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**To cite this article:** Clive Jones & Tore T. Petersen (13 Nov 2024): Hostages to Fortunes: Britain, The Gulf Monarchies and the Incarceration of UK Nationals, The International History Review, DOI: [10.1080/07075332.2024.2427141](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2024.2427141)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2024.2427141>



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Published online: 13 Nov 2024.



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# Hostages to Fortunes: Britain, The Gulf Monarchies and the Incarceration of UK Nationals

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## ABSTRACT

Hostage-taking has become a distressing feature of international politics over the last two decades, associated either with terrorist groups or hostile state actors, such as Iran, willing to engage in hostage diplomacy for political and security advantage. By contrast, the incarceration of foreign nationals by friendly powers has received scant attention. This is the hidden dimension of hostage diplomacy. By examining the case of British nationals held in prisons across the Gulf monarchies, but with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia, we argue that such prisoners were, in effect, hostages themselves, subject to the pursuit of national interests (commercial, economic and strategic) that denied their human rights and wider political agency. They became in effect, hostages to fortunes.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 October 2024  
Accepted 4 November 2024

## KEYWORDS

Britain; Saudi Arabia;  
hostages; Gulf; prisoners

## Introduction

On 18<sup>th</sup> May 2018, Matt Hedges, a doctoral student at Durham University was arrested at Abu Dhabi airport and later charged with spying for MI6, the British secret intelligence service. Hedges had been conducting fieldwork for his PhD thesis that examined the evolution of the state security apparatus in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). His arrest was even more shocking as Hedges had been conducting his research openly with the authorities' knowledge. Indeed, his long association of living and working in the Emirates appeared to offer him immunity, not least because several of his interviewees, high-ranking Emirati officials, were known to him personally. Imprisoned, psychologically tortured and finally convicted of espionage, a sentence that carried a life term, he was eventually pardoned by the President of the UAE, Shaykh Mohammed bin Nayan and released by the Emirati authorities in early 2019. He always maintained his innocence.<sup>1</sup>

Some compared the case to that of Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe, a dual Iranian-British national whose arrest at Tehran airport just before boarding a flight to London in 2016 saw her incarcerated in the notorious Ervin prison for five years. Ill-informed comments by the former Foreign Secretary and later Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, did little to help her case with a regime always ready to believe the worst. It was clear that Ratcliffe was a diplomatic pawn in a wider game of recompense, Tehran effectively using her as surety until London repaid the money – £400m – that the former Shah had given upfront for the purchase of British Chieftain tanks. The revolution of 1979 meant that the armour was never delivered, an ever-increasing source of irritation in already tense relations between Iran and the UK.<sup>2</sup>

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While comparisons undoubtedly exist between the two cases, they differ in one crucial aspect: the UAE is regarded as a friendly power with strong financial, trade and defence ties to the United Kingdom, variables absent in the UK-Iranian relationship after 1979. This then begs the question: how has the UK dealt with cases where its citizens have been incarcerated by its allies? What factors have determined the approach of successive British governments towards dynastic regimes in the Gulf in which, justly or otherwise, UK nationals have found themselves imprisoned in draconian circumstances, often for minor crimes. A broader theme to be explored therefore is the distinction between allies and clients and how that balance between the two shifted and evolved as the Gulf monarchies increased their agency, power and wealth. Of course, the relationship between an ally and a client is not static. For this article, however, the relationship is clear. We define an ally or allies as actors, in this instance state-based, whose relations are based upon mutual interests, shared values and goals.

By contrast, clients are subordinate or in a dependency relationship, and usually reliant upon a stronger party for support that can infringe on sovereignty. This is the essence of clientelism – a *quid pro quo* arrangement where the supply of goods and services prompts reciprocal political support. It is used as a concept to study the erosion of public trust in the accountability of public institutions across the United States, and it has a clear utility in understanding diplomatic engagement and its associated costs and benefits.<sup>3</sup> Bi-lateral ties between states are often transactional and focused on pursuing specific needs rather than broad mutual interests. In the case of Anglo-Saudi relations, however, this clientelism was never openly stated. Rather, the Saudis were a client acting the part of an ally, while the British saw the Saudis as a client but masqueraded as an ally in pursuit of strategic, commercial and economic gains.

It would be easy, of course, to suggest that commercial interests alone always determined the scope and intensity of diplomatic representation towards the Gulf monarchies over the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of UK citizens. There is of course validity to this argument. Equally, however, other factors also need to be considered. Britain had officially withdrawn 'East of Suez' (that is from Singapore and the Gulf) by the mid-1970s, but it still had security interests in the Middle East. Its military footprint may have been decidedly light, but British advisers, some seconded, others contracted, still proliferated across many states in the lower Gulf in what was an 'informal empire'.<sup>4</sup> In short, the habit of empire still lingered but increasingly conflated with the pursuit of commercial gains to be had in a region whose burgeoning oil wealth could be harnessed to an ailing UK economy. This, we argue, created a particular view of how officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Government officials framed perceptions of British interests in the Gulf. Hierarchical, and shaped by a preconceived notion of 'knowing' the Arab world, it was an approach that all too often placed the rights of UK citizens below the interests of the British state.

This article examines the fate of British nationals imprisoned across the Gulf but with an emphasis on Saudi Arabia in the period 1980-1985. This period was chosen because the security needs of the Saudis, and the strategic and commercial interests of the British allowed them to circumvent tensions in relations that might otherwise have derailed the signing of the huge *al-Yamamah* arms package. We do not claim that all those sentenced and convicted were innocent of the crimes alleged, but we do suggest that their subsequent treatment and the willingness of London to intervene was subject to a hierarchy of interests in dealing with the Gulf monarchies. British nationals incarcerated may not always have been diplomatic pawns to be traded for concessions by the host state (although some were), but they were, to all intents and purposes, still hostages or more accurately, hostages to the pursuit of wider fortunes. For successive UK governments, such prisoners were often seen as irritants at best and disrupters at worst to realising British strategic, security and commercial interests across the Gulf.

As such, bureaucratic processes were harnessed to 'compartmentalise' and insulate such cases from the high politics of bilateral ties. Treating these individuals as consular cases to be managed, rather than urgent humanitarian cases to be resolved, was a feature of this

compartmentalisation. Such prisoners were effectively hostages of their own government's lassitude as British officials, fearful that such cases interfere in the pursuit of political and strategic gain, looked to kick such cases into the consular long grass. Such an approach predates successive governments under Margaret Thatcher. In the autumn of 1975, officials in London were preparing for the visit of Saudi Interior Minister, Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdulaziz al Saud to the United Kingdom. The issue of British prisoners in Saudi jails, most of them arrested for drink-related offences, was identified as an issue that might be raised. The British Embassy in Jedda however was less than enthused: One British official, A.K Rothnie opined that:

I have, while working on this exercise, rather lost enthusiasm for it and that is because if we did succeed in urgent deportation for offenders against the drink laws, we would be getting better treatment for them than for lesser offenders who might be languishing in gaol for offences to do with bad debts or traffic accidents or the like.<sup>5</sup>

While the number of British detainees in Saudi prisons was small at the time – no more than six – an attached assessment to the letter highlighted that this number was only set to increase as the number of British expatriates moving to the Kingdom rose exponentially. Still, officials advised against raising the issue with the Saudi Crown Prince. As one noted, 'Fahd would feel that we are attempting to bounce him.'<sup>6</sup> In the end, it was decided that it did not merit inclusion on the proposed agenda, one unnamed official writing by hand on Rothnie's original missive that: 'I agree we don't want to raise this'.

