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# Guardians of the Western Lifeline

The Nixon Doctrine and the Persian Gulf, 1969-1974

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## *Abstract*

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This thesis explores the Nixon administration's policy towards the Persian Gulf between 1969 and 1974. In the aftermath of the British decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf by 1971, the United States had to develop a new strategy for how to approach a region. The region held important economic value to Washington's overall Cold War strategy as Western Europe and Japan relied heavily on access to Gulf oil. An additional challenge was how Washington would approach the oil-rich sheikdoms of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, all of whom had been under British protection until then. Not wanting to replace the British position in the Gulf, the Nixon administration settled on a strategy of promoting cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia to foster stability in the region. This gave Washington a framework for how it could deal with the emerging states and integrate them into a stable post-British Gulf.

The reliance on Iran and Saudi Arabia to uphold stability and security in the Gulf was an expression of the so-called Nixon Doctrine, where the United States sought to transfer the responsibility of containing Soviet influence in the Third World to local allies. Saudi Arabia and Iran would help "guide" and "protect" the smaller sheikdoms to stabilize them. However, this strategy resulted in a form of co-opetition between Washington, Riyadh, and Tehran. The reliance on Saudi Arabia and Iran made Washington defer to Riyadh and Tehran's interest in the Gulf, making the Nixon administration more inclined to pressure the sheikdoms to accommodate to the position of the Gulf monarchies. Furthermore, the entente between Saudi Arabia and Iran proved difficult to foster, as the two did not share a common vision for regional security beyond their shared fear of radical forces in the Gulf. This eventually forced the Nixon administration attempt different methods for mediating ties between the Gulf monarchies and recruit other willing states to contribute to containment in the Gulf. Eventually, the cooperation strategy resulted in the Nixon administration rely more heavily on their bilateral ties with Riyadh and Tehran to coordinate cooperation in the Gulf.

## *Acknowledgements*

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The American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois once stated that “it is never possible to bring a historical treatise to a satisfactory end”. However, as a master thesis is subject to deadlines beyond the control of the historian-to-be, this project has reached its end. In doing so, there are many people who deserve thanks. First and foremostly I would like to thank my supervisor Hilde Henriksen Waage, who over the period of January, 2022 to May, 2023 have given me superb, but at times short, feedback. Yet this is mostly my fault rather than hers. I would also like to give a special thanks to the members of *Fortid*, who have provided me with both a social and professional space throughout my years as a master student. I am grateful to “Ostejentene” for picking up my shifts at work over the past month, allowing me to fully focus on finishing this thesis. A special thanks goes to Berit Enge and her team at the Nordic Press Center for warmly welcoming me into their company during my stay in Washington D.C., significantly lifting the experience of my archival trip. Although I have not been able to see them much over the past year, I would like to thank my friends and family for the few times they have been able to distract me away from the Persian Gulf in the 1970s to spend time in Oslo instead.

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Martin Knutsen Øen

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## ***Chapter 1. Introduction***

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The British decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf by 1971 forced the United States to develop a new strategy towards the region. The end of the *Pax Britannica* would leave the oil-rich sheikdoms of Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait to manage their own independence without any security guarantees from Britain. Having mostly left the area to Britain, Washington lacked strong diplomatic ties to the emerging states. Not wanting to fill the “vacuum” left by the British, the Nixon administration decided to rely on an entente between Washington’s closest allies Iran and Saudi Arabia to foster stability and security in the wake of the British withdrawal. This approach was the expression of the so-called Nixon Doctrine. The doctrine sought to outsource Washington’s containment responsibilities to local allies in the Third World to avoid future Vietnam-like scenarios, preserve and reinstate American power both at home and abroad, whilst simultaneously keep the seemingly collapsing Cold War international order intact. The new strategy envisioned a division of labor between the US and local allies, where day-to-day security of vital regions would be handled by friendly regional powers, while Washington would concentrate on long-term global issues, thus avoiding being bogged down in areas of peripheral interest.

As the Persian Gulf was a crucial economic area, supplying the majority of oil consumed by Western Europe and Japan, the Nixon administration hoped that the new strategy would keep the region stable and continuing the oil supplies. Yet Britain left behind a series of unresolved territorial disputes between sheikdoms and the two Gulf monarchies. These disputes could prove troublesome for integrating the soon to be independent sheikdoms into a cooperative relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Furthermore, if either of the Gulf monarchies pressed their claims by force, the fallout from a confrontation could be detrimental for US interest, particularly if Iran attacked one of the Arab states. Adding to this, Washington feared that the Soviet-backed regimes in Iraq and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen would engage in subversive activities, supporting revolutionary movements in the Persian Gulf and seek to undermine the fragile rulers of the sheikdoms. If Iran and Saudi Arabia was to contain this threat, Washington needed to foster a clear line of communication between them to avoid any misunderstandings that could lead to a confrontation.



How did the United States approach the changing regional order in the lead up to and in the aftermath of the British withdrawal? How did the Nixon administration conceptualize its new strategic vision for preserving stability in the area? Which countries would play a part and in what capacity? How and why did the US develop its relationship with the emerging independent sheikdoms? Why did the US lean so heavily towards Iran and Saudi Arabia to preserve order in this period?

This study examines the Nixon administration's approach to the Persian Gulf with a focus on the Arab part of the region. The British departure threatened to undermine the American policy of securing economic and political stability in the Gulf, for which London had been its main guarantor.<sup>1</sup> It will look at how and why the Nixon administration sought to ensure stability after the British departed by looking at how the Nixon administration approached the sheikdoms of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, all of which had protective or defensive treaties with Britain upon until 1971. The study will rely on the Nixon Doctrine as a way to understand how Washington sought to deal with the Third World in general, and the Persian Gulf in particular to explain how Nixon administration sought to foster cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran to foster a stable environment and forge a new regional order in the wake of the British withdrawal.

### **Historiography & Methodology**

While scholars have by no means ignored the Nixon Doctrine, most have approached it on a theoretical level. Most agree that the Nixon Doctrine sought to reduce American presence abroad and transferring day-to-day security responsibilities to local actors, a process that has been at times termed "Vietnamization".<sup>2</sup> While there is consensus on the theoretical meaning of the doctrine, most of the debate have centered around whether or not the Nixon Doctrine represented a brand-new strategy for dealing with the Third World or just the formalization of established practice. Although historians like John Lewis Gaddis have tended to point to the Nixon Doctrine as something new, a growing number of historians, like Jussi Hanhimäki have argued that the Nixon Doctrine formalized practice that had been a trend in US foreign policy during the

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<sup>1</sup> W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, 1st ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 4-5

<sup>2</sup> David L. Prentice, "Choosing "the Long Road": Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, Vietnamization and the War over Nixon's Vietnam Strategy", *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016), 445-474

Johnson administration.<sup>3</sup> Even so, few have explored the practical meanings of the Nixon Doctrine and how came to shape US foreign policy and relations with different parts of the Third World.

The Persian Gulf does represent one of the few exceptions where scholars have explored the meaning of the Nixon Doctrine. Most of these scholars have tended to focus on the relationship Washington cultivated with Tehran in the period. These scholars have shown how Washington gave the Shah virtually free access to the American arsenal, while also increasingly showing the Shah's agency and his ability to manipulate decision makers in Washington. Most of these scholars also stress the special role Washington assigned to Tehran as their policeman in the region, often illustrated through Nixon's visit to Tehran in 1972.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, much of the literature covering this period in US-Iranian relations has tended to argue that Iran's centrality in the Nixon administration's thinking resulted in that the US Iranian policy became synonymous with Washington's Persian Gulf period.<sup>5</sup> Yet their explorations of the meaning and actual function of this aspect of the US-Iranian relationship have with a few exceptions, mainly been left unaddressed.<sup>6</sup> Part of this might have something to do with how ingrained the notion of Iran's ability to protect US interests in the Gulf was. As historian Mari Salberg has shown, the Nixon administration remained committed to this view of Iran, despite clear lack of evidence and limitations in Iran's ability to play the kind of role Washington wanted.<sup>7</sup>

As far as the Arab states of the Gulf is concerned, historians usually treat them in an overall context of oil politics. Although historians have written extensively on the Arab context within the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Arab Gulf states are usually treated as background characters, appearing in full with the Arab oil embargo in response to US support for Israel during the October War of 1973. Part of this might be explained by the rather vague nature US and Saudi

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<sup>3</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 272-306. Jussi Hanhimäki, "An Elusive Grand Design" in *Nixon in the World – American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977*, ed. Frederik Logevall & Andrew Preston, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25-44

<sup>4</sup> Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mari Salberg and Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Master of the Game: The Relationship between the United States and Iran Revisited, 1969-1972," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 30, no. 3 (2019), 468-89

<sup>5</sup> Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*, 50-55. Mari Salberg, "Conventional Wisdom" – *U.S. Policy Towards Iran 1969-1979*. Ph.D dissertation. University of Oslo. 2018

<sup>6</sup> Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War*, 65-125; James F. Goode, "Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972-75," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2014): 441-62

<sup>7</sup> Mari Salberg, "Conventional Wisdom", 325-328

officials have presented their alliance, as historian Victor McFarland has argued.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as far as the Nixon Doctrine is concerned, the Arab states are usually placed within the Twin Pillar policy, where Washington sought to balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, most scholars tend to dismiss the Twin Pillar policy as a fig leaf policy meant to calm Arab sensitivities and fears over Washington's embrace of Iran. Indeed, it has been commonplace to point out that Saudi Arabia did not constitute a pillar at all, and that the Nixon administration either led a "One Pillar Policy" as historian Roham Alvandi has argued, or that Israel in reality constituted the second pillar, as Salberg has argued.<sup>9</sup>

This lack of exploration of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdom's position in US policy poses a strange hole in the literature, especially when considering how central Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE have been to US foreign policy over the last couple of decades. Indeed, as historian Salim Yaqub has pointed out, the 1970s marked a profound transformation in the US-Arab relationship.<sup>10</sup> Part of this might be explained by the fact the existing literature on the US-Persian Gulf relationship between 1969 and 1974 has to a large extent been "an account of the burgeoning U.S.-Iranian relationship", as historian Taylor W. Fain has characterized this part of the historiography.<sup>11</sup> As shown above, much of this can be explained by the immense power inequality between the Iranian and Arab sides of the Gulf and the general enthusiasm members of the Nixon administration expressed for the Shah. Yet while Iran and Saudi Arabia were not considered as equals by the Nixon administration this does not mean that the US did not formulate policy towards the Saudis or the other Gulf Arabs as well.

Yet, as scholars of the US-Iranian relationship has shown, Tehran played such a central role to US foreign policy in the period that it is quite simply impossible to ignore Iran's impact on Washington's thinking in its relationship with the Gulf Arabs. Hence, the study will apply a regional rather than bilateral lens to explain how and why Washington developed its policies towards the Gulf Arabs. This will allow the study to integrate and bring nuance to Iran and the "role" Tehran was supposed to play, as well as bring light on how Saudi Arabia and the other

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<sup>8</sup> Victor McFarland, *Oil Powers – A History of the U.S.-Saudi Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 3-5

<sup>9</sup> Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*, 50-55. Mari Salberg & Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Master of the Game: The Relationship between the United States and Iran Revisited, 1969-1972," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 30, no. 3 (2019), 477

<sup>10</sup> Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers – Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 1-19

<sup>11</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 200

Gulf Arab states fit into US policy that is often obfuscated by scholars focusing on “Iranian primacy”.

Historians like Yaqub and Tanya Harmer have shown the utility of taking a regional approach to explain aspects of US foreign policy. Yaqub’s study of the Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East has shown the underlying political dimensions that drove the policy as an attempt to contain Nasserist Arab nationalism and its “positive neutrality” towards the Soviet Union by carving out an anti-Communist Arab bloc. In this sense, the Eisenhower Doctrine translated into a general attempt to draw the Middle East firmly into Washington’s Cold War camp.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Harmer has incorporated the Nixon administration’s attempt to recruit Brazil as the policeman of the Southern Cone to contain and ultimately overthrow Salvador Allende’s government in Chile illustrates dimensions of the Nixon administration’s thinking and regional dynamics that usually does not shown through the bilateral lens.<sup>13</sup>

The British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf posed a challenge for the US, not just in Britain abandoning its role as the security balancer of the region, but for how Washington was to deal with the three new sheikdoms that emerged from the region. As Henry Kissinger outlined in a memo to Richard Nixon, the best response to the British withdrawal from the Gulf was an intermingling of three policies: relying on Iran’s preponderant position as the region’s most powerful state; promote cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran; and developing ties with the states granted independence through the British departure. This would ensure the creation of a stable, western-friendly regional system that could resist influence from both the Soviet Union and radical Arab forces (both internal and external).<sup>14</sup> This study will focus on the latter two aspects of the Nixon administration’s strategy and thus explore how the US approached the Gulf Arabs in a wider regional context.

Drawing on the insights from the literature discussed above, this thesis will focus on how the Nixon administration approached the Gulf region by attempting to draw Saudi Arabia and Iran into a cooperative scheme that would transfer the responsibility of protecting the sheikdoms from

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<sup>12</sup> Selim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1-8

<sup>13</sup> Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile & the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 126-132; Tanya Harmer, “Brazil’s Cold War in the Southern Cone, 1970-1975,” *Cold War History* 12, no. 4 (2012), 659–81

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, *Foreign Relations of the United States (hereinafter FRUS)* XXIV, Middle East Region and Arabian Peninsula, 1969-1972; Jordan, September 1970. 89

London to Riyadh and Tehran. By strengthening the ties with its two closest allies in the Gulf, Washington hoped to avoid playing a greater role in the Gulf area in the wake of the British withdrawal. By doing so, the thesis will demonstrate that Saudi Arabia had a central place in Washington's thinking about the Gulf, although Riyadh lagged behind Tehran for most of the period covered here. Indeed, the period covered here will demonstrate that Saudi Arabia emerged as an important US strategic partner in the Gulf and Middle East, culminating in the formation of the US-Saudi joint commission on cooperation in the spring of 1974.

The thesis will also demonstrate how the Nixon administration sought to develop its relationship with the newly independent sheikdoms. Washington's reliance on Saudi Arabia and Iran framed Washington's early relationship with the sheikdoms, as the Gulf monarchies' concerns and interests towards the smaller Gulf littorals became the touchstones from which the Nixon administration approached the sheikdoms. This became particularly clear as Washington sought to resist attempts by the sheikdoms to develop strong bilateral ties with the US. In doing so, this thesis will show that the period between 1969 and 1974 was dynamic and that the Gulf Arabs had a greater importance to US policy towards the Persian Gulf than what has been suggested by the literature on the US-Iranian relationship in the period.

### **Containment By Proxy**

To explain the Nixon administration's policy towards the Persian Gulf, this study will rely on a framework presenting the Nixon Doctrine as "Containment by Proxy". The Nixon Doctrine has traditionally been understood as part of the Nixon administration's attempt to reduce American presence abroad and rebuild the Cold War consensus at home, but the newer parts of the historiography challenges this. Here, the Nixon Doctrine is understood as part of what historian Jussi Hanhimäki termed "the new structure for peace" or the Nixon administration's Grand Strategy.<sup>15</sup> Together with détente with Moscow and rapprochement with Beijing, the Nixon Doctrine constituted a reconfiguration of Washington's Cold War strategy. The administration sought, as historian Barbara Zanchetta has argued, to reinforce and rehabilitate the bipolar international order of the Cold War that had come under pressure by the late 1960s.<sup>16</sup> In this

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<sup>15</sup> Jussi Hanhimäki, "Détente and the Reconfiguration of Superpower Relations," in *The Cambridge History of America and the World*, vol. IV ed. David Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani Mcalister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 512–533. For a complete interpretation of the Nixon administration's foreign policy as Grand Strategy see Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 59-102

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-16

sense, the Nixon Doctrine was part of an overall Grand Strategy that sought to preserve “the conservative world order”, as historian Jeremi Suri put it, by allowing Washington to retain its position in the international system.<sup>17</sup>

Historian Hal Brands defines Grand Strategy as “the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy”. It requires a clear understanding of the nature of international environment, the highest goals, and interests within that environment.<sup>18</sup> Building on this and drawing on the notion of strategic culture, the ideas and frame of mind that shapes and gives meaning to how strategy is formulated, historians Christopher McKnight Nichols and Andrew Preston has argued that Grand Strategy is an “ideological, programmatic vision of reshaping a state’s external environment”.<sup>19</sup>

The Nixon Doctrine constituted the part of the Grand Strategy that was addressed towards the Third World. In the minds of Richard Nixon and his chief foreign policy advisor, Henry Kissinger, this part of the world did not matter a whole lot to continuing waging Cold War against the Soviet Union. However, the area was prone to instability that could allow for the spread of Soviet influence which could upset the balance of power between Washington and Moscow, and in turn distract Washington from more important policy priorities.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the Nixon administration would transfer the responsibility of containing the spread of Soviet influence to US-friendly regional allies, backed by US resources. In this sense, the Nixon Doctrine sought to transform Washington’s relationship with the Third World from an “intervener” to an “overseer”, in historian Odd Arne Westad’s words.<sup>21</sup>

This understanding of the Nixon Doctrine as “Containment by Proxy”, draws into historian Paul Thomas Chamberlin’s notion of the Doctrine as creating a counterinsurgency strategy for the post-Vietnam era.<sup>22</sup> Counterinsurgency is often associated with military action, but as political

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<sup>17</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*, (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2003), 258

<sup>18</sup> Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy*, 1-16

<sup>19</sup> Christopher McKnight Nichols and Andrew Preston, “Introduction” in *Rethinking American Grand Strategy* ed. Elizabeth Borgwardt, Christopher McKnight Nichols, and Andrew Preston, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 7

<sup>20</sup> Mark Atwood Lawrence, “Containing Globalism: The United States and the Developing World in the 1970s” in *Shock of the Global – The 1970s in Perspective* ed. Niall Fergusson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel Sargent, (Cambridge Ma, Harvard University Press, 2010), 208-211

<sup>21</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War – Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 197

<sup>22</sup> Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive – The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87

scientist Jochen Hippler has pointed out, this is only one option.<sup>23</sup> Here, counterinsurgency is understood in political scientist Joseph MacKay's terms as "conservative worldmaking projects" linking military power and politicking to "maintaining the status quo against insurrectionary pressure".<sup>24</sup> On a bilateral level, this political understanding of counterinsurgency is shown through historian Mattias Fibiger's portrayal of the Nixon Doctrine as a process of "authoritarianization" as the facilitation of the construction and consolidation of authoritarian regimes through funneling aid and arms sales.<sup>25</sup> On a regional level, it meant facilitation of collaborative schemes between US friendly powers to "hold the line" against Soviet or radical influences to retain stability in the Third World. In this context they could either overthrow unfriendly regimes or underpin the stability of friendly states.<sup>26</sup>

### **Primary Sources**

This thesis mainly relies on documents found in US archives from the Nixon administration. The major bulk of these documents are from the United States National Archives at College Park, Maryland (NARAII). These documents mainly consist of cables, memorandums, and intelligence notes from the State Department's Records Group 59. Documents from the period January 1969 until June 1973 were accessed in the archive. For the period July 1973 until Nixon's resignation in August 1974, documents were accessed through the Access to the Archival Database (AAD) tool.<sup>27</sup> Since 2010, most of the documents relating to the Nixon White House and the National Security Council has been relocated to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library at Yorba Linda, California, through the Nixon Project. Due to time and financial constraints, it was not possible to visit the library. A substantial number of documents have been made available through four volumes of *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*. One box relating to the smaller Persian Gulf states from the Nixon Library have been digitalized as part of the research.

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<sup>23</sup> Jochen Hippler, "Low-Intensity Warfare: Key Strategy for the Third World Theater", *Middle East Report* 144, no. 1 (1987), 34

<sup>24</sup> Joseph MacKay, *The Counterinsurgent Imagination – A New Intellectual History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 5-6

<sup>25</sup> Mattias Fibiger, "The Nixon Doctrine and the Making of Authoritarianism in Island Southeast Asia", *Diplomatic History* vol. 45, no. 5 (2021), 956-957

<sup>26</sup> Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive*, 6 & 87-88

<sup>27</sup> For access to AAD: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=WR43>

Following US declassification practice, most documents relating to the period have been declassified. In the folder from the Nixon Library 101 documents have yet to be declassified, as well as a small number available at the National Archives.<sup>28</sup>

As the thesis approaches the topic through a regional perspective, much of the work has been organized around how the US developed policies and reacted to events in the region, and how this in turn was implemented and interpreted in the different diplomatic posts in the area. US officials kept well in touch with the various states around the area. As the US had good and well-developed relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, US officials had frequent talks with high-level officials about issues central to American interests. Contacts with Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE were less frequent. This reflects the slow nature in which the US developed its relationship with these sheikdoms. From 1969 until 1972, contacts were made through the US consulate at Dhahran in Saudi Arabia. Following the British withdrawal, Washington extended the functions of its embassy in Kuwait to include contact with the sheikdoms. First at the end of the period covered here did the US establish embassies in each of the sheikdoms. While the contacts with the sheikdoms were less frequent than with the two Gulf monarchies, they tended to be equally cordial, in no small part as the sheikdoms wanted to develop closer ties to the United States.

From an archival perspective this work has been somewhat difficult, as documents relating to more than one country, such as cooperation or disputes, have been archived in boxes relating to just one of the states involved. Hence, the research has required a thorough inquiry relating to US relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE (Trucial States until 1971), North Yemen, Oman, Jordan, and the United Kingdom. In addition to this, much of the thesis builds on US assessment of the relationship between several of the states mentioned above.

An obvious weakness in researching Washington's attempt to foster regional cooperation is the one-sidedness of sources utilized here. When attempting to gain insight into the intentions and considerations of the states involved, "going against the grain" has been the most efficient method available. As such it has been relatively easy to discern the thoughts and actions of Saudi Arabia and Iran, where US officials had frequent contacts with high-level officials and had detailed debriefings from them. However, the states where Washington had more limited

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<sup>28</sup> Document Withdrawal Record (Nixon Project), not dated. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632



diplomatic contact, this has been harder. Due to the limited relationship Washington sought to foster with the sheikdoms, the infrequent contact with the leaders makes it harder to discern their intentions. This is particularly the case with the UAE, where officials like President Sheik Zayed and Foreign Minister Ahmad al-Suwaidi, had widely different opinions on the direction of foreign policy, making it difficult to state firmly the direction of the UAE towards the world. For the three important “side-characters”, North Yemen, Oman, and Jordan, the scope of the thesis have made it necessary to address them as they relate to the two Gulf monarchies and the sheikdoms, rather than actors for analysis.

## ***Chapter 2. Albion's Farewell: The British Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf***

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On January 16, 1968, the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that Britain would not renew its protective treaties with the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf and withdraw its military presence by the end of 1971. Having served as the major power in the Gulf for the last 150 years, Wilson's announcement had great implications for the future of the area. The decision was met with disbelief in Washington and among London's protected states in the area. Washington had come to rely on Britain's military presence in the area to retain stability which would allow, particularly at a time when more and more American resources were being poured into Vietnam.

The departure essentially laid the future of the Persian Gulf open. Britain had continued to play an active role in the Gulf in the aftermath of the Second World War, with Washington's blessing. Yet the announced end of the *Pax Britannica* would leave the Gulf open to global and local forces that had been kept in check by London until then. What "role" did Britain play in the Gulf? Why did London decide to end its protective relationship with the sheikdoms? What was the reaction among the sheikdoms, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States to the British withdrawal?

### **Establishing *Pax Britannica*, 1700s-1945**

Britain had been vital in forming the political system in the Persian Gulf. Britain had started to engage itself politically in the early nineteenth century, when a British naval force was sent to the area to pacify the pirate activities of a number of small emirates in the lower Gulf area. This resulted in a truce agreement between London and the seven emirates of the lower Gulf in 1853, which formed the basis for what historian Taylor W. Fain has termed the "Trucial System". This was the foundation for Britain's political relationship with the area that would last until the British withdrawal in 1971. London agreed to "protect" the seven emirates in return for their commitment not to plunder British commercial activity in the area.<sup>29</sup> The treaty unified the seven emirates into the Trucial States, named after the truce agreement they had entered with Britain.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Taylor W. Fain, *American Ascendance*, 14

<sup>30</sup> The seven Trucial States are Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, Umm al-Quwain, and Fujairah

As the nineteenth century progressed the British Trucial System changed from solely protecting British commercial interests to increasingly committing London to the territorial and political integrity of the sheikdoms. It also saw Britain expand its system to include the sheikdoms of Bahrain (1880), Kuwait (1899), and Qatar (1916), replacing Ottoman and Iranian influence in the region.<sup>31</sup> The creation of so-called “exclusive agreements”, giving London control over foreign and security policy of the sheikdoms, firmly placed much of the Gulf area under direct control of Britain and removing the influence of the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar dynasty of Iran. This meant that Bahrain and the small Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, in addition to a series of other islands, was placed under British rather than Iranian authority.<sup>32</sup>

The other major factor shaping the Gulf prior to the British withdrawal was the emergence of Arab and Iranian nationalism. Both emerged as reactions to the Arab and Iranian “experiences” of the First World War. In Iran, the reaction against foreign occupation led to the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty. The rise of Reza Khan Pahlavi was accompanied by an attempt to revitalize Iran’s regional position by attempting to reclaim the suzerainty over territory “taken” by Britain over the past century.<sup>33</sup> Yet the attempt to reestablish the “historic” Iranian position in the Gulf were met by opposition from the British and the Gulf Arabs under British rule. On the one hand, the Gulf Arabs looked to Britain for protection against Iran’s attempt to reassert authority over the Gulf Arabs, allowing the British to entrench their position over their subjects in the area. On the other hand, the Gulf Arabs came to emphasize their “Arab character” in the face of the threat from Iran. Creating a distinction between the “Arab nation” and the “Iranian foreigner”.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, the combination of Britain’s hegemony in the Gulf and the formation of local forms of nationalism helped shape the modern form of Persian Gulf politics. The events of the 1920s and the 1930s put an end to the era where the Gulf had been characterized by trans-regional commercial networks with overlapping lines of sovereignty and identity. Instead, the formation of nationalisms and national identities under the British hegemony created a wedge between the Arab and Iranian sides of the Gulf. The Gulf Arabs came to view Iranian regional ambition with

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<sup>31</sup> For an account of these events see. Frederick F. Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf – The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

<sup>32</sup> Chelsi Mueller, *The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict – Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf between the World Wars*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 26-30

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 110-112

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 229-230

suspicion, seeing it more as an attempt to establish Iranian hegemony over the region than liberating the Gulf Arabs from British rule. As a result, they looked to Britain to protect their sovereignty. making *Pax Britannica* a period when the modern boundaries of the Gulf started to be drawn. However, this also left open territorial disputes, such as Iran's claim to several Gulf islands, among them Bahrain, Abu Musa, and the Tunbs, which were under Arab rule and British protection.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Pax Britannica* as a “world role”, 1945-1961**

For the Persian Gulf, the post-war decades came to represent a period of redefinition of the role of *Pax Britannica*. Having once been termed “part of the maritime frontier of India” by British strategic thinkers, providing naval bases and airfields to reach and protect India, the Gulf's strategic value changed after India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947.<sup>36</sup> Instead, British policymakers started to emphasize oil and London's commitment to the territorial integrity of the Gulf sheikdoms as the *raison d'être* for Britain's continued engagement with the Gulf. In the period between 1945 and the 1970s, Western Europe, Japan, and to a lesser extent, North America, grew increasingly reliant on access to Gulf oil to fuel their postwar economic growth. By the 1950s, Kuwait alone provided over 50% of the oil consumed by Britain.<sup>37</sup>

