

A NEW DAWN?

by Mark N. Katz

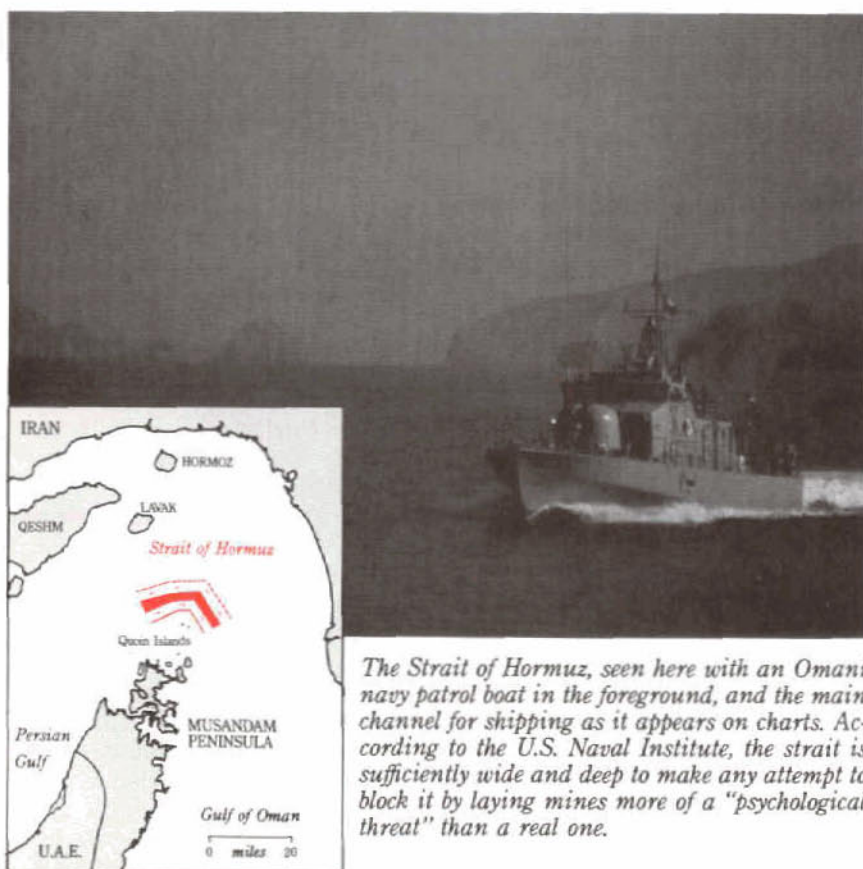
At the entrance to the Persian Gulf lies Oman's Musandam Peninsula, a fissured mass of black rock. Deep fjords cut into the land, their sheer sides rising out of the water as high as 5,000 feet. Largely devoid of shrubs or trees, the peninsula's interior consists of rows of wind-worn ridges, interrupted only by jagged peaks.

Sovereignty over the Musandam, barren as it may be, has made Oman a nation of paramount importance. On a clear day, the peninsula's Shihuh tribesmen, herding goats near their stone huts, can gaze across the Strait of Hormuz and see the brown hills of Iran, two dozen miles away. Nautical charts of the strait show two 2.5-mile wide navigational channels, 30-50 fathoms deep, in Omani waters between Iran and the peninsula. Marking their approximate midway point are the two Quoins, islands named by European sailors after the wedges once used to elevate ships' cannon.

In 1986, flying Liberian, Panamanian, or Japanese flags, roughly 15 to 20 tankers transited outward bound through the strait every day. Some of the VLCCs (very large crude carriers) are 1,000 feet long; each can carry as much as 1.8 million barrels of Gulf oil, or about 11 percent of U.S. average daily oil consumption in 1986. All told, about 14.5 percent of the world's petroleum production (from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states) passed through the strait, supplying Japan with 55 percent of its oil and Western Europe with 25 percent.

