Britain's Informal Empire in the Gulf, 1820–1971

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What was the nature of Britain's interests in the Gulf Arab states before their independence from Britain, and how did Britain protect those interests? These are questions that historians of the Middle East have examined at length, but this examination has taken place completely outside of a wider debate about British imperialism that has occupied historians of Africa, India, Latin America, and China. Historians of the Middle East, and the Gulf in particular, have largely overlooked the theories about the nature of imperialism that these other historians have developed. Peter Sluglett suggests one explanation for this. Middle East historians, he points out, "see themselves primarily as such rather than as historians of part of the British Empire."[1] Nevertheless, Middle East historians could gain new insights from a consideration of the contemporary debate in imperial historiography. What follows is an attempt to link Gulf history with that debate.

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1. Peter Sluglett, "Formal and Informal Empire in the Middle East," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 5: *Historiography,* ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 422.

Historical Background[2]

Until 1947, the Gulf Arab states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, 'Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah, Fujairah, and Muscat/Oman formed part of Britain's Indian Empire, controlled from British India. British India's initial interest in Eastern Arabia grew out of a need to protect its ships and subjects in Arabian waters. In the late 18th and early 19th century, the Strait of Hormuz was controlled by the al-Qawasim family (singular al-Qasimi) of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah.[3] Much of the al-Qawasim's revenue came from tolls, which they levied on all shipping in and out of the Gulf. Partly out of misunderstanding, partly out of arrogance, the British refused to pay these tolls. In response, the al-Qawasim raided British shipping—an act the British considered piracy. British hegemony in the Gulf dates from the winter of 1819–20, when the authorities in British India sent a devastating naval expedition against the al-Qawasim and the "Pirate Coast," as they called the Coast of Oman (the Gulf coast of the present-day United Arab Emirates). Upon the conclusion of the expedition, the British imposed an anti-piracy treaty—known as the General Treaty of 1820—on all the rulers and governors of the Coast of Oman. The Rulers of Bahrain, who wished to avoid maritime toll paying, were admitted to the treaty at their request. To manage British India's relations with these rulers, supervise the enforcement of the General Treaty, and protect British India's ships and subjects in Arabian waters, the British created the post of Political Agent for the Lower Gulf, headquartered on Qishm Island in the Strait of Hormuz. Two years later, in 1822, the British transferred this post to Bushire on the southwest Persian coast and amalgamated it with the much older post of Bushire Resident (established 59 years earlier). The new post of

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2. For more details, see Malcolm E. Yapp, "British Policy in the Persian Gulf," in *The Persian Gulf States: A General Survey,* ed. Alvin J. Cottrell, 70–100 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); J. E. Peterson, "Historical Patterns of Gulf Security," in *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles and the Search for Consensus,* ed. Gary Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, 7–31 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997); James Onley, "The Politics of Protection in the Gulf: The Arab Rulers and the British Resident in the Nineteenth Century," *New Arabian Studies* 6 (2004): 30–92; James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

3. At its height in 1819, the al-Qasimi empire included Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, 'Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, and Fujairah in modern-day UAE; and Charak, Mughu, and Lingah along the Persian coast; and number of Gulf islands: Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, Kish, and Qishm.

Resident in the Persian Gulf—Political Resident in the Persian Gulf after the 1850s—was responsible for Britain's relations with the entire Gulf region. To support the resident in his role, the British assigned a naval squadron to the Gulf to patrol its waters—a practice known as "watch and cruise." The Gulf Squadron was under the command of the Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf and was headquartered at the entrance to the Gulf, first on Qishm Island (1821–63, 1869–1911) and then on neighboring Henjam Island (1911–35). When Reza Shah began to reassert Iranian sovereignty over the northern tier of the Gulf in the 1920s and 1930s, the British moved the squadron's headquarters across the Gulf to Ras al-Jufair on Bahrain Island (1935–71).[4] After Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, Ras al-Jufair became the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. From the 1930s on, the British maintained a small RAF squadron in the Gulf with airfields at Muharraq Island (Bahrain), Sharjah (Trucial Coast), Masirah Island (Oman), and Salalah (Oman). They also maintained a number of infantry units in the region at Qishm Island (1820–23), Sharjah (1951–71), Oman (1913–21), and Bahrain (1961–71).

