BRITISH INTERESTS AND THE USE OF INDIAN RESOURCES IN THE PERSIAN GULF DURING THE OMAN REVOLT (1913-1920)

Y. D. Prasad

The Sultan of Oman became important with the discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf. He came into prominence after the bloodless coup of 1970. But even before it, geographical proximity to and cultural affiliation with India made Oman very significant in relation to British imperial interests in the area and the use of Indian resources here during the age of Neo-Imperialism.

Oman lies at the extreme southeast of the Arabian peninsula, occupying a land area of some 120,000 square miles. It is bordered on the north by the United Arab Emirates, by the Rubal Khali of Saudi Arabia in the north and west, and by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the extreme west. It has a coastline of some 1,000 miles from the strait of Hormuz in the north to the Yemen border, although the Musandam peninsula in the north is separated from the main part of Oman by a strip of land belonging to the UAE.[1]

It is the geography of Oman which has affected its history and its people, both of which have developed seperately from the rest of the peninsula. The differences in development from other Arab neighbours have been accentuated in Oman by the influx of African people which resulted from Omani involvement in the slave trade.

Britain became heavily involved in the affairs of Oman in early 19th century. Mainly through the Indian goverment, the involvement became economic as well as military. It was only the British support that sustained the Sultanate of Oman once Zanzibar was separated from her in 1861 in return for an annual subsidy. Britain undertook the payment of this subsidy in 1873 in return for agreements concerning the suppression of the slave trade.[2] The intervention of the Government of India in the dynastic disputes, the deportation to India of claimants of pretenders and the diplomatic and armed assistance lent to the Sultan when his authority was being challenged by the more conservative of Omani tribes, resulted in British predominance in the affairs of Muscat. An agreement with the British government was signed by the Sultan in 1891 under which he bound himself and his successors never to make any alienation of territory, whether temporary or permanent, in favour of any power but Britain.

The Sultan's total dependance on Indian government was

demonstrated in 1899 when he was publicly humiliated on the decks of British warship. Internal unrest was the by-product of this general debility, and armed attacks from the interior became a regular event. The Sultan only retained his power by buying off the attackers, thus increasing his dependance on Britain and on the Indian merchant community from whom money had to be borrowed. When the tribes revived the office of Imam and a joint tribal revolt took place in May 1913, it was only British forces in the form of Baluchi troops that prevented the Imamate forces taking Muskat. It was only as a result of British mediation (Wingate) that the Treaty of Al-Sib was signed on 25th September 1920 by which the governments of the Imam and the Sultan agreed that they would coexist in peace.

The Revolt of the Oman tribes under the leadership of their elected Imam Sheikh Salim bin Rashid-al-Kharusi against the Sultan was the outcome of more that 60 years of active opposition based on religion to the ruling house by the Oman tribes.[3] Since the middle of the eighteenth century sovereignty was vested in the person of the Ruler, known variously as Saiyid or Sultan. The office of Imam was never, either during that period or before it continuous. However, the election of an Imam was a fundamental principle among the Ibadhi Muslims but in practice it was not carried out by a plebiscite. The people to a certain extent had a voice in the election, but only through their chiefs who assembled in solemn conclave under the presidency of one of their number to discuss the merits of the competing candidates. The elections usually took place at the capital (until 1779); the capital was located in various interior towns (including Nazwa, Bahla and Rustaq), and the resident *gadhi* and notables exercised a predominant influence in the council. The occasion generally drew many people to the capital who awaited in the vicinity of the chamber the outcome of the deliberations. The individual elected received first the recognition of the electors, after which the president publicly proclaimed him Iman before the assembled crowds. The latter tendered the Imam their allegiance by acclamation.[4]

Actually any elected non-hereditary or hereditary religious leader or anyone qualified who leads the prayers in an Islamic country is an Imam. It is to be noted that the Omani tribesmen have never referred to the Imam of Oman and the Imam has never referred to himself as such. The holder of the offcie has always been Imam al-Muslimin, Imam of the Muslims, a title not restricted to Oman, because the Omani Imams have considered themselves to be Imams of all the world's Muslims and are, in theroy, bound by religious law to force recognition from neighbouring countries in Islam. As the Omani Imams have never commanded great military strength, this has always remained in the

realm of theological theory.[5]

