

DOI 10.26886/2520-7474.4(42)2020.1

UDC 94(5)

**THE DHOFAR REBELLION (1963–1976) AS THE FINAL STAGE OF
SULTAN SAID BIN TAIMUR's POLICY**

Olena Andriyenko, PhD, Professor

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2342-2404>

e-mail: elena_andrienko8@mail.ru

Academician of the Academy of Higher Education of Ukraine, Ukraine, Kiev

The article is devoted to the historical inquiry of the Dhofar Rebellion of 1963–1976 which was important stage of the historical development of the Sultanate of Oman. It has been stressed that the background of the rebellion determined by complex combination of political, economic and ethnic factors. The main reason for the support of the local mountain population of Karra and Kathiri for NDFLOAG (the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf) was not revolutionary sentiments but ethnic problems. The Jebel Samkhan highlanders were not part of the tribal structure of Oman and had no place in the political elite. It has been concluded that Dhofar received its current status as a result of the Dhofar rebellion. The rebellion was the final and the most important stage in the policy of Sultan bin Said. After it Oman became a single state. The Dhofar Liberation Front remained an independent organization in Oman (based in London). It pursues the same policy but does not speak openly.

Key words: The Sultanate of Oman, Dhofar rebellion, Sultan Said bin Taimur, the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (NDFLOAG).

The Dhofar Rebellion (1963–1976) also known as the War in Dhofar or the Omani Civil War played an important role in the history of Oman and also the British history. In the 1960–1970s the British together with local allies fought a stubborn struggle against representatives of the insurgency in the Omani province of Dhofar. The local separatist movement soon gained support from left-wing groups in neighboring Yemen, which caused concern among the British and the subsequent dispatch of troops there from Britain. The war in Dhofar threatened to turn into “Arab Vietnam” and caused the downfall of sheikhs and emirs, allies of the United States and Great Britain.

The paper will aim at investigating of the historical and political aspects of the Dhofar Rebellion as final and most important stage of Sultan Said bin Taimur’s policy.

This investigation is based on the works of the representatives both historical and political fields of scientific knowledge. Among them should be mentioned I. Aleksandrov [1], Jr. Allen and H. Calvin [2], R. El-Solh [3], J. Jones [4], B. Korany, P. Noble, and R. Brynen [6], S. Plekhanov [7], and others. In spite of rather wide range of investigations of history and politics of Oman many aspects of the Dhofar Rebellion of 1963–1976 are still largely unexplored.

In 1962 Oman was a very underdeveloped country. Sultan Said bin Taimur – an absolute ruler under British influence had outlawed almost all technological development and relied on British support to maintain the rudimentary functions of the state. Dhofar itself depended of Oman but was culturally and linguistically distinct from Oman proper.

In the 19th century representatives of the Al-Said dynasty concluded beneficial agreements with the British government enlisting the support of the British in repelling external and internal threats. One of the dangers came precisely from the interior of the country or “true” Oman where in the

1860s the tradition of electing local spiritual leaders – imams was revived and the power of the Muscat sultans virtually disappeared. Largely thanks to the presence of the British fleet it was possible to hold the coast which was important for the control of the Strait of Hormuz and the western part of the Indian Ocean. The British went to it in order to secure their possessions in Hindustan. In the 1940–1950s Sultan Said bin Taimur managed with significant support from the British army to annex back the Imamate of Oman which has already become an independent state that has established foreign policy ties with Saudi Arabia and received a place in the League of Arab States.

By the early 1960s the rule of the imams in “true” Oman was done away with but the last imam and his supporters fled to Saudi Arabia from where they openly threatened the rulers of Muscat. Meanwhile a new hotbed of tension has emerged in the Dhofar region which lies in the south of the Sultanate on the border with Yemen. Dhofar was on the sidelines during the conflict between the imam and the Sultan, there were no hostilities although many people from this province served in the newly formed units of the Sultan’s army trained by British instructors.

Dissatisfaction with the Sultan’s policies ultimately provoked an uprising of several leaders of the local Arab tribes led by Musallim bin Nafl. He and his supporters attacked government troops seized part of the oil produced but under pressure from superior enemy forces was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia. The leaders of the latter were hostile towards Said bin Taimur since he was the first to capture an important oasis in the oil-bearing region on the border of the states. In exile Musallim bin Nafl formed the Dhofar Liberation Front which with some support from Iraq and Saudi Arabia began a guerrilla war in the province. In 1968 it joined to the Bahrain National Liberation Front and began to be called the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (NDFLOAG).