After the imposition of the General Treaty of 1820, the Gulf Arab rulers consented to other treaties over the course of the next 150 years of British hegemony. The most important of these were the Maritime Truces, which established the Pax Britannica in the Gulf. The first Maritime Truce, signed in 1835 by the rulers of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, 'Ajman, and the al-Qasimi empire, was an experimental ban on maritime warfare during the pearling season. The truce was a great success and a second truce was arranged the following year, which the newly independent Ruler of Umm al-Qaiwain also signed. After a series of annual 12-month truces and a 10-year truce in 1843, the rulers signed a Perpetual Maritime Truce in 1853. In recognition of the shaikhdoms' membership in the Maritime Truce, the British referred to them as the "Trucial States" and to the Coast of Oman as the "Trucial Coast."[5] The British eventually invited the rulers

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4. The title "Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf" was only used after 1869. Earlier variants were the "Senior Indian Marine Officer in the Persian Gulf" (1822–30), the "Senior Indian Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf" (1830–63), and the "Commodore at Bassadore" (1822–63). For the sake of simplicity, "Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf" is used for all four.

5. Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah became separate Trucial States in 1869, although the British Government did not recognize this until 1921. Fujairah did not follow suit until 1901 and 1952, respectively.

of Bahrain and Qatar to join the truce in 1861 and 1916, respectively. Under the terms of the truce, the Gulf rulers gave up their right to wage war by sea in return for British protection against maritime aggression. This arrangement, known as the "Trucial system," cast Britain in the roles of protector, mediator, arbiter, and guarantor of settlements. Later on, the rulers also signed Exclusive Agreements (Bahrain in 1880, the Trucial States in 1892, Kuwait in 1899, Qatar in 1916) that bound them into exclusive political relations with, and ceded control of their external affairs to, the British Government. The Sultan of Muscat and Oman signed a de facto exclusive agreement with the British in 1891, except that political relations with America and France were permitted because of earlier treaties with those countries. Although these states were still foreign territory and their rulers remained as heads of state, their status vis-à-vis the British Government of India and (after 1947) the British Government in London placed them informally within the British Empire. This state of affairs continued until Britain granted independence to Kuwait in 1961 and the remaining Gulf states in 1971.

Explaining British Imperialism

The debate about the nature of British imperialism is presently dominated by two theories, one developed by Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, and the other by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins (see bibliography at end). The Robinson-Gallagher explanation emphasizes strategy as the primary motive behind British imperial activity during the 19th and 20th centuries, especially the defense of India. In this view, trade followed the flag. British intervention was not normally a result of changed interests, priorities, or policies in London; it was typically a reaction triggered by changes overseas that threatened Britain's global interests. Once the British intervened, they could not have stayed on without local collaborators and mediators. In order to do this, the British had to operate *within* local political systems—they could rarely do otherwise. The form British imperial activity took in a given area was a reflection of two factors: the concern for economy and the extent of direct

control Britain deemed necessary to safeguard its interests. Robinson and Gallagher have summarized this guiding principle of imperialism as "informal control if possible, formal control if necessary." The method of control the British adopted was largely determined by the success they had in attracting local collaborators and mediators. The greater their success, the more indirect their control. Therefore, it is the Empire and its periphery, rather than London, that holds the key to understanding both the timing and the nature of imperialism.

