Disarming the periphery: Inter-war arms control, British imperialism and the Persian Gulf

Leon Julius Biela
Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany

Abstract
Drawing on research on the international disarmament efforts of the inter-war years as well as on arms control in the empires, this article argues that arms control in the imperial periphery was an integral and very tangible part of the inter-war years’ international disarmament policies. It demonstrates that arms control in the periphery was conceived by the imperial actors involved as a pivotal part of the disarmament policies and that the disarmament policies had far-reaching consequences for the imperial periphery. The study uses archival sources to investigate the arms control in the Persian Gulf as a case study for the consequences of the disarmament policies in the imperial periphery. By analysing the goals and ends British imperial actors sought to achieve through arms control and particularly arms trade controls in the Gulf, this approach deepens the understanding of imperial disarmament policies beyond the mere assessment that they were somehow important to imperialism. It moreover diversifies and rectifies the understanding of the ‘peace’ that was to be achieved by the inter-war disarmament. Furthermore, it analyses the concrete practices and measures that arose out of the inter-war disarmament policies as well as their effects on the actual arms trade in the Gulf. Based on these results, the study investigates how actors from the Gulf itself positioned themselves within these developments, how and why they did or did not take part in them and how the Gulf’s societies in general dealt with the disarmament efforts. Hence, by shifting the level of analysis to the imperial periphery itself, the study seeks to expose the global dimension of disarmament policies and their effects on the region, its inhabitants and the imperial order, thereby stressing the importance of this perspective for a comprehensive understanding of inter-war disarmament.

Keywords
Imperialism, inter-war internationalism, disarmament, arms trafficking

Corresponding author:
Leon Julius Biela, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Historisches Institut, c/o Daniel Stahl, Fürstengraben 13, 07743 Jena, Germany.
Email: leonjulius.biela@uni-jena.de
Khizr-i-Tangistani, a khan from south-western Iran, was furious. Sheikh Ahmad, the Ruler of Kuwait, had confiscated two rifles and some ammunition intended to be shipped from Kuwait to the Iranian coast at Khizr’s behest, and refused to release them for reasons Khizr was unable to comprehend. Two lone rifles would be no significant gain for the wealthy sheikh, and since they were to be shipped out of Kuwait, it was not a matter of custom duties. Eventually, in March 1922, Khizr wrote a strongly worded letter asking the sheikh to release the arms: ‘Rest assured that no one can meddle with my property. I do not lack the power to prevent myself and my goods from being harmed, and it is only desire for friendship which keeps me from doing so’.1

Incidents like this were common in the inter-war Gulf region. As this article will argue, they were consequences of the disarmament policies pursued during the inter-war period by the imperial powers. Disarmament has received much attention by historians of the inter-war years, leading to a variety of studies on this topic.2 No serious account of the international history of the inter-war years, of the internationalist movements or of the League of Nations could do without a comprehensive discussion of disarmament policies.3 Yet research on inter-war disarmament almost completely confines itself to examining the mainly transatlantic discourses on disarmament as well as attempts at it among the industrialised states, namely issues like the reduction of troops and arms in Europe, disarmament of the Central Powers, naval disarmament or security policies. Meanwhile, the global dimensions of these discourses on arms control and disarmament as well as their entanglement with imperialism are almost completely neglected. This neglect was first tackled by David Stone who linked the inter-war years’ talks on disarmament to imperialism and its pursuit of a stable imperial order, a thought that was then revisited by other scholars.4 For instance, Andrew Webster repeatedly drew attention to the international trade in small arms as an important dimension of the disarmament talks.5 These studies, however, laid their focus on the level of international conferences and talks. Up until today, no study on inter-war disarmament has attempted to leave Europe and its conference rooms for a thorough examination of the forms disarmament took in the imperial periphery. Neither has the topic been followed up in the still evolving research on arms control in the empires. Particularly for the 19th, but also for the early 20th century, this field of research has brought forward several rich and detailed analyses of arms control and its consequences

1. Translation of an undated letter from Khizr-i-Tangistani to H.E. Shaik Ahmad al-Jabir as-Subah [Sheikh Ahmad al-Jābir al-Ṣabāh], C.I.E., Ruler of Kuwait, in: British Library, Indian Office Records (BL IOR)/R/15/5/47, 112r-113r.
2. See for example: R. Fanning, Peace and Disarmament. Naval Rivalry & Arms Control 1922–1933, Lexington 1995; C. Kitching, Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference. A Study in International History, Basingstoke 2003; R. Shuster, German Disarmament After World War I. The Diplomacy of International Arms Inspection 1920–1931, London 2006; A. Webster, Strange Allies. Britain, France and the Dilemmas of Disarmament and Security 1929–1933, London 2019.
3. Z. Steiner, The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919–1933, Oxford, New York 2005, here: 565-601, 755-799; R. Henig, The Peace that Never Was. A History of the League of Nations, London 2019, here: 102-126.
4. D. Stone, ‘Imperialism and Sovereignty: The League of Nations’ Drive to Control the Global Arms Trade’, in: Journal of Contemporary History 35 (2000), 213-230; see also: D. Stahl, ‘The Decolonization of the Arms Trade. Britain and the Regulation of Exports to the Middle East’, in: History of Global Arms Transfer 7 (2019) 1, 3-19, here: 4-9; S. Ball, ‘Britain and the Decline of the International Control of Small Arms in the Twentieth Century’, in: Journal of Contemporary History 47 (2012) 4, 812-837.
5. A. Webster, ‘The League of Nations, Disarmament and Internationalism’, in: G. Sluga / P. Calvin (eds.), Internationalisms. A Twentieth-Century History, Cambridge 2017, 139-169, here: 155-156; A. Webster, ‘From Versailles to Geneva: The Many Forms of Interwar Disarmament’, in: Journal of Strategic Studies 29 (2006) 2, 225-246, here: 234-236.
in imperial and colonial contexts. In neither field of study, however, has much been done to analyse imperial arms control as a part of the global disarmament policies of the inter-war years.

When studying these policies, the term and concept of ‘disarmament’ used by the inter-war contemporaries should not be confused with measures aiming at the abolishment or reduction of armaments, whether in general or targeting specific types. As Carolyn Kitching has pointed out, in the inter-war years, disarmament had a much broader meaning that included ‘all aspects of the control of armaments, whether reduction, enforcing status quo or in some cases an increase in the level of armaments’. Hence, it could refer to a great variety of arms control measures such as production control, publicity of arms exports or arms trade controls.

With special reference to the Persian Gulf, this article will show that arms control in the periphery was indeed conceived by the imperial actors involved as a pivotal part of the disarmament policies. Subsequently, the analysis shifts to the imperial periphery itself and investigates arms control in the Persian Gulf as a case study of the consequences the disarmament policies had for the imperial periphery. The Gulf is a particular area of interest since it was a part of the imperial order without containing formal colonies. This broadens the understanding of arms control as an instrument of imperial rule, a concept mostly applied by scholars to formal colonial contexts. The goals and ends British imperial actors sought to achieve through arms control and particularly arms trade control in the Gulf will be analysed, deepening the understanding of imperial disarmament policies beyond the mere assessment that they were somehow important to imperialism. Additionally, this perspective diversifies and corrects the understanding of the ‘peace’ that was intended to be achieved by the inter-war disarmament by examining what kind of ‘peace’ the British sought to achieve through arms control measures in the Gulf. Moreover, the focus on arms control in a specific region illuminates the concrete practices and measures that arose out of the inter-war disarmament policies as well as their effects on the actual arms trade in the Gulf. Considering these results, the study will investigate how actors from the Gulf itself positioned themselves within these developments, how and why they did or did not take part in them, and how the Gulf’s societies handled the disarmament efforts in general. Hence, by shifting the level of analysis to the imperial periphery itself, the article seeks to expose the global dimension of the disarmament policies together with their effects on the region and its inhabitants as well as on the imperial order, thereby stressing the importance of this perspective for a comprehensive understanding of inter-war disarmament.

