

THE ROLE OF SMALLNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES OF BRITISH ELITES REGARDING THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE GULF REGION (1968–1971)

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One of the most important attributes of the modern Gulf sub-system of the Middle East and North Africa is the unique distribution of material resources. The region is dominated by three large powers, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, which (according to the latest data of the World Bank)¹ collectively possess approx. 91% of the territory, 87% of the population, and 78% of the economic capacities in the Gulf.² The rest is divided between five smaller states, which are squeezed between the three giants, which constantly represent a threat to their political, economic, military, and societal security.

This scattered configuration can at least partly be attributed to British policies in the region and the practical consequences of the British withdrawal. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, Great Britain was the dominant power in the Gulf through the so-called trucial system. Nevertheless, because of the review process concerning foreign policy initiated in the 1950s, the British government decided in 1968 to withdraw all armed forces from the region by the end of 1971. This process resulted in a flawed negotiation process between local rulers to form a union, which did not manage to integrate Bahrain and Qatar into the emerging United Arab Emirates. The outcome was the quite unstable situation which reproduced international and transnational tensions and strengthened the identity of smallness and weakness of local rulers, all of which manifested in several border tensions, smaller and larger armed conflicts (e.g., the conquest of Abu Musa and Tunb islands by Iran, the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, the constant intervention of Iran in Bahrain, and the tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia).

Despite the apparently dominant role of the British government in the emergence of such a potentially unstable system, the perception of the British elite regarding the smallness of the newly independent states and their own responsibility in the

¹ *World Bank Databank.*

² The Gulf is defined in the framework of this study as the region constituted by the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Iraq, and Iran.

situation has not been investigated. Such an analysis could have potential scientific relevance from two perspectives – in understanding British motivations and strategy during the late 1960s and early 1970s and in researching post-colonial responsibility and the behaviour resulting from such perceived responsibility.

The aim of the research, therefore, is to identify the construction of the concepts of “smallness” and “responsibility” and their interaction in the discourse of British elites during the withdrawal process. To achieve this goal, I analysed the meaningful interactions in the House of Commons and House of Lords between members of Parliament (MPs) and of the government (MGs) regarding the withdraw between 1968 and 1971 and identified the main strategic narratives concerning the region. Using discourse analysis, I argue that the British political elite established five strategic narratives in which the smallness of the emerging states and the responsibility of the British government were constructed differently. In most contexts, smallness equalled weakness in the elite narratives, nevertheless, MPs and MGs avoided taking responsibility in various ways.

Conceptualisation and methodology

In the framework of the research, the discourse of British elites was analysed between 1968 and 1971 regarding their perception of the withdrawal from the Gulf region. To understand their interpretation of the smallness of Gulf states and their perception of their own responsibility, meaningful interactions taking place in the House of Commons and House of Lords were analysed. Altogether, these debates or responses to oral and written questions constitute the discourse in which separate narratives were identified regarding withdrawal.

In the definition, separation, and construction of these narratives, I relied on three key pieces of literature and concepts. First, in conceptualising narratives, I followed David Rudrum’s advice and put the emphasis on not the “*representation of a series of sequence of events*” (as the traditional approach argues) but rather on the use of such series of sequence of events by a narrative goal.³ Consequently, the definition of narratives depends highly on the context. Second, in the framework of this study, the most suitable concept is that of strategic narratives, which are “*means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors*” and “*to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate*”.⁴ The strategic narratives related to the British withdrawal fall in the category of policy narratives, which “*set out why a policy is needed and (normatively desirable), and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished*”.⁵ Based on this definition, five strategic narratives were identified in

³ Rudrum 2015:195–204.

⁴ Miskimmon et al. 2013:2.

⁵ Miskimmon et al. 2017:8.

the discourse of British elites, which were separated on the basis of the different interpretations of withdrawal regarding the interests it serves, the consequences it has, and the role of the smallness of would-be Gulf states plays.

Before analysing the narratives, it is important to describe their basic components.⁶ The *actors* of the narratives were grouped primarily not on the MPs' (and MGs') membership in the Labour and Conservative parties, but rather their pro-government or opposition stance. This is crucially important as the colour of the government changed in 1970, the perception of the withdrawal also changed. These agents have different *agencies* – MGs (and pro-government MPs) -had the power to shape and implement British foreign policy, whereas members of the opposition did use the narratives mostly for other political purposes (e.g., domestic political competition). The *scene* of these narratives was the same, the British parliamentary environment, which entails a culture of debates and accountability. The *act* about which the narratives were constructed was British withdrawal, while the *purpose* of the narratives differed to a considerable extent.

Last, but not least, several discursive strategies used by MPs and MGs were identified.⁷ Nomination (the way in which other actors were referred to) did not play a major role in the analysis, but argumentation (the ways in which actors justify and legitimize their actions) and predication (the characterization of other actors) were important in understanding the perception of responsibility and smallness respectively.

The summary of results

In the period between 1968 and 1971, I found altogether 105 meaningful discussions⁸ (including responses to oral and written questions) about the Gulf region, 101 of which took place in the House of Commons and 4 in the House of Lords. More than a third (38) of these debates were conducted in 1971; 1968 and 1970 had approximately the same debates (28 and 26), while 1969 witnessed the lowest number (13). The general elections and the subsequent change in government in July 1969 also affected the intensity of discussing the Gulf – during the Labour government, on average, 1.7 debates took place monthly about the region, while during the Conservative leadership, this number rose to 2.9. This does not represent, however, a different attitude by the governments, more likely a different attitude by the opposition.

