

Public Diplomacy Of Oman

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ABSTRACT

Oman is an under-studied country in scholarly circles despite its unique and exclusive role in the arduous fields of international conflict mediation and resolution. The present study seeks to an unassuming manner fill this gap a little in the field of Oman's foreign policy. The new and diverse instruments of public diplomacy are increasing their influence and relevancy as well as in the world. Today, the range of new at the disposal of public diplomacy has been growing exponentially.

These are the diaspora, relations with IGOs, infomercials, news agencies, scholarships, social media tools, cultural centers, cooking, music, different types of exchange programs, etc. The number of these public diplomacy tools that we updated in this research is 37. Those instruments are used to study the implementation of public diplomacy in Oman. The paper focuses on how Oman practices its public diplomacy with new instruments in the region and beyond. It first examines rhetoric's practical applications. It then analysis some 431 responses to our electronic and physical surveys carried out in 63 countries by the aim of understanding the level of appreciation of Oman's public diplomacy worldwide. After a careful analysis of the results of the survey, it became clear that Oman needs a modern set of tools and strong strategies if she hopes to successfully implement and achieve the goals of its public diplomacy.

Keywords: Oman's Public Diplomacy, Oman's Global Image, New Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, Public Relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War freed the study of international relations, which had been held hostage by the binary division of the world. Public diplomacy is one of those areas that has been most impacted by the concentration of research on the relations of the two opposing camps of the Cold War.

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In the post-Cold War era, approaches and components of soft power are growing in popularity and importance. Public diplomacy is one of the most important components of soft power. The United Kingdom was the first power to use it in the 19th century. The use of public diplomacy accelerated during the world wars and times of peace. During the First World War, the United Kingdom created the Ministry of Propaganda to legitimize and justify its distant wars. The result of its efforts was very satisfactory especially in the Middle East and Africa. After World War II, it created the Institute of Public Relations. Today, almost all the great powers use public diplomacy as an instrument alongside intelligence, ministry of the foreign affairs and ministry of interior.

New studies emphasize that public diplomacy has developed well over the past two decades. It means that the new public diplomacy focuses not only on providing information and use of other appropriate tools directly or indirectly by governments, but also gathering information and feedback from target audiences to understand the level of success of the government policy. The objective of government work is to verify the effectiveness of its public diplomacy tools and to adjust them based on the results obtained.

Oman, as a small country, uses some tools of public diplomacy, especially in its region and to a lesser extent in the world. Due to its unique culture, religious denomination, geographic position and historical background, Oman pursues quiet diplomacy and an active neutral foreign policy in the region and globally, unlike its neighbors. Oman, because of its positive equilibrium policy, has played a role of facilitator and mediator between the great powers and Iran on several occasions over the past decade. Its most significant success as a mediator was the 5+1-Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Nonetheless, perhaps because of its quiet diplomacy technique, its humility, its willingness to avoid the antagonism of its neighbors, Oman does not seek to publicize the results of its efforts to facilitate conflict resolution. In domestic politics also, Oman has made great strides in parliamentary life, elections and women's rights, but very few people in the world are aware of these developments.

2. OMAN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY WITH THE NEW INSTRUMENTS

Omani culture has been unique perhaps for over two thousand years. In the Arabian Peninsula, four main civilizations have existed: Mecca-Medina, Bahraini, and Omani cultures. Oman has a very polite, civilized, gentle and attractive culture. Two of the peculiarities of Omani culture are silence and humility.

Omani cuisine is rich but mainly imported from Asia and Africa. However, American food culture dominates the Omani fast food market with McDonald's, Subway, KFC spreading across the country to become the favorite food of the younger generations at the expense of the country's traditional foods. It can therefore be assumed that the culture of Omani cuisine is weaker than the dominant cultures.

