The Arabian Peninsula in Modern Times: A Historiographical Survey of Recent Publications

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Abstract: Writing on the history of the Arabian Peninsula has grown considerably in recent years and this survey — an updating of an earlier examination — cites and describes the publications in Western languages since 1990 that deal with the Peninsula’s history, historiography, and related subjects. It loosely categorizes the literature according to subject and assesses the state of the art during this time period. It also includes some personal observations of the author on the progress and direction of writing on the Arabian Peninsula.

Keywords: Arabian Peninsula, Gulf, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, history, historiography, country studies, biography, boundaries, military, economic history, social history, cultural history, diplomatic history, foreign policy, Britain, USA, Islam, Wahhabism, Islamic sects, Indian Ocean studies, Hadramawt, Jews in Yemen

1 Introduction

In an article published in 1991, I wrote that “The outlines of Arabia’s modern history are well known. It is the underlying firmament that remains terra incognita.” To be sure, much of the territory still remains unknown or unexplored, but, on the positive side, significant inroads have been made over the two decades since then.

This survey is an update of that earlier article. The review of recent literature not only reflects an augmentation of publications but a (seemingly paradoxical) broadening and narrowing of focus. I remarked in the earlier essay that much of the literature was descriptive or narrative. An increasing proportion is more rigorously analytical and methodological, building on the foundations provided by earlier “classical” or seminal works.

The directions of recent literature seem to be determined by two independent variables. One is the unfolding of events that alter the canvas. If British withdrawal from the Gulf, the quickening of American interest, the Iranian revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War shaped key regional and domestic developments in the 1970s and 1980s, the landscape of the subsequent decades has been equally forcefully shaped — or scarred — by such events as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Yemeni civil war, 9/11, the Palestinian intifadas, the American-led invasion of Iraq, and the popular ferment in a number of Arab countries in 2011, culminating in the changes of regime...
in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, as well as a civil war in Syria. Inevitably this has had enormous impact on both the selection of subjects and the approaches taken to studying them. As a prominent example, the Iranian Revolution and subsequent events focused more attention on the political role of Islam and virtually dealt a death knell to the emphasis on the military and secular ideologies. Surprisingly, discussion of the topic of a “new middle class”, although perhaps more pertinent than ever, has disappeared as well. More recently, the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the emergence of the global threat of al-Qa’idah and its allies have more tightly focused attention on militant and extremist Islamists. Much of this writing has been policy-oriented and geared to impressing policy-makers and/or the general public. Nevertheless, solid scholarly work has begun to distinguish this field.

My earlier article also remarked on the recent emergence of fragile and seemingly transitory states, given the fact that only two of the seven present states of the Peninsula existed in 1935. From the vantage point of the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appears that the process of state formation has taken deep root. Now the question is how will these states evolve given the pressures of socioeconomic development, political liberalization, globalization and erratic oil prices, socialization and Islamism, and vulnerability to external developments.

Second, another conclusion from my earlier article was that “historical scholarship on the Arabian Peninsula] has yet to move beyond the comfortable horizons of country studies and political analysis” (p. 1436). Fortunately, there has been a deepening in the specificity of topics examined, the analytical and methodological tools used, and the quality of scholarship brought to bear on the region. Yemen has long been a popular subject and specialized centers cater to the relevant scholars. In the late 1980s, an attempt to create a Society for Gulf Arab Studies within the Middle East Studies Association eventually foundered due to the lack of interest. Perhaps now with the emergence of a critical mass concerned with the Gulf side of the Peninsula, the newer Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies will be more successful.

It only seems prudent to begin with a few caveats — or explanations. My interpretation of what is “historical” will be rather broad for some tastes. It does seem important, though, to bring in a broader perspective on scholarly studies in the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, works that fall within the disciplines of political science, anthropology, and economics will find themselves cited in the following pages. All the references I will cite are in Western languages, since works in Arabic and Persian are ably covered by in essays by Fahad Ahmad Bishara and Gholam Reza Vatandoust. Most of these works are in English, undoubtedly reflecting the long and deep relations between Britain and the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, as well as English being the nexus for academic writing today. But that should not obscure the recognition that there is an expanding body of literature in other Western languages, particularly French and German.

Reflecting my own interests, the restricted space for this survey, and logical continuation of the terms of my article mentioned earlier, the selection of works for citation is limited to the modern period and geographically to the Arabian Peninsula. Undoubtedly I have missed many pertinent and valuable publications. I beg the reader’s indulgence and welcome comments and suggestions.

Who are these authors? In my earlier article, I made reference to the many books and articles written by a combination of foreign (heavily British) officials posted to the region and a cadre of intrepid travelers. These are the foundation stones upon which later work and subsequent generations of scholars and other observers have been able to build. We shall not see their like again.

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For at least some, questions may remain about their politics and their attitudes toward the peoples and culture of the region, but there can be little doubt about their dedication to accurate and often minute description, analysis, and translation. The sympathy and close identification of others is beyond doubt, among them Miles, Thesiger, Ingrams, Wilson, Lorimer, Cox, and Philby.

To be sure, there are diplomats today who publish on the region — and not always on policy-oriented matters. Many find it more convenient to write after their retirement. These may include subjects in which they have had personal interests, as well as memoirs and mea culpas, for example, Bernard Burrows and Glen Balfour-Paul.

Of course, a very significant and welcome development has been the growing emergence of scholars from the region. Many have done very competent doctoral work, some of which has been published in book or article form. Unfortunately, the majority seem subsequently to either pursue non-scholarly occupations or get caught in a social environment that deadens the scholarly impulse. There are disadvantages as well as advantages to being from the region or country on which one researches and writes.

There is also the curious phenomenon of scholars who have published on the Arabian Peninsula but then have disappeared from the literature. Some have pursued similar or other interests in a different geographic region, some maintained a scholarly interest in the subject only during and perhaps immediately after their doctoral dissertation/thesis work, and some have abandoned scholarly pursuits altogether. This was perhaps understandable in earlier times when access was extremely difficult. But it is surprising to see this phenomenon continuing into the last two decades.

