The Arab Gulf States
International Relations and Economic Development

British India Office Political and Secret Files, 
c. 1914-1948

- Vital source for the history of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman
- Many files were previously classified as Secret, Top Secret or Confidential
- Including Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf
- Oil exploration and concessions, 1912-1949

Advisor: Penelope Tuson, Former Curator of Middle East Archives, Oriental & India Office Collections (OIOC, now part of the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections), British Library

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The Arab Gulf States

The first half of the twentieth century was a period of unprecedented change in the Arab Gulf states. Because of their strategic and geopolitical importance on the route between Europe and Asia, these tiny desert shaikhdoms had for centuries been the focus of international attention. However, the discovery of potentially vast reserves of oil in the 1920s and 1930s began an unprecedented transformation which was eventually to produce the vibrant and powerful modern city states of today. The archives of the Political and Secret Department of the India Office are an outstanding source for the history of this period. Beginning with J.G. Lorimer’s famous Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, this collection consists of confidential reports, maps, handbooks and printed memoranda, as well as policy files, made available in their entirety for the first time, describing the detailed background to diplomatic and economic negotiations and international interests in the region.

Historical background
In 1903 the British Government of India, anxious to assert imperial authority in the Gulf, commissioned a comprehensive Gazetteer of the area. It was compiled by John Gordon Lorimer, an official of the political service in India. Lorimer began his work while accompanying the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, on a tour of the Gulf, also designed to demonstrate Britain’s dominance and power. Printed for government use only, and classified as secret, the Gazetteer was completed in 1915 and far exceeded its original terms of reference. Generally accepted nowadays as one of the greatest works ever to be produced on the region, Lorimer’s Gazetteer, the first item in this IDC Publishers’ collection, includes detailed geographical, topographical, historical and economic information which still provides the starting point for any research on the Gulf states.

Oil exploration in the Gulf began on the Persian side at the beginning of the twentieth century and the importance of controlling oil supplies was highlighted by the First World War. After the War, the first oil negotiations in the Arab Gulf shaikhdoms focused the attention of world industrial powers on both the potential profits and also the strategic and economic implications of the oil business. At the same time the arrival of oil men, negotiators, geologists and technicians brought in much larger expatriate communities and contributed to the development of communications and infrastructure projects such as the Arabian Gulf coast air route. Meanwhile, offshore, parallel negotiations were taking place, sometimes relating to oil and communications and sometimes relating to strategic issues, on the question of ownership of the many small islands in the Gulf. When the Second World War started in 1939 the British were concerned with putting in place adequate defense measures for each of the Arab Gulf states and for the Gulf waterways.

British relations with the Gulf States
During this period of economic, social and political change, the British exercised unrivalled influence in the region and, through their political representatives and advisers in each state, they observed and reported on all aspects of life. Because of their proximity to the Subcontinent, the Arab Gulf states were drawn into the administrative sphere of the British Empire in India. The archives of the Political and Secret Department of the British Governor’s India Office are therefore a vital source for the history of the Gulf. British relations with the Gulf shaikhdoms were conducted locally by a British Political Resident who until 1948 was stationed on the Persian side at Bushehr. Political Agents and locally appointed officials were posted to Bahrain, Kuwait, Muscat and Sharjah. Both Resident and Agents reported directly to the imperial administrations in Bombay, Calcutta or Delhi and, ultimately, to the India Office in London, where the department responsible for the conduct and supervision of relations with the Gulf was the Political and Secret Department. The Political and Secret Department also liaised, and discussed issues of Gulf policy, with other British government departments such as the Foreign Office, Colonial Office, War Office and Air Ministry.

Provenance and archival background
The India Office Political and Secret Department archives form part of the Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC, now part of the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections) at the British Library. From 1902 the most important of the Political and Secret Department’s correspondence and papers accumulated in London were registered, indexed and bound in files according to subject. At the same time the department also maintained its own reference library of confidential handbooks for the restricted use of its own officials, as did the Military and other India Office departments. The Political and Secret Department papers have now been catalogued under the OIOC reference L/PS. From 1902 to 1930 the subject files are located under the reference L/P&S/10. Around 1930/1931 the department replaced its subject file system with a new series of “Collections”, arranged according to geographical area. Some of these collections were bound; others, particularly in the immediately pre-war and World War II years, were simply placed on tagged files. They are now catalogued under the reference L/P&S/12. Material in this IDC Publishers’ series is drawn mainly from “Collection” 30 (Persian Gulf) with some relevant additional material from Collection 5 (Aviation).

