



## Britain and the Emirs of the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula (1914-1916)

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### Abstract

This study sheds light on Britain's relationship with the emirs and rulers of the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf prior to the First World War 1914 in an attempt to neutralize these rulers and princes from supporting the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. The study also focused on the role of the Sheikh of Qatar, Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim bin Muhammad, in getting rid of the Ottoman influence represented by the Ottoman garrison in Qatar in 1915, thus helping Britain to get rid of any competing forces in the Arabian Gulf in order to preserve its strategic interests in the region. The data of telegram for the research has been collected from Qatar records.

**Keywords:** Britain, The Princes of The Gulf, The Arabian Peninsula, Ottoman Empire, Qatar.

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### Introduction

World War I began in August 1914 following the killing of Archduke François Ferdinand, Crown Prince of Austria, and his wife in Sarajevo by a Serbian student; it started in Europe and ended in the year 1918, bringing together the great economic powers in two opposing factions, the Allies (Britain, France, Ireland, Russia and then America at the end of the war), and the Central Powers (Germany, the Empire of Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of Bulgaria) (Al-Maani et al., 2014; Kaddoura, 1989; Yahya, 2017).

The political situation in the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf was characterized by the presence of a number of ruling families, namely Sharif Hussein bin Ali in the Hijaz, Al Rashid in Hail, Emir Abdul Aziz bin Saud in Najd, Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din in Yemen, Muhammad bin Ali al-Idrisi in Asir, Al Thani in Qatar, Al Khalifa in Bahrain, and Sheikh Mubarak Al-Subah in Kuwait (Rush, 1991).

### ***Britain and the Princes of the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula (1914-1916)***

It became clear to the British government in October 1914 that the Ottoman Empire would enter the war on the side of Germany; therefore, the British government sought to explore the directions of the political forces in the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf regarding the war by sending messengers to them bearing gifts (Antonius, 2013).

Messengers and letters were sent to each of Ibn Saud in Najd, Ibn Rashid in Hail (Wahba, 1961), and Al Thani in Qatar (Rush, 1991). However, Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din, the imam of Yemen, declared his support for the Ottoman Empire (Al-Taie, 2020). Bin Abdul Aziz, the emir of Hail, also declared his support for the Ottoman Empire (Khazaal, 1962). Emir Saud had sent a letter to the emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Subah (Al-Rasheed, 2008), in which he affirmed his adherence to loyalty and his support to the Ottoman Empire despite numerous attempts by British officials to change his stance (Al-Saadoun, 1983). Therefore, the British government excluded Ibn Rashid from being by its side or at least

being neutral (Al-Saadoun, 1983).

The British government, through some of its officers, was able to contact Ibn Saud in April 1914, in the presence of the Political Resident (Grey) (Rush, 1991), who asked Ibn Saud to openly declare war against the Ottoman Empire in return for providing him with British guarantees against any Ottoman objections or naval attack from the Arabian Gulf, in addition to recognizing the status of Al-Qaim in Najd and Al-Ahsa (Najda Fathi Safwa, 2000).

A group of British letters and documents confirmed that Ibn Saud committed to stand by Britain in the war against the Ottoman Empire, as stated in a report issued by (Grey) sent to the British Political Resident. In the Arabian Gulf, Percy Cox (AlSammari, 1999) stated that the Ottoman officer Anwar Pasha had sent a message to Ibn Saud asking him to prepare a military force to be sent to Syria to help the Ottoman government, but Ibn Saud refused to do this due to local conditions in Najd (Najda Fathi Safwa, 2000).

The contacts between Abd al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman Al Saud, the emir of Riyadh, and Britain resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Darien in 1915 (Gharaibeh, 2016). Perhaps the alliance was because of Britain's desire for Ibn Saud to fight Ibn Rashid in Hail, who was hindering Britain's military communications with Iraq because of his alliance with the Ottomans. Moreover, Britain wanted Ibn Saud to preserve the security of the Gulf and its transportation.

In the same context, Storrs, the Asian writer at the British consulate in Egypt, mentioned that since the Ottoman state had disregarded its traditional friendship with Great Britain by standing by Germany, Britain considered itself free from those traditions that had bound it with it since ancient times (Storrs, 1937). Perhaps this is a reference to the 1913 treaty between the British government and the Ottoman Empire regarding the rule of Qatar and the rule of Al Thani over it (Zahlan, 1979).

