

CHAPTER 14



BRITAIN AND THE GULF: AT THE PERIPHERY OF EMPIRE

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In 1876, Queen Victoria was acclaimed by durbar as Empress of India, and the dual designation of British monarch and empress/emperor was maintained by her successors until 1947. This illustration of the role of India as the jewel in the crown of the British Empire was reflected in British policy in and relations with the Gulf. For the three-and-a-half centuries before Indian independence, British activities in the Gulf were dictated largely by their relevance to India—whether those activities were concerned with commerce, diplomacy, imperial defense, or strategic position.

It was only after the Second World War that oil took center stage and, even then, British strategy in the Gulf seemed to be derived largely from broader, lingering, “East of Suez” concerns and a certain lethargy: Britain had responsibilities in the Gulf because it had always had them, or so it seemed. Not until 1968, when the Labour government announced Britain’s official withdrawal from the Gulf, were these responsibilities abandoned. If, despite its predominant position during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, Britain began its adventure in the Gulf in a minor, tentative way, it certainly left the Gulf in the same manner.¹ In between arrival and withdrawal, Britain based its position on its greatest strength:

Command of the sea is the prerequisite of power in the Persian Gulf. Only twice since the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate has a single state succeeded in imposing a hegemony upon its waters, and in both instances the state concerned was a maritime power—the kingdom of Portugal in the sixteenth century and the empire of England in the nineteenth. . . . Whereas the Portuguese came to the Gulf as soldiers and conquerors, to impose their will upon the Gulf states, the English came initially as merchant adventurers, seeking trade and fortune. Two centuries were to elapse before the attainment of territorial dominion in India compelled them to obtain and hold command of the Gulf. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century their position there was unassailable, and from that time forward the guardianship of the Gulf rested in British hands.²

In very broad strokes, the canvas painted here is a triptych. The early period of British involvement in the Gulf—roughly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before India

came to the foreground—was characterized by the circumstances of British interests outweighing capabilities. The heyday of British influence, that is, the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, was the opposite: power often outweighed interests. After Indian independence, and particularly following official withdrawal, the situation returned to what it was previously: British interests in the Gulf were, and remain, considerably weightier than British power to advance those interests.

It should be noted that there were important differences between the two side panels of the triptych. In the earlier period, the Gulf was of only minor importance to Britain and British India, whereas in the last (and present) period it is of considerable importance. Nor are the entities and peoples of the Gulf the seemingly passive actors they were in the past. Furthermore, earlier Britain was able to make full use of its military and maritime powers to advance its policy goals and commercial interests. Since 1971, Britain has abandoned its role as security guardian for the Gulf and must base its commercial position solely on the quality of its services and products.

This chapter begins by categorizing the nature and types of British interests in the Gulf. For the most part, these are remarkably similar over the long run of three-and-a-half centuries. It then seeks to explain how Britain advanced and protected those interests, and how Indian interests in the Gulf were most often subordinated to broader interests of the empire as seen from London. The chapter ends with an evaluation of the impact of the British experience in the Gulf. Some would judge it to have been a success; others would decry British involvement as simply one more example of unjustified imperialism. But even as the specific events and motivations in the history of Britain's role in the Gulf inexorably fade, it cannot be denied that the impact on both Britain and the Gulf has been considerable and will remain so well into the future.

BRITISH INTERESTS IN THE GULF

The principal impetus for initial British entry into the Gulf was a combination of a search for markets and an effort to deny European rivals supremacy in the region. Indeed, trade was the reason the English East India Company was founded in 1600, and, with English woollens difficult to sell in hot India, trading links were soon established with Iran and the first English factories in the Gulf were established at Shiraz, Isfahan, and Jask in 1617–18. A few years later, in 1622, after helping to expel the Portuguese from Hormuz, the English established their commercial headquarters at Bandar Abbas. Although Gulf trade remained modest, it was important in bolstering the East India Company's trading sheets, thus fending off the company's critics. By 1763, though, declining Persian trade and political turmoil forced the closure of the Bandar Abbas factory and the transfer of the political agency to Basra where a factory had existed since 1723.³

The action against the Portuguese and rivalry with the Dutch and the French illustrate the other motivation for British activity in the Gulf. Still, these seventeenth-century rivalries were of minor significance for British interests in the region. Portuguese power was fading in the first half of the seventeenth century even as British interest was increasing: although the Portuguese retrenched in Muscat after the fall of Hormuz, they were ousted from there by 1650. The low level of British interest in the Gulf meant that the emergent Dutch competition was not an important threat, and by the time Britain began to assert its dominance in India, European developments in the early eighteenth century had forced the Dutch challenge in the western Indian Ocean to subside.

Thus Britain's principal opponent in the conquest of India, just as it was in Europe, turned out to be France. Despite reverses, such as the French capture of Madras, Britain was able to demonstrate its mastery over France in India by the mid-eighteenth century. “[B]y 1765 Britain had become the dominant European power in India, and the East India

Company had transformed itself from a trading company into a territorial power with important possessions in Bengal. The metamorphosis of the company had repercussions on its Gulf operations.”⁴

With trade in the Gulf reduced to virtually nothing and political interests absent (and expressly forbidden by the directors of the East India Company), why did the company not simply withdraw from the Gulf? First, the Bombay Marine, the naval force of the company (as well as being that of the Mughal Empire), had assumed responsibilities for protecting shipping of the India country trade (local trade) and these could not be easily abandoned. Second, it was necessary to protect the route for overland mail. Perhaps even more importantly, the French expedition to Egypt in 1798 revived the European threat to a British area of influence.

As Britain began to deepen its mastery of India in the eighteenth century, the Gulf emerged as a peripheral concern of India, rather than as a strategic concern of London. As a consequence, British policy regarding the Gulf up to the Second World War was primarily formulated and conducted by the Government of India and not Whitehall. More often than not, Indian aggressiveness in the Gulf was stymied by London, which saw the Gulf as possessing only minor importance and certainly not worth jeopardizing grander strategy in Europe. Still, the Gulf’s role in Indian foreign policy was not entirely negligible.

Imperial Frontiers

In the first place, the Gulf represented one of India’s imperial frontiers. It is in the nature of such frontiers to be inherently expansionist. Perceived threats to the British position in India were seen as emanating from various quarters, with one of the principal ones being the direction of the Gulf. If the Gulf was one of India’s outer frontiers, it followed that the Gulf must be kept under British influence and control. European challenges to the British position in the Gulf constituted potential threats to India, either because they threatened British predominance in the Gulf or because they were seen as possible encroachments on India itself. As India established itself in and around the Gulf with factories, political representatives, and military outposts, it found it necessary to defend those elements, and that, in turn, deepened the concomitant commitment.

