Society in the Persian Gulf: Before and After Oil

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Abstract
This essay takes as its focus society in the Persian Gulf over the long term, both before and after oil. In order to understand the transitions society has gone through, it is necessary to review the region’s historical evolution and how society in the Gulf today differs from that of the pre-oil era. The Gulf is presented as a distinct historical region, where a tradition of free movement helped account for the success of its port cities, themselves linked more to the Indian Ocean basin than the Middle East. In the twentieth century, the historic ties that connected the people of the Gulf littoral were curtailed as nationalism became the dominant ideology, and borders and passports were imposed. After oil was discovered and exports began following World War II, the small Gulf shaikhdoms, most of which were under British protection until 1971, experienced a surge in revenues that ushered in the modern era. Newly independent states sought to impose a new identity, manipulate history, and exploit sectarian cleavages to solidify the power of ruling dynasties. The historic cosmopolitanism of the Gulf was ignored by states that privileged the tribal, Bedouin heritage of their leaders. Arabs and Persians, both Sunni and Shi’a, as well as many other groups have lived with each other in the region for many centuries, during which mutual differences occasionally led to conflict. But the current mistrust, tension, and sense of vulnerability felt by all sides is a product of the modern age.
Introduction

The image that most people have of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is one of oil-fueled prosperity, including futuristic buildings, buzzing airline hubs, luxury hotels, and pampered citizens. This tends to obscure the rapid, wrenching transformation tribally-organized societies experienced in the rush to modernize and transition to statehood. While the urban landscape may look different than before, local values, attitudes, and behavior have changed more slowly. The persistence of monarchy is an exception in today’s Middle East, and ruling dynasties so far have not allowed their citizens meaningful participation in government. What is often lost in discussions of oil, security threats, and international entanglements is the people themselves—the changes they have undergone, and how they will adjust to the future. As Kuwaiti historian Muhammad Rumaihi has reminded us, “The Gulf is not oil. The Gulf is its people and its land. So it was before the discovery of oil, and so it will remain when the oil disappears. Oil is no more than a historical phase in this part of the Arab world—and a rather short one at that.”

This paper takes as its focus Gulf society over the long term, both before and after oil. Already we are moving into a post-oil era in Bahrain and Oman, and all the regional states must prepare for this eventually. In order to understand the transitions society has gone through—what has changed and what has remained the same—it is necessary to review the region’s historical evolution.

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It is clear that the Persian Gulf has always been a distinct region with its own identity, which has more similarities with the port cities of the Indian Ocean than the landlocked empires of the Middle East. Gulf ports had a social mix composed of many ethnicities, such as Arabs (including the Hawala, who moved from side to side), Persians, Indians, Baluch, Africans, and smaller subgroups. Although there was a Sunni majority in the Arabian peninsula and a Shi’a one on the Iranian plateau, the Gulf was religiously mixed, with many Sunni Arabs on the Iranian coast south of Bushehr and Shi’i Persians on the Arabian side, especially in Bahrain, Dubai, and Kuwait. Rulers were supported financially by leading merchants (who were often not Arab) and governed in cooperation with them. The main local source of wealth was pearls, and later oil.

This all changed in the twentieth century with the onset of oil revenues that accrued to ruling dynasties, and, along with British protection, led to a less consultative and more autocratic style of rule. New states arose on the Arabian side that promoted new nationalisms and new identities, which highlighted the Najdi or Bedouin heritage of the rulers to the detriment of other groups that historically constituted local society. The historic unity of the Gulf characterized by ease of movement was shattered, and the cosmopolitan society that was once a key to its success was now overshadowed by an ethnic exclusiveness promoted by Arab dynasties.

In modern times, states have sought to rewrite history, manipulate sectarian tensions, and create new identities, contributing to the highly politicized situation at present. What has not been appreciated is that the present-day Gulf differs in important respects from the historic Gulf. This paper aims to redress this balance, and stress commonalities rather than the differences that have arisen with modern statehood, including tension over its very name—should it be the Persian or Arabian Gulf?

The unique identity of the Gulf has been well-defined since antiquity. Based on the archaeological record, Daniel Potts concludes that the Gulf “cannot be viewed as a mere appendage of, for example, Mesopotamia or Iran . . . from a very early date, the region has had an identity which was apparent to its neighbours as it was to its inhabitants.”

The Gulf world differs from the region we have come to call the Middle East in its physical, economic, and social aspects. It is set apart by physical barriers—mountains to the north and east, marshes at its head, and forbidding deserts to the south. In the past, people living on its shores had closer relations with each other than with those living in

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Figure 1: The Persian Gulf Cultural World
the interior, which is typical of littoral societies. For millennia it was a region characterized by the constant interchange of people, commerce, and religious movements. Before the modern era, peoples of the region shared a maritime culture based on pearling, fishing, and long-distance trade, and were part of an interlinked system that included agricultural villages and oases that sustained the caravan trade.

Traditional Society in the Gulf

Who, then, are the Khalijis (from *khaliṣ*, Gulf)? Historically, they are the descendants of the Ichthyophagi, the “fish eaters” mentioned by Greek and Latin writers, who lived all around the coasts of the Erythrean Sea—the northwest part of the Indian Ocean, including the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, southern Iran, and India. Like the Ichthyophagi, they share a similar lifestyle but not a common identity, except perhaps in the eyes of outsiders. In some historical periods, however, when both sides of the Gulf were ruled by the same Arab shaikhs or tribes, a sense of common identity may have been stronger. Thus, the kingdom of Hormuz included Qalhat (in Oman) as virtually a second capital, and later Bahrain was ruled by Iran under the Safavids (1501–1732), and again from 1753 to 1783. Oman leased large portions of the Iranian coast around Bandar Abbas for eight decades down to 1869, while the Qawasim controlled the ports of Bandar Lingeh in Iran, as well as Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah on the Arabian coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They freely moved back and forth until the Tehran government, in line with its policy of reclaiming its own Gulf littoral, ultimately evicted them in 1887.

The preoccupation of the Khalijis, past and present, has been business. Probably due to limited local resources Gulf residents have been renowned merchants since ancient times, when trade routes linked the Sealand (southern Mesopotamia), Dilmun (Bahrain), Magan (Oman), and the Indus area.

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4 Michael N. Pearson notes: “Location on the shore transcends differing influences from an inland that is very diverse, both in geographic and cultural terms, so that the shore folk have more in common with other shore folk thousands of kilometers away on some other shore of the ocean than they do with those in their immediate hinterland. Surat and Mombasa have more in common with each other than they do with inland cities such as Nairobi or Ahmedabad,” in “Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems,” *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006): 353–54.


As illustrated by Villiers, who journeyed in a Kuwaiti dhow to East Africa, in modern times merchant families arose in the Gulf that dispatched family members to far-flung parts of the Indian Ocean to manage their interests; a web of such merchants knitted together the trade of the Indian Ocean and operated efficiently in the absence of European interference, down to World War II. The family studied by Onley had outposts in Basra, Bushehr, Shiraz, Manama, Muscat, Mocha, Hudaydah, and Bombay. The success of Dubai today as a center for commerce and tourism rests on solid precedent. As Izady suggests, “the modern glittering shopping malls of Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Kish, Manama, and the like are just a modern version of what centuries ago the commercial centers such as Hormuz, Cong, Cameron, Basra, Siraf, Khat/Qatif, Suhar, and Muscat must have looked like.”

