

## **BAHRAIN SOCIETY PRESENTATION BY JEREMY WILLIAMS OBE AT THE MIDDLE EAST ASSOCIATION ON TUESDAY 28 MARCH 2006**

Jeremy Williams OBE was an Army officer who had served in five Gulf military and diplomatic appointments. He was Defence Attaché in the British Embassies in Abu Dhabi during the Iran-Iraq war and in Bahrain during the Gulf Kuwait war. He said that he first knew Bahrain in 1969 when he stayed at the Moons Hotel on a visit from British Troops Sharjah.

He said that he had for many years been troubled by the level of Western ignorance of Arabs, such ignorance being indicated by the types of questions frequently asked of him by visitors and during telephone calls from UK when he worked in his two embassies. He gave as examples *"Why is the embassy always closed on a Friday?"* and *'Iranians are Arabs, aren't they?'*

He thought that helping Western businesses understand how best to approach and behave in Arab markets would be a suitable retirement job. But he now found himself fully busy dealing with the now dangerous levels of Western ignorance of Arabs and of Islam.

He said that as MD Handshaikh Ltd ([www.handshaikh.com](http://www.handshaikh.com)) he was retained by large Western companies to give seminars that focused on the company's specific needs and expectations in the relevant Arab country, mainly but not always GCC countries. He cautioned against the expression 'The Arabs' since the diversity of the Arab world meant that such a general term was too simplistic.

He recognised that his audience tonight was unusual in that it already knew the Arab world in general and Bahrain in particular, unlike his regular audiences.

His talk would be in two parts, the first being some stories about his time during the Gulf war in Bahrain, and the second being comments on Bahrain's future. At the start of the Gulf Kuwait war there was no Defence Attaché resident in the embassy in Bahrain. A visiting accreditation from



Defence Attaché Riyadh was in place. As he had just completed his tour of duty in Abu Dhabi with his ambassadors Michael Tait and Sir Graham Burton, he was recycled to Bahrain. His ambassador was Sir John Shepherd, (see picture with Gp Capt David Henderson RAF, each with their new mobile phones, devices unknown beforehand).

He decided to operate in the three circles of The Embassy, The RAF and The Bahraini Minister of Defence. He tried to maintain personal daily contact with all three elements and to transmit,

explain and give warning of the intentions and concerns of all three to all three. He would often sleep at the re-constructed RAF Muharraq rather than his hotel.

He remembered being horrified to learn on one occasion that the secret target list being prepared in Riyadh for the next day's USAF etc. raids on Kuwait and Iraq included Kerbala. He was pleased to have played a part in the cancellation of a bombing raid on or near one of the Shi'a's holiest sites. For him this was the most extreme of all his cross-cultural 'moments' and he was glad to have helped avoid an incident that might have brought considerable stress to the Coalition Forces.

He recalled the frequent fear of Scud attack on Bahrain with the attendant risk of chemical and nerve agent attack. The windows and doors of the embassy were sealed with plastic sheeting and sticky tape, and, after a warning of a Scud launch had been received via the US 'Cold War' satellite system, everyone donned their respirators (gas masks) and continued to work in their offices. If at the airfield, you ran quickly to the shelters, and the Press – after a slow start – quickly learned to join the rush to the shelters. Most if not all the embassy staff and the RAF had received a voluntary cocktail of inoculations for various plagues.

The RAF had established a BATELCO pager system that broadcast warnings of Scud attack to UK and Bahraini officials and the RAF throughout Bahrain. The Bahraini government broadcast warnings by TV. Soon the BATELCO computer that operated the pager system became overloaded as word spread and more and more people joined the pager's group call. The 'Cold War' warning system was triggered by the bright glow of missile launch only; it was not until the missile had later been tracked as bound for Israel or Riyadh rather than south east down the Gulf could we stand down. The effect, not just in Bahrain, was that there were many false alarms.. These were frightening times for the whole of Bahrain. On his departure visit to the Minister of Defence he was invited to take as a memento a small piece of one of the two Scuds that had hit Bahrain.

One task that the RAF arranged at the embassy's request for British expatriates was the issue of respirators. He recalled the professional reassurance and quiet but firm efficiency of the RAF in a local gymnasium issuing respirators only to those who appeared with British passports. In terms of survival the need to prove one's nationality, and to have one's passport to hand, was never more acute. A number of non-Britons appeared with British spouses expecting, even demanding, respirators. No entreaty or offer of money would sway the issuers of respirators - *Wasta* didn't work with the RAF! And because the British government had agreed to look after Cypriots in Bahrain (and the Gulf countries generally) there were a number of 'workers' who publicly received respirators, not their employers, some of them Saudis. Difficult moments; all handled with good humour by the RAF whom seemed, in due course, to find extra stocks of respirators from special sources. It was said that in the souks of Saudi Arabia the going rate for a respirator at this time of tension was Saudi Riyals 5000 (£760). And the number of expats who had lived for years in Bahrain but had never registered with the embassy increased dramatically - fear and the precaution to be on any evacuation list was a great encouragement to register.