I. Inter-war disarmament policies and the imperial periphery

The idea of raising the question of arms control and disarmament ‘in the context of the peace negotiations initially came from the Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic, which was summoned by the British government’s Committee of Imperial Defence in early 1917. The Committee’s objective was to consider ‘the general question of the Traffic in Arms after the War with special reference

6. See for instance: J. Grant, Rulers, Guns, and Money. The Global Arms Trade in the Age of Imperialism, Cambridge, MA 2007; E. Chew, Arming the Periphery. The Arms Trade in the Indian Ocean during the Age of Global Empire, Basingstoke 2012; R. Crews, ‘Trafficking in Evil? The Global Arms Trade and the Politics of Disorder’, in: J. Gelvin / N. Green (eds.), Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print, Berkley 2013, 121-142; S. Sané, Le contrôle de la circulation des armes à feu en Afrique occidentale française, 1834–1958, Dakar 2008; G. Macola / K. Jones / D. Welch, A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire, Farnham et al. 2013, 165-190.
7. C. Kitching, Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference, 8. See also: Webster, ‘The Many Forms’.
8. This argument was developed in close mutual exchange with Daniel Stahl, who makes a similar point in the manuscript of his upcoming study.
to Native Races’, which of course referred to the possibilities of arms control in the imperial periphery.\(^9\) This alignment has to be understood against the backdrop of a shift among the imperial powers in the perception of firearms and their trade within and to the periphery that had occurred in the late 19th century. While arms trade had been primarily seen as a profitable business for European arms producers before this shift, afterwards it was perceived as a threat to the imperial order since the trade caused the accumulation of relatively modern arms in the periphery and fostered armed resistance.\(^11\) Consequently, arms control in the colonies was conceptualised among the imperial powers as an instrument of maintaining a challenged imperial order.\(^12\)

A region in which this shift occurred relatively late but particularly vehemently was the Persian Gulf. At the turn of the century, the British came to see the arms trade in the Persian Gulf, which was included in global networks and had reached a considerable scale, as the origin of the arms supply for the frontier regions of India and therefore as a catalyst for resistance and loss of colonial control there.\(^13\) Aiming to protect colonial rule in the Raj by preventing arms from reaching its borderlands, the British implemented initial measures against arms trade in the Gulf. Most notably, they pressured the Gulf’s rulers to issue bans regulating the arms trade, which were, however, only partially implemented in the first years. From 1910 to 1914, they also enforced a naval blockade against Muscat, the major arms traffic hub in the region, accompanied by small military operations against arms traders.\(^14\)

Under these circumstances, it was no surprise that the Gulf was among several regions of the imperial periphery that the Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic identified in its final report as ‘danger zones’ in which uncontrolled arms trade was believed to have especially grave consequences for imperial security. To cope with the British anxiety about firearms in the periphery and particularly in those ‘danger zones’, the Sub-Committee put forward the idea of introducing the question of global arms control to the peace negotiations as a ‘moral issue’.\(^15\) This proposal was well received within the British government, and first drafts for an international convention on the regulation of the arms trade were developed. Concerning the ‘danger zones’ and other parts of the periphery, the drafts determined certain areas in which particularly strict regulations should apply. The model for this idea was the Brussels Act of 1890, which had imposed a ban on arms importation into large parts of Africa.\(^16\) The British proposal for an international agreement soon gained the approval and support of the French and other colonial powers with similar interests and anxieties.\(^17\)

Regarding the Gulf, the British initially hoped to deal with the arms trade there by constituting areas with internationally supervised strict regulations in adjacent regions while

---

9. Committee of Imperial Defence: Report of Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic, 10 Mar. 1917, in: The National Archives of the UK (TNA) CAB 29/1.
10. Stahl, ‘Decolonization’, 4-5; Ball, ‘Decline’, 819-823.
11. Chew, Periphery, 27, 43, 101; Ball, ‘Decline’, 818; Crews, ‘Trafficking’, 122.
12. Grant, Rulers, 65-77; Chew, Periphery, 93-95.
13. Crews, ‘Trafficking’, 132-133. For further studies on arms trade and arms control in the pre-war Gulf, see: G. Crouzet, ‘The Persian Gulf in Global Perspective. British Informal Empire and the Challenge of Arms Trafficking (c. 1870–1914)’, in: Journal of Levantine Studies 10 (2020) 1, 69-90; S. Ball, ‘The Battle of Dubai: Firearms on Britain’s Arabian Frontier, 1906–1915’, in: G. Macola et al. (eds.), A Cultural History of Firearms, 165-190.
14. For a comprehensive study, see: Ball, ‘Battle of Dubai’. For a contemporary report, see: Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 20.2.1913: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B196.
15. Committee of Imperial Defence: Report of Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic, 10 Mar. 1917, in: TNA CAB 29/1.
16. Crew, Periphery, 23-27, 110; F. Brahm, ‘East Africa and the Post-War Question of Global Arms Control’, in: K. Bromber et al. (eds.), The Long End of the First World War. Ruptures, Continuities and Memories, Frankfurt a.M., New York 2018, 85-107, here: 86-87.
17. Brahm, ‘East Africa’, 100-102; Stahl, ‘Decolonization’, 5-6.
keeping exclusive rights of control in the Gulf itself, thereby facilitating the British claim on exclusive influence there. However, as soon as they realised that this strategy would cause serious diplomatic difficulties and weaken the entire concept of designated areas by opening the door to a line of exceptions, they started to strongly advocate for an inclusion of the Gulf region in the areas of strict regulation and stuck to this course over the following years.\(^\text{18}\) Controlling the arms trade in the Gulf region thereby became a major reason that the British pursued an arms trade convention.\(^\text{19}\)

As several studies have pointed out, the British proposals as well as the Anglo-French talks and consequently the intention of maintaining the imperial order were decisive for rendering the regulation of the arms trade in the imperial periphery an integral part of the disarmament policies negotiated at the peace conference.\(^\text{20}\) This suggests that the pursuit of securing the imperial order was from the very beginning one of the driving forces of inter-war disarmament. More decisive, however, was the post-war assumption that the pre-war armaments race had facilitated the outbreak of the war, and the consequent idea of disarmament among industrialised states, particularly among the former Central Powers, as a means of securing a lasting peace.\(^\text{21}\) This idea rendered disarmament a highly popular issue during the peace negotiations and the years thereafter. It was no surprise that delegates assembled in Saint-Germain-en-Laye as early as 1919 to negotiate a convention on the arms trade. In the preliminary talks and at the conference of Saint-Germain itself, the two causes merged. The convention’s text, taking over much of a draft jointly presented by the British and French delegations, incorporated stipulations on disarmament among industrialised states as well as on strict arms control in the ‘danger zones’ of the imperial periphery, now called ‘prohibited areas’.\(^\text{22}\) Yet, the convention failed to reach the necessary number of ratifications. Efforts were soon made to draw up a second convention along similar lines, which was signed in Geneva in the summer of 1925 but eventually met the same fate as its predecessor.\(^\text{23}\) A third, even more extensive attempt to reach a convention in the early 1930s failed to produce a signed text.\(^\text{24}\) Although these conventions were not developed under the formal aegis of the League, the Disarmament Section at the League’s Secretariat campaigned from the very beginning for further ratifications. Its work was also critical for initialising and preparing the second and third attempts to draw up and agree on arms trade conventions.\(^\text{25}\) By pushing forward conventions that were in significant parts directed at arms control in the imperial periphery, the League made imperial arms control a part of its own disarmament agenda. Since the conferences and the bodies of the League concerned with arms trade were the epitomes of the inter-war pursuit of disarmament, they are powerful evidence that this pursuit was inherently a merger of the drive for arms reduction in Europe and arms control in the imperial periphery.

The plans that disarmament in Europe should lead to lasting peace failed, mostly because the European states were never convinced that a reduction of troops and armaments would benefit their security.\(^\text{26}\) Most imperial powers had a different attitude with respect to the imperial periphery and were in agreement that arms control there would benefit the stability of their imperial rule.

