FAMILY STRIFE AND FOREIGN INTERVENTION: CAUSES IN THE SEPARATION OF ZANZIBAR FROM OMAN: A REAPPRAISAL

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The nineteenth-century rise of Zanzibar under the ruling Albusaidi Dynasty of Oman owed its origins primarily to the solid foundations of commercial activity laid down in Muscat in the preceding century. In the subsequent development of the Omani economy, in Omani territories in both Arabia and Africa where the dictates of the Omani political/tribal system did not allow for any centralization of authority, local communities and tribal groups resisted the domination of the Albusaidi rulers as they strove to bring under their own control the benefits of burgeoning trade.

The opposition of the major Omani groups in East Africa, the Mazārī’ā of Mombasa and the Banū Nabhān of Pate, to the Albusaidis and the eventual success of the Omani rulers in dismantling and neutralizing this opposition are fairly well documented. However, the sustained challenge of Hilāl b. Sa‘īd to the reign of his father Sa‘īd b. Sulṭān, the Albusaidi ruler of Oman and Zanzibar and their dependencies from 1806 to 1856, has hitherto been neglected, despite the fact that Hilāl’s resistance in East Africa was the greatest internal threat to Sa‘īd after that posed by the Mazārī’ā and had dire consequences for the subsequent course of Oman’s history. The conflict between father and son set in train a course of events that led inexorably to the 1861 British-sponsored dismemberment of Oman into two Sultanates, one in Arabia and the other in East Africa.

Hilāl’s opposition to Sa‘īd b. Sulṭān.

Born in Muscat in about 1817, Hilāl had at various times during the 1830s occupied the post of wālī of Muscat or of Barka in Oman before becoming his father’s nā‘īb in Zanzibar in 1840. However, in 1844 Sa‘īd decided to disinherit Hilāl, his eldest son, and wrote to Lord Aberdeen, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in these terms expressing his wish that another of his sons, Khālid, should be his successor in Zanzibar instead.

One hypothesis for this dramatic turn of events and the estrangement between father and son is that Hilāl had violated his father’s harīm. Although

2 ibid., introduction; A. M. Khazanov, Nomads and the outside world (Cambridge, 1983), passim.
5 PRO/FO/54/6 and India Office Records [JOR], L/P&S/5/501, Sa‘īd b. Sulṭān to Aberdeen, 6 Rajab 1260 = 23 July 1844.
this view is apparently supported by British consular reports, there is no further corroborative evidence. On the contrary, the contemporary accounts of both the Frenchman Guillain, and Hilāl’s sister, Salmā bint Saʿīd (Emily Said-Ruete), and the later narrative of the Omani/Zanzibari historian ‘Abdallāh b. Ṣāliḥ al-Fārsī, belie these allegations and suggest that this rumour was spread at the instigation of Hilāl’s aunt Khūrshīd, an Indian woman from Malabar and the mother of Khālid.7 Hilāl’s own mother, an Assyrian named Najm al-Sabāḥ, had died giving birth to him. Aware of the fact that Hilāl had no one in the ḥarīm to act on his behalf, Khūrshīd endeavoured to prejudice Saʿīd b. Sultān in favour of her own son with no little success. She apparently wielded considerable political influence in Zanzibar:

She was uncommonly tall, and possessed a great strength of will combined with a high degree of common sense . . . during the time that Khalid represented my father in his absence, it was said that it was she who actually governed the country, and that her son was only her tool. Her advice and counsel in all matters concerning our family was considered quite indispensable, and much depended always upon the decision she came to. She took in at a glance as much as if she had owned the hundred eyes of an argus, and on all momentous occasions gave proof of a wisdom and sagacity truly Solomonic.8

The more plausible reason for the estrangement between Saʿīd and his son, which undoubtedly gave form and impetus to the intrigues of Khūrshīd, appears to have been Hilāl’s developing penchant for over-indulging in alcohol, a habit acquired during his friendship with the French Consul at Zanzibar.9 Damaging rumours against Hilāl of his drinking, linked to those of violating his father’s ḥarīm, acquired a further aura of credibility when he insisted on visiting his sisters at the Palace even after his father had banned him from doing so:

Hilāl was the favourite son of our father, to whom this [his drinking] caused a bitter anguish. He tried to reform the seduced son by having him at first confined to the house, but soon found himself compelled to banish him altogether from our family circle. Our sister Chadudj [Khadija] suffered most of all, as she was very fond of Hilāl. He still visited her at our paternal home after his banishment, but could only gain admittance under the greatest difficulties and dangers, and when he stayed overnight with her and some others, who had remained faithful to him, the room was kept dark so that its lights may not betray him . . . Hilāl sank deeper and deeper under his evil passion, until he was scarcely ever sober.10

