The Persian Gulf and British Defence Policy, 1956-1971

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In the fifteen years prior to Britain's military withdrawal from east of Suez in 1971, the defence of its protectorates in the Persian Gulf became a key focus for British defence policy, largely for economic reasons. This article charts the changing diplomatic situation in terms of Britain's relations with its allies and the threats which existed to them. The major focus is upon the resulting decisions with regards to the stance and readiness of Britain's military forces in the area. The concept of deterrence was crucial and contingency plans emphasised the need to act quickly and decisively. What changed was not Britain's interest in the region, but the practical issues of maintaining its defence posture and whether these commitments could be afforded. A wide range of original documents have been used to shed new light upon Britain's policy towards the Gulf during this period.

Introduction

Britain's defence commitments in the Persian Gulf can be traced back to around 1820 when the desire to stop piracy in the area led to agreements with a number of rulers on the Arab side of the Gulf in what became known as the Trucial States, today the United Arab Emirates. Formal agreements which resulted in British protectorates were signed with the Trucial States in 1853, Bahrain in 1861, Kuwait in 1899 and Qatar in 1916.[1] To give an example of the nature of these agreements, that with Kuwait forbade Sheikh Mubarak or any of his successors from meeting a representative of any foreign power or giving away control of any territory without prior British consent.[2] In return Britain would support these states in the event of external aggression. Other states such as the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman remained closely allied to Britain without any formal treaty. Britain's interest in the Gulf region was transformed by the discovery of oil. Before the First World War the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in Iran was a key supplier of fuel to the Royal Navy. The development of the oil industry in the smaller Gulf states was delayed by the Second World War, but by the 1950s significant quantities were being produced in Bahrain and Kuwait. Britain's focus on its protectorates in the Gulf was enhanced following the decision of Prime Minister Mossadegh of Iran to nationalise the assets of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1951.

There is no doubt that the main reason for Britain's continued interest in the Persian Gulf throughout the period covered in this article was economic. When examining Britain's policy in the region in mid-1958 the Chiefs of Staff placed oil supplies as of primary importance not only in terms of access to large quantities of oil, but also the contribution which they made to Britain's balance of payments. Of secondary significance was Britain's strategic position in the Middle East and her responsibilities under the Baghdad Pact.[3,4] The air bases in the Gulf were also important staging posts to Britain's possessions in the Far East with the airfield on the island of Masirah off Oman highlighted by the Foreign Office's Steering Committee in November 1960 as being of particular value.[5]

Kuwait was by far the most important of the Gulf states supplying around half of Britain's oil. The production of oil in that country was the cheapest in the world and British Petroleum's (BP) share of Kuwaiti oil reserves alone was estimated to be equal to the total oil reserves of the United States. Kuwait produced ninety million tons of oil in 1962, more than any other Middle Eastern state. In comparison Saudi Arabia produced seventy-four million tons, Iran sixty-three million tons and Iraq only forty-eight million tons.[6] In the aftermath of Britain's intervention in Kuwait in July 1961, Selwyn Lloyd, the Chancellor, advised Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that the annual profits of British oil companies in Kuwait amounted to about £100 million. However, in addition to these profits, oil production in the Gulf had a very positive impact on Britain's balance of payments. During 1961 Britain imported £400 million worth of oil and a further £100 million was used by British ships and forces abroad. Yet the net cost with regard to the balance of payments was only £117 million. This was because the Kuwaiti government accepted payment in sterling with foreign exchange only required for production costs and

the overseas sales of Shell and BP were seven times of those to the Britain. In addition the companies' British tanker fleets earned valuable foreign exchange by exporting oil abroad. If the Gulf states nationalised their oil production, as had occurred in Iran in 1951, many of these advantages would disappear resulting in a very detrimental effect to Britain's balance of payments estimated at a minimum of £200 million per year.[7] In June 1963, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Burke Trend, predicted that the whole of Western Europe, not only Britain, would become increasingly reliant on Kuwait as its principal source of oil.[8] By comparison Britain's defence expenditure in the Middle East in 1961 amounted to around £13 million in Aden and the Gulf, £10 million in East Africa and £20 million in Cyprus and Libya, much of it as a result of Britain's commitments to Kuwait.[9]

Until the mid-1950s the emphasis on the defence of Britain's interests in the Middle East had focused largely on air power following the Royal Air Force (RAF) gaining responsibility for the defence of Iraq from the army in 1921 and for the Aden colony and protectorate from the army and the navy in 1928. In the early 1950s the main airfield was at Khormaksar in Aden. The long standing policy of air policing sufficed until clashes occurred in the Aden protectorate in mid-1955 with incursions from across the Yemeni border. The only British ground forces available were from the RAF Regiment and in early 1956 a battalion of British troops was sent to Aden, the first of a range of reinforcements to arrive in the region in the coming years.[10] As far as the Gulf states were concerned the most visible forces were provided by the Royal Navy in the form of a cruiser and a number of frigates.

This article will examine the changing diplomatic situation and the associated military planning in the Persian Gulf in three phases. From the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956 to the intervention in Kuwait - Operation 'Vantage' - in July 1961 there was a substantial increase in forces east of Suez in line with assessments of greater instability in the region. The period from 1961 to 1967 saw initial improvements in contingency plans for the defence of Kuwait and an increasing dependence on air power, but the loss of bases in Kenya and Aden undermined Britain's ability to maintain a credible deterrent. After the announcement of Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf in January 1968 due to the need for defence cuts the priority was to ensure an orderly withdrawal by the end of 1971.

The Road to Intervention, 1956-1961

Due to the Suez Crisis, the Chiefs of Staff assessed in July 1956 that there was a greater risk of internal disturbances the Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. There was also a risk of external interference and subversion from Saudi Arabia.[11] Sir Bernard Burrows, the Political Resident, Persian Gulf, based in Bahrain, warned the Foreign Office the following month that '…if hostilities against Egypt endured for more than a few days… our whole position in the Persian Gulf would be affected for the worse and the loyalty of the local security forces in Kuwait would be particularly strained…'[12] In line with this assessment the Foreign Office warned that it may even be necessary to send forces into Kuwait without the ruler's approval and to face opposition from local security forces.[13] At a meeting of the Local Defence Committee (Persian

Gulf) on 22 January 1957, Burrows commented that Britain's intervention in Egypt had had a more much negative effect in Kuwait than in other Gulf states owing to the prevalent Egyptian and Palestinian influence there. While many of the senior Sheikhs remained well disposed towards Britain, Burrows cautioned that '…the situation remained delicate and any new shock might cause a swift deterioration.'[14] In the Gulf as a whole he said there was little that Britain could do to counter Egyptian propaganda. According to the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies who visited the Gulf the security situation in Kuwait was exacerbated by the absence of Sheikh Mubarraq, in charge of security, who was '…away in Lebanon with his latest fancy.'[15] He gave a more positive assessment of relations with Muscat whose Sultan was very pro-British and with Bahrain whose ruler was delighted that Britian was assisting in the removal of convicted members of the Committee of National Union from the island.[16]

In terms of maintaining security in Kuwait the problems were rather different than those in other Gulf states, such as Bahrain, since there was no tradition of the presence of British forces and the Kuwaitis more jealously guarded their internal independence.[17] The only land forces available in the Gulf itself was one company from the Aden battalion stationed permanently in Sharjah, one of the Trucial States.[18] At a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 28 August 1956 Sir Gerald Templer, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, recommended that to intervene in Kuwait an equivalent of one battalion from the Royal Marines plus one infantry company from Bahrain would be adequate. In Bahrain a force of three companies was necessary and for Qatar landing parties from one frigate. Any extra reinforcements would come from the battalion in Kenya or perhaps from Aden. The Air Ministry was asked to open and stock the West African air route to permit forces to be brought in from Kenya.[19] The Air Ministry confirmed that the logistic support required to operate the route would be in place within three weeks and this was completed by 11 September.[20] Burrows recommended the use of naval forces for the early stages of any intervention since a cruiser and frigates offshore would attract little attention prior to troops being landed.[21] By November 1956 the preferred method of intervention was to send the King's Shropshire Light Infantry from Bahrain to Kuwait in a cruiser and two frigates. These forces could arrive within twenty-four hours of being ordered.[22]

