

Defense Sales and British Security Assistance to Oman, 1975–81

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Abstract: This article examines the evolving security relationship between Britain and Oman from the final stages of the Dhofar conflict until the early 1980s. This period is significant because it saw the continuation of British military assistance in the absence of a compelling security threat. The article illustrates the tensions that emerged between the two states as the sultan of Oman attempted to increase his control over defense policy, while the British struggled to balance the economic benefits of continued arms sales to Oman with the costs and risks of ongoing military support to an increasingly assertive leader. By resolving these tensions, however, the two states effectively laid the foundation for a relationship that remains strong today.

Keywords: Britain, Oman, Dhofar, security assistance

In November 2018, British defence secretary Gavin Williamson announced the establishment of a joint training base in Oman. Following military exercises involving 5,500 British and more than 70,000 Omani personnel, the announcement heralded the longevity and stability of military ties between the two states. As Williamson explained: “Our relationship with Oman is built on centuries of cooperation and we are cementing that long into the future with the development of our new joint base.”¹ But Anglo-Omani ties were not al-

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ways so robust. As part of its withdrawal from “East of Suez” in 1971, Britain abandoned its military bases in the Middle East and rescinded its security guarantees to local rulers in the Gulf of Oman. The growth of a Communist-backed insurgency in the Dhofar region forced the British to make an exception in Oman. Following the defeat of the insurgents in late 1975, however, the rationale for a continued military presence in Oman diminished considerably, particularly given ongoing British military commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in Northern Ireland, as well as significant cuts to defense spending. Yet, British forces never left Oman entirely. Hundreds of personnel seconded from the British Army, the Royal Navy, and the Royal Air Force remained in Oman into the 1980s. British officers commanded the Sultan of Oman’s Land Forces (SOLF), the Sultan of Oman’s Navy (SON), and the Sultan of Oman’s Air Force (SOAF) throughout the 1980s, and even today a British major general serves as an advisor to the armed forces and their commander in chief, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said.

A growing body of scholarship examines British relations with Oman in the 1970s. Much of it, however, focuses on the Dhofar conflict, often in an attempt to explain the reasons for the defeat of the insurgents.² Those studies that examine Anglo-Omani relations more broadly also tend to treat the end of the Dhofar insurgency as the culmination of British assistance to Oman.³ To understand the persistence of Anglo-Omani military ties for decades afterward, however, it is essential to examine the relationship between the two states both during the Dhofar conflict and in its aftermath. This article examines the evolving Anglo-Omani security relationship from the final stages of the Dhofar War through the early 1980s. This period is significant not only because it saw the SOLF acquire and develop the capability to operate advanced weapons, such as naval vessels and fighter aircraft, but also because it saw a shift in the relative economic circumstances of the two states. While Britain faced high inflation and labor unrest, Oman enjoyed an influx of oil wealth. This emboldened the young sultan, encouraging him to strengthen his military capabilities and assert his own control over them. At the same time, these circumstances encouraged the British to consider the economic benefits alongside the military and political costs of their relationship with the sultan.

A British Puppet?:

Sultan Qaboos’s Relations with Britain, 1970–75

Sultan Qaboos would not have become ruler of Oman in July 1970 without British support. Frustrated with the inability of his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, to contain the Communist-backed insurgency in Dhofar, British officers in Oman supported a coup that replaced Sultan Said with his son.⁴ Educated in England and trained at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the

29-year-old Qaboos proved more amenable than his father to British advice. Supported by hundreds of British military personnel, including a Special Air Services (SAS) team, Qaboos initiated a multipronged campaign that included military operations, civil development projects, and negotiations with tribal leaders in Dhofar. Loan service personnel (LSP) seconded from the British armed forces directed the conduct of the war in Dhofar. The commander of the Omani Army was a British major general who held the title of commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces (CSAF). In this position, he had authority over the commanders of the navy and air force, who were also senior British officers. All served the sultan while they were in Oman, but they were ultimately loyal to Britain. Oman also received assistance from Jordan, India, Pakistan, and particularly Iran, but within the SOLE, most positions requiring technical expertise and virtually all command positions were held by British LSP.⁵

