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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Hughes, G. A. (2017). "Amateurs Who Play in League Division One"? Anglo-Iranian Military Relations During the Dhofar War in Oman'. *British Journal for Military History*, 4(1), 90.

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# ‘Amateurs Who Play in League Division One’? Anglo-Iranian Military Relations During the Dhofar War in Oman

GERAINT HUGHES

King’s College London

Email: [ghughes.jscsc@da.mod.uk](mailto:ghughes.jscsc@da.mod.uk)

## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the Iranian military intervention in the civil war in Dhofar, Oman, from 1972 to 1975, focusing in particular on the often strained relationship between the Imperial Iranian Task Force (IITF) and the officers of the British armed forces seconded to command the Sultan of Oman’s Armed Forces (SAF). This article concludes that while the IITF was hampered by its own internal shortcomings and also distrust of its British allies, it made an important contribution to the Sultanate’s victory in the Dhofar conflict. The Anglo-Iranian relationship in this war also highlights the potential challenges that Western militaries can face when advising and mentoring non-Western allies in future expeditionary conflicts.*

## Introduction

In the autumn of 1972 Shah Reza Pahlavi, the absolutist ruler of Iran, began an incremental intervention in the civil war raging at that time in Southern Oman. Acting at the request of his fellow monarch, the Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the Shah first committed special forces soldiers to the fight against the guerrillas of the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO),<sup>1</sup> and subsequently deployed a series of task forces of increasing size to Dhofar, the main battleground of the PFLO insurgency. This represented the Imperial Iranian armed forces’ (*Artesh*) first experience of battle since the suppression of the Soviet-backed separatist republics of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in December 1946.<sup>2</sup> In this campaign

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<sup>1</sup> The insurgent movement in Dhofar changed its name four times between 1963 and 1974, and for convenience’s sake the author has used its final version, the PFLO, throughout this article.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Azerbaijan and Kurdish crises in Iran, see Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.304-350, pp.383-399. See also Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History*

they fought alongside an Omani military (the Sultan's Armed Forces, or SAF) led by loan service officers provided by the United Kingdom, in addition to a special forces battalion committed by King Hussein of Jordan.<sup>3</sup>

The Imperial Iranian Task Force's (IITF) participation in the Dhofar conflict has received scant academic coverage: the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the challenges this has posed for subsequent independent scholarly research, being one factor behind its obscurity.<sup>4</sup> The Iranians joined a war that had been waged since April 1963, and which had almost ended with the capture of Dhofar by the PFLO in the summer of 1970.<sup>5</sup> The IITF's role in operations in Oman has been discussed in memoirs written by British officers who served with the SAF; notably Major-General Ken Perkins, who was its Commander-in-Chief from January 1975 to April 1977, and also Brigadier John Akehurst, who led the SAF's Dhofar Brigade in the final phases of the campaign against the PFLO.<sup>6</sup> The shortcomings displayed by the Iranian military are

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*of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), pp.181-186.

<sup>3</sup> Walter C. Ladwig III, 'Supporting allies in counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar rebellion', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2008), pp.62-88. UK National Archive, Kew (TNA), DEFE11/656, Colonel Pat Allardyce (Defence Attaché, HM Embassy Muscat) to Brigadier Nigel Bagnall (Secretary, Chiefs of Staff Committee), 2 September 1974,

<sup>4</sup> A valuable exception is James F. Goode's 'Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972-75', *Iranian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2014), pp.441-462. See also Ian Buttenshaw, *Iranian Support to Oman During the Dhofar War* (Muscat: Royal Army of Oman Publications, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> On the Dhofar war itself see Marc R. DeVore, 'The United Kingdom's last hot war of the Cold War: Oman, 1963-75', *Cold War History*, vol. 11, no. 3. (2011), pp.441-471; DeVore, 'A more complex and conventional victory: revisiting the Dhofar counterinsurgency, 1963-1975', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 23, no. 1. (2012), pp.144-173; Geraint Hughes, 'A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised: The Counter-Insurgency War in Dhofar, Oman, 1965-1975', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2. (2009), pp.271-305; Hughes, 'Demythologising Dhofar: British Policy, Military Strategy and Counterinsurgency in Oman, 1963-1976', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 79, no. 2 (2015), pp.523-556; J. E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy* (London: Saqi Books, 2007); Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP), 2013). James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> John Akehurst, *We Won A War: The Campaign in Oman, 1965-1975* (Salisbury: Michael Russell, 1982). Ken Perkins, *A Fortunate Soldier* (London: Brassey's Defence

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apparent not only in these memoirs but also from declassified archival evidence. The title of this article is taken from a report written by a British Army liaison officer, Major John Bradell-Smith, who observed the aftermath of a damaging PFLO attack on the Iranians on 5 December 1974. Bradell-Smith concluded his assessment with a now archaic football analogy – ‘Amateurs who play in League Division One – away from home – tend to lose’ – which reflected the general impression of Iranian incompetence that British soldiers and airmen in Dhofar initially derived from serving alongside the *Artesh*.<sup>7</sup>

Military professionals, as well as academics studying military history and strategy, acknowledge that co-operation between coalition partners in war can be undermined by friction and discord. These can derive from perceived or actual differences in grand strategy and war aims, contrasting military doctrines, mutual mistrust, not to mention any incidents (failure to provide assistance in battle, or a ‘blue-on-blue’ clash in which allied forces accidentally open fire on each other) which lead coalition armed forces to question the competence or trustworthiness of their partners.<sup>8</sup> These problems can be mitigated over time, particularly within long-term military alliances. For nearly seventy years, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has provided not only collective security for its members, but also a means of establishing strategic guidance, an integrated command structure (led by a US Supreme Allied Commander, Europe), common doctrine, joint training and exercises, liaison, educational exchanges between staff colleges, and also joint and combined operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> NATO states have also established their own military partnerships, such as that between the UK Royal Marines and the Royal Netherlands Marines in amphibious warfare training from the

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Publishers, 1988), pp.119-158; & Perkins, ‘Oman 1975: The Year of Decision’, *RUSI Journal*, vol. 124, no. 1. (1979), pp.38-45.

<sup>7</sup> TNA, DEF/E11/658, Major-General Timothy Creasey (CSAF) to Omani Deputy Minister of Defence, 14 December 1974. Bradell-Smith was killed in action on Christmas Day 1974, being one of the 38 British servicemen who died on active service in this conflict.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Peter R. Mansoor & Williamson Murray, ‘Introduction: Grand Strategy and Alliances’, in Peter R. Mansoor & Williamson Murray (ed.), *Grand Strategy and Military Alliances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.1-16.

