

## Covert Israeli Intervention in the Yemeni Civil War between 1964 and 1966

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### Abstract

A military coup took place in Yemen on 26 September 1962, which quickly culminated in a civil war. As one of the episodes of the Arab Cold War, the armed conflict transformed into a kind of proxy war in which the ultimately victorious republican side enjoyed direct military assistance from the UAR, while the monarchist side was backed with money and weapons by opponents of Arab unity aspirations, especially Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni clashes promised a number of benefits for Israel. Above all, the UAR, Israel's main opponent, was directly involved in the fight. Therefore, it has been a high priority for Israelis to involve the Egyptian armed forces as much as possible in the fighting on Arab territory, while the Israeli Secret Service could gain valuable information about the Egyptian troops' combat procedures. For this reason, they were ready to cooperate when the British contacted them to support the Yemeni monarchists by air. The main aim of this study is to present the background of the Israeli intervention, the organization and operation of the air bridge, and to assess the effects of the operation.

**Keywords:** Yemeni civil war, Israeli intervention, Arab Cold War, President Nasser, the Six-Day War, United Arab Republic, Arab unity aspirations.

### Introduction

Yemeni Houthi rebels have been accusing Israel of being behind the military intervention of Saudi-led coalition forces since the escalation of the current civil war. The idea itself cannot be considered a novelty, as it has emerged from time to time in connection with various conflicts in the Middle East. However, the current claim has a historical basis, as during a certain period of the civil war in Yemen between 1962 and 1970, Israel did support royalist militias opposed to republican forces with money and weapons. Paradoxically, those Shiite tribes also benefited from Israeli help whose descendants currently rebel and fight against the internationally recognized Yemeni government.

Israel has decided to intervene in the Yemeni civil war because of the combined effect of a

number of circumstances. Outstanding among all, however, was the long-term commitment of the United Arab Republic's armed forces on the Yemeni front. For this reason, Israel operated an air bridge to secure the supply of monarchist forces in cooperation with the British between 1964 and 1966. The covert intervention was carried out throughout without anyone suspecting Israel's involvement other than the narrow group of initiators and participants. The action undoubtedly contributed to the survival of many monarchist groups, increased losses to the Egyptian army, weakened the position of Egyptian President Nasser, deepened the division of the Arab world,<sup>1</sup> and also affected the 1967 six-day war.

### Background of the Israeli intervention

A group of nationalist officers, led by Colonel Abdullah as-Sallal,<sup>2</sup> carried out a coup<sup>3</sup> in Yemen to overthrow the reign of Imam Mohamed al-Badr on 26 September 1962. However, the anti-monarchy action, modeled on the 1952 Egyptian coup<sup>4</sup> by the Free Officers Movement, ended with mixed results. The conspirators managed to seize power and proclaim the republic, which was recognized and assured of support by the socialist countries within days. On the other hand, the ruler, believed to be dead, not only managed to

survive the assassination attempt against him, but was also able to escape north to Shiite tribes loyal to his person, who sided with him and the Civil War broke out.

The escalation of the armed conflict was facilitated by the fact that President Nasser<sup>5</sup> commanded a military force to protect the weak republican power in Yemen. The number of "Egyptian military advisers" ranged from 60,000 to 70,000 over time. However, despite sending about a third of Nasser's army to the territory of the southern Arab state, they were also unable to achieve breakthrough success in the stalemate. Moreover, the emergence of Egyptian militants in Yemen has prompted Cairo's rivals in the race for hegemony in the Middle East to line up behind monarchist forces. Accordingly, royalists could count on the support of Britain alongside Saudi Arabia and Jordan, making the civil war a proxy war in the region in a short time.

Britain would have had the military potential to provide widespread support and even squeeze out a clear decision in the civil war through direct-armed intervention. However, London definitely wanted to avoid an open military clash with the Egyptian armed forces for political and economic reasons, so it formally committed itself to non-intervention in the Yemeni issue. It was then that the idea arose for British intelligence to seek secretly partners in the region for supporting Yemeni monarchist forces. However, the first attempt failed when Iran, French Djibouti, Jordan and Saudi Arabia all clearly refrained from contributing to the air supply of Yemeni

<sup>1</sup> The Arab world was characterized by an unprecedented division and showed a rather complex, confusing picture in the 1960s. Following the contemporary Cold War trend between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was divided into two parts, namely the camp of the „advanced” and the „reactionary”. The former tried to group around President Nasser's Egypt, while the latter considered Saudi Arabia as their leader.

