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The Sea vs. the Desert: Rahmah ibn Jabir and the Dialectic of Piracy and Maritime Influence[**]

البحر مقابل الصحراء: رحمة بن جابر وجدلية القرصنة والنفوذ البحري

Abstract: This study examines the figure of Sheikh Rahmah ibn Jabir, whose influence emerged in the late 18th century, and whose network's activity operated across three key centres along the Gulf shores, without a defined political domain on land. The Gulf waters delineated the boundaries of ibn Jabir's power between 1782 and 1826, with his ship *al-Ghatrusha* serving as his mobile capital city. Unlike land-based tribal leaders, ibn Jabir's power was inseparable from the sea, which he used as a sphere for competition, negotiation, and defence. This study compares the land-centric approach to Gulf political history by highlighting the often overlooked centrality of the sea, in shaping regional power dynamics around the turn of the 19th century. It proposes the term "maritime sheikhdom" as an alternative to "piracy" to better capture what delineates it from land sheikhdoms.

Keywords: Rahmah ibn Jabir; Maritime Sheikhdom; Arabian Gulf; Maritime Influence; Piracy.

الملخص: تتناول هذه الدراسة نفوذ الشيخ رحمة بن جابر في المجال البحري للخليج في أواخر القرن الثامن عشر، ونشاط شبكته البحرية حول ثلاثة مراكز على شواطئ الخليج، من دون أن يكون له مجال سياسي واضح على اليابسة، وتناقش كيفية ارتباط نجاحات ابن جابر بالبحر، حيث جعل منه مجالًا لنفوذه ووسيلة للتنافس والتفاوض والدفاع، مقارنةً بشيوخ القبائل الآخرين المتمركزين على اليابسة. وتساعد هذه المقارنة في الكشف عن مركزية أخرى، هي مركزية البحر التي همّشتها كتابات الباحثين والمؤرخين لمصلحة مركزية اليابسة في تحليل صعود القوى السياسية في الخليج خلال نهاية القرن الثامن عشر ومطلع القرن التاسع عشر. ومن هذا المنظور، تفتح الدراسة مجالًا لإعادة النظر في تاريخ الخليج واختبار ملاءمة «المشيخة البحرية» مصطلحًا بديلًا من «القرصنة»؛ وذلك بما يحمله في طيّاته من خصائص مميزة له من مشيخات اليابسة.

كلمات مفتاحية: رحمة بن جابر؛ المشيخة البحرية؛ الخليج العربي؛ النفوذ البحري؛ القرصنة.

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Introduction

Historical research tends to overstate the relationship between political authority and (dry) land, and between the state's bordersand its terrestrial foundation. Political entities, including states, as well as nationalities, are generally associated with dry land, and their land-based practices are regarded as the cornerstone of their political power.[1] In contrast, entities whose sphere of influence lies at sea have more fluid relationships for lacking fixed geographical boundaries, and thus, able to forge and dissolve alliances. However, when the rulers of such entities exercise control over their maritime spheres, they are viewed as pirates rather than maritime sovereigns with legitimate authority within their aquatic borders.[2]

Rahmah ibn Jabir al-Jalhami (c. 1760-1826), the ruler who made the sea the seat of his government, challenges this assumption. His influence began to take shape in the early 19th century in the Gulf region, where his network operated across three key coastal centres – Khor Hassan, Dammam, and Bushehr – without establishing a defined political sphere for himself on land. For 50 years, the waters of the Gulf were the de facto borders of his influence, while his renowned ship *al-Ghatrusha* served as his mobile capital city.

This study analyses the rise of ibn Jabir's power and political influence in the Gulf waters by comparing his rule to that of his contemporaneous land-based tribal chieftains. It introduces "maritime sheikhdom" as a concept that links ibn Jabir's political and economic power to the sea, and explores the contrast between the centrality of the sea and that of the land in shaping political forces in the Gulf. While other tribal chieftains derived their influence from territorial control and the ability to exploit both land and maritime resources, ibn Jabir established his authority by commanding the sea and maritime trade. On this basis, maritime sheikhdom could refer to a model of political influence in the Gulf – one that parallels the traditional land-based model of political influence.

Recent studies linking maritime power to the formation of political and economic influence have been shaped by theories such as that of Alfred Mahan, who emphasized the role of maritime control in building political influence;[3] Lincoln Payne, who demonstrated how maritime powers have shaped the course of world history;[4] and Geoffrey Till, who argued that control of the seas remains a decisive factor in shaping world powers, even in the modern era.[5] From this perspective, the model of the maritime sheikhdom represented by ibn Jabir may be viewed as part of the broader history of maritime forces and their role in shaping political entities.

This study presents the concept of the maritime sheikhdom as an alternative to the dominant characterization of the 18th-century Gulf "piracy", a view shaped by colonial narratives that prioritize land-based elites.[6] Through a multi-dimensional analysis integrating political, economic, and geographical considerations, the study offers a deeper understanding of the role of the maritime sphere and the historical significance of the sea in shaping political shifts in the Arab Gulf region. Building on this analysis, the study explores ibn Jabir's maritime network across the Gulf, which might be termed Rahmah's "throne at sea". It also highlights his provocative decision to be buried at sea in the Gulf rather than on land, which reflects his vision of the importance of this maritime realm in shaping his identity and influence.[7]

This study consists of four sections. The first presents the concept of the maritime sheikhdom as an alternative to the concept of piracy. The second traces the rise of ibn Jabir's sheikhdom and the formation of his maritime influence. The third examines the expansion of his maritime network across the Gulf,

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[1] Francis Fukuyama, *Uṣūl al-Niẓām al-Siyāsī: al-Juzʾ al-Awwal: Min ʿUṣūr mā Qabl al-Insān ilā al-Thawra al-Faransiyya*, Mujab al-Imam and Muʿin al-Imam (trans.) (Doha: Muntada al-ʿIlaqat al-ʿArabiyya wa-l-Dawliyya, 2016), p. 103.

[2] Muhammad Riyadh, *al-Uṣūl al-ʿĀmma fī al-Jiyūghrāfyā al-Siyāsiyya wa-l-Jiyūbūlītīkiyya* (Cairo: Muʾassasat Hindawi, 2014), p. 147.

[3] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890), p. 85.

[4] Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* (New York: Knopf, 2013), pp. 312-315.

[5] Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 45-47.

[6] John C. Wilkinson, *Arabia's Frontiers: The Story of Britain's Boundary Drawing in the Desert* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), pp. 32-33.

[7] Philip Steinberg & Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume Through Oceanic Thinking," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2015), pp. 247-264. See also: Paine.

analysing its formations, its impact on his political and economic sway, and its role in enhancing his political status. The fourth discusses the distinctive nature of the sea, its influence on ibn Jabir's sheikhdom, and the evolution of his social status and various alliances.

The Piracy-Maritime Sheikhdom Dialectic

The 16th century marked the onset of European expansion into the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf, beginning with the Portuguese seizure of Indian trade routes via the Cape of Good Hope. Recognizing the Gulf's strategic significance, Portuguese commander Afonso de Albuquerque sought also to control the sea routes between the Gulf and the coasts of Africa and India, sparking conflicts with the region's inhabitants.[8] Portuguese ships were fitted out with heavy cannons, which gave them superiority in naval battles.[9] To reinforce their control over maritime trade, the Portuguese also imposed a navigation permit system[10], while building a network of forts at strategic ports to secure trade routes.[11]

By the 17th century, the region began witnessing the arrival of other European powers, most notably the Dutch, English, and French, each vying for dominance over various spheres of influence. The theatre of these conflicts extended from the Indonesian archipelago to the east coast of Africa. Despite its limited economic importance at the time, the Gulf's geostrategic location made it a crucial battleground. This period saw shifting power dynamics as the English and Dutch allied against the Portuguese, driving them out of the Gulf. However, these alliances soon changed as the English gradually extended their control over India and trade routes, first by establishing their main commercial centres in the late 17th century, and later through direct rule under the British Crown between 1690-1858. During this period, the British successfully ousted their erstwhile Dutch allies, while warding off French expansionist efforts in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf.[12]

Methods of the Colonial Powers and the Nature of Their Control Over the Indian Ocean and the Gulf

Colonizer	Colonial Method	Type of Control	Features
Portugal	Constructed a series of strategic fortresses and ports	Direct control over maritime trade routes	Implemented "permit" system to impose control over local trade
Netherlands	Dutch East India Company	More emphasis on trade than on direct colonization	Controlled the spice trade in the East Indies
Britain	British East India Company, then direct colonial rule	Building alliances with local powers	Built a robust network of commercial stations and ports
France	Imitated the British model with the French East India Company	Direct military competition with the British, particularly in India	Attempted to form alliances with local powers to counter British influence

Source: prepared by the author based on: Kirti Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 63-68; Femme Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company, 1602-1799* (Horn: Walburg Pers, 2003), pp. 39-45; Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 86-92; Philippe Haudrère, *La compagnie française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005), pp. 112-118.

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[8] Muhammad Murad, *Ṣirāʿ al-Qiwā fī al-Muḥīṭ al-Hindī wa-l-Khalīj al-ʿArabī: Judhūruh al-Tārīkhiyya wa-Abʿāduh* (Damascus: Dar Dimashq, 1984), p. 178.

[9] John F. Gunpowder & Galleys Guilmartin, *Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the 16th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 132-135.

[10] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History* (US: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), pp. 78-80.

[11] Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion 1400–1668* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 64-67.

