

Global War and its impact on the Gulf States of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, 1914-1918

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This article argues that the First World War had a disruptive impact on the politics, economies and societies of the Gulf States of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. The article provides the first detailed analysis of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar during the war, writing these states' experiences into the conflict's global history. The war affected these states in multiple ways, because they were enmeshed in trans-regional imperial and economic networks. The article highlights the how the interwoven nature of political and economic connections affect societies during wartime, and aids our understanding of how global conflict affects societies who are not major belligerent powers.

Keywords: First World War, Persian Gulf, British empire, imperialism, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar

Introduction

On 13 October 1914, the ruler of Qatar, Abdullah Qassim Al Thani, described the fighting then raging on multiple continents as an event ‘which has disturbed the whole world’.¹ While Qatar and other states in the Gulf did not experience first-hand the large-scale military activity seen on the Western and Eastern Fronts in Europe, or the campaigns that unfolded closer by in what became the Mandate states of Iraq, Palestine and Syria, the war was never far away. British officials informed Al Thani about the arrival of ships carrying Indian Expeditionary Force D in the waters off Bahrain on 23 October 1914, an island approximately twenty kilometres northwest of Qatar.² Histories of the First World War in the Middle East have generally followed the course of those ships carrying the expeditionary force to Iraq, and the progress of the men who disembarked from them, leaving the experiences of those living in the states of Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain largely unexamined for posterity.

This article argues that the war had a disruptive impact on the politics, economies and societies of the Gulf states of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. These case studies have been chosen because, while each state had different experiences during wartime, their histories during this period shared several common features, notably their political and economic connections to the British empire.³ This article strengthens

¹ Abdullah Al Thani to Major S.G. Knox, Political Resident Persian Gulf, 13 October 1914, in P. Tuson, ed., *Records of Qatar, 1820-1960* (hereafter *RoQ*) (Slough: Archive Editions, 1991), Vol. 4, 426.

² Keyes, Bahrain to Knox, Bushire, 8 November 1914, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 427.

³ Following on from this selection of case studies, Raghid el-Solh, ed., *The Sultanate of Oman in the First World War* (Reading: Ithaca, 2000) offers comprehensive coverage of Oman, and there is a lack of archival material on the Trucial States, now the United Arab Emirates. There are numerous existing studies of Persia and Najd during the war, hence their omission from this article.

existing interpretations of the war as a global conflict by bringing to light the experience of these states during the war.⁴ The ‘global turn’ in studies of the war has shed light on many areas beyond Europe, but there still remain several metaphorical blank spaces on the world map of First World War studies, the Gulf being one of them.⁵ Although unlike Europe, the Gulf saw little military activity, and its societies were not ‘home fronts’ that became increasingly geared towards total war, the conflagration affected the region in ways that were both immediate and far-reaching. There are several reasons for this. One is the varying degrees of incorporation these states had into the Ottoman empire prior to 1914. Another is the proximity of these states to the warzone around Basra from late 1914, which was turned into a massive rear-area operations zone as the fighting moved northwards. A further significant reason why the Gulf was neither insulated nor isolated from the conflict was because it was enmeshed in a number of trans-regional imperial and economic networks, which included dense sets of connections involving merchant families, the pearl trade, and tribal migrations. The war disrupted and altered a number of the myriad connections forged and strengthened in the pre-war era of imperial globalization, of which the most significant link was with British India.⁶

Gulf rulers used the conflict as an opportunity to further their own political aims, which, baldly stated, was to ensure the survival of their polities. The First World War, not the 1890s, was arguably the moment that the Gulf became an exclusively British lake, as Ottoman power finally receded from its shores and societies, and German

⁴ An approach pioneered by Hew Strachan in his *The First World War: Volume I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵ H. Strachan, ‘The First World War as a global war,’ *First World War Studies* 1:1 (2010), 3-14.

⁶ S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); T.R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); J. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); B.C. Busch, *Britain, India and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

inroads into Gulf economies were halted.⁷ With the complete absence of rival powers, Britain was able to draw Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar into an ever-tighter tighter embrace through its protectorate system. This system had its roots in the early nineteenth century, when Britain signed a series of treaties with Gulf rulers in the wake of British maritime campaigns against Gulf peoples they termed ‘pirates’. As Shohei Sato has argued, these treaties gave Gulf rulers a legal status in relation to Britain, and transformed them into sovereign states protected by Britain. This protectorate status, further codified in a number of treaties signed in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gave these states legitimacy (if not among their own populations), and, crucially, protection from other powers, although this was never guaranteed, given events such as the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman agreement (discussed below).⁸ But the overwhelming motivation for Gulf rulers to become protected states in the British imperial system was as a form of insurance for their states’ survival. The imperial connections between Britain and the Gulf, and the dense economic ties between the Gulf and South Asia, ultimately proved resilient in the face of wartime disruption, which shunted these links onto new trajectories. What it meant to be a British protectorate in peacetime was rather different in wartime; war imperialism led British officials to intervene in the affairs of these states more forcefully than ever before, as this article will illustrate.⁹ The inhabitants of the Gulf states had their lives and livelihoods buffeted by the war’s effects, which caused hardship for many. A reliance on imported goods exposed the fragility of these states during wartime. Adapting to arduous conditions led to further conflict, as some people smuggled goods to the Ottomans, which drew harsh British reactions in the form of blockades. But at the same

⁷ On British imperialism in the Gulf in the 1890s, see Busch, *Britain, India and the Persian Gulf*. On Ottoman imperialism in the Gulf, see F. Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf: The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); F. Anscombe, ‘The Ottoman role in the Gulf, 1550-1914,’ in *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. by Lawrence Potter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 261-276.

⁸ Shohei Sato, *Embers of Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 2, 13.

⁹ War imperialism is explored in detail by K.C. Ulrichsen, *The Logistics and Politics of the British Campaigns in the Middle East, 1914-1922* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

time, many were able to adapt to changing economic conditions, and even take advantage of them.

This article provides the first detailed analysis of the First World War's impact on Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. It deepens our understanding of Arabia and the Middle East during a period that scarred the region, writing the experiences of these states into the global history of the conflict. More broadly, the article highlights the interwoven nature of political and economic connections that affect societies; those connections that make societies strong can also make them vulnerable.¹⁰ War is a disruptive phenomenon that brings to the fore the strengths and weaknesses of such connections, which affected all those who lived and worked in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar during the First World War: their rulers, British imperial officials, Ottoman soldiers, ship's captains, merchants, pearl divers, labourers, and ordinary families. Using the case studies of these three states, the article aids our understanding of how global conflict affects societies who are not major belligerent powers.

While historians of the First World War have neglected the Gulf states, this does not mean the region's wartime experience should be ignored. From the perspective of those living in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, the war was not a remote event; its effects were similar in some ways to other parts of the globe far from the front lines, such as South America. When we view the war from the perspective of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, it is clear the conflict was an important turning point in their history.

For Gulf studies, like the field of First World War studies, the war remains a blank spot in the region's history. In a wider survey of Middle Eastern studies, Judith E. Tucker noted that the majority of research in the early twenty first century on the Gulf states has been in the fields of political science and economic development, and that historians 'have yet to identify the sources and the questions that will allow for a similar level of intellectual engagement' as their colleagues studying other Middle Eastern

¹⁰ Studies of war and society are innumerable; a seminal work is R. Polenburg, *War and Society: the United States, 1941-1945* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980); a key study for the modern Middle East is F. Ahmad, 'War and society under the Young Turks, 1908-18.' *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* (1988), 265-286.

societies.¹¹ David Commins' important history of the Gulf States is indicative of this state of affairs, devoting a few sentences to the war. In his view, the conflict did not have much impact on the area, aside from reinforcing Britain's position of paramountcy and the Royal Navy's deployment 'to ensure the flow of trade'.¹² A 2016 survey of the Gulf's economic history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries says nothing about the First World War, and notes that the literature on the economic history of the pre-oil Gulf is sparse.¹³

Studies of the war that encompass the Arabian peninsula as a whole have focused on the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918 that began in the Hijaz, and the rise of Saudi power in the peninsula, a process that is often considered in broader studies that examine the post-war expansion of the Saudi state and its diplomatic relations with Britain.¹⁴ Ulrike Freitag has argued that the war meant local rulers in Arabia received

¹¹ J.E. Tucker, 'How Has the Field of Middle East Studies Changed in the Last Five Years? An IJMES Retrospective,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42:1 (2010), 3–5.

¹² D. Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 120. Two other important works, R.S. Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (Reading: Ithaca, 1998) and J.E. Peterson, ed., *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), hardly mention the First World War.

¹³ F. Bishara et al., 'The Economic Transformation of the Gulf,' in J.E. Peterson, ed., *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 187-222, 213. See also N. Fuccaro, 'Re-thinking the history of port cities in the Gulf', in Lawrence G. Potter, ed., *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 23-46 and R.S.G. Fletcher, "'Between the devil of the desert and the deep blue sea': re-orienting Kuwait, c.1900-1940, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 50 (2015), 51-65.

