

The Egyptian-Yemen War (1962-67)

Egyptian Perspectives on Guerrilla Warfare

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Egyptian military historians refer to their war in Yemen as their Vietnam. President Nasser began by sending a battalion of Special Forces and in the end committed 55,000 troops — all in an effort to sustain a revolution of Yemeni officers who brought an end to a tyrannical and medieval Hamiduddin dynasty. This five-year conflict offers many lessons from the Yemeni officers, who were sent to Egypt and Iraq for military training only to return with Nasserist, nationalist and Baathist ideas, to the underestimation of Egyptian Field Marshal Amer and his general staff, who felt that a battalion of Special Forces combined with airpower could score a quick and decisive victory.

As the United States undertakes the crucial task of rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan, it is imperative that this new generation of American military planners gain an appreciation for the history, strategy and tactics of wars not usually studied in today's western war colleges. Despite massive manpower, airpower, armor and artillery, the Egyptian expeditionary forces could only hold onto a triangle of land from the capital Sana'a to the port of Hodeida to Taiz.

An analysis of this conflict may help U.S. military planners as they cooperate with Yemeni authorities to hunt down Al-Qaeda. Studying the Yemen War is also a vital step towards a real appreciation of the combat techniques and terrain of the area in which Osama bin Laden's family originated. The Hardamaut region of Yemen provides Al-Qaeda with a strong base of support among a few of its tribes. Egyptian military planners attempted to pacify the region with the help of Yemeni Republican forces; however, their task was made even more complex when royalist forces were backed by Saudi, Jordanian, Iranian, and British support.

A Backwater of World War I

Using tribal levies, the Ottoman Turks

created four battalions of gendarme and three cavalry regiments. In 1906, the Italians recruited thousands of Yemeni and gave them military training in their colony of Somalia before sending them to Libya to fight the Sanussi insurgency of 1911. It would be a combination of these forces that held stronger ties to tribe that would rebel against Ottoman rule in Yemen in World War I. Aware of the gains made by the Hashemites to the North and their Arab Revolt, Yemeni tribes began their own attacks on Ottoman forces. Although not as famous as the revolts involving T.E. Lawrence, the Yemeni revolt led to the withdrawal of Turkish units by 1918 and the establishment of an Imamate under the Imam Yahya.

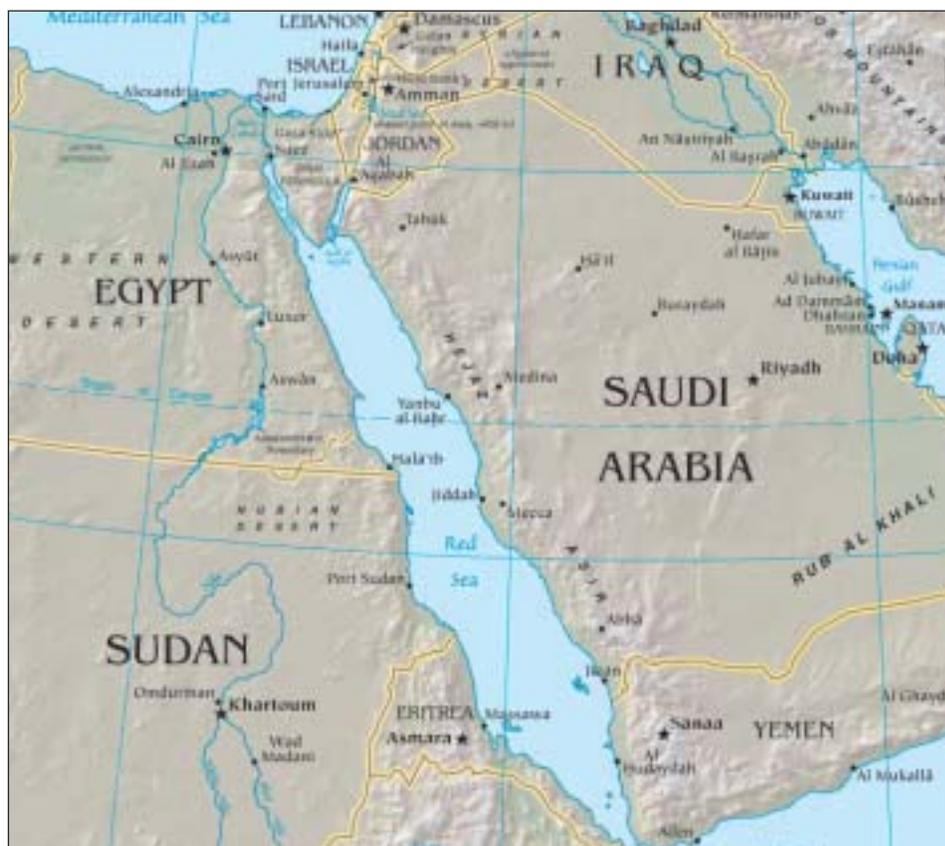
Yahya kept a cadre of 300 Ottoman officers and soldiers to train the Imamate Army. They divided the Yemeni forces into

