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Intelligence Memorandum

The Mountain and the Plain: The Rebellion in Oman

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Directorate of Intelligence
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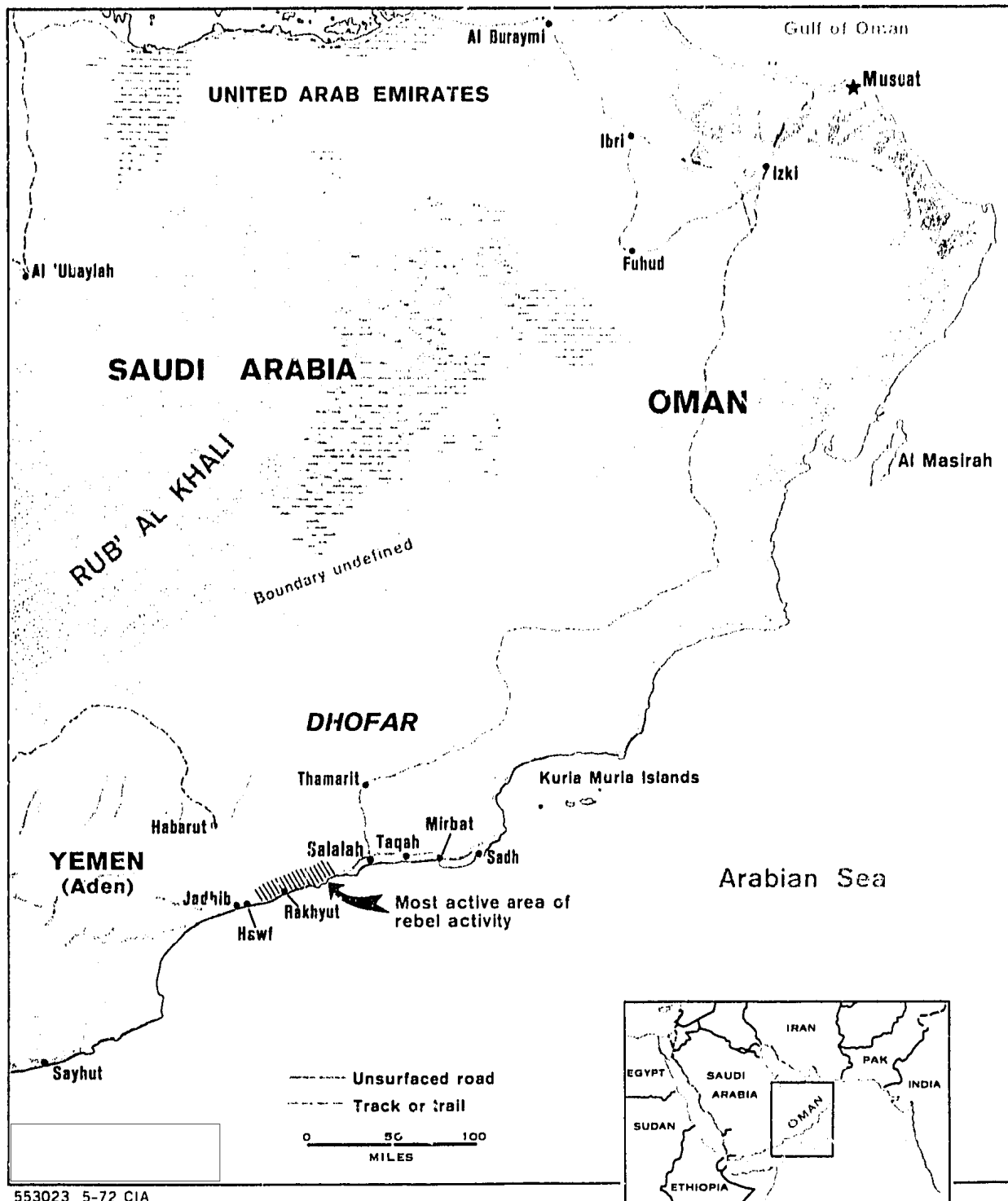
INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Mountain and the Plain: The Rebellion in Oman