The perceived instability in some of the Gulf states was coupled with a greatly increased difficulty in flying in reinforcements from Britain. The Suez Crisis had resulted in the advent of the Middle East air barrier, with a number of states denying overflight rights to British military aircraft. For example in mid-1956 the only realistic option to send forces to the Gulf was the West African route via Algiers, Kano, Nairobi and Entebbe onto Aden. Forces coming from Britain were likely to take four days to arrive in Kuwait, but if a battalion was in Aden or Kenya this could be brought in within forty-eight hours. The Chiefs of Staff Committee submitted contingency plans on 26 September to move a battalion from Kenya and perhaps a brigade from the Britain to Aden using British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) aircraft in an emergency. However, this suggestion met with a sharp rebuke from the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation who noted that there was nothing in the plans

to indicate how aircraft from Transport Command or independent operators would be used and that if all BOAC's Argonaut and Constellation aircraft were thus employed it would not be able to operate its international services for some weeks. He concluded that there was '… no sound basis on which to ask Ministers to face the extremely serious political consequences which would flow from the adoption of this plan.'[23]

The radical Defence White Paper of April 1957 identified the need for a central reserve in Britain to be deployed to trouble spots around the world. To be effective these reinforcements had to be dispatched rapidly at short notice and this would require an expansion of Transport Command whose weaknesses were apparent during the Suez Crisis.[24] As a result Transport Command's capabilities were transformed from 1957 to 1961 including the introduction of the first of twenty-three Britannia long-range airliners in 1959 and a doubling in the number of Beverley heavy transport aircraft. For example in 1956 Transport Command's capacity was around fifty-five million passenger miles per month and this had trebled by early 1961.[25] However, pressure grew in the months following the White Paper that due to the problems caused by the air barrier the forces stationed permanently east of Suez should be increased. The need for a rapid response was highlighted after a revolt broke out in July 1957 in Muscat and Oman. RAF aircraft from Aden supported by a battalion from Kenya and an armoured car regiment from Aden were brought in following the Sultan's request on 21 July and by 16 August the rebellion had been quashed. In November 1957 Duncan Sandys, the Minister of Defence, announced that part of the central reserve would be stationed in Kenya for use in either the Persian Gulf or the Far East.[26] The initial force of two battalions marked the start of a significant build up of forces in the region and the Kenyan garrison had increased to three battalions plus the Headquarters of 24th Brigade by March 1960. During this period the Air Ministry considered that Aden was their preferred choice for a reinforcement base as this had an operational RAF station which Kenya did not.[27] However, there was more space for accommodation and training areas in Kenya and its climate was superior to that of the Arabian Peninsula. Beverley transport aircraft were based in Kenya from 1960 to improve the mobility of the forces based there. Britain's commitment was such that £7.5 million had been spent on facilities in Kenya by the end of 1961. What was not particularly apparent in the late 1950s was that Britain's position in Kenya was under threat, but a fast moving political situation in the early 1960s would rapidly undermine the prospect of stationing forces there.[28]

The continuing limitations caused by the air barrier were apparent in the spring of 1958 when the three possible air routes from Britain and Cyprus to the Persian Gulf were considered. The first was via Malta, Libya, Sudan, and Aden, the second via Malta, Cyprus and Iraq (via Turkey) and the third via Gibraltar, Kano, Entebbe and Aden. If forces were being sent to Kuwait the Chiefs of Staffs believed that politically neither Libyan, Sudanese nor Iraqi airfields would be available. Therefore, it was essential that the third of these, the trans-African route, be improved. Current fuel availability at a number of locations along the route meant that only one battalion with light equipment could be moved along it in six days. In addition the best transport aircraft then available for carrying heavy equipment was the Beverley which was not designed for the

long distances of the trans-African route so equipment would have to be stockpiled in Aden and Bahrain.[29]

The 1957 White Paper also signalled a change in naval policy which had a significant impact on the naval forces available east of Suez. Sandys did not accept the proposition that the navy could conduct a 'broken-backed war' following a nuclear exchange and the White Paper famously declared that 'The rôle of naval forces in total war is somewhat uncertain.'[30] Therefore, the navy's focus moved away from fighting a global war against the Soviet Union to more limited wars where naval forces could be brought rapidly to bear. The key area of operations would be east of Suez, including the Persian Gulf. In line with this new thinking the number of Royal Marine Commandos was increased from three to five from 1957 to 1961 and the aircraft carrier *Bulwark* converted into a commando carrier in 1959 with her sister ship *Albion* following suit in 1962.[31] The Marines would be supported by carrier groups, whose role was reaffirmed in the White Paper, one of which would normally be stationed in the Indian Ocean. A few months earlier the Chiefs of Staff had agreed that in the current strategic situation '…the carrier is the most flexible and valuable unit of the Fleet and that, if economies in naval forces have to be made, these ships should be the last to be reduced.[32] Indeed Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, recommended to Prime Minister Macmillan in May 1959 that what was really needed was in the Gulf was a smaller version of the US 6th Fleet '…a force capable of deploying its striking power in a matter of hours. We cannot without affecting our political position count on basing adequate troops on land for reasons of Arab nationalism...'[33]

By mid-1958 the forces in the Persian Gulf amounted to two rifle companies in Bahrain, an armoured car squadron in Sharjah, the navy's Persian Gulf Squadron and air support from Aden. The Chiefs of Staff planned that the main weight of land forces, a Brigade Headquarters plus three infantry battalions were to be based in Kenya with one infantry battalion, an armoured car regiment and artillery in Aden and two companies of infantry plus an armoured car squadron in the Gulf itself. The major air base was RAF Khormaksar in Aden with a Venom day fighter/ground attack [DF/GA] squadron, a Shackleton maritime patrol squadron, a Beverley transport squadron and a light transport squadron.[34] The most important air base in the Gulf was RAF Bahrain which comprised around five hundred personnel by mid-1959 including the Headquarters of RAF Persian Gulf, No.152 Squadron, the RAF Station Hospital, the Joint User Staging Post, and an important Communications Centre. The Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Dermot Boyle, assessed that due to improved relations with Bahrain and its importance as a mounting base for operations in Kuwait these forces were likely to increase.[35]

The plans for additional stationed forces in the region were justified by important political developments in the Middle East. In February 1958 Iraq and Jordan formed the short-lived Arab Union under which they united their foreign policies. Kuwait was encouraged to join, but it was suggested that if Britain could not persuade her to do so '…it would be necessary for Iraq to take over control of a large part of Kuwait.'[36] Macmillan saw the Union as a means of

Iraq and Jordan gaining access to Kuwait's oil reserves. Far more serious was a coup in Iraq on 14 June 1958 in which a group of military officers led by Brigadier General Abdul Karim Qasim deposed King Faisal II, who had been a reliable ally of the west. During the unrest the British embassy was ransacked and set on fire. Five days after the coup, Iraq sent a clear political signal to the west by joining the United Arab Republic, a political union formed between Egypt and Syria in February 1958. Fears in Jordan and Lebanon that this revolution may provoke similar nationalist uprisings saw them appeal for western support and 1,700 United States Marines were landed in Lebanon and 2,000 British paratroopers were sent to Jordan. In the event that Iraq should threaten states in the Gulf, Britain tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to get a firm commitment from the United States to participate in military action to ensure they remained independent.[37]

