

# The Omani Model

## *The model on how to defeat twenty-first century insurgencies?*

In this day and age western states are struggling to find a way to successfully counter irregular threats. Next to conventional threats from countries like Russia or China, they are dealing with an increasing number of non-state adversaries such as Islamic State in Syria and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Since defence budgets haven't been declining until recently, western strategists are looking for more effective and efficient methods to ensure peace and stability. Important strategic lessons might be found in the past. Almost sixty years ago factions united in the so-called PFLOAG rose against the rulers in the Sultanate of Oman in the Dhofar province. Britain supported the Omani government in its campaign against the rebels. The end game took place between 1970 and 1976 when the PFLOAG insurgents were effectively defeated. The operation in Dhofar is one of the most successful counterinsurgency campaigns of the twentieth century. This article explores the success of the Omani Model.

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*A member of the British Army Training Team (BATT) on a base in Jibjat built for civil aid development after the area was secured from Omani rebels (1972)*



President Trump recently announced a renewed military commitment to Afghanistan in order to turn the tide in the 'longest war'.<sup>1</sup> The West has been struggling to win irregular conflicts for decades. This has only become more apparent as conflicts against insurgents and other violent non-state actors have risen to be the prominent form of conflict since the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> For the past fifteen years western states have been heavily involved in operations against irregular opponents in Afghanistan, Iraq and many other countries.<sup>3</sup> Despite the billions of dollars spent and the deployment of the most sophisticated armed forces in the world, most of these conflicts have yet to be successfully concluded.<sup>4</sup> The experience of fighting irregular opponents without lasting success for so long has left deep scars in the western military establishment and has even raised the question whether success will ever be.<sup>5</sup>

Western states have therefore been looking for a more successful approach to counter irregular opponents in the twenty-first century. Additionally, western armed forces are now needed to counter other imminent, more conventional threats, such as the rising military might of China and a resurgent Russia.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, most western militaries have until recently been exposed to declining defence budgets, which prevented them from conducting prolonged stability operations.<sup>7</sup> Western defence organisations are, therefore, facing an increasing number of threats while their available resources have become increasingly scarce. Western strategists are looking for more effective and efficient ways to counter the increasing number of irregular threats.

It might be beneficial for them to take a closer look at a campaign that was conducted between 1970 and 1976 in the Omani province of Dhofar. Western historians tend to overlook this campaign because the available literature on the conflict is limited and the conflict only involved

a small number of western troops.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the conflict was overshadowed by other world events, such as the Vietnam War and the so-called Troubles in Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup> However, the importance of the conflict should not be underestimated since crucial strategic interests were at stake.<sup>10</sup> An interesting coincidence is that the conflict bears significant resemblance with contemporary insurgencies in,

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- 1 'Donald Trump Commits More Troops to Afghanistan and Calls Britain to Follow Suit', *The Telegraph*. See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/21/donald-trump-address-nation-outline-new-afghanistan-strategy/>.
- 2 Laurens Degenaar, 'How Military Change Affected Western States' Ability to End Conflicts Decisively', *Militaire Spectator*, 184:11 (2015) p. 456 and Andrew Mack, 'Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars', in: Klaus Knorr (ed.), *Power, Strategy, and Security: A World Politics Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
- 3 Adam Roberts, 'Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan', *Survival*, 51:1 (2009) p. 47. Also: Andrew Feickert, *US Military Operations in the Global War on Terrorism: Afghanistan, Africa, the Philippines and Colombia* (Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service, 2005) p. 1-21.
- 4 David Betz, 'The Strategic Bystander: On Mayhem in Century 21', in: *Infinity Journal*, 5:2 (2016) p. 30.
- 5 E. Cohen, 'Lessons from 15 years of War', in: Efraim Inbar and Jonathan Rynhold (eds.), *US Foreign Policy and Global Standing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; Realities and Perceptions* (New York, Routledge, 2016) p. 23-25.
- 6 Matteo Dian, 'The Pivot to Asia, Air-Sea Battle and contested commons in the Asia Pacific Region', *The Pacific Review*, 28:2, (2015) p. 237. Also: Jeffrey A. Larsen, 'US Extended Deterrence and Europe: Time to Consider Alternative Structures?', in: Stéfanie von Hlatky and Andreas Wenger (eds.), *The Future of Extended Deterrence: The United States, NATO and Beyond* (Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2015) p. 48.
- 7 U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense* (Washington D.C., U.S. Department of Defense, 2012), p. 6. Also: Kyle Haynes, 'Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:1 (2015) p. 490. And Benjamin Pohl, 'NATO and Liberal International Relations Theory', in: Mark Webber and Adrian Hyde-Price (eds.), *Theorising NATO: New Perspectives on the Atlantic Alliance* (New York, Routledge, 2016) p. 131.
- 8 Maj. Eric H. Haas, *Operations at the Border: Efforts to Disrupt Insurgent Safe-Havens* (Fort Leavenworth, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2011) p. 31.
- 9 Winston M. Marbella, *Hearts and Minds: Its Evolution and Relevance to Counter-insurgency Campaigns* (Fort Leavenworth, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2010) p. 45.
- 10 Thomas E. Walton, *Headed the Wrong Way; The British Army's Painful Re-Acquaintance With Its Own COIN Doctrine in Southern Iraq* (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2011) p. 71-72.



A member of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) in 1970

PHOTO: B. HARRINGTON SPIER

for example, the Middle East and Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Despite its relative unfamiliarity, the operation in Oman is one of the most successful counter-insurgency campaigns of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> It was subjected to many of the same limitations and restrictions that contemporary western military planners are facing and the way it was conducted may therefore offer a valuable approach for contemporary conflicts. The main question this article seeks to answer is why the Omani Model has been so successful during the Dhofar insurgency? The article will define the Omani Model as a clearly defined counterinsur-

gency strategy, pursued by a combination of western enablers, in partnership with both regular and irregular indigenous troops, and a legitimate development component.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the Omani Model cannot be applied one-to-one to contemporary irregular adversaries. Firstly, the conflict took place in a geographically confined area that was significantly smaller than the countries western states have found themselves in after 2001.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, most of the province was only sparsely inhabited, which enabled the counterinsurgents to employ their firepower much easier than would have been the case in more urban environments.<sup>14</sup> Thirdly, the secrecy, and resulting lack of public scrutiny was only made possible by the lack of press coverage.<sup>15</sup> It would be unimaginable in present-day campaigns due to the presence of global and social media. Nevertheless, as this dissertation will explain, the campaign provides interesting insights that can be of great value in approaching contemporary counterinsurgency.

This article applies a top-down approach and will first take a closer look at the strategic environment in which the conflict took place in order to determine the existing strategic limitations and political restrictions in the conduct of operations. Next, it will examine the campaign's strategy and operational elements in order to deduce the most valuable characteristics from the campaign. Although the earlier years of the conflict will be briefly examined as well, the article will primarily focus on the years 1970-1976 because it was within this timeframe that the transformation from almost certain defeat to decisive victory for the counterinsurgents took place, which suggests the most important elements can be found in this six-year period.