[12] Ibid., pp. 171-184.

The Gulf's importance to the British grew in tandem with their expanding control over India, as they viewed the former as the first line of defence for their interests in the latter. This prompted them to adopt a strategy aimed at controlling the maritime sphere without direct intervention on the coast to secure the trade routes linking India to Persia and Ottoman territories from Iraq, through the Levant, and onward to the Mediterranean. Several factors heightened the Gulf's importance, including the presence of rivers along the Shatt al-Arab, which facilitated the transport of goods from the Gulf to the Levant. Additionally, the Gulf's strategic location made it a central hub in British regional policy. To safeguard their commercial interests and maintain maritime influence, the British sought to control the waterways, while simultaneously avoiding direct involvement in the internal affairs of local powers.[13]

This balanced approach enabled Britain to achieve its strategic objectives while minimizing direct contact with local populations and rulers. This strategy can be understood as an early manifestation of "soft power" in colonial policy, which minimized the material and political costs associated with direct occupation. Moreover, this strategy had a profound impact on the political and economic structures of the region. By emphasizing maritime control, Britain augmented the importance of ports and coastal cities, changing the balance of power between coastal and inland forces in the region.[14]

As British influence grew, they began classifying certain local maritime activities as "piracy". However, this classification was far from objective; rather, it functioned as a political tool – a pretext for tightening their grip on strategic sea lanes and reshaping the region's traditional system of commerce.[15] Many of the activities labelled as piracy were long-standing mechanisms for protecting the economic interests of local tribes and other entities, or part of the locally recognized system of maritime taxes and fees. In some cases, they were acts of resistance to increasing foreign domination.[16]

The British classification of these activities varied according to political interests. Similar activities were classified differently depending on who engaged in them, revealing the strategic nature of Britain's use of the piracy designation. This selective classification had far-ranging impacts on the region, as it legitimized military interventions that changed the balance of power among local forces and led to the imposition of new treaties and agreements on local rulers. It undermined the centuries-old traditional system of commerce and replaced it with a new trading system that served primarily British interests, causing radical shifts in trade patterns and maritime navigation across the Gulf. Local powers responded in different ways. Some resorted to resistance, while others adapted by developing strategies to preserve their interests under the new conditions.[17] Through a combination of military force, diplomacy, and economic policies, Britain successfully cemented its hegemony over the Gulf for nearly two centuries (1820-1971), radically altering the region's political and economic dynamics and shaping the development of local entities and their relations with external powers.[18]

"Piracy" and Resistance to Nascent European Colonialism

The maritime sphere, or the Gulf basin, became the primary arena of conflict for control of the Gulf trade routes between the British and the Arab tribes. English writings assumed this to be "piracy" on

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[13] James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 20-22.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Prior to British intervention, a traditional commercial and maritime system with its own rules and mores was in effect in the region. During that era, local conflicts and rivalries were part and parcel of the region's social and economic fabric. See Khaldun al-Naqib, *al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Dawla fī al-Khalīj wa-l-Jazīra al-ʿArabiyya (Min Manẓūr Mukhtalif)* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1989).

[16] Sultan al-Qasimi, *al-Qawāsim wa-l-ʿUdwān al-Birīṭānī (1797-1820)* (Sharjah: Manshurat al-Qasimi, 2012), pp. 17-18.

[17] Ibid.

[18] al-Naqib, p. 86.

the part of Arab tribes and the local population, portraying the Omani coast as a pirates' abode, and therefore, the British military launched multiple campaigns to combat said "piracy". These developments coincided with the emergence of ibn Jabir, who came to be viewed as the most formidable "pirate" the region had ever known.

British historians such as Gordon Lorimer, John Kelly, and Arnold Wilson consistently labelled all naval military actions undertaken by the people of the Gulf as "piracy", regardless of the historical or political context. In contrast, Russian historians like Natalia Nikolaevna Tomanovych and Mikhin Viktor Leonovich interpreted these actions as forms of resistance and struggle by the region's indigenous inhabitants against the foreign colonizer.[19] Despite this disagreement among Western historians, many Arab researchers have adopted the "piracy" hypothesis, engraining it in the Gulf consciousness as a historical fact.[20] This is evident in the use of the term "Pirates' Coast" to describe the Omani coast, and in ibn Jabir being branded as a pirate. Jamal Zakaria Qasim presented a fictional account of ibn Jabir's life as an adventurous pirate, omitting his complex ties with local powers.[21] Similarly, in her work on ibn Jabir, Hayat al-Bassam relied heavily and uncritically on British documents, perpetuating their narrative. Abdullah Al Khalifa, meanwhile, presented a narrative that lacked academic rigour or methodology. The historical novel *The Pirate* by Qatari writer Abdul Aziz Al Mahmoud,[22] which has enjoyed wide popularity in the Gulf,[23] narrates the adventures of the "pirate" ibn Jabir based on historical anecdotes and folk tales.

British historian John G. Lorimer articulated this British view of piracy in the Gulf. His *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, published in 1906,[24] is among the most important sources on the Gulf due to Lorimer's privileged access to British archival documents. The influence of Lorimer's *Gazetteer* is evident in later studies, such as that of Habibur Rahman, whose work contributed little new information. Similarly, Sultan al-Qasimi's 1987 publication defends the Qawasim against accusations of piracy, but levels the same charge against ibn Jabir. Most researchers failed to acknowledge that Lorimer was commissioned by the British Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon,[25] to write his book. As a result, the book reflects the British colonial point of view on the Gulf.

This, then, is what prompted Lorimer to describe maritime activities in the Gulf as piracy. He argued that the policy of the Bombay government and its "kind-hearted" mayor,[26] which forbade British captains from opening fire on Arab vessels, even if they approached them, emboldened Arab tribes to engage in

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[19] Mikhin Leonovich, *Ḥilf al-Qawāsim wa-Siyāsāt Birīṭānyā fī al-Khalīj al-ʿArabī fī al-Qarn al-Thāmin ʿAshar wa-l-Niṣf al-Awwal min al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ ʿAshar*, Samir Najmuddin Sattas (trans.) (Dubai: Markaz Jumʿa al-Majid li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Turath, 2009), pp. 172-173; Natalia Nikolaevna Tomanovich, *al-Duwal al-Awrubbiyya fī al-Khalīj al-ʿArabī min al-Qarn al-Sādis ʿAshara ilā al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ ʿAshar*, Samir Najmuddin Sattas (trans.) (Dubai: Markaz Jumʿa al-Majid li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Turath, 2006), pp. 15-17.

[20] See: Hasan bin Muhammad al-Thani, "Istrātījiyyat Mawqiʿ Qaṭar wa-Dawruhu fī Ṣirāʿ al-Qiwā al-Khalījiyya fī ʿIshrīniyyāt al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ ʿAshar," *Riwaq al-Tarikh wa-l-Turath*, no. 10 (June 2020); Jamal Zakariya Qasim, "Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," *Hawliyyat Kulliyyat al-Adab*, Ain Shams University, vol. 9 (1964); Hayat al-Bassam, *Aʿmāl Raḥma bin Jābir al-Baḥriyya fī al-Khalīj al-ʿArabī Bayn al-Qarṣana wa-l-Intiqām* (Riyadh: Dar al-Shibl, 1993); Abdullah al-Khalifa, "Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," *Majallat al-Wathiqa*, vol. 30, no. 60 (July 2011); Yusuf al-Abdullah, "Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima wa ʿIlāqātuh bi-l-Qiwā al-Siyāsiyya fī al-Khalīj al-ʿArabī," *Majallat Waqaʾiʿ Tarikhiyya*, Faculty of Arts, University of Cairo, vol. 52, no. 9 (January 2008); Faʾiq Tahbub, *Tārīkh al-Baḥrayn al-Siyāsī* (Kuwait: Manshurat Dhat al-Salasil, 1983); Ahmad Mustafa Abu Hakima, *Tārīkh Sharqay al-Jazīra al-ʿArabiyya*, Muhammad Amin (trans.) (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, n.d.).

[21] Qasim, p. 186.

[22] Abdul Aziz Al Mahmoud, *al-Qurṣān* (Doha: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[23] In a clear indication of its popularity, the novel has gone through six printings. See: "Riwāyat 'al-Qurṣān' Tusajjil Aʿlā Mabīʿāt fī Sūq al-Kutub al-Qaṭariyya," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21/10/2012, accessed on 15/4/2022, at https://acr.ps/1L9zOki

[24] John Lorimer, *Dalīl al-Khalīj* (Doha: Library of His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar, n.d.).

[25] Lord George Nathaniel Curzon (1859-1925) was a prominent British politician and imperialist who served as Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. He also played a pivotal role in shaping British policy in the Arab Gulf. Viewing the Gulf as the "gateway to India", Curzon sought to enhance British influence there. He commissioned John Gordon Lorimer to compile the *Gulf Gazetteer* as part of his efforts to document and better understand the region in the service of British interests. Curzon was a firm believer in British imperialism and its "civilizing" role in the colonies, a belief that was reflected in his policies and decisions. For more, see: David Gilmour, *Curzon: Imperial Statesman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Onley.

