

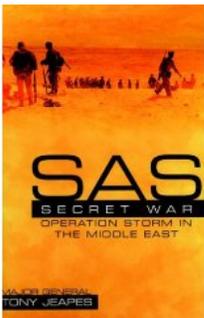


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SAS Secret War: Operation Storm in the Middle East

Reviewed by Travis Weinger



SAS Secret War: Operation Storm in the Middle East. By Major General Tony Jeapes. London: Greenhill Books, first published 1980, this edition published 2005. 253 pages. \$22.95. Reviewed by Travis Weinger.

A fanatical group, playing upon political and economic grievances in an isolated province, develops a base of support among the local tribes and launches a full-blown insurgency against the government and foreign power supporting it. The group violently attempts to break the traditional power structures and elites of the tribes and imposes a brutal and foreign ideology in their place. Realizing their mistake, the tribes begin, fitfully, to fight back against the outsiders, slowly reconciling with the counterinsurgents. The counterinsurgents partner with these tribal fighters to great effect, and the back of the insurgency is largely broken.

This could be a description of the course of the modern insurgency in Anbar province. Instead, it is the picture we get of the Dhofar insurgency in Oman in *SAS Secret War*, written by Major General Tony Jeapes, commander of the first full Special Air Service (SAS) squadron in Oman and SAS Commanding Officer from 1974 until the end of the war in 1975. Republished in 2005 (originally written in 1977), doubtless to cash in on the interest in counterinsurgency generated by the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, General Jeapes' first-hand account of the successful British campaign in Oman during the 1970s is a fascinating read, both on its own merits as a story of war and in light of present-day discussions and debates about the nature and best practices of COIN.

In 1968, the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), a Maoist insurgent group, co-opted a low-level tribal insurgency in Dhofar. After a coup in 1970 brought a new, progressive Sultan to power, the SAS was invited to run a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign in Dhofar against the PFLOAG. After giving a very concise but effective summary of the history of Oman, Dhofar, and the conflict through 1970, General Jeapes begins his narrative from this point.

As the man most directly responsible for exploiting and expanding the “counter-revolution” of the local tribes against the PFLOAG in Dhofar, General Jeapes naturally concentrates on the SAS's role in arming, training, and partnering with defected insurgents and forming them into militias known as “firqats.” By leveraging British civil development and government information

operations, exploiting tribal and familial ties, and promising amnesty, the SAS raises a number of firqats among defected insurgent fighters and convinces others to reconcile with the government. General Jeapes' discussion of this process is fascinating, highlighting the problems cultural differences caused between the British and their new allies, as well as the vital importance of understanding inter- and intra-tribal politics and areas of influence. By following the firqats from their defection, creation, training and deployment into combat, *SAS Secret War* gives the most comprehensive account of the entire process of raising local irregular security forces during an insurgency that this reviewer has ever read.

It has been said that counterinsurgency is 80% political and 20% military. Fittingly, the majority of this book is about information operations, training local fighters, and civil development. Combat is not ignored, but there are better books written about the engagements and combat tactics of the Dhofar insurgency (such as *In the Service of the Sultan*, by Ian Gardiner). General Jeapes' detailed description of the extensive propaganda and development campaign undertaken to capture the narrative of freedom and economic prosperity from the insurgents provides an in-depth look at the creation of a successful hearts-and-minds campaign. By centering government propaganda on the slogan "Islam is our way, Freedom is our aim" and placing the responsibility for propaganda development on Dhofaris themselves, the counterinsurgents are able to craft a culturally-relevant response to the anti-government Communist propaganda of the PFLOAG. The abstract idea of capturing an insurgency's narrative is vividly brought to life when, after a discussion with a surrendered insurgent about the Omani government's plans for civil development, the insurgent tells an SAS Sergeant "You are a Communist!" Civil development, especially well-digging and medical assistance, is also hugely important. In fact, General Jeapes notes many times that one of the most important things a counterinsurgent can do is to show the population that government propaganda regarding economic assistance is true by carrying through with civil development projects. By unifying government propaganda promises with what is feasible in terms of civil development, the counterinsurgents are able to maximize the benefit of both lines of operations.

A veteran of the insurgency in Northern Oman in the late 1950s, General Jeapes is initially unprepared for the extensive effort defeating the PFLOAG would take: "(The first) war had taken us six weeks to crack: this one, had we known it, was to take six years." He is not always able to manage the strong personalities of the leaders of his firqats, leading in some cases to their disbandment or limiting the situations in which he can safely utilize them. Larger-scale operations never prove as decisive as the counterinsurgents hope, at least until the final battles of the conflict in 1975. Admirably, he does not ignore the failures and setbacks of his campaign, though the generally triumphant tone of the book (he humbly calls his strategy "the best-conducted counter-insurgency campaign ever fought") undeservedly implies that a government victory was inevitable.

The events since the Anbar Awakening have made *SAS Secret War* a much more relevant read today than when it was republished in 2005. It remains to be seen whether the coming years will be similarly kind to General Jeapes' remarkable book. Whatever the future holds, serious students of population-centric counterinsurgency will find *SAS Secret War* to be a valuable and instructive addition to their library.

Travis Weinger is entering his second year in Georgetown's Security Studies Program. He previously received a Bachelor's degree in History from the University of California, San Diego, where he wrote his honors thesis on American foreign policy and assistance towards Oman during the Dhofar War. Travis' interest in researching the Dhofar War specifically as a counterinsurgency campaign was inspired by Dr. John Nagl's class at Georgetown.

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