

# Imperialism in the Age of Decolonization: British Policy in the Persian Gulf during the 1960s

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*Notes on a lecture delivered at the Centre for British Studies (Humboldt-University, Berlin) to the members of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft on 5 November 2014. Please do not quote without the author's permission. The lecture was based on Dr. von Bismarck's recently published book 'British Policy in the Persian Gulf, 1961-1968. Conceptions of Informal Empire' with Palgrave Macmillan. For details about the book, please go to <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/british-policy-in-the-persian-gulf-19611968-helene-von-bismarck/?K=9781137326713>*

My theme today is Britain's policy in the Persian Gulf during the 1960s, or, to be more specific, the period from the constitutional independence of Kuwait in June 1961 and the decision of the Labour Government under Harold Wilson, in January 1968, to give up on Britain's remaining military presence east of the Suez Canal. The example of the Persian Gulf confirms two general observations about the history of decolonization. The first observation, almost a truism, is that the relationship between Britain and a dependent territory cannot be properly understood, unless the analysis concentrates on more than the constitutional connection between them. It is, to use a phrase by John Darwin, an eminent Oxford historian of the British Empire, 'not only difficult to say, when empire did end, but what precisely that empire was'<sup>1</sup>. The second general difficulty with the study of decolonization is that it is all too easy for a historian to fall into the trap of examining history prejudiced by hindsight and thereby only telling one part of the whole story. The search for the reasons for the eventual end of empire can blind us to the motivation, the methods, and also the inherent constraints of British imperialism during its final phase and make us ignore the day-to-day management of Britain's relationship with the dependencies in question.

In the case of the Persian Gulf, British policy between 1961 and 1968 was not made out by the constitutional situation, nor was the decision-making defined by the lurking inevitability of decolonization. The methods of British imperialism in the Gulf were developed within the framework of what the relevant policy-makers regarded as Britain's role in the area. Britain's Persian Gulf policy was to a very large degree initiated and implemented by civil servants, not politicians. While disagreements about specific policies occurred fairly often between them, there was a general consensus that Britain's position in the Gulf was upheld through an interdependent and inseparable system of military power, formal treaty rights and informal political influence on local elites, on whose confidence and trust the preservation of the British role in the area depended. This system, to which both officials and politicians preferred to refer as a 'special position' or 'Pax Britannica', rather than using the term 'empire', included the nine, treaty-bound, so-called 'Protected States', Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven Trucial shaikhdoms (today's United Arab Emirates), Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Um al-Quwain and Ras al-Khaimah, as well as the constitutionally independent countries Kuwait and Oman. All these states were monarchies and ruled by the same families who are still in power today.

The legal relationship between Britain and the nine Protected States, Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven Trucial shaikhdoms resulted from a series of treaties dating back to the nineteenth century and limiting their independence and their rulers' sovereignty. Britain was committed to defend the Protected States against foreign aggression, maintained the rights to conduct the external relations of the states *in lieu* of the local rulers, to exercise extra-territorial jurisdiction over non-Muslims residing there, and to be consulted before a ruler could grant an oil concession for his territory to any oil exploring company. In reality, however, the involvement of the British Government in the internal affairs of the Protected States went far beyond exercising merely the rights it had been granted by treaty, which is not to say that British power was unlimited. The treaties forbade the rulers to have diplomatic

relations with any country other than Britain, with the result that British officials were the only foreign diplomats stationed in the area. The British Government expected its agents on the ground to use the exclusive nature of their presence in the Gulf to gain the trust of the rulers and make them receptive to British advice even in areas that officially fell outside the British Government's authority.