Long a choke-point for Persian Gulf trade, the strait has preoccupied the West since the 1979 fall of the shah of Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini now controls the narrow passage's northern shores. Worse, the border war between Iran and Iraq led, in 1986 alone, to more than 60 air attacks on vessels in the Gulf. Insurance rates for ships traveling above the 24th parallel have tripled since the outbreak of hostilities in 1980. Neither belligerent has yet tried to close the strait, but Iran's President Ali Khamenei vowed in September 1985 that "not one drop of oil would be allowed to leave the other ports of the Gulf" if Iraqi bombing blocked Iranian oil exports.

To those European nations needing Mideast oil, Oman is one of the few bright spots in a region known for its turmoil. Unlike the neighboring People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, where heavy fighting between rival Marxist groups broke out last January, Oman is not riven by factional political struggles. Thanks to a relatively tolerant religious climate, Omanis do not engage in the sectarian



The Strait of Hormuz, seen here with an Omani navy patrol boat in the foreground, and the main channel for shipping as it appears on charts. According to the U.S. Naval Institute, the strait is sufficiently wide and deep to make any attempt to block it by laying mines more of a "psychological threat" than a real one.

quarrels that can arise in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

In many matters of foreign policy, Sultan Qabus bin Sa'id of Oman is the Gulf's odd man out. Although Qabus and his ministers consult with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Oman is not a member of OPEC, nor of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries. Alone among the Gulf's leaders, Qabus endorsed the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. He also signed a June 1980 agreement that gives the United States limited access to Omani military facilities. Impressed, the *New York Times* hailed Oman in March 1985 as "Washington's most reliable ally in the Gulf."

That Oman would one day be a stable, staunch friend of the West seemed unlikely 18 years ago. In 1969, the 37th year of the reign of Sultan Qabus's despotic father Sa'id bin Taymur, the country had to contend with a Communist-backed rebellion in southern

Dhufar province spurred, in part, by popular resentment over living conditions one step removed from the Middle Ages. Even in the capital of Muscat, running water and electricity were rare. Wearing eyeglasses and riding bicycles were among the many activities either forbidden or strictly controlled. With London's backing, Qabus deposed his father on July 23, 1970. Then the young sultan and his British-trained army mopped up the Dhufar rebels. Proclaiming "a new dawn," he began to build schools, roads, and hospitals where there once were none—an achievement that inspired the popular slogan, "Before Qabus, nothing."

When 'God' Speaks

Even allowing for the ban on published criticism of the sultan, his popularity seems genuine enough. Most Omanis, especially those old enough to have lived under Sultan Sa'id, appreciate what Qabus has done. They regard him with almost filial devotion. There is a Sultan Qabus University, a Sultan Qabus Mosque, and a Sultan Qabus Stadium. Yet Qabus has avoided the excesses of a formal cult of personality. Except during the annual National Day (November 18) celebrations, his face is not exalted, Mao-style, on billboards and buildings. The sultan is seen rarely in public, preferring, like his father, to stay at his palace in Salalah, capital of Dhufar province.

A picture taken of Qabus shortly after he came to power shows a slight, almost bashful man with an unkempt beard, wearing a long white *dishdasha*. Today, even as he favors traditional garb—the *dishdasha* is compulsory for Omani cabinet ministers—Qabus, his beard neatly trimmed, is as likely to be seen in military uniform. He has gotten over his initial shyness. Foreign visitors are put at ease by his charm, his hospitality, and his excellent English—acquired during a four-year stay in England, including two years at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. Indeed, with his spit-and-polish uniforms, his passion for military parades, his meticulous attention to protocol and ceremony, the sultan is no ordinary Gulf ruler. As he told an interviewer in 1972, "I hope that you are not forgetting that I am a military man and a Sandhurst graduate."