<sup>2</sup> Abdullah al-Sallal (1917–1994) was a Yemeni military officer, politician, and the first president of the Yemen Arab Republic from 1962 to 1967. He entered the military at a young age when he continued his studies at the military school in Sana'a, founded in the 1930s.

<sup>3</sup> The event, referred to in the Western literature as the *Yemeni coup*, appears in Arab archival records and press reports as the *Yemeni Revolution of September 1962*, the *Revolution of September 26*, the *Yemeni War*, or the *Civil War in Northern Yemen*.

<sup>4</sup> It was a coup according to Western sources. However, the Arabs call it a revolution, or a BLESSED movement, or a smooth movement.

<sup>5</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) was born in the Bakos district near Alexandria. He was one of the best known and most charismatic Arab politicians and the second president of the Republic of Egypt. He enrolled at the Military Academy in 1937, where he was inaugurated as an officer after his studies. He has served in Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine. He was a leading figure in the Free Officers Movement. He was Deputy Prime Minister from 1953 to 1954, then Prime Minister as well as President of the Republic from 23 June 1956 to 28 September 1970. He was a prominent representative of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s and one of the main organizers of the non-aligned movement.

monarchist forces. The so-called *Aden Group*<sup>6</sup> therefore sought contact with the Israeli intelligence agencies and air force, which at the time happened to be looking for a liaison acceptable to the Saudis who could wage a guerrilla war against the Yemeni republican regime and its Egyptian supporters. After all, the first British-Israeli consultation took place in October 1962, when McLean met with Israeli military attaché Colonel Dan Hiram in London.<sup>7</sup> At the meeting, Colonel Hiram promised to forward to his superiors McLean's request that his associates have direct discussions on the matter with the relevant Israeli authorities (Dorril, 2000, 680).

In Tel Aviv, McLean's suggestion was sympathetically accepted, so David Smiley and Kim Johnson traveled to Israel several times to discuss the details in the fall of 1963, where they met in person with Moshe Dayan<sup>8</sup>, Shimon Peres<sup>9</sup>, Director General of the Ministry of Defense, Major General Ezer Weizman, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Air Force, and Meir Amit,<sup>10</sup> head of Mossad (Clive, 2008, 77). During the meeting, the parties agreed in principle, and Lieutenant Colonel Ze'ev Liron, head of the Israeli Air Force Intelligence Division, secretly traveled to Yemen to conduct a field visit to assess the conditions for launching the air bridge.

The next level of consultation has already taken place between the parties directly

concerned. Emir Yahya al-Harsi, the personal secretary of Imam al-Badr, first forwarded a message from the monarchists to Chaim Herzog, director general of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office, in London on 10 December 1963. Ten days later, he consulted with the leaders of the various departments in Israel, as well as with Foreign Minister Golda Meir. Because of the talks, the Israeli leadership agreed to supply the monarchist forces with weapons, ammunition and explosives. They also promised to share information about the movement of Egyptian troops and help present the views of royalists and Yemeni events in the media. At Al-Harsi's suggestion, they also agreed to open an official Yemeni royalist representation in Paris, the maintenance costs of which Israel undertook to pay for a period of six months. In return, the representative of the imam promised that, in the case of effective cooperation, Yemen would formally recognize the State of Israel as soon as the Egyptian forces had withdrawn and the ruler had managed to restore his power over the entire territory of the country (Bar-Zohar, 2005, 239; Zuchbaya, "n. d.", 40).<sup>11</sup>

### Reasons for Israeli participation

Israel's decision was fundamentally motivated by its regional isolation and counterbalancing the security challenges posed by neighbouring states in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its measures were most urgently required by several events, such as the formation of the United Arab Republic under President Nasser, the military coup in Iraq and the subsequent showdown with pro-Western elements, and the coup attempt in Jordan with the help of Egyptian special services. There were also serious concerns about Soviet arms shipments

<sup>6</sup> Former members of the British SAS, including British MP Neil McLean, Jim Johnson, David Smiley and Anthony 'Tony' Boyle, the son of the former Chief of Staff of the British Royal Air Force.