In contrast to Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, the Emirate of Kuwait, a former protected state, and the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, were constitutionally fully sovereign countries during the period in question, even though Britain still maintained the commitment to defend them against foreign attack. Britain's power to influence events in these two countries was not at all on the same level as it was in Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial shaikhdoms. Still, British policy towards the nine protected states during the 1960s can only be understood if it is put into the context of Britain's interests in, and relations with, Kuwait and, albeit to a lesser extent, Oman. The Political Residency on the island of Bahrain acted as the coordinating point for Britain's political and military presence in the region. Every week, the respective commanders of the different British services in the Persian Gulf, stationed in Bahrain, Sharjah, and in Oman on Masirah Island and at Salalah, met at the Political Residency to discuss questions involving the military security of the area and the British forces stationed there. The meetings of this so-called Military Coordination Committee for the Persian Gulf were chaired by the Political Resident, while his deputy chaired the weekly sessions of the Intelligence Committee for the Gulf, which coordinated Britain's counter-subversion and intelligence activities in the area. As for the residency's political role, it was officially limited to the nine protected states, while the British Government was represented in Oman by a Consul-General, and, starting with the emirate's constitutional independence in the summer of 1961, an ambassador in Kuwait. However, to maintain a high level of coordination of the British political representation in the Gulf, it was decided in August 1961 that both the ambassador in Kuwait and the consul-general in Oman should continue to report

unofficially to the Political Resident in Bahrain, and, in case of a difference in opinion between them, the Political Resident should have the deciding voice. The local rulers were not informed of this arrangement. The Political Resident travelled regularly to Oman, where he was sometimes brought in as a heavier gun than the consul-general in discussions between the British Government and the Sultan.

Until January 1968, the political decision-making with regard to the Gulf was based on the firm assumption that Britain would not withdraw from its position before the mid-1970s at the very earliest. The relative costs and benefits of a continued presence were debated in British Government circles during the 1960s, especially in the Treasury, but these discussions did not have an immediate effect on the decision-makers in the Foreign Office and the diplomats and officers posted in the area, the so-called men on the spot. From 1965 onwards, they began to discuss ways in which the British Government could help Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial shaikhdoms to prepare for their long-term future, but they felt certain that significant changes had to be brought about before these states could be released into independence, an event that was not to be expected before 1975. While the new Labour Government began in 1964 to scrutinize Britain's military commitments and deployment overseas in a series of Defence Reviews, it did not extend the discussion to the Gulf until July 1967, when it decided that Britain would have to withdraw from the area by the mid-1970s. No concrete date was set and the decision was not made public. The rapid acceleration of Britain's retreat, which was suddenly scheduled for 1971 in January 1968, came as a complete surprise, and considerable shock, to both the Gulf rulers and the British diplomats stationed in the area, who strongly advised against this step. The hasty retreat had nothing to do with a changed situation in the Gulf itself, but was motivated by Britain's very precarious financial situation after the devaluation crisis of November 1967 and the Cabinet reshuffle that had resulted from it.

The reason why British policy-makers were so convinced of the importance of Britain's continued presence in the Persian Gulf can be summed up in one word: oil. The Gulf was anything but an imperial backwater, even if the original incentive for British imperialism in the area, to secure the sea-route to India, had disappeared with the independence and partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The British Government was not only anxious to ensure the continued access of the Western world to Persian Gulf oil, it also wanted to preserve the conditions under which that oil was extracted and exported. This central British interest did not shrink or fade as the 1960s progressed. When the British Cabinet decided on 4 January 1968 to withdraw from the Gulf as part of the larger retreat from east of Suez, the secretary of state for foreign affairs, George Brown, and the secretary of state for commonwealth affairs, George Thomson, warned their cabinet colleagues in very strong words about the potential repercussions of that decision:

'We have a duty to leave our colleagues in no doubt about the nature of the risks to British interests that are involved here. 40 percent of Britain's (and even 50 percent of Western Europe's) oil supplies come from the Gulf and 40 percent of Gulf oil is in British ownership and make a significant contribution to our foreign exchange earnings.[...] An immediate withdrawal would carry with it the certainty of friction and the probability of hostilities, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Repercussions over this could put at risk not only our own, but all Western oil interests in the area.'<sup>ii</sup>

