Shaikhly Authority in the Pre-oil Gulf: An Historical–Anthropological Study

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This article provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing studies of rulership and political allegiance in the Arabian Gulf before oil. It examines the main factors affecting the shaikhs' authority and the interconnectedness and interplay between them. It shows how these factors affected the rulers' authority in a dialectical fashion: sometimes empowering it, sometimes constraining it, sometimes both simultaneously.
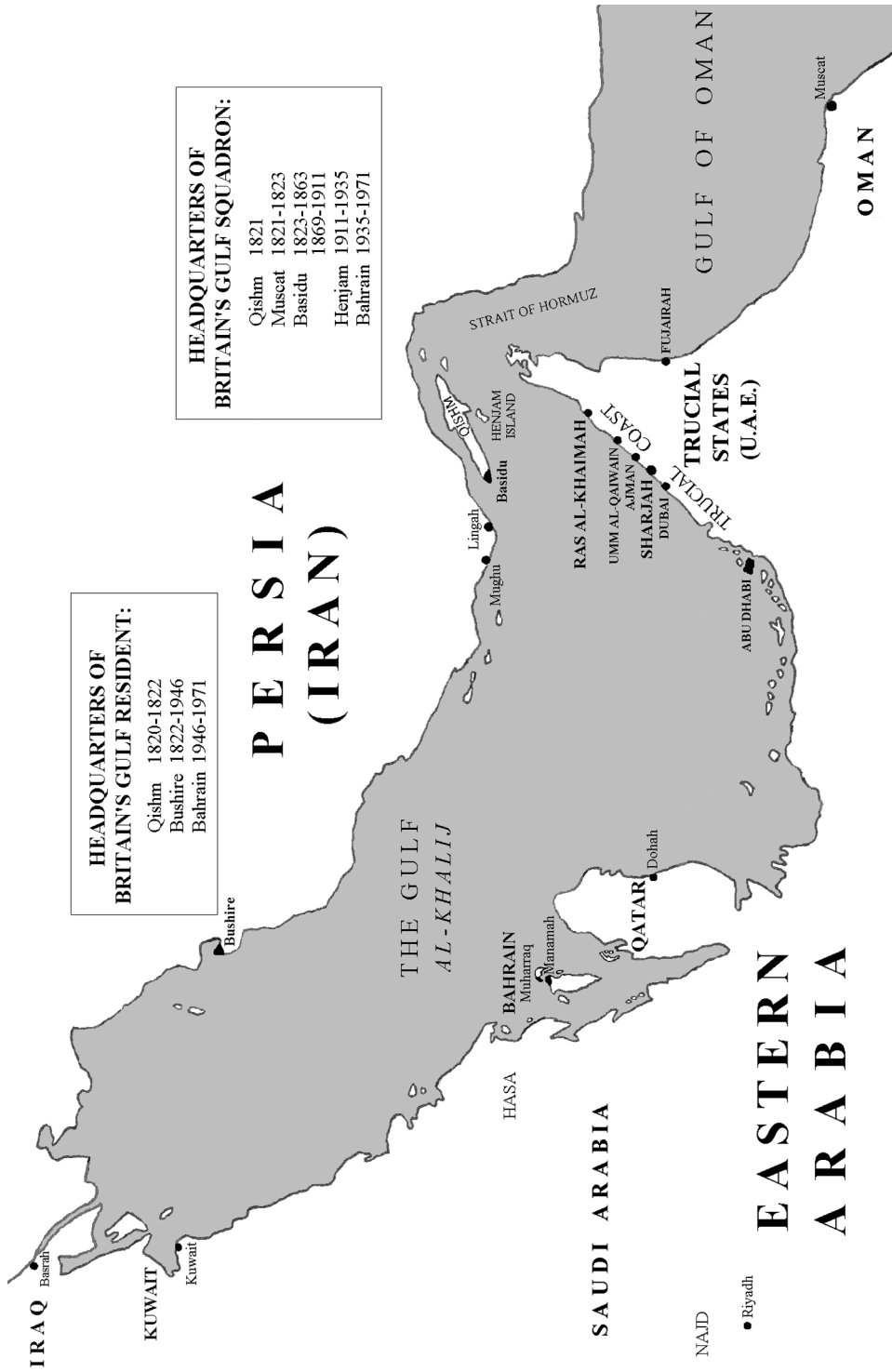
Introduction

This article investigates how ruling shaikhs maintained the shaikhdom system in the small Gulf shaikhdoms of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial Coast (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah—collectively known as the Trucial States until 1971 and as the United Arab Emirates thereafter). Seven main factors affecting shaikhly authority can be discerned from existing studies of rulership in the pre-oil Gulf: some "internal", some "external". The internal factors, which mainly relate to the rulership of shaikhdoms, include: the ruling families, the tribes and tribal guards, the merchants, the governors and the obligations of rulership. The external factors, which concern the protection of shaikhdoms, include: regional powers (the Saudis, Omanis, Persians and Ottomans) and international powers (mainly Britain). These factors have never been examined together in a single work. This study provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing studies by examining the

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HEADQUARTERS OF
BRITAIN'S GULF SQUADRON:

Qishm	1821
Muscat	1821-1823
Basidu	1823-1863
	1869-1911
Henjam	1911-1935
Bahrain	1935-1971

HEADQUARTERS OF
BRITAIN'S GULF RESIDENT:

Qishm	1820-1822
Bushire	1822-1946
Bahrain	1946-1971

GULF OF OMAN

Muscat

OMAN

STRAIT OF HORMUZ

FUJAIRAH

TRUCIAL
STATES
(U.A.E.)

QISHM

HENJAM
ISLAND

Basidu

TRUCIAL COAST

RAS AL-KHAIMAH

UMM AL-QAIWAIN
AJMAN
SHARJAH
DUBAI

Lingah

Mughu

ABU DHABI

P E R S I A
(I R A N)

THE GULF
AL-KHALIJ

Dohah

QATAR

Bushire

BAHRAIN
Muharraq
Manamah

HASA

SAUDI ARABIA

EASTERN
ARABIA

Basrah

IRAQ

KUWAIT

Kuwait

NAJD

Riyadh

interconnectedness and interplay of the seven factors above and showing how they affected shaikhly authority.

