


The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict

Nationalism and Sovereignty in the Gulf
between the World Wars

Chelsi Mueller





The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict

The interwar period marked a transition from a Gulf society characterized by symbiosis and interdependency to a subregion characterized by national divisions, sectarian suspicions, rivalries, and political tension. In this study, Chelsi Mueller tells the story of a formative period in the Gulf, examining the triangular relationship between Iran, Britain, and the Gulf Arab shaykhdoms. By doing so, Mueller reveals how the revival of Iranian national ambitions in the Gulf had a significant effect on the dense web of Arab-Iranian relations during the interwar period. Shedding new light on our current understanding of the present-day Arab-Iranian conflict, this study, which pays particular attention to Bahrain and the Trucial States (United Arab Emirates), fills a significant gap in the literature on the history of Arab-Iranian relations in the Gulf and Iran's Persian Gulf policy during the Reza Shah period.

CHELSEI MUELLER is a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.



The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict

Nationalism and Sovereignty in the
Gulf between the World Wars

CHELSI MUELLER
Tel Aviv University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108489089

DOI: [10.1017/9781108773881](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108773881)

© Chelsi Mueller 2020

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2020

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mueller, Chelsi, 1978– author.

Title: The origins of the Arab-Iranian conflict : nationalism and sovereignty in the Gulf between the World Wars / Chelsi Mueller.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019037795 (print) | LCCN 2019037796 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108489089 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108733410 (paperback) | ISBN 9781108773881 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Nationalism–Iran–History–20th century. | Iran–Foreign relations–Persian Gulf States. | Persian Gulf States–Foreign relations–Iran.

Classification: LCC DS274.2.P35 M84 2020 (print) | LCC DS274.2.P35 (ebook) | DDC 953.05/2–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019037795>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019037796>

ISBN 978-1-108-48908-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Maps and Figures</i>	page vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Transliteration, Terms, and Conventions</i>	ix
<i>Chronology of Major Events</i>	xiv
Introduction	1
1 States and Tribes in the Premodern Gulf	8
2 British Policy in the Persian Gulf between the World Wars	46
3 The Rise of Reza Khan and Iran's Persian Gulf Policy, 1919–1925	78
4 Reza Shah's Persian Gulf Policy, 1925–1941	110
5 The Trucial States, Iran, and the British	158
6 Bahrain, Iran, and the British	191
Conclusion	229
<i>Appendices</i>	242
<i>Glossary</i>	249
<i>Bibliography</i>	250
<i>Index</i>	264

Maps and Figures

Maps

1 The Persian Gulf	<i>page</i> xii
2 The Strait of Hormuz	xiii
3 Bahrain	201

Figures

1 The British Persian Gulf Political Residency in Bushehr	<i>page</i> 20
2 Reza Khan as minister of war	82
3 Rear Admiral Gholam ‘Ali Bayandor	124
4 Reza Shah inspecting the new southern navy in Bushehr with his son, the crown prince.	124
5 Shaykhs Jum‘a bin Maktum and Sa‘id bin Maktum Al Maktum	168
6 The senior naval officer, the Shaykh of Dubai, the Shaykh of Hengam, and their entourages	169
7 Shaykh ‘Isa bin ‘Ali Al Khalifa	199
8 Shaykh Hamad bin ‘Isa Al Khalifa	199
9 An “ilm-o-khabar” travel pass issued in Iran	205

Acknowledgments

This book is based on a doctoral dissertation supervised by David Menashri and Uzi Rabi at Tel Aviv University. David has been a constant pillar of support and encouragement and for his kindness I am truly grateful. Uzi took me under his wing and helped me through each stage in the process. I could not have done this without him.

This book would not have been possible without the support of numerous institutions and individuals. It was supported by generous scholarships and fellowships from Tel Aviv University, the Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities, the Zvi Yavetz Graduate School of History, the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, the Maccabim Foundation, the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, and the Joseph Kostiner Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf Program.

I also want to acknowledge the contributions of the Department of Middle Eastern and African History, especially Meir Litvak, Ami Ayalon, and Joseph Kostiner. Meir Litvak was very supportive: he encouraged my participation in conferences, pushed me to publish, and provided invaluable comments and invaluable advice during the process. Ami Ayalon directed the doctoral seminar during which time I received valuable and constructive comments on a draft of my first chapter from him and from my graduate cohort. I was also fortunate enough to have the opportunity to study under the late Joseph (Yossi) Kostiner. He offered me the opportunity to become his research assistant and shared with me his insights on tribal politics in the Arabian Peninsula. It was under his tutelage that I developed an interest in states and tribes in the Persian Gulf. The graduate students who worked with him are well aware of what a gracious gift he gave us.

