



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Study Acceptance Date: March 2024  
Study Sequence No. 3

### Oman Dhofar 1962–79

#### Executive Summary

In 1962, a separatist rebellion broke out in the southwestern region of Dhofar against Oman's Sultan Sa'īd ibn Taymūr that lasted for 17 years. The rebellion began as a result of Sa'īd's regressive regime (he banned, among other things, modern medicine, radios, and eyeglasses), his unwillingness to consider Dhofar's grievances, and a sense of isolation in Dhofar from the rest of Oman.<sup>1</sup> An influential tribal leader named Musallam bin Nufl, from the southwest of Dhofar, initiated the rebellion by demanding the removal of the Sultan and the departure of the British colonial forces from Oman.<sup>2</sup> The rebels called themselves the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) and employed hit-and-run tactics against the Sultan's forces. One of DLF's notable attacks includes the 1966 attempted assassination of the Sultan.<sup>3</sup>

The British withdrew from neighboring South Yemen (Aden), which borders the Dhofar region to the southwest, in 1967, leading to a Marxist regime replacing colonial rule in the nation. The new government in South Yemen became the primary supporter of the rebellion in Dhofar, providing military support, which led to a complete change in the ideology of the DLF. In 1968, the rebellion in Dhofar changed its name to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) and assumed as its new objective the fight against imperialism and the unification of all Arabian states under Marxism.<sup>4</sup> The insurgents had a safe haven in Yemen (Aden) where they received training and arms from China, Cuba, North Korea, and the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

By 1970, the insurgents controlled almost 80 percent of the Dhofar region.<sup>6</sup> That year, Sultan Sa'īd ibn Taymūr's son, Sultan Qābūs ibn Sa'īd, led a palace coup and exiled his father. The coup was followed by a reversal of Sa'īd's regressive social policies and a complete change in counterinsurgency tactics and the arrival of British military advisers.<sup>7</sup> Sultan Qābūs's new tactics included offering amnesty to the rebels, developing civil projects, renewing efforts to isolate the insurgents, establishing tribal militias and strengthening the Sultanate's Armed Forces (SAF) with British's military support.<sup>8</sup> Saudi Arabia sent artillery and trainers to the nation, and King Hussein of Jordan provided combat engineers, special forces, artillery, and jet fighters. Abu Dhabi sent infantry to provide internal security in northern Oman, which permitted additional Omani forces to deploy instead to Dhofar. Iran sent infantry, paratroops, and fighter aircraft to support Qābūs. In addition to these counterinsurgency efforts, the Sultan also used diplomacy to gain support in the region by joining the Arab League and the United Nations, which deprived the rebels of legitimacy in the Arab world.<sup>9</sup>

International support for the insurgency disintegrated by 1975. China, Egypt, and Iraq dropped their support for the movement. British forces built a series of patrol bases in southwestern Dhofar, known as the Hornbeam Line, to restrict rebel access to Yemen, and Iranian troops created another

barrier line further west, dubbed the Damavand Line, to further restrict cross-border movement. Together these restrictive forces reduced Yemen-based rebel resupply efforts from a steady flow of camel caravans to isolated foot traffic. Iranian paratroopers then reopened the main east-west road into Dhofar from eastern Oman, easing the counterinsurgents' logistics. By November 1975, with international support gone and supplies reduced to a trickle, the PFLOAG was overpowered in eastern Dhofar by the Sultan's armed forces' heavy artillery, fighter jets, and helicopters.<sup>10</sup> Security forces then defeated the insurgents in a series of engagements, and Omani troops took control of western Dhofar. Most of the remaining rebels accepted the Sultanate's amnesty, and the remainder fled into Yemen.<sup>11</sup> From 1976–79, Oman experienced a transitional phase in domestic and international affairs; the country kept ties with Iran after the Iranian Revolution and even proposed a \$100 million protection plan for the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>12</sup> Although the ruler of Oman changed from father to son during the conflict, the continuity of the Sultanate was preserved.

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** Oman had a total population of 622,042 of which 35,000 (5 percent) were Dhofaris; Dhofaris had closer ties with South Yemen traditionally, linguistically, religiously, and tribally.<sup>13</sup> Most of the population in Oman, however, including Dhofar, consisted of Arabs and Muslims who considered themselves from Oman.

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No → Yes.** Sultan Sa'īd experienced several interior conflicts, including the imamate legitimacy and the Dhofari insurgency. In 1954, tribal leaders loyal to imamate leadership elected Ghalib bin Ali al-Hina to replace the former imam, Mohammad bin Abdullah al-Khalili. The new imamate demanded an interior Oman separate from coastal Oman. The group was defeated before gaining any popular support.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Sa'īd's rule was unpopular due to his desire to return Oman to the Middle Ages by banning medicine, radios, and eyeglasses. His son's reforms went a long way to restore the strength of the monarchy and its relationship with its people. Sultan Qābūs defeated the Dhofar rebellion in 1976, and the insurgents could not influence a majority of the population to stand against the Sultan.

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**Yes.** During the rebellion from 1962–79, the Sultan isolated the rebels in the Dhofar region and maintained control over the northern and central regions of Oman, which held 95 percent of the population.

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes → No.** After the withdrawal of Britain from South Yemen, the Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) replaced direct colonial rule in 1967.<sup>15</sup> The PDRY supported the Dhofaris by providing arms, training, and money and became a sanctuary for the insurgents.<sup>16</sup> In the closing years of the conflict, however, dwindling international support for the rebels and the construction of British and Iranian defensive lines near the border of Yemen largely succeeded in shutting down cross-border traffic to and from this sanctuary.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The Sultan enhanced Oman’s small military after the conflict over the Buraimi oasis by establishing the Batinah Force and the Muscat and Oman Field Force (later part of the Oman Regiment). By 1958, the Sultan had the Muscat Infantry, the Oman Regiment, and the Dhofar Force, which were later consolidated into the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF). In 1960, the Oman Gendarmerie at Suhar was established, which was followed by establishment of the Sultan of Oman’s Air Force, Navy, and Desert Regiment.<sup>17</sup>

OMAN DHOFAR 1962–79		
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES	
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO →	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES	
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES →	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES	

## Outcome

Government victory. Sultan Qābūs prosecuted a successful counterinsurgency campaign against the rebellion, which followed “population-centric” and “enemy-centric” strategies. Dhofar provides a rare example of a successful counterinsurgency following the elimination of external sanctuary. The rebellion lost tribal supporters in Dhofar after switching from nationalist principles to a Communist ideology.<sup>18</sup> Qābūs, with the support of British military advisers, took control of the populace and isolated the rebels in the Dhofar region, where only 5 percent of the Omani population resided. Regional actors (Great Britain, Iran, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) played an important role in disrupting the insurgent’s line of support from Yemen (Aden). This conflict supports the Five Factors theory.

## Endnotes

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