

Marc Valeri

The *Ṣuḥār* Paradox: Social and Political Mobilisations in the Sultanate of Oman since 2011

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Marc Valeri

The Şuḥār Paradox: Social and Political Mobilisations in the Sultanate of Oman since 2011

- 1 In 2011 and 2012, the sultanate experienced its widest popular protests since the end of the Dhofar war in the 1970s¹. The depth of the social malaise in the country was illustrated in particular by a series of peaceful sit-ins over two months between February and mid-May 2011 (at the Globe Roundabout in Şuḥār, on the motorway from Muscat to Dubai; in front of the governor's office in Şalāla (Salalah); and in front of the Consultative Council in Muscat), as well as by sustained mobilisations calling for political reforms in Summer 2012².
- 2 The fact that the most important protests took place in the northern town of Şuḥār, with its rich trading history going back thousands of years seems highly paradoxical. Neglected by the modernisation process implemented by the central state after 1970, the town of Şuḥār was after the late 1990s designed by the Omani regime as an international showcase to the economic diversification of the country, and as such had received a substantial share of the money devoted to state-led development projects in the country. This paper thus aims at understanding the Şuḥār protests in the perspective of the new identity of the town as an economic hub. It intends to explore in particular the reasons as to why the town of Şuḥār has been experiencing Oman's most serious political contestation since 2011 while it used to be viewed as the main beneficiary of the economic reforms which had been implemented in Oman over the past decade. After a brief presentation of the ethnic and religious diversity of the population of Şuḥār, this paper examines the social impact of the transition of Şuḥār since the late 1990s from a semi-rural provincial town into the industrial capital of the country, and seeks to explain the tremendous demographic, societal and economic changes brought on by the establishment of the port. In this context, this paper analyses the dynamics of popular mobilisations in Şuḥār since 2011 and the response of the regime to these mobilisations which they failed to anticipate.

Şuḥār's rich trading and cultural legacy

- 3 Since the third millennium BC the strategic significance of the south eastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula, mentioned in Sumerian tablets, led neighbouring empires to take interest in it. The inhabitants of this region developed a strong tradition of trading from the ports on the coast stretching along the Gulf of Oman, known nowadays as the Bāṭina plain. Copper extraction was the spearhead of this intense trade. The Golden Age of Şuḥār, the main town of the Bāṭina, took place under the Abbasids — as illustrated by the legend of Sinbad the Sailor and by the Arab physician Ibn al-Dhahabī, Avicenna's disciple and the author of the first known alphabetical encyclopaedia of medicine. Arab and Persian geographers, such as al-Maqdisī and Ibn Ḥawqal, among others, describe Şuḥār as one of the most prosperous towns in the 10th century Islamic world³. Şuḥār mariners, together with those from Basra and other ports of the Persian Gulf, went as far afield as China. Even if it did suffer economic setbacks and lose its regional economic leadership over the centuries, Şuḥār remained an active harbour and cultivated its role as an international trading power, especially after the Ya'āruba rulers supplanted the Portuguese on the Omani coast in 1650, then when Oman's imperial power grew across the Indian Ocean, all the way up to the mid-19th century. One of Şuḥār's governors under the Ya'āruba, and also the founder (in 1749) of the current Omani ruling dynasty, Aḥmad al-Būsa'īdī, was himself a prominent merchant and ship owner. Later on, his grandson Sa'īd b. Sulṭān (r.1806–56) made Zanzibar his capital in 1832 and gained formal sovereignty over the whole north western edge of the Indian Ocean, from Mozambique to Baluchistan. The political and economic supremacy of the Sultanate was accompanied by a sharp rise in Omani immigration as part of the imperial conquest and which was strongly encouraged by Sa'īd

b. Sulṭān. This led to a migration movement from Oman to the eastern African coast which would last until the mid-twentieth century.

- 4 This rich history shaped by waves of migration over the centuries across the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean explains the contemporary demographic complexity of Ṣuḥārī society. In his seminal ethnographic work published in 1983, Fredrik Barth describes in particular the multiple levels of identity that forge solidarities and senses of belonging to the city, the first of which is related to ethno-linguistic affiliations. According to Barth, “people who regard themselves as Arabs make up from one-half to two-thirds of the population of Ṣuḥār”⁴. Nationals of Baluchi descent constitute probably one-quarter⁵ to one-third⁶ of Ṣuḥār’s inhabitants. The contemporary presence in Oman of people native to Baluchistan results from the choice of local rulers, as early as the Ya’āruba period, to raise a mercenary army so as not to be dependent on Inner Oman tribes. Throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, especially once Oman occupied the coast of Baluchistan in 1794, Baluchi contingents constituted the backbone of the sultans of Oman’s guard. This practice of recruiting soldiers from Sistan and Baluchistan continued well into the twentieth century.
- 5 The largest Shi’i group in the Bāṭina today is the ‘Ajam, said to be from various regions in Southern Iran (Khuzistan, Lār, Bandar ‘Abbas)⁷. Established in Oman for centuries, thanks to the relations between the two shores of the Gulf of Oman since time immemorial, the ‘Ajam, only a few of whom consistently use Persian in daily life, represent today probably 10-15% of Ṣuḥār’s national population. Finally the national population of Indian origin in Ṣuḥār is divided into two major groups, the Banyans, who belong to the Hindu faith, and the Twelver Shi’i Lawāṭiyya. Banyan families have been settled in Ṣuḥār for six to seven generations. They have maintained connections (especially matrimonial ones) with the town of Mandvi in Gujarat (India), where many Banyans originate from, along with Mumbai. Most of the Lawāṭiyya families probably settled in Oman while coming from Sind between 1780 and 1850⁸. Both Banyan and Lawāṭiyya communities in Ṣuḥār consist nowadays of only a few hundred individuals. As a consequence of this ethnic diversity, other than Arabic, which is spoken by the whole Ṣuḥārī population and is the vehicular language, a variety of other languages (Baluchi, Persian, Kutchi, Swahili) are spoken as vernaculars.
- 6 The second kind of local solidarity structuring Bāṭina society is the tribe, headed by a sheikh, and usually expressed in Oman by the term *qabīla*. At lower levels, the tribe is organised in branches or sections (sing. *fakhdh*). Within the tribe, individuals are integrated into a three-level vertical classification. At the top are the supposed descendants of the eponymous ancestor of the tribe, known as the “nobles” (sing. *qabīlī* or *nabīl*). At an intermediate level, the tribe includes the *bayāsara* (sing. *baysar*, or “mixed-race”), descendants of Arabs and slaves, and the *zuṭī* (“gipsies”). In the Bāṭina, the latter, who are often regarded as the tribe’s clients (*mawlā*), used to specialise in manual know-how related to work with raw materials such as metal, leather, stone or animals. The descendants of slaves brought from Africa — *khadam* (“servants”) — are at the lower end of the scale. In the 1980s, John Wilkinson⁹ estimated that *bayāsara*, *mawlā* and *khadam* represented three quarters of the population of the Bāṭina. This social stratification is certainly still relevant in daily social relations but is of lesser significance today, due to the theoretical equality of all Omanis before the law combined to unprecedented work-induced internal population exchanges and migration.
- 7 In terms of religion, estimates of confessions among the nationals are not based on official figures, as the Omani authorities have never published any data on the subject¹⁰. However various estimates show that the large majority of Ṣuḥār’s population is Sunni (as is the case in the Bāṭina) while Shi’a represent approximately 10-15% of the nationals and Ibadis another 15-20%¹¹.
- 8 Last but not least, Ṣuḥār society has long been structured along a division between people defining themselves as sedentary town dwellers (*ḥaḍar*), residing in coastal villages and historically engaged in sea-related and trade activities, and former nomad groups who used to live on pastoral lands in the plain between the coast and the Ḥajar mountains, who became sedentary cultivators over the course of the 20th century (*badū*). Among the latter are the Banī ‘Amr (al-Ma‘marī), who have historically been allied with the Sultans of Muscat and served