<sup>9</sup> Peter R Mansoor, ‘Alliances and coalitions in the twenty-first century’, in Mansoor & Murray, *Grand Strategy and Military Alliances*, p.379. Tim Ripley, *Operation Telic: The British Campaign in Iraq, 2003-2009* (Lancaster: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2016), p.165, p.195, pp.227-230.

early 1970s, and also the close co-operation between British and Danish Army units on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan more recently.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the context of the current operating environment, and a general political and popular hostility towards expeditionary interventions within Western democracies, the likelihood is that the USA, UK and allied powers will be establishing coalitions with regional partners – such as Iraq with reference to the war against so-called ‘Islamic State’ since the spring of 2014 – where the Western military presence consists of a limited number of advisors or special forces personnel, and where the mechanisms and culture of co-operation fostered by NATO or a similar alliance will be absent.<sup>11</sup> Britain’s ‘Building Stability Overseas Strategy’ and the Ministry of Defence’s (MOD) ethos of capacity-building and ‘upstream intervention’ indicate that the UK may fight future wars advising allies with whom they have had no previous defence relationship, in conditions similar to those experienced by the handful of British loan service personnel that worked with the Iranians in Dhofar over forty years ago. These states might have anocratic governments or could, like Imperial Iran, be authoritarian in nature.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars analysing the military effectiveness of authoritarian states, such as that of pre-1979 Iran, have observed that they do not adhere to the Western idea of a depoliticised military that protects state and citizenry from external and internal security threats, rather than protecting a specific regime from overthrow.<sup>13</sup> While it is possible to preserve armed forces which are politically loyal but also capable of winning inter-state wars (the USSR in the latter years of World War II and North Vietnam being historical examples), authoritarian and totalitarian states can also hamper military effectiveness by ‘coup-proofing’ their armed forces. This involves making promotion dependent on political loyalty rather than professionalism, dividing the command structure to make it impossible for senior officers to usurp power,

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<sup>10</sup> Brigadier Julian Thompson, *The Royal Marines: From Sea Soldiers to a Special Force* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp.529-530. Ripley, *Telic*, pp.177-178, p.181, p.244.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Marshall, ‘From civil war to proxy war: past history and current dilemmas’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 27, no. 2. (2016), pp.189-190.

<sup>12</sup> *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (London: Department for International Development/Foreign and Commonwealth Office/Ministry of Defence, 1 July 2011). Cm.9161, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (London: The Stationery Office, November 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 2015). Phil Haun & Colin Jackson, ‘Breaker of Armies: Air Power in the Easter Offensive and the Myth of Linebacker I and II in the Vietnam War’, *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2015-2016), pp.139-178.

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developing ‘parallel militaries’ that are better trained and equipped than their regular counterparts, restricting manoeuvres that could provide potential cover for a military putsch, and finally subjecting the armed forces to pervasive and hostile surveillance by secret police/internal security services.<sup>14</sup> Many of these characteristics were evident within Iran’s military during Shah Reza Pahlavi’s reign (1941-1979), and were overseen by an internal security service (the SAVAK) that was the principal source of support for the Shah’s dictatorship.<sup>15</sup>

With current conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Ukraine, neat conceptual divisions between ‘conventional’ warfare between state adversaries and counter-insurgency are arguably inapplicable,<sup>16</sup> and while Dhofar is commonly seen as an example of the latter, the final year of the war (1974-1975) saw ferocious fighting between the SAF/IITF and a well-trained PFLO armed with mortars, heavy machine-guns, *Katyusha* rockets, and SA-7 man-portable anti-aircraft missiles. Furthermore, there was a clear risk that the PFLO’s main sponsor, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, also known as South Yemen), might openly commit its armed forces to a cross-border war in order to save its client from defeat.<sup>17</sup> Many of the challenges that affected the British officers working alongside their Iranian allies in Oman during the mid-1970s are reflected in current conflicts involving regional partners of the Western powers. These principally involve the challenge of training, equipping and mentoring militaries to fight and defeat foes like Islamic State or Nigeria’s Boko Haram in battle, while also avoiding counter-productive tactics such as inflicting excessive civilian deaths through indiscriminate violence, or the persecuting of communities deemed to be sympathetic towards the enemy (as the Iraqi security forces have done recently with the country’s Sunni Arabs).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Risa Brooks, *Politico-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (OUP/International Institute of Strategic Studies: Adelphi Paper No.324, 1998). Daniel Byman, ‘Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism’, *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2. (2005-2006), pp.79-115. James T. Quinlivan, ‘Coup-proofing: its Practice and Consequences’, *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 2. (1999), pp.131-165.

<sup>15</sup> Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp.50-51, pp.53-54. Ward, *Immortal*, pp.205-206.

<sup>16</sup> Geraint Hughes, ‘Uncertain COINage’, *Defence in Depth*, 7 March 2016; online at <https://defenceindepth.co/2016/03/07/uncertain-coinage/>, accessed 10 July 2017. Jonathan Spyer, ‘Blurred boundaries: Changing battlefields drive insurgent innovation’, *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 28/12 (2016), pp.20-25.

<sup>17</sup> See Hughes, ‘Model Campaign’ and ‘Demythologising Dhofar’. Also DeVore, ‘Last hot war of the Cold War’, and ‘Dhofar counterinsurgency’.

<sup>18</sup> This point is made, for example, in the International Crisis Group’s Middle East Report No.150, *Iraq: Falluja’s Faustian Bargain* (Brussels: ICG, 28 April 1984).

This article does not provide an authoritative history of *Artesh* operations in Dhofar, but instead examines the challenges that emerged when British loan servicemen with the SAF worked with the Iranians to defeat the PFLO, highlighting the problems discussed in the previous paragraph and how they were addressed. Aside from setting the overarching objectives of preserving the Sultanate at minimum cost, throughout the Dhofar conflict there was very little strategic guidance from London for the British war effort. This article therefore focuses on the Commander-in-Chief, SAF (CSAF) and his subordinates, as it was their interaction with the Iranians which was important in shaping the final phases of the campaign. After setting the context for the Iranian engagement in Dhofar, it will discuss the characteristics of Iran's armed forces (which were experiencing rapid expansion in accordance with the Shah's regional ambitions) and the specific difficulties that emerged from the Iranian involvement in the Dhofar war between August 1972 and December 1975. These involved limitations on the *Artesh's* training and experience, differing cultures of command, political problems related to the nature of Iran's royal regime, and the competing interests of the British military advisors and the IITF.

