



Omani children celebrating National Day (November 18). Omanis have rarely failed to charm foreign guests. Writing in 1982, Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan noted their "delicate style of grace, tact, and humility, the quietness and control in manner and speech, the calm and gentle integrity that distinguish them, be they girls or boys, women or men."

Oman

When Oman's English-educated Sultan Qabus visited the White House in April 1983, President Reagan genially cited his guest's accomplishments as well as a shared enthusiasm for horses and for Gilbert and Sullivan. For his part, the sultan said: "We are under no illusions. We realize that the important geopolitical position we occupy at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and the unstable situation that exists . . . make it imperative that we develop our country and its defenses." The sultan noted U.S. military aid and his own oil-rich country's strong links to the West, unique among Arab nations. Here, Calvin H. Allen, Jr., sketches the long exotic history of Oman. And Mark N. Katz looks at the sultan's independent fiefdom on the strategic Strait of Hormuz, not far from the battlefields of the continuing Iran-Iraq war.

A SEPARATE PLACE

by Calvin H. Allen, Jr.

Two things struck early European visitors to Oman: its heat and its desolation. In 1684, the Dutchman John Stuys compared living in Oman to roasting in a "boiling cauldron." Alexander Hamilton, a British traveler in Muscat in 1715, claimed that the Omanis roasted fish on the rocks. Upon his arrival in 1787, William Francklin complained that "the whole country round this place is one continued solid rock." Others might have echoed these remarks, but many died before they could record their thoughts for posterity. The first three agents of the British East India Company, for example, expired of heat stroke, as did two American missionaries during the 1890s.

First impressions, however, can be deceiving. Climate and geography have played vital roles in Omani history, but in a more benevolent manner than early Western visitors cared to acknowledge.

Located along the northern edge of the Indian Ocean monsoon system, Oman, unlike its neighbor Saudi Arabia, receives summer rains that have sustained local agriculture for almost 5,000 years. Although it occupies the southeastern portion of the Arabian Penin-

sula, Oman has long been virtually an island unto itself, surrounded by the vast desert of the Rub' al-Khali ("Empty Quarter") and Wahibah Sands to the west and south and the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea to the north and east. With few exceptions, as historian Robert Landen observes, the Omanis' "contacts with the rest of the world have been . . . via the sea." Coastal cities served as entrepôts that provided not only access to foreign markets, but exposure to foreign influences, especially from India and East Africa.

Spine and Stomach

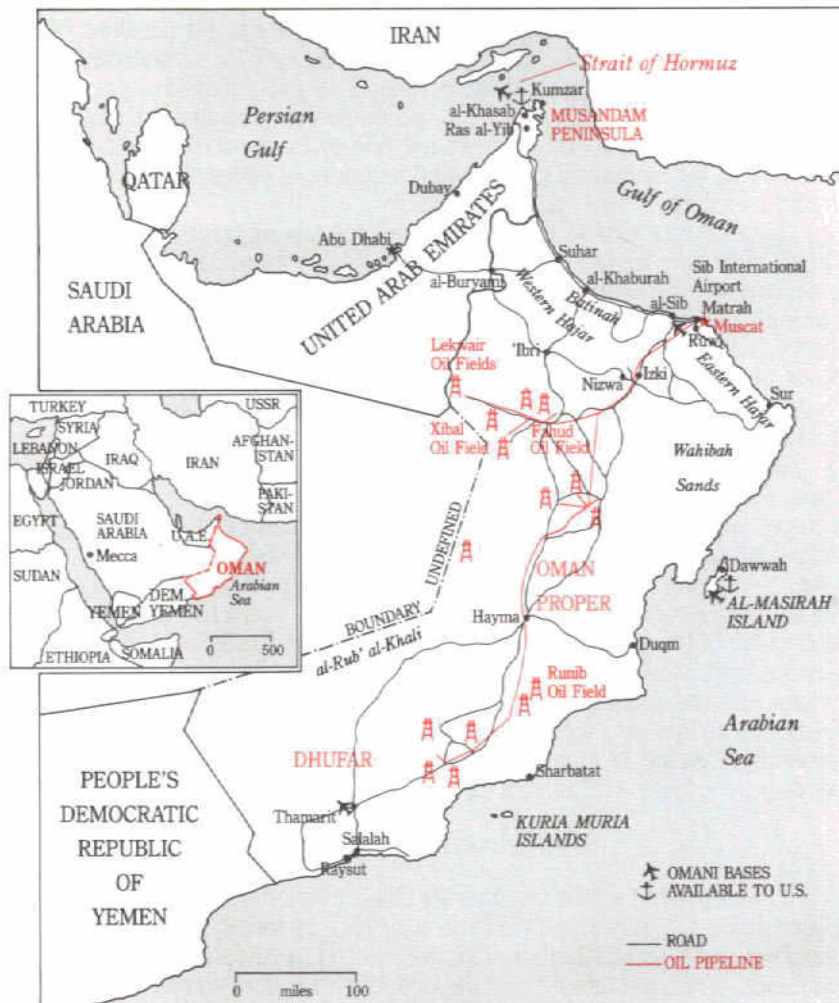
Thus isolated from the rest of Arabia by geography, Oman evolved independently from its neighbors. Despite a history of chronic internal feuds, the country has nonetheless managed to forge a national identity that dates back to A.D. 750, when the Omanis, among the earliest converts to Islam, elected their first spiritual leader, or *imam*. Oman's strategic location invited foreign invasions, but it also provided a base for a powerful maritime empire. Today, the Saudis occasionally criticize Omanis as "non-Arabs"; but to Omanis, the Saudis—with their relatively young 200-year-old kingdom—seem unsophisticated arrivistes.

Roughly the size of Kansas, Oman is divided into three regions: Ru'us al-Jibal, also known as the Musandam Peninsula, a mountainous exclave jutting into the Strait of Hormuz; Dhufar, the southern province, by far the most pleasant part of Oman with its moderate temperatures and summer rains; and Oman Proper, the country's heartland, which includes the cities of Muscat and Nizwa.

Arab geographers have compared Oman Proper to the human body, with the Hajar Mountains (the "spine"), the Batinah (the "stomach"), a narrow coastal plain, to the east, and the Dhahirah (the "back"), the barren, interior gravelly plateau that merges with the Rub' al-Khali, to the west. Omani civilization has its roots in the outwash plains of the Hajar Mountains near Nizwa, where during the fourth millennium B.C. early farmers took advantage of water sources in the gravel of the *wadis* (river beds) to plant wheat, barley, and sorghum. They domesticated the date palm and the camel, built simple stone burial cairns and temples, and smelted copper for use in trade with Sumer, the Indus Valley, and East Africa. By the end of the third millennium, however, camel nomadism began to replace settled agriculture, probably due to a drier climate.

During the seventh century B.C., Persian settlers, encouraged by

Calvin H. Allen, Jr., 36, is associate professor of history at the School of the Ozarks in Missouri. Born in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, he received a B.A. (1972) from the University of Pittsburgh, and an M.A. (1974) and a Ph.D. (1978) from the University of Washington. He is the author of Oman: Traditional Sultanate and Modern State (1986).



With an area of 82,030 square miles, Oman has the second lowest population density (after Saudi Arabia) among its Gulf neighbors. A long-simmering border dispute between Saudi Arabia and Oman has left the boundaries between the two countries undefined.

the expansion of Iran's Achaemenid Empire, came across the Gulf and took control of the country. They began building the *falaj* irrigation systems that still form the basis for Omani agriculture. Elaborate tunnels, barrages, storage tanks, and surface channels enabled local farmers to tap water from a wide area to irrigate not only dates and wheat but bananas, grapes, limes, apricots, and mangoes.

The spread of the *falaj* system created a scattered network of small agricultural settlements across the country. More importantly, it fostered an elaborate social structure. The *falaj* played a part in everything from setting up crop schedules to calculating taxes. Agents, shareholders, and laborers not only oversaw the irrigation of date palms, but arranged for specified amounts of water to be distributed to a village's visitors and its poor.

Legend has it that the first wave of Arab migrants arrived in Oman after the bursting of the massive Marib Dam in Yemen had, according to the Koran, "made [the Arabs] bywords and scattered them abroad." Whether this is true or not, by the sixth century A.D., the Persians were forced to recognize Arab autonomy and appoint an Arab as *julanda* (ruler) over the interior Omani tribes. Within a century, the Arab *julandas* had accepted a new faith, Islam, and had driven the Persian governor from Oman.

Islam brought few other changes. The caliphs in Medina and later in Damascus relied on the *julandas* to rule over the province. Located on the fringes of the Arab empire, Oman became a refuge for religious dissidents, notably the followers of 'Abd Allah bin Ibad, a seventh-century Kharijite teacher from Basrah in Iraq. Unlike their Shi'ite or Sunni brethren, the Kharijite "Ibadis" rejected hereditary leadership of the Muslim community. Instead, the Ibadis held that any physically fit Muslim male, well versed in Islamic law, was eligible for election by the menfolk as imam. Less fanatical than other Kharijite sects, the Ibadis also forbade the killing of other Muslims and were generally tolerant of non-Ibadis, who could marry Ibadis, testify in court proceedings, and inherit property.

