

# Lessons Learnt

## Assessing the Merits of Covert Intervention: Lessons from British Experiences in South Arabia



Dr Rory Cormac

AHRC PUBLIC POLICY SERIES NO 6



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

# Assessing the Merits of Covert Intervention:

Lessons from British Experiences in South Arabia

**Report for the 'History of British Intelligence  
and Security' research project**

December 2012

**Dr Rory Cormac**



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Published by Arts and Humanities Research Council  
Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon, Wiltshire, SN2 1FL  
[www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

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Published December 2012

Design by Rumba.

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# Background

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The 'Lessons Learnt' project was originally funded by a grant from King's College London. In May and June 2010 Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, with AHRC funding, ran a series of 5 policy seminars on *Lessons Learnt from the History of British Intelligence and Security*. These were held in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Cabinet Office, King's College London and The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Just under 180 people attended the seminar series in total, from both academia and government. The output from these has subsequently been published in a book called *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011). The rationale for this initiative and the current one have come from the 2004 Butler Report into the Iraq war (and the intelligence situation that contributed to it), which concluded that the historical lessons had been forgotten, and that a regular review process should be instigated.

## The Current Project

This current project aims to build upon the 2010 seminars, improving and developing the relationship between researchers and government via the production of research and briefing papers, and seminars held in Whitehall. The primary impact is on improving national security, achieved via academics contributing to the development of the government's analytical capability.

The project is split into two halves:

- Highlighting historical examples of good analysis.
- Improving understanding of regions of current interest.

Leading academics have been specially commissioned to produce research and briefing papers for a Whitehall audience. This publication series reproduces the reports.

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## Executive Summary

This report examines the role of intelligence assessment in determining the merits of covert intervention. Focusing on the British experiences in Yemen and South Arabia (1962-1967), it identifies how effective intelligence analysis can guide the decision making process and help ensure any covert intervention is conducted as responsibly as possible, with the best chances of meeting British short and long term interests. In doing so, it identifies transferable lessons from successful intelligence analysis regarding South Arabia, which could potentially be applied to twenty-first century situations.

Whilst the British withdrawal from South Arabia in 1967 is generally considered to be the result of a humiliating political and military failure, the management of covert action is one area in which the joint intelligence machinery arguably saw successes and exerted a positive effect on policymakers. Effective and accurate intelligence analysis by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) helped ensure that proposals for covert action in the region were adequately scrutinised, and that any sanctioned action was conducted as responsibly as possible so as to minimise potentially harmful repercussions. This ultimately moderated more belligerent and aggressive proposals and ensured that covert action was conducted in a less gung-ho manner than may otherwise have been the case. Moreover, whilst ultimately unable to safeguard British interests in the region, covert action helped push back the Egyptians from the South Arabian frontier and tied down Egyptian forces in the Yemen, thereby causing President Nasser much inconvenience.

Almost immediately after the Yemeni coup of 1962, local authorities and certain ministers bombarded policymakers in Whitehall with requests for covert action. These called for military support for friendly tribes on the South Arabian frontier, but extended to include direct intervention in the Yemeni civil war and even the assassination of Egyptian intelligence officers. Using interviews, recently declassified documents, and a critical re-interpretation of existing archival sources, this paper examines how intelligence assessments analysed the merits of covert intervention and the impact this had on ultimate policy.

It examines two aspects of intelligence analysis. Firstly, it discusses how the JIC initially analysed the benefits and limitations of covert (as well as of overt) action. This included whether or not covert intervention could make a tangible difference, as well as determining the implications and potential ramifications of such action. It demonstrates how the committee analysed the strength and reliability of the local rebels and tribes and consequently warned of the dangers and limitations of covert action. Secondly, this paper

examines how the joint intelligence machinery analysed the accuracy and potential bias of local intelligence to ensure that Britain was not being drawn into a conflict under false pretences. Once again, this caused the JIC to express caution regarding covert action.

This paper then examines the impact such assessment had on policy formulation. It argues firstly that intelligence actors ensured covert action was not implemented too hastily. Secondly, it demonstrates how the JIC, and other Whitehall actors, served as a counterweight to more hawkish covert action proposals emanating from certain quarters. This ensured that all proposals were efficiently channelled, scrutinised, and coordinated in a responsible manner so as to best meet British interests.