I want to acknowledge the kindness and support I received from the staff at the libraries and archives I worked in, including the British Library, the British National Archives, and the SOAS Library at the University of London. Special thanks go to Marion Gliksberg and

Rakefet Cohen, the dedicated staff of the Moshe Dayan Center library, who put up with my constant requests to look at the Cambridge Archive Editions, which are housed there.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the external reviewers of my dissertation, Christopher Davidson and James Onley. Their reviews were encouraging and their suggestions were very insightful. James went above and beyond the role of an external reader. He meticulously read my work and addressed a number of issues great and small. His generosity and involvement contributed significantly to helping me revise the manuscript. I want to thank Homa Katouzian for reading my work with interest and for the very valuable suggestions he offered. And I also want to thank the two blind reviewers who carefully read this manuscript and wrote immensely valuable critiques and suggestions that helped me to revise and polish the final manuscript. Needless to say, any errors that remain are my own.

I owe a great deal of thanks to my colleague Nir Boms who has energetically supported me and advocated for me. I owe special thanks to Eline Rosenhart, who held my hand throughout the writing of this book. And finally, I want to thank all of my family, the Mueller's, Zimmerman's, Taylor's, Tollen's, Sisler's, Lattimore's, and Cashman's, who encouraged me during my many years as a graduate student.

Transliteration, Terms, and Conventions

Arabic and Persian

As this work includes names and terms from both Arabic and Persian and cites sources in Arabic and Persian, it makes use of two different transliteration schemes. Arabic names, terms and references follow the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) scheme, while Persian follows the scheme prescribed by *Iranian Studies*. While diacritical marks have been omitted, ‘Ayn and *hamza* are preserved as ‘ and ’ in the text, except for the initial *hamza*, which is dropped. The word “the” is retained along with the definite article “al-.”

The plural of transliterated terms that appear frequently is formed with an –s (*Kargozars*, e.g.). Words found in Merriam-Webster’s are spelled as they are in that dictionary and not italicized (e.g., *shah*, *mudir*, and *nakhoda*). Place names are spelled in accordance with the most common contemporary English usage (thus *Shariqah* is *Sharjah*, Ra’s al-Khaima is *Ras al-Khaimah*, al-Manama is *Manama*, and Bandar-e Bushehr is *Bushehr*). For names of places in Iran preference is given to the Persian rendering (hence *Henjam* is *Hengam*).

In the official correspondence of the period Arabic and Persian names are often transliterated erratically, hence *Easa*, *Isa*, and *Esā* could all refer to the same person. The original forms are preserved in quotations but their transliterations have been standardized in the footnotes. Personal names are spelled in accordance with the transliteration scheme of either IJMES or *Iranian Studies* but without diacritics (thus, e.g., “*Muhammad*” in Arabic and “*Mohammad*” in Persian). Names are spelled in accordance with an individual or family’s preferred use, whenever documentary evidence of a clear preference exists (e.g., business correspondences from the interwar period indicate a clear preference for the spelling of the family name “*Bushiri*” over “*Bushehri*” and “*Farook*” over “*Faruk*”).

Iran and Persia

Since ancient times – and in the Persian documents cited in this work – Persian speakers have referred to the country as *Iran*. In the Western world – and in British archival documents – the country was referred to as *Persia* until 1935 when Reza Shah asked foreign diplomats to refer to the country as *Iran*. This work makes use of the name *Iran* throughout, except where direct quotes – especially from British official documents – refer to the country as *Persia*. The term *Persian* is used in the cultural sense (i.e., Persian shop) or as a referent to the language, also known as Farsi.

Iranians and Persians

Issues of identity, such as Arab or Persian, and the various gradations between the two, form the subject of much debate between scholars. When such distinctions are made in this book, it is an effort to represent, as accurately as possible, the perceptions and self-perceptions of the actors in the story.

With a few notable exceptions, immigrants and children of immigrants, arriving to the Arab shaykhdoms from places in Iran, whether Sunni or Shi'i, are identified in this study as *Iranian* in preference to the alternatives – Persian or *'Ajam*. In the Persian language sources from this period, the prevalent term used by Iranian immigrants to describe themselves is *Irani* – Iranian. Some Iranians also referred to themselves as *'Ajam*. *'Ajam* was a name given them by Arabs, a pejorative word used to refer to someone who could not speak Arabic properly.

One exception to this rule includes the use of the term *Baluch* to describe the tribal inhabitants of Baluchistan, part of which lies in southeastern Iran (also called Makran). The other notable exception applies to a distinct group of people who identify as *Hawala*. This group is composed of Sunnis of southern Iranian origin, who depicted their transfer to the Arab shaykhdoms of the southern littoral as a “return” to the land of their forebears after a long sojourn in southern Iran. There is ample debate from within the community as well as from outside, as to whether it can be said that *Hawala* are ethnically Arab. It is also important to stress that not all Sunnis who immigrated to the Arab port towns from Iran claimed Arab ancestry or defined themselves as *Hawala*, although the term *Hawala* is elastic. Some Sunni

immigrants from Iran depicted themselves as ethnic Persians. This book does not take a stand on the ethnic issue, but rather endeavors to portray the actors in the story as they portray themselves.

