

Oman and the Franco-British Colonial Rivalry: The Bandar al-Jissah Crisis 1898-1900

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Abstract: For certainty that Oman had been a part of the Franco-British political and economic relations rivalry, during the last decade of the 19th century in the eastern seas, as it was an important economic centre in the reign of Sayyid Faisal bin Turki (1888-1900). At the same time Oman had managed to keep itself away from this conflict and secured from being under the influence of these powers.

Under these circumstances France was seriously interested in sharing with the British interest in Oman, and tried to stop them from gaining all the benefits individually, by having a part of al-Jissah cove near Muscat in 1898, as a coal station.

In consequence of these demands Oman had turned about to the French, producing a friendly attitude, because of the British unclear policy towards Muscat and her Sultan. In this regard the British received this policy as repudiation of the Sultan's commitment to them in accordance of the 1891 treaty. The British reaction then felt that the Sultan's alteration of loyal friendship to them were against their wish, and they threatened by using force against his country, while the French Officials considered this action incompatible with the Anglo-French Declaration of 1862.

However, the crisis forced the British Foreign Office to enter into official negotiations with the French Ambassador in London to settle their differences over the lease of Bandar al-Jissah with some consideration to the French demands.

Finally, the French found themselves in a position of accepting the British suggestions to solve the difficulties which had gathered over Muscat, when the French accepted the British offer of taking the southern site of al-Makalla Cove in August, 1900.

By the last decade of the 19th century, the Anglo-French rivalry was getting tougher in India and the eastern seas. At this time Oman became once again a centre for economic activity in the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In these circumstances Oman was a

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potential ally to one or other powers in the region, because of its significant strategic position.

Sayyid Faisal bin Turki bin Said (1888-1913) assumed power at a time when the Arab world was beset by a rising wave of European colonialist influence, particularly that of Britain and France who occupied several parts of the Arab world. Only a few Arab countries were able to escape this fierce colonialist attack. Among these was Oman; for Faisal bin Turki had skillfully established his rule amidst an overall climate of turbulence. He also paid great attention to the internal situation in a bid to strengthen the national front. One of the aims of Faisal's policy was to establish a balanced relationship with England and France. In 1894, he approved the establishment of a French consulate in Muscat; this was followed by granting the French permission to install a coal warehouse at Bandar al- Jissah in 1898. This episode led to very serious results leading to the eruption of a crisis which endangered the British relations with both Oman and France. This paper is an attempt to discuss this crisis and its political consequences depending on British documentary sources.

The French demand and the al-Jissah Crisis

In fact the uncertain policy adopted by the British Government regarding the French activities in Oman, clearly indicated that they had no actual interest in these events, which had an unfortunate effect on the Sultan. The result of the French policy in Oman became very negative for the Sultan's authority during the following years.

The Omani flag holders were transferred from the Sultan's jurisdiction to that of the French, even when they were in the territorial waters of Oman. Any protest by him to the French authorities in Muscat was rejected, while the British refused to offer him any practical support to emphasize his power in the matter. This policy encouraged the Sultan to turn to the French, producing a more friendly attitude to the French Vice-Consul in his country, who appreciated the Sultan's change in his policy; the French took this opportunity to secure a naval base on the Omani coast. At this stage the French policy towards Oman had also advanced in favour of Sayyid Faisal, whose relations with the British were now equivocal. The French maneuver to secure themselves a naval base was successfully achieved by the visit of the French gunboat, the "*Gabes*", to Muscat in February and March 1898, when her Commander managed to obtain a written guarantee from the Sultan on 7th March for a coal station in

