AMERICA AND OMAN:
THE CONTEXT FOR TWO NEARLY CENTURIES OF RELATIONS

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The ties of the United States with Oman are among the longest of any Arab nation, dating from the second treaty signed with an Arab country and Oman's dispatch of the first Arab emissary to the United States. Trade has always been a major aspect of the relationship, even though it withered at times and created breaks in resident diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, the American-Omani relationship has strengthened enormously in the years after 1970 with close cooperation in the strategic, political, and economic fields.

The American Impulse and Its Maritime Interests

The American experience was grounded in a push for new lands for agricultural exploitation, for religious freedom, and for a second chance in life. Not surprisingly, since the original English colonies were all arrayed along the eastern coast of North America, a strong maritime nature was present from the beginning. To the west lay mountains, wilderness, and

often hostile encounters with the native peoples. To the east, across the seas lay the sources of American prosperity.

Fishing was perhaps the first tangible expression of maritime activities but this was principally local in its scope and impact, although shipments of fish were sent to England in the colonial period.[1] The 17th and 18th centuries also saw whaling develop as a major endeavor. From coastal catches, whaling gradually extended deeper into the Atlantic Ocean and the name of Nantucket in Rhode Island became synonymous with whaling in the 18th century.

American maritime shipping and trading had its antecedents in transatlantic trade between England and its colonies and the volume increased as the southern American colonies expanded their exports of tobacco. One consequence was a robust shipbuilding industry, aided by the presence of extensive nearby forests, and American builders even supplied British ports. As trade and exports expanded, so did the demand for ships. At the same time, the years after American independence saw trading relations expand geographically, including around the rim of the Mediterranean. This brought the merchants of the fledgling republic into direct contact with the rulers and fleets of North Africa, the so-called Barbary Coast. With independence, the United States lost the umbrella of immunity that Britain had provided and so American vessels suffered frequent attacks. Despite providing payments to the Barbary rulers, the attacks continued. A small navy was created and shows of force against these rulers during the first two decades of the 18th century resulted in an uncertain peace as America turned its attention to preserving neutrality

1. This brief survey is drawn mainly from A.C. Denison, *America's Maritime History* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1944); James M. Morris, *Our Maritime Heritage: Maritime Developments and Their Impact on American Life* (n.p., University Press of America, 1979); and K. Jack Bauer, *A Maritime History of the United States: The Role of*

between European rivals and defending itself from Britain in the War of 1812. The first half of the 19th century also saw a burgeoning slave trade from West Africa to the West India to American shores and a growing cotton trade.

The early 19th century also saw the expansion of American maritime activities into the Pacific, first with participation in the fur trade along the western North American coast and then the growing importance of Pacific whaling. These enterprises encouraged greater American exploration of Pacific waters and contact with Pacific territories. The first connections were made with Hawaii, which grew continuously until the island kingdom was annexed to the United States in 1898. American interests continued eastward and modest trade with China originated at the end of the 18th century while relations with Japan were established in the 1850s. This was the era of the clipper, the fast ship that signalled American supremacy in maritime trade, a position that began to decline around the time of the American Civil War (1861-1865).

The rise of Salem, Massachusetts, to prominence among American ports in maritime trading during the first half of the 19th century was assisted by its comparative advantage in colonial trade with England, shipbuilding prowess, and early specialization in such activities as fishing, whaling, and fur trading.[2] Salem merchants initiated trade with the Baltic from the 1780s and ships from Salem – and Boston even more – pioneered the opening of trade with China and

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America's Seas and Waterways (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

2. This and following paragraphs are based on material from Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921; reprinted 1941); James Duncan Phillips, *Salem and the Indies: The Story of the Great Commercial Era of the City* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947); and Norman R. Bennett and George E. Brooks, Jr., eds., *New England Merchants in Africa: A History Through Documents, 1802 to 1865* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1965). The latter work contains a considerable number of texts, mostly correspondence, relating to the American consuls in Zanzibar.

expanded their horizons to the spice ports of the East Indies with Salem controlling the pepper trade in America from Sumatra. But Salem was gradually eclipsed by Boston and then by New York and it can said to have ceased as an important port by 1845. New York thereafter outpaced even Boston.

The Genesis of American Ties to Oman and Zanzibar

Muscat saw its first visit by an American ship in 1795, although little is known about it, and more ships arrived in Muscat over the following decade.[3] The first American vessel call at Zanzibar was in 1825, followed by four others in 1826, and eight in the following year. These were merchantmen from Salem, Massachusetts, and American interest in the western Indian Ocean waters was rebounding from President Jefferson's embargo and the War of 1812. The New England role in the slave trade had always been limited and its maritime merchants soon turned their attention to legitimate trade with West Africa.