as military personnel in charge of guarding the sultan's palaces and their *walī*-s' forts, the Banī Ghayth (al-Ghaythī), the Shabūl (al-Shiblī) or the Maqabīl (al-Muqbalī) tribes.

9 Far from representing a mosaic of groups living side by side in a town where "ethnicity would provide the primary ordering identities"¹², Ṣuḥār's social and demographic complexity is described by Fredrik Barth in the 1970s as "truly one of cultural pluralism: both in the sense that a number of cultures coexist and in the sense that every person participates in several, though far from all, of these cultures"¹³. Not only do these multiple layers of identities not determine automatically an individual's socio-professional rank, marriage choice, ideology or behaviour¹⁴, but neither is social life organised around what Clifford Geertz called "primordial attachments"¹⁵ (tribes, clans, ethno-linguistic groups, religious affiliations, etc.). As explained by Fredrik Barth, "this is not because people lack intensity in their embracement of identity, faith, and honor, or because the real differences in values and customs are slight [...]. Nor is this intermixing a recent and temporary phenomenon: while both assimilation and accommodation can be demonstrated to be taking place, the main ethnic and religious components all have a local history stretching back hundreds of years [...]. In this respect, Sohar is thought of and experienced as open to the world"¹⁶.

10 As a consequence of the political decline of the Sultanate from the mid-19th century onwards, of Britain's harsh tutelage after 1920, as well as the difficult social and economic situation across the land experienced during most of the 20th century, Ṣuḥār's glorious past had long since faded away when Fredrik Barth described it in the 1970s as "most dull and unimpressive, no more than an overgrown village [...]. The whisper of the wind in the palm trees and the murmur of the surf are mixed with the buzz of an occasional small private generator by night and of irrigation pumps and a couple of flour mills by day. Otherwise, there is little evidence of the twentieth century. In 1974-76 no part of Sohar was supplied by electricity. There was no piped water at any point; everyone depended on private or public shallow wells [...]. No telephone facilities existed, even for the administration [...]. Meat was essentially unavailable [...]. Sand and dust are everywhere, and penetrate everything. The air is hot and sticky; a piercing sun envelops all in light and heat"¹⁷. Due to the harsh conditions at home, a wide majority of Ṣuḥārī men emigrated during the 20th century to the northern Gulf (Kuwait, Bahrain), Abu Dhabi and Dubai to find work and return home ten, twenty years later with money and experience¹⁸. In this context, Ṣuḥār's cosmopolitan feature and openness to the outside continued into the 20th century.

11 Like all other regions of Oman, the Bāṭina has benefited since the 1970s from the regime's strategy to realise the unification of the territory under the single authority of Sultan Qābūs, financing his state-building endeavours thanks to oil revenues. Between 1980 and 2000, state expenditures were roughly 40-45 % of GDP. Thanks to newly asphalted roads, to schools and health centres built in even the smallest villages, the state materially and symbolically occupied the whole territory. The first asphalted road, built between Muscat and Ṣuḥār in 1973, reached the United Arab Emirates (UAE) border the following year. This process has led to an explosion of jobs and possibilities of income offered, within the public and para-public sectors, to skilled and non-skilled individuals, in an area long characterised by labour emigration.

12 Concomitantly, the redistricting of the country in 1991 further accentuated Ṣuḥār's change of status into a regional capital. While initially composed of two governorates (*muḥāfaẓa*) and nine regions (*minṭaqa*) – reminiscent of the pre-1970 political divisions – the national territory was re-divided into five regions — Bāṭina, Sharqiyya, Dakhliyya, Zāhira and al-Wustā — and three governorates: Dhofar, Muscat, Musandam¹⁹. These new administrative entities were designed around regional capitals (such as Nizwā, Ṣūr, and Ṣuḥār) destined to become conveyor belts between Muscat and their respective hinterlands. In the case of the Bāṭina, Ṣuḥār became the real capital of the region, as opposed to being just one coastal town in the Bāṭina among others, as had been the case for years. This was made possible by the presence of local branches of government and by the rural-urban drift at the regional level resulting from this administrative re-organisation.

- 13 However, well until the early 2000s, Ṣuḥār remained a semi-rural provincial town, neglected by the post-1970 centralised modernisation process. The lack of employment opportunities in the Bāṭina (other than in local branches of government and public sector administrations) explains why the job market in the former Trucial Coast has remained attractive to many low-skilled Omani individuals. Omani nationals, many of them from the Bāṭina, were highly represented in the UAE Armed Forces until the beginning of the 21st century²⁰. More generally the UAE's symbolic, cultural and economic influence on northern Oman has only grown stronger after the 1980s. The UAE is the first economic partner of Oman, with 27% of its importations in value and 70% of its non-oil exports, as well as a place where many Omanis of all social conditions, especially from the northern *wilāya*-s (provinces), go to at weekends, either for fun or for commercial deals. Last but not least, for technical reasons (secondary school certificate marks too low to gain admission to Sultan Qaboos University), financial reasons (inability to pay the tuition fees in private Omani institutions), or personal ones (regular returns to Oman), 8,400 Omani students (of which 81% girls) were registered in UAE universities in 2011 (a substantial number in lesser ones, like 'Ajman), which represent approximately 56% of all Omani students abroad²¹.
- 14 As a consequence Omani authorities have long had to deal with the issue of a strong extraversion of northern Omani *wilāya*-s towards UAE development poles. This has to do with a historical obsession of Muscat rulers, and still present under Qābūs' rule, with the highly populated areas of Zāhira and the Bāṭina breaking away in favour of Saudi Arabia half a century ago and nowadays in favour of the UAE²². It is not without significance that Sultan Qābūs's annual tours in 2005 (a few months after the death of the UAE president) and in 2010 focused on the *wilāya*-s of Shināṣ, Liwā and 'Ibrī and on the Musandam governorate. A civil servant native from northern Bāṭina highlights the underlying political issues:
- 15 "In Shināṣ, 80% of the population is dependent on the UAE; people are working on construction projects in Fujairah or Khawr Fakkān, or even in Sharjah and Dubai. Local sheikhs are related to Sharjah and Dubai families, by marriage, family agreements or business... The town of Shināṣ is completely turned towards the UAE, which makes sense because, on the Bāṭina side, there is nothing that can compete with the UAE... Even in Ṣuḥār"²³.