It is worth mentioning that the British-Ottoman Treaty of 1913 included defining the borders of Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as regulating navigation in the Arabian Gulf. Negotiations between the two parties began in 1911, meaning that they took place after two years of correspondence between the two parties. In the second part of the treaty, which included both Qatar and Bahrain, Britain pressed for the Ottoman Empire to abandon its claim to Qatar and Bahrain (Zahlan, 1979). As for Britain's contacts with Muhammad bin Ali al-Idrisi in Asir, it resulted in the conclusion of the Jazan Agreement on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1915 between the two parties. In this treaty, al-Idrisi was considered the first Arab emir to ally with Britain. Thus, Britain benefited from its alliance with al-Idrisi by standing by it against the Ottoman Empire (Al-Maani et al., 2014; Naval Intelligence Division, 2012; Schofield & Blake, 1988).

As for Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the contact between him and Britain began in February 1914 and resulted in Hussein's alliance with Britain against the Ottoman Empire. Then, Sharif Hussein declared his revolution in June 1916 (Gharaibeh, 2016). It is worth noting that Henry McMahon confirmed in his correspondence with Sharif Al-Hussein bin Ali (Zeidan, 2024) that the issue of the prospective independent Arab state's recognition of the treaties signed with Britain and the sheiks of the Arab Gulf is a foregone conclusion (Gharaibeh, 2016; Mohammed, 2023; Zeidan, 2024). The British government had provided guarantees to the sheiks of the Gulf - and this includes the Sultan of Muscat and the sheiks of the Trucial Coast in Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, and those linked with them by protection treaties. They were contacted by the political residents in the Bushehr region and his assistant political representatives in the region to preserve their freedoms and their holy places so that they would not be affected by the war confrontation between Britain and the Ottoman Empire (Al-Mansour, 1980; Gharaibeh, 2016).

The British government was afraid of the boom in the arms trade in the Gulf prior to the outbreak of the First World War (Al-Mansour, 1980), so it resorted to taking measures to prevent the circulation of this trade in its areas of influence. As a result, it concluded agreements with the sheiks of the Gulf under which arms trade was prohibited. What aroused the suspicion of the British government, in particular, was the exclusion of Qatar (Al-Mansour, 1980) from that prevention because it fell under Ottoman

influence, and we will address this issue later. When the First World War began, the British government sent to the sheikhs and emirs of the Gulf in the Arabian Peninsula, informing them of the start of war operations against the Ottoman forces and, at the same time, reassuring them of its duty to preserve their entities according to the treaties previously signed with them.

Some documents referred to the position of the Sheikh of Qatar on Britain, in which the Sheikh of Qatar Abdullah bin Qasim (Gharaibeh, 2016) replied to a letter from the Political Resident in Bahrain (T.H. Keyss), informing him of the arrival of the British military forces to Bahrain; furthermore, the message included that the Sheikh of Qatar is waiting for Britain's orders and that he is ready to act at the appropriate time regarding the Ottoman garrison in Qatar (Tuson, 1991). In a message sent by the Political Resident in the Gulf, Major Knox (S.G. Knox), to the British officials in the Government of East India, that Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim had been informed that the war had actually begun against the German forces, and he had also been briefed on the new situation in the region<sup>1</sup>.

When the First World War began, Britain and the Ottoman Empire were in two competing factions, and therefore, the British government began to feel the danger of the presence of the Ottoman garrison in Qatar<sup>2</sup>. The issue of the garrison was disturbing to the British government, which sought to get rid of it in cooperation with the Sheikh of Qatar.

### ***Britain and the Arms Trade in Qatar and its Role in Getting Rid of the Ottoman Influence***

Arms trade began in the Arabian Gulf region in the year 1844 AD, and most of those weapons were of British origin. Since 1884, the British government has tried to limit this trade to licensed companies. The British government began to feel the danger of this trade from the large quantities of weapons that entered the Arabian Gulf, especially in the year 1896. Therefore, Britain has sought to conclude treaties with the sheikhs of the Arabian Gulf to eliminate this trade. A treaty was concluded with the Sheikhs of Bahrain in 1889, of Kuwait in 1900, and of the Ottoman coast in 1902.

Weapons were one of the most important factors determining power in the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf, as well as administration to maintain the balance of power in the region. Consequently, the British government sought to try to eliminate that trade for fear of its interests in the region. Qatar was excluded from any treaty with Britain regarding that trade because it was subject to Ottoman influence. The British government was apprehensive about the spread of the arms trade in Qatar because it constituted one of the main entry points for the arrival of weapons to southern Najd and the Arabian Peninsula.

