

National Archives

Oman 1957-9

PREM 11/1944

Sir Bernard Burrows, Political Resident, Bahrain to Selwyn Lloyd, 29 January 1957

"I do not know what is the justification for the assumption that the Gulf states and our relationship with them cannot continue more or less as they are... The experience of democracy in other Middle Eastern countries should surely make us hesitate to introduce it here. There is quite a lot to be said for a reasonably efficient feudalism".

June/July 1957 – Sultan's position in central Oman collapses after uprising by tribes under Talib and others. In June Talib, brother of El-Imam, landed in Muscat with arms. He was joined by his brother and by sections of tribes defecting from the Sultan. After skirmishes Talib and followers seem to be in control of central Oman. UK first uses air attacks, then in July UK decides to use ground forces and by August they are in operation.

Foreign Office to various embassies, 19 July 1957

"The situation is serious. Successful defiance of the Sultan, whether or not supported by Saudi money and arms, is likely to have a snowball effect and large areas of Oman may cease to be under the Sultan's control. There will also be repercussions in the rest of the Gulf if it is seen that the Saudis, even without access to Buraimi, are able to undermine the Sultan's authority". *Sultan has appealed to UK and called for RAF attacks against forts where rebels are. HMG has now "decided ...to extend substantial support to the Sultan".*

Charles Gault, Bahrain to Foreign Office, 21 July 1957

UK has decided to support the Sultan by "air action". "In using air my aim would be to reduce morale of dissidents and increase that of friendly tribes... To achieve this it will be necessary: (a) to show the population the power of weapons at our disposal and convince them that resistance will be fruitless and lead only to hardship. I am most conscious of the need to avoid casualties and to give as little opening as possible to adverse publicity. (b) thereafter to inflict the maximum inconvenience on the population so that out of discomfort and boredom they will turn again the rebel

minority". *Therefore decided that air attacks will be made on different forts where rebels are, which will "demonstrate the power of our weapons". This plan was agreed by Foreign Secretary.*

Foreign Office to Washington Embassy, 21 July 1957

Undertaking air action. "We may hope that this will at least discourage an extension of the revolt and also prevent the infection spreading to the Trucial States, or elsewhere, by showing our friends there that we mean business". Action will "take the form of strikes with cannon and rockets against a few forts in Oman after due warning has been given".

Charles Gault, Bahrain to Foreign Office, 21 July 1957

He has today visited Sultan. "In discussing means of imposing inconvenience on dissident tribes the Sultan has agreed that air attack on date gardens (after due warning) would be effective as the picking season has just started and lasts for the next six weeks. A number of gardens are separate from villages and he confirms attacks with cannon fire on these would deter dissident villages [sic] from gathering their crops. It also appears possible to damage water supply to certain villages by air attack on wells and falajes". Later described as "denial of water supply to selected villages by air action".

Foreign Office to Washington Embassy, 22 July 1957

Contains message from Prime Minister to US President. "We believe that the Sultan is a true friend to the West and is doing his best for his people".

Unsigned brief, "Oman", 4 August 1957

Burrows and Air Vice Marshal Sinclair have asked whether authority can be given for attacks from the air without warning to be carried out by RAF. Considers arguments for and against. On against, "we want to avoid the RAF killing Arabs if possible, especially as there will be newspaper correspondents on the spot. Also the rebels have no medical facilities whatsoever". But, recommends that the request be approved.

Foreign Office to Bahrain, 4 August 1957

Approval for air strikes without warning was given by Foreign Secretary, saying it would be "desirable" if warning was given.

PREM 11/2402

Sir B Burrows, Bahrain to Foreign Office, 11 April 1958

Notes recent "air attack on water supply at Saiq and Sharaijah... I advised against similar proposal last summer, on the grounds of adverse political effect. Circumstances have somewhat changed since then in the following respect. At that time the proposal was to attack the water supply of the villages in the plains. Such attacks would have become widely known, and might have turned permanently against us, and Muscat government, the villagers who would otherwise return to their allegiance, or at least cease opposition as soon as the rebel leaders left.... Villages on top of the mountain are in somewhat different position. What happens there does not necessarily become known widely throughout the country. The inhabitants have shown themselves unwilling or incapable of turning against the leaders. Some damage was done to water supply at Wadi Beni Habib in the course of air support for operation aimed at that place last November. There do not seem to have been any repercussions to this. The Muscat armed forces cooperated recently, cutting the water channel at Semail road, and informed the inhabitants that it will remain cut until their area has been free of mines for a month. Shelling has already rendered cultivation round Saiq and Sharaijah hazardous. For these reasons I do not think attack on water supply at Said and Sharaijah is open to the same political objection as last summer. On the other hand the present phase of the operations is designed to eliminate or reduce the hard core of rebels by direct attack [sic] on them. If these operations succeed, it will not be intended that the villages should be rendered permanently uninhabitable. If they fail there will be a risk of renewal of rebel operations based on these villages, and it would then be an important objective to deny their use as a base. This can probably best be done by rocket attacks on water channel and tanks, rather than by bombing of cultivation". *Therefore recommends authority on these lines.*

Minute by unknown, PM's office to PM, 28 April 1958

In reply to above. "In his minute of 9 April the Minister of Defence proposed to authorise the Commander British Forces Arabian Peninsula to include cultivated areas and water supplies outside villages in the list of targets which may be attacked from the air, subject to the usual warning, in the course of current operations in Oman... [says he agrees but would prefer no action be taken before we have seen the effect of operations already authorised and that London should be referred to first, but ends with]... When action on these lines is taken I think it should be limited in the first place to attacks by rocket on water supplies only, and that we should not start dropping bombs on cultivated areas". *Handwritten from PM Macmillan:* "I agree with this minute".