The Omani national dress code is still in effect throughout the country. For men, Al Frikha still exists in their robe, but this symbolic fashion does not allow exporting to other countries in the region, as these symbols reflect and differentiate the micro-national identity in the Gulf. Women still wear the abaya (topcoat) in cities and more colorful dresses in villages, but when they go to Europe, the majority of these coats and dresses are replaced by European dress code. This shows

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that on the one hand, they are respectful of other cultures and eager to fit in, but on the other hand, their dress culture is not very strong and replaceable.

As for music as a sub-component of culture, although older generations stick to their poetic (nasheed) songs, younger generations listen to their national songs but at the same time American, British and Indian songs are very popular and followed in the region and Oman. While Omani music is also heard in the Gulf and the former Omani Diaspora territories from Pakistan to Zanzibar, it is less so compared to Omani youth.

Arabic language as another cultural component is used all over Oman. It is well known that language is not only a tool of communication, but also a style of thinking and an integrated culture. The younger generations are affected by the English language and the Western type of education. Therefore, in Oman, English is not used only as a communication tool but is also changes young generation's perspectives.

Oman has recently started to produce movies, TV shows and soap operas, but Hollywood, Bollywood, Egyptian and Turkish soap operas have already influenced the younger generations and especially women. Oman does not produce any series or television program for foreign countries. This shows that media and cultural advertising have not taken the right place in Oman.

Oman does not have any international TV or radio 24-hours news channels such as CNN, BBC, and Aljazeera. The Omani news and TV channels, which are received in neighboring countries and in Europe by satellite, do not have programs of international caliber. The absence of a national news agency is most felt in Oman. In general, the majority of international news is collected from large agencies, so there is no original information from the Omani perspective, but the interpretations can be found in the Omani news.

The most important potential card in Oman's hands is the diaspora. From Pakistan to Zanzibar, the entire Omani diaspora resides on the coastline and could be Oman's natural sphere of influence. However, so far, Oman has not acted to use this card. The diaspora could serve as a bridge between the old country of origin and the new adoptive country in a constructive and mutually beneficial way. The Omani diaspora has so far not been used as an important component of the country's public or traditional diplomacy. However, Oman has recently timidly embarked on the path of exploring this potential by signing an agreement for the restoration of the House of Wonders (Bait Al Ajaib) in Zanzibar.

The websites of major ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) are well prepared, efficient and functional. Thousands of foreigners visit the MOFA website every day. Omani government has developed user-friendly websites where the majority of the ministry's services could be managed from the websites and positively help Oman's public diplomacy. The Omani government also has successfully adopted social media tools such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn in its daily activities. However, compared to European countries, government use of social media is still low.

Unlike some other countries like Russia, Turkey and Germany, Oman does not use advertorial public diplomacy in the Euro-Atlantic area. As an alternative remedy, Oman prefers to run an indirect infomercial with certain columnists in the British and American newspapers. Due to the fall in oil prices, Oman no longer spends money on self-promotion although the spending could be beneficial and necessary in public diplomacy.

In the field of exchange programs as a very effective instrument of soft power and public diplomacy, Oman has been part of the Erasmus and Socrates programs. In addition, bilateral education programs, teacher-student exchanges and project exchanges have been implemented very intensively over the past two decades. However, the majority of exchange programs operate in one direction, although they are bilateral agreements. 90% of the exchange programs were used by Omani students, while 10% of the participants are from Europe and the United States. This significant imbalance constitutes an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of Oman's public diplomacy. Government statistics show that thousands of foreign students were educated in Omani universities compared to a negligible number of Omani students who studied in foreign institutions.

