

Britain and State Formation in the Gulf: The Case of Abu Dhabi and Shaikh Zayid bin Khalifah

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The modern state of Abu Dhabi owes much to the policies and actions carried out by Shaikh Zayid bin Khalifah, the ruler of Abu Dhabi during the last half of the 19th and the first few years of the 20th centuries. He was obliged to move carefully through a myriad of competing forces in the region and to tread lightly when dealing with the two imperial powers intimately involved in Gulf affairs at the time, that is the Ottomans and Britain. It was Britain of course that came to dominate the Gulf until well into the 20th century and so it can be said that Zayid's most important relations in many respects were with Britain. Whatever his move, Zayid had to consider what the British reaction would be and adjust accordingly. Over the course of his reign, his relationship with Britain moved from a *pas de deux* over his relations with the Ottomans to formal protected status. While this may have forced him to move cautiously, it did not prevent the consolidation of his – and Al Nahyan – authority over the edifice of modern Abu Dhabi.

The Historical British Role in the Gulf

British dominion over India was responsible for its long interest in and dominance over the Gulf, the apogee of which occurred in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Because of its interests, the British government of India played an increasing role in the politics of the Arabian littoral of the Gulf. This was displayed in a variety of ways.

First, Britain took naval action to suppress what it regarded as piracy in the early 19th century. The principal object of such action was the maritime power of al-Qawasim, based at Ra's al-Khaymah in what is now the northern United Arab Emirates (UAE). Several attacks were carried out on the town between 1817 and 1820 when it was destroyed.¹

Second, Britain began instituting a system of maritime truces in the early and mid-19th century that forbade warfare by sea, since maritime passage was Britain's principal interest at that time. These truces were temporary in nature until 1853 when a general and perpetual treaty of maritime peace was signed. This system of truces in effect legitimized the littoral Shaikhs who signed them, conferring recognition of their leadership over settlements and allied tribes, their right and the right of their families to be regarded as local rulers, and implying their responsibility for the activities of the populace living under their direct control or in their sphere of influence.²

1 British actions against al-Qawasim are detailed in J.G. Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omân, and Central Arabia* (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, Vol. 1: 1915; Vol. 2: 1908), Vol. 1, Part 1, pp. 637-670. For rebuttals of the allegations of piracy, see Sultan Muhammad al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf* (London: Croom Helm, 1986. 2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 1988), and Charles E. Davies, *The Blood-Red Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797-1820* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997).

2 All agreements and treaties between the British government and littoral rulers can be found in C.U. Aitchison, comp., *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries* (revised ed.; Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1933), Vol. 11, "Containing The Treaties, &c., Relating to Aden and the South Western Coast of Arabia, the Arab Principalities in the Persian Gulf, Muscat (Oman), Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province."

Third, this complex of putative recognition was transformed into formal protected status through a number of agreements in or about the 1890s. Not only did these agreements place the local rulers along the Arab littoral under the protection and dominance of British India, which exercised both *de jure* and *de facto* rights to interfere in and direct local affairs when it was felt necessary. This period also resulted in the maturation of the British agent system throughout the Gulf.³

The next step in the intensification of British shaping of statehood on the Arab littoral was prompted by the introduction of air routes to the region in the 1920s and 1930s. Principally, these were the Imperial Airways route from London to India and the Basra-Aden Royal Air Force (RAF) route. The short range of both civil and military aircraft required the establishment of a chain of airfields for regular use and a supplementary network of emergency landing areas. The security of these airfields and landing strips required that the local rulers exercised effective control of their hinterlands. Imposing conditions for rulers' control over tribes and populations under their control on land was a significant step up from the earlier concern over rulers' control over maritime activities.⁴ It should be noted, though, that the introduction of British agents at various settlements along the littoral and concern over Ottoman and Saudi expansionism had led to a stronger measure of British involvement in the littoral rulers' internal affairs already.

The impact of air routes on British regard for internal security was in turn superseded by British efforts to acquire oil concessions for British companies in the littoral states. Concomitantly with the search for oil, this required an extension of rulers' functions from authority over people to territorial integrity and the need to exercise full control of everything within the boundaries of their emerging states.

British concern did not disappear with the independence of India in 1947. For one thing, British oil companies were active participants in many of the producing concessions. This also meant that other British firms capitalized on commercial opportunities in the newly developing Gulf economies. But British actions to protect their clients took the form of efforts to prevent the penetration of radical ideologies in the Gulf during the 1950s and 1960s. Even after Kuwait became independent in 1961, Britain felt it necessary later that year to make a show of political will to engage revolutionary Iraq in military action if Baghdad should move on Kuwait.