This paper closes by identifying transferable lessons from this episode, which could well be applied to decisions relating to future British interventions. These include the importance of (i) a thorough risk assessment, (ii) an objective and strong intelligence assessment machinery willing to defy the expectations of certain consumers, (iii) the willingness and ability to identify biased or flawed intelligence from the field during the intelligence assessment process, and (iv) adequate structural machinery in place to ensure that covert action proposals are sufficiently scrutinised and coordinated so as to best meet British interests.

## **Series Editor's Notes**

This report is the first written for the historical component of the project. The rationale is straightforward: that there is value in identifying historical lessons from the past in order to avoiding the repetition of mistakes in the future; equally as compelling is the importance in learning about successful actions. This paper perfectly demonstrates the logic behind this. Dr Rory Cormac, a leading expert on British colonial intelligence, explores the role of intelligence assessment in planning for covert intervention. Focusing on the British experience in Yemen and South Arabia (1962-1964), the report identifies how effective intelligence analysis can help ensure any such action is objectively assessed and thus best placed to meet British interests.

**Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman**



# Introduction

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This paper explores the role of intelligence assessment in determining the use of covert intervention. Focusing on the British experience in Yemen and South Arabia (1962-1964), it identifies how effective intelligence analysis can help guide the decision making process and help ensure any covert intervention is properly assessed and thus best placed to meet British short and long term interests. Whilst the British withdrawal from South Arabia in 1967 is considered a failure, the management of covert action is one area in which the joint intelligence machinery enjoyed success and impacted beneficially on policymakers. Intelligence was of course just one input among many informing government debate and it would be over simplistic to assert otherwise in many cases. That said, however, effective and accurate intelligence analysis by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) was a useful source in planning covert intervention. This paper examines two aspects of intelligence analysis: firstly, how the JIC assessed the merits of covert intervention; and secondly how the committee assessed the accuracy of local sources to ensure that Britain was not being drawn into a conflict under false pretences. It then considers the impact intelligence assessments had on the ultimate policy chosen, before closing by identifying transferable lessons from this episode, which could be applied to decisions relating to future British interventions. It contends that in the early years of the violence (1962-1964), intelligence assessment was a useful tool in ensuring that covert action was not sanctioned too hastily and aggressively.

Some context on the South Arabian insurgency and the Yemeni civil war is, however, a necessary starting point. Despite Harold Macmillan's famous 'Wind of Change' speech in 1960, some of Britain's imperial possessions were considered too important to relinquish to the forces of nationalism. As a strategic port in the oil trade and a base from which to project British influence, Aden certainly fell into this category. When a nationalist uprising erupted in the new Federation of South Arabia,<sup>1</sup> leading to the declaration of emergency

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<sup>1</sup> In 1959, six states in the Western Aden Protectorate (an area which evolved in the hinterland of the Aden colony) formed a Federation of Arab Emirates of the South and signed a treaty of mutual cooperation with Britain. This grew to 11 in by 1962 and Aden joined in January 1963, by which time it was renamed the Federation of South Arabia (FSA). Britain hoped the move would protect the British base but it served to anger nationalists and create unrest.

in December 1963, British policymakers and military planners were therefore determined to implement an effective counterinsurgency strategy. Yet by 1967, Britain had withdrawn from Aden, relinquished its military base, and cancelled defence commitments with the rulers of the adjoining South Arabian territories. Meanwhile, a civil war was simultaneously under way in Yemen pitting Republicans (who had overthrown the Imamate in September 1962 and who were swiftly supported by Nasser's Egypt) against the Royalists (loyal to the Imam and covertly aided by Saudi Arabia and some indirect British assistance).<sup>2</sup> This conflict overlapped significantly with events in South Arabia, thereby complicating British counterinsurgency and regional strategic policy, as Egyptian and Yemeni intelligence services increasingly directed terrorism and subversion against British interests in Aden.

Almost immediately after the Yemeni coup, local authorities and certain ministers bombarded policymakers in Whitehall with requests for covert action, ranging from military support for friendly tribes on the South Arabian frontier to direct intervention in the Yemeni civil war. Proponents of such measures included local colonial officials such as Aden Governor Charles Johnston and High Commissioner Kennedy Trevaskis who were under pressure from local tribal rulers for British support against territorial incursions from the north. These views were echoed by Conservative ministers in London who 'viewed Nasser as the great Satan'.<sup>3</sup> They included Billy McLean, Member of Parliament for Inverness but who had spent time with the Royalists and acted as an advisor to mercenaries operating in the region; Julian Amery, the Minister for Aviation; Enoch Powell, Minister for Health; Duncan Sandys, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations and also for the Colonies; and Peter Thorneycroft, Minister of (and later Secretary of State for) Defence.