Further reinforcements were ordered to the Gulf by the Chiefs of Staff in the autumn of 1959 as insurance against the possible use of Iraqi armoured forces. The navy's Amphibious Warfare Squadron was sent to Aden and a Squadron of Centurion tanks despatched from Britain to Aden.[38] Half a squadron of tanks would be based permanently on board ships of the Amphibious Warfare Squadron in the Gulf ready to intervene in Kuwait at short notice. While the battalion of 1st Royal Warwicks would withdraw from Aden in March 1960 it would be replaced by 45 Commando maintaining the level of forces to undertake plan 'Cabrilla', the contingency plan to intervene in Kuwait, which was to take effect from 1 January 1960.[39, 40]

Under the 'Cabrilla' plan it was envisaged that intervention in Kuwait could take place at the request of the ruler with four days', or no warning, or alternatively in circumstances without the ruler's invitation, for example if he had lost control. Land forces were to comprise a brigade group and a parachute battalion with naval support ideally provided by aircraft carrier, cruiser and frigates. The air support comprised the two DF/GA squadrons, the first of which would deploy to Bahrain within twenty-four hours and the second within seventy-two hours, plus one Canberra Squadron and two Shackleton Squadrons. Four more Canberra Squadrons available from Cyprus. While extensive air offensive operations were possible, a coherent air defence system would be difficult to achieve since there was no radar equipment at Bahrain or Kuwait. A Cossor type 787 radar was subsequently sent to Bahrain, but this lacked a height-finding capability and obviously did not solve the problem in Kuwait. With four days warning there could be an immediate intervention by two battalions within twenty-four hours, building up to three infantry battalions, one parachute battalion and supporting arms within six days, four days quicker than under the previous plan – 'Alecto'. If no prior warning was given then at least one company would be in Kuwait on the day following the request, a parachute battalion within three days and the total build up in nine days. As far as the airlift of troops was concerned the move of the parachute battalion from Cyprus to Bahrain would remain a critical weakness until more Britannia aircraft were available. However, these timings could only be met if Turkey, Iran and Sudan gave approval for overflight rights within twenty-four hours.[41] Due to a lack of suitable accommodation for the land forces in Aden, Macmillan asked whether the forces there might be reduced. Following an appraisal by

the Chiefs of Staff, Harold Watkinson, who had replaced Sandys as Minister of Defence in October 1959, was able to advise the Prime Minister that both the Chiefs of Staff and the Foreign Office agreed that any reduction of forces in Aden would be strategically unacceptable as they would '…gravely prejudice our ability to intervene in Kuwait at short notice.'[42]

Contingency plans were also put in place to ensure that two DF/GA squadrons, or equivalent, were always available. No.8 and 208 Squadrons were due to be re-equipped with Hunter aircraft and therefore only one of these Squadrons would be available between December 1959 and January 1960 and from April to May 1960. Air Chief Marshal Sir Hubert Patch, the Commander-in-Chief, British Forces Arabian Peninsula, requested that during the second period the east of Suez carrier should be deployed within his command or at least four days steaming from Kuwait.[43] A second Hunter Squadron, either 1 Squadron or 54 Squadron, would also be flown in from Britain, but would take some six days to arrive.[44]

Preparations for the planned armoured support continued apace with the arrival of the Amphibious Warfare Squadron comprising Landing Ship Headquarters (LSH) *Meon* and two Landing Ship Tank (LST) *Dieppe* and *Reggio* and two Landing Craft Tank (LCT) in Aden in June 1960. After a month for maintenance and joint exercises the Squadron was expected to be fully operational by 24 July with the LSTs available to sealift tanks from Aden as soon as possible.[45] A trial was carried out from August to September 1960 with half a squadron of tanks embarked aboard at LST in the Persian Gulf for six weeks followed by an assault landing on their return to Aden.[46]

The Foreign Office view of the threat in August 1960 was that whichever government was in power in Iraq the adverse reaction of the United Nations to any aggression against Kuwait was likely to substantially discourage any such action, but it reiterated that the most effective deterrent was the knowledge that Britain could intervene effectively. Given the insecure position of the Qasim regime in Iraq it was felt unlikely that substantial forces would be moved away from Baghdad, but it was acknowledged that Qasim was '…a master of secrecy and deception…'[47] Some consideration was also given in London to the option of evicting an occupying Iraqi force from Kuwait, rather than just forestalling it. Discussions to this effect took place between the Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Home, and Watkinson, the Minister of Defence, in the spring of 1961. Home believed that planning such an operation could not be undertaken without prior consultation with the Americans while Watkinson thought that planning such an undertaking would take so long that '…world opinion would deter us from completing it.'[48] At a meeting of Ministers on 27 April to discuss possible action if Iraq had occupied Kuwait Macmillan acknowledged that while it would be very difficult to keep adequate forces at continuous readiness there should be some planning to assess how this might be carried out with the forces available.[49]

By the end of 1960 certain improvements had been made to the intervention plan which was renamed 'Vantage' in November. These included an increased number of Britannias from

Transport Command and the stockpiling of Kuwaiti owned tanks for use by British forces. With four days notice, a tactical Headquarters, two battalions with half a Squadron of tanks and armoured car Squadron supported by one DF/GA Squadron and two frigates would be in Kuwait within twenty-four hours. Additional air support comprising a second DF/GA Squadron, a Canberra photographic reconnaissance (PR) detachment and a Shackleton Squadron would be based in Bahrain and a Canberra Squadron at Sharjah. The main build up of the reinforced brigade group would be completed on D+4 with the other half Squadron of tanks arriving on D+9. This represented an improvement of a couple of days over previous plans.[50] If no prior warning was given then at least two infantry or parachute companies would be in place by D+1. By the end of D+2 the land force would comprise a tactical headquarters and two battalions plus half a Squadron of tanks. The only outstanding elements to arrive after D+6 were a battery of field artillery on D+9 and the remainder of the armour from Aden on D+12.[51] The first exercise of the Amphibious Warfare Squadron, 'Awex One', comprising LSH *Meon*, LST *Striker*, and LCTs *Parapet* and *Bastion* with half a Squadron of the 3rd Carabiniers' tanks in *Striker*, a troop of 45 Commando and a company from 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards were due to take place on the Sir Abu Nu'Air and Yas Islands between 21-28 April 1961.[52]

Plan 'Vantage' in Action, July 1961

The major test for the years of planning was shortly to be at hand following Kuwait's declaration of full independence in an Exchange of Notes on 19 June 1961. The Note from Sir William Luce, the Political Resident, Persian Gulf, included the proviso that 'Nothing in these conclusions shall affect the readiness of Her Majesty's Government to assist the Government of Kuwait if the latter request such assistance.'[53] Six days later Brigadier General Qasim announced at a press conference that he was going to appoint the Sheikh of Kuwait as Qaimaqam of Kuwait in the Liwa of Basra. The same day Radio Baghdad asserted Iraq's true right to Kuwait and stated that Kuwait was part of Iraq.[54] As far as predicting the movement of Iraqi military forces were concerned, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, the British Ambassador to Iraq, signalled London to state that he could not guarantee to give warning if Iraqi forces were moved from south of Baghdad to the Basra area.[55] On 27 June Trevelyan advised that Qasim's original plans may be at a more advanced stage than previously thought and '…may have included an early internal coup supported by military action, perhaps timed for July 14 under cover of the usual troop movements.'[56] If circumstances permitted it, he recommended that any action to defend Kuwait be undertaken by Arab states since British intervention would allow Qasim to claim that Kuwait's independence was a sham and make it easier for him to conduct anti-imperialist propaganda. Moreover, he warned that if Britain put troops into Kuwait as a precautionary measure Qasim might break off diplomatic relations and accuse Britain of invading part of Iraq.[57]

In the light of Trevelyan's assessment of Iraqi planning, the commando carrier *Bulwark*, which was at Karachi carrying 42 Commando and sixteen Whirlwind helicopters, was ordered to proceed to Kuwait at maximum speed on 28 June and to wait offshore out of sight. The LSH *Meon* and LST *Striker* carrying half a Squadron of tanks and frigate *Loch Alvie* sailed from Bahrain the following day.[58] The aircraft carrier *Victorious* which was en route to Hong Kong

was told to proceed to Bahrain instead where she was expected on 8 July. The two Hunter Squadrons were moved into position with 208 Squadron flying from Nairobi to Bahrain where they it was joined by 8 Squadron from Aden. Twenty aircraft had arrived there by 1135 on 1 July. A Canberra bomber squadron was ordered to reposition from Germany to Bahrain and elements of the land forces including 24th Brigade in Kenya were put on alert.[59]

