

IRAN/IRAQ

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IRAN/IRAQ : DEPLOYMENT OF HM SHIPS

The deployment of HMS COVENTRY to the Gulf of Oman has proved a valuable step. It has confirmed HMG's willingness and ability to play a part in the protection of western interests in the Gulf whilst at the same time creating an opportunity to exercise some influence on the plans of our allies. The ship's presence has also added conviction to the assurances that we have needed to give to Gulf rulers about our concern for their security.

2. Although the fighting between Iraq and Iran now seems to be moving at a slower pace the dangers posed by the conflict to freedom of navigation in the Gulf have not diminished. The possibility remains that either of the parties might be tempted into an irrational gesture against neutral shipping. Western naval powers may still need to undertake a naval control of shipping exercise. We therefore think that it would be prudent to move a second Royal Navy ship to the area as soon as possible. The Foreign Secretary had a word with the Prime Minister about this just before he left for Italy this morning, and I understand she agrees.

3. I believe that our officials have already discussed this possibility, and that HMS ALACRITY, currently in Singapore, is best placed for such a move. I know that certain ships are already programmed to visit Gulf ports early next month after taking part in Exercise Beacon Compass. But there is no knowing how quickly our ships might be needed. It would also be wise to maintain some parity in numbers between ourselves and those of our allies who have ships already there or nearby, since otherwise our advice on the possible deployment of ships into the Gulf itself may be discounted.

/4. I am

4. I am sending a copy of this minute to the Prime Minister.

J.H.G.

14 October 1980

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