There has always been a problem of access to the countries of the Peninsula in order to carry out scholarly research and fieldwork. Notably, this has eased in recent years. For example, access to Saudi Arabia was almost impossible and those who gained it tended either to work in the kingdom or have a personal connection with someone who did. In the last decade or so, however, the number of young scholars who have spent time in Saudi Arabia has burgeoned. Their ability to research and write intimately on their areas of specialization owes much to the liberalization of attitudes in the Peninsula to scholars. Many problems remain — for indigenous scholars as well as foreign ones — but progress has been made. In the meantime, scholars such as Assem Dessouki, Paul Dresch, Alexander Knys, Madawi al-Rasheed, Jane Bristol-Rhys, and Jörg Matthias Determann have contemplated the writing of history in and about the Arabian Peninsula and published their conclusions in recent years.3

Prior to the 1990s, historical study of the region often and necessarily relied upon archives — principally (although not exclusively) those found in London. The passage of time has altered this necessity. The multiplicity of secondary sources and their extensiveness has enabled many new

directions to be pursued. External archives still dominate but these now include a growing number of state archives, such as Portuguese, Dutch, Russian, and especially Ottoman collections. The missing dimension is the difficulty in gaining access to the archival collections of regional states.4

While archives in the Peninsula remain closed or non-existent, there is more written material available in the Peninsula. Many government departments provide data on the Web. Newspapers are freely accessible. Some oral history collections do exist. A few commercial firms have allowed researchers to examine their archives. Above all, access to people is easier and often more productive.

Also in the farther realm of caveat, some classes of publication seem to be routinely overlooked. Let us not forget new editions. Some may be recent publications of works written a considerable time ago (as the dissertation of George Rentz), while others may be updates or reworkings of earlier books (Frauke Heard-Bey’s survey of UAE history). Some “coffee table” books are just that, pretty objects to decorate the room. But the value of many other “coffee table” books should be recognized, both for the original work that has gone into the writing and for the value of the illustrations they contain. Furthermore, there has been a burgeoning of conferences on the region, organized both by outside groups (such as Gulf/2000) and by institutions within the region. This represents a far cry from such lonely beacons as the 1969 Oxford conference published as The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics5 and the earlier annual conferences of the Center for Arab Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter.

2 Political history

2.1 Country studies

One segment of literature that remains popular is the steady stream of country studies of various sorts. Some of these are reinterpretations, updates, or broader overarching studies of the Peninsula’s constituent countries, often building upon or extending “classic” works published before 1990. Other studies concentrate on a particular period or slice of a country’s history, most frequently on the twentieth century and especially since roughly 1970. In addition, a few view the country’s history through the prism of a particular theory or aspect. Somewhat surprisingly, regional and comparative studies on a countrywide level remain a persistent lacuna.6

Not surprisingly for monarchies, a frequent focus has been on the leadership role of monarchs and ruling families as a frame for the political direction and evolution of the country. Such studies can be either contemporary (i.e. starting in the early or mid-twentieth century and running up to the present or reasonably so), or focusing on particular reigns or historical periods. There are

4 I am self-consciously pleased that my work in researching and writing the official history of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF) in Oman resulted in my creation of the SAF Archives, carefully preserved within the office of the Minister Responsible for Defence Affairs even though it will be many years before anyone is allowed to use them.


6 One of the few works, albeit a short one, to tackle the job is Frauke Heard-Bey’s centenary lecture for the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, “The Gulf in the Twentieth Century”, Asian Affairs 33.1 (2002), pp. 3–17. One could also include Hala Fattah’s examination of trade in Iraq and the Gulf, The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf, 1745–1900 (Ithaca, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). Sheila Carapico has written a sweeping introduction to the study of the region in “Arabia Incognita: An Invitation to Arabian Peninsula Studies”, in Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, edited by Robert Vitalis and Madawi al-Rasheed (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 11–34. Of course there are a number of survey and introductory works that cover the region, especially with chapters by various authors. As these are secondary in nature, they are not discussed here.
numerous examples of the former. As one might expect, the strongest focus has been on Saudi Arabia and Oman.

The formation of the Saudi state, in its three distinct phases, continues to provide fertile ground for analysis, as the works by Abdulaziz al-Fahad, Alexei Vassiliev, Pascal Ménoret, and Madawi al-Rashid demonstrate. Another approach has been to choose a particular formative period in a country’s history, as Joseph Kostiner has done. In the meantime, changes in Saudi society, politics, and socioeconomic development have been explored by Tim Niblock, Michel Nehme, and Mordechai Abir. Saudi Arabia continues to grapple with the succession process. The glacial pace of change in the kingdom quickened a little when ʿAbdallah finally became king on the death of Fahd in 2005. But the aging line of sons of King ʿAbd al-ʿAziz will not last much longer and there still is no established mechanism to moving beyond another generation, as Joseph Kéchichian relates.

Oman’s leadership problem is the opposite of Saudi Arabia — there are not many choices. The reign of the enigmatic and reclusive Saʿid b. Taymur has drawn increasing attention in recent years with studies by Uzi Rabi, Francis Owtram, and Abdullah al-Wuhaibi. The transition to a modernizing régime under Sultan Qabus has been analyzed by Calvin Allen and Lynn Rigsbee, as well as myself.

The smaller Gulf States have been the subject of relatively less attention. The enduring experiment of the UAE, contrary to many expectations at its inception, has had to cope with the necessity of balancing the interests and quirks of seven different but simultaneous rulers, as Andrea

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Kuwait’s experience has also been unique in another direction, beginning with the consolidation of power in the hands of the al-Sabah and Kuwait’s willingness to contemplate political participation, along with being the leader in the Gulf in the learning experience of development. These themes are explored in Kamal Osman Salih’s articles, Abdullah Alhajeri’s thesis, B.J. Slot’s books, and the studies by Jacqueline Ismael and Mary Ann Tétreault. Kuwait was also the first country in the Peninsula to create the outlines of a welfare state, as Sulayman Khalaf and Hassan Hammoud detail. The broad scope of Qatari history, including the emergence of the ruling Al Thani in the mid-nineteenth century, is the subject of the works of Habibur Rahman and Allen Fromherz. Pithy but comprehensive portraits of all five countries are to be found in Rosemarie Said Zahlan’s The Making of the Modern Gulf.

Prior to 1990, authors tended to concentrate on one or the other Yemen. Since 1990, Yemen has achieved a long ambition for unification, marred by the expulsion of Yemeni workers from Saudi Arabia and the loss of nearly all aid in 1990–1991. It suffered through a civil war provoked by the South’s attempt to secede in 1994, and an unresolved state of hostilities in the far north in the 2000s. The following decade brought more destabilization with the emergence of the Huthi forces in the north, agitation for autonomy if not independence in the south, heightened activities by al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, and popular protests that eventually brought down longtime president ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Salih. The country continues to face almost unsurmountable problems of poverty, alienation, Islamist extremism, corruption, and a growing lack of water. Paul Dresch’s survey of Yemeni history brings the story of Yemen up to date through the post-unification era, thus supplementing and extending earlier country studies. His book complements Sheila Carapico’s study of civil society in both separate and unified Yemen.

