

Oman:

*Economic, Social and
Strategic Developments*

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CROOM HELM

London • Sydney • Wolfeboro, New Hampshire

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'Oman'. Is there a more evocative name to contemporary Gulf strategists? At the mere sound of it, images of the 'great game' — superpower competition, the jockeying of giants — drifts into the mind. Serious students of the Sultanate couple admiration for its people, culture and history with a keen appreciation of how Oman's policies and actions affect the well-being of others far beyond its shores. But who are its people and what has projected them into a position of such importance on the world scene? This brief essay on some of the distinguishing features of its history and recent developments provides a synopsis of why Oman, from an international perspective, really matters.

Auspicious Beginnings

The Sultanate constitutes one of the oldest communities in Arabia. A distinguishable ethnic and political entity as far back as two thousand years ago, its people were trading with distant lands as early as the third millennium BC. From the second century BC onward, Oman's Arab population played an especially important role in shaping the country's culture and in influencing its history and development. Oman was one of the first countries to accept Islam, and its mariners helped to spread the faith to distant lands. In the process, the country was a pioneer in establishing Arab and Islamic links with Asia, eastern and central Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Oman was also the first eastern Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with the United States — in 1833 — and in 1840 was the first Arab country to send an ambassador to the United States.

The Sultanate has often been contrasted with the Imamate of Oman, an institution out of which the Sultanate grew and which existed parallel with the Sultanate at various periods during the last two centuries. As a result of his success in driving the Persian invaders out of Oman in 1744, the founder of the current ruling family, Ahmad bin Sa'id, was elected imam. Over time, Al Bu Sa'id rulers dropped the title of imam and became known first as 'sayyids' and then as 'sultans'.

With the death of Sultan Sa'id in 1856, the fortunes of the Sultanate diminished and did not revive until 1970. Although Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur, who acceded to the rulership in 1932, was able to reunite the coast and interior in 1955, as well as suppress a rebellion in the late 1950s, he was unable to deal effectively with an externally-supported rebellion in the southern province of Dhofar during the 1960s.

Sa'id was eventually deposed in 1970 by his son, Qabus. Since then, the Sultanate has undergone a drastic transformation, breaking out of its isolation with an ambitious development programme financed by increasing oil revenues, which in the mid-1980s exceeded \$3 bn annually.

Global Constants and Regional Realities

Oman's global and regional significance derives in large measure from its geographic location. The Sultanate has a 1,200-mile coastline along the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is adjacent to the sea lanes leading to Europe and Asia, Iraq and Iran, and its fellow members in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The Sultanate is keenly aware of its pivotal position in terms of global real estate — at the north-western corner of the Indian Ocean, at the gateway to the Gulf. For these and other reasons — including, most recently, the fall of the Shah of Iran, the rise of Khomeini-inspired radicalism, and the Soviet invasion and occupation of nearby Afghanistan — Oman, many would argue, might well be spelled with italics by geo-strategic cartographers.

Certainly such features of the Sultanate's international significance — although hardly in need of underlining for Britain and numerous other countries — have become increasingly apparent to many Americans. Indeed, from the almost unending flow of first-time American official visitors to the country during the past ten years, it has seemed at times as though the Sultanate was being not so much discovered as uncovered, stripped bare, as it were, in the eyes of the global strategist and the military planner. A decade and more into the effort, there is every evidence that the ensuing gaze is still in place, having become for some almost a fixation. The consequences of this concentrated focus by one country on another from halfway round the world are, in their broadest outlines, already clear: they have reshaped

US thinking about the Sultanate's role in regional and world affairs and the implications of that role for allied interests and policies.

Viewed from a regional perspective, the Sultanate's geo-political importance not only to its fellow GCC members but also to Britain, the US and other Western powers, has more recently been heightened further by its location between two of the Middle East's more radical regimes: the Marxist-oriented People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) to the immediate south and the revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran across the Gulf to the north. Hardly less significant in this regard, since the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, is the fact that Soviet troops in that country, now numbering close to 100,000, have been positioned a mere 300 miles — less than an hour's flying time — from Oman's borders.

