

## **British Diplomatic Oral History Programme: Alan Gordon Munro**

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## BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

Sir Alan Munro

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Int: This is an interview with Sir Alan Munro on the 16th May 1996. The details of Alan Munro's career are on record in the books of reference and I will record the main points in the cover note for this interview. It is also worth mentioning for the benefit of any researcher listening to this that he recently published, in 1996 that is, a book about his experience in Saudi Arabia at the time of the Gulf War entitled *An Arabian Affair - Politics and Diplomacy Behind the Gulf War*; the publisher was Brassey's.

Int: May I start by just mentioning the fact that your career, on paper, is very heavily weighted towards the Middle East, where you served in many different places at different periods - would you like to comment about the overall balance of it and about other aspects as you wish to do?

AM: Yes, certainly. My activity - rather than my time on political work - in the Service over the 35 years that I took part in the Show, was focused very much on Middle East and Arab World affairs, both when overseas and at home; my activity at home also brought with it a specialisation sometimes linked to the Middle East World, a specialisation in Africa. This area of focus in career terms was combined or offset by a line of specialisation which I developed in Personnel Management work and in consequence I had two spells in Personnel Management, one of which also involved a fascinating two years dealing with the recruitment and selection of graduates for the Diplomatic Service. The Middle East focus came about somewhat accidentally, because I joined the Service in 1958 through an alternative examination system which still applied then, known as Method 1.

Int: I remember it; I came in the same route myself.

AM: Oh did you - clever old you? It was quite an ordeal - a marathon, because it was the system which had been the accepted mode of entry during the first half of the century and involved a gruelling series of academic examinations in your area of University specialisation coupled then, if you got through that stage, with a single bullet

shot final interview - in Burlington House. The majority of candidates, by this time – 1958 - were using the more refined selective post-war system which involved a series of interviews, tests, personality tests and so on, and was much less focused on the academic performance. This Method 1 was, indeed, suppressed two years later and only two of us came in in 1958 through that arduous route, but it meant that we joined up four - six weeks after the first and larger batch that had come in through the interview system - the main door. So when I arrived and they said, as was normal of Administrative stream entrance at that time - well, you must start with a spell learning a foreign language to give you a reasonable expertise and to top up a Diplomatic Service cadre of foreign language specialists - very much an asset in the British Diplomatic Service and still is - and well, I said that my preference would be learn Russian as I thought that I would enjoy a specialisation during the time of the Cold War in Eastern European and Soviet relations; if that wasn't possible then I would be very happy to learn Turkish, a country with a specialisation of narrower focus but a country to which I felt drawn. Fair enough, they said, but you are too late; both those lists are closed; however, we do have one or two vacancies in our large, very ample Arabic entry - and that's what you will probably find yourself doing; and so I fell out and became an Arabist, became a Middle East specialist and was promptly sent off after a mere spell of a few days trying to learn the ropes of the Foreign Office to Lebanon to the Middle East Centre there of Arabic studies.

Int: How many people went a year to MECAS from the Foreign Office?

AM: At that time the cadre was really kept at a pretty high level and we had a very strong manpower strength throughout the Middle East, partly for historical reasons and so, I think, we were probably ten or eleven and that was the normal annual intake from the Foreign Office, topped up with a sprinkling of British Military personnel, oil company employees operating in the Middle East and one or two from overseas Foreign Services who wanted to take advantage of the highly efficient Arabic machine that the centre represented - curiously enough one of the foreign countries, during my time there, that did send a couple of students was Cuba.

Int: That was Batista's Cuba?

AM: No, funnily enough.

Int: '59 Castro's.

AM: No, it was Castro's Cuba and so we found ourselves hobnobbing in our mountain top with its enticing night-time view of Beirut spread out with all its lights nearly 3,000 feet below us.

Int: The period you spent in MECAS was followed by postings in Beirut, Kuwait and then after a short spell in the Foreign Office in Libya. Do you feel that this concentration on the Arab World was a good thing for you personally in the terms of your own career satisfaction and a good thing for the Service or do you have any second thoughts about that?

AM: In both professional and personal terms I have no regrets at having become a Middle East specialist and having devoted so much of my working time to that area, whether it be overseas or at home. It wasn't an exclusive concentration, of course, as you point out; I think it probably followed the classic ideal Foreign Office pattern of giving you at least half your time or slightly more in your area of specialisation thereby maximising the investment in your language training and in the ability to interpret that region which the experience of it produces. It had its rough moments, difficult ones, and its adventurous ones too and that added to the spice of the experience, even if it was sometimes a bit trying - I will come to some of those in a minute.

Int: I notice that you spent some time in Kuwait in '61 which you said, when we were talking earlier, was a period of an attempted Iraqi invasion.

