

“GREAT BRITAIN’S GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA”

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Annotation. *The article “Great Britain’s Geopolitical Strategy in the Arabian Peninsula” examines the role of British imperial policy in shaping the political and economic dynamics of the region from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. It highlights the strategic importance of the Arabian Peninsula as a crossroads of maritime trade routes and a buffer zone for protecting British interests in the Persian Gulf. Special attention is given to Britain’s use of diplomatic treaties with local rulers, the establishment of protectorates along the coasts, and its rivalry with other colonial powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire and later emerging global actors. By analyzing archival materials, government reports, and contemporary scholarly interpretations, the study emphasizes how Britain combined military presence, economic leverage, and cultural influence to secure dominance in the region. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of imperial geopolitics and its long-term implications for modern Middle Eastern state formation*

Keywords. *Arabian Peninsula, Near and Middle East, Britain’s colonial policy, the Persian Gulf, Ottoman Empire, protectorates.*

The nations and countries of the Persian Gulf have played a crucial role in human history for millennia. The Persian Gulf region is the place where ancient civilizations of mankind were formed. In this region, great states such as the ancient Sumerian state, the Babylonian kingdom, the Achaemenid Empire, and in the Middle Ages the Abbasid and Umayyad caliphates existed. In the waters of the Persian Gulf, the ships of Egyptians and Hellenes, Persians and Indians, as well as those of Alexander the Great and King Solomon, sailed¹.

After the great geographical discoveries of the 15th–16th centuries, the first predictions about the Gulf’s strategic influence in terms of its economic and political

¹ Bondarevsky, G. L. The Struggle of Peoples for the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Red Sea at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries. Abstract for the Doctor of Historical Sciences Degree. Moscow, 1965.

significance emerged. From then on, international interest in the Gulf grew, and intense struggles began over the status of controlling the region.

This scholarly article discusses the specific features and historical aspects of European policies toward the Gulf.

In the 15th century, the western coast of the Persian Gulf was largely controlled by the Ottoman Empire, while the eastern part was held by the Persians. At the beginning of the 16th century, the ships of Albuquerque appeared in the Persian Gulf, and much of the coast passed into Portuguese hands for many years. From the late 18th century, British colonialists showed increasing interest in the region. By the end of the 19th century, Britain's influence on the western coast of the Persian Gulf had grown stronger. However, Britain's colonial interests in this region were determined not only by its strategic position.

The Persian Gulf is the region where two-thirds of the capitalist world's oil reserves are located. In 1967, nearly 500 million tons of oil were extracted there. More than 35% of the oil being produced in this region, over 50% of the oil refineries, and the oil tanker fleets were all managed on the basis of British capital. The annual profits that British monopolists gained from transporting, selling, and refining oil from the Persian Gulf exceeded one billion dollars. This was even greater than the income Britain had received from India in 1937¹

In the 1760s and during the 19th century, Britain established bases in Oman, Muscat, and Aden. At the decisive stage of British expansion, it faced competition over the Gulf from Russia, Germany, and France. An example of this was the construction of the Baghdad railway and the attempts of Britain's rivals to secure oil concessions from Iran and the Gulf sheikhdoms. At this critical stage of colonial policy, Britain aimed to establish protectorates over Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. As British politicians put it, the Persian Gulf was to become an "English lake."²

Britain's colonial policy in the Persian Gulf region included a number of specific features. England's entry into this region began in the second half of the 19th century. However, at that time there was not yet any talk of oil. The ruling circles of Great Britain envisioned their political and strategic interests in this area. British dominance over the Persian Gulf in the 19th–20th centuries gave it the ability to block its imperialist rivals from entering the region. For imperialism, the competition among several major powers

¹ Bondarevsky, G. L. The Struggle of Peoples for the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Red Sea at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries. Abstract for the Doctor of Historical Sciences Degree. Moscow, 1965.

² Akhmedova, L. Sh. England's Policy in the Persian Gulf Zone in the Last Third of the 19th – Early 20th Century (1870–1914). St. Petersburg, 2006.

for hegemony was defined by the territories they had seized (for instance, an alliance was formed between Germany and Belgium against England, while an alliance was formed between England and Baghdad against Germany).

In the mid-19th century, the Liberal Cabinet that came to power continued its colonial policies, despite opposing the doctrines of non-interference in the internal affairs of colonial states and free trade. The Liberal Cabinet emphasized that pursuing colonial policy in underdeveloped countries would burden the metropolitan budget, as the costs of defending existing colonies and maintaining their administrative structures were already increasing.

Britain exercised its dominance over the Persian Gulf by using various forms of protectorate rule. In doing so, it preserved the tribal and feudal governance of local rulers, maintaining their independence in internal affairs. However, by the end of the 19th century, although Great Britain had turned the Persian Gulf into a sphere of strong influence, the region had also become a center of diplomatic and political controversy and played a significant role in the First World War, the emergence of the Entente, and international relations.

