Contesting Imperialism in Geneva

Interwar Arms-Traffic Conferences and the Anglo-Iranian Confrontation

Leon Julius Biela

Confronted with the horrors of modern warfare, the question of how to reorganize the system of international politics in a way that would safeguard a lasting peace took center stage in the deliberations and negotiations on a post-war order during and after the First World War. Against this backdrop, the idea of the League of Nations emerged from the multitude of ideas on establishing some form of institutionalized society of states that could embody, supervise, and moderate this reorganization. Eventually, in 1919, the League's Covenant was incorporated into the Paris Peace Settlements as part of the Treaty of Versailles.[1] For a long time, the League's work has mainly been evaluated against its main objective: Preventing another large-scale war, especially among the states of Europe. From this perspective, many scholars have judged the League to have been a failure. Over the last decades, a more comprehensive picture of the ways the League and its mission shaped the international system has emerged. For instance, much attention has been paid to its lasting impact on technical cooperation between states.[2] Yet, many aspects of the League's

1 This is of course a very abridged account of the creation of the League. For more extensive ones, see, for instance, Peter Yearwood: *Guarantee of Peace. The League of Nations in British Policy 1914–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Zara Steiner: *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15–386, esp. 349–386; Frank Walters: *A History of the League of Nations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 15–65; Ruth Henig: *The Peace that Never Was. A History of the League of Nations* (London: Haus, 2019), 1–48.

2 See, for instance, Patricia Clavin: *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Magaly Rodríguez García/Davide Rodogno/Liat Kozma (eds.): *The League of Nations' Work on Social Issues* (Geneva: United Nations Publications 2016). For historiographical surveys, see the influential Susan Pedersen: "Back to the League of Nations", in: *The American Historical Review* 112:4 (2007), 1091–1117. Or, more recent, José Antonio Sánchez Román: "La Sociedad de Naciones en su centenario: Un campo historiográfico en expansion", in: *Historia y Política* 45 (2021), 325–355.

significance within the histories of internationalism, international relations, global governance, and so forth remain to be explored.

Only recently, exhaustive work has been done on the role of the League in the increasing antagonism between imperialism and anti-imperialism within the international system. Much of this research has convincingly revealed the League's dense entanglement with imperialist ideas, visions of order, and practices and has shown how the League served to maintain an international order dominated by imperialism. As Mark Mazower and others have argued, for many of the British intellectual pioneers and architects of the League, the British Empire not only acted as the structural model for the organization of the League, but the latter was also meant to stabilize imperialism after the turbulence of the war and to secure British interests in the long term.[3] The significance of this "imperial internationalism" for League politics and vice versa was particularly visible in the transfer of control of the former German colonies and Ottoman provinces under the Mandate system, which most clearly bore the marks of the League's conception as the brainchild of both Wilsonianism and imperialism. Recent studies have pointed out that the internationalization of imperial rule through the Mandates was conceptualized as a form of updating and securing imperial rule. It did so by side-stepping criticisms of imperialism and preserving the ideas of 'civilizational hierarchies', which were crucial for the rationale of imperialism and now baked into the League's ideological foundations.[4] Moreover, the entire structure of the League, which was centered around a Council in which the imperial powers had permanent seats and an administration largely staffed by European (and often colonialist) states, revealed its imperial origins.[5]

---

3 Mark Mazower: *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 28–103; Mark Mazower: *Governing the World. The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin, 2012), 128–135. See also other works like Jeanne Morefield: *Covenants Without Swords. Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005).

4 Sean Andrew Wempe: "A League to Preserve Empires: Understanding the Mandates System and Avenues for Further Scholarly Inquiry", in: *The American Historical Review* 124:5 (2019), 1723–1731; Michael Callahan: *Mandates and Empire: The League of Nations in Africa 1914–1931* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008); Antony Anghie: *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 115–195; Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo: "A League of Empires: Imperial Political Imagination and Interwar Internationalisms", in: Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo/José Pedro Monteiro (eds.): *Internationalism, Imperialism and the Formation of the Contemporary World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 87–126; Florian Wagner: "Naturism, the Permanent Mandates Commission, and the denial of the violent Nature of Colonialism", in: Haakon Ikonoumou/ Karen Gram-Skjoldager (eds.): *The League of Nations. Perspectives from the Present* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2019), 78–89.

5 Megan Donaldson: "The League of Nations, Ethiopia, and the Making of States", in: *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 11:1 (2020),

Some scholarly works have argued, however, that despite of all of this, the League was more than an instrument of empire. Most prominently, Susan Pedersen, in her seminal study of the Mandate system, has argued that the internationalization of imperialism unintendedly created a new way of talking about the empires and their future. Thus, the League "helped to make the end of empire imaginable."[6] Pedersen further argues that "the League's own character and practices – its legalism, proceduralism and 'publicness' – tended to amplify rather than to abate imperial contestation."[7] By this, she implies that not only in the Mandate system the League's form of internationalism and its formal characteristics entailed dynamics that turned it into an arena for the contestation of imperial order. Within the field of international legal history, in which the imperial origins of international law have been firmly established,[8] Arnulf Becker Lorca has emphasized the various forms in which "semi-peripheral actors", that is actors from non-imperial and non-European but not colonized societies, appropriated and influenced discourses and norm-setting of international law, mostly to secure the sovereign equality of their states vis-à-vis the imperial powers of the North Atlantic. The League forms a significant part of his argumentation since it, on the on hand, undertook international norm-setting in a formerly unknown breadth of policy fields and, on the other, enabled new institutionalized forms of participation in this norm-setting processes for "semi-peripherals".[9] Taken together, these studies paint an ambiguous picture of the League's relation with imperialism.

Drawing on these works, this chapter understands the League as well as the wider system of international conferences and meetings that took place under its auspices and procedural rules as an arena in which international norms were discussed, negotiated, and determined. In this novel kind of arena, interests and actors from around the globe could meet and compete, including actors from both the North Atlantic and Middle East. It was novel because it gave all polities accepted as

---

6–31, here 18; Thomas Grant: "The League of Nations as a Universal Organization", in: Michel Erpelding/Burkhard Hess/Hélène Ruiz Fabri (eds.): *Peace Through Law. The Versailles Peace Treaty and Dispute Settlement After World War I* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019), 65–84, here 81.

6 Susan Pedersen: *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), quote from 406.

7 Susan Pedersen: "Empires, States and the League of Nations", in: Glenda Sluga/Patricia Clavin (eds.): *Internationalisms. A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 113–138, here 116.

8 See, for instance, Anghie, *Imperialism*; Martti Koskenniemi: *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations. The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 98–178; Jennifer Pitts: *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

9 Arnulf Becker Lorca: *Mestizo International Law. A Global Intellectual History 1842–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014), 221–304.

members the status of formal sovereign equality and the same formal, legal, and procedural position when it came to discussing and voting on international issues, and this in an institutionalized way not comparable with the participation of non-North Atlantic polities in pre-war international conferences. Following Pedersen's remarks on the League's "legalism, proceduralism and 'publicness'", this chapter will argue that the formal characteristics of the League system indeed opened up new spaces for imperial contestation. It is well known that many non-European member polities attached high expectations to the formal principles of the League when it was founded, hoping that it would provide them with new means to assert their own independence and sovereignty vis-à-vis the imperial powers.[10] Little is known, however, about how these hopes translated into concrete policies and to which degree these policies could use the League system's characteristics to confront the imperial order, which was ultimately also entrenched in the League's own ideological foundations. Exploring these kinds of questions promises new insights into how the League helped to shape a changing international system.

Several publications have already approached these questions. In brief case studies drawing on the rich scholarship on Latin American states' relations to the League, José Antonio Sánchez Román has examined how those states used several technical conferences under the auspices of the League to strengthen their sovereignty.[11] Most recently, Daniel Stahl has shown how the El Salvadorian delegate to the arms traffic conferences under the auspices of the League sought to limit the United States government's abilities to use the supply of arms to certain factions within Latin American states as an instrument of imperialism.[12] This chapter takes up these approaches by concentrating on the politics of the Iranian and British delegations in the arms traffic conferences.[13] Yet it does not focus on the question of

10 See, for instance, Stefan Hell: *Siam and the League of Nations. Modernization, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920–1940* (Bangkok: River Books, 2010), 38–39; Harumi Goto-Shibata: *The League of Nations and the East Asian Imperial Order, 1920–1946* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 10; José Antonio Sánchez Román: "From the Tigris to the Amazon: Peripheral expertise, impossible cooperation and economic multilateralism at the League of Nations, 1920–1946", in: Simon Jackson/Alanna O'Malley (eds.): *The Institution of International Order. From the League of Nations to the United Nations* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2018), 42–64, here 43–44.

11 Sánchez Román, "From the Tigris to the Amazon".

12 Daniel Stahl: "Confronting US Imperialism with International Law. Central America and the Arms Trade of the Inter-war Period", in: *Journal of Modern European History* 19:4 (2021), 489–509.

13 For the politics of Iran in the League of Nations, see Mostafa Mesbah Zadeh: *La Politique de l'Iran dans la Société des Nations. La Conception Iranienne de L'Organisation de la Paix* (Aix-en-Provence: Paul Robaud, 1936); Walters, *League of Nations*, 739–742. There also some contributions written in Persian on the topic. See, for instance, the following article and the references mentioned in Sirous Mohebbi/Saeede-Sadat Ahmadi: "Attitudes of Governmen-

regulating the arms traffic in a narrow sense. As David Stone noted in his appraisal of one of these conferences, fundamental questions about the relation between the empires' claim to power and the interest of non-imperial states to protect their sovereignty emerged in these negotiations.[14] Therefore, this chapter takes a closer look at the visions of international and regional order as well as concepts of sovereignty touched upon by the issues discussed at the conferences. It traces how both the Iranian and the British sides sought to influence the conferences' norm-setting to promote their own agendas and thus turned the conference rooms of Geneva into an unexpected theatre of confrontation between British imperialism and Iranian nationalism over influence in the Persian Gulf.[15] Drawing on inter-imperial agreements as precedents, the British introduced the idea of arms trade conventions with special regulations for the Persian Gulf to consolidate their imperial influence there. The Iranians, however, attempted to thwart these British efforts by utilizing the conferences and their multilateral, public framework to contest British imperialism in favor of their own nationalist claims for influence in the region. By connecting the histories of the Gulf Region and internationalism, this chapter unravels the complex entanglements of regional conflicts, national interests, the interplay of imperialism and anti-imperialism, and a new kind of internationalism. By doing so, it presents a new case study that can shed more light on how the procedural framework of the League's system created new opportunities for actors from recognized states outside the North Atlantic to contest imperial visions of order and their translation into international norms.