'Vantage' was formally put into action by the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, Air Marshal Sir Charles Elworthy at 0700 on 1 July 1961 following a formal request from the Amir of Kuwait the previous day.[60] The fortuitous availability of *Bulwark*, not included in the original 'Vantage' plan, enabled 42 Commando to start going ashore by helicopter at 1100 hours and despite sand storms which gave rise to poor visibility, 500 men were ashore with five hours. Simultaneously two companies of the Coldstream Guards based in Bahrain were flown in. *Striker* also landed her tanks, a process which was hindered because the landing ramp had been removed. The poor weather conditions precluded much activity by either the Hunter or Canberra aircraft and would have greatly limited their ability to attack any Iraqi ground units if any invasion had been taking place.[61] 45 Commando was flown in from Aden, arriving on 2-3 July, albeit in a rather disorganised fashion, together with 150 men of 'A' Squadron, 11th Hussars, whose armoured cars and other vehicles were landed by LCT *Redoubt*. On 2 July another half Squadron of tanks were landed by the LST *Empire Gull* and twelve Canberras from Germany had also arrived.

The ability to intervene quickly was crucial if 'Vantage' was to be successful and a key element in this was securing overflight rights along the three strategic air routes for the operation; Britain to the Gulf (Bahrain or Kuwait) via Aden, Britain to the Gulf via Cyprus and Kenya to the Gulf via Aden. The Middle East air barrier comprised Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Therefore it was crucial to obtain permission from Turkey and Sudan within twenty-four hours. At 1035 on 29 June the Foreign Office instructed Sir Bernard Burrows, Britain's Ambassador in Ankara, to ask the Turkish Government for immediate blanket clearance for overflight rights for approximately fifty British aircraft to be spread over several days.[62] However, it was not until 2342 on 30 June, some thirty-seven hours after the initial request, that Burrows confirmed the agreement of General Gursel, the Turkish President. This was subject to certain restrictions, the main one being that flights over Turkey could only take place at night.[63] It was clearly a sensitive issue for the Turks and Burrows strongly recommended that this co-operation be given as little publicity as possible. In the event news leaked out and the Turks re-imposed their ban on 4 July. Sudan gave its approval on 1 July and Macmillan subsequently sent President Abboud a personal message to thank him 'I have no doubt that its [Vantage's] successful conclusion owes much to the good relations which happily exist between out two countries.'[64]

The delay in receiving permission from Turkey and Sudan led to a change to the airlift plan at 2230 on 30 June. The 2nd Parachute Battalion from Cyprus had been due to be one of the first units into Bahrain, but as its air route was not available it was decided to accelerate the

departure of forces from Britain instead. When the move of the parachute battalion was reinstated, this resulted in servicing and movements personnel who arrived in Cyprus being brought off the aircraft without any clear plan for getting them to the Gulf. Most of these personnel were subsequently sent to Kuwait or Bahrain without any clear appreciation of where they were actually needed. Furthermore the parachute battalion was not in place until the early morning of 5 July.[65]

The main element of the land forces were flown in from Nairobi in Kenya, comprising the Headquarters 24th Brigade, 1st Royal Inniskillings, 1st Kings, 34th Field Squadron Royal Engineers and 210 Squadron. These began moving into Kuwait on 4 July and the Brigade, totaling 2,100 men was operational on 9 July.[66] Bahrain was main staging post for strategic aircraft and tactical aircraft en route to Kuwait and equipment stockpiled there was flown into theatre. By 9 July there were 4,112 army, 596 RAF and twenty-three naval personnel plus 960 Royal Marines in Kuwait after what Sir David Lee has called '…perhaps the most comprehensive, realistic and valuable movement exercise ever carried out by the three British services.'[67] Indeed with little evidence of Iraqi moves by 3 July and the build up proceeding, the Foreign Office politely declined an offer by Dean Rusk, the US Secretary of State, to send two destroyers and an LST to join two American destroyers already in Bahrain. The Foreign Office's main concern was that any American intervention would give '…the Arabs and Russians a pretext for making accusations of joint imperialist manoeuvres and even, conceivably, for Russian intervention in some form.'[68]

'Vantage' was an undoubted political success as the swift deployment of forces, which was at the heart of Britain's policy of deterrence, was largely achieved. Some of the plans which had been put in place since 1957 were vindicated, such as the decision to place part of the central reserve east of Suez, especially 24th Brigade in Kenya. The build up of Britain's air transport capabilities were apparent with the use between 30 June and 13 July of six Comets, twenty Britannias, thirty-one Hastings, twenty-five Beverleys and four Valletas from the RAF supplemented by three Canadairs from the Royal Rhodesian Air Force and seventeen charter aircraft.[69]

However, unsurprisingly given the complexity of the operation there were a number of lessons to be learned. The availability of 42 Commando from *Bulwark* fortunately masked the delayed arrival of the 2nd Parachute Battalion from Cyprus and suggested that more than two companies should be stationed in the Gulf to reduce the limitations of the air barrier. The priority given to getting fighting units into Kuwait, which was apparent from the changes made to the airlift plan, resulted in the air logistic system being disrupted to such a degree that it would have been very difficult to support the force in action.[70] It highlighted the importance of carrying through previously agreed plans, if at all possible. While equipment stockpiled in Bahrain could be airlifted into Kuwait relatively easily, the recently constructed Kuwait New airfield was found to be lacking in terms of unloading, refueling and handling facilities and some aircraft had to return to Bahrain with some of their cargo.[71] Improvements to the airfield were obviously

required and together with stockpiles of equipment in Kuwait. If enough tanks could be based there this largely avoided the need for such these to be brought in by Amphibious Warfare Squadron which had been at a particularly high state of readiness for 'Vantage'

As far as air defence was concerned the lack of radar facilities in Kuwait was partially offset by the fact that *Bulwark* had retained her radar when converted to a commando carrier and gave limited radar cover to a distance of eighty miles. Nevertheless the Hunters could only provide a limited day fighter capability. It was not until *Victorious* began air operations on 10 July that round the clock air defence was available with her all weather Sea Vixen fighters. Rear Admiral Smeeton, the Flag Officer Aircraft Carriers, commented that despite *Victorious'* capabilities had there been serious Iraqi air opposition it would have been difficult to defend both the carrier together with Kuwait New airfield and land forces.[72] The need for radar facilities in Kuwait itself was another crucial lesson drawn from this experience.

One unavoidable issue was the weather with temperatures exceeding 140°F in the cockpits of aircraft on the ground, high humidity and sandstorms which caused the loss of one Hunter of 208 Squadron, which made the build-up all the more remarkable. To partially offset these conditions, parties of two hundred men at a time were flown onto *Bulwark* to recuperate in her air conditioned accommodation for twenty-four hours.[73] In the longer term further air-conditioned accommodation was constructed in Bahrain.

Holding the Line, 1961-1967

By the middle of July 1961 it was apparent to Trevelyan, the Ambassador in Baghdad, that Qasim's inept handling of the situation meant that he had gained little credit from it. More worrying for Britain in the long term was that Iraq's claim to Kuwait '…will remain a permanent feature of the political landscape in Iraq. The belief is strong here, even among Quasim's bitterest opponents, that Kuwait and Iraq should be eventually united…'[74] He recommended that British forces should be replaced by an Arab force as soon as possible since the presence of even a token British force in Kuwait would prove an increasing liability to the future of Kuwait and Britain's interests in the region.[75] Over the next few months British forces withdrew from Kuwait to be replaced by one from the Arab League which provided a crucial political deterrent to any Iraqi aggression.