British support notwithstanding, Qaboos was no puppet. Even before he became sultan, he expressed strong opinions that were not always consistent with British views. According to John Townshend, who later served as an economic advisor to the sultan, Qaboos was openly critical of his father during the final years of Said's rule, "so much that a message had to be sent to him discreetly informing him that not all expatriates shared his views about his father."⁶ After coming to power, Qaboos moved quickly to assert his independence from the British. In August 1970, senior British military officers, diplomats, and business leaders formed an "interim advisory council" to oversee the transition of power from father to son. They also invited Qaboos's uncle, Sayyid Assad bin Tariq al-Said, to return from exile in West Germany and become the first prime minister of Oman.⁷ Qaboos, however, was unwilling to share power with Tariq, an advocate of constitutional monarchy. By the end of 1971, Qaboos had pressured his uncle into resigning.⁸

The sultan also assembled an alternative team of advisors largely independent of British influence. A key figure in this coterie was Timothy W. Landon, a British intelligence officer who became the sultan's equerry, or aide-de-camp. Landon, who had attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst with Qaboos, resigned from the British Army at the rank of captain following the coup in 1970, and actively distanced himself from British authorities afterward. According to a British profile written later in the 1970s: "Landon had fully identified himself with Oman. His attitude towards Britain is coloured by the fact that he wishes to prove to the Omanis that he is one of them, and he is suspicious of possible British attempts to manipulate affairs in the Sultanate."⁹ Even if Landon had sought British advice, senior leaders dismissed his value as an intermediary. In November 1971, Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home directed the British ambassador to Oman, Donald Hawley, to avoid communicating significant information through Landon, dismissing him as "inexpe-

rienced in political and diplomatic matters (and probably does not want to get involved) and your advice might get innocently distorted in transmission.”¹⁰ As a result, Qaboos and Landon were able to recruit a team of advisors with little, if any, British input. This team included American and Middle Eastern business people as well as influential political figures such as Robert B. Anderson, a former secretary of the U.S. Department of the Treasury and assistant secretary of defense under President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The Expansion of the Sultan’s Armed Forces

These advisors played an important role in helping the sultan establish relations with regional leaders and organizations such as the Arab League.¹¹ They also provided advice regarding defense procurement that was not always consistent with the views of British commanders in Oman or the British Ministry of Defence (MOD). In 1973, with Omani revenues increasing significantly as a result of rising global oil prices, the sultan had declared his interest in purchasing an integrated air defense system (IADS) consisting of radar, surface-to-air missile systems, and at least a dozen fighter aircraft. At his request, a team from the MOD conducted a study “to define an air defence system for Oman.” With a potential cost of £70 million, the project would clearly benefit the ailing British defense industry. Nonetheless, the MOD study concluded that the threat posed to Oman by the air force of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen—its principal enemy at the time—did not justify the cost of the system. Moreover, the aircraft that Oman proposed to buy, the Anglo-French SEPECAT Jaguar, was better suited for air-to-ground attack than air defense missions. Possession of such a capability, British defense officials concluded, might in fact embolden the sultan, encouraging him to engage in offensive operations against his neighbor.¹² Furthermore, the British Army and Royal Air Force expressed concern that the necessity of training Omanis in the operation and maintenance of the system would require the deployment of hundreds of additional British military personnel to Oman. The sale of Rapiers missile systems to Oman would also delay the production of similar equipment already ordered by the MOD to fulfill Britain’s commitment to NATO. Such a delay, the British feared, “must inevitably affect adversely our standing in the alliance.”¹³

The sultan, however, was not content simply to accept British advice. Presented with a memorandum recommending against the acquisition of an air defense system, Qaboos began soliciting offers from France and the United States.¹⁴ The sultan’s willingness to explore other options raised British concerns about losing influence in Oman. A 1974 MOD report speculated that “an influx of Frenchmen (or Pakistanis) on the scale that might be required for a French air defense system could reduce British influence in SAF [sultan’s armed forces] and might in the worst case lead to CSAF’s own position being

undermined.”¹⁵ This possibility added to existing British fears of losing credibility with Oman and its neighbors. In June 1974, the minister of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs, David Ennals, contended in a letter to his MOD counterpart, William Rogers, that if Britain failed to offer an IADS to Qaboos, “the Sultan and his allies, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, would undoubtedly think that we were holding out on Oman, reviving the suspicions that our interest really lies in prolonging the war.” Conversely, he also suggested that Iran in particular might interpret British reluctance to provide the equipment as a sign that it was preparing to withdraw from Oman, leaving the shah’s regime with full responsibility for the war in Dhofar.¹⁶

