By Adam Dempsey, Research Associate, UK Defence Forum

In 1951, theUnited Kingdom renewed its treaty of friendship, commerce and navigation with the Sultanate of Oman. The new treaty replaced a version signed in 1939 and reinforced a commitment to Oman that can be traced back to 1891. The treaty in particular guaranteed 'most favoured nation' status regarding commercial matters. As a result of such close ties Oman has occasionally looked to the United Kingdom to help safeguard its territorial integrity. In 1954, for example, the Imam of Oman led a rebellion against the Sultan's efforts to extend government control into the interior. With British assistance, the rebellion was eventually defeated in 1959.

In 1957 parliamentary questions were raised requesting clarification of the United Kingdom's commitments toOman. The Government's decision to provide help to the Sultan was made for two reasons. Firstly, the Persian Gulf was recognised as a region of strategic importance to the United Kingdom. Furthermore, a request had been made from a ruler who had traditionally called upon the United Kingdom to help resist aggression and subversion. The request also reflected that the United Kingdom had certain formal and implicit obligations within the region. These included the protection of rulers of sheikhdoms that were subject to attack and internal unrest. However the Government was keen to emphasise that no treaty existed that compelled the United Kingdom to offer assistance.

After 1959 the British government continued to provide assistance to Oman. Throughout the 1970s the United Kingdom provided support to quell the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) insurgency. Assisted by the government of South Yemen, PFLOAG were able to seize swathes ofOman's Dhofar region. With British assistance the PFLOAG insurgency was defeated in 1975. Since the insurgency, Oman's small professional military has been mainly supplied by the United Kingdom. Arrangements include the provision of British contract soldiers. As of 2009 80 personnel from the British armed forces were serving in Oman. The United Kingdom has also provided training for Omanis to become commissioned and non-commissioned officers. Such provisions remain crucial to the Sultanate's plans for the further 'Omanisation' of its armed forces.

Relations between Yemen and Oman began to improve throughout the 1980s. In 1992 Oman settled its territorial disputes with Yemen with the successful demarcation of the border. However wider regional tensions underpin Oman's substantial defence expenditure programmes. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oman's defence budget for 2009 totalled $4.06 billion. These expenditures account for approximately 12% ofOman's entire Gross Domestic Product. The United Kingdom continues to supply arms to the Sultanate. In 2006 the United Kingdom exported £12 million worth of military equipment. This figure increased to £16 million in 2008. However exports increased dramatically in 2007 when exports to Oman totalled £427 million. Amongst Oman's more significant procurement programmes is Project Khareef. In 2007 the Omani government awarded a contract worth $785

million to VT Shipbuilding for the provision of three offshore vessels. The first vessel produced under Project Khareef was successfully launched in 2009.

In January, Viewpoints outlined the United States' response to the challenges posed by al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Whilst AQAP is a recent merger between the Saudi and Yemeni branches both have been active within the region since the early 1990s. Moreover, Viewpoints speculated that AQAP will allow al Qaida's core leadership to rejuvenate command-and-control networks within the region. Key to AQAP's activities is the ability to tap into the needs and grievances of communities within poorly-governed states. Accordingly, as AQAP comprises members from a state that Oman has historically had strained relations with, its internal stability is potentially subject to external challenges.

The prospect of Islamic extremism gaining a foothold in Oman poses a significant question for theUnited Kingdom. Should AQAP or a similar movement instigate unrest would Oman expect a similar level of assistance to that offered in the 1950s and 1970s? To answer this question, Viewpoints sought the opinion of the Oman All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG). However, all senior members of the APPG canvassed regarding this question declined to comment. In light of the APPG's reluctance to consider a potential threat to Oman's security, Viewpoints has employed its own knowledge to address this question.

