Full citation:
J.E. Peterson. "The Historical Pattern of Gulf Security (2001)." Online edition from www.JEPeterson.net (posted February 2002)

Originally published as:
J.E. Peterson. "The Historical Pattern of Gulf Security." In Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds., *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles, and the Search for Consensus* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 7-31.
N.B. The text in this online edition has not been changed from originally published version.

THE HISTORICAL PATTERN OF GULF SECURITY

More than a century ago, Bismarck declared, "In international affairs, there are three wasps' nests besides the Balkans: Morocco and the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the American Monroe Doctrine; God grant that we may never fall into one of them."[1] Today it is an obvious truism that the primary factor behind concerns for Gulf security is access to oil. It is also self-evident that the key global significance of Gulf oil is a manifestation of only the past few decades. But, as Bismarck's observation demonstrates, the Gulf has been an area of geopolitical importance long before the discovery of oil. Indeed, the Gulf has served as an arena of international concentration and rivalry for centuries and even millennia.

At the same time, it can be observed that the role played by oil today in international concern about Gulf security is not dissimilar to the manner in which other commodities and motives concerned international actors in the past. A closer examination of certain of these themes of continuity in external actors' goals in the Gulf region may well contain worthy lessons for the present and salutary considerations for the future.

It can be postulated that the involvement of external powers in Gulf security has arisen from one or more of three principal motivations: trade, political rivalry, and imperial security. Of these, commerce is perhaps the most obvious factor and itself is divisible into two overlapping subcategories: (1) the protection of (or the desire to penetrate) long trading routes crossing or deriving in the Gulf; and (2) local or regional trading. The earliest well-known example of a trading route traversing the Gulf region was that of the Silk Road, originating in China and terminating in the Mediterranean. Although its heyday was during the period of Roman control of its western terminus and while it declined after the rise of Islam, the Silk Road remained an important route through the time of Marco Polo.

---

[1] Cited in Mary Evelyn Townsend, *The Rise and Fall of the German Colonial Empire, 1884-1918* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 309.

The spice route was in many ways even more central to the Gulf. In addition to transporting cinnamon, cassia, cardamom, ginger, and turmeric from East to West, Arab merchants also exported the southern Arabian products of frankincense and myrrh. Unlike the silk route which was mainly overland, the spice route proceeded largely by sea. Although first the Egyptians and then the Romans commanded the western terminus in antiquity, control of the spice route through its central course was jealously controlled by Arab merchants and states, despite periodic attempts to break the Muslim monopoly (shared in medieval times with Venice and to a lesser extent Genoa). The desire to deal directly with the sources of spices was a principal motivation in the launching of the European age of exploration.

Properly speaking, the frankincense trade can be considered local trade within the Gulf. And of course trade between the Gulf and the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia is an age-old occurrence. Direct European trade with the region, however, awaited the development of the maritime routes around the Cape of Good Hope. In this light, oil can be regarded as both a modern manifestation of local trade and as a network of long trading routes requiring protection as part of the necessity of guaranteeing access to oil.

The second fundamental factor in external concerns, that of political rivalry, stems from the drive of one or more countries to secure control or domination of the Gulf, whether its littoral(s), its hinterland, or its waters. Through the course of history, one of three broad situations can be discerned as existing at any one time: (1) effective domination by a hegemon seeking to protect entrenched interests (such as the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries); (2) a bipolar balance-of-power state of affairs (the Byzantines and the Sasanids; the Ottomans and the Safavids; the United States and the Soviet Union); or (3) a more fluid condition of multilateral sparring and jostling.

As to the third motivation, several dimensions to the rather imprecise category of imperial security can be discerned. The imperial impetus assumes that an actor seeking to or having already incorporated the Gulf, or parts thereof, into its imperial domain or sphere of influence will display unequivocal interests or actions in defense of its imperial position. These may be prompted by such factors as national prestige, advancement of ideology or religion, or perceived threats to the *status quo*. In part, imperial security is internal in that it requires the security of imperial possessions either through direct control or by the maintenance of secure areas of influence. Inevitably this raises the problem of frontiers: where they logically should lie and, once having been defined, how they must be secured. But paradoxically, imperial frontiers can never be established in a definitive sense since their importance lies only in the security they provide for the territory within the imperial dominions or sphere of influence. As a consequence, there is a constant impetus for forward policies, that is, the frontiers can be secured only by securing the further frontier that lies beyond the secured frontier and so on.

Still, as the Gulf essentially has rested on the periphery of empires through the ages – and as the Middle East constitutes a strategic land bridge between three continents – the most important enduring factor in this category seems to be that of establishing and protecting imperial lines of communication. Furthermore, it can be perceived that the construction and relevance of such lines of communications have evolved throughout history as a result of technological progress. Such advances have embraced *inter alia* the development of deep-water maritime vessels, subsequent advances in ship construction and navigational capabilities, especially as utilized by European explorers, the advent of the steamship, telegraphic communications, railroads, and aircraft.

The enduring themes in Gulf security outlined above can best be illustrated by a brief retrospective of Gulf security scenarios throughout history. Before the rise of Islam, two equally matched empires vied for supremacy in the greater Gulf region. The Byzantine Empire controlled the western approaches of the Gulf while the Sasanids held the eastern approaches and the Gulf itself. Constantinople had built a monopoly on trade between Asia and Europe, but it was prevented from dealing directly with China by Persian control of the central segments of the commercial routes. Byzantine-Sasanid relations were always in constant tension and frequent warfare along the frontier failed to budge the *status quo*. In an effort to cut out the intermediaries in the Asia trade, Justinian I (r. 527-565) sought to establish alternative routes circumventing the Sasanids. On the one hand, he explored the northern alternative, by crossing the Black Sea, establishing bases in the Crimea, and opening relations with the peoples of the Steppes. Justinian II (r. 565-578) carried this policy forward by building an alliance with the Turks against the Persians. On the other hand, Justinian I deepened ties with the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum in an effort to develop a maritime route through the Red Sea and across the Indian Ocean. These efforts were not successful, however, and instead the Byzantines' greatest *coup* was discovery of the secret of silk and its subsequent manufacture in Byzantine territories.[2]

The struggle between Constantinople and Ctesiphon continued unabated until the rise of Islam. The Islamic armies from Arabia first drove a wedge between the two ancient warring states and then succeeded in displacing the Byzantines in their Middle Eastern possessions and in conquering Persia as well. Thus the Islamic empire ended a balance-of-power *régime* in the Gulf/Middle East by establishing a centuries-long predominant empire controlling the heart of the region.

As Umayyad rule gave way to 'Abbasid, the locus of the Islamic state moved to the northern Gulf. Although the foundation of Basra in the early days of the Islamic state was the consequence of military requirements, its strategic location ensured that it soon prospered as a center of trade, for the same reasons as had previous commercial hubs in the same area. The positioning of the 'Abbasid capital at the new city of Baghdad, founded in 762, and the predominance of a single powerful political authority in the region helped ensure a shift in the relative importance of long-distance trading routes from the Red Sea to the Gulf. Even the decline and fall of the 'Abbasids as a result of the Mongol invasion did not erase the significance of Gulf trade: the emporia of Siraf, Qays, and Hormuz thrived in turn.

Politically, however, the collapse of the 'Abbasid state led to a long period of fragmentation during which Arab, Mongol, Turkish, and other rulers vied for power and territory. It took several centuries before the Gulf returned to a more durable balance-of-power status, this time with the Ottomans standing in for the Byzantines and the Safavids (and later the Qajars) succeeding the Sasanids. This was the prevailing situation on the eve of European penetration of the Indian Ocean.

[2]Georges Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l'Empire Byzantin* (Paris: Payot, 1956), pp. 103-105.

The Portuguese impetus to explore the seas and lands beyond their immediate shores result from a combination of scientific, economic, military, political, and religious motives.[3] (A contemporary Portuguese chronicler advanced five motives behind the Portuguese drive to explore. The first of these was to explore the African coast beyond the cape of Bojador in order to know what existed there. The second was to find out whether there were any Christian people in Africa with whom it might be possible to conduct profitable trade. The third was to ascertain correctly the extent of the territories of the Muslims because every sensible man naturally would like to know the power of his enemy. The fourth was to discover if there was any Christian kingdom which would help in the war against the Muslims. The fifth and final motive was to extend the Christian faith and "to bring to Him all souls that wish to be saved."[4])

Without doubt, the Portuguese court, especially through the influence of Prince Henry the Navigator, was intrigued by the complementary challenges of expanding geographic knowledge (and dispelling myths about the dangers of the Atlantic), setting new standards of navigational principles and cartography, and establishing a fleet of state-of-the-art ships. But, not surprisingly, a commercial motive was also central to Portuguese thinking. In the same way that the Byzantines had monopolized the western terminus of the Oriental trade routes, so the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople enabled them to control Europe's supply of spices, pearls, ivory, silk, and other textiles. Like other European powers, the Portuguese ambition was to discover trade routes independent of the Ottomans.

