THE PERSIAN GULF IN HISTORY

EDITED BY

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The Persian Gulf in History

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# Contents

List of Tables ............................... v  
List of Maps and Figures ................. vi  
Acknowledgments ............................. vii  
Note on Transliteration ..................... viii  
Introduction .................................. 1  

*Lawrence G. Potter*

## PART I: GULF HISTORY AND SOCIETY

1  The Archaeology and Early History of the Persian Gulf  
   *D. T. Potts*  
   27

2  The Persian Gulf in Late Antiquity: The Sasanian Era  
   (200–700 C.E.)  
   *Touraj Daryaee*  
   57

3  The Gulf in the Early Islamic Period: The Contribution of Archaeology to Regional History  
   *Donald Whitcomb*  
   71

4  The Kings of Hormuz: From the Beginning until the Arrival of the Portuguese  
   *Mohammad Bagher Vosoughi*  
   89

5  Boom and Bust: The Port of Basra in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries  
   *Rudi Matthee*  
   105

6  The Arab Presence on the Iranian Coast of the Persian Gulf  
   *Shahnaz Razieh Nadjmabadi*  
   129

7  Gulf Society: An Anthropological View of the *Khalijis*—Their Evolution and Way of Life  
   *William O. Beeman*  
   147
PART II: THE GULF AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

8  The Cultural Unity of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean: A Longue Durée Historical Perspective  163
   M. Redha Bhacker

9  The Persian Gulf and the Swahili Coast: A History of Acculturation over the Longue Durée  173
   Abdul Sheriff

10 India and the Gulf: Encounters from the Mid-Sixteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Centuries  189
    Patricia Risso

PART III: THE ROLE OF OUTSIDERS

11 The Portuguese Presence in the Persian Gulf  207
   João Teles e Cunha

12 Dutch Relations with the Persian Gulf  235
   Willem Floor

13 The Ottoman Role in the Gulf  261
   Frederick Anscombe

14 Britain and the Gulf: At the Periphery of Empire  277
   J. E. Peterson

15 The United States and the Persian Gulf in the Twentieth Century  295
   Gary Sick

Contributors  311

Index  317
## List of Tables

12.1 List of Goods to Be Supplied to the Royal Factory by the VOC 241
12.2 Exported Quantities of Raw Silk during 1624–1714 (in bales) 251
12.3 Exported Quantities of Kurk 252
12.4 Average Annual Gross Profits in the Persian Gulf during 1700–54 255
List of Maps and Figures

Maps

0.1 The Persian Gulf Cultural World 6
3.1 The Islamic World in al-Muqaddasi, Ahsan al-Taqasim 73
3.2 The Persian Gulf in an Early Islamic Map 74
3.3 The Persian Gulf according to al-Muqaddasi 75
3.4 Land Use and Settlement at Siraf and Suhar 77

Figures

11.1 Hormuz Revenues 1524–50 (Seraphins) 223
Acknowledgments

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Lawrence Potter
Since this book is aimed at a wide readership we have tried to simplify the spelling of Arabic and Persian words, and have forgone diacritical marks in the text. The system of transliteration employed will leave some, especially Iranists, unsatisfied, as it does not make allowance for pronunciation. In this book the initial ain has been dropped (thus Shah Abbas not ‘Abbas), diphthongs have been rendered as -ai (Husain) and -aw (Faw), the izafa (ezafeh) is rendered by -i, short vowels are rendered as u (not o) and i (not e), and Persian words take a final -a and not -eh (thus Shahnama). In the case of proper names, those already familiar in an anglicized version have been retained (e.g., Tehran, Safavids, Saddam Hussein). Since there is no universally accepted system of transliteration some compromise has been necessary.
Introduction

Lawrence G. Potter

Until now the Persian Gulf has been regarded as a border zone of the Middle East, on the periphery of cultures and empires, and as such the Gulf region, which includes the present-day countries of Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, has not received the attention it deserves from historians. This volume, however, will focus on the unifying factors that have historically led to this region’s distinctiveness, and not on the divisions that have arisen with modern statehood. For the first time, the Gulf will be viewed as a civilizational unit that should be studied in its own right over a long period of time.¹

The unique identity of the Persian Gulf has been well defined since antiquity. Based on the archaeological record, Daniel Potts concludes that the Gulf “cannot be viewed as a mere appendage of, for example, Mesopotamia or Iran . . . From a very early date, the region has had an identity which was apparent to its neighbours as it was to its inhabitants.”²

The Gulf world is set apart from the rest of the Middle East by physical barriers—mountains to the north and east, marshes at its head, and forbidding deserts to the south. In the past, people living on the shores of the Gulf had closer relations with one another than with those living in the interior, which is typical of littoral societies.³ For millennia it was an integrated region characterized by the constant interchange of people, commerce, and religious movements. Before the modern era, peoples of the region shared a maritime culture based on pearling, fishing, and long-distance trade, and were part of an interlinked system that included agricultural villages and oases that sustained the caravan trade.

The Gulf has always been a key international trade route connecting the Middle East to India, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and China. Its orientation was outward, toward the Indian Ocean, and its society reflected this. A cosmopolitan, mercantile, and tolerant society developed here, which thrived in spite of the lack of local resources. The mobility of these people and their assets differed markedly from that of the oasis-based agricultural peasant societies that arose in the interior of neighboring states. Historically, regional powers, including states based on the Iranian plateau or the powers that controlled parts of the Arabian Peninsula or Mesopotamia, rarely exercised effective political control over the Gulf littoral.
Regional Identity

The subject of this book is the Gulf, khalij, in Persian and Arabic, and its people, the Khalijis. The literal English translation, “Gulfies,” may be regarded as derogatory by some and has been avoided here. For convenience, the term “Khaliji” is sometimes invoked to draw a distinction between dwellers on the Iranian or Arabian coasts and those living in the interior. Although peoples living on the Gulf littoral had a similar lifestyle and often had intense economic and social relations, this does not mean that they shared a common identity. Rather, in premodern times, identity in the Middle East was local. In the twentieth century, factors such as tribe, locality, ethnicity, and religion have been increasingly overtaken by state citizenship as the primary source of identity. The issue of identity as Arab or Persian or gradations thereof is complicated and is a subject of dispute among scholars studying the region. This essay only seeks to point out the issue, not resolve it.

Tribes were the key to forming modern states in the Arabian Peninsula, and the dynasties presently ruling there are all of tribal origin. Until the mid-twentieth century in Iran and up to the present time in Iraq, tribalism has also played an important role. Language has also served as a source of difference and, sometimes, division. Arabic, a Semitic language, is spoken in Iraq and in the Arabian Peninsula. Iran has an Aryan heritage, and its official language, Persian, is an Indo-European tongue. However, people along the Iranian littoral south of Bushehr often speak Arabic, which also predominates in the southwestern Iranian province of Khuzistan. On the southern shore, especially in Bahrain and Dubai, expatriate communities of Iranians speak Persian. In post–World War II Bahrain, the British diplomat Sir Rupert Hay reported that “the Persians can, nearly all, speak Arabic fluently, but few Arabs will admit to a knowledge of Persian.”4 “A British Political Agent in Muscat, writing at the turn of the century, spoke of 14 languages that might be heard every day in the suqs of Muscat and Matrah.”5 This bilingualism was common and led to a mutual tolerance that typified society in the Gulf.