## The strategic environment

The strategic importance of the Sultanate of Oman lies in its geographical location at the entrance of the Persian Gulf.<sup>16</sup> The sultanate also controls the southern half of the Strait of

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- 11 Walter Ladwig III, 'Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion', in: *Small wars and Insurgencies* 19:1, (Routledge, London, 2008) p. 62-64.  
 12 Geraint Hughes, 'A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised: The Counter-Insurgency War in Dhofar, Oman, 1965-1975', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32:2 (2009) p. 302.  
 13 Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-Imperial Era* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995) p. 92.  
 14 LtCol Jon Hawkins, 'Assessing Afghanistan Against Aden and Oman; A Euphemism For Capitulation or the Seeds of Success', in: *Australian Army Journal*, 7:1 (2010) p. 11.  
 15 Ian Illych Martinez, 'The Battle of Mirbat: Turning Point in the Omani Dhofar Rebellion', in: *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 23:3 (2012) p. 517.  
 16 Maj Gen J.D.C. Graham, 'The Sultan's Armed Forces; March to July 1970', in: *SAF Association Newsletter*, 31:1 (1983) p. 54.

Hormuz, making Oman crucial for the world's oil supply as already was the case during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>17</sup> British ties with Oman date back to the late eighteenth century, and a 1958 treaty secured British military basing rights.<sup>18</sup> The sultanate was, therefore, of great strategic interest to the West, and Britain in particular.<sup>19</sup> Despite these important strategic interests, the counterinsurgency campaign in Oman was subjected to several strategic and political restrictions, which had a significant influence on the conduct of the operations.

The first restriction was the confined budget available to the counterinsurgency operations. It was only from 1967 onwards that oil could be exploited in commercial quantities in Oman, which is why the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) had traditionally been under severe financial constraints.<sup>20</sup> Even after 1970, oil revenues could not keep up with increasing government demands, not only for defence, but also for development programmes, which became an integral part of the counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>21</sup> Omani financial resources were, therefore, constrained throughout the conflict. Finances were also tight for the British. The first Wilson government was faced with increasing pressure from the Treasury Department to reduce its defence spending.<sup>22</sup> These reductions came at a time that prices for military equipment increased drastically.<sup>23</sup> The economic crisis seriously affected Britain's defence budget.<sup>24</sup> This forced the British government to scale down its global defence commitments and focus on its NATO responsibilities instead.<sup>25</sup> The withdrawal from East of Suez from 1968 onwards was a direct result of this, as the British defence commitments there constituted about fifteen percent of the total defence budget.<sup>26</sup> British policymakers realised that economic realities forced the British armed forces to concentrate on Europe.<sup>27</sup>

A second limitation made the effects of the withdrawal from East of Suez and the simultaneous budget reductions become only more significant. At a time when British military capabilities were steadily reduced,



Map No. 3730 Rev. 4 UNITED NATIONS  
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- 17 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran, Oil and the Strait of Hormuz* (Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007) p. 2. Also Rouhoullah K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz* (Alphen aan de Rijn, Sijthoff & Noordhoff, 1979) p. 11.
- 18 'Exchange of Letters Between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Sultan of Muscat and Oman Concerning the Sultan's Armed Forces, Civil Aviation, Royal Air Force Facilities and Economic Development in Muscat and Oman', *Treaty Series No. 28* (London, July 25 1958).
- 19 TNA DEFE 24/574, COS 13/74, 'The Principles Governing British Military Assistance to Oman', 29 May 1974.
- 20 J.E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies* (London/Lebanon, SAQI, 2007) p. 151.
- 21 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Economic Review of the Arabian Peninsula: Shaikh Doms and Republics* (London, 18 March 1971) p. 420.
- 22 Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, Michael Joseph, 1989) p. 256.
- 23 Cmnd 2592, 'Statement on Defence Estimates 1965', February 1965.
- 24 Cmnd. 3515, 'Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy, 1968', January 1968.
- 25 Geraint Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War; The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* (Rochester, The Boydell Press, 2009) p. 84. Also TNA PREM 13/1854, 'Telegram 11855'.
- 26 Robert Self, *British Foreign & Defence Policy Since 1945; Challenges & Dilemmas in a Changing World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 166. Also Saul Kelly, 'Britain's Abandonment of Arabia and Retreat From the Gulf', in: Robert Johnson and Timothy Clack (eds.), *At the End of Military Intervention* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 177.
- 27 TNA CAB 148/30, Overseas Policy and Defence (OPD) (67), '14th Meeting', 22 March 1967.

military demands in Europe only increased.<sup>28</sup> This was demonstrated by the intensified British military involvement in Northern Ireland, where the Troubles had broken out in 1969.<sup>29</sup> Ensuing operations would see the involvement of several thousands of British troops, placing a considerable burden on the British Army.<sup>30</sup>

A third limitation of perhaps even greater concern was the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw pact, and its partner states' subsequent increase in defence spending in 1968-69.<sup>31</sup> Western analysts perceived the Soviet military modernisation and its development of a conventional doctrine as a serious threat to Western Europe.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, NATO had to keep up a credible force in West Germany in order to deter the Warsaw Pact.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Britain could not withdraw any substantial forces from Germany without endangering the solidarity and effectiveness of the NATO alliance.<sup>34</sup> Addressing primarily other threats and crises British military resources were not available for use in the Dhofar insurgency.<sup>35</sup>



*The HMS Ark Royal served partly East of Suez. In the late sixties the British government decided to withdraw from this part of the world. It remained in Oman though, because of its strategical position at the entrance of the Suez Canal*

A fourth limitation can be found in the political pressure to keep casualties to a minimum. In 1970 Edward Heath took office as prime minister and, although intending otherwise, was unable to maintain a global military presence.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the Heath government was willing to conduct low-key military interventions, particularly in areas crucial to the protection of British oil supplies.<sup>37</sup> However, casualties had to be kept to a minimum in order to prevent any unwanted public attention. The aversion of British political leadership to casualties served as an important political restriction throughout the campaign.<sup>38</sup> Military leadership in Dhofar remained anxious that the British government would withdraw from Oman if heavy casualties

28 Cmnd. 3927, 'Statement on Defence Estimates, 1969', February 1969.

29 David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles; The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago, New Amsterdam Books, 2002) p. 55-56.

30 Paul Dixon, *Northern Ireland; The Politics of War and Peace* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p. 101-118. Also Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (New York, Routledge, 2014) p. 64-65.

31 Harvey Starr, 'A Collective Goods Analysis of the Warsaw Pact After Czechoslovakia', in: *International Organization*, 28:3 (1974) p. 530. Also TNA CAB 158/65, JIC (67)3, 'Soviet Bloc War Potential', 16 February 1967; F.S. Northedge, *Descent From Power; British Foreign Policy, 1945-1973* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1974) p. 299.

