

NOTES AND MEMORANDA

DISTURBANCES IN OMAN

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EVERY now and then newspaper reports on clashes between the army of the Sultan of Muscat and Omani guerillas, as well as on acts of sabotage against British ammunition depots and arsenals in the Sultan's territories, draw the attention of a broader public for a short while to the fact that the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula is by no means free from disturbances. For the common man in Europe and the United States of America this may be more or less interesting news from a very remote and rather exotic part of the globe. Viewed from India, however, Oman is the closest section of the Arab world, geographically as well as in many other respects. In the context of Indo-Arab relations manifold ties have developed throughout history between the subcontinent and those of the Arab countries which are cut off from the rest by the Rub'al-Khali, viz, Oman, Hadramaut, and Aden. Even under British Raj India's relations with South Arabia remained strong and multifarious. Although it seems that nowadays interest in this country is almost exclusively focussed on the political and economic centres of the Arab world, it may nevertheless be appropriate to give a brief account of the recent events in Oman.

The Sultanate of Oman and Muscat, as the official designation of the country reads, occupies an area of 82,600 square miles between the desert and the Arabian Sea and is inhabited by between 550,000 and 600,000 people, mostly of Bedouin stock, belonging to more than 200 different tribes. About 60 per cent of the Omanis adhere to the Ibadite sect of Islam, a remnant of the Kharijite movement in early Muslim history. In normal times their leader is an Imam, elected by the nobles amongst them, with whose existence the contemporary world was for the first time acquainted during the Buraimi dispute between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. As it will be remembered, the Sultan of Oman and Muscat, since ages under treaty relations with Great Britain, and the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi, a British protected ruler on the Persian Gulf, had granted concessions for oil-prospecting to the British Petroleum Company in the area of Buraimi Oasis over which they respectively claimed partial sovereignty. Saudi Arabia opposed the grant, maintaining that at least the Abu Dhabi part of the oasis in this undemarcated area was under its jurisdiction. In 1954, Ghalib ibn 'Ali, the newly elected Ibadi Imam of Oman, joined the Saudi objections in claiming sovereignty over the Omani part of the oasis for himself instead of the Sultan of Oman and Muscat. He based his claim on the fact that the Sultan had neither a legal title to, nor control over, the interior of

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Oman and that his jurisdiction was actually restricted to the city of Muscat, the neighbouring coastal strip called al-Batinah and the Province of Dhofar. The Sultan and the British termed this move of the Imam a separatist rebellion, and in 1955 British-officered troops of the Sultan penetrated about 300 miles into the interior and conquered the town of 'Ibri, which had so far been administered by a wali of the Imam. By the end of 1955 the Imam was subdued and the desert town of Nizwa assigned to him as his future residence.

The matter was, however, not yet settled. On 18 July 1957 Imam Ghalib, allegedly on the instigation and with the support of Saudi Arabia, challenged once more the supremacy of the Sultan by force, and again the British, under the terms of their Treaties of Friendship and Commerce with the Sultan's Government, took upon themselves the task of ascertaining the Sultan's claim. Royal Air Force (RAF) planes, starting from the British base at Sharja, bombed the desert resorts, amongst them the Imam's native town, Sait, and on 15 August 1957 British and Muscat troops conquered Nizwa, the Imam's capital. The open struggle was thereby terminated, and the followers of the Imam from now onwards resorted to guerilla warfare and sabotage which is still going on. Imam Ghalib escaped to Saudi Arabia where he became the head of the Oman State's Revolution Command Council whilst some of his lieutenants, the most prominent amongst them being the Amir Salih ibn 'Isa al-Harithy, went to Cairo. The Imam's followers in exile styled Ghalib ibn 'Ali Omani head of state and representative of the "free people" of Oman. In 1959 the League of Arab States resolved to set aside a budget of 2 million Egyptian pounds to finance the Omani struggle for independence.

That much about the outward story of the disturbances in Oman. The background story is much more intricate and will reveal how deeply the present occurrences are rooted in Islamic history.