Omani Security, Regional Political Dynamics, and the GCC

Within a year after his accession to power, it became clear that Sultan Qabus was anxious to inaugurate a new era in Oman's relations with its neighbours. To this end, his early efforts in late 1971 were successful in establishing a degree of political and diplomatic *rapprochement* with most of his fellow Arab rulers. Parallel efforts to win from these same governments military assistance for the Sultanate's war against the rebels in Dhofar, however, proved far less productive. In the end, it was mainly Omani forces on the ground alongside an Iranian expeditionary force, aided by British, Pakistani, Jordanian and Indian advisers plus a limited degree of assistance from the United Arab Emirates, that brought the insurrection to an end in the autumn of 1975.

Scarcely had the Dhofar war been quelled than the Omani government began making preparations to host a major conference aimed at enhancing security co-operation among the Gulf states. Although the foreign ministers of all the Gulf states attended, the delegates to a November 1976 meeting in Muscat came away empty-handed, unable to reconcile the competing agendas for regional leadership pursued at the time by some of the larger states, most notably Iraq and Iran. Even so, Oman's active role in sponsoring the conference served notice of its serious interest in helping to force through a collective defence mechanism in the region.

For the next several years Omani diplomatic and defence specialists were to remain keenly aware of their limited leverage inside international councils on matters pertaining to their country's vital national

interests. Poignant reminders of the risks to Omani interests that could result from the Sultanate's non-participation in regional and international organisations were close at hand: Oman had not joined any of the most pertinent international bodies (i.e. the United Nations, the League of Arab States, and even the World Health Organisation) until the early 1970s. Indeed, it was a source of acute embarrassment and no small disappointment to the new government that, partly as a result of the previous policy of deliberate isolation from its ethnic and religious kinfolk, some Arab countries continued to recognise a group of insurgents who had opposed the Sultanate back in the 1950s. The reason for dismay was understandable: like their counterparts years later in Dhofar, the insurgents in question — followers of Imam Ghalib bin Ali, who had come into prominence in 1954 — were also externally supported but, unlike the Dhofar rebels, had long since been inactive.

From this perspective, it was therefore not surprising that shortly after the Iran-Iraq war broke out, Oman responded positively to Gulf-wide discussions concerning the urgent need for a central co-ordinating body. At an Arab summit meeting in Amman in November 1980, the Sultanate lost no time in communicating its wish to be an integral part of any such organisation that might emerge in which the goals for security and economic co-ordination of the other members would be broadly similar to its own. Important evidence of Oman's efforts to hasten the formation of an institution of this nature was its decision to host in Muscat the final preparatory meeting prior to the GCC's formal founding session, held in May 1981 in Abu Dhabi.

In keeping with these actions, Sultan Qabus, addressing his colleagues at the end of the Council's inaugural summit, was the first GCC head of state to 'go public' in insisting on the need for security co-ordination to proceed hand in hand with social and economic co-operation. As if to press the point home, Oman lobbied hard and in the end successfully for the view that a key position in the GCC hierarchy — Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, a post that also oversees the Council's diplomatic and security policies — should be held by an Omani.

Subsequently, Omani officials were as diligent as any of their counterparts from the other GCC member states in drafting working papers on Gulf security and defence questions. In conjunction with its expected high level of participation in these two fields, the Sultanate acknowledged the numerous benefits that could be gained from even a limited integration of its economy and logistical infrastructure with those of its neighbours. In furtherance of its view that there could be

no real advancement in the material well-being of GCC citizenry in the absence of enhanced regional, national and local security, the Sultanate stressed simultaneously that increased interstate co-operation in the fields of economic development, industrialisation and planning would benefit not only each state's military apparatus, but its internal security establishments as well.

The Sultanate's achievements from having participated in the GCC thus far are mixed. From one perspective, Oman's inability to persuade the Council that the GCC's \$2.1bn Gulf Investment Fund, agreed to in 1982, should be established along developmental instead of commercial (i.e. profit-oriented) lines was a disappointment. This precluded the prospect of Oman receiving as much as it had hoped in the way of development funds from a potentially important GCC economic institution. Council membership has also meant that Omani policies and actions have been exposed to more extensive and at times sharp criticism from some of its neighbours than the government would have preferred.