With a history of clandestine operations over the Yemeni border dating back to the 1950s,<sup>4</sup> Britain initially authorised limited covert action and this was extended in the summer of 1964. However, local officials and the aforementioned politicians pressed for deeper, more aggressive, and more direct intervention throughout. Objective intelligence assessments were therefore necessary to help policymakers determine levels of British intervention required, to assess the merits of covert action, and to help ensure that this potentially risky strategy was used cautiously. Although Britain was ultimately forced to withdraw, covert action, according to Lord Shackleton, minister without portfolio under

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<sup>2</sup> For more detail see Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War, 1962-65*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Gandy, 'A Mission to Yemen: August 1962 – January 1963', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25/2 (1998) p.263

<sup>4</sup> Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire' pp.109-114

Harold Wilson, was 'extremely successful. [It was] effective both in driving the Egyptians back from parts of the South Arabian frontier and in causing the Egyptians considerable inconvenience by tying down a disproportionate number of Egyptian forces.'<sup>5</sup>

Covert action is a risky strategy and proposals regarding Yemen were potentially dangerous as they grew in scope, ambition, and directness. Under Lock Johnson's 'ladder of escalation' model, the proposals were 'high risk options' given that they involved arms supplies but had the potential to develop into 'extreme options' in the form of a major secret war.<sup>6</sup> Before sanctioning covert action, it was therefore vital that the intelligence services were able to conduct an objective assessment of the likely risks and gains, and of the benefits and limitations.<sup>7</sup> Indeed British journalist Anthony Verrier wrote at the end of the conflict that the covert action was very much a double-edged sword with inherent risks involved. Whilst, 'it helped secure the demise of Nasser in Yemen', aggressive intervention, he argued, undermined South Arabian security.<sup>8</sup> Intelligence assessments were therefore important in ensuring the right balance can be met.

## Intelligence analysis

By 1962, the JIC had resided in the Cabinet Office for five years and enjoyed access to high-level policymakers. During the mid 1960s, the committee was chaired by a senior Foreign Office official and composed of representatives from all three intelligence agencies and policymaking departments such as the Ministry of Defence, Colonial Office, Foreign Office, and Commonwealth Relations Office. It was charged with conducting threat assessments from which policy options could be formulated. Operating at the apex of the British intelligence system, the JIC conducted assessments into Yemen and South Arabia which included *inter alia* the risks, limitations, and benefits of embarking upon a policy of covert intervention. From the very outbreak of the violence, centralised intelligence assessments expressed caution about the merits of covert intervention. Firstly, the committee felt that supporting the Royalists would be futile and impose risks

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Spencer Mawby, *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates 1955-67: Last Outpost of a Middle East Empire* (London: Routledge, 2005) p.141

<sup>6</sup> Lock Johnson, 'On Drawing a Bright Line for Covert Operations', *The American Journal of International Law* 86/2 (1992) p.286

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Trevorton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p.193; William Daugherty, 'Covert Action: Strengths and Weaknesses', in L. Johnson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p.613

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Verrier, 'British Military Policy on Arabia: Some Lessons for the Future', *Journal of the RUSI* 112/648 (November 1967), p.352

for little gain; secondly, the JIC grew concerned about the reliability of intelligence which pushed for an escalation of covert intervention.

Assessing the likely outcome of the Yemeni civil war, the JIC predicted stalemate. This had important ramifications for the use of covert action as assessments of the balance of power impacted upon the level of potential intervention authorised and crucially its chances of success. Predictions of Republican discontent fuelled arguments for covert intervention to speed the process along, whilst predictions of Royalist difficulties generated calls for urgent British assistance. In fact at various points in the conflict, proponents of covert action fluctuated between emphasis on both Royalist ascendancy and difficulty. And so the JIC's assessment of stalemate placed the committee at loggerheads with those pushing for intervention. Under pressure from Johnston who deemed the JIC view incorrect, the committee held its ground and concisely asserted in December 1962 that 'so long as Egypt continued its support of the Republicans, there was likely to be a stalemate on the present lines.'<sup>9</sup>

JIC conclusions were again later challenged by local authorities pushing for greater intervention. This time the Aden High Commissioner, Kennedy Trevaskis, used the Algerian war of independence as an analogy to argue that 'persistent skilful and well directed Royalist guerrilla tactics could cause such a degree of wear and tear on Egyptian forces that they could eventually be obliged to withdraw,' as had happened to the French in Algeria. Once again, however, the JIC stood firm by dismissing Trevaskis's analogy and arguing that the Egyptians would use tougher tactics than had the French.<sup>10</sup>

