Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era

Rosemary Hollis
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Contents

About the author ix
Preface and acknowledgments x
Map of the Middle East xiii

Introduction 1

1 Historical background: stages in the relationship 5
   British imperial priorities and the Middle East in the heyday of empire: 1860–1914 7
   Expansion of Britain’s interests in the Middle East 8
   Britain’s grand designs for the Middle East: 1914–47 10
       Imperial machinations 12
       The lines on the map 14
   Imperial retreat: 1947–71 16
       Struggling to adjust 20
   Britain adjusts as America assumes the lead: 1971–97 21
       Britain resurfaces 21
       From war to ‘containment’ in the Gulf 24
       The scene is set 28

2 New Labour worldview and the Middle East 30
   Britain’s place in the post–Cold War world 30
       Embracing globalization 32
       The ‘special relationship’ 33
       Bridging the Atlantic 36
   New Labour: new vision 37
       The first Strategic Defence Review 39
       Initial thinking on the Middle East 40
       The reform agenda 40
Contents

Changing gear after 9/11 42
Taking the fight to the Middle East 44
Strategy revisited 45
Security and the reform agenda 47
A selective reading of history 49

3 New Labour: new policy-making process 50
‘Rebranding’ Britain 50
New Labour leadership 51
‘Values and interests merge’ 53
The policy-making process 55
A presidential and informal No. 10 56
Diplomacy and policy implementation 59
End of an era 63
Civil society 64
The policy agenda and the media 65
Accountability and the public 66
The role of NGOs 68

4 Britain’s role in the peace process: 1997–2001 70
Keeping the process on track: 1997–99 71
Finding a niche 72
Portents of ‘the war on terror’ 75
The death of King Hussein 76
Promises to the Palestinians 77
Betting on Barak: 1999–2000 78
Surprises on the Syria–Lebanon front 81
Collapse of the Palestinian track 82
Losing control 84

5 The road to war in Iraq 86
Containment: running out of steam 87
New Labour’s initial stance 87
Sliding towards war 91
Alliance politics and 9/11 92
Shifting the policy logic 95
Preparing the ground 99
The justification 102
The Point of Departure 106
6 Reaping the whirlwind: the fallout from the invasion of Iraq for British relations across the Middle East

I: Inside Iraq
The Iraq war
Occupation
Democracy, populism, sectarianism and terrorism
Britain’s predicament
The Iran connection
Counting the costs

II: Around the region
Britain and Iran: from rapprochement to animosity
Rapprochement
Deterioration
British relations with Syria and Libya
Syria
Libya
Countering terrorism: British relations with Jordan and Egypt
Jordan
Egypt

7 Realpolitik and the peace process after 9/11
Counter-terrorism and Palestinian statehood
Blair’s diplomatic buffeting in the region
Counter-terrorism and the road to Baghdad
Battle for the peace process
New twist: Bush’s vision and the road map
The palliative of Palestinian ‘reform’
Outmanoeuvred on the road map
Launch of the road map
Blair loses credibility
Illusions of progress
Reality overtakes idealism
Hamas comes to power
From conflict to war
A turning point for Blair
The repercussions
Blair the peace envoy

8 Still flying the flag: Britain and the Arab Gulf states
Shared history
The ‘Trucial System’
Contents

Exclusive relationships 162
Letting go 164
Transition and opportunity 165
An enduring defence cooperation 167
Al Yamamah – the centrepiece 167
Maintaining relationships 169
9/11, Iraq and al-Qaeda 172
Regrouping in Saudi Arabia 172
Testing times for BAE Systems 174
Fortunes restored 175
Constancy rewarded 177

9 Conclusions 179
New Labour’s policy approach 179
9/11 was a turning point 181
Related implications 181

Notes 185
Index 211
About the author

Dr Rosemary Hollis is Director of the Olive Tree Scholarship Programme and Visiting Professor at City University London. Her research focuses on international political and security issues in the Middle East, particularly European, EU, UK and US relations with the region and the international dimensions of regional conflicts, and she has published and broadcast widely on these topics.