Economic frustrations and disintegration of the social fabric

- 16 Forced to accelerate drastically the scope of economic diversification in the 1990s, the Sultanate decided — in the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1996–2000), and more so in the Sixth (2001–2005) and Seventh (2006–2010) plans — to work simultaneously on tourism development, as one of the sectors with strong potential for employment of nationals, and the development of non-oil industries. Natural gas has also long been a focus of the authorities' hopes for the diversification of public revenues. The Ṣuḥār industrial port and free zone has by far been the most ambitious among the industrial projects developed to promote the use of Omani gas resources. Under development since 1998 in the *wilāya* of Liwā, north of Ṣuḥār, and in service since 2002, it has been managed by the Sohar Industrial Port Company, a joint venture between the government of Oman (50%) and the Port of Rotterdam (50%)²⁴. Various activities have been planned for a total investment to date of US\$15 billion. A refinery, operated by Oman Oil Refineries and Petroleum Industries Company (ORPIC, in which the government of Oman holds 75% of the shares and Oman Oil Company, a commercial company wholly owned by the government of Oman, the remaining 25%) started operations in October 2006.
- 17 Ṣuḥār industrial port and free zone include also a polypropylene plant, supplied by the refinery's output; a methanol plant, operated by Oman Methanol Company and owned by the Sultan's Special Adviser for External Affairs 'Umar al-Zawāwī, through his holding OMZEST (30%), and foreign partners (70%); an aluminium smelter, managed by the Sohar Aluminium Company (owned by Oman Oil [40%]), the Abu Dhabi National Energy Company PJSC – TAQA [40%] and Rio Tinto-Alcan [20%]), which started production in mid-2008; a urea and ammonia plant, set up and owned by Omani tycoon Suhayl Bahwān, which started

production in 2009; two iron ore pelletizing plants, operated since 2011 by a joint venture between Vale (70%) and Oman Oil (30%); as well as petrochemical infrastructures (aromatics and polyethylene plants) run by ORPIC. The construction of another US\$ 3.6 bn plastics megaproject (called Liwa Plastic Project), which will include a new 300km natural gas pipeline from Fahūd to Şuḥār, a steam cracker and two polyethylene facilities, operated by ORPIC, is set to begin in the first half of 2015 for completion in 2018. Moreover, the Şuḥār industrial area has the country's largest power generator and sea water desalination plant (owned and operated by Sohar Power Company, whose main shareholders are GDF Suez [35%], Mena Infrastructure fund [20%] and Oman's Ministry of Defence Pension Fund [5%]), and Oman's first steel plant, in operation since 2008. The whole Şuḥār industrial site was originally expected to generate more than 8,000 stable jobs and 30,000 other jobs indirectly in the Bāḩina region by 2015.

- 18 Despite the regime's awareness of the need to rethink its development model based on oil revenues, the priorities defined in the five-year plans since the mid-1990s have fallen well short of tackling these challenges or calling into question the socio-political order established since the 1970s. The Omani population is one of the youngest in the world: 45% of nationals were less than 20 years old and 56% were less than 25 in 2013. 32% of Omanis aged between 15–17 years old in 2007 were not enrolled in school, and half of those who finish high school do not have the opportunity to continue into higher education²⁵. The arrival on the labour market of a huge contingent of young people comes at a time when the economy remains extremely dependent on oil-derived revenue. Omanisation policies have proven to be of limited effectiveness while the process of diversifying sources of revenue has been slow, as illustrated by the explosion of social inequalities and poverty, which are all due to deregulation and privatisation policies. When the protests started in January 2011, estimates at the national level showed a structural unemployment level of 20% among nationals and exceeding 25% among 18 to 24-year olds — not to mention a high rate of underemployment, particularly in rural areas and among women. 38.1% of Oman's unemployed are young people, and of those, 84.7% have never been previously employed²⁶. The Omanisation rate in the private sector had plummeted from 18.8% at the end of 2005 to 15.3% in January 2011 — yet the number of active expatriates had more than doubled since the end of 2005. In February 2011, 70% of Omanis working in the private sector were earning less than the official monthly minimum wage (200 Omani rials [OR]²⁷)²⁸.
- 19 Moreover in order to increase both the elites' loyalty to him and the stability of his rule, the sultan has never been able (nor willing) to prevent the merchant families from taking political office and actively participating in deciding economic orientations. Most cabinet members and key regime officials have personally derived material profits from the oil rent since the 1970s. The common perception of a corrupt elite, primarily interested in safeguarding its privileges, has been fuelled by some of the most influential decision-makers getting involved in such business²⁹.
- 20 These trends offered fertile ground for the development of political grievances. In 2005, employees of Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, as well as senior military and civilian officials, including the son-in-law of the Mufti, all belonging to the Ibadi school (of Islamic jurisprudence), were arrested, leading to prison sentences for more than 70 people. They were accused of belonging to a secret organisation attempting to overthrow the regime and of working towards the establishment of an Ibadi imamate. It seems very unlikely that the individuals arrested had any political objectives, though. They were more likely to have been motivated by religious goals and by the conviction that the official consensual Islam promoted under Qābūs' rule was a threat to the country's Ibadi legacy.
- 21 As far as Şuḥār is concerned, it goes without saying that people welcomed the development of the port and free zone. However the transition within a few years from a semi-rural provincial town into the industrial capital of the country had dramatic effects on Şuḥār's social fabric. The establishment of the port resulted in tremendous demographic changes (see table 1).

