Saudi Arabia, Southern Arabia and the Gulf States from the First World War

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International context

The aftermath of the First World War brought a new political order to the entire Middle East, including Arabia. The Ottoman Empire’s collapse ended its role in Arabian affairs while Great Britain reached the peak of its influence. For launching the Arab revolt against the Ottomans, Sharif Husayn of Mecca received British support to establish the Hashemite kingdom of the Hijaz. The resurgent Sa‘ūdī emirate led by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd had wrested al-Aḥsā‘ from the Ottomans in 1913 and continued expanding after the war, conquering the Rashīdī emirate of Jabal Shammar in 1921 and the kingdom of the Hijaz four years later. In North Yemen, the Ottoman evacuation gave the Zaydi imamate occasion to occupy the coastal plain while Britain retained control over Aden and influence over the southern Yemeni hinterland. Little changed for Gulf coast shaykhdoms in treaty relations, with Great Britain guaranteeing their independence in exchange for conceding London dominance in foreign relations. Beyond the Ottoman sphere, Oman was divided between the coastal area under the British-influenced Al Bu Sa‘īd sultanate and a reinvigorated Ibāḍi imamate buttressed by tribal forces in the interior.

A breach in Britain’s hegemony opened in 1933, when Saudi Arabia’s King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz granted an American consortium an oil concession, a step that led to firm political and military ties between Washington and Riyadh during the Cold War. Anti-British colonialism in Aden began to stir in the 1940s, and that sentiment spread to the Gulf in the 1950s among workers in the oil sector, urged by Arab nationalists to demand better wages and conditions as well as a voice in government. Dynastic rule held firm except in North Yemen, where army officers deposed the imām in 1962; five years later the British withdrew from South Yemen, yielding it to a Marxist revolutionary regime. In 1971 Great Britain withdrew from the Gulf, and the United States replaced it as the guarantor of dynasties facing domestic challenges and threats from Iraq and
Iran. Baghdad had exited the pro-Western camp in the July 1958 revolution against its pro-Western monarchy. Iran left the Western orbit when the 1979 revolution deposed the Pahlavi monarchy.

The Shi‘i ingredient in Iran’s Islamic republic spurred unrest among Shi‘is in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, prompting their rulers to seek firm security guarantees from Washington without appearing to be subservient. The United States therefore maintained an ‘over-the-horizon’ presence until Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, whereupon the Āl Sa‘ūd welcomed massive military intervention. The decision to retain a large American military presence, even one stationed in remote bases, caused a prolonged period of internal unrest in Saudi Arabia. With the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, the United States reduced its presence in the Wahhābī kingdom, but the Islamic reaction to Iraq’s guerrilla war makes close association with Washington a liability for Arabia’s dynasties, whose resistance to participatory political institutions renders them dependent on an external great power, much as they had been at the opening of the period.

Transition to hydrocarbon economy

Prior to Arabia’s passage to a hydrocarbon economy, agriculture, pastoral nomadism and caravan trade were the main sources of livelihood. In the eastern and southern coastal regions, fishermen, boat-builders and pearl divers laboured while merchants traded throughout the Indian Ocean basin. That polyglot world included an Arabian diaspora of Ḥadramis in the East Indies, Omanis in East Africa and Yemenis in Somalia. Enclaves of Indian, Somali and Persian merchants dominated trade in Aden, the Gulf and Oman. Two developments disrupted the Gulf regional economy and brought the half-century pearling boom to a close. First, the global Depression weakened markets and financing. Then, in the 1930s, Japanese cultured pearls drove down prices. The age of oil concessions could not have arrived at a more propitious moment: oilfields provided pearl divers with employment; merchants obtained contracts to provision oil camps; and royalty payments to rulers put their shaky polities on firm fiscal ground.

Oil wealth also enabled Gulf rulers to develop modern governments. State building began with measures to regularise capacity to collect revenue, manage a budget and bolster military and police powers. Because Ottoman administrative and educational reforms barely touched Arabia, rulers turned to expatriate Arab and British advisers for guidance on such matters, and typically delegated authority over provincial affairs and specialised
departments to fellow members of the ruling lineage. After the Second World War, rising oil production made possible a more rapid and ambitious expansion of government institutions and the construction of modern transport and communications infrastructures in pursuit of the modern state’s goal of achieving uniform authority through coercive means (pacifying nomadic tribes in Saudi Arabia, re-establishing the Omani sultan’s control over the interior) and through co-optation (delivering the fruits of oil wealth as goods and services).

In political terms, oil disrupted a historical relationship between rulers and merchants by concentrating wealth with the former, but policies according merchants privileged access to commercial and real estate sectors reconciled them to the new order. As rulers renegotiated oil concessions to acquire a larger share of revenues, they acquired the means to gain citizens’ allegiance in exchange for free education and health care, guaranteed employment and subsidised utilities. In the 1960s and 1970s petroleum sales funded a physical transformation as cities of asphalt, glass and steel mushroomed and hydrocarbon industrial complexes sprang up. Mud-walled homes were abandoned for villas and high-rises equipped with electrical power, air conditioning, piped water and plumbing. Mental landscapes altered as well, as public education systems for all citizens with uniform curricula blending modern subjects, religion and national histories replaced schooling in mosque and madrasa for the few.

Saudi Arabia

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the third incarnation of Sa’ūdi–Wahhābī power. The second Sa’ūdi emirate collapsed in 1891 after prolonged dynastic strife and came under the Rashīdis, former vassals based in Ḥā’il. In 1902 ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Sa’ūd (r. 1932–53) seized Riyadh, and during the next thirty years extended his power through war and diplomacy. He achieved this by joining to the traditional elements of Sa’ūdi military power (militias raised from oasis settlements and tribal allies) the Ikhwān, former nomads residing in agricultural settlements and converted to Wahhābī doctrine.¹

The first Ikhwān settlements were set up around 1913. They represented an effort to domesticate nomads by concentrating them at oases and instructing

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them in Wahhābī tenets, including the view that other Muslims were infidels and thus legitimate targets for jihad. The Ikhwān provided a convenient instrument for Ibn Saʿūd, particularly in his campaign to wrest the Hijāz from the Hashemites in the 1920s. Once he achieved that objective, he withdrew them from the Holy Cities to prevent confrontations with pilgrims whose religious practices the Ikhwān would find objectionable. Ibn Saʿūd then commanded them to cease attacks on ‘infidel’ tribes in Transjordan and Iraq to avoid conflict with Great Britain, the mandatory power in those two kingdoms. The Ikhwān refused to sacrifice religious idealism for the sake of dynastic interest. Moreover, some Ikhwān leaders were tribal nobility who viewed themselves as Ibn Saʿūd’s peers, not his subjects, so they were not only disinclined to obey him, but eager to challenge him. When Ibn Saʿūd conferred with Wahhābī ‘ulamāʾ in 1927 and 1928 to consider the Ikhwān’s grievances, the ‘ulamāʾ endorsed his sole prerogative to wage jihad. In December 1928 a band of renegade Ikhwān attacked a caravan of Saʿūdī merchants, an action that could not be justified under any Wahhābī interpretation. That incident gave Ibn Saʿūd the pretext to launch a campaign to suppress them completely. At the battle of al-Sabila in March 1929 his forces inflicted a decisive defeat on the Ikhwān.

