

The United Arab Emirates – A Product of British Imperialism?

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A few weeks ago, the United Arab Emirates celebrated their 40th anniversary as an independent and sovereign nation. Festivities held across the UAE commemorated the signing of the Proclamation of Union on 2 December 1971 by the rulers of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Umm al-Qaiwain, Fujairah and Ajman. Initially created as a federation of six, the UAE gained a seventh member when Ras al-Khaimah joined in early 1972. Until 1971, the seven shaikhdoms that were to form the UAE had been known as Trucial States and been part of Great Britain’s informal empire in the Persian Gulf. British power in the area had been based on an interdependent system of military presence, formal treaty relations with the Trucial States, Bahrain and Qatar, as well as informal political influence on the local rulers.

The UAE’s 40th National Day is a good occasion to re-examine the transition process that led seven extremely small shaikhdoms on the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf to enter the world stage as one independent federation after leaving their military protection and the conduct of their external affairs for more than a century to imperial Great Britain. The analysis of this process becomes even more interesting in view of the fact that the UAE’s history since 1971, at least from the point of view of political stability and economic progress, has been one of remarkable success. Does this mean that the UAE were an example of a smooth and unproblematic decolonisation? And if they were, who was responsible for that? What was Great Britain’s role in this process? To answer these questions, it is essential to bear in mind that the history of the UAE’s decolonisation really consists of two different histories: the ending of Great Britain’s informal empire in the Persian Gulf and the creation of a federation between the seven emirates.

The independence of the Trucial States resulted from a British initiative. On 4 January 1968, the cabinet under Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson agreed that Great Britain should withdraw from the Persian Gulf by 1971. When this decision was taken, the relative costs and benefits of a continued imperial position in the area had been discussed in British Government circles for several years. Since 1965, it had become increasingly apparent that the maintenance of an informal empire in the Persian Gulf came in the long term at too high a

price for Great Britain, both financially and politically. As a result, the Foreign Office and the British men on the spot stationed in the area began to discuss possible ways to prepare the Gulf States for their eventual independence. They did not envisage a concrete date for that event, but they were in agreement that Great Britain could not possibly withdraw from the Persian Gulf before the mid-1970s. However, the disengagement from the region was suddenly and strongly accelerated when the British Government decided in January 1968 to give up Great Britain's military presence East of Suez altogether. Following the severe economic crisis of November 1967, during which the British currency had been significantly devalued, this plan was one of several measures designed to drastically cut government expenditure.

Throughout the 1960s, British decision-makers remained convinced that the seven Trucial States were all too small and too vulnerable to exist as independent sovereign countries without foreign protection. Another problem was the extreme poverty of five of the seven shaikhdoms: only Abu Dhabi and Dubai had any considerable sources of income. It followed that the best post-independence prospect for the Trucial States was, in British eyes, the creation of a federation between them. In this federation, Abu Dhabi, with its enormous oil wealth, would have to play a central role by providing the other Trucial States with the necessary financial resources for their physical development.

While the British Government believed in the advantages of a federation between the Trucial States, it made very little progress in bringing it about. This was in part due to the peculiar nature of Great Britain's position in the Persian Gulf. The British Government had no formal right to impose a federation on the Trucial States. It could only use its informal political influence on the local rulers to convince them of the benefits of cooperating with their neighbours. Until 1966, the main obstacle on the road towards federation was the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who was strongly opposed to sharing his wealth with the other six shaikhdoms, let alone forming a federation with them. His staunch position on this subject was one of several reasons why the British Government helped his brother, Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, a strong proponent of unity among the Gulf States, assume Shaikh Shakhbut's position in August 1966 and become the new ruler of Abu Dhabi. But even after that, the creation of a federation between the Trucial States seemed to be very far away. A new problem was the tense and competitive relationship between the Shaikh Zayed and the ruler of Dubai, Shaikh Rashid bin Said Al Maktoum.

The situation changed completely in January 1968, with the British decision to allow the Trucial States full independence by 1971. This provided the rulers with a new incentive for unity. Shaikh Zayed took the initiative by overcoming his differences with Shaikh Rashid in order to set a concrete federation process in motion. The result of this process was the Proclamation of Union on 2 December 1971, after which Shaikh Zayed became the first president of the UAE and Shaikh Rashid the first prime minister. While this outcome was exactly what the British decision-makers had been hoping for during the 1960s, it would be wrong to assume that Great Britain actively created the UAE as part of an organized and ordered retreat from the Persian Gulf. It was the reaction of the local rulers to the sudden and unexpected British disengagement from the Persian Gulf that brought about the foundation of the United Arab Emirates.

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