

The British Library / Qatar Foundation Partnership

The purpose of the partnership

The British Library is working with the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development and the Qatar National Library to digitise half a million pages of archival material relating to the Gulf and Arabic scientific manuscripts.

- Fresh, accessible research opportunities: The entire digitised collection of items will be available online, complete with contextualised explanatory notes and links, in both English and Arabic. We hope to create a world class online library to transform the study of Gulf history. These records have been available for decades at the British Library, but the online resource will transform the way that research can be carried out.
- A new perspective on Middle Eastern studies: Much of the material we are digitising has been available in the reading rooms at the British Library for many years but now they will be available also digitally. This process will open up new lines of research for many studying the region.

The scope

- India Office Records that span the period 1763–1951, comprised of files from the Bushire Political Residency Records and the Bahrain Agency Records series.
- J.G. Lorimer's Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia (Calcutta 1908, 1915), a classic work for academics and an engaging and accessible introduction to the history of the Gulf that contains photographs and maps in more than 2700 pages.
- 500 maps, charts and plans of the Persian Gulf and its wider region from the India Office Records Maps collection, War Office Archive and the wider British Library Maps collection.
- Private papers of Sir Lewis Pelly, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf between 1862 and 1872.
- Manuscripts from the British Library's Arabic scientific manuscripts collections, covering topics such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy and engineering.
- A selection of photographs, postcards and other photo mechanically printed objects; sketches, drawings and watercolours; etchings, engravings and illustrations; and audio collection materials including 200 shellac 78 rpm discs recorded in Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq in the period 1920–1940 and the private collection recorded by Edward Fox in Oman in the 1980s.

The aim of the partnership

The Partnership aims to provide researchers around the world with the opportunity to perform ground-breaking research into the history of the Gulf.

The modern history and culture of the Gulf and wider region, particularly its connection with Britain, are vividly documented in personal and official archives, photographs, maps and recordings of traditional music held at the British Library. Insights into the history of science in the Arabic-speaking world and Arabic cultural heritage are also held in the Library. The portal, which will be in English and Arabic, will improve understanding of the Islamic world, Arabic cultural heritage and the modern history of the Gulf providing researchers around the world with the opportunity to perform ground-breaking research in subject areas such as the history of Gulf trade and politics, key individuals in the Gulf and the history of science in the Arabic-speaking world. To date, over 350,000 images have been created including 1,000 archival files from the India Office Records and 90 Arabic Scientific manuscripts. By the end of 2014 we will have digitised half a million pages. Our team of curators, cataloguers, conservators and contain metadata both in English and Arabic.

The oil and mineral files

I am currently working as Archival Specialist for the British Library / Qatar Foundation Partnership, mainly cataloguing and studying 'Oil and Minerals' files from the India Office Records (IOR). These records were produced by two bodies related to the India Office - the Bushire Residency, a secure base from which to conduct trade with Persia and the Gulf, on the northeast coast of the Persian Gulf, in Bushire and the Bahrain Agency,. The records catalogued- from the early 20th century to the 1950s, contain information on the oil exploration and the oil industry in the Persian Gulf countries; with correspondence between the British Government, the local rulers and the oil companies (mostly APOC -then BP, BAPCO, SoCal).

15% of the collections we are digitizing from IOR are on oil (250 out of 1600 files). The papers contain documents on relations with local rulers regarding negotiations for oils concessions, and the subsequent development of oil industry: geological exploration, building infrastructures, oil extraction, exportation and shipment.

The countries we have documents on are:

- Bahrain
- Qatar
- Hasa
- Kuwait
- Oman
- Iran
- Emirates
- Gwadar (Pakistan)
- But we also have documents regarding USA and UK.

The oil companies we have documents on are:

- APOC (now BP)

- Eastern and General Syndicate – their license in Saudi Arabia was purchased by Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco)
- BAPCO
- Standard Oil of California (Chevron).

The India Office Records are public records of great interest for commercial and business history.

The scoping of this project has contributed to ‘Building oil Histories’. Nowhere like in the Middle East, is it true that understanding oil is essential for understanding modern history.

In this paper I will present two examples from the ‘Oil and Mineral’ files, telling how commercial interests become political, one example regarding Qatar and another regarding Iran.

