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# Imperialism after decolonization? British relations with Bahrain from the withdrawal East of Suez to the Iranian Revolution

Simon C. Smith

School of Humanities, University of Hull, Hull, UK

Towards the end of 1961, Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf, Sir William Luce, stated, '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'.<sup>1</sup> In just ten years, nonetheless, British forces had departed from the Gulf signifying the winding up of Britain's formal imperial presence in the region. Reflecting on the importance of these events, the former Labour Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, depicted the decision to withdraw from 'East of Suez', of which the presence in the Gulf was a key component, as 'the most momentous shift in our foreign policy for a century and a half'.<sup>2</sup> Using somewhat more emotive language, the long-standing Labour Cabinet member, Richard Crossman, wrote in his diary with respect to the withdrawal decision, 'the status barrier is as difficult to break through as the sound barrier; it splits your ears and is terribly painful when it happens'.<sup>3</sup> Despite such contemporary assessments of the significance of the withdrawal from East of Suez, there is an emerging consensus in more recent scholarship that the end of empire did not mark the termination of Britain's relations with its former imperial charges. Applying ideas relating to the existence of a large 'informal empire' in the mid-nineteenth century – one based on influence rather than control – historians of British decolonization have suggested that the end of empire represented an attempt to jettison formal empire and replace it with an updated version of informal empire. In a seminal contribution to this debate, William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson argued that 'British officials concentrated on independence for tropical Africa after 1957 to prolong imperial sway and secure British economic and strategic assets. It was increasingly urgent to exchange colonial control for informal empire'.<sup>4</sup>

Many other historians of empire and decolonisation have broadly followed this line.<sup>5</sup> In an emerging consensus, Tore Petersen, Shohei Sato, Gregory Barton, and Francis Owtram have all supported the interpretation that Britain retained a considerable degree of influence over the Gulf Sheikdoms which amounted to a successful reversion to informal empire following formal withdrawal in 1971.<sup>6</sup> Equally, F. Taylor Fain is keen to downplay the significance of Britain's military departure from the Gulf and the winding-up of its special political position in the Gulf Sheikdoms. 'In short', he remarks, 'the sky did not fall for British interests in the Gulf after the last Royal Navy vessel weighed anchor in Bahrain'.<sup>7</sup> In Taylor Fain's opinion, the preservation of British interests after 1971 proved that Britain's direct military presence and role in the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s had been shown to be 'expensive irrelevancies'.<sup>8</sup> Referring specifically to Bahrain following Britain's formal departure from the Gulf in 1971, Miriam Joyce argues that its 'ties with Washington were growing, but London was not forgotten'.<sup>9</sup>

**CONTACT** Simon C. Smith  [s.c.smith@hull.ac.uk](mailto:s.c.smith@hull.ac.uk)

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Bahrain is a particularly illuminating case study to test theories of imperialism after decolonization since it was the political and strategic centre of Britain's imperial presence in the Gulf. The closeness of the relationship between Britain and the al-Khalifah ruling family in particular had been underlined by the use of British forces to suppress unrest and restore the authority of the family in 1956 and again in 1965.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, a close examination of official British records, principally from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as the key department dealing with the Gulf, but also the Cabinet, the Prime Minister's Office and the British Council, can be used to revise existing interpretations of British relations with Bahrain after decolonisation. Indeed, while far from forgotten in Bahrain after 1971, Britain found its position in the Emirate not only challenged by competitors, both regional and international, but also eroded by internal strife within Bahrain itself to a degree that serves to cast doubt on accounts that suggest a British informal empire was established on the island in the years immediately following the departure from East of Suez. Any application of 'soft power' was undermined by financial stringency which witnessed the contraction, rather than expansion, of Britain's educational provision to Bahrain. By the time of the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s, Saudi Arabia, rather than Britain, provided the principal external support for Bahrain, a development which stood in marked contrast to the period from the late nineteenth century to the end of formal empire in 1971.

While the nature of the agreements concluded with the Rulers in the nineteenth century necessarily limited Britain's role in the internal affairs of the Gulf Sheikhdoms,<sup>11</sup> British influence was exercised through officials, known as Political Agents, supervised by a Political Resident whose headquarters were transferred from Bushire in southern Persia to Bahrain itself in 1946. In addition, the Royal Navy's presence in the Gulf had its epicentre at the HMS Juffair base on Bahrain island. Following a series of sterling crises which had characterized Harold Wilson's Labour government in the 1960s, the currency was finally devalued on 18 November 1967. While the significance of devaluation in the British decision, announced in January 1968, to withdraw from the Gulf by 1971 is a hotly debated issue,<sup>12</sup> what is clear is the acute anxiety and anger which it produced among the Rulers of the small Gulf Sheikhdoms, none more so than Bahrain.