Persian Titles and Adopted Names

Iranian elites active in politics before and after the passage of the 1925 Law of Identity and Status, are introduced upon the first mention by both their title and their adopted family name. Thereafter each individual is referred to by the name that he is most recognized by in the historical literature. Thus, the statesman, Mohammad ‘Ali Forughī Zoka’ al-Molk, is introduced by his name and title and thereafter he is referred to as Mohammad ‘Ali Forughī.

The Arabian Littoral

The Arabian littoral of the Persian Gulf is a geographical designation, referring to the eastern coastline of the Arabian Peninsula, without respect to the ethno-linguistic characteristics of its inhabitants. The Arabian littoral is also variously referred to as the Arabian coast or the southern littoral of the Persian Gulf.

The term “Arab shaykhdoms” refers to the small Persian Gulf societies centered around port towns along the southern littoral and ruled by Arab tribal shaykhs, including Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States. Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah were known collectively as the “Trucial States” until 1971 and the United Arab Emirates thereafter. Other names for the Trucial States include “Trucial Oman,” the “Trucial Coast,” and the “Trucial Shaykhdoms.”



Map 1 The Persian Gulf.



Map 2 The Strait of Hormuz.

Chronology of Major Events

- 1622 British trading post established at Bandar Abbas
- 1753 Iran under Karim Khan Zand recaptured Bahrain with the help of the hereditary Governor of Bushehr
- 1783 The Al Khalifa ruling family came to power in Bahrain
- 1798 Treaty of Friendship signed between Britain and the Sultan of Muscat
- 1820 Treaty of Maritime Peace signed between Britain and the shaykhs of Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, and Umm al-Quwain (the “Trucial shaykhs”)
- 1822 First colonial officer appointed to head the British Political Residency at Bushehr
- 1892 Exclusive agreements signed between Britain and the Shaykh of Bahrain and between Britain and the Trucial shaykhs
- 1899 Exclusive agreement signed between Britain and the Shaykh of Kuwait
- 1901 An oil concession obtained from Iran by William Knox D’Arcy
- 1900–1904 Belgian advisers set up an efficient customs administration in the Persian Gulf Ports spurring waves of migration to the Arabian littoral
- 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution in Iran
- 1907 The Anglo-Russian Convention is signed partitioning Iran into British and Russian spheres of influence and a neutral zone
- 1909 Anglo-Persian Oil Company formed and D’Arcy concession acquired
- 1916 Exclusive agreement signed between Britain and the Emir of Qatar
- 1919 Anglo-Iranian Treaty signed but not ratified
- 1919 Iranian delegation denied a seat at the Congress of Versailles

- 1921 Anglo-Iranian Treaty nullified by the Majles
- 1921 Military coup carried out in Iran by Reza Khan and Sayyed Zia' al-Din Tabataba'i
- 1921 Russo-Iranian Treaty of Friendship signed
- 1922 Uprising of the Baharna (Arab Shi'a) in Bahrain
- 1923 Instructions issued to Iran's port officials to treat Bahrainis as Iranian citizens
- 1923 Outbreak of sectarian violence involving Iranian nationals in Bahrain
- 1925 Abolition of the Qajar dynasty
- 1925 Instructions issued to Iran's port officials to treat all travelers from the southern littoral as Iranian citizens
- 1925 Shaykh Khaz'al subdued and Arabistan brought under central authority; the older name "Khuzestan" replaced the name "Arabistan"
- 1926 Coronation of Reza Shah Pahlavi
- 1927 Britain recognized the independence of Ibn Sa'ud in the Treaty of Jeddah
- 1927 Iran's Bahrain claim submitted to the League of Nations
- 1928 Iran's reassertion of sovereignty over Hengam Island
- 1928 Negotiations begun toward the conclusion of an Anglo-Iranian treaty
- 1928 A thorough reexamination of Persian Gulf policy initiated by London
- 1929 The Great Depression and the introduction of cultured pearls hastened the decline of the Persian Gulf pearling industry
- 1929 Iran formally recognized Iraq and Ibn Sa'ud's Kingdom of the Hijaz and Najd
- 1930 An oil concession in Bahrain granted to the Bahrain Petroleum Company
- 1932 British air route transferred from the Iranian to the Arabian littoral
- 1932 Iranian naval ships arrive to the Persian Gulf
- 1933 A year of crisis in Anglo-Iranian relations: British flag hauled down at Basidu; Iranian customs *mudir* arrested by British officers
- 1934 An oil concession in Kuwait granted to the Kuwait Oil Company