The religious history of the Gulf has yet to be written. In a general sense Shiism unified Iran, Wahhabism unified Saudi Arabia, and Ibadism unified Oman. Although Iran today is a Shi’i state and the Arabian peninsula is largely Sunni, there are significant pockets of Sunnis along the Iranian coastline from Kangan to Minab and many Shi’is reside in Bahrain,6 Kuwait, the UAE (especially Dubai), and Oman. Oman forms the only Ibadi state in the world. Historically, there were often outsiders—Banyans from India, Zoroastrians, Jews,7 and Europeans—who also formed part of the human mix in the Gulf and were usually there for commercial purposes. In the Gulf region religious tolerance and intermingling has been the norm in port cities for centuries. A Portuguese visitor in 1549 commented that in Hormuz, God was celebrated four times a week—by the Muslims on Friday, the Jews on Saturday, the Christians on Sunday, and the Hindus on Monday.8

In the twentieth century the historical unity of Gulf society was shattered. On the Arab side, British intervention led to the drawing of borders and the creation of new states. As part of the modernization process these states were determined to create national histories and assert control over their Gulf littoral. After the British withdrawal in 1971, there was a period of about two decades in which regional states (notably Iran and Saudi Arabia) themselves dominated the area, followed by renewed superpower intervention, this time by the United States. Today regional states face a common set of political and economic problems, including regime security, the challenge of radical Islam, sectarian differences, management of petroleum resources, and preparation for life after oil. The major role played by external powers also seems likely to continue.
Rewriting the History of the Gulf

The arrival of oceans as a suitable subject of study is highlighted in a recent series of articles in *The American Historical Review*. As the introduction notes, “No longer outside time, the sea is being given a history, even as the history of the world is being retold from the perspective of the sea.” Much of the history of the Indian Ocean—and by extension the Persian Gulf—since the early modern period has been treated from the standpoint of the intrusion and domination of external powers: the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Dutch in the seventeenth, and the English from the late eighteenth. The great European trading companies that operated in the region, the English East India Company (founded in 1600), the Dutch East Indies Company (founded in 1602), and the French Compagnie Française des Indes (founded in 1664), all left voluminous records that have been mined by historians. These materials, in light of the paucity of local records from the Gulf, have left an image of a region focused on maritime trade and resistance to or collaboration with foreign intruders. However, “contrary to the situation elsewhere in Asia the Europeans did not establish settlements dominated by Europeans that later grew into enclaves with their own jurisdictional rights and authority,” according to Floor. The Europeans were always very much in the minority and were quite dependent on the local powers. As we are reminded in a wide-ranging review article, “many important aspects of European-Asian interaction in maritime Asia cannot be understood if we maintain an analytic separation of European intrusion and Asian response; they emerged in highly contingent and specific ways from the interactions, the congruences and mutual adaptations, of specific facets of the European and various Asian civilizations.”

Writing the history of the Persian Gulf has long been the preserve of outsiders, until recently primarily that of the British, who dominated the region for 150 years. Such writers were mainly interested in the Gulf for strategic reasons and were largely confident of the benevolence of Britain’s imperial imprint. More recently, a few notable works have appeared that focus on the indigenous peoples. In Iran and the states of the Arabian Peninsula, there is frustration among a new generation of historians that others have long had a monopoly on interpreting the region’s history. By the 1970s a new generation of historians had arisen on the Arab side of the Gulf who criticized the British for imposing new boundaries and fragmenting the Gulf’s unity. They also accused the British of altering the traditional Gulf economy, by taking over most of the long-distance trade while relegating native dhows or sailing craft to the peddler trade in smaller ports. Since the revolution, Iranian historians have tended to emphasize the pernicious effects of the Europeans in the Gulf, while criticizing their own government for not resisting more strongly.

What the British characterized as “piracy” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, and used to justify their intervention, could be regarded as lawful resistance to foreign intrusion and a cultural response to maritime competition. “Piracy” could alternatively be described as “maritime warfare,” or as a transference to the sea of the tribal conflict and levying of tolls for protection (khwawa) which was prevalent on land. The idea that their ancestors were pirates, and that it was necessary for the British to intervene to safeguard the trade of the Gulf, is particularly repellent to the ruling shaikhs of what is now the UAE.

In all of the present territorial disputes in the Gulf, such as that between Iran and Iraq and between Iraq and Kuwait over their common borders, much of the key documentary evidence was produced by British civil servants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is an acute shortage of available local records and histories in Arabic and Persian. It is surprising, for example, that so far the Iranian government has not...
produced more historical documents to buttress their claim of ownership of the islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb.

**History Used and Abused**

Governments in the region have sought to use history to create or to reinforce a feeling of national identity and bolster their own legitimacy. They favor national histories that sharply differentiate one state from its neighbors. This has often involved rewriting the past. In line with the tendency in Arabic and Iranian historiography to focus on the deeds of great men (*rijal va muluk*), all of these states have overemphasized the role of personality to the exclusion of social and historical factors shaping events. This has led to personality cults around figures such as Ibn Sa‘ud, Saddam Hussein and the Pahlavi shahs of Iran. But whether they are royal, secular or Islamic, governments have demonstrated that control over the interpretation of the past is an important tool in maintaining authority and legitimacy: history is important.20

Until now, an inability to conceptualize the Gulf’s history as a whole has resulted in scholarly attention being focused on small pieces of it. In the Western academic system, students may specialize in Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, or Iraq and learn Arabic or Persian. But very rarely will a historian of Iran have an interest in the history of Saudi Arabia or vice versa. For this reason no one has yet written a satisfactory and comprehensive history of the Gulf.21 What is needed is a new historical approach in which the unit of study is the Persian Gulf in its entirety.22

**Brides of the Sea**

Any history of the Persian Gulf will necessarily focus on its port cities, those “brides of the sea” that connected the Gulf region to the Indian Ocean and the wider world.23 Persian Gulf ports were mostly small and, with the exception of Basra and Hormuz at its height, did not themselves constitute a significant market. Their main function, as at Bushehr, was to forward goods to the interior, or to redistribute them to minor regional ports.24 The rise and fall of ports in the Gulf has been a feature throughout its history, having to do with both changing geographical as well as political conditions.25 André Wink remarks that “the historical study of the Indian Ocean is, to a very considerable degree, the study of changing landscapes,”26 and this is also true of the Gulf.