<sup>7</sup> However, according to Clive Jones, a professional British researcher on the subject, the McLean-Hiram meeting could not have taken place until the summer of 1963 at the earliest.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Dayan (1915–1981) was an Israeli military leader and politician, Commander-in-Chief of the Israeli Defence Forces from 1953 to 1958, then Minister of Defence from 1967 to 1974, and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1977 to 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Shimon Peres (1923–2016) is an Israeli politician, statesman, prime minister, and president. During his career, he served in 12 governments. In 1994, he received the Nobel Peace Prize along with Yitzhak Rabin, the contemporary Israeli prime minister, and Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO.

<sup>10</sup> Meir Amit (1921–2009) was an Israeli politician, intelligence officer and the leader of Mossad from 1963 to 1968.

<sup>11</sup> During the negotiations, Herzog also allegedly tried to get the monarchists to contact Prince Faisal and persuade Saudi Arabia to recognize the state of Israel as well. He trusted that, if it materialized, Jordan would follow the example of Riyadh.

to the United Arab Republic or the appearance of West German scientists in Egypt, many of whom had a Nazi past, and their involvement in the medium-range missile program and the development of other new types of weapons, including chemical weapons (Shoham, 1998, 48–49).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in the latter case, the assassinations of scientists proved counterproductive, as President Nasser tried to use the deaths of researchers to unite progressive Arab states when he repeatedly called for the liberation of Palestine in order to curb Israel's "terrorist campaign" (Shelby, 2013, 108).<sup>13</sup> In addition, the developments in Yemen have been so disturbing to the Jewish state in many ways. In addition to Egypt, the republican forces also enjoyed the support of Syria, which encouraged the Sallal government to condemn the occupation of Palestine, as did the two patron states. In addition to the declaration, Sallal visited Damascus in early summer 1963 and the idea arose that Northern Yemen would rejoin the United Arab Republic. The alliance between Sanaa and anti-Israel Arab forces was later hinted by the fact that the republican delegation attended the 1964 Cairo summit, where it committed itself to the 12 Arab states that provision must be made for the possibility of retaliation to avenge the diversion of the Jordan River (Shelby: *ibid.* 153–154).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> According to current information, the development and production of chemical and biological weapons began in the early 1960s under the 'Izlis' program at military facility No. 801, located in the Abu-Za'bal industrial district northeast of Cairo. The United Arab Republic's chemical weapons arsenal later included materials such as tear gas, mustard gas, and phosgene, which were mostly loaded into Soviet YHGI-200 R5 and AOKh-25 bombs dropped from Soviet Ilyushin Il-28 bombers during their deployments in Yemen. Despite significant stockpiles and experience in Yemen, Cairo did not attempt to deploy them during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, in which the rapid destruction of the Egyptian air force and the avoidance of expected Israeli retaliation presumably played a decisive role. (Elbaz, Yogev: 'מעורבות ישראל במלחמת האזרחים בתימן – 'אויב האויב הוא ידיד' [The enemy of my enemy is my friend? Israel's involvement in the Yemeni civil war] Haretz, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/blogs/sadna/BLOG-1.2611053> Downloaded: 2021.06.20.)

<sup>13</sup> President Nasser stated in this regard that the road to Arab unity is not through the capital of Yemen, Sanaa, but through Tel Aviv.

<sup>14</sup> Tel-Aviv's concerns were heightened by the fact that at the 1964 summit in Cairo, it seemed that the United Arab Republic would succeed in resolving its previously hostile relations with Jordan and

Finally, the victory of a republican system allied with the United Arab Republic in Yemen would have further jeopardized Israel's vital shipping route in the Red Sea, which connected the port of Eilat with the country's Far Eastern trading partners.