Bandar al-Jissah, about 8 km south east of Muscat.¹ On 7th October 1898, the “*Scorpion*” another French man-of-war, arrived in Muscat under the command of Emile Allen with many presents to the Sultan and with a French request for an amicable relationship with the Sultanate. His Highness accepted in an equally cordial manner, to fulfill the work that had been started by the Commander of the “*Gabes*”.² Shortly after the departure of the “*Scorpion*” from Muscat on 24th October, the “*Journal des Dates*” announced on 20th November 1898 that the French steamer “*Gabes*” had established a coal station at Bandar al-Jissah, on Omani coast. Accordingly the British Ambassador made an inquiry in Paris by asking the French Foreign Minister, M. Delcasse, who denied the news, and stated that it was the first time he had heard about it.³

The British reaction to the Sultan’s action

Under these circumstances a very serious change in Omani internal affairs was adopted by His Highness the Sultan, who dismissed his wazir, Sayyid Said b. Mohammed, who had been very friendly to the British and against the Sultan’s recent policy towards the French, and replaced him by the former wazir Sayyid Muhammed b. Azzan who was in favour of the Franco-Omani understanding.⁴ At this time Sultan Faisal prepared himself to reduce the British position at Muscat, and to encourage the French, creating a balance of the Foreign Powers involvement in his country by giving them a foothold in al-Jissah. The Sultan’s major change in policy was undoubtedly considered by the British Government as a great damage to the privileges they had established in the Sultan’s territories. At the same time the Sultan’s action would be received as a deliberate repudiation of his commitment to the British in the Treaty of March 19th 1891, in which the Sultan obliged himself not to mortgage, or to lease any part of his territories to a Foreign power without British approval.

However, the Sultan was obliged to comply with the British demands in regard, and it was not until 17th January 1899 that the Sultan admitted that he had promised the French a depot in Omani waters, but that the location had not been chosen yet.⁵

The case roused a great dispute between France and Britain, which regarded Oman as its territory with regard to the treaty, though the Declaration of 1862 clearly stated the independence of Oman and its dominions, which must be respected as it was a mutual responsibility for Britain and France. The Sultan exercised this policy in belief that his country was an independent State, and he was free to decide what kind of action would serve his interest. In fact the British saw that action as contrary to the Sultan's obligation when he agreed to bind himself, his heirs and successors by the articles of the 1891 treaty.

By the middle of January 1899, the Commander of H.M.S. "*Sphinx*" H.A. Phillips, instructed Lt. C. W. Robinson of the "*Sphinx*" that during the time of the arrival of any French man-of-war or officer at al-Jissah station, he should hoist the British flag on a British staff near that point, to protest on behalf of the British Government against any French action there, as it would be accounted a breach of the 1891 treaty with the Sultan of Muscat.¹ At the same time the Foreign Office was disturbed at the news of the al-Jissah lease, and the Secretary of State Lord Salisbury sent a telegram on 20th January to the Government of India, enquiring in detail about this concession to the French in Muscat.²

In an exchange of letters between the Political Agent at Muscat (PAM) and His Highness the Sultan, the latter confirmed that he had given the French a coal station similar to that which was now used by the British Government at al-Makalla cove in Muscat harbour. At once the British Government instructed the PAM to withhold the payment of the subsidy to the Sultan, until a satisfactory explanation by him of this action was provided.³ The British Agent remained very active in dealing with this question, investigating the Sultan's actions and observing the French activities in Muscat. He expressed the British dissatisfaction to the Sultan about his recent policy, and affirmed this reaction to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf (PRPG). On 25th January the Secretary of State for India authorized the Viceroy to remind the Sultan of the British assistance which had been provided to him during the past years of his reign. The British now felt that the Sultan's alteration of loyal friendship to them was against their wish, and that their support for his Government would be withdrawn, and might be offered his enemies inside the country.⁴