The Imperial Peace of Saint Germain

Several studies have shown that arms control in the imperial periphery, while frequently framed as part of a 'humanitarian' mission, was intended to stabilize and safeguard the imperial order by denying its opponents access to arms.[16] With the

---

tal Elites League of Nations and the Iran's National Interest", in: *Iranian Research Letter of International Politics* 6:1 (2017/18), 185–218.

14 David Stone: "Imperialism and Sovereignty: The League of Nations' Drive to Control the Global Arms Trade", in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (2000), 213–230.

15 On the Anglo-Iranian confrontation, see the recent study by Chelsi Mueller: "The Persian Gulf, 1919–39: Changes, Challenges, and Transitions", in: *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8:2 (2018), 259–274. In this chapter, the term "Persian Gulf" refers to both the Persian Gulf in a narrow sense and to the adjoining Gulf of Oman.

16 See, for example, Jonathan Grant: *Rulers, Guns, and Money. The Global Arms Trade in the Age of Imperialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Emrys Chew: *Arming the Periphery. The Arms Trade in the Indian Ocean during the Age of Global Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012); Sokhna Sané: *Le contrôle de la circulation des armes à feu en Afrique occidentale française,*

Brussels Act of 1890, this strategy had become part of inter-imperial talks and agreements, which were continued in the interwar years.[17] While historians have long tended to assess arms-control projects originating in the League context exclusively in terms of great-power disarmament, more recent studies have clearly carved out how the imperial powers connected these projects with their strategy of preserving arms control as an instrument of imperial rule by promoting its codification in international law.[18] This imperial interest was a significant factor for the convening of conferences on which international regulation of the arms traffic was discussed that took place in Saint Germain in 1919 as well as in Geneva in 1925 and 1932–33, the latter two under the auspices of the League but not as part of it.[19]

The driving force behind the convening of the first of these conferences in Saint Germain was the British government.[20] As early as 1917 a subcommittee of its Committee of Imperial Defence assessed that the masses of arms produced for the ongoing war could after its end find their way into the hands of "native races", meaning groups opposed to the imperial order and particularly to colonial rule, which was to be prevented for the sake of imperial security.[21] The Gulf Region figured prominently in the subcommittee's risk assessment since at the turn of the century, large numbers of arms had found their way from there to the Indian border regions, where they were used against British troops. Reacting to this threat, the British were able to eliminate most of this traffic by imposing a naval blockade and other strict mea-

---

1834–1958 (Dakar: Karthala, 2008). For a recent overview, see Felix Brahm/Daniel Stahl: "Arms Regimes across the Empires", in: *Journal of Modern European History* 19:4 (2021), 411–415.

17 On the Brussels Act, see Felix Brahm: "Banning the sale of modern firearms in Africa: On the origins of the Brussels Conference Act of 1890", in: *Journal of Modern European History* 19:4 (2021), 436–447; Chew, *Arming the Periphery*, 23–27.

18 Some examples of these recent studies are Stahl, "Confronting US Imperialism"; Leon Julius Biela: "Disarming the Periphery. Inter-war Arms Control, British Imperialism, and the Persian Gulf", in: *Journal of Modern European History* 19:4 (2021), 469–448; Daniel Stahl, "The Decolonization of the Arms Trade. Britain and the Regulation of Exports to the Middle East", in: *History of Global Arms Transfer* 7:1 (2019), 3–19; Andrew Webster: "The League of Nations, Disarmament and Internationalism", in: Glenda Sluga/Patricia Clavin (eds.): *Internationalisms. A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 139–169, here 155–156.

19 For overviews on these conferences, see Andrew Webster: "From Versailles to Geneva: The Many Forms of Interwar Disarmament", in: *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29:2 (2006), 225–246, here 233–242; Stone, "Imperialism", 222–230.

20 Stahl, "Decolonization", 5–6.

21 Simon Ball: "Britain and the Decline of the International Control of Small Arms in the Twentieth Century", in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 47:4 (2012), 812–837, here 819–823; Stahl, "Decolonization", 4–5. See also Committee of Imperial Defence: Report of Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic, 10 March 1917, The National Archives (TNA), CAB 29/1.

sures in the Gulf Region in the years before the war.[22] Yet a lasting sense of insecurity and anxiety about a possible recrudescence of the arms trade remained and deeply influenced British arms-control policy in the Gulf during the interwar years.[23] Thus, the subcommittee, supported by the colonial government of India, advised a continuation of strict controls in the Gulf, for instance through permanent naval patrols.[24]

Another recommendation of the subcommittee was to secure the cooperation of the other powers in the British project of preventing an uncontrolled arms trade to and within the imperial sphere of influence by obtaining an arms-traffic convention in the context of the peace negotiations.[25] Modeled after the Brussels Act, the British vision of an arms-traffic convention included provisions for zones in which especially strict regulations would apply, which were to be under international control by the contracting powers. These zones were of central interest for British imperial officials since they were designed to comprise the colonies and other parts of the imperial sphere of influence, thereby helping to suppress the uncontrolled arms trade there. The subcommittee had initially recommended leaving the Gulf Region outside of these zones of international control, favoring a continuation of unilateral British control instead. This would have underscored the British imperial claim to exclusive power in the Gulf, which was perceived in London as 'British Lake'. In preliminary talks with the French, however, British officials quickly noticed that granting the Gulf Region a special status would entail a line of similar exceptions made by other powers and thus endanger the whole idea of the zones.[26] To avert this, the British began to advocate for an inclusion of the Gulf Region in the zones, now being called "Prohibited Areas". This policy shift was eased, on the one hand, by the interest in

22 On the arms trade and British control measures in the Gulf before the First World War, see Robert Crews: "Trafficking in Evil? The Global Arms Trade and the Politics of Disorder", in: James Gelvin/Nile Green (eds.): *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2013), 121–142; Simon Ball: "The Battle of Dubai: Firearms on Britain's Arabian Frontier, 1906–1915", in: Giacomo Macola (ed.): *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire* (Farnham: Routledge, 2013), 165–190; Guillemette Crouzet: "Arms Trafficking and the Globalization of the Persian Gulf in the Late Nineteenth Century", in: *Journal of Levantine Studies* 10:1 (2020), 69–89.

23 Biela, "Disarming the Periphery", 479.

24 Committee of Imperial Defence: Report of Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic, 10 April 1917, 4, TNA CAB 29/1; Foreign and Political Department of the Government of India to Edwin Montagu (Secretary of State for India), 21 December 1917, 2, British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR) L/PS/10/672, 257r–258r.

25 Ball, "Britain and the Decline", 821.

26 Committee of Imperial Defence: Report of Sub-Committee on Arms Traffic. Appendix IV: Fourth and Fifth Meetings held at the India Office on the 12th and 26th February 1917, 10 April 1917, 2, TNA CAB 29/1; Foreign Office to Sir R. Hingaite (Cairo), 22 December 1919, IOR/L/PS/10/672, 246r–248r; Copy of Minute 1. From War Cabinet, 542, 6 March 1919, Ibid., 160r–160v.

preventing traders from other European states from subverting the British system of controls, as French arms dealers had done before the war, much to the British officials' chagrin, and, on the other, by the idea of obtaining international sanction for the established practice of British arms controls in the Gulf.[27] This orientation toward internationally codifying the control of arms traffic as an instrument to maintain the imperial order also meant that arms-traffic controls in the Gulf would irreversibly shift from being nothing more than a unilateral British practice to a subject of international talks.

Due to the interest of the other imperial powers, particularly the French, in arms control as an instrument of safeguarding imperial rule, the British were successful in putting the issue on the agenda of the peace negotiations in Paris.[28] The negotiation of an arms-traffic convention, which took place during the summer of 1919 in Saint Germain and was attended by delegates from around the world (though the conference was dominated by imperial powers, delegates from countries such as China, Siam, and Bolivia were present, too), was largely based on British drafts. These placed the Persian Gulf along with the entire Arabian Peninsula and the territory of Iran inside the "Prohibited Areas".[29] The Iranian delegates themselves were not admitted to take part in these negotiations, since the British had succeeded in barring them from official participation in the entire Peace Conference, despite Iranian requests to be included and American support for these requests.[30] When the British delegate was absent at the second meeting of the conference, the American delegate, Hornbeck, pointed out this somewhat peculiar situation by explaining that it was "difficult to impose a special regime on independent states like Persia or the

27 Shuckburgh, India Office, to Admiralty, 20 January 1921, BL IOR/L/PS/10/674, 6v; India Office Memorandum Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908–1928, 8 October 1928, BL IOR/L/PS/18/B410, 4.

28 Stahl "Decolonization", 5; Arms Traffic: F.O. Memo, 22 February 1919, BL IOR/L/PS/10/672, 215r–217r.

29 Procès-Verbal N° 1, Séance du 8 Juillet, Annex I: Projet de convention relative au contrôle du commerce des armes et des munitions, in: Commission pour la révision des actes généraux de Berlin et de Bruxelles, Procès-Verbaux et Rapport de la Commission, 11–16, here 12, US National Archives, RG 256, Pub M820, Roll 180.

30 Oliver Bast: "Putting the Record Straight: Vosuq al-Dowleh's Foreign Policy in 1918/19", in: Touraj Atabaki/Erik Zürcher (eds.): *Men of Order. Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London: I.B. Tauris 2004), 260–281. On Iranian diplomacy in the context of the Peace Conference, see Oliver Bast : "La mission persane à la Conférence de Paix en 1919 : Une nouvelle interprétation", in : Oliver Bast (ed.) : *La Perse et la Grande Guerre* (Tehran : Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 2002), 375–425 ; Philip Henning Grobien : "Iran and imperial nationalism in 1919", in : *Middle Eastern Studies* 57:2 (2021), 292–309. The British explained their position in terms of Iran's formal neutrality during the war (which was somewhat cynical considering the massive destruction the war caused in Iran), their deeper motivation, however, lay in the British Iran-policy of the time (see below).