The different interactions constituted separate but interconnected narratives through speeches, questions, and answers delivered by government officials as well as regular MPs from both the government and opposition sides. Throughout the four years, five narratives were identified in connection with the British withdrawal.

⁶ Based on Miskimmon et al. 2017:7.

⁷ Aydın-Düzgüt and Rumeili 2019:285–305.

⁸ It is possible that in debates about other questions, the topic was raised by any MP, but most of these discussions were not included in the investigation.

Table 1 includes the number of interactions dominated by each narrative,⁹ all of which had different and varying relative intensity:

- The withdrawal and the future relations with independent Gulf countries in the broader British foreign policy strategy. This narrative was the most empathetical among all narratives, but it became even more intense after the Conservative election victory in 1970.
- The military balance of power in the region, the possible vacuum created by the withdrawal, and the present and future status of British armed forces in the region. This narrative was dominant in the first two years compared to the others. It was also present in the last year quite strongly.
- The possibility of the creation of a Gulf Union among smaller entities was the third most intensive narrative, but it was mentioned roughly half as many times as the first two ones. It reached its peak also in the last year (1971).
- The presence of global and regional powers (the Soviet Union, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US) was constructed as a threat in a separate narrative, as the withdrawal might incentivise their build-up. This narrative was also stronger after the Conservative victory in June 1970.
- The least intense narrative put the withdrawal in the context of British military and public expenditures and trade. This was mentioned mostly during the period of the Labour government.

⁹ Every interaction was categorized based on the primary theme it contained. This is an imperfect method as several debates can refer to different narratives, nevertheless due to their interconnected nature, other methods of separation would have equalized the intensity of the narratives.

Table 1: The varying intensity of the five narratives regarding British withdrawal from the Gulf

	Public expenditure	Presence of global & regional powers	Defence, power vacuum, and British armed forces	British foreign policy and future relations	Gulf union	SUM
1968	7	4	8	6	3	28
1969	0	1	8	0	4	13
1970 (Labour gov't)	5	0	4	1	1	11
1970 (Conservative gov't)	0	6	0	9	0	15
1971	0	3	11	16	8	38
SUM	12	14	31	32	16	104

In the five narratives, the smallness of Gulf states and the quality and extent of the responsibility of the British government were identified and constructed in different ways; consequently, they were analysed separately.

The five narratives regarding the withdrawal

Public and military expenditure

The initial announcement, which started the discussion on the withdrawal of British forces from the Gulf, was framed in the context of cutting military expenditures overseas. On January 16, 1968, Prime Minister Harold Wilson talked in the House of Commons about the review process announced a month earlier and the “*measures necessary to achieve a progressive and massive shift of resources from home consumption (...) to the requirements of exports, import replacement and productive*

investment".¹⁰ To strengthen his point, Prime Minister Wilson stated that everything he would announce "*relates to public expenditure*".¹¹ According to him, defence policy should support foreign policy, but foreign policy decisions "*are a prior requirement of economies in defence expenditure; and in taking these decisions we have to come to terms with our role in the world. (...) Our economic strength, our real influence and power for peace will be strengthened by realistic priorities*".¹² It was in this context that the withdrawal of forces from the Persian Gulf until the end of 1971 was announced a few minutes later, in connection with the similar withdrawal from the Far East, and with the policy of maintaining military bases only in Europe and the Mediterranean.

In this first announcement, Prime Minister Wilson did not mention either responsibility or the smallness or weakness of the political entities of the Gulf; nevertheless, he talked about the commitments of the British government towards them. He acknowledged that he intends "*changes in our political commitments*";¹³ in practice, "*cuts in defence expenditure would follow reductions in commitments*".¹⁴ This endeavour manifests in "*renegotiating a whole series of arrangements, agreements and treaties*",¹⁵ a process which naturally did not take place among equal participants. Prime Minister Wilson defended his policy, saying that the British government "*must not be asked in the name of foreign policy to undertake commitments beyond its capability*".¹⁶

Members of Parliament at first did not challenge this narrative, but after a week, they questioned the fiscal need of the policy as well. On the 22nd of January, Peter Tapsell asked the government if the article published in the Times about an offer made by the rulers of the Gulf region to provide for the costs of British military presence in order to pressure London to stay in the region was right.¹⁷ The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs refused to react in substance, questioning the reliability of the press. Later, several MPs (including Sir Tufton Beamish, Reginald Maulding) raised the same issue, and after a while, government officials started to give more meaningful answers.¹⁸ MPs referred to the same proposal in a lengthy debate on January the 25th,¹⁹ while in February 1968, the Secretary of State for Defence cited two reasons why accepting the offer of the Sheikhs would not change financial

¹⁰ HC Deb 16 January 1968 vol 756 c1577.

¹¹ HC Deb 16 January 1968 vol 756 c1578.

¹² HC Deb 16 January 1968 vol 756 c1580.

¹³ HC Deb 16 January 1968 vol 756 c1582.

¹⁴ HC Deb 16 January 1968 vol 756 c1596.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ HC Deb 16 January 1968 vol 756 c1580.

¹⁷ HC Deb 22 January 1968 vol 757 cc17–20.

¹⁸ It was in this context that Secretary of Defence Denis Healey famously said that he does not want to be "sort of a white slaver for Arab shaikhs". Peterson 2000, 338.