¹⁴ A.H. al-Enazy *The Creation of Saudi Arabia: Ibn Saud and British Imperial Policy, 1914-1927*. (London: Routledge, 2010); J. Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T.E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008); E. Karsh and I. Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-*

more attention from imperial powers, especially Britain, which created new opportunities for these figures, the most notable being the Hashemite Sharif Husayn of Mecca and Ibn Saud of Najd. This had important consequences for the political future of Arabia, as Saudi victory over Hashemites in 1925 took Arabia in a Saudi rather than Hashemite direction.¹⁵ More broadly, the war was a foundational moment for the region's territorial framework, as new states such as Palestine and Iraq were carved out of the Ottoman empire by Britain and her Allies. Gulf rulers were also recipients of British attention and took advantage of the wartime situation to consolidate their power, further their state-building activities, and ensure the survival of their polities. On the eastern shore of the Gulf, several studies have analysed Persia's experience of the war, when British, Russian and Ottoman forces all violated Persian territory.¹⁶ Consequently, the war affected Persia in a very different way compared to the states on the opposite side of the Gulf.

The First World War in the wider Middle East has received a great deal of scholarly attention, with a raft of synoptic and specific studies that have focused on military history, especially the campaigns in Gallipoli, the Caucasus, Iraq, Palestine and Syria, and a sub-field of works on the Armenian genocide which has made important

1923 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); B. Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); C. Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939: The Imperial Oasis* (London: Frank Cass, 1983); B.C. Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs, 1914-1921* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971).

¹⁵ U. Freitag, 'Modern-Day Saudi Arabia during the First World War: Insights into a Contingent Era,' in *Fikrun wa Fann*, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/phi/prj/ffs/the/a100/en12235572.htm> [accessed 10 October 2016]

¹⁶ T. Atabaki, ed., *Iran and the First World War: Battleground of the Great Powers* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); A.A. Sepher Movarekh al-Dowleh, *Iran dar Jang-e Bozorg 1914-1918* (Tehran, 1983); R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982).

contributions to the wider field of genocide studies.¹⁷ Major works by Eugene Rogan and Leila Fawaz have combined accounts of military campaigns with perspectives from ordinary soldiers and civilians, especially in the Ottoman province of Syria, whose inhabitants suffered so much during the conflict. This article builds on the approaches taken by Rogan and Fawaz and takes as one of its foci the economic and social effects of the war on the peoples of Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. This approach contributes to a body of work that has examined the civilian experiences of those living in Britain, France, Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, and the experiences of populations who were geographically far removed from any fighting, such as Latin America.¹⁸

¹⁷ Studies published to coincide with First World War anniversaries include K.C. Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2014); L.T. Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); E. Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (London: Allen Lane, 2015). Both Fawaz and Rogan's works are noteworthy for their broad sweep combined with groundbreaking archival research. For the Armenian genocide, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) and Raymond Kervokian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁸ Fawaz, *Land of Aching Hearts*; Rogan, *Fall of the Ottomans*. Major studies include A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); J.J. Becker, *The Great War and the French People* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985); Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (London: Allen Lane, 2014); Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History* (Harrow: Pearson, 2005); Y. Akin, *The Ottoman Home Front during World War I: Everyday Politics, Society and Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011). For Latin America, the key work is B. Albert, *South America and the First World War: The Impact of the War on Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

However, the social and economic histories of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar during the war cannot be divorced from broader political structures. In this period, the imperial dimension was important component of Gulf politics.¹⁹ The imperial machinations of Britain and France in the Middle East, the bureaucratic spider's web of overlapping and competing British bureaucracies involved in the region, and the interaction between imperial authorities and Arab nationalism have exercised scholars for decades.²⁰ However, the Gulf states during the war have been largely absent from imperial histories of the Middle East.²¹ Building on the pioneering work of Hew Strachan that

1988). Another important work that goes beyond the front lines and Europe is A. Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Bose, *Hundred Horizons*; Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*; Onley, *Arabian Frontier*; Peterson, *Emergence of the Gulf States*; Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs*; Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*. See also J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); M.E. Yapp, 'British policy in the Persian Gulf,' in *The Persian Gulf States: A General Survey*, ed. by A.J. Cottrell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 70-100.

²⁰ A brief selection of works include John Willis, *Unmaking North and South: Cartographies of the Yemeni Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*; Westrate, *Arab Bureau*; Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs*; J. Fisher, *Curzon and British imperialism in the Middle East, 1916-19* (London: Frank Cass: 1999). The foundational work is E. Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence and its Interpretations, 1914-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²¹ Busch spends a few sentences on Bahrain and a paragraph on Qatar in his *Britain, India, and the Arabs, 1914-1921*, 230-231. Similarly brief references include K.C. Ulrichsen, *The Logistics and Politics of the British Campaigns in the Middle East, 1914-1922* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24, 34 and Jeffrey R. Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf: Anglo-American hegemony and the shaping of a region* (London: Routledge, 2010), 26-27. Onley's important imperial history (*Arabian Frontier*) ends before 1914; Sato, *Embers of*

has successfully argued for understanding the war in a global context, in which empires were an important factor in making the conflict global, and Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela's argument that the war should be seen as an imperial conflict, this article demonstrates how Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar's imperial connections to Britain, and their geographical proximity to Britain's enemy empire, the Ottomans, drew them into the war's orbit.²² By considering imperial, political, economic and social histories together rather than in isolation, and paying attention to the inter-relations between these categories of analysis, a fuller picture emerges of how war affected these Gulf states.

This article uses documents written by British officials serving in the Gulf to reconstruct the impact of the war in these three states. The reliance on material drawn from British Foreign Office and India Office records in a series of published collections is because these documents form the overwhelming majority of what was produced in this period, given the exigencies of wartime. The use of this particular source-base reflects a long-standing issue in Gulf historiography, where official European materials remain the main sources for historians. Although the experiences, thoughts and living conditions of the Gulf's inhabitants are not centre-stage in the British documents, it is nevertheless possible to recover a multitude of information about the economic and social histories of these states from such material. Language limitations precluded the use of Ottoman Turkish sources, although research is being conducted in the Ottoman archives on the wider Arabian Peninsula during the war. The lack of Arabic sources from this period stems largely from the history of state-building in the region, when administrative documents were often not preserved, given the unstable situation on the

Empire, does not mention the First World War; John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1865-1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) does not include the Gulf states during the First World War.

²² Strachan, *First World War*; H. Strachan, 'The First World War as a Global War,' *First World War Studies*, 1:1 (2010), 3-14. R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); R. Gerwarth and E. Manela, 'The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the Reconfiguration of World Order, 1911-1923,' *Diplomatic History*, 38:4 (2014), 786-800.

ground. Beyond official documents, or lack thereof, chronicles written by inhabitants of the Gulf that cover the wartime period remain either unknown or within private, family collections. As Ulrike Freitag, Philippe Pétriat and Martin Strohmeier have persuasively argued, the reliance on European documents, neglect of Ottoman archives and scarcity of local documents explain why the larger Arabian Peninsula is considered marginal in the historiography of the First World War.²³ Despite the limitations of British documents, this article utilises them in order to provide the first attempt at a detailed analysis of the wartime histories of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.

As the European powers slid towards war in summer 1914, the Gulf was a cockpit of imperial rivalries, as the Ottomans, Britain, Germany, and, to a lesser extent, France and Russia, tussled for influence over the area. In the event of war with Germany, British war planners sought to extinguish German influence overseas, which included the Gulf; in the case of the Ottomans, British war objectives were to land forces in Basra and protect oil refineries at nearby Abadan, in Persia.²⁴ In 1914, while the Gulf was considered by many to be a British lake, Kuwait was still nominally part of the Ottoman empire, Bahrain was under a degree of Ottoman influence, and Qatar contained an Ottoman garrison – but there appeared to be no advanced British war planning to deal with these facts on the ground. Gulf rulers were far from passive actors in this inter-imperial struggle for influence, as they were able to use the threat of one Great Power’s influence to wring concessions from another. The outbreak of war placed this type of political bargaining on a different level, as the conflict’s disruptive effects on Gulf economies and societies in turn created political opportunities and restrictions for rulers. The war had a pronounced effect on the Gulf state’s many connections – imperial, political, economic and social. This article will now analyse, in turn, the experiences of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar during the war.

²³ Ulrike Freitag, Philippe Pétriat et Martin Strohmeier, “World War I in the Arabian Peninsula... in Search of Sources”, *Arabian Humanities*, 6, 2016, <http://cy.revues.org/3032>; DOI: 10.4000/cy.3032 [accessed 10 August 2017].

²⁴ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 122.

Kuwait

Situated at the head of the Gulf, Kuwait's strategic location contributed greatly to the Emirate's regional political and economic importance. The town of Kuwait was the largest port in the Gulf in the early twentieth century, with an extensive import and export trade with Basra, Bushire, and Bombay, and a large pearling fleet. Kuwait's economy was not solely focused towards the sea; it was a terminus for a number of caravan trade routes that covered Arabia.²⁵ These facts made Kuwait an object of interest for the Great Powers. Ottoman control over Kuwait had waxed and waned over the centuries, and in the late nineteenth century Germany and Russia were interested in Kuwait as a site for railway and coaling stations. Ottoman, German and Russian interests clashed with Britain's priority to ensure their dominance in the Gulf, which led to a secret Anglo-Kuwaiti agreement in January 1899. The Al Sabah family, who had ruled Kuwait since the 1750s, would receive British support in return for not establishing relationships with other powers, and Emir Mubarak Al Sabah was assigned a British Political Agent in 1904. Yet the thorny path of Anglo-Ottoman relations led to the Anglo-Ottoman Convention in July 1913, which recognised Kuwait as an autonomous part of the Ottoman empire under Ottoman suzerainty.²⁶ Once war between Britain and the Ottomans began in November 1914, the conflict had a profound effect on Kuwait's politics and economy, often in ways that were inter-related.

