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# British Revival and American Decline? Anglo-American Relations and the Persian Gulf 1979–1987

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the trajectory of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East in the latter half of the twentieth century has rarely enjoyed consensus. Some have characterised it as a period of perpetual competition, with London unwilling or unable to accept its diminished status. Others, post-Suez, are more sanguine. Britain, it is argued, acted as a tutor to the United States still struggling to configure its global power with its regional interests. This article questions such assumptions. While its overt military presence across the Persian Gulf had declined by the mid-1970s, Britain had kept discreet military ties with a range of actors in the Gulf. By the early 1980s, with Washington struggling to make sense of the Iranian revolution and its wider impact across the region, Britain, now under Margaret Thatcher, proved adept at using commercial opportunities to recast and secure its strategic and economic interests across the Gulf, notably in Saudi Arabia. Thus, far from being the nadir of British influence in the Persian Gulf, the 1980s witnessed its revival.

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## Introduction

Throughout the 1980s, the United States was noted for its forceful approach to the Soviet Union and the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, its Middle East policies and in particular, the policies of successive administrations under Ronald Reagan towards the Persian Gulf were somewhat lacklustre. Following the Carter Administration's passive approach towards the Iranian revolution of 1979 that removed Washington's great ally, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, and the botched rescue attempt by US special forces of American diplomats taken hostage following the storming of the United States Embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979, it was reasonable to expect Reagan to have adopted a more aggressive stance towards the Persian Gulf. Anti-American sentiment, seen most visibly in the spread of Islamic radicalism, violently removed one US ally in Tehran and appeared to threaten another in Saudi Arabia following the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. When taken in conjunction with the burning of the US embassies in Tripoli and Islamabad it appeared Washington's influence could fall no further. Instead, despite his belligerent rhetoric, Reagan did little to stem terrorism across the region, placed US Marines in harm's way in Lebanon in 1983, and by the harebrained scheme of seeking rapprochement with the alleged

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moderates in Khomeini's Iran that resulted in the Iran-Contra scandal, barely escaped impeachment. The whole policy towards Iran rested on the flimsiest of foundations: a belief that such moderates would soon rise to the fore in Tehran. But no such moderates were allowed to exist in a regime where confrontation with the 'Great Satan' became a central pillar of its legitimacy. Those Iranians that might have sought an accommodation with Washington had been executed soon after the revolution. The nadir of American influence in the Persian Gulf came in May 1987 when Iraq attacked the USS Stark, killing 34 American sailors. Given Washington's animus towards the Ayatollahs, the Reagan administration tacitly accepted the Iraqi ogre Saddam Hussein's excuses that the bombing was a 'mistake'.<sup>2</sup>

While the Reagan administration floundered, the British Government under Margaret Thatcher demonstrated newfound confidence in the region. The eponymous Carter Doctrine proclaimed that: 'any outside attempt to gain control of the Gulf and its resources will be seen as a threat to US vital interests and be repelled by force if need be', and was seen as a clear statement of Washington's hegemonic aspirations.<sup>3</sup> While aimed at the Soviet Union, commentators and historians have seen the Carter Doctrine as confirmation of the final transfer of power in the Persian Gulf from the United Kingdom to the United States.<sup>4</sup> This, however, obfuscates a wider truth. While Britain no longer had an overt military presence across the region, its political, economic, and indeed security influence across the monarchies of the lower Gulf and Saudi Arabia remained deep.<sup>5</sup> Having secured the al-Bu-Said dynasty in Oman from a Marxist-inspired insurgency in the 1970s, British Loan Service officers remained integral to the functioning of the armed forces and the stability of the Sultanate itself.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, seconded military officers and security personnel were embedded throughout the nascent armed forces of other Gulf monarchies, including Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>7</sup> It was such contacts that allowed the Thatcher government to reset its influence across the Persian Gulf. Margaret Thatcher, revelling in her sobriquet of the 'Iron Lady', actively pushed British military hardware on her first tour to the Persian Gulf in 1981, re-establishing a strong, albeit discreet, United Kingdom security presence across the Gulf following the much publicised and controversial British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971. Such British revival reached its zenith with the *Al-Yamamah* agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1985, the single largest arms deal in British history to date.

This contrasts with much of the historiography of the period. A sense of British decline throughout the 1970s managed or otherwise, permeates much of the literature despite London's best efforts. The American historian, W. Taylor Fain argued that the United States, unable to develop effective security clients across the Persian Gulf in the aftermath of the British withdrawal, forced Washington to assume the main responsibility for the security of the region. While noting that the British withdrawal was less than the sum of its claimed parts, Simon C. Smith nonetheless argues that by the end of the 1970s, 'The Gulf States were ... subjected to regional crosscurrents which the British were, for the most part, incapable of countering'.<sup>8</sup>

Of British relations with Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, the literature is surprisingly sparse. London's close ties to Jordan and Oman had long been an irritant in Anglo-Saudi ties. The Yemen Civil War in the 1960s, however, had seen a concord of sorts reached with the re-establishment of diplomatic ties following the nadir in relations caused by tensions over the Buraimi oasis in the mid-1950s.<sup>9</sup> Still, well into the 1970s, Riyadh harboured suspicions of British intent. US diplomats based in Jeddah reported that the Saudis, 'Share with many other states of the Middle East a respect for British advisory abilities and a distrust of British motives. The Saudis believed that Britain was not averse to manipulating tensions across the Gulf and that London had deliberately prolonged the war in the Dhofar region of Oman to maintain its influence on the Arabian peninsula: 'The Saudis have no regrets at the departure of British advisors from the UAE and will be pleased to see their numbers decrease in Oman as well!'.<sup>10</sup>

There is no evidence to substantiate the Saudi claim. But the role and legacy of British advisors, either seconded or under contract who remained in the Gulf monarchies after 1971, underscored an increasing academic interest in the role of informal empire – the security,

economic and political ties that endured in the aftermath of imperial retreat.<sup>11</sup> This focus on the characteristics of an informal empire, while important, should not, however, disguise the continued role that Britain exercised across the Persian Gulf throughout the 1970s. To this extent, the Saudis had a point. It was a policy undoubtedly directed towards commercial gain, but equally, was linked closely to the pursuit of wider security interests that rode on the back of such business links. As such, despite the appearance of retrenchment, Britain remained an important regional actor, a diminished one perhaps, but an actor nonetheless. And like all good actors, given the right script, Britain could still perform on that particular regional stage. In Margaret Thatcher, that script was now given a powerful voice, and with it, unabashed advocacy of vital British interests, even if it came at a cost to individual British citizens. As Tore T. Petersen opined, she proved to be the 'arms sales woman supreme', creating in the process a dependency relationship that strengthened British military and political ties to the region – notably in Saudi Arabia and Oman – at a time when Washington 'floundered'.<sup>12</sup> Building on the work of Petersen in particular, we argue that Britain not only remained an important regional actor but one whose influence, despite periodic tensions, only increased across the Gulf during the 1980s, most notably in Saudi Arabia, while Washington floundered.