Ibn Saʿūd’s handling of the Ikhwān signalled his quest for international legitimacy and his willingness to compromise Wahhābī principle if it might jeopardise his power. Managing the annual pilgrimage presented yet another challenge requiring a balance between satisfying Wahhābī rigour and international Muslim opinion. Anxiety over the Holy Cities was natural, given the bad reputation that trailed the Saʿūdīs for acts committed when they briefly ruled the Hijāz in the early 1800s, when Wahhābī clerics ordered the razing of saints’ tombs and Saʿūdī forces blocked the Ottoman pilgrimage. Ibn Saʿūd wished to dispel that reputation. He facilitated passage from Jiddah to Mecca by introducing motor transport; he regulated guides notorious for cheating pilgrims; and he improved public hygiene. Furthermore, he installed a mild regime of Wahhābī religious supervision, in part by restricting the presence of Ikhwān. Ibn Saʿūd could ill afford to alienate Muslim opinion because the pilgrim traffic brought much-needed revenue until the Depression caused numbers to fall from around 100,000 to 25,000 pilgrims in 1932, the year Ibn Saʿūd proclaimed his domain the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.²

The regions making up the newly formed kingdom had little in common. Najd remained a land of nomadic tribes and small oasis settlements whose merchants traded with the Hijaz, the Gulf coast, Iraq and India. The Hijaz was the site of Islam's two Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina, and the Red Sea merchant town of Jiddah. The religious culture in those places was alien to Wahhabi creed, more akin to the Ottoman pluralism of legal schools and Sufi orders. In the east, al-Ahsa' possessed rich agricultural lands and was home to a large Twelver Shi'ite population. In the south, 'Asir had a mixed population of Wahhabis and Zaydi Shi'is. Knitting together these disparate regions into a modern nation-state would be the project of the Al Sa'ud kings for the rest of the century. The tools at their disposal included coercion, co-optation, religious indoctrination and economic development.3

During the interwar period the treasury depended on revenues from the annual influx of pilgrims, but the Depression reduced that traffic to a trickle. In 1933 Ibn Sa'ud turned to a consortium of United States companies seeking an oil concession. Aramco geologists' discovery of oil in 1938 promised relief to the treasury, but significant production awaited the end of the Second World War. Towards the end of that conflict Ibn Sa'ud and the United States augmented commercial ties with a strategic relationship as American defence planners obtained permission to construct a military airfield in Eastern Province (formerly al-Ahsa') as part of Washington's post-war network of overseas bases. Tapping the kingdom's oil reserves required a pool of skilled labour lacking in Saudi Arabia. Ibn Sa'ud ended the perennial taboo on admitting infidels to the Wahhabis' purely monotheistic domain, but he minimised interaction between expatriates and citizens by creating enclaves for the former. Soon, the Eastern Province contained scattered compounds where expatriates reproduced living conditions more characteristic of California than Riyadh. The oil sector also spawned a modern working class largely composed of non-Sa'iidi Arabs who arrived with nationalist and leftist political ideas that seeped into Sa'iidi society, causing political ferment in the 1950s and 1960s.4

King 'Abd al-'Aziz died in 1953, before the logic of opening to the outside world had fully unfolded. In the following decade the kingdom witnessed a power struggle between the new king, Sa'ud (r. 1953–64), and the crown prince, Fayşal (r. 1964–75), labour disturbances in the Eastern

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4 Ibid., pp. 91–100.
Province and the spread of Arab nationalist sentiment. A handful of young princes led by ʿṬalāl ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz pressed for adopting a constitution. In 1961, Faysal expelled ʿṬalāl from the country, and he moved to Cairo, where he formed the Free Princes. Faysal outmanoeuvred the less adroit Saʿūd and assumed the throne in 1964. During his eleven-year reign he developed state institutions, multiplying ministries and administrative bodies, and put in place a modern communications and transportation infrastructure. Such efforts required a large expatriate workforce, both Arab and non-Arab. Just as Saudi Arabia opened up to the outside world, so it became more assertive in foreign affairs. Faysal closely aligned the kingdom with the United States in the Cold War to combat Arab nationalist and socialist movements. To that end, he framed an Islamic foreign policy through sponsoring multilateral religious institutions such as the Muslim World League, cultivating firm relations with conservative Muslim regimes and funding Wahhābī proselytising through overseas missions.5 Rising petroleum income augmented the kingdom’s influence in Arab affairs, and during the October 1973 Arab–Israeli war Faysal imposed an oil embargo on the United States for supporting Israel, then joined other oil producers in quadrupling prices.

Saudi Arabia attained unprecedented international economic influence as oil revenues rose from $4.3 billion in 1973 to $22.5 billion in 1974, and reached $113 billion in 1981.6 The oil boom funded construction on a vast scale, rapidly transforming cityscapes with broad boulevards lined with high-rise office buildings, commercial enterprises and hotels. Populating the burgeoning cities were waves of mostly male expatriate workers from Asia and Arab countries. New money reshaped habits of consumption and leisure as well, fostered in part by Faysal’s introduction of television and girls’ education. Within a few years Saʿūdīs undertook a double migration. In provincial towns some abandoned their small mud-brick homes for large air-conditioned villas equipped with modern amenities. Others relocated from the provinces to major cities such as Riyadh, Jiddah and Dhahran. Nomads abandoned their tents for jobs as taxi and truck drivers, oilfield workers and security forces. The shrinking population of nomads remaining in the desert embraced motor vehicles, shifted from camels to

sheep and goats, and came to rely on water tanks dispersed in the desert. Modern government had advantages: improved health care, more reliable food supplies and security with the suppression of tribal feuds and caravan raids. On the other hand, all this required sacrificing nomads’ customary self-sufficiency.\(^7\)

In 1975 King Faysal was assassinated by the relative of a prince killed while protesting against the introduction of television. Khālid ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 1975–82) assumed the throne and continued along Faysal’s path, but unease with corruption and moral change eroded royal authority. In November 1979 a band of militants led by Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī stunned the world by seizing Mecca’s Grand Mosque at the conclusion of the annual pilgrimage ceremonies. The rebels called for the overthrow of the Āl Sa‘ūd for their alleged betrayal of Islam, but the rulers obtained a fatwā from the Wahhābī authorities denouncing the rebels and permitting a military assault, advised by foreign forces, to regain control of the holy sanctuary.\(^8\)

In the midst of the Mecca crisis the kingdom’s Shi‘ī population, concentrated in the Eastern Province and stimulated by revolution in Iran, erupted in anti-government demonstrations expressing anger at discrimination. The authorities responded first with a show of force and then promises to redress grievances.\(^9\)

In the wake of Juhaymān’s uprising, King Khālid appeased conservatives with increased spending on religious institutions and curbs on liberal trends, dismissing female television broadcasters and shutting down video stores. His successor, King Fahd (r. 1982–2005), emphasised anew the dynasty’s role as guardians of Islam’s pilgrimage sites, adopting the title ‘Custodian of the Two Holy Places’ in 1986. The government had enlarged the Grand Mosque in 1955 to accommodate the larger numbers that arrived with the rise of commercial air travel after the Second World War. By the early 1980s the number of pilgrims reached nearly 2 million.\(^10\) Sa‘ūdī efforts to capitalise on managing the ḥājj collided with the challenge posed by Iranians eager to preach their revolutionary message to pilgrims. The contest between Riyadh and Tehran escalated partly because the former supported Iraq in its war against Iran. A series of minor incidents between

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Sa‘ūdī security forces and Iranian demonstrators culminated in July 1987, when clashes and panic led to a stampede, killing several hundred pilgrims.  

To counter Iran’s revolutionary propaganda, Saudi Arabia relied on Islamic organisations that King Fayṣal had created during the Cold War such as the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. The anti-communist and Islamic threads converged in Riyadh’s support for anti-government insurgents in Afghanistan, where Marxists had seized power. Young Sa‘ūdī men travelled to the Peshāwar headquarters for Afghan insurgent groups in Pakistan, mixed with fellow holy warriors, and returned home bearing enthusiasm for political causes from Bosnia to the Philippines. Back in the kingdom, Muslim Brother refugees from Egypt, Jordan and Syria had been quietly spreading their ideas in schools and universities since the 1960s. Their effort, combined with Sa‘ūdī participation in the Afghan jihad, altered the kingdom’s religious landscape by weakening support for the Wahhābī establishment’s obedience to the pro-Western monarchy.  

