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THESIS

**THE DHOFAR REBELLION: INFLUENCE OF
EXTERNAL POWERS ON COUNTERINSURGENCY**

by

Brennan Hosack

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Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Afshon P. Ostovar
Ryan Gingeras

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ON COUNTERINSURGENCY**

Brennan Hosack
Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy
BS, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 2012

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**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
June 2022**

Approved by: Afshon P. Ostovar
Advisor

Ryan Gingeras
Second Reader

Afshon P. Ostovar
Associate Chair for Research
Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

This thesis endeavors to understand the significant role that external power influence plays on the success of a nation's counterinsurgency strategy. Specifically, this thesis looks at the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman (1965–1975) as it pulled great powers of the 20th century into an insurgency fought on the Southern Arabian Peninsula and demonstrates the significant role that these powers played in the eventual outcome. The sociopolitical conditions in the Dhofar region of Oman that set the stage for the rebellion are important in order to determine the root cause that ignited the conflict. Many authors have already written on the Dhofar Rebellion from a purely counterinsurgency perspective. This thesis endeavors to consider the significant influence that the support provided by nations external to the conflict have on the outcome of an insurgency, and it concludes that success or failure of the insurgency can be determined by this level of support—or lack thereof—rather than solely by military operations.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DLF	Dhofar Liberation Front
NLF	National Liberation Front
PFLOAG	Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf
POLO	People's Organization for the Liberation of Oman
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRSY	People's Republic of South Yemen
SAF	Sultan's Armed Forces
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The Dhofar Rebellion was Sultan Qaboos bin Said's first major crisis as the ruler of Oman, and the conflict was known to have had enduring influence on his view of international relations, especially within the region. In order to understand what drove Qaboos's approach to international affairs, and thus Oman's regional role and relations with foreign powers, it is important to understand the role that foreign intervention played in the rebellion, both in the form of aid provided to the rebels and in support provided to Qaboos. Thus, this thesis will explore two key questions: What socio-political conditions fuelled the Dhofar Rebellion (1965–1975) in Oman and how did foreign intervention impact the conflict?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The Dhofar Rebellion has been viewed primarily as a small-scale conflict and counterinsurgency campaign internal to the country of Oman and its stoic leader, Sultan Qaboos. This analysis would be mistaken, as the rebellion contained many more attributes than simply a localized conflict. First, the rebellion had evolved over time. It started as a loosely connected grouping of Dhofari locals known as the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF), discontent with Sultan Said's oppression and negligence in Southern Oman. It eventually became a full-scale effort to liberate not only Oman as a whole, but the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. This was largely due in part after the alteration of the name of the organization to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), the shift in principles and desires of the group, as well as the structural leadership.¹ The roles of external nations supporting the rebellion also changed in both scope and commitment to the rebel's cause. For example, throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, China was initially a large contributor to the upstart of the rebels and revolutionary groups within the region,

¹ Geraint Hughes, "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised: The Counter-Insurgency War in Dhofar, Oman, 1965–1975," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 2009): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390902743357>.

specifically the DLF.² Yet as the war progressed, they would shift sides completely in 1971, and side with Sultan Qaboos in his efforts to regain stability within Oman and oust the rebels from Dhofar.³ Great Britain held a vital role at the onset of the rebellion, advising Sultan Said and developing a counterinsurgency strategy based on prior British doctrine and experience. But, as the conflict grew in size, scope, and enemy actions, the levels of British support would also change, being shaped and constrained by their own domestic foreign policy and causing Sultan Qaboos to rely more heavily on other nations within the region such as Iran and Jordan. These dramatic shifts in support demonstrated not only the role external powers played within the Dhofar Rebellion itself, but helps to signify the massive impact external powers can have through various levels of support to either insurgencies, or the formal governments combatting them.

The fluctuation in various levels of commitment and contribution by supporting nations caused contrasting, and at times confusing, dynamics between Oman, and other actors involved. It is important to note these dramatic shifts, and to project the lessons learned as they apply to future conflicts with an insurgent flavor, as to the relevant importance that external actors play on the outcome of a given situation. Engagement not only militarily, but at political levels, can both hinder and help to alter key contributors' actions and decisions, resulting in a higher possibility for the desired outcome of one party or the other.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 13th Sultan of Oman, Said bin Taimur, ruled with an iron fist from 1932–1970, and during the end of his tenure, would see the formulation of an uprising in the Southern Dhofar region in Oman that would spell his end. “It is important to understand that no political grievances (or new ideas) were involved...it was the Sultan personally who was

² Bin Huwaidin and Mohamed Mousa Mohamed Ali, “China’s Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region,” in *China’s Relations with Arabia and the Gulf 1949–1999* (Routledge, 2003), 103 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203221679-4>.

³ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, 104–5.

held responsible: resentment was not against the Sultanate or the system.”⁴ His lack of focus and general care for the Dhofar region’s peoples allowed for mass poverty to develop in the province, and stimulated anger and resentment amongst its population. “By the 1960s, the growing prosperity of neighboring Gulf monarchies combined with Dhofar’s lack of development alienate [sic] a majority of the province’s 30,000 villagers and pastoralists from the sultan’s government.”⁵ A successful raid by members of the local Dhofari Bait Kathir tribe on an Omani fueling vehicle and Omani armed forces would act as the ignition for the rebellion, molding a group of loosely connected and aggravated civilians into a cohesive group of rebels, and resulting in creation of the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF).⁶

As the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) demonstrated their support for the rebels with military training, weapons, and ideology, the rebellion assumed greater significance within the context of the Cold War. Sultan Qaboos’s small war against a rebellion in Southern Oman would grow in importance and act as secondary arena to battle communist expansion and influence in the Middle East. While the rebellion seemed highly probable due to the preexisting conditions in the Dhofar region, it was more or less a loosely conjoined group of untrained militants, unable to achieve its goals without external assistance. The dedicated commitment by supporting nations towards the DLF, most of whom exerted heavy communist influence on their rebel beneficiaries, assisted in the creation of a formidable challenge for Omani leadership and its allies.

Many scholars and retired military officers have studied and written on the Dhofar Rebellion due its convenient application as a reference of a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. The combination of military force with social changes has been utilized extensively in modern day COIN strategy and the term winning ‘hearts and minds’

⁴ Penelope Tremayne, “Guevara Through the Looking Glass: A View of the Dhofar War,” *The RUSI Journal* 119, no. 3 (1974): 39.

⁵ Marc R. DeVore, “A More Complex and Conventional Victory: Revisiting the Dhofar Counterinsurgency, 1963–1975,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): 146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2012.632861>.

⁶ DeVore, 146.

permeates this doctrine. Author Penelope Tremayne, who had visited Oman during the period of the Dhofar War, has joined other's in placing the COIN effort at the top. In "Guevara Through the Looking Glass: a View of the Dhofar War," she embraces the idea that the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) were successful due to the, "first-class counter-insurgency techniques"⁷ However, there was more at play than simply a picture-perfect demonstration of British COIN strategy.

In "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised: The Counter-Insurgency War in Dhofar," Oman 1965–1975, author Geraint Hughes concludes that the success of the Omani Sultan in squashing the rebellion was due to limited British intervention as well as Sultan Qaboos' social reform policies that ran tangentially with the war effort.⁸ The author focuses on the British efforts and levels of support, the addressing of societal issues that plagued the Dhofar region, and the eventual lack of support from the local population in the Dhofar region for the rebellion due to conflicting ideology. Authors Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clark, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan also highlight the success of the COIN strategy in their book chapter "Oman (Dhofar Rebellion), 1965–1975: Case Outcome: COIN Win." They state that it was once, "Sultan Qaboos, took power in a coup, the Omani forces and their British advisors adopted a more effective COIN strategy and combined conventional operations with civil development and political reform"⁹ that turned the tide of the war in Oman's favor. In "A More Complex and Conventional Victory; Revisiting the Dhofar Counterinsurgency, 1963–1975," author Marc R. DeVore highlights similar points from Hughes when chronologically tracking events during the period, but determines that the Dhofar Rebellion needs to be looked at in two phases.¹⁰ DeVore states that the shift in strategy by the Omanis and their British advisors from combatting a classic counterinsurgency to a more conventional war spelled success for Sultan Qaboos. DeVore also focuses on other complex external factors such as Chinese and Soviet support, whose

⁷ Tremayne, "Guevara Through the Looking Glass: A View of the Dhofar War," 42.

⁸ Hughes, "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised," 271–305.

⁹ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, "Oman (Dhofar Rebellion), 1965–1975: Case Outcome: COIN Win," in *Paths to Victory* (RAND Corporation, 2013), 274, <https://doi.org/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.34>.

¹⁰ DeVore, "A More Complex and Conventional Victory," 144–73.

changing foreign policies shifted the nature of the insurgency and laid the framework for bilateral foreign relations in the Middle East to this day. Though the nature of these sources are primarily written through a British-centric lens, there are more telling sources that expound upon the external states contributions in the war.

Sources indicating a larger game was afoot during the Dhofar War look towards the politics of China, Russia, and Iran's foreign policies and the power dynamics between both, and other countries within the Middle East. Some argue it was not only British intervention and advisement that saved the Sultanate, but rather, it was the external actors' shifting foreign policy plans during the Cold War, which operated on the periphery of Oman's borders, that greatly influenced the result of the rebellion. In "Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972–75," James Goode makes a strong case for Iranian support to Oman, concluding that it was in fact Iranian intervention at the behest of Sultan Qaboos that shifted the outcome in Oman's favor, and demonstrated a pivotal proving ground for Iran's role as a regional security provider at the time.¹¹ Throughout the article Goode notes the continuous energy that Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of the Imperial State of Iran, placed on supporting the counterinsurgency and his endeavor to support Sultan Qaboos. Goode notes that the Shah's gift of both men and machine on the battlefield, primarily the air support that the British were unable to provide, were critical to the Dhofari rebels' end, and assisted in pushing back the Soviet sponsored communist rebels from gaining a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula and the Strait of Hormuz. In an article titled "Iran Steps Up Role in Oman," Juliet Pearce adds to Goode's conclusion of integral Iranian support, noting the Shah's intent on keeping the Strait of Hormuz out of the hands of communist backed rebels and his, "campaign by the controlled Iranian press to muster the entire area's support for the Dhofar mini-war."¹² The Shah's push for multi-lateral support of other nations in the Middle East helped advance the perception that Iran was a leader in the war against the PFLOAG with

¹¹ James F. Goode, "Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972–75," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 3 (February 5, 2014): 441–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.880631>.