Hinawi versus Ghafiri

Oman proved fertile ground for Ibadi missionaries, and the collapse of the Ummayyad caliphate in A.D. 750 provided them with an opportunity to establish their "kingdom of God on earth." Ibadism has been, and continues to be, the country's most powerful unifying force. A political as well as religious figure, the elected imam became an important rallying point for Oman's quarreling tribes. After rebuffing an invasion launched by the new caliphate in Baghdad, the Omanis enjoyed a period of peace under benevolent imams who, as one Omani chronicler put it, "walked in the way of truth, justice, and integrity, decreeing what was right and forbidding what was wrong."

But while the imamate system promised unity, its democratic nature also invited discord. The deposition of the aged imam Salt bin Malik in 886 ended a brief golden age. In a pattern that would persist over the ages, Oman's 200-odd tribes fought among themselves as the clerics debated the legality of Salt's deposition and argued over a successor. Divided by genealogy and religious faction, the tribes fell

into two separate camps whose rough outlines have survived into the present day. The Yemenis tended to be Ibadi; the Nizar, predominantly Sunni. During the 1720s, a civil war again broke out between the two confederations, the Yemenis then known as the Hinawi, the Nizar as the Ghafiri. Omani villages are still partitioned into different sections matching these ancient tribal divisions. In fact, some tribesmen have been known to refuse government arbitration if the arbitrator comes from a tribe long hostile to their own.

While the tribes in the interior quarreled, Oman's coastal cities flourished. Suhar, first built up under Persian rule, rose to such prominence during the 10th century that the geographer Istakhri proclaimed that "it is not possible to find on the shore of the Persian Sea nor in all the land of Islam a city more rich in fine buildings and foreign wares." Here Arab, African, and Indian merchants financed trading ventures throughout the western Indian Ocean and as far afield as China. Qalhat, with a more southerly location that enabled it to profit from Egyptian trade, eclipsed Suhar in the 13th century. Then Qalhat itself was eclipsed by Muscat with the arrival of the empire-building Portuguese at the dawn of the 16th century.

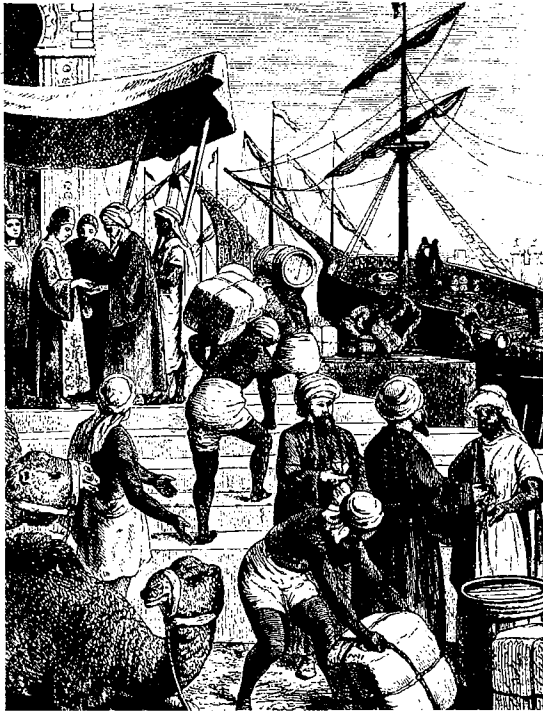
The Portuguese Interval

On his way to Qalhat in 1507, Portuguese admiral Affonso d'Albuquerque distinguished himself by destroying every Arab ship he encountered. The citizens of Qalhat escaped unharmed, but Muscat, whose rulers refused to accept Portuguese sovereignty, was sacked and burned; those inhabitants who resisted had their ears and noses cut off. The Portuguese established a garrison and a trading post. Despite their initial harshness, they adopted a largely laissez-faire attitude toward Oman during their 140 years of rule, and were content to control the country's coastal commerce. Aside from building the two stone fortresses of Merani and Jalali that guard Muscat's harbor, the Portuguese left almost no lasting impression.*

Their rule, however, did inspire Oman's tribes to set aside their differences and elect a new imam, Nasir bin Murshid al-Ya'aribi, in 1624. For almost 25 years, Nasir sought to drive the Portuguese from Oman. Only in 1650 was his successor able to dislodge them from Muscat, after a bloody struggle that, in the words of historian ibn Ruzaik, saw slain Portuguese soldiers scattered "prostrate like the trunks of uprooted date trees." The Portuguese never returned.

The Ya'aribah imamate (1624-1749) is regarded by Omani historians as the restoration of the medieval ideal of the kingdom of God on earth. It was a time of wealth and stability for Oman as slaves, gold, ivory, hides, coffee, spices, pearls, copper, rice, dates, fish, and

*One alleged *Omani* legacy to Portuguese culture was Muscatel wine, the product of grapes originally grown in Oman.



Trade brought prosperity to coastal Oman during the Middle Ages. One of the earliest exports: frankincense from Dhufar, valued throughout the Middle East and Asia as a medicine and perfume.

horses all flowed through Muscat. Armed with modern cannon, the vessels of the Ya'aribah fleet—often Indian-built copies of European warships—collected a tax from all seaborne traffic in the Gulf and extended the imamate's sway from Bahrain to the Swahili coast of East Africa. Wealth from this maritime empire went into a rash of building projects—the round fort at Nizwa, the elaborately carved and painted palace at Jabrin, and restoration of the *falaj* system.

Once again, however, the old medieval pattern reasserted itself. Ibadi religious leaders criticized the hereditary, increasingly cosmopolitan and wealthy Ya'aribah regime. Disagreements sparked a 20-year tribal war, with the Persians intervening, hoping to take over Muscat's trade.

Only in 1749 was Ahmad bin Sa'id Al Bu Sa'id, progenitor of today's ruling Al Bu Sa'id dynasty, able to unite the country's warring tribes and expel the Persians. (Ahmad effectively ended the threat by slaughtering Persian emissaries during a banquet celebrating a peace treaty.) The focus of Omani history shifted from the interior to Muscat. Ahmad bin Sa'id Al Bu Sa'id's descendants, temporarily losing control of the interior, relinquished the title of imam, but they consolidated Muscat as the premier port in the Persian Gulf.

"There are at present such immense quantities of goods in this

town," wrote Abraham Parsons of the English Levant Company in 1755, "that . . . there are not warehouses to contain half of them." The hinterland tribes, meanwhile, were left to their own devices and suffered a series of incursions from Saudi Arabia.

This cycle of Omani history might have continued had not events in Europe dictated otherwise. The struggle between Great Britain and Napoleon's France spilled across the Mediterranean to Egypt, which was invaded by French forces in 1798. Soon the western Indian Ocean became a war zone, as French and British ships did battle in numerous engagements. With its strategic location and good harbor, noted historian J. B. Kelly, Muscat itself "was admirably suited to serve Bonaparte as a rendezvous or staging point, should he decide to move upon India." Indeed, Muscat already had ties to the French on the island of Mauritius, an important market for the slave trade. Alarmed, the British dispatched diplomats to Muscat in 1798 to conclude an agreement with Sultan bin Ahmad. He gladly pledged his friendship to the British, especially after they promised to send him a physician and increased the amount of salt that his ships could sell to the British East India Company. The French were kept out.

Off to Zanzibar

Sultan died from a musket wound incurred in a fight against pirates in 1804. After a two-year struggle, Sa'id bin Sultan (Sultan's son) came to power by murdering his uncle. To his biographer ibn Ruzaik, Sa'id was "the happiest of rulers, who attained quiet prosperity and perennial glory . . . conquered with the sword hitherto unknown countries, and made a straight road over the dissevered necks of the rebellious." In reality, Muscat declined during Sa'id's rule, not least because his attempts to use the British to further Omani ends generally backfired.

Playing on British concern with piracy in the Gulf, Sa'id sought London's aid against his Arab rivals. However, a joint Muscati-British attack in 1819 eventually resulted in British recognition of Sa'id's competitors in what is now the United Arab Emirates, thus precluding his hopes of defeating them. Sa'id's close alliance with the British also incited French attacks on Muscati shipping. Finally, the British themselves exerted mounting pressure on Sa'id to abolish the lucrative slave trade.*

Muscat's economic fortunes suffered. Arriving in 1829, British traveler J. S. Buckingham described the port as "meanly built, having no good edifices in it, except the residence [of Sa'id]." Sa'id turned his

*In 1873, the sultan issued a decree forbidding Omanis to import or export slaves; the institution of slavery was not formally abolished until 1963. But as Robert Landen has noted, "often the relation between master and slave was purely a formality, the slave working where he pleased and returning to his master a portion of his earnings."

ambitions increasingly to East Africa, where during the 17th century the Ya'aribah imamate had helped Swahili rulers expel the Portuguese. By 1829, having conquered the Swahili coast (now Tanzania and Kenya), Sa'id had resolved to abandon Muscat in favor of Zanzibar. There, his clove plantations worked by the slaves whom he could no longer sell provided a handsome income, in a much more hospitable environment. Appointing a regent in Muscat, he put the port's financial apparatus in the hands of Indian agents and tried to buy the cooperation of powerful local rivals.

