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## Imperialism after empire? Britain and Qatar in the aftermath of the withdrawal from East of Suez

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There is growing recognition that the demission of the British Empire in the post-war period did not necessarily equate with the ending of Britain's interests in, and attempts to exercise influence over, its former imperial demesne.<sup>1</sup> This was especially the case in the resource-rich Gulf States which were among the last territories to experience a severing of formal ties with Britain following the so-called withdrawal from 'East of Suez' in 1971.<sup>2</sup> Not only were they a key source of oil, but also a significant and expanding market for British goods and services. The Gulf States' continuing importance to Britain despite formal withdrawal can be incorporated into wider debates about the relevance of the concept of 'informal empire' to the process of British decolonization.

A number of historians of empire have drawn on the work of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson<sup>3</sup> and applied their concept of 'informal empire' – areas of the world that while not under formal British control were nevertheless under Britain's imperial sway – to the process of decolonization. Writing with Ronald Robinson, Wm. Roger Louis has asserted that decolonization by the European imperial powers (principally Britain and France) should be seen as attempts at 'exchanging formal control for informal tutelage.'<sup>4</sup> Extending his analysis, Louis has propounded the notion of the 'imperialism of decolonization', which he defines as the 'reversion to indirect control or influence rather than direct colonial rule.'<sup>5</sup> Relating his interpretation specifically to the Gulf Sheikdoms, Louis contends that 'by dismantling the system of protected states, the formal British presence disappeared, but invisible or informal influence remained.'<sup>6</sup> Referring to the formal ending of Britain's imperial role in the Gulf in 1971, Shohei Sato comments that 'In essence, Britain's goal was to leave in peace and to retain some informal influence after its retreat.'<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Francis Owtram argues that with the demise of formal imperialism, 'efforts turned to securing post-colonial states on the Arabian peninsula conducive to Western and specifically British interests.'<sup>8</sup> In contrast to its generalized failure across the wider Middle East, argues Gregory Barton, 'Britain did hang on successfully in the Persian Gulf, drawing on its long history of informal empire over these small Sheikdoms to achieve the grand aims that failed elsewhere in the region.'<sup>9</sup> Equally, Uzi Rabi, surveying the post-1971 landscape, contends that 'the practical content of the interchange between Britain and the Gulf in all fields exceeds anything that could have been predicted by previous generations.'<sup>10</sup> Focusing in particular on security, Ash Rossiter emphasises the continuities in Britain's relations with the Gulf States that transcended formal British military and political withdrawal from the region.<sup>11</sup> Referring specifically to Qatar, Tancred Bradshaw claims that 'By the late 1970s, Britain maintained a dominant position.'<sup>12</sup>

Tore T. Petersen is equally positive about Britain's ability to preserve its influence in the Gulf after empire, albeit it in conjunction with the United States. Examining Anglo-American policy towards the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula during the Nixon presidency, Petersen presents the

region as 'for practical purposes, an exclusive British and American domain.'<sup>13</sup> He proceeds to stress that the 'Persian Gulf was to all intents and purposes an Anglo-American lake during the Heath and Nixon era' and that the 'Anglo-Americans would brook no outside interference.'<sup>14</sup> Petersen also emphasizes that 'The British, despite liquidating most of its fixed positions in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, successfully made the transition from formal to informal empire in the region.'<sup>15</sup> He goes so far as to suggest not only that 'British influence remained large and almost paramount'<sup>16</sup> in the Gulf, but also 'the retrenchment of the British from the Gulf in 1971 was... more apparent than real.'<sup>17</sup>

An analysis of British relations with the Gulf State of Qatar in the aftermath of Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez casts doubt on some of these assumptions and can be used to challenge the existing historiography. While Britain undoubtedly aspired to maintain as much of its influence and as many of its interests in Qatar as possible after 1971, it found these increasingly challenged by the encroachment of its industrial rivals into the Amirate. What is more, Qatar's growing involvement in the Arab world saw it pursue policies that were sometimes antithetical to British interests. Indeed, the Al-Thani ruling family was reluctant to be seen to be tied too closely to the former protecting power, let alone being perceived as puppets of the British.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the poor performance of British commerce undermined any British pretensions of maintaining an informal empire in Qatar after the withdrawal from East of Suez.

On the eve of Britain's formal departure from the Gulf, the Foreign Secretary's Private Secretary, Ian McCluney, warned: 'Foreign competition in the Gulf States is increasing, and will be given further impetus after 1971 when our major industrial competitors open diplomatic missions in the Lower Gulf.'<sup>19</sup> Ominously, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office observed that the French had been 'going out of their way to flatter' the ego of Qatar's Deputy Ruler, Sheikh Khalifah bin Hamad, during a visit to France in 1970.<sup>20</sup> French cultivation of Sheikh Khalifah was even more threatening to British interests since he was the power behind the throne in Qatar and approved all major commercial projects.<sup>21</sup> The centrality of Khalifah to Qatar's political and commercial life increased still further when he seized power from his hapless cousin, Sheikh Ahmed, on 22 February 1972 and assumed the position of head of state and Amir of Qatar.<sup>22</sup> Although the new ruler had a reputation for being modern and progressive, the British Ambassador in Doha, E. F. Henderson, warned that 'With a man as impetuous and impatient as Khalifah to deal with there is always the danger that some other power might step in to meet his desires where we have considered it imprudent or impractical to do so.'<sup>23</sup> The threat of just such a circumstance was not slow in materializing.