The main reason for the support of the local mountain population of Karra and Kathiri for NDFLOAG was not revolutionary sentiments but ethnic problems. The Jebel Samkhan highlanders were not part of the tribal structure of Oman and had no place in the political elite.

The ideologues of the NDFLOAG developed a revolutionary theory and invented a new revolutionary class – the Bedouintariate. These were young “kabili” – people who left their tribes. They had nothing to lose and they were the most progressive revolutionary class in the Arabian Peninsula. The ideologues – “*Adu*” (“enemies”, the common name for NDFLOAG fighters) were trained in Yemen. Ideological work took primitive forms. A. Vasiliev in his book [8] described a “demonstration” in one of the mountain villages of Dhofar. The militant Adu with a submachine gun lined up the entire population of the village and shouted slogans to the peasants – about the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Lenin, Marxism-Leninism, etc., which the peasants loudly chanted in chorus, hardly knowing what this is about [8, p. 75]. At the same time the activities of the partisans who opened schools, tried to provide medical and veterinary care, aroused sympathy from the ranchers, many of whom still lived in caves.

Dhofar at this time was divided into four zones. The western zone and the neighboring zone of Ho Chi Minh were controlled by Adu. There was a front line on the “red line” a guerrilla war was going on in the eastern zone [7, p. 66].

The first step of the Sultan was to spread in Dhofar information about the amnesty for the participants in the armed struggle. Radio stations were broadcasting on Dhofar where the Sultan’s decree on amnesty was passed on to the militants, leaflets were dropped from planes. Already in August 1970 about 200 Adu militants descended from the mountains. On the basis of the militants who surrendered under the amnesty from the Dzhebali (highlanders), the Sultan began to form the firkat (anti-partisan

commandos). Firkat actions were effective because their fighters knew how to fight in the mountains, and also knew the routes of the partisans, the locations of their warehouses, etc. [2, p. 165].

The strategy of the anti-partisan war was also changed. Prior to that with the onset of the harif (monsoon season) when it became impossible to use aviation, the forces of the SAF (Sultan's army) left the mountains, returned to the Salalah plain. Now it was decided to create zones of constant control of the SAF and gradually expand them. The first successful operation was the seizure of the port town of Sadakh in the west of the country by a firkat detachment.

Measures to win the sympathy of the local population were the supply of food to the highlanders through the firkat. Prizes were also awarded for the surrender of Soviet weapons which were armed with Adu (Kalashnikov assault rifles, Simonov and Degtyarev rifles).

Nevertheless the first firkat detachment of several dozen fighters created in February 1971 disintegrated due to contradictions between representatives of various Jabali clans without even entering a battle. When forming subsequent units tribal principles were taken into account.

There was also a powerful propaganda and agitation campaign. This was how the sale of transistor receivers at very low prices in the market-places was organized so that the population could listen to the programs of the loyalist Radio Salalah leaflets were dropped from planes, hung on notice boards at checkpoints. The main emphasis in these materials was made on the atheism of the communists, on the fact that they are the enemies of Islam.

Simultaneously with the firkat Civic Aid Teams were organized to dig wells, distribute food, and organize primary health care. In the zones of government control, they began to build roads, conduct electricity, open schools and mosques [3, p. 64].

During this period Adu changed their political orientation from China to the USSR. The USSR had incomparably greater capabilities to help the partisans than China, which in the early 1970s was on the brink of economic disaster. But it was also connected with the events in neighboring Yemen where as a result of political struggle came to power “supporters of scientific socialism”, a pro-Soviet group. Through Yemen the USSR transferred to Adu Shpagin’s large-caliber machine guns, light 60-mm mortars, portable missile systems, anti-aircraft guns, and many automatic small arms.

Feeling the weakening of support for their struggle by the people of Dhofar Adu unleashed a mass terror, now killing everyone who was critical of their policies including the representatives of the working people [6, p. 82].

The weakening of Adu’s positions was also the result of a change in the international situation – since 1970 a sharp “correction” of a number of regimes in Arab countries began.

As a result the internationalization of the conflict began. Hussein – the King of Jordan sent his instructors and pilots to the SAF (trained by Soviet instructors in their time). A battalion of Jordanian paratroopers was stationed in Tamrit which controlled the road linking the Dhofar Plateau with Salalah. Thus, the partisans were deprived of the opportunity to expand the area of their actions. Egyptian military advisers also appeared. They were also trained by Soviet instructors at the time.