British fears increased significantly from the boom of the arms trade in Qatar in 1897 when more than 2,000 weapons arrived in Qatar, and it is reported that most of the weapons that were arriving in Qatar came from Muscat (Al-Hashemi, 2009). A number of influential people and sheikhs in Qatar were interested in this trade. Most of the weapons that were arriving in Qatar were transported to the middle of the Arabian Peninsula and Bahrain. After 1908, Qatar was a center for exporting weapons to Riyadh due to the strong relations between Sheikh Qasim bin Muhammad and Abdulaziz Al Saud. Perhaps this is due to Abdulaziz Al Saud's need for weapons to build the Saudi state and fight enemies. The orders of the British Navy, which applied to the Arabian Gulf, included the need to search all boats flying Arab flags and confiscate their shipments.

As for the Qatari boats, they were flying the Ottoman flag, and therefore, the orders of the British Navy stipulated that the weapons that were confiscated should not be destroyed unless the Government of British India issued a special order. The issue of arms trade in Qatar was one of the factors that prompted the British government to enter into negotiations with the Ottoman government in 1911 AD, as those negotiations culminated in an Ottoman-British agreement in 1913, in which it recognized the independence of Qatar from the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, Britain got rid of any

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/87/7057.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/87/7057.pdf>

competitor in the Arabian Gulf region. The arms trade in Qatar also stopped when it signed a treaty with Britain in 1916.

### ***Role of Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim in Ending the Ottoman Influence in Qatar (1913-1916)***

The Qatar Peninsula did not appear as a political unit until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most of the people of Qatar, who migrated two and a half centuries ago and settled in the Jabreen Oasis, then Al Zubarah, are originally from Najd. The sheikhs of Bahrain counted Qatar as one of their possessions, and a revolution took place in 1866 in Qatar, which ended with the death of a Bahraini worker. Sheikh Qassim bin Muhammad (1820-1913) tried to appease the Sheikh of Bahrain, so he went to him as a conciliator and a visitor, but he was arrested; as a result, his tribe attacked Bahrain to save him, but they were defeated in 1867. When the forces of the Sheikh of Bahrain pursued them to Qatar, they were able to kidnap one of the relatives of the Sheikh of Bahrain, but he was released in exchange for the release of Sheikh Qassim, who became the ruler of Qatar. The Ottomans seized the opportunity to impose their control on Qatar, and the Ottoman forces entered Qatar in 1871 (Al-Qarala & Shadia, 2018; Gharaibeh, 2016), and Sheikh Qassim became an Ottoman governor. This disturbed the British government, which was keen not to compete with any powers in the Arabian Gulf.

However, the relations between Sheikh Qassim bin Muhammad Al Thani and the Ottoman Empire soon became tense, especially after the year 1887 AD. This was because the Ottoman Empire sought to establish a customs revenue project in Doha in an attempt to confirm its influence and control over Qatar (Gharaibeh, 2016), which disturbed Sheikh Qassim as he considered that interference in Qatar's internal affairs would harm its economic interests.

Due to the recurring disputes between Sheikh Qassim and the Ottoman Empire and the latter's continuous attempts to expand in the region, Sheikh Qassim sought to get closer to Britain, trying to conclude a protection treaty with it, similar to the treaties concluded with Bahrain and the coast of Oman (Gharaibeh, 2016). The official negotiations began in 1911 through a British memorandum sent to the Ottoman government, followed by many memorandums, and negotiations continued between the two parties until the treaty was concluded in 1913 (Gharaibeh, 2016). The Ottoman Empire gave up its claim to both Qatar and Bahrain under pressure from Britain, and Britain recognized Qatar's independence under the rule of Al Thani, noting that the Ottoman garrison in Qatar would remain there until 1915. The envoy of the Ottoman Empire, Officer Abdul-Jabbar Effendi, had arrived in 1915, Qatar, in order to hand over the garrison<sup>3</sup>. The British government had sent a message to Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim that the Ottoman officer would meet the commander of the Ottoman garrison in the port of Doha, confirming the unwillingness of the commander of the British forces in Qatar to send soldiers to the port, because the forces of the Ottoman garrison, despite their small number, will fight bravely, and he does not wish to shed blood in the port of Doha.