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 brought to the surface tensions between leading clerics and younger religious personalities, known as shaykhs of the awakening (Ṣahīwa), influenced by Muslim Brother ideas. King Fahd’s decision to invite United States military forces to defend against a possible Iraqi invasion rested on a fatwā from the Wahhābī establishment, but it provoked harsh criticism from Ṣahīwa shaykhs on the grounds that Islamic law prohibits seeking assistance from infidels.  At the same time, Sa‘ūdī liberals petitioned the king to move in the direction of a representative constitutional monarchy with protections for religious groups such as the Shi‘īs and curbs on Wahhābī authority over public behaviour. Religious conservatives responded with their own set of petitions calling for greater compliance with Islamic law in foreign and domestic policy. The petitions revealed the lines of Saudi Arabia’s Kulturkampf and expressed a common desire for accountability of rulers to citizens and curbing corruption. King Fahd responded with a crackdown and the promulgation of a Basic Law (1992), which provided for the formation of a consultative council (majlis

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al-shūrā), comprised of appointed experts, to advise the government on policy. This step did not satisfy Şăḥwa shaykhs, who condemned the presence of United States military bases. In 1994 the government imprisoned leading dissidents.¹⁴

Dissent then assumed more violent form. In November 1995 militants exploded a car bomb outside the National Guard building in Riyadh, and in June 1996, they set off a powerful explosion in the Eastern Province city Khobar. The attacks targeted the Āl Saʿūd’s alliance with the United States. Osama Bin Laden and al-Qāʾida gave ideological focus to such attacks with pronouncements calling on Muslims to rise up against the Americans, dubbed ‘Crusaders’ in their discourse. Bin Laden had participated in the Afghan jihad on the same side as the Saʿūdi government and the United States, and when Iraq invaded Kuwait, he had offered the Āl Saʿūd his services if they would agree to dispense with American military backing. But like the Şăḥwa shaykhs he turned against the rulers for despoiling Arabia by hosting infidel military forces. In August 1998 al-Qāʾida pursued the anti-American jihad with twin suicide truck bombings against the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Its agents attacked an American naval vessel at Aden in October 2000. Then, on 11 September 2001, al-Qāʾida struck the United States by crashing hijacked commercial airliners into the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and a field in western Pennsylvania.¹⁵ At first, Saʿūdīs doubted that Bin Laden and al-Qāʾida were responsible for the attacks. Only when al-Qāʾida attacked a residential compound in Riyadh in May 2003 did Saʿūdīs become convinced that the organisation was indeed responsible for 11 September. Saʿūdī cities then became the scene of fire fights between security forces and al-Qāʾida militants.

The Āl Saʿūd faced calls from home and abroad for measures to curb religious extremism and to advance political reform. A series of officially sponsored National Dialogues broached taboos such as the standing of non-Wahhabi Muslims (Shiʿis and Sufis), religious education and women’s status.¹⁶ Elections to municipal councils and chambers of commerce were held. At the same time, there was no indication that King ʿAbd Allāh (r. 2005–) would take steps that might diminish the Āl Saʿūd’s firm grip on power. Turmoil in neighbouring Iraq following the American overthrow of Saddam

¹⁴ Mamoun Fandy, Saudi Arabia and the politics of dissent (New York, 1999).
Hussein’s Ba’th Party regime in April 2003 further unsettled many in Saudi Arabia, which became a recruiting ground for volunteers to fight the Americans. The amplification of Shi‘i power in Baghdad was not welcome in Riyadh. Likewise, movements towards participatory government in Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar fed popular expectations that made the kingdom’s rulers uneasy. Nevertheless, they retained control over oil, the price of which increased due to rising global demand, and there was no political opposition of national scope to challenge the dynasty.

Oman

Muscat’s Āl Bū Sa‘īd sultanate split in the nineteenth century between Omani and Zanzibar branches. Both were absorbed into the British sphere of influence. In 1913 a tribal rebellion in the name of reviving the Ibāḍī imamate and rejecting foreign encroachment expelled the sultan’s forces from inner Oman. Tribesmen briefly threatened the sultan’s seat at Muscat before British forces relieved the siege. In 1920 the British negotiated the Agreement of Sīb, partitioning Oman between the Ibāḍī imamate in the interior and the coastal sultanate. The agreement effectively prevented the repetition of a historical cycle that witnessed the occasional rising of imamate-tribal forces to overthrow a coastal sultanate.\(^\text{17}\) In the revolt’s aftermath, the British pressed Sultan Taymūr ibn Faysal (r. 1913–32) to reorganise fiscal affairs and establish a regular council of ministers, but he displayed little interest in governance, and delegated authority to British and Omani advisers. He even tried to abdicate, but the British did not allow him until his son Sa‘īd (r. 1932–70) attained his majority.

In the interior, Imām Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Khalīlī’s (r. 1920–54) realm rested on tribal power and religious legitimacy. Tribal notables and ‘ulamā’ had elected him in 1920 after his predecessor’s assassination. From his seat at Nizwā he exercised loose authority over a domain administered by governors who collected taxes and adjudicated disputes over water and land rights. Unlike other traditional Muslim rulers of the twentieth century, the Ibāḍī imām displayed little interest in adopting modern forms of governance, although an aspiration for international recognition appeared in the early 1950s with the issuance of passports and an application for membership in the

Saudi Arabia, southern Arabia and the Gulf from 1919

The autonomy guaranteed by the Agreement of Sib did not survive Imām Muḥammad’s reign because Sultan Sa‘īd was determined to regain control. During the 1930s and 1940s he adroitly manoeuvred to extend his authority to inner Oman by mediating tribal disputes and paying subsidies to tribal leaders. To bolster his standing with Ibādīs he employed Ibādī qādis to administer justice in his domain.

The quest for oil altered political dynamics in several ways. Royalties for an oil concession (1937) strengthened Sultan Sa‘īd’s hand and his determination to recover inner Oman, where prospectors believed oil reserves to lie. The prospect of oil wealth tempted tribal leaders to make exceptions to the imām’s ban on contact with foreigners for petroleum engineers. Finally, the indeterminacy of international borders among Oman, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia fostered rival claims to concession areas held by foreign companies. In the late 1920s the Sa‘ūdi governor of al-Ahsa’ dispatched tax collectors to the Buraymī oasis, a cluster of ten villages divided between Abu Dhabi and Oman. In 1949 Riyadh asserted sovereignty over Buraymī, and in August 1952 a Sa‘ūdi expeditionary force occupied one of the Buraymī villages. Riyadh failed to gain Imām Muḥammad’s backing, and he chose to cooperate with the sultan.19

While the Buraymī dispute moved to arbitration, Sultan Sa‘īd was waging diplomacy to persuade inner Oman’s shaykhs to give him their allegiance upon Imām Muḥammad’s death, which occurred in May 1954. Tribal notables and ‘ulama’ convened to elect a new imām, Ghālib ibn ‘Alī al-Hinā‘ī. His decision to seek Sa‘ūdi assistance weakened his standing, and in June 1955 a number of Buraymī shaykhs declared allegiance to the sultan. Shortly afterwards, Britain dispatched troops to oust the Sa‘ūdis from Buraymī in October 1955. In the next two months the sultan’s forces overran the main interior towns and Imām Ghālib abdicated, but his brother Ta‘līb and other backers of the imamate’s independence took refuge in Saudi Arabia. Sultan Sa‘īd then undertook a tour of inner Oman to mark its reintegration into the sultanate, promising to retain the imamate’s officials in their positions and to refrain from punishing Imām Ghālib’s former supporters.20 Saudi Arabia maintained its claim to Buraymī and assisted the deposed imām’s brother, Ta‘līb ibn ‘Alī, to mount a revolt for the imamate’s restoration. He returned to Oman in

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20 Eickelman, ‘From theocracy to monarchy’, p. 15.
June 1957 leading the Oman Revolutionary Movement to rally tribal allies and opponents of British influence. London's decision to intervene with air power reversed the course of battle and compelled Ṣālib's forces to retreat to the heights of Jabal Akhdār, where they held out until early 1959. The Oman Revolutionary Movement survived for three years, but by 1962 the imamate was extinct, the sultan's authority restored to the interior and the Saʿūdī challenge in Buraymī defeated. One effect of the conflict was the establishment, with British support, of Oman's first modern military force, the Sultan's Armed Forces.