Relaying the dismay which the formal withdrawal declaration on 16 January 1968 had engendered, Britain's Political Agent in Bahrain, A. D. Parsons, reported that the al-Khalifah ruling family were left in a state of 'bewildered resentment'.<sup>13</sup> Although Bahrain's progress towards full independence was smoothed by the abandonment of Iranian claims in the wake of a United Nations report which found that the majority of the island's population wished to become an independent Arab state,<sup>14</sup> attempts to incorporate Bahrain into wider political structures for the Lower Gulf in advance of British withdrawal proved unsuccessful. Shortly after the declaration of Bahrain's independence in August 1971, Britain signed a treaty of friendship with the Emirate under which the two parties agreed to 'consult together on matters of mutual concern and in time of need'.<sup>15</sup> While reflecting ongoing Anglo-Bahraini amity, it was a fairly anodyne document which did little to secure Britain's influence and interests in Bahrain following formal independence. Indeed, despite the ostensible success in managing Bahrain's transition to independent status, the subsequent erosion of Britain's position in the Emirate belies any notion that Britain succeeded in establishing an informal imperial position after 1971.

## The demise of Britain's exclusive role in Bahrain

At the beginning of 1972, Britain's last Political Agent and first ambassador to the independent state of Bahrain, A. J. D. Stirling, warned that 'We shall have to work harder than ever and to make the utmost of our non-military means of influence if we are to maintain our political ascendancy and commercial predominance'.<sup>16</sup> In his first impressions of Bahrain, Stirling's successor, Robert Tesh was able to report that Bahrain's police and security services were headed by 'efficient and devoted Britons who have the confidence of the rulers and themselves seem confident'.<sup>17</sup> Special Branch itself was led by Ian Henderson, a Briton with wide (if controversial)

experience of colonial policing.<sup>18</sup> Despite retaining such close ties with Bahrain's security services after formal independence, Tesh admitted at the end of 1972 that 'for all that they ride with a very loose rein', the security services under their British heads were 'beginning to come under attack'.<sup>19</sup> Further signs of the attenuation of Britain's position in Bahrain can be identified in the diplomatic field.

In December 1880, the Ruler of Bahrain, Isa bin Ali al-Khalifah, had signed an agreement with Britain in which he bound himself and his successors to 'abstain from entering into negotiations or making treaties of any sort with any State or Government other than the British without the consent of the British Government, and to refuse permission to any other Government than the British to establish diplomatic or consular agencies in our territory, unless with the consent of the British Government'.<sup>20</sup> In a so-called 'exclusive agreement' concluded twelve years later, Isa bin Ali committed himself and his heirs and successors on 'no account' to enter into any agreement or correspondence with any power other than the British government and not to consent to the residence within their territory of the agent of any other government without the assent of the British government.<sup>21</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez, its former exclusive position in Bahrain was rapidly diluted. As early as June 1968, Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf, Sir Stewart Crawford, presciently noted: 'Our special position will come to an end and the emphasis of our information effort will alter into something more orthodox, in which we shall have to concentrate on publicity in support of British policy and interests, in competition with other foreign diplomatic missions which will then be established.'<sup>22</sup> In his annual report for 1972, the first full year of Bahraini independence, Tesh reported that the Australians were upgrading their trade mission, the French had appointed a Chargé d'Affaires, and the Japanese were preparing to open a diplomatic mission.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Tesh had already voiced concerns that 'The main danger to our position in the next year or so may come not so much from Russians or Iraqis but from the commercial tactics and corrupting influence of some of our Western allies and trade competitors.'<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, the Foreign Secretary's Assistant Private Secretary, Ian McCluney, had cautioned: 'Foreign competition in the Gulf States is increasing, and will be given further impetus after 1971 when our major industrial competitors open diplomatic missions in the Lower Gulf.'<sup>25</sup> Reflecting Britain's changed position in Bahrain following the formal ending not only of its military presence, but also the exclusive agreement dating from the nineteenth century, Ambassador Stirling remarked at the end of 1971: 'Our position here is strong. We can best maintain it by giving help and advice at least as readily as hitherto, but always remembering that the Bahrainis are now fully independent and expect to be treated accordingly.'<sup>26</sup> While commenting in May 1973 that Britain's 'traditionally strong' commercial ties with Bahrain had 'survived independence', the Joint Intelligence Committee recognized that they were being challenged by the 'competitiveness of other trading nations, notably Japan.'<sup>27</sup> The growth of French influence also became increasingly prominent.

