

The Gibraltar That Never Was. [Paper presented to the British World conference, Bristol, 11–14 July 2007, originally titled “A Rigid Conception of Britishness: Imperialism, Local Regionalism and Transnational Links among the British of Basra and Abadan, 1890–1940” and published here with an epilogue on the contemporary geopolitics of the Shatt al-Arab delta and some reflections on current British and US policies.]

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They are more British than the British themselves. During the course of history, this description has been allotted to the inhabitants of many areas of the world: the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, New Zealand, Australia, Canada (particularly British Columbia), Natal, and Trinidad may be the most famous examples. Somewhat more surprising contestants in the field include places like Fiji, Barbados, and Singapore. But doubtless among the least-known areas on this list is Basra in Iraq.

Less than one hundred years ago, the elites of Basra were in fact famous for their Anglophile attitudes. They even made a determined effort to become a part of the British Empire, preferably as a crown colony. In 1921, commercial elites of Basra fronted a project to establish the fertile and strategic strip of land from Fao to Qurna as a separate cosmopolitan republic under British protection. The Basra separatist movement, as it was known, remained influential throughout the 1920s. It enjoyed the support of most leading merchants and landowners of the city, representing a cross-section of ethnic and religious communities – Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, Christians and Jews.¹

At the time, this kind of vision of a future “Gulf state” partnership with Britain was not restricted to Basra. Neighbouring Kuwait was an obvious parallel (as well as a more successful one.) But even right across the river, in Muhammara in Persia, a local shaykh – Khaz‘al ibn Jabir – had similar ambitions, albeit based on a somewhat more traditional political platform of tribal values. This pro-British project proved even more enduring than the one in Basra: as late as in 1942, local intellectuals evoked the unique loyalty to Britain shown historically by the Arabs of Iran as they made the case for the “Elam Arab Republic” – covering the Arab-majority areas of south-western Iran and including the vital refinery island of Abadan next door to Muhammara – to be established under British protection.²

In contrast to what developed in Kuwait, official British policy turned against these two projects at Basra and Abadan soon after their inception. In the case of Basra, British authorities in Baghdad were overwhelmingly in favour of a large state extending from the Gulf to the Kurdish mountains – above all because they considered this the minimum of territory required to constitute a “viable” political entity. Similarly, the autonomy-seeking shaykh of Muhammara was ultimately let down, as London decisively aligned itself with the central Persian government in Tehran in 1925, abandoning its long-standing policy of providing guarantees that Khaz‘al would remain at least semi-independent. In both cases, Whitehall rejected advances by local communities with pro-British inclinations, in favour of regimes

¹ This project is covered in Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2005.

² Petition signed by Mahmud, secretary of the Arab State of Elam Party, 4 October 1941. See also Reza Jafari, “Centre–Periphery Relations in Iran: The Case of the Southern Rebellion in 1946”, D. Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2000.

based on larger geographical entities – eventually to be dominated by pronouncedly anti-British, nationalist ideologies.

The great paradox of these two cases is that Britain's chief strategic interests in the Gulf region were associated precisely with the two core areas that stood out as most pro-British. During the Second World War, British military strategists singled out Basra (with its air base) and Muhammara (with the nearby Abadan oil refineries of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, APOC) as the top desiderata for any British intervention in the area.³ If the list is expanded to also include Aden – often rated alongside Basra and Abadan as Britain's most important Middle Eastern imperial asset east of Suez – the tendency becomes even clearer: here, in the 1940s and 1950s, local initiatives to preserve the crown colony as a separate entity were spurned in favour of a greater federal scheme that eventually transmuted into South Yemen. But the British preference for larger entities failed disastrously: during the 1950s and 1960s, London lost all these assets because nationalist forces had taken control in the capital cities where Britain had put all its money, after the nationalisation of Abadan (1951), a pro-communist coup in Baghdad (1958) and the establishment of a socialist republic in South Yemen (1967). By means of support for a pro-Western putsch, Britain was eventually able to recoup some influence in Iran (influence that, arguably, came to an end only with the Islamic revolution of 1979), but Basra and Aden were gone.

The fundamental question remains whether London might have better protected its imperial interests through a different policy focused on small-scale political entities throughout the Persian Gulf. Why did Britain feel the need to support polities covering 2 million square kilometres of Iraqi and Iranian lands, when its principal interests were limited to the small triangle of around 6,000 square kilometres bounded by Basra, Abadan and the inland oilfields at Masjid-i Sulayman, all seething with pro-British separatist sentiment?

This paper focuses on the role of the small British communities in Basra and Abadan in the geopolitical struggle that unfolded in the inner parts of the Persian Gulf between the 1920s and the 1940s. Potentially, these communities could have produced vital intermediaries between local forces and British policy-makers. In theory, they could have added stimulus to local projects which in both cases emphasised native–expat partnerships as a fundamental aspect of their political programmes. With their frequent visits from Abadan to Basra and vice-versa (less than 40 kilometres separated the two strategic nodes) they might even have taken the lead in unifying the two local projects, which had much in common and could have mutually strengthened each other. But none of this materialised. Instead, after some initial wavering, the British in Basra eventually became “British in Iraq” and those of Abadan “British in Persia”, whereas the local aspirations for autonomy under the British aegis were soon forgotten. The discussion that follows is focused on how business interests, urban geography, and not least ideas about what constituted “Britishness” all played a role in the demise of small-scale cosmopolitanism and the victory of more grandiose nationalisms in the Shatt al-Arab region in the interwar years.