Hedjaz without their consent."[31] However, these kinds of objections with reference to formal sovereignty were abandoned before the next session, not to be mentioned again, prompting an assumption of British lobbying behind the scenes.[32]

The British treatment of Iran in Paris and its suburbs in 1919 fit into British Iran policy of the time, which would have been hard to reconcile with multilateral negotiations. During the war, Britain and Russia had occupied vast parts of formally neutral Iran. After the fall of the czarist government, Britain remained as the only imperial power in Iran. Lord Curzon, former viceroy of India and now British foreign secretary, saw this situation as a window of opportunity to realize his long-cherished vision of transforming Iran into a dependent buffer-state in the *cordon sanitaire* around India.[33] For this reason, in 1919, he had an Anglo-Iranian treaty negotiated, which would have enshrined Britain's control over Iran. The treaty, however, failed due to strong resentment among the Iranian public and the British government's unwillingness to shoulder the costs of a continued military presence in Iran.[34] Thus, Lord Curzon's support for Iranian membership of the League was motivated by the intent to at least safeguard from the ambitions of the emerging Soviet Union the territorial integrity of an Iran that still appeared to be susceptible to British influence.[35] The inclusion of Iranian territory within the "Prohibited Areas" of the arms-traffic convention was pushed through by the British for the same reasons. By establishing an additional obstacle for the arms trade to and in Iran, the British sought not only to prevent Iranian territory from becoming again a highway for the arms trade to the borders of India. They moreover aimed to prevent the uncontrolled influx of arms from fueling internal conflicts. British officials feared that this would facilitate Bolshevik infiltration, impede the British exercise of influence, and endanger imperial interests in the country, especially the strategically important oil fields of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Hence, an influx of arms – particularly the many left over from the Middle Eastern theatre of the World War – seemed anything but

31 Procès-Verbal N° 2, Séance du 9 Juillet 1919, in: Commission pour la révision des actes généraux de Berlin et de Bruxelles, Procès-Verbaux et Rapport de la Commission, 35–39, here 36, US National Archives, RG 256, Pub M820, Roll 180. Translation by the author, French original: "difficile d'imposer un régime spécial, sans leur consentement, à des états indépendants comme la Perse ou le Hedjaz."

32 Ibid., 40–43.

33 Houshang Sabahi: *British Policy in Persia 1918–1925* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 2–8; Yann Richard: *Iran. A Social and Political History since the Qajars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019), 133; Grobien, "Imperial nationalism", 296.

34 Ervand Abrahamadin: *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), 61–62; Sabahi, *British Policy*, 53–58.

35 Timothy Nunan: "Persian Visions of Nationalism and Inter-Nationalism in a World at War", in: Marcus Payk/Roberta Pergher (eds.): *Beyond Versailles. Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2019), 189–214, here 204.

desirable to British officials. This twofold goal of safeguarding the distribution of power on which the regional imperial order rested and the prevention of arms from reaching other parts of the Empire was the underlying rationale for British efforts to control the trade in arms in the entire Gulf Region.[36]

The Convention of Saint Germain was signed after only six days of negotiations on 8 September 1919. It included Iran and the Persian Gulf in the "Prohibited Areas", and thus, from the British perspective, was an important instrument for their own imperial ambitions in the region. However, it soon became clear that it would not come into effect, since the necessary number of ratifications could not be reached due to the American withdrawal from the League and the Convention. Yet, in 1920, France, Japan, Belgium, Italy, and Great Britain – all of them imperial powers – agreed to act in accordance with the Convention, though only with respect to the "Areas".[37] This agreement, which confined arms-control efforts to the colonies and other parts of the imperial spheres of influence, vividly demonstrated whose and which interests were decisive. It revealed how deeply the Convention – and especially its notion of "Areas" – was entangled with the fundamentally racist concept of 'hierarchies of civilization'. The 'peace' it purported to produce was nothing more than an 'imperial peace' with all its oppressive consequences.[38]

This was not only laid bare by the very existence of the concept of "Areas" but also by the provisions regarding the so-called "Native Vessels". This term referred to maritime vessels under 500t originating from the coasts adjacent to the maritime parts of the "Areas". In the practice of control, all vessels were to be deemed "Native Vessels" when it could be assumed that they originated from the adjacent coasts based on their appearance and style of build. The Convention subjected "Native Vessels" to stricter regulations. Most importantly, they were not allowed to carry arms consignments internationally or outside of the immediate vicinity of their home polity's coasts at all. Additionally, "Native Vessels" under the flag of a contracting state could be stopped at any time by the navy of any contracting power to check that the flag it was flying was being used legitimately and could be escorted to nearest port of the vessel's state of origin in case of the unlawful use of a national flag or any suspicion that the vessel might be engaged in the arms trade. Moreover, the Convention limited the possibilities of "Native Vessels" flying a contracting power's flag.[39]

36 Biela, "Disarming the Periphery", 475–478.

37 Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 218; Stahl, "Decolonization", 7–9; Ball, "Decline", 822–823. See also Seymour, Foreign Office, to Admiralty, 30 December 1920, BL IOR/L/PS/12/4094, 266v.

38 Brahm/Stahl, "Arms Regimes", 413; Stahl, "Decolonization", 6; Biela, "Disarming the Periphery", 474.

39 Convention for the Control of the Trade in Arms and Ammunition, Signed in Saint Germain on September 10th, 1919, Art. 12–16. See also the respective provisions in the succeeding convention: Convention for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammu-

All of this was of major advantage for British control of the arms trade in the Gulf since it significantly limited the possibility of arms traders circumventing and subverting the British controls by flying the flag of another European power. Because of this, as well as the public commitment of other major imperial powers to strict arms controls and the further diplomatic options to proceed against violations of this commitment, British officials were generally satisfied with the Saint Germain Convention, despite its non-ratification, as well as with the subsequent 1920 Agreement and deemed them highly valuable for imperial security.[40]

In this way, the British chose the path of internationalization of arms-traffic control in the Gulf to safeguard and enhance its usability in maintaining the imperial order by obtaining its sanctioning under international law. This is not only a further example of the entanglement of international law and imperialism.[41] It furthermore reveals another imperialist thread in the fabric of the League. Since the League was commissioned by article 23d of its Covenant with the supervision of the trade in arms and munitions, its Secretariat undertook great efforts to convince more countries to ratify the Convention.[42] For the British, the internationalization of arms control in the Gulf, to which previously hardly any attention had been paid outside of its regional context, was to have profound consequences as soon as the international framework had changed. In 1919, Iran did not possess a potent central government, nor was the League's institutional framework established yet.[43] As a non-imperial power from outside the North Atlantic world and under heavy British influence, it was not taken seriously. In 1929, an internal memorandum from the India Office retrospectively pointed out with reference to Iran that "the Convention of 1919 was drawn up at a time when it was considered unnecessary to take serious account of her."[44] Since this had changed by the time the next arms-traffic conference was convened, arms-traffic control in the Gulf constitutes a fruitful case study to analyze the consequences of internationalization processes under the formal ramifications of the League's system for the contestability of the imperial order.

---

nition and in Implements of War, Signed in Geneva on 17 June 1925, Annex II. Paragraph 5 (2) states explicitly: "Any vessel which presents the appearance of native build and rig may be presumed to be a native vessel."

40 Biela, "Disarming the Periphery", 482. See also Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908–1928, memorandum by John Laithwaite, India Office, 8 December 1928: BL IOR/L/PS/18/B410, 4; India Office (presumably J. Laithwaite), Note explaining the object of the British draft Art. 10 of the Draft Revised Arms Traffic Convention, 20 August 1924, BL IOR/L/PS/10/673, 24r–28r.

41 Stahl, "Decolonization", 4.

42 Ibid., 3; Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 218–219; Webster, "From Versailles to Geneva", 234–235.

43 On the condition of Iran in 1919, see Abrahamadin, *Modern Iran*, 62; Richard, *Iran*, 157.

44 Memorandum: Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, John Gilbert Laithwaite, India Office, 30 July 1929, BL IOR/L/PS/12/4094, 216r–218v.

Iranian Nationalism and Arms-Traffic Control

In 1917/18 Iran experienced its own kind of "Wilsonian Moment".[45] There was animated discussion of the US president's ideas for a post-war order among Iranian government officials and intellectuals and they became a projection surface for the Iranian desire for disengagement from all kinds of imperial control.[46] This pursuit was deeply embedded in Iranian nationalism. Whereas Iran could look back on a long history of empire, during the 19th century, it fell almost entirely under British and Russian influence.[47] This led to an increasing sense of humiliation, which climaxed during Iran's wartime occupation, entailing battles between Entente and Ottoman troops on Iranian soil that caused devastation and famine.[48] Because of this long continuity of opposition against any form of imperial control, dependencies, and unequal treatment, Iranians paid great attention to Wilson's announcement that after the war a society of states should be established, whose tasks would include among others the protection of the integrity and sovereignty of smaller states.[49] Already before the peace conference, the Iranians attached to this rather vague vision of the League far-reaching hopes that they could achieve their goal of real independence through this organization by becoming an equal member of the global peace order.[50] These hopes were very similar to the expectations of other polities in similar circumstances.[51]

In the years after the Peace Conference and the failed Anglo-Iranian Treaty, Iranian politics experienced sweeping change with the withdrawal of British troops and the meteoric rise of Reza Khan (after 1925 Reza Shah), who succeeded in establishing a stable and potent central government, gradually breaking the power of regional potentates, and extending his rule to all of Iran after his coup d'état of 1921.[52] His

45 The term was introduced by Erez Manela: *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Manela's book does not mention Iran.

46 Li-Chiao Chen: "The Signing of the Sino-Iranian Treaty of 1920", in: *Iranian Studies* 52:5/6 (2019), 991–1008, here 995; Michael Axworthy: *Empire of Mind. A History of Iran* (New York: Penguin, 2008); 215; Grobien, "Imperial Nationalism", 294. Nunan, "Persian Visions", 197–199, emphasizes the similarly interested reception of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty's implications.

47 Abrahamadin, *Modern Iran*, 36–39; Axworthy, *Empire of Mind*, 192–197.

48 Abrahamadin, *Modern Iran*, 60; Richard, *Iran*, 139–140.

49 Bast, "Putting the Record Straight", 262; Richard, *Iran*, 144.

50 Besides the works mentioned in the previous footnote, see Axworthy, *Empire of Mind*, 215; Grobien, "Imperial Nationalism", 292, 305f.

51 See, for instance, Hell, *Siam and the League of Nations*, 38–39; Goto-Shibata, *East Asian Imperial Order*, 10; Chen, "Sino-Iranian Treaty", 996; Sánchez Román, "From the Tigris to the Amazon", 43–44.