Following a recommendation by the Ministry of Defence that Qatar should purchase a squadron of British-built Jaguar aircraft to allow it to take part in regional defence, Sheikh Khalifah expressed a firm interest in placing an order for six Jaguars, with the option for a further six. The head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Middle East Department, P. R. H. Wright, cautioned that there was a 'serious risk' of France seeking to curry favour by offering French-built Mirage aircraft in place of Jaguars.<sup>24</sup> Wright proceeded to warn that in such a scenario the British stake in the re-equipment the Qatar Security Services, which was estimated to be worth £40 million, would be put in jeopardy.<sup>25</sup> 'With French influence supplanting ours in the Qatar Security Forces', concluded Wright, 'our special relationship with the Al Thani could be rapidly eroded.'<sup>26</sup> The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Sir Alex Douglas-Home, subsequently impressed upon Prime Minister Edward Heath that a refusal to supply Jaguars to Qatar 'might lead the French to steal a march on us in the defence equipment market.'<sup>27</sup> Douglas-Home's intervention proved decisive, Heath readily consenting to the sale of Jaguars.<sup>28</sup> In the wake of this decision, Henderson reported that he had had a 'most wonderful' interview with Sheikh Khalifah in which the latter 'launched forth on a very extensive and detailed peroration praising HMG and all their works and promising to buy everything he possibly could from "England", provided only that we make it.'<sup>29</sup> This proviso was particularly significant given Henderson's recognition with respect to Qatar's consumer market that 'several

of our firms are making a weak showing and many none at all.<sup>30</sup> In the event of Britain's major exporting firms failing to identify Qatar as a 'worthwhile market', warned Henderson, 'the French, Japanese and others will take our place.'<sup>31</sup> Certainly, Sheikh Khalifah was being subjected to what Henderson described as 'strong French pressure' to buy military hardware and co-operate on industrial projects in Qatar.<sup>32</sup>

In June 1973, J. R. Young, an official in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Middle East Department, confessed that 'we cannot regard Qatar as a "chasse gardée" any longer and while many firms have adapted to the new situation, we must expect that some will sink now that the flood gates have been opened.'<sup>33</sup> At the end of the year, Henderson admitted: 'I am very anxious about the French influence here which is increasing and I fear will increase a great deal more at our expense. The Amir's eyes almost sparkle when he mentions them nowadays.'<sup>34</sup> Reflecting a few months earlier on the changed atmosphere in which Britain was operating, P. R. H. Wright noted: 'Our relationship with Qatar sometimes reminds me of a game of snakes and ladders in which the ladders are horizontal and the snakes all too numerous.'<sup>35</sup> Qatar's growing ability to imperil British interests was underlined by mounting pressures on the Amirate from within the Arab world.

In May 1973, the Joint Intelligence Committee predicted 'Growing oil revenues may tempt some producer countries to use the interruption of oil supplies as a political weapon.'<sup>36</sup> Ostensibly, however, Sheikh Khalifah adopted a moderate approach to oil affairs. Giving his views on the legitimacy of using oil as a weapon in the ongoing conflict with Israel to a *Daily Express* reporter in June 1973, Khalifah opined, 'oil was trade and he did not wish to mix this with politics.'<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, he admitted that if the Arab League or the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) stipulated that all members took a particular position, 'of course he would go along with it.'<sup>38</sup> Even more ominously, Khalifah pointed out that 'He would never go against the wishes of Arab countries as a whole.'<sup>39</sup> In mid-September 1973, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office cautioned that if Saudi Arabia decided to cut back production or boycott certain oil-consuming countries, Qatar would be 'under strong pressure to follow suit.'<sup>40</sup> During Anglo-American talks held in Washington later the same month, Brooks Wrampelmeir of the State Department's Office of Arabian Affairs remarked upon Saudi Arabia's 'growing oil revenues and increasing realization of the power of the oil weapon.'<sup>41</sup> The Saudi monarch, King Feisal, had already promised to wield the oil weapon if Egypt went to war with Israel,<sup>42</sup> recapitulating this pledge shortly after Egyptian (and Syrian) forces had launched a major offensive against the Israelis on 6 October 1973.<sup>43</sup> Meeting in Kuwait on 17 October, a conference of Arab oil ministers resolved to reduce production by a recurrent monthly rate of 5 per cent from September levels 'until such time as total evacuation of Israeli forces from all Arab territory occupied during the June 1967 war is completed, and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people are restored.'<sup>44</sup> This served to exacerbate the damage to Western industrial economies wrought by news on the previous day that OPEC would be increasing the posted price of oil by 70 per cent.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of Sheikh Khalifah's seemingly moderate stance, Henderson accurately predicted that 'as in the past Qatar will tend to follow the example of Saudi Arabia and they will also be more afraid of appearing out of line with the Arabs than of upsetting their friends.'<sup>46</sup> Referring to the use of the oil weapon, Sheikh Khalifah himself impressed upon Henderson that, while he was being as 'gentle as possible', he could 'not step too far out of line.'<sup>47</sup> While Khalifah distanced himself from the use of the oil weapon in private, Henderson pointed out that 'the Qatar government is not going to say anything on the record which is far out of line with Arab thinking.'<sup>48</sup> The steep rise in oil prices exacerbated Britain's trade deficit which reached the record monthly level of £383 million by February 1974, prompting the financier, Siegmund Warburg, to maintain that Britain was facing the 'most serious economic crisis in its history.'<sup>49</sup>

The inability of Britain to influence former imperial charges such as Qatar to step out of line with Arab oil policies, despite Sheikh Khalifah's scepticism towards mixing oil with politics, underscored the sea change in Anglo-Qatari relations which had occurred since 1971. Indeed,

Qatar's participation in the unsheathing of the oil weapon casts doubt on Shohei Sato's claim that the process of decolonization in the Gulf 'entailed only a rearrangement of the collaborative relationship' stemming from imperial times.<sup>50</sup> By contrast with this interpretation, the example of Qatar suggests that the transition from empire to independence was a more profound and far-reaching one which entailed not only the termination of Britain's largely exclusive role in the Gulf States, but also its ability to shape their policies in accordance with British interests. Indeed, the degree to which emerging states such as Qatar were subjected to new pressures and influences was one of the principal lessons for the Gulf of the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict and the subsequent wielding of the oil weapon in pursuit of Arab objectives beyond national boundaries. The flaws and weaknesses of British commerce in the Gulf merely served to emphasize the dilution of Britain's position, and the imperilling of its interests, in the region.

