



Thomas Sveen

Influence by Commitment

British Loan Service Personnel in Oman
1981-82

Master's thesis in history
Supervisor: Tore Tingvold Petersen
Trondheim, November 2016

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All errors are of my own making.

Thomas Sveen

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Table of Contents

<i>List of abbreviations</i>	v
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Historiography	3
1.2 Research Objective and Relevance	16
1.3 Findings	19
1.4 The Source Material	20
1.5 Thesis Outline	22
2 Loan Service Policy under Thatcher, 1981-82	23
2.1 Withdrawal Reconsidered: Britain and Oman in the 1970s	24
2.2 Omanisation under Thatcher: What Omanisation?	27
2.3 The Official Level: Slow to Adapt to Thatcher's Policy Change	34
2.4 The Sultan: Keen to Retain British Support	39
3 Presence – Influence – Goodwill	45
3.1 Stability, Security, Influence	46
3.2 The Increasing American Involvement	58
3.3 Loan Service Personnel and British Exports	64
4 Political Concessions, 1982	73
4.1 A Potential Irritant: Loan Service Charges	74
4.2 Rhetoric versus Reality: The Application of Loan Service Personnel	82
5 Concluding Remarks	93
Bibliography	97

List of abbreviations

CDS – Chief of the Defence Staff

CSAF – Commander Sultan’s Armed Forces

CSOAF – Commander Sultan of Oman’s Air Force

CSOLF – Commander Sultan of Oman’s Land Forces

CSON – Commander Sultan of Oman’s Navy

FCO – Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British foreign ministry

GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council

HM – His Majesty the Sultan of Oman

HMG – Her Majesty’s Government

LSP – Loan Service Personnel

MoD – Ministry of Defence, the British defence ministry

NCO – Non-commissioned officer

PM – Prime Minister

RAF – Royal Air Force

RDF – Rapid Deployment Force

RN – Royal Navy

SAF – The Sultan’s Armed Forces

SOAF – The Sultan of Oman’s Air Force

SOLF – The Sultan of Oman’s Land Forces

SON – The Sultan of Oman’s Navy

UK – The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

US – The United States of America

Chapter 1

Introduction

Britain's role in Oman represents something of a challenge to traditional narratives of British decline and loss of will to maintain its ascendant position. The co-ordinated and calculated response to the situation facing Oman and the determination shown by both officials and key politicians demonstrates that when core national interests were threatened, a much more robust and determined British response would be apparent.¹

By the early 1980s, Britain's fixed military bases in the Persian Gulf² were long gone; its last Arab dependencies abandoned; its former role as leading power in the region increasingly played by the more powerful United States of America (the United States) as sole caretaker of Western interests there. The newly elected British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher³ presided over a very different Britain from many of her post-war predecessors in that both the formal and informal empire⁴ was gone but for a few scattered islands and unresolved problems. The narrative of Britain as a true world power⁵ could very well have ended here – however with a few moments of triumph like the victory in the Falklands War⁶ still to come – without firm

¹ James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire*. London 2014: 11.

² The Persian Gulf (often referred to simply as “the Gulf”) is the inner part of the Arabian Sea situated between the southwestern part of Iran's coast and the Arabian Peninsula, connected to the wider Arabian Sea basin through the narrow Straits of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Persian Gulf (accessed March 31, 2016). In this thesis the terms Persian Gulf and the Gulf encompass the Sultanate of Oman proper and not only the Musandam peninsula.

³ Margaret Thatcher served as British Prime Minister from 1979-1990. See for example Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*. London 1993: Chronology.

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “empire” as “Supreme political power over several countries when exercised by a single authority”. Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Empire (accessed April 1, 2016). Glen Balfour-Paul offers a feasible definition of “informal empire”: “‘Informal empire’ may sound a contradiction in terms, since Empire in the proper sense involved annexation and full subordination to the Crown. The term must serve to embrace the varying modes and degrees of overlordship imposed on different territories and for different lengths of time [...]” See Glen Balfour-Paul, “Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East”, in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*. Oxford 1999: 490.

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “world power” as “A country that has significant influence in international affairs”. Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, World power (accessed April 1, 2016).

⁶ In April 1982, Argentina invaded the British overseas territory of the Falkland Islands off the coast of South America. By mid-June, Britain had defeated the invaders and retaken their territory. See Robert Self, *British Foreign and Defence Policy since 1945: Challenges and Dilemmas in a Changing World*. Basingstoke 2010: 64-68.

objections from anyone but a school of historians contesting or nuancing Britain's steady loss of power⁷ in the latter part of the 20th century.

In fact, the story about Britain's world role in the post-war era⁸ is far more complex and nuanced than a mere retreat from Empire and world power. Britain under Thatcher retained significant influence in the Gulf acting as arms dealer and co-guarantor for regional security alongside the United States. In the particular case of the Sultanate of Oman, the Thatcher government strengthened Britain's commitment by a string of ministerial contacts and, more concretely, by agreeing to second more British military personnel to serve on loan in the Omani armed forces. The British military presence in Oman in the early 1980s demonstrates that the United Kingdom was both able and willing to pursue its interests and maintain influence⁹ in the Middle East at this point, rather than leaving all former spheres of interest to the United States or other great powers.¹⁰

The concern of this thesis is to assess and discuss British loan service policy in Oman in 1981-82. British loan service personnel in command positions in the Omani military was a tool with which Britain could pursue its strategic and commercial interests in the Sultanate. There was a firm connection between British military presence and influence on the one hand and Omani goodwill and prospects for defence sales on the other. One element was dependent on the other two in order to retain Britain's favourable position in Oman. This represents a far more sophisticated approach to world power and pursuance of interests than colonialism¹¹ and gunboat diplomacy¹²; namely one where the influence of an outside great power is dependent on commitment to the concerns of local authorities. Due to real or perceived threats to the Sultanate, Britain operated there by the local ruler's invitation. Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman

⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary provides several definitions of "power". In the context of Britain's alleged loss of power two are especially appropriate: (a) "The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events", and (b) "The military strength of a state". Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Power (accessed April 1, 2016).

⁸ The decades following the end of the Second World War in 1945.

⁹ Influence is a softer form of power (see note 7 for definitions). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "influence" is "[t]he capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behaviour of someone or something, or the effect itself". Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Influence (accessed April 1, 2016).

¹⁰ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a "great power" is "[a] nation or country that has considerable international influence and military strength". Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Great power (accessed April 1, 2016).

¹¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines "colonialism" as "The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically". Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Colonialism (accessed April 1, 2016).

¹² Gunboat diplomacy is "[f]oreign policy that is supported by the use or threat of military force". See the Oxford English Dictionary online: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Gunboat diplomacy (accessed April 1, 2016).

was eager to maintain his military links to the United Kingdom, and he was unhappy with any sign of British withdrawal from command positions and subsequent Omanisation of such posts.

1.1 Historiography

Macmillan¹³ was the first British Prime Minister to confront explicitly the painful reality that his country was no longer a world power. Churchill had dealt with America and the Soviet Union as an equal. [...] By the time Macmillan was faced with the Berlin crisis,¹⁴ the illusion that Great Britain by itself had the capacity to change the strategic calculations of the superpowers could no longer be sustained.¹⁵

1.1.1 Declinist and transformationalist¹⁶ perspectives on British post-war history

After the Second World War, the United Kingdom had to adapt to a shift in international status and a new world order dominated by the two superpowers the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union). Historical research on this subject has been profound, resulting in a multitude of academic works.¹⁷ The most prominent narrative among historians is one of British decline and retreat from its once extensive empire, economic hardships and struggles to adjust to a diminished role in the world order. According to Robert Self:

¹³ Harold Macmillan served as British Prime Minister from 1957-1963. See Self 2010: 10.

¹⁴ The Berlin Crisis of 1961 was a Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The superpowers disagreed over the future status of West Berlin, and it resulted in the building of the Berlin Wall. For a thorough explanation of the Berlin Crisis, see Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*. Cambridge 1996: 194-202, 247-248, 248-258.

¹⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. New York 1994: 595.

¹⁶ "Declinists" and "transformationalists" are terms applied here to discuss the dichotomy between historians arguing strongly for British post-war decline in power and wealth (declinists) and those advocating that British power was transformed and adjusted to changed circumstances but not unequivocally lost (transformationalists). For a further explanation of these positions on British post-war history, see David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*. Harlow 2000: 2.

¹⁷ See Self 2010; Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990*. Oxford 2010; Mark Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power: British Foreign Policy since 1945*. London 1995; David Childs, *Britain since 1945: A Political History*. London 2006; Norman Lowe, *Mastering modern British history*. Basingstoke 2009; Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*. Oxford 1999; Reynolds 2000.

Britain no longer possess a global empire and the Commonwealth of Nations has proved a bitter disappointment to those who expected it to act as a surrogate empire loyally enhancing the diplomatic authority of the ‘Mother Country’ in the council chambers of the world. Britain’s ability to exert ‘hard power’¹⁸ in a military sense has also been vastly diminished since the 1940s.¹⁹

Other historians have challenged this gloomy story of British failure and advocated more nuanced and less deterministic interpretations of British post-war history. They demonstrate that Britain’s history of the latter part of the 20th century is far from one-sided. For one, domestic achievements like the development of the welfare state, civil rights and better living standards contest the notion of a general British decline. Moreover, and more important to this context, these authors argue that Britain retained significant influence in world affairs despite the loss of empire and relative decline. The imperial experience left Britain with a worldwide network of connections and contacts that allowed it a role, albeit different from before. British power projection transformed from the traditional but increasingly financially and morally untenable reliance on military might to an approach to foreign policy largely replacing such hard power with soft power²⁰ means. The United Kingdom thus remained a prominent power by the early 1980s, although it was arguably no longer of the first rank like the Soviet Union or the United States and hence had to accept the role of junior partner to its American ally.²¹

Britain’s post-war policy in the Arab Middle East²² has faced the same fluctuations as its overall diplomatic performance, and has thus attracted much attention from researchers. Many historians have discussed this subject as part of more general accounts of the region’s history, with varying emphasis put on the British position.²³ Other writers have concerned

¹⁸ The term “hard power” refers to “[a] coercive approach to international political relations, especially one that involves the use of military power. Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Hard power (accessed April 2, 2016). See also Joseph S. Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*. New York 2007:60-64.

¹⁹ Self 2010: 289.

²⁰ Soft power is “A persuasive approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence”. Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Soft power (accessed April 5, 2016). See also Nye 2007: 60-64.

²¹ See Keith Robbins, *The Eclipse of a Great Power: Modern Britain 1870-1992*. London 1994; T. O. Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: History of the United Kingdom 1906-2001*. Oxford 2002; Curtis 1995.

²² The Oxford English Dictionary defines the Middle East as “An extensive area of SW Asia and northern Africa, stretching from the Mediterranean to Pakistan and including the Arabian peninsula”. Source: <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, Middle East (accessed April 6, 2016). This thesis discusses British policy towards the Arab part of the Middle East, and especially towards the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, whenever the term is applied, it refers to this area.

²³ See L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*. London 1984; Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*. London 2002; J. B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West*. New York

themselves more specifically with British policy, albeit often with a distinctly “declinist” perspective deeming the British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971 the end point of decisive British influence in the Middle East.²⁴ Such contributions have not infrequently commented exclusively on one specific “low-point” of British conduct in the Middle East like the Suez Crisis of 1956²⁵ or the messy retreat from Aden in 1967.²⁶ In his classic book *Arabia, the Gulf and the West* from 1980, J. B. Kelly criticises the British departure from the Persian Gulf and argues that the primary reason for this was a lack of will to heed Britain’s commitments in the region²⁷:

All they [the arguments for withdrawal] served to demonstrate was how advanced was the palsy which had overtaken the conduct of British foreign policy, a palsy which owed its origin to a craven view of the world and of Britain’s place in it. With a foreign policy that operated from a basis of fear, it is not to be wondered at that the hallmarks of British diplomacy of late years have been vacillation, self-abasement and a profound yearning for ‘peace in our time’.²⁸

Some writers like Saki Dockrill put greater emphasis on financial stringency and economic difficulties in the late 1960s as important causes for British disengagement “east of Suez.”²⁹ Kelly published his account before many relevant archival sources were available to researchers and expressed a less nuanced view on British decision-making than Dockrill.

1980; Jeremy Salt, *The Unmaking of the Middle East: A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands*. Berkeley 2008.

²⁴ See Glen Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East: Britain’s Relinquishment of Power in Her Last Three Arab Dependencies*. Cambridge 1991; Saki Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?*. Basingstoke 2002; Miriam Joyce, *Ruling Shaikhs and Her Majesty’s Government 1960-1969*. London 2003; Balfour-Paul 1999. J. B. Kelly’s *Arabia, the Gulf and the West* comments extensively on the British retreat from its commitments in the Gulf (except for Oman where the British stayed on for some years to fight an insurgency), thus placing him among the “declinists” as well. See Kelly 1980.

²⁵ See for example Steven Z. Freiburger, *Dawn over Suez: The Rise of American Power in the Middle East, 1953-1957*. Chicago 1992; Saul Kelly and Anthony Gorst (eds.), *Whitehall and the Suez Crisis*. London 2000.

²⁶ See for example Peter Hinchcliffe, John T. Ducker and Maria Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia: The British Retreat from Aden*. London 2006.

²⁷ Kelly 1980: Chapter II – The Retreat from the Gulf. Regarding Britain’s retreat from South Arabia, Kelly said of the British government: “In a contest of wills it proved spineless.” See Kelly 1980: 46.

²⁸ *Ibid*: 97.

²⁹ See Dockrill 2002. See also Joyce 2003. Moreover, Dockrill argues that the British chose to commit the United Kingdom to a European role over its world role. See Dockrill 2002: Chapter 8 – The Choice between Europe and ‘East of Suez’, March-December 1966.

Dockrill, writing some 20 years later (in 2002), benefited from access to far more archival material than Kelly did. Thus, her account appear less polemical and more broadly based.

Other historians have disagreed with the declinist viewpoint of a definite British withdrawal. They demonstrate that military withdrawal is not synonymous with loss of interest or will, and that rhetoric and appearance are not always in line with reality. Such accounts argue that Britain, far from renouncing vital interests in the Gulf even if withdrawing its visible military presence, retained influence well into the 1970s and even beyond by attempting to elevate rulers in the area from clients to allies.³⁰ In several works on the subject, Tore T. Petersen advocates that the United Kingdom intentionally appeared weak but in reality continued to control events in the Gulf to a great degree³¹ – even increasing its commitments in the lower Gulf after their alleged departure.³² Petersen’s assessment is controversial, but some researchers have reached similar conclusions.³³ Writes James Worrall: “While the withdrawal from RAF Salalah and Masirah³⁴ in April 1977 marked the end of the last permanent British bases in the Gulf, Britain has by no means abandoned its role in the region and especially in Oman.”³⁵ Worrall’s remark suggests that a rethinking of the British departure from the Gulf is especially relevant in the case of the Sultanate.

However, the United Kingdom’s position in Oman post 1977 has received little comment from historians. Much of the existing research on recent Omani history concern state building, development and the Dhofar War.³⁶ One characteristic dichotomy within the limited historiography regarding the British presence concern the nature of Britain’s involvement in the Sultanate. Fred Halliday’s Marxist and rather deterministic perspective represents one extreme in this regard. His book *Arabia without Sultans* depicts Oman of the early 1970s as a

³⁰ See for example Worrall 2014; Tore T. Petersen, *Richard Nixon, Great Britain and the Anglo-American Alignment in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula: Making Allies out of Clients*. Brighton 2009; Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Policy toward the Persian Gulf, 1978-1985: Power, Influence and Restraint*. Brighton 2015; Tore T. Petersen, “Richard Nixon, Great Britain, and the Anglo-American Strategy of Turning the Persian Gulf into an Allied Lake”, in Jeffrey R. Macris and Saul Kelly (eds.), *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf*. Annapolis 2012.

³¹ See Petersen 2009: 4-6; Petersen 2015: 2.

³² See Petersen 2009: 5; Petersen 2012: 77.

³³ See especially Worrall 2014.

³⁴ British military bases in Oman.

³⁵ James Worrall, “Britain’s Last Bastion in Arabia: The End of the Dhofar War, the Labour Government and the Withdrawal from RAF Salalah and Masirah, 1974-1977”, in Tore T. Petersen (ed.), *Challenging Retrenchment: The United States, Great Britain and the Middle East, 1950-1980*. Trondheim 2010: 140.

³⁶ See for example Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa’id bin Taymur, 1932-1970*. Brighton 2006; Francis Owtram, *A Modern History of Oman: Formation of the State since 1920*. London 2004; Calvin Allen, Jr. and W. Lynn Rigsbee II, *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution 1970-1996*. London 2000; Worrall 2014.

British colony and the British conduct there as both cruel and greedy.³⁷ In Halliday's words, "Oman remained under the control of British imperialism, and of the Al Bu Said client dynasty".³⁸ He is not wrong when arguing that the British continued to influence affairs in the Sultanate into the 1970s, but his study – although partly based on visits to the rebel controlled area of Oman³⁹ – lacks basis in archival material only recently released. Halliday first published his book in 1974 before the end of the Dhofar War. In many respects, this contemporary report from the rebel ranks of Dhofar and the ideologically tainted interpretations might represent an interesting contribution to the historiography of Oman – not least as an example of how ideology mixed with history can result in rather biased accounts. But for the context of this thesis, Halliday's viewpoint is nonetheless insufficient because of its deterministic outlook, lack of basis in relevant archival material and because it concerns an era preceding that of this thesis.

J. B. Kelly's criticism of the British withdrawal from the Gulf as referred above represents another extreme. His work on Arabia and the Gulf includes much comment on Oman.⁴⁰ Its concluding remark reveals his assessment of the strategic value of the Sultanate to the West as well as his contempt for the Western (and especially British) departure:

Oman is still the key to command the Gulf and its seaward approaches, just as Aden remains the key to the passage of the Red Sea. The Western powers have already thrown away one of these keys; the other, however, is still within their reach. Whether, like the captains-general of Portugal long ago, they have the boldness to grasp it has yet to be seen.⁴¹

Even though Kelly's is an important contribution, its weaknesses are much the same as those inherent in Halliday's book. Firstly, it concerns an era preceding that of concern to this thesis. Secondly, the kind of source material vital to the subject of this dissertation was largely not available to Kelly at his book's publication in 1980. Thirdly, his presumption that the British simply left Arabia and the subsequent criticism of this policy (particularly in the case of Aden

³⁷ See Halliday 2002: Part Four: Oman.

³⁸ Ibid: 296.

³⁹ Ibid: 1-2.

⁴⁰ See Kelly 1980.

⁴¹ Ibid: 504.

1967⁴²) appear just as ideologically tainted as Halliday's account – although at the opposite end of the spectrum.

More recently, other scholars have produced books with sections covering later Omani history. Calvin Allen, Jr. and W. Lynn Rigsbee II have provided an important work, as has Francis Owtram. Allen and Rigsbee's book *Oman under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution 1970-1996*, while mainly concerned with the wider context of Omani development under its present sultan, contains an interesting chapter about Qaboos' foreign policy up to 1996. With their arguments based on secondary literature, these authors demonstrate how Oman pursued an independent and pragmatic foreign policy driven both by the Sultanate's economic and security interests.⁴³ Qaboos has moved his country from isolation to becoming a "small and respected participant" in world affairs.⁴⁴ They argue that the only factor limiting the Sultan's power to direct foreign policy is Oman's lack of a substantial oil income.⁴⁵ Allen and Rigsbee show that Oman cultivates close relations with Britain as well as other major powers like the United States and Japan and that it depends on great power support to supplement its defence.⁴⁶ However, their discussion of Omani foreign policy fails to appreciate fully any external influence on foreign policymaking beyond "encouragement"⁴⁷ – whether it be British or American. Thus, they downplay the British post-1970s role and influence in Oman.

Writing from a Marxist perspective (although less zealous than Halliday's), Francis Owtram's main concern is the influence of Western capitalism upon Omani state formation from the 1920s on – with British imperialism being the main external source of such influences until Britain's military withdrawal from Oman of 1977.⁴⁸ He argues that from this point on the Americans steadily replaced the British as Omani security guarantor, however with the British retaining both presence, influence and a large share of the Omani market. The Omani defence hierarchy is one area where the British remained prominent during the 1980s through secondment of military personnel, with Margaret Thatcher even agreeing in 1981 to provide a British general to become Omani Chief of the Defence Staff.⁴⁹ Owtram demonstrates that the

⁴² See Kelly 1980: Chapter 1 – The Abandonment of Aden.

⁴³ Allen and Rigsbee 2000: Chapter 7 – Foreign Policy under Sultan Qaboos.

⁴⁴ Ibid: 180-182.

⁴⁵ Ibid: 182.

⁴⁶ Ibid: Chapter 7 – Foreign Policy under Sultan Qaboos.

⁴⁷ According to Allen and Rigsbee, Qaboos' British advisers "encouraged" him to end Oman's isolation after seizing power. See Allen and Rigsbee 2000: 182.

⁴⁸ See Owtram 2004.

⁴⁹ Ibid: 156-160.

Western interests in Oman are mainly geostrategic, and predicts that Britain and the United States will continue to play a role there and intervene if their interests are threatened.⁵⁰ His study draws on an extensive amount of secondary literature. However, he employs comparably little archival material. His assessment that the British maintained considerable interests and influence in Oman during the 1980s is very much in line with the viewpoint of this thesis. The brief mentioning of British seconded military personnel serving with the Omani military is of particular relevance.

Neither of the accounts on Omani history hitherto commented on contain much discussion of British decision-making processes regarding Oman. James Worrall, on the other hand, shows how Britain of the 1970s were prepared to defend its clearly defined national interests⁵¹ and support Oman in fighting the rebels in Dhofar. In this archive-based study of counterinsurgency and state building in the Sultanate, he explains how British authorities at official and political level formulated and implemented strategy.⁵² One important element in United Kingdom strategy was to supply (for a debated charge) British military officers on loan to the Omani armed forces to ensure their effectiveness.⁵³ Thus, as the opening quote for this chapter suggests, far from retreating or losing will the British in fact renewed their commitment to Oman during this period in order to protect their interests. In the process, the Conservative Heath government even facilitated Oman's move from international isolation to participation.⁵⁴ This claim is contrary to Allen and Rigsbee's account, which ascribe this initiative to Qaboos. Worrall's reliance on archival material deems, however, his claim the more credible one. His work mainly concerns the era preceding this study, with only scant comment on the continued British support and interest in Oman after 1977.⁵⁵ Its main importance for the context of this thesis lies in it taking account of British loan service personnel as an important tool for United Kingdom strategy in Oman.

The loan service element in British policies toward the Sultanate has attracted minimal attention from other researchers,⁵⁶ especially the continued supply of such personnel to Oman's

⁵⁰ Owtram 2004: Chapter Six: Western strategic interests in the contemporary Omani state.

⁵¹ The British desired peace and stability, to shore up its influence in order to maintain stability and counter communists influence, secure continued supply of oil and to increase its exports to the Omani market. See Worrall 2014: 78, 96-97.

⁵² See Worrall 2014.

⁵³ Ibid: 66, Chapter 6 – British Policy, Whitehall Debates & External Aid 1972-74.

⁵⁴ Ibid: Chapter 5 – The Search for International Recognition: Britain's Role in Securing Legitimacy.

⁵⁵ See for example Worrall 2014: 228-229.

⁵⁶ However, writers are aware of the loan service arrangement between Britain and Oman. One example is Clive Jones (2010) who mentions it briefly in his discussion of British intelligence and covert action in South Arabia

armed forces after the Dhofar War.⁵⁷ One important exception is Tore T. Petersen's recent book about Anglo-American Gulf policies in 1978-1985, which includes a chapter commenting on British and American involvement in Oman. Here, Petersen demonstrates that continued provision of British loan service personnel was essential for maintaining good relations between London and the Sultan.⁵⁸ He explains how the Labour government (to the dismay of Qaboos) sought to reduce the loan service presence in the Omani military after replacing the Conservative Heath government in 1974 through a programme of so-called Omanisation. This policy aimed to withdraw British loaned personnel and replace them with Omani officers.⁵⁹ When assuming power, the Conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher reversed this policy altogether.⁶⁰ Before discussing Thatcher's loan service policy in Oman in detail, however, it is necessary to assess the wider historiography available about her foreign policy.