During the 1960s, oil was produced in commercial quantities in the Persian Gulf in Bahrain, Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. From 1967 onwards, Dubai also began to show promise as a potential source. The concessions for the exploration and export of Persian Gulf oil was largely in the hand of two companies, British Petroleum (BP) and Royal Dutch Shell. The only Persian Gulf state they were not involved in was Bahrain, by far the least important producer in the area. By virtue of their concession agreements with the local rulers the oil companies became the legal owners of any oil found in the Gulf. The revenues from oil production were then shared between the companies and the rulers of the producing states. The British Government had a significant economic interest in the commercial success of both Shell and BP. Although the majority of Shell was Dutch property, 40 percent of the company

was owned by British shareholders, while British Petroleum was entirely British-owned, with the British state holding 51 percent of its shares. It followed that the profits these companies made with Persian Gulf oil significantly benefitted Britain's balance of payments.

Among the Persian Gulf oil producing countries, Kuwait was of overriding importance to Britain, because it had become clear by 1961 that a fifth of the world's known petroleum resources were located in the emirate. By then, Kuwait's oil output had evolved into the largest in the Middle East, outstripping that of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, with the result that Kuwait had become extremely wealthy. Its annual oil revenues reached a record £150 million in 1960 and there was no end to the upward trend in sight. Since the Amir of Kuwait had agreed from 1950 onwards to receive his royalty payments from the oil companies in sterling, Kuwait had become one of the world's largest sterling holders, investing heavily in the City of London and contributing to the stability of the British currency. Bearing in mind that the 1960s were a period of dollar-shortage, Kuwait's membership in the sterling area presented the added advantage that British industry was able to meet its ever-growing need of energy by buying Kuwaiti oil and paying for it in sterling. Another reason for the strong British interest in Kuwait was the emirate's position as an independent oil producer in the Middle East, with friendly policies towards Britain and the West in general. If Kuwait had been invaded and annexed by a greater oil-producing Middle Eastern power, such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia, the number of major oil producers would have been reduced, with the result that the remaining ones would have obtained too much power to dictate prices to the West.

The oil wealth of the Persian Gulf States, in combination with their small size in territory and population, made them a very attractive prey to their larger neighbors, Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the eyes of the British Government, Britain's presence in the area was essential to preserve the stability and security of the Gulf and prevent the development of a dangerous power vacuum, which, in the event of Britain's retreat, would in all likelihood lead to a regional conflict or even result in the eventual intervention of the Soviet Union. Such a

conflict would almost certainly end the – from the British point of view – beneficial conditions under which Persian Gulf oil was extracted and exported, and very likely disrupt the flow of oil to the West.

These considerations were the reason why the British Government insisted in June 1961, when it acknowledged Kuwait's full independence and sovereignty in a formal Exchange of Letters with the Amir, to add the caveat that Her Majesty's Government would always be ready 'to assist the Kuwaiti Government if the latter requests such assistance'<sup>iii</sup> in the event of an external attack. The reaction of the president of Iraq, Karim Abd-al Qasim, to Kuwait's declaration of independence confirmed the worst fears of the British Government. At a press conference on 25 June 1961, Qasim made an aggressive speech, in which he declared the Exchange of Letters to be null and void and reiterated a historic claim that Kuwait was in fact part of Iraqi territory. Convinced that this speech signalled an imminent Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the British Government launched a preventive military intervention, the largest since the Suez Crisis, called 'Operation Vantage', on 1 July 1961. When the expected attack did not occur, the British Government did not conclude that it had been wrong about the Iraqi threat to Kuwait, but remained convinced of Qasim's intention to invade and annex the emirate at the earliest opportunity. As a result, the Chiefs of Staff developed a new defence plan for Kuwait, called Operation Sodabread, in the autumn of 1961 and the Cabinet agreed to extend Britain's military presence in the entire Persian Gulf significantly. Britain was now militarily more present in the Gulf than when Kuwait had still been a protected state. Given the limited power Britain enjoyed in the Protected States by treaty, the new deployment also had political consequences, because the British Government now depended more than ever on the goodwill of the local rulers who needed to give their consent to the stationing of additional troops. Reflecting the experience of the Kuwait crisis and its consequences for Britain's position in the entire area, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Sir William Luce, therefore concluded in November 1961:

‘[...] it is no exaggeration to say that Britain at this moment stands more deeply committed in the Persian Gulf, both politically and militarily, than at any time since the last war, a situation which is in marked contrast with the great contraction of our political and military commitments elsewhere in the world over the past fifteen years.’<sup>iv</sup>

The redeployment in the autumn of 1961 was not the last time the British Government decided to strengthen its military presence in the Gulf. A similar step was taken in 1966. In November 1965, the British Government decided to give up the military base in Aden on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, until then headquarter of Britain’s Middle East Command, by 1968. This plan was in part motivated by the necessity to curtail defence expenses, but mostly by the deteriorating security situation in Aden, where anti-British violence had reached a considerable level since the beginning of the Yemeni civil war in 1962. From the point of view of military planning, the withdrawal from Aden entailed considerable difficulties for the future British protection of the Persian Gulf in general and of Kuwait in particular. Without the Aden base, Britain would be unable to defend Kuwait in accordance with the existing intervention plan, since the forces stationed in the Persian Gulf at Bahrain, Sharjah, Salalah and on Masirah Island were not sufficient for that purpose. Despite these difficulties, the British Government was resolved that the disengagement from Aden could not be allowed to lead to the end of Britain’s military presence in the Persian Gulf and its commitments towards the states of the area, which might lead to ‘a serious breakdown’ of stability there. However, it soon became clear that Britain could not compensate for the loss of Aden by stationing sufficient forces for the defence of all of the Gulf States in the Gulf itself, because a redeployment of this scale would have entailed the enormous costs of £22 million, the existing bases and staging posts were not big enough to accommodate the additional men, and the rulers were highly unlikely to agree to lease the necessary land to Britain for such a substantial redeployment. The British Government therefore decided on a compromise by changing its intervention plan for the emirate: in the event of an attack, Britain would limit its military commitment towards Kuwait to the provision of air support

only. To meet the requirements for protecting Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the Trucial States and providing Kuwait with air support, the Cabinet decided on a smaller redeployment of British Forces from Aden to the Gulf, thereby reducing the costs of redeployment to £10 million.

It was always very important to the British Government to enlist the support of its counterpart in the United States for its Persian Gulf policy, but its success in this regard was limited. Both President John F. Kennedy and his successor Lyndon B. Johnson agreed that the Persian Gulf was an inherently unstable area, greatly appreciated Great Britain's presence there and wanted to see it continue, but they had no intention of getting embroiled in its affairs. The preservation of peace and stability in the Persian Gulf and the protection of the continued supply of its oil to the West was a British responsibility in which the US Government did not want to get involved. The reluctance on the side of the Americans to take over any responsibility in the Gulf only grew as the 1960s progressed and American forces became more and more tied up in the Vietnam War. The only exception to the general principle of non-involvement was the idea of the State Department's Policy Planning Council to have US diplomatic representation in the Protected States. While Britain hoped to encourage American interest in the Persian Gulf and gain US support for British policy in the area, the British Government vehemently refused to consider the diplomacy idea, because the Foreign Office was afraid that the opening of a US consulate or embassy in any of the Protected States would lead to requests for diplomatic representation by countries they were trying to keep out of the area, such as Iraq and Egypt. Until 1968 the British Government remained determined to maintain the exclusivity of its relations with the Protected States, with the detrimental result of having to do without US support on the ground.