The Cain-Hopkins explanation, on the other hand, asserts that economic factors were the primary concern of British strategists. British overseas economic activity—mainly by the City of London's finance and service sectors—provided the arena in which British overseas political and military activity took place. British intervention was motivated by the need to protect overseas markets against European rivals: the flag followed trade. Cain and Hopkins agree with the Robinson-Gallagher theory that economy was a key motivating factor in the nature of imperialism and that the guiding principle was "informal control if possible, formal control if necessary." However, the Cain-Hopkins theory holds that it was the financial interests of the City of London in a region that determined the nature and timing of British imperial activity, and not conditions or events in the Empire or its periphery. For example, the Robinson-Gallagher theory explains the timing of British withdrawal from India as a result of a breakdown in the system of local collaboration and mediation, while the Cain-Hopkins theory holds that Britain's presence there was no longer economically profitable or fiscally viable and that it was the conversion of India's long-standing debt to the city that determined the timing of the transfer of power in 1947.

Britain's Informal Empire

The two theories of imperialism also converge on another point: the nature of informal empire. They conceptualize it as Britain's commercial empire outside of the British Empire. This idea was first advanced by Robinson and

Gallagher in "The Imperialism of Free Trade."[6] The general argument is that Britain enjoyed informal political influence over those countries that were economically dependent upon Britain. Cain and Hopkins believe it was the finance and service sectors of the City of London more than anything else that enabled Britain to exercise informal political influence outside the British Empire. In *British Imperialism*, they suggest that Persia and the Ottoman Empire comprised Britain's informal empire in the Middle East, while they identify Egypt, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, British Somaliland, the Aden Protectorate, the Gulf Arab states, the mandates of Iraq, Trans-Jordan, and Palestine, and the colonies of Malta, Cyprus, and Aden as belonging to Britain's formal empire.[7]

British officials at the time, however, saw formal and informal empire rather differently. They viewed the distinction in constitutional terms of sovereignty and suzerainty, or full and partial sovereignty. To them, Britain's formal empire was *British* territory over which Britain exercised full sovereignty, in a word: colonies. Britain's informal empire, on the other hand, consisted of *foreign* territories over which Britain had acquired some degree of suzerainty or partial sovereignty granted through treaties, in other words: protectorates, condominia, mandates, and protected states.[8] According to this definition, Britain's formal empire in the Middle East was composed of the colonies of Malta, Cyprus, and Aden, while its informal empire was much larger, consisting of the Aden Protectorate, the Gulf Arab states, British-protected Egypt (1914–36), the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, British Somaliland, and the mandates of Iraq, Trans-Jordan, and Palestine. Foreign territories over which Britain exercised varying degrees of influence or informal suzerainty—namely "independent" Egypt (1882–1914, 1936–47/56),[9] "independent" Iraq (1932–58), "independent" Jordan (1946–56), and certain parts of Persia—were not considered by British officials to fall within Britain's informal empire as they defined it; indeed it was in their interest to

publicly deny it. They regarded these states instead as spheres of influence. But their constitutional status aside, these states were just as integrated into Britain's imperial system as British protected states. Their state infrastructures—from their militaries and civil services to their postal offices and schools—were often organized and run along British lines, and their military units and government departments were often advised or run by Britons in the private employ of these states.[10]

Present-day historians have different views of formal and informal empire. Some view it as described above, while others see no real difference between de jure and de facto suzerainty, for the end result was the same.[11] Cain and Hopkins argue, for instance, that "sorting the empire into different constitutional groups ... leaves untouched the central issue of the degree of control exercised by the centre, for this is not necessarily measured by an index of constitutional standing."[12] Philip Curtin points out that, while "European empires overseas had increasing administrative power ..., an enormous gap could sometimes exist between their claims to authority and the reality of power they were actually capable of exercising"; conversely: "At other times, Europeans underplayed rather than overplayed the reality of their power." Here Curtin gives the well-known example of Britain's "veiled protectorate" over Egypt (1882–1914).[13] For these reasons, historians are faced with a perplexing problem of terminology. One historian's sphere of influence is another's informal empire. Elizabeth Monroe got around the problem by calling it "Britain's moment in the Middle East."[14] Perhaps the most accurate, inclusive term yet is the one coined by John Darwin: "Britain's undeclared empire in the Middle East."[15]

6. *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6/1 (1953): 1–15.

7. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 1: *Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London: Longman, 1993), 6–9.

8. Edward Jenks, *The Government of the British Empire* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1919), 87–92.

9. British forces withdrew from Cairo and Alexandria in 1947 and from the Suez Canal Zone in 1956.

10. See, for example, Matthew Elliot, *"Independent Iraq": The Monarchy and British Influence, 1941–58* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), chapter 5.

11. For an excellent discussion of this, see Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), 30–47.

12. Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 1: *1688–1914*, 6–7.

13. Philip D. Curtin, *The World and the West: The European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 15–16.

14. Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East, 1914–1971* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981).

15. John Darwin, "An Undeclared Empire: The British in the Middle East, 1918–39," in *The Statecraft of British Imperialism: Essays in Honour of Wm. Roger Louis,* ed. Robert D. King and Robin Kilson, 159–76 (London: Frank Cass, 1999). Also see Sluglett, "Formal and Informal Empire in the Middle East," 416–36.

Despite the remarkable similarities between those states British officials regarded as informal parts of the Empire and those states they regarded as spheres of influence, there was one major difference between the two: the absence or presence of rival imperial influence. Inside Britain's informal empire, rival imperial influence was excluded, while inside Britain's spheres of influence, it was not. In Persia, the Ottoman Empire, "independent" Egypt (1882–1914, 1936–47/56), "independent" Iraq (1932–58), and "independent" Jordan (1946–56), British proconsuls were constrained to some extent by the presence of the ambassadors or consul-generals of other imperial powers— considerably so in Persia and the Ottoman Empire, marginally so in Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. This was not the case in the Gulf shaikhdoms of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, and the emirates of the Aden Protectorate, where there was no rival imperial presence whatsoever, or even in British-protected Egypt (1914–36) and the British mandates, where the presence of other imperial powers was merely nominal.

If the distinction between formal and informal empire used by Cain, Hopkins, Robinson, and Gallagher (and many others) would not have been accepted by British imperial officials, then how far do the two theories of imperialism explain British involvement in the Gulf?

Britain's Economic Motives and Methods in the Gulf: The Cain-Hopkins Explanation

Britain has always viewed the Gulf as consisting of two separate entities: a northern tier, comprised of Persia and Iraq, and a southern tier, Eastern Arabia. Early British interest in the Gulf was wholly economic and restricted to the northern tier. In 1616, the East India Company established its Persia Agency in Jask (later moved to Bandar 'Abbas) to oversee its commercial activities in the Gulf region. The Persia Agency opened a series of Factories in Shiraz, (1617), Isfahan (1617), Basrah (1635), Bandar Riq (1755), and Bushire (1763), and Brokerages in Kirman (c.1720s) and Muscat (c.1750s). Since the 18th century, Muscat has always been the exception to the rule in Britain's relationship with the Gulf Arab states. Outside of Muscat, the British had no economic interests

in Eastern Arabia whatsoever until the early 19th century. Before then, British merchants avoided the area because they perceived the threat of "piracy" to be too great and the commercial prospects to be too small. Take, for example, this British naval report from the mid-18th century: "The Coast of Arabia, from Musseldon [Ras Musandam] to Bahareen, is unfrequented, and therefore unknown to Europeans";[16] or this statement by a former Indian Navy officer: "In consequence of the dangerous character of the Arabian coast, owing to the pirates and the prevailing winds, this portion of the Gulf littoral was avoided as much as possible by trading vessels, and nothing was known concerning the navigation of this coast, until [the 19th century]."[17] Although British India was of great importance to the Gulf shaikhdoms economically, the economic importance of the Gulf shaikhdoms to British India was small, limited almost entirely to the pearl trade.[18] As a result, trade and shipping between the Gulf shaikhdoms and British India in the 17th and 18th centuries were entirely in the hands of local Arab, Persian, and Indian merchants with trading houses in both India and the Gulf shaikhdoms.[19] Although Gulf historians presume the value of this trade to have been relatively small, its exact value is unknown since the annual compilation of trade reports on Eastern Arabian ports did not begin until 1834. These reports were compiled by British agents in the Gulf and published in the Indian Foreign Department's annual *Report on the Administration of the Persian Gulf Political Residency* (1873–1904) and later in its annual *Persian Gulf Trade Reports* (1905–40).[20] Trade reports before 1834 on "Arabia" were not on Arabia at all, but on "Turkish Arabia"—the British name for the Ottoman Provinces of Baghdad and Basrah.