For Washington, the great string of British bases through the Middle East and Gulf region was seen as an asset in containing the spread of communist influence. The growing importance of oil made it important that Britain was able to retain stability in the area.<sup>38</sup> Washington and London's relationship in the Gulf developed into a form of co-opetition as each sought to harness the strength of the other for their own interests. For Britain, the ascendance of American power and the dawn of the Cold War became a way to redefine the continuation of its empire's continued existence with the construction of the role “East of Suez”. Following the Suez Crisis in 1956, it was necessary for London to reassess its role and relevance to the ongoing superpower struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. In this changing situation Britain “must make itself indispensable to its more powerful transatlantic cousins” by developing a policy of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 158-228 & 231-233

<sup>36</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 16

<sup>37</sup> David M. Wight, *Oil Money: Middle East Petrodollars and the Transformation of US Empire, 1967-1988*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 15-30

<sup>38</sup> David S. Painter, “The Marshall Plan and Oil”, *Cold War History* vol. 9. No. 2 (2009), 159-175

interdependence with Washington. As Fain points out, London, which was intent on retaining its position in the Gulf after Suez, gained acceptance for its role as Washington's junior partner in the Cold War.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Washington's and London's understanding of this role diverged in the face of the growing force of Arab nationalism in the Middle East. As political scientist Gregory Winger have pointed out Washington feared that "the use of British force might invite Soviet action in the region whilst impairing American efforts to come to terms with Arab nationalism".<sup>40</sup> In addition to the Suez disaster, Britain's decision to forcefully evict Saudi troops occupying the Buraimi Oasis, which was claimed by the Trucial Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate of Oman, further illustrated the divergence between Washington and London over what role Britain would play. For the British, the Buraimi dispute became evidence for the continued utility of the *Pax Britannica*, containing Saudi ambitions in the Gulf. For Washington, the episode illustrated the limitation in relying on British power, as Saudi Arabia started to develop closer ties with Egypt in response to the British use of military force.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Dimming Twilight of *Pax Britannica*, 1961-1967**

While Britain remained committed to its position in the Gulf, London had started to rationalize its commitments to the area. This was done by gradually granting more independence to Kuwait, the largest and most important of the British protectorates in the Gulf. In 1961, London agreed to abrogate the 1899 protection treaty, granting Kuwait full independence. At the same time, the two entered into a security treaty, continuing Britain's role in the area without the political responsibility.<sup>42</sup> However, granting Kuwait independence resulted in an immediate crisis, as Iraq laid claim to Kuwait as a lost province. Seeking to illustrate its ability to respond to threats from the Gulf, Britain deployed troops in a rapid manner to protect Kuwait from a potential Iraqi invasion.<sup>43</sup> Yet the Iraqi invasion never materialized, resulting in a backlash from the

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<sup>39</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 79-80

<sup>40</sup> Gregory Winger, "Twilight on the British Gulf: The 1961 Kuwait Crisis and the Evolution of American Strategic Thinking in the Persian Gulf", *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 23, no. 4 (2012), 663

<sup>41</sup> Tore T. Petersen, *The Middle East between the Great Powers – Anglo-American Conflict and Cooperation, 1952-7*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), 40-59. Fain, *American Ascendance*, 83-90

<sup>42</sup> Simon C. Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall – Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, 1950-1971*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 14-16

<sup>43</sup> Nigel Ashton, "Britain and the Kuwait Crisis, 1961", *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 9, no. 1 (1998), 163-181

surrounding Arab states of the quick return of British forces to Kuwait, forcing them to withdraw.<sup>44</sup>

For Washington, the backlash to the British deployment to protect Kuwait served, according to Winger, made it necessary to develop alternative methods to ensure stability in the Gulf beyond British military power. The result was an increasing emphasis on the importance of regional states, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, to support stability together with the British presence.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, British diplomats concluded that the debacle illustrated the need to further rationalize London's relationship with the Gulf sheikdoms. As access to Gulf oil no longer required the kind of extensive British military presence and the rulers of the three protected states would increasingly seek autonomy, London risked produce the kind of instability the continued British presence was meant to prevent.<sup>46</sup>

While London remained committed to Britain's position in the Gulf, events in other parts of the East of Suez area made the commitment increasingly unfeasible. Two developments in Southeast Asia and Southern Arabia in 1966 had a great impact on Britain's strategic commitment to the Gulf. First, the end of the confrontation between Britain and Indonesia over Malaysia meant that there was less need for the British military presence in Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, the growing level of conflict in Southern Arabia putting the British position there under increasing pressure, made the Wilson government decide to abandon their base in Aden once the Federation of South Arabia was scheduled to gain independence in 1968.<sup>48</sup> In addition to this, the Wilson government had committed itself to a spending cap of £2000 million on the military. As historian Edward Longinotti has shown, this cap forced London to prioritize between its commitment to Europe and its commitments East of Suez as real price growth forced cuts in military spending. With the changing strategic situation in the East of Suez area, the Wilson government concluded in mid-1967 that Britain would have to abandon its position in the area by the mid-1970s.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Winger, "Twilight on the British Gulf", 668-672

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 672-675

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 17-28

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Jones, "A Decision Delayed: Britain's Withdrawal from South East Asia Reconsidered, 1961-68", *The English Historical Review* 11, no. 117 (2002), 569-595

<sup>48</sup> Hulda Kjeang Mørk, *Between Two Doctrines – Emerging Patterns in Relations among Israel, Iran, and the United States, 1964-1968*. Ph.D dissertation, University of Oslo, 2021, 255-263 & 179-281

<sup>49</sup> Edward Longinotti, "Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: From Economic Determinism to Political Choice", *Contemporary British History* 29, no. 3 (2015), 318-330

The 1967 decision did not include the Persian Gulf, and the government made plans to continue its protection of the Gulf states. This was shown with some of the troops stationed at Aden being transferred to military installations in Bahrain and the Trucial Emirate of Sharjah. However, the loss of the Aden base meant a severe reduction in Britain's ability to respond to threats in the Gulf rapidly. Furthermore, officials within the British Foreign Office doubted that London would commit to developing the necessary military infrastructure to retain its position in the Gulf over time.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the British currency had come under increasing pressure from Britain's diminishing economic outlook. In an effort to bolster London's ability to continue its role "East of Suez", the United States had engaged in a campaign to strengthen the British Pound to alleviate some of Britain's immediate balance of payment problems. However, through a series of economic setbacks in late 1967 and Washington lacking the ability to aid Britain further, the Wilson government was forced to devalue the Pound.<sup>51</sup>

Devaluation forced London to commit to further spending cuts, which resulted in a firm timeline for withdrawing East of Suez by the end of 1971. Although the Wilson government initially wanted to retain its position in the Gulf, the debate over spending cuts between November 1967 and January 1968 concluded that Britain would have to terminate its protective treaties with the Gulf sheikdoms as well. Part of the reason was to justify cuts in social spending, which had increased since 1964.<sup>52</sup> Yet the decision was also informed by the growing consensus in London that Britain would have to shed its East of Suez role by the mid-1970s. Combined with the caps on military spending, resulting in a priority of London's position in Europe and the loss in military potential with the abandonment of Aden, the British position in the Gulf had become redundant.<sup>53</sup>

### **"Don't Mourn, Organize!", 1968**

In Washington, the Johnson administration met the British decision to withdraw from the Gulf by 1971 with dismay. The Johnson administration was furious with the British decision with

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<sup>50</sup> Simon Smith, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A Pattern Not a Puzzle", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44, no. 2 (2016), 338-339

<sup>51</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 160-168

<sup>52</sup> Shohei Sato, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf, 1964-68: A Pattern and a Puzzle", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, no. 1 (2009), 99-117

<sup>53</sup> Smith, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf", 339-342

Secretary of State Dean Rusk demanding “For God’s sake, act like Britain”.<sup>54</sup> As historian Mark Atwood Lawrence have argued, as Washington poured more resources into Vietnam, the Johnson administration had started to pursue a policy of stability, preferring regimes and arrangements that kept the status quo in the Third World.<sup>55</sup> Hence, the British presence in the Gulf was seen as keeping stability in an economically important region. The administration feared that the British withdrawal would unleash forces kept in check by the *Pax Britannica*. Particularly conflict between the smaller sheikdoms and the regional powers, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Furthermore, it would open the Gulf for external influences, mainly the Soviet Union which the British had so far denied any influence in the area.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, a new strategy was needed. Within a month of London’s announcement, the Johnson administration had decided on a strategic framework. It would seek to keep the British to still commit to its “special role” in the Gulf as much as possible, encourage cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, foster economic and political cooperation between all Gulf entities, and avoid greater commitments to arms sales. The main thrust of US policy would be directed towards Britain, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The US had developed close relationships with the two Gulf monarchies and Washington would continue to take a “leading role” in these countries. The Johnson administration would coordinate its policy with Britain and encourage London’s effort to ensure an orderly withdrawal from the sheikdoms.<sup>57</sup> Consensus within the administration also supported that Washington had “no intention” of replacing the British, hoping instead that the littoral states themselves would commit to the future stability of the area.<sup>58</sup>

Britain’s greatest challenge leading up to 1971 was the question of the Gulf sheikdoms independence. Counting together nine different entities, some which had populations of only a few thousands, the sheikdoms had long constituted a challenge for Britain. Since 1945, London had sought to foster greater unity between the nine rulers to create stronger political cohesion among them. However, the cornucopia of different rivalries between the rulers had always

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<sup>54</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 141

<sup>55</sup> Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The End of Ambition – The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 79-106

<sup>56</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 173-177

<sup>57</sup> Record of Meeting Washington, February 1, 1968. *FRUS XXI*, 131

<sup>58</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Southern Yemen. Washington, February 3, 1968. *FRUS XXI*, 134



undermined Britain's efforts.<sup>59</sup> Yet, in response to the British decision to end its protective treaties with the sheikdoms, the rulers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai announced the formation of a union between the two Trucial Emirates. The union served as a template for the formation of the Federation of Arab Emirates (FAA) between all nine sheikdoms on February 29, 1968. The FAA was a declaration of intention that the Gulf sheikdoms would cooperate towards independence from Britain. However, the traditional rivalries among the sheikdoms quickly slowed the negotiations.<sup>60</sup> Britain, which had negative experiences with creating federations among former colonial subjects elsewhere, only agreed to facilitate the talks, fearing that a forceful intervention would hinder a successful federation.<sup>61</sup>

While the Johnson administration welcomed the FAA, they refused to develop any concrete position towards it until after their treaty relationship with Britain had ended.<sup>62</sup> Instead Washington concentrated on getting its two closest allies in the area, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to cooperate. Following the backlash after Britain's deployment to Kuwait, the US had gradually started to invest more into its relationship with the two Gulf monarchies. Iran had emerged as one of Washington's key allies in the Third World during the Johnson administration. Through rapid economic growth and a sense of political stability, the Shah had started to develop a foreign policy of "independent nationalism", by seeking arms deals and investment from the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> Fearing that they could lose an important ally, the Johnson administration had reluctantly embraced the Shah's requests for larger quantities of arms sales to keep him in the American orbit.<sup>64</sup>

The Shah had stressed his willingness to take a greater responsibility in Gulf security as early as 1965, as he foresaw that a British withdrawal from the region was inevitable. In the wake of Wilson's announcement, the Shah had again stressed Iran's preparedness to defend Western

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 49-71

<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 78-90

<sup>61</sup> Simon C. Smith, "Failure and successes in state formation: British policy towards the Federation of South Arabia and the United Arab Emirates", *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 1 (2017), 84-97

<sup>62</sup> Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts. Washington, February 21, 1968. Vol. XXI, 137

<sup>63</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 176. Stephen McGlinchey, "Lyndon B. Johnson and the Arms Credit Sales to Iran, 1964-1968", *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 2 (2013), 234-242

<sup>64</sup> Claudia Castiglioni, "No longer a client, not yet a partner: the US-Iranian alliance in the Johnson years", *Cold War History* 15, no. 4 (2015), 491-509

interests in the Gulf, as “the Persian Gulf was vital for Iran”. Yet he wanted to take responsibility in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf littorals.<sup>65</sup>

Saudi Arabia was Washington’s closest ally in the Arab world. Although lagging behind Iran economically, Riyadh had developed a relatively close relationship with Washington over their shared interests in oil and containing the spread of Egypt’s version of Arab nationalism.<sup>66</sup> The Johnson administration had agreed to undertake a modernization of the Saudi armed forces, granting Riyadh the ability to defend its immense, and in some cases undefined, borders.<sup>67</sup> While Washington and Tehran had developed a tentative partnership by 1968, the US-Saudi relationship suffered from strain caused by US support for Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.<sup>68</sup> Even so, the Johnson administration believed that Saudi Arabia would have a key role in protecting the sheikdoms after the British departure.<sup>69</sup>

Making Washington’s two closest allies in the Gulf cooperate could form the foundation for a new framework for Gulf security. with National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow arguing that it “could form the nucleus for stability and progress in the Persian Gulf”.<sup>70</sup> Wanting no role for the US after 1971, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul H. Nitze added that “Iran and Saudi Arabia, can better manage the situation in the Gulf without involvement by the US”.<sup>71</sup> However, the Johnson administration feared that the ambitions of the two Gulf monarchies could fuel tensions between them. Particularly troublesome was Iran and Saudi Arabia’s outstanding territorial claims in the region which had been kept dormant by the British presence there. Saudi Arabia still claimed the Buraimi Oasis, which was controlled by Abu Dhabi. Britain feared that Riyadh might use the federation negotiations to force Abu Dhabi to give up the territory.<sup>72</sup> More troublesome was Iran’s claim to a string of Gulf islands, including Bahrain, Abu Musa, and the Tunbs. As the islands were considered Arab territory, the Johnson administration believed that

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<sup>65</sup> Message From the Shah of Iran to President Johnson, Tehran, February 1, 1968. *FRUS XXI*, 130. Fain, *American Ascendance*, 175-176

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Mann, “King Faisal and the Challenge of Nasser’s Revolutionary Ideology”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 5 (2012), 749-764

<sup>67</sup> McFarland, *Oil Powers*, 93-97

<sup>68</sup> McFarland, *Oil Powers*, 82-86

<sup>69</sup> National Intelligence Estimate. Washington, December 8, 1966. *FRUS XXI*, 283

<sup>70</sup> Lawrence, *The End of Ambition*, 209

<sup>71</sup> “Memorandum From the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Nitze) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler)” Washington, August 2, 1968. *FRUS XXI*, 150

<sup>72</sup> Smith, *British Revival and Fall*, 80

Iran forcing these claims could fuel tensions between Iran and the Gulf Arabs, which in turn could undermine any cooperative effort between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>73</sup>

This fear was proven right a few weeks after Wilson's announcement, as Iran's claims to Bahrain sparked a diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia. King Faisal, which had a close relationship with Bahrain, supported Bahraini independence, which affronted the Shah who claimed the island as "Iran's fourteenth province". In response, the Shah canceled his planned trip to Riyadh, which sparked deep concern in Washington. While the Johnson administration doubted that the Shah would resort to force to claim Bahrain, they sought to smooth tensions between Tehran and Riyadh over the next few months. Both parties seemed to express an interest in strengthening cooperation between them, as Rostow expressed surprise at King Faisal's patience with the Shah's cancelation.<sup>74</sup> The effort to smooth relations paid dividends as the two managed to agree on a median line, demarcating off-shore drilling rights between Saudi Arabia and Iran in October, with help from Washington.<sup>75</sup> The Shah eventually traveled to Riyadh in November, where he and King Faisal expressed their "common interest in the stability of the area".<sup>76</sup>

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The Johnson administration's ability to craft a comprehensive new strategy for the Gulf proved limited. While the administration had reacted frantically to Britain's announcement, the Gulf had remained fairly low on its priorities. In Vietnam, the year had begun with North Vietnam's massive Tet Offensive, making it clear that the US was nowhere near winning the war. Coming under increasing pressure at home, Lyndon Johnson decided not to seek reelection. While the Johnson administration bequeathed guidelines for the future policy, it would be up to the next presidential administration to craft a comprehensive strategy for the Persian Gulf. In the 1968 election, Richard M. Nixon, the former Vice President under Dwight Eisenhower, won over Johnson's own Vice President, Hubert Humphrey. Nixon promised a new era in US foreign policy based on peace and stability and away from the turmoil of the late 1960s.

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<sup>73</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 180

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson. Washington, February 6, 1968. *FRUS XXI*, 135

<sup>75</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 180

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 87-88

### **Chapter 3. “Increasingly difficult”: the Nixon administration and the question of a Persian Gulf policy, 1969-1970**

Richard Nixon was inaugurated on January 20, 1969. He arrived in office with an ambitious plan to transform American foreign policy away from the gridlock that had developed under Johnson. In addition to the difficult situation in Vietnam, he also inherited the future problem of the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf. Yet the region did not feature high on the President’s agenda. In fact, the issue was mostly ignored by the National Security Council (NSC), the Nixon administration’s primary agency for foreign policy making, until the mid-1970. Instead, the issue was left to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) under the leadership of the career diplomat Joseph J. Sisco.<sup>77</sup>

Sisco and his team drew upon the path drawn up by the Johnson administration. Their overall goal was to create the conditions for continued stability in the Gulf, thus ensuring the free flow of oil to the world market. While Washington continued its close coordination with Britain in its approach to the Gulf, paying close attention to Britain’s attempt to form a federation between the nine sheikdoms of the Gulf. Additionally important, was London’s attempt to resolve Iran and Saudi Arabia’s territorial claims to the various parts of the sheikdoms. Simultaneously, the Nixon administration sought to build on its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran to make them cooperate, which the administration hoped could form the framework for future stability in the Gulf. How did the Nixon administration formulate its new policy towards the Persian Gulf? What would be the central elements in this policy? How did events in the region influence Washington’s policy planning?

#### **Gulf Negligence**

Richard Nixon ascended to the presidency with an aura of change. Declaring his inauguration as president as a “moment of beginning”, Nixon sought to position himself as a changemaker in an era of both domestic and international turmoil.<sup>78</sup> The 1960s had eroded the basis of power that had underwritten America’s preponderance for power that had characterized the early Cold War decades. The Vietnam War, a changing international situation, and the breaking of the American

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<sup>77</sup> Teresa Fava Thomas, *American Arabists in the Cold War Middle East, 1946-75*. (London: Anthem Press, 2016), 139

<sup>78</sup> Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19-23

Cold War consensus had tossed the United States into a period of relative decline. Nixon refused to believe that the relative decline was permanent and rather a result of lacking will power. He wanted to freeze the decline and adapt America to the new international reality. He juxtaposed himself to the “bear any burden”-type rhetoric that had characterized every American administration since Truman. Instead, Nixon presented a vision of limits, but one that was capable of showing that the US still could play a decisive role on the world stage.<sup>79</sup>

In order to mitigate the US’ relative decline, Nixon presented his “New Structure for Peace”. Several historians have described this as a sophisticated strategy consisting of individual moves that worked within an overall framework to transform the Cold War international structure. The strategy consisted of a three-part program: rapprochement with Beijing; arms limitation negotiations; and the Nixon Doctrine.<sup>80</sup> Unlike what some historians argue, the Nixon administration had no intention of ending or moving beyond the Cold War.<sup>81</sup> As Zanchetta has argued, the “New Structure for Peace” was inherently Soviet-centric, intent on better managing the Cold War rivalry through dialogue and containment by proxy. Nixon’s utmost goal was to reestablish American primacy, but one based on geopolitics rather than American strategic superiority.<sup>82</sup>

The Persian Gulf did not have a central place in Nixon’s grand vision. Much unlike the Johnson administration’s hectic response to the British decision to withdraw from the region, the Nixon administration mainly treated the area as a backwater region.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the Gulf’s position in the Nixon administration mirrors how Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, viewed the Third World in general. The pair only concerned themselves with Third World matters where instability might invite Soviet expansion.<sup>84</sup> The Persian Gulf mainly derived its importance from the oil that fueled the Western European and Japanese economies. Hence,

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44-48

<sup>80</sup> Hanhimäki, “An Elusive Grand Design”, 25-27

<sup>81</sup> For an overview of the debate on détente see Olav Njølstad, “The collapse of superpower détente, 1975-1980” in *Cambridge History of the Cold War* Vol. II eds. Odd Arne Westand & Melvyn Leffler, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135-155

<sup>82</sup> Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970s*, 24-25

<sup>83</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 182-183

<sup>84</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War, 195-196*

keeping the oil flowing by retaining political stability in the area was the main priority for the administration.<sup>85</sup>

Another important aspect that influenced the development of the Persian Gulf policy was the centralization of foreign policy decision-making within the White House. Believing that the bureaucrats at the State Department and the rest of the foreign policy establishment would resist the vast changes Nixon and Kissinger envisioned, the two viewed it as necessary to centralize foreign policy in the National Security Council. During the transition phase of November 1968 to January 1969, Kissinger developed and presented a new structural plan, which in essence transformed the NSC from a coordinating body to a decision-making body.<sup>86</sup> According to historian Teresa Thomas, the plan would remove the system interdepartmental regulations, which granted the State Department oversight functions over the NSC, leaving the latter body in control of formulating policy papers.<sup>87</sup>

The selection of William P. Rogers, Nixon's long-time friend and ally, as Secretary of State also played into this strategy. While Rogers had governmental experience, having served as Attorney General under President Dwight Eisenhower, he lacked substantial experience in foreign policy.<sup>88</sup> According to Zanchetta, this was part of the elaborate strategy of side-lining the State Department. Rogers' inexperience would force State to play catch-up, leaving initiative at the NSC under Kissinger's more experienced leadership.<sup>89</sup> Secretly, Nixon had agreed to leave only the Middle East policy in the hands of the Secretary of State. The responsibility for the rest was given to Kissinger. However, over time, even the Middle East would fall under the purview of the NSC following a taxing bureaucratic battle between Kissinger and Rogers and Nixon's own preference for his National Security Advisor rather than his old friend.<sup>90</sup>

A final aspect of the centralization effort was Kissinger's introduction of a new policy development system. First, a National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM), would be issued by the National Security Advisor, asking for lengthy research reports intended to develop a

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<sup>85</sup> Lawrence, "Containing Globalism", 208-209

<sup>86</sup> William Inboden, "Implementing Grand Strategy: The Nixon-Kissinger Revolution at the National Security Council" in *Rethinking American Grand Strategy* eds. Elizabeth Borgwartz, Christopher McKnight Nichols, and Andrew Preston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 272-291

<sup>87</sup> Thomas, *American Arabists*, 141

<sup>88</sup> Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American Power*, 30. Rogers' only experience with foreign policy had been as Eisenhower's special presidential representative at the independence ceremony of Togo

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 31-30

<sup>90</sup> Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect – Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23-24

policy that would result in a National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM). The NSSMs would mainly be developed by an Interdepartmental Group (IG), mainly staffed by experts from the State Department, but under the oversight of an NSC-officer.<sup>91</sup> As Teresa Fava have argued, part of the intention with the NSSMs were to keep the State Department busy with research, hence, keeping them from initiating policy.<sup>92</sup> The result of these reforms was the transformation of the NSC into a “mini-State Department” as historian Arthur Schlesinger have termed it.<sup>93</sup>

The new system constructed an information hierarchy, where only the most important strategic issues reached the President. This allowed Nixon and Kissinger to concentrate on what they considered key foreign policy issues. It also meant, as Salberg has pointed out, that concerns from bureaucrats in State and other departments could be drowned out before they reached Nixon.<sup>94</sup> However, this also resulted in foreign policy issues not given the same weight, like the Persian Gulf, being ignored by the NSC. This effectively left the Gulf policy in the hands of the Near Eastern Agency at the State Department, under the leadership of Assistant Secretary of State, Joseph J. Sisco. As Fain has pointed out, with the heavy centralization, the NEA gained much influence over the shaping of the day-to-day policy towards the Gulf.<sup>95</sup> Taking this a step further, Salberg has argued that this disparity between the NSC and the NEA hampered the development of the administration’s Persian Gulf policy. Without a clear strategy to tie their dealings with various officials in the Gulf, the NEA and Foreign Service Officers were left to interpret the Gulf policy as it developed. This resulted in the Persian Gulf strategy developing a life on its own.<sup>96</sup>

First six months into the new administration did Kissinger see fit to give instruction to convene an IG to develop a new Gulf policy. Part of the reason was Kissinger trying to end speculations over what the administration’s policy towards the region would be.<sup>97</sup> When briefing Nixon, Kissinger explained that the Persian Gulf would become increasingly difficult to deal with over

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<sup>91</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 182-183

<sup>92</sup> Thomas, *American Arabists*, 140-143

<sup>93</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger jr. *Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 190

<sup>94</sup> Salberg, “*Conventional Wisdom*”, 62-63

<sup>95</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 183

<sup>96</sup> Mari Salberg, “*Conventional Wisdom*”, 59

<sup>97</sup> Salberg, “*Conventional Wisdom*” 68-69

the next few years and that the British withdrawal would require Washington to readjust its relationships and define its interests more clearly for the time ahead.<sup>98</sup>

The National Security Study Memorandum 66 asked the IG to formulate a policy based on three considerations. First, the consequences of the British withdrawal for the Gulf, particularly the possibility of an Arab-Iranian confrontation. Secondly, how the United States should develop its relationship to the various political entities in the area. Finally, decide what was to happen to the US MIDEASTFOR, a small US naval unit stationed at Bahrain since 1948.<sup>99</sup> With Bahrain becoming independent, the US needed to consider whether or not to negotiate a new stationing agreement with Bahrain or relocate the ships elsewhere. Although the IG report to NSSM 66 was intended as an interdepartmental endeavor, the NEA did the majority of the work.<sup>100</sup>

Around the same time, Nixon held an improvised press conference at the US island of Guam that had major implications for the Persian Gulf policy. The President told the press corps that while the US would continue to keep its treaty obligations and provide strategic (i.e. nuclear) protection for its allies, Washington would expect that its allies take the primary responsibility for handling their own internal security.<sup>101</sup> These “informal remarks” was later rebranded as the Nixon Doctrine. Although, as historian Jeffery Kimball has argued, the press conference at Guam hardly constituted the announcement of a new grand strategy for the Third World, it did contain some of the central elements that would develop into the Nixon Doctrine by early 1970.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, Guam remarks was an expression of the Nixon administration’s effort to withdraw US troops from Vietnam without giving in to isolationist pressures at home, a process known as “Vietnamization”. In this sense, the Nixon administration was approaching the Third World by rationalizing US commitments abroad became as a way to sustain containment, rather than shed it.<sup>103</sup>

As the doctrine developed it proved highly adaptable to the situation in the Persian Gulf. Britain had every intention of ending its commitments to the region by the end of 1971. Following their

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<sup>98</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 66. Washington, July 12, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 73, footnote 1

<sup>99</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 66. Washington, July 12, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 73

<sup>100</sup> Stephen McGlinchey, “Richard Nixon’s Road to Tehran: The Making of the U.S.-Iran Arms Agreement of May 1972”, *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 4 (2013), 845-846

<sup>101</sup> Informal Remarks in Guam With Newsmen. July 25, 1969. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon*, 544-556

<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* vol. 36, no. 1 (2006), 59-74

<sup>103</sup> Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, 48-59



departure new tools for preserving stability were needed. London had started to work for uniting the nine British Protected States in the lower Gulf into a federation. The Federation of Arab Emirates (FAA) would give the sheikdoms better abilities to fend for themselves as well as giving them a forum to manage their cornucopia rivalries.<sup>104</sup>

Though much work still needed to be done as the various sheikdoms had competing visions and ambitions for the future federation. The British were particularly wary about Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi, who had been central to launching the federation negotiations. London believed that Zayed intended to use the federation as a vehicle to enhance Abu Dhabi's power. While Zayed had managed to gain support from some of the smaller sheikdoms, Abu Dhabi's traditional rivals Qatar and Dubai opposed his version of the federation, stalling negotiations.<sup>105</sup> While the negotiations progressed slowly, London expressed optimism to Washington over the possibility of forming the FAA.<sup>106</sup> Other regional states had also started to throw their weight behind the federation, with Kuwait attempting to mediate differences between the sheikdoms.<sup>107</sup> King Faisal also supported the union as the best way for the sheikdoms to "protect themselves from subversion".<sup>108</sup> However, Faisal's support was partially aimed at containing Zayed to prevent him from gaining too much power.<sup>109</sup>

