

# RAF Counter-Insurgency Operations in Oman and Aden, 1950-1970

By Dr Sebastian Ritchie

Recent years have witnessed a marked increase in the study of counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare, driven primarily by events in Iraq and Afghanistan. The present impasse alone has generated an understandable desire to learn the lessons of earlier operations, but the multiplicity of articles and conferences currently addressing the theme of air power in small wars and insurgencies has not merely been concerned with the search for possible solutions. There is, from an air force perspective, an even more far-reaching issue to address. For while the role of land armies in modern-day COIN warfare is well established and generally accepted, it has not proved easy for air power to offer a contribution extending far beyond the provision of support for ground operations. While there is evidently a perception that air power should play a more distinct role, in practice such a role has proved very difficult to identify.

The search for examples of how air power might contribute more directly to COIN warfare has predictably led students of air power to re-examine such topics as colonial air policing between the World Wars, and the role of air forces in more recent insurgencies, notably in South Vietnam. Yet there are many other lesser-known COIN campaigns in which air forces have played a prominent part, and as some of these offer far more obvious parallels with

current operations they clearly merit investigation and analysis. Two such campaigns involving the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Oman and Aden in the 1950s and 60s are the central focus of this study.

In Oman British and Omani forces were relatively successful in maintaining stability; but by the time Britain withdrew from Aden in 1967 security in the colony had almost completely broken down. The contrast appears striking, and requires explanation if meaningful lessons are to be learnt from the British experience. In pursuit of this goal, this paper surveys the strategic background against which the Oman and Aden campaigns were mounted, RAF dispositions across the Middle East, their historic COIN role, and their specific part in the two conflicts. Finally it draws together such conclusions and lessons as may be identified from Oman and Aden, with particular reference to modern-day COIN activity.

## The Strategic Background

Britain emerged from the Second World War with her empire predominantly intact, but with her capacity to maintain the empire fatally undermined. The United States and the Soviet Union were now the world's superpowers, while Britain could no longer lay claim to the great power status that she had enjoyed in the 1920s and 30s. Wartime economic

dislocation would take years to rectify, and Britain was also massively indebted to her Allies. And yet her post-war governments were confronted by new financial pressures – by a vulnerable currency, and by the need to finance the new welfare state. In this environment there were inevitably strong pressures to reduce defence spending. And yet the demands of imperial defence were in some ways more taxing than they had been in the inter-war period. The war had served to encourage nationalist movements in a number of British colonies, and in some areas communism emerged as a threat to British control. Of course, it was also perceived to be a threat in Western Europe, and consequently the demands of European defence would loom far larger in British thinking after 1945 than they had for most of the 1930s. Soon Britain would be committed to NATO.

Taking all this into account it was perhaps remarkable that Britain's withdrawal from empire in the late 1940s was virtually confined to India and Palestine. Nevertheless, it became clear during the 50s that Britain no longer possessed the military and economic muscle necessary to sustain the empire; nor, increasingly, did her governments have the will to sustain it. The old arguments used to justify Britain's overseas presence began to sound very hollow; anti-imperialist sentiments were also strong in the Labour Party, which governed Britain in the late 40s and from 1964 through to 1970. The turning point came with the Suez Crisis of 1956, which brutally exposed the limitations of British power in the post-war world. After Suez there were repeated cuts in Britain's conventional armed forces, and the process of decolonisation gathered pace. By the early 1970s the withdrawal was

complete, and British defence policy had been almost entirely reoriented towards NATO.<sup>1</sup>

At its peak the British Empire had extended across the Mediterranean, through the Middle East, and then east to Asia, the Far East and Australasia. The Middle East had thus been of critical strategic importance providing, as it did, the essential link between Europe and Asia, and the colonies beyond. The British presence in the Arabian Peninsula area had developed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and was founded primarily on a large number of treaties and agreements with indigenous rulers and tribal chiefs, which in most cases left Britain with responsibility for the foreign affairs and defence of the areas concerned. Through this process the entire western Peninsula coast was effectively brought under British control, primarily to safeguard sea-lanes across the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup>

After India was granted independence the rationale behind the British presence on the Arabian Peninsula changed. The extensive oil resources of Oman and the Trucial States (now the UAE) made them attractive possessions in their own right at a time when oil was driving Europe's post-war economic reconstruction; Britain's withdrawal from Iraq and Egypt enhanced the importance of her military bases further south; and a continued presence in these areas also appeared desirable to deter communist expansion into the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

### **The RAF in the Middle East**

Since 1918 the RAF had played a prominent role in maintaining British control over the Middle East. Air power's capacity to reduce substantially the cost of imperial policing was formally recognised in 1921, when the

RAF were given primary responsibility for maintaining the security of Iraq; later the RAF would also be assigned lead role in other areas.<sup>4</sup> Thus, by the 1950s, the RAF had a well established base infrastructure in this theatre, stretching from Habbaniya and Basrah in Iraq, around the Gulf coast to Bahrain and Sharjah, and south to Aden via small route stations like Masirah and Salalah. There were also numerous smaller airstrips across the peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

while Oman and Aden were under subordinate commands based in Iraq and Aden Colony. After Suez the number of these lower-tier commands was rationalised down to just two, with Headquarters British Forces Aden attaining a heightened strategic importance, being assigned responsibility for all territories south of Egypt, including the Gulf and Oman. Initially Headquarters British Forces Aden remained an RAF Command



**The Middle East Theatre in the 1950s**

and control in the Middle East went through a number of changes in the post-war years. At first RAF Middle East Command was based in Egypt,

Command but in 1959 it was turned into a joint command, in which a single Commander-in-Chief presided over land, air and naval components. It was

renamed Headquarters Middle East Command in 1961.<sup>6</sup>

The RAF forces committed to the Oman and Aden COIN operations covered in this study were managed in very different ways. For much of the period of Oman operations (1952-1959) RAF Middle East Command was still in a position to draw on resources from Iraq, Egypt, and the Mediterranean, and there were even temporary deployments from the home commands in Britain. Consequently there were regular changes in the size and composition of RAF detachments. In terms of combat aircraft, there were never more than two squadrons committed to the Oman task at any one time; otherwise the force consisted largely of fixed or rotary-wing transport aircraft, or reconnaissance platforms.