By November 1971 the Sultan’s troops had regained full control over the Red Zone and the Eastern Zone. In November 1971 a chain of fortified points was built in the “red zone” between which minefields were arranged. This defensive line became known as the Leopard Line. By May 1972 5AR units in pursuit of the partisans were already entering Yemen. In June 1970 – May 1972 more than 110 incursions by Omani (that is, in fact, British)

aviation were committed into Yemeni airspace. 5AR aircrafts struck targets in Yemeni territory.

The government of the NDFLOAG has made a formal request to Whitehall regarding the involvement of British 5AR troops in operations in Yemen. However, the British Foreign Office spokesman denied the participation of the British army in such actions but did not rule out that the 5AR ranks may include British citizens who served in the British army. But they fight as mercenaries [1, p. 57].

However, in the summer of 1972 during the harif the Sultan's units retreated from the Leopard Line, as they lost their air supplies. The partisans attacked the Mirbat fortress at the foot of the northern slopes of Jebel Samhan. It was the largest battle of the war which began on July 19, 1972. Just as the guerrillas broke through the line of barbed wire "5AR Strikemasters" appeared in the sky and launched a missile attack on clusters of militants after which helicopters landed paratroopers.

As it turned out later, this major action was a gesture of despair on the part of Adu. They intended to capture the city for at least a few hours, execute vali and rich citizens who were active supporters of the Sultan, and intimidate the residents as much as possible. A large-scale act of intimidation was envisaged upon learning of which the population would be afraid to support the Sultan and would discard the idea of leaving the war. However, everything happened the other way around – Adu left about 100 dead on the battlefield, about the same number later died of wounds in primitive mountain hospitals.

Adu as typical political sectarians began searching for "scapegoats" responsible for the failure of the operation; a number of "revolutionary tribunals" were held over the alleged perpetrators [5, p. 219–220]. But in fact Adu's mistake was that they were completely sure that during the harif not a single plane or helicopter would be able to take off. They did not take

into account that the technology was constantly being improved. After that the Hornbeam Line was built from the coast inland of Dhofar consisting of barbed wire, minefields, and sangars (boulder checkpoints).

To provide military assistance to Iran in the Dhofar Rebellion the Sultan made territorial concessions handing over to Iran three small islands in the navigable part of the Persian Gulf. Despite the fact that these islands were just rocks protruding from the sea, they had a strategic value – by placing military bases on them, Iran could block navigation in the Persian Gulf – one of the busiest shipping areas in the world.

On December 23, 1973, 3,000 Iranian paratroopers supported by an English airborne battalion and British aviation launched an offensive in Dhofar. For the partisans the landing of the airborne assault was a surprise since there was no airborne force in the SAF.

The war in Dhofar consumed great resources. Up to 47% of the total budget was spent on military spending. At the same time the Sultan not trusting the tribes of Oman formed his army from Baloch mercenaries (up to 70% of the entire army) [9, p. 184].

According to Soviet researchers Dhofar then found itself in the conditions of a military, economic and political blockade. But in fact, the ultra-left Omani revolutionaries made a number of tactical mistakes. So Adu's voluntaristic decision "abolished the tribes" in Dhofar. Tribal pastures and water sources were declared the property of the whole people. After that part of the tribes under the influence of their sheikhs began to tend to a compromise with the enemy. Because of this the Adu units formed on a non-tribal basis began to lose their combat effectiveness – the fighters stopped trusting each other. A number of mistakes were made during the anti-religious campaign. A breeding ground for atheism was the 6-year Lenin school in Yemen, near the border. Teachers which were trained in the Warsaw Bloc countries worked there. At the same time it must be

emphasized once again that Adu and their allies sought to attract the population not only with ideological slogans. Thus, in the Hauf region (Yemen, near the border with Oman) a modern Cuban hospital was deployed where not only the wounded Adu were treated but also the civilian population of Dhofar. For people for whom the only method of treatment for almost all diseases was cauterization with a hot iron the effect of even the simplest antibiotics seemed a real miracle [9, p. 187].

A feature of the anti-partisan struggle in Dhofar was that the government forces did not pursue the goal of inflicting maximum damage on the enemy. The main goal was to win the hearts and minds of the militants. Therefore, the means of the anti-guerrilla warfare arsenal were used very limitedly –for example, they never poisoned water sources, did not place “mine-stretchers” so that none of the civilian population would suffer, so as not to anger even more militants [5, p. 329–330].