Finally, the British decision to withdraw from the Gulf, made in 1968 and carried out in 1971, prompted British and international concern over the stability and survival of the small Arab states without the protection of the British umbrella. Needless to say, these states have survived very well, albeit with a broader American umbrella backed by Britain and other actors.

The effect of these activities and their gradual evolution on the peoples and rulers along the Arab littoral was profound. It was the genesis of a transformation from almost purely tribal systems to convenient states. Those prominent leadership figures along the Arab littoral that the British encountered were confirmed in their authority and their

3 The agreements are discussed in a number of works, particularly in various country studies. The text of the agreements can be found in Aitchison, "Collection of Treaties."

4 J.E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

writ gradually evolved into the status of rulers of small states. Thus the Arab littoral was brought into British India's informal empire and an abiding relationship between the region and Britain created.

It is especially important to note that the course of this history was determined not only by British policy but also in substantial part by certain strong local personalities. They not only inaugurated the relationship with the British but put their stamp on the transformation of their territories into statehood. This paper is concerned with one of these personalities and his formative role in the development of his state.

Shaikh Zayid bin Khalifah and the formation of Abu Dhabi

During the 19th century, the area known as the Trucial Coast and later became the United Arab Emirates was dominated by two principal and rival actors: the Bani Yas and the Qawasim.⁵ Al-Qawasim were situated at the northern end of the Trucial Coast, principally in what are today Ra's al-Khaymah and Sharjah, to where they had come from the Persian coast.

The Bani Yas was originally a confederation of tribes, embracing to a greater or lesser degree the Al Bu Falah, al-Hawamil, al-Muharibah, al-Mazari', Al Bu Muhayr, al-Rumaythat, al-Qubaysat, al-Murr, and in some views al-Sudan and al-Manasir. It had become one of the most powerful tribes of the region through the cohesion of its settled and bedouin elements and its alliances with other leading tribes. Its original center was in al-Liwa oasis in the southeastern part of present-day Abu Dhabi emirate but a settlement had been created on Abu Dhabi Island in 1761 and it later became the Bani Yas "capital." The Shaikhs of the tribe came from the Al Bu Falah faction and then specifically the Al Nahyan family. The tribe acted closely with the widespread Sudan and Manasir tribes, into which various Al Nahyan Shaikhs married, and these tribes supported the Bani Yas in times of crisis. Later, a close relationship was established with the Dhawahirah as the Bani Yas expanded their interests in al-Buraymi oasis, inland from Abu Dhabi settlement. In addition, other smaller bedouin tribes often recognized the authority of the Al Nahyan Shaikhs and referred disputes to them for judgment.

Because of their bedouin background and dispersion of settlements, the Bani Yas were a land power as opposed to the Qasimi maritime power – and thus perhaps less likely to find themselves in confrontation with the British. As the British acted to curtail Qasimi power in the early 19th century (because the Qawasim had interfered with British shipping and were tarred as pirates by the British), the power of the Bani Yas began to rise. The Al Bu Falah, and within that the Al Nahyan, was one of the smallest sections of the Bani Yas tribe but had achieved a position of leadership within the tribe that was not imperilled by the departure in 1833 of the Al Bu Falasah family to found Dubai.

5 This brief historical survey relies on background material presented in J.G., Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omân, and Central Arabia* (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, Vol. 1: 1915; Vol. 2: 1908), "History of Trucial Oman," in Vol. 1, Historical, Part 1, Chapter 3, pp. 630-785; Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, *The United Arab Emirates: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978); Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (London: Longman, 1983; new ed., 1996); and Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989; rev. ed.; Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998).

In particular, the fortunes of the Al Nahyan and the Bani Yas soared under the leadership of Shaikh Zayid bin Khalifah (r. 1855-1909). Al Nahyan leadership earlier in the century had been erratic and Zayid's predecessor was forced to flee Abu Dhabi when faced with a public uprising over his actions (he attempted to return in 1856 with the help of the Ruler of Sharjah but was unsuccessful). In his first years as paramount Shaikh, Zayid worked to consolidate the cohesion of the Bani Yas and its Mansuri and Suwaydi allies, as well as to extend his authority over other tribes in the region of Abu Dhabi. Much of his attention was focused on the great rivalry with the Qawasim but the death of Qasimi Shaikh Sultan bin Saqr of Ra's al-Khaymah in 1866 enabled him to extend his authority farther north along the Trucial Coast. His standing was further elevated two years later when he killed the new Qasimi leader Shaikh Khalid bin Sultan in a hand-to-hand fight.