AM: Yes, in a curious way my career, my involvement with the Arab World, went full circle because after finishing my Arabic training I was posted to Beirut as Assistant Press Attaché at a time when the hyper active Arabic press with all its political strands and propagandising credence, either reflecting support for or antipathy to the powerful and fairly recently established Arab nationalist movement personified by President Abdul Nasser of Egypt, was at its height. Then I was detached for six very interesting months to Kuwait, still in the early stages of its oil development, because Kuwait had in

that year 1961 severed her protectorate link with Britain and had taken on full independence and membership of the United Nations; this was a signal for an Iraq filled with radical revolutionary fervour, following its own anti-monarchist revolution of 1958 and by then under the military leader President Abdul Karim Kassim to resurrect earlier claims to sovereignty over Kuwait and to pose a military threat which was countered with British troops. This experience launched my familiarity and involvement in the affairs of Arabia and the Gulf and my career thirty five years later terminated with a further Iraqi threat to Kuwait. This occurred during the time when I was Ambassador in Saudi Arabia and very deeply involved in the much larger international military operation in which there was a very significant British role played to remove Iraq from Kuwait.

Int: It is clear from your career that the Service gained a great deal from the fact that you had this long running specialisation in Arabic and the Arab world and had that experience of that part of the world which must have served you very well when you came back as Ambassador in Saudi Arabia at the end of your career, but I was very struck by you saying that there were as many as ten or eleven entrants to the Foreign Service going to MECAS every year, even in the period after the Suez disaster when one might have expected somewhat less emphasis on that part of the world which must necessarily have been, to some degree, at the expense of the amount of attention we could devote to other parts.

AM: Well, I think the Service got their money's-worth for the investment they put in to my training and specialisation in the Arab World and certainly I have no regrets myself about having served in and dealt with the affairs of that region. The Foreign Office had at that time, and to some extent it still does, a voracious appetite for Arabists, derived from the high profile historical role which we still sought to play in the region; they also, I think, had to allow for the likelihood that a small proportion would find themselves progressively disenchanted with that part of the world and would seek to move to other specialisations - so there was a certain wastage. The course itself was very intensive one, a very successful one in the grounding it gave one in this difficult language - the short course being some ten months in length and the long course being nearly a year and a half, taking one on to interpretership standard. For me perhaps the main advantage of this particular area of specialisation over the thirty five years of my

service since the late 1950's has been the way in which it involved me in diplomacy in an area of the world in which Britain was able, and was expected, to play a significant part across the whole front of diplomatic activity. This was, in part, a legacy of the deep involvement of this country in the affairs of the Middle East; particularly in Arabia, the Gulf and parts of the Levant as well as in Egypt which were the result of the various mandates and other associations which formed part of the settlement of the Ottoman Empire's lands following the First World War and Turkey's defeat in that conflict. But the lingering position, fuelled again by experiences in the Second World War, meant that one was caught up immediately in involvement with a region that was vibrant with its own politics, with its animosities, moving rapidly into a period of political change, and the demise, the overthrow indeed in the case of Egypt and Iraq, of some of the monarchies that had been established following the First World War. In addition there was the rise of Arab nationalism as a seductive and universal creed as personified in Egypt's charismatic new leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, the upheavals in Iraq, the impact of new oil revenues on the very traditional states of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia and their very rapid development. All this meant that from the beginning one was involved in an area of great activity and where Britain was seen by those around one to be playing a role; I should mention here that this role was made all the more acute by the intense pressures caused by the creation of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent and enduring stand-off with her Arab neighbours and the displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees decanted into the neighbouring countries. Much of the blame was at that time being laid by the Arab community at Britain's door for having failed to reconcile all these pressures over the mandate over Palestine. When we found ourselves coming under pressures or drawn into the various conflicts or confrontations which were so much a feature during the 1950's and '60's of the Middle East, one of our reflexes - and I began my career in this atmosphere - was to look to or consider the military option. There was never any question but that it was the appropriate way to go, in Kuwait in 1961 when we reinforced Kuwait in the face of an Iraqi threat and then again in the mid 1960's in Libya where we had a substantial garrison, both Army and Air Force, and substantial training facilities. Whenever there was some sign of local protest the reaction was to 'stand to' the military, as happened for perhaps the last time in the shadow of the 1967 Arab/Israel War which burst upon us in the June of that year and aroused tensions in Libya as elsewhere - latent animosities directed towards Britain to a very high pitch.

Int: This was after the arrival of Gadaffi?

AM: No, this was pre Gadaffi - Gadaffi came in 1969 - Libya was still a kingdom very closely associated with us for historical reasons, since the removal with the help of British forces of the Italian occupants of Libya and the establishment of an independent State under British tutelage under the rule of King Idris; but there were pressures of a nationalist kind to remove British tutelage, just as there were at the same time violent pressure to remove French tutelage elsewhere in North Africa, notably in Algeria. These were constantly a feature below the surface in all one's diplomatic dealings within the Middle East as a British diplomat right up until the mid '70's. After this phase we entered into a period of deliberate political regression, following the decision in 1971 to pull out British military presence from East of Suez; and one main focus of that former presence had been in the Gulf; so British policy towards the Middle East throughout the 70's, during a period, in the major part of which Britain had a Labour Government, was one of seeking consciously to withdraw from this inherited role with all its expenses in the Middle East - trade apart - to seek to turn our backs on the area. Yet it was a role we found we could not shrug off. Consequently it persisted at a time of generally recessive British diplomacy in the 1970's while we took stock of our status. The Middle East still remained an area of active diplomacy for us. This meant that as an Arab specialist one still felt oneself taking a hand in the affairs of that area at a time when political activity by Britain in other parts of the globe was being handled in a discreet and low ebb fashion. A third stage occurred from the early 1980's with a restoration of international confidence on the part of this country, inspired to a considerable degree by the style of Mrs. Thatcher, the new Conservative Prime Minister. Once again resources were made available for us, in partnership with others, to take a more forward position. I found myself playing an interesting part, as far as our policy towards the Middle East was concerned, in that new activity, when in 1979 with the advent of the Conservative Government, I found myself for a spell as Head of Middle East Department and had the opportunity to recommend to Ministers that we relaunch our activity in the Middle East in response to the decline of Arab nationalism. There were signs that our political support, our advice in terms of Defence, would once again be welcomed, particularly by those countries with whom we had strong traditional and trading relations and who felt themselves threatened by the new