- 1935 British naval facilities at Hengam and Basidu evacuated and moved to al-Jufayr, Bahrain
- 1937 Promulgation of the Nationality and Property Laws in Bahrain endeavored to turn wealthy traders from Iran into Bahraini citizens
- 1938 Reform movements in Kuwait, Dubai, and Bahrain
- 1941 Iran invaded by British and Soviet forces; Reza Shah forced to abdicate

Introduction

The geopolitical rivalry between the Gulf Arab states and Iran has its origins in the interwar period, the period between the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, which marked the end of the First World War, until 1941 when the Persian Gulf became a theater of the Second World War. The interwar period was a formative period because it marked a transition from a Gulf society characterized by symbiosis and interdependency to a subregion characterized by national divisions, sectarian suspicions, rivalries, and political tension. The introduction of Iranian nationalism to the Persian Gulf waterway, islands, and littoral and the unprecedented interventions of the British government in the Arab shaykhdoms including Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Ras al-Khaimah, constituted a watershed in the history of the Persian Gulf, disrupted centuries of unrestricted movement, refashioned frameworks of exchange between the two shores, and forged an acute Arab-Iranian dichotomy that would characterize the Persian Gulf into the twenty-first century.

Cultural animosity between Arabs and Iranians has been centuries in the making. A prominent example is the way that Arabs are depicted in the *Shahnameh*, the epic tale of Persian kings composed more than a thousand years ago. Its author, Ferdowsi, derided Arabs as an uncivilized people who drank camel's milk and ate lizard meat. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some Iranian intellectuals have even gone so far as to trace Iran's weaknesses back to its conquest in the seventh century by "barbaric" Arab nomads.¹ Persians, too, have been scorned and mocked by Arabs. The difficulties faced by immigrants from Iran who have tried to gain acceptance in the tribally organized Arab societies of the Gulf are exemplified by the moniker 'Ajam, a pejorative term that denotes "foreigners" but is used almost exclusively

¹ David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society, and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 237–238.

of Persians. The hardening of Arabs' attitudes toward Iran was prominently reflected in the nomenclature – the Arabian Gulf – which was introduced into the political discourse during the interwar period, but would gain particular prominence during the heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Religious differences, which are also cultural differences, have their roots in antiquity. The Persian Gulf is the epicenter of the Sunni-Shi'i divide, the origins of which can be traced back to the early days of Islam and the struggle for succession in the Muslim world after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Since the Battle of Karbala in 680, in which Hussein, a direct descendant of the Prophet was defeated by the Umayyad Caliph, the cry for revenge by his supporters has divided the Muslim community. At that time the defeated supporters of Hussein became like a dissident faction – the Shi'a. In the subsequent centuries, persecution and exclusion of the Shi'a at the hands of the Sunnis perpetuated the rivalry between the communities of the two major traditions of Islam. The conversion of Iran to Shi'i Islam further divided Arabs and Persians. But the split did not conform to national or geographic lines. Arab Shi'a have long been a minority in most Arab countries, and a majority in Iraq and Bahrain.

Indeed, the Persian Gulf basin sits astride the region's major geographical, cultural and religious fault lines. And yet, even while the Gulf's inhabitants dwell in the clefts and ridges of these sectarian fault lines, there has been at least as much impetus for cooperation and interdependence between them as there has been for division. For millennia, the upper and lower Gulf littorals comprised an integrated societal unit – united by linguistic, cultural, religious, tribal, maritime, and commercial factors – the inhabitants of the two shores having more in common with each other than with the nomadic or agricultural peasant societies dwelling on the Iranian and Arabian plateaus. The Gulf's physical location between the Zagros Mountains of Iran and the foreboding deserts of Arabia encouraged the inhabitants of the northern and southern littorals to supply their needs from within and through economic connections with each other.²

² Lawrence G. Potter, "Introduction" to *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–24. See also Lawrence G. Potter, "Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and after Oil," CIRS Occasional Paper No. 18 (Georgetown University in Qatar, 2017).

It was during the period between the First World War and the Second World War that this integrated and interdependent Persian Gulf civilization came to be characterized by rivalry and competition. The form that the Arab-Iranian conflict in the Gulf has taken today has less to do with ancient religious and ethnic divides and more to do with the introduction of modern political forces – namely, imperial intervention, state formation, and the rise of nationalism. The introduction of Iranian nationalism into the Persian Gulf during the interwar period, a period that roughly corresponds to the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1921–1941),³ and the challenge that Iran posed to the dominant imperial power in the region elicited an unprecedented degree of imperial intervention in the smaller tribal societies situated around its perimeter. To obstruct Iranian ambitions in the Gulf, British policy makers decided to reinforce the authority of the Gulf's ruling shaykhs. These actions expedited a process whereby tribal rulers were transformed into absolute monarchs. This process was underway before the advent of oil. Britain's policy of denying Iran a role to play also laid the foundations of the modern security architecture in the Gulf, which excludes Iran and relies upon an outside security guarantor.