Table 1: Number of International Students in Oman

Year	Number of International Students	Percentage of International Students
2009	1911	1.9
2010	2108	2.0
2011	2515	2.6
2012	2568	2.2
2013	3108	2.5
2014	3778	2.8
2015	4015	2.8
2016	3043	2.3
2017	3262	2.6
2018	3384	2.7

(Oman National Center for Statistics and Information, 2019)

University chairs such as the Jean Monnet Chair and the Professor's Chair are a good tool for public diplomacy. Oman has some granting post of professor of Sultan Qaboos in the United States and in Europe. At the same time, Sultan Qaboos Chairs exist in 11 different countries, such as Netherlands, China, UK, Australia, Pakistan, USA (2 for each), Bahrain and Jordan (Omani Diwan, 2020). However, it could be said very clearly, Oman does not use the Chairs effectively unlike Jean Monnet Chairs. There are also a number of prizes and awards under the Sultan Qaboos name, such as the UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation and the Sultan Qaboos Prize for Culture, Arts and Literature. Again, those are mostly symbolic; Oman has never intended to use those prizes as a soft power tool. Compared to majority of GCC countries, the number of national and international academic branches is very low in Oman. While the majority of private universities in Oman offer dual degrees with UK, German and US universities, it is extremely rare to see Oman use this tool of public diplomacy by offering joint degrees in European countries.

International festivals, events and cultural centers are practical and necessary tools in public diplomacy. Oman annually organizes cultural events in Washington, London and Paris through Sultan Qaboos centers or other institutions. For example, the Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center in

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Washington was established in 2005. Its main mission is to share Omani culture with the American public and tries to promote mutual respect and understanding. It strives to educate a new generation of culturally sensitive and informed citizens in every society through outreach programs, scholarships, conferences, educational resources and cultural partnerships (SQCC, 2020). The Oman Center for Arabic Language and Culture in Belarus is another center located at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. The Center teaches Arabic and disseminates Arab culture, and conducts studies, research and conferences. (Oman Observer, 2018)

International conferences are one of the benevolent tools of public diplomacy. Oman has held several annual conferences, especially under the leadership of four ministries (Foreign Affairs, Interior, Defense, and Finance) and Sultan Qaboos University as the largest university in Oman. Again, compared to universities in the Euro-Atlantic area, the number of these international conferences is low as is the number of academic journals, magazines and books published. To boost Oman's public diplomacy, public and private institutions award around 300 graduate scholarships to Western students. On the other hand, Erasmus-Mundus is the only program available to the European Union (EU) to send its exchange students to Oman. The United States has allocated a very limited fund to send 2-3 students per year for exchange.

Sultan Qaboos was Oman's most imposing figure for the past fifty years. He has been the mediator between the West and Iran for thirty years. He was respected by foreign heads of state as a great political leader and revered by his people. He was a charismatic visionary leader who had devoted himself entirely to serving the well-being of his people, as well as international peace and security (Yenigun, 2020). However, when we look at the results of our next survey, we see that the public in Western societies did not know him, despite being a very effective politician and diplomat on the international stage. The reason could lie in the remarkable humility of the Omanis and their preference for quiet diplomacy where the outcome of their efforts is more important than the process and the limelight of the media.

The institution of armed forces and military attachés as their integrated representatives in embassies can play an important role in the implementation of a country's foreign policy, as Nye mentions. "Military diplomacy can be defined as a set of activities carried out mainly by representatives of the Ministry of Defense, in the field of security and defense policy, and whose actions are based on the use of negotiations and other diplomatic instruments" (Pajtinka, 2016). In this sense, the 12 military attachés of Oman, located in 10 countries, support and strengthen the country's public diplomacy in the host countries. They play an essential role in the implementation of Omani military diplomacy through military cooperation with the countries of accreditation. This cooperation covers several aspects, including training and joint exercises as well as visits and meetings for the purchase of military equipment. Bilateral military relations are also strengthened through the exchange of knowledge and information (Yenigun, AlBasoos and Hassan, 2020). However, the limited number of Omani military attachés makes it difficult to cover problem areas and ensure adequate protection in an unstable international environment.

IGOs are another environment for Oman to demonstrate its public diplomacy. Records show Oman is a constructive and responsible member of the League of Arab States, GCC, Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), Interpol, IMF, Group of 77, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to only cite a few. Oman has never been a non-permanent member of the UNSC or president of the UNGA.