several formations:

◆ The Al-Muzaffar Army — This was the tribal levy begun by the Ottomans and diverted to Imam Yahya in 1919. A fascinating element is that each tribe included a retainer who reported on the behavior, awards, and misdeeds of members of his tribe. If a member of the tribal levy stole, or left without permission, the retainer and tribal chief compensated the Imam for the loss.

◆ The Defensive Army — Created in 1936, it was a draft of all able-bodied men capable of bearing arms. The difference was that each person was given six months training and the draft included urban Yemenis. They received periodic training for 10 years. This was a primitive form of reserve army that trained 15,000 per year.

◆ The Outback Army — This was an



exclusive fighting force in which Zeidi tribesmen, of the same religious sect as the Imam, brought their own rifle and provisions. This irregular infantry and cavalry force served for one to two years and then another soldier was provided by the Zeidis. They numbered 50,000 at any given time.

◆ Special Imamate Guard — Specially selected for their absolute loyalty to the monarch, they were called the “Ukfa” and numbered about 5,000.

Military Training Missions

Yemeni officers who undertook failed coup d' etats in 1947 and 1955, before the successful 1962 coup, all received advanced military training in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. These officers were in awe of the great cities of Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. They lamented the backwardness of their own nation and received heavy doses of Arab nationalism, ideas on how civil-society functioned, and much more. Some listened to the methods by which Nasser and his free officers overthrew the monarchy of King Farouk, and dreamt of doing the same in Yemen.

Italy provided six tanks, 2,000 rifles, four anti-air guns and communications gear in 1926. Iraq provided rifles and communications equipment. Four officers and noncommissioned officers along with four cannons, six heavy machine guns, 12 light machine guns and 20 rifles came from Egypt in 1954. Throughout 1956 and 1957, Soviet freighters brought the largest infusion of modern weapons into Yemen. It included tanks, artillery, planes, armored cars, submachine guns, and small arms, many of which were left boxed in crates.

Organization of the 1962 Revolution

Upon the death of Imam Ahmed on September 18, 1962, the Imam who had ruled ruthlessly for three decades was succeeded by his son Imam Badr. The army officers argued on whether to strike now or wait until Imam Badr's uncle Prince Hassan returned from abroad to capture them both. Colonel Abdullah Sallal decided to act and ordered that the military academy in Sana'a go on full alert — opening all armories and having weapons issued to all junior officers and troops. On the evening of September 25, Sallal gathered known leaders of the

Yemeni nationalist movement and others officers who had sympathized or participated in the military protests of 1955. Each officer and cell would be given orders and would commence as soon as the shelling of Imam Badr's palace began. Key areas that would be secured included:

- * Al-Bashaer Palace (Al-Badr's Palace);
- * Al-Wusul Palace (Reception area for dignitaries);
- * Radio Station;
- * Telephone Exchange;
- * Qasr al-Silaah (Main Armory); and
- * Central Security Headquarters (Intelligence and Internal Security).

The revolution was carried out with 13 tanks from the Badr Brigade, six armored vehicles, two mobile artillery cannons, and two anti-air guns. Command and control of the forces loyal to the coup would take place at the Military Academy.