¹² Juliet Pearce, "Iran Steps Up Role in Oman," *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1975, F1.

whom other nations should rally behind in a unified effort, demonstrating Iran's own feelings of its key role in the conflict.

More authors have focused on China as a key player in the war and argue that China's shifting foreign policy from supporting the communist rebels as an integral part of Oman's eventual success. In "China's Relations with Oman," Jonathan Fulton dives deep into the origins of the Chinese – Oman relationship, stating that relations had been strong for over a thousand years but had changed appreciably due to Sultan Said's increased relations with Great Britain.¹³ The author states that, "the PRC leadership's motivation for getting involved with the DLF can be attributed to a combination of its revolutionary foreign policy, a misinterpretation of the nature of the conflict in Oman, and its orientation away from the Soviet Union in the Cold War system."¹⁴ Fulton also notes that China saw the Dhofar Rebellion as a struggle against colonialism vice a struggle against the leadership, and that their fluctuating support of the rebellion tracked along with their own Cultural Revolution at the time. Bin Huwaidin and Mohamed Mousa Mohamed Ali echo Fulton's assessment in "China's Perception of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula Region," highlighting the significant foreign policy shift that China employed in Oman in the midst of the Cold War.¹⁵ This shift in Chinese foreign policy from supporting rebellions and revolutionary groups in the Middle East, to working with traditional governments, in this case Oman, removed a key supporting cog in the wheel supporting the Dhofari rebels.

While a late-comer to the conflict, the USSR had its feet well entrenched in the Middle East at this time. In his journal article "Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar," author Howard M. Hensel determines that the genesis of Soviet involvement lay within the communist nature of the rebels as well as the opportunities that it entailed in the Arabian Gulf region.¹⁶ Hensel claims that, "once the revolutionary regime in South Yemen

¹³ Jonathan Fulton, "China's Relations with Oman," in *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 120–21, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315142678>.

¹⁴ Fulton, 123.

¹⁵ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, "China's Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region," 104–5.

¹⁶ Howard M. Hensel, "Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar," *Asian Affairs* 13, no. 2 (August 24, 2007): 187–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068378208730072>.

adopted a Marxist programme...and the Dhofaris adopted a similar focus...Moscow had to recognize both...it became the USSR's duty to back both the South Yemenis and the Dhofaris in their efforts to displace the old order, expel the 'imperialists' from the rest of South Arabia, and establish a new 'socialist order' in the region."¹⁷ Author Aryeh Yodfat notes a different genesis of USSR involvement in the rebellion, stating that Soviet support to the rebels truly only increased in 1971 in an effort to counter what they perceived as weakening revolutionary support from China.¹⁸ Yodfat also states that the, "competition between the Chinese and the Soviets over the PFLOAG was won by the [sic] USSR...however, at a time of decline in the power and activities of the PFLOAG."¹⁹ This statement indicates that the USSR may have determined that communist support of revolutionary anti-monarchical groups did not outweigh the larger competition globally against China.

There is little doubt that the Dhofar Rebellion can be reflected upon and analyzed as a successful COIN campaign. Multiple sources indicate that the tactics and techniques utilized by Sultan Qaboos and his advisors throughout the war resulted in the ending of the insurgency and the capitulation of the PFLOAG. Other authors undoubtedly focus primarily on the larger global bipolar scenario taking place during the Cold War between western and communist-aligned powers, noting the various alliances to either side of the conflict, and oscillating levels of support as the key driver of the success of Sultan Qaboos and defeat of the PFLOAG. Yet very few authors have considered the entire picture in one synopsis, and the lack of which refuses academics and military strategists the full list of ingredients that enabled a successful end to the insurgency.

The COIN strategy implemented by Sultan Qaboos could not stand on its own feet without the support of key external influence and support, the absence of which, would have left the Sultan without the necessary knowledge and strength to back up his initiatives.

¹⁷ Hensel, 188.

¹⁸ Aryeh Yodfat, "Arabia and The Gulf - Soviet Approaches, Successes and Failures (1917-1975)," in *The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula (RLE Iran D)* (Routledge, 1983), 14, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203832073-6>.

¹⁹ Yodfat, 15.

A COIN strategy conducted by a nation without organic superior strength over its adversary, and which does not consider the critical enablers and proper injections of necessary supporting elements, will either lack the gravitas within its intent, or acquire the characteristic of protraction. If the Dhofar Rebellion is analyzed solely as a battle ground of competing wills from external powers involved in a greater struggle, one overlooks the significance of the COIN strategy and policy on the ground, without which no will could effectively be imposed. This thesis will aim to demonstrate that it was the integration of both external power dynamics operating within the global-level Cold War, as well as the educated analysis by Sultan Qaboos of the issues in the Dhofar rebellion while implementing his COIN strategy, that directly affected the result of the Dhofar Rebellion, and laid the foundation for Oman's approach to international relationships in the future.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The literature review addresses the two common explanations for the successful outcome of the Dhofar Rebellion. The first school of authors focus primarily on the British-advised COIN campaign and the critical decision made by both Sultan Qaboos and his British military strategists in developing a strategy that would win the war. The second set of authors vary in their individual claims per contributing country. They focus attention on the foreign policy approaches of each individual external actor involved in the war having a greater influence on the result than did the tactical decisions on the ground. A larger number of smaller explanations can be derived from these explanations that may demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of battling an insurgency.

Some authors argue that it was the introduction of new communist Marxist-Leninist social institutions and ways of thinking that delivered a heavy cost to the insurgents; no doubt a mark of the Soviet and Sino influence on the rebels. For example, Hughes states that the, "PFLOAG squandered the opportunity they had to overthrow the Sultanate in 1970 by following Marxist-Leninist ideology which was incompatible with Islam and local cultural conditions."²⁰ This ideology would lead to a dramatic shift in the support the

²⁰ Hughes, "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised," 301.

insurgents obtained in the initial years of the war by the population; a key tactical advantage lost which eliminated their insurgent operations in the Dhofar region and turned the tide of the war.

Others such as Fulton and Huwaidin note the significant threat of encirclement that China had felt during the conflict, and that the Cold War tactics of the USSR pushed China to change sides halfway through the war.²¹ Other authors state that countries both internal and external to the region, reevaluated their support to either the Sultan, or the rebels over the course of the war. This shift in support would enable the Sultan to push past the then weakened rebels and execute both his civil social programs in the Dhofar region and removal of the PFLOAG from Oman.

There are a few instances within sources studied that these hypotheses intersect and attempt to chronologically portray a steady picture of the conflict, yet none address the necessity of one or the other for the war's eventual end, nor group them coherently to display their dependence on one another. It is possible that the complex intertwining of fluctuating external power foreign policy, key efforts of the Sultan's COIN strategy, and the incompatible communist-nature of support the insurgents received, that enabled a success for Sultan Qaboos and elimination of insurgents in Dhofar. In many instances during the campaign, possession of the victory was shifted based on both the decisions made by contributing actors, as well as battles won on the ground, and goals scored by either side were contingent on a litany of timely and fortunate occurrences.

This thesis will address those decisions by cohesively grouping together foreign policy initiatives of contributing actors, the "why" behind COIN strategy wins and losses during the war, and aim to demonstrate the importance of full-scale analysis of the insurgency to explain the successful end to a possible consequential communist victory in the Arabian Peninsula.

²¹ Fulton, "China's Relations with Oman"; Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, "China's Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region."

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this thesis will address the Dhofar Rebellion utilizing the two schools of thought that dominate the topic; those that focus on the success of Oman's COIN strategy, and those that focus on the foreign policy and approaches of external powers involved in supporting the war on either side.

In order to lay the framework for this analysis, a review of Oman's political and social preconditions will also need to be addressed. A review of the history of Sultan Said Bin Taimur's role as the leader of Oman and his relationships with external powers prior to the emergence of the Dhofari rebels will demonstrate the necessary elements that came together to spark a revolution within its borders. Also, a review of his predecessor and son, Sultan Qaboos, will also need to be investigated as it will show the critical role that leadership change played during the conflict due to the radical shift in approach.

Writings and analysis regarding the successful COIN campaign during the war will need to be assessed to display the nature of the conflict on the ground, as well as the leading actors implementing the COIN strategy throughout the effort. Second, a review of foreign policy doctrines of Oman, Great Britain, China, USSR, and Iran, must also be investigated further to denote each country's intentions leading up to and during the Dhofar War (1965-1975). These documents will aim to address the significant bipolar external conflict exemplifying itself through and within the state of Oman, providing background and justification to the decisions being made in the rebellion. Perspectives and statements from both Omani and other involved nations during the Dhofar Rebellion will also be utilized to display the public picture of the conflict within the global lens and highlight critical moments of shifting foreign commitments that affected the outcome.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis will be organized into four chapters. The first chapter will consist of the introduction, containing many of themes focused on within this thesis proposal. The second chapter will focus on setting the stage for the rebellion pre-1965 and discussing the conditions that allowed for the rebellion to develop. The third chapter will discuss the external power politics of contributing countries to the rebellion, detailing the meaning

behind, and impact of, key decisions in foreign policy and support to the war effort on both sides. The fourth chapter will discuss the individual impact that external powers had on events throughout the course of the war when combined with notable efforts of the COIN campaign. It is within chapter four that the main argument will be presented with supporting evidence by combining timing of events from chapter two with fluctuating policies from chapter three, to highlight the intermingling of both to deliver conclusive evidence in support of the argument.

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II. THE OMANI SULTANATE

A. HISTORY OF OMAN

The country of Oman rests on the southeastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. Oman is nominally a part of the Middle East, but aside from its predominantly Arab-Muslim population, the country is distinct from its neighbors in a number of ways, especially culturally. These differences are partly reflected in its unique foreign policy which has stressed neutrality. During the past five decades Oman has been labeled as the “Switzerland of the Middle East” largely due to its objective responses to various conflicts in the region.²² The question remains how Oman achieved this uncommon position in an area plagued with consistent conflict without alienating its friends and allies worldwide? How did Oman come to establish its relatively peaceful and pragmatic approach to its international relationships, and where does this answer lead when assessing future policy decisions of the Sultanate? The answer to these questions lay within its volatile past, Oman’s struggle for its own sovereignty at the fringes of the Cold War, and its efforts to squash a communist insurgency during the Dhofar Rebellion of 1965.