Henderson was particularly critical of the approach of some British enterprises operating in Qatar arguing that they seemed be 'politically deaf and dumb' and were failing to 'make their faces fit'.<sup>51</sup> 'Firms enter contracts which will cover long periods and involve tens of millions of pounds and still not engage a single Arab-speaking member of their management staff,' he expatiated.<sup>52</sup> The Ambassador reserved especial opprobrium for the British company, Power Gas, which was not merely over five months late in delivering on a £25 million Natural Gas Liquids plant contract, but also over eighteen months late in bringing to fruition a £28 million contract for a fertilizer plant.<sup>53</sup> 'Leaving aside problems of late delivery of materials which are common to British industry,' fulminated Henderson, 'the Power Gas team have lacked sufficiently competent middle management both on site and in London. Their failure has damaged our reputation severely in this small but important market.'<sup>54</sup> The consequences of this were soon to become apparent.

In 1974, Sheikh Khalifah sought tenders for a steel plant in Qatar, informing Henderson that not only was the Japanese bid to construct a steel plant 'a very strong one',<sup>55</sup> but also Tokyo was 'strongly behind' the proposal and wished to make it a 'government to government affair'.<sup>56</sup> By the beginning of July, Henderson reported that the contract had been awarded to the Japanese firm, Kobe Steel. Ruminating on British Steel's failure to secure the contract, the Ambassador noted that the legacy of Power Gas' eighteen-month delay in completing the fertiliser plant had 'weighed very heavily with the Amir against another big British project at this moment'.<sup>57</sup> More worryingly still, Henderson pointed out that although 'in the old days our special position gave us an enormous advantage... we cannot use our historical influence to offset high prices nor will it offset major weaknesses such as the appearance of a company which is made up of separate parts whose managers are not even in agreement when proposals are made'.<sup>58</sup> Towards the end of August 1974, Henderson baldly stated: 'We have had a bad summer, either by letting things go by default to the Japanese or the French or losing contracts through pricing our goods too high.'<sup>59</sup> Earlier in the year, A. D. Harris of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Middle East Department conceded that 'We cannot rely on goodwill to maintain our place in Qatar'.<sup>60</sup> This was underlined by the Treasury Deputy Secretary, F. R. Barratt's, visit to Qatar in February 1975. Although he discovered a 'great desire to buy from the UK', Barratt identified problems with British firms' marketing and delivery dates which he contrasted with those of their German competitors in particular.<sup>61</sup>

In his annual report for 1974, Henderson's successor as British Ambassador in Doha, D. G. Crawford, recorded that Britain had lost its position as the leading exporter to Qatar, Japan having secured some 17 per cent of the Qatari market compared with Britain's 15 per cent.<sup>62</sup> This picture differed markedly from the one just three years earlier when Britain had supplied 37 per cent of Qatar's imports.<sup>63</sup> The growth in competition, coupled with what Sheikh Khalifah described as 'the slowness of British industry to accept his invitations to take part in the development and industrialisation of Qatar',<sup>64</sup> were largely responsible for Britain's precipitate fall in the Qatari marketplace. Equally, Britain's more-or-less exclusive influence in Qatar before 1971 was increasingly challenged by its industrial competitors, France, Japan, Germany, and the United

States all opening diplomatic missions in Doha in the course of 1974.<sup>65</sup> While Britain's relations with Qatar had remained cordial, mused Richard Kinchen of the FCO's Middle East Department, they had become a 'degree or two less special' as Qatar's foreign relations had become 'more diverse.'<sup>66</sup> Such diversity undermined any notion that Britain could sustain an informal imperial relationship with Qatar after 1971.

A conscious attempt to revitalize British economic fortunes in Qatar was undertaken at the beginning of 1975 with separate visits to the Amirate by F. R. Barratt of the Treasury and the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, David Ennals. Sheikh Khalifah readily informed Barratt that he welcomed 'impartial developmental advice from the UK,'<sup>67</sup> while also expressing support for joint UK-Qatar enterprises during his talks with Ennals.<sup>68</sup> Unsurprisingly, when Qatar's Minister of Finance and Petroleum, Sheikh Abdul Aziz floated the idea of a joint Anglo-Qatari Committee to make proposals for cooperation between the two countries,<sup>69</sup> it was enthusiastically embraced by Britain. In London on 1 August 1975, the Agreement on Cooperation establishing the Anglo-Qatari Committee was initialled by Sheikh Abdul Aziz and the Secretary of State for Trade, Peter Shore.<sup>70</sup> The Committee sought to pave the way for cooperation between the two countries in industry, agriculture, and the exchange of experts.<sup>71</sup>

Britain's push to improve its commercial standing in Qatar was reflected in trade figures which for the eight months to October 1975 indicated that Britain had restored its leading position in the Qatari marketplace, pushing the United States and Japan into second and third places respectively. Despite, the apparent revival in Britain's economic fortunes in Qatar, Crawford drew attention to the fact that, with the exception of a £30 million desalination plant secured by Weir Westgarth, no other major contracts had been won by British companies, the growth in exports being due principally to the endeavours of more traditional suppliers of manufactured goods and a number of smaller and medium-sized firms, some of which had tapped into the Qatari market for the first time. Crawford was especially critical of the electronics, communications, and engineering giant, GEC, depicting it as "sluggish" and not prepared to take an aggressive approach to large contracts invariably preferring caution to risk taking.<sup>72</sup> What is more, he remarked that GEC's negotiations for a new power station at Umm Said and Taylor Woodrow's proposals for industrialized building did not represent the 'breakthrough both the Amir and we are looking for allowing our mutual cooperation to compare favourably with the major projects on which the Japanese and French are now engaged.'<sup>73</sup>

From the British perspective, furthermore, the results of the Anglo-Qatari Cooperation Agreement were disappointing. Shortly after the initialling of the agreement, Airwork Limited, a British company which provided specialized defence support services, lost its contract with the Qatar Armed Forces.<sup>74</sup> Crawford observed at the beginning of 1976 that not merely had Qatar's 'traditional preference' for British goods and services waned, but equipment from Britain's industrial rivals, especially Japan, was 'pouring in.'<sup>75</sup> He went on to predict that the Japanese would become 'the market leaders here and the predominant contractors,'<sup>76</sup> while Sheikh Khalifah himself had already remarked upon the failure of British industry to share adequately in the development of his country.<sup>77</sup>