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16. Capt. David Rannié, "An Account of the Winds, Etc. in the East Indies" [*c.*1757–63], in Lt. John McCluer, *An Account of the Navigation between India and the Gulph of Persia at All Seasons* (London: George Bigg, 1786), 95.

17. Lt. Charles R. Low, *History of the Indian Navy (1613–1863)*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1877), 189.

18. Capt. John Malcolm, "Report on the State of the Trade between Persia and India … 1800," in J. A. Saldanha, *Selections from State Papers, Bombay, regarding the East India Company's Connections with the Persian Gulf, with a Summary of Events, 1600–1800*, (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1908), appendix h, 445.

19. Anne Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790–1833* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), chapter 8.

20. These were republished by Archive Editions in 1986–7.

In 1862, the British India Steam Navigation Company (known as the BI Line) established a regular shipping route between Basrah and Bombay. Eventually, it incorporated the Arabian ports of Muscat (1862), Manamah (1869), Qatif (1874), Kuwait (1874), and Dubai (1909) into the route. Before the establishment of the route, British policy had been only to make the Gulf safe for British shipping. As British trade with Eastern Arabia increased after the 1860s as a result of the incorporation of Arabian ports into the BI Line's Gulf route, the Government of India began to actively encourage it. The value of the trade with Manamah, Qatif, Kuwait, Dubai, and Sharjah always remained small, however, and was never in the same league as that of the trade with large ports like Muscat (before the mid-19th century) and Basrah. Not until the discovery of oil in Bahrain (1932), Kuwait (1938), Qatar (1940), Abu Dhabi (1958), and Oman (1964) did British economic interests in Eastern Arabia become significant in a global sense. Oil had a strong influence on British policy in the Gulf after its discovery—most notably on Britain's decision to stay on in the Gulf after its withdrawal from India in 1947.

Britain's pre-oil commercial interests in the Gulf shaikhdoms are not sufficient in themselves to explain Britain's presence in Eastern Arabia. This may seem unlikely at first glance because British political dispatches between Bushire, Bombay, Calcutta, and London are filled with references to British and British Indian trade with the Gulf shaikhdoms. However, the relatively insignificant value of the Gulf shaikhdoms' trade with the British Empire needs to be kept in mind when reading these dispatches. The British were keen to increase and protect these commercial interests at every opportunity, but this was an economic policy with a political motive. Increasing Arab economic dependency on British India, and later Britain itself, was one of several methods Britain used to increase its political influence over the Gulf shaikhdoms. The British recognized the links between trade and politics in the Gulf and used these to their advantage, but one should not conclude from this that Britain's pre-oil commercial interests in the Gulf shaikhdoms were the motive behind its involvement there. While the Cain-Hopkins theory may explain Britain's motives for its initial involvement in Persia and Muscat in the 17th and 18th centuries, the theory does not explain British involvement in the Gulf shaikhdoms before oil. The strengths of the theory lie in its emphasis on British

economic strategies to exercise political influence and, of course, in its explanation of Britain's decision to remain in the Gulf after Indian independence.