Although election to the Immate is supposed to be valid for the life of the individual, the practice has been otherwise, and in cases where an Imam's supporters deserted him, his abdication was virtually automatic; Ibadhis are in unanimous agreement that there can be no obedience to the Imam who deviates from the law of God. At the same time, an Imam cannot resign his office if the electors still feel he is fit to continue, for he has a double responsibility to God and to the people.[6]

Besides religion, foreign interference particularly British was a major cause of the Oman Revolt of 1913. A brief perusal of the treaties and engagements with the rulers of Muscat show that the British influence had been entirely self-interested, it paid no regard to the peculiar political and social conditions of the country and its rulers, and by bribing effete Sultans to enforce unpalatable measure which benefitted none but the British and permitting them to misrule without protest had more to alienate the interior and to prevent the Sultan from re-establishing their authority than all the rest put together. In other words it has been support wrongly applied, in money and not in essentials, interference in external affairs which must have seriously reacted upon internal peace and no palliative except money which was thrown into the sea or worse by those into whose hands British put it. The result was that they were reduced to the absurd position of supporting by armed force under their treaty obligations a ruler against whom most of his subjects were in open rebellion, who was theoretically independent and yet who would be driven into the sea in a day if it were not for the British.[7]

The immediate cause of this civil strife was the stoppage of the importation of arms. The Sultanate, due to its strategic maritime position, for considerable time been the favoured centre for a major illegitimate arms traffic originating from the third Afghan War of 1880. When European manufactures dumped quantities of small arms, on to the west Asian market by 1891, arms imports accounted for over a quarter of Muscat's 4,000,000 rupee import income. In 1897 more than 30,000 breach loading rifles mainly of British and French origin, were imported into Muscat, making it the greatest market for arms of precision in the region. However, in 1910 Sultan Faisal had prohibited the export of guns and ammunition to Bahrain and Kuwait.[8]

An explosive situation was created in 1912 when the Anglo-Indian government convinced Sultan Faisal to set up a warehouse in Muscat to supervise the import and export of all weapons and ammunition in and out of Oman. Under this arrangement the Sultan agreed to establish at Muscat a bonded warehouse under sufficient control, in which all

arms and ammunition would be deposited on importation, the warehouse to be incharge of a trustworthy person from among his subjects. All issues from the Warehouse would be regulated by special licences prepared by the Superintendent and countersigned by the Sultan personally, and such licences would be issued only to individual purchasers or their authorised agents subject to satisfactory proof that the issue involved was "free from Justifiable, objection". Licences would not be issuable to traders.[9]

The terms on which the Sultan agreed to this settlement were as follows: He was to receive as compensation an immediate lumpsum payment of 1 lakh of rupees, together with 1 lakh of rupees per annum in the future, paid monthly in advance. In addition he was to receive compensation for certain specific losses in 1909 and 1911. The Sultan was further guaranteed that the British Government would give him all the necessary support to dispose of objections that might ensure that French or other Powers; that no right was given by the arrangement to British Government or their officials to take action in his territories any more than in the past, and that a friendly understanding should be reached with him by the British HM Government as to suitable arrangements for the support of the bonafide needs of his administration and his subjects.[10] For the British, the 1912 arms trade agreement put an end to the security problem caused by "gun-running" in the Persian Gulf, but for Sultan Faysal and his government the conclusion of the agreement precipitated one of the most dangerous crises ever faced by an AI Bu Sa' id regime.[11] It was the final proof of total subservience to Christian foreigners and of his heretic tendencies. The sultan's reliance on British military aid and his acquiescence - grudgingly given though it was - to British views in regard to the slave trade were well known. It is true that once Sultan Faisal established the warehouse he thought that he would benefit politically because he could prevent the interior tribes from arming themeselves with guns that could be turned against him. The only thing wrong with this assumption by the sultan was the fact that the Omani tribes had been acquiring stocks of new, serviceable rifles and ammunition for some 20 years. The tribes were armed to the teeth already; the door had been closed too late.[12]