[26] William Hornby served as governor and chair of the Bombay Council between 1771 and 1784. See: Pamela Nightingale, *Trade and Empire in Western India: 1784-1806* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 23.

piracy and attack naval ships.[27] Lorimer identifies the first incident of piracy in the region as the 1778 Qawasim seizure of a British East India Company vessel.[28] However, British archival documents reveal that the Sheikh of the Qawasim, Saqr bin Rashid al-Qasimi,[29] justified this action by asserting that the seized ship was not flying the British flag, but rather the flag of the Imam of Muscat,[30] with whom the Qawasim were at war.[31]

In a similar vein, historian Nicholas Tarling argues that the colonial use of the term "piracy" was widespread in the Malay Islands,[32] and that the activities referred to as "piracy" were quite similar to those in the Arab Gulf. Tarling notes that the political, economic, and social structures of the Malay Islands fostered conditions in which violence on land and sea became a tool for achieving political and commercial objectives. In other words, they were acts of rivalry and warfare, rather than evidence of backwardness or ill-temper.[33]

The British understanding of piracy, thus, did not emerge from the Gulf: it was an imported European construct. The actions labelled as piracy in the Gulf basin were acts of war or products of tribal conflicts, driven by the pursuit of economic or political gains. Therefore, instead of "piracy", this study proposes the concept of the maritime sheikhdom, which counters and critiques the colonial narrative based on the model presented by ibn Jabir.

The Maritime Sheikhdom: Re-Imagining 18th-Century Arab Gulf Political Entities

The notion of the maritime sheikhdom[34] was inspired, in part, by the model of the Italian maritime republics[35] that emerged in the Middle Ages, particularly amid Italy's political disintegration during the 10th and 11th centuries CE. This historical parallel is particularly striking when compared to the rise of the Gulf maritime sheikhdoms, which also flourished during periods of weakness and competition among the region's major powers. The fragmented political context paved the way for new political entities to establish themselves, relying on the sea as a primary source of power and influence. Just as Venice and Genoa relied primarily on sea trade, Gulf maritime sheikhdoms, such as that of ibn Jabir, relied heavily on maritime activities as a source of economic wealth and political influence, thus setting themselves apart from land-based sheikhdoms. This model offers a new perspective on figures such

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[27] Ibid., p. 291.

[28] Established in 1600 as a business venture, the British East India Company was gradually transformed into a colonial power in the Indian subcontinent and surrounding regions. The company played a pivotal role in expanding British influence in India and the Arab Gulf during the 18th and 19th centuries and was responsible for managing British interests in the region until 1858, when power was transferred directly to the British Crown. See: John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (London: HarperCollins, 1991).

[29] Saqr bin Rashid al-Qasimi governed Ras Al Khaimah from about 1777 to 1803. One of the most prominent chieftains of the Qawasim in the late 18th century, he helped expand their maritime influence in the Arab Gulf. bin Rashid was famed for having faced off with European powers, particularly the British, and for his role in bolstering the Qawasim's naval power. See: al-Qasimi.

[30] The Imam of Muscat was Ahmad bin Saʿid Al Busaidi (who ruled from 1749-1783). Founder of the ruling Al Busaidi family in Oman, he played a key role in expanding Oman's influence in the region, including through conflicts with other local powers such as the Qawasim.

[31] R/15/1/32, 27/4/1824, pp. 97-100.

[32] i.e. Southeast Asia; that is, present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and their environs.

[33] Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1963), p. 20, quoted in May Muhammad al-Khalifa, *Muḥammad bin Khalīfa 1813-1890 CE: al-Usṭūra wa-l-Tārīkh al-Muwāzī* (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 1996), p. 77.

[34] This term has been used elsewhere to refer to a merchant who owns ships for hire. See: "Bayt Abū Dāwūd … min Mashyakhat al-Baḥr ilā Shāhbandar al-Tujjār," *al-Madina*, 4/6/2010, accessed on 9/9/2024, at: https://2u.pw/HQ2b7mbE. In this context, however, I am using the term in a different sense that refers to a ruler who possesses maritime political power and economic resources, and to whom others are subordinate, a description which fits ibn Jabir.

[35] These entities emerged in the context of the political disintegration of Italy, where cities such as Venice and Genoa were able to consolidate highly influential economic power. Based primarily on maritime trade, these republics developed advanced naval capabilities, constructing powerful fleets and recruiting mercenary forces. Their economic and military success enabled them to expand their influence beyond their original borders, establishing a network of ports and colonies in various regions of the Mediterranean and beyond. Genoa, for example, founded the colony of Galata in Turkish territory, while Venice's influence extended to include islands in the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, reaching locations as far as Cyprus and parts of Greece. For more, see: Ermanno Orlando, *Le repubbliche marinare* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021).

as ibn Jabir and begs for a reassessment of the written histories of al-Hula,[36] al-Qawasim,[37] and other tribal communities.

The relationship between land and sea in maritime sheikhdoms differs from that of land-based sheikhdoms. In the latter, cities or castles serve as their centres from which influence extends outward to the sea, safeguarding them relative stability within a defined geographical location. Maritime sheikhdoms, however, reverse this dynamic. For example, ibn Jabir established his power at sea and extended his influence to key coastal centres, such as Khor Hassan, Dammam, and Bushehr, which were not static bases, but rather nodes in a dynamic, adaptive, and flexible network.

Ibn Jabir's flagship *al-Ghatrusha* can be regarded as the mobile capital of his sheikhdom. More than just his largest ship, it functioned as his main headquarters for receiving visitors, decision-making, and collecting information and taxes.[38] The type of maritime sheikhdom established by ibn Jabir finds historical parallels. Between the late 8th- and mid-11th centuries CE (c. 793-1066), the Vikings expanded their influence by using ships as bases for launching attacks and engaging in trade.[39] Similarly, the Sulu Sultanate in the Malay Islands, founded in the early 15th century, developed a sophisticated political and economic system based on maritime control.[40] However, what set ibn Jabir apart was his ability to combine Arab traditions with practices adapted to the geopolitical conditions of the Gulf. His maritime sheikhdom was tailored to the challenges of his era, including competition between colonial and local powers, the need to control pearl diving and trade routes, and the flexibility required to cope with political vagaries.

The relationship between a sheikh and his followers and warriors in a maritime sheikhdom differed from that of land-based sheikhdoms. In a land-based sheikhdom, warriors were only recruited from among those bound to the sheikh by family ties and tribal alliances,[41] whereas maritime sheikhdoms generally formed broader and more flexible alliances, incorporating diverse groups into their ranks, including slaves. Ibn Jabir was able to attract followers from diverse backgrounds , including slaves, and unite them under his leadership by providing them with protection and economic opportunities based on the social network he had formed in the Gulf basin.

The two types of sheikhdoms also differ in the nature of their authority and sources of power. A maritime sheikhdom enjoys greater flexibility than a land-based sheikhdom, as it is not dependent on fixed borders and territorial control. Instead, its influence is anchored in trade routes and strategic points of contact, forming an expansive maritime network that extends from shore to shore. This fluid structure enabled ibn Jabir to swiftly adapt to geopolitical shifts and forge alliances with a variety of powers, including the British, the Ottomans, the Omanis, and the Wahhabis, as interests dictated.

Economically, maritime sheikhdoms depended primarily on maritime trade and the various resources of the sea distributed across different regions such as pearl diving, shipping, tributes, maintaining their primacy as suppliers to ships, sailors, and other rulers – many of whom were merchants.[42] By contrast, the

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[36] The Huwala are Arab tribes who migrated from the Arab shores of the Gulf to the Persian side during the 17th and 18th centuries, many of whom have since returned to the Arabian Peninsula. Over time, they came to be known as *al-Huwala* (from "*alladhīna taḥawwalū*", those who shifted or moved) due to these movements away from, and back to, the Arabian Peninsula. See: Muhammad Hatim, *Tārīkh ʿArab al-Huwala* (Kuwait: al-Amin li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʿ, n.d.).

[37] The Qawasim are an Arab tribe that formed emirates along the Omani coast in modern times. See: al-Qasimi.

[38] al-Khalifa, "Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," p. 260.

[39] Anders Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 72-77.

[40] James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

[41] As a result of ibn Jabir's continuous peregrination and the multiple points of influence he had established, he was able to build up a broad network of relationships throughout the Gulf. The growth of the pearl trade and his increased revenues enabled him to buy slaves, protect tribes, harbour rebels, and take in those in search of economic opportunity. See: R. Hughes Thomas, *Mukhtārāt min Wathāʾiq Būmbāy: Silsila Jadīda Raqam (24) ʿĀm 1856*, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani (trans.) (Doha: Markaz Hasan bin Muhammad li-l-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya, 2017), p. 436; al-Khalifa, "Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," p. 260.

[42] R/15/1/25, 8/4/1822, pp. 37-39.

land-based sheikhdoms relied more on fixed resources, such as agriculture and herding.[43] In the case of ibn Jabir, he relied on maintaining maritime trade routes, pearl fisheries, and the imposition of tributes,[44] which together made up a major source of his economic and political power.

Thus, a deeper understanding of maritime sheikhdoms requires a reassessment of traditional conceptions of authority and sovereignty. Instead of relying on fixed borders, territory, and community as sources of legitimacy, figures like ibn Jabir built up their authority through control of sea lanes and commercial networks. This pattern extends beyond individual figures to encompass the broader dynamics of power and trade in the Gulf region. From this perspective, authority in the Gulf has consisted historically of a network of relationships: state influence shaped by trade and economic interactions crossed oceans, seas, and even beyond to the formation of political alliances and the exercise of influence.

The theoretical framework offered by the concept of the maritime sheikhdom allows us to also reassess power relations as it serves as a meeting point for interests on the local level (tribes and merchants), the regional level (Omani and Persian powers), and the international level (the Ottomans and the British).