Table 1: Proportion of nationals and expatriates in Şuḥār, Liwā, North Bāṭina and Oman

	1993	2003	2010
Number (and proportion) of Omanis in Şuḥār	71,254 (78.5%)	84,681 (80.6%)	92,590 (66.1%)
Number (and proportion) of expatriates in Şuḥār	19,560 (21.5%)	20,421 (19.4%)	47,416 (33.9%)
Total population in Şuḥār	90,814	105,102	140,006
Number (and proportion) of Omanis in Liwā	19,453 (85.8%)	23,217 (89.3%)	25,455 (74.9%)
Number (and proportion) of expatriates in Liwā	3,214 (14.2%)	2,776 (10.7%)	8,546 (25.1%)
Total population in Liwā	22,667	25,993	34,001
Number (and proportion) of Omanis in north Bāṭina	299,222 (83.5%)	354,552 (86%)	386,535 (79.9%)
Number (and proportion) of expatriates in north Bāṭina	59,256 (16.5%)	57,720 (14%)	97,047 (20.1%)
Total population in north Bāṭina	358,478	412,272	483,582
Number of Omanis	1,483,226 (73.5%)	1,781,558 (76.1%)	1,957,336 (70.6%)
Number of expatriates	534,848 (26.5%)	559,257 (23.9%)	816,143 (29.4%)
Total population in Oman	2,018,074	2,340,815	2,773,479

Source: Calculations based on figures of 1993, 2003 and 2010 national censuses available on Oman's National Centre for Statistics and Information website (<http://www.ncsi.gov.om>) North Bāṭina includes here the *wilāyas* of al-Khābūra, Liwā, Şaḥam, Shināş, Şuḥār and al-Suwayq.

- 22 Between 2003 and 2010, the total population in the *wilāya*-s of Şuḥār and Liwā increased by 33% and 31% respectively. By comparison the total population in Oman grew by 18.5% only during the same period. This demographic boom is due to the fact that the number of expatriates has more than doubled in Şuḥār (from 20,400 in 2003 to 47,400 in 2010) and even tripled in Liwā (from 2,800 in 2003 to 8,500 in 2010) over a seven-year time frame. As a consequence, the proportion of expatriates in the total population of Şuḥār and Liwā has increased from 20% to 34%, and from 10.7% to 25% respectively.
- 23 At the same time, the majority of the Bāṭina population did not benefit from the economic spin-offs. Many have actually experienced a fall in living standards. Inequalities have exploded, between pockets of wealth (including Blue City project [discussed below], and luxury gated communities built in Ghaḍafān, Liwā and north of Şuḥār, reserved for the expatriate executives of industrial groups present on the port) and the rest of the area, which has been hard hit by all round cost increases (rents, equipment, consumption goods). Conversely a few regime insiders, including the top Muscat business groups (OMZEST, Zubayr, WJ Towell, Bahwān, etc.), as well as local notables disproportionately benefited from the dramatic rise in land prices and, more generally, from opportunities for substantial profits. An illustration of this phenomenon has been the involvement in Şuḥār's business opportunities of royal family members, including the ruler's first cousin and Minister for Heritage and Culture *sayyid* Haytham. A shareholder in the 1990s of *Sun Farms* agricultural company, one of the biggest landowners in the Bāṭina and a top vegetable producer in Oman³⁰, *sayyid* Haytham has substantially increased his involvement in business ventures since the early 2000s, especially through the holding company for investment and project development (*National Trading Co.*) he owns and chairs. In the Bāṭina in particular, the group was involved in the construction of Şuḥār's power plant and is the agent in Oman for multinational companies (*Alstom*, *Thyssenkrupp*) present in Şuḥār industrial area. *Sayyid* Haytham also shared with another Omani investor a 30% stake in the Blue City project, supposedly worth US\$20 billion. Covering 35 km² on al-Sawādī beach, south of Şuḥār, this mega tourism-devoted new city approved by the government in 2005 was supposed to accommodate 200,000 residents in 2020 and lead to the creation of 7,000 jobs on the site, as well as over 25,000 indirect jobs.

However mismanagement and legal battles between the project's owners, combined with the 2008 regional real estate crisis, resulted in Oman's most resounding bankruptcy ever and the infamous intervention of the state's sovereign wealth fund OIF in 2011 and 2012 to buy Blue City bonds³¹.

24 Nuisances caused by industries in Ṣuḥār port also helped trigger local popular frustrations. Since as early as 2004, inhabitants from villages close to the Ṣuḥār industrial port (in particular Ghaḍafān and Ḥarmūl, in the *wilāya* of Liwā) had tried to alert the authorities about the impact of emissions by polluting industries located in the port area, which were said to have caused a severe increase in cases of cancer and respiratory diseases, and even the forced displacement of residents from their villages. The issue went up one notch after 2009, and especially in 2010, when local residents managed to make themselves heard at the national level, by multiplying public interventions on radio and TV, despite all efforts by the government and business interests to obstruct any investigation and to cover up the problem. A number of bloggers and intellectuals from Muscat, including prominent human rights defender Ḥabība al-Hinā'ī, also took up the issue by conducting interviews and surveys of people affected by these nuisances, and imposed it as a hot topic on social networks.

Ṣuḥār's 2011 social explosion

25 Against all expectations, this general climate of frustration caught the regime by surprise. On 26 February 2011, 30-40 young unskilled people native to neighbouring cities started a sit-in at the Ṣuḥār branch of the Ministry of Manpower after they had been told yet again that there were no jobs for them. Evacuated by the police at the branch director's request, they decided to gather at Ṣuḥār's main Globe roundabout, on the Muscat-Dubai road, but were arrested in the middle of the night and transferred to Samā'il central prison. In the morning, skirmishes developed around Ṣuḥār police station where the crowd believed that the individuals were detained, and one protester was shot dead the next day when the police fired live ammunitions and tear gas at the crowd. From that moment on, Ṣuḥār's Globe roundabout, renamed 'Reform square' (*mīdān al-iṣlāḥ*), became the gathering place of the protesters, in their majority young, unskilled or low-skilled, and native from all over the Bāṭina region. Far from calling into question the authority of the ruler, the mobilisations in Ṣuḥār were cries for help for more job opportunities and for measures to curb rising prices and inequalities. As illustrated by the list of demands displayed on the Ṣuḥār roundabout, protesters called on the sultan to personally intervene to end the reign of *wasta* (social intermediation) and favouritism in the public sector and to put on trial long-serving ministers widely perceived as embodying corruption – such as 'Alī al-Ma'marī, the Minister for the Royal Office; Aḥmad Makkī, the Minister for National Economy; and Maqbūl al-Sulṭān, the Minister for Commerce and Industry.

26 In an attempt to pull the rug from under the protesters' feet, the regime took several steps. In addition to the increase of the private sector minimum wage for nationals by 43% to OR 200 that had been announced in mid-February, Sultan Qābūs made further concessions on 27 February, including the introduction of a monthly allowance (OR 150) for job seekers registered at the Ministry for Manpower, the creation of 50,000 new jobs for Omanis in the public sector, doubling the monthly allowance for families benefiting from the social security law and the increase of student allowances. He also announced the establishment of a ministerial committee to examine the possibility of granting legislative powers to the Consultative Council (*majlis al-shūrā*).