In 1958 Sultan Saʿīd moved to the Dhufār port city of Salala, where he had begun residing more frequently since the late 1930s. His high-handed conduct in the province incited a general uprising in 1965. The Dhufār rebellion had both tribal and ideological Marxist strands, the latter attracting strong support from the Soviet Bloc, including South Yemen, while Britain, Iran and Jordan backed the sultan. The region's small, dispersed population (roughly 60,000 in 1970) included a large non-Arab segment, locally called jībālīs, who had not come under central authority before. Hence, the rebellion expressed rejection of political integration by an autonomous region. In 1965 local tribal groupings joined forces in the Dhufār Liberation Front (DLF). The rebellion assumed a radical flavour and more ambitious goals in 1968 when the DLF assumed a new name, the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf. Within two years it dominated the Dhufār mountains and a coastal town. Success spurred the formation of the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf in tribal areas of the former imamate. While the sultan's forces easily suppressed it, its appearance prompted Saʿīd's son Qābūs (r. 1970--) to seize power.21

The son of a Dhufārī mother, Sultan Qābūs ibn Saʿīd had been educated in England and resided in Salala. As the rebellion gained momentum he plotted with relatives, army officers, tribal leaders and British officials to depose his father. He made his move on 23 July 1970, launching an armed assault on the palace to compel Saʿīd to abdicate, who then went into exile in England. To quell the rebellion Sultan Qābūs used military and political measures, pledging to improve the region's medical, education and water facilities, and offering amnesty to rebels. He also used oil revenues to expand the armed forces and obtained reinforcements from Britain, Iran and Jordan. The combination of political inducements and robust military measures resulted in the rebellion's collapse by the end of 1975.

Qābūs took steps to demonstrate his determination to move Oman in new directions. He dismissed his father’s officials, installed a new cabinet and returned the sultanate’s seat to Muscat. Under Sultan Sa‘īd only Britain and India had maintained permanent envoys in Oman; Qābūs established ties with Arab countries, bringing his country into the Arab League and reconciling differences with Saudi Arabia. He departed from his father’s conservative policies by investing in the modernisation of infrastructure and social institutions. Construction of ports, an international airport and roads accompanied projects to lay down an electricity grid and provide clean water, health facilities and schools. Expatriates and Omanis returning from Bahrain, Kuwait and Zanzibar executed these projects.

Sultan Qābūs also developed new political institutions that spread responsibility for decisions on social and economic policies. In 1981 he created the State Consultative Council, consisting of appointed members from each of the country’s districts. Nine years later he dissolved that body and replaced it with the Omani Consultative Council. Candidates for the new body were chosen through indirect election and then final selection by the sultan. Women gained the right to vote and run for the council in 1997. The year before, the sultan issued a Basic Law, which serves as a constitutional document. If measured by the criterion of political stability, Oman’s gradual pace of economic, social and political development has succeeded. Dhufar is firmly integrated and a popular destination for Gulf Arab tourists. The imamate’s former domain is likewise calm. The Islamist wave that washed over much of Arabia barely touched Oman. In 1994 the authorities arrested as many as 200 Islamists allegedly linked to the Muslim Brothers for plotting to sow unrest; they were released from prison the following year as part of a general amnesty for political prisoners. In 2005 rumours spread of an Islamist conspiracy to attack a popular cultural gathering, the Muscat Festival, but it turned out to be a small group of Ibaḍī traditionalists quixotically seeking to re-establish the imamate. As in the 1994 case, Qābūs granted the conspirators clemency. The singular uncertainty on Oman’s horizon concerns the succession. Whereas Arabia’s other ruling families have a surfeit

22 Ibid., pp. 201–10.
of princes, the sultan has no heir, and there is no clear choice among members of Al Bū Saʿīd to succeed him.

The Gulf states

Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial states had Exclusive Agreements with Great Britain that gave London an exclusive role in foreign relations, provided shaykhs independence from larger regional powers and strengthened shaykhly lineages against internal challenges. Within each shaykhdom, the key players were ruling lineages and merchants whose commerce was critical to local economies. The pearling industry had expanded rapidly in the late 1800s; its sudden collapse in the 1930s due to the spread of Japanese pearls threatened to devastate the region. Oil concessions and payments for access to air bases revived Gulf economies, concentrated wealth in the hands of shaykhs and weakened merchants’ position. Shaykhs deflected potential discontent among merchants by providing rich opportunities in real estate development and commerce. Shaykhs also used oil wealth to modernise infrastructure and develop generous benefits such as free education and health care. The shaykhdoms were notable for the absence of robust anti-colonial movements, in part because of the low level of political development, but primarily because without the British the shaykhdoms would probably have been annexed by larger regional powers (Kuwait by Iraq, Bahrain by Iran, Qatar and the Trucial states by Saudi Arabia). After the British departed in 1971 the United States assumed the role of guarantor, demonstrating its commitment in 1991 by intervening against Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1990.

Kuwait’s ruling Al Šabāh steered the shaykhdom through troubled waters in the 1920s and 1930s when a Saʿūdi trade embargo and the decline in pearling hurt trade. In 1934 Shaykh Ahmad ibn Jābir (r. 1921–50) signed an oil concession with a British–American consortium, the Kuwait Oil Company, and drillers struck oil in 1938. That same year, merchants and a maverick member of the Al Šabāh launched a movement demanding a charter for an elected council (majlis) to oversee legal, educational and municipal reforms. Shaykh Ahmad initially recognised the majlis, but dissolved it after six months when it asserted control over oil revenues.26 In the 1950s his successor, Shaykh ‘Abd Allāh (r. 1950–65), used burgeoning

26 Jill Crystal, Oil and politics in the Gulf: Rulers and merchants in Kuwait and Qatar (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 47–55.
petroleum income for development programmes that required an influx of foreign workers, who by 1965 eclipsed the native population.

At independence in June 1961 'Abd Allâh traded in the title of shaykh for āmir and issued a constitution providing for hereditary rule with an elected, consultative national assembly, setting the tone for Kuwait to have the most liberal political climate in the Gulf, with a vibrant press and vocal deputies. The Āl Šâbâh nevertheless retain control over crucial cabinet positions, receive large allowances and possess privileged access to business deals. Allegiance to the ruling family arises largely from its management of oil wealth, in particular policies providing social benefits for citizens: education through university; medical care; guaranteed employment; and subsidies for water, electricity and telephone service. Any business enterprise must have at least 51 per cent Kuwaiti ownership. While such policies elicited broad support, Arab nationalist deputies in the national assembly criticised the Āl Šâbâh’s pro-Western policies and royal corruption.