## The United States and Iran

In 1979 and with his regime on the brink of collapse in the face of mass street protests, across his country Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, reverted to his previous status as a client of London and Washington, expecting to be saved by his western benefactors. This was coupled, however, with a lingering suspicion of British perfidy when he opined to the British Ambassador to Tehran, Sir Anthony Parsons: 'If you lift up Khomeini's beard, you will find 'MADE IN ENGLAND' written under his chin'.<sup>13</sup> While the outgoing Labour government under James Callaghan could exercise little influence throughout events in Iran, the Shah continued to entertain suspicions, about the legacy of British meddling in his country and the wider region. His father, Shah Reza Pahlavi, had been deposed by the British in 1941, as was the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh in a coup organised jointly by MI6 and the CIA in 1953.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, Sheikh Muhammed bin Shakhbut al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi was purged in 1966 for refusing to follow the edicts of the British political resident.<sup>15</sup> In 1967, Aden and the still-born Federation of South Arabia were callously abandoned by the Labour Government under Harold Wilson, with many of the Sheiks and Potentates who had supported this experiment in state creation at London's behest, forced into exile. Of those that chose to stay, several were murdered.<sup>16</sup> In 1970, the old Sultan of Oman, Sa'id bin Taymur was deposed for not toeing the British party line, while the following year, Britain unilaterally handed Iran Abu Musa and the Tunbs Islands without bothering to involve the rulers of Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah to whom the islands belonged and to whom Britain was pledged to protect.<sup>17</sup>

When the Shah went into exile on 16 January 1979, his western benefactors no longer had use for him, being denied asylum in the United Kingdom and the United States. Miffed at his treatment, this former King of Kings wrote from exile in Egypt: 'In power, I believed that my alliance with the West was based on strength, loyalty, and mutual trust. Perhaps this trust had been misguided'.<sup>18</sup> Yet after the fall of the Shah and despite Tehran's fiery anti-American rhetoric amid the later hostage crisis, the Carter administration, as well as Reagan's presidency, never gave up seeking accommodation with theocratic Iran. Shortly after taking power, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that anyone hostile to the revolution 'will be considered as opposed to God Almighty and a traitor to the country and the Islamic movement'.<sup>19</sup> The regime soon unleashed a wave of terror. Despite all this, when Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State in the Carter administration, met his Iranian counterpart on 3 October 1979, he explained that the US 'was prepared to deal with Iran in the future on the basis of friendship and mutual respect'.<sup>20</sup> National

Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, went further. Meeting an Iranian delegation in Algiers on 1 November, he pleaded that: 'We are prepared for any relationship you want... We have a basic community of interest but we do not know what you want us to do.'<sup>21</sup> The examples above were part of wider attempts by the United States to placate the Ayatollahs, but there were no takers in Iran and besides, it was already too late.<sup>22</sup> The Shah, despite Carter's misgivings, had already been admitted to the United States for medical treatment, serving as a convenient excuse for the Iranians to occupy the United States Embassy in Tehran and take US diplomats hostage. At first, the British kept their distance from the new revolutionary regime in Iran, hoping to remain in Washington's good graces as it pledged to reduce trade with the new regime. But as always, commercial considerations overrode almost everything. In the first seven months of 1980, British trade with Iran doubled compared to the same period in 1979.<sup>23</sup>

The Carter administration made great efforts to solve the hostage crisis peacefully, only to be rewarded by Iran constantly reneging on deals already brokered. Operation Eagle Claw, the ill-fated attempt to rescue the US hostages in Tehran on 25 April 1980, was the exception that proved the point: overly complicated, poorly planned, and badly executed it was almost designed to fail. There is evidence that Carter ordered the operation to counter his image of ineptitude and failure as he sought re-election, but Carter never again tried force to resolve the crisis.<sup>24</sup> Iran finally released the hostages after Carter left office but on meeting them upon their return, he was shocked about what he learned of their treatment, writing to his successor, Ronald Reagan, on 21 January 1981:

They have been abused more than I had previously known. The Iranians have – even up to the last moment – acted like savages. Even going from their last bus ride in Iran to the plane the Americans were forced individually to walk a gauntlet – through a human corridor receiving verbal & physical abuse from both sides. This long, official criminal act of terrorism should never be accepted nor forgotten or forgiven by the civilized world.<sup>25</sup>

The new President's tough rhetoric on terrorism had allegedly persuaded the Iranians to release the hostages. But once in office, Reagan proved long on rhetoric but short on action when it came to the new regime in Tehran. Welcoming the returning hostages home, the newly elected President promised 'swift and effective retribution'. During the next five years, however, Americans suffered ever-increasing attacks at the hands of Iranian-inspired proxies across the Middle East. Between 1981 and 1987, 660 American civilians and military personnel were killed or wounded in a series of devastating attacks. Such attacks reached their apogee in Beirut in October 1983 when 241 US Marines and sailors – part of the Multi-National Force that had been sent to Beirut to oversee the evacuation of the PLO and protection of Palestinian refugee camps following Israel's invasion of Lebanon the previous year – were killed in a suicide truck-bombing.<sup>26</sup> After each attack, the President pledged retribution on the culprits but rarely acted.<sup>27</sup> This lack of a forceful response and resolve was noted by America's opponents and enemies, a policy that steadily decreased the penalties for challenging the United States. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the scandal that almost brought down Reagan's Presidency: The Iran-Contra Affair.

## **The Iran-Contra affair**

Following the revolution in Iran, the United States imposed a total arms embargo on Tehran, the sale of weapons being prohibited by laws passed in Congress. Between 1981 and 1986, however, senior officials in the Reagan Administration conducted back-channel dealings with the Iranian regime that had seen Israel, acting on Washington's behest, transfer American-supplied anti-tank missiles and other munitions to Iran. Such weapons were desperately needed by Iran, now engaged in a bloody war of attrition with Iraq. Later, the transfer of these weapons was justified on humanitarian grounds, leading to the release of American citizens taken hostage by militant Shi'ite groups in Lebanon closely linked to Tehran.

This moral justification for breaking US law was retrospective and cynically made. The initial trade in arms to Iran had been condoned *before* any hostages had been taken. Moreover, Iran paid for these weapons in cash, money that was then siphoned off to support the Contras fighting to overthrow the pro-Soviet government under the Sandanistas that had taken power in Nicaragua in 1979. There is no direct connection between American policy towards Iran and the Contras/Nicaragua in this period apart from someone in the United States administration, possibly the President, who thought it a good idea to use the profits from overcharging Iran for these weapons to clandestinely support the Contras.<sup>28</sup> Funding for the Contras had been explicitly banned under the Boland Amendment, passed by the US congress in 1982 and amended in 1984. Even so, three members of Reagan's National Security Council, US Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, Admiral John Poindexter, and National Security Advisor, Robert McFarlane, acting on Reagan's behest and instruction, conspired to use funds from the arms sales to Iran to purchase weapons for the Contras.<sup>29</sup> The burning issue remained Reagan's culpability. Once the Iran-Contra scandal broke, few believed his subsequent denials.

One would think that after watching Carter flounder while benefitting politically from the hostage crisis amid Iran's fiery anti-American rhetoric that Reagan would have been wary of seeking an accommodation with the Ayatollahs. Far from it: the President himself was the key player in seeking better relations with Iran, putting his hopes that 'moderates' in the regime would seek better relations with the United States after the eventual death of Khomeini. This premise was deeply flawed. Few moderates remained in Iran; the mullahs had simply killed them off. Equally, the subsequent policy of seeking better relations with Iran by selling arms to Tehran at inflated prices and then illegally using the proceeds to fund the anti-communist guerillas (the Contras) in Nicaragua was poorly planned and badly executed. When the affair became public, Reagan barely escaped impeachment. As Ann Wroe wryly notes:

Two illusions lay at the heart of Iran-contra. The first was that the Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini could, in some sort, be reasonably dealt with; the second was that a band of rag-tag guerillas, the Nicaraguan contras, could save the West from Communism. Both illusions were shattered in ways that underlined how fragile and ramshackle the policies were, and they were shattered within a month of each other.<sup>30</sup>

More devastating was the final Congressional Report into the Iran-Contra affair: 'The lesson to Iran was unmistakeable. (...) All U. S. positions and principles were negotiable, and breaches by Iran went unpunished. Whatever Iran did, the U.S. could be brought back to the arms bargaining table by the promise of another hostage.'<sup>31</sup> If the Carter administration's vision of Iran was often blurred by its Cold War bifocals, this was even more so with the Reagan Administration. Many have excused Reagan's reckless handling of the Iran-Contra affair and his avoidance of impeachment because he was so concerned about the welfare of the US citizens taken hostage in Lebanon. He was, but it also served as a convenient excuse for engineering a new American approach to Iran. As such, the hostages became a Trojan 'mouse' for changing American policy. As soon as the Iran and its Lebanese proxies learned that the political worth of hostages would only increase, they did what all sensible entrepreneurs do: they took more of the valuable commodity, kidnapping more Americans and other westerners, including, later on, British and Irish nationals. Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne noted:

In the end, the Americans and Israel supplied Iran with 2,004 TOW and eighteen HAWK anti-aircraft missiles (...), 240 HAWK spare parts, and a variety of sensitive intelligence on Iraq. They were willing to supply much more, including more HAWKS, radar equipment, and other material. In return, only Benjamin Weir, Lawrence Jenco, and, on November 2, 1986, David Jacobsen were freed—a partial accomplishment that was offset by later kidnappings. Ironically this sequence of events supported President Reagan's public stance—ignored in practice—that dealing with terrorists only contributes to more terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

Rapprochement with Iran was not something that suddenly occurred to the president while riding on his Californian ranch.<sup>33</sup> It had its gestations deep within the US Government bureaucracy. On 23 March 1982, Deputy Undersecretary of State, Lawrence Eagleburger, received a

memorandum warning that the situation in the Persian Gulf was dire and could soon blow up. 'Various reports suggest that the threat has recently become more acute owing to increasing Soviet and proxy penetration of Iran and Iranian moves against the Gulf States'. The memo argued that even after the recent successful Iranian offensive against Iraq, American policy should be more than just tilting towards Iran. Its size, location and resources were too important to be left alone to Soviet penetration. But behind every problem there is usually an opportunity; the renewed Iranian threat gave the United States a chance to actively prove its commitment to Gulf state security. This, Eagleburger noted, should be combined with a more active and forthcoming policy towards Iran to increase Western influence in the country.<sup>34</sup>

To control the growing political fallout from the Iran-Contra Affair, Reagan established the President's Special Review Board (later called the Tower Commission after its chairman, John Tower) to assess administration policy. The subsequent report was particularly damning of Don Regan, Reagan's White House Chief of Staff: 'He must bear primary responsibility for the chaos that descended upon the White House' but the report was equally damning of the Reagan White House. It led Wroe to observe: 'The Tower Commission produced its picture of a comatose President and his wild aides, and there was no rebuttal'.<sup>35</sup> However, there are strong indications that the Tower Commission report was flawed. Highlighting the testimony of Reagan's former National Security Advisor, Robert McFarlane, to Congress, *Time* magazine noted:

The [Tower Commission] report depicts the President as a woolly-minded, out-of-touch leader who permitted a band of overzealous aides to conduct secret and possible illegal operations right under his nose. The White House has done little to dispute that characterization, and for good reason: an inattentive Reagan who knew little of the weapon's sale to Iran and nothing of the funneling of arms to Nicaraguan rebels seemed better than a President who played an active role in the affair.

McFarlane claims that Reagan overrode strong objections by Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, and Secretary of State, George Shultz, and instructed McFarlane to go ahead secretly with the Iranian initiative. But the President evaded responsibility by blaming Don Regan and his overzealous aides, while leaving the impression that Reagan's lack of attention and laziness allowed the pursuit of illegal policies.<sup>36</sup> The Tower Commission report spreads the blame evenly; the President had such a compassionate attachment to the hostages and was so inattentive to detail that he embarked on illegal policies, without hardly realising it. Furthermore, he did not use the NSC apparatus properly by failing to submit his policy for review. But the whole point was secrecy: Reagan did not want to involve the cumbersome, and not-so-secretive NSC. McFarlane is criticised for not keeping all parties informed, including the Secretaries of State and Defense. For their part, Schultz and Weinberger, '[S]imply distanced themselves from the program. They protected their record as to their position on the issue. They were not energetic in attempting to protect the President from the consequences of his commitment to freeing the hostages'.

More likely however, Reagan simply told them to mind their own business. Shultz admits as much in his memoirs. The whole Tower Commission report reeked of memories of Watergate, but as an institution, another crisis for the Presidency had to be prevented. By seemingly making a 'full disclosure', impeachment was avoided, but many details were presented in a confused fashion, contradictory signals were given, and the issue of ultimate responsibility remained deliberately opaque. Theodore Draper notes: 'The Tower Report is at its worst in its verdict on what was wrong with President Reagan's handling of this affair. The emphasis was placed on his 'management style' instead of his political decisions'.<sup>37</sup> The Tower report was therefore a Godsend to the President, who used it to wriggle out of a potential impeachment case. As Iwan Morgan observes: 'It is pertinent to ask whether the old actor had pulled off his greatest performance in hoodwinking the Tower panel into believing that he was too dodderly and disoriented to have played the lead in Iran-Contra'.<sup>38</sup> The President also played the independent counsel Lawrence Walsh in the Iran-Contra affair, who described Ronald Reagan thus: 'It had been a long time since anyone had captivated me so completely. I knew I was dealing with



an actor but, after sixty years of examining witnesses, I was ready to stake my reputation that this was not an act'.<sup>39</sup>

## Backing Baghdad

Washington's fraught relationship with Iran has come to overshadow a detailed appreciation of its links to Iraq. Baghdad had severed ties with Washington over its support for Israel in the aftermath of the June 1967 War. With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, Washington publicly asserted its neutrality towards the protagonists although, by the mid-1980s, there was a distinct shift towards Baghdad. In part, this was a reaction to the regional fallout from the Iran-Contra affair which was met with consternation among the Gulf monarchies that had largely been bankrolling the Iraqi war effort since 1982. As the American diplomat and historian Gary Sick argued, '[t]he revelation of these [Iran-Contra] arrangements created consternation and threatened US relations with friendly oil-producing states of the Gulf'.<sup>40</sup> It was also meant to forestall any challenge to the core regional interests of the United States: ensuring the unfettered access of the industrialised world to the oil resources of the region and thwarting Soviet influence across the region that might threaten such access. Washington had re-established diplomatic ties with Iraq in 1983, but Reagan always found dealing with the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein a somewhat convoluted process. Still, the Iraqi dictator was incensed when he learned about American double-dealing towards Iraq, a Janus-faced policy that came to light in the wake of Congressional investigations into the Iran/Contra scandal and at a time when Iraq was caught in a bloody stalemate in its war with Iran. With his well-developed suspicion and paranoia, the Saddam Hussein did not take kindly to American offers to assist Iran. Presenting himself as a victim, the Iraqi dictator wrote to President Reagan on 18 November 1986:

Iraq, Mr President understands in principle your endeavour to establish normal relations with Iran. Now or in the future, regardless of whether we agree with your justifications and goals or not. What concerns Iraq, in these matters, is that such relations do not involve a threat to its security, sovereignty and legitimate interests. (...) What has shocked and caused our great surprise – and frankly, even aroused our suspicions – is that the process of your rapprochement with Iran has involved supplying that country with quantities of U. S. military equipment and that the contacts have been undertaken in the manner uncovered recently.

Hussein further pointed out that he believed there was an American-Iraqi agreement based on several years of exchanges between their respective foreign ministries, that to force Iran to reach an accommodation with Iraq, a full US arms embargo against Tehran was necessary. He continued, 'You informed us through official channels that you were continuing with an extensive worldwide campaign in this direction'. The Iraqi dictator reminded Reagan that Iraq had, along with other Arab states, cooperated fully with the American initiative. 'I and my colleagues in the Iraqi government have rightly found that what has taken place involves a direct and grave threat to the security and safety of our country and a direct contribution to the prolongation of the war'.<sup>41</sup> When receiving the letter, the US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, assured the Iraqi ambassador that the US would continue to pursue the regional arms embargo 'vigorously'. But he also noted privately, '[T]hat the recent revelations will require special U.S. efforts to re-establish full credibility for [the operation] Staunch with all parties'.<sup>42</sup> By trading arms for hostages, Reagan violated official American policy.