Economic factors also favored the sale. While the primary purpose of Britain’s intervention in the Dhofar conflict was to maintain the stability of the gulf region, the British recognized that Oman and its neighbors constituted a potentially lucrative market for defense sales. As the British defense attaché in the Oman capital of Muscat observed in late 1972: “While in world market terms sales to Oman may be relatively small, SAF is going to expand, the Iranians and Jordanians are here, listening to users’ quoted opinions which filter on to other Gulf states and further [*sic*] afield still.” Thus, he continued, “it is in our interests to redouble our sales efforts despite the small orders, when so many are watching and listening from neighboring countries.”¹⁷ The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo and the ensuing increase in global oil prices in late 1973 reinforced arguments in favor of arms sales to the Middle East. Even the MOD, which opposed the diversion of British resources away from its NATO commitments, recognized in 1974 that

the inevitable increase in the UK [United Kingdom] balance of payments deficit caused by higher oil prices makes it all the more urgent that exports should be increased and oil producing countries constitute an obvious market. It is therefore, in strictly commercial terms, in our interests to secure as much of the arms business in Oman as is within our capability against increasing activity by the French and possibly the US.¹⁸

Thus, in the spring of 1974, British officials abandoned their reservations of the previous year and convinced the sultan to purchase a package of British radar, 12 Anglo-French-made SEPECAT Jaguar fighter aircraft, along with the British Rapier antiaircraft missile system.¹⁹

Installing the air defense system was a significant undertaking that lasted until 1979. The British Ministry of Defence attempted to minimize its commitment of personnel to these tasks, encouraging the companies involved to rely on contractors. These were often former Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel working for Airwork Services Limited, a British company that had long provided air-

craft maintenance and support services to the RAF and partner air forces in the Middle East. Contractors were largely responsible for installing the new system. Among British expatriates in Oman, the IADS was jokingly referred to as an acronym for “it’s all double shifts.”²⁰ The number of Airwork personnel in Oman almost doubled, from 260 in November 1974 to “nearly 500” one year later.²¹

The expansion of the Omani Air Force that accompanied the acquisition of the new system also required the continued commitment of RAF personnel and resources. Omanis underwent training at a series of newly established schools that provided instruction in most of the functions of a modern air force. These schools included a technical training institute, an aircrew initial training school, and a flight training school.²² Prior to attending one of these schools, SOAF officer candidates were sent to the UK, where they completed an officer training course at the RAF officer cadet training unit. Prospective pilots remained in the UK where they received aviation medicine training as well as initial flight training on piston-engine aircraft, before returning to the flight training school in Oman where they were trained to fly fighter or transport aircraft.²³ Air Vice Marshal Erik Bennett, the British commander of the SOAF, insisted on LSP rather than contract officers in the training role, partly because they usually had more recent experience than retired RAF personnel, but also because of what he viewed as their superior motivation. Bennett described the flight training school as “the cornerstone of the Omanization policy and its graduates must receive the best training available. This can only be provided by RAF personnel with a career before them; the example which the instructors set is at least as important as the tuition they give.”²⁴ Thus, the cadre of LSP in Oman remained relatively stable throughout the second half of the 1970s, with approximately 30 RAF officers serving in senior command and staff positions, flying aircraft, and training Omani officers.

