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ARABIAN EXTREMITIES

By AIR VICE-MARSHAL M. L. HEATH, C.B., O.B.E., R.A.F.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, April 27, 1966, Sir John Troutbeck, G.B.E., K.C.M.G., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: We are lucky this afternoon in having as our lecturer Air Vice-Marshal Heath. Air Vice-Marshal Heath has had a most distinguished career. He started in his early days in the Royal Air Force in specializing in armaments and he held many appointments in that sphere before the war. He then spent some years in New Zealand, came back from there, held more appointments, both in the field and in the Air Ministry, and then went out to Aden, where he commanded the British Forces in the Arabian Peninsula. He has come home quite recently and is now Commandant of the Royal Air Force Staff College.

Air Vice-Marshal Heath will talk to us now about the fringes of the Arabian Peninsula and I need say no more in calling on him to give his talk.

MAY I start by saying that I feel most honoured to have been asked to talk to you at all—and that I feel very inadequately experienced to do so!

I have called my talk Arabian Extremities because it is literally only the extremities of Arabia that I know anything about and because I want to give you views which concern the fringes rather than the function of the task which kept me in Arabia for two years.

I take heart in addressing you from the conviction that you would not be here to listen to me if you were not interested in Arabia and from the conviction also that to an interested audience another slant, or another view, of even a well-known subject is welcome—and there is no doubt in my mind of the fascination of this part of the world and its people.

I do not feel, therefore, that I need apologize to you for covering ground with which you are familiar, either in description or in pictures, for these are just my views after a two years' acquaintance with the area.

I think I should preface my remarks by explaining what my real task was in Arabia, then I would like to describe to you in words and pictures the country as I know it, and I would like to indicate what I believe to be the main present threat to its future and finally to suggest the line of action which I believe is necessary to retain the goodwill and security of this part of the world—and its freedom from Communist domination.

My appointment in Arabia was as Commander of the British Forces in the Arabian Peninsular—a new Unified Command comprising all three Fighting Services which was set up, with its Headquarters in Aden, on April 1, 1958.

H.Q. British Forces was responsible for the security of the area which included the Persian Gulf States in Treaty relations with H.M.G., the Protectorates of Aden and Somaliland and the Colony of Aden. We naturally had an interest also in the activities of those countries bordering this area for it was from these that the threat to our security arose—and still arises.

The main concern was the protection of these territories from both ex-

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ternal threat and internal subversion so that the Middle East oil of the Persian Gulf might flow freely and so that our main base in Aden might be secure. Through the area also run the sea and air communications to India and the Far East.

Our military dispositions were based on the Unified H.Q. in Aden and a subordinate tri-Service H.Q. in the Persian Gulf with small forces only at its disposal in normal times. Our concept of defence was to train and assist local Arab Forces in all areas and back these with small but highly mobile hard-hitting British Forces using sea and air power to provide the mobility and the support for the land forces. I think that is enough to give you the gist of the military task, though I would like to emphasize that military action was never taken without the closest co-ordination with political authority at all levels. I had in consequence to be familiar with the political background of my area of Command and in close touch with the Governors and the Political Resident Persian Gulf, as H.M. Chief Representative in the Persian Gulf area is called. This is the reason why I dare stray from my military function and propound to you ideas which may seem to be only on the fringes—perhaps even beyond the “extremities” of a military Commander’s job!

With that introduction to my talk and to myself I would now like to get on with the job of describing the area and its political background, as I saw fit, in a little more detail.

Kuwait. I would like to start with the important oil-producing State of Kuwait at the head of the Persian Gulf and work my way round. I was unable to visit Kuwait myself for although we have guaranteed the protection of the independent State of Kuwait the Ruler prefers for understandable reasons to emphasize the reality of his independence. As the head of an Arab State he has to consider his relations not only with the United Kingdom but with the rest of the Arab world and in particular with the powerful and conflicting forces represented by President Nasser on the one hand and General Kassem on the other. To preserve her position Kuwait has built up the strength of her land forces but the nearest State which provides us with military facilities is Bahrain, 250 miles to the South, where a small British Garrison is stationed.

Bahrain. Here there is open association with H.M.G. and acknowledgment of British protection, as well as the small British garrison, but the Ruler’s position in the Arab World is made difficult by his acceptance of us in Bahrain, because the Egyptian sponsored propaganda on Arab Nationalism decries and derides those States who show dependence on the West. But Bahrain, so far as we are concerned, is the political centre of the Persian Gulf. It is here that the Political Resident lives and it is also the H.Q. of the land, sea and air forces in the Gulf; the operational base of the Naval Forces and a centre of communications between the Gulf States and both Aden and London.