phenomenon of the Islamic revolution which had taken place with the overthrow of the Shah in Iran in the early part of 1979. So there came a turning point again when our role in the Middle East in diplomacy was regenerated. It was certainly a point of considerable professional satisfaction for me to find that my final ten years in the Service, which covered the Ambassadorship in Algeria as well as the four years in Saudi Arabia and the two years or so as the Deputy Under-Secretary responsible for the Middle East and the Arab World, - these coincided with a period when once again we were looked to to play a more active political role and responded by doing so.

Int: I must ask you the obvious question, I am afraid it is rather obvious, but you will have certainly have been faced with it before, that how it came about with our great expertise in this area we so often seem to have been caught off guard by events and the obvious ones that come to my mind are the Iraqi revolution and the murder of Feisal in 1958 and many years later the fall of the Shah and of course most recently the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein. It is easy to be wise after the event and I think it is a quite fair reply to this criticism that we were not the only people, to a certain extent, caught unawares - what are your thoughts on that?

AM: This is an important point and one which has engaged my attention at various stages during my involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. Particularly in mid 1979 when in the last days of David Owen's period as Foreign Secretary I found myself responsible for overseeing the Foreign Office post mortem on why we had failed to read the omens right in those last months of Imperial Iran, leading to that cataclysmic change which certainly produced great injury to Britain's economic and trading interests and even today, seventeen years on, continues to do so. There is, I think, apt to be an inbuilt weakness or flaw in diplomatic attitudes as they develop on the ground in a particular country - particularly in a country where the current relationship with this country is a strong and smooth one, because there is an instinctive reluctance, which I have felt myself and I know it comes upon others, that when things are going well not to give too much thought to the alternative that they might suddenly go badly. I think of it as a kind of momentum syndrome - don't upset things, don't rock the boat, things are going very well and with luck they will continue to do and let's spend all our effort and our considerable talents as a Service benefiting, nursing, cultivating this excellent relationship that we have. This disinclination to pick up stones and look under them is



a feature which I am convinced a diplomat has to have in his mind and seek to counter at every stage. In the case of the overthrow of King Faisal in Iraq in 1958, I think it is generally acknowledged that we, along with others who also shared a strong relationship with monarchist Iraq, did not look for alternatives, did not look for things we did not want to see. Again in 1977 at a time of opposition to the Shah from various sectors - clerical and Bazaari, we put all our effort, as did our main Western partners, into sustaining our precious relationship with the Shah and with his system. We did not seek to evaluate, let alone have contact with the Opposition. This happened again to some degree in the case of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 when once again, as in the case of Iran, nobody among those foreign countries who had an interest in the issue got it right. It was once again a question of seeing signs of troubles, seeing these grow, but making an assumption that the conclusion to which they pointed was unthinkable, went against all the pattern of previous behaviour, and also carried with it implications of such awkwardness that we certainly did not seek to adopt an alarmist view of them. It wasn't just that this was the view of ourselves and other Western countries but, and this is very important, it was the view of Arab neighbours as well. So, the maxim that when things are going well, leave well alone, is something that we have to be on our guard against.

Int: I think I heard recently - not from him directly, but indirectly - I must have read it - that Tony Parsons, that's Sir Anthony Parsons who was Ambassador in Iran at the time before the Shah's downfall, had expressed the view that, looking back on it, he felt that he had been so heavily involved and in a sense under pressure from London to concentrate on commercial opportunities - and the commercial work of the Embassy were very important - that he took his eye off the ball. I don't know whether that is a fair way of putting what he said, but that is how I took it on board. What do you think about that?

AM: That is something of which I had first hand experience when Tony Parsons came out of Tehran at the time of the revolution shortly before the Shah's departure and returned to London. At that point I was Head of the Middle East Department and he became my boss. By one of those extraordinary moves the Foreign Office sometimes manages to concoct Tony Parsons as Deputy Under Secretary for the Middle East, John Moberly as Assistant Under Secretary for the Middle East and me as Head of the

Middle East Department all took over our new responsibilities on the same Monday to the astonishment and disbelief of David Owen, who could see flames all over the Middle East horizon and all three people in lead FCO positions changed on the same day! However we got over that one, indeed we all knew the area - another argument in favour of specialisation if you like - and got to work on this massive crisis that we had on our hands. I'll never forget it. Tony Parsons spent the next few weeks very honourably, with great integrity, donning a hair shirt and going around various centres of opinion within this country with the task of explaining to them, for the sake of his own self-respect, how it was we had got things so wrong. Yes, he did make the point that the focus of our activity lay in that precious and valuable relationship with the Shah's regime, with emphasis on commercial work, and on military co-operation, the areas which were central to our economy. But it wasn't as though this meant that he wasn't in position to consider the political scene, political alternatives. But as he himself said, he was very much part of this mood of enthusiasm and leave well alone. The good momentum syndrome affected him as it affected everyone else - so they weren't looking for trouble.