The Gulf and the Indian Ocean

The Gulf region was oriented outward, toward the Indian Ocean, and was part of a cosmopolitan world of mixed race, religion, and ethnicity. A historic lack of borders, a multiplicity of identities, and the considerable autonomy that Gulf ports enjoyed until recent times led to a hybrid society that was unlike other parts of the Middle East.

An obvious difference was the absence of a settled peasantry (except in Bahrain, al-Hasa, Oman, and at the head of the Gulf around the Shatt al-Arab) and the low level of urbanization. Whereas most people in Iran and Arabia were tied to the land and oasis-based agriculture, the Khalijis were tied to the sea, and they could easily move if dissatisfied. In a region where boats and not land constituted capital, it was easy for people to sail away and re-establish themselves elsewhere, and there was little a ruler could do to stop it. The Gulf was noted for the mobility of merchant capital, and merchants frequently relocated if the terms of trade were better.

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11 To cite a well-known example, when in 1910 Shaikh Mubarak of Kuwait demanded higher payments, the three leading pearl fishermen deserted with their several hundred boats, which was a crippling blow to the local economy and the prestige of the shaikh. They defected to Bahrain, and stayed there until the shaikh made concessions to ensure their return. For more on this, see Salwa Alghanim, *The Reign of Mubarak Al-Sabah: Shaikh of Kuwait 1896–1915* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 146–48.
The Gulf also had something lacking in other areas: the hope of striking it rich and the incentive to work hard to do so. The prospect of finding a valuable pearl, however improbable, gave hope to the impoverished pearl divers and sent them back to the sea year after year until they collapsed physically.\(^{13}\) Significantly, nobody owned the pearl beds and anyone from the region was free to fish them and perhaps realize his fortune. Likewise, the prospect of profitable voyages induced thousands of men to depart the Gulf annually in dhows throughout the Indian Ocean. There was uncertainty of reward, but hope that it would be forthcoming.\(^{14}\) All this was very different from peasants living in grinding poverty in Persian villages or Bedouin tribesmen trying to wrest a livelihood from the Arabian deserts. The spirit of possibility that still animates the Gulf provided an incentive missing elsewhere.

The Gulf also differed from landlocked empires and dynasties of the Middle East in that, while in many senses it constituted a distinct region, it has been united under the same political leadership only rarely in history—notable examples being the (Persian) Sasanians in the pre-Islamic period and the kingdom of Hormuz in the 1300s and 1400s. Hormuz, indeed, is an excellent example of a thalassocracy (sea rule, from the Greek thalassa, sea), as first described by Thucydides in the fifth century B.C. The amirs of Kish Island in the twelfth century C.E. and the Qasimi tribal confederation in the nineteenth century are other examples of the type of local maritime polities that typically controlled and contested parts of the Gulf. The rise and fall of ports in the Gulf has been a feature throughout its history, and has been affected by political, economic, and geographical conditions. The usual situation has been for powerful city-states or port cities to rise and fall, with none dominating the others.\(^{15}\) Historically, regional powers, including states based on the Iranian plateau, or those that controlled parts of the Arabian peninsula or Mesopotamia, rarely exercised effective control over the Gulf littoral.

Over the past 500 years, an outside power has usually dominated the Gulf. In the era of imperial intrusion, the Portuguese were the first to arrive, and controlled the area around the Strait of Hormuz as well as Bahrain from the early sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. Other outside powers, including the Dutch (in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the


\(^{14}\) On the mindset of the sailors, see Villiers, “Some Aspects of the Arab Dhow Trade,” 407–08 and 416.

\(^{15}\) Potter, “The Rise and Fall of Port Cities in the Persian Gulf,” 131–32.
Ottomans (in the sixteenth/seventeenth and nineteenth/twentieth centuries), later controlled parts of the Gulf in turn. Only the British dominated the entire Gulf region and governed it as one unit during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Gulf has always been a key international trade route connecting the Middle East to East Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and China. The port cities probably maintained more regular ties with trading partners in the Indian Ocean than with distant inland capital cities such as Tehran or Baghdad. And as has been pointed out by Abdul Sheriff, trade is not only an economic activity. The very lifestyle in the Gulf was strongly affected by its exchanges with India and Africa. India supplied timber for shipbuilding, rice for eating, and cotton cloth for wearing. Material culture such as architecture also reflected India’s influence.

One of the most significant limitations was the lack of wood. Although this was a ship-building society, the lumber to build them was imported from India or East Africa, and cut according to the instructions of the dhow-builders in Kuwait and other places. The lack of wood also affected the architecture and town structure. The ceilings of houses on both sides of the Gulf were made of mangrove poles obtained from East Africa, which determined the size of the rooms. This was the case, for example, at the fortress at Siraf on the Iranian coast, built in the early twentieth century. In the travelogue of his voyage to East Africa before World War II, seaman Alan Villiers reports that his ship picked up 6,000 mangrove poles to be used for a palace in Riyadh for King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud.

Because of the long layovers in port while waiting for the opposite monsoon to return home, many Arab sailors took local wives. As their family networks stretched throughout the region, cultures became fused, with the culture of the Gulf reflecting that of the Indian Ocean. The extensive business, family, and social connections helped to create a “brotherhood of the sea.”

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19 Alan Villiers, Sons of Sinbad (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1940; reprint 1969), 300–03.
The Role of Climate

The harsh physical environment has played a profound role in shaping society in the Gulf, as similar climatic conditions led to related material culture, architecture, dress, and diet. As noted by historian Frauke Heard-Bey, “when one studies the climatic conditions and the geographical environment, it becomes obvious that for the tribal societies of the Arabian coasts and the hinterland of the Gulf, survival was a challenge and an achievement. It often meant that families had to combine a number of economic pursuits.”

Gulf ports depended on nearby cities and regions to supply them with the basic necessities of life, including food, water, and firewood. Kuwait had to import everything it needed. This typically led to exchanges of products produced in different climatic zones. For example, in the Ras al-Khaimah area, “there was a deficit of dry dates, tamr, and on the coasts, of grain; people inland obviously did not produce their own fresh or salt fish.” A member of the Shihuh tribe living in Dibba observed, “families on the coast and in the mountains needed each other; we had dates and fish, they had grain and animals, and we gave each other presents.”

Housing for most people along the Arab coast and southern Iranian littoral consisted of simple huts made of palm fronds (Arabic, barasti; Persian, kapar). These were the most effective adaptation to a hot, damp climate. In Dubai, many people lived in barasti houses well into the 1960s, and in Oman, until the mid-1970s or later. “These houses were the nearest thing to a bedouin tent among the settled people: they could if necessary be dismantled and removed to another place,” according to

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23 William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster, Honour is in Contentment: Life Before Oil in Ras al-Khaimah (UAE) and Some Neighbouring Regions (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 239.
24 Ibid., 243.
Lienhardt. More substantial buildings on the coast were constructed of coral rock (Arabic faroush or hasa; Persian sang-i marjan).

