CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Persian Gulf is a land-locked sea extending in a south-easterly direction from Iraq to the straits of Hormuz. To its east lies the Gulf of Oman. The two Gulfs constitute a composite geo-political unit, with their histories interwoven into a common pattern. The Gulf of Oman opens into the Arabian Sea. It thus links the Persian Gulf with the seas skirting the western periphery of the Indian sub-continent. The land masses of Persia and Arabia lie to the north and south of the Persian Gulf. They comprise plateaux of considerable elevation separated from the Gulf by low lying coastal plains. The Gulf of Oman is co-extensive on the south with the Sultanate of Oman, which is one of the three Arabian states possessing a distinct history of its own. A prominent feature of Oman is a mountainous complex, the Hajar, which runs parallel to the coastline, receding for a considerable distance to form the crescent shaped plain of the Batinah.

The Gulf has been a channel of trade between


the ancient centres of civilisation and the outer world since the dawn of history, the Euphrates and the Tigris having sheltered some of the earliest cultures known to antiquity. In the second millennium B.C. the Harappans of North India carried on commercial intercourse with the peoples inhabiting the western head of the Gulf. Coming nearer our times, we observe that ancient Mesopotamian states like Babylonia exploited the Gulf for trading with India and Arabia. Their successors, the Achaemenians, however, lacked a sea-faring tradition and they did not develop the potentialities of the Gulf. The subsequent Hellenic movement to the east, manifested in the invasion of Alexander and the explorations of his sea-captains, affords us a fascinating glimpse into the conditions then prevailing in the region. The period following the decay of the Achaemenian Empire witnessed, in succession, the sway over Persia of the Macedonian successors of Alexander, and the Parthians and the Sassanians. However, none of these dynasties build itself up as a sea-power. Persian Gulf trade, therefore, did not flourish in this period. A similar condition of affairs prevailed in the centuries following Christ, the Romans preferring the Red Sea route to India due to rivalry with Persia.


2. Sykes, op. cit., I, Chapters XII, XX-XXIV, passim.
The rise of Islam was a significant event for the Gulf. The Arab conquest of Syria and Persia, and the transference of the epicentre of the Islamic Empire to Damascus and Baghdad, were developments which profoundly affected the region. Mesopotamia thereby became a flourishing centre of economic activity, and the existence of a rich hinterland resuscitated the Gulf as a highway of international trade. It soon came to harbour commercial centres like Basra, a metropolis which finds prominent mention in the accounts of contemporary annalists.1

With the coming into prominence of Hormuz, the Gulf acquired a legendary fame as a centre of international commerce. The city, originally located on the mainland, was founded by the Sasanian monarch, Ar ashir Papakan, in the third century A.D. In the fourteenth century it was threatened by the Mongols, so that its ruler abandoned the old site and built a new port on a neighbouring island. During the next two hundred years Hormuz was regarded as the most important commercial centre in the Gulf. Ibn Batuta visited it in course of his travels but for a graphic account of the city we turn to the journals of Abbé Raynal:

Ormuz afforded a more...agreeable scene than any city in the East. Persons from all parts of the globe exchanged their commodities...with an air of politeness...seldom seen in other places...(The city) was crowded with beautiful women from all parts of Asia?2

1. Hitti op. cit., pp. 139-59; Also see Wilson, op. cit., pp. 100-09.
After the decline of Rome, the eastern trade was monopolised by the Venetians. Their only rival was Genoa, which combined with the Byzantine Empire to cause them to be turned out of Constantinople. However, the Venetians then turned their attention to Egypt in search for a new route, and established a link with India through Alexandria and Rosetta. But their success was not lasting since factors like the growing power of the Ottoman Turks, and the arbitrary fiscal practices of the Mameluke rulers of Egypt, soon wrested from the Italian Republics their hold over the eastern trade.

The discovery of the Cape route to India dealt a death blow to the commercial ascendancy of medieval Italy. This came about through the determination of certain Portuguese statesmen, in the closing decades of the fifteenth century, to “discover (a sea-route to) the lands from where spiceries were procured.” Through their encouragement the Portuguese sea-captain Diaz sailed around the southern-most projection of Africa in 1486. Twelve years later Vasco da Gama went around the Cape of Good Hope to anchor at Calicut on the west coast of India.