¹⁹ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 cc641–717.

calculations – first, while it would help ease the foreign currency burden on the budget, but it would not contribute to the reduction of public expenditures; and second, covering the costs of the military presence of the Gulf would not be enough because the government has to provide for the military logistical capability which is required to station British armed forces in the region, which would be higher than what the Sheikhs offered.²⁰ Similar conversations (which usually ended with a reference to this exchange or previous exchanges of arguments) took place on the 26th of February,²¹ 20th of March,²² 12th of June,²³ among others.

Another point of debate was the exact amount which is spent on the stationing of British troops East of Suez and thus saved by the withdrawal. Government officials put overseas expenditure at around 100–150 million pounds a year,²⁴ while the per capita costs related to every British serviceman stationed in the Gulf were calculated to be 1500 pounds a year.²⁵ The maintenance of British bases was conducted with 11 million pounds a year.²⁶ Additional savings (related to phasing out the logistical support and other equipment) were estimated to be around 12 million pounds a year.²⁷

Naturally, these numbers were questioned by the Conservative opposition,²⁸ but a more meaningful debate emerged if these costs worth it and whether withdrawal could be expensive as well. “*The question is not whether we can afford to stay there*”, argued Desmond Donnelly, “*the question is how we can afford to leave*”.²⁹ Several conservative MPs cited not just economic costs but political ones as well, arguing that leaving behind allies for financial reasons is bad for the reputation of the empire. In this debate, the smallness of Gulf states was implicitly cited positively by the opposition as a reason for small defence costs related to their deployment.³⁰

Regardless of what the actual cost is, the final argument of the Labour government, which served as the basis for the final decision, was adequately summarized by Robert Edwards: whatever the actual cost of staying, “*we cannot afford that money any longer. We are no longer a world power. We have not a great empire to protect*”.³¹ This quote shows clearly that the governing political party

²⁰ HC Deb 14 February 1968 vol 758 cc1346–7.

²¹ HC Deb 26 February 1968 vol 759 cc934–7

²² HC Deb 20 March 1968 vol 761 c411

²³ HC Deb 12 June 1968 vol 766 c234

²⁴ HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 c507; HC Deb 28 May 1970 vol 801 c520W.

²⁵ HC Deb 04 March 1970 vol 797 c405.

²⁶ HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 c507.

²⁷ HC Deb 15 November 1968 vol 773 c160.

²⁸ E.g., HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 c507.

²⁹ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c669.

³⁰ E.g., HC Deb 24 January 1968 vol 757 cc526–527; or HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 cc445–446.

³¹ HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 c507.

perceived its responsibility towards the British Empire as greater than the responsibility towards the peoples of the dependencies.

Power vacuum and the balance of power

Despite the efforts of the government to frame the withdrawal as a question of reducing public expenditure, the opposition quickly connected the topic to the local balance of power and the role of British forces played in it. In this narrative, the removal of the imperial army is interpreted as a measure that eventually creates a power vacuum in the region, as well as instability, conflict, and competition. Withdrawal is mostly seen as a disadvantageous decision that should be avoided.

One day after the announcement of the Prime Minister, former Minister of Defence Duncan Sandys laid down the foundations of this narrative. He argued that after British withdrawal, the “*small oil-producing States will have little chance of maintaining their independence without our help*”.³² This is problematic not because of the well-being of Gulf communities, but mostly because of the interests of the British empire connected to oil trade, as well as the chance that “*control [in the region] may pass into the hands of people who feel no friendship towards Britain and who may be actively hostile*”.³³

Basic notions of the narrative were repeated several times by the Conservative opposition. “*When we move out of any are in the world*”, argued one noble in the House of Lords, “*we create a power vacuum. That vacuum is immediately filled by someone else, and nearly always by someone entirely opposed to all the interests and principles for which we stand*”.³⁴ British withdrawal from the East of Suez was connected to the American withdrawal from Vietnam, which could result in “*the instability in the vast arena of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf*”.³⁵

In this discursive framework, the smallness of the Gulf states appears implicitly as predication and as a reason for their weakness and a cause for instability. Moreover, many representatives of the narrative connected the size of the Gulf states to their massive oil wealth, depriving them of the possibility to build up relative deterrence.³⁶ All in all, “*they are countries which, being small and relatively defenceless but having a large oil income, offer a tempting prize to many people*”.³⁷ This is especially dangerous since “*there are big power rivals in the Gulf and different and conflicting claims by big Powers against small Powers. In the area*

³² HC Deb 17 January 1968 vol 756 c1849.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ HL Deb 22 May 1968 vol 292 c790.

³⁵ HC Deb 16 March 1970 vol 798 c118.

³⁶ E.g., HC Deb 17 January 1968 vol 756 c1849; HC Deb 18 January 1968 vol 756 c2071.

³⁷ HC Deb 18 January 1968 vol 756 c2071.

there are many States which are indefensible in terms of their own population, but which have vast and growing economic resources".³⁸

Smallness and the inability to maintain their security constitutes responsibility for the British government to protect the area and to provide deterrence, at least according to the narrative promoted by the Conservative opposition.³⁹ Tory MPs oftentimes questioned even the agency of small Gulf states and predicted that in case of the British withdrawal, there would be another great power that will take over this responsibility. This idea was best captured by a debate in May 1968:

*"It is no use talking in modern intellectual language to the Sheikhs and the small Governments of the Persian Gulf. They do not understand Oxford and Cambridge vernacular so pleasantly put forward from the Front Bench. All they see is that here is an area in which there has long been a dominant Power and when that power goes, they know in their hearts that there will be another dominant Power to replace it, because the pickings, to put it brutally, are so enormous and the military strength of the area is so ridiculously small."*⁴⁰

