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# AL-MUNTAQA

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ARAB STUDIES

Vol. 8 | no. 1 | January/February 2025



## Water Ways: Critical Studies in Gulf and Arab History

**Fahad Ahmad Bishara**

The Sailing Scribe: Mansur al-Khariji and the Oceanic Worlds of the Gulf

**Amna Abdulla Sadiq**

The Drought Years: The Forgotten Economic Transformations in Gulf History

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

This special issue of *Al-Muntaqa*, titled “Water Ways: Critical Studies in Gulf and Arab History”, features critical essays in Water Studies, focusing on cases from the Arabian Peninsula, Lebanon, and Palestine. Based on a conference held at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies on 8-10 February 2024, in collaboration with Rubaiyat Qatar and Qatar Museums, this issue features four essays presented at the conference and published in volume 50 of the journal *Omran*, complemented by an additional article, an Arab Opinion Index analysis, and a book review.

Guest editor and the conference co-organizer Ismail Nashef is Associate Professor in the Program of Sociology and Anthropology at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Nashef provides an introduction to Water Studies as a growing field of intellectual inquiry, and discusses the original contributions of the essays selected for publication in *Al-Muntaqa*, arguing that “Collectively, they raise critical questions around water as a site of profound epistemological, theoretical, and methodological inquiry, in terms of materiality, links to time and place, the conditions that enable its production and critique, and the possibilities for developing it in relation to “dry land”, whether as an extension of or separate from it”.

In addition to the four essays selected, this volume includes an essay by Hussein Abdulmunim Amery, “The Litani as a Link: Toward a Better Reconstruction in Lebanon”, addressing the vital importance of the Litani River in Lebanon and the environmental challenges resulting from its severe pollution. Amery shows how Lebanon’s water crisis is deeply rooted in its sectarian political system, inadequate governance, and pervasive poverty, proposing effective water and land governance.

As usual, this issue also includes an analytical essay of data from the Arab Opinion Index provided by the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, “Social Media’s Socio-Cultural Impacts: An Analysis of the 2022 Arab Opinion Index”. It examines the socio-cultural impacts of social media in Arab public opinion in 14 Arab countries, revealing that over two-thirds of respondents consider social media to have a positive societal and cultural impact, albeit to varying degrees.

The issue concludes with a book review in which Hichem Charfi reviews As-Saghira Ben Hamida’s *The History and Memory of the Sea in Modern Tunisia: Between the Oral and the Written*.

MUSIC

ARTICLES

Ismail Nashef\*

## Introduction

### Water Ways: Critical Studies in Gulf and Arab History\*\*

The Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Rubaiyat Qatar, and Qatar Museums co-hosted on 18-20 February 2024 a conference titled *Water Ways: Epistemologies and Aesthetics*. The conference focused on water studies in the context of environmental change and the emergence of the Anthropocene as its central theme. It explored how these global developments have shaped academic research agendas, as well as artistic and literary production, and the intersections among them.

This issue brings together a selection of studies presented at the conference, with a focus on social history through water as a key element in the formation of both material and symbolic social orders in the Gulf and Palestine. These contributions develop a theoretical and methodological framework that positions water as a starting point for conceptualizing the world, offering an alternative to what might be termed a “land-based” methodology.

Additionally, the studies highlight the importance of emerging forms of knowledge in relation to the phenomena they examine. Collectively, they raise critical questions about water as a site of profound epistemological, theoretical, and methodological inquiry. These include considerations of water’s materiality, its connections to time and space, the conditions that shape its production and critique, and the potential to conceptualize it in relation to land - whether as an extension of it or as something distinct.

Traditional studies on water have long been characterized by sharp disciplinary divides. For instance, geographical approaches to water have largely remained disconnected from historical and anthropological inquiries. These studies have often overlooked the epistemological potential of water, treating it merely as an object of study within a broader framework, rather than as a conceptual lens in its own right.<sup>1</sup> Until the late 2000s, water was not widely recognized as an intellectual starting point for understanding the world we inhabit. Nor was it afforded significant theoretical or methodological weight - weight capable of challenging established categories such as “homogeneous” dry land or the structural contradictions obscured by the metaphor of stable, “dry” solidity.

Nevertheless, this dominant framework did not entirely suppress the emergence of a critical discourse that acknowledged water as a material force with distinct characteristics shaping economic and social structures. This includes its influence on symbolic and semiotic systems that generate meaning in everyday life - whether through literature, art, or religious ritual.<sup>2</sup> What was once a prevailing paradigm accompanied by a fringe of sporadic critical engagements with water has, over the past two decades, begun to give way to a more robust and systematic body of scholarship. This ongoing shift reflects not only the formation of water studies as a multidisciplinary field, but also its emergence as a distinct epistemological site,

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\*\* This introduction was originally published in Arabic in: Ismail Nashef, “Ṭuruq al-Miyāh: Dirāsāt Naqdiyya fī Tārīkh al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī wa-Filasṭīn,” *Omran*, vol. 13, no. 50 (Fall 2024), pp. 7-16.

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Kunlata Lahiri-Dutt, “Knowledge Others, Other’s Knowledge: The Need for a New Epistemology of Water,” *Ecology Economy and Society-the INSEE Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2 (July 2020), pp. 113-123.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of the Humanities and Culture, 1999).



providing a mode of knowing that differs from and challenges the assumptions embedded in land-based methodologies, often taken for granted and rarely examined as such.<sup>3</sup>

Several factors from parallel fields - those not immediately associated with water studies - have converged to drive the emergence and development of the field as a distinct academic discipline. Environmental changes have been steadily intensifying, affecting the everyday lives of people across the globe, regardless of geographic location. What stands out is the sheer scope and complexity of these changes and their consequences. Existing economic, social, and political categories often prove inadequate for tracing, explaining, or conceptualizing this breadth. Among the most prominent elements of these climatic transformations is water and its natural cycle, both of which exert profound effects on human life. First, at the most fundamental level, water is a basic physiological necessity. Second, it underpins key material processes of production - such as fishing, agriculture, and industry - as well as transportation systems across water, air, and land. Third, water plays a vital role in shaping symbolic and semiotic systems, influencing language and discourse, ritual practices, and religious beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

We now live under the regime of late digital capitalism - a historical condition that shapes the very possibility of social action, particularly through its reformulation of such acts into digital commodities marked by fluidity and the seamless flow of matter, time, and space. In many ways, this condition mirrors the nature of water more closely than the solid, fixed forms that characterized earlier commodity structures.

At the same time, late digital capitalism has enabled - at times even necessitated - the restructuring of academic and other epistemic frameworks. Over the past two decades, there has been a widespread re-examination of theoretical, methodological, and empirical knowledge across the social sciences and humanities. This re-reading has given rise to numerous cross-disciplinary fields that integrate subfields from established disciplines, including memory studies, visual studies, material culture studies, queer studies, and cognitive studies.<sup>5</sup>

Another key dimension is the reformulation of the political field, its internal dynamics, its complex relationship with other economic, social, and cultural spheres of action, and the resulting impact on academic institutions and the forms of knowledge they produce. While some of the forces driving this reformulation are purely political, arising from within the field itself, what makes them particularly transformative is their intersections with social, economic, and cultural forces that, to some extent, operate independently of the political sphere.

At first glance, these transformations may suggest a retreat of the political field, signalling a major shift in its role, from managing public affairs to managing intractable conflicts between competing political forces. This shift has, in effect, led to a deconstruction of the political itself, replacing it with various forms of violence as the principal mechanism of governance.

Within this dynamic transformation - and in its intersection with the digital capitalist order - the cultural field has emerged, and continues to function, as an alternative vector for direct political action, as traditional forms of political engagement have significantly weakened. This is evident in the professionalization

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<sup>3</sup> See: Peter Schulz & Alexis Gros, "Toward a Sociology of Water: Reconstructing the Missing 'Big Picture' of Social Water Research," *Water*, vol. 16 (2024).

<sup>4</sup> For a general survey of the history of climate change, see: Antonello Provenzale, *History of Climate Change: From Earth's Origin to the Anthropocene* (London: Polity 2023). For the intersection between climate change and social, economic, and political history, see: Sunil Amrith, *The Burning Earth: A history* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> One of the first sociological studies that linked developments in late capitalism and the use of water metaphors to describe the consequences of these developments for social and cultural processes was Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*. See: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity, 2000). For the characteristics of digital capitalism, see: Sabine Pfeiffer, *Digital Capitalism and Distributive Forces*, Jan-Peter Hermann (trans.) (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2022).



of public affairs, where “cultural” professions increasingly govern through the deployment of expert knowledge rooted in the digital-cultural form. This evolving cultural condition has repositioned the academic establishment as a site of contradiction, shaped by the displacement of political activity into the cultural sphere, which now functions as its surrogate.

Experts have come to dominate academia, following a “CEO” model akin to that employed by large corporations. At the same time, the broader recognition of the political significance of knowledge producers has grown, yet they remain largely confined within the institutional walls of academia. As a result, academic “political” action has shifted away from contesting the nature, content, and discourse of knowledge, as it did in earlier phases, and now centres instead on managing epistemological affairs themselves.

This shift has given rise to new academic fields, which in reality represent a re-linking of subdisciplines that had been fragmented under the logic of traditional modernity. These subfields were previously separated into distinct specializations due to the tight coupling of academic structures with the demands of the public and private labour markets.<sup>6</sup>

Building on these factors and their varied dynamics, water studies has emerged as an independent academic specialization, giving rise to new sub-disciplines that define their fields of inquiry through the central lens of water, whether seawater, river water, or rainwater. Notable examples include Indian Ocean studies, Nile Basin studies, research on the Monsoon cycle and its impact on states and societies, studies of port cities, and the history of maritime trade.