In addition, five centuries of struggle for independence against the Muslims had produced a keen sense in the Portuguese psyche of the Islamic world as enemy. This manifested itself in both the political and the religious spheres. On the one hand, a successful undermining of the Ottoman control over Oriental trade would seriously weaken Europe's greatest rival. On the other, Christian expansion into Asian waters was regarded as a maritime extension of the Crusades. Hand in hand with conquest went conversion and Portuguese accounts of their exploits frequently spoke of carrying the sword in one hand and the crucifix in the other. Even the legend of Prester John seemingly had played its part in stoking religious fervor, and his "lost" Christian kingdom was seen as a potential ally against the Muslims and as a possible base of operations.

Beginning early in the fifteenth century, the Portuguese used their caravels to extend the limits of navigation down the coast of Africa until Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. By 1498, Vasco da Gama had reached India and he returned home the following year with

---

[3]Discussion of these motives is drawn from K.M. Mathew, *History of the Portuguese Navigation in India (1497-1600)* (Delhi: Mittal, 1988), pp. 74-81, who relies upon H.V. Livermore, *A New History of Portugal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 1. Other sources on the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean include C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Sea-borne Empire (1415-1825)* (London: Hutchinson; 1969); ibid., *Portuguese Conquest and Commerce in Southern Asia, 1500-1750* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985); Paulo Craesbeeck, *The Commentaries of Ruy Freyre de Andrada: In which are Related his Exploits from the Year 1619, in which he left this Kingdom of Portugal as General of the Sea of Ormuz, and Coast of Persia, and Arabia, until his Death* (ed. with introduction by C.R. Boxer; London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930); F.C. Danvers, *The Portuguese in India: Being a History of the Rise and Decline of Their Eastern Empire* (2 vols.; London: W.H. Allen, 1894; reprinted New York: Octagon Books, 1966; and reprinted New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992); and R.B. Serjeant, *The Portuguese Off the South Arabian Coast* (Beirut, 1974).

[4]Gomes de Azurara, *Chronica de Descobrimento e Conquista de Guinea* (Paris, 1841), p. 28; cited in Mathew, *Portuguese Navigation*, p. 74.

the first wares from the Orient. In subsequent years, Portuguese ships captured ports along the Indian Ocean littoral and established factories, particularly along India's Malabar Coast. The first Portuguese fort in Asia was constructed at Cochin by Afonso de Albuquerque in 1504.

It was quickly realized that the protection of Portuguese trading interests would require a strong presence and a permanent fleet. Accordingly, Francisco de Almeida arrived in India as Portuguese viceroy in 1505. With an Indian base centered first on Cochin, Portugal moved in two directions. Expansion in the direction of the Gulf to the northwest was intended to disrupt Muslim commerce, to place pressure on the Ottomans, and to consolidate control of the spice trade. With this in mind, Albuquerque made his way up the East African coast, established a short-lived fort on Socotra Island in 1507, and then captured Qalhat, Quriyat, Muscat, Suhar, and Khawr Fakkan on his way to the Gulf. Hormuz was reduced (although not permanently captured until 1515), which not only provided the Portuguese with control of the entrance to the Gulf but eliminated any threat from the kings of Hormuz and opened Persia to direct trade with Europe. An unsuccessful attempt to take Aden in order to control the entrance to the Red Sea was also made at the same time.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese were also expanding their presence and trade opportunities eastward, capturing Malacca in 1511 and founding Macau in 1557. Although Malacca, at the epicenter of Asian trade, would have made the better Portuguese capital for economic reasons, it remained at Goa in order to better confront the Ottoman threat. As early as the Almeida viceroyalty (1505-1509), Portugal had established mastery of the Indian Ocean. Rather than relying on a strategy of defending factories when attacked by local rulers, Almeida placed emphasis on the expansion of the armada backed by coastal forts *qua* naval bases at key positions. The vigorous application of sea power enabled a monopoly to be established over navigation and long-distance maritime trade.

Albuquerque, Almeida's successor, strengthened Portugal's hegemonic position and even altered the strategy from one of protection of navigation and trading interests through overwhelming sea power to the acquisition of territory in order to better safeguard interests. This marked the emergence of a Portuguese empire in India with Goa (captured in 1510) as its capital. Other forts were built along the Indian coast as well as at Malacca, Ceylon, East Africa, and, in the Gulf, Muscat (1507) and Hormuz (1515).[5]

Thus the Portuguese enjoyed hegemony over the Gulf, as well as the rest of the Indian Ocean, for nearly a century before fading in the face of serious challenges by European rivals and resurgent local rulers. There had always been an aura of fragility to the empire, a consequence of the wide geographic dispersion of its strongholds, as true in the Atlantic as in the Indian Ocean basin, and the constant and severe lack of manpower that more than once left the Portuguese vulnerable to opportunistic Ottoman raiders. Indeed, the Portuguese hegemonic position in the Gulf was threatened throughout this period by Ottoman expansionism into Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Mesopotamia, which was checked largely by Lisbon's alliance with Persia.

---

[5]One fascinating facet of Albuquerque's imperial policy was the encouragement given to Portuguese ranks, particularly artisans such as shipbuilders, ropemakers, gunners, and other workers in the arsenal and dockyard, to marry native women from Goa in order to form a loyal population who would remain in India for life. Despite opposition from other officers and the clergy, as many as 450 marriages took place before Albuquerque left Goa for Malacca. H. Morse Stephens, *Rulers of India: Albuquerque* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), pp. 152-155.

The end to Portuguese predominance in the Gulf came when a joint expedition of Shah 'Abbas and the English East India Company captured the Portuguese stronghold of Hormuz in 1622 and Muscat, to where the Portuguese garrison had fled, fell to the Omanis in 1650. In fact, this marked the emergence of a period of Omani seapower between 1650 and 1730, during which the Arabs expelled the Portuguese from much of the East African littoral and harassed their remaining possessions on the western coast of India.

With the Portuguese decline, the power situation in the Gulf and Indian Ocean expanded from hegemonic to multilateral, with the Dutch making an early bid to supplant Portuguese dominance in the face of vigorous English and French competition.[6] Following the establishment of the Dutch East India Company in 1602, the Dutch gradually usurped Portuguese forts, factories, and settlements around the Indian Ocean, including the capture of Malacca in 1641 and Cochin in 1663.

After the establishment of the company's headquarters on Java in 1607, the Dutch successfully forced England to restrict its interests to India. Besides seeking to monopolize local trade throughout the area, the Dutch concentrated on directing the China trade through their base on Java and protecting the onward route by establishing a station at Cape Town in 1652. The wealth of the company was assured as well by controlling the production, in addition to the exportation, of spices such as nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, pepper, and coffee.

In the Gulf, Dutch aggressiveness moved into the vacuum left by the declining Portuguese, and they frequently were successful in besting the English both in trade with Persia and Iraq and in naval engagements. But in the first half of the eighteenth century, Dutch power in the western Indian Ocean began to decline, principally as a result of reverses in European wars, including the War of the Spanish Succession (1713-1714).

The power eventually superseding the Portuguese as hegemon in the region was Britain. Britain's initial involvement with the Gulf was predicated exclusively upon commercial interests.[7] The English East India Company was incorporated in 1600 and trade with the Gulf quickly supplanted declining Portuguese commerce while competing favorably with the Dutch and the French. A century later, though, the importance of Gulf trade had diminished considerably, and by

---

[6]C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (1965, reprinted 1990); Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976); and Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*.

[7]Principal sources on British involvement in the Gulf include J.G. Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Oman, and Central Arabia* (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1908-1915; reprinted Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg International Publishers, 1970); J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); and Malcolm Yapp, "British Policy in the Persian Gulf," in Alvin G. Cottrell, gen. ed., *The Persian Gulf States: A General Survey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 70-100. On the maritime role, see R. St. P. Parry, "The Navy in the Persian Gulf," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, Vol. 75 (May 1930), pp. 314-331; and J.F. Standish, "British Maritime Policy in the Persian Gulf," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1967), pp. 324-354.

the end of the eighteenth century it had virtually disappeared.[8] Continued British representation in the Gulf and the occasional patrols there by the Bombay Marine could be reasonably justified only in terms of protection of the minor "country" trade from India. Nevertheless, new factors appeared to prevent complete British withdrawal from the area.

Not the least among these factors was the rivalry with Britain's old enemy France. Under the prodding of Colbert, the French established their own East India Company in 1664 and made Madagascar and Ile de France their base of operations. French advances in India, however, apart from the capture of Pondicherry and several other ports, were slow to come, partly due to the strength of Aurangzeb, the last great Mughal emperor, and partly because of competition from the English East India Company. Nevertheless, by 1677 the French company possessed a factory at Bandar 'Abbas. In conjunction with military successes in Europe in the 1740s, the French governor-general of India, Dupleix, succeeded in capturing Madras, but a subsequent treaty returned to Britain its center of power in India and the French East India Company was never able to recover.