The sultan is also an absolute monarch. For all Qabus's attention to his people's needs, observes John Townsend, a former British adviser to both Qabus and his father, "the prime objective of the

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Qabus meeting with tribesmen in Dhufar. According to former adviser John Townsend, the sultan, although reclusive, is "a formidable orator . . . In the public performance of his duties as Head of State, [he] has few peers."

Sultan, in political terms, can be expressed in one word: 'survival.'" Initially reliant on British counselors, he now stands as master in his own house, serving as head of state, prime minister, and minister of defense, finance, and foreign affairs. Advice comes from a State Consultative Council, but its 55 members, drawn largely from the ranks of cabinet undersecretaries, merchants, and backcountry tribal leaders, have no legislative powers.

No detail is too small to escape his attention. He has been known to tour Muscat at night, ordering the owners of dirty cars fined and rubbish removed. His own government employees refer to him as "God." When I asked why, several of them responded, "because he is all powerful but nowhere to be seen."

As Sultan Qabus has steered his country into the 20th century, it is oil that has provided the necessary propulsion. In 1984, the petroleum sector accounted for 95 percent of all export earnings and 90 percent of government revenues. Oman's daily production, as high as 600,000 barrels in 1986, is modest in comparison to that of its two neighbors Saudi Arabia (4.7 million) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (1.4 million). Even so, oil has enabled the country to more than quadruple its gross domestic product (GDP) since 1976. In 1984, GDP per capita stood at \$6,600, slightly below that of the

United Kingdom (\$7,488), but much lower than that of Saudi Arabia (\$13,250) and the UAE (\$28,000).

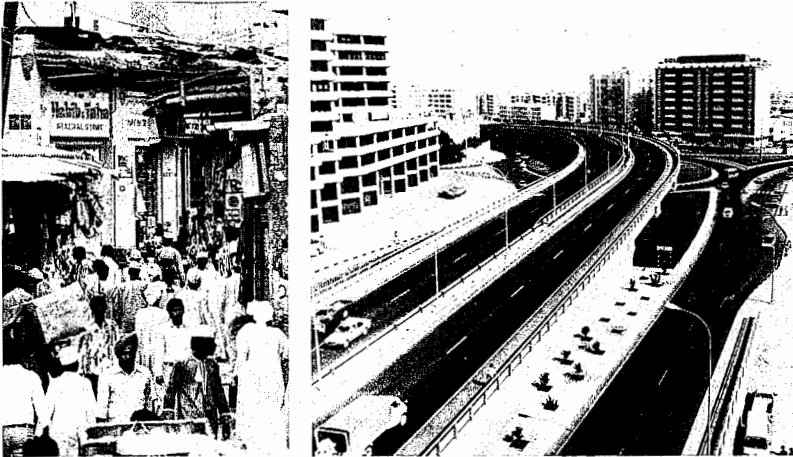
This prosperity is evident as soon as one lands at Muscat's Sib International Airport. Buick sedans, Datsuns, motor scooters, and the occasional Mercedes taxi cruise the four-lane highway leading to the capital. Tower cranes loom over the steel and concrete skeletons of new offices and apartment blocks. Overlooking the sea, the hillside homes in the wealthy suburb of Qurm are worthy of southern California. Even the poorer quarters of Ruwi, greater Muscat's outlying commercial district, lack the grinding poverty one finds in, say, Cairo: Almost all the tiny, one- or two-room dwellings have air conditioners to ease the discomfort of 100-degree summer temperatures.

Of Toyotas and Televisions

Set in a crescent of rugged brown hills, Muscat has seen substantial urban renewal. Two 16th-century Portuguese forts still flank the city's waterfront, but many of the elaborate stone and wood townhouses built by well-to-do merchants were torn down in 1974 to make room for Qabus's new downtown palace. Of the half-dozen or so that survive, one has been turned into a museum, another is used as the U.S. embassy. Most modern business enterprises have moved outside the old city walls, within which no building is higher than six stories. The capital's narrow, winding streets have been widened. Part of its old *suaq* (market) is now a parking lot. Those who crave its former bustle can go to the *suaq* in the adjoining port of Matrah, where the air is thick with the shouts of vendors and the smell of fish and dates. Tucked into narrow, crowded alleys, tiny shops and stalls sell gold jewelry, silver coffee pots, and *khanjars* (ceremonial daggers worn by Omani men), as well as stereos, television sets, and bootlegged video cassettes.