After Suez it was no longer possible to manage Arabian Peninsula operations in this way. Britain withdrew from Egypt and then Iraq; air movements from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and Aden became very much more difficult. Consequently in the late 50s the base at Aden was enlarged and made far more self-sufficient. Some 36 aircraft were permanently based at Aden at the end of 1956; by the beginning of the Radfan campaign in 1964 84 aircraft were located there, divided between nine squadrons and two additional flights. Aden was the busiest station in the RAF. There were three full squadrons of combat aircraft; otherwise the force was again largely composed of fixed-wing transport and reconnaissance aircraft, and helicopters.<sup>7</sup>

It is important for these commitments to be considered in their proper historical context. In the period from

1950 through to 1970 the RAF faced numerous other operational tasks, including the Malayan Emergency (1948-60), the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952-55), the Cypriot insurgency (1955-60), the Suez Crisis (1956), the Kuwaiti Crisis (1961) and the Indonesian Confrontation (1962-66). Beyond this there were extensive colonial garrison duties to perform. And then there was the task of containing the Soviet Union, which involved the assignment of UK forces to NATO, to the Central Treaty Organisation (Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan), and to the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation. Finally it should be remembered that throughout the period the RAF were solely responsible for Britain's independent nuclear deterrent.<sup>8</sup> These innumerable commitments had to be carefully balanced and it was never possible for the RAF to focus on one particular area of tasking to the exclusion of all others.

### **Air Control**

The RAF had been extensively involved in colonial policing operations in the 1920s and 30s. Consequently, by the end of the Second World War, a coherent body of doctrine had been assembled to describe how air power could best be employed to uphold imperial authority in so-called 'undeveloped countries'. This doctrine included the well-known concept of air control. According to the *RAF War Manual* of 1950, the aim of air control was 'achieved not by killing the enemy or occupying his country, but by making life a burden to him – by so dislocating the normal existence of the community that they submit to terms rather than endure the continuance of inconvenience and discomfort.' The application of air power against insurgents in the colonies was to be carefully staged:

*The first thing to do is to inform the people in unmistakable terms of what is required of them – the surrender of offenders or of looted rifles or camels or cattle, or the payment of a fine or whatever it may be. They must also be given a clear warning of what will happen to them if, within a stated time, they have not complied with our terms. This is done either verbally or by political officers or by dropping pamphlets in the tribal area concerned. Action of this sort will sometimes suffice to restore order.*

The pressure was then to be increased; the *War Manual* continued:

*The next step is to issue a further notice that air action will begin within an area which must be clearly defined, from a certain time ... The enemy should be told to evacuate his habitations and advised to send his women and children out of the prescribed area.*

*On the expiration of the warning period, air action should begin and be continued until the enemy complies with our terms.*

The object was 'to make it unsafe at any time for the inhabitants to return to their possessions or live any form of normal existence.' According to the *War Manual*,

*Experience has shown that the inconvenience and discomfort, coupled with the feeling of boredom and helplessness engendered by this form of attack, sooner or later convinces the people that they have much to lose and nothing to gain by continued resistance.<sup>9</sup>*

Such was the theory of colonial air control. But recent scholarship has tended to cast doubt on the effectiveness of air control as a means of prosecuting COIN warfare. The RAF has been accused of overstating its role. According to this view, air control's

utility was in fact quite limited, and dealt only with the symptoms of unrest as opposed to the causes, which were largely political. The psychological effect of air attack was limited, and quickly wore off as insurgent elements became more accustomed to the threat; and in any case, while the RAF gave the impression that air control operations were prosecuted independently, they were in fact largely undertaken in support of ground forces.<sup>10</sup>

Ostensibly this revisionist case is a strong one. Yet it can in fact be challenged on three counts. First, it does not give sufficient consideration to the political context within which colonial air control was employed. In conditions of extreme financial stringency in the 1920s and 30s British politicians and colonial administrators embraced air control as a means of limiting the cost of policing the empire; in the meantime the RAF promoted air control in order to justify its continued existence as an independent force, at a time when the other two services were attempting to destroy it.<sup>11</sup> In other words, there was far more to air control than its mere application at the operational or tactical levels. Second, it is all too readily assumed that there were practicable alternatives to air control. In fact, when air power was genuinely employed independently in the colonies it was often because there was literally no other viable means of engaging insurgent groups, either because ground forces were unavailable, or because they could not be deployed into remote and inaccessible areas. This remained a feature of British colonial operations in the post-war period, as we shall see.

Most of all, however, the critique of air control is founded on a misrepresentation of the RAF's stance;

for air control represented only a part of the RAF's doctrine on COIN warfare. The true position is again clearly spelled out in the *War Manual*. Thus, for example, the *Manual* did not make exaggerated claims about the efficacy of independent air action. Indeed, while it referred to air power playing a 'primary role' it did not actually employ the term 'independent' at all. Moreover, it openly accepted that there were many scenarios in which it would be necessary to employ ground forces to quell unrest; in such circumstances the role of air power would be to support ground operations. The *War Manual* also pointed out that the employment of air power in a COIN role should be the subject of close consultation between military and civil authorities. At no stage did it claim that air control techniques would eliminate the underlying causes of insurgent activity. At best they could 'restore order, stop raiding, or enforce collective punishment to discourage future misdeeds.'<sup>12</sup>

The *War Manual* contained a few further points which the critics of RAF COIN doctrine have again somehow managed to overlook. First, it stated quite specifically that classic air control techniques were best suited to open terrain. They would be impossible to employ in jungle or urban environments, where air power's role would again predominantly involve the support of ground forces.<sup>13</sup> Second, the *Manual* stressed the importance of not underestimating the challenge that might be posed even by primitive adversaries:

*These barbarous or semi-civilised peoples can be formidable enemies, and they usually have valuable allies in the climate and the terrain. Their very lack of formalised military organisation may in itself be a*

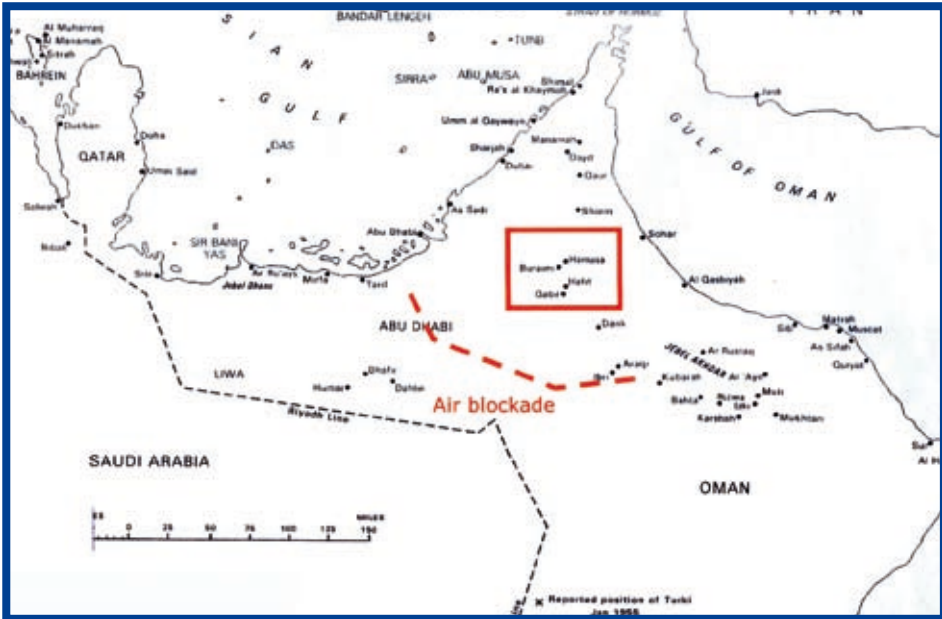
*source of strength to them... They will be largely self-supporting, capable of living on the country and independent of lines of communication in the accepted sense. Unencumbered by complicated equipment they will be highly mobile and elusive opponents, operating in a climate and in country familiar to themselves but presenting considerable difficulties to normal modern land forces.<sup>14</sup>*

Third, the *Manual* pointed out that the long-term subjugation of insurgent areas would only be achieved through protracted occupation. Ground forces might be deployed into particular trouble spots to restore order, but:

*This method has certain disadvantages. It is expensive in men, material and money. Unless it is followed by permanent or prolonged occupation ... withdrawal is likely soon to be followed by a repetition of tribal disorder.<sup>15</sup>*

Fourth, the *Manual* emphasised the critical role of intelligence in COIN operations, although warning that accurate information would often prove very difficult to obtain. Again the enemy, fighting on his own ground, might well command primitive but highly effective intelligence collection mechanisms.<sup>16</sup>

These four points were based on the extensive experience of COIN warfare gained by the RAF between the World Wars; they reflected the lessons identified from a very wide range of operations. They were written into RAF doctrine in 1950, more than half a century ago. And yet these very same lessons have since had to be re-learned repeatedly, even by the British. It has consistently proved very difficult to exploit air power in COIN campaigns waged in jungle and urban environments; and the major



The Buraimi area

powers have frequently underestimated the capability of rebel forces, and the scale of effort required to impose long-term stability upon insurgent areas. And while the acquisition of accurate and timely intelligence about insurgent activity has frequently been fundamental to successful COIN operations, winning and then maintaining information superiority has often presented another extremely tough challenge.

The air control concept was still very much in evidence when the *RAF War Manual* was reissued in 1957, but was almost completely dispensed with when Air Ministry Pamphlet 375, *Internal Security Air Operations*, appeared in 1961. This 62-page document consisting of eight chapters and eleven appendices assigned just one paragraph to 'operations which are designed to punish by causing maximum inconvenience without inflicting casualties.' Its contents otherwise dealt overwhelmingly with the application of air power in support of

ground forces or civil authorities.<sup>17</sup>

### Oman

The first significant troubles in Oman in the 1950s (which also spilled over into the Trucial state of Abu Dhabi) had their origin in a long-term border dispute with Saudi Arabia centred on a remote area around the Buraimi Oasis. Saudi Arabia, which was by this time an independent and very anti-British state, had revived its long-standing claim to Buraimi in the inter-war period as it became clear that the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula was rich in oil. After extended negotiations came to nothing, the Saudis took matters