The Sultanate of Oman, at the southeastern end of the Arabian Peninsula, has been experiencing rebellion since 1963. The rebellion, which threatens to cut off Oman's western province of Dhofar, had its seeds in years of discontent over poor social and economic conditions and the authoritarian rule of the Omani sultans. This discontent has been exploited by leftist elements, assisted by the radical regime in neighboring Yemen (Aden). The leftists have organized a political front with a guerrilla army that has fought for the last several years for control of Dhofar. Government forces have begun to strike back, and, since late last year, they have recovered some areas of the province from rebel control. They are now engaged in an offensive that the government believes will turn the tide in its favor; the monsoon may bring the offensive to a halt before this happens.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA.


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The Setting

1. Dhofar, which covers an area of approximately 30,000 square miles, has a population of about 35,000. It has few towns—the provincial capital of Salalah, Taqah, and Mirbat being the most important—and a handful of villages. Most of the other locations appearing on maps are water holes or vaguely defined areas associated with the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes which inhabit the mountains. The narrow 250-mile coastal plain benefits from the southwest monsoon from late May through September. As a result, the coastal plain and the seaward slopes of the 3,000 to 4,000 foot mountains are green and fertile. From the crest of the mountains, numerous wadis run northward through a barren and arid landscape toward the sands of the Rub al Khali—the Empty Quarter. The Dhofar rebels have capitalized on both weather and terrain in their guerrilla war against the British-led forces of the Sultan.

The Beginning

2. The roots of the insurgency lie in long-standing demands by Dhofari traditionalists to be separated from Oman. For centuries, the sultans of Oman have claimed authority in Dhofar, but the province has been troubled by almost constant dissidence and unrest as Dhofaris persistently resisted this outside rule. Separated from the more populous part of Oman by hundreds of miles of desert, Dhofar has been and is more closely linked religiously, tribally, economically, and linguistically to the Hadhramaut area of Yemen (Aden) than to the rest of Oman.

3. Dhofaris, as well as other Omanis, became increasingly restive in the early 1960s as a result of the social and political restrictions imposed upon them by the reactionary and authoritarian Sultan Said ibn Taymur Al Bu Said. The capricious Sultan ruled the country from 1932 until 1970, when he was deposed by his son, Sultan Qabus. The discovery of oil in the sultanate in 1963 made small difference to the Dhofaris; most of what little economic and social development was started by the government was undertaken in Oman itself. A growing number of Sultan Said's Dhofari subjects came to resent his neglect, maladministration, and heavy-handed eccentricities.

4. The current rebellion is usually traced to an uprising in 1963 staged by members of the Bait Kathir tribe who had joined the Dhofar Benevolent Society, a religious and social welfare organization. This group was composed mostly of Dhofari nationalists favoring secession; they were soon

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joined by members of the local branch of the leftist Arab Nationalist Movement and some Dhofaris returning from service in the British-sponsored Trucial Oman Scouts (now the defense force of the United Arab Emirates). The merger resulted in the creation of the Dhofar Liberation Front, which pledged to detach Dhofar from Oman by armed force. By 1964, Iraq may have been providing military training for a few rebels; by mid-1965 the front was receiving limited financial and military aid from Egypt and Iraq. Its first anti-regime military action took place in June 1965.

5. The revolt was initially small and limited for the most part to sporadic attacks on traffic along the mountain road linking Salalah and Thamarit. The Sultan of Oman took a complacent view of the rebellion, considering it little more than another expression of the tribal and religious enmity that had frequently plagued his regime. He preferred to keep his small British-led army near Muscat and ordered local security forces to deal with the rebels.