In his annual report for 1974, Ambassador Tesh ruefully commented that 'it is the French who of the Europeans are the most visibly and successfully active in the Arab world.'<sup>28</sup> Equally, Richard Kinchen of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Middle East Department remarked: 'It is sad but, I suppose, inevitable that relations with the UK should already be becoming less special. Our endeavour to maintain an even-handed policy in the Middle East dispute is clearly one of the reasons behind this trend.'<sup>29</sup> Shortly before his departure from Bahrain in July 1975, Tesh emphasized: 'It is regretted that the French, for whom the Bahrainis have no natural feeling, should have forged ahead of us in Arab favour.'<sup>30</sup>

In March 1980, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing declared French support for Palestinian self-determination, as well as calling for the inclusion of the Palestine Liberation Organization in peace talks.<sup>31</sup> Reflecting France's growing stature in the Gulf, the Bahraini Foreign Minister, Sheikh Muhammad bin Mubarak, informed Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the FCO, J. C. Moberly, that,

the French were now regarded in the Gulf as the real friends of the Arabs in the West. He was sorry to say this, bearing in mind our own long associations with the Gulf States. However, it was the French who were seen as taking the lead in pointing Europe towards support for a just and comprehensive Middle East settlement and they would reap the benefits in the area accordingly.<sup>32</sup>

In his annual review, moreover, Britain's ambassador to Bahrain, H. B. Walker, observed that 'Among the Western powers 1980 might have to be conceded as France's year.'<sup>33</sup> The encroachment of the Arab world into the life of Bahrain also had the effect of diminishing Britain's role in the Emirate and, to some extent, damaging its interests. This was underlined in 1973 through the use of the so-called 'oil weapon'.

Although a relatively minor oil producer, Bahrain had joined the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) in 1970. In response to the renewal of the Arab-Israeli conflict in early October 1973 – the so-called Yom Kippur War – Arab oil ministers meeting in Kuwait on 17 October resolved to cut production by a recurrent monthly rate of 5 per cent compared with September levels 'until such time as total evacuation of Israeli forces from all Arab territory occupied during the June 1967 war is completed, and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people are restored'.<sup>34</sup> Although the government of Bahrain were quick to realise that a world recession and higher goods prices resulting from the unsheathing of the oil weapon imperilled the Emirate's own development plans, Tesh reported that,

There was no doubt however that Bahrain would have wanted to join in the Arab oil measures even at a sacrifice. The enthusiasm for Arab successes against Israel was felt here as in every other Arab country. Not merely by political calculation, but by spontaneous feeling, most if not all Ministers accepted that the oil sanctions policy must be followed.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of 1973, Tesh reported that the Bahraini Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Mohammed bin Mubarak, had 'cultivated Bahrain's relations with the Gulf States and the rest of the Arab world'.<sup>36</sup>

Bahrain's growing alignment with the Arab world was reflected in the signature, also in 1973, by five OAPEC members of an agreement to finance a dry dock in Bahrain to service large tankers which would have the effect of strengthening Bahrain's claim to be the main industrial, communications, and services centre in the Lower Gulf.<sup>37</sup> The decision stemmed from a direct appeal by the Emir of Bahrain and his senior ministers to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia.<sup>38</sup> The growth of the Emirate's external relations, and especially its growing alignment with the Arab world, was indicative of the extent to which Britain's former exclusive role in Bahrain had been eroded following formal withdrawal just two years earlier. Tesh went so far as to describe Bahrain being 'dragged into the stream of joint Arab action by the October War'.<sup>39</sup> Ruminating on the transformation in Bahrain's geo-political alignments since 1971, furthermore, Tesh prophesied that, 'In a new rift between the Arabs and the West they [the Bahrainis] could only be on the Arab side'.<sup>40</sup>

The intrusion of the Arab world served to erode Britain's former exclusive role in the Emirate and undermines interpretations which identify a seamless transition to informal empire following formal British withdrawal in 1971. Far from remaining 'paramount' as suggested by Tore Petersen,<sup>41</sup> British influence in Bahrain, and indeed other Gulf Sheikdoms formerly under British protection,<sup>42</sup> was significantly diluted. Although Britain strove to maintain good relations with the al-Khalifah, its interests and influence in Bahrain were also challenged by the emergence of new internal political forces outside the direct control of the ruling family, the advent of the Bahrain Parliament being the most significant example of this.