\(^\text{18}\) Committee of Imperial Defence: Report of Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic, 10 Mar. 1917, in: TNA CAB 29/1; Foreign Office (\(=\)FO) to R. Hindgate, 22.12.1918, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/672, 246r-248r.
\(^\text{19}\) FO Memorandum on Arms Traffic by R. Sperling, 22.2.1919, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/672, 215r-217r; Minute 1. from War Cabinet, 542, 06.03.1919, in: Ibid., 160r-160v.
\(^\text{20}\) Stahl, ‘Decolonization’, 5-6; Ball, ‘Decline’, 819-822.
\(^\text{21}\) Stone, ‘Imperialism’, 217; Webster, ‘Disarmament’, 139-141.
\(^\text{22}\) Brahm, ‘East Africa’, 101-102.
\(^\text{23}\) Stone, ‘Imperialism’, 221-229.
\(^\text{24}\) Steiner, Lights, 755-799.
\(^\text{25}\) Stone, ‘Imperialism’, 218-222; Ball, ‘Decline’, 823-825; Stahl, ‘Decolonization’, 8.
\(^\text{26}\) Henig, Peace, 126.
For many of the imperial actors, the ‘most important feature’ of the conventions was ‘the prohibition of the export to prohibited zones of arms etc. likely to be used by turbulent tribes’. This imperial interest led to an inclusion and maintenance of the zones regime in the conventions, as well as to further stipulations aimed at the imperial periphery. In 1920, after the failure of the St. Germain Convention had become obvious, the same imperial interest finally produced an agreement between Britain, France, Belgium, Japan and Italy to act only in regard to the ‘prohibited areas’, concurrent with the stipulations of the failed conventions. That the Great Powers’ efforts to set up an arms trade convention were mainly informed by imperial interests did not pass their contemporaries by. A New York Times article commented on the convention of 1925: ‘The restrictions imposed by the Geneva Conference run less toward the safeguarding of international peace than to the maintenance of order in the backward regions of the world’. While the article correctly assesses the respective importance of the two aspects of the convention, it creates the fallacious connotation that arms control in the imperial periphery was part of the disarmament talks but not a part of the pursuit for a lasting ‘international peace’. The actors involved in the disarmament, particularly imperial ones, however, conceptualised arms control in the periphery as a part of this pursuit. The imperial order was deemed by many of the actors of inter-war liberal internationalism as necessary for global peace, and arms control was a tried instrument of maintaining this order. This was reflected in the disarmament discourse. In 1920, for instance, the disarmament committee of the League invited the British jurist Cecil Hurst to speak, who stated: ‘Arms of precision in the hands of individuals in the less civilised areas pose a great danger to the peace’. This assumption was shared among the different factions of the disarmament conferences.

The entanglement of arms control in the imperial periphery and the notion of global peace was particularly distinct with respect to the British push for strict arms control in the Persian Gulf. As early as December 1917, when the idea of an international disarmament convention was still in its early stages of development, the Government of India, when commenting on the idea, seamlessly tied the threat of a loss of colonial control in India’s frontier regions posed by the arms trade in the Gulf to ‘the great danger to which [the arms traffic among savage and semi-savage peoples] exposes the peace of the world’. During the conferences of 1919 and 1925, the British and British-Indian delegates repeatedly emphasised the importance of arms control in the Gulf for the conventions themselves and for the intended ‘peace’ to be achieved through them. For instance, in a speech at the conference of 1925, the British-Indian delegate Sir Percy Cox declared: ‘One of the main objects of the Convention is to suppress or control the illicit traffic in arms, especially rifles and revolvers, in those parts of the World where their possession by local inhabitants constitute a menace to peace and order’. In Cox’s view, the Gulf not only constituted such an area, but
providing strict arms control there was ‘the most vital factor’ for the success of the convention as a whole.35

2. The role of arms control in British inter-war Imperialism in the Persian Gulf

Why was arms control in the periphery, particularly in the Gulf, that important for the British officials? Which goals and ends did they seek to achieve? As will be shown in the following, these goals during the inter-war period exceeded in significance and extent the objective of preventing arms from reaching the borders of India. Instead, they were mainly aimed at the imperial order in the Gulf itself.36 The war had left the British in the Gulf with a significant gain in power, rendering them the only imperial power of importance.37 With the Russian and German Empires, two rivals had collapsed, and France had agreed to confine its interests to Greater Syria.38 Furthermore, the Ottoman Empire had vanished under British bullets and given way to an expansion of British influence in Arabia. Iraq was entrusted to Britain as mandated territory by the League.39 Simultaneously, the British interests in the region and its strategic importance for the Empire soared. In 1928, a cabinet memorandum summarised these developments as follows: ‘The maintenance of British supremacy in the Persian Gulf is even more essential to the security of India and to Imperial interests at the present time than it was in the past’.40 The British core interest in the Gulf was to strategically secure India and to protect the lines of transport (most notably the newly established air routes), communication and trade from the metropole to the Raj.41 Additionally, the beginnings of oil production all around the Gulf over the inter-war years gave high strategical importance to the region and its oil fields, since the resource became increasingly crucial for the British navy as well as for the industry.42 For Britain, any possible loss of control became intolerable.

The British official’s anxiety about a loss of control, however, was by no means calmed by the British gain in power. On the contrary, they perceived the imperial order in the region as more threatened than ever before. The Cabinet memorandum stated: ‘Our interests are exposed to dangers not less in degree, though differing in kind, from those to which they were liable in the past. Modern developments [...] have increased the potential risks to which our interests are exposed’.43 The dangers for the imperial order in the Gulf that the memorandum mentions were both real and

---

35. Percy Cox, Report on the Meeting of the Geographical Committee, 9.6.1925, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 257r-261r.
36. Some studies touching on arms control in the inter-war Gulf assert that preventing arms from reaching India was still the decisive motivation for British arms control in the Gulf during the inter-war years: Stahl, ‘Decolonization’, 5; Ball, ‘Decline’, 815; Stone, ‘Imperialism’, 224.
37. J. Peterson, ‘The Historical Pattern of Gulf Security’, in: L. Potter / G. Sick (eds.), Security in the Persian Gulf. Origins, Obstacles, and the Search for Consensus, New York 2001, 7-31, here: 19.
38. Peterson, ‘Gulf Security’, 18-19.
39. D. Commins, The Gulf States. A Modern History (New Edition), London 2014, here: 134; J. Peterson, ‘Britain and the Gulf: At the Periphery of Empire’, in: L. Potter (ed.), The Persian Gulf in History, New York 2009, 277-293, here: 188.
40. Committee of Imperial Defence: The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee, 30.10.1928, in: TNA CAB 24/198/21, 4-5.
41. A. Rossiter, Security in the Gulf: Local Militaries before British Withdrawal, Cambridge et al. 2020, here: 13-14, 237; Peterson, ‘Britain and the Gulf’, 278-279.
42. Peterson, ‘Britain and the Gulf’, 284; Commins, Gulf States, 117-119; Oil Interests in the Persian Gulf. Communicated by the Board of Trade, 28.6.1928, in: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B413.
43. Committee of Imperial Defence: The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee, 30.10.1928, in: TNA CAB 24/198/21, 25.
imagined. The British feared upheavals against their influence and the authorities co-operating with them. The reason for that was the significant anti-British and anti-imperial sentiment in the region caused by the post-war order, which led to uprisings against British imperialism all over the Middle East during the years of 1919 and 1920, within the Gulf region most notably in Iraq in 1920. The British answered these challenges to their imperial order with military force, particularly aerial strikes of the Royal Air Force, violently quelling the uprisings.\textsuperscript{44} Still, the events caused a lasting sense of insecurity among the British.

The Soviet Union was also perceived by the British officials as a threat to their position in the Gulf. The British suspected that the Soviets sought to provoke and support further uprisings to destabilise British imperialism, gain influence in the region, and thereby obtain control over the oil fields and find a way to destabilise even India. While this scenario was exaggerated, it deeply informed British policy in the Gulf particularly in the first half of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, as Chelsi Mueller has recently pointed out, the British position was also challenged by Pahlavi Iran, leading to worries about the deterioration of British influence on both coasts of the Gulf.\textsuperscript{46}

As a consequence of all these developments, the first and foremost goal of the British was to preserve the established distribution of power as the basis of their imperial order. Strong rulers and central governments, effectively ruling their territories while simultaneously being under some grade of British influence and posing a reliable point of contact, client and proxy ruler, were conceived by the British as the ideal structure to assert and secure their interests.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, the main goal regarding the coast of the Arabian Peninsula was to ‘retain the status quo in its entirety’.\textsuperscript{48} Changes in the established order or in the distribution of power, particularly in the sheikhdoms, were not tolerable for the British. Driven by their fears and insecurities, the British officials sought to create a more consolidated order.\textsuperscript{49} In this process, arms control took centre stage.

Arms control was intended by the British first and foremost to contribute to the efforts of maintaining the established distribution of power. The access to arms as a means of power assertion on the one hand and physical resistance to an established order on the other was to be monopolised for those groups and authorities embedded in the imperial order and denied to their opponents. This was to prevent changes in the power distribution or the weakening of an authority embedded in the imperial order, which would have endangered British interests. Therefore, the British officials sought to control the entirety of the arms trade and to eradicate any arms transfer outside of their control. This split the arms transfers within and to the Gulf into two distinct groups in the eyes of the British, into controlled and uncontrolled arms transfers. The controlled arms transfers were directed at central governments and authorities embedded in the imperial order. From the British perspective, they had to continue to provide these authorities with the means to assert

\textsuperscript{44} E. Rogan, The Arabs. A History, London 2018, here: 195-218; C. Mueller, The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict. Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf between the World Wars, Oxford et al. 2020, here: 49; M. Thomas, Empires of Intelligence. Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914, Berkeley et al. 2008, here: 126-132; P. Satia, 'The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia’, in: American Historical Review 111 (2006) 1, 16-51.