Simultaneously the Secretary of State for India prepared himself to accept and approve any measures not in accordance with the British interests and the Declaration of 1862. The situation was now seen to require more the British side towards the Sultan; and the PRPG Col. Meade, was instructed by the Government of India to proceed to Muscat, and he arrived there in the first week of February 1899.¹ The Resident was also directed to discuss the situation with the Sultan and to inform him officially of the discontinuance of the subsidy until they reached a proper settlement of the differences between the Sultan and the British Government, and he was authorised to indicate to the Sultan that if he would not comply with the British demands, and adopted a disloyal attitude to them in future, his position in the country would be severely affected.² On 6th February 1899, Col. Meade had a long interview with Sultan, and he demanded an immediate cancellation of the al-Jissah lease.³

The Sultan presented a genuine challenge to the British authorities when on 28th January he refused to follow the British advice, and to produce the agreement made between him and the French Government with regards to the al-Jissah lease.⁴

On 7th February 1899, soon after his arrival in Muscat the PRPG sent a telegram to the Government of India confirming the Sultan's loyalty to the French, and stating that he was now relying on their support, so that his refusal to comply with the British demands was to be expected. Meade suggested in this event that he should be authorized to employ naval force when necessary. The request was subject to the condition that collision with the French should be avoided. Lord Curzon recommended this stipulation to Her Majesty's Government, on condition that the Sultan was still defying the British power.⁵ On 9th February, the Secretary of State for India approved the authorization given to the Political Resident in order to compel compliance on condition that there must be no collision with the French in this event.⁶ In the afternoon of the same day Colonel Meade made an Arabic translation of the British demands, including the cancellation of the al-Jissah depot lease, which was read by himself to the Sultan, who received a copy of it.

In consequence of this action the French Vice-Consul informed the Sultan on 10th February that he could not recognize the treaty of 1891, which was not in accordance with the Declaration of March 1862. On 11th February 1899, the Sultan was given 48 hours to comply with the British demands or Muscat would be bombarded from the sea by the British Navy.¹ The Sultan then appeared to be in an extremely difficult situation: the British officially announced their strong objection to his policy and withdrew from supporting him, while the French promised no assistance to him in the event of British action against his authority. At this stage the Sultan was isolated from the British, and came entirely under the French Vice-Consul's influence, as he had acted within the past two years in an unfriendly way to the British, and troubled them with many actions against their wishes. One of the undesirable actions which caused tension between him and the British was the appointment of Abdul-Aziz b. Muhammed b. Salim al-Rawahi as his confidential advisor and Agent between his Government and the French Consulate at Muscat. He was at the same time a French consulate employee, and very much hated by the British.² However, nothing useful took place to ease the tension between the Sultan and the British authorities in the matter, and the situation developed for the worse.

The British threat of using force

On 14th February 1899, Admiral A. L. Douglas arrived in Muscat on board the British flagship "*Eclipse*" to demonstrate the British threat against the Sultan's action in a practical manner. At this time the Sultan had not yet replied the British authorities recent demands, and all his explanations seemed to them to be unsatisfactory. On the following day, the Resident in the Gulf received an authoritative command from the Government of India to use force against the Sultan if necessary to force him to comply with the British requirements. On 16th the same order was received by Admiral Douglas, and by H.M.S. "*Redbreast*" which had arrived from Jask for the purpose of emphasising more threats against Muscat. Eventually the Resident authorized the Rear Admiral to deal with this matter, who immediately addressed an abrupt warning to the Sultan that unless he appeared on board the British flagship "*Eclipse*" and complied with all British orders within a certain time, the bombarding

of Muscat would be unavoidable.¹ With regard to this strong warning the Sultan sent his brother Sayyid Muhammed b. Turki to discuss the situation with Douglas, but he ignored Sayyid Muhammed, who was not even allowed to board the “*Eclipse*”. As a result of this incident, Sultan Faisal finally arrived at 1.30 p.m. on 16th February 1899 on board the British flagship, and stayed for three hours discussing the situation before he accepted all demands unreservedly, and left the ship under a Royal Salute.² Undoubtedly the proceedings concluded with a full warning which was directed against the Sultan that if he declined to fulfill his promises, or showed any sign of unfriendly attitude towards the British Government, that his palace would be fired on by the British men-of-war. The Sultan also agreed to show the Resident his agreement with the French regarding the al-Jissah lease, and to dismiss Abdul-Aziz al-Rawahi from his service.³ The Sultan then pasted a notification at the Custom-House, and on the principal gates of Muscat and Matrah, about his agreement with the British Admiral. Douglas visited the Sultan in his palace on 17th February, where a great durbar was held, and the Sultan publicly declared the cancellation of his agreement with the French Government regarding the lease of al-Jissah.⁴