Such disappointments pale, however, in comparison with the benefits gained. These include:

i) the downgrading of Oman's territorial disputes with its neighbours to the extent that they have for some time now been treated inside the Council as procedural and administrative matters rather than, as previously, sources of inter-state rivalry or conflict;

ii) the quite significant amplification of Oman's voice in regional and international affairs;

iii) the enhancement of security co-operation with its neighbours through bilateral and multilateral military training exercises with the armed forces of other GCC members;

iv) the strengthening of both the Sultanate's position and those of the other GCC states against the revolutionary regimes in the area;

v) the abolition of tariffs in five regional (i.e. the other GCC states') markets on the export of numerous Omani goods and services;

vi) the savings gained on costly industrial and other developmental projects through co-ordination with fellow Council members; and

vii) the successful placement of one of its nationals in the bureaucratic and policy-making cockpit of GCC activities bearing on regional defence and diplomacy.

As it has done for the other Council members, the GCC experience has lessened the vulnerability that the Sultanate previously felt in acting alone. At the same time, the seriousness of the members' co-operative

orientation and the emphasis on deterrence in their defence and diplomatic policies has had two very beneficial results. First, it has reduced the potential for superpower conflict in the area. Second, it has helped to develop faster than would otherwise have been possible regional and national reservoirs of trained personnel whose skills are vital to the security and economic well-being of each of the member states.

In sharing the lessons of its considerable experience with externally-supported instability, Oman has helped, via GCC discussions and debate, to forge a perceptual and role adjustment among the members on matters pertaining to regional co-operation. The Sultanate has certainly spoken as consistently and convincingly as any Council member of the need for financial and military backing to increase the member states' internal and external security. In sum, the most all-pervasive benefit from Oman's membership in the GCC is that it has allowed the Sultanate to co-operate with others in economic, security, military and diplomatic fields in ways that would not have been possible if the Council did not exist.

The American Variable

While the foregoing developments have heightened US appreciation of Oman's changing international and regional role, there have been parallel changes in the US-Oman bilateral relationship. Such changes have been no less significant for their impact on the policies and attitudes of the two countries towards each other and, to a degree as well, on US-British relations with respect to Oman.

Viewed from the perspective of the mid-1980s, American firms and individuals are currently playing more important roles in Oman's plans for development than at any point in the history of the relationship between the two countries. Quite apart from the military component of the overall US involvement in contemporary Oman, Americans have been, and in some cases still are, involved in fishing surveys, the construction of processing plants for dates, the development of plans to mine copper, and the provision of agricultural, communications and computer technology expertise. Several companies — e.g. Amoco, Chevron, Mobil and Occidental — are partners in oil concessions. Members of the Peace Corps have served in Omani villages, several hundred Omani students are currently attending American universities, and a dozen Omani army officers are enrolled in professional

management and training programmes at leading US service institutions. Signifying the symbolic importance of Oman's substantially broadened strategic orientation to the West, Sultan Qabus himself visited Washington in January 1975 and again in April 1983. On both occasions, he completed a full round of meetings with every high-ranking American official involved in the US-Oman relationship.

Such a multifaceted character to the ties between the two countries, however, has not always been in existence. Indeed, although the Sultanate has always been geographically the most distant Arab country from the United States, and one that in modern history was largely isolated from most of the outside world until fifteen years ago, Omani-US ties have had a long, if chequered, history. Contacts date from the end of the eighteenth century, when US trading vessels first ventured into the Indian Ocean.

One of America's New England ships, the *Commerce*, was unfortunate enough to be grounded off the southern Omani coast in 1792, and the survivors were forced to undertake a gruelling overland journey to Muscat before finding passage to India. Notwithstanding this ill-omened first contact, American ships — especially from the port of Salem, Massachusetts — were frequent visitors to the important commercial centre of Muscat in the following years.

However, a few decades later, these vessels began to neglect Muscat in favour of other ports under the Sultanate's sovereignty. This development was largely due to the influence of one of Oman's greatest rulers, Sultan Sa'id bin Sultan (r. 1804–56), under whose leadership Oman experienced an impressive commercial boom and expansion into a maritime empire, particularly along the east African coast. By the 1830s, Sa'id had transferred his residence from Muscat to Zanzibar, and made the African island the headquarters of what was reputed at the time to be the largest fleet in the Indian Ocean. One of the Salem merchants who periodically visited Zanzibar was instrumental in laying the foundations for the aforementioned commercial treaty between Oman and the US in 1833, only the second American treaty with an Arab country.