The preceding neatly illustrates the point that changing fortunes in colonial arenas and local contentions often were outgrowths of home rivalries in Europe. While France's presence in the Indian Ocean basin never again seriously challenged British predominance, the mere whisper of French intrigues was taken very seriously indeed. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte landed an army in Egypt and easily overpowered that country's Mamluk rulers. In British eyes, however, the real goal was India, and this suspicion was given additional credence with the interception of Napoleon's letters to the rulers of Muscat and Mysore. The destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of Aboukir in 1798 and then Napoleon's ignominious flight to Europe after the unsuccessful siege of Acre in 1799 proved to be only temporary setbacks to French designs. Indeed, it took Napoleon's occupation of Egypt to alert the British belatedly to the country's geopolitical importance.

Instead, France changed tactics and a small fleet was dispatched to the Indian Ocean in 1803, and was followed by the posting of a commercial agent to Muscat in 1807. The treaty of Finkenstein, signed in the same year, would have obliged Napoleon to restrain Russian expansionism in the direction of Persia in return for the Qajar Shah's declaration of war upon Britain and his participation with Afghans in an attack on India. This agreement came to naught, however, as France soon reconciled with Russia and Britain subsequently reached a new treaty with Persia in 1809. The final blow to Napoleonic ambitions came with the British capture of Ile de France (thereafter named Mauritius) in 1810, depriving France of its last major base in the Indian Ocean.

British mastery of the Indian Ocean clearly rested on its supremacy at sea. In this respect, its thinking and practice differed little from that of Portugal several centuries earlier, even though methods of ruling possessions differed markedly. The British Empire was built on and kept ascendant by sea power. The eminent theorist on the subject, Alfred Thayer Mahan, defined sea power as (1) command of the sea through naval superiority; and (2) that combination of maritime commerce, overseas possessions, and privileged access to foreign markets that produces national

[8]Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient*, p. 330, notes a sea change in the nature of European imperialism in Asia at this time with competing East India companies being replaced by an emerging *Pax Britannica* and he pins it precisely to "the first appearance of Indian sepoys on the Mediterranean margins of the European world" when a fleet with British and Indian troops was dispatched to Egypt in 1801 to help expel Napoleon.

"wealth and greatness."[9] For two centuries or more, the technology of sea power – ship design, armaments, and the science of naval warfare – remained virtually unchanged and preserved Britain's advantage, although this began to shift in the latter part of the nineteenth century.[10] Imperial policy depended not only on mastery of the seas but also on control of vital choke points and ports of entry. Thus British possessions came to include Gibraltar, Suez, Aden, South Africa, India, Ceylon, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain had vanquished effective threats from European rivals and was in a position to dominate all maritime activity in the Gulf. A first requirement, however, was to defuse regional threats to the British position. Despite the decline in trade, British and British-protected vessels continued to ply Gulf waters and were attacked with increasing frequency in the early years of the nineteenth century. There are various reasons for the emergence of what the British termed "piracy," including depressed economic conditions along Gulf shores and the decline of existing political authority in the region.

The Portuguese had first applied the term "pirates" in the seventeeth century to the Ya'rubi (pl. Ya'aribah) rulers of Oman, who were then engaged in expelling the Portuguese from their strongholds in the Gulf and East Africa. A century-and-a-half later, the British tended to regard the activities of the Qawasim (sing., Qasimi), who were based along the southern shore of the Arabian littoral, in the same light.[11] The strength of Muscat's rulers was quickly fading at the time and local opposition in Oman to their dominance was enflamed by the alliance with the British. In short order, Muscat's possessions on both shores of the Gulf fell to Qasimi control. The anti-Muscat and anti-European inclinations of the Qawasim were further exacerbated by their conversion to Wahhabism, the puritanical strain of Sunni Islam prevailing in central Arabia and being spread by the efforts of the Al Sa'ud.

To the British, these attacks on the shipping of various flags were an annoyance and were lumped together with the activities of the Gulf's freebooters as "piracy"; as a consequence, the territory of the Qasimi lairs was labeled "the Pirate Coast." The principal British response to this "piracy" came in the form of punitive expeditions launched against Qasimi ports. The first of these was prompted by the growing seriousness of the situation in 1808 when many of those aboard an East India Company cruiser were massacred and Qasimi vessels began to appear for the first time in Indian waters. Consequently, an 11-ship armada laid siege in 1809 to the Qasimi capital at Julfar (modern Ra's al-Khaymah) and burned it. Another Qasimi stronghold at Lingah (on the Persian

---

[9]Philip A. Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian," in Peter Paret, ed., with the collaboration of Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 450-451; citing Mahan's two principal works, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (1890), and *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* (1892).

[10]Arthur J. Marder, *British Naval Policy, 1880-1905: The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (London: Putnam, 1942), pp. 3-4. "With the introduction of steam power, the screw propeller, the shell gun, and the use of iron and steel as shipbuilding materials, a new era began. The science of naval architecture underwent a greater change in the latter half of the 19th century than in the preceding ten centuries combined." *Ibid*.

[11]Al-Qawasim constituted a maritime force based on a family of the same name who first appeared in Lingah, a port on the Persian coast. By the early ninteenth century, the family had relocated its center of activities to the Arabian coast, particularly Julfar (subsequently known as Ra's al-Khaymah). From there, maritime raids were carried out against both local and European shipping.

coast) was stormed next, and finally a joint British-Muscati fleet captured Shinas (on Oman's Batinah coast) following a fierce battle. Despite these successes, the power of the Qawasim was broken only temporarily.

By 1812, the Qasimi fleet had been restored and soon their dhows reappeared off the coast of India. British resolve to act forcefully against the renewed threat was stiffened by the success of Egypt's Muhammad 'Ali in defeating the Al Sa'ud, presumed to be backing their fellow Wahhabis. After extensive planning and a suitable respite in internal Indian troubles, a second expedition, again relying on Muscat's help, stormed Ra's al-Khaymah in 1819-1820. The town was captured after considerable loss of Arab life while smaller parties were sent out to gain the surrender of neighboring ports and towns. A small garrison left behind when the fleet withdrew subsequently transferred to Qishm Island.

The idea of a base in the Gulf to protect commercial interests had been broached a century earlier but the scheme advanced in 1808 derived from political and strategic considerations. A military presence on, say, Kharg Island or Qishm Island, it was argued, would not only offer protection against pirates but also serve to counter Persian and French designs in the area. While the scheme enjoyed the support of officialdom in India, it was rejected by London, which preferred instead to rely upon diplomacy to advance its strategic interests in the Gulf. Actual occupation of Qishm Island in 1820 proved short-lived as the garrison quickly fell prey to disease and entanglement in local politics and warfare.[12] It was withdrawn in 1823 and the idea of a military base languished, with a few limited exceptions, for nearly another century. A more fruitful idea arising from the efforts of the Government of Bombay to eradicate piracy eventually culminated in the trucial system operating under British aegis.

The first step in the erection of a productive and durable trucial system appeared in the aftermath of the 1820 siege of Ra's al-Khaymah.[13] The "General Treaty of Peace with the Arab Tribes," which the area's *shaykh*s (tribal heads) were forced to sign, prohibited piracy and plunder by sea and required their vessels to fly a recognized flag and be registered. Enforcement was provided at first by the short-lived base on Qishm Island. Then regular Bombay Marine patrols in the Gulf, introduced shortly thereafter, were able to deal effectively with the occasional attacks perpetrated over the next few decades.

One limitation of the 1820 treaty was its failure to regulate the conduct of warfare on sea amongst the Arab tribes, which tended disrupt the fishing and pearling seasons with some regularity. The British were able finally to arrange a maritime truce in 1835 that forbade all hostilities by sea for a period of six months, with the understanding that Britain would not interfere with wars on land.

---

[12]Ordered to investigate reports of piracy by the Bani Bu 'Ali tribe (residing at the southeastern corner of the Omani coast), a ship from the Qishm garrison was attacked by the tribe. The attempt of the garrison's commander, Captain T. Perronet Thompson, to punish the Bani Bu 'Ali ended in catastrophe when the tribe counterattacked and nearly massacred Thompson's forces. A new punitive expedition was sent out from India. In early 1821, in combination with Muscati troops, the Bani Bu 'Ali were defeated in a fierce battle, their main settlements razed, and their leaders imprisoned in Muscat. Subsequently, Thompson was court-martialed for unnecessarily involving Britain in a campaign in the interior of Arabia and publicly reprimanded, although his social standing allowed him to escape punishment.