### **The Strategic Context**

Dhofar borders Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and its inhabitants are ethnically distinct from Oman's predominantly Arab population. The province consists mainly of a mountainous plateau (the *jebel*) up to 1,000m in height, and at the time of the war it had a population of 30,000-50,000 nomads living by subsistence-level farming, and no all-weather roads. The *jebel* terrain presents tough going for infantry soldiers and during the 1960s-1970s the only efficient means of moving troops across the area of operations was by helicopter, although the SAF did not acquire rotary wing aircraft until 1971. From June and September every year Dhofar is affected by a seasonal monsoon (the *khareef*) which covers the *jebel* in lush vegetation, but which also blankets the mountains with a thick mist which reduces visibility to a few metres. Temperatures during the *khareef* are fairly mild, in the high twenties Celsius, but can rise to fifty degrees Celsius at other times of the year. Any assessment of the Iranian combat performance in Dhofar – not to mention that of the British officers and Arab and Baluchi rank-and-file of the SAF – should acknowledge the harsh climactic and topographical conditions these soldiers had to endure.<sup>19</sup>

The Dhofari revolt was initially a nationalist rising, caused by both a lack of economic development and the despotism of the Omani Sultan, Said bin Taimur. However, following the British withdrawal from South Arabia and the emergence of the PDRY

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<sup>19</sup> Francis Owtram, *A Modern History of Oman* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp.108–109. Ladwig, 'Supporting allies', pp.64–65. The author's comments here are also drawn from his two visits to Dhofar in July and October 2014.

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the insurgency morphed into a Marxist-Leninist movement intent on overthrowing firstly the Omani Sultanate, and ultimately all of the pro-Western absolutist monarchies in the Arabian Gulf. The PFLO received Soviet bloc support, and by the summer of 1970 it had conquered nearly all of Dhofar save for the coastal plain around the capital, Salalah. With discreet British backing, the Sultan was overthrown by his son Qaboos on 23 June 1970, and with incremental assistance from the UK the SAF was able to expand and gradually wrest control of the *jebel* from the PFLO. Popular accounts and memoirs make much of the contribution of soldiers from the British Army’s 22 Special Air Service Regiment (22SAS) committed during the latter half of the conflict to train the *firqat* forces, a Dhofari militia raised to fight for the Sultanate. However, the SAF remained the most important element in the war against the PFLO, and one of the key developments was the construction of a defensive line (*Hornbeam*) between 4 December 1973 and 29 June 1974, which enabled Qaboos’ armed forces to confine the insurgents to the Western sector of Dhofar, while the bulk of the civilian population was concentrated East of *Hornbeam*. It was at this point in the war that the Iranians started to participate in this campaign.<sup>20</sup>

From the UK’s perspective, Oman was a crucial regional ally. Britain had signed a defence treaty with the Sultanate in July 1958 which made it responsible for training and commanding the SAF, in return for which it gained access to air bases at Salalah and on Masirah Island. Officials in Whitehall feared that the fall of Dhofar, and then the remainder of Oman, to pro-Soviet insurgents would lead to the collapse of the Saudi, Emirati, Qatari and Bahraini monarchies, thereby imperilling the West’s access to regional oil supplies.<sup>21</sup> However, both the Labour (1964-1970, 1974-1979) and Conservative (1970-1974) governments of this era recognised that regional hostility to British imperialism precluded an overt military commitment to save the Sultanate, and Foreign and Commonwealth Officials (FCO) were concerned that Oman could

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<sup>20</sup> DeVore and Hughes, *passim*, provide more detail on the course of the war. For other useful memoirs from British participants (aside from those of Akehurst and Perkins already cited), see Ranulph Fiennes, *Where Soldiers Fear to Tread* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975); Brigadier Ian Gardiner, *In the Service of the Sultan: A First-Hand Account of the Dhofar Insurgency* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2006); Brigadier John Graham, *Ponder Anew: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (Staplehurst: Spellmount Press, 1999) pp.313-375; Major-General Tony Jeapes, *SAS Secret War: Operation Storm in the Middle East* (London: Greenhill Books, 2005); and Major-General Corran Purdon, *List the Bugle: Reminiscences of an Irish Soldier* (Antrim: Greystone Books, 1993), pp.187-306.

<sup>21</sup> TNA, CAB148/122, DOP(72)25(Revised), *Defence Assistance to the Sultanate of Oman*, 22 May 1972. TNA, DEFE24/574, COS13/74, *The Principles Governing British Military Assistance to Oman*, 29 May 1974.



become the UK's 'Vietnam'.<sup>22</sup> Britain's economic travails led to the end of the 'East of Suez' defence policy, which meant that between January 1968 and December 1971 the UK withdrew its Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force (RAF) units from its bases in Bahrain and Sharjah (the latter being in what is now the United Arab Emirates (UAE)).<sup>23</sup> Commitments to NATO and the worsening security situation in Northern Ireland from August 1969 meant that Britain could not send an expeditionary force to Oman even if regional opinion had proved favourable.<sup>24</sup> Support from regional allies proved to be crucial in augmenting the limited assistance that the UK could send to Oman, and Iranian intervention in particular provided the mass and combat power that the British simply could not afford to supply.

It is also important to note that for both Harold Wilson and Edward Heath's governments the war in Dhofar was a secret one, and the extent of British assistance to the Sultanate, limited as it was, was concealed from Parliamentary scrutiny.<sup>25</sup> Responsibility for the conduct of operations against the PFLO was also devolved by Whitehall to the CSAF, who was in the unique position of being both a senior serving British Army officer as well as being in overall command of another sovereign state's armed forces. Although the CSAF was instructed by the UK Chiefs of Staff (COS) not to commit British loan service personnel to any operations which could potentially damage Britain's national interests, he had considerable freedom to direct military strategy in Oman as he saw fit. As a consequence, the CSAF had responsibility for strategic decisions which in other conflicts would have been made by the UK Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers and the COS. For both Perkins and his predecessor, Major-General Timothy Creasey, this involved liaising with the Iranian

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<sup>22</sup>TNA, FCO8/2006, Memorandum by A. D. Parsons (Supervising Undersecretary, Middle Eastern Department), 12 February 1973. TNA, PREM15/2155, Conversation between Prime Minister Edward Heath and Sultan Qaboos bin Said at 10 Downing Street, 11 December 1973.

<sup>23</sup> Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). Simon C. Smith, *Ending Empire in the Middle East: Britain, the United States and Post-War Decolonization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp.92-127.

<sup>24</sup> TNA, DEFE11/737, DOP Note 714/74, *Report on the Provision of British Military Assistance to Oman*, 12 July 1974.

<sup>25</sup> Both governments denied that British military personnel were involved in combat operations. See, for example, Hansard, House of Commons Debates Fifth Series Volume 868 (H. C. Debs5s), Written Answers, 28 January 1974, 25-26; and H. C. Deb5s 872, Written Answers, 30 April 1974, 419-420, where both the Conservative and Labour Defence Secretaries (Peter Carrington and Roy Mason) issued almost identical statements in response to parliamentary queries about loan service personnel with the SAF.