At the end of the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s, Great Britain, through its political maneuvers, intimidation, purchases, and direct and indirect acts of aggression, gained control over the Near and Middle East. Moreover, the colonialists established a monopoly over the entire western part of the Persian Gulf through the sheikhdoms of Turkey and Iran, Muscat and Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Qatar, as well as through agreements and disputes among Oman, Muscat, Bahrain, and Qatar¹.

By the term “Persian Gulf,” the British referred not only to the Arab and Persian coasts of the Gulf, but also to the Persian coast of the Arabian Sea, as well as the two coasts of Shatt al-Arab and Oman. Although British manuscripts repeatedly claimed that their goal was peace, their main aim was to establish a protectorate over the Gulf states and secure reliable bases. Taking advantage of the weakness of the ports, the British captured the port of Aden in 1838. They openly threatened the rulers of Oman, including the agreed-upon Umman and Muscat, and forced them to sign unequal treaties in 1798, 1820, 1843, 1853, 1861, and 1862. By the mid-19th century, disagreements arose between the British and the French over the division of Oman. As a result, in 1856, the Anglo-French Declaration regarding Muscat and Zanzibar was adopted. That same year, the British-Bahrain agreement was established, and Great Britain retained primary control over Bahrain. In correspondence, British Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon explicitly

¹ Bondarevsky, G. L. The Struggle of Peoples for the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Red Sea at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries. Abstract for the Doctor of Historical Sciences Degree. Moscow, 1965.

emphasized that the Gulf governments should allow British naval forces to enter the Gulf and refrain from creating their own personal fleets.

Aden was a route to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. The opening of the Suez Canal increased Aden's importance. In 1869, the British captured the Sultanate of Lahj, and soon after, nine sheikhdoms under Aden's authority were also taken. In 1886, the British seized the island of Socotra, and in 1888, they reached an agreement with one of the Hadramaut sultans.

Another direction of British expansion was Yemen. In 1870, the British attempted to reach an agreement with Sheikh Khalid bin Hussein, but this effort failed. In 1871, Turkish troops invaded Yemen and captured Sanaa. In 1872, the country became a province of the Ottoman Empire. The British envoy in Istanbul demanded explanations from the Turkish military. In 1873, Northbrook proposed sending an expedition to western Yemen, supported by India and Aden. However, Prime Minister Gladstone did not approve the action, seeing no positive effect from it and fearing resistance from local tribes and a deterioration of international relations. In 1874, the Turks captured Dala, which lay along the caravan route between Sanaa and Aden. Britain's headquarters in Aden suggested withdrawing from Dala, but the matter did not reach a conclusion. In 1876, due to several factors—including resistance from local tribes, British pressure, uprisings in the Balkans, and the financial difficulties faced by the Turks—the Ottoman troops withdrew from Dala¹.

In the 1890s, Great Britain supported all movements and uprisings against the Ottoman Empire, even allowing the transport of weapons through Aden. The British presence in Muscat in the mid-19th century helped establish their monopoly over trade and sea routes in the Gulf. With the opening of the Suez Canal, the Gulf's importance increased, and trade began to gain significant value. British entrepreneurs started to earn substantial profits from this development.

In the Persian Gulf, following the 1853 "Perpetual Treaty of Peace," the British, whose fleet dominated the waters, skillfully and cunningly played local sheikhs against one another. This included the rulers who were party to the treaty, such as the Ottoman sultanate, Qatar, Bahrain, and Abu Dhabi. Notably, Britain's policy in the region involved supporting the Wahhabis in areas where they needed to oppose the Ottomans, while simultaneously exercising mastery and tact in the Gulf emirates already subservient to Britain, as well as in dealing with military opposition.

¹ Kotlov, L. N. Yemeni Arab Republic. Moscow: Nauka, 1971.

In the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, the British maintained control over coastal areas either through local sultans or directly. For example, the population of the city of Aden, which the British had planned as a major port, had grown to around 20,000 by 1856 (mainly consisting of British, Indian, and African residents). Between 1843 and 1870, the value of imports increased tenfold, while exports grew fiftyfold. The British successfully repelled all attempts by the neighboring Hadramaut sultans to capture Aden. Moreover, all of these sultans accepted British protection.

Through these measures, Britain solidified its dominance over the Persian Gulf, southern Arabia, and Yemen. Its control over trade, navigation routes, and emerging oil resources was combined with careful management of local rulers, rivalries, and international competition. By the early 20th century, Britain had established itself as the leading power in the Gulf region, shaping its political, economic, and strategic landscape for decades to come.

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