[13]The texts of the relevant treaties and discussion of their background are to be found in C.U. Aitchison, comp., *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries* (5th ed.; Delhi: Manager of Publications, Government of India, 1933), Vol. 11. The Ruler of Sharjah, Dr. Shaykh Sultan b. Muhammad al-Qasimi, has refuted the idea that his ancestors were pirates in *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf* (London: Croom Helm, 1986; 2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 1988).

In British eyes, the "Pirate Coast" was thereby transformed into the "Trucial Coast" (or "Trucial Oman"), a sobriquet it was to retain until full independence in 1971. This maritime truce proved so successful that it was renewed regularly until 1843 when a ten-years' truce was signed. Upon its expiry, Britain induced the shaykhs to accept a "Treaty of Perpetual Maritime Peace." By its terms, the British government assumed responsibility for enforcing the treaty. Aggression by any signatory upon another was not to be met with retaliation but instead referred to the British authorities.

The foundation had been laid for Britain's legal and formal predominance in the Gulf itself to be combined with British mastery of its external allies into a truly hegemonic position. But permanent responsibility entailed permanent *in situ* supervision and so official representatives gradually were stationed around the Gulf. In final form, British administration there formed one part of the Government of India's far-flung residency system, with a Political Resident in the Persian Gulf (PRPG) headquartered at Bushire (on the Persian coast) until 1947 and thereafter at Manamah, Bahrain. The resident's subordinates at one time or another included political agents, political officers, and native agents, stationed at Muscat, Bandar 'Abbas, Sharjah, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manamah, Kuwait, and Basra (located in what was an Ottoman wilayat until 1914).[14]

In addition to establishing and maintaining maritime peace, the British pursued other ancillary interests during the mid-nineteenth century. One of these involved the restriction and then the elimination of the slave trade. By 1848, Britain had succeeded in pressuring most of the Gulf's rulers to declare illegal the carriage of African slaves in Gulf vessels and later in the century British legations routinely manumitted slaves upon request.[15]

The next step in enhancing British control of the Gulf came about partly as the result of European challenges to British supremacy and partly due to the inexorable logic of the defense of India. As Britain solidified its position in India, the natural concern about external threats meant that zones of influence should be extended beyond the Indian frontiers. But as frontiers were secured, they in turn required protection and thus securing the zones of influence became fresh objectives. This seemed to require an ever-expanding circle of engagement and pacification. The seemingly baffling involvement in Afghanistan was at least in part a product of this impulse. By the 1890s, the debate had become fully engaged between the Government of India on one hand, arguing that Britain must seize control of additional buffers of territory in order to safeguard India, and Whitehall on the other, countering that the empire could not support unending expansion and that influence and indirect control were preferable to conquest and direct administration.

In the Gulf, which had by this time become a vital communications route for the British Empire, the impulse to protect the outer perimeters of India and its lifelines took two forms. Britain allowed the Qajar Shahs to reign relatively unimpeded in interior Iran but exercised strong influence in, if not outright control of, the Gulf coast through a consul-general who was also the political resident. On the Arab littoral, a new series of formal treaties was engineered with all the chieftains of the coast. In return for cession of responsibility for defense and foreign relations to the British,

---

[14]J.B. Kelly discusses the evolution of this administrative network in "The Legal and Historical Basis of the British Position in the Persian Gulf," in *St. Antony's Papers*, No. 4 (London: Chatto & Windus; New York: Praeger, 1959; Middle Eastern Affairs, No. 1), pp. 119-140.

[15]On the slave trade see Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Appendix L, "The Slave Trade in the Persian Gulf Region," pp. 2475-2516.

the local shaykhs were recognized as legitimate rulers (*hakim* in the singular). What had been a fluid system of authority based on tribal leadership and alliances was transformed into the emergence of territorial states complete with hereditary rule through designated individuals and their families.[16]

In this manner, the Al Thani rose to prominence in Qatar despite their having been virtually unknown prior to the nineteenth century. By reason of his protected relationship with Britain, Shaykh Mubarak of Kuwait was able not only to hold off the Ottomans but to strengthen his position *vis-à-vis* the other leading families of Kuwait. Along the Trucial Coast, the resurgence of the Al Bu Falah under the Al Nahyan led to recognition of the shaykhs of Abu Dhabi while the role of the Al Maktum in creating an *entrepôt* in Dubai assured their recognition. The Qasimi shaykhs at Ra's al-Khaymah and Sharjah retained enough significance to be recognized as well (although Ra's al-Khaymah did not acquire trucial status until 1921). Other shaykhs gained and lost recognition as their fortunes waxed and waned. Even Oman, always independent even if only nominally so, was forced to adhere to a similar treaty in 1891. The weak link in this system was Mesopotamia, which remained under Ottoman sovereignty until the First World War.

Insofar as the Gulf had become a "British lake," the paramount position was not, however, without challenges, sparked by technological change. The earliest and most prolonged manifestation of British concern with the Gulf's impact on India's security was to guarantee the security of imperial lines of communications between India and Britain. A quick glance at the map reveals two alternative routes: the Gulf and the Red Sea. The advantage of the Red Sea was its maritime nature, which permitted Britain to rely on its principal strength, mastery of the seas, and suggested that it need not be dependent on the goodwill of other powers along the route. The disadvantage of this route lay in the choke points at Bab al-Mandab, the Gulf of Suez, and Gibraltar. Indeed, Suez was a weak link in the chain as it required an overland transfer. As the geopolitical importance of Egypt had been recognized by the beginning of the nineteenth century, due to Napoleon's invasion, it is not surprising that Britain enthusiastically backed the construction of the Suez Canal, nor that it soon asserted its control over Egypt. At the opposite end of the Red Sea, Britain had taken Aden in 1839 for use as a base to protect the southern approaches to the Red Sea.[17]

On the other hand, the Gulf provided a more direct route, despite the disadvantages of an absence of control over overland segments. The Gulf had served as a principal mail route between London and India until superseded in 1833 by a Red Sea alternative. Direct and reliable postal connections with the Gulf were restored only in 1862 with the introduction of a Bombay-to-Basra steamer mail service, but the connection to Europe was never renewed. However, advances in technology soon allowed quicker and more direct communications using the Gulf route. Indeed, technology was quickly becoming a key ingredient in changing or intensifying conceptions of Gulf security. Important for imperial purposes was the laying of a submarine-and-coastal telegraph cable

---

[16]This evolution of authority has been outlined in J.E. Peterson, "Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1977), pp. 297-312.

[17]The problem of secure frontiers arose here as well. The security of the settlement (later colony) of Aden could be guaranteed only by satisfactory agreement with the adjacent petty states. But the establishment of treaty relations with the surrounding rulers forced Britain to ensure both their internal and external security, and the encircling band of protectorates grew until confronted with a similar Ottoman expansionism from the north.

along the Gulf in 1864. This link enabled the Indo-European Telegraph Department (later Cable & Wireless) to provide an essential and profitable service until undercut by wireless competition in the 1920s.[18]

Another technological advance was responsible for the "steamship" challenge of the 1860s. While it has been suggested that new technology was responsible for altering the pattern of trade, as European steamships replaced coastal craft and European textile mills rendered local weaving uncompetitive, it seems equally likely that competition between European powers drove a quickening of interest in the Gulf. In any case, the decade saw a profusion of Russian, French, and German steamships establishing regular routes up and down the Gulf, in direct competition with the British India Steam Navigation Company. But the interest eventually wore off, most likely because the trade advantages were meager and the costs of maintaining such transparently political maneuvers were too high.[19]

British supervision of Gulf maritime activities and the development of communications lines through the area, in turn, served to strengthen the British stake in what was seen increasingly as a region of some geopolitical importance. Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India at the turn of the century (1898-1905), categorized British interests in the Gulf as being commercial, political, strategical, and telegraphic.[20] As one scholar has put it, the Gulf in fact was not a "British lake" at this time but "an international waterway of steadily increasing importance in an age of imperial rivalries, diplomatic flux, and sizable dangers to international peace of mind in the cycles of decay and revolutionary activity in the Ottoman and Persian states."[21] The growing importance of the Gulf, especially as a backup to the all-water Suez route, was noted by Mahan in his article, "The Persian Gulf and International Relations."[22] Between the middle of the nineteenth century and World War I, Britain consistently worked to consolidate its position in the Gulf and to deny access to other non-regional powers. Principal threats were seen as emanating from France, Russia, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire.

The most spirited threat to the British position, however, came with the French challenge of the 1890s and beyond the turn of the century. Despite the entente cordiale, Anglo-French relations hovered on the verge of crisis in the Gulf during this time, most particularly in Oman. The French offensive caused friction in several ways. First, dhows from the Omani port of Sur were allowed to hoist the French flag, thus providing them with immunity from the British and the Sultan in their smuggling activities, principally arms and slaves. Second, French arms dealers plied their wares openly in the markets of Muscat and adjoining Matrah, with the consequence that many of these

---

[18]On communications, see Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Appendix J, "The Telegraphs of the Persian Gulf in Their Relation to the Telegraph Systems of Persia and Turkey," pp. 2400-2438, and Appendix K, "Mail Communications and the Indian Post Office in the Persian Gulf," pp. 2439-2474; and Christina Phelps Harris, "The Persian Gulf Submarine Telegraph of 1864," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 135, Pt. 2 (June 1969), pp. 169-190.