The Dynamics of the Coup

A unit of revolutionary officers accompanied by tanks headed towards Al-Bashaer Palace. By microphone, they voiced an appeal to the Imamate Guard for tribal solidarity and to surrender Imam Al-Badr, who would be sent peacefully into exile. The Imamate Guard refused to surrender and opened fire, leading the revolutionary leaders to respond with tank and artillery shells. The rebels planned to deploy tanks and artillery in the coup. Amazingly, the coup leaders had only five rounds per tank. The battle at the palace continued until guards surrendered to the revolutionaries the following morning. The radio station was first to fall, secured after a loyalist officer was killed and resistance collapsed. The armory was perhaps the easiest target, as a written order from Colonel Sallal was sufficient to open the storage facility, beat the royalists, and secure rifles, artillery and ammunition for the resistance. The telephone exchange likewise fell without any resistance. At the Al-Wusul Palace, revolutionary units remained secure under the guise of granting and protecting diplomats and dignitaries staying there to greet the new Imam of Yemen. By late morning on September 26, all areas of Sana'a were secure and the radio broadcast that Imam Al-Badr had been overthrown by the new revolutionary

government in power. Revolutionary cells in the cities of Taiz, Al-Hujja and the port city of Hodeida then began securing arsenals, airports and port facilities.

It is important to realize that throughout the reign of Imam Ahmed, dissent, revolution, and intrigue reigned. The Imam suffered from no less than 12 attempts on his life, including a failed assassination while on his deathbed. What Colonels Al-Sallal, Mohammed Al-Zubairi, Abdulrahman Al-Baidani and Mahasen Al-Aini did was coordinate the various aspects of revolutionary activity into one concerted effort. The group's leader, Al-Sallal, was influenced by readings about the French revolution and Nasser's book, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*. Al-Baidani, an intellectual holding a doctorate degree, was an ideologue who did not share in Nasser's vision. He wanted to create a Republic along Yemeni lines, not emulate Nasser, which was the path Al-Sallal had chosen. The two would come to a head with Al-Sallal eventually coming out on top.

On September 28, the radio announced the death of Imam Al-Badr, who was still very much alive. By this time, Al-Badr had left the capital of Sana'a and fled towards Al-Hujjah to the north. He intended to do what his forefathers had done — rally tribes in the north and in the Hadramaut Mountains and wage a war to regain his capital. Egyptian General Ali Abdul Hameed was dispatched by plane, and arrived on September 29 to assess the situation and needs of the Yemeni Revolutionary Command Council. Not wasting any time for a review of what was going on in Yemen, the Egyptians gave a battalion of Special Forces (Saaqah) the mission to act as personal guards for Yemeni Colonel Al-Sallal. They arrived at Hodeida on October 5.

Anwar Sadat was convinced that a regiment reinforced with aircraft could firmly secure Al-Sallal and his free officer movement. Events moved quickly and Saudi Arabia, fearing Nasserist encroachment, moved troops along its border with Yemen, as the Jordanian monarch dispatched his Army chief of staff for discussions with Imam Al-Badr's uncle, Prince Hassan. Between October 2-8, four Saudi cargo planes left Saudi Arabia loaded with arms and military material for Yemeni

royalist tribesmen; however, the pilots defected to Aswan, Egypt. Ambassadors from Bonn, London, U.S. and Amman supported the Imam while ambassadors from Cairo, Rome and Belgrade declared support for the republican revolution.

Egyptian Strategic Rationale

Egyptian military thinkers have debated the reasons why their forces were sent to Yemen. Anthony Nutting's definitive biography of Gamal Abdul-Nasser identifies several factors that led the Egyptian President to send expeditionary forces to Yemen. Among the situations pressuring Nasser was the unraveling of the union with Syria in 1961, which meant that the United Arab Republic (UAR) he created in 1958 lasted barely 18 months. Nasser needed to regain prestige after Syria's separation from his union. A quick decisive victory in Yemen could help him recover leadership of the Arab world. Nasser also had his reputation as an anti-colonial force, setting his sights on ridding South Yemen and its strategic port city of Aden, of British forces.

Dana Adams Schmidt's book, *Yemen, the Unknown War*, reveals Nasser's initial willingness to wait out Imam Ahmed and work with his son Imam Badr. However, the hostile relations between the old Imam and Nasser were evident in a poem written in 1961 by Yemen's monarch criticizing Nasser. The Egyptian Pan-Arabist leader then responded on Radio Cairo.

