

Largest Protests Since Arab Spring Sweep Oman as UK Support for Regime Rises

By [Phil Miller](#)

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[Declassified UK](#)

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As Oman’s UK-trained police confront popular protests against unemployment and corruption in the dictatorial Gulf state, the British military prepares to deploy an aircraft carrier to a new UK naval base in Oman, and the head of the Royal Air Force praises his Omani counterpart.

Britain’s closest ally in the Gulf has been rocked by three days of protests in the largest show of dissent against its unelected Sultan since the Arab Spring in 2011.

Police have fired tear gas, deployed armoured vehicles and mass arrested protesters, raising concern over the British government’s extensive support for Oman’s monarchy.

It comes as Britain’s new aircraft carrier set sail on [Saturday](#) on a voyage that will see her stop off at the UK’s growing naval base in [Duqm](#), Oman, and with the head of Britain’s Royal Air Force currently meeting his Omani counterpart.

Thousands of Omanis are protesting against high levels of unemployment and corruption, as well as police crackdowns on their initial attempts to demonstrate.

All political parties are banned in Oman where it is a criminal offence to insult the Sultan, who rules with absolute power. The only independent newspaper, *Al Zaman*, has been shut down for attempting to cover corruption.

Declassified recently showed that [until](#) at least last year, Oman’s ruler was secretly advised by a British-dominated privy council that held midnight meetings at his lavish palace. Its members have included General Nick Carter, the current head of the British [military](#) and Richard Moore, the chief of intelligence agency [MI6](#).

Other high-level advisers to the Sultan have been Mervyn King, the former governor of the Bank of England, and [Lord Geidt](#), an ex-private secretary to the Queen who is now responsible for stopping corruption among British government ministers.



British advisers dominate the Sultan's privy council. (Photo: In the Thick of It)

It is not known whether the Sultan followed all the economic and strategic advice provided by his privy council, but Oman spends more on its military per person than almost any other country in the world and has a vast national debt.

Much of the regime's military equipment has been bought from British arms companies, which have received billions of pounds from Oman since the Arab Spring in 2011.

Those protesters were partly placated when Oman's then Sultan, Qaboos bin Said, created [10,000](#) new jobs in the police force. However such short-term tactics to reduce [unemployment](#) have saddled his successor, his nephew Haitham bin Tarik, with more national debt, a problem compounded as [revenue](#) from oil reserves fell 35% at the start of 2021.

Anonymous opposition sources inside Oman told *Declassified* last week that discontent about the economy was at an all-time high and had risen since our privy council revelations. People were afraid to speak out openly for fear of reprisals and some worry that Oman's newly expanded cyber security apparatus could intercept their messages.

GCHQ, Britain's electronic surveillance force, has [three](#) listening stations based at secret locations in Oman. In addition, Crossword – a cyber security company chaired by Richard Dearlove, a former head of MI6 who sat on the Sultan's privy council – [announced](#) last week that it was setting up its Middle East headquarters in Oman.

Despite concern at being monitored, on Sunday morning people gathered outside the labour ministry in Sohar, an industrial city in northern Oman. They were almost immediately arrested by large numbers of riot police, but a handful of photos from the protest went viral and trended in Oman on Twitter.

Another group of around 30 men attempted to protest in Sohar on Monday morning, but were surrounded by a similar number of riot police vehicles and taken away in a police coach. Almost identical scenes were repeated in Salalah, a city 850 km southwest of Sohar.

A larger group then gathered near the labour ministry in Sohar where they were chased away by riot police. Some protesters resorted to throwing stones against well-protected police units, who responded with tear gas.

The British government approved the [export](#) of £16.6-million worth of tear gas to Oman in August 2015, and has allowed smaller quantities to be shipped there in the last 12 months, according to research by Campaign Against Arms Trade.

Oman's police have also had extensive training from the UK, including at the College of Policing in Britain as well as [public order](#) sessions with officers from [Northern Ireland](#) and its state-owned company, NI-CO.

The training is currently being delivered through the Foreign Office's [Gulf Strategy Fund](#).



**DREW HARRIS OBE
DEPUTY CHIEF CONSTABLE**

Our Ref: Com Sec 1715061

25 April 2017

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Drew Harris'.

PSNI SUPPORT TO THE ROYAL OMANI POLICE

I wanted to advise you that a further request has been received from the Royal Omani Police as part of the ongoing support from PSNI, requested by the British Embassy.

On 6 and 7 May 2017 Assistant Chief Constable Barbara Gray, Superintendent Muir Clarke and [REDACTED] will travel to Oman to take part in a Strategic Public Order event, sharing their experience in relation to delivering successful policing operations.

The visit will last three days (excluding travel) and will be fully cost recovered.

If you require any further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to let me know.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Yours Sincerely J A Harris'.