Within a few days of Britain's intervention Harold Watkinson, the Minister of Defence, recommended that Britain should provide the Kuwaitis with equipment to defend themselves in future with enough equipment for an infantry brigade, a regiment of tanks and some modern aircraft for reconnaissance and ground attack.[76] Sir Norman Brook, the Cabinet Secretary, urged Macmillan to be cautious 'After all the tanks which we sold to Iraq were used first to overturn the regime and are now threatening our own troops. The Sultan of Muscat… is firmly of the opinion that no Arab should be promoted above the rank of Major because "revolutions are always made by Colonels"'.[77] Macmillan agreed with Brook '…I doubt if it would be wise to entrust them with large quantities of modern arms; after all the tanks which we sold

to Iraq were soon used to overturn the Hashemites.'[78] Despite these reservations, the build up of the Kuwaiti army and to a far lesser extent its air force was an element in Britain's strategy over the next couple of years.

Watkinson was more successful at getting a major change in the existing arrangements for the defence of Kuwait in the autumn of 1961. Under current instructions the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East could only act on receipt of authorisation from London. Since the delay from the first reports of an Iraqi invasion to receiving this authorisation was about fifteen hours, Watkinson suggested that the Commander-in-Chief be given the authority to act more promptly. He was concerned about the ability to achieve a favourable air situation as well as the need to attack Iraqi ground forces.[79] The Cabinet approved early intervention involving the use of a DF/GA squadron on 5 October 1961. This was soon extended to cover the introduction of a parachute battalion and crews for eight stockpiled tanks into Kuwait. The parachute battalion group was moved from Cyprus to Bahrain, to avoid any airlift delays, and would be air-dropped into Kuwait in two waves with close air support and possibly naval gunfire support to secure Kuwait New Airfield and the Kuwait army reserve. If the parachutes and heavy drop equipment were already stockpiled at Bahrain the first drop would take place within twenty-seven and a half hours and the second five hours later.[80]

In December 1961 intelligence was received from a Kuwaiti source, albeit an unreliable one, regarding Iraqi troop movements in the Basra and Shaiba areas. As a result six Britannia aircraft and seventy-five army personnel were brought to twelve hours notice. Within thirty-six hours of authorisation to proceed, 1,455 army personnel would be in Kuwait including two infantry battalions, the advance headquarters of 24th Brigade, thirty-two Centurion tanks plus armoured cars and artillery. There would be 277 RAF personnel manning one Hunter DF/GA Squadron and radar facilities. Also available would be two Canberra PR aircraft at Bahrain, twelve Canberras bombers in Sharjah and one frigate off Kuwait.[81]

The spring of 1962 brought a new assessment from the Joint Intelligence Committee of potential airpower which Iraq could bring to support an attack on Kuwait. This was believed to be two jet fighter Squadrons and one jet light bomber Squadron. The acquisition of more advanced types of Russian-built MiG fighters was judged to have altered the military balance in the region. The major concern of Earl Mountbatten, the Chief of Defence Staff, was the vulnerability of transport aircraft each carrying 90-110 troops. If one of these was lost he felt an intervention in Kuwait would be completely disrupted.[82] Under the rules agreed in October 1961 the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East could only authorise the pursuit of Iraqi aircraft to fifteen miles inside Iraq. However, to achieve a favourable air situation, airfields in the Basra and Shaiba areas would have to swiftly attacked. The delegation of such authority was approved, although the Dominions Office recommended that in such circumstances the Prime Minister should inform Commonwealth governments as to what justifications Britain had for doing so, in case some saw it as an act of aggression.[83]

To ensure that two Hunter DF/GA Squadrons were always available for deployment to Bahrain, a rotation programme was devised in the autumn of 1962 involving the two Khormaksar-based Squadrons being sent to Bahrain for two month periods with Hunters from Cyprus and those from 38 Group in back in Britain be added to the rotation programme between September 1962 and December 1963. It was eventually hoped to equally distribute responsibility between the Air Force Middle East, the Near East Air Force and 38 Group. In addition between four and six Canberra bomber aircraft would be sent from Cyprus to Sharjah for two week stints every two months the first of which began on 16 July 1962. More than half the Beverley transport force was permanently deployed overseas and in future it was likely that half the Belvedere, Argosy and Avro 780 Squadrons together with all Wessex helicopters would be based abroad.[84]

The need for radar coverage in Kuwait had been addressed by the installation of an RAF Type 'T' convoy radar situated near Kuwait New Airfield. However, the difficulties of maintaining air cover over the country were demonstrated on 21 and 28 March 1962 when single aircraft were detected, presumed to be Iraqi on photographic reconnaissance. They flew from the Shaiba airfield in southern Iraq, across the whole length of Kuwait from north to south and then into the neutral zone at a speed of 600 knots and a height of 25,000 feet. It was presumed that the aircraft returned to Iraq over the sea. Sir William Luce, the Political Resident, Persian Gulf believed there was considerable advantage in stopping such flights and that the interception of Iraqi aircraft would be a clear demonstration of the alertness of British forces and provide a further deterrent to Iraqi action.[85] The view of the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East was that given current arrangements there was little chance of conducting a successful interception and Earl Mountbatten, the Chief of Defence Staff, recommended that the Amir of Kuwait should not be told because "…if we do inform the Ruler and he requests military counteraction, it would be humiliating to have to admit that we can do nothing effective."[86] The Type 'T' convoy radar was capable of early warning to a range of 130 nautical miles at 30,000 feet and 90 nautical miles at 40,000 feet. The Kuwaitis had agreed to the installation of a superior Marconi 264 radar to take place in mid-1964.

Possible air defence options for Kuwait were considered by a team from the Central Fighter Establishment which visited Kuwait in December 1962. A short term solution to improving fighter capability would be to equip the Hunter Mk.9 with a simple air-to-air missile such as the Sidewinder which with the Type 'T' convoy radar could provide some degree of air defence at medium and high altitudes during daylight. But little defence was available at aircraft at low altitudes or attacks at night. The ideal air defence aircraft was the Lightning, but there was a risk of losing some on the ground if deployed forward area and adequate servicing facilities would have to be provided. As far as potential surface-to-air missile (SAM) defence was concerned the first overseas deployment of a Bloodhound Mk.2 Squadron at Singapore was to commence in early 1965. While this Composite Squadron was equipped with air portable sections with a view of sending them to the Middle East the problem was that no current transport aircraft was capable of carrying a single launcher over the long ranges from RAF

Butterworth near Singapore to staging post at Gan and then on to Masirah. Only the Short Belfast due in service in 1966 would be capable of performing this role. The Central Fighter Establishment's team thought that the Bloodhound was the wrong type of SAM for Kuwait because of the difficulties with airlift and the time required to set it up. What was needed was a portable weapon-pack which could be flown in with the first wave and provide a modicum of immediate air defence.[87] A report by Fighter Command's Research Branch a few months later confirmed that given the Iraqi Air Force's capabilities and the lack of high performance radar and adequate navigational facilities for fighter aircraft there would be serious medium level air defence problems.[88]

While the issue of air defence continued to be an issue, in other respects Britain's preparedness for intervention in Kuwait reached a peak in the spring of 1963. By this time the Kuwaiti army was 5,000 strong and was equipped with Centurion tanks and Vigilant anti-tank missiles, but was weak in air power terms, the Kuwaiti Air Force possessing only six armed Jet Provosts.[89] Attacks against enemy airfields in the Basra and Shaiba areas in addition to engaging Iraqi ground and air forces in and over Kuwait could quickly take place given the delegated authority to the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. It was estimated that Iraqi forces would take eighteen hours to cover the seventy miles from the border to the Kuwait New Airfield, but a parachute battalion from Bahrain could land there within thirteen and a half hours to secure the airstrip and stockpiled equipment. Two battalions plus armoured car and tank support would be in position within thirty-six hours and with a force of four battalions supported by thirty-two tanks, artillery and air support in place on day five no difficulty was anticipated in defeating an Iraqi incursion. A carrier task group and a commando carrier would also be ordered to Kuwait, if available within a reasonable timescale.[90] Plans were also drawn up for more extensive air operations against Iraq as a last resort. These included attacks on Iraqi airfields, the Iraqi Ministry of Defence General Headquarters, other military installations and interdiction targets. To augment the Middle East Air Force, Canberra Squadrons from Cyprus and two V-bomber Squadrons from Malta would be utilised. While the Chiefs of Staff believed that such attacks had the potential to make the Iraqi air force ineffective by seventy-two hours and even force Iraq to cease hostilities within ninety-six hours, they recognized that air operations on such a scale were likely to be politically unacceptable.[91] The key issue was intelligence and both Peter Thorneycroft, who had replaced Watkinson as Minister of Defence, and the Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Home, assured Macmillan that all possible actions were being taken to improve intelligence coverage of Iraqi intentions.[92]