Even though the Kuwait crisis had convinced the British Government that Britain's special position in the Persian Gulf remained a necessity, it was acknowledged at the same

time that maintaining this presence came at a certain political price. Its main disadvantage was the strain it placed on Britain's relationship with other Arab countries, most importantly the United Arab Republic. At a time when the ideology of Arab nationalism, with its distinctly anti-colonial and anti-British ethos, had turned into a mass movement in the Middle East, Britain's presence in the Gulf was very unpopular in the rest of the Arab world. A Foreign Office memorandum of April 1963 summed up Britain's international image with regard to the Gulf as follows:

[...] the picture which we [Great Britain] present to the eyes of the world is as follows. The British Government is keeping reactionary and discredited Rulers in power for selfish purposes of its own; in doing so, it deliberately excludes all progressive influence, including that of the United Nations, from this area; and since the Rulers are really only British puppets in spite of protestations about their independence, Britain is not only perpetuating colonial rule in contrast to what she says is the aim of her policy but is also directly responsible for preventing constitutional progress of the type achieved even in her own colonial territories elsewhere; moreover, Britain is directly interfering with Arab affairs where the wishes of the Arab States themselves should be paramount. This picture is unfair, but nonetheless exists.<sup>v</sup>

The centre of Arab nationalist criticism of Britain's presence in the Persian Gulf was Cairo. Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of the United Arab Republic and leader of the Arab Nationalist Movement, used his elaborate propaganda machinery for this purpose. His main tool for spreading anti-British sentiment was the radio station *Voice of the Arabs*. To make matters worse for the British Government, this station was not only popular in the Middle East, but was also 'listened to pretty widely in Africa and Asia'. Apart from being a symbol of Arab nationalist revolution, President Nasser was also a leading figure of the Non-Aligned Movement, and his anti-British propaganda was therefore likely to influence the formation of opinion in the emergent bloc of Afro-Asian nations.

As the 1960s progressed, the Foreign Office became increasingly worried that the negative image of Britain's presence in the Gulf as propagated by Nasser would ultimately result in interference in the area by the United Nations. From the perspective of the British

Government, the worst possible development was the UN Committee of 24 turning its attention to the Protected States. The Committee of 24 had been founded by the General Assembly in 1961, following the passing in 1960 of UN Resolution 1514 that called for the liberation of all colonies. The committee's task was to monitor the worldwide progress of decolonization. According to Sir Patrick Dean, the United Kingdom's Permanent Representative at the United Nations in New York, Great Britain's position at the UN with regard to the Protected States was very weak and a concerted attack by the Arab members of the General Assembly could be expected at any moment from 1963 onwards. If the Committee of 24 decided to put Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States on its agenda, Dean warned, the British Government would not be able to convince its members that there was no reason to define the Protected States as non-self-governing territories that had to be decolonized. The British Government could not possibly claim that the nine Protected States were completely independent, since Britain's military protection of the shaikhdoms and its conduct of their external relations were proofs to the contrary. The best the British Government could hope for at the United Nations would be to convince the members that the sovereignty of Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States was limited only as far as their external relations and defence were concerned, and that the British Government had no power to influence the internal affairs of the nine shaikhdoms. However, Britain's representatives at the United Nations were deeply sceptical as to whether this presentation of the British role in the Protected States would be accepted by the Committee of 24. Dean put it bluntly in December 1963: '[...] we have no defence here [at the United Nations] to the charge that we [the British Government] are running an under cover [sic!] old-fashioned colonial empire with the object of making a large profit out of the oil'.<sup>vi</sup>

Since Britain could only expect to lose at the UN, the only way open to policy-makers was to try and avoid drawing international attention to the Persian Gulf, whilst working