Though small in comparison to other nations in the Middle East, Oman holds a key strategic location on the Arabian Peninsula and has been the epicenter of trade relations. As John Newsinger explains:

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.²³ (*See Figure 1.*)

²² Nidal Morrison, “Oman: The Switzerland of the Middle East,” Harvard International Review, January 9, 2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/oman-the-switzerland-of-the-middle-east/>.

²³ John Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency From Palestine to Northern Ireland*, 1st ed. (London UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 132, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504554>.

The Sultanate of Oman was fashioned crudely out of warring factions internal to Oman's borders and further developed geographically, demographically, and politically with expansive maritime trade and the involvement of invading great powers. A constant struggle for Oman's sovereignty and control of its internal domestic disputes created an environment rife with consternation. On the domestic front lay the dispute between the Sultanate and the conservative Ibadi ulama. The Ibadi ulama were religiously guided leaders who had been an integral cog in determining the legitimacy and selection of Oman's leadership, while Sultan Ahmed ibn Said aimed to limit the power of this advisory group from the future of Omani political appointment and succession.²⁴ This conflict between the Ibadi ulama and the Sultanate would divide Oman into two distinct ideological groups in the 18th century, largely stemming from the decision to shift the new capital from Nazwa to Muscat: the Sultanate transitioned away from the internal regions of Oman to cosmopolitan Muscat and its coastal provinces, leaving the conservative Ibadi ulama to the hinterland provinces.²⁵ This division would only deepen feelings between the two groups as they strove to maintain salience in Oman's future.

The external powers involved at this time in Omani history were primarily the French and British who strove to maintain control and stability of maritime trade in the region. The world powers recognized Oman's geostrategic significance towards the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and the necessity to leverage their relationship with Oman to achieve supremacy and maintain control of goods necessary to the survival of their empires. Sultan Ahmed, with a more outward-looking approach, and possibly due to the historical dealings with invading powers on the coast, chose first to foster some level of relations with the French.²⁶ Unfortunately, during the attempts at Franco-Omani relationship development during the mid to late 18th century, various conflicts emerged that undercut their progression. For example, in 1798 when the French intervention took place

²⁴ Hussein Ghubash, *Oman : The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 70–73, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203099704>.

²⁵ Hussein Ghubash, *Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 73–74, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203099704>.

²⁶ Ghubash, 75.

in Egypt, a letter was written and sent to Oman to reaffirm Franco-Omani ties. This letter was delayed however as it was intercepted by the British, reaching the Sultan late and possibly creating unease in Oman at the French intrusion in Egypt.²⁷ There was also an effort to establish a French consulate in Muscat, but delayed posting of its leadership by France combined with the Omani-British treaty of 1798 eliminated this diplomatic effort; the treaty contained the removal of the offer Oman extended to the French for representation in Muscat.²⁸ Lack of immediate concern for the development and strengthening of Franco-Omani relations from the French, combined with intense British interventionism, drastically affected bilateral Franco-Omani efforts, and provided the window for British opportunism in both the region, and Oman.²⁹

Failed relations with France allowed Great Britain to rise as the leading external power in Oman. Multiple interventions into Oman's territorial disputes and domestic affairs accompanied the British presence. The British eventually strong-armed Oman into another bilateral treaty in 1800 with the threat of closing off profitable trade routes to the Sultanate as the alternative.³⁰ This treaty along with a further secret treaty later in 1891 provided exclusive trading rights to Britain and made Oman a de facto British protectorate.³¹ Also of great significance to the early 20th century in Oman was the Treaty of Sib signed in 1920. This treaty was promulgated after the Imamate's attempt to remove the Sultan from power, though it was rapidly squashed by the British. Due to the weakness of the Sultan and his inability to control the Imamate was a treaty to allowed Oman to be divided but not independent, with non-interference from the Sultan in the Imamate's affairs.³² Extensive British involvement in all facets of Omani political decision-making would impede Omani development and sovereignty, further dividing the population and

²⁷ Ghubash, 78.

²⁸ Ghubash, 79.

²⁹ Ghubash, 77–81.

³⁰ Roy C. Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past" (MacDill Air Force Base, Florida: The JSOU Press, 2011), 20, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA591975.pdf>.

³¹ Ghubash, *Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, 143.

³² Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 28.

geographic area into the government in Muscat, the internal Ibadi Imamate, and cause future rebellions for the Sultan to contend with.

The division of territory and the addition of extensive historical trading ties across the Indian Ocean, has given Oman a diverse cultural identity. As these divisions grew, ethnic and cultural identity broadened, laying the roots of inequality amongst the Omani people, and sowing discord throughout. This imbalance was further exemplified in the Sultan's methodology when governing the country and its distinct provinces, causing its leader to focus largely on the capital of Muscat and leave other more distant territories to fend for themselves.



Figure 1. Map of Oman (Nations Online Project)³³

B. THE RISE OF SULTAN SAID BIN TAIMUR

To understand the preconditions that led to the insurgency in its Southern Dhofar region of Oman, the country's history during the reign of Sultan Said bin Taimur (1932-1970) will need to be investigated. In conjunction with Oman's tumultuous history of internal division, Said's policies would enact and inflame further disparity amongst his people and lead to an insurgency in the southern Dhofar governorate that would challenge Oman as a nation, and the Sultanate as a legitimate ruler.

³³ Source: "Map of Oman," Nations Online Project, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/oman-map.htm>.

Oman is no different than many of the absolute monarchies around the world with all political power and decision-making executed from the top. Successful legitimate power transfer was enacted through nepotistic institutional guidelines from father to son. Sultan Said was the son of the Sultan of Muscat, Taimur bin Feisal, and after overthrowing his father, became the new Sultan of Muscat and the territories of Oman.³⁴ Said entered this role as a ruler leading a deeply indebted country, and his choice of governance was not one of benevolence, but of strict authoritarianism. While Oman had been developing wealth via its oil reserves since 1967, it would be the Sultan's allocation of these funds that would drive Oman further into desperation.³⁵ His diversion of wealth for personal gain was a method of control for the Sultan. As Newsinger argues, the Sultan "quite deliberately and calculatedly kept his people impoverished and uneducated as a means of political and social control"³⁶ According to Ian Skeet, author of *Behind the Scenes: The Creation of Oman, 1970–90*, Said demonstrated significant paranoia in his governance of Oman after a conflict with Saudi Arabia and the Ibadi Imamate of Oman over the oil rich territory of Buraimi.³⁷ The conflict sewed further doubt in the Omani people that Said held a grasp on Oman's domestic affairs and fostered further opposition towards his leadership.

The Buraimi dispute during the 1950s, largely stemmed from the Ibadi Imamate's dissatisfaction with the Sultan, and Saudi Arabia's greed as they attempted to increase their oil revenues and undercut the legitimacy of Oman's Sultan. However, Saudi Arabia's efforts to seize control the Buraimi oil resources from Oman was blocked by the British. As Skeet explains:

Saudi Arabian claims over wide expanses of desert, of which the Buraimi claim was the most notable, were based on all sorts of dubious tribal and border agreements but were promoted largely in the interests of oil...The

³⁴ Harris M. Lentz III, *Heads of States and Governments Since 1945* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 604, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1619042>.

³⁵ Richard H. Curtiss, "Oman: A Model for All Developing Nations," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (Washington, United States: American Educational Trust, August 1995), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/218802522/abstract/1F28F7EAD00F4E1DPQ/1>.

³⁶ John Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency From Palestine to Northern Ireland*, 1st ed. (London UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 133, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504554>.

³⁷ Ian Skeet, *Oman: Politics and Development* (London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 34, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230376922>.

war was won by the Sultan only because of the assistance given him by the British whose moral obligation was directly descended from its eighteenth-century links to the Sultan but whose practical interest was to ensure a friendly and independent state in the South East corner of Arabia where, with luck, oil might be found by a company that was not Aramco of Saudi Arabia.³⁸

The conflict in the Buraimi oasis began as an attempt to regain territory that Saudi Arabia believed to be theirs. With this claim backing Saudi Arabia's actions, their forces swiftly took over both land and tribes in the area with little dispute, and established influence through coercive tactics and bribery. During British attempts to stymie efforts of Saudi gaining access to land with possible oil, they enacted a plan to arbitrate and agreement in Geneva that ultimately failed once it came to light that Saudis had bribed both the tribal population, as well as the judges on panel for resolving the dispute. The Sultan, heavily influenced by British approval to act decisively in light of events from Geneva, took swift action with pre-established soldiers and associated British support and equipment to recapture the Buraimi oasis and remove Saudi Arabia from the area. During this time, the Ibadi Imamate had fled to Saudi Arabia due to the Sultan's loss of confidence in their ability to control Oman's interior, the Imamate's attempt to appeal to the Arab League for independence from Oman during the Buraimi crisis, as well as perceptible allegiance to Saudi Arabia during the conflict.³⁹ The subsequent attempt by the Imamate to regroup and reattack the Sultan in 1957 were stopped by intense British intervention, ultimately leading the end of the Imamate in Oman by 1960, but not the end of rebellious groups attempts to overthrow the Sultan and its British protector.⁴⁰

The confidence derived from this conflict with Saudi Arabia and the Ibadi Imamate would give Sultan Said both reinforcement of his leadership as a Sultan, as well as the demonstrate the immense value of having Great Britain as a key ally and partner well intertwined in his nations' survival. It would also highlight the Sultan's insecurities regarding his rebellious internal population, and reaffirm his aforementioned paranoia

³⁸ Skeet, 34.

³⁹ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 30–36.

⁴⁰ Barrett, 41–42.

regarding Oman's survival economically, enabling the Sultan's staunchly authoritarian approach to enhance his longevity. Skeet also notes when speaking of Sultan Said's psychological state that, "in terms of Omani internal policy, he trusted nobody, took all decisions and worked on the basis of restriction and constraint," and that although the British had advised developing Oman's infrastructure and social programs, the Sultan was reluctant to do so.⁴¹

While the disparity in social conditions that Said fostered destabilized the country, his British advisors looked the other way. As historian Abdel Razzaq Takriti notes, the British "long tolerated the Sultan's cruel and unusual treatment of his subjects...British officials also disregarded the complaints of Amnesty International concerning the treatment of political prisoners."⁴² The feckless support by Great Britain can only be quantified by the notion that while Sultan Said was a recognized oppressive authoritarian, he was a known entity that the British had well within their sphere of influence, enabling effortless political maneuvering for continued profit. This relationship also allowed the British to become deeply intertwined within the Omani institutional structure.