The major ports at the head of the Gulf were located far up an inland river, the Shatt al-Arab: Basra is 72 miles upstream from its mouth, Khurramshahr (formerly Muhammara) is 52 miles inland, and the newer port of Bandar Shahpur (renamed Bandar Khomeini after the revolution), located on the Khur Musa inlet, is 40 miles up the channel. Such rivers and inlets, however, often silted up. The Shatt al-Arab, with a shallow entrance, was notorious for its wrecks and dangerous currents and was considered “one of the most dangerous waterways in Asia.”27 Because of this goods bound for Basra were commonly offloaded at Muscat or Siraf for further transport by smaller ships. This is similar to the situation at the Red Sea, where goods would be transferred at Shihr or Aden for shipment further north.28

Port cities on the southern shore such as Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras al-Khaimah are located on small inlets (*khurs*), known in English as creeks, with the same problem.29 Silting led to the decline of Sharjah as a port, whereas the decision to dredge Dubai Creek in the late 1950s led to the port’s runaway success.30 As Lienhardt observes, “the shifting of the sands of the coast, blocking some ports and eating others away, is perhaps a reason why the coastal towns as we know them have had such a short history.”31
There has always been a major port at the head (northern end) of the Gulf. Thus Ubulla, the port for Basra under the Abbasids, was the former Apologus of Sasanian times. The most important Gulf ports up to the twentieth century were always on the Iranian coast, probably because the water is deeper there. Over time their location shifted eastward: from Rishahr on the Bushehr peninsula in the Umayyad period (661–750 C.E.) to Siraf (850–1000), Kish (1000–1300), and Hormuz (1300–1600). Bandar Abbas was the most important port from 1622 to the mid-eighteenth century, when it was replaced by Bushehr. After about 1900 Bushehr was increasingly eclipsed by Khurramshahr, which was the leading Iranian port by World War II. This suggests a certain interchangeability, where port traffic was affected by the rate of customs duties as well as by the political situation: for example during troubles at Bandar Abbas in the late eighteenth century, the European trading companies transferred operations to Basra or Bushehr.

The relative importance of ports on the Arab side also shifted. Thus Julfar was the most important port on the Trucial coast from the early Islamic era until the eighteenth century when it was superseded by nearby Ras al-Khaimah, a base of the Qawasim rulers, and Abu Dhabi was developed by the Bani Yas tribal confederation. By the early twentieth century Ras al-Khaimah had been eclipsed by Sharjah as the largest port on the Trucial Coast. In Oman, the city of Qalhat, which thrived from the thirteenth to sixteenth century, was superseded by Suwar and eventually by Muscat as the leading port.

The difficulty of communication with the interior before modern times—especially prior to the coming of the telegraph in the 1860s—served to isolate the Iranian littoral from major cities such as Shiraz, Isfahan or Tehran. For example, Bushehr is 182 miles from Shiraz and in the 1890s it took five or six days to travel this route. On the other hand, by sea Bushehr is 170 miles from Kuwait and 190 miles from Manama. With a good wind, the sailing time from Bushehr to Kuwait was 22 hours and from Bushehr to Manama 24 hours. In his autobiography, Easa Saleh Al-Gurg, an Arab from Lingeh whose family moved to Dubai after World War I (where he became a leading businessman and diplomat), relates a family tradition of Friday dinners when relatives from Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah would cross the Gulf in time for the evening prayer and, after dinner, return to the Arabian shore, arriving around midnight. Today, Iranian smugglers from Bandar Abbas who sell sheep and goats in Khasab, on the Musandam peninsula of Oman, and bring back cigarettes to Bandar Abbas can make the trip in as little as 45 minutes in a fast boat.

Also crucial is the subject of port-hinterland relations. Iranian ports were cut off from the major cities on the plateau by the Zagros Mountains, and connections with the interior were via a few difficult passes, for example, those behind Bushehr and Lingeh. The cities on the coast thus depended extensively on imports to sustain what seem like impossibly large populations, if we accept that at its height in the tenth century Siraf was almost as large as Shiraz and Hormuz once held up to 40,000 people. Recent work on the Bushehr hinterland has helped reveal how the city was provisioned in the Sasanid period. Insecurity in the hinterland could have a severe effect on the ports. Attacks by Mongol tribesmen around 1300 on the original city of Hormuz, located on the mainland near Minab, led to a move to the island of Jarun, subsequently renamed Hormuz. The major reason for the fall of Bushehr, which had been an independent Arab shaikhdom from 1750 to 1850, was that it lost control over its hinterland and could not resist Qajar advances.

A Hybrid Culture

One characteristic of port cities in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean was the varied human mix: “port functions, more than anything else, made a city cosmopolitan, a word which does not necessarily mean ‘sophisticated’ but rather hybrid. A port city is open to the
Map 0.1 The Persian Gulf Cultural World.
world, or at least to a varied section of it. In it races, cultures, and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix, and enrich each other and the life of the city.44

In the Gulf ports a hybrid Arab-Persian culture flourished. According to the tenth-century geographer Muqaddasi, Persian was spoken in the port of Suhar (modern Oman), while in Aden and Jidda the majority of people were Persian but their language was Arabic.45 At the same time in Khuzistan the people “often blend their Persian with the Arabic . . . You do not find them speaking in Persian without changing to Arabic; and when they speak in one of the two languages you would not realize they knew the other one well.”46 Hormuz in medieval travel accounts was legendary for its human diversity, and the descriptions of port cities in Lorimer’s great compendium of the early twentieth century make their hybrid nature very clear.

During his visit to Bandar Lingeh in 1863, Lewis Pelly notes that “the wealthier class are Persianised Arabs,” although the bulk of the population appeared to be African.47 This is a reminder of the large role that slavery played in the Gulf, especially in the nineteenth century, and the fact that many pearl divers were slaves.48 At the time of his visit to the same city in 1889–90, George Curzon remarked that “the population of the place is partly Arab, partly Persian, partly African, partly that nameless hybrid mixture that is found in every maritime town east of Port Said.”49

Another characteristic of Gulf ports was their transient population.50 They would be teeming with foreign and local merchants during the trading season, but become ghost towns when the hot weather set in. Muscat, for example, was notorious for its torrid summers, and its weather took a deadly toll on British diplomats stationed there. Those who could, moved to the seaside or inland spring towns. Likewise, in Bandar Abbas, anyone who could, took off for the inland hills or mountains, notably the town of Isin, 16 kilometers to the north. Many Gulf Arabs traditionally summered in Shiraz on the Iranian plateau; others preferred the rainy monsoon weather in Bombay or, more recently, Dhofar. This population shift was not unique to the Gulf but was also characteristic of the Red Sea ports.51

**The Gulf World Defined**

As scholars have moved beyond nation-states to formulate histories based on the great oceans of the world, there is often a question of how to define the topic and structure research.52 As one scholar has remarked, “historians of contemporary times who choose to focus on the ocean, or on any one of its coastal regions, have to confront the problem of where the coast ends and the hinterland begins and how much of the hinterland is relevant to an understanding of the coast and the ocean.”53 Studies of port cities in Asia have tended to focus on themes such as city-hinterland relationships, morphogenesis, and interactions between indigenous and foreign elites,54 which are pointers to the way Gulf ports might be explored. Studies of the Indian Ocean have also focused on networks of commercial exchange, religious diffusion, and resistance to imperial powers, all fruitful avenues of research.