Oman was conquered by the Arab Muslims in the course of their drive to expand the realm of Islam as early as 634. It remained, with a brief interruption, under the rule of the Caliphs until the eleventh century, when it wrought its independence from the hands of the Abbasids. At that time it was already the stronghold of the Ibadite sect which questioned the legitimacy of the Abbasid Caliphate. The history of the Ibadiyah is briefly the following :

During the battle of Siffin (Iraq) in 658 between the son-in-law of the Prophet, 'Ali, and the Umayyad pretender for the Caliphate, Mu'awiya, the parties to the conflict agreed to submit their case to arbitration. About 4,000 of 'Ali's followers thereupon left his camp, resenting their leader's acceptance of the principle of arbitration and claiming that arbitration belonged to Allah alone. These "Kharijites" (seceders) developed into a powerful sect—the first in Islam—which was able to embarrass the Caliphs for more than two hundred years and to gain temporarily considerable political importance. Their main dogma was that the Islamic Caliphate was not a hereditary or aristocratic institution, but that the worthiest of the Muslims should be elected Imam by the Believers, "even if he be an Abyssinian slave". Correspondingly, the Imam or Caliph could at any time be deposed if he deviated from the right path of Islam. Muslims leading an un-Islamic life were considered equivalent to apostates and therefore

liable to capital punishment, as Islam has provided it for the crime of apostasy. The Kharijites deemed themselves authorized to mete out this punishment to those whom they styled sinners amongst their co-religionists, and this philosophy led to a comprehensive justification of political assassinations, which under the name of *isti'rād* became a favourite device in Kharijite tactics. About 685 one 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Ibād, of Basra, broke away from the Kharijite sect and became the founder of a more moderate group, the sect of the Ibadites. The Ibadites maintained the Kharijite principles regarding the Caliphate, but rejected the philosophy of *isti'rād*. 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Ibād's successor as head of the Ibadite sect was Djabir ibn Zaid al-Azdi, who had come to Basra from Nizwa in Oman and who was later on banished from Iraq by the Umayyad Caliph and returned to Oman. Under the next leader of the sect, Abu 'Ubaida, Ibadite agitation spread all over the Islamic world and was responsible for rebellions and civil strife in various countries. The Ibadites of Oman elected a member of a pre-Islamic princely family to the office of Imam and under him gained temporary independence from the Caliphs in 755. Ibadites from other parts of the Islamic Empire, above all from Basra, flocked into Oman where the desert town of Nizwa became their political and spiritual centre. But only during the eleventh century the Ibadites of Oman succeeded in achieving complete and lasting independence from the then Abbasid Caliphs.

Whilst in other parts of the Islamic world, excepting a few insignificant places in Zanzibar, Tripolitania and Southern Algeria, the Ibadite sect has later on vanished away, it has persisted in Oman and is today the common creed of about two-thirds of its Bedouin population which is otherwise split up in the *Hināwī* and the *Ghāfiri* faction. Their Imam who, according to Shari'a law, is both the secular and the spiritual leader of the community, is to be elected through a secret balloting procedure by their Sheikhs and laymen of reputation. No constitution other than the relevant commands of the Shari'a is permissible, and any attempt to limit the authority of the elected Imam by stipulation (*shart*) or otherwise would be considered an act of heresy. The Imam can be deposed through the same procedure which applies to his election. If no suitable person for the office of Imam is available, it is better — according to Ibadite tenets — to leave the community without a head for a while than to elect somebody who might prove unworthy. This Imam-less period, for which special provision is made, is termed *kitmān* (reserve, caution), and years of *kitmān* have often enough occurred in the history of Oman. In 1743 the office of Imam became vacant again after it had in practice been the rule for a rather long time that only members of the Ya'rubid family were elected. During the reign of the last Ya'rubid Imam, the Omani coastal strip of al-Batinah had been under Persian occupation until Ahmad ibn Sa'īd of the Al Bu Sa'īd family, allegedly originating from Yemen, had ousted the Persians from the country. The Ibadite Notables thereupon elected him Imam in 1744 and thus made him their spiritual as well as political sovereign. After Ahmad's death his son Sa'īd ibn Ahmad was elected in his stead and held the office of Imam until he died in 1793. His son Sultān ibn Sa'īd was, however, not able to obtain the necessary majority, and as there was no other candidate, the office of Imam was left vacant and a long period of *kitmān* commenced. The reason for the Sultān's failure to secure the support of the Omani Notables in the voting procedure is to be found in the fact that meanwhile the Al Bu Sa'īd family had