Unfortunately, the promise held by these early contacts failed to blossom. With Sultan Sa'id's death in 1856, the African possessions of Oman were made an independent state and Oman itself suffered through a lengthy economic decline. Although the US maintained a Vice-Consulate between the 1880s and 1915, the office was generally held by a local merchant resident in Muscat. His duties were minimal, consisting of checking the invoices for a few shipments of dates to the

US and in watching over the small band of American missionaries in the country.

These hardy missionaries were members of the Reformed Church of America, with headquarters in New Jersey. At the turn of this century, the decision was made to establish the 'Arabian Mission' and members were sent out not only to Oman but also to Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq. Although the evangelical goals of its representatives were quickly curtailed, the missionaries came to perform essential services as doctors and nurses. A hospital was built in Matrah, the maritime entrepôt situated a short distance west of Muscat. This hospital, still in operation, albeit administered nowadays by the Omani Ministry of Health, constituted almost the sole source of professional medical care in Oman for sixty years. The rapport which the American medical missionaries established with the people of the country was remarkable. Some of them, such as Peter Zwemer, Paul and Ann Harrison and Sarah Hosman, found themselves in demand to treat Omanis in the interior of the country. These Americans were almost the only Westerners who were permitted to travel to the settlements of Oman's mountains and valleys, often at the express request of ailing tribal and religious notables.

Apart from the efforts of the Arabian Mission, American contacts with the Sultanate tended to diminish during the twentieth century, as the country became more and more isolated. Because of Oman's extreme poverty, such commerce as existed with the outside world remained very limited. Even the small date trade with the US disappeared. The American Consulate was closed and the building taken over by the British Government. If the US — or, for that matter, any other country — had any business to discuss with the Sultan, the British Government was simply requested to forward a message.

Thus, the British Government was responsible for arranging a round-the-world tour by Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur (r. 1932–70) in 1937–8, which included a journey across the US from San Francisco to Washington. Sultan Sa'id was greeted in the nation's capital by President Roosevelt. But thereafter US-Omani relations once again slid into inertia. Only rarely did American diplomats based elsewhere — most often in the British Crown Colony in Aden or at the US Consulate General in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia — visit the country.

The demands of the twentieth century, however, would not let Oman remain isolated for long. Outside agitation contributed to the aforementioned tribal insurrection in the 1950s and the Sultan's armed forces were required to put it down. The country's location at the entrance to

the region containing much of the world's oil reserves, at a time when the Nasserite version of Arab nationalism was at its zenith and the concept of non-alignment had begun to take root on a worldwide scale, made the Sultanate the object of American strategic interest, and a new Treaty of Friendship and Commerce was signed in 1958.

At about the same time, an American archaeological expedition working in North Yemen was forced to flee that country, and was welcomed to Oman by Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur. The expedition's flamboyant leader, the late Wendell Phillips, subsequently established a close personal relationship with the Sultan. Sa'id granted him concession rights for the southern Omani province of Dhofar and various American oil companies undertook drilling operations there up to the mid-1960s. All failed to find oil deposits of commercial value.

American concern over the situation in Oman deepened during the 1960s, as it became increasingly clear to Britain and others involved in monitoring events on the ground that the rule of Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur was unsuited for the challenges the country was facing, including a rebellion in Dhofar. Finally, a change in government in July 1970 saw Sa'id's son, Qabus, replace his father as Sultan.

As the new ruler, Sultan Qabus immediately sought to involve the country more actively in the affairs of the outside world and, towards that end, channelled the Sultanate's modest oil income into an ambitious programme of development. Muscat's century-old isolation was swept away in a burst of enthusiasm over the change in rulership, as the government was expanded, new buildings went up, and Omanis returned from exile abroad. The cobwebs which had long surrounded the Sultanate were swept aside and relationships were eagerly sought with many states around the world. For the first time, Oman became a member of the Arab League and the United Nations. After a hiatus of over 130 years, an Omani ambassador returned to the United States and the first US Ambassador to Oman took up residence in Muscat.