The JIC also made important assessments about the third parties to whom aid would be channelled – the British-backed tribes on the frontier and potentially the Royalists in Yemen. As Gregory Treverton has recently written, the secret nature of covert action renders it difficult for the sponsoring state to control the actions of third parties – yet unintended consequences of potential third party action could have negative political or security implications for that state.<sup>11</sup> Accurate intelligence assessments of the ability, motivations, and loyalty of the third party are therefore essential when planning covert intervention. Assessing these issues, the JIC doubted whether the Royalists had the ability and determination to fight a more aggressive campaign caused by increased covert intervention. The committee doubted the Royalists' willingness to accept the losses that

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<sup>9</sup> 'JIC Minutes', 6th December 1962, JIC(62)63rd Meeting, CAB 159/38

<sup>10</sup> 'JIC Minutes', 25th March 1964, JIC(64)16th Meeting, CAB 159/40

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Treverton, 'Covert Action: Forward to the Past' in Lock Johnson (ed.) *Strategic Intelligence Volume 3: Covert Action, Behind the Veils of Secret Foreign Policy* (Westport CT: Praeger Security International, 2007) p.14

inevitable Egyptian reprisals would bring. In fact, the JIC dismissed the Royalists as having 'so far shown little inclination to die for their cause.'<sup>12</sup> Whilst seemingly blunt or flippant, assessments of this nature were vital for it would have presented an insurmountable risk to offer weapons (with all the negative political consequences entailed) to a third party lacking sufficient motivation to succeed.

Similarly, the JIC expressed reservations about the loyalty of these tribes. Emphasising issues of tribal venality, the committee warned that they were ready to cause trouble for anyone 'on either side' if given arms, money and encouragement.<sup>13</sup> Highlighting the potential dangers of covert action, the JIC thus felt it was dangerous to place confidence, security, reputation, and money into groups vulnerable to counter-bribery. This again was an important judgement when planning covert action.

A further important assessment to be made involved considering unintended consequences, future implications, and the dangers of mission-creep. To again quote Treverton: 'Small operations have often begun with grand purposes, objectives incommensurate with the instrument. When the goals could not be achieved, leaders were tempted to take the next step and the next [...] Sometimes a more limited objective can be achieved, but its achievement makes it appealing to hope for more.' Therefore at minimum intelligence must assess whether operations as initially conceived can achieve their purposes.<sup>14</sup> Given that those planning or calling for covert action can develop a personal stake or investment in its implementation and success, an objective interdepartmental body is necessary to assess such matters. Indeed, the JIC argued that 'the Royalists cannot be defeated nor can they win even with outside help unless such help went beyond the supply of equipment which they could operate themselves.'<sup>15</sup> The levels of escalation required to aid the Royalists decisively, including the supply of tanks and aircraft (and men to operate them), would therefore, according to the committee, probably lead to Egyptian reprisals.<sup>16</sup> It is commonly accepted that 'the more provocative or threatening the operations, the more apt they are to come to the attention of the target country's internal security service.'<sup>17</sup> As such, the JIC warned of dangerous escalation resulting from Egyptian awareness of British interference and subsequent reprisal attacks against British interests, thereby rendering covert action counter-productive. For example, the committee warned against increasing the scale of covert

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<sup>12</sup> JIC Minutes', 25th March 1964, JIC(64)16th Meeting, CAB 159/40

<sup>13</sup> 'Developments in the Arabia Peninsula and their Implications for Aden', 17th March 1964, JIC(64)32, CAB 158/52

<sup>14</sup> Treverton, 'Covert Action: Forward to the Past' p.14

<sup>15</sup> 'Developments in the Arabian Peninsula and their Implications for Aden,' 17th March 1964, JIC(64)32, CAB 158/52

<sup>16</sup> 'Developments in the Arabian Peninsula and their Implications for Aden,' 17th March 1964, JIC(64)32, CAB 158/52

<sup>17</sup> Daugherty, 'Covert Action' p.622

action because the 'provision of heavier weapons might well [...] be offset by the effects of reaction to their supply.'<sup>18</sup>

In addition to analysing the risks of covert action, JIC assessments also considered the accuracy of intelligence received from the theatre. Before embarking on covert intervention, it was crucial to ensure that sources were validated and that action was thus not being instigated under false pretences. All source intelligence analysis by an interdepartmental body operating at the apex of the intelligence structure was therefore a useful tool in evaluating and corroborating incoming information.