This, in many ways, is the hidden story of 'hostage taking', in more recent times dominated by 'kidnap for ransom' strategies used by terrorist groups – notably Islamic State and Al-Qaida - who made effective use of social media to extract large payments from Western governments for the release of their citizens.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, this study suggests that as the Gulf monarchies emerged from British tutelage and gained statehood, a dependency relationship of sorts remained albeit one that became diluted over time. This was in effect a transition to an informal empire, a period in which the norms that had governed patron-client relationships between London and the Gulf monarchies gradually shifted in favour of the Shaykhdoms who knew their longevity and stability was (and still are) a vital Western strategic and economic interest. These changes, however, did not extend to social mores. Previously, Britain had accepted and indeed encouraged the application and administration of local justice, across the Gulf region. It had lent a veneer of sovereign independence to various dynastic orders from the Trucial States to the Aden Protectorates and was seen by officials in London as necessary to ensure the loyalty of local rulers in the pursuit of wider imperial interest.<sup>8</sup> This however left a difficult legacy. Such systems of justice remained integral to the penal codes of the emerging Gulf orders and meant that foreign nationals, including British citizens, were now subject to often antediluvian punishments. These measures, including solitary confinement and lashings, were regarded by UN conventions as tantamount to torture. As we shall see, it left Britons accused of various crimes and misdemeanours hostage not so much to the often capricious justice system of some Gulf monarchies, but by the pursuit of wider interests of their own government.

## Hostage taking as diplomatic leverage

Until recently, hostage-taking was largely associated with terrorist groups, a crude but often effective means by which ransoms or wider political demands involving the release of named groups or individuals were leveraged from the state. While authorities claimed publicly to adopt a zero-tolerance approach towards such demands – the official view being it only encouraged further acts of hostage-taking and extortion – the historical record speaks to a different narrative. The United Kingdom, long associated with a 'zero-tolerance' approach towards hostage-taking, had adopted an ambiguous approach towards hostage-taking during the 1970s and 1980s. As Lewis Herrington and Richard Aldrich note in their study of kidnap for ransom, the record of the

UK government has been somewhat equivocal. They noted that 'Britain has only pursued a flexible policy on kidnap and ransom insurance since 2015. Up until that point, officials pursued a rigid policy, acting against payment to the IRA, but facilitating insurance payments against extortion by South American terrorists and drugs gangs.'<sup>9</sup> More recently, the literature has shifted its focus to state-sponsored kidnapping, or what Danielle Gilbert and Gaëlle Rivard Piché term 'Hostage Diplomacy', defined as the taking of hostages 'under the guise of law for use as foreign leverage' as a means of international coercion. It has increasingly become a norm in international diplomacy. States that hitherto have taken a hardline towards non-state actors that have kidnapped their nationals have, by contrast, negotiated for the release of their citizens from regimes defined as authoritarian or hostile. They noted:

In the last six years alone, Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump offered diplomatic recognition, cash payment, and withdrawal of American troops – to bring imprisoned Americans home from Cuba, Egypt, Iran, North Korea, Syria and Turkey. These prisoners might be caught up in broader ongoing negotiations....More often, however, states have targeted and arrested foreigners as standalone diplomatic leverage.<sup>10</sup>

Warming to their theme, Gilbert and Piché added conceptual ballast to their definition. Hostage diplomacy is defined by a hostile regime using its criminal justice system to detain foreign nationals, only to then use those nationals to extract foreign policy concessions. As they note, 'this form of coercion occupies an ill-defined middle ground between legitimate arrest and prosecutions on one side, and illicit kidnapping on the other'. Thus, while a national might be arrested and charged with spying, such charges are often a fig leaf to pursue wider diplomatic and economic concessions. Iran used this strategy against Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe and Dr Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a dual Australian-British national who was arrested at Tehran airport in September 2018 having attended an academic conference in the Iranian capital at the invitation of her hosts. She was eventually released two years later as part of a complex prisoner exchange that saw three suspected Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps officers released from captivity in Thailand.<sup>11</sup>

Such examples are not just restricted to recent events in the Middle East. Between 1967 and 1969, the UK and China, then in the throes of the cultural revolution, engaged in a tit-for-tat game of what amounted to hostage diplomacy. Having arrested Xue Ping, a journalist for the pro-Beijing China News Agency on accusations of sedition in what was then the British crown colony of Hong Kong, the Chinese authorities responded in kind by arresting Anthony Grey, a British national working for Reuters in China. Further acts of retaliation escalated: arrests of pro-Communist journalists in Hong Kong soon followed, exit visas were denied by both sides to each other's diplomats, while the British diplomatic mission in Beijing was subject to an arson attack by the Chinese Red Guards. Throughout this time, Grey was imprisoned in a cell measuring little more than 12 feet square for two years. As Chi-Kwan Mark notes of this episode, London remained unsure of how far China would push the issue diplomatically, knowing full well that as a closed regime, it was immune from public pressure to push for a prisoner swap. Time was decidedly on Beijing's side. Finally, whatever the competing narratives over sedition and subversion, London remained keen to compartmentalise any negotiations so that they remained apart from the wider trajectory of bilateral ties between Britain and China.<sup>12</sup>

This links to a wider issue that has long been the subject of criticism as to how successive British governments have dealt with state-based hostage-taking: a reluctance of London to use the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD). This organisation has third-party jurisdiction to investigate cases of suspected arbitrary 'deprivation of liberty worldwide'. Despite its global standing and its ability to investigate the suspected illegal detention of any citizen of a member state of the United Nations, the UNWGAD has rarely been used by the UK government as a legal instrument to investigate cases of alleged arbitrary detention. In short, it suggests that sovereignty and the interests wrapped up in bilateral relations have trumped the use of an international body designed to protect individual liberty.<sup>13</sup> If we reflect, again, on the

case of Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe, there is perhaps a well-founded suspicion that using the UNWAGD might well have shone an unwelcome light on UK trade practices with Iran and equally, the pressure London faced from the Trump Administration who argued that payment of the £400m debt would only be used by Iran to fund its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.<sup>14</sup>

In 2023, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) produced a damning report, *Stolen Years: Combatting State Hostage Diplomacy*, that critically examined how successive British governments had dealt with state base hostage-taking. It noted that the 'UK government does not use the term 'state hostage' or appear to have criteria to identify a detainee abroad as such', a definitional lacuna that, the report opined, led to incoherent policy making. By contrast, the United States had, under the Levinson Act, outlined 12 criteria that determined whether a citizen was being detained illegally by a foreign power and the subsequent steps that should be taken to secure their release.<sup>15</sup> But as impressive as the FAC report undoubtedly was, it said little about the incarceration of UK nationals by friendly powers. Of the case involving Matt Hedges, only one passing reference was made concerning a rather clumsy attempt by Foreign Office officials to prevent his spouse from publicising his case.<sup>16</sup>