More troubling were Iran's claims to Bahrain, as well as to the smaller islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs. London viewed a resolution of these claims as the most crucial aspect of their withdrawal effort. While Iran claimed that the islands once belonged to them, they were mostly understood by the international community as part of the Arab world.<sup>110</sup> If Britain was unable to negotiate a solution to the current impasse, there would be a serious risk of confrontation between the Arab and Iranian sides of the Gulf. In both Washington and London's eyes, the Persian Gulf was the area where Arab and Iranian nationalisms confronted one another, making the area particularly vulnerable. Hence, there was a need for active diplomacy.<sup>111</sup> British officials

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<sup>104</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, March 11, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 72

<sup>105</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 81-82

<sup>106</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, January 12, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 73

<sup>107</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, January 19, 1969. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1967-69, Box 2284

<sup>108</sup> Telegram From the Consulate at Dhahran to the Department of State. February 5, 1969. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1967-69, Box 2474

<sup>109</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 83

<sup>110</sup> Charles L. O. Buderl & Luciana T. Ricart, *The Iran-UAE Gulf Islands Dispute – A Journey through International Law, History and Politics*. (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2018), 553-554

<sup>111</sup> Intelligence Note. Washington, February 12, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

informed Sisco that they prioritized the Bahrain question to the extent that they would be willing to sacrifice the federation if it meant securing an independent Bahrain. Yet if a solution to the issue was found, the other outstanding problems would be easier to resolve.<sup>112</sup>

It was on this background that the NEA presented the first draft to the IG report at the end of 1969. The IG report identified Washington's two key interests in the area. The first was the continued access and influence over the Gulf area. The second was the continued stability in the area following the British withdrawal. The NEA viewed the main course of action for the US as the "manifestation of greater US interest in the area". While the US would not assume Britain's role in the region, the NEA argued that Washington could take certain steps to communicate to its allies in the region and the Soviet Union the US' interests in the area. The main lines of action would be to help along the formation of the Federation of Arab Emirates (FAA), continue encouraging Saudi Arabia and Iran to develop closer ties, and encourage London to retain a non-military role in the region. Finally, they also recommended that Washington open for modest arms sales to Kuwait and the nine sheikdoms where British suppliers proved insufficient.<sup>113</sup>

The NSC dismissed the report as "not worth reading". Kissinger's Special Assistant, Peter Rodman, pointed out that parts of the report were out of date. Indeed, the recommendation that the US help Saudi Arabia and Iran build trust by negotiating a median line agreement, demarcating their offshore drilling rights, had been negotiated a year in advance by the Johnson administration.<sup>114</sup> In all, the IG report did not bring any revolutionary changes to the table. The priorities listed bear a striking resemblance to the Johnson administration's strategic outline from 1968. The only new aspect of the policy was to consider opening up for modest arms sales to Kuwait and the sheikdoms where British supplies fell short.<sup>115</sup> The lack of new options and specifications for policy recommendations indicates that the Gulf policy was still fairly underdeveloped. Indeed, Kissinger's response to the lack of concrete proposals for manifesting greater US interest in the Gulf was "like what?".<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, March 11, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 72

<sup>113</sup> Memorandum From Peter Rodman of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, December 31, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 76

<sup>114</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 180

<sup>115</sup> Fain, *American Ascendance*, 177-181

<sup>116</sup> Memorandum From Peter Rodman of The National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, December 31, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 76, footnote 9

While the Persian Gulf policy would continue to drift for another year until finally being settled, some contours of the future policy had started to develop. Salberg has argued that even at this point, the NSC had already concluded that Iran would become Washington's chosen instrument to take up the torch after the British withdrawal. Any other policy options would be considered based upon their ability to co-exist with this notion.<sup>117</sup> While this strongly influenced Washington's thinking about the Gulf, the idea of fostering Gulf cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran had also started to gain traction. Indeed, there was a general consensus that "the future stability of the Persian Gulf will largely depend on the decisions made by...Iran and Saudi Arabia".<sup>118</sup> While Iran and Saudi Arabia were not equals in the Nixon administration's eyes, both had common interests in containing radical forces in the Gulf. Furthermore, fostering an understanding between the two would prove important for the stability of the FAA.<sup>119</sup> As such, Gulf cooperation started to emerge as a way to integrate the Gulf Arabs in Washington's thinking.

### **Dawn of the Twin Pillars**

The idea that the future of Gulf stability would rest on the shoulders of Iran and Saudi Arabia after an eventual British departure was not new. The Johnson administration had concluded that Saudi-Iranian cooperation was necessary to contain the spread of radical forces in the sheikdoms after the British departure.<sup>120</sup> The Nixon administration had continued to emphasize to the two Gulf monarchies as well as Kuwait about the necessity to settle their differences and work closer together.<sup>121</sup> Yet cooperation between the two could not be taken for granted, as Arab-Iranian nationalism impeded their ability to cooperate in a constructive manner. Indeed, the CIA warned that Riyadh and Tehran's effort to stabilize the Gulf sheikdoms could translate into "competitive interference", harming rather than strengthening stability.<sup>122</sup>

Simultaneously, Iran and Saudi Arabia were themselves interested in developing closer ties prior to the British departure. The Shah had presented the idea of a Saudi-Iranian security pact to

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<sup>117</sup> Salberg, *"Conventional Wisdom"*, 73

<sup>118</sup> Intelligence Note. Washington, February 12, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>119</sup> Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, December 12, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 75

<sup>120</sup> Research Memorandum. Washington, November 14, 1968. Nara, CFPF 1967-69, Box 2356

<sup>121</sup> Memorandum For the Secretary of State. Rogers From NEA. Washington, September 30, 1969. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1967-69, Box 2284

<sup>122</sup> Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, December 12, 1969. *FRUS XXIV*, 75

Secretary Rogers during the former's October 1969 visit to Washington.<sup>123</sup> The idea started to gain traction after Iran agreed to lend Saudi Arabia anti-aircraft gun, which the Nixon administration viewed as a major development in their relationship.<sup>124</sup> The US ambassador to Iran, Douglas MacArthur II stressed that a Saudi-Iranian security pact was very much in Washington's interest and would strengthen Gulf stability. Yet as the arrangement was far from certain, Washington had to continue encouraging closer cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and to facilitate an enlargement to include Kuwait and the FAA. MacArthur further stressed that a Saudi-Iranian security pact would be in line with the "Nixon Doctrine" making local states "get together to assure their own defense rather than looking to [the] US".<sup>125</sup>

The notion was well received within the Nixon administration. CINCSTRIKE, the head of the global military response force United States Strike Command, argued that such an arrangement could prove "the least costly and the most practical and credible approach to regional security".<sup>126</sup> The US embassies in Riyadh and Kuwait also agreed to MacArthur's point but expressed some caution. US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Hermann Eilts, cautioned against forcing Saudi Arabia into accepting the idea.<sup>127</sup> US Ambassador to Kuwait, John Patrick Walsh, pointed out that the Shah's territorial pretensions in the Gulf, particularly the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs still proved major obstacles for uniting the Arab and Iranian sides.<sup>128</sup> MacArthur responded that the Shah was intent on accommodating these concerns and intended to treat the Gulf Arabs as equals rather than promoting some form Iranian solution for the Gulf.<sup>129</sup>

Indeed, Iran's territorial pretensions constituted a major impediment in Tehran's relationship with the Arab states. At the beginning of 1969, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Omar al Saqqaf, had canceled a planned visit to Tehran. King Feisal strongly implied to the Americans that the visit had been canceled over the Shah's inability to adopt a more constructive position on Bahrain. Feisal hoped that the Shah would become more constructive by the time Saqqaf was

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<sup>123</sup> Editorial Note. *FRUS XXIV*, 74

<sup>124</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, January 5, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2584

<sup>125</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, January 5, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>126</sup> Telegram From CINCSTRIKE to the Department of Defense. January 13, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>127</sup> "Editorial Note" *FRUS XXIV*, 74

<sup>128</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, January 9, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>129</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, January 7, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

able to visit.<sup>130</sup> Kuwait also informed the Americans that any future cooperation between Iran and the moderate Arab littorals would depend on a satisfactory solution to his claims to Bahrain and the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs.<sup>131</sup>

Efforts to find solutions to both the Bahrain issue and the three Gulf islands had been underway since 1968. As historian Roham Alvandi has shown, the Shah had no intention of enforcing his claims to Bahrain but was intent on gaining the other islands as they had greater strategic value in his eyes. However, fearing that simply giving up his claims to Bahrain would cause a backlash in Iran, as Iranian nationalists considered the island Iran's long lost fourteenth province, the Shah was attempting to negotiate a "package deal" with London where he would give up his claims to Bahrain in return for the other three islands.<sup>132</sup> Through 1969, London, with the assistance of Kuwait, had sought to develop a formula acceptable for both the Shah and Sheik Isa of Bahrain. First at the beginning of January 1970 could the US Consul at Dhahran, Lee Dinsmore, inform the Nixon administration that the Shah had agreed to a UN-mediated solution to the Bahrain dispute.<sup>133</sup> However, the agreement was not made public until March and Iran's formal revoking of its claim did not happen until May.<sup>134</sup>

While Washington was regularly informed about the developments in the negotiations, they remained uninvolved. In general, the Nixon administration was pleased with the unfolding of events, as Iran's revocation eased tensions across the Gulf. Indeed, Iran's relationship with the Gulf Arabs improved shortly after, as Saudi foreign minister Omar al-Saqqaf visited Tehran shortly after the UN-mediated solution had been announced. Although no security pact materialized from the talks, both Riyadh and Tehran declared their intentions to cooperate to further foster Gulf stability. Tehran viewed the talks as preliminary to form a security pact later on, as the British withdrawal effort left the situation in the Gulf in an unpredictable state.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, February 5, 1969. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1967-69, Box 2474

<sup>131</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State. Tehran, March 11, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 80

<sup>132</sup> Roham Alvandi, "Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question, 1968-1970", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37. No. 2 (2010), 159-164

<sup>133</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, January 05, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2112

<sup>134</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, March 19, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2112

<sup>135</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, April 15, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2493

During the summer, Tehran also sought to include Kuwait in similar kind of talks to create a shared kind of understanding for Gulf security.<sup>136</sup> The Kuwaitis expressed themselves willing to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and Iran to foster stability but wanted to avoid joining any formal security pact out of the fear that it might antagonize Iraq. This indicated some limits to the idea of a security pact.<sup>137</sup>

Washington sensed a degree of optimism for long-term cooperation between the two Gulf monarchies. Saqqaf had publicly stated after the meeting that relations between Riyadh and Tehran was at the moment so good that any formal pact would simply be “superfluous”.<sup>138</sup> In private, the Saudi foreign minister had stressed that there “should be no bar to increased and closer Saudi-Iranian cooperation in the period ahead”.<sup>139</sup> Saudi Arabia’s approach to the meeting reflected a general pattern towards Iran. King Faisal had developed a form of “conscious self-restraint” that sought to avoid developing any unnecessary irritation in Riyadh’s relationship with Tehran. As both were concerned for the situation in the Gulf after 1971, Faisal was interested in developing a closer relationship with Tehran.<sup>140</sup> While the Nixon administration was pleased with the developments, they were concerned that the two would not be able to cooperate as equals, given the immense power discrepancy between them.<sup>141</sup>

### **Benevolent neutrality**

While Iran and Saudi Arabia seemed to be moving closer to each other, the negotiations to bring the nine British Protected States together were going nowhere. Since its inception in 1968, the negotiations towards forming the Federation of Arab Emirates had more or less not moved forward. Disagreements over distribution of power and which sheikdoms should be included or not made the negotiations incredibly slow-moving.<sup>142</sup> While the British sought to facilitate the negotiations, they did not want to force any of the sheikdoms into a federation. Their earlier experience as federation makers in places like South Arabia, which had failed spectacularly, made them wary of not forcing the sheikdoms into political arrangements they themselves did not

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<sup>136</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, July 16, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>137</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, April 16, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>138</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State, Tehran, April 15, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2493

<sup>139</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, May 3, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>140</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, May 15, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970.73, Box 2112

<sup>141</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, July 29, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2584

<sup>142</sup> Smith, *Britain’s Revival and Fall*, 93-98

want to enter.<sup>143</sup> Hence, while all parties were interested in a federation, no one wanted to sacrifice their own position and they blamed each other for why the negotiations stalled.<sup>144</sup>

Washington shared Britain's desire to unite the nine sheikdoms into a federation. Yet having no direct relationship with any of the sheikdoms, the US preferred to leave the details of the negotiations to the British.<sup>145</sup> Yet the Nixon administration did not want to actively involve itself in the negotiations, preferring to leave it to the British.<sup>146</sup> This was reflected in how the Nixon administration handled attempts by the sheikdoms to establish direct relationships with the US. In the spring of 1970, Washington rejected an attempt to arrange a visit from Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi.<sup>147</sup> In another instance, Assistant Secretary Sisco declined Bahrain's request of appointing an American diplomatic representative to Manama. Sisco argued, with advice from the British, that America would not develop any representation on the island until after the conclusion of the federation talks.<sup>148</sup> The State Department reasoned that establishing "official" ties to any of the sheiks prior to the conclusion of the federation negotiations would be seen as "favoring one Ruler over another", which could damage the talks.<sup>149</sup>

Guiding Washington's thinking about the federation was the concept of Gulf state interdependence, which meant that more unity among the Gulf entities, the better for Gulf security and stability. The concept had initially been developed by the Johnson administration which encouraged the sheikdoms to start thinking in terms of "interests" and the "considerable overlap and mutuality which should constitute [the] basis for needed cooperation in various spheres." Hence, the concept relied on the Gulf states to renounce their own self-interests for the benefit of the common interest of Gulf stability.<sup>150</sup>

The Nixon administration continued to use the Gulf state interdependence as a guiding tool for their approach to the British withdrawal effort. This worked on two levels. The first level related to the unity between the sheikdoms themselves. With both the various disputes between the

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<sup>143</sup> Simon C. Smith "Failure and Successes in State Formation, 84-97

<sup>144</sup> Smith, Britain's Revival and Fall, 98-100

<sup>145</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate General in Dhahran. Washington, May 16, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 81

<sup>146</sup> "Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate General in Dhahran" Washington, February 20, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 79

<sup>147</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Dhahran, May 7, 1970. RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2584

<sup>148</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate General in Dhahran Washington, May 16, 1970. *FRUS* Vol XXIV, 81

<sup>149</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Dhahran, May 7, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2584

<sup>150</sup> Telegram From the Consulate General in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State. Dhahran, January 28, 1968. *FRUS* XXI, 127

sheikdoms and the immense differences in wealth, Washington thought the federation would not only stabilize relations between them but also provide a way to develop the poorer sheikdoms. The five smaller sheikdoms were considered both too small and too poor to be capable of supporting their own independence. Their poverty and underdevelopment made them more susceptible to subversion by radical forces.<sup>151</sup> There were already reports that Iraq was building subversive capabilities in Ras al-Khaimah.<sup>152</sup> Hence, it was important that the larger sheikdoms united with the smaller to bolster stability in the area.

The second level of Gulf state interdependence was the federation's relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran. While the FAA would be able to provide stability on their own, at least for a few years, Washington considered it necessary that they foster a relationship with the two larger Gulf littorals to further underwrite their stability.<sup>153</sup> Iran and Saudi Arabia were considered the two most stable states in the area, and both possessed immense influence with the individual sheikdoms. Iran had already been seen doing its part in fostering better ties with the sheikdoms, inviting the individual sheiks to Tehran for talks.<sup>154</sup> Saudi Arabia was slower in making its influence felt among the sheikdoms, but had started to contribute aid to some of the poorer Trucial Emirates.<sup>155</sup>

How Washington wanted to address Gulf state interdependence was placed into a framework which emerged into practice in the spring of 1970. During a tour of the area, Sisco and other officials stressed to the leaders of the region that Washington looked to "the enlightened leadership of the Shah, Faisal, and other leaders" to provide stability as the Persian Gulf was entering a period of transition.<sup>156</sup> The US would support the effort of these states to "work harmoniously together to foster [the] development of [a] stable Gulf".<sup>157</sup> However, Washington could only play a complementary role. Only if Gulf stability itself was threatened would Washington engage itself directly. As an NSC report stated, the considerable economic

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<sup>151</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State, Jidda, November 2, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 90

<sup>152</sup> National Intelligence Estimate. Washington, April 7, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 140

<sup>153</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. March 18, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2112

<sup>154</sup> Airgram From the US Embassy in Tehran. Tehran, June 9, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>155</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, July 29, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>156</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate General in Dhahran. Washington, May 16, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 81

<sup>157</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, May 6, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631



significance Gulf petroleum had for the economies of Western Europe and Japan, Washington had to mitigate the various forces threatening disruption in the area.<sup>158</sup>

As such, the Nixon administration wanted to foster Gulf state interdependence by encouraging the smaller sheikdoms to develop closer ties with Riyadh and Tehran. Yet the outstanding territorial claims the two Gulf monarchies had towards the smaller sheikdoms impeded this effort. This became clear following a meeting between Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi and King Faisal in May 1970, which managed to make the Buraimi dispute an active part of the British withdrawal effort again. The dispute over the oil rich Buraimi Oasis had long been a thorn in Riyadh's relationship with Abu Dhabi, since Britain forcefully removed Saudi troops from the oasis in 1955.<sup>159</sup> The May meeting was the first since 1967 between the two leaders, and King Faisal had been led to believe that Sheik Zayed was prepared to make considerable concession in the negotiations.<sup>160</sup> However, following Zayed's unwillingness to discuss the issue, Saudi Arabia issued an ultimatum to have the border dispute resolved or Riyadh would resort to "other means".<sup>161</sup>

The development was worrisome. US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Hermann Eilts derided the May meeting as a "mistake" and the parties involved having been "thoughtless" for managing to reawaken the Buraimi dispute at a particular vulnerable moment in the Persian Gulf.<sup>162</sup>

Washington believed that the King's attachment to the Buraimi issue was a "highly emotional one" and that he was unlikely to forgo his claims in favor of the federation. While concerned, Eilts argued that the Saudis were unlikely to resort to force, believing that Riyadh had time on its side.<sup>163</sup> Eventually moderating forces from within the Saud family, headed by foreign minister Omar Saqqaf and the Saudi minister of petroleum, Ahmad Yamani, emerged and calmed the situation. Yamani informed the Americans that Saudi Arabia had "no intention to move against

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<sup>158</sup> Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff. Washington, June 12, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 24

<sup>159</sup> Petersen, *The Middle East Between the Great Powers*, 36-48. For more on the Buraimi Dispute see Richard Schofield, "The Crystallisation of a Complex Territorial Dispute: Britain and the Saudi-Abu Dhabi Borderland, 1966-71", *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1. No. 1 (2011), 27-51

<sup>160</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, April 27, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>161</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda. Jidda, May 7, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2361

<sup>162</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. May 19, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>163</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. May 19, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

Buraimi before the end of 1971”, confirming Eilts suspicion that King Faisal had no rush to resolve the matter.<sup>164</sup>

Throughout the crisis, Eilts recommended that Washington remain on the sideline. Washington would only give “friendly advice”, rejecting an offer from Yamani to mediate the conflict. Eilts explained to the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia that Britain needed to urge Sheik Zayed to adopt a more accommodating position towards the ultimatum. As the stability of the FAA would depend on support from Saudi Arabia, Zayed needed to be willing to negotiate with the Saudis on the matter.<sup>165</sup> Zayed was frustrated with King Faisal, seeing Saudi Arabia’s pressure upon Abu Dhabi to give up territory as counterproductive. Yet Faisal seemed intent on having Abu Dhabi show deference to Saudi Arabia in return for support.<sup>166</sup>

Washington’s handling of the renewal of the Buraimi dispute reflected an aspect of Gulf state interdependence generally favored the sheikdoms’ relations with the two Gulf monarchies. Washington’s belief that Iran and Saudi Arabia would underwrite the stability of the FAA, also meant that London had to work in cooperation with the two larger littorals. As both Riyadh and Tehran started to communicate a willingness to resolve these territorial disputes by force, which would be detrimental to Gulf stability, Washington started pressuring London to encourage its sheikdoms to accommodate Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>167</sup> Washington viewed it as “absolutely essential” that Britain make concrete proposals in order to gain the support for Iran and Saudi Arabia for the federation. As Assistant Secretary Sisco explained to the UK ambassador in Washington, the “US attaches great importance to [the] UK taking such initiative[s]”.<sup>168</sup>

While Washington claimed to approach Gulf affairs through a form of benevolent neutrality, encouraging the various entities to take constructive steps towards improving the conditions for Gulf cooperation, Washington tended to tilt towards the position of Iran and Saudi Arabia. As the Nixon administration was leaning towards an entente between Saudi Arabia and Iran to preserve stability, the FAA had to be fitted into this reality.

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<sup>164</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, May 18, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>165</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, May 13, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>166</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. June 29, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>167</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, July 9, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>168</sup> Telegram From Department of State to the Embassy in United Kingdom. Washington, June 17, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 84.

## NSDM 92

Half a year after the initial Interdepartmental Group paper was discussed, its final draft was submitted. Kissinger convened an NSC meeting to discuss the report and its recommendations. The meeting would settle on a policy that would be presented for Nixon in a formal policy instruction in late 1970. The report listed six different options for Washington's policy, of which the NSC considered only three actually feasible. Washington was interested in continuing its engagement with the area but had no desire to assume Britain's role. Hence, the only option was to continue fostering its ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia to be responsible for Gulf stability.<sup>169</sup> Relating to the smaller Gulf states, Kissinger remarked that it would be natural for Washington to develop its relationship beyond the current consular level once they emerged as independent.<sup>170</sup> Salberg have pointed out that the discussion essentially amounted to a "un-decision", as the options discussed was essentially the policy Washington had pursued over most of 1969 and 1970.<sup>171</sup>

The conclusions reached at the twenty-minutes-long meeting were eventually formalized into National Decision Memorandum 92, presented to Nixon on November 7. It presented five points on which US policy towards the Persian Gulf would be based upon. The first stressed that Washington's general strategy for the area would be to promote cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran as the foundation for stability in the Gulf after Britain withdrew. Simultaneously, the administration would recognize Iran as the preponderant power in the area. The remaining four points addressed how Washington would develop its relationship with the smaller Gulf states.<sup>172</sup>

Scholars have mostly argued that NSDM 92 was the Nixon administration's final embrace of Iranian "primacy" in the Persian Gulf. Both historian Michael Palmer and political scientist Stephen McGlinchey argue that the idea of a balancing strategy and the inclusion of Saudi Arabia in the policy functioned as a "fig leaf". After the strain Washington's continuing support

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<sup>169</sup> Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff. Washington, June 4, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 82

<sup>170</sup> Minutes of a Reviewing Group Meeting. Washington, June 5, 1970. *FRUS* Vol XXIV, 83

<sup>171</sup> Salberg, "Conventional Wisdom", 83-84

<sup>172</sup> National Security Decision Memorandum 92. Washington, November 7, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 97

for Israel in the 1967 war put on the US-Saudi relationship, backing Iran as its “chosen instrument” could break the relationship.<sup>173</sup>

Scholars taking the “Iranian primacy”-approach to US-Gulf relations during the Nixon administration usually take aim at the idea of the Twin Pillar policy. This argues that Washington relied on a balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia to ensure stability in the Gulf after the British withdrawal. Yet, the term itself was coined by a journalist shortly after the Iranian Revolution as a shorthand for the policy prior to 1979 and does not in fact appear in any of the official records.<sup>174</sup> The Nixon administration itself does not appear to have entertained the idea of balancing the two Gulf monarchies. The notion of balancing Saudi Arabia against Iran only appears once in the IG-report, and then as the possibility of backing the Saudis as Washington’s “chosen instrument” in the region. The report dismissed this notion as unfeasible.<sup>175</sup>

Instead of balancing between Riyadh and Tehran, most officials tended to frame the two’s place within US strategy in terms of cooperation. The emergence of a possible security pact, or at least security cooperation, between Riyadh and Tehran seems to have vindicated the idea of encouraging cooperation between the two monarchies. Kissinger argued to Nixon when explaining the NSDM 92, that as long as the two Gulf monarchies seemed intent on cooperating “the U.S. had every reason to support it”.<sup>176</sup> This is not to argue that Washington did not view Iran as its primary ally in the region. As member of the State Department’s Policy Coordination staff, Joseph W. Neubert argued in a summary of the Nixon administration’s thinking, “an effective US policy in the Gulf must be built on co-operation with Iran and secondarily Saudi Arabia”.<sup>177</sup> Rather, the point here is that the framework for Gulf stability, at least in the near term, would rely on cooperation between King Faisal and the Shah. Quite simply, why choose one side when circumstances allow you to choose both.<sup>178</sup>

While the general consensus within the administration viewed cooperation between the two Gulf monarchies as the best possible option, some voices within the administration remained skeptical

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<sup>173</sup> Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf – A History of America’s Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992*. (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 88-90. McGlinchey, “Richard Nixon’s Road to Tehran, 848.

<sup>174</sup> Roham Alvandi, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The Origins of Iranian Primacy in the Persian Gulf”, *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 2 (2012), 338

<sup>175</sup> Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff. Washington, June 4, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 82

<sup>176</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, October 22, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 91

<sup>177</sup> Smith, *Britain’s Revival*, 142

<sup>178</sup> “Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff” Washington, June 4, 1970. *FRUS* Vol XXIV, 82

of the alliance's viability. Fear about tensions in the wider Arab-Iranian relationship and the imbalance of power between the two Gulf monarchies made parts of the administration cautious for the prospects of the Saudi-Iranian relationship. US ambassador to Iran, Douglas MacArthur, derided the critics as "obsessed" over the potential obstacles to meaningful cooperation between Riyadh and Tehran.<sup>179</sup> As Salberg has shown, MacArthur had a tendency to adopt and communicate the Shah's views on Gulf affairs back to Washington as his recommendations for action.<sup>180</sup> After all, the idea of an indigenous security pact had initially been the Shah's idea. "Pahlavism", the underlying assumption that Iran's usefulness to American interests in the area, undoubtedly had an effect on the administration's optimism for meaningful cooperation between the two Gulf monarchs.<sup>181</sup> In the absence of other options and as long as Saudi Arabia and Iran seemed intent on cooperating, fostering an entente between Saudi Arabia and Iran was the best way to foster stability for the Gulf Arabs after the British had vacated their stabilizing role in the region.

