

Historic and enduring friendship

By RT HON LORD ASTOR OF HEVER PC DL

PRIME MINISTER'S TRADE ENVOY TO OMAN AND THE DEFENCE SECRETARY'S ADVISER FOR MILITARY COOPERATION



LORD ASTOR

is a Conservative Peer and has sat in the House of Lords since 1986. Lord Astor was Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence from 2010-2015. As a British Army Officer in The Life Guards, part of the Household Cavalry Regiment, he served on mounted ceremonial duties in London and, amongst other countries, in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. He is Deputy Lieutenant of Kent, President of the British Motorsport Industry Association, Vice Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Oman and President of the Thai-UK Business Council.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome this FIRST report and to express my warmest congratulations to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on his accession. I know that His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will build on the achievements of his predecessor.

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was one of the most inspirational and visionary leaders of our time. Over the course of his near 50 years of leadership, he completely transformed Oman into the developed and forward-thinking nation that it is today.

Like so many of my compatriots, my family and I have been regular visitors to Oman for many years, and the Omani people have a very special place in my heart. I have been honoured to visit Oman in a variety of official capacities – initially in my role as a Defence Minister, and more recently in my dual role as the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy to Oman and the Defence Secretary's Adviser on Military Cooperation with Oman. Through these visits, I came to know both His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos and his Ministers very well – I have always been heartened by the way I was received by them, and have been humbled by their generosity and warmth towards me, and on a personal level towards my family. On this latter point, it was a moment of personal pride when my daughter, Violet, held her "Wild Oman" art exhibition in Muscat in October 2019, and I am delighted that her work has both raised awareness of endangered wildlife in Oman and has generated funds for the Omani Environmental Society.

However, the UK's relationship with Oman is far broader and deeper rooted than my personal connection – this is an extremely special and long-standing bilateral friendship dating back hundreds of years, and which spans the whole of our respective societies – from political to defence to economic, and of course to trade. As Trade Envoy, I have observed first-hand that the UK has a very close commercial relationship with Oman, of which we should be very proud. Bilateral trade reached £1.4bn in 2019; and the UK accounts for 50 per cent of all Foreign Direct Investment in to Oman, with large recurring investments in the oil and gas sector. But, it's not just about oil and gas – we have also developed particularly strong links in defence, financial and professional services, education, healthcare and retail. Iconic British brands have had a long affinity with Oman; HSBC have been here for 70 years and are one

of the largest banks in the country; BAE Systems have been here for 60 years and are a major supplier to the Omani Ministry of Defence; and British engineering and construction companies have built key national infrastructure, including the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque and Royal Opera House in Muscat.

I have had the honour and the privilege of travelling extensively around Oman, and nothing has captured my attention more than the development of Duqm. Duqm is the flagship mega-project of Oman's drive to diversify its economy. The vision is enormous (port, economic freezone, heavy/light industry, residential and tourism), and development of the whole 2000km² site will make Duqm one of the world's largest logistics hubs and freezones. The Special Economic Zone Authority Duqm (SEZAD)'s priority is commercial success, and investment is keenly sought. The Babcock-Oman Drydock Company (ODC) Joint Venture reflects Omani trust in British companies to support the long-term development of Duqm. Atkins are also heavily involved, having undertaken the master planning activity; and Petrofac are one of the major construction contractors working on the Duqm Oil Refinery project.

The Department for International Trade (DIT) team in the Embassy in Muscat stand ready to offer support to any British company interested in doing business with Oman. In recent years, they have provided excellent support to International Hospitals Group (IHG), Petrofac, Vodafone, BAE Systems, BP, Shell, KPMG, Dentons, Interserve, Mace and many others. The team know Oman incredibly well, and regularly go above and beyond to support UK business – if you reach out for assistance, you will not be disappointed.

With an expansive Indian Ocean coastline, Oman is a politically and economically stable country. At the same time, Oman offers a strategically advantageous place to do business in the Middle East – outside of the Strait of Hormuz, on the open ocean (Duqm), and in very close proximity to major East-West global shipping routes. Oman offers excellent opportunities for companies with high quality products looking for long-term relationships.

I wish His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik every good wish and congratulations and know that the Sultanate of Oman will enjoy further progress and prosperity under His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's wise leadership.

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