2. E. Sanseau, *Indies Adventure*, p. VI.
His voyage ushered in a new era in relations between the East and the West.

Soon after Vasco da Gama's journey to India, the Portuguese Viceroy, Alfonso de Albuquerque, set about the task of founding an empire in the East. Albuquerque's attention was drawn towards the Persian Gulf for two reasons. He believed that dominance over the Gulf and the Red Sea was necessary for a maritime power with possessions in India. Besides, a monopoly over the Indian trade was possible only through acquiring control over the Arab routes to the East through Egypt and Mesopotamia. In 1507 Albuquerque proceeded to the Gulf in a bid to establish Portuguese hegemony there. The naval squadron under his command sailed along the Oman Coast, accepting the allegiance of Kilhat, and subjugating Masqat and Sohar. The Portuguese next headed for Hormuz, their principal objective. After a successful siege of the port Albuquerque returned to India, having forced the ruler of Hormuz to pay tribute to the Portuguese sovereign, and to admit Portuguese goods in his country on a preferential tariff.

1. Danvers, op. cit., I, pp.34, 42-49.

Albuquerque's first expedition to the Gulf was followed by a second incursion in 1515 which made his country the premier naval power in the region. Of course, Portuguese hegemony over the Gulf did not remain unchallenged for long. An attempt to seize the customs of Hormuz in 1522 provoked a revolt the suppression of which taxed Portuguese resources to the utmost. Persia and Turkey too looked askance at the sudden emergence of a new rival in the Gulf. Persia, being powerless on the seas, adopted a conciliatory attitude. But the Ottoman Government refused to view with indifference the intrusion of a European Power into the region. However, in a series of engagements fought in the 1550's Portugal was able to clear the Gulf of the Ottoman Navy.

As the sixteenth century drew to a close, Portuguese supremacy over the Gulf was undermined by a combination of factors. Of these the most important was the annexation of Portugal by Spain, the attention of the conjoint state being primarily directed towards America. Rivalry on the part of other European Powers like England also contributed to the Portuguese decline. For a decade after its inception in 1600 the British East India Company did not show any interest in the Persian Gulf. However, the necessity of finding a market for goods like woollen cloth led to the despatch of a mission to Shah Abbas of Persia.

The Persian Emperor sensed the advantages of establishing relations with another European Power as a counterpoise to Portugal, and granted a firman to the Company embodying extensive commercial privileges. Shortly afterwards, in 1616, the first British merchant ship touched the Gulf port of Jask.

Portuguese supremacy over the Gulf did not long survive the arrival of the English in Persian waters. Having emerged victorious of a conflict with Turkey about this time, Shah Abbas thought it opportune to clear the Gulf of Portuguese influence. In 1602 Bahrein was re-captured by him. An initial attempt to gain possession of Hormuz having failed for lack of naval support, the Shah inveigled the East India Company into an alliance and the two powers combined to wrest Hormuz from the Portuguese in 1622. Thereafter, the village of Gombroon on the mainland was renamed Bander Abbas, and with state encouragement became an important centre for Persian trade.

The eclipse of Portugal initiated a conflict in the Persian Gulf between the English and the Dutch. Shah Abbas' death in 1629 affected the British position in Persia.


adversely. His successor, Shah Shafi, renewed their privileges after the lapse of a considerable interval. In the meanwhile, the Dutch had established themselves and the middle of the seventeenth century found them eclipsing everybody else in the Gulf. So formidable was their position that English trade with Persia almost came to a standstill during the Anglo-Dutch naval wars of the 1660's and the Company for a time shifted its factory at Bander Abbas to Basra. However, this was not to be for long. Towards the close of the seventeenth century England and Holland fought as allies in Europe with the France of Louis XIV. When hostilities were terminated through the Treaty of Ryswick, the Dutch, as junior partners in the alliance, found their interests subordinated to those of the English. Holland was consequently deprived of her influence in the Gulf, which was left a free field for British enterprise.

BRITISH HEGEMONY OVER THE GULF

With the consolidation of the British position in India, the commercial hegemony of the East India Company over the Persian Gulf underwent a gradual change into political supremacy over the region. Given the premises of British rule over India, the exercise of predominance over the Gulf by England in some form or the other was inevitable. The precipitating factor turned out to be

Napoleonic activity in the Middle East. Traditionally England's rival in colonial politics, France had made an abortive attempt to establish herself in the Gulf as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Later, when hostilities broke out between England and revolutionary France, the Paris Government sent emissaries to the Middle East to explore the possibility of an advance towards India. Against such a perspective, Napoleon's arrival in Egypt was interpreted in British circles as a prelude to the invasion of India.

