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The Persian Occupation of Oman in the Eighteenth Century

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Arabian Gulf suffered from ferocious Portuguese military attacks. The Portuguese first arrived in the Arabian Gulf in 1507, almost immediately launching a blistering attack on the region's most prominent cities, and ports seized the Qalhat⁽²⁾, Muscat and Sohar⁽³⁾ and other Omani cities. The Portuguese quickly gained dominance over the Hormuz Strait, the gateway to the Arabian Gulf, building a castle there to act as the central base for their presence of the Portuguese in the region⁽⁴⁾.

Oman before the Persian occupation

The Portuguese military attacks were characterized by massive power and savage destruction, with the Portuguese fleets not only looting those cities but setting fire to them and taking their populations as prisoners; when the invading ships could not accommodate the captured peoples, they were savagely brutalized, with the survivors being released often after their noses and ears had been severed.⁽⁵⁾ This brutality was intended to break the spirit of the region's peoples and terrorize them into subjugation, with Portugal quickly becoming the dominant force in the Arab region, controlling its ports and coastal areas and monopolizing regional trade, with the peoples of the area only allowed

to conduct limited business, which was tightly controlled by the Portuguese occupiers. This continued for more than a century until the Alya'aribah dynasty emerged and succeeded in expelling the Portuguese colonialists from Oman. ⁽⁶⁾

The history of the Alya'aribah family ⁽⁷⁾ began when the people of Oman accepted Nasir Ibn Murshid Ibn Sultan Alya'aribah (known as Nasir Ibn Murshid in short) as their ruler and pledged allegiance to him in the early half of the 1620s while the country was still under Portuguese occupation; he was officially appointed by the Omani people as ruler in 1624 and became renowned for his just and righteous rule. One of his first acts on being appointed as ruler was to set about uniting Oman, which was at the time divided into many districts, each with their own domestic leader. The most prominent coastal cities at the time remained under the rule of Portugal; however, he succeeded in taking control of Nizwa ⁽⁸⁾ and Samail ⁽⁹⁾, as well as of a number of inland areas. ⁽¹⁰⁾ After this, he devoted his efforts to liberating a number of Portuguese garrison towns on the coast, seizing several cities, including Galfar ⁽¹¹⁾, Sur ⁽¹²⁾, and Sohar. Laying siege to the Omani capital, Muscat, in 1643, Nasir Ibn Murshid eventually forced the Portuguese colonialists to sign an agreement obliging Portugal to pay an annual tax to him in return for retaining control of the city (3). The Portuguese occupiers were outraged at the terms of this agreement, which they viewed as humiliating, taking this as a cue to resume war against the Omani people. Nasir Ibn Murshid was ready for this, however, and launched an attack against the garrison in Muscat ⁽¹³⁾, forcing the occupiers in 1648 to comply with the terms of the previous agreement ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Following the death of Nasir Ibn Murshid in 1649, the Omani people pledged their allegiance to his cousin, Sultan Ibn Saif Alya'aribah, who followed in Nasir's footsteps, confronting the Portuguese occupiers and recapturing the remaining Portuguese garrison towns along the Omani coast, with Portuguese forces fully driven out of Muscat in 1650 ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Sultan Ibn Saif did not stop with the expulsion of the Portuguese from Oman but also sent ships to attack some of the Portuguese colonies on the Indian coast ⁽¹⁶⁾ in response to pleas for help from Muslims there who were subjected to similar savage brutality and oppression by the Portuguese occupiers. In 1699, his navy even seized control of Mombasa in Kenya ⁽¹⁷⁾, the Center of the Portuguese colonization of East Africa, after which Oman became the ruler over

East Africa ⁽¹⁸⁾. The Alya'aribah dynasty continued to be an economic and political powerhouse for many years, extending its political influence far beyond Oman, from the East African coast, along with the entire southern Arabian Peninsula, to the west coast of the Indus Valley in northwest India.

