

BRITAIN AND 'THE OMAN WAR':

An Arabian Entanglement

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IN MAY 1954, the Imām of interior Oman, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Khalīlī, died. His death was followed by a series of essentially minor skirmishes; yet this activity signalled the end to over three decades of peaceful slumber in that isolated and hitherto forgotten corner of Arabia.

The conflict between the Sultān of Muscat and Oman and several rebellious tribes of the interior arose in an atmosphere of incipient Arab nationalism, amidst Saudi Arabian claims to al-Buraymī oasis, and was compounded by the British-French-Israeli invasion of Suez in 1956. Thus, it is not surprising that the local nature of the events was distorted into a wider question of Arab-British relations in the Middle East. In Oman, the end result was the total unification of a country which had been marked since the early twentieth century by the existence of a semi-autonomous, tribally organized territory in the interior, nominally obeisant to an Imām of the Ibāḍī sect of Islam.¹ Jurisdiction by the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman over this interior region had been limited by the weakness of the Sultāns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – creating a situation which had been formalized by an agreement between Sultān Taymūr ibn Fayṣal and the important tribal leaders of the interior at the coastal village of al-Sīb in September 1920.²

In a wider arena, these skirmishes precipitated debate over British presence and objectives in the Arab world, with arguments advanced in such forums as Parliament, the Arab League, the world press and various bodies of the United Nations. The situation made for a tension in Anglo-American relations and was almost certainly an important factor in subsequent British withdrawals from Aden and the Persian Gulf.

The seeds of Britain's entanglement lay in her influential role in the councils of the Āl Bū Sa'īd Sultanate in Muscat. Her relative importance there is illustrated by the fact that only Britain (and India in the post-independence era) maintained a resident Consul in Muscat between 1915 and 1970. But Britain's Muscat representative held another even more important title in the days before Indian independence – that of Political Agent, and therefore subordinate to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf (PRPG).³ The British impact was also manifested by the fact that of the three Sultāns since 1913, two were educated at Mayo College, Ajmere

(the so-called "Eton of India") and the third, Sulṭān Qābūs ibn Sa'īd who came to power in 1970, is a Sandhurst graduate.

The British presence in Oman, as well as her interests in the Gulf and eastern Arabia in general, was the result of an evolving series of goals and perceived needs, linked only by the obsession with the defence of India. The beginnings of this relationship arose out of British attempts to eradicate piracy in the Gulf and to prevent slave-trading throughout the Indian Ocean. Both of these policies required Omani co-operation due to the Sultanate's position as a major maritime power in the Indian Ocean. Then, arbitration by the Government of India over the division of the Omani empire into an Arabian state and an African one was the first step in closer involvement in the internal politics of Muscat. This interest was reinforced by extra-territorial rights acquired by British subjects (i.e., Indian merchants) in Oman, the construction of the Indo-European Telegraph across Sultanate territory, and the development of air routes to India in the 1930s using Omani aerodromes.

As a result of these interests, Britain acquired a set of obligations to the Muscat Sulṭāns which in the twentieth century found form in defending Muscat against tribal attacks during the 1913-1920 revolt, along with the subsequent arbitration between the opposing sides,⁴ extending subsidies and loans to the state, which found itself in dire financial straits by the turn of the century, and in providing military and financial advisers to the Sultanate in the 1920s. Only with the accession of Sulṭān Sa'īd ibn Taymūr to the throne in 1932 was absolute Sultanate dependence on the British lessened; nevertheless, the ties remained strong.

Although the post-World War II years saw the dissolution of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean, Oman's importance in an age of air-power and its location in an oil-abundant region vital to Britain's economic well-being, gave the Sultanate high priority in the eyes of 'East of Suez' policy-planners.⁵ The RAF viewed al-Maṣīrah Island as an important air link to Singapore, while the possibility of oil deposits under Omani soil encouraged London to back the Sultanate against Sa'ūdī claims during the Buraymī crisis.⁶ In addition, the southern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, through which all tankers entering and exiting the Persian Gulf must pass, was in Sultanate territory. Clearly, British policy options coincided with historical obligations in determining Whitehall's response to the Sultanate's difficulties in the 1950s.

The crisis in Oman's interior originated in attempts to select a successor to Imām Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Khalīlī. Muḥammad had been elected Imām after the assassination of his predecessor in 1920 with the strong support of 'Īsā ibn Šāliḥ al-Hārithī, the leader of the Hināwīs, one of two major tribal confederations in eastern Arabia. Although Muḥammad was very much a protege of the Hināwīs at the beginning, he became a respected figure of the interior, politically as well as religiously, with the passage of years. When Muḥammad's health began to fail in the mid-1940s, Sulṭān Sa'īd ibn Taymūr initiated correspondence with the major tribal shaykhs and invited them to Muscat - his goal being abolition of the Imamate after Imām Muḥammad's death. The Imām, however, clung to life for nearly a decade longer; by the time he died the Hināwī confedera-

tion had diminished in prestige after the death of its leader, 'Isā ibn Ṣāliḥ, and Sa'udi intrigues had stimulated the ambitions of Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar al-Nabhānī, the leader of the Ghāfirīs, the other tribal confederation.