There were three main conservative factions. The most doctrinaire group was that of Shaikh Abdullahibn-Humayd al-Salimi, a blind religious scholar well versed in Omani history and conservative Ibadi ideology. Al-Salimi was strongly supported by his son-in-law. Shaikh Salim ibn-Rashid al-Kharusi of the Bani Kharus, a Ghafiri tribe that provided many Ibadi imams in medieval times. The champion of the conservative Hinawi tribes was Isa ibn-Salih, tamimah of al-Hirth, the martial tribe that supplied the hard core of conservative military

strength. Shaykh Isa was a forceful and intelligent leader whose orientation was basically political. He was inspired by a desire to assure the autonomy of his tribe, its supermacy among the Hinawis, and his personal leadership in conservative councils. Not as doctrinaire as Al-Salimi, Isa ibn-Salih, although he took his religious views seriously, was willing to consider expedient political compromises. Another among the major conservative chiefs, and a new source of strength for fundamentalist Ibadism, was Shaykh Himyar ibn-Nasir al-Nabhani, tamimah of the Ghafiri bani-Riyam. The Bani-Riyam had remained aloof from Azzan ibn-Qays Imamate and the conservative cause generally until the early twentieth century. Fears that his autonomy and the Ibadi faith were being threatened by increased foreign meddling in Oman undoubtedly caused Shyakh Himyar to embrace the conservative programme.[13]

The revolt started in 1913 when the tribes revived the office of Imam joint tribal uprising took place in May of that year. One of the longest lapses in the Imamate occurred after 1871 when Saiyid Azzan bin Qais, a regularly ordained Imam was killed by Sultan Turki. A successor was not elected until the year 1913, when several tribes of inner Oman, representing certain isolationist factions of Ibadhi zealots, revolted against Sultan Faisal and chose Salim bin Rashid al-Kharusi of Tanuf, nephew of the blind Ibadhi historian Al-Salimi as the first Imam of the twentieth century. These extremists of the interior, representing a temporary healing of the Hinawi-Ghafiri breach, considered the slave traffic essential to their social and economic system. They were anti-foreign and objected to treaties with infidel power and to any control over the arms traffic; they even maintained that the imposition of custom duties lacked the Prophet's sanction and was therefore impious.[14]

The conservative coalition was forged in two stages. First Himyar ibn-Nasir, al-Salimi and Salim ibn-Rashid al-Kharusi joined forces, engineered al-Kharusi's election as imam at Tanuf in May 1913 and set out to attract the rest of the Ibadi community to the newly restored imamate. The conclave of religious scholars who ratified the restoration of the Imamate also declared the Sultan Faisal ibn-Turki was deposed, that he was dissociated from the affairs of the Muslims (the Ibadis) and deprived of any role in their realm, his decrees becoming null and void. Thus, it is clear that originally the new regime aimed at establishing an Imamate like that of 1868-71 which would include all Oman - Muskat and the coast, as well as the interior. In June 1913 Nazwa was taken; in imitation of its ancient status it became the Imam's capital. Then in July the neighboring Omani town of Izki capitulated. Meanwhile, most of the tribes of Uman - both Ghafiri and Hinawi -

offered their allegiance to the new Imam. The fact that Ghafiris as well as Hinawis were attracted to al-Kharusi's white banner and that they were among the leaders and organizers of the Imamate was most significant because one of the main reasons for the failure of Azzan ibn-Qays government and the subsequent lack of permanent conservative successes against the moderate sultans in Mascat was the absence of extensive Ghafiri participation in the fundamentalist movements. Isa ibn-Salih, after reading the signs, joined with the Imamate in July 1913 and immediately became one of its most influential figures. His adherence solidified a conservative Hinawi-Ghafiri alliance of formidable proportions which remained strong for over 40 years under the unifying aegis of the Imams.[15]

The early successes of the Imam's forces started giving anxious moments to the British. Major S. G.Knox, the British political agent in Maskat, became so alarmed at the possible consequences of the progress of the Imam's cause that he sent a letter to Nazwa in July 1913 stating that the Anglo-Indian governmet would not allow Maskat and Matrah to be captured. The Imam wrote back tersely that the British should not interfere in the affairs of the Ibadis. Under the circumstances it was only prudent for the British to land a small Indian Army detachment at Matrah in July to signal the Anglo-Indian government's resolve to live up to its commitment to defend Sultan Faysal. Nevertheless, in August the Sultan's position became precarious as the Wadi Samail passes and the town of Samail itself were overrun by the Imam's adherents. Now Mascat and Matrah were directly managed by a regime whose declared intention was to depose the Sultan. As such in September 1913 the Anglo-Indian troop strength was doubled and the soldiers moved into entrenchments at Bayt al-Falaj at short distance inland from the twin port cities.[16]