A Culture of Migration

If one thing characterized the Gulf and south Arabia, it was the constant emigration of people to other parts of the Indian Ocean basin. Poor ecological conditions, along with the changing political and economic situation (e.g. greater traffic through the Red Sea at the expense of the Gulf in some periods) made it hard for the Gulf to support all its people. Migration, either temporary or permanent, became a way of life. Aside from the Gulf proper, neighboring areas such as the Hadhramawt and Baluchistan were historically large exporters of manpower. The first sent merchants, mercenaries, and religious luminaries to the Malay world, southwest India, and to East Africa, while many Baluch emigrated to the Arab side of the Gulf to be employed as mercenaries. The ease of circulation before the twentieth century was notable, especially in light of the contemporary obsession with state citizenship.

It was common for tribes to migrate, both over their home range (Arabic, dirah) on land and from one side of the Gulf to the other. For example, drought conditions in the interior helped push Arabian tribes toward the coast in the late eighteenth century, where new dynasties and states were founded: the Al Sabah established themselves in Kuwait in the early 1700s and became its rulers in 1752. Those under the leadership of the Al Khalifa migrated to Zubara (on the northwest coast of Qatar) in 1766 and ultimately came to rule over Bahrain in 1782.

There was also a pull factor due to favorable ecological conditions on the Iranian coast, which always attracted Arab settlers. In the eleventh century many Arabs moved from the Omani coast to southern Iran where they established the city of (old) Hormuz. In the period after Nadir Shah’s death in 1747, a decades-long political struggle ensued in Iran during which there was no strong central

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government, and the southern ports were largely autonomous. The German traveler Carsten Niebuhr, who visited the region in the 1760s, remarked that “the Arabs possess all the sea-coast of the Persian empire, from the mouths of the Euphrates, nearly to those of the Indus.”  

This autonomy is exemplified by the Hawala, groups of Sunni Arabs who migrated from Oman and the eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula to the Iranian side of the Gulf, between Bushehr and Bandar Abbas, probably starting in the sixteenth century. Their heyday was in the eighteenth century. They settled in a number of cities on the Persian side and engaged in fishing, pearl diving, trade, and sometimes maritime warfare. Persian shahs and the imams of Muscat at times hired them to supply troops and transport for their interventions. They eventually returned to the Arab side, especially after the discovery of oil and Reza Shah’s imposition of unpopular policies, such as trade restrictions, increased taxes, military conscription, and the ban on veiling, in the 1920s and 1930s. Such Hawala, who were at ease on either side of the Gulf, were Khalijis par excellence. In the early 1900s, Hawala were living in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Hasa, and on the island of Sirri.

Brides of the Sea

Any history of the Gulf will necessarily focus on its port cities, those “brides of the sea” that connected the Gulf region to the Indian Ocean and the wider world. A problem hindering understanding is that, so far, few Gulf ports have been studied. For the Iranian side, Bushehr, Bandar Lingeh, Bandar Abbas, and Khark Island have been examined by Willem Floor. There are now excellent historical treatments of Manama by Nelida Fuccaro and Kuwait by Farah Al-Nakib, which seek to situate them in comparative context, and an important

Figure 2: Port Cities in the Persian Gulf
historical gazetteer of Muscat by John Peterson. The ongoing Origins of Doha Project is a significant contribution to our understanding of the urbanization process in the Gulf region. The initial results of this multidisciplinary, landmark study have appeared recently. Using GIS (geographic information system) data, the growth of Doha, founded as a pearl fishing town in the early nineteenth century, has been mapped between 1823 and 1956, with its various districts (firjān, sing. farīj) located. Interestingly, Doha was found to be less cosmopolitan than most other Gulf and Omani ports, partly because Indians and other British subjects were effectively excluded until the late 1940s. It also never became an entrepôt for other parts of the Gulf.

Challenging environmental conditions, geographic barriers between the coastal and interior towns, and lack of water made these cities dependent on the sea for their prosperity and livelihood. There were many similarities between port cities besides their maritime orientation, such as hybrid populations including diaspora communities, mixed ethnicities, multilingual people, and an emphasis on mercantile activities.

The Gulf has probably always been ethnically mixed. Arabs were predominant on the Arabian littoral and parts of the Iranian shore (especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and Persians were present in significant numbers on both sides. Many other tribal or communal groups made up the picture, including Indian traders, Baluch laborers, Hawala merchants, and African slaves.

The ports in the Gulf were part of a network of other ports in the western Indian Ocean (Zanzibar, Mombasa, Lamu, Massawa, Mocha, Aden, Bombay, Mangalore, and Calicut) and the eastern Indian Ocean (Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai). This suggests that similar approaches in studying them may be fruitful. There was, however, a big difference, in that the Gulf ports remained small and never developed into European colonial port cities. The Gulf ports


37 Ibid., 459–60.


had tiny European populations, and during the period of British domination the number of resident Britons was very restricted. As Onley has demonstrated, they ruled by coopting a network of native agents, especially merchants, to assist them, and did not interfere too much in internal matters.\textsuperscript{40} 

\textit{Port City Cosmopolitanism}

Even though recent archaeological research has demonstrated that earlier Gulf cities such as Julfar and Zubara were capable of rapid, planned expansion, until the rise of pearling revenues in the nineteenth century fueled urbanization, port cities were relatively small.\textsuperscript{41} Around 1900, the largest towns on the Gulf littoral were on the Arab side, with the population of Kuwait about 35,000, Manama 25,000, Muharraq 20,000, and Dubai 10,000. On the Iranian side, Bushehr is estimated at 15,000–18,000, Bandar Lingeh 8,000–10,000, and Bandar Abbas 5,000–8,000. Outside the Gulf proper, Basra had 40,000 and Muscat around 8,000.\textsuperscript{42}

One age-old characteristic of port cities in the Gulf and Indian Ocean was the varied human mix. As theorized by Rhoads Murphey, the geographer and historian, “port functions, more than anything else, make a city cosmopolitan, a word which does not necessarily mean ‘sophisticated’ but rather hybrid. A port city is open to the world, or at least to a varied section of it. In it races, cultures, and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix, and enrich each other and the life of the city.”\textsuperscript{43} This is the key to understanding Gulf society.

A hybrid Arab–Persian culture flourished in the Gulf for many centuries. According to the tenth-century geographer Muqaddasi, in the port of Suhar (modern Oman) Persian was spoken, while in Aden and Jiddah the majority of people were Persian but their language was Arabic.\textsuperscript{44} At the same time in Khuzistan the people “often blend their Persian with the Arabic. . . .You do not find them speaking in Persian without changing to Arabic; and when


\textsuperscript{44} Al-Muqaddasi, \textit{The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions (Aḥsān al-Taqāsīm fi Maʿrifat al-Aqālīm)}, trans. Basil Anthony Collins, reviewed by Mohammad Hamid Al’ta’i (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing for The Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilisation, 1994), 89.
they speak in one of the two languages you would not realize they knew the other one well.”