Muscat and its satellites of Matrah and Ruwi (total pop. 220,000) boast a higher standard of living than do the towns and villages of the interior, home to roughly half of Oman's one million inhabitants. But the hinterland gets its share of consumer goods. When I arrived in Nizwa (pop. 15,000), some 100 miles southwest of Muscat, tribesmen were selling goats in the marketplace adjacent to the town's 17th-century fort. Parked nearby under placards advertising Pepsi-Cola was a row of Toyota pickup trucks and Land Rovers.

More important, however, than cars, trucks, televisions, and stereos has been the steady improvement in the average Omani's health and education. In fact, after almost four decades of imposed penury and isolation under Sultan Sa'id, Omanis can reel off "progress" statistics not matched by many countries. In 1970, the entire country had three schools with 909 male students (often hand-picked by the sultan himself), one hospital with 12 beds, and 10



Sultan Qabus's downtown palace now takes up much of old Muscat's waterfront, but the atmosphere of Matrah's suq is unchanged. Fifteen years ago, Ruwi, seen here with the highway leading to Sib International Airport, boasted only a few modern buildings amid its mud brick huts.

kilometers of paved roads. Now some 200,000 students (79,300 of them female) attend 590 schools, hospital beds number 2,587, and the road network stretches 3,308 kilometers. In the absence of radios, televisions, or newspapers, most Omanis heard of Qabus's accession in 1970 by royal decrees posted on city walls or by word of mouth. Today, they can tune in to a color TV channel or two radio stations, or read six Arabic and three English-language papers.

As Ian Skeet, an oil executive in pre-1970 Oman, remarked after a 1983 return visit, "the Sultanate . . . is a different country set in the same surroundings." My own two trips to Oman (December 1982 and February 1986) provided ample proof of progress. What I

saw, however, also pointed to the problems a society can encounter when it tries to jump, in the span of a decade or two, from medievalism to modernity. While much has been made of Oman's dramatic material transformation, much of its feudal framework remains intact.

To their credit, Qabus and his ministers have avoided many of the expensive mistakes made by Mexico, Venezuela, and other more advanced nations suddenly inundated by petrodollars. They have not tried to "buy" an industrial base overnight; nor have they relied overmuch on tomorrow's oil revenues to secure today's foreign loans. In 1980, Qabus began diverting 15 percent of annual gross petroleum revenues into a State General Reserve Fund—since used to cover annual budget deficits. Partly as a result, Oman enjoys an excellent reputation among international lenders.

Small Is Beautiful

Fiscal prudence is dictated by the limited size of Oman's proven oil reserves, estimated at four billion barrels in 1986. Small by comparison with Kuwait's 90 billion or the UAE's 33 billion—and barring future discoveries—they will last another 20–25 years at current production levels. Thus, while the UAE can afford to build seven jet airports—including two within 10 miles of one another—Oman cannot. "We don't really go . . . for prestige projects," said Minister of Information Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed al-Rowas in 1985. "We don't believe in them and we can't afford them."

Oman's largest nonpetroleum venture is a \$213 million copper mine and smelter operated by the Oman Mining Company in Suhar. Other enterprises include the Oman and Raysut Cement Companies and the Rusail Industrial Estate, where small factories assemble water pumps, air conditioners, car batteries, furniture, and other items once imported from abroad. In 1984, manufacturing represented just three percent of Oman's GDP—insignificant, except that it had risen 41 percent since 1983. Construction and wholesale and retail trade have also helped to whittle down oil's share of the GDP from 61 percent in 1980 to 46 percent in 1984.

