
The Beginning of the Post-Imperial Era for the Trucial States from World War I to the 1960s

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The UAE never was a colony, but its forerunner, the 'Trucial States',¹ was increasingly absorbed into the British orbit by a system of agreements which successive British governments, first in Delhi and then in London, deemed necessary in order to best pursue their particular objectives of the day.

The First World War was like lightning and thunder bursting forth from the storm clouds which European imperialist ambitions had fomented. This was not the time for letting the privileged position, which Britain had acquired on the Arab side of the Gulf,² slip from her hands. Rather, in order to consolidate her hold, it was necessary to be prepared to support the war effort in the Middle East, regardless of whether or not the Gulf became a war zone. During the period before the War, the German plan to nominate Kuwait as a terminus for the proposed Baghdad Railway was perceived as part of an increasing threat to the British position of hegemony in the Gulf. This justified enhancing and elaborating the set of treaties, in which the rulers of the then six Trucial States – like other Arab rulers in the area – had agreed in 1892 to 'on no account enter into any agreement or correspondence with any Power other than the British Government'.³

Another important objective was to prevent arms from reaching sensitive areas such as Afghanistan or Baluchistan on the fringe of the British Empire. The countries in the entire region were all closely watched, and eventually treaties were made in November 1902 in which the rulers agreed to 'absolutely prohibit the importation of arms for sale . . . or the exportation therefrom'.⁴ In 1911 it was agreed that concessions for pearling, sponge fishing and related economic activities should not be granted except with the permission of the British Political Resident for the Gulf in Bushire.⁵ This undertaking had the additional benefit for the local population that no outsiders were permitted to exploit the resources, which were a significant part of their livelihood. Practical benefits for the far-flung Empire, such as way-leaves for telegraph lines or the demarcation of shipping lanes by buoys and lighthouses, were secured as the need arose. Thus a *cordon sanitaire* was thrown around the Arab states of the Gulf, which in the event meant, for the British at least, a well covered flank when Turkey, aided by Germany, engaged in hostilities in southern Iraq in 1916.

After the defeat of the main rivals within the Gulf region, Turkey, Germany and Russia, the previous British political and strategic considerations of the nineteenth century – with the desired effect of denying the littoral states of the Gulf contacts with other European powers

– gave way to the pursuit of economic goals. During the War it had grown evident that access to oil resources had become of prime importance. Finds in Persia and Iraq had already indicated that the entire region could be rich in oil. Therefore, Britain wanted to ensure that in the areas where she had already secured political influence, no other nation would pip her at the post if and when a race for oil concessions were to ensue. Between February and May of 1922 the rulers of the Trucial States gave an undertaking that if the search for oil commenced in their territories they would not grant ‘any concession in this connection to any one except to the person appointed by the High British Government’.⁶ Similar agreements had already been signed in 1913/14 by Kuwait and Bahrain, although British diplomatic efforts never achieved the same level of influence with Ibn Saud, the new ruler of Central Arabia.⁷

However, for more than a decade British oil companies were unable to take advantage of this privileged position in the Trucial States, because they were committing their capital and resources to the areas where oil had already been found, Persia and Iraq. Oil was then also discovered in Bahrain in 1932, and there were good prospects for discovery in Kuwait and the al-Hasa area – all in American-owned concessions. The London-based multinational consortium, which had been restructured after the First World War to exploit the known deposits in Iraq, the Iraq Petroleum Company Ltd (IPC),⁸ secured a concession in Qatar in 1935 with the help of the British government. In the same year IPC formed a subsidiary called Petroleum Concessions Ltd (PCL) in order to secure oil concessions on the Trucial Coast and in Oman and to exclude American companies from these areas.

PCL’s negotiations with the individual rulers proved to be tough and protracted and on numerous occasions required intervention by the British Political Agent in Bahrain as the long arm of the British government. The first of these concessions was signed in 1937 by the ruler of Dubai; the last to sign was the newly independent ruler of Fujairah in 1952.⁹ The Trucial States had so far been perceived by the British primarily as a string of settlements dominated by the rulers of the coastal city states. From the early 1930s onwards, British policy towards the Trucial States became much more intrusive in preparation for the operations of oil company personnel in the uncharted hinterland. The way in which the rulers dealt with domestic matters was now more closely monitored and, on occasions, severely censored, and the British authorities took an interest in inter-tribal strife and the increasing number of territorial disputes in the hinterland. The frequency, not only of the letters, which were sent to the rulers via the Residency Agent in Sharjah, but also of the visits of one or another of the warships stationed in the Gulf increased, carrying the Political Agent from Bahrain or Kuwait or even the Political Resident from Bushire – depending on the urgency and importance of the matter. The Senior Naval Officer in the Gulf, and even the captains of the ships, were also empowered to conduct political negotiations.