Hormuz in medieval travel accounts was legendary for its human diversity.

The descriptions of port cities in Lorimer’s great compendium of the early twentieth century make their hybrid nature very clear. During his visit to Bandar Lengeh in 1863, Lewis Pelly notes that “the wealthier class are Persianised Arabs,” although the bulk of the population appeared to be African. This is a reminder of the large role that slavery played in the Gulf, especially in the nineteenth century, and the fact that many pearl divers were slaves. At the time of his visit to the same city in 1889–90, George Curzon, Viceroy of India at the time, remarked, “the population of the place is partly Arab, partly Persian, partly African, partly that nameless hybrid mixture that is found in every maritime town east of Port Said.”

With hybridity came a certain level of mutual acceptance. Towns such as Kuwait were marked by social tolerance and a lack of religious strife. The Islam practiced there was not the austere Wahhabi version, which highlights the difference between inland and the coast. As Al-Nakib relates, “people were not obligated to subsume their own traditions and backgrounds in order to fit into one consensual, mono-vocal cultural identity. The multiplicity of languages, tastes, and styles was precisely what created the social life and cultural milieu of Kuwait as a port town. Its very identity was the fact that it was a hybrid place, and from this . . . emerged a tolerant and open society.”

She attributes this to the difficulty of life before oil and the need for mutual support. However, the situation in Kuwait, which was a predominantly tribal society with few Shi’a and no Indian merchants, differed from that of other Gulf ports, such as Manama.

Commerce in the Gulf was regularly conducted in a multilingual fashion. In Bahrain, “a familiarity with Arabic, English, Farsi and Hindi were prerequisites for the commercial and political success of the upper echelons of Manama’s

47 Lorimer, Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, ‘Omān and Central Arabia.
50 See Al-Nakib, Kuwait Transformed, chapter 3, “A Cosmopolitan Community.”
51 Al-Nakib, Kuwait Transformed, 75.
notability.” Oman had perhaps the most diverse society in the Gulf, a place where in the early twentieth century fourteen languages might be heard in the souqs of Muscat and Matrah. The Political Agent enumerated the languages:

Arabic is spoken by the natives of the country; Persian by some natives of Persia who have settled recently in Oman for trade purposes as well as by some families who are of Persian extraction and whose residence dates from the Persian occupation of Maskat; Biluchi by the Biluch fishermen and others who form the majority of the servant class throughout the State; English by the Political agent and his staff, also by certain Goanese and other merchants; French by the French Consul and certain Belgian arms merchants; Swahaili by the Negro slaves and their relatives; Somali by natives of Somaliland who visit the Oman shores yearly in search of dates, etc.; Hindustani by the large bulk of the educated population; Sindi by the Hindu merchants from Sind and by the Khoja community who have within the last century settled in Oman and are rapidly coming to be regarded as part of the Arab population; Gujarati by a number of Hindu traders from the southern part of Bombay Presidency, the residence of some of whom in Oman dates back for 150 years, possibly more; Portuguese or Goanese by the Goanese population, merchants, domestic servants, etc., who number a dozen souls or more; Pushtu by Biluch and Afghan arms’ dealers who are still to be met with occasionally in the bazaars; Armenian and Turkish by the Armenian merchants and secretaries and by a few Turkish soldiers who having deserted from the Turkish army operating in Yemen have migrated east and taken service under the sympathetic ruler of Oman.

Arabic was commonly spoken along the Iranian littoral south of Bushehr, and also predominated in the southwestern Iranian province of Arabistan, now called Khuzistan. (Today ethnic Persians are believed to predominate in this province). On the southern shore, especially in Bahrain and Dubai, expatriate communities of Iranians speak Persian. In post-World War II Bahrain, British diplomat Sir Rupert Hay reported that “the Persians can, nearly all, speak Arabic fluently, but few Arabs will admit to a knowledge of Persian.”

52 Fuccaro, Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf, 63.
A Tolerant Gulf?

The fact that Gulf ports had cosmopolitan societies is well attested, and many writers have assumed that this fostered a measure of mutual tolerance. Although this may be generally true, the relationship between cosmopolitanism and tolerance has been little investigated. It may depend on time and place. The greatest port in Gulf history was the island of Hormuz, which flourished from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Religious tolerance and freedom prevailed; although the king was Sunni his vizier was Shi‘i and there was a large Shi‘a community there, as well as Christians, Jews, and Hindus.55 A Portuguese visitor in 1549 commented that in Hormuz, God was celebrated four times a week—by the Muslims on Friday, the Jews on Saturday, the Christians on Sunday, and the Hindus on Monday.56

There are some red flags in the literature, however, about various Gulf ports, as well as examples of intolerance and factional conflict in Indian Ocean ports, especially those in Africa, which indicate caution about such a conclusion.57 Racial strife in colonial African port cities was significant at times and, in Zanzibar, culminated in deadly riots against the Arab elite in the early 1960s.58 Glassman points out that the process of building a racial state and an ethnic hierarchy in Zanzibar with Omani Arabs at the top and slaves at the bottom started with the Omani conquest and not European rule.59

In Middle Eastern history one of the main functions of the ruler was to keep different factions in line and in their station in society, so as to prevent strife and preserve order. Gulf ports in the pre-modern period often did not have strong rulers, as a traditional Arab shaikh was reckoned as first among equals, bound to consult his tribesmen before taking action. One would expect that factional strife could explode, and sometimes it did. According to Fuccaro, “the political supremacy of tribes and the absence of centralised administrations set them [the towns of the Arab coast] apart from the ports

57 I am grateful to Professor Fahad Bishara for sharing his insights and suggesting sources on this subject.
59 Glassman, War of Words, 735.
under Ottoman and Qajar control, contributing to the instability of local
government and to the precariousness of urban public security. The tension
between mercantile communities, immigrants and tribesmen, often the only
militarised segments of urban society, compounded by infighting among
ruling families, accentuated their political disunity.”

She has a whole chapter on disorder in the public sphere in Bahrain in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries, commenting that “random acts of violence could easily
ignite intercommunal conflict [between Persians and Arabs].”

Perhaps the largest group of outsiders in the Gulf, especially at
Muscat and Bahrain, was Indians, mostly Hindu and Muslim traders.
They were easily identified by distinctive garb and were to some extent self-
contained communities who could provide financial backing to merchants,
dhow captains, and ruling families. Their financial success, however, could
make them targets of attack. For example, Bose relates stories of deadly
competition in Qatar and Qatif in the late nineteenth century between
Arabs and Persians and Indian traders, who appealed to the British agent
for protection. There are examples of local rulers expelling Indians because
of commercial rivalry, for example in Doha in the early 1880s and at Kuwait
in the early 1900s. A new imam who came to power in Muscat in 1868
had an intolerant attitude toward non-Muslims, leading to an exodus of
Indians. Onley’s research has revealed, however, that Hindu wives and
daughters of merchants were found throughout the lower Gulf in the late
nineteenth century, indicating it was regarded as a safe place for them.