The French threat led Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General of India, to look beyond the frontiers of the Indian Empire for its defence. Wellesley sought to safeguard British interests through extending his well-known policy of subordinate alliances to the states contiguous to India on the West. Alarmed by French intrigues in Persia and Oman, he sent a mission headed by a Persian diplomatist in the service of the Company, one Mirza Mehdi Ali Khan, to Teheran and Masqat with the object of negotiating agreements to secure the exclusion of French influence from the two countries.

Mehdi Ali Khan first visited Masqat. The Imam of Oman, Saiyid Sultan bin Ahmed, readily entered into an alliance with the Indian Government, being cognisant of

the power of England on the seas, and the economic dependence of his state on trade with the western seaboard of India. The Imamate was thereby virtually converted into a British protectorate. At Teheran the envoy confronted a more difficult task. However, exploiting Fath Ali Shah's ambitions over Afghanistan, and presenting before him a lurid picture of the anti-monarchical and anti-religious principles of the French Republic, the envoy induced the Shah into promising armed assistance to the British in the event of a French advance towards the Gulf.

Though Mehdi Ali Khan had succeeded in achieving the objectives set before him, his mission lacked the flamboyance characteristic of Wellesley's statesmanship. In the volatile imagination of this proconsul, the important task of thwarting a possible French invasion of India could not be entrusted to an oriental diplomatist. He consequently sent Captain (later General Sir John) Malcolm to Teheran in order to frustrate the designs of "those villainous but active democrats, the French; (and)


2. Mehdi Ali Khan to Governor of Bombay, dated 2 April, 1799; quoted in Adimiyat, op. cit., p. 43.
to restore ... to its former prosperity a trade which has been in a great degree lost. 1 1 Malcolm was also instructed to visit Masqat in order to remind the Imam, who was again intriguing with the French, of his obligations towards the Government of India.

Following his predecessor's footsteps, Malcolm first met the Imam of Oman, on whom he impressed the danger of a flirtation with the French, and from whom he obtained permission to station a British representative at Masqat. 2 The envoy next proceeded to Tehran. While travelling to the Persian capital Malcolm drafted a memorandum outlining the political and strategic importance of the Gulf which has left an indelible impression on British policy in the region. 3 He pointed out that a British base in the Gulf was both an economic as well as a political necessity. It would serve a three-fold purpose: militarily, it would be tete du pont to Bombay harbour; commercially, it would revive the extinct glories of Hormuz; and politically, it would dominate one of the highways to India.

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Though the instructions issued to Malcolm were silent on the question, he tried to persuade the Shah to lease an island in the Gulf to the Indian authorities. Not surprisingly, his demand excited concern in Teheran, for the Persians had seen before their eyes the growth of British possessions in India. Fath Ali Shah was unequivocally opposed to the concession of any base. Malcolm had, therefore, to be satisfied with two treaties, one political and the other commercial, in which the question of a base found no mention whatsoever. By virtue of the political engagement the contracting parties agreed to concert measures for joint defence in the event of a French move towards the Gulf. The commercial treaty embodied several measures seeking to encourage trade between the two countries. However, by the time negotiations were completed the French threat to India had subsided, so that Malcolm’s first mission had “little effect on the course of events and ... must be regarded as devoid of any substantial gain.”

The Anglo-Persian entente resulting of Malcolm’s mission soon involved the British authorities in the affairs of Central Asia. The annexation of Georgia, a territory over which the Persian Emperor exercised a

1. For texts of the Treaties see Kirpal, op. cit., Appendix I.
nebulous suzerainty, by St. Petersburg in 1800 precipitated an antagonism between Russia and Persia which soon became the principal theme of Central Asian politics. So far as Persia was concerned, the alliance with the British Government was primarily an instrument to be used against Russia. However, when Teheran sought assistance in its conflict with its northern neighbour, the British refused to look upon the engagement negotiated by Malcolm as a comprehensive alliance, thus divesting it of all significance in Persian eyes.  