As communications between Britain and its Indian Empire developed to include air travel, and when landing facilities on the Iranian side of the Gulf were withdrawn, the Trucial States were considered as essential staging posts first for military and, later, for civilian planes. The British needed to be successful in negotiating agreements for runways, refuelling facilities and emergency landing strips for their seaplanes and aircraft.¹⁰ From 1932 there were overnight facilities at a purpose-built fortress near a landing strip in Sharjah for the crew and passengers of (British) Imperial Airways. The strategically placed facilities for air communications, in particular at Sharjah, played an important role during the Second World War, and were secured

by constant monitoring of developments in the area through copious exchanges of letters and frequent visits from the Agent in Sharjah, and the British personnel in Bahrain, Bushire, India and London. The oil concessions remained dormant due to the shortage of men, money and steel during the Second World War and for several years thereafter.¹¹

In all matters of communication with the British government, the sole addressees in every state were the rulers. Since the early nineteenth century the status of an incumbent ruler had usually been much enhanced by the importance which the 'High Government' placed on a 'Trucial Ruler' to the exclusion of a tribal sheikh in the interior.¹² But from the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, when the decline of the pearling industry spelled great economic hardship for the region, the population in these states, led by the merchants, strongly resented the fact that all the potentially lucrative arrangements and concessions, for which the British government or foreign companies made payments, were agreed exclusively with the rulers. This further enhanced an already existing regional trend to xenophobia and encouraged alienation between the rulers and their people.

After the War the search for oil began in earnest in 1950, when the first drilling rig was erected on the coast of Abu Dhabi. But several dry holes were drilled in locations throughout the Trucial States and its adjacent sea bed, before oil was struck in commercial quantities offshore from Abu Dhabi in 1959 and on-shore in the desert of the same state in 1960. Export facilities were built and shipments began in 1962 and 1963 respectively. The influx of foreign personnel working for the oil companies and, eventually, an ever increasing number of men with the many construction and service companies, made it imperative that their safety was guaranteed while they were working in remote locations. In response to these requirements a British officered local force was established in 1951, the 'Trucial Oman Scouts'. A host of regulations were enacted to ensure their security, to define their legal status in the country as well as to cover many other issues. The Political Agency, staffed by British officials since 1949, was moved from Sharjah to Dubai in 1954, and a new Political Agency was opened for Abu Dhabi in 1957. Legal arrangements for British protected people were made in so-called 'Orders in Council', decided upon in London. The British-made immigration rules were implemented by the Political Agencies. Thus, British involvement on a daily basis became very much more obvious, but, because it coincided with a period of perceptible economic improvement, at least for those people who obtained employment with one of the companies, this was probably less resented than when the oil companies first arrived before the war.

As for the British government's approach to this region within the slowly disintegrating empire, the changes which were sweeping the global political scene in the post-war era also made their mark here. The plight of people in developing countries was being discussed in the United Nations. Britain, too, felt morally obliged to care for the population of this region which was under her domination and from which she had over time benefited so much more than she had been required to care for. Once the necessity to become active in the development of the Trucial States had become widely accepted, several efforts were initiated. The Foreign Office profited from the fact that a number of its members, who came to serve in the Gulf, had already been involved in development in the Sudan Civil Service. They and others were prepared to implement this new approach to the British imperial role – to help to improve the living standards of the people, and to prepare the area of the Trucial States for the changes which were to be expected if oil was found there. The world economic recession of the 1930s,

the decline of the pearling industry, and the impact of the Second World War had combined to reduce the Trucial Coast to poverty. The finances which the British government was prepared to commit to this task were very limited, but a number of dedicated civil servants, engineers, military personnel and other specialists managed to have an impact in several fields and laid the groundwork for the road to development

The rulers of the seven Trucial States were brought together in the 'Trucial States Council', which met regularly and decided upon the priorities for the 'Trucial States Development Office'.¹³ Modest beginnings in health care, road building, agricultural extension work, vocational training, statistics and surveys of water and soil resources were made in the 1950s. Such efforts accelerated and brought visible results in the 1960s, when Abu Dhabi began to pay the lion's share for these development projects. This leading role taken by Abu Dhabi already pointed the way forward to the foundation of the Federation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971, an independent state which benefited from the oil wealth of its member states.

With this event the British Political Agency, which had been perceived by many in the country to be the hub of influence and power, was transformed into the British Embassy¹⁴ – one among a fast growing number of diplomatic missions in the country, thus symbolically marking the end of the imperial era in the Gulf.

¹ This was the name given to the area (with the exception of Bahrain and Qatar) under the sovereignty of the rulers who had signed the 'General Treaty' with the representative of the East India Company in 1820.

² The supervision of developments on the Arab side of the Gulf was coordinated by the British Political Resident in Bushire; from 1823 a 'Native Agent' was sent to Sharjah to maintain a channel of communication with this Coast.

³ C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, Delhi, Government of India (1933) p 256.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 257.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 263.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 261.

⁷ See G. Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia. Britain and the Rise of the House of Sa'ud*, London, Frank Cass (1976) pp 34ff.

⁸ The shareholding at the time was: 23.75 per cent each BP, Shell, Compagnie Francaise des Petroles (later Total), and Near East Development Corporation (half Mobil and half Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey) and 5 per cent Mr. Gulbenkian's Participations and Explorations (Partex).

⁹ See for details F. Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates. A Society in Transition*, London, Longman (1982) pp 296f.

¹⁰ See R.S. Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates*, New York, St. Martin's Press (1978) pp 98ff.

¹¹ A team of geologists had visited some parts of the hinterland in 1936 and some seismic investigations had followed in 1946.

¹² For instance, the decision as to who should be the ruler in Kalba in the 1930s was entirely a British one, as was the later decision to reincorporate Kalba into the state of Sharjah in 1951 after a series of struggles over succession.

¹³ See also for the following Heard-Bey, *op. cit.*, pp 319ff.

¹⁴ The Agent in Abu Dhabi became the Ambassador to the UAE, while the Agent in Dubai became a Consul General.