The launch of the intervention was clearly decided when the Egyptian pilot, Captain Mahmoud Abbas Hilmi, disillusioned with the fighting and the Republic of Egypt, deserted and landed with his Czechoslovak Yakovlev Yak-11 trainer aircraft at Lod Airport, approx. 15 km southeast from the centre of Tel Aviv. During his interrogation, Hilmi said, among other things, that his comrades had also used chemical weapons to break the resistance of the Yemeni mountain tribes (Kahana & Suwaed, 2009, 109–110).<sup>15</sup> The news had a profound effect on Golda Meir, who feared that Egypt would use weapons of mass destruction tested and further developed in Yemen against Israel after the Republican victory.<sup>16</sup> In addition to Egyptian rocket launchers, Israeli concerns were heightened by information that the Soviet Union was willing to replenish tens of millions of tons of munitions used by the United Arab Republic in Yemen. Finally, the Egyptian conscripts deployed in the rotation system gained combat

Saudi Arabia. This suggested that the two monarchies had re-established official diplomatic relations with Cairo. Assessing the events, Israeli policymakers did not rule out the possibility of the evolution of a united anti-Israel Arab front.

<sup>15</sup> Although Captain Hilmi was offered a well-paying job in exchange for open condemnation by the Egyptian regime, the pilot was still unable to integrate in Israel. He refused the refugee status offered to him, instead applying to settle in South America. Mossad therefore created a new identity for him and was sent to Argentina in possession of a respectable sum. However, Hilmi made several fatal mistakes in Buenos Aires that made Egyptian intelligence aware of her whereabouts. Barely ten days after his arrival, he was abducted by Egyptian agents on June 30, 1964. He was then smuggled on a cargo ship to Egypt, where he was sentenced to death by a court-martial in an expedited procedure and then executed. (Hare, Thomas Van: Defection to Israel! In: *Historic Wing*, 13 April 2015. <https://fly.historicwings.com/2015/04/defection-to-israel/> Downloaded: 2021.06.16.)

<sup>16</sup> Israeli concerns have been heightened by the fact that, despite the demonstrable use of chemical weapons, neither the United States nor the United Nations has publicly condemned the United Arab Republic. It was therefore concluded that the international community would take a reluctant stance even if the Egyptians used their toxic gas reserves against Israel.

experience, which enabled them to confront anti-republic forces more and more effectively (Orkaby, 2017, 173).<sup>17</sup> This seemed to be justified by the desperate attempt by those in distress of monarchist forces to preserve the status quo who had no knowledge of the deal with Israel. In their message to the Cairo government, they promised to stop the attack by republican forces if Egypt led its troops stationed in Yemen against Israel. Meir therefore took the view that it would be in Tel Aviv's best interest to tie up Egyptian forces for as long and as far as possible at a fair distance from their original location, so that they would have neither the time nor the strength to threaten Israel. Meanwhile, Mossad would have ample time and opportunity to assess the size and strike power of Egyptian troops and to learn their strategies and methods during their military operations, so that lessons learned from them could enable the Israeli armed forces to confront them even more effectively later. Moreover, if these goals had been accompanied by a victory for the monarchist side, Israel hoped that it could have led to the creation of a moderate regime under the leadership of a ruler grateful for Israel's help who could have represented a restrained policy or even a purely neutral stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Finally, if the promise of al-Badr's representative to recognize the state of Israel had come true, it would have meant breaking the hostile Arab ring around the Jewish state and building official relations with a Muslim-Arab country in a strategically important area (Kostenko, 2019, 21).

### Preparation of the Israeli air bridge

However, there were a number of obstacles to delivering the promised combat equipment.

<sup>17</sup> The above finding was exponentially true of the Egyptian Air Force, which improved its combat procedures for more effective bombing, air reconnaissance, and supporting ground units on combat missions in Yemen.