This book tells a story of the formative period in the history of the Persian Gulf with particular attention to the roles of the main political actors, Iran, Britain, and the Arab shaykhdoms. With regard to the Arab shaykhdoms, Bahrain and the Trucial States are presented as case studies that can shed light on the role of the smaller, tribal societies centered around port towns on the Arabian littoral of the Persian Gulf, during the interwar period. The book examines the revival of Iranian national ambitions in the Persian Gulf under Reza Shah Pahlavi, the challenge that Reza Shah's assertive Persian Gulf policy posed to Britain's hegemonic position in the Persian Gulf, the challenge it posed to the Arab shaykhdoms under British protection, and the effect of these dynamics on the dense web of Arab-Iranian relations in the Gulf. It investigates the Arab shaykhs' relationships with Britain during the interwar period when Iran contested Britain's position in the Gulf and the independent status of the Arab shaykhs under Britain's protection. It surveys the different expressions of Iranian nationalism and

³ Reza Khan's rise to power began in 1921 when he became the minister of war. In 1923 he became the prime minister and in 1925, after deposing Ahmad Shah Qajar, he was proclaimed the Shah of Iran and took the name Reza Shah Pahlavi.

patriotism among Iranian immigrant communities in the Gulf Arab shaykhdoms and the perceptions and responses of the shaykhs and inhabitants of the Arabian littoral to this phenomenon. It also explores how local actors, such as merchants, state officials, and military men influenced and responded to efforts by states to create or challenge boundaries, to control movement, and to sanction or limit contact between individuals in the contested frontier region.

Reza Shah's Persian Gulf policy was strongly influenced by a particularly virulent strain of anti-colonial, nationalist impulses that emerged in Iran in the aftermath of the First World War. The highly visible British presence in the Persian Gulf was a lightning rod for the vital expression of anti-British sentiment during the war and in its aftermath. Britain's support for the Al Khalifa shaykhs of Bahrain, and the Al Qasimi shaykhs who claimed Abu Musa and the Tunbs – like their support for Shaykh Khaz'al in Khuzestan and other semi-autonomous tribal chiefs in the south – was viewed as part of a colonial strategy that was designed to deny Iran its territorial sovereignty and independence. Under Reza Shah, Iran contested Britain's claim to be the protector of Arab shaykhs in the Persian Gulf and challenged its position as the main security provider in the Persian Gulf waterway. Nationalist sentiments were expressed in territorial terms: the entire Persian Gulf, including the islands, waterway, and the shaykhdoms on the Arabian littoral, were depicted as usurped Iranian frontiers. Iran's claim to be the only legitimate sovereign in the Persian Gulf – a claim that resonated in the minds of many Iranian people – gained the shah some leverage that he could use to reduce British influence in southern Iran and loosen British authority in and around Iran's territorial waters.

Reza Shah succeeded in extending the authority of the central government over Iran's ports, islands, and territorial waters. The British government was obliged to relinquish its assets and evacuate its posts on the Iranian side of the Gulf, and the modern Iranian navy and customs administration came into being. One area in which the shah failed was in his policy toward the Arab shaykhdoms of the Persian Gulf: Reza Shah's government sought to establish relations with the Arab shaykhs of the southern littoral and, at the same time, promoted its claims to be the rightful sovereign over their domains. The Arabs' fear of Iran strengthened their reliance on British protection allowing Britain to further entrench its position on the Arabian littoral and making it all the more difficult for Iran to successfully appeal to the

shaykhs. While Reza Shah's efforts to assume responsibility for policing the Gulf met with limited success, the introduction of Iranian nationalism into the Gulf waterway engendered both feelings of pride on the part of Iranians as well as feelings of superiority that, at times, produced destructive consequences. Heavy-handed treatment of travelers from the lower Gulf by Iran's port authorities sowed the seeds of resentment and mistrust. This stifled the flow of goods and people to and from Iran. Furthermore, harsh enforcement of new policies that were intended to bring about national unity prompted waves of emigration from Iran's southern coastal areas to the Arab shaykhdoms of the lower Gulf.