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One approach in country studies has been to use specific rulers as prisms through which to filter political developments. Saudi Arabia has been a particularly popular choice for this — as in the works by Sarah Yizraeli, Uwe Pfullmann, Joseph Kéchichian, and Alexei Vassiliev — but the undeniable personal impact of individual rulers on the course of modern history has also been examined for other countries, particularly Kuwait as discussed by Salwa Alghanem and B.J. Slot. The anthropologist Gabriele vom Bruck has taken a slightly different view in elucidating the role of Yemen’s sadat, the country’s pre-revolution ruling class comprised of descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

Most work by scholars from the region on country-study topics has yet to be published. A few exceptions are Hussein Ghubash’s revised French doctoral thesis on Oman, the revised thesis by Aqil Kazim on the UAE, and Sulaiman al-Farsi’s revised thesis on Oman. Several other theses done in Britain remain unpublished and difficult to access. These include two on Oman, Said al-Hashimy’s thesis on the Ibadi Imamate in Oman and Abdulmalik al-Hinai’s study of state formation in Oman.

2.2 Sub-country studies

The broad country-wide emphasis only explains part of what has happened and why in these countries. Narrower or more focused studies on smaller geographic units have also been a feature of the recent literature. Much of this has been devoted to Saudi Arabia. But Saudi Arabia is a recent invention and its component parts have their own distinct pasts. The most prominent of them is of course Najd, the homeland of the Al Sa’ud as well as the location of their capital at Riyadh. But Najd itself is divided into distinct components. So while Uwaidah...
al-Juhany explores the pre-Al Sa‘ud past, Madawi al-Rasheed and Michael Baran illuminate the role of the Al Rashid of Ha’il in northern Najd, who a century ago briefly supplanted the Al Sa‘ud as rulers of all Najd and Sebastian Maisel looks at ‘Unayzah, one of the most important centers of al-Qasim region.\(^{22}\) The history of Riyadh has been laid out by William Facey.\(^{23}\)

On the other side of the Peninsula, al-Hijaz has an even more storied past, in part because the holiest sites of Islam are to be found there in Makkah and al-Madinah. The early twentieth century following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, saw the struggle for control of al-Hijaz between the Hawashim (or Hashimis, the family that had exercised responsibility for the holy cities over centuries) and the Al Sa‘ud (the evangelizing expansionists from Najd) in favor of the latter. This conflict has been dissected in recent decades by Joshua Teitelbaum in his books and articles, as well as in the articles of William Ochsenwald, Joseph Kostiner, and Suleiman Mousa. In addition, Hijazi scholar Mai Yamani has examined the persistent lure of Hijazi nationalism. At the southern tip of the kingdom lies ’Asir, incorporated into Saudi Arabia in the early half of the twentieth century but previously an independent Idrisi state, as Anne Bang shows.\(^{24}\)

Oman has also received attention from Paolo Costa and myself because its capital, Muscat, was until 1970 one of the best preserved capitals in the world.\(^{25}\) The history of its regions has


been largely unexplored, although the survey of Qalhat under the Kings of Hormuz by Mohammed Redha Bhacker and Bernadette Bhacker can be mentioned. This is not true of Yemen where Shelagh Weir has studied the tribes of a far northern part of the country while Paul Dresch also examines tribal documents in a different area. Two articles look at other areas — E.J. Keall the faded town of Zabid in the Tihamah and H. Matsumoto a region farther inland. To the southwest, Linda Boxberger expands on works about the Hadramawt and the far eastern reaches of Yemen. The troubled history of South Yemen and its unification with the north has received attention as well through the works of Noel Brehony and Stephen Day while Serge Elie examines the history of Socotra Island off southern Yemen. In the Gulf, Christopher Davidson has explored the explosive growth of Dubai and the emergence of Abu Dhabi.

2.3 Biographies and autobiographies

Works of this genre abound, adding to the richness of understanding and presenting different as well as more personal points of view. The majority of this category of the literature involves Westerners who have lived and worked in the region but there is a healthy sub-genre of studies of local personalities. Not surprisingly, given the crucial role of personal leadership in these states, many biographical works deal with rulers. The additions are welcome because of the paucity of material except on King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz of Saudi Arabia. It is not surprising that so much has been written on King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, his life, his creation of the Third Saudi State, and his relations with foreign powers, given his pivotal role in modern history. The numbers of books, articles, and other studies on him virtually mushroomed in the 1960s and 1970s. One needs to be either foolhardy or extremely insightful to base work within the confines of that subject today. There is little original that can yet be written and the quality of writing ranges from incisive to hagiographic. Another formative figure in Saudi Arabia’s history, Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the school of thought that Westerners often refer to as Wahhabism, continues to receive attention as well from Esther Peskes and by the publication after many years of the seminal doctoral dissertation by George Rentz.

Longtime Saudi Arabian minister, writer, and poet Ghazi Algosaibi is one of the few Gulf politicians to publish an autobiography. A more recent but equally imposing figure in Saudi history, King Faysal, is the subject of biographies by Joseph Kéchichian and Alexei Vassiliev, while David Ottaway has produced a study of Saudi Arabia’s long-time ambassador to the


USA, Prince Bandar b. Sultan. From a different point of view, Mamoun Fandy has produced pen portraits of prominent Saudi dissident leaders and Steve Coll chronicles the history of the Bin Ladin family, far more complex than caricatured in the popular image of Usamah b. Ladin.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, Robert Jarman has written on Amir Sabah of Kuwait and Andrew Wheatcroft on Amir Salman of Bahrain, both twentieth-century rulers. A rare autobiography has been penned by Easa Saleh al-Gurg, a prominent Dubai businessman and former UAE ambassador to the UK. The study of established merchant families in the Gulf has been enhanced by a “biography” of Bahrain’s best known family by family member Khalid M. Kanoo and by James Onley’s articles on an earlier Perso-Bahraini family. In 1947, Imam Yahya took a radical step for Yemen and sent a small group of young men out of the country for education. These “Famous Forty” and the several hundred other Yemenis educated abroad until 1959 are the focus of Robert Burrowes’ article. Another rare autobiography has been published by Mohsin Alaini, a prime mover behind the fledgling Yemen Arab Republic as frequent prime minister and foreign minister, and translated into English. In counterpoint, a voice from Aden and the founder of South Yemen’s Communist Party, ‘Abdullah Ba Dhib, is discussed by A.K. al-Ilbi.