A shaikhdom or emirate is the political domain of a ruling shaikh and his shaikhly family. A shaikhdom's political identity and ruling family are virtually one and the same, although less so now than before the advent of oil wealth. Unlike the Gulf states or "oil shaikhdoms" of today, the pre-oil shaikhdoms were small scale in terms of their economic, military, political and demographic resources. They were a type of strong chiefdom, similar to what Ernest Gellner (1995: 184) calls "tribal proto-states". On the scale of social development, they were closer to what social anthropologists call "small-scale societies" (tribes and villages) than to "large-scale complex societies" (modern states) (Benedict 1966: 23–35). Their populations were small, numbering between 5,000 and 25,000 in most cases (see Lorimer 1908). Their boundaries were fluid and shifting, defined by political loyalties rather than political borders. Sovereignty was seen in terms of people, not territory (Wilkinson 1983; Joffé 1994). Pre-oil shaikhly governments were tiny and loosely structured; they exercised only weak authority beyond the towns they controlled directly. Pre-oil shaikhs provided three main services to their people: protection, justice and various forms of assistance, in return for which they collected taxes and were entitled to loyalty. In general, the pre-oil shaikhdoms were very similar to other tribally based chiefdoms in Africa and Asia (for examples, see Gluckman 1963; Comaroff 1974, 1978; Mair 1977; Swidler 1992). Oil wealth has changed many things, but not everything. The shaikhdom system, for instance, continues to be hereditary and patrimonial. Legitimacy continues to be based on the sanctity of customs and "traditions" (in Max Weber's sense of the term). Tribal affiliations are still an important factor in the allocation of power and economic privileges. Rulership remains highly personalized; there is still little distinction between a ruling shaikh and the office he holds. A shaikhdom's government treasury, for instance, remains to a great extent the ruler's private purse.

Shaikhly authority was characterized by frailty, vulnerability and precariousness, requiring the rulers to constantly juggle the seven factors identified in this article in order to survive. "Frailty of authority" (a term developed by Max Gluckman in his work on African chiefdoms) means the limitations imposed on a ruler's authority by his subjects' awareness that he does not live up to the ideals of leadership established by their culture. We use "vulnerable" and "precarious" in their usual sense, except that they apply to the shaikhdoms in general, as well as to the shaikhs' authority within them.

In contrast to the small Gulf shaikhdoms, the Omani state (1744–), the three Saudi-Wahhabi states at their heights (1794–1818, 1843–71, 1913–) and the Qasimi state centred around Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah at its height (c.1750s–1860s) were more like mature states than proto-states in terms of their economic, military, political and demographic resources, and thus do not fit the paradigm we outline in this article except where indicated. Another difference between these regional powers and the small Gulf shaikhdoms was the close connection in the former between religious and political authority. In the Saudi and Qasimi states during the height of Wahhabi influence, the *ulama* (specialists in Islamic religious and legal matters) held political authority and exercised influence over the rulers, and in the Ibadi Imamate of central

Oman (751–1957), religious and political authority were one in the same. In the shaikhdoms, however, the *ulama* exercised no political influence over the rulers, nor did the rulers claim religious authority, so we do not consider Islam to have been a factor determining the nature of shaikhly authority.

The Pre-oil Economy

We preface our discussion of the factors affecting shaikhly authority with an overview of the pre-oil economy that shaped the world in which the shaikhs lived. The Gulf's pre-oil economy was noted for its vulnerability and precariousness, a result of Eastern Arabia's harsh environment: the desert and the sea. There was fierce competition between and within tribes and ruling families for control of the Gulf's scarce resources. Lucrative economic activity occurred only in the coastal towns, where it was limited to the exportation of pearls and dates, the importation of goods from abroad, shipping and ship-building. Because those who possessed scarce resources were always at risk of losing them, an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity prevailed in the open terrain of the desert and sea (Landen 1986: 59, 64). This state of affairs had serious implications for regional relations. One nineteenth-century observer described it as "a condition wherein every man's hand was ever prone to be raised against his neighbour" (Pelly 1869; also see Lienhardt 2001: 97). As a result, vulnerability, precariousness and the acute need for protection dominated and shaped the political economy of the Gulf more than any other factors.

A shaikhdom's most vulnerable source of income was its pearling fleets. Before oil, the pearling industry was the Gulf's largest single income source and its biggest employer (see Wilson 1833; Durand 1878). It follows that the prosperity of a Gulf shaikhdom was linked to a ruler's ability to safeguard his ports, ships and surrounding waters and territory. His subjects' ships and caravans travelling between his shaikhdom and distant markets were vulnerable to three types of raiding. The first was piracy (by sea) and Bedouin raiding (by land), in the usual meaning of the terms. Raiding by land was far more common, as it was a form of ecological adaptation, redistributing the desert's meagre wealth and resources among the various tribes (see Sweet 1965). The camel herds and date gardens of oasis-dwelling Bedouin groups were as vulnerable to desert raiding as they were to fluctuations in the harsh desert environment (droughts, disease, locusts). Watchtowers and armed guards were essential for their defence until Britain gradually assumed responsibility for the protection of the shaikhdoms by land in the twentieth century. These watchtowers, hundreds of which still dot the Gulf landscape, now stand as reconstructed symbols of national heritage.

The second form of raiding was punishment for toll evasion. Tolls were normally collected by the rulers and tribes who controlled the maritime and overland trade routes connecting Eastern Arabia's towns with distant markets. These tolls took the form of *khuwa* (a "brotherhood fee" for protection) or *juwaiza* (a fee for free passage). A merchant who travelled along controlled routes had to call at the principal towns of the controllers and pay *khuwa* or *juwaiza* to guarantee his safe passage (for details, see Fattah 1997; Khuri 1980; al-Naqeeb 1990; al-Rasheed 1991; Onley 2004a).

Ships sailing through the Gulf had to pay *khuwa* or *juwaiza* to the Sultan of Oman (who controlled the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz), the Ruler of the Qasimi state (who controlled the lower Gulf between Lingah and Sharjah) and the Ruler of the Kaab (who controlled the sea route between Bushehr and Basra). Piracy and maritime toll-collection declined significantly after Britain's imposition and enforcement of the General Treaty of 1820 on the Rulers of the Trucial Coast. The Treaty outlawed all forms of peacetime raiding at sea, which the British regarded as piracy.