This was the Golden Age of the Alya'aribah dynasty, which began to fade following the death of Sultan Ibn Saif in 1718 ⁽¹⁹⁾. In the wake of the celebrated leader's death, there was debate over who was best qualified to succeed him, with the public keen to see his son, Saif Ibn Sultan, assume power, while the leading Omani scholars of the time insisted that it should go to another family member, Muhanna Ibn Sultan ⁽²⁰⁾, rejecting the concept of hereditary rule which they insisted violated the precepts of the Ibadi imamate system ⁽²¹⁾, as well as expressing unhappiness at Saif Ibn Sultan's youth and relative inexperience compared to Muhanna's greater maturity which they insisted meant that he, rather than Saif Ibn Sultan, met the requirements of the imamate ⁽²²⁾. The Ulama's decision to swear allegiance to Muhanna Ibn Sultan led to public unrest that eventually evolved into a civil war. Despite the fact that Muhanna Ibn Sultan was killed in 1720, the battle for power continued, with new rivals appearing to contest the right of the second Saif Ibn Sultan to assume power. This rivalry extended and expanded to include most of the tribes in Oman, passing through several stages and arguments between various would-be rulers, ultimately resulting into Oman effectively splitting into two blocs, the Huhannawi and the Ghafiriyeh blocs, each of which insisted on its right to supremacy ⁽²³⁾.

The long and bloody conflict between the Huhannawi and Ghafiriyeh over supremacy had a lasting impact not only domestically but regionally, extending to neighboring rival states around the Arabian Gulf region, whose rulers used the power struggle to their advantage to achieve their own political objectives and expansionist aspirations. The primary rival among these was the Persian kingdom, whose military succeeded in exploiting the turmoil to its own advantage to seize control of Oman, which it subsequently occupied for some years ⁽²⁴⁾.

The first Persian occupation of Oman

Saif Ibn Sultan II was ultimately been approved to attain the status of the ruler of the imamate in 1728; however, he neglected the affairs of governance and perpetrated a number of ill-conceived acts, which angered not only the Abadites but ordinary Omanis, leading to his being stripped of his imamate status in 1732. At this point, another member of the Alya'aribah family, a cousin named Belarab

Ibn Hammir, was appointed to the imamate, angering Saif Ibn Sultan II, who sought to regain the title for himself, asking in 1735 for assistance from the Balochi people. However, the forces of Belarab Ibn Hammir managed to defeat the Balochi forces amassed by Saif Ibn Sultan II, killing many of them ⁽²⁵⁾.

Following this defeat, Saif Ibn Sultan II began seeking another ally to assist him in the restoration of power, requesting assistance from the Persian rulers, who warmly welcomed his pleas for help against his opponent. There are two questions over this; why did the second Saif Ibn Sultan turn to the Persians specifically, and why did the Persian Shah of the time welcome this plea and rush to offer assistance? To answer these questions, one must examine the history of that period, when Persia had suffered a long series of domestic conflicts and periods of turmoil, which led to the nation being occupied in 1722 by Afghan forces who captured its then-capital Isfahan. The Persian Safavid ruler of the time, Shah Hussein, conceded power to the Afghan commander, Mahmoud Mir, which signaled the end of the Safavids' rule for the next seven years of Afghani occupation of Persia. During this seven-year period, the Turks and Russians also occupied parts of the country adjacent to their borders, with this chaotic state continuing until a Persian leader named Nadir Gholi was able to expel the Afghani occupiers from Isfahan and restore Safavid rule in 1729.

Tahmasp Mirza, the son of Shah Hussein, then inherited his father's title, becoming Shah before abdicating and appointing his young son, Abbas Shah, as the third Shah of Persia, with Tahmasp acting as his guardian. After succeeding in strengthening his own position and restoring stability to Persia, he did everything in his power to ensure strong governance for the country, resuming his place on the throne in 1736 and taking the title of Nadir Shah for himself ⁽²⁶⁾.

As Nadir Shah, Tahmasp began showing the strength of his character and vast ambition; this was soon noticed by Saif Ibn Sultan II in Oman, who was so impressed by it that he felt that Nadir Shah would be the ideal source to turn to for help in restoring his own power, not only because of the Persian ruler's power and influence but because of the proximity of the two countries across the Arabian Gulf, which Saif Ibn Sultan felt would help in ensuring the success of his objective.

Nadir Shah, meanwhile, welcomed the request of Saif Ibn Sultan II for assistance since he viewed it as a means of fulfilling his own expansionist ambitions to establish a Persian empire extending to the eastern and western shores of the Arabian Gulf. For Nadir Shah, the Omani leader's request allowed him to achieve two objectives,

First, weakening then eliminating the Yaruba dynasty. During the period of Alya'aribah rule, the Omani Navy was the main regional rival and obstacle to Persian expansion, with Oman was still enjoying the status of the predominant regional power, which extended to maritime supremacy and control of both the eastern and western coasts of the Arabian Gulf; Oman even controlled the main Persian port of Bandar Abbas since first capturing it in around 1720 AD. The request of Saif Ibn Sultan II, therefore, allowed Nadir Shah to set about weakening and eliminating Oman's regional power.

