

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

John MOBERLY (born 27 May 1925)

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Career (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Entry to Foreign Service (Information Policy Department, then Middle East Centre for Arab Studies), 1950	pp 2-3
Political Officer, Kuwait, 1954	pp 3-5
FO, 1956 (Eastern, then Northern Department)	pp 5-6
Political Agent, Doha, 1959	pp 6-9
First Secretary, Athens, 1962	pp 9-10
FO, 1967 (Eastern Department)	pp 10-11
Canadian National Defence College, 1968	pp 11-12
Counsellor, Washington, 1969	pp 12-14
Director, Middle East Centre for Arab Studies, 1973	pp 14-15
Ambassador to Amman, Jordan, 1975	pp 15-19
Assistant Under-Secretary of State (Near and Middle East) 1979	pp 20-21
Ambassador, Iraq, 1982	pp 21-27
Retired 1985	pp 27-28

**Sir John Moberly KBE, CMG interviewed by Gwenda Scarlett on 23 October 2002**

**Entry into the Diplomatic Service in 1950**

*You began your career in the Foreign Office in 1950 but you had previously been in the Royal Navy. At what stage did you decide that the Foreign Service was the career you would like to pursue?*

Well I had been interested in world affairs, since I was at school and – so I had always had the idea that I might like to work for the Foreign Office but it hadn't crystallised until I was at university and I decided to try to enter the Foreign Office though there was an idea that it was a very ambitious thing to want to do and it might be very difficult to get accepted. Nevertheless I decided to give it a go.

*Had you been at university before the war?*

No I hadn't. I was a school boy for the first bit of the war.

*So following your service with the Royal Navy you went to Magdalen College, Oxford?*

That's right.

**Language training**

*When you joined the Foreign Service did you immediately do some language training – how did your work in the Middle East begin?*

Well – my work in the Foreign Office began in this way. I did not go immediately to language training. I was sent to the Information Policy Department. While I was there I was asked as a new entrant to see the Head of Personnel Department, at that time George Middleton, and he said, would I like to take training in one of the more difficult languages? – The implication was that it could be a good career step. I said that I should be quite interested

to learn Arabic because I had become involved in the Near East when I was in the Navy and took an interest in Arabic although I did not know any until later.

*So you went - after the Information Policy Department you went off to MECAS. Was that for 18 months or a bit longer?*

Less, we had two months at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and then we went – in those days for just about a year to MECAS. At that time there was no further language training on offer and so I continued my Arabic language studies on my own when I was in Kuwait in order to be able to take what was then called the Higher Standard in Arabic.

*So you went from MECAS straight to Kuwait?*

### **Political Officer, Kuwait 1954-56**

No, I went to Bahrain which was the seat of the Political Resident who was the sort of boss of the region at that time from the British point of view and he later sent me to Kuwait. He had spent his career in the Indian Political Service so he was very much part of the old school as far as the Gulf was concerned.

*Your job in Kuwait as Political Officer - would you like to explain what functions that covered?*

My function as Political Officer was to try to get to know as many of the prominent people there and keep an eye on internal developments such as there were, so it did not have any sharp lines of distinction but it was following political developments in Kuwait to see if there was opposition in any way to the Government, either on political grounds or as there were later when I was still there in connection with unhappiness about the five British companies that had been given easy access to Kuwaiti development. Local residents began to resent this arrangement when these firms were able to charge expenses and costs plus a percentage which local people began to feel was excessive. This was an area in which there was a quite a lot to do.

*Were you able to change that at all or exert an influence over the country?*

Gradually it did change because the Kuwaitis appointed a Syrian engineer to take charge of the development. He was called *Jabri* and British firms that were benefiting from this 'cost plus' arrangement were gradually squeezed out though other British firms of course continued to be highly involved in the development of Kuwait. But the previous sort of Supremo of development there was a Major General Hasted who came from the Indian Army originally. He was there when they were putting in the initial administration – particularly on the engineering side. He had to go in the end.

*The years that you were in Kuwait and then after your return to London in Eastern Department were years full of tension in that region with the growth of Nasserism. How did that affect your work first of all in Kuwait?*

Well, it did affect it. At that time, the younger generation at any rate were very much enthused by Nasserism. Secular Arab nationalism wasn't a religious factor then, so it did affect Kuwait and the Kuwaitis were a little bit less inclined to do every thing the British wanted them to do – unlike say Bahrain, where the ruler was reliant on British advice. That is not to say that there was a hostile attitude in Kuwait but it was more critical and the recurrence of Arab nationalist feeling was stronger there and they were stacked a bit more loosely to the arrangements with Britain than some of the others further down the Gulf, in particular Bahrain and the other Trucial states and so on. Kuwait had a more independent history and of course it had relations with Britain that went back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but you felt all the time that they were somewhat less enthused by this British connection. On the whole, they were not very happy with it. Of course, it did affect their defence, and, later on, when there was the Iraqi threat to cross the border the Kuwaitis relied on British military help to keep the threat at bay. But it was a different atmosphere to the atmosphere in the other states in the Gulf which were less developed than Kuwait was. Kuwait had a very enlightened ruler at that time in Sheik Abdullah Salim who unlike some of the others in the Gulf was determined that a substantial portion of the oil money that was beginning to flow in considerable amounts should be set aside for the next generation. He wasn't an extravagant person himself so I think Kuwait owes him a lot for the way in which the development proceeded and the way he used the money. Well, obviously all members of the ruling family

got pots of money but not to the extent that was the case in some other parts of the Gulf – including Qatar where I went later.