In his absence, however, the situation at home deteriorated. An American consul sent to Muscat during the 1840s stayed only six months, complaining to Washington that there was no trade. Sa'id's death in 1856 marked the demise of Oman's days as a maritime power. For that matter, trade throughout the Gulf and the Indian Ocean was changing. The advent of European steamships, carrying European manufactured goods, wiped out much local industry and commerce or brought it under foreign control. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 hastened the process. By the beginning of the 20th century, even the cotton cloth used to make an Omani tribesman's robes came from Lancastershire mills.

Sa'id's death heightened British influence as the British government mediated the dispute among Sa'id's sons over the succession. Under the 1861 Canning Award, Muscat and Zanzibar became independent sultanates; in compensation, Muscat was promised a substantial British-guaranteed subsidy from Zanzibar. But the British remained reluctant either to guarantee the survival of the Al Bu Sa'id regime or to assume direct control of Oman. When tribal forces led by a revived imamate succeeded in briefly taking over Muscat, the British did little but express worry over the possible abuse of British nationals and withhold payment of the Zanzibar subsidy.

Drifting into Isolation

Ever in need of cash, the sultans in Muscat depended on the British-controlled payments from Zanzibar to keep their governments solvent. By 1895, J. T. Bent, a British traveler, could assert that "unquestionably our own political agent may be said to be the ruler in Muscat." When a sultan sought to free himself of British domination, as when Faysal flirted with the French in the 1890s, London took appropriate action. In 1899, Faysal was ordered to board a British gunboat in Muscat harbor and informed that if he did not promptly break an agreement giving a coaling station to the French, his palace would be bombarded. The agreement was cancelled. In 1912 Britain also forced the Muscat government to end its profitable arms trade with the Persians and Afghans, granting in return a new subsidy that bound the sultans even more closely to the British.

Contributing to British dominance was the inability of Muscat's sultans to protect themselves against frequent tribal attacks. The clerics and tribal leaders of the interior, determined to restore an Ibadi imamate that better embodied the old religious values, launched a strong uprising in 1913. Worried that Muscat would fall, Britain sent a detachment of Indian Army troops to defend the port. Seven hundred well-entrenched infantrymen beat back an assault by 3,000 tribesmen in 1915. The two sides began negotiations, but it took an economic blockade of the interior by Muscat and the assassination of the imam before Sultan Taymur bin Faysal, represented in the talks by the British, and Imam Muhammad bin 'Abd Allah al-Khalili were able to reach an agreement. In the so-called Treaty of Sib (1920), sultan and imam each agreed not to interfere with the affairs of the other. If not strictly in a legal sense, Muscat and Oman became, in fact, separate countries.

During the next 35 years Oman and Muscat remained at peace. Sultan Taymur was a reluctant ruler who sought only to abdicate and retire in peace to India. The British would not allow him to do so until Taymur's son Sa'id had reached maturity. They pressured Taymur to modernize the Sultanate's finances, provide the rudiments of modern ministerial government, and establish a local defense force—the Muscat Levies—to replace Britain's Indian garrison.



The Omani Council of State (1928), including Bertram Thomas, Sultan Taymur bin Faysal's finance minister. More intent on exploring than administering Oman, Thomas, known as the wazir (adviser), resigned in 1931.

'A TYRANNY OF INDIFFERENCE'

"The people shall not have what they want," Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur once said, "but what I think is good for them." Educated at a British school for princes in India, and speaking three foreign languages, Sa'id bin Taymur nonetheless kept his countrymen trapped in almost medieval ignorance and poverty for 38 years. He subjected them to what John Townsend, one of his former advisers, called "a tyranny of indifference."

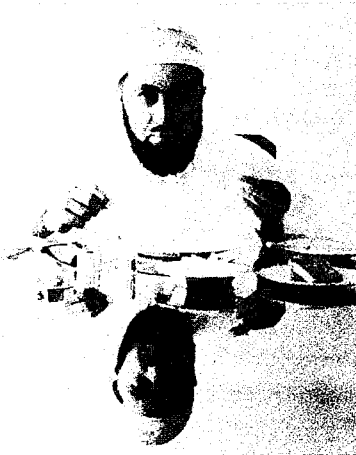
Outside the Women's Hospital in Muscat, modern medicine was virtually unknown in Oman. As Sa'id put it, "If we build clinics, many more will survive, but for what? To starve?" Public education consisted of three state-run primary schools. Sa'id's reasoning: "I cannot afford to pay good teachers." Religious conservatism led him to restrict public singing, smoking, and the carrying of dolls. He insisted that Omanis wishing to import cars, build stone houses, or travel across the land first secure his permission. That in itself was no easy matter, for only a handful of officials had a radio link to his palace in Salalah.

Yet for all Sa'id's austerity, most foreigners who met him agreed with Colonel David Smiley, commander of the Omani armed forces, who found him a man of "quiet dignity and almost irresistible charm."

The sultan's frugality is best explained by what happened to his father, Sultan Taymur bin Faysal. Sa'id had watched as his father went into hock to Hindu merchants. He saw that the British would repay his father's loans, but only at a price. ("If the Sultan is in our debt," said British Resident Percy Cox in 1916, "we are in a stronger position to guide Muscat affairs.") Sa'id vowed that Oman, to retain its autonomy, would enjoy only what it could afford.

To Sa'id, penury was sound politics. Education was expensive—and risky. "That is why [the British] lost India," observed Sa'id, "because [they] educated the people." Surveying the Middle East, he noted that high expectations usually led to trouble. Citing the case of Egypt, where in 1952 young army officers led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser toppled King Farouk I, Sa'id said to Colonel Smiley: "All revolutions in the Arab world are led by colonels. That is why I employ you. I am having no Arab colonels in my Army."

Unfortunately for Sa'id, his faith in *British* officers was misplaced. After Oman began to export oil in 1967, Sa'id's British advisers—worried about a growing insurgency in Dhufar—urged rapid economic reforms. But the sultan balked, little realizing that his refusal paved the way for British support of his son, Qabus, who ousted his father in July 1970.



In 1931 Taymur was permitted to abdicate in favor of his son Sa'id, who immediately adopted the policies that characterized his regime until its downfall in 1970: direct control over the various branches of government and an economic policy of rigid austerity [see box, facing page]. Oman drifted into isolation.

By the mid-1950s, however, a new variable had entered the political equation—the promise of oil wealth. The first concession in Muscati territories had been granted to the British D'Arcy Exploration Company in 1924, but Imam Muhammad bin 'Abd Allah al-Khalili had steadfastly refused to permit geologists access to the interior. Matters came to a head in 1954 when the imam died. Although no oil had yet been discovered, Sa'id authorized Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the consortium then managed by Shell Oil, to occupy Jabal Fahud, far in the interior. The Muscat and Oman Field Force (the oil company's own militia) went further and seized the town of 'Ibri, well within the imamate's domain. With aid from Saudi Arabia, the new imam, Ghalib bin Ali al-Hina'i, counterattacked. But by December 1955, Nizwa, the imam's capital, had fallen to the sultan's forces. Ghalib resigned as imam and retired to his home in Bilad Sait. Oman was unified.

Sa'id was able to savor his new-found eminence as sultan of Muscat and Oman only briefly. In May 1957, the supporters of the imamate, with weapons and supplies provided by Saudi Arabia, attempted to restore Ghalib. The Oman Revolutionary Movement (ORM) easily ousted Sa'id's garrisons from Nizwa and Bahla. Sa'id wrote to the British consul general requesting "the maximum military and air support which our friend Her Britannic Majesty's Government can give." In response, the British dispatched a company of Scottish Cameronians and provided Royal Air Force support, forcing the ORM rebels to take refuge on the Jabal al-Akhdar (Green Mountain). A sheer limestone massif, with a large plateau at 6,000 feet and peaks rising nearly twice as high, the Jabal al-Akhdar made an ideal haven for the imamate's guerrillas.

Waiting for Oil

On the diplomatic front, a vigorous propaganda effort based in Cairo managed to get the "Oman Question" on the United Nations Assembly agenda in 1957. In July 1958 Sa'id again called for British help. Britain, under increasing criticism in the UN, agreed to step in, but only after the sultan promised to reform his medieval kingdom. It was all done in the old imperial style. The Sultan's Armed Forces were reorganized by British advisers and officers. Two squadrons of Britain's elite Special Air Service, airlifted from Malaya, stormed the Jabal al-Akhdar in January 1959 and captured the imam's headquarters. Ghalib and other leaders escaped, eventually to settle in Saudi

Arabia. Leaderless, the rebellion soon dissolved.

Sa'id considered his victory Pyrrhic at best. The oil explorations that had inspired the conflict had discovered no oil. He had gone into debt to finance the war and had been compelled by the British to begin what he considered to be a frivolous economic development program. Fed up, Sa'id retired to the isolation of Salalah, Dhufar's chief city, never again to set foot in Muscat.