The Rise of Rahmah ibn Jabir: A Critique of the Notion of "Piracy"

Ibn Jabir belonged to the Jalahima tribe, whose chieftain was his father, Jabir bin Adhbi. This tribe is considered part of the Bani ʿUtba tribal confederation (the ʿUtub), a branch of the large ʿAniza tribe that inhabits central Arabia. Notably, the current ruling families of Bahrain (Al Khalifa) and Kuwait (Al Sabah) also descend from the Bani ʿUtba confederation. The exact date of ibn Jabir's birth remains uncertain. However, based on British archives and local sources, which state that he died in 1826 CE,[45] and accounts suggesting he was in his seventies when he passed away,[46] he was most likely born between 1756 and 1760[47] in al-Qurain (present-day Kuwait).

Most historians agree that the ʿUtub, including the Jalahima tribe, migrated with other branches (Al Sabah and Al Khalifa) from their homeland in al-Aflaj in Najd to the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. While the date of their migration has not been determined, historians estimate that it took place in the early 18th century.[48] The ʿUtub settled in the northwestern region of the Qatar Peninsula. At the time, the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, from Qatar to Kuwait, was under the rule of the Bani Khalid tribe, who were represented by the Al Muslim family. The ʿUtub remained there for about 50 years; then, due to a dispute that arose between them and Al Muslim, they were forced to leave Qatar. They sailed across the Gulf, and around 1717 CE, they arrived in al-Qurain.[49]

In Kuwait, the three families (al-Jalahima, Al Sabah, and Al Khalifa) agreed to forge a power-sharing alliance. Under this agreement, Al Sabah would assume political rule, Al Khalifa would engage in trade and commerce, and the Jalahima under the leadership of Sheikh Jabir bin ʿAdhbi (Rahma's father) would oversee maritime affairs.[50] This alliance endured for nearly half a century before Al Khalifa left Kuwait for Zubara in Qatar. Some historians attribute their departure to the fact that Al Sabah had monopolized

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[43] al-Naqib, p. 38.

[44] R/15/1/22, 9/4/1820, pp. 72-73.

[45] R/15/1/40, 14/12/1826, pp.129-131.

[46] al-Bassam, p. 66.

[47] Ibid.; Qasim; al-Khalifa, "Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima."

[48] Abd al-Aziz al-Rashid, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* (Beirut: Manshurat Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, 1978), p. 106; Abu Hakima, p. 74; Yusuf al-Qinaʿi, *Ṣafaḥāt min Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* (Cairo: Dar Saʿd Misr, 1946), p. 9.

[49] al-Qinaʿi, p. 8; Abu Hakima, p. 96.

[50] Thomas, p. 305.

political power,[51] while others believe that repeated attacks on Kuwait by the neighbouring Bani Kaʿb emirate on the Shatt al-Arab,[52] which flourished in the 18th and early 19th centuries, made Al Khalifa feel that Kuwait was unsafe. In 1766, Al Khalifa settled in Zubara, where they were later joined by the Jalahima, though their exact date of arrival remains known. Initially, the Jalahima were well received by Al Khalifa, who welcomed them with gifts. However, tensions soon arose over revenue disputes, leading the Jalahima to relocate to Al Ruwais in northern Qatar, where they began building their naval fleet. Historian Ahmad Abu Hakima suggests that this move was motivated by a desire for revenge against Al Khalifa, and to begin making their living[53] via "piracy". However, Abu Hakima's interpretation reflects a colonial narrative, one that will be deconstructed below.

The Rise of the Maritime Sheikhdom (1808-1825)

Lorimer notes that after Al Khalifa conquered the island of Bahrain in 1783 with the help of other tribes, the Jalahima briefly relocated to Kharg Island before moving to Bushehr, and later returning to Khor Hassan on the Qatari coast. Although he does not provide specific dates, Lorimer mentions that the Jalahima helped the Imam of Oman in securing control over Bahrain in 1800.[54] However, two years later, Al Khalifa were able to reclaim the island with the support of the Wahhabis. The only mention of ibn Jabir in the British archives between 1783 and 1809 appears in a letter dated 1808[55] from Nicholas Hankey Smith, the British Resident in Bushehr. In the letter, Smith reports that ibn Jabir has informed him of his intention to confiscate the property and ships of the people of Bushehr due to a dispute between him and them. In response, Smith states that the British had no objections to this and even regarded ibn Jabir as their friend.[56] Lorimer echoes this episode in his writings, saying: "It wasn't long before Rahmah ibn Jabir gained a reputation as a highly successful, intrepid brigand whose raids were the bane of the Iranians and all the rest of the ʿUtub with the exception of the Jalahima".[57] However, the British archives contain no direct description of ibn Jabir as a "highly successful and intrepid brigand". Indeed, the purpose of the British narrative in historical writings about the Gulf was to weave the legend of Gulf piracy and illustrate it with figures likes ibn Jabir.

Lorimer further adds that in 1809, an Iranian fleet from Bushehr attacked Khor Hassan, the stronghold of ibn Jabir, who, along with a group of Qawasim, successfully repelled the assault and even seized some Iranian boats.[58] The description indicates that what happened was not piracy, but a war between ibn Jabir and the people of Bushehr.[59] Hence, the persistent failure of researchers to acknowledge this fact can only be attributed to their uncritical acceptance of the Gulf piracy narrative.

This also raises a question about ibn Jabir's biography, which contains a significant chronological gap. For almost a quarter of a century, from 1783 to 1808, there is no mention of any activities that have been labelled as "piracy." Moreover, researchers who have written about ibn Jabir's life fail to address this gap, likely because English sources make no reference to him during this period. This absence of documentation prompts several questions: was ibn Jabir peaceful during this period? And if so, what explains the change? Moreover, if we assume that he was peaceful, then why, when his activity began to be recorded in 1809,

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[51] al-Rashid, p. 108.

[52] Abu Hakima, p. 93.

[53] Ibid., p. 104.

[54] Lorimer, Part VI, p. 1199.

[55] Nicholas Hankey Smith served as British Resident at Bushehr from 1798 to 1809. He was one of the first official representatives of the British East India Company in the Arab Gulf, and played an important role in establishing and consolidating British relations in the region during a critical period of history.

[56] R/15/1/10, 22/4/1808, pp. 212-213.

[57] Lorimer, Part VI, p. 1198.

[58] Ibid.

[59] See: Qasim, p. 186; al-Bassam, p. 29.

was he described as a brash marauder, with some writers going so far as to say that he terrorized every ship that passed through the Gulf basin?[60]

Ibn Jabir's appearance in the British archives beginning in 1808 can be linked to several key developments. One was the rise of the Wahhabi state's power and influence in the Gulf at the turn of the 19th century, as it tightened its control over the Qatar Peninsula and the eastern coast of Arabia. Ibn Jabir then aligned himself with the Wahhabis and became the Emir of Khor Hassan and the neighbouring regions.[61] In addition, the British launched two military campaigns against the Qawasim in Ras Al Khaimah. The first took place in 1805, followed by a harsher campaign in 1809, led by Captain John Wainwright[62] in cooperation with the Imam of Muscat, which resulted in the destruction of the Qawasim fleet and the port of Ras Al Khaimah.[63]

A distinguishing feature of this period, particularly after 1805, was the British adoption of the term "piracy" to describe certain maritime activities in the Gulf. This shift in British discourse had profound impact on subsequent policies in the region. By labelling these activities as "piracy", the British reframed longstanding maritime activities in the Gulf, eventually shaping political and military consequences in the region.

These developments enabled ibn Jabir to maximize his power. After sealing their alliance with him, the Wahhabis secured control over Qatar and Bahrain, and in 1810, they appointed their leader Abdullah bin Ufaisan as governor over both regions. The migration of some Qawasim to ibn Jabir's port further strengthened his naval power. Following 1809, ibn Jabir attacked his own enemies and the enemies of the Wahhabi state, launching naval raids as a legitimate war tactic to weaken opponents. However, Lorimer's description of these raids is laden with rhetoric that depicts them as piracy and embodiments of the pirate's savagery. For instance, when referring to ibn Jabir's seizure of 18 ships belonging to the ʿUtub, Lorimer wrote, "Rahmah ibn Jabir began to commit increasingly serious atrocities".[64] Though the ʿUtub were ibn Jabir's enemies, Lorimer omits this crucial context.

Similarly, Lorimer documents ibn Jabir's capture of ships belonging to Muscat and Bushehr but fails to acknowledge that both were also enemies of the Wahhabi state. Instead, Lorimer writes, "With only rare exceptions, Rahmah would order the execution of the sailors on the ships he captured. In short, he extended the reign of terror over the entire Gulf".[65] It is not clear what Lorimer based this claim on, as the British archive contains no evidence to corroborate or confirm it. Nevertheless, later researchers have built on this. Hayat al-Bassam, for instance, asserts that "Rahmah ibn Jabir began fortifying himself through the brutality and cruelty with which he treated his captives", adding, "He plundered ships passing through the Arabian Gulf, which led to horrific massacres against those who had fallen captive".[66]

Further confirmation that ibn Jabir's maritime activities were not acts of piracy but rather a common way of engaging in politics, can be found in the decline of his raids after the Wahhabis' setback. In 1811, the Imam of Muscat attacked Qatar and Bahrain, successfully driving the Wahhabis off the Qatari coast. At the time, a naval battle took place between Al Khalifa and their ally, the Imam of Oman on one side, and

[60] al-Bassam, p. 30.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Captain John Wainwright, a prominent officer in the British Royal Navy in the early 19th century, played a pivotal role in British naval operations in the Arab Gulf, particularly in combating what the British viewed as "piracy". He led a major naval campaign against Ras Al Khaimah in 1809 as part of British efforts to secure trade routes in the Gulf. His reports and memoirs contributed to shaping British policy toward the region. For more, see: Charles E. Davies, *The Blood-Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797-1820* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 152-155.