Only a small portion of the supplies launched from Saudi Arabia on camel caravans reached royalist forces, as the Egyptians effectively blocked the vast majority of their land supply lines, while shipments sporadically dropped by the British Royal Air Force covered only a small part of the needs. In addition, only two of the arms shipments launched from Europe reached Yemen via French Somaliland (now Djibouti), while a third shipment of 1,600 rifles was seized by the French authorities. Attempts by the royalists to obtain a fishing vessel capable of transshipping the consignment at sea and then transporting it to the Yemeni coasts have also proved unsuccessful. Saudis have also clearly rejected their request to take control of a stretch of coastline where they could then safely unload (Kostenko: *ibid.* 20). After all this, the Israelis decided to bring consignments destined for their allies into the Arab country by air. Lieutenant Colonel Liron therefore trained monarchist groups during his mission in Yemen on how to designate a drop zone and how to direct pilots flying overhead with beacons (Zuchbaya, *ibid.* 41–42). However, to protect the anonymity of the action, he also made it clear that only British mercenaries could communicate directly with aircraft crews. In addition, the Israelis carefully removed any identification marks from the objects assembled for handover that could have linked them to the Jewish State (Jones, *ibid.* 79.).<sup>18</sup>

The Israeli Air Force's largest four-engine cargo aircraft, the Boeing 377M "Stratocruisers" named Anak ("Giant"), have been designated to carry out the missions which were capable of delivering a consignment of approximately 5,670 kilograms. During the preparations, the signal

<sup>18</sup> Israeli caution was well demonstrated by the removal of the serial number from each of the weapons handed over. They were then packed in wooden boxes imported from Cyprus and dropped with Italian-made parachutes.



lights and the essential electronic navigation devices were removed from the aircraft to avoid their discovery. This had a fundamental impact on the execution of night missions, as they could only be carried out at low altitudes, at full moons, and in clear skies due to the position of the stars and orientation based on visual cues. Due to the critical circumstances, the planes and their flight crew were prepared for the mission for three months, while keeping the purpose of their mission secret to them until the last minute.<sup>19</sup> They were also ordered that participants must wear civilian clothes during deployments and could not take any Israeli identity document with them. They were also provided with fake passports and gold coins in case they had to make a forced landing in Yemeni territory.

Meir Amit, Israeli Air Force officers, and a British delegation – composed of SAS veterans and British officers – led by David Stirling, recorded the final details of the operation on February 20, 1964 in Israel at the Mossad Centre. Boylet was appointed to coordinate military cooperation. The veteran of the British Royal Air Force was assigned to the flight crew, with whom he also personally participated in the missions at the express request of the Israelis.

### Execution of Israeli missions

The first consignment, launched in support of monarchists, was dropped on March 31, 1964, which filled the Yemeni ruler with extraordinary satisfaction. In addition to military equipment, however, he also wanted to use foreign aid to reaffirm his already weakened influence over tribal leaders. To strengthen confidence in him, he therefore requested that the next shipment be scheduled

for May 26, 1964, by which time he convened a council of prominent loyal tribes for his headquarters in the cave complex of Jabal al-Qarah.<sup>20</sup> As desired, the Israeli aircraft dropped its cargo of military equipment, medical equipment and money attached to the parachutes over midnight on the given day and along coordinates. The sight shocked the tribal chiefs, because they knew nothing about the arrival and origin of the objects that had literally fallen at their feet. Therefore, they came to the conviction that even Allah supported the imam (Orkaby: *ibid.* 171). The incident had a serious psychological impact on those present, as well as significantly raising the prestige of the ruler among the previously neutral Shiites, while further increasing the fighting spirit of its supporters (המרכיב הסודי של הירוטב: *ibid.*).<sup>21</sup>

During the renamed operation,<sup>22</sup> the “Stratocruisers” flew into Yemeni airspace 14 times until 5 May 1966. Some of the war equipment delivered was obsolete, a World War II weapon that had already been scrapped by Israeli defense forces. The other part was Egyptian weapons, ammunition and medical equipment looted during the 1956 Suez War, which were an undivided success among monarchist forces (Kostenko: *ibid.* 21). Mossad also deployed several intelligence agents, mostly Arab intelligence specialists and Yemeni Jews living in Israel<sup>23</sup>, in the field

<sup>20</sup> Among those present was Sheikh Hassan al-Houthi, who represented the Houthi tribe at the meeting, which is currently leading the fight against the internationally recognized Yemeni government. (Kessler, Oran: When Israel Helped Yemen's Shiites. In: *Politico Magazine*, 21 April 2015. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/israel-yemen-shiites-117208/> Downloaded: 2021.06.18.)

<sup>21</sup> One of the tribal chiefs present was completely captivated and exclaimed enthusiastically that “we are now strong enough to conquer not only Sanaa but Aden as well”. Although his statement was not taken seriously by the British, it was not seen as a sign of recognition or gratitude in return for their contribution.