Dr Hollis was previously Director of Research at Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs) after ten years as Head of the Middle East Programme there. She has also held positions at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies and George Washington University in Washington, DC.
Preface and acknowledgments

This book was originally inspired by Khair el-din Haseeb, the Director General of the Centre for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS) in Beirut. Thanks to his vision and determination, since its foundation in the 1970s the CAUS has grown into a major sponsor, publisher and promoter of scholarly works on Arab affairs. The challenge he set me was to write an account of how the British make their policies towards the Arab world in the contemporary era.

Since my initial discussions with Dr Haseeb in the mid-1990s, the goals and hence the substance and focus of the work I have undertaken have evolved. Even so, the finished product is still broadly in line with the study he originally commissioned as part of a series published by the CAUS on the major international powers and the Arab world. Accordingly, with some adjustments, this book is to be published in Arabic by the CAUS, in association with Chatham House, in 2010. I should like to take this opportunity to thank Dr Haseeb and the CAUS for granting me the funds to begin work on the book when I was Head of the Middle East Programme at Chatham House.

I originally saw the project as an opportunity to build on the research I had done for my doctoral thesis about Britain’s adaptation to imperial decline, as played out in the Arab Gulf states between 1965 and 1985. As the work developed I realized that this was also my opportunity to achieve a goal originally proposed to me by Professor Bernard Reich, my PhD supervisor at George Washington University in Washington, DC in the 1980s. He urged me to write the sequel to a seminal work by another British woman, Elizabeth Monroe, entitled Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 1914–71, published in 1981. An earlier version of this work had been published in 1963 – and in both cases the author was fortunate, as I have been, to have the assistance of the library staff at Chatham House. In my case I should like to thank Susan Franks in particular for her incredible capacity to track down key sources and check the accuracy of references.
This book thus represents the fulfilment of two long-harboured personal ambitions. Some of the specific findings of my PhD thesis are presented here (notably in Chapter 8), but the whole is the synthesis of evidence, insights and observations accumulated over more than two decades – from the vantage points of Washington, London and countries across the Middle East.

Specifically for the book, in 1996 I began a series of tailored interviews of British officials and businessmen dealing with the Middle East. However, as soon as New Labour swept to power in 1997 I realized that a new era had dawned in the British government’s understanding of Britain’s place in the world – which had implications for the British policy-making process and policies in the Middle East. This realization shaped the substance of my research in the late 1990s.

The shock of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 (9/11) then transformed the global landscape. For the next three years I gathered material as events unfolded. As Head of the Middle East Programme and then Director of Research at Chatham House during this period, I was also a participant in the national, policy and media debates about the implications of 9/11 and the ensuing Iraq crisis.

Living through this momentous period prompted me to rethink the thrust of the work I had embarked upon. From an explication of British policy-making towards the Arab world, it became an examination of Britain’s response to 9/11 and the government’s decision to join the US invasion of Iraq, and all that this entailed for Britain’s involvement in the Middle East. What follows, then, is an attempt to explain British policies and policy-making in a critical period, to those in both the Middle East and elsewhere who seek to understand the broader context of what changed with 9/11 and where that takes British relations with this complex region. The emphasis is on the British side of the story, written as much with a British audience in mind as an Arab one.

I am particularly indebted to those friends, colleagues and contacts who have generously afforded me the benefit of their insights. Among those from the Middle East I should like to acknowledge especially Prince Hassan bin Talal, Mustafa Hamarneh, Omar Nahar, Ghassan Khatib, Easa Al Gurg, Khalil Shikaki, Asher Susser, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Yossi Alpher, Samir Al-Taqi, Mustafa Alani, Heba Saleh, Nabil Fahmi, Abdel Monem Said Ali, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, Saeed Badib, Khalid Al-Khater and a number of Iranians whom I shall not name for fear of causing them embarrassment. I have also benefited from the wisdom and experience of friends and contacts across Europe, notably Bassma Kodmani, Christian Berger, Volker Perthes, Svein Sevje, Johannes Reissner, Olivier Roy, Isabel Rauscher, Charlotta Sparre, Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Mariano Aguirre and Richard Youngs. In
Preface and acknowledgments

