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# U.S. Is Said to Develop Oman As Its Major Ally in the Gulf

The following article is based on reporting by Jeff Gerth and Judith Miller and was written by Miss Miller.

CAIRO, March 24 — In the six years since the Iranian revolution, the strategically placed and isolated nation of Oman has emerged as Washington's most reliable ally in the Persian Gulf, according to Western, Omani and other Arab officials.

This development, the officials said, has resulted largely from the influence of about 20 American, British and Arab advisers to the country's reclusive and absolute ruler, Sultan Qabus bin Said.

The advisers, many of whom have intelligence backgrounds, have helped shape Oman's domestic and foreign policies — often to the benefit of their own country's interests, the officials said.

The advisers have encouraged Sultan Qabus to give Western strategists access to Omani installations that other

Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have been unwilling to provide, the officials said. As a result, they said, Oman has become a base for Western intelligence operations, military maneuvers and logistical preparations for any defense of the oil-producing Persian Gulf.

On Thursday the Reagan Administration engaged in a rare public discussion of Oman's growing strategic value to the United States. In testimony before a Congressional subcommittee, Maj. Gen. David Watts, director of Logistics and Security Assistance for the Central Command, said the United States had nearly finished building and modernizing sites in Oman and two African nations — Somalia and Kenya — for use by a rapid deployment force in

the event of a crisis in the Gulf.

The new installations would "support tactical air operations, MAC operations and pre-positioning of air force war readiness material assets," the Army general said. MAC stands for Military Airlift Command.

American and other Western and Arab officials discussed developments in Oman in interviews in Washington as well as in Britain and various Middle Eastern countries, including Oman.

Among those interviewed in Oman during an eight-day visit there late last year were some of the foreign advisers to the Sultan, although several declined to speak on the record. The Sultan declined a request for an interview.

The location of Oman, the second largest and least densely populated country in the Persian Gulf, dictates its strategic value to the West: It controls the 24-mile wide Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant amount of the West's oil flows, though the amount has lessened in recent years.

Oman agreed to the relationship with the United States for a variety of reasons, Omani officials said. Many Omanis, they said, favored a relationship with the United States to reduce British influence in the country.

## Britain Exercised Major Role in Past

Modern Oman, they said, is in large part a creation of the British, the first to sense its strategic potential.

The British helped the Sultan overthrow his father in a coup in 1970, according to some officials involved in its planning, although the report has been denied by the British Government. In the mid-1970's, the Sultan had British assistance in quelling an insurgency, backed by Southern Yemen, in the southern province of Dhofar.

In addition, Omani officials said, Oman has been more concerned with what it sees as the Soviet threat to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean than with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The perception, Omani officials said, has spurred them to seek foreign military support, as has Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's stated intention to export his Islamic revolution from Iran to other countries in the region.

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, some advisers to the Sultan said, both Britain and the United States have tried to assume a low profile in Oman — to avoid, they said, creating the kind of foreign presence in Oman that ultimately proved so destabilizing in Iran.

Several advisers to the Sultan noted that the two countries are very different. Many Omanis, they said, have benefited from the development of the country under foreign tutelage, and most are members of a small Moslem sect called Ibadhi that lacks the politi-

cally radical tradition of Shiism, the sect of Islam dominant in Iran.

## Agreement Gives U.S. Military Staging Points

Although the British were instrumental in opening the country to Western influence and modernization in the 1970's, Oman's isolation in the last five years has been actively encouraged by the advisers, Omani officials and some of the Western advisers said. The British and American advisers said they believed that Oman's inaccessibility facilitated United States and British intelligence and military plans in the country.

Under an agreement with the United States, Oman provides staging points for the United States at military installations at Masira Island, Sib and Thumrait, and on the Masandam Peninsula near the Strait of Hormuz, Western officials said. The installations, they said, could be critical to any defense of the Gulf.

Because only the strait separates it from Iran, the Masandam Peninsula has provided a useful listening post for monitoring the Ayatollah's revolutionary Government, according to western and Arab intelligence sources interviewed in Washington and the Middle East.

The United States used Oman to stage the unsuccessful mission to rescue the American hostages in Iran in 1980. Last December, according to Western and Arab officials in Washington and the Middle East, the United States had a team of commandos secretly positioned in Oman to monitor the situation during the hijacking of a Kuwaiti plane to Teheran in which two Americans were killed. The Omanis have denied the reports.

"Oman has become what we had hoped Egypt might be," a senior American military official said recently.

"We could never secure the kinds of access in Saudi Arabia that we have negotiated in Oman," a State Department official said.

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