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THE IMPACT OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE ON OMAN IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY (1856-1913)

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ABSTRACT

Oman has gained special importance in the Arabian Gulf region throughout its long history. This is attributed to its distinctive geographical location in the Arabian Gulf region and the Arabian Sea. Oman has served as the southern gateway to the Gulf and a crossroads for international trade and navigation. This advantage has granted it experience in sea riding and carrying out important business activities between East Africa and South-West Asia, including the slave trade. The slave trade has been an important source of Oman's economy from slaves imported from East Africa. The period (1856-1913) is selected, during which Oman after the death of Saeed bin Sultan is divided into two separate authorities, the first in Oman, its capital Muscat, and the second in East Africa, its capital Zanzibar. European countries, notably Britain and France, have contributed to establishing this division, arguing that it serves the case of the abolition of the illegal trade (the slave trade) in Oman. This study concluded that Britain and France had ended their competition for Oman by agreeing to transfer this case to the International Court of Justice and then to apply its decisions. It also found that abolishing the slave trade in Oman had resulted in several consequences for Britain. They included the practice of piracy through its naval fleet, so that none of the Omani ships dared to sail for fear of being inspected by the British fleet. This facilitated the extension of British influence in the Sultanate and the confiscation of goods on the Omani ships under the pretext of being on ships engaged in the slave trade. This in turn led to the economic exhaustion of Omani merchants.

INTRODUCTION

Oman has gained special importance in the Arabian Gulf region throughout its long history. This is attributed to its distinctive geographical location in the Arabian Gulf region and the Arabian Sea. Oman has served as the southern gateway to the Gulf and a crossroads for international trade and navigation. This advantage has granted it experience in sea riding and carrying out important

business activities between East Africa and South-West Asia, including the slave trade. The slave trade has been an important source of Oman's economy from slaves imported from East Africa. The period (1856-1913) is selected, during which Oman after the death of Saeed bin Sultan is divided into two separate authorities, the first in Oman, its capital Muscat, and the second in East Africa, its capital Zanzibar. European countries, notably Britain and France, have contributed to establishing this division, arguing that it serves the case of the abolition of the illegal trade (the slave trade) in Oman.

This study aimed at addressing the issue of the slave trade in Oman through explaining the role of Britain and France in abolishing the slave trade, the impact of this abolition on the Omani economy, as well as the most important effects of abolishing this illegal trade on legitimate trade in Oman. This study is divided into introduction, three sections and conclusion. The first section dealt with Oman's geographical location and its impact on its trade and economy through the ages. The second section discussed the slave trade between the coasts of East Africa and Oman. While the final section analyzed the British and French role in the abolition of the slave trade and its effect on the Omani economy. The study relied on various Arab and foreign sources as well as theses, dissertations and periodicals.

Section One: The Geographical Location of Oman and Its Impact on Oman's Trade

In the past, Oman has been one of the oldest political units emerged in the Arabian Peninsula. Throughout its history, Oman has preserved its independence in many ages. In addition, it has witnessed the interaction of many human civilizations on its territory, such as the Sumerian, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Persians and Arabs. All this is due to the important geographical location it has enjoyed, making it the crossroads of land and sea throughout the ages (Al-Khairo, 1987).

Oman is semi-isolated from other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, surrounded by the Arabian Gulf to the north, the Gulf of Oman to the east, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to the south, and the Rub' al Khali (the "Empty Quarter") desert to the west (Qassem, 1967). It is located between two latitudes (40-60, 20-26) north and two longitudes (50-51, 40-59) south. It has an area of approximately (309,500 km) (Lorimer, 1967a). Its climate is characterized by high temperatures and relatively low rainfall (Zalloum, 1963). Oman's territory is divided into three natural areas: the coastal plains that surround it, the stone heights that stretch along the Gulf of Oman and then the inland plateau and its slopes in the Empty Quarter (Zalloum, 1963).