27 Although well received, these announcements did little to dull the protesters' resoluteness though. Clashes with the riot police intensified while the roundabout was closed to traffic and a blockade of the main accesses to Ṣuḥār's port and industrial area was frequently organised between late February and early April 2011³². In a long-suppressed outcry against the regime's inability to deliver on its promises of local development, symbols of the state's authority and properties of those who represent it were targeted. Protesters forced a number of government buildings (local branches of the Ministries of Housing, Manpower, Social Development, Education, etc.) to close while a police station and the *walī*'s office were put on fire³³. Personal houses of dignitaries (such as the *walī* of Ṣuḥār) were attacked. Epitomising the conflict of

interests between business and politics, and the excessive profits accumulated by a few regime insiders during the town's economic boom, Ṣuḥār's main supermarket (*Lulu*), the building and land belonging to 'Alī al-Ma'marī, was burned down and ransacked. On 7 March, in the largest cabinet re-organisation in forty years, Sultan Qābūs dismissed ten ministers (one third of his cabinet) and replaced them with younger politicians who had not held ministerial posts before, including three natives from the Bāṭina region: Sheikh Sa'd al-Sa'dī (Minister of Commerce and Industry, former representative of al-Muṣna'a in the Consultative Council [2000–2011]); Aḥmad al-Fuṭaysī (Transports and Communications), from Shinās; and 'Abd Allāh al-Sa'īdī (Legal Affairs), from the *wilāya* of al-Suwayq. This raised the total contingent of cabinet members from the Bāṭina to six (out of a total of twenty-nine ministers).

28 Senior officials and the national media repeatedly labelled the protesters as 'scum' (*ra'ā'*) and 'vandals' (*mukharibīn*). They also accused them of being under foreign influence, in order to discredit them and their demands. In particular, text messages and tweets circulated by security forces tried to fuel unfounded rumours of supposed Emirati involvement in the organisation of the Ṣuḥār protests — which did not get much attention. Attempts were also made to buy off individuals thought to be the leaders of the protests, by offering them money (amounting to hundreds of thousands of Omani rials) and managerial positions in government departments³⁴ — usually without success. Similarly, the government announced that jobs with the port companies would be "reserved" for residents in villages close to the port and those most affected by industrial nuisances. The CEOs and human resources departments of private companies based in the Bāṭina were contacted directly by police and Ministry of Manpower officials only to be instructed to create (sometimes up to fifty) jobs overnight for "Ṣuḥār roundabout's young people", whose names were then transmitted³⁵. After the Minister of the Diwan of the Royal Court, *sayyid* 'Alī b. Ḥamūd, sent by Sultan Qābūs to Ṣuḥār to hold talks, failed in his mission and was driven away by the protesters, he asked local businessmen to organize a counter-rally in support of the government, calling for an end to the protests so as to "restore the image of the town"³⁶. It is also noteworthy that the Ministry of Interior tried on several occasions to get tribal *sheikhs* involved to appease protesters. The protesters responded to these with insults and obscene gestures³⁷, illustrating the dramatic erosion of their respect for and the authority enjoyed by tribal leaders in the Bāṭina regions after decades of Qābūs's encapsulation and co-optation policy.

29 After the sultan's royal decree announcing his intention to grant the Council of Oman greater legislative and regulatory powers, which coincided with Saudi and UAE forces' entry into Bahrain on 14 March, it became clear that a security-obsessed response to silence dissenting voices was being favoured. Another young Omani died at the beginning of April 2011 in protests following the clearing of the peaceful gathering in Ṣuḥār by riot police backed by the army, which had been present since late February. 50 to 60 protesters, beaten and dragged from their car in the street or from bed in the middle of the night by masked members of the Sultan's Special Force, were arrested in late March and early April 2011. Immediately after their arrest, many were blindfolded, ankle-shackled with hands tied behind their back, put in a bag with two holes for breathing and sent by military plane to Samā'il central prison³⁸. The transformation of Ṣuḥār into a fortified city in April and May, the deployment of the army in Ṣuḥār and the drastic increase of police controls on roads to the UAE illustrated the creeping militarisation imposed in the Bāṭina region. Sultan Qābūs expanded the powers of the police too, allowing them to arrest individuals without an arrest warrant from the public prosecution, and detain them longer before bringing them to court. In June and July 2011, 27 Ṣuḥār activists were sentenced to jail terms on various charges related to "illegal gatherings," "incitement to cause riot" and "public disorder." Seven of them in particular, tried under the Terrorism Act Law, received a 30-month jail term on the accusation of "possessing material with the intention of making explosives to spread terror" while seven others were given five-year jail terms for "sabotaging and destroying public and private properties" and "forcefully stopping work at government offices, blocking roads and disrupting traffic at Ṣuḥār port"³⁹. Finally, in October 2011 several articles of the Penal Law were amended by royal decree, including

article 135 imposing jail sentences for “the publication of false news, statements or rumors liable to incite the public or undermine the prestige of the state or weaken trust in its financial state”, as well as article 137 which states that “anyone participating in a gathering of at least 10 persons, with an intent to affect the public system, can be punished with a gaol term of one month to one year.” These amendments criminalised the specific character of these protests, even down to the methods used (e.g. road blocks) and the protesters’ appearance (e.g. with covered faces). The same month, the administrative re-organisation of the territory dismantled the Bāḩina region, dividing it into two, and transformed all regions into governorates, with all governors (except those of Muscat and Dhofar) exercising their prerogatives under the strict supervision of the Minister of Interior.

30 However these reforms, supposed to reinforce the control of the central state on its turbulent peripheries, did not stop the contestation. Popular frustration with the slow pace of reform became evident again all over the country in May 2012. Around 1,000 oil workers went on strike in Muscat, Fahūd and other oil fields in May, demanding better pay and working conditions. At the same time, protests developed in Ṣuḥār and Liwā in support of Liwā Consultative Council member Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī who faced calls from the Public Prosecutor for his parliamentary immunity to be lifted, following postings on his Facebook page criticising senior officials of the Ministry of Housing. These mobilisations resulted in more clashes and arrests, while the Consultative Council rejected the request to lift Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī’s immunity. In early June, the Government adopted a hard line: the Public Prosecutor, on the basis of the amended Penal law criminalizing lèse-majesté and ‘publication of false news, statements or rumors liable to undermine the prestige of the state’, announced that anyone who publically criticised the Government would be charged with sedition. The summer of 2012 reflected this move, with a new crackdown on civil society all around the country, leading to the arrest and sentencing to jail terms of more than 40 writers, human rights activists, lawyers and bloggers. In Liwā and Ṣuḥār, repeated protests, coupled with blockages of Ṣuḥār’s industrial area, were staged on a weekly basis in the second half of 2012. Residents were demanding the release of local prisoners and the jobs promised by the government, but the main trigger for the protests was again the pollution created by the industries located in and around the port.