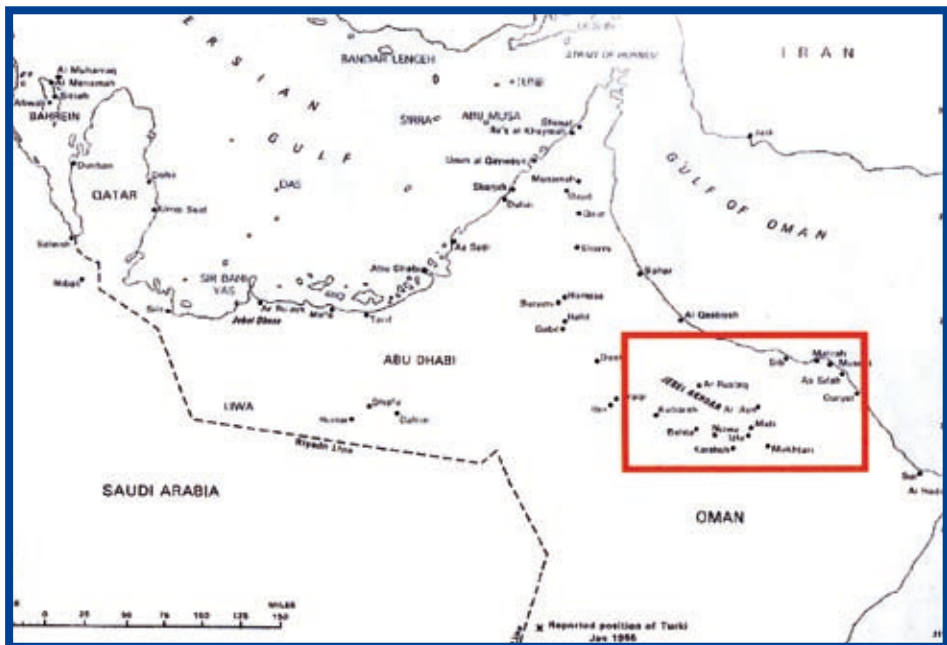
RAF de Havilland Venom at Shanjah, Oman

into their own hands, infiltrating a government representative and a police contingent into Buraimi in August 1952. They promptly set about subverting the population, primarily by dispensing money among the local tribesmen.<sup>18</sup> The British response was cautious. There were no overt hostilities, but Omani Levies (Omani troops with British officers) established a presence in the Buraimi area and RAF Vampire jets flew a number of low-level sorties over nearby villages, while Valetta transports dropped leaflets urging the tribes to remain loyal to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman. However, although such techniques had often been employed quite effectively in the past, Britain was now confronted by an Arab country which could command considerable support in both the United Nations (UN) and Washington. The Saudis' protests subsequently led to the cessation of military activity around Buraimi, which they fully exploited by intensifying their efforts to ferment tribal unrest.<sup>19</sup>

1953 brought clear signs of insurgency in the Buraimi area, and no indication of a Saudi withdrawal. Although the Saudis' forcible ejection would have been a relatively easy task, the British government remained anxious to avoid such a solution, and unwilling to implement more aggressive air control measures. An alternative course of action was therefore proposed involving the aerial surveillance of cross-desert routes between Saudi Arabia and Buraimi to prevent overland reinforcement or re-supply of the area. Surveillance sorties began in March 1953 and involved a mixed force of combat,



RAF Avro Shackleton at Shanjah, Oman



Central Oman

transport and reconnaissance aircraft. A largely Omani Levy ground force was positioned so that it could be called in to investigate contacts of interest. The task was protracted, monotonous and unrewarding. It did not result in a Saudi withdrawal from Buraimi, for their personnel were given food and shelter by the local tribes, but it did deter the Saudis from enlarging their presence.

The operation was executed on 26 October, and involved Omani Levies supported by RAF reconnaissance aircraft and two heavy bombers of Second World War vintage, employed primarily to intimidate rather than to attack Saudi or insurgent forces. Transport aircraft were to land at Buraimi to bring out Saudi prisoners and any casualties, and ground-attack jets were held at readiness in case serious resistance was encountered. However, the extraction went largely according to plan, and within hours the entire Saudi contingent had been flown out to the RAF base at Sharjah, after which they were repatriated.<sup>21</sup>

This episode naturally did nothing to improve British relations with Saudi Arabia. It did lead to the re-imposition of order around Buraimi, but the British government's protracted reluctance to tackle the problem head-on had in the meantime given the Saudis ample opportunity to extend their influence into central Oman. Their success in fermenting unrest among tribes in the area became apparent in the autumn of 1955. An attempt by the Sultan of Oman to stamp his authority on the region was successful, but a number of the rebels afterwards fled to Saudi Arabia where they received rudimentary military training, weapons and ammunition, and formed the so-called Omani Liberation Army. In June 1957 a rebel force landed

on the coast near Muscat and seized control of a mountainous area slightly south of the Jebel Akhdar. Omani ground forces sent in to restore order met fierce resistance, and the Sultan duly appealed to Britain for military support. The British were inclined to view the threat very seriously: as we have seen, after Suez the Arabian Peninsula assumed a heightened importance in their strategic thinking.

The first operation against the central Oman insurgency involved the employment standard air control procedures, after which it was hoped that Omani troops with limited British Army support would be able to move into the Jebel Akhdar to occupy rebel territory. The RAF at first gathered detailed imagery of the fortified mountain villages occupied by the rebels, and warning leaflets were afterwards dropped giving 48 hours notice of air attack. Finally, on 24 July, the village fortifications were rocketed by formations of Venom ground-attack aircraft. These firepower demonstrations were followed up by further attacks on fortified structures and by patrolling over rebel-held areas, while ground troops moved into the Jebel from both north and south. By early August the rebels had been pressed into a small pocket in the Nizwa area. However, the final ground advance into this region proved extremely hazardous, and required highly effective air-land integration, the Venoms repeatedly being called in by forward air controllers to clear road blocks and sniper positions. The ground forces, having been deployed forward into the Jebel Akhdar region by air, were also then sustained by aerial re-supply. The principal insurgent stronghold fell on 12 August, but the rebel leaders and at least some of their followers escaped

capture and pulled back further into the mountains.<sup>23</sup>

The first Jebel Akhdar campaign perfectly illustrates the reality of RAF colonial policing operations, as opposed to the popular myth. A prominent offensive role was assigned to the RAF not because of confidence in the efficacy of independent air action, but because of the weakness of the Omani army, and the remote and inaccessible location of the principal insurgent strongholds. Even then it would be impossible to argue that the strikes executed by the Venoms in July 1957 represented the independent application of air power; on the contrary, it was always anticipated that they would merely precede (and facilitate) action on the ground. Otherwise, virtually all air operations were mounted in direct support of ground forces and overwhelmingly involved close air support (CAS), reconnaissance, air movement and air re-supply.