The Defence Dimension and Inter-allied Co-operation

The chronological coincidence of Oman's need for new allies at roughly the same time as the US needed to improve the prospects for regional co-operation in the Gulf could hardly have been more fortuitous for both sides. Oman, for its part, immediately broadened the base of international strategic, diplomatic, political, military and even economic support for a range of issues bearing on its security and

stability. The US, in turn, was accorded privileged access to and a heightened degree of influence with an Arab country which, after Saudi Arabia, was arguably, then as now, the most strategically important of all the Arabian peninsula and Arab Gulf states.

It was in the nature of the Sultanate's needs and US interests at the time that efforts to upgrade Oman's defence posture figured prominently in the minds of Omani and American planners. Fortunately, owing to major contributions by British military advisers and trainers, Oman's armed forces, although small (all three services number just over 23,000), were considered by most analysts to be among the most capable in the Arabian peninsula. Much of their stature in this regard was the result of the land forces' experience in the Dhofar rebellion from 1965 to 1975. Of additional importance in the period since then have been the accelerated training programmes and arms purchases made possible by increased oil revenues over the past decade. Despite these advances, the Sultanate, by its own admission, has not yet reached the point of being able to deter an attack by one or more of its neighbours solely by itself, a situation that remains a source of concern not only to Omani military tacticians, but to British, and, to a lesser extent, American personnel involved in the Sultanate's military modernisation efforts.

US interest and involvement in these matters date from the early 1970s, when Oman first became eligible to purchase US weaponry. Although minor purchases were made in 1975, little else occurred until after the seizure of the US hostages in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Seven months later, a US-Oman military access agreement was signed. In exchange for assistance in upgrading four of Oman's airfields and the provision of military and economic credits, the agreement stipulates that US forces, upon the Sultanate's invitation, be allowed access to Omani military facilities in the event of a regional confrontation requiring Western intervention. Pursuant to this agreement, the Sultanate has been the only GCC member state — and apart from Morocco, Egypt, the Sudan and Somalia, the only Arab country — to conduct joint exercises with US military forces.

Compared with the several hundred British military personnel serving in the Sultanate on secondment and private contract, the number of US forces on duty in Oman seems tinier than minuscule. Their military presence consists of an Army Corps of Engineers contingent, separate army and air force attachés, a security assistance officer, and a small technical assistance field team given the task of

training Omanis on the six M60A1 tanks purchased from the US in April 1980. Beyond the modest-sized staff of the US Embassy, a somewhat broader diplomatic and developmental face to the essentially strategic nature of the relationship exists in the form of a US-Oman Joint Commission on Economic Co-operation, also dating from 1980. Far less noticeable or permanent, the aforementioned Peace Corps volunteers in the health and education fields, civil aviation specialists on loan from the US Federal Aviation Authority, and an authority on agriculture at Qabus University, scheduled to receive its first students in 1986, have been at work in Oman.

All of which, by US standards and British vernacular, might be reckoned to be small beer. But much more in the way of inroads than this, however desirable in the eyes of some Americans, would be unrealistic in the light of prevailing circumstances. One of the reasons is that the US lacks now, as it has always lacked, the historically far more intimate ties that Great Britain long enjoyed with the Sultanate via a special treaty relationship which permitted British involvement in Oman's civil and military affairs.

In the absence of a comparable history, which in the contemporary era is out of the question, it is difficult to imagine the mechanism by which a US presence of any greater size or depth than that already achieved might be possible — or, one could argue, even desirable. As it is, considering regional realities and US global concerns, a case can be made for the view that, in terms of its relationship with Oman, the US could hardly be situated in a more advantageous position from which to pursue its national, bilateral and regional security interests.

This is not to say that, from the perspective of a military tactician or crisis manager, the arrangements in force between the US and Oman on regional security matters are adequate — either in terms of what might be necessary for dealing with worst-case scenarios or even low-level regional conflict. Neither is it to say that anything near the optimum has been achieved in the matter of allaying the suspicions, mistrust and competitive one-upmanship that periodically characterise the relationship of the Anglo-American actors on whose joint efforts a significant portion of the prospects for regional security co-operation are ultimately hinged.