52 Abrahamadin, *Modern Iran*, 65.

successes led to a dynamization of Iranian nationalism, which he took up and fueled, molding it into a cohesive element of Iranian society that formed the ideological base of his rule.[53] For this restrengthened nationalism, connecting to the Iranian imperial past, or rather a glorified version of it, was crucial. This entailed a belief in a historical mission to restore Iran's position as dominant regional power and the 'lost frontiers' of the old Iranian Empire. The Persian Gulf, in particular, came to the fore as a space to fulfill these ambitions. Its waters, however, were still firmly in the grip of the British Empire, which was now subject to fierce rhetorical attack by Iranian nationalist intellectuals and the press, who deemed the British presence in the region a historical injustice and illegitimate vis-à-vis the Iranian ambitions.[54]

This intensified the anti-British thrust of Iranian nationalism and heavily influenced the foreign policy of Reza Khan's government. With recourse to the hopes attached to the post-war peace order, the Iranians sought to use the international stage to stand up for their national independence.[55] Moreover, after the ousting of much of the British influence from Iran's territory (which never reached completion – for instance, much of the oil fields remained under British control), the government now aimed to eliminate expressions of British imperial dominance in a broader sense by replacing the British order in the Gulf with a political structure dominated by Iran.[56] The Iranian government subsequently claimed sovereignty over a number of islands in the Gulf, interfered with the British administration of travel, and sought to assume other administrative and policing tasks. This inevitably led Iran into conflict with the British Empire, for which the Gulf was of paramount strategic importance due to its location between Europe and the Raj, as well as because of the burgeoning oil production. For British officials, a withdrawal from the Gulf remained unthinkable.[57]

Against this backdrop, after the official founding of the League in 1920, the Saint Germain Convention quickly caught the Iranians' attention. While the Iranian delegate to the League had later signaled his acquiescence to the Convention, it was

53 Chelsi Mueller: "Nationalist representations of the Persian Gulf under Reza Shah Pahlavi", in: Meir Litvak (ed.): *Constructing Nationalism in Iran. From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 117–129, here 121; Richard, *Iran*, 139–140.

54 Chelsi Mueller: *The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict. Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 78–82; Mueller, "Nationalist Representations". For examples, see British Legation Tehran, Extracts from Persian Press, 23 September 1930, BL IOR/L/PS/10/1045, 302–310.

55 Mueller, *Arab-Iranian Conflict*, 130–131.

56 Chelsi Mueller: "Anglo-Iranian Treaty Negotiations: Reza Shah, Teymurtash and the British Government, 1927–32", in: *Iranian Studies* 49:4 (2016), 577–592, here 583; Axworthy, *Empire of Mind*, 215.

57 Mueller, "Persian Gulf".

never confirmed by the Iranian government or ratified by the Iranian parliament.[58] In 1923, Iran officially declared its opposition to the Convention. The Iranian delegate at the League, Prince Arfa ed-Dowleh, a career diplomat from old Qajar aristocracy who had represented his country for decades in various capitals, submitted a complaint to the president of the League's Council in which he emphasized Iran's commitment to arms control but stated "that Persia was never consulted and that she cannot recognise the validity of any document which disposes of her sovereign rights without her assent."[59] He deemed Iran's inclusion in the "Prohibited Areas", in particular, irreconcilable with the League's principles of sovereign equality, since it placed Iran under different regulations than the other members of the League and requested that Iran be excluded from the "Areas". His complaint was sympathetically received by the Council, which agreed with the rapporteur, Antonio Salandra, in commending the Iranian commitment to arms control and expressing hope that an amicable solution soon be found for this issue. Encouraged by this, the Iranian delegation resubmitted the complaint in similar words to the Secretary General in the following year.[60] The Iranian pursuit of a revision of Saint Germain was facilitated by other events. In late 1923, the League began to promote and prepare for another conference, not formally part of it but held under its auspices, which was expected to produce a new convention that would be ratifiable for the United States.[61]

For the Iranian government, this was good news. It posed an opportunity to replace Saint Germain with a convention more acceptable to the Iranians. This is why Arfa ed-Dowleh repeatedly emphasized in the preliminary talks that the new convention should not be modeled after the old one.[62] Conversely, the British officials feared the disadvantages of a new convention. They consequently advocated for transferring as much of the 1919 Convention as possible.[63] Given these contrary positions, when in early 1925 final preparations were made for the new conference, which was to take place in Geneva in the early summer, a showdown between British imperialism and Iranian nationalism was in the making. This conflict was, unlike

58 Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 224.

59 Letter from His Highness, the Prince Arfa-ed-Dowleh to the President of the Council of the League of Nations (Translation), 18 September 1923, BL IOR/L/PS/12/4094, 263r–264r.

60 League of Nations, Traffic in Arms and Ammunition, Request by the Persian Government. Report by Mr. Salandra, Adopted by the Council, 26 September 1923, BL IOR/L/PS/12/4094, 260r–262r; League of Nations. Letter From the Persian Delegate Concerning the Convention of St. Germain to the Secretary General, 4 February 1924, Ibid., 257r–258r.

61 Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 220.

62 Sub-Commission of the Temporary Mixed Commission for the Reduction of Armaments. Procés Verbal of the second meeting, 24 March 1924, League of Nations Archive (LNA) R 242, Dossier 39570.

63 Stahl, "Decolonization", 8. See also Memorandum for Lord Robert Cecil, 30 November 1923, TNA FO 371/8422.

the conflict over arms control in Latin America analyzed by Daniel Stahl, not about arms control itself.[64] Rather, the Iranian desire for strict control was as strong as that of the British. For Reza Khan's project of consolidating the rule of his central government, the disarmament of the semi-autonomous communities of Southern Iran that opposed it was of crucial importance.[65] Against this background, preventing the disarmed groups from restocking their arms and munitions by suppressing the small stream of arms trafficking across the Gulf was imperative.[66] The Anglo-Iranian conflict looming over the approaching conference in Geneva was thus about more fundamental issues than arms control itself.

Showdown in Geneva

When the second postwar arms-traffic conference started in May 1925, both the British and Iranian delegations lost no time in making their cases. The British brought along their own draft of a convention based on the Saint Germain Convention, which competed with the official draft of the League's Temporary Mixed Committee.[67] The Iranian delegates circulated a dossier with all their arguments against the Saint Germain Convention in general and against the inclusion of Iran and the Persian Gulf in the "Prohibited Areas" in particular, which, at the instigation of the British officials, had been euphemistically rebranded "Special Zones".[68] Iran was represented by General Habibullah Khan, a dedicated advocate of Iranian nationalism and protégé of Reza Khan, and Arfa ed-Dowleh.[69] The British delegation was headed by Lord Onslow, who was somewhat upstaged by Percy Cox, representing the colonial government of India. Cox had formerly served in various positions as a British official in the Middle East and had been, most notably,

64 Stahl, "Confronting US Imperialism".

65 Richard, *Iran*, 167–168; Abrahamadin, *Modern Iran*, 92.

66 Trott (Acting Military Attaché), Intelligence Summary No. 4 for the period ending 25 February 1933, 26 February 1933, in: Robert Burrell/ Robert Jarman (eds.): *Iran Political Diaries, Volume 9: 1927–1930* (Slough: Archive Editions, 1997), 380. See also Mueller, *Arab-Iranian Conflict*, 107, 120–121.

67 Minute by the Secretary of State respecting the Arms Traffic Conference, FO, 28 April 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 545r.

68 Verbatim Report of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Conference on the Control of the International Trade in Arms, munitions and Implements of War, 5 May 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675,472r–477r.

69 R. Clive: Notes on Leading Personalities in Persia for 1927, in: Robert Burrell/ Robert Jarman (eds.): *Iran Political Diaries, Volume 8: 1924–1926* (Slough: Archive Editions, 1997), 73–86; Michael Noel-Clarke: "Introduction", in: Prince Arfa ed-Dowleh: *Memories of a Bygone Age. Qajar Persia and Imperial Russia 1853–1902*, translated and edited by Michael Noel-Clarke (London: Gingko Library, 2016), XVII–XXII.

an outspoken supporter of a strong British presence in Iran. It was he who had been commissioned by Lord Curzon with negotiating the failed 1919 Anglo-Iranian agreement.[70]

Even before the conference had really begun, the Iranians had already achieved a first victory. In internal deliberations, British officials concerned with the matter had concluded that the insistence on the inclusion of Iran in the "Zones", although advisable and desirable for imperial security, would most likely not be viable in light of the Iranian protests to the League and the sympathy for these protests among other powers that London did not wish to alienate. They therefore decided to give up the demand that Iranian territory be included in the "Zones".[71] How correct this assessment was is revealed, for instance, by the instructions to the US delegation issued by the Secretary of State, which explicitly stated not to support another British attempt to include Iran in the "Zones".[72] While in 1919, nothing would have dissuaded the British negotiators from demanding the inclusion of Iranian territory in the "Areas", the relatively unresisting abandonment of this demand in 1925 hinted that something had changed. Through their protest notes and appeals to the League, Iranian diplomats took advantage of the 'publicness' provided by the League and put Britain under pressure in a way that had previously been unimaginable. On the downside, however, British officials tied their retreat to the demand that Iran would introduce strict arms-control legislation.[73] This did not bother the Iranians much, since arms-control laws in Iran had a long tradition, dating back to the late 19th century.[74] Yet, the new British demand introduced a conditionality to the acceptance of Iran's territorial sovereignty in this matter, thereby implying the continuance of uneven sovereignties, even on a formal level, within the League and casting a shadow of ambiguity over Iran's success.[75]

---

70 Sabahi, *British Policy*, 42–43, 66. If not explicitly stated otherwise, the use of "British delegation" includes both the delegation from Great Britain and from British India, who acted jointly most of the time. On the relationship of India and Britain in the League, see Joseph McQuade: "Beyond an Imperial Foreign Policy? India at the League of Nations, 1919–1946", in: *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48:2 (2020), 263–295.

71 Percy Loraine, H.M. Minister in Tehran, to Austen Chamberlain, 7 May 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 390r–391r; Memorandum of India's desiderata regarding Arms Traffic Convention, 19 February 1925, Ibid., 596r–601r.

72 The Secretary of State to the American Delegation, 16 April 1925, in: Foreign Relations of the United States 1925, Vol. 1, Document 31.