Such dilemmas were hardly new challenges to British diplomacy in the Gulf monarchies. The late 1970s and 1980s brought to the fore a series of cases where the ill-treatment of UK citizens, often arrested and imprisoned on the flimsiest of charges, threatened to derail British relations with several Gulf monarchies but most notably, the Saudis. While, as noted, an informal empire of sorts still gave London some sway in its relations with the potentates of the region, British influence in Saudi Arabia was less than the sum of its parts compared to elsewhere in the Gulf. Indeed, despite their global alliance, London and Washington had previously been at odds over spheres of influence to be claimed by their respective clients across the Gulf, a situation that had led to clashes over the Buraimi oasis bordering Saudi Arabia, Oman and the Trucial states (later the UAE), in October 1955.<sup>17</sup>

The subsequent break in diplomatic ties between London and Jedda (then the diplomatic capital of the Kingdom) was not to be reversed until the outbreak of the Yemen Civil War in 1962 when a common cause was found in trying to undermine the establishment of a Republican regime in North Yemen, backed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. After the re-establishment of Anglo-Saudi relations on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1963, the effective ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Faisal, established a National Guard or White Army to act as a counterweight to the potential sedition of the regular army by Saudi inspired Arab nationalists. Faisal requested British military personnel help train his *Jaysh Obeid* (White army), an opening that allowed Saudi Arabia to become a lucrative market for British arms. It was a foothold that undoubtedly served London well in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

Britain of course had formally withdrawn its military from across the lower Gulf in by the end of 1971. While it would be a stretch to suggest London lacked any strategic influence across the Gulf by the late 1970s – it still enjoyed very close ties to the Sultanate of Oman – it was nonetheless diminished in terms of strategic reach. But as formal British influence waned across the Gulf in the early 1970s as the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar gained full sovereignty, dependency across the West on the free flow of cheap energy to fuel the world economy grew. This dependency was thrown into stark relief following the October 1973 Arab Israeli war. Equally, the expanded coffers of the newly sovereign Gulf monarchies allowed for wholesale state modernisation projects to be launched, projects that offered new markets to an otherwise ailing British economy battered by recession, industrial decline and rising unemployment.<sup>19</sup>

From being beholden to Britain to amplify their voices on the global stage, the Gulf monarchies had by the late 1970s developed greater autonomy as sovereign states. As the rentier state model increasingly determined the economic base of all the Gulf monarchies, they looked to move away from being just 'clients' of London. If political support for British investment was to be had from across the Gulf, London had to move beyond the old power asymmetries and treat the Gulf monarchies as at least partners if not outright allies. In 1980, the Treasury released



figures on the Saudi economy that suggested expenditure on development and capital projects for the period 1980-1985 would total \$250 billion. UK exports to the Kingdom for the year 1979 totalled £894 million. The attraction of the Saudi market for a struggling British economy was obvious.<sup>20</sup> By this time, 20,000 British nationals were now working in Saudi Arabia of which 22 were in custody, mainly for alcohol-related offences. As one report noted with some understatement: 'Prison conditions are poor'.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, driven by economic and commercial imperatives, the emergence of this new-found clientelism was to impact adversely on the rights of increasing numbers of Britons as London looked to secure a competitive advantage across the region.

## Who pays the piper calls the tune

Reflecting on his career as a diplomat with extensive service in the Gulf, Sir Alan Munro opined that in his time British influence evolved through two periods of relative decline and one of renaissance. The first was the pressure of Arab nationalism that, throughout the 1950s and 1960s looked to remove 'British tutelage'. The second, a period of deliberate 'political regression' followed the withdrawal East of Suez in 1971 and underscored by a Labour government 'seeking consciously to withdraw from this [British] inherited role with all its expenses in the Middle East - trade apart - to seek to turn our backs on the region. It was, however, he noted 'a role we found we could not shrug off'. He continued:

A third stage occurred in the early 1980s with a restoration of international confidence on the part of this country, inspired to a considerable degree by the style of Mrs Thatcher, the new Conservative Prime Minister. Once again, resources were made available to us [the Foreign Office], in partnership with others, to take a more forward position. ....I found myself for a spell as Head of the Middle East department and had the opportunity to recommend to Ministers that we relaunch our activity in the Middle East in response to the decline of Arab nationalism. There were signs that our political support, our advice in terms of Defence, would once again be welcomed, particularly by those [Gulf] countries with whom we had strong traditional and trading relations and who felt themselves threatened by the new phenomenon of the Islamic revolution [in Iran].<sup>22</sup>

This was of a piece with the recommendations of the so-called Duncan Committee, named after Sir Val Duncan, Chairman and Chief Executive of Rio-Tinto who, in the aftermath of the decision by Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson to withdraw British forces East of Suez in January 1968, looked at how British commercial and economic interests overseas could best be served by the Foreign Office. The driver, as always, was value for money but the expectation was that diplomats needed to have a greater immersion in commercial activities as British interests were increasingly seen through the prism of economic gain.<sup>23</sup> Munro himself personified this shift: he later spent time in the Ministry of Defence with responsibility for arms sales to the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup>

Still, the recommendations of the Duncan Report were never entirely accepted by the FCO, not least the suggestion that experienced businessmen should become ambassadors, their skill set deemed better suited to developing and exploiting new export markets. As Sir David Gore-Booth, a career diplomat who was appointed as a commercial counsellor in Jedda in 1980 remarked, ' [M]y own view is that there isn't a single decent businessman in Britain who would be prepared to take on an Ambassadorship for the money that an ambassador gets paid and for the lifestyle that he is obliged to lead. People may think it's glittering and glamorous; it isn't actually, it is extremely humdrum and at times punishing'.<sup>25</sup> Embassy officials such as Gore-Booth very much had to 'learn on the job' but if they lacked the big beasts of British industry to push UK goods and services in the Middle East, they had, as their champion an individual willing to expend considerable political time and effort to push British exports, particularly in the defence sector to the Gulf monarchies in particular: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The role of Thatcher in promoting British arms sales across the Gulf including Saudi Arabia is well documented. One noted commentator of British influence in the Gulf regarded Thatcher as

an 'arms saleswoman supreme', a sobriquet that was certainly deserved.<sup>26</sup> Britain, of course, had a track record of selling arms across the Middle East and given its military presence in the Gulf until 1971, it had enjoyed something of a captive market. The question that vexed successive governments in London thereafter was how to keep it. From the mid-1970s, pro-Western regimes across the region had turned to other suppliers as Paris and Washington looked to offset defence development costs by selling weapons to Gulf clients whose financial wherewithal seemingly knew few bounds.