1.1.2 Margaret Thatcher's foreign policy

Margaret Thatcher's controversial premiership 1979-1990 has attracted extensive comment from writers.⁶¹ Her reputation as a Cold War-warrior, achievements in settling unresolved colonial issues like Rhodesia, victory in the Falklands, battles with the European Economic Community and the close political relationship with American President Ronald Reagan have led to many assessments of her foreign policy. These appear both as part of general accounts or as monographs.⁶² A large number of biographies exist, many of them based on her own memoirs

and Oman in the 1960s and 1970s. See Clive Jones, "From the Deniable to the Acceptable? Britain, Intelligence and Covert Action in Yemen and Oman 1962-1976", in Tore T. Petersen (ed.), *Challenging Retrenchment: The United States, Great Britain and the Middle East, 1950-1980*. Trondheim 2010: 160.

⁵⁷ As seen, one exception is Francis Owtram. See Owtram 2004: 156-160.

⁵⁸ See Petersen 2015: Chapter IX – Oman: Discretion Required.

⁵⁹ Ibid: 107-108.

⁶⁰ See Petersen 2015: 108, 120-121.

⁶¹ See Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*. London 1997; E. H. H. Green, *Thatcher*. London 2006; Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain*. Cambridge 2012; Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change*. Oxford 1989.

⁶² See for example Anthony Parsons, "Britain and the World", in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change*. Oxford 1989; Evans 1997: Chapter 7 – Thatcher abroad I: Europe, Chapter 8 – Thatcher abroad II: defence and The Americas and Chapter 9 – Thatcherism abroad: influence and prejudice; Richard Vinen, "Thatcherism and the Cold War", in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain*. Cambridge 2012; Andrew Gamble, "Europe and America", in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain*. Cambridge 2012; Stephen Howe, "Decolonisation and imperial aftershocks: the Thatcher years", in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain*. Cambridge 2012; Robin Renwick, *A Journey With Margaret Thatcher: Foreign Policy under the Iron Lady*. London 2013; Richard Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher: The Difficult Relationship*. London 2012.

The Path to Power and *The Downing Street Years*,⁶³ other works or the media. Charles Moore have penned two outstanding volumes of an authorised biography on Thatcher, drawing on numerous interviews, personal and public archival material.⁶⁴

Assessments of Thatcher's foreign affairs differ widely. Some authors emphasise her alleged inexperience with foreign affairs when becoming prime minister, with the Falklands War being a turning point that enabled Thatcher to exercise greater authority within her Cabinet and made foreign policy a greater priority of hers.⁶⁵ Richard Vinen argues that Thatcher's policies represent less of a break with former British policy than often suggested.⁶⁶ He states that in foreign and defence policy issues Thatcher "[talked] the talk of radicalism while walking the walk of pragmatism".⁶⁷ This view reflects well with that of Eric J. Evans who describes Margaret Thatcher as more pragmatic than her reputation as a forceful leader suggests, with "pragmatism [tempering] principle" on many occasions (although her opposition to German unification is an example of the contrary).⁶⁸ Her biographer, Moore, advocates that she often used a "small thing to make a bigger point,"⁶⁹ which indicates that she could make a fuss over details in order to send a firm message.⁷⁰ Her former advisor Robin Renwick is at the other end of the spectrum. In his recent account on Thatcher's foreign policy, he maintains that she was far from inexperienced when taking office and that she based her policy on ideas rather than events. Her foreign policy ideas developed while she was Leader of the Opposition and remained guiding principles during most of her time in office. Renwick deems her convictions and political courage important factors in achieving "a greater impact on world affairs than her predecessors or, to date, successors [...]".⁷¹ Renwick thus cultivates a rather favourable image of the Prime Minister, with an obvious weakness of his interpretation being his former association with Thatcher as her employee. Thus, there is an inherent danger of intended or

⁶³ Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power*. New York 1995; Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*. London 1993.

⁶⁴ See Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography: Volume One: Not For Turning*. London 2013; Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography: Volume Two: Everything She Wants*. London 2015.

⁶⁵ See Parsons 1989; Green 2006.

⁶⁶ Vinen 2012.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*: 215.

⁶⁸ Evans 1997: 101, 102. For Thatcher's efforts to oppose German unification following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, see Evans 1997: 103-105.

⁶⁹ Moore 2013: 552.

⁷⁰ Moore explains how Thatcher used the 're-election' of the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party 1964-82) to demonstrate her contempt for the Soviet regime. While other European leaders sent their messages of congratulations, she advised that the Queen should not. See Moore 2013: 552.

⁷¹ Renwick 2013: 13, 283-287.

unconscious loyalty to her memory in Renwick's contribution. His account, however, stops well short of outright bias.

One of the most debated issues concerns Thatcher's relationship and influence with Ronald Reagan. Many writers argue that, in Sir Anthony Parsons' words, their relation was a "political love affair".⁷² Brian Harrison claims that Thatcher did not make "Macmillan's and Wilson's mistake of thinking that the UK could act as broker between the superpowers: she saw herself simply as an intermediary or facilitator. Through such relationships, she could extend Britain's world influence for a decade longer than British economic strength merited".⁷³ Andrew Gamble shows that this close alignment with the United States, although much debated, was not a "trade-off" of British public subservience for insider influence, but rather about coinciding British and American interests – and in fact a continuation of British policy since the 1940s.⁷⁴ Against this, Richard Aldous has demonstrated – quite convincingly and partly based on archival material – that the Thatcher-Reagan alliance was a turbulent one: "During eight years together in power, these two leaders had fought and disagreed over almost every major decision that they had confronted [...]."⁷⁵ However, as Charles Moore points out, such interruptions in the relationship did little to alter Anglo-American relations in the end since vital British interests depended on American support.⁷⁶ The Anglo-American relationship (and especially not upsetting it) was in fact Thatcher's overriding priority in foreign affairs.⁷⁷

Another point of contention is Margaret Thatcher's alleged distrust of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Parsons, writing while she was still in office, advocates that Thatcher did not turn her office into an alternative source of British foreign policymaking to the FCO – at least not to a greater degree than some of her predecessors did.⁷⁸ Others argue quite the opposite.⁷⁹ Charles Moore demonstrates that Thatcher indeed used alternative sources of advice in addition to those in the FCO.⁸⁰ This is particularly evident in some aspects of her

⁷² Parsons 1989: 161.

⁷³ Harrison 2010: 52-53.

⁷⁴ Gamble 2012: 223-226.

⁷⁵ Aldous 2012: 274-275.

⁷⁶ See Moore 2015: 134-135.

⁷⁷ See for example Green 2006: 161; Renwick 2013: 5; Moore 2013: Chapter 20 – Russia...and Reagan: *'The only European leader I know with balls'*.

⁷⁸ See Parsons 1989: 159-160.

⁷⁹ See for example Howe 2012: 241; Moore 2013: 553, 555-557.

⁸⁰ See Moore 2013: 553-554.

policy like the Middle East and the apartheid regime of South Africa.⁸¹ Writes Moore: “As was the case in some other areas of diplomacy – aspects of the Cold War, relations with Saudi Arabia – South Africa became one of those subjects for which Mrs Thatcher and Powell⁸² worked out the direction of policy at the highest level in Downing Street and cut out Geoffrey Howe⁸³ and his officials.”⁸⁴ If anything, the case of South Africa reveals her dominating leadership style, occasionally trying to sidestep her foreign secretary and his department.⁸⁵ Any discord between Thatcher and the FCO was rooted, as Renwick suggests, in her belief that the British foreign policy elite lost their faith in Britain’s capabilities after the humiliation at Suez – very different from her own viewpoint.⁸⁶

Despite the extensive body of work discussing Margaret Thatcher’s foreign policy, very little detailed comment exists on her policy towards the Middle East. In some accounts on the Thatcher era, other aspects of British foreign affairs overshadow this area of policy.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the Thatcher government vigorously pursued British interests there and merged decisiveness with pragmatism with the aim of strengthening United Kingdom influence.⁸⁸ Renwick, though largely ignoring the Persian Gulf, argues that Thatcher contributed to stiffen American resolve in dealing with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 as well as committing a large British military contingent to military action. Thus, she contributed to the ensuing Gulf War of early 1991, although she herself was out of office at its actual outbreak.⁸⁹

However, some writers have commented more thoroughly on Thatcher’s Middle East policy – especially regarding her efforts to promote British defence sales. These demonstrate that Thatcher was very much personally involved in policy initiatives in the region. Writes Charles Moore: “Mrs Thatcher’s chief aims across the Middle East were to assist and, where necessary, restrain the United States, to be vigilant against the Soviet Union and to improve British export markets with Arab countries.”⁹⁰ He continues: “She was the most tireless

⁸¹ Moore 2015: Chapter 9 – Arms and the Woman: ‘*Your Majesty, who do you trust – Mitterrand or Mrs Thatcher?*’ and Chapter 16 – Against Queen and Commonwealth: ‘*Blacks and their families out of work. Moral? Poof!*’

⁸² Charles Powell served as Private Secretary to the Prime Minister from 1983-91. See Moore 2015: 96.

⁸³ Geoffrey Howe served in various positions within Thatcher’s cabinet, from 1983-89 as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. See Moore 2015: 4.

⁸⁴ Moore 2015: 567-568.

⁸⁵ Ibid: 558, 567-568.

⁸⁶ Renwick 2013: 2.

⁸⁷ See for example Howe 2012:241; Evans 1997: 93.

⁸⁸ See Moore 2015; Petersen 2015.

⁸⁹ Renwick 2013: Chapter XVI: ‘No time to go wobbly’.

⁹⁰ Moore 2015: 272.

saleswoman for British companies.”⁹¹ Moore focuses largely on Thatcher’s sales efforts – especially the Tornado aircraft deal with Saudi Arabia – rather than on strategic or military considerations.⁹² Moreover, he offers comparably little comment on Thatcher’s policy on Oman or Anglo-Omani relations.⁹³

Petersen, as we have seen, concerns himself more directly with the case of Oman during the early Thatcher years in his book about Anglo-American Gulf policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His work, although much concerned with the importance of defence sales like Moore, offers a rather balanced account taking into consideration strategy and providing detailed discussion of the nature of Anglo-American cooperation in the Gulf and Oman. Whatever the nature of the “special relationship” elsewhere, it worked well in the Persian Gulf according to Petersen.⁹⁴ In fact, Thatcher used the American presence in the Gulf as a tool with which to further British influence.⁹⁵ In Oman, she took care to second additional loan service personnel at the Sultan’s occasional requests in order to remain on good terms, thus in effect reversing earlier attempts to scale down the British presence in the Omani armed forces.⁹⁶ Petersen argues, quite rightly, that British authorities initially retained ultimate control over their seconded personnel. However, he attaches great importance to a letter from Thatcher to Qaboos of July 1982 in theory conceding to the latter a greater say over British loaned personnel.⁹⁷ While his account otherwise explains British policy towards the Sultanate convincingly, he pays little attention to the immediate background for Thatcher’s letter and the difference between its theoretical and practical significance.

1.1.3 The position of this thesis

The position of this thesis is very much that of the transformationalists and thus it challenges the declinist perspective on British post-war history as advocated by Kelly and others. To link

⁹¹ Moore 2015: 282.

⁹² Ibid: Chapter 9 – Arms and the Woman: ‘*Your Majesty, who do you trust – Mitterrand or Mrs Thatcher?*’ For another discussion of the Saudi arms deal, see Petersen 2015.

⁹³ Moore is more concerned with discussing the dealings of Mark Thatcher, Margaret’s son, than the content of Anglo-Omani relations during her premiership. See Moore 2015: 289-293.

⁹⁴ See Petersen 2015. Owtram also discusses Anglo-American relations in the particular case of Oman, depicting Britain and the United States as both allies and competitors. See Owtram 2004: Chapter Six: Western strategic interests in the contemporary Omani state.

⁹⁵ See for example Petersen 2015: 3.

⁹⁶ Petersen 2015: 108, 121.

⁹⁷ Ibid: 121-122.

the liquidation of the British Empire too closely with a demise of British world power is wrong. To accept the narrative of unequivocal British decline in the latter half of the 20th century would be to acknowledge a deterministic and one-sided view on history – indeed to come close to suggesting an “end of history”. To deny any form of relative deterioration of British world power, on the other hand, would be to deny the undeniable; namely to advocate that the British Empire never formally ended. The truth lies somewhere in-between. For a number of reasons like economic decline and growing international resentment to the concept of colonialism the British Empire transformed into other relationships – some resembling those of informal empire and some leaving the British with little influence. Thus, in the post-war era Britain gradually has had to adjust to a situation with no empire to back it up in global politics. Despite the dissolution of its empire, however, Great Britain has remained a significant power in world affairs possessing sufficient hard and soft power to pursue its interests and play a role – albeit less independently than in the heyday of imperial pre-eminence.

This is also true for the British position in the Middle East. Here too it is counterproductive to accept too uncritically a narrative of British decline. This is not to say that the Suez crisis or the disorderly retreat from Aden never happened. These incidents effectively left Britain with no influence in Egypt and South Arabia respectively. However, this was not the case elsewhere in the Middle East. The thesis contests the commonly accepted truth that the United Kingdom left the Gulf in 1971 and Oman in 1977 – both politically and militarily. Indeed, the British transformed from paramount power in the decade following the Second World War to a great power operating alongside and gradually under the cover of the United States. This is particularly true in the lower Persian Gulf. They also left their fixed military bases. But they did not stop pursuing interests in the area. By overtly withdrawing militarily from the Gulf, British authorities had the best of both worlds: They retained influence at reduced financial and diplomatic cost. They did not have to pay for bases (or have their friends paying) and they were less vulnerable to criticism of outdated imperialism. The result was a transformation of British power in the region, but without actual withdrawal. In the case of Oman, Britain even left behind a small but effective military presence as a device to protect its collaborators and national interests. Margaret Thatcher built on this British presence and strengthened it during her premiership.

Thus, British post-war history in the Middle East (as elsewhere) is not one of steady and inevitable decline from pre-eminence to incompetence. It is a story of adjustment to new

circumstances and lessons learned. It is a story of application of new or refined means to old ends – those ends of regional stability, influence and commercial gains. It represents a shift from emphasis on hard power to soft power, necessitated both by the need to make economies and a world order where violence was less applicable as a means for pursuing national interests. Finally, in the case of the Persian Gulf and Oman it is a story of the appearance of weakness versus Britain's real capabilities.

The particular story of this thesis is not a dramatic one of British revival, fall or both, as is so often the case with historical accounts on Britain and the Persian Gulf. It is a story about recommitment and gradual expansion of a presence in Oman that never really ended – in many ways related to the narratives of Worrall and Petersen on the subject, but with its own twists and emphasis. It concerns itself mainly with Thatcher's loan service policy and thus implicitly her efforts to promote British defence sales (which relates it to Moore as well). In effect, it is a story about a presence resembling a modern form of informal imperialism⁹⁸ – although one should be careful to apply such tabloid and negatively charged terms too uncritically. To claim that the British informal empire in the Gulf never really ended would be controversial to say the least. More research on the importance attached by Thatcher to loan service personnel as a means of influence would contribute, however, to a clearer understanding of the true nature of the Anglo-Omani relationship of the 1980s and beyond as well as Britain's role in the Sultanate.

1.2 Research Objective and Relevance

Despite the intense research on British post-war diplomatic history, this vast body of work have paid only scant attention to the United Kingdom's continued defence posture in Oman. What little comment that exists either concern counterinsurgency during the Dhofar War or provide too few details to grasp fully the nature or implications of such a presence. As claimed by transformationalists, Britain indeed maintained interests and retained influence in the Persian Gulf after the formal military departure from the Gulf and Oman in 1971 and 1977 respectively. Existing literature on Anglo-Omani relations during the Thatcher years does not fully appreciate, however, the importance of loan service personnel as a means of projecting influence and furthering national interests. An exploration of the details of the continued British presence in Oman in the form of loan service personnel will shed light on the true nature of

⁹⁸ See Glen Balfour-Paul's definition. Balfour-Paul 1999: 490-491.

Britain's position in the Sultanate in the early 1980s and thus add to the understanding of Anglo-Omani relations then and now.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute such a detailed discussion about the nature of the Anglo-Omani loan service arrangement in 1981-82. Within this short period, the Thatcher government reinforced British efforts to maintain influence in Oman and strengthened its commercial position in the Omani market – especially concerning defence sales. The main research objective of this thesis is to examine and analyse loan service personnel as a means to achieve foreign policy goals. It claims that the Thatcher government consciously applied its loan service policy to its own clearly defined ends – in effect utilising their loan service presence as a tool with which they obtained influence through commitment. Secondary objectives are to discuss thoroughly the reversal of Omanisation and the link between loan service personnel and defence sales. These issues link closely to the main research objective and will contribute even more depth and detail to the discussion.

The value to contemporary society of understanding British loan service policy in Oman during the early 1980s is almost self-explanatory: Britain has been part of most major Western interventions⁹⁹ in the wider Middle East since the Gulf War against Iraq of 1991 to the present bomb raids against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In 2014, the British Secretary of State for Defence announced that Britain planned to establish its first fixed military base in the Persian Gulf since 1971, namely a naval base in Bahrain.¹⁰⁰ The British Strategic Defence and Security Review of 2015 signals that 10,000 army troops will form two strike brigades to serve as a quick reaction force which the British government can deploy globally. Moreover, it states that Britain will prolong the service of its Typhoon aircraft by a decade to enhance British airpower and indicates a general redistribution and increase in resources aimed at strengthening British offensive capabilities.¹⁰¹ The Royal Navy¹⁰² will soon receive two large aircraft carriers

⁹⁹ The Gulf War of 1991, the invasions of Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003, the intervention in support of regime change in Libya 2011, air raids against the Islamic State in Iraq since 2014 and Syria since late 2015.

¹⁰⁰ According to a news article retrieved from the British Broadcasting Corporation website (no personal author). <http://www.bbc.com>, “UK to establish £15m permanent Mid East military base”, December 6, 2014 (accessed April 26, 2016).

¹⁰¹ A pdf version of this policy document is available on the website of the British government. See The British Government, National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, Cm9161, London 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015> (accessed April 26, 2016).

¹⁰² The British maritime combat force.

that will greatly enhance Britain's naval capability.¹⁰³ In fact, contemporary Britain appears to be more willing to engage militarily in conflicts of the Middle East than during the Thatcher era and has done so on a larger scale (Thatcher nonetheless contributed to the run-up of the 1991 Gulf War¹⁰⁴). However, the new direction of defence and Britain's close involvement in Middle Eastern affairs today have clear parallels to those years.

Contemporary Anglo-Omani relations largely resemble those of the Thatcher years as well. On November 25th, 2011, Lord Astor of Hever, Deputy Lieutenant and Under-Secretary of State at the British Ministry of Defence (MoD), addressed the Sultan's Armed Forces Association annual dinner in London. In a rare deviation from the normal discretion surrounding the Anglo-Omani military relationship, the Under-Secretary spelled out its present form. His speaking notes read:

Defence co-operation remains the underpinning foundation of our friendship.

Many Omanis attend prestigious courses such as RCDS; Dartmouth; Cranwell; and Sandhurst, as His Majesty the Sultan did before them.

They typify the professionalism of the Omani Armed Forces, well trained and highly motivated.

The Loan Service Personnel in Oman, our largest team deployed anywhere in the world, now advise and discuss issues, rather than instruct or implement.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, there is still a British loan service presence in the Sultanate as well as close overall military links between the two countries. To be able to grasp fully the implications of this form of military presence it is necessary to consult its recent history.

¹⁰³ These ships will displace about 65 000 tonnes each and carry American F-35B Lightning aircraft. See online factsheet from the British Ministry of Defence. Source: <https://www.gov.uk>, "About Aircraft Carrier", February 9, 2015 (accessed April 26, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ See Renwick 2013: Chapter XVI: 'No time to go wobbly'.

¹⁰⁵ The entire written speech is available on the website of the British government. The British Ministry of Defence and John Astor, 3rd Baron Astor of Hever, "Sultan [of Oman's] Armed Forces Association annual dinner", November 25, 2011, retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/2011-11-25-sultan-of-oman-s-armed-forces-association-annual-dinner> (accessed April 26, 2016).

1.3 Findings

Contradictory to the claim of much research literature (although with exceptions), Britain of the 1980s still exerted significant influence in Oman. British authorities cultivated excellent relations with the Sultan through frequent ministerial visits. Even the Prime Minister herself visited the Sultanate in late April 1981. The Thatcher government responded favourably to most requests from Qaboos, with Thatcher often personally overseeing the follow-up. One result of this favourable atmosphere was a considerable increase in loan service numbers from the outset of 1981 to the close of 1982. Frequently, Omani purchases of sophisticated British defence equipment led to requests for additional loan service personnel. Presence, influence and goodwill were three elements of a policy to obtain ever more defence contracts.

Within this period, British authorities twice extended the service of their loan service commanders and even agreed to second yet another, more senior officer to the Omani defence hierarchy to serve as Chief of the Defence Staff – second in command only to the Sultan himself. This demonstrates how dependent the Sultan was on British support, but it also shows the depth of the British involvement in the running of Oman's military and its potential as a source of influence. Britain ran the Omani armed forces through officers whose ultimate loyalty was to authorities in London. The loan service commanders lobbied the Sultan into changing the Omani defence hierarchy from a committee system to a command system, thus implicitly instigating the request for a Chief of the Defence Staff. A reorganisation of the Omani defence hierarchy was in line with current British interests and worries over the Sultan's meddling in defence affairs, the ineffective command structure, corruption in relation to defence procurement and excessive military spending. The new Chief of the Defence Staff sought to mend these deficiencies. While upsetting many people in both Oman and Britain, he had made good progress in his efforts by the close of 1982. He had also succeeded to establish a close rapport with Qaboos.

One notable feature with Margaret Thatcher's approach to loan service was that the bureaucracy in the FCO and MoD only slowly adapted to her new direction of policy. New loan service requests met with scepticism from officials, particularly in the case of providing a general for the Chief of the Defence Staff post. The ensuing debate over this issue was twofold; firstly, it regarded whether or not Britain was able or willing to second another senior officer to Oman, and secondly it concerned the suitability of the Sultan's preferred candidate General Sir Timothy Creasey. This rift over policy between Thatcher and the official level is very

interesting, especially in light of the differing views on Thatcher's relationship with the FCO in the historiography.

In 1982, Thatcher signalled to the Sultan what in theory was a major policy shift on the application of loan service personnel. Not only did she renew efforts to reduce loan service charges and agree formally to expand the loan service presence. She gave the Sultan what Petersen interprets as a free hand in deploying loan service personnel abroad without need for prior consultation (although this was desirable) – in theory handing over effective control over loan service personnel to the Omanis. A closer assessment of the source material now available reveals, however, that this was not the case in practice. The British framework for micromanagement of the Omani military – namely the senior loan service officers – ensured information in advance of such deployments and provided channels through which they could object and influence matters. Thatcher, rather than setting off a new departure in the Anglo-Omani military relationship, paid lip service to the Sultan in order to obtain goodwill while knowing that she still possessed means to control events. By appearing committed to Oman, Thatcher obtained influence.

Taken together, these findings makes a significant contribution to a wider understanding of British policy in Oman during the early Thatcher years. Although this thesis concerns itself only with a narrow subject within a very brief period of two years, it represents a fresh take on the source material available on the topic.

1.4 The Source Material

The thesis at hand is an empirical study. It draws mainly on recently released source material collected at the National Archives in London, the United Kingdom. The bulk of these primary sources stems from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) series, but some documents originate from the Ministry of Defence (DEFE) and the Prime Minister's Office (PREM). One classification of sources is policy papers produced by officials of the FCO. They contain information on the political challenges necessitating the particular paper as well as assessments of possible solutions and policy direction. Some are merely unapproved drafts, while others have received approval from the political level. Those of the latter category are by far the more valuable ones since they provide the more reliable evidence on direction of policy. Another group of sources is dispatches like telegrams, minutes and letters. These exchanges document

communication between various actors. Telegrams document exchanges between the FCO and British overseas embassies or missions. In the current context, these dispatches tend to occur between the FCO and the embassy in Oman. Minutes and letters are documents circulating within the whole spectrum of foreign policymaking, from exchanges at political level to intradepartmental communication. This group of documents provides information spanning from day to day departmental or governmental business to comments on policy paper drafts.