To most rural Omanis, the sultan's difficulties mattered little. Their daily concerns did not extend beyond their virtually self-sufficient villages. Living in houses of sunbaked mud brick or *burasti* (palm fronds), drawing their water from the *falaj*, they subsisted on a diet of dates, limes, dried fish from the coast, or rice imported from India, supplemented occasionally by goat, mutton, and tinned fruit from Muscat. Contact with the outside world was minimal. There were no radios, TVs, newspapers—not even a postal system.

'A Little Trouble'

Affairs of state were the concern of tribal sheiks, who served as the intermediaries between the people and Sa'id bin Taymur's *walis* (governors) in the larger towns. Justice, regulated by Muslim law, was administered by *qadis*, like the *walis* known more for their greed than their ethics. The sultan accepted their venality. As he saw it, "to do otherwise would require that I pay them a salary." The rudiments of a Koranic education were provided to village boys by religious scholars, who might also dispense good-luck charms or apply hot irons to the sick.

Not surprisingly, Sa'id's move to Salalah failed to eliminate his political problems. Prior to his accession, Dhufar had been only loosely bound to the rest of Oman. "The people," commented Bertram Thomas, Sultan Taymur's finance minister, "composed of warlike and rival tribes, have always found law and order irksome." They were to find Sa'id's rule irksome indeed. According to John Townsend, one of Sa'id's former advisers, the sultan treated the Dhufaris as if he were "a harsh Victorian nanny, save that his punishments tended ultimately to be fatal." The Dhufaris reacted by attacking oil company facilities and ambushing army patrols. By 1965, the rebels had formed themselves into the Dhufar Liberation Front (DLF). In April 1966, DLF agents infiltrated Sa'id's bodyguard and attempted to assassinate him. They missed. Sa'id promptly telephoned a nearby army camp and told a British officer there that "we seem to be having a little trouble down at the Palace and I wonder if you would be so good as to come down."

Marxist radicals dominated the DLF by 1968, turning a quasi-nationalist struggle against Al Bu Sa'id despotism into a leftist revolution. Following a familiar Third World script, the DLF became the

Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). Its adherents began to receive military training, AK-47 automatic rifles, and Katyushka rockets from the USSR, China, and Iraq. South Yemen, newly independent (1967) and a Soviet ally, provided bases and other facilities. Although PFLOAG did not attract much of a following among the region's Jibali tribesmen, by 1970 its guerrillas controlled Dhufar's mountains and much of the coast.

The only good news for Sa'id was the discovery of oil at Fahud in 1964 and the beginning of exports in August 1967. With annual production near 100 million barrels, the Omanis now had enough money to launch a real development program. It came too late for Sa'id. For almost four decades, his guiding principle in financial matters was that Oman did without what Oman could not afford. Therefore, Oman did without almost everything. Even Sa'id's isolation from his people was explained in financial terms; the gifts and banquets required of a proper Arab ruler would have been too great a drain on the treasury. Hated by his subjects for his meanness and petty restrictions, Sa'id in turn despised the Omanis for their backwardness and opposition to his rule. When the money came in, Sa'id permitted work to begin on a few projects—a new hospital, a modern harbor, and an international airport—but progress was slow, too slow.

Opposition to Sa'id spread. In early 1970 a National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf emerged, staging



Omani troops taking a break during the Dhufar Rebellion (1963-75). Neighboring states like Abu Dhabi, whose army in 1979 was 85 percent Omani, often try to lure seasoned Omani soldiers with offers of higher wages.

mortar attacks on Nizwa and Izki. Another group, the Arab Action Party, was formed in Ru'us al-Jibal. It became apparent to pro-Western critics of Sultan Sa'id that a change had to be made. The focus of their hopes was the 29-year-old crown prince, Qabus bin Sa'id.

Born in November 1940 to Sa'id's Dhufari wife, Qabus's early years were spent in Salalah. In 1958, like many another Arab prince, he was sent off to boarding school in England, and thence to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. After a brief stint with the Cameronians in West Germany, training in municipal administration, and a world tour, he returned to Salalah in 1964. There, the future sultan was kept under virtual house arrest, compelled to study Islamic law, and denied contact with all outsiders except a few of Sa'id's trusted British advisers.

Worried that Oman would go the way of Marxist South Yemen, even some of the Britons began to conspire with Qabus. On July 23, 1970, a group of soldiers commanded by Buraik bin Hamud al-Ghafiri, son of the governor of Dhufar, entered Sultan Sa'id's apartment in the palace. After a brief gun battle (Buraik was shot in the stomach, Sa'id in the foot), the sultan was arrested.* On July 26, the new Sultan Qabus made his first national radio broadcast, informing his subjects—few of whom *had* radios—of the coup.

The Dhufar War

"When the post-coup tumult and shouting had died," wrote Townsend, "and the heady euphoria of the old sultan's departure had abated, it came to be realized that Oman had no government, no plans for the future, no people able to take office and make clear and firm decisions."

Qabus's uncle (and Sa'id's brother) Tariq bin Taymur was called back from self-imposed exile in West Germany to serve as prime minister. But jealousy and distrust between the two men ultimately led to Tariq's resignation. Qabus assumed full control. After 1971 Qabus's government, while involved in a much greater range of activities than under Sultan Sa'id, exhibited many of the characteristics of the ancien régime. The new sultan relied heavily on expatriates, especially in military and economic affairs, and traditional Al Bu Sa'id family retainers. Furthermore, he remained isolated from his subjects, very much in the manner of the Al Bu Sa'id Sultanate.

But unlike his father, Qabus immediately tapped the country's oil wealth for schools, hospitals, roads, electrification, and radio and color television service. He established ministries for labor, health, and education, among others. Unfortunately, as a 1974 World Bank report noted, "the development effort [was] unavoidably ad hoc and largely uncoordinated." Before securing the sultan's approval for

*Taken by RAF plane to England, Sa'id died in exile in his suite at Claridge's two years later.

their projects, ministers would rarely check to see if the necessary money was available. Newly rich, the country grew newly indebted. World Bank technical assistance and the establishment of a planning council helped to put Oman's financial house in order by 1975.

These political and economic difficulties stemmed in part from Qabus's priorities during his first five years—winning the Dhufar war. The conflict received little attention in the Western media. Not only were few journalists allowed in to cover the war, but events elsewhere in the Middle East—the 1973 Yom Kippur War, for example—proved more riveting. And with the pro-Western shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in control of Iran, the Gulf seemed secure. Yet even the shah recognized the danger posed by the Dhufar uprising, dispatching a brigade of paratroopers to help out his ally in Oman. Qabus devoted almost all of his attention to the conflict, frequently visiting his British-led troops to cheer them on.

One of Qabus's first acts was to offer a general amnesty to all enemies of his father, particularly those in Dhufar. He began an ambitious hearts-and-minds campaign among the Jibali, building wells, roads, and schools. Between 1971 and 1975, Dhufar, with its population of about 50,000, received almost one-quarter of the funds spent on development. Surrendering guerrillas were retrained by the Special Air Service and turned into an irregular unit—the *firqat*. Meanwhile, the 10,000 men of the Sultan's Armed Forces, led by British contract officers, concentrated on cutting supply lines between the roughly 2,000 rebels and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. RAF Strikemaster ground support aircraft flew missions from the RAF bases at Salalah and the island of al-Masirah. In 1973-74, with the arrival of Jordanian engineers and the Iranian paratroopers, government forces went after the guerrillas in the mountains.

By 1975, Brigadier John Akehurst, commander of the sultan's Dhufar Brigade, could report that "Dhufar is now ready for civil development." At the National Day celebrations in 1976 Qabus announced to his nation and the world that Oman was reunited and at peace. Oman's new era could begin in earnest.