Britain's Strategic Motives and Methods in the Gulf: The Robinson-Gallagher Explanation

Britain's original interest in the Gulf shaikhdoms of Bahrain and the Trucial Coast developed out of a strategic concern for the protection of British shipping between Persia, Iraq, Muscat, and India. Arab maritime raiders, whose activities between 1797 and 1819 caused the British great concern for the safety of their ships, had their base of operations along the "Pirate Coast." The increasing threat to British shipping eventually prompted the British to dispatch a series of naval expeditions to the Gulf. After the last expedition, it became clear that the stability of the Gulf shaikhdoms was essential for the security of the shipping lanes in and around the Gulf. In 1820, therefore, Britain embarked upon a policy of increasing intervention in Arabian affairs in order to pacify, stabilize, and secure the Gulf region—a policy Britain maintained until 1971. It was for this purpose that the Lower Gulf Agency (1820–2) and its successor, the Gulf Residency (1822–1971), were established. Although located on the Persian coast, their principal role was to maintain political relations with both the rulers of Eastern Arabia and the governors of southern Persia in order to protect British ships, subjects, and interests in the Gulf region as a whole. The decision to locate in Persia (the Lower Gulf Agency on Qishm Island and the Gulf Residency at Bushire) instead of Arabia was a logical one at the time. For the past 200 years Britain's main interest in the region had been Persia, not Arabia; Britain's shipping lanes through the Gulf ran along the Persian coast, making communications with India easier; Persia had better amenities and a more developed infrastructure; and the British considered Persia a safer base of operations than the Pirate Coast.

Though the protection of trade was important to Britain, it was a regional strategic concern limited to the Gulf. The Gulf held no global strategic value to Britain until France sent a military expedition to Egypt (1798–1801) and entered

into a military alliance with the Shah of Persia (1807–9). Suddenly, British India faced the threat of invasion from the west. Britain quickly adopted the policy of securing Persia and Muscat/Oman as buffer states against French influence. British envoys were dispatched from India to Muscat and Persia with orders to secure anti-French treaties in return for promises of British support. A political representative was sent from England to report on French activity in Baghdad. Apart from Muscat, Eastern Arabia remained outside of this diplomatic activity. After Britain defused the French threat, it maintained a buffer state policy toward Muscat and Persia until its withdrawal from India in 1947. In fact, J. B. Kelly argues that Britain may well have abandoned Persia altogether had France not become involved in Egypt and Persia when it did, as Britain had lost all economic interest in the country by then.[21] Thus, the Gulf shaikhdoms were important to Britain because of their proximity to British shipping lanes and to important buffer states on British India's western flank.

In the 1860s, the strategic importance of Eastern Arabia to Britain increased dramatically. In 1865, Britain established two telegraph lines through the Gulf—one underwater cable and one overland cable, both along the Persian coast—giving Britain instant communication with India. The Gulf had long been used by Britain as a mail route to India, but it was only one of three routes to the East (the others being the Red Sea mail route and the Cape of Good Hope shipping route). Now the Gulf became a vital communications corridor and the protection of British telegraph lines and stations along the Persian coast became a global strategic concern for Britain. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 also had a significant influence on British strategy for the defense of India. Overnight, the normal shipping time between Britain and India was cut from months to weeks. The security of the surrounding areas—Egypt and Arabia—now concerned British policy-makers in London. The Gulf was moving into the forefront of Britain's global strategic planning.

Shortly after these favorable developments for Britain, the Gulf came under threat from the north. Russia was expanding into Central Asia with an eye to securing a warm water port somewhere along the southern Persian coast. In 1868, Russia captured Samarkand; in 1873, it took Khiva; and in 1884, it

occupied Merv. By 1885, Russia had a common frontier with Persia, from the Caspian Sea to Afghanistan, and Russian influence was spreading throughout northern Persia.[22] From this point on, British policy in Persia was largely concerned with excluding that influence. If a major rival like Russia were to establish a naval base in the Gulf, it would pose a serious maritime threat to India. In this way, the Persian side of the Gulf became a frontier in the "Great Game" between Russia and Britain that dominated strategic thinking in India for over a century.