\textsuperscript{45} Major Norman Bray, Situation in the Middle East, 18.11.1920: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B358. (See on this: Thomas, Intelligence, 124); S. White, Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution. A Study in the Politics of Diplomacy, London 1979, 81-108.

\textsuperscript{46} Mueller, Origins, 5; C. Mueller, ‘The Persian Gulf, 1919–39: Changes, Challenges, and Transitions’, in: Journal of Arabian Studies 8 (2018) 2, 259-274.

\textsuperscript{47} Rossiter, Security, 271-272; Peterson, ‘Gulf Security’, 19-20.

\textsuperscript{48} Committee of Imperial Defence: The Persian Gulf. Interim Report, 30.10.1928, in: TNA CAB 24/198/21, 6.

\textsuperscript{49} Mueller, ‘Persian Gulf’, 259-260, 271.
their power. While these transfers were in line with British interests and were defined as ‘legal’, the British officials still felt the need to control them in order to prevent those arms from getting into the ‘wrong hands’ or being resold.\textsuperscript{50} Although defined as ‘illegal’ by the British, transfers that were not directed at the group described above and evaded the control measures continued to occur, too. Particularly, these uncontrolled arms transfers, which undermined the arms control efforts, fuelled British fears of a loss of control, leading the British to attempt to eradicate them.\textsuperscript{51} From a British perspective, arms control was the ideal instrument for building and maintaining a more consolidated order. While the British perceived a growing need for control and interventions in the region, the inter-war years were simultaneously shaped by the necessity to reduce military presence in Asia since the war had exhausted the Empire’s budgets, leaving inadequate resources for a vast military presence.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, securing the imperial order by extensive military interventions was not an option, although air strikes and air surveillance of the Royal Air Force were decisive in quelling resistance against the established order.\textsuperscript{53} Against this backdrop, arms control was meant to prevent losses of control, uprisings or changes in the distribution of power pre-emptively, thus reducing costs by rendering large military investments unnecessary. Moreover, the implementation of control was carried out largely by the authorities of the Gulf’s polities, which further lowered the costs for the British. Hence, arms control in this area of mainly informal British imperialism can be seen as the quintessential instrument of the ‘empire on the cheap’.

Priya Satia and other historians have emphasised the violence of British imperialism in the Middle East, particularly in the Iraq mandate.\textsuperscript{54} Arms control must be viewed as the flip side of this violence and military activities. It maintained and consolidated the imperial order by applying minimal force and violence needed for the detention of traffickers and confiscation of contraband goods. On the surface, it prevented war, conflict and thereby even deaths. By linking the measures to notions of the ‘humanitarian’ mission of bringing ‘peace’ to the Gulf in order to legitimate their actions at home and on an international level, the British rendered arms control a low profile instrument of empire, reducing the risk of criticism.\textsuperscript{55} Yet at its core, arms control was central in the creation and maintenance of an order which was inherently violent and repressive, particularly towards those opposing it, who were deprived of the means of resistance. Although less obviously, it was as much an integral part of the repressive and violent imperial order as aerial bombardments. What is more, arms control was the epitome of British inter-war imperialism in the Gulf, a compromise between lowering the costs on the one hand and the need for control on the other, thus making it a pivotal means of securing the Gulf for the Empire.

This analysis of the significance of arms control to the imperial order in the Gulf and of the developments during the war and the inter-war years would be incomplete without mentioning the accompanying cultural reconceptualisation of the Gulf. Scholars like Priya Satia and James Renton convincingly argued that the Asian campaign of the British in World War I led to a new construction of the ‘Orient’ as ‘Middle East’, a region of yet ‘uncivilised’ inhabitants

\textsuperscript{50} Laithwaite, India Office (= IO), Note explaining the object of the British draft Article 10, 20.8.1924, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 24r-28r; Fowle, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf (= PR PG), to H.M. Chargé d’affaires, Tehran, 6.2.1932, in: BL IOR/R/15/6/70, 66r-70r.

\textsuperscript{51} Instructions regarding Slave and Arms Trade in the Persian Gulf, 1930, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/4094, 21r.

\textsuperscript{52} Rossiter, \textit{Security}, 4.

\textsuperscript{53} Satia, ‘Inhumanity’; P. Satia, \textit{Spies in Arabia. The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East}, Oxford et al. 2008, 263-286; Peterson ‘Gulf Security’, 20-21; Rossiter, \textit{Security}, esp. 23-68, 271-273.

\textsuperscript{54} Satia, ‘Inhumanity’; Satia, \textit{Spies}, 263-286; Thomas, \textit{Intelligence}, 126-132; Peterson, ‘Gulf Security’, 24-25.

\textsuperscript{55} On British public opinion and criticism of imperialism regarding the Middle East, see: Satia, \textit{Spies}, 287-327.
who in their pursuit of ‘civilisation’ and self-determination needed the help and ‘tutelage’ of the ‘civilised’ Great Britain. This conception served as legitimation for the expansion of British imperialism in the region and the methods it employed.\(^{56}\) In the Gulf region, this conceptualisation obtained a new dimension in the context of the arms trade. The Gulf was defined by the British as a region particularly prone to trading in arms, trafficking and gun violence on account of the alleged lower ‘grade of civilisation’.\(^{57}\) Thereby, the self-imposed British mission of suppressing uncontrolled arms trade in the Gulf could become a part of a civilisational self-affirmation following the country’s participation in the brutalities of the industrialised war in Europe.\(^{58}\) This conceptualisation served, internally and particularly on the level of international talks, as legitimation for the strict measures of arms control. Particularly Percy Cox, the British Indian delegate at the Conference of 1925, who had served in the Middle East in various positions and is among the British officials identified by Priya Satia as having participated in the construction of the ‘Middle East’, instrumentalised this conception of the Gulf.\(^{59}\) Arguing with exaggerated figures, Cox called the Gulf a ‘hotbed of arms traffic’\(^{60}\) and accused the other delegates of not possibly being able to imagine ‘the conditions of perpetual turbulence and disorder which prevailed and were prevailing in an unusually violent form at the very moment in the areas bordering’ the Gulf.\(^{61}\)

3. The implementation of imperial arms control in the Gulf

Now, considering its importance for British imperialism, what concrete shape, in terms of measures and practices, did arms control in the Gulf take? What consequences did it have for the arms trade? The measures implemented in the years before the war, most notably naval control and bans on arms trade issued by the rulers of the Gulf’s polities, had already led to a significant decline in uncontrolled arms trade within the first post-war years. Uncontrolled arms trade was continued as smuggling, which evaded the control measures. When in 1921 the senior British officials in the Gulf region met in Karachi to evaluate developments in the arms trade in light of the war’s leftover stocks, they concluded: ‘the figures before us show no immediate marked increase in the traffic’.\(^{62}\) The bureaucracy in London and New Delhi shared this assessment, which did not significantly change throughout the entire inter-war period. In 1932, the consensus was still that the arms trafficking in the Gulf was of ‘negligible proportions’.\(^{63}\)

56. Satia, *Spies*, 59-98; P. Satia, ‘Developing Iraq, Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in the First World War’, in: *Past & Present* 197 (2007) 1, 211-255; Renton, ‘Changing Languages’.
57. Draft Telegram by John Laithwaite (IO), 9.12.1932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 439r-441r; Rendel (FO) to Carr, UK Delegation to the League of Nations, 14.10.1932, in: ibid., 464r-465r.
58. See here the thoughts at Renton, ‘Changing Languages’ and Satia, ‘Developing Iraq’, the latter makes a similar argument in respect to British development policy in Iraq.
59. Satia, *Spies*, 27-28, 37-40.
60. Speech of Percy Cox, in: General Committee, Verbatim Report of the Twenty-Sixth Meeting, 15.6.1925, 4-7, in: LNA, Repertoire General, R 253, 43073, 43921.
61. Percy Cox, Report on the meeting of the Geographical Committee, 8. June – Afternoon, 9.6.1925, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 257r-261r, here: 258r.
62. Report of Conference held at Karachi on the Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 5.8.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 233r-236r.
63. Cabinet. Disarmament Conference, 1932. Interdepartmental Committee. Conclusions of the Fourth Meeting of the Committee, 29.11.2932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 394r-420r, here: 400r. See also: Notes of A Meeting at the Foreign Office, 20.01.1933, in: ibid. 287r-296r.
However, the anxiety about a potential recrudescence of the arms traffic and subsequent loss of control was deeply felt by the British. As an easing of vigilance was considered potentially dangerous, the British officials agreed that the conditions achieved were no reason to relax the arms control. Already the Karachi Conference’s report had postulated that arms trafficking could increase any time and that the traders were just waiting for an opportunity.\textsuperscript{64} Smuggling was indeed present throughout the inter-war years, but it would be impossible to systematise it since the trading routes, origins and destinations of the contraband as well as the actors and groups involved kept changing with the political situation and the focus of the control measures. The only constants appear to have been transfers from the inland of the Arabian Peninsula northwards, particularly to Iraq, as well as transfers among the Baluchi populations at the east and west coast of the Gulf of Oman.\textsuperscript{65} Fragmentary data makes it difficult to estimate the quantities of arms trafficked. British statistics, when available, placed the number of the rifles annually confiscated at sea and in the ports of the Iranian coast at a low four-digit level.\textsuperscript{66} On exposed smuggling routes on the Arabian Peninsula, the largest caravans carried a few hundred weapons each.\textsuperscript{67} Since the British statistics were often conservative and exclusively based on confirmed or confiscated consignments, it must be assumed that the number of unrecorded cases was much higher. Nonetheless, in comparison with the figures from the time of the blockade of 1910–1914, the number of weapons confiscated at sea and in the ports had decreased significantly in the interwar years.\textsuperscript{68} Since the measures of control were more extensive after the blockade than before it, it is reasonable to assume that the volume of trafficked and unrecorded arms also dropped.