Another source of commitment came with the rooting of British and indigenous Indian commerce in the region. Commercial interests and resident subjects and property had to be protected. This was a primary factor in the campaign waged against “Arab piracy” in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, and it also explained British hostility to shifts in political power in Muscat in 1868–71 and 1895.

Lines of Communication

The second significant role of the Gulf in Indian imperial policy was its importance in providing lines of communication between India and Britain. The particular nature of these communications has changed over time. Perhaps the earliest was that of mail. Originally, dispatches were sent aboard the East Indiamen ships making their way from England to India via the Cape of Good Hope, but the length of the route meant that replies to messages often took two years to be received. Although the Gulf had been used intermittently for the transmission of posts, a more usual route was across Egypt and down the Red Sea. But difficulties in dealing with the Ottoman authorities made this route intermittently problematic and Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt exacerbated the situation. By the mid-eighteenth century, the route through Basra, Baghdad, and Syria had become well established and resulted in Basra becoming the East India Company’s

headquarters in the Gulf. However, the main route was shifted back to the Red Sea in 1833, and its primacy was aided by the acquisition of Aden in 1839, the construction of the Alexandria-to-Suez railroad in 1858, and completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. Reliable mail communications with the Gulf were restored only with the introduction of a Bombay-to-Basra steamer mail service in 1862.⁵

Another advance was the use of steam navigation to speed imperial communications, with interest expressed during the 1830s in the development of a route up the Euphrates River in addition to the main route up the Red Sea. But the use of steam navigation on open waters appeared only in the 1860s and reached its apogee with the establishment of the British India Steam Navigation Company, which served principal ports in the Gulf as well as offering services elsewhere around the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, the introduction of a steamship service in the Gulf owed much to European political rivalries, and Gulf services, such as the post that was carried up the Gulf by steamship, served only to improve India's communications with the Gulf and not with London.

The telegraph was a contemporaneous technological advance that greatly improved imperial lines of communication. A submarine and coastal telegraph system was established through the Gulf in 1864, enabling the Indo-European Telegraph Department (later Cable and Wireless) to provide an essential and profitable service until undercut by wireless competition in the 1920s. Another submarine cable was laid between Bombay and Suez in 1869.⁶

The final advance in communications was that of air routes. Proposals for a London-to-India air service had been advanced as early as 1912 and were renewed after the First World War. An air service was finally opened in 1921 between Cairo and Baghdad, reducing the time for mails between London and Baghdad from twenty-eight to nine days. Imperial Airways was born in 1923 from a merger of several earlier airlines and it introduced a passenger service between Cairo and Basra in 1927. Continuation of the route through the Gulf, however, faced political problems. Negotiations for a route through Persia were troubled by competing European schemes and by disagreement over the course of the route. A limited service using Bushehr and Jask aerodromes was introduced in 1928 and this was incorporated into the Cairo-to-Karachi service that operated between 1929 and 1932. By the latter date, Britain had reached agreements with various rulers on the Arabian coast to establish aerodromes in their territories and newer, longer-range, aircraft made traversing the long segment between the Trucial Coast and the Makran Coast feasible.⁷

Aerial lines of communication acquired even greater urgency with the Second World War when they constituted a vital, if vulnerable, link between the European and Far Eastern theaters of war. Air routes continued to be important after the war, with the route through the Gulf, which utilized Habbaniya in Iraq as a staging base, supplementing the main Red Sea route. This added importance to retaining treaty arrangements with Iraq and use rights within the Baghdad Pact. The Kuwait crisis of 1961, when Iraq appeared to threaten the emirate's existence shortly after independence, demonstrated the increasing vulnerability of air routes as Turkey and Sudan refused overflight rights during the crisis and the deployment of Royal Air Force units was successful largely because of existing bases in Bahrain and Sharjah.⁸

Responsibilities as Protector and Administrative Requirements

India's expanding concern with Gulf affairs necessarily brought concomitant responsibilities and administrative requirements in its wake. India's efforts to create tranquillity on the seas prodded the local rulers on the Arab coast to agree to a system of maritime truces. These began in 1835 and were renewed at intervals until the General Treaty of

Maritime Truce was concluded in 1853. Britain's formal influence over much of the Arab littoral was reinforced in the 1890s when treaties of protection were signed with the rulers of Bahrain and the Trucial States. Muscat agreed in 1892 not to cede any territory without British approval, thus bringing the sultanate into a subordinate Indian orbit. Treaties of protection were also forged with Kuwait in 1899 and with Qatar in 1916.

Only Najd, Hasa, and Mesopotamia remained outside the British sphere of influence. The latter's situation changed with Indian occupation during the First World War and establishment of the Iraq Mandate in 1920. India's hesitation to embrace Abd al-Aziz Al Sa'ud after his recapture of Riyadh in 1902 was dictated largely by London, which favored the Hashimi kingdom in Hijaz. It took decades for Abd al-Aziz to prove his power and permanence and extend his authority from Najd over Hasa, Hijaz, and the southern borderlands with Yemen. The British championing of Hashimi states in Transjordan and Iraq, as well as stiff resistance to Saudi expansion into the shaikhdoms, hampered bilateral relations and the oil concession was allowed to slip into American hands.

While Persia remained outside India's control, political weakness there virtually dictated greater British involvement in Persian affairs. In part, concern was prompted by Russian inroads. The weak Qajar shah, Muzaffar al-Din, secured two massive Russian loans in 1900 and 1902 and then found his foreign trade closely tied to Russia. British concern over developments was assuaged by the Anglo-Russian Declaration of 1907, which led to the division of Persia into British and Russian zones of influence apart from a central buffer area. This agreement was made possible by Russia's defeat in its 1905 war with Japan and growing British fears of German penetration through the Ottoman Empire. India's concern for the security of the waters of the Gulf and trade with the immediate hinterland led to the creation of a quasi-sovereign position in south Persia.⁹

Thus, by the 1920s, India's predominant position was quite secure throughout the Gulf. Indian interests were administered by a network of representatives along the littoral. Apart from Iraq, which was given its own government in 1921 and independence in 1932, a political resident in the Persian Gulf, headquartered in Bushehr, supervised the system. The political resident was directly responsible to the External or Foreign Secretary of the Government of India. Under him were political agents resident in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Sharjah, Muscat, and eventually Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Because of Muscat's formal independence, the political agent there was also styled consul (later consul-general) and thus reported on some matters directly to the Foreign Office in London as well.