Iran's repudiation of foreign interference and its articulation of an assertive, anti-colonial, and nationalist policy brought about a watershed in British imperial strategy in the Persian Gulf. Iranian assertions in and around the Gulf posed a direct challenge to Britain's position and engendered an abrupt shift from indirect to direct forms of imperial penetration in the Arab shaykhdoms and a gradual transfer of its locus of power from the Iranian to the Arabian littoral. This was especially manifested in Bahrain where the imperative to stymie Sunni-Shi'i tensions and deny Iran a pretext to continue intervening in the affairs of Bahrain brought about the forced retirement of Shaykh 'Isa bin 'Ali Al Khalifa, the hereditary ruler, and the establishment of a modern state administration under the aegis of the government of India. Similarly, British protection of Dubai's ruler, Shaykh Sa'id bin Maktum Al Maktum, curtailed his autonomy and brought him to the brink of a palace coup, but enabled him to survive it. The neighboring shaykhdoms, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Ras al-Khaimah, also became an arena of growing foreign intervention owing to their strategic value as a civil and military air route. Finally, the transference of Britain's main Persian Gulf naval base in 1935 from the Iranian island of Hengam to al-Jufayr in Bahrain cemented the archipelago as the linchpin of British strategy in the Persian Gulf on the eve of the Second World War.

The political awakening that ignited Iran spread like wildfire to the Iranian immigrant communities dwelling in Arab port towns such as Manama, Kuwait, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi. Their flamboyant expressions of patriotism, which included wearing the Pahlavi cap and trousers, marching about in military formation, singing anthems, and waving flags, drew sharp protests from the Arab inhabitants who had no sympathy for Iran. Iranian immigrants who thrived under the

British protective apparatus were increasingly perceived as agents of colonial exploitation. In the 1930s, young people in Bahrain protested the employment of Iranians and other foreigners in the oil company, which they viewed as an enterprise that should exclusively benefit Bahrainis. Their protest was reflected in the formulation of a new discourse that focused on the dichotomy between the “Arab nation” and the Iranian “foreigner.” Members of another immigrant group, the Hawala, were also resented in some quarters for different reasons. The Hawala were Sunni merchants from Iran that exhibited Persian appearance and characteristics to varying degrees, though many of them began to emphasize Arab origins to gain greater acceptance in tribal societies during the interwar period. Their transnational connections and involvement in the sea trade kept them relatively prosperous even while the pearl merchants lost out during the pearling crash and the economic depression of the 1930s. The Hawala maintained their access to political and economic patronage while other traditional elites whose fortunes were degraded began to lose clout and influence.

By the beginning of the Second World War, the crystallization of an historic process was increasingly becoming evident in the shaykhdoms whereby revenues from external sources paid directly to the rulers’ purses began to weaken their dependence on revenues derived from merchant activity. External revenues dramatically restructured the political and economic foundations of the shaykhdoms.⁴ Moreover, the special relationship between the rulers and the British – which had previously worked to the advantage of the merchants by providing protection for their economic activity – ceased to be an advantage for the merchants and was now an acute source of friction. New ideas were gaining currency in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Dubai, including ideas about national rights and popular representation in decision-making bodies. The 1938 reform movements in Bahrain and Dubai were fueled in part by Arab-Iranian antagonisms and resentment about British interventions that were administered in the name of protection. In Bahrain, Hawala merchants and disenfranchised Sunni Arabs composed a critique that cast British imperialism and tribalism as the root of Bahrain’s social ills. These activists began to articulate alternative frameworks of identity, along national and ethnic lines. Intermittent

⁴ See Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (1990; Repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

calls for “Arabization” or “Bahrainization” – political goals that were by no means coterminous – divulged the new fault lines crisscrossing the social and political landscape of Bahrain. Moreover, the perceived significance of these new fault lines was beginning to transcend the significance formerly attached to religious divides.

The sharp rise of Iranian nationalism and British interventionism in the Persian Gulf during the interwar period bore out profound consequences among the tribally organized societies situated around its perimeter. An era of fluid identities and unfettered movement of people was eclipsed by the drawing of political boundaries and the regulation of national status. Inhabitants of the Gulf region who had long enjoyed access to multiple social and economic worlds were compelled to chart out their destinies in line with the emerging geopolitical fault lines. Modern notions of citizenship and national status vied for significance with traditional frameworks of identity, such as tribe and religious sect. The movement of goods and people previously determined by nature became subjected to the intrusion of the centralizing structures of Iran and the emerging Arab states. The entrance of nationalism forged an acute dichotomy between Persians and Arabs in the Gulf, and its application to the entire depth and breadth of the waterway forged an acute geopolitical rivalry that endures to this day.

