

An enduring spirit of friendship

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HAMISH COWELL joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1987, and has spent much of his career on Middle East and North African issues, including as Deputy Head of Mission in Tehran, Head of the Political and Economic Section in Cairo and as British Ambassador to Tunisia. Other postings include Paris and Brussels as well as No 10 Press Office and Foreign Secretary's Speechwriter. He was made Ambassador to Oman in 2017.

This time last year, we looked ahead to 2020 with two important anniversaries in mind. First, of course, the 50th anniversary of HM Sultan Qaboos' accession; of Oman's remarkable transformation during his rule; and of the exceptionally close relationship between our two countries over this time. The second was the 220th anniversary this year of what is known as the '*Unshook Treaty*' between our two countries. As I discussed with His late Majesty last year, the convergence of HM Sultan Qaboos' Golden Jubilee year and the 220th Anniversary in 2020 of the treaty that most succinctly expresses this special and historic relationship seemed a perfect way to celebrate our partnership.

2020 has seen plans confounded everywhere. But an unprecedentedly challenging year globally started also as a very sad one in Oman, and for Oman's many friends around the world. Those friends shared with the people of Oman their deep sense of loss at the death of HM Sultan Qaboos in January, a feeling reflected in tributes paid by leaders from around the world.

In the case of the United Kingdom, it was exemplified in person on the first day of condolences by the presence of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, by the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff amongst others. Their presence testified to our respect for His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, to our commitment to His Majesty Sultan Haitham and to the relationship between Oman and the UK, which goes back beyond the '*Unshook Treaty*' of 1800.

The plan to bring together those two anniversaries was in part inspired by a fascinating conference on the history of UK/Omani relations organised two years ago by Oman's National Archives under the auspices of His Majesty Sultan Haitham, when then Minister of Heritage and Culture, which brought out many enduring themes of this unique and historic partnership, not least our shared commitment to stability, security and freedom of navigation in this region.

It was therefore no surprise that the National Archives conference coincided with the start of Exercise Saif Sareea 3 – the UK's largest joint military exercise in the world in nearly twenty years. Following the success of SS3, in 2019 we signed our Joint Defence Agreement. As part of that, we are now working closely together on developing a Joint Logistics Hub at the new Duqm port.

Our trade and investment ties are similarly significant. The UK is the largest investor in Oman, accounting for nearly half of all foreign direct investment. That investment, like Oman's economic aspirations, is diversifying beyond the hydrocarbon sector to explore opportunities for cooperation in sectors including education, healthcare and ICT.

In keeping with Vision 2040, we see the digital opportunities as exciting. Last year we launched our UK/Oman Digital Hub initiative, reaching out to schools and universities as well as start-ups in the private sector- the first such initiative in this region.

The opportunities in other sectors are no less exciting. Tourism has huge potential, as do fisheries and aquaculture. We have experts working with their Omani counterparts to develop sustainably the Blue Economy, a focal point of HRH The Duke of Cambridge's visit last year.

Education links remain second to none. Each year, around two thousand five hundred Omanis go to study in UK universities and colleges. Four years ago, the British Council in Oman launched, with Embassy support, a UK graduate Alumni Association which now has nearly 1700 Omani members – the most thriving in the Gulf region.

Last year, our two countries sought to capture the breadth and depth of this cooperation in a Comprehensive Agreement on Enduring Friendship to sit alongside the Joint Defence Agreement. The Comprehensive Agreement is a little longer than the 1800 '*Unshook Treaty*' but the spirit is the same; as that earlier Treaty put it, to ensure '*that the friendship of the two States may remain unshook till the end of time, and till the sun and moon have finished their revolving careers.*'

That spirit of enduring friendship brings me back to my starting point, to why we were represented at such a high level to convey our condolences to His Majesty Sultan Haitham. And it is reflected in the deeply woven links between the Omani and British people.

It is what makes this relationship so strong. Our engagement in 2020, including visits since March by the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and the Minister of State for the Middle East, underlines our commitment to His Majesty Sultan Haitham and the people of Oman. As they and we celebrate 50 years of Oman's renaissance, and as they embark on the process of renewing that renaissance, I am delighted that this special edition is, in its own way, contributing to it. **E**