The third form of raiding was *ghazu* (wartime raiding). All rulers in the Gulf, including those who did not control a trade route, used privateers as well as their own military forces to engage in *ghazu* against their enemies.[1] Pearling fleets were the most vulnerable to *ghazu*, as raiders always knew where to find them. A successful raid on a pearling fleet could plunge a shaikhdom into deep recession. *Ghazu* at sea was outlawed by the Maritime Truce (enforced by Britain during 1835–1971), to which the Rulers of the Trucial Coast were admitted at their request in 1835, followed by the Ruler of Bahrain in 1861, the Ruler of Qatar in 1916 and the Ruler of Kuwait in 1899/1914 (see Onley 2004a). *Ghazu* by land, and land warfare in general, continued until the 1920s in Kuwait, 1930s in Qatar and 1950s in the Trucial States. Another type of economic loss, more devastating than raiding, was inflicted by nature on sailing ships. The loss of ships, cargo and lives was very common in long-distance trade. Sudden sea storms and strong unpredictable winds occurred annually, destroying life and property. Maritime histories of the Gulf shaikhdoms are filled with stories about the precariousness of life at sea (e.g., see Abdulrahman 1990).

What clearly emerges from this overview of the Gulf shaikhdoms' maritime and land economies is the high vulnerability of the main sources of income to both raiding and the Gulf's harsh environment, the extent to which raiding could seize or destroy limited resources and the resulting importance of protection. The need for protection dominated the rulers' relations with their tribes, other rulers, regional powers and the British Government; it also influenced their relations with their families and merchant elites, and even shaped their worldview.

Internal Factors Affecting the Shaikhs' Authority

The Shaikhs' Relationships with their Families

A shaikh cannot accede to the rulership of his shaikhdom and, therefore, to the head of his family without the support of his family members. Once a shaikh becomes ruler, his family must continue to approve of his rulership, lest they replace him with another member of the family. From the point of view of the people, the replacement of a ruling shaikh was not a difficult matter as their loyalty was to the ruling family rather than to an individual ruler. Furthermore, as Peter Lienhardt explains, ruling shaikhs "held their power in order to do a job for the people, keeping order and managing defence, and were not there either by any absolute right or by brute force" (Lienhardt 1975: 68; also see Lienhardt 2001: 19–21, 184–186, 212–214). A shaikh's rulership, he continues,

> was not irreversible. It did not have the quasi-sacramental force of a European coronation. …. [T]here was no fixed heredity principle of succession to office except that the shaykh had to be a member of the ruling family. The head of a ruling family was thus in some potential danger from his kinsmen, and, as far as the general public were concerned, the threat these kinsmen represented held the ruler's authority in check. (Lienhardt 1975: 63)

Only half of the ruling families in the Gulf practice primogenitor: the al-Nuaimi of Ajman, the al-Sharqi of Fujairah, the Al Khalifah of Bahrain (since 1869), the Al Thani of Qatar (except for 1972), the Al bu Said of Oman (except for 1868 and 1871) and the al-Muallah of Umm al-Qaiwain (except for 1873, 1923 and 1929). Most recently, one could add the Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi (since 2004). Succession to the rulership of a shaikhdom could be, and still can be, achieved both vertically by sons and nephews, and horizontally by brothers and cousins. Whenever a ruler was deemed unworthy to rule, or died, succession crises often followed (Peterson 2001). The most notable example is the ruling Al Nahyan family of Abu Dhabi, in which eight rulers were killed and five were overthrown by rival kin between 1793 and 1966 (for details, see Lienhardt 2001: 175–179).

Competition within ruling families for the position of ruler—brother against brother, son against father—was a recurrent feature of the Gulf shaikhdoms in the past: there were 35 coups and four territorial secessions between 1793 and 1965. This was a result of factors such as shifting tribal politics, the quest to attain greater material gains in a world of scarce resources and the practice of polygyny producing half-brothers who were often inclined to compete among each other for the highest office. Such rivalry and conflict over leadership succession and legitimacy has its roots and parallels in the political life of Arab tribal communities as a whole. It has been repeatedly observed in tribal Bedouin communities further north: in Najd (central Arabia), Jordan, Syria and Iraq (for examples, see Khalaf 1975; al-Rasheed 1991).

To avoid threats from within their families, ruling shaikhs resorted to a number of strategies. They included relatives who were potential rivals in their *majlis* (court) and consulted them before taking major decisions. They paid them regular salaries. They helped them acquire property, houses, animals and so on. They kept a close watch on their activities. They and their children married politically important relatives. (This, in theory, intensified and compounded inner-kinship relationships, reinforcing internal lineage family cohesion.) They and their children married into other ruling families to solidify alliances. They and their sons married into tribal shaikhly families and affluent merchant families to solidify allegiances. Despite their destabilizing effect, internal family conflicts over the ruler's office were rebellions not revolutions: they were aimed at changing the ruler, not the system of rulership.

The Shaikhs' Relationships with their Tribes and Tribal Guards

In addition to support from his family, a shaikh must command military power in order to accede to the rulership of his shaikhdom. The greater a ruler's military strength, the more territory and economic resources he could control and the higher his status in regional politics. Borders naturally fluctuated according to rulers' military abilities. If a

ruler was succeeded by one of significantly greater or lesser ability, there were often territorial consequences. There are countless examples of village shaikhs asserting their independence and of town rulers taking villages under their control (Lienhardt 2001: 15). This is because, before oil wealth, the rulers of the small Gulf shaikhdoms lacked the financial and military resources they needed to guarantee the security of their domains. The personal military forces of the rulers were small, leaving the rulers vulnerable to antagonistic regional powers or to alliances formed against them.