31 In November 2012, on the occasion of ‘Ayd al-aḩḩa, Sultan Qābūs visited Musandam and Ṣuḥār — his first visit to the town since the beginning of the 2011 protests, with the obvious intention to suggest that things were “back to normal.” While this visit was heavily choreographed, with large deployments of security forces in effect placing the town under siege, confirmed reports of pre-emptive arrests of young people by the security forces, accused of making fun of the visit, mushroomed on social networks. At the same time, the car of a cameraman covering the visit for government television was set ablaze⁴⁰. However, a few days earlier, the Council of Ministers chaired by the sultan, had finally recognised the pollution issues, and had ordered that nine villages, located in the *wilāya* of Liwā and affected by Ṣuḥār port’s activities, be transferred. The Ministry of Housing, in charge of conducting the study, announced a few weeks later that a fully residential complex would be built 20 km away from Ṣuḥār and provide 4,000 land plots expected to accommodate 30,000 citizens transferred from the affected villages⁴¹.

32 Despite the fact that the relocation scheme received very positive responses from the population targeted, clashes between riot police and local youth in the villages (Ṭarīf, Ḩarmūl, Ghaḩafān, etc.) were still commonplace in 2012 and 2013. North Bāḩina police and security forces were placed under orange alert on several occasions, curfew had to be imposed and armoured vehicles were deployed in Ḩarmūl in October 2013. As a Ṣuḥāri businessman explained in November 2012, “nowadays young people aged 13 to 18 confront security forces on a weekly basis in some villages. It has become something of a game to them, a pastime, a prerequisite to become ‘a real man’ in the eyes of your peers...”⁴² Even more, graffiti calling for the overthrow of the sultan showed up on the walls in Ṣuḥār.

33 Although protests were primarily motivated by social and economic issues, two notable dimensions need to be highlighted. First, while these mobilisations were definitely not focused

on sectarian demands nor rights for a particular community or group, the Islamists played a crucial role in channelling discontent – probably not so much for the attractiveness of their ideologies *per se*, but rather because they offered one of the few easily identifiable alternative counter-discourses and forms of collective organisation. The influence of underground Muslim Brotherhood cells and networks was visible during the protests in Ṣuḥār, just as the Salafis in all Bāṭina protests. This Islamist component is best illustrated by Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī, a Salafi 40-year old professor of Arabic literature at Ṣuḥār University who was very active in the 2011 protests. One of the people put on trial in June 2011, he was released without conviction. His political activism, and especially his role as a champion of the victims of Ṣuḥār’s industrial area pollution, was crucial in his election in October 2011 as the representative for Liwā in the Consultative Council. Following the sultan’s royal decree granting the Consultative Council greater powers to propose and amend laws⁴³, Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī, along with a handful of other representatives, took full advantage of the chamber’s change of status and the necessity for the sultan to give the Council more opportunities to make its voice heard (at least, formally), as a small safety valve in the post-Arab Spring context. Ṭālib became one of the most vocal critics of government policies within the chamber, usually grilling ministers and making the most of Omanis’ general distrust towards Cabinet members. Live coverage of these sessions of parliamentary questions on the national channel (and their extensive re-distribution, via small videos, on social networks) only increased his national visibility — and his popularity in north Bāṭina, as explained by a local journalist in 2012: “Ṭālib has become a real idol in Liwā. Many locals think that it is only thanks to him that they finally received tangible promises from the government: land, houses, financial compensation [...]. These demands were at least six or seven years old, but only in 2012 were the authorities willing to discuss them. The only thing the regime got out of this was to make Ṭālib a real political leader”⁴⁴.

34 Second, it is interesting to note that the Interior region remained untouched by the “Omani Spring.” More than an Ibadi particularism or socio-economic specificities (absolute poverty is as widespread in the Interior as in the Bāṭina), the Interior’s twentieth-century history provides elements for understanding this immunity. As explained by an Internet activist native to the Interior region, “the memory of the Jabal Akhdar war in the 1950s, when the Sultan’s Armed Forces and the British destroyed the Imamate, is still alive. People in Inner Oman remember how bad the al-Būsa‘īd were and know they are all alike. In Dhofar, they have this same memory of the war against the sultan, but it is different because this memory is a good one: they won the war and pushed out Qābūs’s father”⁴⁵.

35 Due to this historical legacy, Qābūs has always been very careful not to alienate Ibadi Inner Oman, the stronghold of the Ibadi Imamate. In particular tribal and religious leaders of this region have been granted prominent positions in the new state with continuous access to central authority. Omanis from Inner Oman are thus over-represented across the security forces, but also in the ministries of Interior, Justice, National Heritage and Culture, as well as at Sultan Qaboos University. In this perspective the feeling of abandonment by the central government experienced in the Bāṭina and among other communities since 1970 has been less pronounced in the Interior region. This, combined with the memory of the 2005 wave of arrests among Ibadi activists, probably contributes to explain the absence of protests in the Interior region.

36 Finally, contrary to Ṣuḥār, where social structures did not resist the tremendous changes instigated by the establishment of the port, the “traditional” social organisation in Inner Oman remains strong and has served to palliate poverty, growing inequalities and frustrations. Both the mufti of Oman and the Ibadi religious establishment in Nizwā retain a high degree of prestige, and their statements since 1970, always in favour of preserving the social and political order, are still greatly respected.

37 On 23 July 2013, on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of his accession to the throne of Oman, Sultan Qābūs pardoned and ordered the release of all individuals sentenced and imprisoned for political reasons, including 14 activists from Ṣuḥār, who had been serving prison terms of between 30 months and five years since June 2011. The sultan also ordered those dismissed from private and public jobs after the 2011–2012 protests to be reinstated. This decision was intended to close the delicate chapter of social and political contestation opened two years

before and that the authorities have considered only a parenthesis in an otherwise cautious and harmonious development process conducted since the 1970s under the aegis of the “father of the nation,” *Bābā Qābūs*. In yet another government attempt to show its attentiveness to the demands of the people, the end of 2013 and the spring of 2014 were punctuated by a litany of reports announcing prosecutions and convictions of government officials and businessmen on various charges related to abuse of office and corruption⁴⁶. Companies involved in contracts and projects related to Ṣuḥār port, including ORPIC, one of the main targets of Liwā protesters’ wrath⁴⁷, were also affected. In particular, former executives of state-owned Oman Refinery Company and Aromatics Oman Company⁴⁸, whose assets are now owned by ORPIC, received heavy jail sentences for abuse of office, money laundering and accepting bribes to facilitate the awarding of public contracts⁴⁹.