Within two years of taking office, Thatcher had toured the Gulf monarchies and had suggested closer defence ties with the United Arab Emirates and Oman, the *quid pro quo* being the purchase of UK military equipment and expertise. While the Iran-Iraq war provided a pressing rationale for Abu Dhabi and Muscat to draw closer to London, Thatcher looked to press home perceptions of regional threat to Britain's advantage. Soon following in her wake, a series of senior Cabinet officials, including the Foreign Secretary, Lord Peter Carrington and Trade Secretary, Cecil Parkinson arrived in the Kingdom with a series of trade proposals dominated by defence sales. Following his visit to Saudi Arabia in mid-June 1981, Parkinson wrote to the Prime Minister that:

I found this visit most encouraging, and firmly believe it was worth the effort. I am sure my visit will have helped to keep up the political and commercial momentum established by the Prime Minister's own highly successful visit and King Khaled's [sic] equally successful visit here. Perhaps more importantly, all the businessmen who accompanied me reported themselves delighted with the success of the trip – even though no major contract was signed during my visit.<sup>27</sup>

Still, wary of competition from the French and Americans, London looked to leverage its informal empire to ensure it widened its market access. This included the need to ensure that traditional clients – notably Oman – resisted Saudi pressure through the Gulf Cooperation Council to standardise the purchase of military equipment. This could, of course, be justified based on interoperability, but British officials suspected that Riyadh's military relationship with the United States and the influence of Washington was a key driver. While acknowledging Saudi defence ties to the United States were crucial to the stability and security of the region, it was seen by officials in London as a threat to an arms market worth £780m in 1982 to the British exchequer. Emphasis was placed not just on the standard and training the Gulf dynasties could expect from buying British, but also on the continued presence of British Loan Service personnel who were now expected to influence the 'selection of British equipment'. It was dependency on informal empire at its most obvious. Also noted in the race for market share was an assumption that the Gulf monarchies appreciated British interest in their security and a view in one report that they: [A]re reluctant to become beholden to the US with its super-power status'. Whether an accurate example or not of 'knowing the Middle East' with its hints of orientalism, the key to success in increasing arms sales to the region was quickly identified: Saudi Arabia.

The key to UK success in securing our future sales position in the Arabian Peninsula lies in achieving a position as a significant supplier of equipment to Saudi Arabia. In the Gulf states, our comparatively good competitive position should be preserved by maintaining our existing efforts. But Saudi Arabia is the *biggest spender* [our emphasis] and increasingly the dominant voice of the region – we lag behind the US and French here and we need to make an intensive marketing effort.<sup>28</sup>

Key to this was the creation of a better political climate between London and Riyadh. While this primarily concerned seeing eye to eye over regional matters – tension had arisen over the refusal of the Thatcher government to issue a visa to a member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation attending a meeting of the Arab League in London – it also meant preventing the behaviour of British nationals in Saudi Arabia from derailing the pursuit of large defence and infrastructure contracts to which Margaret Thatcher leant her full support.



Those contracts were won. From large infrastructure projects in the petrochemical industries to successful competition in selling aeroengines, the bullish approach of successive Conservative governments under Margaret Thatcher brought financial dividends. It reached its apogee, however, in the realm of defence sales and the conclusion of one of the biggest single arms deals in history: *al-Yamamah*.<sup>29</sup> 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 sixty 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>30</sup> Such was the scale of the deal, that the Saudis were allowed to make their payment in oil, with British Petroleum and Shell lifting 300,000 barrels a day.<sup>31</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 per cent of the technical support costs involved in the deal.<sup>32</sup>

The financial returns accruing to Britain from *al-Yamamah* proved considerable. The first contract was worth \$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 near 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>33</sup>

As bountiful as *al-Yamamah* to the British economy was, the path to its negotiation had been far from smooth. Almost immediately after coming to power in May 1979, the Thatcher government had to contend with the diplomatic fallout from the screening in the UK, and later across Europe, of the drama-documentary, *Death of a Princess*. First broadcast in April 1980 by ATV, an independent broadcast station in the UK, *Death of a Princess* depicted the death of a real Saudi royal, Princess Misha, for adultery. The events depicted took place in 'Arabia', but this abstraction did little to disguise Saudi Arabia as the villain of this artistic 'piece', and the scorn heaped on what was presented as the primitive social and religious mores of the Kingdom.<sup>34</sup> While an irritant in bilateral ties between London and Riyadh, the FCO believed there were limits to the extent to which the Saudis would express their displeasure. As one 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>35</sup> It was a serious miscalculation. Such was the Saudi ire that they refused to fill their vacant ambassadorial post to London while Sir James Craig, widely regarded as the finest Arabist in the FCO and the British ambassador in Jeddah, was given his marching orders, albeit with two weeks' grace.<sup>36</sup> While couching his anger in diplomatic language, Crown Prince Fahd, the *de facto* Saudi head of state used the controversy to make a wider political point to the British. In a letter to Thatcher written at the beginning of June, he noted that:

Although we were all convinced that the film referred to contained a distortion of facts, cheap intrigue, and deception of public opinion in your friendly country, it was shown, which harmed a country with a deep-rooted friendship for Britain and injured the feelings of hundreds of millions of Muslims living there and abroad. On this occasion, I should like to disclose to your excellency that the issue is not confined to the subject of this film alone. A continuous campaign [has been run] which aims at harming the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a structure, a government and a people, using Britain as one of its main bases.<sup>37</sup>

Not knowing if he would be returning to Jeddah anytime soon, Sir James Craig penned what he thought would be a valedictory despatch to Lord Carrington titled 'Au Revoir to Saudi Arabia.'

He was quite candid in his assessment of his erstwhile hosts, stating bluntly from the outset that: 'It is not easy to like the Saudis; and the task has so far proved beyond me', before adding that it was nonetheless 'imperative in our own [British] interests, and desirable for reasons of human kindness, to try to understand them'. Noting that it had taken the UK over eighteen centuries to rid itself of public executions he argued that amid the seismic change that modernity had wrought upon Saudi Arabia, how could 'we expect the Saudis in one generation to understand a slick and mean film on the television and the subtleties of [British] press freedom'.<sup>38</sup>

Constrained as it was by the norms of a free and open press, the government nonetheless looked to mollify Saudi anger. Statements were made in the House of Commons that questioned the veracity of the drama-documentary, with Sir Ian Gilmour, the Lord Privy Seal and Deputy to Lord Carrington highlighting that many of the incidents portrayed in the film 'had virtually no factual basis at all and were based on innuendo and rumour'.<sup>39</sup> Equally, representations were made to the Saudis that left no doubt as to the government's true feelings and the wider anxiety over the diplomatic fallout. As one memorandum prepared for wider circulation and approved by Thatcher's foreign policy advisor, Sir Michael Alexander declared: 'The Government is fully aware of the shortcomings of the film and deeply regrets the offence it has caused. These regrets have been passed to the Saudi authorities at a very high level'.<sup>40</sup>

A series of suggestions to help repair relations were now circulated across Whitehall by Sir James Craig. These ranged from advising the Saudis how better to handle the British press, courting journalists who might be willing to write positively about Anglo-Saudi relations, to using allied or friendly governments to intercede with Jedda. While this increasingly made Britain look like a supplicant in the relationship, Craig was also hardnosed: the Saudis, he noted should be reminded of the areas in which the UK 'had something special to offer in defence training and security liaison'. Still, he ended his recommendation on a note of realism: 'In the last resort, and if no progress towards normality is evident after two or three months, or if commercial relations turn sour, we may have to remind the Saudis that our relationship with them is not one-way. But our (diplomatic) weapons are weaker than theirs and we should not contemplate reprisals unless all else fails'.<sup>41</sup>

