

Interview with Talal Saad and Said Seif on the political situation in Oman and Dhofar

introduction

In February 1971 the Conservative Government announced its plans to withdraw British forces from the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971, in accordance with a plan originally drawn up by the Wilson government in January 1968 and accepted by the Conservatives only after they had come into office. Britain, formally in control of nine Gulf states, was to hand independence to them. The British had hoped to unite this group of states into a neo-colonial federation, the Union of Arab Emirates, but internal disagreements between the rulers have so far prevented this Union from emerging in its intended form.

The British 'withdrawal' is in many ways less significant than is officially claimed. Britain pretends that the Sultanate of Oman is an independent state and will therefore keep her military installations there after 1971, and continue to run the Sultan's army. In the areas she is formally quitting Britain will continue to train and arm the local armies, either through defence agreements or through mercenaries organized by covert government agencies. The us is also prepared to back up local reactionary forces: it has an air base in Saudi Arabia, at Dahrán, and naval facilities on the island of Bahrein. These imperialist military forces could be made available to local states if their own forces were unable to suppress oppositions, and if the leading neo-colonial régimes in the area, Iran and Saudi Arabia, were unable to provide necessary support.

The active revolutionary movements in the area fall into three groups: Communist Parties (Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, Iran, Iraq); Ba'thi revolutionary groups (Bahrein, Ras al-Kheima) and 'Marxist-Leninist' organizations. The third group are the most powerful. They are former branches of the pan-Arab party, the Arab Nationalist Movement, which desintegrated in 1968. Three of these former branches are active in the Gulf area: the *Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf*, in Dhofar; the *National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf*, in Oman; and the *Popular Revolutionary Movement*, in Trucial Oman, Bahrein, Qatar and Kuwait. The PFLOAG is by far the most important of these, and after five years of guerrilla war, it controls almost the whole of Dhofar. The British were forced in July 1970 to depose the reigning Sultan Said and install his son Qabus instead, in an attempt to stem the opposition by token reforms and by opening Oman to colonial capitalist development of the kind taking place elsewhere in the Gulf. The interview we print here was recorded on February 21st, 1971 and covers the major strategic conceptions of the allied revolutionary groups in the area. Talal Saad is a member of the General Command of PFLOAG, and Said Seif is a member of the PRM.

In July of last year the British overthrew Said bin Taimur and put in his son Qabus. What have the British done since then, and what have Qabus' policies been?

TALAL SAAD: What happened in July 1970 was not unexpected; it was the result of a long-term plan, drawn up by British imperialism to contain, and then liquidate, the prevailing revolutionary trend. In this sense, the overthrow of Said bin Taimur was part of a double plan. First there was the plan for a so-called 'Omani constitutional monarchy'; this had long been advocated by Tariq bin Taimur, Said's brother. The second plan was obviously that of the Union of Arab Emirates. Both were political fronts for British neo-colonialism in the area, in a desperate attempt to advance seemingly patriotic régimes. There were two major reasons why the British were driven to replace Said by his son. The first was the success achieved by the revolution in Dhofar; this had begun to constitute a serious threat to the interests of imperialism in the whole area. In contrast, the reactionary régime of Said bin Taimur had become incapable of coping with the rising tide of revolution in Dhofar. A second equally important cause was the beginning of armed struggle in Oman proper under the leadership of the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf. After Said's replacement, the British tried to undermine the revolution by a series of so-called reforms. In Salala itself, and in the plain around Salala, one or two clinics were opened, and some land was reclaimed. But in the mountains controlled by the Front British imperialism was unable to

carry out even these minimal reforms, because of the Front's control over the mountains. The British also tried to divide the revolution and attract some of the tribesmen, but that too was a miserable failure. Militarily, British imperialism stepped up its attacks, especially its genocidal assault on the civil population in Dhofar. Recently, in the western sector, there was an attack on a civilian settlement at Mbrot; some people were wounded and many cattle were killed. The western part of the liberated area has been subjected to constant strafing and bombing of an indiscriminate kind, in an attempt to terrify the civilian population and weaken their support for the revolution.

The British have announced their plans to try to cut the supply lines between South Yemen and Dhofar in the way that the Americans are trying to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail in Indo-China. What have they done in this respect?