The main supply sources for this trade in contraband arms were the stocks of weapons left over by the war, mostly of Ottoman and British production, as well as the arms supplied by Britain to Iraq and Ibn Saud, which were frequently given away, sold by the respective soldiers or stolen from the armies’ depots.\textsuperscript{69} Reasonably modern rifles, revolvers and pistols were thus always obtainable on the black markets. In the thirties, the number of firearms on the Arabian Peninsula was estimated at several million. The ironical consequence of these trafficking circuits was that the British arms control often confiscated arms that were introduced to the region by the British themselves.\textsuperscript{70}

When the participants of the Karachi-Conference of 1921 reported that uncontrolled traffic in arms had fallen sharply, they nevertheless asked in the very same report for more material and measures to fight the remainder.\textsuperscript{71} London declined most of these demands for financial reasons as long as uncontrolled arms trade remained low, approving only the proposed increase of pressure that was

\textsuperscript{64} Report of Conference held at Karachi on the Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 5.8.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 233r-236r. See for similar fears: Rendel (FO) to Carr, 14.10.1932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 464r-465r; Phillips, Admiralty to FO, 11.01.1933, in: ibid., 360r.

\textsuperscript{65} Report of Conference held at Karachi on the Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 5.8.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 233r-236r; Memorandum on Arms Traffic by T.C. Fowle (PR PG) 13.5.1935, in: BL IOR/R/15/6/70, 63r-64r.

\textsuperscript{66} See the previous footnote and also: Memorandum by the Political Agent in Muscat, 17.11.1934, in: BL IOR/R/15/6/70, 10r-11r.

\textsuperscript{67} Extract from Report No. B/62/56 dated 8th February 1922 from Special Service Officer, Basrah, 15.2.1922 in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 118r-119r; Air Headquarters Iraq: Alleged smuggling of arms from Kuwait into Iraq, 28.6.1938, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 64r-65r.

\textsuperscript{68} For the number of the Arms confiscated during the blockade, see: Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, Appendix: Principal captures by the naval blockading since June 1910, 20.2.1913, in: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B196, 60-61.

\textsuperscript{69} Fowle (PR PG) to Peel (IO) 12.01.1939, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 26r-27r; Watts, Intelligence Officer in the Persian Gulf, to Senior General Staff Officer, 30.9.1920, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 33r-34v.

\textsuperscript{70} Commander Harvey, H.M.S. Fowey, to The Senior Naval Officer, 27.11.1934, in: BL IOR/R/15/6/70, 22r; Political Agent (=PA), Kuwait, to Deputy Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 2.6.1919, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 3r; Report by a Saudi Arab informant on the Arms Traffic, 12.12.1938, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 269r-270r.

\textsuperscript{71} Report of Conference held at Karachi on the Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 5.8.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 233r-236r.
to be placed on the rulers of the Gulf’s polities by local British officials in order to make them co-operate.  

(As will be shown later, arms control was, however, not only implemented due to British pressure.) The implementation of arms trade bans on land, in the towns and ports of the Gulf region was carried out by the polities’ authorities since the British had far from the required personnel capacities. Local police and customs forces carried out detainments and confiscations as well as searches of harbouring ships in the ports, warehouses and caravans for contraband arms.

Still, neither was the role of the British officials in the Gulf region’s major towns rendered obsolete, nor did they confine themselves to pressuring the rulers and authorities. Their main function in the arms trade controls was the collection and exchange of information on arms traffic and the co-ordination of measures across the borders. The significant role of intelligence for British imperialism in the Middle East was emphasised by various studies and should not be underestimated here either. To gather information, officials fell back on their own net of agents, informants and aerial surveillance, whose output was combined with information gathered by the polities’ authorities. The information was then used to counteract uncontrolled arms transfers, often by handing the cases over to local authorities. By using that network, which was increasingly extended over the inter-war years, British officials throughout the region were able to share information on suspicious ships and persons and were able to intercept the contraband consignments at the port of destination with the help of local police or customs forces. The controls at sea were the exclusive domain of the British and British Indian Navy until Iran launched its own navy in the mid-thirties. Three to four sloops intercepted and searched ships of ‘indigenous appearance’ if they appeared suspicious or if intelligence indicated that the vessel might be engaging in arms trafficking. Even if those few warships could not possibly control all of the Gulf, their presence had noticeable effects. The size of the smuggled arms consignments significantly decreased as the traders feared being searched and losing the precious commodities.

A further arms trade control measure established in the inter-war years was carried out in the metropole itself. At the turn of the century, British companies were mostly unrestricted in their ability to export arms and explosives to the Gulf. That changed in the second decade of the century, when a licensing system was introduced which was further developed in the inter-war years. This system granted British companies clearance for their arms exports to the Gulf by the Board of Trade if they could provide a ‘No-Objection-Certificate’ for the specific arms consignment, which was to be issued by a British official from the Gulf region. Before issuing the certificate, the official checked the consignee and the commensurability of the consignment and denied the certificate in case of any doubt. This system was a further measure to rule out arms transfers to

72. Wakely (IO) to Under Secretary of State Colonial Office, 21.12.1921, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 138r-139r+146r; Political Agent, Kuwait, to His Excellency, Shaikh Abdulla as-Salim as-Sabah [Sheikh Abd Allah al-Salim al-Sabah], Deputy Ruler of Kuwait, 10.9.1935, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 91r.
73. See the reports and correspondences regarding various cases in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, Ibd/48, Ibd/308.
74. Thomas, Intelligence, 1-144; Satia, Spies, 23-58.
75. See the correspondences regarding various cases in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308 and BL IOR/R/15/5/47.
76. Laithwaite (IO) to Danckwerts, Admiralty, 29.11.1932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 444r-444v; Foreign Office to Clive, H.M. Minister, Tehran, 19.6.1929, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/974, 203r-203v.
77. Report of Conference held at Karachi on the Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 5.8.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 233r-236r.
78. Ball, ‘Battle of Dubai’, 178-180; Board of Trade to FO, 11.2.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 330r.
79. Symon (IO) to Biggs, Board of Trade, 14.2.1938, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2206, 281r; Board of Trade, to Under-Secretary of State for India, 5.2.1927, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/974, 203r-203v.
80. Laithwaite (IO) to Hind, Committee of Imperial Defence, 5.5.1933, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2188, 52r-55r; See for an instance: Political Agent, Kuwait to Shaikh Sir Ahmed Al-Jabir Al-Subah [Sheikh Aḥmad al-Jābir al-Ṣabāḥ], Ruler of Kuwait, 10.3.1938, in: BL IOR/L/PS/15/5/308, 165r.
groups outside the imperial order both by direct deliveries and by partial resales of incommensurably large consignments. A memorandum by the India Office stated: ‘[Britain would] suffer chiefly from the results of the rulers’ acquisition of surplus munitions which he would, naturally endeavour to dispose to private individuals to the detriment of order in surrounding countries’. 81