The French reaction to the British show of force

With reference to this procedure, on 16th February 1899, the French Vice-Consul M.Ottavi protested officially to the British Agent at Muscat about the British action against the Sultan. At the same time, the Sultan himself wrote to the Janabah of Sur asking them to return all their flags to the French authority at Muscat. The British had been apprised of the action, and the Sultan received their promise to support him even against France if that proved necessary, while the subsidy might be paid as a result of following British advice.⁵ The crisis forced the Foreign Office to enter into official negotiations with the French Government, which decided immediately to be involved in a friendly discussion to settle their differences in Muscat.⁶ The issue was discussed during the conversations of the French ambassador in London, M. Paul Cambon, with Lord Salisbury, in which Cambon tried to convince the Foreign office in

London that the lease was not incompatible with the Anglo-French Declaration of 1862, while the British Government accused the French of breaching that decree, by their acceptance of the lease. Thus the French formally declared on 15th February 1899 that they had leased a site for a coal station from the Sultan of Muscat.¹

The matter of canceling the French lease seemed to be a sensitive question which needed more care from the Foreign Office to deal with, and more discussion before it was adopted. On 22nd February Salisbury wrote to Sir E. Monson informing him about the France Ambassador's reaction with respect to the British move, approved by the Foreign Office, against the Sultan of Muscat, which had provoked a hostile public opinion in France toward the British Government. Lord Salisbury however clearly indicated in his letter that the French behaviour in Muscat seriously threatened the agreement of 1862.² The two Governments' views on the Declaration appeared not to be entirely in agreement as to its interpretation, but the British saw their action as being a consequence of the French activity, which had affected the position they had built through a series of engagements with Muscat, and the mutual respect between the two Governments. During the discussion Combon denied any permanent occupation of any part of Muscat territories, and objected to the proposal of acquiring a coal station in the name of French citizens, but he asked whether it would not be possible after such declarations had been made to establish in some form a coaling station, which was a matter of great necessity to France.³ Lord Salisbury promised to discuss the situation with the Government of India, whose strong wish was to solve the problem in a friendly fashion. On 27th February the Secretary of State for India Lord George Hamilton informed the Government of India that the French had accepted the British reading of the Declaration of 1862, and confirmed that neither State could accept cession or lease of Muscat territory, but the French wished to have a coal station on the same level as the British had.⁴

At the same time the Government of India was directed to express the British satisfaction with the Sultan's attitude towards the British demands made on him, and his acceptance of following the advice of the British Agent and to inform the Sultan that the British would have no objection to

a French request for a coal station, if that request were limited to merchant purposes and carried no territorial right in his dominions, and that any such proposal should be submitted by the Sultan to the British Agent for approval.¹

The British suggestion and the French acceptance

By now the Anglo-French tension seemed slightly improved in that a reasonable solution would be adopted, and the situation quickly moved to better understanding between London and Paris over Muscat. On 7th March 1899, “*The Times*” stated that during the discussion of this problem in the French Chamber, the conclusion appeared to be that the unexpected difficulties which had taken place over Muscat had been solved entirely with the satisfaction of the national interest and dignity.² The French Foreign Minister M. Delcasse himself was involved in that debate, confirming respect for the 1862 Declaration and stating that France never planned to damage the Sultan of Muscat’s dignity or the independence of his country. He emphasized that the British Government, which had not been slow in recognising the identical rights of the two Powers in Muscat, was in a position to judge the truth of the French intentions. The French could have a coal station, in particular of the same character as the British. Delcasse then officially submitted that a satisfactory solution would not be out of reach when he proclaimed the following in debates:

*“I thank the Chamber for having left to the Government the duty of setting this affair and allowing it time to do so. Whereas some journals –only a few I admit–seized on the Muscat incident as an opportunity to announce a fresh reculade, as if they wished to enjoy beforehand a humiliation for their country, I thank the Chamber for having by its silence testified its confidence in the Government. It sees that the satisfaction obtained has not been the less prompt or less complete for having been asked for quietly”.*³

The difficulties which had gathered over Muscat were now seen to have gradually decreased, and the relations between the two European States

were recognized not to have been disturbed by the affair of Muscat; the solution to this matter, achieved formally in April 1904, encouraged them in future to work together to solve their differences throughout the world.¹ In the Salisbury-Combon negotiations for settlement, the Foreign Office approved the French desire to refer the question of Muscat to any discussion which would take place with the Foreign Secretary, for the purposes of drawing a general conclusion to the difficulties in Muscat.²

On 11th March 1899, a telegram was sent by the Secretary of State for India, to the British PRPG Col. Meade, instructing him that the British Government had no objection against the French Government having any shed in Muscat harbour, similar to that of Her Majesty's Government, in which no political or territorial right of any kind were involved, and that any request submitted to the Sultan in this regard must be approved by the Agent, who should secure the British influence in Oman undiminished, and watch the Sultan's action.³ The Resident suggested in his reply to the Government of India that the Sultan should stick to his obligations, and not offer a coal depot to the French before they requested on this point. He felt that this was the right time to tell the Sultan that any such concession to the French in Muscat had been recommended by the British Government at the French request.⁴ The Foreign Secretary approved in his following communication that any coal station for the French should be under the name of coal sheds, as the British and French Governments were agreed that the French sheds in Muscat on the same terms would not be refused.⁵

In connection with these suggestions, the British man-of-war, H.M.S. "*Sphinx*" arrived in Muscat on 6th March 1899, and brought a cablegram addressed to the French Consul that day. Accordingly, M. Ottavi held a meeting with His Highness Sultan Sayyid Faisal which was also attended by the Sultan's brother Sayyid Muhammed b. Turki and his wazir Sayyid Mohammed b. Azzan. Ottavi informed the Sultan about the Anglo-French settlement of the matter – in which the French had secured assurances from H.M. Government that the independence of Oman would

remain intact, and that there would be no more British protests against the French obtaining coal sheds from the Sultan in Muscat territory.¹

By now the Sultan's showed a considerable improvement towards the British authorities, and he was quite satisfied with the settlement, which certainly secured his prestige as Sultan and regained the assurances of the independence of his country. Hereupon the Sultan started to show his allegiance to the British during the exchange visit with the Political Agent C.G.F. Fagan at Muscat, and gave his approval towards their views on granting the French coal sheds in al-Makalla, one of the Muscat coves. His Highness appeared to wish achieve that good relationship with the British, believing, that the French were not a power he could depend on during the time of difficulties. The British took this fact to their advantage, and forced the Sultan to comply with their demands at Muscat, as the basis of granting their support.² On the other hand Fagan had explained to the Sultan that the British Government had never refused that French desire to obtain a coal station in Muscat. Nevertheless, coal had been readily supplied to them whenever required from the British sheds, and they were in full respect of His Highness Government as far as he held himself to his engagements with the British.³

Accordingly the Secretary of State approved any suggestion presented by the PAM and the Resident in the Gulf, regarding the French sheds in Muscat. The discussions and settlement of the matter remained the Foreign Office priority at this time.