## The growth of new internal influences in Bahrain

Bahrain's relatively high educational standards, coupled with its more cosmopolitan nature fuelled by its status as a trading centre, had resulted in its becoming the most politically sophisticated of the Lower Gulf Sheikdoms by the inter-war years.<sup>43</sup> This sophistication was reflected in

growing demands from the late 1930s for constitutional reform which were met with intransigence by the al-Khalifah.<sup>44</sup> Failure to satisfy Bahrainis' yearning for change prompted further agitation in the post-war period which culminated in the outbreak of disturbances in the first half of March 1965. Initially demonstrators focused their anger on the Bahrain Petroleum Company's redundancy scheme, but later extended their activities to agitation in favour of the formation of unions. From the Foreign Office's perspective, however, the demonstrations were designed 'more as a trial of strength with authority than to achieve any particular objective'.<sup>45</sup> The British Political Resident in the Gulf, Sir William Luce, traced the origins of the troubles to the influence of the Arab Nationalist Movement operating through Kuwait and sponsored by President Nasser of Egypt.<sup>46</sup> In these circumstances, Luce sought authority to commit British forces should the Bahrain Ruler request assistance in preserving order. In December 1964, Britain had renewed an undertaking, first given in 1958, that Her Majesty's Government would 'as in the past, and on the basis of existing treaties and engagements, support Bahrain, should the need for help arise, and maintain Bahrain's independence'.<sup>47</sup> Having taken legal advice, the Foreign Office accepted that this commitment extended to a need for assistance against internal as well as external attack.<sup>48</sup> On a more pragmatic note, an FO official remarked that 'it is very much in our own interest to avoid prolonged disturbances which might jeopardise British lives and would certainly attract hostile publicity'.<sup>49</sup> As a result of such calculations, Luce was authorized on 13 March 1965 to commit British forces to the maintenance of internal security if so requested by the Ruler. A day later, having received such a request, the Political Resident ordered the use of naval helicopters to assist local police in identifying demonstrators and, where necessary, to drop tear gas to disperse them.<sup>50</sup> By 18 March order had been restored sufficiently to permit the withdrawal of the helicopters. Reporting on the violent demonstrations which witnessed the deaths of at least a dozen people, the *Observer* newspaper recorded that the troubles revealed a 'well-organised underground movement directed against both the Bahrain Government and Britain's influence'.<sup>51</sup>

Bahrain's stability was rocked yet again by a series of strikes and disturbances which broke out on the morning of 13 March 1972. The Manama government deemed the troubles sufficiently serious to deploy not merely local police, but also the Bahrain Defence Force. Having withdrawn its military forces several months earlier as part of the pull-out East of Suez, and in contrast with the troubles in 1956 and again in 1965, no British forces were involved in the restoration of order in March 1972. Following the labour disorders, the Bahraini government finally pledged to introduce some form of Parliament which would allow the thorny issue of permitting trade unions to be discussed.<sup>52</sup> In advance of this development, a Constituent Assembly, elected at the beginning of December 1972, was tasked with drafting a constitution. With some relief, Ambassador Tesh felt able to report that the elected members appeared to be a 'fairly moderate body'.<sup>53</sup> Following the completion of the Assembly's proposals on 9 June 1973,<sup>54</sup> a Parliament was elected towards the end of the year.

If the al-Khalifah were expecting a compliant, moderate body their hopes were quickly dashed. Summarising the new political landscape, Tesh observed:

The results of the voting...came as a surprise, and caused alarm among the conservatives in Bahrain and among neighbouring traditionalist regimes. Only a third of the members of the Constituent assembly were re-elected. The loose Nationalist group which had occupied the Left of the Assembly and provided the main opposition to the Government were largely swept away, and of the four who survived, three were among the regime's most ardent critics. The Right Wing is filled with six 'Religious' Shia, who represent the villages. On the Left we now find eight new faces in Bahraini politics – lawyers and clerks in their early thirties with long security records, Marxist sympathies, PFLOAG [Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf] and Iraqi connections, and, some of them, training in subversion and militancy.<sup>55</sup>

Tesh proceeded to report that such left-wing radicals, who termed themselves the 'People's Bloc', had sought election on a common manifesto which demanded nationalisation of foreign firms, Bahrainisation, freedom for trade unions, curbs on police powers, and opposition to foreign military bases.<sup>56</sup> 'What the Government will have to watch', cautioned Tesh, 'is attempts by

the Left to organise support and subversion from behind the protection of parliamentary privilege.<sup>57</sup>

The Bahraini Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifah bin Salman, confessed that he 'wasn't happy with "the democracy we got"'.<sup>58</sup> Apprehension about the turn of events in Bahrain reached Iran where the Shah expressed to the British Ambassador, Peter Ramsbotham, his disquiet at the election of left-wing elements.<sup>59</sup> While Tesh insisted that 'It would be wrong to suppose that Bahrain has gone Communist and that the Al-Khalifah are doomed',<sup>60</sup> the Parliament's emphasis on Bahrainisation placed pressure on Britons still employed by the Bahrain government.<sup>61</sup> In addition, it provided an alternative source of power in Bahrain to the ruling family and one which the British, at least in the short term, had little prospect of either cultivating successfully or cooperating closely with.<sup>62</sup> At most, Tesh felt that his role with respect to the members of the new Bahrain Parliament would be 'to try to educate them without appearing to be trying to play old-style British Political Agent'.<sup>63</sup>