Royal Navy personnel also supported the expansion of the Sultan of Oman’s Navy. As late as 1977, the SON consisted of three fast patrol boats, two old Dutch minesweepers, two auxiliary vessels, and a royal yacht. But the acquisition of four more fast patrol boats along with a landing craft effectively doubled its size by 1979.²⁵ As was the case in the air force, expansion on this scale required extensive foreign assistance. While the sultan aimed to “Omanize” all three services, training Omanis to fill the officer corps of the army, air force, and navy, few had the necessary education and technical skills to become officers. Given that the country’s secondary education system had only been developed in the 1970s, this is not surprising. Nevertheless, it meant that the navy faced severe officer shortages as it expanded. Oman was not solely dependent on the British for training, as the SON was able to send cadets to the Pakistani naval academy. Most of these cadets, however, were apparently forced to withdraw due to inadequate English skills.²⁶ Thus, even in 1979, the British ambassador

to Oman, James Treadwell, reported that the officer designated to be the first Omani commander of the SON (CSON) “is still only a Sub Lt [lieutenant] putting in his service with the Royal Navy and having trouble with his maths.”²⁷

In the context of cuts to the British defense budget, supporting the expansion of the navy constituted a burden. But the Royal Navy recognized that providing personnel to train Omanis and command the sultan’s expanding fleet directly benefited the British defense industry. As Commodore Peter M. Stanford explained in a 1979 report: “The Navy Department attaches considerable importance to maintaining the Navy’s high reputation in Oman, not least in the context of defence sales, in which field in Oman it enjoys a virtual monopoly. CSON’s request for additional LSP is therefore viewed sympathetically.”²⁸ The number of British naval officers in Oman was always smaller than the contingent of RAF officers supporting SOAF. In early 1980, for example, there were only 9 LSP serving in the SON compared to 29 in the SOAF.²⁹ Given the lack of qualified Omanis, however, the British estimated that expatriate officers would be required “well into the 1990s.” It proved difficult to find former Royal Navy officers to work as contractors. In 1980, the British CSON, Commodore Harry Mucklow, complained that “in the absence of more attractive terms of service we are still losing well-qualified men (who can find better terms elsewhere) and there is a minimal response to our advertisements for the categories of officer whose qualifications and experience we need.” Mucklow therefore requested permission “to increase the proportion of UK LSP to the extent that becomes necessary to ensure SON’s level of effectiveness.”³⁰

Sultan Qaboos, the British, and Control of the Armed Forces, 1976–81

British officers were not required simply for their technical knowledge or tactical experience. Given its expansion during the 1970s, the Sultan’s Armed Forces also required senior leaders experienced in financial management and strategic-level decision making. The war in Dhofar had already led to a significant expansion of the armed forces. From 1971 to 1975, the force grew in size from 6,000 to 17,000 personnel, with costs for training, base construction, and supplies rising accordingly. The decision to purchase a state-of-the-art air defense system and several new naval vessels meant that Omani defense spending continued to increase even as the war was subsiding. Thus, the defense budget rose from \$144 million (U.S.) in 1971 to \$645 million, more than 40 percent of Oman’s gross national product, in 1975. As the armed forces acquired components of the air defense system in 1976, the defense budget would rise even further, to nearly \$753 million.³¹

While Oman’s expanding defense budget resulted in part from the sultan’s decision to purchase the air defense system, Qaboos also attributed it to un-

checked spending by the British officers commanding his armed forces. The sultan was at least partly correct. Although Qaboos served as commander in chief of the armed forces, the CSAF and the service commanders acted more as advisors than subordinates. One observer described the relationship between the young Qaboos and Major General Timothy M. Creasey, the CSAF during 1972–75, as “more Father and Son than General and Ruler.”³² Individuals such as Timothy Landon may have provided an alternative source of advice, but they had relatively little influence over the senior British officers who ultimately served the government. There is no evidence to suggest that these officers made financial decisions carelessly. Nonetheless, their overriding concern up to late 1975 was to win the war in Dhofar. In addition to the purchase of ammunition and supplies necessary to sustain ongoing military operations, this required the expansion of the armed forces and the purchase of expensive hardware, including naval vessels, transport aircraft, and helicopters.