This raises an important question: what is the nature of the epistemological value added by water studies and the sub-disciplines it has either established or reinforced? What follows is a preliminary attempt to outline the types of epistemological contributions that may emerge when water is taken seriously as a foundational lens for conceptualizing historical and social processes.

## Water

Water is not only distinct from land in terms of its geographical coordinates; it is, in its very essence, a material substance whose characteristics are fundamentally different - and often incompatible - with those of land. The most defining of these characteristics is movement. In its natural forms, whether on the earth’s surface or in the sky, water is governed by the logic of movement. On land, it appears in rivers, seas, and wells; in the sky, it manifests as clouds, rain, and wind.

In its “social” state, however, the forms that water takes are shaped primarily by practices of storage and redirection, adapted to suit the needs of socioeconomic, political, and cultural systems. In this context, the dominant logic becomes the prevention and regulation of water’s natural movement. The degree of such intervention varies, depending on historical and technological conditions, but the aim remains consistent: to discipline and harness water according to socially constructed demands.<sup>7</sup> However, a closer examination of the processes of storage and rechanneling reveals that these too constitute forms of movement, despite initially appearing to represent the opposite. What may seem like a dichotomy between “natural” and

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<sup>6</sup> For more on transformations in the political field under digital capitalism, see for example: Ulrike Klinger, Daniel Kreiss & Bruce Mutsvario, *Platforms, Power, and Politics: An Introduction to Political Communication in the Digital Age* (London: Polity, 2023); Michael Betancourt, *The Critique of Digital Capitalism: An Analysis of the Political Economy of Digital Culture and Technology* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015). On transformations of knowledge and the academic establishment under digital capitalism, see for example: Thomas Almer, “Academic Labour, Digital Media, and Capitalism,” *Critical Sociology*, vol. 45, no. 4-5 (2019), pp. 599-615.

<sup>7</sup> The storage of water has long been considered a key measure of civilizational development. Initially, the concepts of storage and rechanneling were applied to the study of riverine societies. Over time, this conceptual approach was extended to encompass the storage and redistribution of other material and symbolic resources.

“social” movement will be further explored through three foundational dimensions of knowledge production: material/form, time/rhythm, and place/space, along with their various interconnections.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of water’s materiality is its lack of fixed form. It takes the shape of whatever contains it, yet never settles into that form permanently; instead, it changes each time it moves or is transferred to a new container, whether “natural” or “social.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, water resembles a dancer, whose trained and flexible body enables fluid performance, or an actor, whose adaptable persona can be deconstructed and reassembled to embody different roles. This stands in sharp contrast to figures such as politicians or ideologues, who often present a clear, fixed identity and maintain “principled” and unchanging positions - or to religious identities grounded in “absolute” faith in a particular doctrine.

These two social roles operate according to different governing principles, yet they do not negate one another. Instead, they are constituted through an ongoing relational process. When considering the materiality of water as a socially and historically situated substance, just as with the materiality of land, water’s formlessness and land’s form should not be understood as pre-existing material givens. Rather, both are socially constructed forms of presence and exchange par excellence.

Traditionally, this relationality has been, and continues to be, reduced to a single pole: the form of land as the primary site of knowledge production. In contrast, the pole of water’s formlessness has been systematically elided from the institutional and academic sites. The added value lies precisely in conceptualizing this ongoing relationality - the spectrum of interactions between form and formlessness - as a continuous process of formation from which social and other phenomena emerge.

When investigating a social, cultural, political, or economic phenomenon from a social sciences or humanities perspective, it is useful to evaluate it along the spectrum of formlessness and form as a process through which its material presence is shaped and made socially legible. For instance, if adolescence is examined through this lens, the adolescent body can be understood as undergoing continuous transformation, producing multiple successive forms in rapid succession. This rapid metamorphosis can create a state of confusion between the different forms the body might assume - so much so that formlessness itself becomes perceptible, especially when this “confusion of form” renders the body non-circulable within the social context under study.

There is no singular or fixed time or rhythm governing the “natural” or “social” movement of water. Rather, this movement can be shaped by multiple temporalities and rhythms. On the one hand, seasonal water movement follows a cyclical rhythm, such as the rainy season and the forms of agriculture dependent on it. Similarly, river water flows in a linear direction, with its rhythm sometimes interrupted and reshaped by dams that regulate or redirect its flow to generate alternative forms of energy. In contrast, the sea embodies overlapping and intersecting temporalities, producing a hybrid time that gives rise to various rhythms: the linear time of maritime transport, the cyclical rhythm of seasonal fishing, and the undulating rhythm of waves, each with its own internal logic and variation. On the other hand, the storage and rechannelling of water introduce imposed rhythms - ones external to water’s natural flow and shaped instead by the dominant temporalities of land. Chief among these is the “zero-rhythm” of storage, a suspended temporality from which various forms of fluid movement are later reactivated through processes of rechannelling.

It thus becomes clear that the movement of water is composed of multiple, simultaneous times and rhythms that cannot be reduced to the singular time/rhythm or operating logic of storage. Instead, the movement of water should be understood as a temporal form that operates within, and in relation to,

<sup>8</sup> For more on the concept of materiality, see: Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). For more on the concept of “formlessness”, see: Yve-Alain Bois & Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

other forms. This perspective allows us to conceptualize time/rhythm as a temporal-rhythmic compound composed of various layers and directions - even as the modern land-based system attempts to impose a homogenous, linear time that advances unceasingly forward.

The added value lies in expanding our understanding of this temporal/rhythmic compound. While it certainly includes linear time, it also exceeds its limitations, unfolding along multiple axes of horizontal and vertical fluidity, much like a musical phrase. Every phenomenon is constituted, in part, by its own unique time/rhythmic compound. It is the task of the researcher to identify and analyse this compound to grasp the phenomenon critically.

Returning to our example of adolescence: if measured according to its time/rhythmic compound, we can distinguish at least the following rhythms - those of the physical, organic body and its transformations; the rhythm of the self and its development; the time/rhythm of the family (which may be in its early stages or at other points along its trajectory); and the broader time/rhythm of society itself. Together, these elements constitute the temporal/rhythmic compound of the adolescent in modernity, helping to explain why this period is marked by an especially intense temporal and rhythmic experience.

At first glance, the place/space of water appears clearly defined. It is possible to identify its “natural” locations - seas, lakes, rivers, springs - and likewise to classify the “social” spaces through which it is regulated, such as wells, dams, channels, and various types of containers.<sup>9</sup> However, even a preliminary examination reveals a necessary distinction between places/spaces that *contain* water and those that *arise from* water itself - spaces fundamentally characterized by movement.

An analysis of water’s interaction with its immediate environment reveals that it transforms the places it enters, forming new compounds. When water meets soil, for instance, it produces mud. It thus becomes difficult to speak of a place or space that is purely of water. Rather, water is always entangled with the spatial environments it traverses, generating diverse compounds that contribute to the formation of new places and spaces. While the places that *contain* water emerge from a conceptual framework rooted in land, the places *generated by* water and its movement highlight water’s capacity to reshape and be reshaped by its environment.

The added epistemological value lies in understanding that fixed, systemic places and spaces are only one pole in a broader spectrum. The other pole is the ongoing process of transformation produced through the dynamic interaction between water and its surroundings. When investigating a phenomenon through the lens of place/space, it must be measured, first, by the space that contains it; second, by the space it itself generates; and third, by the interactions between these two.

In the case of adolescence, analysing its spatial coordinates through this relational lens reveals a wide range. On one end are the spaces that externally contain the adolescent and their experiences, such as the family, which they may openly reject yet still cling to. On the other end are the places and spaces the adolescent creates from within, through interaction with chosen worlds they seek to build - worlds that are always temporary, continually replaced as new ones are discovered.

This preliminary sketch has highlighted the epistemological value that emerges when “land”, as an epistemological foundation, is opened - relationally - to “water”. While this outline still requires further development, testing, and calibration in order to produce a fully articulated theoretical and conceptual framework, it already suggests that many social, economic, political, and cultural forces remain invisible when research phenomena are examined solely from a land-based perspective. What distinguishes this

<sup>9</sup> On the concepts of place and space in late capitalism, see for example: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 154-180; Harvey, pp. 201-323.

relational approach is its ability to uncover the simultaneity of different forms, rhythms, and spaces within a single phenomenon. This stands in contrast to the dominant land-derived paradigm, which tends to operate through a uniform mode.

This shift in perspective calls for the development of new tools of measurement - ones that adopt a logic of multiple indicators, approached both successively and simultaneously. These distinctive features gesture toward the interpretive potential made possible by thinking through the relationality of water. Moreover, the epistemological “recognition” of water may open the door to other such recognitions, of air, for example, or of outer space, which could profoundly reshape the types of knowledge we produce.

## Special Issue

This special issue comprises four studies that explore various social and historical phenomena in which water plays a central role. Three of these studies focus on different aspects of Gulf history, spanning from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century. They trace historical developments rooted in the relational dynamics between sea and land, examining the systems that operated within each domain and the strong interconnections that linked them. In his study *“The Sailing Scribe: Mansur al-Khariji and the Oceanic Worlds of the Gulf”*, Fahad Ahmad Bishara presents the observational writings of Kuwaiti sailor Mansur al-Khariji (1879–1954) to explore the maritime landscape from epistemological, institutional, economic, and social perspectives. Anchored in the themes of movement and circulation across various political and economic land-based systems, Bishara argues that al-Khariji’s reflections reveal a complex temporal/rhythmic compound.