²⁵ Hala Fattah, *The Politics of regional trade in Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf, 1750-1900* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997); Robert Carter, *Sea of Pearls* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2012); R.S.G. Fletcher, 'Between the devil of the desert and the deep blue sea': re-orienting Kuwait, c. 1900–1940,' *Journal of Historical Geography*, 50 (2015), 51-65; Bishara et al., 'Economic Transformation of the Gulf', 187-222.

²⁶ A. Rush, *Al-Sabah: History and Genealogy of Kuwait's Ruling Family 1752-1987* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1987), 101; Dahlan, *Making of the Modern Gulf States*, 16-17; J.E. Peterson, 'The Age of Imperialism and its Impact on the Gulf', in J.E. Peterson, ed., *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 127-158, 138-140; Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, 94-113, 187-234, 304-347.

The major political change caused by the outbreak of war between Britain and the Ottomans was the invalidation of the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention, which paved the way for Britain to revive Kuwait's status as a British protectorate. Britain declared Kuwait 'an independent Shaikhdom under British protection'.²⁷ Mubarak Al Sabah was promised that 'he and his heirs and successors would be maintained as Shaikhs of Kuwait for all time by the British Government' and that if the Allies won the war, his date gardens on the Shatt al-Arab would be his in perpetuity and tax-free.²⁸ Mubarak immediately declared his allegiance to Britain, which carried risks given that there were very few British military forces in the Gulf to protect Kuwait from the Ottomans.

Furthermore, Kuwait's protectorate status came with immediate requests for military assistance from the protecting power. Britain asked Mubarak to seize Ottoman border posts at Safwan, Umm Qasr and Bubiyan island, threaten Basra and take the town if possible, as Indian Expeditionary Force D steamed up the Gulf towards Basra. While Basra was captured by the Indian Expeditionary Force on 21 November 1914, Mubarak's fighters outside the town created a diversion that was of 'material assistance' to the British forces during their fight for the town.²⁹ Mubarak's aid to Britain's war effort in Iraq went even further. He hosted a British hospital ship in Kuwait's harbour, sent out search parties at his own expense north of Basra for a lost British aeroplane, sent boats at his own expenses to Bushire to aid British troop landings there, contributed 50,000 rupees to the British Red Cross, and sought to curb anti-British propaganda in Kuwait by only allowing pro-British newspapers in English and Arabic into the Emirate. For his efforts, Mubarak was rewarded with the honour of Knight Commander of the Star of India (K.C.S.I.) on King George V's birthday.³⁰ Mubarak and Britain's

²⁷ Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 103.

²⁸ H.R.P. Dickson, *Kuwait and Her Neighbours* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), 150. Busch, *Britain, India and the Arabs, 1914-1921*, 230.

²⁹ Dickson, *Kuwait*, 150. Dickson was attached to the Indian Expeditionary Force in 1914.

³⁰ M.S. Casey, *The History of Kuwait*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 53-54, Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 94, 103. Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency for 1914, 60-61, in *The*

strategy of moving Kuwait firmly into the British sphere of imperial influence proved beneficial to Britain in the early stages of their military operations in the Middle East, but Mubarak's pro-British stance was unpopular in his Emirate.

Most of Mubarak's subjects were opposed to their ruler's relationship with Britain, although openly stating this meant facing British coercive power, which was now able to reach those living in Kuwait given its new status as a British protectorate. The British Political Agent in Kuwait believed that 'pro-Turks...are compelled to keep their views to themselves'.³¹ One opponent of the British was Hafiz Wahba, an Egyptian whom the British deported to India. Wahba later became the Saudi Ambassador to Britain.³² When Mubarak died on 28 November 1915, his son and successor Jabir Al Sabah outwardly continued his father's pro-British stance, and reprimanded a Persian resident who had been writing letters 'giving unfavourable views' of the Allied war effort. Nevertheless, Jabir sympathised with merchants who were unhappy at British restrictions designed to prevent their goods reaching Ottoman forces.³³ British officials viewed the merchant Yusuf al-Duwairi as 'one of the most anti-British forces in Kuwait' who apparently held much influence over Jabir's

Persian Gulf Administration Reports: 1873-1947 (hereafter *PGAR*), Vol. 7: 1912-1920 (Gerrard's Cross: Archive Editions, 1986). Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1915: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1915, 52, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1915: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1915, 53, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

³¹ Casey, *History of Kuwait*, 53-54; Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 94, 103. Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1914, 60-61, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1915: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1915, 52, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

³² Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 105.

³³ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1915: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1915, 52, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

successor, Salim Al Sabah, who became ruler in February 1917. On 26 August 1918, the Political Agent broached the matter of al-Duwairi with Salim and recommended that al-Duwairi should be deported to Bombay. Salim prevaricated on this, but further messages from Sir Percy Cox, the Civil Commissioner in Iraq and Britain's senior official in the region, along with pressure from Salim's advisers, meant al-Duwairi was finally deported on 29 August 1918.³⁴ The protectorate agreement meant Britain would not interfere in Kuwait's internal affairs, but wartime conditions meant British officials disregarded this policy order to ensure those in Kuwait with hostile views towards Britain were rebuked or removed.

One reason why merchants such as al-Duwairi were hostile to Britain was the disruptive effects the war had on Kuwait's economy. Kuwait formed one part of a broader trading network for goods and mail travelling from South Asia, Iran and Southern Arabia to the Levant and Europe, a network that expanded dramatically from the 1850s as the Gulf was integrated into the world economy during the era of imperial globalization. In winter, long-distance traders took dates from Basra and then sold them in South Asia in exchange for commodities such as rice, spices and cotton. There was also an extensive local trade along the Arabian coast.³⁵ Kuwait had £370,817 worth of imports and £114,421 worth of exports in 1913-1914. India accounted for 58% of those imports, carried on British India Steam Navigation Company ships from Bombay, and 65% of exports from Kuwait in 1913-1914. Kuwait had no currency of its own, relying largely on the Indian rupee for transactions.³⁶ The close economic linkages that had

³⁴ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 62, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

³⁵ A. Rush, ed., *Records of Kuwait, 1899-1961, Vol. 4, Economic Affairs* (hereafter *RoK*) (Farnham Common: Archive Editions, 1989), xxii; F. Bishara and P. Risso, 'The Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Arab World,' in J.E. Peterson, ed., *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 159-186, 171-175.

³⁶ Lt-Col. W.G. Grey, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1913-14, 1-3, in P. Tuson, ed., *The Persian Gulf Trade Reports, 1905-1940, Kuwait I, 1905-1925* (hereafter *PGTR-K*) (Farnham

been forged between India and Kuwait were highly vulnerable to the type of disruption unleashed by the war.

Pearling was the main economic activity on which the majority of Kuwait town's 50,000 people depended on for their livelihoods, based on seven hundred boats, with crews enmeshed in a system of debt between the pearl-divers, ship's captain's and merchants who supplied credit, tapping into South Asian financial markets through Indian merchant-bankers. The beginning of the war in Europe in August 1914 meant most of the pearls that year remained unsold. This left less money for pearl merchants to send boats out for the first wartime pearling season; half the pre-war number, around three hundred and fifty boats, left for the pearl fisheries in late 1914.³⁷ This collapse in the number of pearling boats was also due to the lack of labour. British military operations in Iraq meant Kuwaitis who normally worked on the pearling boats were now employed in the huge military support operations that comprised the rear areas of the British imperial forces in Iraq.³⁸ Kuwait's proximity to a fighting front offset the decline of the peacetime pearling trade, a good example of how decline in global demand for one product due to the war was balanced by local demand for labour due to military operations.

The economic effects of global war, and the demand stimulated by the fighting front in southern Iraq, caused the locations of Kuwait's imported goods to change, sometimes to the chagrin of British officials who wanted to preserve British commercial predominance. The British India Steam Navigation Company suspended sailings in the Persian Gulf in October 1915; a service between India and Basra had been running since 1862, which had called at Kuwait since 1904.³⁹ The severing of this key

Common: Archive Editions, 1987); Bishara et al., 'Economic Transformation of the Gulf', 190-191.

³⁷ Lt-Col. W.G. Grey, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1914-15, 1, *PGTR-K*. See also Carter, *Sea of Pearls*.

³⁸ Major R.E.A. Hamilton, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1915-16, 1, *PGTR-K*.

³⁹ Major R.E.A. Hamilton, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1915-16, 2, *PGTR-K*; Rush, *RoK*, Vol. 4, xxii; S. Jones, 'British India steamers and the Trade of the Persian Gulf, 1869-1914,' *The Great Circle* (1985) 7:1, 23-44.

connection to India, and wartime restrictions imposed in India on the export of goods, such as coir rope and wood for boats, led to shortages of many goods.⁴⁰ Merchandise such as enamelware, sugar, gold and silver thread, imported from Germany and Austria-Hungary before the war, disappeared as the Royal Navy blockade of these countries took hold. Fruits were in short supply due to military operations in southern Iraq, which was the main source of this product for Kuwait.⁴¹ Imports from the Americas increased from £9,949 in 1913-1914 to £20,950 in 1915-1916, an indication of how countries not directly engaged in fighting filled a commercial vacuum left by the exclusion of Germany and Austria-Hungary from the global economy.⁴² British officials tried to prevent this type of commercial penetration in Kuwait. After discussions with Jabir Al Sabah, the British Political Agent reported that the Emir had ordered the Customs Master to prohibit facilities to any foreign ships, stating that the port would only deal with established shipping lines, a move designed to forestall 'the event of the Japs attempting to get a footing commercially in Kuwait' through establishing their own steamship service.⁴³ This action was prompted by anxiety over potential Japanese economic expansion in the Gulf; in fact, a Japanese steamship, the *Asia Maru*, arrived in Basra and Kuwait in October 1916. British concerns around the changing trading situation had pre-war antecedents with the entry of the German Hamburg-Amerika Line in the Gulf before the war, when British shipping concerns drew back from competition with the Germans and came to an accommodation with them.⁴⁴ Again, because Kuwait was a British protectorate, the Emirate's ability to adapt to the fluctuating economic circumstances caused by the war was limited by British pressure.