Labour MPs and MGs responded to the vacuum narrative by three points. First, they questioned the theoretical foundations of the whole narrative, pointing out that the balance of power approach is flawed. According to Colin Jackson, "*another version of Conservative foreign policy has constantly included the word 'vacuum'—there will be a vacuum in this, that, or the other part of the world unless the British stay*".⁴¹ Nevertheless, "*It is not the job of Western Powers or any others to go around setting up so-called vacuum positions*".⁴² The MP even recalled a similar narrative regarding predicting an emerging vacuum in the Middle East after 1956, to which the Jordanian foreign minister of that time said, "*I am not a vacuum. I do not want to be filled up. I just want to be an Arab leader within the Arab world.*"⁴³ Second, they pointed out the vacuum narrative is used to argue for the maintenance of an ever-lasting military presence in various parts of the world, which is "*entirely non-sustainable*".⁴⁴ Moreover, in the long run, the stationing British troops might for good eventually undermine the security of Gulf states. Naturally, the Conservative opposition rejected the idea that they argue for perpetual commitments,⁴⁵

³⁸ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c642.

³⁹ E.g., HC Deb 24 January 1968 vol 757 c527; HC Deb 18 January 1968 vol 756 cc2071–2072.

⁴⁰ HC Deb 31 May 1968 vol 765 c2401.

⁴¹ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c697.

⁴² HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c700.

⁴³ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c697.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 cc433–563.

Third, Labour MPs and MGs connected the idea of the vacuum to the negotiations of a possible federation among Gulf states (see the fourth narrative). “*I do not agree that a vacuum will be created. We have until the end of 1971 to strengthen the States in the area and help them, if they require our help, to create a strong and viable union.*”⁴⁶ “*We believe that the outstanding problems of the area will be best met by solutions reached locally.*”⁴⁷ Using this argument, which almost automatically made Labour politicians optimistic (and Conservative ones pessimistic)⁴⁸ about the unification talks,⁴⁹ was also another way to deflect taking responsibility (“*After 1971, defence will be primarily the responsibility of the States in the area*”).⁵⁰

Great power competition

A strategic narrative closely connected to the power vacuum one (though containing its own features) interpreted the withdrawal from the perspective of the competition of great powers and regional ones. In this framework, British actions in the Gulf should be interpreted in a Cold war context and the regional manifestation of traditional power politics. This strategic narrative was present throughout the whole period, but it never became dominant; major political debates mostly took place in evaluating the absolute and relative severity of these threats. That’s being said, a major political cleavage did not evolve strictly on party lines as both parties accepted this interpretative framework – though the Conservative government was more open to taking into consideration the necessities of great power politics.

The primary threat perceived by MPs and MGs was constituted by the Soviet Union. The growing influence of Russia was observed and feared in the Persian Gulf region⁵¹ (especially from Yemen),⁵² an actor who is “*ready to stir the pot*” if the withdrawal would lead to instability.⁵³

Iran was identified as another potential troublemaker,⁵⁴ even if the Shah’s regime was a close partner of the United States and Great Britain. British elites perceived Iran as a great power of the region⁵⁵, and they also realised that the Iranian territorial claims would outlast their military presence.⁵⁶ They also identified Abu Musa and

⁴⁶ HC Deb 18 November 1968 vol 773 c880.

⁴⁷ HC Deb 31 May 1968 vol 765 c2410.

⁴⁸ HC Deb 19 November 1970 vol 806 cc1452–577

⁴⁹ HC Deb 13 November 1968 vol 773 cc397–8

⁵⁰ HC Deb 15 October 1969 vol 788 cc103–4W

⁵¹ E.g., HC Deb 20 May 1968 vol 765 cc8-9; HC Deb 12 June 1968 vol 766 c40W; HC Deb 09 December 1970 vol 808 cc435–508.

⁵² HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c642.

⁵³ HC Deb 24 January 1968 vol 757 c423

⁵⁴ More so than Iraq, although the Kuwaiti crisis was also mentioned a few times (e.g., HC Deb 24 January 1968 vol 757 c423.).

⁵⁵ HL Deb 24 February 1971 vol 315 cc1091.

⁵⁶ HC Deb 04 November 1971 vol 825 c350.

the Tunb islands as a potential source of conflict between the smaller states.⁵⁷ The limited amount of trust towards the Iranian Shah was visible in a speech in which an MP argued that the British withdrawal would inevitably push him “*to closer association with the Soviet Union*”.⁵⁸

Even if regional and global powers were seen as potential threats to British interests, sensible optimism was detectable throughout this strategic narrative. British elites were comfortable thinking about the issue of withdrawal from the perspective of great power politics, and even if they identified possible challenges, they remained confident that they can handle these issues. At the end of the day, great powers like Iran or Saudi Arabia “*will have a positive dominating influence*” in the region⁵⁹ since “*all the countries in the area of the Gulf are interested in political stability*”.⁶⁰ In the House of Lords, it was even argued that London might be more aware of the interests of regional powers than the powers themselves (“*the States that border the Persian Gulf have common interests, whether they perceive it or not*”).⁶¹ This romanticised view of great power politics also led to the presumption that other actors share the same feeling – even if Saudi Arabia and Iran “*have their claims in the area for sure*”, they are still considered to want the Brits a great power, to stay.⁶²

The argumentation in this narrative, therefore, leads not to change the decision regarding withdrawal but to consult security issues more intensively with great powers instead of local elites. The dominance of great powers should not be questioned, but even reproduced and strengthened – as early as January 1968, it was argued that the security of the region should be based on the “tripod” of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and, interestingly, Kuwait.⁶³ This strategy was mostly (but not exclusively)⁶⁴ argued for and implemented by the Conservative government after 1970, with the inclusion of Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵ It was admitted as well that talks are directly focusing on the defence of the area.⁶⁶

This is the narrative where, both implicitly and explicitly, state size and responsibility are the most vividly connected by British elites. Great powers have more leverage and responsibility than small powers because they are bigger;

⁵⁷ E.g., HL Deb 29 November 1971 vol 326 c4; HC Deb 03 December 1971 vol 827 c189W.