England's refusal to assist Persia against Russia was consequential of a renewed French drive to incorporate the country within her sphere of influence. Despairing of solving the northern problem through British support, Fath Ali Shah turned to the French for assistance. Napoleon, needless to say, was only too willing to extend protection to a country which could serve as a base for operations against India. In 1807 a treaty was signed between the two countries. Thereby, France undertook to secure the restoration of Georgia to Teheran, and to furnish military aid in the event of a Perso-Russian

conflict. In return the Shah promised to rid Persia of British agents, and to assist in operations against India. The treaty of 1807 was followed by a French military mission to Persia sent with instructions to strengthen the "triple alliance between France, the Porte and Persia (in order) to open up a road to India...."

Intelligence of the Franco-Persian rapprochement caused consternation in India. Lord Minto, Wellesley's successor as Governor-General, sent Malcolm to Persia for a second time with instructions to prevent the French from occupying a position in the Persian Gulf. French influence at Teheran had become so predominant that when the envoy landed at Bushire, Fath Ali Shah gave expression to his hostility towards the British Government by asking him to negotiate with the subordinate court of the Prince-Governor of Fars at Shiraz. Offended by the insult offered to the British authority, Malcolm immediately returned to Calcutta and urged Minto to send an expedition to the Gulf with the object of establishing a base there. As he pointed out to the Governor-General,

1. See "Napoleon's Instructions to the Chief of the French Mission to Persia" dated 10 May, 1807; vide Hurewitz, op. cit., I, pp. 78-81.


3. Report from General Malcolm to Lord Minto; See J.A. Saldanha, Precis of Correspondence Regarding the Affairs of the Persian Gulf, p. 16.
It would be foolish to rely upon the Persians in the event of a European invasion of India "unless we possessed the immediate power of punishing their ... treachery". A base in the Gulf would place such a lever in the Government's hands, and it would no longer be at the mercy of "the fluctuating policy of unsteady, impotent and faithless courts ....".

While Malcolm was leading the Government of India towards a rupture with Teheran, the Imperial Government sent a separate mission under Sir Harford Jones to drive a wedge between Persia and France. Sir Harford's task had been rendered difficult through the hardening of the Persian attitude as a consequence of the exchanges between Malcolm and the Teheran court. However, the Tilsit agreement between Napoleon and Czar Alexander came at an extremely opportune moment for the Imperial envoy. Tilsit blunted the edge of the Franco-Persian alliance, since for Teheran this engagement had validity only as an anti-Russian understanding. Skilfully exploiting the situation arising of the Tilsit peace, Jones negotiated a treaty, whereby the Shah denounced

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. See H. Jones Brydges, An Account of the Transactions of His Majesty's Mission to the Court of Persia in the years 1807-1811, (London 1834), 2 Vols. Sir Harford's Mission to Teheran, and the duel he fought with Minto and Malcolm over the policy to be pursued towards Persia, comprise one of the most important chapters in the History of British diplomacy vis-a-vis Persia.
all previous engagements and undertook to prevent the passage of European armies to India, in return for a promise of financial and military assistance in the event of the invasion of Persia by a European Power. The preliminary engagement negotiated by Jones in 1809 formed the basis of the Definitive Treaty of 1814 between England and Persia.

British activity in Persia and the adjoining seas during the first decade of the nineteenth century constituted a riposte to French designs on India. However, the downfall of Napoleon opened a new chapter in Asian politics; for after his eclipse Russia became England's principal rival in Asia. So far as Persia was concerned, the northern problem had become a live issue as early as 1800, with the annexation of Georgia by St. Petersburg. The latter event called into existence a state of uneasy peace between the two countries, and the opportunistic somersaults executed by Persian diplomacy in the succeeding decade assume comprehensibility as manoeuvres to gain a European ally in the conflict with Russia. In 1811 the dormant antagonism between the two countries assumed an open form and resulted in the defeat of Taheran in the hostilities which ensued. Peace was arranged between the belligerents through the Treaty of Gulistan (1813), which
converted the Caspian into a Russian lake and legalised the seizure of Georgia.

The Treaty of Gulistan was a temporary truce between Russia and Persia and the alliance which Teheran contracted with England in the succeeding year was, in Persian eyes, solely directed against St. Petersburg. For that matter, certain English publicists like Reaylinson contend that the Anglo-Persian engagement of 1814 meant for Great Britain, too, the adoption of an anti-Russian orientation in Asia. However, events were soon to demonstrate that England had not committed herself to support Persia to the extent it was believed at Teheran.