Before oil, Gulf rulers normally employed no more than a few hundred armed retainers on a full-time basis; only regional powers such as the Saudi Amir of Najd (in central Arabia) and the Sultan of Oman could afford to employ more (Rosenfeld 1965: 178). The rulers typically recruited their retainers from loyal tribes from Arabia and Baluchistan, or bought them as slaves from Africa. The limited numbers of armed retainers the Gulf rulers maintained reflects the small scale of their governments and the limitations on their ability to exercise their authority in the days before oil. For example, the historian John Lorimer notes that the Gulf rulers had the following number of armed retainers in 1905: Bahrain 200 (plus another 240 retained by his brother and three sons), Kuwait 100, Dubai 100, Ras al-Khaimah 70, and Sharjah 20 (Lorimer 1908: 252, 454, 1009, 1076, 1761). Compare these numbers with the 1,050 armed retainers that the Sultan of Oman had during this time (Lorimer 1908: 1422–1423). For major conflicts, the ruling shaikhs called upon Bedouin warriors from loyal tribes. The maintenance of tribal allegiances was, therefore, important for a shaikhdom's security.

The extent of a ruler's military resources depended upon the economic prosperity of his shaikhdom. The greater a ruler's financial resources, the more armed retainers he could employ and the more tribal shaikhs he could reward for their loyalty and military support. Madawi al-Rasheed (1991: 81–82) explains how the rulers "maintained a tradition of subsidising these [tribal] shaikhs through the continuous distribution of cash and gifts of rice, coffee, sugar, camels, and weapons". Payments to secure loyalty accounted for the majority of a ruler's expenses (e.g., see Lorimer 1908: 251). Money enabled him to reward or bribe people for their loyalty—most importantly his armed retainers (who enforced his will) and his fellow shaikhs.

Tribes also paid tribute to their rulers as a symbol of political submission. In return for submission, the tribes were entitled to protection, justice and assistance (in the form of subsidies from their rulers). The payments of subsidies and tribute were symbolic manifestations of the rulers' authority over their tribes (Heard-Bey 2004: 120). Tribes in tribute relations with the same ruler were forbidden to attack each other, which had a positive stabilizing effect within shaikhdoms.

The principal difference between the shaikh of a tribe and the ruling shaikh of a shaikhdom was the latter's command of armed retainers. While both shaikhs had authority derived from their leadership qualities and shaikhly social status, only the latter had the coercive power to collect taxes and tribute, enforce laws and punish criminals (Khuri 1980: 51–52, 1985: 435; Lienhardt 2001: 209–210). Both led, but only the latter ruled. Only the latter had the ability to control enough people and territory to constitute a shaikhdom or emirate. Wilfred Thesiger (1959: 311, 324)

noted how a tribal shaikh was like "the chairman of a committee meeting" leading solely by consent, while a ruling shaikh was more like "an autocrat accustomed to obedience". The key to rulership was the consistent loyalty of one's people, but even the ablest leader could not secure this without money (Khuri 1985: 435). As their full-time military forces were never very large, the rulers relied upon tribal allegiances or wartime alliances either to redress the balance when faced by a stronger enemy or to gain an advantage over an enemy of equal strength.[2] The rulers also sought military alliances with each other. Alliances did not always work, of course, nor did they always last.

A ruler's relationship with his tribes was often precarious. On the one hand, his political power depended upon his ability to create and maintain the allegiance of powerful tribes (Fenelon 1973: 19). On the other hand, these same tribes were a potential threat to his power and authority before oil. If a ruling shaikh alienated the leadership of a loyal tribe, the tribe might shift its allegiance to a neighbouring shaikhdom with whom the shaikh was often in competition. Neighbouring shaikhs were always ready to welcome such moves as new allegiances expanded their boundaries and enhanced the economic and military resources at their command. David Long (1976: 17) notes this is why the borders between the emirates of the United Arab Emirates look like a patchwork quilt, reflecting allegiances of non-contiguous tribal areas to various coastal ruling shaikhs. When we note that these shaikhdoms had very small populations, then we see how immense the loss of a tribal allegiance was to a losing shaikh. The potential for such a move by a whole tribe, or certain segments of it, was a serious threat to the overall welfare of every pre-oil shaikhdom. A tribe shifting its allegiance meant removing its tribal territory from one shaikhdom and adding it to another (Davidson 2005: 16).

The ruling shaikhs always appreciated the grave losses and corresponding gains resulting from shifting tribal allegiances. On many occasions, rulers or their sons embarked on long journeys and hard negotiations to bring back dissatisfied tribes or tribal groups. The camel herds of the Bedouin, which gave tribes their mobility, were both their "means of production" and their "means of aggression", providing them with food (milk and meat), material (hair for tents and clothes) and war mounts. Similarly, the flexibility of their political segmentary linage system enabled subsections of tribes to split away from the main body and leave the tribal territory. These features of Bedouin tribal social and economic life enabled them to remain largely self-sufficient, mobile and independent. This mobility enabled them to vote with their feet if their ruler abused his authority over them. This served as an effective check on the ruler's actions, for tribal secession was a major military and economic loss for the overall wellbeing of their ruler's domain. The most famous example of a tribal secession is the creation of the shaikhdom of Dubai, which declared independence from the Ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1833.

The shifting politics of Bedouin life drove the rulers to make special seasonal tours of the desert, usually on extended falcon-hunting trips in order to reach out to their tribes, renew their personal ties with tribal shaikhs and update themselves with tribal news. One of the best examples of this was Shaikh Zayid Al Nahyan, Governor

of al-Ain during 1946–1966 and Ruler of Abu Dhabi during 1966–2004 (see Thesiger 1959: 291–294; Shepherd 1961: 136). These sporting trips remain politically important and are still made by the rulers of the modern Gulf states.

The Shaikhs' Relationships with the Merchants

In addition to support from his family and command of tribal military force, a shaikh could not rule without the support of his shaikhdom's merchant elites who controlled the pearling industry and import-export sector. Before oil, most affluent merchants enjoyed some degree of influence with local rulers. Jill Crystal (1990) argues that this stemmed from the rulers' economic dependence on the merchants. A substantial portion of the rulers' revenues came from the merchants through customs duties, pearl boat tax, rents and other revenues that flowed from a prosperous *entrepôt* economy (for details, see Heard-Bey 2004: 112–119). Rulers also depended upon occasional loans and financial gifts from the wealthiest merchants. Beyond this, pearl merchants also had economic control over large portions of the local population through employment and indebtedness. All this gave the wealthiest merchants considerable political influence with the rulers (Onley 2005). The rulers could not afford to ignore the opinions of powerful merchants within their shaikhdoms. Politically, the power relationship between the rulers and the merchants was one of offsetting influences; economically, it was one of interdependence (Crystal 1990: 57). The result, says Crystal (1990: 26), was a political structure consisting of "a ruling Shaikh, whose pre-eminence was… constrained by the merchant elite, tied to the economy of pearling and trade". Indeed, the economic dependence of the ruling families on the merchant class ensured that there was an integration of their interests and welfare, which simultaneously placed restraints on the rulers' ability to exercise their authority.