The Iranian ports also experienced periods of strife, and attitudes
toward minorities could shift over time. In Bushehr, “whereas the Sunni
majority did not seem to have been hostile to the Shiite minority in the
early nineteenth century, the Shiites, when they overtook the Sunnis in
number behaved in a rather hostile manner towards their fellow Sunni
townsmen.” The population of Bandar Abbas, mostly of mixed Arab,
Persian, African, and Baluch descent, on the other hand did not seem to

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60 Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State*, 71.
61 Ibid., 153; see, also, chapter 5.
62 James Onley, “Indian Communities in the Persian Gulf, c. 1500–1947,” in The Persian Gulf in
Modern Times: People, Ports, and History, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,
2014), 242–43.
63 Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 2006), 79.
64 Onley, “Indian Communities in the Persian Gulf,” 247.
65 Ibid., 248.
66 Ibid., 251–52.
have a problem with racial tensions, and racial tolerance was the hallmark there.\textsuperscript{68} At Bandar Lingeh, in the early nineteenth century there were few Shi’a, but by 1880 they were prominent there and had a special bazaar.\textsuperscript{69} In 1900 they constituted an estimated 20 percent of the Muslim population, and by 1922 there were 5,000 Shi’a and 8,000 Sunnis, and reasonable harmony prevailed.\textsuperscript{70}

\textit{The Rise of Pearling Cities}

The emergence of the Wahhabi religious movement in Najd in the mid-eighteenth century coincided with widespread ‘Utubi tribal migrations, probably hastened by drought, to the Gulf coast. Their settlement of Kuwait, Zubara, and Bahrain led to competition with the established ports of Basra, Bushehr, and Muscat. The rapid rise of new regional emporia was a magnet for Arabian tribesmen and merchants, who for example deserted Basra and flocked to Zubara. As Hala Fattah has demonstrated, the key to their success was that they were free ports with no customs duties.\textsuperscript{71} This was a major difference from the Ottoman port of Basra or the Persian port of Bushehr, and shifted much trade to the southern part of the Gulf. Nelida Fuccaro attributes the port towns that took shape in the Gulf in the second half of the nineteenth century to a resurgence of tribal power, large revenues from pearling that spurred the urbanization process, and British military protection.\textsuperscript{72}

As cities prospered economically, there was a transformation in power relations between rulers and people. Shaikhs had traditionally been considered the first among equals, and governed with the consultation and consent of the rich merchants. Historically, the removal from power of ruling shaikhs had not been unusual and there was a regular turnover.\textsuperscript{73} However, with the guarantee of British protection and dynastic continuation, shaikhs felt less need to consult their subjects and became more autocratic. The age-old

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 14 and 23.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{72} Fuccaro, “Pearl Towns and Early Oil Cities.” See, also, Fuccaro, “Rethinking the History of Port Cities in the Gulf,” 30–31.
tension between settled society (hadar) and tribesmen (bedu) lessened in the rapidly urbanizing port cities.74

Because of the rapid growth of these cities due to strong demand for pearls and dates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was considerable labor migration from Persia to the Arabian side. Fuccaro highlights the importance of Persians to the development of Manama from the nineteenth century until the promulgation of the Nationality and Property Law in 1937.75 Most immigrants arrived from coastal cities in Iran between the 1860s and early 1920s, and the majority were Shi‘a, particularly from the Bushehr area. She speculates that many were pushed out by famine and disease, as well as by high tariffs on food imports and local political

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75 Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf*, 123.
instability. Many merchants came and created a demand for better-quality goods. There were numerous communal organizations for Persians, above all the ma’tams (Shi’i houses of mourning). Poor Persian peasants also arrived in large numbers to do menial work and participate in the pearling industry, thereby swelling Manama’s population. Affluent residential districts, such as ‘Awadiyyah in Bahrain and Bastakiyya in Dubai, were built by Iranian immigrants and distinguished by Persian architectural features such as badgir (known in Dubai as barjeel) or wind towers.

The migration process from southwestern Iran to Kuwait in the period 1880 to 1938, as studied by Mohammad al-Habib, emphasized the attractions of moving: Kuwait was politically stable, allowed Shi’a to practice their rites, and had a thriving merchant community and demand for labor. At the same time, conditions in southwest Iran were politically unstable, there was a lack of work, and it was prone to frequent climatic disasters such as drought. Kuwait had intensive trade relations with Basra, Muhammarah, Bandar Daylam, Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, Manama, and Muscat, facilitated by networks of Shi’i families and friends. Many Kuwaiti surnames were the same as those of Iranian villages or districts, and there were similar naming patterns in Bahrain.

Although most research based on British records has emphasized the Gulf’s connection to India, there was also a great deal of intra-Gulf trade. Persian ports provided much of Kuwait’s needs in the nineteenth century, reports Yacoub Al-Hijji: “From the Persian coast near Hindijan they imported wheat; from Bushehr they imported dried fruits and other articles; and from the Shatt-al-Arab waterway they bought dates, vegetables, fruits and other essential items.” Kuwaiti dhows brought their goods to the ports of Bushehr and Muhammarah, while they transported Iranian (and Iraqi) dates to India. Al-Hijji speaks highly of the contribution made by Persian workers from Behbahan, Bushehr, Kangan, and Kish Island. He emphasizes the mixing of cultures that resulted from the influx of Iranian workers into Kuwait, and observes that the Arabic language there was peppered with Persian. The number of Persians was at first relatively small: Lorimer reports that in 1904, Persians made up 3 percent of the population of Kuwait. From 1910 on, however, due to the high wages in this boomtown, there was a large influx of “Persian artisans and laborers.”

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The Transformation of Society after Oil

In the twentieth century, the historic ties that connected the people of the Gulf littoral were curtailed. With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the re-drawing of the map of the Middle East, and the rise of modernizing leaders in Iran (Reza Shah) and Arabia (Ibn Sa'ud) after World War I, nationalism became the dominant ideology. The issue of whether one was an Iranian, an Iraqi, or a Saudi became important as new states promoted new identities. Borders were imposed and movement began to be regulated by means of passports and identity cards. By the mid- and late-twentieth century, states had become the dominant factor in regional relations, although they were sometimes challenged by political movements or ideologies such as pan-Arabism and socialism, as well as transnational groups, including radical Sunni and Shi’i factions.

The discovery of oil led to major political, economic, and social changes in the Persian Gulf. Oil was first discovered in Iran in 1908, in Iraq in 1927, in Bahrain in 1932, and in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 1938. Commercial quantities of oil were discovered in Qatar and Abu Dhabi in 1960, in Oman in 1962; and in Dubai in 1966. Exports became significant after World War II, and led to a major change in power relations between the different groups that constituted local society.