As the conflict drew to a close, therefore, the sultan moved to establish greater control over military spending by restructuring the armed forces. In 1976, he created a new position of director general of the Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Defense, reporting directly to the sultan. The following year, Qab-bos abolished the position of CSAF and placed the three armed services—the Sultan of Oman’s Land Force, the Sultan of Oman’s Navy, and the Sultan of Oman’s Air Force—under the control of a joint staff.³³ The director general, the chairman of the joint staff, and most employees at the Ministry of Defense were British; but rather than loan service personnel seconded from the British armed forces, they were contractors who served the sultan directly. Under this new structure, the British commanders of the separate services reported to the sultan through the director general, who controlled all expenditures. This enabled Qaboos to limit military spending. In 1977, the defense budget decreased to \$661 million, approximately 31.5 percent of Oman’s gross national product. By 1979, it had diminished to \$555 million, or 23 percent of gross national product.³⁴ According to a British civilian employed in the Ministry of Defense in the late 1970s, the arrival of the director general “marked a period when building plans submitted by military units and services were constantly rejected or sent back to the originators for modification as a recognized delaying tactic.”³⁵

Senior British officers, however, resented the new arrangement, and not just because it reined in their spending. The director general, a retired British foreign service officer named Robert Browning, did not have military experience, a financial management background, or any significant knowledge of Oman.³⁶ Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to exercise his authority, blocking expenditures while lecturing military officers and diplomats alike about their lack of respect for the sultan and his Omani advisors. As one diplomat commented: “There is something bizarre in being told, by a former member of the Foreign

Service who has been in the Arab world scarcely 3 weeks that the British have been insensitive and are unpopular but all that is going to change.”³⁷ The other British contractors at the Ministry of Defense had more military experience than Browning, but the service commanders resented taking direction from ex-military personnel who were “well-passed [*sic*] retirement age, and judged not to be in the mainstream of current British or any other modern military doctrine.”³⁸ Even the chairman of the joint staff, retired Brigadier General Peter T. Thwaites, who had commanded the Muscat Regiment as a serving British officer until 1971, earned little respect. A 1978 report by the British defense attaché in Muscat noted that “Thwaites is attempting to establish himself as a pseudo CDS [chief of the defense staff], but does not have the ability of character to do so.”³⁹ Thus, while restructuring the military chain of command helped limit defense spending, it brought to the fore tensions between British loan service personnel and contractors, each of whom served different masters.

Even before the reorganization of the armed forces into separate services, a February 1977 report referred to “in-fighting” between British advisors to the sultan, with the director general and the chairman of the joint staff on one side and the ambassador and the British service commanders on the other.⁴⁰ The issues at stake went well beyond the defense budget. In late 1977, the chairman of the joint staff developed a plan to use military force to occupy disputed territory claimed by both Oman and the neighboring United Arab Emirates (UAE). Given that British loan service officers also served in the UAE, the involvement of British personnel in the Omani operation had potentially embarrassing implications for the United Kingdom.⁴¹ Ultimately, the British commander of the SOLF was able to dissuade the sultan from initiating the operation. On several occasions in 1978, however, Omani forces deployed along the disputed border. In one case, the sultan’s advisors developed a plan to launch airstrikes against targets in the UAE based on erroneous reports that mistook routine Emirati exercises for an imminent military action.⁴² British officers complained about the poor guidance that the sultan received from advisors such as Landon and Thwaites. As the defense attaché commented in 1978:

Those in positions of authority do not have the training, ability or experience to draw the correct conclusions from the information which they are given. Furthermore, the advice (and very considerable experience) of the Loan Service Commanders is not sought, and even when it is given it is usually not heeded. The results have been close to disaster on a number of occasions, and it has only been the good sense of CSOLF, after consultation with HMG [Her Majesty’s Government], that has kept the Omanis on the rails.⁴³