In order to prevent an attempt by the Sulṭān to take over the interior on the death of the Imām, considerable political manoeuvring had been going on for several years prior to 1954 with the purpose of selecting a suitable successor. Although five or six candidates were proposed, the eventual choice was Ghālib ibn 'Alī al-Hinā'i, a protege of Imām Muḥammad and the choice of the strongest of the tribal leaders, Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar.⁷ Indeed, Ghālib was soon dominated by Sulaymān and his brother, Ṭālib ibn 'Alī, the governor of al-Rustāq, a major town not far from the Gulf of Oman coast. Both Sulaymān and Ṭālib had been receiving Sa'udi payments of cash and arms for several years, and having secured leverage over the Imamate, soon sought to extend their control to the northern town of 'Ibrī.

During the early 1950s, the Ya'āqib tribe of 'Ibrī had risen against the Imām's wāli (governor) there and had made themselves virtually independent. The importance in the reduction of 'Ibrī to the control of the Imamate was essential to maintain direct contact between the Imamate and the Sa'udi outpost at al-Buraymī. The success of Imām Ghālib's venture, however, resulted in the journey of the leading shaykhs of the Durū' tribe (which owned property in 'Ibrī and were almost clients of the Ya'āqib) to Muscat to seek assistance from the Sulṭān. The trip was not entirely at their initiative as the Sulṭān had need of their help at the same time. Petroleum Development (Oman) Ltd. (PDO), the local operator for Iraq Petroleum Company, was anticipating the start of exploration and drilling in the interior of Oman at the edge of the Rub' al-Khāli desert – on locations which were in Durū' territory. The company required a military escort and to this end the Muscat and Oman Field Force (MOFF) was being raised – ostensibly as a third unit of the Sulṭān's military (in addition to the old Muscat Infantry and the recently-formed Batinah Force) but paid for by PDO.

With the agreement of the Durū' shaykhs to co-operate with PDO in return for assistance in their struggle against the Imām, PDO was able to move ahead. An advance base had already been established in the spring of 1954 at al-Duqm (on Oman's southern coast in the Gulf of al-Maṣīrah) and the joint PDO/MOFF column headed north in June to establish a camp at Jabal Fahūd far in the interior. In late October, after the new Imām had seized date gardens belonging to the Durū' in retaliation for their co-operation with PDO, the MOFF occupied 'Ibrī without opposition. Imām Ghālib thereupon accused the Sulṭān of breaking the 1920 'Treaty of al-Sīb' and on 25 November 1954, he sent a membership application to the Arab League.⁸

Although the route between al-Buraymī and Nizwā (the capital of the Imamate) was policed by the MOFF, as well as by the Trucial Oman Scouts, the connexion between the Sa'udi outpost and Oman had not been severed. The Imām, Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar and even the Lābāt section of the Durū' (who lived close by Nizwā) continued to receive cash payments from the Sa'udis, as well as substantial supplies of arms and ammunition.

Meanwhile, the Buraymī arbitration talks in Geneva between the Sa'udis and the British, acting on behalf of Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate, broke down in September 1955 when the British delegate, Sir Reader Bullard, resigned. According to the British, the Sa'udis had placed biased observers on the tribunal,⁹ attempted to foment a *coup d'état* in Abu Dhabi and when that failed, sought to bribe Abu Dhabi's governor in the oasis, Shaykh Zāyid ibn Sulṭān Āl Nuhayyān, for £30 million. On 26 October 1955, the Trucial Oman Scouts escorted the Sa'udi garrison out of the oasis.

With the Sa'udi link now cut, the way was open for re-occupation of the interior. In his typically cautious way, Sulṭān Sa'id ibn Taymūr made his preparations slowly and delayed his offensive to December 1955. The MOFF left 'Ibri for Nizwā which they easily captured on the 15th, with only one shot having been fired. Imām Ghālib posted a declaration of abdication on the Masjid al-Jāmi' (community mosque) in Nizwā and then prudently retired to his nearby home in Bilād Sayt. Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar likewise retired to his home in Tanūf. Meanwhile, the Sulṭān's Batinah Force laid siege to al-Rustāq and captured it after four days – but its defender, Ṭālib ibn 'Alī al-Hinā'i, managed to escape to Saudi Arabia. The fourth leader of the Imamate, Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Isā al-Ḥārithī, decided to lay his case before the Sulṭān in Ṣalālah, capital of the southern province of Dhufar. However, by the time he reached Dhufar, the Sulṭān had already left on his unprecedented land journey from Ṣalālah across the desert to Oman proper. The only message left for Ṣāliḥ suggested that he keep going until he reached Russia. Ṣāliḥ took the hint and embarked for Zanzibar.

Sa'id ibn Taymūr arrived in Fahūd on 22 December, inspected the oil rig there and then continued his triumphant entry through Ādām, becoming the first Sulṭān to visit the family's ancestral home in over a century, and Firq, arriving victoriously in Nizwā on 24 December. The interior was safely under his control, the Imām had abdicated, and Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar came down to Nizwā to tender his submission to the Sulṭān.¹⁰ Only Ṣāliḥ and Ṭālib remained outside Oman, busy drumming up support among Arab League members. The Sulṭān continued his tour through al-Buraymī, Ṣuḥār, and on to Muscat. As his deputy in the interior, he appointed Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥārithī, a nephew of the rebel Ṣāliḥ and now temporary governor of Nizwā as well as the new leader of the Ḥirth tribe. The interior remained quiet for eighteen months.