In *“The Drought Years: The Forgotten Economic Transformations in Gulf History”*, Amna Abdulla Sadiq traces the transition from a pearl-diving economy to an oil-based one, shifting from a maritime economy to one firmly rooted in land. She examines the implications of this shift for British colonial policy, particularly in its interactions with Gulf inhabitants and political systems. Sadiq argues that a degree of autonomy persisted as long as the sea and its associated economic activities remained central to Gulf social and political life. However, with the rise of the oil economy, this margin of independence nearly vanished, at least during the historical period in question.

Faozi Al-Goidi’s study, *“The Sea vs. the Desert: Rahmah ibn Jabir and the Dialectic of Piracy and Maritime Influence”*, examines the phenomenon of “piracy” in the Arabian Gulf, so labelled by British archives, at the turn of the 19th century. Through a critical reading of the biography of Rahmah ibn Jabir (1756–1826), Al-Goidi challenges conventional narratives by introducing the concept of the “maritime sheikhdom” as distinct from both piracy and land-based sheikhdoms. He outlines its defining characteristics, emphasizing its remarkable capacity to navigate between diverse systems and spaces, thereby establishing a form of maritime influence grounded in liquidity as its core logic.

In *“Star-Tied Water: Tracing Life in a Colonized Palestinian Village During the Anthropocene”*, Yasmeen Qadan explores the contemporary life of a Palestinian village through the cultural significance of water and the alternative rhythms of life it sustains under a late colonial-capitalist system. She examines various material, temporal, and spatial relationships that exist beyond the confines of capitalist-colonialist structures within the Anthropocene, framing them as emancipatory spaces. Qadan argues that water - through its materiality, temporality, and spatiality - offers Palestinians a means of stepping outside the accelerating rhythm of colonialist capitalism and into a slower, alternative rhythm. This “space of water” becomes, at least in a ritual sense, liberated from the power and tempo of colonial capitalist time.

These studies uncover the epistemological significance of water across various contemporary and historical contexts, revealing dimensions that remain hidden when viewed solely from the traditional epistemological “land” that continues to dominate. They bring to light material forms, rhythmic patterns, and spatial movements that shape the practices and rituals of social, economic, cultural, and political life, emerging from the relational interplay between water and land. In doing so, these studies pose a new challenge to researchers in the social sciences and humanities: to critically reconsider the one-dimensional reliance on land as the starting point for research, and to imagine new epistemological foundations for the inquiries of today and tomorrow.

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Fahad Ahmad Bishara\*

## The Sailing Scribe: Mansur al-Khariji and the Oceanic Worlds of the Gulf\*\*

### الناسخ البحار: منصور الخارجي وعوالم المحيط في الخليج

**Abstract:** How did Gulf *nakhodas* [dhow captains] produce the routes they traversed around the Indian Ocean? This article draws on the writings of one Kuwaiti *nakhoda*, Mansur bin Ibrahim al-Khariji (1879-1954) to explore the intellectual labour that made movement and circulation in the Gulf and Indian Ocean possible. His manuscript, which he composed after a long sailing career, includes notes on navigation, transactions, and the political geographies he crossed, together with stanzas of poetry. His notes shed light on the workings of a world in motion; of institutions and ideas that animated circulation around the Gulf and Indian Ocean. Through engagement with al-Khariji's writings, this article offers reflections on a nautical world that has been pushed to the margins of a terrestrially moored historiography.

**Keywords:** *Nakhodas*; Indian Ocean; Gulf; Historiography; Dhow.

**الملخص:** كيف أنتج نواخذة الخليج الطرق التي عبروها في المحيط الهندي؟ تستند هذه الدراسة إلى كتابات أحد نواخذة الكويت، منصور بن إبراهيم الخارجي (1879-1954)، لاستكشاف العمل الفكري الذي جعل الحركة والتداول في الخليج والمحيط الهندي مُمكنين. ويتضمن مخطوط الخارجي، الذي أنتجه بعد مسيرة بحرية طويلة، ملاحظات حول الملاحة والمعاملات والجغرافيا السياسية التي عبرها، إضافةً إلى أبيات شعرية. وتسلط ملاحظاته الضوء على طريقة عمل عالم متحرك من المؤسسات والأفكار التي نشطت التداول في جميع أنحاء منطقة الخليج والمحيط الهندي. ومن خلال التفاعل مع كتاباته، تُقدّم الدراسة تأملات في عالم بحري دُفع إلى هوامش التاريخ الأرضي.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** نواخذة؛ المحيط الهندي؛ الخليج؛ منصور بن إبراهيم الخارجي؛ السفن الشراعية.

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## Thinking About Movement and Mobility

By the time the *nakhoda* [dhow captain] Mansur Al-Khariji sat down and penned the colophon to his manuscript in March 1945, he had already been sailing for more than 40 years, and had spent nearly as long recording his observations and experiences. His first voyage, he wrote, was with his older brother Ali, in 1895. Seven years later, he would begin learning how to captain his own vessel. Decades after al-Khariji's death, a Kuwaiti research centre published his notebook as a navigational guide with the rather unwieldy title *al-Qawā'id wa-l-Mayl wa-l-Natīja fī 'Ilm al-Bihār* [*The Principles, Declinations, and Almanac in the Science of the Seas*], which al-Khariji himself appended to the book's inside cover page. But there was little to suggest that there was a coherent project behind the book itself: he cobbled together the different principles of navigation and data that one might find in other navigational manuals, but much of it consisted of what appeared to be notes to himself. Rather than a coherent treatise on navigation, al-Khariji's work more closely resembles a notebook in which he jotted down various principles of navigation and their accompanying maxims, but also different rules, formularies, observations, poetry, and more. The only threads that ran through the different entries in the book were al-Khariji himself, of course, and the fact that all of these were collected on his dhow as he sailed around the Western Indian Ocean.

A ship captain's notebook may seem like an unlikely starting point for reflecting on how we write history, yet from the deck of a dhow, we might read things a little differently. For *nakhodas* like al-Khariji, the world was not the static, bounded entity we see when staring at a map. Where we see landmasses separated (or connected) by bodies of water, they saw seas and oceans ringed by coasts – waterways and sea lanes that bled into one another, and an oceanic world that washed up onto the shores of the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, and India. From the deck of the dhow, then, what historians understand to be the “Middle East” or “Arabia” appeared dissolved into the waters of their more immediate milieu: the Arabian Sea.<sup>1</sup>

For al-Khariji, the Arabian Sea was far more than an abstract scholarly construct; it was the world in which he lived. From the turn of the century onward, he spent most of his time at sea, shuttling back and forth between the Gulf, South Asia, the Southern Red Sea, and East Africa. His notebook reflected this broad geography, as did his dhow. *Nakhodas* like al-Khariji recruited sailors from Yemen and saw themselves as part of a broader community of Arab mariners. Through al-Khariji, his dhow, and these mariners, we can consider the watery contours of the Arabian Peninsula, and the ways we draw lines around our subjects of inquiry. The dhow offers a compelling lens to reorient us away from the land and toward the sea – prompting us to write history such that the land is relegated to the periphery, and to weave together the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, all of which had equal claim to being the home of that vessel.

This is more of a challenge than it might appear at first glance. Historians and social scientists are thoroughly oriented toward land-based categories of analysis. Our training is often in fields rooted in a terrestrial schema of world geography (the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, etc.), and the bulk of our analytic tools for understanding society, economy, and politics emerged from a Westphalian vision of world order. Even subfields that focus on the maritime world – Indian Ocean history and its other oceanic siblings, not to mention the long tradition of maritime history – find it difficult to wrest themselves from the firm grip of land-based paradigms. For many scholars in these fields, envisioning a history untethered from the land remains elusive, and for many decades, historians chose to fall back on the well-worn (and perhaps tried and tested) frameworks of trade and empire. This is especially true of scholarship on the Arabian Peninsula, which, insofar as it has taken on the sea, has struggled to conceive

<sup>1</sup> Here, I understand the Arabian Sea to stand in for much of the Western Indian Ocean, at least in geographical terms. However, as a historiographical category, I argue here that thinking with the *Arabian Sea* might help us open up the historical container of the *Arabian Peninsula* to broader oceanic processes and currents, allowing us to resituate it in the world-historical map.

of an oceanic history that does not place most of the analytical burden on empire (usually of the European variety).<sup>2</sup>

For many historians, circulations, connections, and mobilities – crossings, more generally – offered a way out of the continental and imperial containers that constrained their thinking and writing. By narrowing their focus on individuals, objects, texts, ideas, and sometimes institutions that moved and crossed boundaries, they were able to engage in generative conversations about the limits and prospects of a new type of world history, which they alternatively called connected history, *histoire croisée*, “new” world history, or, more recently, global history. However, as analytic categories, circulation and mobility have not gained traction everywhere. Boundary-crossing has not been at the forefront of the literature on the Gulf, Red Sea, and Arabian Peninsula. Insofar as it has been acknowledged, work on these areas have treated movement as though it were incidental to their histories.<sup>3</sup> One notable exception has been the work on the Bedouins of the region, whose movements were understood to pose a serious challenge to state structures. Beyond this, the tendency had been to underplay the movements of the region’s inhabitants, assuming their fixity in space, and (perhaps unintentionally) restrict their role in shaping the historical narratives of the region. In the Gulf and Red Sea, movement has largely been understood as an activity that foreigners engaged in – Indian merchants, colonial officials, and, more recently, migrant labourers. This has of course changed in recent years, as historians are increasingly recognizing the centrality of mobility to the histories of these regions, widening their apertures to encompass the broader arenas in which their histories unfolded.<sup>4</sup>

Circulation and mobility, while often conflated, are not the same thing, at least not analytically. Circulation “implies a double movement of going forth and coming back, which can be repeated indefinitely”.<sup>5</sup> Whether of people or goods, this back-and-forth movement has been a regular feature of world history. Historians writing in this vein have frequently focused on the circulation of commodities within an imperial framework – that is, between metropole and colony, or between colonies under the carapace of empire.<sup>6</sup> Even Fernand Braudel, for whom circulation formed one of “the pre-conditions of any form of capitalism” – so much so that “indeed at first sight one might think them to be exclusively determined by this single factor” – reserved circulation on a global scale for empires.<sup>7</sup> In a global world of commodity circulation, then, empires have often formed the sinews of circulation and the epistemological

<sup>2</sup> This is a point that has been made in a few different places. See, for example: Michael Christopher Low, “The Indian Ocean and other Middle Easts,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2014), pp. 549-555; Fahad Ahmad Bishara, “The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr: Unfurling the Gulf in the Age of Oceanic History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2020), pp. 397-412.