With the independence of India, the residency was shifted from Bushehr to Bahrain but the system remained intact until British withdrawal at the end of 1971. Kuwait's independence in 1961 entailed the replacement of the political agent by an ambassador, and the creation of a new regime in Muscat in 1970 led to the redesignation of the political agent/consul-general there as ambassador in 1971. With the demise of the Government of India, the system was incorporated into the Foreign Office (Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1968).¹⁰

BRITISH REPRESENTATIVES

For the most part, being a British representative in the Gulf was a thankless task. Duty stations were often extremely isolated, living conditions could be exceptionally harsh, and the work frequently ignored by the powers that be. For many, posting to the Gulf was tantamount to a sentence and, for a few, a death sentence (the first four British residents in Muscat at the turn of the nineteenth century all died in short order). The Gulf was a convenient place to send the mediocre and troublesome. For most, toiling in the Gulf meant a career of obscurity.

On the positive side of the ledger, the Gulf Residency could command the resources of men who dedicated their careers to service in the Gulf and were intimately familiar with the people, the ruling families, tribal intricacies, political circumstances, and the languages and culture. Many complemented their official duties by translating cardinal historical and religious texts, by publishing their own histories and observations, and by collecting geological, botanical, and zoological data. This cadre almost constituted a separate Gulf service in practice even if not formally. After Indian independence, when full responsibility for the Gulf devolved upon the Foreign Office, new blood was injected into the Gulf system for a time by old hands from Sudan and Aden.

This chapter would be remiss in not mentioning at least a few of the British officials connected to the Gulf who stood out for both positive and negative reasons. Major-General Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833) first entered the Madras army but turned to civil service as a surer route to advancement, later serving as governor of Bombay and as a member of Parliament. Sent as ambassador to Persia on three occasions, Malcolm sought to advance British interests by making arrangements to freeze out European competitors. Most importantly, he was the first would-be architect of a forward policy in the Gulf, which involved establishing a base there to allow Britain to dominate local politics. Never reticent to advance his own cause with superiors, “Malcolm made a great hero. Judging from his treatment of anybody who stood in his way, he was also the nastiest of [Governor-General] Wellesley’s associates; quite as nasty as Harry Flashman.”¹¹

One of the earliest Residents was Samuel Hennell, to whom fell the responsibility of making the nascent crucial system work.

In 1826, at the age of 26, he was posted to the Gulf as assistant Resident, at a time when the piratical tribes were still smarting from their defeat by [Major-General Sir William Grant] Keir [in 1819], and a half dozen cruisers were required on the station to protect merchant shipping. When he departed twenty-six years later one cruiser sufficed to watch over the peace of the Gulf. . . . He was, without doubt, the greatest Political Resident Britain has ever had in the Persian Gulf.¹²

Equally influential was a successor as resident (1862–72), Lewis Pelly (1825–92), who stanchd Al Sa‘ud designs on the Gulf and thwarted the implementation of an Ibadi imamate in Muscat. He also used his position to advance “modernization” in the Gulf: “He developed and asserted Britain’s extraterritorial privilege in the Gulf as much to assure freedom of business operations as to advance British political influence.”¹³

One of the last of the residents was Sir William Luce (1907–76), a veteran of the Sudan Political Service who subsequently served as governor of Aden (1956–60) and political resident in the Persian Gulf (1961–66). His success in the latter position led to his being recalled from retirement to take on the difficult and thankless task of being the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary’s Personal Representative for Gulf Affairs, that is, to work out the arrangements for British withdrawal from the Gulf and usher the smaller Gulf principalities into full independence. In his role in orchestrating the withdrawal, “Luce had to deal with the vain and arrogant Pahlavi government in Iran, with suspicious Saudis and anxious Gulf Rulers, not to mention his political bosses in London, some of whom were far from committed to the decision to terminate the British protective presence in the Gulf. He charmed everybody, he persuaded everybody, he was patient, good humoured (with occasional explosions) and skilful.”¹⁴

Muscat served as a germinal station for a number of British representatives. Prominent among them was Col. Samuel Barrett Miles (1838–1914), who spent most of 1872–86 serving as political agent in Muscat. He also traversed most of Oman and was one of the first Europeans to venture to many of its remote areas. These journeys were published

in exacting detail in various journals of the day and his death interrupted the completion of his lifetime work, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, which covered only Oman when it appeared in print. "Miles was an accurate observer, a good classical scholar and Arabist, and a keen antiquarian. These qualities are displayed to advantage in the accounts of his travels . . . and in the papers he presented to learned societies in his lifetime."¹⁵

Sir Percy Cox (1864–1937) was another erstwhile political agent in Muscat (1899–1904) who went on to become political resident in the Persian Gulf (1904–13), foreign secretary of the Government of India (1913–14), chief political officer of the Indian Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia during the First World War, and acting British minister to Persia (1918–20). But it was his role as the first High Commissioner of Iraq (1920–23) and his forging the foundations of the Iraqi state for which he is best remembered. With policy in Iraq crumbling because of the 1920 revolt, Cox returned to Baghdad where, "possessed of enough Asian experience to outshine even Curzon, [he] was able to force London to take decisions, however unpalatable."¹⁶

Cox's longtime assistant, Sir Arnold Wilson (1884–1940), served as Civil Commissioner in Iraq (1918–20) and Resident in the Gulf (1920). He later went on to employment with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, became a member of Parliament, and wrote an early authoritative history of the Gulf before dying in combat during the Second World War while serving as a gunner in the Royal Air Force. But it was on Wilson's watch that the 1920 revolt took place. "[S]omehow, Wilson never fulfilled the promise he displayed as a young political officer in Persia, the Gulf, and Iraq. If Curzon never lived down being Viceroy of India, Wilson never lived down being Civil Commissioner of Iraq."¹⁷

TWENTIETH CENTURY CONCERNS

Britain's responsibilities as protector of the smaller states in the Gulf were significant but not onerous. Formally, it acted as the protecting state in foreign affairs and defense. In practical terms, this meant that all diplomatic relations with these states and visa requests were conducted through the Government of India. A small British military apparatus was at the Resident's call. However, until Indian independence, there were few actual requirements for military assistance and the occasional port call by the cruiser at the Resident's disposal sufficed to either protect a new successor as shaikh or apply pressure against a recalcitrant one. While the Resident and his subordinate agents were not directly involved in rulers' affairs, they were able to exercise considerable persuasive power over the shaikhs and, occasionally they helped push rulers into exile.