Bahrain is incidentally 1,400 miles from Aden. As far as from London to Moscow which you may think rather remote for a subordinate H.Q.! It is certainly a fact often overlooked by people much nearer to the scene of action than we are here in London!

Bahrain is fortunate in having an abundant supply of water, as well as oil, though where the water comes from is one of the world's mysteries for this flat little island is many hundreds of miles from any substantial rainfall, yet so abundant are the natural springs that fresh water can be obtained in several parts of the Persian Gulf from the sea bed merely by lowering an inflated goatskin and allowing it to fill with water at that level!

Qatar. The next place coming South from Bahrain is the flat arid desert peninsular of Qatar. Here also oil is found. The State is kindly but not firmly governed by its Arab Ruler and its main problems seem likely to arise from the development of industrial troubles sponsored by Cairo radio and Egyptian propaganda amongst its oil workers.

Das. South of Qatar between there and the Trucial States is the small island of Das where an oil company has built an airfield to drill for oil in the sea bed.

Trucial States. There are seven of them but they are relatively poor, small and easily influenced by their neighbours—they are so-called because of the truces made with H.M.G. when piracy was rife in the Gulf. They are now grouped together by us for convenience—they are each in fact independent sheikhdoms—and by their common support of a local Arab Force known as the Trucial Oman Scouts which is based at Sharjah where there is also a staging post airfield on the route to Aden and to India.

At Sharjah the scenery is more typical of what one expects of Arabia. Sharjah is 250 miles from Bahrain and 1,130 miles from Aden.

Some oil prospecting is in progress near Tarif, and Saudi Arabia has, as you know, shown some interest in Buraimi, the oasis cross-roads.

Muscat and Oman. The most interesting part of S.E. Arabia, politically, militarily and scenically is Muscat and Oman. The Sultanate has presented us with a number of problems. While these are basically endemic to the country, they have been given an added gravity and importance, both locally and internationally, through outside interference.

Since the second half of the eighteenth century, the family of the present Sultan have held sovereignty as independent rulers over the South-East corner of the Arabian peninsula. Their territories have comprised both the coastal area and the mountainous district in the interior known as Oman. This sovereignty is recognized in international treaties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the past 200 years, occasional conflicts have arisen between the authority of the Sultan and that of the so-called Imam of Oman.

These troubles were brought to an end in 1920 by an Agreement concluded at Sib between the Sultan on the one hand and a number of tribal leaders in Oman on the other, who signed the Agreement together with the then Imam. The Agreement of Sib allowed the tribes of the interior a considerable degree of local autonomy, but in no way recognized Oman as an independent State.

During the thirty-four years which followed the conclusion of the Agreement, relations between the Omani tribes, under the guidance of the Imam, and the Sultan's Government were reasonably good. There were no disputes over the Sultan's sovereignty, which the Omanis recognized in a number of practical ways (e.g. they used Muscat passports—they referred their disputes to the Muscat Courts and offered help to the Sultan when the Saudis invaded Buraimi in 1952). In 1954, however, the Imam died. His successor, Ghalib, defied the authority of the Sultan, made contacts with foreign powers, and laid claim to be an independent ruler. By these actions he rendered the Agreement of Sib invalid, and in 1955 the Sultan re-asserted his authority by moving his forces into Oman, without opposition and with the appearance of welcome by the tribesmen and their sheikhs.

The Sultan allowed Ghalib to retire to a village in the interior, but his backers, who consisted of his brother Talib and one or two other tribal leaders, sought sanctuary in Saudi Arabia. There, a rebel army of several hundred men was trained and equipped, and in 1957 Talib returned to Oman to raise a new revolt. In view of the extensive support of the insurrection from outside the country, the Sultan requested help from H.M.G. and this was given. The revolt was quickly brought under control though the rebel leaders took refuge on the Jebel Akhadar and continued to hold out there, causing much trouble until they were ousted, again using British forces together with the Sultan's armed forces early in 1959.

The mountain, the Jebel Akhadar, where the rebel leaders took refuge and from which they were dislodged by British Land and Air Forces, together with the Sultan's armed forces, at the end of January last year, is a formidable stronghold which explains why the rebels were so confident. You can also probably imagine the difficulty of the task of winking them out because the height at the top of the plateau was 7,000 ft., and of the valley at the base 2,000 ft., so that the climb over great rock slabs, was 5,000 ft., with temperatures varying from 120° by day, to freezing by night.