Int: I think my own experience, which is not in the Middle East at all, but had some in similar circumstance in the case of the Falkland Islands and that experience very much confirms what you say, there was intelligence, there were indicators that, with hindsight, should have been ringing every alarm bell, but we didn't assess the information correctly and in some cases we simply refused to believe it.

AM: This may be to do with our formation and the conditioning of the task we perform abroad, which is to maximise the relationship for the benefit of one's own society, country, political environment and the standards which we represent. There is a disinclination to look for trouble and certainly not to try and compound trouble - an example of this here was, I think, produced in the 1980's and more recently in the Gulf, when we found ourselves intellectually at odds with both Iran and Iraq over different issues, but because one set of confrontation is tough enough and something that we only contemplate with reluctance, to have two was a most unattractive prospect and probably again therefore inclines one to make the best of one or the other of them.

Int: Apropos of the problem or dilemma presented by being - as you put it - at cross

purposes, I think that's how you put it, with both Iran and Iraq at the same time, of course researchers will be very interested to know your view about the whole Arms for Iraq business, as it has come to be called. Can I put that in specific terms as a question - do you consider that any Minister or Ministers should have resigned either before the Scott Enquiry or after it?

AM: I was not called to give evidence but some of my minutes and memoranda within Whitehall as Deputy Under Secretary responsible for the Middle East in the late 1980's have been reviewed and quoted in the Enquiry. I regard the Scott Enquiry as having been firstly an over-elaborate affair which had the result of giving undue prominence to the issue which it was called upon to examine. There was certainly material that merited (?) examining in the context of British defence contacts with Iraq during the 1980's. But a second element here is that I find that the approach and the conclusions of the Scott Enquiry demonstrated a certain naïveté in the field of Government, in the field of foreign relations. The enquiry seems to be predicated on an assumption by Sir Richard Scott that in foreign affairs the major objective should be transparency. Now transparency certainly is something that those in the practice of Government need to have in the forefront of their minds, but it cannot be practised in absolute terms, because in order to achieve one's objectives in foreign relations to the benefit of one's society, much of what is being transacted or negotiated has to be kept private, at least at the time when it is being handled. This naïveté is a feature which I think has distorted the thrust and the conclusion at which the Scott Enquiry arrived. Concerning the strictures made on certain Ministers, from what I know of what went on, I do not believe that there was any deliberate duplicity at all; certainly in the years 1988-89 when I was involved, I can see no tendency towards that at all; nor indeed does the Enquiry report conclude categorically that it was the case. If you like, where there were instances of what looked like concealment or double talk I attribute it to cock-up rather than conspiracy. Now, it may be, and it has been argued, that certain Ministers - William Waldegrave was a particular case - might have considered resignation on publication of the Report in view of the critical comments that it made about their activity - not resignation as an admission of culpability, but resignation in order to have a freer hand to challenge the strictures that the Report contained. To have done so would have allowed them, perhaps, a greater deal of public respect and credibility in the comments that they saw fit to make in defence of themselves and on that basis,

having got it off their chest, that would in no way have precluded them from re-entry into politics. This, if you like, was the approach of Lord Carrington over the Falklands War in which he took blame, but in the subsequent enquiry no blame was laid upon him. As for my own part in these things, as is quoted in the Scott Report, there is one particular area that I would like to put on record, because I believe it does illustrate this point I have made about the essential naïveté of the Enquiry's' approach. One of the areas of Whitehall discussion which is identified in the Report is on page 291 of volume 1; it mentions an episode in September 1987 when it was recommended, up the chain within the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence who were responding to approaches from British military equipment firms, in this case both Rolls Royce and British Aerospace, that we should at this dying stage of the Iran - Iraq war when the Security Council had passed its resolution calling for a cease-fire and Iraq had accepted it but Iran had not yet done so, that we should in this situation ease up a bit on our self-imposed, self-denying ordinance over supply and offer on the one hand to offer replacement aero engines - Avon engines -for Iraq's Hawker Hunter aircraft and on the other to provide certain crucial spares for the F4 Phantom combat aircraft in the Iranian air force. My own feeling was that the time had not yet come when we should ease our restrictions to the extent of offering to provide material which, while not of a direct combat value, nonetheless would reinforce the capacity of both sides to carry conflict forward. It would be an unwise thing to do and would send the wrong signals to them. As the report notes the advice I gave on this was accepted by FCO Ministers and the proposal did not receive their approval; this was a matter of some relief to me and the matter stopped there. One of the arguments I had used to Ministers was that not only would supply at this time be hard to justify in both international and domestic political terms, but it could also detract from the role we were seeking to play, in pressing the Iranians to accept resolution 598, the Security Council resolution of early 1957, which called on both sides, particularly Iran, to cease hostilities. It would send Iran the wrong signal of encouragement when we were actually trying to get them to turn the military tap off. Now, Sir Richard Scott commented here that this argument of mine represented an example of the use by the FCO of military export controls for the purpose of achieving, or trying to achieve, political objectives, i.e. the cease-fire relating to Iran, unrelated to the specific licence applications. He went on to question whether export control on military equipment ought to be used as an instrument towards a broader political objective. To suggest that military equipment supply to

foreign countries can be ring fenced apart from our broader political objectives is, I believe, naïve in the extreme. Even if we were for our part to seek to make the distinction the other parties would simply not believe us. Nevertheless it does figure as one of the major recommendations in the Scott Report.

