MILITARY HISTORY NOTE

Dhofar insurgency: lessons not too late for learning

James P. Ayliffe
Royal United Service Institute of Tasmania[1]

Between the 1960s and 1970s, a communist-inspired insurgency in the Dhofar province of Oman had the potential to threaten the entire region. Sultan Qaboos succeeded his despotic father, Said bin Taimur, in 1970, but came to power too late to prevent the rebellion from escalating. With the aid of British loan and contract officers, he was able to prevent a rebel takeover. In this paper, a former contract officer summarises key observations and lessons that may have application to the conduct of counter-insurgency campaigns in the future.

Key words: Dhofar; Oman; counter-insurgency; Sultan Qaboos.

An inconvenient truth about counter-insurgency operations is that there are not many that can go down in history as successful in terms of achieving of a pre-determined end-state or outcome. On the other hand, the Dhofar war is a text-book example of what can go right.

The lessons from that campaign are filed away in private memoirs and archives, and are rarely considered by Western military leaders, although the Dhofar war is now studied at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, in the United Kingdom.

Nearly 50 years ago, Britain was drawn into supporting the Sultan of Oman in putting down the insurgency, which was seen to have the potential to destabilise the economic system of the Western world. This was an era of economic belt tightening by the British government. Its decision to withdraw all British troops from east of Suez could not have been made at a worse time for Oman, a developing state trying to put down an emerging insurgency. However, in spite of this new policy, the British cabinet made a calculated decision, based on strategic imperative. The campaign could have turned horribly wrong had it not been undertaken in the way it was. This was also a time when international news services were focused more on Vietnam than Oman; and so the planning to support Oman was able to be conducted with minimal media scrutiny.

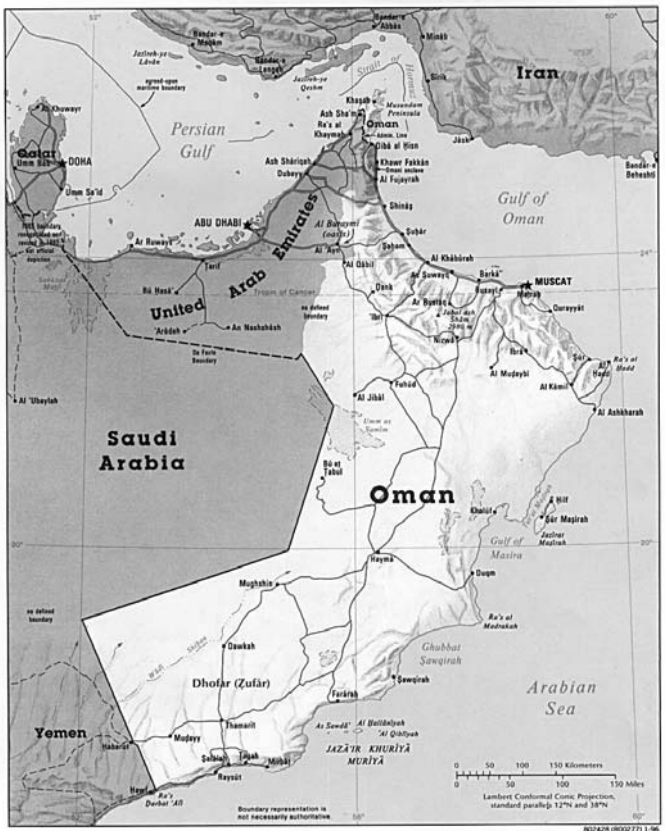
Numerous books have been written about the conflict but none so grounded as Brigadier Ian Gardiner's personal account of his experiences (Gardiner 2006). His articulation of the justification for British involvement reinforces the rationale for the government's stealthy deviation from its east of Suez withdrawal policy:

> *"What were we British fighting for in another country's war? In the first place, the Omanis asked us to help them. But more importantly, no British Serviceman in Oman was in any doubt about the element of realpolitik in our presence there. It was very much in the British national interest that Oman should not become another Communist satellite." (Gardiner 2006: 175)*

Lessons

In a presentation to the Royal United Service Institute in Hobart in 2012, I provided some insights on the campaign based on my observations as a British contract officer and recorded in my unpublished memoirs. These observations could also be framed as lessons to inform future counter-insurgency campaigns and include the following.

Sovereign head: The decision to back Sultan Qaboos was based on an assessment by the British government that he would introduce good governance and accountability within his government. With earlier work experience in a British municipal council gaining knowledge on how communities should be managed, followed by officer training at



Oman, showing the southern province of Dhofar and its Salalah and Mirbat bases on the coast (Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas Library, Austin)

[1]James Ayliffe was a British contract officer in the Sultan's Armed Forces in 1974-1975. He held infantry battalion and garrison roles in Khasab and Buraimi, Northern Oman, and Habrut and Makinat Shihan in Dhofar.