<sup>3</sup> There are clear exceptions to this. See, for example: Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Engseng Ho, “Empire Through Diasporic Eyes: The View from the Other Boat,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2004), pp. 210-246; Michael Christopher Low, *Imperial Mecca: The Ottoman Hijaz and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550-1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lindsey Stephenson, “Rerouting the Persian Gulf: The Transnationalization of Iranian Migrant Networks, c. 1900-1940,” PhD. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2018; Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Ulrike Freitag, *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Low, *Imperial Mecca*; Stephenson.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass & Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950* (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2015); Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century World and the Dawn of the Global World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); Erika Rapaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 587. As a feature of economic life, circulation dominated the second (and perhaps even the third) of Braudel’s trilogy on capitalism in world history: the technologies, institutions, and infrastructures of circulation in Europe take up virtually all of *The Wheels of Commerce*, whereas Braudel’s third volume, *The Perspective of the World*, was effectively an economic history of imperial expansion in the early-modern period.

foundations of “the global”. The circulation of people, too, has overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, been understood as an inter-imperial phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

And yet not all meaningful circuits of movement were global, nor were they imperial. Across the Indian Ocean world, goods, people, ideas, and other artifacts of history circulated (in dhows, caravans, and other vessels) between small states, littoral communities, and other social groups and political entrepreneurs that lived on the peripheries of, or in spaces in between, empires. The circulation of goods mattered a great deal to the polities they traversed, opening up avenues of connection to distant marketplaces and sustaining communities that could not provide everything they needed for themselves. Circulation constituted the lifeblood of these societies, and as historians have long recognized, those who facilitated it – who organized it, and who could channel resources toward it – could position themselves advantageously within the social and political community. Within these groups, circulation was woven into the fabric of the polities, societies, and economies of the region, and involved more than just the goods themselves.

Among the emirates and sheikhdoms of the Gulf and Red Sea, circulation was no less a “total social fact”, completely blurring the boundaries between the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Sea. The wealth and income they relied on were spread out across the Indian Ocean littoral: the government budget in Muscat depended on remittances and wealth in Zanzibar; the physical and financial capital of economic actors in Kuwait circulated between Southern Iraq, Persia, India, and East Africa much more than they did inland; and the merchant classes of Aden relied heavily on a broad infrastructure of law, industry, and government that linked them directly to Bombay.<sup>9</sup> The circulation of people, goods, and other “things” on board dhows loosens our grip on historical processes, shifting our view from “the sedentary prince” to “the life of the wanderer”.<sup>10</sup> It destabilizes our sense of place, challenging our terrestrially-grounded notions of state, law, economy, and even society, forcing us to grapple instead with how those categories might operate when spread over broad distances. Contending with, tapping into, and otherwise managing the movement of goods, people, and wealth around the Indian Ocean was thus central, rather than incidental, to the processes that constituted state, society, and economy in the region.

To write an Indian Ocean history of places like the Arabian Peninsula means more than merely acknowledging their connections overseas; it requires weaving those connections (and the circulations that animate them) into the social, political, and economic fabric of the region. Without eschewing trade and empire (for how can we?), I suggest that al-Khariji’s notebook provokes us to think less imperially and more oceanically. Rather than taking stable, grounded categories as our point of departure, it invites us to think about the sinews of circulation and connection across the Indian Ocean – about the movement itself, the ideas, and infrastructures that make that movement possible. Reading al-Khariji’s notebook in this way is not as radical an imaginative departure as it might initially appear: the thrust of the notebook involves the routes that he constructed and traversed, and the circulation of goods, people, and capital that he engaged in. By thinking alongside al-Khariji, we can liberate these circulations and connections as routes from the confines of the Arabian Peninsula that the Red Sea and Gulf have become limited to and instead open them up to the broader horizons of the Arabian Sea. Rather than limiting “Arabia” to the peninsula and its terrestrial neighbours, we might take the notebook as an opportunity to disaggregate it and spread it out over a much broader maritime geography. Al-Khariji, like other *nakhodas*, was actively

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Ogborn; Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Empires between Islam and Christianity, 1500-1800* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1995); Tania Bhattacharyya, “Ocean Bombay: Space, Itinerancy and Community in an Imperial Port City, 1839-1937,” PhD. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2019; Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf, 1745-1900* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997); Yacoub Y. Al-Hijji, *Kuwait and the Sea: A Brief Economic and Social History* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Markovits, Pouchepadass & Subrahmanyam (eds.), p. 2.

tracing out the connected worlds that dhows moved through, and the routes and circuits of capital and law that animated them. His notebook, therefore, is as much of an invitation to think more capaciously about Arabia's oceanic history, as it is a practical guide for navigating the seascape and maritime economy.

## Environment and Epistemology

It might come as no surprise that the bulk of al-Khariji's notebook deals with the nuts and bolts of navigation on board a dhow; that was his livelihood, after all. Although some of this involves instructions for sailing into and out of specific ports and along particular coasts (a topic I discuss in greater detail below), most of it delves into the abstract principles that facilitated wayfinding by the *nakhoda*. These include principles for determining latitude through solar measurements, and a series of mathematical principles for deriving longitude from a combination of solar declination and latitude – highly technical discussions that would not normally be of interest to anyone but the most committed of historians of the navigational sciences.

Al-Khariji's notes on wayfinding immediately challenge the historian to consider how individuals along the Arabian coasts harnessed their natural environment to forge routes across the water. For the Indian Ocean historian, this is in many ways an old story. The pioneering works of Indian Ocean history all began with an explication of the monsoon winds and the patterned movement around the water that they helped shape. The monsoon winds are, in many ways, the *sine qua non* of circulation in the Indian Ocean world: it constitutes the essence of how historians have understood movement and connection in the region, and what lends the region its coherence. In many ways, it is what makes the region "oceanic" but also what makes it distinctly "Indian". For those working on trade and empire in the region, the environment has thus long been part of the story of the Indian Ocean world – so much so that the monsoons have become an abused metaphor for virtually every remotely oceanic phenomenon there can be.

But al-Khariji's writings remind us that the natural environment was not simply a backdrop, shaping human behaviour yet never shaped by it. Actors around the Indian Ocean world actively intervened in their environment as they made their way across the ocean. They actively thought about the wind but also the stars, the sun, and the water itself, and devised ways to recombine those elements into epistemological frameworks that allowed them to determine where they were and where they might be going. The act of movement thus involved a high degree of interaction (and indeed, entanglement) with the natural environment. It required *nakhodas* and other wayfinders to take the natural world and abstract from it, so as to facilitate the circulations from which they drew their livelihoods.

Al-Khariji was hardly alone in this endeavor. *Nakhodas* from around the Gulf produced similar texts – manuals aimed at guiding their peers through the maritime environment of the Indian Ocean, virtually all of which were even more structured and intentional than al-Khariji's. Among those, perhaps none was as prolific or revered as the *nakhoda* Isa al-Qitami. Born in 1870, he was a renowned Kuwaiti captain and navigator. Historians and other *nakhodas* alike refer to him as "*al-rubbān al-awwal*" [the first pilot]. By the early 1920s, al-Qitami had authored three texts, the first and most popular being the *Dalīl al-Muhtār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār* [*The Perplexed's Guide to the Science of the Seas*], a nautical manual that combined the principles of navigation with practical directions for sailing around the coasts of the western Indian Ocean, which he first published in 1916. Shortly after writing the *Dalīl*, he published *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Khāṣ lil-Musāfir wa-l-Tājir wa-l-Ghawwāṣ* [*The Summary Specific to the Traveler, the Merchant, and the Diver*], a shorter manual aimed at guiding *nakhodas* around the coasts and pearl banks of the Persian Gulf. In 1924, he also published *al-Khāliṣ min Kull 'Ayb fī Waḍ' al-Jayb* [*The Blemish-*



*Free in the Situation of the Pocket*], a manual to assist in the standardization of the weight and value of pearls, facilitating their movement from one marketplace to another.<sup>11</sup>

While al-Qitami's texts give a good sense of the diverse texts *nakhodas* produced on how to recombine the elements of the natural world to facilitate the movement of people and goods, he was not the only one. There were many others like him, though few were quite as active. In 1933, his contemporaries, the Kuwaiti *nakhodas* Mohammed bin Asfour and Hussain bin Abdulrahman al-Asousi, published *al-Natīja al-Kuwaytiyya*, an almanac that mixes navigational principles with mathematical tables for determining date and time. Further, as late as 1956, the Syrian *nakhoda* Nasser al-Khaduri penned the manual *Ma'dan al-Asrār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār* [*The Mine of Secrets in the Science of the Seas*] as a corrective to al-Qitami's manual.<sup>12</sup> Read together, we might see these texts as part of a trans-oceanic maritime print culture, a world of books that travelled back and forth across the ocean, prompting a circulation of ideas and skills that were at least as important as the trade in goods. The circulation of these texts on the decks of dhows – their movement from the hands of one *nakhoda* to another – contributed to the spread of particular forms of navigational practice around the Arab maritime communities of the Indian Ocean, as mobile captains and mariners moved from one port city to another. These writings thus formed the vectors through which navigational knowledge and practice was disseminated through the Indian Ocean world. They formed a crucial part of the history of oceanic circulation that drew the Arabian Peninsula into its sea.

