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TRIBES AND POLITICS IN EASTERN ARABIA

In the short space of a century or so, Eastern Arabia – particularly the region now comprising Bahrain (al-Bahrayn), Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman – has undergone a fundamental evolution in political authority. At the beginning of this period, the principal political unit was the tribe, decentralized and egalitarian in nature. Through a combination of largely external factors, this environment was drastically transformed with increasing rapidity. Eventually, the present situation was reached whereby a number of "nation states," or, perhaps in some cases more accurately, "city states," have come to exercise ultimate political control. Despite some difference of opinion over who should govern in these states, there is little denial of their legitimacy as sovereign states. Equally evident is the reliance on political institutions in the Western mold. The growth of these political modifications has meant a parallel eclipse in the influence and power of the tribes.

This process of transformation was necessarily centered around first the consolidation and then the formalization of leadership institutions. Traditionally, tribal leadership was vested in the shaykh, originally an honorific title of respect carrying the connotations of respected elder and wise man. The shaykh also came to be an elected leader in the sense of *primus inter pares*[1]. Over the years, certain Eastern Arabian shaykhs acquired additional power and prestige as a result of being recognized by the British as Trucial Shaykhs. Eventually, they adopted the title of *hakim* (ruler) and finally, at independence, the title of *amir,* combining the attributes of ruler, commander and prince. This process, however, benefitted only certain tribal leaders. Many of the remaining shaykhs found their authority diminishing and, in the near future, they may see their separate leadership status disappear entirely.

Of equal importance in the transformation of Eastern Arabia has been the dichotomy between *badu* and *hadar,* and the gradual preponderance of the latter. The term *badu* bears the associated meanings of Bedouin, nomadic, rural, of the desert, whereas *hadar* denotes a civilized region, the

[1]In reference to the classical Bedouin society of Arabia, Werner Caskel has written that "In this tribal organism there was no official leader, let alone a hierarchy. A leader can acquire a position of any official character only by being appointed to, or confirmed in, his office by a non-Bedouin power; otherwise he is only *primus inter pares*. His authority is usually inherited, but it is sometimes won by his own efforts." "The Bedouinization of Arabia," *American Anthropologist,* Vol. 56, No. 2, Pt. 2; *Memoir* No. 76 (April 1954), p. 37.

settled population, town dwellers. Throughout the span of Middle Eastern history, the *badu* and *hadar* populations have maintained an unstable relationship characterized by mutual need and mutual mistrust, each dependent on the other while maintaining claims of superiority over the other[2]. In Eastern Arabia, *hadar* culture has been concentrated in Oman while the origins and customs of Gulf society have tended to come from the *badu* tradition. The historical development of the two areas demonstrates this basic distinction. The Gulf states blossomed as distinct political entities only relatively recently, whereas the acknowledgment of a legitimate central authority in Oman is a long established tradition. While the culture of the Gulf largely emanates from the desert, Omani culture has grown out of a long history of continuous cultivation, predating the arrival of the Arab tribes and complemented by the country's ancient tradition as a secure fastness for the Ibadi sect of Islam against a wide range of both Islamic and European invaders.

Despite this conceptual distinction between Oman and the Gulf, tribalism has served as a fundamental political force in both areas. The degree of cohesion within the tribe varies widely. At one end of the spectrum are strongly knit tribes under the leadership of a *tamimah,* or paramount shaykh, who exercises political authority over all sections of the tribe. At the other extreme, a tribe may actually consist of nothing more than a loose federation of autonomous subsections. Although a tribe may be either settled *(hadar)* or nomadic *(badu),* the settled tribes are more likely to possess a strong central organization whereas the nomadic tribes generally are divided into independent family units. This observation is complicated, however, by the existence of a number of tribes which contain both settled and nomadic sections.

Equally important is the realization that tribal politics is constantly in a state of change. Formation of new tribes is not unusual, as is illustrated by the example of the Balush tribe, composed of ethnic Baluchis originally from Baluchistan, along the Iran and Pakistan coast, who migrated inland to al-Zahirah (Dhahirah) province of Oman and there formed a tribal unit analogous to their Arab neighbors. Another example is that of the Al Bu Shamis of the Buraymi region, who have only recently divorced themselves from their parent Nu'aym tribe. The reverse situation, that is, the disintegration of an existing tribe, is also not unknown, a case in point being the Bani Riyam of the mountainous interior of Oman. Following the flight of the tribe's *tamimah* in 1959 after the failure of a revolt against the Sultan, the Bani Riyam lost their position as one of the most important tribes in Oman and the tradition of strong leadership by the Nabahinah clan gave way to the virtual independence of a dozen or more subdivisions.