The oil industry provides cash but not many jobs for Omanis. The government (60 percent), Royal Dutch Shell (34 percent), Compagnie Française des Pétroles (four percent), and Partex (two percent) make up the Petroleum Development Oman consortium. It accounts for more than 95 percent of Oman's oil production but employed fewer than 5,000 Omanis in 1982.

Most Omanis, like their forebears, are fishermen and farmers. With its interior and fertile Batinah coastal plain suited to dates, limes, alfalfa, wheat, and sorghum, and its waters rich in kingfish, tuna, skipjacks, and sardines, Oman is one of the few Gulf states with the *potential* to both feed itself and export food. (After oil, Oman's

most valuable exports are frozen fish, copper, and limes.) The Bank for Agriculture and Fisheries (opened in 1981) has provided loans for seeds and fertilizer, subsidized the construction of jetties and harbors, and purchased outboard motors and new boats.

Yet despite this official encouragement, more and more Omanis are abandoning their fields and wooden *dhow*s for the (relatively) bright lights of the capital. A 1977 study of the agricultural community of 'Ibri showed that three-quarters of the male population between the ages of 14 and 40 had left; nearly half of these men took low-ranking posts in the security forces, a quarter were unemployed, and almost all the rest worked as occasional laborers or messengers in government offices. Self-sustaining in food a generation ago, Oman had to import an estimated 90 percent of its wheat and 40 percent of its vegetables and meat in 1980.

Ironically, improvements in farming technology may be hastening the rural exodus. Crucial to rural society has been the intricate *falaj* irrigation network; villagers share responsibility for coping with seasonal variations in the water supply, maintaining canals, and distributing individual "shares" of water. The introduction of mechanical pumps is now lowering Oman's water table; the pumps suck up water faster than it can be replaced. And because only the wealthier farmers can afford pumps, the gap between rich and poor is growing.

Investments in Switzerland

Further loosening local bonds has been the beneficence of the Qabus regime. New schools and health clinics have displaced such institutions as the *waqf*, a system of religiously organized charities that provided funds for the upkeep of mosques, education, the poor, and orphans. "The growth of a welfare state . . ." writes Oxford geographer John Wilkinson, "administered by a remote central government, is replacing self-help and . . . communal responsibility."

It is also replacing tribal authority. Where rural Omanis once relied on their sheiks for help or protection, they increasingly turn to the sultan's *wali* (governor) or to local municipal councils.* As for the sheiks themselves, Qabus has sought to pry them from their followers with money and patronage. "These days," said a civil servant quoted in the *Economist*, "the tribal leader does not want to know about the problem of one *bedu* who has lost his camel. He is more interested in his investments in Switzerland or his job in Muscat."

These changes, social and otherwise, have been felt most strongly in Oman's interior, historically more isolated and conservative than the coastal regions. Not surprisingly, some customs and

*While Oman is governed by Islamic law, the *qadi*, who arbitrates according to the book (i.e. the Koran), is losing much of his power to the Royal Omani Police, who are now responsible for handling everything from traffic violations to murders.

traditions have been easier to alter than others. Bedouin women, for example, may be grateful that doctors now check them for trachoma, an eye disease striking 95 percent of the population as late as 1975. But some remain reluctant to remove the *burqa* (face mask) for the examination. For its part, the government has been prudent in such matters. "It is a mistaken policy to impose things," noted Qabus in 1985. "They must be allowed to evolve quite normally."

In general, however, the inhabitants of both the interior and the coast have taken to modernity with better grace than some of their counterparts elsewhere in the Gulf. Paolo Costa, an Italian anthropologist who has spent more than 20 years in the Middle East, put it thus: "If I wanted to take a picture of an Iraqi and his camel, the Iraqi would want to smash the camera because I was an imperialist looking down on him for being primitive. In Oman . . . the man will tell you, 'Yes, fine-looking beast isn't it?' The Omanis are utterly secure in their sense of who they are."