The book that best places a reader into President Nasser's mindset leading to the commitment of troops in Yemen is General Mahmoud Adel Ahmed's 1992 book *Memories of the Yemen War 1962-1967*. It was published in Arabic as *Dhikrayat Harb Al-Yaman*. The author highlights that on September 29 the decision was debated by Egypt's National Command Council. The council felt it necessary to send an Egyptian expeditionary force as a deterrent to Arab monarchies bent on the destruction of the Yemen coup and, in particular, to deter Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed Heikal, a chronicler of Egyptian national policy decision making and confidant of Nasser, wrote in *For Egypt Not For Nasser*, that he had engaged Nasser on the subject of supporting the coup in Yemen. Heikal argued that Colonel Al-

Sallal's revolution could not absorb the massive amount of Egyptian forces that would arrive in Yemen to prop up his regime, and that it would be wise to consider sending Arab nationalist volunteers from throughout the Middle-East to fight alongside the Republican Yemeni forces. Heikal discussed the example of the Spanish Civil War as a template from which to conduct events in Yemen. Nasser refused Heikal's ideas and was adamant about the need to protect the Arab nationalist movement. Nasser was convinced that a regiment of Egyptian Special Forces and a wing of fighter-bombers would be able to secure the Yemeni Republican coup d'etat. Nasser had looked to regime change in Yemen since 1957 and finally put his desires into practice in January 1962 by giving the Free Yemen Movement office space, financial support, and radio air time.

Among the items in Nasser's mind when he sent forces to Yemen were:

- ▶ Impact of his support to the Algerian War of Independence from 1954-1962.

- ▶ Syria breaking up from Nasser's United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1961.

- ▶ British and French relations were strained by Nasser's support for the Algerians and primarily for his efforts to undermine the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which caused the downfall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958.

- ▶ Nasser saw it as Egypt's destiny to confront imperialism.

- ▶ Nasser's Defense Minister, Field Marshal Amer, was quoted as saying that securing Yemen for Republican forces was vital to Egypt's national interest, by guaranteeing dominance of the Red Sea from the Suez Canal to the Bab-el-Mandab Strait.

- ▶ Yemen was seen as a way of settling the score with the Saudi royal family, who Nasser felt had undermined his union with Syria.

Nasser and his Field Marshals on the Yemen War

Within three months of sending troops to Yemen, Nasser realized that this would require a larger commitment than anticipated. By early 1963, he would begin a four-year quest to extricate Egyptian forces from Yemen, using an unsuccessful face-saving mechanism, only to find himself committing more troops.