towards the creation of a more positive British image. In order to create and spread this positive image, the British Government had to refrain from any action that was likely to confirm Arab nationalist suspicions that the sovereignty of the rulers of the Protected States was restricted, not only externally but also with regard to their domestic affairs. At the same time, however, the Political Resident and the Political Agent used their personal influence on the rulers of Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States to persuade them of the advantages of good government and encourage them to carry out administrative, judicial, economic and social reforms. Britain's agents in the Gulf had to pay close attention to the potential danger of allowing these reforms to go too far. From the British perspective, social and economic progress in the Protected States was desirable as long as it did not endanger the government system of shaikhly rule. The British Government was well aware of the fact that Britain's privileged political position in the Protected States, and thereby its military presence in the Persian Gulf as a whole, was based on its close relations with the local rulers. As long as the British Government wanted to preserve its presence in the Persian Gulf to protect its economic and political interests, the Gulf monarchies had to be kept in power. The British image campaign with regard to the Gulf reached a new level in 1965 with the launch of a 'modernization policy', by which the British Government would shed those aspects of its relationship with the Protected States that seemed unnecessary for the protection of Britain's interests whilst hurting the British image in the world. Unsurprisingly, the list of actual changes was kept very short. Officially designed to develop both the protected states and their relationship with Britain, the modernization policy was not a first step towards gradual retreat, but above all a measure to strengthen the British position in the Gulf by reducing Arab nationalist criticism against it.

In reality, both the British Government's and the Arab nationalist version of presenting Britain's role in the Gulf were lacking in precision and subtlety. The 1960s were

the period during which British interventionism in local affairs was at its peak. The British Government had no scruples about intervening in the internal affairs of the protected Gulf States for which it was officially not responsible, but this does not mean that Britain's power in the Trucial States, Bahrain and Qatar was unlimited, as Nasser claimed. Concern for Britain's international image in times of decolonization meant that the British Government ultimately depended on the confidence and cooperation of local elites, who in turn used the connection with Britain to seek support for their own agendas. To illustrate this point, it is useful to explain the British Government's role in two seemingly isolated incidents: the depositions of Shaikh Saqr bin Sultan Al-Qasimi, ruler of Sharjah, in May 1965, and of Shaikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi, in August 1966.

Shaikh Saqr of Sharjah and Shaikh Shakhbut of Abu Dhabi had in common that they both stood in the way of important British policies in the Persian Gulf. In the case of the ruler of Sharjah, this became apparent during the period from October 1964 to May 1965, when the British Government was faced with a plan by the Arab League to open a development office in the Trucial States. Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf, Sir William Luce, regarded this plan as a major threat to Britain's position in the area, believing that the office would become a vehicle of Arab nationalist propaganda instigated by Egypt's president Nasser, and that it would support subversive activities designed to drive Britain from the Gulf. The problem was that in order to keep the Arab League out of the Gulf, the British Government depended on the cooperation of the Trucial rulers and their determination to forbid the opening of an Arab League office in their territories. Shaikh Saqr of Sharjah not only sympathized with the Arab League, as well as refusing to go along with the British plan, he also persuaded his cousin, Shaikh Saqr of Ras al-Khaimah, and the rulers of three other Trucial shaikhdoms, Umm al-Quwain, Ajman and Fujairah, to do the same. Matters came to a head on 22 May 1965, when Luce reported to London that Shaikh Saqr had decided to provide representatives of the Arab

League with Sharjah passports that would enable them to evade immigration control, travel undetected to the Trucial States and begin setting up an office there immediately. Two days later, Shaikh Saqr was deposed.

Shaikh Shakhbut of Abu Dhabi also stood in the way of important British objectives in the Persian Gulf. After significant oil resources had been discovered off the coast of Abu Dhabi in 1958 and on its mainland in 1962, he ruled what promised to become the richest state in the Persian Gulf after Kuwait. The British Government wanted Shaikh Shakhbut to invest his new wealth in the physical development of Abu Dhabi and in the creation of a modern administration. But Shaikh Shakhbut was extremely reluctant to spend more money than was absolutely necessary and was unwilling to delegate authority. He insisted on maintaining absolute control over the internal affairs of his shaikhdom and remained impervious to British advice. Apart from obstructing the modernisation of his own shaikhdom, Shaikh Shakhbut also stood in the way of another central British aim in the Gulf: the federation of the seven Trucial States. Convinced that each of the seven shaikhdoms was too small to survive on its own after Britain's eventual withdrawal from the area, the Foreign Office regarded a federation between them as the only possible way to prepare them for their long-term future. Abu Dhabi, as the only oil-producing Trucial State, was supposed to play a crucial role in the federation process, providing the other six shaikhdoms with financial resources. Shaikh Shakhbut, however, had little, if any, interest in this policy and obstructed the progress of cooperation between the seven Trucial States.