Ruling dynasties now had a reliable source of income from the oil concessions that freed them from financial dependence on the merchants. Around the time this was happening, in the 1930s, many merchants were suffering due to the collapse of the market for pearls. As first noted by Jill Crystal, the merchants’ role now changed, as they traded influence for assured economic success thanks to favorable government policies. This led to a more powerful role for royal families, upsetting the previous social balance.79

In the past, the majority of people in the Gulf had a similar lifestyle and struggled economically to survive: as Heard-Bey recalls, “until the 1950s the whole area showed a homogeneous social background, with some richer merchant communities as in Bahrain or Muscat being only marginally more conditioned by outside influences.”80 As oil revenues rolled in, in the 1960s and 1970s, the windfall was redistributed to citizens

80 Heard-Bey, *Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates and the Gulf Region*, 22.
of the recently independent states. The sudden prosperity in the Gulf seemed like a dream to the people: as related by anthropologist Mandana Limbert, in Oman since 1970 people have been living in a “dreamtime” of oil. They fear the current period may turn out to be a temporary one, between the realities of political instability and poverty.\textsuperscript{81}

The newfound prosperity led to a culture of entitlement, and an increasing differentiation between citizens and migrant workers, who formed a majority of the population in the smaller states. It also led to the rise of what has come to be called the “ruling bargain” between subjects and rulers in the Gulf monarchies: as long as the government took care of people’s needs, including employment, housing, education, and health care, and did not tax them, they would acquiesce in the ruling families’ monopoly on government. The Arab uprisings of 2011, the drastic reduction in oil revenues since 2014, and widespread addiction to social media by the youth, leading to a better-informed population, have made clear that this ruling bargain must be reformulated. Governments can no longer restrict the flow of information, nor can they afford to coopt their populations or permanently exclude them from meaningful participation in the affairs of state.\textsuperscript{82}

\textit{The Politics of Gulf Identity}

One of the characteristics of the Gulf is that it has always been a creole area—an arena of mixed descent, where the line between Arab and Persian was not clearly drawn.\textsuperscript{83} Many people were bilingual and related to those on the other side. In this region, as elsewhere, individuals had multiple identities any of which could be activated depending upon the circumstances. Aside from Arab, the most important historic ethnicity was the ‘Ajam, the generic term in the Gulf for Persians or Persian speakers.\textsuperscript{84} Beeman makes the case that today, as opposed

\textsuperscript{81} Mandana E. Limbert, \textit{In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3 and 11.

\textsuperscript{82} For an update on the “ruling bargain” and how it is now being replaced by a new social contract, see Mehran Kamrava, “The Rise and Fall of Ruling Bargains in the Middle East,” in \textit{Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East}, ed. Mehran Kamrava (London: Hurst, 2014), 17–45; and “The Social Contract in the GCC,” Middle East and North Africa Programme Workshop Summary (London: Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, January 11–12, 2016).


\textsuperscript{84} C. E. Bosworth, “‘Ajam,” in \textit{Encyclopaedia Iranica} I (1985): 700–01. The term was often used in a pejorative sense in medieval Arabic literature to refer to non-Arabs of the Islamic empire, particularly the Persians.
to a constructed and “imagined” community typical of many states, the Gulf “is an ‘unimagined’ community—a community in fact, but not in name and not in its social identification.” He notes the similarity in lifestyle of communities all around the Gulf littoral, and the tradition of unfettered movement, and invokes the concept of an inclusive Khaliji identity that separates them from others living inland. This is more relevant historically than today, where in Iran coastal people identify as Iranians and do not embrace a Gulf-wide identity. In cities on the Iranian coast such as Gavbandi the term khaliji refers to Iranian migrant workers in the GCC states.

In the past, identity in the Middle East was local and typically derived from tribe, place, and religion, although since the twentieth century state citizenship has increasingly become the most important identity. Up to around fifty years ago the transnational aspect of Gulf society, as evident in historic photos of people wearing varied garb, was much more pronounced than at present. As Onley explains, “In contrast to Gulf merchant families today, a nineteenth-century transnational family did not have to Arabize to gain acceptance and become influential. . . . The result was a blending of cultures into a complex transnational family identity.”

Since the founding of the GCC in 1981, another broader regional identity with political resonance, referred to as “Khaliji,” has developed in the Arab states of the Gulf. This is a realignment of the term as traditionally understood (and reflected in Beeman’s formulation) that is meant to offer a counter identity that excludes Iran. It reflects a common heritage and lifestyle as well as a political bond, and is an alternative to identities states try to discourage, such as radical Islamism or Arab nationalism.

Today, the GCC states seek to instill a strong sense of national identity that disregards the historic cosmopolitanism of the region and results in dividing rather than uniting people. Except in the case of Oman, this draws mainly on the Bedouin heritage that has played an important role in the Gulf

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87 Onley, “Transnational Merchants in the Nineteenth–Century Gulf,” 79.
since the eighteenth century, but only became a political imperative since the rise of the oil state. The “monoculture of oil,” in the words of Fattah, “eventually impacted the memory of a connected history.”

Because of its ancient history and well-established cultural heritage there was no need to promote an Iranian identity in the same way as in the new Gulf states. However, under the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–79) a strong effort was made to centralize the rule of Tehran and get people to identify with and support the Persian-dominated and Shi‘i-controlled state, which often downplayed minority, tribal, and regional identities. Likewise in Iraq, from the 1920s to about 1990, governments placed a high priority on instilling a national identity that deemphasized differences between the largest sectarian communities, the Arab Shi‘a, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds.

State-Sponsored History

All regional states manipulate the politics of identity, which has led to a manipulation of history itself and contributed to serious sectarian tensions in the present day. Ethnic and sectarian strife is not inevitable but results from political strategies of states to divide and rule. The idea that identities are immutable is part of the problem. As anthropologist Lois Beck notes, “identity is fluid and malleable for the individual and changes over a lifetime and according to context. Certain aspects of identity rise in importance and expression over time while others recede.”

To create and reinforce identity, all the Gulf states have prioritized re-writing their history. And with good reason: as George Orwell has observed, “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.” In order to promote an “official version” of their past, Gulf states are promoting the heritage industry and investing in new museums to tell their story.

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The result of state-sponsored history, as presented in school textbooks and tourism brochures, as well as museum exhibits, is a skewed portrayal of the pre-oil Gulf, with a loss of the diversity and ambiguity that characterized it. Thus, the Bedouin heritage is emphasized to the exclusion of other elements. For example, in the Dubai Museum, mannequins depicting shopkeepers in the souq are clearly Arab, whereas we know from eyewitnesses that in the 1950s in Dubai and Abu Dhabi they were mainly Indians and Persians. As Lienhardt observed in the early 1950s, retail trade was not traditionally considered to be a noble profession by the Arabs; wholesale trade was more respectable and the most prestigious were major pearl merchants. Museum exhibits and displays in most Gulf cities feature images of distinctly non-African individuals performing tasks, such as working in the date groves of the Batinah (Oman), that historically were performed by Africans, which silences their contribution.