To achieve control over almost all arms imports of the sheikdoms on the Gulf’s western coast, the British officials in the Gulf pressured the sheikdoms’ rulers to buy only British arms or left them in the false belief that they had to obtain a British permission for all arms imports regardless of their origin. The British treaties with the sheikdoms also included stipulations that provided an upper limit for arms exports regardless of their origin, a limit that the British interpreted in accordance with their own interests. 82 This often amounted to a downright veto power over the arms imports of the sheikdoms, which was used by the British to supersede foreign companies. 83 For instance, when the Sheikh of Qatar attempted to import arms which were both from a non-British producer and of a calibre ‘which did not suit’ the British, Political Resident Fowle informed the Sheikh with a not exactly subtle reference to the protection provided by the British that ‘he could not do this’. 84 Simultaneously, by using a combination of pressure and special offers, Britain also sought to gain a dominant position as an arms supplier in polities where it did not have as many possibilities to impose pressure, like in Iraq after 1931 and particularly in Iran, although these efforts did not succeed every time. 85

This dominant position was not only beneficial for arms trade control. It also served British economic interests in creating markets for British products, in this case arms and ammunition. While the establishment of the arms trade regime in the years before World War I had ended the British arms industry’s uncontrolled but profitable exports to the Gulf region, being established as the largely exclusive arms supplier of the Gulf’s governments and rulers was a somewhat adequate substitute. It was a new source of revenue for British producers, which the British officials sought to maximise by utilising the arms trade controls. 86

For this practical implementation of arms control in the Gulf, the conventions on arms trade negotiated within the context of European disarmament policies played an important role, despite never coming into force. The Conventions of Saint Germain in 1919 and Geneva in 1925 provided special regulations for the ‘prohibited areas’ (‘special zones’ in the Geneva Convention) allowing the export of arms into these zones only if delivered to colonial administrations or recognised authorities. The so-called ‘Native Vessels’, that is ships or boats of individuals indigenous to the respective region and weighing less than 500 tons, were restrained from carrying arms consignments at all. 87 The conventions’ stipulations would have closed some loopholes of the British arms trade control in the Gulf by restraining other industrialised states’ arms exports to groups outside the imperial order. This was important for the British since they still feared that ships from industrialised states might land arms consignments in parts of the coast barely under

81. Laithwaite (IO) Note explaining the object of the British draft Article 10, 20.8.1924, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 24r-28r.
82. Fowle (PR PG) to Clauson (IO) 23.9.1937, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2206, 305r-306r.
83. See for instance: PA Kuwait to PR PG (Express-Letter C/102), 7.3.1938, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 170r.
84. Fowle (PR PG) to Clauson (IO) 23.9.1937, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2206, 305r-306r.
85. Memorandum prepared in the FO, 25.9.1936, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2184, 31r-36r; Memorandum by Robert Vansittart (FO) 29.9.1936, in: ibid., 45r.
86. Memorandum prepared in the FO, 25.9.1936, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2184, 31r-36r; Note for Secretary of State for next Cabinet Meeting, India Office, 13.11.1929, in: ibid., 85r-88r.
87. Draft Convention for the Control of the Arms Traffic, 25.1.1919, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/672, 229r-230v.
the control of the respective central authorities, thereby causing a further deterioration of the authorities’ already weak power.\textsuperscript{88} While the British could intercept consignments from other parts of the Gulf region, they had no authority to stop ships under the flags of other industrialised states without causing diplomatic troubles. The Foreign Office expressed the usefulness of an international convention as follows:

While in some parts of the prohibited areas the local Governments are in a position to restrict the importation of arms within proper limits, and may be trusted to do so, it cannot be assumed that this is the case in all parts of such areas, and the value of control is immensely reduced if the districts where no proper control of imports exists are able to draw supplies of arms freely from Europe. It seems desirable accordingly to take steps to secure so far as possible a uniform procedure.\textsuperscript{89}

It was consequently also an advantage that the convention’s text limited the rights of ‘native vessels’ to hoist the signatory powers’ flags and thereby evade searches.\textsuperscript{90} Since some major arms producers had in the agreement of 1920 guaranteed to honour these stipulations with regard to the ‘prohibited area’, these international efforts had practical consequences for the British arms control in the Gulf.

Besides that, from the British perspective, the other signatory powers’ participation in the drafting and signing of the conventions alone was enough self-commitment to arms control by them to enable the British to publicly denounce and diplomatically counteract potential arms transfers from other powers to the periphery contrary to the provisions of the conventions.\textsuperscript{91} The India Office summarised:

the fact that the Convention of 1919 was signed, if not ratified, by the principal arms exporting countries other than the United States of America, has the advantage of reducing substantially the danger of obstructive action such as that taken by France […] in connection with the arms traffic in Muscat.\textsuperscript{92}

This self-commitment was for the British also a source of legitimisation of their own actions. Some of the practices described above were not based on any legal ground. This was particularly true for naval searches on high seas, which would have not even been legitimised by the zones regime of the conventions.\textsuperscript{93} The British officials felt, however, that they had a ‘moral right’ to conduct searches, which was ‘backed by the world opinion’ through the conventions’ texts and the respective conferences. Hence, as far as the international community was concerned, the British officials felt that the conventions would provide legitimate justification for their drive towards stricter arms control in the Gulf. This was similar with regard to many of the Gulf’s littorals’ inhabitants, of whom the British assumed that they accepted the convention as adequate legal basis for British

\textsuperscript{88} PR PG to Govt. of India, Foreign and Political Department, 07.12.1932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 385r.
\textsuperscript{89} Seymour for the Secretary of State (FO) to Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, Ambassador to France, 5.4.1921, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 310r-311r.
\textsuperscript{90} Convention for the Control of the Trade in Arms and Ammunition, Signed in St. Germain on 10.9.1919, Article 14; Notes on the Convention by Trevor, Deputy Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 21.2.1920, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 335r-337r.
\textsuperscript{91} Laithwaite, Note explaining the object of the British draft Article 10, 20.8.1924, in: BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 24r-28r; Viceroy of India to Secretary of State of India, 27.10.1921, in: TNA, FO 371, 5530.
\textsuperscript{92} Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908–1928, memorandum by John Laithwaite (IO), 8.10.1928: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B410, 4. French traders had been significant figures in the Muscat trade at the turn of the century.
\textsuperscript{93} Memorandum by John Laithwaite, 9.12.1932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 439r-441r; Phillips for the Lords of the Admiralty to Under Secretary of State (FO) 11.1.1933, in: Ibid., 349r-360r.
arms control measures.\textsuperscript{94} This perceived legitimation was a key reason for Britain to press for the inclusion of the Gulf into the zones.\textsuperscript{95} It was the ‘humanitarian’ and ‘pacifying’ notion of disarmament that allowed the British to see their ‘illegal’\textsuperscript{96} arms control in the Gulf legitimised.

4. The Gulf’s inhabitants and arms control

The measures described above were able to significantly reduce uncontrolled arms trade in the Gulf and transform the Gulf’s globally interconnected arms market of the 19th century into a mostly closed, controlled and British dominated one. Moreover, the measures naturally affected the Gulf’s inhabitants, rulers, notables and officials in various ways. They positioned themselves within the arms control debate, not only reacting but also taking part in it, amending it or challenging it. How did they position themselves in regard to arms control? What were their motives and what can this tell us about the consequences of the disarmament policies concerning the Gulf?

As we have seen, actors from the Gulf itself were decisive in the process of arms control implementation as conceived by the British. The co-operation, particularly of the rulers and authorities of the sheikhdoms, was pivotal for the British efforts, which explains the pressure Britain sometimes exercised on the rulers. Yet the rulers’ and authorities’ willingness to co-operate was not determined by the grade of British pressure but by their own political interests which were shaped by their often very ambiguous position towards the arms trade. The arms trade was historically deeply rooted in the trading networks of the Gulf region, rendering arms an important commodity, which was expressed for instance in a high brand awareness among buyers.\textsuperscript{97} The possession of arms made possible by this trade was culturally engrained and often integral to concepts of masculinity.\textsuperscript{98} Particularly for individuals living non-sedentary, participating in long-distance trade via caravans or dhows, or for villagers in sparsely populated areas, weapons were a precious possession, a symbol of strength and a tool of self-defence, which is why they were anxious to keep them.\textsuperscript{99} Besides the cultural and practical importance of weapons, the arms trade had also been a significant economic factor for decades and centuries.

The sudden proclamation of arms trade bans defining this business as ‘illicit’ and the implementation of respective controls and measures were met with incomprehension and protest, as seen for instance in the opening anecdote of Khizr-i-Tangistani. An even more drastic example is the Sultanate of Muscat, where by the turn of the century the revenue of the arms trade had become essential since other business branches of the sultanate were in decline. In a deeply fractured polity, the arms trade revenues were instrumental in soothing inner tensions.\textsuperscript{100} For a long time, the Sultan resisted the British demands for stricter arms control. Only when confronted with the naval blockade in the early 1910s, he decided to establish a warehouse under his control in which all arms for trade

\textsuperscript{94} Seal, Admiralty, to Rendel (FO) 28.4.1933, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 162r-166r. See also: Record of a Meeting held at the FO, 27.4.1933, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 127r-145r.