In September 1845, Hilāl secretly journeyed to England to petition the British government in person to intercede on his behalf in order that he might secure his status as successor to the throne which, as the eldest son, he deemed his birthright.11 Although he was not given an official reception in London since his visit was unannounced, the British sympathized with him sufficiently to write to his father enjoining him to restore Hilāl to favour. But Saʿīd b. Sultān

7 al-Fārsī, Alhāsaʿīdīyūn hukkam Zanjīrā, 15–16; C. Guillain, Documents sur l’histoire, la géographie et le commerce de la côte orientale d’Afrique (Paris, 1856), ii, 228; E. Said-Ruete, (tr.), Memoirs of an Arabian Princess (London, 1886), 139.
8 Said-Ruete, 35; see also IOR/V/23/45; Miles, 34; and al-Fārsī, 16–17.
9 al-Fārsī, loc. cit.
10 Said-Ruete, 139–40; al-Fārsī, 16.
11 PRO/FO/54/7, Hilāl b. Saʿīd to FO, 20 November 1845; PRO/FO/54/9, Hamerton to Willoughby, 14 April 1845.
remained implacable in the face of all entreaty and in reply wrote: ‘You say he is my eldest son, yet amongst the Arabs being the eldest son is of no consequence, but the ornament and dignity of a man is from his conduct.’

Enraged at the thought that Hilāl’s behaviour had provided an opening for the British to meddle even in his own family affairs, in November 1849 Sa’id exiled his son from Zanzibar altogether.

Hilāl was none the less very popular among the local population. According to one account, he was ‘the greatest favourite of the imām’s Arab subjects and the most shrewd and energetic of all the Imām’s [sic] sons and had[d] the goodwill and sympathy of all His Highness’s Arab subjects who always say that he is the model of what his father was’. So when he headed for Lamu after his banishment from Zanzibar, he received open support from the local people as well as from those of nearby Pate. Soon after his arrival, ‘Aḍī b. Sayf, his father’s appointee as the wālī of Lamu, was assassinated, which enabled Hilāl not only to take possession of the town but to expel his father’s garrison and to instal in its place his own supporters. Sa’id b. Sulṭān at Zanzibar, constantly irked by disturbances in Pate, now had to contend with what amounted to an uprising by the whole of the Lamu Archipelago (Lamu, Pate, Manda and some other smaller islands), a development described by Guillain as ‘d’une nature bien grave’. To exacerbate the situation even further, Hilāl unceremoniously dismissed the local agent of Zanzibar’s customs master, dispatching him to Zanzibar empty-handed and confiscating the customs receipts for that year, which purportedly amounted to between MT$10,000 and 12,000.

So serious did the situation become for Sa’id b. Sulṭān that he sent urgent appeals to his son Thuwaynī, his nā’ib at Muscat, to provide troops for an attack against Hilāl’s stronghold. However, Thuwaynī was himself gravely preoccupied with repulsing renewed Wahhabi incursions into Oman and was unable to comply with his father’s wishes. The depth of concern felt by Sa’id b. Sulṭān at this turn of events can be gauged from his decision to go himself to Muscat to raise tribal levies. Not only was this to be his first trip to Oman in eleven years but, even more tellingly, it was the first time he had felt compelled to leave his East African sanctuary since his arrival there in 1840.

Ultimately however, the bloodshed that would have resulted from a battle in Africa between an Omani ruler and his once ‘favourite’ son was averted not by the military might of Sa’id b. Sulṭān but by Hilāl’s expressed desire for a reconciliation with his father. At the beginning of 1851, Hilāl wrote to Sulaymān b. Ḥamad Ḥlūsā‘a’idī, the wālī of Zanzibar, pleading with him to intercede with Sa’id b. Sulṭān on his behalf and offering to surrender the territories under his control on condition that his father agreed to either British

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12 PRO/FO/54/10, Sa’id b. Sulṭān to FO, 9 February 1846.
13 IOR/L/P&S/5/405, Agent at Muscat to Bombay, 3 October 1850; M. Ylvisaker, Lamu in the nineteenth century: land, trade and politics (Boston, 1979), 82; Sa’id b. Sulṭān was never elected as an Iḥsān Imām but most contemporary European consular reports erroneously refer to him with that religious title; for the way Sa’id came to power see M. R. Bhacker, ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, ch. iv.
14 C. Guillain Documents, iii, 450.
15 ibid.
17 Zanzibar Archives [ZA], Zanzibar, AA3/8 Hamerton to Bombay, 5 November 1849; IOR/L/P&S/5/405, Agent at Muscat to Bombay, 27 May 1850.
19 ZA/AA3/8, Hamerton to Bombay, 4 September 1852 and 18 April 1854, for the duration of Sa’id b. Sulṭān’s visits to East Africa, see M. R. Bhacker ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, table 3, p. 138.
or French mediation in the settlement of their dispute. When in answer to his plea he received the news that his father had left for Muscat in April to raise tribal levies against him, a disheartened Hilal decided to make the hajj in the summer of that year to avoid an open confrontation with his father. All further overtures towards reconciliation were cut short by Hilal’s untimely death in Aden on 10 June 1851 on his way to Mecca.