A NEW DAWN?

by Mark N. Katz

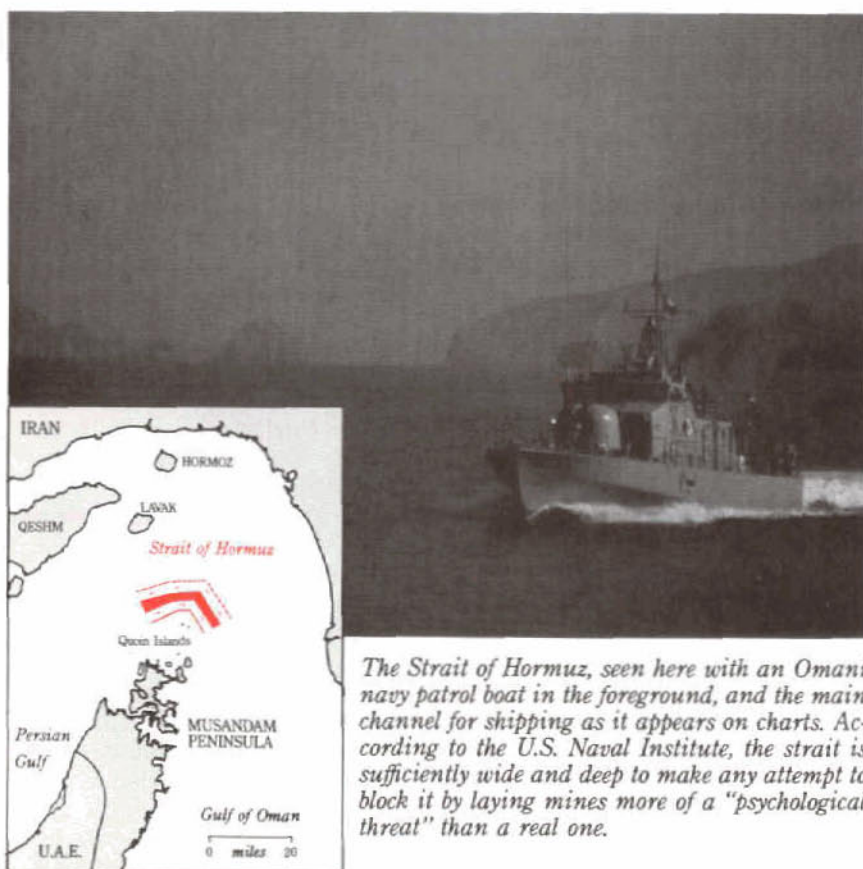
At the entrance to the Persian Gulf lies Oman's Musandam Peninsula, a fissured mass of black rock. Deep fjords cut into the land, their sheer sides rising out of the water as high as 5,000 feet. Largely devoid of shrubs or trees, the peninsula's interior consists of rows of wind-worn ridges, interrupted only by jagged peaks.

Sovereignty over the Musandam, barren as it may be, has made Oman a nation of paramount importance. On a clear day, the peninsula's Shihuh tribesmen, herding goats near their stone huts, can gaze across the Strait of Hormuz and see the brown hills of Iran, two dozen miles away. Nautical charts of the strait show two 2.5-mile wide navigational channels, 30-50 fathoms deep, in Omani waters between Iran and the peninsula. Marking their approximate midway point are the two Quoins, islands named by European sailors after the wedges once used to elevate ships' cannon.

In 1986, flying Liberian, Panamanian, or Japanese flags, roughly 15 to 20 tankers transited outward bound through the strait every day. Some of the VLCCs (very large crude carriers) are 1,000 feet long; each can carry as much as 1.8 million barrels of Gulf oil, or about 11 percent of U.S. average daily oil consumption in 1986. All told, about 14.5 percent of the world's petroleum production (from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states) passed through the strait, supplying Japan with 55 percent of its oil and Western Europe with 25 percent.

Long a choke-point for Persian Gulf trade, the strait has preoccupied the West since the 1979 fall of the shah of Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini now controls the narrow passage's northern shores. Worse, the border war between Iran and Iraq led, in 1986 alone, to more than 60 air attacks on vessels in the Gulf. Insurance rates for ships traveling above the 24th parallel have tripled since the outbreak of hostilities in 1980. Neither belligerent has yet tried to close the strait, but Iran's President Ali Khamenei vowed in September 1985 that "not one drop of oil would be allowed to leave the other ports of the Gulf" if Iraqi bombing blocked Iranian oil exports.

To those European nations needing Mideast oil, Oman is one of the few bright spots in a region known for its turmoil. Unlike the neighboring People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, where heavy fighting between rival Marxist groups broke out last January, Oman is not riven by factional political struggles. Thanks to a relatively tolerant religious climate, Omanis do not engage in the sectarian



The Strait of Hormuz, seen here with an Omani navy patrol boat in the foreground, and the main channel for shipping as it appears on charts. According to the U.S. Naval Institute, the strait is sufficiently wide and deep to make any attempt to block it by laying mines more of a "psychological threat" than a real one.

quarrels that can arise in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

In many matters of foreign policy, Sultan Qabus bin Sa'id of Oman is the Gulf's odd man out. Although Qabus and his ministers consult with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Oman is not a member of OPEC, nor of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries. Alone among the Gulf's leaders, Qabus endorsed the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. He also signed a June 1980 agreement that gives the United States limited access to Omani military facilities. Impressed, the *New York Times* hailed Oman in March 1985 as "Washington's most reliable ally in the Gulf."

That Oman would one day be a stable, staunch friend of the West seemed unlikely 18 years ago. In 1969, the 37th year of the reign of Sultan Qabus's despotic father Sa'id bin Taymur, the country had to contend with a Communist-backed rebellion in southern

Dhufar province spurred, in part, by popular resentment over living conditions one step removed from the Middle Ages. Even in the capital of Muscat, running water and electricity were rare. Wearing eyeglasses and riding bicycles were among the many activities either forbidden or strictly controlled. With London's backing, Qabus deposed his father on July 23, 1970. Then the young sultan and his British-trained army mopped up the Dhufar rebels. Proclaiming "a new dawn," he began to build schools, roads, and hospitals where there once were none—an achievement that inspired the popular slogan, "Before Qabus, nothing."

When 'God' Speaks

Even allowing for the ban on published criticism of the sultan, his popularity seems genuine enough. Most Omanis, especially those old enough to have lived under Sultan Sa'id, appreciate what Qabus has done. They regard him with almost filial devotion. There is a Sultan Qabus University, a Sultan Qabus Mosque, and a Sultan Qabus Stadium. Yet Qabus has avoided the excesses of a formal cult of personality. Except during the annual National Day (November 18) celebrations, his face is not exalted, Mao-style, on billboards and buildings. The sultan is seen rarely in public, preferring, like his father, to stay at his palace in Salalah, capital of Dhufar province.

A picture taken of Qabus shortly after he came to power shows a slight, almost bashful man with an unkempt beard, wearing a long white *dishdasha*. Today, even as he favors traditional garb—the *dishdasha* is compulsory for Omani cabinet ministers—Qabus, his beard neatly trimmed, is as likely to be seen in military uniform. He has gotten over his initial shyness. Foreign visitors are put at ease by his charm, his hospitality, and his excellent English—acquired during a four-year stay in England, including two years at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. Indeed, with his spit-and-polish uniforms, his passion for military parades, his meticulous attention to protocol and ceremony, the sultan is no ordinary Gulf ruler. As he told an interviewer in 1972, "I hope that you are not forgetting that I am a military man and a Sandhurst graduate."

The sultan is also an absolute monarch. For all Qabus's attention to his people's needs, observes John Townsend, a former British adviser to both Qabus and his father, "the prime objective of the

Mark N. Katz, 32, is a research associate at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies. Born in Riverside, California, he received a B.A. in international relations (1976) from the University of California, Riverside, an M.A. in international relations (1978) from Johns Hopkins, and a Ph.D. in political science (1982) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of The Third World in Soviet Military Thought (1982) and Russia and Arabia (1986).



Qabus meeting with tribesmen in Dhufar. According to former adviser John Townsend, the sultan, although reclusive, is "a formidable orator . . . In the public performance of his duties as Head of State, [he] has few peers."

Sultan, in political terms, can be expressed in one word: 'survival.'" Initially reliant on British counselors, he now stands as master in his own house, serving as head of state, prime minister, and minister of defense, finance, and foreign affairs. Advice comes from a State Consultative Council, but its 55 members, drawn largely from the ranks of cabinet undersecretaries, merchants, and backcountry tribal leaders, have no legislative powers.

No detail is too small to escape his attention. He has been known to tour Muscat at night, ordering the owners of dirty cars fined and rubbish removed. His own government employees refer to him as "God." When I asked why, several of them responded, "because he is all powerful but nowhere to be seen."

As Sultan Qabus has steered his country into the 20th century, it is oil that has provided the necessary propulsion. In 1984, the petroleum sector accounted for 95 percent of all export earnings and 90 percent of government revenues. Oman's daily production, as high as 600,000 barrels in 1986, is modest in comparison to that of its two neighbors Saudi Arabia (4.7 million) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (1.4 million). Even so, oil has enabled the country to more than quadruple its gross domestic product (GDP) since 1976. In 1984, GDP per capita stood at \$6,600, slightly below that of the

United Kingdom (\$7,488), but much lower than that of Saudi Arabia (\$13,250) and the UAE (\$28,000).

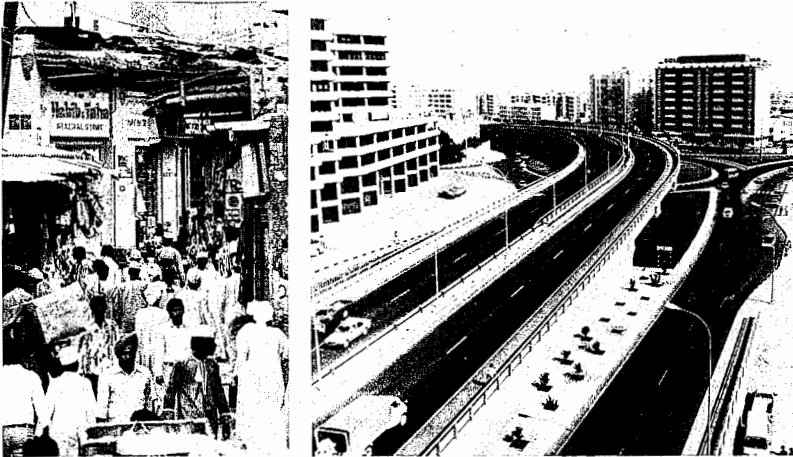
This prosperity is evident as soon as one lands at Muscat's Sib International Airport. Buick sedans, Datsuns, motor scooters, and the occasional Mercedes taxi cruise the four-lane highway leading to the capital. Tower cranes loom over the steel and concrete skeletons of new offices and apartment blocks. Overlooking the sea, the hillside homes in the wealthy suburb of Qurm are worthy of southern California. Even the poorer quarters of Ruwi, greater Muscat's outlying commercial district, lack the grinding poverty one finds in, say, Cairo: Almost all the tiny, one- or two-room dwellings have air conditioners to ease the discomfort of 100-degree summer temperatures.

