

CE/C
(2)



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

8 November 1990

M

Prime Minister

Dear Charles,

A fairly lame reply:

Iraq/Kuwait: BBC World Service

a case of falsehood being half way round the world.

You wrote to me on 29 October about the complaint made by Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia to the Prime Minister over the BBC Arabic Service's broadcasts to the Gulf. You will since have seen Riyadh telegram number 1107 reporting the Saudi King's concern at BBC World Service reporting on Saudi/Yemen relations.

Since the Gulf crisis began officials from Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have made a number of complaints about the BBC Arabic Service. Like Prince Bandar's remarks to the Prime Minister, they allege pro-Iraqi bias, particularly in the number of interviews with Iraqi and pro-Iraqi sources, lack of challenge to the Iraqi viewpoint and inadequate coverage of Gulf States and particularly Saudi positions. Most of the complaints have contained too little chapter and verse to identify specific items: the concern has been more about the overall tone, reinforced by Arabic Service use of a number of senior and long established Palestinian presenters.

with truth in still looking for its shoes. Open 6/11.

FCO Ministers and senior officials have brought these complaints to the attention of the BBC Chairman and the Managing Director of the World Service. The Secretary to the Cabinet has spoken to the Director-General.

The World Service have investigated the specific complaints which have been made and have arranged for an independent Arab academic (the Deputy Director of Farnham Castle) to monitor output. The Head of the Arabic Service has been through the complaints in detail with FCO officials; he has also visited Saudi Arabia twice and Egypt once since the crisis began to hear criticism at first hand. We have recently arranged for a senior member of the FCO Language Centre to monitor Arabic Service output.

The World Service have confirmed that they have taken measures to ensure that John Birt's "Producers' Guidelines on Impartiality" are fully observed by the Arabic Service. The World Service have repeatedly



reminded us of their editorial independence and concern to retain credibility with Arab audiences. We have drawn their attention to the FCO/BBC Agreed Objectives for the World Service which include: "a credible, unbiased, reliable, accurate, balanced and independent service of news a balanced British view of developments and of world events taking into account British Government policy".

Our conclusion so far is that the Arabic Service:

- needs to reinforce its collection of news from Saudi Arabia through the appointment of a better or additional stringer;
- has probably given more prominence than was warranted to the Iraqi position, at least in the early days of the crisis;
- has had difficulty throughout the crisis in obtaining quick and authoritative comment from the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia (we have repeatedly urged the Saudi and Kuwaiti authorities to be more forthcoming);

We continue to make the first two points forcibly to the BBC at senior levels.

Yours,
Stephen Wall
 (J S Wall)
Private Secretary

C D Powell Esq
 10 Downing Street