3. SURVEY RESULTS: WHERE IS OMAN IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?

Effective public diplomacy should be built on reciprocal relationships and understanding. In this section, we assess world public opinion and knowledge about Oman and the degree of effectiveness of its public diplomacy as well as its soft approach to influencing other others.

To measure the impact of Oman’s public diplomacy, we have conducted a physical survey in different European cities and virtually in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. 431 responses were received from 63 countries. 48.7 percent of respondents are female and 51.3 percent male. Age group is distributed very balanced spectrum; the combination of the first age groups is around 64 % (Ages between 15-40). Education level of responders is very high, 93 percent of the responders are minimum bachelor holders and above since, we have targeted-academics and think tanks for the survey.

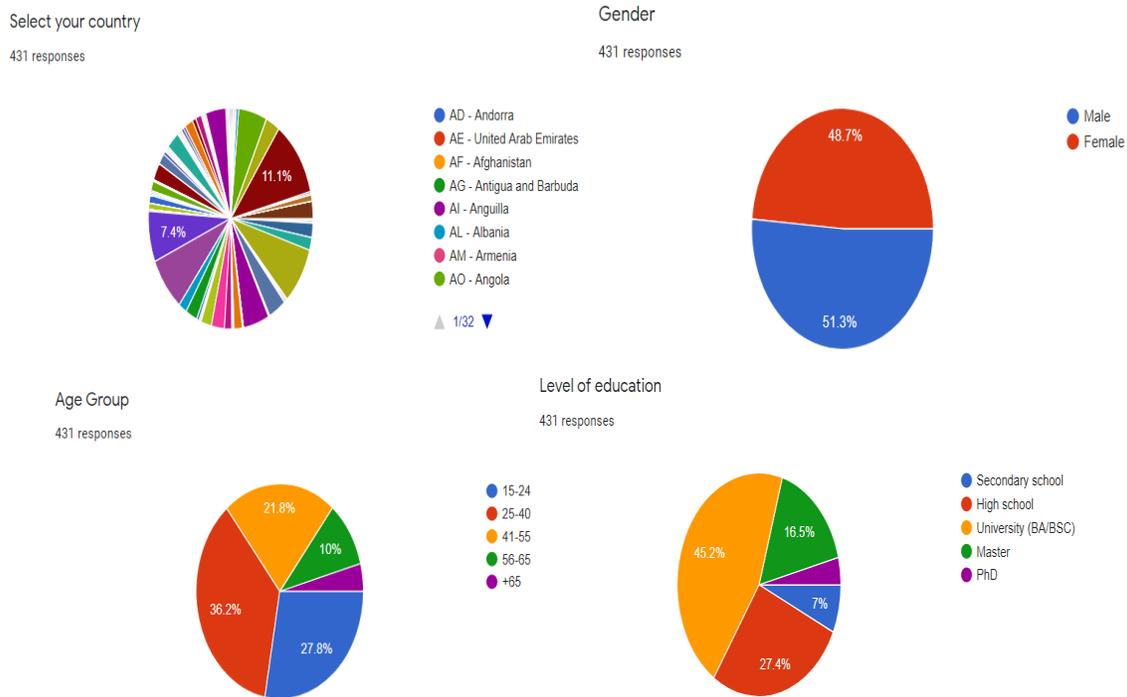


Figure 2: Social Distribution of the World Survey, Oman’s Global Image

Our investigation shows that despite the effort invested in all aspects of its public diplomacy, we find that Oman's overall image is weak as suggested by respondents' response to our relatively straightforward questions. For example, only 44.8 percent of those surveyed knew that Oman is located in the Persian Gulf region; only 27.8% knew the name of the capital of Oman and only 23.4% knew that the currency of Oman is the Rial.