⁵⁸ HC Deb 31 May 1968 vol 765 c2401.

⁵⁹ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c698.

⁶⁰ HC Deb 20 July 1970 vol 804 c14.

⁶¹ HL Deb 22 May 1968 vol 292 c796.

⁶² HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1291.

⁶³ HC Deb 24 January 1968 vol 757 c528.

⁶⁴ HC Deb 23 June 1969 vol 785 c190W

⁶⁵ E.g., HC Deb 20 July 1970 vol 804 cc13–6; HC Deb 20 July 1970 vol 804 c5W; HC Deb 15 July 1970 vol 803 c231W.

⁶⁶ HC Deb 14 December 1970 vol 808 c248W.

therefore, even the independence and security of small states should be discussed with and by great powers. As a key example of predication, the primary attribute of Iran and Saudi Arabia is that they are big and strong, whereas the emerging states are small and weak,

British foreign policy and future relations

The most empathetical narrative throughout the four years interpreted the withdrawal from the Gulf in the broad framework of British foreign policy. Accordingly, the decades-long process of re-evaluating the interests, capabilities, and grand strategy of the Empire is the main theme in which basically all foreign policy decisions should fit. It is not just the reasons and circumstances of the withdrawal but the role of the Gulf states and British policy towards the region before and after withdrawal that should be decided and identified. “*Our future is basically in Europe*”, argued one Labour MP in early 1968,⁶⁷ therefore most resources and attention should be devoted to Europe, instead of territories East of Suez. In this narrative, the future of relations with soon-to-become independent Gulf states bears as much value as details regarding the stationing of Gulf troops. This narrative was a fertile ground for both parties throughout the four years.

Despite the dominant nature of this narrative (especially visible in the last years), both governments were heavily criticised by their opposition for lacking a proper concept about the present and future role of the region in British foreign policy. In February 1968, the Labour government avoided a direct answer to such questions by arguing that the formulating and discussing the future relationship with Gulf leaders “*will be a long and continuing process*”.⁶⁸ Later, Labour MPs and MGs only managed to refer to overly general aims, like the desire to make “*arrangements for stability and peace*”,⁶⁹ or “*treaties of friendship*”.⁷⁰ Similar to the power vacuum narrative, decision-makers pointed out the responsibility of local rulers who have to make an agreement about their own status first, before detailed negotiations could start.⁷¹

Maybe the most tangible strategic view articulated by the Labour government was that they do not consider the withdrawal as an end of British leverage in the region. As they proclaimed multiple times, the influence of Great Britain does not solely depend on military power.⁷² The evidence behind this argument was said to be the fact that despite the presence of the British army in the Middle East, “*we have been impotent in recent crises*” in the region.⁷³

⁶⁷ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c679.

⁶⁸ HC Deb 26 February 1968 vol 759 c229W.

⁶⁹ HC Deb 01 May 1968 vol 763 c1101.

⁷⁰ HC Deb 08 July 1968 vol 768 c24.

⁷¹ HC Deb 08 July 1968 vol 768 c33.

⁷² HL Deb 22 May 1968 vol 292 cc798-800; HC Deb 27 November 1969 vol 792 c617..

⁷³ HC Deb 25 January 1968 vol 757 c679.

The Conservative opposition did not accept the argumentation of the narrative (even if they used many of its elements in government). In 1969, Tory MP Geoffrey Rippon, who would become the Minister of Technology a year later, even asked the Labour government to give Gulf leaders “*our assurance that after the General Election the new government will give them support and will not be afraid to name them as friends and allies*”.⁷⁴ This rhetorical move was intended to enlarge the agency of the opposition and undermine the leverage of the sitting government, arguing that severe changes are bound to happen after the Conservatives would be entitled to form foreign policy.

Nevertheless, such severe changes did not take place after the formation of the Heath government. Conservative MPs echoed the general and basically empty words of the previous government and put forward a very shallow vision about the current and future policy towards the region. In this case, the confusion was exacerbated by the lack of appetite of the Tory government to say if they would follow the withdrawal plan at all.⁷⁵ Minister of state Lord Balniel only proclaimed that “*In the Gulf, as in the Far East, our objective is the promotion of peace and stability. (...) The Foreign and Commonwealth secretary has started the process of consultations with our friends in the Gulf to establish how this common objective may best be served*”.⁷⁶ Starting from October, Lord Balniel started to refer to the fact that the government asked Sir William Luce (the previous commander-in-chief and governor of Aden) to submit a study on the Gulf, and final decisions will be made afterward.⁷⁷

Avoiding a detailed answer mostly by referring to waiting for the Luce report was a behaviour repeated by the Tory government for months.⁷⁸ The study was finally submitted in February, 1971,⁷⁹ after which the government still needed a couple of weeks for the formulation of the policy (despite the continuous attempts of the Labour opposition to force a meaningful answer out of MGs).⁸⁰ This practically meant that less than one year before the self-imposed deadline of the withdrawal,

⁷⁴ HC Deb 19 February 1969 vol 778 c472.