6. It was not long before the Dhofar Liberation Front began to move to the left. A left-wing faction—largely from the Qara tribe—talked about Arab unity, socialism, anti-colonialism, and pan - Persian Gulf revolution, but the right-wing Bait Kathir tribal faction in the front remained primarily concerned with Dhofari separatism. The eventual triumph of the leftist element was ensured by events in neighboring Yemen (Aden), where the radical National Front came to power in late 1967 after the British had withdrawn. The new regime in Aden became an active patron of the Dhofar Liberation Front, providing arms, money, an outlet for rebel publicity and propaganda, and a safe haven for the guerrillas. The Yemen (Aden) port of Hawf and the interior town of Habarut became important supply depots for materiel being passed to the insurgents. By mid-1968, the rebels were able to make daylight raids on Salalah and Mirbat, and by the end of the year the rebels were fairly well-equipped and organized, and more aggressive.

The Popular Front

7. The growing strength of the radical wing was reflected at a 20-day meeting, since described as a turning point in the rebellion, which was held in September 1968 at Hamrin. The Dhofar Liberation Front was renamed the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf, a 40-member General Command was elected to replace the old leaders, and a new statement of goals was promulgated. The new name signified the organization was no longer concentrating on Dhofari separatism, but was committed to a people's war throughout the Persian Gulf, which was described as "a

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Muhammad Ahmad Salal al-Ghassani
Popular Front Leader

single historical, geographical, and ethnic entity." The Hamrin delegates adopted Marxism-Leninism as their ideology.

8. The popular front is run by a Central Committee, with sub-units responsible for Dhofar, political affairs, training, finance, and supply. Its headquarters are in Aden; other offices are located in Cairo, Kuwait, Baghdad, and Bahrain. The front has denounced the "cult of leadership," and for this reason, as well as for security, leaders are rarely mentioned. But it is believed that Muhammad Ahmad Salal al-Ghassani, a Chinese-trained Dhofari of the Qara tribe, is the front's chief.

9. The size of the front's People's Liberation Army is a well-shrouded secret; estimates have been as high as several thousand. Nearly all the guerrillas in Dhofar are believed to be indigenous to that area; in fact, it is estimated that only about 10 percent of the People's Liberation Army is composed of non-Dhofaris, mostly gulf Arabs and Adenis. The front also supports a People's Militia, made up of less committed armed supporters in sympathetic villages; these number about 2,000. The front has no permanent military bases in Dhofar, and rebel camps are moved every two weeks or so, in part because food and water are scarce in the mountains. The guerrillas operate in groups of 20 to 40 men. These groups have names such as the Ho Chi Minh unit and the Che Guevara unit. They avoid pitched battles with the Sultan's armed forces, and as a result, losses have been low on both sides. The rebels favor tactics such as the mining of roads, the ambushing of patrols, and the use of mortars to shell targets.

10. Basic military training and political education are conducted at Hawf and at Jadhīb in Yemen (Aden). Recruits are reportedly given heavy doses of lectures on class struggle and wars of national liberation, with frequent references to Marx, Lenin, and Mao; the goal is to prepare both "fighters and politicians."

11. Following the Hamrin conference, the front undertook new military initiatives in Dhofar, and the number of rebel attacks increased

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markedly. By mid-1970 the rebels controlled the coastline from the Aden border to within a few miles of Salalah and held many coastal villages—such as Mirbat and Sadh—east of Salalah. They moved at will through the mountains and along numerous overland routes. The environs of Salalah were sporadically attacked.

12. In pressing their drive, the rebels enjoyed certain advantages: a sanctuary across the Aden border; admirable guerilla terrain in the mountains and wadis; and the sympathy and cooperation of a substantial proportion of Dhofaris. It is estimated that at one time about two thirds of the population supported the rebels. The front looked to civilians to supply informers, messengers, lookouts, and workers. Terrorist tactics have been used against Dhofaris who fail to cooperate.