The Gulf of Oman coast is located to the east of Oman, which extends from Ras Musandam to the north to Ras al Hadd to the south. Its most famous cities are Muscat, Sur, Muttrah and Sohar. The coastal plain did not appear in the mountain tops area in the north. It first appeared at Dibba as a line covered by mountains in the town of Fujairah and Mudeer (Hawley, 1970).

The coasts of Muscat are located in the coastal area between Ras Musandam to Ras al Hadd. They are bordered Samail Valley to the west and Al Maiba Valley to the east. The geographical location contributed to Muscat's international perception as compared to the Omani cities. In addition, it is the capital of Oman and containing many commercial ports that have facilitated communication with the outside world and the interaction of developments and events there (Al-Abed, 1979).

In general, Oman's geographical location has been particularly important because it occupies an important position for roads to India, Africa and the Red Sea. Additionally, monsoon has been the best way for Omanis to practice trade with the surrounding areas (Abdul Hamid, 1959). Omani Arabs have benefited from Oman's geographical location, engaging in east-west trade and transporting goods to meet the needs of the population (Hawley, 1970).

Section Two: The Slave Trade Between Oman and The Coasts of East Africa

The slave trade was the main activity in Oman, as well as the backbone of its economic life. This trade was within the trade practiced in the world as a whole (Coupland, 1959). Since 1806, Muscat had been one of the largest transit centers for the slave trade in the Arabian Gulf. However, this center had shrunk when it had been competing with Sur, located in the south of Muscat (Kelly, 1971). The motives of the slave trade in Oman and the Arabian Gulf region differed from the West, as they employed slaves to work in economic activity, such as agriculture, fishing, grazing, diving, crafts, as well as domestic service (Lorimer, 1967b). The small population, the scarcity of labor and the tribal social culture prevailing in the region might be among the reasons behind the popularity and persistence of the slave trade during this period. The customs and traditions prevailing in the tribal society also accepted the use, sale and purchase of slaves at a time when many did not wish or refuse to engage in it, which greatly helped to popularize the trade (Abdul Rahman, 2000).

The Omanis preceded others in the practice of the slave trade as a result of their arrival to the islands of the East African coast islands, such as Zanzibar and Bemba. These islands became popular markets for the slave trade. This business activity was not limited to coastal areas, but Arab merchants were able to operate regular commercial flights that reached the heart of the African continent in the tropical lakes (Qassem, 1975). In 1822, the number of slaves exported to Muscat from the coast of East Africa, which was the main source of this trade, was estimated at 60,000 to 100,000 per year. Most of slaves were young people. Thus, Oman was the main crossing point from which this trade passed to the markets of the eastern regions of Oman, Iraq, Persia and India (Al-Akkad & Qassem, 1979).

African tribal chiefs engaged in the slave trade through imprisoning members of the tribes in conflict with them, enslaving and taking them to ports to sell them to Arab merchants. Two important sites emerged in Africa for this trade. The first was in Kilwa, which was a major port for the export of slaves, and the second was in Zanzibar, which was the main center of their import from the African continent. In these two cities, large markets were established for the

sale of slaves. In 1856, Zanzibar's slave trade became the total preserve of Muscat's Arabs and rulers, through which they received significant material income as a result of the taxes imposed on the trade. The length of the east African coast, which was about 400 miles long, helped to establish and flourish the slave trade between the African regions and Oman (Kelly, 1979).

Slave prices in Oman remained stable. The price for boys was (120) riyals per slave, and adults (150) riyals per slave, while girls were priced at between (200-300) riyals per person (Lorimer, 1967b). Females of slaves were taken as slaves and domestic workers, while males were used as workers on farms, houses and ships (Mangat, 1969). Slaves were distributed after being removed from Omani ports by transporting them to Persia and the coasts of the United Arab Emirates, to be used as workers in maritime activity (Mangat, 1969). The relationship between the slave and the owner was described as routine, i.e., the slave can do some work in exchange for paying some of his fees to his master (Hollingsworth, 1968).