Change may also occur within a tribe. Under the leadership of a particularly forceful shaykh, a comparatively small or weak tribe with little control over its subdivisions may strengthen its internal organization and increase both its influence and the size of its *dirah* (range). The reverse side of the coin is the damage done to a tribe's existing position by weak leadership. Besides resulting in diminished status and perhaps reduced territory *vis-à-vis* neighboring tribes, the weak

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[2]The classic exposition of this dichotomy was given by Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah.* translated by Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958). The complementarity of the two cultures is the focus of Cynthia Nelson, ed., *The Desert and the Sown: Nomads in the Wider Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

leader faces replacement by a close relative; alternatively, the reins of tribal leadership may be usurped by a rival clan.

Although a major impact of tribalism on the modern states of the area has been the evolution of ruling families out of tribal leaders, there have been other profound effects as well. A number of essential concepts incorporated into Eastern Arabian governments are based directly on tribal custom. Among these ideas is that of the *majlis,* a public session whereby the individual citizen is granted personal access to the Ruler and has an opportunity for immediate redress of his grievances. Another is the *shura,* the process of consultation with tribal or community notables, an idea which has been formally incorporated into most of the area's governments through provisions for consultative or legislative assemblies. The incorporation of these traditional practices in the governments of the area has contributed to a sense of continuity in the midst of rapid change.

Evolution of Tribal Régimes in the Gulf

In tracing the political development of the various Gulf states, it seems useful to divide the period into three somewhat arbitrary phases: ① the rise of certain powerful tribes to political prominence, with the accompanying establishment of nuclear settlements along the coast; ② the accrual of autocratic powers by the shaykhs of these tribes and, ③ the eventual appearance of territorial states in a constitutional framework. The first step, the concentration of power and the creation of nuclear settlements, was accomplished by the more cohesive tribes, exhibiting strong, central leadership and shifting from a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence to a more settled environment. Their moves were undertaken for a variety of reasons, and the underlying compulsions for the shift, as well as the process itself, have yet to be adequately studied. However, it is probable that changes in occupational pursuits, such as from the emphasis on herding or date cultivation, to fishing and pearling or increased opportunities for trade, played a central part. In a sense, these moves reflected the age old pattern of tribal migrations in the Arabian Peninsula, as tribes were forced to seek security and independence in new locations as a result of pressure from other tribes.[3]

The establishment of coastal bases at al-Manamah, Doha (al-Dawhah), Abu Dhabi, Dubai (Dubayy), *etc.*, was a significant departure for a number of reasons beyond that of simple physical relocation. The act of selecting a permanent geographical center resulted in an identification between the tribe and its settlement. Furthermore, this small shift from *badu* to *hadar* culture required a concomitant increase in reliance on stronger political authority. In this milieu, the eventual result was an intensification of the concept underlying the ceremony of *mubaya'ah* – one denoting homage, allegiance and acknowledgement as sovereign – to the tribal leader. This, then, was an early step in the transformation of leadership along a spectrum from tribal shaykh to protector of a territorial entity to *hakim* to *amir.* Concurrently, the shaykhly clans of the predominant tribes

[3]The odyssey of the Al Khalifah, from Kuwait to the Qatar Peninsula to Bahrain in the eighteenth century provides a pertinent example. See Ahmad M. Abu Hakima, *History of Eastern Arabia 1750-1800* (Beirut: Khayat's, 1965).

of the nuclear settlements evolved into aristocratic families, eventually providing the ruling families in each of the amirates.[4]

At the same time, the predominant shaykhs began to assume increasing responsibility over all members of the tribe, even though some tribesmen were physically separated from the rest of the tribe. In addition, they sought to gain support for their predominant position by strengthening existing tribal alliances into permanent confederations, a course skillfully pursued by the shaykhs of Abu Dhabi.[5] Finally, the shift to coastal residences opened the way to greater contact with the outside world-which may have had an additional effect in promoting an exchange of ideas and weakening the hold of traditional beliefs and customs.[6] It should be pointed out that there are notable exceptions to this generalized view of the development of coastal settlements. One is the long tradition of seafaring pursued at such ports as Ra's al-Khaymah (formerly Julfar) and Khawr Fakkan – the Arab navigator for Vasco da Gama's initial voyage across the Indian Ocean is thought to have been from Ra's al-Khaymah.[7] A second example is the agricultural settlements of northern Bahrain Island inhabited by the Baharinah.[8] Nevertheless, the distinctions between these minority traditions and the more recent settlement patterns outlined above became increasingly blurred with the coming of the Europeans and subsequent Arab reaction to this development.