The study benefits from wide-ranging and detailed primary sources. An extensive body of source material is available for research on loan service personnel in Oman during the first years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, thus providing a solid basis for discussion of this subject. The material provides sufficient information to interpret the extent of British influence in Oman and the connection between this influence and the Anglo-Omani loan service arrangement. Since the sources applied in this thesis are recent, they are mostly easily readable. However, there are certain deficiencies. For one, the source material is incomplete. Some documents remain wholly or partly classified, while others or parts of others are missing. Secondly, when the author visited the National Archives in spring 2015 the most recently released FCO files regarding the current topic were those of 1982. This means that any discussion of the present topic based on the FCO series ends with the close of 1982.

The first flaw represents only a minor problem since there are only a few instances (some missing records of meetings and a very limited number of documents with large classified sections) when this has frustrated progress on the thesis. In general, there are very few missing or classified documents (or sections of documents) that pose a problem for the discussion. The second flaw is also manageable. Sources are the basic components with which an historian constructs his interpretation of the past and as such, their availability will always have a bearing on the period of historical research. Thus, with available sources up to 1982 it is necessary to operate within this frame.

Autobiographies represent a supplement to the archival material. Sometimes they provide useful anecdotes or first-hand information from actors close to the matters up for discussion. There are, however, problems attached to the use of autobiographical material in historical research. There is always a danger for writers pursuing agendas like self-aggrandisement or self-justification, or for plain misinterpretation or incorrect memory. Whatever the case, one should be very careful when using such accounts. In this thesis, such sources appear very rarely – only when they offer valuable comments not found elsewhere.

Having established that the source material, despite its weaknesses, is sufficient to construct a plausible interpretation of British loan service policy in Oman in the early 1980s, only one basis for uncertainty remains; namely the historian. John Tosh observes that: “There is nothing obvious or predetermined about the way in which the pieces fit together, and the feat is usually accomplished only as a result of much trial and error.”¹⁰⁶ With interpretation and analysis of sources where the answers – or appropriate arrangements of the pieces – are not straightforward comes the danger of misinterpretation. This might occur due to an overall lack of understanding of the source material. However, it might just as well result from a failure to put together the fragments of history in a correct and meaningful way or attaching importance to the wrong parts of the story. Awareness of these risks is important, although one can never be entirely sure of avoiding them.

1.5 Thesis Outline

Before turning to the discussion, it is necessary to outline the structure of the thesis. Chapter 2 shortly explains how the Anglo-Omani relationship transformed during the 1970s before it turns to a thorough discussion of Britain’s military recommitment to Oman in 1981-82. It argues that British officialdom only slowly adapted to this policy change and in addition points out that there were certain pull factors in Oman that also had an impact. Then chapter 3 argues that the British loan service presence led to influence and goodwill that shored up the British sphere and served Britain’s strategic and economic interests in the Sultanate. It also includes an assessment of how loaned officers limited United States involvement. Chapter 4 discusses British efforts to cut loan service charges in order to accommodate Omani complaints, and in addition provides a fresh interpretation of British concessions to Omani authorities concerning loan service application. Chapter 5 offers concluding remarks that briefly emphasise the relationship between commitment and foreign policy gain in the post-imperial world and then consider the significance of loan service personnel in such a context.

¹⁰⁶ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*. Harlow 2010: 147.

Chapter 2

Loan Service Policy under Thatcher, 1981-82

I always regretted, even at the time, the decision of Ted Heath's Government not to reverse the Wilson Government's withdrawal of our forces and the severing of many of our responsibilities east of Suez. Repeatedly, events have demonstrated that the West cannot pursue a policy of total disengagement in this strategically vital area. Britain has, however, continued to supply equipment, training and advice.¹⁰⁷

Margaret Thatcher always opposed disengagement in the Persian Gulf, as suggested in the above statement from her memoirs. During her tenure as British Prime Minister, she took care to reassert British interests in this important region. In Oman, she could build on the strong Anglo-Omani relationship from the 1970s as strengthened and cultivated by her immediate predecessors. From this basis, she reinforced the policy of providing low-key military assistance to the Sultanate. Thatcher's commitment of more British military personnel to serve on loan with the Omani armed forces in effect reversed the established policy of gradual withdrawal of such personnel from executive posts.

This policy shift stemmed partly from a general shift in British foreign policy aimed at strengthening ties with old partners and partly from the need to address the spectrum of threats looming in the Gulf. Thus, Thatcher's policy was both proactive and reactive. British officials, however, occasionally warned about the need to monitor loan service numbers and keep in mind the ultimate objective of Omanisation. When the Sultan requested another British general to fill the new post of Chief of the Defence Staff, officials in the FCO and MoD argued against while Thatcher was in favour. This demonstrates that British officials only slowly adapted to the policy of recommitment practiced by the Thatcher government.

There were also pull factors in Oman that influenced British loan service policy. The steady Omani demand for more personnel – exacerbated by an accelerating expansion of the Omani military – interrupted the British military phase-out. The Sultan was, moreover, eager to retain key United Kingdom personnel for as long as possible and therefore opposed British military disengagement through Omanisation. If the British government refused his bids he

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*. London 1993: 162.

could always employ contract personnel instead, which risked reducing British influence in the Omani armed forces since officers serving on contract terms were outside British control. Hence, it was often strategically wise for British authorities to meet Omani requests for more personnel in order to maintain British influence.

2.1 Withdrawal Reconsidered: Britain and Oman in the 1970s

Any discussion of British loan service policy in Oman in the early 1980s requires an understanding of why Britain prolonged and transformed its presence there during the preceding decade when it was supposed to withdraw from military commitments¹⁰⁸ in the area. Britain never divested itself completely of its commitments in the Sultanate. In the 1960s and 70s it fought a small-scale war there in order to prevent a regime change, with British authorities themselves in the process contributing to a palace coup that installed a ruler more receptive to (and dependent on) United Kingdom advice. There was therefore no actual political or military withdrawal in the 1970s but merely occasional shifts in rhetoric and priorities that corresponded with changes of government in the United Kingdom. Circumstances in Oman on the contrary persuaded British authorities to recommit militarily and politically. Writes Tore T. Petersen:

The war in Dhofar is an excellent example of the British trying to hang on to important positions, even though they tried to do so on the cheap. But British influence in Oman did not end after the successful conclusion of the Dhofar War in 1975.¹⁰⁹

From the 1960s onwards, a mounting insurgency in Oman's southernmost province Dhofar threatened to destabilise the whole country. It originated from underdevelopment and oppression and later turned into a Marxist-oriented uprising.¹¹⁰ This threat to Omani stability

¹⁰⁸ For a detailed discussion of the Labour government's decision in 1968 to withdraw militarily from east of Suez by 1971 and the political and economic circumstances, see Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?*. Basingstoke 2002.

¹⁰⁹ Tore T. Petersen, *Richard Nixon, Great Britain and the Anglo-American Alignment in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula: Making Allies out of Clients*. Brighton 2009: 127.

¹¹⁰ James Worrall and Uzi Rabi provide thorough discussions of the Dhofar insurgency in their works. See James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire*. London 2014; Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman under Sa'id bin Taymur, 1932-1970*. Brighton 2006: 188-212.

provided a pretext for Britain to prolong its military presence in the lower Persian Gulf without overtly altering its stated policy of withdrawal.¹¹¹

Neither Labour nor the Conservatives left the Omani regime to its own devices in face of this unrest. British recommitment to the Sultanate accelerated with the accession of the Conservatives and Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1970.¹¹² However, even the preceding Labour government under Harold Wilson¹¹³ – concerned about the crisis in southern Oman – proved more willing to intervene militarily in defence of British interests in the Sultanate than its official policy of disengagement east of Suez suggested. It reviewed its Oman policy and suggested some direct military assistance but – true to form – remained reluctant to commit too firmly to the Omani cause.¹¹⁴ The Heath government went further in terms of political and military support, for example through supply of ever more loan service personnel for the Sultan's Armed Forces to boost Omani military capabilities.¹¹⁵ Prime Minister Heath – an outspoken critic of British military retreat from east of Suez when in opposition – nonetheless stopped short of reversing eventual withdrawal but rather readjusted policy to allow for a continued British role in that part of the world through less direct means.¹¹⁶

The rebellion provided the British with a convenient excuse to dispose of Oman's intransigent ruler Sultan Said bin Taimur.¹¹⁷ This move was necessary in order to make British efforts to win the Dhofar War more effective. Mark Curtis has commented that Said's "regime was highly repressive and existed for the benefit of the Sultan – in power with British support since 1932 – his immediate entourage and Britain".¹¹⁸ The Sultan's rule was partly to blame for the rebellion in the first place,¹¹⁹ and his inclination to resolve the crisis solely by force rather than by mending the underlying problems of underdevelopment obstructed any viable

¹¹¹ See for example Petersen 2009: Chapter 6 – Oman: British Imperialism as Transition to Modernity, 1970-1973.

¹¹² Edward Heath was British Prime Minister from 1970-1974. See Robert Self, *British Foreign and Defence Policy since 1945: Challenges and Dilemmas in a Changing World*. Basingstoke 2010: 10.

¹¹³ Harold Wilson served two terms as British Prime Minister, first from 1964-1970 and then again from 1974-1976. See for example Self 2010: 10.

¹¹⁴ See Worrall 2014: 66-67, 69-70, 72.

¹¹⁵ See Worrall 2014.

¹¹⁶ According to James Worrall, Heath "led a change of emphasis on defence and 'East of Suez' matters [...]". Worrall 2014: 78. See also pages 71-72, 79-86.

¹¹⁷ Said bin Taimur was Sultan of Oman from 1932-1970. See Rabi 2006: 1.

¹¹⁸ Mark Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power: British Foreign Policy since 1945*. London 1995: 98.

¹¹⁹ Dhofar – ruled as the Sultan's personal fief – was underdeveloped even by Omani standards. See Rabi 2006: 189-191.

solution.¹²⁰ Moreover, he happened to be generally unsympathetic to British advice.¹²¹ Only weeks after assuming power, the Heath government therefore sanctioned – at least tacitly – a palace coup ousting the old Sultan and replacing him with his pro-British son Qaboos.¹²² James Worrall concludes that: “With Qaboos, Britain finally had a Sultan who shared London’s views on development and how to tackle the insurgency.”¹²³

Such a partner – for a time even tutored by the British¹²⁴ – was indeed useful to United Kingdom interests. British authorities aimed to modernise Oman and transform Anglo-Omani relations from an all-too-obvious patron-client relationship to something resembling an equal partnership.¹²⁵ After the coup, the British campaigned to integrate Oman into the international community through membership in the Arab League and the United Nations.¹²⁶ This effort aimed to end the Sultanate’s isolation and appearance as a semi-protectorate.¹²⁷

However, British influence remained intact. Oman in effect became “a British-run subsidiary” in the early 1970s.¹²⁸ Britain ran the Dhofar War. Several other countries provided support for the Omani regime as well, but with the British coordinating and leading the effort.¹²⁹ The Sultan declared victory in December 1975, although hostilities continued on a smaller scale for years.¹³⁰ Among the keys to British success in Dhofar were discretion and low publicity,¹³¹ core principles of United Kingdom policy towards Oman ever since.¹³²

The 1970s were transformative years that put Anglo-Omani relations on a new but strong footing. Another Labour government, back in power since 1974, nevertheless meant

¹²⁰ Worrall 2014: 52, 53, 64.

¹²¹ See for example Miriam Joyce, *Ruling Shaikhs and Her Majesty’s Government 1960-1969*. London 2003: 95-97.

¹²² Many writers have commented on the coup, with differing emphasis on British involvement. See for example Worrall 2014: 72-75; Rabi 2006: 212-214; Curtis 1995: 101-102.

¹²³ Worrall 2014: 75.

¹²⁴ Worrall describes Britain’s relationship to Qaboos immediately after the coup as that of a tutor to a pupil. See Worrall 2014: 226.

¹²⁵ For British efforts to transform Oman from client to ally, see Petersen 2009.

¹²⁶ Both achieved in 1971. Calvin Allen, Jr. and W. Lynn Rigsbee II, *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution 1970-1996*. London 2000: 182. For a discussion of the British role in this, see Worrall 2014: Chapter 5 – The Search for International Recognition: Britain’s Role in Securing Legitimacy.

¹²⁷ See Worrall 2014: 129-132.

¹²⁸ Petersen 2009: 117.

¹²⁹ See Francis Owtram, *A Modern History of Oman: Formation of the State since 1920*. London 2004: 129-131. For a thorough discussion of outside support, see Worrall 2014: Chapter 6 – British Policy, Whitehall Debates & External Aid 1972-74.

¹³⁰ Worrall 2014: 216-217.

¹³¹ For the importance of a low-key British approach during the Dhofar War, see Worrall 2014.

¹³² For British emphasis on discretion during Thatcher’s premiership, see Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Policy toward the Persian Gulf, 1978-1985: Power, Influence and Restraint*. Brighton 2015: Chapter IX – Oman: Discretion Required.

different priorities. Victory against the rebels in southern Oman prompted a scaling down of the British military presence in the Sultanate through abandonment of British bases and gradual Omanisation of loan service posts.¹³³ Political control also diminished compared to the immediate post-coup years.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, Britain in subsequent years retained a sphere of influence in Oman underpinned by persistent supply of loan service personnel.¹³⁵ Thus, despite ebbs and flows in the British commitment to the Sultanate, British interest in Oman and support for its regime never ceased. The Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher therefore built on already existing close ties when it reasserted British military commitment to the Sultanate in 1981-82. Thatcher's policies represented yet another shift in an ongoing pattern of moderate policy adjustments that never decisively divested Britain of its role but rather adapted to changing circumstances and transformed it accordingly.

2.2 Omanisation under Thatcher: What Omanisation?

Omanisation never became a tidy process of British disengagement but rather developed into a series of compromises that sought to balance various British concerns. Neither was it a wholehearted effort to leave Oman. During Thatcher's premiership, any hint of British military disengagement in Oman evaporated altogether. In the years 1981-82 Britain significantly increased its loan service presence in the Omani armed forces. British policy moved from a gradual albeit flexible phase-out of British seconded personnel from command posts to agreement at governmental level to provide the manpower necessary to meet future Omani requirements.

British authorities formally agreed the programme of Omanisation with the Sultan in early 1980¹³⁶ but soon had to reconsider the consequences of too rapid a changeover from

¹³³ For a discussion about British withdrawal from these bases, see James Worrall, "Britain's Last Bastion in Arabia: The End of the Dhofar War, the Labour Government and the Withdrawal from RAF Salalah and Masirah, 1974-1977", in Tore T. Petersen (ed.), *Challenging Retrenchment: The United States, Great Britain and the Middle East, 1950-1980*. Trondheim 2010. For a definition of "Omanisation" and comments on this policy, see Petersen 2015: 108.

¹³⁴ Worrall 2014: 228.

¹³⁵ See especially Petersen 2015: Chapter IX – Oman: Discretion Required.

¹³⁶ Thus, the British formalised its Omanisation policy after Thatcher took office. For a reference to the formal Anglo-Omani agreement, see Lucas to Carrington, "Oman: Defence 1980", March 7, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, The National Archives.

British to Omani command. The British Ambassador to Oman¹³⁷, Ivor Lucas, reported to British Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington¹³⁸ in retrospect:

”Hardly was the ink dry on the words out of our mouths”, as Your Lordship’s distinguished predecessor, Mr Ernest Bevin, might have said, when this agreed programme needed some re-thinking. This is partly because as Omanisation progresses, as it has done rapidly in the Sultan of Oman’s Land Forces, and the senior appointments are taken over by officers who only a few years ago were NCOs or less, the need for flexibility in implementing the programme becomes more evident.¹³⁹

According to this, Omani officers were not yet professionally ready to assume certain senior posts. Other sources suggest the same. The British Defence Attaché in Muscat, Johnny Johnson, remarked of Omanisation that it was “proceeding apace and some difficulties are being experienced as local officers assume the more senior command and logistic appointments”. He continued: “A significant problem is the lack of experience on the part of formation and unit commanders in the handling of Battle Groups and Combat Teams.”¹⁴⁰ Britain’s Naval and Air Attaché in Oman commented on Omani naval officers – of which the most senior at the time served as lieutenants – that they lacked the skills necessary to replace loan service or contract personnel.¹⁴¹ It is obvious from these observations by professionals that Omani lack of experience obstructed speedy British withdrawal from senior executive posts in the Sultan’s armed forces. On the contrary, it necessitated continued British commitment in order to underpin Omani military efficiency.

Omanisation was in any case not synonymous with military withdrawal despite its inherent intention to remove British loaned officers from command posts in the Omani military. Rather it represented a transformation of the British military presence from an executive to a

¹³⁷ The reader will note that Britain had two ambassadors to Oman within the timespan of this thesis. Both will thus appear in the text and might cause confusion. Therefore, a clarifying remark is necessary: Ivor Lucas was British Ambassador to Oman until the end of November 1981. Duncan Slater then replaced him. For the appointment of a new Ambassador to Oman, see “Ambassadorial Appointment”, September 29, 1981, DEFE 24/2108, TNA.

¹³⁸ Peter Carrington was British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs from May 1979 to April 1982. See Thatcher 1993: 873-874.

¹³⁹ Lucas to Carrington, “Oman: Defence 1980”, March 7, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁴⁰ British Defence Attaché Muscat, “Annual Report for 1980”, March 3, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁴¹ British Naval and Air Attaché Muscat, “Annual Report on Naval Matters – 1980”, March 3, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

training role. MoD officials drafted a brief for the British Secretary of State for Defence, Francis Pym¹⁴², in the beginning of January 1981 that explained the scheme:

It is HMG's policy to phase out British Loan Service Personnel from chain of command appointments so as to make way for Omani officers. [...] It is also current policy that, as Omani officers take over chain of command appointments from British LSP, standards in the Sultan's Armed Forces will be maintained by building up British 'Training Teams' to assist and advise the new Commanding Officers.¹⁴³

This passage clearly demonstrates that British personnel would remain even if Omanis took over executive posts hitherto held by loan service officers. In similar vein, Lucas explained to Carrington, in March 1981 that “withdrawal [would be] qualified by the retention where necessary of LSP in a training rather than an executive role”.¹⁴⁴ If British authorities ever had implemented the policy of Omanisation in full, this conversion of personnel nevertheless would have preserved a British military presence even less visible than under the loan service arrangement. Whereas there would be no British officers directing the day-to-day running of military units, they would still exercise influence through advice and training. Thus, a complete phase-out of executive loan service posts and retention of training teams would have disguised actual continued commitment as disengagement, with the result being anything but British military departure.

Moreover, flexibility was always a core principle of Omanisation that made this policy anything but straightforward. British authorities never accomplished to implement the policy properly because they had to cater for new Omani requests, often connected to Omani defence purchases. Lucas predicted on March 7th, 1981, that an ongoing expansion of the Omani armed forces – recently commenced by the Sultan – would lead to some additional requests for loan service personnel and thus cause “a perceptible change of policy”.¹⁴⁵ His assessment was correct: The Omani military build-up consequently interrupted British phase-out of loaned

¹⁴² Francis Pym served as British defence secretary from May 1979 to January 1981. He was later British foreign secretary from April 1982 to June 1983. See Thatcher 1993: 873-875.

¹⁴³ Lindsay to DS11, “Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP”, January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁴⁴ Lucas to Carrington, “Oman: Defence 1980”, March 7, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁴⁵ Lucas mentioned this in his cover for the Service Attachés' annual reports for 1980. This suggests that the expansion of Omani military capabilities intensified during this year. See Lucas to Carrington, “Oman: Defence 1980”, March 7, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

officers and prompted British flexibility in order to underpin it. Officials in MoD briefed the Defence Secretary that Britain

continue to be reasonably flexible over adjustments to the numbers of LSP. [...] HMG's policy towards Omanisation is consequently resolute, but with an element of flexibility to it in order that new requirements (for example the recent acquisition of counter-battery guns and tanks) can be catered for – and British expertise made available.¹⁴⁶

John Gamp, MoD, later commented on an Omani request for more loan service personnel to the Sultan's air force that MoD officials “recognise that additional LSP posts will be necessary as a result of the equipment expansion programme being undertaken by SOAF”.¹⁴⁷ These comments from MoD demonstrate that British authorities readily extended their loan service assistance when it underpinned the introduction of new equipment into the Sultan's armed forces. Britain's readiness to second more personnel on such occasions related to a profound British interest to sell defence equipment to the Omanis.¹⁴⁸ Omani requirements and British commercial interests – often one and the same – outweighed any urgency on Britain's part to pull out from Oman militarily. The Omanis took advantage of British flexibility through numerous requests for more personnel. British authorities, on the other hand, practiced flexibility to such a degree that Lucas in June 1981 aired his frustration to the FCO:

While I accept the necessity to fill most of these posts from LSP, the numbers involved represent a considerable increase in relation to current LSP involvement overall. This must raise the question of how flexible we are prepared to be on Omanisation without tacitly abandoning it altogether.¹⁴⁹

An alteration of the Omanisation programme was in fact exactly what was about to happen – with 1981 as the turning point. The steady demand from Oman for more loan service personnel clearly coupled with renewed British willingness at governmental level to meet such

¹⁴⁶ Lindsay to DS11, “Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP”, January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁴⁷ Gamp to Air Plans 2, July 30, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁴⁸ Export promotion was an important British objective in Oman; see for example Miers to Lucas, February 6, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA. See also chapter 3.

¹⁴⁹ Lucas to FCO, June 18, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

requests. Foreign Secretary Carrington informed Lucas to that effect in early July: “We believe in Omanisation in principle but accept that it has to be applied flexibly even if this results in a slower pace than we would like.”¹⁵⁰ Clearly, there was growing political will in Britain to recommit by seconding more British troops to serve with the Omani military. This is especially evident from a meeting between then British Defence Secretary John Nott¹⁵¹ and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Alawi, during the Sultan’s state visit to the United Kingdom in mid-March 1982. Alawi asked for a guarantee that Britain would continue to prop up the Omani military through provision of loan service personnel. Stephen Lamport, Private Secretary to British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Douglas Hurd (also present at the meeting), recorded the discussion:

Yusuf Alawi said that Oman would like assurances that LSP officers would continue to serve in Oman as and when they were required. [...] Mr Nott said [...] that we would in principle be happy to increase the numbers of LSP as and when these might be required as Oman’s needs developed. [...] He could give a very firm assurance in principle about possible increases in numbers.¹⁵²

This firm pledge from Nott for continued and increased support signalled a significant shift of emphasis from phase-out to recommitment. In effect, it implicitly meant that the British government sanctioned a halt to the scaling down of Britain’s military presence in Oman. Thatcher personally informed the Sultan of the willingness of her cabinet to meet present requests on July 15th, 1982: “I can confirm that we agree to an increase in numbers of British Loan Service Personnel until Omani replacements are available. We hope to meet the current bid for an increase of 82 posts in 1982/83.” She also promised to “endeavour to be as helpful as possible” in meeting further Omani requirements.¹⁵³ These repeated assurances from the British government for more loan service assistance were genuine. In June 1982, Mike Patterson, FCO, remarked on new loan service posts that “we are no longer working to strict

¹⁵⁰ Carrington to Lucas, July 6, 1981, FCO 8 3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁵¹ John Nott served as British defence secretary from January 1981 to January 1983. See Thatcher 1993: 873-875.

¹⁵² Lamport to Miers, “Military Assistance for Oman”, March 17, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

¹⁵³ Thatcher to Qaboos, July 15, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

numerical ceilings”.¹⁵⁴ From this comment, it is clear that British pledges to Oman translated into actual policy.

