

Ruling from Behind: Foreign Power in the Gulf



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once famously said, “If Britain ruled a country for a hundred years, its policies would continue to rule it for two hundred more after withdrawal.” This quote encapsulates a deeper pattern of colonialism and dominance, shedding light on the forms of inherited imperialism that followed World War II.

Though the United States emerged as the new global power and heir to Britain’s colonial legacy, this did not mark a complete end to British influence especially its cultural and administrative presence in former colonies.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the Arabian Gulf, a region historically referred to by multiple names “The Gulf of Basra,” “The Persian Gulf,” “The Eastern Gulf,” and “East of Suez” each term reflecting a different mode of colonial dominance.

With the sun setting on the British Empire in the mid-20th century, especially in the Indian subcontinent, Britain pivoted from direct rule to a more subtle form of control through protectorates, spheres of influence, and advisory missions.

This form of indirect rule came to define the emergence of the modern Gulf states Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq. British involvement extended beyond mere partition and fragmentation; it influenced judicial systems, police and security apparatuses, educational curricula, and the control of natural resources such as oil and pearls.

To implement Churchill’s long-term vision of influence without direct occupation, Britain employed a strategy of “rule from behind,” relying on local rulers while embedding British advisors within royal courts.

These advisors quietly shaped state institutions, policies, and the political direction of Gulf monarchies without the overt presence of colonial governors. This low-cost approach secured British interests while avoiding the political fallout of formal colonialism.

This report deconstructs this enduring power structure by examining the Gulf as a case study of informal guardianship and advisory rule. It delves into the roles of British advisors such as Charles Belgrave in Bahrain, Hugh Boustead and William Luce in the Trucial States (now the UAE), and figures like Timothy Landon in Oman. These individuals did more than advise; they effectively governed from the shadows.

The report explores how these figures shaped rentier economies and created long-standing dependencies on external actors not only in security and foreign policy but also in economic and administrative management.

It also documents the evolution from direct colonialism to the rise of global

consulting firms entities now tasked with managing Gulf states' economic transitions under the guise of international expertise.

[The full article continues across multiple sections highlighting detailed historical accounts of Charles Belgrave's sweeping authority in Bahrain, Ian Henderson's security reign and practices of torture, William Luce's orchestration of regional influence, and Timothy Landon's role in Oman's palace coup.]

These case studies illustrate how British influence morphed from overt control to institutional embedding, evolving over time into the contemporary era of "soft guardianship" a form of structural dependency facilitated by multinational consultancy firms and defense alliances.

Despite formal independence in 1971, the legacy of colonial structures continues to shape governance, economic planning, and security strategies across the Gulf.

Today, states like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia rely heavily on firms like McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and PwC to structure economic diversification, public sector reform, and strategic planning. These firms have effectively replaced imperial advisors, operating behind the scenes while asserting significant influence on policy directions.

In essence, the Gulf's experience underscores that guardianship did not end with the departure of colonial administrators. Instead, it was rebranded continuing through security agreements, economic advisory roles, and administrative partnerships. Western powers secure the region's borders, while consulting firms engineer its domestic transformation.

It is colonialism without colonies: a mutually dependent structure where external actors wield internal control under the banner of modernization and stability.