Second, the ambitious Persian Nadir Shah found Saif's request as an excellent opportunity to take control of the Persian and Omani coasts dominated by some Arab Emirates to achieve his expansionist ambitions of eliminating the Arab rule on both sides of the Arabian Gulf.

In 1737 Nadir Shah responded to Saif Ibn Sultan II by asking help from the English and Dutch agencies at Bandar Abbas to transport his forces to the Omani coast due to the weakness of the Persian navy. The English rejected his request while the Dutch agreed to exchange of some privileges in the Gulf. Five thousand Persian soldiers were transported in April 1737 from Bandar Abbas to Khor Fakhān and Ras al-Khaimah. The Persian forces, led by Latif Khan invaded both territories and moved to the inside where they defeated Bilarab Ibn Hmaier and took control of most Omani territories⁽²⁷⁾.

The Persian leader Latif Khan declared himself an absolute military ruler of Oman. Consequently, Saif Ibn Sultan II found himself in a difficult situation; he angered Scholars and people, and the in same time, was treated arrogantly with disrespect by the Persian leader. Saif finally recognized that the Persian quick response to his request aimed at dominating Oman, eliminating Alya'aribah dynasty, and expand the Persian rule.

Factors of Persian presence elimination in Oman

The tension between Saif Ibn Sultan and Latif Khan led to the fall of their coalition and the retreat of the Persian leader from the inside of Oman to Ras al-Khaimah; consequently, Nadir Shah launched another campaign to assist Latif Khan headed by Taqi Khan to keep domination of Oman. Both leaders invaded the rest of the Omani cities such as Nazwa, Bahla⁽²⁸⁾, Azka⁽²⁹⁾, and finally, captured Muscat in March 1737⁽³⁰⁾.

Saif Ibn Sultan lost control of the country to the Persians; as a result, he was obliged to come to an agreement with Belarab Ibn Hammir and unify the Omani tribes. Hammir gave up the Imamate to Saif with the approval of Alghafiriah, who side by side with Hanawiah assembled under the banner of Saif Ibn Sultan II to drive the Persians out of Oman.

Omanis used disagreement between the two Persian leaders, Taqi Khan and Latif Khan and drove the Persians out of the country ⁽³¹⁾. The brave resistance of Sahar's ruler Ahmad Ibn Saeed ⁽³²⁾ helped defeat the Persians in Sahar and Azka where the Persian forces were eliminated by the Omanis who took back control of their homeland.

Nadir Shah used the Arab sailors inhabiting the eastern coast of the Arabian Gulf to build the Persian fleet due to their maritime skills and the Persians ignorance of sea routes. The Arab sailors had earlier helped the Persians in the attacks on Portuguese but refused to help in the attacks on their Arab brothers on the western coast of the Arabian Gulf. In 1740 they rebelled and killed the commander of the Persian fleet Mir Ali Khan and seized some Persian ships, which made Nadir Shah ask help from the Dutch to attack the Arab sailors who defeated both Persians and Dutch. These events contributed to weakening the position of the Persian garrison in Oman and helped Omanis drive the Persians out of their country that retreated to Bandar Abbas. ⁽³³⁾

The failure Persian reoccupying of Oman

After Persians had left Oman, a dispute over Imamate continued between the Omanis themselves. People broke up with Saif and swore allegiance to another member of the family, Sultan Ibn Mirshid who took Muscat, the capital. That made Saif re-contact the Persians, disregarding their ambitions in Oman and their devastation of the country. He gave them promises of recognizing the Persian sovereignty over Sahar, the symbol of the Omani resistance under the leadership of the wise and genius ruler Ahmad Ibn Saeed who foiled the Persian plot of occupying Oman. ⁽³⁴⁾