Meanwhile, Ṭālib had found a ready sponsor in Saudi Arabia, which had been smarting over its eviction from al-Buraymī. Consequently, Ṭālib was allowed to set up a training camp at al-Dammām in Saudi Arabia and received a steady supply of arms and supplies. By the spring of 1957, he was ready to move and messages were sent to Oman. Unfortunately, Ṭālib's re-entry by sea was delayed and his fellow conspirator in Oman's Sharḡiyyah province, Ibrāhīm ibn 'Isā al-Ḥārithī,¹¹ rose in revolt only to find himself fighting alone and pursued by the Oman Regiment.¹² At the end of May, Sulṭān Sa'id invited Ibrāhīm to discuss the issue with him at Bawshar; when Ibrāhīm arrived on 11 June, he was arrested and sent to Fort Jalāli in Muscat, the country's only – and extremely notorious – prison from which he emerged, mad, in 1970.

Ṭālib ibn 'Alī finally landed at Khawr Dhayam near al-Suwayq on the Bāṭinah coast of Oman on 14 June 1957. From there, he secretly made his way over the mountains, accompanied by his newly-trained men and replete with fresh supplies of arms and ammunition. His destination was his home village of Bilād Sayt where he and his brother Ghālib soon proclaimed that the Imamate was re-established. The Oman Regiment, sent out on 7 July to capture the rebels, soon found itself bogged down in a disastrous siege and the decision was made to retreat to the army camp at Firq. Meanwhile, Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar, who had been brought down to Muscat when the trouble in the Sharqiyah began in May, proceeded to leave Muscat secretly on the night of 12–13 July. On reaching Tanūf, he led his tribe, the Banī Riyām, in sniping at the retreating column as it passed through Riyāmī territory. By the time it reached Firq, the Regiment was in such poor shape that it was withdrawn further to Fahūd where it was subsequently disbanded. Upon learning that the army had left the area, the governor of Nizwā also departed, leaving behind his treasury of gold. Thus when Ṭālib's forces appeared before Nizwā, the local garrison of the great central tower surrendered without firing a shot. Another rebel force captured the town of Bahlā without gunfire and suddenly the entire province was in rebel hands, with the white flag of the Imamate replacing the red flag of the Sultanate on every fort.

At this point, Sa'id ibn Taymūr had no choice but to call upon the British for help. His request, coming at a time of post-Suez reappraisal of Britain's world-wide role, met with heated Parliamentary debate. Labour opposition to British involvement was led by backbencher Wedgwood Benn who expressed fears of a 'second Suez'. The Government replied that the situation in Oman was simply a tribal rebellion. British cautiousness in extending aid was due considerably to the rebels' use of American arms (although British spokesmen consistently refused to identify them as such). After the debacle of Suez, Whitehall was in no position to antagonize an American government whose interests in the Arabian Peninsula were intricately bound up with Saudi Arabia.¹³

Despite the hesitation, however, British aid was provided. Air Vice-Marshal L. F. Sinclair, the Commander of British Forces, Arabian Peninsula (BFAP), flew into Bahrein from Aden and together with the PRPG, Sir Bernard Burrows, flew to Muscat to discuss the situation with the Sultān on 24 July. Meanwhile, the RAF sent Venom fighters on attacks against Izki on the 24th, Nizwā on the 25th, and Tanūf on the 26th, from their base at Sharjah, where at least two companies of The Cameronians waited in readiness.

Also on the 26th, planning began at Sharjah for the land campaign. In attendance were Air Vice-Marshal Sinclair, Group Captain H. Bufton (Air Commander for the Persian Gulf), Captain Beattie (Sea Commander for the Gulf), Col. S. L. A. Carter (Commander of the Trucial Oman Scouts – TOS), Col. Campbell (commanding The Cameronians), Col. P. R. M. Waterfield (the Sultān's Chief of Staff) and Edward Henderson (Political Secretary to the PRPG and formerly with PDO). A forty-eight-hour cease-fire was declared and when that produced no results, action began on 30 July, despite the great heat of the season.

Ten Venoms (instead of the usual four) attacked Birkat al-Mawz and The Cameronians and TOS left for al-Buraymi. The next day, seven newspaper correspondents were flown to Muscat for the first time to receive a briefing from Muscat officials. These included the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Neil Innes; the Wāli (Governor) of Maṭraḥ, Ismā'il ibn Khalīl al-Raṣāṣī; the Governor of the Capital and Ceremonial Representative of the Sulṭān, Shihāb ibn Fayṣal Āl Bū Sa'idi; and the Sulṭān's brother, Ṭāriq ibn Taymūr. Innes told the reporters that the governor of Izki had already surrendered, the rebels' forces numbered some 600 men and that there were three causes of the revolt: Sa'udi money, hopes of oil and Cairo Radio.¹⁴

Two days later, the Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Land Force, Lt. General Sir Geoffrey Bourne, flew into Bahrein from Cyprus and went on to discuss the situation with Sa'id ibn Taymūr in Muscat. On 2 August, while Venoms, Meteors and Shackleton bombers attacked the ex-Oman Regiment camp at Firq, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles denied in a BBC interview in London that the troubles in Oman were due to US and British oil rivalry.¹⁵ On the 4th, Sinclair announced that the operations were entering their third phase: a general land campaign was being waged by the Sulṭān's forces with British troops in support.¹⁶

This array of troops (dubbed Carterforce after the TOS commander) was led by General J. A. R. Robertson, a former Gurkha commander brought in for this occasion from Cyprus. Although the Sulṭān's Northern Frontier Regiment (NFR) was to lead the attack, it was backed up by an impressive number of forces, including three squadrons of TOS, two companies of The Cameronians (brought in from Bahrein and Kenya) and a squadron of Ferret armoured scout cars from Aden. The entire operation from pushoff at 'Ibri to the capture of Nizwā was to take five days and was to be joined by several hundred loyal tribesmen recruited from various tribes. At the same time that Carterforce was making its way eastward, the Muscat Regiment (dubbed Haughcolumn after its commander, Lt. Colonel F. W. Haugh) was advancing westward up the Wādī Samā'il, accompanied by the Sulṭān's personal representative, Major Jasper Coates; the Minister of the Interior, Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl Bū Sa'idi; and Ṭāriq ibn Taymūr. British military liaison with the Sulṭān was to be through a Wing Commander in Muscat.