In 1976 the āmir dissolved the national assembly and ruled by decree until 1981, when the Āl Šâbâh rallied public support during a period of heightened regional tensions (the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran–Iraq war). By then an Islamist tendency had emerged, in part as a reaction to liberal trends such as co-education at the university and women’s participation in modern occupations. The local wing of the Muslim Brothers, the Social Reform Society, used positions in the ministries of education and information to reshape school curricula and censor books and television. 27 The early 1980s saw a rash of Iranian-inspired violence, with militant attacks carried out by Shi‘î expatriates from Iraq, Lebanon and Iran on Western targets, and an assassination attempt on the āmir in 1985. The regime again dissolved the national assembly in 1986. A pro-democracy movement gathering momentum in early 1990 was cut short by Iraq’s invasion.

Iraq had asserted sovereignty over Kuwait on several occasions since the 1930s, partly because the way Britain had drawn the Iraq–Kuwait boundary in 1923 so narrowly pinched Iraq’s outlet to the Persian Gulf. Iraqi forces rapidly overran the country on 2 August 1990, causing the mass flight of Kuwaitis and expatriates. During the seven-month occupation, Kuwaitis who stayed behind organised a nationalist resistance movement while pro-democracy activists in exile called on the Āl Šâbâh to guarantee the national assembly’s restoration upon liberation. Meanwhile, the United States mobilised a broad

international coalition to expel Iraqi forces. On 16 January 1991 the US-led coalition launched a six-week campaign of missile and air strikes; then, on 25 February, ground forces attacked and liberated Kuwait in four days of warfare. With the United States strongly urging the amīr to revive the national assembly, he announced elections for October 1992. The outcome was a balance among Islamist, secular-liberal and royalist factions.28 Islamists called for a ban on co-education and tried to silence secular authors, and they joined other conservatives to block the secular-liberal campaign to grant women voting rights.29 That campaign succeeded in 2005, and women candidates ran for seats (without success) in the national assembly in the June 2006 elections.

Bahrain's modern experience has been coloured by sectarian tensions between the Shīʿī majority and the Sunnī Āl Khalīfa rulers, and by relatively modest oil reserves. In 1922 Shīʿīs demonstrated against discriminatory taxes and forced labour. Shaykh ʿIsā (r. 1869–1923) refused to grant reforms, but the British urged him to reconsider in order to deflect Iranian pressure on behalf of fellow Shīʿīs. When members of a Sunnī clan attacked a Shīʿī village the British expelled the clan, forced Shaykh ʿIsā to abdicate and installed his son Shaykh Hamad (r. 1923–42), who carried out reforms.30 In 1929 Bahrain became the first Gulf shaykhdom to enter the global oil market when an American firm, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) obtained a concession. It discovered oil in 1932 and began exporting in 1934. Oil revenues fuelled Bahrain's emergence as a centre for Gulf commerce and services, and afforded resources for developing public schools and medical services. Kuwait's 1938 reform movement inspired a counterpart to call for reforming the courts, creating a legislative assembly and affording Shīʿīs access to jobs in the oil sector, where expatriate workers from India occupied high-paying positions.31 Shaykh Hamad outmanoeuvred the reformers but his son Shaykh Salmān (r. 1942–61) had to face a new wave of protest in the mid-1950s, when industrial grievances overlapped with rising Arab nationalist sentiment, spurred by BAPCO's continued preference for South Asian workers. In 1953 activists formed the Higher Executive Committee to renew demands for an

elected legislature and legalisation of trade unions. Shaykh Salman consented to draft new labour legislation but rejected political reform.

When Bahrain gained independence in August 1971, activists hoped that the Āl Khalīfah might follow the liberal path charted by the Āl Šabāh. In 1973 Shaykh ‘Īsā ibn Salmān (r. 1961–99) issued a constitution that stipulated extensive powers for the ruler and an elected advisory national assembly. Arab nationalist and leftist deputies formed a vocal bloc that stirred lively debates until 1975, when the amīr dissolved the national assembly for refusing to endorse a controversial security law.32 Whereas Kuwait’s large petroleum income affords the means to dilute political dissent, Bahrain’s small reserves provide less margin. Efforts to diversify the economy through initiatives in communications, transport and industry mitigated the impact of lower oil revenues, but the Āl Khalīfah lack the means to co-opt citizens with extensive social welfare programmes.

The Iranian revolution stirred unrest among the rulers and excitement among many Shi‘īs. Bilateral relations reached their lowest point in December 1981 when Bahrain accused Iran of conspiring to replace the Āl Khalīfah with an Islamic republic. Given the ties of Bahrain’s Shi‘īs to co-religionists in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, many ordinary Sunnis doubted their loyalty. While Bahrain’s Shi‘īs no doubt sympathise with Shi‘īs elsewhere, their dissent stems from underrepresentation in national politics and discrimination in access to employment. In the 1980s Shi‘ī political movements demanded the restoration of constitutional government, the end of discrimination and economic justice.33 Kuwait’s reinstatement of parliament in 1992 encouraged Bahrain’s activists to renew calls for restoring the national assembly and ending sectarian discrimination. A wave of violent protests, bombings and harsh crackdowns washed over the country between 1994 and 1999.34 The accession of Amīr Ḥamad (r. 1999–) initially offered the prospect of ending the political stalemate. He promised municipal council elections, inclusion of more Shi‘īs in national institutions and a referendum (in which women would vote) on a charter for political reform. He also abolished the State Security Law and State Security Court. The revised constitution issued in 2002, however, assigned more power to the ruler than the 1972 constitution. Before holding elections, the regime gerrymandered districts to dilute

the Shi'i vote. Consequently, the confrontation between the Āl Khalifa and the opposition remained tense and sectarian tensions unresolved.35

Qatar shares with other Gulf states an abundance of hydrocarbons and a shaykhly dynasty. When Shaykh 'Abd Allāh ibn Qāsim Āl Thānī (r. 1913–49) signed a treaty with Britain in 1916, he ensured his independence of Qatar's former Āl Khalifa suzerains and possible encroachment by Saudi Arabia. Even before oil, the balance between the Āl Thānī and local merchants weighed in the dynasty's favour because of its large size and the small number of merchants. While this rendered the Āl Thānī less answerable to merchants, the clan has suffered from endemic intrigue against incumbents and a series of forced abdications.36 In 1949 Shaykh 'Abd Allāh faced disgruntled clansmen demanding a greater share of oil royalties (dating from the 1935 concession) and administrative positions. He abdicated in favour of his son 'Ali (r. 1949–60). Shaykh 'Alī fared no better handling relatives clamouring for allowances and he stepped down, to be succeeded by his son Ahmad (r. 1960–72). Family pressure on Shaykh Ahmad and his preference for vacations abroad led him to make way for his cousin Shaykh Khalīfa ibn Ḥamad (r. 1972–95). Family intrigue resulted in Khalīfa's deposition by his son Ḥamad (r. 1995–).37

The export of oil, begun in 1949, made possible a first phase of administrative development, under British tutelage, with the creation of fiscal and police institutions. The oil industry also stimulated political change. In 1951 Qatari workers protested at the employment of Dhufaris and successfully pressed for their expulsion. Labour unrest and Arab nationalist agitation broke out in 1956, and again in 1963. In response, the rulers established hiring preferences for Qataris and protected Qatari merchants by requiring that businesses have majority ownership for nationals.38 At independence in September 1971, Shaykh Ahmad issued a temporary constitution and created municipal councils offering merchants a share in local governance. Shaykh Khalīfa was the first ruler to curtail allowances to the Āl Thānī, electing to court the backing of ordinary Qatari with higher spending for education, health and housing. At the same time, the Āl Thānī continued to dominate cabinet positions and powerful institutions (armed forces, police, treasury). The rise in oil prices made it possible to embark on massive construction of infrastructure. Given Qatar's tiny population and late start at educating its citizens, the tasks of staffing schools, health clinics and technical positions

36 Crystal, *Oil and politics*, p. 112.
37 Ibid., pp. 152–8.
38 Ibid., pp. 124–6, 144–53.
required the hiring of expatriate workers, who comprised 80 per cent of the population by the early 1980s.