13. Both for ideological reasons and in an attempt to destroy existing patterns of leadership, the front made an effort to reorder society in the



Women Fighters of the Popular Front

so-called “liberated” areas. In particular, it undertook to eliminate the traditional tribal and kinship system of Dhofar, which it saw as irrelevant to the needs of the revolution. Front leaders have claimed “dazzling success” in replacing tribal relations with “comrade relations.”

14. Although the front is committed to “liberate” all of the gulf, the organization has yet to get off the ground outside of Dhofar. Most front organizers appear to be primarily occupied with raising funds and with

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political indoctrination, rather than with armed subversion. The Dhofaris have little interest in fighting for anything but Dhofar. For instance, large numbers of Dhofaris living in Abu Dhabi who had been active in the Dhofar Liberation Front lost interest and stopped their financial contributions when the leftists took control.

The New Popular Front

15. Last January the popular front announced that it had merged with another left-wing organization that had been operating in northern Oman intermittently since early 1970. The new organization took as its name "the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf." The merger probably grew out of a conference held in June 1971 in Rakhyut. It was decided at this meeting that a second front elsewhere in Oman was essential if the rebellion in Dhofar was to succeed.

Foreign Assistance

16. The rebel's chief foreign backer is the radical government of Yemen (Aden). Aden's financial support has been estimated variously at between \$150,000 and \$600,000 per year. (The lesser figure is probably more nearly correct.) The front's headquarters is in Aden, and the Adenis provide arms—mostly of Soviet origin—logistic support, medical aid, broadcasting facilities, and training sites for the guerrillas. Occasional tension has marked the relationship; the Adeni Government frequently complains, with reason, of being pestered for aid and is critical of the rebels' failure to gain victory. The Adenis also complain that too many front members prefer living in Aden to fighting in the mountains of Dhofar.

17. China has supplied limited quantities of arms, ammunition, and other equipment to the rebels. Thirty front members reportedly were trained in China in 1968, and a Chinese training and advisory mission may be based in Hawf. The New China News Agency disseminates rebel propaganda.

18. The Soviet Union has also provided modest amounts of war materiel to the rebels. Yemen (Aden) has tried to persuade Moscow, as well as Eastern European nations, to give the Dhofar rebels more aid, but apparently without much success. North Korea sent a small quantity of arms and foodstuffs in 1970 and reportedly has given military training in North Korea to 20 Dhofaris.

19. For its part, the front has concluded that, with the exception of Yemen (Aden), no Arab state will provide support. In fact, the front bitterly

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(left) A Member of the Sultan's Forces

(right) Sultan Qabus of Oman

(bottom) British Officers Serving With
the Omani Army



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attacks the other Arab states. Limited Iraqi and Syrian aid channeled through Aden ended in 1970. The front does maintain close ties with Nayif Hawatmah's Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a fedayeen group not responsive to the direction of any government.

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The Sultan's Forces

20. Attacks on several northern Oman towns in June 1970, in the wake of a deteriorating situation in Dhofar, probably triggered the [Redacted] palace coup that ousted Sultan Said ibn Taimur from office and replaced him with Sultan Qabus ibn Said. Initially, Sultan Qabus believed that the change in leadership and his promises of reform and development would encourage Dhofaris and rebellious Omanis to lay down their arms. Most rebels at first rejected the Sultan's offer of amnesty. A trickle of defectors began, and by late 1971 the number had increased to the point where they were being organized into small counter-insurgency units, called firqats. These firqats know the terrain, but their enthusiasm is frequently fleeting, and some have redefected.

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21. When it became obvious that these policies were not working, Sultan Qabus and his British military advisers resolved to enlarge the army, acquire new weapons, and go on the offensive. Qabus increased the armed forces from fewer than 3,000 to over 7,000 by late last year. About half of this force are Omanis and half expatriate mercenaries, primarily Baluchis. The ground forces are led by 100 to 120 British officers; the air force of some 40 to 60 pilots is entirely a British operation.