73 Minute for Secretary of State, 28 April 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 1096; Geneva Delegation to Hirzel, India Office, 11 May 1925, Ibid., 1096.

74 Reza Khan, President of the Council of Ministers, to Percy Loraine, H.M. Minister in Tehran, 30 April 1925, Ibid., 392r–393r.

75 Similar arguments are made with regard to Ethiopia in: Donaldson, "Making of States"; Rose Parfitt: *The Process of International Legal Reproduction. Inequality, Historiography, Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 62–63.

Despite the British concessions, two other points of contention emerged: First, whether the high seas (that is the waters outside the three-mile zone of territorial waters) of the Persian Gulf should be part of a "Special Maritime Zone" to which particularly strict regulations would apply. Second, whether Iranian maritime vessels under 500t should be classified as "Native Vessels" and therefore be subject to controls by navy ships of the other contracting powers along the lines provided by the Saint Germain Convention. While the British advocated an affirmative answer in both points, the Iranian delegates took an adversarial stance. These points might seem like merely technical issues of arms control, but they were the expression of fundamentally different and competing conceptions of sovereignty and international order. Ultimately, in the framework of the conference, which was shaped by the League system's "legalism, proceduralism and 'publicness'", nothing short of the future of imperialism in the Persian Gulf was negotiated. [76]

From the beginning, it was clear to all delegations that the question of including the Persian Gulf in the "Zones" would be one of the most difficult issues to solve. The chairman assigned the determination of the delimitation of the "Zones" to the Geographical Committee, which decided to wait for the opinion of the Technical, Military, Naval, and Air Committee on the matter.[77] Here, the Iranian delegates were able to achieve another unexpected success. Despite fierce protests by the British delegations, who denied the competence of the Technical Committee and pointed to the past usefulness of naval control for the maintenance of "law and order" (meaning the imperial peace), the Technical Committee criticized the concept of "Special Maritime Zones" in its entirety and recommended leaving Iranian ships out of the category of "Native Vessels".[78] This was a first warning to the British delegates that their imperial interests would not be asserted as easily as they were used to. Accordingly, when the Geographical Committee formed a Sub-Committee to discuss the "Special Maritime Zones" and the report of the Technical Committee, British delegates successfully threw their entire diplomatic weight behind the rejection of the

76 The essential confrontation of imperialism and the sovereignty of smaller states at the conference was first pointed out by David Stone. He also mentions the conflict of the Iranian and British delegations, though without providing a comprehensive analysis (see Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 224–226). Quoted is: Pedersen, "Empires, States, and the League", 116.

77 Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 225. The Committees and their composition were determined right at the start of the conference and voted on by all delegations. Final votes were made in the General Committee, which included delegates from all participating states. The creation of several committees to discuss specific areas befitted more powerful states with more diplomatic personnel, who were thus able to participate in all of them.

78 Report of the Naval Sub-Committee to the Military Naval and Air Technical Committee, 30 May 1925, LNA, Repertoire General, R 233, Dossier 32639, Doc. 44276.

report and the inclusion of the Gulf. After lengthy discussions, the Sub-Committee voted for an inclusion of the Gulf's waters in the "Zones". Despite a statement of protest added to the Sub-Committee's report by the Iranian delegates, on 3 June the entire Geographical Committee followed the Sub-Committee's line. The Iranians announced that they would raise the issue again in the General Committee.[79]

The issue of the Iranian vessels' classification was also discussed in the Geographical Committee. In the vote regarding this issue on the morning of 8 June, the Iranians were successful again. They rallied four other votes for a proposal that added stipulations to the Convention's draft providing that ships under the Iranian flag would be exempted from the "Native Vessels" clauses. For their part, the British and British-Indian delegations were joined only by the Italians in their rejection of this proposal. The Iranians were supported by Turkey and China, who shared the Iranian anti-imperial sentiment and frequently formed a voting bloc with Iran, indicating a form of politics of anti-imperial solidarity among some of the non-imperial, non-European League members.[80] More surprisingly, however, the Iranians were also joined by the Portuguese and Belgian delegates. This, as well as the great number of abstentions and the lack of support for the British was an unmistakable sign that many delegations might not have been ready to openly confront Britain but did not have much sympathy either. Neither Lord Onslow's loud protest that this decision would destroy the very core of the Convention (a further hint to what the Convention was really about), nor Cox's announcement that India would not accept a convention on these lines could change this situation.[81] The British delegates were forced to compromise. After informal talks with the Americans and French, they launched a proposal that extended the rights of control to all vessels under 500t, making the category of "Native Vessels" obsolete.[82] The Iranian delegates pointed out that this was still discriminatory toward Iranian ships since, of all contracting powers, only Iran would have significant numbers of ships below 500t in the Gulf. Nonetheless, without the category of "Native Vessels", they were more inclined to this compromise. Without new instructions from their government, however, they

79 Draft Report submitted to the Geographical Committee by the Sub-Committee on Special Maritime Zones, 3 June 1925, 5–6, LNA, Repertoire General, R 233, Dossier 32639, Doc. 44276; Report of the Geographical Committee on Chapters III and V of the Draft Convention, 9 June 1925, 4, LNA, Repertoire General, R 234, Dossier 32639, Doc. 44276; Percy Cox, Report on the Eighth Meeting of the Geographical Committee, 4 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 496.

80 Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 225. On the Sino-Iranian cooperation in the League, see Chen, "Sino-Iranian Treaty", 1002–1003.

81 Arms Traffic Conference, Meeting of the Geographical Committee on 8 June 1925, Report by Percy Cox, 8 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 253r–254r. See also: Zadeh, *La Politique de l'Iran*, 154–155.

82 Meeting of Indian and British Delegations, 8 June 1925, Report by Percy Cox, 8 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 256r.

were not ready to take a position and absented themselves from the final vote in which the British proposal was unanimously adopted.[83]

From this point on, events got out of hand for the Iranian delegates. Not only did none of their instructions state how to deal with the new British proposals or which compromise would be acceptable, they furthermore noticed that General Habibullah had received slightly different instructions from the Ministry of War than Arfa ed-Dowleh had received from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[84] Thus, the delegates contacted their superiors to request new instructions. In Tehran, however, the Prime Minister was absent, and the cabinet did not venture to provide new instructions without his confirmation. Hence, Arfa and Habibullah had little choice but to proceed on the lines of the demands of their original instructions without making too many concessions.[85] The first blow came in the meeting of the General Committee on 11 June in which Cox and Onslow formed a coalition of imperial powers and polities in relations of dependency to Britain[86] for the inclusion of the Persian Gulf in the "Special Maritime Zones" against Iran, Turkey, and China. It was again remarkable just how many delegations did not attend (21, among them the Americans "on principle") or abstained (eleven).[87] The potential sympathy for the Iranian position among these delegations was at this point not large enough to risk antagonizing Britain, one of the most powerful participants in the conference and crucial for its success.

A second setback was delivered by the committee tasked with drafting a final version of the Convention's text based on the votes of the other committees, and in which the Iranian delegation was not represented. The Drafting Committee could not agree on a final version of the stipulations for the "Special Maritime Zones", since some delegations, including the American, protested the British compromise that stipulated the control of all ships under 500t. The question was thus referred back to the Geographical Committee. The latter hastily formed a Sub-Committee to discuss the question – again not including the Iranian delegation – which, also on 11 June, concluded that only by abandoning the British compromise and reinstating the former provisions regarding "Native Vessels" could the reservations of the Drafting Committee be dispelled. The complete Geographical Committee, which was no-

83 Report of the Geographical Committee on Chapters III and V of the Draft Convention, 9.06.1925, 5–6, LNA, Repertoire General, R 234, Dossier 32639, Doc. 44276; Meeting of the Geographical Committee, 8 June – Afternoon, Report by Percy Cox, 9 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 257r–261r.

84 Sir P. Cox to Sir Arthur Hirtzel, India Office, London, 4 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 306r.

85 Percy Loraine: Annual Report on Persia for 1925, 25–26, Robert Burrell/ Robert Jarman (eds.): *Iran Political Diaries, Volume 7: 1924–1926* (Slough: Archive Editions, 1997), 355–440.

86 Britain, British-India, Irish Free State, Canada, Egypt, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and France.

87 International Arms Traffic Conference, Geneva, May–June 1925. Report by the Delegates for India, 30, BL IOR/R/15/1/748, 45r–61v.

ticeably tired of this controversial issue and anxious to bring its work to a conclusion, voted to proceed along the lines suggested by the Sub-Committee. The Iranians protested at this hurried and untransparent procedure but it fell on deaf ears.[88]

A final, rather symbolical confrontation between the two delegations took place at one of the last sessions of the General Committee on 15 June. Addressing the Iranian delegates' protests and demands to reverse the latest decisions, Cox delivered a remarkably emotive speech in which he explained, stressing his experience in the region, that the Gulf was a "hotbed" of arms trafficking, the strict regulation of which would be in the interest not only of the Indian but of all delegations. He supported these claims with exaggerated numbers[89] and finally attempted to convince the Iranians with the racist argument that individuals of "Arab blood", who were "natural" pirates and traffickers, were Iranian citizens too. This would render checks on vessels under the Iranian flag necessary.[90] In the style of the rhetoric of the 'White man's burden', Cox sought to frame arms control as part of a 'civilizing mission', giving an impression of the extent to which debates in the League system were imbued by concepts of racial hierarchization. Ignoring Cox's elaborations, in a resigned speech, Habibullah Khan stated that the Iranian delegation saw no possibility anymore to make the Convention's text acceptable to Iran and announced the Iranian delegation's withdrawal from the conference.[91] Lord Onslow started a final attempt to find a compromise by suggesting a new category of "Local Vessels" for Iranian ships and boats. Even before it could be considered by the Iranian delegation, this proposal was torpedoed by Percy Cox, who stated that he saw no reason to categorize Arabs and Iranians differently.[92]

After the Iranians' withdrawal, the General Committee approved the vote of the Geographical Committee and the text of the Convention was signed by the remaining delegates on 17 June. Both the British and the Iranian delegation held the other responsible for the failure to reach a compromise. In his final speech, General Habibullah Khan emphasized: "If they would be a little less unyielding,

88 Ibid.; "Persia to Protest Search of Ships", *The Evening Star*, 16 June 1925.

89 Cox supported his argument with the claim that 12,000 rifles were seized in the Persian Gulf in a period of just six months. This number seems very high for 1925 and is not supported by any other reports of the time, which provide significantly lower numbers of seized contraband arms (Biela, "Disarming the Periphery", 479–480). However, it is likely that Cox just took numbers from the years before the war, when these numbers had been higher.