The Sultan Said was an adamant supporter of Great Britain and involved British advisors into every level of Oman's domestic affairs. For instance, the Sultan's senior military leadership and staff, as well as prominent British companies such as Shell, were all British.⁴³ This British interventionism would enable the Sultan to sit casually on his throne while British diplomats and military ran the innerworkings and influenced policy and trade within Oman. British involvement in Oman's governance would also create the bilateral alliance that greatly influenced the outcomes of Oman's future internal skirmishes.

⁴¹ Skeet, *Oman*, 35.

⁴² Abdel Razzaq Takriti, "The 1970 Coup in Oman Reconsidered," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 156–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2013.863682>.

⁴³ Takriti, 56.

C. THE DHOFAR REGION

The Dhofar region of Oman is situated in the southwestern corner of Oman, bordered by Yemen to the South, and Saudi Arabia to the North. (*See Figure 2.*) The governorate lay in a desolate and distant location, far removed from Oman's central arena of power and international relations in Muscat. Though Sultan Said resided in a palace in Salalah, his governance of the local populace, or lack thereof in Dhofar, was inequitable to the northern Oman and its coastal metropolitan capital.

In *Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past*, author Roby C. Barret provides a rather astute and succinct relationship between the various components of Omani territorial relationships, and highlights the ethnic similarities of the Dhofaris to the Yemeni Hadramut.

The Sultanate is a cosmopolitan coastal society that has derived its livelihood and prosperity from participation in the Indian Ocean and global commerce for centuries... In the isolated, conservative Imamate, political legitimacy was far more closely tied to the stricter tenets of Ibadi Islam and the conservative traditions of a fractious tribal culture... In a largely Sunni, ethnically African Dhofar, the situation was even more complicated... the culture focused on Indian Ocean trade, but historically and culturally, the Dhofaris are far closer related to the Hadramutis than to the Ibadis to the North.⁴⁴

Dhofar maintains a diametrically different landscape to the rest of Oman, culturally, religiously and geographically. The population was largely Sunni and the language and culture was closer to that of the Hadramat in Yemen than the rest of the Ibadhi, Arabic speaking Oman.⁴⁵ The region was 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... and where mistreatment, mutilation and torture were routinely used to intimidate the population into quiescence and passivity."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 6.

⁴⁵ Barrett, 7.

⁴⁶ Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency From Palestine to Northern Ireland*, 133.

Newsinger paints a damning picture of Said's opinion of the Dhofaris, noting an instance from the Sultan's military commander Corran Purdon. He stated that when the Sultan had taken temporary residence in the region's capital of Salalah, Said told Purdon that, "If you are out walking and meet a Dhofari and a snake, tread on the Dhofari."⁴⁷ Though the Sultan himself had lived in the Dhofar region for some time, his gross negligence of the area was derivative of his immense hatred towards the people, and it can be inferred that his governance of the region directly mirrored this opinion due to his action, or rather inaction, in governing it.

⁴⁷ Newsinger, 140.



Figure 2. Map of Oman’s Governorates (The Anglo-American Society)⁴⁸

In reality, the Dhofar region was a peer without comparison amongst Oman’s other territories. Isolated, culturally different, and destitute, the Dhofar region dealt with the wrath of the Sultan, and in a small fraction of Dhofari minds, this constituted an uprising to unseat the Sultan and attempt to improve their livelihoods through violent means.

D. FAILING POLICIES AND START OF REBELLION

During his tenure, the Sultan was not above utilizing his power to oppress his subjects. The unfortunate beneficiary of the Sultan’s wrath lay with the people in Oman’s southern region in Dhofar. These socio-economic conditions were largely the drivers of

⁴⁸ Source: “The Governorates,” The Anglo-American Society, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.ao-soc.org/the-governorates>.

discontent with the Sultan and provided an environment easily manipulated by those wishing to oust Said.

The people of Dhofar... were treated by the Sultan as slaves. He was cruel and imposed many arbitrary restrictions on the people. They could not travel outside; they were not permitted to build houses; food could only be bought in one walled market where the quantity that could be bought was fixed; and they were not allowed to import or export goods. Further, there was no work in Dhofar, no schools, no hospital, no economic life, no equality and no right to participate in politics.⁴⁹

The forced social conditions placed on the population of Dhofar were untenable to its population, opening a window for rebellious revolutionary groups to insert themselves in the region and demand regime change. The turbulent period of rebellion from the 1950s would help inspire these groups and compound societal displeasure with mobilization of communist-backed insurgents known as the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF), spurring a conflict that would bring great powers into its fold, and eventually alter the status quo in Omani leadership.

⁴⁹ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 46.

III. THE DHOFAR REBELLION

A. CREATION OF AN INSURGENCY

The Dhofar Rebellion began as mix of revolutionary groups that coalesced due to their shared interest in Omani regime change. According to author J.E. Peterson,

There were six basic groups: The Arab Nationalist' Movement (ANM), the Dhofar Benevolent Society (DBS), the Dhofar Soldiers' Organization (DSO), the Hizb al-Zhaf (Party of the Advance), al-Kaff al Aswad (The Black Palm), and finally Musallim bin Nufal and the Bayt Kathir tribal grouping. Musallim bin Nufal bin Sharfan al-Kathari was the driving force that unified the disparate opposition groups into the DLF.⁵⁰

These opposition groups would go on to become the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) but would have multiple names throughout the course of the conflict due to external influence from other nations. The DLF leader, Musallim, began associating with contacts early on to facilitate the arming and weaponizing of the revolutionary group. Musallim received initial support from Talib bin 'Ali al-Hinai in Saudi Arabia, a family member of the prior Omani Imam Ghalib who had fought against the Sultan in the late 1950s. Talib bin 'Ali was influential in the initial funding and arming of the DLF, helping to prop Musallim up for his eventual armed conflict with the Said in Dhofar.⁵¹

The initial manifesto issued by the DLF in 1965 demonstrated their ideological parallels to communism and socialism, focusing on the lower class and revolutionary's recruitment to form the organization, the destruction of imperial influence, and ultimately the removal of Sultan Said.⁵² The initial elements of an insurgency were festering in the Sultan's Southern border region with a cohesive, armed, trained, and externally supported DLF. It would only be after the assassination attempt by an imbedded DLF member in the SAF that the Sultan would take the threat seriously and turn towards his British advisors

⁵⁰ J. E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy* (London, United Kingdom: Saqi Books, 2013), 187.

⁵¹ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 47.

⁵² Barrett, 47.

for assistance.⁵³ What the Sultan did not foresee was that other great powers external to Oman's borders such as China and the USSR had taken notice of the window of opportunity to spread ideology and influence in Oman. This influence would take root within the DLF, helping them obtain further military assistance and support throughout the rebellion, and pitting other great powers of the time against each other.

As it drew in global support, the Dhofar Rebellion that began as would play out as an internal conflict within Oman, would find itself wrapped within the greater context of the Cold War. The struggle by China, USSR, Great Britain, and others in the region for strategic influence and hegemony became the definitive factor that marked the successes and failures of both sides throughout the rebellion. The counterinsurgency campaign and civil society initiatives were important in combatting the revolutionaries in Dhofar and improving socio-political conditions, but the most influential players were undoubtedly foreign nations external to Oman, and it would be these actors who dramatically shifted the outcome. An analysis of these nations intent, actions, and foreign policy decisions are important to understanding the larger picture of what was occurring in Dhofar, and how the relationships fostered during the war helped establish Oman's foreign policy outlook post conflict.

B. EXTERNAL POWER SUPPORT

1. China

During the mid-20th century, China's position in the Gulf and Arabian states was one of ambivalence, having not gained favor in the region due to its communist ideology, its aggressive position on Taiwan's status as a nation, its lack of trade relations post revolution, or its recognition of Israel.⁵⁴ Though throughout history China had been a regular visitor of the area for trade and commerce from the 5th up until the 15th century.⁵⁵ The establishment of the PRC in 1949 and its rise as a communist nation created a new

⁵³ Barrett, 4–9.

⁵⁴ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, "China's Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region," 96–98.

⁵⁵ Fulton, "China's Relations with Oman," 120–21.

starting point for the country in terms of diplomacy and economic ties with Middle Eastern countries, largely hampered initially by its desired export of communist ideology. Author's Bin Huwaidin and Mohamed Mousa Mohamed Ali note, China's relations with the Gulf and Arab states can be divided in three separate periods, early involvement (1949-1970), pragmatic foreign policy (1971-1989), and economic interests (1990-1999). For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be placed on the first two periods as they encapsulate the relationship during the Dhofar Rebellion and speak to the dramatic shift that occurred between the two.⁵⁶

The first period of early involvement was marked by what Huwaidin and Mohamed state as China's view that the West was already well entrenched in the region and favored, as well as China's perceptions that a few Gulf states had been outspoken about their position that China had been the aggressor in the Korean War.⁵⁷ Chinese relations were also heavily influenced by their support of any Maoist leftist organization in the region, causing conflict between the countries of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Oman.⁵⁸ Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Oman would not recognize China over Taiwan at the UN and reinforced trade ties with Taiwan, upsetting the PRC, and separating the countries in the Middle East into two categories, those that supported Western ideology and capitalism, and those that supported communism.⁵⁹ China had also offered aide to the Imamate in Oman during their 1955 rebellion against the Sultan from its embassy in Cairo, and though it was not taken advantage of, this action informed Sultan Said that China was against his leadership.⁶⁰ This instance of support for revolutionary groups in Oman would show itself later in the support China demonstrated for the DLF.

⁵⁶ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, "China's Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region," 95.

⁵⁷ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, 96.

⁵⁸ Muhamad Olimat, *China and the Middle East: From Silk Road to Arab Spring* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 133,151, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1092617>.

⁵⁹ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, "China's Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region," 97.

⁶⁰ Fulton, "China's Relations with Oman," 121.