Operation Jaguar

22. When the Sultan's army launched "Operation Jaguar" in Dhofar last October, he controlled only the Salalah plain, an area of approximately 80 square miles along the coast, and had military posts in the towns of Sadh, Taqah, and Mirbat. The Sultan's forces had recaptured Taqah in February 1971 after it had been in rebel hands for about a year. Even these military posts, as well as Salalah, were subject to sporadic mortar attack and hit-and-run raids by the rebels.

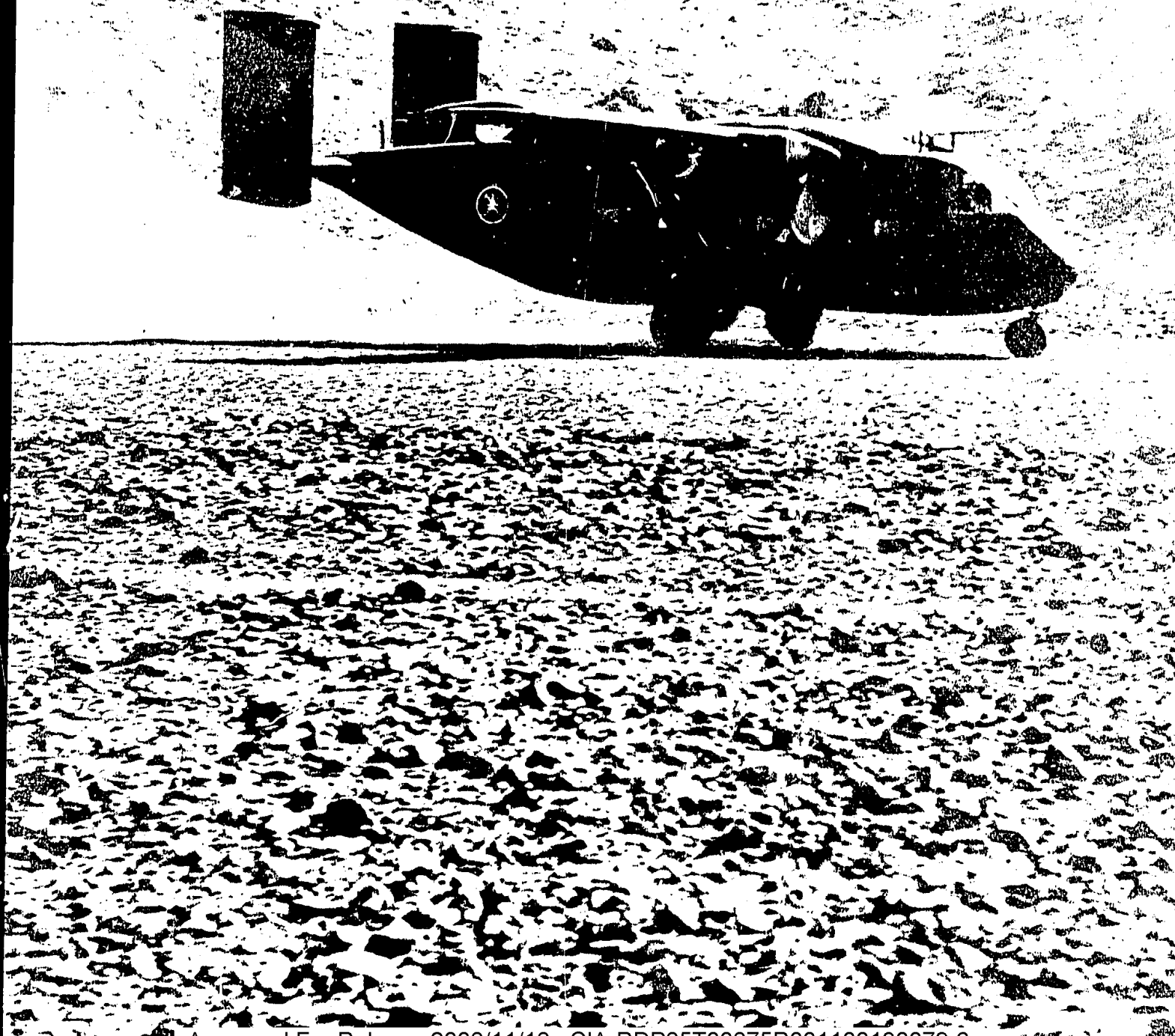
23. "Operation Jaguar" was a post-monsoon offensive designed to drive the rebels from the coastal plain and from the mountains that provide cover and sanctuary. The Sultan's military advisers are pleased by the results of the