*Was it felt that Nasserism and the move towards Arab nationalism was something that would happen what ever ... ?*

I think, dare I say it, when I and one or two other people who came to MECAS around that time would have been astonished to hear that all these years later broadly the same system was still in being and the same ruling families were still there. The tide of Arab nationalism seemed unstoppable. I have to say that we certainly foresaw a time when the countries governed by sheikhs might have been overthrown by nationalist demagogues and that broadly this was an inevitable development coming in the future, but not so far in the future as it has turned out to be.

### **Return to work in the Foreign Office in London in 1956**

*So you returned to London in 1956 to work - to continue your work in the Gulf but from a different perspective and at a time when foreign policy was complicated by the Suez crisis?*

Yes, certainly.

*Were you involved in that in London?*

I was involved in the sense that I think I and many others thought that the policies being pursued and the idea of toppling Nasser was a folly by people who were locked into an old imperial way of thinking where Britain decided what should be done and more or less imposed its will, but of course the world was changing. I think that we were more aware of this than some of our more senior colleagues. Some of them seemed to be locked for ever in an old way of thought.

*So you felt a sense of dismay at what was going on?*

Yes, certainly a sense of dismay. It seemed to me that policies were being pursued that were out of touch and were likely to be very damaging to our interests in that part of the world. It

turned out it was a climactic moment after which the idea of Britain being able to make independent decisions to do this or propose that or whatever had really gone from that moment, and we could often only act in conjunction with the United States.

*So still in London you moved from Eastern Department to Northern Department?*

Yes.

*A change of scene?*

Very much a change of scene. And I was rather sad about it to begin with, because I felt that in the Eastern Department I was dealing with subjects that I knew and was very up to speed on. Then to go to Northern Department where I was a beginner – I think it was obviously right that I should do that - but at the time it seemed unfortunate.

*Which countries were you dealing with?*

Particularly with the Soviet Union. And others of course.

*Right. In the Khrushchev years then. But you weren't there for very long?*

No, I was not there very long because I was posted.

### **Political Agent, Doha, 1959-62**

*So you went back to the Middle East to Doha where you were Political Agent from 1959 to 1962.*

That's right.

*Political Agent - yet again a term from the old Indian Political Service.*

It was because our relations with the Gulf up to 1947 were made through the Department of External Relations, or whatever it was called, in Delhi, but another point was that a lot of

people were taken on who originated from the Indian Political Service who were working in the Gulf at that time, including the Political Resident. But he - this was really earlier - but the Indian Service Political Resident, Sir Rupert Hay, retired and a younger man from the Foreign Office, Bernard Burrows, became Political Resident before I went back to the Department in London.

*So in 1962, you hadn't really been out of the Gulf for very long. Were there any noticeable changes by the time you returned for those years?*

Well, I think that one major change was that the Foreign Office was in charge by then and they were less bound by the sort of conventions that governed the Indian Political Service way of doing things so a fresh look was being taken at our relations with these countries. A report written by Roger Makins became one of the bases on which we operated. In my own position as Political Agent it was a fact that our relationship with Qatar was much newer than that with say Kuwait and Bahrain because up to the First World War - 1915 - there was an Ottoman presence in Doha and Qatar and so Doha and Qatar tended to be less highly regarded by a lot of British officials in the Gulf. This coupled with the fact that our relationship with the country had been of a shorter duration was noticeable in the way that crises or developments were responded to and there were a number of problems in relations there. For example there was a dispute over an island off the coast of Qatar called *Halul* which was of interest to the oil companies - particularly to Shell who had a concession in the seabed there as it was going to be used as a gathering station for bringing oil ashore from seabed drilling that was being undertaken by the Shell Company - so there was this dispute between Qatar and Abu Dhabi the next door state as to who really had the right to be the sovereign as it were as it were over *Halul*, and the problem for the Qataris was that the documents which were relied upon in the British Archives tended to favour the claim of Abu Dhabi. That of course caused great unhappiness in Qatar. The British Government then appointed a former Political Agent in Bahrain, Charles Gault, to write a report about *Halul*. Since he used what documentation was available in the British Archives his report came down in favour of Abu Dhabi. The Qataris weren't at all happy with this. My view was that if we were going to make decisions about this those decisions would have to be seen to be fair by both sides. The Qataris had to be given every chance to work out their claim to the island *Halul*. The Qataris by this time had a rather clever Egyptian lawyer, a former Egyptian of the old school, to advise them and he managed by looking at non-British archives, travellers' accounts and other

things of that kind, to make a very good case for Qatar. In the end a decision was made that *Halul* should be awarded to Qatar. This was still an area in which our government thought they could make high-handed decisions. My argument was that if they were going to make the decision it must be seen to be fair, the Qataris should have a chance to make their case and that a legal person ought to be involved. That was accepted and Professor Anderson, a noted professor of international or Islamic law, was brought in as part of the commission who were going to make an adjudication. In so far as I had any effect on anything in my time when I was working for the Foreign Office that was an occasion when I did manage to play a role in getting this commission constituted in a way that could have some credibility with the Qataris and which gave them time with their own legal adviser to make out their case.

*Was the Shell Company involved in any of the negotiations?*

I don't think they were directly involved in negotiations. For them the important thing was that they should be able to bring their oil ashore. So I think what they wanted was to have it settled to whom it was going to go so they could begin. They were already drilling in the seabed by this time and they wanted to bring any oil ashore at this place which subsequently they did. But it is an illustration of the changing way in which the British government behaved in the sense that they thought they could arrange things as they thought best in that area, without necessarily bringing in any kind of international element, or indeed they were prepared to do it without legal authority so - it wasn't a sudden change but was a gradual change over the years. It became clear that the sort of high-handed business where we would appoint rulers or remove them was no longer a purely British government decision. Originally, of course, it was. That was a big change in the atmosphere.