Sandhurst and a deployment with the British Army in Germany, Sultan Qaboos was well equipped for the task of governing Oman and its southern province, Dhofar.

Publicity: The military campaign was managed in a media vacuum. The concept of deployable military public relations staff was a luxury not to be had, and there was no such thing as 'press embeds'. In hindsight, this enabled the military campaign to be conducted without being 'second guessed' by international spectators.

Diplomacy: The commander of Sultan's Armed Forces and the British ambassador in Muscat worked as a cohesive team to ensure that the operational plans implemented in-country were in sync with confidential strategic objectives of the British government. The Sultan was effective in gaining support from the United Nations, which motivated regional neighbours, particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to back the Sultan. In turn, this resulted in the insurgents from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen being ostracised.

Cultural sensitivity: The British had a detailed understanding of Omani language and culture and this significantly enhanced operability. Loan and contract officers understood the importance of recognising regional civilian authorities in their areas of operations. The 'hearts and minds' campaign required that the Sultan's Armed Forces showed respect for the municipal leaders and supported the local population where practicable.

Military: Exclusive command and control of the Sultan's Armed Forces by a British-serving loan officer was the key success factor. Other factors that positively impacted on the campaign included:

- ***Leadership:*** The commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces (CSAF) was appointed for his leadership ability and strength of character in that, while his primary responsibility was to command the Sultan's Armed Forces, his secondary responsibility was to tell the Sultan what he needed to know, not just what he wanted to hear. Such was the level of trust between CSAF and the Sultan that when CSAF was approached by another Western nation to 'help' the war effort and 'introduce Western democracy', on advice from CSAF, it was tactfully, but forcefully resisted by the Sultan. This decision was critical to containing the conflict.
- ***Integrated:*** British loan and contract officers were integrated into military unit structures in commanding officer and second-in-command positions; dressed in the uniforms of the Sultan's Forces, not in foreign uniforms which might otherwise have made them discernible as 'foreigners'. The expatriate officer numbers were able to be reduced over time as Omani junior officers and non-commissioned officers graduated from the Sultan's Armed Forces Training Regiment.
- ***Messaging:*** The avoidance of an overt, extensive deployment of British troops underpinned Sultan Qaboos' legitimacy as head of state. Whilst Iranian and Jordanian military were deployed in support of the campaign, they were culturally akin to the Omanis, unlike Caucasian troops who might otherwise have caused some disquiet among the people.
- ***Air power:*** Air power was a significant force multiplier. The campaign would have dragged on for years without the effective strike, airlift, and casualty evacuation capability provided by loan and contract officers.
- ***Good timing, good luck or both:*** The defence of Mirbat, a modern day 'Rorke's Drift' led by British Special Forces, provided the Dhofaris and Omanis with a decisive victory. The requirement for Britain to downplay this 'awkward' victory in the face of overwhelming guerrilla forces enabled the Sultan's Forces to rightly exploit the initiative and use the success in battle to boost the morale of their conventional forces and encourage them to take the fight to the jebel.
- ***Training:*** Training was never seen as a component of an exit strategy – rather, it was seen as a long term commitment by Britain and viewed by the indigenous soldiers as a reward for trust and loyalty.

Resources: Britain resisted the temptation to throw cash at the conflict and all development was funded by the Government of Oman. This reduced the risk of corruption among the Omani leadership. At the operational level, British loan and contract officers were responsible for basic day-to-day accounting for transport and logistic supplies as Omani officers and NCOs were still being trained in basic resource management.

Civil Service: Expatriate civilian contract officers with British Civil Service experience provided corporate and departmental knowhow and mentoring in support of the Omani department heads.

Non-Government Organisations and foreign aid were viewed as negative influences that dissipated the integrity of the sovereign state and were restricted to a few medical representatives.

Reconciliation: A national amnesty policy facilitated reconciliation between warring parties and helped to mend the rift in trust between the indigenous tribes who sided with the insurgents and the new government of Sultan Qaboos.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most subtle of lessons that came out of the conflict was articulated by Gardiner (2006: 21): *"At the root of all insurgent wars is bad government……"*. Sultan Qaboos was very aware of his predecessor's despotic rule and the risk that this type of governance posed for the reunification of Dhofar with the north. He was quick to realise the benefits of using his newly-found oil revenues to commence construction of health and education infrastructure as the conflict was being waged. His style of leadership was inculcated throughout every government department with the result that, almost 50 years later, Oman stands out as a conservative, well managed and prosperous country – a light amidst the darkness that pervades most of the Middle East today.

Acknowledgement

I thank Colonel Nigel Knocker, OBE, Chairman, Sultan's Armed Forces Association, United Kingdom, for helpful consultation.

References

Gardiner, Brigadier Ian (2006). *In the service of the Sultan: a first-hand account of the Dhofar insurgency* (Pen and Sword: Barnsley, UK).

Sultan's Armed Forces Newsletters: Issue Nos. 32 (December 1983) to 65 (March 2016).