Of Toyotas and Televisions

Set in a crescent of rugged brown hills, Muscat has seen substantial urban renewal. Two 16th-century Portuguese forts still flank the city's waterfront, but many of the elaborate stone and wood townhouses built by well-to-do merchants were torn down in 1974 to make room for Qabus's new downtown palace. Of the half-dozen or so that survive, one has been turned into a museum, another is used as the U.S. embassy. Most modern business enterprises have moved outside the old city walls, within which no building is higher than six stories. The capital's narrow, winding streets have been widened. Part of its old *suaq* (market) is now a parking lot. Those who crave its former bustle can go to the *suaq* in the adjoining port of Matrah, where the air is thick with the shouts of vendors and the smell of fish and dates. Tucked into narrow, crowded alleys, tiny shops and stalls sell gold jewelry, silver coffee pots, and *khanjars* (ceremonial daggers worn by Omani men), as well as stereos, television sets, and bootlegged video cassettes.

Muscat and its satellites of Matrah and Ruwi (total pop. 220,000) boast a higher standard of living than do the towns and villages of the interior, home to roughly half of Oman's one million inhabitants. But the hinterland gets its share of consumer goods. When I arrived in Nizwa (pop. 15,000), some 100 miles southwest of Muscat, tribesmen were selling goats in the marketplace adjacent to the town's 17th-century fort. Parked nearby under placards advertising Pepsi-Cola was a row of Toyota pickup trucks and Land Rovers.

More important, however, than cars, trucks, televisions, and stereos has been the steady improvement in the average Omani's health and education. In fact, after almost four decades of imposed penury and isolation under Sultan Sa'id, Omanis can reel off "progress" statistics not matched by many countries. In 1970, the entire country had three schools with 909 male students (often hand-picked by the sultan himself), one hospital with 12 beds, and 10



Sultan Qabus's downtown palace now takes up much of old Muscat's waterfront, but the atmosphere of Matrah's suq is unchanged. Fifteen years ago, Ruwi, seen here with the highway leading to Sib International Airport, boasted only a few modern buildings amid its mud brick huts.

kilometers of paved roads. Now some 200,000 students (79,300 of them female) attend 590 schools, hospital beds number 2,587, and the road network stretches 3,308 kilometers. In the absence of radios, televisions, or newspapers, most Omanis heard of Qabus's accession in 1970 by royal decrees posted on city walls or by word of mouth. Today, they can tune in to a color TV channel or two radio stations, or read six Arabic and three English-language papers.

As Ian Skeet, an oil executive in pre-1970 Oman, remarked after a 1983 return visit, "the Sultanate . . . is a different country set in the same surroundings." My own two trips to Oman (December 1982 and February 1986) provided ample proof of progress. What I

saw, however, also pointed to the problems a society can encounter when it tries to jump, in the span of a decade or two, from medievalism to modernity. While much has been made of Oman's dramatic material transformation, much of its feudal framework remains intact.

To their credit, Qabus and his ministers have avoided many of the expensive mistakes made by Mexico, Venezuela, and other more advanced nations suddenly inundated by petrodollars. They have not tried to "buy" an industrial base overnight; nor have they relied overmuch on tomorrow's oil revenues to secure today's foreign loans. In 1980, Qabus began diverting 15 percent of annual gross petroleum revenues into a State General Reserve Fund—since used to cover annual budget deficits. Partly as a result, Oman enjoys an excellent reputation among international lenders.

Small Is Beautiful

Fiscal prudence is dictated by the limited size of Oman's proven oil reserves, estimated at four billion barrels in 1986. Small by comparison with Kuwait's 90 billion or the UAE's 33 billion—and barring future discoveries—they will last another 20–25 years at current production levels. Thus, while the UAE can afford to build seven jet airports—including two within 10 miles of one another—Oman cannot. "We don't really go . . . for prestige projects," said Minister of Information Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed al-Rowas in 1985. "We don't believe in them and we can't afford them."

Oman's largest nonpetroleum venture is a \$213 million copper mine and smelter operated by the Oman Mining Company in Suhar. Other enterprises include the Oman and Raysut Cement Companies and the Rusail Industrial Estate, where small factories assemble water pumps, air conditioners, car batteries, furniture, and other items once imported from abroad. In 1984, manufacturing represented just three percent of Oman's GDP—insignificant, except that it had risen 41 percent since 1983. Construction and wholesale and retail trade have also helped to whittle down oil's share of the GDP from 61 percent in 1980 to 46 percent in 1984.

The oil industry provides cash but not many jobs for Omanis. The government (60 percent), Royal Dutch Shell (34 percent), Compagnie Française des Pétroles (four percent), and Partex (two percent) make up the Petroleum Development Oman consortium. It accounts for more than 95 percent of Oman's oil production but employed fewer than 5,000 Omanis in 1982.

Most Omanis, like their forebears, are fishermen and farmers. With its interior and fertile Batinah coastal plain suited to dates, limes, alfalfa, wheat, and sorghum, and its waters rich in kingfish, tuna, skipjacks, and sardines, Oman is one of the few Gulf states with the *potential* to both feed itself and export food. (After oil, Oman's

most valuable exports are frozen fish, copper, and limes.) The Bank for Agriculture and Fisheries (opened in 1981) has provided loans for seeds and fertilizer, subsidized the construction of jetties and harbors, and purchased outboard motors and new boats.

Yet despite this official encouragement, more and more Omanis are abandoning their fields and wooden *dhow*s for the (relatively) bright lights of the capital. A 1977 study of the agricultural community of 'Ibri showed that three-quarters of the male population between the ages of 14 and 40 had left; nearly half of these men took low-ranking posts in the security forces, a quarter were unemployed, and almost all the rest worked as occasional laborers or messengers in government offices. Self-sustaining in food a generation ago, Oman had to import an estimated 90 percent of its wheat and 40 percent of its vegetables and meat in 1980.

Ironically, improvements in farming technology may be hastening the rural exodus. Crucial to rural society has been the intricate *falaj* irrigation network; villagers share responsibility for coping with seasonal variations in the water supply, maintaining canals, and distributing individual "shares" of water. The introduction of mechanical pumps is now lowering Oman's water table; the pumps suck up water faster than it can be replaced. And because only the wealthier farmers can afford pumps, the gap between rich and poor is growing.

Investments in Switzerland

Further loosening local bonds has been the beneficence of the Qabus regime. New schools and health clinics have displaced such institutions as the *waqf*, a system of religiously organized charities that provided funds for the upkeep of mosques, education, the poor, and orphans. "The growth of a welfare state . . .," writes Oxford geographer John Wilkinson, "administered by a remote central government, is replacing self-help and . . . communal responsibility."

It is also replacing tribal authority. Where rural Omanis once relied on their sheiks for help or protection, they increasingly turn to the sultan's *wali* (governor) or to local municipal councils.* As for the sheiks themselves, Qabus has sought to pry them from their followers with money and patronage. "These days," said a civil servant quoted in the *Economist*, "the tribal leader does not want to know about the problem of one *bedu* who has lost his camel. He is more interested in his investments in Switzerland or his job in Muscat."

These changes, social and otherwise, have been felt most strongly in Oman's interior, historically more isolated and conservative than the coastal regions. Not surprisingly, some customs and

*While Oman is governed by Islamic law, the *qadi*, who arbitrates according to the book (i.e. the Koran), is losing much of his power to the Royal Omani Police, who are now responsible for handling everything from traffic violations to murders.

traditions have been easier to alter than others. Bedouin women, for example, may be grateful that doctors now check them for trachoma, an eye disease striking 95 percent of the population as late as 1975. But some remain reluctant to remove the *burqa* (face mask) for the examination. For its part, the government has been prudent in such matters. "It is a mistaken policy to impose things," noted Qabus in 1985. "They must be allowed to evolve quite normally."

In general, however, the inhabitants of both the interior and the coast have taken to modernity with better grace than some of their counterparts elsewhere in the Gulf. Paolo Costa, an Italian anthropologist who has spent more than 20 years in the Middle East, put it thus: "If I wanted to take a picture of an Iraqi and his camel, the Iraqi would want to smash the camera because I was an imperialist looking down on him for being primitive. In Oman . . . the man will tell you, 'Yes, fine-looking beast isn't it?' The Omanis are utterly secure in their sense of who they are."