The first resistance to the advancing troops was met when Carterforce tried to occupy Firq. After several days of inconclusive fighting, the Cameronians launched a night assault on Jabal Firq (overlooking both Firq and Nizwā) and captured it. Nizwā fell without a shot on 11 August and Carterforce was joined by Haughcolumn the next day without having run into trouble. The military men congratulated each other on the campaign and the rebels retreated to the safety of the high plateau of the Jabal al-Akhḍar mountains, where only two Westerners had ventured since 1837. In the following days, surrounding towns such as Bahlā, Izki, Birkat al-Mawz and Tanūf were brought under control. At the Sulṭān's express orders, the Royal Engineers blew up Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar's fort at Tanūf and the town was reduced to rubble.

Casualties were stated to be one dead and four wounded in Carterforce

and an estimated thirty deaths among the rebels. The campaign had been run at a cost to the British Exchequer of £270,000.¹⁷ General Robertson flew to Muscat to meet the Sulṭān, Sinclair, Burrows and Waterfield, and then on to Bahrein to receive congratulations there from Minister of Defence Duncan Sandys. With the quick withdrawal of the British troops by airlift from PDO's airfield at al-'Adhaybah (Azaiba), the campaign was completed and maintenance of the Sultanate's position fell on the local forces. The military phase had been finished and the civilian's turn was next, as Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm was named civil administrator of the area.

In actuality, the situation had reached a stalemate. British troops had been withdrawn from the interior but the Sulṭān's forces continued to cordon off the Jabal al-Akhḍar.¹⁸ Outside the country, Arab leaders denounced the campaign with displays more of nationalistic fervour than true grasp of the situation. Syrian President Shukri al-Quwāṭli described the situation as "aggression, pure and simple against people who are seeking peace and liberty".¹⁹ President Ḥabīb Bourguiba of Tunisia also criticized British action, although he admitted he knew little of Oman.²⁰ The British Political Resident in Zanzibar was visited by a delegation of Zanzibari Arabs who registered their objections.²¹ During the height of the battle, Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Isā al-Ḥārithī, residing in Cairo and styling himself 'Prince of the Sharqiyyah' and 'Deputy Imam', had sent messages to both the American and Russian embassies which were duly ignored.²² Ṣāliḥ later visited Peking and then Moscow in efforts to drum up support.

In order to avoid the repeated dispatch of troops to support the Sultanate through every crisis, the British sought to strengthen the Sulṭān's hand. In January 1958, Under-Secretary of State for War Julian Amery visited Muscat and laid down the foundations for an exchange of letters between the Sulṭān and the British government which took place during Sa'id ibn Taymūr's visit to London in July. In concrete terms, this "exchange" provided for the immediate secondment of twenty-three British officers to the Sulṭān's military in addition to the dozen already on private contract. It also meant a military subsidy including arms, vehicles, help in establishing an air force and navy, and a training platoon of Royal Marine Commandos; this was in addition to a separate development subsidy.²³

After the arrangement was announced on 1 August 1958, Colonel David deC. Smiley of the Royal Horse Guards was dispatched to become the first Commander of the newly re-organized Sulṭān's Armed Forces (SAF) – thus establishing a tradition for seconded command of the military which continues to the present.²⁴ Colonel Colin Maxwell, who had served as Commander of the Batinah Force while on private contract, was named Deputy Commander while Colonel Waterfield moved over to the civilian side as Defence Secretary. The heavy cost of the beefed-up SAF was borne by the British subsidies and by the Sulṭān's sale of the port and enclave of Gwadar on the Makran Coast to Pakistan for £3 million.²⁵

The stalemated situation was taking its toll on SAF and PDO personnel, as vehicles were continually blown-up by rebel mines of American manufacture.²⁶ The necessity of driving the rebels off the Jabal al-Akhḍar was clearly seen but SAF was faced with the dual tasks of keeping order in the interior and attempting to blockade the entire Jabal al-Akhḍar with a

force of less than 800 men, most of whom were ill-trained and ill-equipped. The rebels were resupplied not only from the interior side of the mountain, but on one occasion managed to run a three-ton truck overland from Sharjah and up the Wādi Banī Kharūṣ on the seaward side.²⁷ "Offensive action" was limited to several heavy guns shelling the plateau from al-Kamah (near Tanūf), a Pembroke fitted with loudspeakers, and a number of sorties by the Sharjah-based Venoms.²⁸ Price-tags were put on rebel heads: 13,000 Maria Theresa dollars for Ṭālib and 5000 each for Ghālib and Sulaymān.²⁹

Finally, Smiley met the Secretary for War, Christopher Soames, in Sharjah and made an urgent appeal for British troops, preferably the Special Air Service (SAS), Marines or a Parachute Battalion, to help put an end to the deteriorating situation. Accordingly, Lt.-Colonel A. J. Deane-Drummond, Commander of the 22nd SAS Regiment, which was just winding up a nine-year campaign against communist insurgents in Malaya, visited Oman in October 1958 and paved the way for a SAS squadron which arrived a month later. This squadron managed to quickly establish a foothold on the edge of the mountain plateau at 'Aqabat al-Dhafar at the end of the Wādi Banī Kharūṣ – but it soon became apparent that more support and a carefully planned assault would be necessary to flush the rebels out. A second squadron of SAS was introduced in January 1959 and plans were drawn up for a multi-pronged attack: the SAS troops were to lead the assault, assisted by SAF, a TOS squadron, elements of the Life Guards who had been manning the Ferret scout cars, and tribesmen from the Banī Ruwāḥah and 'Ibriyyīn tribes.

