

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.