32 Lawrence Freedman and Geraint Hughes, 'Strategy', in: Saki R. Dockrill and Geraint Hughes (eds.), *Palgrave Advances in Cold War History* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p. 48-49. Also TNA CAB 158/65, 'Soviet Bloc War Potential', 16 February 1967 and DIS Report DI4(N)119, 'The Soviet Naval Presence in the Mediterranean', 1 January 1967 and CIA Memorandum, 'Soviet Military Policy in 1967', 14 June 1967.

33 James Worrall, 'The Model Counterinsurgency: Dhofar 1962-1975', in: Gregory Fremont-Barnes (ed.) *A history of Counterinsurgency* (Santa Barbara, Praeger Security International, 2015) p. 76.

34 Cmnd. 3927, 'Statement on Defence Estimates, 1969', February 1969; CAB 128/42, CC26(67) 26<sup>th</sup> 'Conclusions', 30 April 1967. Also TNA CAB 148/30, 'Final Report on Trilateral Talks', 3 July 1967.

35 TNA FCO 8/1860, 'Telegram No. 184, Wright to Hawley', 13 May 1972.

36 Roger Louis, 'The British Withdrawal From the Gulf', in: *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* No. 1 (London, 2003) p. 97-99.

37 POWE/63/449 (JIC (68) 24), 'JIC Report on the Implications of Oil Supplies and British Oil Interests in the Middle East', 9 September 1968.

38 TNA PRO DEF 25/187, 'SAS Operations in Oman', 14 December 1971.



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resulting lack of available forces. The British military was refocusing on the threat posed by the Warsaw Pact and simultaneous budget reductions only aggravated the gap between ends and means. The forces that were available for the Dhofar insurgency, therefore, consisted mostly of special forces whose role had to be well-concealed in order to prevent any publicity. Moreover, the military leadership in Dhofar was subjected to significant political pressure by the government in London to avoid casualties, which also restricted the conduct of the campaign.

## The insurgency

Before looking further into the conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign, it is important to take a closer look at the insurgency itself. The province of Dhofar was infamous for its rebellions, often originating from the tribal diversity of its population.<sup>42</sup> The start of the 1960s Dhofar insurgency also preceded the British involvement in the counterinsurgency campaign. This section will look further into the origins and course of the Dhofar insurgency, which can be distinguished in three phases. The first is the development of the rebellion between 1962 and 1967. The second is its expansion into a communist inspired insurgency between 1967 and 1970. The third and culminating phase lasted from 1970 to 1976 and witnessed the foreign intervention on behalf of the Sultan of Oman.

In 1963 rebellion was imminent among the Dhofari population. Sultan Said bin Taimur asserted his authority through medieval measures, thereby fuelling grievances and

were sustained.<sup>39</sup> The British government therefore discreetly deployed units of the Special Air Service (SAS) under the guise of the British Army Training Team (BATT), whose official task was to train and advise the SAF but which was in fact directly involved in combat operations.<sup>40</sup> This continued to be the official stance for the duration of the Omani conflict, also when questions were asked in the House of Commons at a time when the SAS had already been directly involved in combat operations for over five years.<sup>41</sup> Politically, this only emphasized the importance of keeping casualties to a minimum.

All in all, the conduct of the campaign in Dhofar was heavily influenced by several strategic and political restrictions. One of the most important strategic limitations was the British withdrawal from East of Suez and the

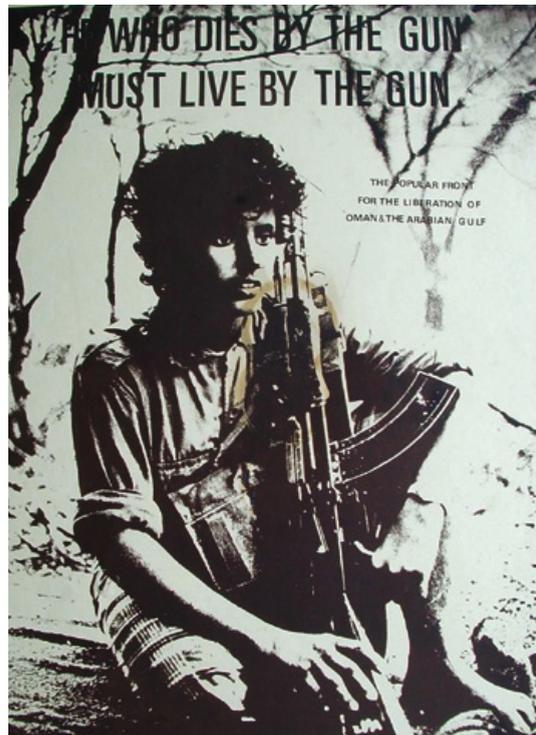
39 Ken Connor, *Ghost Force; The Secret History of the SAS* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1998) p. 171.

40 Lt Col John McKeown, *Britain and Oman: The Dhofar War and Its Significance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 65. Also Alastair MacKenzie, *Special Force; The Untold Story of 22<sup>nd</sup> Special Air Service Regiment (SAS)* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2011) p. 135.

41 Cmnd. 5976, 'Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975', March 1975, p. 55. Also HC Deb 19 November 1974, Vol. 881 cc356-7W.

42 J.E. Peterson, 'Oman's Diverse Society: Southern Oman', in: *Middle East Journal*, 58:2 (2004) p. 257-266.

creating discontent.<sup>43</sup> The sultan was able to suppress the insurgency for the first few years.<sup>44</sup> The situation changed drastically after the British withdrawal from neighbouring Aden and South Yemen in 1967, which had been British protectorates until then. The British departure enabled the Marxist National Liberation Front (NLF) to seize power and rename the country as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).<sup>45</sup> Similarity in political convictions of the PDRY and of the Dhofari rebels soon gave rise to material support flowing into Dhofar.<sup>46</sup> Other communist regimes such as China, North Korea, and eventually the Soviet Union, contributed support by providing weapons, training, and sometimes even advisers.<sup>47</sup> Under communist influence, the Dhofari insurgents changed their name into the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf (PFLOAG).<sup>48</sup> The PFLOAG was divided into two groups, the first consisting of hard-line communists who had been trained abroad and indoctrinated in the communist ideology.<sup>49</sup> The second group was composed of tribesmen who



Leaflet spread by the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLOAG) in Dhofar, home of the insurgency against Sultan Said Bin Taimur