<sup>22</sup> The codename for the missions was initially “Sauce,” which was renamed “Spur” from the tenth deployment.

<sup>23</sup> In two years since Israel's declaration of independence, some 50,000 Yemeni Jews have been resettled as part of Operation ‘Magic Carpet’. In their appearance, they were indistinguishable from the native Yemenis, spoke the local dialect of the Arabic language, and knew the customs. For this reason, they were able to unnoticed, gather

<sup>19</sup> המרכיב הסודי של הירוטב [The secret ingredient of the Sauce] Israeli Air Force, <https://www.iaf.org.il/2058-27788-he/IAF.aspx> (Downloaded: 2021.06.20.)

to effectively operate the air-bridge and spy on Egyptian military movements.

The operation can be said to have been multilateral, similar to the Yemeni intervention that is taking place today. In addition to Israeli logistics and flight crews, British intelligence also played an active role in its implementation. Israeli planes took off from Tel-Nof air base near Tel Aviv and then approached Yemen along the Saudi coast, making it much easier to orient and navigate during night operations. As Saudi Arabia did not yet have a radar system at the time that would have allowed it to track the planes passing through its airspace, it was possible to conceal the operation carefully throughout, even to the Saudi people. The caution was justified by the fact that although King Faisal knew about Israel's assistance to the monarchists, he refused to acknowledge it publicly. He also threatened the participants of the action that he would immediately denying the royalists further support if the matter came to light, even if it certainly meant their inevitable defeat (Kostenko: *ibid.* 24). After reaching Yemen, the planes flew in the direction of Sanaa and then turned back after dropping the cargo. If the planes had experienced a fuel shortage or other unforeseen circumstances, they would have had to make a forced landing in French Somalia or Ethiopia according to the developed emergency scenario (Kostenko: *ibid.* 21).

However, despite its multifaceted involvement, Israel has maintained its limited engagement throughout and has never been in direct contact with Yemenis during the operation. In addition, at the suggestion of

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information, and support monarchist war efforts. Their activities were further facilitated by the fact that at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War, some 3,000 Jews living in Yemen were loyal to the Imam and several of them were also serving armed on the side of the royalists. For more information on the exodus of Yemeni Jews, see (Prantner, 2008, 102–111).

Mossad, Yitzhak Rabin, who was Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Forces at the time, and Prime Minister Levi Eshkol categorically rejected British and Yemeni requests for Israeli planes to conduct a surprise air strike against Egyptian military aircrafts stationed at Sanaa Airport, as well as against the al-Hudaydah military base<sup>24</sup>, when Egyptian forces launched a general offensive on the entire front in January 1965 (Sheffy, 2013, 113–114).

### Completion of the mission

Mossad intelligence agents informed the Centre in April 1966 that the Egyptians had become aware of the Israeli arms shipments sent to the monarchists and began preparations to intercept Israeli planes flying in. As a result of the information and the change in the domestic political situation in Yemen, the Israelis dropped their last cargo on May 5, 1966, permanently ending the operation.

The professionalism in the organization and execution of the missions so far was well demonstrated by the fact that, apart from the few initiates, Israel managed to maintain its anonymity throughout the operation. This was mainly because the aircraft was equipped with an AWACS-type system, which allowed continuous monitoring of Egyptian and Saudi radio traffic during deployments. The interception of all frequencies of the Egyptian Air Force, including fighter jets stationed along the coast between Cairo and Luxor at the airport near Hurghada, could therefore have alerted Israeli aircrews in time if they were discovered (Orkaby: *ibid.* 171).<sup>25</sup> In addition,

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<sup>24</sup> Al Hudaydah was a port city and a large military base on the shores of the Red Sea in western Yemen. It is located about 230 km southwest of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a.

<sup>25</sup> During the series of actions, therefore, Egyptian fighter jets only tried to intercept the Stratocruiser cargo plane detected on their radar only once. Sensing the danger, the pilot immediately steered east, steering the plane in the direction of Saudi airspace, trusting that enemy aircraft could no longer follow it. Its calculation proved successful and after reaching the Saudi border, the Egyptian MiGs were called back to their base.

the British also misled royalist forces about the origin of the consignment. To dispel the suspicion, they spread false news among the Yemenis that the airplanes were of French origin, coming from Djibouti (Orkaby: *ibid.* 172).