Shaikh Zayid's drive to build the Abu Dhabi state also benefitted from a favorable turn in the regional situation. The Qawasim had slipped into a decline in power and successive Shaikhs sought friendly relations with their powerful Al Nahyan neighbor. The collapse of the Second Saudi State in the 1860s removed another threat to Abu Dhabi and further weakened the Qasimi state. The unrest in Oman with an usurper capturing Muscat during 1868-1871 weakened the Al Bu Sa'id rulers' control over al-Dhahirah, the region bordering Abu Dhabi on the east. With the help of Imam 'Azzan bin Qays (the usurper in Muscat), Zayid moved into the villages of the Na'im tribe in al-Buraymi oasis and expelled the Saudi garrison.

While the Bani Yas had had a political role in al-Buraymi since the early 17th century and property for numerous decades, Shaikh Zayid's actions opened a new front to bring most of the oasis under the control of the Bani Yas. Thus, Shaikh Zayid was simultaneously extending Al Nahyan influence within the Bani Yas and also Bani Yas influence over allied tribes such as al-Manasir and al-Sudan, as well as badu tribes. His close involvement in al-Buraymi brought al-Dhawahir tribe into the Bani Yas orbit and he supported them against the other major tribe of the oasis, al-Na'im. In territorial terms, his authority stretched from al-Liwa to al-Dhafrah and Abu Dhabi settlement, as well as into al-Buraymi oasis. Lesser influence even extended into al-Dhahirah as far as 'Ibri and among the tribes around Suhar on Oman's al-Batinah coast and he held designs on the northern Trucial coast as well.

Eventually, because of the weakness of the Muscat rulers, Zayid's writ extended far into al-Dhahirah and the tribes there, at least nominally subject to the Sultans, sought Zayid's help and rulings in disputes. Although relations between Zayid and the Muscat ruler who ousted 'Azzan bin Qays were somewhat frosty, it was in both powers' interest to cooperate and Sultan Turki bin Sa'id and his successor Faysal bin Turki gave Zayid responsibility for looking after many of Muscat's interests in al-Buraymi and al-Dhahirah.

Shaikh Zayid and the British

Many of the regional factors that strengthened Shaikh Zayid's position also brought him into line with British interests. Abu Dhabi's first interaction with Britain occurred when the Al Nahyan signed the General Treaty of Peace with the Arab Tribes in 1820.

Abu Dhabi was also a signatory of the General Treaty of Perpetual Maritime Peace in 1853, which banned warfare by sea between the littoral powers. But as a tribal system whose principal interests lay inland or along the coast, Bani Yas connections to Britain were relatively minimal. In addition, as Britain had secured maritime peace by the middle of the 19th century and trading interests with the Arab littoral were on a small scale, its regional interests shifted away from the Trucial Coast and became more focused on such concerns as the telegraph route, steam navigation, political relations with Persia and Ottoman Mesopotamia, and then the attempts of European rivals to intrude on the British sphere of influence in the Gulf – most of which had little to do with the Trucial Coast.⁶ Nevertheless, Britain had at least a minimal concern about developments along the entire Arab littoral and the activities of Shaikh Zayid intensified that concern. Zayid had had direct contact with British representatives as early as 1859 when he met with the Political Resident on the latter's visit to Abu Dhabi and expressed his concern about possible Saudi designs on his territory while skirting the issue of his own relations with the Ottomans.⁷

Britain of course had long desired the curtailing of al-Qasimi power at the entrance to the Gulf. But Britain was forced to intervene when the Al Nahyan leader sent a fleet in support of the ruler of Muscat against the Qawasim in 1860. However, Shaikh Zayid ran afoul of the British when he sent a fleet in support of the ruler of Bahrain against the Qatari tribes. He contended this was justified because the Qataris were backed by the Al Sa'ud, who posed a continual threat to Abu Dhabi. Nevertheless, he was forced to submit a written undertaking to the Political Resident that he would not commit any offenses by sea, to pay a fine, and to turn his cannon pieces over to the British.⁸