Social mores tend to be more relaxed in Oman than in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, where, for example, the sale or consumption of liquor is completely forbidden. But in Oman, thirsty foreigners can go to bars in the Al-Bustan Palace, the Muscat Intercontinental, or other hotels. Omani women also enjoy much greater freedom, shopping at the *sug* in Matrah, Nizwa, or 'Ibri without veils and wearing brightly colored shawls. Some work as secretaries, teachers, factory hands, even policewomen.

The U.K. Connection

Omani women enjoy unusual opportunities in part because their country faces a chronic labor shortage. The population is growing at an annual average rate of three percent, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor now runs 10 vocational training centers. But Oman is still short of native mechanics, engineers, electricians, doctors, and teachers. From 1981 to 1985, as the economy grew, the number of foreigners employed in Oman rose by 64 percent. Egyptian and Jordanian teachers, Sri Lankan maids, Filipino nurses, Pakistani merchants, and Indian doctors and bureaucrats made up most of the 270,000 foreign workers who, in 1985, filled about two-thirds of all private sector jobs and one-third of those in the public sector.

If Omanis do not resent the presence of so many foreigners, it is because they are seen as necessary, or because they do the undesirable chores. But the presence of expatriate senior advisers, mostly British, in key ministries is another matter. Educated Omanis are anxious for these "expats," as the elite foreign group is known, to move on, and leave the directing of the country to its native sons.

The British presence has diminished since the early 1970s. Once-powerful royal counselors have gone home. But the British and

THE UNITED STATES AND OMAN

Few Arab nations boast such long-standing ties to the United States as Oman. After Sa'id bin Sultan signed a Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833, Oman became the second Arab country (Morocco was the first, in 1787) to establish diplomatic relations with the young Republic. Seven years later, Sa'id sent his 20-gun corvette *Sultana* to New York, bearing the first Arab envoy to the United States and gifts—including two stud horses and a gold-mounted sword—for President Martin Van Buren.

Despite the fact that unruly New Yorkers delighted in pulling the beards of the *Sultana's* crewmen, relations between the two countries got off to a cordial start. But only with the accession of Sultan Qabus bin Sa'id did Oman and the United States become close allies as well. In April 1980, for example, Oman served as a staging point for the ill-fated attempt to rescue the American hostages held in Iran.

Qabus sees the United States as a valuable ally against Soviet expansionism. To the Pentagon, Oman is a valuable logistical link for the forces of its Central Command, responsible for any future operations in the Persian Gulf. In June 1980, after being rebuffed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Carter administration secured Qabus's approval of a treaty that grants the United States access to Omani military facilities, as well as permission to pre-position munitions and other supplies. In return, Washington promised to upgrade four Omani bases at Khasab on the Musandam Peninsula, al-Sib near Muscat, Thamarit in the interior, and the island of al-Masirah.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed its work—valued at \$300 million—in 1985. Most of it was done at al-Masirah, built up by the British Royal Air Force during the 1930s and used as a training base during World War II. Its airstrip now has 12,000-foot runways—long enough for B-52 bombers—and storage tanks that hold six million gallons of jet fuel. A refueling stop for ships of the U.S. Sixth and Seventh fleets, the island sometimes serves as a base for antisubmarine reconnaissance flights by the U.S. Navy's P-3 Orions.

Qabus knows the 1980 treaty does not please some of his Arab brethren (notably Kuwait). He has stressed that U.S. forces can be introduced only “at the request of the majority of the Gulf Cooperation Council states in case of a direct threat which they cannot repulse with their own forces.” But the rules are sometimes bent. In 1984, U.S. commandos visited Oman to monitor the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner—an episode the Omanis officially deny.

Still, Washington has been careful to act with discretion. Mindful of the hostility engendered by a large U.S. presence in pre-revolutionary Iran, the United States maintains only a small military mission in Muscat. And while Qabus has said that he will not renew the current agreement (which runs until 1990), he seems relatively happy with the way things now stand. Indeed, in 1985 Minister of Information Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed al-Rowas told the *Wall Street Journal* that the U.S.-Omani accord could be “a model for a relationship between a superpower and a Third World nation.”

Omanis have not ended what British ambassador Duncan Slater called in 1985 their "broad, deep relationship." Almost 11,000 Britishers work in Oman as engineers, architects, bankers, businessmen, or consultants. British officers serve as chief of the Defense Staff, commander of the air force, and commander of the navy.* (Only in 1984 was an Omani appointed commander of the army.) Some 1,000 seconded and contract British officers are in the armed forces, and their countrymen are prominent in the intelligence services.

Business As Politics

The British influence is felt in less formal ways as well. Those Omanis rich enough to do so spend their vacations in London, where many own second homes. Although more Omani students now go to the United States for university training, a degree from Cambridge or Oxford commands greater respect. And if anyone hopes that, in Oman, there'll always be an England, it is Qabus himself. A dedicated Anglophile, he has flown in the London Symphony Orchestra for National Day, and played host to the Prince of Wales and his wife last November. He owns a country house in Berkshire. According to the London *Financial Times*, his palaces in Salalah and al-Sib are stocked with pieces of Crown Derby china on side tables and volumes of Wilde, Dickens, and Fielding in bookcases. He likes to give his British friends a helping hand. Reportedly at Qabus's insistence, a British company, Airworks Limited, got half of a \$50 million defense contract slated to go to the Vinnell Corporation, a U.S. firm.

In Oman, "conflict of interest," as American reformers know it, is an alien concept.† Unlike Saudi Arabia, where political power is concentrated among members of the ruling Saud family, in Oman only five of 23 members of the cabinet belong to Qabus's Al bu Sa'id dynasty. Most ministers are businessmen first and public servants second. The most talented are by no means the most powerful. As Roger Matthews, Middle East editor of the *Financial Times*, has noted, the "power wielded by an individual minister . . . relate[s] to his rapport with Sultan Qabus, rather than to the weight of argument he can marshal in cabinet."

Some ministers have not hesitated to turn the sultan's absolute power to their own profit. In 1974, for example, the minister of communications requested a "minute" of the sultan after a ministerial meeting. Without a formal, detailed presentation, he convinced

*The sultan's troops are widely acknowledged as among the best in the Gulf. Well trained and well equipped, the 16,500-man army, 3,000-man air force, and 2,000-man navy were allotted 46 percent of the national budget in 1985.

†A case in point: In July 1986, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission charged the Ashland Oil Company with paying one of Qabus's closest advisers \$29 million in bribes to secure an oil concession in 1980-83.



The best in the Gulf: Omani camels are highly regarded. So is Omani crude, low in sulfur and wax but expensive to extract.

Qabus to grant permission for a \$57 million desalinization and electricity facility (which would also water the gardens in the sultan's new palace). According to John Townsend, the final bill for the plant—including, of course, the minister's commission—came to \$300 million. Since 1981, the State Consultative Council has helped to curb such extravagances. For his part, Qabus has warned his ministers that "your business must not interfere with your service to your government and your people." But the sultan devotes more attention to military matters than to financial affairs, and he seems to have abandoned a 1982 attempt to draft a law regulating cabinet officials' participation in private ventures.

Qabus has spoken often of "the happy day . . . when more people will take responsibilities from my shoulders." In 1979, he told a *Time* correspondent, "I'd like to see us create a democracy for Oman, and I sincerely hope that day is not too far distant." Almost eight years later, he still shows little eagerness to yield real power, or to make his government more democratic. Unlike his counterparts in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Qabus does not hold a regular *majlis*, an informal conference in which ordinary citizens can present petitions and air their grievances. Instead, Omanis must wait for the two or

three times a year when Qabus sets off in a caravan to tour the land and meet with his subjects.

Some educated Omanis worry about Qabus's reliance on one-man rule. Most Omanis, however, seem to care more about whether the sultan will produce an heir—and thus continuity and stability—than about questions of participatory democracy. (His 1976 marriage to his uncle Tariq bin Taymur's daughter ended without child.) Qabus's autocratic reign is largely benevolent: There is no significant political opposition, underground or otherwise; Amnesty International knows of no political prisoners. If Qabus can continue to deliver economic gains to his subjects, he will likely encounter only occasional grumbling about his policies.

Empty Beaches

Thus, Oman's petrodollars have buttressed Oman's political stability. But what oil giveth it can just as easily take away: The global oil glut dropped the price of Omani crude from \$27.35 per barrel in January 1986 to \$8.20 per barrel seven months later. Not bound by OPEC's policies, Oman compensated by pumping more oil. Even so, oil revenues for 1986 will probably be half those of 1985. Qabus has cut government spending by 10 percent across the board and devalued the riyal against the dollar by the same amount. Projects called for under the third Five Year Plan (1986-90) have been canceled or delayed. Said Ahmad Makki, undersecretary of commerce and industry: "It is hard to plan what to spend when you don't know what your revenues will be."

