

From East to West of Suez, the UK's legacy in the Arab Gulf.

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*Half a dozen Englishmen helped the Rajah with a will,
Talked of noble aims and high, hinted of a future fine
For the State of Kolazai, on a strictly Western line.*

A Sudden Departure, an Unfulfilled Model

In 1968, United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, declared that: 'British forces would be withdrawn from the Far East and the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971.'¹ From the late 19th century until this declaration, the states on the East coast of the Arabian Peninsula were informally part of the British Empire, as protectorates, and relied on London for their defence and external affairs.² Therefore, this decision had some acute implications for the consequent development of the Arab Gulf region that are relevant even today. New states were created, wars were waged, new regimes arose. Fifty years have since passed, and the time seems ripe to analyse the implications of the UK's redeployment out of the Gulf. Analysis can help understand both the institutional structure of the Arab Gulf states their domestic and international policies. This work argues that the states in the Arab Gulf were meant to be modeled after the European Westphalian State. However, it will also be argued that the actions undertaken by the British government, in order to create such new states, did not achieve that goal as the new polities were not equipped with the fundamental means and tools to that end. Interestingly, the challenge of state building continues to be the focus of some of the Arab Gulf leaders today.

Crucially the historic perspective behind the goal of achieving a proper European Westphalian State is underlined. That is to say that this research does not provide a prescriptive analysis but rather a descriptive one and it is not my intention to suggest that *all* the states are meant to become Westphalian States, but that it was the British model for its former protectorates—it was the predominant political reference for London.

In order to elaborate this argument, it is necessary to first answer the question of what is a state? In this study, I rely on the relevant definition of a Westphalian State provided by Max Weber, who suggests

'a 'ruling organisation' will be called 'political' insofar as its existence and order is continuously safeguarded within a given *territorial* area by the threat and application of

¹ UK House of Commons, 'Hansard', Prime Minister Wilson 16 January 1968, available at http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1968/jan/16/public-expenditure#S5CV0756P0_19680116_HOC_3 quoted in LTCOL Brendan Robinson *To what extent should the UK's Armed Forces once again be prepared to operate routinely east of Suez?* (Australian Defence Forces: Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, October 2016) p. 4

² James Onley, 'Britain's Informal Empire in the Gulf, 1820–1971'. *Journal of Social Affairs*, 22(87), (2005) pp. 29-45

physical force on the part of the administrative staff. A compulsory political organisation will be called a 'state' if and insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim on the 'monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force' in the enforcement of its order.³

So, the main point of this definition is the 'monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force.' This is the specific criteria on which this study intends to focus as, arguably, it is the most specifically ambiguous in the context of the Arab Gulf states which, as will be further on clarified, have chosen, for several years, to outsource their security needs to an external allied power.

Given the special constraints of this research, I will elaborate the analysis considering what is, arguably, the most representative case: the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There are two reasons why: the peculiar way in which the state was created and the dynamism shown by it in recent years particularly in the realm of security.⁴

State-Building in the Arab Gulf

Despite many achievements, the Arab Gulf states have not really managed to satisfy Weber's definition of a Westphalian State because of the absence of fully independent, fully autonomous defense and security architectures. For instance, the UAE was left abruptly by the British troops without providing the time needed to establish autonomous, indigenous security forces. The fact that all the smaller Gulf states relied almost completely on British armed forces for external protection until 1968, left them without the proper defense and security mechanism necessary to claim the monopoly of physical force over their territory. I define such a mechanism by including two main aspects: a trained group of armed forces with cadres and expertise and an industrial sector capable of supplying those armed forces with the fundamental technological means required to maintain and support the military. On both counts, the states borne after the UK's withdrawal were not fully equipped to develop such mechanism and had to find ways to survive in their tumultuous region. The historical data collected and analysed in this work focus on the decades after the British withdrawal and are crucial to understanding why and how this situation came into being.

The UAE was established in 1971 as a federation, which was the model encouraged by the UK to avoid them falling under the influence of other major powers in the region such as Iraq and Iran. The idea was to include this new state into the international community and therefore make it more difficult for regional powers to take control of the oil-rich and strategically relevant area.⁵ However, the UK's withdrawal from the Arab Gulf was not

³ Max Weber, *The Theory Of Social And Economic Organization*, ed. by Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) p. 54

⁴ Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 11-25; Hussein Ibish, *The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy*, (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington: Issue 4, 2017) pp. 3-5

⁵ Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, p. 19

properly planned nor implemented. The government intended to leave the area according to a schedule set by Prime Minister Wilson —pushed by domestic politics considerations— rather than by pondering a proper cost/benefit analysis of the implications of such a decision for the future of the region.⁶ The decision was presented by the British as an economic necessity. Nevertheless, it was more political than economic, as testified by London’s rejection of the proposal made by the Shaykh Zayid of Abu Dhabi to absorb, along with the other rulers in the area, the entire cost of maintaining the British troops on the ground. This option was never really considered by the British.⁷ Nonetheless, the proposal reflected the concerns of the local rulers as to the absence of a functioning military structure, and therefore it highlighted the inability of those states to be security-independent and to claim ‘the monopoly of legitimate violence,’ as Weber would put it. The UAE required the presence of British troops in a period that saw the rise of nationalism, the spreading of Marxism and the absence of mutual recognition of legitimacy between the new states created –or already present– in the region.⁸ However, the British put domestic affairs first. Wilson’s cabinet needed the support of the radical side of the Labour party (increasingly influenced by the anti-colonial dogmas, then predominant in Europe) which were very much against the presence of British troops in foreign countries.⁹ Additionally, despite the awareness of the former British protectors of the absence of an independent military force, there was little help to implement one in the UAE, where a proper army was not completed until 1998.¹⁰ The federation relied for a long time on a few British cadres to lead the local forces, and, after a few years, on the establishment of an American military base on its territory.