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government over the IITF’s engagement in combat operations, which extended to influencing how and where the *Artesh*’s contingent was to be deployed.<sup>26</sup>

### **Iranian defence policy and the region in the 1970s**

At the time of the war Iran was governed by an absolutist monarchy under Reza Pahlavi, who ultimately owed his throne both to the August 1953 coup instigated jointly by the American CIA and the British SIS, and to the SAVAK, which ruthlessly suppressed all internal opposition against the royal regime. The USA became the main source of weaponry for the Iranian armed forces, although Britain was both an exporter of arms and also an alliance partner within the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). The Shah’s aim was to develop Iran as an industrial and a military power on a par with that of a Western nation, declaring that his realm would possess all arms ‘short of atomic weapons’.<sup>27</sup> Until the late 1960s Iran’s national strategy had focussed on territorial defence against the USSR; although it had to defend 2,000km of border with its Northern neighbour the country’s mountainous terrain was also a barrier against any invasion by Soviet armoured and mechanised forces.<sup>28</sup> Iran was also a founder member of CENTO (along with Pakistan, Turkey and the UK), but had lost faith in this pact after its ally Pakistan was defeated by India in 1965. In any case, CENTO had been very much a ‘paper alliance’ and the member states’ armed forces had very little actual experience of joint co-operation or peacetime exercises during this pact’s brief lifetime.<sup>29</sup>

By the early 1970s, the Shah was less concerned about the Soviet threat to Iran, and instead viewed a comparatively weak Iraq as his realm’s principal external adversary.<sup>30</sup> He also adopted a counter-revolutionary policy of backing allies against internal insurgencies, which explains not only his intervention in Oman but also the

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<sup>26</sup> TNA, DEF/1/657, Bagnall, *Directive to the Commander of the Sultan’s Armed Forces*, 24 October 1974.

<sup>27</sup> Shahram Chubin, ‘Implications of the Military Buildup in Less Industrial States: The Case of Iran’, in Uri Ra’anan, Robert L. Pflazgraff & Geoffrey Kemp (ed.), *Arms Transfers in the Third World: The Military Buildup in Less Industrial Countries* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1978), pp.259-261.

<sup>28</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, p.191, p.193. Iran’s defensive posture towards the USSR, and the advantages posed by its terrain, is also explained in TNA, FCO46/2560, Air Commodore D. G. Brook (RAF), *Record of Discussions between the CDS and CJCS in the Pentagon on 11 March 1981*.

<sup>29</sup> Alvin J. Cottrell, ‘The Foreign Policy of the Shah’, *Strategic Review* 3/4 (1975), pp.32-44. Panagiotis Dimitrakis, ‘British Diplomacy and the Decline of CENTO’, *Comparative Strategy* 28/1 (2009), pp.317-331.

<sup>30</sup> Cottrell, ‘Foreign Policy of the Shah’, p.36. J. E. Killick (HM Ambassador, Moscow) to Parsons, 1 August 1973, TNA, FCO93/229.

military assistance given to Pakistan in its fight against a rebellion in Baluchistan. The Shah was also convinced that Iran should fill the power vacuum left by the British military withdrawal from the Gulf, and was encouraged by the 'twin pillars' policy of Richard Nixon's administration, which treated the Iranians and the Saudis as the USA's regional surrogates. During Nixon's Presidency, Iran received lavish defence assistance from the Americans, providing much of the foreign aid which the Shah used to expand his forces.<sup>31</sup>

On paper, Iran's military build-up during the 1970s was impressive. The army expanded by 173%, the navy by 466% and the air force (the Shah's 'pet service') by 1000%. The Army was 170,000 strong in 1974 and stood at 285,000 by 1979, consisting of the Imperial Guard Division, three armoured and three infantry divisions, and four independent brigades. Its Aviation Command had more than 600 helicopters and 400 transport planes. Purchased in order to give the *Artesh* the ability to move troops across Iran, these aircraft proved their worth in the Dhofar war. Possessing 459 combat aircraft at the decade's end, the air force (IIAF) was larger than either the French *Armée de l'Air* or the West German *Luftwaffe* at that time. The objective of Iran's naval programme was power projection into the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and it included the purchase of three destroyers and four missile frigates (the latter from the UK).<sup>32</sup>

This rapid growth created severe structural problems for the Shah's military. Equipment purchases were not matched by the training of personnel required to manage and maintain them, and there was a shortage of mid-ranking staff officers, senior NCOs, military mechanics and aircraft ground crews. This failure in capacity-building was epitomised by the fact that although Aviation Command had up to 220 helicopter gun-ships by the decade's end its crews lacked gunnery practice, as Iran had no live-fire training ranges for them to exercise on. As noted below, Iranian helicopter crews also had no experience in night-flying, which contributed to at least two incidents when the IITF was unable to evacuate battle casualties during operations in Oman.<sup>33</sup> The culture of command within the officer corps was highly

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<sup>31</sup> Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army, and the Wars Within* (Oxford OUP, 2008), pp.334-335. Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992* (NY: The Free Press, 1992), pp.86-93.

<sup>32</sup> Gholani Chegnizadeh, *Iranian Military Modernisation, 1921-1979* (DPhil, University of Bradford 1997), pp.310-313, pp.360-364. Chubin, 'Iran', pp.262-263. Ward, *Immortal*, pp.195-200. Alvin J. Cottrell, 'The Political Balance in the Persian Gulf', *Strategic Review* 2/1 (1974), pp.32-38.

<sup>33</sup> Chubin, 'Iran', p.269. Williamson Murray & Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.77. Author's interview with Major Mike Lobb, 25 November 2014.

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authoritarian, discouraging tactical initiative in combat. Perkins, observing the IITF on operations in Dhofar, described the Iranian troops as being ‘tough and brave but [tactically] quite inflexible’.<sup>34</sup> The *Artesh*’s system of command was both over-centralised and highly dysfunctional. Inter-service co-operation was lamentable, and Iran’s military chiefs reported directly to the Shah, lacking an institutionalised repository of military co-ordination and advice analogous to either the US Joint Chiefs of Staff or the British COS. The *Artesh*’s officer corps were characterised by political reliability rather than professionalism, and following the royal coup of 1953 the military had suffered an indiscriminate purge conducted by the SAVAK against suspected Communist sympathisers. Appointments above the rank of Major were managed by the Imperial court, and loyalty to the Shah became the key qualification for promotion. General Golam Reza Azhari, the Chief of Staff of the Army at the time of the Dhofar war, epitomised the character of Iran’s high command, as his main trait was deference to his imperial master.<sup>35</sup>

Popular Anglophobia in Iran, which extended to the imperial court itself, also made the Iranians awkward alliance partners. Britain’s record of meddling in the country’s internal affairs (which included its division into spheres of influence with Russia in 1907, Iran’s near-incorporation as a British imperial dependency after World War I, and the Anglo-Soviet invasion and occupation during World War II) fuelled popular and elite perceptions that the British were never to be trusted.<sup>36</sup> For its part, the UK was concerned about Iranian territorial ambitions in the Gulf region, reflected by Tehran’s territorial claim on Bahrain, and also its annexation of the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs (both claimed by the nascent UAE) in November 1971. Indeed, up until the ‘East of Suez’ withdrawals British forces in the Gulf had contingency plans to deter any Iranian effort to seize these islands. While Iran’s military assistance in Oman was militarily beneficial, it was also politically