⁷⁵ The Labour opposition asked the obvious question in October 1970 if the Conservatives had “*decided to accept the withdrawal plans*” of the previous government after all, to which Lord Balniel replied very shortly (“*no, not at all*”) HC Deb 28 October 1970 vol 805 c235.

⁷⁶ HC Deb 13 July 1970 vol 803 c141W.

⁷⁷ HC Deb 28 October 1970 vol 805 cc231–232.

⁷⁸ HC Deb 29 October 1970 vol 805 cc397–8; HC Deb 16 November 1970 vol 806 cc298–9W; HC Deb 19 November 1970 vol 806 cc1455–87; HC Deb 19 November 1970 vol 806 c461W.

⁷⁹ HC Deb 22 February 1971 vol 812 cc29–30.

⁸⁰ E.g., HC Deb 18 December 1970 vol 808 c486W; HC Deb 14 January 1971 vol 809 cc232–3; HC Deb 25 January 1971 vol 810 cc8–9W; HC Deb 10 February 1971 vol 811 c193W; HL Deb 18 February 1971 vol 315 cc701–2; HC Deb 22 February 1971 vol 812 c18W; HL Deb 24 February 1971 vol 315 cc1062–157; HC Deb 25 February 1971 vol 812 c226W.

British elites failed to provide any long-term vision regarding the future of the Gulf and Gulf states in British foreign policy. The ongoing federation talks, and consultations were oftentimes mentioned as a reason as well, which deprives London of the ability to formulate the future strategy⁸¹

Eventually, the government provided the description of its Gulf policy on the 1st of March 1971,⁸² right before the discussion of an upcoming Defence White Paper. When drawing up the context of the new policy, Secretary of State and Commonwealth Affairs Sir Alec Douglas-Home blamed the Labour government for their withdrawal decision which “*created a new and difficult situation*”⁸³ with the emergence of dormant tensions and growing opposition to British military presence. He admitted that the unification talks (which had previously been cited as the primary reason behind delaying the formation of the new policy) are yet to be concluded, but regardless of their outcome, the government was offering “*continuing links and assistance*”⁸⁴ in five different forms:

- signing a Treaty of Friendship “*containing an undertaking to consult together in time of need*”,⁸⁵
- handing over the Trucial Oman Scouts to construct the core of the army of the future federation,
- stationing forces for training and liaison,
- conducting joint exercises with the participation of the British Army and Air Force
- conducting regular visits by the Royal Navy.

While the aim (and the embeddedness) of the British Gulf policy was not described in detail, “*continuing and effective British contribution to the stability of the area*”⁸⁶ was named as the primary framework for London’s activity in the region. This tone is much softer than previous obligations partaken by the British government and signalled a much looser relationship and engagement in the Gulf.

While the Labour opposition expressed satisfaction about the conservative government’s “*conversion (...) to the views of the [previous] Labour government*”,⁸⁷ they criticised the government for wasting time in formulating the policy:

The government’s response to the criticism was basically expressing frustrations with the previous government and the slow pace of the unification talks. Regarding

⁸¹ E.g., HC Deb 07 December 1970 vol 808 c15W; HC Deb 09 December 1970 vol 808 c545.

⁸² HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 cc1227–32.

⁸³ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1227.

⁸⁴ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1228.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1229.

⁸⁷ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1230.

the differences between the Labour and the Conservative government, Douglas-Homes argued that “*they would have been out of the Gulf with no thought and no arrangements made for any future plans*”.⁸⁸ Lord Balniel referred back to the public expenditure narrative, which, according to him, drove foreign policy decisions in the former administration, which “*had nothing to do with strategic objectives*”.⁸⁹ Setting the deadline of December, 1971 was “*a sudden decision, a panic decision*”, but after that, the new government did not have the leverage to change course. “*The very announcement of such a policy has changed the situation. A new approach and a new relationship are now needed*”.⁹⁰

It is clear, that the responsibility (especially towards the leaders and the peoples of the Gulf) was deflected by both governments. The role played by economic calculations by the Labour government was replaced by the Conservative administration with pointing fingers towards the previous government. Arguing that objective necessities (let them be of political or economic nature) deprived the elites to implement more satisfying policy was used as a tool for politicians to narratively undermine their own agency, and therefore question their responsibility. This was the only narrative in which the smallness of Gulf states did not play virtually any role, as it was concerned only with the British perspective.

Unification negotiations in the Gulf

The last narrative identified in the British parliamentary discourse was focusing on the unification of Gulf entities. According to this interpretation, the British withdrawal incentivised the sheikhs of the Gulf to start the long-awaited federalisation talks, which would (hopefully) eventually lead to the unification of the coastal region. This strategic narrative had the most connection with the other discursive frameworks – as it was already mentioned, the federalisation of the Gulf was named as a process of vital importance in terms of the local and regional balance of power politics, as well as in terms of the formation of the future British policy towards the region. That’s being said, it is somewhat surprising that the narrative was among the less intense ones.

One possible reason behind this lacking intensity is that generally, there were no serious debates regarding the desirability of unification; views mostly differed on its probability. Again, in the argumentation behind this strategic narrative, the real cleavage was not constituted by political affiliation but by the agency of narrative actors – governments tended to be more optimistic about unification while members of the opposition questioned it oftentimes.

State size played a central role in the argumentation. According to MPs on both sides, the smallness of would-be Gulf states makes it imperative for them to conduct

⁸⁸ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1230.