transferred their headquarters to the coastal town of Muscat and thereby lost contact with the Bedouins of the interior. At Muscat they had developed increasing interest in commerce and trade and entered into relations with French and British merchants and official representatives in the area, thereby alienating themselves from the people of Oman. The European partners of the Al Bu Sa'ids were either not aware of or did not care for the politico-religious tenets of the Ibadites of the desert and accepted the head of the family, present at Muscat and obviously governing the place, as the Sultan of Muscat and the presumable ruler of Oman, too. In 1798 the British East India Company concluded its first treaty with the Al Bu Sa'id ruler at Muscat whose candidature for the office of Imam had only five years before been defeated. His son and successor Sa'id ibn Sultan Al Bu Sa'id (1806-56), under whom the family members adopted the title of Syed, embarked upon an almost exclusively maritime policy in collaboration with the British, acquired the Island of Zanzibar and, in 1832, even transferred his residence from Muscat to this remote place. During his reign an attempt was made in 1846 by the Ibadite Sheikhs and Notables of Oman to end the period of *kitmān*, but after three polls at al-Rustāq the venture failed as none of the persons elected was prepared to accept the office of Imam. Five years after Sa'id ibn Sultan's death the union between Muscat and Zanzibar broke down under quarrels amongst his successors, leaving different branches of the family in power at Muscat and in Zanzibar. From 1868 to 1871 the only Imam of the Ibadites during the nineteenth century was in office — 'Azzam ibn Qais, a member of the Al Bu Sa'id family, but not the ruling one. His son Sa'ud tried in vain in 1898 to be elected Imam of Oman.

The actual conflict between the Al Bu Sa'id Sultans at Muscat and the Imams of Oman began in 1913, when the Ibadites of the interior finally decided to end the *kitmān* by electing a man out of their own ranks, Salim ibn Rashid al-Kharusi, their temporal and spiritual head. The Al Bu Sa'id Sultan of Muscat at that time was Taimur ibn Faisal (1913-32), whose authority was more or less confined to the capital. By 1915 the new Imam had succeeded in establishing his control over the whole of the country except for Muscat which was under British war-time occupation. In July 1920 Imam Salim was assassinated and Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Khalili elected in his place. On 25 September of the same year the famous but somewhat obscure treaty of Sib was concluded between representatives of the Al Bu Sa'id Sultan and the Imam's military commander Sheikh 'Isa ibn Salih al-Harithy. This treaty is still today interpreted in different ways by the contracting parties, and as the text has allegedly been lost, no objective judgement of the situation created thereby is possible. Whilst the Ibadites claim that under the stipulations of the treaty the Sultan recognized the sovereignty of the Imam over the interior of Oman, confining himself to Muscat and the adjoining coastal strip, the Al Bu Sa'id followers maintain that on the contrary the Imam accepted the Sultan's suzerainty as the secular ruler of the whole of Oman and Muscat. However this may be, by 1950 the authority of the present Sultan, Sa'id ibn Taimur, who succeeded his father in 1932, was virtually confined to Muscat, the Batinah coast and the Province of Dhofar in the South whilst the hinterland was in fact controlled by the Imam with the support of the leading Sheikhs of the Bedouin tribal factions, the Ghāfiri and the Hinawi, Sulaiman ibn Himyar and al-Harithy. This does,

of course, not preclude that some of the unruly tribes of the interior recognized neither the Imam's nor the Sultan's overlordship. The present Imam, under whom the conflict with the Sultan reached its climax, was elected after Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah's death in 1954. The Ibadite Sheikhs and Notables rejected Sultan Sa'id ibn Taimur's candidature and voted for Ghalib ibn 'Ali al-Hina'i, who accepted the office, making his brother Talib his first lieutenant. At the same time the Sultan had transferred his permanent residence from Muscat to Sallalah in the southern province of Dhofar, leaving his uncle Shehab ibn Faisal in charge of the capital as governor. During the first year of Imam Ghalib's rule the disturbances with which we are dealing here took their final shape.