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I owe a very special debt of thanks to those who read and commented in detail on drafts of this book: Sir Harold (Hooky) Walker, Richard Muir, Greg Shapland, Mark Heller, Tarak Barkawi, Kathleen Jordan and Roger Morgan. They were very generous with their time and gave me much encouragement. I should also like to thank and honour the late Patrick Bannerman, St John Armitage and Lord (Timothy) Garden, who were a great source of inspiration to me in my quest to better understand Britain and the Middle East. I also much appreciate the guidance and support I have received from Sinclair Road, Sir James Craig, Sir Mark Allen, Anthony Milton, Raad Alkadiri and Cho Khong.

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R.H.
Map of the Middle East

Source: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division
The decade of Tony Blair’s leadership of the British government has proved distinctive in the history of Britain’s involvement in the Middle East.¹ The story of this period is in many ways the sequel to an earlier account provided by Elizabeth Monroe in her book *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*,² which charts the rise and fall of British imperial power in the region, ending with the withdrawal of British forces ‘East of Suez’ in 1971. Thereafter, the United States assumed the role of principal arbiter of regional political and security arrangements while the British, though still active in the region, adopted a more modest and less influential profile.

So the situation remained until the late 1990s, when the British electorate delivered a landslide victory to the rejuvenated British Labour Party – the self-proclaimed New Labour – in May 1997. This proved a turning point, as successive New Labour governments began reordering Britain’s foreign policy priorities, projected a new image and reshaped the way policy was made. Initially the Middle East did not dominate the agenda, but after the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) Blair personally took the lead in developing a policy dictated by ‘the war on terror’ and focused on the Middle East. Britain's involvement in the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath delivered a bitter epilogue to Britain's imperial ‘moment’ in the Middle East.

This book offers an examination of Britain’s policies and role in the Middle East during the Blair decade. The central focus is on how the British response to 9/11 – particularly the decision to join the US invasion of Iraq – affected British thinking about and relations in the region. Far from assisting the United States in remaking the Middle East for the better, the British ended up partnering the Americans in an endeavour that hastened the end of US regional hegemony, leaving President Barack Obama’s administration to reap the consequences after both his predecessor George W. Bush and Tony Blair had left office.

Introduction
Three key questions about Britain's role in the story are explored in this work. First, what was 'new' about New Labour and how did this affect the policy-making process and British policies in the Middle East from 1997 to 2001 – before 9/11? Second, what changed in British thinking as a result of 9/11? And, third, how did the British government’s handling of the Iraq crisis and invasion alter its policies and role in the Middle East? The detailed analysis takes the story to the point at which Tony Blair handed over as prime minister to Gordon Brown – though the legacy of his period at the helm and the apparent implications are also discussed.

Given the genesis and development of this study, as outlined briefly in the Preface, the whole work is organized around the central focus of Britain’s stance before and after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. The pivotal chapter (Chapter 5) is devoted to a detailed account of how the British government arrived at the decision to join the invasion of Iraq and presented that decision to the British public.

In order to understand what was new about New Labour thinking and policy with respect to the Middle East it is necessary to have a picture of what went before. Accordingly, Chapter 1 provides a historical overview to set the scene. An understanding of Britain’s role in shaping the contemporary state system in the Middle East and the transition that took place from the era of British imperialism to US hegemony is also essential if one is to make sense of how Britain is perceived and received in the region today.

Chapter 2 opens with an assessment of Britain’s place in the global order when New Labour came to power in 1997. An account follows of how Blair’s government presented Britain’s foreign policy priorities and goals during his first term and how the Middle East featured in its overall vision. The content of the government’s first Strategic Defence Review is examined, as well as its initial policy pronouncements on the Middle East, including an early commitment to promoting democracy in the region. The chapter ends by assessing the rethink prompted by 9/11 and the US response to it. As a consequence of the ‘war on terror’ declared by President George W. Bush, and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003, the Middle East moved to centre stage in British foreign policy. It became the cockpit of US and allied British confrontation with the forces of al-Qaeda, its sympathizers and various other radical and anti-Western forces. The Strategic Defence Review was expanded with a new section on the threat posed by terrorism.