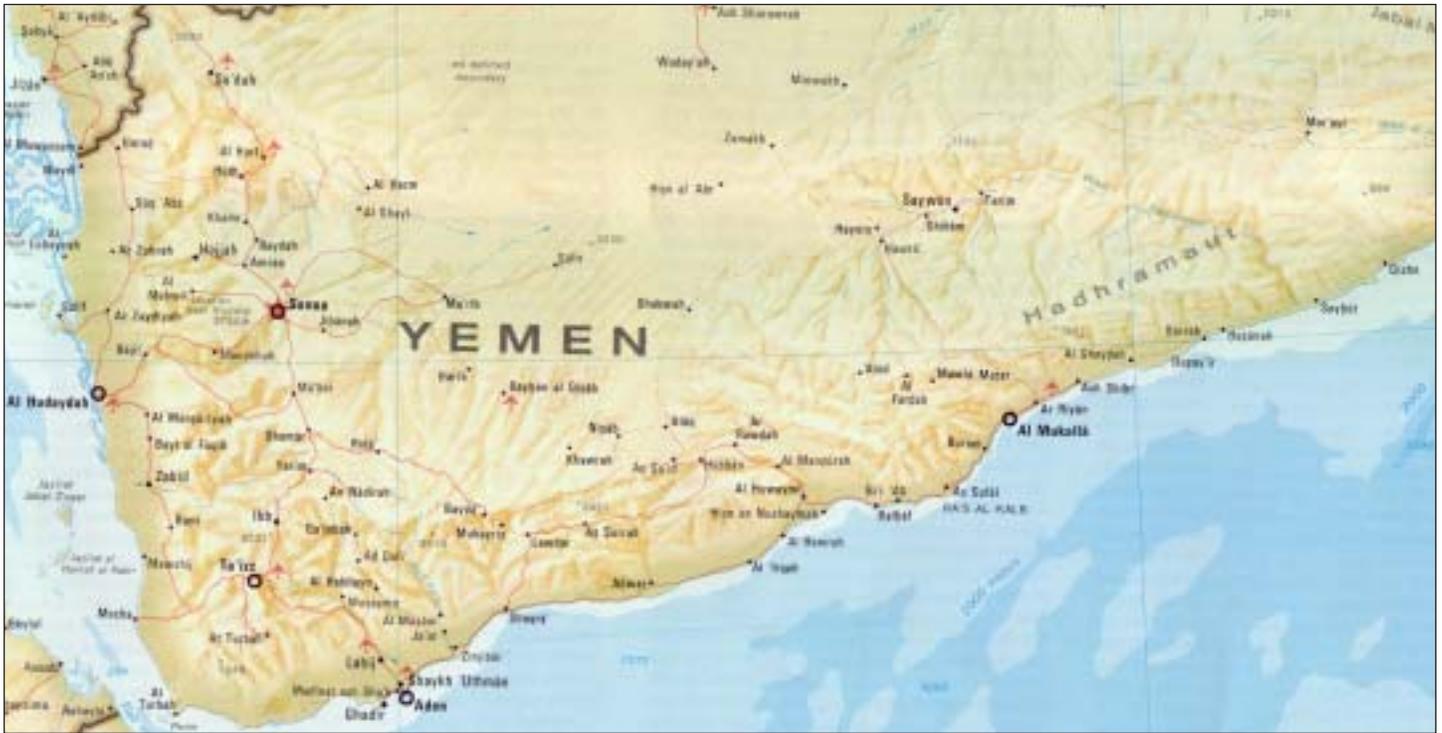
A little less than 5,000 troops were sent in October 1962. Two months later, Egypt had 15,000 regular troops deployed. By late 1963, the number was increased to 36,000; and in late 1964, the number rose to 50,000 Egyptian troops in Yemen. Late 1965 represented the high-water mark of Egyptian troop commitment in Yemen at 55,000 troops, which were broken into 13 infantry regiments of one artillery division, one tank division and several Special Forces as well as paratroop regiments.

Ambassador Ahmed Abu-Zeid served as Egypt's ambassador to Royalist Yemen from 1957 to 1961. He sent numerous valuable reports on Yemen that did not reach Ministry of Defense officials and seemed to be buried in the Foreign Ministry. He warned Egyptian officials in Cairo, including Defense Minister Amer, that the tribes were difficult and had no sense of loyalty or nationhood. The Ambassador stood against sending Egyptian combat forces and argued that only money and equipment be sent to the Yemeni Free Officers. Abu Zeid warned that the Saudis would flood Yemen with money to turn against the revolution.

Nasser and his Revolutionary Command Council did not understand that placement of troops in Yemen - at the gates of Saudi Arabia - would be viewed as a matter of life or death to the Al-Saud family, as well as increase the threat of British forces stationed in the Protectorate of Aden. These effects were not taken into consideration when the final decision was made to commit Egyptian forces in Yemen. Another hidden dimension of the power struggle was Saudi Arabia seeking to be the dominant influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Nasser's expeditionary forces threatened the traditional dominance Saudi Arabia enjoyed over Yemen and the other gulf states.

Running a War without Maps

All the Egyptian field commanders complained of a total lack of topographical maps causing a real problem in the first months of the war. Commanders could not plan military operations effectively nor could they send back routine and casualty reports without accurate coordinates. Field units were given maps that were only of use for aerial navigation. Chief of Egyptian Intelligence, Salah Nasr, admitted that



information on Yemen was nonexistent. Egypt had not had an embassy in Yemen since 1961; therefore when Cairo requested information from the U.S. ambassador to Yemen, all he provided was an economic report on the country.

The lack of adequate maps and understanding of the terrain would continue to dog Egyptian forces in Yemen. Of the commanders sent to execute Operation 9000, as Egyptian war planners called the Yemen War, only General Talaat Hassan Ali, an Egyptian of Yemeni descent from the Bani Saand Tribe, had any real knowledge of Yemen.