B.Burrows, Bahrain to Foreign Office, 23 March 1958

“Shelling of mountain villages continues intermittently and is having success in denying the use of the village [sic] and cultivation.”

PREM 11/4360

B.Burrows to Foreign Office, 21 July 1958

Reinforcements have reached Talib and he has a “gloomy view of the situation in Oman... There has been a noticeable swing of general opinion throughout the Sultanate in favour of Talib, who is becoming more and more recognised as the local exponent of Arabism, and against the Sultan, whose popularity is at a very low ebb now”. Recommends operation to “clear the mountains”. Talib is widely distributing money to the tribal leaders and Walis and Sultan should be given money by UK to do the same: “He should be provided with a large sum of money to be spent within a time limit outside the normal administrative expenditure for such purposes as presents to tribal leaders, rewards to Walis” and others. He recommends £50,000.

B.Burrows to Foreign Office, 3 August 1958

UK official has had talks with Oman minister of the interior. “He [latter] said that the tribes as a whole had little love and no respect for the Sultanate forces or the Administration. It was fear of the British that kept them on the Sultan’s side and only the thought that we were coming back which kept them from joining the rebels now... The Minister’s recommendations...for keeping the situation under control and bringing it to a conclusion are: ... [four others, then] ...British troops should stage an all out attack on the mountains as soon as possible. Alternatively, or additionally, her Majesty’s Government should agree that aircraft should destroy mountain villages systematically one by one with due warning between a clear offer given in reasonable terms in advance.”

Foreign Office to Bahrain, 10 October 1958

HQ, British Forces Arabian Peninsula (BFAP) in August 1958 notes serious situation and calls for full scale op (called Dermot) to end rebellion, to capture the Jebel Akhdar mountains. This is where rebels are, with arms and money continuing to flow to them. UK government in October decided against this full scale operation. Alternative agreed to was: surrender terms to be offered to Talib and Ghalib to live as sheikhs, with some economic development programme and “intensifying air activity” to coincide with these, plus extra UK forces to Sultan.

Bahrain to Foreign Office, 31 October 1958

Major Kitson accompanied by Col Deane-Drummonds of SAS have reconnoitred Jebel Akhdar area and have prepared a plan recommending it be approved. Involves use of SAS regiment engaging in specialised operations. "The object would be to kill or capture Talib and other leaders" or as many as possible of the hard core. Would need to begin without delay. He does not propose to inform Sultan of arrival of the SAS detachment. This was agreed in November 1958.

Foreign Office to Bahrain, 14 November 1958

First detachment of SAS will arrive in next few days. "It is essential not repeat not to ask for the Sultan's agreement to the entry of the unit, since we do not want to give him either the opportunity to obstruct or the incentive to relax". He will be told that SAS men are to strengthen the life guards. "A cover plan is being worked out which will indicate that the purpose of the SAS unit is to assist in the training of the Sultan's forces".

December 1958 – UK decides to send second SAS detachment to reinforce.

Sir George Middleton, Political Resident, Bahrain to Foreign Office, 18 November 1958

"It is difficult to say at this stage whether the rebels are serious about negotiations. Talib and Suleiman have informed Qadhi ... that they wish to have peace to live in their villages. One of their conditions is that the Sultan's armed forces shall not go up the mountain. These conditions are, of course, not satisfactory but they would at least represent the basis for negotiation".

George Middleton, British residency, Bahrain, to Derek Riches, FO, 29 December 1958

Writing to give him "my first impressions of Muscat... My visit confirmed all my worst forebodings. What surprises me is, not that there is still a rebellion in the Jebel Akhdar, but that there are not half a dozen similar uprisings in other parts of the country. The condition of the people is miserable, the Sultan is unpopular, there is no central administration, no communications and, under the present regime, not a great deal of hope for the future". Urgent need is for agriculture, education and health – "even the beginnings of progress could serve to revive a national conscience". "Largely for reasons of self-interest, we are helping the Sultan to put down a rebellion and are paying the cost. But even if we succeed on the military side and Boustead [UK official?] is not frustrated on the development side, we are not going to make the Sultan popular nor create an administration which can benefit from our efforts... His unpopularity is reflected on us and this is yet another instance of our appearing to back an unpopular, undemocratic and selfish potentate, in fact too be thoroughly

reactionary and ‘imperialistic’”.