Fearing bias and exaggeration, the JIC was wary about intelligence reports emanating from local British authorities in the region. This was because, according to local Foreign Office officials for example, Kennedy Trevaskis was 'convinced that the Egyptians have a great plot' against South Arabia and therefore 'tends to interpret any incident [...] according to his theory,' thereby hindering objective analysis of the threat to Aden posed by the Yemeni civil war.<sup>19</sup> Governor Charles Johnston was perceived in a similar way and reports from Aden regularly suggested that the Royalist cause was strong, that Egyptian morale was low, that Nasser was anxious to withdraw, and that with some covert assistance from Britain Royalist tribesmen would be victorious in the civil war, which in turn would decrease the threat to Aden.<sup>20</sup> Yet the JIC treated such reports with caution, opting instead for signals intelligence acquired by GCHQ. In October 1962, using Sigint intercepts the JIC chairman Hugh Stephenson dismissed Johnston's reports and told Macmillan directly that Egyptian morale was high and that sources in Aden had 'clearly [...] exaggerated' reports of Egyptian defeats.<sup>21</sup> A similar instance occurred six weeks later when the JIC again dismissed Johnston's views by stating 'there was at present no evidence available to support the Governor's contention that Nasser was anxious to pull his forces out of the Yemen, and indeed there were some indications to the contrary.'<sup>22</sup>

At other points in the conflict, local intelligence reports emphasised Royalist difficulties and their imminent defeat, with all the consequences this would have had for British regional interests. Again, however, the JIC sensed bias and an agenda designed to encourage increased British covert assistance. Questions were consequently raised

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<sup>18</sup> 'Developments in the Arabian Peninsula and their Implications for Aden,' 17th March 1964, JIC(64)32, CAB 158/52

<sup>19</sup> Note from Bushell (Political Office M/E Command) to Benchley (FO), 19th March 1964, FO 371/174627

<sup>20</sup> Tom Bower, *The Perfect English Spy: Sir Dick White and the Secret War 1935-90*, (London: Heinemann, 1995) p.245; 'JIC Minutes', 6th December 1962, JIC(62)63rd Meeting, CAB 159/38; 'JIC Minutes', 25th March 1964, JIC(64)16th Meeting, CAB 159/40

<sup>21</sup> Gen.776/2nd Meeting, 31st October 1962, CAB 130/189; See also, Richard Aldrich, *GCHQ: The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency* (London: Harper Press, 2010) pp.163-164

<sup>22</sup> 'JIC Minutes', 6th December 1962, JIC(62)63rd Meeting, CAB 159/38

over their reliability. For example, tribal rulers and indigenous intelligence officers loyal to those rulers had motive to misrepresent the threat to induce further assistance from the British. In spring 1964, the committee assessed that 'we have no evidence that the Royalists are seriously short of ammunition and spares for their present scale of equipment (the various tribal and Royalist complaints of shortage probably reflect maldistribution and in any case have to be judged against determination to retain adequate reserves for purely sectional reasons).'<sup>23</sup>

Similar issues were raised regarding reports from alleged mercenary sources close to the Royalist tribes, who also pressed for deeper British covert involvement in the Yemeni civil war. Again the JIC treated such intelligence with caution and it is highly likely that intelligence perceived as biased was weeded out at the assessment phase. For example, the committee stressed the distinction between intelligence obtained via unprejudiced sources and that obtained 'from persons favourable to [the] Royalist Cause.'<sup>24</sup> Likewise the JIC was wary of assessments being exaggerated so as to indicate Royalist requirements should their activities become more ambitious, as advocated by the mercenaries, as opposed to their present requirements.<sup>25</sup> These concerns were echoed by the JIC's regional outpost, the JIC (Middle East).<sup>26</sup>

The centralised intelligence assessment process, embodied by the JIC, sought to evaluate sources and reduce bias to allow an objective foundation for decision-making. The system was not perfect, however, and the JIC can be accused of too quickly dismissing reports from local authorities or of overly relying on GCHQ and Foreign Office sources. Lack of space precludes a thorough exploration of these charges, but what is important for the purposes of this paper is that centralised intelligence assessment, at the apex of the British system, helped ensure that biased or exaggerated information from the theatre was evaluated and not allowed to detrimentally affect decision-making by leading to an overly aggressive covert action.