There had been a significant change in the political situation in Iraq on 8 February 1963 when the Qasim's government was overthrown in another military coup. Qasim himself was executed the following day and Colonel Abdul Salam Arif was appointed acting President by the National Revolutionary Council.[93] The threat to Kuwait was deemed to have reduced because the new government had a considerable amount of work to do to in order to improve conditions in the country. In the same month the Arab League Forces were withdrawn from Kuwait. A major step forward in relations between Kuwait and Iraq occurred on 4 October

1963 when Iraqi Prime Minister Ahmad Hassan Al-Bakr signed an agreement recognising Kuwait's independence. Despite a reduction in the immediate threat level, the Foreign Office's advice to the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee was that no overt action should be taken to reduce the deterrent value of forces in the region.[94] There was a minor scare two months later when a regiment of tanks was moved from Baghdad to Basra. While the regiment was considered to be of low operational capability and was not accompanied by infantry units, the Joint Intelligence Committee took a number of steps to improve surveillance including cancelling the plan to remove the Canberra PR aircraft from Bahrain.[95]

One military option that was finally ruled out in May 1963 was the possibility of evicting Iraqi forces which had already occupied Kuwait. On 24 April the Directors of Plans reported that such an operation would take up to twenty-eight days to mount. Given the existing forces in the Middle East it would begin with a simultaneous airborne and seaborne assault with a parachute battalion and a helicopter-landed commando. These would be followed in on D-Day by two infantry battalion groups and armour with a further battalion group plus administrative units landing on D+1. Apart from any Iraqi resistance, the major limiting factor for this operation was the assembly of the brigade group's heavy vehicles and equipment in chartered merchant shipping and logistic support including ammunition, petrol and water at Bahrain. In their final analysis the Directors of Plans recommended was that the best option was to maintain a reinforced brigade group capable of intervening within five days and providing an effective deterrent and to cease planning for an eviction operation.[96] This assessment was endorsed at the subsequent meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Home agreed that 'The political difficulties of mounting an assault in cold blood after such a long waiting period where the Iraqis might have captured the Amir or set up a puppet government seems likely to be insuperable.'[98] In fact Prime Minister Macmillan also had his doubts over the option for intervention 'If "Planning for eviction" is to be abandoned, I feel doubtful whether planning to **intervene** will be realistic. However I will agree [to continued planning for intervention].'[99]

Macmillan's scepticism over the probability of being able to intervene in the future was no doubt influenced by the knowledge that Kenya, which had played a pivotal role as a base for units of the central reserve since the late 1950s, would become independent at the end of 1963 and British forces withdrawn by the end of 1964. As early as the autumn of 1960 the Official Committee on the Middle East discussed whether Britain could realistically maintain a capability to intervene in Kuwait in the event of the loss of facilities in Kenya or Aden. The Committee assessed that if facilities in Kenya were lost current plans to reinforce the Persian Gulf would be impossible to achieve. Watkinson, the Minister of Defence, commented that if facilities in both Kenya and Aden were lost the cost of an alternative strategy would be so great that it may exceed the net profits from oil revenues and thought it unlikely that a deterrent largely dependent upon forces in Britain would be an effective.[100] Sir Norman Brook, the Cabinet Secretary, advised Macmillan in September 1961 that Britain's traditional policy towards Kuwait of extracting oil concessions from an autocratic ruler in return for military

protection was no longer viable since the number of locations where British forces would be tolerated was in, as he put it in '…irrevocable decline.'[101]

In September 1963 the Acting Chief of Defence Staff recommended the major changes regarding the basing of forces to take place the following year. Of the four battalions available in 1963, one parachute battalion was in Bahrain, a commando in Aden and two infantry battalions in Kenya. Both the Aden commando and the two Kenyan battalions would be withdrawn by the end of 1964. One of the battalions from Kenya plus the Headquarters of 24th Brigade, an artillery regiment and brigade administrative units would be transferred to Aden. Therefore, from the end of 1964 the forces for a Kuwait operation would comprise a parachute battalion in Bahrain, two infantry battalions from Aden including the one earmarked for internal security, and a further battalion from outside the theatre or afloat. There were obvious problems with acclimatising troops if the fourth battalion to be flown in directly from Britain and it would be extremely difficult to hold a unit in Britain at very short notice indefinitely.[102] In addition the assumption that both Aden battalions may be available was soon proved incorrect. A positive development as far as potential air support was concerned was that the Chiefs of Staff agreed in October 1963 that in future two aircraft carriers were being deployed east of Suez with one carrier earmarked for the Middle East and the other for the Far East. The carrier allocated to the Middle East would be within seven days steaming of Kuwait.[103]

The forthcoming loss of bases in Kenya had caused attention to switch to Aden, which was especially apparent with the decision in 1961 to build accommodation for 2,500 troops and 1,000 civilians at a cost of £5 million at Little Aden.[104] The problem was that the Aden Protectorate, especially the Radfan region, was a hotbed of insurgent activity, especially following the revolution in Yemen in September 1962 when supplies of arms and money flowed freely over the border.[105] Sir Robert Scott, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, predicted in May 1963 that if Aden was lost the impact upon Britain's position in the Gulf would be profound 'We should lose our ability to influence by threats of force the profitability of our Middle East oil operations, to prevent rival Arab nations trying to take over Gulf sheikdoms, Oman and Muscat or Aden…'[106] The situation in Aden came to a head in December 1963 with a grenade attack on the British High Commissioner at Khormaksar civil airport. A state of emergency was declared and large scale military operations began in the Radfan area at the beginning of 1964.

The operations in the Radfan not only involved some of the forces based in Aden which were earmarked for use in the Gulf, but called on those stationed in the Gulf. In May 1964 the second of four parachute companies stationed in Bahrain was withdrawn for operations in the Radfan. The Acting Political Resident in Bahrain agreed to a reduction of two companies, but only for a short period. The Ambassador in Baghdad warned that such a reduction for more than a month would risk sending a signal to Baghdad that Britain was reducing its commitment to the Gulf.[107] The following month, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East was given the

authorisation to deploy one company of the Parachute Battalion Group from Bahrain to anywhere within the Middle East Command with the agreement of the Political Resident, Persian Gulf. Earl Mountbatten, the Chief of Defence Staff, gave an assurance that as long as the extended state of readiness for 'Goodwood', the latest reinforcement plan for Kuwait, remained in force the deterrent posture in the Gulf would not be affected.[108] The 'Goodwood' plan called for the first troops to arrive in Kuwait within twelve hours and within six days a force of four battalions, an armoured regiment and armoured car regiment would be in place. A stockpile of equipment, including tanks, was now maintained in Kuwait. Hunter aircraft based in Bahrain would provide the immediate strike capability and three frigates were stationed at Aden.[109] Early in 1965 the principles governing the deployment of carriers and commando ships east of Suez were changed so that one carrier and one commando ship would be within twelve days of Kuwait, rather than the previous limit of seven days. This would allow the carrier to visit the Subic Exercise Area if necessary with the agreement of the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East.[110] The fact that various forces were being used in Aden and others were at extended readiness can be explained by a perceived reduction in the direct threat posed by Iraq. According to Michael Stewart, the Foreign Secretary, in mid-1965 the most likely threat to Kuwait was an internal coup d'état, possibly with backing from Iraq or Egypt, followed by an Iraqi intervention. The possibility of a direct Iraqi attack as had been feared in 1961 was deemed as somewhat remote.[111]

While an Iraqi attack was judged unlikely it is interesting that Denis Healey, the Secretary of State for Defence, requested that the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East should have delegated authority to order air attacks on Iraqi ground forces inside Iraq south of Zubair.[112] Existing authority, dating from April 1963, was limited to engaging Iraqi air and ground forces in Kuwait, pursuing aircraft thirty miles over the border and attacking airfields in southern Iraq. Healey believed that such air attacks, especially on armoured units, would disrupt their invasion plan and sought delegated authority for attacks on ground forces south of Zubair. At a meeting of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee on 28 July 1965 the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, was duly granted such authority.[113] This was another signal that Britain's strategy of deterrence was increasingly dependent on air power.