When Britain thought it necessary to replace a sitting shaikh, it preferred to work behind the scenes and within the ruling family. In 1923, Britain forced the abdication of Shaikh Isa b. 'Ali Al Khalifah in Bahrain and his replacement by his son Hamad b. Isa in order to institute what it believed to be long-overdue reforms in the country. In 1965, members of the ruling al-Qawasim family in Sharjah were encouraged to depose Shaikh Saqr b. Sultan, a thorn in the British side because of his admiration for pan-Arab nationalism and ties to Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and the Arab League. In 1966, Britain prodded Shaikh Zayid b. Sultan Al Nahyan to remove his long-serving brother Shakhbut, who was clearly unsuitable to govern an oil-era state. In 1970, Britain encouraged young Sayyid Qabus b. Sa'id to overthrow his father as Sultan of Oman.¹⁸

The advent of oil-producing status in the Gulf states simultaneously increased and decreased British influence. As functioning governments were formed and expanded, the need for advisers in financial, development, and military affairs also grew, and bureaucrats in London generally picked these advisers for rulers. At the same time, however,

the residency system held little actual power to force rulers and their families to do their bidding. Newly created government departments generally became the fiefdom of close relatives of the ruler, who used them to create personal fortunes and, in many cases, to gain relative independence from the ruler. Rulers came to rely on long-serving British advisers, sometimes to the advantage of Her Majesty's Government (HMG) who thus gained another channel of persuasion. At other times, however, rulers clung stubbornly to advisers that even HMG wished to see long gone, as was the case of Charles Belgrave in Bahrain.

By the mid-twentieth century, oil clearly had become Britain's predominant interest in the Gulf.¹⁹ The combination of British predominance there, the Gulf's emergence as the world's leading source of oil, and the strong position of British oil companies in the region, all served to increase the Gulf's importance in British perceptions. This interest had been building for some time. Only a few years after the discovery of the first oil in the Gulf at Masjid-i Sulaiman in Iran in 1908, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later, Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and later still, British Petroleum [BP]) became a major source of fuel oil for the Royal Navy during the First World War. British oil interests were also responsible for developing the oilfields in Iraq in the 1920s.

During the Second World War, Bahrain was the principal supplier of oil to the Royal Navy. After that war, British oil interests in the Gulf were a major contributor to a positive British balance of payments and Kuwait was a major participant in sterling area accounts. By 1949–50, the Gulf was the source of more than 80 percent of Britain's crude oil imports.²⁰ The Iranian oil crisis of 1953, when Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq nationalized Anglo-Iranian Oil Company assets, threatened to bankrupt the company and devastate the British economy.

The emergence of the Cold War also increased British concern over the Gulf, thus forming another strategic interest, since Britain and the West remained suspicious of Soviet designs for greater influence in the region. While Soviet-backed breakaway republics in postwar Iran were soon suppressed, the Iraqi revolution of 1958 eliminated British bases in that country and introduced a new threat of subversion, with Soviet assistance. The Yemen revolution of 1962 and consequent civil war introduced Egyptian troops and Soviet military equipment and advisers to the Arabian Peninsula. British withdrawal from Aden resulted in the establishment of a quasi-Marxist regime in South Yemen, which then provided active support for the separatist front in southern Oman.

Inescapably, the Gulf became part of Britain's inexorable process of retreat from empire. In part, Britain's retreat from the Gulf was the consequence of changing political circumstances: the ill-advised Suez invasion in 1956 had poisoned Britain's position throughout the Arab world and the accelerating pattern of pan-Arab nationalism made Britain's politico-military position in the region increasingly vulnerable. Rather paradoxically, Britain's abandonment of the Gulf was accelerated by budgetary concerns. The relatively minor expense of maintaining a military presence in the Gulf was judged to be unnecessary and a retrenching Labour government announced withdrawal in 1968.

From 1971 on, Britain's interests in the Gulf had turned full circle: access to markets and the pursuit of local trade were at the top of the list. This became even more of a concern following the 1973–74 oil price revolution when the need to recycle increased payments for oil with a greater volume of trade with the Gulf states was obvious.

THE GULF IN IMPERIAL FOREIGN POLICY

It is perhaps easier to divine the importance of the Gulf to Britain and British India in retrospect than at the time, at least to policymakers in Whitehall. Time and time again, India-proposed strategic policy initiatives in the Gulf were subordinated to perceived

greater Europe-centered policy considerations in London. This was as true of John Malcolm's grand strategy at the beginning of the nineteenth century to establish a British base in the Gulf to dominate local politics as it was of Curzon's grand strategy at the end of the nineteenth century to pursue a "forward policy" to deny European rivals any influence in the Gulf. Even the early advantages in securing the first oil concessions in the Gulf and in crafting the legal bases for British supremacy were not exhaustively pursued, thereby permitting an American entry into the Gulf arena.

It is clear that oil was an important issue that demanded agreements between the oil companies and governments concerned, but there is no good evidence that the desire to control supplies of oil played a decisive part in the evolution of British policy toward Iraq during the immediate postwar period. Nor is there convincing evidence that British policy in the Gulf during the interwar period was strongly influenced by the desire to control oil resources. British oil companies had sufficient oil for their needs, and although they evidently wished to reserve possible deposits for the future, they were unwilling to invest the money needed to develop them.²¹

Although Britain exercised considerable command of the Gulf during the Second World War, its activities there were almost always something of an afterthought.

This seeming paradox in British foreign policy deserves closer examination. Prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, British interests in the Gulf were relatively minor, relating to some trade and European rivalries. The conquest of India and its denial to France and other rivals occupied the focus of British concern and the Gulf received scant attention, left largely to its own internal forces and rivalries.

The first Indian effort to engage the Gulf in a broader strategic view occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century, when Captain John Malcolm, an assistant resident at Hyderabad, was ordered by Governor-General Lord Wellesley to negotiate a treaty with Fath Ali Shah of Persia to prevent further invasions of India by Zaman Shah of Afghanistan, and to oppose any attempts by the French to encroach on the Gulf. In Tehran, Malcolm was struck by the threat posed to the shah's domains by Russian expansionism and recognized its potential for threatening India. In the end, however, the treaty was largely obsolete even as it was being signed in 1801, and its value was soon discounted even as Wellesley was recalled from India.