⁴⁰ Lt-Col. W.G. Grey, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1914-15, 2, *PGTR-K*.

⁴¹ Lt-Col. W.G. Grey, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1914-15, 2, *PGTR-K*.

⁴² Major R.E.A. Hamilton, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1915-16, 3, *PGTR-K*.

⁴³ Political Agent, Kuwait, to Percy Cox, 19 September 1916, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 617.

⁴⁴ Chief Political Officer, Basra, to Simla, 15 July 1918, *RoK*, Vol. 5, 181. Political Agent, Kuwait, Memo on Secret Transaction at Kuwait Relative to Intrusion of Foreign Steamship Lines, Particularly Japanese, in the Gulf Trade During the War, 31 October 1916, *RoK*, Vol. 5, 186.

By 1915, however, Kuwait's economic condition had improved, largely because of the Emirate's proximity to the warzones in the region. In 1915-1916, trade improved as places in Basra district such as Zubayr drew supplies from Kuwait instead of Basra, due to its occupation by British forces.⁴⁵ Basra, on Kuwait's doorstep, became a huge military supply centre and base to support the soldiers fighting further north in Iraq. The southern region of Iraq saw extensive construction work, from the reconstruction of Basra port to the building of roads, railways, bridges, power and water plants.⁴⁶ Employment opportunities for Kuwaitis concomitantly improved as they found jobs as labourers for the British armed forces. The British force's commissariat department purchased many supplies from Kuwait. In 1917, for example, this included 4,700 camels, 19,975 sheep, 1,111 cattle and 3,000 tons of stores.⁴⁷ All this activity was a great fillip to Kuwait's economy, which partly enabled Jabir Al Sabah to reduce unpopular land and house taxes introduced by his father.⁴⁸ Kuwait's proximity to British forces in Iraq enabled it to overcome the earlier economic disruption caused by the conflict.

Another war-related factor that further improved Kuwait's economy was the smuggling of goods by Kuwaiti merchants to Ottoman forces in Syria, Hail in central Arabia, and Medina in the Hijaz. Britain's trade report for Kuwait showed the value of supplying British forces as well as Ottoman forces and Ottoman-held areas: trade figures for 1916-1917 were £624,243, and £1,533,161 for 1917-1918.⁴⁹ There was also demand from central Arabia for foodstuffs, because their traditional markets in Syria

⁴⁵ Major R.E.A. Hamilton, Report on the Trade of Kuwait 1915-16, 1, *PGTR-K*.

⁴⁶ Thair Karim, 'Tribes and nationalism: tribal political culture and behaviour in Iraq, 1914-20', in *Tribes and Power: Nationalisms and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, ed. by Faleh A. Jaber and Hocham Dawod (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 283-309, 299.

F. Anscombe, 'The Ottoman role in the Gulf, 1550-1914,' in *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. by Lawrence Potter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 261-276.

⁴⁷ R/15/5/341, India Office Records, British Library, London, quoted in Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 95-96.

⁴⁸ Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 95.

⁴⁹ Capt. D.V. McCollum, Report on the Trade of Kuwait, 1917-18, 1, *PGTR-K*.

were closed due to the war.⁵⁰ Britain's Political Agent thought Kuwait was 'one of those places, which, far from feeling any bad effects from the world-wide hostilities, has actually grown richer and happier'.⁵¹ This traffic of goods from Kuwait to Ottoman areas had a detrimental effect on Britain's war against the Ottomans, as this flow of goods partly counteracted the Royal Navy blockade of the Syrian coast. Jabir's successor in February 1917, Salim Al Sabah, offered his congratulations to the British Political Agent when Kut al-Amara was retaken in February 1917, and British officials believed he was 'genuinely anxious' to halt the trade with Ottoman-held cities such as Hail and Medina, citing an example of how he threatened merchants with their tongues being cut off if they continued their trading activities.⁵² However, Salim clearly condoned the illicit traffic in goods to the Ottomans, who were ostensibly Kuwait's enemy. Salim opposed British demands to institute a blockade of goods from Kuwait to Ottoman Syria, proposed by the Political Agent in Kuwait in November 1917. British officials believed it was 'urgently necessary' to 'supervise and register' all Kuwaiti exports to ensure they did not reach the Ottomans, through stationing a cordon of troops around Kuwait town.⁵³ The ruler of Kuwait and his merchants believed they could benefit from supporting both warring parties, although this turned out to severely affect Kuwait's political economy as a clash loomed with Britain.

Britain's dispute with Salim over the proposed blockade on goods reaching Ottoman forces in Kuwait highlighted the limits on the Emir's freedom of action during wartime. While Britain's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its protectorates in the Gulf and elsewhere was often ignored, the exigencies of wartime, and evidence that goods were moving from a British protectorate to supply an enemy's

⁵⁰ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1916: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1917, 51, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁵¹ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1916: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1917, 51, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁵² Kuwait News up to 19 February 1917, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 643. Political Agent, Kuwait, to Chief Political Officer, Baghdad, 10 November 1917, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 650. Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 79.

⁵³ General Officer Commanding, Baghdad to Foreign Secretary, India, 6 December 1917, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 651.

armed forces was unacceptable to a British imperial state that had been at war across the globe for over three years. On 4 January 1918 Salim agreed to the establishment of a blockade under British supervision but then changed his mind because 'his honour and dignity would be affected'. British officials' interpretation of Salim's refusal stemmed from his previous role as head of tribal affairs during his father's reign. He had close relationships with many tribal leaders, who benefited from the traffic of goods to Ottoman areas. Messages from British officials such as Sir Percy Cox, Civil Commissioner in Iraq and Britain's senior official in the region, did not change Salim's viewpoint. This led Britain to proceed more coercively. On 10 February 1918, the British Political Agent in Kuwait, Colonel Hamilton, prevented the steamship *Zayani* from unloading its cargo, and its goods were subsequently taken to Basra. This was intended to put pressure on Salim to accept the imposition of the blockade, which he did on 15 February 1918.⁵⁴ Faced with the loss of customs revenues from ships calling at Kuwait's port, revenues which went directly into the Emir's personal treasury, Salim's autonomy in relation to Britain appeared to have been decisively curtailed.

However, there were limits to the British ability to stop the illicit trade between Kuwait and the Ottomans, although this did not seem apparent in the early days of the blockade. While Salim claimed to be unaware of this flow of goods, and that he was unable to halt it, when British officials said earlier promises of protection and financial support to him might be dropped, the flow of goods to Damascus, Hail and Medina ceased - temporarily.⁵⁵ Salim's son Abdallah was deputed to assist the British Blockade Officer D.V. McCullum and four other British soldiers. Abdallah was supposed to 'turn out any enemy elements' from Kuwait, rather than issuing and checking written passes. However, Salim acquiesced in continued Kuwaiti smuggling to the Ottomans. The blockade was never entirely effective, as the posts established to enforce it were

⁵⁴ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 58, *PGAR*, Vol. 7. Percy Cox to Cairo and Delhi, 16 February 1917, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 626.

⁵⁵ Dickson, *Kuwait*, 243-244; Casey, *History of Kuwait*, 53.

manned by Kuwaitis in Salim's service.⁵⁶ The strategy of blockade during the First World War, used to devastating effect by the Royal Navy against Germany and Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman-held Syrian coast, was implemented in other parts of the world, in this case a land blockade in a British protectorate, which proved less effective.⁵⁷

Making the blockade at least be seen to work led to further conflict between Britain and Kuwait's ruler. At the beginning of April 1918, several large caravans of nearly 5,000 camels arrived in Kuwait, claiming to be from Najd. According to the Political Agent, however, they apparently 'comprised largely of enemy elements or traders with the enemy'. The leaders of these caravans requested blockade permits but British officials refused to issue them. Two Royal Navy ships arrived in Kuwait on April 10 1918. During a meeting between the Political Agent, Blockade Officer and Salim, the Emir was told to communicate to the caravan leaders that they would not receive blockade permits. Salim refused, so the Political Agent told the caravan leaders of the refusal instead. The caravans left Kuwait past the British Agency, which had mounted two machine guns on the roof. Royal Navy Marines landed to search the camels, but there were no discoveries of illicit goods.⁵⁸ Salim's intransigence had further undermined his authority and autonomy. Economic activity that arose during wartime combined with Salim's anti-British stance to reveal what being a British protectorate actually meant in practice.