Amid growing concerns among the British business community over the growing discrimination faced in the bidding for contracts, Thatcher intervened. She wrote to Crown Prince Fahd on 28 April 1980, highlighting her government's regret over the *Death of a Princess*, and its alleged inaccuracies, and highlighted the condemnation expressed by her ministers and others across the floor of the House of Commons. Thatcher, however, also broadened the basis of her letter to remind the Saudis of the wider instability across the region caused by the Iranian revolution and therefore the necessity 'for our two countries to keep in the closest touch. There is a most urgent need to restore relations to their normal friendly basis as soon as possible'.<sup>42</sup>

The crisis eventually died down, in part because of growing tensions between Tehran and Baghdad that led to the outbreak of war in September 1980, but also because of the continued expressions of regret conveyed to the Saudis by the British government officials throughout the spring and summer of 1980. Now back in Jedda, Craig reported that while 'responsible Saudis' were upset by the *Death of a Princess*, they acknowledged that it was a 'mistake to react so violently'. This reflected tensions within the House of Saud but even so, Craig felt that 'commercially we are back in business again with, I should judge no residual handicap'.<sup>43</sup>

But just as the furor over *Death of a Princess* was subsiding, another incident threatened to derail Anglo-Saudi rapprochement. In May 1979, Helen Smith, a 23-year-old British nurse fell to her death 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 any further damage to Anglo-Saudi ties still simmering over *Death of a Princess*. The rejoinder from the FCO was lukewarm 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>44</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 equally cool if not bordering on the callous: 'The Prime Minister fully understands and sympathizes 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>45</sup>

Questions continued to be raised in Parliament regarding the circumstances of her death, with Ron Smith criticizing 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. While there was no question of Saudi involvement in her death, the suspicion remains that a fully transparent investigation would have highlighted shortcomings in the Saudi legal system and invited yet more unwelcome scrutiny of Saudi Arabia in the British press.<sup>46</sup> The wall of official obfuscation that met Ron Smith in his quest for justice was later 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 clear that no official enquiry would be launched into his daughter's death. Ron Smith died in 2011. Helen Smith's death never was subject to a full independent investigation in the UK.<sup>47</sup>

The broadcast of *Death of a Princess* and the death of Helen Smith proved in the end to be of little impediment to the development of Anglo-Saudi relations. Wider regional concerns allowed a measure of realism to dampen the ire in Saudi Arabia but even so, London was only too well aware that such incidents carried the potential to derail the business and commercial opportunities for UK companies at a time of increasing competition from European states, notably France and the United States. In such circumstances, Britain increasingly behaved like the client, a position acknowledged in Craig's observation that Britain's diplomatic weapons were indeed weaker. Still, the *al-Yamamah* deal saw Britain eventually reap the rewards for a strategy that had its genesis in the recommendation of the Duncan report and pushed remorselessly by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Ministers. The ends justified the means. There was a cost however, and this was paid by a handful of British citizens not just at the hands of the Saudi legal system, but by their government that placed profit before people.

## **Please stop maltreating and beating British nationals**

In the attempt to repair relations following the screening of *Death of a Princess*, London sent the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Douglas Hurd MP, who has responsibility for the Middle East to smooth relations with the Saudis. In smoothing the ruffled feathers of the Saudis, his visit in July 1980 proved a success, paving the way for the visit of Lord Carrington to the Kingdom the following month. Hurd, acting more perhaps as a supplicant, once again apologized to the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Saud al-Faisal, for the offence caused by the film, noting that '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 apology was instrumental: Hurd hoped that Britain would no longer lose out on commercial opportunities in Saudi Arabia. Having made his pitch for an improvement in relations, Hurd then added an aside: could the Saudis please stop maltreating and beating British nationals imprisoned in their country?<sup>48</sup>

By the early 1980s, it was estimated that over 45,000 UK nationals were working in Saudi Arabia. In 1981, nineteen of these were being held in Saudi prisons on a variety of charges, the most common being the smuggling of alcohol into the Kingdom or the illegal construction and use of distilleries. Other cases, however, were more serious. The case of Keith Carmichael was the most egregious. Oxford-educated, a former officer in the Scots Guards who continued to serve as a reserve officer in the Independent Parachute Brigade, Carmichael was in many ways the embodiment of the British establishment. A tall and imposing figure, he became a director for Sacem International, a Dutch construction company that built medical facilities and accommodation blocks for foreign workers. It also had close ties to a member of the Saudi Royal family. Soon after arriving in Saudi Arabia in 1981 however, Carmichael was soon embroiled in scandal. Sacem, it transpired, was allegedly carrying huge debts, a position that threatened his work visa under Saudi law. Advised to leave the country as soon as he could, he fled to Qatar, only to be deported back to Saudi Arabia in November 1981 where he was imprisoned in the Ulaysha detention centre in Riyadh. Over the next 857 days, he was held in solitary confinement, endured beatings to his knees and feet, suffered sexual assault, was shackled in leg irons, and threatened with execution. His alleged crimes for which he refused to confess included leaving Saudi Arabia illegally, espionage and criticizing the House of Saud. His plight was only known by messages he managed to smuggle out of prison to Amnesty International. Physically and psychologically damaged, Carmichael was later told that Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, then serving as Governor of Riyadh (and currently the reigning Saudi monarch), viewed his imprisonment as a mistake. He never received an apology from the Saudi government; nor, as his later obituary notes drily, did his brutal incarceration 'cause any significant disruption to UK-Saudi commercial relations'.<sup>49</sup>

The gentle admonishment given by Hurd to his Saudi hosts had little impact on the treatment endured a year later by Carmichael. Yet British authorities were only too well aware of the capricious nature of Saudi justice. In the Spring of 1981 and with the considerable support of Margaret Thatcher who intervened personally, a British consortium including the UK Ministry of Defence, and the Department of Health and Social Security won a contract for the modernization and development of Medical Facilities and ancillary services of the Saudi National Guard. Abbreviated SANGMED, the project involved the running and management of new medical facilities by seconded UK military personnel in the initial stages. Herein lay a problem. Members of the armed forces were servants of the British Crown. As such, the UK government insisted that they be immune from Saudi law, an issue that at one point threatened to derail the contract. While various forms of hard and soft jurisdiction were discussed, Lord Carrington opined that:

[I]t would probably be appropriate to hold out for more specific immunity in the case of uniformed service personnel than civilians. Immunity for Her Majesty's Armed Forces ought in the last resort to be acceptable to the Saudis, whereas they know that there are many thousands of foreign civilians in Saudi Arabia who enjoy no immunities.<sup>50</sup>

In private, the British were concerned that in the absence of immunity, they would not be able to 'get enough volunteers to man the project if they had to accept the rigours of Saudi law'.<sup>51</sup> It was noted that UK citizens working in Saudi Arabia enjoyed no such immunity but that the attraction of high, tax-free salaries was incentive enough to risk working in a country where 'civil law' and 'local arrangements are often arbitrary, harsh and nasty'. By contrast, it was 'possible for quite innocent team members or their wives to find themselves apprehended, unable to communicate with their guards or their friends and incarcerated under the most unpleasant conditions'.<sup>52</sup>