⁸⁹ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1334.

⁹⁰ HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1242.

the talks on federalisation successfully. Even if “*there have been inevitable disagreements among the nine Rulers about the future form of the federation or union*”,⁹¹ the British elite perceived that “*there is recognition that the smaller States must combine together if they are to have an effective future*”.⁹² The question of security (and not, for example, political and economic viability) dominated the British perception of the region, as it should be the “*federal defence force to take over the British Treaty responsibilities*”.⁹³ On the other hand, the responsibility of Great Britain in the successful conclusion of the negotiation process was not recognised, as London did not participate directly in the talks⁹⁴ but submitted its recommendations and proposals.⁹⁵

In March 1968, one and a half months after the announcement of British withdrawal, Gulf leaders agreed in theory about the basic principles of the future federation. The Labour government called the event as “*an encouraging demonstration of a constructive approach on the part of these Rulers*”.⁹⁶ An overly positive attitude towards the negotiations was observable; the Labour administration even took credit for it, arguing that “*these great and constructive strides towards greater unity and self-reliance in the Gulf*” would or could not have been “*taken so rapidly and successfully had the British Government not announced its own decision on the Gulf in January*”.⁹⁷

Despite British optimism, negotiations did not proceed as the Labour government wanted them to. They dragged on without any meaningful result, and even if the principles decided in March 1968 would become the foundations of the constitution of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain did not participate in the unification, despite British desire. The meeting of Gulf rulers in October was (falsely) perceived as witnessing a good atmosphere and substantial progress.⁹⁸ By the end of the year, the opposition started to claim that the talks “*have broken down*”, blaming the British government and not the Rulers.⁹⁹ The Labour government defended the process, arguing that “*to form a federation takes a long time, and a hastily formed federation often leads to danger*”.¹⁰⁰

The conservative victory in the 1970 elections did not represent a substantial change in the narrative. MPs still questioned the viability of the process,¹⁰¹ while the

⁹¹ HC Deb 08 July 1968 vol 768 c23.

⁹² HC Deb 09 December 1970 vol 808 c546.

⁹³ HC Deb 08 July 1968 vol 768 c23.

⁹⁴ HC Deb 04 March 1968 vol 760 c57; HC Deb 01 March 1971 vol 812 c1228.

⁹⁵ HC Deb 03 December 1969 vol 792 cc301–2W.

⁹⁶ HC Deb 04 March 1968 vol 760 c57.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ HC Deb 18 November 1968 vol 773 c185W.

⁹⁹ HC Deb 08 December 1969 vol 793 c84.

¹⁰⁰ HC Deb 05 March 1969 vol 779 c445.

¹⁰¹ HC Deb 19 November 1970 vol 806 c1550.

new Conservative government constantly referred to the consultations as proceeding,¹⁰² although slowly, with the help of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.¹⁰³ The official aim of Great Britain remained to be the promote “*the union of the protected States consistent with the wishes of the Rulers*”.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, participants failed to reach a breakthrough even after the March 1971 announcement of the government regarding the future contours of British Gulf policy.¹⁰⁵

It remains to be an open question if the two subsequent British governments had anticipated the (partial) failure of the talks but kept their anticipation as a secret, or they were blindsided by realist expectation that small states should unite in such a volatile neighbourhood. Previously cited diplomatic notes from the 1960s show that the local agents of the British Empire were sceptical of the probability of the unification,¹⁰⁶ nonetheless, the fact that in the political discourse, the creation of a federal state was described as a key condition for the future stability of the region questions that the perception of diplomats was shared by the political elite in London.

Eventually, the sigh of relief of the Conservative government was easily sensible after the summer break of 1971, when they were able to announce for the House that “*six of the Trucial States Rulers (...) signed a provisional constitution for a Union. Her Majesty’s Government welcome this useful preparatory step towards the establishment of a Union*”.¹⁰⁷ MGs did not elaborate much on the refusal of Bahrain and Qatar to join the federation, except that they “*wished to resume responsibility for the conduct of their own affairs*”¹⁰⁸ and they signed treaties of friendship with them too.¹⁰⁹ They did not reflect on the fact that one of the smallest and weakest entities, Ras al-Khaimah, initially also refused to be part of the union (nevertheless, the leaders of the emirate eventually took part in the process).¹¹⁰

The process of withdrawal and the unification was to be concluded in November, when Rulers accepted the British offer made in March.¹¹¹ The British elite did not reflect on the incomplete nature of the unification. In December 1971, the government argued that the “*situation now achieved represents a reasonable and acceptable basis for the security and future stability of the area*”.¹¹² In conclusion, the Tory government tried to refuse responsibility and take credit for the outcome of the process at the same time. Responding to general questions from a Labour MP

¹⁰² E.g., HC Deb 22 March 1971 vol 814 c17W.

¹⁰³ HC Deb 17 May 1971 vol 817 cc880–1.

¹⁰⁴ HC Deb 09 December 1970 vol 808 cc545–546.

¹⁰⁵ HC Deb 21 June 1971 vol 819 c183W.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Jarman 1998.

¹⁰⁷ HC Deb 02 August 1971 vol 822 c203W.

¹⁰⁸ HC Deb 04 November 1971 vol 825 c350.

¹⁰⁹ HC Deb 18 October 1971 vol 823 c49W.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Zahlan 1978.

¹¹¹ HC Deb 25 November 1971 vol 826 c451W.