For all purposes, British willingness to support Oman during Thatcher’s premiership effectively postponed any reduction in the loan service presence – on the contrary numbers gradually increased. The total number of British troops serving in executive posts was never impressive but definitely on the rise from early 1981 onwards. Lucas once estimated the British loan service element to number about 350 soldiers during the most intense phase of the Dhofar War.¹⁵⁵ In April 1980, numbers were down to 141. Among these, 11 served in the navy and 39 with the air force. The remaining 85 troops served in the army.¹⁵⁶ Less than a year later – in January 1981 – officials in MoD briefed their Secretary of State that Britain had 120 loaned personnel serving with the Omani military.¹⁵⁷ This demonstrates that at this point numbers were still decreasing due to Omanisation. Only two months later, though, Lucas explained to Foreign Secretary Carrington that Britain had 130 loan service personnel stationed in the Sultanate.¹⁵⁸

During the first few months of 1981, British authorities received several Omani requests for more loan service personnel that explain this increase of about ten troops and signalled more to come. On February 5th, Lucas reported an Omani bid for ten loan service officers, most of them needed immediately. Of these, five were new posts and the rest extensions of existing positions.¹⁵⁹ Approval from MoD in London soon followed.¹⁶⁰ Only days later, however, Lucas had forwarded another request for four more officers, among them a bandmaster.¹⁶¹ These were at the time merely “being considered” by MoD.¹⁶² The Omani need for a bandmaster illustrates in full the lack of skilled manpower available locally in Oman. Expansion of the Omani defence exacerbated this deficiency and led to various Omani requests for British military expertise like Royal Air Force personnel to cater for new aircraft in the Sultan’s air force¹⁶³ and soldiers to

¹⁵⁴ Patterson to Miers, Moberly, PS/Mr. Hurd, June 4, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

¹⁵⁵ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA. James Worrall estimates loan service numbers to about 200 troops, which is considerably less than Lucas’ estimate. See Worrall 2014: 226.

¹⁵⁶ See J. A. Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman: Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

¹⁵⁷ Lindsay to DS11, “Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP”, January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁵⁸ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

¹⁵⁹ Lucas to FCO, February 5, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁶⁰ Turner to Lucas, “LSP for Oman”, not dated, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA. The FCO filed the teletype on February 25, 1981. Thus, the Ministry of Defence approved the Omani request that month.

¹⁶¹ Lucas to MoD, February 11, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁶² Turner to Lucas, “LSP for Oman”, not dated, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁶³ See for example Gamp to Air Plans 2, July 30, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

support the introduction of new tanks in the army.¹⁶⁴ In July 1982, the Defence Policy Staff, MoD, completed a loan service review calculating that there were currently 170 loan service officers serving in Oman – with a projected strength by 1982/83 of 218 troops. It concluded that it was beneficial for Britain to meet the remaining Omani requests for personnel, but that the “eventual aim should remain the Omanisation of SAF”.¹⁶⁵

Through the course of 1981-82, British loan service policy clearly rendered eventual Omanisation a distant policy goal at best. Not only did the British military presence in the Sultanate almost double from the low-point in early 1981 to its projected strength of 1982/83. Thatcher also agreed to supply a British general to fill a new post of Omani Chief of the Defence Staff, which in effect added another senior loan service officer to Oman’s defence hierarchy. The perceived need for such a post stemmed from efforts in Oman to reorganise the defence structure and address organisational deficiencies.¹⁶⁶ Major General Johnny Watts and Air Vice-Marshal Erik Bennett, British loan service commanders of the Omani army and air force respectively, made a case for the addition of this senior post to MoD and FCO officials in London on January 20th, 1981. According to Richard Palmer, FCO, Watts envisaged that the Chief of the Defence Staff “would become the principal defence policy maker” in Oman.¹⁶⁷ Three months later, Thatcher met with the Sultan in Oman and consented to the secondment of General Sir Timothy Creasey to serve in this capacity. Michael Alexander, Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, recorded this:

Sultan Qaboos said there was one thing he wished to raise with the Prime Minister. He was reorganising the Services Command structure in Oman. He attached importance to having General Creasey come to work in Oman. [...] The Prime Minister said that if the Sultan wished to have General Creasey, he could be sure that the General would be made available.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Johnson to MoD, April 26, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁶⁵ J. A. Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman: Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

¹⁶⁶ There was no coordinated policy on procurement and no actual chain of command. See for example Lindsay to DS11, “Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP”, January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA. For a thorough discussion of these deficiencies, see chapter 3.

¹⁶⁷ Palmer to Moberly, January 21, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁶⁸ Alexander, “Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman in Salalah on 23 April 1981 at Noon”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

In only two years, British loan service policy thus transformed from gradual phase-out to firm recommitment. Under Thatcher, eventual withdrawal (from a stable and viable Oman) was neither imminent nor inevitable. Rather, the British government based its policy on hanging on.

2.3 The Official Level: Slow to Adapt to Thatcher's Policy Change

The new direction of British loan service policy was rooted in two developments. Firstly, it was part of a more general change in British foreign policy where the Thatcher government set out to revive and put on new footing old relationships that had faded in the wake of imperial withdrawal. Thatcher explains the political reorientation thus in her memoirs:

The Left would have it that the legacy of the British empire was one of bitterness and impoverishment in the former colonies: this was a grossly distorted and inaccurate view. Nor for the most part did those with whom I dealt in these countries see Britain in that light. Sweep away some of the rhetoric and with the exception of certain issues [...] you will find that no country is as trusted in every continent as Britain. In 1981 I began to make more systematic use of these relationships to promote the interests of Britain and the wider objectives of the West.¹⁶⁹

This revitalisation of policy toward old British spheres of interest had a profound impact on Anglo-Omani relations. Oman, never actually abandoned by Britain nor critical of its experience as a de facto outpost of the British Empire, was in every way a viable candidate for increased British attention. There, the Sultan welcomed any British effort to strengthen relations. Thatcher intensified such efforts through a series of high-level visits from Britain to the Sultanate. She even went there herself in April 1981 on a trip that resulted in a “considerable meeting of minds”¹⁷⁰ between her and the Sultan. Wrote the British Ambassador to Oman, Duncan Slater, in his annual review for 1981:

¹⁶⁹ Thatcher 1993: 160-161.

¹⁷⁰ For this remark, see Slater to Carrington, “Oman: Annual Review”, January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

The main practical demonstration of the very real and close ties between the two countries was the highly successful visit to the Sultanate of the Prime Minister in April. [...] The Secretary of State for Defence, accompanied by the Chief of the Defence Staff, spent a few days here in March; Mr Hurd paid three useful and valued visits in the course of the year and Mr Kenneth Baker MP, Minister of State, Department of Industry was here in September. These visits are much appreciated by the Omanis and are a useful demonstration of our continued interest in this country.¹⁷¹

Then British Foreign Secretary Francis Pym later explained to Slater that “[o]ver the last 2 years Oman has attracted the attention of Ministers more than in the recent past”.¹⁷² From this, it is obvious that Thatcher in the early 1980s aimed to reinvigorate the Anglo-Omani relationship and stress to Qaboos that Britain wished to remain involved.

Secondly, a challenging security situation in the Persian Gulf at the time¹⁷³ impressed on Thatcher that the United Kingdom needed to commit in order to protect its interests. Britain under Thatcher did not shy away from defending its interests in the face of threats. The Prime Minister’s resolute decision to repel militarily the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 is an obvious example of this,¹⁷⁴ but she also showed – as seen above – determination in the Gulf. She commented in retrospect:

The Iraq-Iran conflict was continuing, though at a lower level of activity. No one knew how serious the threat of Islamic fundamentalism might become. Too overt a western presence might provide an excuse for it: too little support from the West might provide an opportunity.¹⁷⁵

According to records, she confided to the Sultan in 1981 “that the accumulation of problems made this period the most dangerous that she had known”.¹⁷⁶ This naturally prompted stronger British commitment toward Gulf partners, which in the case of Oman meant increased

¹⁷¹ Slater to Carrington, “Oman: Annual Review”, January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

¹⁷² Pym to Slater, “British Policy on Oman”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 020/2, TNA.

¹⁷³ There were many threats to Gulf stability at the time like spill over effects from the ongoing Iran-Iraq war and the enduring Arab-Israeli conflict. See for example Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA. See also chapter 3.

¹⁷⁴ For Thatcher’s determination to dispatch a task force to recover the islands, see for example Robin Renwick, *A Journey with Margaret Thatcher: Foreign Policy under the Iron Lady*. London 2013: 42-43, 46.

¹⁷⁵ Thatcher 1993: 162-163.

¹⁷⁶ Alexander, “Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman in Salalah on 23 April 1981 at Noon”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

British willingness to second more personnel to its armed forces. Loan service personnel represented exactly the kind of modest, low-key military presence suitable to prop up local potentates without provoking resentment among the populace – especially when applied with a care to limit the total number of foreign troops on the ground.

However, British officials were slow to adapt to the shift in British loan service policy. Whereas the government increasingly neglected the policy of Omanisation and pursued an agenda of recommitment, bureaucrats in MoD and the FCO initially remained committed to the gradual phase-out of loaned personnel from executive posts. David Miers, FCO, commented to colleagues in March 1981 that Britain “need to help Oman improve its defence capabilities with the minimum number of white faces in command positions”.¹⁷⁷ This remark demonstrates that a perceptible atmosphere of British incompetence and continuing disengagement that related more to policies in the 1970s than to the Thatcher era, still lingered within officialdom. Officials clearly put greater emphasis on caution and retreat than did Thatcher’s ongoing transformation of Britain’s Oman policy. Lucas remarked to Palmer, FCO, on August 22nd, 1981:

When I was home on leave in autumn last year I recall attending a meeting at which you were present, when the MoD expressed some horror at the spate of requests which they had been receiving for additional LSP. Although this was to some extent based on a misunderstanding [...] I was asked to do what I could to put the brakes on.¹⁷⁸

This passage reveals significant scepticism in MoD in the autumn of 1980 towards new Omani requirements. The attitude of MoD officials at this point clearly stemmed from the philosophy of gradual military departure from Oman evident in Labour’s post-1975 policies. One year later, Lucas himself worried that the British government practiced flexibility to an extent that unduly obstructed Omanisation. He warned that without agreement on a firm line on which Omani requests to meet or reject, British phase-out of loan service personnel risked to be “abandoned by default”. He concluded:

I realise that we should not be able to be unduly specific about this, but unless we have indeed decided that Omanisation is a will o’ the wisp (a tenable

¹⁷⁷ Miers to Moberly, Graham and PS/Mr. Hurd, March 18, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1. TNA.

¹⁷⁸ Lucas to Palmer, August 22, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

proposition but I still think an unacceptable one for us) I believe it is necessary to keep the Omanis' eyes on the ball and oblige them to justify major deviations from the goal.¹⁷⁹

The rift between the British government and the official level over the approach to Omani requests for more military support is especially evident in the question of whether Britain should supply another senior British officer to serve in Oman as Chief of the Defence Staff. This prospect represented a “major deviation” from eventual Omanisation that caused unease among bureaucrats in both MoD and the FCO. There were two points of contention to discuss; one concerning the objective need for an extra officer to fill the post and the interruption this would cause for the British military phase-out, and one concerning the suitability of the Sultan's preferred candidate.

Officials persistently advised against a separate post to act as an “overlord” in Omani military matters during the early months of 1981. Lucas voiced misgivings about the idea to the FCO in mid-January 1981: “I am not at all sure that HMG would be either able or willing to provide an officer of this status for the job. It would certainly be difficult to square with the policy of phasing out LSP at the top.”¹⁸⁰ Palmer, FCO, reported from the January meeting with Watts and Bennett (see above) that his colleagues from MoD, Roger Jackling and Captain A. D. Hutton, stated “considerable scepticism as to the need for such a senior post”.¹⁸¹ Bureaucrats rather preferred that one of the service commanders already present in Oman should assume the post and combine it with his other duties. MoD told Watts on January 30th that the British Chiefs of Staff were inclined to reject the idea of an extra officer to fill the proposed Chief of the Defence Staff post. An attached organisational outline suggested that Watts himself should fill the position.¹⁸² Francis Richards, FCO, summarised the FCO and MoD view to Alexander at 10 Downing Street on April 2nd, 1981:

Hitherto we and the Ministry of Defence have not been convinced that this new post (which would involve being the ‘overlord’ of the Commanders of the Sultan's three armed services who are all British Loan Service Officers) is really

¹⁷⁹ Lucas to Palmer, August 22, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁸⁰ Lucas to FCO, January 15, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸¹ Palmer to Moberly, January 21, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸² Hutton (for Howard) to Watts, January 30, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

required. Our view has been that the job should be taken on by one of the LSP commanders, preferably Watts, Commander of the Army.¹⁸³

On March 26th, 1981, the Sultan met with Defence Secretary Nott and “specifically requested HMG’s support for secondment of [General] Creasey as C.D.S.”.¹⁸⁴ This provoked further opposition from FCO officials who deemed this particular officer unsuitable to handle the political realities of the Sultanate. Creasey had a history of intransigent and uncompromising behaviour from previous service in Oman and Northern Ireland. If he adopted a similar approach to the Chief of Defence Staff role in Oman it risked doing more harm than good in a country where British bureaucrats perceived caution an overriding political imperative. Lucas commented to the FCO only days after Nott’s audience with Qaboos that

[b]oth Miers [...] and I are doubtful whether Creasey is the right choice. He may well be too senior, and is not believed to have got on particularly well with the Sultan as CSAF during the Dhofar rebellion (when his qualities were better suited to the war-time role). A subtler and more politically sensitive though at the same time strong and decisive figure seems to be required.¹⁸⁵

FCO bureaucrats in London agreed with this assessment. Wrote Mike Patterson in the Middle East Department:

General Creasey’s relations with the Constabulary in Northern Ireland led to a number of difficulties and resulted in Sir Maurice Oldfield having to be sent out to resolve them. It also seems clear that General Creasey does not have the subtlety, tact and political sensitivity which will be required for this post.¹⁸⁶

Richards subsequently wrote to Alexander that the FCO “would much prefer that the Ministry of Defence should look for an alternative candidate [...]”.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Richards to Alexander, April 2, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸⁴ Lucas to FCO, March 27, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸⁵ Lucas to FCO, March 29, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸⁶ Patterson to Palmer, Graham and PS/Mr. Hurd, March 31, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸⁷ Richards to Alexander, April 2, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

The British government proved significantly less inhibited, however, about the idea to second another senior officer for service in Oman than did the official level. As seen, Thatcher agreed to meet the Sultan's request for Creasey to become Omani Chief of the Defence Staff when she met him in late April. But there can be no doubt that she had made up her mind to fulfil this bid earlier on. Defence Secretary Nott signalled agreement in principle to the request already during his audience with Qaboos in March. According to Lucas, Nott "said that while the concept was correct he would like to discuss request for Creasey's services with the Prime Minister before her forthcoming visit".¹⁸⁸ Nott's reservation clearly concerned only the candidacy of Creasey and not the post itself. He could hardly commit to the supply of a Chief of the Defence Staff without prior approval from his superior. This in turn suggests that Thatcher had consented to his sympathetic response. Through her private secretary Alexander, she herself shortly after told the FCO "there would be no objection to a British Officer filling the new post of Chief of the Defence Staff in Oman". Moreover, Alexander explained that if Creasey rejected the offered post Thatcher wished to nominate another officer for the appointment.¹⁸⁹ This demonstrates that the Prime Minister took a great interest in this issue. She clearly saw the prospect of adding one more senior British officer to the Omani defence setup as an opportunity for British interests rather than an interruption for Britain's loan service policy. Britain under Thatcher seized such opportunities rather than shied away from them.

2.4 The Sultan: Keen to Retain British Support

Thatcher's perceptible policy shift was obviously the main factor that triggered British recommitment to Oman. There were, however, also pull factors in Oman that influenced British policy. The Omani need for British military expertise that resulted in a steady demand for more personnel and the accelerating expansion of the Omani armed forces that exacerbated this need – both commented on above – clearly had an impact upon the extent of British support. But the most important pull factor in Oman was the Sultan's attitude towards Omanisation. As Petersen points out, Qaboos "had neither wished for it nor asked for it".¹⁹⁰ On the contrary, he was keen to retain British military support for as long as possible.

¹⁸⁸ Lucas to FCO, March 27, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁸⁹ Alexander to Richards, April 6, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁹⁰ Petersen 2015: 108.

The Sultan was well aware how the close military cooperation with the United Kingdom benefited his regime in terms of security. From his point of view, the British loan service presence made Oman less vulnerable to internal subversion and external threats – in his mind interrelated problems. He remarked to Thatcher on April 23rd, 1981, that “[t]hanks to the British Government, the Omani Government was better placed than most” to deal with instability.¹⁹¹ This awareness resulted in a constant need for reassurance from British authorities that their commitment to the Sultanate would endure. Qaboos’ basic policy on the Anglo-Omani military relationship was a profound interest to keep Britain involved – a goal he pursued through requests for guarantees and retention of key personnel.

MoD officials in retrospect referred one such explicit request for British assurance from the Sultan’s state visit to Britain in March 1982:

On 17 March 1982 Sultan Qaboos told the Prime Minister that UK should continue to provide Loan Service Personnel, and that Omanisation was only wanted where it was compatible with efficiency. He added that more LSP would be needed in the future because of the introduction of new equipment, but after a period the need might decrease.¹⁹²

General Creasey remarked to Nott the same day “that there had in the past been a feeling in Oman that HMG had wanted gradually to withdraw LSP. The Sultan felt strongly that this was not the right time”.¹⁹³ Qaboos clearly asked for a guarantee that Britain would stay on. He urged that the British government should maintain its loan service presence in order to underpin the Omani armed forces. If need be British authorities should be prepared to expand it. Omanisation was obviously not important to the Omani ruler – indeed, there was no need for it at all at the moment.

The Sultan in fact persistently tried to avert Omanisation of key posts in the defence organisation throughout 1981-82. When the post of Commander of the Sultan of Oman’s Land Forces was due for Omanisation in 1981, he developed a dislike for the Omani replacement, Brigadier Mutasim, and asked for an extension of service for the present incumbent Major

¹⁹¹ Alexander, “Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman in Salalah on 23 April 1981 at Noon”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

¹⁹² J. A. Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman: Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

¹⁹³ See Lamport to Miers, March 17, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

General Watts. MoD officials commented on January 2nd, 1981, that the “intended Omani relief has recently shown personal weaknesses and is no longer acceptable to HM the Sultan as CSOF [sic.]”.¹⁹⁴ Mutasim was allegedly idle and addicted to alcohol,¹⁹⁵ which of course were valid reasons to disqualify him from running the Omani army. But the Sultan’s unmistakable opposition to Omanisation suggests that Mutasim’s loss of royal favour was also politically motivated. An extension of Watts would effectively postpone British withdrawal from one of the top posts in the Omani defence hierarchy. Lucas on March 24th notified the FCO on a formal Omani bid for the retention of Watts until late April 1983.¹⁹⁶ Foreign Secretary Carrington replied the following day: “MoD and FCO are content that General Watts [sic.] appointment should be extended as suggested.”¹⁹⁷

Not even a year later, the Sultan in another bid to obstruct British phase-out induced General Creasey to inquire possible extensions for all senior loan service officers presently in charge of the Omani armed forces. Slater informed MoD on March 3rd, 1982: “[General] Creasey remarked yesterday that HM the Sultan had said he wanted CDS, CSOLF, CSOAF and CSON to remain until 1985.”¹⁹⁸ MoD officials later commented in their loan service review that

Sultan Qaboos has stated that he wants the Loan Service Commanders now in post, (General Creasey, Commodore Gunning, Major General Watts, Air Vice-Marshal Bennett), to remain until at least 1985 [...]. The Secretary of State has been advised that no difficulty is seen in their extension [...]. General Creasey has proposed that SOLF, SON and SOAF will continue to be commanded by British LSP until, at the earliest, 1985, 1988 and 1990 respectively. Currently there are clear advantages in planning to these dates.¹⁹⁹

The Sultan was clearly anxious to retain key loan service personnel and tried to influence British authorities accordingly through his requests. And apparently with great success. British

¹⁹⁴ Lindsay to DS11, “Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP”, January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁹⁵ For a remark on Mutasim’s weaknesses, see Lucas to Palmer, June 22, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁹⁶ Lucas to FCO, March 24, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

¹⁹⁷ Carrington to Muscat, March 25, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

¹⁹⁸ Slater to MoD, March 3, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

¹⁹⁹ J. A. Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman: Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

plans even exceeded the initial bid from Qaboos and signalled significant extensions of service for both Watts and Commodore J. P. Gunning.²⁰⁰

This is not to suggest that the Sultan in any way dictated British loan service policy. He certainly did not. But whenever he threw his weight behind a particular request, he automatically put extra pressure on the British to comply. Britain could always reject Omani requests, but this could in turn result in reduced British influence over the Omani military. The Sultan could simply employ British personnel on contract, which meant they would serve in Oman without any obligation to heed British interests. Pym explained to Slater in July 1982:

[T]he LSP constitute only a third of the British element in the armed forces. The rest are directly recruited, and it is open to the Omanis to seek their own British candidates for key posts if we limit the availability of LSP. This would be undesirable since such contract personnel have in general shown themselves less conscious of HMG's views and may in some cases be of lower calibre than LSP.²⁰¹

Thus, British refusal to supply loan service officers implicitly risked encouraging an increase in the contract element in the Omani armed forces. Such personnel were in fact mercenaries over whom the British government had no effective control. Wrote MoD officials: "Contract personnel owe allegiance only to the Sultan. He may use them to his own ends uninhibited by any constraint, such as imposed by Britain on the use of LSP."²⁰²

Potential loss of influence from rejection of inconvenient Omani requests therefore occasionally induced Britain to comply for strategic reasons. British authorities often deemed it wiser to accept a loan service appointment rather than provoking a contract appointment out of their reach. The prospective secondment of General Creasey to Oman in 1981 represents one such dilemma. Source material suggests the Sultan was "adamant" about having Creasey.²⁰³ If

²⁰⁰ Gunning's post as Commander of the Sultan of Oman's Navy was initially due for Omanisation in 1983. British withdrawal from executive posts in the Omani air force was not in any case due before 1989/90. See Lindsay to DS11, "Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP", January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²⁰¹ Pym to Slater, "British Policy on Oman", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 020/2, TNA.

²⁰² J. A. Gilbert, "Loan Service Personnel in Oman: Report by the Defence Policy Staff", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBL 071/437/1, TNA.

²⁰³ Creasey in fact even tried to persuade the Sultan that he should find another officer, but the Sultan wanted Creasey and no one else. See Lucas to MoD, April 14, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

Britain refused to second this particular officer, there was a distinct possibility that Qaboos would employ him on contract instead. Carrington commented to Lucas on April 10, 1981, that

there is a risk that, if we do not agree to loan Creasey, the Sultan might offer him the job on contract terms. If Creasey accepted this, it would complicate the position of the present loan service commanders and considerably reduce our influence with Creasey.²⁰⁴

Clearly, it was politic for the British to meet this specific request in order to maintain their influence on Omani defence policymaking. But above all the example illustrates that Britain had to take into account the Sultan's concerns when they decided on whether or not to meet certain Omani requests. Thus, the British interest under Thatcher to remain in Oman gave Qaboos scope to pursue his own interests and thereby – on occasions – have an impact on British loan service policy.

²⁰⁴ Carrington to Muscat, April 10, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

Chapter 3

Presence – Influence – Goodwill

Britain has a strong commitment to Oman. Its basis is three-fold. First, our historical association with the Sultanate, particularly since 1800. Second, our current Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation of 1951, though apart from its detailed provisions this does no more than “to confirm and strengthen the friendly relations which now subsist” between the two Monarchs. Neither of these two elements, perhaps, would be of overriding importance were it not for the third – our political, economic and commercial interests in the region of which the Sultanate forms part. This gives us a broad political obligation to help preserve Oman’s stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁰⁵

Britain still pursued politico-strategic and economic interests in the post-imperial Persian Gulf – and in Oman in particular – in 1981-82. But loose expressions of “friendship” were not enough on which to build a foreign policy in the Sultanate – as the British Ambassador to Oman, Ivor Lucas, pointed out to the British Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington in the quote above. Britain wanted to preserve status quo in Oman for its own strategic ends. It sought influence in order to persuade the Sultan to purchase British defence equipment. In addition, the British tried to restrain the United States from overwhelming the Sultanate and consequently eroding the British sphere of influence. This chapter argues that the British loan service presence was an important means with which Britain could demonstrate commitment and pursue its foreign policy goals in Oman.

The British presence led to influence and sales. Britain’s policy of supplying loan service personnel to the Omani armed forces ensured a continued albeit small British military posture in the region that made Britain a worthwhile ally. The loan service presence contributed to effective Omani military forces, and thereby also to the Sultanate’s stability and security in the face of internal and external threats. It ensured Britain influence in Omani defence and other governmental matters. The senior loan service officers, well placed to advise and influence the Sultan, shored up British influence vis-à-vis growing American involvement in the Sultanate – an effort without which Britain risked to become a junior partner there. In commercial terms, British loaned personnel underpinned British defence sales efforts in a number of ways. Their

²⁰⁵ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

presence ensured goodwill that led to sales. The senior loaned officers decided – together with the Sultan – what equipment to purchase. Secondment of additional loan service officers to operate equipment and train Omanis in its use underpinned specific sales from British suppliers. Finally, Britain’s contribution to the running and training of the Sultan’s armed forces familiarised Oman’s defence organisation with the English language and British military expertise to an extent that British equipment became a natural choice for the Omani defence.