Sultan Faisal ibn-Turki died on 4 October 1913. He was succeeded by his eldest son Taimur ibn-Faisal then 27, who had taken an increasingly active role in his father's government. Inheriting a nearly empty treasury as well as a shaky throne, Sultan Taimur tried as best as he could to reverse the tide of events by inviting his old acquaintance Isa ibn-Salih to Mascat in December to parley with him. The talks were inconclusive, however, and in the spring of 1914 the Imam was gaining adherents even among the coastal tribes. After the seaport towns of Barka in al-Batinah and Quryyal, about 40 miles south of Mascat, were taken over by conservative forces. Sultan Taimur ibn-Faisal controlled little more than Mascat and Matrah, Sur, Suhar, and a few small al-Batinah ports. But in April 1914 the conservatives received their first check when gunfire from H.M.S Fox and Dartmouth

drove them from Barka and Quryyat. Following century old policy the British would tolerate no threat to their hegemony over the Gulf's shores. But the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 meant that British ships and military forces would no longer be available to support the Sultan on a few hours' call. Meanwhile, German propaganda reputedly filtering into Oman via Zanzibar and German East Africa (Tanganyika) was spreading the message that British dominance in the Persian Gulf region would soon be a thing of the past. Nevertheless, in August 1914 more Anglo-Indian soldiers arrived to defend Sultan Taimur. When Imam Salim and Isa ibn-Salih made their long-heralded assault upon the capital in Junuary 1915, Mascat's defenses were ready.[17]

The attack was made by 3,000 men against 700 well-entreched Anglo-Indian soldiers. The Imam's confident army fell on its outnumbered but well-trained, disciplined foe in a frontal charge in full daylight. This lack of any semblance of martial guile resulted in so terrible a slaughter that the Imam's now discouraged army withdrew into the highlands and Mascat has not had to endure any attacks since. The coastal regions were cleared of remaining imamate forces when Sultan Taimur led a force against the previously troublesome bani-Battah tribe in July 1915 and forced them to surrender their tribal seat, Hayl al-Ghaf, as well as the port village of Daghmar, a place located south of Mascat, where a fortified outpost was constructed. Despite rumours that a conservative thrust against Sur was imminent in October 1915, the Sultan did not have to contend with any more moves toward the coast mainly because of the presence of British forces in the area.[18]

A five-year long succession of half-hearted negotiation attempts started between the Sultanate and Imamate. These began on the initiative of India's viceroy, Lord Hardinge, who during a visit to Mascat in February 1915 offered the services of the British political agent as a mediator. While the Sultan eagerly accepted Lord Hardinge's suggestion, the Imam's followers looked on the British overtures as a sign of the Sultan's weakness and forthcoming collapse; morevoer, they apparently wondered how impartial a mediator any British officer would be, given the fact that scores of their comrades had been killed by Anglo-Indian troops just a month earlier. Nevertheless, formal contacts began in April 1915, followed in May by talks between Isa ibn-Salih and the political agent. These contacts continued sporadically throughout the summer of 1915 when, after it became clear agreement was impossible at the time, they were shelved.[19]

The conservative demands put forth during the course after the negotiations are interesting because they throw light on the aims of

the Salim a-Kharusi regime, and also because many of them were incorporated subsequently into the Treaty of al-Sib of 1920 which ended hostilities between the Sultanate and imamate. Finally the following terms were arranged. The Sultan's Government would:

1. Reduce the Zakat on all goods coming into the coast towns to 5 per cent.
2. Guarantee safety and freedom for Omanis in the coast towns.
3. Remove all restrictions on the entry of Omanis into Muscat and Matrah.
4. Return fugitives from their justice and not interfere in their internal affairs.