In the second half of August the British withdrew most of the ground troops they had committed to central Oman. International and domestic opinion, resource constraints and a flawed assessment of the insurgents' residual strength may all have contributed to this decision. Omani ground forces subsequently tried to follow the rebels on to the plateau which dominated the southern approaches to the Jebel Akhdar, but on 15 November they were halted and then thrown back. In London both the government and the Chiefs of Staff were unwilling to consider a large-scale deployment of British ground forces to Oman, so again there was no alternative but to intensify air operations. For the first time in Oman the use of 1,000lb bombs was authorised; cultivated areas, livestock,

water supplies and other essential infrastructure were targeted day and night. Leaflet drops maintained the psychological pressure on insurgent villages. Air reconnaissance kept the Jebel under surveillance, and was also used to monitor supply routes into the area. Nevertheless, it seems likely that this protracted bombardment may actually have strengthened the determination of some insurgents to resist, and nearly a year passed before intelligence began to suggest some weakening of rebel morale.<sup>24</sup>

In considering how to exploit this situation the government again rejected proposals for a major ground operation involving the British Army. Instead it was decided to deploy a squadron of Special Air Service (SAS) troops, which would have dedicated CAS at their disposal provided by Venoms and Shackletons. Hence this could be seen as an early attempt at Special Forces (SF)-air integration. Recent experience of SF-air integration has suggested that on-call air support cannot entirely compensate for the more fundamental limitations of the SF – particularly their numerical weakness – and this was also to be the lesson of the second Jebel Akhdar campaign. The challenge facing the SAS involved scaling the Jebel and leading Omani troops into the plateau area. After good initial progress it became clear that this task lay beyond the capability of a single SAS squadron, and a second squadron was therefore committed to the operation. By the end of January 1959 the insurgency had effectively been suppressed.

Unrest would continue in Oman for many years afterwards in the southern region of Dhofar, initially with backing from Saudi Arabia, later with the support of Yemen, the USSR and China. But the

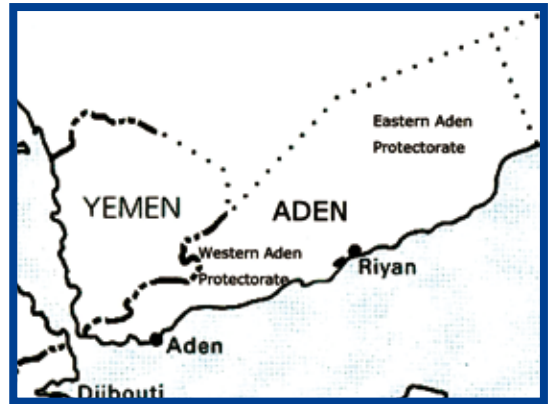
from Saudi Arabia, later with the support of Yemen, the USSR and China. But the RAF played little part in countering the insurgency beyond periodically airlifting troops into the region and providing RAF Regiment units to help defend Salalah airfield. The majority of specific threats were dealt with by the Omanis during the 60s, while UK military activity predominantly took the form of exercises, firepower demonstrations, so-called 'flag waves' and – crucially – training and equipping the Omani armed forces. The Sultan was deposed in a coup in 1970 and was succeeded by his son, but Britain nevertheless withdrew in relatively stable conditions at the end of following year. Limited assistance to the Omanis in the Dhofar area continued for several years afterwards, but ultimately the Dhofar insurgency would be defeated by the Omanis themselves, partly through military action and partly through the sustained efforts of their new Sultan to modernise one of the world's most backward and impoverished societies.<sup>25</sup>



RAF police patrol at entrance to Crater City, Aden

## Aden

The British presence in the far south of the Arabian Peninsula comprised two protectorates and the coastal colony of Aden; in the 60s they were turned into the South Arabian Federation, and the region has since been incorporated into Yemen. The more remote parts of the Western Aden Protectorate had for many years been characterised by tribal dissidence,



Aden

and again there was an important cross-border element in this unrest: in this instance rebellion was actively encouraged by the Imams of Yemen. Yet Aden remained relatively stable in the immediate post-war period. In the late 1940s and early 50s the RAF was still using typical air control procedures to keep order – leaflets, air presence, periodic strikes and shows of force – but on a limited scale. This ground task was largely being fulfilled by locally raised Levies.<sup>26</sup>



Patrol at Crater Police Station, Aden

The most prominent COIN operation of the mid-1950s took place in Western Aden, after continuing low-level unrest in the remote Wadi Hatib area persuaded the government to establish a new fort at Robat. The fort, together with a number of other isolated military outposts, subsequently came under attack from two dissident tribes, who received backing from Yemen. The British were obliged to airlift troops from Aden Colony into the affected area, and this relief operation was soon followed by the application of more forceful air control measures – warnings followed by the bombing of rebel villages, crops and water supplies. These operations were sustained throughout the second half of 1954, but there was no obvious reduction of insurgent activity.

In the spring of 1955 more troops were airlifted into the area and again the basic infrastructure of the insurgent tribes was targeted by both air and land forces. However, it was becoming

clear that the Robat fort was a liability: it was too difficult to defend and sustain, and its presence only seemed to encourage tribal rebellion. After a further substantial airlift of troops to relieve the fort in July, it was abandoned; shortly afterwards it was levelled by the insurgents. Although the Aden government was by this time apparently satisfied that it could project force into the Wadi Hatib region with relative ease in the event of further large-scale unrest, the withdrawal was inevitably viewed by both the Yemenies and the tribes as an important victory.<sup>27</sup> The campaign perfectly illustrates the problem identified by the *RAF War Manual* in 1950. The deployment of ground troops into insurgent areas can often be difficult and expensive; a long-term commitment may well be necessary, at even greater cost; and early withdrawal may incite further disorder.