### **Posting as First Secretary in the British Embassy, Athens, 1962-66**

*Following that time in the Gulf you then went to pastures new: to Greece - and you were First Secretary at the Embassy in Athens. Did you enjoy this change?*

Yes, very much and of course I tried to learn Greek. I did not know as much Greek as I knew Arabic, but I tried and passed the intermediate exam. It was an interesting time because of the whole question of the future of Cyprus and the deterioration in relations between Greeks and

Turks and an awkward relationship for a time between us and the Greek government over Cyprus.

*Did you travel to Cyprus at all?*

Yes, I have been to Cyprus quite a few times. I am trying to think whether I actually went when I was in Greece, I am not quite sure about that. But I have been to Cyprus. I first visited Cyprus when I was in the Navy so I had a long acquaintance with Cyprus and of course I met Archbishop Makarios when I was at the Canadian Defence College and we went to Cyprus. The Canadians had troops in the UN force there and it was during that period that I actually met Makarios and talked to him.

*Was there a great deal of support for him from the Greek government while you were in Athens?*

Yes, undoubtedly they strongly supported the Greek Cypriot point of view. They did not go so far as some of the others in the time when they had a sort of coup in Cyprus. Makarios in fact was pushed aside by someone called Samson of an extremely Greek nationalistic point of view. Makarios was elbowed aside for a bit and that led up to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 but the Greek government were I would say strongly supportive of the Greek Cypriot government's case, and they weren't entirely neutral as between the Turkish case where the Turks wanted to have strict arrangements on the basis of the agreement under which Cyprus became independent. So our relations with the Greek government were deteriorating. It was no longer the government of Karamanlis. My wife always tells a story about how at a party a Greek lady came up to her and said "as one of the few friends of Britain left in Athens I just wanted to say...". So it was a period when we didn't have a smooth relationship with the Greek Government.

*During these years also there were tensions in Greece as you say - there were a series of Prime Ministers, the tensions between the right and the left were building up?*

Well, I don't know if they were exactly between the right and the left but there were tensions within the Greek political world. It was the time when the son of former Prime Minister Papandreou came to the fore, an American educated Greek but of the left, and his influence

was somewhat malign in the sense that he provoked the colonels who stepped in and took over in Greece in 1967.

*Which was just after you left.*

Just after we left and you could see it was all going down hill towards something of that kind.

*Your time in Athens came to an end and then you returned to London and back to Eastern Department?*

### **Return to Eastern Department of the FCO in 1967**

Yes, that's right and that was of course at the time of the 1967 war in the Middle East.

*And were you specifically responsible for Arab/Israeli problems?*

Yes under Head of Department, Willie Morris who was a very experienced, excellent man, no longer alive, sadly, but that was my field at that time in Eastern Department. It was a quite difficult and critical time really.

*What sort of work did you do at that time?*

Well, constant work would be writing briefs and replies to MPs' letters. There were floods of letters initiated by the Jewish community and they were very critical of the British Government, so there was an enormous amount of work to do dealing with this flood of correspondence and briefing Ministers. The one time I ever met Lord Longford was when there was a debate in the House of Lords and he wanted at very short notice a draft of what he should say. I remember the occasion because we were due to go out to dinner that night - and of course I could not go because I had to sit in the office and put together what he was going to say. That was the kind of thing we were doing: briefs for Ministers, dealing with letters and preparing submissions stating what we should say or do at a particular juncture.

### **Sabbatical year at Canadian National Defence College 1968-69**

*You were there really quite a short time because you had a sabbatical year from 1968 to 1969 when you went to the Canadian National Defence College in Kingston, Ontario, similar to the course in Britain at the Royal College of Defence Studies.*

I think probably it had that name by then. It was a very interesting year in Kingston and there was a lot of Canadian uncertainty about how Canada should deal with the French/Canadian problem and move towards unification of the three Canadian armed services so that they had one armed service. There was a lot going on and of course a lot happening in the United States which had an effect in Canada. We felt the Canadians had a bit of a complex about the big neighbour to the south who supposedly does everything so much better than the parochial Canadians, but our own impression was that on the whole the Canadians were more efficient than the Americans in many ways and that no inferiority complex was justified, that they could manage well and also deal with the French-Canadian aspect. It was the time of Trudeau, you know the dashing young French-Canadian prime minister. Because there were French speaking Canadians on the course as well as English speaking Canadians one could feel that Canada had its internal complexes. One of our fellow students was a Canadian Police Commissioner from the Ukrainian community in Canada. One could sense the whole diversity of Canada's population.

### **Transfer to British Embassy Washington as Counsellor 1969-73**

*Following that year you actually stayed on that side of the Atlantic and you were sent to Washington as Counsellor. What were your responsibilities in particular?*

I was responsible for supervising the officers who were dealing directly with Middle East, Africa, Far East and South East Asia. I had to take some cognisance of, and learn something about, quite a wide area.

*These years in Washington were the time when President Nixon was in the White House.*

Yes, and Watergate was bubbling away there all the time.

*But in foreign affairs Vietnam was very much to the fore ....*

Yes.

*Cambodia?*

Yes.

*And since you were dealing with South East Asia?*

I was concerned with South East Asia. We had a very good man as the sort of directly dealing man - John Boyd - who subsequently became Chief Clerk and is now Master of Churchill College in Cambridge. He was an excellent man and on his way to higher things. He ended up as Ambassador to Japan. He is a Chinese speaker. So I was backed up by very good people really.