Even so, the US has been exceptionally fortunate in the degree of inter-allied co-operation to date. The gaining of such strategic assets as conditional access to the Sultanate's military facilities, and permission to pre-position supplies, lengthen runways and make other improvements to the above-mentioned facilities in order to render them

compatible with American specifications can hardly be likened to 'small beer'. On the contrary, they represent extraordinary breakthroughs that are the envy of other countries with similar interests in the region. Each of these benefits, it needs to be stressed, was granted by a country which has had valid reason to ponder the potential effects of agreeing to such arrangements for its domestic legitimacy and for its political acceptability regionally.

Neither have such gains been cost-free in terms of the overall Anglo-American alliance. Indeed, many British officials and private citizens alike have viewed these developments as akin to an American juggernaut galloping through the Gulf. If the perceived aim, however remote, is to substitute US for British favour — in terms of jobs, corporate profits, tax monies and national balance-of-payments assets — an understandable British response would be to want nothing of it. In Oman, just as anywhere else, the existence of different agendas tends to undermine the extent to which a co-operative spirit, even between such long-standing allies as Britain and the US, can be nurtured among the parties concerned.

The reluctance of various elements within the British public and private sectors to accommodate the perceived American juggernaut can be attributed only in part to reasons of economic self-interest. To the extent that the economic dimension is an important one, the facts in this regard would appear to speak for themselves. In this context, there is no denying that Oman represents an especially lucrative market for British goods and services. Fully a quarter of the Sultanate's total imports — nearly four times the volume received from the US — come from Britain. The other side of the ledger is equally impressive: whereas the US purchases an average of 6 per cent of Oman's total exports, Britain's share of what Omanis sell to the outside world is less than 1 per cent.

Such figures indicate the substantial balance-of-payments benefit which Britain derives from its relationship with Oman. Moreover, these figures translate into economic and social benefits which are hardly less impressive. Indeed, directly connected to the one billion dollars in annual export earnings which Britain derives from its commercial relationship with the Sultanate are an estimated 30,000 British jobs. Such realities bear heavily on the livelihoods of approximately 120,000 British citizens.

By these lights alone, one can easily empathise with — perhaps even endorse — the rationale behind the British Prime Minister's seeming double-speak when, for example, in one breath she informs President

Reagan that the US can rely on Britain's wholehearted support in working out co-operative security arrangements for the Gulf and, in the next, indicates to her countrymen at home and in Oman that it would not be in their interests to let the Americans any further into the Sultanate than they already are.

On matters concerned with regional security co-operation, such Anglo-American differences in outlook and approach have been a source of continuing frustration for various US military strategists and armaments manufacturers. Unmindful of the frequent discrepancy between rhetoric and reality condoned by their own and most, if not all, other governments in comparable situations, such strategists and corporate marketing representatives all too often cite the misleading, unfair and irrelevant factor of 'British obstinacy' as a major obstacle to effective inter-allied co-operation on regional security matters that pertain to Oman. The arguments of these individuals are primarily technical and encompass the following:

i) How can a Western *cum* US commitment to deter aggression and defend the Gulf be deemed credible in the absence of a region-wide movement towards standardisation of equipment and inter-operability of weaponry?

ii) How can Saudi Arabia, with its primarily US arsenal, and Oman, where most of the military hardware is of British manufacture, be expected, at present or at any time in the near future, to be the credible linchpins they must be in any intra-regional defence mechanism?

iii) With this in mind, is Saudi Arabia to be expected to adapt its equipment to the Omani arsenal instead of the other way round?

iv) If the former, how might a bilateral *cum* multilateral force, thus structured, be expected to deter Soviet, Iranian, South Yemeni, or even Israeli adventurism better than, or as well as, one based primarily on US standards?