Int: May I ask you, going back as it were, to your own period as Ambassador in Saudi Arabia and your experience then of the Gulf War, what would you like to say about the question that is so often asked - why did the Allied invasion stop at the moment it did? Should it not have continued long enough, and if so how long would that have been, to ensure that Saddam Hussein was removed from power? and any other thoughts you may have about the Gulf War beyond what you may have already put in your book.

AM: Yes, this is an area that I do try to address in some detail in the later chapters of my book, because so often the question is raised to-day . Now this was a massive Western engagement, a massive British engagement too; 12% of all Western forces in the field came from this country, which at any rate for us is a pretty big total; we had some 46 thousand military personnel in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf or at sea in the area during that period; the fact that the Americans had half a million puts it in proportion if you like, but nevertheless having an Armoured Division in the field was a very significant contribution by this country. It also involved considerable expense, the major part of which was very generously refunded to us by the Saudi Arabians. And, of course, it disrupted all sorts of other patterns, both military and civilian for us and gave, at the same time, our media a field day, - but that is another subject. So what did we achieve? Here we are in 1996; Saddam Hussein, the tyrant, is still in tyrannical control; his people continue to suffer and indeed their suffering has been intensified as a result of the stringent and sustained economic sanctions that the international community has imposed through the Security Council resolution ever since the fighting stage ended; we are still obliged along with the Americans and French, and with considerable support within the Gulf and Saudi Arabia in terms of basing facilities, to maintain regular patrols to try and curb some of the oppression which Saddam Hussein continues to apply to his dissident Shia population in the South. There are operations out of Turkey to protect his dissident Kurdish population in the North. So was it all worth it? What have got to show for it? First the general point; it was the first opportunity, coming as it did fortuitously, shortly after the ending of the Cold War with

its stand off between the two major international groups in the Middle East and other parts of the world - in this more multi-polar and perhaps therefore more volatile environment which succeeded the Cold War, it was the first opportunity for the international community, operating through the Security Council, to take action to stop and reverse a naked act of aggression by one State against another; that established a very important principle, one which the United Nations, for its own self respect and credibility needed to apply. It did so by stringent international sanctions in a succession of Security Council resolutions, coupled with the novelty of a military operation which was not under direct United Nations command, unlike other instances - Bosnia for example or the Korean war in the early 1950's. A coalition of like-minded members of the United Nations banded together under the authority of the Security Council resolution to achieve the military objective of restoring Kuwait's independence. That was the political objective, a limited one, a clear cut one, which was achieved. The second point came nearer home in terms of our own interests. The United Kingdom, together with a number of other States - notably the United States - had a direct interest in supporting the political status quo and the security of the governments of the Arab Gulf States. This derived from historical political associations, from a wider objective of the political balance vis à vis a fervid and still revolutionary Iran, and from our very important economic stake, not only for the access to their hydro-carbon resources - their oil resources - and remember that the Gulf States represent some 62% of all known world oil reserves - but also because they represent for us and a number of other countries very important trading markets, sustained by the stability of the political relationship. That is a narrower argument but it is still a valid one and must be seen alongside the broader political context. In the House of Commons debate in September 1990 about whether we ought to be sending troops or not, somebody stood up and said that if Kuwait was growing carrots we would not be doing what we were. So much for the principle that the United Nations must defend any member State that is aggressed by another. The answer must be that if Kuwait had grown carrots no-one would have aggressed it anyway! Now Kuwait was liberated; yes, the relationships within the area remain unstable - there is still an inherent instability in that cockpit which is the Gulf, as between its three poles: one Iraq, currently in eclipse; one Iran, showing renewed muscularity but with major and inhibiting economic problems; and the third the medley of Arabian States who are the weakest leg of the tripod but who nevertheless as a consequence of this crisis have evolved away from some of the traditional aspects of

their Government, and may continue to be a stabilising and moderating influence in the region.

Int: Right.