The 1950s saw China attempting to establish diplomatic relations with countries that were amenable to accepting its role as a burgeoning power on the world stage. The Chinese held Bandung Conference allowed senior level negotiations between representatives from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. China worked tirelessly to associate itself with the region culturally. For example, China had been perceived as historically oppressive to their Muslim citizens, and in order to alter that perception, sent Chinese pilgrims to the hajj in Saudi Arabia to demonstrate their support for Islam. China also steadily increased visits of senior delegations to enhance and strengthen its economic positions with nations in the Middle East. Huwaidin and Mohamed state that the most significant of these relations was with the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), the third nation to diplomatically recognize the PRC in the region after Egypt and Syria. This relationship would prove critical in the future Dhofar Rebellion as it would be Yemen that allowed the flow of Chinese weapons, communist doctrine, and training of rebels within its borders. China also took advantage of the revolution in Iraq after Iraq had left the Baghdad Pact, a prior U.S. and British led initiative. China's efforts in this region helped establish its relations with Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, and Sudan, and presented it an opportunity to combat Western influence in the region as well as compete with the Soviet Union due to the deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship.⁶¹

China viewed the DLF as a means to combat Soviet power in the region, as well as an opportunity to counter Western imperialism. "China provided material, economic, and ideological support...significant in enhancing the DLF."⁶² The Himrin Congress in 1968 hosted by the DLF saw the rebels change their name to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), and was attended by Chinese representatives who reported that the rebels had adopted their Maoist ideology. This change of name to the PFLOAG was also accompanied by an, "expanded agenda with resolutions including the use of organized revolutionary violence to affect political change, the nationalization of

⁶¹ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, "China's Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region," 99–101.

⁶² Fulton, "China's Relations with Oman," 123.

resources, and a revolutionary strategy that moved beyond Dhofar.”⁶³ With the massive influx of Maoist propaganda and PRC support, the rebellion had entered a turning point in their campaign, markedly different from their original intentions of regime change stated in 1964. There is little doubt that China had much to do with this transition. The change of name and goals of the rebel group highlights the significant impact an external power can have on a proxy, dramatically altering the original objective.

In Yemen, China was an adamant supporter of the YAR and saw Yemen as a means to continue further ideological expansion and position in the region. China was also an outspoken supporter of the National Liberation Front of Occupied South Yemen (NLF), a rebel group that aimed to rid Yemen of imperial British influence. After the NLF assumed power and changed its name to the People’s Republic of South Yemen (PRSY), China offered similar support of money, weapons, and trade deals to reinforce its relationship and counter Soviet expansion also taking root in Yemen.⁶⁴ Barrett notes that, “By 1970, the weapons were increasingly Chinese copies of Soviet weapons.”⁶⁵ Having both PRSY and the PFLOAG in its pocket, China continued their support and elevated their relationships in the region with revolutionary adventurism. While this relationship greatly assisted the PFLOAG, a major change in China’s foreign policy strategy would upset the rebels initiatives in the middle of the war.

In 1971, China determined that its foreign relationships would be better served in dealing with formal governments vice small revolutionary groups; a complete reversal almost overnight.⁶⁶ The primary driver of this change was due deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations and increased strategic competition. China now saw the need to beat the Soviets to relationship building with Gulf and Arabian Peninsula partners as it seemed the USSR had greatly expanded its efforts. After aggressive bilateral and multilateral Soviet

⁶³ Fulton, 123.

⁶⁴ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, “China’s Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region,” 102.

⁶⁵ Barrett, “Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past,” 51.

⁶⁶ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, “China’s Perceptions of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region,” 104–6.

initiatives were launched in the region, China jumped on U.S. foreign policy and position during the Cold War era, aiming to fill the vacuum before the Soviets could.

This drastic transition in policy could be viewed as an attempt by China to alter the narrative that it was a purely disruptive institution in the global arena. Huwaidin and Mohamed note that, “China’s continued support for the PFLOAG presented an obstacle in China’s efforts to achieve diplomatic relations with countries in the region” causing them to cease support for the rebels and transition to supporting other nations efforts to fight the rebels, such as Iran.⁶⁷ The PRC also reinvigorated its relationship with Oman after the rebellion. Due to the new Sultan Qaboos’ diplomatic fervor for impartial foreign policy, its past transgressions were overlooked and China was able to utilize shared Sino-Omani fear of Soviet expansion in the region to gain eventual diplomatic recognition in 1978 from Oman.⁶⁸

The dramatic shift in China’s foreign policy could be viewed as having the most significant impact on the duration of the Dhofar Rebellion. China’s shift decapitated high-level support from an external power that itself had pushed its support and ideology on the rebels initially. China had directly affected the original initiatives of the PFLOAG and turned the group from a small insurgency set on regime change and social condition improvement, to one that was bent on revolutionary goals spanning the region with a communist ideological twist. The alteration in the nature of the revolution had a substantial impact internal to the Dhofar region and its population as well. Communist, atheist, ideology would eventually turn the Muslim population of the Dhofar rebellion against the PFLOAG in the later years of the rebellion. This demonstrated how China’s influential ideology led to the ultimate loss of social approval, and the failure of the rebel group in securing the will of the people for popular support. The immediate withdrawal of Chinese support, the rebellions largest supporter financially and ideologically, effectively dismantled the PFLOAG’s momentum and left the fate of the rebels in the hands of its less benevolent advocates.

⁶⁷ Huwaidin and Mousa Mohamed Ali, 106.

⁶⁸ Fulton, “China’s Relations with Oman,” 125.

2. Yemen

Yemen holds a significant role in the context of the Dhofar Rebellion. Its close proximity on the Western border of Oman, its volatile diplomatic instability pre-conflict, and its alignment with both Soviet and Chinese support enabled it to be utilized as both a base of operations for the DLF/PFLOAG, as well as a means to provide critical diplomatic, financial, and military aide to rebel fighters. Barret confirms this powerful enabler by stating that, “With the NF, the DLF now had a safe-haven from which they could recruit, arm, and resupply. In addition, powerful transmitters of Radio Aden and the Sawt al-Arab in Cairo intensified the propaganda campaign.”⁶⁹ The consistent struggle for power by factions internal to Yemen, and their proclivity to align with foreign great powers for support, placed Yemen at the center of the conflict. Yemen’s robust backing of the DLF/PFLOAG, its provision of a home-base from which the rebels could train and launch their attacks, allowed for both insurgency reinforcements and protracted war to take place.

A brief history of how Yemen’s political situation developed in the 20th century is warranted to determine how and why they became adamant supporters of the DLF/PFLOAG. “At the end of the 19th century, the British divided Yemen into North Yemen and South Yemen (the Aden Protectorate) for administrative purposes.”⁷⁰ This split devolved into civil war between North Yemen, British led Aden, and the prior deposed Saudi and Egyptian backed royalists. This war would see regional and external power support combatting for influence both directly and indirectly up until 1967 when North Yemen and the British managed to squash the rebellious royalist faction.⁷¹ The outcome divided Yemen into two separate governments, each with their own diverse foreign power supporters. In 1967, following the British withdrawal from Aden, the Southern region rebranded itself the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and aligned with the Soviet Union as well as China. Post-civil war and prior skirmishes, North Yemen

⁶⁹ Barrett, “Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past,” 49.

⁷⁰ Jacob Bercovitch and Judith Fretter, *Regional Guide to International Conflict and Management from 1945 to 2003* (Washington, DC, UNITED STATES: SAGE Publications, 2004), 275, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=419523>.

⁷¹ Bercovitch and Fretter, 275–76.

eventually decided to align itself with Saudi Arabia.⁷² These relationships would provide the necessary connective tissue for the inflow of support to the DLF/PFLOAG in the coming years.

Author Geraint Hughes highlights the notable level of PDRY support to the DLF/PFLOAG due to the elimination of British involvement in the region. Hughes states that, “The character of the insurgency changed after December 1967, following the British withdrawal from South Arabia (what became South Yemen) and the emergence of a Marxist-Leninist regime in ‘Aden. Provided with sanctuary, funds, training, and arms by the South Yemenis, the PFLO insurgency grew rapidly in size and scale.”⁷³ There were subsequent attempts by North Yemen and the Saudi-backed rebels in South Yemen to overthrow the PDRY communist government but they were unsuccessful.

Monick writes about the significance of the PDRY on the Dhofar Rebellion and states that the “paramount influence in the insurgency was Communist subversion (manifested in the insurgent movement designated the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman; or PFLO); functioning as an extension of the power of a neighbouring Marxist state (The People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen – PDRY).⁷⁴ Monick also states that the significant influence that Marxist elements had on the PDRY enabled the DLF to assimilate into the PFLOAG; there was reluctance by the original DLF to join with atheist Marxist forces, but they were swayed due to the level of funding and support the PFLOAG could provide.

South Yemen became a means of training in communist ideology as well, with youth being sent from Dhofar to study Leninist doctrine. The PDRY was also heavily influenced by China, enabling the PDRY to become an important interlocutor between China and the DLF/PFLOAG during the Dhofar Rebellion. Southern Yemen also grew into a critical debarkation point for PFLOAG members to receive training in Russia and China,

⁷² Bercovitch and Fretter, 279.

⁷³ Geraint Hughes, “A Proxy War in Arabia: The Dhofar Insurgency and Cross-Border Raids into South Yemen,” *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 1 (2015): 93.

⁷⁴ S. Monick, “Victory in Hades: The Forgotten Wars of the Oman 1957–1959 and 1970–1976 Part 2: The Dhofar Campaign 1970–1976,” *Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies* 12, no. 4 (1982): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5787/12-4-600>.

returning back to Yemen post guerilla warfare instruction.⁷⁵ This land encapsulating the border between Oman and Yemen extending from the sea inland would become a critical arena for the rebels to receive military aide and personnel during the conflict, largely due to its prior ethnic composition whom had compassion for the Dhofaris.