The newer aspects of US policy that emerged with NSDM 92 was how Washington would approach the sheikdoms following 1971. Kissinger identified the future diplomatic, technological, and military relationship Washington would develop. Washington would continue the presence of the small naval contingent at Bahrain, develop formal diplomatic relations, provide technical and educational aid to foster development, and open for reviews of arms sales to the sheikdoms.<sup>182</sup> However, with the federation question still unresolved all these items, particularly the arms policy, were put up for further review and had to be developed as events in the Gulf unfolded over the following year. Yet the deliberations within the IG paper pointed towards a changing posture of benevolent neutrality, as the US started to consider a more direct relationship with the smaller Gulf sheikdoms.<sup>183</sup>

Until then, Washington was still committed to keep the British withdrawal efforts at arms-length. Both the IG paper and the following discussions did not see Washington taking a bigger role in facilitating the federation negotiations as an option.<sup>184</sup> Through the fall of 1970, the Nixon

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<sup>179</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State" Tehran, February 4, 1970. *FRUS* Vol XXIV, 77

<sup>180</sup> Salberg, "Conventional Wisdom" 78-79

<sup>181</sup> Salberg, "Conventional Wisdom", 93-94

<sup>182</sup> National Security Decision Memorandum 92. Washington, November 7, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 97

<sup>183</sup> Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff. Washington, June 4, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 82

<sup>184</sup> Minutes of a Review Group Meeting. Washington, June 5, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 83

administration continued their efforts to encourage Britain and the sheikdoms to form a federation. The FAA was still conceived of as the best option for providing stability for the sheikdoms, particularly the smaller sheikdoms in the Trucial States.<sup>185</sup> Yet by late 1970, the notion of a union of nine seemed to have reached a dead-end. Both Bahrain and Qatar had taken steps towards declaring themselves as independent entities, although officially they kept open the option of joining the federation later on. In Washington's eyes this was seen as unfortunate, but the administration believed that as long as a federation under the leadership of Abu Dhabi and Dubai was more plausible it would not damage Gulf stability.<sup>186</sup>

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The decision to foster stability for the Gulf Arabs through a framework of a Saudi-Iranian entente bore clear markings of the Nixon Doctrine. Since Guam, the doctrine had developed into a more coherent outlook towards the Third World. During President Nixon's first annual report on US foreign policy to Congress, Nixon presented the Nixon Doctrine as "Peace through Partnership". Seeing that "others now have the ability and responsibility to deal with local disputes", the Nixon Doctrine sought to build partnerships with local allies to preserve stability and create a "durable structure of international relationships" that could hold the tide against the spread of Soviet and radical influence in the Third World.<sup>187</sup> Washington would support these "partnerships and mutual efforts" by helping the states develop the capabilities to carry out their new role. In this sense, the Nixon administration was willing to back Saudi Arabia and Iran and mediate ties between them as the two sought to cooperate to preserve stability in the Gulf.<sup>188</sup>

While the consensus within the Nixon administration favored the Saudi-Iranian entente as a framework, it was far from a guaranteed formula for stability. The cordial tone in the Saudi-Iranian relationship was fairly new and relatively fragile to tensions in the broader Arab-Iranian relationship. Yet as King Faisal and the Shah seemed intent on cooperating to foster Gulf stability, the Nixon administration embraced the option as a solution. As the finalization of the British withdrawal was still a year away and many aspects of the withdrawal effort still unsolved,

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<sup>185</sup> These two sheikdoms had a population of about 8000 combined.

<sup>186</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State. Jidda, November 2, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 90

<sup>187</sup> Frist Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970s. February 18, 1970. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon (1970)*, 115-190

<sup>188</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Jidda. Jidda, March 16, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

the future outlook of the Gulf was uncertain. This made it difficult for the Nixon administration to formulate more concrete policies towards the smaller sheikdoms beyond offering support and encouragement for the British effort to negotiate a federation among them. However, backing the Saudi-Iranian entente as the foundation for Gulf stability had implications for Washington's indirect approach to the Gulf sheikdoms. As stability would depend upon Saudi Arabia and Iran, it was important that the sheikdoms be accommodating towards the interests of Tehran and Riyadh. As the crisis after the meeting between King Faisal and Sheik Zayed illustrated, Washington favored accommodation towards Riyadh's territorial claims as Abu Dhabi needed the future support from Saudi Arabia.

## ***Chapter 4. “In the interest of Gulf Security”: the US and the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, 1971***

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Having settled on a general policy for the Persian Gulf through National Security Decision Memorandum 92, the Nixon administration started to address the immediate problems facing the British withdrawal which would be finalized by the end of the year. Washington had two primary concerns that ideally had to be resolved by the end of the year. The first was Britain's attempt to unite the nine sheikdoms into a federation prior to its withdrawal. The negotiations had been stalling for most of 1970, with indications that Bahrain and Qatar were likely to withdraw from the negotiations. While Washington did not want to intervene directly in the negotiations, the Nixon administration looked to Iran and Saudi Arabia to help clear the impasses among the sheikdoms. Having settled on a Saudi-Iranian entente as the foundation for future Gulf stability, the Nixon administration considered it crucial that both Riyadh and Tehran play an active role in establishing a federation.

The second concern was the outstanding territorial disputes between the two Gulf monarchies and the sheikdoms. While both the Saudis and Iranians supported the formation of a federation, both had signaled that they wanted favorable solutions to their claims if they were to support the FAA. Saudi Arabia's unresolved dispute with Abu Dhabi over the Buraimi Oasis, made Riyadh reluctant to accept a federation that did not include Bahrain and Qatar as counterbalances to the power of Abu Dhabi. Iran's claim to the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, belonging to the Trucial Emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah posed another threat. Particularly troubling was the Shah's threats to resort to taking the islands by force unless Britain could negotiate a satisfactory solution to the problem. Such a scenario posed a threat to Washington's overall strategy towards the Gulf, as an Iranian occupation of Arab territory would fuel Arab-Iranian tensions potentially disrupting the newly founded Saudi-Iranian entente. How and why did the Nixon administration approach the issues that threatened to spoil the calm transition into a post-British Gulf?

### **Cooperation and Its Limits**

The Nixon administration had landed on a comprehensive US strategy towards the Persian Gulf at the end of 1970. While the NSDM 92 left a lot of policy decisions to after the British



withdrawal, the main thrust of US policy to foster a stable regional order was to continue to promote the Saudi-Iranian entente that had started to take shape in 1970.<sup>189</sup> Iran had through 1970 started to engage in a policy of developing a closer ties with the smaller Gulf sheikdoms, as his decision to shelve his claims to Bahrain reduced tensions with the Gulf Arabs. Shortly thereafter Iran and Qatar had reached an agreement over their median line, demarcating offshore drilling rights.<sup>190</sup> The agreement was part of a wider Iranian policy of expanding Iranian influence on the western side of the Gulf by treating the Gulf sheiks as equals by inviting them to audiences in Tehran.<sup>191</sup>

Britain also stressed the importance of cooperation between the two major Gulf littorals. Sir William Luce, who had been leading the withdrawal negotiations since 1970 and held deep influence over British Gulf policy, argued that while Iran was the strongest power in the region, Tehran could not alone establish stability without the help of Saudi Arabia.<sup>192</sup> Neither Riyadh nor Tehran would tolerate the establishment of a radical regime in one of the British protectorates. He warned that an Iranian intervention against such a revolution would cause serious problems as the move would be opposed by the other moderates, including Riyadh. In Luce's view, the continued stability of Saudi Arabia was the most important source of security for the Gulf, as the Saudi monarchy would "buttress" the stability of the smaller littoral states.<sup>193</sup>

While Iran was taking concrete steps to improve his relationship with the Gulf Arabs, officials within the Nixon administration remained skeptical about Saudi-Iranian cooperation's potential. Director of the CIA, Richard Helms, warned that while Iran and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia both would play leading roles in the Gulf and shared some views on stability and security, cooperation between the two should not be taken for granted. Helms shared Luce's view that an uncoordinated Iranian intervention against the western side of the Gulf would likely be opposed by King Faisal, even if he sympathized with Tehran's goal of removing a radical regime. At worst, it could cause a confrontation between the two over their respective roles in the region. A Saudi-Iranian confrontation would make it difficult for Washington to reconcile its many

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<sup>189</sup> National Security Decision Memorandum 92, Washington, November 7, 1970, *FRUS XXIV*, 91

<sup>190</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, May 11, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>191</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, September 24, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2361

<sup>192</sup> For more information on William Luce see: M. W. Daly, *The Last of the Great Proconsuls: The Biography of Sir William Luce* (San Diego: Nathan Berg, 2014)

<sup>193</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, January 13, 1971, *FRUS XXIV*, 93

commitments to the two states and would severely damage US interest in the region. Hence, the most important job of American diplomacy would be to keep Saudi-Iranian friction at acceptable levels by mediating forces that could cause a bigger rift between Washington's two main partners.<sup>194</sup>

An important step in avoiding such a scenario was to ensure the formation of the Federation of Arab Emirates. While Washington kept the federation negotiations at arms-length, leaving the details to Britain, the Nixon administration viewed it as essential to ensure that Saudi Arabia and Iran embrace the federation, as Riyadh and Tehran could provide necessary support to prevent subversive forces spreading in the area.<sup>195</sup> Without support from the two Gulf monarchies, Washington believed that the sheikdoms might last two to three years before subversive forces could overthrow the rulers.<sup>196</sup> With London reaffirming its commitment to withdraw from the Gulf by the end of the year, Washington found it necessary to develop concrete approaches that would ensure a clam withdrawal.<sup>197</sup>

A primary hindrance for forming a federation was Saudi Arabia and Iran's outstanding territorial claims to parts of the sheikdoms. Particularly troublesome was the dispute over the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, currently ruled by the Trucial Emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah. The islands vicinity to the Strait of Hormuz, key to Iranian security, made the Shah reluctant to shelve his claims like he had done with Bahrain.<sup>198</sup> US ambassador to Tehran warned that this issue presented an "obstacle to Iran-Gulf Arab cooperation", calling for more US attention on the issue. At the same time, MacArthur advocated that the Nixon administration should encourage Saudi Arabia and Iran to issue a joint statement declaring their intentions to cooperate for peace and security in the region. Such a statement could over time include Kuwait and the sheikdoms and create an atmosphere for closer Gulf cooperation.<sup>199</sup>

Yet the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran already seemed to be at a crossroads. Following Saudi foreign minister Saqqaf's visit to Tehran in 1970, Saudi Arabia had adopted a

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<sup>194</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, Washington, April 1, 1971, *FRUS* XXIV, 96

<sup>195</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, London, Tehran, and the Consulate in Dhahan. Washington, March 3, 1971. *FRUS* E-4, 118

<sup>196</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahan to Department of State. February 12, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>197</sup> Intelligence Note. Washington, March 5, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>198</sup> Alvandi, "The Bahrain Question", 163

<sup>199</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to Department of State. Tehran, February 6, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

position towards the islands issue as being a legal dispute between Tehran and the sheikdoms. The position had made both the US and Iran hope that Riyadh could play a constructive role in finding a resolution to the issue to avoid a confrontation.<sup>200</sup> Riyadh had rejected the attempt out of hand, with King Faisal stating that he viewed the islands as “Arab territory” and that he “could not understand how [the] Shah could seriously believe “vital” Iranian security considerations were involved”.<sup>201</sup> While the Saudis remained committed to not having the islands issue affect its entente with Iran, Riyadh was simply unwilling to involve itself any further as it could likely damage King Faisal’s Arab nationalist credentials. Iran had adopted a similar position to Riyadh’s dispute with Abu Dhabi. Indeed, this kind of benign negligence was a method for Tehran and Riyadh to avoid fueling tensions between them.<sup>202</sup>

Tehran and Riyadh also seemed to be diverging on the nature of their cooperation. The Shah had since the start framed his security cooperation initiative towards Saudi Arabia as a means to bolster what he saw as an inherently unstable regime in Riyadh.<sup>203</sup> During the 1970 meeting, both Saudi Arabia and Iran had agreed that a formal security alliance was “superfluous” between the two. Yet over the span of 1970, the Shah had become more eager for concrete steps towards formalizing this cooperative effort, with MacArthur advocating for greater US action along these lines.<sup>204</sup> These two diverging positions came to fore during King Faisal’s visit to Tehran in May 1971. While Faisal emphasized that he wished for a closer and stronger relationship with Iran, he refused to join in any formal pact with Iran, which frustrated Tehran.<sup>205</sup> While the two would continue to work towards further cooperation, the event spelled out the kind of limits that would characterize the relationship going forward. While Iran wanted a security pact with Saudi Arabia as a junior partner, Riyadh were careful in appearing dependent on Iran for military help.<sup>206</sup>

### **Securing Riyadh’s Approval**

By the beginning of 1971, the nine-member format for the FAA had reached a dead-end. The talks to form a federation between the British protectorates had since its inception moved at an

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<sup>200</sup> Telegram From the US Mission to the UN to the Department of State. New York, October 22, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2586

<sup>201</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, September 18, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2493

<sup>202</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, May 20, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>203</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, January 12, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>204</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, December 1, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>205</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, May 20, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>206</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran May 20, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

incremental pace, and through the fall of 1970 no new grounds were brokered between them. At the beginning of 1971, William Luce informed Washington that Bahrain had turned against the idea of joining a federation after Iran had given up their claims to the island. With Bahrain opting for independence, Qatar was likely to do the same. As a result, the most likely outcome was a seven-plus-two solution, with the Trucial States uniting into a federation dominated by Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Washington, who supported the largest possible federative structure Britain could create, offered support for London's assessment.<sup>207</sup>

Yet a federation dominated by Abu Dhabi would likely be opposed by Saudi Arabia. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's relationship had reached low levels after the renewed confrontation over the Buraimi Oasis the previous spring. While King Faisal supported the federative attempt, he refused to recognize any federation without a satisfactory solution to the dispute. Riyadh hoped this position would result in Britain pressuring Abu Dhabi into a compromise, with the Saudis indicating their willingness to have William Luce mediate the dispute.<sup>208</sup> In addition, Saudi Arabia sought to pressure Bahrain and Qatar to remain in the FAA-talks. As the two largest sheikdoms among the British protected states, Bahrain and Qatar could counterbalance Abu Dhabi's influence in a future federation.<sup>209</sup> Hence, Riyadh started to cooperate with Kuwait to inject themselves more forcefully in the federation negotiations to break the current impasses hindering a federation of nine.<sup>210</sup>

Washington welcomed Saudi Arabia's sudden volte-face in its approach to the federation negotiations. Riyadh had mostly been aloof in the negotiations, mainly offering supportive statements and stressed the necessity of forming a federation to protect the sheikdoms from subversion.<sup>211</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco expressed his pleasure for the initiative to Saudi Foreign Minister Saqqaf for Saudi Arabia taking increased responsibility for stability in the area.<sup>212</sup> Yet by the spring of 1971, the Saudi-Kuwaiti mediation effort had become counterproductive as Saudi Arabia's continued pressure upon Bahrain and Qatar to remain in the

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<sup>207</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, January 13, 1971, *FRUS XXIV*, 93. Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates. A Society in Transition* (London & New York: Longman, 1982), 360-361

<sup>208</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, August 30, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2584

<sup>209</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 88-89

<sup>210</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, August 9, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2586

<sup>211</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, February 5, 1969. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1967-69, Box 2476

<sup>212</sup> Letter From Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Joseph J. Sisco to the Saudi Arabian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sayyid Omar al Saqqaf. Washington, February 8, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

talks kept the negotiations from moving forward. Wanting to secure the federation prior to the British withdrawal, Secretary of State William Rogers wanted the Nixon administration to appeal to King Faisal's shared conviction with Washington that a federation is "indispensable to Peninsula stability." and embrace a federation of seven.<sup>213</sup>

Through the spring, Washington attempted to convince King Faisal to embrace the federation of seven, with even Secretary Rogers directly encouraging him.<sup>214</sup> Yet Faisal remained committed to the nine-member formula, even pressuring Bahrain to make formal moves towards becoming independent. Kuwait had become frustrated by the Saudi monarch's intransigence, stressing that they needed Saudi Arabia's support to work out a federation of seven<sup>215</sup> Middle East expert at the National Security Council, Harold Saunders argued that Faisal was intentionally dragging out the federation negotiations to allow him to place the blame on Britain for failing to unite the states in a federation. This would allow Riyadh to either formally accept Bahraini independence or indirectly endorse a federation of seven.<sup>216</sup> Indeed, British officials had concluded that Riyadh would tacitly support a federation of seven as the best solution for Saudi interests. Even so, Faisal remained committed to a federation of nine in public.<sup>217</sup>

The impasse between the nine sheikdoms was finally broken when six of the Trucial Emirates proclaimed the formation of the United Arab Emirates on July 18. The move made Britain pressure Bahrain and Qatar to make a formal position to their membership in the union.<sup>218</sup> The Nixon administration was pleased by the progress and prepared to recognize the two states as independent. Yet the administration wanted to wait for Saudi Arabia's reaction to Bahrain's decision until it formally recognized the island's independence.<sup>219</sup> Saudi Arabia eventually relented, with King Faisal accepting Bahraini independence in August. The decision was

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<sup>213</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Washington, April 13, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 97

<sup>214</sup> Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to President Nixon. Washington, May 5, 1971. *FRUS* Vol. 149

<sup>215</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, May 30, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2585

<sup>216</sup> Memorandum From Harold Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, June 22, 1971, *FRUS*, XXIV, 99

<sup>217</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 103

<sup>218</sup> Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall*, 104

<sup>219</sup> Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to President Nixon. Washington, July 14, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 102 & footnote 5

followed by the visit of a high-level Saudi delegation to Riyadh intent on deepening Saudi-Bahraini ties.<sup>220</sup> Later the same month, King Faisal granted a similar tacit approval to Qatar.<sup>221</sup>

With Riyadh accepting Bahrain and Qatar's independence, the Saudi monarch also gave his acquiescence to the political composition to the post-British Gulf. However, Riyadh refused to recognize the newly formed UAE until the Buraimi dispute had been resolved.<sup>222</sup> Riyadh's position deeply frustrated Abu Dhabi, which urged Washington to encourage Saudi Arabia to drop their "negative attitude" towards the federation "in the interest of us all".<sup>223</sup>

While Washington did express its positive attitude towards the UAE, the Nixon administration applied little effort to change Saudi Arabia's position. Through its policy of benevolent neutrality, Washington did not want to involve itself in the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. Furthermore, as the administration sought to establish Saudi Arabia as the "leader of the Arabian Peninsula and the Arab side of the Gulf", Washington did not want to damage its relationship with Saudi Arabia by intervening.<sup>224</sup> Hence, Washington tacitly accepted King Faisal's waiting strategy in his approach to the Gulf states, whereby he demanded that the sheikdoms yield to his line in return for support. As in the case of the UAE, Faisal would simply wait until Abu Dhabi gave in to Riyadh's demands in return for recognition. However, through the fall of 1971 there were signs that the Buraimi dispute could be solved. Saudi and Abu Dhabi officials agreed to start talks over a "window on the Gulf" compromise, where Abu Dhabi would give its coastal territory along its border with Qatar in return for Riyadh shelving its claims to Buraimi. Although no deal was reached, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi indicated that the talks would continue.<sup>225</sup>

### **Dealing with Iranian Primacy**

With Faisal tacitly accepting the formation of a federation without Bahrain and Qatar, the problem turned to Iran. Like King Faisal, the Shah had expressed support for the sheikdoms uniting into a federation early on but had started to oppose the federation without Tehran's

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<sup>220</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, August 23, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2585

<sup>221</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, August 28, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>222</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Washington, July 21, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 104

<sup>223</sup> Telegram From the US Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, July 2, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>224</sup> Memorandum For President Nixon From the Secretary of State Rogers. Washington, May 24, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2585

<sup>225</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, December 16, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

claims to the Gulf islands recognized. The three islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs are located just west of the Strait of Hormuz, roughly in the middle between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. Iran claimed the islands as rightfully Iranian territory, but that Britain had stolen them and arbitrarily transferred them to the Trucial Emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah in the late nineteenth century.<sup>226</sup> During the negotiations over Bahrain, the Shah had attempted to get a *quid pro quo* over the islands in return for his forthcomingness on Bahrain. Yet Britain feared that handing the islands over to Iran would damage London's future relationship with the sheikdoms.<sup>227</sup> Without a forthcoming solution to the dispute, Tehran had started to threaten to seize the islands by force by the end of 1971.

The impasse between Britain and Iran caused concern in Washington. Unlike their attempt to secure Riyadh's approval, the Nixon administration viewed the islands issue with general alarm. While Washington wanted Tehran's support for the new federation, the Shah's threat of invading the islands had wider ramifications for the future of the UAE and could result in Iran undermining the entire federative project.<sup>228</sup> From Tehran, MacArthur advocated that the US should do more to urge Britain to be more forthcoming in the negotiations to break the current impasse and consider involving the US more directly in the talks.<sup>229</sup> The State Department agreed that Washington could not sit back and watch the problems "drift ominously into 1972". The Nixon administration wanted to prod both London and Tehran for possible alternative solutions, such as the necessity of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah's approval for transferring the islands to Iran. Another possibility was to encourage Iran to embrace a "truncated federation" that denied membership to Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah until the islands issue had been dealt with.<sup>230</sup>

Ambassador MacArthur rejected the option. The Shah had made it clear that he would oppose any form of federation, even one that excluded Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, unless the islands issue was resolved in a satisfactory manner. Tehran was determined to get the islands,

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<sup>226</sup> Charles L.O. Buder and Luciana T. Ricart, *The Iran-UAE Gulf Islands Dispute*, 560-561

<sup>227</sup> Alvandi, "The Bahrain Question", 163. Richard A. Mobley, "The Tunbs and Abu Musa Islands: Britain's Perspective", *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 4 (2003), 632-634

<sup>228</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State. London, March 19, 1971. *FRUS* Vol. 4-E, 119

<sup>229</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, February 9, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>230</sup> Telegram 36738 From the Department of State to the Embassies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, London, Tehran, and the Consulate in Dahrn Washington, March 3, 1971. *FRUS* E-4, 118

MacArthur explained, as the Shah felt about them the same way “Americans felt about Soviet missiles in Cuba”.<sup>231</sup> MacArthur’s position on the Gulf islands again follows the pattern where the ambassador simply repeated the Shah’s talking points as policy recommendations to Washington.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, already in 1970 had MacArthur argued that the Shah viewed Washington’s position on the Gulf islands as a test case for Iran’s position in the Nixon Doctrine. This made it difficult for Washington to support any British-sponsored solution that the Shah deemed unsatisfactory without damaging the US-Iranian relationship.<sup>233</sup> As a result, the Shah’s brinkmanship put serious pressure upon Washington’s benevolent neutrality position towards territorial disputes in the region.

The threat of an Iranian invasion had wider ramifications for stability and cooperation in the Gulf. Already in 1970, Kuwaiti officials had warned the US that an Iranian invasion of Abu Musa would alienate the Gulf Arabs from Tehran and make future Arab-Iranian cooperation impossible.<sup>234</sup> The American Consulate in Dharan had been repeatedly warned that an invasion would likely cause uprisings in Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, threatening the ruling families there.<sup>235</sup> These views were echoed by the CIA, where they concluded that an invasion would make it difficult to foster Arab-Iranian cooperation in the future.<sup>236</sup>

An Iranian invasion also held potential to damage Saudi Arabia. While Riyadh had taken a neutral position on the issue, refusing to involve itself in the negotiations, Iran’s threat to undermine the federation in favor of a series of ad hoc relationship with the sheikdoms would damage Saudi security and threaten their interests.<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, King Faisal had expressed to the Nixon administration that an Iranian invasion could embarrass Saudi Arabia’s attempts to deepen its relationship with Iran, further alienating Riyadh within the Arab world.<sup>238</sup> The CIA concluded that an Iranian invasion could potentially destabilize the Saudi monarchy. Faisal’s desire to be the protector of Arab interest in the Gulf required him to oppose the Shah’s current

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<sup>231</sup> Telegram 2491 From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State. London, March 19, 1971. *FRUS* E-4, 119

<sup>232</sup> Salberg, “*Conventional Wisdom*”, 78-79

<sup>233</sup> Telegram 2225 From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State. Tehran, May 25, 1970. *FRUS* E-4, 68

<sup>234</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State. Tehran, March 11, 1970. *FRUS* XXIV, 80

<sup>235</sup> Telegram 2491 From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State. London, March 19, 1971. *FRUS* E-4, 119, footnote 1

<sup>236</sup> National Intelligence Estimate. Washington, April 1, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 96

<sup>237</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State. Jidda, March 3, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 95

<sup>238</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Jidda. Washington, June 2, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2585



position if he were to preserve his image and influence among the sheikdoms.<sup>239</sup> Unless Britain was able to reach a compromise with the Shah, an Iranian invasion could create the kind of rupture in the Saudi-Iranian relationship the CIA had earlier predicted.<sup>240</sup>

The question over the islands boiled down to sovereignty. As the islands were considered parts of both Iran and the Arab world, the dispute was essentially a confrontation between Iranian and Arab nationalism. For the Shah, reclaiming the three islands was part of reestablishing Iran in its historical duty as the regional hegemon of the Persian Gulf.<sup>241</sup> For the rulers of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, agreeing to give up sovereignty over Abu Musa and the Tunbs would cause a backlash in the sheikdoms, as their credentials as Arab rulers would be seriously weakened by giving up “Arab territory”. Indeed, Kuwait had started to publicly stress the islands “Arab” nature, which put more pressure on the two rulers and deeply annoyed the Shah.<sup>242</sup> The ruler of Sharjah had directly warned the Nixon administration that giving up Abu Musa could result in assassination attempts against him.<sup>243</sup>

Britain attempted to work around these two confrontational views by promoting a compromise that would blur the sovereignty question. The Shah had initially seemed positive to such a solution, but he demanded that Iran be allowed to immediately establish military presence on the islands in return for not addressing sovereignty, which the two Trucial Emirates did not accept. Indeed, the NSC concluded that the rulers of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah might prefer an Iranian invasion as a way to absolve them of the responsibility of giving Iran the islands.<sup>244</sup> Iran’s position on the question of sovereignty seemed to both Washington and London to be contradictive, as claiming sovereignty by force would make it harder for Tehran to gain acceptance for its hegemony in the Gulf. Henry Kissinger had started to speculate that the Shah’s intransigence might be part of his strategy to establish hegemony. Kissinger argued that dealing

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<sup>239</sup> Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, July 15, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 153

<sup>240</sup> National Intelligence Estimate. Washington, April 1, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 96

<sup>241</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 34-70. Washington, September 3, 1970. *FRUS Vol. E-4*, 86. For more on Iranian nationalism and its relations to Gulf politics see Robert Steele, *The Shah’s Imperial Celebrations of 1971 – Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022), 13-29 & 55-73

<sup>242</sup> Memorandum From Harold Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, June 22, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 99. Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 252-253

<sup>243</sup> Smith, *Britain’s Revival and Fall*, 106

<sup>244</sup> Memorandum From Harold Saunders and Rosemary Neaheer of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, May 19, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 98

with seven individual sheikdoms was easier than a federation, stressing that “the Shah was extremely intelligent.”<sup>245</sup>

By the summer of 1971, Washington’s position had been tied up. The ramifications for an Iranian invasion of the islands would likely do serious damage to US interests in the Gulf and undermine the strategic framework the Nixon administration had settled upon a mere six months earlier. These risks made the CIA recommend more direct US involvement to avoid an invasion.<sup>246</sup>

Simultaneously, tensions between Iran and Britain had started to increase over the dispute as no solution was forthcoming.<sup>247</sup> Britain kept promoting a compromise that would blur sovereignty and establish an Iranian military presence on the islands as the best possible solution for Gulf security. However, the Shah continued to insist on sovereignty.<sup>248</sup> While Washington did not develop a position on the sovereignty versus garrison solution, the Nixon administration was careful not to make any overt moves that might anger the Shah. As a result, when six of the seven Trucial Emirates declared the formation of the UAE, Kissinger recommended to Nixon that he approve “in principle” of recognizing the federation but hold off on formalizing ties until the islands issue was resolved.<sup>249</sup>

### **The September Breakthrough**

In the beginning of August, the US embassy in London reported that William Luce’s recent talks with the Shah had shown some promise, as the Shah had started to show flexibility on how to blur the issue of sovereignty.<sup>250</sup> A month later, the US embassy in Iran reported that Britain and Iran had made an agreement in principle, depending on the concurrence from the Sheiks for the next step. In the message, MacArthur also conveyed a warning from the Shah, stressing that with the new proposals, Iran had compromised as much as it could. If Britain was unable to persuade the Sheiks into accepting the agreement, it would seriously damage Iran’s relationship with

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<sup>245</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. London, June 25, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 100

<sup>246</sup> Report Prepared by Director of Central Intelligence Helms, Washington, undated. *FRUS XXIV*, 101

<sup>247</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, June 17, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>248</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. London, July 25, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 103

<sup>249</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated. *FRUS XXIV*, 106

<sup>250</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in the United Kingdom and Iran. Washington, September 13, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 105, Footnote 5

Britain and could end further negotiations. MacArthur urged Washington to pressure London into getting the Sheiks to accept.<sup>251</sup>