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<sup>23</sup> 'Developments in the Arabian Peninsula and their Implications for Aden,' 17th March 1964, JIC(64)32, CAB 158/52

<sup>24</sup> 'JIC Minutes', 2nd April 1964, JIC(64)17th Meeting, CAB 159/40

<sup>25</sup> 'JIC Minutes', 2nd April 1964, JIC(64)17th Meeting, CAB 159/40

<sup>26</sup> 'Weekly Intelligence Review as at 31st May 1963', 22/63, CO 1035/61; 'Weekly Intelligence Review as at 19th July 1963', 29/63, CO 1035/61

## Policy Impact

Covert action, however, is not essentially an intelligence activity but a foreign policy option, designed to influence events overseas in support of British interests.<sup>27</sup> Having considered some of the strengths of the intelligence analysis conducted by the JIC, it is now important to examine the impact these assessments had on the covert intervention sanctioned. The JIC's influence was intermittent in the early years of the conflict and assessments were used or overlooked depending on the consumers' interests. Although some officials and ministers vociferously disagreed with committee reviews, JIC reports were however used in planning covert intervention. They helped temper some of the more aggressive proposals and ensure that any action did not extend to actively taking sides in the civil war but was instead limited to counter-subversion along the frontier. It must, however, be noted that JIC assessments were only one source in moderating covert action. Other factors simply included bureaucratic delays in responding to and processing requests, as well as policy malaise owing to ongoing tension about the best means with which to proceed.

From the outbreak of the Yemeni conflict, the JIC chair fed intelligence directly to senior policymakers through attending ad hoc Cabinet committees. This happened for example in October 1962 when the committee's assessments of stalemate and its criticism of exaggerated local reports were used in debates regarding initial responses and potential recognition of the new Yemeni regime.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps such input casting doubt on the governor's assessment played a role in Macmillan's decision to sanction only some of Johnston's requests the following month.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, the Chiefs of Staff waited for JIC conclusions before planning action to 'counter border incursions and subversion in the Protectorate or hostile action affecting the security of the Aden base'.<sup>30</sup> Based on the JIC's threat assessment, military planners then began to liaise with the Colonial Office and a local security committee to consider how best to react to border skirmishes using counter subversion, infrastructure development, and propaganda.<sup>31</sup> Between late 1962 and early

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<sup>27</sup> James Scott and Jerel Rosati, "'Such Other Functions and Duties': Covert Action and American Intelligence Policy", in Lock Johnson (ed.) *Strategic Intelligence Volume 3: Covert Action, Behind the Veils of Secret Foreign Policy* (Westport CT: Praeger Security International, 2007) p.85; William Daugherty 'Political Action as a Tool of Statecraft', in Lock Johnson (ed.) *Strategic Intelligence Volume 3: Covert Action, Behind the Veils of Secret Foreign Policy* (Westport CT: Praeger Security International, 2007) p.120

<sup>28</sup> Gen.776/2nd Meeting, 31st October 1962, CAB 130/189

<sup>29</sup> Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire', pp.117-118

<sup>30</sup> Chief of the Defence Staff to Peter Thorneycroft, 'Review of Measures Necessitated by the Situation in the Yemen', 11th November 1962, DEFE 13/398

<sup>31</sup> Chief of the Defence Staff to Peter Thorneycroft, 'Review of Measures Necessitated by the Situation in the Yemen', 12th December 1962, DEFE 13/398



1964, the government authorised cautious covert action in the frontier area, including mine-laying, supplying arms to tribes, and sabotage.<sup>32</sup> This was ultimately defensive and more limited than requests from people like Johnston and Trevaskis, which included retaliatory action inside Yemen itself as well as covert military assistance directly to the Royalists and hence active involvement in the civil war.<sup>33</sup> As Spencer Mawby has argued, 'Macmillan's administration was willing to consider retaliatory action, though not on the scale which Johnston proposed.'<sup>34</sup>

A review of policy towards Aden and South Arabia took place in spring 1964, in which JIC intelligence assessments proved influential. The Prime Minister, Alec Douglas Home, requested a fresh look at the situation and commissioned an up-to-date JIC appreciation which was to be circulated amongst the most senior policymakers.<sup>35</sup> Although Douglas Home was not 'yet convinced' by the JIC's review,<sup>36</sup> the Foreign Secretary, Rab Butler, drew heavily on the committee's intelligence to argue for a distinction to be made between aiding the frontier tribes and the Yemeni Royalists. Butler wrote that 'we must look critically at the argument that the best way of countering U.A.R.-Yemeni subversion is to provide encouragement and help to the Yemeni Royalists.' Explicitly referring to the JIC's conclusions, he posited that direct aid to the Royalists was futile and risked escalating the violence.<sup>37</sup>