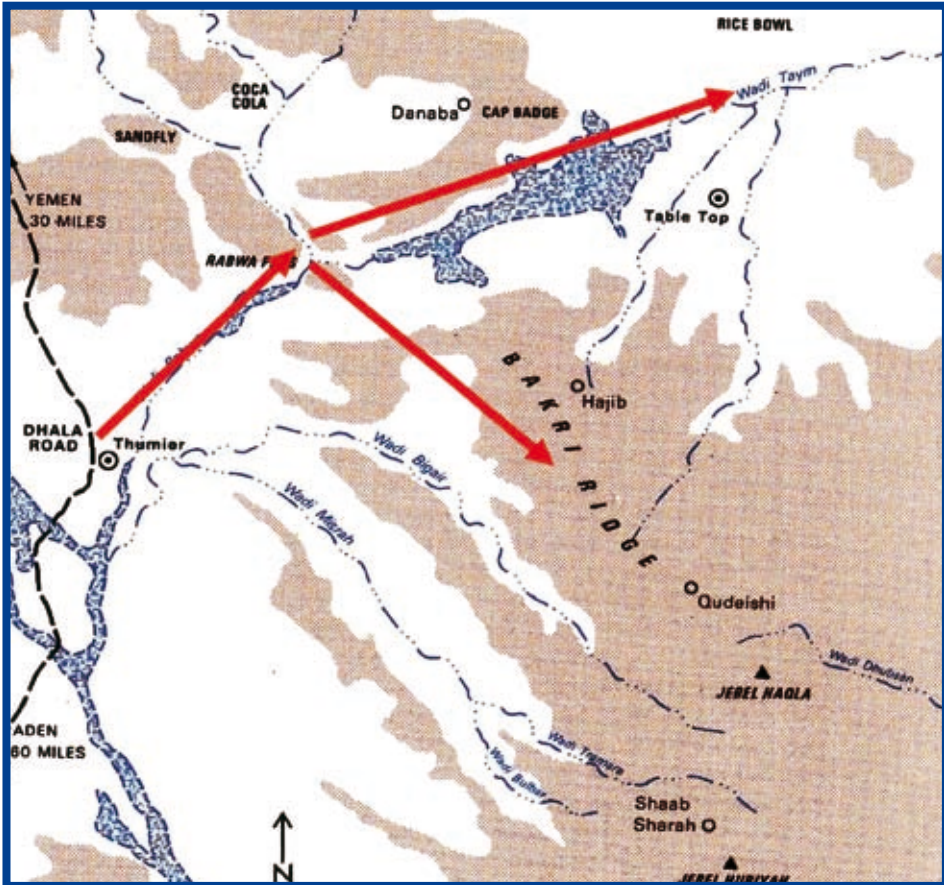
As we have already noted, the late 1950s was a period of expansion for



Wadi Hatib



Both images: RAF Bristol Belvedere helicopters operating in Aden



Operation Nutcracker: main direction of British advance

the RAF in Aden. Operational activity at this time encompassed a wide range of tasks, including the maintenance of air presence, leafleting, periodic strikes, reconnaissance, and the movement of ground troops and supplies into inaccessible areas. In an effort to sever the link between Yemen and the Western

Aden insurgents, Britain also mounted a series of cross-border ventures in this period, which included Special Forces missions, covert support for dissident Yemeni tribes, and selective air attacks. Apparently it did not occur to the British authorities in Aden that these operations might help to deliver Yemen into the

hands of a very much more hostile regime.

Had military action been coupled with an energetic political process for developing self-government in Aden, Britain's ultimate departure from southern Arabia might have been very much easier. As it was, Aden's importance as a military base was such that early proposals for political reform were strongly opposed in London. At the end of the decade belated efforts finally began to create a so-called South Arabian Federation, but the combined effects of economic development and migration from Yemen were in the meantime generating new political forces in the form of Arab nationalism and socialism, which were never likely to be pacified by limited constitutional reforms in favour of Aden's traditional ruling elements. Indeed, political exclusion only served to radicalise the population of Aden Colony. The spread of nationalism became more pronounced after 1962, when a coup in Yemen resulted in the creation of an Egyptian-backed republic, which soon embarked on a far more systematic programme of cross-border agitation and radio propaganda. Predictably enough, the main targets were Britain and the Federation, which was presented as a puppet state. The Yemeni message was enthusiastically received in both Aden Colony and in the rebellious border regions to the north.<sup>28</sup>

By 1963 Britain was facing growing unrest both in Western Aden and in Aden Colony, where a new threat emerged in the form of urban terrorism. The British armed forces had some experience of urban terrorism, but in Aden the scale of the problem rapidly assumed unmanageable proportions. Unable to quell the urban insurgency but

desperate for a means to demonstrate its authority and force projection capability, the British administration once again decided to target the border tribes. The joint commander (Lieutenant General Sir Charles Harrington) saw in this operation a chance to test the newly formed South Arabian Army by deploying them alongside British troops, who would also provide armour and artillery. The RAF would lend all possible support to the expedition.<sup>29</sup>

The main area of tribal unrest at this time was another remote mountainous region known as Radfan. The British operation – entitled 'Nutcracker' – was launched into Radfan in January 1964, and merely repeated the basic mistake that had been made back in 1955 in the Wadi Hatib campaign. As an exercise in force projection and as a demonstration of military strength it was quite successful. The air support was highly effective, as it should have been given the resources available and the RAF's extensive experience in theatre. But once the initial objective of Nutcracker had been achieved there was little option but to pull back from Radfan, for there were insufficient ground forces to garrison the area and maintain security across the rest of Aden. Predictably enough, the insurgents then re-occupied Radfan, while Yemeni and Egyptian radio claimed that a great victory had been won over so-called 'puppet imperialist forces'.<sup>30</sup>

The decision was consequently taken to mount a second operation to end the Radfan insurgency once and for all. British ground forces were enlarged by Parachute Regiment, Royal Marine and Special Forces elements, as well as by other regular Army units. The first incursion at the beginning of May was partly planned as an airborne operation,