- 43 Ian Skeet, *Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era* (London, Faber & Faber, 1974) p. 163-203.
- 44 TNA FCO 51/41, 'Memorandum on the Dhofar Liberation Front', 30 January 1968.
- 45 Humphrey Trevelyan, *The Middle East in Revolution* (New York, Macmillan, 1970) p. 209-266.
- 46 TNA CAB 158/70, JIC (68) 35. Also Fred Halliday, *Revolution and Foreign Policy: The Case of South Yemen, 1967-1987* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 142-143.
- 47 MEC John Graham Collection 2/2, 'Anti-Guerrilla Operations in Dhofar, 1972, Section 5'. Also John Akehurst, *We Won a War: The Campaign in Oman, 1965-1975*, (Salisbury, Michael Russell, 1982) p. 26. And TNA FCO 8/2018 338047, 'Top Secret: From Major General Timothy Creasy to His Majesty Qaboos bin Said, Annex 'C', Organisation and Future Intentions of PFLOAG in Northern Oman', 4 January 1973.
- 48 Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1975) p. 320-321.
- 49 Maj Gen Tony Jeapes, *SAS Secret War; Codename Operation Storm* (Glasgow, HarperCollins Publishers, 1996) p. 38.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ranulph Fiennes, *Where Soldiers Fear to Tread* (London, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1995) p. 186.
- 52 John McKeown, *Britain and Oman*, p. 42-43. Also TNA FCO 46/609, 'The Employment of an SAS Squadron in Dhofar', 26 February 1970.
- 53 MEC John Graham Collection 2/2, 'Anti-Guerrilla Operations in Dhofar, 1972, Section 4'.
- 54 TNA FCO 46/609, 'Ministry of Defence: Chiefs of Staff Committee, Confidential Annex to COS 8th Meeting/70', 17 March 1970. Also TNA FCO 46/609, 'The Employment of an SAS Squadron in Dhofar', 26 February 1970. And TNA CAB 186/5, JIC(A)(70)6, 'Sultanate of Muscat and Oman: The Military and Political Situation in Dhofar in the Shorter Term', 17 April 1970.
- 55 TNA CAB 158/70 JIC (68) 35, 'Likely Developments in the Persian Gulf and Their Probable Effects for British Interests', 7 June 1968.

were given weapons by the hard-liners but whose operations were largely limited to their own tribal areas.<sup>50</sup>

The infusion of modern weapons, thorough training and a new ideology significantly changed the chances for the insurgency.<sup>51</sup> As a result, the conflict intensified, with the sultan's forces SAF suffering a series of defeats between 1967 and 1970.<sup>52</sup> By March 1970 the insurgents controlled the entire Dhofar province, except for a narrow stretch along the coast and its capital, Salalah.<sup>53</sup> Intelligence reports estimated that it would take the insurgents less than a year to seize the remaining territory, which would threaten the RAF airbase at Salalah as well.<sup>54</sup> The British government feared that loss of Dhofar would enable communist forces to push further into Oman and might even cause instability in the rest of the Gulf region.<sup>55</sup> Despite the magnitude of the setbacks, the

sultan was unwilling to approve political, military and economic reforms needed to turn the tide.<sup>56</sup> However, British strategic interests necessitated the deployment of military forces, despite the fear of becoming involved in an open-ended conflict.<sup>57</sup>

One of the most decisive moments of the conflict came on 23 July 1970 when Sultan Said bin Taimur was overthrown in a nearly bloodless coup by his son Qaboos bin Said, who was covertly supported by the British government.<sup>58</sup> The new sultan had received his education at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and had served as an officer in the British Army.<sup>59</sup> He quickly announced political and economic reforms and asked for British military resources to aid the SAF. Support arrived in 1970 in the form of two SAS squadrons.<sup>60</sup> This enabled the new sultan to create a strong and undivided political leadership, which would prove essential in the years to come.<sup>61</sup> Despite attempts to implement a classical counterinsurgency campaign, the SAF still lacked the necessary resources to dislodge the PFLOAG from its strongholds in Dhofar.<sup>62</sup> Some help started to arrive in the form of so-called Firqats, indigenous tribesmen who had defected from the PFLOAG and started to augment SAF resources.<sup>63</sup> Although this enabled the Sultan's Armed Forces to gain some success, they were unable to defeat the PFLOAG and only managed to turn the insurgency into a stalemate.<sup>64</sup>

The Dhofar insurgency evolved significantly during its first few years. The conflict started out as a tribal rebellion but developed into an ideologically motivated, transnational insurgency receiving significant external support. By 1970 it had almost succeeded in defeating the SAF who were only able to bring about a stalemate in the conflict after Sultan Qaboos assumed power and British support began to arrive. It would still take several years before the PFLOAG was decisively defeated. Therefore, something must have changed significantly between 1970 and 1976. The next sections will demonstrate how the SAF was able to turn the tide at strategic, operational and tactical levels, and to eventually triumph over the PFLOAG.

## Strategy

One of the key points of the entire counter-insurgency campaign in Dhofar was its clear political aim: preventing Oman from falling into communist hands, thus maintaining secure sea lines of communication through the Persian Gulf. This clearly defined a political objective that demonstrated the strategic interests at stake.<sup>65</sup> In order to achieve the political aim, a deliberate strategy had to be devised. The envisioned strategy between 1970 and early 1972 was largely based on a classic counterinsurgency approach intended to win the popular support of the Jebalis, or mountain people.<sup>66</sup> For several reasons this approach was not instrumental in breaking the stalemate.

Firstly, military resources were too limited with regard to what the government forces were facing. SAF forces were outnumbered and outgunned by PFLOAG insurgents, who were continuously being (re)supplied by the Yemenite PDRY.<sup>67</sup> Secondly, the limited military forces

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- 56 TNA FCO 46/609, 'P.J. Bayne, Commodore, Chiefs of Staff Committee, to CDS', 4 June 1970. Also TNA FCO 46/609, 'Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Operational Planning Staff, The Situation in Muscat and Oman', 7 July 1970.
- 57 James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman* (London, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2014) p. 161.
- 58 TNA FCO 46/609, 'Bahrain Residency to FCO, Telegram 340', 13 July 1970; TNA FCO 46/609, 'A.A. Acland to P. Hayman, Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, Possibility of a Coup', 8 July 1970; CAB 186/11, JIC(A)(72)11, 'The Outlook for Oman', 1 March 1972.
- 59 Sergey Plekhanov, *A Reformer on the Throne: Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said* (London, Trident Press Ltd., 2004) p. 78-82.
- 60 TNA DEFE 25/186, 'Department of Military Operations to Vice-Chairman of the General Staff, Assistance to SAF', 13 August 1970.
- 61 Bart Schuurman, 'Trinitarian Troubles: Governmental, Military and Societal Explanations for Post-1945 Western Failures in Asymmetric Conflicts'. In: *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 22:1 (2011) p. 40-41.
- 62 TNA FCO 8/1856, 'Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces' Assessment, 1972'.
- 63 Tony Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, p. 53-54.
- 64 MEC John Graham Collection 2/1, 'CSAF's assessment of the situation in Dhofar as at 14 February 1972'. Also TNA FCO 8/1856, 'From A.D. Parsons to Mr. Renwick, Private Secretary, 17 January 1972'. And TNA CAB 148/122/49, 21 November 1972.
- 65 M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015) p. 145.
- 66 TNA FCO 8/1437, UK Eyes Only - Secret, 'An Outline Plan to Restore the Situation in Dhofar Using Special Air Service Regiment Troops', 7 April 1970.
- 67 TNA PRO FCO 8/1415, 'Muscat and Oman - Dhofar', February 12, 1970. Also TNA PRO FO 1016/791, 'Sultanate's Balance Sheet - 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1969', 13 October 1969. And John Graham, *Ponder Anew: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (Staplehurst, Spellmont Ltd, 1999) p. 316.