There is no historical record of the medical cause of Hilal’s death but it is evident that he died an embittered man, far from his family and without the reconciliation with his father that he had so craved. As Guillian puts it, he died ‘d’une maladie de longueur causée, dit-on, par le chagrin’. Despite the long and bitter estrangement between father and son, Sa’id b. Sultān was greatly affected by Hilal’s death for, as his daughter records, ‘in spite of all that had occurred, our father’s grief for his favourite son was unspeakable. He often locked himself up in his chamber, and the traces of tears could be seen afterwards in the place where he had knelt down to pray. Something which had never happened before: he gave vent to his grief even in words like these: “How great is my despair and my grief for thee, oh, Hilal!’”

After his son’s death, Sa’id sailed for Lamu and succeeded in reasserting his suzerainty over the population which, in the absence of Hilal, lacked any coherent leadership. On 13 January 1853, the Omani ruler returned to Zanzibar stopping at Mombasa and Pangani on the way to ensure that local leaders reaffirmed their allegiance to him.

The consequences of Hilal’s opposition.

Despite the fact that in his lifetime Hilal failed to achieve any of his stated objectives in the dispute with his father, his actions were to have profound consequences for Oman after his father’s death two years later. When Sa’id b. Sultan died in 1856, his 1844 letter to Lord Aberdeen in which he unequivocally disinherited Hilal came to the fore, and gave a whole new dimension to the succession dispute. Since that time, the question of whether or not Sa’id ever actually intended to divide his realm amongst his sons after his death has exercised the minds of many a writer. The hypothesizing and conjecturing have revolved primarily around Sa’id’s letter to Aberdeen, since his actual will dealt exclusively with the disposal of his personal property and made no provisions whatsoever with regard to succession. In this letter, while appointing Khālid as ruler of his African dominions, Sa’id had also declared that ‘. . . in like manner, we appoint our son Said Thoweeenee to be ruler over all our possessions in Oman in Arabia, in the Persian Gulf, and on the coast of Persia.’

Although this declaration of de facto partition may be adduced as convincing proof of Sa’id’s intention to divide his realm geographically between his sons Khālid and Thowaynī, in the historical context it can equally convincingly be construed purely as the strategy adopted by the ruler to ensure compliance

20 Guillian, Documents, iii, 454.
21 ibid.
22 ibid. and ZA/AA3/8, Hamerton to Bombay, 23 July 1851.
24 Guillian, Documents, iii, 454.
26 For the full text of Sa’id’s will see Bhacker ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, Appendix 3.
27 ibid.; see also Appendix 2 for text of Sa’id’s letter to Aberdeen.
with his wish for the total exclusion of Hilāl from succession to any of his dominions after his death. Saʿīd knew only too well that after his death, Khālid would have no chance of holding out in Africa without British support against a challenge from the popular Hilāl. His letter was thus a device to publicize his wishes and to secure the necessary backing.

While what precisely Saʿīd b. Sultān had in mind when he wrote his letter to Aberdeen will always remain a moot point, the painful irony is that it achieved a result against which the Omani ruler had fought throughout his reign, namely, the involvement of the British authorities in the domestic affairs of his own family. In essence, his letter to Aberdeen amounted to nothing less than an open invitation to the British to mediate in his family disputes.

Another factor with a crucial bearing upon Saʿīd b. Sultān’s intentions as regards partition or otherwise is the tribal-cum-political perception of what constituted the Omani ‘State’. It is inconceivable that the Omani ruler could ever have thought of his far-flung dominions as a homogeneous entity constituting an ‘empire’, or even a ‘state’ in the modern sense. From his own political experience of Omani tribalism Saʿīd b. Sultān well knew that tribal allegiances and loyalties were built on shifting sands. As long as he enjoyed at least nominal recognition from the major tribes in a particular area, whether in Africa or in Arabia, then that area was considered as falling within his domain. As for the division of his realm, even the British authorities of the time rejected the idea that Saʿīd had ever wished to divide his possessions. Brigadier W. M. Coghlran, appointed by the British authorities as the head of the 1861 Muscat-Zanzibar Commission to investigate and report on the succession dispute, interpreted the Omani ruler’s motives in the following light: ‘His late Highness in his arrangements actually made or prospectively designed, had nothing more in view than to allot subordinate governorships to one or more of his sons under the paramount Sovereign of Oman.’