The Qatar Oil Concession

The first license for oil exploration was granted to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (A.P.O.C.) by the ruler of Qatar, Shaikh ‘Abdullāh bin Jāsim Āl Thānī, in 1932. But the extraction process was not put in place until several years after the Second World War.

Qatar’s exploratory wells were drilled relatively late, especially considering that oil exploration had already begun in the 1920s, earlier in some cases, in most other countries in the Middle East. For example, by that time explorations had already concluded in Bahrain with the discovery of oil in 1931.

Despite the discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was only in the 1920s that Britain’s interest in oil concessions deepened. In 1922, Major Frank Holmes, a British-New Zealander known as ‘abu naft’ (the Father of Oil), started seeking an exploratory lease in Qatar. A lease was granted by the Shaikh in 1926 to the British owned D’Arcy Exploration Company, a subsidiary of A.P.O.C. and early predecessor of British Petroleum (BP). The British Government itself held a majority shareholding in the Company from 1914 (to 1967), long before it was re-named as British Petroleum Co. Ltd, in 1954.

We can only speculate about what, if any, explorative moves were made to look for oil before this date. However, it is clear that A.P.O.C. agreed to undertake a geological exploration of the country in return for the sole right to submit an application for a concession.

The importance of oil as a resource in Qatar only grew after the crisis of the pearling industry, which was partially brought about by the introduction of cultured pearls by the Japanese into the market. The fall in value of luxury goods after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 also played its role in realigning the Qatari economy towards oil.

Exploration was carried out in early 1933 by two British geologists, E. W. Shaw and P. T. Cox. They found that the rock composition of the highest hill in Qatar bore similarities with the rock found at the oil field discovered in Bahrain. The first license for exploration, granted in 1932, had to be extended for eight months until 1933. Then, finally, after long negotiations APOC agreed the deal in 1935 by signing a seventy-five year oil concession. The negotiations were helped in no small part by the British offer of military protection against the Saudi ruler, Ibn Sa’ud in exchange for exclusive rights to bid for the oil concession.

After initial exploration was carried out to find out the right spot for drilling, oil was discovered onshore in 1939 at Jebel Dukhan. In 1941, oil was also found in a second well, ten miles south of the first, which opened in 1939.

By offering military protection to the ruler of Qatar, Shaikh Abdullāh bin Jāsim Āl Thānī,, the British government helped to ensure that the Qatar Oil Concession was granted in 1935 to the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Who or what did Qatar need protection from?

Qatar's desire to secure military protection was understandable in the context of the international political situation, too, especially just a few months after Germany announced its rearmament, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles.

The most prominent threat came from the newly established Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – under Ibn Sa'ud – on its southern and maritime borders as well as from eventual 'serious' incursions by other regional powers.

At the same time, Britain was starting a programme of rearmament, including acquiring new battleships and providing modern monoplanes to the RAF. It was essential that they ensure there was enough fuel to power the new fleets in case of a new war against Germany. Access to the Qatari oil supply would be vital if it were made possible.

The British need for oil in the case of war was addressed by a clause inserted into the Qatar Oil Concession, which was agreed between A.P.O.C. and the Shaikh in 1935: the clause allowed 'for pre-emption of oil in case of national emergency or war'. This pre-emption was to be determined 'solely by His Majesty's Government'. Although the Concession was signed between A.P.O.C. and the Shaikh, this clause in effect ensured that neither party would be able to exert full control over the oil supply in the event of war.

The Second World War reset the priorities: in a letter dated 14 January 1940 that was sent to the Shaikh to congratulate him on the discovery of oil in Qatar, the Political Agent, Hugh Weightman, wrote:

[I]t is most regrettable that the Company's operations are bound to be delayed by the war which has been forced on us by Hitler and the German Government. We must hope that victory will be speedily achieved so that normal conditions may return to the whole world. In December 1942, the camp at Dukhan was closed and the operations in Qatar were suspended. The British Government justified their decision with the Shaikh of Qatar on the basis of 'the occurrence of force majeure'.

During the suspension of operations, which lasted until early 1947, payments of 300,000 rupees a year in addition to several salaries were still provided to the Shaikh, but this wasn't enough to help with the country's financial difficulties. The economy was weak, the country was poor and depopulated. The political climate was also suffering as a result of a dispute with the Bahraini ruling family, the al-Khalifa, over sovereignty of the territory of Zubarah, in the North of the Peninsula. So great was the crisis that Shaikh 'Abdullāh bin Jāsim Āl Thānī had to mortgage his home.