Britain also welcomed Zayid's correct relations with Sultan Turki, having regarded Imam 'Azzan's tenure in Muscat with alarm. Farther afield, both Britain and Abu Dhabi opposed Ottoman expansion into the Gulf and the Ottoman occupation of al-Hasa in 1871 had the salutary effect of bringing their interests closer together. The Ottomans claimed suzerainty over Abu Dhabi although they could never act on it. However, Zayid found a silver lining in this threat as it allowed him to not only assert Abu Dhabi's independence but also advance Abu Dhabi's claim to Khawr al-'Udayd, the coastal region lying between Abu Dhabi and Qatar. In order to deny Ottoman authority over al-'Udayd, Britain was forced to back Zayid's claim despite his difficulty in physically exerting that control over al-'Udayd's inhabitants.⁹ The contestation of Khawr al-'Udayd was not only between the Ottomans and Abu Dhabi or between Zayid and tribes normally subject to his authority. It was also a source of friction between Abu Dhabi and Qatar for more than a decade to come.¹⁰

6 Recent treatments of British activities and policy in the Gulf during this period are in James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), and J.E. Peterson, "Britain and the Gulf: At the Periphery of Empire," in Lawrence D. Potter, ed., *The Gulf in History* (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).

7 The Political Resident's report on his annual tour of the Gulf, April and May 1859, reproduced in Penelope Tuson, ed., *Records of the Emirates: Primary Documents, 1820-1958* (London: Archive Editions, 1990), Vol. 3, 1853-1871, esp. pp. 81-83.

8 Tuson, *Records of the Emirates*, Vol. 3, pp. 554-555.

9 See the Viceroy of India's despatch to the Secretary of State for India of 22 May 1879, reproduced in Tuson, *Records of the Emirates*, Vol. 4, 1871-1892, pp. 73-80.

10 See the British correspondence on developments in Abu Dhabi-tribal and Abu Dhabi-Qatari relations between 1876 and 1890 in Tuson, *Records of the Emirates*, Vol. 4, pp. 247-414.

At the same time, Zayid was careful to cultivate regional relations that would bolster his independence. His pilgrimage to Mecca in 1880 had the secondary effect of establishing ties with the Hashimi sharifs of Mecca, who were nominally subjects of Istanbul but largely autonomous. Zayid was also careful to renew traditional ties with Bahrain, a necessary development given the state of hostility that emerged between Abu Dhabi and Qatar during the 1880s.

The decades of the 1880s and especially the 1890s, however, also saw emerging friction between Britain and Zayid. The activities of a Persian representative in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in 1887, seeking to counter the British position on the coast and to establish a Persian equivalent of the British Residency Agent, led to swift British remonstrance. In December of that year, Britain pressured the Trucial Shaikhs into signing an agreement that they would not deal with governments other than the British or permit any non-British agent to be resident in their territories. The quickening of European interest in the Gulf, particularly France, led Britain to tighten its power through a more formal agreement of 1892 that bound the Trucial Shaikhs and their successors to the 1887 assurance and secured their guarantee to never cede, sell, or mortgage any of their territory to anyone except the British government. This agreement served as a model for subsequent but similar ones elsewhere in the Gulf.

Britain clearly recognized the importance of Shaikh Zayid and the necessity of keeping him in check. This was reflected by the comment in the Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency for 1888-1889 that Zayid "is the the most important personage in Western 'Oman. The jurisdiction of this Chief extends along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, as far as 'Odeyd, his western limits thus marching with those of El-Katr and El-Hasa, and numerous Bedouin clans ranging the plains between that frontier and El-Bereymi are dependents, or allies, of the Chief of Abu-Dhabbi."¹¹

In the following decade, Zayid apparently saw growing ties between the French and Sultan Faysal bin Turki in Muscat as an opportunity to broaden his international connections and he wrote several letters to the French Consul in Muscat offering Abu Dhabi as a port of call for French maritime lines. Although nothing came of this correspondence and it remained unknown to the British, Zayid's overtures to Persia in 1900 and his refusal to fly a Trucial flag brought a swift reprimand and he was forced to abjure contact and accept the flag. Finally, it has been suggested that Zayid's growing ambitions for domination of all the Trucial Coast alarmed the British even more in the first few years of the 20th century. They feared that the Qawasim and Qasimi allies would turn in desperation to the Saudis for help and this would upset the British policy of maintaining the status quo along the Trucial Coast and in the Gulf. The key to preventing this was careful maintenance of the status quo, which in turn depended on preventing the schemes of Shaikh Zayid from causing upset.