In any event, as is witnessed time and again throughout Oman’s history, there was a tried and tested tribal mechanism for the resolution of disputes which, in normal circumstances, would have overriden any express appointment of a successor. On a visit to Zanzibar in 1859 Hilāl b. Muḥammad Āl Buṣāʿīdī, the wāli of Suwaiq, explained this essentially Omani mechanism to the British consul, Captain C. P. Rigby, in the following way:

Generally on the death of a chief his sons disputed the succession and the one who had most influence with the tribe or who gave the greatest hopes of being an efficient leader was elected . . . ; no law of progeniture is recognised . . . [but] might coupled with the election by the tribes is the only right.

In accordance with established practice, Omani tribes had already set in train the process described by the wāli of Suwaiq with a view to resolving the succession dispute. The initiative was taken away from them, however, when Britain took it upon itself to intervene, invoking the express authority apparently accorded to it by the late Saʿīd b. Sultān in his letter to Aberdeen.

In fact, Omani tribes had initiated the process even before Saʿīd b. Sultān’s death. When Khālid died of pneumonia on 7 November 1854 in Zanzibar while his father was away fighting the Persians over Bander ‘Abbās, the influential Barwānī tribe seized the opportunity and rose in open rebellion against the

28 ZA/AA3/18 and IOR/L/P&S/507, Coghlran to Anderson, 4 December 1860.
29 IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Hilāl b. Muḥammad quoted in Rigby to Anderson, 4 April 1859.
30 ZA/AA12/2, Hamerton to Clarendon, 10 November 1856; IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Rigby to Anderson, 4 April 1859.
Albusaids.31 But at that very moment in Muscat, ‘Abdallāh b. Sālim al-Barwānī, the leader of an important faction of the Barwānīs who was customarily taken hostage by the Omani ruler every time he left Zanzibar as a means of pre-empting trouble,32 was pleading his support on behalf of all his followers to the Albusaidi ruler in the presence of both Thuwaynī and the latter’s younger brother Barghash.33

There seems little doubt that Khālid’s death and the Barwānī uprising were the main reasons behind Sa‘īd’s hastily conducted negotiations with the Persians over Bander Abbās and his wish to return promptly to East Africa to prevent the insurgency from gaining further momentum. Sa‘īd b. ʿUthmān himself was never to complete his return journey to Zanzibar, for he died at sea on 19 October 1856. The presence on board of Barghash and ‘Abdallāh b. Sālim al-Barwānī, who accompanied the ruler on this ill-fated journey,34 has crucial significance for the subsequent turn of events since both personalities played pivotal roles in the succession conflict.

With the death of his father, the ambitious nineteen-year-old Barghash saw an unparalleled opportunity to seize power for himself with the assistance of the Barwānīs. Although four years younger than his other brother, Mājid, who had taken control of Zanzibar’s affairs upon Khālid’s death, Barghash knew that Mājid suffered badly from epilepsy and could not to be considered fit to rule: ‘He [Mājid] frequently suffered from severe spasms, and for this reason he was hardly ever left without an attendant to render immediate assistance’.35 Moreover, although Mājid had assumed the de facto reins of power at Zanzibar after Khālid’s death, it is crucial to note that he had never been nominated as successor nor even appointed as wāli or nāʾib by his father. Barghash calculated that these factors, together with the element of surprise, weighed heavily in his favours and accordingly, during the night following his arrival at Zanzibar on 25 October 1856, ‘he sent no information to Sayyid Mājid nor to anyone else... He ordered soldiers to surround the houses of Sayyid Mājid and of his brothers so that no one should go in or out. He went with a few of his people and secretly buried his father in their graveyard Makusuran’.36

Nevertheless, Barghash’s plan faltered ignominiously at the first hurdle when the Baluchi commander of the Zanzibar garrison stood his ground refusing to allow him to capture Mājid who, at the moment of Barghash’s arrival at the Palace, was in throes of an epileptic fit.37 The following morning, it was ‘Abdallāh b. Sālim who proceeded to the British consulate to ask ‘what they should do, as the island was without a ruler’38. Turning him out of the building, Captain A. Hamerton, the British consul at the time, informed the Barwānī leader that ‘if he attempted to disturb the peace, his head would fall within twenty-four hours’.39 Thus Mājid’s position was preserved and Barghash’s initiative, such as it was, failed for three reasons: the Baluchi commander’s action, Hamerton’s prompt response on Mājid’s behalf and, more

