



*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.

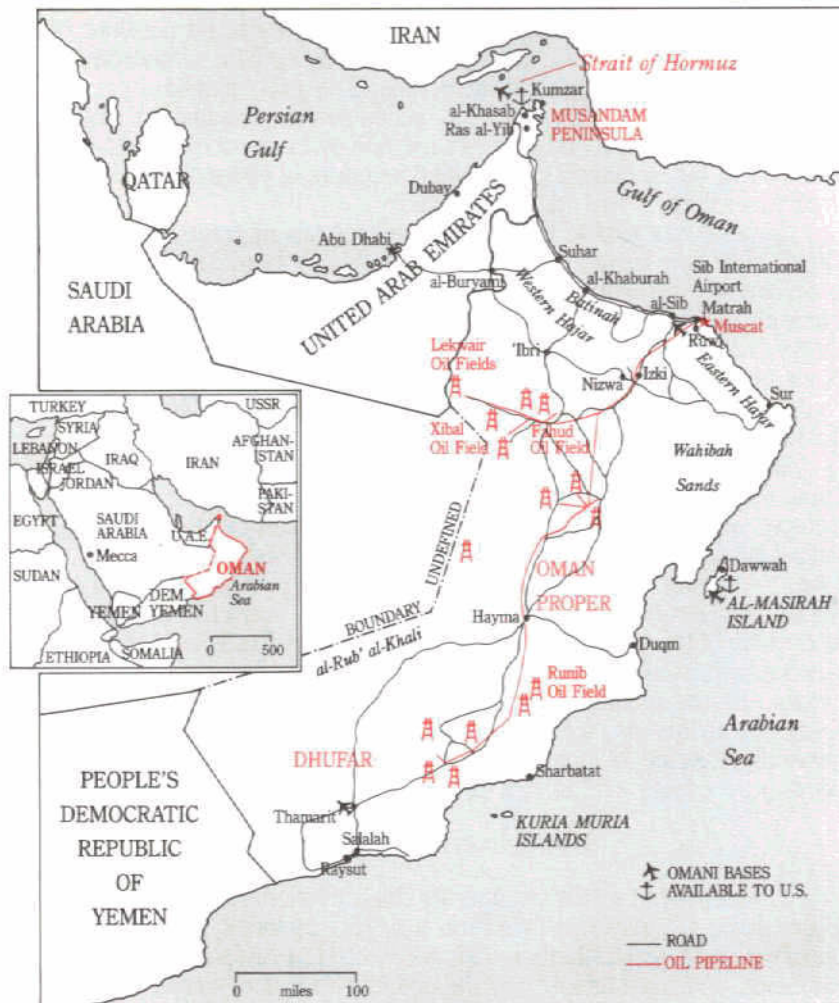
Roughly the size of Kansas, Oman is divided into three regions: Ru'us al-Jibal, also known as the Musandam Peninsula, a mountainous exclave jutting into the Strait of Hormuz; Dhufar, the southern province, by far the most pleasant part of Oman with its moderate temperatures and summer rains; and Oman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

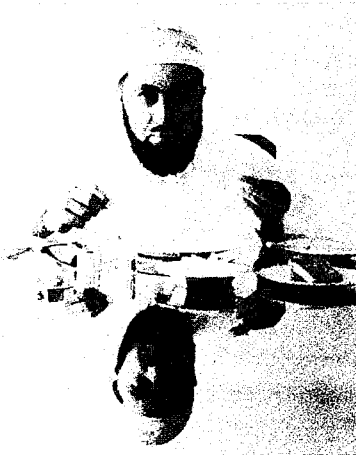
Outside the Women's Hospital in Muscat, modern medicine was virtually unknown in Oman. As Sa'id put it, "If we build clinics, many more will survive, but for what? To starve?" Public education consisted of three state-run primary schools. Sa'id's reasoning: "I cannot afford to pay good teachers." Religious 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.