This missive leaves no doubt that the Prime Minister and her senior officials were all too aware of the capricious nature of the Saudi justice system. Attached to a report on the number of personnel required to fulfil the SANGMED project was a summary of the application of Sharia Law across the Kingdom. It noted that this was 'strict and unchanging' and often cruel not just

in the sentence given for crimes such as adultery but equally, the means a sentence - death by stoning - was to be carried out. The report went on to note that:

More critical for the Westerner is the arbitrary method of administration of the law and the behaviour of the police and other agencies. Suspicious of foreigners, many uniformed officials behave arrogantly and with little sympathy for Western ways. Customs and immigration officials delight in humiliating visitors with perverse and pedantic action at airports unless they are confronted by a diplomatic passport or identification card.<sup>53</sup>

This contrasted with more benign prison conditions elsewhere in the Gulf. Reporting on consular cases and the legal system in Oman, one British diplomat, Richard Dalton, noted that the prison authorities were humane and often 'deferential' in their treatment of Europeans. While not a perfect system by any means - retribution could still be decided by tribal custom rather than accepted standards of proven guilt - he opined that: 'The Englishman in trouble here has a lot to be thankful for'. He concluded by noting: 'We are, as you know, prepared to intervene through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the courts and the police if we believe that a British subject has been imprisoned unjustly *by our standards* (emphasis added).'<sup>54</sup> It was a level of intervention conspicuous by its absence in the case of Saudi Arabia.

Eventually, Thatcher reached a compromise with the Saudi Defence Minister, Prince Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz al Saud over the issue of jurisdiction, it being agreed that British military personnel accused of any infringement of Saudi law would be withdrawn at once and face military justice back in the UK. Indeed, such was her investment in securing the SANGMED contract that the Prime Minister felt aggrieved her role had garnered so little attention in the British press.<sup>55</sup> Putting aside Thatcher's disappointment over backing into the limelight when no one was watching, this episode highlights the British government's awareness of the harsh and arbitrary nature of Saudi justice. While British service personnel had been placed beyond Saudi jurisdiction, UK citizens working under contract for private companies in Saudi Arabia enjoyed no such protections. Despite the tepid request of Douglas Hurd, British officials often appeared indifferent to ensuring a basic duty of care towards British citizens who fell afoul of Saudi law, however innocuous their crimes, proven or otherwise.

This was evident in the cases of Charles Clark, Philip Clark and John Sullivan. Charles Clark had been arrested on 26 November 1980 in Dammam and accused of being part of a large-scale whiskey smuggling operation into the Kingdom. The exact misdemeanour of his namesake Philip is unclear from the documents but Sullivan, arrested along with a German, three Austrians and a Saudi national was caught distributing alcohol to European expatriates. In early 1982, he was sentenced to 150 strokes of the cane and 12 months imprisonment.<sup>56</sup> Philip Clark was sentenced to seventy lashes and deportation but remained in prison. Charles Clark always protested his innocence, but it would be another 18 months after his arrest before he was formally charged and sentenced to two years imprisonment. During his time in prison, he was, in his own words, 'subjected to intensive interrogation, threats of physical violence, solitary confinement and intimidation of all sorts.'<sup>57</sup> Whether any or all were guilty of smuggling and selling alcohol remains a moot point. Rather, it is the alleged indifference of Foreign Office officials to their conditions that suggests a reluctance to leverage what influence London had to secure their release. The three prisoners wrote several letters to Foreign Office officials and the Prime Minister directly protesting not just about physical ill-treatment at the hands of the Saudi authorities but equally, the apparent indifference of British Embassy staff to their plight.<sup>58</sup>

Embassy officials were quick to push back against such accusations, highlighting the bureaucratic obstacles encountered in dealing with Saudi officialdom, visits that the prisoners had received from Embassy staff and noting too the representations that Douglas Hurd, as a Minister of State at the FCO had made to the Saudi ambassador in London on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1982.<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting too that the Prime Minister herself had been willing to intervene in one particular case a year before. Neil Clynton-Reed had been arrested and

convicted in Saudi Arabia for possession of hashish, sentenced to two years imprisonment and 50 strokes of a cane.

The Prime Minister was approached by Clynton-Reed's MP, Sir Maurice Macmillan, who asked her to intercede with the Saudi authorities on the basis that Clynton-Reed's father, a former Brigadier in the British army and his mother were aged and unwell.<sup>60</sup> Likely out of respect for an ailing man who had served his country, Thatcher, who was due to visit the Kingdom on her first visit, rejected the advice of the FCO who claimed that 'It would be a mistake to single out any one of the five (now four) British subjects serving sentences in Saudi prisons.' A further 19 Britons were held in Saudi Arabia, most awaiting trial for drug or alcohol offences. Yet the concern of the FCO was less to do with seeking any clemency for crimes committed, and more to do with fears that preferential treatment of one would lead to accusations of bias among other families equally keen to secure the release of their loved ones. In the event, Thatcher made a private representation to the Saudis. She wrote to Macmillan: 'While there are no legal grounds on which I can make a specific plea for clemency on Mr Clynton-Reeds' behalf, I am concerned about reports of Brigadier Clynton-Reed's age and deteriorating health. For this reason, I am, exceptionally, prepared to raise with Saudi ministers the possibility of their exercising clemency.'<sup>61</sup>

Such a dedicated diplomatic approach was absent in the case of Clark. In particular, he felt that his case alongside that of Sullivan had been sacrificed on the altar of wider diplomatic expediency. In a letter dated 15<sup>th</sup> October 1982, they again raised the efficacy of British Embassy support, noting that one consular official in particular, a Mr Northern, had failed to appear with any news on his allotted visiting date, which, combined with the failure to secure Sullivan's release despite receiving no official prison sentence, led them to question the very credibility of diplomatic efforts to secure their release.<sup>62</sup>

Charles Clark should have been released by the Saudis in July 1982, having served the bulk of his sentence while awaiting trial. He had, however, been re-arrested on the eve of his release, this time pending further investigations by Saudi Custom Officials who now insisted on payment of a fine equivalent to £250,000. Sullivan was released under a King's Amnesty and deported back to the UK at the end of October 1982. Clark was eventually released in December 1982 having already served over two years in conditions he openly described to Thatcher in one missive as this 'HELL-HOLE'. In the same letter, written while still in prison, he touched on what must have been a very sore nerve for the Prime Minister but one that highlights the disparity in treatment that, to him at least, Her Majesty's Government had afforded his case:

To touch on a more personal note [which brings me to] the reason for my writing. I was at first surprised, then amazed, then disgusted when I heard and read about the amount of time, money and efforts made by the British government and Algerian authorities with regard to saving your son, Mark, from a place and situation into which he should not have been in the first place!, whilst I have been left in this situation! Madam, may I remind you that I too, am some mother's son, her name is Mrs Elizabeth Clark, old age pensioner, fully paid up taxpayer and upright citizen of the United Kingdom who has, with the aid of family and relatives, brought to the notice of countless government officials, my predicament, all to no avail. Your intervention, personally, on my behalf to the Saudi Arabians, with even half of the expended effort for your own so, would be truly appreciated by me.<sup>63</sup>

In a reply issued by 10 Downing Street, Thatcher's Private Secretary, W.F.S Rickett did note that the Prime Minister had raised Clark's particular case with the Saudis during her touch of the Gulf in the Spring of 1981, while also noting that Sir James Craig had pressed a review of his imprisonment. Fine words, but Ricketts was being more open than he realized when he added that since his letter to Thatcher, Clark had now, 'been sentenced to two years imprisonment but that this has been backdated to the date of your original imprisonment. I very much hope you will be able to qualify for maximum remission and be released soon.'<sup>64</sup> As an official expression of a problem the British government hoped would now go away as they looked to increase defence sales, this could not be bettered.



