The two wars fought on behalf of the Sultans of Oman, Said bin Taimur and his son, Qaboos, were both small affairs that involved only small numbers of British military personnel. Nevertheless, they were both important, first of all for maintaining a British presence and British influence in the Middle East and, secondly, for the part they played in the fortunes of the Special Air Service (SAS). The Jebel Akhdar campaign of 1958–59 arguably saved the SAS from disbandment once the Malayan Emergency came to an end, while the later more protracted war in Dhofar has been generally regarded as a triumphant success for British counterinsurgency methods comparable with the success in Malaya. Moreover, the success in Dhofar indicated that British counterinsurgency specialists had a post-colonial future as, in effect, mercenaries hired out by the British government to friendly foreign governments to advise and assist in the suppression of unrest and rebellion.

A medieval tyranny

The Sultanate occupies 82 000 square miles between South Yemen and the Gulf and had a population estimated at 750 000. It is made up of two distinct territories: in the northeast Muscat and Oman, a fertile coastal region and a mountainous interior dominated by ‘the Green Mountain’, Jebel Akhdar. Southwest, across 500 miles of desert is the province of Dhofar, an Omani colony that was even worse governed than the rest of the Sultanate.

Since the 1870s the Sultanate had been a British protectorate, ‘a de facto British colony’ in Fred Halliday’s phrase, ruled by the Sultan but under the effective control of his British advisers.1 They presided over
a backward poverty- and disease-ridden society where the infant mortality rate was 75 per cent and the literacy rate was 5 per cent, where slavery was still practised quite openly (the Sultan himself owned some 500 black slaves) and where mistreatment, mutilation and torture were routinely used to intimidate the population into quiescence and passivity. As Halliday insists, however, Said bin Taimur’s regime was not that of an ignorant feudal reactionary who knew no better, but of a man who had been educated by the British at Mayo College, ‘the Eton of India’, who regularly spent his summers living in the best hotels in London and who diverted his country’s oil revenues into his personal Swiss bank accounts. He was a despot ‘very much of the Duvalier and Somoza kind’, but relying on Britain rather than the United States for support. It is wrong to regard Said as ruling by ‘naked terror’ however. According to John Townsend, who went out to Oman as an adviser in early 1969, his was more ‘a tyranny of indifference to want and suffering backed up by a very genuine threat of punishment if people complained’. He quite deliberately and calculatedly kept his people impoverished and uneducated as a means of political and social control. As he told David Smiley, the commander-in-chief of his army in the late 1950s, if he provided hospitals and clinics to cut the infant mortality rate this would only cause social unrest by increasing the numbers of the poor and, as for schools and education, ‘That is why you lost India’.

Some of the British soldiers in Said’s service did have doubts about his regime. In his account of his service with the Muscat Regiment, Ranulph Fiennes, later to achieve fame as an explorer and adventurer, confessed as much:

The evidence of my own eyes suggested the British were bolstering a corrupt regime where the Sultan and his chosen few lived sumptuously, enjoying the first fruits of oil wealth whilst the mass of Omanis lived out their narrow lives in squalor and illness benefiting not at all from the culling of their country’s riches ... Content that the age-old conservatism of the Ibadhi system would continue to strangle all strivings for change, to smother all revolutionary mutterings, Sultan Said bin Taimur seemed determined to perpetuate the medieval gloom of Oman. And here I was volunteering my services to the military machine that upheld the old man in denying eight hundred thousand Omanis their rightful inheritance; the benefits of human progress, hospitals and schools ...