AM: Finally, on this point, what do we have to show for it? - I should mention some of the important by-products or spin-offs of this conflict. In a situation of conflict in international relations you tend to find, though they are not always predictable at the outset, certain other problems which had hitherto looked pretty intractable are facilitated towards a solution. It is one of the oddnesses of these things when some pieces are moved on the board and this allows other pieces to disengage and so on. In the case of the Kuwait crisis and the Gulf War, the eclipse of Iraq in terms of the pernicious diplomatic role she had sought to play in previous years, produced certain consequences of which subsequent benefit was taken. One - the final vestiges of the civil war in Lebanon, that intractable fifteen year civil war, were finally extinguished - that is up until now. This was a consequence of Saddam Hussein's inability to continue in highly opportunistic fashion to fund the right wing segment in Lebanese politics led by General Aoun, the Maronite leader who had refused to accept the conciliation arrangement worked out, mainly by the Saudis in 1989 in a gathering at Taif in Saudi Arabia. General Aoun went into exile in France; and Lebanon was at last able to get on with the business of reconciliation and reconstruction. A second by-product, of relevance to ourselves, was that Syria's entry from the outset into the military confrontation with Iraq as part of the Saudi-led Arab wing of the military coalition in which the other major partners were the Egyptians, this Syrian role, and the respectability in diplomatic terms which it brought with it, gave the British Government the opportunity to renew the diplomatic relations with Syria which had been broken off four years earlier as a result of Syrian involvement in an attempted airliner bomb outrage which was concocted in London. Britain's breach of relations was - in the eyes of some of us - premature and represented an over-reaction. We had found over the succeeding years that we had effectively blocked ourselves out of play with Syria, at a time when, with the collapse of her partnership with the much weakened Soviet Union, she was seeking to come centre stage. There were good diplomacy reasons for British restoration of relations with Syria. We were able to take advantage of our being side by side in the coalition to do this. We also took advantage of the helpful neutrality, which

she adopted throughout the crisis, to renew our breached relationship with Iran, at a time when, not only in the context of Kuwait but for broader reasons, we and they were seeking to renew a relationship that had trading implications and diplomatic importance in terms of our policy in the region. Likewise the Saudi Arabians, who had some years previously broken off relations with Iran as a result of attempted subversion and bomb outrages undertaken by Iran under cover of their pilgrims on the Haj, they too finding themselves associated with Iran across the Gulf in withstanding Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, had the opportunity to renew relations.

But above all the by-product that mattered most was that the experience of the missile exchanges, in particular the long range missile campaign launched by Iraq and directed at Israel, produced a situation in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, in which it was possible for the international community, with an American lead and with a strong support from the United Kingdom and from Saudi Arabia and other Arab States, to relaunch, on a more solid basis, the Arab/Israel peace process which had fallen into a stalemate in the late 1980's. The two main factors here were firstly on Israel's side a recognition that as a result of Iraq's random Scud missile attacks on Israel to which Israel had, with some frustration, found herself unable to retaliate as a result of pressure from the Americans and others of us - this brought home the lesson that buffer areas of land, which had previously been a military objective for Israel in the protection of her frontiers, no longer mattered so greatly, because missile ranges could now transcend such buffers. So other approaches - involving a political solution became more relevant. On the Arab side the radical spirit of minimalist compromise with Israel which had been a hallmark of the PLO under Yasser Arafat's leadership for years past was supplanted by a new situation in which the PLO and its leadership found themselves discredited internationally and with those of the Arab world who had faced up to Iraq's activity. They were discredited by virtue of the outright support which the PLO as a movement had given to Iraq for what they perceived as their own emotional short term objectives. This meant that the PLO was in effect no longer in the driving seat in terms of Arab political attitudes towards Israel. Other more moderate strands within the Palestinian political body, noticeably elements living within the occupied territories, were able to come forward with fresh encouragement and re-open the dialogue with Israel, whether the PLO liked it or not. Indeed the PLO sensibly fell in behind. This has moved on since then to a remarkable degree, albeit with certain



checks and balances, not least the recent fracas in Southern Lebanon, to the point where we today in practice have a Palestinian autonomy and there is now talk of statehood; this was a major by-product of the Gulf War and an uncovenanted one, but one which has been of immense regional and international benefit.

Int: That's a very interesting account of the many benefits of the operation but presumably you are not saying that these benefits would not have accrued if we had gone on to remove Saddam Hussein - what would you say about that?

AM: Certainly these benefits, particularly the degree of co-operation with the leading Arab elements which contributed so much to the relaunching of the Arab\Israel dialogue starting with the Madrid conference in November 1990 could well have been prejudiced, I believe, if we had lingered on the scene of battle or taken things as far as Baghdad; but there are broader issues here which are much debated; at the time the question of where and when to stop was much debated among us. I discussed it in considerable detail with the Saudis as well. I had no doubt and still have no doubt that, give or take a day or two from when President Bush decided to blow the whistle at the end of February, it was right that we limited ourselves as a coalition objective to the liberation of Kuwait, to Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait without the ability to return or to pose a secondary threat. A major factor here was that the remarkable extent of international support which had been shown, including the Russians and the countries of the former Soviet bloc for this American-led, largely Western-inspired, military operation, was posited on Kuwait's liberation and the upholding of that principle of international support for the right of self-defence of a member. That is all the UN remit said and that is what we achieved. To have gone further would not only have breached that Security Council authority and consequently could well have led to disagreement and back-peddalling among certain members of the Security Council, not least among the permanent members the Russians and Chinese - the Russians after all had their own long standing and valuable relationship with Iraq, particularly of a military kind which was in tatters but which they had every interest in seeking not to wreck altogether. We also had to consider the likely consequences of a more forward action within Iraq itself; if we had moved ahead with the objective of terminating the rule of Saddam Hussein and his atrocious regime the down side, in my view, was going to be considerably greater than the potential advantages.