3.1 Stability, Security, Influence

Britain under Thatcher remained firmly committed to Omani stability and security. By 1981-82, its loan service personnel serving with the Omani military and in the security forces of some of the other Gulf countries²⁰⁶ formed the only remaining fixed British military presence in the Persian Gulf. It was a small but politically important presence in the post-imperial Gulf in that it signalled continued commitment to a region the United Kingdom had left years ago according to conventional wisdom. In order that Britain remain a relevant political actor in a region traditionally under a British security umbrella, it was necessary to act like a great power. Lucas advised Margaret Thatcher to that effect in advance of her visit to Oman in April 1981: “What is the message that, in the bilateral context, I would like the Prime Minister to convey to the Sultan? In general, that Britain is still a force to be reckoned with in the world at large and in particular that she is a worthwhile friend and ally of the Sultanate.”²⁰⁷

Commitment through military presence was a viable strategy to remain worthwhile. British supply of loan service personnel to boost Omani stability and security demonstrated such commitment and in turn allowed Britain to exercise significant influence in Oman’s military affairs. Loan service personnel thus contributed significantly to Omani confidence in the United Kingdom and ensured that the Sultan remained well disposed toward British interests. There can be no doubt that it was important for the British to retain military links to Oman for this reason. David Miers, FCO, explained to colleagues how Anglo-Omani defence cooperation aimed to “lay the foundations for the twin pillars of our policy to increase the West’s defence capabilities and to increase our defence sales.”²⁰⁸ Loan service personnel were

²⁰⁶ Britain had about 750 loan service troops worldwide in March 1982, including over 100 in Kuwait and about 50 in Saudi Arabia. See Nott to Thatcher, “Military Assistance and Training Charges”, March 1, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²⁰⁷ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

²⁰⁸ Miers to Moberly, Graham and PS/Mr. Hurd, March 18, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

ideal for achieving this. British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Francis Pym explained as much to the new British Ambassador to Muscat, Duncan Slater, in July 1982:

Our Loan Service Personnel are the most important and visible sign of our readiness to support Oman. They are also a valuable asset in pursuit of HMG's objectives [...]. We do not wish to discard this asset until we are confident that the Omanis can manage their own defence themselves.²⁰⁹

But to achieve all this it was important to secure status quo in Oman.

3.1.1 Stability and security

One of the overriding British objectives in Oman was to secure the continued viability of the present regime. In February 1981, officials at the FCO dispatched draft political instructions for Ambassador Lucas that stated Britain's desire

[t]o maintain the security and stability of Oman under a Western-oriented government in the interests of preserving the country's willingness to provide facilities in support of the wider Western position in the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf, and of avoiding the serious repercussions to be expected elsewhere in the area from a collapse of the present regime.²¹⁰

Pym reiterated these points to Slater in July 1982.²¹¹ The reason for persistent British commitment to Omani stability and security was twofold. Firstly, Omani territory was approximate to the important shipping lane through the narrow Strait of Hormuz, which deemed it a valuable and relevant ally for Western powers despite its modest size and economy. In a country assessment paper from 1982, officials in the Middle East Department, FCO, remarked that:

²⁰⁹ Pym to Slater, "British Policy on Oman", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

²¹⁰ Miers to Lucas, February 6, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²¹¹ Pym to Slater, "British Policy on Oman", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

The Sultanate of Oman lies at the entrance to the Gulf, and overlooks the Strait of Hormuz through which much of the West's oil flows. It is one of the least affluent Arabian oil producing states [...]. For its large area it is sparsely populated. But its strategic position makes its friendship of considerable value to the West.²¹²

It made good strategic sense for Britain to cultivate whatever Western allies there may be near such a crucial site and underpin them militarily – not least because of the heightened security concerns in the region.

In the early 1980s, there were in fact several immediate threats to Gulf stability that could in turn jeopardise the supply of oil from the area to the West. These included intraregional warfare, Iranian aspirations to interfere in affairs on the Arabian side of the Gulf and the enduring Arab-Israeli conflict. A MoD report on British loan service policy from July 1982 summed up the current regional problems as seen from London thus:

The Gulf region suffers from perennial threats to its stability; although the regimes in the conservative Arab states retain and outward appearance of stability which depends on their Islamic traditions and strong oil based economies, their rulers have cause to feel particularly uneasy at the moment. The recent Iranian successes in the war against Iraq, the attempted coup in Bahrain which relied on Iranian assistance, annexation of the Golan Heights and the number of Israeli overflights of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq have all contributed to this feeling.²¹³

The magnitude of threats to regional security naturally increased the geostrategic importance of Oman. Any disturbances on the Arab side of the Strait of Hormuz – whether it be due to one or the other of the referred developments – could prove disastrous for commercial shipping since the hostile post-revolutionary regime in Iran²¹⁴ controlled its eastern shore. There were, however, also more direct threats to Oman. Occasionally, hostile raids occurred on Omani territory from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Lucas informed the FCO of one

²¹² Middle East Department, FCO, "Country Assessment Paper: Oman", December, 1982, FCO 8/4502/NBL 014/3, TNA.

²¹³ Gilbert, "Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²¹⁴ For comments on the revolution in Iran and the new regime's antagonistic relationship with the West, see Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Policy toward the Persian Gulf, 1978-1985. Power, Influence and Restraint*. Brighton 2015.

such incursion in June 1981. Omani troops intercepted the raiders and arrested three of them.²¹⁵ British Defence Attaché in Oman Johnny Johnson reported one episode of enemy infiltration and three border incidents in the first six months of 1982.²¹⁶ General Sir Timothy Creasey, Omani Chief of the Defence Staff, explained to MoD on January 31st of that year that Oman faced external threats from Iran and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen as well as from internal quarters.²¹⁷ This tense situation warranted more attention from British authorities towards the Sultanate. Commented Richard Palmer, FCO, on April 1st, 1981:

Our bilateral relations have probably never been of greater significance than now. Recent developments in the region have underlined the potential threat to Gulf and Western interests and have at the same time highlighted the strategic importance of Oman.²¹⁸

Secondly, the Sultanate proved more responsive to Western policies than most other countries in the region – and therefore more likely to accept British influence. Then British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Douglas Hurd recalls that, “[o]f all the Gulf States, Oman was closest to Britain”.²¹⁹ Thatcher reported to American President Ronald Reagan following her 1981 visit to the Sultanate that, “Oman, as you know, is more receptive to our ideas than the rest. The Sultan sees the Soviet threat as his top priority, with the Arab/Israel problem of secondary importance.”²²⁰ Oman's close alignment with Western (and, of course, in particular British) interests was a valuable asset in a region where the United States and Britain had only recently lost their foothold in Iran. Qaboos himself was, above all, crucial to the maintenance of close Anglo-Omani relations since he was a most loyal friend of Britain. According to Lucas, the Sultan was pro-British to the extreme. He commented that Qaboos' “predilection for our own can sometimes verge on the embarrassing.”²²¹

From a British point of view, then, there were good reasons to prop up the Sultan's regime in face of both internal and external threats. The strategic location and favourable political orientation of Oman were both indispensable strategic assets that made it natural for

²¹⁵ Lucas to FCO, June 17, 1981, DEFE 24/2108, TNA.

²¹⁶ Johnson, “Valedictory Report by Defence Attaché, Muscat”, 1982, FCO 8/4383/NBD 062/437/2, TNA.

²¹⁷ Creasey to British Defence Attaché Muscat, January 31, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²¹⁸ Palmer to Moberly, April 1, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

²¹⁹ Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs*. London 2003: 304.

²²⁰ Thatcher to Reagan, April 27, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

²²¹ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

Britain to commit to political status quo there. A hostile takeover in the Sultanate would be a severe setback and deem its strategic value null and void to British interests.

Supply of loan service personnel was a significant practical contribution towards preserving Omani stability and security. British loaned personnel were responsible for facilitating training and efficiency in the Omani forces and thereby they effectively underpinned the Sultan's regime. The experiences of the Dhofar War had shown in full the necessity of efficient and well-trained military forces in case of unrest.²²² This military imperative had not changed. Creasey reasoned in early 1982 that because of the threats to Omani security "our forces must be effective".²²³ Provision of high-quality military expertise through loan service was clearly a very effective way of boosting Omani military prowess and capability to deal with possible threats. Members of the Defence Policy Staff in MoD found it "advantageous that Oman's fledgling forces should be trained and expanded under British guidance". They continued: "Our aim is to leave efficient, well-led and pro-Western forces in Oman."²²⁴ Reports from the Service Attachés in Muscat reveal that both the army and air force were well trained and efficient.²²⁵ Wrote British Defence Attaché Johnson of the Omani army in his valedictory report of 1982: "It is judged and acknowledged to be the best in the Gulf and would acquit itself well in the event of hostilities."²²⁶ In light of these reports, there can be no doubt that the loan service presence was beneficial for Omani stability and security. Officials in the Defence Policy Staff themselves concluded in 1982 that, "Oman benefits by the British presence because of the high calibre of the LSP, and the quality of advice and training assistance which they provide."²²⁷

They also made one further – and sound – point that the British loan service presence helped prevent a military coup that could upset the local political balance: "While SAF is British-led, the opportunities for an Omani coup d'état from within the armed forces are much reduced."²²⁸ For one, United Kingdom loan servicemen themselves remained loyal. They were

²²² For a thorough discussion of the conduct of the Dhofar War, see James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire*. London 2014.

²²³ Creasey to British Defence Attaché Muscat, January 31, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²²⁴ Gilbert, "Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²²⁵ See annual reports from the Defence Attaché and the Naval and Air Attaché for 1980: "Annual Report for 1980 by Defence Attaché Muscat", March 3, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA; "Annual Report on Air Matters – 1980 by Naval and Air Attaché, Muscat", March 3, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²²⁶ Johnson, "Valedictory Report by Defence Attaché, Muscat", 1982, FCO 8/4383/NBD 062/437/2, TNA.

²²⁷ Gilbert, "Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²²⁸ Gilbert, "Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

ultimately under British government control²²⁹ and had as such neither scope nor interest for plotting on their own. Omani officers might on the other hand have their own political agendas. Secondly, the presence of British officers at various levels and in various units within the military naturally reduced greatly the scope for dissident activity or infiltration in that they could detect and monitor any discontent within the Omani soldiery and respond accordingly. Two episodes from the first few months of General Creasey's tenure as Omani Chief of the Defence Staff demonstrate how this worked in practice. Lucas reported only weeks after Creasey's arrival that the latter had "detected signs of dissatisfaction in the Sultan's Armed Forces with their relative pay and conditions of service".²³⁰ Creasey later discovered and prosecuted a fundamentalist group within the Omani armed forces. Lucas concluded in mid-November 1981: "But this is the first we have heard of a fundamentalist problem in the armed forces (which is in itself a cause for concern) and we shall need to follow it up."²³¹ Without the presence of loaned officers, the British would neither have known nor been able to address these problems, which in the long term could have threatened the Omani regime.

3.1.2 Influence

The United Kingdom gained significant influence in Omani defence affairs (and in some cases even in other policy areas) through its commitment to Omani stability and security. Loan service personnel evidently ensured Britain a say in organisational matters like reorganisation of the Omani defence structure and political matters like defence spending. The Defence Policy Staff, MoD, explained the extent of British influence obtained from the loan service presence thus in July 1982:

By providing LSP, HMG gains both a position of influence and involvement in Oman affairs at Governmental level, and exercises some measure of control, via CDS' directive, over the use made of her armed forces. Senior LSP officers may

²²⁹ British loan service personnel remained loyal to the British government whereas British contract personnel – employed directly by Omani authorities – were outside British governmental control. See for example Pym to Slater, "British Policy on Oman", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

²³⁰ Lucas to Miers, August 27, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²³¹ Lucas to Miers, November 16, 1981, FCO 8/3970/NBL 071/1, TNA.

also have some influence in GCC matters, and provide an extra ‘ear’ in the conduct of Arab affairs.²³²

Hard as it can be to identify and measure influence, the above passage lists specific cases in which British influence occurred as a direct consequence of the loan service presence. Commitment through the overall loan service presence – even at lower levels – and micromanagement through senior loan service posts clearly paid off. There can be no doubt that loan service personnel enabled Britain to maintain a strong position in the Sultanate. However, to understand fully the connection between loan service personnel and political influence in Oman it is necessary to analyse further the different levels on which such influence were evident.

Firstly, Britain gained influence merely from providing Oman with military support. According to MoD, provision of military assistance enabled Britain to gain “influence with the armed forces of Third World countries [...]”.²³³ For any one government, there are clear advantages in providing military support to another country if it is in the recipient country’s interest to accept and retain such help for either political or military reasons. If one party in a bilateral relationship can grant services essential to the other, the relationship becomes asymmetrical – with the supplier achieving an influential position vis-à-vis the recipient. Britain made available skilled manpower to Oman, with the latter accepting support for both practical and political reasons. According to officials in the Middle East Department, Oman took significant interest in the extensive military support it received from London – an arrangement that would continue “for as long as the Omani government wants it”. They continued: “[Oman] looks to us (and the US) for support against external threats.”²³⁴ There can thus be no doubt that Qaboos wanted Britain to hang on to their position in Oman,²³⁵ and that British willingness to do so resulted in goodwill which in turn led to influence. On the other hand, Britain could always disengage and leave the Sultan to his own devices if he proved intransigent. The British military presence hence presented the United Kingdom with a certain degree of negative control over matters of direct concern to their interests in Oman. The British could simply leave if this

²³² Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²³³ Dawson to Alexander, June 15, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

²³⁴ Middle East Department, FCO, “Country Assessment Paper: Oman”, December, 1982, FCO 8/4502/NBL 014/3, TNA.

²³⁵ See chapter 2 for a thorough discussion of the Sultan’s desire to keep Britain involved.

political course served their interests best. For as long as the Sultan remained keen to retain British support, this implicitly left Britain with a significant say in Omani affairs.

Secondly, British senior loan service officers ran the Omani military altogether. British expatriates commanded all the three service branches, and, from August 1981, a British loaned officer served as Omani Chief of the Defence Staff.²³⁶ These officers remained under strict United Kingdom control. Their directives from London instructed that they should not act against British interests, while at the same time always appear to be loyal to Qaboos.²³⁷ In effect, Britain achieved a great degree of control over the Omani armed forces through secondment of such officers – of course in terms of management but also (and more importantly) in terms of the service commanders' ability to direct policy. Naturally, these officers took care to use their influence to safeguard and promote British interests wherever possible. Wrote P. J. Roberts in MoD on senior loan service officers: "They are meanwhile a most valuable asset to us – with what other Arab country do we have such influence on defence matters?"²³⁸ When the Sultan decided to reorganise the Omani defence structure in 1980, he tasked the Commander of the Sultan of Oman's Land Forces, Major General Johnny Watts, to review it and propose changes. The latter subsequently turned to his superiors in Britain for guidance. Gloria Franklin, MoD later summed up: "These studies were led by CSOLF who sought assistance from CDS."²³⁹ Officials in MoD soon dispatched advice in the form of comments and a "wiring diagram" that outlined a possible organisational chart.²⁴⁰ London clearly gained both insight and influence on the process through Watts.

Moreover, Qaboos obviously preferred to approach his service commanders and expatriate advisers to discuss defence policy rather than members of his own government. Lucas reported further development in the reorganisation process in mid-January 1981:

HM Sultan called a meeting on 13 Jan attended by both CSOLF, CSOAF, CSON, Brig Landon and Lt Col Ali Majid. Last two are former and current equerry. [...]

²³⁶ General Creasey assumed command as Omani Chief of the Defence Staff on August 5th, 1981. See for example Guy to Creasey, August 4, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²³⁷ Eyre, "Directive to the Chief of the Defence Staff Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces", August 17, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA. This document includes one set of directives each to the seconded Chief of Defence Staff and the three service commanders. Thorough comments on British control over loaned personnel appear in chapter 4.

²³⁸ Roberts to Palmer, February 2, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²³⁹ Franklin to AUS (D Staff), June 10, 1981, DEFE 24/2108, TNA. CDS here means the British Chief of the Defence Staff.

²⁴⁰ Hutton (for Howard) to Watts, January 30, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

He tasked CSOLF to draw up a charter for MoD Oman and to recommend its basic structure and outline organisation. This in complete secrecy from Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defence and Under Secretary.²⁴¹

At this meeting, all the three loan service commanders were present but not the relevant members of government. Reorganisation clearly accelerated, but without participation from the Omani governmental level which was not even supposed to know about it (except, of course, from the absolute ruler himself). Thus, service commanders formed part of a small and exclusive group that enjoyed preferential access to the Sultan on defence matters. This consequently suggests that the British government could influence Omani defence policy through their service commanders whereas members of the Omani government had in fact little impact.

General Creasey achieved even greater influence in Oman as the Chief of the Defence Staff, which in turn tightened British control over the Omani military. The service commanders, particularly well placed to shape the new Omani defence hierarchy, undoubtedly used their influence to persuade the Sultan of the need for this post. Francis Richards, FCO, once remarked that Qaboos opted for the inclusion of a Chief of the Defence Staff in the defence setup on the advice of his senior loaned officers.²⁴² At the time, there were certainly good reasons to encourage the addition of a British officer that could exert greater authority than those already serving in Oman. Competition for influence from contract advisers and organisational deficiencies had hitherto prevented senior loan service officers from exercising their potential impact on Omani affairs in full. On the former point, Lucas explained to Carrington in March 1981 that

I do not think that Her Majesty's Government's influence in the Sultanate is commensurate with their commitment [...]. The British advice which Sultan Qaboos tends to rely on is mainly that of contract advisers who for the most part have their own positions to think of and who do not share British official perceptions of current realities. Broadly speaking, this does not apply, of course, to our Service Commanders, but the Sultan does not consult them as often or as fully as he should [...].²⁴³

²⁴¹ Lucas to MoD, January 15, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁴² Richards to Alexander, April 2, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁴³ Lucas to Carrington, "Anglo-Omani Relations", March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

This was an obvious impediment for British interests. Contract advisers were outside British governmental control and therefore under no obligation to adhere to British concerns or designs. Rather, they pursued their own interests and agendas that benefited themselves or any other interests they represented. Whenever the Sultan approached his contract advisers for counsel rather than the loan service commanders, this in effect meant reduced British influence. Creasey alleviated this problem. He established a close rapport with Qaboos that in turn enabled him to offer firm advice and have frank talks about sensitive matters. Before long, he raised with the Sultan the issue of corruption and named Qaboos' uncle Sayyid Fahr among those involved. The Sultan, far from being offended, was pleased to have someone with whom to discuss the issue and endorsed Creasey's efforts to battle it. Lucas concluded: "[Creasey] has clearly got off to a good start, and could prove to be the man we have been looking for to do some straight talking to Qaboos."²⁴⁴ This episode demonstrates the good working relationship that developed between the two. There can be no doubt that Creasey was a valuable addition to the British presence in Oman in terms of inflicting what British authorities perceived as the right kind of advice on Qaboos. Creasey even arranged his accommodation with a view to obtain as much influence as possible. John Moberly, FCO, reported as much from a lunch with him and Bennett in October 1981: "General Creasey had made a point of living in Sib in order to have easy access to the Sultan." He found it very encouraging to learn from Creasey "that the Sultan had begun to talk of dropping in on him informally at his house".²⁴⁵ Creasey's approach clearly paid off.

Moreover, the defence organisation did not work satisfactorily. Firstly, there was little coordination of policy. Qaboos often approached the service commanders individually to discuss defence matters rather than through official channels. MoD briefed the British Secretary of State for Defence in early January 1981 that

The Sultan as [Commander-in-Chief] and Minister of Defence has often preferred to deal individually with the British Service Commanders rather than through the Defence Council. In consequence many proposals, e.g. for defence expenditure, have not been properly considered in the wider context of foreign

²⁴⁴ Lucas to Miers, September 20, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁴⁵ Moberly to Graham, October 23, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

affairs, security and finance available, but have reflected the personal whims and interests of the Sultan.²⁴⁶

The Sultan's ad-hoc approach to defence clearly limited the service commanders' ability to direct policy and organise a coordinated strategy for defence procurement. The British Defence Attaché remarked in his annual report for 1980: "There have been 2 occasions in 1980 where HM Sultan has ordered the purchase of major equipments without a formal statement of requirement in a General Staff paper [...]."²⁴⁷

Secondly, there was in fact no real chain of command to prevent this disorderly leadership style. The Sultan governed his defence organisation through a flat structure of independent committees and individuals where none except himself wielded real authority. This committee system with no clearly defined hierarchical structure (as opposed to a command system) made military decision-making in Oman dangerously ineffective. Through Defence Attaché Johnson MoD got hold of a paper in February 1981 that concluded thus:

The current system of command which allows the Under-Secretary, [Chief Joint Staff] and Service Commanders direct and equal contact with HM the Sultan could be divisive in an emergency, when the fullest and quickest cooperation is absolutely necessary.²⁴⁸

Within the flat committee structure, there was simply no one except Qaboos to exercise the proper authority to direct policy and make priorities – or indeed to formulate a coordinated response to an attack. One could for example hardly expect the single service commanders to meddle in questions of procurement for other service branches than their own. The addition of a more senior officer to the defence hierarchy mended this organisational flaw and was an important step towards the introduction of a proper command system. Creasey was able to wield the authority necessary to streamline Omani military decision-making. He could impose greater

²⁴⁶ Lindsay to DS11, "Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP", January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²⁴⁷ British Defence Attaché Muscat, "Annual Report for 1980 by Defence Attaché Muscat", March 3, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA

²⁴⁸ The Omani Chairman Joint Staff prepared an informative paper with recommendations for the Omani defence structure independently from Watts' efforts. For the paper, see Johnson to MoD, February 18, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA. For remarks on its independence from Watts' work, see Lucas to Miers, February 7, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

financial discipline and coordination on the three services and micromanage the Omani armed forces even more systematically than the service commanders – always preoccupied with their own respective services – had done.

Creasey also used his influence to address other political issues of interest to Britain, like the imbalance between excessive Omani defence spending and civil expenditure and corruption in connection with defence purchases. The former might provoke resentment among the populace and thereby lead to instability.²⁴⁹ The latter was an irritant because it diverted funds intended for procurement into the hands of leading Omanis or expatriate advisers.²⁵⁰ Pym told Slater in 1982 that such dishonesty from leading members of the elite in Oman threatened stability as well.²⁵¹ Creasey could impress the negative consequences from wrong priorities in spending and neglect of corruption more directly on the Sultan as Chief of the Defence Staff than could any British minister or diplomat without risking subsequent damage to Anglo-Omani relations. Richard Palmer, FCO, captured the cautious mood in London in a comment to Moberly: “You will recall that the Department’s advice has been that we should occasionally discuss delicate topics with the Sultan but in a spirit of encouragement and not ‘governessy admonition.’”²⁵² Patronising would surely be counterproductive. Miers once remarked on the issue of Omani defence spending: “Despite the inherent dangers in this imbalance our whole relationship would be put at risk if we pushed too far the role of the ‘do gooder’.”²⁵³ Not even Thatcher wished to press the matter of civil versus military expenditure when she met the Sultan, but merely “refer (in the tête-a-tête with the Sultan) to the balance between defence and civil expenditure and the importance we attach to the latter”.²⁵⁴ Judging from the record of this tete-a-tete, she did not mention it at all – at least not to the extent that it was worth recording.²⁵⁵

The efforts of Creasey were successful. Slater summed up his achievements thus in the annual review for 1981:

²⁴⁹ See for example Middle East Department, FCO, “Country Assessment Paper: Oman”, December, 1982, FCO 8/4502/NBL 014/3, TNA.