Hamad ibn Khalifa followed his 1995 coup against his father with promises to bring significant changes to Qatar’s political order. To buttress his declared commitment to liberal policies, he dissolved the Ministry of Information, ending official censorship. In 1996 he launched Al-Jazira satellite television network. The network’s candid treatment of taboo social and political matters (excepting Qatari affairs) gained it a wide Arab audience, inspired imitators and fostered a more open climate for public discourse. In 1998 Qatar held elections to the Chamber of Commerce (heretofore an appointive body). In municipal council elections the following year, women were eligible to vote and run for office. These moves in a liberal direction have been tempered by Amîr Hamad’s retention of complete control over revenues and budget.\(^{39}\)

In the Trucial states early twentieth-century politics consisted of power struggles within ruling lineages and between neighbouring shaykhdoms. Dubai’s commercial ties throughout the Indian Ocean basin made it the most cosmopolitan town of the lower Gulf, its merchants serving as the channel for modern cultural influences emanating from Cairo and Bombay. As the economy shifted in the mid-1930s from pearling to oil concessions and air-base royalties, Dubai’s merchants followed the example of their counterparts in Kuwait. In 1938 they pressed Shaykh Sa’id ibn Maktûm (r. 1912–58) to limit his share of oil royalties and to establish a majlis to supervise the treasury and institute reforms in education and municipal administration. In March 1939 Shaykh Sa’id dissolved the majlis and replaced it with an appointed advisory Merchants Council.

In neighbouring Abu Dhabi, dynastic rivalries plagued the Al Nahayân until Shaykh Shakhbût ibn Sulṭân (r. 1928–66) gained control. He signed an oil concession in 1935, but the extent of the concession was unclear because of rival territorial claims asserted by Abu Dhabi, Oman and Saudi Arabia. In the mid-1950s Britain supported Abu Dhabi’s claim to several villages in the Buraymi oasis. Following the discovery of oil in 1958, revenues began to grow, but Shaykh Shakhbût, a cautious autocrat in the mould of Oman’s Sultan Sa’id, refused to spend on projects like those in Kuwait and Bahrain. In 1966 Al Nahayân elders agreed to depose him and installed his brother Zâyid ibn Sulṭân (r. 1966–2004), who initiated modern development.

During the 1960s Britain encouraged the Trucial states to cooperate on security, oil exploration and public works. Modest steps in these areas paved the way for the more ambitious enterprise of forming an independent federation once Britain decided to withdraw from the Gulf. Abu Dhabi's Shaykh Zāyid emerged as the leading voice for a federation to encompass the Trucial states, Bahrain and Qatar. Dubai's Shaykh Rāshid ibn Sa'īd (r. 1958–90) made adherence to the federation conditional on autonomy for each shaykhdom. Ra's al-Khayma's shaykh baulked at joining as he hoped that an oil discovery would spare him the need to depend on Abu Dhabi's benevolence; Iran's occupation of two disputed islands prompted him to join. In the end, Bahrain and Qatar opted for independence, and in December 1971 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerged as a federation of the former Trucial states: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ra's al-Khayma, Fujayrah, 'Ajman and Umm al-Qaywayn. Shaykh Zāyid became president and Shaykh Rāshid the vice-president. The seven shaykhs comprise the Supreme Council of Rulers, a body that sets policy for an appointed Council of Ministers, mostly drawn from shaykhly lineages. A forty-seat appointed Federal National Council possesses consultative, not legislative, powers. Abu Dhabi and Dubai dominate these bodies because of their wealth, not their population; in fact, Sharjah and Ra's al-Khayma each have more Emirati nationals than the two dominant emirates. In general, Abu Dhabi has pushed for increased centralisation while Dubai has sought to retain the autonomy of each emirate. This has made it difficult to formulate common policies on immigration and sharing revenues as well as unification of defence forces.

The UAE has followed the Kuwaiti model of spending oil revenues to develop infrastructure and provide its citizens free education, medical care and subsidised housing. Pursuing these projects required heavy dependence on expatriate labour from Arab countries, Asia and the West. By the 1990s Emirati nationals counted for only 15 per cent of the population. While Abu Dhabi is the centre of the federal government and the purse for poorer shaykhdoms, Dubai's Āl Maktūm have developed a diverse range of commercial and financial enterprises to wean their emirate from dependence on oil. By the late 1990s petroleum products accounted for only 10 per cent of Dubai's GDP.

41 Ibid., p. 189.
Yemen

Yemen stands apart from the rest of Arabia in several respects. It possesses the most extensive and productive agricultural lands in the peninsula, allowing for relatively dense settlement of Arabia’s second most populous country. While other monarchies survived domestic and regional crises, Yemenis have lived under republics since the 1960s. Its recently discovered petroleum reserves are modest by Arabian standards and, unlike the oil-rich states, it has long been an exporter rather than a receiver of expatriate workers. With few natural resources, Yemen depended on foreign aid to finance modern infrastructure, and regimes lacked the means to gain citizens’ allegiance with social benefits. South Yemen’s Marxist regime pursued revolutionary transformation while North Yemen’s military-dominated republics struggled to attain stability and genuine authority over its population.

In 1904 Yemen was divided between the Zaydi imamate in the north and a British sphere in the south comprising a colony in Aden and autonomous chieflaincies. Revolutionary army officers overthrew the imamate in 1962, triggering an eight-year civil war against royalist forces. In Aden and the Protectorates, an anti-colonial movement fought for independence, achieved in 1967. During the 1970s and 1980s coexistence between the two Yemens was uneasy because the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) had a conservative complexion and capitalist economy while the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) was Marxist. In 1990 they merged to form the Republic of Yemen, but the stresses of unification resulted in war in 1994, when northern military forces thwarted former PDRY leaders seeking secession. Throughout the century Yemen underwent a state-building project as rulers strove to project power over populations that had seldom felt the reach of central authority. In the early twenty-first century the project remained incomplete.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire left the field clear for Imam Yahyā (r. 1904–48) to embark on an enterprise similar to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd’s expansion and consolidation of power. Yahyā expelled the Idrīsī ruler of ‘Asīr from southern Tīhama and waged a harsh campaign to pacify that region’s powerful tribesmen. When he attempted to extend his authority into the British sphere of influence, his forces retreated in the face of aerial attacks. By the 1934 Treaty of Ṣan‘ā’, Yahyā acknowledged the 1904 Anglo-Ottoman boundary agreement between North and South Yemen. Also in 1934, his bid to annex ‘Asīr and Najrān precipitated war with Saudi Arabia. Yemeni
forces were no match for the northern neighbour, and Yahyā conceded Najrān and 'Asīr to the Sa'ūdis by the Treaty of Ṭā'īf.

Yahyā aspired to cement authority over a population dispersed among hundreds of small settlements scattered over rugged terrain. While the imām enjoyed legitimacy among Zaydi tribes in his domain’s northern parts, lower Yemen’s Shāfī’ī townspeople and villagers were less inclined to accord him their allegiance. He relied on Ottoman-trained advisers for expertise in foreign relations and concentrated power in his immediate family by appointing his sons to govern the main towns. To augment the ranks of capable administrators, Yahyā sent a few dozen Yemenis to study in Lebanon and Cairo. To strengthen military capacity, he sent a mission to Baghdad and engaged Iraqi military trainers in Ṣan‘ā’. Young Yemenis exposed to more advanced conditions in other countries formed a critical component of political opposition to the imamate, and quite a few found their way to Aden.42

In striving to gather more power, Yahyā departed from Zaydi custom by acting in the manner of a king rather than an imām.43 Thus, he rankled traditionalists in 1927 when he designated his son Aḥmad as successor. Rather than rule in cooperation with other sayyid clans, he appointed his sons to govern provinces. Political opposition broadened as disgruntled Shāfī’ī traders and educated townspeople migrated to Aden, where the Free Yemeni Movement was formed with the aspiration of turning the imamate into a constitutional monarchy. The movement’s leaders plotted to unseat the imām and install a member of the rival al-Wazīr clan. On 17 February 1948 the conspirators assassinated Imām Yahyā, but Aḥmad escaped and rallied tribal allies to crush the revolt.44 Imām Aḥmad (r. 1948–62) thereafter kept his court at his provincial seat in Ṭa‘izz and designated his son Muḥammad al-Badr as his successor.