The warning created a sense of urgency in Washington. The NSC considered intervening in the negotiations if Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah rejected the Shah's offer and move the negotiations away from the brink.<sup>252</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco urged Secretary Rogers to communicate to London that Washington viewed the Shah's latest offer was "as good as the sheikhs can expect". At this crucial stage in the negotiations, the sheiks had to accept the Shah's demands "if there is to be stability and cooperation in the Gulf after [the] British withdrawal. Indeed, the Shah had reserved the right to invade the islands if his agreement "in principle" with London fell apart.<sup>253</sup>

The deliberations in Washington ended with Secretary Rogers sending a letter to the Foreign Secretary Doulgas-Home. While Rogers offered support for Britain's attempt to negotiate a solution, London needed to make the two rulers agree to the Shah's latest terms. As Iran had gone as far as it could, these terms were the best Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah could hope for. Hence, Washington pressured London to accept the Shah's terms for the sake of future Gulf security and avoid a more grievous confrontation.<sup>254</sup>

Unlike Washington, London read the Shah's latest position as a negotiation position. In his response letter to Rogers, Douglas-Home argued that the Shah was indicating that he wanted to avoid a confrontation with the "whole Arab world".<sup>255</sup> As a result, over the next two months, London and Tehran managed to reach a compromise. Tehran agreed to share Abu Musa with Sharjah, with the question of sovereignty not being addressed. For this, London was willing to acquiesce in the Iranian takeover of the Tunbs.<sup>256</sup> The Memorandum of Understanding between Iran and Sharjah did help avoid a rupture between the Arab and Iranian side of the Gulf. Even so,

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<sup>251</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in the United Kingdom and Iran, Washington, September 13, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 105, Footnote 2

<sup>252</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in the United Kingdom and Iran, Washington, September 13, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 105, Footnote 6

<sup>253</sup> Action Memorandum for the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco) to Secretary of State Rogers, Washington, September 9, 1971. *FRUS* E-4, 143

<sup>254</sup> Letter From the Secretary of State Rogers to the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Douglas-Home). Washington, September 13, 1971. *FRUS* E-4, 144

<sup>255</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in the United Kingdom and Iran, Washington, September 13, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 105, Footnote 7

<sup>256</sup> Richard A. Mobley, "The Tunbs and Abu Musa Islands", 637-643. Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, 366. Buderer & Ricart, *The Iran-UAE Gulf Islands Dispute*, 597-598

the Shah's brinkmanship had not yielded him much, as the MoU essentially mirrored the blurring of sovereignty formula London had been promoting since the start of the negotiations.<sup>257</sup>

The episode was a clear illustration of Washington's tilt favoring the Gulf monarchies in their disputes with the sheikdoms. Historian Roham Alvandi have argued that the seizure of the Gulf islands was seen by Washington as an example of Iran's ability to take leadership in the Gulf.<sup>258</sup> However, while Washington was willing to embrace Iran's position, the Nixon administration had questioned the Shah's ability to establish hegemony if he approached the issue through confrontation. Rather, Washington's approach to the Gulf islands issue appears more along Salberg's argument that the Nixon administration was willing to support Iranian interests that went counter to Washington's own.<sup>259</sup>

In addition to this, the approach should also be seen in light of Washington's concept of Gulf state interdependence, with the Nixon administration believing that the sheikdoms would be more stable with Tehran's support than in opposition to Iran. Brought to the brink, Washington was prepared to accept terms favoring the Shah rather than the territorial integrity of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah. In doing so, the Nixon administration was also prepared to damage the future British position in the Gulf in favor of the Shah's interests. In this sense, Washington was prepared to underwrite Iran's territorial ambitions.<sup>260</sup>

While the Shah had only agreed to the MoU because Britain acquiesced in the taking of the Tunbs, London had by this point given up on bringing Ras al-Khaimah to the table.<sup>261</sup> In fact, Ras al-Khaimah had spent the past six months attempting to recruit Washington's support the Trucial Emirate's independence in return for establishing a US military base and drilling rights for US companies.<sup>262</sup> Washington consistently rejected Ras al-Khaimah's numerous requests for support, stressing that the Nixon administration believed that a "union is necessary to assure [a] secure future" for the Gulf sheikdoms.<sup>263</sup> The response was overall in line with the Nixon

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<sup>257</sup> Buderer & Ricart, *The Iran-UAE Gulf Islands Dispute*, 572

<sup>258</sup> Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*, 59-60

<sup>259</sup> Salberg, "Conventional Wisdom", 93-95

<sup>260</sup> Tore T. Petersen reaches a similar conclusion in "Anglo-American relation over Aden and the United Arab Emirates, 1967-71", *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 1 (2017), 98-111

<sup>261</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State. Tehran, November 15, 1971. *FURS* XXIV, 109, Footnote 4

<sup>262</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate in Dhahran. September 24, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2632

<sup>263</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate in Dhahran. November 11, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2632

administration's policy towards supporting as large a federation as possible. Indeed, supporting Ras al-Khaimah's independence bid would likely damage Washington's relationship with the UAE and Iran.<sup>264</sup>

The day before the British forces withdrew from the Gulf, on November 30, Iranian forces landed on Abu Musa and the Tunbs. Two days after six of the Trucial States proclaimed independence and joined together in the United Arab Emirates. The news pleased Washington, which had come to fear reports that the six Trucial States intended to unite into a federation regardless of the outcome of the islands negotiations.<sup>265</sup> The NSC reported that diplomatic reactions around the Gulf and the Arab world were fairly mild. Saudi Arabia, in line with its cooperation policy, remained silent over the Iranian landings. Kuwait reacted more vocally, denouncing the Iranian move and withdrawing its ambassador in Tehran, yet refrained from taking further action.<sup>266</sup>

The reaction from "radical" Arab states were more aggressive, with Iraq responding to the landings by severing diplomatic ties with Britain and Iran. Libya moved to nationalize all British Petroleum interests in the country. Furthermore, Tripoli threatened to send troops to reclaim the islands, even gaining Baghdad's approval for landing troops in Basra. Yet the sheikdoms rejected hosting Libyan troops on their soil.<sup>267</sup> Secretary of State William Rogers expressed optimism for the situation. By keeping in the background, Washington had been able to contribute to a calm transition into a post-British Gulf in a manner that would allow the Nixon administration to continue fostering long-term stability.<sup>268</sup>

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1971 had seen the first year where the Nixon Doctrine truly sprang into action in the Gulf. Washington had left it to its regional partners, Saudi Arabia and Iran to sort out the outstanding problems in the Gulf. Yet this had produced an uneven result. Saudi Arabia, with the Nixon administration's approval, had delayed the formation of Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE as

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<sup>264</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. November 11, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2632

<sup>265</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. November 17, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2631

<sup>266</sup> Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Eliot) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, December 1, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 110

<sup>267</sup> Mobley, "The Tunbs and Abu Musa", 636. Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States*, 366

<sup>268</sup> Memorandum From Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon. Washington, December 16, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 112

independent entities for half a year. Given the tremendous influence King Faisal had over the sheiks, he had also contributed to Ras al-Khaimah's independence effort, as Riyadh continued to oppose the UAE as long as the Buraimi dispute continued.<sup>269</sup> Iran had spent most of the year threatening to thwart the federation if its claims to the islands were not recognized. The Shah's brinkmanship had eventually gained Washington's support as the Nixon administration feared that an Iranian invasion would undermine the Arab-Iranian relationship that it sought to foster for future stability in the Gulf.

In all, the Nixon administration's tilt towards Saudi Arabia and Iran in Gulf affairs became indicative of a pattern that characterized the period. As Saudi Arabia and Iran were seen as the caretakers of Washington's interests in the Gulf, the Nixon administration tended to defer to Riyadh and Tehran's interests and ambitions for the region. On the one hand, this was a result of Washington not wanting to alienate its two key partners at a critical juncture in the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, this was also a reflection that the Gulf sheikdoms needed to realize that their future security and stability depended on support from Riyadh and Tehran. Hence it was necessary for them to realize, in the interest of Gulf security, that giving up territory was better in their long-term interest. However, as Washington refused to involve itself directly in the dispute, this only reproduced the power dynamics that brought about the impasses to begin with. As a result, the UAE, which proved hard to conform to Washington's vision of the Gulf, was established without the support from either Saudi Arabia or Iran, which the Nixon administration thought necessary.

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<sup>269</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Consulate in Dhahran. November 11, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2632

## **Chapter 5. Making It Work: The Nixon Administration and the Aftermath of the British Withdrawal, 1972**

The end of 1971 had seen the successful finalization of the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, at least according to Washington. While the hopes of a nine-member Federation of Arab Emirates had failed, three new states had emerged: Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Furthermore, Britain had managed to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the islands dispute between the sheikdoms of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah and Iran. While the Iranian landings on the islands had sparked protests in the newly founded UAE, Washington had been generally pleased with the relatively moderate reaction among Arab states. Overall, 1971 had left the Nixon administration in a self-congratulatory mood. Its “overseer” approach of leaving the direct handling of the events to the states involved, only intervening when necessary, had vindicated itself.<sup>270</sup>

While the immediate problems presented by the British withdrawal had been solved in a satisfactory manner, the challenges of long-term problems had emerged. With Britain having ended its stint as protector of the Gulf, the sheikdoms were left to fend for themselves. Washington mainly looked to Saudi Arabia and Iran to protect the newly independent states from allowing Moscow or radical Arab forces to increase their influence in the region.<sup>271</sup> Yet the Iranian invasion of the Gulf islands had resulted in tensions between Iran and the Arab states, preventing Iran from establishing diplomatic ties with the newly formed UAE. Saudi Arabia had refused to recognize the new federation due to Riyadh’s unresolved border dispute with Abu Dhabi.

The current tensions between Washington’s two main partners and the UAE further complicated the Nixon administration’s ability to implement its Gulf policy. Importantly, the US arms policy towards the new sheikdoms had been left untouched in the National Security Decision Memorandum 92. This required action as the immensely wealthy sheikdoms essentially was free to acquire whatever arms they wanted. With Iran and Saudi Arabia viewing the newly independent sheikdoms with skepticism, selling massive amounts of arms to them could prove

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<sup>270</sup> Memorandum From Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon. Washington, December 16, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 112

<sup>271</sup> Research Study. Washington, February 28, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

problematic. How did the Nixon administration approach Gulf cooperation in the aftermath of the British withdrawal? How and why did the Nixon administration shape its policy towards the Gulf sheikdoms? And how would Washington attempt to resolve the problems in the relationship between the UAE and the two Gulf monarchies?

### **The British Hangover**

For Washington, the most important aspect of its approach to the Gulf was the implementation of the decisions in the National Security Decision Memorandum 92 that had been postponed in 1970. In line with its role as the “overseer” of Gulf state interdependence, Washington wanted to develop instruments by which they could encourage further cooperation among the newly independent entities. The first move was to establish diplomatic posts in Bahrain and the UAE, with another planned for Qatar at a later date.<sup>272</sup> The second was the conclusion of a new leasing agreement with Bahrain that would allow the MIDEASTFOR, the small US naval contingent stationed in Bahrain, to remain after the British vacated their naval base on the island.

Washington had gained approval from both Saudi Arabia and Iran prior to the finalization of the agreement with Manama, the capital of Bahrain.<sup>273</sup> The agreement did not change the nature of the US presence in the area, as Kissinger explained to Nixon, the only change was that “the Bahrainis rather than the British are now our landlords”.<sup>274</sup>

Retaining the presence of the MIDEASTFOR was intended to show the surrounding states that Washington was still engaged with the region despite the British withdrawal. This kind of “show the flag”-mission was mainly aimed at Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, giving them a sense of stability in the changing situation. The Arab Gulf states and Iran admitted that the naval force had a stabilizing effect.<sup>275</sup> The Nixon administration was adamant that the continued presence of its naval contingent and expansion of diplomatic representatives did not amount to the US replacing Britain’s role. Rather, the administration hoped that it would help offset Soviet influence and encourage further cooperation among the various Gulf states.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, March 13, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 113

<sup>273</sup> Airgram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, January 5, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>274</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, March 13, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 113

<sup>275</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Manama. February 1, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1690

<sup>276</sup> Telegram 446 From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State. Tehran, January 22, 1972. *FRUS* E-4, 163



Yet the immediate transition into a post-British Gulf proved somewhat tumultuous. Within a month, there had been coups in both the UAE and Qatar. In the UAE, the sheikdom of Ras al-Khaimah, which had refused to join the federation at the end of 1971, had initiated a coup in the neighboring sheikdom of Sharjah. There had been continuous protests in the sheikdom following the Iranian landings on Abu Musa. The sheik of Ras al-Khaimah sought to take advantage of the situation and strengthen his position vis-à-vis the UAE by installing a more UAE-critical leader.<sup>277</sup> However, the members of the UAE had intervened and stopped the coup by force. The forceful response put pressure upon Ras al-Khaimah, which joined at the UAE in early February.<sup>278</sup> The coup in Qatar was less dramatic, with the *de facto* ruler Sheik Khalifa ousting his cousin Sheik Ahmad in a bloodless palace coup.<sup>279</sup>

In both cases, Washington was fairly pleased with how the sheikdoms handled the developments. The response to the coup in Sharjah proved to Washington that the UAE was capable of acting together, with Kissinger characterizing the countercoup as “the first time the UAE had acted in the interest of Gulf security”.<sup>280</sup> The coup in Qatar was seen as contributing to Gulf stability, with Sheik Khalifa being seen as a far more progressive and effective leader than his cousin. London described him as “the most sensible man in [the] Gulf”, a view Washington shared.<sup>281</sup> The Nixon administration was particularly pleased when Sheik Khalifa came out in favor of increasing Gulf cooperation and improving Qatar’s ties to Bahrain. In all, Washington viewed the situation as “cautiously optimistic”.<sup>282</sup>

While this optimism existed, Washington still believed that there existed potential for instability. The events in Qatar and the UAE proved the unruly nature of Gulf politics and Washington looked to the entente between Saudi Arabia and Iran to stabilize the politics of the sheikdoms. This became apparent in the handling of the aftermath of the coup in Qatar. Although Washington was pleased with the new Qatari leader, the Nixon administration worried about the continued presence of the ousted Qatari leader in Dubai.<sup>283</sup> Worrying that the former leader or

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<sup>277</sup> Intelligence Note. Washington, February 4, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>278</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, January 25, 1972. NARA, RG 59, 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>279</sup> Memorandum From Theodore Eliot to Henry Kissinger. Washington, March 2, 1972. NARA, RG 59, 1970-73, Box 2560

<sup>280</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, March 13, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 113

<sup>281</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to Secretary of State Rogers in Australia. Washington, June 28, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 117

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, March 5, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2560

his son might launch a countercoup, which would create an unfortunate precedent in Gulf politics. Washington sought to recruit Saudi Arabia or Iran to intervene with Sheik Khalifa to find a solution to the problem. Seeing the issue as sensitive and wanting to play the “overseer”, the Nixon administration stressed that the initiative to find a solution could not appear to come from Washington.<sup>284</sup>

The initiative failed, as neither Riyadh nor Tehran proved willing to intervene with Sheik Khalifa. The Iranians considered intervening but were reluctant to meddle in conflicts between the Arab littorals at a time when Arab-Iranian tensions still were high following the Iranian landings on the Tunbs.<sup>285</sup> The Saudis appeared to be favorable to the events in Doha. Riyadh had quickly embraced Sheik Khalifa, labeling the coup as “Qatari internal affairs”.<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, Saudi Arabia had moved troops to the Saudi-Qatar border during the coup to “sanitize” Qatar from outside interference.<sup>287</sup> Riyadh’s indication that it would intervene against outside forces made the Saudis unlikely to facilitate any settlement between Sheik Khalifa and his cousin.<sup>288</sup>

The event spelled out wider implications for Washington’s strategy of promoting cooperation among the Gulf states. Iran had severely damaged its ability to cooperate with the Arab states following the seizure of the Gulf islands. In the aftermath of the invasion, Kuwait had frozen its ties with Iran, and the newly formed UAE had started to campaign among Arab states for support against Iran.<sup>289</sup> Tehran was furious over Abu Dhabi’s campaign, believing that it promoted anti-Iranian attitudes among the Arabs.<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, Iran condemned the UAE’s handling of the coup in Sharjah, seeing its inability to prevent the coup from happening in the first place as evidence of the UAE’s unreliability in contributing to Gulf stability. Washington disagreed with Iran’s interpretation, seeing the islands dispute becoming a “philosophical [more] than a practical problem” with Ras al-Khaimah joining the UAE.<sup>291</sup> Iran’s response to the coup in Sharjah was dismissed as reflecting Iran’s lack of understanding for the situation among the

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<sup>284</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Jidda. March 8, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2560

<sup>285</sup> “Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, March 11, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73. Box 2560

<sup>286</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, March 8, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73. Box 2560

<sup>287</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, August 8, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2560

<sup>288</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, March 8, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73. Box 2560. Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, March 12, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73. Box 2431

<sup>289</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tripoli to the Department of State. Tripoli, March 6, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>290</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in London to the Department of State. London, April 4, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>291</sup> Telegram 69032 From the Department of State to the Embassy in France. Washington, April 20, 1972. *FRUS* E-4, 306

Arabs. The division between Iran and the Gulf Arabs reflected the limitations to Iran's ability to play the kind of constructive role Washington wanted Iran to have in the area.<sup>292</sup>

This division was also had consequences for the Saudi-Iranian relationship. Riyadh and Tehran viewed their relationship as important and looked at each other as a common partner in containing the spread of radical forces in the Persian Gulf. Hence, Riyadh had refused from involving itself in the islands dispute, calling for negotiations and, finally, refrained from condemning the Iranian occupation of the Tunbs.<sup>293</sup> While King Faisal's conscious constraint in his approach to Arab-Iranian conflicts and tensions allowed Saudi Arabia to retain cordial ties with Iran, the strong reactions in the Arab world towards the Iranian occupation restrained Riyadh's ability to further develop its relationship with Iran. Saudi Arabia was already fairly isolated among other Arab states, and Washington believed that Faisal had to adhere to Arab opinion to some extent to retain the stability of his own regime.<sup>294</sup> This essentially forced Saudi Arabia into a balancing act where its ability to cooperate with Iran was conditioned on the level of tension in the wider Arab-Iranian relationship.

As a result, Riyadh refrained from initiating any high-level talks with Tehran during 1972. This reflected the 1969 decision to postpone a visit by the Saudi Foreign Minister to Tehran until after Iran had renounced its claims to Bahrain. Even the Shah admitted that the Iranian occupation had unnecessarily damaged his relationship with Riyadh and "embarrassed" King Faisal.<sup>295</sup>

Washington had long been aware of the limits any entente between Riyadh and Tehran faced due to tensions in the overall Arab-Iranian relationship. Already in 1970, the CIA had warned that any Iranian military incursion towards the Arabs would likely force King Faisal to oppose Iran "regardless of the issue".<sup>296</sup> The Iranian occupation of the islands showed the reality of this assessment, further illustrating the limits facing Washington's cooperation strategy.

As the Nixon Doctrine sought foster regional partnerships that could contain the spread of Soviet or radical influence in the region, it was necessary that Riyadh and Tehran were capable of cooperating. Hence, the Nixon administration sought to continue to work towards making the

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<sup>292</sup> Telegram from the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, January 29, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>293</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, December 4, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>294</sup> Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, July 15, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 153

<sup>295</sup> Memorandum From the Director of Central Intelligence (Helms) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, May 8, 1972

<sup>296</sup> National Intelligence Estimate. Washington, April 7, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 140

two Gulf monarchies improve their ties. Given Iran's immense strength vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, the administration believed that it was necessary for the Shah to take constructive steps towards Riyadh, reassuring Faisal of Iran's intentions.<sup>297</sup> Hence, the Saudi-Iranian entente needed to be properly mediated as to not produce friction. Washington explained this to Riyadh, stressing that while they applauded Saudi Arabia and Iran's efforts to increase cooperation, the Nixon administration stressed that this was a two-way street and Iran had to show more flexibility.<sup>298</sup>

In the meantime, Saudi Arabia had emerged as a constructive partner for Washington among the Gulf sheikdoms. Saudi Arabia had become increasingly active in Gulf affairs as the British withdrawal drew closer and had started to show the extent of its influence among the sheikdoms. In addition to its support for the coup in Qatar, Riyadh had pressured the three Gulf states not to establish official diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union.<sup>299</sup> Washington viewed this move as evidence that Saudi Arabia had the ability to contain the spread of Soviet or radical influence in the Gulf.<sup>300</sup> While the Nixon administration applauded Riyadh's desire to play an active role in Gulf affairs, they wanted to refrain from encouraging them to play the "policeman". A heavy-handed Saudi policy would likely draw Washington deeper into Gulf affairs because of Saudi military deficiencies and heavy reliance on American equipment and expertise.<sup>301</sup> Instead Washington wanted Riyadh to pursue its relationship with the Gulf sheikdoms on a basis of "cooperation", which would make it easier for them to accept Saudi tutelage.<sup>302</sup>

Yet, the policy of encouraging further cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia remained the touchstone for the Nixon administration. During high-level meetings with Saudi and Iranian officials, the administration continued to stress the importance of an entente between Riyadh and Tehran.<sup>303</sup> Both Gulf monarchies stressed their intentions of attempting to improve their ties, with the Saudis even promising to seek solutions to the islands dispute that would not damage

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<sup>297</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, May 18, 1972. *FRUS* E-4, 196

<sup>298</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, June 15, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 160

<sup>299</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, February 15, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>300</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, April 16, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>301</sup> Briefing Memorandum. Washington, May 18, 1972. RG 59, SNF 1970-1973, Box 2585

<sup>302</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, March 30, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2585

<sup>303</sup> Telegram 3254 From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State. Tehran, May 31, 1972. *FRUS* E-4, 202

the “solidarity” among the Gulf states. Reconciling the UAE and Iran would clear a major hurdle in further developing cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>304</sup>

At the same time, the Nixon administration feared that if Saudi-Iranian relations did not get back on track, the two could start to engage in a form of competitive cooperation. Washington viewed a confrontation between the two Gulf monarchies as unlikely. Riyadh and Tehran’s shared hostility towards radical regimes, like in Baghdad, would likely make them cooperate in some way. However, given the competing ambitions between the two, with Saudi Arabia wanting to establish hegemony on the Arabian Peninsula and Iran establishing hegemony in the Persian Gulf, the lack of a clear cooperative framework between them further fuel suspicion between the two monarchs.<sup>305</sup> If they continued to assert their influence and disregarding the concern of the other, particularly if Iran continued to assert its influence through military force, it would widen the gap between the two giving Moscow and other radical forces further room for maneuver in the area. This in turn would prove detrimental for the Nixon Doctrine in the region.

### **Arming Gulf Cooperation.**

The final aspect of the National Security Decision Memorandum 92 that needed implementation was the question of arming the newly independent states. Official US policy held that Washington would not provide arms to Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. However, the US did allow American companies to sell insignificant amounts of small arms and ammunitions.<sup>306</sup> As the Nixon administration started to develop its Gulf policy through 1969 and 1970, a consensus within the administration recommended that Washington move to allow for modest amounts arms sales to the sheikdoms. This would enhance their internal security and complement what Britain, the Gulf states’ traditional arms provider, could provide.<sup>307</sup> In the NSDM 92 it was decided that a formal decision on whether to provide weapons and on what condition would be taken based on a paper developed by Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco and the Middle Eastern branch of the State Department. While a policy paper was written, the review meeting to be headed by Henry Kissinger does not appear to have taken place.<sup>308</sup> As

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<sup>304</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, June 15, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2585

<sup>305</sup> Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, September 21, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 122

<sup>306</sup> Letter to Congressman Frank Horton From the White House. February 16, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>307</sup> Memorandum From Peter Rodman of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, December 31, 1969. *FRUS* XXIV, 76

<sup>308</sup> “National Security Decision Memorandum 92” Washington, November 7, 1970. *FRUS* vol. XXIV, 91. Footnote 4

such, the development of the Nixon administration's arms policy reflected the overall Gulf negligence that had characterized other parts of its Gulf policy.