First, it is not sure that we would have got rid of Saddam Hussein as a feature on the political landscape; yes, he could have been chased out of Baghdad, indeed out of Iraq, but there were plenty of refuges not too far away for him to move to. Such indeed was the high level of preparation for his protection that he would have fled to another lair and from there would have represented a threat for a recovery of authority which would have produced for us an enduring guard role. Secondly there were the lessons of our own experience in the Twenties, Thirties and Forties of an association - tutelage association with the government of Iraq. Iraq is not a homogeneous political society - it is split three ways. This was an accident of history, largely of British making in the aftermath of the First World War. If we had found ourselves in association with our western partners seeking to establish an alternative government of reconciliation and recovery in Iraq, I rather doubt if we would have got away with it. A role of tutelage which would have been a thankless one and perhaps an enduring one and not an effective one, because all the currents of Iraqi politics would have come into play and would have resisted the regime we might have established. It would have been in effect an anachronism and frankly would have been impossible to operate. More than that, by establishing a western sponsored regime as it would have been seen in Iraq, we had a strong chance of alienating Arab public opinion which had on the whole shown a remarkable degree of solidarity against Iraq's threat and support for association with western forces to liberate Kuwait. These old sentiments of what the Arabs see as imperialism would have come into play, and we might have found our Arab partners decoupling from us for reasons of their own public opinion. So we would have been left alone as a western exercise with a high degree of Arab disapproval and in all probability no more support from within the Security Council either. An assumption that we made, not simply an assumption of convenience, but one of serious calculation, was that - rather as in the case of the post Falklands situation - Iraqi public opinion would have reasserted itself -with support from elements within Iraq's still very powerful army, and would have overthrown their regime; the Galtieri syndrome if you like. This was an assumption which we made. Events have shown that we may have made it too readily but things did come very near to happening in that way: the uprising of the Arab Shia population in the South opposed to the Kurdish one in the North which occurred as soon as the cease fire was called and to which, rightly, in my view, no direct coalition support was given, this uprising which was not initially confined to the

Shia had the effect of overthrowing the regime. It nearly happened but it went sour. This was partly because it turned into an inter-communal confrontation; the more extreme elements among the Shia, reinforced by fervent Iraqi Shia exiles who had taken refuge and had formed a militia in Iran in the preceding years gave it a sectarian flavour and a very savage one. This had an effect of frightening off Iraq's Sunni population, giving them pause for thought, an opportunity which Saddam Hussein and his people seized and rallied these groups back to his side - I can protect you against this threat which the Shia uprising in the south represents to you, the Sunni community. Then with army elements, which he had kept well out of the Kuwait theatre, including main elements of the Revolutionary Guard, he savagely repressed the Shia uprising, snuffed it out and that put an end to the popular reaction to Saddam Hussein's gross military failure as a result of the Kuwait operation. He resecured his position. The subsequent Kurdish uprising in the North had much more of its own regional and communal flavour to it and was never, because it represented the Kurdish population only, a threat to the central authority in Baghdad. It was more of a separatist uprising whereas the Shia one had more to do with central authority and its replacement.

Int: Was it entirely untrue that neither of these uprising was stimulated or encouraged in any way by the coalition or by the Americans?

AM: Both were in my view totally organic to Iraq.

Int: Well, you make a very powerful case that it was right not to go further - the Saudis would never have gone along with it even tacitly?

AM: They would have been very uncomfortable - their regime, which had worked with us right up to the hilt all the way through the crisis and to their considerable credit, would have found it impossible, I believe, whatever their private view, to count on national opinion to sustain the reestablishment of a Western sponsored administration in Iraq or indeed in any other Arab country - this is where history was on our backs.

Int: That is the extreme position there. What I suppose a lot of people like myself would have hoped might have happened is that pressure of events stimulated to some degree by foreign invasion would have swept away Saddam Hussein without requiring

the invaders to actually assume responsibility for administering the country.

AM: Yes, but the preferred course was, as I said, that this process should take place without our having to be there on the ground, because for reasons to do with all the historical baggage we carried since the Second World War of the old British tutelage of this part of the Arab world, the association of Western governments, neo imperialists if you like, with a puppet regime would have aroused deep resentment not least in Egypt which was playing a leading part in holding together that portion of the Arab community that had supported the confrontation with Iraq.

Int: Well, I think you have provided a great deal of material for future students of the region, Alan. Can we turn to discuss, a little bit, the other main feature of your service which was your involvement with personnel management and all those questions. I felt in recent years, not just since my own retirement but some years before that, that the Diplomatic Service role had become less effective to a degree - there are many reasons for that - one reason being that the quality of the people coming into the Service did not seem to be as high as it had been in the decades after the Second War; for perhaps twenty or thirty years we recruited, I think it is fair to say, at least our fair share, perhaps more than our fair share, of the top quality people emerging from the British educational system, in the latter years I wonder if that is true. You were involved, as Head of Personnel Operations Department in the late seventies, and also you mentioned that you had been involved, over a long period, with selection.

AM: In the late sixties.

Int: Late sixties, I'm sorry.

AM: The recruitment side was the late sixties and I ran Personnel.

Int: So you have been in contact with these issues over a longish period - what do you feel about them?