When, on 17 May 1987, Iraq attacked the USS *Stark*, killing 37 American sailors, Reagan meekly accepted the loss, now eager not to lose an ally against the Iranian ogre. He dismissed the incident as trivial: 'The months following the Reykjavik summit were very busy: ... and then there was the tragic attack by Iraqi planes on the USS *Stark*'. While Shultz doubted whether the attack was an accident, he accepted Saddam Hussein's admission of error and apology. For General Colin Powell, later to become the US Secretary of State under George W. Bush, 'the



U.S.S. *Stark* was accidentally attacked by an Iraqi Exocet missile<sup>43</sup> The incident caused far less controversy than the assault on the USS *Liberty*, a US Navy signals gathering ship attacked in international waters off the coast of Egypt by Israeli aircraft in the June 1967 War. Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger followed the official line while in office, but stated later that he believed the attack to be premeditated, arguing Iraq: 'wanted to demonstrate that they could attack America and deal with a superpower and they should be the leading power in the Gulf'.<sup>44</sup> Given the dramatic revelations from the investigations of the Iran/Contra affair, Saddam's implicitly threatening letter and Murphy's weak apologies, it is reasonable to suggest that the Iraqi dictator, given his *modus operandi*, deliberately ordered the attack on USS *Stark* to show he was not to be trifled with, and of course, to test American resolve. To his satisfaction, he must have found such resolve lacking, given the meek American response. One can only surmise, that having killed large numbers of American sailors with impunity with the bombing of the USS *Stark*, Saddam may well have had reason to believe that he could invade Kuwait with little to fear from the United States. This was a belief reinforced by events elsewhere. The United States, along with much of the international community, had turned a blind eye, other than the mildest diplomatic slapping of the Iraqi wrist when the Iraqi dictator used chemical weapons and nerve agents against the invading Iranians and his Kurdish population, most notoriously in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja in March 1988.<sup>45</sup>

In sum, there was little that was new in the American approach to the Persian Gulf under Reagan. Richard W. Murphy, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 29 May 1987, noted that the United States had three overriding objectives in the Gulf: '[T]o galvanise the international community to press for a just end to the Iran-Iraq war; to motivate the Iranian leadership to cease its aggressive posture and re-join the ranks of peaceful nations, and to prevent a strategic gain by the Soviet Union in the region'. To explain the American interests in the region Murphy rounded up the usual suspects: the continued supply of oil; prevention of Soviet influence and maintaining the major American political interest in the non-belligerent Gulf states. On the U.S.S. *Stark* and US-Iraqi relations, Murphy noted: 'Our ability to communicate frankly with each other kept the tragedy of the U.S.S. *Stark* attack in context, so as to preserve our larger relationship'.<sup>46</sup> One would have to look long and hard to find a clearer example of how little the Reagan administration was concerned about the loss of American lives, down-playing their deaths to preserve a relationship with one of the worst dictators the world has ever seen, a dictator who revered Joseph Stalin as his idol. Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, Richard Armitage, observed to Congress following Murphy's testimony: 'I want to say that no matter how terrible and heart-rendering the tragedy of the *Stark*, the May 17 tragedy, that terrible event, in and of itself, did not signal a new level of danger in the Gulf'.<sup>47</sup> Saddam Hussein had nervously awaited American reactions to the bombing of USS *Stark*. When there was no response and the United States meekly accepted Iraqi excuses, the Iraqi dictator noted contemptuously that: 'If someone had attacked my ship, I would have bombed the airfield the plane came from'.<sup>48</sup>

## Re-enter albiion: Britain and the Gulf

Under President Richard Nixon, US policy towards the Persian Gulf had been based on two pillars: Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi foreign policy, or any policy, was simple: ensuring the survival of the ruling dynasty and the country's territorial integrity in a system where political survival ensured personal survival for the multitude of Saudi princes. Apart from liberally spreading its oil money about, money that was often used to support radical Islamist movements across the Muslim world in the name of *Zakat* (charity), the regime leaned heavily on its western benefactors for its security. All American presidents from Truman to Reagan had guaranteed the regime's security. When Reagan became President, his administration approached

Saudi Arabia with a great burst of energy; renewing American security guarantees, asking for money to support the Contras and the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan and pushing through Congress the sale of Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) planes, despite strong pro-Jewish opposition in Congress. Thereafter, the Reaganites seem to lose interest or steam, creating a political and security vacuum quickly filled by the British. London had one overriding interest in the Kingdom: to sell as much military hardware as possible, and supinely kowtowing to almost any Saudi whim to do so, provided the Saudis bought British.

It had not escaped the notice of the Carter administration that Britain had retained a substantial but low-key presence in the Kingdom. Brzezinski noted that:

British personnel, largely civilians on contract, are heavily involved in developing the Saudi Arabian Air Force and its air defence systems. In 1978, for example, the Royal Saudi Air Force renewed its contract with the UK to provide technical support for its British-supplied Lightning fighter planes, the running of the King Faisal Air Academy, and the operation of the Technical Institute in Dhahran through to 1982. As The British Aircraft Corporation [BAC] maintains and serviced Saudi planes and is also installing the Saudi missile defence system. Almost 2,000 BAC personnel are currently in Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup>

With the fall of the Shah, the United States and Britain quietly shifted their focus to the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf and would, thereafter, systematically strengthen their presence there. Saudi military deficiencies were not so much a cause for alarm but rather an opportunity. It allowed Britain to heap more military hardware on the Kingdom in the name of regime security that required a growing number of Western experts to run it. Whatever Saudi Arabia did or however frustrated the Saudi royals were at their Western benefactors, they took care never to jeopardise their all-important security relationship with the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>50</sup>

Brzezinski underestimated the physical size of the British presence in Saudi Arabia. Britain's stake was of a similar size as the US, with almost 30,000 United Kingdom nationals working in Saudi Arabia in the oil industry and defence sector, annual sales of almost £900 million, and oil imports worth over £1bn annually.<sup>51</sup> In early 1980, relations became frayed, however, following the televising of a drama-documentary, *Death of a Princess*, depicting the execution of a member of the Saudi Royal family, Princess Misha, for adultery. Still, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) understood there were limits to the extent to which the Saudis would express their displeasure. As one FCO official noted, '[W]e would not expect the wide-ranging and close relations in defence, and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia to be adversely affected.'<sup>52</sup> But the controversy over the programme did sour Anglo-Saudi relations. In late April 1980, the British Cabinet discussed the problems associated with this drama-documentary. The Saudis, when wanting to show their displeasure to the British, retaliated in the only way they knew how by cancelling commercial contracts, this time for gas turbine generators. The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was concerned enough to consider personally intervening with the Saudi leadership to smooth things over.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, with a keen eye for their self-interest and security, the punishment did not extend to British forces then serving in a training capacity in Saudi Arabia. A training team of British SAS was present in the Kingdom when the Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized by dissidents opposed to the al-Saud and what they regarded as its accommodation with an apostate West.<sup>54</sup> Thatcher wrote to crown prince Fahd on 25 April 1980:

I am distressed and saddened by the unfortunate consequences that the recent television film has had on relations between Britain and Saudi Arabia. I understand and sympathise with the feelings of deep injury which are felt by the Royal Family and the people of Saudi Arabia. (...) You will have seen from reports of exchanges in Parliament on April 24 that the British Government's concerns and regret are shared by Members of Parliament from all sides of the House. (...) Both the Independent Broadcasting Authority and the British Broadcasting Corporation will have taken note of the adverse comments and unfortunate consequences which followed this film. The growing tensions in the Middle East and the latest very serious turn of events in Iran underline the necessity for our two countries to keep in the closest touch. There is an urgent need to restore relations to their normal friendly basis as soon as possible.<sup>55</sup>