After the military phase, the UK should get the Sultan to embark upon political reform and a development programme. “If he proves recalcitrant we should be prepared to consider engineering his disappearance from the scene and possibly his replacement by a council of regency until his son comes of age. I believe that such a course would find a public response, though we should have to be willing to face outside accusation that we were only acting from selfish motives”.

Julian Amery, Colonial Minister, minute, 19 January 1959

Comments on above letter and criticises it heavily. Sultan “is not a great man and not a natural leader” but is shrewd and knows his own limitations. He does not try to interfere in matters he doesn’t understand like military operations. “His record is on the whole a good one. He has been loyal to the policy of cooperation with Britain. He has given important facilities to the RAF at Masirah and Salalah... He has never encouraged Arab nationalism; and – though some may hold this against him – he was the only Arab ruler who gave public support to the Suez expedition... There is... no obvious alternative to the Sultan... In the circumstances any impatience we may sometimes feel with the Sultan’s methods should be balance... by the recollection of the Sultan’s steadfast adherence to a pro-British policy and of his readiness to give us facilities and to accept our advice”.

27 January 1959 – SAS began assault on Jebel mountain. Defeats rebels quickly.

DEFE 11/401

Foreign Office, Oman Working Party, “Future of Muscat and Oman”, 31 July 1959

Long analysis. Rebellion crushed in January and no longer active but did not lead to a political settlement in the interior – “It provided no more than a breathing space during which every effort was needed to consolidate the Sultan’s position by non-military means... The long term problem, which is largely political lies in the continued disaffection of large parts of the interior towards the Sultan, and the lack of evidence that the Sultan has any plans for dealing with this except (a) using our own development money on parts of the interior, (b) strengthening his military forces, with our financial aid, and (c) relying on us to provide any supplementary assistance necessary to quell a rebellion”. The military threat at the moment lies in fact that rebel leaders have resumed training in Saudi Arabia and could return.

“The situation in Muscat and Oman and the preservation of the Sultan’s authority throughout the Sultanate concerns us because of: (a) the RAF base at Masirah; and overflying rights in the area; (b) the relationship of our position in the Sultanate to our position in the remainder of the Gulf; (c) the possibility that oil will be found; (d) the

advantage of having a friendly power astride our oil route". *On oil currently there's a prospecting programme with no immediate hope of discovery but could be "of great value" in future.*

"The principal defects of the Sultan's administration are that: (a) it depends for all important decisions on one man, the Sultan, who moreover spends nearly all his time almost inaccessibly at Salalah; (b) hardly any of its officials can be regarded as even moderately competent and very many of them are basically disloyal to the Sultan and oppressive to the people because they are grossly underpaid; (c) it is regarded everywhere as an instrument for imposing restraint or levying taxes without bringing any corresponding benefit; (d) ..."

DEFE 11/402

British Forces Arabian Peninsula, Commander's report on operation in Oman, October 1957- February 1959, September 1959

Secret long report. In 1956 Talib with Saudi assistance recruited and trained a force of around 500 Omanis. In May 1957 they landed at three points and concentrated forces under Talib and the revolt soon began. First, British and local troops deployed after the Sultan's request, and recaptured the main centres of population. The Iman, Ghalib bin Ali, his brother Talib and about 50 rebels then climbed the Jebel Akhdar and mustered some of the hill tribesmen. HMG decided against UK bombing of the top of the Jebel mountain after a proposal in November 1957 since "world opinion at that time was very flammable". Instead "it was suggested that two medium guns should be loaned to him [Sultan]. With these, manned by his own men, he could blast the top of the mountain where and when he pleased, without publicity or odium affecting HMG. There was one proviso, the inhabitants of the mountain villages should be given ample warning. The proposal was accepted and timed to go into action in mid-February 1958". It was put into effect then. But it didn't work since the guns did "insufficient damage, the daily rate of fire was restricted by the cost and availability of ammunition" and the blockade was never sufficiently strengthened. "When by the end of March no result had been achieved, Ministerial authority was given for Succour, ... This permitted the rocketing and bombing of suspected rebel hideouts, base defensive positions, defended localities – main routes leading up to the mountain, providing all targets were outside actual villages". In mid May 1958 the plan of action put into effect included "air attacks on supply routes across the mountain outside of inhabited areas...guns to continue to harass the mountain top...air attacks to deny waterways and proscribe cultivation outside inhabited areas."

In May 1958 UK officers were seconded to train the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), continued fighting in summer, continued air action by UK. November 1958 – introduction of SAS. In conclusion: "Fear of publicity and resultant controversy at United Nations debates appeared from here to be HMG's main anxiety and her reason

for restricting operations. Great pains were taken throughout the Command to keep all operational actions out of the press. Luckily the task was greatly assisted by the Sultan's complete ban on visas for press men and our ability to use Masirah airfield, which had practically no communications with the outside world... Throughout the whole campaign a game of bluff and deceit was carried out, which at times was far from pleasant".