  A ruler's continued abuse of authority, persistent disagreements with influential merchants over taxation and so on could trigger the migration of some merchants to another shaikhdom or emirate. When a pearl merchant left, he would take his pearl divers with him—sometimes a hundred people or more. Mercantile secession, just like tribal secession, was thus a major check on the rulers' authority over their merchants. Peter Lienhardt (1975: 64) explains how:

> [T]he lack of water for irrigation made the settled people in some ways more like Bedouin than like those peasant populations so easily exploited and tyrannized over by landlords and potentates throughout most of Middle Eastern history. The settled people were mostly seafarers. Their most important assets were mobile like the herds of the Bedouin. Their property was in the form of boats… They could leave home without abandoning their means of livelihood, and the boats in which they sailed away could carry their household goods besides assuring them a living. People did move away from circumstances they disliked, both as tiny units made up of individuals or little families, and as substantial tribal segments.

Migration is a dominant theme in Gulf history. There are countless stories of merchants and tribes migrating away from rulers who threatened their livelihood and well-being by the financial and political mismanagement of their shaikhdoms. Such

migration curtailed the rulers' capacity to exercise their authority in autocratic ways. Taxes were carefully assessed and remained low, and the interests of merchants and loyal tribes were carefully balanced and coordinated.

The Shaikhs' Relationships with their Governors

A ruler resided in the largest town in his shaikhdom, usually a seaport, which he normally governed himself. He appointed a governor or deputy to govern each of the surrounding towns, districts and dependencies (conquered territories) he claimed authority over. The acceptance and permanence of the governor was, in itself, recognition of the ruler's authority. To ensure the personal loyalty of the governor, the ruling shaikh often appointed his sons, brothers, trusted armed retainers, or protégé tribal leaders. Frauke Heard-Bey (2004: 81) explains how the greater the geographical distance between the governor and his ruler, the greater the governor's independence and the less his ruler's personal influence in the town, district or dependency under the governor's supervision (also see Balandier 1970 [1967]: 137–143). This was an age-old predicament, first noted by Ibn Khaldun (1969 [1377]: 250–251) over six hundred years ago. The problem of distance influenced a ruler's choice of governor. The stronger the bonds of trust between governor and ruler, the more a ruler could delegate authority without the risk of secession (Heard-Bey 2004: 81–82).

   Every shaikhdom had recurrent tensions between its centre and periphery; this appears to have been a common feature of chiefdoms everywhere (Balandier 1970 [1967]: 137). The governing of a ruler's shaikhdom and dependencies by a number of semi-autonomous governors, some of whom might be rivals for his rulership, meant that a ruler's authority rested not only on a general acceptance of his rule and his command of economic resources and armed retainers, but ultimately on his superior ability to protect his subjects and dependants. A ruler's presumed or actual skill at forging military alliances, maintaining tribal loyalty and devising effective protection-seeking tactics when his shaikhdom and dependencies were threatened was what kept him in power over his governors.

The Obligations of Rulership

A ruler was constantly challenged by the need for legitimacy in the eyes of his family, tribes and merchants. A ruler gained legitimacy by observing a series of commonly recognized obligations of rulership—obligations that still remain in place today. Harold Dickson (1949) identifies four such expectations in his celebrated *Arab of the Desert*. They are echoed in Ibn Khaldun's (1969 [1377]: 111–114) *Muqaddimah* as well. The first consisted of the ruler's personal attributes. He is expected to be a wise, eloquent, persuasive, able and courageous leader. As Paul Harrison (1924: 126; also see 139–145) puts it: "The ablest ruler is the man wanted and the one who is eventually secured." However, these qualities alone are not enough. To be a successful ruler, a shaikh must have *hadh* (luck). In the highly adversarial environment of the Gulf, a ruler's *hadh* was considered essential for a tribe's prosperity (Dickson 1949: 52). For the

Bedouin, an ideal shaikh should combine two essential roles in his person: he should be a great negotiator/peacemaker and a great warrior; ideally he should be both a shaikh "of the door" (*al-bab*) conducting peace settlements and a shaikh "of the saddle" (*al-shdad*) leading his people in war (Meeker 1979: 190).

The second expectation is that a ruler be a "father to his people", with all the responsibilities that entails (Dickson 1949: 53). For the majority of his subjects, these responsibilities originated from the payment and collection of tax or tribute. (These transactions ceased with the influx of oil wealth, but the expectation remains to this day.) Rulers' armed retainers collected the former from individuals and the latter from submissive tribes. When a person pays tax to his ruler, that ruler becomes responsible for his protection (physically as well as diplomatically) from all quarters, as if he were the payer's father.

The third expectation, and related to the second, is that a ruler keep an open house. As a "father" of his people, he must be accessible to them (Dickson 1949: 53). This is the purpose of the ruler's *majlis* (court)—a regular, often daily, council held at his residence. The practice is comparable to the European custom of holding court, except that *majlis* was informal and access was unrestricted. Because shaikhdoms were small-scale societies, anyone with an enquiry, a request or a case could attend *majlis* to present it to the ruler (for details, see Dickson 1949; Lienhardt 2001; Khuri 1980). Once the ruler settled a case, he was also responsible for its enforcement (al-Rasheed 1991: 93). The position of arbiter was and remains a prestigious one in Arabian society. The settling of cases reinforced a ruler's legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects (Harrison 1924: 150).