Section Three: The Impact of The Abolition of The Slave Trade on The Omani Economy

At the end of the 19th century, the slave trade was greatly degraded by British interventions, which, from the Omanis' viewpoint, were evidence of European intervention in the slave trade (Research Division of the Arab American Oil Company, 1952). Western countries witnessed a strong movement aimed at abolishing the slave trade, and viewed slavery as an act of affront to the human dignity and contrary to all principles of morality and justice. Britain, the largest commercial beneficiary in the slave trade, was the first to call for the abolition of slavery (Coupland, 1933). ⁽¹⁾ The British Government quickly responded by finding that this abolition would enable it to impose its control over large parts of the world and the seas by imposing treaties on countries of strategic and economic importance, under the pretext of combating slavery. This, in turn, would give Britain the right to inspect the ships of these countries on the grounds that it was implementing the abolition policy. Its position on slavery was not for humanitarian and moral motives as much as it was a means to achieve political and interest purposes (Al-Ghannam, 1980).

Oman was one of the regions of the Arabian Gulf most affected by the anti-slavery trade measures because its social and economic system was associated with that trade. Accordingly, a series of internal disturbances emerged against the Government of Muscat, as well as Omanis remained engaging in this trade. The slaves were transferred secretly from East Africa to Somalia and then to the Gulf of Aden to Hadramaut to avoid passing through the sea to avoid harassment by British ships. This had a negative impact on the mistreatment of slaves and the increase in their tragic status (Al-Akkad, 1984). The Regime of Abu Saidi (Al-Jamil, 1991) ⁽²⁾ in Zanzibar suffered great material sacrifices as a result of its involvement with Britain in suppressing the centuries-old slave trade by

signing a joint treaty between the two parties in 1822. This treaty stipulated prohibiting the sale of slaves to European countries and the confiscation of ships engaged in such a terrible trade. Mr. Saeed bin Sultan, who ruled Oman during the period (1806-1856), refused to receive any compensation from the British Government as a result of the heavy losses following the application of the treaties to abolish the slave trade (Al-Jamil, 1991).

Britain assigned the task of attacking the slave trade near its sources to the British fleet, which made great efforts to fight this trade in Oman, particularly between 1856 and 1860. While the task of combating the slave trade and arresting ships carrying slaves was entrusted to the ships Tigris and Falklands (Lorimer, 1967b). Oman witnessed a significant deterioration in the volume of trade exchange, as a result of the political disorder in it, especially after the death of Saeed bin Sultan Abu Saidi (1806-1856) and the occurrence of disputes between his sons (Majid and Thwini). These disputes eventually led to dividing Oman's property between them; therefore, Thwini remained sultan on Muscat, while Majid became sultan of the Sultanate of Omani Arabic Zanzibar. This means that Omani-Asian property is completely politically separated from African ones (Qassem, 1967). Britain was keen to confirm the political separation of Oman's property, with the aim of eliminating the Arab-African forces by dividing them and their property (Kelly, 1979). The role of colonial powers was not only to encourage separation in Oman, but also Britain, Germany and France began working to penetrate the African part, which has become self-contained (Ruth, 1988).

As a result of the political developments in Omani power following the death of Sultan Saeed, Thwini bin Saeed (Sultan of Oman) in 1860 argued that any action by the British fleet in the Gulf region towards the slave trade would not be effective (Kelly, 1979). Since the 400-mile-long East African coast was not monitored, he suggested that Britain should put more pressure on his brother Majid (Sultan of Zanzibar) and ask him to ban the slave transport on his property (Ibrahim, 1982). In addition, ban should be applied to the chiefs of the Omani coast to prevent them from transporting slaves to the Gulf region (Kelly, 1979). All contacts with the Sultan of Zanzibar on the prohibition of the slave trade in the area under his control had failed, so the work of British cruisers during this period had focused on areas between Ras al Hadd and the coasts of Zanzibar. However, in 1860, Britain equipped two armed commercial cruisers with anchors in Zanzibar whose primary task was to prevent the shipment of any slaves on the Gulf ships, and to arrest as many offending ships as possible that were able to carry slaves before leaving the African coast (Kelly, 1979).