The second stage in the political development of the Gulf, the concentration of political power in the hands of a few shaykhs, owes a great deal to the activity of the British in the Gulf over the last 150 years. Britain's supremacy over the southern shore of the Gulf was first manifested by the imposition of maritime restrictions on the Arab population, beginning in the early nineteenth century, and directed against Arab "piracy" (as perceived by Britain) and slave trading. These restrictions eventually reached the point of preventing Arab warfare-by-sea, which was formally renounced in the Treaty of Perpetual Maritime Peace, signed in 1853. The network of truces engineered by this document came as a result of British perceptions that the shaykhs of the nuclear settlements – *i.e.* the "Trucial Shaykhs" – exercised political authority over all residents of their

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[4]The pivotal role played by these families is brought out by Peter Lienhardt in "The Authority of Shaykhs in the Gulf: An Essay in Nineteenth-Century History," *Arabian Studies,* Vol. 2 (1975), pp. 63-64.

[5]The shaykhs were from the Al Bu Falah section of the Bani Yas tribe, whose main center had been in al-Liwa' (al-Jiwa) oasis to the southwest of Abu Dhabi town. The settlements of al-Liwa' have long been shared peacefully by the Bani Yas and the Manasir. To the east and around al-Buraymi oasis, Al Bu Falah influence was maintained by close ties with the Zawahir (Dhawahir). A third pillar of support for the Abu Dhabi shaykhs was provided by the widespread 'Awamir tribe. See J.B. Kelly, "A Prevalence of Furies: Tribes, Politics, and Religion in Oman and Trucial Oman," in Derek Hopwood, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 137-141.

[6]The cultural impact of the outside world on the southern shore of the Gulf in a later period is covered in M. Morsy Abdullah, "Changes in the Economy and Political Attitudes, and the Development of Culture on the Coast of Oman Between 1900 and 1940," *Arabian Studies,* Vol. 2 (1975), pp. 167-178.

[7]Gabriel Ferrand, "Shihab al-Din Abmad b. Madjid," *Encyclopaedia of Is/am,* 1st ed., Vol. 4, pp. 362-368.

[8]The Baharinah, of mixed Arab and Persian stock, are the original inhabitants of Bahrain. They are Shi'i Muslims, unlike most of the Arabs of the Gulf who are Sunni.

settlements. In other words, their position was considered to be closer to *hakim* than the traditional conception of a tribal shaykh.[9] Despite having achieved recognition of a sort by the British, the Trucial Shaykhs received no benefit from the trucial relationship, as regarded their internal position, until much later. Among the indigenous population, the status of a Trucial Shaykh continued to depend on the vigor he displayed and the skill he could show in maintaining tribal support.

The third stage, the development of a territorial state, began with the quickening of British involvement with the Arab littoral. The Trucial Shaykhs were held responsible for all members of their physical or tribal communities, reinforcing the transition from *primus inter pares* to autocrat. The establishment of British protection over these settlements in the early 1890s not only formalized the British position *vis-à-vis* the Trucial Shaykhs, but also bestowed a legal status on the concept of "shaykhdom." At this stage, the term denoted an embryonic territorial entity geographically centered on the nuclear settlement but under the political control of an autocratic tribal shaykh who exercised a measure of responsibility over the *dirahs* of the tribes owing allegiance to him. The territorial sovereignty thus implied in turn reinforced the legitimacy of the Trucial Shaykhs and their families. Nevertheless, despite the emergence of the concept of shaykhdom, consensus on which settlements constituted shaykhdoms, particularly along the Trucial Coast, was not reached until quite recently. The town of Kalbah was considered to be a trucial shaykhdom from 1936 until 1951, and Ra's al-Khaymah and al-Fujayrah, two of the seven members of the United Arab Emirates, did not achieve trucial status until 1921 and 1952 respectively.

Final impetus for consideration of the shaykhdoms as full fledged states came as a result of the drive for oil and the attendant need for delineation of boundaries. Petroleum concessions were obtained for Bahrain and Qatar in the early 1930s and exploration agreements were secured for various shaykhdoms of the Trucial Coast soon after. All of these and subsequent contracts were negotiated between the various companies on the one hand, and the Trucial Shaykhs on the other, under the watchful eye of the British government. The granting of concessions by the Rulers was done under the assumption by both parties that the Trucial Shaykhs as a group held sovereignty over all territory lying between the Gulf coast and the borders of the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, even though the limit of each shaykhdom's territory was still undetermined. The vagueness surrounding boundary questions would undoubtedly remain vague today had not the possibility of oil deposits in undemarcated regions required the drawing of precise boundaries. The most notable example of impediments to the solution of this thorny problem was the longstanding dispute between Saudi Arabia and the British, acting on behalf of the shaykhdoms, over the Qatar and Abu Dhabi borders with Saudi Arabia.[10]

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[9]The Muwahhidun (Wahhabis) of central Arabia also made this assumption regarding the role of the Trucial Shaykhs. See Lienhardt, "The Authority of Shaykhs in the Gulf;" p. 70.