Long after the crisis had blown over, Lord Peter Carrington, the British Foreign Secretary would write in his memoirs: 'I remember the television programme 'Death of a Princess' which was regarded by the Saudis as intolerably and inaccurately unfriendly – indeed they asked the British Ambassador to quit Riyadh. The incident proved the sad irresponsibility of some entertainment media in a free society, with programmes made regardless of their impact on British interests.'<sup>56</sup> But the broadcast undermined relations, with the Saudis demanding the recall of the UK Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir James Craig to London. Only in July of the same year was the relationship repaired and Craig was allowed to return to Jeddah.<sup>57</sup>

Adding to Anglo-Saudi tensions was the tragic death of the British nurse, Helen Smith, in May 1979 while attending an illegal drinks party in Jeddah. While her death was ruled an accident, there is strong circumstantial evidence that foul play was involved. It led her father, a retired West Yorkshire police officer, Ron Smith, to embark on a decades-long quest for justice for his daughter. The evidence released so far suggests that the FCO tried to downplay the incident to avoid disturbing already much-ruffled Saudi feathers over *The Death of a Princess*. The response from the Foreign Office mandarins was less than enthusiastic, to put it charitably, to repeated requests from Ron Smith to open a full investigation into his daughter's death. The investigative journalist Paul Foot noted:

Foreign Office officials at every level strove mightily to deflect Ron Smith from his justified anxiety about his daughter's death. They refused him even documents and telegrams which reflected their doubts and suspicions. In one interview at the Foreign Office, Mr Patrick McDermott, who was introduced to the case late in the day, begged me to understand that all mistakes and mistranslations which appeared from the Jeddah embassy were coincidental – just a catalogue of unfortunate errors. I shall be surprised if anyone reading the record shares that view.<sup>58</sup>

Typically, Carrington, who got himself quite worked up on *The Death of a Princess*, did not deign to mention the Helen Smith story in his memoirs; neither did Margaret Thatcher.<sup>59</sup> The response by the Prime Minister to a request from Helen's brother, Graham, to intervene with the Saudi authorities and ensure an open investigation into his sister's death, was cool and rather callous: 'The Prime Minister fully understands and sympathises with the grief and concern which Helen's death must have caused your family. The matter has been investigated carefully and the Prime Minister is satisfied that officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and the embassy in Jeddah have done everything they can to help your family'.<sup>60</sup> Douglas Hurd, Minister of State at the Foreign Office, blamed everybody but the politicians involved. Instead, he criticised Ron Smith, his legal advisors, and an irresponsible press. In exasperation, Hurd claimed that: 'We were not sufficiently robust in our rebuttals of nonsense, because I listened attentively to the caution of our legal advisors'.<sup>61</sup>

It was clear that Riyadh needed to be assuaged. As such, the Anglo-Saudi process of reconciliation started with Douglas Hurd's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 1980, while Lord Carrington visited between 25–27 August 1980. Hurd began his meeting with the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Saud al-Faisal, by once again apologising for the film *Death of a Princess*. 'The British Government had felt real distress at the wretched film. We quite understood and deeply regretted the offence which it had caused. He had seen it himself so he could understand the offence which had been taken; it was full of bad taste'. The abject apology came with a price: Hurd hoped that Britain would no longer lose out on commercial opportunities in Saudi Arabia. And, as an aside, he asked, could the Saudis please stop maltreating and beating British nationals imprisoned in their country? The Helen Smith case was not even mentioned at this august level.<sup>62</sup> Questions continued to be raised in Parliament regarding the circumstances of her death, with Ron Smith criticising the efficacy of the autopsy report, and the lack of cooperation by Saudi authorities with investigating officers from the West Yorkshire Police when they arrived in Jeddah to investigate further. The wall of official obfuscation that met Ron Smith in his quest for justice was summed up in a terse letter he received from Thatcher's Private Secretary in a

letter dated 20 October 1983. While conveying the Prime Minister's sympathies, 10 Downing Street was quite clear that no official enquiry would be launched into his daughter's death. Ron Smith died in 2011. His daughter's death never was subject to a full independent investigation in the UK.<sup>63</sup>

Carrington's visit had an added purpose to Hurd's, this being 'to reopen opportunities for us to win business in Saudi Arabia, and to establish a relationship of confidence with the Saudi Government in which it will be possible to discuss the problems of regional security, energy policy, the Middle East question, etc., in a spirit of mutual trust'. The prospects were good. The Saudis promised Carrington the red-carpet treatment: 'It may be possible to exploit this mood to obtain preferential consideration for British firms or projects and thus for us to bounce back into a better position than we were before'. The price to pay for an increased British market share was small: 'A further statement (if the Saudis still want this) of HMG's regret at the consequences of the film for Anglo-Saudi relations, and a reaffirmation that the Secretary of State found it deeply offensive'. At this point, British apologies seem to have become more than ritualistic. As such, the case of Helen Smith was seen by Carrington as an irritant to the part Britain could play in this process.<sup>64</sup>

Once restored to his position as UK Ambassador to Riyadh, James Craig reported back to London on 3 September that Carrington's visit 'was a marked success, having been received by the King and four royal Ministers', an entourage of high diplomatic standing. On the Saudi side, bitterness over the film still simmered, but Carrington succeeded in assuaging Saudi anger, smoothing the way for British business, which was the main reason behind the Foreign Secretary's visit.<sup>65</sup> The Thatcher government, just like its Labour predecessor under James Callaghan, had looked to stay close to Saudi Arabia while avoiding formal defence obligations towards the Kingdom. This now changed with the *Al-Yamamah* deal, a deal which carried an implicit commitment to Saudi security, confirming a new British approach towards the dynastic regimes of the Gulf: no security without the purchase of British equipment.

Like Britain, the United States understood the Saudis needed constant stroking, whatever Washington's private reservations. Reagan, like Carter, easily adopted the role of a benign feudal overlord. The security assurances were repeated in April 1981 combined with the dispatch of Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, which 'will aim at showing Saudi Arabia that the United States intends to be a consistent and reliable friend'.<sup>66</sup> In their particular way, the Saudis reciprocated: 'In a gesture to the new administration and on the occasion of [US ambassador] West's impending departure, [the Crown Prince] Fahd said he had ordered the release and amnesty of 21 Americans held for offences against the kingdom'.<sup>67</sup> As noted, the British also faced the problem of UK nationals detained in the Kingdom for real or alleged offences; taking the larger view it is tempting to see the detainees as potential hostages to be leveraged in return for acceptable Western policies as the Saudis defined it. From the available documentary records, what is most striking is how little concern the United Kingdom and the United States showed towards the fate of their nationals in Saudi captivity. Apart from Hurd's light admonishment concerning the maltreatment of British nationals, we found little official concern regarding allegations of human rights abuses. But as with the Carter administration, the Saudis were not above rattling the oil weapon, claiming excess oil revenue to its budgetary requirements, and wanting political courtesies from the West for its 'generous' oil policy. Still, as Clark dryly noted to Reagan, this was essentially a Saudi fiction. The Kingdom, he argued, wanted to sell as much oil as possible because they needed the revenue, and not because they were doing the Americans any favours.<sup>68</sup>

Once approved in the Senate, the sale by the United States of the AWACS had implications for British arms sales. The British had hoped to sell the Saudis the Nimrod (a similar maritime surveillance plane), a sale that would help offset the cost of developing the system for the RAF. Meeting King Khaled on 4 November 1981, Carrington suggested to the king: 'Perhaps the Saudis would buy NIMRODS when the AWACS were worn out. Following the US decision, they

did not need NIMRODS now: *but they did need political support from Britain*.' The underlining in the text was by the Prime Minister herself, showing that both parties had a clear grasp of each side of the equation; buying arms from Britain also bought security.<sup>69</sup> Not buying British was also a guarantee that no security would be forthcoming from the United Kingdom.