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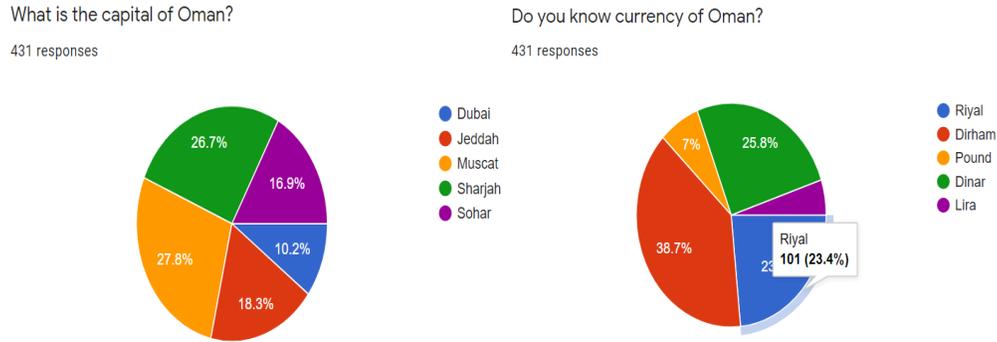


Figure 3: Simple Questions, Capital and Currency of Oman

With 50 years in the service of his country and the cause of international peace and security, including the act of mediation between Iran and the West on several occasions as well as the spectacular 5 + 1 + Iran nuclear agreement concluded in 2015, only 59 respondents out of 431 (13.7%) knew that Oman was the mediator of this agreement, even if we accepted all the answers “Sultan”, “Sultan Qaboos” and “Sultan Haitham bin Tariq”. In another question, we asked to name the head of state of Oman; only 14.2% could give the correct answer.

Who is the Head of State of Oman?

431 responses

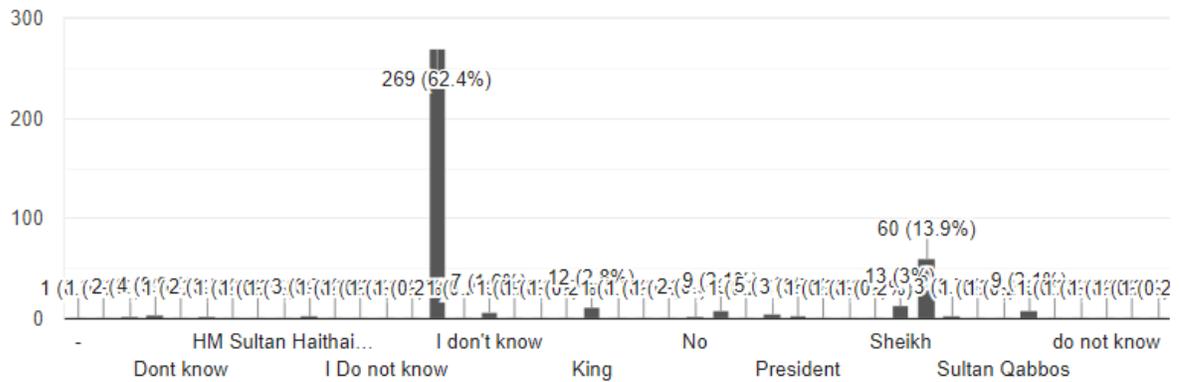


Figure 4: Result(s) about the Oman’s Head of State

According to our survey, almost 80% of those questioned were unaware that there is an electoral system in Oman, despite the fact that the creation of this system was a major development in the stages of democratization of the political system in the country and in Persia. . Gulf region. Only 22.7% knew there were general elections in Oman, and only 15.3% knew that Oman has a bicameral parliamentary system. The highest correct answer, 48 percent, identified oil as Oman’s main source of income.