“Most current categories of social analysis were initially developed to understand land-based societies,” according to Kären Wigen. “How those categories need to be transformed by perspectives from the sea—and how far they can be stretched, bent, and reworked to accommodate ocean-centered realities—is perhaps the most important unresolved agenda.”55 In the case of the Persian Gulf, like the Mediterranean, defining the research area is not an issue, for it is a clearly defined body of water.

While the Persian Gulf is part of a region we today call the Middle East, it also constitutes a world of its own, a geographically and culturally distinct region (see map 0.1).56 As is the case with the Black Sea, regions “are about connections: profound and durable linkages among people and communities that seem to mark off one space from another.” The Gulf world from the earliest times has been characterized by a dense web of economic...
and social connections. How shall we define the boundaries of the Gulf world? In the north, it is hemmed in by the great marshes of southern Iraq and the swampy lowlands of the Iranian province of Khuzistan. The coastline at the head of the Gulf is composed of river deltas, marshes, and mud flats and was known to ancient Mesopotamian cultures as the “Seeland.” The southern foothills of the Zagros Mountains, which rise in Iran north of Ahwaz, abruptly mark the northern boundary of the Gulf world.

Along the Iranian coast, littoral society inhabits a narrow, salty coastal plain between the Zagros Mountains and the sea. The coastal zone in Iran forms part of what the Iranians call the garmsir, or “hot lands,” as opposed to the sardsir, or “cold lands” of the high plateau. The garmsir roughly corresponds to the realm of the date palm. North of Bandar Lingeh and 190 miles distant, at an altitude of about 3,000 feet, lies Lar, located south of the main Zagros range. This salient of territory has often had connections with the Gulf world and should be counted as its northern fringe. The Lar princes, for example, played a major role in controlling the Persian Gulf ports, especially Bandar Abbas, during the Safavid period. The Lar area is known for its Sunni population, many of whom migrated to the Arab side of the Gulf over the past century.

Just as the Iranian coast is bounded by barren limestone and sandstone mountain ranges, the Arabian coast is hemmed in by deserts and salt flats (sabkha). From the Shatt al-Arab all the way to the Musandam Peninsula at the mouth of the Gulf, the coastline is made up of sand and gravel plains and is everywhere below 200 meters in altitude. In Oman, the Jabal Akhdar Mountains, rising to 10,000 feet, cut off the coast from inland areas. The Arabian shoreline is backed by desert, including the awesome Rub’ al-Khali, which in places continues down to the water’s edge. There are some mangrove swamps, especially on the coast between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, similar to those on the Iranian side around the Clarence Strait (between Qishm island and the mainland). There are no rivers, but there are a number of inlets or khurs where settlements have been founded, such as at Dubai and Sharjah. Kuwait, surrounded by sandy desert, has the largest bay and the finest natural harbor in the Gulf.

People of the Dhow

The key determinant of the Gulf’s trading seasons was the annual cycle of monsoon winds. From the Arabic mawsim, meaning “season,” the monsoon referred to the regular periods of northeast and southwest winds that blew across the Indian Ocean. These winds resulted from the difference in temperature of the sea and the continental landmass of Asia. “The seasonal monsoons, blowing in opposite directions, determine the patterns of winds, ocean currents and rainfall, and it is within this rhythm of nature that Arabians travelling between India, Southern Arabia and East Africa came into contact with different cultures, races, religions and ideas. The longue durée or long rhythms of the climate, agriculture and seaborne activity determined basic social attitudes in terms of diet, technology and what goods the Arabians traded.” The dates when it was safe for dhows to sail were established with great precision. Hourani, for example, has reconstructed the likely schedule of the voyages between the Gulf and China that were made in the Abbasid period, the round trip taking a year and a half. From the fall equinox through the winter, ships from the Gulf and India caught the northeast monsoon and sailed down to the East African coast. From the spring equinox to the summer the winds reversed, and the southwest monsoon carried the ships back. Alan Villiers, the intrepid Australian seaman, sailed in one such dhow on the eve of World War II and told the tale in the great classic Sons of Sinbad. The long layover in the ports led to marriage and liaisons between Arab sailors and local women, and extensive
business and social connections, and helped to create a “brotherhood of the sea” that tied together the Indian Ocean basin.

The sailing season dovetailed nicely with other aspects of the Gulf economy. Thus dates, the major product of the Gulf, were harvested from plantations along the Shatt al-Arab in August and September, just in time for loading the dhows that would sail from Kuwait. Summer in the Gulf, when the dhows were laid up, was the time that the water was warm enough for pearling, so those who wanted to could sail in the winter and work the pearl beds in the summer. Pearling, which occupied a large part of the Gulf’s population and produced much of its wealth, was however physically punishing, and the life of a diver was often a short one.

**The Environment’s Effects**

The physical environment has played a profound role in shaping society in the Gulf. The setting is well described by the British politician and journalist L. S. Amery, in his foreword to Arnold Wilson’s classic history:

A certain aroma of romance hangs round the name of the Persian Gulf, but those who know the region best are probably least disposed to regard it in a romantic light. It is an area of bleak coasts, torrid winds, and pitiless sunshine. The amenities of life are few and far between. Nature is in her fiercest humour and man has done little to improve upon her handiwork. The population is scanty, the standard of living low. Towns are few and insanitary; villages little more than clusters of mud huts. To a casual visitor it might seem a mere backwater to which civilization has scarcely penetrated.

Similar climatic conditions led to similar material culture, architecture, dress, and diet among the people of the Gulf littoral. The primary diet always consisted of fish and dates, as confirmed by travelers such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta. The climate may have also led to similar medical conditions, as explored in a pioneering work on the medical history of the Persian Gulf by Dr. Iraj Nabipour.

The geography and climate of the Gulf have also had a profound effect upon the pattern of settlement. Here a distinction should be made between a port and a harbor. “Most ports have poor harbours, and many fine harbours see few ships. Harbour is a physical concept, a shelter for ships; port is an economic concept, a centre of land-sea exchange, which requires good access to a hinterland even more than to a sea-linked foreland.” With the exception of Kuwait Bay, there were few good harbors in the Gulf. The main port cities in southern Iran—Bushehr, Lingeh, and Bandar Abbas—all had anchorages far out at sea. According to a visitor, in the early twentieth century, “none of these [Persian] ports, though much business is done there, possesses an apology even for a wharf, jetty or landing place of any sort or description.” On the Arabian coast, even in Kuwait, deep-water steamers had to anchor a mile offshore. The major Saudi oil terminal at Ras Tanura extends some 9 miles into the sea, another indication of the very shallow shoreline. Muscat, located outside the Gulf proper but well integrated into the Gulf world, has a good but small protected harbor.