The congress of the NDFLOAG in June 1974 decided in the changed situation to remove the task of a regional revolution in the Persian Gulf and to create a wide the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO). The task of socialist transformations was also removed. NDFLOAG now set itself only the task of eliminating military bases and withdrawing foreign troops from the country, fighting against the “Iranian invaders”. An absolutely untimely decision was made to create a regular army NDFLOAG. The Omani “ultra-left” continued to make mistakes in the “Soviet construction”. So, private trade was prohibited. In the conditions of the blockade of Dhofar an equal distribution of food rations was introduced. However, let us remember that a significant part of the land fund, the lands of the fled feudal lords, were abandoned – the poor Karr were afraid to take them for themselves and cultivate them. Due to the fighting the irrigation system was destroyed and not restored. The Adu were no longer able to provide the population with food, even with ration cards.

Yemen could not provide assistance in this regard, since there the “building of socialism” led to the same problems. Adu tried to solve the problem, as in Yemen – by socializing property and creating “cooperatives” modeled on Soviet collective farms. In general, there was nothing new in collective property for Karr, but one must remember that the Adu “abolished the tribes” and cooperatives were founded from representatives of different clans, which simply did not fit into the psychology of local residents in terms of the attitude to property. This is a vivid example of “left-wing excesses” typical for Omani revolutionaries – even in the USSR during collectivization in a number of national regions, such factors were taken into account, for example, in Chechnya and Dagestan. The local population was also annoyed by the endless meetings, rallies, and political education filled with obscure political demagogy. Even Kabilī began to turn away from Adu. At the same time the Sultan managed to invite hundreds of nurses, doctors, teachers, hydrologists from Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan to use oil revenues. The water problem was successfully solved by drilling artesian wells (several hundred of them were drilled).

By November 1974 the insurgents had been completely driven west of the Hornbeam Line. Firkat combed the vadi and caves of Dhofar where the partisans set up warehouses, hospitals and bases. In January 1975 as a result of a joint operation of the Iranian paratroopers and the Sultan’s fleet the capital of the “liberated region” – the port village of Rahyut was captured. The Adu sea supply route was cut. After that construction began on the Demavend Line 35–40 km west of Hornbeam. In January-February 1975 the SAF established control over the main militant bases in vadi Shershitti, Ashauk, and Guiper. During all this time the partisans undertook only one retaliatory action – a rocket and mortar attack on Sarfait in honor of the decade of the revolution on June 9, 1975. The “Simba Line” was already in close proximity to the border with Yemen, from

which shelling of Omani territory became more frequent [4, p. 111–115]. On October 16, 1975, Omani Hawk Hunter attack aircraft attacked the Yemeni town of Haufa, destroying the headquarters of Adu, a police station and artillery positions. The Sultan feared that this would become a pretext for a war with Yemen. However, this did not happen, since Yemen at that time developed extremely tense relations with the Yemen Arab Republic, and inside the country there was a struggle between Nasserites and supporters of “scientific socialism”. The remaining Adu group was cut off from the border with Yemen by the “Simba line” and surrounded in a gorge. The partisans were threatened with total destruction. However, the Yemeni government asked the Sultan to provide a corridor to escape the encirclement for 200 of its soldiers who were in the ranks of Adu. The partisans also left Oman along the corridor leaving, however, all their heavy weapons.

The rebellion was declared suppressed in January 1976, although isolated incidents took place until late 1979.

Thus, as a result of the rebellion Dhofar received its current status. The rebellion was the final stage in the policy of Sultan bin Said. After it Oman became a single state. The Dhofar Liberation Front remained an independent organization in Oman (based in London). It pursues the same policy but does not speak openly.

References:

1. Aleksandrov, I. A. [Melikhov, I. A.] (2000). *Monarchies of the Persian Gulf: the Stage of Modernization*. Moscow: Delo i servis, 544. [in Russian].
2. Allen, Jr., Calvin, H. (1987). *Oman: The Modernization of the Sultanate*. Colorado, Westview Press, 168.

3. El-Solh, R. (1997). *Oman and the South-Eastern Shore of Arabia*. Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 336. (Archive Documents on the History of the Arab World Series).
4. Jones, J. (2007). *Negotiating the Change: The New Politics of the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 224.
5. Jeapes, T. (2000). *SAS: Secret War*. N.Y.: Harper Collins, 253.
6. Korany, B., Noble, P., Brynen, R. (1993). *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 322.
7. Plekhanov, S. N. (2003). *Reformer on the throne. Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said*. Moscow: Mezhdunarodniye otnosheniya, 288. [in Russian].
8. Vasiliev, A. (1977). *The Difficult Pass*. Moscow: Nauka, 304. [in Russian].
9. Vorobiov, N. N. (1984). The Role of Tribes in the Socio-Economic Life of Oman (1950–1980): State Power and Socially-Political Structures in Arab Countries. *History and Modernity*. Moscow: Nauka, 182–187. [in Russian].