In March 1861, the two British cruisers arrived in Zanzibar and began pursuing slave ships. The actions of the British fleet led to severe tension between the Asian and African Omani sultanates due to hostilities by British officers while observing East African waters in search of slaves, which, from the viewpoint of Europeans, particularly the French, were regarded as real piracy (Haraz, 1971). The result of operations by British fleet ships was that in 1861, the British cruiser Lara was able to seize a ship belonging to Sur merchants and release more than 59 slaves from it (Al-Akkad & Qassem, 1979). Under pressure from the British fleet in Zanzibar, Majid bin Saeed issued a warning to the ships to

leave Zanzibar port within three days. As a result of the lack of response from these ships, clashes between the owners of the ships and the British cruiser resulted in the destruction of 16 ships and the release of 250 slaves (Kelly, 1979). Zanzibar Governor Majid bin Saeed thus demonstrated his full cooperation with the British government in eliminating the slave trade, particularly those of Omanis. Therefore, in 1864, Britain imposed new restrictions to curb the slave trade on Oman's coasts (Haraz, 1971).

Although Zanzibar Governor Majid bin Saeed had carried out all promises against the Omanis, he disregarded the confiscation and destruction of Arab ships by the British fleet and the return of their navigators to Zanzibar for trial (Kelly, 1979) in courts governed by the British council authorities. In addition, they sent freed slaves to the British colonies to work on their farms as free workers (Haraz, 1971). Beginning from 1869, the British fleet began its first large-scale crackdown on the slave trade in the Arabian Gulf region and East Africa, owing to the increased volume of the slave trade and the arrival of large numbers of Omani slave traders in Zanzibar (Lorimer, 1967b). During the operations carried out by British cruisers, about 13 Omani and Gulf ships were destroyed, and about 967 slaves were released in the following year, i.e., in 1870. Additionally, about 400 ships were intercepted and inspected during their journey from East Africa to the Arabian Gulf, 100 slaves were released and about 11 traders were brought to trial. Yet, the anti-slavery proponents believed that these statistics represented only a tenth of the annual slave trade (Ibrahim, 1982). The suspected ships were brought to trial in a fleet court in Zanzibar established by the British Navy, but was ineffective because of the Arab ignorance of British language and laws. This led to the destruction of many Arab ships, while the survived ones did not venture to sail for fear of piracy of the British fleet between East Africa and the Arabian Gulf (Ibrahim, 1982).

Since 1861, Omani sailors secretly transported slaves by flying the French flag over their commercial ships, avoiding the harassment they faced by British fleet ships (Coupland, 1938). Relations between Omanis and French began through trade exchange through the islands in East Africa. After the death of Sultan Saïd bin Sultan, France tried to maintain its relations with Britain, issuing a set of instructions, informing the French consul in Zanzibar that the French should export slaves only if the directives were given (Ruth, 1988). However, France granted some Arab merchants' French flag-raising permits on their ships to get rid of British surveillance and inspections in the Arabian Gulf under the pretext of fighting the slave trade, based on the Treaty on the Omani-French Treaty of 1844. This treaty included the exemption of French nationals and their servants, even while in the Sultan's land, from arrest, inspection and trial in local courts (Ruth, 1988). Article 4 of the treaty also provided for the French to be given judicial powers to the French nationals in Muscat and its districts. It also provided that those who served the French nationals enjoyed the same privileges as the French. Therefore, the residents of Sur took advantage of obtaining French citizenship to escape the British naval follow-up and inspection. France found this a great opportunity for it to achieve as much influence as possible in the region among the local population (Qassem, 1985).