However valid such a narrow US line of reasoning might be from the perspective of long-term military hardware strategy, many British defence specialists, and quite a few Omanis, fault the analysis for its failure to appreciate numerous other factors which, in terms of their real and potential impact on Oman's overall security equation, are of equal if not greater importance. Among such British and Omani-voiced reservations are the following:

i) American defence specialists are relatively new to Oman — read

untried, untested, possibly even untrusted — in comparison with their British counterparts;

ii) by virtue of their considerably greater exposure to the area over a period spanning many generations, British expatriates serving in the Sultanate, much more so than their US counterparts, tend to be far more knowledgeable of and sensitive to the dynamics of the regional, national and local security environments;

iii) British foreign affairs practitioners in general, and 'old British Arabian hands' in particular, unlike their counterparts on the US side, continue to derive subtle influence due to the fact that more than a few of their number were intimately involved in the accession to power of a majority of the incumbent GCC heads of state;

iv) there is something to be said for the reputed existence of more than 100 British Members of Parliament who support the Palestinian right to self-determination as the key to solving the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, by contrast, not much to be said about the fact that the MPs' American counterparts number as yet fewer than a dozen;

v) British diplomats, military spokesmen and representatives of armaments manufacturers — in most cases unlike their American competitors — can more nearly be taken at their word when they assure Omanis and other GCC states' nationals interested in purchasing advanced military technology from Britain that the attendant political and legal problems will be minimal, if not non-existent. By contrast, in view of Saudi Arabia's, Kuwait's and Jordan's experiences with AWACS and Stingers (shoulder-fired anti-aircraft weaponry), Americans, in conversations with Omanis and others in the GCC, cannot be so reassuring.

Even so, despite these and other legitimate questions by British and Omani officials alike about US credibility on sensitive security and political matters, the extent of meaningful inter-Allied co-operation has been impressive. The US and Britain, for example, are co-operating in helping Oman to improve its maritime surveillance capability; in integrating the new Omani consignment of British-made Jaguar fighter planes into the US-assisted facilities for modern aircraft at Masirah; in holding periodic joint consultative sessions in London and elsewhere; and in liaising with other GCC states with which the two countries have a relationship. Given the circumstances noted above, the extent to which Britain has accommodated basic US needs and interests towards the improvement of regional security has been exceptional. The US, on its side, has briefed senior British military personnel serving with the

Omani forces at the US Central Command headquarters; arranged for tours by Omani air force officers and their British advisers of facilities at such major US armaments manufacturers as McDonnell-Douglas, Northrop Corporation and General Dynamics; and agreed to let a British firm receive a portion of a contract that, under normal US regulations and practice, would have been awarded to an American company.

In addition, the US has spent more than a quarter of a billion dollars in connection with holding three joint training exercises with Omani forces in 1981, 1982 and 1983, and in improving facilities at Masirah, Khasab, Thamarit and Sib, including provisions for fuels and ammunition storage, housing, landing-strip extensions, new electricity generating and desalination plants, aircraft maintenance and warehousing. As Anthony Cordesman has noted, the improvements to the facilities at Masirah alone 'will give Oman a modern air base to cover its seacoast that is outside the effective range of most Iranian and Yemeni fighters, and the tacit guarantee of over-the-horizon reinforcement from the US without having sacrificed any aspect of Omani sovereignty'.¹

Some problems, however, seem likely to remain for a good while into the future. Among the ones that US security assistance officials cite in their very limited success to date in integrating US equipment standards with Omani organisation models and command and control systems, as well as basic logistics, are the following:

i) training abroad for members of Oman's armed forces is carried out primarily in Britain; the US offers alternative training for professional military education, but such training quite obviously diverts Omanis from the Sultanate's normal training pattern;

ii) in the US efforts to win the Omani Government's agreement in principle to utilise fully American training opportunities and to assist Oman in planning and implementing a US training programme, both the Omanis and the Americans have encountered the above-mentioned resistance to change among vested interests;

iii) although Omanis have shown interest in acquiring additional military equipment of US manufacture, including the acquisition of an advanced interceptor aircraft, the sales have been made dependent upon external financing and more favourable terms for price and delivery versus competing equipment. With the US Government opposed to providing the external financing, because of budgetary constraints, and such potential sources as the GCC oil producers unlikely to do so in the

light of their own cashflow uncertainties and other reservations of a political nature, the US may be caught in a classic bind of its own making.