But the situation was about to change. Offshore exploration, drilling and extracting as well as the building of infrastructure only restarted in 1947. Between December 1947 and April 1948 a new geological survey was carried out in order to set up a new camp. Finally, in December 1949, oil exports began, an event that was to determine the beginning of a new era for Qatar.

The Persian Oil Concession

In 1900, Persian officials offered William Knox D'Arcy, an Englishman, the chance of acquiring an oil concession in Persia. The first of its kind in the Gulf region, the oil concession granted D'Arcy 'a special and exclusive privilege to search for and obtain, exploit, develop, render suitable for trade, carry away and sell natural gas, petroleum, asphalt and ozokerite throughout the whole extent of the Persian Empire for a term of sixty years'.

The Persian Oil Concession was originally granted to the D'Arcy Exploration Company in 1901, providing that the company pay Persia sixteen percent of its net profits. However, this unsophisticated wording – written in the earliest years of oil exploration – made the precise royalties hard to determine. A further agreement, known as the Armitage-Smith Agreement, was signed in 1920 providing further clarity to the terms.

Although D'Arcy undertook the enterprise as a personal adventure for profit, the concession had a strong influence on the development of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) and was ultimately to steer British Government interests in the region.

In 1908, after oil was discovered in Persia by D'Arcy's engineers, the British Government began to exert more influence over the company's affairs; in doing so, they displeased the Persians. However, the tide had already turned: by 1914, long before it was re-named the British Petroleum Co. Ltd in 1954, the British Government held the majority of shares in the company.

Internal changes within the country were also to effect the relationship between the authorities and the company. After the fall of the Qajar Empire in 1925, the Pahlavi dynasty took a different approach to the concession and to concomitant British interests.

Grievances voiced from the end of the First World War against the company were not just financial and commercial: the autocratic Government was seeking an 'Iranianization' of the company, which was accused of not employing the Iranian workforce. A similar attitude, intended to protect the country from foreign interests and influences, propelled Reza Shah's decision, in 1935, to change the name of the country from its exonym, Persia – the name by which the country was known externally but which referred only to a single province – to its endonym, Iran – the name by which the country had been known internally.

The company's growth was affected by the recession in 1930 and, in 1931, royalties were reduced to a quarter of the previous year's. In November 1932, the Shah himself cancelled the concession, allegedly because the APOC was not acting in Persia's interests. In addition, it was claimed that the company was neither extracting enough oil and minerals from the territory, nor paying enough royalties. The political reasons for the cancellation were more likely rooted in a desire to be emancipated from British interests, while the financial motivation was for the renegotiation of higher royalties, which would drive revenues and, in particular, finance Reza Shah's modernization plans.

As the Soviet paper *Izvestia* wrote at the time, the cancellation of the concession represented 'a serious breach of the colonial policy of England'. After a long debate within the Foreign Office, both the company and the British Government agreed to challenge the Shah's right to cancel the concession.

Interestingly, the government directly intervened to support the interests of the company, to the extent that the cancellation of the 1901 D'Arcy Concession was considered a dispute between Britain and Iran and was referred to the Council of the League of Nations.

The Council considered the action of the British Government contrary to international law, finding that they had no right to make a diplomatic issue of the case. The dispute was solved informally by the two parties, under the supervision of the Council's rapporteur, and negotiations for a new concession began in April 1933.

A new concession, valid until 1993, was quickly renegotiated and signed on 28 April 1933, with the company, now renamed as the 'Anglo-Iranian Oil Company' (AIOC). This new agreement obliged the AIOC to employ more Iranians, to refine oil in Iran and to widen the concession to the sea bed in the Gulf. In doing so, the concession helped to define the border with Iraq in the Shatt el-Arab and to delimit Iranian coastal waters in the Gulf.

The intervention of the British government in these two occasions shows when the state mixes with interests of the company, making commercial interests become political, national and imperial interests.

Nowhere like in the Middle East, is it true that understanding oil is essential for understanding modern history, and the India Office Records that will be online will contribute to this understanding.

Valentina Mirabella
British Library / Qatar Foundation Partnership
@BLQatar