On the other hand, the Omani-French Treaty of 1844 gave the French the right to establish any warehouses wherever they wished in the sultan's territory (Al-Wasmi, 1993). Britain feared that the French might use that treaty to establish centers in Oman, although the British believed that France had no commercial or maritime interests in the Arabian Gulf and that the establishment of a warehouse there could not be for expansion purposes (Al-Akkad, 1984). The raising of the French flag on Arab ships had the worst impact on the British Navy, as this hindered it from exercising the right to inspect under the Treaty on the Prohibition of The Slavery Trade signed by Britain with Turki bin Saeed (1864-1913) in 1873. The number of Omani ships carrying the French flag was about 70 ships (Ruth, 1988). Britain objected to the actions of the French in Muscat and withdrew French citizenship from some Omanis, based on the 1861 statement on respect and independence of Oman's sovereignty. Britain claimed that the prohibition of French citizenship for ship-owners was contrary to that independence (Qassem, 1985). In addition, Britain continued to provide financial assistance to the Sultan of Oman to ensure his loyalty on the one hand as well as to incite him against the French (Kelly, 1979).

The fever of conflict and competition among European colonial states for control of Oman and the Arabian Gulf region, under the pretext of the issue of trade abolition, had a negative impact on the Omani economy, which continued to deteriorate since 1861. In addition to the popularity of illegal trade (smuggling, slavery and arms trade) that was popular in the coastal area of Oman (). Despite official protests by the British Foreign Office to the Paris government, French consuls continued to grant licenses to Omani ship-owners who were seeking French citizenship for their ships because the French were always against the principle of maritime inspection. Since 1867, the French were able to get rid of collecting the international treaties on this matter, but they did not even sign the ship inspection terms approved by the 1891 Brussels International Conference to consider procedures for the abolition of the slave trade (Al-Wasmi, 1993).

French interests flourished in 1894, particularly in the port of Sur, on Muscat's southern coast, whose residents were strong sailors and had close ties to the French colonies on the African coast. They went on regular trips to the African coast, where they engaged in the slave trade under the protection of the French flag in 1896. They often demanded compensation from the Sultan of Muscat for being abused by authorities (Lorimer, 1967b). This means that the raising of French flags had prevented the Omani Sultan from exercising control over his inner provinces or territorial waters. The Sultan of Oman, in 1900, thus issued an appeal to the people of Sur. He stated that he did not recognize the sovereignty of any foreign State over the port, and that he and his British allies should be free to inspect and impose tax on the ships belonging to the people of Sur and demanded that they should register their own ships (Al-Wasmi, 1993). Britain has followed a series of measures to eliminate French activity in the granting of French documents and flags to Omani merchant ships. There was tension in Franco-British relations, which ended in 1904 with the peaceful resolution of their dispute by invoking the International Court of Justice. This agreement helped to resolve many of the problems that existed between them. Therefore, Britain achieved its desires to prevail over French activity (Qassem,

2001), which had begun to weaken since 1905 until it declined in 1913 in Oman and the Arabian Gulf region in general (Lorimer, 1967b). In fact, the sultans of Oman were in dire need of British support to ensure their survival in the regime. However, the development of the situation in Oman after the killing of Thwini bin Saeed on February 11, 1866, and the continuation of the slave trade at the same time had led to a reconsideration of the British government's policy of fighting the slave trade in the East African and Arabian Gulf regions in general, especially after the assumption of two new sultans in both Oman and Zanzibar at close time, namely, Turki bin Saeed (1864-1913), Sultan of Oman, and Burges bin Saeed (1870-1888), Sultan of Zanzibar (Al-Farsi, 1944).

In this sense, on 6 May 1871, the British Government announced the formation of a selected committee of the British Parliament headed by one of its members (Lorimer, 1967b). The committee's task was to research and investigate the slave trade and how to eliminate it, as well as to examine the details of existing treaties on the slave trade between Britain and Omani sultans in the East African and the Arabian Gulf regions (Kelly, 1979). After extensive discussions, the committee wrote its report, which contained a number of recommendations. The most important recommendations were the need to eliminate the slave trade and inviting Omani sultans to sign new treaties to achieve this goal, as well as increasing the number of British cruisers in Indian Ocean for controlling and inspecting Arab ships (Babiker, 1417 AH).