The second phase of the Persian occupation of Oman started in 1742. The Persian fleet headed by Taqi Shah left Bushehr port and arrived in Ras al-Khaimah. The Persian army split up into two divisions, one headed to Muscat and defeated Sultan Ibn Mirshid. It took control of the capital and its neighboring cities in February 1743. The other group blockaded Sahar with constant bombing

of the city. The Imam, Sultan Ibn Mirshid broke the siege around Sahar and entered Ahmad Ibn Saeed's fort where he died of his wounds in 1743. On the other side, the Persians betrayed Saif again and refused to give him Muscat and Matrouh, which made him hide in Alhazm keep in Ristaq where he lived until death suffering sorrow and coercion few days after the killing of Sultan Ibn Mirshid. With the passing of the two leaders, Oman laid under the Persian domination.⁽³⁵⁾

Omanis rallied around the ruler of Sahar that became the symbol of their resistance. The Persians continued their land and sea blockade of Sahar for more than seven months with the constant bombing that resulted in many casualties of Omani people⁽³⁶⁾. After a prolonged period of blocked, both sides signed a treaty of arbitration stating that all Persian forces retreat from Sahar to Muscat, while Ahmad Ibn Saeed kept Sahar and Barka⁽³⁷⁾ in exchange for annual tax paid to the Persians⁽³⁸⁾.

Resources differed about the reasons of the treaty. Some said that the Persians signed it because of the strong resistance of Ahmad Ibn Saeed and the losses they suffered⁽³⁹⁾, while others said that Ahmad's running out of munitions and desire to strengthen his political position made him asked for the treaty⁽⁴⁰⁾. All in all, with this treaty the Persian blockade of Sahar ended and the Persian leader Taqi Khan retreated and went back to Persia, leaving his troops in Muscat and some other Omani territories.

Ahmad Ibn Saeed had succeeded in strengthening his position inside Oman and gathering Omanis around him. After that, he blockaded the Persian garrisons in Muscat and stalled paying the annual tax to them. The Persian leaders became incapable of paying salaries to their soldiers, which made a significant number of them escape to Persia. What severed the position of the Persian troops in Oman was the repeal of tariff on goods coming to Barka port, attracting merchants from Muscat and declining the financial status of the Persians⁽⁴¹⁾.

Moreover, Nadir Shah failed to send new supplies to his troops in Oman because of his engagement in war with the Ottoman Empire and his efforts to end the internal rebellions led by some of his leaders that contributed to the decline of the Persian forces financially and militarily. The most prominent of these rebellions was the one led by Taqi Khan, the Persian leader who led the campaigns on Oman before⁽⁴²⁾.

Due to this deterioration of the Persian capabilities, commanders of the Persian garrisons in Oman were obliged to leave. The Persian government asked Alya'aribah to dispatch the closest relative for Saif Ibn Sultan, Majid Ibn Sultan to Persia to have a hand in Oman. Nadir Shah gave him a letter to the Persian garrisons in Oman asking them to leave their positions and hand them over to Majid Ibn Sultan. Before Majid got to the garrisons, Ahmad Ibn Saeed had seized this letter from him and attacked the Persian forces while they were preparing to leave and killed most of them, while those escaped, drowned in the sea ⁽⁴³⁾.

By doing this, Ahmad Ibn Saeed liberated Oman from the Persian occupation completely in 1744 ⁽⁴⁴⁾. All Omanis gathered and swore allegiance to him and ended Alya'aribah dynasty that signaled the beginning of Albosa'eedi reign.

Alya'aribah succeeded in driving Portuguese out of the country with the support of all Omanis same as Ahmad Ibn Saeed who drove Persians out through the full support of all Omani people and succeed to the throne of Oman.

Conclusion

People have to learn an everlasting lesson that the use of foreign forces in any internal disagreement between people of the same country makes them easy prey for these forces and invaders. Controversy, division, and ambitions for power contributed to the fall of Oman under the Persian domination; on the contrary, unification led to its liberation and driving invaders out of the country. Finally, the Omani case is evidence that the Persian ambitions in the Arabian Gulf are not new but deeply rooted in history.

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- (3) Sohar or Suhar: is located on the Gulf of Oman, and with the advent of Islam was an important commercial center, and today is one of the most important cities of Oman. Alani: Oman in the Islamic Ages, p. 58.
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- (13) Sahari: Tareekh Oman, p. 127; unknown: Tareekh Ahel Oman, p. 145, Agil: Altanafos Aldwali fi Alkhaleej Alarabi, pp. 113-114; Al-Abed: Alssirae Alomani Alburtughali Watahrih alshrq Al'iifriqi, p. 127.
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(31) Qasim: State Bou Said, p. 41; Khososi: Derasat fi Tareekh Alkhalij, C 1, p. 73; Fahmi: qawasim .. Nashtohom Albahri, p. 26; Aidaroos: Altadakhol Alfarsi fi Asho'un Alomania, p. 168; Mursi: UAE coast, p. 70.