On the night of 26 January, diversionary attacks were launched from the previously captured handhold at 'Aqabat al-Dhafar and the wādi behind Tanūf (on the landward side);³⁰ the main assault, however, was made up the Wādi al-Kamah. The surprise combination of deception and the rebels' mistaken belief that immediate supply drops by parachute were instead a battalion of paratroopers made the rest of the operation almost anti-climactic as the rebels either surrendered or melted away. The three leaders, Ṭālib, Ghālib and Sulaymān, managed to make good their escape and surfaced later in Saudi Arabia. SAF intelligence received a boost when a search of the cave where the leaders had been living yielded information on the network of rebels and sympathizers inside Oman. The last steps in the operation were the establishment of an NFR camp at Sayq, the main village of the plateau, and the appointment of Colonel Maxwell as Military Commander of the Jabal; this was followed by the withdrawal of the SAS units in March.³¹

The rebel leaders next attempted to continue the rebellion from Saudi Arabia, and a new training camp for the "Oman Liberation Army" was set up at al-Ṭā'if (allegedly with American instructors). Ghālib ibn 'Alī, accompanied by Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar, travelled to Damascus on 21 July and met President Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir in Alexandria on 20 August.

But the prospect of a guerrilla war inside Oman was gradually turning into a terrorist campaign carried on outside the country.³² On 10 December 1959, the Sulṭān's Minister of the Interior, Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl Bū Sa'īdi, boarded the British India ship *Dwarka* at Muscat on his way to Bombay. An hour after the ship had put off from the Oman coast, a bomb

exploded in Aḥmad's cabin: his life was saved only due to the odd premonition that had caused him to change position in the bed with his feet to the opposite end just minutes before the explosion.

Other incidents followed: a DC-3 on charter to Gulf Aviation disappeared in July 1960 with an Omani passenger who had been implicated earlier in carrying arms to the interior; in November 1960, a parcel belonging to a bank cashier known to have connexions with the rebels exploded in a bank in al-Dawḥah, Qaṭar; this was followed by an explosion on the Qatar Petroleum Company pipeline near Umm Sa'id. In addition, an explosion occurred on the Dutch ship *Waingapoe* next to cargo addressed to the Sulṭān; another explosion took place on an RAF Beverley aircraft flying from Bahrein to al-Kuwayt; and there was an explosion in the RAF stores at Bahrein airport.³³

Then on the night of 8 April 1961, an explosion rocked the British India steamer *Dara* as it lay in a storm off Dubay. The order to abandon ship was given, and after efforts to fight the subsequent fires had proved fruitless, the ship sank as it was being towed back to Dubay. Nearly a year later, a London court of inquiry determined that a bomb placed aboard ship had taken the lives of 214 passengers and twenty-four crew members.³⁴ Fortunately, this spate of activity ceased almost entirely after the RNS *Loch Ruthven* captured a dhow of rebel mine-layers off Ra's Suwādi on the Bāṭinah Coast in August 1961; subsequent interrogation led to the capture of another thirty rebel leaders inside the country which broke the back of the resistance.

The only recourse left to the rebel leaders in al-Dammām and Cairo was outside support, primarily from other Arab states. As British and Sa'udi relations improved, Sa'udi support was replaced by Iraqi: Major General 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qāsim, the Iraqi Prime Minister, announced in August 1960 that he had given the rebels "a new war plan" and was sending them arms.³⁵ The "Oman Liberation Army" training base was relocated in Iraq and Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Īsā al-Ḥārithi was later sent to Moscow to ask for assistance.

Only a few months later, Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Īsā publicly broke with the other rebels. He gave as his reason the fact that negotiations had been instituted between the Imamate and the Sultanate but the break was also alleged to have been at the initiative of his colleagues, due to Ṣāliḥ's supposed misappropriation of Imamate funds for his personal use. The negotiations alluded to had grown out of a tentative contact in Beirut between a British official and Imamate officials in early January 1961. In the following month, full-scale talks were held outside Beirut with the Deputy PRPG acting on behalf of the Sulṭān, and Ṭālib ibn 'Alī and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Sālimi representing the Imamate. The discussions were unsuccessful and came to an abrupt halt when the Imamate officials walked out after presenting unrealistic demands for complete independence and reparations.³⁶ The only other contact between the Sultanate and the erstwhile Imamate, initiated in 1970 after the change of régime in Muscat, resulted in an early unsuccessful conclusion.

As soon as the rebels' military position began to collapse in 1957, they had sought to marshal sympathy at the United Nations against their ad-

versaries. As the fighting in Oman drew to a close in August, ten Arab countries requested an urgent meeting of the Security Council to consider the question of British aggression against an "independent Imamate of Oman".³⁷ By a narrow margin the Security Council refused to consider the matter. A year later, the Arab states requested that the issue be included on the General Assembly agenda. This move was successful and in the following years, the "question of Oman" was regularly introduced at Assembly sessions and then assigned to various committees for further deliberation.