The fourth expectation is that a ruler be generous (Dickson 1949: 53). Tremendous importance is attached to a ruler's reputation for generosity. The greater his generosity, the greater his popularity, the greater his legitimacy and the greater his influence. It is important for the ruler of a shaikhdom to be known as its most generous host. A ruler who ignored his social and political obligations, or fulfilled them poorly, risked both the loss of important and affluent members of his shaikhdom to migration and the loss of his rulership to a rival member of his family (Lienhardt 1975: 63–65, 72–73, 2001: 19–23). The Gulf rulers were constantly constrained by limited economic and military resources in their ability to live up to these common expectations of rulership. Their inability to fulfill these expectations rendered their authority frail, leaving them vulnerable to challenges.

External Factors Affecting the Shaikhs' Authority

The Shaikhs' Relationships with Regional Powers

There were four main regional powers in the Gulf before oil: the Saudis, Omanis, Persians and Ottomans. The Al Saud family of Riyadh ruled Najd and Hasa during 1794–1818, 1843–71 and 1902/13–present; and occasionally influenced or occupied neighbouring Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States. The Omanis (the Al bu Said family of Muscat), too, influenced or occupied Bahrain and the Trucial States a

few times before the mid-nineteenth century. The Persian Government ruled Muscat and Bahrain for a few decades in the seventeenth century and maintained a claim to Bahrain until 1970. During the 1850s–1920s, it slowly assumed direct control over the Persian coast, eventually displacing the Arab ruling families there. The Ottoman Government ruled Hasa during 1871–1913 and exercised varying degrees of influence over neighbouring Kuwait, Qatar (both autonomous districts of the Ottoman Empire), Bahrain and the Trucial States (see Anscombe 1997; al-Aydarus 1999). The interest of these regional powers in the Gulf shaikhdoms enabled the shaikhs to seek protection for their domains by playing one power off against another.

If a ruler faced the impending attack of a much stronger enemy, he would typically seek the protection of a regional power to ward off the threat. These protectors gave guarantees of defence in return for subservience or the relinquishment of some degree of independence. The protégé's payment of tribute symbolized this and had a trans-forming effect (Rosenfeld 1965: 78–79; Landen 1986: 59). The protector regarded his tributary as a part of his own tribe (Rosenfeld 1965: 76). Similarly, the protector regarded his tributary's territory as his territory, but with one important distinction. The protector considered such land, especially if it was at some distance from his shaikhdom, to be a "dependency" rather than a part of his shaikhdom. The protector usually left the governing of his dependency to the local ruler or tribal leader who had submitted to his authority (Harrison 1924: 125). See Onley (2004a: 44–57) for a case study of Bahrain's tribute relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Custom dictated the amount of tribute a protégé should pay his protector, if he were to pay any at all (for examples of customary tribute payments, see Dickson 1949: 443–444; al-Rasheed 1991: 113–114). If the parties failed to agree on the amount, they would often enlist a neutral ruler to arbitrate. Tribute was normally paid annually and could take many forms: a fixed sum of money; a share of the annual customs revenue; a share of the agricultural produce (mainly dates); a certain number of horses, camels and so on; provision of men for military service; and even *zakat* (Islamic alms that, in the Sunni interpretation, Muslim officials normally collect from Muslim subjects). Tribute was typically imposed as *khuwa*. In its original form, *khuwa* was a "brother-hood fee" paid voluntarily by the weak to the strong in return for protection (Khuri 1980: 20). The protector became, in effect, his protégé's big brother, with all the responsibilities that entailed.

A would-be attacker's forceful imposition of *khuwa* as a "protection tax" on an opponent, however, symbolized not brotherly relations, but political domination (al-Rasheed 1991: 111–117). *Khuwa* clothed unequal power relations in a culturally meaningful kinship ideology (Khalaf 1975). Militarily strong rulers would often threaten to attack weaker rulers with the intention of tribute-collection, not military conquest. The same tactic was employed by those who controlled Arabia's trade routes and imposed tolls (often as *khuwa*) on those who used them. If the ruler of a shaikhdom, skipper of a ship or leader of a caravan refused to pay tribute to a would-be attacker, he risked military conquest or raiding (Onley 2004a: 43).

Henry Rosenfeld (1965: 79) tells us how a group's increased power typically resulted in "increased tribute payments, tributary groups and honour", while decreased power

meant "less ability to receive tribute, less recognition and, as the group itself becomes tributary, [a] gradual reduction on the status scale of honour". Tribute payment created what Rosenfeld (1965: 85, note 3) calls the "web of overlordship and the recognition of a hierarchy of dominance" in Arabia. Personal honour and status relations were at the centre of Arabian politics in the nineteenth century, as they are today (Rosenfeld 1965: 79).

Hitherto, historians have explained the Gulf Arab rulers' ever-changing alliances solely in terms of the rulers' self-interest and shrewd pragmatism. As yet, no historical explanation has viewed intraregional relations through the lens of Arabian political culture. Yet the tribute system upon which these relations were based was in fact regulated by the Arabian custom of protection-seeking. The norms and obligations of the protector-protégé relationship provided the rulers with an effective survival strategy in the face of Arabia's ever-shifting power dynamics. The rulers used these norms and obligations in a variety of ways to legitimate and regulate their political relations with regional powers and, in time, with the British Government as well (Onley 2004a: 57).

Personal honour was central to both the politics of protection and regional political relations. If someone requests protection, honour demands that protection be given (Dresch 1989: 258). The granting of protection is considered an honourable deed, which enhances the reputation of the protector, while refusing protection has the opposite effect (Lienhardt 2001: 112). Once protection is granted, the protégé is "on the honour" of his protector. This law of entering another's protection, known as *dakhala* (entering), is a sacred and honoured custom throughout Arabia (Dickson 1949: 133–134; Khalaf 1990: 227). In this system of protection, a protégé is answerable to his protector who, in turn, is answerable to the public for the actions of his protégé. If one has a claim against a protégé, he is supposed to go to the protector, not the protégé (Dresch 1989: 60–61). Protégés of rulers—be they individuals, tribes or other rulers— normally paid tribute to their protector (Dickson 1949: 440–444). The norms and expectations of dakhala influenced the conduct of the Gulf rulers towards regional powers and, in time, the British Government as well (Lienhardt 2001: 5–8).