*Sultan Qaboos bin al Said rose to power in 1970 after overthrowing his father. He countered the PFLOAG insurgency successfully with foreign aid. Qaboos then modernized Oman. He is the longest serving Arab leader*

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available made it too dangerous to maintain a continuous presence in the mountainous region known as the Jebel.<sup>68</sup> An aggravating circumstance was the inability to resupply units at the Jebel.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, it turned out to be impossible for SAF forces to provide sufficient security to the population, which faced reprisals

by PFLOAG insurgents for cooperating with the SAF.<sup>70</sup> This, thirdly, significantly deteriorated the amount and quality of the intelligence received because the population refused to talk to SAF forces.<sup>71</sup> Without good intelligence, no successful operations could be carried out. Together the reasons demonstrated a lack of coherent strategy because no desired end-state could be determined.

Faced with a grinding stalemate, military leadership decided to transform the strategy profoundly from 1972 onwards. This was made possible by the arrival of much-needed critical enablers, such as additional aircraft, Jordanian engineers and Iranian special forces.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps the most important development was a conditions-based redefining of the strategic end-state of the campaign.<sup>73</sup> It signalled a

68 TNA PRO DEFE 4/1831, 'CSAF Maj. Gen. Tim Creasey, brief for Sultan Qaboos', 28 September 1972.

69 McKeown, *Britain and Oman*, p. 45.

70 TNA PRO FCO 8/1668, 'SAF Sitrep', 13 November 1971.

71 TNA PRO FCO 8/1667, 'War in Oman', 17 August 1971. Also MEC John Graham Collection 2/5, 'Resume of Events, January 1 to July 20, 1971', 14 August 1971.

72 TNA FCO 8/1858, 'Patrick Wright to Le Quesne', 2 July 1972. Also TNA FCO 8/2023, 'Engineer Assistance at Simba', 12 March 1973. And Marc Devore, 'The United Kingdom's Last Hot War of the Cold War: Oman, 1963-1975', in: *Cold War History*, 11:1 (2011) p. 17. And MEC John Graham Collection 4/1, 'JDC Graham Oman Diary', 2 October 1972. And TNA DEFE 25/312, 'Review of the Situation by Major General Tim Creasy, Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces, December 1973 - May 1974', 14 May 1974.

commitment to stay instead of an upcoming deadline to leave, in contrast to the timeline-based conditions set in many other campaigns. The objective of the counterinsurgency campaign became securing Dhofar for civil development.<sup>74</sup> This clear and attainable objective was to be achieved by destroying the hard-line PFLOAG fighters by attrition and simultaneously addressing popular grievances with a legitimate development programme that could take away support for and prevent potential recruitment by the insurgents.<sup>75</sup> This strategy enabled the British and Omani governments to pursue their political objectives, while also demonstrating a willingness to adjust their means to their desired ends.

## Operational elements

Securing Dhofar was to be achieved through three different operational steps: holding the areas already seized, expanding pacification on the Jebel and mounting a decisive blocking operation in order to cut off the insurgent supply lines from the PDRY.<sup>76</sup> These steps resemble the three elements of classic counterinsurgency in clearing, holding and building, but without the massive troop deployments seen in other classic counterinsurgency battles.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the Dhofar campaign possessed some components of classic counterinsurgency theory based on fighting in decolonization conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>78</sup> The following sections will look more closely at each of the three operational elements of the strategy in Dhofar, as well as the associated tactical actions that were necessary to accomplish each element.

*Firqats, units of indigenous tribesman who defected from PFLOAG and worked along with the sultan's forces and British SAS in the battle against the Dhofari guerrillas*

73 Ken Connor, *Ghost Force*, p. 156.

74 John Akehurst, *We Won A War*, p. 65.

75 Ian F.W. Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq: An Historical Perspective* (Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, 2005) p. 13.

76 MOD COS 37/72, 'Future UK Defence Activity in Oman', 29 March 1972.

77 J.E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, p. 267.

78 Frank G. Hoffman, 'Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?' in: *Parameters* 37 (2007) p. 71.



The first operational element for SAF forces was to stabilize the few areas that were still under government control. Many of the Dhofar coastal towns still in government hands, and Salalah airfield in particular, frequently fell victim to stand-off attacks by mortars and rockets.<sup>79</sup> The formation of an additional infantry regiment enabled SAF for the first time to deploy two regiments simultaneously in Dhofar.<sup>80</sup> These forces were put to good use in a series of harassing operations in late 1970 and early 1971.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, BATT teams were deployed to the coastal towns to act as Civil Action Teams (CAT). They organized immediate development locally by providing basic medical care and even veterinary services to the local population.<sup>82</sup> The projects were deliberately limited to tribes and Firqats supporting the government and only

addressed the legitimate grievances 'as perceived by the population'. The relatively simple measures greatly improved the economic situation in the government-controlled part of the Jebel. This was a significant feat because it nullified many of the original causes for the insurgency and persuaded additional PFLOAG fighters to defect to the government side.<sup>83</sup>

Food control measures were established to prevent the PFLOAG from receiving food and supplies from the Salalah plain.<sup>84</sup> As a result, the increased control over the population and support for the government significantly reduced the amount of supplies the PFLOAG insurgents were receiving from these areas.<sup>85</sup> PFLOAG responded by attacking coastal towns in order to demonstrate its resolve. The best known example is the battle for the town of Mirbat in July 1972 when an attack of 200-250 insurgents was repelled. This is often seen as a turning point in the battle for the Salalah plain.<sup>86</sup>

With the coastal plain largely secured, the second operational element was to expand SAF presence on the Jebel, which constituted a sanctuary for the insurgents from where they could attack SAF forces with relative impunity.<sup>87</sup> The rugged landscape consisting of impenetrable mountain regions and wild desert favoured the insurgents tremendously.<sup>88</sup> The only way this area could be controlled was by extensive patrolling, securing the villages and thereby establishing a permanent footprint on the Jebel.<sup>89</sup> The SAF plan for expanding its presence called for securing the areas where PFLOAG was weakest first. It therefore started in the east.<sup>90</sup> SAF began setting up patrol bases in the eastern part of the Jebel during the second half of 1972.<sup>91</sup> The local indigenous Firqat were especially helpful in securing these outposts on the Jebel. The first Firqat were recruited from a group of defected insurgents who chose to abandon the PFLOAG after internal clashes between some of the militias and hard-line communists.<sup>92</sup> The defected fighters were subsequently rearmed and a BATT team was assigned to each Firqat for training purposes and the coordination of air- and fire support.<sup>93</sup> The combination of increasingly brutal methods

79 Bryan Ray, *Dangerous Frontiers; Campaigning in Somaliland and Oman* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Books, 2008) p. 62. Also Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, p. 261.