The Omanis would—

1. Remain in peace with the Sultan, not attack the coast and not interfere with his Government.
2. Permit freedom of trade and travel in Oman and guarantee the safety of travellers.
3. Would return and not protect fugitives from the Sultan's Justice.
4. Would hear hte claims of traders and others against Omanis according to Shara.[20]

At various points in the negotiations the conservatives argued that they were not opposed to a British presence in Oman but that they did wish all British troops removed from the country. Also, they said that they regarded the Sultan as a heretic because he did not conform to their version of Ibadi practice, and they maintained that the British should not support him in matters contrary to religious truth. A general complaint against the British from the Ibadi point of view was that the Westerners permitted the forbidden, such as the import and sale of wine and tobacco, but forbade the permitted, such as the trade in slaves and arms. Further, the conservatives denied the right of the British to claim the command of the sea, which, they said, should be open to all, and attacked the practice of forcing all ships engaged in overseas journeys to go first to Mascat to pay duties. The conservative negotiators also alluded to the fact that the people of Oman were suffering from the continued fall in the value of the dollar and the concurrent increase in the price of food and cloth. These conditions, of course, had been developing over many decades, but the general economic dislocations that resulted from World War I heightened the distress; the British and the Sultan were blamed for the difficulty in any case. This complaint also shows that the blockade that had been imposed on all imports into the interior was causing hardship there. Another economic criticism of the conservatives was that members of interior tribes - particularly al-Hirth - who owned property on the coast and in Zanzibar, or who were owned money by people who lived in these places were unable to supervise their business interests or settle claims. As might be expected, the right to trade in slaves and arms was defended. Specific complaints against the Sultan's government, besides that of general irreligiousness, were that its justice was corrupt,

that favouritism was shown to friends of the palace, that Ibadi religious law has been abandoned, and that the ruler's income, largely mortgaged in advance to Hindu businessmen, was used to support a large and unnecessary list of officers, relatives of the Sultan, and various hangers on. Despite this catalogue it was stated that the conservatives were willing to regard the Sultan "as ruler of Oman" if the Imam actually administered the country according to religious law either personally or through a representative at Mascat. Thus, it appears that the conservatives were willing to compromise — to the extent of leaving the Sultan on his throne if he were willing to become a puppet of the Nazwa authorities.[21]

Sultan Taimur rejected the conservative demands and became convinced that the Imam did not want peace because he refused to return the Wadi Samail forts even though Isa ibn-Salih seemed ready to do this in the interests of securing peace. In any event, the Sultan and his British allies adopted a defensive stance along the coast while the Imam proceeded to consolidate his grip on interior Oman. In August 1917 young Ahamd ibn-Ibrahim, a nephew of the last Imam Azzan ibn-Qays, but also a cousin and a friend of the Sultan, was forced out of al-Rustaq by Imam Salim ibn-Rashid as the climax of a conservative drive which secured the Hajar mountain valleys north of Wadi Samail. Once again Isa ibn-Salih disagreed with the Imam, the Shaykh preferring to leave Ahmad ibn-Ibrahim in al-Rustaq. The expulsion served to heal once and for all the century old breach between the Qays ibn-Ahmad and Sultan ibn-Ahmad branches of the Al Bu Said family, and Ahmad ibn-Ibrahim fled to Mascat where he became a trusted aid of the moderate regime [22]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Frank, A. Clements, *Oman*, World Bibliographical Series, Vol. 29, Clio Press, Oxford, 1981.
2. Ibid.
3. India Office Library and Records, Political and Secret Subject Files (London), Affaris of Muscat State and the Inauguration of Administrative Reforms, (3 June 1921), R.E.L. Wingate, Political Agent in Muscat to The Deputy Political Resident in Bushire, Confidential No. 2052; 14 October, 1920, L/P&S/10/427, p.2
4. Wendl Phillips, *Oman — A History*, Longman London, 1967, P. 155.
5. Ibid, p. 156.
6. Ibid.
7. L/P&S/10/427, p.2.
8. Phillips, p. 157.
9. J.G. Laithwaite, Muskat, 1908-1928, Political and Secret Memrorandum (25 August, 1928), L/P&S/18/B400, p.3.
10. Ibid., p.4.
11. Robert G. Landen, *Oman Since 1856 A Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1967, p. 391.

12. Ibid., p. 392.
13. Ibid., p. 393.
14. Phillips, p. 156.
15. Landen, p. 394.
16. Ibid., p. 395.
17. Ibid., p. 396
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p.397.
20. L/P&S/10/427, p.8.
21. Landen, p. 398.
22. Ibid., p. 399.