³ Marion Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins: Oil, Imperialism and the Middle East in British Foreign Policy, 1900–1940*.

Gray Mackenzie: from Gulf company to the Mesopotamia–Persia Corporation

By the time of the outbreak of the First World War, Gray Mackenzie was one of two leading British firms in Basra. It had firm historical roots: ever since the 1860s, it had served as agents for the pioneering British Indian Steam Navigation Company, gradually developing a portfolio of agencies and complementary commercial services. As British steamships acquired a near-monopoly on large-scale cargo freight in the Gulf in the early twentieth century, the firm generated huge profits.⁴

By 1914, Gray Mackenzie had definitely become a Gulf-oriented enterprise. In addition to Basra, it had branch offices elsewhere in the Gulf – at Linga, Bushire and Muhammara in Persia, and at Bahrain. Within this system, Basra was clearly the jewel in the crown, with the recent strong growth in date exports to European and American markets its primary driving force. From the economic point of view, the attempts of Basra merchants to establish Basra as a British colony could have served to solidify this position: Gray Mackenzie could have expected to retain its leading position in Basra’s date business (which accounted for almost all the dates exported from the entire region), because the city’s entire elite depended on the firm to get their dates sold at lucrative prices on the world market.

In the event, things turned out very differently. In 1920, Gray Mackenzie decided to join forces with the other major British player in Basra’s economy, Lynch Brothers, and became the Mesopotamia–Persia Corporation (Mespers). The original focus on the Gulf was soon abandoned; by 1928, company investments in Baghdad equalled those at Basra, and the value of Mespers’ assets in Tehran was growing.⁵ The company expanded its original business concept to include trade in such areas as wool and machinery. In financial terms, however, the results of the new expansion were disastrous. The firm incurred severe losses, and in 1936 Gray Mackenzie was once more separated as a company in its own right. It reverted to its original Gulf focus and soon regained profitability. Still, in Basra it had clearly lost some of its former influence. A US firm, Hills Brothers, was now dominant in the city’s date trade. Moreover, due to the increased competition from Iraqi state railways, the company suffered losses in its river-shipping operations.

To some extent, it may have been a very natural decision for Gray Mackenzie – and later Mespers – unquestioningly to follow the Union Jack northwards, as new areas were opened for trade. Government pressures were considerable; in fact, in this part of the British Empire, it is clear that government officials pleaded with investors to join them at their bridgeheads, whereas the forces of capitalism themselves often proved sceptical due to the high risk. Prior to the war, pro-active British consuls in Baghdad had taken steps to acquaint the Ottoman government with Indian industrial methods (“so the use of English tools and machinery may be promoted”)⁶ and had launched initiatives to create links between local merchants and British firms, for instance in the pharmaceutical sector.⁷ There had also been proposals for “developing British retail trade at Basra”, although officials at the British embassy in Istanbul had

⁴ For an overview of the company history, see Stephanie Jones, “The Management of British India Steamers in the Gulf 1862–1945: Gray Mackenzie and the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation”, in R.I. Lawless (ed.), *The Gulf in the Early Twentieth Century*, Durham: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1986.

⁵ Gray Mackenzie company archives, Mss. 27,707, profits and losses for the year 1928 (Corporation of London archives, Guildhall).

⁶ FO 195/2242, J. Ramsay to N.R. O’Conor, 19 March 1907 (Foreign Office archives, UK National Archives, Kew).

⁷ FO 195/2243, J. Ramsay to N.R. O’Conor, 18 November 1907.

worried that it might prove difficult to find a British businessman willing to “risk his money and endure the discomfort”.⁸ In Baghdad, at the time, the bottom line had been, “anything that increases the purchasing power of the country must be to our advantage”.⁹ A similar tone had prevailed with regard to southern Persia, where the opening of river communications was hailed by George Curzon: “each fresh town, we may say each fresh village that is brought into communication with the Persian Gulf will thereby be drawn into the mesh of the Lancashire cotton spinner or the Hindu artisan”.¹⁰

Before the war, the Basra manager of Gray Mackenzie had indeed taken the bait with regard to the Karun River, and had played a prominent role in exploring the potential of the south-western districts of Persia.¹¹ On the other hand, entrepreneurial advances northwards to Baghdad had been slower to materialise. This changed after the war. Soon, an incrementalist attitude could be noted within the newly formed Mespers. Not until the autumn of 1918 had a British policy of amalgamating Basra and Baghdad started to crystallise (and as of early 1921 there remained serious doubts about the usefulness of that policy)¹² – yet already by 1922 Mespers investments were being made beyond the company’s core area in Basra, for instance in the wool trade of Baghdad.¹³ True, there was awareness of the greater political risk associated with Baghdad, which was perceived as more anti-British. But on the whole, decisions as to whether to open or close new branches ever further into the Mesopotamian interior now seemed to be taken on the basis of purely economic analyses of gains and profits, with confidence in the British government’s ability to guarantee a stable political framework as an underlying axiom. (In 1927, for example, it was decided to close down an unprofitable branch in Mosul, even though the settlement of the Mosul question in 1925 had eliminated some of the political risk associated with the northern parts of Iraq.¹⁴) And economic arguments were marshalled for the expansion beyond Basra’s date trade as well. In 1928, a board meeting concluded, “the Corporation in the past has not taken full advantage of its favourable position, and was unable to do so owing to their not having sufficient experienced European staff... [Therefore it] limited grain purchases to Basra district, which policy has been that of all exporters in Iraq until recent times, growers and dealers upcountry normally sending all their stocks to Basra for sale here. The Corporation has Branches at several points in grain growing districts, and can, without any great expense, extend its activities in these areas...”¹⁵ By moving beyond the date sector, Mespers soon established firmer links with the grain-producing areas of central Iraq. Additionally, agentships by their very nature strengthened the logic of the existing systems, as they were awarded on “Iraqi” or “Persian” bases.