Since the peace patched up at Gulistan had left neither side satisfied, Russo-Persian tension continued thereafter. The irredentist spirit in Persia did not die out in the decade which followed. Russia's appetite too was not appeased, despite substantial territorial gains. The result was the renewal of hostilities between the two countries in 1826, in course of which Persia again

1. Sykes, op. cit., II, Chapter LXXVI, passim; Aitchison, op. cit., XIII, Appendix V, pp. LV-XVII.

2. See B. Prasad, The Foundations of India's Foreign Policy, (1860-1882), (Calcutta 1925), 1, p. 4; Article 8 of the Definite Treaty reads:

"Should any European Power be engaged in war with Persia when at peace with England, His Britannic Majesty engages to use his best endeavours to bring Persia and such European Power to a friendly understanding. If, and however, His Majesty's cordial interference should fail of success, England shall still, if required ... send a force from India, or in lieu thereof, pay an annual subsidy ...."
suffered a series of reverses. Peace was restored by
the Treaty of Turkmanchay (1828), whereby Russia acquired
further territory, and imposed a heavy indemnity on the
defeated country. Even more significant were the
commercial privileges which Persia was forced to concede,
privileges which conferred extra-territorial rights on
Russian subjects, and set the pattern for the capitulatory
regime for Europeans in Persia. Turkmanchay "marked
the beginning of a new era, since Persia from that time
cessoed to be the entirely independent power that had
been courted by France and England"¹.

The disastrous conflicts with Russia impressed
upon Persia the dangers of her position as between
England and Russia. When in 1826 Teheran applied to the
Government of India for assistance, the request was
turned down on the plea that Persia had waged an
aggressive war². The British now found the Definitive
Treaty of 1814 an embarrassing commitment, and exploited
Persia's financial difficulties to negotiate an amendment
of its key clauses. Whereupon the Persians drew the
conclusion that England would no longer play an active
role in Central Asia. However, when under Russian
inspiration, Teheran tried to recover Herat from its
Afghan ruler, in order to make good the losses it had

suffered in the Caspian region, the British Government intervened decisively, because if Persia had been successful, Russian influence would have penetrated to the south of the Hindu Kush, and presented a standing threat to the Indian sub-continent. The British campaigns of 1838 and 1856-57 in the Gulf thus restored the equilibrium in Persia, and reminded Tehran of the avenues of pressure to which England could take recourse for the defence of her interests.

THE OMAN STATES AND THE MARITIME PROTECTORATE OVER THE GULF

The pursuit of an active diplomacy in Persia was followed by events which led to the establishment of a British sphere of influence over the principalities on the southern coast of the Gulf. British interference in the affairs of the Arabian littoral was a direct consequence of the rise of the Wahhabi theocracy in Central Arabia. Wahhabism was a politico-religious movement which originated with the teachings of one Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab, who was born in A.D. 1703. It was essentially a revivalist creed, and sought to rid Islam of the corrupting influences which had crept into it over the course of time. Starting his career

as a persecuted reformer, Abdul Wahab won over to his creed in 1745 the chief of Dariya, Mohammed bin Saud. The alliance between the prince and the reformer was profound in its implications for Arabia. Within half a century of its consummation the Al Saud had established their hegemony over the entire peninsula; and under their aegis the maritime tribes of east Arabia began to prey on British merchant shipping in the Gulf.¹

When the attention of the Government of India was first drawn towards the lawlessness prevailing in the Gulf, an attempt was made to remedy the situation through the negotiation of an engagement with the Joasmees, the principal Arab tribe of the region, whereby they undertook not to prey upon ships flying the British flag.² The engagement of 1806 with the Joasmees did not lead to concrete results, and in 1809 the Government of Bombay sent a military expedition under Colonel L. Smith to destroy the pirate strongholds on the Oman Coast.³ However, the Indian authorities

1. H.S.J. Philby, Saudi Arabia, (London 1955), Chapter I to III, passim; Also see Jones-Brydges, op. cit., II, pp. 7-10.


were anxious to avoid being involved in a sanguinary conflict with the Wahhabis. Colonel Smith was, therefore, instructed to treat the maritime principalities as "independent States"; and to assure the Wahhabi Imam that the Government of India wanted to remain "on terms of friendship with him, and ... desired only to provide for the security of the general commerce of the seas ...." The circumspection of the Indian authorities defeated the expedition of its purpose. The British Commander was unable to make any lasting impression on the Jumeiies for fear of coming into contact with the Wahhabis. The result was that piracy flourished in the Gulf on an undiminished scale soon after the return of the Smith expedition to India.