If resemblances existed between the relationships of the British Government with the rulers of Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, respectively, the circumstances of their eventual depositions were also similar. In both cases, Britain's representatives in the Gulf were presented with a letter signed by the leading members of the ruling family in question, informing the British Government of their decision to replace the current ruler with another member of the family

and asking the British agent to convey the news to the deposed ruler. Shaikh Saqr of Sharjah was replaced by his cousin, Shaikh Khalid bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, while Shaikh Shakhbut's place was taken by his younger brother, Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan. Both Saqr and Shakhbut were then escorted by the British diplomat in question to the airport from where they were flown out of the country to Bahrain on planes provided by the Royal Air Force. When Shaikh Shakhbut of Abu Dhabi at first refused to step down, Britain's local security force, the Trucial Oman Scouts, surrounded his palace and successfully urged his guards to lay down their guns.

The British Government presented the two depositions to the world as internal family affairs in which Britain had played no other part than the one of a messenger. In this official version, the eventual removal of both Shaikh Saqr and Shaikh Shakhbut from their shaikhdoms was a decision of the new rulers, whose wishes the British Government respected by providing the necessary planes. In reality, however, the British Government had a much bigger hand in installing new rulers in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi than it cared to let on. In the case of Sharjah, the archival record remains patchy, because all records for the day of the overthrow and the day preceding it remain classified. The last available source is Luce's telegram dating from two days before the deposition, in which he warned that the arrival of Arab League personnel in Sharjah was imminent. What can be stated with certainty is that Luce, supported by the Political Agent in Dubai, Glencairn Balfour-Paul, and the Minister of State in the Foreign Office, George Thomson, advocated the idea of instigating a coup in Sharjah to get rid of Shaikh Saqr for months before it eventually happened. Thomson, who had visited the Gulf in early May and failed to pressurize Shaikh Saqr into abandoning his plans of cooperating with the Arab League, actually wrote a personal and top secret letter to Luce a fortnight after the event, congratulating him – and Balfour-Paul – on their 'success' and expressing his hope that the other rulers of the Gulf had had a sufficient 'fright' from the

deposition to make them more amenable to British advice in future. The timing of the events and the sources from the months preceding the coup make it seem highly unlikely that Shaikh Saqr's replacement resulted from the initiative of his own family. In any case, it ended Britain's problem with the Arab League in the Gulf: Shaikh Khalid immediately revoked his predecessors' permission for an Arab League office in Sharjah, and the four other dissident leaders quickly fell back into line behind the British as well.

Britain's role in the deposition of Shaikh Shakhbut of Abu Dhabi is even less ambiguous. From 1962 onwards, Luce and two subsequent Political Agents in Abu Dhabi, Hugh Boustead and Archie Lamb, urged the British Government to organize Shaikh Shakhbut's replacement with Shaikh Zayed. The latter maintained close relations with the British agents in the Gulf and, during their regular meetings, did everything in his power to discredit Shaikh Shakhbut as mentally unstable and present himself as a suitable alternative to his brother, as a modern man who would embrace the British objectives of modernization and federation, as well as always listening to the advice of the Political Resident. Before 1966, the British Government made at least two attempts to organize a coup in Abu Dhabi, one in May 1963 and one in the winter of 1964/65, both of which failed because key members of the Al-Nahyan family withdrew their support in the last minute. It is important to note that both plans included the provision that the overthrow would be publically presented as the initiative of Shaikh Zayed and the Al-Nahyan family, to avoid suspicions that it resulted from an act of British imperialism. When Sir William Luce tried to convince the Foreign Office in 1964 to go ahead with withdrawing Britain's recognition of Shaikh Shakhbut as ruler without waiting for the support of the ruling family, his propositions were dismissed on the grounds that an open intervention in the government of Abu Dhabi would not be defensible internationally. In June 1966, following a falling out between Shaikh Shakhbut and his other brother, Shaikh Khalid bin Sultan, Shaikh Zayed travelled to London on the pretext of seeking medical treatment for one of his sons, met with George Thomson in the Foreign Office and agreed