After the war was over, and as RAF Muharrak was being dismantled and returned to normal Bahraini control, many items purchased by or given to the RAF were sold off. One special item was Dell Boy's Reliant Robin of Trotters' Independent Trading fame. This had been filled with chocolates by some



kind benefactor in UK and given to the RAF in UK. Somehow it had found its way to Bahrain and its disposal was now a problem. The RAF decided that the British Club should be given the honour of this gift! The picture shows the car leaving RAF Muharraq.

After the war the British ambassador Sir John Shepherd decided that, as a mark of respect and thanks from UK to Bahrain for the use of the island as a base of operations, he would give an early-evening dinner for The Ruler, Shaikh Issa,

known to many in the audience. The RAF had been asked to provide a map showing their flights from Bahrain on their first night's operation. Shaikh Isa appreciated the gesture of the map, and what it represented, but quickly focused on how the location and ownership of the Howar Islands was shown on the British map. Now that the threat from Sadam Hussain was at an end he saw the dispute with Qatar (now resolved) as much more important.

**The Present.** Jeremy Williams said that before he turned to Bahrain's future he proposed to remind his audience of the present arrangements in the country and he outlined a number of population and GDP considerations. He said that Bahrain had:

- An Hereditary Monarch
- An Appointed Council (The Shura Council appointed by the King) of 40 members and
- An *Elected* 'House of Deputies' of 40 members who served 4 years. A Jewish lady, Christians, Sunni, Shi'a etc. were all included.

There were no political parties but political societies were permitted. Bahrain was proceeding at its own pace towards democracy and there was no need for any 'help' from the Americans in this regard. Bahrain knew what it needed to do and was doing it in its own fashion, like many Arab countries. He said that he had noted in several conversations with Arabs that there was some resentment at the West's, i.e. American, presumption that there was only one form of democracy that could be

respected. He hoped that 'Arabs' would now engage professional 'spin doctors' to correct the image of Arabs generally, especially in the mid west of America where 'Arab' and/or 'Islam' simply means 'Danger'.

**The Future.** Jeremy Williams had visited the Bahrain Embassy in London in preparation for tonight's talk and had asked HE Yousef al-Jameel, the Deputy Head of Mission, what he saw as the top items on Bahrain's agenda now. Yousef had promptly replied that 'Reform' was right at the top of that list. Reform was needed in its widest sense. Yousef said that political and economic reforms were both important but changes in these two areas had to go hand in hand. There was no point, he said, in rushing ahead with political reform if the economy could not support political changes, and vice versa.

**Steady reform.** Yousef had said that reforms must be done steadily, "*.....not rushed like Algeria where extremists are now in place again*". He believed that perhaps Dubai was going too fast – both Bahrain and Qatar were looking at Dubai's example and were drawing their own conclusions from Dubai's extraordinary pace of change. He noted that under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia is taking a steady, even slow, pace of reform.

**Freedom of speech.** Yousef was proud of the freedom of speech in his newspapers. Criticism was to be encouraged generally but Bahrain did not expect rude or unhelpful remarks against the King or the Government.

**Income.** Yousef said that Bahrain's money comes from petroleum production & refining. He knew that good communications attracted many multinational firms and he encouraged more to come to Bahrain. He said that Rolf, the German car factory, had chosen Bahrain as the first GCC car plant and the output was, mainly, for GCC customers. He believed that the Formula One track helped Bahrain's automotive industry considerably.

**Greatest need.** Asked of Bahrain's greatest need, Yousef had replied that regional stability was the absolute and underpinning requirement. He knew that Bahrain was not unique in this respect, but he recalled that there were several Iraqi families in Bahrain which highlighted the need for a stable Iraq, not least so that families could be reunited. And Bahrain feared a nuclear-equipped Iran.

**Business in Bahrain.** Yousef said that Bahrain welcomed many types of business but he felt that Bahrain saw too many Defence and Oil companies. He hoped that other sectors from UK and other countries would soon be seen. He wanted more factories in Bahrain.

**The GCC.** Yousef commented briefly on GCC passports. He knew that all GCC countries regarded nationality as something sensitive which had to be protected carefully and although there had been some minor discussion on the possibility of a GCC-wide passport it was unlikely that the matter would reach an early conclusion, if ever. However, he thought that a common GCC currency might one day be a possibility, but not soon.



**Book.** Jeremy Williams ended his talk by drawing attention to his book '*Don't they know it's Friday?*' a cross-cultural guide to doing business in the Gulf, now in its 7<sup>th</sup> reprint and available from his web site [www.handshaikh.com](http://www.handshaikh.com) or from most bookshops in the Gulf and UK.