[63] al-Qasimi, p. 103.

[64] Lorimer, p. 1200.

[65] Ibid.

[66] al-Bassam, p. 31.

ibn Jabir and his Wahhabi allies on the other, in Khakikira, the maritime area between Bahrain and Qatar. Ibn Jabir and his allies were defeated, and therefore, the Wahhabis left Bahrain and the Qatari Peninsula, while ibn Jabir left Khor Hassan and relocated to Dammam on the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula.[67]

Once the Wahhabis' power on the eastern coast of Arabia had waned, there is little documentation of operations carried out by ibn Jabir, until 1813, when he seizes a ship belonging to a Basran merchant with whom he had hostility.[68] However, the ship happened to be transporting horses belonging to the British East India Company and was en route to Bombay. Upon realizing this, ibn Jabir sent the horses to Bombay on his own ships.[69] A comparison between Lorimer's account of this incident and the archives reveals that Lorimer disregarded that the ship was owned by a merchant in Basra allied with Al Khalifa (enemies of ibn Jabir). To any reader, the ship appears to have belonged to the British East India Company. Lorimer also fails to mention that the ship was flying the Ottoman flag, not the British one. Since the First Saudi State, with which ibn Jabir was aligned, was hostile toward the Ottoman State, ibn Jabir attacked this ship. This underscores Lorimer's bias and his attempt to portray ibn Jabir's operations as piracy, disregarding the broader context. Numerous other researchers have followed Lorimer's example, reinforcing the image of the pirate ibn Jabir.[70]

Between 1813 and 1816, the British archives provide no information on ibn Jabir's activities. If the piracy narrative to be adopted, the question arises: How could a pirate cease operations for some years, then resume for others? Would it not make more sense to attribute such fluctuations to his rulership over a maritime sheikhdom, political conflicts, and the influence of the various forces in the Gulf basin? In 1816, for example, ibn Jabir renounced his alliance with the Wahhabis and instead allied himself with the Imam of Muscat. This shift was driven by two reasons. First, the Wahhabis had concluded an agreement with Al Khalifa, ibn Jabir's perennial foes. Second, his decision was influenced by a strategic reading of the political scene. In September 1812, the Hijaz had slipped out of the Wahhabis' hands and into those of Egyptian General Ibrahim Pasha, commander of the Ottoman campaign to eliminate the First Saudi State. Ibn Jabir likely thought it best to ally himself with a rising power in the Gulf, which at the time was the Imam of Muscat, Said bin Sultan Al Busaidi,[71] and distance himself from the Wahhabis, who were on the verge of defeat.[72]

Ibn Jabir's travels between Bushehr and Dammam further illustrate that his political alliances governed his sea raids rather than piracy for its own sake. The pirate narrative fails to explain the cessation of his activity during the period in which his alliances were shifting. This inconsistency undermines the piracy narrative, whereas it aligns seamlessly with the proposition that he ruled over a maritime sheikhdom.

As 1819 drew to a close, Britain began preparing its fourth military campaign against the Qawasim. As an ally of the Imam of Muscat, ibn Jabir was expected to provide assistance to Britain, particularly since he had expressed willingness to do so.[73] However, his main goal was to seize Bahrain. Thus, in 1820, he also assembled a fleet to support the ruler of Persia, Fath Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797-1834), who was preparing to launch a campaign to capture the island, but a storm descended and destroyed ibn Jabir's largest ships,[74] causing the entire venture to fail.

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[67] Ibid., p. 59.

[68] R/15/1/10, 22/4/1813, pp. 212-213.

[69] Lorimer, p. 1201.

[70] al-Bassam, p. 47.

[71] Said bin Sultan Al Busaidi ruled Oman from 1804 until his death in 1856, during which time Oman's influence expanded to encompass the territory from Bandar Abbas as far as Zanzibar on the east coast of Africa.

[72] al-Abdullah, p. 202.

[73] Thomas, p. 435.

[74] Lorimer, p. 1204.

After the success of the fourth British campaign against the Qawasim in early 1820, a maritime peace agreement was imposed on several Arab tribal chieftains. The rulers of the Omani coast, as well as Al Khalifa in Bahrain, signed the treaty. However, ibn Jabir refused, citing his subordination to the ruler of Shiraz. His position was backed by the chieftain of Bushehr, and Britain ultimately accepted his excuse.[75] This episode reveals that Britain viewed ibn Jabir as a chieftain on par with the Gulf chieftains who had signed the agreementwhich contained a provision distinguishing between wars fought between recognized entities and acts of plunder, which the signatory sheikhdoms worked to combat. By implication, Britain acknowledged ibn Jabir as the sovereign of a political entity with its own sphere of authority. It also suggests that his earlier naval operations were not viewed as piracy at the time but rather as actions undertaken within his maritime sheikhdom.

Rahmah ibn Jabir in Najdi Sources

An assessment of the accounts of British historians, archival records, and studies on ibn Jabir reveals that he is overwhelmingly portrayed as a pirate. In contrast, Najdi sources paint a different portrait. Najdi historians depict him as a valiant *mujāhid* and a naval commander, deeply devoted to Wahhabi teachings and committed to serving the religion.[76] One of the most important Najdi sources[77] is the work of Uthman bin Abdullah bin Bishr (d. 1870), a contemporary of ibn Jabir who described him as "a rarity of his age, uniquely endowed with strength, power, and courage".[78] He adds that the Wahhabi Imam appointed ibn Jabir as emir over Qatar and Dammam, emphasizing that ibn Jabir's support was crucial in securing Wahhabi control over Qatar and Bahrain in 1809.[79] Additionally, poetry attributed to ibn Jabir serves as evidence of his adherence to sound doctrine and his admiration for those who followed Wahhabi teachings. Some of these verses read:

> O people, you are bound to die,
> so draw provisions from God-wariness.
>
> All people are charged with a duty;
> think not that God will leave them alone.[80]

And:

> May God lavish reward on the Imams
> who urged us to monotheism, away from the void of death.
>
> Our sheikhs are scholars of their Prophet's religion:
> pious, knowledgeable, and self-denying.
>
> In [the Prophet's] footsteps stood our wise sheikh –
> an Imam preaching God's oneness with knowledge and authority.
>
> He extinguished the flames of idolatry in Najd,
> snuffing it out there, once and for all.[81]

Ibn Bishr notes that ibn Jabir's poem is lengthy, and he selects specific verses that demonstrate the latter's affiliation with the Wahhabis and sincere belief in their message. Furthermore, ibn Jabir was

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[75] Thomas, p. 436.

[76] Uthman bin Abdullah bin Bishr, *ʿUnwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd* (Riyadh: Dar al-Malik Abd al-Aziz, 1982), p. 320.

[77] Najdi sources consist of a collection of books and historical documents written by historians and authors from the Najd region in central Arabia. These sources are of great importance for the study of the history of the region, particularly as it pertains to the first and second Saudi states and the Wahhabi movement. The most important Najdi sources include: *ʿUnwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd* by Uthman bin Abdullah bin Bishr (d. 1873), *Tārīkh Najd* by Husayn bin Ghannam (d. 1810), *Lamʿ al-Shihāb fī Sīrat Muḥammad bin ʿAbd al-Wahhāb* by Ibrahim bin Isa, and *Tārīkh ibn Laʿbūn* by Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Laʿbun (d. 1976).

[78] bin Bishr, p. 52.

[79] Lorimer, p. 1200.

[80] Ibid, p. 53.

[81] Ibid., p. 54.

eulogized by several local poets and scholars after his death,[82] a testament to the close ties he maintained with them. The Wahhabis had benefited from his naval prowess in subjugating the Qatari coast, Bahrain, and the coast of Al-Ahsa. In turn, he had benefited from their supplies of weapons and men and their appointment of him as emir of Khor Hassan and the surrounding regions. Their relationship was, therefore, of mutual benefit.[83]

In the book *al-Khabar wa-l-ʿAyān fī Tārīkh Najd* (1927), ibn Jabir is described as a legendary hero, Sinbad the Sailor, a shrewd pirate, champion of the seas, a pious ascetic, and the captain of *al-Ghatrusha*.[84] This description reflects the multi-faceted image of him that has existed in the popular imagination. The book also attributes his hostility toward Al Khalifa to their killing of his father. It suggests that his alliance with the Wahhabis was driven primarily by his desire for vengeance.[85] The book states that ibn Jabir did not own warships, instead relying on small ships used for pearl-diving and fishing.[86] However, this claim does not preclude his possession of large warships, which are mentioned in other sources. It is likely that his maritime sheikhdom wielded both military and economic power.