[19]The debate over the role of technology in the introduction of steamships to the Gulf can be followed in Robert G. Landen, *Oman Since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*; T. Cuyler Young, ed., *Middle East Focus: The Persian Gulf* (Princeton: Princeton University Conference, 1969; Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Near East Conference); and Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*.

[20]Cited in Standish, "British Maritime Policy," p. 345.

[21]Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, pp. 1-2.

[22]*National and English Review*, Vol. 40 (Sept. 1902), pp. 27-45. Mahan is credited with coining the term "Middle East" on p. 39 of this article.

weapons made their way to the North West Frontier where they were used against British forces. Third, France sought to insinuate itself into Oman on an equal status with Britain first by the appointment of a French consul in Muscat, initially the redoubtable Paul Ottavi, and then, more seriously, by the securing of the Sultan's permission to establish a coaling station at Bandar Jissah, just outside the capital.

This provoked the British to issue a strong warning to the sultan to revoke the license or face the wrath of the Government of India. The sultan capitulated, the coaling station was never constructed, and Britain offered an olive branch in the form of shared coaling facilities in Muscat harbor. At the same time, the British notion of thwarting the French challenge in Oman by making Muscat a protectorate ironically was stymied by the Anglo-French Declaration of 1862, which stipulated that neither power would seek to alter Oman's sovereign status without reference to the other power. Thus, the addition of another imperial frontier to be defended was narrowly avoided.

In the meantime, India was facing a challenge from another direction with considerable potential impact for the Gulf. The Russian threat to British hegemony in the Gulf took two concrete forms. One was the intrigue of the "Great Game," especially in Afghanistan, which was viewed as a deliberate attempt to extend the Russian sphere of influence and to frustrate Britain's expansion of its zone of influence. Britain feared a Russian push from the North, which was frequently expressed in the premise of a Russian drive for a warm-water port. In short, nineteenth-century suspicions were driven by tsarist expansionism in Asia, competition for influence in Afghanistan, and fears that Russia, in competition with Germany, would seek a port in the Gulf to connect with a railway.

The other perceived threat was an intensification of Russian influence over the Qajar court. Disastrous wars with Russia early in the nineteenth century forced Persia to cede its Caucasus territories and Russian influence in Tehran reached its apex in the early years of the twentieth century, marked in part by the establishment of formal Russian and British zones in the country. The Russian-officered Cossack brigade played a significant role during the Constitutional Revolution and it was an officer from this brigade, Reza Khan, who took control in 1921 and made himself shah in 1925. The Russian role in Iran abated as a result of the Russian Revolution but increased dramatically early in World War II when the Soviet Union joined Britain in invading Iran. Thereafter, the Russian threat found expression in the Cold War, with the apex occurring in the late 1940s: Soviet sponsorship of the short-lived Azerbaijan and Kurdish republics and close relations with the communist Tudeh Party.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian threat was perceived not just as a drive for influence in the murky region of Russo-British frontiers but was given new importance by emerging conceptions of geopolitical theory. The central idea was embodied in Sir Halford Mackinder's thesis of a world "Heartland" stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic Ocean.[23] Russia was located at the pivot of world politics. Cradling it was a great inner

---

[23]H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (April 1904), pp. 421-444.

crescent including Germany, Austria, Turkey, India, and China, while Britain, South Africa, Australia, the United States, Canada, and Japan comprised an outer crescent. At stake was no less than a "World-Island" composed of Europe, Asia, and Africa. As Mackinder put it, "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World."[24]

In large part, technology again was seen as being at the root of this shift in strategic power. Whereas once the great land mass of Eurasia was a liability in strategic terms, technological advances reversed the picture. For centuries, sea power had defined world domination since ships could project power across far distances much more quickly and efficiently than land-based armies. But the development of the railroad meant that troops and supplies could be sent great distances more advantageously than by sea.

Not only was Russia ideally placed to take advantage of this new equation but Germany, at least potentially, posed as great a threat. The Gulf figured prominently in this new struggle as British control of India, including its periphery, was necessary in order to thwart domination of the "World-Island." This thinking not only intensified concern about a Russian threat from the North but Germany's influence in Istanbul and the projected Berlin-to-Baghdad railway with its terminus on the Gulf also gave great cause for alarm. Britain's Middle-East strategy in World War I was aimed not only at removing the weak Ottoman Empire from the scene but at seizing Mesopotamia to seal off the last unsecured access to the Gulf and thus eliminate a vulnerable short-cut to India as well as a potential threat to imperial lines of communication.

British confidence in the Gulf/overland route could not be assured as long as the Ottoman Empire sat astride it. And in the early years of the twentieth century, the penetration of German influence within the Ottoman Empire was a growing cause for concern, not least because of the projected railway. Indeed, the development of railroads with their superior ability to shunt troops and supplies from one place to another threatened more generally to negate the heretofore effective British strategy of relying upon its maritime supremacy to defend its imperial interests. For this reason, it was not surprising that Britain reacted with alacrity when Germany began actively searching for a Gulf terminus.

Although the spearhead of the German assault lay in the establishment of various commercial interests in the Gulf, the real threat clearly was posed by the proposed location of the eastern terminus of the German-built Ottoman railway at Kuwait, the site favored by Berlin and Istanbul. Britain adamantly opposed the unambiguous incorporation of Kuwait into Ottoman territory as well as the construction of a railhead and port that would threaten British strategic interests. Following years of negotiation, the Anglo-Ottoman treaty of 1913 included an agreement to terminate the line in Basra, but the two powers found themselves at war before ratification was completed.

The railway, however, formed only one aspect of the protracted Anglo-Turkish rivalry. The Ottoman Empire, long sovereign in Mesopotamia, had become increasingly expansionist in the mid-nineteenth century. As early as the 1860s, claim was laid to Kuwait, Bahrain, central Arabia, Qatar, and even the Trucial Coast. Al-Hasa (now part of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province) was occupied

---

[24]Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), p. 150.

in 1871 and became a permanent, if unruly, possession until its recapture by the Al Sa'ud in 1913. 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. The status of Kuwait was considerably more ambiguous and was complicated by the railway question. Tentative agreement on recognition of nominal Turkish sovereignty over the shaykhdom in return for its autonomy was overtaken by the outbreak of World War I and subsequently Kuwait was regarded as an independent state under British protection. Thus, the extension of a British umbrella of protection to Kuwait was done not really for local considerations but for the wider goal of maintaining Gulf security within the imperial context.

In related manner, British strategy in the Middle East during World War I was predicated on the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, as well as its dissolution, in order to remove a chronically weak – and thus unstable – element in the European equation. The extension of British control or influence over Mesopotamia, Palestine, and al-Hijaz (as well as the allied French paramountcy in Lebanon and Syria) enhanced imperial security along both the Gulf and Red Sea lines of communication.

The war enabled Britain finally to take control of Mesopotamia. This region long had been a center of British interests for such reasons as several centuries of British commerce in Mesopotamia, a tradition of political representation there since 1728, the establishment of postal service in 1862 through the (British) Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Company, the increasing desire to protect the northern reaches of the Gulf from European ambitions and Ottoman expansionism, the perceived need for control over any eventual railhead on the Gulf, and lastly the desire to participate in and control oil exploration. An expeditionary force of the Indian Army landed in Ottoman territory almost immediately upon declaration of war and marched into Basra a few weeks later. But Baghdad was not captured until 1917, after the catastrophic defeat at al-Kut, and Mosul was not entered until after the armistice had been signed. In the end, though, France, Britain's remaining European rival in the Middle East, bowed to Britain's claims in Mesopotamia and existing control was ratified through the granting of the League of Nations mandate for Iraq to Britain.[25]

By the time hostilities were terminated in 1918, the Gulf had very nearly become a "British lake" in truth. Through a series of formal arrangements in the 1890s, prompted by the "forward policy" of Lord Curzon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial Shaykhs had legally accepted British protection and advice.[26] Similar terms had brought the nominally independent sultanate in Muscat within the British sphere of influence. Iraq had become a British mandate. Only Persia and the Al Sa'ud retained any degree of real independence, yet Britain exercised considerable leverage in Tehran and Saudi authority was confined largely to its Najdi base. With British supremacy in the

---

[25]On the establishment of British control over Iraq, see A.J. Barker, *The Neglected War: Mesopotamia, 1914-1918* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967); Edith and E.F. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development* (London: Ernest Benn; Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978); and V.H. Rothwell, "Mesopotamia in British War Aims, 1914-1918," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1970), pp. 273-294.