The schedule for the British withdrawal became a guideline for when the Nixon administration addressed its policy. The first major event in this regard was the termination of the Kuwaiti-British defense treaty in early 1971. The administration believed it was necessary to provide arms for Kuwait, in part to deter a potential military threat from Iraq, which claimed Kuwait as part of its territory. Such an invasion could disrupt the flow of oil to Western Europe, thus threatening wider US security interests. As Sisco's report stated, Kuwait had a small but well-equipped military and had through 1970 sought to acquire American arms as a way of diversifying its arsenal away from British weapons.<sup>309</sup> While initially skeptical of entering into a relationship that might weaken Britain's engagement with the Gulf, the Nixon administration made Kuwait eligible for arms credit purchases in early January 1971.<sup>310</sup>

The decision to approve modest arms sales to Kuwait followed the logic of Washington's arms policy to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Scholars have devoted much attention to the US-Iranian arms relationship. Iran had emerged as the largest US arms customer by 1971 and scholars, like political scientist Stephen McGlinchey, have argued that this massive infusion of arms was in part intended to allow Iran to carry out its role as the "sheriff" of the Gulf.<sup>311</sup> While this argument is valid, it followed a broader trend in US policy towards the Gulf in the period. Saudi Arabia had also emerged as an important arms customer in the early 1970s, albeit lagging behind Iran on the quantity and the qualities of the weapons.<sup>312</sup> Through 1970 and 1971, Washington agreed to undertake several modernization programs for the Saudi military.<sup>313</sup> Part of this was to grant Riyadh the ability to better defend itself, but as Secretary of State William Rogers argued, modernizing the Saudi military would enhance its ability to contribute to Gulf security.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Memorandum From Joseph Sisco to Henry Kissinger. Washington, December 2, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>310</sup> Memorandum From K. Wayne Smith of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, January 3, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 92

<sup>311</sup> McGlinchey, "Richard Nixon's Road to Tehran", 841-843. Alvandi, Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah, 62-64. Salberg & Waage, "The Master of the Game", 480

<sup>312</sup> David M. Wight, *Oil Money*, 50

<sup>313</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State. Jidda, June 11, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 152. Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco) to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nutter). Washington, November 4, 1971. *FRUS XXIV*, 156

<sup>314</sup> Telegram From the Department of State and Defense to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia. Washington, March 7, 1970. *FRUS XXIV*, 138

Indeed, the notion of collective defense was important in the Nixon administration's thinking when agreeing to sell arms to Kuwait. In the event of an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, US officials believed that Saudi Arabia or Iran would intervene. However, Kuwait needed to develop the military capabilities that could stave off the immediate invasion until Saudi or Iranian forces could arrive.<sup>315</sup> Hence, the equipment made available for the Kuwaitis had to be compatible with what had been granted to Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>316</sup> As John P. Walsh, the US ambassador to Kuwait argued, strengthening the militaries of the Gulf Arabs would make them better able to enhance Iran's ability to defend the Gulf.<sup>317</sup> As such, the logic of the NSDM 92 guided the development of the arms policy. By helping to modernize the Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti militaries, Washington would make these states more capable of contributing to containing radical forces in the Gulf.<sup>318</sup>

While Washington had been quick to approve arms sales to Kuwait, the arms policy towards the remainder of the sheikdoms was not addressed until the spring of 1972. The aftermath of the British withdrawal had ended up creating a more difficult diplomatic map, as the UAE pursued seven individual arms policies rather than one, making it more challenging for Washington to address its arms policy.<sup>319</sup> Like Kuwait, the sheikdoms quickly started to signal their interest in diversifying their arsenals as their protection treaties with Britain expired. The immense oil wealth the sheikdoms possessed made them a tempting and lucrative market for Western arms manufacturers eager to take advantage of the end of the British arms monopoly in the wealthy region.<sup>320</sup> Particularly Abu Dhabi, the wealthiest of the sheikdoms, was interested in acquiring sophisticated American arms, inquiring about the possibility of buying American F-5 fighter jets and M60 tanks. American arms firms, like Northrop, wanted to cultivate these deals, bringing them to the attention of the Nixon administration. However, to proceed on the deals, the Nixon administration would have to formally agree to provide arms to the sheikdoms.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, August 11, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1762

<sup>316</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, November 17, 1971. *FRUS* XXIV, 108

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, Footnote 2

<sup>318</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, June 11, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>319</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, December 15, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>320</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, January 7, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1774

<sup>321</sup> Telegram From the Department of State and Defense to the Embassy in Kuwait. Washington, April 25, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

This proved a difficult dilemma for the Nixon administration. While the administration had approved sale of small quantities of defensive weapons, like small arms, they considered more sophisticated weapons to be beyond the needs and the ability of the sheikdoms to be unnecessary for their defense. Furthermore, given Abu Dhabi's ongoing territorial dispute with Saudi Arabia over the Buraimi Oasis, the Nixon administration feared that selling offensive weapons, like F-5s or M60s, could damage Washington's more important relationship with Riyadh.<sup>322</sup>

Yet the Nixon administration did not want to give a blanket denial to requests from the sheikdoms. Washington lacked the ability to restrain the sheikdoms' appetite for arms, as the sheikdoms' immense oil wealth allowed them to turn to French or British producers if the Nixon administration declared the Gulf to be off limits to American producers. This would only result in denying American arms manufacturers access to a lucrative market.<sup>323</sup> Furthermore, as US non-resident ambassador to the UAE, William A. Stoltzfus argued, agreeing to sell arms would allow the US to develop more influence in the sheikdoms. This was particularly important in the UAE, where Stoltzfus argued that arms sales could be used to promote military integration between the sheikdoms, which still operated with seven individual militaries.<sup>324</sup>

Hence, striking a balance between these considerations became the main priority when the Nixon administration started to formulate its arms policy in April 1972. As Kissinger stressed to Nixon, the US had to recognize "that our ability to affect the level of arms in the Gulf would be limited". Stoltzfus explained that the sheikdoms "has the money and freedom to buy arms from anywhere".<sup>325</sup> The Departments of State and Defense argued that the policy should aim to give the US maximal control over the weapons provided without denying American firms the ability to operate in the Gulf market.<sup>326</sup> In this sense, the Nixon administration started to develop a policy that sought to accommodate the sheikdoms' freedom of maneuver on the arms market, but at the same time keep as much control as possible over the military ambitions of the sheikdoms. This was particularly addressed to the ambitions of Abu Dhabi, which had launched the most

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<sup>322</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, April 27, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>323</sup> Telegram From the Department of State and Defense to the Embassy in Kuwait. Kuwait, May 9, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>324</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, May 1, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>325</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, August 14, 1972. *FRUS XXIV*, 119

<sup>326</sup> Telegram From the Department of State and Defense to the Embassy in Kuwait. Washington, May 9, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813



ambitious armament program of the sheikdoms.<sup>327</sup> The tensions existing between Abu Dhabi and Washington's two main partners in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia, made Tehran and Riyadh anxious over what type of arms would be provided to Abu Dhabi.<sup>328</sup>

The result of the policy deliberations was the National Security Decision Memorandum 186, signed by Nixon on August 18, 1972. The policy allowed American arms manufacturers to sell modest amounts of weapons that would contribute to the "internal security" of the sheikdoms. The US government would generally not be involved with providing arms but could agree to supply military equipment under the Foreign Military Sales Act as long as it was consistent "with the objective of furthering cooperation among the regional states". Every arms request would be reviewed by the Nixon administration on a case-to-case basis, giving the administration the ability to deny sales of weapons they considered "destabilizing" for the region. Above all, Washington reaffirmed its commitment to encourage cooperation among the Gulf states to ensure security and stability in the region. This required Washington to "continue close consultation" with the "states primarily involved in promoting stability" in the area.<sup>329</sup> In this sense, the NSDM 186 did not translate to the "tidal wave" of arms flowing into the Gulf, as political scientist Stephen McGlinchey have argued, but rather a policy seeking to contain the military ambitions of the Gulf sheikdoms within the frame of wider policy interests.<sup>330</sup>

The NSDM 186 thus reaffirmed Washington's commitment to encouraging cooperation among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait to retain the security and stability of the Gulf. By limiting arms sales to the sheikdoms to equipment that would enhance "internal security", Washington created a hierarchy among the Gulf states in how it sought to foster security in the region. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait emerged as Washington's main partners in the region, with access to sophisticated weapons that would allow them to defend the Gulf if need be. These kinds of weapons were denied to the sheikdoms, because Washington feared that providing them sophisticated weapons would damage its more important relationships with Tehran and Riyadh. This in turn would hamper Washington's cooperation strategy. Thus, the guidelines were intended, as Kissinger aptly put it "[to] protect the role and sensitivities of the British, Iranians,

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<sup>327</sup> Telegram From the Department of State and Defense to the Embassy in Kuwait. Washington, May 4, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>328</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, June 4, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>329</sup> National Security Decision Memorandum 186. Washington, August 18, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 120

<sup>330</sup> McGlinchey "the road to Tehran", 858

Saudis and Kuwaitis”.<sup>331</sup> The NSDM 186 thus helped strengthened Washington’s strategic reliance on Saudi Arabia and Iran by giving them the ability to veto the kind of arms Washington provided to the sheikdoms. This in turn allowed Riyadh and Tehran greater leverage in determining the security needs of the Gulf.<sup>332</sup>

### **The Jordanian Connection**

The formulation of the arms policy also reflected a deeper challenge to Washington’s cooperation strategy in the region. The UAE’s lack of a constructive relationship with either Saudi Arabia or Iran impeded further cooperation among the Gulf states. This was seen as a particularly challenging problem as Washington viewed the UAE as “in [a] state of disarray” and “open to foreign influence from any direction”. Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi, the leader of the federation, had launched an ambitious foreign and domestic policy that alienated the other rulers of the federation.<sup>333</sup> The CIA believed if Zayed was not put on a more constructive path there was a genuine chance that the UAE could break up.<sup>334</sup> Washington wanted Riyadh and Tehran to use their influence to constrain Zayed and protect the UAE from radical influence, but the lack of diplomatic relations between the two Gulf monarchies and the federation had, at the moment, precluded them from playing any constructive role.<sup>335</sup>

Seeing the territorial disputes between Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Tehran as the most severe threats to Gulf stability, the Nixon administration started to look for ways to improve relations among them.<sup>336</sup> Their most immediate concern was the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. Riyadh continued to refuse to recognize the UAE as long as the decades-old dispute over the Buraimi Oasis remained unresolved. Following the renewed confrontation over the area in the spring of 1970, Britain had attempted to negotiate a resolution shortly before its withdrawal. The talks in late-1971 had shown some progress but had ended without a resolution.<sup>337</sup> While

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<sup>331</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, August 14, 1972. *FRUS XXIV*, 119

<sup>332</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, November 6, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813. Telegram From the Department of State and Defense to the Embassy in Abu Dhabi. Washington, August 9, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>333</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, March 28, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>334</sup> Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, September 21, 1972. *FRUS XXIV*, 122

<sup>335</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Kuwait & Jidda. Washington, April 19, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>336</sup> Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, September 21, 1972. *FRUS XXIV*, 122

<sup>337</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, December 16, 1971. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

Washington hoped that the talks would resume in early 1972, Sheik Zayed's decision to establish formal ties with the Soviet Union brought another nadir to the Saudi-Abu Dhabi relationship. While Saudi Arabia had pressured Zayed into freezing his agreement with Moscow, Washington viewed Riyadh's inability to hinder the agreement in the first place as evidence of the necessity to repair Saudi Arabia's relationship with Abu Dhabi.<sup>338</sup>

Thus, wanting to enhance Saudi Arabia's ability to play the role Washington envisioned for Riyadh, the Nixon administration started to review possible ways to restart the talks. Washington swiftly concluded that they would be unable to convince Riyadh to shelve its claims in favor of establishing ties with Abu Dhabi.<sup>339</sup> Furthermore, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Nicolas Thacher concluded that "we have no concrete suggestions for resolution of [the boundary] issue".<sup>340</sup> A consensus emerged within the administration that direct contacts between Saudi and Abu Dhabi officials would be best way to break the impasse. The State Department recommended a two-way approach for Washington to encourage direct contact. First, was to encourage Zayed to take a "first step" in initiating direct contacts with the Saudis. Secondly was to approach high-level Saudi officials around King Faisal and create a consensus supporting resumption of the negotiations. Yet the current level of tensions between the two made Washington conclude that the effort would have to wait a few months. Attempting to bring Faisal and Zayed during the Spring of 1972 would likely produce a similar kind of confrontation to the one that happened in May 1970.<sup>341</sup>

Yet, Washington did not want any direct role in the negotiations. Fearing that taking up London's traditional mediatory role would only damage Washington's relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Nixon administration preferred to retain their "benevolent neutrality". Their approach would concentrate on encouraging direct contact between Saudi and Abu Dhabi officials without addressing any "substantive aspects of the territorial dispute".<sup>342</sup> Instead, the Nixon administration approach Jordan as a possible mediator, as Amman had signaled its interest in playing a more active role in Gulf affairs.<sup>343</sup> King Hussein had emerged as a potential partner

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<sup>338</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, April 17, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>339</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, April 27, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>340</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, April 23, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2857

<sup>341</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Kuwait & Jidda. April 29, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>342</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Jidda. Washington, June 16, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>343</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, May 13, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970, Box 1774

for the US in the Gulf in the wake of the Jordanian Civil War in 1970. Facing diplomatic estrangement in the rest of the Arab world, Amman had turned to the Gulf states for badly needed financial assistance.<sup>344</sup> Jordan had also managed to facilitate direct contact between Iran and the UAE in May and June to lessen tension between them.<sup>345</sup> Combined with Hussein's cordial relationship with King Faisal and Sheik Zayed, Washington encouraged Jordan to attempt to mediate the border dispute between the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The State Department concluded that it "would appear best to keep [the] Jordanians in forefront with USG[overnment] in [the] background."<sup>346</sup>

The Jordanian mediation effort was launched during the summer of 1972. During Hussein's July trip to Abu Dhabi, Zayed had enthusiastically accepted Jordan as a mediator between himself and King Faisal.<sup>347</sup> Throughout the spring, Zayed had stressed to the Americans that he prioritized repairing his relationship with Saudi Arabia, seeing "the necessity of a common cause among Gulf riparians" as more important than the territorial conflict between them.<sup>348</sup>

Washington stressed this to the Saudis, with US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Nicolas Thacher adding that the absence of Saudi influence over Abu Dhabi might result in the sheikdom falling under radical influence. The Saudis agreed to this but stressed that King Faisal had been both generous and patient in his dealings with Sheik Zayed.<sup>349</sup> So, while the Saudis restated their refusal to shelve their territorial claims towards Abu Dhabi, they appeared positive to the prospect of a Jordanian-led mediation effort, which they accepted in August.<sup>350</sup>

Washington was pleased with the developments. The fact that both Faisal and Zayed had accepted Jordan as a mediator was taken as a sign by the Nixon administration that both sides were interested in finding a resolution to the conflict. Another positive note was that the talks seemed to move beyond the Buraimi Oasis, as King Faisal had made a "generous offer" of rescinding his old claims to the oasis in return for a corridor to the Gulf along Abu Dhabi's

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<sup>344</sup> Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, September 21, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 122

<sup>345</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, July 14, 1970. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>346</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Amman. Washington June 6, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>347</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, July 15, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>348</sup> Telegram From the Consulate in Dhahran to the Department of State. Dhahran, February 16, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970, Box 2640

<sup>349</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, July 18, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>350</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, August 8, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

border with Qatar.<sup>351</sup> However, the administration concluded that Faisal's new claim was too extensive for Zayed to accept without damaging the latter's position at home. On his side, Zayed remained committed to a counteroffer the Saudis had ignored earlier. As both the position of Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia was impossible to unite, the Jordanians instead wanted to engage in "exploratory talks" to find new ways to approach the dispute and move beyond the current impasse.<sup>352</sup>

The slow momentum of the talks frustrated Abu Dhabi, which was eager to improve its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Zayed turned directly to the Americans to intervene in the mediation to get the talks underway. The Nixon administration rejected Zayed's suggestion, fearing that it would damage Washington's relationship with Faisal.<sup>353</sup> Instead, Washington urged Zayed to understand that he needed to develop a new proposal which might elicit a response from Faisal.<sup>354</sup> However, fearing that Zayed's faith in King Hussein was slipping, Washington sought to strengthen Jordan's influence in Abu Dhabi by allowing Jordan to resell American-made weapons to the sheikdom. Seeing the Jordanian mediation effort as the best chance to improve relations between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, thus strengthening Gulf stability, approving these sales would allow Jordan to continue to "play the sort of role which would be most awkward for [the] US to play".<sup>355</sup>

In fact, by the end of 1972, the Nixon administration itself had started to doubt King Hussein's ability to resolve the conflict between Zayed and Faisal. The combination of the two rulers' stubbornness in the talks and Jordan's dependence on financial aid from both countries made it unlikely that Amman could produce a formula for a resolution.<sup>356</sup> Instead, Washington continued to stress the common interest both had in resolving the dispute and encourage direct talks between Saudi and Abu Dhabi officials.<sup>357</sup> Despite the meager result from the mediation through the fall of 1972, there were signs that the two countries wanted to improve their ties. This was

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<sup>351</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, July 4, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381. Letter From Hume A. Horan to Joseph Twinam. Jidda, June 5, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>352</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, September 28, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>353</sup> Telegram From USUN to the Department of State. New York, September 28, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>354</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Abu Dhabi. Washington, October 26. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>355</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, November 11, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1813

<sup>356</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, December 22, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>357</sup> Memorandum From Francois M. Dickman to Joseph Sisco. Washington, December 12, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

reflected in Saudi officials informing the Nixon administration in early 1973 that Zayed only had to agree to Faisal's demands "in principle", then everything could be discussed.<sup>358</sup>

Through its effort of fostering reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, Washington remained committed to its role as the overseer of Gulf affairs. They continuously stressed to both sides that a Saudi-Abu Dhabi relationship was more important than their territorial dispute. Yet, Saudi Arabia's centrality in Washington's policy made the Nixon administration careful when approaching Riyadh over the topic. Instead, they continued to urge Sheik Zayed of the necessity of being more accommodating towards Saudi Arabia's demands, particularly as Faisal seemed sincere with his offer of trading the Buraimi Oasis for a corridor to the sea. Instead, they left it to Zayed to develop a position that could bring the Saudis to the table.<sup>359</sup>

In this sense, the Nixon administration helped underwrite Faisal's policy of creating a tutelage relationship with the newly independent sheikdoms. While Bahrain and Qatar had been willing to accept Faisal as the "father of all Arabs", Zayed remained reluctant to bend. The Nixon administration speculated that Zayed sought to negotiate with Riyadh from a position of strength, linking Abu Dhabi's inquiries about sophisticated arms to the territorial dispute.<sup>360</sup> For his part, Zayed wanted to find a compromise, but wanted to avoid sacrificing "Abu Dhabi's essential interests" in restoring relations with Saudi Arabia.<sup>361</sup> Although the Nixon administration was able to keep Abu Dhabi's armament program under control, Saudi Arabia's lack of leverage over Abu Dhabi had brought the relationship to an impasse. Hence, Washington had to engage itself more actively in attempting to facilitate direct talks between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.<sup>362</sup>

In the meantime, there had been considerable progress in the UAE-Iranian relations. Britain, supported by Jordan, had launched a mediation effort to reconcile Abu Dhabi and Tehran. London had explained to Washington that it wanted to see an Iranian ambassador in Abu Dhabi to influence Zayed away from his "foolish" foreign policy.<sup>363</sup> Zayed had also expressed a desire to repair his relationship with the Shah, seeing rapprochement with Iran as inevitable and

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<sup>358</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, January 8, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>359</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in London to the Department of State. London, September 15, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>360</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, January 29, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>361</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, October 28, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>362</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, January 31, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>363</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Secretary of State Rogers in Australia. Washington, June 28, 1972. *FRUS* XXIV, 117

necessary to hinder future Iranian intrusions.<sup>364</sup> Yet Zayed felt unable to move ahead with the rapprochement as long as the other Arab states opposed UAE reconciliation with Iran.<sup>365</sup> Seeing no way to recapture the Gulf islands Iran had seized, the UAE and Jordan sought to convince other Arab states of dropping their opposition to a rapprochement.<sup>366</sup> When the opposition waned, Britain managed to negotiate a rapprochement agreement, where Iran and the UAE agreed to exchange ambassadors and Zayed shelved the UAE's claims to the islands.<sup>367</sup>

The rapprochement between Iran and the UAE was much welcomed in Washington. The development was seen as a major step towards furthering cooperation across the Gulf.<sup>368</sup> Indeed, shortly after the UAE had agreed to exchange ambassadors with Iran, Kuwait, which had frozen its relationship with Iran following the seizure of the Gulf islands, agreed to send their ambassador back to Tehran.<sup>369</sup> Furthermore, Saudi Arabia reengaged with its security cooperation efforts with Iran, as Saudi foreign minister Saqqaf traveled to Tehran. Both Riyadh and Tehran avowed not to let the islands issue come in the way of further cooperation between them.<sup>370</sup> Hence, by the end of 1972, Iran's relationship with the Gulf Arabs was seemingly restored again. As the UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia had acquiesced in his occupation of Arab territory, there seemed to be some accommodation among the moderate Arabs towards Iran's new position in the Gulf.

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1972 had proven to be a fairly undramatic year for the Persian Gulf. The immediate transition into a post-British Gulf had for the most part proven calm. While there had been two coups in Sharjah and Qatar related to the withdrawal, both of these were handled in a manner that strengthened Gulf cooperation. However, the Iranian landings on Abu Musa and the Tunbs towards the end of 1971 had resulted in the year being rather challenging for the Nixon Doctrine. The Nixon administration's effort to foster cooperation had been brought to a grinding halt as Riyadh was reluctant to initiate further cooperation with Iran following the rise in Arab-Iranian

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<sup>364</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, June 11, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>365</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, September 6, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>366</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, September 2, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>367</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Manama to the Department of State. Manama, October 14, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>368</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Kuwait. Washington, October 18, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>369</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, December 11, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>370</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, January 8, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

tensions over the Iranian occupation of the Gulf islands. Iran had also limited its ability to use its influence on the Arab side of the Gulf, as Tehran refrained from intervening to lessen tensions after the coup in Qatar. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia continued to increase its importance as Washington's partner in dealing with the Gulf sheiks, shown through Riyadh pressuring Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE to refrain from establishing diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union.

While Saudi-Iranian cooperation had been put on pause, the Nixon administration sought to integrate the Gulf sheikdoms in its overall policy. The NSDM 186 had created a clear hierarchy in Washington's thinking about Gulf security. The administration pointed to Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait as the main contributors to Gulf security, while Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE intended as the ones needing protection. The policy had opened for modest sales of arms minted on strengthening internal security. The new arms policy was also intended as an attempt to contain the ambitious arms policy of the smaller sheikdoms, fearing that opening for sales of sophisticated US arms would anger Saudi Arabia and Iran as long as the two were in conflict with the UAE. Yet allowing for some sales were intended as granting Washington ways to develop its own bilateral influence with the sheikdoms.

The Nixon Doctrine had also added a new component during 1972 as Jordan had emerged as an auxiliary for Washington's cooperation strategy. The Nixon administration hoped that King Hussein would function as a mediator between the various Gulf entities, help build trust, strengthen cooperation, and improve Gulf security. Seeking to increase Saudi Arabia's influence over Abu Dhabi, the Nixon administration turned to Jordan as a potential mediator to break the current impasse in the Buraimi dispute. Throughout the fall of 1972, Amman had attempted to develop a new formula, but the mediation had progressed slowly. The Jordanian connection was an attempt to overcome some of the difficulties to Washington's cooperation strategy that the current regional dynamic hindered.



## ***Chapter 6. The Rise of the Guardians: The Nixon administration and the Gulf, 1973-74***

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1972 had proven a relatively satisfactory year for the Nixon administration strategy in the Persian Gulf. In Secretary of State William Rogers' foreign policy report for 1972, the Secretary stressed the growing importance of the Persian Gulf for the world economy as the world would increasingly rely on Gulf oil to fuel their economies. To ensure continued access to Gulf oil, Washington would continue to deepen and broaden their relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran as its two main partners in the region. Washington had also started to develop its relationship with the smaller sheikdoms which had emerged as independent at the beginning of the year.<sup>371</sup> Saudi Arabia and Iran remained the two pillars upon which Washington sought to build influence in the region.

The start of 1973 proved more dramatic as both Iraq and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen conducted border raids against Kuwait in the north and Saudi Arabia in the south. Albeit minor incursions, the events marked a development in the US policy towards the Gulf as the center of gravity for instability in the area had moved from the newly independent sheikdoms to north and the south of the region. How did Washington respond to these sudden incursions? What could Washington do to make Saudi Arabia and Iran respond more actively to these threats? How could the sheikdoms, like Kuwait and the UAE, better contribute to the overall state of Gulf stability?

### **Another Gulf Islands Crisis.**

On the morning of March 20, 1973, Iraq attacked and occupied the al-Samita border post in Kuwait, followed by the bombardment of another border post a few days later. The background for the attack was Iraq's attempt to gain control over the islands of Warbah and Boubiyan, which guarded the waterway to the strategic Iraqi port of Umm al-Qasr. The port represented the only outlet to the Persian Gulf that was not threatened by Iran. In the months leading up to the attack, Baghdad had pressured Kuwait to accept a treaty that would increase Iraq's control over the

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<sup>371</sup> Secretary's Foreign Policy Report For 1972 – Arabian Peninsula/Iran Portion, Part 1. Washington, April 18, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

islands, which Kuwait had refused.<sup>372</sup> The attack caused alarm in Kuwait, which ordered a mass mobilization and announced an extensive plan to expand the Kuwaiti military to deter future attacks.<sup>373</sup> Washington concluded that the Iraqi attack was intended to pressure Kuwait into giving up the islands, which was reflected in the subsequent negotiations where Baghdad demanded sovereignty of the islands. The Nixon administration feared that the current crisis had the potential to set off a regional confrontation, particularly if the Iraqis opted to take the islands by force.<sup>374</sup>

For Washington, this novel Gulf islands crisis presented an opportunity to draw Kuwait more firmly into its Gulf cooperation strategy. Since its independence in 1961, Kuwait had developed a balanced foreign policy, seeking closer ties with radical Arab regimes while holding the Americans and their associates at a distance. This was seen as the best method for avoiding a confrontation with Iraq, which claimed Kuwait as part of its territory.<sup>375</sup> Through 1972, part of this outlook had started to change. Washington's burgeoning arms relationship with Kuwait had made the Nixon administration see Kuwait as a potential pillar, albeit a small one, in Gulf stability. Although Kuwait preferred to stay on good terms with other radical Arab states, the Nixon administration noted with satisfaction that its relationship with the sheikdom was solid underneath the surface.<sup>376</sup>

Yet Kuwait's relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran was strained. Kuwait had been frustrated over the two Gulf monarchies' "bulldozer approach" to Gulf affairs, being particularly dismayed over Iran's occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, and Saudi Arabia's continued insistence of territorial compensation for recognizing the UAE. Indeed, the Kuwaiti skepticism towards Washington's main partners in the region had shown when the Kuwaiti foreign minister had doubted either of the two would intervene to pull the "Kuwaiti chestnut out of [the] fire" in case of an Iraqi invasion.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Telegram From the Interests Section in Baghdad to the Department of State. Baghdad, April 9, 1973. *FRUS* Vol. XXVII, 210

<sup>373</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, March 28, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

<sup>374</sup> Intelligence Note Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Washington, April 17, 1973. *FRUS* Vol. E-9, 213

<sup>375</sup> Simon C. Smith, *Britain and the Arab Gulf after Empire – Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, 1971-1981*. (London: Routledge, 2019), 52

<sup>376</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in London to the Department of State. London, January 24, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2432

<sup>377</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, June 15, 1972. *FRUS* Vol. XXIV, 116

This was in fact reflected in both Tehran and Riyadh's reaction to Iraqi incursion. Saudi Arabia had condemned the attack but refrained from further action. The Shah mainly expressed his disappointment in Saudi Arabia's lack of a response to the attack. Although he implied his willingness to intervene, he later pondered to the Americans "how can Iran help Kuwait if Kuwait does not request it?".<sup>378</sup> While part of the two Gulf monarchs' response were attempts not to escalate the situation, the Shah's unwillingness to intervene without the support of another Arab state reflected a moderation of Iran's policy after the backlash created by the occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunbs.<sup>379</sup> Indeed, the embassy in Tehran reported that the Iranians considered it unwise to intervene against another Arab state without another Arab littoral took the lead.<sup>380</sup>

Washington decided to keep a low profile on the dispute, seeing that a direct American intervention could escalate the situation. At the same time, the Nixon administration moved rapidly to address Kuwait's urgent request for arms.<sup>381</sup> Undertaking the Kuwaiti armament program would allow Washington to increase its influence over the sheikdom and better integrate it into Washington's cooperation strategy. Hence, only eleven days after the al-Samita attack the Nixon administration decided to send an "across-the-board" military team to Kuwait to discuss the "entire Kuwait [defense] program".<sup>382</sup> At the beginning of May, the Kuwaitis made it clear that they intended to "purchase virtually all items discussed" with the US military team. This meant a large-scale upgrade in defensive arms but also the acquisition of offensive weapons like the M-60 tank.<sup>383</sup>

The most significant development of the armament program was a general discussion of providing Saudi Arabia and Kuwait with the sophisticated F-4 jet fighter. Part of the arms negotiations in Kuwait revolved around ways to rapidly strengthen the Kuwaiti air force, with discussions revolving around rapid transfers of F-8 fighter jets. However, the Kuwaitis wanted US attachment to provide a sophisticated "follow-on" aircraft at a later date.<sup>384</sup> Combined with a similar request from Saudi Arabia following an attack on a southern border post by the People's

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<sup>378</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran. Washington, June 18, 1973. *FRUS* Vol. XXVII, 19

<sup>379</sup> Telegram From the Interests Section in Baghdad to the Department of State. Baghdad, April 9, 1973. *FRUS* Vol. XXVII, 210

<sup>380</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, April 12, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>381</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, March 28, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

<sup>382</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the US Embassy in Kuwait. Washington, March 31, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

<sup>383</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, May 7, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

<sup>384</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, May 3, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

Democratic Republic of Yemen, the State Department and Department of Defense called for a review to approve the F-4 as the follow-on aircraft.<sup>385</sup>

The review in itself was a major development in US policy towards the Gulf Arabs. Until 1973 only Iran and Israel had gained access to the F-4. As such, considering approving these jets for Saudi Arabia and Kuwait reflected their growing potential as US allies.<sup>386</sup> Both the State Department and the Department of Defense favored approving the sale as it would give Washington increased influence over Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian security until the late 1970s. The Nixon administration would also underscore their interest in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, strengthening Washington's political relationship with the two. As such, approving the F-4s would illustrate that US interests in Saudi Arabia was "of equal importance with those of Israel and Iran".<sup>387</sup>

Given the magnitude of the decision, the NSC needed to approve the sale before Saudi Arabia and Kuwait could be informed. The NSC responded to the request by drawing a distinction between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Kissinger approved of selling the F-4 "in principle" to Saudi Arabia. Seeing Riyadh as an important strategic partner, approving the F-4 would illustrate that Washington was willing to treat the Saudis similar to Israel and Iran.<sup>388</sup> The NSC acknowledged that granting a similar approval the F-4 for Kuwait would allow Washington to draw the Kuwaitis more firmly into the US orbit and strengthen Washington's position in the region. However, Kuwait's "neutralist" foreign policy and their relative novel relationship with the US made Kissinger hold off on a decision.<sup>389</sup>

Ultimately, the Kuwaitis themselves started to change their position on a "follow-on" aircraft, stressing an interest in other, less sophisticated fighter jets than the F-4.<sup>390</sup> While the Embassy in Kuwait continued to recommend open-ended formulations that "in principle" supported the sale of the F-4, the NSC decided that the US were willing to offer a "follow-on" aircraft that was

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<sup>385</sup> Near Eastern Highlights, March 24-30. Washington, April 2, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2493

<sup>386</sup> Mørk, *Between Two Doctrines*, 177-185 & 306-316

<sup>387</sup> Memorandum From Assistant Secretary of State Sisco to Secretary of State Rogers. Washington, May 4, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1868

<sup>388</sup> Memorandum From Harold A. Saunders and William B. Quandt of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) Washington, May 3, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 87

<sup>389</sup> Memorandum From Harold A. Saunders and William B. Quandt of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) Washington, May 25, 1973. *FRUS* Vol E-9, 34

<sup>390</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, June 14, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

“mutually agreed upon”.<sup>391</sup> This effectively ended the F-4 discussion for Kuwait, and resulted in the Kuwaitis agreeing to acquire French Mirage jets instead.<sup>392</sup>

By June, the rest of the US-Kuwait arms deal had been agreed upon and started to enter more specific negotiations. Estimated at around \$500 million, this tentative treaty represented a major shift in US-Kuwait relations.<sup>393</sup> The treaty engaged Washington deeply in Kuwaiti security, giving the Nixon administration influence over Kuwait’s security policy until the late 1970s. Within the span of two years, Washington had become the major arms supplier to three of four major Gulf states, replacing Britain as the chief arms supplier of Kuwait. The decision to approve of major increases in arms sales to Kuwait and provide F-4s “in principle” for Saudi Arabia, also reflected the growing importance of Washington’s relationship with the Arab states in the Gulf. While Iran remained Washington’s most important partner and biggest arms customer in the region, the Nixon administration had started to embrace Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as constructive contributors to Gulf stability.<sup>394</sup>

However, the debate over the F-4s also revealed an underlying disagreement between the State Department and the NSC over the importance of Washington’s Arab allies. State had for the most part been able to execute much of the broader Gulf policy without much input from the NSC. Yet with an important decision like providing F-4s for Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Kissinger had balked despite the Department of State and Department of Defense favoring such a decision. Kissinger’s decision to approve F-4s for Saudi Arabia reflected more a decision of necessity, reflecting Saudi Arabia’s growing importance in the Middle East rather than seeing Riyadh as a genuine partner. Kissinger’s stalling and eventual rejection on approving F-4s for Kuwait seems in part to have been motivated by a fear that Kuwait could transfer the fighter jets to another Arab state and used against Israel.<sup>395</sup> While the State Department had started to view the Saudis and the Kuwaitis as genuine partners for Gulf security, the NSC still held off on fully embracing

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<sup>391</sup> Memorandum To Executive Secretary Pickering From Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Scowcroft. Washington, August 1, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1868

<sup>392</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, April 17, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, ET 1974

<sup>393</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, May 2, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1736

<sup>394</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Tehran. Washington, May 24, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 1868

<sup>395</sup> Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Acting Secretary of State Rush and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, May 29, 1973. *FRUS* Vol E-9, 89

them. This disparity between State and the NSC became even clearer when the Nixon administration started to review its Gulf policy during the Spring of 1973.

