

Britain and Oman: Will Their Growing Special Relationship Survive Succession?

Britain is seeking ever closer relations with its longstanding Gulf allies, at the expense of promoting positive regional change

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Sixty years ago, Britain won a long-forgotten [war](#) in Oman, setting the special relationship between the two countries that is still being boosted today.

The anniversary falls as the head of the British army recently [visited](#) Oman, and as the two countries [signed](#) a “Comprehensive Joint Declaration on Enduring Friendship” and a new Joint Defence Agreement. Last year, the two [cooperated](#) on the UK’s largest military exercise in the Middle East in 20 years.

The UK’s growing support for Oman’s ruler, Sultan Qaboos, is as extensive as it is ignored in the British media. But a key question looms: who will succeed the sultan after his death, and will London then continue this special relationship?

‘Not a great deal of hope’

The 1957-9 war in central Oman defeated an uprising threatening the rule of Sultan Said bin Taimur, one of the most repressive regimes ever seen in the Middle East. [Declassified files](#) show Britain’s chief diplomat in the region, George Middleton, recognising that: “The condition of the people is miserable, the Sultan is unpopular, there is no central administration ... and, under the present regime, not a great deal of hope for the future.”

But that didn’t stop Britain from coming to the aid of the sultan, who kept hundreds of slaves at his palace in Salalah, deploying the Royal Air Force (RAF) to bomb the rebels from the air “to show the population the power of weapons at our disposal” and to convince them that “resistance will be fruitless and lead only to hardship”, [the files show](#).

Former prime minister **Harold Macmillan** approved the bombing of water supplies and agricultural gardens – civilian targets that constitute war crimes – to “deter dissident villages from gathering their crops” and to promote “denial of water supply to selected villages by air action”. The Special Air Service was also deployed in late 1958 and captured the rebels’ final stronghold the following year.

The rebellion that broke out a few years later in Dhofar province in southern Oman also prompted British intervention. The Dhofar uprising was “an indigenous rebellion against the repression and neglect” of the sultan, the Foreign Office later [privately noted](#).

With barely any schools or health facilities in the country, even by 1970 it was forbidden to smoke in public, to play football, to wear glasses, or to talk to anyone for more than 15

minutes. The sultan's response to the uprising was to use even greater force – largely from British officers, who controlled Oman's military.

A giant British base

When the British realised the sultan might not win the Dhofar war, their military advisers in Muscat overthrew him in a [palace coup](#) in 1970 and installed in power his son, Qaboos, who has remained there ever since. Oman became, in effect, a giant British military and intelligence base.

Files leaked by Edward Snowden [show](#) that Britain's GCHQ has a network of three spy bases in Oman – codenamed Timpani, Guitar and Clarinet – which tap in to various undersea cables passing through the Strait of Hormuz into the Arabian Gulf.

These bases [intercept and process](#) vast quantities of emails, telephone calls and web traffic. The information is then shared with the US National Security Agency.

Britain has just established a large, new military base at the Duqm port complex in central Oman, which will house the two [65,000-tonne](#) aircraft carriers being built for the Royal Navy. This will [provide](#) “a strategically important and permanent maritime base east of Suez, but outside of the Gulf” and “serve as a [staging post](#) for UK Carrier Strike Group deployments across the Indian Ocean”.

A new [Omani-British Joint Training Area](#) is also being established in Oman this year to facilitate a permanent British army presence in the region. The relationship is solidified, as ever, by arms exports: Oman imported [\\$2.4bn](#) worth of arms during 2014-18, of which the UK was the largest supplier.

Economic interests

British commercial interests in Oman are also growing, especially in oil and gas, which accounts for [30 percent](#) of Oman's GDP. Shell has a [34 percent interest](#) in the Petroleum Development Corporation, which manages the country's oil, while BP has a 60 percent interest in the massive Khazzan gas project, in which it has invested [\\$16bn](#).

These interests are tying the UK still further to the sultan's regime, which is authoritarian and repressive even by Gulf standards. Political parties are banned and political meetings are [likely to result](#) in arrests. Although Oman has elections to its lower house, the body is largely toothless.

Sultan Qaboos [formally holds](#) the positions of prime minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, chairman of the central bank, and minister of defence, foreign affairs and finance.

While Oman has made major economic progress in recent decades, portraying it as a benign dictatorship is misleading. In 2014, a UN special rapporteur [described](#) a “pervasive culture of silence and fear affecting anyone who wants to speak and work for reforms in Oman”.

Last year, Oman introduced a new penal code that contains harsh penalties against free speech and other rights, and gives [sweeping powers](#) to authorities. It provides for [jailing anyone](#) who publishes material that poses “a challenge to the rights of the Sultan and his

prerogatives, or disgraces his person” or which “undermine the stature of the State”.

Human rights abuses

Britain’s active support for the sultan’s regime was confirmed in 2017, when Middle East Eye [revealed](#) that the Police Service of Northern Ireland had run programmes training Oman’s police, military and special forces in how to manage strikes and protests.

London remains silent on Oman’s human rights abuses, while [stressing](#) their “exceptionally close relationship”. Indeed, when the recently-sacked UK defence secretary, Gavin Williamson, was in Oman in February 2019, he [praised](#) the “statesmanship, the knowledge, the wisdom” of the sultan, even describing him as a “visionary”.

Alan Duncan, a British foreign minister, is a regular guest of the sultan and has visited Oman 24 times since 2000, according to the British parliament’s [register of financial interests](#). These trips have been mainly paid by the sultanate. Three visits have taken place since Duncan became minister of state in July 2016.

But will Britain maintain its special relationship when the current sultan dies? Qaboos, who is 78 and has suffered from colon cancer since 2014, has no heirs and has not formally designated a successor. Oman’s Basic Law [stipulates](#) that the next leader must be a male descendant of Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan, the sultan of Muscat and Oman from 1871-88.

The two most commonly mentioned frontrunners are Qaboos’s cousin, Sayyid Asaad bin Tariq al Said, and the latter’s son, Taimur.

Business as usual

Asaad, the deputy prime minister, regularly meets foreign diplomats on behalf of Qaboos and is believed to be the most likely [successor](#). Asaad was, like Qaboos himself, trained at the UK’s military training centre at [Sandhurst](#) in the 1970s before becoming an army commander.

Taimur, who is just 39, was described in a US State Department [cable](#), revealed by Wikileaks, as “personable, affable and informal”. He studied for four years in the UK, in Brighton, Galashiels in Scotland and London.

The UK will be using its connections with the coterie surrounding its current placeman in Muscat to help ensure more of the same upon Qaboos’s passing.

Britain’s exit from the European Union is prompting the British government to seek ever closer relations with its longstanding allies in the Gulf. This will continue to be at the expense of promoting positive political and economic change in the region.

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