The perspective presented by the Najdi sources is reinforced by British documents, which reveal different views of ibn Jabir among British officers and officials. While some saw him as a Wahhabi pirate who needed to be subdued, others held that he should be left in peace because he had not attacked British ships. At one point, Officer Smith wrote to the Wahhabi emir Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, asking him to instruct ibn Jabir to halt his piracy operations. Saud's response was unequivocal: ibn Jabir was not doing piracy but *jihād*, urging Britain not to interfere in his campaigns against Muslims who had abandoned their religion.[87]

Western historians make no reference to Najdi views of ibn Jabir. Instead, they study his relationship with the Wahhabis under the rubric of piracy and generally omit any discussion of Najdi sources, which provide strong evidence that ibn Jabir was not a pirate. Despite that ibn Jabir reached the peak of his strength and naval power during his alliance with the Wahhabis in 1809, he was not, however, subordinate to the Wahhabis, as the Najdi sources might imply. This independence is evident in his refusal to abide by their 1816 agreement with Al Khalifa. Emir Saud requested his consent to the agreement, but ibn Jabir refused and broke off his alliance with the Wahhabis.[88]

A similar scenario arose in 1816 when Al Khalifa concluded a peace agreement with the Imam of Muscat, Said bin Sultan Al Busaidi, who at the time was allied with Ibn Jabir. Al Khalifa introduced a clause stipulating that ibn Jabir would enter into the terms of the peace agreement with the Imam of Muscat, and that the Imam would be held responsible for any hostilities ibn Jabir might initiate against Al Khalifa. However, the Imam rejected this, proposing that the matter be referred directly to ibn Jabir, who would be free to decide whether to join the agreement or not. Additionally, the Imam proposed that the British Resident act as a mediator between ibn Jabir and Al Khalifa to resolve any problems that might prevent the agreement's finalization.[89] This shows that ibn Jabir enjoyed relative autonomy and significant freedom to switch alliances, and that he was not subordinate to those with whom he aligned. His "throne at sea" enabled him to withdraw from or modify agreements. Moreover, if he choose to withdraw from an agreement, even the most powerful regional actors found themselves unable to punish him, because ibn Jabir's realm was not linked to dry land.

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[82] See: Hamad Khalifa Abu Shihab, *Turāthunā min al-Shiʿr al-Shaʿbī* (Riyadh: Muʾassasat al-Ittihad li-l-Sahafa wa-l-Nashr, 1980).

[83] al-Abdullah, p. 202.

[84] Khalid al-Faraj. *al-Khabar wa-l-ʿAyān fī Tārīkh Najd*, Abdullah al-Shuqair (ed.) (Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʿUbaykan, 2000), p. 243.

[85] This account may be accurate; however, I think it is improbable. Rather, I believe it is more likely that the political and economic motives to control Bahrain at that time were the main driver behind this alliance.

[86] Ibid., p. 245.

[87] Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Ghani, *Biriṭānyā wa Imārāt al-Sāḥil: Dirāsa fī al-ʿIlāqāt al-Taʿāhudiyya* (Beirut: ʿAdnan li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Nashr, 2017), p. 160.

[88] R/15/1/16, 9/6/1815, pp. 92-96.

[89] R/15/1/21, 1816, pp. 43-45.

At least, one contemporary British historian supports the idea of the maritime sheikhdom, thus breaking with previous British historians on this issue. Quoting an unnamed earlier historian, Jon Mandaville writes:

> As one British historian wrote late in the [eighteenth] century, "... Rahmah was rather a petty territorial ruler ... than a pirate; ... he had always carefully abstained from offenses against the British government and British subjects". Piracy, like beauty, often lies in the eyes of the beholder. As it happened, in Rahmah's case it was not piracy but war grown from the bitterest seed – a family feud.[90]

Mandaville adds that this "family feud" had to do with control over land and resources. Regardless, he offers a vision that goes beyond the reductive classification of ibn Jabir as a pirate. Mandaville supports the notion of a maritime sheikhdom, whereby ibn Jabir ought to be recognized as a political leader with regional influence who grasped the importance of maintaining diplomatic relations with major powers.

Rahmah ibn Jabir's Maritime Network

Throughout his lifetime, ibn Jabir navigated between three main centres. Beginning in Khor Hassan, he then relocated to Dammam in 1811, where he built his castle. Then, during his dispute with Al Saud sparked by their agreement with Al Khalifa in 1816, he moved to Bushehr. In the following years, he continued to alternate between Dammam and Bushehr as his interests required.[91]

Rahmah on the Qatari coast

Ibn Jabir established his first base in Khor Hassan, in al-Khuwair, a village on Qatar's western coast.[92] His choice of this location was far from arbitrary; it was strategic. One crucial advantage was that Qatar Peninsula's coast remained unexplored by the British, who did not conduct a marine survey of the area until the early 19th century,[93] which made al-Khuwair an ideal base from which ibn Jabir could consolidate his influence over the Gulf waters. Additionally, the base was well fortified against any external invasion. A British document reveals that when the British ship *V. Royal* sailed past the coast of Khor Hassan to inspect it in 1810, its crew relayed a message to the Bombay government that it would be exceedingly difficult to attack ibn Jaber's location due to its natural inaccessibility.[94]

Ibn Jabir maintained a strong connection to the Qatari coast throughout his life and was regarded by Qatari tribes as a seafaring knight and the Emir of Khor Hassan,[95] whose influence reached as far as Zubara. At the peak of his power, his influence extended to Bahrain and the coast of Al-Ahsa twice: first, in 1801, when he allied with the Omanis to seize control over Bahrain,[96] and again in 1809, when he allied with the Wahhabis. However, his influence over Bahrain ended when he was defeated by Al Khalifa at the Battle of Khakikira in 1811.

From the time his name first appeared in British documents between 1782-1815, ibn Jabir remained in Khor Hassan. He then moved to Dammam, where he had built a castle in 1809 at the height of the Wahhabis' influence. This indicates that he frequented Dammam and used it as a way station. Some have attributed his relocation to newly changing circumstances in the Gulf,[97] without clarifying the nature of these circumstances.

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[90] Jon Mandaville, "Rahmah of the Gulf," *Saudi Aramco World*, vol. 26, no. 3 (May-June 1975), accessed on 21/1/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/ynzzfuj9

[91] al-Bassam, pp. 58-65.

[92] Lorimer, p. 862.

[93] R/15/1/12, 15/1/1811, pp. 19-20.

[94] Abu Hakima, p. 151.

[95] Hasan bin Muhammad al-Thani, *Lamaḥāt min Tārīkh Qaṭar* (n.c.: n.p., 2006), p. 135.

[96] Ibid., p. 103.

[97] Ibid., p. 135.

What can be inferred from these events is that ibn Jabir moved to Dammam due to its proximity to Bahrain and his desire to close in on its rulers, particularly after suffering two defeats at their hands: first at the Battle of Khakikira (1811), and later at the Battle of al-Maqtaʿ (1815).[98] Moreover, this relocation was only partial. While he took men and warriors to Dammam, he left the remaining families of the Jalahima tribe in Khor Hassan. Further evidence of the partial nature of his move is his withdrawal from the Wahhabi alliance in 1816. In response, the Wahhabis tried to capture him, forcing him to retreat to Khor Hassan, where he regrouped with the Jalahima families before seeking refuge in Bushehr. In retaliation, the Wahhabis demolished his castle in Dammam. Historians have not focused on these details, likely because they treat ibn Jabir as a pirate. However, this pattern of movement reflects the fluid nature of the maritime sheikhdom as a political system that transcends traditional boundaries.

Rahmah on the Persian Coast (the Port of Bushehr)

Ibn Jabir made the port of Bushehr a way station to recuperate from aggression by enemies and unjust treatment by allies. It also served as a place where he could foster ties with the British, whose Political Resident in the Gulf was based in Bushehr. Ibn Jabir's first contact with the British took place in 1808, and the relationship appears to have been friendly.[99] In a letter addressed to ibn Jabir that year, the British Resident in Bushehr stated that the British conduct themselves on the basis of justice and equality among all:

> With regard to the dispute you say has arisen between you and the inhabitants of Bushehr and your determination to confiscate their property and ships with all the force at your disposal, I have nothing to do with your disputes, nor will this give me cause for anger so long as you do not disturb the British fleet, or attack British property or subjects of the British government. Rest assured that I will not disturb you, for there is nothing between us but friendship. Thus far I have seen nothing to the contrary, nor have you seen any contrary indications from me. Therefore, I will do nothing against you so long as your conduct toward the British is marked by goodwill and you do nothing to harm their property. This, then, is the agreement between us.[100]

This letter provides further evidence of the complex nature of political relations in the Gulf during this period. It shows how Britain dealt with local powers such as ibn Jabir, recognizing their influence while simultaneously defining the limits of this influence explicitly in relation to British interests.

British documents record no acts of hostility by ibn Jabir against the people of Bushehr. After escaping the aggression of Al Saud, he moved to Bushehr in 1816 with his clan, which the British Resident estimated at around 500 families. They were received by the Chieftain of Bushehr, who gave them a neighbourhood in the city and stipulated that ibn Jabir should befriend his friends and declare enmity against his foes. However, traveller James Buckingham[101] offers quite a different description to that of Britain's Political Resident. According to Buckingham, ibn Jabir's fleet consisted of five to six large ships, with a crew of up to 300 men. Moreover, he had followers of up to 2,000 men whose business was to loot and plunder, most of whom were slaves from Africa.[102]

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[98] Muhammad al-Nabahani, *al-Tuḥfa al-Nabahāniyya fī Tārīkh al-Jazīra al-ʿArabiyya* (Beirut: Dar Ihyaʾ al-ʿUlum, 1999), p. 100.

[99] R/15/1/10, 22/4/1808, pp. 212-213.

[100] Ibid.