The Saudis and Royalists did not suffer from these problems as the tribes of Southern Saudi Arabia and Northern Yemen were closely linked. In addition, the Saudis enticed thousands of Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia to assist the royalist cause. The increase in Egyptian forces was a direct result of Saudi and British escalation, not driven by terrain or actual offensive studies. In addition to the Saudis and British, the Iraqis also sent plane loads of Baathist Yemenis to undermine the survival of the pro-Egyptian Al-Sallal Free Officer's regime.

Egyptians Realize the Importance of Airpower

From 1962 to the end of the Yemen War, the Egyptian general staff quickly came to appreciate the power of airlift. Its impact on the Egyptians was not made clear in Yemen until October 1963. At that time, Algerian leader Ahmed Ben Bella became embroiled in a desert war with the U.S.-friendly Moroccan monarchy over an area of the Sahara awarded to Algeria by the French. The Algerians possessed only a guerilla army that confronted conventional armored forces of the Royal Moroccan Army. Algerian President Ben Bella appealed to Nasser for help which came in the form of a massive sea and airlift of tanks and equipment that according to Nutting was of remarkable speed and efficiency

for the Egyptian army. It enabled the Algerians to hold the disputed territory. In January 1964, royalist forces sieged the Yemeni capital Sana'a. Egyptian Anotnov heavy-lift cargo planes airlifted tons of food and kerosene into the region. The Egyptians estimate that hundreds of millions of dollars were spent to equip Egyptian and Republican Yemeni forces, and in addition, Moscow refurbished the Al-Rawda Airfield outside Sana'a. The politburo saw a chance to gain a toehold on the Arabian Peninsula and accepted hundreds of Egyptian officers to be trained as pilots for service in the Yemen War.

Egyptian air and naval forces began bombing and shelling raids in the Saudi southwestern city of Najran and the coastal town of Jizan, which were staging points for royalist forces. In response, the Saudis purchased a British Thunderbird air defense system and developed their airfield in Khamis Mushayt. Riyadh also attempted to convince Washington to respond on its behalf. President Kennedy sent only a wing of jet fighters and bombers to Dhahran Airbase, demonstrating to Nasser the seriousness of American commitment to defending U.S. interests in Saudi Arabia.

Israeli Interests in the Conflict

Strategically, the Yemen War was an opportunity for Israel. It stagnated Egyptian military plans for the reinforcement of the Sinai by shifting the Egyptian military focus to another theater of operation. Egyptian historian Mohammed Heikal writes that Israel provided arms shipments and also cultivated relationships with hundreds of European mercenaries fighting for the royalists in Yemen. Tel-Aviv established a covert air-supply bridge from Djibouti to North Yemen. The war also gave Israelis the opportunity to assess Egyptian combat tactics and adaptability. Heikal believes missions, such as Israeli General Moshe Dayan observing U.S. forces in Vietnam, were part of a deliberate effort to collect

information on eastern, Soviet, and Chinese-based guerilla tactics as well as learn how to respond to a movement of nationalist liberation. The Palestine Liberation Organization had already begun to absorb the lessons of the Viet Cong by the mid-1970s.

Royalists Yemeni Forces and Their Contributors

In 1963 alone, the Saudis spent \$15 million to equip royalist tribes, hire hundreds of European mercenaries, and establish their own radio station. Pakistan, which saw a chance to make money in the conflict, extended rifles to the royalists. Remnants of the Imam's Army also had elements of the Saudi National Guard fight alongside its ranks. Iran subsidized royalist forces on and off, as the Shah felt compelled, to provide the Shiite Zeidi Imam Al-Badr with financing. The British allowed convoys of arms to flow through one of its allies in Northern Yemen, the Sherief of Beijan, who was protected by the British administration in Aden. British military planes conducted night operations to resupply Imam Badr's forces.

Imam Al-Badr had formed two royalist armies — one under his uncle Prince Hassan in the east and one under his own control in the west. Both armies controlled most of the north and east of Yemen, including the towns of Harib and Marib. The provincial capital of Northern Yemen, Sadah, which would have given the Imam a key strategic road towards the main capital Sana'a, was controlled by the republicans. There were also areas like the town of Hajjah, where they the royalists controlled the mountains while the Egyptians and republicans controlled the town and fortress. Mercenaries from France, Belgium and England, who had fought in Rhodesia, Malaya, Indochina and Algeria, were sent to assist the Imam in planning, training and giving the irregular forces the ability to communicate with one another and the Saudis. They trained tribesmen in the use of antitank weapons, such as the 106mm gun and in mining techniques. The numbers of mercenaries are unknown but it seems they numbered in the hundreds, not 15,000, as reported by Egyptian sources. Royalist tactics were confined to guerilla warfare, isolating conventional Egyptian and Republican forces, and conducting attacks on supply lines.