In this manner, a pattern was set for a cycle of Arab-British debates within the committees over the merits of the Sultanate's and Imamate's respective cases. Witnesses appeared before meetings of the Special Political Committee, the Fourth Committee and the "Special Committee on the Situation With Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples".³⁸ Nearly identical draft resolutions were submitted to the General Assembly calling for the withdrawal of troops from Oman and a peaceful solution to the conflict; however, the Assembly consistently rejected these drafts.

The routine was interrupted in 1962 as Sulṭān Sa'īd finally consented to allow a personal representative of the Secretary-General to visit Oman and acquire first-hand information on the situation. Consequently, the Swedish Ambassador to Spain, Herbert de Ribbing, was appointed as Special Representative and proceeded to visit Oman, Saudi Arabia and London to gather material for a report submitted to the Secretary-General on 21 August 1963.³⁹ His conclusions were more-or-less in keeping with the Sulṭān's interests, stating that the rebellion was long over, that the majority of the populace denied the existence of political repression, and that the British officers in SAF apparently had nothing to do with general policy-making.⁴⁰

Despite the report, the Arab states continued to press for UN action favourable to their allegations. Consequently, in December 1963, the General Assembly created an "Ad Hoc Committee" to engage not only in a fact-finding mission on Oman but also to render a judgement on the relative merits of the conflicting views of the parties to the issue.⁴¹ This committee conducted discussions in London, al-Dammām, al-Kuwayt and Cairo; Sa'īd ibn Taymūr, however, refused permission for the committee's entry to Oman.⁴² Partly as a result of this attitude, the committee reported in January 1965 that the "question of Oman" was indeed an international issue, as it was the result of "imperialistic policies and foreign intervention in Muscat and Oman".⁴³ The General Assembly simply noted the report and declined to take any action.

With almost clock-work regularity, the Arab delegations continued to introduce the question at subsequent General Assembly sessions between 1966 and 1971. The Assembly routinely turned it over to the Fourth Committee and then just as routinely adopted the Committee's recommendation that the United Kingdom be forced to implement the previous session's resolution and that the "Special Committee on . . . Colonial Countries and Peoples" continue to consider the issue. An attempt to involve the Secretary-General in the merits of the question resulted in a similarly

non-committal response. This cycle was finally brought to an end with the admission of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations on 7 October 1971: the General Assembly adopted a resolution concluding consideration of the "question of Oman" by a vote of 115 to two. Only the representative of the People's Democratic Republic of the Yemen spoke out against the measure.

At the heart of the dispute was the legality of the rebellion and the subsequent steps taken by the Sultān and the British to suppress it. The major contention by sympathizers of the Imamate was that a separate, independent state had existed in the interior of Oman since the conclusion of the "Treaty of al-Sib" in September 1920.

It is clear from the provisions of the Treaty of Sib, 1920, that Oman retained an internal independent character of its own. Thus the Omanis reserved full authority in respect of administration, justice and other aspects of government. The provisions concerning the extradition of criminals are significant in that they attribute to Oman a distinct personality and a separate existence.⁴⁴

Frequently, this argument was coupled with charges that the Sultanate was a "British colony", which seems to contradict the alleged validity of the document of al-Sib as an international instrument. The British responded to the allegation by pointing out that the agreement at al-Sib made no mention of the Imamate and simply granted a measure of autonomy to the tribes of the interior who were beyond the control of a weakened Sultān. Furthermore, the point was made that the Imām had served as little more than *primus inter pares vis-à-vis* the tribal leaders in a political sense. In addition, Sultanate treaties with the United States, France and the Netherlands were cited as proof of Muscat's independence. Pro-Imamate complaints that the British had meddled in a purely internal dispute, i.e., between the Sultanate and the Imamate, were equally countered by mention of the Sa'udi machinations in eastern Arabia since the early 1950s.⁴⁵

In short, most objections to the British role were based on wider political considerations rather than on the merits of the situation in Oman. Similar arguments were used in the years to come by increasingly radical groups, particularly the National Liberation Front in Aden and revolutionaries in Dhufar, to attack Britain's position in Arabia.⁴⁶ British sensitivity to adverse reaction by nationalist and radical elements in the Arab world contributed to decisions to withdraw from Aden in 1967 and the Persian Gulf in 1971, even though some rulers of the area sought to maintain continued British presence. Eventually, the official British umbrella in Arabia was restricted to Oman.

But even the Anglo-Omani relationship was dramatically altered by the beginning of the 1970s as Oman rejected its medieval isolation and entered the international arena. Although British interests continued unabated, her influence was subject to increasing competition. British contractors were in the forefront of the state's newly-emphasized development, but also active were American, Cypriot, French, German, Lebanese, Swedish and Swiss firms. Although British officers continued to provide the backbone of SAF, Jordanian and Iranian troops also contributed to

the victory in Dhufar. With Britain's gathering economic troubles, Oman was forced to look to its neighbours, including arch-rival Saudi Arabia, for financial support. In short, London's paramount position of centuries past was fundamentally transformed: she remained a friend and ally but she was no longer the only one.