Imām Aḥmad’s reign coincided with the rise of Arab nationalism. He developed friendly ties with Egyptian president Nasser, a fellow opponent of British influence, which Aḥmad regarded as an obstacle to reuniting Yemen under his rule. When Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic in 1958, Aḥmad declared Yemen’s adherence. His decision to withdraw when Syria seceded in 1961 alienated pro-Egyptian army officers, and they began to plot against him. Their chance to seize power came when

Aḥmad died in September 1962. A week after his passing, on 26 September, they took over Ṣanʿāʾ and proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic. Under President ‘Abd Allāh al-Sallāl, a veteran of the 1948 conspiracy, the revolutionaries executed and imprisoned members of the old regime, but failed to capture Muḥammad al-Badr. He escaped to the northern highlands, the bastion of tribal support for the imamate.45

External forces complicated Yemen’s civil war. Nasser dispatched Egyptian troops to bolster republican forces while royalists drew support from Saudi Arabia. Nasser also sent civilian advisers to direct government offices in Ṣanʿāʾ, but their overbearing manner made the Sallāl regime unpopular and exacerbated political differences on the republican side between hardliners and moderates. The royalist side was divided between proponents of full restoration and advocates of an imamate committed to modernisation. The stalemate was broken not on the battlefield in Yemen but in Egypt’s humiliating defeat in the June 1967 War against Israel. The end of British rule in South Yemen the same year also affected regional politics. Nasser agreed to withdraw Egyptian forces and King Faysal, alarmed at the emergence of Aden’s socialist regime, mended fences with the moderate republicans in Ṣanʿāʾ. At a 1970 conference in Jiddah, royalists agreed to jettison the imamate in exchange for places in the government.

The end of civil war did not bring about political stability. On the contrary, the combination of feeble governing institutions, scant resources and social divisions resulted in a series of ephemeral, ineffective regimes. In 1974 ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Iryānī stepped down and Colonel ʿIbrāhīm al-Ḥamdī became the head of state. His three years in power were notable for launching economic development efforts through a Central Planning Organisation, but administrative capacity trailed plans on paper. In October 1977 Ḥamdī was killed in obscure circumstances and another officer, Aḥmad al-Ghashmī, seized power. He in turn was assassinated in June 1978. Major ʿAlī ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣāliḥ then became president. He would become Yemen’s most durable leader, in part by appointing kinsmen to sensitive political, security and military posts.

As army factions jostled for power, Yemenis adapted to fluid circumstances. Saudi Arabia’s liberal entry policy for Yemenis facilitated the flow of migrant workers to oilfields and construction sites. Remittances rose from

Second-hand oil wealth fuelled infrastructure improvement. Local development associations sprang up to provide basic medical services and clean drinking water. Reliance on remittances meant that Yemen’s economy entered recession when oil prices fell in the early 1980s. The discovery of oil in the mid-1980s thus came at a propitious time. Oil revenues provided San'a' with the resources to bolster state power, building on President Saleh’s endeavour to make the General People’s Congress (GPC) a mechanism to represent diverse interests, incorporate military officers in the regime and dispense patronage to local powerbrokers.47

Southern Yemen lacked a unifying political institution like the Zaydi imamate. The impulse to unity came instead from nationalist movements. Starting in 1937, Britain governed Aden’s mixed population of Arabs, Indians and Somalis as a Crown colony while leaving the hinterland’s cultivators and pastoralists under the rule of local leaders. Advisory treaties with protectorate rulers gave the British influence over internal affairs in exchange for arms and development assistance, allowing a modest augmentation of services in education, health and agricultural development. In Aden, the British expanded the port and constructed a major oil refinery, spurring the population to swell from around 50,000 in 1930 to 200,000 in 1960, in large measure due to the arrival of migrant workers from the hinterland and the imamate.

Nationalist politics began with reformist groups such as the Aden Association (founded in 1949), comprised of merchants and professionals espousing a gradual path to independence within the British Commonwealth. Sharper demands for independence were sounded by the Aden Trades Union Congress (ATUC, founded in 1956) and its leader, 'Abd Allah al-Asnaj. In the hinterland, the anti-colonial cause found an unlikely advocate in the sultan of Lahj, Ali bin 'Abd al-Karim al-Abdali, who joined the South Arabian League, a body pursuing a reformist course in seeking independence and union for Aden and the Protectorates. But Aden’s cosmopolitan Arabs were not seeking union with a region whose inhabitants they regarded as backward. Nevertheless, when London rejected a proposal for independence on the Singapore model in 1962, Aden’s legislative council agreed to join the Protectorates in the Federation of South Arabia. That same year, the

46 J. E. Peterson, Yemen: The search for a modern state (Baltimore, 1982), p. 149.
ATUC established the People’s Socialist Party to spread activities to the Protectorates, but with little success.⁴⁸

The task of knitting together nationalists in Aden and the hinterland fell to the National Liberation Front (NLF), a coalition of nationalist groups established in Ṣan‘ā’ in June 1963 with the backing of the new republican government. Nasser asserted his pan-Arab leadership by organising the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY), largely drawing on the People’s Socialist Party, but the NLF refused to cooperate.⁴⁹ In October 1963 the NLF launched a rebellion for independence. Its violent campaign forced London to abandon negotiations with the ATUC and the quest for a gradual path to independence. Instead, the British announced their decision to withdraw by the end of 1967. Fighting then erupted within the nationalist camp, with the NLF moving from bases in North Yemen and the Protectorates against the ATUC and FLOSY. As British forces were pulling out, the NLF overran the weak federal army they had trained to handle the transition to independence. By the end of November 1967 the British were gone and the NLF had proclaimed the People’s Republic of South Yemen.

South Yemen was one of the least developed countries in the world, with few paved roads, medical facilities or schools. Prospects for economic development were dimmed by Britain’s evacuation of the military base and termination of direct aid as well as the decline in port business due to the closure of the Suez Canal caused by the June 1967 War. Political conditions remained unsettled as Saudi Arabia and North Yemen backed armed opposition groups. The first president, Qaḥṭān al-Ṣhaʿbi, was deposed in June 1969 by the NLF’s radical wing and replaced by Saʿīd Ṣalīḥ (known as Salmayn) as chairman of the presidential council and Ṭāhir ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Ismā‘īl as secretary-general of the NLF’s central committee. A constitution promulgated in November 1970 changed the country’s name to the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Factional strife in June 1978 resulted in the execution of Salmayn and the recasting of the NLF as the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP).