80 MEC John Graham Collection 2/4, 'Summary of the Dhofar War So Far', September 1971. Also MEC John Graham Collection 4/1, 'JDC Graham Oman Diary', 24 February 1971.

81 TNA PRO FCO 8/1667, 'SAF Activity Report', 22 January 1971. Also Lt. Col. Karsten Kraemer, *Special Operations Forces During the Dhofar Insurgency and in Afghanistan: A Comparative Study for German Special Operations Forces* (Quantico, USMC Command and Staff College, 2011) p. 6. Also Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, p. 255-256.

82 Ian Gardiner, *In the Service of the Sultan: A First Hand Account of the Dhofar Insurgency* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Books, 1988) p. 159.

83 Walter Ladwig III, 'Supporting Allies in COIN', p. 81;

84 MEC John Graham Collection 2/1, 'CSAF's assessment of the situation in Dhofar as at 14 February 1972', 17 February 1972.

85 TNA PRO DEFE 24/1837, JIC(A)(72):1, 'The Outlook for Oman', 10 March 1972. Also MEC John Graham Collection 2/5, 'Captured Enemy Documents, Third National Congress of Rakyut June 1971', 15 December 1971.

86 TNA PRO DEFE 24/1869, 'Marbat Incident July 1972', 5 March 1975.

87 MEC John Graham Collection 2/1, 'CSAF's assessment of the situation in Dhofar as of 14 February 1972', 17 February 1972. Also TNA PRO FCO 8/1667, 'Record of Meeting Dhofar', 7 August 1971.

88 Rory Cormac, *Confronting the Colonies; British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 159.

89 Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman*, p. 162.

90 Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, p. 275. Also William Seymour, *British Special Forces; The Story of Britain's Undercover Soldiers* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Books, 2006) p. 295.

91 TNA PRO DEFE 13/779, 'Brig John Akehurst, Commander Dhofar 1974-1976, The End of the Dhofar War Speech', January 1976. Also TNA PRO DEFE 24/574, 'A Review of the Period 1 November 1973 to 30 April 1974', June 1974.

92 McKeown, *Britain and Oman*, p. 55.

93 MEC John Graham Collection 2/2, 'Headquarters Sultan's Armed Forces, Plans 7', 12 February 1971. Also MEC John Graham Collection 2/2, 'Irregular Forces - SAF's View'. And MEC John Graham Collection 2/2, 'BATT Notes on the Raising and Training of Irregular Forces in Dhofar'. And Paul Sibley, *A Monk in the SAS* (London, Spiderwize, 2011) p. 63.

used by the hard-line communists and a generous offer for amnesty by Sultan Qaboos encouraged an increasing number of PFLOAG fighters to surrender and join the Firqat.<sup>94</sup> Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP) were not necessarily treated as prisoners of war or interrogated as such. Instead, they were treated friendly and asked questions by the Firqat, who tried to persuade the SEP to join them.<sup>95</sup> Eventually the Firqat totalled as many as 2,500 men.<sup>96</sup>

The use of Firqat also had disadvantages. The first was the tribal structure of Jebali society. Firqat often spent more time arguing and fighting each other than they did fighting the communists.<sup>97</sup> As a result they were unable or unwilling to operate outside their own tribal areas.<sup>98</sup> The only attempt to set up a multi-tribal Firqat was abandoned after only three months due to the tensions between the different participating tribes.<sup>99</sup> Another disadvantage was their irregular character making them unsuitable for conventional operations, which was demonstrated as early as 1971. The Firqat's operational success depended on the tribal interests involved. They lacked reliability if their interests did not coincide with those of the government.<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, the advantages of the Firqat greatly outweighed the disadvantages, especially because they had qualities the SAF forces lacked.<sup>101</sup> Firstly, they significantly improved the government's intelligence position because they allowed government access to parts of Dhofar that were previously inaccessible to SAF forces.<sup>102</sup> The Firqat knowledge of the terrain, tribal structures and local customs, as well as their ability to distinguish insurgents from civilians on the Jebel made them highly capable of gathering local intelligence and winning the trust of the local population.<sup>103</sup> Secondly, Firqat provided an opportunity to present development projects as an Omani success, thereby increasing the legitimacy of Sultan Qaboos and his government.<sup>104</sup> SAF forces consisted mostly of soldiers from Northern Oman and Baluchistan and were often looked upon with suspicion by the population. The arrival of the Firqat therefore significantly increased the legitimacy of the



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*The Dhofari war was also waged by civil development programmes improving living conditions of the Omani people. Here military helped drilling for water, needed for the irrigation of local crops*

94 Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, p. 38-39.

95 DEFE 25/186, 'Folio No. 71, Telegram No. 20, CDS to CBF, 31 December 1970.

96 Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, p. 277.

97 Ken Connor, *Ghost Force*, p. 160.

98 Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, p. 109-111.

99 Ibid, *SAS Secret War*, p. 111-113.

100 Ibid II, *SAS Secret War*, p. 102.

101 Jacqueline L. Hazelton, *Compellence and Accommodation in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Boston, Brandeis University Press, 2011) p. 84.

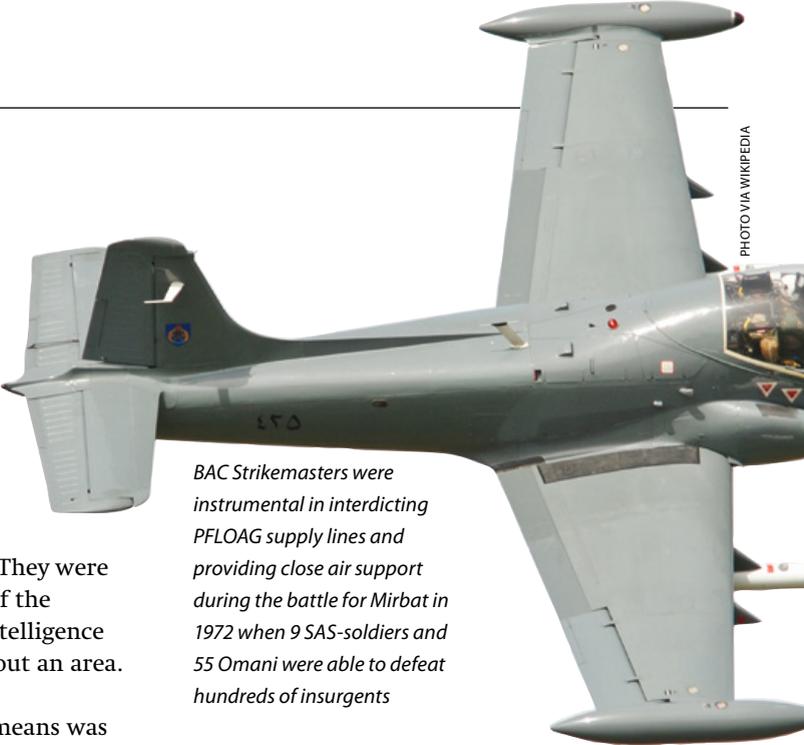
102 MEC John Graham Collection 2/1, 'The Future of Dhofar', 15 July 1971. Also Jeffrey R. Macris and Saul Kelly, *Imperial Crossroads; The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2012) p. 105-106.