The Political Agent believed that a British occupation of Kuwait was the only 'real solution' the staunch flow of goods to the Ottomans and deal with the Emirate's anti-British ruler. However, officials decided that to avoid the actual occupation of Kuwait, Britain would buy all the stocks in the Emirate and limit the Emirate's imports. 56,753 bags of rice, 10,655 bags of coffee among other goods such as wheat, barley,

⁵⁶ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 58-59, 61, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁵⁷ For the effects of blockades during the First World War on civilian populations in Europe and Syria, see Watson, *Ring of Steel* and Fawaz, *Land of Aching Hearts*.

⁵⁸ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 58-59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

sugar and pepper were purchased by Britain at a cost of 2,552,943 rupees.⁵⁹ This was surely one of the more unusual entries on Britain's First World War balance sheet. Kuwaiti merchants swiftly ordered replacement stocks from India and elsewhere in the Gulf, which countered Britain's buying bonanza. The Political Agent then informed Salim that if any of these goods landed in Kuwait or Basra, the Blockade Officer would deem them 'impermissible to land', and Britain would buy them. Salim finally conceded defeat, and wrote to the Political Agent, stating that he wished for the same protection and friendship that Kuwait's previous rulers had received from Britain, and that he would take responsibility for events occurring in his territory - which meant he would ensure that nothing happened in Kuwait that was against British interests, such good being sold to Ottoman forces. In June 1918, the Government of India replied to Salim's letter, but added a further condition, that exports from India to Kuwait were prohibited from leaving the Emirate except with permits signed by the Political Agent. The blockade remained in place, although by this point it was clear that British forces held the advantage over their Ottoman adversaries in Iraq, Palestine and Syria.⁶⁰ By September 1918, the Political Agent fulminated that Salim was 'unsatisfactory' and 'unsuitable' as a ruler, and continued bitterly: 'he hates us and is only driven into a display of friendship by force'.⁶¹ Kuwait experienced economic warfare during the First World War, and possessed the unusual status of being a British protectorate that was treated as an enemy power.

After the armistice of Mudros ended hostilities between Britain and the Ottoman empire on 3 November 1918, the blockade of Kuwait ended. Britain paid Kuwait

⁵⁹ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 58-59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁶⁰ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; Political Agent, Kuwait, to Political Officer, Baghdad, 8 August 1918, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 685.

⁶¹ Political Agent, Kuwait, to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, 19 September 1918, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 693-694.

487,000 rupees as compensation.⁶² But shipping restrictions covering exports such as foodstuffs from India to Kuwait continued until February 1919, due to British wartime requisitioning policies in India that had massively strained the Indian economy.⁶³ After the war, Kuwait faced a serious external threat in the form of Ibn Saud, who coveted Kuwait's deep-water port. Repeated raids by the *Ikhwan*, Saud's followers, into Kuwaiti territory culminated in the battle of Jahrah on 10 October 1920, where Salim emerged victorious. Saudi-Kuwaiti border disputes were partially resolved by the British-brokered convention at Uqair in 1921.⁶⁴ The war significantly disrupted Kuwait during its opening stages. But as the conflict dragged on, Kuwait's proximity to the fighting fronts, and the economic changes that active front lines caused to nearby areas, enabled certain merchants and traders to materially benefit from the conflict. These economic changes caused by the war collided with Kuwait's politics in relation to its imperial protector, Britain. Kuwait's status as a protectorate, and British ruthlessness in prosecuting the war against the Ottomans, combined to curtail the Al Sabah's freedom of action in a number of areas, not least in economic policy. Nevertheless, the war ultimately enabled the continued existence of Kuwait under British protection, as Ottoman power disappeared and the threat of a post-war Saudi takeover was neutralised.

Bahrain

The Al Khalifa family who controlled Bahrain had been in a treaty relationship with Britain since 1820, with an updated agreement signed in 1892.⁶⁵ This status quo was

⁶² Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter XI, Administration Report for the Kuwait Agency, 1918, 61, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; Rush, *Al-Sabah*, 80; S. Al-Shamlan, *Min Tarikh al-Kuwait* (Kuwait: Dar al-Salasal, 1986), 181.

⁶³ Major J.C. More, Report on the Trade of Kuwait, 1919-1920, 1, *PGTR-K*.

⁶⁴ Rush, *RoK*, Vol. 4, xxiii. For a contemporary account, see 'Enemy at the Gates', by unnamed doctor at the American Mission in Kuwait, *RoK*, Vol. 1, 703-709.

⁶⁵ Chapter XXXII, Agreement Concluded by the Chief of Bahrein [sic], 1892, 82, in P. Tuson, ed., *Records of Bahrain, 1820-1960* (Slough: Archive Editions, 1993) (hereafter *RoB*), Vol. 3: 1892-1923, 5; Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, 133-153.

contested several times by the Ottomans during their expansion into Eastern Arabia in the 1890s. For example, an Ottoman official at Qatif, the nearest town on the Arabian peninsula to Bahrain island, publicly proclaimed on 20 August 1892 that Bahrain was ‘part of the Ottoman dominions’.⁶⁶ The Ottomans also attempted to transport troops from Basra to Hasa via Bahrain island, which was prevented by Britain.⁶⁷ When war began between Britain and the Ottomans in November 1914, Bahrain was a long-standing member of the Gulf protectorate system. However, this arrangement was not liked by most Bahrainis, which affected Britain’s ability to use Bahrain in its military plans against the Ottoman empire.

The limits on Britain’s freedom of action in Bahrain during the war are well illustrated by the case of the Indian Expeditionary Force D, which was tasked to invade the Ottoman *vilayet*, province, of Basra. The force, which at this stage comprised the 16th Indian infantry brigade, arrived off Bahrain on 23 October 1914. The previous day, the British Political Agent, Major T.H. Keyes, informed Shaykh Isa Al Khalifa that the force would shortly arrive and requested permission for them to land, before they carried onto Basra. Isa deputed his son to tell Keyes where the best camping sites were. However, British officials received reports that Bahrainis feared that the troops would militarily occupy the island. This led to further concerns that the landing of troops would have a negative effect on the population, whose Persian component was believed to be pro-German. Keyes reported that Isa and the ruling family’s attitude to the arrival of the force was ‘perfectly loyal’, but the ‘common people and even a number of the merchants were much disturbed’. One of the main reasons for anti-British sentiment at this point among the island’s majority Shi‘a population was the bombardment of the shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Shi‘a imam, by Britain’s ally Russia. Keyes described how ‘the feeling against us is now strong and almost universal. With the exception

⁶⁶ Chapter XXXII, Agreement Concluded by the Chief of Bahrein [sic], 1892, 82-85, *RoB*, Vol.

3, 5; see also Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

of...Shaikh Isa's secretaries we have no open sympathisers'.⁶⁸ After gauging the mood of the island's population, it was decided that the force should not disembark but remain on board their ships. The force left Bahrain's waters on 30 October 1914 for the Shatt al-Arab near Basra, when the force was notified of Ottoman hostile naval actions in the Black Sea.⁶⁹ When hostilities between Britain and the Ottomans began, Isa was urged by several of his advisers to remain neutral. But Isa maintained his support for Britain, and he donated 9,600 rupees to various British relief funds.⁷⁰ Bahraini hostility to Britain lessened slightly after Britain captured Basra on 21 November 1914, although 'one Mullah fainted on hearing of the latter and another tried to'.⁷¹ Bahrain's ruling family's support for Britain was not enough to ensure that British military forces could land on the island. The hostility of the island's population to the British meant inconvenience for the forces that would shortly begin the invasion of Iraq.

A British protectorate with a largely anti-British population meant that the control of information on Bahrain became an issue of paramount importance when war began. No British telegrams had arrived on Bahrain since hostilities broke out in Europe in August 1914. By contrast, German telegrams had been circulated by the Manager of Wonckhaus, a German firm on the island, and German telegrams had been brought across from Basra and Bushire in Arab boats. These emphasised German victories, and, according to Keyes, meant Germany became the 'favourite' amongst Bahrainis. One of the Al Khalifa family called his hawk 'Guilliamme' after Kaiser Wilhelm II.⁷² German

⁶⁸ T.T. Farah, *Protection and Politics in Bahrain, 1869-1915* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1985), 202, quoting Keyes to Knox, 4 November 1914, L/P&S/11/86, India Office Records, British Library, London.

⁶⁹ Paul Knight, *The British Army in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2013), 14-15. Farah, *Protection and Politics*, 202.

⁷⁰ Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁷¹ Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*

telegrams were halted once the Wonckhaus manager was arrested, and the flow of information turned in the Allies' favour when Reuter's summary telegrams of war news were circulated around the island.⁷³ Wherever there were rival sources of information and officials and citizens of belligerent powers, the wartime propaganda battle was waged across the world, even in a polity like Bahrain, far from any fighting front.

Propaganda, however, was not as important or as wide reaching as the economic effects of the war on Bahrain. In this period, the island's economy was dominated by the pearl trade, which consisted of pearls from Bahrain itself, and those that were imported from nearby locations such as al-Hasa to be sold locally or re-exported to India. Pearling was a seasonal activity, taking up approximately five months of the year.⁷⁴ In 1910-1911, European dealers purchased 6,400,000 rupees of pearls.⁷⁵ This figure reflected a boom in the pearl market that had been underway since the later nineteenth century, driven by demand in Europe and North America, and enabled by regular steamship services and the telegraph. In Bahrain, the value of pearls exported between 1873-1906 rose by 600%.⁷⁶ There was an increase in the number of French and British pearl dealers from three European firms who travelled to Bahrain in 1913.⁷⁷ The

⁷³ Ibid. Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1915: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1915, 50, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁷⁴ Capt. Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1910-11, 2, in P. Tuson, ed., *The Persian Gulf Trade Reports, 1905-1940, Bahrain I, 1905-1925* (hereafter *PGTR-B*) (Farnham Common: Archive Editions, 1987); Bishara and Risso, 'The Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Arab World,' 173. Bishara et al., 'Economic Transformation of the Gulf', 195-196, 198-202. See also Carter, *Sea of Pearls*; Fattah, *Politics of Regional Trade*. A further important study that covers economic activity in Bahrain is Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷⁵ Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1910-11, 3, *PGTR-B*.