## Conclusion

At the beginning of March 1985, the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Richard Luce MP, embarked on a tour of the Gulf. Amid the discussions of high politics that dominated his talks, Luce raised with Minister of the Interior Prince Nayef Abdulaziz al-Saud, and Foreign Minister Prince Saud bin Faisal Al Saud, the case of John Kelly, a British engineer. He had been sentenced to 30 months in prison, 250 lashes, and a fine of £17,000 for illegally brewing beer. In a case that at the time became something of a minor *cause celebre*, Luce, while thanking his Saudi hosts for improving consular access to British detainees, agreed with Prince Saud that the 'British press took an excessive interest in the few incidents (flogging) that occurred'.<sup>65</sup> Luce was perhaps too forgiving in his attitude but he had been firmly reminded of Saudi Arabia's penal system in no uncertain terms:

They (Prince Naif and Prince Saud) said that just as Saudi citizens living and working in the UK were expected to abide by and be bound by the laws and punishment of this country, the same applied to British citizens in Saudi Arabia. But British subjects were treated as well as one could expect in the light of the close and friendly relations which existed between Britain and Saudi Arabia. Fortunately, the great majority did not break Saudi laws.<sup>66</sup>

Kelly went on to receive his first batch of fifty strokes, delivered throughout his sentence, two months after Luce's departure. He was the last UK citizen to be flogged in Saudi Arabia, although not the last to be sentenced to such punishment.<sup>67</sup> It is of course right to point out that those subject to the Saudi penal system were mostly aware of the strict imposition of Saudi Sharia law. Flouting such laws brought risked harsh retribution. But critics point to the inhumane and degrading treatment that certainly ran counter to UN human rights conventions and for most, constituted a form of torture.

That Britons endured such treatment without effective interventions from London cannot be divorced from the pursuit of high politics as the relationship between Britain and the Gulf monarchies, and Saudi Arabia in particular, evolved. Britain knew only too well the antediluvian nature of the Saudi penal code and indeed, government officials looked to ring-fence military personnel from its reach should they fall foul of the Saudi authorities. It is of note too that the visit of Luce to Saudi Arabia was only six months before the signing of the *al-Yamamah* deal. London was never going to allow the case of Kelly, a potential irritant in bilateral relations at a particularly sensitive time, to impede negotiations for what was then the largest arms deal in history. That deal, with its attendant packages and add-on deals, effectively tied the United Kingdom to the security of Saudi Arabia for the next four decades, the operational effectiveness of much of the Royal Saudi Air Force now heavily dependent on the support and training of BAe systems. That dependence continues, and we would add the masquerade too, the pretence of being allies disguising a relationship akin to clientelism.

Still, Britain has paid a price for this clientelism. In treating the imprisonment of Britons in Saudi Arabia as consular cases to be isolated from the high politics of security and diplomacy, London effectively made them hostage to the pursuit of their wider commercial, economic and security interests, unwilling to press with any vigour their treatment at the hands of a government that they knew to be harsh. Irrespective of individual guilt, their human rights should have been non-negotiable. Yet the evidence suggests they were captives of an official approach that placed profit (and strategic gains) before the welfare of its citizens. The legacy of the Duncan Report was more deeply woven into the institutional fabric of the grand offices of the British state than hitherto realized. As the case of Matt Hedges highlighted, hostages are not just taken, they can also emerge from grand bargains in which their state representatives appear all too willing to trade down their value in the wider pursuit of national interests. They were hostages to fortunes, presenting British policymakers with a normative dilemma that, four decades on, still, it seems, places profit before people.

## Notes

1. Matthew Hedges, 'I was detained in the UAE. I learned that Britain puts trade before its citizens', *The Guardian*, 26 Nov. 2019.
2. Mark Leftly, 'Iran sues MoD Firm over the Shah's tanks', *The Independent*, 2 Feb. 2014; Karl McDonald, 'Why Britain owes Iran £450m – and why it might finally pay it back', *The Independent*, 16 Nov. 2017.
3. See for example Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco, *Brokers, Voters and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
4. The term 'informal empire' was first applied to understanding how economic leverage and coercion was used by great powers to retain control of former colonies. See John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review* vi (1953), 1-15. On the influence of British Loan Service personnel on the development of the armed forces of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman see Ash Rossiter, *Security in the Gulf: Local Militaries before British Withdrawal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
5. The National Archives (hereafter TNA) FCO 8/2601. Letter from A.K Rothnie to Ivor Lucas, Middle East Dept, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 20 Sept 1975.
6. TNA FCO 8/2601. Restricted: British Subjects in Gaol in Saudi Arabia, 20 Sept 1975.
7. See Rukmini Callimachi, 'Al Qaeda's cash cow: Ransom', *The New York Times*, 30 July 2014. Britain and the United States adopted a policy of refusing to condone cash payments to terrorist groups for the release of its citizens but remained somewhat opaque regarding private funds of insurance policies being used to facilitate such transactions. This policy contrasts with that of Italy and France who paid ransoms to Islamic State for the release of their nationals. See Rukmini Callimachi, 'The horror before the beheadings', *The New York Times* 26 October 2014. US and UK nationals taken by Islamic State were usually beheaded, and their brutal executions were posted online. The relative of one Briton murdered by al-Qaeda noted that holding a British passport was tantamount to a death sentence in some countries in North Africa and the Middle East rife with insurgencies. In 2013, al-Qaeda was estimated to have earned £13 million from hostage deals with Switzerland, Austria and Finland. See Michael Savage, 'Britain pushes for UN resolution to prohibit ransoms', *The Times*, 14 December 2013.
8. See Stephen Day, 'Aden and the Gulf: the reflections of a Political Officer' in Clive Jones (ed), *Britain and State formation in Arabia 1962-1971: From Aden to Abu Dhabi* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 141,143.
9. Richard J. Aldrich and Lewis Herrington, 'Secrets, Hostages, and Ransoms: British Kidnap Policy in Historical Perspective', *Review of International Studies* xlv (2018), 757.
10. Danielle Gilbert and Gaëlle Rivard Piché, 'Caught between Giants: Hostage Diplomacy and Negotiations Strategy for Middle Powers', *Texas National Security Review*, 5/1 (2021/2022), pp.12-13. At <https://tnsr.org/2021/11/caught-between-giants-hostage-diplomacy-and-negotiation-strategy-for-middle-powers/>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
11. Ben Doherty, "A nightmare": Kylie Moore-Gilbert's 804 days as a victim of Iran's hostage diplomacy', *The Guardian*, 28 Mar. 2022 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/29/a-nightmare-kylie-moore-gilberts-804-days-as-a-victim-of-irans-hostage-diplomacy>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2024. The three IRGC suspects had been accused of plotting to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. As in the case of Ratcliffe, Moore-Gilbert, a political scientist working on social movements in the Middle East was accused of espionage for MI6 and Israel's Mossad, charges she always strenuously denied.
12. Chi-Kwan Mark, 'Hostage Diplomacy: Britain, China, and the Politics of Negotiation 1967-1969', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* xx (2009), 473-475.
13. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Stolen Years: Combatting State Hostage Diplomacy*. Sixth Report of Session 2022-23; 4 April 2023, 9 at <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40750/documents/198593/default/>. Accessed 15 June 2024. See also Jasmine Cameron-Chileshe, 'UK government "failing citizens" in handling of state hostage taking, says enquiry', *Financial Times*, 4 April 2023.
14. *Stolen Years: Combatting State Hostage Diplomacy*, 37.
15. *Stolen Years: Combatting State Hostage Diplomacy*, 6 (f.n10).
16. *Stolen Years: Combatting State Hostage Diplomacy*, 29.
17. Tore Tingvold Petersen, 'Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East: The Struggle for the Buraimi Oasis, 1952-1957', *International History Review*, xiv (1992), 71-91.
18. Frank Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History, 1945-87* (London: Lester Crook Academic Publishing, 1989).
19. Churchill College Cambridge Archives (hereafter CCCA). Transcript of interview with Hon Sir David Alwyn Gore-Booth, GBR/0014/DOHP49, 8.
20. TNA FCO 8/3456. Department of Trade: The Saudi Arabian Economy, 25 February 1980.
21. TNA FCO 8/3456. Department of Trade: The Saudi Arabian Economy, 25 February 1980.
22. CCCA. Transcript of interview with Alan Gordon Munro, GBR/0014/DOHP13, 6.
23. The National Archives (hereinafter TNA) CAB 162: Review Committee on Overseas Representation (The Duncan Committee) 1968-69.