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The Police Service of Northern Ireland trained Oman's riot police in 2017. (Photo: Declassified UK)

As smaller groups of protesters continued to march around the streets of Sohar on Monday morning, armoured vehicles belonging to Oman's army were seen approaching the city and police set up roadblocks.

Almost 100 serving British troops are [on loan](#) to Oman's military and UK army officers serve in Omani armoured units and military intelligence. Their rules of engagement are [classified](#), but early versions show they were permitted to assist with internal security.

By midday on Monday, riot police were seen snatching individuals from the streets of Sohar and officials warned people not to film the security forces or discuss them on social media platforms such as WhatsApp.

Local media were also censored by the information ministry while state TV initially ignored the protests, belatedly publishing some photos from the protest only once they were being reported by international media.

Later on Monday fresh protests broke out in Salalah, in support of the activists in Sohar. Many of the protesters in Salalah appear to come from the mountainous Dhofar region, which has a long history of resistance to the Omani Sultans and fought against British special forces in the 1970s.

Their protests continued late into the night and were met with a markedly smaller police presence. By the end of Monday, the police released many of the protesters who had been arrested.

However, this concession did not stop an even larger wave of protests starting on Tuesday morning, as youths in Salalah returned to the streets at first light.

Protests also took place in at least eight other cities: Sur, Nizwa, Ibri, Ibra, Rustaq, Suwayq, Al-Khaburah and again in Sohar.

Nabhan al-Hanashi, a political exile and chairman of the Omani Centre for Human Rights, told *Declassified* that the protests should not come as a surprise.

“The people in Oman, especially the unemployed, were waiting for reforms to take place a long time ago,” he commented. “During the last days of Qaboos they were silenced. When Haitham took over, he promised the people he would do lots of reforms and hold corrupt officials to account. But nothing happened.”

An activist in Oman, who asked to remain anonymous for safety reasons, told *Declassified*:


“As an Omani citizen I feel upset that we carry the Omani government’s mistakes. We as people don’t have a real opinion on the laws. We cannot oppose the government and there’s no freedom of expression to demand our rights, so we protest with our brothers and sisters for justice and fighting the corruption that is covered up by powerful figures in the government. We demand freedom of media, more power to the people, jobs and economic reforms.”

Oman protests 25 May 2021



Key

 Protest

 UK naval base

Map: Phil Miller/Declassified UK • Created with Datawrapper

The head of Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF), Sir Mike Wigston, [met](#) his Omani counterpart amid the protests on Tuesday morning and described him as a "great" friend. Around 24 RAF personnel are on [loan](#) to Oman, including pilots and engineers. Historically, Oman's rulers have used aircraft to attack opposition groups.

Police tactics on Tuesday varied from place to place, with some protesters being given water bottles while others were pursued by riot police. A water cannon and armoured police trucks were seen inside Sohar, where protesters staged a sit-in at the site of the old Globe Roundabout, which was a centre of demonstrations during the Arab Spring.

Experts told *Declassified* the water cannon may have been produced by a South Korean arms [company](#).

Andrew Smith from Campaign Against Arms Trade told *Declassified* his group was particularly concerned by videos showing Omani police firing tear gas.

"The regime in Oman avoids a lot of the international scrutiny it deserves, but these images show the repression that it uses to entrench its authoritarian rule," he said.

"For decades now, the UK has armed and supported the Omani dictatorship, helping to secure its position regardless of the threats and abuses that are inflicted on opponents.

"As long as the UK and other arms-dealing governments are arming human rights abusers, there will always be a risk that those weapons are used in this way.

"The arms sales are also a sign of political support and often go hand-in-hand with an intense political and military collaboration - such as in the case of Oman where the UK has military bases and a long history of military training.

"There must be a full investigation into whether UK-made tear gas or other weapons have been used in the attacks, and an end to the shameful policy that allowed for them to be sold in the first place."

Last month, Oman's former foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi [predicted](#) another Arab Spring could soon sweep the region "because nothing changed" since 2011.

The UK Foreign Office would not tell *Declassified* when Britain last provided public order training to Oman's police. Instead, a spokeswoman said:

"The UK urges all countries to uphold the rule of law. We are aware of demonstrations in Oman are monitoring the situation closely."

Under Oman's Basic Law, any "associations whose activities are inimical to social order" are illegal. The UK Ministry of Defence did not respond to *Declassified's* questions about whether British troops were assisting Oman's response to the protests or whether General Carter still sat on the Sultan's privy council.

Last night, Omani state television announced that the Sultan had ordered 2,000 full-time government jobs be temporarily opened, but protests look set to continue for a fourth day.

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Phil Miller is a staff reporter at Declassified UK, an investigative journalism organisation that covers the UK's role in the world.

Featured image: Protests in Oman started on Sunday in Sohar. (Photo: Declassified UK)

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