The peoples of the Dhofar region had close ties ethnically to the PDRY, a product of their common historical bonds. For example, the Mahra region encompassed territory in both Southern Yemen and Western Dhofar and having escaped British rule during their period of control in Aden, became an important offload point for weapons to the PFLOAG.⁷⁶ These close ties enabled the PFLOAG to freely maneuver between the border as well as obtain necessary support for their cause from the tribesman within the area. Critical to an insurgency is the will of the people, and with this beneficial ethnic tribal support, the PFLOAG was able to maintain a semblance of safety and protection from the Sultan and British forces. However, this support would turn sour when the rebels took on more Marxist-Leninist, and predominantly atheist, guided approach towards the local peoples in Dhofar.⁷⁷

The contributions of the PDRY to the conflict cannot be understated, as they were key to enabling the PFLOAG in their endeavors in Oman. More importantly, their position, close ties to Egypt, China, and the Soviets, enabled critical aide and support to reach the rebels throughout the conflict. However, the PDRY would become the final resting place of the residual PFLOAG forces at the end of the rebellion following a final push by Iranian forces, acting in the service of Qaboos, removing PFLOAG fighters from the caves of Rakhyut. Subsequent to the PFLOAG withdrawal, Saudi Arabia placed its diplomatic efforts into enticing the PDRY to establish formal relations. The PDRY eventually caved to the Saudi pressure of money and aid, resulting in the end to the PDRYs support for the

⁷⁵ Monick, 5.

⁷⁶ Monick, 4.

⁷⁷ Monick, 5.

PFLOAG, ultimately utilizing their military to help squash remaining rebels within Southern Yemen.⁷⁸

3. United Socialist Soviet Republic

The United Socialist Soviet Republic's (USSR) role in the Dhofar Rebellion can be linked directly to their global foreign policy initiatives during the Cold War, as well as their desired spread of Marxist-Leninist ideology that accompanied Soviet revolutionary rhetoric. Throughout the Cold War, the USSR espoused anti-Western ideology and attempted to gain access and influence in the Middle East through their support for both formal governments sympathetic or amenable to Soviet/communist initiatives (Egypt, PDRY), and through revolutionary elements internal to the region. The USSR would become a key supporter, though rarely public, of the PFLOAG during the Dhofar Rebellion.

Howard Hensel states that the acquisition of power by revolutionaries in South Yemen and the transition of the DLF to a more Marxist-Leninist group produced an almost obligatory attraction for the USSR, and "Moscow had to recognize both as 'progressive' forces attempting to build socialism in south Arabia."⁷⁹ Hensel also states that the combination of USSR responsibilities to support socialist movements, their recognition of intense Chinese support for Dhofaris and South Yemenis, and the notion that enhanced Soviet relations in Southern Arabia could hamper Western initiatives in the region, emboldened the Soviets to assist the revolutionaries. Author Aryeh Yodfat notes that the USSR looked at the example of Soviet support that helped enable the birth of the PDRY and attempted to emulate that in kind with the PFLOAG.⁸⁰ There was also the added benefit that Soviet support could be limited in scale, delivered through a third-party vice directly (PDRY), and create the narrative of revolutionary groups fighting a colonial

⁷⁸ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 60.

⁷⁹ Hensel, "Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar," August 24, 2007, 188.

⁸⁰ Aryeh Yodfat, "Arabia and The Gulf - Soviet Approaches, Successes, and Failures (1917-1975)," in *The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Taylor & Francis Group, 1983), 13–14, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=801933>.

(British) presence in Oman.⁸¹ This cost-benefit analysis provided Soviets a means of pragmatically assessing the situation in Dhofar and assisted the USSR in their decision to aid the rebels in their endeavor; if the PFLOAG wins, the Soviets have an upper hand in future negotiations, if the rebels lost, the Soviets could wipe their hands clean having provided minimal and nonattributable assistance and saving face.

Soviet support in the initial years of the rebellion was minimal at best and can be characterized by the diplomatic notion of ‘keeping one’s options open’. The USSR attempted to uphold their commitments to socialist movements through minimal aide, working to counterbalance Chinese influence, enabling future Soviet exploitation of a possible successful revolutionary outcome by the PFLOAG. The USSR conducted themselves more privately than publicly in their acknowledgment of support for the rebels, while at the same time mediating other bilateral relations in the region so as not to foster uncertainty of Soviet involvement in the overthrow of a government.⁸² The revolutionaries were both problematic and beneficial for the Soviets, and they were adamantly watching to see if the PFLOAG would prevail so as not to be associated with a failed rebel group and suffer the consequences of the relationship.

By 1971 the USSR was lead supporter of the PFLOAG due largely in part to the PRC’s decision to cease support for the rebels which opened a vacuum for the Soviets to fill. Yodfat argues that although the USSR beat out of the Chinese as lead supporters for the PFLOAG, the rebels were isolated in Dhofar, and the possibility of further gains into Oman or other Gulf nations looked futile.⁸³ The Soviets also began to publicly acknowledge their support in the media, demonstrating the commitment the USSR now held to the Dhofari rebels.⁸⁴ More importantly, the USSR played a pivotal role in the redefinition of the PFLOAG’s goals. The Soviets helped confine the PFLOAG back to internal Omani objectives vice attempting the broader goal of freeing other nations in the

⁸¹ Hensel, “Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar,” August 24, 2007, 188–89.

⁸² Hensel, 190–91.

⁸³ Yodfat, “Arabia and The Gulf - Soviet Approaches, Successes, and Failures (1917-1975),” 15.

⁸⁴ Hensel, “Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar,” August 24, 2007, 193.

region from their perceived imperial shackles. This alleviated Soviet concerns that their involvement would affect relations external to the conflict, primarily Soviet-Iranian relations.⁸⁵ Soviet support remained minimal though throughout the rest of the war, limiting assistance to minimal aid and never contributing their own forces to the conflict.

The relationship between the USSR and the PFLOAG ended with a muffled bang. Soviet support for the PFLOAG, who had changed names again to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO), dwindled in 1975 after Qaboos declared that rebellion was over, and following suit with the PDRY, decided to end USSR support indefinitely. The Soviets walked away from the rebellion unscathed, having input minimal effort apart from small military aide and media rhetoric, playing the geopolitical long game to maintain other more important relations in the region.

4. Iraq

Much like Egypt, Iraq was subject to Soviet influence prior to and during the Dhofar Rebellion. Iraq support for the DLF was less for revolutionary or antimonarchic rebel initiatives and were more focused on ridding the region of imperial powers like that of Great Britain and their support for Said. Iraq was heavily influenced by the USSR at this time, and with new combat power acquired from the Soviets, was looking to insert itself into ideological conflicts to establish its self-perceived predominance in the region.

Initially, the Iraqis provided aid to the DLF in the form of a monthly stipend through their diplomatic outpost in the PDRY.⁸⁶ Hensel claims that, “Iraq had been important to the Front, not only as a source of money, arms, guerilla training, and public support, but also as a major source of external encouragement for rebel activities in northern Oman.”⁸⁷ This northern support came in the form of the revolutionary group known as the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (NDFLOAG); the

⁸⁵ Hensel, 195–97.

⁸⁶ Goode, “Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972–75,” 450.

⁸⁷ Howard M. Hensel, “Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar,” *Asian Affairs* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 1982): 200, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068378208730072>.

NDFLOAG would eventually join with the PFLOAG in the early 1970s. This element would incite violence and resistance to Said in Northern Oman near Muscat, Jabal al-Akhdar, and the al-Sharqiyah region.⁸⁸

Iraq's contribution to the rebel forces, while seemingly minimal across most sources, ensured that during the insurgency's infancy, soldiers were being trained, allocated, and supported during operations throughout the conflict. Once Saudi Arabia had stopped the ability for forces to flow from Iraq to Oman, Iraq's contribution became stunted. As the tides of the war turned in Sultan Qaboos' favor towards the end of the rebellion, and with Iraq's signing of the Algiers Agreement in 1975, Iraq began to cease support for the rebel forces and began normalization talks with Oman, resulting in another loss of a critical enabler for the PFLOAG.

5. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's role in the Dhofar rebellion was rather muted throughout the conflict. Saudi did play an important part in helping to incite and participate in the conflict prior to Dhofar with their support for the Imamate's attempts to oust Said, assisting in destabilizing Oman. Their initial relationship with Said had clearly been strained due to events from the 1950s Buraimi crisis and Jabal al-Akhdar conflict, as well as their support for fleeing leadership of the Imamate from interior Oman.

During this time, the Saudis would link up in a "cooperative venture with those of Nasser" to support efforts to undermine Said, largely based on Saudi desire for territory Oman held claim to.⁸⁹ The Saudis originally assisted in the development of the DLF by allowing coordination of revolutionary elements inside Saudi Arabia, supply of military aide, and more importantly free transit through the country of rebel fighters to Dhofar that had been trained in other nations such as Iraq. This support would be short lived as the Saudi experience with Egyptian forces in Yemen turned sour due to the Egyptian bombing of Saudi territory, and King Feisal reneged on his commitment to the DLF, ending support

⁸⁸ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 51.

⁸⁹ Barrett, 45–46.

in 1967.⁹⁰ There also resided a feeling that the PFLOAGs antimonarchic rhetoric could spread an influence revolution internal to Saudi borders.⁹¹ With the fear of an uncontrollable antimonarchic force so close to their border, Saudi Arabia ceased support for the rebels, choosing from their point of view, the lesser of two evils in Oman.

Saudi engagement in the conflict drastically shifted in support of the Sultanate from 1967 until the end of the conflict. Iran's participation in support of the newly instituted Sultan Qaboos made the Saudis uneasy at the prospect of their adversary, Iran, gaining an advantage in relations. The Saudis consistently requested that the Sultan rid Oman of Iranian troops.⁹² The ever-present fear that the Iranians would establish themselves on the Arabian Peninsula was all too concerning for Saudi Arabia, and they made sure they vehemently voiced that rhetoric.

Although seemingly self-serving, the Saudis also sponsored one of the *firqas* (militia) to the Mahra region to counter the PFLOAG and upset the PDRYs efforts supporting the rebels. This effort was purely financial, with no commitment of Saudi forces to the actual battles.⁹³ While its military contributions were less than adequate, Saudi Arabia did play a key role towards the end of the conflict in the mid-1970s utilizing their vast oil wealth, helping to eliminate rebel support from the PDRY through their diplomatic efforts. The shift of support from the PDRY effectively removed the safe haven from which supplies, and men were stationed, trained, and funneled to the conflict.⁹⁴ Not to be unaccounted for, King Feisal also assisted in Sultan Qaboos' COIN initiatives, providing critical monetary aid to spend on various projects of development in the Dhofar region.⁹⁵ Saudi Arabia's contributions to the war effort can be characterized by a nation who was inundated with the desire for Saudi regime survival, benevolent to Oman only when their existence was threatened by other external powers internal and external to the region.