**Shortage of Water and Wood**

The shortage of fresh water has always been a serious issue on the Gulf littoral, in light of the scanty rainfall and high temperatures. However, local people overcame the problem of transportation of water. In the sixteenth century, the great island emporium of Hormuz—which had virtually no water—required over 300 terradas (small boats) per day to bring water from the neighboring island of Qishm. Drinking water for
Kuwait was provided by special water dhows that brought it from the Shatt al-Arab, until desalination facilities were built in the early 1950s. In towns along the Persian coast, including Bandar Abbas, Bandar Lingeh, and Bushehr, cisterns (birka) for collecting the scanty rainwater were in widespread use. In Bahrain, people obtained fresh water from underwater springs near shore.

Two inventions attributed to Iranian ingenuity provided successful strategies for dealing with the extreme climate. The underground aqueduct, known in Persian as qanat or kariz and in Arabic as falaj (pl. aflaj), constructed in the mountain foothills, made settled life possible on much of the Iranian plateau and in highland areas of northern Oman. Aflaj were also built in the Hasa region of eastern Arabia, Qatif, Khobar, and Bahrain. Another Iranian invention, the badgir or windcatcher, was in widespread use in cities on both sides of the Gulf, especially Bandar Abbas and the Al Bastakiya neighborhood of Dubai (where they are known as barjeel), as well as in Bahrain, Qatar, and throughout the UAE.

One of the most significant limitations was the lack of wood. Although this was a ship-building society, the wood to build them was usually imported from India (or East Africa) and cut according to the instructions of the dhow-builders in Kuwait and other places. The lack of wood was undoubtedly one reason that Iran did not have a navy until the twentieth century. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the Ya’rubid dynasty in Oman resorted to Indian shipyards to build their navy. Even the Ottomans were unable to establish a shipyard at Basra and had to build ships on the upper Euphrates.

The lack of wood also affected the architecture and town structure. The ceilings of houses on both sides of the Gulf were made of mangrove poles obtained from East Africa, which determined the size of the rooms. Thus the cargo of poles collected by Villiers’ dhow was used to build a palace in Riyadh. Such poles were also widely used on the Iranian side of the Gulf, for example, in the fortress at Siraf, built in the early twentieth century.

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

More substantial buildings on the coast were constructed of coral rock (Arabic farush or hasa; Persian sang-i marjan). The mining of this coral from shallow water on the Arab side was a dangerous occupation that took place mainly in the summer months. The reason that much of the great fortress that the Portuguese built on Hormuz in the sixteenth century survives is that it was built of locally mined coral, whereas most other historic forts in Iran were built of mud and are crumbling today.

A Culture of Migration

An obvious difference between the littoral areas and other parts of the Middle East was the absence of a settled peasantry (except in Bahrain, Qatif/Ahsa, and Oman) and the low level of urbanization in the Gulf. Whereas most people in Iran and Arabia were tied to the land and oasis-based agriculture, the Khalijis were tied to the sea, and they could easily move if dissatisfied. In a region where boats and not land constituted capital, it was easy to sail away and reestablish themselves elsewhere and there was little a ruler could do to stop this. To cite a well-known example, when in 1910 Shaikh Mubarak of Kuwait demanded higher payments, the three leading pearl fishermen deserted with their several hundred boats, which was a crippling blow to the local economy and the prestige of the shaikh. They defected to Bahrain and stayed there until the shaikh made concessions to ensure their return.
It was common for tribes to migrate, both over their home range (Arabic, *dira*) on land and from one side of the Gulf to the other. For example, drought conditions in the interior helped push Arabian tribes toward the coast in the late eighteenth century, where new dynasties and states were founded: the Al Sabah established themselves in Kuwait in the 1750s, while those under the leadership of the Al Khalifa migrated to Zubara (on the northwest coast of Qatar) in 1766 and ultimately came to rule over Bahrain in 1782. The most important feature of new towns such as Kuwait, Qatar, Zubara, and Bahrain is that they were free ports with no customs taxes, and as such attracted regional merchants.94

There was also the pull factor of favorable ecological conditions on the Iranian coast, which, when unprotected, attracted Arab settlers. In the eleventh century many Arabs moved from the Omani coast to southern Iran where they established the city of (old) Hormuz. In the period after Nadir Shah’s death in 1747, a decades-long political struggle ensued in Iran during which there was no strong central government and the southern ports were largely autonomous. The German traveler Carsten Niebuhr, who visited the region in the 1760s, remarked that “the Arabs possess all the sea-coast of the Persian empire, from the mouths of the Euphrates, nearly to those of the Indus.” 95 Some tribesmen, notably the Qawasim, were based at Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah on the Arab shore but also governed Bander Lingeh, one of the most important Persian ports. They freely moved back and forth until the Tehran government, in line with its policy of reclaiming its own Gulf littoral, ultimately evicted them in 1887.96

This movement is exemplified by the Hawla or Hawala, groups of Sunni Arabs that migrated from Oman and the eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula to the Iranian side of the Gulf, between Bushehr and Bandar Abbas, probably starting in the eighteenth century.97 They eventually returned to the Arab side, especially after the discovery of oil and the imposition of restrictive economic policies by Reza Shah in the 1930s. In the early 1900s Hawala were living in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Hasa and on the island of Sirri.98 Such Hawala, who were bilingual and at ease on either side of the Gulf, were Khalijis par excellence.

Since the arrival of the Najdis and their Bedouin culture in the eighteenth century, the tradition of the Arab tribal shaikh as the first among equals, bound to consult his tribesmen before taking action, militated against the rise of autocratic shaihks. Political differences led to tribal splits and the formation of new tribes, not enforced allegiance. There was also something else in the Gulf that was lacking in other areas: the hope of striking it rich and the incentive to work hard to do so. The prospect of finding a valuable pearl, however improbable, gave hope to the poor pearl divers and sent them back to the pearl beds, year after year until they collapsed physically.99 Significantly, nobody owned the pearl beds and anyone from the region was free to fish them and perhaps find his fortune. Likewise, the prospect of profitable voyages induced thousands of men to depart the Gulf annually in dhows throughout the Indian Ocean. There was uncertainty of reward, but hope that it would be forthcoming.100 All this was very different from the poor peasants in Persian villages or Bedouin tribesmen trying to wrest a livelihood from the Arabian deserts. However, life was not necessarily rosy for people in the Gulf. Sailors and pearlers were not paid a salary but only received a share of the hoped-for profits. High levels of debt that effectively restricted one’s freedom of action were common at all levels of society from the pearl divers to the sea captains (*nakhudas*).