As part of the spring review, various proposals were made both in London and locally.<sup>38</sup> Reflecting the input of Butler and the JIC, those actions which were sanctioned demonstrated the distinction between defensive border operations and offensive aid to the Royalists as well as an unwillingness to engage in particularly aggressive operations. For example, 'actions to induce Yemeni tribes to neutralise centres of anti-Federation subversion' were sanctioned, whilst a suggestion to assassinate Egyptian Intelligence Officers was not. Shallow non-retaliatory sabotage was sanctioned, whilst proposals for action deep inside the Yemen were vetoed. Similarly, the government was prepared to

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<sup>32</sup> Foreign Secretary to Prime Minister, 'Yemen: Range of Possible Courses of Action Open to Us', attachment to 'Yemen and the Federation of South Arabia', 21st April 1964, DEFE 25/129

<sup>33</sup> 'Federation of South Arabia: Counter Subversion Measures, Note by the Colonial Office', 14th January 1964, DEFE 11/422; Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire' p.119

<sup>34</sup> Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire' p.118

<sup>35</sup> Note from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Secretary, 8th March 1964, PREM 11/4678

<sup>36</sup> Handwritten note by the Prime Minister on Foreign Secretary to Prime Minister, 20th March 1964, 'The Yemen and South Arabian Federation', PREM 11/4678

<sup>37</sup> Foreign Secretary to Prime Minister, 20th March 1964, 'The Yemen and South Arabian Federation', PREM 11/4678

<sup>38</sup> Foreign Secretary to Prime Minister, 'Yemen: Range of Possible Courses of Action Open to Us', attachment to 'Yemen and the Federation of South Arabia', 21st April 1964, DEFE 25/129; Mawby, *British Policy* p.110; Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire', pp.118-122

offer the Royalists money and to turn a blind eye to their use of Federation territory but was not prepared to supply arms and heavier equipment.<sup>39</sup>

JIC intelligence assessments had a more formalised impact on policy from summer 1964 when calls for increased covert intervention intensified and interdepartmental machinery was accordingly established in the form of the Joint Action Committee (JAC). Available archival evidence suggests that, channelled through the JAC, all source intelligence again helped moderate the more aggressive proposals. Covert action was stepped up but intelligence played an important role in ensuring that it was a proportionate response to the threat, tied to specific goals, and embedded in a broader foreign and colonial policy.

The Joint Action Committee was chaired by the JIC chairman, shared the JIC's secretariat, and brought the most senior JIC members together with representatives from the operations dimension.<sup>40</sup> This set-up therefore achieved a further important criterion for planning covert interventions, that government should 'evaluate covert action options through the full interagency process, including consultation with intelligence analysts, not just covert action specialists.'<sup>41</sup> Indeed, combined with a bureaucratic process subjecting proposals to scrutiny, the influence of the JIC members and their intelligence assessments helped ensure that operations were conducted as responsibly as possible.

Throughout the summer of 1964, calls continued to press for more active or offensive operations including organising tribal revolts inside Yemen and directly supplying the Royalists with arms and ammunition.<sup>42</sup> Hawkish ministers hoped to link government-sanctioned covert action with direct aid to the Royalist forces by calling for clandestine parachute drops to be made directly to Royalist forces operating inside Yemen.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, however, the JAC recommended that covert operations 'should not be resumed so long as the U.A.R. and their friends remain inactive against the Federation. [Redacted sentence...] Should Egyptians or Yemenis however resume their attacks and armed invasions, the J.A.C. considers that it is important that retaliatory RANCOUR [the codename used for covert operations] action should be permitted on a similar scale.'<sup>44</sup> These operations were, however, more defensive than those called for from South Arabia

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<sup>39</sup> Copy marked by William Luce (Acting Chief of the Defence Staff) of Foreign Secretary to Prime Minister, 'Yemen: Range of Possible Courses of Action Open to Us', attachment to 'Yemen and the Federation of South Arabia', 21st April 1964, DEFE 25/129

<sup>40</sup> Cormac, 'Finding a Role: The Joint Intelligence Committee and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire' (PhD Thesis, King's College London, 2011), pp.190-191

<sup>41</sup> Scott and Rosati, 'Such Other Functions and Duties', p.101

<sup>42</sup> Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War* pp.94-95; see also Mawby 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire' p.122