Resumption of a forward policy in the Gulf began with Wellesley's replacement, Lord Minto, who viewed a new alliance between France, Russia, and Persia, with suspicion. His instrument was Malcolm again, by this time Resident at Mysore. Failing in his 1808 mission to convince the shah to sever relations with France, Malcolm proposed his grand scheme for the Gulf: seizure of Kharg Island off the Persian coast and the transfer to it of the Basra and Bushehr Residencies and all commercial activities in the Gulf. Malcolm secured Minto's approval for an expedition to carry out his plan but the expedition was cancelled when London sent another emissary to Fath Ali Shah, who successfully negotiated a treaty of friendship. London had trumped Calcutta and the Gulf receded from Indian awareness.

Strategic interest in the Gulf did not disappear, however, since the problem of "piracy" retained India's attention. In particular, India was concerned by the activities of the Qawasim, based at Lingeh and Ras al-Khaimah. They had attacked British shipping as early as 1778 and, after a pause, their attacks had increased in 1804 and in the following years, at least partly a result of their alliance with the Al Sa'ud of Najd. Some assistance was provided to the ruler of Muscat in his defense against the Qawasim, but Muscat's efforts were also directed to defending the coast from the invading army of the Al Sa'ud, which was assisted by the Qawasim. In 1809, a naval expedition was sent to attack the Qasimi port of Ras al-Khaimah and Malcolm's instructions included a determination of

the most suitable island in the vicinity on which to establish a residency and keep an eye on the Qawasim. In late 1809 and early 1810, the combined British-Omani expedition successfully overran Ras al-Khaimah, Lingeh, and then Shinas, but most of the Qasimi fleet escaped destruction. In the end, however, Lord Minto abandoned the idea of a base in the region as the Al Sa'ud, to whom the Qawasim were believed to be subordinate, promised to respect British shipping.²²

When Qasimi attacks again became prevalent, another expedition was launched to capture Ras al-Khaimah and other Qasimi ports and to destroy ships and raze all fortifications. Having succeeded in this endeavor, a "General Treaty of Peace with the Arab Tribes" was signed in 1820, and it subsequently included non-Qasimi leaders and tribes as well as Bahrain. Renewed treaties were signed at intervals until the permanent General Treaty of Maritime Peace came into force in 1853. The impetus for a base in the Gulf was still alive, however, and a garrison was established on Qishm Island. But the search for an ideal location was interrupted by an ill-advised expedition to punish the Bani Bu Ali tribe of eastern Oman for acts of piracy. When the Omani-British force attacking the Bani Bu Ali headquarters was routed in 1820, a second, larger, expedition had to be mounted in the following year to avenge the loss. The garrison at Qishm was evacuated in early 1823, in part because of its unsuitability and Persian opposition but, even more, because of Calcutta's unwillingness to countenance a military base in the Gulf for fear of involvement in Gulf politics. From then on, British supremacy was to rest upon diplomacy and a maritime presence (including at Basidu on Qishm island).

Although British supremacy in the Gulf was assured, and trade increased marginally due to the advent of steam navigation, the Gulf remained of secondary interest to Britain and India during the second half of the nineteenth century. Even the Persian War of 1856–57, triggered by Persian expansionist activities in Afghanistan, British opposition to a rival claimant in Muscat in 1868–71, and muted reaction to Ottoman expansionism in Hasa and Qatar in the 1870s and 1880s were little more than aberrations.

Indeed, strategic interest in the Gulf was renewed only in the 1890s. A preliminary measure involved formalization of the British position vis-à-vis the Arab states, prompted by increasing Ottoman and French interest. In 1891, the ruler of Muscat signed an agreement never to transfer any of his domains to any foreign power. In 1892, the various shai-khs of the Trucial Coast (including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, and Umm al-Qaiwain) signed more restrictive agreements forswearing treaty relations with and the acceptance of agents of any other powers. Also in 1892, the shai-kh of Bahrain signed a nearly identical agreement, even though he had signed an agreement in 1880 abjuring relations with foreign powers. Kuwait signed a similar agreement in 1899, and Qatar was eventually brought into line with a similar agreement in 1916.²³

Although these agreements seemed to be little more than a tidying up of an existing British position—one that rested more on influence, persuasion, and policy, and the efforts of individual residents and agents than it did on legal documents—they did provide the foundations for the attempt at a larger forward strategy for the Gulf during the term of Lord Curzon as Viceroy of India (1898–1905). Curzon's vision of empire, and the requirements to sustain it, extended well beyond the narrow confines of India. The Gulf had been of considerable concern even before his viceroyalty, as shown by the publication of his *Persia and the Persian Question* in 1892.²⁴

Furthermore, the Gulf's importance in global geopolitics and the growing interest expressed in the Gulf by Britain's European rivals contributed to its rising profile. As the editor of the *Times of India* during Curzon's viceroyalty remarked,

British supremacy in India is unquestionably bound up with British supremacy in the Persian Gulf. If we lose control of the Gulf, we shall not rule long in India. . . . The moment it

became known that Russia, or Germany, or France, or any other powerful nation, had planted a post within easy reach of the shores of India, an ineffaceable impression of the impermanence of British rule would be produced throughout Hindustan. . . . The appearance of a foreign Power anywhere in the Gulf, under however innocent a guise, would carry one irresistible conviction to the mind of every intelligent Indian.²⁵

Indian sensibilities were particularly excited by French, German, Ottoman, and Russian activities in the Gulf. The French challenge was concentrated in Oman: the French flag was raised on smuggling dhows that resisted the Muscat ruler's authority; French arms dealers operated openly in Muscat's market, their wares destined for the North-West Frontier of India, where they were used against British forces; and Paris sought to undermine Britain's monopoly of influence over the sultan. The sultan was ordered aboard a British warship in Muscat harbor in 1899 and warned that his capital would be bombarded if he did not rescind his permission for a French coaling station in Oman.

The perceived German threat derived from the drive to build the so-called Berlin-to-Baghdad railway with a terminus on the Gulf, most likely in Kuwait. The issue was complicated by the uncertain status of Kuwait, which was claimed by the Ottoman Empire as part of its territory. Britain's refusal to recognize this claim was demonstrated by the treaty of protection signed with the amir of Kuwait in 1899 and, after years of sparring and negotiation, an Anglo-Ottoman understanding to terminate the line in Basra was reached in 1913. The Anglo-German agreement, however, had not been ratified by the onset of the First World War.²⁶

The Ottoman role in Kuwait was seen as one menacing aspect of Istanbul's expansionist drive in the Gulf during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As early as the 1860s, claim was laid to Kuwait, Bahrain, central Arabia, Qatar, and even the Trucial Coast. Hasa was occupied in 1871 and became a permanent, if unruly, possession until its recapture by the Al Sa'ud in 1911. An attack on Qatar in 1892 ended in disaster and the effort a decade later to introduce Ottoman officials there was aborted by British representations in Istanbul. Ottoman claims to Qatar and parts of Abu Dhabi were eliminated only by the "Blue Line" Agreement of 1913. Recognition of Kuwait's autonomy, if not de facto independence, was not completely settled before the outbreak of war in 1914, but the war soon established its independence under British protection.