[101] James Silk Buckingham (1786-1855), a British travel writer, undertook extensive journeys through the Middle East and the Arab Gulf region in the early 19th century. He became known for his detailed writings on the region, particularly his voluminous: James Silk Buckingham, *Travels among the Arab Tribes Inhabiting the Countries East of Syria and Palestine* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825). In his observations, he would offer perspectives that contrasted with those presented by official British reports, which makes them a valuable source of information on social and political life in the Gulf, including figures such as Rahmah ibn Jabir.

[102] al-Khalifa, "Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," p. 260.

Although Nicholas Hankey Smith and James Buckingham observed the same scene, their descriptions could not have been different. This discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that a travel writer like Buckingham will exaggerate his narratives in order to ensure good sales for his books, particularly when writing about the East in a fanciful manner. After all, what could be more exciting than to depict ibn Jabir as a pirate recruiting slaves in his service?

Ibn Jabir left Bushehr in 1818 after allying himself with the Egyptian forces. However, he left the families there until 1822, when he returned to transport them to Dammam where he had settled. Because Bushehr was farther from Bahrain than any of the ports in which ibn Jabir had settled previously, he did not remain there too long. Moreover, the ruler of Bushehr had imposed conditions that required ibn Jabir to align with his own political alliances and rivalries, thereby restricting his freedom and influence. As a result, Bushehr was merely a temporary refuge to escape danger, distance himself from alliances, and prepare for a subsequent phase.

Rahmah ibn Jabir on the Al-Ahsa Coast

In 1815, ibn Jabir moved to Dammam, where he remained until his death in 1826. Periodically, however, he was forced to move to Bushehr on the Persian coast to escape the brutal treatment of Al Saud. A year after his settling in Dammam, the Wahhabis signed an agreement with Al Khalifa, prompting ibn Jabir to renounce his alliance with Al Saud. This is documented in a memorandum sent by the Honble Company to the government of Bombay in 1816, stating that Al Khalifa had signed a peace agreement with the Wahhabis, but ibn Jabir had rejected it and instead allied himself with the Imam of Muscat.[103] Angered by what ibn Jabir had done, Al Saud destroyed his castle in Dammam and seized both his wealth and that of his followers. Thus, he left Dammam for Khor Hassan, and from there, he and his followers went to Bushehr.[104]

When the Saudi state began to retreat at the hands of Egyptian General Ibrahim Pasha in 1818, and as Egypt's vanguard forces began arriving in the Al-Ahsa region, ibn Jabir allied himself with them. His decision may have been driven by a desire to take revenge against the Wahhabis, and the hope of returning to Dammam. Regardless of his motivations, ibn Jabir was regarded at that time as the Egyptian army's naval force.[105] He bombarded the port of Qatif, forcing its residents to surrender to the Egyptian forces, and launched a successful attack on merchant ships belonging to the Qawasim, allies of the Wahhabis, seizing twelve ships laden with rice and dates.[106] Lorimer, and those who quote him, have portrayed this operation as an act of piracy.[107] In fact, however, it was part of a broad military campaign consisting of a regional alliance that rallied the Ottomans, the British, the Persians, and the Omanis around the single objective of eliminating the First Saudi State and its most prominent allies in the Gulf, namely, the Qawasim. Thus, a year after Ibrahim Pasha eliminated the First Saudi State, the British launched their fourth military campaign against the Qawasim.

Just as the Wahhabis benefited from their alliance with ibn Jabir to compensate for their lack of naval experience, the Egyptian forces under Ibrahim Pasha similarly leveraged their alliance with him to extend their influence along the Gulf's western coast.[108] For ibn Jabir, this alliance proved equally advantageous, as the Egyptian forces helped in subjugating Dammam, Qatif, and Uqair. Afterward, Ibrahim Pasha allowed

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[103] al-Bassam, p. 63.

[104] Abu Hakima, p. 57.

[105] Ann B. Campbell, *Tārīkh al-Qaṭīf al-Siyāsī fī Mudhakkirāt al-Muqīm al-Siyāsī al-Birīṭānī fī al-Khalīj al-ʿArabī*, Jalal al-Ansari (ed.) (Beirut: al-Dar al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Mawsuʿat, 2020), p. 31.

[106] Majid Shibr, *al-Qabāʾil wa-l-Ṣirāʿāt al-Siyāsiyya wa-l-Qabaliyya: al-Imārāt, Qaṭar, al-Baḥrayn, al-Manṭiqa al-Sharqiyya fī Taqārīr al-Ḍubbāṭ wa-l-Muʿtamadīn al-Biriṭāniyyīn* (Beirut: Isdarat Bayt al-Warraq, 2010), p. 467.

[107] Lorimer, p. 1203.

[108] Qasim, p. 179.

him to rebuild his castle in Dammam and fortify it with cannons.[109] After successfully subjugating the coast extending from Al-Ahsa to the vicinity of Kuwait, ibn Jabir began inciting Ibrahim Pasha to invade Bahrain.[110] Ibn Jabir's break with the Wahhabis can be explained by his pragmatic political approach, as he took advantage of the opportunity created by the waning power of the Saudis and joined the Ottoman-Egyptian alliance. As such, this shift was not ideological but rather an act of retaliation against the Wahhabis for destroying his castle in Dammam and confiscating his property, as well as a bid to recover his influence there.

Ibn Jabir explains that his naval attacks during his alliance with the Egyptian forces were carried out under orders from Ibrahim Pasha. This claim is supported by his correspondence with Dawud Pasha (d. 1850), the governor of Baghdad, in which he states that Ibrahim Pasha had assigned him certain tasks, which he was carrying out to the best of his ability.[111] The reason for ibn Jabir's letter to the governor of Baghdad remains clear. However, it may have been prompted by the governor's fear over the Egyptian forces' expansion along the Gulf's western coast, raising concerns that their operation might extend into Iraq. Ibn Jabir may have sought to reassure the governor that his naval operations had not been launched independently but were part of Ibrahim Pasha's plans, thus avoiding any potential hostility from the Ottoman State, which would have jeopardized his influence in the Gulf basin.

The Egyptian forces withdrew to Najd, handing Al-Ahsa over to Al Urayir,[112] while ibn Jabir remained the ruler of Dammam. In 1820, Britain invited ibn Jabir to sign the Maritime Peace Treaty, but he refused. Had he agreed, the British would have consolidated his rule just as they had done for other sheikhs along the Gulf's western coast, bringing the sheikhdom era to an end and establishing the Gulf ruling families in their places to this day. Nevertheless, Britain overlooked ibn Jabir's refusal, likely because he was not the head of a tribe that owned a defined, land-based geographical area, nor had he ever attacked British ships. On the contrary, his relations with the British had always been friendly. The pretext ibn Jabir provided for rejecting the treaty was that he was working under the ruler of Shiraz, effectively placing himself under the protection of the Persian state. His unwillingness to sign may also have stemmed from the fact that it would have restricted his influence at sea, preventing him from controlling the island of Bahrain.

As mentioned earlier, ibn Jabir moved his family and the families of his clan from Khor Hassan to Bushehr in 1816. In 1822, he went to Bushehr and brought them back to Dammam, where he had settled. That same year, he attacked boats belonging to Al Khalifa – an incident that some researchers have portrayed as an act of piracy, primarily because Sheikh Abdullah Al Khalifa (ruler of Bahrain from 1795 to 1843) had lodged a complaint with the government of Bombay.[113] In response, the Governor of Bombay instructed Britain's Political Resident to settle the dispute between ibn Jabir and Abdullah Al Khalifa. The Resident summoned each of the men separately, seeking a resolution that would guarantee the safety of navigation in the Gulf. In the course of these talks, Sheikh Abdullah and his brother Salman told the Resident that a misunderstanding had occurred with ibn Jabir over a rental agreement for several boats, particularly over the number of boats they had rented from him. This dispute illustrates the intricate entanglement of economic and commercial dealings with political relations, as tensions and competition for influence and resources could turn a minor commercial dispute into a wider conflict.

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[109] Shibr, p. 468.

[110] Campbell, p. 31.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Al Urayir were a ruling family belonging to Bani Khalid who governed Al-Ahsa (eastern Arabia) on and off during the 18th and 19th centuries. They were an important regional power prior to the expansion of the First Saudi State, and regained power for a short period after the withdrawal of Egyptian forces in the early 19th century. They entered into conflicts with the Saudi state and sometimes cooperated with Ottoman and British forces. They also played a pivotal role in regional politics during a period of major transformations in the region. For more, see: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[113] R/15/1/25, 8/4/1822, pp. 37-39.

What is particularly significant here are three key points. First, ibn Jabir and Al Khalifa had commercial ties, which suggests that their relations were not solely adversarial; otherwise, such dealings would have been unlikely. Second, the existence of this relationship indicates that ibn Jabir owned many boats and rented them out. Third, the fact that Al Khalifa, the wealthy rulers of Bahrain, resorted to renting boats from ibn Jabir and disagreed with him over their number further reinforces the idea that ibn Jabir was a maritime ruler with command over a considerable naval force.[114]

In his private discussions with the British Resident, ibn Jabir revealed another aspect of the dispute with Al Khalifa: they used to pay him annual fees in return for permission to engage in pearl diving, but they had defaulted on these payments for two years.[115] The fact that Al Khalifa had to pay ibn Jabir for access to pearl diving supports the view that he exercised authority over a political entity at sea, and maintained legitimate control over the pearl diving sites in which Al Khalifa had been operating.