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<sup>34</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, pp.206-208. Major General Ken Perkins, ‘The Death of an Army: A Short Analysis of the Imperial Iranian Armed Forces’, *RUSI Journal*, vol. 125, no. 2, (1980), pp.21-23. Perkins, *Fortunate Soldier*, p.129. Email to author from Captain Gordon Allen, 17 June 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Chikara Hashimoto, ‘The Training of Secret Police in Conflictual Intelligence Cultures: British Failure in the Middle East during the Cold War’, *International History Review*, vol. 39, no. 3. (2017), p.459. Barany, *How Armies Respond*, p.53, p.59. Chegnizadeh, *Iranian Military Modernisation*, pp.274-281. Ward, *Immortal*, pp.209-210, p.215.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (London: Penguin, 2014), pp.24-27. Anthony Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), pp.x-xi, p.38, pp.72-73, pp.140-141. ‘My Uncle Albion’, *The Economist*, 11 July 2009. Hashimoto, ‘Training Secret Police’, pp.461-462.

embarrassing for the UK because of widespread Arab resentment of the Shah's regional ambitions.<sup>37</sup>

### **Iran and the Dhofar war, 1972-1975**

The Iranians were no strangers to campaigning in Oman. The Sultanate was part of the Achaemenid Empire until the Arab conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and both Nader Shah and the Qajar dynasty waged disastrous wars in Oman in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> and the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>38</sup> In August 1972 Reza Pahlavi began shipping arms to Qaboos at the latter's request, and the fact that the Sultan did not inform his British advisors of this decision demonstrated that he was far less subservient to the UK than has previously been supposed. Two months later, the Sultan accepted the Shah's offer to commit 150 special forces soldiers to Oman. In February 1973 Iran sent a squadron of six helicopters to augment the Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF), which was overstretched by the scale of its commitments, and these aircraft were used to support the SAF garrison at Sarfait, an isolated outpost on the South Yemeni border subjected to frequent bombardment by the PFLO, and occasional cross-border shelling by PDRY regular forces. At the end of the year, Iran deployed a battle-group of paratroopers to open up the Midway Road which linked Dhofar to the rest of the Sultanate. Having fulfilled this task by 29 December 1973, the Iranian commitment provided the basis for expansion to perform wider operations.<sup>39</sup>

The next phase was shaped by the SAF's construction of the *Hornbeam* line (December 1973) to June 1974, which was intended by CSAF's staff to block insurgent infiltration into Eastern Dhofar. In conjunction with the SAF's Dhofar Brigade, the *Artesh* contingent pushed into the more sparsely populated West, constructing their own defensive positions (named *Davamand*, after Iran's tallest mountain) at the end of December. On 22 October the Iranians established a base at a location near Aydim (codenamed Manston by the British), with an air-strip which could accommodate F-5 fighters and also C-130 transport planes. The following

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<sup>37</sup> Goode, 'Assisting Our Brothers', p.451, pp.458-460. Richard Mobley, 'Deterring Iran, 1968-71: The Royal Navy, Iran, and the Disputed Persian Gulf Islands', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 71, no. 4. (2003), pp.107-118. Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, pp.296-299.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia: Nader Shah, from Tribal Warrior to Conquering Tyrant* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp.229-230, pp.263-264. Robert Alston & Stuart Laing, *Unshook Till the End of Time: A History of Relations between Britain & Oman 1650-1970* (London: Gilgamesh Press, 2012), p.73.

<sup>39</sup> Buttenshaw, *Iranian Support to Oman*, pp.1-3. Goode, 'Assisting Our Brothers', p.446, pp.450-451. TNA, DEFE5/197, COS46/73, *Future United Kingdom Defence Activity in Oman*, 31 December 1973.

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month the first battalion of the IITF arrived at Manston.<sup>40</sup> In May 1974, there were 1,200 Iranian troops in Oman, and by the war's end there were 3,000.<sup>41</sup> During the course of the year Iran also provided air defence cover for much of Dhofar, including Salalah and Sarfait. This addressed a significant concern for British officials both in Oman and Whitehall, as the PDRY possessed MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighters supplied by the USSR, whereas the SAF and SOAF had no fighter aircraft or anti-air weapons of their own.<sup>42</sup>

The Imperial Iranian Navy sent a task group to the Arabian Sea to cut off shipments of arms, supplies and fighters from South Yemen, confining most of the PFLO's supplies and reinforcements to the land route across the PDRY's border. The most significant commitment for the Iranian armed forces involved a series of offensives in Western Dhofar from December 1974 to December 1975. The IITF fared poorly in its initial battles with the insurgents, but it captured the coastal town Rakhyut in January 1975, and at the end of the year it participated in a successful offensive with the SAF (Operation *Hadaf*) which led to the loss of the PFLO's key base at the Sherishitti Caves, the closure of its supply line to South Yemen, and the capture of the rebellion's last outpost, the coastal village of Dhalqut.<sup>43</sup>

*Hadaf* was a major offensive involving two brigades (SAF and IITF) supported by air cover, and with naval gunfire provided by three Iranian navy frigates; Perkins recorded over 1,000 rounds of 4.5 inch shells being fired by the latter during the course of the operation. While the PFLO continued low-level guerrilla operations throughout the late 1970s, the insurgency was a spent force after Christmas 1975. Iran also retained a token military presence in Dhofar up until the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's seizure of power in February 1979, providing both a

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<sup>40</sup> TNA, DEF11/658, Muscat to MOD, No.183, 16 November 1974; DOP Note 733/34, *The Progress of Operations in Oman*, 30 December 1974; & Creasey, *Final Report of the Situation by CSAF*, 28 December 1974.

<sup>41</sup> TNA, AIR20/12737, HQ SAF, D-Ops 5, Annex A, 12 April 1974. TNA, PREM16/2167, A. A. Acland (FCO) to T. Bridges (10 Downing St), 7 June 1974. TNA, DEF68/308, DPI5/76(C), *British Military Assistance to Oman*, 2 June 1976. Akehurst, *We Won A War*, p.71.

<sup>42</sup> TNA, DEF5/197, JIC(A)(72)7, *The Subversive Threat from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)*, 25 February 1972. COS46/43. TNA, AIR20/12738, Minute by Air-Vice Marshal W. E. Colahan, *An Air Defence System for Midway and Salalah*, 10 July 1974.