By the beginning of the 20th century, British interests in the Gulf had become regarded as so important to the empire that Lord Lansdowne, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, declared in Parliament that "we should regard the establishment of a naval base, or of a fortified port, in the Persian Gulf by any other Power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our

¹¹ Reproduced in Tuson, *Records of the Emirates*, Vol. 4, p. 502.

disposal.”¹² At the same time, British policy in the Trucial States was described in direct fashion by Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, at a durbar at Sharjah on 21 November 1903. This was the first visit ever by a Viceroy to the Gulf and Curzon took advantage of the opportunity to set out the nature and force of the relationship in front of an audience of the rulers.

Chiefs, out of the relations that were thus created, and which by your own consent constituted the British Government the guardian of inter-tribal peace, there grew up political ties between the Government of India and yourselves, whereby the British Government became your overlords and protectors, and you have relations with no other Power. Every one of the States known as the Trucial States has bound itself, as you know, not to enter into any agreement or correspondence with any other Power, not to admit the agent of any other Government, and not to part with any portion of its territories. These engagements are binding on every one of you, and you have faithfully adhered to them. They are also binding in their reciprocal effect upon the British Government, and as long as they are faithfully observed by the Chiefs there is no fear that anyone else will be allowed to temper with your rights or liberties.

Sometimes I think that the record of the past is in danger of being forgotten, and there are persons who ask – Why should Great Britain continue to exercise these powers? The history of your States and of your families, and the present condition of the Gulf, are the answer. We were here before any other Power, in modern times, had shown its face in these waters. We found strife and we have created order.¹³

The rulers, including Zayid, may not have been as congratulatory as Curzon but it was indisputable that Britain had achieved a position of strength and control all along the Arab littoral, including the Trucial Coast.

It should also be remarked that British worry about Zayid’s ambitions in the last decade or so of his life was shared by many in the Trucial States as well. His relentless drive for control over al-Buraymi brought him into conflict with the beleaguered al-Dhawahir by the late 1880s and early 1890s. In addition, Zayid was pushed into an agreement in 1906 with other Trucial rulers to respect spheres of influence over bedouin tribes.

Assessment

In many ways, Shaikh Zayid’s relationship with the British could be characterized as adversarial more than anything else as a result of British constraints on his naval activities, British limitation of the geographical extent of his influence, and British insistence on mediation in disputes with other tribes and rulers. British sway reached a crescendo in 1892 with Shaikh Zayid’s accession (along with the other Trucial Shaikhs) to a treaty of protection. While Britain had in effect recognized Abu Dhabi’s independence for quite some time, the 1892 agreement effectively “legitimized” the composition of the Trucial states. These essentially endured into the seven member states of the UAE.

12 . Quoted in Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 256.

13 . Quoted in Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. 1, Historical, Part 2, p. 2638.

Shaikh Zayid's actions and role was pivotal in the emergence of the state of Abu Dhabi. He was an accomplished statesman and manipulator of the tribal environment. In this connection, he continued and deepened a process begun by his predecessors – to a point that even the fratricidal strife after his death could not undo his work. He managed to “co-exist” with the British, to accept the limitations they imposed but also maintained his freedom of movement and extend his influence. While the 1892 agreement compromised his sovereignty in some respects, it imposed little in the way of new limitations on his rule in practice. The agreement served principally to govern Abu Dhabi's relations with other European powers and vis-à-vis regional threats. The protection it afforded cost Shaikh Zayid little in terms of his control over his people.

Shaikh Zayid is perhaps best assessed in company with a select group of pivotal rulers of the era, particularly Shaikh Mubarak al-Sabah of Kuwait (r. 1896-1915) and Shaikh Jasim bin Muhammad of Qatar (r. 1876-1913), as well as perhaps Amir (later King) 'Abd al-'Aziz of Najd (r. 1902-1953). This was the formative period in the modern history of all these states. Like Jasim and Mubarak, Zayid protected his country from Ottoman aspirations and Saudi incursions. Like Mubarak, he embraced a long-term relationship with Britain that secured autonomy if not independence, although in Abu Dhabi's case the external threats were less pronounced and the internal repercussions less substantial. Like Jasim, Zayid forged the first steps of a national consciousness out of a tribal milieu.