Mespers executives were not entirely ignorant of Basra’s demands for autonomy. Indeed, in the late 1920s, pleading the case for a British consulate to be re-opened at Basra, Mespers director Chas Wills wrote, “it is generally felt that the central administration of the Iraq government does not appreciate the importance of Basra to the country, and both Britishers and Arabs consider the interests of Basra are

⁸ FO 195/2274, F.E. Crow to N.R. O’Conor, 20 February 1908.

⁹ FO 195/2243, J. Ramsay to N.R. O’Conor, 19 August 1907.

¹⁰ George Curzon, “The Karun River and the Commercial Geography of South West Persia”, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, 1890.

¹¹ W.F. Ainsworth, *The River Karun: An Opening to British Commerce*, London, 1890.

¹² Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*, pp. 69–71.

¹³ Gray Mackenzie, Mss. 27694/1, minutes of board meeting 7 August 1922.

¹⁴ Gray Mackenzie, Mss. 27694/1, board meeting 31 October 1927.

¹⁵ Gray Mackenzie, Mss. 27694/1, board meeting 1928.

overlooked in favour of Baghdad”¹⁶ – a remarkable echo of one of the key messages of the indigenous separatist elite. At the same time, Wills agreed that even though most British firms had branches in Baghdad, “the head offices of most of the firms are established at Basra, and their volume of business is far more extensive there than that of their branches in Baghdad”. Also Mespers in principle was not foreign to the idea of fostering partnerships with the local population, for instance by supporting charitable causes, and the company offered bonuses to those of its staff who learnt Arabic or Persian.¹⁷ Mespers certainly went further towards integration in the local society than other British establishments in Basra, for example by locating its headquarters smack in the centre of the cosmopolitan suburb of Ashar, and not in the British enclave of bungalows and military cantonments further to the north at Ma‘qil.¹⁸

However, at this point, the greatest concern to Wills was that the “Mesopotamian” population was not growing fast enough. Just as the Karun River had proven irresistible in the 1890s, the prospect of increased trade along the upper reaches of the Euphrates and the Tigris seemed to cancel out any misgivings about political risk. In general, confidence in London’s ability to hold the newly acquired areas appeared unshakeable, despite frequent turmoil about the ultimate territorial configuration of the area (which actually persisted for the duration of the mandate). Another factor that may have served as an impediment to any close link with the local mercantile community in Basra was the continued British preference for recruiting leading staff from Europe or India rather than from among local society. Indeed, for certain tasks, Mespers clearly discriminated between “Europeans” and everyone else. Even in the late 1920s, the company director – himself a resident of Basra for more than thirty years – still maintained this distinction.¹⁹

No partnership: the case of the Abadan township in the 1920s

The factor of self-identity was to prove even more decisive for the fate of British relations with a local population seeking autonomy on the other side of the river, in Abadan in Persia. There were many similarities between Basra and Abadan after the First World War: both were areas of chief strategic concern for the British, and both fostered local political movements that favoured the creation of formal imperial enclaves in order to seal their partnerships with London. But there were also some differences. In particular, the economic zone of immediate interest to the British seemed more finite in the case of Abadan, bordered as it was by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company oil refinery at Abadan and the oilfields themselves further north at Masjid-i Sulayman, and with its political seat at Muhammara. In a sense, the potential for an overlap of interests was even stronger on the Persian side of the Shatt al-Arab.

And yet also this attempt at developing close ties between Britain and local notables came to nought. In 1925, the central Persian government made an

¹⁶ *Basrah Times*, 9 February 1927.

¹⁷ Gray Mackenzie, Mss. 27694/1, board meeting 31 October 1927.

¹⁸ On the general British tendency to create segregation in Basra’s urban geography see Reidar Visser, “Melting Pot of the Gulf? Cosmopolitanism and Its Limits in the Experience of Basra’s British Community, 1890–1940”, paper presented to the Global Gulf Conference, University of Exeter, 4–6 July 2006, revised version available at www.history.org/cosmopolitanism.asp

¹⁹ Speech by Chas Wills, reproduced in *Basrah Times*, 9 February 1927; IO L/PS/10/547, note by C. Wills dated 11 January 1928 (India Office records in the British Library, London).

astonishing return to an area hitherto completely outside its control, and London did nothing to support Britain's long-standing ally, the local shaykh. Khaz'al was promptly removed to Tehran, where he remained under house arrest until his death in 1936; subsequent attempts by relatives and tribal allies to restore the semi-autonomous Arab principality all faltered and failed to receive British support. The greatest oil refinery in the world and, by 1945, the home of a British community of 4,500 individuals, Abadan had to be evacuated in 1951 when nationalists came to power in Tehran – the capital which Britain had chosen to back, at the expense of local elites in the area around the oil installations.²⁰