[10]This dispute dated back to the period of Ottoman ascendancy in Arabia at the turn of the century. The "Blue Line" of 1913 was the first attempt to delineate the border between the then-Ottoman Najd and the Gulf states. Saudi claims were set forward in the "Red Line" of 1935; the British presented counter-proposals later that year in the "Green Line" and then the "Riyadh Line." For greater detail on these proposals, see Great Britain, *Arbitration Concerning Buraimi and the Common Frontier Between Abu Dhabi and Sa'udi Arabia, Memorial submitted by the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (2 vols.; London: HMSO, 1955), and

By the 1950s, increasing expectations of oil in the northeastern part of the Rub' al-Khali desert, along with various other factors, resulted in the extension of Saudi control over part of al-Buraymi oasis, this precipitating the protracted "Buraymi crisis" which pitted Saudi Arabia against Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, and, by extension, some American individuals against some British individuals. Although the expulsion of the Saudis by the British-officered Trucial Oman Scouts in 1955, following the breakdown of an arbitration tribunal meeting in Geneva, imposed a *de facto* solution to that particular boundary question, a formal agreement on the Saudi-Qatari border was not reached until 1965, and not until 1974 on the Saudi-Abu Dhabi border. Saudi Arabia and Oman, however, have yet to agree on a *de jure* border. The difficulty of drawing boundaries in the midst of a maze of mountain enclaves in the Trucial Coast has proved particularly troublesome. Although claims over many disputed areas were settled by a British official, Julian Walker, others remain.[11]

Despite the dilemma over boundaries, the oil companies went ahead with drilling operations and eventually brought oil onstream in most of the shaykhdoms. The wealth provided by this newly tapped resource provided the fortunate Rulers of the so-blessed shaykhdoms with ample means with which to consolidate their internal positions, as well as to advance their prestige at the expense of the Rulers of non-oil-producing shaykhdoms. Even before the revenue from oil exports appeared, the modest concession payments enabled Rulers to expand the traditional practice of largesse in furthering their prestige and reputations. With the commencement of payments on oil exports, the Rulers embarked on ambitious programs of socioeconomic development. For the first time, basic services were provided, such as roads, housing, education and health care, which gained the respect of the population and added functions to the institution of the Ruler. This newly acquired wealth provided the means for expanding what had been rudimentary government on a personal level into a more complex edifice. Functional government departments were established, buildings raised, services expanded and expatriates hired to advise, administer and train local personnel to eventually staff their own bureaucracy.

As a result of their having taken advantage of the opportunities presented for change and evolution, the states of the lower Gulf achieved full independence in 1971 without suffering the instability and disintegration which some had feared after Britain's announcement of withdrawal in 1968. Both Bahrain and Qatar emerged as full fledged members of the Arab League and the United Nations with few fundamental changes apart from their assumption of complete responsibility for defense and foreign affairs. The Rulers of the Trucial Coast, however, exchanged British restrictions on their sovereignty for collective restrictions as embodied in the federation of the United Arab

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Saudi Arabia, *Memorial of the Government of Saudi Arabia, Arbitration for the Settlement of the Territorial Dispute Between Muscat and Abu Dhabi on One Side and Saudi Arabia on the Other* (3 vols.; Cairo: 1955).

[11]One such unresolved territorial dispute received considerable attention in the area in the late summer of 1976 when Sharjah announced plans to build a multi-million-dollar shopping complex, the Charles de Gaulle center, on land also claimed by Dubai.

Emirates.[12] Apart from the novelty of the UAE in the Peninsula as an experiment in power-sharing, it was notable in formalizing the necessary adjustments in relative status between the Rulers of the various shaykhdoms, largely caused by the discovery of oil: whereas once the Qawasim of the northern settlements had enjoyed the power and respect due to the Trucial Coast's premier ruling family, the arrangements of 1971 clearly favored the Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi and the Al Maktum of Dubai, since the two families garnered the Presidency, the Vice-Presidency and the most important cabinet positions in the new federation. The UAE was also important in driving home the realization that the individual Rulers and their mini-states could not go their separate ways but needed to cooperate in the larger political entity provided by the UAE.[13]

The Traditional Tribal System of Interior Oman

Having dealt with the evolution of the Gulf states, it remains necessary to outline the development of Oman along substantially different lines. Oman's experience has been shaped largely by two factors: the role of Ibadism in creating a sense of a distinct Omani community *(misr)*;[14] and by the dichotomous nature of the Ghafiri and Hinawi tribal confederations. Although Ibadism arose in Basra as a moderate variant of the Khariji sect of Islam, Omanis were heavily involved in its early development and the first Ibadi state, under the leadership of an Imam, was established in Oman in the eighth century A.D. Thus, the Omani heartland not only acquired a distinct religious and communal identification but it was also provided with a tradition of a central political institution or quasi-government. The focal point of this system was the Imam, whose office was modelled on the pattern of the tribal shaykh and included the concept of *primus inter pares.* The resultant democratic, almost anarchic, nature of the Imamate gave considerable latitude and independence to individual tribes.[15]

As a result of this centrifugal religio-political system, the history of Oman in the Islamic period has been characterized by a series of historical cycles. First, the tribes are united behind a vigorous Imam. Following his death, a secularized dynasty of Imams emerges and Omani influence is extended overseas, principally to East Africa. Eventually, the dynasty collapses in civil wars over

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[12]A detailed examination of the progress of these states in the first years of their independence is to be found in John Duke Anthony, *The Arab States of the Lower Gulf: People, Politics, Petroleum* (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1975).