[26]"In Southern Persia and the Persian Gulf Lord Curzon restored the waning prestige of Great Britain, and demonstrated the determination of the Government not to permit any violation of the preferential position which Great Britain has acquired in that great land-locked sea after keeping the peace for three hundred years at a heavy cost in blood and treasure." Lovat Fraser, *India Under Curzon and After* (London: William Heinemann, 1911), p. 25.

Gulf finally and unquestionably assured, the thrust of British policy increasingly turned toward involvement in local politics to protect its growing list of accrued interests.

The ensuing Gulf security concern involved another advance in technology – the airplane – concomitant with new geopolitical theories regarding the role of air power. While the classical proponents of air power theory, Giulio Douhet and his near-contemporaries Billy Mitchell and Alexander de Seversky,[27] were concerned with total warfare, the application of air power to the Gulf was more narrowly restricted to the establishment and maintenance of aerial lines of communication and colonial policing. As Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India (1943-1947), remarked, "There are two main material factors in the revolutionary change that has come over the strategical face of Asia. One is air power, the other is oil."[28] The discovery and exploitation of oil in the Gulf has been the more important and permanent factor catapulting the region into global attention, but the necessities of air communications and air power were first responsible for British concern with the security of the Arabian Peninsula itself. Not long after the technology of air power had been developed, it was applied to Arabia and the Gulf.[29] It was to remain a principal British tool for providing both internal and external security until final withdrawal in 1971.

Prior to the 1920s, British concern with the affairs of the Arab littoral states of the Gulf was prevention of warfare by sea but otherwise generally non-interference in internal affairs, including warfare by land.[30] To repeat, British concern was centered on the security of imperial lines of communication, which were essentially maritime and where they were not, as in the Indo-European

---

[27]Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, translated by Dino Ferrari (New York: Coward-McCann, 1942; London: Faber & Faber, 1943; 1st Italian ed. published 1921 and 2nd edition published 1927); Edward Warner, "Douhet, Mitchell, Seversky: Theories of Air Warfare," in Edward Meade Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), pp. 485-503; and David MacIsaac, "Voices from the Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists," in Peter Paret, ed., with the collaboration of Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 624-647.

[28]Address to the Royal Central Asian Society, June 1949; cited in Olaf Caroe, *The Wells of Power: The Oil-Fields of South-Western Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 184.

[29]The British, French, and Germans all used aircraft for reconnaissance in Arabia during World War I. British airplanes bombed Ottoman forces besieging Aden in 1916 and attacked other Ottoman troops outside al-Kut in Mesopotamia during the same year. Britain utilized air power in colonial policing along the North-West Frontier and in Afghanistan during 1918-1920; the attack by one bomber on Kabul in May 1920 was seen as an important factor in the decision to sue for peace. Aircraft were used to even greater effect in Somaliland in early 1920, when the forces of Muhammad bin 'Abdullah (the "Mad Mullah") were routed by a single bomber squadron in only three weeks. The rulers of Najd (later Saudi Arabia) and Yemen acquired their first aircraft in the mid-1920s, although the effectiveness of these purchases for military use was extremely limited by the unsuitability of the particular airplanes, the lack of skilled pilots (all of whom were Europeans), inadequate supplies, and haphazard maintenance. For more details, see J.E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 18-20.

[30]The optimal outlines of British policy in the Gulf were summarized by the Political Resident, H.V. Biscoe, in 1931: "to maintain the independence of the Arab Shaikhdoms so long as they preserve law and order and maintain a system of administration that will satisfy or at any rate be tolerated by their subjects, to avoid any greater degree of interference in their internal affairs than is forced upon us but at the same time to prevent any other foreign power from dominating them or obtaining any special privileges in the Gulf." India Office Library and Records (London), L/P&S/12/3727, Biscoe to F.V. Wylie, Deputy Secretary (Foreign) to the Government of India, 24 November 1931. It should be noted as well that another British consideration was the protection of British Indian subjects resident in the Gulf. In practice, this required direct involvement only in a few special circumstances.

Telegraph, the telegraph line had been deliberately laid along the Persian coast in order to avoid the lack of security on the Arab littoral.

This "hands-off" attitude changed in the second decade of this century. A principal factor in the application of air power to the Gulf was the emergence of the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a full-fledged Service and, especially, the success of the chief of the air staff, Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, known as "the father of the RAF," in carving out a role for the RAF as the primary policing force in the Middle East. The RAF not only carried out security responsibilities in Iraq but assumed administrative control of the mandate in 1922. Meanwhile, the RAF had been active in protecting Aden from the Ottomans during World War I and air sorties were carried out against recalcitrant tribes as early as 1919. Trenchard argued vigorously that the RAF could provide a more cost-effective policing function in the protectorates of southern Yemen. In 1928, the RAF was given overall responsibility for the defense of Aden Colony and Protectorate, replacing a British and Indian garrison. Other RAF duties in the Gulf included protecting Kuwait and Iraq from incursions by the Ikhwan of the Najd and bombarding one of the sultan of Oman's tribes in Sur.

With the assumption of the two noncontiguous areas of responsibility in Iraq and Aden, it was necessary to establish a chain of aerodromes and emergency landing grounds along the coastal route from Basra to Aden. Political arrangements and surveying of the complete route began in earnest in 1929, in conjunction with the civil air route to India. This involved additional negotiations with littoral rulers regarding security and procedures for dealing with unruly tribes. For various reasons, particularly uncertainty surrounding security in remote stretches of the route, especially along Oman's Arabian Sea coast, completion of the route was held up until 1936.

As another aspect of the new technology, developments in aircraft meant that for the first time it was feasible to introduce long-distance civil air routes. Naturally, the route from London to India was a high priority, and the RAF established a mail-carrying air service through the Middle East in 1921. Accordingly, Imperial Airways (the forerunner to British Airways) set to work making arrangements for such a route in the late 1920s, involving both land-based aircraft and flying boats. While initial arrangements were made to route the Gulf segments along the South Persian coast, it soon became clear that for political reasons this was not a permanent solution.[31]

As a consequence, Government of India officials in the Gulf were instructed to enter into negotiations with the various Arab rulers for rights to establish aerodromes and maritime landing areas, and the RAF carried out the surveying. Facilities were quickly arranged in Kuwait and Bahrain but negotiations proved more difficult along the Trucial Coast. Eventually, the ruler of Sharjah was persuaded to permit a landing ground and rest house and the Imperial Airways service was switched from the Persian coast to the Arabian littoral in late 1932, using stops at Kuwait, Bahrain, Sharjah, and Gwadar (the Omani enclave on the Pakistan coast).[32] These air-driven developments prompted a significant change of policy: for the first time, the British required assurance that the rulers with whom they had established treaty recognition would be responsible

[31]Opposition to the British route was voiced within the Persian Majlis (Parliament), in part because of Soviet influence. Persia insisted on a route through the central part of the country which would have meant additional difficulties from an operational point of view, and a competing German service from Berlin to Tehran via the Soviet Union had begun operations in 1924. Eventually, a South Persian routing operated from 1929 to 1932. Peterson, *Defending Arabia*, pp. 20-22.

[32]The intractability of the rulers of Ra's al-Khaymah and Dubai meant that the proposed use of flying boats, already employed by the RAF in the region, had to be abandoned as Sharjah could not provide a suitable anchorage.

for the security of their onshore territory. While the determination of borders between the states remained unsettled and the allegiance of bedouin tribes was not always certain, an important step had been taken in the evolution from tribally based shaykhs to territorial rulers.

At the same time, it was recognized that circumstances in the Gulf had changed already since Curzon's day. As remarks of a Foreign Office official were summarized in 1935: "To-day the Persian Gulf was one of the world's highways, bordered by strongly nationalist States, whose interest in the Gulf was real and active, and the discovery of oil had led other foreign Powers to take an increasing interest in Gulf affairs. In his view, the time had come, or was at least rapidly approaching, when His Majesty's Government would no longer be able to maintain their previous policy of merely keeping others out, and living, as it were, from hand to mouth, but would be faced with the necessity of going either forwards or backwards."[33]

This then introduces the paramount catalyst for Gulf security over the last half century or more: access to Gulf oil. Oil was first discovered in Iran in 1908 and then in Iraq shortly after World War I. The geopolitical importance of Gulf oil manifested itself as early as World War II, when Bahrain served as one of Britain's three major sources of East-of-Suez oil requirements. During the war, the fear of Axis threats to the supply of Gulf oil were responsible for an interruption of production in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In an amazing, even if less than effective, feat of aerial bravado, Italian bombers made their way from Rhodes to the Gulf, dropping bombs on Bahrain and Dhahran – but missing their intended targets and landing in Eritrea. At the same time, the Gulf assumed another important, if transitory, role as a conduit of Allied war supplies to the Soviet Union. American and British ships deposited their cargoes at Persian ports, which were then ferried overland by truck to the Soviet Union.