The more peaceful atmosphere that followed the conclusion of the Agreement of Sib would not have been shattered, nor would the recent troubles have been prolonged, had not outside powers, in particular Saudi Arabia, sought to stoke the flames, for the Imam's financial and military support was supplied directly by Saudi Arabia, who recruited, trained, supplied and paid for the "liberation Army of free Omanis."

East Aden Protectorate. Muscat is in fact off the direct route from the Gulf, at Sharjah, to Aden and we normally flew round the Saudi border and down to Salalah in the Sultan of Muscat's territory (and the location of his summer residence) before proceeding along the coast to the Protectorates. To do this we had to skirt the Rhub-Al-Kali—"the empty Quarter," a part of the world which has truly earned its name.

At Salalah the temperature seldom rises above 80° so you can understand why the Sultan prefers it to the oven heat of Muscat baking between its high black rocks in a summer shade temperature of 120° by day, and a palpitating breathless radiation from the same rocks by night.

On from Salalah the next staging post is Ryan in the East Aden Protectorate, near to the British Resident's H.Q. at Mulkulla.

Here are some pictures of this lovely Arabian Port—the lecturer here showed slides of Mukulla). And here—because I know he lectured to you recently—is that great and dear character Colonel Hugh Boustead, to whom, after the Ingrams, the East Aden Protectorate, and indeed all South Arabia, owes so much. You see him in a typical scene amongst those “Bloody Bedou” as he affectionately calls them, and making his farewell address in the Sultan's palace on the occasion of his retirement. He is as you may know now at work with the Sultan of Muscat.

This picture, less formal, shows him on the sea-shore evening walk which was so typical of him that it has crept into more than one descriptive book on Arabia!

Here, in the E.A.P. with its rugged country and poor roads and with its improbable but none the less formidable forts, there has been comparative quiet since the Ingrams established peace between the Qaiti and Kathiri tribes and commenced a period of relative prosperity, which was worked on and improved by Colonel Boustead. The work of these two men and their many European and Arab helpers stands as a monument to what can be achieved by co-operation and goodwill—by advice patiently given and carefully nurtured—a monument not to Colonialism or Imperialism but to the work of free men. This is one of the practical answers to the nonsense put out by Cairo and believed unfortunately not only by many uninformed people in the Middle East but also by many who should know better here in England and on the other side of the Atlantic.

But the East Aden Protectorate has had one great advantage in the period since Ingrams took over in 1938. It has not had oil. The Hadhramaut, famous and romantic though it is, is not a primary producer of sufficient importance to arouse envy or avarice, and the Mahra—the region to the East of the Hadhramaut—is as wild and rugged a piece of country as one could imagine—just a tumbled mass of mountains dividing a hot ocean from a hotter desert. In consequence there have been no outside pressures; no sponsoring of rebel causes and, so, no troubles. Oil is now being prospected there so I fear that we must expect trouble makers to show an interest in it in future.

West Aden Protectorate. The East and West Aden Protectorates are divided somewhat arbitrarily and it so happens that the division coincides roughly with the junction of the Yemen/Saudi borders to the North. Thus the East Aden Protectorate has a frontier with Saudi Arabia, and the West Aden Protectorate has one mainly with the Yemen. The West Aden Protectorate consists of a large number of small States whose Rulers have at different times sought British protection against the aggressive intentions of their neighbours, usually from the Yemen, and who have been held together since the end of the First World War by the continuing threat of Yemen expansion. Within the Protectorate there is great goodwill for the British. This goodwill is based on the experience of many decades during which the protection afforded by H.M.'s forces has been continually and actively demonstrated and during which the selfless in-