The situation was changed dramatically given the decisions in the famous Defence White Paper in February 1966. It was announced that Britain intended to withdraw from Aden when South Arabia became independent in 1968. This would result in the loss of RAF Khormaksar and bases for the infantry battalions which were so important to an effective response in the Gulf. However, the White Paper identified that this would be counter-balanced to a limited degree by increasing forces stationed in the Gulf to the tune of one fighter Squadron and one infantry battalion which would be stationed at Sharjah. The Government wanted to send a signal to its allies in the region including King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran that its determination to defend its interests in the Gulf would not be diminished by the loss of Aden. Indeed during the summer of 1966 the expansion of facilities at Bahrain and Sharjah proceeded as planned.[114] However, by the end of the year consideration was being given to

reverse the decision to station a battalion at Sharjah and the Acting Chief of the Defence Staff concluded that to do so '…would disillusion our friends, encourage those who wish to make trouble, and diminish the chances of achieving stability.'[115] Sir Stewart Crawford, the new Political Resident, Persian Gulf, reported that the sending of reinforcements would calm the nerves of the Gulf rulers in the short term, but that a British withdrawal from Aden would be followed by 'a period of intense anxiety' in the region and this would be made worse if there was not an orderly transition to a stable South Arabian government.[116]

While Britain may have been keen to demonstrate a continued commitment to the Gulf in general, the defence review undertaken by the Labour government in 1965-1966 marked a landmark in the policy of military assistance to Kuwait. A statement in the White Paper that Britain that it would not try to maintain defence facilities in an independent state against its wishes was clearly a criticism of Kuwait which had long refused to have British forces in the kingdom while benefiting from British protection.[117] The Amir of Kuwait was informed that from 1 January 1967 Britain would not be making any special provision for the use of ground forces in the country. Any request for ground forces could not be met for several weeks as a significant proportion of these forces would have to come from Britain or the Far East. This marked the end of the policy of rapid response which had evolved since 1957 and provided a stark contrast with plan 'Goodwood' a few years earlier when the first forces were due arrive within twelve hours and reinforced brigade group within six days. Stockpiles of army equipment in the Gulf would be reduced and the tanks maintained in Kuwait sold to the Kuwaitis. Therefore in practice future British military assistance would be limited to air support only. The Amir could do little, but agree to the new arrangements noting that the greatly reduced external threats to Kuwait were acceptable.[118]

In practice the new 'air only' concept came into effect on 1 February 1967. This involved daylight patrols with Hunter DF/GA aircraft based in Bahrain along the Kuwait/Iraq border and Kuwait town within one hour of a request. A second Hunter Squadron from Aden would be available within twenty-four hours. In addition two Squadrons of Canberras could move from Cyprus to Sharjah with thirty-six hours and a Squadron of Lightnings from Britain to Bahrain in six days. The policy of delegating increased authority to local commanders was also reversed with an insistence that targets within Iraq could only be engaged with specific ministerial authority from London.[119] In the event such plans for a revised defence posture in the Gulf were rapidly overtaken by events. The final withdrawal from Aden took place in November 1967 which left South Arabia in the hands of the communist National Liberation Front. This was hardly the smooth transition likely to give confidence to Britain's Gulf allies who were visited that same month by Goronwy Roberts, a Foreign Office Minister and reassured that it had no intention of withdrawing its forces.[120]

Withdrawal, 1968-1971

Despite Roberts' assurance withdrawal was inevitable given the financial pressure on the government since devaluation of sterling on 18 November 1967 which increased the cost

of maintaining Britain's forces overseas by £50 million annually and the Ministry of Defence was ordered to make cuts of £100 million in 1968-1969. On 16 January 1968 Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that Britain would withdraw from the Far East and the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971. All the navy's aircraft carriers would be withdrawn at the same time.[121] The 1968 Defence White Paper acknowledged that if reductions in capabilities had to be made then they must be accompanied by a corresponding decrease in commitments 'We have no intention of allowing a repetition of the situation which existed in 1964 when, because of the lack of balance between military tasks and resources, our forces were seriously overstretched.'[122] Two days later George Brown, the Foreign Secretary, informed the House of Commons that it was essential to withdraw from the Gulf at the same time as the Far East if the reductions in forces and therefore financial savings would be achieved. He highlighted the carrier force as an example of a capability which would have to be retained if Britain's commitments in the Gulf persisted. To give an example of the savings, the estimated cost of defence commitments Gulf in 1965-1966 was £25 million.[123]

Reactions from the Gulf States who were given prior warning of the announcement were varied, albeit largely predictable. The Kuwaiti Foreign Minister believed that while Kuwait could manage the transition, other Gulf states would be left in chaos.[124] After contrary British assurances only a few months he forecast that the announcement would destroy confidence in the British government. The ruler of Bahrain expressed his extreme unhappiness at the decision and urged the Britain not to set a specific withdrawal date which he felt would result in an 'Aden' type of catastrophe.[125] King Feisel of Saudi Arabia also saw significant dangers in announcing a firm date.[126] The ruler of Qatar predicted that the Gulf States 'would be eaten up either by Saudi Arabia or by Russian and Arab Revolutionary Governments. This was not what the people wanted.'[127] Such risks were recognized in London and Paul Gore-Booth, Head of the Diplomatic Service at the Foreign Office expressed concern to Sir Burke Trend, the Cabinet Secretary, that in comparison with South-East Asia, predicting the political future of the Persian Gulf was rather more uncertain.[128] This was particularly the case of smaller states such as Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial states.

Aware that Britain's decision was largely an economic one, the rulers of Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Bahrain offered to make financial contributions which might induce Britain to retain its forces. In the case of Bahrain this was to waive the payments which Britain made to use military facilities in the country, estimated at £350,000 a year.[129] The offer from Abu Dhabi was to contribute in any way to ensure a continued British presence. Such offers became publicly known and did not go down well with Denis Healey, the Secretary of State for Defence. When asked by Robin Day on the BBC's 'Panorama' programme what he thought of a reported offer by the Sheikhs of the Persian Gulf to pay for British forces, Healey replied 'Well I don't very much like the idea of being a sort of white slaver for Arab sheikhs… it would be a very great mistake if we allowed ourselves to become mercenaries for people who would like to have a few British troops around.'[130] Perhaps the most significant indication of displeasure at Britain's decision came from Washington where US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk declared he was

'deeply disturbed' at an acceleration British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf since the United States placed Britain's position there as one of very high importance.[131]

As far as military advice on the withdrawals was concerned, the Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Charles Elworthy, advised against leaving the Persian Gulf before the Far East as this would jeopardise the main air route to the latter and result in the withdrawal from Malaya and Singapore having to be made by the 'Westabout' route.[132] If the RAF was asked to take over the task of covering the final withdrawal from Bahrain from the Royal Navy then a theoretical study that estimated ten Phantoms and seven tanker aircraft would be have to be based at Masirah to provide two aircraft on continuous daylight patrols over a ten day period.[133] In the event it was confirmed that the aircraft carriers, whose phasing out had been announced in 1966, would remain in service until the withdrawals from the Gulf and the Far East were complete. The assumptions made by the Commander Air Forces Gulf in March 1968 were that the 'air only' commitment to Kuwait would cease six months before withdrawal and that neither Phantom fighters nor Rapier SAMs would be deployed to the region.[134]

By the autumn of 1969 air power assets available included two Squadrons of Hunter DF/GA aircraft and six tactical transport aircraft at Bahrain. Assets in Sharjah, one of the Trucial States, comprised four long range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, one Squadron of tactical transport aircraft and one Squadron of support helicopters. While no aircraft were permanently stationed at either Masirah in Oman, the importance of this staging post for the withdrawal from the Far East was evident from the concern which Michael Stewart, the Foreign Secretary, expressed to Healey in April 1970 over the rebellion in Dhofar, a region in the south of Oman.

