



Book review: Deconstructing ‘Energy Security’ in Oman. A Journey of Securitisation from 1920 to 2020

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Lamya Harub, *Deconstructing 'Energy Security' in Oman. A Journey of Securitisation from 1920 to 2020*, Singapore: Springer, Gulf Studies, 2022, 287 p.

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REFERENCES

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- 1 Contrary to what one may assume, the analysis of the impact and structure of the oil economy in the Gulf monarchies has gradually become a rather marginal issue addressed by contemporary social sciences focusing on the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, matters related to identity, state and nation building, and political mobilisations prevail in the academic bibliography over efforts to study the political economy of oil and the effective practices of the so-called rentier state.
- 2 This makes Lamya Harub's critical reflection on 'energy security' in the Sultanate of Oman all the more meaningful and interesting. The publication itself is thus original and brings a breath of fresh air to a topic that is in somehow disdained as the private domain of think tanks, journalists and decision makers. *Deconstructing 'Energy Security' in Oman*, the author's PhD dissertation defended in 2017 in the United Kingdom (and updated for publication), shows that a different approach is possible.
- 3 Harub, herself now a practitioner in the energy sector in Oman, draws on a wide range of sources, including many oil company archives, and covers a broad chronology. The framework values critical theories in International relations, highlighting a clear

ability to discuss current debates in the discipline, particularly around the so-called Paris School linked to the contributions of Didier Bigo.

- 4 Harub constructs her argument over an entire century, starting five decades before the emergence of the contemporary Omani state in 1970 when Sultan Qaboos ascended the throne. The beginning of his reign is usually the starting point for many monographs on the country. Such a scope is interesting as it allows her to build a counter-narrative to the official history, to show some kind of continuity in the dynamics observed and to highlight how these also depended on the competition between world powers, not only on the policies of the Omani state itself. This approach also serves as a means of developing a critical approach to security studies, building on what she presents as a non-Western perspective focused on an empirical study of energy in Oman.
- 5 In contrast to dominant realist and liberal approaches, the author defines 'energy security' as a social and political construct, dependent on a variety of discourses and practices that are always contingent on evolving historical contexts. She shows how the concept has evolved from a focus on extraction by competing American and British companies to one that emphasizes issues of local development and decarbonation. By defining energy security, the author sheds light on power relations and interactions that are often obscured by the standard 'rentier state theory'. Indeed, the latter tends to focus primarily on state-market relations, leaving out too many other actors, including private ones, involved in the energy sector.
- 6 The book starts with a discussion of the limitations of the dominant approaches to energy and is then structured chronologically. It shows how the diversity of actors involved in what is labelled a 'security continuum' in Oman has grown since the 1960s, moving away from a state-centric approach. The Omani case study thus stresses the importance of considering society in its various inception. The overall argument of the book is that the materiality of energy is in itself a meaningful object, especially as it is constantly reinventing itself. In studying the rent, one must not only focus on production or export but also understand how it is materialised (in the sense coined by Timothy Mitchell in his seminal *Carbon Democracy*) through public and private policies that claim, for example, to have 'corporate social responsibility' in mind or to promote a 'culture of entrepreneurship'. This materiality, Harub explains "produces particular forms of social relations in Oman (p. 52)". In a way, her approach is reminiscent of Steffen Hertog's work on Saudi bureaucracy more than a decade earlier or Toby Craig Jones's work on the influence of experts on Saudi development around the same time. However, it also sheds light on practices of redistribution that are specific to Oman, especially as the amount of wealth redistributed is more limited and involves different forms of contestation than in Saudi Arabia.
- 7 By discussing issues related to oil and gas, but also to more recent hydrogen projects, Lamya Harub provides valuable insights into how the Omani state functions and evolves in a dynamic context. Thanks to a broad sociological approach that pays attention to actors and their interactions, discourses and debates, the book is a most valuable addition to our collective understanding of contemporary Oman. The recent updates, especially when it comes to Vision 2030 and the changes that Sultan Haytham has introduced since 2020, are important and differ from the often redundant analysis that one so often reads about Omani diplomacy. In addition, alongside anthropological works, such as Mandana Limbert's *In the Time of Oil*, which have focused on the interplays between the hydrocarbon economy and social life in Oman, Harub's volume

adds new perspectives on the internal debates surrounding the governance of the oil rent, particularly within the national company Petroleum Development of Oman (PDO).