THE DHOW HARBOUR—ADEN



THE CUSTOMS QUAY, MUKULLA. EAST ADEN PROTECTORATE

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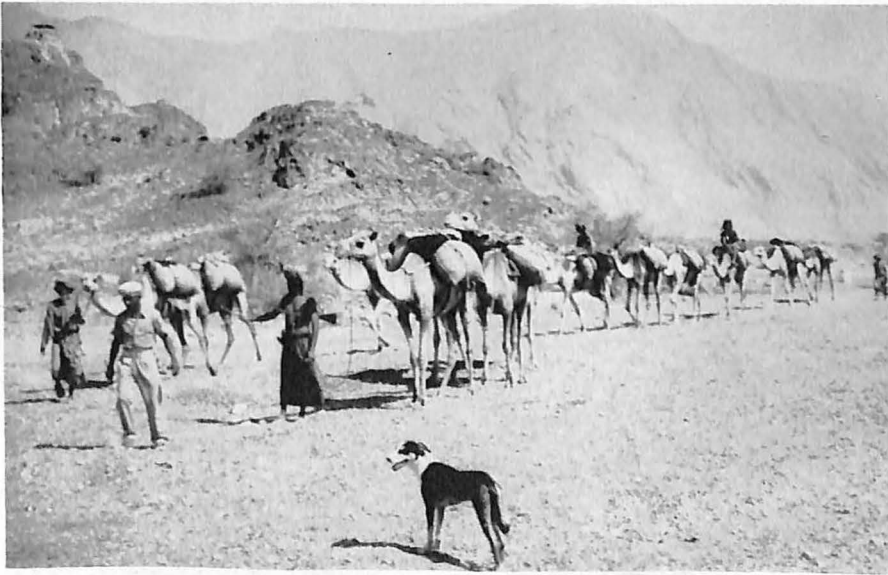
OIL RIG 25 MILES FROM DAS ISLAND, PERSIAN GULF



MUKULLA, THE LONELY ARABIAN PORT WHERE THE BRITISH RESIDENT OF THE EAST ADEN PROTECTORATE HAS HIS H.Q.



MUSCAT AND MUTTRA



CAMEL TRAIN AT THE FOOT OF THE JEBEL ALCHAAR ON THE SUMAIL GAP
ROAD TO NIZWA



JEBEL AKHAAR—OMAN

The rock slabs, 5,000 ft. high, up which British troops and the Sultan of Muscat's Armed Forces assaulted the rebel stronghold

terest of many British military and political men has been shown by their advice and help in agriculture, education, irrigation, health and assistance of many kinds—not least by famine relief, the opening and protection of roads and the air evacuation of sick people from inaccessible areas to the British hospitals in Aden Colony.

In February, 1959, a big step forward in constitutional development was made possible by H.M.G.'s support for the Federation which six of the Protectorate States desired to form.

Is all this exploitation, imperialism, colonialism? On the contrary here is the natural development of free men bonding together not only for mutual protection but to give each other greater fiscal strength and more enduring prospects. It is interesting to note that there is yet greater goodwill for us within these combined Federal States than there was in the same individual States before we helped them to federate.

Aden. Geographically within the West Aden Protectorate lies the Colony of Aden but as you know British administration was established in what is now the Colony in 1839 and British protection was later extended to the States around it. The Colony itself is only some 30 miles by 10 if you include the two peninsulas whose volcanic fists embrace the harbour. Much of this area is either water or sheer volcanic rock and slag. Political development has naturally followed economic growth, stimulated by the turmoil of Arab Nationalism since the war, and to some extent by the progress of certain less well developed or economically sound countries, such as Somalia. I believe we should assist this progress—I do not mean speed it up, but help the people both of the Colony and the Protectorate to develop the right organization, and to achieve the strength that alone can keep them free. I believe the goodwill that is now ours should be nurtured and built upon and I am certain that the legitimate aspirations of the people of Aden can be reconciled with H.M.G.'s rights in the Colony for so long as it is necessary for us to retain them, and that we can secure their friendship and alliance long afterwards.

If we resist the natural development and aspirations of these intelligent, but impoverished people we shall lose the goodwill we now possess and jeopardize our security in Aden, and therefore our ability to protect our oil.

Yemen. The consolidating force in the West Aden Protectorate is, as I have said, the attitude of the Yemen to the North. The Yemen is ruled by an autocratic Imam—a combination of King and spiritual leader—who constantly lays claim to rule the whole of South West Arabia. He, the present Imam, is of the Zeidi sect drawn from the hill tribes of the Yemen and the dominating, though numerically smaller, part of the population. The rest of the population, particularly those in lowland areas are, like the tribes of the Protectorates, of the Suni Sect. Zeidis and Sunis are, in the Mohammedan world, incompatible.

In furtherance of his claims to rule South West Arabia, the Imam of Yemen has in the past attacked the Protectorate border tribes and has spent much effort in supporting dissident elements in the Protectorate States but it is unrealistic to think of these activities as warfare in the European sense. Although there is a well recognized border between the Yemen and the

Protectorate it has always been disputed by the Imam. It is not like a frontier so much as a county boundary, for tribesmen move freely in both directions and regularly attend the "Suq" in each other's territories. But over the past year there has been an absence of attacks by the Yemen on the border and a lessening of subversion within the West Aden Protectorate States.