If one thing characterized the Gulf and south Arabia, it was the constant emigration of people to other parts of the Indian Ocean basin. Because of poor ecological conditions the Gulf region could not support all its people, so migration became a way of life. “The people of Oman . . . have always needed to develop outside their own land if they are to rise above the lowest economic levels,” according to John Wilkinson. “Almost to exist, therefore, they have traditionally operated overseas.”101 Aside from the Gulf proper the Hadhramawt, in southwest Arabia (present-day Yemen), was historically a
large exporter of manpower, including merchants, mercenaries, and religious luminaries. The Hadhrami diaspora throughout the Indian Ocean, from the Malay world to southwest India to East Africa, has recently begun to attract scholars’ attention.102

**Society in the Gulf**

Who, then, are the Khalijis? Historically, they are the descendants of the Ichthyophagi, the “fish eaters” that lived all around the coasts of East Africa, the Gulf (“Erythraean Sea”), southern Iran, and India who were mentioned by Greek and Latin writers. Like the Ichthyophagi, they share a similar lifestyle but not a common identity, except perhaps in the eyes of outsiders. There are, for example, clear differences between those living in the northern and southern Gulf on both sides: on the Arab side historians have discerned a “Greater Bahrain” and a “Greater Oman,” while on the Iranian shore societies differ in Bushehr and Bandar Abbas. In some historical periods, however, when both sides of the Gulf were ruled by the same Arab shaikhs or tribes, the sense of common identity may have been stronger. Thus the kingdom of Hormuz included Qalhat (in Oman)103 as virtually a second capital, and later Bahrain was ruled by Iran. Oman leased large portions of the Iranian coast around Bandar Abbas, while the Qawasim tribe controlled ports such as Bandar Lingeh, Sharjah, and Ras al-Khaimah. Clearly, much more research must be done before any conclusions can be reached about the nature of identity in the Persian Gulf.

The preoccupation of the Khalijis, past and present, has been business.104 Probably due to limited local resources, Gulf residents have been renowned merchants since ancient times, when trade routes linked the Sealand (southern Mesopotamia), Dilmun (Bahrain), Magan (Oman), and the Indus area. As illustrated by Villiers, in modern times merchant families arose in the Gulf that dispatched family members to far-flung parts of the Indian Ocean to manage their interests there; a web of such merchants knitted together the trade of the Indian Ocean and operated efficiently in the absence of European interference, down to World War II.105 The success of Dubai today as an El Dorado of commerce and tourism rests on this solid precedent. As M. R. Izady suggests, “the modern glittering shopping malls of Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Kish, Manama, and the like are just a modern version of what centuries ago the commercial centers such as Hormuz, Cong, Cameron, Basra, Siraf, Khat/Qatif, Suha, and Muscat must have looked like.”106

Life along the Gulf littoral, and on the sea itself, strongly influenced the literature, folk beliefs, and religious practices of the Khalijis and set them apart from those living inland. The severe climate also wrought havoc with people’s mental health. The mental universe of the coastal dwellers was explored in the writings of the prominent Iranian author Ghulam-Husain Sa’idi (d. 1985) in his anthropological study, Abl-i Hava (People of the Wind, 1966), and his novel, Tars va Larz (Fear and Trembling, 1968).107 For Sa’idi and most other Iranians, the Persian Gulf coast was an unfamiliar and isolated area remote from the world of urban Iran. There, the influence of Africa, Arabia, and India was strong. The most characteristic local ritual was that of the zar cults, which were of African origin but were also prevalent in Oman and East Africa.108 More recently, the leading Iranian contemporary writer Moniru Ravanipur (b. 1954) has portrayed the beliefs, superstitions, and lifestyle of her native village of Jofreh near Bushehr, in the novel Ahl-i Gharq (The Drowned, 1989).109

Another unique marker of Khaliji culture is its music, in which the songs of the pearl divers form an important musical tradition.110 Each year the great Arab pearling fleets left port to the sounds of this music with its drumming “imbued with mystical, religious and symbolic meanings” and designed to strengthen the will of the divers as they headed off on their hazardous occupation.111 “In every boat, whether pearling boat or cargo boat, there used to be a naham, a chanter. Some shipmasters vie to get
first-class *nahams* and pay them well. . . . The *naham* had a great influence on the sailors. They would take up their gruelling work with strength and vigour and, if the *naham* was really good, forget about their hardships.\textsuperscript{112}

### The Indian Connection

Any consideration of what distinguishes the Khalijis from other Middle Easterners must highlight their historic ties with India. (Countries in North Africa and the Levant, in contrast, were more closely tied to the Mediterranean and Europe). Since the first recorded trading voyages thousands of years ago, India has always been the primary trading partner with the Gulf and indeed the source of supplies, such as foodstuffs and wood, that were critical to the survival and prosperity of the Khalijis. The main exports of the Gulf were pearls, dates, and horses, which found ready markets there. Indian currency was used in the Gulf down to the twentieth century. The great prosperity of Basra and Hormuz was to a large extent based on the India trade. Bushahr was known as the “darvaza-yi Hind,” or Gateway of India. By the time of World War I, the mail streamer from Bombay to Basra took only seven to eight days to make the passage.\textsuperscript{113}

On a cultural and political level, Persia had a huge amount of interaction with South Asia in the period 1500–1900, as demonstrated by Juan Cole.\textsuperscript{114} He notes in particular the linguistic affinity, with Persian widely taught and understood in India, as well as being the official language of the Mughal Empire. Indeed, since the population of the Indian subcontinent in 1600 (estimated at 120 million) dwarfed that of Persia itself (estimated at four to five million), there were many more Persian speakers in India than in Persia or the Gulf.\textsuperscript{115} There were also religious groups in India that maintained close ties to Iran, such as Shi‘i dynasties in the Deccan, Zoroastrians, and Isma‘ilis.

### Protecting the Indian Frontier

The major aim of both Portugal and Britain in the Gulf was to protect their Indian frontier. After Britain became a territorial power in India in the late eighteenth century, and especially after it abolished the Mughal dynasty in 1858 and assumed direct rule, political and security ties with India were the most important fact of life in the Gulf. The major rationales for British involvement were to put an end to the piracy, slavery, and the arms trade that flourished there and disrupted maritime traffic on the route to India. These concerns led Britain to establish control over the Gulf after the 1820s and establish political ties with ruling shaikhs. Britain enforced a maritime truce and instituted a system of indirect rule identical to the one it had developed in India since the late eighteenth century, as explained by James Onley.\textsuperscript{116} Officials from the Indian Political Service served as its representatives there, with the top official, the Resident, based at Bushehr and assisted by officers posted around the Gulf.\textsuperscript{117}

Britain also relied on Indian manpower to police the Gulf. Twice in the nineteenth century when London sought to stymie Persian incursions against Herat, it mounted expeditions to the Gulf to threaten and punish the shah. In such cases, Indian troops were considered suitable for duty. Thus, after the Persian army besieged Herat in 1837, the Indian navy occupied Kharg Island from June 1838 until March 1842.\textsuperscript{117} When the Persian army besieged Herat in May 1856 and later occupied it, a Persian Expeditionary Force occupied Kharg and Bushehr in December and Muhammara was captured the following March. By this time one-third of the Bombay Army had been sent to Persia, endangering security in India. The war was settled by the Treaty of Paris (March 4, 1857), and the last imperial troops did not leave Persian soil until February 1858.\textsuperscript{118}

The policing actions and small wars undertaken by Britain in the Gulf in the nineteenth century were minor affairs compared with the commitment of Indian forces on the side
of Britain in two world wars. Some 600,000 Indian troops were sent to Mesopotamia to secure the Ottoman vilayets of Basra and Baghdad during World War I. “This enormous outpouring of men and material from India transformed much of Mesopotamia, above all the province of Basra, into a de facto Indian colony,” according to Thomas R. Metcalf.119 This was the only time in history that India directly controlled southern Iraq.