REFERENCES

1. The Imām was the spiritual, and, during the medieval period, secular head of the Ibāḍī sect, the only surviving offshoot of the first sect in Islam, Kharijism. For more background on the Omani Imamate, see Derek Hopwood, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* (London 1972), especially the articles by J. C. Wilkinson, R. D. Bathurst and J. B. Kelly.
2. The so-called "Treaty of al-Sib" did not give independence to the interior as sometimes alleged and made no mention of an existing Imamate government. The original document was in Arabic but an authoritative English translation can be found in the India Office Records, R/15/3/204, letter from the British Political Agent in Muscat to the Deputy Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, No. 2052 Confidential of 14 October 1920. The text of the document is also contained in David Holden, *Farewell to Arabia* (London 1966), 249–50; Robert G. Landen, *Oman Since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society* (Princeton 1967), 403–4n.; and Husain Albaharna, *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States* (Oxford 1968 and second edition, Beirut 1975), 242–3. The Arabic text is in Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Sālimi, *Nahḍat al-A'yān bi-Ḥurriyyat 'Umān* (Cairo 1961), 345–9.
3. The PRPG, as an official of the Foreign Department of the Government of India, was responsible for a network of Political Agents throughout the Gulf serving as advisers to rulers of the Arab shaykhdoms which were under varying degrees of British protection. Although the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman was technically independent, the Political Agent in Muscat exercised a great deal of influence on internal affairs as well as handling the state's foreign relations.
4. For further information on this rebellion, see the writer's forthcoming article, "The revival of the Ibāḍī Imamate in Oman and the Threat to Muscat, 1913–1920", *Arabian Studies III* (1976).
5. The impact of Oman and particularly the rebellion discussed in this article, is treated in Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez, 1947–1968* (London 1973), 128–33.
6. For a carefully researched account and background of the Buraymī crisis, see J. B. Kelly, *Eastern Arabian Frontiers* (London 1964).
7. There have been doubts raised as to whether this was a proper Ibāḍī election. Most reports seem to agree that it was but that Ghālib failed to receive support from all the shaykhs, including the leader of his own tribe. Consequently, most tribes viewed the revolt a few years later as simply a matter between Ghālib's supporters and the Sulṭān.
8. Arab Information Centre, *British Imperialism in Southern Arabia* (New York 1958), 55. Various organs of the League considered the application and the issue of Oman in December 1954, October 1955, and April and October of 1956, particularly in attempts to find out more about this relatively unknown corner of the Arab world. The question of membership was never voted on.
9. Specifically, the Saudi delegate, Shaykh Yūsuf Yasin, was determined to be the Sa'udi government official responsible for the Buraymī garrison.
10. A journalist accompanying the Sulṭān on his epic journey describes Sulaymān ibn Ḥimyar as looking "like some great Sicilian bandit" and arriving in a Sa'udi-supplied American convertible. James Morris, *Sultan in Oman* (London 1957), 86–7. Later, Sulaymān claimed that he had been brought to Nizwā by "armed patrol".
11. Ibrāhīm was the full-brother of Sāliḥ ibn 'Isā and consequently supported Šāliḥ against Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad and his half-brother, Nāṣir ibn 'Isā.
12. The Sulṭān's military had been reorganized in March 1957. As a result, the Muscat and Oman Field Force became the Oman Regiment; the Muscat Infantry became the Muscat Regiment; the Batinah Force became the Northern Frontier Regiment; and

all three were placed under a Chief of Staff, Colonel P. R. M. Waterfield, with headquarters at Bayt al-Falaj near Maṭrah.

13. Anthony Eden, Prime Minister at the time, later wrote that President Eisenhower had held a dim view of British action in eastern Arabia: "During the Suez crisis, I learnt that the United States Government had regarded our action during the autumn of 1955 in furthering the reoccupation of Buraimi by the Sultan of Muscat and the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi as an act of aggression". *Full Circle* (London 1960), 373.

14. *The Times*, 1 August 1957.

15. *Ibid.*, 3 August 1957.

16. The first phase consisted of demonstration air strikes and the second was restriction of rebel movements by air attacks. *The Times*, 5 August 1957.

17. *Ibid.*, 21 November 1957. For two first-hand accounts of the campaign, see P. S. Allfree, *Warlords of Oman* (London 1967), and Anthony Shepherd, *Arabian Adventure* (London 1961).

18. They were unable to prevent supplies and arms from reaching the rebels since the major supply route lay behind Jabal Kawr in Bani Hinā territory. The Bani Hinā were one of the two tribes most involved in the fighting yet the loyalty of their shaykh, 'Abd Allāh ibn Zāhir al-Hinā'i, to the Sulṭān meant that the Bani Hinā villages were off limits to military reprisals.

19. *The Times*, 7 August 1957.

20. *Ibid.*, 16 August 1957.

21. *Ibid.*, 14 August 1957.

22. *Ibid.*, 6 August 1957.

23. For texts of the exchange of letters, see UN General Assembly A/5846 (the Jiménez report) 166; and Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (Harmondsworth 1974), 517-18. In 1961, the civil subsidy amounted to £1,058,750. *The Times*, 25 March 1961. The military subsidy was £477,175. These subsidies lasted from 1958 until 1967-68 when the Sultanate began to receive oil revenues from PDO discoveries at Fahūd. Apparent American support for the arrangement was indicated by a nearly simultaneous treaty signed in late 1958, covering economic relations and consular rights and replacing an earlier treaty dating from 1833.

24. Smiley has written an autobiographical account of his experiences in Oman: *Arabian Assignment* (London 1975).

25. Gwadar had been part of the Sultanate since 1785, and it had taken Pakistan ten years of steady but unsuccessful pressure on the Foreign Office to get Sa'id to relinquish the enclave before the necessities of 1958 finally convinced him.

26. A large number of vehicles fell victim between March and November, and as the guerrillas graduated to using larger mines, increasing injuries occurred among drivers and passengers. But rebel activity was not limited to mines: "Raids were made, too: the new dispensary at Bahla was blown up, and the Health Assistant badly wounded and blinded. As no compensation was given by the Sultanate to anybody other than the armed forces, this kind of thing was not much encouragement to doctors and Health Assistants doing their duty to the interior." Sir Hugh Boustead, *The Wind of Morning* (London 1972), 224. Boustead was the first Director of the British-instituted Development Department.