<sup>43</sup> Hughes, 'Model Campaign', pp.284-286. Perkins, *Fortunate Soldier*, p.148. TNA, DEF11/902, Commander H. N. Balfour (Royal Navy), *Oman Summary – 15 to 23 Oct*, 24 October 1974; *Oman Summary – 24-30 Oct*, 31 October 1974. Balfour, *Oman Summary – 20 Nov to 2 Dec*, 3 December 1975, TNA, DEF11/912.

deterrent to South Yemeni escalation, and also a means of reinforcing the Sultanate in the event of a recurrence of rebellion in Dhofar.<sup>44</sup>

### **The IITF at war, 1973-1975**

From the outset, British servicemen who observed the Iranians at war were critical of their performance. Soldiers from 22SAS considered the standards of their *Artesh* counterparts to be 'pathetically low'. The SAS described the Iranian special forces sent to Dhofar in October 1972 as being deficient in fitness and basic skills such as map-reading, with officers who were 'weak, dull mentally and physically soft'.<sup>45</sup> In January 1974 one visiting British Army staff officer described the IITF as being 'lavishly equipped', but of following 'the American system of drowning everything in a hail of fire' whenever they were engaged in operations.<sup>46</sup> The CSAF, Creasey, acknowledged that the Iranians played a vital role in opening up the Midway Road, but in a report to Sultan Qaboos in August 1974 he stated that their 'habit of indiscriminately firing at anything that moves has alienated the *firqat* [forces] and the uncommitted civilian population'. Trigger-happy Iranian soldiers had repeatedly shot at civilians assuming that they were insurgents, killing livestock and wounding their owners in the process, and had also opened fire on the *firqat* forces and their SAS mentors.<sup>47</sup>

The IITF's poor relationship with Dhofaris was such that CSAF opposed General Azhari's proposal to deploy his contingent East of the *Hornbeam* line. Creasey wanted the local population to be guarded by the SAF and the *firqat* militiamen, and via Qaboos he successfully exerted pressure on the Shah to order the Iranians into combat against the PFLO in the West; this was one occasion in which Reza Pahlavi's habit of micromanagement actually benefited the British. Even so, the CSAF felt that his allies interacted badly with the Omani security forces and Dhofari civilians alike, stating in December 1974 that the Iranians were 'arrogant, contemptuous of all Arabs, critical of others, militarily slow and inefficient, badly trained, and frightened of the enemy'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Buttenshaw, *Iranian Support to Oman*, p.2. Goode, 'Assisting Our Brothers', p.461. Perkins, 'Death of an Army', p.23. Perkins, 'Oman 1975', *passim*.

<sup>45</sup> TNA, FCO8/1859, P. Wright (Middle East Department) to Parsons, 10 October 1972. Worrall, *Oman*, p.189.

<sup>46</sup> TNA, DEFE24/573, LM/MO2/210/76, Colonel W. J. Reed, *Notes on a Visit to Oman, 20-24 January 1974*, 30 January 1974.

<sup>47</sup> CSAF to Sultan Qaboos (no date specified), August 1974, TNA, AIR20/12739. Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, p.165, pp.171-172.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, DEFE11/657, CSAF to Azhari, 5 September 1974. Perkins, *Fortunate Soldier*, p.132. TNA, DEFE11/658, CSAF, *Final Review of the Situation by CSAF*, 28 December 1974.

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The IITF initially deployed to Oman without engineer support, so in August CSAF had to divert a squadron of British Army Royal Engineers sent to Dhofar on civil development tasks to help the Iranians establish vitally-needed water supplies. Furthermore, due to language problems the latter were also unable to operate with the SAF and the *firqats*, and Creasey noted with alarm that the *Artesh* lacked experience in the basic infantry skills (such as patrolling and ambushing) that would be required in operations on the *jebel*.<sup>49</sup> The implications of this inadequate training were seen on the afternoon of 5 December 1974 when a Company from the IITF's 129 Battalion was assaulted by the PFLO, suffering 10 dead and one missing for no enemy losses. Creasey deduced from after-action reports that the battalion had sited its defences poorly, and that the PFLO guerrillas were able to infiltrate the Iranian positions without either being impeded by patrols or sentries. A mortar attack by the insurgents that evening revealed that Iranian helicopter crews were not trained for night-flying, as the *Artesh* Company commander was obliged to radio for a SOAF flight to evacuate casualties wounded by PFLO fire. On this occasion the RAF-run Omani air force was able to render assistance. In a similar incident in the spring of 1975 the SOAF refused to recover *Artesh* soldiers wounded in a mine-strike because there were no English-speakers on the ground to direct a rescue helicopter for a night-time evacuation, and British staff officers were concerned that jittery Iranian troops might fire on their aircraft. One of the casualties died of his wounds, and the incident created bad blood between the IITF and the SAF.<sup>50</sup>

As noted above, the Iranians' first significant action was Operation *Nader* in December 1974, which involved a sluggish advance by both Iranian infantry battalions towards Rakhyut. On Christmas Day, the IITF's 153 Battalion was ambushed by the PFLO, and its British liaison officer, Major Braddell-Smith, was among those killed in the ensuing battle. In his after action report the British defence attaché noted that although '[conditions were] said to be ideal for the full employment of every element of Iranian firepower', the *Artesh* infantry failed to disperse and manoeuvre when under PFLO fire, 'did little in the way of firing back at the enemy', while 'supporting fire went everywhere except where it should have gone'. Creasey's estimate was that there at most 20 guerrillas involved in the ambush, which nonetheless managed

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<sup>49</sup> TNA, AIR20/12738, CSAF, *A Review of the Period 1 Nov 1973-30 Apr 1974*, 3 June 1974. DEF E11/656, CSAF to Sultan, 25 August 1974.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, AIR20/12739, *Record of CSAF's Audience with His Majesty the Sultan*, 7 December 1974. TNA, DEF E11/658, Creasey to Deputy Defence Minister, 7 December 1974. The account of the second incident comes from the author's interview with Lobb, *passim*.



to balk an assault by far larger force.<sup>51</sup> In fairness, the terrain of Western Dhofar favoured the defence, and an offensive by the far more experienced SAF against Difa the following month (Operation *Dharab*) also ended in failure.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the abortive assault on Rakhyut showed that the Iranians had to learn to adapt to combat operations quickly. Not only had they suffered several 'friendly fire' casualties during their first battle in Dhofar, but their habits of static defence and unwillingness to patrol caused further avoidable casualties. The PFLO were particularly adept at digging up Iranian mines and using them against the IITF, and one platoon of 21 soldiers from 129 Battalion was massacred while digging its trenches, having posted only one sentry for security. Mike Lobb, at that time a Captain in the SAF assigned as a liaison to 153 Battalion, counted at least 250 Iranian casualties from *Nader*, and one post-war estimate states that the *Artesh* suffered 1,000 killed and wounded in its operations against the PFLO.<sup>53</sup>

One factor affecting the IITF's ability to absorb lessons learned was the Shah's decision to rotate Iranian units every three months; to provide a retrospective comparison, British Army and Royal Marine units on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan thirty to forty years later served six month tours. The official reason for such a short deployment was to ensure that as much of the *Artesh* as possible could gain combat experience, although British officers suspected that the Shah was actually trying to preserve morale by minimising his soldiers' exposure to combat. While nearly 15,000 Iranian soldiers served in Dhofar during the war Creasey's successor, Perkins, noted that they tended to become more risk averse near the end of their already truncated tours, suggesting that the Shah's intervention actually accentuated morale problems within the IITF.<sup>54</sup>

Political complexities also had a negative effect. The delay in committing the IITF to West Dhofar was caused in part by the Omani Foreign Minister Qais al-Zawawi announcement on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1974 that the Iranians were withdrawing from the Sultanate. Al-Zawawi's statement was intended to mollify Oman's Arab allies, but it enraged Reza Pahlavi. The Iranians were in the process of withdrawing the Midway

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<sup>51</sup> TNA, DEFE11/658, Allardyce to Bagnall, 31 December 1974. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, pp.346-348.

