

MUSCAT

chancellor of the all-women university, Al-Zahra, in Tehran. They have three daughters.

See also BEHESHTI, MOHAMMAD; IRANIAN REVOLUTION (1979); KHAMENEHI, ALI; KHOMEINI, RUHOLLAH; RAFSANJANI, ALI AKBAR HASHEMI; RAHNAVAR, ZAHRA.

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ALI AKBAR MAHDI

MUSCAT

Capital of Oman; formerly a Portuguese and later a British stronghold on the Oman coast.

Muscat's fine natural harbor has for centuries attracted local and foreign maritime powers. Otherwise, the city's location offers more challenges than benefits. Its climate is hot and humid most of the year, and the narrow, rocky strip of land upon which it lies is wedged tightly between the Indian Ocean and the steep flanks of the Hajjar Mountains. It is not known when Muscat was established, but the name first appears in written sources during the thirteenth century.

The port came into regional prominence during the sixteenth century, after Portugal seized control and built two massive forts that overlook the harbor to this day. Portugal ruled until the Ya'ariba imamate restored Omani rule in 1649. Although not Oman's capital, Muscat thrived under Ya'ariba patronage as a leading Indian Ocean emporium and shipping center and the hub of an expanding maritime empire. After a period of decline and Iranian rule, Muscat became one of the main ports and trading centers on the western Indian Ocean from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, controlled by the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty.

Muscat's prosperity began to decline in the 1830s, as Zanzibar became the region's premier commercial center. During the nineteenth century, British influence grew in Muscat, and the port became an important coaling station for ships plying routes between the empire's Indian possessions and the Middle East. By the early twentieth century, despite some

arms smuggling, Muscat had become a sleepy steamer port. Its faltering business was conducted mainly by British-protected Indian merchants. Economic depression reduced the population in the early years of the twentieth century to just above 4,000 from about 30,000 in the mid-eighteenth century, before a revival began after the 1970 coup that installed Sultan Qabus ibn Sa'id al Bu Sa'id's modernizing regime.

As in other places on the Arabian Peninsula, oil revenues have been used to develop once-poor towns in Oman. Although lack of space has limited Muscat's growth, post-1970 improvements have included a sumptuous royal palace, restoration of historic structures, and a modern infrastructure. More extensive development has been possible in nearby towns because of the greater availability of land along the coastal strip between the capital and the international airport at Sib. Thus while Muscat had an estimated population of 55,000 in 2003, the nearby city of Ruwi had 112,000 inhabitants as well as much of the capital region's commercial, government, and residential development. Other towns in this region include Matrah, famous for its traditional *souk*, or market, Darsayt, Qurum, Mandinat Qabus, Ghubra, and Khuwayr.

See also AL BU SA'ID, QABUS IBN SA'ID;
OMAN.

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