

Stephen Quick, *The Dhofar War: British Covert Campaigning in Arabia, 1965-1975*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2024. Pp. 171, £95.

This is a holistic politico-military history of British operations in Oman, built on an impressive range of archival sources. Stephen Quick's book examines the communist-led Dhofar region insurgency in western Oman. Foundational themes tying together this book echo other British counterinsurgencies: build-up of (mostly local) forces; hearts and minds civic-action programmes; overall British political direction; SAS-run psychological-operations to split Marxist insurgents from Islamic Dhofaris; the use of turned surrendered insurgents as loyalist *firqa* forces. Britain's removal of Oman's feudal Sultan Said in a managed coup in 1970 in favour of his more forward-thinking son, Qaboos, was key, highlighting the politically driven, Clausewitzian quality to overall strategy. Qaboos facilitated the 'carrot' part of operations to win the population. His antediluvian father hated Dhofaris and demanded the 'stick' of collective punishment after every action by the People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf (PFLOAG). As with so many counterinsurgencies, without source materials, we see the insurgents through a glass, darkly.

There were three stages to counterinsurgency: an all-British effort in the fading colonial period after 1965; the 1970 coup that changed the conflict's parameters; finally, 'accelerated decline' as Jordanians, Pakistanis (Baluchis), and Iranians took over operations, and the new Omani government asserted itself. The last phase is interesting, as British officials after 1970 still closely managed the high-level, behind-the-scenes action driving forward counterinsurgency. Outsourcing field operations reduced British casualties: thirty-five dead, compared to almost 800 Iranians. In 1972 in Ulster, over a hundred soldiers died. Carefully managed, minimised commitment in Oman gave a big 'bang for bucks.' Coalition building and scaling of operations reduced collateral damage, ensuring that violence never outpaced political control. The British-led triumph in Oman in 1975 readily compares to the US departure from Saigon the same year, but Dhofari insurgents never had the organisation and civil traction of Vietnamese guerrillas. Maoist insurgent women's liberation programmes fared badly in patriarchal, rural Dhofar. The reader wonders whether this was a British-inspired victory, or whether the insurgents failed themselves.

The British pulled the strings, genuflecting to the Sultan, but they effectively ran the operations of another sovereign country. The watchwords were contain, expand, stabilise, defeat. Cumulative post-1945 British experience in irregular operations coalesced in a 'high point' in Dhofar. Experience equalled success. British 'contract' (or mercenary) officers supported small cadres of official ones. With political control and political objectives secured, Britain built blocking fences such as the Hornbeam line, later the Hammer and Damavand lines, to control the border with Marxist Yemen. Moderate Sultan Qaboos helped push forward civic action. A more Omani-centred literature has challenged this British-centric view of history, but the

British led the show in this book. New units emerged to support Oman's Muscat and Northern regiments: Desert Regiment, Jebel Regiment, Dhofar Force, Baluch Guard, and Frontier Force, often with majority Baluchi soldiers, but British command structures.

Surrendered enemy personnel (SEPs) rose in number, from one in September 1970 to over one hundred by March 1971. Formed into *firqa* units, they resembled Frank Kitson's Kenyan pseudo-war counter-gangs of the 1950s. Secret funds went to unconventional militia forces; the Intelligence Corps got to work, as did Special Branch. Quick offers a discrete chapter on operational and tactical matters. Contra the comment above, Quick rates the insurgents: a 'formidable enemy,' and supported by Yemen after Britain's 1967 Aden withdrawal. 'Truly remarkable' insurgents in the words of a British officer; it would 'be an honour to command such a group.' Britain contributed the men up to 1970, after which there was more local commitment: 10,000 Omanis/Baluchis, 3000 Iranians, 1000 *firqas*, and 800 Jordanians by 1975, alongside some 1000 British personnel. Quick draws attention to the poor quality of some local troops, bringing the reader back to Britain's pivotal guiding role. As a British officer put it the 'incompetent' Iranians were 'unlike the Omanis, you couldn't teach the Iranians anything; they knew it all. The sublime combination of arrogance and ignorance was a marvel to behold.' Meanwhile, Britain supplied military and political influencers to Oman's court, and who were well-paid for their services. Timothy Landon – the 'White Sultan' – advised Qaboos, and reportedly received £1 million as a yearly birthday gift from the Sultan. Former cavalryman Anthony Ashworth ran the Sultan's public relations operation. As Quick concludes, the campaign was a 'British-inspired win.' Quick's conclusion that 'without the British input and custodianship of the campaign, the war would likely have been lost' sums up the value of British commitment to Dhofar. Quick is to be congratulated for his scholarly, interesting study of a pertinent, successful British 'COIN' case study that will be of great value to military history and students of the British army.

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