Added to this uncertainty are the vicissitudes of foreign policy. True, Qabus does not have to worry overmuch about the remaining rebels in Dhufar, now no more than a handful. The rebels no longer receive support from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, with whom Oman exchanged nonresident ambassadors in 1985. But Oman occupies a peculiar perch in Middle East politics. Qabus is seen as an outsider by the sheiks and princes of the upper Gulf. The sultan's closest ties are to King Hussein of Jordan and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Unlike his fellow Arabs, he is more likely to speak of the "Soviet threat" than of the "Palestinian question," and he makes no secret of his pro-Western sentiments, as witness his current close relations with the United States [see box, p. 73].

Aware that some Arabs criticized Oman as a "client state" of the West, Qabus opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in September 1985—a move designed, as he remarked, to "keep people on their toes." He also believes that his control over internal matters stems to some degree from his ability to limit Oman's exposure to the outside world. Foreign newspapers, magazines, video tapes and the like are scrutinized carefully, and some are occasionally

banned. Most visitors, whether Arab or Western, must obtain a No Objection Certificate, and despite the obvious attractions of Oman's pristine seashore and rugged mountains, tourism is next to nonexistent. "Our people," observed Minister of Information Abdul Aziz al-Rowas in April 1986, "are not ready for bare-breasted [European] women on the beaches."

Perhaps so, but there are signs that official xenophobia may be getting out of hand. In February 1986, a royal decree went into effect banning all marriages between Omanis and foreigners (except citizens of other Gulf countries). The minister of justice invoked the "many social problems" that would result from children being raised under foreign influences. But to Omanis long used to marrying Muslim women from Pakistan, Baluchistan, and India, the ruling came as a shock, its prohibitions reminiscent of the bad old days of Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur.

In 1972, Qabus said of his father: "He didn't believe in change. His thinking went back to an age which is not this present age. So he had to fall from power, and this is what happened." Much has changed in Oman since 1970. Yet as historian John Peterson argues, "the post-1970 era should not be viewed . . . as the abrupt departure from the past that slogans such as 'new dawn' would have it."

The Sultanate survives as one of the world's remaining absolute monarchies—akin to those in Saudi Arabia, Brunei, and Nepal. If anything, it is stronger than in times past. The notion of a benevolent autocracy may affront many Westerners. However, for a variety of cultural and historical reasons, the Arab Middle East is not about to embrace the tenets of, say, Swedish democracy. Of the six nations belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council, only Kuwait has an elected body (the National Assembly)—and even that was suspended last July by Emir Jabir al-Sabah. But thanks largely to Qabus's stewardship, Oman has avoided the brutality, violence, and poverty that plague other Middle East nations variously inspired by Marxism, Arab socialism, or Islamic fundamentalism. In that respect, the years since 1970 represent an unqualified success story.

BACKGROUND BOOKS

OMAN

"The people of Muscat seemed to me to be the cleanest, neatest, best-dressed, and most gentlemanly of all the Arabs that I had ever yet seen," recalled J. S. Buckingham, a British traveler, after a visit in 1816.

Buckingham's observations are preserved in historian J. B. Kelly's **Britain and the Persian Gulf** (Oxford, 1968), a survey of British involvement in the region from 1795 to 1880. As Kelly makes clear, Britain's ever-growing commercial and political interests in the Gulf ensured that Oman saw more than its share of British adventurers, diplomats, and journalists.

Men like James Welsted, an Indian Army officer in Oman in the early 19th century, and Samuel Miles, British political agent in Muscat (PAM) from 1872-76, brought British influence directly to bear on the Sultanate.

Welsted's **Travels in Arabia** (J. Murray, 1838), a classic description of Oman in the early 1800s, traces its author's route through the interior and along the coast. Miles, combining diplomacy with exploration, traveled widely as "PAM," recording his impressions of Omani history and culture in **Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf** (1919; Cass, 1966).

Such personal recollections abound, as do elegant coffee-table books. One of the latter is **Oman and Its Renaissance** (Stacey International, 1977) by former British envoy Donald Hawley. Thoroughly researched, Hawley's photographic survey of Oman depicts everything from the green palm gardens of the Batinah coastal plain to the six-hundred-foot dunes of the daunting Rub 'al-Khali desert. W. D. Peyton's **Old Oman** (Stacey International, 1983), a compendium of portraits and landscapes dated 1900-70, complements Hawley's book with an earlier look at Oman.

Readers in search of good general his-

stories of Oman, however, will have to look hard. Maverick U.S. oilman and amateur archaeologist Wendell Phillips provides one of the few in **Oman: A History** (Reynal, 1967). Highly colorful, somewhat idiosyncratic, Phillips's account draws on Arab sources to describe such intervals in Omani history as the "pirate wars" at the turn of the 19th century. "The most troublesome pirate captain," writes Phillips, "was one Rahma bin Jaubir, the very type of the 'Barbary pirate' of fiction: he had the capture of entire fleets to his credit, he gave no quarter... his body and face were a mass of disfiguring scars."

Buccaneering aside, tribes have always supplied the structure for Omani economic and social life, and **Tribes in Oman** (Peninsular, 1982) by J. R. L. Carter describes them. Carter, a former tribal liaison officer for Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), outlines one fundamental division that persists in modern-day Oman: "the old rivalry between the town or *hadr* tribes, and the desert or *bedu* tribes." The *bedu* like to tell a story about a townsman who, sleeping in the desert for the first time, thought that the stars were the Devil's eyes and died of fright.

Carter finds that, though they may deny it, townsfolk and nomads rely on each other in a patron-client relationship.

Interdependence has not always meant peaceful coexistence, as the Dhufar Rebellion (1963-75) proved. In polyglot Dhufar, under the sultan's direct administration only since 1880, "ferment had been a... pastime for hundreds of years," writes Brigadier John Akehurst in **We Won a War** (Russell, 1982), his chronicle of the assimilation of the isolated southern province.

Akehurst recalls the *firqat* (Jibali tribesmen recruited to fight for the sultan) and their enthusiasm for their new cause. When shown battle films, "chosen

mainly for their visual effect," the *firqat* would get so excited that they would fire their rifles at the screen.

Fortunately, northern Omanis no longer say, "If you see a snake and a Dhofari on your path, kill the Dhofari first," notes journalist Liesl Gratz in **The Omanis: Sentinels of the Gulf** (Longman, 1982). Gratz, in a rosy account of her own sojourns in contemporary Oman, argues that modernization has not yet destroyed the Omanis' traditional patterns of life.

In Suhar the oil boom has changed the lives of the inhabitants only slowly. Anthropologist Unni Wikan's **Behind the Veil in Arabia** (Johns Hopkins, 1982) pictures the enduring separation of the sexes: Suhar divides "into male and female spheres, roughly commensurate with the public and private domains." Outside the home, Suhari women wear the *burqa* (face mask) as "a secluding and beautifying device," to them no more a symbol of oppression than a blouse is to a Western woman.

Based on contacts with Suhari women inside their homes, Wikan's book also discusses the *xaniths*, transsexual male prostitutes who style themselves women and are accepted as such by both sexes.

As toleration of the *xaniths* suggests, the old and the new may not be the polar opposites that many Westerners assume. J. E. Peterson argues in **Oman in the Twentieth Century** (Barnes & Noble, 1978) that even now "the new face of the country's politics [is] firmly rooted in pre-1970 foundations." Oil executives, for example, often rely on prominent sheiks, traditional arbiters, to act as intermediaries between the company and its tribal workers.

Even so, since Qabus's coup, the Omani regime has been "trying very hard to put a modern image before its own people and the world," comments John Townsend, former British adviser to Qabus, in **Oman: The Making of a Modern State** (St. Martin's, 1977). Remarkably candid, the book has been banned in Oman because of its mixed review of Qabus's government.

To Townsend, one of the more glaring failures of Qabus's regime is its failure to organize a system of water conservation and management. Qabus's top advisers apparently believe that it "is only a question of drilling [wells] in the right place"; as a result, "indiscriminate drilling and pumping" have caused irreversible damage to valuable ground water resources.

What happens to the "new" Oman depends as much on events outside its borders as decisions made within them. The Gulf states, argue the editors of **The Persian Gulf States: A General Survey** (Johns Hopkins, 1980), can be viewed as "a unit, with a common geography, history, economics, and culture." But political scientist David Long, in **The Persian Gulf** (Westview, rev. ed., 1978), thinks that differences predominate, with religious (Sunni versus Shi'a), ethnic (Persian versus Arab), and political (Marxist versus monarchist) schisms dividing the region.

Autocratic, multi-ethnic Oman will certainly feel the pull of other Gulf ideologies. But in **Arabia, the Gulf and the West** (Basic, 1980), J. B. Kelly emphasizes that the Omanis, looking to their long history, "have a tranquil pride which sets them apart." They are likely to defy easy prediction: "What the future holds for Oman is Oman's secret."

—Jennifer L. Howard

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jennifer L. Howard is copy editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*. Some of the titles in this essay were suggested by Calvin H. Allen, Jr. For related titles, see *WQ Background Books* essays on Saudi Arabia (Winter '79) and *Energy: 1945-1980* (Spring '81).