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Author(s): Neelofar Firdous

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OMAN FROM INDEPENDENT COMMERCIAL POWER TO BRITISH SEMI-COLONY, 1832-1914

Neelofar Firdous

In the early nineteenth century, Oman occupied a remarkable position by being the centre of an extensive trade carried out by Omanis both in the Far East and East Africa. Sayyid Said (1807-1856) the Sultan of Oman, had great interest in his commerce and his port of Zanzibar. In 1832 Said decided to make Zanzibar his capital and himself settled there. He began to rule Oman from East Africa. The main reason for his choice of Zanzibar as capital was its excellent strategic position. Zanzibar was destined to develop into the chief centre of trade for the whole of East Africa. His long absence from Oman after 1832 encouraged other European powers to establish trade in Oman. Sultan Said established friendly relations with Britain to protect the security and stability of his country. On the other hand, Britain was interested in Oman in order to maintain her supremacy in the Indian Ocean.¹ British interest in the Persian Gulf was also driven by its desire to control all possible routes to India.²

Sultan Said encouraged European merchants to settle in Zanzibar for carrying out their trade. In 1833 he concluded a commercial treaty with the United States of America and in 1837 an American consulate was opened in Zanzibar.³

Britain realized that European powers like France, as well as America, which were interested in Gulf of Oman and East Africa, would be a possible threat to her position in the Arabian Sea. So the British concluded a treaty of commerce with Sultan Said in 1839, preceded by one in 1822, and followed by that of 1845, for the purpose of suppression of slave trade.⁴ The slave trade with East African countries formed a substantial part of the economic base of Omani sea-borne enterprise. Sultan Said promised the British that he would not allow the sale of slaves to any European nations in Oman. The British by the order of the Sultan had a free hand to seize all Arab vessels carrying slaves. Finally, the treaty of 1873 absolutely prohibited the importation of slaves into Oman and required the closure of public slave market in Oman.⁵

Prior to the 1860s a great variety of products including luxury items, wine, tobacco and silk formed items of trade at Muscat because of its function as an entrepot. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century

trade items like rice, cloth, yarn, sugar were also imported into Oman. Her main export items were dates, other fruits, fish and pearls. Two areas of illicit commerce on which some information is available are slaves and arms. From 1890 onward and in the early twentieth century arms used to be smuggled from Muscat into Asian countries.⁶

The import (but not the ownership) of slaves was made illegal in Oman after 1873 and the arms trade, although legal in Oman, was not legal in many of the Middle Eastern countries to which Muscati arms merchants transhipped their weapons such as guns, rifles etc. In the mid-1830s and 1840s Muscat was a great market for slaves, and supplied them to the entire Persian Gulf, littoral countries and various parts of Iraq and Iran. The trade was immensely profitable for Sultan Said's government.⁷

In the 1860s the slaves trade in the Persian Gulf began to decline noticeably, largely due to the British navy patrols, although according to one estimate 4,000 to 10,000 slaves were still sent to the Gulf from East Africa each year during this decade.⁸ The last quarter of the 19th century was a period of political upheaval in Oman, which had a damaging effect on its trade.⁹

Before the opening of the Suez canal, trade goods exchanged between the Middle East and India used often to be shipped from or to Muscat, thus making it an entrepot of some eminence. But the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 shifted the main line of trade, not only from the Cape of Good Hope, but also from Muscat to Port Said in Egypt. Furthermore, as the British domination of trade in the Indian Ocean area increased, commerce shifted from the silver to the gold standard. Oman's *MariaTheresa* dollar, which was based on silver, suffered a depreciation when silver prices fell in the late 19th century.¹⁰

One important effect of the decline of Muscat's trade was that the rulers of Oman became more and more dependent upon Britain. Britain controlled the payment of the Zanzibar subsidy (given to the Muscat rulers in lieu of loss of revenue from their African possessions).¹¹

Between 1874 and 1884 British antislavery cruisers effectively throttled the slave trade. But between 1884 and 1902 the slave traffic revived somewhat, partly because a sizeable number of slavers operated under the protection of the French flag.¹²

French activities in the Gulf were centred on the Sultanate of Muscat. French citizenship and the French flag were granted to the inhabitants of Sur. In 1896 Shaikh Zayed accepted French protection. The French tried to establish a coal depot in Bandar Jisseh close to Muscat while they also established their influence in south of Muscat

for their shipping.¹³ Lord Curzon, on the other hand, objected to the Sultan's grant of Bandar Jisseh to the French in 1899. The French were alleged to have conducted extensive anti-British propaganda and played a crucial role in promoting arms trade in Muscat. The principal aim of the French in all their activities was to undermine British influence and extend their own.¹⁴

The large scale transport of slaves in the Indian Ocean littoral ended in 1902 with an intervention by the Portuguese.¹⁵ But the major issue between Britain and France was over the arms trade in the Gulf of Oman. This trade began in the 1880s and was originally handled by both British and French companies. During the 1890s Muscat became its chief centre in the Middle East. In 1898 the British realised the arms trade was directly connected with the troubles on the Afghan-Indian border.¹⁶ This can further be corroborated by Lord Curzon's view who is said to have perceived the danger of illicit arms trade on the frontier of Oman Gulf and was determined to take all necessary steps to control it. But the main obstacle was the French presence at Muscat. By an exaggerated assessment this was seen as dangerous for the British position in India and the Persian Gulf.¹⁷

The British advised the Sultan of Oman to establish an official force to control the traffic.¹⁸ In March 1902, a local agreement was reached between the British Political Agent in Baluchistan and his counterpart on the Persian side to keep an eye over the problem of arms supply in their respective areas.¹⁹

The Anglo-French Entente of 1904 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 completely transformed the international scene. France now recognized British supremacy in the Gulf of Oman as well as in the Persian Gulf.²⁰

But the Entente failed to bring to an end Anglo French rivalry over Oman.²¹ The arms trade continued unabated until 1914 — despite of Britain's blockade of the Gulf between 1907 and 1913 and her constant protests to the French. The French tolerated arms trading in the Gulf because of similar British trade in Morocco (which led to the infiltration of weapons through Algerian frontiers).²²

Sultan Saiyed Faisal-bin-Turki of Oman had agreed not to allow the export of arms through Muscat to India and Persia. In 1898 he had also empowered Britain to act on his behalf by making use of her naval force within the territorial waters of Muscat. In 1903 he further agreed to search operations by Britain and Italian ships on persons of Muscat domicile suspected of carrying arms on the high seas.²³

The agreement to control the arms traffic was finalized in May 1912. Sultan Faisal agreed to establish at Muscat an arms warehouse

under adequate control.²⁴ Finally, Britain succeeded in establishing her influence in the Gulf of Oman and her prestige was considerably enhanced with the construction of a telegraph network on the Persian coast, in Bushire, Bahrain, and the Trucial coast.²⁵

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