31 ZA/AA3/11, Hamerton to Bombay, 15 November 1854.
32 On the Barwānīs, see Bhacker, ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, 144–5 and ch. xii.
34 Juhaynā; according to al-Mughayrī, Barghash was undoubtedly on board but ‘Abdallāh b. Sālim’s presence can only be inferred from the fact that he was a constant companion of Sa‘īd b. Sultān, was in Muscat with Barghash prior to Sa‘īd’s death and in Zanjībār after his death.
36 al-Fārsī, 85; for a similar account see Said-Ruete, 108.
37 ZA/AA12/2, Hamerton to Clarendon, 10 November 1856; Said-Ruete, 108.
38 ZA/AA/12/2.
39 ibid.
importantly, the overt support for Mājid of the Zanzibar a'yān (religious and tribal leaders) led by the powerful wāli Sulaymān b. Ḥamad, the prime mover behind Mājid’s assumption of power in the first instance.40

It is not evident at this stage whether Thuwaynī in Muscat was aware of the abortive coup attempt by Barghash, in league with the Barwānī leader. But such an eventuality and the possibility of Thuwaynī instigating the movement against Mājid seems unlikely at this juncture, for soon after Barghash’s débâcle, Thuwaynī despatched Ḥamad b. Sālim Ālbūsā’idī as an emissary to Mājid ostensibly to discuss an amicable settlement of the succession dispute. To appease Thuwaynī, Mājid agreed that he would send MT$40,000 as an annual free gift to Oman and asserted that he was willing to send extra funds on condition that Thuwaynī recognized him as the sovereign of Zanzibar.41 At the same time, Mājid also attempted to pacify ‘Abdāllāh b. Sālim by offering to pay him a yearly stipend of MT$12,000.42 Any respite he gained from these overtures was fleeting since, with his financial resources already stretched to breaking point by other commitments and his Treasury under assault from all sides,43 Mājid had no way of fulfilling these undertakings. His inability to discharge these financial obligations sparked off a collaboration between his old rivals, Barghash and ‘Abdāllāh b. Sālim, in collusion with Thuwaynī and was to culminate in an open rebellion in 1859.

After Hamerton’s death on 5 July 1857,44 Thuwaynī was even declared guarantor of Barghash’s loans contracted in Zanzibar for the purchase of arms and provisions.45 These conspiracies and intrigues were taking place on a political scene from which the British were notable by their absence but only temporarily as such a state of affairs was not destined to last. The summer of 1857 was the period of the Indian Mutiny.46 With the prolonged absence of a British agent at both Muscat and Zanzibar, there was much agitation regarding the security of the British position in the wider context of India. As Consul Rigby was later to comment:

There had been no British agent or consul here [in Zanzibar] for 13 months; this was the period of the Indian mutinies and the French had persuaded the Sultan and the Arabs that the British had lost India, and that no British consul would ever reside here again.47

The opportunity presented by Britain’s preoccupation elsewhere was not lost on Thuwaynī who decided to set forth for Zanzibar in the summer of 1858 at the head of a naval force, with the intention of settling the affair with Mājid once and for all.48 Crucially, as it proved, the execution of his plan had to be postponed until the start of the north-east monsoon which did not occur before November. In the interim, on 27 July 1858, Rigby came to take up his position as the new British Consul to Zanzibar. It is no surprise that Mājid was so delighted at Rigby’s arrival that he ‘repeatedly expressed the gratification it afforded him to again welcome a British Resident in Zanzibar’.49

40 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 17 February 1859; al-Fārsī, 37, 85.
41 ZA/AA12/2, Mājid b. Sa‘īd to Coghill, 14 October 1860; IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Rigby to Anderson, 4 April 1859.
42 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 14 April 1859.
43 For Mājid’s debts and financial difficulties, see Bhacker, ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, ch. xi.
44 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 14 January 1859.
45 For examples of these loan agreements, see Juhayna, 200.
46 The Mutiny broke out at Meerut on 10 May 1857 and continued until the end of June 1858, see P. Spear, A history of India (London, 1965), vol. ii, ch. xi.
47 IOR/L/P&S/9/38, Rigby to Russell, 1 July 1861.
48 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 17 February 1859; Juhayna, 200.
49 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 1 August 1858.
Undeterred by the presence of a British consul in Zanzibar or perhaps unaware of the fact, and with his expedition already fitted out, Thuwaynī together with 2,500 armed men sailed from Muscat at the start of the monsoon. In February 1859, before the bulk of his fleet could reach the East African coast, the British authorities, alerted of his imminent arrival, despatched a warship to intercept Thuwaynī’s expeditionary force.\footnote{ZA/AA2/2, Jones to Jenkins, 25 February 1859.}