²⁵⁰ As seen above, Qaboos’ uncle was one of them. Others included the Sultan’s former equerry and current adviser Brigadier Timothy Landon and, notably, Qais Zawawi from the Omani government. See Moberly to Graham, October 23, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁵¹ Pym to Slater, “British Policy on Oman”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

²⁵² Palmer to Moberly, April 1, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

²⁵³ Miers to Moberly, Graham and PS/Mr. Hurd, March 18, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁵⁴ Moberly to Lucas, April 8, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

²⁵⁵ See Alexander, “Points Raised in a Tete-A-Tete Discussion between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman on 24 April 1981”, April 27, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

He has rearranged the Defence Budget, cutting back or cancelling some defence contracts but improving the pay and conditions of the servicemen and thus removing a potential source of discontent within the armed forces. He has also shaken up the Ministry of Defence and has reorganised the way in which defence contracts are awarded so as to remove the formerly widespread graft and corruption. The advice which he gives the Sultan goes beyond the defence field and he has been urging Qaboos to sack some of his more flagrantly corrupt advisers. In short, he has assumed a very important role in the country.²⁵⁶

This testimony to Creasey's activities in the Sultanate demonstrates in full how the British government employed their loan servicemen (especially senior officers) as intermediaries through whom they injected their desired policies in Oman. Military commitment through loan service extracted the necessary influence with which Britain could shore up its interests. As subsequent sections argue, this influence was critical for preserving the British political and commercial sphere vis-à-vis competitors.

3.2 The Increasing American Involvement

In the early 1980s, Oman was no longer an exclusively British sphere but one where Britain faced increasing competition from the United States for influence and commercial gain. The Americans intensified their interest in Oman from around 1980.²⁵⁷ In June that year, they signed an access agreement with the Sultan in order to enhance their ability to intervene militarily in the Persian Gulf.²⁵⁸ Later, they secured access to basing facilities on Masirah Island and planned massive civil and military investments in the Sultanate to underpin their interests there.²⁵⁹

These developments naturally put the British position in Oman under increasing pressure. The United States cared little about British concerns or interests, or indeed the need for careful handling of the Sultan. Wrote the British Defence Attaché in Muscat in his annual report for 1980: "The United States are becoming more involved in day-to-day military matters

²⁵⁶ Slater to Carrington, "Oman: Annual Review 1981", January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

²⁵⁷ However, James Worrall argues that the British took a strategic interest in Oman already in the early 1970s. See Worrall 2014: 192-194.

²⁵⁸ Francis Owtram explains that the Carter Doctrine from January 1980, named after then American President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, declared that the United States would resist any outside seizure of control over the Gulf, if necessary with military means. To enforce this pledge, the United States prepared a Rapid Deployment Force that could intervene in the region if necessary. Carter's successor Ronald Reagan increased its funding in 1981, thus extending this policy. See Francis Owtram, *A Modern History of Oman. Formation of the State since 1920*. London 2004: 144-145. For comments on the access agreement, see Owtram 2004: 147-148.

²⁵⁹ Petersen 2015: 119.

with the Sultanate [...]. A spirit of co-operation becomes less evident near the coal face and is replaced by one of straightforward competition.”²⁶⁰ Roger Jackling, MoD, enquired service commanders Watts and Bennet in January 1981 about United States conduct in the Sultanate:

Both agreed that, notwithstanding the sensitivity and good sense which characterised the approach of senior US officials, those on the ground in Oman showed little appreciation of the need to keep a low profile and take account of Omani sensibilities and needs. They continued to press the case for equipment like tanks and a heavy gun, which the Army Commander believed his Force did not require and could not manage [...].²⁶¹

This obtrusive behaviour ran counter to the traditional low-key British approach to Oman.²⁶² Publicity could provoke local or regional resentment against the Western involvement and lead to instability, contrary to British objectives. If the Sultan gave in to United States pressure to buy American arms it would disturb Britain’s influence over the management of the armed forces and challenge its commercial ambitions. In the longer term, an American thrust towards the Sultanate might even reduce Britain to a junior partner in what had hitherto been a British preserve. Lucas – although susceptible to reassurances from the American ambassador to Oman that the Americans would restrain themselves²⁶³ – gloomily remarked to Carrington on March 5th, 1981, that

our role as Oman’s major ally is increasingly going to be played by the United States. Our reaction to this development should, I believe, be to foster the closest possible co-operation (and therefore influence) with the Americans in this country, where there is probably less objection than anywhere else in the Arab world to being identified with them.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Defence Attaché Muscat, “Annual Report for 1980 by Defence Attaché Muscat”, March 3, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁶¹ Jackling, “Note for the Record”, January 22, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁶² Discretion was always at the core of British policy towards Oman. See Petersen 2015: Chapter IX – Oman: Discretion Required. See especially page 109.

²⁶³ Lucas dismissed the referred misgivings of the service commanders as inaccurate and referred to a recent talk with his American colleague where the latter assured him that he advised discretion on his superiors. See Lucas to Miers, January 28, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁶⁴ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

It was thus not without reason that Slater in his annual review for 1981 warned that “[t]he increasing US interest in Oman, a country which they have hitherto regarded as primarily a British sphere of influence, carries with it some risk of Anglo-American friction”.²⁶⁵ The friction – or more precisely the competition – was by then already there.

Moreover, the Omanis might try to take advantage of the increasing American interest and play off one Western power against the other in order to extract greater concessions. Requests made during Thatcher’s visit to Oman in April 1981 demonstrate that the Omani authorities were not simply passive recipients of Western support; they readily pursued their own agendas. Qais Zawawi, the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, requested during a meeting with Douglas Hurd that Britain agree to the formation of a joint Anglo-Omani economic commission and the establishment of a line of credit to cover Omani defence purchases in the United Kingdom. He made firm references to similar arrangements with the United States and even volunteered to provide the terms of reference for the American-Omani commission “as a guide in the drafting” for an Anglo-Omani equivalent.²⁶⁶ Zawawi clearly referred to the support offered by the United States in order to pressurise the British into offering equally favourable arrangements.

Britain could hardly compete with the vast resources at the United States’ disposal and would surely compare unfavourably in any bidding contest. The British government did not intend, however, to confine itself to the role of a junior partner and simply throw in their lot with the Americans. It was therefore imperative for British authorities to urge restraint on United States conduct and retain their own distinct relationship with Oman. On February 6th, 1981, the FCO instructed Lucas that Britain should “encourage the Americans to make their dispositions in Oman as unobtrusive as possible [...]”. The American presence should not lead to resentment locally or regionally or disturb Omani defence priorities. While Lucas should maintain close ties with his American counterpart, these instructions made clear that Britain remained an independent actor not too closely identified with United States policy.²⁶⁷ In effect, then, the United States should not undermine British efforts to preserve Omani stability and direct Omani defence policy or otherwise erode Britain’s position in Oman or the Gulf in

²⁶⁵ Slater to Carrington, “Oman: Annual Review 1981”, January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

²⁶⁶ Graham, “Record of a Meeting between the Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Salalah on Thursday 23 April 1981 at 1815 Hours”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

²⁶⁷ Miers to Lucas, February 6, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

general by overwhelming the Sultanate with its own designs. Margaret Thatcher even gently advised American President Ronald Reagan to this end when she reported on her April 1981 talks with Qaboos: “He and his country are important to us. But we must not overburden him.”²⁶⁸

An independent policy towards Oman was clearly key to preserve a distinct British sphere of influence and avoid British subordination to American interests. Hurd commented to Foreign Secretary Carrington on October 22nd, 1981, on prospective Anglo-American-Omani trilateral talks:

We have our own relationship with the Sultan which is of a different kind from that of the Americans. We should aim to preserve our relationship as a separate fact, and not allow it to be swallowed up in some sort of new Anglo-American approach to Oman. If we allow the latter to happen we shall quickly find ourselves a junior partner.²⁶⁹

Pym summed up the British position to Slater in 1982 thus: “[I]t needs to be clear that in this part of the world (as indeed in many others) we support the general thrust of American policy while reserving the right to disagree – and to preserve our own interests – on points of detail.”²⁷⁰

The senior loan service officers were instrumental for maintaining the British sphere and restricting American influence. They could protect the United Kingdom position in Oman and limit American “obtrusiveness” without provoking overt Anglo-American rivalry or causing an outright diplomatic row with the United States – whom after all was Britain’s most important partner in the Gulf as elsewhere. As seen above, these officers exercised significant influence on the Sultan through their advice and could therefore persuade him in favour of British interests. They were in Oman to underpin British political and commercial interests only and made no exception in the case of United States involvement. Indeed, the loan service commanders did their best to obstruct American aspirations when these diverged from British

²⁶⁸ Thatcher to Reagan, April 27, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

²⁶⁹ Hurd to Carrington, October 22, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁷⁰ Pym to Slater, “British Policy on Oman”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

concerns. For instance, air commander Bennett was unpopular with the Americans because of his efforts to that effect. Wrote Miers, FCO, to Lucas on March 13th, 1981:

Bennett's difficulties with the Americans are understandable and unavoidable given the conflicting priority of interest. His opposition to some US ambitions – eg for greater day to day use of Seeb airfield – is based on what he perceives as the Omani interest and is consistent with our own concern at the level of the US profile.²⁷¹

From this, it is clear that Bennett acted just as much in the interest of the United Kingdom as in that of Oman when he resisted American designs.

General Creasey also worked strenuously to frustrate United States interests when he arrived in the Sultanate in August 1981. Only months after he assumed command he was at odds with United States authorities over the American military exercise “Bright Star” as well as the American-Omani access agreement. The former case was an obvious attempt to moderate the American profile in Oman. Creasey used his influence as Omani Chief of the Defence Staff to downgrade Omani participation in the exercise, which took place in December 1981, in order to reduce its overall scale. In this, he succeeded. Slater commented in retrospect: “The fact that General Creasey was instrumental in having the Omani part of the exercise reduced in scope caused us some difficulties with the Americans.”²⁷² In the latter case, Creasey – alarmed by the contents of the access agreement – tried to persuade the Sultan to revise the terms of United States access to Oman. Here, Creasey clearly aimed to limit United States access (and thereby the scope for pursuing interests) altogether. Hurd reported from a discussion with Creasey on December 2nd, 1981:

[Creasey] mentioned difficulties with the Americans and I told him of the worry expressed to me emphatically by Burt in Washington last week that he was trying to narrow and restrict the agreement on facilities which the Omanis had reached with the Americans. Creasey said this was exactly what he was trying to do. His job was to give the Sultan honest advice. Having seen the agreement (which we

²⁷¹ Miers to Lucas, March 13, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁷² Slater to Carrington, “Oman: Annual Review 1981”, January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

have not) he felt that the Omanis had yielded far too much sovereignty. He had advised the Sultan that it should be revised [...].²⁷³

Hurd doubted that Creasey would succeed in his efforts to alter the terms of the American access agreement.²⁷⁴ But the fact remains that Creasey could monitor the development of American-Omani relations and intervene to preserve British or Omani interests more effectively than could anyone else on the British side. It is clear from Hurd's remark that Creasey had seen the access agreement whereas authorities in London had not. The overriding reason for his actions was mistrust of what the Americans were really up to in Oman. He did not trust American motives in relation to either British concerns or indeed the Omani regime itself. During a heated exchange between Creasey and the American ambassador in the Sultanate, the latter bluntly declared, "whereas the dog had previously been allowed only in the garden he could now come into the house and if he made a mess it was too bad".²⁷⁵ This was an ill-concealed reference to the access agreement and its implications for British interests vis-à-vis the new American position, which in turn prompted Creasey to study this agreement in detail. Moreover, Creasey suspected that the Americans controlled Zawawi and that one motivation for the "Bright Star" exercise was to sound out if Zawawi or the Sultan was in charge in Oman.²⁷⁶ Lucas dismissed these suspicions but nonetheless found Creasey's assessment of the access agreement worrisome.²⁷⁷

Too much opposition to American interests on the part of the British loan service officers could, however, be counterproductive and cause embarrassment to the British government. United States authorities strongly – and of course largely rightly – suspected that the loan service commanders acted on behalf of the British government. The British certainly tried to convince the Americans that they did not exercise control over their loaned personnel,²⁷⁸ but to little avail.²⁷⁹ Lucas reported: "The embassy here have commented to us that they do not understand why we do not "keep better control of your LSP", and why Creasey dabbles in

²⁷³ Lucas to FCO, December 2, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁷⁴ Lucas to FCO, December 2, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁷⁵ Lucas reported this encounter to the FCO. See Lucas to Miers, November 16, 1981, FCO 8/3970/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²⁷⁶ Lucas reported these suspicions to Miers, FCO. See Lucas to Miers, November 16, 1981, FCO 8/3970/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²⁷⁷ Lucas to Miers, November 16, 1981, FCO 8/3970/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²⁷⁸ For example, Hurd told United States representatives that Creasey acted independently without consulting London. Lucas to FCO, December 2, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁷⁹ Slater to Carrington, "Oman: Annual Review 1981", January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

“foreign affairs which are none of his business”.”²⁸⁰ In order to avoid further friction with the United States, officials in London discussed in late 1981 how they best discourage Creasey from further antagonising American authorities.²⁸¹

Notwithstanding this, there can be no doubt about the service commanders’ potential to preserve British interests vis-à-vis those of the Americans and their efforts to limit the United States presence in the Sultanate. The next subchapter will show their worth in terms of ensuring that Britain retained a significant market share – especially in the arms trade – in competition with the Americans and others.

3.3 Loan Service Personnel and British Exports

Britain took great interest in its commercial position in Oman. The Sultanate was an important market for British exports, especially in terms of defence sales. In the early 1980s, it faced increasing international competition in the Omani market but managed to retain a significant market share despite relative decline.²⁸² Slater summed up Britain’s economic performance in Oman in 1981 thus: “It is true that Japan will have overtaken us as the major exporter, thanks largely to motor sales, but we are probably still ahead if defence sales are included.”²⁸³

Naturally, retention of “favourable trading and defence sales interests” in Oman was an important British policy objective. Miers, FCO, instructed Lucas to that effect in early 1981.²⁸⁴ Foreign Secretary Pym issued new instructions to Slater in July 1982. These explained in detail that the British government wished

[t]o preserve our present advantages in the commercial field, for the award both of civil and defence equipment contracts, stemming from our past historical links and the Sultan’s present preference for British products, as well as from the high number of British expatriates in Oman.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁰ Lucas to Miers, November 16, 1981, FCO 8/3970/NBL 071/1, TNA.

²⁸¹ One suggestion was that the Secretary of State should admonish him. See Burns to Graham, December 4, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁸² In 1981, Japan accounted for 19,7% of Omani imports. Britain stood at 18,6%, down from 20,9% (and first place) in 1976. See Middle East Department, FCO, “Country Assessment Paper: Oman”, December, 1982, FCO 8/4502/NBL 014/3, TNA.

²⁸³ Slater to Carrington, “Oman: Annual Review 1981”, January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

²⁸⁴ Miers to Lucas, February 6, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁸⁵ Pym to Slater, “British Policy on Oman”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

Clearly, the British expatriate community in Oman helped to promote British trade. Slater also concluded thus in his annual review for 1981.²⁸⁶ The majority of the several thousand British citizens resident in the Sultanate were employees of British firms.²⁸⁷ These expatriates obviously took care of their own respective business interests while in Oman – as did expatriates from other countries. However, those British expatriates that served with the Omani armed forces on loan service terms – although few in numbers – allowed Britain to pursue its commercial ambitions more directly. Loan servicemen were in fact foremost sales agents that ensured British suppliers preferential treatment whenever the Sultan planned new projects or procurements.

Loan service personnel supported British defence sales efforts in the Sultanate in four particular respects. Firstly, the mere presence of loan service personnel obtained the goodwill necessary to create a favourable atmosphere in which to do business. Firm British commitment was always the key to keep the Sultan well disposed towards everything British. Britain's loan service posture – being the most visible demonstration of its commitment to Oman²⁸⁸ – was thus an important asset. General Creasey observed:

I cannot emphasise too strongly the importance of [goodwill]. Without a presence, there is little influence, and our stock of goodwill will erode rapidly. Presence and influence leads to sales. Wherever possible, and subject to fair and proper pricing, the Sultan would like to buy British (many of his so called advisers think otherwise – hence the importance of presence – influence – goodwill).²⁸⁹

This passage explains the scheme neatly. Goodwill was a precursor for sales, but it depended on influence that stemmed from presence. Britain could not passively depend on Oman to purchase its military hardware from British sources but needed to commit militarily in order to facilitate future sales. Officials in the Defence Policy Staff, MoD, agreed with

²⁸⁶ Slater to Carrington, "Oman: Annual Review 1981", January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

²⁸⁷ See Middle East Department, FCO, "Country Assessment Paper: Oman", December, 1982, FCO 8/4502/NBL 014/3, TNA. The Middle East Department calculated that there were about 4 000 British expatriates resident in Oman while Slater considered the British expatriate community to number some 6 000 in his annual review for 1981. See Slater to Carrington, "Oman: Annual Review 1981", January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

²⁸⁸ See Pym to Slater, "British Policy on Oman", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

²⁸⁹ Creasey to British Defence Attaché Muscat, January 31, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

Creasey and stated in their loan service report of 1982 that: “Goodwill, generated by making LSP available, also has a bearing on the successful outcome of defence sales efforts.”²⁹⁰

It is difficult to measure the exact impact of goodwill upon political decisions. But by seconding military personnel and meeting other political or economic requests from Oman, the British government obtained political capital that made it possible to promote British firms and equipment whenever convenient. For example, Thatcher agreed to second General Creasey and to consider favourably other Omani requests²⁹¹ when she met the Sultan in April 1981. During a tete-a-tete discussion, she herself took an interest in Omani plans to build a new university.²⁹² Slater later reported in his annual review for 1981 that British firms had obtained major building contracts connected to this project.²⁹³ This demonstrates how political capital – or goodwill – obtained from meeting Omani requests could translate into commercial gains. Thatcher demonstrated her willingness to help Qaboos and thus created the right atmosphere in which she could draw his attention to a British interest. Likewise, British loaned personnel demonstrated Britain’s commitment to Omani security and thereby drew Oman closer to Britain. This ensured that Qaboos remained sympathetic to British concerns.

However, as Creasey pointed out above, goodwill would quickly diminish if British commitment dwindled. It was thus important for British authorities to meet Omani requests (especially for more loan service personnel) in order to demonstrate continued commitment. To do otherwise could damage British commercial interests and persuade the Sultan to take his business elsewhere. MoD officials therefore advised flexibility, particularly when loan service requests related to sales. “To do otherwise would damage UK’s defence relations with Oman [...] and prejudice UK’s defence sales prospects.”²⁹⁴ Without credible presence and commitment, it would become increasingly difficult to maintain Britain’s market share in the Sultanate when goodwill eroded.

²⁹⁰ Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

²⁹¹ These included requests for Britain to open a line of credit for Omani defence purchases, review loan service charges and reconsider a reduction in aid for Oman. The Sultan made these requests during a tete-a-tete meeting with Thatcher on April 24th, 1981. See Alexander, “Points raised in a Tete-A-Tete Discussion between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman on 24 April 1981”, April 27, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

²⁹² Alexander, “Points raised in a Tete-A-Tete Discussion between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman on 24 April 1981”, April 27, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

²⁹³ Slater to Carrington, “Oman: Annual Review 1981”, January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

²⁹⁴ Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

Secondly, British micromanagement of the Omani military put Britain in a unique position to direct what equipment Oman should procure and from what suppliers they should buy it. The presence of loan service officers thus paid of commercially because of the influence they exercised on Omani defence matters. Wrote Pym to Slater in 1982:

The predominance of British officers in the Omani armed forces gives us an advantage though these British officers need to avoid undermining Omani confidence in their loyalty or objectivity by too partisan a preference for British equipment. [...] General Creasey has himself volunteered, privately, that our defence sales efforts may be superfluous while he is there and we are likely to rely on him, for the time being, to push our broader interests.²⁹⁵

The senior officers had ready access to the Sultan and could therefore discuss such matters with him directly. Their experience and senior rank meant that they were better qualified than most in the Sultanate to counsel from a professional viewpoint on what military equipment to purchase and operate in the Omani armed forces. Chief of the Defence Staff Creasey even had financial control (although of course subject to the Sultan's wishes).²⁹⁶ Their background from the British armed forces meant that they were familiar with British equipment. Their ultimate loyalty to British authorities and interests dictated that they should promote British defence sales when they could. For both these reasons, they naturally tried to persuade the Sultan to buy British.

There can be no doubt that the loan service commanders did their very best to promote British weaponry. According to Lucas, Air Vice-Marshal Bennett in 1981 tried to convince the Omanis to order British Tornado aircraft for the Omani air force.²⁹⁷ Moreover, the Sultan ordered Major General Watts in early 1981 to advise on whether to acquire British Chieftain Main Battle Tanks or American M60s for the Omani army.²⁹⁸ R. P. Wilkin in MoD briefed Carrington in July that Oman had decided on the British alternative although Zawawi had made

²⁹⁵ Pym to Slater, "British Policy on Oman", July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

²⁹⁶ For a remark on Creasey's financial control and general influence on procurement, see Jeffs to APS/Secretary of State, October 13, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

²⁹⁷ Lucas revealed as much in a remark made when he commented on benefits from a planned air exercise: "In addition to providing air defence training for SOAF such an exercise would highlight the present deficiencies in Omans [sic.] air defence capability and reinforce CSOAF's internal case for the acquisition of Tornado." Lucas to MoD, May 14, 1981, FCO 8/3963/NBL 061/1, TNA.

²⁹⁸ See Franklin to AUS (D Staff), June 10, 1981, DEFE 24/2108, TNA.

a case for American tanks.²⁹⁹ Watts undoubtedly persuaded Qaboos to buy British on this occasion. He surely intended to. Lucas commented in February: “But he [Watts] hopes to persuade Qaboos not to complicate matters by getting more M60s [...]”³⁰⁰ It is obvious from this that Watts did not want American tanks and would do his best to influence the Sultan accordingly. Such efforts by service commanders were a significant competitive advantage that enabled Britain to counter outside competition and in particular United States pressure on the Sultanate to purchase military equipment from American suppliers.

In parenthesis, it is important to note that General Creasey had to reconcile two contending British interests – namely those of increased defence exports to Oman and continued Omani stability. This put him in a somewhat peculiar position where he should as far as possible support British defence sales efforts while at the same time try to restrict Omani military spending and improve pay and conditions in the armed forces. This of course meant potential setbacks for British military exports. Lucas commented on Creasey’s efforts shortly after the latter’s arrival: “We shall probably have to accept that the rationalisation of the defence budget will mean the loss of some of our projected deals.”³⁰¹ Creasey made it clear to Lucas that he would not be pressurised into obtaining new equipment: “CDS himself told me that he did not want armies of salesmen coming out to the Sultanate to foist sophisticated equipment on him.”³⁰² He would rather allocate more resources to better pay and conditions for the soldiery. He explained as much when he met a MoD negotiating team to discuss the Chieftain tanks purchase in October 1981. Moreover, he even threatened to turn to the Americans for outdated L60 tanks if MoD tried to bully him into buying more Chieftains than he thought Oman could afford.³⁰³ Pym later commented that Creasey would “no doubt drive a hard bargain on the Omani’s behalf but not to the extent of eroding our advantages vis à vis our competitors”.³⁰⁴ That was exactly what he did in order to get his defence budget under control, even at the cost of British defence sales (but to the benefit for other British concerns).

However, this is not to say that Creasey did not observe British commercial interests – he simply had to cut expenses somewhere. Britain, being a large arms supplier, necessarily had

²⁹⁹ Wilkin to Patterson, July 23, 1981, DEFE 24/2108, TNA.

³⁰⁰ Lucas to Miers, February 7, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

³⁰¹ Lucas to Miers, September 20, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

³⁰² Lucas to Miers, September 20, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

³⁰³ Creasey set out to reduce the Chieftain order from 35 new tanks to 15 new plus 12 tanks currently on lease to Oman. See Jeffs to APS/Secretary of State, October 13, 1981, FCO 8/3966/NBL 062/1, TNA.