Restored Saudi goodwill soon translated into British military contracts. The Saudi National Guard ordered communication facilities worth £200 million to be supervised by the Ministry of Defence, which in addition secured a government-to-government contract of £370 million for training and support for the Saudi Airforce to be run by British Aerospace, the successor to BAC. Negotiations had been difficult 'but now it has been completed it could clear the way for us to pursue other military aircraft and equipment sales to the Saudi Defence Ministry'.<sup>70</sup> The Saudis blew hot and cold on their relations with Britain; one moment pulling out all the stops when the new Foreign Secretary, Francis Pym, visited the Kingdom in 1982, then complaining about an unacceptable item on the BBC critical of Riyadh. This produced the usual genuflections from Thatcher as well as continued reassurance of the importance Britain attached to ties with Saudi Arabia.<sup>71</sup> Less the Saudis forget, Thatcher took care to underline the connection between the regime's security, and even survival, which was built on the foundation of massive purchases of military hardware from its Western benefactors. Writing to King Fahd on 23 December 1983, the Prime Minister pointed to the volatile situation in the region generally and the heightened tensions caused by the current unrest in Lebanon: 'In such difficult and dangerous times I think it is of the highest importance that like-minded countries should meet frequently and take counsel together so that we may be better able to defend and further those things in which we believe'. This was after London had strongly pushed Rolls-Royce engines on the Saudis to be used in their planned purchase of Boeing aircraft.<sup>72</sup> These efforts paid off handsomely. British defence contracts with Saudi Arabia had increased by 38 per cent in 1982, and each successfully signed deal was used as a staging post to gain ever more sales.<sup>73</sup> In 1983 sales were up by twenty per cent compared to 1982, totalling £2,255 million.<sup>74</sup> This paved the way for the historic *Al-Yamamah* arms deal, at the time, the largest arms deal in the world to date.

The origins of the deal are to be found in US domestic politics. In July 1985, the Reagan Administration formally declared that it would not be conducting a planned upgrade of the Royal Saudi Air Force's F-15 C/D fighter aircraft. The planned upgrade would have given the F-15s a significant ground attack capability. Israel, however, raised objections through its supporters in Congress, causing the upgrade to be cancelled. Frustrated, the Saudis now looked to Europe for a suitable alternative. Britain was well placed, having sold Riyadh Lightning fighter aircraft along with servicing and support structures in the mid-1960s, and followed a decade later by the sale of jet training aircraft.<sup>75</sup>

The Chairman of British Aerospace, Sir Austin Pearce, had already raised future aircraft deals to Saudi Arabia with Thatcher in April 1981. His lobbying was motivated by two concerns: that the current memorandum of understanding that had seen British Aerospace as the prime contractor for the Royal Saudi Air Force was up for renewal and, concerning from a British perspective, the French were offering the Saudis purchase of their Mirage 4000 fighter which had not much developed beyond the concept stage. Writing to Thatcher in advance of her first trip to the Gulf in the Spring of 1981 Pearce opined that:

The opportunities for developing our participation in the development of the Royal Saudi Air Force have not been fully exploited in the sense that several proposals have been put to the Saudi Defence Minister for increasing our participation. We believe that this would be a useful addition to the present scope of activity which foreseeably must decline unless additional contracts are awarded to us since those activities are based on aircraft (the Lightning) that are increasingly becoming obsolete. Therefore, if we are to retain our presence at current levels, it will entail either new aircraft or additional support activities or preferably both. Clearly, we would be most grateful for any opportunity you may have to promote such ideas.<sup>76</sup>

In his letter, Pearce also highlighted ongoing negotiations for the sale of aircraft and air defence equipment to Oman, the UAE, Qatar as well as Egypt. Pearce was writing to the converted. Thatcher was aware of the strategic clout such arms sales carried for British influence and prestige in the Gulf. While politics in Washington undoubtedly played their part, Thatcher's promotion of the British arms industry was crucial in what now unfolded over the next four years. The British offered the Saudis the Tornado IDS, a ground attack aircraft whose performance was enough to persuade the Saudis to forego the French Mirage. More controversially, allegations of commissions paid to ensure the purchase of Tornado eventually clinched a deal that saw Britain agree to deliver 48 Tornado IDS, 24 Tornado ADVs (Air Defence Version) and 60 training planes. The memorandum of understanding signed in September 1985 included the sale of 132 planes by British Aerospace as the prime contractor. Ultimately, Britain was able to clinch this deal because it promised rapid delivery of the aircraft, achieved through sending Tornados that had already been earmarked for the Royal Air Force.<sup>77</sup> Such was the scale of the deal, the Saudis were allowed to make their payment in oil, with British Petroleum and Shell lifting 300,000 barrels a day.<sup>78</sup> Proceeds from the sale of this oil were expected to pay for the aircraft over three years with safeguards included should the price of oil drop substantially. *Al-Yamamah* also included an offset deal, requiring London to encourage inward investment into Saudi Arabia of up to a total of £1 billion, reckoned to be 25% of the technical support costs involved in the deal.<sup>79</sup>

The financial returns accruing to Britain from *al-Yamamah* proved considerable. The first contract was valued at \$7.6 billion, with life-cycle support contracts to support servicing of the aircraft and training of Saudi aircrews reckoned to constitute multiples of this figure over the following decades. The deal safeguarded British defence and electronic industries at a time when British manufacturing industries were making large-scale redundancies. It showed the UK as the primary guarantor of Saudi air power for the foreseeable future, a factor that may well have been instrumental in the signing of the second memorandum of understanding between London and Riyadh in 1988.<sup>80</sup>

The *al-Yamamah* deal went hand in hand with a strengthening of British military and political ties across the region. With its close ties to Oman, Britain concluded a deal for the sale of Chieftan tanks to the Sultanate in 1981 although some British officials, including Douglas Hurd, thought such money would be better spent on civilian infrastructure.<sup>81</sup> Still, such were the closeness of Anglo-Omani ties that in 1982, the Prime Minister gave Sultan Qaboos of Oman a free hand to deploy British troops under his command in an emergency without prior consultation with the UK. This was unprecedented and emblematic of Thatcher's desire, once more, to restore Britain's fortunes across the Gulf.<sup>82</sup> As we have seen, this was part of a wider regional push to substantially increase British influence and power in the Gulf, a policy that culminated in 1985 with the *Al-Yamamah* arms deal with Saudi Arabia. Later, under the premiership of Tony Blair, *Al-Yamamah II*, a follow-on deal became enmeshed in scandal, with charges of high-level corruption. While it is probably wrong to blame Thatcher for allegations of corruption surrounding her successors, her government undoubtedly set the precedent.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

It has long been fashionable to regard Britain as a spent force across the Middle East by the beginning of the 1970s. Certainly, in terms of its ability to project raw military power, its presence was much diminished. The abandonment of the Federation of South Arabia in 1967, followed four years later by its departure from the rest of the lower Gulf monarchies did appear to underscore British decline. However, an informal empire of sorts continued. British military advisors remained embedded in many of the Gulf monarchies and dependence on British courtiers and advisors continued until well into the 1990s. Such have been the enduring ties



between Muscat and Oman, for example, that the UK now has a permanent military base in Oman, while GCHQ, the British signals intelligence agency, reportedly operates at least two secret listening stations at Seeb and Salalah.<sup>84</sup> The arms deals agreed with Saudi Arabia, however, remain the epitome of this revival. It also underscored its new dynamic: the business and commercial opportunities it offered to Britain, opportunities that came about in no small part because of Washington's regional troubles.