In Zanzibar meanwhile, Mājīd and the wālī, Sulaymān b. Ḥamad, were making preparations for the defence of the island in constant consultation and liaison with the British consul, Rigby. Furthermore many local leaders, still regarding themselves under the suzerainty of the Zanzibari sultan, rallied round in support of Mājīd. Saʿīd b. Muhammad, the ruler of Mohilla (Comoro Islands) for example, came armed with 150 men and took charge of one of Mājīd’s ships for the defence of his sovereign.\footnote{ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 4 April 1859; IOR/L/P&S/5/446, Rigby to Anderson, 4 April 1859.} According to al-Mughayrī,

such was the commotion at Zanzibar that trade had come to a standstill and buying and selling had completely stopped. Many people from the interior of the island and from the mainland had gathered, each one ready to defend against the awaited enemy. Anyone running in the streets could hear nothing but the random sound of gunfire, with people at a high pitch of excitement and armed to the teeth.\footnote{Juhayna, 200–1.}

Indeed, the local resistance to Thuwaynī was such that a number of baghlas (dhows) from his fleet which had managed to evade capture by the British warship were forcibly prevented from landing at various points along the East African coast. Their half-starved and disheartened crews had no strength to resist capture when they subsequently arrived in Zanzibar.\footnote{ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 22 March 1859.}

Mājīd, then, was not so defenceless and so ‘helpless’, resignedly awaiting the arrival of the so-called ‘invasionary forces’, as is suggested by Rigby’s reports to his superiors.\footnote{Ibid.} During Thuwaynī’s preparations for his expedition in the summer of 1858, Mājīd had sent not only money but also guns and ammunition to his other brother, Turkī, at Sohar inciting him to attack Muscat.\footnote{ZA/AA12/2, Baghbash b. Saʿīd to Elphinstone, 31 March 1860 and Rigby to Mor, 29 September 1859.} ‘These ‘defensive’ measures no doubt took a heavy toll of Mājīd’s already strained finances and his mounting indebtedness to, and reliance upon, ‘British Indian’ merchants effectively enabled Rigby to circumscribe the ruler’s activities at his wont.\footnote{All merchants originating from India, even those regarding themselves as Omani ‘nationals’, were treated by British authorities as being under British jurisdiction, see Bhacker, ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, passim.}

For his part, with the threat he had posed now neutralized by the superior military force of the British, Thuwaynī was forced to comply with British demands that he ‘should address the British Government in the first instance if he has any claims to proffer against his brother Syed Majīd’.\footnote{ZA/AA2/2, Jones to Jenkins, 25 February 1859.} When the contents of his father’s letter to Aberdeen were made known to him, Thuwaynī agreed, albeit reluctantly, to submit his case with regard to sovereignty over Zanzibar to British arbitration.\footnote{ZA/AA2/2, H. H. Syed Soweynee Imam of Muscat [sic] to Captain Felix Jones, 24 Safar 1276 [= 22 September 1859].}
**British intervention and the dismemberment of Zanzibar.**

At the beginning of 1859, the British authorities were generally in favour of maintaining the status quo, that is, the formal unity of the Omani ‘State’. Indeed as late as 1861 when Coghlan was first appointed to his mission, the British were of the opinion that among Sa‘īd b. Sulfān’s surviving sons the one best qualified to assume the role of the overall sovereign of Oman and Zanzibar was Thuwaynī. But as was so often the case, it was not the dictates of formulated policy so much as the actions taken in the field locally by British agents that were ultimately decisive in shaping history. Rigby’s intervention at Zanzibar coupled with the reliance of British authorities on his often biased portrayals of events and the tide of local opinion in both Oman and East Africa, persuaded even a person like Coghlan, who at first had been totally against the idea of partition, to change his mind.

Having taken a leading role in mounting the Zanzibari resistance to the Muscati fleet, Rigby could not be held back from intervening directly in the succession dispute at a local level. In fact from the moment of his arrival in Zanzibar, Rigby had been greeted by a troubled and besieged Mājīd who virtually threw himself upon the mercy of the consul’s goodwill. More importantly, Rigby had been welcomed by a willing and cooperative wāli, Sulaymān b. Ḥamad, who placed the considerable assets he possessed at the consul’s disposal for the sake of defending Mājīd’s position. In his endeavour to save Mājīd’s neck at all costs Sulaymān, no doubt unwittingly, also provided Rigby with a powerful entrée and leverage in the commercial sphere. Surprised at first by the rising dynamism and potential of Zanzibar’s trade ‘under the primitive leadership of an Arab chief’, the consul singlemindedly set himself the objective of diverting trade profits to benefit British India and not Oman.

In Muscat, Thuwaynī, undeterred by the failure of his expedition, formulated another strategy to overthrow Mājīd. On 18 April 1859 his envoy, Ḥamad b. Sālim, arrived once again in Zanzibar on the pretext that he had come to collect the money Mājīd had promised during his previous visit. The Zanzibari ruler however immediately referred him to the British Consulate insisting that all negotiations were henceforth to be conducted through Rigby: ‘Had he not made war on me, I should not have withheld the money from him; nor was it ever my intention to deprive the subjects of Oman of the benefits which they receive from Zanzibar... but one who acts in this manner is not to be trusted.’ On presenting himself to Rigby, the Muscati envoy was informed in no uncertain terms that Mājīd ‘would never pay a farthing’ to Muscat and his interview with the Consul terminated abruptly.

