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OF 310957 OCTOBER 90
INFO DESKBY 311200Z SANAA
INFO PRIORITY UKMIS NEW YORK, CAIRO, GULF POSTS, ACTOR

BBC EXTERNAL SERVICES AND SAUDI ARABIA/YEMEN

SUMMARY

1. SAUDIS SAY KING UPSET ABOUT BBC REPORTING FROM SANAA, CLAIM MAJOR SAUDI STATEMENT OF 29 OCTOBER ON SAUDI-YEMENI RELATIONS IGNORED. THEY AGAIN CRITICISE LOCAL BBC ARABIC SERVICE STRINGER. TO SOME EXTENT SAUDIS HAVE THEMSELVES TO BLAME IF REPORTING IS ONE-SIDED, BUT ARABIC SERVICE DO NEED A BETTER LOCAL CORRESPONDENT.

DETAIL

2. DEPUTY INFORMATION MINISTER RANG DHM LAST NIGHT TO SAY THAT THE KING WAS UPSET AT BBC REPORTING FROM YEMEN. FARSI APPEARED TO BE REFERRING TO WORLD SERVICE REPORT, PRESUMABLY TRANSLATED AND ALSO CARRIED ON ARABIC SERVICE, EARLY ON 30 OCTOBER ON EXODUS OF YEMENIS FROM SAUDI ARABIA. THERE WAS A FURTHER BUT SIMILAR REPORT, THIS TIME ON ECONOMIC ASPECTS, THIS MORNING ON THE WORLD SERVICE NEWS. FARSI SAID THAT BBC HAD RELAYED THE YEMENI POINT OF VIEW, BUT HAD PAID NO ATTENTION TO A MAJOR STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT ON 29 OCTOBER (THE SAUDI STATEMENT IN QUESTION RESPONDED TO RENEWED CRITICISM BY ALI ABDULLAH SALIH OF SAUDI ARABIA'S REQUEST FOR FOREIGN MILITARY ASSISTANCE AND PRAISE BY HIM FOR SADDAM. THE STATEMENT REJECTED CLAIMS BY ALI ABDULLAH SALIH THAT SAUDI ARABIA HAD SOUGHT OVER THE YEARS TO UNDERMINE YEMENI STABILITY, AND POINTED TO SAUDI ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO YEMEN. IT SAID THAT THOSE NOW LEAVING SAUDI ARABIA DID SO OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL, AND WERE ALLOWED TO TAKE ALL OF THEIR POSSESSIONS WITH THEM. IT DESCRIBED ALI ABDULLAH SALIH'S CLAIMS TO A LEADERSHIP ROLE WITHIN THE UN AND ARAB LEAGUE AS LAUGHABLE).

3. FARSI SAID THAT THE BBC'S LOCAL PALESTINIAN STRINGER SHOULD HAVE PICKED UP THE SAUDI STATEMENT. FULLER REFERENCE TO IT MIGHT HAVE INFUSED SOME BALANCE INTO THE BBC REPORT. HE RECALLED

INFORMATION MINISTER SHAIR'S RECENT CONVERSATION WITH THE HEAD OF THE BBC ARABIC SERVICE AND EXPRESSED THE HOPE THAT THE BBC WOULD LOOK FOR A MORE EFFECTIVE LOCAL CORRESPONDENT HERE.

4. PLUMBLY SAID HE WOULD CONVEY COMPLAINT TO LONDON. THE BBC EXTERNAL SERVICE'S TASK WAS NOT MADE EASIER BY THE RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED ON ACCESS TO THE KINGDOM, OR THE DIFFICULTIES THEY ENCOUNTERED IN FINDING SOMEBODY TO PUT OVER THE SAUDI VIEW. HE PRESSED FOR EARLY ISSUE OF A VISA TO MASON OF THE WORLD SERVICE, WHO HAD BEEN KEPT WAITING FOR A LONG PERIOD. FARSI TOOK THE POINT AND UNDERTOOK TO HELP. ON THE LOCAL STRINGER, PLUMBLY SAID THAT 29/30 OCTOBER HAD BEEN BUSY DAYS FOR NEWS HERE, WITH THE GCC FOREIGN MINISTERS MEETING AND THE ARRIVAL OF PRIMAKOV. THE BBC WERE UNLIKELY TO ACT ON A NEW STRINGER BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL PRESSURE, BUT HE (PLUMBLY) THOUGHT THAT THEY WERE LOOKING AT THE POSSIBILITY OF HIRING AN ADDITIONAL ONE.

COMMENT

5. SAUDI/YEMENI RELATIONS SEEM TO HAVE HIT A NEW LOW, WITH RESUMPTION OF THE MEDIA WAR AT AN EVEN SHARPER LEVEL THAN BEFORE. BBC REPORTING FROM YEMEN IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES IS INEVITABLY SENSITIVE, FARSI'S CRITICISMS CAN BE FAIRLY EASILY REFUTED SEMI COLON SAUDI TARDINESS IN GRANTING A VISA FOR MASON IS PERHAPS SUFFICIENT RESPONSE. I DO NOT THINK WE NEED SAY MORE UNLESS THE SAUDIS RETURN TO THE CHARGE. NONETHELESS IT IS CLEARLY IMPORTANT THAT THE BBC GET THEIR FACTS RIGHT (IT IS NOT OUR IMPRESSION THAT THE SAUDI AUTHORITIES WISH TO REDUCE THE YEMENI POPULATION TO 'A HANDFUL' AS ONE OF THE BBC REPORTS IN QUESTION SUGGESTED).

6. FARSI'S CRITICISMS OF THE BBC ARABIC SERVICE LOCAL STRINGER HERE ARE NEARER THE MARK. THE STRINGER IN QUESTION, NIMR, IS HOPELESS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF REPLACING HIM, OR ADDING A SECOND STRINGER HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN US AND INFORMATION DEPARTMENT (PLUMBLY'S TELELETTER OF 24 OCTOBER TO MUIR REFERS).

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