1 *States and Tribes in the Premodern Gulf*

It is the opinion of ancient historians that the cradle of civilization, even of the human race, is the Persian Gulf; that the inhabitants of its islands were the first to launch a sail upon the water and to brave the dangers of long voyages between the East and the West.¹

Ameen Rihani, 1930

The Persian Gulf has been variously shared and contested by tribes and states since time immemorial. Before the introduction of modern political forces, the most conspicuous constant was its constant changeability – the configuration and reconfiguration of frontier zones in line with the construction of imperial space or the expansion of tribal authority. The Persian Gulf in antiquity was an arena of waxing and waning empires variously based in Mesopotamia or on the Iranian plateau. After the rise of Islam, the Persian Gulf was dominated by Muslim dynasties that gained control over trade routes linking the commerce of the Indian Ocean to the thriving urban centers of the interior. Trade, it has been argued, gave rise to a unique relationship between the inhabitants of the northern and southern Gulf littoral, who shared more linkages with each other than with the agrarian and nomadic societies of the interior.² The allure of trading ventures in the East brought Portuguese, British, Dutch, and French traders into contact with Persian Gulf states and tribal principalities. During the Age of Imperialism the port towns of the Persian Gulf became increasingly integrated into the wider Indian Ocean maritime trading system.

In the eighteenth century, the British East India Company edged out its European rivals on the Indian subcontinent. In the nineteenth century, it undertook the herculean task of eliminating piracy in its vital transportation route thorough the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf

¹ Ameen Fares Rihani, *Around the Coasts of Arabia* (London: Constable, 1930), p. 271.

² See Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf: 1745–1900* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

under the *Pax Britannica*, as the era of British supremacy came to be called, was subdued by a series of maritime truces between the British government and the Arab shaykhs of the southern littoral. In the 1880s and 1890s, the British deepened their commitment by means of the “exclusive agreements” according to which the British government undertook the conduct of relations with foreign powers on behalf of the shaykhs. These agreements blocked the influence of Britain’s imperial rivals and prevented regional powers from exerting any meaningful influence in the Persian Gulf. The expanding Saudi state was similarly incorporated into the system in 1915 with a treaty that bound Ibn Sa‘ud to respect British influence in the Gulf Arab shaykhdoms. On the Iranian littoral, *ad hoc* arrangements with various tribal chiefs of southern Iran, and an agreement with the Shaykh of Mohammerah in particular, helped the British to consolidate their political and military control over the strategic waterway and nascent oil industry.

The Persian Gulf from the Dawn of Civilization to the Rise of the British

The world’s oldest known civilization, Sumer, developed in Mesopotamia at the head of the Persian Gulf. It was conquered around 2,334 B.C.E. by Sargon the Great and turned into the first recorded empire in history. He boasted in his inscriptions that the merchant ships of Dilmun (Bahrain) and Magan (Oman) docked in his Mesopotamian ports.³ The first known polity to control the northern littoral from Mesopotamia to the Gulf of Oman was the Median Empire, a state that grew out of the confederation of ancient Iranian tribes. In the sixth century B.C.E., Cyrus the Great united the Median and Persian tribes and led them in a conquest of territory that spanned three continents. Iranian domination of the Persian Gulf was ended during the conquests of Alexander the Great but restored in the seventh century when the Sassanid dynasty (224–651 B.C.E.) conquered the whole of the Persian Gulf – its northern and southern shores.

The Arabian Peninsula since times immemorial was home to nomadic tribes, although several regional states developed on its perimeter, including the Kingdoms of Saba, Hadramawt, and Awsan in

³ Harriet E. W. Crawford, *Dilmun and Its Gulf Neighbors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1–2, 104.

the territory of present-day Yemen. But the coming of Islam in the seventh century created, for the first time, a single unified polity in the Peninsula, organized not around the tribal concept of kinship, but around the principle of a common faith. With Muhammad's successors at the helm, the Bedouin armies burst out of the Arabian Peninsula, took possession of the Byzantine province of Syria, and then went on to overwhelm the entire Persian Sassanid Empire. The Arab-Muslim conquest of Iran changed its linguistic, religious, and cultural makeup almost beyond recognition. The subsequent invasion by Turkic and Mongol tribes gave rise to strong dynasties such as the Seljuk Empire, which later gave way to a succession of weak dynastic empires whose waxing and waning authority overlapped with that of smaller regional states and tribal polities.

The Safavid dynasty (1501–1736) reunited Iranian territory under central rule, reestablished Persian as the official language of Iran, and established Twelver Shiism as the official religion of the realm. Though the Safavids were the strongest force in Iran, they exercised less than complete authority over Iran's nomadic tribes, particularly the Kurds, Turkomans, Baluch, and Arabs. Most of the Arabs, who dwelled along the Persian Gulf littoral and in Khuzestan, retained their Sunni faith.⁴ The Safavids' greatest rival was their Ottoman neighbor to the west. Their rivalry was galvanized by the Sunni-Shi'i schism. The Ottoman-Safavid frontier that ran through Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf became a zone of conflict and competition. Here, the notion of the Persian Gulf as a frontier zone deserves special attention.