After the escape of the Imam and his leading adherents, which has already been recorded above, and the formation of the Oman State's Revolution Command Council in exile, Imam Ghalib is reported to have negotiated with the British regarding his restoration until 1962. Meanwhile the Revolution Command Council split in 1961, giving birth to a more conservative faction comprising the Imam, his brother Talib, and the Ghāfiri Sheikh Sulaiman ibn Himyar and represented by the Oman Imamat Office in Cairo, and a progressive faction led by Amir al-Harithy. This revolutionary leader was invited in 1959 by Burhan Shahidi, President of China's Islam League, to visit Peking and since then enjoys at least verbal support from China, including messages of solidarity on each "Oman Day", i.e. 18 July, the date when the Imam's revolt commenced in 1957. In September 1963 Amir al-Harithy founded the Oman Liberation Front the declared purposes of which are the elimination of British imperialism from Oman, the continuation of the fight inside the country and the application of diplomatic strategy abroad, with the aim of establishing the Arab Republic of Oman. Of course, this programme which found the support of the United Arab Republic (UAR) and other progressive Arab countries cannot be in harmony with the Imam's expectations as far as the aim is concerned. The establishment of an Omani Republic would be distinctively different from the restoration of the Ibadite Imamate under which even an attempt at introducing a constitution would be considered heresy. Nevertheless, the two factions were reconciled at a meeting at Cairo under the auspices of the Arab League in March 1964.

Outside the Arab World the Soviet Union has styled the disturbances in Oman, "part of the world-wide struggle for national and social liberation" and Soviet writers have repeatedly dealt with what they call "the epos of a national struggle against foreign imperialism". In Great Britain, Labour M.P. Robert Edwards founded the "Committee for the Rights of Oman", especially to investigate the alleged atrocities of British troops in quelling the Ibadite movement. The Security Council of the United Nations refused in 1957 to discuss the problem of Oman, but later on the Secretary-General appointed the Swedish baronet Herbert de Ribbing to conduct an enquiry into the existing situation. On the strength of Ode Ribbing's report, submitted in October 1963, and following the demand made by the UAR and Saudi Arabia and supported by the Soviet bloc for the application of the principle of self-determination to Oman, the General Assembly appointed in December 1963 a commission of enquiry under the Trusteeship Council, consisting of representatives from Afghanistan, Costa Rica, Nepal,

Nigeria, and Senegal, with a Venezuelan representative as chairman. During the conference of the Heads of State and Government of Non-aligned Countries, Cairo, October 1964, several Arab leaders referred to Oman when denouncing British imperialism in South Arabia, and in its final resolutions the Conference recommended that all necessary political, moral, and material assistance be rendered to the liberation movement of Oman, along with Aden and the Protectorate, in its struggle against colonial rule.

This brief analysis of the contemporary disturbances in Oman demonstrates to what extent forces and ideas which originated long ago in Islamic history may be able at least to spark off movements which arouse world-wide concern. To understand the situation, not only non-Ibadite Arabs, but also Soviet journalists, British M.P.s and a Swedish baronet as well as Latin American and African members of a UN commission had at first to learn their lesson about the tenets of an Islamic sect which came into being about 1,300 years ago. This may well serve as an example to show that understanding the Arab world still requires a certain acquaintance today with the field of Islamic Studies. Political scientists, engaged in research on Middle East in countries which assign primary importance to good relations with the Arab world, will therefore hardly be able to dispense with a somewhat more than basic knowledge of Islamic history and Islamic institutions.