In June 1976, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade, Michael Meacher, journeyed to Doha to sign the Anglo-Qatari Cooperation Agreement on behalf of the British government. Meacher's visit came in the wake of mounting economic gloom in Britain caused by an unstable exchange rate, a decline in the reserves, and poor competitiveness.<sup>78</sup> On the eve of Meacher's departure, Crawford observed that 'The United Kingdom press is regularly read or quoted in Qatar and Qataris have numerous British business contacts both here and in London. These sources continue to utter a gloomy prognostication on Britain's economic future tending to make this Embassy a lonely optimistic voice.'<sup>79</sup> Meacher himself sampled at first hand the manifold complaints about British business in Qatar, ranging from the late, or inadequate, delivery of goods in demand in the Qatari market to the supply of unsuitable products such as non-air-conditioned cars.<sup>80</sup> A business seminar held at the British Embassy during Meacher's

visit underlined that while figures for 1975 had shown that Britain remained the largest single supplier of goods to Qatar, it should have 'won by several lengths instead of only by a head.'<sup>81</sup> Indeed, British enterprise failed to capitalize fully on the inherent advantages which it enjoyed, not least Sheikh Khalifah's declared 'preference for British goods and for cooperation with British industry.'<sup>82</sup> Khalifah's favourable attitude towards Britain notwithstanding, Henderson had earlier warned that 'This built-in advantage will only continue if we are successful in stimulating British companies to take an interest in this small but growing market and in keeping those companies which are here up to the mark.'<sup>83</sup>

Following his visit to Qatar, Meacher lamented that 'British companies were not being as successful as they might expect in securing the large contracts for major public works projects and heavy industry.'<sup>84</sup> Although Sheikh Khalifah informed Meacher that he wanted to see the United Kingdom becoming the 'leading trading nation, replacing the Japanese',<sup>85</sup> a slowing down of Qatar's development plans from early 1977 equated with reduced opportunities for British commercial interests, not least because contracts for the principal industrial projects had already gone to the Japanese and other foreign competitors.<sup>86</sup> To make matters worse, Khalifah named his son, Sheikh Hamad, crown prince in 1977. Although a graduate of Sandhurst and an ostensible admirer of Britain, Hamad launched a diatribe during a demonstration of the British-manufactured Blindfire air defence system in July 1977, proclaiming that 'all Englishmen hated Arabs and that he and his fellow countrymen respected the way in which President [Idi] Amin had dealt with the British in Uganda.'<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, an opportunity to reinforce British relations with Sheikh Khalifah was provided by his visit to Britain in the autumn of 1977.

Bearing in mind that Qatar remained the fifth most important supplier of oil to Britain and a significant market for British exports, the head of the FCO's Middle East Department, Ivor Lucas, emphasized that a meeting between Khalifah and Prime Minister James Callaghan would serve to promote British interests in the Amirate which were threatened by the encroachment of Britain's industrial competitors, not least the French in arms sales.<sup>88</sup> Lucas also posited that a meeting with the Prime Minister offered the prospect of counteracting Khalifah's doubts about whether the importance he attached to links with Britain were reciprocated, a question he had raised in a previous meeting with Callaghan in Doha two years earlier.<sup>89</sup>

FCO arguments, exemplified by Lucas, proved persuasive, Callaghan agreeing to meet Khalifah at 10 Downing Street on 1 November 1977. From the British perspective, the encounter did not prove entirely satisfactory and certainly did not represent the breakthrough in re-establishing British interests in Qatar that Lucas and his FCO colleagues had hoped for. Although Callaghan vouchsafed his 'friendship and support', in addition to conveying his hope that British commerce would be given the opportunity to participate in Qatar's development, Khalifah pointed out that 'the Japanese were proving very strong competitors with the Europeans in the Arabian Gulf.'<sup>90</sup> The Amir also highlighted what he characterised as 'misconduct' by British consultants in Qatar, referring especially to 'serious errors' made concerning a water distillation project which had led to a 'great deal of expense.'<sup>91</sup> Although Callaghan offered personally to look into the complaint, Khalifah confessed that the incident had 'given rise to doubts about the competence of British firms.'<sup>92</sup>

Shortly after Khalifah's visit, Crawford pointed out that, while Britain maintained an 'influential, but unobtrusive, position' in Qatar, its industrial competitors were making 'significant inroads' into the Qatari market.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, Crawford's successor, C. T. Brant, was notably upbeat, indicating that Britain enjoyed three 'trump cards' in its commercial relations with Qatar.<sup>94</sup> First, Brant noted that historical links with Britain had 'accustomed the older generation of Qataris to doing business with us.'<sup>95</sup> In addition, he emphasized that, deriving from these associations and Qatar's newfound wealth, a British community had developed 'of serious, respected and highly competent company representatives and expatriate British professional men and businessmen, guiding and advising the inexperienced Qataris in almost every field.'<sup>96</sup> Finally, Brant recorded that 'the combination of history and experience seems to have induced in the Qataris

a feeling of affinity with Britain and the British which defies analysis.<sup>97</sup> To give substance to his positive assessment, the Ambassador reported that Britain's visible sales to Qatar had risen from £7.5 million in 1970 to £116 million by 1977.<sup>98</sup>

A more sobering picture was painted by P. J. Parramore of the FCO's Middle East Department who stressed that 'over the last few years we have lost first place to Japan in Qatar's import market (we stand at 17% against their 29%) despite all that we have going for us.'<sup>99</sup> While lamenting Britain's demise as Qatar's principal supplier, Ivor Lucas expressed hope that the close ties between the two countries in terms of history, language, goodwill, and mutual trust could be used to increase Britain's share of the lucrative Qatari market.<sup>100</sup> Lucas' optimism seemed to be confirmed in February 1979 when Britain restored its position as the principal exporter to Qatar. Seeking to explain this apparent reversal in fortunes, Brant observed:

British firms selling here enjoy advantages and assistance from the basic strength of our relations with Qatar. In turn, that strength derives from our historic ties with this small country, the support given to the Amir and his Government by the policies of HM Government, and the vital role of members of the British community in Qatar's national life.<sup>101</sup>

The improvement in Britain's trading position proved ephemeral, however. By March 1979, it had slipped back to third place as a result of sizeable Qatari repayments to Japanese and German companies for generating equipment.<sup>102</sup> The level of competition which Britain faced from its industrial competitors was highlighted in mid-1979 by the awarding of contracts for the construction of a new university, and for the completion of the Sheraton Hotel and Conference Centre, to Japanese and Korean firms respectively.<sup>103</sup> The joint Anglo-Qatari Committee, moreover, did not provide a panacea for promoting British interests.