90 Speech of Percy Cox, in: General Committee, Verbatim Report of the Twenty-Sixth Meeting, 15 June 1925, 4–7, LNA, Repertoire General, R 253, 43073, 43921.

91 Speech of Habibullah Kahn, in: General Committee, Ibid., 9–10.

92 Lord Onslow to FO, 15 June 1925, BL IOR/LP/S/10/675, 390r; International Arms Traffic Conference, Geneva, May–June 1925. Report by the Delegates for India, 31–32, BL IOR/R/15/1/748, 45r–61v.

a little less drastic, we would be delighted to collaborate."[93] In his final report to the Government of India and the India Office, Percy Cox declared the "ignorance, unintelligence, and obstinacy"[94] of the Iranian delegation responsible. After the conference, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs approached the British legation in Tehran and submitted a new proposal for a compromise, which was, owing to the anti-imperial tenor of Iranian public opinion, close to the original Iranian position. While the British legation was positive that a compromise could be reached, the proposal was rejected by Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, who initiated a counterproposal which was in turn entirely unacceptable to the Iranians.[95]

Contesting Imperialism

As already mentioned, the conflict between the British and the Iranian delegation was essentially a confrontation of two different concepts of sovereignty and international order. The allegation of a violation of sovereignty was at the center of the Iranian delegates' rhetoric during the conference. To counteract these accusations and to show that the Iranians were at fault, British negotiators repeatedly emphasized that the Convention would not infringe on any Iranian sovereign rights. After the Iranian protests prior the conference and bearing in mind the unpleasant international backlash against the Anglo-Iranian Treaty of 1919, which was deemed contrary to the principles of a new world order particularly in US-government circles and in the French press, giving assurances that none of Iran's formal rights guaranteed under the League's principles would be infringed upon appeared particularly important to the British.[96] In this matter, they could refer to an assessment of the conference's Legal Committee, which had confirmed that the "Zones" would not extend into the three-mile-zone of territorial waters and that all "Native Vessels" would be treated equally, regardless of whether they had hoisted the British or Iranian flag.[97] This moved Percy Cox to accuse the Iranians of a lack of understanding of international law.[98]

93 Speech of Habibullah Kahn, in: General Committee, Verbatim Report of the Twenty-Sixth Meeting, 15 June 1925, 9–10, here 10, LNA, Repertoire General, R 253, 43073, 43921.

94 International Arms Traffic Conference, Geneva, May–June 1925. Report by the Delegates for India, 29, BL IOR/R/15/1/748, 45r–61v.

95 Percy Loraine, H.M. Minister in Tehran, to Foreign Office, 31 July 1925, BL IOR/LP/S/10/675, 54r–55r; Villiers, Foreign Office, to Admiralty, 14 August 1925, Ibid., 56r–57r.

96 On the international backlash 1919, see Homa Katouzian: *Iranian History and Politics. The dialectic of State and Society* (London/New York: Routledge 2003), 167–176.

97 Sir P. Cox to Sir Arthur Hirtzel, India Office, London, 4 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 306r.

98 Meeting of the Geographical Committee, Report by Percy Cox, 3 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 243r.

This perspective ignored, however, that the Iranian position was based on a wholly different, less legalistic understanding of the concept of sovereignty. While the British operated with a narrow concept focused on the formal rights of a state over its own territory, the Iranians professed a more holistic understanding centered on equality. This understanding was already implied in the Iranian expectations as expressed on the founding of the League, which encompassed not only protection from future occupation but also equality within the state system, since lasting protection from imperial influence and thereby true sovereignty could only be achieved in a system based on equality.[99] Consequently, in his opening statement at the beginning of the conference, Arfa ed-Dowleh stated that Iran attached "supreme importance" to the general principle of the League that all members were to be treated with "absolutely impartial equality".[100] As he later explained, this meant that "The Persian Delegation cannot accept any provision likely to be derogatory to Persia's rights, or likely to prevent Persia from enjoying the same rights of navigation as those enjoyed by the Great Powers in their own waters."[101]

The Iranian delegation pointed out that the inclusion of the Gulf in the maritime "Special Zones" rendered Iran the only contracting power besides Egypt, which was still under heavy British influence, to directly border such a "Zone", which thereby turned all its maritime vessels under 500t into "Native Vessels". From the Iranian perspective, this special position constituted a continuation of de facto Iranian inequality vis-à-vis other states. Moreover, it would give British gunships the right to interfere with Iranian trade by stopping Iranian merchant vessels. For its part, Iran would have no reciprocal possibility of exercising these rights due to the lack of any ships under 500t flying a British flag in the Gulf. The Iranians argued that while the British would never accept ships from another power stopping and controlling their own vessels in the English Channel, they were, at the same time, unrelenting in claiming this right in the Gulf. Thus, the "Native Vessel" classification meant not only an unequal status for Iranian ships and boats, but it furthermore gave other powers rights and possibilities unattainable for Iran. For the Iranian delegates, this structural inequality amounted to nothing less than the violation of the principle of sovereign equality.[102]

---

99 See the second section. See also: Zadeh, *La Politique de l'Iran*, 156–159.

100 Verbatim Report of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Conference on the Control of the International Trade in Arms, Munitions and Implements of War, 8 May 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 472r–477r.

101 Draft Report submitted to the Geographical Committee by the Sub-Committee on Special Maritime Zones, 3 June 1925, 5–6, LNA, Repertoire General, R 233, Dossier 32639, Doc. 44276.

102 During the conference, the Iranian delegates explained their position multiple times. See among others: Statement of the Persian Delegates, in: Report of the Geographical Committee on Chapters III and V of the Draft Convention, 9 June 1925, 4, LNA, Repertoire General, R 234, Dossier 32639, Doc. 44276; Verbatim Report of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Con-

There were further reasons for Iranian opposition to the British position and to the final text of the Convention. Against the backdrop of previous occupation, the Iranian government assigned a high value to Iran's defense capability, making the unhampered import of arms a sensitive topic. This fueled the anxiety that the Convention would give Britain the opportunity to potentially interfere with these imports.[103] Moreover, the Iranians deemed the Convention a privileging and validation of the British position as the regulatory power in the Gulf, since it confirmed and sanctioned the British practices of control. This was not compatible with Iranian nationalism's aspiration to an Iranian sphere of influence in the Gulf.[104] This aspiration was the reason for Iranians repeatedly referring to large areas of the Gulf's waters as "territorial waters" of Iran, which was refuted by Percy Cox with legal arguments.[105] This Iranian terminology was, however, the expression of the idea that the Gulf was part of a historically established and legitimate Iranian sphere. One of the consequences of this idea was the Iranian drive to take over the policing and administrative tasks carried out by the British in the Gulf, for instance quarantine administration, lighting and buoying, or the suppression of trafficking and the control of the trade in arms.[106] Ultimately, these aspirations meant the replacement of large parts of the imperial order in the Gulf by regional, Iran-dominated security and administrative structures. The Iranian attempt to alter the Arms Traffic Convention was therefore not only an attempt to counter structural inequalities in the international system and to make a stand for the Iranian concept of sovereignty, but also a concrete tactic to limit and push back the British spaces of action in the Gulf in favor of their own vision of regional order. Percy Cox reacted to this with the patronizing comment that the Iranian position was merely based on "sentiment, and, gentlemen, we cannot frame an Arms Traffic Convention on a basis of sentiment."[107]

---

ference on the Control […], 8 May 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 472r–477r. Arfa's statements on the Iranian withdrawal toward the press are reported in: "Persia to Protest Search of Ships", *The Evening Star*, 16 June 1925. Summaries of the Iranian position are provided in: Telegram of Prince Arfa, attached to: Williams to Indian Office, 14 August 1925, in: Anita Burdett/Angela Seay (eds.): *Iran in the Persian Gulf, Volume 3: 1919–1932* (Slough: Archive Editions, 2000), 176; Persian Government: "Convention for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunitions and in Implements of War. Memorandum", in: *League of Nations – Official Journal* 12:8 (1931), 1583–1585. See also: Zadeh, *La Politique de l'Iran*, 156; Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty", 224–226.

103 Loraine to Foreign Office, 12 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 410. On the importance of arms imports for Iran, see Zadeh, *La Politique de l'Iran*, 144–145.

104 Mueller, "Anglo-Iranian Treaty Negotiations", 588. See also the second section.

105 Meeting of the Geographical Committee (Sub-Committee), 3rd June, Afternoon, Report by Percy Cox, 3 June 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/10/675, 243r.

106 Mueller, *Arab-Iranian Conflict*, 63–64, 107.

107 Speech of Percy Cox, in: General Committee, Verbatim Report of the Twenty-Sixth Meeting, 15 June 1925, 4–7, LNA, Repertoire General, R 253, 43073, 43921.

On a deeper level, his notion of only applying this to the Iranian vision of dominance in a new regional order but somehow not to the British imperial claim to power reveals not only how irrevocably his mindset was shaped by imperialist ideas of 'civilizational hierarchies' but also a certain degree of helplessness in how he dealt with Iranian aspirations in the context of a changing international system.

All of this leads straight to the ambivalent tensions at the heart of the League system, which was shaped by the synchronicity of the persistence of imperial order and its ideological foundations based on an alleged 'civilizational hierarchy,' on the one side, and new spaces for contesting this order, on the other.[108] Marcus Payk argues, with regard to the Paris Peace Conference, that its foundation on legality made an international order of formally sovereign and equal states necessary.[109] Others argue that the formal and legalistic admission criteria of the League heralded a departure within the international system from an exclusive club of self-proclaimed 'civilized' states toward an international order more inclusive of all polities, as long as they were organized as states.[110] Undoubtedly, the League meant an expansion of participation in the 'international community' of non-North Atlantic polities, if accepted as members. Thomas Grant asserts that "it was a momentous step to affirm sovereign equality in a general political organ of the international community."[111] The fundamentally different position of Iran and its increased scope of action at the 1925 arms-traffic conference when compared with the conference of 1919 underscores this. Yet, it is only half of the story. The world was still structured by empires, and even the League was knitted from imperialist threads. The conditionality of the repeal of Britain's demand to include Iran in the "Zones", the kind of rhetoric employed by Percy Cox, and, most importantly, the structural inequality that imperial actors sought to enshrine in the Arms Traffic Convention bore witness to this. This British effort to maintain a more subtle structural inequality in the Convention despite formally accepting Iranian sovereignty, a 'sovereignty safe for empire',[112] was an attempt to was an attempt to navigate the changing system, preserve a hierarchical structure within the 'society of states' during the moment in which the League system made the complete exclusion of states like Iran based on an alleged failure to meet the 'standard of civilization' impossible. The refusal to relent to this British strategy and insistence on ending all kinds of structural inequality was what made Iranian politics at the conference decidedly anti-imperial. The Iranian strategy at the

108 This ambivalence is emphasized, too, by McQuade, "India at the League", 288; Donaldson, "Making of States", 18; Nunan, "Persian Visions", 204–205.