### **The Odd Couple**

The twin attack by Iraq and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) that had kicked off the F-4 debate within the Nixon administration had wider implications for US strategy towards the Gulf. For dealing with regional security issues, the Nixon administration mainly looked to Riyadh and Tehran to deal with the issue. While Riyadh and Tehran continued to stress that the differences between them would not hinder deeper cooperation, their relationship failed to evolve beyond such statements.<sup>396</sup> Indeed, Washington was frustrated over their inability to develop more direct dialogue, characterizing their meetings as having "limited success".<sup>397</sup> This lack of a mutual understanding of their respective roles in Gulf security was problematic as the two sought to contain the PDRY, which together with Iraq constituted the most potent threats to Gulf stability.<sup>398</sup>

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran felt threatened by the PDRY's attempt to spread revolution throughout South Arabia. The revolutionary government in Aden supported the Marxist-inspired rebellion in the Dhofar province of Oman as well as engaging in subversive activities against the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen).<sup>399</sup> To counter the threat from Aden, Saudi Arabia had restored relations with North Yemen in 1969 and started to coordinate efforts to subvert the PDRY.<sup>400</sup> For Iran, the PDRY's support for the insurgents in Dhofar held potential to spread to the Gulf and threaten Iranian interests. In the fall of 1972, Iran had moved a small number of troops as well as military equipment to Oman to bolster the regime in Muscat against the PDRY. The move had disturbed Saudi Arabia which disliked the presence of Iranian troops on the western side of the Gulf.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, January 8, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>397</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. April 16, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>398</sup> National Intelligence Estimate Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, June 7, 1973. *FRUS*, vol. E-9, 5.

<sup>399</sup> Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98-101. Mørk, *Between Two Doctrines*, 279-280

<sup>400</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State. Jidda, August 2, 1970. *FRUS* vol. XXIV, 179.

<sup>401</sup> James F. Goode, "Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972-75", *Iranian Studies* Vol. 47, no. 3 (2014), 441-462

For Washington, this common interest in containing the PDRY presented an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and Iran to cooperate closer. This was also the response when the PDRY conducted a raid against a Saudi border post, two days after the Iraqi attack on Kuwait. Saudi Arabia responded by requesting emergency munitions for their F-5 fighter jets.<sup>402</sup> Washington immediately requested that Tehran provide the necessary munitions, believing that the situation was best addressed through a regional framework.<sup>403</sup> Yet the Saudis rejected the notion of requesting arms from Iran, with US Ambassador to Riyadh, Thatcher arguing that King Faisal's "Pride" made him opposed to be "beholden [his] Iranian neighbor".<sup>404</sup> The refusal triggered alarms in the State Department, as Saudi Arabia had earlier accepted transfers of Iranian-owned arms to counter immediate threats from PDRY. Secretary of State Rogers recommended that Washington find ways to improve Riyadh and Tehran's lines of communications, helping them build trust between the monarchs.<sup>405</sup>

From Washington's perspective, both Riyadh and Tehran worked towards a common end in containing the radical forces in Southern Arabia, but their efforts mostly existed independently of one another. This had resulted in a form of competitive cooperation between the two, seeking to outbid each other for influence in the region. This did not risk an outright rupture, but the conflicting visions of what role Riyadh and Tehran was going to play would likely "inhibit any substantial increase in cooperation".<sup>406</sup>

Indeed, Saudi Arabia and Iran had started to bicker over their respective roles. Tehran called out Saudi Arabia for not offering enough assistance to the Gulf sheikdoms to control subversion compared to what Iran was offering.<sup>407</sup> Similarly, King Faisal had started to propose new solutions to the seemingly resolved Gulf islands issue, which infuriated the Shah. Yet Tehran also feared that Saudi Arabia's sudden engagement with the issue was in part intent on

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<sup>402</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, March 26, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>403</sup> Telegram From the Secretary of State Rogers to the Embassy in Tehran. Washington, March 29, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>404</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, April 9, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>405</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassies in Tehran and Jidda. Washington, April 14, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>406</sup> Research Study by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Washington, April 12, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>407</sup> Telegram From Department of State to the Embassy in Jidda. Washington, April 23, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

undermining the recent improvement in Iran's relationship with the UAE and Kuwait following the 1972 reconciliation agreement between Tehran and Abu Dhabi.<sup>408</sup>

The growing sense of strain in the Saudi-Iranian relationship made the administration call for a review of Washington's general policy. Richard Helms, the newly appointed ambassador to Tehran and former CIA-director, argued that Washington needed to play a more active role in Gulf relations to "assure that emotions are kept suppressed" so that the "uneasy truce" between Iran and the Gulf Arabs could be preserved.<sup>409</sup> The NSC staffers and Middle East experts Harold Saunders and William Quandt concluded that Saudi Arabia's inability to play an effective role in Gulf cooperation required Washington to conduct a policy review, seeing that "the US has an interest in helping the Saudis play a more effective role".<sup>410</sup> These concerns resulted in Henry Kissinger calling for a general review of Washington's Persian Gulf strategy in the National Security Study Memorandum 181.<sup>411</sup>

The NSSM 181 sought to review the Nixon administration's Persian Gulf policy, established in NSDM 92 and 186, in light of the developments since 1970. In a reflection for how central Saudi Arabia and Iran had become for Washington's strategy, most of the study focused on the prospect of Saudi-Iranian cooperation, ways to improve it, and how the two might contribute to containing the PDRY.<sup>412</sup> The shifting focus from the Gulf to Southern Arabia reflected the growing sense in the administration that the sheikdoms were moving along fairly well. While there still existed concern for the future stability of Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, neither state faced any immediate threat to their stability.<sup>413</sup> Indeed, the CIA concluded that the PDRY's support for subversive activities in the Gulf sheikdoms, as well as its support for insurgency campaigns in North Yemen and Oman posed at the moment the greatest risks.<sup>414</sup> The NSSM 181 was paired with NSSM 174 and 182, which sought to review US policy in light of the growing importance of Middle East oil and Soviet strategy towards the region.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, July 23, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>409</sup> Memorandum From National Security Advisor Kissinger to President Nixon. April 24, 1973. CREST

<sup>410</sup> Editorial Note. FRUS Vol XXVII, 22

<sup>411</sup> Salberg, "*Conventional Wisdom*", 123-124

<sup>412</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 181. Washington, May 10, 1973. FRUS Vol. E-9, 2

<sup>413</sup> Memorandum From National Security Advisor Kissinger to President Nixon. April 24, 1973. CREST

<sup>414</sup> National Intelligence Estimate Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, June 7, 1973. FRUS Vol- E-9, 5

<sup>415</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 174. Washington, March 8, 1973. FRUS Vol. XXXVI, 171. National Security Study Memorandum 182. Washington, May 10, 1973. FRUS Vol. E-9, 3



The discussions following the NSSM 181 not only reflected different notions about Saudi-Iranian cooperation but also revealed a more fundamental disagreement over Saudi Arabia's position in US foreign policy. As Saunders reported to Kissinger, Washington seemed to be diverging between continuing its reliance on Saudi-Iranian cooperation or drift more towards relying more heavily on Iran to guarantee stability in the area.<sup>416</sup> If Washington was to foster closer relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, this either had to be done by attempting to moderate Tehran to be more accommodating towards cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arabs or find ways to strengthen Saudi Arabia to make Riyadh more capable of contributing to Gulf security.<sup>417</sup>

At the same time, upon Richard Helm's recommendation, Henry Kissinger also called for a contingency plan to address a sudden regime collapse in Saudi Arabia.<sup>418</sup> The plan envisioned that Iran and Jordan, with support by the US, would likely intervene to restore stability in Saudi Arabia in the event of a collapse.<sup>419</sup> Both the State Department and the Department of Defense criticized the plan, seeing it as a threat to Saudi-Iranian cooperation and US-Saudi relations. Framing the Saudi monarchy as potentially unstable would play on Riyadh's sensitivities on being beholden to Iran for their continued hold to power. Furthermore, the consensus within the Nixon administration was that the Saudi monarchy was unlikely to collapse in the near future.<sup>420</sup>

Kissinger dismissed the criticism, stressing that Saudi Arabia's growing importance to the US necessitated such a plan. He attempted to calm officials at State and Defense by arguing that the Shah would not be included in any such conversation as it might "whet his appetite" and indicate that Washington granted Tehran a *carte blanche* to intervene on the Arab side of the Gulf.<sup>421</sup> Even so, Kissinger agreed to establish a backchannel for exploring a Saudi-contingency with the Shah, during the latter's visit to Washington. During the fall, Helms and the Shah held two meetings on the topic, although without result.<sup>422</sup> Kissinger's initiative was a general embrace of the Shah's obsession with Saudi instability and generally reflected a framework that looked to

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<sup>416</sup> "Memorandum From Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)" Washington, July 19, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 8

<sup>417</sup> Paper Prepared by William B. Quandt of the National Security Council Staff. Washington, July 19, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 10

<sup>418</sup> Paper Prepared by William B. Quandt of the National Security Council Staff. Washington, July 19, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 11

<sup>419</sup> Paper Prepared by William B. Quandt of the National Security Council Staff. Washington, July 19, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 11. *Ibid* (?)

<sup>420</sup> Minutes of Senior Review Group Meeting. Washington, July 20, 1973. *FRUS* vol. XXVII, 23

<sup>421</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, July 23, 1973. *FRUS* vol. XXVII, 24

<sup>422</sup> Minutes of Senior Review Group Meeting. Washington, July 20, 1973. *FRUS* vol. XXVII, 23, footnote 7

the Shah to strengthen friendly regimes in the Persian Gulf.<sup>423</sup> The development also reflected the growing US-Iranian covert security relationship that originated with their support for the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>424</sup> Yet in context of the Gulf the initiative was an explicit affirmation of Saunderson's characterization of US policy as drifting towards Iranian primacy.<sup>425</sup>

While Kissinger was leaning towards increasing Washington's reliance on Iran in the Gulf, both the State Department and Department of Defense supported ways of strengthening Saudi-Iranian cooperation. Deputy Secretary of Defense, William Clements, emphasized that US policy remained to develop "an indigenous capability which will ensure stability in the area built on the twin rocks of Iran and Saudi Arabia".<sup>426</sup> However, the current disparity in strength between Saudi Arabia and Iran combined with the disagreement over their respective roles in the area, required further US action to create some form of balance. Iran's rapid military build-up and deployment to Oman had left Saudi Arabia in the unclear about Tehran's intentions, which further fueled King Faisal's distrust.<sup>427</sup>

Hence, the US needed to work to make Iran show more flexibility. As Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco argued "the point is to stress to the Shah that he should do everything he can to strengthen cooperation with Saudi Arabia".<sup>428</sup> In an attempt to achieve this, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Nicholas Thacher sought to facilitate further contacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia over their policies towards Southern Arabia. He coordinated with the US Embassy in Tehran to create a formula that sought to achieve "working level approaches" to strengthen relations over "matters of mutual interests".<sup>429</sup> Thacher's plan would have the Saudis approach the Iranians with specific initiatives. Seeing that King Faisal was unlikely to accept the Shah's desire for a security pact, developing an informal security cooperation in coordinating aid to Southern Arabia seemed like the best option. There were signs of progress, as the Iranians had started to signal their willingness to send aid to North Yemen, which they previously had

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<sup>423</sup> Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, Undated. *FRUS* Vol. XXVII, 25, footnote 1

<sup>424</sup> For more on the Kurdish Operation, see Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*, 65-125

<sup>425</sup> Memorandum From Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). Washington, July 19, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 8

<sup>426</sup> Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff Seymour Weiss to the Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Rush. Washington, May 7, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>427</sup> Annual Policy Assessment, Saudi Arabia, 1973. Jidda, August 1, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>428</sup> Minutes of Senior Review Group Meeting. Washington, July 20, 1973. *FRUS* vol. XXVII, 23

<sup>429</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, April 26, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

rejected.<sup>430</sup> However, as a report written in early August noted that the coordination effort still “smack more of competition than cooperation.”<sup>431</sup>

While this was happening, Riyadh explicitly outlined their future cooperation policy towards Iran. In a major speech by the Saudi minister of Defense and key advisor to King Faisal, Prince Sultan stressed that while the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia was cordial, there were “no need” for a formal treaty between them. Sultan also adamantly dismissed the notion of a “vacuum” being left in the Gulf after the British withdrawal, stressing that the Gulf Arabs were capable of handling their own security. This was a rejection of the kind of security pact the Shah had promoted since the beginning, as Sultan spelled out that Saudi Arabia was uninterested in providing a blessing for Iran intervening on the western side of the Gulf.<sup>432</sup>

Sultan also later revealed that Saudi Arabia was taking steps to coordinate its defense policy with Qatar and Bahrain to improve Gulf security, adding that the UAE would be added to this scheme once the border issue had been resolved. The Nixon administration interpreted the speech as a major assertion of the Saudi role in the Gulf. Indeed, Riyadh’s policy of increasing its security cooperation with the sheikdoms was a clear indicator of Saudi Arabia playing “protectors of [the] “Arabian” Gulf”. This role also limited how close Riyadh could move towards Iran, seeing that a pact between the two would, like the F-5 munitions, stress Saudi Arabia’s dependence on Iran for its security.<sup>433</sup>

While the Nixon administration remained committed to the Saudi-Iranian cooperation strategy, the administration’s dual policy only helped reproduce the cooperative competitive dynamic that characterized the two Gulf monarchies’ relationship. Washington’s simultaneous effort to coordinate cooperation between them and Kissinger’s embrace of Iran as the sole guardian of the Gulf did not move either Riyadh or Tehran beyond the impasse currently locking their relationship. Indeed, Prince Sultan’s speech pointed to the fact that the Arab-Iranian nationalist divide would limit the Shah’s ability to play an effective role on the Arab side of the Gulf without support from Saudi Arabia, which Riyadh was disinclined to do. Underlining this point, the CIA warned that an uncoordinated Iranian intervention into one of the sheikdoms would

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<sup>430</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, April 12, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>431</sup> Intelligence Note. Washington, August 3, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2381

<sup>432</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, July 17, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>433</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, July 24, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

likely force a counterreaction from Riyadh, which would do massive damage to US interests in the region.<sup>434</sup>

### **The Arabization of the Gulf**

While the Saudi-Iranian relationship was entering into a kind of limbo, the sheikdoms, particularly the UAE, had started to emerge as more active contributors to Gulf stability. Washington had from the start looked to Saudi Arabia and Iran to use their influence in the sheikdoms to help them contain radical influence. Indeed, the US had decided to keep a low diplomatic posture towards the area to force the two Gulf monarchies to take a more active role.<sup>435</sup> While this had worked with Bahrain and Qatar, the UAE had proven more difficult to move under either Tehran or Riyadh's thumb. While the UAE had accepted a rapprochement with Tehran, establishing formal diplomatic relations with Iran, Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi had resisted attempts to reconcile his relationship with King Faisal. Instead, he had sought to strengthen his relationship with the US, attempting to recruit Washington to facilitate talks between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. Altogether, Washington was pleased with its burgeoning "working relationship" with the UAE.<sup>436</sup>

Through the fall of 1972 and the spring of 1973, Abu Dhabi had started to signal its intent on playing a more active role in Gulf affairs. Abu Dhabi believed its considerable wealth could be used to improve the economic situation of the surrounding states, which would contribute to overall stability.<sup>437</sup> Furthermore, the UAE's petroleum minister and trusted advisor of Sheik Zayed, Mana Otaiba had called for deeper foreign policy integration between the states of the Arabian Peninsula, stressing that "[the Arabian] Peninsula must be considered as [a] geographic whole, and [a] threat to one state becomes [a] common threat".<sup>438</sup> While Washington welcomed Abu Dhabi's willingness to contribute, the administration for the most part wanted the UAE to focus on strengthening integration between the seven sheikdoms and to reconcile its differences with Saudi Arabia. Even so, the State Department had taken to characterize Sheik Zayed as

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<sup>434</sup> National Intelligence Estimate Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, June 7, 1973. *FRUS* vol. E-9, 5.

<sup>435</sup> Memorandum From Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security (Kissinger). Washington, July 19, 1973. *FRUS* Vol. E-9, 8

<sup>436</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, January 31, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

<sup>437</sup> Telegram From USUN to the Department of State. New York, September 28, 1972. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>438</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, May 12, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2587

“probably in the best position of any leader in the Gulf to contribute to the stability of the Peninsula”.<sup>439</sup>

Abu Dhabi’s developing approach to Gulf stability was noticed in Washington when the Nixon administration started to address the threat from the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. Following the March 22 PDRY raid on Saudi Arabia, reports appeared warning of a possible imminent invasion of North Yemen by PDRY forces.<sup>440</sup> Seeing the situation as a possible threat to Saudi Arabia as well, the Nixon administration started to develop an armament program for strengthening North Yemen. Secretary of State William Rogers approved of a program where Washington agreed to transfer US-produced arms owned by Saudi Arabia and Jordan to North Yemen.<sup>441</sup> The plan envisioned that Abu Dhabi would cover the financing for Jordanian arms and American provided ammo.<sup>442</sup>

Washington hoped to expand on the UAE-Jordanian arms relationship it had sought to organize during the fall of 1972 as the basis for the arms package to North Yemen. The plan would allow Jordan and Abu Dhabi to develop a closer relationship and draw North Yemen closer to the Western camp.<sup>443</sup> Jordan was willing to participate but depended upon Abu Dhabi funds to finance the package. In presenting the plan to Abu Dhabi, the Nixon administration stressed the necessity of addressing the Communist threat in Southern Arabia on a regional basis, with wealthy states like the UAE “bearing the financial costs”.<sup>444</sup> Zayed stressed his “willingness to pay” but required the price on the equipment before agreeing to the transaction.<sup>445</sup> Hoping to leave the agreement to be firmly worked out by the three states involved, Washington continued to prod Abu Dhabi for a firm commitment to finance the agreement. However, as a result of North Yemen’s poor communication with Abu Dhabi and Sheik Zayed’s busy traveling schedule, the agreement entered into a limbo over the fall of 1973.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Memorandum From Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Davies) to the Secretary of State (Rogers). Washington, April 24, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2640

<sup>440</sup> Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Richardson and Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon. Washington, April 16, 1973. *FRUS* E-9, 198

<sup>441</sup> Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Richardson and Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon. Washington, April 16, 1973. *FRUS* E-9, 198

<sup>442</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Yemen Arab Republic. Washington, July 14, 1973. *FRUS* E-9, 201.

<sup>443</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Amman. Washington, July 21, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>444</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, July 30, 1973. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

<sup>445</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, August 2, 1973. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

<sup>446</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, September 4, 1973. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

Washington's attempt to utilize Abu Dhabi's immense oil wealth reflected a new aspect of the Nixon Doctrine. The effort to organize an arms coalition to strengthen Oman and North Yemen where the finances and arms would be provided by local US allies showed a development in the containment by proxy strategy, where the Gulf area seemed stable enough to contribute to containing radical forces elsewhere. This development works along a system of interdependence that came to characterize US-Arab relations in this period. As historian David Wight have argued, Washington sought to utilize the immense financial reserves the states of the Persian Gulf possessed to forward US foreign policy goals by developing closer ties with them.<sup>447</sup> Although the Abu Dhabi aspect of this strategy was slow in emerging, the US had managed to organize a large-scale supply and training effort for North Yemen, mostly led by Saudi Arabia. The scope of the operation, including training in Jordan and Iran for Yemeni troops, illustrated that Washington's strategy of relying on regional partners to handle containment was working.<sup>448</sup> Even so, this aspect of the Nixon Doctrine also showed limits, as Washington sought to establish a similar assistance alliance for Oman. The Nixon administration had warmly embraced the Shah's intervention against the Dhofar insurgency during the fall of 1972.<sup>449</sup> However, their efforts to draw Saudi Arabia in failed, as Riyadh refrained from providing any substantial aid.<sup>450</sup> Abu Dhabi proved more forthcoming offering considerable amounts of aid to Oman, but on the condition that Sultan Qaboos had to affirm the "Arab character of the Gulf".<sup>451</sup> The statement was clearly directed at the Iranian presence in Oman, which was disliked by most Gulf Arabs. Taken together with Prince Sultan's speech on Gulf cooperation, the reluctance to come to Oman's aid in a substantial manner reflected the Gulf Arabs' desire to keep security on the western side of the Gulf Arabized. Indeed, upon learning that Iran wanted to provide air force training for North Yemen, Washington had to intervene to avoid causing Saudi annoyance over the matter.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> David M. Wight, *Oil Money: The Middle East Petrodollars and the Transformation of US Empire, 1967-1988*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 1-9

<sup>448</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jeddah, October 3, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>449</sup> Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 285-289

<sup>450</sup> Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of State (Eliot) to the President's Assistant For National Security (Kissinger). Washington, March 3, 1973. RMNL, NSC, CFME, Box 632

<sup>451</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, April 5, 1973. NARA, RG 59, SNF 1970-73, Box 2517

<sup>452</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. July 31, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

## The Oil Crisis and Embracing the Gulf Arabs

The impasse that had developed in the Nixon administration's thinking on the Gulf Arabs was finally challenged by the outbreak of the October War and the subsequent oil embargo. Egypt and Syria's surprise attack on Israel on October 6 was the starting point for a major crisis in the US-Gulf Arab relationship. The immediate background for the war was the two Arab states' losses during the 1967 war, when Israel had occupied Sinai from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria.<sup>453</sup> Throughout 1973, Egypt had sought to recruit Arab oil producing states to support their planned attack. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Abu Dhabi had started to commit to the idea of cutting oil export to the US should Washington support Israel in the event of another war. The Arabs believed that cutting oil exports to the US would force the Americans to change their policy in the Middle East and take the Arab position more seriously.<sup>454</sup>

Despite numerous warnings through the fall of 1973, Washington did not take the threat of the oil weapon seriously. Part of this was because states like Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi sent mixed messages to the US over their threats. Saudi Arabia engaged in negotiations with Riyadh to deepen the US-Saudi security and economic relationship.<sup>455</sup> Similarly, Abu Dhabi attempted to walk back statements from Zayed stressing that "Oil can serve as [an] important means of promoting understanding of Arab...policy" and that the "UAE seeks neutral US policy toward Arab-Israeli dispute". The Nixon administration interpreted Zayed's statements more as an attempt to "protect himself against attacks on his dedication to Arabism".<sup>456</sup>

These mixed signals were an expression of the Arab Gulf states reluctance to enter into a confrontation with the US unless absolutely necessary. Their decision to commit to a boycott hinged on Washington's approach to Israel after Egypt and Syria's attack. Following the attack, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait warned Washington that any increases in its support for Israel would result in significant cuts in oil exports from the Gulf.<sup>457</sup> However, with the Israeli forces hard-pressed by Egyptian and Syrian forces, the Nixon administration decided to resupply the Israeli

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<sup>453</sup> For more on the Egyptian and Syrian context prior to the October War see Yoran Meital, "The October War and Egypt's Multiple Crossings", 44-56 & Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the October War: The Missed Opportunity", 70-73, both in *The October 1973 War – Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy* ed. Asaf Siniver (London: Hurst & Company, 2013)

<sup>454</sup> MacFarland, *Oil Powers*, 117-122

<sup>455</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, September 28, 1973. *FRUS* E-9, 95

<sup>456</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in the United Arab Emirates to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, September 1, 1973. *FRUS* E-9, 37

<sup>457</sup> Memorandum by the chairmen of Exxon Cooperation (Jamieson), Mobil Oil Cooperation (Warner), Texaco, Inc. (Granville), and Standard Oil Company of California (Miller). New York, October 12, 1973. *FRUS* XXXIV, Energy Crisis, 1969-1974, 212

forces to avoid an Israeli defeat.<sup>458</sup> Kissinger sought frame the decision to resupply Israel as a response to the Soviet airlift for Egypt and Syria, explaining that the Nixon administration “had no alternatives”. The Saudis dismissed Kissinger’s reasoning, stressing that Riyadh’s relationship with Washington “can never be the same again”.<sup>459</sup>

In response to the airlift, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) decided on October 16 to drastically cut oil production. However, as the Nixon administration moved to increase support for Israel a few days later, the OAPEC states escalated by issuing a complete embargo on oil export to the US by October 20.<sup>460</sup> Bahrain, which was not a major oil producer, joined the embargo effort by canceling the MIDEASTFOR agreement, forcing the US to relocate its small US naval contingent currently stationed in Bahrain within the year.<sup>461</sup>

Adding to this, Washington informed North Yemen that the effort to organize an emergency arms package would have to be put on hold due to the high-level of tension in US-Abu Dhabi relations at the moment.<sup>462</sup>

The Gulf Arabs were determined to force Washington to contribute to progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The CIA concluded that King Faisal was the key-figure in the embargo coalition, seeing his willingness to play a leading role in ensuring that the US committed to negotiate a “just” settlement between the belligerents.<sup>463</sup> The sheikdoms underwrote this logic, stressing that they were willing to lift the embargo once progress on a settlement had been made. Yet they were unwilling to move unless Faisal did so first. However, US ambassador to Kuwait, William Stoltzfus reported that Washington’s position among the Gulf states remained intact and that the Nixon administration could increase its influence in the region with a settlement.<sup>464</sup> As to illustrate their willingness to restore cordial ties with Washington, the ruler of Bahrain informed

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<sup>458</sup> For more on the US decision to resupply Israel during the October War, see Zach Levey, “Anatomy of an airlift: United States military assistance to Israel during the 1973 war”, *Cold War History* 8, no. 4 (2008), 481-501

<sup>459</sup> Editorial Note. *FRUS XXXIV*, 216

<sup>460</sup> David S. Painter, “Oil and the October War”, in *The October 1973 War* ed. Asaf Siniver, 176-177. McFarland, *Oil Powers*, 135-136

<sup>461</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Manama. Washington, October 20, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD, Electronic Files, 1973

<sup>462</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in the United Arab Emirates to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, December 16, 1973. *FRUS E-9*, 40

<sup>463</sup> Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington, October 25, 1973. *FRUS XXXIV*, 228

<sup>464</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait, November 23, 1973. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD



the Nixon administration that he was determined to reverse the cancellation of the MIDEASTFOR agreement once the conflict settled down.<sup>465</sup>

Indeed, the US-Gulf Arab relationship mostly followed a form of stiff cordiality through the oil crisis, with certain aspects of their relationship, like security, mostly remaining intact.<sup>466</sup> Saudi Arabia and Bahrain continued to provide fuel to the US Navy.<sup>467</sup> Washington also continued to facilitate the arms relationship between Abu Dhabi and Jordan, with Abu Dhabi agreeing to undertake financing of Jordanian arms purchases from the US.<sup>468</sup> The Nixon administration also agreed to provide a US ship to transport Jordanian armored cars to Abu Dhabi as part of the agreement.<sup>469</sup> These contacts reflected that both the US and the Gulf Arabs wanted to contain the scope of their confrontation, allowing them to keep the door open to repair their relationship again once the oil crisis had settled.