[13]The Qisimi shaykhdom of Ra's al-Khaymah remained aloof from joining the UAE at its inception in hopes of a fortuitous oil strike in its territory. This independent stance lasted only three months, however, when no oil proved forthcoming and Ra's al-Khaymah was obliged to join the federation without obtaining any of the conditions it had previously set out for membership. For a detailed analysis of the formation of the UAE, see John Duke Anthony, "The Union of Arab Amirates," *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (1972), pp. 271-287.

[14]". ..by which term may be understood the territorial expression of the community..." J.C. Wilkinson, "The Ibadi Imama," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* Vol. 39, Pt. 3 (1976), p. 537.

[15]A good exposition of Ibadi tenets as they apply to Oman is contained in *ibid.,* pp. 535-551.

the succession to the office of Imam, and finally a new cycle begins with the election of a strongly religious figure as Imam.[16] This pattern was finally altered in the nineteenth century as a result of increased British activity in Oman.

The Al Bu Sa'id dynasty, established in the mid-eighteenth century, had followed this pattern by forsaking its interest in the tribal politics of the interior for a maritime empire. Following the death in 1856 of the family's most capable Ruler, Sa'id bin Sultan, the Al Bu Sa'id gradually lost control of all Oman except a narrow coastal strip. Their claims to legitimate leadership over the country were largely forfeited when the office of Imam was discarded in 1784. By the early twentieth century, a definite schism had emerged with the British supported Al Bu Sa'id Sultans on the coast and a renascent and tribally dominated Imamate in the interior. This state of affairs was formalized by the Agreement of al-Sib in 1920, which was negotiated by the British Political Agent and signed by representatives of the Sultan and important tribal figures. By its terms, the existing autonomous nature of inner Oman was recognized by the Sultan and the interior was left to a tribal balance of power system under the loose supervision of the Imam.

The key to the working of this tribal system in the interior was the Ghafiri-Hinawi dichotomy. Although based to some extent on north Arab/ south Arab lines and on the distinction between Ibadis and Sunnis, the Ghafiri and Hinawi confederations essentially grew out of alliances forged during the civil wars of the early eighteenth century. As a result of these alliances, all Omani tribes became identified with one of the two sides. If the inhabitants of the upper part of a valley or town were Ghafiri, then the populace of the lower part of the valley or town would generally be Hinawi. Tribes with traditional feuds generally chose opposite sides of the division. Since identification with one confederation was not absolute, tribes could and did switch allegiance. As a result of this fluidity in alliances, it required an exceptionally skillful individual to secure the support of tribes from both the Ghafiri and Hinawi factions in order to claim leadership over inner Oman. Furthermore, the only key to cooperation between the two confederations lay in the religious appeal: only the symbol of the Imamate could unite the majority of Omani tribes.

Between 1920 and 1954, these conditions held: inner Oman functioned as a relatively cohesive unit at peace with the coastal Sultanate, under a triumvirate composed of the Imam and the Ghafiri and Hinawi leaders. But in 1954, the death of the old Imam and the subsequent alliance between the new Imam, his ambitious brother and the equally ambitious Ghafiri leader, plus covert Saudi assistance, combined to trigger a chain of events that brought an end to the Imamate. By early 1959, all of Oman was brought under the Sultan's control. The office of Imam lay vacant and all the tribes paid allegiance to the Sultan.

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[16]"It is easy to see that the Ibadi politico-religious ideology is an impractical basis for the permanent development of a state. It automatically develops a cycle which encompasses its own downfall. As the country is united so does its wealth and prosperity increase and the religious ideal weaken; the leadership becomes the prerogative of a single group and degenerates into temporal power *(saltanah*). There ensues a struggle for power in which tribal *'asabiyah* is brought into play and every potential weakness in the country exploited until full-scale civil war is the outcome. The situation is usually resolved by one or more of the parties calling in an outside power, normally with disastrous results for the Omanis in general." J.C. Wilkinson, "The Origins of the Omani State," in Derek Hopwood, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 78-79.