While the Reagan administration presented an image of stoic fortitude in the face of the Soviet Union, its policies in the Middle East in general, and the Gulf region in particular, were marked by hesitancy, naivety, and, in the case of the Iran-Contra affair, illegality. The Reagan Administration did not appreciate, let alone understand, the profound political shifts that had recast the political order across Iran. Equally, the impact that the Iranian revolution had across the region saw the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon and inspired bloody attacks on the US Embassy and the US Marine base in Beirut in 1983. Despite this, the Reagan Administration hoped that deals could be struck with a regime that had kidnapped, and in some cases murdered, US citizens. With the publication of the Tower report it is not beyond the realm of reason that the Iraqi bombing of USS *Stark*, which killed 34 American sailors, was retribution for Washington's attempt to broker an Iranian America rapprochement. Whatever the true rationale, Washington's muted response to this attack proved pivotal. Baghdad claimed it was a mistake, but it signalled to the Iraqis that the United States was reluctant to use military force to protect itself, let alone its allies and interests across the region.

After 1987 did Washington take a more robust attitude towards Tehran, effectively fighting an undeclared naval war against Iran in the Gulf from 1987–1988 that badly damaged Iran's oil industry. The cost proved high, however. Reagan was willing to indulge Iraq over its attack on the USS *Stark*, while ignoring the gas attacks on Kurds in the Iraqi town of Halabja, despite an international outcry. As such, signals had been sent to Baghdad that the US had no red lines. The outcome of such misperception was to be realised in 1990, with Iraq's disastrous invasion of Kuwait. We live with the consequences to this day.

## Notes

1. For two contrasting accounts see James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Ritchie Ovendale, *Britain, the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East 1945–62* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996).
2. Between 1987 and 1988, the US effectively conducted an undeclared war against the Iranian Navy and Iranian oil installations 'Operation Nimble Archer and Operation Praying Mantis'. Therefore, following its humiliation at the hands of Tehran, Washington was more aggressive towards Iran by 1987, while willing to accept the excuses of the Iraqis based on wider strategic objectives. See Harold Lee Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone: The U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf, 1987–88* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007).
3. Marc J. O'Reilly, *Unexceptional: America's Empire in the Persian Gulf, 1941–2007* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000), 150.
4. See Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Relations toward the Persian Gulf 1978–1985: Power, Influence and Restraint* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2015).
5. On the security legacy of Britain in the Gulf see James Onley, *Britain and the Gulf Sheikdoms, 1820–1971: The Politics of Protection* (Doha: Centre for International and Regional Studies/Georgetown University, 2009), Occasional Paper No.4, pp.22–26. Available at [https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/iais/downloads/Onley\\_Britain\\_and\\_Gulf\\_Shaikhdoms2009.pdf](https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/iais/downloads/Onley_Britain_and_Gulf_Shaikhdoms2009.pdf), accessed 21 April 2022.
6. Minute from Defence Secretary John Nott to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: Subject Military Assistance and Training Charges, 1 March 1982. The National Archives UK (hereafter TNA) PREM 19/0859 f19. Over two hundred British military advisors were stationed in Oman and Kuwait.
7. See Athol Yates, 'Western Expatriates in the UAE Armed Forces, 1964–2015', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 6/2 (2016), 182–200; Ash Rossiter, *Security in the Gulf: Local Militaries before British Withdrawal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Tancred Bradshaw, 'Security Forces and the End of Empire in the Trucial States, 1960–1971', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56/6 (2020), 1019–33.



8. W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008); Simon C. Smith, *Britain and the Arab Gulf after Empire: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 170.
9. Tore T. Petersen, 'Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East: The Struggle for the Buraimi Oasis', *International History Review*, 14/1 (1992), 71–91.
10. From US Embassy Saudi Arabia, Jeddah to State Department. Subject: Secret. Advisory Roles of UK and Other Countries in the Persian Gulf States, Thursday, February 20 1975. This document was released on the Wikileaks website (Canonical ID 1975JIDDA01210\_b). This document is no longer available online. Hard copy retained by the authors.
11. See Jill Crystal, 'Public Order and Authority: Policing Kuwait' in Paul Dresch and James Piscatori (eds) *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 158; Frank Heinlein, *British Government Policy and Decolonization, 1945–63* (London, 2002), 297; Sarah Stockwell, 'Ends of Empire' in Sarah Stockwell (ed), *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Oxford, 2008), 281.
12. Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Policy towards the Persian Gulf 1978–1985: Power, Influence and Restraint* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 126–7.
13. Anthony Parsons, *The Pride and Fall: Iran, 1974–79* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), x. The emphasis is in bold in the original.
14. Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 91–108; Ali Rahnema, *Behind the Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers and Spies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
15. Glen Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Relinquishment of Power in Her Last three Arab Dependencies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 122–3, note 681.
16. See Thanos Petouris, 'The Present Drift of Events Makes One Feel Extremely Embittered and Depressed': The British Exit from South Arabia' in Noel Brehony and Clive Jones (eds), *Britain's Departure from Aden and South Arabia: Without Glory But Without Disaster* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2020), 47–64.
17. 'Secrets and Deals: How Britain left the Middle East', *BBC News Arabic/BBC New Persian Documentary*, Broadcast 30 August 2022. Available at BBC iPlayer – Secrets and Deals: How Britain left the Middle East, accessed 5 September 2022; Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in Tribal Society. Oman Under Sa'id bin Taymur, 1932–1970* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), 212–4. A vivid account of British government involvement in the coup that removed Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur was given in the BBC Radio 4 *Document* programme, broadcast on 23 November 2009. Available on BBC Sounds at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b00ny7nb>, accessed 9 May 2022.
18. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 12, 15.
19. Khomeini statement, 12 February 1979, Iran 2–3/79, National Security Files, Brzezinski Material, Country File (hereafter cited as NSABMCF, box 29, Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter cited as JCL).
20. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 371.
21. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977–1981* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), 474–5.
22. Richard Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1981), 445.
23. Brzezinski to Carter, September 29, 1980, Remote Archives Capture Project in Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter cited as NCL with proper filing designations), NCL-1-17-121-8.
24. Paul Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 8.
25. Carter to Reagan, 1 January 1981, Plains File, Iran 1/21/81 [1], box 24, JCL.
26. Nicholas Cummins, 'American Cold War Strategy and the Absence of "Swift and Effective Retribution" for the 1983 Marine Barracks Bombing', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 22/2 (2022), 330–54.
27. Joseph T. Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan's Undeclared War with Qaddafi* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003), pp. x, 90. The rare exception was the attack by the United States on Muammar Qaddafi on 14 April 1986. The attack was a response to the bombing of a US servicemen's club in Berlin. The American bombers flew from Britain, Reagan having gained the reluctant permission of Margaret Thatcher. While London differed with Washington over how to deal with Qaddafi, Thatcher felt compelled to support the United States, noting according to her Private Secretary, Charles Powell, 'That's what allies are for'. See Nigel Ashton, *False Prophets: British Leaders' Fateful Fascination with the Middle East from Suez to Syria* (London: Atlantic Books, 2022), 215.
28. <sup>28</sup> On this see the report of the special counsel on the Iran Contra affair: Lawrence E. Walsh, *The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-Up* (London: W.W. Norton, 1997).
29. On the role of Oliver North see the documents held at the National Security Archive, George Washington University at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/iran/2018-05-16/oliver-norths-checkered-iran-contra-record>, accessed 6 May 2022.
30. Ann Wroe, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), p. 3.