With the first two attempts proving abortive, in 1820 the Bombay Government despatched another expedition under General Sir William Grant-Ker to put an end to the power of the tribes of the Oman Coast. The General was instructed to destroy the pirate nest of Ras-ul-Kuymah and to inflict "the most exemplary punishment" on the tribes guilty of piratical practices. Such a consumma-
tion, it was hoped, would free Indian commerce of "the

1. See Instructions issued by the Bombay Government to Col. L. Smith, vide Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf, pp. 45-48.

2. Sketch of the Wahhabi Kingdom of Najd by J.W.S. Wyllie, Under-Secretary, Foreign Department, GOI dated 21 February, 1866; F.D.F.F. No.74, March 1866.
further ravages of those barbarians, who...have so long contrived to practice... (piracy) with so much success." The expedition of 1820 did much more than secure the military objectives set before it. Executing a shrewd stroke of policy, General Kier persuaded the chiefs of Oman to subscribe to a General Treaty of Peace which conferred on the British Government the right to police the waters of the Gulf. This engagement stands as a conspicuous landmark in the history of British policy in the region. In de jure terms it only secured for the Indian authorities a right to act against piracy. But in practice the Government of India applied it to all political relations in the area. It thus became the dominant power in the Gulf.

The scope of the General Treaty was extended in the decades following the Kier expedition. In 1835 the British Resident introduced an idea which soon became the leitmotif of British policy in the Gulf. Premising his approach on the argument that the coastal tribes stood to gain if they agreed to suspend

1. Instructions issued by the Bombay Government to General Kier dated 27 October, 1819; Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf, pp. 94-97.
2. See General Kier to Bombay Government dated 6 January, and 11 April, 1820; Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf. For texts of the Treaties see Aitchison, op. cit., XI, pp. 245-49.
hostilities during the pearl-diving season, he induced the Arab chiefs to sign an engagement banning naval warfare, initially for a period of six months. The importance of this engagement lay in that its signatories agreed to British arbitration in any dispute as might arise between them. The extension of the truce of 1835 into a permanent arrangement was inevitable. The engagement was renewed annually till 1843, when it was extended for a period of ten years. Finally, in 1853, came the Treaty of Peace in Perpetuity, which stipulated a "complete cessation of hostilities at sea" by declaring that "perfect maritime truce shall endure between ourselves ... for evermore". The signatories of the treaty were henceforth referred to as the Trucial Chiefs.

Involvement on the part of the British in the affairs of the Trucial Principalities was accompanied by a growing intimacy with the Imamate of Masqat, the most important state in eastern Arabia. Masqat, as a matter of fact, came to occupy a position in British policy vis-a-vis the Gulf comparable to that held by Afghanistan in respect of Central Asia. Immediately before the

1. Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf, pp. 192-94.
2. Treaty of Peace In Perpetuity between the East India Company and the Chiefs of the Arab Coast dated 24 August, 1853; Aitchison, op. cit., XI, pp. 252-63. The signatories were the chiefs of Im-ul-Keiwalyn, Debay, Beniyas and the Joaamees.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
arrival of the English in the Gulf, the Portuguese had ruled over the littoral districts of Oman, with the local Imams exercising a precarious authority over the areas towards the interior from their seat at Restaq. However, as Portuguese influence declined, the Al Yaareby rulers of Oman reconquered one coastal stronghold after another, and by 1651 the province had become free of Portuguese rule. When a civil war in 1737 led a Yaareby Imam to ask for Persian assistance, he was swept out of power by one Saiyid Ahmed bin Said, who soon established his rule on a firm basis, and with whose successor, Saiyid Sultan bin Ahmed, Mehdi Ali Khan negotiated the alliance of 1798.¹

No sooner did Oman come under British aegis that its integrity was threatened by the Wahhabis, whose ambitions in respect of the region opened a question which was to plague British statesmanship for the better part of the nineteenth century. In 1800 a Wahhabi force made its appearance on the Oman border and after defeating Sultan bin Ahmed imposed a humiliating peace on him. Three years later the Wahhabi general El Hariq again invaded Oman and inflicted a series of reverses on its ruler. It is probable that only the assassination of the

Wahhabi Imam Abdul Aziz, an occurrence which compelled El Hariq to proceed to Dariya, saved the state from complete annihilation.