Despite meagre resources and political turmoil, the revolutionary regime took steps to transform society. It nationalised the oil refinery, large industries and foreign firms, causing northern merchants who had come to Aden for the opportunities afforded by the colonial economy to return home. An

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agrarian reform law put a ceiling on landholdings and the authorities converted confiscated estates to cooperatives and state farms. Measures to advance the welfare of ordinary citizens included efforts on behalf of nomads such as digging wells and placing water tanks at frequent intervals, subsidising housing for poor citizens and steps to bring about equality between men and women. The Family Law of 1974 raised the minimum marriage age for girls to sixteen, put a ceiling on bride price, restricted polygamy and bolstered women’s rights in divorce and custody cases. The government also opened higher education to female students and encouraged higher participation by women in paid occupations, but conservative attitudes in smaller towns, where most of the population lived, kept many girls out of school after a few years of elementary education.50

Relations between Yemen’s two regimes were generally hostile, as Aden backed the National Democratic Front’s rebellion against Şan’a’ while the North supported remnants of FLOSY and the South Arabian League. In border clashes in February 1979, PDRY forces occupied towns inside the YAR and put them under NDF control. After mediation by Arab states, Prime Minister ‘Ali Nāṣir Muḥammad adopted a moderate line, with an eye on improving relations with Saudi Arabia, and he jettisoned the NDF. There followed a showdown between ‘Ali Nāṣir and the ideological purist ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Ismā‘īl, who was forced to resign and go into exile. ‘Ali Nāṣir relaxed state control over the economy to the dismay of the YSP’s true believers. As strains within the regime mounted, the socialist faction brought Ismā‘īl back from Moscow in 1984. Finally, on 13 January 1986, ‘Ali Nāṣir triggered a bloody climax when he attempted to kill Ismā‘īl and other rivals at a YSP conference, but ‘Ali Nāṣir was defeated and forced to flee to Şan’a’ along with thousands of followers. Thousands perished in the fighting. The YSP had essentially decapitated itself, with dozens of leaders killed, imprisoned or exiled. Moreover, the blood-letting did not resolve fundamental economic and political problems confronting the PDRY’s new president, ‘Alī Salīm al-Bīḍ.51

In the early years, socialist policies had provided affordable food, broad access to education and a general feeling of equality, but by the mid-1980s the country was stalled. Leaders hoped to discover valuable oil reserves, but the area of exploration in Shabwa Province near the border with the YAR meant

50 Lackner, PDR Yemen, pp. 114–17.
that efforts to develop oilfields would exacerbate bilateral tensions. A military confrontation in spring 1988 was averted when Presidents Ṣāliḥ and al-Bīḍ decided to meet. They agreed to connect electricity grids and facilitate border crossings in preparation for reaching a union accord, a goal frequently declared in the past, but never before seriously entertained. Pressure on Aden, however, was growing as the Soviet Union declared that it would cut support for client states. In November 1989 Ṣāliḥ and al-Bīḍ announced that the two regimes would achieve unification within one year under a transitional government that would hold first a referendum on a new constitution and then national parliamentary elections.⁵²

Shortly after Yemen’s unification, it became embroiled in the regional crisis sparked by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Yemen withheld support for the international coalition against Iraq. Saudi Arabia retaliated by cancelling its policy of allowing Yemenis to reside without permits, causing an enormous flood of returning migrants. As many as 800,000 workers came home in six months. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf states also cut financial aid. The upshot was a period of economic hardship (inflation, unemployment, arrears in payments to government workers).⁵³ Most Yemenis, though, supported government foreign policy and looked forward to the next steps to cementing the union. Given the disparity in population – the north had eleven million, the south had around two and a half million – President Ṣāliḥ’s GPC seemed bound to dominate while the YSP tried to maintain influence in the south. The novel political force was the Yemeni Reform Grouping, or Iṣlah, a nominally Islamist party, established in 1990. Iṣlah’s leader, ‘Abd Allāh al-Aḥmar, is a veteran of YAR politics long associated with the moderate republicans. In the April 1993 national elections the GPC took 123 seats, followed by Iṣlah with 62, and the YSP with 56. The YSP leadership reacted to defeat by returning to Aden and boycotting the newly elected government. Tensions between rival military units loyal to the YSP and GPC flared into warfare in May 1994. In early July northern forces overran the south, subjecting Aden to extensive looting, forcing al-Bīḍ into exile and consolidating Ṣāliḥ’s hold on power over the entire country.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Dresch, Modern Yemen, pp. 186–98.
In the war’s aftermath, the regime strengthened presidential powers at the expense of civil liberties enjoyed by political parties and newspaper publishers during unified Yemen’s first years. Šāliḥ did not dissolve the YSP because he viewed it as a useful foil to balance Islāḥ, which reflects both the regional upsurge of Islamists and Yemen’s own complicated social and political complexion, as it contains tribal leaders and supporters of the Muslim Brothers. Moreover, Islāḥ is just one part of a broad spectrum of religious activism along with Zaydi neo-traditionalists, Sa‘ūdī-influenced Salafis, Sufis and jihadist Salafis. The pluralist landscape reflects historical religious cultures, contemporary influences from the Gulf and participation in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. The militant strain of jihadist Salafism is embodied by the Islamic Jihad movement and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, small but dangerous groups. They have carried out attacks on Western targets, kidnapped tourists and assassinated a YSP leader. In the broad Yemeni context, however, they are overshadowed by the regime’s capacity for co-opting dissidents and by the country’s own diverse regional, social and religious composition.

Expatriate workers

Migrant workers and expatriate traders were mainstays in the Gulf well before the discovery of oil. Indian and Persian merchants dominated long-distance trade in Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the Trucial states. During the pearling season, from July to October, thousands of men flocked to the Gulf coast from Oman, Najd and southern Iraq. In its early phase the oil industry built on extant migration patterns. The Bahrain Petroleum Company, for instance, initially employed Iranians and later brought workers from India. Typically, expatriates first worked in the oil sector, then, as revenues increased, they carried out construction projects and staffed medical and education sectors. In each country there was seldom any question of delaying projects until the national labour force possessed the requisite technical skills to implement them. Instead, there evolved a division between the public sector, dominated by nationals, and the private sector, dominated by expatriates.

57 Ibid., pp. 6–11.
The composition of the expatriate labour force has been diverse and dynamic. One tendency was for Arabs to comprise the bulk of foreign workers during the 1950s and 1960s and then for Asian workers to become predominant. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, Arabs went from nearly three-quarters of expatriate workers in the early 1970s to less than one-third by the late 1990s. Because of Yemen’s position on Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the Sa’ūdis expelled Yemenis. Likewise, the Kuwaitis deported Palestinians after the expulsion of Iraqi forces. A second tendency was the steady increase in the proportion of expatriate workers in the labour market until the mid-1990s when it peaked in Gulf Cooperation Council countries at nearly three-quarters of workers. By then expatriates comprised over 80 per cent of the labour force in the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait. A third tendency is for nationalities to specialise in occupations: Egyptians and Palestinians as teachers, Indians and Pakistanis as engineers, Sri Lankans and Filipinos as domestic servants.

Even though expatriates are excluded from the privileges of citizenship, workers borrow money to pay for travel, work permits and visas because of the opportunity to earn much higher wages than in their home countries. Some expatriates live in segregated camps to work on short-term construction projects; others employed by smaller firms reside with countrymen, frequently relatives or fellow villagers, often in squalid conditions. Mutual aid associations based on ethnic solidarity provide emergency assistance and social support. Professionals and business managers naturally enjoy more comfortable circumstances, but no matter how long they stay, they may not own property or a business.

Eventually, population growth and declining oil reserves will diminish the ability of Gulf countries to afford a large expatriate labour force, guaranteed employment for citizens in the public sector and extensive welfare benefits. Programmes to increase citizens’ participation in the private sector include technical training and quotas on expatriates. Business owners, however, have not rushed to hire citizens because they demand higher wages. Employers’ complaints about their compatriots’ slack work ethic might merely indicate resistance to exploitation, but they could augur profound problems ahead.

59 Ibid., p. 60.
Precisely when demographic pressures impinge on oil revenues will vary, with Bahrain already feeling the pinch. Political stability rests on a bargain struck in the early decades of the petroleum production. It appears that rulers will either find ways to engage citizens in productive endeavours or have to renegotiate the political bargain if they are to avoid acute political difficulties in the future.