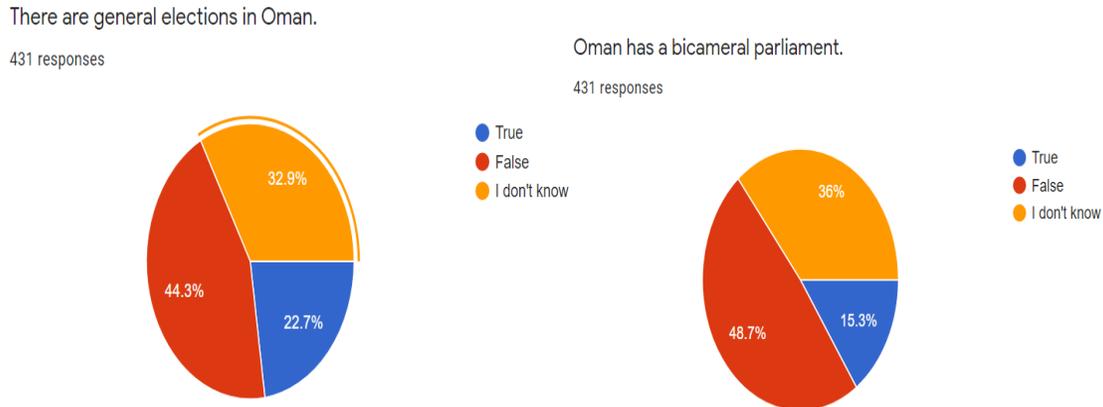


Figure 5: Political Questions, Elections and Bicameral Parliament

Norway is a very good example of a small country's style of public diplomacy, Nye said. Its population is only 5.3 million; its language is not international; its culture is not transnational; it is on the northern periphery of Europe; it is not a hub for IGOs or large multinationals, and it is not a member of the EU. However, it has developed a distinct world personality based on a single message: "Norway is an actor for peace in the world". Norway shows how a small country is doing very well internationally (Nye, 2008, p. 104). Drawing inspiration from Norway, Oman should take several steps to improve its image with the global public by using appropriate instruments of public diplomacy.

4. CONCLUSION

Oman is a small country located in a region where there are more powerful players like Iran and Saudi Arabia and great powers like the United States and the United Kingdom. It has a unique culture, a remarkable historical past, and a foreign policy distinct from that of its neighbors. Perhaps because of these peculiarities, Oman prefers to pursue low profile and silent diplomacy in several important international issues.

Although Oman has helped to avoid some potential conflicts, it needs to pay more attention to its public diplomacy to overcome obstacles and problems that prevent it from deriving the maximum benefit from its efforts. In the post-Cold War era, public diplomacy is revolutionized. New diplomatic techniques are used and new elements of power have appeared in the theory of international relations. Today, almost all international actors attach greater importance to public diplomacy and allocate it adequate funding.

Despite its past successes on the international scene, there are areas in which Oman needs to invest more. First, the viability of Oman's public diplomacy is uncertain. It should be continuous and consistent. We see the impact of falling oil prices on Oman's spending on international festivals, scholarships, exchange programs, educational chairs and publicity diplomacy that have fluctuated over the past three decades. Second, there are some tools of public diplomacy that Oman never put into effect, such as reaching out and collaborating with the Omani diaspora in the Indian Ocean region or establishing international universities and opening branches of renowned foreign universities. One of the reasons of the lack of initiative in these areas could be

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Oman's foreign policy principles of neutrality and non-interference in the affairs of other countries. Third, the absence of a sustained media campaign to highlight Oman's foreign policy and domestic achievements. Oman should be proactive in using infomercials and news agencies, as well as social media tools as channels to inform international public opinion of its achievements.

Although Oman is the second most democratically developed country in the Persian Gulf, after Kuwait, world public opinion does not have enough information about its parliaments or about the conduct of national and local elections in the country. Likewise, Oman had a vast maritime empire that stretched from Pakistan to Mozambique, but only 8% of respondents knew about it.

Our global public opinion survey makes it clear that Oman needs to keep up with new techniques of public diplomacy, increase the components of applied public diplomacy, stabilize its fluctuating funding for public diplomacy instruments, and ensure sustainable public diplomacy tools. Only in this way, Oman will be able to compete peacefully in the region and in the world.

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