Ibn Jabir's demise in 1826 marked the beginning of Al Khalifa's influence extended over the western coast of the Gulf. Liberated from the impenetrable siege he had imposed on them, they advanced toward Dammam and destroyed his castle. This was the first time Al Khalifa had left the island of Bahrain. Throughout their history, they had been in a constant state of defence, never taking the offensive or establishing a military presence beyond their island. Al Khalifa's forces remained in Dammam until 1830, when the forces of the Second Saudi State[116] reached its gates.[117]

Ibn Jabir derived his authority from his ability to control maritime trade routes, impose tributes, and collect taxes from passing ships. This unique style of governance, rooted in naval rather than territorial rule, granted his regime more flexibility in dealing with political changes in the region. Thus, he was able to navigate among rapidly changing alliances, introducing a new dimension to the Gulf's political scene in his era.

The Impact of the Sea on Rahmah ibn Jabir's Sheikhdom

Rising Status and Increasing Gains

Ibn Jabir's travels along the Gulf shores and the maritime network he formed enabled him to achieve economic, political, and social status, which helps explain the ease with which he concluded alliances with parties as diverse as the Imam of Muscat, the Qawasim, the Wahhabis, the Bani Khalid, and the Persian state. Recognizing the growing influence of the British, he strategically identified himself to them to ensure they would view him as an ally rather than as an enemy. In 1814, he asked the British Resident in the Gulf for permission to visit the British government in Bombay and meet with its head. The Bombay government welcomed this initiative, and in response, the British Resident in Bushehr showered ibn Jabir with gifts worth 250 rupees.[118] Ibn Jabir thus became a trusted figure, renowned for his naval power.

The status ibn Jabir attained yielded numerous advantages, including the freedom he enjoyed to sail throughout the Gulf basin and the trust he commanded from all who dealt with him. This reputation proved invaluable during the incident in which he mistakenly seized a commercial vessel carrying horses that belonged to the British East India Company. When he learned that the boat belonged to the British, he

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[114] The maritime heritage of al-Jalahima to which Ibn Jabir belonged was based on a two-century-long history of ship and boat manufacture, naval power, sea transport, and pearl diving, all of which undergirded ibn Jabir's naval dominance.

[115] R/15/1/28, 19/10/1822, pp. 227-240.

[116] The Second Saudi State was established in 1824 under the command of Turki bin Abdullah Al Saud, who regained control over Riyadh, and ended in 1891 when it fell to Al Rashid.

[117] Qasim, p. 51.

[118] R/15/1, 14/8/1814, pp. 177-179.

borrowed some boats from the chieftain of a nearby island to transport the horses to Bombay. His network allowed him to obtain manpower and critical resources from various ports in the Gulf basin, debunking claims that he relied solely on the purchase and recruitment of slaves to supplement his forces. These networks also allowed him to remain offshore for extended periods, particularly when his land-based centres, such as Dammam or Khor Hassan, had been destroyed. Another benefit was the political capital he amassed; his goodwill, favour, and protection were courted by various tribes and political powers. This network may also explain how he was able to rebuild his fleet after it was destroyed by a storm at sea in 1818, which allowed him to move easily among ports, conclude alliances, receive support, and evade agreements – such as when he declined the British Resident's request to sign the Maritime Peace Treaty. It was probably this network of contacts that sustained his influence, whereby he remained the most formidable naval force in the Gulf basin for nearly a quarter of a century.

The social position ibn Jabir carved out, along with his maritime centres along the shores of the Gulf, served as key assets in his quest to secure control over Bahrain. He chose his Gulf allies carefully: Khor Hassan on the Qatari coast, Dammam on the coast of Al-Ahsa, and Bushehr on the Persian coast formed a triangle around Bahrain, strongly suggesting that their proximity to Bahrain was a decisive factor in his choices. In 1822, the Imam of Oman reportedly invited ibn Jabir to reside in Muscat or another region under his rule, but he declined. This may have been due to Muscat's distance from Bahrain. Similarly, his brief stay in Bushehr might be explained by its position as the most distant point within his strategic triangle.

Why was ibn Jabir so particularly interested in the island of Bahrain? Economic and geographical reasons are most likely. As an island with no land borders, Bahrain was well suited to his "throne at sea". It was distinguished by its proximity to small ports on the western coast of the Gulf such as Al-Uqair, Zubara, al-Bad', and al-Qatif. According to Lorimer, Bahrain's annual trade amounted to half a million rupees in 1790, with its pearl exports to Basra amounting to 500,000 rupees – nearly 50,000 pounds sterling.[119] A decade later, Captain John Malcolm estimated the island's annual pearl exports at nearly 1 million rupees,[120] with nearly 2,500 pearling ships. Meanwhile, the ruler of Bahrain collected nearly 10,000 pounds sterling annually in taxes in return for the protection he provided for these ships.[121]

Bahrain's commercial traffic was worth 2,459,200 Maria Theresa thalers, a third of which came from imports and the remainder from exports. Imports included sugar, rice, copper, and wood, whilst exports consisted of dates, swords, and Arabian ghee. Bahrain also served as a transit station for goods moving between India and the Gulf,[122] making the island the "Pearl of the Gulf" for the profits its trade generated. It is therefore unsurprising that Bahrain was coveted by the Omanis, Al Saud, the Persians, and ibn Jabir himself. Accordingly, economic considerations alone were sufficient reason for ibn Jabir to set his sights on the island and remain locked in constant competition with Al Khalifa, whether because of his father's slaying or, as some sources allege, due to rivalry over the era's "pearl of the Gulf".

A Fight to the Death

Even at nearly 70 with failing eyesight, ibn Jabir remained active and continued laying siege to the port of Qatif. His longstanding conflict with Al Khalifa had been reignited by violations of a treaty they had concluded. By the end of 1826, Al Khalifa and the leaders of Qatif had themselves laid siege to ibn Jabir in the port of Qatif. When he saw that his fate was sealed – that he would either be taken captive or killed – ibn Jabir put up fierce resistance. What happened next remains a matter of dispute. A local account reads:

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[119] John Kelly, *Birīṭānyā wa-l-Khalīj 1795-1870*, Muhammad Abdullah (trans.) (Oman: Wizarat al-Turath al-Qawmi wa-l-Thaqafa, n.d.), p. 52.

[120] Lorimer, p. 164.

[121] William Palgrave, *Wasaṭ al-Jazīra al-ʿArabiyya wa Sharqihā*, Sabri Hasan (trans.) (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿla li-l-Thaqafa, 2001), p. 248.

[122] Leonovich, p. 106.

After intense fighting, Sheikh Ahmed bin Salman Al Khalifa's ship came up next to Rahmah's. There ensued a hand-to-hand battle in which the sides clashed with swords and other types of iron weapons. Rahmah was accompanied by a young son of his and a slave named Tarar, and he began asking them about the fighting and who had been killed. Eventually his enemies reached the main mast, then the poop deck. Seated in the ship's hold, Rahmah took his son and placed him in his lap. Then, following the example of al-Zabbaʾ [Queen of Palmyra], famed for her words "By my own hand, not ʿAmr's!" [*bi-yadī lā bi-yadi ʿamr*], he took a burning coal from the narghile he had been smoking and thrust it into the gunpowder keg beneath him, causing the ship to blow up and kill him, his son, and everyone on board. This incident, referred to as "the Slaughter of Rahmah al-Jalahima", took place in the year 1242 AH/1826 CE.[123]

If ibn Jabir's end is seen through the lens of a seafaring ruler, it offers a profound understanding of a controversial figure. Rather than seeing it as a "tragic end",[124] it can be viewed as an epic conclusion of a maritime sheikhdom that embodied a model distinct from that of land-based sheikhdoms. Ibn Jabir's choice to end his life at sea represents a final affirmation of his deep-rooted oceangoing identity, showingthat his maritime sheikhdom was not merely a political strategy but an integrated identity and way of life. This view challenges prevailing narratives, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of ibn Jabir's role in shaping the sociopolitical history of the Gulf. The phrase "by my own hand, not ʿAmr's" reflects a consistency between his life and his death: an unwavering commitment to his maritime authority until his last breath. This end underscored the relative political autonomy that defined his maritime sheikhdom, which prompted him to reject subjugation to either traditional local powers or international forces.

Conclusion

In comparing the relationship between land and sea, this paper has demonstrated that the sea in Gulf history was not merely a secondary geographical space but rather central to the formation of political and economic forces. Similarly, the description of ibn Jabir as a pirate is simply a reflection of the narrative adopted by colonial powers, who disregarded local contexts and dismissed any form of nontraditional power or authority as an illegitimate threat. What colonial narratives labelled as piracy in the Gulf was, in fact, part of a complex political and economic system that gave rise to the maritime sheikhdom as embodied by ibn Jabir and others. The actions of such figures were not mere acts of looting and plunder as they have been depicted in colonial narratives – which used the bogeyman of piracy as a political tool to impose control over Gulf sea routes – but strategies of survival and competition over influence in a dynamic and changing environment.

The study has highlighted the need to reassess the way the history of local powers in the Gulf has been written and reformulate this history within critical frameworks that depart from colonial narratives or local legends. By emphasizing the sea as central to shaping political entities and economic resources, a new way of viewing the life story of ibn Jabir emerges: one that explains his ability to build a naval force that played an influential role in the region, highlighting the political pragmatism that facilitated the conclusion of alliances, and offering a more accurate understanding of regional balances of power.

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[123] Ibid.
[124] al-Abdullah, p. 212.

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