(32) Ahmad Ibn Saeed: belongs to the tribe Busaid that their lineage backs to Alozd, a Hinaoa originally Ibadhi doctrine, this tribe has settled in the town of Adam on the edge of the Empty Quarter, Ahmad Ibn Saeed is a sophisticated mind, weighty figure, was appointed by Sultan Ibn Saif as his adviser, then appointed him as ruler of the port of Sohar, and emerged as a political star in during the Persian

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(33) Lorimer: *Gulf guide, historic section c 1*, pp. 159-160; Haifa Abdul-Aziz al-Rubaie: *Ghozat fi Alkhalij, Mosul, National Library, 1989*, pp. 110-111.

(34) Lockhart: *Nadir Shah*, pp. 215-216; Aidaroos: *Altadakhol Alfarsi fi Asho'un Alomania*, S172-173.

(35) Sahari: *Tareekh Oman*, pp. 159 a -160 b; Ibn Rezzig: *AlfathAl-Molbn* , p. 304; Abu Suleiman Mohammad Ibn Amer Ma'awali: *stories and news that took place in Oman*, 2nd F, Oman, Printing Arabs record, 1406 H / 1986, p. 149; Salmi: *Tohfato Ala'yan*, c 2 , p. 15; C. Niebuhr: *Travels Through Arabia and Other Countries In the East* (London: Morison and Son Bookers, 1792) p. 119.

(36) Ibn Rezzig: *Fath Al-Mobin*, p. 300; Salmi: *Tohfato Ala'yan*, c 2, pp. 152-156, Hamdani: *Maqawamat Alomanieen lilhamalat Alirania 'al Beladehim*, p. 119.

(37) Barka: Located on the coast of Oman, and away from Muscat about 43 miles away, Lorimer: *Gulf guide geographical section, c 1*, p. 335.

(38) Sahari: *Tareekh Oman*, pp. 160 -160 A. B, Phillips, *Oman*, p. 77, Qasim, *Tareekh Alkhalij Alarabi, C 1*, p. 129; Aidaroos: *Altadakhol Alfarsi fi Asho'un Alomania*, p. 179.

(39) Salmi: *Tohfato Ala'yan*, c 2, p. 154; Ibn Rezzig: *AlfathAl-Mobin*, p. 304.

(40) Aidaroos, *Altadakhol Alfarsi fi Asho'un Alomania*, p. 179, Qasim: *Dawlat Bou Said*, p. 143; Khososi: *Derasat fi Tareekh Alkhalij, C 1*, p. 75.

(41) Lockhart: *Nadir Shah*, p. 219 Phillips: *Oman*, p. 77; Aidaroos: *Altadakhol Alfarsi fi Asho'un Alomania*, p. 180.

(42) Lockhart: *Nadir Shah*, pp. 223-224, Qasim: *Dawlat Bou Said*, p. 44, Hamdani: *Maqawamat Alomanieen lilhamalat Alirania 'al Beladehim*, p. 115.

(43) Ahmad Ibn Saeed invited Persian garrison to a big feast in plain Barka, once their horses entered the fort and gave them banquets until Omani caller called out from the top of the castle "anyone who wishes to take revenge from Persians can take it now. Then, a large number of people including old and young man waged a fierce battle against the Persians killing many numbers. Some had surrendered themselves and pleaded for a pardon from Ahmad Ibn Saeed and some fled trying to cross the sea by swinging but became exhausted half way and drowned there after the domestic Omani people set their ships on fire. Ibn Rezzig: *AlFath Al-Mobin*, p. 307; Salmi: *Tohfato Ala'yan*, c 2, p. 157.

(44) Lorimer: *Historical Gulf guide c 1*, p. 215; Ma'awali: *Qesas Wa Akhbar Jarat fi Oman*, p. 147; Murad: *Sera' Alqewa*, p. 232; Hamdani: *Maqawamat Alomanieen lilhamalat Alirania 'al Beladehim*, pp. 117-120.