Contents of files
The materials in this collection focus on the Gulf states in the economic and international sphere. IDC Publishers propose to make available a second collection in 2005 which will complete the project with the entire set of Political and Secret files relating to the internal affairs and inter-state regional relations and boundaries of the Arab Gulf states. These sets will also complement the previously published collections of Political and Secret files on “The Creation of Iraq” and “The Creation of Modern Saudi Arabia”, both of which include material of interest to the Gulf states.

In this present collection, the first section of gazetteers and handbooks includes military, naval and hydrographic reports as well as diplomatic treaties. However, the items also encompass a wide-range of historical, topographical, social, tribal and biographical information. The Political and Secret departmental papers (sections 2-4) consist of policy files and documents relating to international and regional diplomatic negotiations. They include questions of Gulf island sovereignty and offshore regional boundary disputes; papers on the
development and exploitation of oil resources, including signed concession and exploration agreements; reports and surveys relating to navigation and trade in the Gulf; and the development and exploitation of aviation and the Arabian Gulf air route, together with agreements with local rulers for aerodromes, resthouses and landing rights. The files include many documents in Arabic (always with English translations), notably correspondence and agreements with Gulf state rulers.

The economic development of individual states – Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman – and their relations both with each other and with the wider world are described in the regular and detailed reports from British officials. The British and international perspective is set out in minutes of interdepartmental meetings, diplomatic correspondence and inter-governmental discussions.

Some of the most perceptive and informative comments are found in the typed or, more often, handwritten notes of senior India Office officials. Sometimes scribbled in the margins of documents or on small scraps of paper, these observations by experienced and erudite men such as Sir John Shuckburgh (“JES”) and J.C.Walton (“JCW”), Secretaries of the Political Department from 1917-1921 and 1929-1936 respectively, and those of eminent Under-Secretaries of State for India, such as Sir F.A.Hirtzel or Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, provide a unique insight into the British viewpoint in the Gulf region.

Both the Handbooks and Gazetteers and also the departmental files include a large number of maps, showing physical features, areas of habitation, routes, boundaries, concession agreements, islands and harbours. Many were previously classified as Secret, Top Secret or Confidential.

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**Cover Illustration:** Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia Vol 1, Historical, Part I
J.G. Lorimer, Calcutta: Government Printing India, 1908-1915, Secret L/P&S/20/C91/1-4 (microfiche 1)
**THE CREATION OF MODERN SAUDI ARABIA**

*India Office Political and Secret Files, c. 1914-1939*

**Editor: Penelope Tuson**

The archives of the Political and Secret Department of the India Office are an outstanding source for the history of the Saudi state. This is the first time the major files have been made available in their entirety in one series. The material in this collection consists of confidential printed reports, maps, memoranda, and handbooks, together with Political and Secret Department policy files describing the wider context of international relations, as well as the practical details of an expanding political administration and social and economic infrastructure.

- 37,800 frames
- 778 microfiche
- Printed guide by Penelope Tuson
- Free EAD guide at www.idc.nl/EADBI

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**THE CREATION OF MODERN IRAQ**

*India Office Political and Secret Files, c. 1914-1921*

**Editor: Penelope Tuson**

The materials in this collection consist of India Office Political & Secret Department confidential reports, memoranda, maps and handbooks as well as policy files describing the background and practicalities of the creation of a political administration and a social and economic infrastructure.

The geopolitical identity of present-day Iraq can be traced back down to the British Military occupation of the First World War and the civil administration laid down at the beginning of the British Mandate, which lasted 1921 to independence in 1932. During the War, British officials prepared detailed intelligence reports on local personalities, tribes and political affiliations. At the same time both military and civilian experts produced geographical and topographical surveys of the entire region, from the boundaries with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the south to Kurdistan in the north.

- 32,965 exposures
- 675 microfiche
- Printed guide by Penelope Tuson
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**BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY ON PERSIA (IRAN), c. 1900-1949**

*India Office Political and Secret Files and Confidential Print*

**Editor: Anthony Farrington**

The dominant theme of the collection is the position of Persia between two powerful neighbors, namely Russia to the north and the British Government of India to the east. By the late nineteenth century, Persia became the playground of both interests for almost half a century, during which time the British, with their immensely valuable oil concessions in the south, emerged as the dominant (though hardly ever welcome) foreign partner. The strategic planning and policy formulation of British India and London required information to provide ‘background’ for political relations and practical ‘know-how’ for military operations and clandestine activities. The present collection from IDC Publishers brings together the product of all this activity.

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