**Paras coming down from hill top position, Radfan**

but insurgents intercepted the SAS team which had been tasked with marking the drop zone. The airlift was therefore cancelled, leaving 45 Commando and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Parachute Regiment (3 PARA), to advance into the Radfan mountains largely on foot. The offensive developed into another classic exercise in air-land integration, as 3 PARA often found themselves beyond the range of their artillery. Ground attack aircraft – Hawker Hunters – were frequently called in to strike rebel forces only just ahead of forward British units. In one instance a British soldier was injured by a spent cartridge case ejected from a Hunter overhead.<sup>31</sup>

Once British forces had reached their initial objectives, the nearby airstrip at Thumier was enlarged so that additional ground forces could be brought into Radfan, and two tactical landing grounds were established known as Monk's Field and Blair's Field. While the build-up was in progress frequent air strikes maintained pressure on the insurgent tribes. The subsequent advance towards the Bakri Ridge was supported by artillery which had been airlifted by helicopter into mountain-top positions overlooking the rebel stronghold. But the operation also witnessed further exceptional integration between 3 PARA and the

Hunter squadrons. After the ridge had been taken the final objective became the 5,500ft Jebel Huriyah, which could not be approached without the preliminary capture of two wadis. When elements of 3 PARA found themselves cut off and under fire in the Wadi Dhubsan, the supporting Hunters actually flew up the wadi at ground level to attack rebel positions. The final assault was executed early in June and by the 11<sup>th</sup> Jebel Huriyah had been secured. This did not bring an end to resistance in the Radfan, and air control operations were maintained for several months afterwards; but it did begin a process whereby dissident tribes began to sue for peace. The final pocket of resistance came under heavy air attack in November, and the last of the rebel tribes then capitulated.<sup>32</sup>



**Transferring a patient to the medical centre, Radfan**

At considerable expense the Radfan operations dealt with one source of opposition in Aden. But the overall impact of Radfan on the insurgency was negligible, and if there were any beneficial effects at all they were quickly undermined by strategic developments. In 1964 the new British Labour government announced that the South Arabian Federation would be granted independence 'not later than 1968', although Britain might

retain a base in Aden. If this was intended as a concession to help pacify insurgent groups it was spectacularly misconceived. The announcement created a deadline for the attainment of Arab nationalist aims and gave considerable impetus to the growing wave of terrorism. It was followed by a further statement in February 1966, which declared that the Aden base itself was no longer essential. This implied a total British withdrawal, and the removal of British military backing for the Federation and for Aden's traditional rulers.<sup>33</sup>

In later attempts to keep order the RAF's role was confined largely to maintaining the operation and security of Aden's main civil and military air bases. There were further air operations in Western Aden in the Yemeni border region, but the RAF could play little direct part in combating the urban insurgency. With little intelligence and with the relatively inaccurate weapons of the period, it was virtually impossible to strike insurgents in built-up areas from the air; aerial reconnaissance was of limited effectiveness, and there was no scope for employing traditional air control techniques.<sup>34</sup> There were leaflet drops, and helicopters were often used to lift troops to particular trouble spots at short notice, or to position them for cordon searches; fitted with machine guns they also had some deterrent value.<sup>35</sup>

But increasingly the RAF's task in Aden became one of managing withdrawal. The challenge was vastly complicated both by terrorism directed towards the security forces, and by the increasingly bitter struggle between rival political elements in the Federation. Any residual political

support for the British presence collapsed; the indigenous police and armed forces became unreliable, and prone to periodic mutiny. Force protection gained a heightened importance against this background, as terrorists frequently sought to target airfields and other RAF installations; this was a particularly busy period for the RAF Regiment, although airfield guard duties were also performed by many other RAF personnel. The final British departure from Aden came in November 1967, some months earlier than originally planned. The nightmare scenario of a fighting withdrawal was at least narrowly avoided, but the new People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (established in place of Aden) remained a threat to British interests in the region as the primary sponsor of the Omani insurgents across the border in Dhofar.<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusions and Lessons**

It is a truism that the effectiveness of COIN operations must depend to a considerable extent on the scale of the insurgency. The British experience in Oman demonstrated that military action can be successful against insurgent forces which are not numerous, and which are confined to relatively limited geographical areas susceptible to isolation and systematic targeting. By contrast it is practically impossible to quell a large-scale and widespread insurgency using military force alone. Indeed, military action will often be counterproductive, encouraging rather than suppressing opposition. This was one basic lesson of Aden. Hence there must always be a parallel political process designed to deter insurgent activity and to direct opposition along peaceful and law-abiding channels. In Aden this process was initiated far too late, and it was

too transparently designed to serve British interests at the expense of the indigenous population of Aden Colony. The British experience in Aden also illustrates how the political process can be one of the key centres of gravity of any nation engaged in COIN operations and may well be directly targeted by insurgents or by nearby countries which support them. Recently we have witnessed similar targeting in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The successful prosecution of COIN operations also requires considerable political willpower. COIN warfare is invariably an expensive, protracted, difficult and messy business. As well as resulting in casualties among friendly forces, it is also usually characterised by the loss of civilian lives and property. Both domestic and international opinion may prove hostile. All of these factors can serve to undermine the political will that must ultimately sustain COIN operations, leaving governments desperately searching for exit strategies. And yet nothing gives more encouragement to insurgent forces than the knowledge that their enemies are seeking an opportunity to withdraw. By the 1960s British decolonisation was gathering pace and there was simply not the will in London to sustain a large-scale and protracted war in the Middle East. This fact was abundantly clear both to Yemen and to nationalist groups in Aden, and was effectively confirmed by the British government itself between 1964 and 1966.