*Was opposition to Vietnam within the United States very evident?*

I think it was evident. One was reading all the time about it and there seemed to be a general sort of malaise. Families seemed to be in a state of tension between parents and children throughout the war. This was certainly very much the situation one was aware of all the time and also of course of Nixon and his gradual descent to the point where he had to go, but ...

*What were relations between the British government and Washington like at that time?*

I think they were broadly speaking very good, but when we first went there the Ambassador was John Freeman the former Labour Minister. His advantage was that he could deal with Henry Kissinger on a day to day basis, same interests and so on - and you know there was a lot of direct dealing with Kissinger who very often bypassed the State Department and the Secretary of State so it was, I think, uncomfortable in a way for Ambassadors at that time. Relations on the whole were excellent between our governments.

*This is the time when Edward Heath was perhaps a little bit more interested in the European arena than the US relationship. But you didn't feel this in Washington?*

No. At the time I am thinking of Harold Wilson was Prime Minister. He came to Washington at that time and I was present at some of the talks he had. I don't have such a good recollection of when the Conservatives came to power and Edward Heath came in. I can't remember exactly when the change of government took place but generally speaking I think that the relations remained good all the time. We had a change of Ambassador at that stage and Lord Cromer became ambassador. He had been previously in Washington in a financial capacity and was a very different character to John Freeman.

*And during that time was the beginning of the opening of China?*

Yes very much so.

*That must have been quite an exciting time.*

Yes that was very exciting in the sense that there were a lot of people working on the Far Eastern side of the State Department who had not been able to deal with the Chinese directly for years. They were absolutely thrilled to be going there when the opening took place and some of them were able to go back to Peking. This was something that they had obviously wanted to happen for a long time and they had felt rather out on the fringe because they were not able to make full use of their expertise and knowledge. Suddenly here they were again in the forefront of important developments and those who were able to go to China were very excited.

### **Appointment as Director of MECAS 1973-75**

*So you had those four years in Washington and then you returned to the Middle East from 1973 to 1975, when you were Director of the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies. Would you like to say something about that?*

I became the Director of the organisation which taught me my Arabic originally. By 1973 it had become much more international than it was when I was there in 1952 and it had lots of Japanese and some Europeans, including French and Germans and even one or two Americans came there though they had their own arrangements - perhaps they were people

from oil companies. There was one chap who was later one of the hostages in Iran. When the civil war broke out in Lebanon that of course made holding seminars on general background studies of the Middle East, history, politics and so on more difficult. These seminars were valued by quite a lot of commercial firms working in the area. We had one that went very well, but the next time we were due to hold it it had to be cancelled altogether because the civil war had really started hotting up and it was no longer easy to get people to travel to Shemlan where the Institute was. It was not that easy and nobody quite knew what was going to happen next. The Japanese tended to all get their marching orders, and be told they must leave at once. It was a time of great internal turmoil in Lebanon which made the job of running the school less easy. A while later after I had left, the Foreign Office decided to set up alternative arrangements and to abandon the site in Shemlan. It had been rented from a local business man. There had been moves to try to buy it but wisely as it turned out, one or two of my predecessors had said that it was not suitable. The situation was not sufficiently stable to think in terms of acquiring property and though I might have been sad if that had happened in my time, in the light of hindsight it was clearly a wise decision.

*MECAS has had a great role in producing a lot of Arabists in the Foreign Office.*

A great many of our Arabists and several others were produced in MECAS. Anthony Acland was one who reached the top. There is an association which has one or two annual gatherings where you meet a lot of people whom you knew and also a lot of people who have a continuing important role.

### **Appointment as Ambassador to Jordan 1975-79**

*Then following MECAS you went to Jordan as Ambassador.*

Yes, and that of course was a very agreeable place to go to. We had a bit of a problem whether we could get our goods and chattels there given the civil war but they did eventually arrive in Amman. Jordanians, be they of Palestinian or East Bank origin, are friendly people. A lot was going on all the time and the access to those who made the decisions was easy for the British Ambassador. It was possible to see the king fairly easily, and frequently, and even without specific instructions to go and say something; a tour d'horizon with him, and also with one or two of the principal people who were supporting him, was always possible. We

felt that the death of an excellent cousin who was an adviser to the King was a considerable loss in subsequent years.

*Did you travel around in Jordan a lot or was it too dangerous?*

Oh, we did travel around mainly in Jordan, and it was no real problem although we were enjoined to be accompanied by guards even to go into the office. I used to walk to the office from the Embassy, and there was a time when the question arose whether that was a wise thing to do. I used to vary my route so I must say I didn't feel under any threat, though of course there could have been. There was a moment when the principal hotel in Amman was occupied by some extreme group and there was a shoot out for many hours, a whole day I think. The people responsible were either killed or apprehended. But there weren't many incidents of that kind. They had more problems, I suppose, when we were at MECAS, when the second of the wars between Israel and the Palestinians broke out. That was quite worrying because for example our young daughter had to go down to Beirut to school and there was a taxi that took her and some other children. One day when they were on their way Israeli attack planes came over to attack a place just near the route by which they went, which the Israelis said was the headquarters of an extreme group of Palestinians. That was quite worrying because we did not know immediately what had happened. Fortunately the taxi driver had managed to get past the bend in the road near the place that was being rocketed. There were other occasions in Beirut when things were difficult. When we went back there one time we had to go by sea from Piraeus to Beirut and when we got to Cyprus there was a call that we should try to disembark there, but as we had our vehicle in the ship we were very loth to do that. When we finally got to Beirut we did get our vehicle off and drove up to our house up the hill. So that was the war and it was very much the most threatening period of our career, I suppose, when things were awkward and we could have got into difficulties although we did not have any serious problems.