A new convention to suppress the slave trade was therefore drawn up, under which British officials pledged to ensure the continuation of Zanzibar's aid (Kelly, 1979). The British Government of Bombay would pay Zanzibar's aid through the British political agent in Muscat retroactively from the assumption of power by Sultan Turki in March 1872, in exchange for agreeing to sign the agreement. The Sultan of Oman had already agreed to conclude a treaty to ban the slave trade on April 14, 1873. This treaty provoked violent reactions from Oman's conservative tribes that refused this treaty, but at the same time it increased British domination of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean as well as the Arabian Gulf (Lorimer, 1967b). British warships then rarely found Omani ships trading in slaves between East Africa and Oman, as one or two ships were captured each year, until the import of slaves in 1875 became very limited. In some years, no ship carrying slaves came from East Africa to Oman, as happened in 1874-1879 (Kelly, 1979).

The revival of the slave trade from 1884 led to the resumption of operations by British cruisers from the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. In September 1884, a British ship pursued a slave ship was passing to the coast of Batina and fired artillery fire at it, and the captain of the Arab ship managed to escape with five merchants, while six other merchants were arrested and about 154 slaves were released. British control of the routes of Arab ships continued from 1896 to 1905, and the British fleet played little role in the capture of an Omani ship because some Omanis used the French flag to smuggle slaves, as well as the lack of slave trade workers due to British control of East Africa and the Arabian Gulf (Lorimer, 1967b).

Britain thus destroyed the vast majority of Omani ships engaged in the legal and illegal trade between East Africa and Oman. In fact, the remaining Omani ships were not sailing for fear of the British fleet's piracy, which severed trade links between East Africa, Oman and the Arabian Gulf in general (Ibrahim, 1982). Moreover, the presence of British warships in the coast of Oman under the pretext of resisting the slave trade eventually facilitated the extension of British influence in the Sultanate, and making the Omani sultans feel anxiety and fear (Research Division of the Arab American Oil Company, 1952). In addition, foreign influence was removed from the Arabian Gulf region through continuous patrols by British ships in the Arabian Sea and the Arabian Gulf to arrest Omani ships accused of trading slaves (Al-Bassam, 1998).

The above explanation showed the importance of the role played by Britain to abolish the slave trade in Oman, but at the same time, it had economically affected Omani merchants. In addition, Britain had benefited greatly from freed slaves through their work in the territories of the British colonies.

CONCLUSION

Oman enjoyed an important geographical and strategic position. This allowed Omanis to play an important role in maritime trade in the Indian Ocean until the arrival of European powers, such as Britain and France, whose attention drew to the importance of Omani ports, especially Britain. Britain was anxious about Oman's naval power that extended to East Africa because the presence of a strong Arab entity from the region was contrary to Britain's interests in the region. The slave trade was an important manifestation of economic activity in Oman. This trade prevailed at the time in east Africa and the Arabian Gulf. Hence, Britain's adoption of banning the slave trade was only for a purpose through which it sought to control the region's capabilities. It succeeded largely by achieving a number of political advantages. Therefore, it succeeded in removing its rival forces, securing its transport links to India, as well as seizing power of Oman through holding of treaties on banning the slave trade. The study concluded that despite the British-French competition for the Arabian Gulf region and Oman, France worked to resist British influence in Oman by giving French flags to some ships of the Omani port of Sur so that they could not be stopped or inspected by British ships. This resulted in the Omani sultan's weak control of the port and the revival of illegal commercial activities. The study showed that Britain and France had ended their competition for Oman by agreeing to transfer the case to the International Court of Justice and then to apply its decisions. It also found that abolishing the slave trade in Oman had resulted in several consequences for Britain. They included the practice of piracy through its naval fleet, so that none of the Omani ships dared to sail for fear of being inspected by the British fleet. This facilitated the extension of British influence in the Sultanate and the confiscation of goods on the Omani ships under the pretext of being on ships engaged in the slave trade. This in turn led to the economic exhaustion of Omani merchants.

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