with him that he would organize the necessary letter signed by the leading members of his family, if the British Government would in turn guarantee recognizing him as new ruler and provide him with the support of the Trucial Oman Scouts and the Royal Air Force. The coup of 6 August 1966 was therefore a joint enterprise by Shaikh Zayed and the British Government, after the latter had been working for years to achieve this outcome.

As I hope to have shown in this paper, the British policy-makers responsible for Persian Gulf affairs dedicated only very limited effort to preparations for retreat, until a drastically changed situation and timeline was sprung upon them in January 1968 with the announcement of Britain's impending withdrawal from East of Suez. From 1965 onwards, the Foreign Office tried to organize a rapprochement between the Protected States and Saudi Arabia, the only large Arab power that was not hostile to Great Britain. Sir Colin Crowe, the British ambassador in Jeddah, explained the reasoning behind this policy as follows:

'[...] if we are not going to be able to hold our position indefinitely by our own military strength, but wish to preserve as much as we can for the future, we must come to some kind of terms with some country in the area. The U.A.R. is out of the question and too far away; the Iraqis are too hostile; the Iranians would unite all the Arabs against us; there remain the Saudis. They are in the strongest position to make trouble for us, in the field, if not at the United Nations, but equally they could best protect our flank.'<sup>vii</sup>

The political aim of forging closer relations between Protected States and Saudi Arabia was not easy to achieve since the British Government could not risk provoking rumours that it had any intention of leaving the Persian Gulf in the foreseeable future. The situation was especially delicate after the publication of the Defence White Paper in February 1966 which announced Great Britain's intended withdrawal from Aden. Afraid to lose the confidence of the rulers of the Persian Gulf and upset the United States, the British Government was determined to keep up its prestige in the area. These attempts, however, were rendered futile by the sudden decision for retreat taken by the Cabinet in January 1968. When Foreign Secretary George Brown informed the US government at a meeting in Washington D.C. of the plan to withdraw, both President Johnson and Secretary of State Dean

Rusk reacted with anger and dismay. Rusk exploded: ‘For God’s sake act like Britain, George, how can you betray us?’<sup>viii</sup> Rusk’s fury was hardly surprising in view of the fact that the Foreign Office had only two months earlier reassured the State Department that Britain would remain in the Gulf at least until the mid-1970s. However, neither the complaints of the US Government, nor the local rulers, who actually offered to pay Britain for its continued military protection, could bring Harold Wilson and his ministers to reconsider.

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<sup>i</sup> John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate*, Oxford/Cambridge, MA 1991, p.3.

<sup>ii</sup> ‘Public Expenditure: Post-Devaluation Measures. Defence Cuts. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs’. Cabinet Memoranda (68) 7 (Review), 3 January 1968, CAB 129/135 (National Archives, London).

<sup>iii</sup> ‘Exchange of Letters between Her Majesty’s Government and His Highness the Ruler of Kuwait’, Art. 4, 19 June 1961, FO 93/137/15 (National Archives, London).

<sup>iv</sup> Luce to Home, Despatch No. 98, 22 November 1961, FO 371/162812 (National Archives, London).

<sup>v</sup> ‘Anglo-US Talks April 23/24 1963: Persian Gulf Policy’. Briefing Paper by the Arabian Department, 22 March 1963, FO 371/168633 (National Archives, London).

<sup>vi</sup> Dean to Harrison, 27 December 1963, FO 371/174491 (National Archives, London).

<sup>vii</sup> Crowe to Harrison, 27 February 1964, FO 371/174481 (National Archives, London).

<sup>viii</sup> See Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, Vol. 2: Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, 1966-68*, London 1976, pp. 646-647.