In addition, only one package landed in wrong place during the 14 missions despite the often difficult-to-identify, narrow drop zones and unfavourable wind conditions (Orkaby: *ibid.* 171). On the other hand, the shipments that reached their destination proved invaluable help, especially to the monarchist forces that were pushed back to remote and isolated mountainous areas.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the whole operation was extremely cost-effective for Tel Aviv, as much of it was funded by Saudi Arabia, of course unknowingly, through the mediation of British SAS veterans (Jones: *ibid.* 77–78).

In addition to the above, the results of British-Israeli cooperation were also of paramount importance. In return for operating the air bridge, British mercenaries on the ground regularly reported to the Israeli authorities on the combat value and troop movements of the Egyptian expeditionary forces and handed them over a number of assets that had been seized from their common enemies (Orkaby: *ibid.* 173.).<sup>27</sup>

### Evaluation of the action

According to some historians, the Israeli intervention in Yemen ultimately ended in failure, given that the heir to the throne they supported finally was defeated and the republican form of state could survive. In my view, however, the emphasis should not be on the failure of the royalist side in assessing the effectiveness of the intervention. The basic

aim of the aid was not to help the pro-imam forces to victory, but to prolong the armed conflict in time. For pragmatic reasons, Israel, based on the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” principle, supported anti-republic forces solely to weaken its main opponent in the fighting as much as possible and to strengthen the security of its own country by reducing the threat against it. And in this respect, Tel Aviv has clearly been able to record the results of the Yemeni mission as a success. In line with the preliminary expectations of Israeli leaders, Egypt suffered severe financial and human losses in exchange for its Yemeni adventure. Of the total 100,000 to 200,000 men who died, were captured or disappeared in the civil war, differing estimates put the number of Egyptian casualties at between 5,000 and 25,000, which is why historians aptly christened the UAR mission in Yemen as “Nasser’s Vietnam” (Ferris, 2013, 192–195).<sup>28</sup> The replacement of equipment destroyed on the Yemeni front has caused serious problems, which has undoubtedly had an adverse effect on the effectiveness of the Egyptian armed forces. The large number of soldiers killed or injured significantly reduced the army’s fighting morale, and the 3–4 divisions stationed in Yemen would have been badly needed in the Sinai Peninsula in early June 1967 (Rahmy, 1983, 251–252).<sup>29</sup> All of this undoubtedly played a role in Israel winning an

<sup>28</sup> To the best of our knowledge, more than 150,000 Egyptian soldiers served in a rotating system in Yemen between 1962 and 1967. If we take the average of the different estimates of casualties as the guideline, we can say that at least 10% of the Egyptian expeditionary force was on the loss list during the mission in Yemen.

<sup>29</sup> Operations in Yemen have tied up about a third of the land forces of the United Arab Republic and the Egyptian Air Force and Navy units supporting them simultaneously, about 2,000 kilometres from their mainland. In addition to the numbers, it was also a relevant aspect that the most striking formations were far from their homeland, while about 40% of the force stationed on the Sinai Peninsula was made up of inexperienced reservists. Finally, in the opinion of Lt. Gen. Abdel Muhsin Kamel Murtagi, chief of staff of the Yemeni Egyptian Armed Forces, Egyptian soldiers in Yemen are accustomed to fighting guerrilla forces in the presence of air supremacy. For this reason, they were not prepared in the event of a face-to-face encounter with an opponent who also has his own air force.

<sup>26</sup> The imam’s uncle, royalist commander Abdullah ibn al-Hassan, for example, avoided a certain defeat twice only thanks to the Israeli air bridge.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, the British handed over to the Israelis for inspection more of the artillery shells used by the Egyptians during the June 8, 1963, poison gas attack on the Yemeni village of al-Kawma.



overwhelming victory over the United Arab Republic (and thus Arab unity aspirations) in the 1967 Six-Day War, which forced it to withdraw its troops stationed in Yemen by the end of the year.

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