The uncompromising posture of the British Consul into whose hands Mājīd had delivered not only his fate but also that of Zanzibar sowed further seeds of dissent which, with the arrival of more Thuwaynī supporters from Oman, germinated into a fully-fledged conspiracy against Mājīd. Having anticipated the possibility that his envoy might meet with an unfavourable reception, Thuwaynī had drawn up contingency plans which relied for their success upon enlisting the support of the influential wāli, Sulaymān b. Ḥamad. However, Thuwaynī had seriously misjudged his approach to the wāli. Instead of wooing Sulaymān by the exercise of diplomacy or the oft-tried method of bribery, the Muscati ruler’s letters contained threats that ‘if he [did] not comply with Syed

59 ZA/AA3/18, Coghlan to Anderson, 4 December 1860.
60 ZA/AA2/2, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf [PRPG] to Bombay, 11 April 1859.
61 see Bhacker, ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, ch. xi.
62 ZA/AA12/2, Mājīd b. Sa‘īd to Coghlan, 14 October 1860.
63 Juhayna, 201; IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Rigby to Anderson, 19 April 1959.
Thuwenee’s wishes, then he must take the consequences’. 64 By way of response, Sulaymān, Sa‘īd b. Sulṭān’s old trustee, did not hesitate to pass these letters over to Rigby. 65

While tribal leaders from Oman were busy at Zanzibar inciting the populace to revolt against Mājīd, 66 Barghash was using the greater part of the money he had received from Muscat to buy off other local leaders. 67 However, when the conspiracy erupted into open rebellion and the rebels, who by the beginning of October had established themselves in a fortified plantation outside Zanzibar town and were ‘openly expressing their intention to seize the government of the island’, 68 Rigby decided to take action. ‘Exasperated by the habits of procrastination peculiar to the Arabs’, Rigby called upon the commanders of the Royal Navy, whose frigates by a happy coincidence for Mājīd were anchored off Zanzibar harbour, to attack the rebels’ stronghold. One hundred British marines equipped with a twelve-pound howitzer succeeded, after a heavy bombardment, in crushing the rebellion on 16 October 1859 and thus Thuwaynī’s and Barghash’s ambitions to force the issue with Mājīd were thwarted. 69

This military intervention by Rigby in Oman’s succession dispute was the first comparable action taken by Britain in support of the claims of an Omani contender for power. That such intervention occurred in Africa was ironic, given the fact that Sa‘īd b. Sulṭān had spent most of his reign unsuccessfully endeavouring to achieve British military involvement in Oman’s possessions in Arabia. The irony is compounded by the fact that when the British finally chose to intervene militarily it was not, by their own admission, on behalf of Sa‘īd’s legitimate successor. That successor, as was expressly declared by Coghlan at the time, was none other than Thuwaynī who, paradoxically, had been prohibited by Britain’s military intercession from laying claim to part of his realm in Africa.

When Rigby left Zanzibar in September 1861 for health reasons, he was greatly despised even by those who had at first welcomed and cooperated with him. His machinations and posturings had won him few friends. But if his departure was regarded as the ‘termination of a great catastrophe’, 70 the degree of support he had originally received from the local a‘yān, together with his own partisan accounts, had done enough damage to convince Coghlan that ‘such being the altered condition and circumstances of the African dependencies, it seems consonant with reason and justice . . . that the people of those countries should have a voice in the election of their sovereign’. 71 Less philanthropically, and perhaps more persuasively for the British, Coghlan added that the fact that ‘the separation of Zanzibar from Muscat would deal a great blow to the slave trade’, and that it would be well nigh impossible for one ruler to govern both areas effectively, had led him now to recommend partition; he concluded elliptically: ‘Fortunately, the expediency on which they [Coghlan’s conclusions] are based, and which would hardly suffice to justify the severance of that state from the parent state of Muscat, is adequately supported and confirmed by the arguments founded on right’. 72