Texts like these imagined a broad audience of Arab mariners, none more self-consciously than al-Qitami, whose *Dalīl* addressed “our Arab seafaring brothers” (*ikhwānunā al-‘arab ahl al-sufun*). To meet their expectations, he wrote in a nautical colloquial that, according to the *Dalīl*'s editor, was to appeal to mariners, for “among those who work on sailing voyages, some are illiterate and cannot read and write, and they will not benefit from it unless it was written in the common dialect”.<sup>13</sup> In his *Mukhtaṣar*, al-Qitami makes this clearer: he explains that although grammarians (*ahl al-naḥw*) might find fault in the language he uses in the text, “it will suffice to communicate the book, because all of them [i.e. practitioners] will have come upon this language in their comings and goings”.<sup>14</sup> Al-Qitami thus stretched the contours of Arabic writing – and with it, the Arab world – into the circulating dhows and mariners that made up his “Arab seafaring brothers”. His writing suggests the possibility of a broader society of Arabs at sea who had their own lexicons, signs, and histories.

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that al-Khariji's notes include an explicit reference to the writings of the 15th century Arab navigator Ahmad Ibn Majid, a looming figure in Indian Ocean history and the author of the navigational treatise *Kitāb al-Fawā'id*, considered today a pillar of the Arab nautical canon. In a section titled “The Sayings of Ibn Majid, the Sheikh of the Science of the Seas”, he quotes the navigator's admonitions to *nakhodas* to keep watch at night and to take responsibility for the ship more generally, but also his advice on when to take solar bearings.<sup>15</sup> More than 400 years stood between the two navigators, and yet Ibn Majid remained, both for al-Khariji and for many other *nakhodas* who found in the famous navigator's treatise echoes of issues they continued to confront. The appearance of the legendary navigator illustrates how, on the deck of the dhow, the epistemologies of the past poured into those of the present, tying the Arab seafarers of earlier centuries into the circulations of the *nakhodas* of the 20th century Arabian Sea.

<sup>11</sup> Isa al-Qitami, *al-Khālīṣ min Kull 'Ayb fī Waq' al-Jayb* (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2007); Isa al-Qitami, *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Khāṣ lil-Musāfir wa-l-Tājir wa-l-Ghawwāṣ*, 2nd ed. (Kuwait: Kuwait Printer, 1924); Isa al-Qitami, *Dalīl al-Muhtār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār*, 3rd ed. (Kuwait: Government Printer, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> Nasser bin Ali al-Khaduri, *Ma'dan al-Asrār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār*, 2nd ed., Hassan Saleh Shihab (ed.) (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> al-Qitami, *Dalīl al-Muhtār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> al-Qitami, *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Khāṣ lil-Musāfir wa-l-Tājir wa-l-Ghawwāṣ*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Mansur al-Khariji, *al-Qawā'id wa-l-Mayl wa-l-Natīja fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār* (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2007), p. 105. Throughout this article, I will be making reference to the printed version of al-Khariji's manuscript so that interested readers can refer back to it.



## Infrastructures of Circulation

Of course, not all al-Khariji's notes were on the principles of navigation. Littered throughout the manuscript, and in no particular order, were principles of a very different sort: legal and financial. Much like his discussion of the principles of navigation, these were also intimately tied to the act of circulation. Law and finance formed the infrastructure of circulation in the Indian Ocean, animating the act of crossing and forging pathways through the regional commercial arena. Like matters of navigation, these fell directly within the scope of the *nakhoda's* work. It was his responsibility to ensure that the books were in order, that sailors were paid, and that the business of the voyage was on a sound footing. It is thus wholly sensible that al-Khariji would place discussions of money and law alongside wind, water, sun, and stars.

It is roughly a quarter of the way into his notebook that al-Khariji enters into his brief digression into the principles of profit-sharing on a dhow voyage, taking for his example a sailing season that he identifies as occurring in 1941 (although his discussion seems largely hypothetical). Over the course of four manuscript pages, he walks his reader through the intricate mathematics involved in determining the number of shares on that voyage and their division between the shipowner and the crew – and within each, he outlines the sub-divisions of shares for the *nakhoda*, his mates, and ordinary sailors, and in a number of different scenarios.<sup>16</sup> His instructions would have been immediately legible to *nakhodas* in both the Gulf and Red Sea, where the basic principles underlying the profit-sharing regime on board dhows were the same.<sup>17</sup>

Although al-Khariji supplied only the principles for the division of profits at the end of a sailing season, his schema rested on a more expansive financial system that intertwined the littoral economies of the Arabian Peninsula with that of the Western Indian Ocean more broadly. Profit-sharing regimes like these gave teeth to the circulation of capital around the Arabian Sea and its transformation from one form to another as the dhow and its mariners travelled around the ocean's littoral. Arrangements like this were necessary given the variety of goods that dhows moved from one season to another. Dhows from Basra would have to make their way to markets around the Western Indian Ocean, where profits would be plunged into sacks of rice, flour, and other dry goods, scores of timber and mangrove poles, which would then be sold in different markets, with proceeds going to different combinations of merchants, *nakhodas*, mariners, and shipowners, all of whom had accrued varying amounts of debt along the way. The date circuit thus forged the pathways through which other goods and forms of capital could travel, both in space and through account ledgers. The profit-sharing system, based as it was in the net proceeds of the entire season rather than individual rights to single transactions, was supple enough to bear it all.

As any *nakhoda* would have known, though, even the most minute arrangements for profit-sharing were only as good as the regimes of law that they were anchored in. Financial regimes around the world rest on different forms of legal security, and the dhow economies of the Western Indian Ocean were no different. Virtually every one of the ties that bound *nakhodas*, mariners, ship-owners, and merchants together was articulated as a legal obligation – in a written legal and financial instrument that the dhow generated in its wake. Al-Khariji understood this well and knew the importance of getting the form of the instrument right. Among his notes were formulas for various legal instruments, including acknowledgments of debt, safe-conduct passes, and legal requests for death certificates from different authorities.<sup>18</sup> Together, legal forms like these constituted artifacts of a legal infrastructure that underpinned the oceanic circulations that *nakhodas* engaged in. They helped infuse certainty and regularity in a highly uncertain enterprise

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-63.

<sup>17</sup> On profit-sharing on dhows, see also: Dionisius Agius, *The Life of the Red Sea Dhow: A Cultural History of Seaborne Exploration in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), pp. 175-192; Al-Hijji, pp. 78-92; Alan Villiers, "Some Aspects of the Arab Dhow Trade," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1948), pp. 399-416.

<sup>18</sup> al-Khariji, pp. 128-129, 146-150.

and coordinated expectations and action between far-flung actors. If the coastal economies of the Arabian Peninsula were connected to those of the western Indian Ocean littoral, legal instruments like this formed the sinews of those connections.<sup>19</sup>

Read this way, al-Khariji's notes on law and finance suggest yet another route away from the land-locked epistemologies that had long constrained thinking on the Gulf and the Red Sea. These were once institutions and practices that we understood as being mostly local in nature – the sort that actors developed to give shape to the maritime economies of the Arab coasts, and not much more. However, once we open up their vistas to include South Asia and East Africa, we can begin to see how they formed an infrastructure that facilitates the circulation of goods, people, and capital around the western Indian Ocean more broadly. Through the different pieces of paper they mobilized, *nakhodas* like al-Khariji forged the contours of a maritime commercial arena, weaving the economies of coastal Arabia more deeply into those of India and the East African coast. For the inhabitants of the world of dhows, law was not the terrestrial phenomenon we have long understood. Rather, law as a historical phenomenon was thoroughly submerged in salty water, soaking through the pieces of paper that *nakhodas*, mariners, and even pirates wielded as they crossed the waters of the Arabian Sea.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, these circulating forms must be read as expressions of a much deeper Islamic legal epistemology, one that bound the history of the Arabian Peninsula to legal communities around the Indian Ocean world. They drew on a long history of Islamic jurisprudence and writings on obligations – or, more accurately, they excerpted, paraphrased, and otherwise borrowed from them in order to forge the legal contours of their own world-economies. As they circulated around the ocean's shores, these legal discourses, anchored in texts and embodied in legal scholars traveling on dhows, formed a counter-narrative to that of imperial law. And as they took shape in different paper obligations, they rendered that counter-narrative portable.

## Imperial Entanglements

Of course, imperial politics were never too far from the minds of *nakhodas* like al-Khariji. If their writings point to a narrative of connection, circulation, and history beyond empire, they could never escape it entirely. As frequent visitors to the port cities of South Asia and East Africa at the height of imperial expansion in the Indian Ocean, they were keenly aware of how empires attempted to impose themselves onto the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula and across the high seas. For the mobile mariners of the 20th century Indian Ocean, the British Empire was the most dominant imperial presence, but was certainly not the only one – and, more than that, only the latest in a long chain of empires.