⁷⁶ Bishara and Risso, 'The Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Arab World', 173.

⁷⁷ Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1912-13, 2, *PGTR-B*.

author of a British trade report on Bahrain for 1912-1913 predicted that if the pearl trade suddenly ceased or declined, ‘the vast majority of the urban population of Bahrain would leave the country’.⁷⁸ The combination of pearling’s centrality to the island’s economy and its export-led business model meant that a war which involved Europe and its colonies posed a significant risk to Bahrain’s economic well being.

Bahrain’s reliance on imports shows how there were further risks of economic disruption if there was a war that involved Europe and its colonies, especially one that included Britain. Given the lack of agriculture and industry in Bahrain, many goods were imported to the island, such as coffee, coir, dates, firewood, rice, hides, metalware, flour, ghee, shells, sugar, tea, timber and tobacco.⁷⁹ Merchants in Bahrain obtained European goods from Gray and Paul, a British firm, and Wonkhaus, a German company, or from Indian agents in Bombay.⁸⁰ India was the largest source of Bahrain’s imported goods, just over one million rupees worth, 56% of the total, and the largest destination for the island’s exports, 72%, in 1910-1911.⁸¹ India supplied virtually all of Bahrain’s rice and tea.⁸² Bahrain’s import dependency rendered it even more vulnerable to disruption in wartime.

Bahrain possessed a dense set of connections with a number of Gulf ports, Persia, and especially British India, which added a further layer of risk in the event of a war that would affect the shipping in which imports and exports were transported. Bahrain acted as a central port and distribution centre for the nearby Arabian coast, largely because Manama, the capital, was one of the few ports on steamship routes

⁷⁸ Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1912-13, 1, *PGTR-B*.

⁷⁹ Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1910-11, 3, *PGTR-B*; Bishara et al., ‘Economic Transformation of the Gulf’, 191, 195.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 2, *PGTR-B*.

⁸¹ Ibid, 4, *PGTR-B*. These statistics were obtained from ships which carried manifests, and the author acknowledged that there were many boats that imported and exported goods, but did not carry manifests. Bishara et al., ‘Economic Transformation of the Gulf’, 191, 195.

⁸² Capt. T.H. Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1913-14, 3, *PGTR-B*.

between India and the Gulf because of the pearling trade.⁸³ The extent to which Bahrain was connected to the Gulf and India is illustrated by Manama port's register of ships: it was visited 141 times by steamships during 1910-1911, which included ships from Basra, India (which mainly comprised the British Indian Steam Navigation Company service from Bombay and Karachi to Basra), and services run by the Hamburg-Amerika Line.⁸⁴ Exports, imports, and shipping combined with a further aspect of Bahrain's economy to produce another key risk to economic stability: the island had no bank, and trade was conducted in Indian rupees, the delivery of which relied on steamships from India.⁸⁵ Overall, then, the outbreak of war in Europe had high potential to bring economic, social and potentially political disaster to this island in the Gulf, 3,500 kilometres from Sarajevo, where the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand precipitated the July Crisis of 1914.

The July Crisis came at a particularly inopportune time for Bahrain, as it coincided with the arrival of European pearl dealers. The dealers' employers sent their representatives telegrams ordering them to cease buying pearls due to the diplomatic situation in Europe. French, English, German and Romanian pearl brokers returned to Europe, with few pearls in their luggage. When the major European powers declared war on each other in August 1914, Bahrain's pearling fleet was celebrating the end of Ramadan. Pearl exports dropped precipitously from £1,431,281 in 1914 to £79,897 in 1915.⁸⁶ This had a very human cost – those most affected by this decline were the pearl trade's seasonal workers. Advances on account given to pearling boats by merchants

⁸³ Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1910-11, 2, *PGTR-B*. See also Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸⁴ Lorimer, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1910-11, 4, *PGTR-B*. See also Jones, 'British India Steamers'.

⁸⁵ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1913-14, 1, *PGTR-B*.

⁸⁶ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 1, *PGTR-B*; Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 57, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

were not sufficient for divers and their families until the next season; many suffered ‘considerable hardship’ according to a British trade report for 1914-1915.⁸⁷ Some divers received charity while others found employment with merchants who took advantage of low wages to buy large amounts of stone to build and extend their homes.⁸⁸ The beginning of hostilities between Britain and the Ottomans in November 1914 had a more direct effect on the pearl trade. Fighting around Basra meant many divers from this area and its environs did not come to Bahrain – they had been celebrating Ramadan in their homes before they would have travelled to Bahrain.⁸⁹ Isa advised the captains of Bahraini ships to advance money to their non-Bahraini divers to leave the island to seek work elsewhere.⁹⁰ The war had dealt what initially seemed like a fatal blow to the island’s main economic activity.

War disrupted Bahrain’s economy in many different ways; the island’s connections to India, and fighting in Basra, showed how Bahrain’s incorporation into wider imperial networks proved a source of weakness, not strength, during wartime. There was a flight of specie from Bahrain to India. £243,313 was registered as being carried on British steamships. Many high denomination notes were posted back to India as well. Some Indian merchants returned home carrying gold, which made the estimated total of specie leaving the island at nearer £300,000.⁹¹ Steamships from India no longer called at Bahrain, and overall, only forty-nine vessels visited Manama in 1915-1916, compared to sixty two in 1914-1915.⁹² Between 1914 and 1915, rice imports fell by

⁸⁷ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 1, *PGTR-B*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 2, *PGTR-B*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 1, *PGTR-B*. Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 57, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁹⁰ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 57-58, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁹¹ *Ibid*; Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 1, *PGTR-B*.

⁹² Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 1, *PGTR-B*; Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1915-16, 2, *PGTR-B*; Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1918-19, 2, *PGTR-B*.

50%. Overall imports fell by 60%, and exports decreased by 78%.⁹³ Isa Al Khalifa's personal finances were severely affected, because he personally received the revenues from Bahrain's Customs Department, which had fallen some 80% after the beginning of the war.⁹⁴ Indian clerks in the Customs Department were dismissed and returned to India.⁹⁵ The price of goods increased because of the dislocation of steamship services, resultant scarcity of many goods, and restrictions imposed in India on exporting certain articles.⁹⁶ Isa Al Khalifa issued a proclamation, with the agreement of Bahrain's British Political Agent, which prohibited food exports without a permit. The Political Agent regulated prices of goods alongside a committee of local merchants, an unexpected further erosion of Bahrain's autonomy.⁹⁷ Once British imperial forces began their invasion of Mesopotamia in November 1914, the closure of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, along which some of Bahrain's exports and imports travelled, further affected the island's trade.⁹⁸ War depleted Bahrain's wealth and resources, a trend that affected everyone on the island; not even its ruler was immune.

Life on Bahrain during the war was hard, but its population adapted to new conditions. Bahrainis were reported to be selling utensils and clothes in exchange for cash. Merchants donated approximately 11,000 rupees to the Prince of Wales Relief Fund by the end of October 1914. One local merchant distributed 3,000 rupees in

⁹³ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 3, *PGTR-B*.

⁹⁴ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

⁹⁵ Bahrain Political Agency News for Week Ending 10 October 1914, R. Jarman, ed., *Political Diaries of the Persian Gulf* (hereafter *PDPG*) (Farnham Common: Archive Editions, 1990), Vol. 5, 553.

⁹⁶ Capt. T.C. Fowle, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1915-16, 1, *PGTR-B*. See the comparative example of South America in Albert, *South America*.

⁹⁷ Bahrain Political Agency, News for Week Ending 15 August 1914, *PDPG*, Vol. 5, 531.

⁹⁸ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 1, *PGTR-B*; Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 57, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

charitable donations in December 1914. A further disaster for the island was a plague epidemic that broke out at the end of 1914 and raged until June 1915; approximately 5,000 died, and many more fled the island.⁹⁹ Yet Bahrainis adapted to survive. The lack of imported food, especially wheat and flour from Karachi, meant Bahrainis ate more locally available fish and dates.¹⁰⁰ In 1917, the island's population decreased by several thousand due to the departure of foreign merchants and workers who went to Iraq; the British occupation held better business prospects than Bahrain.¹⁰¹ The advance of British forces in Iraq presented further commercial opportunities for Bahraini merchants. After receiving news of the fall of Baghdad on 11 March 1917, merchants increased prices on a number of goods that they thought would be in great demand there, and shipped the merchandise northwards in sailing boats.¹⁰² Poverty caused by the war exacerbated the effects of plague, yet shortages were alleviated by changes in diet, and the changed political situation in Iraq drew Bahrainis there to seek a livelihood and economic opportunities.