Westerners involved with Arabia have produced far more autobiographies and have been the subject of both casual and serious biographers. The substantial genre of travel writing, which revealed so many details of the lives of authors, has been largely superseded by guidebooks as mass tourism has entered the region. Britain has had the most substantial and enduring

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34 Fortunately, that effective demise of exploratory travel writing has not put an end to writing about travelers: Michael Wolfe (ed.), One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing About the Muslim Pilgrimage (New York: Grove, 1997); Terence Clark, “The British in Oman Since 1645”, in Unfolding the Orient: Travellers in Egypt and the Near East, edited by Paul and Janet Starkey (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002); Hilal al-Hajri, European Travel-Writing on Oman: Orientalism Reappraised (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006); idem, “British Travellers in Oman from 1627 to 1970”, in Modern Oman: Studies on
relationship with Arabia and the Gulf of any Western power. Not only is there a long history of
diplomatic ties with regional entities but the smaller Gulf States were British “protected states” as
mentioned below. Consequently, British memoirs published in the last two decades have been
written by Political Residents, Political Agents, and Resident Advisers in the Gulf and South
Arabia. Through their pages, the reader can gain understanding of the transition from the
Indian Political Service and from Sudan administration to the Gulf, which occurred in the
decades prior to official British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971.

A number of these books were penned prior to 1990 but more recently Julian Walker has
written of his time in the Gulf while Michael Crouch, Nigel Groom, and John Harding recount
their experiences in British-administered South Arabia. Former Political Resident Bernard
Burrows followed up an earlier chronicle of his time in the Gulf with a more general autobiogra-
phy of his diplomatic career, as did retired ambassadors Ivor Lucas and Glencairn Balfour Paul.
The redoubtable Gertrude Bell, who held a variety of positions in Iraq and the Gulf States
throughout the early twentieth century, is the subject of biographies by Georgina Howell and
Liora Lukitz, and has had her diaries edited by Rosemary O’Brien. An attempt to explain the atti-
tudes and behavior of British officialdom in the Gulf through their public school experiences was
published by Paul Rich.

Another treasure trove of British autobiography is the memoirs of military men serving in
Arabia. Oman, with two internal wars, has been a particular focus of this genre, with post-
1990 books by Johnny Cooper, who served with the Special Air Service (SAS) in Oman’s
1950s al-Jabal al-Akhdar War, former commanders of the Oman armed forces Corran Purdon
and John Graham, and former field officers David Gwynne-James and Allan Williams (served
in Oman in the 1960s) and Peter Thwaites and Ian Gardiner (relate their experiences in the
Scouts. Two other military memoirs of interest that include service in Arabia are by Peter de la
Billière, who commanded British forces in the 1991 Kuwait War, and A.J. Deane-Drummond,
a storied commander of the SAS. Finally, Xan Fielding has recounted the life of British army
officer and politician Billy McLean, who saw action with the royalists during the 1960s North

Politics, Economy, Environment, and Culture of the Sultanate, edited by Andrzej Kapiszewski, Abdulrah-
man al-Salimi, and Andrzej Pikulski (Krakow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2006), pp. 63–88; Alastair Hamil-
ton, An Arabian Utopia: The Western Discovery of Oman (London: Oxford University Press for the Arcadian
Library, 2010).

35 Michael Crouch, An Element of Luck: To South Arabia and Beyond (London: Radcliffe Press, 1993); Julian

36 Ivor Lucas, A Road to Damascus: Mainly Diplomatic Memoirs from the Middle East (London: Rad-
cliffe Press, 1997); Bernard Burrows, Diplomats in a Changing World (Durham, UK: The Memoir Club,
2001); Glencairn Balfour Paul, Bagpipes in Babylon: A Lifetime in the Arab World and Beyond (London:

37 Paul Rich, The Invasions of the Gulf: Radicalism, Ritualism and the Shaikhs (Cambridge, UK: All-
Influence of English Public Schools”, PhD dissertation [University of Western Australia, Perth, 1989]);
Rosemary O’Brien (ed.), The Arabian Diaries, 1913–1914, by Gertrude Bell (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Uni-
versity Press, 2000); Georgina Howell, Daughter of the Desert: The Remarkable Life of Gertrude Bell
(London: Macmillan, 2006; published in the USA as Gertrude Bell [New York: Farrar, Straus and
Giroux, 2007]); Liora Lukitz, A Quest in the Middle East: Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq
(London: I.B. Tauris, 2006). A related study of interest is Maria Holt, “Memories of Arabia and Empire:
Yemen civil war.38 Prince Khalid b. Sultan, the commander of Arab forces during the 1991 liberation of Kuwait and son of the late Saudi Minister of Defense and Aviation, is probably the only Gulf military officer to pen an autobiography.39

The early days of Arabia’s oil industry was dominated by larger-than-life men. Aileen Keating tells the story of Frank Holmes, a pioneering geologist who acquired and lost what became Arabia’s biggest concessions. Early ARAMCO head Thomas Barger has published some of his correspondence of the late 1930s while Fahd al-Semmari and Jill Roberg have edited the recollections of a number of Americans who lived and worked in the kingdom and another set of interviews was collected by the University of California, Berkeley. Reem Alissa’s study looks at the development of the Kuwait Oil Company camp at Ahmadi. Thomas Lippman published a biography of American diplomat and intelligence agent Bill Eddy. Speaking of Americans, Shaykh Sultan al-Qasimi, historian and the Ruler of Sharjah, has written a short biography of an apparently American cabin boy who became the virtual ruler of Oman’s southern region of Dhufar in the nineteenth century. French medical doctor Claudie Fayein, who earlier published her autobiography of life in Yemen in the mid-twentieth century, recounts events in a more recent article.40