*Did you ever feel from your time in Lebanon and in Jordan that there was a solution to the Palestinian problem?*

My view has always been that there will not be, or cannot be, a settlement until each side is prepared to scale down its highest demands and to concede to the other party what they claim for themselves. Now in all the years when I was in the Middle East, the problem has been

that the Palestinians weren't ready to negotiate. Occasionally they set out in words that they weren't prepared to negotiate. Later on, since 1988, the Palestinians have been ready to negotiate. They have been ready to accept a two states solution whereby both would live together alongside each other and there would be security for Israel and the Israelis. The Israelis would have to withdraw from all the settlements, the new settlements they have been putting in recently. I think there are grounds for a settlement but of course the difficulties got worse with all the suicide attacks. No one can understand the policy that Sharon is pursuing. He makes it impossible. First of all he said the Palestinians had to do this that and the other and at the same time he made it impossible for Arafat to move around. He destroys the infrastructure of the Palestinians, not only the military weapons but all the records of the ministries have been trashed - so it is very difficult now to see what the solution can be unless and until it is based on some sort of community willingness to make concessions and, of course, obviously to find ways to stop the suicide bombings. That clearly has to happen. But Sharon set off this current intifada by his aggressive raid on the *Harem al Sharif*, you know the area with the mosque which of course was also the place where the Jewish temple was in ancient times. It was crass folly to start shooting Palestinians. This really set off this cycle of violence. Until everybody can step back and take a look in a way they have not been prepared to do until now it is very difficult to see what the way forward is and how it's to be achieved. Barak, they say, was prepared to give them so much of Palestine, but of course it was not Palestine, it was part of the West Bank. I don't think there was an offer which the Palestinians could reasonably accept and of course in Barak's time new settlements were being built at an even greater rate than under Netanyahu so it's difficult not to be gloomy about it all. And of course the trouble is also that the Americans are not seen as being in any way a mediating force because they are supporters of Israel and intend to remain so - and with George Bush Jr they've gone further in that direction. At least in the previous Bush era they were prepared to say no to the Israelis when they wanted more money to support more settlements. I wish I could feel more optimistic but it is difficult to see an end. Perhaps some sort of exhaustion will produce more ways to compromise. I think there are plenty of people on both sides who would dearly love to get out of this cycle of violence.

*Going back to your time in Jordan would you like now to say something about Jordan's relations with her neighbours particularly Syria and Iraq?*

Yes certainly. Relations with Iraq were generally good, because Jordan depends on trade with Iraq, and they were getting oil at cheap rates from the Iraqis. Syria varied – depending on who was in power in Jordan. Relations were reasonable but there were ups and downs. There were times when the Prime Minister of Jordan was close to the Syrians and others when there was quite a lot of tension. Iraq of course had this sort of dual relationship. One of the Hashemite kings was killed by the Iraqis, not by the party but by previous nationalists in Iraq, who were eventually themselves killed off by the Ba'ath party, so it's a bit of an up and down relationship.

*And these were the years also when the Camp David negotiations were happening and eventually there was the Israeli withdrawal from Egypt. How was that viewed from Jordan?*

The Jordanians were not very happy about the way that happened because their interests were not taken account of and they were not party to the negotiations in any way. They were certainly miffed at not having been brought into the negotiations in some way particularly because, of course, at least half the population of Jordan are Palestinians and therefore what happens with regard to Palestine is very sensitive in Jordan until this day. They felt that the Egyptians had rather let the side down by not having negotiations that covered other interested parties particularly the Jordanians themselves.

*And while you were in Jordan what other concerns did the King, and the Government have to deal with?*

Well the shortage of water was a very important question for the Jordanians and they had a plan to build a dam. Some progress was made towards an agreement with the Syrians to build a dam at the head waters of the *Yarmuk* River which would supply and be of interest to both Syria and Jordan. It was never accomplished while I was in Jordan. And I don't think it has been up till now. But thinking about Jordan generally there is always, and has always been, a serious water problem and various schemes were being negotiated with British firms amongst others to get water from underground sources in the south of Jordan. There is no doubt that water remains a major problem for Jordan and of course for the new king and it is not easy to find a solution to this.

*This problem has wider implications for the whole area, doesn't it.*

It has wider implications for the whole area and all sorts of ideas have been put forward. Bringing water down from the Dead Sea for example. The Dead Sea has a tendency towards drying up and there are mineral resources there of importance to Jordan. Phosphates are being developed and have been developed in Jordan for export but it is a country which is always going to have problems – particularly with water. There are these other resources that can be developed but nothing too extensive, nothing like substantial sources of oil for example which could be helpful if they were to be found. They have been looked for. I think small traces of oil have been found but not to the extent that would really help Jordan's water problem. But you could say that the absence of oil has been helpful to Jordan. Lack of oil has forced the Jordanians, and also the Palestinian community, to be avid for education because there is no easy oil money going around which some of the Gulf countries have had and which I think in some cases has had harmful results on their people who are more keen to become rich playboys than to knuckle down to education. The Jordanians, whether they be East Bank Jordanians or Palestinians have always seen education as the way to success.