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offensive and recently expressed cautious optimism about their ability to handle the military aspects of the rebellion. The coastal area between Mughsayl and the Yemen (Aden) border is now one of the most active areas of conflict. Perhaps the main achievement of the offensive has been to cut two of the three important rebel supply routes originating in Yemen (Aden). More and more tribesmen are cooperating with the government as its ability to protect them increases. The fighting has been fierce and casualties are up but, for the first time since the rebellion began, the Sultan's forces occupy outposts in the mountains. They hope to hold these positions during the coming summer rainy season. Although security checks in Salalah and other coastal towns remain tight, the almost nightly mortar attacks and mining of roads have been reduced. Areas considered cleared and secure are still occasionally penetrated by guerrillas, and fighting in the difficult mountain terrain is expected to continue.

24. The success of "Operation Jaguar" is, in part, a result of increased mobility and the effective use of air power. The government prepared small airstrips near some of the mountain bases to ease the problems of supply and to accommodate reconnaissance planes. From these airstrips and from bases near Salalah, British-piloted Beaver spotter planes and helicopters seek out rebel camps and supply dumps. Defectors are used to help spot guerrilla hideouts. Air strikes are then carried out by BAC-167 Strikemaster jets. The Skyvan transport, with its short take-off and landing capabilities, has been used effectively by the government to ferry troops and supplies.

25. Oman's offensive led to a border clash with Yemen (Aden) in early May. The four-day battle involved attacks by popular front insurgents as well as Adeni militia on Omani positions near Ha'arut. The attack, which was probably designed to ease pressure on other popular front units, was the first reported clash across the ill-defined border. When Omani attempts to arrange a cease-fire were unsuccessful, Omani fighter aircraft strafed the attackers across the border in Aden. Yemen (Aden) seized upon the incident to spotlight British military assistance to the Sultan.

Outlook

26. When the summer monsoon piles thick rain clouds and heavy fog and mist against the Dhofar mountains, helicopters and Skyvans will be unable to bring supplies or evacuate wounded from the government's mountain outposts, and the jets will be forced to suspend most of their air strikes. The government's ability to keep forces in the mountains under these circumstances and maintain the security of overland routes will, in large


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measure, determine the future of the Dhofar rebellion. If the Sultan's forces are compelled to retire to the Salalah plain during the monsoon, the rebels will have the opportunity to regroup and to receive new supplies. If, on the other hand, the government can retain its hard-won mountain posts, it will perhaps be able, during the dry season beginning in October, to deliver another heavy blow to the rebels in Dhofar. Nevertheless, as long as Yemen (Aden) provides a safe haven, Dhofar is likely to be subject, at a minimum, to cross-border attacks.

27. Should the front be able to prolong the rebellion in Dhofar, Sultan Qabus's social and economic development program will be retarded. Failure in Dhofar could open the gates for unrest and subversion elsewhere in Oman and the Persian Gulf. Oman, a primitive and very poor country, is spending between 40 and 60 percent of its annual \$125-million oil income—almost its only budgetary source—for defense.



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The Sultan's intentions are good, but expectations of people who have been waiting for reforms for generations may outstrip his performance. The Sultan cannot afford to get bogged down much longer in Dhofar.

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