

Ref. A084/363

PRIME MINISTER

At the meeting of OD(EM) on 26 January (OD(EM)(84) 1st Meeting), the Sub-Committee concluded that deployment of British ground forces and/or air defence aircraft to the Gulf area should be countenanced only as a measure of last resort if British interests were directly threatened; and that final decisions on any such deployment must rest with the British Government. I was instructed to arrange for officials to examine whether this conclusion was consistent with the various assurances about potential British assistance which had already been given to certain Gulf States. The following examination of the question has been agreed by officials of the Treasury, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence.

2. No formal treaty commitments exist which would oblige the United Kingdom to come to the defence of the Gulf States in time of need. Informal assurances have, however, been given to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and to Oman, as follows:

(a) UAE

In October 1980 Mr Moberly (Assistant Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) called on Shaikh Zaid with a personal message from Lord Carrington saying that, in the spirit of our very long-standing friendship, we stood ready in principle to provide military assistance if asked. Such assistance would be defensive in nature.

(b) Oman

On 2 December 1981 Mr Hurd (the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) told Sultan Qaboos that the United Kingdom intended to maintain its close defence relationship with Oman. It had been decided to keep in being certain forces that could be used outside the NATO area either with an ally (for example the United States) or alone. The elements that could be made available could include a

naval escort task group, mine clearance units, some combat aircraft, and one or two infantry battalions or commandos with support for land or amphibious operations. Subsequently, you wrote to Sultan Qaboos on 15 July 1982 to assure him "that we are fully committed to the security of Oman". You will however see from the attached copy of your letter that this assurance was directly linked to the use of British Loan Service Personnel in time of internal or regional conflict.

3. In the case of the UAE, the assurance given is in general terms and does not commit us to any specific form of assistance. It is therefore consistent with OD(EM)'s conclusion that deployments of British ground forces and/or air defence aircraft to the Gulf should be countenanced only as a measure of last resort if British interests are threatened, and that final decisions on deployment must rest with the British Government.

4. In the case of Oman, the list of military resources mentioned by Mr Hurd was purely illustrative, and in no sense constituted a commitment to make any particular one of them available if requested. The guidelines for Loan Service Personnel are, as agreed by OD(EM), now being reviewed.

5. We therefore conclude that there is nothing in the assurances already given to the Gulf States which is inconsistent with the conclusions that British ground forces and/or air defence aircraft should be deployed to the Gulf only if British interests are directly threatened. Nor is either assurance inconsistent with the conclusion that final decisions on the deployment of forces to the Gulf must remain with the British Government.

6. I was further instructed to arrange for officials to examine whether the language of the proposed message to Sultan Qaboos about the possible deployment of British mine countermeasures vessels was consistent with the assurances which had been given to the Omanis. The formula now proposed is as follow:

The mine countermeasures force would be deployed to the Gulf in response to an Omani request, subject only to Her Majesty's Government's overriding national requirements,

to agreement between Her Majesty's Government and the Omani Government, and to the availability of adequate defence arrangements for the force on arrival in Gulf waters.

Given that no specific commitment to deploy a mine countermeasures force to the Gulf area has been made in the past, this formulation would be in keeping with the assurances that have already been given. It is also explicitly consistent with OD(EM)'s conclusion that final decisions on deployment of the force must rest with the British Government. Her Majesty's Ambassador at Muscat and the Chief of the Omani Defence Staff believe that the proposed formula should be acceptable to Sultan Qaboos. The Ambassador would like authority to pass the message to the Sultan as quickly as possible; I should be grateful to know whether you are content for him to proceed.

7. Finally, I was instructed to have the proposed message to Shaikh Zaid recast in order to ensure that it was consistent with undertakings already given to the United Arab Emirates, preserved the British Government's right to take a final decision on the deployment of British forces to assist them, and was as forthcoming --- as possible. A revised text of the proposed message is at Annex; I should be grateful for your approval to its terms. I recommend that the message be transmitted on your behalf by Her Majesty's Ambassador at Abu Dhabi. It should also be made clear to Shaikh Zaid that the UAE would be expected to meet the cost of any assistance provided to them; and the Ambassador should therefore be instructed to make this point clear at an appropriate stage.

8. I am sending copies of this minute to the other members of OD(EM).

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

1 February 1984

DRAFT MESSAGE TO SHAIKH ZAID

When you kindly received Mr Richard Luce on 18 December, you told him of your concern that an escalation of the conflict between Iran and Iraq might put the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in danger of an Iranian attack. You asked him to indicate whether and in what way the United Kingdom would be prepared to help the UAE defend itself against such an attack. Your request has been given very careful and detailed consideration by Her Majesty's Government, and I am now able to provide a reply.

You will recall that when hostilities first began between Iran and Iraq in 1980, and fears were expressed that they might spread to other parts of the Gulf, Mr Moberly visited you to convey a personal assurance from Lord Carrington that in the spirit of our very long-standing friendship we stood ready in principle to provide military assistance of a defensive nature if asked. Mr Luce told you in December that we stood by this commitment, which I am happy to reaffirm.

In considering the United Kingdom's own defence needs, we have been guided by the belief that the best defence is collective self-defence. That is why we have been substantially increasing our own defence expenditure in real terms. In the same way, we welcome the development of increased co-operation on defence issues between the member countries of the Gulf

Co-operation Council (GCC), including their first joint military exercises last autumn. As hitherto, we are anxious to provide all the assistance in our power, by way of training and advice in the United Kingdom and locally, and through meeting the GCC's defence equipment needs, to help the UAE and its partners to continue building up their capabilities for self-defence. General Dennis has just visited the UAE with a mandate to ascertain what more we can do to help you in these areas. If you believe that the UAE has specific needs which are being overlooked, I should be grateful if you could let me know immediately.

I also understand, however, that in the short term you are concerned that the UAE's own resources might not be wholly adequate to counter an Iranian threat, and have asked what forces the United Kingdom might be able to make available if the UAE called for our assistance. Although the United Kingdom's primary defence responsibilities will continue to be in the NATO area, one lesson of the Falklands crisis is that we need to retain and enhance our capacity to act outside that area. We therefore possess a number of defensive military capabilities, including naval mine counter-measures and escort vessels, tactical air defence, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, and air defence missiles and radar, that could in principle be made available to support such action; it would be imprudent to decide at this stage that particular forces would be allocated to specific areas or tasks, in the event of

an escalation of the Iran/Iraq war, since we should need to deploy them where the need was greatest, taking due account of the capabilities of other friendly nations. Chief among these is of course the United States, with whom we are in close touch about the measures that might need to be taken if there were any escalation.

I cannot emphasise too strongly that the continued safety and security of the UAE is a matter of great importance to us. As I have said, if the UAE has specific defence needs which are not at present being met, I should be grateful if you would let me know. I should in any case like to keep in the closest possible contact with you until we are agreed that the threat of Iranian action against the UAE has passed.

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