Al-Khariji had a keen eye for how the empire had remade the world around the dhow. At a few points in his manuscript, he made note of different political events that he had witnessed or heard about. The first such note appears roughly halfway through the notebook, sandwiched between a template for a debt obligation and a note on how to convert between different units of weight measurement. In it, he writes that on 17 Dhu Al-Hijja 1332 AH – that is, 6 November 1914 – he was loading dates in the town of al-Qasba, on the Shatt al-ʿArab waterway in southern Iraq, when “the English entered al-Faw”, the town at the mouth of the Shatt, where the Ottoman customs house stood. “On the second day”, he continued, “their ships entered into the creek, and a fierce battle took place, lasting an hour and a half”. He followed

<sup>19</sup> See also: Fahad Ahmad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Thomas F. McDow, *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Fahad Ahmad Bishara, “‘No Country but the Ocean’: Reading International Law from the Deck of an Indian Ocean Dhow, c. 1900,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2018), pp. 338-366; Lauren Benton, “Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2005), pp. 700-724.

it with a different note – this one from February 1936, where on the island of Zanzibar “there was a battle between the English Christians and the Arabs of Oman” which left several people dead or injured on both sides, along with other onlookers. The cause, he wrote, “was the coconut copra” – the dried flesh of the coconut fruit, which formed one of the island’s exports.<sup>21</sup>

The two notes, separated in both time and space, highlight different moments in the history of British imperialism in the Western Indian Ocean. The first was a clear reference to the beginnings of the Mesopotamia campaign of WWI, which ultimately led to the establishment of a British mandate in Iraq during the 1920s. The second was a much lesser-known event: a riot that took place in the Zanzibar countryside over rising British regulations on the sale of copra – a matter that would hardly make it into the annals of the history of Zanzibar itself, let alone the world. Taken together, the two events plot out different moments in the history of Arab encounters with empire in the 20th century: the first with imperial battleships, and the second with imperial regulations. Read alongside a third note, the picture emerges more clearly. In a later inscription, al-Khariji very briefly mentions that in 1343 AH (1924/5) Reza Shah, the Pahlavi ruler of Iran, took over the town of Mohammerah (a major port of call for dhows visiting the Shatt al-‘Arab) “and what remained of the possessions of the ruler Sheikh Khaz‘al, the son of Shaikh Jaber”, the town’s chief.<sup>22</sup>

The note on Reza Shah, unrelated to the history of encounter with Europeans, casts a different light on al-Khariji’s observations as a whole. Read differently, al-Khariji was drawing attention to the ways in which the political shape of the Arab world of the Indian Ocean was slowly being transformed. His notes alluded to a littoral geography that had largely been under the control of Arabs – the agricultural villages and hamlets along the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway, the sheikhdom of Mohammerah (which comprised both Arabs and Persians, but was known to many as ‘Arabistan), and the Arab-headed Sultanate of Zanzibar – that over the 20th century had increasingly fallen under the control of more distant rulers. There were others like them, too, around the Arabian Peninsula – most prominently Aden and the neighboring island of Perim, which during the 19th and early-20th centuries fell under the administrative jurisdiction of the Bombay Presidency.<sup>23</sup>

This political transformation makes itself visible in al-Khariji’s drawings, roughly a dozen of which are scattered around his notebook. All were of different coastlines and port cityscapes around the Gulf, Red Sea, South Asia, and East Africa. None of this was unusual: landmarks like mountains or other unique geological features helped orient them as they made their way along the coasts of the Western Indian Ocean, and navigational guides often included at least rough drawings of them. Many of al-Khariji’s drawings were like those of his peers. They included hillsides, rough drawings of coastlines, and features like trees and ships. In some of his drawings, there was little (if any) direct imperial presence: he highlighted mosques, temples, lighthouses, and other distinct features, but nothing with any strong imperial connotations.

In other drawings, though, the imperial presence is highly visible. His drawing of Mangalore, for example, features a large Union Jack right at its centre; another drawing of Perim Island includes two smaller British flags, while a drawing of the port city of Merca in Somalia includes one Italian tricolor. Had he included drawings of Obock or Djibouti, they would doubtless include French flags as well. Beyond these obvious signs were more subtle indicators: signs of industrial activity along the waterfront, or systems of lighthouses and buoys for regulating movement across particular creeks and headlands, for example.<sup>24</sup> As the dhows moved around the Western Indian Ocean, then, they had to navigate the markings of political authority that

<sup>21</sup> al-Khariji, pp. 145-146.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>23</sup> See also: Scott Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839-1937* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); R. J. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule, 1839-1967* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1975).

<sup>24</sup> al-Khariji, pp. 167-181.

different imperial projects left along the coast. Empire was thus part of the Arab *nakhodas* seascape. It etched itself onto the coastlines that captains like al-Khariji saw as they looked out from the decks of their dhows and onto the port cityscapes and approached them from their bow. Empires did not just map themselves onto old geographies; they created new ones, and with them new pathways of circulation.

From those port cities, empires attempted to project themselves beyond the coast and onto the high seas. By the mid-1860s, the British had established Vice-Admiralty Courts in Bombay, Aden, and Zanzibar, routing a regular convoy of naval ships around the Western Indian Ocean in attempts to intercept dhows suspected of involvement in the slave trade.<sup>25</sup> If al-Khariji included templates for safe-conduct passes, it was in part because of the frequent encounters between dhows like his and naval vessels. In 1868, *nakhodas* were already producing passes like these in an effort to maneuver around the British surveillance regime. Al-Khariji would have known, too, that there were other papers he could obtain that would produce different results. Alongside the British, after all, were the French and the Italians, all of whom were furnishing their own safe-conduct passes from ports they controlled. The Arabian Sea, thus, teemed with different political authorities, all of whom intervened in the geographies of circulation and tried to determine the terms on which it could happen – to delineate the “right” forms of circulation from the “wrong” ones.<sup>26</sup> The savvy *nakhoda* had to know how to navigate across more than one imperial horizon at a time.

But the history of the Arabian Sea is not just one that pits plucky Arab mariners against the forces of the European empire. As tidy as it might be to schematically separate the two from one another, the evidence immediately suggests a history of deeper entanglement. Read from the dhow, the horizons of the *nakhodas* and of the British officials they encountered were closely bound up in one another. Al-Khariji and his fellow Arab *nakhodas* frequently drew on British nautical technologies – admiralty maps, nautical almanacs, and the like – as they plotted their routes around the Western Indian Ocean. His own notebook attests to as much. Al-Khariji included a discussion of how *nakhodas* converted dates from the Nawruz calendar (which they routinely used to track the passage of time) to the “Frankish” (i.e. Gregorian) calendar on which the almanacs he relied upon were based.<sup>27</sup>

European officials, too, exerted enormous efforts to draw on the nautical expertise of dhow captains. The story of the Indian Ocean navigator who helped Vasco da Gama cross the Arabian Sea (erroneously thought to be Ahmad Ibn Majid) is by now well-known. Less familiar are the publications that European officials produced on Arab navigational techniques, and the degree to which they drew on *nakhodas*’ knowledge to produce texts like the *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden* and the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia*. Imperial practices of knowing and mapping thus rested on a body of locals and wanderers – of natives whose expansive movements and networks fed imperial officials with the information they needed to make sense of the Indian Ocean world.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, even as the circulations that Arab *nakhodas* thought about and engaged in forged routes that take historians beyond the imperial connections that they have so thoroughly relied upon in writing oceanic history, they were invariably bound up in them. However they might have been classified, the circuits of people, goods, texts, and ideas that dhows traced out between the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and

<sup>25</sup> Philip Howard Colomb, *Slave-Catching in the Indian Ocean: A Record of Naval Experiences* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873); George L. Sullivan, *Dhow-Chasing in Zanzibar Waters and on the Eastern Coast of Africa: Narrative of Five Years’ Experience in the Suppression of the Slave Trade*, 2nd ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1873).

<sup>26</sup> Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> al-Khariji, pp. 67-68.

<sup>28</sup> Nelida Fuccaro, “Knowledge at the Service of Empire: The Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia,” in: Inga Brandell, Marie Carlson & Öner A. Çetrez (eds.), *Borders and the Changing Boundaries of Knowledge*, vol. 22 (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, Transactions, 2015), pp. 17-34; Alexis Wick, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), p. 144; James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

East Africa, all pulsed through imperial arteries. Meanwhile, the pathways of imperial expansion mapped themselves onto the movements of dhows and the circulations they animated. As dhows and British ships made their way around the Indian Ocean, then, their epistemological horizons were more deeply entangled in one another than either would have been ready to acknowledge.

## Conclusion: Unmooring Arabian History

There are many reasons why historians might have passed over al-Khariji's notebook and the broader constellation of texts and practices that generated it. Read from the perspective of land, few of these texts make much sense. They either come across as excessively technical or esoteric, and in all cases seem peripheral to the individuals, institutions, and processes that Middle East historians have been interested in. Even historians of the Gulf and Red Sea have only noted them in passing, as they appear at first blush to offer very little insight into the histories of those areas as well. However, this is a matter of perspective more than content.

Read from the sea – from the deck of the dhow – instead of the land, these writings open up a window into a whole world of material circulation and the intellectual histories that animated it. Circulation, these texts make clear, was not just about goods or people, but about the full range of social, political, and cultural behaviours entangled in the movement of goods, people, and capital around a far-flung arena. As a historical phenomenon, it offers historians a lens through which to see how areas were intertwined with one another, and how different realms of life could play out over broad distances. Texts like al-Khariji's – and more importantly, the ideas found in their pages – formed the sinews of circulation and helped forge historical pathways.

For the historian of the Arabian Peninsula, the move to the Arabian Sea, then, is much more than a shift to a maritime perspective. Thinking, reading, and writing oceanically allows us to move beyond national and terrestrial paradigms for writing “Middle Eastern” history, and to think about the connections, circulations, and entanglements that make up oceanic Arabia. The Indian Ocean opens up a new frontier for writing histories of the Arabian Peninsula in a broader arena, situating Arab communities in the Indian Ocean within a broader world of ethnic groups, practices, and currents of thought. Seen this way, Indian Ocean history is not orthogonal to Middle Eastern history, nor is it an alternative to it; the Indian Ocean is woven into the fabric of the Arabian Peninsula itself.