While these developments unfolded in Persia, there were also unfavorable developments on the Arab side of the Gulf. In 1871–2, the Ottoman Empire occupied Hasa and Qatar in the space of a few months. Soon the Ottomans began to threaten annexation of the remainder of Eastern Arabia: Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, 'Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, and Ras al-Khaimah—territories forming a de facto part of the British Indian Empire. The Ottoman presence cut off a large portion of Eastern Arabia from British maritime policing with destabilizing results. Pirates sought refuge in Ottoman waters from British gunboats. British policy on Eastern Arabia now became concerned with the prevention of further Ottoman expansion in the Gulf—and was thus tied up with the "Eastern Question" (about the future and integrity of the Ottoman Empire) that dominated Euro-Ottoman relations before the Great War. Toward this end, the Government of India signed Exclusive Agreements with the Rulers of Bahrain (in 1880 and 1892), and Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, 'Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah (in 1888 and 1892), turning them into British-protected states, although Britain did not clarify their status in this regard until 1949. The Sultan of Muscat and Oman signed a de facto exclusive agreement with the British in 1891, except that political relations with America and France were permitted because of earlier treaties with those countries. In 1899, the Ruler of Kuwait signed an Exclusive Agreement with the Government of India to exclude German influence and involvement from his shaikhdom. The Ruler of Qatar followed suit in 1916 after the withdrawal of the Ottoman garrison at Doha. These agreements bound the rulers into exclusive political relations with,

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21. J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795–1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 61.

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22. See map in Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia* (London: Abacus, 1999), 118–19.

and ceded control of their external affairs to, the British Government.[23] This was the final step in the Gulf Arab states' formal incorporation into the Indian Empire. They formed a part of what Frauke Heard-Bey aptly describes as "the screen of semi-independent states and principalities ... right across the British Indian Empire's northern frontiers and western seaboards and along its vital communication lines with Europe."[24] The Exclusive Agreements legitimized Britain's exclusion of Ottoman influence—and later German, French, and Russian influence—from strategic parts of Eastern Arabia, allowing Britain to establish a *cordon sanitaire* to protect British India.

Conclusion

Britain maintained its informal empire in the Gulf in order to protect British India and its trade and communication routes. By offering a series of treaties through which Britain became responsible for the maritime protection of the Gulf shaikhdoms, Britain was able to get the local rulers to collaborate in the pacification of the Gulf and in the later exclusion of foreign influences that threatened British India. In South Arabia, Britain entered into similar treaties with the rulers and tribal leaders of the Aden Protectorate in order to protect its important base at Aden. Britain's primary motive for entering into these relationships was strategic: to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around British India. Outside of the ports of Aden and Muscat, the financial value of Arabia to Bombay and the City of London was relatively small before oil. Cain and Hopkins' theory that economic interests shaped British imperial policy is relevant for only the last 30 years of British involvement in the Gulf shaikhdoms.

For the first 120 years, the timing of British intervention was determined solely by circumstances and events within the shaikhdoms that threatened British interests in Persia, Muscat, and the waters of the Gulf. Historians of the region, therefore, should take note of Robinson and Gallagher's theory of British imperialism, for it offers the best explanation of the nature of British India's informal empire in the Gulf, as well as other frontier regions of the Indian Empire like Afghanistan, Baluchistan, the Northwest Frontier, and Nepal ∎

23. For analysis of the treaties, see J. B. Kelly, "The Legal and Historical Basis of the British Position in the Persian Gulf," *St. Antony's Papers*, no. 4: *Middle Eastern Affairs*, vol. i (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 119-40; David Roberts, "The Consequences of the Exclusive Treaties: A British View," in *The Arab Gulf and the West*, ed. Brian R. Pridham (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 1-14; Husain M. Al-Baharna, "The Consequences of Britain's Exclusive Treaties: A Gulf View," *The Arab Gulf and the West*, 15-37; Al-Baharna, *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States: A Study of Their Treaty Relations and Their International Problems* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1968).

24. Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1996), 294.

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