoeuvre' could be used to general advantage, or where the experience of being a small nation has the potential to shape policy in constructive ways. The first, to which we have alluded and which will remain a theme throughout this book, is the ability to prioritise 'good neighbour relations'. The second, which might seem to follow from the first, is the space it affords participation in regional associations and the benefit derived through solidarity and cooperation. This may sometimes mean that the interests of the association as a whole, in Oman's case the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for example, rather than any individual member, must be placed first, sometimes at the expense of individual interests; Oman has, indeed, on several occasions seen some of its most important initiatives within the GCC come to little or nothing. Nonetheless, it is characteristic of Oman's approach that such frustration does not lead to threats of non-cooperation. It can, however, create difficult political situations, particularly in reporting policy positions in the international media. For example, very recently, the dispatch of troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to cooperate with the Bahraini security forces in March 2011 was widely reported as a GCC operation, thus potentially implicating Oman at a time when the Omani government was taking a distinctly different approach to dealing with popular protest from that adopted by its Bahraini counterpart, while experiencing an unusual degree of international media attention. Maintaining a 'good neighbour' policy and preserving the solidarity of regional associations are priorities that are not without their tensions and difficulties, even if they can sometimes sound a little like diplomatic versions of motherhood and apple pie.

The third and fourth aspects outlined by Badr bin Hamad's conception of 'small nations' diplomacy effectively extend the principles underpinning the 'good neighbour' policy into a global setting. We may see, then, the emphasis placed here on the 'rule of law in the space of international relations'[6] as a further development of the small nation's particular experience of interdependence, and as an indication of the value, to those without the 'might' of a major power, of a strong system grounded in 'right'. Oman's enthusiasm for the work of the United Nations and its preference for the extension of multilateral and

rule-based decision-making within the international community reflects this emphasis. The final and related area concerns the role of 'ethics' in international relations. This does not seem to constitute the sort of ambition for an 'ethical foreign policy' proclaimed by the incoming UK government in 1997, but rather a suggestion that nations that stand a little to one side of the dominant international culture and the supposedly 'universal values' enshrined in its conventions and procedures may have something additional to contribute 'because the particularities of our experience make available to the wider international community a certain diversity of perspective'.[7]

Indeed, it is almost as though this reference to 'ethics' expresses a desire that the dominant international culture might adopt a more 'ethical' position in relation to the diversity of global cultures and temper any drive to universalism with an increasing attention to the particular. Something of this attitude may also be detected, as we shall see, in the interactions between Oman and the USA on issues related to human rights, where Omani diplomats invited their American interlocutors to consider the extent to which the specific historical circumstances in which the Universal Declaration was drafted might mean that it expressed a culturally specific conception of what should constitute universal values. Throughout this book, then, we wish to be attentive to the interplay between aspects of a dominant international culture that are sometimes (rightly or wrongly) assumed to be universal and features of the global landscape that are more readily understood as culturally specific. By focusing on aspects of culture that are not normally considered to contribute to the practice of diplomacy or the formulation of foreign policy, we hope to offer an account of Omani diplomacy that complements, rather than recapitulates, the insights offered by works of political science and international relations. In so doing, we also hope that the study of Oman diplomacy and some of its distinctive characteristics may enrich our understanding of what diplomacy might include and achieve.

Notes

1 The *Global Peace Index*, which measures twenty-three indicators ranging from levels of militarisation to internal strife, incarceration and murder rates, placed Oman 41st internationally, out of 153 countries, in 2011. Recent years have seen Oman ranked at 23 of 149 (2010); 21 of 144 (2009); and 25 of 140 (2008). The drop in 2011 is due to general unrest in the region, termed the 'Arab Spring'. See Vision of Humanity, *Global*

Peace Index 2011, http://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/2011-GPI-Results-Report-Final.pdf, accessed 21 July 2011.

2 John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*, John E. Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*, Marc Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*, Carol J. Riphenburg, *Oman: Political Development in a Changing World*, Calvin H. Allen, *Oman: The Modernization of the Sultanate*, Joseph A. Kechichian, *Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy*, Fredrik Barth, *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town*, Unni Wikan, *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*, Mandana Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Omani Town*.

3 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Foreign Policy', http://mofa.gov.om/mofanew/index.asp?id=1, last accessed 5 July 2011.

4 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

5 Badr bin Hamad Al bu Saidi, 'Small States' Diplomacy', p. 354.

6 Ibid., p. 355.

7 Ibid., p. 356.