Beyond these considerations are those of a more fundamental nature, at least in terms of the short-run prospects for human resource development and absorptive capacity. In this regard part of the problem is attributable to serious constraints in the area of manpower training and education. These problems, in turn, are compounded by the fact that the Sultanate's national income is substantially less than that of any other GCC state, with the possible exception of Bahrain, and that it has had to come such a long way since 1970, when it had only one doctor, three elementary schools and less than ten miles of paved roads. With a population of less than a million in what is the Arabian peninsula's second-largest country, Omanis themselves acknowledge that there are limits to the extent that they can be expected to manage and staff the Sultanate's four main airfields and its several naval facilities, at least for the next few years.

In addition to the internal variables, Omanis, Britons and Americans alike acknowledge that there are international ones which are also substantial and difficult to solve. Among the most worrisome is the Soviet-supported PDRY, also known as South Yemen. The Omani Government knows that its air force is smaller than — and not superior to — South Yemen's. The Sultanate's apprehensions have been heightened by an awareness of its less-than-perfect air and maritime defence system and Soviet access to the PDRY's naval facilities at Aden and the Indian Ocean island of Socotra. Of additional concern is Soviet access to PDRY land bases — and a soon-to-be-completed new air base — near the Omani border. From a military perspective, Omani and GCC strategists alike are well aware of the need to strengthen the Sultanate's southern defences in order to block the potential expansion of Soviet influence into the Gulf.

Another of the Sultanate's major defence concerns — and one of immense importance to allied interests — remains the situation in and around the Strait of Hormuz. The Iran-Iraq war, plus higher maritime insurance rates and a lower level of Middle East oil production, have reduced considerably the volume of traffic through the Strait. Nevertheless, the stakes remain exceptionally high for the many who are dependent on free passage through the waterway. Just under half of all the oil produced by the OPEC countries leaves the Gulf through Omani waters along the Strait. Viewed from the outside-in, the Strait acts as

a pathway to oil reserves estimated at approximately 350 billion barrels. In such circumstances, the certainty of outsiders being able to transit the waterway at will remains exceptionally problematic. In the event of a blockade, the results could be catastrophic for more than a few countries. In the short term, the United States and Britain could rely on their own sources of energy in event of the Strait being closed. The same, however, cannot be said for many others. Indeed, some three-quarters of Japan's oil and nearly half of continental Europe's oil originate west of the Strait, inside the Gulf.

On the northern side of the Strait, Oman faces the revolutionary government of Iran, which has declared all of the governments on the south side of the Gulf, including Oman's, to be illegitimate. As nearly all of the Strait's shipping passes through the Omani and not the Iranian side of the waterway, this has elevated the Sultanate's role as a guarantor of safe passage through the Strait. To date, however, neither its own small force of half a dozen patrol boats nor the fleets of all the other GCC states combined can make any pretence of being able to perform this role on their own. Rather, it has been American, British and other Western ships stationed in the Indian Ocean augmenting Oman's naval force that have helped deter adventurism by Iran and others.

The rationale behind Oman's abiding concern about the Islamic Republic of Iran is well-founded. Iran represents a double threat to the Sultanate, which is one of the many countries to which Tehran would like to export its revolution. No less pertinent is Oman's concern that the Soviet Union — quite possibly via the guise of citing insecurity along its southern flank — might consider military intervention in Iran in the event that the Islamic revolution there falters. Additionally, Omani strategists give credence to the view that any number of scenarios evolving from the Iraq-Iran war could end up pushing Iran closer to Moscow, thereby drastically upsetting the existing strategic and military balance in the area.

In conclusion, all of the foregoing is but to underline the context and rationale for heightened regional and allied involvement in planning for the security of the Gulf. The growing significance of Oman to both GCC and Western planning interests in this regard is beyond argument. Regardless of the nature, pace or extent of progress on this front in the immediately foreseeable future, the Sultanate is likely to continue to serve simultaneously as guarantor of one of the world's most strategically vital lifelines — regardless of the day-to-day ups and downs of its growing defence and security relationships with the United States,

Britain and others — and as an increasingly important actor in the Gulf region.

Note

1. Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability* (Westview, Boulder, 1984), p. 619.