In his previous message, the British commander wished to persuade the Ottoman garrison to leave Qatar for Bahrain, provided that they would be allowed to take their weapons if they left peacefully. The British Resident asked the Sheikh of Qatar to provide the garrison with what they needed if it left Qatar and went to Bahrain, as well as provide troops for them and inform him of any developments through the Political Resident in Bahrain. It should be noted that the negotiations with the Ottoman garrison did not succeed in getting them out of Doha despite their small number; the British officials believed that the garrison forces would fight bravely, but the British did not want to fight; moreover, the Ottoman officer Abdul Jabbar Effendi expressed his desire to allow the forces of the Ottoman garrison in Qatar to leave it in an honorable manner with their weapons and equipment, and with the mediation of the British Political Resident in Bahrain. Then, they will be sent to Basra and Istanbul without being subjected to any harm or punishment.

After the failure of previous attempts with the commander of the Ottoman garrison in Doha, Sheikh

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.qdl.qa/en>

Abdullah bin Qasim took it upon himself to carry out this task, as he reached the British government a report stating that Sheikh Abdullah had expressed his willingness to get rid of the garrison and seize its weapons. The report also mentions the existence of consultations between Sheikh Abdullah in Qatar and his brother Sheikh Khalifa in Bahrain, which resulted in Sheikh Abdullah being able to seize the garrison's weapons.

After completing the process of controlling the garrison, Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim sent a message to Captain T. Keyss in which he told him about the weapons he had obtained from the Ottoman garrison, and T. Keyss informed him that the British forces were in need of those weapons and ammunition. Sheikh Abdullah expressed his willingness to send weapons to the British forces, despite the difficulties in transporting them, pointing out that the number of boxes of weapons and ammunition that were seized from the garrison was ninety-five boxes only and that he would send five boxes from his own to make a group of one hundred. As for the missing cannons, his men were searching for them, and if they were found, they would also be sent.

British documents showed that the forces of the Ottoman garrison in Qatar did not all leave Doha. In a telegram sent by Percy Cox to the Government of British India, the captain of the Royal Ship Pyramus, which was about to head to Kuwait and Bahrain in search of Ottoman troops and soldiers, suggested that it continued its way to Qatar in order to search for the fleeing forces from the Ottoman garrison in Qatar.

The British government was very keen to get rid of the remnants of the Ottoman forces in Qatar in order to confirm the subjugation of that region to them. The British Political Resident in Bahrain received a report indicating Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim's approval of the British request to pursue the Ottoman forces in Qatar, which he estimated were two officers and forty soldiers. The Royal Ship Pyramus had arrived in the port of Doha on August 17, 1915, and the British forces explored the fort in which the Ottoman garrison forces who had fled had been barricaded<sup>4</sup>. They found five hundred shells in that fort that had been captured by the British forces; the fort was handed over to Sheikh Abdullah, and thus, Qatar completely got rid of the Ottoman presence after more than 43 years of Ottoman control.

The Ottoman garrison in Qatar did not mean much to Britain, even if it expressed its concern, as we have noticed about its presence. However, the real reason for that was its desire to get rid of any manifestation of Ottoman influence in the Gulf and thus be able to control the Gulf fully, as it would not allow the existence of any Ottoman military threat, even if it were a small garrison which could not be compared to the British military power. Following the end of the Ottoman presence in Qatar and the departure of the Ottoman garrison, the British government decided to continue the talks with the Sheikh of Qatar and conclude a treaty with him.

British documents indicated that the assistance provided by Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim to the British government had a decisive and important role in getting rid of the garrison and, thus, the Ottoman influence in Qatar. The treaty concluded between Sheikh Abdullah bin Qasim and the British government did not mention anything about the arms trade that Britain was afraid of at the beginning of the war, and the British government had ignored any attempts to smuggle weapons to Qatar; therefore, the treaty was devoid of any clause related to weapons. This indicates that the issue of weapons is no longer important to the British government, as this is associated with the end of the Ottoman presence in Qatar, and therefore it no longer threatens the British forces.

The Qatari-British treaty of 1916 placed Qatar under British protection and prevented the Sheikh of Qatar from entering into relations with foreign countries. As for Britain, it pledged to protect him from any external aggression.

## **Conclusion**

The study showed Britain's endeavor to try to neutralize the rulers, emirs, and sheikhs of the Arabian Gulf

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.qdl.qa/en>

and the Arabian Peninsula by concluding agreements with them to stand by it against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War (1914-1918). The study also focused on Britain's position on the arms trade in Qatar and its attempt to eliminate it by getting rid of the Ottoman influence on Qatar and making Qatar dependent on Britain. The study also traced the great role of the Sheikh of Qatar Abdullah bin Qasim in getting rid of the Ottoman garrison in Qatar in 1915, and thus, Britain got rid of any competing forces in the Arabian Gulf in order to preserve its strategic interests.

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