109 Marcus Payk: *Frieden durch Recht? Der Aufstieg des modernen Völkerrechts und der Friedensschluss nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 610.

110 Donaldson, "Making of States"; Becker Lorca, *Mestizo International Law*, 263.

111 Grant, "The League of Nations", 72.

112 Pedersen calls the independence of Iraq in 1932 "independence safe for empire" (Pedersen, *Guardians*, 261).

conference not only threatened British dominance in the Gulf, but it also challenged the foundations of imperial visions of order.

At the arms-traffic conference of 1925, the Iranian anti-imperial agenda met a procedural framework that provided new institutionalized possibilities of participation in international norm-setting and thereby opened spaces to pursue this anti-imperial agenda. We have seen how the Iranians used these spaces to achieve an arms-traffic convention that would enshrine equality and further Iranian goals in the Persian Gulf. One could, however, argue that this agenda, these spaces, and the Iranian strategy ultimately remained irrelevant, since it was the British delegates who carried the day and achieved a convention that met their goals. This line of thought, however, would be somewhat short-sighted. The British victory was pyrrhic at best since its rules would not apply to Iranian vessels as Iran was not a signatory party to the Convention. What is more, if recounting the course of the conference has shown anything, then that is how uncertain its outcome was. The ability of the British to assert their agenda was far from granted, and during some parts of the negotiations, a compromise seemed much more likely. There was often no significant support for the British position at all. In the end, a series of unfortunate circumstances thwarted the Iranian prospects of achieving their goals. But the fact that parts of an anti-imperial agenda came close to significantly influencing the results of an international norm-setting exercise illustrates how the League system heightened the fragility of imperial self-empowerment.

This impression is affirmed by viewing the conference at the level of discourse as well as by evaluating the conference's reception. Percy Cox's rhetoric framed the issue of arms control in the Gulf as necessary to bring peace and order to the "backward" people of the Gulf. This fit into his personal history, as he was, as Pryia Satia noted, among those British officials that created a new conception of the 'Middle East' as a space prone to violence during the World War, which allowed the British to rationalize and legitimize their expansion of power in the region.[113] Cox wanted to discuss the issue within an ideologically imperialist framework of thought, according to which arms control was – like the imperial order itself – for the greater good and benefit of everyone. In doing so, he took up the rhetoric that empires have always employed to justify the suppression of the arms trade.[114]

The Iranians, however, shifted the discussion from this imperialist discourse toward questions of sovereignty and the limits of imperial power. Thanks to the publicness embedded in the League system, the Iranian cause and the reasons for their withdrawal reached audiences around the globe and all over the North Atlantic

113 Priya Satia: *Spies in Arabia. The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27–28, 37–40.

114 See, for instance, Brahm, "Brussels Act", 444.

through reports in the press.[115] Both *Reuters* and *Associated Press* reported on the conference and issued reports on the Iranian point of view, which thus found its way even into regional newspapers.[116] While the British press extensively recounted the arguments of Onslow and Cox, many Swiss and US-American newspapers gave more room to the Iranian position. Leftist papers such as the German social-democratic *Vorwärts* explicitly connected the Iranian withdrawal from the conference to the British insistence on imperialist structures.[117] A Soviet official even published an article in the US *Daily Worker*, in which he equated the 1925 convention with the 1919 convention and denounced both as mere instruments of imperialism.[118] In Germany, the national-liberal local paper *Karlsruher Tageblatt* reported on the arms-traffic conference that Iran felt its "sovereignty grossly flouted" and commented:

> Formally, all members of the League of Nations are among themselves equal and sovereign states. It is already known that this equality is not true in material terms […] yet one did believe it would be possible to suppose that the formal juridical equality would be retained. Now, this is not true.[119]

Surprisingly, even the *Correspondencia Militar*, a newspaper close to the Spanish Military, expressed a similar opinion:

> In seeking to establish these zones, there was great struggle between England and Persia and Egypt, it was consoling for equality-loving countries such as Spain to see the mighty Albion and some of its feudal countries on an equal level, a

115 For examples, see "The Arms Conference", *The Irish Times*, 16 June 1925, 8; "Persia to Protest Search of Ships. Blames Britain for Arms Traffic Agreement Imposing Supervision on Vessels", *The Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), 16 June 1925; "Arms Traffic at Geneva", *New York Times*, 17 June 1925; "Scene at Arms Conference. Persia and Control of the Gulf. General Walks Out", *Daily Herald*, 16 June 1925, 8; "Arms Traffic Conference: Persian Delegate Withdraws", *The Times*, 16 June 1925, 15; "Völkerbund: Konferenz für die Kontrolle des Waffenhandels", *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 16 June 1925; "Die Waffenhandelskonferenz: Persien verläßt die Konferenz", *Der Bund* (Berne), 16 June 1925.

116 For a *Reuters* report, see: "Arms Conference. Dispute over Persian Gulf Regulations", *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 12 June 1925, 7.

117 "Gegen den Giftkrieg. Der Genfer Verbotsentwurf", *Vorwärts*, 17 June 1925, 1. See also: "Persia's Discontent against British Imperialism Increased by League's Arms Recision", *The Daily Worker*, 30 June 1925, 4.

118 "The Geneva Conference on the Question of Commerce in Arms", *The Daily Worker, Special Magazine Supplement*, 5 September 1925, 1.

119 "Die Hilfesuchenden", *Karlsruher Tageblatt*, 21 September 1925, 1. Translation by the author; German Original: "Souveränität gröblich mißachtet" and "Formell sind alle Völkerbundsmitglieder unter sich gleichberechtigte souveräne Staaten. Man wußte ja, daß diese Gleichberechtigung in materieller Hinsicht nicht zutraf […] aber man hatte doch geglaubt, annehmen zu dürfen, die formell juristische Gleichberechtigung werde gewahrt. Das trifft nun nicht zu."

> disconcerting spectacle for diplomats who in the course of their careers had not breathed the atmosphere of the League of Nations.[120]

Hence, the Iranians were successful in influencing the international talks on arms control in the Gulf. Instead of discussing the Gulf as an 'uncivilized' space in dire need of the 'humanitarian' act of arms control, international publics now rather considered it in terms of whether the Iranian claims of violated sovereignty were legitimate. Susan Pedersen has argued of the Mandate system that its internationalization of imperial rule created talk about how this rule should be and thereby facilitated thoughts about alternative futures.[121] This case study shows a similar phenomenon. The internationalization of arms control in the Gulf under the principles of the League system allowed Iran to generate publicity for its cause, inscribing it into a discourse on the limits of imperialism and the meaning of sovereignty. The conversation was shifted from the alleged benefits of empire to its legitimacy. What is more, by asserting another vision of regional order, the Iranians introduced a non-imperial conception of the future of the Gulf to the international stage, where the notion of the Gulf as 'British Lake' had before largely remained unquestioned.[122]

While the Iranian anti-imperial agenda at the Geneva Conference undoubtedly posed a challenge to the foundations of the imperial order as such, it remained rooted in particularistic Iranian regional interests. Thus, it can hardly be seen as driven by the goal of bringing down imperialism and its ideological foundations entirely. The Iranian insistence on full sovereign equality among the members of the League did challenge European conceptions of 'civilizational hierarchies' but did not reject it. Like many other non-European members of the League, the Iranians did not oppose the idea of 'civilized' and 'non-civilized' peoples, they just drew the line between them differently than most of their European counterparts.[123] One of the reasons why the Iranians perceived the Convention as humiliating was because it placed them on the 'non-civilized' side. Arfa ed-Dowleh rejected the inclusion of Iranian vessels in the "Native Vessel" category because in this category they would

120 "Charlas Internacionales : La Conferencia del tráfico de armas y municiones", *La Correspondencia Militar*, 8 September 1925, 1. Translation by the author ; Spanish Original : "Al procurar establecer esas zonas hubo gran lucha de Inglaterra con Persia y Egipto, siendo consolador para los países amantes de la igualdad, como España, ver en un plan de igualdad la poderosa Albión y algunos países feudalarios suyos, espectáculos desconcertantes para los diplomáticos que en el curso de su carrera no habían respirado el ambiente de la Sociedad de las Naciones."

121 Pedersen, *Guardians*, 4.

122 On this notion: Mueller, "Nationalist Representations", 124.

123 Grobien, "Imperial Nationalism", 299–301. On other League members: Stahl, "Confronting US Imperialism", 499; Hell, *Siam and the League*, 200–212; Sánchez Román, "From the Tigris to the Amazon", 52–53.

be put on the same level as "crafts belonging to a colonial or mandated people."[124] Thus, in this case, contesting universal visions of imperial order was the result of particularistic interests. There are, however, other instances suggesting that Iranian diplomates were influenced by a broader conception of anti-imperialism. Arfa ed-Dowleh, for example, also undertook efforts to ensure that subaltern groups who sought to be heard by the League, but were rejected by the Secretariat and other delegations, would get a chance to present their cause.[125] The Iran-Turkey-China voting block at the conference as well as the security pact between Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan, which was established in the context of the League in the late 1930s, signaled forms of non-imperial cooperation within the League system.[126]

Helpless Imperialists

The British did not gain much from their success in pushing through their version of an arms traffic convention. Like its predecessor, the Geneva Convention did not obtain enough ratifications to come into force. What is more, the publicity created by Iranian diplomacy had lasting effects by placing significant and sustained pressure on British officials which limited their actions in any future negotiations. Under the eyes of an observant public, it was no longer possible to simply ignore Iranian interests. This situation placed the British officials in a rather difficult spot, since they were by no means ready to give up their practice of control in the Gulf, which became ever more important with every newly discovered oil field. In 1929–30, the relevant departments therefore decided to continue this practice, since it was deemed crucial for the suppression of arms trafficking in the Gulf and thus for imperial security.[127] Yet Iranian diplomacy had, at the same time, infused a growing sense of fragility in the British. Whereas, before the war, no British official convinced by the self-proclaimed 'civilizing mission' would have spared a single thought on this matter, now the British sense that the controls in the Gulf were justified was weighed against their actual legal framework. The results were sobering. John Gilbert Laith-

124 Telegram of Prince Arfa, attached to: Williams to IO, 14 August 1925, in: Burdett/Seay, *Iran in the Persian Gulf*, 176.