<sup>43</sup> Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War* p.87, 102, 106-107; Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire' p.123

<sup>44</sup> 'Aden and the Federation: Ministerial Meeting held at No.10 Downing Street at 11.30 am on Wednesday, November 25, 1964: Annex A – Memorandum by the Joint Action Committee', DEFE 13/404

and involved indirect aid channelled to pro-British tribes as opposed to direct intervention in the civil war.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, JAC recommendations included the proviso that any supply of arms was a 'once-for-all exercise',<sup>46</sup> and that the High Commissioner had to seek interdepartmental clearance before resuming operations beyond the accustomed level.<sup>47</sup>

By the autumn of 1964 British-backed tribesmen were engaged in operations against Egyptian forces along the Yemeni frontier,<sup>48</sup> yet this was quite different to the more active and direct operations inside Yemen urged by local authorities and certain ministers in Whitehall. Indeed, in November 1964 that JAC stated that 'none of the foregoing [covert operations] has any direct connection with the Royalists versus Republican struggle in the Yemen but has merely been part of an economical system for protecting the frontier of the Federation for whose defence we are responsible.'<sup>49</sup>

## Transferable lessons

This paper has contended not that covert action is inherently bad – it is a potentially critical adjunct to foreign policy – but that all source intelligence assessment can play a useful role in allowing it to be employed sensibly, rationally and objectively. Britain did covertly intervene in the Yemeni civil war but the JIC helped ensure it was not rushed in to and that requests involving offensive action inside the Yemen or direct aid to the Royalists were tempered. In doing so, three key lessons have become apparent which are transferable to planning covert action in the twenty-first century.

### 1. The need for a thorough risk assessment

Covert intervention is a risky strategy and it is therefore imperative that the likelihood of success is adequately considered. Assessments must examine firstly whether covert action is necessary, commensurate with broader policy goals, and that the means chosen are proportionate to the objective. Secondly, the balance of power in the conflict must be assessed to determine the scale of covert action required. Thirdly, the trustworthiness, skill, and motivation of the sponsored party should be considered, as the inherent secrecy involved generates a lack of ultimate control. Such risk assessment can then

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<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War* p.98; 'Supply of Arms to a Dissident Group in Taiz', Note from Butler to the Prime Minister, 11th September 1964, CAB 13/570

<sup>46</sup> 'Supply of Arms to a Dissident Group in Taiz', Note from Butler to the Prime Minister, 11th September 1964, CAB 13/570

<sup>47</sup> 'Aden and the Federation: Ministerial Meeting held at No.10 Downing Street at 11.30 am on Wednesday, November 25, 1964: Annex A – Memorandum by the Joint Action Committee', DEFE 13/404

<sup>48</sup> Mawby, 'The Clandestine Defence of Empire,' p.124

<sup>49</sup> 'Aden and the Federation: Ministerial Meeting held at No.10 Downing Street at 11.30 am on Wednesday, November 25, 1964: Annex A – Memorandum by the Joint Action Committee', DEFE 13/404

form a foundation for appreciating the feasibility of covert intervention and to set clear objectives accordingly.

## **2. Interdepartmental and all-source intelligence assessment**

Planning covert action can degenerate into a politicised activity. Given the secret nature of proposals and potential for cloak-and-dagger style derring-do, officials can develop a personal stake in the operations, lose perspective, and become swept away in the drama. As a result objective and strong intelligence assessment machinery is necessary. An interdepartmental approach combining all available sources is important in ensuring that intelligence can be adequately evaluated and compared against other sources from different departments. This is integral in spotting flawed sources which may have been written with a clear agenda, and ensuring that covert intervention is planned objectively and rationally. It is therefore important that the intelligence assessment machinery is confident enough to deliver conclusions unpopular to senior policymakers and officials. This is easier said than done and it is therefore beneficial if assessment is conducted interdepartmentally and disseminated by senior figures.

## **3. Adequate structural machinery**

For intelligence assessment to fulfil its role as 'value-added' to policy debates, it must first actually be considered by decision-makers. An interdepartmental body, such as the JAC, is therefore useful in bringing the intelligence community together with covert action specialists and in drawing upon intelligence assessment to offer recommendations to ministers. It is important in allowing those with experience in intelligence and security issues (as well as those from the operational perspective) to adequately scrutinise proposals, consider issues of escalation and blowback, and ensure that any covert action sanctioned is embedded in broader strategic policy.



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