2.4 Boundaries and legal matters

Boundaries in the Arabian Peninsula have been one of the principal legal problems over the course of the twentieth century, a point underscored by Richard Schofield, John Wilkinson, Ibrahim Ibrahim, Husain Albaharna, and myself.41 The British-sponsored 1922 conference at


al-Uqayr (now in Saudi Arabia) established the outline of borders between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq, as well as two Neutral Zones, as Eran Segal discusses while Anthony Toth elucidates the tribal aspect of the divisions. Yitzhak Gil-Har points out that the British also played a major role in delineating the Saudi-Jordanian border. John Willis has examined the question of borders in Yemen, including between former North and South Yemen. Most borders have been settled by comprehensive agreements in recent years — among them the Saudi-Yemeni border, which has been studied by Askar al-Enazy and in the book edited by Renaud Detalle.42 So have most of the most contentious issues, such as the Saudi claims to al-Buraymi oasis (subject of an article by Tore Tingvold Petersen and book by Michael Quentin Morton), the dispute between Bahrain and Qatar over islands and the enclave of Zubarah (examined from a Bahraini point of view by the edited work by Jawad al-Arayed), and Iraq’s claim to Kuwait (which has spawned a large literature, headed by studies by Richard Schofield, Maurice Mendelson and Susan Hulton, David Finnie, and Habibur Rahman).43 But one dispute that continues to fester is that of ownership of the islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs, seized by Iran in 1971 over the


strong objection of the UAE. Publications abound on both sides of the issue: the Iranian point of view is represented by Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, Hooshang Amirahmadi, Farhang Mehr, and Jalil Roshandel while the UAE side has been taken by Mohamed Abdullah al-Roken, Hassan al-Alkim, and Thomas R. Mattair, with more neutral assessments provided by Richard Schofield and Richard A. Mobley.44

2.5 Military and security

It will be obvious to any casual observer of the region that the topic of “Gulf security” receives global attention and that the literature, both scholarly and policy-oriented, is enormous — as well as being outside the scope of this survey. That includes publications on Western military activities. My annotated bibliography lists more than 2200 entries on the subject through 2004.45 Jeffrey Macris, though, has published a careful study of the Gulf’s role in World War II operations and Co-operation in the Persian Gulf, Occasional Paper 15 (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, 1995); Hooshang Amirahmadi and Roshandel while the UAE side has been taken by Mohamed Abdullah al-Roken, Hassan al-Alkim, and Thomas R. Mattair, with more neutral assessments provided by Richard Schofield and Richard A. Mobley have written on similar forces and operations in South Arabia. I have published a study of Oman’s two internal wars with Imamate forces in the north and Marxist insurgents in the south, and Walter Ladwig III, Geraint Hughes, Christopher Carlton, Marc DeVore, Ian Ilych Martinez, and Abdel ‘azzak Takriti have dealt with the British role in Oman during the British war.46


3 Economic, social, and cultural history

3.1 Economic history

An encouraging sign of diversification and intensification of efforts is the growing literature on economic, social, and cultural history, to a degree unthinkable before 1990. Whereas the story of oil exploration was a prominent feature of earlier writings, post-1990 literature has produced Anthony Cave Brown’s sweeping history of ARAMCO (the Arabian American Oil Company). Robert Vitalis has challenged conventional history of ARAMCO and the American impact on Saudi Arabia while Steffen Hertog examines the experience of Saudi Arabia’s first national oil enterprise, Petromin. The history of oil exploration and production has also been explored for Oman by Terence Clark and for the UAE by David Heard.

The Peninsula has experienced two distinct types of economic development or change. The six members of the GCC have all experienced high income from oil exports (and some, more latterly, from gas exports). Their state-directed income distribution, small populations and lack of other natural resources have driven what some have termed rentier economies that benefit certain sectors of the population more than others, as Rayed Krimly and Steffen Hertog demonstrate. The other type of economy is that of Yemen, similar to many Third World countries and characterized by limited and dwindling oil production, exploding population, persistent poverty, and growing water scarcity, as Ali al-Hagari has outlined.


A key element of economic history regarding the Peninsula has been that of trade. Rather than constituting a destination, the Peninsula served as a focal point for transit from East to West and West to East. Overland routes have been of key importance for millennia but Arabia also boasts a variety of ports with long and storied histories, as Mohamed El Amrousi, Willem Floor, and Nelida Fuccaro delineate. The interaction of the Gulf with the western Indian Ocean is examined by Fahad Bishara and Beatrice Nicolini. The story of pearling, once the economic driver in much of the Gulf, has been chronicled by Robert Carter and Victoria Penziner Hightower while Yacoub Yusuf al-Hijji has written about aspects of Kuwait’s traditional maritime experience. More attention has been paid to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, as shown in the works by Colette Dubois, Michel Tuchscherer, Roxani Margariti, Hasan Shihab, C.G. Brower, Giancarlo Casale, Guido Steinberg, and André Raymond.


3.2 Culture and social history

Much of the emergence of Arabian social history deals with the role of elites and leadership. This was a central focus in Khaldoun al-Naqeeb’s seminal study of society and state. Yemen has been the most studied area, as seen by the works of Isa Blumi, Gabriele vom Bruck, Paul Dresch, Aharon Gaimani, and A. Sayyad, which range from society in Ottoman times to the resistance of the Yemeni sayyids to Wahhabi penetration to ideological elites in South Yemen. On the other side of the Peninsula, historian James Onley and anthropologist Sulayman Khalaf look at leadership in the Gulf, Fatma al-Sayegh examines the role of merchant families in Dubai, and I draw conclusions about the role of ruling, merchant, and shaykhly families in recent Gulf history. Perhaps the most pervasive form of social organization in the Peninsula is the tribe, although Donald Cole and Soraya Altorki question that assumption, and much of Arabian history has been seen as a perpetual struggle in political, economic, and social terms between the badu (bedouin, nomads) and the hadr (settled, townspeople), a conflict that Anh Nga Longva and Farah al-Nakib examine in relation to Kuwait. The tribes undoubtedly remain most powerful in Yemen and the tribes of northern Yemen are dominated by the Hashid and Bakil confederations, as explained by Paul Dresch.

Other social histories deal with more specific topics. Aspects of women’s lives and restricted roles in society have been studied by Eleanor Doumato in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, Sophia Pandy in Bahrain, and Ulrike Freitag, Hanne Schöning, and Susanne Dahlgren in South Yemen. Another approach is Penelope Tuson’s look at Western women in Arabia.55 Soumyen


Bandyopadhyay chronicles the development of an Omani interior town and Muhammed A. Albaqshi examines the expansion of Kuwait. Although the people of the Peninsula are predominantly Arab and Muslim, it should not be forgotten that the region is also home to an intriguing variety of religious, social, and/or ethnic minorities and communities who, in many cases, have been in the Peninsula for centuries. Some of these, such as the *hawalah* (Arabs from the Persian coast who resettled on the Arab littoral of the Gulf) and the Baluch (originally from the Pakistani and Iranian coast) have received little attention (except for the articles by Beatrice Nicolini and myself). Fortunately, however, Nelida Fuccaro has looked at Persians in Bahrain, Anie Montigny at Africans in Qatar (as well as Arabs in Iran), and Marc Valeri at “Zanzibaris” in Oman. The role of Western medical missionaries in the Peninsula from the late nineteenth century on remains a fascinating topic, attracting the attention of Eleanor Doumato and Catherine Woodward for the Gulf, Fatma al-Sayegh for American missionaries in the UAE, Paul Armerding for American missionaries in Saudi Arabia, Lucile Fevrier for French missionaries in Yemen, and J.H. Proctor for Scottish missionaries in South Arabia.

