

## *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

CHELSEI MUELLER  
*Tel Aviv University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-48908-9 — The Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict  
Chelsi Mueller  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## 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](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108489089](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108489089)

DOI: 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 Glikberg 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 *Esa* 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.

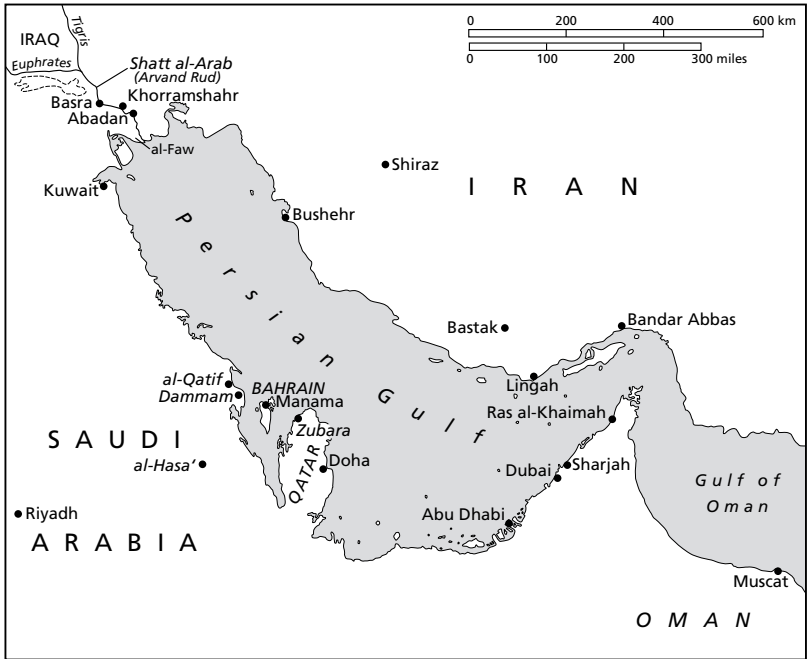
### **Persian Titles and Adopted Names**

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 Foroughi Zoka’ al-Molk, is introduced by his name and title and thereafter he is referred to as Mohammad ‘Ali Foroughi.

### **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

*Chronology of Major Events*

xv

- 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  |