TALAL SAAD: There is an overall concentrated plan to liquidate the revolution throughout the Gulf, and all the forces of reaction in the area have been working in this direction. This plan is being carried out as follows. First, Saudi Arabia is arming and financing mercenaries and these forces, together with Saudi Arabia's own army, are making constant raids into the fifth and sixth provinces of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The aim of this is to liquidate the revolutionary régime in South Yemen and to deprive the revolution in the Gulf of its secure base. In addition, there has been constant bombing of the region around Hauf, the South Yemeni village on the borders of Dhofar, and of the track that links South Yemen to the front lines of the Dhofari revolution, and which crosses the western sector of the liberated areas.

One of the causes of the overthrow of Said, as Talal Saad has said, was the outbreak of armed struggle in Oman itself. Now in Oman in the 1950's there was a tribal rebellion, led by the Imam Ghalib. Could you say what your relationship to that was, since it was regarded in the west as an anti-imperialist struggle and was supported by revolutionaries? What were the events which precipitated the June crisis in Oman, and what has happened since then? What have Qabus and Tariq been trying to do?

SAID SEIF: The most important thing to say about Imam Ghalib's movement is that it represented a clash *within* the imperialist camp. It was a conflict between the Imam and Said bin Taimur, i.e. a conflict between an absolute régime and a caricature of that obsolete régime, represented by the Imam himself. When we say that it is a conflict within the imperialist camp, we mean that behind Said bin Taimur and Imam Ghalib were Britain on the one hand and America and Saudi Arabia on the other. However, although the Imam's movement represented a clash within the imperialist camp, it did have sizeable mass support; the masses who supported the Imam supported him mainly as a patriotic reaction to the British occupation of the interior of Oman in 1954.

As for the events of June 1970, it was clear by then that Britain was depending on an obsolete régime that was increasingly in contradiction with social and economic developments in the Gulf as a whole.

Two opposition forces stood against this régime. One force argued that the best way to counter the revolution was by making certain concessions and certain reforms. This was the reactionary opposition to Said bin Taimur. The second opposition was the progressive opposition; it opposed the whole structure of Omani society and the organic ties that united this society and the Said dynasty to British imperialism. These were two local Arab opposition forces. On the other hand, there had traditionally been two trends among the British imperialists in the area. One trend was a traditionalist, colonialist trend, consisting mainly of people who had come from India and were personal advisers to the Sultan; they defended the policy of maintaining Said in office and at times justified all he stood for. Against these traditionalists there stood a group of modernists who wanted to rely not on an autocratic régime like Said's but on the new middle class, which was to be the major basis for the preservation of neo-colonialism in the area. What tipped the scales in favour of the second, modernist, trend was the launching of armed struggle in the interior of Oman in June 1970. It was at this time that Shell felt that its interests were at risk, and pressed for Britain to back the 'moderate' wing of the Al Bu Said dynasty, represented by Qabus and Tariq.

June 1970 was an embodiment and an extension of the policies of the *Popular Revolutionary Movement*. Towards the beginning of 1969 this organization decided that the best way to drive imperialism from the Gulf was to hit at its weakest point, the Omani interior. The *Popular Revolutionary Movement* therefore created the *National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf* to lead armed struggle in Oman. The Front considered its struggle to be an extension of the armed struggle already being waged in Dhofar. On June 12th, 1970 the Front launched a set of raids and attacks against government military posts in the Green Mountain area; there were political links with the peasants and shepherds of the area and the basic tactic was to create a revolutionary foco on the mountain. This widescale military operation led to a series of arrests, many of which were the result of mistakes committed by militants of the Front itself. The most important of these was that many chose to remain in Matrah, a coastal city where it is very difficult to find refuge or to make a retreat.

A series of arrests were made on June 18th and many of the leaders of the Front were captured. Among them were Ahmad Humeidan, Sa'ud el-Salemi, Yahya el-Ghassani, Ahmad er-Rob'i and Seuliman Seif. Stocks of arms were captured and the British realized, by reading captured documents, that there was a large-scale political movement behind the military events of June 12th. This movement constituted a real revolutionary threat to reaction in the area, and there was barely a month between these arrests (on June 18th) and the overthrow of Said bin Taimur (on July 23rd). The speed of their reaction shows how important the events were in forcing the British to get rid of Sultan Said.