Slavery was at its height in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when there was strong demand for labor in the pearling and date industries. Around 1900, Africans constituted a significant minority of the coastal population from Oman to Kuwait. Slavery’s obvious legacy is the presence today of many people of African ancestry on both sides of the Gulf. Aside from hard work, they have contributed much to the popular culture of the Gulf in terms of sports, African-influenced music, and spiritual practices such as zar. This African heritage, however, has been obscured as they have been assimilated into local societies. Today they do not identify as Africans, but as Arabs or Iranians, and speak Arabic or Persian.

The first and only Museum of Slavery in the Gulf opened in Doha in 2017. Housed in an old slave trader’s home, the Bin Jelmood House is part of the Msheireb Museums and will undoubtedly stir up further discussion of this aspect of local heritage. One gallery tells the story of slavery and the slave trade in Qatar, acknowledging that in the nineteenth century the pearling industry was

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100 Ibid., 329–31.
the largest employer of slaves. Modern-day human trafficking and exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf are also addressed. The museum, funded by the state, is an admirable first step, although its narrative represents the “official story.”

In the 1970s, as Bahrain benefited from the oil boom, many of the historic communities such as the Baharna (Arab Shi’a), Persians, and Indians left Manama, and the previous cosmopolitan traditions were lost. All around the Gulf, the pre-oil history and architecture of Gulf cities is being obscured and destroyed, although there now are movements afoot, such as in Sharjah, Bahrain, and Doha, to restore historic buildings. This has been accompanied by a “name game” in the urge to Arabize. In Doha, the traditional shopping area that used to be called Souq al-Farsi (Persian Souq) was replaced with an alternative name, Souq al-Waqqi’ (Standing Souq), which had applied to part of the area, after renovations were completed in 2008, thus removing the association with Iran. In Dubai, the historic Bastakiya quarter where Persians lived now has been recreated as a tourist site and renamed the “Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood,” after the nearby eighteenth-century fort of the ruling family.

In the Gulf monarchies, the Shi’a, despite their numbers, have been written out of the official narrative. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shi’i communities cherish the myth of a “golden age” before their conquest by Sunni or Wahhabi outsiders. They are not permitted to serve in the police and army, which has opened a role for neighboring Sunnis, especially the Baluch, in Gulf militaries. Ironically, while often regarded by (Sunni)
Gulf monarchies as a dangerous political bloc, in actuality the Gulf Shi’i communities are very diverse and have a limited sympathy for Iran, except perhaps in Bahrain and Saudi. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, there has been a regional perception of the growing empowerment of Iran and its Shi’i allies at the expense of Sunni Arabs. This has now led to a virtual “cold war” and the outbreak of what are widely regarded as proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria and Yemen.

The way the majority treats minorities is also an issue in Iran and Iraq. According to Beck, “Persians have often seemed oblivious to other ethnic peoples in Iran, or they disregarded them, considered them inconsequential.”

Trying to identify uniform traits among the ill-defined “Persian” community in Iran is difficult. In Iraq there has been a role reversal since the ouster of Saddam Hussein, with Sunnis protesting about their treatment at the hands of the Shi‘i majority.

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Although books on the Gulf routinely mention the presence of minority and outside groups, there has been almost no academic study of them.\textsuperscript{109} Even if they are considered a “minority” in terms of citizenship, such groups now form a majority of the population in some of the GCC states. As al-Dailami notes, “because the publication of [their] histories depends on how little political controversy they will stir, they rarely challenge the dominant narratives of the state. Although innocuous to more dominant groups in society, such histories encode messages that demand inclusion by fusing historical empiricism with current idioms of authenticity and orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{110} The story of groups who played an important role historically, but have been excluded in the national narratives promulgated by ruling dynasties, needs to be told. “While official censure on the part of twentieth-century governments has forced these divisions underground, they persist in the social memory of peoples of the Gulf as persistent communal symbols,” according to Fattah.\textsuperscript{111}

In recent times, Gulf history has become highly politicized, Sunni-Shi’a tensions have increased and the traditional hybridity of its port cities has been obscured. Since the 1950s, this has led to a struggle over the name itself: is it the Persian or Arabian Gulf? This issue, which is a product of political competition that tries to “Arabize” or “Persianize” the history of the region, will probably never be resolved. It has, however, fueled what Fred Halliday has called the “ideologies of antagonism” that accompanied national state-building.\textsuperscript{112}

**Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

Long on the periphery of empires, ironically today the Gulf with its mega oil cities is increasingly regarded as the center of the Middle East, displacing historic cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad.\textsuperscript{113} The Gulf ports, until the 1950s relatively small and poor, have been completely transformed by the sudden rush of oil wealth and exploding population and today are known for their extravagance and futuristic architecture, including the tallest building


\textsuperscript{110} Al-Dailami, “Purity and Confusion,” 315. He analyzes two histories written by Hawala historians.

\textsuperscript{111} Fattah, “Social Structures and Transformation in the Gulf and Arabia,” 249.


in the world, the Burj Khalifa, in Dubai. What used to be regarded as “port cities” have now become functionally differentiated and can be considered “cities with ports,” according to Keshavarzian.\textsuperscript{114}

The Gulf states are now highly urbanized: in 2017, Bahrain was regarded as 100 percent urban, Qatar 99 percent, Kuwait 98 percent, the UAE 86 percent, Saudi Arabia 83 percent, and Oman 75 percent, while neighboring Iran is 73 percent urban and Iraq 70 percent.\textsuperscript{115} This growth has come with an absolute dependence on desalinated water, which puts the populations in a precarious position due to the potential for contamination by oil spills or a nuclear accident at Bushehr.

The famous Saudi Arabian novelist Abdelrahman Munif concluded that the glittering oil cities of today are cities of salt, that will be gone like salt in water.\textsuperscript{116} According to Munif, oil is not a blessing but a curse. In a newspaper interview he said, “The tragedy is not in our having the oil, but in the way we use the wealth it has created and in the future awaiting us after it has run out . . . . In twenty or thirty years’ time we shall discover that oil has been a real tragedy for the Arabs, and these giant cities built in the desert will find no-one to live in them.”\textsuperscript{117} So far this has not happened, but the cities on the Arab side of the Gulf have been outstripping their ecological base for years.

The effects of globalization on the Gulf have been profound. According to Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Professor of Political Science at UAE University, “In terms of identity, Dubai is no longer what it was just a short time ago—Emirati, Gulf, Arab, Islamic or Middle Eastern. It has hurriedly become a global city that is intricately connected to the economic, financial, and commercial global network.”\textsuperscript{118} In these states, especially since the uprisings of 2011, ruling families have become increasingly defensive as public criticism is not tolerated and lines between the pampered citizens and migrant workers (regarded as there temporarily), are being more sharply drawn. The virtual impossibility

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    \item \textsuperscript{115} Population Reference Bureau, “2017 World Population Data Sheet” (Washington, D.C., August 2017), 12 and 14.
    \item \textsuperscript{117} This quote comes from a November 21, 1984 \textit{al-Khalij} (UAE) newspaper interview with Abdelrahman Munif, cited in Rasheed El-Enany, “Cities of Salt: A Literary View of the Theme of Oil and Change in the Gulf,” in \textit{Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States: Essays in Honour of M. A. Shaban’s 60th Birthday (16th November 1986)}, ed. Ian Richard Netton (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 220.
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for such workers, even those who have been there for several generations, to achieve citizenship, does not bode well in the long term. Citizenship itself is now being used as a tool to keep populations in line, and can be withdrawn arbitrarily. By 2017, due to major budget shortfalls in the GCC states, an exodus of expatriates had begun.