Sultan bin Ahmed's death in 1804 enabled the Wahhabis, who had in the meanwhile chosen Saud bin Abdul Aziz as their leader, to re-establish their hegemony over Oman. Sultan had left behind two sons, Salim and Said, to rule over the country. However, after his death effective power was exercised by a pro-Wahhabi faction headed by one Badar bin Saif, a scion of the ruling family. Sultan's sons asked the Indian authorities for assistance. But the Government of India refused to interfere in the war of succession, being determined to maintain with whomsoever emerged triumphant "the same relations of amity which subsisted with the former Government (of Sultan bin Ahmed) ..." In spite of the odds against him, Said bin Sultan eliminated his opponent through an assassination and seized for himself the reins of power.

While the elimination of Badar left Said supreme in Oman, it was not to be expected that the Wahhabis would

2. Lord Wellesley to Governor of Bombay dated 10 January, 1805: Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf, pp. 33-34.
tarnely acquiesce in the eclipse of their protege. The assistance which Said extended to the British expedition of 1809 against the Joasmees led to a further deterioration in relations between Masqat and the Wahhabi ruler. In 1811 the Wahhabis invaded Oman for a third time and defeated the Masqat ruler. Said applied to Bombay for assistance, but he was blandly told by the Indian authorities, whose interest in the Gulf had cooled off with the disappearance of the French threat, that the treaty of 1798 did not impose "any obligation on either of the contracting parties to co-operate in the wars of the other".¹ The British refusal placed Oman in a precarious position. However, the growing political power and 'spiritual pretensions' of the Wahhabis had aroused concern at Constantinople, and the Turkish Sultan instructed the Khedive of Egypt, Mohammed Ali Pasha, to crush them. The Egyptian Pasha struck a fatal blow at the Wahhabi Empire through a series of expeditions organised during the years 1812-18.² The eclipse of the Wahhabis enabled Said to consolidate his position in Oman.

¹. Bombay Government to the Agent to the Imam of Masqat dated 2 June, 1814; Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf, pp. 53-54.

The assumption by the British of an active role
vis-a-vis Masqat followed Mohammed Ali's invasion of
Arabia in 1833, which the Imperial Government opposed
in pursuance of its policy of supporting Ottoman
integrity against the ambitions of the Egyptian
Khedive. On learning of the Pasha's intentions,
Palmerston warned him to abandon all ideas of "establishing
himself in the Persian Gulf, because ... such a
scheme on his part could not be viewed with in-
difference by the British Government". After the
Egyptian withdrawal, the Government of India more than
once assisted Said in overcoming threats to the integrity
of Oman. Thus in 1845 and 1852 the Wahhabis were told
that Calcutta would not tolerate "aggression on the
territories of our ancient ally". Of course, British
intervention did not go beyond mediating an agreement
between Masqat and Riyadh whereby the security of Oman
was ensured in return for the payment of a tribute to
the Wahhabis.

The prolonged struggle with the Wahhabis convinced

1. C. Webster, Foreign Policy of Lord Palmerston,
(1830-41), (London 1951), I, p. 228.

2. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to H.M's
Consul-General, Cairo, dated 29 November, 1833, vide
Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf,
pp. 201-02.

3. Secretary, Foreign Department, GGI to Secretary,
Bombay Government dated 6 May, 1845; vide Correspondence
Regarding Affairs of the Persian Gulf, p. 278.
Said of the futility of attempting any expansion of his power in the Arabian peninsula. He consequently directed his attention to East Africa, over the coast of which the rulers of Oman had exercised influence in the past. Of the former African possessions Zanzibar alone remained under Arab rule when Said came into power. But starting from this base he was able to establish his sway over the coastline from Mogadishu to Cape Delgado, while towards the interior his influence stretched as far west as the great lakes. Said thus laid the foundation of an empire which dominated the maritime trade route between the countries of Asia and the West prior to the opening of the Suez Canal.

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