\textsuperscript{95} Phillips for the Lords of the Admiralty to Under Secretary of State (FO) 11.1.1933, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 349r-360r; Barnes (Admiralty) in: Record of a Meeting held at the FO, 27.4.1933, in: ibid., 127r-145r.

\textsuperscript{96} This was the assessment of Edward Carr, British delegate at the disarmament conference of 1932/33: Carr to Warner (FO), 5.12.1932, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 369r-370r.

\textsuperscript{97} Ball, ‘Battle of Dubai’, 182-184.

\textsuperscript{98} Chew, Periphery, 135; Crews, ‘Trafficking’, 134, 137.

\textsuperscript{99} PA Kuwait to Bazalgette, Secretary to the PR PG, 4.6.1935, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 84r-87r; Haidar Khan Hayat Daudi to Shuldham, Secretary to the Political Resident, 13.8.1921, in: ibid., 159r.

\textsuperscript{100} R. Landen, Oman since 1856. Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society, Princeton 1967, 391.
had to be deposited, registered and licensed.\textsuperscript{101} This commitment to arms control was the spark in the tinderbox. The inner tensions erupted and caused a rebellion against the Sultan.\textsuperscript{102}

The rulers could not ignore these interests and sentiments among larger segments of their subjects, but they also felt the pressure from the British to enforce arms control. The British even used their promise of protection to the polities and ruling families as a means of imposing pressure, often combined with financial incentives.\textsuperscript{103} It was nonetheless primarily not the British pressure that moved the authorities of the sheikhdoms to adopt and enforce arms controls, but their own interest in securing their rule and power. Referring to the Middle East, historian Robert Crews wrote:

Rulers took great care to regulate the circulation of firearms, to deprive subjects of the means to resist their authority. [...] A time of rapid technological change, the period stretching from the 1880s to the 1920s was also one in which states broadened their attempts to monopolize the means of violence within their territories and to count, immobilize, and disarm populations, especially in sensitive borderlands, where emerging state boundaries became crucial symbols of territorial sovereignty.\textsuperscript{104}

In the polities of the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula, where borders had been fluid for a long time, this process was still going on in the inter-war era. Many rulers were very aware of the advantages of arms control for the consolidation of their own authority and their ability to assert it inside of their borders. While disarmament outside of the towns often proved to be a futile endeavour, arms trade control was a largely effective means to prevent opposition groups from obtaining large numbers of arms and acting against the established order. Here is where the British interest in consolidating the imperial order and the rulers’ interest in asserting their power met.

The rulers and authorities of the sheikhdoms found themselves in an ambiguous position between their own and their subjects’ interest in continuing a culturally and economically important trade on the one hand, and their interest in securing their own power through centralising their polities on the other. Simultaneously, they had significant scopes of action in arms control. While the British were able to ensure that every ruler proclaimed arms trade bans and pressured the authorities to act in specific cases, they could hardly determine the intensity of the authorities’ actual efforts to implement the bans. This left the rulers and authorities space to decide for themselves to what extent they would participate in the arms control. These decisions depended upon where they located themselves between the poles described above, how they set their political priorities, and at which political assessments they arrived.

Kuwait is a particularly illuminating example for the importance of the rulers’ individual political assessments. When the British began to establish their arms trade regime, the rulers of Kuwait, the Sheikhs Mubārak (1896–1915), Jābir II (1915–1917) and Sālim (1917–1921), were no more than moderately interested in implementing the regime in their territory. They co-operated as far as necessary to avoid causing severe resentments among the British but were far from enthusiastic about stopping arms traffic with all measures available to them. A consequence of this was that Kuwait remained the centre of arms trafficking to a small extent.\textsuperscript{105} When Sheikh Sālim died in 1921, his nephew Sheik

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908–1928, memorandum by John Laithwaite (IO), 8.10.1928: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B410, 3. See also: Chew, \textit{Periphery}, 122; Ball, ‘Battle of Dubai’, 186-187.
\item[102] Landen, \textit{Oman}, 388-41; Chew, \textit{Periphery}, 123, 134-135.
\item[103] For an instance, see: Fowle (PR PG) to Clauson (IO) 23.9.1937, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2206, 305r-306r.
\item[104] Crews, ‘Trafficcking’, 126.
\item[105] Watts, Intelligence Officer Persian Gulf to Senior General Staff Officer, 30.9.1920, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 33r-34v; Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908–1928, memorandum by John Laithwaite (IO), 8.10.1928: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B410; Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, memorandum by David Monteath, 20.1.1913: ibid./B169.
\end{footnotes}
Ahmad al-Jābir al-Ṣabāh (1921–1950) succeeded him as ruler of Kuwait. Sheikh Ahmad was much more interested in the regulation of the arms trade. He established closer co-operation with the British in the issue of arms control, imposed higher fines for individuals engaged in smuggling and increased the general arms control efforts.\textsuperscript{106} He undertook these actions not only for the sake of his relationship with the British or due to British pressure. It was in his interest to end arms trafficking. Although his motivation is not completely clear, at least part of it had to do with his concerns that Ibn Saud would encourage the Najdis in Kuwait to perform a coup using the accumulating weapons in the city.\textsuperscript{107} It can also be assumed that he was anxious that other groups in Kuwait's internal power structures could use arms or the control over arms disposals to consolidate their power vis-à-vis the Sheikh.\textsuperscript{108} He tried to establish a firmer control on weapons disposals and possessions. When in 1938 the merchants of Kuwait established a legislative council for a short period of time, challenging the rule of the Sheikh, they also sought to gain exclusive control over access to arms.\textsuperscript{109} In any event, as a result of Sheikh Ahmad's stricter policy regarding arms trade and possession, arms trafficking in and from Kuwait decreased significantly.\textsuperscript{110}

While the rulers' and authorities' decisions were naturally diverse, eventually most of them acted on their own security interests in arms controls. Their dedication to arms control rendered these controls and the British plan to use them as instruments of imperial order possible in the first place.

At the same time, the other levels of the social hierarchies, particularly the polities' notables or public authorities, gave a more diverse picture. The arms control, however, depended on their efforts, too. Most of the police and customs officials, who were responsible for carrying out searches, confiscations and detainments on the spot for arms control, accomplished the tasks assigned to them, some even risking their lives.\textsuperscript{111} Yet some were open to letting the contraband weapons pass for money or because they saw them simply as a continuance of a traditional and culturally sanctioned business.\textsuperscript{112}

In this context, the actions of individuals who opted to engage in uncontrolled arms trade should not be neglected, since these actions were inherently challenging to the imperial order. While the reason to participate in this trade was of economic nature for many, some groups used the arms trade as a deliberate action to oppose the established order, often motivated by religious or anti-imperial views.\textsuperscript{113} Since arms control had often limited acceptance among the populations and many enemies, it was pivotal for the control's proponents to achieve the support of local notables and thus assure the populations' compliance. The notables' position towards arms control, however, was often determined by their sentiment towards the respective government and the British presence in general.

\textsuperscript{106} Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908–1928, memorandum by John Laithwaite (IO), 8.10.1928: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B410, 4; PA Kuwait to the Secretary to the PR PG, 14.2.1922, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 104r.

\textsuperscript{107} PA Kuwait, to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 4.5.1924, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 220r.

\textsuperscript{108} Arguments supporting that assumption can be found in: Rossiter, Security, 44; Loewenstein, 'The Veiled Protectorate of Kuwait'. Liberalized Imperialism and British Efforts to Influence Kuwaiti Domestic Policy during the Reign of Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber, 1938–50', in: Middle Eastern Studies 36 (2000) 2, 103-123, here: 110-111.

\textsuperscript{109} Loewenstein, 'Liberalized Imperialism', 110-111.

\textsuperscript{110} PA Kuwait, to the High Commissioner for Iraq, 11.12.1922, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 194r.

\textsuperscript{111} There are an abundance of reports available, for example, see: PA Kuwait to PR PG, 2.1.1925, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 6r; Extract from Diary of H.B.M's Consulate, Khuzistan, August 1931, in: BL IOR/15/5/48, 175r; PA Kuwait to PR PG,11.3.1922, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 112r; 'Custom Guards' Fight with Koweiti Smugglers', in: Times of Mesopotamia, 27.2.1929.