38 However, a Ṣuḥāri blogger, Sulṭān al-Sa‘dī, who had been pardoned in March 2013, was again detained for three weeks in August 2013 for posts on Twitter. The same month, renewed demonstrations and blockages of Ṣuḥār’s industrial area in protest of the pollution caused by industries led to a renewed crackdown by the riot police, as well as arrests, including that of Liwā representative in the Consultative Council, Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī. In May and July 2014, four businessmen and civil servants from Ṣuḥār and Buraymī (two of them relatives of Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī) and a blogger from Shinās, Nūḥ al-Sa‘dī, were arrested and detained incommunicado. Nūḥ al-Sa‘dī, who had been arrested three times since 2011 and always released without charges, was again held for 26 days, subject to ill-treatment (especially sleep deprivation for several consecutive days) and denied access to a lawyer and any contact with his family⁵⁰. The other four arrested were held in secret locations for three months, despite the 30-day limit under the law for crimes related to terrorism or national security, and released in August without charges.

39 Despite his parliamentary immunity, Consultative Council member Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī was sentenced in October 2014 by Muscat’s Court of Appeal, after more than fourteenth months of detention, to three years in jail on charges of undermining the status and prestige of the state and illegal gathering, on the basis of articles 135 and 137 of Omani Penal Law⁵¹. Contrary to previous rulings, this harsh sentence did not cause immediate tension in the Bāṭina. However, this latest crackdown is unlikely to buy off social peace in the long run or to hide the sultan’s unwillingness to allow questions of how the country will fare after him. As of 2014, the “Omani Spring” has not led to any formal political change. Yet the impact of the events on the authoritarian system has proved as massive as they were unexpected by many Oman observers, and by the regime itself. The official narrative stressing Omanis’ duty of loyalty towards *Bābā Qābūs* is like a broken record that has proved inaudible in a country where 84% of the population was born after 1970 and 70% after 1980. This young Omani civil society is composed of educated males and females who no longer agree to abdicate their right to take part in the political and economic decision-making process, as their parents had done in the name of social welfare or for the requirement of national unity behind the ruler. In this perspective, social mobilisations in Ṣuḥār represent the most blatant symptom of the unprecedented challenges to the old authoritarian rentier model of development that confront the Qābūs-state. Social structures in Ṣuḥār (and the Bāṭina) have not resisted the tremendous demographic, societal and economic changes instigated by the establishment of the port, and more generally by a badly-digested transition within a few years from a semi-rural provincial town into the industrial capital of the country. This brutal collision with reality definitely marks the beginning of a new chapter in Oman’s history and in its legitimization of authoritarian rule.

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Notes

- 1 This research was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J012696/1]. I thank the two anonymous readers for their helpful comments and critiques of earlier drafts of this paper. The interpretations are my own.
- 2 Al-Hāshimi, 2013a.
- 3 For detailed accounts of Ṣuḥār during the classical period of Islam, see Williamson, 1974; Wilkinson, 1979.
- 4 Barth, 1983, p. 38.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 6 Peterson, 2004a, p. 36.
- 7 Barth, 1983, p. 212.
- 8 For more details, see Valeri, 2010.
- 9 Wilkinson, 1987, p. 97.
- 10 At the national level, Dale F. Eickelman (2001, p. 202) considers that “roughly 50–55% of [the] citizen population is Sunni, 40–45% is Ibadi and less than 2% is Shia”. According to calculations based on census, Ibadis appear to constitute 50-55% of the population, Sunnis 45-50%, and Shi‘a 3 to 4%.
- 11 In the middle of the 1970s, Unni Wikan (1982, p. 42) and Fredrik Barth (1983, p. 50) gave estimates of 10 and 25% of Ibadis and Shi‘a respectively in Ṣuḥārī population. These figures have probably evolved substantially following massive internal migration for work experienced under Qābūs, as a consequence of the development process led by the central state and the immense pool of jobs in the public sector offered all over the territory (schools, local branches of government departments, etc.) but managed centrally.
- 12 BARTH, 1983, p. 81.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 14 “What I am stressing is that we cannot assume that a Sohari will act in a certain way simply because he was born a Baluch, or an Arab, and that is what a person with that identity is expected to do, or because he was inculcated a set of customs” (*Ibid.*, p.252).
- 15 Geertz, 1963, p. 128.
- 16 Barth, 1983, p. 7 and 19.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

18 As explained by BARTH (1983, p. 17-18), “Practice of labor migration occurs so frequently that it affects nearly everyone’s world view directly. Indeed, we know only two adult men who have not been abroad on labor migration [...]. The typical pattern has been for young men in Sohar — many as early as ages ten to eleven [...] — to seek work and experience abroad [...]. The result is a pattern of prolonged absences by some male members of most households, and remittances from wage-earning persons abroad, and on the other hand a local community in Sohar composed of men nearly all of whom have extensive individual experience of other and distant places, other cultures and styles of life, and often other languages”.

19 Another governorate (Buraymī) was created in 2006. These regions and governorates were themselves divided into *wilāya*-s (provinces).

20 This was reversed by the UAE government after 2003, out of the perception that such a presence could have adverse effects in case of UAE-Oman political tensions. Omani nationals remain highly represented in Dubai police until now.

21 Sultanate of Oman (2013), tables 42-19, 43-19, 44-19 and 45-19.

22 Peterson (2004b, p. 10) noted the prevalence in post-1970 cabinets of personalities from Zāhira. Originating from tribes who had established ties with Riyadh in the 1950s, they were said to receive preferential treatment aimed at diverting them from the enticements of the late Sheikh Zāyid.

23 Personal interview, 14 February 2005.

24 Data mentioned in the following paragraphs were found on Ṣuḥār Port and Free zone website (<http://www.soharportandfreezone.com/>) and on the websites of the companies concerned.

25 AL-HĀSHIMI, 2013b, p. 182.

26 *Ibid.*

27 1 Omani Rial = 2.6 US Dollars.

28 Monthly Statistical Bulletin March 2011, National Center for Statistics and Information (available at: http://www.ncsi.gov.om/NCIS_website/book/mb/mar2011/T15.pdf).

29 For more details on the conflict of interests between business and politics in Oman, see Valeri, 2009.

30 See Allen and Rigsbee, 2000, p. 141.

31 “Oman Now Owns Blue City Project,” *The National*, 1 April 2011; Camilla Hall, “Oman Fund Seeks to Buy Blue City Bonds,” *The Financial Times*, 7 November 2012.

32 Western managers of port companies were even temporarily moved to Muscat as a precautionary measure (see Jason Benham, “Oman Army Tries to Disperse Protests, Wounds One”, *Reuters*, 1 March 2011).

33 “The Middle East in Crisis: Looters Take Control of Oman's Streets”, *Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 2011.