Enter the US

After the British redeployment a new power stepped forward in order to preserve security in the region: the US. Until 1979, US policy in the area was that of relying on two major states to maintain security: Saudi Arabia and Iran. This ‘two pillars policy’¹¹ was based on the one side on the military prowess of Iran, while on the other on the defence partnership with Saudi Arabia. The Iranian Islamic Revolution (1979) compromised the US strategy in the region and strengthened relations with Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states. However, this did not lead the US to support for an autonomous military industries for the countries in the area but rather on “doubling down” on weapons sales, while gradually increasing the US military presence in the area.¹² There are two crucial points to highlight in relation to such reasoning. First, the states in the area had to rely on US weapons was problematic because weapons sales are a matter on which the US Congress –and specifically the Senate– has to approve and political opposition to sales has often compromised weapons supply for the Gulf states.

⁶ F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 18

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, p. 18

¹¹ Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, p. 21

¹² *ibid.*, p. 57

Second, the necessity of relying on US forces and military structures for defending the Gulf states, has long constituted an impediment to this full development into Westphalian States. Inside Emirati territory there are a number of foreign bases, including a US air base in Al Dhafra, just outside Abu Dhabi, and a permanent French base housing both air and naval forces.¹³ Moreover, some of these bases are very recent in their establishment, which supports the idea of long term needs by the UAE for international power to maintain the claim over legitimate violence. Such considerations cannot but support the argument that neither the British nor the American allies, have given the necessary means to develop in the Westphalian model.

Flexing the State's Muscles for the UAE

However relevant understanding history may be the difference between now and then is getting increasingly striking. The UAE is working towards an autonomous defence and security mechanism with the goal of being more independent from the international actors both domestically and internationally.

The policy of establishing a proper military mechanism is recent but has been carefully planned for a long time. Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, supported the strengthening of an independent armed force and military industry and put it as a priority for the federation since, at least, 2004. The Crown Prince's plan saw the use of oil revenues invested into the military industrial complex through the purchase of advanced weapons while developing a domestic industry that could meet the internal demand and allow the state become independent from external suppliers. This led to the establishment of the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC) in 2014 –a holding group of several local companies producing armaments– which was founded with the goal of improving the military capacity of the state and give the UAE more autonomy in military technology procurements.

As a small state, the availability of human capital for the strengthening of the armed forces, has, historically, been the main challenge. However, thanks to targeted policies, such as the introduction of military conscription in 2014, as of 2016 the army of the UAE can count approximately fifty thousand members of the armed services—a huge number when compared to those who hold the country's citizenship (one million).¹⁴ Despite such challenges, the path towards an increasing role as a local medium power undertaken by the UAE in the past decade appears clear. Under the *de facto* leadership of Mohammed bin Zayed, the continuous development of the military industry and the growing participation in international missions, the UAE is now much closer to Weber's ideal type of state than ever

¹³ Ben Piven, 'Map: US bases encircle Iran' *Al Jazeera* 1st May 2012
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/04/2012417131242767298.html> [consulted 6th February 2018]

¹⁴ 'UAE issues compulsory military service law for Emirati men' Reuters June 7, 2014
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-military/uae-issues-compulsory-military-service-law-for-emirati-men-idUSKBN0EI0EN20140607> [consulted 12th February 2018, 5:02 pm]

before.¹⁵ For instance, the decision to participate to the international mission in Afghanistan in 2003 tested the armed forces in a complicated theatre and allowed the army to develop expertise in a real theatre of war.¹⁶ More recently, UAE forces took part to the international coalition against Daesh as the only non-NATO member allowed to join US actions in Syria and Iraq. The rapid development in the military field and the increasing importance as a regional military medium power even won the UAE the nickname of Little Sparta by the current US Secretary of Defense James Mattis.¹⁷

It is clear that the actions undertaken by Abu Dhabi have been meant to create a functional security architecture, with long term implications.

Conclusion: A Path to Autonomy

As noted, when the British government announced the redeployment of their troops from East of Suez, local rulers had to face some difficult circumstances. The absence of a military architecture pushed the leaders in the area to request a permanent contingent of the British troops to the point of being ready to absorb their full costs. However, London had already taken the decision and left UK's protectorates without the fundamental means for maintaining autonomy both domestically and internationally. The first one was needed because of the tribal nature of the UAE and the consequent internal division of the state itself. It has been one of the main obstacles to the creation of a state defence architecture. The second was needed because of the strategic and economic relevance of the area. The UAE was aware that it would face the appetite of larger powers and neighbouring competitors alike. Therefore, the development of a proper defence architecture was needed to face these challenges. Here is the significance of the claim of the monopoly of legitimate violence over a territory: to not have internal (in this case the tribal) nor external competitors in the control of the state and in the enforcement of its sovereignty. This is only possible through the establishment of an autonomous military architecture, even more so in a region as troubled and as strategically important as the Arab Gulf. This is why the UAE is on the path towards an increasingly autonomous military architecture which appears to be the main tool for the proper establishment of a Westphalian State.

¹⁵ Theodore Karasik and Adam Dempsey, *UAE Struggling to Build World Class Defense Industry?*, Lexington Institute, April 16 2017, <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/uae-struggling-build-world-class-defense-industry/> [consulted 8th February 2018, 3:21 pm]

¹⁶ Kristian Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policy-Making* (London & New York: Routledge, 2017) p. 146

¹⁷ 'The Gulf 'Little Sparta'. The Ambitious United Arab Emirates' *The Economist*, 6th April 2017 <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21720319-driven-energetic-crown-price-uae-building-bases-far-beyond-its> [consulted 6th February 2018, 3:11 pm]

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