



F.N. Richards
Prime Minister
Richards

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

(2) London SW1A 2AH

24 February 1981

Dear Michael,

no

Mr Hurd's Visit to Saudi Arabia and Oman

I enclose a copy of Mr Hurd's personal report to Lord Carrington on his visit to Saudi Arabia and Oman from 15 - 19 February, which Lord Carrington believes may be of interest.

Yours ever,
F N Richards
(F N Richards)
Private Secretary

M O'D B Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
LONDON

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Secretary of State

cc: Lord Privy Seal
PUS
Sir J Graham
Mr Moberly
Mr Miers

SAUDI ARABIA AND OMAN : 15 - 19 FEBRUARY

In Riyadh I saw three Saudi Ministers including Prince Naif, and in Jedda had a long talk with Prince Saud's deputy Mansouri (Saud was skiing in France). They were all in friendly and confident mood after the success at Taif on Gulf Co-operation. Nothing startling was said. Mansouri put the main message more frankly, indeed indiscreetly, than James Craig had heard it before - that the Saudi Government agreed privately with what Oman, Somalia and Egypt were doing, that they wanted the Russians out of Aden, that they would much rather deal with Egypt than with Syria or Iraq, but this was impossible so long as the man in the Arab street felt that Russia was his friend, because the US was the friend of Israel. Therefore it was up to us British etc etc.

Oman

2. The Sultan's desert style is at the opposite extreme from that of the King of Morocco. After ninety minutes in a helicopter we descended on a simple encampment of green army tents and Range Rovers, far from any human habitation. Here Qaboos will stay for a week, while his subjects come in over the sand dunes with greetings and complaints. In this way he will move slowly south to Salalah. He received us in a small tent without any furnishing except carpets, on which we sat for nearly an hour and a half. He had just one junior minister with him. He was very communicative and charming. He evidently enjoyed his two (very rare) journeys abroad, to the Arab and Islamic summits. He looks forward to the Gulf Co-operation, which he evidently sees as an operation by the Saudis and himself to put some sense into the other Gulf States. He talked firmly, but rather defensively, about his decision to buy tanks and a host of other equipment. He had no major points to make on our own defence effort in Oman. He talked interestingly about the UAE, Aden and his own political plans for Oman (separate record).

3. The next candidate for ordeal by carpet was Waldheim, with whom we later lunched in another tent. He was his usual gloomy self, but could be useful on Palestine - separate record.

/We have

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

4. We have a problem over Oman which needs more thought. It is illustrated by the Sultan's decision to buy Chieftain tanks, though it goes deeper. In separate talks with me General Watts and two of Qaboos' most intelligent young Ministers made the same points in different words - that Qaboos had decided to buy tanks against advice, without analysis of the threat, without considering that they would require more British LSP (30 at least), that they would upset the defence budget, and that if he was really interested in protecting his throne the money would be better spent on wells, schools and hospitals as subversion was the main threat. General Watts said that Qaboos, "stood on the top of a hill and ordered tanks from the back of an envelope". Hence the strongly maintained view of HM Ambassador that we and the Americans should have argued him away from the tanks - and indeed earlier away from the second squadron of Jaguars. (and the U.S. Ambassador)

5. In the present fever about defence sales I do not think you would wish to take the above line. Nor indeed is it now possible, as Qaboos clearly showed me that the decision to buy tanks was a proof of his personal authority, and contrary advice would be unwelcome and unsuccessful (though if they are to be British tanks MOD will have to find the LSP, (mainly NCOs). Moreover, his psychological argument that his soldiers expected to have tanks (Oman 6, PDRY 350 at present) was persuasive to me, though evidently not to his advisers.

6. So he may well be right this time. But it is dangerous to have a lonely, moody man with no heir or close family at the top of an important country, who is apt to take decision by whim without analysis. In Whitehall we have too much paper and too many committees, but he could do with more of both. We may be able to help in this sensitive area of machinery of government. In any case I am sure we should not again allow a gap of almost a year to pass between visits by British Ministers. In Oman the platitude about relying on our wisdom and experience has some truth.

7. We shall also need to consider before the Prime Minister's visit how to respond if the Sultan asks what we would do if Oman is attacked. He will probably be briefed to do this, as some at least of his advisers see satisfactory US and British assurances on the external threat as one way of dissuading him from the accumulation of hardware.

Douglas Hurd

Douglas Hurd

20 February 1981