Tesh's successor as British Ambassador to Bahrain, E. F. Given, observed that while the opposition in Bahrain would have to be 'reckoned with one day', it was 'likely to remain aloof from us'.<sup>64</sup> Drawing a specific distinction with the imperial past, Given asserted that Britain's position in Bahrain was 'due to the achievements of our predecessors, to the welcome which Bahrainis have always had in Britain, and to honest dealing by British business, and not to a covert continuation of colonialism'.<sup>65</sup> As regards the approach which Britain should adopt towards Bahrain more broadly, Given made a strong case for non-interference in the island's internal affairs which serves to belie any notion that Britain sought to maintain an imperial relationship with Bahrain after the withdrawal from East of Suez. On the one hand, Given pointed out that British diplomats knew less about what went on under the surface since they were reliant upon information passed on by officials whose first loyalty was to the Bahrain government. 'In this state of ignorance', he opined, 'I do not think we are qualified to try and move the Bahrain government in one direction or another'.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, he mused, 'I have the impression that the Political Agents here nannied the local authorities more than their counterparts elsewhere in the Gulf; however that may be, I do not think the results were particularly successful in the political field'.<sup>67</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office were completely in step with Given's approach, the Head of the FCO's Middle East Department, Ivor Lucas, responding, 'we entirely endorse the philosophy of "non-interference"... "Responsibility without power" got us into enough difficulties prior to 1971, and we are even less well-placed now to proffer our advice. I think that this goes for the other Gulf States too'.<sup>68</sup> The dilution of British influence through the advent of new internal forces was exacerbated by the encroachment of Britain's industrial and commercial rivals into Bahrain after 1971.

## The erosion of Britain's commercial position

In his annual review for 1972, Ambassador Tesh soberly recorded that 'after a spurt in 1970 and 1971, our export performance is declining'. He proceeded to estimate that Britain's 'present "natural" percentage of the [Bahraini] market might be about 25 per cent', a significant fall from the 31 per cent achieved just a year earlier.<sup>69</sup> While Tesh expressed hope at the end of 1973 that Britain could hold its share of Bahrain's expanding market, fuelled by the dramatic rise in oil prices,<sup>70</sup> these hopes proved forlorn. Bahrain's imports for the first ten months of 1974 totalled BD144 million, some 30 per cent higher than for the previous year. Britain's market share in this ten-month period, nevertheless, was only 12.7 per cent, compared with 18.9 per cent in 1973. The United Kingdom, moreover, had fallen behind the United States and Japan which enjoyed a 19.2 per cent and 14.5 per cent share in the Bahrain market respectively. One of the main reasons for Britain's poor relative performance was traced by Tesh to problems with delivery dates,<sup>71</sup> an issue which afflicted Britain's business relations throughout the Gulf.<sup>72</sup> 'I have been disappointed', Tesh expatiated, 'by the lack of follow-up to the successful Exhibition of British Quality



Consumer Goods in February [1974] and by the failure of exporters to visit regularly and frequently. Subsidised missions from Chambers of Commerce ... still consist mainly of people whose firms do business here already or people who are never seen here again.<sup>73</sup> Tesh was equally pessimistic about the state of Anglo-Bahraini relations more generally, recording that 'the Bahrainis feel that on our side the "special relationship" has cooled'.<sup>74</sup>

While Britain, with some 18 per cent of the Bahraini market, managed to restore its position as Bahrain's leading supplier in the course of 1976,<sup>75</sup> some significant underlying problems remained. During a visit to the UK in February 1977, the Ruler, Sheikh Isa bin Salman al-Khalifah, impressed upon Ivor Lucas that the British were 'too slow in promoting trade with Bahrain'.<sup>76</sup> Ambassador Given also recorded in early 1977 that 'There were the usual complaints that British firms were not keen enough in going after such big contracts as were on offer'.<sup>77</sup> Lucas observed that the 'failure to go for the big contracts has been echoed elsewhere in the Gulf'.<sup>78</sup> In a down-beat reply, Given confessed, 'I doubt if there is much you or Department of Trade could do to persuade British contractors, whose lack of keenness in certain cases was due to inability to produce the equipment required'.<sup>79</sup> The Ambassador also reported that 'Our commercial rivals are now tending to send politico/business missions headed by a Minister, which secures them attention at high levels which is not open to ordinary business visitors'.<sup>80</sup> Similar political support to British business was in short supply since, as Lucas pointed out, the delicate political balance in the UK which centred on uncertainty over how long the Parliamentary alliance between the Labour government and the Liberal Party would subsist, had the effect of making plans for visits by ministers or MPs 'subject to disruption'.<sup>81</sup>