These manufactured crises apparently reminded the sultan of the benefits of British LSP, who were not only experienced but also able to offer relatively objective advice. Robert Browning left Oman in 1979 after a short stint of three years as director general of the Ministry of Defense. In a candid letter to an American advisor to the sultan, he admitted that he had taken the job for financial reasons and complained bitterly that he had received an end-of-service gratuity of only \$300,000 upon his departure; an “injustice” that he attributed to the fact that he had threatened—in jest—to write a book about his experiences in Oman.⁴⁴ Peter Thwaites remained as chairman of the joint staff until 1981, but afterward the sultan requested that a serving British officer take on the new position of chief of the defense staff, with authority over all three Omani armed services. The sultan’s choice for the post was General Timothy Creasey, who had served as commander of the Sultan’s Armed Forces and as an advisor to the sultan from 1972 to 1975. In a meeting with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, however, Qaboos made clear that “he attached great importance to General Creasey’s being, and being seen to be, on the Active List of the British Army both on his appointment and throughout his tour of duty as a loan service officer in Oman.”⁴⁵ Creasey was already employed as commander in chief of UK land forces, but Thatcher agreed to return him to Oman in an effort to increase British influence over Oman’s defense policy. This was particularly important given that the British recognized that training the Sultan’s Armed Forces to operate its newly acquired equipment would keep loan service personnel in Oman for at least the rest of the decade.

The sultan may have had several different motives for his change of heart. He may have believed that the presence of a respected, senior British officer at the head of the armed forces would prevent the emergence of an Omani officer who might become a rival for power. He also likely saw Creasey as a symbol of his continued alliance with Britain, an important consideration given the increasing regional instability associated with the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. The fact that he chose Creasey, a senior commander with whom he had previously had a relationship “more Father and Son than General and Ruler” suggests that the sultan also had come to recognize the value of independent and, if necessary, dissenting advice. Creasey’s return reestablished the precedent of a current British general officer serving as advisor to the sultan’s armed forces, a policy that remains today.

Conclusion

British security assistance to Oman began well before the Dhofar conflict, and it continues today. The period from 1975 to 1981 is important, however, because it saw the continuation of military ties between the two states in the absence of a clear threat to Oman. In fact, the British hoped to end their military role in

Oman as soon as practically possible following the defeat of the Dhofar insurgency. Economic considerations figured prominently in decisions to prolong this military presence. Enjoying an influx of oil revenue, Sultan Qaboos sought to expand and modernize his armed forces. British military advisors attempted to dissuade him; but when Qaboos declared his intention to seek other suppliers, the British government, facing economic troubles at home, agreed to support the sultan's purchases of British military and naval equipment by providing loan service personnel well after the Dhofar conflict had ended. Britain was not motivated solely by financial considerations. A principal reason for British security assistance to Oman was, and still is, an interest in maintaining national and regional stability. Nonetheless, the prospect of significant defense sales was an important contributor to the British decision to remain in Oman at a time when internal and external threats appeared to be subsiding.

It is unlikely that the sultan's only aim was to expand his arsenal. Just as valuable as aircraft or naval vessels was the presence of the British military and naval personnel that accompanied them. To borrow a term from the strategist Richard P. Rumelt, Qaboos discovered *hidden power* in his relationship with Britain, leveraging his newfound wealth to convince the financially strapped British to extend their security assistance efforts despite the end of the conflict in Dhofar.⁴⁶ The continued British assistance helped the sultan deter both internal and external threats to his rule. Assertive but inexperienced, Qaboos occasionally miscalculated in his efforts to manage his economic and military resources. In his attempt to strengthen his control over defense strategy and procurement decisions, he sidelined the experienced British loan service personnel who had provided valuable assistance during the Dhofar conflict. Ultimately, however, he realized the benefits of their advice and presence in Oman. The emergence of new threats, as well as subsequent purchases of British defense equipment, have justified continued British assistance since the 1980s. Nonetheless, the ongoing Anglo-Omani security relationship owes much to the decisions made and lessons learned in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Notes

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3. See, for example, James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); and Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
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13. “Proposed Sale of Rapier to Oman,” NA, FCO 8/2235; and “British Military Assistance to Oman,” 20 February 1974, NA, FCO 8/2234.
14. Hawley to P. R. H. Wright, 14 October 1973, NA, FCO 8/2025; and “British Military Assistance to Oman,” 12 February 1974, NA, FCO 8/2234.
15. “British Military Assistance to Oman,” NA, FCO 8/2235.
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17. “Annual Report for 1972, by Defence Attaché, Muscat,” NA, FCO 8/2022.
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31. Allen and Rigsbee, *Oman under Qaboos*, 65–66.
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