The Russian challenge was, at the same time, less direct but potentially more threatening. Russian expansionism throughout Asia was viewed warily in India. Not only was the Indian empire threatened by perceived Russian designs on Iran and desire for a warm water port in the Gulf, but also Russian movement from Central Asia potentially imperiled the approaches to India through Afghanistan and Tibet. Through the decades on both sides of the turn of the century, rumors periodically surfaced of Russian planning for a railway with a terminus somewhere on the Persian shores of the Gulf, although such an endeavor never received serious consideration and Russia formally denied its intention to acquire a Gulf port. Russian warships and commercial shipping also appeared in the Gulf, and a Russian bank and consulate were established at Bushehr. In an effort to recognize Russian interests in the region and to control them, an accord was reached between London and St. Petersburg in 1907, dividing Iran into spheres of influence. In the end, the Russian threat to the Gulf, real or imagined, disappeared with the 1917 revolution.

The 1907 accord neatly illustrates the subordination of Indian foreign policy to Britain's broader international interests as seen in London. Curzon's victories in advancing his "forward policy," particularly the 1899 agreement with Kuwait, were few and, following his departure as viceroy, Whitehall assumed considerably closer control over Indian foreign policy. As a consequence, while British interests in the Gulf expanded in the

years before the First World War—notwithstanding the declaration in 1903 of Lord Landsdowne, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, that Britain would not tolerate the establishment of a foreign base in the Gulf—the extension of British supremacy in the region was of a subdued and largely passive nature.

The war, of course, brought its own dynamics. India's operations in the Gulf played a significant, if subsidiary, role in the larger war effort by tying up Ottoman forces on a front complementing British and French operations in the Levant. In addition, India was concerned as usual that India's Muslims might respond to a call for jihad from the Ottoman sultan in his capacity as caliph. Initial plans for the Indian expeditionary force sent to the Gulf were for the protection of the Iranian oil fields, a vital source of fuel for the Royal Navy. But as fears mounted that Istanbul might use the Gulf as another front or seek to undermine British influence there, and as considerations of the postwar political situation emerged, thoughts turned to the conquest of Mesopotamia. An easy start and quick occupation of Basra encouraged further advances, particularly as optimism gripped Delhi and Whitehall. But disaster struck with a serious setback at Ctesiphon in November 1915 and then the surrender of the British forces at Kut al-Amara where they had regrouped in April 1916.

Following this catastrophe, military operations in Mesopotamia reverted to the direct control of the Imperial General Staff in London, which resumed the campaign in early 1917 and captured Baghdad. Although political direction in Mesopotamia remained in Indian hands, there were considerable efforts to divorce it from India, particularly once the Arab Bureau was established in Cairo, with debate centering on whether administration of captured territories should be Arab or Indian in nature. In the end, the matter was settled by the metamorphosis of the Sykes-Picot Agreement into League of Nations mandates by which the French assumed control of Lebanon and Syria, and Britain did the same for Palestine, Transjordan, and Mesopotamia. There was no question of Iraq being incorporated into India, particularly once London replaced King Faisal al-Hashimi's lost throne in Damascus with another in Baghdad.

The new Iraqi mandate was the only place in the Gulf where Britain sought to rule directly. Indeed, while the reasons for Britain's assumption of control over the new state may have been less than compelling, the impact on Iraq was tremendous. For the first time, a single state emerged out of the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. The idea of direct rule was abandoned after the 1920 revolt and, after considerable deliberation in Whitehall, Britain thereafter chose to work through the Sunni establishment under the leadership of King Faisal.²⁷

By this time, the British position in the Gulf was at its apogee. Britain controlled Iraq, supervised the smaller states of the Gulf, exercised considerable influence in Persia, and held the Al Sa'ud in check in Najd. But it is still surprising that Britain did not do more to consolidate its position and isolate the Gulf from the outside world. In part, this may be explained by the continuing bureaucratic war between Whitehall and India over control of the Middle East. When India lost the battle for Iraq, it withdrew bruised and unable to contemplate any new "forward policy."

Most surprising was the British attitude toward Gulf oil. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company and later the Iraq Petroleum Company operated the first oil-producing concessions in the Gulf and, since these provided sufficient oil for British needs, no concerted effort was made to prevent rival companies from gaining a foothold in the region. The Bahrain concession was acquired by Standard Oil of California (SOCAL), which registered the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) in Canada (and later brought in the Texas Company [TEXACO] as an equal partner), apparently as a way to satisfy British objections to American involvement in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. And what turned out to be the most important concession of all, in Saudi Arabia, was secured by American oil companies

operating as the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO), largely because of British lack of interest and parsimoniousness.

RETREAT FROM THE GULF

The Gulf's experience during the Second World War introduced the first of two factors that marked the diminution of the British position. For the first time, the United States made its presence known in the Gulf, particularly through the shared role in resupplying the Soviet Union through the Persian corridor and in its use of British air bases in the Gulf (and along the southern rim of the Arabian Peninsula) in ferrying men and matériel to the Far East. American military advisers appeared in Iran for the first time. British complaints over American airplane damage to the landing field in Bahrain were a spur to the establishment of an American air base in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. This marked the beginning of a change from Britain to the United States in providing the lion's share of military assistance, arms sales, and training efforts to the kingdom.

It should be noted that the American entrance in the Gulf, as tentative as it was for decades, came when the British Empire was collapsing and India was acquiring independence, thus eliminating one principal motive for British concern about the position of rivals in the Gulf. Still, the British government did not concede an American presence easily: U.S. diplomatic representation in the Gulf prior to British withdrawal was permitted only in Kuwait (from 1951) and then only grudgingly. The war also introduced a return of Russian influence to the Gulf, marked first in the abortive attempts to establish republics in Iran and later evolving into Russian political and military support to Iraq, Yemen, and Southern Yemen.

