

Winning Small: Lessons in Military Intervention from Oman and Syria

DEREK R. NOEL

LIEUTENANT COLONEL, U.S. ARMY

COUNTERTERRORISM AND PUBLIC POLICY
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

SANFORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

DUKE UNIVERSITY



A Case Study



The Syrian Civil War: 2011- Ongoing Russian Large-Scale Intervention: 2015-2018



Russian-Led Coalition:

- State Actors:
Syria, Iran
- Non-State Actors:
Desert Tigers, Desert Falcons, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia Militias
- Mercenaries
Wagner Group

Russian War Aims:

1. Establish Regional Military Presence and Power Projection Capability
2. Prevent Regime Change
3. Counter Terrorism
4. Increase Stature and Influence in the Region



The Dhofar War: 1965-1975 British Large-Scale Intervention: 1967-1975



British-Led Coalition:

- State Actors:
Oman, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Jordan
- Non-State Actors:
Dhofari Firquatmen
- Mercenaries
Baloch, Former SAS

British War Aims:

1. Safeguard Partnership with the Regime
2. Prevent Expansion of Communism in the Region

Core Principle of Success 1:

Select limited political objectives achievable through military operations and with clear geopolitical benefit



- "Just enough" approach to conflict
- Functional governance: not a requirement
- 50-year lease on military bases in Syria
- Power-broker in the region



- Territory-based conflict
- Finite amount of enemy
- Did not have to sway populace
- Lasting partnership for 50+ years

Core Principle of Success 2:

Prioritize the intervening nation's political objectives over the goals of the host nation



- Assad regime outcomes left on the table
- Declared victory almost immediately
- No interest in retaking all territory
- Regime: Just strong enough to survive



- Coup d'état: Sultan Said Bin Taimur
 - British planned and facilitated
- New Sultan: Qaboos bin Said
 - Pre-screened to ensure compliance

Core Principle of Success 3:

Reduce cost, decrease risk, and expand control



- Maximized the use of regional state and non-state proxy forces
- Leveraged mercenaries when necessary
- Retained complete control of military intervention: Strategic, operational, and tactical
- Prevented domestic backlash by outsourcing risk and keeping costs low

Conclusion

- U.S. Policy Applications
- Recommendations for Future Research
- Ukraine Applicability



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