Established under the Co-operation Agreement with Qatar in June 1976, the Committee offered the prospect of joint ventures in the development of light industry, the training of personnel, and the provision of experts. The first formal meeting was held in Doha in January 1977. While a second was due to have taken place the following year, it became entangled with a short visit to the United Kingdom by Sheikh Abdul Aziz, who, as we have already seen, had played a key role in setting up the Anglo-Qatari Committee. Following a number of postponements, Abdul Aziz's visit, along with the second Committee meeting itself, were cancelled.<sup>104</sup> Reflecting on the failure of the meeting to take place, Brant noted: 'the whole project foundered on Abdul Aziz's insistence on being met by someone of a least equal rank in our hierarchy.'<sup>105</sup> Despite the slow start made by the Committee, the Department of Trade in Whitehall rebuffed any idea of Britain taking the initiative in winding it up on the grounds that such action risked damaging Anglo-Qatari relations, not least because Sheikh Khalifah himself had supported its creation.<sup>106</sup> The British Council, established in Doha under a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1971, proved a more successful instrument for the preservation and enhancement of British interests in Qatar.

In an effort to counteract what Henderson identified as the 'Egyptianisation of the Department of Education, especially on the English language teaching side',<sup>107</sup> the British Council sought to increase Council-trained teachers, prompting Henderson to remark: 'They are making a strong impact on the teaching of English in Doha through the secondary and primary schools.'<sup>108</sup> In his annual report for 1974-5, the British Council's director for Qatar, M. R. W. Dexter, felt able to declare that it was 'now definitely part of the general scene in Doha and enjoys the most cordial relations with the Government and with wide sectors of the Qatari, and multinational, general public.'<sup>109</sup> Dexter's successor, W. H. Jefferson, observed that the recruitment of teachers had contributed to what he defined as the Council's 'special relationship' with the Qatari Ministry of Education.<sup>110</sup> He also drew attention to an agreement concluded at the beginning of 1977 between the Ministry of Education and the Council 'paving the way to future cooperation in training, exchange of persons, technology and recruitment.'<sup>111</sup>

On the eve of the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration in May 1979, the British Council congratulated itself on enjoying a position of 'immense influence' in English language training in Qatar and being 'respected in all areas of government.'<sup>112</sup> Evidence of this was not slow in materializing. In response to the Thatcher government's decision that the British Council would have to make savings of some £3 million for the financial year 1980-1, the Qatari Minister of Education, Sheikh Mohammed bin Hammad al-Thani, impressed upon his British counterpart, Mark Carlisle, that 'every effort be made to maintain the Council's operation in Qatar at its present level of activity.'<sup>113</sup> Demonstrating his commitment to the perpetuation of the Council's activities in Qatar, Sheikh Mohammed arranged for annual rent for its offices in Doha to be covered by the Qatari government.<sup>114</sup> Reviewing Anglo-Qatari relations in 1980, nonetheless, the British Council itself remarked: 'While a special relationship with Britain continues, Qatar has made efforts since independence in 1971 to widen its circle of non-Arab friends, and the visit earlier this year of the French President with an entourage of four ministers can be seen as part of that process. Most of the new industrial projects are in non-British hands.'<sup>115</sup>

In keeping with the British Council's observations, the French in particular began to encroach on Britain's former exclusive role in Qatar, symbolized by the creation of a Franco-Qatari Commission and the fielding of senior French ministers to attend its meetings.<sup>116</sup> France's growing involvement in Qatar was reinforced by the opening in May 1979 of a Franco-Qatari petrochemical plant in Dunkirk. To make matters worse for Britain, the project had been taken up by the French after the British firm, ICI, having vacillated for two years following the Qataris' initial approach, had turned them down with what Brant described as a 'terse two page letter.'<sup>117</sup> More damaging still, Brant recorded that the Amir had 'always held it against us since then that "Britain would not help us".'<sup>118</sup>

While Britain's stock in Qatar was declining that of France was on the rise. Despite the fact that Sheikh Khalifah was reported to be a 'fervent admirer' of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, describing her government as 'in a class of its own',<sup>119</sup> this did little to stem growing French involvement in Qatar. From his vantage point in Doha, Brant cautioned that the ostensibly positive state of Anglo-Qatari relations following the election of the Thatcher government 'must not blind us to the fact that the French are making rapid strides, particularly among the younger Al Thani (including Shaikh Hamad, the Heir Apparent, and his two brothers) and the Armed forces.'<sup>120</sup> The prescience of Brant's observation was demonstrated by the Qatari Air Force's order for six French Alpha-Jet advanced trainer/ground attack aircraft to replace its increasingly obsolete fleet of British-built Hunter aircraft. British Aerospace quoted delivery times of 24 months from the signing of contracts for its alternative, the Hawk trainer. By comparison, the French, whom Brant accused of possessing 'fewer scruples about retrieving aircraft and equipment from their own armed forces for sale abroad', offered delivery times of between six and twelve months which was also central to their success.<sup>121</sup>