*Within their own country, or do they tend to travel abroad to study?*

They do have universities but they tend to do a lot of travel abroad particularly to the UK or America, although there was a stage, for example, when many medical people were going to Romania or the Soviet Union and then coming away without a very effective educational standard. I refer to Iraq in this context. Iraqis have always been avid for education and they have a very good education service started by the British but carried on like this by the Ba'ath Party before they got into these military adventures. Their scheme was not to send people abroad for initial degrees, but to send them for advanced degrees, particularly medical degrees like FRCS, MRCP. Some of the examinations were held in Baghdad by teams coming out and that's one of the things that has helped them to provide the technical back up for a modern state. There is probably not much lacking in education because they can produce nuclear materials. I think the Ba'ath party was keen on education reflecting the keenness of the leader and they produce high standards of people. My wife, a doctor, found that in Iraqi hospitals one found more female consultants than you would have in hospitals in this country, at any rate, definitely until recently. That is another aspect of Iraq that is forgotten. To my astonishment, when I went there the British Council told me that there were then more Iraqis in higher education in the UK than there were from almost any other country in the world.

### **Assistant Under Secretary of State in the FCO 1979-82**

*That's interesting. Shall we move on to your time then back in the Foreign Office in London from 1979 to 1982 when you were Assistant Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for the Near and Middle East. What were the main events of those years?*

I suppose that the Arab/Israel problem was the continuing background to events in the Middle East. By the time the war of 1973 broke out I had gone to MECAS – the Arab Language Institution. The war was still on while I was there. During the period that I was an Under Secretary, the main event occurred in Iran where there was a revolution and the return of Khomeini.

*As far as most of the general public was concerned this was the beginning of the Islamic revolution and its appearance in world affairs, which obviously had been going on for a long time but these were very striking events.*

This marked a really big change from my early years in the Middle East when Arab Nationalism was important and was a purely – or mostly - secular movement. In Iran we saw the beginnings of a very large Islamic movement which dispossessed the Shah and also gave rise to fear of similar movements taking hold in other countries in the region. This is the big difference between the period of Islamic revolution and the earlier times that I spent in the Middle East. Islamic extremism or Islamic fundamentalism or whatever you call it has become a major factor affecting the concerns of other governments with interests in the area and this looks like continuing now for some time to come, perhaps indefinitely. When the Islamic revolution took place in Iran it gave a boost to similar ideas and similar movements throughout the region and it is hard to see a part of the Middle East that is not in some way or other affected by these developments. They certainly affected or could affect the stability of other countries and also the stability of the existing governments in the region which all have to take account of this strong feeling. Even Saudi Arabia, which has been so closely involved with the United States and with the development of its oil industry and a lot of other industry and with help from other western countries, now has to take close account of the reactions of their own people which are very often not always determined by the Islamic factor but considerably affected by it. It does not look like going away and we obviously can see how

widespread the Al Qaida is as a movement. We do not know the extent of it but it does look as though it had some role in the horrific events in Bali just the other day.

*But in those years from 1979 was Iran the main embodiment of Islamic policy?*

Yes it was.

*As far as British interests were concerned, the embassy was closed down. What were the implications for British interests?*

Of course we have an interest in oil production there. We have an interest also in trading in Iran. It is a very important country. I don't know exactly what the population is but it is much higher than nearly all the other Middle Eastern countries and for geographical and strategic reasons it is of great interest to Britain. We have seen how even small events like Rushdie's book, which gave offence to Muslims, events of that kind which in normal times would probably have gone unnoticed, or been an insignificant problem, became a major factor in our relations with Iran. I don't see that this is going to change for quite a long time to come. And much depends nowadays on what happens with Iraq and the question of invading Iraq if that takes place, has to be a very big worry about how that is to play.

### **Appointment as Ambassador to Iraq, 1982-85**

*And after that time in London you went to Iraq as Ambassador. Iraq should be one of the richest countries in the region?*

It should, because it has oil resources which are second only to those in Saudi Arabia, or may even be larger when the full extent is known. It is a country that has enormous potential both economically in terms of the oil and the potential provided by its really large highly educated middle class. Its potential has been severely damaged for the time being by the excesses of the present regime of Saddam Hussein. When you talk about the regime it is really of Saddam Hussein that one speaks. He gives the tone to the regime and nobody dares speak out of turn, because his ruthless record is one of coming down heavily and removing from the world people who makes suggestions, or have ideas he doesn't like. When I was in Baghdad there had been a recent incident when the Minister of Health (this was while the Iran/Iraqi war

was in progress), had made a suggestion to the effect that it might be helpful if Saddam Hussein were to step down for a short period, so that Iraq could bring the war to an end. And then he died a few days later in an "accident" in his car. As my Defence Attaché said rather dramatically: he was rapidly called to higher service and everyone knows now from the record that it does not do to say something that Saddam does not like.

*Were you aware at the time because that story I think has been publicised quite recently that perhaps it was Saddam Hussein himself who shot that Cabinet Minister. Were you aware at the time of the detail of the terror that he imposed all around him?*

Yes, I don't know if it is true that he shot him himself. The fact that he was ruthless was known to us and of course it was a country where you could feel the fear of people – unlike most Arab countries. Supposing you go to a barber shop to have your hair cut, before you've hardly started the barber has to know your life history and so on. But in Iraq you could feel that everybody knew of the current affair. Also it was very difficult to meet Iraqis. You couldn't easily invite them to your house; you could only do so if there was some official occasion of which the government approved, otherwise they would be afraid to come. That applied also rather surprisingly to my wife. She was allowed to spend certain days in the week at the children's hospital in Baghdad and that was unexpected by many people, but she could not ask the people with whom she worked to come and see us at our house because she knew that would be dangerous – unless it was something official. Even the doctors with whom my wife worked when she was at the children's hospital would not come to our house except for some official occasion approved by the government, which they knew was approved. So there was this background or underlying feeling of fear there, and this is something of course all Iraqis were aware of. You have two lots of people there, those who are involved in some way with the government and those who are not. Saddam has always adopted a policy to make as many people as possible accessories to his own excesses so that they know they would have no future if he wasn't there. That's one of the ways he bolsters his regime in the country and has continued to do so. I have been there on a number of occasions since, including when I went there again after I left the Foreign Office for the UN Mission looking at humanitarian conditions in Iraq after the last Gulf War. I was able to walk around rather more freely with the UN flag than I could when I was Ambassador because ambassadors' movements were restricted and one had to get permission to go out and could not always get it until the last moment or you might not get it at all. So it was quite a

restricted life. Though having said all that, the Iraqis as a whole are a very nice people, highly regarded, but circumstances lurking there were such that you couldn't move freely among them, unfortunately.