Saudi Arabia. Now behind all these Territories lies the vast central mass of Saudi Arabia—rich in oil but overspending its income, not always in a manner best calculated to improve the country's economy. Saudi Arabia is still a despotic country ruled today by a clique of princes under King Saud and Prince Feisal. With a country so vast, and a relatively large income from oil, it might be expected that the policy of Saudi Arabia would be a stable and positive one, which would give a lead to the Rulers and the populations of the small peripheral States, but under the present King, Saudi Arabia has pursued a wavering policy. On the one hand it is conservative and mediæval, though it is clear that the real interests of the Saudi monarchy are bound up with the West. On the other hand, the Ruling Family do not have the courage to oppose Nasser, and they pay lip service to his kind of Arab nationalism. They are also resentful of the British connection with the Persian Gulf States. The result is that Saudi Arabia does not play the leading role she might be expected to play. If her Rulers could be persuaded to co-operate wholeheartedly with the Western world in the combating of communism, great good would come of it. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabian policy in the past has not been such as to inspire confidence among the small Arab States round her periphery whom we protect. If the Buraimi issue and the troubles in Oman are to be regarded as evidence that Saudi policy aims at control of the whole Arabian peninsula, the possibilities of an accommodation are distinctly limited. Such a Saudi policy would, of course, be in accord with Russian and Egyptian objectives.

So the pattern of interference becomes apparent. Both Russia and Egypt, for their own separate reasons, wish British influence removed from Arabia. Both hope to find in the Yemen, and in Saudi Arabia, countries within Arabia which will play their game and further their ends, for their own expected gain. The facile cry of Arab Nationalism is the basis—the tide it is called by some, the flood by others.

I have a great suspicion of these terms, once applied they create a picture of inexorable certainty much beloved by their originators and all too easily believed by their listeners—is it a true picture?

I do not believe it is. In parts of Southern Arabia there are the remains of cities and complicated irrigation systems which go back to 300 B.C. Arabia is very old and its history is uncertain and largely unrecorded but its people although impoverished are not savages. They have long established customs, age old laws and Rulers who count their descent back to the times when our ancestors wore woad—just as the native Bedou today wear indigo.

Their lack of progress since those times is a matter of economy. Until recent time Arabia produced nothing of value. Without trade and money,

and without the means, either material or physical, of attracting outsiders Arabia has remained a country of peasant workers, of Bedouin herdsmen or Coastal fishers ruled over by hereditary families. It is tribal because shortages of water and lack of communications have tended to isolate communities and force on them the need to defend themselves from marauders.

Arabia, as I know it, is not "national," nor cohesive and I would have said that Arabians were about as much like each other in different parts of the country as Europeans are in Europe. Indeed the tendency for coastal Arabs to travel all over the Indian Ocean and on to the Far East confirms this comparison, for these external journeyings—much easier than those inside Arabia—have brought in many foreign strains of blood.

One thing, however, is common to most of Central and Southern Arabia—her people there are mostly illiterate. Their sources of news are verbal. In these circumstances radio is a more powerful influence than it would be if the printed word could provide the factual information which is available in other parts of the world to counteract anti-British propaganda. The sponsors of Arab Nationalism have chosen radio as the principal medium to reach and influence the Arab people. As a result of its impact we have for years now fought a defensive battle in support of law and order and in the interests of peace and free development and we have been much hampered by lack of adequate radio coverage ourselves—steps are now being taken to improve things in this field and I believe that much can be achieved in this way, for the Arabs have a strong sense of honour and an admiration of truth and of strength—they also have a strong sense of humour, particularly of the ridiculous.

These qualities give us a great chance to cash in on the goodwill we already possess, because the propaganda of Cairo, Damascus and Sana radios is so blatantly inaccurate that it would not be difficult to discredit it, particularly if we can provide programmes run by Arabs with items of local interest and if we compete with Cairo on entertainment value.

I'd like to end by telling you a true story which illustrates the sort of way in which Cairo radio's inaccuracies can be exposed and turned to good advantage by exploiting the Arab sense of humour.

After the Oman operations in 1959 and just before a muster parade of the Trucial Oman Scouts on their return from the Jebel Akhdar, Cairo radio announced triumphantly that Colonel Carter their beloved Caid, had been killed by the "Free Omanis." Colonel Carter promptly ordered the flag to halfmast, and then, advancing on to parade, he solemnly informed his delighted men of the tragedy which led to this lowering of the Colour!