\textsuperscript{112} There are various reports available, too. For examples, see: PA Kuwait to Deputy Political Resident, 23.8.1920, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/47, 23r; Office of the PR PG to Peel (IO) 7.10.1938; in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 50r.

\textsuperscript{113} Chew, Periphery, 135.
An instance for this is Bahrain in the mid-thirties. Since the island was the linchpin of the British strategy in the Gulf, a deterioration of the British-supported government’s authority was especially unacceptable for the British. Simultaneously, Bahrain was prone to internal conflicts due to its diverse population and the consequent inner tensions. When in 1935 the Political Agent in Bahrain observed a surge in arms trafficking from the Saudi Arabian coast accompanied by an increase in criminal gun violence, he proposed the implementation of a gun licensing system. While the import of arms was strictly prohibited and strictly monitored by the ruling sheikh, the possession of guns was allowed and uncontrolled. Therefore, arms successfully trafficked and sold were no longer detectable for the authorities. A licensing system was to end that problem by allowing the authorities to prospectively identify trafficked guns, which would have no license. Since the ruling sheikh and the Bahrain government were sympathetic to the idea, respective proclamations were developed. However, this sparked heavy resistance from various notables belonging to different ethnic and religious groups in Bahrain, who were at odds with the ruling sheikh and sought to instrumentalise the new measures of gun control to agitate against the government. They called upon the population to disobey the order, claiming that the licenses were a first step on the way to taking away the arms and leaving the civil population ‘defenceless like animals’. The pressure on the sheikh to take back the order mounted. In this situation the eventual success of arms control was only due to the work of some notables who sympathised with the new gun control measures, most notably Sheikh Ali bin Hasan al-Musa who convinced large parts of the Shi’i peasantry to register their arms.

While the sheikhdoms and their arms control policies were more or less directly tied to the British efforts, the situation in Iran and Iraq after ‘independence’ was different. In these large polities, arms control was of pivotal importance for the central governments that struggled to exercise authority in all parts of their territories. Especially Iran pushed forward large disarmament campaigns among its population and made strong efforts to suppress trafficking which would have rendered their disarmament efforts futile, thereby contributing to the British goal of keeping arms away from the Indian borders. The Iranian efforts were nonetheless not intended to complement the British arms control but to compete with British policing, which was seen as an epitome of the imperial order and thus a challenge to Iranian nationalism.

Iraq was anxious to control the disposal of firearms among its population too, since armed tribes opposing the central government were a constant source of unrest and loss of control. At the same time, Iraq used the British arms control similarly to the Bahraini notables as a leverage
point for its very own agenda, which was contrary to the imperial order. Over the 1930s, Iraq repeatedly accused Kuwait and its ruler of tolerating arms trade in Kuwait and arms trafficking at the Kuwait–Iraq border, where arms smugglers were detained regularly. Yet when British officials made inquiries on this issue, they determined that the weapons originated in Saudi Arabia, where high numbers of arms and ammunition were available, but traded to Iraq, where they obtained a higher price. Some of these trading flows crossed the desert in the hinterland of Kuwait, merely passing Kuwaiti territory. The local British officials, that is, the Political Resident Fowle as well as the Political Agent de Gaury, were convinced that Kuwait or Sheikh Aḥmad had nothing to do with the trafficking. When the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Nājī al-Aṣīl visited Kuwait in 1936, Sheikh Aḥmad managed to convince him as well that Kuwait was not involved in arms trafficking. Still, the Iraqi government kept repeating these accusations over the years. Major Cecil Edmond, British advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, advocated for the Iraqi point of view in London. His elaborations caused deep concern about the British–Iraqi relations among officials in both London and Baghdad. They repeatedly ordered the Political Resident in the Gulf to take action against the alleged trafficking. The Political Resident, however, replied to each of these orders that the Kuwaiti authorities were already taking sufficient action.

The reason why Iraq repeated these incorrect accusations against Kuwait was their attempt to instrumentalise the British interest in arms control for the sake of pursuing an actual Iraqi policy, namely the claim on Kuwait, an important factor in Iraq’s foreign policy from its very beginning. The Iraqi accusations were always accompanied by policy proposals which were promoted by the Iraqis as effective counter-measures against the alleged trafficking but which would all end in significant cessations of Kuwait’s sovereign rights to Iraq. The British instead preferred an independent Kuwait, ensuring British influence and control over the port of Kuwait Town. Consequently, although only the officials in the Gulf fully realised the Iraqi agenda, all British authorities agreed that they could not support the Iraqi demands and proposals. This put them in an inconvenient position, because they simultaneously were deeply concerned about the affair’s impact on the Anglo-Iraqi relations. It is not without a certain irony that Iraq instrumentalised the British interest in arms trade controls, an instrument of the imperial order, to pursue its own geostrategic interests contrary to the British interest. The cases of Iran and Iraq draw attention to a further aspect of the imperial disarmament policies regarding the imperial periphery. Owing to their importance for the imperial powers, the policies provided a good target for actors challenging them.

123. Abbas Mahdi, Foreign Ministry to Scott, H.B.M.’s Embassy, 31.8.1937, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 92r-93r.
124. PA Kuwait to PR PG, 10.11.1936, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 110r; PR PG to Air Officer Commanding, British Forces in Iraq, 21.6.1938, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 206r-209r; Slade for Air Vice Marshal Commanding to PR PG, 28.6.1938, in: ibid., 210r-212r.
125. Kerr, British Ambassador in Iraq, to PR PG, 31.5.1937, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 98r-99r. Baxter, Under Secretary of State (FO) to Under Secretary of State (IO) 19.10.1938, in: ibid., 39r-42r.
126. Fowle (PR PG) to Peel (IO) 29.11.1938, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 95r-96r.
127. P. Sluglett, ‘The Resilience of a Frontier: Ottoman and Iraqi Claims to Kuwait, 1871–1990’, in: The International History Review 24 (2002) 4, 783-816, esp. 800-805.
128. Record of Conversation with the Iraqi Minister for Foreign Affairs held at the Foreign Office, 4.10.1938, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 247r-249v; Baxter, Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office to Under Secretary of State (IO) 19.10.1938, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 39r-42r.
129. Baxter, Under Secretary of State (FO) to Under Secretary of State (IO) 19.10.1938, in: BL IOR/L/PS/12/2212, 39r-42r; James Morgan of the British Embassy in Iraq to Baggallay (FO) 15.3.1938, in: BL IOR/R/15/5/308, 193r-194r.
5. Conclusion

This study has argued that arms control in the imperial periphery was an integral part of the inter-war disarmament policies and negotiations, inseparable from the rest in being directed towards the same goal of lasting ‘peace’. With regard to the Persian Gulf, however, this ‘peace’ was equivalent to the imperial order with all its oppressive aspects, making a favourable assessment of the disarmament policies as progressive and humanitarian too short-sighted. As demonstrated, arms control in the Gulf was conceived by the British as a pivotal part of their imperialist strategy. Through arms control, they sought to strengthen the rule of authorities embedded in the imperial order by attempting to monopolise their access to arms and to deny it to opposing groups. By so doing, the British sought to maintain and consolidate the established distribution of power and with it the imperial order. This was not an expression of imperial strength, but of the increased sense of crisis, anxiety and fear of a loss of control experienced by the British in the inter-war years. The article has shown that disarmament policies in the imperial periphery should be seen as a strategy for coping with these insecurities, which rendered this dimension of disarmament even more important for the crisis-ridden inter-war imperialism. Moreover, this article has examined the measures and practices of arms control in the Gulf as practical expressions of the disarmament policies. It has emphasised the comprehensive and far-reaching nature of the attempt to subjugate the globally interconnected arms trade in the Gulf under British control. Arms control interfered with traditional business, thereby prompting resistance and challenges. Many of the Gulf’s rulers and authorities had a self-interest in arms control and thus decided to take part in it. In this way, the consequences of arms control shaped the political and social landscape of the inter-war Gulf.

Most importantly, all of this shows how far-reaching the consequences of disarmament policies could be in regard to the imperial periphery. The discourses on reduction of arms among the industrialised states are certainly of significant importance for analyses of the inter-war era, particularly in Europe. However, in the end, they mostly did not produce the anticipated results. On that basis, disarmament efforts have often been portrayed as a failure. This assessment is certainly not true for the imperial periphery, as this article has shown by leaving the level of the international negotiations and examining their significance in the Persian Gulf. Here, the disarmament policies brought far-reaching consequences of profound importance for imperialism and for the respective societies and rulers. That makes it hard to understand why the accounts of inter-war disarmament almost completely neglect its imperial dimension and its grave consequences to the imperial periphery.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Leon Julius Biela https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8460-2460