AM: It is a fair point you make. I have no doubt, although one benefited very much from it at the time, that in the first two decades after the Second World War the Foreign

Office and the CRO, with which it merged in the late sixties - the Commonwealth Relations Office - were in a position to indulge themselves, perhaps to an excessive extent, in the quality of their recruits to Diplomatic political work. Partly this was because the job market, in Britain, was perhaps a simpler one then and those who had formed something of an intellectual elite out of the education system found themselves particularly attracted, in that post war environment, to public service whether abroad or at home. The alternatives such as openings in higher education, which subsequently proved very popular, were very limited, because the number of centres of higher education did not expand until the 1960's. Likewise in the commercial field the routes to the top were narrower so there was a greater conditioning of this stratum of society towards public service. The Diplomatic Service was held particularly high esteem; thus for the modest salaries which government offered they could command applications from a talented market and they took advantage of it. The talent which then became integrated into the Diplomatic Services was, in my view, in excess of what the work required; in effect, as I remember a colleague of mine saying to me in the sixties, we have here a stable of race horses some of whom are pulling milk floats. We had a Rolls Royce system which produced at the end of the day a very well crafted diplomatic product whether it be in terms of exposition or advocacy of policy. But much of it involved duplicating the work of others in order to hone the product down. It was a general working environment in which thresholds of responsibility tended to be moving down the scale in other areas of occupation yet we saw ourselves with a long stretch ahead refining policies for which we carried, at the end of the day, no sense of responsibility or authorship ourselves. There was a frustration in this, however luxurious it was for Ministers at the top. This tendency resulted in pressures within the Diplomatic Service among us all during the sixties and seventies for youth to be given its head. Responses were made rather slowly - at the political level I think it was probably David Owen who in the late 1970's observed this locking up of talent in the Diplomatic Service and argued that in national terms the Service and perhaps other parts of Whitehall had more than their fair share of it and that we could well manage to conduct our diplomacy at the high standard we had achieved with less first and second class degrees. We willingly took the cue therefore to broaden out the bases of employment within the Diplomatic Service and made better use of those people of ability who had come into what was called the executive stream, and were primarily involved in the non political aspects - the consular, the managerial, the trade promotion

side of Diplomatic work. They were now brought more into political work in place of the previous concentration of talent. This process, the striking of the new balance was awkward to put through but with a sense of purpose it was achieved. Within about ten years a fairer balance was struck which made for a more rewarding career for all elements within our Service. In more recent years, in my view, personnel management has become more formalised so we are now finding ourselves leaning rather more towards what is known as courses for horses - i.e. a job must be found for this person - than horses for courses - here is a job which ideally needs a certain quality of person to do it. I think we may have found that as result of this, some of the specialisms, some of the standards that we require, are being put at risk. But it is all a matter of balancing resources.

Int: There is another aspect of it which I have noticed and I think you might have something to say about this too, since you are now engaged in retirement in various commercial and banking interests, as I have been a bit. Looking at the service that our Diplomatic Service offers to, and I am speaking now of posts abroad rather than the Foreign Office in London, looking at the service they offer to business, I have had my eyes opened quite a bit; I used to think that we offered a pretty good service, not always as good as people hoped for or demanded, but as good as could reasonably be expected, but I must say, as a user of it, I have not been terribly impressed and this is not because of a lack of intellectual talent or quality in the people who staff the Embassy commercial departments abroad but because of a lack of feel and practical realistic business nous that perhaps can only be achieved by direct experience. How do you feel about that?

AM: I think the Service deserves considerable credit for the deliberate effort that was made in the 1960's as a result of the Duncan Report on the operation of the Diplomatic Service. A new emphasis and prestige was given to trade promotion and commercial work and was stressed in personnel work. If you had acquired commercial experience in one or more jobs this should help you on your way to the top. This message went through and I think both you and I responded to it. I was asked to do a stint in commercial work and went off to Rio de Janeiro responsible for what was then a very important market for Britain - I subsequently took myself off to the Ministry of Defence and had a direct role of contact with the British Military Equipment Industry

with responsibility for all our Military sales to the Arab World including some major contracts which I had to negotiate myself in Saudi Arabia. Many of us volunteered for commercial work and took to it pretty well, finding it interesting, rewarding and congenial; not everybody did, but a large number of us; that had the effect of putting new impetus into commercial work. Its status was raised, more talent was devoted to it, better resources were devoted to it and this matched, what in the seventies had become a prime objective of British foreign policy which was to maximise our economic benefit and our trading position in the World rather than playing politics as we had in the past. But I admit that there are instances of weakness and the performance of posts on trade work tends to be somewhat uneven; in one place you will find that you get first class help - support, contacts, enthusiasm, and judgement at your disposal and in others you will find it is a bit pedestrian. At the same time I have to say that, I think, business can never be fully satisfied in this area. But I would like to suggest that where we are seeing weaknesses or a slowing down of vigour in commercial work, I think that this is in some degree a consequence of the regrettable evisceration of the Department of Trade which has been feature of Government policy since the mid 1980's. It was initiated by Lord Young in his time as Secretary of State, a man who did not believe in the value of centralised Government support for British business effort overseas. The free market was to be the conditioning factor, people would respond to that and it was largely a waste of money to keep an information bank and sponsorship activity going at the previous level at the Whitehall end. This is now to some extent being reversed; perhaps a lesson was learnt.