More cultural contributions include Nicolas Gavrielides on historical memory in Iraq and Kuwait, Nadia Rahman on the memory of UAE elders, Ulrike Freitag on the press in Yemen’s Hadramawt, and Bernard Haykel on legal proceedings in eighteenth-century Yemen.


Architectural history forms the basis of John Alexander Smith’s study of Islamic gardens in Oman while Lealan Swanson regards historical houses in Yemen and Nancy Um concentrates on architecture in al-Mukha (Mocha).  

4 Diplomatic history

4.1 The international relations and foreign policies of regional states

Diplomatic history has continued to capture the attention of the largest number of scholars. Historical relations between states and powers within Arabia has been explored with regard to Saudi Arabia by Elie Podeh, to Kuwait by Uzi Rabi, to Yemen by Paul Dresch, and to Oman by Christopher Hedigan and Raghid El Solh’s reprinting of a half-century old ARAMCO work. The history of Omani foreign policy has been studied by Joseph Kéchichian and Majid al-Khalili while Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout look at the role of culture in Oman’s historical foreign policy and Saeed Badeeb and Faisal bin Salman al-Saud have dissected the pivotal period in Saudi-Iranian relations immediately prior to British withdrawal.

4.2 The role of foreign powers

But the greatest volume of diplomatic history chronicles the involvement of foreign powers with Arabia. Most attention is given over to the ingress of European powers into the region although a welcome development has been the attention given to the Ottoman presence. The lion’s share of studies of the Ottomans in Arabia covers Yemen, where Istanbul was dominant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and then again in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Manfred Kropp, Salih Özbaran, and Frédérique Soudan have dealt with the earlier period while Caesar Farah, Thomas Kühn, Vincent Wilhite, and A.R. Yaccob have studied the more...

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recent episode. Suraiya Faroqhi and Syed Tanvir Wasti have both written on the Ottoman presence in al-Hijaz, where they at least nominally controlled the holy places of Islam until defeated at the end of the First World War. But it is in the Gulf that a small outpouring of Ottomanist work has first appeared in recent years, led principally by Frederick Anscombe and Zakariya Kurşun. Persian relations with Arabia have been covered by Mohammad al-Muqadam, Mohammad Vosoughi, and J.F. Standish while R.T. Mortel has written on Mamluk-Hijazi ties.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, various European powers vied for power and influence in the Gulf. The earliest of these were the Portuguese, who literally blazed a trail up East Africa and along the Arabian coast and into the Gulf, as described by João Teles e Cunha and the authors in the edited work of Rudi Matthee and Jorge Flores, whose efforts are supplemented by Joseph Chelhod’s examination of the Portuguese in Yemen and by Dejanirah Silva Couto’s look at Portuguese maps; they were followed closely by the Dutch as Willem Floor and Virginia Lunsford


outline. The French arrived shortly afterwards and were engaged in a continuous but losing struggle with the British until well into the twentieth century. Surveys of French relations with the Gulf have been published by B.J. Slot, with Oman by Sultan al-Qasimi and Robert Oddos, while C. Veillon and Roger Joint Daguenet relate incidents involving the French in Yemen. Other European challengers to Britain’s predominance appeared late in the nineteenth century. Among them were Russia, chronicled by Efim Rezvan and Grigori Bondarevsky with a later look at Soviet policy in the Gulf by Mishel al-Mosaed. German interests emerged at roughly the same time but the recent literature by Helmut Mejcher and Fahd al-Semmari concentrates on twentieth-century German relations with Saudi Arabia. The Italian interest in the Red Sea and its favored position in pre-revolutionary Yemen are the subjects of R. Rainero’s article.

As befits the victors in the European rivalry in Arabia and the Gulf, the literature on the wide span of British interests, influence, and interference is voluminous, even considering that published in just the last two decades. More general studies include the surveys of Britain’s role in the Gulf by Uzi Rabi, Saul Kelly, and myself while more specific approaches are in Robert Dalziel’s study of maritime contacts, Rabi’s overview of British possessions in the region, Harry Wieschhoff’s view of the role of economics in the formulation of British policy toward the region, Robert Johnson’s account of Anglo-Russian rivalry, and Clive Jones’ look at British intelligence in the Dhofar War.


By the mid-twentieth century, Britain had established a crown colony in Aden and protectorates over its hinterland, gathered the small Gulf States into de jure or de facto protected status, and effectively checked Saudi expansion. This required an administrative apparatus that was exceedingly modest given the vast territory under British control. Earlier works have concentrated on arrangements in Aden — although Simon Smith has made a more recent contribution — but Omer al-Omery and James Onley have written on the residency system in the Gulf and former ambassadors Richard Muir and Terence Clark have traced the history of British missions in Kuwait and Oman respectively, as have Robert Alston and Stuart Laing for Oman as well. Onley also treats the role of the Gulf in the British Empire, focusing on the reach of British India, while Robert Blyth discusses the struggle between British India and London for control in the Gulf. John Willis looks at the role of British India in Yemen while Christian Lekon narrows the subject to the British role in the Hadramawt.70

The somewhat wider subject of British relations with regional states and British activities has attracted a plethora of authors who have examined most aspects of the British presence. Shafi Aldamer looks at Anglo-Saudi relations around the period of World War II while relations with Kuwait in the pre-1961 period have been studied by Simon Smith, Andrew Loewenstein, and Miriam Joyce. Smith and Joyce also contribute studies of relations with Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, and an article on British relations with Yemen. Christopher

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Davidson also looks at Britain and the Trucial States (as do Miriam Joyce and Helene von Bismarck) while Hussain al-Mousawi, Lawrence Timpe, and Miriam Joyce Haron examine aspects of the several centuries of the British–Omani relationship. Timothy Paris studies the British role in al-Hijaz, where the Hashimis were eventually defeated by the Al Sa‘úd and forced to accept the British offer of thrones in Syria, Iraq, and Transjordan. The gradual British drawdown from its East of Suez prominence, culminating in official withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, received considerable attention in pre-1990 works to which John Darwin contributes another study. At the other end of the microscope, Suliman (Soli) Shahvar looks at the impact of the Indo-European Telegraph Line and P.J.L. Frankl and Christopher Gandy have written about specific British initiatives in Saudi Arabia and Yemen respectively.