The failed attempt to transform Abadan to a “company island” between 1920 and 1930 epitomises the paradoxes of British policy. After its establishment between 1909 and 1913, the Abadan refinery had soon expanded beyond all expectations, thanks not least to the First World War and the growing importance of an oil-fired naval fleet. Originally designed to house 2,000 refinery workers, APOC's “village” on the island had rapidly become overcrowded as numbers of employees had risen sharply, reaching 9,000 by the end of the decade – in addition to some 5,000 sub-contracted workers. By 1920, Abadan was therefore becoming increasingly chaotic. To the north of the refinery, Western staff resided in a “Bungalow” area of purpose-built accommodation. To the south, there were two small centres of population: the “company's village”, leased by APOC from the island's owner – Shaykh Khaz'al – where the original housing with a capacity of 2,000 had been erected and subsequently occupied mostly by Indian staff; and then “the shaykh's bazaar” (also known as “the native village”), under Khaz'al's full control and inhabited by Arabs and Persians not directly employed by APOC but involved in the island's economic boom. The total population around the refinery site was now estimated at 30,000, including an Indian contingent strong enough to make the celebration of Ramakrishna's birthday a major local event.²¹ To APOC managers this island community presented a golden opportunity for “reform”. There was even talk of a creating “model village”.²²

But APOC did not approach the ethnic chaos of Abadan as nation-builders: their approach to “town planning” was that of the epidemiologist. Various described as “the real plague spot”,²³ “insanitary beyond imagination”²⁴ and with “ground [which is] sodden and impregnated with disease germs”, the “Shaykh's village” was seen as a problem almost impossible to rectify. Accordingly, priority was accorded to solutions that emphasised relocation to new, “untouched” ground.²⁵ In general, the focus was on “healthiness” and “order”, although each APOC ideologue had his own idiosyncrasies and pet projects. One project focused on the “opening up” of the village, with the aim of getting “the openings straight and even uniform” and as far as possible eradicating alleys and “tortuous and ill-ventilated gulleys”.²⁶ Others were particularly concerned with population density and proper “light and air”.²⁷ The local population was never treated as prospective partners; they were approached as an altogether different species: in a discussion of various options for the installation of

²⁰ On Abadan in the post-war period and during the 1951 crisis, see Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 686–89.

²¹ *Basrah Times*, 6 March 1925.

²² BP 72138, Greenwood to H.E. Nichols, 7 June 1920 (BP archives at the University of Warwick).

²³ BP 70209, note by John Cadman dated 19 February 1924

²⁴ BP 70209, report by Dr. Young, 1 October 1923.

²⁵ BP 70209, Jas Jameson to APOC London, 7 January 1924.

²⁶ BP 68723, undated APOC office note, circa 1921.

²⁷ BP 68723, Abadan Town Planning Report, by G. Wittett and F.C. Temple.

running water (and the dangers that the natives would destroy the new equipment), APOC advisers concluded that “up to the present Hughes’ Rotary is far the best waste preventer for Eastern people”. Sometimes there appeared to be signs of benevolent paternalism: “The sterilization of water by sedimentation and chlorination should be carried to the Native quarter as well, where some 5,000 water use water direct from the river...” But even here the ulterior motives had more to do with company interests: “It is here where epidemics are liable to occur, and, from the natives, spread to Europeans – a point which should not escape attention when dealing with preventive measures at Abadan.”²⁸

Ideally, the British had hoped to buy out Khaz‘al and thereby become the sole owner of the refinery site²⁹ – with a “rent-free” company village, without any need for troublesome municipal institutions, and with the possibility to eject tenants at will on the completion of their service to the company. However, the bazaar on the island and the rent it generated were valuable to the shaykh, and after repeated efforts in the early 1920s, APOC gave up, opting instead for a shared scheme in which they would design the changes in urban structure – primarily by shifting the focus of the village to a new “planned” area to which it was hoped the centre would gravitate – with Khaz‘al providing financial support. But bureaucratic delays and hesitancy with regard to financial outlay meant that little was actually achieved in the crucial years of transition from 1918 to 1925. Grand visions of a “model village” soon degenerated into heated debates about the number of billiard tables and pianos to be provided for the projected new social clubs for the “Europeans”.³⁰

While the British wasted valuable time, new competitors entered the scene. Shortly after shopkeepers in the projected reconstruction area in 1924 had been served six months’ notices to evacuate their premises (which were due to be demolished), Persian central government officials began voicing an interest in their cause. They soon emerged as an attractive source of redress for Abadan inhabitants frustrated with the harsh “compensation” terms offered by APOC. Letters of complaint began to appear in Tehran newspapers. However, still as late as in 1924, APOC bosses were primarily afraid of incurring the local shaykh’s “ill-feeling”; in March 1925, while describing him as “a broken reed”, they continued to view Khaz‘al as someone who had to be placated.³¹ In May 1925 they voiced exasperation about the central government’s intervention in the reconstruction scheme.³² Nevertheless, policy changes did materialise, and in this case it seems impossible to divorce official British policy from that of APOC. Despite support for Khaz‘al among many British administrators and consuls in southern Persia (who themselves often had a background from British India),³³ London in 1925 decisively switched its allegiance to the central government. And soon after Khaz‘al’s removal by force to Tehran, APOC seemed to toe the London line. In 1925, the official APOC journal published a euphemistic postscript to the whole Arabistan affair: “The province of Khuzistan is so remote and difficult to access from the capital at Tehran that the scene of the Company’s quarters there has never before been visited by anyone of high authority

²⁸ BP 68723, M.Y. Young to Strick & Co., 3 March 1921.