Social mores tend to be more relaxed in Oman than in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, where, for example, the sale or consumption of liquor is completely forbidden. But in Oman, thirsty foreigners can go to bars in the Al-Bustan Palace, the Muscat Intercontinental, or other hotels. Omani women also enjoy much greater freedom, shopping at the *suaq* in Matrah, Nizwa, or 'Ibri without veils and wearing brightly colored shawls. Some work as secretaries, teachers, factory hands, even policewomen.

The U.K. Connection

Omani women enjoy unusual opportunities in part because their country faces a chronic labor shortage. The population is growing at an annual average rate of three percent, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor now runs 10 vocational training centers. But Oman is still short of native mechanics, engineers, electricians, doctors, and teachers. From 1981 to 1985, as the economy grew, the number of foreigners employed in Oman rose by 64 percent. Egyptian and Jordanian teachers, Sri Lankan maids, Filipino nurses, Pakistani merchants, and Indian doctors and bureaucrats made up most of the 270,000 foreign workers who, in 1985, filled about two-thirds of all private sector jobs and one-third of those in the public sector.

If Omanis do not resent the presence of so many foreigners, it is because they are seen as necessary, or because they do the undesirable chores. But the presence of expatriate senior advisers, mostly British, in key ministries is another matter. Educated Omanis are anxious for these "expats," as the elite foreign group is known, to move on, and leave the directing of the country to its native sons.

The British presence has diminished since the early 1970s. Once-powerful royal counselors have gone home. But the British and

THE UNITED STATES AND OMAN

Few Arab nations boast such long-standing ties to the United States as Oman. After Sa'id bin Sultan signed a Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833, Oman became the second Arab country (Morocco was the first, in 1787) to establish diplomatic relations with the young Republic. Seven years later, Sa'id sent his 20-gun corvette *Sultana* to New York, bearing the first Arab envoy to the United States and gifts—including two stud horses and a gold-mounted sword—for President Martin Van Buren.

Despite the fact that unruly New Yorkers delighted in pulling the beards of the *Sultana's* crewmen, relations between the two countries got off to a cordial start. But only with the accession of Sultan Qabus bin Sa'id did Oman and the United States become close allies as well. In April 1980, for example, Oman served as a staging point for the ill-fated attempt to rescue the American hostages held in Iran.

Qabus sees the United States as a valuable ally against Soviet expansionism. To the Pentagon, Oman is a valuable logistical link for the forces of its Central Command, responsible for any future operations in the Persian Gulf. In June 1980, after being rebuffed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Carter administration secured Qabus's approval of a treaty that grants the United States access to Omani military facilities, as well as permission to pre-position munitions and other supplies. In return, Washington promised to upgrade four Omani bases at Khasab on the Musandam Peninsula, al-Sib near Muscat, Thamarit in the interior, and the island of al-Masirah.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed its work—valued at \$300 million—in 1985. Most of it was done at al-Masirah, built up by the British Royal Air Force during the 1930s and used as a training base during World War II. Its airstrip now has 12,000-foot runways—long enough for B-52 bombers—and storage tanks that hold six million gallons of jet fuel. A refueling stop for ships of the U.S. Sixth and Seventh fleets, the island sometimes serves as a base for antisubmarine reconnaissance flights by the U.S. Navy's P-3 Orions.

Qabus knows the 1980 treaty does not please some of his Arab brethren (notably Kuwait). He has stressed that U.S. forces can be introduced only “at the request of the majority of the Gulf Cooperation Council states in case of a direct threat which they cannot repulse with their own forces.” But the rules are sometimes bent. In 1984, U.S. commandos visited Oman to monitor the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner—an episode the Omanis officially deny.

Still, Washington has been careful to act with discretion. Mindful of the hostility engendered by a large U.S. presence in pre-revolutionary Iran, the United States maintains only a small military mission in Muscat. And while Qabus has said that he will not renew the current agreement (which runs until 1990), he seems relatively happy with the way things now stand. Indeed, in 1985 Minister of Information Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed al-Rowas told the *Wall Street Journal* that the U.S.-Omani accord could be “a model for a relationship between a superpower and a Third World nation.”