103 Akehurst, *We Won a War*, p. 96.

104 TNA FCO 8/1669, 'D.G. Crawford to Sir Alec Douglas-Home', 4 Jan. 1972.

sultan in the eyes of the Dhofari population.<sup>105</sup> All in all, the partnership between SAF and Firqat was greatly beneficial for expanding the government's influence on the Jebel because of their division of tasks, although it always had to be carefully considered what missions the Firqat were given.<sup>106</sup> They were able to win the hearts and minds of the population and provided crucial intelligence which enabled SAF forces to clear out an area.

Winning the population by other means was also an integral part of the counterinsurgency strategy in Dhofar, which is why development programmes were started. These projects were deliberately limited to the areas of tribes and Firqats supporting the government. The Jebalis still living in insurgent-controlled parts of the province had to do without the economic developments they could witness in the government-controlled areas. This provided a rewarding incentive to that particular part of the population to come over to the government's side.<sup>107</sup> Initial development projects designed to address popular grievances were set up by British engineers, such as building schools, clinics and mosques.<sup>108</sup> Local security then could be left to the Firqat thus making SAF forces available for other, more conventional operations in areas still controlled by the PFLOAG.<sup>109</sup> The relatively simple measures



*BAC Strikemasters were instrumental in interdicting PFLOAG supply lines and providing close air support during the battle for Mirbat in 1972 when 9 SAS-soldiers and 55 Omani were able to defeat hundreds of insurgents*

greatly improved the economic situation in the government-controlled part of the Jebel, which was significant because it nullified many of the original causes for the insurgency and therefore helped persuading additional PFLOAG fighters to join the government side.<sup>110</sup> Consequently the existing tensions between PFLOAG hard-liners and the Jebali population were further increased.<sup>111</sup>

The third and perhaps most crucial operational element in defeating the PFLOAG was interdicting supply lines from the PDRY to the insurgents. SAF forces would remain stuck in a running battle as long as these supply lines stayed intact.<sup>112</sup> Interdiction was implemented simultaneously with expanding SAF influence on the Jebel. It forced the PFLOAG to expand large quantities of ammunition, which at the same time made them increasingly dependent on resupply.<sup>113</sup> The first attempt at cutting at least part of the supply from the PDRY was by constructing a line of minefields and barbed wire with isolated outposts stretching from the coast to the border with Saudi Arabia, known as the Leopard line, in the aftermath of Operation Jaguar.<sup>114</sup> The fixed defensive line frustrated PFLOAG attempts to supply the Eastern sector, thus affecting their ability to conduct operations.

Although the Leopard line achieved some initial success, it had to be abandoned due to the

105 Gardiner, *In the Service of the Sultan*, p. 159.

106 MEC John Graham Collection 2/2, Section 10, Annex B, 'BATT Notes on the Raising and Training of Irregular Forces in Dhofar'.

107 MEC John Graham Collection 2/1, 'Peter Thwaites, Lecture Dhofar 1967- 70'. Undated.

108 John Graham, 'The Sultan's Armed Forces: March 1970 to September 1972, Part I March to July 1970', *Sultan's Armed Forces Association Newsletter*, 31:1 (1983) p. 51.

109 Akehurst, *We Won a War*, p. 63-64.

110 Ladwig III, 'Supporting Allies in COIN', p. 81;

111 MEC John Graham Collection 5/2, 'John Graham, Thirty Months'. Undated.

112 TNA FCO 46/609, COS Committee, Defence Operational Planning Staff, 'The Situation in Muscat and Oman', 30 July 1970.

113 Akehurst, *We Won a War*, p. 20.

114 Clive Jones, 'Military Intelligence, Tribes, and Britain's War in Dhofar, 1970-1976', in: *The Middle East Journal*, 65:4 (2011) p. 567.

difficulties of resupplying the outposts during monsoon season.<sup>115</sup> Another difficulty was the large amount of SAF forces it took to occupy the line, preventing their use in other operations.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, the use of fixed defensive lines to interdict PFLOAG supply lines would remain an important element of the campaign in Dhofar.<sup>117</sup> This became obvious as the number of rocket and mortar attacks east of the Hornbeam line declined significantly after its completion.<sup>118</sup> The line managed to prevent about 85% of PFLOAG supplies reaching their destination.<sup>119</sup>

The fourth operational element of the campaign in Dhofar was the air support SAF forces were receiving from the Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF). Without SOAF support, none of the operational elements mentioned above would have been possible.<sup>120</sup> In three areas SOAF had the most impact, the first of which was close air support (CAS). SAF forces and their BATT and Firqat counterparts usually operated in relatively small units on the Jebel and were often outnumbered by PFLOAG formations.<sup>121</sup> As a result, their ability to take on the PFLOAG relied on adequate artillery and air support.<sup>122</sup> CAS was primarily provided by relatively cheap and light ground attack jets, such as Provost and later Strikemaster, operated by RAF loan- and contract officers.<sup>123</sup> The importance of CAS is exemplified by its crucial role in the aforementioned battle for Mirbat. If it had not been for the timely air attacks, the Mirbat garrison would have been overrun, which would have presented an important propaganda victory for PFLOAG.<sup>124</sup> CAS success, however, greatly depended on British officers on the ground that possessed the skills to direct the aircraft to their targets.<sup>125</sup> SOAF also played an important role in interdicting PFLOAG supplies, especially after the completion of the Hornbeam line. SOAF aircraft were able to interdict camel trains at will, without having to worry about civilian casualties, since the Hornbeam line was established between the densely populated eastern sector and the largely uninhabited western sector.<sup>126</sup>



British military inside the BATT-house at Mirbat

PHOTO B. HARRINGTON SPER

Another area of the campaign where SOAF support proved invaluable was air transport. The combination of a non-existent road network and the rugged terrain that favoured ambushes largely prevented resupply by ground vehicles.<sup>127</sup> The establishment of isolated outposts made resupply even more challenging, so SAF relied on SOAF transport aircraft and helicopters to bring in crucial supplies such as food,

115 Hughes, 'A 'Model Campaign Reappraised'', p. 291. Also Anthony Kemp, *The SAS Savage Wars of Peace, 1947 to the Present* (London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2001) p. 107.

116 TNA FCO 8/1856, 'CSAF's Assessment, 1972'; TNA DEFE 24/575, 'CSAF's Assessment, 1972', 14 February 1972.

117 J.E. Peterson, 'Guerrilla Warfare and Ideological Confrontation in the Arabian Peninsula: The Rebellion in Dhufar', in: *World Affairs*, 139:4 (1977) p. 283.