The promise of oceanic history has long been evident, but the project that motivates its writing is not over yet. A pressing need remains to ground our narratives of movement across the Arabian Sea in the actions and discourses of non-Europeans, and to write histories in which the principal actors are not empires (even as they spend much of their time thinking through and alongside empires). And this is precisely where the dhow – as a historical actor, as a metaphor for a particular kind of history, and as an epistemology grounded in a set of notes – might help us sail.

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Amna Abdulla Sadiq\*

# The Drought Years: The Forgotten Economic Transformations in Gulf History\*\*

## سنوات القحط: تحوّل اقتصادي مَنسي في تاريخ الخليج

**Abstract:** This article discusses a transformative phase in the history of trade in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, as a result of the expansion of World War II into the passages and ports of the Indian Ocean. The countries in the region suffered from British policies which introduced austerity measures to mitigate the widespread economic and social instability at that time. These British interventions challenged the economic system in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, marking a turning point from pearl to oil-based economies. This transformative period spans approximately a decade, from the mid-1940s until the early 1950s.

**Keywords:** Gulf; Indian Ocean; World War II; Austerity Measures; Pearling.

**الملخص:** تناقش هذه الدراسة مرحلة تحوّل لافتة للانتباه في تاريخ التجارة في منطقة الخليج والمحيط الهندي. وقد تشكّلت هذه المرحلة نتيجةً لامتداد الحرب العالمية الثانية إلى ممرات المحيط الهندي وموانئه، حيث عانت دول المنطقة من سياسات التقشف البريطانية، التي سعت لإدخال هذه السياسات في محاولة للحدّ من حالة عدم الاستقرار الاقتصادي والاجتماعي المنتشرة آنذاك. ومثّلت هذه التدخلات البريطانية تحديات للنظام الاقتصادي في الخليج وشبه الجزيرة العربية، وكانت نقطة التحوّل من اقتصادات اللؤلؤ إلى اقتصادات النفط. واستغرق هذا التحوّل قرابة العقد من الزمن؛ من منتصف الحرب العالمية الثانية إلى بداية خمسينيات القرن العشرين.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الخليج؛ المحيط الهندي؛ الحرب العالمية الثانية؛ سياسات التقشّف؛ اقتصاد اللؤلؤ.

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## Introduction

In late 1942, British political agents in the Gulf introduced a nation-based rationing system for the first time in the region's history. Accordingly, ration cards were issued to each household for rice, flour, and sugar, extending later to tea, coffee, and then to textiles. A wartime necessity, rationing was a desperate response to the region's deteriorating economic and social conditions even before the outbreak of World War II. Far from alleviating the economic crises, the rationing system placed the region on the brink of famine.

The rationing system was part of the extensive British austerity policy in Gulf Sheikhdoms during the 1940s. It was more a reflection of British agents' general understanding of economies across the Middle East than a plan tailored to the region's economic activities and resources. The policy failed to compensate for several shortcomings of the regional political economy, intensified the economic and social crisis, and disrupted the economic cycle and its trade patterns centred in the Indian Ocean.

Austerity policies were a constant strategy of the British Empire, which introduced them to the region during World War II. Few studies have explored these measures and their historical legacy in the political economy of the Gulf. In fact, scholars tend to assume that Gulf Sheikhdoms, as the protectorates of the British Empire, were exempted from many of the British policies or schemes imposed on its colonies. That is why, most studies focus on the role of British withdrawal plan either from the region, or on British anti-piracy schemes and its wars with the Qawasim.<sup>1</sup> Still, studies that do focus on the role of the British Empire in the region do little to explore the effects of these measures on the local economic, social, or political structures.<sup>2</sup>

By looking specifically at the experience of the Gulf sheikhdoms under British influence during World War II, this article examines the circumstances that brought a decade of widespread hunger and depression to the region, known to its residents as the *Drought Years*.<sup>3</sup> Understanding this phase of the Gulf's modern history would partially explain the critical shift Gulf countries weathered from traditional pearling to modern oil-based economies.<sup>4</sup>

This article draws upon material from the British National Archives, local archives, and travellers' memoirs to evaluate the economic and social conditions in the Gulf during the 1930s and 1940s. A complete display of the archival records on the economic conditions of each of the Gulf states is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, it provides a glimpse of the general conditions across the region, mainly because the British wartime measures were designed as a regional policy not confined to one individual states. The severity of the conditions and crisis also varied across the Gulf, and more work is needed to develop a comprehensive case by case account.

This article argues that British austerity measures during World War II failed because they ignored the significant shortcomings of the regional economic system. Apart from their limited economic and

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the 19th Century Gulf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Khaldoun al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: A Different Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> *Sanawāt al-jirīsh* translates to "years of wheat". It refers to the "age of wheat" because people replaced rice with wheat during World War II. Another name for the same phase in Gulf history is *Sanawāt al-Biṭāqa*, which translates to the "age of the card"; the card here is the ration card distributed in the region during World War II. The period is also called *Sanawāt al-Qaḥṭ*, which refers to the drought years. Some locals indicate *sanawāt al-jirīsh* only lasted seven years during World War II, while as this study indicates, this phase started a decade before with the collapse of the pearling economy.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the limited scope of the study, analyses concentrate exclusively on the economic and political conditions related to the British wartime measures in the Gulf, other political and economic transformations that happened around the same time such as oil discovery, political movements, and nationalization are not covered.

social prospects, these plans did not offer alternative livelihoods or resources for locals to supplement the declining pearling and entrepôt economies. Instead, they stalled the economic cycle, which never truly recovered until the discovery of oil, inflicting harm on the Gulf economy.

## The Gulf's Economic Cycle

Located on the middle route between Asia and Europe, with its mainland linking the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean, the Gulf Sea was a thriving commercial channel for the Oceanic economy.<sup>5</sup> Given the lack of agriculture and industrialization, the people of the Gulf historically had little beyond the commercial networks of the Indian Ocean. With the arrival of British steamship and telegraph services in Gulf ports in the mid-19th century, a new commercial network around the Indian Ocean started to form.<sup>6</sup>

The date-harvesting season marked the beginning of the region's commercial cycle.<sup>7</sup> In August and September, Gulf merchants and owners of date farms travelled to the Gulf oases of Basra and al-Ahsa to supervise the harvest. Once the dates were harvested, they were loaded onto large ships for the long journey across the Indian Ocean, to trading houses and agents at the Indian subcontinent ports such as Goa and Colombo, and to the East African ports such as Zanzibar and Mombasa.<sup>8</sup>

Upon their return to the region, Gulf ships usually imported commodities such as timber, general commodities, foods, and textiles from India, while importing mangrove poles and coffee from East Africa.<sup>9</sup> Many of these imported goods travelled far into the region through either land routes or smaller ports. For example, small ports such as Doha and Lingah were usually supplied by the ports of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Dubai.

By spring, Gulf ships had arrived after date season and began preparing for the beginning of the pearling season, marked by the Great Dive.<sup>10</sup> Between March and May, Gulf merchants started provisioning pearling fleets of thousands of crewmembers and hundreds of dhows with sails, rigging, lateen yards, and anchor rope, along with dietary staples such as rice, dates, and coffee.

Oil industry started to enter the economic cycle of the region after oil in commercial quantities was discovered in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar during the mid-1930s.<sup>11</sup> In Bahrain particularly, due to early oil discoveries, the oil company started hiring locals from across the region to work in Bahrain.

<sup>5</sup> The Gulf as a water channel that served the Indian Ocean before the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope is well documented. For example, it was described by German mathematician and cartographer Carsten Niebuhr, on his travels through Arabia as "That trade, when once brought within this channel, continued to flow through it, under the Ptolemies, the Romans, the Greek Emperors, and the Caliphs of Egypt". See: Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia and Other Countries in the East 1733–1815*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: R. Morison and Son, 1792), p. 9. Similar remarks could be found on: Ludovico di Varthema, *Travels of Ludovico Di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, A.D. 1503–1508* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863), p. 89; Pedro Teixeira & John Stevens, *The Travels of Pedro Teixeira: With His 'Kings of Harmuz' and Extracts from His 'Kings of Persia'*, Donald Ferguson (ed.), William Sinclair (trans.) (London: Hakluyt Society, 1802), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on the emergence of the new Gulf-Indian Ocean networks in the middle of the 19th century, see: Matthew Hopper, "The Globalization of Dried Fruit: Transformation of the Eastern Arabian Economy, 1860s–1920s," in: James L. Gelvin & Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (California: University of California Press, 2014); Matthew Hopper, "Debt and Slavery among Arabian Gulf Pearl Divers," in: Gwyn Campbell & Alessandro Stanziani (eds.), *Bonded Labour and Debt in the Indian Ocean World* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> For details regarding the Gulf seasonal cycle, see: Dionisius Agius, *Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: The People of the Dhow* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Alan Villiers recorded his experience at one of the Kuwaiti dhows during their trading journeys across the Indian Ocean. He also provided good details of the routes and nature of these trading voyages. See: Alan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad* (London: Arabian Publishing, 1940).

<sup>9</sup> Several maritime records detailed the nature and scope of this commercial network. See, for example, the letter exchanged between Fyez Khames to Mohammed bin Matrook, presented in: Mohammed al-Matrook, *Min Tijārat al-Mādi: Min Arshif al-Haj Muhammad bin 'Abdallah al-Matrūk* (Kuwait: n.p., 2016), p. 65; and al-Mulla logs presented in: Abdulrahman al-Khulaifi, *al-Ghawṣ 'alā al-Lu'lu' fi Qaṭar* (Qatar: Katara Publishing, 2012), p. 685.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive study of the Gulf pearling economy, see: Robert Carter, *Sea of Pearls: Seven Thousand Years of the Industry That Shaped the Gulf* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion on the role of the British companies in the Gulf, see: Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, *Oil Revenues in the Gulf Emirates* (Boulder: Westview, 1978).