Yet for relations to be restored to normal, Washington needed to make concrete moves towards a settlement before Riyadh would agree to lift the embargo.<sup>470</sup> The Nixon administration concluded early that they lacked the tools to pressure the Gulf Arabs into lifting embargo without a settlement.<sup>471</sup> Instead, Henry Kissinger, who had been appointed to Secretary of State in September, devised a strategy that would illustrate Washington's commitment to create a just settlement, but without fully giving in to the Arabs' demands and preserving Israeli security. Kissinger aimed to do enough so that the Gulf Arabs were satisfied with the progress and lift the embargo. Over the first half of 1974, Kissinger negotiated in a series of "step-by-step" disengagement agreements between Egypt, Syria, and Israel. The agreements resulted only in incremental Israeli withdrawals from Egyptian and Syrian territory and mostly contributed to freeze the peace efforts rather than bring about a "just" settlement.<sup>472</sup> Kissinger's effort was

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<sup>465</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Manama to the Department of State. Manama, November 14, 1973. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

<sup>466</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait City, May 22, 1974. *FRUS* E-9, 42

<sup>467</sup> McFarland, *Oil Powers*, 142-143. Telegram From the Embassy in Manama to the Department of State. Manama, March 3, 1974. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

<sup>468</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, January 30, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>469</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Amman to the Department of State. Amman, February 21, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>470</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State. Jidda, November 26, 1973. *FRUS* XXXVI, 246

<sup>471</sup> Briefing Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and South Asian Affairs (Sisco) to Secretary of State Kissinger. Washington, Undated. *FRUS* Vol. E-9, 39

<sup>472</sup> Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers*, 147-182. For a more detailed account of Kissinger's Shuttle Diplomacy see Salim Yaqub, "The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli Conflict" in *Nixon in the World – American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* ed. Frederik Logevall & Andrew Preston, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 227-248

successful as Abu Dhabi informed the Americans after the first disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt that the UAE would back Saudi Arabia's effort to lift the embargo.<sup>473</sup>

In addition to Washington's effort to move towards a settlement, the Nixon administration also conceived of a strategy to developing closer US-Saudi relations. The strategy built upon the talks during the talks in 1973 to strengthen US-Saudi ties but envisioned an even deeper relationship taking advantage of the immense financial reserves built up during the crisis.<sup>474</sup> Kissinger broached the idea to King Faisal during his March 2 visit to Riyadh, offering to start talks on "long-term cooperation in the military field".<sup>475</sup> The Nixon administration hoped that going "all out with the Saudis" would encourage Riyadh to soften its stance on the embargo.<sup>476</sup> The effort seemed to work, as King Faisal started to soften his position on a disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel, stressing that progress rather than a firm agreement was enough to lift the embargo. This was also the reasoning given when OAPEC agreed to lift the embargo on March 18.<sup>477</sup> Meanwhile, the Nixon administration continued to seek a deeper relationship with Riyadh, issuing the National Security Study Memorandum 198 to develop programs for deepening US-Saudi ties.<sup>478</sup>

The strengthening of the US-Saudi relationship wanted to strengthen Saudi Arabia's ability play a role in the region. The Nixon administration continued to emphasize the Saudi-Iranian entente as a framework, but argued that it was necessary to treat Riyadh and Tehran as equals to avoid triggering suspicion that the US was "building up Iran to dominate the Arabs".<sup>479</sup> Indeed, this had been one of the major impediments for fostering a close Saudi-Iranian relationship. Riyadh had feared that entering into an alliance with Tehran would appear to grant the Iranians a "carte blanche" for intervention on the Arab side of the Gulf. Furthermore, treating them as equals would avoid presenting Saudi Arabia as the junior partner in the Saudi-Iranian relationship. The Shah generally welcomed Washington's decision to deepen its ties with Saudi Arabia, seeing the

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<sup>473</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, February 9, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>474</sup> Telegram From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) and Charles A. Cooper of the National Security Council Staff to Secretary of State Kissinger in Damascus. Washington, March 1, 1974. *FRUS* E-9, 101. Wight, *Oil Money*, 71-72

<sup>475</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Riyadh, March 2, 1974. *FRUS* XXXVI, 332

<sup>476</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Clements). Washington, March 7, 1974. *FRUS* XXXVI, 335

<sup>477</sup> McFarland, *Oil Powers*, 148-151

<sup>478</sup> National Security Memorandum 198. Washington, March 12, 1974. *FRUS* Vol. E-9, 18

<sup>479</sup> Memorandum From Director of Central Intelligence Coly to the President's Assistant for National Security (Kissinger). Washington, April 24, 1974. *FRUS* E-9, 108

development as a major contributor to Gulf stability.<sup>480</sup> However, as an intelligence report concluded in late May, the Saudi-Iranian relationship was “not likely to ever become close” although both states understood that they needed to avoid actions that would cause deterioration of Gulf stability.<sup>481</sup>

Washington’s new relationship with Saudi Arabia also extended to the Gulf sheikdoms as well. The Nixon administration emphasized that they looked to Saudi Arabia to stabilize the Gulf sheikdoms and help build “a permanent peace in the area”.<sup>482</sup> To help Saudi Arabia’s effort to strengthen North Yemen, Washington finally managed secure Abu Dhabi’s commitment to finance an arms package as well as military training for Yemeni personnel in Jordan.<sup>483</sup> Bahrain also signaled their interest in Washington undertake a military modernization program to improve Bahrain’s security.<sup>484</sup> The program was adopted into the US-Saudi security cooperation, with Washington agreeing to provide the military equipment that would strengthen Bahrain’s internal security and Riyadh financing much of the program.<sup>485</sup> The closer coordination of Washington’s foreign policy towards the Gulf sheikdoms with Riyadh moved the Nixon administration away from its traditional indirect approach of “benevolent neutrality” to a more direct approach. Yet by firmly appointing Saudi Arabia as the second guardian of the Gulf, Washington also came to rely even more heavily on Riyadh’s interest towards the sheikdoms.

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The two final years of the Nixon administration had proven transformative for the Nixon Doctrine. The growing threat from Iraq and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen to the Gulf had resulted in a large expansion of US interests and engagement in the Gulf. The Nixon administration had sought to firmly draw Kuwait into the Western orbit in the Gulf following the Iraqi border attack in March. Similarly, Washington had helped Saudi Arabia put together a regional coalition to strengthen North Yemen against threat from the PDR. The US would help resupply arms that coalition partners sent to North Yemen, with financing for the operation

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<sup>480</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State. Tehran, June 26, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>481</sup> Interagency Intelligence Memorandum. Washington, May 31, 1974. *FRUS* E-9, 21

<sup>482</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Washington, June 6, 1974. *FRUS* E-9, 110

<sup>483</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Sanaa to the Department of State. Sanaa, April 11, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

<sup>484</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Manama to the Department of State. Manama, June 24, 1974. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

<sup>485</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State. Jidda, November 17, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

provided by Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. The utilizing of the Gulf Arabs immense wealth to finance containment efforts was a new aspect of the Nixon Doctrine and reflected Washington's willingness to recruit the Gulf sheikdoms into its containment by proxy scheme. In this sense, 1973 did see the year when Washington fully emerged as the "overseer" of Gulf affairs.

Yet the period had also seen the central aspect of the Nixon Doctrine continue to falter. The Saudi-Iranian entente, which had been the centerpiece of Washington's strategy towards the Gulf since 1970 had failed to develop into a cohesive cooperative relationship. As the two sought to contain the PDRY, Riyadh and Tehran mostly engaged in a form of competitive cooperation, competing over influence while working towards a common goal. The failure of the two to cooperate forced the Nixon administration to intervene in the relationship to attempt to facilitate and coordinate their cooperative effort, although without much success. With the NSC favoring Iranian primacy for Gulf security, the Nixon administration itself was contributing to the competitive cooperative dynamic continuing. Washington's support for the Shah would make it difficult to make Tehran more flexible in its approach to Saudi Arabia, which was necessary as Riyadh was starting to assert its role in the Gulf.

The impasse in the strategy was finally broken by the Oil Crisis. The Nixon administration's embrace of Saudi Arabia as an equal partner in the Gulf and the Middle East as a way to ease the Gulf Arabs' willingness to uphold the oil embargo left the Nixon Doctrine intact through the crisis. By increasing policy coordination with Saudi Arabia towards the Gulf sheikdoms, Washington fully embraced Saudi Arabia as the second Twin Pillar. Yet it also ended the Nixon administration's indirect approach that limited their relations to the sheikdoms basing itself on guessing what would be acceptable for Riyadh. The post-Oil Crisis strategy retained its cooperative framework for the Gulf, but the Nixon administration had come to admit that the Saudi-Iranian entente would require more heavy work through US bilateral ties with each of the two Gulf monarchies to function properly.

## ***Chapter 7. The Guardians of the Western Lifeline***

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On August 8, 1974, under increasing pressure from the Watergate investigation, Richard Nixon resigned as President of the United States.<sup>486</sup> Two months before his resignation, Nixon had been the first President in US history to visit Saudi Arabia as part of his 1974 Middle East tour.<sup>487</sup> During his meeting with King Faisal, Nixon stressed the deep friendship that existed between the United States and Saudi Arabia. He reiterated Washington's interest in Riyadh being the "watchman" over the smaller Gulf sheikdoms, to help strengthen and support them. Furthermore, Nixon implied to Faisal that he should help furnishing arms to friendly states in the area by ordering "extra amounts" of arms.<sup>488</sup> The meeting bears some resemblance to the Tehran Summit in May of 1972, when Richard Nixon "anointed" the Shah of Iran as the guardian of the Persian Gulf by asking him to "protect me".<sup>489</sup> Although Faisal and Nixon never developed the close relationship the President enjoyed with the Shah of Iran, the meeting and Nixon's references to Faisal's role illustrates Saudi Arabia's growing importance to the Nixon Doctrine in the Persian Gulf.

As if to further stress Saudi Arabia's importance to Gulf affairs, news arrived a month after Nixon's departure from Riyadh that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had resolved their border dispute. Mediated by Qatar, which hoped to moderate Abu Dhabi's support for radical Arab states, the agreement gave Saudi Arabia a "window on the Gulf" by Abu Dhabi seceding territory close to its border with Qatar in return for Riyadh shelving its claim to the Buraimi Oasis.<sup>490</sup> The news was welcomed as a major win for US interests. The reconciliation between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh was seen as allowing Saudi Arabia to exercise more influence over the UAE to moderate its foreign policy and strengthen the federative integration. The agreement also served as guidance for Iran to seek diplomatic solutions in dealing with the sheikdoms rather than relying on brinkmanship and threat of "armed confrontation".<sup>491</sup> Kissinger sent congratulatory notes to

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<sup>486</sup> For an account of the Watergate Scandal see Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014)

<sup>487</sup> McFarland, *Oil Powers*, 1

<sup>488</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Jidda, June 15, 1974. *FRUS* E-9, 113

<sup>489</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Tehran, May 21, 1972. *FRUS* E-4, 201. For this interpretation of the Tehran Summit see for example: Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*, 62-64

<sup>490</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Kuwait to the Department of State. Kuwait City, August 12, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-1979, AAD

<sup>491</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Abu Dhabi to the Department of State. Abu Dhabi, August 7, 1974. NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1973-79, AAD

Saudi Arabia and the UAE stressing that the agreement would “do much to strengthen stability throughout the area”.<sup>492</sup>

Coming at the very end of Richard Nixon’s presidency, the Jeddah Accords, as the agreement between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is known, marked the resolution of the final border dispute left by the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf.<sup>493</sup> As the accords had been negotiated and mediated solely by Gulf states, it proved a final success for the Nixon Doctrine prior to the President’s resignation.

This thesis has explored the Nixon administration’s approach to the Persian Gulf in the lead up to and the aftermath of the British withdrawal from the region. It has looked at how Washington sought to approach the changing situation in the Gulf and the emerging states in the region by leaning on its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran to foster stability in the area. The thesis has seen this policy as an expression of the Nixon Doctrine, which was an attempt by the Nixon administration of transferring the responsibility of containing Soviet influence in the Third World to regional powers by furnishing them with arms and support to allow them to carry out this role.

For the Persian Gulf, the Nixon Doctrine manifested itself in two ways. First, the US sought to foster political stability by supporting Britain’s attempt to negotiate a federation between the nine sheikdoms. This would allow these polities to be better able to fend for themselves following the British withdrawal and give them mechanisms to manage the cornucopia of different rivalries that existed between them. To supplement this, the Nixon administration sought to encourage Iran and Saudi Arabia to use their influence with the states to “guide” and “protect” them against the radical influence once they became independent. The effect of Gulf state interdependency was meant to underscore the necessity of cooperation between the sheikdoms and the regional powers to ensure stability. The policy would also leave it to the Gulf states to resolve major differences between themselves.

Secondly, the Nixon administration sought to facilitate the creation of some form of regional security cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although Washington’s two allies

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<sup>492</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Abu Dhabi. Washington, July 31, 1974. RMNL, NSC CFME, Box 632

<sup>493</sup> Smith, *Britain and the Arab Gulf after empire*, 84-85

possessed widely different military capabilities, their cooperation was seen as essential to retain stability in the region. An understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia would make it easier for both states to contain the spread of radical forces, and in extreme cases handle the rise of a radical regime in one of the sheikdoms without triggering a wider confrontation. The hope was that such a scheme could result in closer security cooperation with Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE over time. To strengthen this potential, Washington approved of selling arms that were compatible with what was made available to Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In line with its newfound role as the “overseer”, the Nixon administration actively sought to facilitate these two aspects of the Nixon Doctrine. However, neither Washington’s concept of Gulf state interdependence nor a security framework based on a Saudi-Iranian entente fully emerged. Part of this was Washington’s reliance on Saudi Arabia and Iran to guide their policy towards the sheikdoms. Both Gulf monarchies had their own ambitions for the Gulf, with the Shah wanting to establish Iran as the hegemon of the area, while King Faisal wanting to establish himself as the master of the Arabian Peninsula. Both Riyadh and Tehran made the sheikdoms’ acceptance for their ambitions the conditions for the two Gulf monarchies’ support their attempt to form a federation. Washington’s own position of benevolent neutrality, encouraging the states involved to take constructive steps to increase cooperation and resolve dispute, tended to come with a tilt favoring the position of the two Gulf monarchies. In the interest of Gulf security, Washington favored Iran and Saudi influence in the sheikdoms over the latter’s territorial integrity.

The inefficiency of this approach came most clearly to fore in Washington’s approach to the Gulf islands dispute in the fall of 1971. As the date for the British withdrawal drew close, the Shah started to threaten that he would seize the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs from the Trucial Emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, unless London accepted his latest demands. Washington feared that such a scenario could disrupt Arab-Iranian relations at a critical juncture and even undermine the United Arab Emirates that was close to forming. As a result, the Nixon administration tried to pressure London into accepting the Shah’s ultimatum as the best possible solution. London ignored Washington’s pressure and negotiated a compromise over the three islands. Part of the compromise acquiesced in Iran’s forceful seizure of the Tunbs, which Tehran claimed the day after Britain departed. The backlash in the Arab world against the Iranian

landing clearly demonstrated the limits in relying on Iran power to uphold stability on the western side of the Gulf, as Arab-Iranian relations froze for most of 1972. Indeed, during the next Gulf islands crisis between Iraq and Kuwait in 1973, Iran was reluctant to intervene without another Gulf littoral state doing so first, fearing backlash.

Benevolent neutrality also helped reproduce the power dynamics at play in the region. This was apparent in Washington's approach to the Buraimi Oasis dispute between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. Following the reignition of the dispute in the spring of 1970, King Faisal made a resolution of the dispute the as condition for his support for a federation among the sheikdoms. As Britain was neither willing nor able to negotiate a resolution prior to its departure, the UAE emerged without a formal diplomatic relationship with Saudi Arabia. Seeing Saudi influence as crucial to stabilizing and "controlling" the UAE, Washington sought to facilitate a reconciliation between the two. However, unwilling to involve itself, the Nixon administration looked to Jordan as a potential mediator in the conflict. While accepted by both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the Jordanian mediation effort proved far less successful than hoped. Neither Riyadh nor Abu Dhabi were willing to alter their position to reach a compromise, and Jordan, relying on aid from both countries, was in no position to alter the position of either of them.

This deference to the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran had clear influence on Washington's decisions when formulating policy towards the Gulf sheikdoms. This was especially clear in the formulation of NSDM 186, which formalized Washington's arms policy towards the Gulf sheikdoms. The new policy was an attempt to contain the newfound freedom on the arms market by the wealthy sheikdoms, especially Abu Dhabi. The administration feared that allowing Abu Dhabi to buy sophisticated equipment from the US would anger Saudi Arabia, as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had not resolved the Buraimi dispute. Yet Washington opened for selling arms minted for strengthening internal security partially to strengthen Washington's influence in the region, although these had to be cleared by Riyadh and Tehran before approval. The NSDM 186 also illustrated Washington's thinking in Gulf security, as the policy made a clear distinction between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, which the Nixon administration had come to view as a potential third partner in Gulf security and the sheikdoms. The first three were seen as able to directly contribute to Gulf security, while the sheikdoms were the ones needing security.



Washington's other main priority, the creation of a Saudi-Iranian entente as a framework for Gulf security fell hostage to the Arab-Iranian nationalist divide. The Nixon administration had adopted the idea of a Saudi-Iranian entente as a central feature of its policy in response to a seemingly burgeoning cooperative relationship between the two. However, while Washington remained committed to encouraging this kind of cooperation throughout the period, Tehran and Riyadh never fully developed a mutual understanding of their relationship. Tehran wanted a formal security pact with Riyadh, seeing this as necessary to bolster the Saudi regime, which the Shah perceived as unstable. In this sense, the security pact was part of the Shah's policy of establishing Iranian hegemony in the Gulf after the British withdrawal, with Saudi Arabia as a junior partner.

Yet Riyadh was reluctant to enter into a formal security pact with Iran. King Faisal, who sought to establish Saudi Arabia as the guardian of the Arabian Peninsula, sympathized with the Shah and wanted to cooperate on security. Yet wanting to assert Saudi Arabia's role in the region, Riyadh could not appear as being dependent on Iranian security guarantees. Adding to this, the Gulf Arabs were skeptical of Iranian intentions in the Gulf, particularly Tehran's territorial claims to Bahrain, Abu Musa and the Tunbs, which were considered "Arab territory". Indeed, Riyadh had held off on approaching Iran on security matters until Tehran had shelved its claims to Bahrain. Saudi Arabia's desire to cooperate with Tehran was reflected through its benign negligence towards the Gulf islands dispute, several times stressing that Iran's conflict with the Trucial Emirates of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah would not hinder further cooperation between them. However, as the two Gulf monarchies failed to move beyond this benign negligence and develop deeper dialogue.

Instead, Riyadh and Tehran developed a form of competitive cooperation, seeking to outbid each other for influence in the Gulf. Iran asserted its position in the Gulf by seizing Abu Musa the Tunbs and intervening in Oma. The Gulf Arabs interpreted this as an attempt to Iranianize the Gulf, which further fueled Arab suspicion and inhibited Saudi Arabia's ability to cooperate with Iran. This dynamic was brought into full view when Riyadh rejected an attempt to transfer emergency F-5 munitions from Tehran to Saudi Arabia. While Washington attempted to foster dialogue between them, the Nixon administration's own policy only locked them further in competitive cooperation. The role granted Iran in Kissinger's Saudi-contingency plan signaled to

the Shah that Washington looked to Iran as its primary partner and protector in the Gulf. Although Washington sought to signal Saudi Arabia's importance, such as approving the sale of F-4 to Riyadh, the process of fully adopting Riyadh as an equal partner progressed slowly. First during the Oil Crisis in 1973-74, did Riyadh manage to force Washington to fully embrace Saudi Arabia as the guardian of the Gulf Arabs.

Competitive cooperation does not in itself translate to a prelude to the bitter rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that emerged after 1979. The deep and bitter religious and ethnic divides that has fueled the post-revolutionary Saudi-Iranian rivalry was not present in the relationship during the reign of the Shah.<sup>494</sup> Rather, competitive cooperation was characterized by different understandings of Riyadh and Tehran's respective roles in the area that in turn was fueled by each states' adherence to Arab and Iranian nationalism. The two shared common concerns over the threats posed by the revolutionary regimes in Iraq and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Yet this amounted more to solidarity between two conservative monarchs rather than the two Cold War partners Washington wanted to foster cooperation between. Indeed, by the end of the Nixon administration, the Saudi-Iranian entente needed US bilateral coordination to function more effectively.

The failure to make Saudi Arabia and Iran overcome their differences to join together as Cold War allies in some ways mirror earlier attempts by the US to enforce Cold War bipolarity onto different regional contexts. As historian Salim Yaqub has shown the Eisenhower Doctrine failed to produce a cohesive coalition of conservative Arab states to oppose Nasser in part because of regional contexts and deep-seated suspicion between the Arab state hindered them in fostering closer ties.<sup>495</sup> Similarly, the Nixon Doctrine failed to produce a functioning Saudi-Iranian entente because of each states unwillingness to move beyond their perceived regional role, which to an extent clashed with the other's. As such, the Nixon administration slowly evolved its approach to the Gulf, by seeking to draw other willing states into its attempt to foster Gulf cooperation.

The response to the Iraqi attack on Kuwait in 1973 was one such event. With help from Saudi Arabia and Iran not forthcoming, the Nixon administration agreed to sell Kuwait sophisticated

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<sup>494</sup> On the Saudi-Iranian rivalry after 1979 see for example: Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia & Iran – Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013). Katherine Havery, *A Self Fulfilling Prophecy – The Saudi Struggle For Iraq*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2021)

<sup>495</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 5-6

arms in an effort to bolster Kuwaiti security. Thinking more long-term, the Nixon administration hoped that selling arms to Kuwait would allow Washington to draw the Kuwaitis more firmly into its cooperation scheme with the other Gulf states. Another example was Washington's willingness to draw Jordan into its policy in an attempt to bolster Gulf security by having King Hussein play the middleman between the various Gulf states. While Jordan's effort to mediate between Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia failed, the Nixon administration did succeed in facilitating a mutually beneficial arms relationship between Abu Dhabi and Jordan.

For the Gulf Arabs, the evolution of the coordination role culminated in the Nixon administration's effort to recruit a regional coalition to furnish emergency arms supplies for North Yemen. With the threat of a potential invasion from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen against North Yemen, which could also threaten Saudi Arabia, the Nixon administration approved of supplying emergency arms to Sana'a. The policy would mainly rely on transfers of US-produced arms from Saudi Arabia and Jordan, with the US supplying ammunition and replacement parts. The entire operation would rely on financing from Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi to pay for the arms donated to North Yemen and the replacement to the donors. Washington attempted to organize a similar coalition for Oman, but the Iranian presence in the area made the Gulf Arabs reluctant to embrace Oman.

Combined with the attempt to foster a Saudi-Iranian entente, the efforts to organize various containment schemes in and around the Gulf were signs of the Nixon Doctrine developing from merely relying on regional partners to retain stability to actively coordinating and supporting regional attempts to contain, destabilize, and in some instances overthrow radical regimes. For the Gulf context this was also illustrated through Iran's intervention in Oman and Iraqi Kurdistan. Globally this was seen through US support for covert counterinsurgency and containment schemes such as Operation Condor in Latin America or the Safari Club in Africa, of which the latter counted Iran and Saudi Arabia as its members.<sup>496</sup> As such, the relationship the Nixon administration had started to foster with the Gulf Arabs during the early 1970s was a

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<sup>496</sup> On Operation Condor see John Dinges, *The Condor Years – How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents*, (New York: The New Press, 2004). The literature on the Safari Club is fairly scant but for an example see Farid Boussaid, "Brothers in Arms: Morocco's Military Intervention in Support of Mobutu of Zaire During the 1977 and 1978 Shaba Crises", *International History Review* 41, no. 1 (2021), 185-202

prelude to the Reagan administration's cooperation with Riyadh to supply arms for the Afghan Mujahedeen during the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s.<sup>497</sup>

Through its newfound role as the overseer, the Nixon Doctrine helped reinvigorate American power abroad. In the period between 1969 and 1974, Washington had become more active in Gulf affairs than at any point in its history. By 1973, Washington had emerged as the primary arms supplier of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, and was developing more modest supply relationships with Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. As such, the Nixon administration had started to replace and chip away at important tools for the continued role Britain wanted to play in the Gulf after its withdrawal, gradually replacing the *Pax Britannica* with a *Pax Americana*, although this transformation only gained pace after the Iranian Revolution.<sup>498</sup>

This gradual transition was partially a result of the co-opting nature of the Nixon Doctrine. By transferring the responsibility for preserving US interests in the Persian Gulf to the regional states, Washington came to see its own interests in line with the interests of states like Saudi Arabia and Iran. In turn, the two Gulf monarchies sought to utilize American power in support of their own ends, thus having the Nixon administration underwrite the regional ambitions of Riyadh and Tehran. The appointment of Iran and Saudi Arabia as Washington's guardians helped produce historic outcomes that without the co-opting dynamic produced by the Nixon Doctrine might have unfolded differently. Hence, the period between 1969 and 1974 might be termed the Nixonian moment in the Persian Gulf.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> Wight, *Oil Powers*, 228-232

<sup>498</sup> Olav Njølstad, "Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in US Strategic Planning in the Carter Years", *Cold War History* 4, no. 3 (2004), 21-55

<sup>499</sup> For similar co-opting patterns in US diplomatic relations during the Nixon administration see. Tanya Harmer, "Fractious Allies: Chile, the United States, and the Cold War, 1973-76", *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 1 (2013), 109-143. Fibiger, "The Nixon Doctrine and the Making of Authoritarianism in Island Southeast Asia", 954-989



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