

Who runs the Sultan of Oman?

With the British virtually gone, the southern stretch of the Arabian peninsula is an ominously ragged patchwork, and minor items of news this week suggest that tensions in the area are going to build up. The forces of **Sultan Qabus of Oman**, who seized power about 18 months ago, are reported to have occupied three enclaves belonging to the Ruler of Sharjah; and the two resistance movements which have been the spearhead of the Dhofar rebellion against the Omani government for the past seven years (the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf, and the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman) have merged in a new movement, under what purports to be a unified command.

The world has heard this kind of claim from Arab revolutionaries in the past, and will wait to see what happens. But at least it is a sign that the Dhofar rebellion, and everything currently going on in Oman, cannot be swept under the carpet. The Americans realise this; despite the disavowal this week by Mr Alexis Johnson, the Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs ('we have no intention of replacing the British'), with regard to Bahrein, all the evidence suggests that the Americans are moving into the area fast, and their influence on the Sultan of Oman is certainly increasing.

Briefly summarised, the factors in the Oman situation are:

(i) **The Dhofar war** and the British involvement. The rebels are supported by both the Russians and the Chinese (as well as by the South Yemen government), though how exactly Moscow's men and Peking's men dovetail their efforts remains a mystery. It was officially admitted a few weeks ago that two men of the British Special Air Service regiment had been killed last October. An expert observer who has recently visited the country insists that the number of casualties is appreciably higher - according to this source, as many as six officers and a score or two of Omanis have been killed - but it is very hard to get correct figures. There is strong evidence that the SAS goes beyond its 'official' task of training the sultan's forces - hence the casualties, and the capture of some equipment.

The British personnel involved are in two categories: officers seconded to the sultan's defence force, and an unspecified number of men who get paid £300 a month, all found. The progress of the rebels has undoubtedly worried the sultan, and he has recently been asking for more arms - guns, aircraft, gunboats.

(ii) **Political conditions in the rest of Oman.** So far there is no evidence that disaffection is spreading from Dhofar to other parts of the country; but Qabus's popularity has waned, after a good start. Political activity in Oman is led mainly by the Omani students' association (a body which Qabus fears), and some 30 Omanis who have been educated in the Soviet Union. The strikes and demonstrations which occurred in Matrah in September were basically economic in derivation - the Omani labourers resent the way foreigners get better wages and better housing - but were also, in part, a protest against the way Qabus is spending his money: on his defence force, on military hardware, and on Dhofar instead of on the development of places like Muscat and Matrah. Some observers fear that with the passing of time he is becoming increasingly like his father.

He is accused of selecting selfish advisers and using Britons in key posts; his critics say that he hides behind them to cover his immature thinking. He stays as often as possible in Salalah, in the company of British officers, some of whom are his inseparable companions. All this may seem mildly gratifying to Whitehall, but it is not necessarily a situation which will permanently be of advantage to Britain.

Of his other foreign advisers, the most influential - and the most unpopular - in recent months has been Abdullah At-Ta'i, from Abu Dhabi, who last year worked his

STATINTL