A good example of the interplay between war and economics is the end of German involvement in Bahrain's economy, namely the fate of Robert Wonckhaus, the sole German firm on Bahrain in 1914. The company was closed in November 1914 at the behest of Britain's Political Agent for Bahrain. Wonckhaus's two employees experienced very different fates. Before the company was closed, Herr Trümper, a Lieutenant in the German Army's active reserve, managed to return to Germany via

⁹⁹ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 2, *PGTR-B*; Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; Bahrain Political Agency News for Week Ending 10 October 1914, *PDPG*, Vol. 5, 554; News Summary of Residency in the Persian Gulf, June 1915, *PDPG*, Vol. 6, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 59, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; News Summary of Residency in the Persian Gulf, April 1915, *PDPG*, Vol. 6, 38.

¹⁰¹ Capt. P.G. Loch, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1916-17, 1, *PGTR-B*.

¹⁰² Bahrain News for the Period ending 31 March 1917, *PDPG*, Vol. 6, 331.

Baghdad once war was declared in August 1914. Herr Harling, also in the reserve, did not leave at the same time, and was made a prisoner of war when the Indian Expeditionary Force was anchored off Bahrain, and was sent to a prisoner of war camp in India. Germans in Bahrain were also targeted. Herr Abraham, a German employee of Rubin and Company, an Australian pearl firm with its headquarters in Paris, was in Bahrain when war began in Europe and tried to return home. Because he was a member of the German *Landsturm*, local militia, he was detained as a prisoner of war and sent to Karachi.¹⁰³ The war had a wider impact on Germany's economic connections with Bahrain. The Hamburg-Amerika Line stopped running ships to the island as their ships were redirected to the war effort.¹⁰⁴ Imports from Germany to Bahrain, worth some £21,000 in 1914-1915, completely halted when the Allied blockade on Germany began, although at only approximately 3% of the total value of imports, this loss was negligible.¹⁰⁵ The war affected German interests worldwide, and disappearance of German interests from Bahrain's economy shows the global reach of measures such as the Allied blockade of Germany and the internment of Germans as enemy subjects.

Wartime disruption recalibrated the markets for Bahrain's exports and imports. There was a modest revival in the pearl market in 1915, with prices 50% higher and £150,300 worth of pearls exported. This was because of the rise in demand from the United States, which had historically been the third largest market for pearls after France and Britain, as well as demand from Japan. The transition to war economies in Europe meant countries such as the United States and Japan became key export markets for many goods across the world, and Bahraini pearls were no exception to this.¹⁰⁶ In 1917, the market continued to improve, with prices 30% higher than 1916 and £264,400 worth of pearl exports.¹⁰⁷ The end of the war saw a large demand for pearls and prices

¹⁰³ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1914: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1914, 56, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Keyes, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1914-15, 2, *PGTR-B*.

¹⁰⁵ Loch, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1916-17, 5, *PGTR-B*.

¹⁰⁶ Fowle, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1915-16, 1, *PGTR-B*.

¹⁰⁷ Loch, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1916-17, 2, *PGTR-B*.

rose by 50%; pearl merchants took £511,000 worth of pearls to India for re-sale.¹⁰⁸ The sources of Bahrain's many imported goods changed as well. Prior to the war, most of the island's sugar had come from suppliers based in Europe, but the fighting there meant sugar was imported to Bahrain from Japan, Mauritius, China and Java.¹⁰⁹ European war economies left a vacuum which changed the export and import profile of Bahrain's economy, although older markets such as India retained their importance after the war.

Bahrain's close economic connections to India hampered the recovery of the pearl trade during the war. The Government of India imposed wartime restrictions on the export of silver, which forced many merchants to draw rupees from India via telegraphic orders at a loss of 6-11% per 1000 rupees. As a result of this, merchants also imported rice from India to use as currency for their businesses.¹¹⁰ Merchants who imported foodstuffs from India as a means of providing funding to pearl merchants were hampered by the November 1918 embargo on rice, wheat and flour exports from India, imposed as a result of the deleterious effects of war requisitioning in India.¹¹¹ British influence on Bahrain's economy was direct as well as indirect. In July 1918, the British Political Agent warned Bahraini merchants that food exports from India to the Gulf were permitted for local consumption only. If food was re-exported without a permit from the Political Agent, it would be liable for confiscation and imports would be halted.¹¹² India's war economy combined with Bahrain's close economic and political links to the Raj to produce a very difficult trading environment during wartime.

The British embargo on wheat, rice and flour exports from India in November 1918 caused the greatest hardship to fall on Bahrain after the war had ended, as famine swept the island. On a tour to investigate the famine, the Political Agent wrote that 'the

¹⁰⁸ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1918, 56, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Fowle, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain islands, 1915-16, 3, *PGTR-B*.

¹¹⁰ Fowle, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain islands, 1915-16, 1, *PGTR-B*.

¹¹¹ Major H.R.P. Dickson, Report on the Trade of the Bahrain Islands, 1918-1919, 2, *PGTR-B*.

¹¹² Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1918: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1918, 56, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

starving conditions of the many villagers scattered over the Island was amply verified', and he requested his superiors to increase Bahrain's emergency allotment of rice, and hoped the Government of India would remove the export restrictions, stating that 'it is difficult to persuade a starving man that Government has other people to think of besides himself'.¹¹³ While the famine did not lead to political turmoil, it was a tragic example of how Bahrain's integration into the British imperial system had a disastrous effect on its population, when war placed an economy vulnerable to external shocks under a series of interconnected stresses. The First World War was a period of great disruption to Bahrain; the island's distance from the fighting fronts held little relief for Bahrainis, who found themselves at the mercy of the war's long reach, a conflict that was simultaneously remote and uncomfortably close, one which caused them hardship, hunger and death.

Qatar

Twenty kilometres east of Bahrain and ruled by the Al Thani family, Qatar had been under Ottoman suzerainty since January 1872, part of the Ottoman empire's wider expansion into Eastern Arabia.¹¹⁴ The Emir of Qatar acted as the Ottoman *qaim maqam*, or Governor. Qatari conflict with the Ottomans over taxation and the imposition of administrative reforms resulted in the battle of al-Wajbah in March 1893. Qatar's defeat of the Ottomans there meant the Emirate became a more autonomous part of the empire. This greater autonomy enabled the Al Thani family to further consolidate their control

¹¹³ Administration Report for the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1919: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1919, 62, *PGAR*, Vol. 7.

¹¹⁴ Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf*. For late nineteenth century Ottoman expansion elsewhere on its frontiers, see E. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and M. Minawi, 'Lines in the Sand: The Ottoman Empire's Policies of Expansion and Consolidation on Its African and Arabian Frontiers, 1882-1902' (PhD diss., New York University, 2011).

over the peninsula.¹¹⁵ One important limit to Qatari autonomy was the continued presence of an Ottoman garrison at al-Bidda, near the Qatari capital of Doha.

The outbreak of war between Britain and the Ottomans in November 1914 presented a political opportunity for Britain and Qatar's Emir, Abdallah bin Qassim Al Thani, to re-position Qatar's status. Britain wanted Qatar to become part of the Gulf protectorate system, and Al Thani wanted to further the Emirate's development. These positions were not oppositional, as Al Thani calculated that Qatar's territorial integrity needed protecting by an external power in order for the Emirate's internal development to progress. British authorities in India felt they could 'start afresh' in relations with Qatar, freed from having to consider any hostile Ottoman response to British dealings with the Emirate.¹¹⁶ Officials in London wanted to conclude a Treaty of Protection with Qatar during wartime so it could be an 'accomplished fact' when discussing Arabia's future with other powers, even though it was considered unlikely that France or Russia would question Britain's 'paramount position' in the region.¹¹⁷

The main obstacle to Britain's wartime objectives in Qatar was the Ottoman garrison at al-Bidda. British officials in the Gulf monitored the garrison closely throughout 1914. The Political Agent in Bahrain reported to his superior in Bushire that most of the Ottoman troops embarked with their stores at the beginning of September 1914, but when they learnt Basra was 'closed' they disembarked.¹¹⁸ While the Ottoman garrison was not a significant force, with only ninety men remaining by May 1915 due to repeated desertions, officials in India felt negotiations could not be opened with Al Thani until the garrison - the last vestige of Ottoman power in Qatar - had been ejected. Britain had a shortage of ships and men in the Gulf to tackle the garrison, and authorities in India had prioritised negotiations with Ibn Saud in Najd over Al Thani in 1915. The Viceroy of India thought that Al Thani was not entirely secure in his

¹¹⁵ See R.S. Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar* (London: Routledge, 1979).

¹¹⁶ Deputy Secretary, Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, to Sir Percy Cox, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 13 May 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 430.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Keyes, Political Agent, Bahrain, to Knox, 11 September 1914, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 425.

position; he apparently had ‘some difficulty in holding his own’.¹¹⁹ Britain’s manpower and material shortage led Sir Percy Cox, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, to send a captive Ottoman officer, Abdul Jabbar Effendi, to Qatar in June 1915. His task was to induce the garrison at al-Bidda to surrender peacefully. The terms of surrender were that the garrison would be transported to Bahrain with full military honours, where they would be then be shipped to India and become prisoners of war in a ‘cool station’ and be ‘looked after’. Even if the Ottoman officer’s mission was successful, Britain had no ships to transport the men, so Cox wanted Al Thani to provide the garrison with shipping to leave Qatar.¹²⁰ The garrison decided not to take their fellow soldier’s offer from the British. By August 1915, some of the men had made their way across the Gulf to Persia, leaving only two officers and forty men left in the fort. The Ottoman commandant wrote to Al Thani informing him of his intention to try to reach Baghdad via Kuwait.¹²¹ Although the Ottoman garrison still existed, its ability to exercise any control over Al Thani and Qatar had been eliminated by its isolation from other Ottoman forces, and some soldier’s decisions to leave Qatar to either continue the fight elsewhere, or simply leave military service altogether.