To date Oman has largely avoided becoming a hotbed of terrorist activity and radical Islamism. In 2002, the Omani authorities arrested a number of al Qaida associates. Amongst them was a Kuwaiti-Canadian associate believed to be attempting to enter Saudi Arabia via Oman. However, out of all the arrests made few actually involved Omani citizens. Indeed Oman has recently proved to be a valuable member in the 'war on terror.' In late January of this year Oman captured Abdullah Saleh al-Eidan, a known al Qaida field commander. Whilst al-Eidan is by no means a senior al Qaida operative his arrest nevertheless yielded some impressive results. According to reports, al-Eidan was captured with information from al Qaida's base inSouth Asia bound for AQAP. Al-Eidan also had the names of 300 al Qaida operatives within his personal belongings.

Yet despite its role in the 'war on terror,' Oman under Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said has traditionally practised m0derate foreign policies. Qaboos has sought to maintain good relations with all Middle East states. Oman's independent foreign policy even led to criticism of the United States' role in Iraq. In 2006, the Omani foreign minister accused the United States of effectively handingIraq to al-Qaida. As a result, Oman called upon the United States to change its strategies in Iraq. The foreign minister also denied that the growing influence of Iran was a major concern of the Gulf Arab states. He also ruled out possible attacks in light of US and Israeli concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme. Until quite recently Oman even had a working relationship with Israel. In 1996 Oman became the first Gulf state to exchange trade offices with Israel. However these offices were closed in 2000 as a result of the renewed Palestinian uprising.

Oman's domestic policies are also moderate, especially in comparison with neighbouring states. In 1996 Oman introduced a constitution that established a bicameral legislature and guarantees basic civil liberties for all its citizens. Oman's commitment to improving human

rights was clearly demonstrated in 2004. In the build-up to a trade and culture festival in Muscat the authorities arrested approximately 300 Omanis plotting to violently disrupt the event. The plotters were opposed to the un-Islamic nature of the festival. Yet despite receiving sentences ranging from one to twenty years, all of the convicted plotters were immediately pardoned by the Sultan. It has been speculated that the Sultan regarded the plotters merely as a group of misguided religious fanatics.

Indeed, the Sultan's alleged opinion of the plotters also reflects Oman's unique approach to the practice of Islam. The de facto state religion of Oman is Ibadhi, a branch of Islam that is neither Sunni nor Shia. Yet like both of them, Ibadhi also disputes the leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammed died. In doing so, Ibadhi also recognises aspects of both the Sunni and Shiite debate regarding this issue. Like the Sunnis, the Ibadhis believe that merit rather than hereditary claims forms the correct basis of succession. The Ibadhis also agree with the Shiites that the Koran was created, rather than being the actual word of God.

The Ibadhi approach to Islam is regarded by some observers as a possible reason whyOman has not been dramatically affected by radicalism. Identifying with the key tenets of Sunni and Shiite thinking has allowed Oman to take a more tolerant approach to the practice of Islam. Ibadhis, for example, frequently worship at Sunni mosques. Oman's de facto religion also permits Shiites to build their own places of worship. The Sultanate shows remarkable tolerance for other religions too. Both Oman's Hindu and Christian communities have been given permission to build churches and temples on public land. Communities of other faiths are also free to practice their faith.

It therefore seems unlikely that Oman will become immediately vulnerable to the influence of AQAP or Islamic fundamentalism. In comparison with other Gulf States, Oman has a more tolerant approach to religion and politics. Indeed, Oman's tolerance will prove crucial to its attempts to diversify its economy away from its dwindling oil supplies. If it can develop economic policies that can elevate the country beyond its 'middle-income nation' status AQAP will have fewer opportunities to foment unrest in Oman. Whilst this article cannot confirm if Oman would look to the United Kingdom for support against unrest, the prospects for cohesion within the Sultanate look more promising than in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. As a result, the United Kingdom is unlikely to become embroiled in a conflict that would be at least as domestically unpopular as the war in Iraq andAfghanistan.

However, the eternal question mark remains. The announcement that Major-General J.H. Gordon CBE will take over as Senior British Loan Service Officer in Oman from Major-General Whitley CMG, CBE in January next year merely confirms the cause for interest.