Omanis have not ended what British ambassador Duncan Slater called in 1985 their "broad, deep relationship." Almost 11,000 Britishers work in Oman as engineers, architects, bankers, businessmen, or consultants. British officers serve as chief of the Defense Staff, commander of the air force, and commander of the navy.* (Only in 1984 was an Omani appointed commander of the army.) Some 1,000 seconded and contract British officers are in the armed forces, and their countrymen are prominent in the intelligence services.

Business As Politics

The British influence is felt in less formal ways as well. Those Omanis rich enough to do so spend their vacations in London, where many own second homes. Although more Omani students now go to the United States for university training, a degree from Cambridge or Oxford commands greater respect. And if anyone hopes that, in Oman, there'll always be an England, it is Qabus himself. A dedicated Anglophile, he has flown in the London Symphony Orchestra for National Day, and played host to the Prince of Wales and his wife last November. He owns a country house in Berkshire. According to the London *Financial Times*, his palaces in Salalah and al-Sib are stocked with pieces of Crown Derby china on side tables and volumes of Wilde, Dickens, and Fielding in bookcases. He likes to give his British friends a helping hand. Reportedly at Qabus's insistence, a British company, Airworks Limited, got half of a \$50 million defense contract slated to go to the Vinnell Corporation, a U.S. firm.

In Oman, "conflict of interest," as American reformers know it, is an alien concept.† Unlike Saudi Arabia, where political power is concentrated among members of the ruling Saud family, in Oman only five of 23 members of the cabinet belong to Qabus's Al bu Sa'id dynasty. Most ministers are businessmen first and public servants second. The most talented are by no means the most powerful. As Roger Matthews, Middle East editor of the *Financial Times*, has noted, the "power wielded by an individual minister . . . relate[s] to his rapport with Sultan Qabus, rather than to the weight of argument he can marshal in cabinet."

Some ministers have not hesitated to turn the sultan's absolute power to their own profit. In 1974, for example, the minister of communications requested a "minute" of the sultan after a ministerial meeting. Without a formal, detailed presentation, he convinced

*The sultan's troops are widely acknowledged as among the best in the Gulf. Well trained and well equipped, the 16,500-man army, 3,000-man air force, and 2,000-man navy were allotted 46 percent of the national budget in 1985.

†A case in point: In July 1986, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission charged the Ashland Oil Company with paying one of Qabus's closest advisers \$29 million in bribes to secure an oil concession in 1980-83.



The best in the Gulf: Omani camels are highly regarded. So is Omani crude, low in sulfur and wax but expensive to extract.

Qabus to grant permission for a \$57 million desalinization and electricity facility (which would also water the gardens in the sultan's new palace). According to John Townsend, the final bill for the plant—including, of course, the minister's commission—came to \$300 million. Since 1981, the State Consultative Council has helped to curb such extravagances. For his part, Qabus has warned his ministers that "your business must not interfere with your service to your government and your people." But the sultan devotes more attention to military matters than to financial affairs, and he seems to have abandoned a 1982 attempt to draft a law regulating cabinet officials' participation in private ventures.

Qabus has spoken often of "the happy day . . . when more people will take responsibilities from my shoulders." In 1979, he told a *Time* correspondent, "I'd like to see us create a democracy for Oman, and I sincerely hope that day is not too far distant." Almost eight years later, he still shows little eagerness to yield real power, or to make his government more democratic. Unlike his counterparts in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Qabus does not hold a regular *majlis*, an informal conference in which ordinary citizens can present petitions and air their grievances. Instead, Omanis must wait for the two or

three times a year when Qabus sets off in a caravan to tour the land and meet with his subjects.