The other factor was the changing political atmosphere in the Middle East. Colonial empires were no longer fashionable and Arab and Iranian nationalism rendered European supremacy and bases in the region increasingly untenable. Indian independence in 1947 was only the first in a long line of colonial and political disengagements. Resistance to Iranian Prime Minister Musaddiq's nationalization of British oil assets in 1953 was unsuccessful. Britain was forced to abandon its bases in Egypt in 1954 and, in a futile attempt to regain its position, participated in the Suez debacle in 1956. The British privileged position in Iraq and its bases there were swept away in the 1958 revolution. Even Britain's provision of forces to defend newly independent Kuwait in 1961 deserved an asterisk: it is by no means clear that Baghdad was seriously contemplating backing up its verbal threats with military force against the shaikhdom.²⁸ The attempt to center British military forces in the Middle East in Aden in the 1960s, in compensation for the loss of Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq, foundered on the emergence of yet another nationalist movement that forced abandonment of Aden in 1967. The final British retreat from the Gulf—the withdrawal from its small air bases in Bahrain and Sharjah and the abrogation of the treaties of protection—was more of a whimper than an exclamation point. No foreign power or even local agitation forced the British withdrawal. It was prompted instead by minor budgetary calculations in Whitehall and a general sense that it was time to declare the empire dead.

It can be argued that the loss of India rendered British interests in the Gulf even more peripheral than before. To be sure, Britain continued to predominate in the Gulf oil industry, to exercise political overlordship in the smaller states, and to enjoy substantial commercial interests, particularly as oil exports first transformed Gulf states and when the oil price revolution dramatically increased their purchasing power. But despite the legacy of its privileged position, the British role in the Gulf was henceforth fundamentally little different from other outside powers. It traded commercial and cultural advantages and military support for recirculated petrodollars and a limited measure of influence.

THE LEGACY OF THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE WITH THE GULF

The long experience of British involvement with the Gulf produced lasting impact on both Britain and the Gulf. There are both tangible and intangible aspects to the impact on Britain. While the long decades of British intrigues in domestic politics, military interventions, political ultimata, and high-handed decisions are becoming largely and increasingly forgotten, the intangible bonds between the United Kingdom and the various Gulf states continue to remain vibrant. Despite its status as an oil-producing country (British oil production outstripped domestic demand by some 1,200,000 b/d as late as 1999 although consumption overtook production in 2006 for the first time), Britain is still heavily involved in Gulf oil matters. While Britain is not dependent on Gulf oil to meet its own needs, the fact remains that primarily British oil companies, such as BP and Royal Dutch Shell, are major players in the Gulf oil industry.

At the same time, the Gulf is an important market for Britain. British construction firms had the inside track in many Gulf states in the early years of the oil boom and they continue to hold a preponderant share of the industry today. British goods, from Land Rovers to household goods and foodstuffs, are ubiquitous imports in the Gulf. British expatriates remain highly visible in the smaller states—as managers in Gulf commercial firms as well as representatives of British industry, and in government and armed forces. Even in Saudi Arabia, the number of British expatriates is not far behind that of Americans. Britain continues to supply seconded military personnel to several Gulf states while others serve on private contract. Britain remains the United States' principal competitor in arms sales, even as British troops have backed up American forces in Iraq. During the period 2002 to 2005, Britain supplied some 27 percent of the total world arms deliveries to the Middle East, second only to the United States at just under 39 percent.²⁹

The impact on the Gulf has been equally significant. Trading links remain strong and British industrial standards dominate throughout much of the region. British schools and universities draw large numbers of Gulf students and the British Council and private British firms provide much of the region's advanced English-language instruction. London and the British countryside remain a favorite summer destination for many Gulf visitors, particularly since September 11, 2001 made many Gulf nationals hesitant about traveling to or studying in the United States. The smaller Gulf states remain close politically to Britain. While the United States, as the world's leading military power, has assumed primary responsibility for Gulf defense, the smaller Gulf states hold fast to their military links with Britain, which is seen as less threatening than often unpredictable American military and political might.

It has also been observed in recent years that American policy in the Gulf has become reminiscent of past British policy. Like Britain, the American role began in a diffident manner but gradually increased in intensity and involvement. Since the mid-1980s, Washington has followed the British experience in engaging in active intervention in the Gulf and has acted for many of the same reasons that motivated Britain earlier: preventing rivals (the Soviet Union) from entering the region, protecting regional interests (supporting Iraq against Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, as well as reflagging the Kuwaiti tankers), propping up the Al Sa'ud despite opposition at home, entering into treaties of security protection with the smaller littoral states, marching into Afghanistan without achieving the objectives of the campaign, and invading Mesopotamia to oust an enemy and impose a subservient government only to find itself increasingly and fruitlessly entangled.

Whereas Britain's justification for such behavior was primarily India, that of United States is overwhelmingly oil. Gulf oil has come to play a much greater role in American foreign policy than it did in Britain's, perhaps because concentration on the essential problem of keeping India secure tended to obscure other goals. It may be also because

of the complacency of British oil companies in the first half of the twentieth century and Britain's self-sufficiency in oil in later years. Yet another reason may be the transformation of the international political environment in which the United States regards itself as having an obligation to protect worldwide access to oil supplies—and the Gulf with two thirds of the world's reserves is obviously the key—while Britain's horizon was more modest in its goal of securing adequate supplies for only its empire. In any case, American policy since 2001 has increasingly come to resemble Britain's imperial attitude: the U.S. government asserts its right to use its power as it chooses to deal with whatever enemies it discerns and local actors are subordinated to accepting and helping to execute this policy.

At the beginning of this chapter, British involvement in the Gulf was described as a triptych. The Gulf was seen as largely peripheral to British interests until the beginning of the nineteenth century when specifically Indian interests gradually created a preponderant British role in the region. It may be speculated that the transformation of British interests in India from commerce (the East India Company) to politics (the Government of India) was a determining factor in augmenting British power to protect the security of India and thus increase its role in the Gulf.