34 Personal interview with a coordinator of Ṣuḥār protests, Muscat, 11 October 2011.

35 Personal interview, Ṣuḥār, 13 November 2012.

36 Personal interview, Muscat, 12 October 2011.

37 Personal interviews, Muscat, 11 and 12 October 2011.

38 Systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture (politically motivated disappearances, forced confessions, solitary confinement and incommunicado detention in small cells without window with loud music and full light for 24 hours in unknown location, restricted access to toilets, sleep deprivation, etc.) were reported (personal interviews, Ṣuḥār, 13 October 2011 and 13 November 2012; US Department of State Country Reports for Oman on Human Rights Practices 2012: 1.usa.gov/URP0Gp). Such practices continue until today. See “Oman: Rights Routinely Trampled,” *Human Rights Watch*, 19 December 2014.

39 “Sohar Protesters Given Five-Year Jail Term”, *Gulf News*, 28 June 2011; “Court Jails 12 in Sohar Terrorism Case”, *Gulf News*, 7 July 2011. These sentences were upheld by Oman’s Supreme Court in April 2012.

40 “‘Umān: majhūlūn yaḥriqūn siyyārat muṣawwir ṣaḥāfi”, *al-Haya*, 6 November 2011. On the wall of his house, an explicit message was left to explain the act: “No siege; don’t come to Ṣuḥār and may Qābūs help you!” (*Lā ḥiṣār wa lā tajī Ṣuḥār wa khalli Qābūs yinf’ak*).

41 *Oman News Agency*, 20 January 2013. Royal decree n.52/2013 of 22 October 2013 declared the Liwa Housing scheme as a public utility project. The authorities received the approval to expropriate properties and relevant land needed for the project.

42 Personal interview, Ṣuḥār, 13 November 2012.

43 Royal decree n.99/2011 of 20 October 2011. The Consultative Council can not question ministers in matters of national sovereignty (Foreign Affairs, Defense, Finance, Interior, Oil), and its opinion is not binding on the sultan, who can dissolve the chamber.

44 Personal interview, Ṣuḥār, 13 November 2012.

45 Personal interview, Muscat, 10 October 2011.

46 Except the former long-serving (1996–2011) Secretary General of the Ministry of National Economy Muḥammad al-Khuṣaybī, who briefly held the position of Minister of Commerce and Industry in early March 2011, and Indian businessman P. Muḥammad ‘Alī, co-founder and managing director of Galfar group, Oman’s largest construction company, people involved in these cases were not major economic and political players, though.

47 “ORPIC, you destroyed crops and animals” (*Yā Orpic... Laqad Ahlaktum al-ḥarth wa-l-nasl*), read one poster quoting a Qur’anic verse and carried during a protest in Liwā on 22 August 2013.

48 Oman Refinery Company was merged in 2007 with another state-owned company, Sohar Refinery, to create Oman Refineries and Petrochemicals Company (ORPC). In 2011, ORPIC was formed through the integration of ORPC, Aromatics Oman and Oman Polypropylene Company (in which the Ministry of Finance held 40% of the shares, Oman Oil 40% and South Korea’s LGI 20%).

49 “Omani CEO Jailed for 23 Years in Graft Case: Court”, *Reuters*, 27 February 2014; “Aḥkām wa qaḍāyā jadīda fī muḥākamāt al-fasād”, *al-Zaman*, 3 March 2014.

50 “Two Omani Bloggers Freed After Being Held Arbitrarily for a Month,” *Reporters without Borders*, 18 August 2014.

51 “Idāna ‘uḍū majlis al-shūrā Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī bi-3 sanawāt sijn”, *al-Balad*, 30 October 2014. Liwā’s elected representative on the Bāḥina Municipal Council, Ṣaqr al-Balūshī, was also sentenced to one year of jail on the same charges. Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī and Ṣaqr al-Balūshī were initially sentenced to four years and one year respectively in December 2013. In February 2014, the Supreme Court overturned the verdict on the basis that Muscat’s Court of Appeal lacked jurisdiction to take the case and ordered to return it to Liwā’s Court of Appeal. However the following month the Public Prosecution filed a motion to transfer the case again to Muscat’s Court. On 7 April 2014 the latter confirmed that it has jurisdiction to take the case. In the meantime, his lawyers’ multiple demands to release the accused on bail pending retrial were rejected by Muscat’s Court.

Pour citer cet article

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À propos de l’auteur

Marc Valeri
University of Exeter

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Résumés

Les mouvements de revendication politique et sociale qui ont agité le sultanat d’Oman en 2011 et 2012 sont les plus importants que le pays ait connus depuis la fin de la guerre du Dhofar dans les années 1970. Le fait que les manifestations les plus sérieuses soient survenues dans la ville de Ṣuḥār, au riche passé commercial, semble paradoxal. Laissez-pour-compte de la modernisation centralisatrice mise en œuvre par l’État après 1970, la ville avait vu l’implantation du port industriel à la fin des années 1990, qui se voulait la vitrine internationale de la diversification économique du pays, comme une aubaine. Cet

article replace les manifestations qui se sont déroulées à Ṣuḥār dans la perspective de la transformation fulgurante, en l'espace de quelques années, de cette petite ville de province en capitale industrielle du pays. Plus largement l'étude du cas de Ṣuḥār permet de se pencher sur les racines socio-économiques du « printemps omanais » de 2011, ainsi que sur les réponses apportées par le régime à un mouvement populaire qu'il n'avait pas anticipé et porteur de conséquences majeures à long terme pour la légitimité du régime.

In 2011 and 2012, the Sultanate of Oman experienced its most widespread popular protests since the end of the Dhofar war in the 1970s. The fact that the most serious protests took place in the northern town of Ṣuḥār, with its rich trade history going back thousands of years, seems highly paradoxical. Initially neglected by the modernisation process implemented by the central state after 1970, the town of Ṣuḥār was after the late 1990s designed by the Omani regime as the international showcase to the economic diversification of the country. This paper aims at understanding the Ṣuḥār protests in the perspective of the town's breakneck transformation within a few years from a semi-rural provincial town into the industrial capital of the country and widely viewed as the main beneficiary of economic reforms. In particular, this paper will use the case study of Ṣuḥār to examine and explain the socio-economic roots of the 2011 'Omani Spring'; and the regime's response to protests they failed to anticipate, as well as the long-term impact of the protests on the regime's legitimacy.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Printemps arabe, Oman, Printemps omanais, Sohar (Ṣuḥār), Liwā, Bāṭina, zone industrielle, diversification économique, mouvement social, Sultan Qābūs (Qabous)

Keywords : Arab Spring, Oman, Omani Spring, Sohar (Ṣuḥār), Liwā, Bāṭina, industrial estate, economic diversification, social movement, Sultan Qābūs (Qaboos).

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