<sup>52</sup> Major E. Ashley, *Lessons from Op Dharab* (no date specified), January 1975. Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, pp.198-205.

<sup>53</sup> Middle East Centre Archives, St Antony's College, Oxford, GBI65-0399/2/2, Buttenshaw, *Iranian Support for Oman*, p.11, pp.17-18, p.25. Lobb, interview, *passim*. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, p.331.

<sup>54</sup> Perkins, *Fortunate Soldier*, p.131. Ward, *Immortal*, p.204. Buttenshaw gives the specific figure of 14,683 Iranian personnel serving in Oman during the war (*Iranian Support to Oman*, p.25).

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Road battalion and replacing them with a brigade of fresh troops, but the Shah ordered a halt to their deployment. It took a month of pleading by Qaboos and the British ambassador to Iran, Anthony Parsons, for Reza Pahlavi to relent and to formally send the IITF into battle on the Sultan’s behalf.<sup>55</sup>

The *Artesh*’s culture of secrecy and mistrust also meant that British liaison officers assigned to the IITF’s headquarters were often denied essential information, such as the location and disposition of its forces on the ground; the Iranians also developed a habit of reporting to their SAF allies only ‘what [they wished CSAF] to hear’. Creasey for his part issued specific orders in September 1974 that any guerrillas captured by the *Artesh* (or who voluntarily surrendered to them) should be handed over to the SAF at the earliest opportunity, to be interrogated and debriefed by the British Army Intelligence Corps detachment seconded for duty in Oman. On no account was the IITF to hold and interrogate its own prisoners, the implication behind this order being that the Iranians might torture their captives.<sup>56</sup> The downing of an IIAF F-4 *Phantom* on a reconnaissance mission over South Yemen eleven months after the formal end of hostilities (24 November 1976) also demonstrated the enduring lack of trust on both sides. During a visit to air force headquarters in Tehran the RAF attaché in Iran was informed by one IIAF Colonel that his colleagues ‘[did not] tell the British of any of their plans because they felt sure they would be passed on to the opposition’. Perkins was incensed with the suggestion that the British were betraying intelligence on Iranian activities to either the PFLO or the South Yemenis, and suspected that they were being blamed to cover up incompetence on the part of the IIAF’s staff. The incident may possibly also have reflected the enduring Anglophobia and institutionalised mistrust of the British within Iranian officialdom.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> TNA, FCO8/2219, Text of Statement by Foreign Minister Qais al-Zawawi, 15 October 1974; Tehran to FCO, No.466, 15 November 1974. Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, p.296.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, DEFE11/657, D-OPS/4, *Operational Instruction 6 of 1974*, 29 September 1974. TNA, DEFE11/658, FCO to Overseas Missions, Priority Telegram Guidance No.159, 2 December 1974; & Allardyce to Bagnall, 31 December 1974. Following detainee abuse scandals in Aden and Northern Ireland the Conservative and Labour governments of this time were both concerned about possible maltreatment of PFLO prisoners in Oman. Hughes, ‘Model Campaign’, pp.293-294. See also Clive Jones, ‘Military Intelligence, Tribes and Britain’s War in Dhofar, 1970-1976’, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, no. 4. (2011), pp.557-574.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, AIR8/2794, Muscat to MOD, No.360, 7 December 1976; & Muscat to MOD, No.399, 8 December 1976.

With British attitudes, subconscious factors such as ethnocentrism and envy (particularly of the IITF's lavish equipment and logistical support) could conceivably have coloured already negative perceptions of the *Artesh*. At the policy-making level FCO officials in London were worried that Iran might supplant the UK as Oman's principal ally, undermining Britain's privileged defence relationship with the Sultanate. As far as combat was concerned, Mike Lobb, the SAF liaison officer, recalled that for all their initial blunders the Iranian contingent did improve its tactical performance after *Nader*. He also observed that at the tactical level the British and the Iranians often talked at cross-purposes because of differing interpretations of doctrinal terms. The US-trained *Artesh*, for example, used the word 'control' to imply that they had a location covered by artillery and air support, while the British employed it to describe physical occupation and the domination of ground by troops. The differences between American and British military terminology therefore meant that there were opportunities for inadvertent misunderstandings to arise between the two allies.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, both at the time and in retrospect, British loan service officers readily admitted that Iran had played an important role in defeating the PFLO. During Creasey's tour in command Iranian aid proved to be invaluable both to the British and the Omanis. The helicopter squadron the Shah provided to Qaboos in 1973 meant that the SAF was able to sustain its beleaguered garrison in Sarfait, avoiding a withdrawal which would have constituted a strategic defeat for the Sultanate and a propaganda triumph for the insurgents. The 18 sorties flown by Iranian C-130s in July-August of that year also provided much needed arms and supplies for Qaboos' forces. Yet even by early 1974 the SAF, and its Dhofar Brigade in particular, was seriously overstretched.<sup>59</sup> The *Artesh* therefore provided essential reinforcement at a critical time in the struggle against the PFLO.

Perkins noted in December 1976 that 'I frequently make the point [to my subordinates] that without Iranian assistance we could not have won the war' and in their recollections British veterans of the conflict stressed that *Artesh* support enabled the SAF to recover control over Western Dhofar with greater ease and

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<sup>58</sup> TNA, FCO8/2026, Wright to Parsons, 6 December 1973. Lobb, interview, *passim*. Although British officers assigned to the SAF had Arabic language training (Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, p.26, pp.49-52, p.57; Ladwig, 'Supporting allies', pp.73-75), this would have been of little use with Farsi-speaking Iranians.

<sup>59</sup> TNA, DEFE11/762, Welch to Bagnall, 11 June 1973. TNA, PREM15/2155, Peter Carrington (Defence Secretary) to Heath, 4 December 1973. TNA, DEFE5/197, COS46/43. TNA, AIR20/12737, HQ SAF, D-OPS5, Annex A, 12 April 1974.