²⁹ BP 72138, H.E. Nichols to H.A. Walpole, 8 April 1920.

³⁰ BP 72138, R.G. Neilson to Greenwood, 21 April 1920.

³¹ BP 70640, memo to the management committee by H.E. Nichols, 6 March 1925.

³² BP 68723, N.A. Gass to APOC headquarters, 25 May 1925.

³³ Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia, 1918–1925*, London: Frank Cass, 1990, p. 174.

in the Persian government.” The change of regime in Muhammara and Abadan was referred to as “the reorganisation of the government’s control in Southern Persia”.³⁴

These dramatic changes brought further delays to APOC’s plans for a “model Abadan”. By 1927 only demolition work had been completed.³⁵ In Abadan, no efforts were made towards a more pro-active contribution, for instance in the field of education – even though APOC did spend a small sum supporting existing schools, and in the inland (oilfield) areas took more specific steps to recruit the sort of employee candidates they were looking for.³⁶ In fact, in this sphere, the surrender to the central government appeared total and emerged as a stark and sudden antithesis to the previous decades of supporting Khaz’al at almost any cost: “the primary importance”, said T.L. Jacks in January 1926, “is that the sympathy and appreciation of Persian government be secured ... We are only too pleased that any schools in which we were interested should be under supervision of the Director of Education, who would thus be able to satisfy himself that these schools were being administered on lines which were in conformity with the views of the Ministry of Education and the Central Government”.³⁷ Not until the 1930s – following serious labour disturbances at Abadan in 1929 – did some new urban structures finally emerge in Abadan, in the shape of the Bawarda suburb. This was designed by the British architect James Mollison Wilson but catered only for higher-ranking clerks and thus fell short of the original vision of an integrated company society.³⁸ By that time, the potential for partnership between Britain and the local population had all but vanished.

Local partnerships and the idea of Britishness

To some extent, opportunities in Basra and Abadan were lost because short-term industrial and commercial expansion always enjoyed priority over attempts at community-building. But at the heart of the failure was also a quite rigid and non-negotiable idea about what constituted Britishness.

Whereas in the 1890s, Basra’s small British colony had sometimes been referred to as “the Protestant community”, Britishness in the 1920s was not defined primarily in terms of religion. Although a Basra and Persian Gulf chaplaincy had existed since 1921 (with its nucleus in Basra and encompassing the principal Persian port cities along the northern shore of the Gulf), enthusiasm for church activity appeared rather modest among the APOC leadership. As the refinery area began to supersede Basra in terms of the number of British inhabitants in the mid-1920s (Basra then remained at around 250 UK citizens while Abadan was rapidly approaching 1,000), managers had reacted coolly to suggestions by the Anglican priest in Basra for a new church in Abadan. A “church room”, not a complete edifice, was what was needed, advised APOC chairman John Cadman in 1928.³⁹ Another official was clearly concerned about the sort of influence a new vicar could come to exercise: he was adamant that

³⁴ *APOC Magazine*, vol. 1 no. 4, 1925.

³⁵ BP 68723, APOC Abadan to London, 21 September 1927.

³⁶ BP 71183, Education in Khuzistan: “Note on the present activities of the company”, undated note, circa February 1926.

³⁷ BP 71183, “Notes taken at a conference on education held at Abadan on 15 January 1926”.

³⁸ On this project, see Mark Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company”, *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 12, 1997, pp. 341–59.

³⁹ BP 71527, J. Cadman to E.H.O. Elkington 7 December 1928.

APOC should ensure that any clergyman sent to Abadan should be “a man’s man and not of the type that would probably appeal more to the opposite sex and should be definitely broad-minded ... as a low-church man but with very much broader views”.⁴⁰ And despite the growth in potential members of the congregation, church statistics for the sprawling chaplaincy remained unimpressive, with the total number of communicants at the “great festivals” (Easter, Whitsun and Christmas) for the year 1927 all in the range between 28 and 56.⁴¹

Instead, being British in the Gulf was related to a fluid identity of Westernness – Whiteness may be a more accurate term – which changed according to geographical context or even season. Where the British were few they melted into the more general category of “Europeans”, as in Muhammara.⁴² Where they were many, they would sometimes discover their separate British sub-identities, especially at Abadan and Masjid-i Sulayman, where the Scottish element was strong, for many years marking St. Andrew’s Day and Burns’ Supper (in memory of Robert Burns and properly celebrated with haggis and “aitcakes”).⁴³ These activities were given ample and mostly complimentary coverage in the official APOC newsletter. But only rarely did symbolic celebrations of an empire-wide identity surface. There were of course some predictable examples, like enthusiasm for the Royal Air Force (described as “lending a helpful hand to civil aviation, which is bringing all Britons in the Middle East closer to the Motherland”).⁴⁴ But often, such ideas about an empire identity related to the select few, as when “clerical staff” – meaning higher-ranking Indians – were invited aboard a visiting British warship, alongside members of the “European community”.⁴⁵ There was also the safe context of humorous theatre, as in the 1924 performance of “The Maidens of Maydan-i Naftun”. This play “intended to show in symbolic form, the benefits to Persia, Iraq, Great Britain and the British Empire generally of the activities of APOC”, with “Scotland”, “Ireland” and “Africa” featuring as constituent parts of the imperial whole.⁴⁶