*Was the Ba'ath party an Islamic party or a secular party?*

Not at all. One of the mistakes people make, even George Bush and possibly Tony Blair, is imagining that somehow the Iraqis are closely linked with Al Qaeda. The trouble with that idea is that the philosophy of the Iraqi Ba'ath party is entirely secular and indeed one of the problems at the start of the Iran/Iraq war which affected relations was that the Iranian Islamic revolutionaries would describe Saddam Hussein as an atheist and were totally opposed to him. The Islamic fundamentalists have never been in league at all so far as I am aware with the Iraqi Ba'ath party. The only thing they did was when they were involved in the war was to try to put on an Islamic face in order to get support from the Shi'ites. They had the Islamic motto on their flag which is: there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His Prophet. Nobody in Iraq was fooled by that and I think they know very well that he is a ruthless secular dictator. But not an Islamic fundamentalist in any way and I am sure that no Islamic fundamentalist could accept the idea of Saddam being a supporter.

*Iraq does have these divisions within Islam, within the Muslim religion in their country - with the Shi'ites in the south and the Sunnis and Kurds in the north.*

The majority of the population are Shi'ites, but they have never been dominant in any of the governments in Iraq of Saddam or before or even in the days of the royalists. They have never been the driving force, so you do have, - and the main support for Saddam comes from tribal elements and the Sunni population in Iraq, but you also have the Kurds. The Kurds are mostly Sunnis, though they are not extreme in religious terms. You have the three main elements. Then there are other smaller groups including the Christians of whom Tariq Aziz is one. The country was put together as a single country by the British after the First World War as this seemed a way of trying to bring tranquillity to the area. Of course the Kurds remained dissatisfied with the settlement which left them with no area of their own, but one of the problems has been that the Kurds tend to fight each other a lot of the time as they have been doing even in the more recent period of the two major groupings. I think they have now under American pressure got more or less together but they have until very recently been

fighting each other. So it is I suppose rather like Scottish tribes in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. They don't find it easy to combine.

*Was it dangerous in Baghdad while you were there during the war with Iran?*

No, not in any significant way. Some missiles arrived in Baghdad just after I left, but the war was going on of course. My Defence Attaché described it as the war between the fat men and the thin men. The fat men were the Iraqi armed forces and the people who liked to have air-conditioned accommodation in dug-outs on the front line or near the front line with iced water and every single luxury available. And then there were the thin men, the Iranian Islamic people who had very little in the way of military supplies but had absolute willingness to die for Iran or die for Islam and who, despite their lack of equipment, were ready to make their name. They didn't succeed in defeating Iraq, but they made it very difficult for the Iraqis. But perhaps it is worth mentioning here that one of the reasons why they didn't beat Iraq was that at that time the Americans were anxious to give them intelligence material so that they would not be defeated and they were also anxious to trade with them after that, so it is a bit of a volte-face on the part of the Americans subsequently to describe Saddam's Iraq as being part of the axis of evil. They were quite happy with Iraq and they didn't say very much about Saddam's use of chemical weapons against Iran. There was very little condemnation of Iraq by the Americans, or indeed by the West as a whole. I think the Americans at that stage were quite happy to see the Iranians being defeated. The Iraqis were using these weapons and made no bones about that, so it is sort of ironic in a way.

*But the British attitude was fairly supportive of Saddam Hussein at this time as well?*

No, I would say this is a myth which the press liked to publicise. We built up Saddam. Not true. We were very careful to try to avoid, first of all, supplying armaments to either party in the Iran/Iraq war that would materially affect the outcome of the war. So we were quite careful about offering to supply, certainly while that war was going on - and indeed I used to be ticked off by Tariq Aziz whom I used to see quite a lot of. He used to say, 'You people started Iraq but, you know, nowadays when I go to Washington I get much more understanding than I do from your government', which was the case. In our case they were cross because we were treating them on the same basis as Iran. The Iraqis said: we've accepted all proposals for ending the war, but you go on treating us as though we were

equally in the wrong or equally bad. So whatever our press may think, we were not supplying armaments to Iraq while that war was going on apart from uniforms and that kind of thing. The Iraqis wanted tank spares and that sort of thing as they had British tanks and we used to supply the tanks. And then when the Iran/Iraq war was over, it is true that we did control items that might be supplied to Iraq less strictly. Things like machine tools and so on which could be used for repairing armaments. We were more flexible on that because the war was at an end and there was important business to be done in this field. Alan Clark in the Ministry of Defence was involved in this but we were never major suppliers of military equipment to Iraq. They got most of their material from Russia and quite a lot of things from France and even at one point from the Americans, who before I left were supplying helicopters to Saddam, which were in theory for peaceful purposes but could easily be converted to military use. Possibly they were. So I think it's not right to suggest that we had built up Saddam. The other thing they say is: Ah, but you – this is about the time of the Scott affair - you were prepared to give the Iraqi government credits. Well, we did have a system of commercial credit but military equipment was specifically excluded from the credit. It is a myth that has grown up and of course there were problems with the Scott enquiry, but maybe there were some of these dual use things we probably were a bit more free with at the time after the Iran/Iraq war was over. But to suggest that we were major suppliers of arms to Iraq is simply a myth. But the press go on with it regardless.