It should of course be remembered that the British presence in Arabia was not always harmonious and accepted by regional political entities or their neighbors. In some ways, the British need to take military action to secure the interests of themselves and their clients rivaled their efforts to maintain their position through quiet administration and diplomacy. This was certainly true in Aden and the Protectorate when rising Arab nationalism in the 1960s forced the British out of their last military redoubt in the Middle East, as Spencer Mawby, Peter Hinchcliffe, John Ducker, and Maria Holt make clear. But Britain also saw Jamal Abd al-Nasir’s intervention in


British military action had an even longer pedigree on the Gulf side of the Peninsula, beginning with the campaigns against the Qawasim of what the British then termed the “Pirate Coast” (and which later became known as the Trucial Coast). This subject was covered in earlier years but Mubarak al-Otabi and Charles E. Davies add new light. British activity in Saudi Arabia fell into the category of military assistance, which Joseph Kostiner examines for the period of the 1930s and Nikolas Gardner discusses for the period of the 1960s–70s. The insertion of British troops into Kuwait when Iraq seemed to threaten that country upon its independence in 1961 has been treated in the past but Nigel Ashton reviews the topic. Another side of British security concerns involved internal developments in the Gulf States and the emergence of opposition movements perceived as radical threats, as Miriam Joyce describes in the case of Bahrain in the 1950s and Hasan Alhasan describes in the 1980s after independence. A few studies look at the security scene from a broader point of view: Rod Thornton describes British strategy in countering Arab insurgencies and William Roger Louis adds what must be hoped is the final coda on British withdrawal.


It was, after all, British withdrawal in 1971 that sparked American interest in “protecting” the Gulf, even if that interest did not translate into direct action for a decade or more to come. Certainly, the USA had official interests well before 1971, as Moiara de Moraes Ruehsen, William Fain, Reuven Hollo, Michael Palmer, Gary Sick, and Naif Bin Hethlain demonstrate, while Fred Lawson discusses the US position vis-à-vis opposition movements in the region. Victor McFarland contributes a look at the relationship during the succeeding decade and Amy Austin Holmes examines the US Naval presence in Bahrain from World War II on. But the transition from a British umbrella to an American one was not smooth and the two powers clashed discreetly over al-Buraymi Oasis and Kennedy’s recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962, among other points of tension. The intertwining of Anglo-American interests in the Gulf during the 1940s through the 1960s has been studied by Simon Davis, Taylor Fain, Tore Tingvold Petersen, and Miriam Joyce, and Simon Smith, as well as by Petersen and Jeffrey Macris in the 1970s.

Washington’s closest bilateral relationship was with Saudi Arabia, in large part because of the kingdom’s gigantic oil reserves but also because of American involvement in that country’s development and Riyadh’s emerging role on the Arab stage. Rachel Bronson has published one of the latest overviews of US–Saudi relations while a former ambassador, Parker Hart, wrote about the

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early years of the relationship, as have Nathan Citino, Fahad al-Nafjan, Bruce Nardulli, Abdulmuhsin Ruwaithy, David Lesch, and Helmut Mejcher. Jason Campbell looks at later years in the relationship while Fawaz Gerges builds upon earlier works dissecting American-Saudi cooperation in countering the Yemen revolution in the 1960s. The story of American relations with Oman (which was the second Arab state to enter into diplomatic relations with Washington and the first to send an envoy to the USA) is covered by Miriam Joyce and Mohammed al-Khudhairi.

5 Islam and Islamism
5.1 Wahhabism

The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the emergence of al-Qa’idah and like-minded groups on the global stage have created a cottage industry of publications on Islamism, Islamist extremism, and terrorism. Most of these works fall outside the scope of this survey but it should be noted that Wahhabism — the conservative Salafi interpretation of Sunni Islam prevailing in Saudi Arabia — has received increased critical attention as well. The historical linkages between the religious reformer Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab (and his descendants, known as the Al al-Shaykh) and the holders of political power Al Sa’ud, as well as the historical, theological, and social context in which the movement emerged in Najd has been explained by Khalid al-Dakhil, Muhammad al-Freih, Michael Cook, Guido Steinberg, Abdulaziz al-Fahad, Natana J. Delong-Bas, David Commins, and Michael Crawford. In addition, Hala Fattah has explored the Wahhabi influence

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in Iraq, Scott Reese looks at Salafi influences in Aden and the Indian Ocean, Abdulla Zaid has studied the Ikhwan (the harnessing of the tribes of the Najd as the flying wings of the Saudi expansionism before being crushed by King ‘Abd al-Aziz), and Yaroslav Trofimov gives a detailed account of the takeover of the Great Mosque of Makkah in 1979 by descendants of the Ikhwan, also called Neo-Ikhwan, a subject also studied by Pascal Ménoret.\footnote{gbv.278599-1}  

5.2 Islamic sects and minorities

Other scholars have worked on the Shi‘ah and other Islamic sects. Studies of the Twelver Shi‘ah (Ja‘fari or Itha‘asharhis) predominate, with Laurence Louër providing a view throughout the Gulf, Guido Steinberg investigating the Shi‘ah of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province (now numbering several million), Werner Ende illuminating the little-known Nakhawilah community of al-Madinah, and Fouad Ibrahim tracing the rise of Shi‘ah political opposition in the Eastern Province. Mark Sedgwick also provides a look at Sufism in al-Hijaz earlier in the twentieth century.\footnote{gbv.278599-1} Amongst other studies of Islamic sects, Gabriele vom Bruck has tackled the centrality of the Zaydi (Fiver Shi‘ah) imamate in Yemen, S. Jiwa discusses Isma‘ilis (Sevener Shi‘ah) in Yemen, John Wilkinson discusses the development of Ibadism in Oman, Valerie Hoffman and Amal Ghazal throw light on Ibadism in Oman and Zanzibar, and Molly Patterson examines the role of South Arabia in introducing Islam to East Africa.\footnote{gbv.278599-1}

\begin{itemize}
6 Popular topics

There remains a body of work that might be given, for lack of a better term, the title of “Popular Topics” because of the numbers of studies and scholars devoted to two fields relating to Yemen, which continues to exhibit the most research and publication of any area of the Arabian Peninsula, and to highlight some works that reach beyond the Peninsula to other areas of the Indian Ocean.