Again, there are obvious modern-day parallels with the situation in Iraq: at the time of writing, British troop numbers are being slowly reduced, and it seems likely that an American withdrawal will be initiated at the

end of the Bush presidency. As far as the insurgents are concerned, time is on their side. The obvious distinction to make is that the British politicians and military chiefs who wrestled with the problems of decolonisation in the 1950s and 60s bore no responsibility for Britain's historic overseas presence. By contrast Britain is today paying the price for massively underestimating the difficulties involved in establishing new regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Critical decisions were taken as recently as 2001 and 2002 without any proper consideration being given to their implications in terms of long-term military occupation, stabilisation, peace enforcement and reconstruction. These onerous liabilities are inherent in the 'regime change' concept that has gained currency over the last ten years. If nations do not wish to accept them, they should be seeking alternatives to regime change, such as influence or containment strategies. One possible model in which air power played a prominent part is the containment strategy pursued towards Iraq between 1991 and 2003.

Failures in the political process and/or a perceived lack of long-term political commitment will almost certainly exert a direct impact at the operational level, complicating the already difficult task facing commanders responsible for COIN. Some of the other major operational issues that arose in Oman and Aden of long-term relevance to modern air forces can be summarised as follows.

First, the employment of military force in a counter-insurgency role must be geared to the achievement of measurable effects. As the *RAF War Manual* put it, 'The main thing is to be quite clear as to the effect required

to be achieved.<sup>37</sup> Second, central to the pursuit of effect is detailed and accurate intelligence about the enemy.<sup>38</sup> A number of the air and joint air-land operations described in this paper were mounted for effect, primarily through the medium of punitive action. Yet they sometimes failed to secure their main objectives, and in a number of instances they were demonstrably self-defeating, resulting at best in the short-term pacification of insurgents at a cost of longer-term political alienation. Failure often stemmed from the fact that the response of insurgent groups was miscalculated. Politicians and colonial administrators were too apt to make superficial or prejudiced assessments which ultimately proved to be unfounded.

Third, we should beware of simplistic arguments regarding the respective merits of air and land operations, for they each offer advantages and disadvantages. As a general rule, through the process of physical occupation, ground operations are likely to be more successful than independent air operations in suppressing insurgent activity in specified geographical areas. But to initiate and sustain ground operations requires the commitment of far more resources. And even when ground operations are successful in pacifying particular regions there remains the question of what to do next. Long-term occupation may prove impossibly expensive; withdrawal can hand a propaganda victory to the insurgents and encourage further rebellion. British forces in Afghanistan encountered precisely this problem as recently as 2006.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, air power's inherent flexibility, penetration, reach, and speed of response mean that an air presence over insurgent territory is very much

easier to establish and maintain than a presence on the ground. On a number of occasions in Oman and Aden these characteristics were exploited to target insurgent areas which would otherwise have escaped military action completely. It was not a question of air versus land; it was a question of air power or nothing.

Beyond this, even when resources were sufficient to mount ground operations against insurgencies, air power still had a fundamentally important part to play, particularly where the provision of fire support, troop movement and re-supply were concerned. Indeed, most of the Oman and Aden operations described in this paper would have been impossible without these capabilities. This fact was reflected in the growing sophistication of air-land integration exercised by the RAF and British Army units deployed in the Middle East. Forward air control techniques were steadily refined; air intelligence officers were deployed with forward ground troops and were even infiltrated into rebel tribes; joint operations were mounted in which the Special Forces worked with dedicated close air support; air transport was employed in every conceivable role, often using the most primitive tactical landing grounds.

The problems that arose would seem all too familiar to anyone with recent experience of operations in Afghanistan. Requests for air support were sometimes submitted at the last minute in an ad hoc and haphazard fashion, which made them difficult to answer; accurate and timely target intelligence was often lacking; small and fleeting ground targets were hard to spot; fixed-wing air transport resources were frequently stretched to

the limit, and there were never enough helicopters. Today the British armed forces are confronted by a similar shortage, reflecting the exceptional utility of rotary-wing platforms in COIN warfare.

Other air roles were no less important. Offensive air power was overwhelmingly employed either directly or indirectly in conjunction with ground operations; even the protracted air campaign in central Oman in 1958 was part of a joint operation. But there were occasions when independent air attacks were mounted against deeper insurgent targets – particularly along the border between Western Aden and Yemen. There were many strikes on mountain forts and strong-points, but the RAF also targeted the rebels' infrastructure and basic means of subsistence after appropriate warnings had been issued. Today collateral damage considerations and the law of armed conflict would rule out similar action. But improved technology – more sophisticated means of surveillance, rapid sensor-to-shooter links and the availability of precision-guided munitions – have ensured that there is still an independent role for air power to play, albeit against far more specific insurgent targets.

Otherwise interdiction operations helped to isolate rebel strongholds in both Oman and Western Aden; 'air presence' was regularly exploited, sometimes accompanied by firepower demonstrations, and leafletting was used for psychological effect. Reconnaissance was a near constant task, often providing the only intelligence (including mapping) available on insurgent areas; and as we have seen it could also be used to monitor cross-border movements

to and from adjacent countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Today, in much the same way, air and indeed satellite reconnaissance is employed to monitor the frontiers of Iraq and Afghanistan. The application of air power in urban COIN operations was admittedly far more problematic; but urban operations continue to pose a significant challenge to modern air forces, despite the capability advances that have taken place since the 1960s.

Current RAF doctrine is strangely silent on the subject of COIN warfare. Curiously the only air force in the world to maintain a robust and authoritative doctrinal position on COIN operations from the 1920s through to the 1960s now appears to have suffered a crisis of confidence. Particular issues with some relevance to the problem such as urban close air support, ISTAR and force protection certainly receive ample consideration, but no broader role for air power is otherwise defined.<sup>40</sup> It is to be hoped that this situation will soon be rectified and that in the process the RAF will draw at least to some extent on historical experience. This would not mean developing some updated version of air control. Rather, it means accepting that the RAF employed a very broad range of air power capabilities in colonial policing operations, and that their doctrine and practice in these operations always embraced both joint and independent air activity. History also has much to tell us about the relative importance of political and military processes in countering insurgencies, and their complex inter-relationship; and it demonstrates repeatedly that military action counts for little unless its effect contributes tangibly to a clearly defined strategic or operational end state.

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