Chapter 3 is devoted to considering how the policy-making process changed under New Labour. Blair’s government wanted to ‘rebrand Britain’, and design a foreign policy that would ‘make Britain a force for good in the world’ through promoting the values of freedom, tolerance, democracy and justice, confronting dictators and championing human rights. Crucially,
how the government described its objectives became as important as its actions and achievements. A preoccupation with policy presentation – news management, or ‘spin’ – prevailed at the expense of policy substance. The prime minister adopted a presidential style of government and concentrated decision-making in Downing Street. He devised policy in consultation with an inner circle that included unelected advisers and officials, to the detriment of deliberations in cabinet and debate in parliament. Moreover, Blair and his team at No. 10 preferred informality to meticulous record-keeping. The combined effect was to undermine time-honoured processes and procedures, which had a bearing on how the government handled the Iraq crisis and planning for the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Chapter 3 concludes with some thoughts on the roles of the media and civil society, and hence government accountability and public trust in the 9/11 era.

In Chapter 4 a detailed examination of Britain’s involvement in the Middle East peace process between 1997 and 2001 shows how the government sought a niche role in the margins of US and EU engagement. For most of this period the US administration of President Bill Clinton was in the forefront of attempts to revitalize the Arab–Israeli peace process, but events on the ground defied its best efforts and by late 2000 the second Palestinian Intifada and Israel’s response heralded a return to intense conflict. British policy progressed from supporting US strategy – with periodic interventions by both Blair and the Foreign Office – to a series of desperate attempts to stem the tide of violence. British diplomatic dealings with Syria and Lebanon during this period are also discussed here.

Chapter 5, the pivotal chapter, considers in detail New Labour’s policy on Iraq, before and after 9/11, culminating in the government’s decision, approved by parliament on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, to join the US undertaking. Citing open sources – including a series of internal memos that would subsequently surface through the media and on the internet, and the reports of the Hutton and Butler inquiries – the account presented here traces the steps by which Tony Blair and his team arrived at the fateful decision to go to war, and discusses how their thinking was presented to the cabinet, parliament and the public. The chapter concludes with an examination of the justification that was offered and the questions surrounding this. Chapter 6 analyses the consequences of the invasion of Iraq – for the country itself, the wider region and Britain. A summary of developments in Iraq following the invasion and Britain’s role in the occupation precedes some comments on the costs incurred by Britain (and others) in the Iraq theatre. The rest of the chapter examines developments in British relations with Iran, Syria, Libya, Jordan and Egypt and how these were affected by 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq.
In Chapter 7 the focus returns to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and Britain’s involvement in efforts to galvanize the US administration of President George W. Bush to restart serious peace negotiations. The advent of the ‘war on terror’ and then the Iraq crisis significantly changed British thinking about the conflict as it became increasingly important to deal with it more effectively. Yet British thinking changed again after the terrorist bomb attacks in London on 7 July 2005 (7/7): there were indications of a hardening of attitudes in the British government and a change in the tone of British diplomatic dealings with the Israelis, suggesting greater appreciation of their position. The British government’s reactions to the election victory of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas in 2006 and its stance on the war between Israel and Lebanon that summer also receive consideration.

Chapter 8 discusses British relations with the Arab Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (the UAE) and Oman – the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The central issue addressed is the British defence agreement with Saudi Arabia, Al Yamamah, forged originally in the 1980s and the largest single defence deal in history. The chapter argues that Blair’s government could not have rowed back on the deal it had inherited without serious damage to the British national interest. The significance of Al Yamamah is examined in terms of the secrecy and controversies that have surrounded the details of the arrangement and the implications for British policy options in future. The story of Britain’s relations with the GCC states demonstrates how the British, as they wound up their empire, essentially paved the way for the United States to assume predominance in the region. Yet the British have not exited; instead they are still present in the Gulf – investing, trading, taking holidays and selling arms – and they count the GCC states as among their closest allies.