The major withdrawals of RAF assets were to start from Bahrain and Sharjah in May 1971 with closure scheduled for December. From 1 September an aircraft carrier would be at fourteen days notice and from 1 November would be available as required. A commando carrier was to be at fourteen days notice for Gulf operations from 1 July, at eight days notice by 1 October and would be supplemented by an assault ship from 1 November.[135] If further reinforcements were required at very short notice then the Spearhead battalion would be sent from Britain. This unit was at seventy-two hours notice with the lead elements ready to go within twenty-four hours. Aircraft from Air Support Command were also on twenty-four hour standby to move the Spearhead battalion.[136] The force which remained by the beginning of October were required to protect the installations and personnel in Bahrain and Sharjah until the final withdrawal two months later.[137]

In the event this element of Britain's withdrawal from the Middle East was relatively smooth, certainly compared with the debacle in Aden. Agreement was reached with Kuwait that the 1961 accord would be terminated on 13 May 1971 and Sir William Luce, who had previously been Political Resident, Persian Gulf, was appointed to represent Britain in the negotiations between the Gulf states to try to ensure long term political stability. He recommended a loose association of states, but a closer union of the Trucial states which became the United

Arab Emirates. This was to be accompanied by continued British co-operation in term of training and equipping the forces of the Gulf states and visits by British naval and air units to demonstrate Britain's continued unofficial support.[138] The logistics of the actual withdrawal were made easier because Britain retained access to the airfields at Masirah and Salalah at the behest of the Sultan of Oman until 1977 during which time Britain provided assistance against the Dhofar rebellion.

Conclusion

Britain's renewed interest and commitment to its Gulf protectorates, especially Kuwait, from the mid-1950s unfortunately coincided with the repercussions of the Suez Crisis. In diplomatic terms these amounted initially to the fear of external subversion or internal unrest and following the Iraqi revolution in 1958 the possibility of a direct military threat to Kuwait. Militarily the Middle East air barrier posed a serious problem for the dispatch of reinforcements from Britain. In the short term it became possible to circumvent this to some degree, albeit at great expense, by expanding the facilities in Kenya and later in Aden and the capabilities of Transport Command. The Royal Navy also became far more focused on operations east of Suez in the late 1950s.

By 1960 the intervention plans, involving a brigade group with air and naval support had been honed considerably and these were largely vindicated when British forces were put into Kuwait in July 1961. A number of valuable lessons learned from this operation including the need for stockpiles of equipment and a radar capability in Kuwait. In light of the continued Iraqi threat, delegated authority was given to local commanders to intervene and this was ultimately extended to include attacks on airfields and ground forces in Iraq itself. It was fortunate that a change of government in Iraq in 1963 brought about an improvement in relations since contingency plans were substantially undermined by Kenyan independence and the loss of bases there in 1964. Subsequently a large scale insurgency also forced Britain out of Aden in 1967. While Britain remained dependent on Kuwaiti oil the difficulties in maintaining a balanced intervention force meant that an 'air only' plan was instituted in early 1967. Throughout the whole period under review political sensitivities precluded the presence of meaningful numbers of British forces in Kuwait and while Britain had been able and willing to make a considerable effort for several years by 1966 this was not longer the case. Promises that forces would be maintained in the long term elsewhere in the Gulf were swiftly broken when British announced its withdrawal from the region in 1968. Britain still felt it had important interests in the Gulf when its forces withdrew forty years ago, but the problems of maintaining forces which constituted an effective deterrent coupled with an economic crisis meant it had no choice other than to relinquish its formal defence commitments. It is unsurprising that it has maintained close relations with its former protectorates in terms of political support and the training and equipping of their military forces in the decades which have followed.

Notes

[1] The UK National Archives, Kew [TNA] AIR 38/399, Report No.9/62 'Operation Vantage' by Research Branch, Headquarters Transport Command, January 1962, Preface, 2-5.
[2] TNA PREM 11/3427, Annex to Exchange of Notes regarding Relations between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the State of Kuwait, 19 June 1961.
[3] The Baghdad Pact was signed by Britain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey in 1955 to prevent Soviet infiltration into the Middle East. It was renamed the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1959 when Iraq had withdrew from the organisation.
[4] TNA DEFE 13/307, Memorandum 'United Kingdom Policy in the Arabian Peninsula' by Chiefs of Staff, 9 June 1958.
[5] TNA FO 371/152118, Second revision of planning paper 'Future Policy in the Persian Gulf' by Steering Committee, 3 November 1960.
[6] TNA CAB 21/5901, Appendix to Memorandum 'Future Defence Policy' by Cabinet Secretary, 7 June 1963.
[7] TNA PREM 11/3452, Report 'Kuwait and Middle East Oil' from Chancellor of Exchequer to Prime Minister, 2 August 1961.
[8] TNA CAB 21/5901, Memorandum 'Future Defence Policy' by Cabinet Secretary, 7 June 1963.
[9] TNA PREM 11/3452, Report 'Kuwait and Middle East Oil' from Chancellor of Exchequer to Prime Minister, 2 August 1961.
[10] Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez 1947-1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 89-91.
[11] TNA DEFE 11/77, Report 'Responsibility for the Persian Gulf' by Chiefs of Staff, 30 July 1956.
[12] TNA AIR 8/2109, Brief 'Possible Implications of Operation Musketeer in the Middle East' from Acting Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Policy) to Chief of Air Staff, 21 August 1956.
[13] TNA AIR 8/2109, Brief 'Reinforcement of the Persian Gulf' from Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Policy) to Chief of Air Staff, 17 September 1956.
[14] TNA AIR 8/2109, Extract from minutes of Local Defence Committee (Persian Gulf) meeting, 22 January 1957.
[15] TNA AIR 8/2109, Extract from letter by Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, January 1957.
[16] Ibid.
[17] TNA DEFE 11/77, Telegram from Political Resident, Persian Gulf to Principal Officer, Middle East Forces, 30 August 1956.
[18] TNA DEFE 11/77, Joint Operation Instruction 'Reinforcement of potential centres of unrest in the Persian Gulf' by Chiefs of Staff, 23 August 1956.
[19] TNA DEFE 11/77, Confidential Annex to Chiefs of Staff Committee (56) 85th meeting, 28 August 1956.
[20] TNA DEFE 11/77, Confidential Annex to Chiefs of Staff Committee (56) 86th meeting, 30 August 1956.
[21] TNA DEFE 11/77, Telegram from Political Resident, Persian Gulf to Principal Officer, Middle East Forces, 30 August 1956.
[22] TNA AIR 8/2109, Brief 'Intervention in Kuwait' from Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Policy) to Chief of Air Staff, 29 November 1956.

[23] TNA AIR 8/2109, Note 'Reinforcement of the Persian Gulf' from Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation to Chiefs of Staff Committee, 28 September 1956.
[24] *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, Cmnd 124, April 1957 (London: HMSO, 1960), 5.
[25] Darby, *British Defence Policy*, 180-184.
[26] Darby, *British Defence Policy*, 123-125.
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