Trade with Zanzibar was promoted particularly by Edmund Roberts of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.[4] Roberts, who had arrived in Zanzibar in 1827, confronted Sayyid Sa‹id on his arrival for the first time in Zanzibar in 1828, irate over exorbitant charges levied on his cargo. Representing himself as an American consul (although it seems he had not technically served as

3. Phillips, *Salem and the Indies*, pp. 186 and 238. Joseph A. Kechichian, *Oman and the World: The Emergence of an Independent Foreign Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1995), p. 140, asserts that the first American visit to Muscat was in 1790, followed by the marooning of a shipwrecked party of Americans in 1792.
4. This section is summarized from Hermann Frederick Eilts, "Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission to the United States in 1840: The Voyage of Al-Sultanah to New York City," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol 98, No. 4 (October 1962), pp. 219-257; reprinted by the Sultanate of Oman Embassy, Washington, DC; and Richard H. Sanger, *The Arabian Peninsula* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1954), pp. 184-190.

one), he told Sa‹id that the US had no territorial designs unlike Britain and France and offered to arrange for American terms for trade and perhaps even a commercial treaty. Sa‹id agreed and Roberts returned to the US.[5]

But it took until 1831 before his kinsman by marriage, Senator Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire, was appointed Secretary of the Navy and ordered a naval squadron to visit the Indian Ocean, including Zanzibar. Roberts was appointed confidential agent for the mission and so in March 1832 set sail on the US sloop of war Peacock. He arrived in Muscat in September 1833 and quickly concluded a commercial treaty with Sayyid Sa‹id. The US ratified the treaty in June 1834 and Roberts was sent back to Zanzibar and on to Muscat to exchange instruments of ratification, which were done in Muscat in September 1835. Roberts died in 1836 at Macao from dysentery contracted in Siam.[6]

Trade between Oman and the United States had had a promising start already. Between September 1832 and May 1834, 32 out of 41 foreign ships visiting Zanzibar had been of American registry, although few American ships had landed in Muscat before 1835. In accordance with the treaty, an American consul was sent to Zanzibar in 1837 (Richard Palmer Waters, a Salem merchant and initially the only resident consul in Zanzibar) and to Muscat in 1838 (Henry P. Marshall, from New York). The latter left after a few months and Sa‹id b. Khalfan, the translator of the 1833 treaty, became the Muscat consul in 1843, although most of the diplomatic contact was conducted through Waters in Zanzibar. American trade with Zanzibar burgeoned, despite

5. Eilts, "Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission." Embassy reprint, p. 7.
6. Eilts, "Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission." Embassy reprint, pp. 9-14.

complaints about Waters monopolizing it for Salem's benefit. Cotton sheeting, crockery, muskets, gunpowder, ships stores, clocks, shoes, and specie were traded for gum copal, copra, cloves, and ivory.[7] In particular, Salem merchants monopolized the export of copal from Zanzibar soon after new methods of cleaning it were perfected in Salem in 1835 and so created a strong market there. But this connection lasted only a decade as Salem faded.[8]

Sayyid Sa‹id had long flirted with the idea of sending one of his vessels to the US. He even proposed to do so on his first meeting with Roberts in 1828, using Roberts as a navigator but the latter would not delay his departure.[9] In 1839, several senior members of the New York firm Scoville and Britton (who employed Waters) arrived in Zanzibar and sought to persuade Sayyid Sa‹id to open direct trade with New York. Sayyid Sa‹id selected his new Bombay-built ship, al-Sultanah, to carry out the voyage and settled on his confidential private secretary, Ahmad b. Na‹man b. Muhsin b. ‹Abdullah al-Ka‹bi al-Bahrani, as his emissary. After loading some cargo in Muscat, al-Sultanah took on additional cargo in Zanzibar and set sail for America, stopping only in St. Helena. The ship was well received on its arrival in New York in early May 1840 and its officers were invited to visit the Navy Yard, take a train ride, and attend a reception for the governor of New York and vice-president of the United States. The US Navy undertook repairs to al-Sultanah, as a gesture of gratitude for al-Sultanah's assistance to the American vessel Peacock, which had been damaged when it went aground on a coral reef off Masirah Island in 1835.