On 12th April 1899, the Secretary of State for India, Lord Hamilton, confirmed to the Government of India the Foreign Office's desire to keep the decision about granting the French sheds in Muscat under their approval. The French sharing with the British coal sheds in Muscat with equal right had been submitted several times for discussion on the basis of Government of India reports.⁴ Henceforth the consultation of the Foreign Office was absolutely required and the settlement of the issue was imminent. The Foreign Office approved the order that the French could utilize the coal sheds at Muscat which the British possessed there, and the French and the British Governments should agree beforehand as to the procedure, and inform their representatives accordingly; but that there should be no joint communications from the two Consuls to the Sultan.

The right of the French was to be restricted to occupancy on agreement, changing no territorial or sovereign rights. The coal sheds should be under British control and there would be no question of fortifications or flying the French flag over the sheds.¹ In accordance with these instructions the Government of India was given the full authority to deal with the issue, and the French were informed of the British view under which they should make their request to the Sultan, who was instructed not to take any action before the Agent had given his approval, while he could not protest against any request which would be made in accordance with British views.²

The issue had now reached its conclusion, and the success of the British policy of forcing the French to accept their view on permission to have coal sheds at Muscat was now confirmed by telegram from the Secretary of state for India, in which he stated to the Agent that the French Ambassador in London had confirmed to Lord Salisbury their acceptance of the British offer, and they had applied for it from the Sultan of Muscat. The Agent was instructed to ascertain orally from M. Ottavi, the precise location desired for the French station at Muscat.³ Fagan then told the Government of India that the location was not decided yet, and Ottavi suggested leaving the choice of the sheds for the time being until the next visit to Muscat of the French man-of-war, whose Captain would be asked to make choice of a suitable place.⁴

Sultan Faisal had also agreed to dismiss Abdul Aziz al-Rawahi, and to discuss any question regarding his communication with M. Ottavi, and to consult the British Government in any involvement with the French authority in future. He had also agreed to listen to the British advice, that any concession of any part of his country to the French could not be acquiesced in, but French coal sheds within Muscat harbour should be on the same conditions as the English, without flag or fortifications. On June 7th 1899, the French Ambassador in London complained to the British Foreign Secretary that Muscat harbour was not big enough to contain coal sheds for French and British at the same time, and suggested asking for some other cove within the Muscat area, such as al-Jissah cove. The Foreign Secretary rejected the request, but he promised to offer them one

of the three British coal sheds in al-Makalla cove if they wished.¹ The French reaction to this offer seemed not to be immediate acceptance, as it was considered not to be adequate to their requirements, and they asked for the cove of Riyam.² At this time Ottavi worked to encourage the Sultan to give the French independent coal sheds anywhere in Muscat waters, such as Sedab about 5 km from Muscat. However, the request was not within the Sultan's decision, and no promise was given to him.³ On the basis of the French complaint of the inadequacy of al-Makalla cove when shared with the British, Fagan confirmed to the Foreign Secretary that the French allegation was the contrary to the truth, while the cove of Riyam would be an unsuitable place to acquire as it was the summer station of the Suri dhow owners, and quite inappropriate for a coal depot.⁴ On 10th August 1899, the British Government confirmed their refusal to the French Government's request for Riyam, and they were prepared to give them the third shed in al-Makalla.⁵ The French Vice-Consul at Muscat, M. Ottavi, stated to the British Agent at Muscat during the discussion of the matter that he was disappointed at the weakness of the French Government in dealing with this question, and he urged his Government to resist the British demands on the Sultan of Muscat.⁶

The French Government finally complied with the British demands and accepted their offer, when they decided to take the southern site of al-Makalla cove, and the choice was confirmed with an exchange of memoranda between the two Governments' representatives at Muscat on 11th and 12th August, 1900.

However, the dispute over the settlement of the coal station problem, and the compromise of the two Governments' did not end the two powers competition in Oman. The French demands had been directed towards the Suri French flag holder protection, which had renewed the British protest against the French activities in the dominions of the Sultan of Oman.

The flags question appeared now as the hot issue which would define the British and the French interests in Oman for the next few years.

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