What is the situation in other parts of the Gulf, in Babrein and Trucial Oman? To what extent is there an opposition movement in those areas? Can you also explain the relationship between revolutionary guerrilla warfare in the mountains of Dhofar and Oman and revolutionary struggle in a very different

situation, the cities of the oil-producing Gulf states, where there is no countryside?

SAID SEIF: The British and their local agents consider the interior of Oman to be the safe rear for defending the Trucial Oman area and the other oil-producing states. The revolutionary movement begins from the same premises. Britain's safe rear area can be turned against it. In addition Oman's geographic nature, its social composition and the politics of its people make it suitable to revolutionary work. In the rest of the Gulf, there are the beginnings of revolutionary action in the coastal towns. Bahrein suffers from an unfavourable situation: first, it is an island, and secondly, it is largely surrounded by Saudi Arabia and its military bases. At the present time, there is a noticeable shift in imperialism's policies in Bahrein itself. The revolutionary movement passed through two phases there: one, in the period 1953-56, was a reformist one, and the second one, which exploded in 1965, was a revolutionary one, calling for armed struggle. What imperialism is now trying to do is to implement the programme of the early reformist nationalist movement, by relying on the relatively large middle class and on the comprador bourgeoisie. This forms part of a general attempt to rally all possible forces against the revolutionary threat coming from Dhofar and the interior of Oman.

As far as the British withdrawal is concerned, we think that this withdrawal is a formal one; it marks the transition from old-style colonialism to neo-colonialism. This change is being carried out in several ways. The different states are being provided with the appearance of independence, such as having their own foreign representation, and having large administrations which can attract large numbers of middle-class intellectuals. At the same time the area is being more closely linked to the west, not only as an oil-producing area, but also as an area for other investment and the importation of consumer goods. In particular, there has been a large influx of financial capital into the area in recent months.

The British always divided the area into two zones: Oman, which it pretends is an independent Sultanate, and in which it claims that everything is the result of the wishes of its ruler, while the other zone is the rest of the occupied Gulf, under British protection, from which Britain is going to withdraw by the end of 1971. The function of this distinction is obvious, since it enables Britain to withdraw its bases from the rest of the Gulf and to consolidate its forces in Oman, and in particular to build up its position on the island of Masirah. After the withdrawal of the British from the rest of the Gulf, the Masirah base will become British imperialism's most vital base in the area, i.e. in the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean.

As far as we are concerned, there is very little difference between the kind of treaties that Britain has had with the area officially under its protection, and the kind of treaties it has with the Sultanate of Oman.

As a representative of the 'Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf', what is your opinion of the proposed Union of Arab Emirates? Do

you think that the disagreements within the UAE are of any importance, and what effect do you think the British withdrawal will have on the fight in Dhofar?

TALAL SAAD: All Britain's plans in the Gulf are a response to the development of the revolutionary struggle in the area. As the revolution advances, plans to liquidate it are developed accordingly. The UAE is part of this attempt to liquidate the revolution. It is designed to be both a dam against the advance of the revolution, and to defend the oil interests of British and US imperialism after the formal withdrawal. There are differences within the UAE, but they are secondary compared to the dominant interests that unite all of them together.

The revolution in Dhofar is organically linked to the revolution in the whole of the Arab Gulf. The way to defeat imperialist manoeuvres is through long, difficult and protracted struggle to develop a people's war for liberation in the area as a whole, and to develop and escalate it militarily and politically in Oman in particular, so that Oman can become the revolutionary base from which the spark of revolution can spread to the Emirates and the Gulf coast. As for the withdrawal itself, it will make little difference to the position of British imperialism and of its local clients in the area.

Interviewer: FH

screen 1971

a unique quarterly journal
of the cinema combining
film theory with a practical
concern for education,
which attempts to advance
and develop a theory of the cinema

spring

ben brewster:

structuralism in film

criticism

terry lovell:

sociology and cinema

sam rohdie:

education and criticism

cahiers du cinema:

criticism/ideology/film

summer

special issue on

douglas sirk:

john elderfield

jon halliday fred camper

jean-luc godard

andrew tudor

thomas elsasser

subscription £1.80

single copies 50p

seft

81 dean street
london W1V 6AA