The trip was primarily a commercial venture and al-Sultanah's cargo of Persian carpets,

7. Eilts, "Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission." Embassy reprint, pp. 14-15.
8. Morison, *Maritime History of Massachusetts*, pp. 222-223.
9. The principal source used for the al-Sultanah episode is Eilts, *Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission*.

coffee, dates, ivory tusks,, gum copal, cloves, and salted hides was offloaded in New York. The proceeds were used to purchase American goods including general merchandise, personal items for Sayyid Sa‹id and his brother, and some chandeliers and mirrors for several Zanzibar merchants.

Rumors of a call upon President Martin Van Buren or the secretary of state were unfounded as Ahmad b. Na‹man had no formal accreditation and the men only exchanged correspondence. This consisted of two letters from Sayyid Sa‹id to the president, one expressing friendly feelings and the second conveying a variety of expensive gifts. The secretary of state, John Forsyth, replied on behalf of the president, regretting that the gifts could not be accepted and the horses offered were sold after a contentious struggle in the Senate to authorize disposition of the gifts. An American sailing master was engaged to replace the Englishman who had brought the ship and finally in August 1840, al-Sultanah set sail from New York and arrived in Zanzibar in early December. The commercial gains from the voyage appear to have been meager and Sayyid Sa‹id was not encouraged to repeat the venture.

Subsequent 19th and Early 20th Century Relations

The 1833 treaty and the mission to New York in 1840 set the stage for a long relationship between the United States and Omani rulers, a relationship that easily survived minor crises and downturns in American interest in the sultanate. One of the early examples of the former involved Waters' successor as consul, Charles Ward, who confronted Sayyid Sa‹id with commercial issues and interpretation of the 1833 treaty; an alleged insult to the American flag

brought a US Navy warship to Zanzibar in 1850 but the dispute soon blew over.[10] Although it was discovered that the English and Arabic versions of the 1833 treaty differed from each other, the treaty did serve as a model for later US commercial treaties with Britain, France, and the Hanseatic cities.[11]

The US continued to operate a consulate in Zanzibar until 1915 (reopening in 1961) and its sultan, after the death of Sayyid Sa‹id and the partition of Oman and Zanzibar, accepted in 1879 the validity of the 1833 treaty, which remained the basis of formal relations with the United States into the 20th century.[12] The treaty's translator, Sa‹id b. Khalfan was commissioned American consul at Muscat in 1843 but his function was never recognized by the authorities there, and direct relations were soon abandoned.[13] During a period of trade expansion, Washington sent an emissary to Muscat in 1879 to explore re-establishing resident relations. Sayyid Turki b. Sa‹id was agreeable and Louis Maguire, an Irish businessman, took up the post of consul in 1880 and he was succeeded by other European businessmen. In 1906, the State Department decreed that only American consular officers should fill the post. The three American consuls serving after that were assisted by a local merchant from the Lawatiyah community, Mohamed Fazel, who became vice-consul in 1913 when political unrest in Oman coincided with sharply declining trade to curtail American interest in keeping the consulate open.[14]

With only a handful of Americans resident in Oman (mainly from the Arabian Mission of

10. Bennett and Brooks, *New England Merchants,* p. xxviii
11. Bennett and Brooks, *New England Merchants,* p. xxvii.
12. Eilts, *Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission,* p. 59.
13. Eilts, *Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission,* pp. 58-59.
14. Hermann F. Eilts, "United States/Oman: A Sesquicentennial Commemoration," (Washington, DC: United

the Reformed Church of America, established in 1893), the vice-consulate was left without much work, mostly relating to certification of invoices of date shipments.[15] Frustration over the lack of functions was expressed by the last American consul, Homer Brett, when he wrote to the State Department in 1913 that there was virtually no trade and that the last American ship to put in to Muscat was in 1897 and before that in 1855.[16] The consulate was abruptly closed in 1915, to the surprise and consternation of Sultan Taymur b. Faysal who inquired of the British whether he had done something to offend the Americans.[17]

Visits by US diplomatic personnel were few and far between in the succeeding decades: the American consul at Baghdad paid a courtesy call in 1923 and the American Minister Resident in Baghdad headed a small mission to Muscat in 1934 to mark the centenary of the bilateral treaty and opened the new American missionary hospital.[18] Meanwhile, Sultan Sa‘id visited the United States, stopping first to see his father in Kobe, Japan, and stopping in the United Kingdom and Europe afterwards. Following a stop in California that included touring Hollywood movie studios, he arrived in Washington in March 1938, was received by Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and had lunch with President Franklin Roosevelt.[19]