Some conclusions are presented in Chapter 9. The implications of policies adopted during the 9/11 era are apparent not only on the home front but in how Britain is generally perceived and received in the Middle East too. As a result of the decisions made during this period, many see Blair as having been Washington’s unquestioning lieutenant. Yet the evidence throughout this study is that Blair was his own man, evolving from affable champion of good causes to a conviction politician confronting evil. But despite all that was new about New Labour, and all the changes it made in the policy-making process, it did not deliver Britain from the lingering legacy of empire. It merely encountered the latest manifestations of that legacy.
Historical Background:
Stages in the Relationship

‘Where the relationship between peoples is what it has been in the Middle East – one of self-confident force imposing itself upon resentful weakness – certain consequences are bound to follow, and they are not essentially different whether it is Westerners who are imposing themselves upon Asiatics, Christians upon Muslims, or one Western people upon another.’ – Albert Hourani (1953)

‘Apart from general human benevolence, what has Great Britain ever wanted in the Middle East but stability and peace, and reasonable freedom to come and go and trade, and, if and when world strategy makes it imperative, some access to strategic points?’ – Stephen Longrigg (1953)

To understand British relations with the Middle East in the 9/11 era it is instructive to have in mind the successive phases through which those relations have evolved since the mid-nineteenth century. The advent of the New Labour government towards the end of the 1990s marked a shift in the British outlook on the world and changes in the policy-making process, yet a review of the historical context will demonstrate how much was actually new and how much was a product of underlying assumptions and connections built up over decades. A grasp of the historical context is also essential to understand the impact of 9/11 on both Britain and the Middle East.

For the purposes of this historical overview, the following sections delineate and examine four phases in Britain’s relations with the Middle East over the last century and a half. Overall, these phases trace the evolution of Britain from an imperial power of unrivalled global reach to a much reduced but still significant power, whose continued prosperity and influence depended fundamentally on its relationship with the United States. By the 1990s Britain still ranked among the major economies, allied to the United States and Europe within the framework of NATO and the European Union, in a world defined by globalization and the relative supremacy of the United States. Over the same period the Middle East emerged from the dominion
of the Ottoman Empire to become the single most significant energy-producing region of the world, divided into fractious states and characterized by territorial conflicts and competing ethnic and sectarian identities.

British involvement in the Middle East over the last 150 years has been continuous but variable in intensity. The relationship, although never symmetrical, has been formative for the Middle East and instrumental for Britain. On the one hand the contemporary state system in the Middle East was largely designed by the British (along with the French) in the 1920s. On the other hand, the energy resources of Iran and later of various Arab states maintained British naval power in the early twentieth century and fuelled the British economy thereafter. Following nationalization, the oil wealth of the Arab Gulf states has also sustained the British defence industry, buttressed the financial sector and provided a lucrative market for other corporate interests.

The historical summary below highlights how changes in Britain’s power and global outlook have affected its engagement with and policies towards the Middle East. The first phase spans the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the British Empire was still expanding and Britain viewed the region primarily as a communication route to its imperial possessions and interests further east. As such, the Middle East was primarily depicted as an area to be mastered in the face of competition from other powers. By the early years of the twentieth century, it was also viewed as a repository of precious oil resources to be tapped, where possible to the exclusion of rival claimants.

During the second phase, from the First to the Second World War, the British, in conjunction with the French, divided up the remains of the Ottoman Empire into separate states and spheres of influence. Britain, with its League of Nations Mandates for Iraq and Palestine, among other areas, presided over the formation of the modern state of Iraq, maintained privileged access in Egypt, established the Hashemite monarchy in Transjordan and enabled a Jewish homeland to develop west of the Jordan River in Palestine.

The third phase takes the story from 1947 to 1971, when the last formal vestiges of Britain’s imperial presence in the region were finally withdrawn. During this period almost the whole of what remained of the British Empire was dismantled in a retreat driven primarily by the need to adapt to Britain’s economic decline and the rise of independence movements and nationalism across the globe. Meanwhile the Cold War and superpower rivalry became the defining features of the global order, determining the security agenda and British policy options in the Middle East as elsewhere.