France's sales drive in the Gulf was exemplified by the high-profile visit of French President Valerie Giscard D'Estaing to the region in March 1980. Even before Giscard's arrival, Brant confessed: 'Clearly the wall has been breached by the French in a big way.... With President Giscard's visit coming up, they will be riding the crest of a wave, and will doubtless exploit this situation to the full.'<sup>122</sup> Brant's prediction was borne out by the plethora of agreements that resulted from Giscard's tour of the Gulf covering a whole host of areas including energy development, as well as co-operation in environmental, industrial, cultural, and agricultural matters.<sup>123</sup> The rise in France's standing in Qatar was specifically underlined by heir apparent Sheikh Hamad who made the observation to Brant that 'for the first time ever, the Qataris felt themselves to be in close relations with the French as a result of Giscard's visit here.'<sup>124</sup>

In the wake of Giscard's Gulf odyssey, Brant observed: 'On the commercial front, I was left in no doubt of the French Government's hopes and intentions of seeing French industry and commerce expand here – even if such operations were described as "a matter for the

companies”<sup>125</sup> In a similar vein, K. J. Passmore of the FCO’s Middle East Department mused: ‘the French have made no secret that they wish to rival our position, in the linguistic and cultural as well as the commercial fields.’<sup>126</sup> With respect to arms sales, Passmore noted that the French had made ‘good progress at our expense, not only because their delivery times are better and their arms are more suited to what many Gulf shaikhs (rather than their military advisers) think they need, but also because of the good relations established at the highest level. This is particularly true of Qatar and the UAE (Abu Dhabi).’<sup>127</sup> The head of the FCO’s Middle East Department, H. D. A. C. Miers, agreed that ‘we can expect the French to reinforce their successes at our expense in the field of defence sales amongst others. They are undoubtedly trying hard, and with the advantage of good “fixers” and sales technique they can be expected to follow up determinedly.’<sup>128</sup> Referring to the defence field, Brant went so far as to remark: ‘In the course of time, with the Qataris having established a French language training school of a size equal to the English language training school, it may be increasingly difficult for us to break in here on the basis of longstanding ties as well as excellent quality.’<sup>129</sup> As an indication of Britain’s changed position in the Gulf in general and Qatar in particular, Brant also conceded: ‘while the French are so clearly set on such spoiling tactics, with the aim of profiting at our expense, there seems to be little we can do except keep our end up as far as possible.’<sup>130</sup>

In his annual review for 1980, Brant made a point of observing that the French had made a ‘major effort this year to achieve a substantial position in Qatar in all fields – political, industrial and military.’<sup>131</sup> Referring specifically to defence sales, Brant remarked: ‘we were undercut by the advantages which the French enjoy: manufacturing arms specifically for export, and the ability to offer quicker deliveries and lower prices.’<sup>132</sup> ‘The combination’, he conceded, ‘proved irresistible here.’<sup>133</sup> Following a visit to Qatar in October 1980, the Director of the UK’s Military Assistance Office, Major General K. Perkins, had already reported that ‘The French have beaten us so far in terms of defence sales.’<sup>134</sup> Perkins’ observations were supported by Brant who noted at the end of the year that, in defence sales, the French had achieved a ‘near monopoly.’<sup>135</sup>

Ruminating on the reasons for this development, Brant remarked that it was the French, rather than the British, who were able to meet Qatari needs, citing as an example the decision in September 1980 to purchase 12 French-made Mirage aircraft which satisfied Qatar’s requirement for a supersonic interceptor to protect its airspace.<sup>136</sup> By contrast, the British alternatives – the Harrier, the Jaguar, and the Tornado – were seen as unsuited to this role. Even where Britain was in a position to compete, added Brant, ‘we were up against “France Incorporated”, and especially the close Government-Industry co-ordination orchestrated in support of defence sales.’<sup>137</sup> The support given by the British government for defence sales in Qatar, Brant candidly admitted, could ‘hardly be described as overwhelming.’<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, the Ambassador underscored that the French had ‘somehow or other been able to beat us substantially on prices and delivery dates for their weapons systems.’<sup>139</sup> Summing up British shortcomings in defence sales in Qatar, Brant commented:

the sales methods and representations of major British firms are distinctly poor when compared with the show which the French put on when they are after an order. The French firms, when called for negotiations with GHQ here, send out a team of 20, including directors armed with sufficient authority to take major decisions on the spot, (and a hired Lebanese TV “personality” to do the presentation in Arabic!). By contrast... our own people seem pretty low-level and low calibre – even bucolic.<sup>140</sup>

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980, however, presented Britain with an opportunity to rebuild defence relations with Qatar.

In the wake of the onset of hostilities, Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the FCO, J. C. Moberly, was sent to the Gulf for urgent consultations. The Qatari Heir Apparent, Sheikh Hamad, who, as already noted, had had a palpably strained relationship with Britain, conveyed his ‘grave concern about the vulnerability of Qatar, like the other smaller states in the Gulf, in the light of Iranian threat to take action against them should they be perceived as helping Iraq.’<sup>141</sup>

Moreover, he also came across as being 'anxious to establish an understanding with Britain about the reaction to any attack', pointing out that 'it would be too late ... to concert measures after the event.'<sup>142</sup> Sheikh Hamad also informed Major General Perkins, who toured the Gulf shortly after Moberly, that while he did not wish to become involved in 'overt Western military assistance' for fear of prejudicing Qatar's status, he did feel that Britain could help in a 'covert manner.'<sup>143</sup> More specifically, he requested that Britain carry out a 'strategic survey' to cover all aspects of Qatar's armed services, which Perkins himself agreed to lead. Bearing in mind British Aerospace's efforts to sell its Rapier air defence system to Qatar, Perkins asserted that his report would point to the Qataris' 'glaring deficiency' in air defence which, he prophesied, 'should surely ease the way for a deal to be concluded on Rapier.'<sup>144</sup> While recognizing that the French had 'beaten us so far in terms of defence sales', Perkins confidently predicted that the proposed comprehensive review of Qatar's armed services would 'maintain our influence and also help future sales.'<sup>145</sup> Although Brant insisted that Britain had an 'excellent and unrepeatable opportunity' to press the sale of Rapier in Qatar,<sup>146</sup> it took the visit of Margaret Thatcher to the Gulf in 1981 before the deal was finally concluded.