In the British mindset at the time, the prevailing view of the Other was linked to ideas about racial hierarchy: “Europeans” invariably on top, Indians in-between, and, depending on the particular sub-theory of the observer,⁴⁷ Arabs or Persians at the bottom. In many cases, mixing across these borders was specifically discouraged, and segregation was held up as the best alternative. In 1926, for example, an APOC executive at Abadan wrote, “Armstrong [is] anxious that Indians clerks should be given chance to make use of the Library, but I personally feel that this might prevent some Europeans from doing so, and advise instead establishment of small library for them, to which additions could be made from old and used books of European library”.⁴⁸ Similarly, it was felt that there had to be a separate category of hospital for Indians – not as good as that for Europeans but not as bad as that for “natives”.⁴⁹ APOC chiefs working on staff issues in neighbouring Iraq also revealed firm opinions

⁴⁰ BP 71527, J.C. Boyd to J. Cadman, 13 April 1927.

⁴¹ BP 71527, C.W. Carter to J.A. Jameson, 1 August 1927.

⁴² *APOC Magazine*, vol. 2 no. 2, March 1926, p. 39.

⁴³ *APOC Magazine* vol. 2 no. 3, May 1926 p. 43. The number of attendants at these events tended to be in the region of 200.

⁴⁴ *APOC Magazine*, vol. 5 no. 1, January 1929, p. 46.

⁴⁵ *APOC Magazine* vol. 4 no. 2, March 1928.

⁴⁶ *APOC Magazine* vol. 1 no. 2, 1924.

⁴⁷ Some British had a weak spot for “pure Arab” culture; however, within APOC the prevailing view was the racist idea that Persians were “more suitable than Arabs” for technical positions.

⁴⁸ BP 71183, unsigned and undated office note from circa 1926.

⁴⁹ BP 68723, M.Y. Young to Strick & Co., 3 March 1921.

as to how suited various ethnic groups were for performing clerical tasks: to a query as to why out of 63 “native” APOC employees in Iraq only one was Muslim (there were 40 Jews and 22 Christians), a Baghdad representative of the company commented, “Muslims as a class suffer from two serious defects: a.) they have no gift for figures, and, b.) their knowledge of English is not of the standard required by us.”⁵⁰ However, it should also be noted that this was not entirely a one-way rejection process. John Van Ess, a Basra-based American missionary who was a true cosmopolite and for decades worked to advance the educational opportunities of young boys and girls (of whatever religion) in Basra and the wider Gulf region, maintained that part of the reason there were so few Muslims employed in foreign companies in Iraq and Persia were “nationalism; harder work demanded by the companies; and few opportunities for pulling strings to get advancement”.⁵¹

There was of course some kind of British core to this. Far more prominent than religion were social activities like sports. Ideally, APOC leaders maintained, their workers would become member of British clubs when they arrived at Abadan (in 1926, the 40 or 50 who had failed to do so were described as an anomaly).⁵² Club membership would help to activate employees, prevent them from “sticking in their bungalows” and “incidentally reduce tendency to moping or grouching”.⁵³ Also it was hoped that social activities would reduce tendencies of “the modern ultra-democratic spirit” and general “restlessness”. At the annual athletic meeting of the Abadan Gymkhana Club in March 1920, APOC chairman John Cadman, on a visit from London, commended the company’s employees for the “keen spirit in which the sports had been carried through, a spirit which was in every way as good as any which was to be found among Britishers at home or abroad, and a spirit which he saw evident throughout the Refinery.”⁵⁴

All year long, social and sporting events aimed at reproducing this sense of being British in the Gulf. There was a Spring Race Meeting and a Boat Club Race in March, a Test Match in cricket in April, a flower show by the Horticultural Society in late spring, a Boat Club Carnival in September, a soccer season which started in October, Poppy Day and Armistice celebrations in November, and then of course Christmas and New Year’s Eve – which on one occasion was marked by the playing of a soundtrack of Big Ben ringing with the traffic noise of Westminster in the background.⁵⁵ The annual cycle was punctuated by occasional visits from Britain; the arrivals of naval vessels were a particularly popular kind of event. And even on a daily basis British identity was reproduced, with an English-language daily based in Basra enjoying circulation throughout the Gulf, and not least through cinema – available in Basra since the early post-war period and in Abadan since 1922. According to one Abadan observer, the cinema had “done more, possibly than any other single factor, to make life tolerable in this isolated spot”. The advent of “talkie machines” (cinema with sound) in 1932 had been particularly welcome. They came with hour-long news programmes before refreshments and the main feature of the evening, and many APOC employees went every week to see the news regardless of the film being shown. One Abadanite praised it thus: “[it brings] familiar scenes of home, bringing back vividly and clearly happy memories of leave and youth ... Give

⁵⁰ BP 72614, I.M. Jones to C.C. Mylles, 6 July 1931.

⁵¹ BP 72614, note for C.C. Mylles authored by “C.L.H.”, 25 February 1931.

⁵² BP 71183, unsigned and undated office note from circa 1926.

⁵³ BP 72138, Greenwood to H.E. Nichols, 7 June 1920; R.G. Neilson to Greenwood, 16 April 1920.

⁵⁴ *APOC Magazine* vol. 2 no. 3, May 1926, p. 43.