British business in Bahrain also faced what Given termed an 'under-current of nationalism'.<sup>82</sup> 'Bahraini Ministers may in theory be willing to tolerate the presence of many British', he explained, 'but their Egyptian advisers get them so tangled up in laws which on their face are perfectly reasonable that the effect is a squeeze'.<sup>83</sup> The 'squeeze' on British business was tightened still further by the penetration of the Bahrain market by Britain's industrial competitors. This was symbolised by the building of a \$340 million dry dock capable of accommodating tankers of 500 000 tons which was completed at the end of 1977 by Hyundai Construction Company of South Korea. Although the design for the dock was produced by an Anglo-Portuguese consortium, Gibb Profabril, Given underlined that Hyundai Construction, 'by doing a first-class job and finishing ahead of time', had put itself in a 'good position' to get more work in the area.<sup>84</sup> In his annual review for 1977, furthermore, Given drew attention to the fact that although Britain remained 'on the friendliest of terms' with Bahrain, this did not mean that it automatically got the 'inside track' where it really mattered, namely in trade.<sup>85</sup>

The lack of preferential treatment accorded to British commerce was compounded by heavy local criticism of British consultants and contractors which resulted in British business losing ground to competitors in work for the Bahraini government.<sup>86</sup> Although Given actively sought to promote British commerce by reassuring business visitors that Bahrain was a safe place to invest or locate a regional office,<sup>87</sup> Ivor Lucas conceded that it was 'niggling' that several important contracts had been lost by small margins to Britain's commercial competitors.<sup>88</sup> In his annual review for 1979, furthermore, Britain's new Ambassador to Bahrain, H. B. Walker, reported that Bahraini merchants 'complained about price increases caused by the strength of sterling, about our failure to keep to delivery dates, and on occasion about our failure to innovate'.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Britain continued to face strong commercial pressure from its industrial rivals. In his annual review for 1980, for instance, Ambassador Walker pointed out that, although Britain remained Bahrain's principal trading partner, its market share had dropped from 20 per cent to less than 18 per cent, with the US and Japan 'coming up fast behind us'.<sup>90</sup> Far from expanding, British trade with Bahrain actually stagnated. Walker's successor as Ambassador to Bahrain, W. R. Tomkys, reported that, in terms of exports, Britain had dropped from first to third place behind the Americans and Japanese, and that the value of British exports to Bahrain had remained flat in 1981, being about the same as the 1980 total of £115 million.<sup>91</sup> 'There have been several



opportunities but all too often British firms have been pushed into second place,' bemoaned Tomkys.<sup>92</sup> Britain's Chargé d'Affaires in Manama, M. J. Copson, conceded shortly after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Bahrain in September 1981 that even the Anglophile Bahrainis complained about the high prices and poor delivery dates typical of British manufacturers and cautioned that Bahrain would go elsewhere if they remained 'as bad as they regrettably had been in recent years.'<sup>93</sup> Bahraini Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifah bin Salman, moreover, had told Thatcher in person that one of Bahrain's two British-built Westland helicopters had had to be 'cannibalized' for lack of spares and that as a result a decision had been made to switch to the US aviation company, Sikorsky.<sup>94</sup> Deficiencies in British commerce, coupled with the intrusion of other industrial powers into the Bahraini market, serve to qualify existing interpretations which seek to emphasise the maintenance of informal empire after decolonisation. The weakening of Britain's position in Bahrain was mirrored by the growth of Saudi influence in the Emirate, especially following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a development that was not counterbalanced by the build-up of 'soft power' in the educational and cultural fields in the years following the withdrawal from East of Suez.

### The Iranian Revolution, the growth of Saudi influence, and the limits of 'soft power'

The extent to which Bahrain, while retaining cordial relations with Britain, had moved away from British influence was underscored by the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979. The Emirate was especially vulnerable to events in Iran due to its large Shia population which tended to look to Iran for inspiration. As Vanessa Martin notes, Shia grievances were 'compounded by elite frustration at not having a larger share of government responsibilities.'<sup>95</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini's call for the export of the Islamic revolution was especially troubling for the ruling family of Bahrain. In a meeting with Margaret Thatcher on 2 July 1979, the Bahraini Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifah bin Salman, 'repeatedly expressed his deep concerns over recent developments in Iran and the present situation there.'<sup>96</sup> Protests in August 1979 involving some 200 people carrying placards with such slogans as 'Our watchword is the rule of Islam' followed the arrest of five leading Bahraini Shias, including their leader, Mohammed Al-Akri.<sup>97</sup> 'The nub of the situation,' observed Walker, 'remains that the authorities and the Shia leaders are confronting each other with apparently irreconcilable positions.'<sup>98</sup>