In its brief for Thatcher's visit to the region in April 1981, the first by a sitting British Prime Minister, the FCO stressed that 'The Gulf is an area where British influence was once paramount but where an initiative of this kind is now necessary to maintain our position and in particular to counteract efforts which our competitors, especially the French, have been making at our expense to secure influence and large contracts.'<sup>147</sup> 'The principal aim of the visit', explained the FCO 'should be to proclaim our determination to maintain a continuing and vigorous interest in the Gulf.'<sup>148</sup> Despite this invocation, Qatar was not initially included in the Prime Minister's itinerary. Unsurprisingly, the FCO subsequently made a strong case for its incorporation. In a missive to Thatcher's Assistant Private Secretary, Michael Alexander, the Foreign Secretary's Assistant Private Secretary, F. N. Richards, emphasized that 'A visit by the Prime Minister in April would be an extremely important boost to our effort against determined French competition.'<sup>149</sup> He subsequently provided Alexander with details of potential contracts, including the development of Qatar's North-West Dome Gas Field (worth up to £2 billion), a new power station valued at £300 million plus a further £300 million in associated contracts, as well as Qatar's air defence system. In a final appeal Richards pointed out that 'These are all the sort of major projects on which our commercial competitors ... are often able to bring extra-commercial pressures to bear, and where support from the Prime Minister at the right time and after due preparation could tilt the balance.'<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the head of the FCO's Middle East Department, H. D. A. C. Miers, posited that Qatar was 'at least as deserving of Prime Ministerial intervention in favour of British interests as the UAE, which she is already committed to visiting.'<sup>151</sup>

In many respects the FCO was preaching to the converted, Thatcher having already impressed upon Sheikh Khalifah in January 1981 that 'We remain ready to co-operate with you as effectively as we can in the fields of defence and security, by training and equipping your armed forces.'<sup>152</sup> Unsurprisingly, the British Embassy in Doha was informed at the beginning of February that the Prime Minister was willing to include Qatar in her itinerary bearing in mind that by April 'the time may well then be ripe to give high-level political support to British firms bidding for important commercial and defence contracts.'<sup>153</sup> Margaret Thatcher herself subsequently issued instructions to Whitehall Departments 'To continue to seek as a matter of high priority to increase the present level of overseas defence sales.'<sup>154</sup> The Prime Minister's incorporation of Qatar into her visit to the Gulf provided an opportunity to pursue this objective.

In the course of discussions with Sheikh Khalifah on 25 April, Thatcher emphasized that Britain was 'very anxious' to supply Rapier to Qatar, describing it as a 'unique air defence system' which had already been sold to a number of countries including the United States and Switzerland.<sup>155</sup> She proceeded to stress the growing competitiveness of British industry and improvements in delivery times. Putting her personal authority behind the deal, Thatcher vouchsafed that any subsequent problems or complaints would be dealt with directly by her office.<sup>156</sup>

Sheikh Khalifah subsequently assured Thatcher that there would be 'no difficulty about the Rapier contract. It would certainly be given to Britain.'<sup>157</sup> Khalifah's assurance was reiterated by the Qatari heir-apparent, Sheikh Hamad, who expressly told Thatcher that Britain would be awarded the Rapier contract.<sup>158</sup>

Thatcher's high-profile advocacy notwithstanding, H. D. A. C. Miers pointed out that the Prime Minister's advocacy of Rapier missiles appeared merely to have 'confirmed a sale that was coming our way anyway.'<sup>159</sup> Evidence for this is provided by Sheikh Khalifah's intimation to Defence Secretary John Nott, during the latter's visit to Qatar in March 1981, that 'the way was open' for Britain to negotiate a successful deal over Rapier.<sup>160</sup> While paying tribute to the 'massive political support brought to bear on the project since last Summer', Brant drew attention to the part played by external events in securing the Rapier contract, not least the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War and that the Israeli attack on the Iraqi Osirak reactor on 7 June 1981, which, according to Brant, had 'concentrated the Qataris' mind wonderfully.'<sup>161</sup> Although the value of the order was £71.3 million, Brant expressed some disappointment that the Qataris only agreed to buy one battery, whereas it had originally been hoped that they would purchase three.<sup>162</sup> Further disappointing news came in August 1981 when it emerged that the German firm Fichtner had won the contract to construct the Ras Laffan Power Station in Qatar<sup>163</sup> despite Thatcher having appealed to Sheikh Khalifah to 'review favourably British bids' during her visit to the Amirate in April.<sup>164</sup> D. F. B. Edye of the British Embassy in Qatar mused that

this decision by the Amir would seem to represent a fairly major reverse for our commercial effort here and a chastening indication of the limited extent for which our influence and interests count in a matter of this sort. This conclusion would seem particularly valid given that the British firms received the maximum support possible through the Prime Minister's personal intervention on their behalf during her recent visit to Qatar.<sup>165</sup>

The three-month delay in announcing the award of the contract to Fichtner following Thatcher's visit was perceived by Edye as an attempt by Sheikh Khalifah to 'make his seeming disregard for her *démarche* and for British interests less apparent.'<sup>166</sup> In his annual review for 1981, the new British Ambassador to Qatar, Stephen Day, recorded his disappointment that Britain's share of large orders, particularly in power generation and desalination, had 'slumped badly.'<sup>167</sup> Indeed, despite the inclusion of Qatar into the Prime Minister's itinerary, the commercial results were relatively meagre. As Brant had admitted in the immediate aftermath of Thatcher's visit in April 1981:

this is a continuing battle, and the millennium has by no means arrived. We still have to work for every inch of ground, with sustained and intelligent salesmanship, backed by competitive prices and delivery dates. All too often in the recent past here, we have seen worthwhile contracts slip through our firms' fingers for lack of such salesmanship, so that first-class British products have gone down before second-class competitors' products, because the latter were sold more vigorously and plausibly.<sup>168</sup>