⁵⁵ *APOC Magazine* vol. 5 no. 1, January 1929, p. 46.

an Abadan audience a picture of Piccadilly, with the roar of the traffic and the occasional hoot of a motor horn rising and they ask for nothing more... Some people in Abadan prefer the cinema to mail day”.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The British failure to maximise its strategic interests in the Gulf in the 1920s was first and foremost the result of a conceptual disconnect. To some extent it is possible to explain Gray Mackenzie’s expansion to become an “Iraqi” company and APOC’s failure to undertake a thorough community-building project at Abadan with reference to the prospect of short-term economic profit. The directors of these companies always had their eyes directed at the next General Meeting, and subscribed to ideals of conducting business along “purely commercial lines”. Also, the process whereby the trans-river community of Britons on either side of the Shatt al-Arab was shattered was partially attributable to actions of the emerging Iraqi and Persian central governments, which from 1922 imposed stricter passport regulations on travel, and from the second half of the 1920s began implementing them in practice.⁵⁷ But closer examination of the then-prevalent ideas about Britishness and Otherness shows that any kind of equitable cosmopolitan partnership between local elites and London was simply inconceivable as far as the British were concerned.

The obsession with hierarchy – a dossier from the 1930s dwelt at considerable length on the complicated issue of “accommodation for Second Class and Superior Third Class Employees in Abadan”⁵⁸ – seemed to play a role in this. But above all, British identity at the time was highly exclusivist, and integration of the Other seemed to be the exception to the rule. Perhaps there was room for the exclusive elite that had been decorated with medals of the Indian Empire; people like “Mirza Muhammad Khan, C.I.E.” (a Persian intellectual based in Basra) and “His Excellency Shaykh Sir Khaz’al ibn Haji Jabir, G.C.I.E., K.C.S.I., Shaykh of Muhammara and Dependencies”.⁵⁹ But when APOC chiefs lamented the nationalism of Persian government officials, they also revealed a more general distrust that could only hamper any ideas about partnerships, also with those local elites who did not subscribe to new-fangled nationalist ideas: in 1927 E.H.O. Elkington complained about the “new wave of nationalism” but seconds later went on to condemn “Oriental mentality” more generally.⁶⁰

Gradually the APOC leadership came to understand the need for some form of integration of at least higher-ranking non-British employees. However, even in the 1930s they would still complain that even this more modest vision was difficult to achieve due to the “peculiar disinclination of the average Britisher to meet on a pleasant social basis with foreigners”.⁶¹ Examples of cosmopolitan Britons in places like Alexandria show that this stereotype, too, is problematic, but in very general terms it does seem that British expatriates in the Gulf for a long time found it nigh-

⁵⁶ *APOC Magazine* vol. 10 no. 2, March 1934, p. 12.

⁵⁷ *Basrah Times*, 19 July 1922. Still in late 1925, British in Basra frequently visited compatriots in Basra and Abadan. *APOC Magazine* vol. 2 no. 1, January 1926.

⁵⁸ BP 53875.

⁵⁹ APOC director A.T. Wilson, among others, used this form in his writings, such as *Loyalties: Mesopotamia, 1914–1917*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930.

⁶⁰ BP 71527, E.H.O. Elkington to J. Cadman, 25 November 1927.

⁶¹ Quoted in J.H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company: Volume II, The Anglo – Iranian Years, 1928–1954*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 84.

impossible to shed the baggage of social stratification which they brought with them from home and from India. The casualty was pioneering ideas about small-scale civic identity that could have brought Britain improved security in the Gulf – as well as a very different twentieth century.

Epilogue: The contemporary geopolitics of the Shatt al-Arab delta

There are many parallels between the 1920s and the early twenty-first century with regard to how the outside world approaches the strategic delta area that traverses the Shatt al-Arab. With the development since the 1950s of some of the world's most important oil production fields on the Iraqi side of the border around Basra, the importance of the region is today even higher.

Perhaps the most striking similarity is the continued tendency of outsiders to try to impose their own visions on the land, its inhabitants, and the local natural resources. In the 1920s and later, the British rejected not only the local economic elites (who were separatist or at least autonomy-seeking) in Basra and Abadan, but also their opponents in the nationalist camp (Iraqi nationalists in Basra; Persian and later Iranian nationalists and communists in Abadan). Instead of backing up either current, they sought to artificially create an order more in tune with their own preferences. Wary of unpredictable separatists and “extremist” nationalists, they took steps to bolster those politicians they perceived as “moderates” – urban bourgeoisie prepared to work with the British, and a sleepy segment of rural tribal shaykhs who were given a free hand to deal with internal dissent in their fiefdoms as long as Pax Britannica was adhered to. It could not work for long and it did not: in 1958, the British-sponsored system in Iraq came to a violent end as the monarchy, incapable of engineering much-needed and long-promised social reform, was overthrown, and pro-communist and nationalist forces replaced it. On the Iranian side of the border, the “moderates” lasted somewhat longer (until 1979), and perhaps the successor regime has been marginally more successful than its Iraqi counterpart in placating local sentiment in its Shatt al-Arab periphery.⁶²

The strategy pursued by the United States in southern Iraq after 2003 seems broadly similar to the British approach in the 1920s. They too have declined to have anything to do with local forces in Basra that favour small-scale autonomy and local control of petroleum resources (such as the Fadila party) and at the same time have rejected nationalist forces they deem too extreme (like the Sadrists). Instead, they are cultivating the idea of a “moderate coalition” at the national level (chiefly, Kurds, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, as well as a minority of Sunnis who are willing to work inside the system) whose efforts to clamp down on internal enemies within their constituencies – including in places like Basra where they are particularly weak – are generally being supported. In this way, the centralisation of Basra's oil reserves (which account for the vast majority of all Iraq's energy resources) is being countenanced, whether through a Shiite-dominated central government led by Nuri al-Maliki (and with some Americans apparently still hoping for Adil Abd al-Mahdi to replace him) or through the scheme for a Najaf-dominated Shiite republic (as conceived by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and his friends). In comparison with the British