*I'm glad that you were able to set the record right on that one. Did you meet Saddam Hussein?*

Not very often. I met Saddam Hussein first when I presented my credentials to him. Later on, ambassadors did not present their letters to Saddam personally. I did have 20 minutes or so tête à tête conversation with him. And then one or two visitors came. Lord Carrington came, no longer as a Government Minister. But they were prepared to regard him as a very senior figure of the Government party so he was received. He had talks with Saddam and I was present at those and then later Richard Luce, who was Minister of State, came and there were one or two others at a similar level who came and were received by Saddam and I accompanied. So I had a quite good personal idea of him. He is not somebody who is personally sort of .....- I don't know. You don't feel: this is a very evil man or anything like that - just by seeing him, but you can't get away from knowing that he is absolutely ruthless and that people who cross his path tend to be done away with. But he is able to keep

up quite a good conversation and discussion with visiting ministers, or Lord Carrington, or whoever it may be. So it was a worrying time for any Minister prepared to go to Iraq. My own impression, derived both from my dealings with Iraq subsequently is that many Iraqis would be delighted to see him go except those who are so tied up with his own excesses that they fear what would happen if he went. But for most of them what they are afraid of is what would happen if Saddam went. The last thing they want is war, civil war, anarchy, because they have enough problems trying to look after their families and keep them fed and get some kind of education for them. Schools, good schools, find it very difficult to get good materials and that's what they are most worried about. I think this would calm their attitude. I suppose if the Americans were able to go in very quickly, change the government very quickly - then maybe the problems wouldn't be so great but if it is a long drawn out affair, and it could be, well - I fear what the effects might be not only in Iraq but in the wider region. I am not a great admirer of Dubya (George W Bush) as we call him nowadays. His father and his advisers were wiser than the ones around today.

*Were Iraqis already leaving the country to go into exile at the time you were there?*

Yes, lots had gone into exile. But still the country was dependent not on the Ba'ath party but on the educated Iraqis. People like oil men who deal with Iraqis find they are absolutely on the level - unlike much of the rest of that government. But a lot of them have left. An Iraqi millionaire in exile told me the other day that he is actually supportive of the Iraqi government as it is now, and there are quite a few with views like that. In fact one or two of the Iraqis that I knew best are hostile to the idea of Western intervention in the country. I suppose they are also thinking of their own families who have probably stayed behind. And I think for Iraqis wherever they are it's a very awkward time at the moment because they don't know what's going to happen and they fear it'll be something not particularly good for them or their families.

*I imagine you reached your 60th birthday while you were in Iraq which meant you reached the end of your work in the Foreign Office, as that is statutory. So how did your time come to an end in Iraq?*

I came to the point where I reached my birthday and I knew I was going to retire then. But I have been to Iraq several times since retiring from the Foreign Office. I do remember I'd

been busy the very evening I left Baghdad. I had had to go to see Tariq Aziz who was then Foreign Minister. I can't remember what the discussion was about but I had to discuss something under instructions from London and then I got on the plane and the next day I was in London. I woke up in the morning here and thought: what do I do now? My life had been rather structured. First of all I was at school that is inevitably a structured life, and then I was in the Navy for four years and that was a very structured environment and then the Foreign Office where there was a definite structure governing one's life. So I woke up in the morning thinking: what do I do? But I have continued to be involved not only with Iraq, but with Middle East problems in general. After I retired I became involved with Chatham House and its programme and that continues to this day in that I am still an associate fellow in its programme but in effect I had a year where I have not been active at all. After a long period of indifferent health I got to the point where there really were two alternatives, one was to go on as I was doing feeling actually worse or to have an operation to remove the damaged lung with the inevitable risks of such an operation. Having discussed it with my wife and family we decided that it was better to go for this risky operation rather than to go along into a slow decline. And so we decided to go for the operation which happened last year at the Brompton Hospital, thanks to the NHS because we don't have any private insurance. Fortunately the NHS came up trumps. I had a wonderful surgeon.

*So you had happy results and you were able to continue your association with Chatham House?*

Yes, I think they have been rather kind to keep me on and not bring it to an end. So it was very good. Though I can't climb up mountains in Austria as I used to, or go skiing.

*You mentioned that your wife is a doctor and that she was able to go to a Children's Hospital in Iraq. Was she able to work during your periods abroad?*

No, not very much but a certain amount. She was a paediatrician, and when we were in the Gulf, before we went to Doha she was used by the Shell Company as backup for their staff. And then in Canada she was teaching medical students at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. And the hardest bit was in America. She did do things of a charitable nature but she would have had to have taken all her medical examinations again to take up any form of employment.

*So she sacrificed quite a lot as a Foreign Office wife?*

Yes, she's retired now but she did work subsequently.

*Well, one final question, you have been in a number of countries in the Middle East. Was there one you have particular affection for?*

Well I suppose I have particular affection for Jordan, because it was such an easy - the access to the people and - interesting country, I mean, interesting politically and interesting from the point of history and archaeology and so on. So I think that I would put that at the top of the list though I liked a number of countries - Lebanon for example where I spent quite a lot of time - but Jordan has to come top of the list and the very nice people I was dealing with.

*Sir John Moberly, thank you very much indeed.*