Tribal Components in the Development of Modern States

In Eastern Arabia, even though the state has replaced the tribe as the primary political unit, it still relies heavily on various tribal components. The most obvious and most important of these is the ruling family, whose political position is absolute.[17] The family provides both the Ruler and the Heir Apparent, who generally also serves as the Deputy Ruler. In addition, other family members hold the major ministerial portfolios and command of the military forces partly to retain ultimate power within the family and partly to satisfy the ambitions of close relatives who otherwise might be tempted to instigate *coups d'état.* In 1974, the Al Khalifah held six out of the 13 ministerial positions in Bahrain,[18] while the Al Thani held nine of the 14 posts in Qatar.[19] The allocation of cabinet posts in the United Arab Emirates has been particularly ticklish, since there are a number of ruling families to take into account. The ruling families of the seven shaykhdoms had members in 12 of the 28 posts announced in December 1973, and in seven of the 23 posts in the cabinet announced at the beginning of 1977.[20] The most important posts belong to the Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi and the Al Maktum of Dubai, including Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. In Oman, close relatives of the Sultan – known as the Al Sa'id – occupied three of the 17 cabinet posts, while other members of the ruling family hold an additional two posts.[21] Furthermore, many of the more than 30 *walis* (local representatives of the Sultan) belong to distant branches of the Al Bu Sa'id. Besides holding political supremacy, the ruling families of the area also enjoy high status due to their relative wealth, education and, in recent years, commercial ties.

Complementing the family elite is a second elite group composed of the shaykhly clans from other major tribes in the state. The allegiance of this group to the state and the Ruler has been secured through subsidies provided by the Ruler, intermarriage with the ruling family, and the distribution of choice government posts, particularly as ministers or ambassadors. Certain of these clans have also been quick to take advantage of the increased economic activity of the last several decades in establishing commercial activities and obtaining franchises for foreign products. The

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[17]Emile Nakhleh has formulated the concept of "urban tribalism" in explaining the role of these ruling families. "Legitimacy, authority and the allocation of values within the political system reside in an all powerful ruling family which views the governing process as a synthesis of a well-entrenched tribal tradition and a functionally limited form of public administration." Letter to the editor in the *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (1973), p. 273. He has incorporated this concept in his recent study, *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976).

[18]Emile Nakhleh, *Arab-American Relations in the Persian Gulf* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1975), pp. 12-13.

[19]*Qatar into the Seventies* (Doha: Ministry of Information, 1973), p. 13.

[20]*Middle East Journal,* Vol. 28, No. 2 (1974), pp. 167-168; *Middle East Economic Survey,* Vol. 20, No. 13 (17 January 1977), pp. v-vi. In addition to the federal cabinet, most of the member states of the UAE retain their own cabinets.

[21]*Oman News* (Embassy of Oman, Washington), No. 5/76 (May 1976).

'Atiyah family of Qatar is representative of this group. One member of the family is Minister of Public Works, another is second in command of the army, while others serve in the diplomatic corps. The family is tied to the Al Thani through various marriages and is also part of the merchant community. In several states, representatives from the major tribes and merchant families have been allocated seats in consultative assemblies. Although these institutions provide their members with a certain amount of additional prestige, their full political and institutional potential has yet to be realized. Most of the 50 members of the shortlived National Consultative Council in Abu Dhabi were tribal representatives. Particular tribes have frequently been tapped as a source of armed retainers, and *badu* tribesmen are often employed as night watchmen. The situation in Oman is more complex, as the cooptation of representatives from major tribes of the interior of Oman in the Sultanate government dates only from the *coup d'état* in 1970. Previously, nearly all authority was kept firmly in the hands of the Sultan who entrusted little to his small, mixed cadre of officials. This position was reversed by the more pluralistic regime after 1970.

Erosion of Tribal Society

As the pace of the development of modern political units and the process of socioeconomic transformation quickened, tribalism as a political, social and economic force in the societies of Eastern Arabia declined. In the past, occupational patterns were closely linked to the tribe, in the type of activity pursued as well as the location. These patterns were regulated by a seasonal cycle followed by various semi-nomadic tribes of the Gulf. The winter occupations of nomadic herding and the harvesting of date palms in tribal oases were left behind in the summer as the tribesmen moved to the coast for employment in fishing or pearling.

The early presence of oil companies in the area tended to complement this cycle, as casual laborers, truckdrivers and guards were recruited from the tribes in whose *dirah*s the exploration for oil was being conducted. These new job opportunities were not viewed by the tribesmen as different in kind from the supplemental employment in which they had been engaged during earlier pearling seasons, although they were more lucrative. Many tribesmen saw oil company employment as merely a short term means of gaining extra money which could be invested in livestock or palm trees. Even later, when concessionary payments to the Trucial Shaykhs allowed a modest expansion in employment, the tribesmen who drifted to the towns rarely remained there longer than a few months, by this time possibly investing their surplus earnings in the purchase of a taxi rather than a few palms.[22]