Hala Fattah, in her seminal work on the politics of regional trade, observes that imperial frontiers were never defined in an exact manner: "Both the Ottomans and the Persians continued to treat them as buffer zones, or strongholds, a no-man's-land defended by tribal armies in the pay of either empire, or sometimes of both."⁵ Kaya Şahin in her study on Ottoman state-building highlights the interdependent nature of tribe and state on the Ottoman-Safavid frontier: both the Ottomans and the Safavids relied on their alliances with the semi-autonomous tribal power centers in the periphery to establish and maintain their military and political influence in the area. The frontiers were very

⁴ See Richard Tapper, "Introduction," *Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*, ed. Richard Tapper (New York: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 1–75.

⁵ Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade*, p. 32.

fluid, she notes. “Constant skirmishes occurred, intelligence peddlers traveled between the two sides, fortresses changed hands, allegiances were quickly shifted and restored, and commercial activity took place despite the tensions.”⁶

Merchant activity was a unifying factor that brought the people of the northern and southern littorals of the Persian Gulf into closer relations with each other than with the peoples of the interior. Geographically, the Persian Gulf is an extension of the Indian Ocean and its economic orientation has always been outward toward the Indian subcontinent. After the spread of Islam in the seventh century, the spice trade was dominated by Muslim seafarers who transported spices from the trading emporiums in India to ports in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. During the Age of Exploration, the region’s trade was transformed when European trading nations entered the commercial and political power map. Moreover, this was the Golden Age of Piracy. Trade vessels loaded with gold, spices, and silk from the rich markets in India were particularly vulnerable in the narrow Strait of Hormuz where marauders lay in wait inside the long, deep inlets nestled in the craggy cliff walls. Persian, Arab, and Indian pirates were joined by European privateers – individuals authorized by their governments to attack foreign vessels during wartime. One astute chronicler noted “there was only one rule of law at sea in those days, to destroy one’s rivals and make as much money as possible in the shortest possible time.”⁷

States, Tribes, and European Trading Companies

The Portuguese were the first of the European powers to play a major political, economic, and military role in the Persian Gulf waterway following the momentous voyage of Vasco de Gama to the Indian Ocean in 1498. In 1507, Portuguese explorer Alfonso de Albuquerque captured the Kingdom of Hormuz and its dependency, Muscat. Albuquerque turned the trade-based Arab city-state, formerly a tributary of the mainland rulers of Fars and Kerman, into a Portuguese vassal. In 1521, a joint Portuguese-Hormuzi naval expedition subdued Bahrain

⁶ Kaya Şahin, *Empire and Power in the Reign of Süleyman: Narrating the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 92.

⁷ William McFee, *The Law of the Sea* (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1950), p. 139.

and gained Portugal control over Bahrain's rich pearl banks. By 1554 the Portuguese had eliminated Ottoman sea power and established a monopoly over the lucrative East-West trade.⁸

The tide was turned with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736) and particularly, the rise of its greatest monarch, Shah Abbas I (1587–1629). Shah Abbas built a new infantry and artillery and embarked on an ambitious campaign to recover Herat and Mashhad from the Uzbeks and parts of Mesopotamia and the Caucasus from the Ottomans. After those victories, he turned his attention to territories held by the Portuguese in the Persian Gulf. In 1602 his forces ousted the Portuguese from their fort in Bahrain. He made contacts with European trading nations, namely the British and the Dutch, offering them trading privileges in Iran, in exchange for their help in establishing control over Iran's Persian Gulf littoral. In 1622, with the reluctant help of the British East India Company he drove the Portuguese out of Qeshm Island and Hormuz.⁹

The British East India Company had arrived in the Persian Gulf hoping to profit from the spice trade with India. The company's agents reached an agreement with Shah Abbas leading to the establishment of trading posts, first at Jask in 1616 and then inland at Shiraz and Isfahan in 1617. After the defeat of Hormuz in 1622, the company was awarded a monopoly on the silk trade and commercial privileges at the nearby port of Bandar Abbas. The establishment of a British trading post in 1622 and then a Dutch trading post in 1623 marked the rise of Bandar Abbas as a regional emporium for trade in a wide variety of merchandise including horses, gold, silver, silk, dyes, spices, rice, and sugar. While initially there was cooperation between the British and Dutch companies, the better part of the next 150 years was characterized by Anglo-Dutch imperial rivalry in the Persian Gulf, a rivalry that was variously played out at Bandar Abbas, Basra, Bushehr, Bandar Rig, and Kharg Island. The French East India Company entered the Gulf in 1664 and by the time of Napoleon

⁸ Rudi Matthee, "The Portuguese Presence in the Persian Gulf: An Overview," in *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf*, eds. Jeffrey Macris and Saul Kelly (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), pp. 1–12.

⁹ Sadeq Nash'at, *Tarikh-e Siyasi-ye Khalij-e Fars* (Tehran: Kanun-e Ketab, 1344/1965), pp. 132–139.