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with far fewer casualties than if they had been obliged to fight the PFLO alone.<sup>60</sup> The IITF provided much-needed assistance in both mass and airlift (particular rotary wing), and also played an important role in the final victory in December 1975, decisively cutting the PFLO’s supply lines to South Yemen. Their military presence also arguably deterred the PDRY from escalation at a time when the likelihood was that border clashes could lead to an inter-state war. A US Department of Defense assessment of the *Artesh* dating from September 1973 dismissed it as ‘a ‘parade ground army’ – physically impressive but incapable of prolonged military action’. British loan service officers who saw it in action in Dhofar recognised their allies’ flaws, but by the war’s end they would in all likelihood have disagreed with such a categorically dismissive verdict.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusions

Four years after the PFLO defeat in Dhofar, the Shah’s military disintegrated as a consequence of the Islamic Revolution. The Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the recall of the remaining *Artesh* contingent from Oman, and the imperial armed forces were supplanted by the *Komiteh* militias and the new Revolutionary Guard. The revolution led to a decisive breach in Iran’s alliance with the Western powers, and the demise of an already moribund CENTO. The officer corps was purged of the Shah’s loyalists, and the dead or exiled included an unknown number of officers who had fought in the war against the PFLO. Reportedly, some Dhofar veterans survived to fight in the war against Iraq (September 1980-August 1988), and the air force’s pilots certainly enjoyed a clear qualitative edge over its Iraqi foe. The degree to which this was due to US training prior to the revolution, or experience in operations in and IIAF patrolling over Oman in the late 1970s, is difficult to determine.<sup>62</sup> One other legacy of the Dhofar War concerns the unique relationship that has survived between Muscat and Tehran, which has survived the Shah’s overthrow. Out of all the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states Oman has by far the closest ties with Iran. Sultan Qaboos remained neutral during the Iran-Iraq war – while other Gulf Arabs

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<sup>60</sup> Akehurst, *We Won A War*, pp.58-59. TNA, AIR8/2974, CSAF to Commodore P. M. Stanford (RN, MOD), 9 December 1976. Email to author from Mike Lobb, 13 June 2016. Email to author from Gordon Allen, 17 June 2016. Jeapes, *SAS Secret War*, p.165, p.197.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, DEFE11/902, HQ SAF, *Operational Instruction 2/75*, 30 November 1975. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf*, p.91. Hughes, ‘Demythologising Dhofar’, pp.449-450.

<sup>62</sup> Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.117, pp.184-186, pp.189-190, pp.193-193, pp.269-270. Mark Gasiorowski, ‘The Nuzhah Plot and Iranian Politics’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34/4 (2002), pp.645-666. Murray & Woods, *Iran-Iraq War*, p.77. Perkins, *Fortunate Soldier*, p.153.

backed Saddam Hussein – and Oman is also conspicuously absent from the Saudi-led GCC coalition which has waged war in Yemen since March 2015.<sup>63</sup>

As far as the Iranian contribution to the Sultanate's victory is concerned, research on external intervention in civil wars suggests that the latter is only decisive if foreign actors back the winners. As was the case with the USA in Vietnam (1965-1973) and the USSR's embroilment in Afghanistan (1979-1989), interventions cannot save the losing side from defeat, but they may simply only delay the outcome. Iran's assistance to Oman was important, but the crucial year of the war was that of 1972, in which the SAF and its British backers were able to stave off a PFLO victory, yet still lacked the troop numbers and resources to recover full control of Dhofar. The Iranian commitment helped shorten the war, and was of great assistance to the Sultanate, but it could not be a substitute for the Omani Arab and Baluchi soldiers who withstood the insurgency between the summer of 1970 and early 1973.<sup>64</sup>

There are research questions which this article cannot answer, notably on the lessons of combat which Iran acquired from Dhofar, and how exactly this shaped the future evolution of its military doctrine. Given contemporary political sensitivities, it is also unlikely that in future conflicts British or other Western commanders and advisors working with local and regional partners would have the same leeway that the CSAF and his subordinates had in Oman in the 1970s. In the current operating environment it would be reasonable to presume that any potentially complex and politically risky issues analogous to military collaboration with the Shah's Iran would be the preserve of national governments rather than senior military officers on the ground.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, as a case study Dhofar points to the challenges that the UK

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<sup>63</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford, OUP, 2009), pp.75-76. ICG Middle East Briefing No.45, *Yemen at War* (ICG, 27 March 2015), p.7.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara F. Walter & Kenneth Pollack, 'Yemen is Even More Dangerous Than We Think', *Political Violence at a Glance*, 26 January 2015, online at <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2015/01/26/yemen-is-even-more-dangerous-than-we-think/>, accessed 8 April 2015. Hughes, 'Demythologising Dhofar', pp.450-451. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies*, pp.294-308.

<sup>65</sup> As contemporary examples the author could point to the intricacies of US and Western assistance to the Iraqi government, which is also allied to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and also the precarious position of US and British special forces personnel assisting both anti-IS and anti-regime rebels in Syria. 'Syria's multi-sided war escalates yet again', *The Economist*, 22 June 2017. Michael Eisenstadt & Michael Knights. 'Mini-Hizballahs, Revolutionary Guard Knock-Offs, and the Future of Iran's Militant Proxies in Iraq', *War on the Rocks* 9<sup>th</sup> May 2017; online at

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and other Western states could face if co-operating with non-NATO regional partners. Military and civilian advisors could have to contend with politicised armed forces rather than professional ones, with command structures influenced more by the demands of coup-proofing than the requirement to undertake combat operations efficiently. Alliance partners may present sensitive challenges related to their own regional reputations (as was the case with the Iran’s unpopularity on the Arab ‘street’) and their own internal politics (not least with the grim reputation of the SAVAK, and the likelihood that Western states aiding regional partners will face legislative and media criticisms of the latter’s human rights records). Collaboration with them in war may well be a reputational problem internationally, or as far as domestic political critics, the media and NGO activists are concerned. With military assistance, the Iranian experience shows that capacity-building does not just involve supplying arms and equipment, but also the training and mentoring of the professional cadres required to employ them effectively in peacetime (including senior non-commissioned officers, technicians, and staff officers). Finally, the relationship between British military officers and those of the Shah testifies to the enduring requirement for delicacy and tact when managing relations with a potentially difficult partner, which requires not only patience on the part of Western military personnel, but also a sensitive understanding of their allies’ strengths and weaknesses, and how the former can be maximised to best effect.

### **Endnotes:**

This article is based on a paper presented as part of the ‘Armed Forces and the Cold War’ symposium held by the King’s College London (KCL) Research Centre for the History of Conflict at the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC), Shrivenham, UK, on 13 July 2016. The author is very grateful for the feedback received from his KCL colleagues, and for the recollections, insights and commentary offered by three SAF veterans of the Dhofar conflict, Captain Gordon Allen, Major Ian Gordon and Major Mike Lobb. He also owes much to Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Buttenshaw, WKhM, for his research on the IITF, and to Colonel David Benest for sharing his knowledge on Dhofar. The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this article are nonetheless those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the JSCSC, Defence Academy, the Ministry of Defence or any other UK government agency.

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<https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/mini-hizballahs-revolutionary-guard-knock-offs-and-the-future-of-iran’s-militant-proxies-in-iraq/>, accessed 10 July 2017.