Despite more restrictive government policies, the role the Gulf ports play, and the mix of population within them still reflects what society the Persian Gulf always has been—part of the Indian Ocean world in terms of people, trade, culture, and outlook. Tension and overheated rhetoric between Iran and the Arab states in the early twenty-first century derives from historical antagonisms, security threats, political differences, and attempts by states to impose national identities. In the process of disregarding minority and communal concerns, governments have inflamed sectarian tensions, especially between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. This, along with autocratic and ineffective government and a dependence on outside protection, lies behind much of the current turmoil in the region. The new reality of significantly lower oil prices, however, has now forced governments to confront their problems and do what had been unthinkable, such as introducing taxes. The Saudi Vision 2030 plan for reforms introduced in April 2016, for example, seeks a major correction in the economy, reducing its reliance on oil revenues and increasing investment in the private sector. By late 2017, however, the goals were scaled back due to falling revenues and public apprehension about the social and economic effects of the plan.

The present-day Gulf is still a transnational space, but in different ways than before. The inclusive Khaliji society of the past is now a memory, and residents of the Gulf littoral are quick to identify as Arab or Iranian. History has become an important tool used by states to promote their own legitimacy, but in the process of rewriting history a more nuanced and therefore more accurate representation of the past has been lost. Arabs, Persians, and many other groups have lived with each other in the region for many centuries, during which mutual differences occasionally led to conflict. But the current mistrust, tension, and sense of vulnerability felt by all sides is a product of the modern age.


The dispute that broke out in June 2017 between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt has shuffled regional alliances and distracted attention, which does not bode well for scholarly research in the region. Although ostensibly about political and sectarian issues, in reality the quarrel reflects continuing fallout of the failed Arab uprisings and intermittent Saudi attempts over a long period of time to expand their power throughout the Arabian peninsula. An additional goal is to challenge Iran for regional hegemony. The future of the GCC itself is in question, as tribal dynasties that had traditionally stuck together are now at odds and people and states have to take sides. As Kristin Smith Diwan points out, the “generational transition is creating new rules of monarchy. Collective deliberation within ruling houses is being replaced by individual—and national—ambition.”

Gause notes that “the real underlying conflict is not about Iran but about very different understandings of how political Islam should relate to the state among the Sunni powers of the Middle East.” The conflict is not about sectarian issues, as for example Shi’i Iran came to the rescue of Sunni Qatar while Saudi Arabia appears ready to reconcile with Shi’i leaders in Iraq.

The dispute remained stalemated through the fall of 2017 as countries tried to adjust to the new uncertainty, and this cast a chill over reasoned discussion and scholarly activities. Nevertheless, as this paper argues, there is plenty of scope for future research on society in the Persian Gulf in all historical periods. Many local sources have not yet been utilized, and a Gulf-wide focus, as has been employed for other regions such as the Mediterranean Sea or the Indian Ocean, has yet to be embraced by most historians.

A review of the history of the Persian Gulf over the longue durée suggests some avenues for future research:

- Since this area has historically constituted a distinct region, and not a mere appendix to Iran or Arabia, more work should be done to define the regional

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124 Fuccaro suggests a number of avenues for future research in “Rethinking the History of Port Cities in the Gulf,” 23–46.
culture and the connections that have knitted together the two sides of the Gulf. Scholars of the Arab and Iranian side should take a greater interest in their counterparts, read their studies, and seek to present a more integrated vision of the region’s history. Unfortunately, they have been discouraged from doing this by academic compartmentalization, politicized funding sources, lack of linguistic ability, and obstruction by local states in allowing scholars access to archives.

- It is time for alternative approaches to historical writing that go beyond previous tropes that have stressed imperial history, the role of the British, the tribes, the oil industry, and the rentier state. There needs to be more input from indigenous historians who emphasize the local and regional situation rather than the Gulf’s strategic location and international entanglements.\(^{125}\)

- The history of the Gulf as part of the history of the Indian Ocean, as pioneered by scholars such as Bhacker, Sheriff, and Bishara, deserves much additional study.\(^{126}\) Studies that offer “a view from the sea” would be most welcome. How are cities in the Gulf similar to or different from other ports in the Indian Ocean?

- Study of the Gulf ports could benefit from the methodologies used to study Asian port cities, such as city-hinterland relations, morphogenesis, interaction between indigenous and foreign elites, and resistance to imperial powers. The subject of religious diffusion as recently treated in *Bombay Islam* could profitably be applied to the Gulf.\(^{127}\)

- The historic Gulf has usually been portrayed as both a cosmopolitan and tolerant society. While there is plenty of evidence for the former, more study is needed of social relations at the local level to reveal how different groups related to each other and how tolerant it was in different periods.

- Gulf ports should be studied in the context of littoral societies, as they have been elsewhere. Relations with the hinterland are crucial in understanding

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port cities in other regions such as Africa, although in the Gulf such studies are generally lacking. This could help explain how port cities that were not self-sustaining in food, water, and wood (like medieval Hormuz, Siraf, and Zubara) could flourish.

- Has the Gulf’s connection with India been overemphasized in the literature due to abundant source material? While we have good information on long-distance trade, in all periods this was probably eclipsed by local or country trade and intense intra-Gulf social and economic interactions. Although British India exercised political control starting in the early nineteenth century, how meaningful was this for local society?

- Study of the literature of the Gulf as a source of history has barely been explored. While stories may not be relied upon for historical “facts,” they provide the context for understanding the rapid pace of transition the Gulf has been experiencing since the 1970s. For example, Muhsin al-Musawi has examined a number of short stories on the contemporary Gulf written in Arabic. These focus on the social and cultural dimensions of the changes brought about by the rise of an oil society—the passing of an economy based on pearls to that of oil—and the feeling of nostalgia and sense of loss as the Gulf becomes integrated into a global society. Likewise, Persian writers have explored the “otherness” of the Gulf coast from the people and culture of the Iranian plateau.

- Identity is a popular topic today, and the Gulf region as a creole area is the subject of confusion and dispute. Identities change over time, and there seems to be a wide spectrum of Arab and Persian feeling/identity. Was there a Khaliji identity that historically united people on both sides of the Gulf, as Beeman maintains, or was there always a clear line between Arab and Persian, as regional states today would insist?

- Scholars should call to account state-sponsored history—as expressed in books and museum exhibits, for example, or censorship of publications or scholarly conferences—that seeks to glorify and legitimize ruling dynasties or governments for political purposes, and ignores the other ethnic and religious groups, now disenfranchised, who worked alongside them to create the unique culture of the Persian Gulf.

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