64 IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Thuwaynī b. Sa‘īd to Sulaymān b. Hamad quoted in Rigby to Anderson, 25 April 1859.
65 IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Rigby to Anderson, 25 April 1859.
66 ibid.; ZA/AA12/2, Mājīd b Sa‘īd to Coghlan, 14 October 1860; one important personality ranged against Mājīd was Šālīb b. ‘Alī, leader of the influential Ḥārtī tribe of Oman.
67 Juhayna, 203; IOR/L/P&S/5/501, Rigby to Anderson, 14 April 1859.
68 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 9 October 1859.
69 ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 21 October 1859; for the 1859 rebellion, see Bhacker, ‘Roots of domination and dependency’, ch. xii.
71 IOR/L/P&S/5/507, Coghlan to Bombay, 4 December 1860.
72 ibid., the emphasis is in the original; ZA/AA12/2, PRPG to Thuwaynī, 28 October 1859.
Although these two citations from his report might help to explain Coghlan's views on the *expediency* aspect, the allusion to the *right* remains obscure. It is not evident, nor does Coghlan attempt to clarify whether the right referred to was that of the Omanis or the British. If Mājid did indeed have any rights, Coghlan does not indicate on what criteria they might have been based, especially as he himself previously, in the same report, had declared: 'I am led to conclude that Syud Majid's claims to the independent sovereignty of Zanzibar... must be pronounced untenable'. On any other interpretation the distinction between right and expediency made by Coghlan is entirely spurious, particularly if we bear in mind that since the days of the Ya'ariba dynasty of the mid seventeenth century the Omanis had been recognized rulers of important commercial outposts on the East African coast where, by perpetuating the age-old Omani tribal-cum-political system, they had appointed *wālis* from their capital in Rustaq in interior Oman, finding it perfectly 'expedient to govern both areas effectively'.

Thuwaynī for his part had cut his losses and with the continuing strife in Oman had given up any hope (*āyasa min 'azmihi*) of ever acquiring Zanzibar even before Rigby had deported Barghash from Zanzibar in October 1859. Following his agreement to British arbitration, and long before the British authorities had appointed Coghlan to his mission, Thuwaynī already seemed resigned to the fact that Zanzibar was forever lost to Muscat.

On 2 April 1861, working on Coghlan's recommendations, Lord Canning duly effected the formal partition of the Omani 'State' into two Sultanates, with Zanzibar obliged to pay to Muscat an annual subsidy of MT$40,000. The Canning Award, as it came to be known, was nothing less than the imposition of the European notion of statehood on the African and Arabian sections of the Omani 'State'. Oman's own structures and institutions were far too inadequate to deal with the realities of the latter half of the nineteenth century and suffered particularly in comparison to those introduced by Britain. They were not even competent to control Oman's expanding trade networks, perceived in European terms as a far-flung 'empire'. But while the rulers of the two newly-formed Sultanates, who were henceforth addressed officially by the grand title of 'Sultan', like the Ottomans, continued for many years thereafter to operate in their old way within their separate spheres of influence, the most radical change was not their independence of each other, but the greater ease with which Britain could now control the two separate entities. As the official responses of the two Sultans to the Canning Award clearly indicate, they could hardly have grasped the full significance of the division of their father's realm, steeped as they were in Oman's tribal traditions, nor could they have appreciated the implications of the Award with regard to their own independence. Here is how they reacted to Lord Canning's decision:

We heartily accept... and thank God for your efforts on our behalf, praying also that your goodwill may be rewarded and that you may never cease to be our support [Thuwaynī];

I feel very much obliged to the British Government for all its kindness and favour, and for having averted from my dominions disorders and

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73 IOR/L/P&S/5/507.
74 *Juhayna*, 204; ZA/AA12/2, Rigby to Bombay, 29 October 1859.
75 IOR/L/P&S/5/447, Cruttenden to Anderson, 24 September 1859; ZA/AA2/2, Thuwaynī b. Sa'id to Jones, 24 Safar 1276 [= 22 Sept 1859].
76 For the text of the Canning Award see IOR/L/P&S/5/507.
hostilities. During my lifetime, I shall never forget the kindness which it has shown to me [Mājid].

Whereas Britain had already been able to establish an economic stranglehold over Oman by exercising control over the ‘Indian’ merchant population, it was now able, by its manipulation of the Sultans through the Canning Award, to confirm its political paramountcy over both Zanzibar and Muscat.

Thus it was that the British authorities ultimately responded to the invitation extended to them some seventeen years earlier by Sa’īd b. Sulṭān, as a result of his son Hilāl’s actions, to intervene in Omani succession disputes. Oman’s own methods of resolving such disputes, based on tribal feuding and continuous strife within the ruling family, were a thing of the past. From now on it was to be the dominant power in the region, Britain, who assumed the role of kingmaker in Zanzibar as well as in Muscat. But barely a decade after the separation of Zanzibar from Oman, one of Britain’s more high-ranking officials, Bartle Frere, then Governor of Bombay, was able to comment that Britain had brought about ‘the ruin of a flourishing country and kingdom’.  

78 See note 56 above.  
79 Bartle Frere quoted in Kelly, Britain and the Persian Gulf, 696.