Ultimately, given the military situation in the Middle East, the understandable lack of interest evinced by the Ottoman army and authorities in the Qatar garrison led the remainder of the soldiers to take their future in their own hands. On 19 August 1915, Major T.H. Keyes, Bahrain’s Political Agent, arrived in Qatar with two Royal Navy Ships. Keyes offered Al Thani five thousand rupees to approach the Ottoman commandant and re-iterate the terms previously outlined to them by Abdul Jabbar Effendi. Before negotiations were opened, the Ottoman soldiers abandoned the fort during the night of 20 August 1915 and disappeared. A British landing party occupied the fort. Three guns, five hundred shells and 8,000 rounds of ammunition were given to

¹¹⁹ Viceroy of India to Knox, 6 May 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 524.

¹²⁰ Cox to Al Thani, 27 June 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 435; Memorandum for Abdul Jaffar Effendi, undated, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 437.

¹²¹ Keyes to Knox, 10 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 438.

Al Thani.¹²² In Sir Percy Cox's words, the Qatar question was 'disposed of'.¹²³ After the garrison's departure, Qatar remained a place where a handful of Ottoman deserters from other fronts washed up as workers in the local fishing fleet.¹²⁴ The demands of fighting on multiple fronts meant the Ottomans allowed their approximately forty year old suzerainty over Qatar to wither away, the timing of which was dictated by the local Ottoman commandant and his men, prompted by the arrival of British forces off the Emirate's shore, rather than by Ottoman leaders in Istanbul.

The war had precipitated the end of Ottoman power in Qatar, and left the political field open for Al Thani and Britain to forge a new relationship, with Britain as the dominant power. The negotiations and terms for the treaty between the two states shared many features with protectorate treaties signed with other rulers in the region and across Africa and Asia. Preliminary negotiations showed the limits of British power over Al Thani, and the Emir's power over his subjects. The Emir could not accept draft articles that limited the import duties on British goods, the posting of a British Agent, the establishment of a Post and Telegraph office, and the admission of British subjects to the Emirate.¹²⁵ The Emir told British officials this stance was because Qataris were 'strongly anti-foreign and that he would be in constant fear of trouble resulting to himself from the bad treatment of such persons by his people'.¹²⁶ Al Thani apparently showed 'so much distress of mind' regarding this that British negotiators moved onto other points, and were willing to let these clauses drop.¹²⁷ The Viceroy of India, who

¹²² Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency, 1915: Chapter X, Administration Report for the Bahrain Agency, 1915, 49, *PGAR*, Vol. 7; Zahlan, *Creation of Qatar*, 59. Keyes to Cox, Political Resident Persian Gulf, 23 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 440-441.

¹²³ Cox to Government of India, 26 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 450.

¹²⁴ Keyes, Political Agent Bahrain, to Cox, Political Resident Persian Gulf, 23 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 439.

¹²⁵ Cox to Government of India, 17 April 1916, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 530.

¹²⁶ Grey, Political Agent, Kuwait to Cox, 20 October 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 539.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

believed the draft clauses were ‘of no great importance’, approved of this negotiating position.¹²⁸ Senior British officials thought more important to secure a treaty and exclude external powers from Qatar, thereby removing another potential chink in the armour of their Gulf protectorate system.

Qatar signed a Treaty of Protection with Britain on 3 November 1916, which was similar to 1892 agreements with other Gulf rulers. The most important conditions were that the Emir could not cede territory or have relations or correspondence with foreign powers without British consent; a British Agent would be stationed in the Emirate; British subjects would be admitted, and Qatar would not engage in piracy, slavery or arms trafficking. However, given British concerns over Al Thani’s internal position, articles such as the stationing of Political Agent remained inoperative, and the ruler’s family could retain their slaves.¹²⁹ Britain was allowed to establish a telegraph and post office station in Qatar, to bolster the connective hardware of its imperial system in the Gulf.¹³⁰ The treaty enabled British officials to proffer advice to Al Thani regarding Qatar’s internal governance. Keyes wrote to Al Thani that ‘it is by organisation of officials that the Western Powers prevail, and I trust that you will understand this’, suggesting appointing competent officials and ensuring government administration did not cause discontent among Al Thani’s subjects.¹³¹ The war’s disruption of Gulf politics meant Qatar became firmly part of Britain’s informal empire.

For Al Thani, his concessions to Britain on Qatar’s sovereignty and unsolicited British advice on internal governance were outweighed by two conditions. The first was Al Thani’s ability to import 1,000 rifles and ammunition every year for his own use ‘and the arming of his dependents’, which was crucial for ensuring his rule internally and externally; the second was the article that bound Britain to protect Al Thani and his

¹²⁸ Telegram from Viceroy of India, 2 June 1916, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 544.

¹²⁹ Draft Agreement Between the British Government and the Shaikh of Qatar, 14 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 432; Zahlan, *Creation of Qatar*, 60; Final Agreement Ratified by Government of India, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 567-568.

¹³⁰ Final Agreement Ratified by Government of India, 3 November 1916, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 567-568.

¹³¹ Keyes to Al Thani, undated, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 446.

subjects.¹³² After formally signing the treaty, Al Thani asked for 150 rifles and 15,000 rounds of ammunition. The Government of India gave him 300 rifles with 30,000 rounds as a gift.¹³³ The terms of protection were carefully worded. Britain promised to protect Qatar ‘from all aggression by sea’, a remote prospect, and the commitment to British protection from land attack was ambiguous: only if aggression was ‘unprovoked by any act or aggression on the part of myself [the Emir] or my subjects against others’, which gave Britain a wide degree of latitude in interpreting this article to their advantage.¹³⁴ Qatar’s survival as an autonomous polity was now dependent on Britain.

This Qatari example, along with those of other Gulf ruling families, offer some distinct parallels to the political calculations of tribal leaders in southern Iraq, despite the tribes’ greater proximity to military operations. Tribal leaders’ decisions to side with either the Ottomans or the invading British were partly based on their historic relations with each belligerent power; a number of tribes (along with merchants and landowners), hoped for better treatment under the British than the Ottomans. Expediency was a more important factor, often dependent on the military fortunes of either side at a particular point in time. After the British defeat at Kut in 1916, some tribes changed their loyalties back to the Ottomans, then back again to Britain after the fall of Baghdad in 1917. Location also played a role: settled tribes near key communications routes offered their loyalty to a particular side at crucial junctures in military campaigns. Tribal leaders acted in their own interests, in order to gain more power and influence.¹³⁵ Gulf rulers also pursued their own interests, although their freedom of action was more constrained than the southern Iraqi tribes. Divisions among some Gulf ruling families and their successive leaders reflected changes in their polities’ receptiveness or hostility to Britain or the Ottomans. Location also played a role – the further away states were from

¹³² Draft Agreement between the British Government and Shaikh of Qatar, 14 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 433.

¹³³ Political Resident, Persian Gulf, to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 26 December 1916, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 559.

¹³⁴ Draft Agreement between the British Government and Shaikh of Qatar, 14 August 1915, *RoQ*, Vol. 4, 433.

¹³⁵ This paragraph is based on Karim, ‘Tribes and nationalism’, 288.

the retreating Ottoman frontlines, the more likely the ruling family was to side with Britain. Overall, however, like the tribes, expediency was the predominant factor in political calculations, which increasingly pointed towards an accommodation with Britain, the power seen as best placed to ensure these states' survival.

The dispersal of the Ottoman garrison in Qatar in 1915 was a small military footnote in Britain's war against the Ottomans, yet its consequences were long lasting. The forces of Ibn Saud nearby in Najd threatened Qatar's existence several times in the war's aftermath.¹³⁶ Like Kuwait, Qatar's enmeshment in the British protectorate system ensured its survival in the face of the Saudi threat. The effects of the First World War on Qatar presented a serious challenge for its ruler, as Al Thani navigated his way from one political suzerain to another, but it did guarantee Qatar's survival as a distinct polity, an outcome which eluded other British allies in Arabia, such as Asir and the Hijaz.

Conclusion

The disruptive effects that the First World War had on Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar demonstrates the truly global nature of the conflict from the new perspective of the Gulf. The pre-war period of imperial globalisation that integrated far-flung regions into a world economy meant that societies such as Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, who were not belligerent powers, could not avoid being buffeted by the war from a number of directions that interacted with each other - whether it was economic disorder that caused hardship and distress, or imperial relationships that were broken, re-made, or renewed in different forms. The British and Gulf rulers in equal measure exploited the upheaval caused by the war to re-cast their relationships; these interactions had long-term consequences in the region's political structure that lasted in its essential outline until the late 1960s. The populations of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar suffered as war severed many of the economic links forged during the pre-war period, but some took advantage of new economic opportunities that the war created. Given the differing experiences of

¹³⁶ See Zahlan, *Creation of Qatar*, for an analysis of Saudi-Qatari disputes in the post-1918 period.

1914-1918, the Gulf states have not remembered the First World War in same way as European countries; yet it was a formative moment in their specific political, economic and social histories, and is simultaneously an example of a modern global war's universalising tendencies to destroy and create, with little regard to who the affected people are, or where in the world they live.