Continuing revolutionary fervour emanating from Tehran remained a threat to stability in the Gulf. In answer to Iranian radio broadcasts following the execution in Iraq of the Shia cleric, Saqr Badr, disturbances broke out in April 1980 among Shia villages in Bahrain which soon spread to Manama.<sup>99</sup> A month later, the death in police custody of Jamil Ali,<sup>100</sup> a Shia accused of assaulting two Bahraini intelligence officers, triggered two separate protests by around 1000 Shia, during the first of which ritual swords were carried suggesting that a revenge killing would take place.<sup>101</sup> Despite the ostensible closeness of Anglo-Bahraini relations, the British were largely reliant for information on the troubles on unofficial channels, most notably the Director of Bahrain's Security and Intelligence Service, Ian Henderson.<sup>102</sup> Equally, it was the Bahraini authorities, albeit aided by Henderson, which took the lead in suppressing the disorders, whereas in the 1950s and 1960s it had been the British themselves who had done so. As referred to previously, in 1956, and again in 1965, British forces were called in to contain Bahraini disturbances which threatened the al-Khalifah ruling family and the stability of Bahrain.

The modification in Anglo-Bahraini relations since the withdrawal from East of Suez was also highlighted by events surrounding an attempted coup in Bahrain at the end of 1981. In the months leading up to the coup attempt, the Minister of State at the FCO, Douglas Hurd, had noted: 'There is no doubt that the shock-waves of the Iranian revolution have been felt in Bahrain, and that hostile broadcasts from Iran and the pronouncements of certain Iranian ayatollahs have occasionally made life difficult for the Bahraini authorities.'<sup>103</sup> On 13 December, Bahraini security

authorities affirmed that a number of returnees from Iran had arrived in Bahrain with the aim of staging violent demonstrations.<sup>104</sup> According to the Interior Ministry, the group's objectives centred on sabotaging vital installations, spreading terror among the local population, and attacking senior government, police, and military targets.<sup>105</sup> The group was controlled by the Shia Islamist organization, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain headed by Iraqi-born Hadi al-Modarresi.<sup>106</sup> Drawing inspiration from the Iranian revolution, al-Modarresi and his elder brother, Mohammad Taqi, planned to export Islamic revolution to the Gulf.<sup>107</sup> Bahrain's Information Minister expostulated: 'Tehran denies it sponsored the plot, then it beams radio programmes over here telling people to rise up and how to make petrol bombs. Who are they trying to fool?'<sup>108</sup>

On 19 December 1981, the Bahrain authorities declared that the staff at their embassy in Tehran had been pulled out and the Iranian Chargé d'Affaires had been requested to depart from the Emirate.<sup>109</sup> The Head of the FCO's Middle East Department, H. D. A. C. Miers, commented, 'The success in uncovering the plot was largely due to the efficient way Mr Henderson runs his organisation.'<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, it was Saudi Arabia, rather than the United Kingdom as in former times, that afforded Bahrain the key external support in its time of trial.<sup>111</sup> On 14 December, the Saudi Cabinet denounced 'the criminal gang which had aimed to disturb the security of Bahrain and other areas of the Gulf.'<sup>112</sup> As a result of the attempted coup, Miers remarked that Bahrain had 'reinforced its links with Saudi Arabia and signed a Security Cooperation Agreement on 20 December. In the event of a serious threat to the Al Khalifa rule we believe the Saudis would resort to armed intervention.'<sup>113</sup> Analysing these events, Ambassador Tomkys opined: 'I do not see revolutions succeeding in Bahrain so long as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is intact.'<sup>114</sup> 'The only danger', warned P. F. M. Wogan of the FCO's Middle East Department, 'is that Bahrain will snuggle so closely under Saudi Arabia's protection that it will lose its independence and liberal traditions.'<sup>115</sup>

While Saudi Arabia's role in the Gulf in general, and Bahrain in particular, was becoming more prominent, Britain was adopting a more recognizably post-imperial stance. During talks with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in September 1981, Sheikh Khalifah bin Salman al-Khalifah emphasized that 'Although there were more British in the Gulf than ever before it was not possible to go back to the days when British troops were stationed there.'<sup>116</sup> In the wake of the Iranian revolution, moreover, an important paper produced by the FCO's Middle East Department on British policy towards Arabia and the Gulf asserted:

To resume a tutelary or policing role, backed by a military intervention capacity, even if we shared this with our Western partners, would carry little appeal for our friends in the Arab world, embarrass or inhibit our broader relationship with the Third World and, as seen in Iran, would be unlikely to counter unrest arising from internal strains in any country. Moreover, heightened involvement might not even buy time for the present regimes in the area; it would exacerbate local nationalism and encourage immobilism among the rulers.<sup>117</sup>

Britain's inability to compete with Saudi Arabia in exercising hard power was not compensated for by a countervailing deployment of soft power. This was underlined by Britain's failure to sustain its role in Bahrain's education sector.