⁹⁰ Barrett, 48.

⁹¹ Hughes, "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised," 297.

⁹² Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 60.

⁹³ Hughes, "A Proxy War in Arabia," 102-3.

⁹⁴ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 60.

⁹⁵ Hughes, "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised," 290.

6. Great Britain

Great Britain played a pivotal role in the eventual success of Oman against the insurgency in Dhofar. Britain's well-established historical relationship with the Omani Sultanate, their deep entrenchment into Omani political and military affairs, and their continual efforts throughout the conflict to support the SAF were integral to fighting and ending the war. In stark contrast to the rebel external support from the PRC, USSR, PDRY, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, British military advisors with their COIN strategists and direct support forces were heavily involved in all aspects of the rebellion, with troops on the ground fighting side by side with the SAF rather than supporting through military and financial aid.

Author Geraint Hughes notes, the deep British investment into Oman was due to their desire to maintain Great Britain's strategic goals in the Middle East, primarily its access to key oil resources and the Strait of Hormuz. Hughes notes that "both the Conservative and Labour governments remained convinced that Britain's vital economic and strategic interests justified the costs of arming and funding the Sultan's war in Dhofar," though the British government would keep quiet the true level of support in their home country.⁹⁶ After all, Britain had decided to remove its forces in the Arabian Peninsula by 1971, leaving less of a military footprint that had prior been leaned upon to ensure continual access to resources.⁹⁷ The desire to maintain Britain's foothold in the region by supporting the Omanis in conjunction with Great Britain's desire to extract themselves from the region effectively shaped the level of support and intervention provided to the Sultan throughout the conflict.

Prior to and throughout the Dhofar Rebellion, British officers held high positions in the military institutions within Oman. Prior to the Dhofar Rebellion, the SAF was filled with mostly on-loan servicemembers of the British military due to the initial low numbers of Omani soldiers.⁹⁸ The consequences of this force makeup were that the British had to

⁹⁶ Hughes, 277–78.

⁹⁷ Barrett, "Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past," 51.

⁹⁸ Hughes, "A Proxy War in Arabia," 94.

rely heavily on their own forces to combat insurgent activity while at the same time conduct force generation, training, and supplying of Omani soldiers, as well as advising the Sultan on COIN/civil development initiatives and strategy.

The British absorbed the heavy task of creating an Omani army out of minimal numbers and a lack of equipment in both the SAF and Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF). The "SOAF aircraft were obsolete, and there were no helicopters available to either transport troops or supplies, or to evacuate SAF casualties from the *jebel*."⁹⁹ With the complex geography of the Dhofar region and its vast mountainous topography creating a perfect hideout for insurgents, the outdated equipment and air power would prove difficult in the early years of the war. Future implementation of British and Iranian aircraft eventually proved critical to enhancing the SAF in combatting and surviving the insurgency.

British advisement did not always prove to be the correct approach to countering the rebels in Dhofar. The initial COIN strategy implemented by the British led to an increased hatred towards Said and his foreign advisors. For example the SAF instituted mass detentions and capped wells in local Dhofari areas, effectively painting themselves the enemy of the people.¹⁰⁰ These brutal tactics would hinder the initial efforts by the Sultanate in quelling the rebellion, and it would not be until a coup that removed Sultan Said, that the course of the war would change.

The coup, for which the British had a direct involvement in, deposed Sultan Said and replaced the Omani leader with his son, Sultan Qaboos, a British-groomed Sandhurst graduate. Author Abdel Razzaq Takriti indicates that the main driver for British involvement was their unhappiness with Said's reluctance to implement meaningful political and social reform in conjunction with military operations. Takriti also noted that the British had developed five options to deal with the Dhofar Rebellion and the Sultan. These options were to: increase British forces to Oman, withdraw British forces from

⁹⁹ Hughes, "A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised," 280–81.

¹⁰⁰ Hughes, 280.

Oman, institute regime change, maintain their current level of British support, and to compel the Sultan to change his ways through high-level engagement.¹⁰¹

An attack by the NDFLOAG on 12 June, 1970 against a SAF camp indicated to the British that the Sultan and his forces were more vulnerable than they predicted, and that they could either assist in choosing his replacement or let the rebel forces do it for them.¹⁰² On 23 July, 1970, with British supporting SAF forces, Sultan Said was removed from his palace after a brief firefight, during which he was injured, and his son Sultan Qaboos took the throne as Oman's leader in the midst of a rebellion. The quick removal of the hated Sultan Said would drastically change the nature of the rebellion, and the manner in which it was fought.

With Qaboos now in power, and with the close advisement of British military advisors, Oman began to push back the rebel forces and implement their COIN strategy. Author Clive Jones notes that,

the role of British Army Training Teams (BATTs) formed around elements of the SAS, the *Firqat* – the tribal militias raised and trained by the BATT—as well as the Civil Action Teams (CATs) have widely been credited as being the ‘match winners’ of the Dhofar campaign. The CATs in particular oversaw the drilling of new water wells, introduced basic medical care where none had previously existed, as well bringing new forms of husbandry to tribes across Dhofar.¹⁰³

These civil society developments matched with British and trained SAF soldiers directly led to the increased victories in favor of the Sultan. Qaboos was able to achieve what is colloquially called in COIN, ‘winning hearts and minds’, providing many of the services that were the original cause of unhappiness in Dhofar prior to conflict.

The unmatched assistance of Great Britain to Oman during the war cannot be understated. Their benevolent, although reluctant at times, contributions were not without selfish desires to maintain a strategic partner in the region. Yet without British

¹⁰¹ Takriti, “The 1970 Coup in Oman Reconsidered,” 157–59.

¹⁰² Takriti, 160–61.

¹⁰³ Clive Jones, “Military Intelligence and the War in Dhofar: An Appraisal,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 3 (May 4, 2014): 631, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.913743>.

involvement, the rebellion may have ended entirely different. It was the British involvement in Oman that sparked much anti-imperial hatred and garnered support from like-minded nations external to the conflict, and it would be Britain who carried most of the weight through their efforts. Their military aid and advisement, financial support, direct involvement in regime change, and their effective COIN strategy in the latter half of the war enabled the defeat of the PFLOAG by the SAF, and the betterment of livelihood for the Dhofaris.

7. Iran

During the Dhofar Rebellion Iran proved to be an incredibly useful and effective partner for Oman. Though not entering the conflict until 1972, Iran's military provided a necessary element of combat power for Sultan Qaboos and greatly assisted in the PFLOAGs overall defeat in the final years of the conflict. It also proved to be an effort by Iran to prove itself in military combat and establish its reputation as a formidable regional power.

According to Hensel, Iran was originally supportive of the Dhofari rebels and their efforts to overthrow Sultan Said.¹⁰⁴ With the overthrow of Said and the introduction of Soviet rebel support, Iran became determined to play a role in the rebellion. Author James Goode notes that as the rebel group in Oman morphed into a communist-backed effort, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, sought to contain the expansion of great powers at the time, primarily Soviet. Prior to and during this time, the USSR had made inroads into Iraq, Afghanistan, and now into Oman through the PFLOAG, developing relationships and expanding their reach. The Shah also sought to counter the continual growing influence of its rival Saudi Arabia across the Persian Gulf. With the intended departure of the British, the Shah was determined to establish himself as a leading power in the region, and with his capable military and vast oil wealth, Dhofar would constitute a pivotal training ground to flex his military prowess to his neighbors.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Hensel, "Soviet Policy Towards the Rebellion in Dhofar," June 1, 1982, 184.

¹⁰⁵ Goode, "Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972–75," 442–43.

Iran was also concerned about the possible successes of a Soviet-backed revolutionary group overtaking Oman and affecting Iran's access to the Strait of Hormuz. In a Washington Post article, author Juliet Pearce notes due to the undeniable importance of the strait to the Shah and his desire to maintain control over its access.¹⁰⁶ With these concerns in mind, the Shah was carefully watching the development of the conflict, and would enter into it with ferocity at the behest of the Sultan.

The relationship between Oman and Iran would not be formally established until over a year after Qaboos took power. During a visit by Qaboos to the Shah in 1971, Iran made its first offer of military aid, to which the Sultan took advantage of in 1972.¹⁰⁷ After recognition of his limited forces to confront the PFLOAG, Qaboos reached out again to the Shah in late 1972 requesting not merely military aid, but direct involvement of Iranian forces. Goode explains the massive benefit that Iranian forces brought to the conflict,

At the height of the conflict, over 4,000 Iranian soldiers were serving in Dhufar...The Imperial Iranian Air Force used its C-130 transports to ferry in the troops as well as everything they would require, artillery, weapons, ammunition, even food and water. They evacuated the dead and wounded directly to Iran. The air force was the shah's pride and joy, and it served him well. The navy, too, sent several vessels to the coast of Dhufar to blast rebel positions along the coastal plain and in the mountains behind.¹⁰⁸

Iranian forces were well-equipped and well-trained, and relied little on the assistance of the Sultan or the British, but most importantly, they were self-sustaining. Iranians could easily access Oman and deploy forces internal and to the coast with relative ease. The Iranians played a key role in pushing the rebel forces back into PDRY territory through a calculated strategy with the Omanis involving weaponized barriers. Goode notes,

The joint Omani-Iranian strategy, 1973–75, was to create successive barriers of barbed wire, mines and fortified posts, stretching from the interior to the coast. These barriers were regularly patrolled and prevented easy movement of rebel forces from one part of the province to another. Once the area in the rear of a barrier had been cleared of the enemy, a new barrier would be constructed, moving ever closer toward the border with the

¹⁰⁶ Pearce, "Iran Steps Up Role in Oman," F1.

¹⁰⁷ Goode, 448.

¹⁰⁸ Goode, 451.