Operational Phases of Combat

The Egyptian General Staff divided the Yemen War into three operational objectives. The first was the air phase, it began with jet trainers modified to strafe and carry bombs and ended with three wings of fighter-bombers, stationed near the Saudi-Yemeni border. Egyptian sorties went along the Tiahma Coast of Yemen and into the Saudi town of Najran and Jizan. It was designed to attack royalist ground formations and substitute the lack of Egyptian formations on the ground with high-tech airpower.

In combination with Egyptian air strikes, a second operational phase involved securing major routes leading to the capitol Sana'a, and from their secure key towns and hamlets. The largest offensive based on this operational tactic was the March 1963 "Ramadan" Offensive that lasted until February 1964, focused on opening and securing roads from Sana'a to Sadah to the North, and Sana'a to Marib to the East. The success of the Egyptian forces meant that royalist resistance could take refuge in hills and mountains to regroup and carry out hit-and-run offensives against republican

and Egyptian units controlling towns and roads.

The third strategic offensive was the pacification of tribes and their enticement to the republican government, meaning the expenditures of massive amounts of funds for humanitarian needs and outright bribery of tribal leaders.

By 1967, Egyptian forces would rely exclusively on defending a triangle linking Hodeida, Taiz and Sana'a. It struck southern Saudi Arabia and North Yemen with air sorties and Nasser desperately wanted a mutual withdrawal of Egyptian and Saudi forces, and a face-saving way out of Yemen. It came in the form of the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasser's saber rattling, coupled with a withdrawal of United Nations forces from the Sinai, led Israel to take a bold offensive defeating the combined armed forces of Syria, Egypt and Jordan. After the Six-Day War, Arabs began to unify against Israel, and this gave Nasser a way out of Yemen at the Arab Summit in Khartoum. From 1968 to 1971, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, along with hundreds of mercenaries, began a disengagement from Yemen.

In comparing Egyptian tactical performance in this conflict with that of others, Egypt demonstrates a higher level of initiative and military innovation. For instance, early in the war, Egyptians modified jet trainers and Soviet transports into strafers and bombers. Egyptians evolved their tactics, but were bogged down in a guerilla stalemate. War planners in Cairo also realized that the Bab-el-Mandab Strait offered a deeper strategic means of blockading oil supplies to Israel, a tactic they employed in the 1973 Yom-Kippur War. Yet another lesson is the Saudi-Wahabi ability to support a Shiite regime of royalist Yemen against what they perceived as godless Nasserist socialists. Indeed, this war is the clearest indication of staunch Wahabi Sunnis cooperating with Shiites in combat. This should shed light on the present day notions of Al-Qaeda cooperating with Shiite organizations such as Hezbollah.

The Yemen War also offers a model from which to compare and contrast today's war on terrorism, in the hills of Yemen, using UAVs. It seems aerial assaults are still the ideal method of catching tribal and terrorist cells hiding in the caves and mountains of North Yemen. Finally, it is vital in today's post September 11th environment to rediscover these obscure insurgency wars waged in the Middle East. Another example worthy of study is the insurgency supported by Nasser of the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY), a means by which British forces could be diverted to subduing their own war in South Yemen, that would lead to the only communist nation in the Arab World. This would be another theater, and aspect, of the Yemen War not covered in this essay. There are also border wars between Oman and Saudi Arabia, and insurgencies known as the Dhoffar Rebellion in Oman, all of which offer students lessons in border control, desert warfare and mountainous guerilla tactics.

Lieutenant Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein is currently serving as the country director for North Africa and Egypt at the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He is a frequent contributor of essays and reviews on Middle East issues for Department of Defense publications. Translations of Arabic materials cited represent Aboul-Enein's understanding of the material and any errors are unintended. Special thanks go to the Pentagon and Georgetown University librarians and Julia East, a James Madison University student, for their assistance in preparing the article.