The next American official visit took place in 1946, carried out by the newly established

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States Information Agency, 1983), p. 9.
15. J.E. Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century: Political Foundations of an Emerging State* (London: Croom Helm; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978), pp. 151-152.
16. Quoted in Sanger, *Arabian Peninsula*, p. 191.
17. British Library, India and Oriental Collections, R/15/3/147, Political Agent in Muscat R.A.E. Benn to Political Resident in the Persian Gulf Percy Cox, 11 April 1915.
18. Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 151-152; Eilts, *Ahmad bin Na‘aman's Mission*, p. 59.
19. Sanger, *Arabian Peninsula*, p. 194; Wendell Phillips, *Unknown Oman* (London: Longman, 1966), pp. 18-19.

consul in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, who met Sultan Sa‹id b. Taymur in Muscat.[20] In addition, the US Army Air Force made use of facilities in Salalah and on Masirah during World War II and the US consul in Aden made informal visits in the 1950s and 1960s.[21]

US-Omani Relations After 1958

The post-World War II era quickened US interest in the Gulf, prompted in part because of the mostly American ownership of the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in Saudi Arabia and the creation of a consulate-general in Dhahran. In 1957, an American proposal to open a consular office in Muscat led to negotiations over a refinement of the 1833 treaty. The US consul-general in Dhahran, Walter Schwinn, made a number of trips to Salalah to discuss terms with Sultan Sa‹id b. Taymur and a new treaty to supersede the previous one was signed on 20 December 1958.[22] Although the treaty contained provisions for the exchange of consular representatives, none were envisioned at that time.

The re-establishment of an American diplomatic presence in Muscat was left until after British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971. An embassy was then established in 1972 with the American ambassador in Kuwait serving as nonresident plenipotentiary. An Omani embassy in Washington appeared in the following year with Sayyid Faysal b. ‹Ali as the first ambassador. The first US resident ambassador in Muscat was appointed in 1974.

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20. Sanger, *Arabian Peninsula*, pp. 192-198.
21. Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 151-152; Eilts, *Ahmad bin Na‹aman's Mission*, p. 59. Details on the air facilities can be found in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1942; The Near East and Africa* (Washington, 1942), pp. 531-537.
22. Kechichian, *Oman and the World*, p. 144. See also Joseph A. Kéchichian, "The Sultanate of Oman and the

These diplomatic developments marked the beginning of a long period of deepening bonds between the two countries.[23] Beyond diplomatic connections, the relationship grew in a number of aspects. Oman's pivotal position at the entrance to the Gulf and on the Strait of Hormuz gives it great geopolitical importance. As a result, a strategic relationship between the two countries has developed. American military planners were interested in making use of Omani facilities even before the British vacated their bases at Salalah and on Masirah. Discussion continued during the visit of Sultan Qaboos b. Sa‹id to Washington in early 1975 and resulted in the first American arms transfer to the sultanate.

The revolution in Iran quickened US strategic interest in the Gulf and a facilities access agreement with Oman was reached in 1980. The agreement was extended at five-year intervals thereafter as ties grew progressively warmer. Sultan Qaboos made his second visit to Washington in 1983 and additional use of Omani facilities occurred in 1990-1991 at the time of Operation Desert Storm.

But official ties were equally to be seen in other arenas. The United States provided development support from the early 1970s, through the presence of Peace Corps volunteers during 1973-1983, assistance for the development of civil aviation administration during the 1970s and 1980s, and the creation of a Joint Economic Commission in 1980 that focused on aid in such areas as education, fisheries, management, and water resources. The commission's activities

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US," in Robert E. Looney, ed., *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009).
23. This quick survey is drawn largely from Kechichian, *Oman and the World*; *ibid*., "The Sultanate of Oman and the US," in Robert E. Looney, ed., *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009); and J.E. Peterson, "American Policy in the Gulf and the Sultanate of Oman," *American-Arab Affairs*, No. 8 (Spring 1984), pp. 117-130.

dovetailed with efforts by the US Agency for International Development in privatization and institution building. In 2005, Oman signed a free trade agreement with the United States. In some ways, this was a recognition of the continually growing volume of trade in goods between the two countries. In 1992, US exports to Oman were valued at $257 million and imports at $186 million. By 2013, exports had grown to $1.571 billion and imports to just over $1 billion.[24]

24. United States Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with Oman," Accessed at https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5230.html.