ARABS, PERSIANS, AND KHALIJIS

In reconstructing the history of the region, it is not fruitful to engage in polemics such as whether the proper name should be the Persian Gulf or the Arabian Gulf. One recent book even flaunted the title *The Ottoman Gulf,* as a reminder that the Ottomans were players in the region in the sixteenth and again in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.120 (The Ottomans themselves referred to it as the Gulf of Basra.) As Jean Aubin recommended back in 1953, there should not be a hegemonic Iranian or Arab historiography that improperly “iranizes” or “arabizes” the littoral population and its culture.121 The Gulf region has always been a mixed one ethnically, linguistically, and religiously and should not be considered a mere annex of either the Iranian or Arab world.

As is evident from the chapters in this book, the Gulf has been united under the same political leadership only rarely in history, notable indigenous examples being the Sasanians in the pre-Islamic period and the kingdom of Hormuz in the post-Mongol period. Hormuz, indeed, is an excellent example of a thalassocracy (sea rule, from the Greek *thalassa,* sea), as first described by Thucydides in the fifth century B.C. The amirs of Kish in the twelfth century C.E. and the Qawasim in the nineteenth century are other examples of the type of local maritime polities that typically controlled and contested parts of the Gulf. The usual situation has been for powerful city-states or port cities to rise and fall, with none dominating the others. In the era of imperial intrusion, although the Portuguese in the sixteenth century controlled the area around the Strait of Hormuz they infrequently ventured into the upper Gulf. Only the British, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dominated the entire Gulf. The situation today resembles that which has prevailed for the past 500 years, in which an imperial hegemon—now the United States—tries to maintain stability thanks to naval superiority but is not able to exert complete control over the regional states.

THE IRANIAN ELEMENT IN THE GULF

Most of the history written about the Gulf after the coming of Islam tends to privilege the Arab element at the expense of the Iranian.122 Iranians, in fact, are often denigrated for their fear of the sea or lack of nautical ability. The opinion of Curzon represents a harsh consensus:

> Brave and victorious as the Persians have shown themselves at different epochs on land, no one has ever ventured so far to belie the national character as to insinuate that they have betrayed the smallest proficiency at sea. It would be difficult, and perhaps impossible, in the history of the world to find a country possessing two considerable seaboards, and admirably suited for trade, which has so absolutely ignored its advantages in both respects, and which has never in modern times either produced a navigator, or manned a merchant fleet, or fought a naval battle.123

One of the major reasons for this line of thinking is the historic lack of interest by Iranian dynasties in projecting their power into the Gulf. Despite Sasanian domination of the Gulf, evidence of a Sasanian navy is lacking. During the Abbasid period, major voyages launched from Basra, Siraf, and Suwar to as far as China were organized by
merchants in the port cities. As Hourani reminds us, the Abbasids aimed to meld Arab and Iranian together in one Islamic society, in which for hundreds of years Arabic was the language of scholarship. Thus the great Muslim geographers of the tenth century, even if Persian, wrote in Arabic. It is therefore perhaps not unusual that there is more literary mention of Arabs than Persians in the sea trade. However, it is clear that Persians continued to play an active role in the Gulf and beyond. Many of the nautical terms in widespread usage in the Indian Ocean were Persian, such as nakhuda (captain), bandar (port), and shahbandar (port master). Likewise many of the names of captains in the tenth-century Aja‘ib al-Hind, a collection of sea stories collected by a captain from Siraf, were Persian. A glittering succession of independent port cities on the Iranian side—Siraf, Kish, and Hormuz—dominated the Gulf from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries.

It was not until the Safavid period that Iranian governments sought a naval arm in the Gulf, and not until the time of Reza Shah that they began to acquire it in earnest. The fact that Persian kings did not have a navy meant that they could not prevent Albuquerque’s conquest of Hormuz in 1515, and in order to evict the Portuguese they had to depend on English ships of the East India Company in 1622. Numerous Safavid requests for ships or naval transport so that they could attack Oman or the Portuguese were refused. It was not until the 1740s that an Iranian ruler, Nadir Shah, sought to control the Gulf. His attempt to build a navy met familiar obstacles: refusal on the part of the English and the Dutch to sell him ships and a lack of wood to construct them himself, excepting what could be imported from India or obtained at great effort from the Caspian forests. Although he had a Persian admiral, most of the seamen in his fleet were Arabs, with some Baluchis and Indians.

The early Qajar monarchs were not particularly interested in the Gulf or able to assert themselves there; they were preoccupied with threats from Russia in the northwest and the reconquest of Herat in the northeast. The Persian government was content to let the British provide security in the Gulf, although it was periodically rebuffed in requests for naval assistance to retake Bahrain. Not until 1888 did the Tehran government finally acquire a modern warship to patrol Gulf waters. In a similar manner neither the contemporary Wahhabis in Arabia nor the Ottomans made a serious effort to exert control in the Gulf.

The Name Game

The rise of pan-Arabism in the post–World War II period and the sharpening of political tensions between Iran and Arab states have led to an unfortunate lexical struggle over the proper name of the Gulf. The same impulse has led Iranians to restore the classical name (Arvand Rud) of the Shatt al-Arab, the waterway forming the border between Iran and Iraq. It has also led some modern Iranian historians to emphasize the eternal Persian nature of the Gulf and deemphasize its hybridity. In a similar manner, Arab states now insist on using the term “Arabian Gulf.”

What, in fact, does the historical record show? According to Potts, the name “Persian Gulf” probably came into use at the time of Darius I (522–486 B.C.). “In older Mesopotamian cuneiform sources it had always been the Lower Sea and in one case the ‘Sea of Magan,’ but around 500 B.C. the Greek geographer Hecataeus . . . used the term Persikos kolpos, i.e. Persian Gulf, for the first time in a written source.” Herodotus (fifth century B.C.) refers to the modern Red Sea as “the Arabian Gulf,” and the wider region including the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Gulf of Oman was the “Erythraean Sea” as described in the famous Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (about second century A.D.). The earliest Islamic text on seafaring in the Indian Ocean uses
the Arabic term *Bahr Fars,* “Sea of Fars,” which came into general use. Much later accounts of the Portuguese use the term Persian Gulf (*Sino Persico*), and this term was subsequently employed by European mapmakers, and used by the British, for the past two centuries. All the extensive publications of the British on the region until recent years used the term “Persian Gulf.”