Significant departure from traditional practices only came following the discovery of oil and its export. The mushrooming of nuclear settlements as urban centers of an increasingly Western nature resulted in more and more opportunities for permanent employment. Changing values caused more tribesmen to retain jobs on a permanent basis, since this afforded them such advantages as

[22]One example of this process, as it has developed in the state of Abu Dhabi, has been ably described in Frauke Heard-Bey, "Development Anomalies in the Beduin Oases of al-Liwa," *Asian Affairs,* Vol. 61 (N.S. 5), Pt. 3 (October 1974), pp. 272-286.

education for their children and the benefits of modern health care. The newfound oil wealth trickled down to all segments of the indigenous population, especially through government land purchases and provisions for free education and inexpensive housing. The result was an exodus by many tribesmen from the interior oases to the nuclear settlements and replacement of the tribe by the family as the primary social unit. As education became widespread, its role in expanding an awareness of the outside world grew. For the first time, the women of the tribes left the interior and joined their male relatives in the towns: their social horizons were broadened, the opportunity for education extended, and a crack in the door toward employment and social mobility was opened.

One example of the profound changes in tribal politics wrought by oil company activities is that of the Duru' of Oman, a *badu* tribe occupying a large *dirah* between the Rub' al-Khali desert and the settled areas of Oman's al-Dhahirah province.[23] In common with most *badu* tribes, tribal organization among the Duru' (singular, Dir'i) has been extremely loose in the past. However, after Petroleum Development (Oman) (PDO) began drilling operations in Dir'i territory in the mid-1950s, the tribe's political system began to resemble the local equivalent of a labor union. All local labor used by company parties had to be recruited from the Duru' and the shaykhs of the premier clan, the Mahamid, were employed as Arabian equivalents of "shop stewards," and used as "labor supervisors" on drilling sites to prevent wildcat strikes. Internal power struggles in the Mahamid clan resulted in PDO's introduction of a system whereby three of the more prominent shaykhs each served three-month periods in rotation as "duty shaykh." By 1970, this system proved ineffective and the role of the "duty shaykh" was limited to outlying parties while their place elsewhere was taken over by an "employees' representative committee."

The growth of government authority and services has also contributed to the erosion of tribalism by usurping functions previously performed by the tribes. Gradually, the position of the various Trucial Shaykhs grew more autocratic. Once simply the strongest tribal shaykhs in their immediate areas, they eventually acquired complete political authority over all the tribes, as well as the non-tribal population, residing in a shaykhdom. Government agencies were created to assume functions previously filled by tribal leaders. Courts were established and legal codes written, reducing the role of *'urf* (tribal law), with its emphasis on collective responsibility, in favor of Western legal precepts, with their stress on individual responsibility. In most Gulf states, this expansion of the government apparatus first consisted of additions in departments and advisors directly subordinate to the Ruler, although the last decade has seen the introduction of constitutional modifications, such as a Council of Ministers and/or a legislative/consultative assembly in all the states of the region.[24]

Slowly the influence of the non-Trucial Shaykhs declined. Their traditional role as intermediaries between the Ruler and the members of the shaykh's tribe was superseded by the establishment of government agencies in direct contact with the people, such as courts, municipalities, hospitals and health clinics, schools, and programs for roadbuilding and agricultural improvement. Although this trend operated also in Oman, particularly after 1970, the situation there

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[23]The following discussion of the Duru' is largely based on information contained in a mimeographed study produced *ca.* 1971 by Petroleum Development (Oman) Ltd.

[24]For a discussion of the development of this process in Abu Dhabi, see Frauke Heard-Bey, "The Gulf States and Oman in Transition," *Asian Affairs,* Vol. 59 (N.S. 3) Pt. 1 (February 1972), pp. 19-20.

was complicated by the existence of what had long been an autonomous region in the interior. As a result of the schism between the coast and the interior, the power of the tribes of inner Oman persisted until later than was the case in the Gulf. Nevertheless, the events which led to the dissolution of the Imamate in the 1950s and restoration of Sultanate control over the interior set in motion the same forces which resulted in the decline of tribal influence in the Gulf.

The reunification of Oman came in late 1955 when the armed forces of the Sultanate occupied the major towns of the interior. Government authority was vested in the person of a sort of "superwali" who represented the Sultan in dealings with the various tribal shaykhs. In the summer of 1957, the leader of the Ghafiri confederation and the last Imam's brother, along with the erstwhile Imam, staged a brief insurrection. They managed to gain temporary control over much of the central portion of Oman before being driven up onto the Jabal al-Akhdar mountain by a combined British and Sultanate force and then finally driven from Oman in early 1959.