31. Iran-contra Report quoted from Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York: New Press, 1993), p. 215.
32. Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 251–2.
33. In his memoirs, Reagan said: 'Nothing is so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse.' See Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), 74.
34. James G. Roche to Lawrence Eagleburger, 23 March 1982, Iran (05/29/1981-12/31/1983), Fortier, Donald Files, box 1, RWRL.
35. Quoted from John Tower, et al., *The Tower Commission Report*. The full text of the President's Special Review Board (A *New York Times Special*, New York, 1987), 81 (hereafter cited as the Tower report); Ann Wroe, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), 155.
36. David Mervin, *Ronald Reagan* (London: Longman, 1990), 150–61; Jacob V. Lamar, Jr., and Michael Duffy, 'The Good Soldier', *Time Magazine*, 25 May 1987, 32–34; Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell & Davies, 1994), 31, 349. The Independent Counsel in the Iran-Contra investigation is emphatic that Reagan was portrayed as out of control to avoid impeachment, rather than the authority behind the initiatives. See Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-Up* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 24. See also Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003).
37. The Tower report, 79, 81–82; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 785; Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill And Wang, 1991), 596.
38. Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 280.
39. Lawrence Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 420–1.
40. Gary Sick, 'The United States and the Persian Gulf' in Hanns Maull and Otto Pick (eds), *The Gulf War* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989), 132.
41. Saddam Hussein to Ronald Reagan, 18 November 1986, Iraq, Teicher, Howard J. Files, box 9, RWRL.
42. Mc Iraqi ambassador Hamdoun and Murphy, 20 November 1986, Iraq, Teicher, Howard J. Files, box 9, RWRL. Operation Staunch was an American initiative to stop arms sales to Iran in an attempt to bring Tehran to the negotiating table.
43. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), 684; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York, 1993), 927; Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 512.
44. Harold Lee Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone: The U. S. Military in the Persian Gulf, 1987–1988* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 47.
45. Dan Kaszeta, *Toxic: A History of Nerve Agents: From Nazi Germany to Putin's Russia* (London: Hurst, 2020), 173–8. The Iraqis had been using chemical weapons against the Kurds from 1986 onwards, largely as punishment for Kurdish support for Iran.
46. Testimony Murphy, 'U. S: Policy in the Persian Gulf', Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 100d Cong: 1st sess., 29 May 1987 (Washington: GPO, 1988), 4–7.
47. Testimony Armitage in *ibid*.
48. David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 227.
49. Brzezinski, 'Allied Military Deployment in the Indian Ocean Area', Donated Material, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection (hereafter ZBDM), Geographical File, Southwest Asia/Persian Gulf—[2/80], JCL.
50. 49 One recent work highlights the myth of British withdrawal from the Gulf, noting the continued military presence in Oman and ever-present naval patrols. See Zoltan Barany, *Armies of Arabia: Military Politics and Effectiveness in the Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 37–39.
51. Even if Brzezinski underestimated the British presence in Saudi Arabia, leaked US State Department cables highlight that Washington was aware of the strength and limitations of Britain's military presence elsewhere in the Gulf from the mid-1970s onwards. From US Embassy, Jeddah to Department of State (and Middle East embassies) Secret: Advisory Roles of UK and Other Countries in the Persian Gulf States, 20 February 1975. Available at [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975JIDDA01210\\_b.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975JIDDA01210_b.html), accessed 2 May 2022.
52. TNA FCO 8/3737/NBS 020/1. Foreign Office memorandum, n.d. (Undated).
53. TNA CAB 148/189. Cabinet discussions, 25 April 1980.
54. TNA FCO 8/3753/NBS 061/1. Richard Williams, 'Brief for Minister of State's Visit to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, 7–12 November', 3 November 1980. The SAS were there in a pure training capacity, working with the regular Saudi army.
55. TNA FCO 8/NBS 020/1. Thatcher to Fahd, 25 April 1980,
56. Peter Alexander Rupert Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: Collins, 1988), 339.
57. The situation room for Brzezinski, 10 July 1980, PDRF, box 16, JCL.

58. Paul Foot (with Ron Smith), *The Helen Smith Story* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 405.
59. Peter Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: Collins, 1988); Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993).
60. Private secretary Alexander to Graham Smith, 5 June 1980, TNA PREM 19/1126.
61. Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs* (London: Little Brown, 2003), 273–4.
62. TNA FCO 47/973/ GK 026/372/1. Mr Hurd to King Faisal, 27 July 1980. Most of the Britons in Saudi jails were arrested on suspicion of either smuggling alcohol into the Kingdom or operating illegal stills. Not only were such offences punishable by a period in prison but they were also supplemented by prescribed strokes of the cane. At the time of Margaret Thatcher's first visit to the Gulf in April 1981, 19 British citizens were imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. See TNA PREM19/467. Letter from Francis Richards (Private Secretary to Margaret Thatcher) to Michael Alexander. Subject: Neil Clynton-Reed – Detained in Saudi Arabia, 8 April 1981.
63. From the Private Secretary, 10 Downing Street to Ronald Smith Esq, 20 October 1983; available at <https://e3392c052334bac88ffb-4c459826b1c4d51634c39169da9f8ca9.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/831020%20no.10%20let%20PREM19-1126%20f38.pdf>, accessed 6 April 2022.
64. FCO 8/3752/NBS 026/3. Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 'Visit by Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to Saudi Arabia, 25–27 August 1980.
65. FCO 8/3751/NBS026/3. Craig to Carrington, 3 September 1980.
66. Reagan to king Khalid, 18 February and 4 March 1981, Saudi Arabia: King Khalid – Cables (1/2), Head of State File, Executive Secretary, NSC, box 29, RWRL. These assurances were repeated from time to time, see for instance talking points meeting with prince Bandar, in McFarlane to Reagan June 25, 1985, Chron File June 1985 (5), Teicher; Howard J.: Files, box 6, RWRL.
67. Richard Allen to Reagan, 18 February 1981, Saudi Arabia – General (1 of 3), Meese, Edwin Files, box 3, RWRL.
68. Clark to Reagan, 27 February 1982, Oil (January–March 1982), Executive Secretariat, NSC, RWRL.
69. TNA PREM 19/533. Mr Carrington and King Fahd, 4 November 1981. The emphasis in the original.
70. TNA PREM 19/842. Jane Ridley to John Nott, 23 June 1982.
71. TNA PREM 19/1126. Private secretary to Thatcher, 19 April 1983, Thatcher to Fahd, 'I was concerned to learn that an inaccurate news item had been carried by the BBC, 18 October 1983. Thatcher to King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz bin Abdul, 1 December 1983; 'The close cooperation in economic and trade matters between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom reflects the good relations between our two countries'.
72. TNA PREM 19/1126. Thatcher to Fahd, 12 December 12, 1983.
73. PREM 19/1185. Michael Heseltine to Thatcher, 21 December 1983; Jane Ridley, Defence, to Thatcher, 15 November 1982.
74. PREM 19/1185. Heseltine to Thatcher, 'Quarterly Report on Defence Sales', 21 February 1984.
75. Nicholas Gilby, *Deception in High Places: A History of Bribery in Britain's Arms Trade* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 131.
76. TNA PREM19/467 f71. Letter from Sir Austin Pearce to Margaret Thatcher, 8 April 1981.
77. Anthony Cordesman, *Western Strategic Interests in Saudi Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 196–214.
78. Ben Jackson, *Gunrunner's Gold: How the Public's Money Finances Arms Sales* (London: Worldwide Development Movement, 1995), 11.
79. 'Offsets: Taking a Strategic View', *Janes Defence Weekly*, 5 February 1994, 27.
80. Cordesman, *Western Strategic Interests*, 216.
81. TNA PREM19/530 f119. FCO Letter to No.10. Mr Hurd's visit to Saudi Arabia and Oman, 15–19 February 1981.
82. TNA Secret: PREM 19/842. Personal Letter from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos, 15th July 1982. While Sultan Qaboos was an Anglophile, others have challenged the idea that Omani foreign and security remained so beholden to London. See Nikolas Gardner, 'The Limits of the Sandhurst Connection: The Evolution of Oman's Foreign and Defense Policy, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 6/1 (2015), 45–58.
83. On allegations of corruption that attended the *Al-Yamamah* contracts, particularly under the Blair Government see Gilby, *Deception in High Places*, 152–78.
84. See Phil Miller, 'British spy Agency refuses to acknowledge its bases in Gulf dictatorship', *Declassified UK*, 30 November 2020 at <https://declassifieduk.org/british-spy-agency-refuses-to-acknowledge-its-bases-in-gulf-dictatorship/>, accessed 6 April 2020.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.