If a ruler was unable to secure, or unwilling to accept, the protection of a regional power, or an alliance with a less powerful ruler, and faced certain defeat in battle against his enemy, he had one last resort. It was acceptable for him to place himself under his enemy's protection as a form of reluctant nominal subservience. This was a political compromise preferable to outright military defeat. If a ruler did this, he became a protégé and was required to pay tribute as a sign of submission and political subordination. Henceforth, the ruler's shaikhdom was considered a dependency of his protector, as discussed above. The ruler became, in effect, a governor who ruled on behalf of his protector (Harrison 1924: 126). For powerful rulers and tribes, submissions were often nominal and always temporary, lasting no more than a few years. For weak rulers and tribes, submission involved a greater loss of autonomy and tended to be more permanent, lasting for decades or even generations, as did the tribute payments.

The protection of their shaikhdoms and dependencies from antagonistic regional powers was an on-going problem for the Gulf rulers. Often they lacked sufficient military resources and were forced to seek or accept outside support. All the ruling

families of the Gulf today have been the protégés of regional and extra-regional powers in the past, including the Saudis and Omanis. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most of them sought British protection. The reason was simple: Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf had the greatest coercive power in the region at his command: the Gulf Squadron of the Indian Navy and later of the Royal Navy. The Resident had a better chance than any other regional protector of punishing and exacting compensation from offenders. As a result, British protection was the least likely to be violated.

The Shaikhs' Relationships with the British Government (1820–1971)

British hegemony in the Gulf dates from the imposition of the General Treaty of 1820 (outlawing maritime toll-collection and piracy) and the Maritime Truce (outlawing maritime warfare and *ghazu*), first signed in 1835. One of the significant effects of British hegemony was the gradual demise of the centuries-old pattern of protection-seeking from regional powers and the rise and fall of ruling shaikhly families. The British Government not only introduced peace and stability to the region, it also provided important external recognition of the most powerful ruling families, or factions within them, as the legitimate rulers over their people and their domains (Onley 2004a: 66).

   The British Government saw several advantages in recognizing only the most powerful coastal rulers in the Gulf. The basis of British power in the Gulf was its navy. The British Government, therefore, was unable and unwilling to project its power beyond the range of its naval cannons. Britain's Gulf Resident found it easier to deal with a few key rulers than with all the rulers and tribal shaikhs in the region. Likewise, it was easier and preferable for the rulers themselves to enforce the various Anglo–Arab treaties (such as the anti-piracy and anti-slave-trade agreements), and for the Resident to hold the rulers accountable for their subjects' transgressions, than for the Resident to enforce the treaties directly and punish the transgressors himself (Kelly 1968; Peterson 1997; Onley 2004a, forthcoming).

   Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Gulf rulers signed a series of treaties with the British Government, placing them under British maritime protection (the Trucial States in 1835, Bahrain in 1861, Kuwait in 1899/1914 and Qatar in 1916).[3] By allying with a powerful protector like the British Government, a ruler both reinforced his position within his shaikhdom and enhanced his shaikhdom's political status within the regional political system. J. E. Peterson (1977: 302) notes how British maritime protection amounted to international recognition. Protection and recognition of local rulers and tribal chiefs was used as a political strategy by the British throughout their empire (see Newbury 2003) and by the French in Syria (see Khalaf 1975: 57–70; Lewis 1987: 154–7). The withdrawal of British protection and recognition from a shaikhdom or its dependencies made a ruler vulnerable to a family coup d'état or a tribal secession, respectively.

   In the case of the Trucial Coast, British protection and recognition of the coastal rulers also helped to empower most of them to dominate the independent rulers and

tribal leaders of the interior, whom the British had not recognized. The result was the conversion of the interior shaikhdoms and tribal territories into dependencies of the coastal shaikhdoms. In the 1950s and 1960s, the British helped the coastal rulers to achieve complete control over these dependencies, in effect to annex them, enabling a British-run oil company to explore and drill wells there.

Despite the advantages British protection brought, it proved to be a double-edged sword for the rulers. It came at a high price: accountability to the Gulf Resident for any action of which he disapproved. Accountability was common to both British and Arabian understandings of the protégé-protector relationship, of course, but the problem for the rulers was that the Resident was able to hold them thoroughly accountable. While British protection had enabled many rulers to acquire new inland dependencies, it had the opposite effect on rulers with overseas dependencies, as the British forbad all use of naval force, including the protection and control of tributary domain.

The strength of the British position in the Gulf in the nineteenth century was that the British alone had the power to stop the cyclical pattern of protection-seeking, raiding and invasion among the rulers. The Gulf Resident could use this position to his advantage as an indirect method of keeping in power those rulers who cooperated with him to maintain the Pax Britannica, and keeping out of power those who did not. Occasionally the Resident employed more direct methods, intervening personally to punish or remove rulers unwilling to cooperate with him and installing shaikhs who would uphold the Pax Britannica. Bahrain and its dependencies provide the best illustration of this, for the Resident intervened there more than in any other shaikhdom (see Table 1). One must view this in context, however. Regional protectors, like the Saudi Amir of Najd and the Sultan of Oman, regarded such interventions as a right and behaved accordingly. The fact that protégés were occasionally deposed by their protectors did nothing to diminish the general demand for protection and the willingness of the rulers to accept it.

The Pax Britannica benefited the Gulf shaikhdoms as much as it did the British. The view of British protection as unsolicited and unwanted only arose when memories of the turbulent years before British protection became distant, when the benefits of British protection became less apparent and when the British became increasingly

Table 1   British intervention in Bahrain and its dependencies (Onley, forthcoming)

Method used	When employed
1. Deposing rulers	1868, 1869, 1923
2. Imprisonment	1869 (5 Bahrainis, including 2 rulers)
3. Firepower	1821, 1841, 1861, 1868, 1895
4. Threat of firepower	1829, 1836, 1858, 1859
5. Public flogging	1834 (3 slaves of the Ruler's son)
6. Destruction of property	1868, 1895
7. Confiscation of property	1861, 1865, 1888
8. Blockades	1829, 1858, 1859, 1868, 1869

involved in domestic affairs.[4] Even so, the need for British protection remained. In 1968, when the British Government declared it could no longer afford the £12,000,000 per annum to keep its forces in the Gulf and would be withdrawing its military in 1971, the Ruler of Abu Dhabi offered to pay for the military presence himself. The Ruler of Dubai made a similar offer, adding that he believed all four oil-producing states under British protection—Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Dubai and Qatar—would be willing to cover the cost. The British Government declined these unprecedented offers, however, and withdrew its forces in December 1971.