⁶² Developments during the early years of the Iran–Iraq War certainly indicated that rule by Baghdad was not considered an especially attractive alternative to the Arabic-speaking south-west of Iran, even if persistent episodes of political violence show that also Tehran has yet to find a formula acceptable to local sentiment.

period, there is an additional complication in that one of the principal “moderate” forces involved, the Supreme Council, also happens to be the principal Iraqi ally of neighbouring Iran.

As for Britain, its role has hitherto been somewhat more neutral and aloof than was the case in the 1920s. For example, London has refrained from taking a very definitive stand on the question of southern autonomy, allowing parties outside the US-sponsored umbrella of “moderates” to hold on to power in provincial government in key areas like Basra and Maysan. A particularly refreshing aspect of the British attitude to southern Iraq is their preparedness to accept the Sadrists as an expression of popular sentiment – a preparedness which is sorely lacking in US circles where the “terrorist” label has tended to dominate.⁶³

It is therefore a worrisome sign that in the latest discussions concerning British policy in Iraq, there seems to be a desire to abandon the idea of neutrality. Among the conclusions of the non-governmental Iraq Commission (sponsored by Channel 4 Television and the Foreign Policy Centre with its final report released on 14 July 2007) is the idea that henceforth, the UK shall support “Iraq’s federal constitution”. This is far less innocuous than it may appear at first sight. For starters, the way this position is marketed as a “stark contrast” to US policy can only mean that it is intended as a counterweight to the current US policy of supporting changes to the constitution supposedly aimed at restricting the powers of the regions somewhat. (The contrast between the US Iraq Study Group and the UK Iraq Commission is particularly clear on this point.) More fundamentally, a serious contradiction inside this position has apparently gone undetected: the clause in the Iraqi constitution that stipulates a one-off constitutional revision without special majorities (including the theoretical possibility of a modification of federalism) is just as integral to the constitution as every other article in it, including the provisions for federalism. Briefly, had this clause not been added in the last minute, there would have been no Iraqi constitution today – it was central to the reluctant “Yes” from both some Sunni leaders and from the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the principal Shiite theologian of Najaf. In fact, sentences in the Iraq Commission report such as “[federalism] is envisaged but not yet implemented in Iraq” even suggest that its authors may not have fully understood that the Iraqi constitution sets out an asymmetrical, not a symmetrical federation.⁶⁴

It is highly unclear why Britain should have any interest in interfering with this debate. No one in Iraq has the intention of reversing federalism for the Kurds. But there is a continuing debate on whether federalism would be meaningful south of Kurdistan, with significant voices, especially outside those groups seen as “moderates” by the United States, calling for a stronger role for the centre or for a more limited definition of federalism (as seen as in the Shatt al-Arab delta). In this respect, the “new” pro-federal UK stance, apparently already exemplified even by comments from foreign minister David Miliband (“the north of Iraq is calm because of federalism” – another hint at a general federalisation of the country being seen as desirable in British circles) would be just as arrogant as the idea of backing up selected loyal shaykhs in the 1920s. The Iraq Commission report even includes language like “strongly federal” as an ideal state structure – as if the centrifugal forces in Iraqi politics that created the incredibly weak central government of the 2005 constitution should need any further encouragement!

⁶³ The flip side to this, of course, is that militia rule is perhaps even more pronounced and certainly more disorderly in the south than anywhere else in Iraq.

⁶⁴ In this regard, post-2005 Iraq is actually somewhat reminiscent of the UK itself!

The US concept of a military “surge” to create a permissive environment for political negotiation is supposed to rectify the problems created by imbalances in Iraqi politics after 2003. In theory, this should enable Iraq to find back to its own natural equilibrium. An interesting indication that it could actually be working in some geographical areas is the recent trend in Anbar governorate, where local forces increasingly stand up against al-Qaida (and at the same time are making office-seeking Sunni parliamentarians in Baghdad more and more nervous about internal Sunni competition). In practice, however, in the rest of Iraq, and perhaps especially south of Baghdad, it seems that precisely the narrow US definition of “moderates” serves to counteract any advantages that are being gained from a drop in violence in some areas. Quite ironically, some of the groups that make the most insistent demands that US troops should stay for a long time (Kurds and Shiites close to the Supreme Council) also remain among the most obstinate in the reconciliation discussions where “surge” theorists expect them to now show greater flexibility.⁶⁵ True, there are independent Iraqis – many of them belonging to the micro-minorities of Christians, Turkmens and Shabaks – who are genuinely working for reconciliation and at the same time asking for a continued US presence. But unless Washington is capable of performing a more honest and even-handed surge without the strained and artificial “moderate”/“extremist” dichotomy, then the present campaign will amount to nothing more than a repeat of the old British strategy of backing up likable personalities at the expense of long-term stability. It is a policy destined to meet its 1958 at some point.

⁶⁵ Conversely, some of the factions that receive short shrift in US circles actually say what the Americans want to hear: for instance the Fadila party, which emphasises the need to include the “national resistance” in government.