There were other reasons for the strategic importance of the Gulf during the war. In the words of the Political Resident just before the war, "The importance of [the air route through the Gulf] is obvious, as if it is 'cut' in time of war, for the period that it remains cut no British civil aircraft, and RAF aircraft only with difficulty (by the Aden Muscat Route) ... can reach India, Singapore or Australia."[34] Bahrain was a significant asset because of its oil fields and refinery, the naval base at Jufayr, and its selection already as the future home of the Political Residency in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf and Iranian corridor was used as a key Allied supply route to the Soviet Union. The Arabian Peninsula and its surrounding bodies of water – the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea – provided the air and sea gateways to the Indian Ocean, Asia, and the Pacific. In particular, air routes through the Gulf and along the southern Arabian rim served as important links in the ferrying of men and matériel to the Pacific theater in the latter stages of the war. This was especially important for Britain but it was also valuable for the United States, which not only utilized British facilities but established its own, such as the Dhahran airfield in Saudi Arabia. In addition, bombing raids were conducted from Aden during the Italian East Africa campaign early

---

[33]Remarks of G.W. Rendel, Counsellor in the Foreign Office, summarized in Public Record Office (London), Air Ministry Records, AIR/2/1612, Committee of Imperial Defense, Standing Official Sub-Committee for Questions Concerning the Middle East, Minutes of the 42nd Meeting, 24 September 1935.

[34]L/P&S/12/3727, T.C. Fowle, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, to J.C. Walton, India Office, 18 January 1938; copy in Public Record Office, Cabinet Papers, CAB/104/71.

in the war, and southern Arabia and Gulf bases were used to provide convoy escorts and conduct anti-submarine patrols.

The spirit of East-West cooperation during the war was not to last, of course, and in the decades after the war the Gulf became yet another arena of Cold War competition. To at least some extent, this shift in perceptions of a changed global strategic environment was driven by the emergence of a sort of "rimland" elaboration of Mackinder's "heartland" thesis, with the rimland corresponding to his "Inner Crescent."[35] In the minds of Western policymakers, the heartland was now occupied by a hostile Soviet Union brandishing an expansionist ideology. Consequently, it was imperative to contain this threat by controlling the encircling rimland. NATO secured the western perimeter, although the eastern reaches were threatened by Communist victory in China. In the middle, however, lay the Middle East and the Gulf. Western strategy concentrated on securing the Gulf – both its oil supplies and the survival of friendly regimes – against the perceived Communist threat. Friendly countries in the region were encouraged to form the Baghdad Pact in the 1950s as a kind of protective arc around the vital Gulf oil-producing regions.

Given the existing British paramountcy in the Gulf, defending the region from the renewed threat from the north was regarded in the immediate postwar years primarily as a British responsibility. Nevertheless, the decline of British standing in the Middle East and the perceived seriousness of the Cold War danger served to refocus Washington's attention on the Gulf.

American penetration of this British domain, bitterly resented by the British, had begun in the decade before the war but benefited heavily from the need for cooperation in war efforts and it became more pronounced in subsequent years. The process had started with American minority interests in British oil concessions and it then became pronounced with the establishment of the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) concession in Saudi Arabia. American armed forces utilized Gulf air facilities during World War II. Subsequently, the United States built an airfield at Dhahran, established a small naval presence in the Gulf (headquartered in Bahrain), and initiated a long and close relationship with Iran under the rule of Muhammad Reza Shah. Thus, by the early 1950s, the British influence in two of the most important countries of the Gulf had been eroded and replaced by American influence.

The slowly emerging American insinuation into the Peninsula occurred simultaneously with a gradual British retrenchment from the existing position in the Gulf and Middle East. This phenomenon was only the local manifestation of a broader process involving the dismemberment of the British empire and the cumulative relinquishing of longheld East-of-Suez responsibilities. The Peninsula and Gulf constituted the tail end of a retreat punctuated by exits from India in 1947 and Egypt in 1954, the Suez débâcle in 1956, the Iraqi revolution in 1958, the surrender of Aden in 1967, and finally withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971.

Withdrawal from Aden – also signifying abandonment of Britain's last major military installation in the Middle East – turned out to be a long, involved, and bloody process. In contrast,

---

[35]The theorist probably most closely identified with the rimland thesis was Nicholas Spykman. In his words, "If there is to be a slogan for the power politics of the Old World, it must be 'Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.'" *The Geography of Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944), p. 43.

withdrawal from the Gulf was far less painful. The military implications were negligible, and at the time the political impact as seen from London and Washington seemed relatively minimal. The impact on the Gulf was more substantial, especially for the smaller amirates. Britain had served as judge, arbiter, administrator, and, of course, protector of this littoral for well over a century. Departure in 1971 was tantamount to removal of the safety net. Obviously, the currents of nationalist and modernist sentiments and ideas had begun to circulate along the shores of the Gulf even before the influx of oil revenues. Apart from Iraq and perhaps Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, few people of the Arab littoral seemed really prepared for the burden of complete political and international responsibilities. Nevertheless, the newly independent states of Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates – along with the not-so-much-older nations of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia – adjusted quickly enough.

The "changing of the guard" in the Gulf from Britain to the United States constituted a lengthy process stretching over several decades. American policy in the Gulf since British withdrawal can be divided into two distinct and contrasting periods: an interval of relatively low commitment during the 1970s followed by two subsequent decades of increasing involvement and concern.[36]

US interests in the Gulf were considerable when Britain withdrew in 1971. Still, even with three years or more advance notice, the United States was not fully prepared to accept direct responsibility for the security of the Gulf and Peninsula, let alone take up Britain's shield. Close working relations existed only with Iran and Saudi Arabia, American diplomats had yet to take up residence in the newly independent states, US military capabilities in the Gulf were miniscule, and apart from the oil companies, there were few politicians, officials, or businessmen who were familiar with the region.

The seeming American inaction concerning the Gulf during the first period cannot be put down solely to indifference, although the Gulf's pivotal role in the looming global oil crisis was not generally appreciated at the outset of the 1970s. Rather, the explanation lay elsewhere. Except for the ties to Iran and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf had always been unfamiliar territory. Even later, Washington's perceptions of events and situations in the region in large part were filtered through Pahlavi Tehran and Riyadh. In addition, the simultaneous American dilemma in Vietnam made direct involvement along the lines of the British experience impossible. The Nixon Doctrine of 1969 was formulated as an attempt to shift the burden of "world policekeeping" away from the application of American force to a reliance on surrogates. Thus, American policy in the Gulf during the period from 1971 to 1979 could well be described as benign inaction, essentially dependent on a "twin pillars" policy whereby the military establishments of the two principal American allies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, were built up with American arms and training assistance.

In addition to a different approach and policy outlook, the United States also faced a radically changed situation from the prewar era of British predominance. While Gulf oil had been

---

[36]It is outside the scope of this essay to discuss or even just cite the voluminous literature that has grown up around Gulf security and especially the American role. My *Security in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf States, 1973-1984* (Washington: National Council on US-Arab Relations, 1985; Occasional Paper No. 7) provides a comprehensive annotated bibliography of this literature, albeit now very dated. An updated and greatly expanded revision is forthcoming.

important to Britain then, in the 1970s that oil was at the heart of global dependence on an increasingly "vital" resource. The political environment had changed as well: no longer was the Gulf ringed by minor possessions and quasidependencies of an empire but independent states had appeared and been fully integrated into the international system.

Even though the American strategic interest of denying entry to the Gulf to its superpower rival echoed earlier British attempts at quarantine, there were differences even here. The East-West rivalry and the supremacy of the United States and the Soviet Union in a bi-polar system represented a far more direct challenge than those of previous years, as illustrated in the stubborn Soviet presence in northern Iran after World War II and emerging Soviet influence in Iraq after 1958.

Finally, the United States came cold to its role as guardian of the Gulf. Britain had had three and a half centuries of experience in the region and had worked up to its position of predominance and security responsibility gradually over the course of at least a century. In 1971, the United States found itself thrust into a role not of its choosing. For most of the ensuing decade, Washington looked benignly on the Gulf from a distance, blithely assuming that the *status quo* would remain undisturbed and that the amount of regulation required could be provided by its Iranian and Saudi clients. Neither the oil crisis of 1973-1974 nor the spillover from continued Arab-Israeli strife shook this complacency, but only the events of 1979. The *laissez-faire* attitude of the 1970s finally gave way to a skittish, hawkish attitude in the 1980s and an increasingly bullying posture in the 1990s.

It took the combination of a number of worrying events around 1979 to give added impetus to a perceived requirement for a more active and direct American security capability in the Gulf. These included the Marxist revolution in Ethiopia, the war between Ethiopia and Somalia in the Ogaden, the short border war between the two Yemens that seemed to favor radical South Yemen, and especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But the most important of these developments was the revolution in Iran. This epochal event not only removed the key element in the American "twin pillar" strategy but gave birth to a regime hostile to the United States and its friends and one that seemed intent on exporting its revolutionary ideology to the region.