24. CCCA. Transcript of interview with Alan Gordon Munro, GBR/0014/DOHP13, 20.
25. CCCA. Transcript of interview with Sir David Gore-Booth, GBR/0014/DOHP49, 9.
26. Tore T. Petersen, *Anglo-American Policy towards the Persian Gulf 1978-1985: Power, Influence and Restraint* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 29-32; Tore Petersen and Clive Jones, 'British Revival and American Decline? Anglo-American Relations and the Persian Gulf 1979-1987', *International History Review*, xlv (2023), 10-13; Nicholas Gilby, *Deception in High Places: A History of Bribery in Britain's Arms Trade* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).
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29. TNA PREM 19/1446. Letter from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to His Royal Highness Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, 23 August 1985.
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32. 'Offsets: Taking a Strategic View', *Janes Defence Weekly*, 5 February 1994, 27.
33. Cordesman, *Western Strategic Interests*, 216.
34. TNA PREM19/1126, From Assistant Head MED/Draft Undated.
35. TNA FCO 8/3737/NBS 020/1. Foreign Office memorandum, n.d. (Undated).
36. CCCA. Transcript of Interview with Sir James Craig, GBR/0014/DOHP141, 40.
37. TNA PREM19/1126 Confidential. Subject: Anglo-Saudi Relations 2 June 1980.
38. TNA PREM19/1126: From Sir James Craig to Lord Carrington. Subject: Au Revoir to Saudi Arabia, 29 April 1980.
39. TNA PREM19/1126. Cited in the cable from Private Secretary to Secretary of State Foreign Affairs (on behalf of Prime Minister), 28 Apr. 1980.
40. TNA PREM 19/1126. Letter and attached memorandum from Paulk Lever to M'O D.B Alexander, 8 May 1980.
41. TNA PREM19/1126: Subject: Anglo-Saudi Relations, Craig (Jedda) to FCO. 30 April 1980.
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44. Paul Foot (with Ron Smith), *The Helen Smith Story* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 405.
45. Private secretary Alexander to Graham Smith, 5 June 1980, TNA PREM 19/1126.
46. CCCA. Transcript of interview with Sir John Gray, GBE/0014/DOHP76, pp.22-25.
47. 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 7 July 2024.
48. TNA FCO 47/973/GK 026/372/1. Mr Hurd to King Faisal, 27 July 1980. Most 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, they were accompanied 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 held in Saudi prisons. 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.
49. Carmichael later went on to found Redress. It seeks justice and reparations for victims of torture globally. See Own Bowcott, 'Keith Carmichael obituary', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2024.
50. TNA PREM19/1126. From Francis Richards to Michael O'D B Alexander, Subject: SANGMED, 13 May 1981.
51. TNA PREM19/1126. Prime Minister: Saudi Arabia. Memo dated 6 May 1981.
52. TNA PREM19/1126. Prime Minister: Saudi Arabia. Memo dated 6 May 1981.
53. TNA PREM 19/1126 Saudi Arabian National Guard. The SANGMED Project and Jurisdiction: Annex B. Undated.
54. TNA FCO 8/5536/5: From R.J. Dalton (Muscat) to D.J. Plumbly MED/FCO, Subject: The system of Justice in Oman, 18 Feb.1984.
55. TNA PREM19/1126. Memo to Mr Ingham, 29 May 1981.
56. TNA PREM19/0757. Essential Facts: Charles Clark; John Edward Sullivan. Undated.
57. TNA PREM 19/0757. Letter from Charles Clark, Dammam Central Prison Saudi Arabia (handwritten) to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, 21 April 1982.
58. TNA PREM19/0757. Handwritten letter from John Sullivan, Charles Clark and Philip Clark, Malaz Prison, Saudi Arabia to Margaret Thatcher, 9 September 1982.
59. TNA PREM19/0757. Letter from PM Private Secretary to Charles Clark and John Sullivan 8 October 1982.
60. TNA FCO8/3821. Draft: From the Prime Minister to the Right Honourable Maurice Macmillan MP. Undated.
61. TNA FCO8/3821. Subject: Neil Clynton-Reed. Detained in Saudi Arabia, 7 Apr.1981. Listed alongside Clynton-Reed in detention were Desmond Smith (three years and 300 strokes for distributing alcohol); Guy

Wilson (18 months and 80 strokes for possession and distilling alcohol); and Edwin Bate (12 months and 49 strokes for possession, consumption and distilling alcohol).

62. TNA PREM19/0757. Letter from Charles Clark and John Sullivan (handwritten) to the Prime Minister 15 October 1982.
63. TNA PREM 19/0757. Letter from Charles Clark (handwritten) Dammam Prison, Saudi Arabia to the Prime Minister, 21 April 1982. Mark Thatcher, the Prime Minister's son and a companion had gone missing while taking part in a competitive rally across the Sahara Desert. He was eventually found safe and well.
64. TNA PREM 19/0757. From W.F.S Rickett to Charles Clark, 19 May 1982.
65. TNA FCO 8/6043. Visit by Sir Richard Luce Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to Saudi Arabia, March 1985.
66. TNA FCO8/6043. Subject: Mr Luce's visit to Saudi Arabia: consular matters. 11 Mar. 1985.
67. See 'Torture claims over Briton in Saudi jail', *The New Zealand Herald*, 2 Jun. 2001 at <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/torture-claims-over-briton-in-saudi-jail/HH6OZL643QLDSI55JGH3SR3I6A/>. Accessed 3 October 2024.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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