In the fourth and final phase described here, from the 1970s to the
mid-1990s, the British financial sector and industry adjusted to the new realities and capitalized on the opportunities afforded by the 1970s oil boom and attendant wealth creation in parts of the Middle East. In the 1980s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher presided over a restructuring of the British economy which shifted the emphasis from production to services and finance as the keys to its prosperity. In the Middle East superpower antagonism gave way to unrivalled US influence as the Soviet Union collapsed and Washington became the leading peace-broker on the Arab–Israeli front and dominant arbiter of security arrangements in the Gulf.

BRITISH IMPERIAL PRIORITIES AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE HEYDAY OF EMPIRE: 1860–1914

Historians differ as to the exact date when the British Empire reached its peak, but most place it somewhere between 1860 and 1880. Almost all identify the causes of eventual decline as implicit within the strengths that distinguished Britain among its economic and industrial competitors in the late nineteenth century. These competitors, notably the United States, Germany and France, would eventually overtake the British in terms of industrial production and share of global trade. In 1860 Britain accounted for 25 per cent of world trade, more than twice the share of its nearest competitors in Europe, and even in the mid-1890s, Britain clearly led the world’s league table of economic powers in terms of annual per capita income, but ‘others were catching up’. By the 1870s income from overseas investment had overtaken returns on overseas trade as a primary source of wealth generation for Britain. Thus net overseas assets grew from around 7 per cent of the stock of national wealth in 1850 to around 14 per cent in 1870 and then to around 32 per cent in 1913.

During the late nineteenth century, British foreign policy remained the preserve of the British upper classes and:

For the Foreign Office it would have been vulgar … to measure a country’s importance by the amount of trade done with it. Nowhere in the world was more important than Europe: Europe was the world. The rest was periphery.

In fact, the majority of British trade was with the rest of the world. However, trade was the concern of the middle classes and did not present a problem for foreign policy so long as economic opportunities abounded and the Royal Navy ‘ruled the waves’. In any case, prosperity, social mobility and representation in parliament enabled a convergence of interests between the middle and upper classes during the heyday of empire. Successive prime ministers and their governments prevailed in pursuit of what they themselves deemed the national interest.
As recounted by Dahrendorf, Hobsbawm and Bernard Porter, in the mid-nineteenth century the British did not see themselves as empire builders in territorial terms, but rather as the harbingers and beneficiaries of free trade and capital generation through investment worldwide from which all, it was assumed, stood to gain. It was the essence of Victorian liberalism ‘to believe that “interests”, properly perceived, were not mutually exclusive but were common and complementary, so that what was ideal and what was practical really were the same’. Curiously – and as will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3 – this notion that interests and ideals can be complementary infused New Labour thinking about foreign policy over a century later. As Tony Blair would contend: ‘values and interest merge’.

This broadly optimistic worldview endured until it was increasingly challenged by countervailing interests and the resistance of others to British assumptions about the common good. Competition for market predominance, influence and territory, notably in Africa, gathered pace. Meanwhile, British trading interests demanded unimpeded access to communication routes. Among these, the Suez Canal was to acquire a central place in British calculations.

**Expansion of Britain’s interests in the Middle East**

The term ‘Middle East’ made sense for British traders and imperial civil servants depicting the region midway between Britain and East Asia, or the Far East. That the term has become common parlance and has also entered the Arab lexicon is indicative of the strength of that legacy. Yet the name refers to a region on the way to somewhere else that was originally of far greater intrinsic interest to early British adventurers and merchants.

Britain’s Indian Empire emerged in defence of commercial gains made by the East India Company. The British presence and thence colony at the port of Aden (in what is now Yemen) was established by displacing a rival Portuguese presence, in order to set up a coaling station for British steamships making their way to and from India and beyond. The British navy, operating out of India, imposed its presence in the Persian Gulf in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the better to protect its merchant vessels from piracy (see Chapter 8).

British speculators and investors also made their presence felt in nineteenth-century Persia (modern Iran), principally in search of ‘concessions’ – favourable or exclusive entitlements in the trading of commodities and access to resources. For their part the Persians hoped to secure British support against Russian encroachment through Central Asia, but discovered that the British gave precedence to the protection of their own imperial