Although British officials in the Gulf, most notably the Political Resident, Sir Stewart Crawford, placed emphasis on an increase in the British Council's educational and cultural work in the region, lack of funds proved a perennial problem.<sup>118</sup> The Director of the British Council's Middle East Department, D. E. Frean, added a dose of realism into the debate, pointing out that 'The desirability of expansion on the lines suggested is obvious but when the Council cannot even find funds for a much needed full-time Secretary for Bahrain, expansion would seem to be out of the question.'<sup>119</sup> Unsurprisingly, Frean informed the British Council's Director in Bahrain, J. G. Hanson, that 'I very much regret to have to tell you by reason of the present financial stringency we see no prospect of expansion in the near future.'<sup>120</sup> Hanson subsequently complained that 'Our third floor premises in Bahrain are unattractive and unimpressive from the outside and are

approached by a rather dingy staircase.<sup>121</sup> The Bahraini Heir Apparent, Sheikh Hamed bin Isa al-Khalifah's, wish to establish a Research and Development Centre for Bahrain also received short shrift.

First articulated in March 1975, Sheikh Hamed's idea involved seeking the advice of the Inter-University Council (IUC) in Britain, which promoted higher education overseas, for the establishment of the proposed Research and Development Centre.<sup>122</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in particular, sought to quash the idea. A. J. A. Douglas of the FCO's Overseas Development Administration pointed out that Sheikh Hamed's proposed Research and Development Centre was modelled along the lines of the Royal Scientific Society in Jordan which had 'never achieved its objectives' while its influence and the enthusiasm of its younger personal had 'waned'.<sup>123</sup> As such, Douglas concluded that Sheikh Hamed's initiative 'would not be best suited to Bahrain's needs or something with which we should be too closely identified'.<sup>124</sup>

Far from seeking to expand its educational provision for Bahrain, British institutions sought to run down their commitments. In the financial year 1975–76, for instance, Britain provided some 22 teachers under its Technical Assistance Programme, of whom 12 were funded directly by Britain and the other 10 by Bahrain. In April 1975, it was decided by the London-based Council for Technical Education and Training in Overseas Countries progressively to run down this commitment until the British contribution would be 'nil' by the financial year 1979–80.<sup>125</sup>

Similarly, Britain's financial liabilities with respect to the Gulf Technical College were identified for retrenchment. Formed in 1968, the Gulf Technical College provided post-secondary commercial and technical education for students from Bahrain and the wider Gulf region. The major share of running costs was borne by Abu Dhabi although the Ministry of Overseas Development in the UK provided staff under its Technical Assistance Programme. Of the 20 British staff, 6 were financed in this way. Nevertheless, in 1975 the process began of transferring the costs of the programme to the Bahrain government.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, 1980 was set as the date by which Bahrain would assume 'full financial responsibility' for the college staff.<sup>127</sup> Such financial stringency meant that Britain could not keep up its educational provision to Bahrain which was a key component of any realistic attempt to deploy soft power to maintain British influence in the wake of the withdrawal from East of Suez.

## Conclusion

Informal empire of the type first applied to regions of the world outside the formal British Empire in the nineteenth century depended upon a degree of commercial, military, and political power which Britain arguably no longer possessed in the era of decolonization. While the application of the concept of informal empire to British relations with Bahrain after 1971 is superficially attractive in the light of the maintenance of British interests in the Emirate after formal imperial withdrawal, the archival record indicates that the pursuit of informal empire was neither feasible nor actively pursued by British decision-makers. The decline of British influence in Bahrain in the decade following the departure from East of Suez, the rise of new internal influences in Bahrain beyond British control, the palpable growth of commercial competition from Britain's industrial rivals, and the expansion of the role of regional powers, most notably Saudi Arabia, in the affairs of Bahrain serve to belie any notion that Britain seamlessly made the transition from formal to informal empire. The 'imperialism of decolonization' paradigm is equally questionable. Not only the rapidity, but also the extent to which Britain's former exclusive role was eroded after 1971, undermine any notion that Britain retained an imperial role after decolonization. The replacement of formal British protection with an informal imperial relationship between Britain and Bahrain proved beyond the former's capacity. Equally, the case of Bahrain casts doubt on whether Britain even wished to preserve an imperial role after formal withdrawal. Indeed, the archival evidence suggests that policy-makers sought to construct a recognizably post-imperial relationship with Bahrain after 1971 which represented a departure from

the erstwhile imperial one. As Margaret Thatcher remarked during her visit to the Gulf in September 1981: 'it is not a question of saying whether we thought what happened 10 years ago was right or wrong, it happened. There is no point in discussing it. We start from where we are now.'<sup>128</sup>

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes

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