A campaign to replace the term “Persian Gulf” with “Arabian Gulf” or “Arab Gulf” was carried out by President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt starting in the 1950s in his bid to promote pan-Arabism and oppose Iranian hegemony in the region. After the revolution in Iraq in 1958, the Baathist regime took up the campaign with gusto in an attempt to cultivate influence in the shaikhdoms of the Gulf and among ethnic Arabs in the southwest Iranian province of Khuzistan (now referred to as Arabistan). A report in *The Times* of August 5, 1958 (only three weeks after the coup overthrowing the monarchy), recorded an Iranian protest that the new government of Abd al-Karim Qasim had decided to start using the term “Arabian Gulf” instead of “Persian Gulf.” “By 1968, however, all Arab states, including the Gulf Emirates passed laws and issued decrees making the use of the term ‘Arabian Gulf’ compulsory in all communications with the outside world.” Subsequent usage in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) communiqués of the term Arabian Gulf has continued to anger the post-revolutionary government in Tehran.

Compromise suggestions, for example, that the body of water be referred to as the “Islamic Gulf,” have not been embraced by either side. While many Arabs would apparently accept the term “the Gulf” without a specific referent (as in GCC), the Iranians insist that the full historic name be used. After the National Geographic Society in Washington published a new edition of their world atlas in late 2004 adding in parentheses the term “Arabian Gulf” under the term “Persian Gulf,” as an alternative secondary name already familiar to many, Iranians both in Iran and abroad raised a firestorm of protest and insisted that the term be withdrawn. The society updated its online maps to include a summary of the dispute and a statement that the waterway was “historically and most commonly known as the Persian Gulf.” At present, the term “Persian Gulf” is recognized by the United Nations and by the U.S. State Department, although the Defense Department began occasional use of the term “Arabian Gulf” in September 1987 in deference to its Arab allies during the Iran-Iraq War. The U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army now use “Persian Gulf” almost exclusively, whereas the U.S. Navy (whose Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain) uses “Arabian Gulf.”

What is clear is that there will be no resolution of this issue as the competing nationalisms of both sides will not permit any compromise. Just as other geographic areas carry dual designations (such as the English Channel for Britons and La Manche for the French, the Falklands/Malvinas islands off South America or the body of water between Japan and Korea (Sea of Japan/East Sea), the terms “Arabian” and “Persian” Gulf will continue to be used as symbols of regional rivalry.

**CONCLUSION**

“The Gulf is not oil. The Gulf is its people and its land,” Kuwaiti historian Muhammad Rumaihi reminds readers. “So it was before the discovery of oil, and so it will remain when the oil disappears. Oil is no more than a historical phase in this part of the Arab world—and a rather short one at that.” Although the contemporary world is riveted on the price of oil and the stability of the Gulf due to dependence on its oil and gas, in this book oil hardly figures at all. Rather, the important role the Gulf has played in history, its outward orientation toward the Indian Ocean, and the distinct culture of
its inhabitants, the Khalijis, as well as their interactions with outsiders, have formed its subject. What persists is the unique role the Khalijis have carved out for themselves in marketing their only valuable local resource—first pearls and now oil.

The Persian Gulf’s continued strategic significance is not in doubt: it is a key source of the world’s energy and was the location of a revolution and three major wars at the end of the twentieth century. It may well be the venue of future conflicts. There is every indication, in short, that the Gulf will continue to play a critical international role in the twenty-first century. It is vital for both outsiders and insiders to better understand its past and to account for prevailing present-day attitudes about the region. This book represents an unprecedented international collaborative effort that seeks to address these important issues, set an agenda for future research, and help reframe our understanding of the Gulf.

Notes

1. I would like to express my sincere thanks to several colleagues who read an earlier version of this chapter and provided helpful comments and corrections: Richard Bulliet, M. R. Izady, Rudi Matthee, Shahnaz Nadjamabadi, J. E. Peterson, and Haideh Sahim. In addition, Willem Floor and Ahmad Ashraf provided help along the way, and Karen Rohan offered valuable editorial suggestions. Needless to say neither they nor the participants at the conference on which this book is based necessarily agree with my conclusions.


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


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


8. Cited below, page 221.


23. Material on the largest Arab port cities (Kuwait, Manama, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Muscat, and Mutrah) is collected in Richard Trench, ed., *Arab Gulf Cities*, 4 vols. (Slough, UK: Archives Editions, 1994). See now Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). This important rethinking of the history of the Gulf focuses on urbanism and indigenous populations, as opposed to tribalism and external influences that have traditionally dominated scholarship of the region.


32. Basra lay 12 miles from the Tigris and was connected by two canals. (G. Le Strange, The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the Time of Timur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905; repr. Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1977), 44.


34. Lorimer, Gazetteer, vol. 9, 1761–62. At this time Sharjah had a population of about 15,000.


37. My thanks to Dr. Iraj Nabipour for consulting old sailors in Bushehr to determine this information.


40. According to Istakhri, cited in Le Strange, Lands of the Eastern Caliphate, 258. Excavations in the 1970s revealed that the walls of Siraf enclosed an area of more than 250 hectares (see David Whitehouse, “Excavations at Siraf: Sixth Interim Report,” Iran 12 [1974]: 2.)

41. Here I accept the reasoning of Floor, who suggests 40,000 as the maximum population of Hormuz in the winter season. (Floor, Five Port Cities, 16.) Others commonly cite a figure of 50,000 at the beginning of the sixteenth century proposed by Jean Aubin in “Le royaume d’Ormuz,” 150.


46. Ibid., 371.

47. Lewis Pelly, “Visit to Lingah, Kishm, and Bunder Abbass,” Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London 34 (1864): 252. I am grateful to William Beeman for providing a copy of this article.


50. There is a good discussion of this concerning Hormuz in Floor, *Five Port Cities*, 17.


53. Ibid., 234–35.


58. For excellent maps by Dr. Izady illustrating the cultural boundaries, languages, and religions of the Gulf world, see the website of the Gulf/2000 project located at http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml.


66. See Chapter 11, “Braving the Winds,” in Dionisius A. Agius, *Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: The People of the Dhow* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005), 191–201. Matthee notes, for example, that there was a narrow window of opportunity for trading in Basra: ships departing from Goa in May, with intermediate stops, would arrive in Basra in July and had to depart again for India not later than October. Unfortunately, this corresponded with the hot summer months (see below, page 109).


69. Alan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940; repr. 1969). This book has now been republished with a new introduction by William Facey, Yacoub Al-Hijji, and Grace Punydk (London: Arabian Publishing, 2006). A marvelous selection of his photos has appeared as *Sons of Sinbad: The Photographs; Dhow Voyages with the Arabs in 1938–39 in the Red Sea, round the Coasts of Arabia, and to Zanzibar and Tanganyika; Pearlring in the Gulf; And the Life of the Shipmasters and Mariners on Kuwait,*