As a result of these developments, the Gulf and the broader region came to be regarded as the "Arc of Crisis," a term coined by US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. Echoes of Mackinder's "heartland" and Spykman's "rimland" rumbled loudly through the rhetoric around the so-called "Arc of Crisis" and its close cousin, the "Crescent of Crisis."[37] It was felt in Washington that the United States could no longer stand idly by and expect the course of Gulf events to continue along a favorable heading. Intervention was increasingly seen as proper, necessary, and even a duty. Thus, in his State of the Union address of 23 January 1980, US President Jimmy Carter announced that "An attempt by any outside forces to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America. And such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." The Carter Doctrine introduced by this declaration bears a remarkable similarity to the enunciation of British policy in 1903 when Lord Landsdowne, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, stated in Parliament that "we should regard the establishment of a naval base, or of a fortified port, in the

[37]One can postulate that the linear descendant of this shift in perceptions of the region and its importance (*i.e.* toward regarding it as a zone threatening Western interests because of its internal instability and vulnerability) is the notion of the zone itself constituting an implacable Islamic "cultural" threat to the West, as expressed by Samuel P. Huntington in his *The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

Persian Gulf by any other Power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal."[38]

Much as Egyptian attacks on Saudi territory during the Yemen civil war of the 1960s prompted Washington to dispatch a fighter squadron and to encourage Britain to provide the kingdom with Lightning and Hunter aircraft, the looming Iranian threat in the Gulf caused Washington to accede to Riyadh's request for five AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft to provide long-distance radar coverage. In some ways, this decision can be seen as marking the beginning of a qualitative change in US policy: no longer content with assisting surrogates from afar, the United States found it necessary to insert its own equipment and personnel into the region.

While the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 seemed to benefit US interests by diverting Iran's attention and moderating Iraqi attitudes towards friendly Arab states, the shift in fortunes of war to Tehran's favor eventually forced the United States into deeper involvement, as evidenced most obviously by the commitment to reflag vulnerable Kuwaiti oil tankers under the US standard. Henceforth, a permanent naval presence (the long-present but minuscule US Navy's Mideastfor notwithstanding) was added to an air force presence.

But assistance to allied nations was only part of the sea change in US policy. In response to the perceived threats at the end of the 1970s, the first serious planning for military intervention began to take place. The Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force was established at Tampa, Florida, in 1980. By the beginning of 1983, it had evolved into the US Central Command, one of six US unified, multiservice commands, with a theater of operations centered in Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa.

Still, for much of the decade of the 1980s, the US Central Command was an onlooker to regional strife that it could not control, could not influence, could not ameliorate, and in which it could not intervene. The Iran-Iraq War was perhaps the first concrete indication in Western capitals that the primary threat to security in the Gulf did not come from the Communist bloc but from regional actors. The end of the Iran-Iraq War and the collapse of the Soviet Union served finally to refocus American attention on more immediate, regional threats to Western conceptions of Gulf security. The culmination of this redirection was, of course, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Desert Storm war.

It can be debated whether Operation Desert Storm could have taken place in the absence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. For all the rhetoric of the time, not least of which being George Bush's proclamation of a "new world order," it seems abundantly clear in retrospect that the war was a classic illustration of American force projection supported by a diverse and diffuse coalition. Both the scale of the buildup and Washington's success in manipulating the playing field had not been witnessed since the Korean War nearly 40 years before. On the one hand, the massive orchestrated build-up of forces and then their successful and vigorous application utilizing the latest in warfare technology seemed to be a vindication of those who had earlier advocated the adoption of a half-war doctrine in American defense strategy.

On the other hand, however, the Kuwait campaign demonstrated the pitfalls inherent in pursuing limited war. By Western reckoning, Iraq had lost the war most definitively and therefore

---

[38]The Carter Doctrine is quoted in Peterson, *Defending Arabia*, p. 126, while the Landsdowne Declaration is quoted in Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, p. 256 (citing the *Parliamentary Debates*), and Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. I, pp. 367-368 (citing *The Times*, 6 May 1903).

should have capitulated in full to the demands and requirements of the victors. But in the mind of Saddam Husayn, though, he had taken on the combined might of the world and he and his *régime* survived intact. It was not a defeat so much as a temporary setback on the field of combat. It could even be construed as a victory in much the same way that Saddam was able to portray his near-fatal escape from Iranian counterattack during his long war with his larger neighbor as a glorious victory.

The implementation of no-fly zones in Iraq's north and south and the introduction of the sanctions *régime* demonstrably failed to force Saddam's submission after a decade of enforcement. Indeed, they did not significantly weaken Saddam's *régime* internally as they were intended to do, at least in part. Rather, their continuation, combined with the periodic cat-and-mouse traps that Saddam set and into which Washington repeatedly stumbled, aroused widespread sympathy for the plight of the Iraqi people while solidifying Arab, Islamic, and wider indignation and anger against American (and British) "bullying." At the end of the decade of the 1990s, American policy seemed to return to a vague wishfulness that an end to the drama would be forthcoming through Saddam's ouster from within – not, it has been notably emphasized, through an uprising by the people but by action within those inner *élites* of the *régime* closest to him (and, paradoxically, in combination with those exiles farthest away from the *régime*).

The application of American security goals in the Gulf today rests upon variations of earlier external powers' strategies. Douhet's vision of the overwhelming nature of air power found form in the massive aerial bombardment of Iraq in early 1991. There is an echo of the RAF's past role in Western air forces' enforcement of the no-fly zones in Iraq, as well as in the American-backed Saudi emphasis on air mobility as its most effective defensive strategy. But sea power has not disappeared either. American ships seek to protect Western interests to, from, and in the Gulf through naval superiority, and the dispatch of an aircraft carrier or two sends a powerful psychological message. The parallels can even be stretched back a century or more. The British and European powers were prone to regard annoying local powers opposing them as "pirates"; the present-day equivalents are dismissed as "rogue states."

The pendulum of Gulf security has swung once again. British hegemony evolved into a Cold War bipolar situation and then into American hegemony. But clearly, despite the triumphal posturing following the hostilities in 1991, American power in the Gulf was only a shadow of past British supremacy. International sensibilities had changed and direct intervention in Iraq was not a possibility. Washington's pro-Israeli policy alienated public opinion throughout the Arab world and hampered relations with even friendly regimes. Despite the promulgation of a policy of "dual containment," the United States was unable to force Baghdad to bow to its demands and found itself reduced by domestic constraints to await those initiatives by Tehran tentatively permitted by changes in Iranian politics. At one time the Portuguese crown could simply send a flotilla to enforce compliance with its demands as bloodily as it liked. No longer. It's not easy being a hegemon in the twenty-first century, not even as a demi-hegemon.

The state of affairs today in the Gulf fundamentally follows the same rules and conditions as it has throughout history, notwithstanding changes in actors and the impact of technological change. The primal factors essentially remain the same. Trade is still the *raison d'être* of Gulf security: external actors are still concerned about access to and control of the supply of a valued commodity, today defined as oil, and they seek access to regional markets. Lines of communication

no longer may be imperial, but they still exist. The flow of oil from Gulf terminus to end consumer is regarded as a key element of international security, and thus protection of lines of communication is as vital as ever.

Political rivalries continue unabated, of course. A decade or more ago, the United States sought to maintain and expand its influence in the region in order to deny any gains to the Soviet Union, with the Gulf comprising one subsystem in the larger bipolar, balance-of-power Cold War struggle. Today, as the dominant external power, the United States replicates the policy of earlier predominant powers in seeking to maintain the *status quo* and to prevent the rise of hostile regional powers that would threaten friendly regimes. Regional turbulence is seen as potentially destabilizing the region and thus, given the importance of oil, jeopardizing global security.

There are even echoes of earlier stimuli of ideology and religion. While the sense of religious mission does not apply as it did in earlier periods, one can still speak of a motive of conversion. This is not conversion in traditional religious terms, although there are occasionally reverberations of the revival of the conception of an "Islamic threat" and the consequent perceived need for a new "crusade." Nor is Western, and specifically American, concern any longer cast in terms of a struggle between "good and evil," between capitalism and communism. But it is clear that American economic views predominate, and riding on their crest is a triumphant wave of American pop culture. The West, and specifically the United States, is frequently accused of seeking to propagate not only a capitalist, free-market economy but a global culture based on "the American way."

The Gulf essentially has rested on the periphery of empires through the ages, sometimes under the thrall of a dominant power, sometimes as the prize contested by political rivals, and on occasion at the mercy of a wider mix of competing local and external powers. While the concoction of goals and rewards to be found in the Gulf have changed over the centuries, its central location astride the world's major commerce routes and zones of competition ensures a continued presence on the world stage.