Although Thatcher's historic trip to the Gulf was designed to embody a renewal of Britain's commitment to the region, the example of Qatar served to underline the degree to which its position had been undermined since 1971. As Brant observed in May 1981: 'the Qataris are a shrewd bunch, who can always be relied on to make the best bargain they can for themselves and their projects. The Amir and his advisers maintain (sometimes truthfully) that they would prefer to buy from the UK. But the world is now their oyster, and the competition here is intense.'<sup>169</sup> Although Henderson had argued in 1974 that 'at all points in the Government and in the business community I think we have even better relations after independence than we had before',<sup>170</sup> this did not necessarily translate itself into the maintenance of Britain's tangible interests in the face of growing competition from its commercial competitors after 1971. As early as 1975, Henderson's successor, D. G. Crawford, had noted that 'statistics reflect Qatar's increasing ability and intention to shop around all the Western industrial countries for her requirements.'<sup>171</sup> Indeed, following the withdrawal from East of Suez, Britain's exclusive role in

Qatar was significantly undermined by the infiltration of its industrial rivals into the Qatari market place. The Qataris also sought, as Brant pointed out, 'to reap the political benefits which could be obtained from spreading the favours of their contracts more widely.'<sup>172</sup> Britain's former exclusive position in Qatar, moreover, was further eroded by the growing intrusion of the Arab world into the Amirate. This was highlighted by Qatar's participation in the use of the oil weapon at the time of the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict despite Sheikh Khalifah's evident reluctance to do so. Furthermore, the relative weakness of the British economy in the 1970s, which manifested itself in a lack of competitiveness, poor delivery times, and, in some instances, a lack of entrepreneurship, militated still further against the preservation of British influence and interests, let alone the establishment of an informal imperial relationship with Qatar. This was simply unrealistic in the face of British economic weakness, fierce competition from Britain's industrial rivals, and the encroachment of the Arab world into the affairs of Qatar.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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122. Letter from Brant to W. J. Jones (Ministry of Defence), 27 Jan. 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3674.
123. Letter from S. J. G. Cambridge to Miers, 3 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3447; Letter from Colin Brant to Carrington, 10 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3447; Charles Hargrove. 'Giscard visit leads to closer Franco-Qatar industrial links', *Times*, 7 March 1980, <http://find.galegroup.com/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=uni-hull&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=CS118195815&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0> (accessed 7 Dec. 2016).
124. Letter from Brant to Miers, 24 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3671.
125. Letter from Brant to Miers, 15 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3447.
126. 'Gulf tour of President Giscard d'Estaing', Minute by Passmore, 18 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3447.
127. Ibid.
128. Letter from Miers to Brant, 21 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/ 3447.
129. Letter from Brant to Miers, 17 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3673.
130. Letter from Miers to Brant, 21 March 1980, TNA, FCO 8/ 3447.
131. Letter from Brant to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 8 Jan. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/4107.
132. Ibid.
133. Ibid.
134. 'Visit DMAO to Qatar 28–29 October 1980', Minute by Perkins, 3 Nov. 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3670.
135. Letter from Brant to P. H. Moberly, 11 November 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3674.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid.
138. Ibid.
139. Ibid.
140. Ibid.
141. Telegram from Doha to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, No. 145, 11 Oct. 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3453.
142. Ibid.
143. 'Visit of DMAO to Qatar 28–29 October 1980', Minute by Perkins, 3 Nov. 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3453.
144. Ibid.
145. Ibid.
146. Letter from Brant to P. H. Moberly, 11 Nov. 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3674.
147. The Prime Minister's visit to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: 19–25 April 1981, Brief by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, TNA, CAB 133/514.
148. Ibid.
149. Letter from F. N. Richards to M. O'D. B. Alexander, 12 Jan. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3818.
150. Letter from Richards to Alexander, 23 Jan. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3818.
151. 'Prime Minister's visit to the Arabian Peninsula', Minute by Miers, 20 Jan. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3818.

152. Letter from Thatcher to Khalifah, 19 Jan. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/4108. In his reply, Khalifah thanked Her Majesty's Government for all the 'valuable assistance' it had provided in the fields of defence and security by way of training and equipping Qatari armed forces (Translation of a letter from His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Khalifah bin Hamad Al-Thani, to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the Right Honourable Margaret Thatcher (undated), TNA, FCO 8/4108).
153. Telegram from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Doha, No. 21, 5 Feb. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3818.
154. 'Defence sales policy: Middle East', Note by the Defence Department, 9 Feb. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3850. Robin Renwick, leading diplomat during the Thatcher years, remarked in his memoirs that the Prime Minister saw it as her mission to 'arrest and reverse' British decline 'not only economically, but also in terms of our standing in the world' (Robin Renwick, *A Journey with Margaret Thatcher: Foreign Policy under the Iron Lady* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013), p.xvii).
155. Record of a discussion between the Prime Minister and the Amir of Qatar, HH Sheikh Khalifah bin Hamad al Thani, in Qatar on 25 April 1981 at 10.00hours, TNA, PREM 19/757.
156. Ibid.
157. Points from the Prime Minister's tete-a-tete conversation with Sheikh Khalifah of Qatar on 25 April 1981, TNA, PREM 19/757.
158. Ibid.
159. 'Prime Minister's visit to the Gulf: Qatar', Minute by Miers, 14 May 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3824.
160. Telegram from Doha to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, No. 84, 31 March 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3802.
161. Letter from Brant to K. P. Jeffs (Ministry of Defence), 15 June 1981, TNA, FCO 8/4113.
162. Ibid.
163. Letter from D. F. B. Edye to K. J. Passmore, 9 Aug. 1981, TNA, FCO 8/4115.
164. Record of a discussion between the Prime Minister and the Amir of Qatar, HH Sheikh Khalifah bin Hamad al Thani, in Qatar on 25 April 1981 at 10.00hours, TNA, PREM 19/757.
165. Ibid.
166. Ibid.
167. Letter from Day to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 2 Jan. 1982, TNA, FCO 8/4682.
168. Letter from Brant to Carrington, 4 May 1981, TNA, FCO 8/3823.
169. Ibid.
170. Rossiter, *Security in the Gulf*, p.269.
171. Letter from Crawford to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 20 Jan. 1975, TNA, FCO 8/2524.
172. Letter from Brant to P. H. Moberly, 11 Nov. 1980, TNA, FCO 8/3674.