As a result of this revolt, the Sultan, acting through his *walis* in all the sizable towns of central Oman, exercised direct control over all the tribes except for those with *tamimah*s who had remained loyal to him. The principal tribe involved in the rebellion, the Bani Riyam, suffered the destruction of their principal settlement and the imposition of a military governor over their mountain villages. The untrained and ill-equipped levies which had characterized the Sultan's military were reorganized into the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) under the leadership of a commander seconded from the British Army, and military camps were established at key locations throughout the interior. The new army also assumed responsibility for the collection of taxes from that area for the first time in nearly a half-century. Another indication of the Sultan's increased control was his ability to issue orders to all the shaykhs of the interior and have them obeyed without question.

The only tribes to retain some measure of autonomy were those with leaders who had declared their loyalty to the Sultan previous to, during and after the revolt of 1957-1959. Principal among these leaders was Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Harithi. Ahmad's career is well worth examining in some detail since his rise and fall illustrates the transformation of tribal politics in Oman over the last 30 years, as well as the general decline in tribal power throughout Eastern Arabia. Under Ahmad's great-grandfather and grandfather, the Hirth had become the principal tribe of the Hinawi confederation and the Harithi *tamimah*s the most important tribal figures in the country. When Ahmad's father became *tamimah* of the tribe in 1946, his weak leadership and continued illness resulted in a loss of prestige for the tribe. The father's death two years later set off a succession struggle between Ahmad and Ahmad's uncle, Salih bin 'Isa. When Salih emerged victorious and was generally recognized as *tamimah,* Ahmad went to see the Sultan and offered him his support.

This alliance was tested a few years later when Salih joined with the forces of the short lived Imamate of 1954-1955 and subsequently left for exile in Egypt. The loyalty shown by Ahmad to the Sultan at this time earned him the position of *wali* of Nizwa, the most important town in inner Oman. His further expression of loyalty in 1957 gave him a position of unquestioned power over the province of al-Sharqiyah, in which the Hirth tribe was situated, as well as considerable influence over much of the rest of the interior. As a result of his association with the Sultan, albeit as a subordinate, Ahmad was able to create a personal aura of power that had not been equalled in the

interior since the middle of the eighteenth century, a particularly remarkable achievement in light of the ebbing position of the rest of Eastern Arabia's tribal leaders during this period.

Nevertheless, Ahmad was either unable or unwilling to comprehend the fundamental shift in political power following the 1970 *coup d'état.* The new régime was no longer dependent on the fealty and support of tribal figures. Nearly all the financial reserves accumulating from several years of unspent oil revenues were expended on a rapid program of economic expansion-although a considerable amount went to fighting the guerrilla war in Dhufar – and the base of participation in the government was significantly broadened. The old situation of an isolated Sultan requiring all government business to be conducted through him and entrusting very little substantive authority to his few inadequate minions, was abruptly reversed by the expansion of government machinery and widening of the state's political outlook following the 1970 *coup.* Key posts were filled by men from merchant families, educated Omanis returning from exile under the old Sultan, and representatives of various other minority groups.

Tribal organization and tribal confederations were no longer a major factor in Omani national politics. Although one or two ministerial positions were reserved for representatives of interior tribes, the shaykhs were bypassed as government services were extended directly to the population and individuals were recruited for government employment on their personal merit and not necessarily through membership in any particular tribe. The few remaining *tamimah*s were forced to accept the supremacy of the government in all matters, retaining authority only in internal tribal affairs. When Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Harithi refused to acknowledge the complete sovereignty of the Sultan, he was quickly put under house arrest in Muscat, where he remained through 1976.[25]

With Ahmad's demotion, the last significant bastion of tribal autonomy in Eastern Arabia fell. Henceforth, the only tribes which were able to conduct their internal business relatively free from government supervision were the few completely *badu* tribes of the desert. Even there, the impact of oil had transformed daily life and drawn tribesmen away to the coastal settlements. Clearly, tribalism as a factor in the political life of the states of Eastern Arabia is declining in importance. The vastly increased resources available to the area's Rulers has allowed them to consolidate and delegate political power in an unprecedented manner. Shaykhly clans have generally been able to retain influence only through lateral movement into such fields as commerce and real estate. The road to prosperity for the average tribesman has required less dependence on tribal connections and more on non-ascriptive criteria.

Only the ruling families continue to play an important, central political role. Yet, in their evolution into autocratic dynasties, the tribal orientation of these families may be fading. Although radical elements in the Peninsula have sought to enlist tribal elements in subversion against the existing regimes, any successful pressure for broader political participation is likely to come from other elements of society, such as professional groups, social clubs and organized labor.[26]

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[25]Interviews conducted in Oman by the author.

[26]The social development necessary for the appearance of these groups has so far been largely limited to Bahrain, owing to its longest period of oil income. Even there, however, the ruling family has been reluctant to share political power, as evidenced by the events of August 1975 when the National Assembly was dissolved indefinitely. See Nakhleh, *Bahrain*.

Nevertheless, the position of the ruling families will undoubtedly remain paramount for some time to come, particularly since they constitute an important link in the area's transition from tribal societies to modern states.

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