Some educated Omanis worry about Qabus's reliance on one-man rule. Most Omanis, however, seem to care more about whether the sultan will produce an heir—and thus continuity and stability—than about questions of participatory democracy. (His 1976 marriage to his uncle Tariq bin Taymur's daughter ended without child.) Qabus's autocratic reign is largely benevolent: There is no significant political opposition, underground or otherwise; Amnesty International knows of no political prisoners. If Qabus can continue to deliver economic gains to his subjects, he will likely encounter only occasional grumbling about his policies.

Empty Beaches

Thus, Oman's petrodollars have buttressed Oman's political stability. But what oil giveth it can just as easily take away: The global oil glut dropped the price of Omani crude from \$27.35 per barrel in January 1986 to \$8.20 per barrel seven months later. Not bound by OPEC's policies, Oman compensated by pumping more oil. Even so, oil revenues for 1986 will probably be half those of 1985. Qabus has cut government spending by 10 percent across the board and devalued the riyal against the dollar by the same amount. Projects called for under the third Five Year Plan (1986-90) have been canceled or delayed. Said Ahmad Makki, undersecretary of commerce and industry: "It is hard to plan what to spend when you don't know what your revenues will be."

Added to this uncertainty are the vicissitudes of foreign policy. True, Qabus does not have to worry overmuch about the remaining rebels in Dhufar, now no more than a handful. The rebels no longer receive support from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, with whom Oman exchanged nonresident ambassadors in 1985. But Oman occupies a peculiar perch in Middle East politics. Qabus is seen as an outsider by the sheiks and princes of the upper Gulf. The sultan's closest ties are to King Hussein of Jordan and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Unlike his fellow Arabs, he is more likely to speak of the "Soviet threat" than of the "Palestinian question," and he makes no secret of his pro-Western sentiments, as witness his current close relations with the United States [see box, p. 73].

Aware that some Arabs criticized Oman as a "client state" of the West, Qabus opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in September 1985—a move designed, as he remarked, to "keep people on their toes." He also believes that his control over internal matters stems to some degree from his ability to limit Oman's exposure to the outside world. Foreign newspapers, magazines, video tapes and the like are scrutinized carefully, and some are occasionally

banned. Most visitors, whether Arab or Western, must obtain a No Objection Certificate, and despite the obvious attractions of Oman's pristine seashore and rugged mountains, tourism is next to nonexistent. "Our people," observed Minister of Information Abdul Aziz al-Rowas in April 1986, "are not ready for bare-breasted [European] women on the beaches."

Perhaps so, but there are signs that official xenophobia may be getting out of hand. In February 1986, a royal decree went into effect banning all marriages between Omanis and foreigners (except citizens of other Gulf countries). The minister of justice invoked the "many social problems" that would result from children being raised under foreign influences. But to Omanis long used to marrying Muslim women from Pakistan, Baluchistan, and India, the ruling came as a shock, its prohibitions reminiscent of the bad old days of Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur.

In 1972, Qabus said of his father: "He didn't believe in change. His thinking went back to an age which is not this present age. So he had to fall from power, and this is what happened." Much has changed in Oman since 1970. Yet as historian John Peterson argues, "the post-1970 era should not be viewed . . . as the abrupt departure from the past that slogans such as 'new dawn' would have it."

The Sultanate survives as one of the world's remaining absolute monarchies—akin to those in Saudi Arabia, Brunei, and Nepal. If anything, it is stronger than in times past. The notion of a benevolent autocracy may affront many Westerners. However, for a variety of cultural and historical reasons, the Arab Middle East is not about to embrace the tenets of, say, Swedish democracy. Of the six nations belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council, only Kuwait has an elected body (the National Assembly)—and even that was suspended last July by Emir Jabir al-Sabah. But thanks largely to Qabus's stewardship, Oman has avoided the brutality, violence, and poverty that plague other Middle East nations variously inspired by Marxism, Arab socialism, or Islamic fundamentalism. In that respect, the years since 1970 represent an unqualified success story.