¹¹² HC Deb 06 December 1971 vol 827 cc946–9.

about the armed forces in the Gulf region, Minister of State Joseph Godber argued on the 13th of December that¹¹³

“We inherited from his party a difficult problem in the Gulf area which my right hon. Friend, with great patience, has brought to what I believe is a satisfactory and honourable conclusion under which all the States in the Gulf, both Arab and non-Arab, can, I think, look forward to a future of stability, as a result of what Britain has done”.

Conclusion

The British withdrawal from the Gulf region in 1971 was a pivotal moment in the history of both local societies and Great Britain itself. For the former, it represented the beginning of an era of more self-reliance without the British security umbrella with more freedom and less security. For the latter, it meant a turn away from the East of Suez and putting more attention to Britain’s place in Europe. From both perspectives, the responsibility of the British government and the smallness of the newly established states are important factors to understand the motivations and the policies of London.

As it is not surprising, British elites did not produce a single strategic narrative for the withdrawal but interpreted in five different frameworks. These narratives have three major attributes from the perspective of the present research. First, the relationship between the five narratives was different in each case. The first and the second ones were, for example, conflictual (as the power vacuum narrative was used as a counter-narrative by the Conservative opposition vis-à-vis the public expenditure narrative of the Labour government), while the fifth one was used as a supportive narrative for the second, third, and fourth ones too.

First, smallness and responsibility played different roles in the five strategic narratives (see Table 2) and were used differently by narrative actors. British members of Parliament and government used predication regarding smallness most explicitly in the first, second, and fifth narratives, mostly as an essential weakness that incentivises federalisation of the Gulf. The only positive connotation of smallness was visible only in the case of the first narrative, concerning the limited costs related to the defence of the Gulf states.

Responsibility on the side of the British government was avoided in all strategic narratives, except maybe for the third one (great power politics). Nevertheless, one can observe diverse ways of refusing responsibility in the argumentation of different actors – in the strategic narratives about vacuum policy and the unity negotiations, the British elite transferred responsibility for local rulers without reflecting on the role played (at least informally) by Britain. In the framework of the fourth strategic narrative (and to some extent the first one), domestic political and economic constraints were used to deflect responsibility, especially in terms of financial

¹¹³ HC Deb 13 December 1971 vol 828 c21.

sustainability and, in the narrative of the Conservative government, the limitations set by the previous administration.

Table 2: Smallness and responsibility in the five strategic narratives

	1: Expenditures	2: Vacuum policy	3: Great power politics	4: Future relations	5: Unity talks
Smallness	Small costs	Inability to provide relative deterrence	Greater powers have automatic responsibility		Incentive for federalisation
Responsibility	Changing obligations	Transferred to local rulers		Avoided by referring to domestic political and economic constraints	Transferred to local rulers (no British participation)

Third, the relationship between narrative actors and narratives depended on both their political affiliation and, maybe even to a great extent, on their agency. The general elections of June 1970 represented a turning point in the discourse regarding withdrawal, which left the framework of the strategic narratives intact, but the various actors slightly altered their tone and the extent of support of various narratives.

The practical consequences of the strategic narratives laid down in the study is hard to prove, nevertheless, but they have. As Laurel Weldon argues, such discourses “*distribute political advantage and disadvantage*”, especially in such a post-colonial context.¹¹⁴ From this perspective, a few observations can be made. First, for the British elites, the smallness (as well as their massive oil wealth) was the primary attribute of Gulf states, which reflects a traditional great power viewpoint that is echoed by various actors in different situations. The hypothesis can be made that differentiating between smallness and largeness and connecting the importance of a territory or community to its size is possibly a key feature of colonial and post-colonial discourses and behaviour. Nevertheless, further study should be made in this field.

¹¹⁴ Cited by Barkin et al. 2019:111.

Second, avoiding responsibility regarding the effects of not just historical British presence but also of British withdrawal was also a vivid attribute of all strategic narratives. This observation helps us explain British behaviour after and during the early 1970s. A representative example was the Iranian occupation of the Greater Tunb Island, which occurred on the last days of November 1971. The island had been claimed by Ras al-Khaimah, one of the smaller emirates, but the Iranian leadership managed to capitalise on the instability caused by British withdrawal. The interesting aspect of the development was that legally, the occupation took place at a time when the British government still had responsibility in defending the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, nevertheless, London decided to stay out of the affair.

The strategic narratives built up since 1968 helped the British government to deflect responsibility in the crisis. Responding to questions from Labour MPS, Minister of State Joseph Godber called the occupation of the Greater Tunb Island “*an unfortunate incident (...) which we regret very much*”, and “*it is true that Britain’s responsibility did not end technically until 24 hours later, we have made it quite clear that we did not think that (...) [paying compensation] was possible or practicable, when we were at the need of the period of our protection, as we explained to the Ruler of Ras al Khaimah. While we regret it, we cannot accept responsibility for it*”.¹¹⁵

Third, the strategic narrative and the British behaviour connected to them reproduced (and arguably, reinforced) several key attributes of the Gulf sub-system, which affect security in the region ever since. Among these, one should highlight the different status of small and larger states (especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq), the perception of the shores of the Gulf as a vacuum to be filled, as well as penetrated nature of the region. The constant instability caused by size differences in the region paved the way for the future presence of great powers in the region (especially that of the United States after 1991), the asymmetric relationship between local and extra-regional actors, as well as the almost constant interference of regional powers into the domestic affairs of smaller countries. These problems were not created but clearly reproduced by British elite discourses during the withdrawal period.

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¹¹⁵ HC Deb 13 December 1971 vol 828 c22.

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