118 TNA PRO DEFE 25/312, 'Review of the Military Situation Since the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1973 to the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1974', 19 December 1973.

119 TNA PRO DEFE 25/312, 'Review of the Military Situation', 26 November 1973; TNA DEFE 11/762, 'Welch to COS Secretary', 11 June 1973; TNA DEFE 11/737, 'Bridges to D. Acland', 12 June 1974.

120 Akehurst, *We Won a War*, p. 39, 96.

121 John Pimlott, 'The British Army: The Dhofar Campaign, 1970-1975', in: Ian Beckett and John Pimlott (eds.), *Counter Insurgency: Lessons From History* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Books, 2011) p. 29.

122 Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-Imperial Era*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995) p. 82.

123 Rowland White, *Storm Front* (London, Transworld Publishers, 2011) p. 96-97.

124 Martinez, 'The Battle of Mirbat', p. 520.

125 White, *Storm Front*, p. 135-136. Also Gardiner, *In the Service of the Sultan*, p. 116-118.

126 Gardiner, *In the Service of the Sultan*, p. 78.

127 McKeown, *Britain and Oman*, p. 45-46.

The combination of an increasingly strong SAF posture on the Jebel and visibly growing development programmes, persuaded many PFLOAG insurgents to surrender their support for the communist cause

ammunition and water.<sup>128</sup> Its fixed wing fleet consisted of easily maintainable and reliable aircraft that could land on short and improvised airstrips.<sup>129</sup> Although their number was limited, their role in keeping SAF units supplied cannot be underestimated. The amount of SOAF helicopters was also limited, but they were supplemented by Iranian helicopters during the latter years of the conflict.<sup>130</sup> The increase in helicopter availability made it possible to conduct additional air mobile operations. This provided much needed mobility and enabled SAF to keep its units supplied and achieve higher levels of surprise during operations.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, SOAF played an indispensable role in medical evacuations. Initially, the only way wounded men could be taken off the Jebel was by an agonizing journey on the back of a mule.<sup>132</sup> For this very reason, SOAF's first helicopters were acquired. They significantly boosted the morale of the men fighting on the Jebel.<sup>133</sup> This was reinforced by the presence of an RAF field surgical team that provided medical care to both British servicemen and Omani soldiers, including the Firqat.<sup>134</sup>

In conclusion, the operational elements began to pay off from 1974 onwards. The combination of an increasingly strong SAF posture on the Jebel and visibly growing development programmes, managed to persuade many PFLOAG insurgents to surrender their support for the communist cause by either force or reward.<sup>135</sup> By early December 1975 organised resistance by the PFLOAG had collapsed and the province was subsequently declared 'secure for civil development' on 4 December, thereby achieving the overall objective of the campaign.<sup>136</sup> Although a small number of insurgents would continue to hold out for several more years, the conflict had essentially been concluded by 1976.<sup>137</sup>

## Conclusion

Now that the 'longest war' has entered its seventeenth year, it has become clear that western states need a new, more effective and efficient way of countering irregular opponents. A possible solution could be derived from the Dhofar campaign between 1970-1976. From the beginning, the campaign was subjected to significant strategic limitations and political restrictions. British and Omani financial difficulties ensured that the available resources and manpower remained scarce throughout the conflict.<sup>138</sup> This was further aggravated by the continuing British military commitment in Europe, which was necessitated by other threats. Besides these significant limitations, operations in Dhofar were further restricted by the political intention to keep casualties to a minimum in order to prevent any public scrutiny about the

128 James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars; Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2003) p. 213.  
 129 David C. Arkless, *The Secret War; Dhofar 1971-1972* (London, William Kimber & Co, 1988) p. 14-15.  
 130 TNA DEFE 11/762 'COS Briefing', 17 July 1973; Maj. Gen. Ken Perkins, *A Fortunate Soldier* (London, Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988) p. 141.  
 131 Douglas Blaufarb and George Tanham, *Who Will Win: A Key to the Puzzle of Revolutionary War* (New York, Crane Russak, 1989) p. 66.  
 132 White, *Storm Front*, p. 118-119.  
 133 Ibid.  
 134 M.A. Melsom, M.D. Farrar and R.C. Volkers, 'Battle Casualties', in: *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 56:1 (1975) p. 289.  
 135 TNA FCO 8/2687, 'Oman Annual Review 1975', 2 January 1976.  
 136 Ian Skeet, *Oman: Politics and Development* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) p. 50  
 137 Ibid.  
 138 TNA FCO 8/1855, 'Oman Economy, Hawley To Wright', 8 May 1972, p. 2.

conflict. Despite these limitations, British strategic interests necessitated the deployment of military forces to Dhofar.

Due to the existing limitations, the British commitment to Oman consisted mostly of special forces personnel, seconded officers to regular SAF and SOAF units, and other critical enablers such as engineers. The latter were used on the basis of a solid strategy that effectively balanced ends, ways and means in order to achieve the main objective of securing Dhofar for civil development. This was done by what was essentially a force and reward approach which aimed to destroy the PFLOAG by attrition, while simultaneously addressing popular grievances by a legitimate development programme addressing only the grievances 'as perceived by the population'.

The combination of regular and irregular forces was critical to the success of the operation. Firqat proved unable to conduct conventional military operations but were very successful when used to gather intelligence and provide security in their local tribal communities. Together with their BATTs they proved to be decisive in holding liberated areas from being retaken by the PFLOAG. Additionally, they enabled regular forces to clear areas of PFLOAG insurgents and conduct operations against their supply lines. The construction of a series of fixed defensive lines by British and Jordanian engineers also contributed largely to severing PFLOAG supply lines from the PDRY. These remote defensive positions were critical in stemming the flow of arms and other supplies, but were isolated and therefore vulnerable to PFLOAG attacks. For this reason, SAF forces heavily relied on air support for their mobility, supplies and fire support.

All in all, the success of the campaign in Dhofar can be attributed to three main factors. The first was the fact that the British and Omani



*British SAS gives medical treatment in the remote Yanqul Plain of Oman*

PHOTO IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

governments pursued a clear strategy with attainable objectives, in which they adjusted their means to their ends. The second factor was the combination of regular and irregular forces which were each assigned tasks that benefitted their respective qualities. They were strongly supported by critical enablers such as airpower, engineers and special forces, in conjunction with a third factor in the form of a legitimate development programme that effectively addressed existing grievances as perceived by the population. Together, these three factors enabled the Omani government to decisively defeat the communist insurgency and re-establish control over the province of Dhofar by 1976.

The similarities with operations against contemporary irregular adversaries are apparent and significant. This article demonstrates it can be highly beneficial for contemporary western strategists to study the Dhofar campaign in greater detail. I venture to suggest that the success factors of the Dhofar campaign can provide the guidelines for defeating twenty-first century irregular adversaries. ■