PDRY. In this way territory under PFLO control was steadily reduced in size. Once they had reached adequate strength, Iranian forces manned the barrier, while Omani troops mopped up rebel forces in the rear, which were now cut off from supplies and reinforcements. One of these lines was named “Damavand” after the iconic Iranian peak. The Iranians suffered many casualties in this process.¹⁰⁹

Though the Iranians fighting for the Sultan, there were at times differences in opinion on how to conduct the war and synchronization of strategy became difficult. The Shah’s desire to implement his forces aggressively was met with stern pushback from the British and Omani counterparts. The Shah wanted to expedite ending the conflict with military force while the Sultan and his British advisors were concerned with the ramifications it would have on their COIN strategy, particularly inciting more discontent from the local populace about possible inadvertent civilian casualties the Iranian strategy would create.¹¹⁰ The back and forth of strategy determination would ultimately favor the Sultan and his approach, although constant disagreement from Iran regarding the length of the conflict and timeliness of defeating the rebels would surface intermittently until the wars’ end.¹¹¹

Iran’s contribution to the conflict in Dhofar was undeniably important to its successful ending for Oman. While motivated primarily out of self-preservation for the security of Iran itself, and heavily influenced by the red wave of Soviet expansion in the region, the Shah’s desire to assist Qaboos in quelling the rebellion resulted in critical capability gaps in the SAF being filled. The assistance that Iran provided during the Dhofar Rebellion would also ignite the long-standing relationship that to this day exists between Oman and Iran. This relationship that has survived Iran’s tumultuous revolutionary period serves to reinforce the perception of Oman’s neutrality in foreign policy, and its efforts during the Dhofar Rebellion have never been forgotten.

¹⁰⁹ Goode, 452.

¹¹⁰ Goode, 454.

¹¹¹ Goode, 460.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. LESSONS LEARNED

The Dhofar Rebellion in Oman was an all too familiar occurrence within the study of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. The preconditions that allowed to the insurgency to develop and fester were a perfect amalgamation of political unrest and societal upheaval mixed with external power influence and proxy warfare. The rebellion and subsequent efforts to squash it have generally been viewed as a COIN win within the annals of military doctrine and research. While the fact that the COIN strategy and implementation were successful during the war, the underlying effects that external foreign power influences had prior to, and throughout the conflict played a significantly greater role in its eventual outcome.

Prior to the creation of the DLF and start of the insurgency, conditions in the Dhofar region had deteriorated to an unbearable situation for the populace. Discrimination, lack of basic social and public services, and destitute living conditions all factored into the general despondency of the Dhofari people. Sultan Said's autocratic and repressive policies created an unstable environment in Dhofar, and Said's prior internal conflicts and weak relationships with his neighbors provided the necessary spark for an insurgent group to instigate a revolt against his leadership.

The glaring issues within Dhofar were without doubt able to be avoided by Said. The reluctance to establish programs to address basic human needs such as wells to reduce water scarcity, medical care facilities, and improve creation of economic opportunities in the region, directly resulted in the insurgency. Had Said made any effort to reduce these issues, the insurgency would more than likely have never occurred, as the initial policy of the DLF was in direct response to his neglect. While the British made small efforts to curb his repression of Dhofar, there is not enough evidence to suggest their goals at ameliorating a rebellion outweighed their desire to keep in good standing with Said, and thus their strategic foothold in the region. Had the British made their continued military and political support contingent on improvements made in Dhofar and increased internal stability in

Oman, the British may have been able to leverage a deterrence option vice further fueling instability. However, due to the tenuous predicament that the British were in regarding their position in the Middle East, combined with the decision by Great Britain to remove themselves from the region by 1970, the possibility of losing Oman and its access to key waterways over an internal Omani dispute was not a palatable option. The absence of an intervening force internal to Oman, such a strong SAF, that could assist Said in avoiding an insurrection emboldened the subjugated Dhofari's to coalesce into a cohesive insurgent group. Yet, without the backing of external powers, this group would not have advanced ideologically or militarily during the war. The involvement of external foreign powers during the Dhofar Rebellion necessitates a closer look in order to develop a new understanding of how these actors contribute, or detract, throughout the life cycle of an insurgency, as well as how future conflicts can be scrutinized and approached from a different avenue.

China, a burgeoning power in the mid-20th century played a key role during the inception of the DLF and subsequent PFLOAG. China's contributions of military aid and communist doctrine had a notable impact on the insurgents, and their support helped combine Dhofari discontent with tools of violence. China's foreign policy of assisting revolutionary groups against perceived oppressive regimes, and China's desire to expand its influence in the Middle East, was the driving factor supporting the DLF, with hopes that DLF success would provide China an inroad to the region. However, the dramatic shift in Chinese foreign policy in the middle of the war had consequential effects on the success of the rebels. China's desire to work with formal institutional governments and its fear of Soviet encirclement left the rebels in search of other external supporters, leading to a drastic decrease in rebel combat power and cohesiveness. It was also China's communist atheist ideology imposed on the DLF that assisted in their loss of advocacy from the Muslims in Dhofar, disabling the rebel's ability to imbed within the populace and gain the necessary popular support from society an insurgency requires.

The USSR was also a major player assisting the rebels. Although muted in public rhetoric, their support for the DLF/PFLOAG was balanced between their desire to prop up revolutionary groups, and their attempt to not upset regional powers at the time with whom

they had strong foreign relations. The USSR maintained their assistance throughout the war, albeit it primarily in arms and in an advisory capacity, and assumed the role as a primary backer for the rebels after the withdrawal of significant Chinese backing.

The PDRY's role during the war was equally significant to China and Russia, as they provided the important physical space that the rebels could survive and grow. The PDRY enabled the insurgents to stage, train, receive military aid, and offered a location of retreat to the DLF. Without the PDRY's support, Chinese and Soviet weaponry and communist doctrine may not have reached the insurgents through the important access points along the Southern Yemen coastline. Yemen also provided a means of exit and return for insurgents earmarked to receive critical training in guerilla warfare and communist manifesto outside of the region. Their decision to cease support for the rebels, primarily due to Saudi promises of financial aid, removed a key location for the DLF/PFLOAG to operate out of. The loss of this physical sanctuary compressed the rebels between the Oman-Yemen border and the SAF, leaving only space for PFLOAG attrition.

The support for the rebels from Saudi Arabia was less notable other than during the infancy of insurgency development, having more impact during the later years of the war in mediation efforts. Saudi Arabia's initial permission to allow trained DLF troops from Iraq to transit through Saudi territory, as well as provision of basic military aid to the DLF, was largely due to historically contentious feelings regarding Said's unwillingness to bend on Saudi territorial claims. This was exemplified during events such as the Buraimi crisis in the 1950s that pitted Saudi Arabia against the Sultan, only being resolved by British support to Said. Due to regional power balancing, and following the deposition of Said, Saudi Arabia decided to cease all support to the rebels, and worked to stabilize the conflict through both financial coercion of rebel supporters, and financial support for Qaboos' internal Omani civil society initiatives.

Iraq during the conflict best represents a nation caught up in Cold War politics of the period. As good relations between the Soviets and Iraq had strengthened, Iraq looked to enable other antimonarchical groups in the region, and the DLF provided one such option they could support. Their initial contributions were predominantly during the infancy of the insurgency through financial aid and training. Iraq's close ties with the Soviet Union

and their involvement in the Dhofar War directly influenced Iran to consider Iraq's goals in the region, the threat of future Soviet influence, and assisted in bringing significant Iranian support for the Qaboos that contributed to rebel losses and the eventual outcome. This instance demonstrates that external powers not directly involved with the conflict can be dragged in based on their own international relations with parties directly involved, or personal security concerns of their own.

Great Britain's involvement was both to Oman's detriment, and their benefit. Their historical position in Oman made many surrounding nations question British influence in the region, and Oman's individual capability to make decisions without British advisement. The British were well entrenched in Omani political and military wings of the government primarily to serve their own interests. British decisions and actions leading up to the Dhofar Rebellion were reflective of that position as they sought to maintain their regional influence and prosperity during a time of British retreat from the Middle East.

That being said, Great Britain's contribution to holding together the loose fibers that constituted the Omani government, and both financially and militarily supporting Oman's sovereignty, cannot be discounted. Their actions advising both Said and Qaboos on COIN strategy as well as implementing British combat power throughout the insurgency helped to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic victories, providing the necessary space for Qaboos to improve civil society development. Great Britain provided training and structure to the SAF, and in conjunction with the Iranians, assisted heavily in their victory over the PFLOAG. British presence and action in Oman were an important counterbalance to other external foreign supporters of the insurgents, as the rebels not only combatted the Sultanate, but Oman's powerful Western backer as well.

The only major regional power to come to the aid of the Sultan was Iran. Iran's recent improvements to their armed forces as well as their desire to project power, combat Soviet encirclement, and maintain control of the Strait of Hormuz, enabled their steadfast support for Oman in the war. Iran provided beneficial self-sustaining combat power in the form of military aid, troops, and air capabilities that had been lacking in the SAF. These capabilities enabled the British-advised Omani-COIN strategy implementation, and

resulted in a more rapid conclusion to the war, as well as recognition of Iran as a regional power with a formidable and tested military.

External foreign powers, such as those involved in the Dhofar Rebellion, regularly provide the outside observer with a key insight into the projected successes or failures of an insurgency. Insurgencies rarely operate without this external support, be it militarily, financially, or through rhetoric. Without this necessary assistance, rebel groups would not be able to maintain the necessary equipment, training, and funding to continue their objectives. The Dhofar Rebellion is a prime historical example of how these influences can promote, or detract, from insurgent groups. Contrary to the popular assessment of the rebellion resulting in a COIN win, scholars should dig deeper past the tactical and operational aspects of the conflict in order to notice the more influential role that participating external powers and their foreign policies play in its outcome.

Recognition of the role external powers play over the preponderance of focus placed on the actual COIN campaign would enable other arms of government within today's nations to enact destabilizing effects on current insurgent groups. Diplomatic officials stand to play a significant role in this endeavor to help coerce and incentivize supporters of insurgencies to cease by providing beneficial alternatives, or unpalatable repercussions. While ideological connections between external supporters and insurgents are difficult to replace, they are not impossible to stymie with commitments and agreements from other nations that supersede their significance. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also stand to play a role in this arena through their development of civil society and institutional capacity building. The role that NGO's such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) could play in a developing area could help quench the burning embers of societal discontent that enable insurgencies to ignite and sustain.

Combatting or preventing insurgencies through other-than-military intervention are dependent on the early identification of warning signs and preconditions that a conflict will take place, as well as accurately assessing the key external powers involved. This early identification can provide windows of opportunity to dramatically influence the outcome of an insurgency through, and amongst, coordination at higher levels of government. While the military arm of a COIN acts as a deterrent and a necessary counter to insurgent violence,

the other arms of government should progress along their own COIN campaign, deterring external powers from supporting insurgents, and improving stability in the affected country.

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