While British protection strengthened the position of the rulers within the regional political system, in some respects it limited the extent of their authority within their shaikhdoms. British political agents posted in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Trucial States and Oman frequently intervened in the internal affairs of the shaikhdoms to safeguard the lives and property of British subjects (usually Indian merchants) and British-protected persons (usually local elites) (for details, see Hay 1959; Burrows 1990; Balfour-Paul 1991; al-Sayigh 1997; Onley 2004b, 2005, forthcoming). These interferences constrained the rulers' authority, making the business of local governance sometimes difficult and frustrating (for details, see al-Rihani 1959 [1924]: 769–770, 1930: 303; al-Baharna 1998). If the rulers found themselves at odds with British interests and refused British "advice" on the protection of those interests, they risked British intervention. A more serious dilemma occurred when the rulers found themselves trapped between the competing interests of their people and the British Government. The rulers needed the support of both groups. If they sided with their people, they risked British intervention. If they sided with the British, they undermined their legitimacy in the eyes of their people. This scenario is known as "the chief's dilemma" in African studies.[5] Fuad Khuri (1980: 85–108) calls it the problem of "duality of authority", where local and imperial jurisdictions overlap resulting in competition and conflict (for examples, see Zahlan 1978, 1979; Farah 1985; Loewenstein 2000; Smith 2000, 2004).

Conclusion

In this article, we offered a synthesis of existing historical-anthropological studies of the pre-oil Gulf to shed light on the nature of shaikhly authority and the conditions that shaped it. Shaikhly authority was frail, vulnerable and precarious—a result of the interplay between internal and external factors that included the ruling families, the tribes and tribal guards, the merchants, the governors, the obligations of rulership, regional powers and the British Government. These factors affected the rulers' authority in a dialectical fashion: sometimes empowering it, sometimes constraining it, sometimes both simultaneously. The ruling family, for instance, was both the source of the ruler's hereditary legitimacy and strength, and a constant constraint on his rulership; it supported him against the merchants and tribes, but it produced his strongest rivals. In a similar fashion, tribes were both a source of strength for the rulers (as a military and economic resource) and a potential vulnerability (if they shifted their allegiance). The wealthy merchants were both a source of wealth for the rulers and a constraining

political influence on them. The ease with which they could migrate to other shaikh-doms was also a source of vulnerability for the rulers. The threat of migration or secession by the tribes and merchants, therefore, limited the rulers' abuse of authority. While the ruler's fulfilment of the obligations of rulership reinforced their legitimacy in the eyes of their people, their inability to fulfil these obligations completely (due to their limited resources) also undermined their legitimacy. The protection the rulers received from regional powers and, later, the British Government simultaneously benefited the rulers' domains and constrained the rulers' authority within their domains.

The interplay between these many factors created opportunities and challenges for the rulers. To maintain their rulerships and the wellbeing of their shaikhdoms, the rulers had to engage in a never-ending juggling act, playing one brother, one tribe, one merchant, one governor, one obligation, one regional power or one foreign protector off against another. The rulers were constantly observing, assessing, balancing and rebalancing situations; forever negotiating and renegotiating the various options available to them at any one moment in an endless effort to redress the frailty, vulnerability and precariousness of their authority within their shaikhdoms.

Oil wealth has changed much of this. It has given rulers economic autonomy from their people—they no longer depend on the merchants for financial support as they once did; indeed, it is the merchants who now depend on the rulers for government contracts and assistance (Khalaf & Hammoud 1987; Crystal 1990). The rulers' authority is no longer frail, vulnerable and precarious. It is no longer constrained as it once was by their families, tribes, merchants, governors, regional powers and international protectors (America and Britain). Oil wealth has empowered the rulers to fulfil the obligations of rulership more than ever before by establishing a welfare state system that provides generously for all. It has enabled them to appease most of their political rivals. It has enabled them to acquire large modern militaries, police forces and bureaucracies. These new institutions provide jobs for tribesmen, enmeshing them within the state structure and so depriving them of their traditional mobility, independence and political power. It has ensured that international powers have a vested interest in their continued wellbeing, as witnessed by American and British military support for Kuwait during 1987–1988 (when Iran was attacking its oil tankers) and during the Gulf War of 1990–1991 (when Iraq occupied Kuwait). It has enabled them to build "large-scale societies"—modern states serviced by a global expatriate workforce larger than the local population. However, as these modern states have grown, so have the barriers between the rulers and their people. As the people have lost their political power, the *majlis* has declined in importance. The *majlis* is no longer an informal space where the people can discusses matters with their rulers; it is a formal court where they appear in their best attire to demonstrate their loyalty.

Yet oil wealth has not changed everything. Tribal affiliations remain an important factor in the allocation of power and economic privileges. Rulership remains highly personalized. The shaikhdom system is still hereditary and patrimonial. The rulers are still bound by the obligations of rulership. Oil wealth may have enabled the rulers to fulfil these traditional obligations more completely, but it has created new obligations

and challenges for them. Oil wealth alone cannot protect the rulers from rivals: there have been two coups in Qatar (1972, 1995), one coup in Abu Dhabi (1966) and one coup in Sharjah (1986) since oil was discovered there. And so the political manoeu-vring continues, although with much less intensity than before.

Notes

[1]   Patricia Risso [née Dubuisson] prefers to describe *ghazu* as "piracy" (Risso 1978: 47).
[2]   There has been extensive work on alliance-seeking in Arabia; see, e.g., Khuri (1990: 114–117); al-Rasheed (1991); Anscombe (1997); Alghanim (1998); Onley (2004a: 38, 65–67).
[3]   See Onley (2004a) for an analysis of Britain's protection of the Gulf shaikhdoms.
[4]   Our thanks to Frauke Heard-Bey for this insight.
[5]   See Newbury (2003) for an excellent study of chieftaincy and imperialism.

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