125 Becker Lorca, *Mestizo International Law*, 261, 284–285.

126 On the security pact, see Amit Bein: *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East. International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 82–88.

127 Instructions regarding Slave and Arms Trade in the Persian Gulf, 1930, BL IOR/L/PS/12/4094, 16r–21v; Draft Record of an interdepartmental meeting to consider the instructions regarding the search by His Majesty's ships of Arabian, Persian and Iraqi vessels for slaves and arms, 24 April 1930, ibid., 127r–145r.

waite of the India Office's Legal Department concluded: "Our legal basis is extremely sketchy." [128]

This created an uncomfortable situation for the British officials when a new arms-traffic conference, this time in the context of a general Disarmament Conference, was prepared for 1932/33, which would inevitably bring the issue again on the international agenda. At this moment, the British policy on arms control in the Gulf imploded. For the first time, the Foreign Office now suggested to consider models other than a "Special Maritime Zone", arguing that it would be impossible to achieve Iranian accession to a convention that included the "Zones".[129] For the Admiralty, such a strategy was unthinkable. Its representatives reasoned:

> If these clauses [regarding the "Special Zones"] were now to be definitely rejected at Geneva, My Lords think it probable that the Navy would find that its powers of supervision in these waters [the Persian Gulf] in peace time would rapidly disappear. […] Their formal cancellation, which will no doubt be well advertised by Persia, would be such a complete break with the past that our rights, based mainly on custom, would almost certainly be challenged.[130]

These differing positions caused an insurmountable deadlock in the British government, leaving it somewhat helpless with the new arms-traffic conference approaching. Edward Hallett Carr, head of the British delegation at the conference, became increasingly unnerved about this deadlock and commented: "If we are satisfied (as I gather we are) with the practical, though illegal, status quo, surely our best course is to "sit tight" and say as little as possible since any controversy one way or the other must tend ipso facto to disturb it."[131] This non-strategy was the only one left to a British Empire cornered by Iranian diplomacy and clinging to an illegal practice. No other statement summarizes so precisely the ambivalence between continuing imperial self-empowerment in the Gulf, on the one side, and the fragility inflicted by the Iranians, on the other.

Yet once again, the circumstances came to the aid of the British officials. Before the issue of the Persian Gulf could be negotiated, the conference foundered on other problems.[132] During the eventually aborted conference, the Iranian government had

---

128 Memorandum by John Gilbert Laithwaite, 9 December 1932, BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 439r–441r. See also Phillips, Admiralty, to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 11 January 1933, ibid., 349r–360r.

129 Notes of a Meeting Held at the Foreign Office on 20 January 1933, to Consider the Arms Traffic Convention of 1925, BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 287r–296r; Foreign Office to Carr, 2 March 1933, ibid., 237r–238r.

130 Phillips for the Lords of the Admiralty an Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 11 January 1933, ibid., 349r–360r.

131 Carr to Warner (FO), 5 December 1932, ibid., 369r–370r.

132 Webster, "From Versailles to Geneva", 242–243.

offered to negotiate a bilateral agreement on arms control with the British. After the failure of the conference, the Iranians kept pressing for such negotiations.[133] While the British officials would have rather continued to 'sit tight', the Iranian diplomacy had ensured that no reaction was not an option. The British Legate in Iran warned that the parallel conflict between Iran and Britain over oil concessions for the *Anglo-Persian Oil Company* had created a "bad atmosphere in Geneva" and that "a refusal to act with the Persians over an issue to which they attach the utmost importance from the angle of national status could easily be represented as a clear and deliberate attempt to bully."[134] The Foreign Office's George Rendel complained that "certain League circles, which were always inclined to be prejudiced in favour of the smaller power" would always accuse Britain of "adopting an obstructive and bullying attitude" toward Iran and thus narrow the British scope of action.[135] Yet, reacting to the Iranian proposals was not easy for a British administration that had, by this time, sunk into complete discord over the issue.[136] The helplessness in dealing with the Iranians that this produced left only one path open for the British officials. From an increasingly weak position, the British officials adopted an obstructive attitude, which was successful, again, only because of aiding circumstances.[137] Amidst the turbulence and lack of continuity of personnel in Iranian foreign policy following the political downfall and death of its central figure, Teymourtash, the arms-traffic issue faded into the background and did not reemerge until the British occupation during the Second World War.

Conclusion

In his book *No Enchanted Palace,* Mark Mazower insinuates that the imperial powers fell victim to their own strategy of internationalization, since the League of Nations,

133 Rendel, Foreign Office, to Hoare, H.M. Minister in Tehran, 26 April 1933, BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 185r–192r.

134 Hoare, H.M. Minister in Tehran, to Rendel, FO, 8 April 1933, Ibid., 182r–184r. On the *Anglo-Persian* affair, see Peter Beck: "The Anglo-Persian Oil Dispute 1932–33", in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 9:4 (1974), 123–151.

135 George Rendel in: Record of a Meeting held to consider proposals put forward by the Persian Minister at Berne for a Solution of the Problem of Arms Traffic Control in the Persian Gulf, 27 April 1933, BL IOR/L/PS/12/2182, 127r–145r.

136 Record of a Meeting held to consider proposals put forward by the Persian Minister at Berne for a Solution of the Problem of Arms Traffic Control in the Persian Gulf, 27 April 1933, Ibid., 127r–145r; Persia and Arms Traffic Convention. Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty Bolton Eyres-Monsell, 26 May 1933, TNA CAB 24/241/23; Persia and Arms Traffic Convention. Memorandum by Foreign Secretary John Simon, 23 May 1933, TNA CAB 24/241/16.

137 Rendel, Foreign Office, to Under-Secretary of State, India Office, 20 July 1934, BL IOR/L/PS/12/2193, 34r–38r.

conceived as a support for imperialism, was transformed into the United Nations, which offered a unique arena for the contestation of an imperial world order during the process of decolonization.[138] Pedersen suggests a similar thesis, which instead already attributes the unintended creation of space for the contestation of imperialism to the League itself.[139] This chapter has presented a case study that underscores this argument. It has shown how Great Britain sought to internationalize the issue of arms control in the Gulf to ensure inter-imperial cooperation on this matter and obtain sanction for their already established control practices under international law. These largely successful efforts brought about the Saint Germain Convention of 1919, through which Britain, among other things, aimed to safeguard the use of arms control as instrument for maintaining the imperial order in the Gulf. In contrast, the Iranian Government under Reza Khan was interested in restricting the British ability to carry out controls, which were perceived as the epitome of the continued British imperial presence in the Gulf, itself now being increasingly conceived of as an Iranian sphere of influence. Meanwhile, the Iranian government had developed hopes that the newly established League would help Iran to secure full sovereignty in the sense of ending all inequalities vis-à-vis the imperial powers. Hence, Iranian diplomats took advantage of the internationalization of the issue and attempted to use the "legalism, proceduralism and 'publicness'" of the largely British-constructed League system, which formed the framework of the arms-traffic conference of 1925 and its run-up, to press for a convention that would limit the British scope for action with regard to naval controls in the Gulf, would include no structural inequalities for Iran, and would therefore respect the Iranian vision of true sovereign equality in every regard.

Despite the ultimate British success at the 1925 Geneva Conference, the Iranian strategy yielded profound consequences that resulted in a picture substantially different from the situation in 1919. First, Iran secured the exclusion of its territory from the "Special Zones". At the Geneva Conference, the outcome of events remained open-ended for a long time, and the British did not enjoy overwhelming dominance during the negotiations. The Iranian appeals and protests created international publicity for the issue, which shifted the related discourse from the alleged necessities of a 'civilizing mission' to the question of the limits of imperialism and the meaning of sovereignty. The publicity created by the League system had altered the rules of the game by creating new spaces for Iran to claim and defend the formal territorial sovereignty guaranteed by the League's principles. In the end, moreover, all of this caused significant discord within the British administration, which simultaneously felt pressured by a world public sensitized for the issue and the perceived need for strict-but-illegal arms controls for the sake of imperial security. When the question

138 Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, 29.

139 Pedersen, "Empires, States, and the League", 116; Pedersen, *Guardians*, 13.

of a convention was raised again and the Iranians subsequently pressed for a bilateral agreement, the Empire could agree on nothing more than to sit the issue out, adopt a somewhat obstructive attitude, and hope for the best.

This case study has presented a further instance of how the character of the League system amplified imperial contestation. While the inherently anti-imperial pursuit of an Iranian sphere of influence in the Gulf was a crucial part of Iranian nationalism, the Iranian state lacked the economic or military means to thwart British imperialism on site in the Gulf. At Geneva, however, the Iranians were able to use the multilateral framework of the conference to challenge the British vision of an arms-traffic convention Arms Trade Convention, which would have safeguarded the British powerbase in the Gulf and reified the political inequality between the British Empire and Iran. That Iranian diplomats were able to challenge a major imperialist power in this way stands in remarkable contrast to the pre-war world and even to 1919. While Britain could still rely on the imperialist foundations of the international system, imperial solidarity, and its diplomatic weight, the consequences of the internationalization of arms control in the Gulf and the lack of support for the British position vividly demonstrated that the League had created a framework in which the will of the imperial power would at least not automatically surpass the interests of the smaller power every time. Hence, this chapter argues that we indeed, in Susan Pedersen's words "miss much if we treat the League only as imperialism's handmaiden."[140] Under the procedural framework of the League system, the internationalization of policy issues entailed a dynamic that created points of leverage for actors such as Iran to promote anti-imperialist agendas and thus unsettle the imperial practice of self-assertion and self-empowerment. Only by shifting focus to consider these dynamics, actors, and agendas, can we reach a comprehensive understanding of the League system's lasting significance.

140 Pedersen: "Empires, States and the League", 116.