This is only one of many incidents which could be used by us to offset the advantage which Russian and Egyptian interests now hold over us and which has helped them to use Yemen and Saudi-Arabian aspirations against us.

The line of action which I suggest is necessary in order to retain our goodwill, and our security in this part of the world, is an active and whole-hearted prosecution of the radio war which has been waged against us. That this can be effective is demonstrated by the stand taken against Cairo propaganda by the courageous little King of Jordan.

Mrs. FERGUSON: On the subject of B.B.C. broadcasts, are steps going to be taken to make broadcasts to these countries?

Air Vice-Marshal HEATH: I think so. There has already been some beginning on this. I admit I would like to see more action and initiative being taken, but there has been a beginning.

Wing-Commander MACRO: Can you say anything about any airfields between Salalah and, say, Muscat?

Air Vice-Marshal HEATH: Yes. There are a large number of landing strips of a minor capacity all over Arabia and many of them can be re-activated at short notice for taking light transport type of aircraft, and some will take a thing like the Beverley which is big and heavy and which will take off in a short distance and land in a short distance. But the main airfields are the ones I have described—Ryan, Salalah, Sharjah and one on the South-East tip of Arabia on the island of Masirah. There are two or three in Oman which can be activated when necessary. There is a big one with good runways which were laid down by the oil company at Fahud, where they thought they had found oil, but it turned out to be dry, so there is an airfield there and nothing else.

Colonel CANTLIE: I have a report that gun emplacements have been built at Perim. Can you say whether there is anything effective in them?

I would like to ask a second question about the radio war you talked about. A good many of us at this end in London have been pressing for this for some time, and one objection which is raised, which may be valid, is that it is difficult to put on a specially interesting programme to attract the general listeners because Cairo scooped practically all the entertainers and so on to which the Arabs like to listen. I do not know whether there is anything in that—I would not like to say; it may be merely a question of finance. Possibly you have some information on these points.

Air Vice-Marshal HEATH: On your first question, Perim is, of course, British. In fact, it comes under the Governorship of the Governor of Aden, but on the mainland next to Perim is part of the Yemen Coast called Bab el Mandeb and on that part there are some gun emplacements. I do not think they were built by the Russians, they were built by the Yemen, but they do contain some modern Russian weapons. I have watched them with interest. They are singularly ill-placed and I do not know what they are there for; they seem to be a great waste of money.

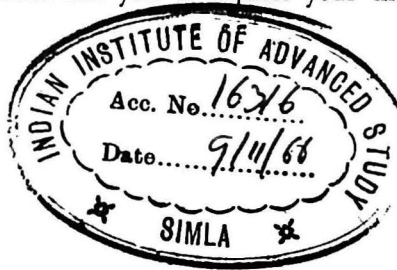
On the second question, this is an attitude which is quite common, and I certainly came across it, but it is an attitude of defeat—someone puts on a show, so we cannot put on a better one. I do not believe it. As to scooping Cairo Radio, this is just too easy, but admittedly we have to spend some money. But is it better to spend money on something constructive which will educate these people and give them the facts upon which our goodwill rests—which is the truth; that is all we are asking for—or is it better to spend money in trying to block up the holes made in the wreckage of our position by the untruths put out by Cairo, because we spend a great deal in blowing off bombs and moving troops about over the area trying to make up for what damage is done to us by a whole lot of complete piffle and unpalatable nonsense. I am quite certain we could easily

capture the attention of the Arab listener and having done so, give the facts on which our case would rest of its own accord.

Colonel CANTLIE: There is one more question I would like to ask. In Aden, do you hear the B.B.C. clearly, as there are a great many parts of the world in which it is swamped by more powerful transmission coming from Russia, Cairo and other places?

Air Vice-Marshal HEATH: You can hear it quite clearly as locally, Aden Radio picks it up and relays it. As far as B.B.C. coverage is concerned, one cannot have any complaint. But the point is that the Arab does not listen to the B.B.C. and it is the Arab whom we have to provide with information in the coverage. So far as that goes, it is inadequate. There are Cairo Radio, Damascus Radio, Sana Radio and Baghdad Radio, all of which can be heard more clearly and better than Aden in the local area.

The CHAIRMAN: I am afraid that time is up. It only remains for me to thank Air Vice-Marshal Heath for his extraordinarily interesting lecture. When there is so much pessimism heard not only outside but inside this country about the position of the Arab world, it has given us all joy to hear someone just back from there speaking with this robust note of optimism. I would ask you to express your thanks in the usual way. (*Applause.*)



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