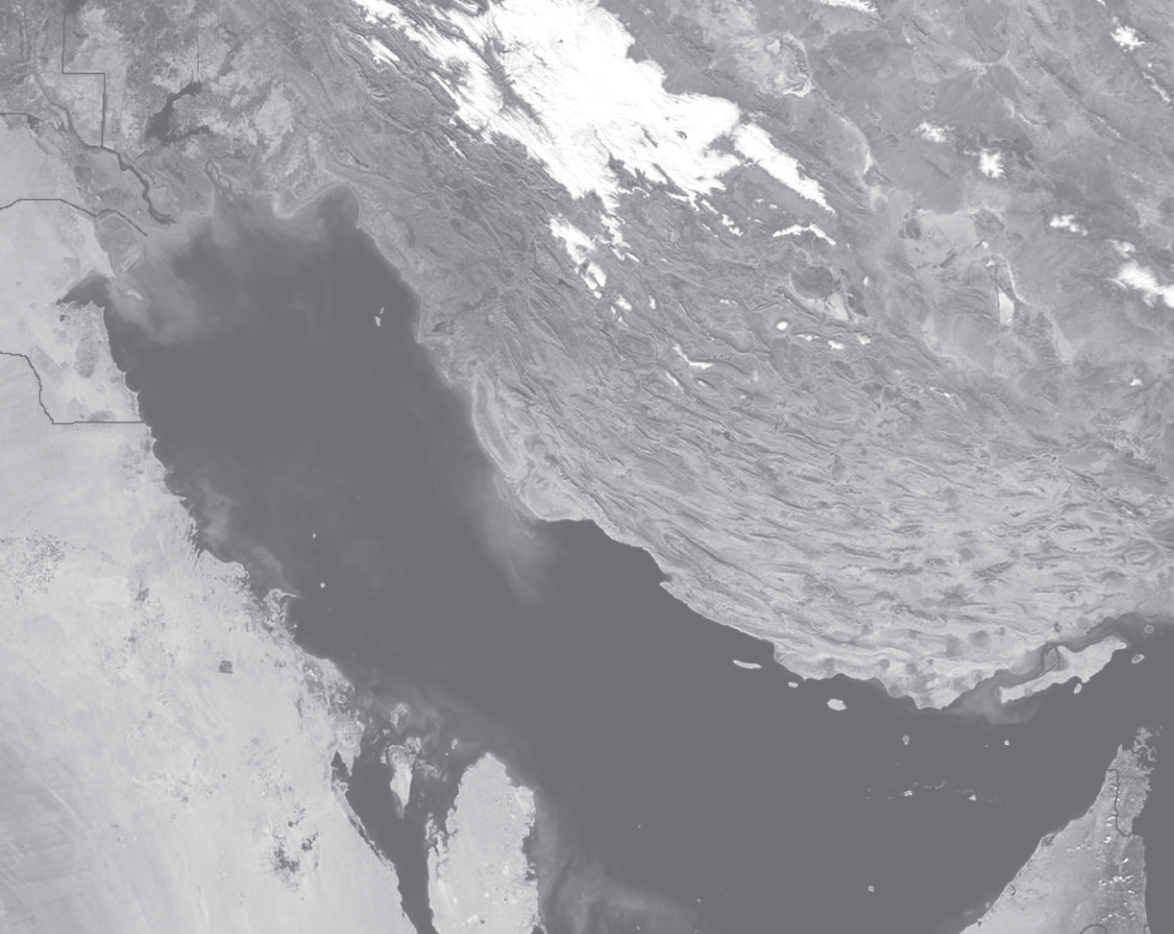
Still, although British power during this period was clearly capable of protecting and advancing British interests, London's concern with the impact on the larger arena served to confine, check, and even deny Indian strategy in the Gulf at nearly all points during the long period until the Second World War. Although perhaps not evident at the time, the British position in the Gulf began its decline from this point for a variety of reasons. The Gulf had been essentially peripheral to Indian interests during the empire. With India independent, its even more peripheral nature to Britain itself was masked only temporarily by the British retreat from its position in the wider Middle East. Nevertheless, the lessening of British supremacy in the Gulf coincided with Britain's declining ability to protect its interests and its friends there. Withdrawal in 1971 may have seemed fickle to some at the time, but in retrospect, it was clearly time to go.

NOTES

1. I have used the terms "Britain" and "British" throughout this chapter for the sake of consistency, even though it would be more usual to speak of "England" and "English" in the first half of the period under review. Similarly, use of the terms "India" and "Indian" in this paper should be understood to mean the British government in India, unless otherwise indicated.
2. J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795–1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1.
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4. Yapp, "British Policy," 71.
 5. Halford L. Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (London: Longmans, Green, 1928; repr. London: Frank Cass, 1966; New York: Octagon Books, 1966).
 6. Hoskins, *British Routes to India*, 373–97; Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, vol. 1, Appendix J, "The Telegraphs of the Persian Gulf in Their Relations to the Telegraph Systems of Persia and Turkey," 2400–38; and Christina Phelps Harris, "The Persian Gulf Submarine Telegraph of 1864," *Geographical Journal*, vol. 135, Pt. 2 (June 1969): 169–190.
 7. J. E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
 8. Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez, 1947–1968* (London: Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1973); David Lee, *Flight from the Middle East: A History of the Royal Air Force in the Arabian Peninsula and Adjacent Territories, 1945–1972* (London: HMSO for the Ministry of Defence, Air Historical Branch, 1980).
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 10. On the development and structure of the system, see J. B. Kelly, "The Legal and Historical Basis of the British Position in the Persian Gulf," *St. Antony's Papers*, no. 4; *Middle Eastern Affairs*, no. 1 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958; New York: Praeger, 1959), 119–40. For a study of the Gulf as an instance of Britain's "informal empire" as viewed through the employment of native agents in Bahrain, see James Onley, "The Politics of Protection in the Gulf: The Arab Rulers and the British Resident in the Nineteenth Century," *New Arabian Studies* 6 (2004): 30–92; as well as the same author's *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007).
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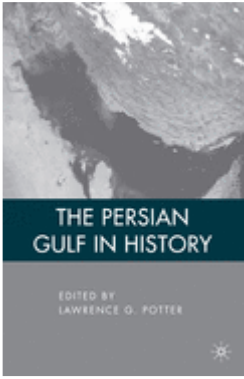
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19. Stephen H. Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Marian Kent, *Oil and Empire: British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil, 1900–1920* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Peter J. Odell, *Oil and World Power: Background of the Oil Crisis*, 8th ed. (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986); and Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).
 20. Yapp, “British Policy,” 93.
 21. *Ibid.*, 89.
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 23. The absence of any commitment to forsake other foreign relations in the Muscat agreement was due solely to the Anglo-French Declaration of 1862 in which both sides agreed to respect the independence of Muscat and Zanzibar. The texts of all these agreements are to be found in Aitchison, *Treaties*, vol. 11.
 24. G. N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1892; repr. London: Frank Cass, 1966).
 25. Lovat Fraser, *India Under Curzon & After* (London: William Heinemann, 1911), 112–13. See also the argument of American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and International Relations,” *National and English Review*, no. 40 (September 1902): 27–45.
 26. German activity in the Gulf also included the establishment of a German commercial firm along the Persian shore, the same firm’s mining concession on the disputed island of Abu Musa, and the introduction of commercial shipping arrangements in the Gulf that undercut the prices of British lines.
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THE PERSIAN GULF IN HISTORY

EDITED BY
LAWRENCE G. POTTER





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