27. "This old ex-British 3-ton lorry carried four Browning 0.5 anti-aircraft guns, nine heavy mortars, 13 Bren guns and their ammunition, three wireless sets and not less than 40 men!" David Smiley, "Muscat and Oman", *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution* 105, 617 (February 1960), 37.

28. When one crashed near the village of Sharayjah, the pilot was buried nearby and the place was thereafter known as "Wādi Venom".

29. *The Times*, 9 April 1959.

30. On the previous day, the donkey-drivers had been told that the attack would be made up the Tanf trail - accordingly the information passed on to the rebels who were deceived into deploying their men at that end of the plateau.

31. Smiley has described the capture of the plateau in "Muscat and Oman", op. cit., as has Phillip Warner, *The Special Air Service* (London 1971), 209-21; and Colin Maxwell, *Short History of the Sultan's Armed Forces* (Bayt al-Falaj, Oman, mimeographed, November 1969). Colonel David Stirling, the founder of SAS, wrote a letter to *The Times* soon afterwards, asserting that the group had by this operation achieved their "true peace-time role". *The Times*, 10 April 1959.

32. Despite the new emphasis on activities outside the country, a total of 51 mines were set off in Oman during the years 1960-63, and the military (SAF, British personnel, and tribal retainers for garrisons) reported twelve casualties during those years. UN Document A/5562, *Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General* (New York 8 October 1963; also known as the "de Ribbing Report").

33. Testimony by John Burke Da Silva, First Secretary to the PRPG, on activities of Omani rebels at the inquiry into the loss of the passenger ship *Dara* as recorded in P. J. Abraham, *Last Hours on Dara* (London) 1963, 104-5.

34. *Ibid.*, 231.

35. *The Times*, 29 August 1960.

36. *Ibid.*, 22, 24 and 25 February 1961.

37. Discussions of UN activity regarding the "question of Oman" is drawn largely from issues for the *United Nations Yearbook* between 1957 and 1971, and the two reports cited above.

38. Among the speakers were: Ṭālib ibn 'Alī; Faris Glubb, son of the former Arab Legion Commander, Sir John Bagot Glubb; Shaykh Saqr ibn Sulṭān al-Qāsimī, the anti-British former Ruler of Sharjah; and Yūsuf al-'Alawī, the representative of the nascent Dhufar Liberation Front who later became Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the Sultanate after the 1970 coup d'état.

39. UN Document A/5562, *Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General* (New York 8 October 1963).

40. De Ribbing also recommended that UN assistance be granted to help improve health and social conditions in Oman. In an annex to the report, information is given on the size of SAF: 2,333 in total strength with twenty-five seconded officers and thirty-five on private contract (including five Pakistanis).

41. The Committee consisted of Abdul Rahman Pazhwak (Afghanistan), Chairman; Fernando Volio Jiménez (Costa Rica), Rapporteur; Ram C. Malhotra (Nepal); Ali Monguno (Nigeria); and Ciss Abdou (Senegal).

42. The Sulṭān had been extremely reluctant to allow de Ribbing to enter Oman in 1963, claiming that the matter was entirely internal and therefore outside the UN's jurisdiction. His refusal to recognize the "Ad Hoc Committee" was a result of his conviction that the de Ribbing Report had settled the matter once and for all.

43. UN Document A/5846, op. cit., 222.

44. Albaharna, op. cit., 242. This same contention was pursued by others with more vehemence and less objectivity. See Ezeldin Foda, "Controversy over Oman", *Egyptian Economic and Political Review* 4, 4 (March 1958), 12-14; Arab Information Center, *British Imperialism in Southern Arabia* (New York 1958); Arab Information Center, *The Question of Oman: An Analysis of the British Oman Dispute* (New York 1960; largely rewritten from the former paper); and the correspondence of H. St. John B. Philby in the *Middle East Journal*, 13, 1 (1959), 126-7; 13, 4 (1959), 487; and 14, 3 (1960), 365. It is interesting to see the viewpoint advanced by the more recent revolutionaries in Oman, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO), who charge the Imamate forces with repressing the people in the same manner as the Sulṭān and the failure of the 1950's revolt as being due to the feudal nature of tribal leadership and dependence on the "reactionary" Saudis ("or rather the CIA"). Gulf Committee, *The Oman War 1957-1959: A Critical History* (London 1974). The Sultanate's position was ably presented by J. B. Kelly, 'Sultanate and Imamate in Oman'. *Chatham House Memoranda* (1959).

45. It should be mentioned that the co-operation of Imām Ghālib with the Sa'udi ran directly counter to both the religious and secular principles of the traditional Ibāḍī Imamate. The Sa'udis were Sunnis and not Ibāḍīs, and previous Imāms had been just as alarmed over Sa'udi invasions of Oman as the Sulṭāns had been, if not more so. When a Sa'udi garrison was established in al-Buraymī in 1952, Imām Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Khalīlī had begun to raise a tribal levy and even sent some tribesmen to join the Sulṭān's abortive expedition being raised on the coast.

46. Dhufar had been annexed to the Sultanate in the late nineteenth century. Dissatisfaction with Sulṭān Sa'id ibn Taymūr's paternalistic rule in Ṣalālah where he had resided since 1958, began in the early 1960s with assistance from Saudi Arabia and the Imamate rebels. The Dhufar Liberation Front was created in 1965 and the Marxist-Leninist elements entered the movement's leadership in 1968.