³⁰⁴ Pym to Slater, “British Policy on Oman”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 20/2, TNA.

to account for some of these cuts. Creasey nevertheless ensured that British suppliers enjoyed preferential consideration and informed British authorities when some British supplier risked losing out to competitors. Reported Alan Munro, MoD, from a discussion with Creasey on October 22nd 1981:

General Creasey was very critical of Landrovers' support and service in Oman. This might be the fault of the firm or perhaps their agent. As a result he was obliged to consider Toyota as an alternative. But if Landrover could pull their socks up he might be able to stay with them.³⁰⁵

Rather than turning to the Japanese for Toyota vehicles, Creasey obviously would like to stick to British Land Rover if this supplier could deliver on his demands. Likewise, Creasey explained that he would prefer to obtain reconnaissance vehicles for the Omani army from British supplier Alvis rather than the French if the former came up with a reasonable offer on their vehicle.³⁰⁶

Thirdly, seconded troops effectively underpinned British efforts to promote sales to Oman because the British government could supply extra loan service personnel in support of particular sales. This meant that when the Sultanate procured British military hardware it had access to additional military expertise from the British armed forces to operate equipment and train Omanis in its use if needed. Other countries could of course also offer military expertise in support of procurement, but to introduce servicemen foreign to British defence philosophy into the Omani military would surely be inconvenient in terms of effectiveness. Moreover, although Oman's neighbours tolerated the British military presence they were not likely to accept an American one. The FCO instructed Lucas to that effect in February 1981.³⁰⁷ The loan service presence thus gave Britain a foothold in Omani defence policy that its competitors could neither presently match nor easily emulate. Naturally, this gave British suppliers a competitive advantage over its rivals in that the former benefited from the Thatcher government's willingness to second more personnel.

³⁰⁵ Munro to AUS (Sales), October 22, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

³⁰⁶ See Munro to AUS (Sales), October 22, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

³⁰⁷ Miers to Lucas, February 6, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

This is evident with the expansion of the Sultan's armed forces. Omani requests for loaned personnel to support procurement of new tanks and aircraft from British suppliers demonstrate that major British sales often coupled with secondment of more personnel. Defence Attaché Johnson informed MoD on April 26th, 1981, that "[t]he Ministry of Defence (Oman) has made a formal request for 8 officers and 30 soldiers to fill key appointments as a result of the decision to purchase Chieftain Main Battle Tanks."³⁰⁸ By mid-May, London had agreed to fill 29 of the requested posts.³⁰⁹ In mid-June, Lucas reported another request for 19 troops to serve with the air force.³¹⁰ Both these requests were of the utmost importance for British commercial interests, not only to secure current sales but also in order to facilitate future business. Wrote A. D. Hutton, MoD:

The additional LSP – 19 for SOAF and about 29 for SOLF – are essential if we are satisfactorily to underpin the Sultan's recent acquisition of British defence equipment (2nd Jaguar Squadron, extra aircraft for Maritime Patrol duties and tanks (and therefore prospects of further sales including an integrated air defence system, rapier and chieftain).³¹¹

Fourthly, United Kingdom personnel serving on loan in Oman's armed forces left a strong British imprint on the Omani military that consequently had a bearing on Omani equipment preferences. Both language issues and routine deemed it good sense to procure arms from British suppliers. For one, there was the issue of military efficiency. As long as loaned personnel from the United Kingdom propped up the Sultan's armed forces there were clear advantages with procuring arms and equipment familiar to the British contingent. British troops naturally were used to British equipment, which in turn meant that any introduction of new tanks, aircraft and so on would proceed smoother if Oman bought from Britain than if the seconded troops would have to familiarise with equipment from France or other exporters. There would be no language problems or additional training on part of the seconded officers. More importantly, however, British training and direction of the Omani defence familiarised Omani troops with the English language and British equipment and thereby created a lasting legacy from British military support that could benefit Britain's defence exports both at present

³⁰⁸ Johnson to MoD, April 26, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

³⁰⁹ See Dickinson to DS11, May 18, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

³¹⁰ Lucas to FCO, June 18, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

³¹¹ Hutton to Head of DS11, June 23, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

and in the future. The Sultan discussed prospective sales of British Tornado aircraft to Arab countries with Thatcher in April 1981 and told her “that he had been worried about the tendency to give everything to the French”. He continued: “No one country should have a monopoly in this part of the world. Moreover, there was a language problem in that aircraft manuals were all in English, and pilots had been trained in English.”³¹² In his mind, then, equipment from non-English-speaking countries like France or Germany would create unnecessary difficulties – which in turn put English-speaking producers in a good position to achieve commercial gain.

The considerable British involvement in the Sultan’s armed forces moreover evidently ensured that the Omanis often preferred British-operated equipment to that from other English-speaking exporters (in effect, the United States). When the Sultan met Hurd in November 1982, he explained that he would spend much of his newly received Gulf Cooperation Council funds on British military hardware rather than on American or French arms:

The Military Committee had recommended that Oman should buy the Mirage 2000 or F.16 aircraft and the M1 tank. Oman did not think that these were suitable and wished to purchase British equipment with which the Oman Armed Forces were already familiar. In particular, Oman wanted the Tornado aircraft and more Chieftain tanks.³¹³

There can be no doubt that presence and commitment – effected by British loan service policy and provision of military training – was key to secure that Britain remained a natural choice for Omani defence purchases over rivals like the French and the Americans. The policy of presence, influence and goodwill clearly paid off: Officials in the Middle East Department reported a 58% increase in British arms sales to Oman during the first six months of 1982 over the first half of 1981. Prospects for further sales were also excellent: “The Sultanates’ [sic.] known wish to buy British whenever possible may result in further large-scale business, perhaps

³¹² Alexander, “Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman in Salalah on 23 April 1981 at Noon”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

³¹³ “Record of Conversation between His Majesty the Sultan of Oman and the Rt Hon Douglas Hurd CBE MP, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, held at the Al Alan Palace, Muscat at 1315 on Thursday 18 November 1982”, not dated, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

negotiated on a Government-to-Government basis. Promotion of British expertise could serve the same purpose.”³¹⁴ Loan service personnel was a core condition to achieve such business.

³¹⁴ Middle East Department, FCO, “Country Assessment Paper: Oman”, December, 1982, FCO 8/4502/NBL 014/3, TNA.

Chapter 4

Political Concessions, 1982

The Prime Minister would like our policy on this issue to be reconsidered. She wholly disagrees with the position that we should assess charges for Loan Service Personnel on a full cost basis. She believes that this approach does us very great harm. She considers that we are unnecessarily upsetting friendly countries by raising “trifling matters” such as this.³¹⁵

The Anglo-Omani relationship needed constant working at in order to function satisfactorily. Margaret Thatcher, conscious that political irritants could damage Britain’s interests and erode its influence in the Sultanate, took care to avoid any friction with Omani authorities. As suggested in the above quote, she occasionally intervened personally to ensure that British authorities complied with Omani requests. Commitment and flexibility – sometimes genuine, sometimes artificial – were key elements of her approach to Oman.

In 1981-82, Britain had to deal with two requests that were particularly difficult to square with current loan service policy. Firstly, Oman put increased pressure on the British to reduce their charges for loan service personnel. The charges assessed were steep, and the prospect of an increase in loan service numbers due to British military recommitment intensified the Omani demand for a better bargain. British charging policy aimed at recouping expenses rather than aiding the Omani defence budget. The FCO and MoD were therefore initially unenthusiastic about revising the scheme. Thatcher repeatedly had to instruct the ministries concerned on the importance to make progress on the matter in order to remain on good terms with the Sultan.

Secondly, the Sultan in 1982 requested greater control over the British loan service personnel serving with the Omani armed forces. In particular, he wanted to be able to deploy loaned officers in Gulf Cooperation Council member states if circumstances required Oman to heed treaty obligations to Gulf partners. Thatcher agreed to this in what appeared to be a departure from the policy of firm control hitherto exercised by the British government over its personnel on loan. However, in reality she conceded very little. British micromanagement of

³¹⁵ Alexander to Richards, May 6, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

the Omani armed forces ensured that Britain would continue to receive ready information on Omani designs and have a significant say over the application of loaned troops. British loan service commanders, on whom the Sultan largely relied for military advice, would surely persuade against deployments that risked embarrassing the British government. Britain moreover maintained a military presence in the Sultanate only for as long as it was in its interest – if Qaboos deployed loaned officers in operations contrary to these interests they would surely be withdrawn. Thus, whereas Thatcher in theory yielded a significant concession she in practice merely paid lip service to the Sultan in order to appear committed. Britain remained in control of its loaned personnel.

4.1 A Potential Irritant: Loan Service Charges

4.1.1 British policy on loan service charges

The British Ambassador to Oman, Ivor Lucas, once remarked that British support to Oman was “the subject of irritating niggling over money”.³¹⁶ What he meant was that the British concern to recover costs prejudiced Britain’s willingness to help its ally and that such hesitant support risked doing more harm than good to Anglo-Omani relations. This was particularly accurate in the case of loan service charges. The loan service arrangement as agreed between Britain and the Sultanate resembled a conventional business agreement where the Omanis rented British military expertise – in effect the officers and non-commissioned officers on loan from the British armed forces – for a fixed charge. Omani authorities were, however, unhappy about the total cost and persistently sought reductions. According to James Worrall, the Sultan asked Britain for a discount on loan service charges already in March 1972.³¹⁷ Nearly a decade later the Omanis still disputed the price. MoD officials briefed the British defence secretary in early January 1981 that “[t]he Omanis occasionally raise the question of the costs to the Omanis of their LSP, and in particular have asked why it is necessary for them to pay tax and national insurance contributions.”³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Lucas to Carrington, “Anglo-Omani Relations”, March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

³¹⁷ James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire*. London 2014: 173.

³¹⁸ Lindsay, “Visit by Secretary of State for Defence to Oman: Brief on LSP”, January 2, 1981, FCO 8/3968/NBL 071/1, TNA.

British rates were in fact rather stiff. They were designed not only to cover salaries for loaned personnel but also aimed to retrieve some of the erstwhile expenses connected to the training of the individual loan serviceman throughout his career in the British armed forces.³¹⁹ This charging policy naturally rendered loaned personnel more expensive than those serving on contract terms (whom triggered no extra costs beyond their own salary). For example, a loan service colonel supplied by the United Kingdom cost the Omanis almost three times more than a colonel employed on contract. Salem Ghazali, the Omani Under-Secretary for Defence, explained as much to the British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Douglas Hurd, during a meeting in spring 1981. According to Ghazali, “Oman had to pay 3,172 rials a month for a British LSP colonel. But the colonel himself received only 1,732 rials from the Ministry of Defence in pay, and a British colonel on contract terms would be paid only 1,111 rials”.³²⁰ British military recommitment to the Sultanate in 1981-82 increased the loan service presence³²¹ and consequently the costs to the Omanis. The impending increase in loan service numbers aggravated further Omani discontent with British charges. Ghazali clarified to Hurd “that the Omani concern was caused by the need for more LSP to handle new equipment on order”.³²² Omani authorities clearly wanted to avoid an abrupt rise in manpower expenses stemming from an expanded British loan service presence. As a result, the Omani demand for a reduction in charges intensified.

During spring 1981, therefore, the question of loan service charges featured prominently in talks between Omani authorities and British ministers. First, the Omanis broached the matter when the British Secretary of State for Defence, John Nott, visited the Sultanate in late March. Lucas reported from the ensuing discussions that the issue of loan service costs was among the “familiar themes” raised by the Omani side.³²³ Then they made a strong case for reductions when Thatcher and her entourage visited Oman one month later. Ghazali and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Qais Zawawi, made their case to Hurd on April 23rd. Sir John Graham, FCO, recorded: “Ghazali stressed that there was a feeling on the Omani side that

³¹⁹ Francis Richards at the FCO explained this to Thatcher on May 1st, 1981. See Richards to Alexander, May 1, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³²⁰ See Graham, “Record of a Meeting between the Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Salalah on Thursday 23 April 1981 at 1815 Hours”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³²¹ See chapter 2.

³²² Graham, “Record of a Meeting between the Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Salalah on Thursday 23 April 1981 at 1815 Hours”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³²³ Lucas to FCO, March 29, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

Oman should be treated differently by the UK because of the special relationship between the two countries.”³²⁴ The Sultan put it even more plainly during a tete-a-tete with Thatcher one day later. Her Private Secretary, Michael Alexander, recorded: “The Sultan argued, and the Prime Minister agreed, that these charges are excessive and that some way should be found to reduce them.”³²⁵

4.1.2 Thatcher intervenes

Thatcher, mindful of the need to retain the Sultan’s goodwill, was clearly inclined to meet the Omani request for reduced loan service costs – in fact, she was markedly less reserved about this than were her ministerial colleagues in MoD and the FCO. Defence Secretary Nott undertook to review the debated charges when he returned to Britain from Oman³²⁶ but it soon became clear that both the defence and foreign ministries were unenthusiastic about a full revision of British charging policy. The British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Peter Carrington, advised Nott on April 15th that the problem encompassed many of Britain’s allies but nonetheless put great emphasis on the need to recover British expenses:

I am sure that your initiative in relation to charges will be implemented in a way which meets our general need to maintain, by training and sales, good defence relations with friendly foreign states as well as satisfying your particular need to recoup as large a proportion as possible of your costs.³²⁷

This implicitly suggests that in the FCO and MoD foreign policy considerations relating to costs for British military assistance had to adjust to perceived economic imperatives even if it risked causing discontent among allies. Likewise, the exchange between Hurd and the Omanis during Thatcher’s visit demonstrated that the FCO was not prepared to yield on the matter.

³²⁴ Graham, “Record of a Meeting between the Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Salalah on Thursday 23 April 1981 at 1815 Hours”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³²⁵ Alexander, “Points Raised in a Tete-A-Tete Discussion between the Prime Minister and Sultan Qaboos of Oman on 24 April 1981”, April 27, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

³²⁶ Hurd explained this to Omanis during a meeting in late April 1981. See Graham, “Record of a Meeting between the Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Salalah on Thursday 23 April 1981 at 1815 Hours”, April 24, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³²⁷ Carrington to Nott, April 15, 1981, PREM 19/757, TNA.

Despite Hurd's vague promise to consider the Omani request "carefully in the context of the review under way", the British side nevertheless felt "that the charges for LSP could be defended" on economic grounds.³²⁸ Thatcher requested upon her return to the United Kingdom a report from the FCO on follow-up action to the points discussed with Omani authorities; the reply reveals in full the hesitancy to revise loan service costs. Wrote Francis Richards, Private Secretary, on behalf of the FCO on May 1st:

Ministers agreed as recently as January this year that we should continue to assess charges on a full cost basis [...]. The Defence Secretary has, however, agreed that we should be able to reassess the fees in individual cases where there are good reasons or defence grounds, including defence sales.³²⁹

This passage demonstrates in full that neither the FCO nor MoD initially favoured an alteration of the hitherto practiced charging policy but rather preferred to apply flexibility in cases where it explicitly served British interests to do so.

The Prime Minister cared little for British haggling over paltry sums. She strongly opposed the idea that Oman (and other British allies) should pay full costs for loan service personnel.³³⁰ Her reply to Richards, as penned by her Private Secretary Michael Alexander (and quoted in the introduction), left no doubt that the question of loan service costs was a "trifling matter" of little consequence to Britain except that British refusal to reduce them might dismay allies. She therefore demanded a reassessment of policy.³³¹ This firm rebuke of the FCO view clearly demonstrates that she deemed the assessment of charges for British military assistance subordinate to the maintenance of Anglo-Omani (and other bilateral) relations. She would rather reduce British charges than risk a fall-out with the Sultan over this trivial matter.

However, no actual change occurred during the remainder of 1981 although Defence Secretary Nott on June 15th submitted to Thatcher a set of draft proposals regarding future British charging policy. Among the propositions under consideration in MoD was "a new

³²⁸ Hurd argued that British charges aimed to recoup funds spent on training the individual serviceman. See Graham, "Record of a Meeting between the Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Salalah on Thursday 23 April 1981 at 1815 Hours", April 24, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³²⁹ Richards to Alexander, May 1, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³³⁰ See for example Thatcher's handwritten note in the margin of Richards' report. Richards to Alexander, May 1, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³³¹ See Alexander to Richards, May 6, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

scheme for the provision of advice and training in-country, which would reduce the charge to the receiving Government quite considerably [...]”.³³² This was in line with the Prime Minister’s wishes, but there was in fact no subsequent perceptible progress on the matter. By mid-August, Lucas in Muscat commented on what he dubbed “a deafening silence on the question of LSP charges” to David Miers in the FCO.³³³ Miers replied a few days later:

The Prime Minister’s visit unlocked a door which previous assaults had jammed more tightly shut. As a result, the MoD undertook a fundamental reappraisal and I am sure that something will come out of this, though the initial impetus had inevitably slackened and been eroded. We are told that a package of proposals is nearing its completion which the MoD plan to put to Mr Nott and the Chiefs of Staff early in October. If agreed, Mr Nott will put it to the Cabinet.³³⁴

There can be no doubt that the push for changes had “slackened”. Despite any intentions to the contrary, British authorities had yet to come up with a final, approved solution by the late autumn. When Hurd paid Oman another visit in the beginning of December, the Sultan again felt compelled to inquire about the issue of loan service costs since “[t]his was the only aspect of our defence relationship still in question”. But there were simply no new developments to report. Therefore, Hurd could do little more than implore Omani patience. Lucas summarised: “We would speak again to the Sultan as soon as there was a clearer answer.”³³⁵

An impending state visit to the United Kingdom by the Sultan – due in mid-March 1982 – prompted Thatcher to intervene once again in order to overcome the impasse and find an acceptable and conclusive solution to the matter. The Prime Minister learned in early February that the question of loan service charges remained unresolved. Displeased, she revitalised efforts to revise British charging policy in order to ensure continued good relations with Oman and avoid any resentment because of British indecision. Her new Private Secretary, John Coles, wrote to MoD on February 8th:

During a meeting here on another matter, at the end of last week, the Prime Minister asked whether the issue of Loan Service Personnel Costs for Oman had

³³² Dawson to Alexander, June 15, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³³³ Lucas to Miers, August 17, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

³³⁴ Miers to Lucas, August 24, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

³³⁵ Lucas to FCO, December 2, 1981, FCO 8/3963/NBL 061/1, TNA.

been settled. Mr. Douglas Hurd, who was present, explained that this had not yet proved possible. The Prime Minister made it plain that she wished to see a very early decision.³³⁶

Thatcher was obviously impatient and determined to resolve the matter well in advance of Qaboos' visit. This time around, she made sure that results were forthcoming. To achieve this, however, she had to make it very clear to MoD that she was not inclined to accept further delays on the matter. David Omand submitted on behalf of MoD a fresh report on the ongoing revision of British charging policy on February 12th. Its proposals addressed the relevant difficulties, but lacked final approval from the defence secretary. According to Omand, Nott would reach a final decision on MoD's "new approach to all of this within the next couple of weeks".³³⁷ Thus, MoD had yet to provide conclusive guidelines on how to proceed on the question of loan service charges. Thatcher therefore set a definite deadline. Coles notified Omand to that effect on February 15th:

The Prime Minister considered this matter over the weekend. She is most anxious that decisions should be taken before the Sultan arrives here on 16 March. She would therefore be grateful if your Secretary of State could consider the final proposals to which you referred and report to her on the outcome by the end of February.³³⁸

Nott presented his final propositions for "a more purposive approach to military assistance" on March 1st. Regarding loan service charges he proposed a changeover from loan service to secondment terms of service. He explained that "under these terms our people are relieved of their UK income tax obligation and the receiving government pays from 15 to 20 percent less. Oman will be the main beneficiary from this change".³³⁹ More precisely, secondment terms meant that local authorities would pay servicemen on loan direct rather than reimburse MoD for its expenses.³⁴⁰ Thus, it was in fact a transfer of administrative responsibility (but of course not effective control) from British authorities to the recipient

³³⁶ Coles to Omand, February 8, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³³⁷ Omand to Coles, February 12, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA. These proposals resembled and elaborated those submitted by MoD in June 1981.

³³⁸ Coles to Omand, February 15, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³³⁹ Nott to Thatcher, "Military Assistance and Training Charges", March 1, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³⁴⁰ See the initial draft proposals. Dawson to Alexander, June 15, 1981, PREM 19/858, TNA.

governments. Nott estimated in a second note of March 2nd that Oman currently would save about £1 million-£1,5 million per annum from the changeover. A projected expansion of the British loan service presence of about 50 troops would increase the stipulated savings to the Omani defence budget with a further £500 000.³⁴¹

Thatcher was content with the result. And relieved. Owing much to her own personal involvement Britain was finally prepared to yield a concession on this matter for the sake of good Anglo-Omani relations. Delighted with the projected Omani savings, she wrote in the margin of Nott's second dispatch: "Thank you very much. Welcome news for the State Visit and for a friend of Britain."³⁴² According to Coles, she considered it essential "that Sultan Qaboos is given the good news at the time of his State Visit on 16-19 March".³⁴³ During this visit the Omani side – true to form – forwarded yet another request for reductions in loan service charges but was satisfied to learn that the British had at last come up with a viable solution. Nott informed the new Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Alawi, about this during a meeting on March 17th. According to Hurd's Private Secretary, Stephen Lamport:

Mr Nott explained that a decision had already been taken to bring down LSP costs to Oman in a way that could eventually amount to as much as £2 million per year. This was a very significant reduction, which we intended to implement as soon as we could.³⁴⁴

In July, the Prime Minister reiterated Britain's intention to reduce Oman's loan service costs in a letter to the Sultan. She even indicated that the Sultanate might save up to £500 000 during the current financial year depending on when the new scheme was implemented.³⁴⁵ Thus, it seemed as if the matter had reached a satisfactory conclusion.

³⁴¹ Nott to Thatcher, "Military Assistance and Training Charges – Oman", March 2, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³⁴² See Nott to Thatcher, "Military Assistance and Training Charges – Oman", March 2, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³⁴³ Coles to Omand, March 5, 1982, PREM 19/858, TNA.

³⁴⁴ Lamport to Miers, March 17, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁴⁵ Thatcher to Qaboos, July 15, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

4.1.3 Aftermath

The issue of charges nevertheless continued to be a nuisance in the Anglo-Omani relationship for the remainder of 1982. But this time it was due to Omani intransigence rather than unenthusiastic British government departments. Omani authorities proved rather sceptic about possible consequences from a changeover to secondment. In particular, the Sultan feared that personnel serving under the new terms would lose out financially compared to those employed on loan service. This could in turn lead to a shortage of suitable volunteers for service in the Omani armed forces. Qaboos also worried that the new system would be complex to understand and operate, and that this would require extra administrative effort.³⁴⁶ The result was another deadlock that required new rounds of discussions.³⁴⁷ The new British Ambassador to Oman, Duncan Slater, anxiously remarked to Miers on October 8th on the necessity of “reaching a solution before this becomes a political irritant in our relations with Oman”.³⁴⁸ The British persistently tried to convince the Omanis that secondment was the only viable way forward (although with possible adjustments to appease Omani concerns³⁴⁹) for the rest of the year, but to no avail. When Hurd met the Omani Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Timothy Creasey, on December 23rd the latter declared his desire “to stick with the existing system” and achieve savings from other measures. Creasey also doubted whether the Sultan would be inclined to change his mind. The new British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Francis Pym, concluded: “The outcome of this meeting was not ideal.”³⁵⁰

This further delay was an obvious setback to the efforts set in motion by the Prime Minister earlier in the year. However, these later developments do not alter the fact that the United Kingdom under Thatcher set out to revise its charging policy in an earnest bid to accommodate the Omanis. Jane Ridley, MoD, remarked to Coles on July 5th, 1982, that “we have gone considerably further towards Oman than we have done for any other country”.³⁵¹ Thatcher clearly understood that commitment and flexibility were requisite to maintain the British sphere in the Sultanate and aimed to shape British policy accordingly.

³⁴⁶ For a summary of Omani reservations, see for example Slater to Miers, “Loan Service/Secondment”, October 8, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁴⁷ For example, Foreign Secretary Pym concluded that “further discussions and an explanation is required” on August 24th. See Pym to Muscat, August 24, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁴⁸ Slater to Miers, October 8, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁴⁹ Hurd clarified British willingness to accommodate Omani reservations in a letter to Alawi from December 1982. See Pym to Muscat, December 9, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁵⁰ Pym to Muscat, December 23, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁵¹ Ridley to Coles, July 5, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

4.2 Rhetoric versus Reality: The Application of Loan Service Personnel

Margaret Thatcher wrote the Sultan in July 1982 following an undertaking made during the latter's state visit to "examine in detail Your Majesty's requests for further military assistance".³⁵² Here, the Prime Minister apparently eased restrictions on the use of British loan service personnel and agreed the principle that the Sultan could deploy British loaned forces abroad in what Tore T. Petersen describes as "a stunning change of British policy". He contends that these concessions amounted to an extraordinary reversal of Britain's tight restrictions on the application of its loaned personnel.³⁵³ This subchapter takes issue with Petersen's assessment. Based on source material now available, it argues that the practical implications from Thatcher's lessening of restrictions were in fact insignificant. However, such a discussion necessitates an overview of the circumstances prompting the initiative and a consideration of the restrictions in question.