6.1 Indian Ocean studies

Holistic treatments of the Indian Ocean littorals have seen a growing attraction in the past two decades, beginning with K.N. Chaudhuri’s companion volume on the Indian Ocean as a historical economic whole and complemented by the works of Richard Hall, Patricia Risso, Redha Bhacker, Mandana Limbert, and Kenneth McPherson. Studies with narrower focus include elucidations of the slave trade by Janet Ewald, Thomas Ricks, Jerzy Zdanowski, Johan Mathew, and Hideaki Suzuki, as well as Giancarlo Casale’s exploration of Ottoman influence and Patricia Risso on India’s role while Amal Ghazal, Thomas McDow, and Beatrice Nicolini discuss the connections with Africa (and with the Makran Coast in the case of Nicolini).
6.2 The Hadramawt and its diaspora

Since Yemeni unification in 1990, southern Yemen has been opened to development, tourism, and ... scholars. Nowhere in the south has the focus of scholarship prospered more than the Hadramawt, the wadi of the eastern part of south Yemen with its storied cities of Shibam, Tarim, and Say‘un. Not only is the Hadramawt famous as a center of learning controlled by its sayyid families (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad), but for the Hadrami diaspora across the Indian Ocean. The Hadramawt’s traditional prosperity depended far more on remittances from abroad than its agriculture. Engseng Ho, Linda Boxberger, Ulrike Freitag, and Leif Manger trace the contours of the diaspora and Kazuhiro Arai and Ahmed Abushouk zero in on the Hadrami influence in southeast Asia, Friedhelm Hartwig analyzes the Hyderabad connection, Sumit Mandal concentrates on Java, and Natalie Mobini-Kesheh dissects the presence in the Netherlands East Indies. Back at home, Sylvaine Camelin expands on earlier studies of social stratification and Freitag delineates the Hadramawt’s religious role.

6.3 The Jews of Yemen

Another “popular topic” with a burgeoning literature also comes from Yemen. The Yemeni Jewish community has dwindled from a pre-Israel peak of perhaps 50,000 to only a few hundred today (increasingly threatened by both Zaydi and Sunni Islamists). But the relocation of the community to Israel has both sustained scholarly interest in it and made it easier for scholars to study and write about it. Thus, the works of Reuven Ahroni, BatZion Eraqi Klorman, Yehuda Nini, Tudo Parfitt, Yosef Tobi, Ari Ariel, and Aharon Gaimani look at the Jewish community in the modern era, particularly the nineteenth and twentieth

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centuries. Meanwhile, Ahroni, Isaac Hollander, and Renate Meissner focus their attention on Jews in southern Yemen and Aden.

### Conclusion

What can be said in conclusion given such a myriad of purposes and expressions in writing? Most obviously (and perhaps equally banally), time marches on. The concerns of scholarly interest, the methodologies, and the persistent range of lacunae—all have changed or evolved over the past several decades. Undeniably, the range of scholarship (in terms of geographic origin as well as topics of examination) and the numbers of scholars has increased. Naturally, this is a most welcome development, given that in 1990 the Arabian Peninsula was probably the least-studied part of the Middle East.

It would have been difficult two decades ago to hold a conference at which the subjects cited in this essay were presented (let alone to hold it in the Gulf itself). Three decades ago, it would have been virtually impossible. I participated in a conference on the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf at Oxford a few years ago. Looking around at the other participants, I was moved to remark to a colleague of my age that somehow we had become the older generation. This was quite a shock. I had always regarded the older generation to be composed of such stellar names as George Rentz, Bob Serjeant, Bayly Winder, J.B. Kelly, Robert Landen, and Briton Cooper Busch. The torch is being passed yet again.

My experience in the Peninsula and Gulf spans some forty years. Much has happened in regards to the difficulties and challenges of conducting research in the region. In the early 1970s, visas for most researchers were difficult to come by. There were few institutions able or willing to sponsor scholars and those that existed tended to have no interest in sponsorship or understanding of the purpose of such research.

In the last few decades, some institutions in the region have emerged and sponsored seminars, conferences, and publications. To be sure, their principal interest is in Arabic-language works but the volume of English publications has grown as well. Abu Dhabi has been a leader in this regard as the publications lists of the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research and the National Center for Documentation and Research (NCDR) show. The private Gulf Research Center, previously headquartered in Dubai, also publishes extensively in English. Kuwait’s *Journal of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf Studies* was an early leader in the region, as was Bahrain’s *al-Watheeka*. Oman’s *Journal of Oman Studies* has continued to produce excellent

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archaeological and historical material. The NCDR’s recently launched *Liwa* is another step forward. Al-Darah (the King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Foundation) in Saudi Arabia also sponsors books and journals in English as well as Arabic. Indeed, there is a relatively greater desire in general across the region for conference proceedings and invited lectures to be published, often in dual-language formats.

Many of these works published in the Gulf itself showcase non-regional authors. This is not surprising but it may indicate a continuing problem with regard to self-censorship. Many topics remain taboo for local scholars and official toleration of discussion regarding these topics has been accepted for Western scholars only grudgingly. Furthermore, nearly any publication presents the risk that it will upset someone over even a minor point and thus jeopardize the writer’s standing or livelihood. This may well constitute an additional reason why many promising young scholars fail to publish or even move into occupations that have nothing to do with scholarship. It is often safer to pick topics in countries other than one’s own but the fact remains that most Gulf scholars write about only their own countries, in part because it is frequently true that the citizens of any Gulf state know very little about the other states. And it is all-too-frequently true that elaborate centers and magnificent structures are created in various Gulf States to showcase their own history but the buildings stand largely empty and their administration and staffing are hollowed out, misdirected, or controlled by inappropriately appointed leaders.

Another major lacuna is in the near-absence of autobiographies by Gulf personalities. This is true not only for political figures but also businessmen, educators, oppositionists, and even the “average” person’s point of view. A few biographies have appeared, particularly in article format, but they are generally descriptive and often limited to their subjects’ publicly known activities. As so much that happened within living memory, that is, from the early years of the oil era to the present and in what have been key transitional times, is not otherwise recorded, the failure of participants to tell their versions means that large chunks of historical knowledge are lost forever.

Significant advances in the production of history about the Gulf States have been made in the last twenty some years. But, by and large, these have been only incremental advances. In many cases, works to date are still scratching the surface, providing the groundwork upon which future scholarship can be built. The subjects still not studied far outweigh those given consideration. Just a few representative areas deserving considerably more study include: the composition of society and social change; the dynamics of policy-making, past and present; and the emergence of new elites and the growth of the middle class.

Nevertheless, the next two decades are distinctly promising, to judge by the accomplishments so far and the quality of younger scholars. I still sense an urgency to document what still exists — or did exist — before it is too late and no record remains. I also look forward to surveying the scene two decades hence and — with any luck — to writing an even more optimistic prognosis.