4.2.1 Omani aspirations and British policy

During the Sultan's state visit to the United Kingdom in March 1982, the Omanis asked the British government to guarantee full participation of British loan service personnel in both internal and certain external security operations. In talks with the Prime Minister on March 17th, the Sultan emphasised that British loaned personnel should be available for all internal operations in Oman. In addition, he asked for permission to deploy such personnel for military action in other Gulf Cooperation Council member states if called upon to heed treaty obligations.³⁵⁴ Yusuf Alawi reiterated this latter Omani wish to Defence Secretary Nott the same afternoon. Lamport summarised from that meeting that "Oman sought assurances that in the event of a common threat to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, HMG would allow LSP officers to serve, if needed, in other GCC states".³⁵⁵

A guarantee along the lines requested by Oman would – in principle – exempt the Omanis from any obligation to consult the British government on the use of their loaned

³⁵² Thatcher to Qaboos, July 15, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

³⁵³ Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Policy toward the Persian Gulf, 1978-1985: Power, Influence and Restraint*. Brighton 2015: 122.

³⁵⁴ See "Summary of the Requests for Military Assistance from the United Kingdom Made during His Majesty's State Visit to London on 17th March 1982", annex to Ridley to Coles, July 5, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

³⁵⁵ Lamport to Miers, "Military Assistance for Oman", March 17, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

personnel and allow them to deploy these officers within the Gulf Cooperation Council area at will. A MoD summary of the Sultan's requests suggests that Britain would amend a confidential exchange of side-letters from 1978 in order to adapt to the Omani bid for possible loan service deployments abroad "as may be agreed between the Governments of Oman and Great Britain".³⁵⁶ Upon agreement between the two governments and subsequent amendment of the relevant regulations concerning the role of loaned personnel, there would thus be no formal need for further consultations on such matters. Therefore, British compliance to this request would cede theoretical control over British loaned troops from British to Omani authorities.

The bid thus exceeded regular Omani pleas for reassurance. It was encouraged by a combination of geopolitical calculations and prospects for financial aid that made it logical for the Sultan to seek greater control over the British loan service troops and obtain authorisation to deploy them abroad at the time he did. Firstly, Oman took a profound interest in the security aspect of the Gulf Cooperation Council organisation and hoped for closer defence cooperation with its fellow member states.³⁵⁷ However, the Sultanate's close military ties to the United States and Great Britain was an obstacle to this and even provoked criticism from some of the other members. Lucas commented in June 1981: "As I see it the appearance that the Sultan's Armed Forces are under British control to an even greater extent than before can hardly fail to prejudice acceptance of Oman's views about a greater defence content in the GCC."³⁵⁸ Ambassador Slater reported to Foreign Secretary Carrington in his annual review for 1981 that some members were critical of "Oman's overtly pro-US stand".³⁵⁹ The Iranian-backed attempted coup in Bahrain of December 1981 nevertheless propelled the Gulf countries toward closer defence cooperation.³⁶⁰ This created momentum for Omani interests. If the Sultanate could boast a greater say over its own defence and utilise its military ties to the West – in effect, the British loan service presence – to the benefit of the whole organisation it would be better placed to counter such criticism and pursue its goal to increase cooperation on security.

³⁵⁶ "Summary of the Requests for Military Assistance from the United Kingdom Made during His Majesty's State Visit to London on 17th March 1982", annex to Ridley to Coles, July 5, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

³⁵⁷ Douglas Hurd and Qais Zawawi made remarks on the Omani goal of greater defence cooperation among the Gulf countries during a conversation of February 27th, 1982. See "Record of a Meeting between Mr Hurd and Qais Zawawi, Deputy Prime Minister for Financial and Economic Affairs, in Muscat on 27 February", not dated, FCO 8/4504/NBL 020/2, TNA.

³⁵⁸ Lucas to Miers, June 25, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

³⁵⁹ Slater to Carrington, "Oman: Annual Review 1981", January 11, 1982, FCO 8/4501/NBL 014/2, TNA.

³⁶⁰ See "Record of a Meeting between Mr Hurd and Qais Zawawi, Deputy Prime Minister for Financial and Economic Affairs, in Muscat on 27 February", not dated, FCO 8/4504/NBL 020/2, TNA.

Secondly, Oman expected to obtain considerable military funding from the Gulf organisation. General Creasey notified the British Defence Attaché in Muscat about this prospect on January 31st, 1982.³⁶¹ If the Sultan could secure British agreement to loan service deployments within the Gulf Cooperation Council area, he would surely offer the other member states an extra incentive to grant financial aid to the Omani defence. Since any Omani military effort largely depended on loan service personnel for efficiency,³⁶² such clearance from Britain would enable Oman's armed forces to aid fellow members more effectively and hence deliver value for money.

At the time both Thatcher and Nott promised to consider the request "sympathetically".³⁶³ This was previously unheard of. British flexibility did not initially extend to the application of loan service personnel. On the contrary, the British government exercised firm control over their forces stationed in Oman.³⁶⁴ London were concerned that the British troops on loan to the Omani armed forces – whom were "almost automatically" bound to act if Oman came under attack³⁶⁵ – should not turn into a liability. They were therefore subject to tight formal restrictions and exclusively committed to defend the regime and Omani territory, with Britain being particularly careful to avoid any deployments of seconded troops outside Oman's borders.

British concerns in fact consistently outweighed those of Oman in matters regarding the use of loaned personnel. MoD issued service directives to the loan service commanders and the newly appointed (loan service) Omani Chief of the Defence Staff that clarified the role of loaned troops on August 17th, 1981. These explained that the United Kingdom supplied personnel for "the defence of Oman and its protection against external and internal threats". The senior loan service officers were responsible for ensuring that neither they nor other British loan servicemen were "employed directly on active operations beyond the frontiers and territorial limits of Oman, without the prior approval of Her Majesty's Government". Moreover, Omani authorities should consult the United Kingdom whenever the application of seconded troops risked causing embarrassment to either the British government or Oman. The only exception from this restriction was scenarios where an emergency left no time for prior

³⁶¹ Creasey to British Defence Attaché Muscat, January 31, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁶² See chapter 3.

³⁶³ Lamport to Miers, "Military Assistance for Oman", March 17, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁶⁴ Petersen provides a thorough discussion about this control. See Petersen 2015: 122-123.

³⁶⁵ See Lucas to Carrington, "Anglo-Omani Relations", March 5, 1981, FCO 8/3956/NBL 020/3, TNA.

consultation. Loan service commanders should in addition seek advice from the British ambassador if in doubt about whether a particular Omani order concerning the use of loan service personnel was compatible with British interests or not. But any approach to the Embassy should be discrete in order to preserve the impression that British officers were trustworthy and loyal: “Your loyalty to the Sultan of Oman must never appear to be in doubt.”³⁶⁶ There can thus be no doubt that Britain micromanaged not only the Omani defence through its military presence but also these officers themselves in order to avoid embarrassment from their use. Loaned officers remained loyal to the British government and primarily observed British rather than Omani interests when performing their duties in the Sultanate.

Britain resolutely protected this position of ultimate control over its personnel. When British officials in early 1981 became aware that the Omanis prepared a military exercise directed against a possible intervention in the United Arab Emirates in case of a communist takeover there, they employed their available tools for influencing the Omani defence in order to control events. Exercises preparing for military adventurism in neighbouring countries were clearly against the British objective to maintain the stability of the area.³⁶⁷ But the British were especially worried about consequences for the application of loan service personnel “if the eventuality in question ever looked like becoming a reality”.³⁶⁸ John Moberly, FCO, therefore in February instructed Ambassador Lucas on the advisability of “putting down a marker now on the need for [prior] consultation” with the Omanis. He advised that Lucas should ask Major General Johnny Watts, Commander of the Sultan of Oman’s Land Forces, to utilise his influence with Omani authorities to impress on them the delicacy of this issue and to keep London informed:

[S]ubject to your views, we think it would be desirable for you to mention the matter privately to General Watts [...] to underline the need for a high degree of discretion on the part of the Omanis in handling this matter. No doubt Watts has this in mind already but we would see some advantage in indicating to him that we have heard of this proposal and in implying that he should warn us of any

³⁶⁶ Eyre, “Directive to the Chief of the Defence Staff Sultan of Oman’s Armed Forces”, August 17, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA. This includes one set of directives each for the single service commanders and the Omani Chief of the Defence Staff. See also Petersen 2015: 122-123.

³⁶⁷ For a discussion of this particular British interest, see chapter 3.

³⁶⁸ See Moberly to Graham, January 11, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

diplomatically very sensitive development of this kind carrying with it long-term implications for the use of LSP outside Oman's borders.³⁶⁹

Watts shortly after assured Lucas as well as Hurd that the Sultan, following the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council, had redirected his efforts toward improving relations with the United Arab Emirates rather than contemplating a military intervention there.³⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the initial British reaction shows that any hint of actions that might lead to loan service deployments abroad prompted British authorities to attempt to restrain the Omanis through available means. Britain readily used its influence to avoid embarrassing or dangerous employment of its loaned officers.

4.2.2 Thatcher's response

Margaret Thatcher's eventual reply to the Sultan signalled what appeared to be a major reassessment of this well-entrenched policy. She personally wrote Qaboos on July 15th, 1982, to confirm British agreement to the Omani request for greater control over British loan service personnel and assure him that Great Britain was "fully committed to the security of Oman". In this dispatch, the Prime Minister left no doubt that the loan service arrangement should be flexible in order to satisfy Omani security requirements. First, she relieved the Omanis of any strict obligation to consult British authorities before committing seconded personnel to defend the Sultanate:

While we would wish to be consulted before British personnel were used in circumstances which could prove embarrassing to either of our two Governments, we recognise that the urgency of a military response in the event of a direct threat to Oman might not allow time for consultation. In these circumstances, we would be content that British personnel should play their full part in Oman's defence.³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Moberly to Lucas, February 12, 1981, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

³⁷⁰ "Record of a Meeting between Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and the Commander Sultan of Oman's Land Forces Thursday, 19 February 1981", not dated, FCO 8/3965/NBL 062/1, TNA.

³⁷¹ Thatcher to Qaboos, July 15, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

This meant that Omani authorities could employ British loan service personnel in operations that risked exposing Britain to criticism without obtaining prior permission from London if the Omanis themselves judged the emergency at hand sufficiently urgent. Thatcher thus ceded to Oman the right to define the circumstances in which exemption from this restriction applied. Hence, the Omanis gained significant scope to decide themselves if loan service participation in a particular operation was appropriate or not.

Secondly, the Prime Minister agreed to the idea that the Sultanate could deploy British loaned troops within the Gulf Cooperation Council area if necessitated by Omani treaty obligations. The Thatcher government thus implicitly accepted the principle that authorities in Oman could utilise British forces to achieve their own foreign policy goals. If one of the Gulf Cooperation Council member states called the Omanis to arms, the latter should nevertheless consult with the British government before taking action:

We would wish to be consulted by you, as provided in our existing confidential Exchange of Letters, before British personnel were committed to operations outside the frontiers of Oman. We recognise that Oman may assume certain obligations under Gulf Co-operation Council agreements. In the event of an emergency requiring Oman to act in accordance with these obligations, we would consider sympathetically requests you might put to us for the use of British Loan Service Personnel in a manner consistent with their role in support of Your Majesty's Armed Forces.³⁷²

Thatcher had however already conceded, as seen above, that the Omanis could mitigate British emphasis on the need for consultation if they considered circumstances pressing. The only formal constraint left on the use of seconded troops was in effect that their conduct had to be in line with British military regulations. According to Thatcher: "It is well understood between us that British Loan Service Personnel can only follow orders which are consistent with UK military law."³⁷³

In theory, these pledges removed ultimate control over the application of seconded troops from British authorities and risked situations where the Omani government committed British forces to combat within the Gulf Cooperation Council area without London even

³⁷² Thatcher to Qaboos, July 15, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

³⁷³ Thatcher to Qaboos, July 15, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

knowing about it. British officials certainly considered the apparent change of emphasis from retention of control to flexibility a striking development. Jane Ridley, MoD, accordingly dubbed the Prime Minister's concessions "new departures" in British loan service policy.³⁷⁴ This assessment was – however still from a theoretical point of view – very accurate. Technically, the exemption from the need to consult in times of emergency and the undertaking to consider "sympathetically" requests for loan service deployment abroad largely resembled contingencies already included in the service directives issued for senior loan service officers. These clearly acknowledged that pressing circumstances might dictate action before deliberations: "In emergency you are therefore empowered to authorise the employment of Loan Service personnel on such specific operations, provided you inform Her Majesty's Ambassador at the earliest opportunity."³⁷⁵ But Thatcher went further in that she explicitly recognised – and indicated support for – the possibility of loan service officers participating in operations aimed to counter emergencies not directly threatening Oman but rather its allies. Moreover, since the said directives were for internal British use only,³⁷⁶ her dispatch to the Sultan was a new development because it stated these hitherto confidential provisions directly to the Omanis. Britain's response to the Omani request therefore supposedly amounted to a considerable lessening of British restrictions.

But in reality, the Prime Minister did not initiate a major shift in loan service policy. Rather, she paid lip service to Qaboos in order to appear committed and hence preserve good relations. Whereas her efforts to review loan service costs had been genuine, her persuading rhetoric on the question of loan service application was just that: Rhetoric. It was not commensurate with the real substance – or more precisely the lack of substance – in this undertaking. Thatcher's concessions to the Sultan were therefore of little consequence to the actual position of seconded personnel serving in Oman. The British did certainly not relax their grip on their military presence, which after all was one of their foremost assets in the Sultanate. On the contrary, loan service personnel remained under British authority. No evidence in the source material suggests for instance that Britain amended the service directives to the senior

³⁷⁴ Ridley to Coles, July 5, 1982, FCO 8/4368/NBD 061/437/2, TNA.

³⁷⁵ Eyre, "Directive to the Chief of the Defence Staff Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces", August 17, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

³⁷⁶ The directives were in the care of the British ambassador in Oman and were "to be read and initialled" by the senior loan service officers. See Eyre, "Directive to the Chief of the Defence Staff Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces", August 17, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

loaned officers – which in effect governed the use of loaned troops through their instructions³⁷⁷ – in accordance with Thatcher’s compliance to the Omani request.

Neither did the idea of greater formal Omani control alter the fact that Britain maintained a significant machinery, centred on the senior loan service officers, with which it could exercise significant influence on the Sultan’s armed forces. British micromanagement of the Omani military through these officers both safeguarded British interests and provided ready information about Omani dispositions. British authorities could, as seen in chapter 3, rely on the senior loan service officers to advise the Sultan in accordance with British concerns. If anything, Thatcher’s dispatch to Qaboos increased their usefulness in that regard even further. Fewer British restrictions on the use of loan service personnel could in principle for example lead to reckless Omani employment of British forces abroad. Unnecessary display of the British military presence in the Gulf could in turn provoke regional resentment that obstructed British objectives in the wider Arab world. Wrote MoD officials on July 28th, 1982, in a paper on British loan service policy:

Other Arab countries in the area may suspect the “mercenary presence” and be inhibited in developing a close military relationship on account of it. But, providing our profile is not exaggerated, overall reaction is likely to be one of acceptance of, or even gratitude for, a benign British contribution to stability in the area.³⁷⁸

The loan service commanders, as the principal military decision makers, could monitor this and avoid assigning British personnel to deployments that could embarrass Britain. One particular instance from the summer of 1982 demonstrates the extent of the influence exercised by the loan service commanders over the application of British loaned forces. At the time, there were prospects for Omani participation in a military exercise in Bahrain that might also include deployment of British seconded personnel.³⁷⁹ The senior loan service officers clearly considered it sensible to avoid loan service participation and simply decided against this. Roger Tomkys, the British Ambassador to Bahrain, reported on July 5th that General Creasey had

³⁷⁷ See Eyre, “Directive to the Chief of the Defence Staff Sultan of Oman’s Armed Forces”, August 17, 1981, FCO 8/3969/NBL 071/1, TNA.

³⁷⁸ Gilbert, “Loan Service Personnel in Oman – Report by the Defence Policy Staff”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁷⁹ See for example Franklin to APS/Minister (AF), July 16, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

ordered a “temporary expedient of not sending any loan service personnel to Bahrain”.³⁸⁰ Army commander Watts was “involved in initial planning for such an exercise” but considered loan service participation unnecessary.³⁸¹ By August 30th, well after Thatcher had met the Sultan’s request (and the Bahrainis had called off the exercise³⁸²) Hugh Tunnell at the British Embassy in Muscat remarked that “General Creasey has said that he would not propose to use Loan Service Personnel on such exercises”.³⁸³ From this, it follows that British control over loan service personnel endured. There is no reason to believe that British concessions on the use of loaned personnel in any way reduced the Sultan’s reliance on his senior loan service officers for advice. He had only in March 1982 stated that he wanted to keep the commanders currently serving until at least 1985.³⁸⁴ Thus, they were in a good position to persuade against any loan service deployments that might damage British interests.

Moreover, any interpretation of Thatcher’s agreement to the Sultan’s request for greater control must take into account that the United Kingdom retained a military presence in Oman primarily to further its own interests, not because it was beneficial to Omani authorities. Shortly after Thatcher dispatched her reassurances to Qaboos, the British Foreign Secretary, Francis Pym, explained to Ambassador Slater that continued British military efforts in the Sultanate depended on whether or not provision of such support remained advantageous to Britain. Pym stated: “We shall aim to continue our present programme of military cooperation with Oman as long as we believe it to be in our interests and as long as the Sultan wants it.”³⁸⁵ From this, it is evident that Oman could not take British military assistance for granted; provision of support had to be worthwhile for the United Kingdom. This implicitly meant that if the British military presence for some reason ever turned into a liability it would be in Britain’s interest to terminate the arrangement. If the Sultan – following Thatcher’s concessions – employed British loaned troops in operations contrary to British interests, the British government could hypothetically withdraw such personnel to avoid further embarrassment or damage to its wider interests. The Omani scope for assigning loan service personnel to operations without prior clearance from British authorities was therefore limited even after Thatcher supposedly had lessened British

³⁸⁰ Tomkys to Miers, July 5, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁸¹ Tunnell to Miers, July 12, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁸² For a remark on the Bahraini change of heart, see Tunnell to Patterson, August 1, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁸³ Tunnell to Plumbly, August 30, 1982, FCO 8/4402/NBD 071/437/1, TNA.

³⁸⁴ Slater to MoD, March 3, 1982, FCO 8/4401/NBD 071/437/1, TNA. See also chapter 2.

³⁸⁵ Pym to Slater, “British Policy on Oman”, July 28, 1982, FCO 8/4504/NBL 020/2, TNA.

restrictions. Clearly, the well-entrenched policy of control hitherto exercised by the British government was actually still in force.

Chapter 5

Concluding Remarks

We were flown in helicopters up into the Dhofar hills above Salalah, still troubled by rebels armed from the adjoining communist state of South Yemen. We stood in the rising mist on the edge of a deep ravine which marked the frontier. ‘Is that still ours down there?’ asked the Prime Minister, pointing with imperial gesture towards enemy territory far below her.³⁸⁶

South Yemen was no longer a British preserve in 1981, but Margaret Thatcher looked down on its territory from what was still an important foothold for British interests in the region. The contrast between Britain’s performance in Aden and the adjacent protectorates – abandoned in a hurry in 1967 and then overrun by radicals shortly after³⁸⁷ – and its accelerating recommitment to Oman less than 15 years later is striking. During Thatcher’s premiership, Britain lacked neither intent nor energy to maintain a distinct British sphere of influence in the Sultanate – even in the face of increased competition from the United States. This was largely due to the efforts of the Prime Minister herself, with Thatcher sometimes intervening personally to impress on MoD or the FCO the importance of a particular course of action. Her new assertiveness in British foreign policy was of great consequence for the British approach to Oman. Earlier foreign policy blunders like the Aden debacle could offer a profound lesson for British leaders, and Thatcher chose to observe it: Britain could not pursue disengagement and at the same time expect to maintain its interests. It had to be one or the other, and Thatcher evidently chose the latter in the case of Oman.

However, the United Kingdom at the time clearly applied new methods to their old ends. It could not revert to the coercive practices from the heyday of empire since these would be counterproductive for both practical and political reasons in the post-imperial era. The transformation of the British Empire into a series of bilateral relationships with varying degree of lasting success³⁸⁸ was in one sense a recognition that modern incarnations of “empire”

³⁸⁶ Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs*. London 2003: 307.

³⁸⁷ See J. B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West*. New York 1980: Chapter 1 – The Abandonment of Aden.

³⁸⁸ For comprehensive overviews of the dissolution of the British Empire, see for example David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*. Harlow 2000; Robert Self, *British Foreign and Defence Policy since 1945: Challenges and Dilemmas in a Changing World*. Basingstoke 2010.

depended less on force and more on demonstrating commitment and obtaining local goodwill. More precisely, “empire” in this sense denotes a process of cultivating sufficient influence with the help of political capital (rather than coercive means) in order to pursue interests successfully.

This approach worked particularly well in the case of Oman. British commitment generated local goodwill to an extent that Britain’s position even continued to resemble that of an informal empire – although this time around it was an empire by invitation rather than by intrusion. Neither was it longer an exclusive relationship.³⁸⁹ The basis for the Anglo-Omani alignment as it worked in 1981-82 was that both sides had to find it worthwhile to interact; it could only work if both Britain and Oman benefited from the arrangement. However, it needed constant working at. That was exactly why Thatcher did her best to keep the Sultan happy by endeavouring to meet even difficult requests for British military assistance. In order for British influence to remain, she had to impress on him the advantages of sticking to Britain rather than turning to other powers for support. Persuasion had indeed replaced coercion, with commitment being the key to influence.

These points obviously add to the transformationalist argument that Britain never truly relinquished its role or abandoned its interests in the Persian Gulf. However, the British presence was less impressive and less visible than before since the United Kingdom had abandoned its fixed military bases. This thesis has nonetheless demonstrated that the remaining military posture in Oman – namely the seconded personnel serving with the Omani military – was a core condition for the retention of British influence there. These troops fulfilled both Omani and British interests (although the British cared little for Omani concerns except for keeping their ally content) and were as such crucial for the enduring Anglo-Omani relationship. Whereas the Sultan was eager to utilise British military expertise to boost his armed forces and cater for expansions, the Thatcher government was equally eager to maintain the stability of a friendly regime and increase British defence sales. Loan service personnel were key to all of this.

Naturally, the Thatcher government did not want to discard this asset. This is the main reason why Britain became increasingly flexible towards Omani requests in the early 1980s. The gradual withdrawal through Omanisation practiced under Thatcher’s immediate

³⁸⁹ For remarks on this, see for example the Afterword in Robert Alston and Stuart Loan, *Unshook till the End of Time: A History of Relations between Britain and Oman, 1650-1970*. London 2012: 305.

predecessors could disrupt the British position. A scaling down of the British military presence would gradually erode British influence and even risked that the Omanis lost confidence in the United Kingdom as a worthwhile ally. Therefore, Thatcher was happy to comply whenever Qaboos inquired for more seconded personnel. It follows from this that if the Omani need for loaned troops or British willingness to supply them ever evaporated, the Anglo-Omani relationship would be quite different – perhaps even more symmetrical. The Omani case therefore demonstrates how supply of military expertise can be an excellent way of pursuing foreign policy goals. It evidently paid off for Britain in Oman during the early Thatcher years.

The elaboration of British loan service policy in the early 1980s also serves as a reminder that power relationships persist between great powers and smaller nations even in our present-day world, despite the end to colonialism and other overt mechanisms for exploitation. Such asymmetrical relationships are less perceptible than in the past, with no political agents or residents operating under a distinct flag. Nevertheless, there are a lot of opportunity to construct such connections for countries who possess the adequate means to render any particular support in demand. Thus, whenever the news report that the United States, Great Britain or another great power send military advisors or training teams to an area of conflict it could very well be for reasons similar to those that persuaded Britain of the feasibility of supplying British personnel for service in the Omani armed forces in the early 1980s. No one country would offer such support for purely altruistic reasons. Rather, the benefactor would take advantage of the asymmetrical relationship automatically evolving when one party supplies a service needed by another to underpin specific interests in the recipient country. A greater awareness of such imperceptible power relationships not only contributes to a greater understanding of Anglo-Omani relations in the near past, but also hints to the machinations of international politics of the present day.

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