Company workers enjoyed stable incomes and better working conditions than the pearling system. Hence, many Gulf locals from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, for example, flocked to Bahrain for employment in the oil industry. However, about a decade after the oil discovery, World War II interrupted the growth of the oil industry.

Gulf economies were firmly woven into the networks of the Indian Ocean through a well-managed economic cycle. However, as soon as the pearling economy started to decline and World War II approached the region, the Gulf entered nearly two decades of economic and social stagnation that did not end until oil production resumed after World War II in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

## A Pearling and Re-Export Crisis Uncovered During World War II

In 1924, Saeed al-Maktoom (1912-1958), the ruler of Dubai, received a telegram from India informing him about cultured pearls mixed with natural pearls being purchased from Dubai. After a thorough investigation, al-Maktoom found that an estimated Rs. 200,000 worth of cultured pearls had been sold in his market during the 1924 pearling season.<sup>12</sup> Soon afterward, locals found cultured pearls mixed with the season's purchases across the Gulf from Kuwait to Muscat. The shocking news from India about the Gulf's pearls was a blow to the pearling markets, in which local pearling merchants realized that the market for natural pearls is losing its prominence.

It is most likely that demand for Gulf pearls had started waning earlier, around World War I. In 1917, Gulf merchants noted that the pearling season had been weak, and many returned from India without selling their pearls. Five years later, in 1922, some Gulf merchants reported that they had to reduce the price of their pearls due to flagging demand in India; some even took their pearls to Marseille and Paris, on the assumption that the weak demand for natural pearls was confined to Indian markets.<sup>13</sup> Reports from Bahrain noted that there was an increase in revenues during the 1916 pearling season to Rs. 5,466,000, compared with a decrease that reached Rs. 2,193,700 in 1924.<sup>14</sup> By then, British officials suggested drafting a pearling law in order to improve the diving system and prevent a social upheaval.<sup>15</sup>

With the assistance of British agents in the region, the rulers of Gulf Sheikdoms began drafting a pearling law.<sup>16</sup> This was the region's first attempt to regulate economic life, especially pertaining to the relationship between merchants and labourers. While pearling laws differed slightly across the region, the provisions were similar. Most importantly, the new laws abolished all hereditary debts, and the government would strictly control the amounts advanced to the divers to encourage them to continue in the profession.<sup>17</sup>

By the early 1930s, the widespread distress in the pearling market had only intensified after the worldwide depression of 1929. Reports indicate that Gulf pearl exports fell to 30-50% of their value in the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> Gulf merchants began losing their financial stability, and their ability to continue their support for the pearling season. The pearling merchants began demanding relief from their lenders, most of whom were wholesalers. The rulers could not slow the snowballing economic crisis and lacked the financial resources

<sup>12</sup> "Letter from the Residency Agent in Sharjah to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf," 15 July 1924, Coll 25 / 9 Orders in Council: Bahrein: King's Regulation No. 1 of 1930: Traffic in Cultured Pearls; King's Regulation no. 3 of 1936: Possession and Traffic in Arms, IOR/L/PS/12/3312, QDL; For further discussion of the incident, see: Carter, p. 262.

<sup>13</sup> Saif al-Shamlan discusses in detail three stories about pearl merchants who travelled to Paris and Marseille between 1923 and 1932 in an attempt to find markets better than those of India and Bahrain. See: Saif al-Shamlan, *Tārīkh al-Ghawṣ 'alā al-Lu'lu' fī al-Kuwayt wa-l-Khalīj al-'Arabī* (Kuwait: That al-Salasil, 1976), pp. 265-300.

<sup>14</sup> See: Carter, pp. 259-284.

<sup>15</sup> "Administration Report of the Persian Gulf," IOR/R/15/1/713.

<sup>16</sup> Mohammed al-Fares, *al-Awḍā' al-Iqtisādīyya fī Imārāt al-Sāhil (Dawlat al-Imārāt al-'Arabiyya al-Muttaḥida Ḥāliyyan) 1862-1965* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2000), pp. 90-94.

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion on the pearling law, see: Moza al-Jaber, *al-Taṭawwur al-Iqtisādī wa-l-Ijtīmā'ī fī Qaṭar 1930-1973* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research & Publishing, 2020), pp. 37-39.

<sup>18</sup> Carter, pp. 259-273.



to do so. By then, prominent Gulf merchants started declaring bankruptcy and claiming insolvency, let alone the ability to fund pearl diving.

To make matters worse, when World War II started, the British merchant fleet was placed under the control of the Ministry of Shipping.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the quality and quantity of the shipping lines to and in the region suffered greatly, and land freight, the lifeblood of the region's markets and supplies, underwent a steady decline. In addition, a soaring number of local entrepôt ships were attacked and sunk by German U-boats en route from the Gulf to India,<sup>20</sup> with entire crews and consignments lost. Consequently, some merchants developed relationships with British customs officers in an effort to protect their ships. In contrast, other Gulf merchants became reluctant to invest in entrepôt ships, fearing that they would lose the invested funds.

Due to the increasing difficulty of shipping to and in the region, merchants struggled to maintain their entrepôt activities. Some consignments to the Gulf were delayed for weeks, if not months, in Indian customs houses while merchants tried to obtain shipping space on a British steamship or a local boat. Many shipments were damaged by the weather or inadequate storage spaces in Indian customs houses, resulting in a significant loss of value and utility upon their arrival in the region.

Another critical dimension of the crisis was the lack of reserve stockpiles across the Gulf.<sup>21</sup> Due to the rotating economic cycle, local merchants rarely had several seasons of reserve stockpiles. In fact, merchants working within the rotating seasonal economy used to build their stockpiles based on the demands of the pearling season and the date harvest. Hence, many merchants started to reduce their imports during the pearling crisis and became almost wholly dependent on the date harvest.

Given the lack of reserve stockpiles, it was only a matter of time before shortages developed in the region and inflation hit the markets. Indeed, by then, poverty was already widespread across the Gulf region due to the lack of economic resources, the decline of the pearling economy, and the weakening of entrepôt activities. Local people found themselves in need of financial resources and imports.

These dire conditions prompted British intervention to save the region from socioeconomic collapse. Although the Gulf was far from the front lines, British officials feared a social uprising forcing the Gulf rulers to change their positions during the war, therefore harming British arrangements. As a consequence, British interference was deemed necessary to safeguard Britain's prestige and strategic interests in the Middle East.

## Britain and Wartime Measures in the Gulf

Trenchard Craven Fowle (1932-1939), Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf, voiced his concerns regarding the Gulf's position during the impending World War II. He sought to broaden the scope of the political agents' authorities in Gulf Sheikdoms to protect British interests during the war.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the British political agents had to obtain the right to punish any individual within the territories under their supervision who sympathized with British enemies during the war. This policy aimed to prevent locals from providing housing, supplies, or financial support to foreign individuals across the region, fearing

<sup>19</sup> See: Catherine Behrens, *Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War: History of the Second World War* (London: Longmans, Green, 1956).

<sup>20</sup> al-Khulaifi, pp. 572-582.

<sup>21</sup> "Letter from the Political Agent in Bahrain to the Adviser to the Bahrain Government," 17 September 1941, File 34 / 3 Imports and exports, IOR/R/15/4/13, QDL.

<sup>22</sup> "Letter from the Political Resident in Bushire to the Political Agents in Bahrain, Kuwait and Muscat," 8 April 1939, File 28/34-(i) War Emergency Legislation, IOR/R/15/2/726, QDL.



that Gulf ports would be used to assist Axis Powers or that public opinion would be incited against the British presence in the Gulf.

At the same time, Fowle argued that Gulf rulers were less likely to contain any public dissent due to the lack of financial resources. Usually, rulers will seek financial support from their traditional allies, the merchants or British officials. However, due to the ongoing economic crisis, no one was able to provide them with the essential resources they desperately needed. As a result, they will seek the support from the Axis Powers, which directly harm the British interests in the region.<sup>23</sup>

Over the long term, Britain risked losing its commercial advantage in the region, which threatened its strategic power.<sup>24</sup> Offshore and onshore operations were underway before the outbreak of the war. However, these operations were suspended during the war. While Gulf rulers signed long-term binding concessions with British companies to develop and operate their oil discoveries, there remained a chance that the anti-British propaganda would fuel a movement to nationalize the oil industry.<sup>25</sup>

Eric Beckett, legal adviser to the Foreign Office (1945-1953), and Fowle alarmed the British Committee of Imperial Defence of the quickly deteriorating conditions in the region. In their letters to the committee, they lobbied for elevating the Gulf states' position in the British wartime policies, asking for the Gulf to be treated as "belligerent territories participating in the war in the same way as British territories in general" instead of merely minor states.<sup>26</sup> They argued that the Gulf "has to be framed now" as "the Suez Canal of the air as well as the sources of most important oil supplies".<sup>27</sup>

As their demands were met, London agreed to take further measures to protect British interests in the Gulf. At this time, wartime measures in the region were limited to financial and policy support, which amounted to £4,000.<sup>28</sup> They also upgraded the Gulf Sheikdoms to belligerent territories during the war, opening a window for postwar support to the Gulf Sheikdoms and facilitating the broadening of austerity measures later on.

These concerns were also well received by the India Office in London, which liaised with the Publicity Officer in the Bahrain to keep an eye on the public opinion regarding the British position on the war.<sup>29</sup> The propaganda campaign consisted of two main sections. First, a systematic reporting of the public opinion among locals across the Gulf regarding the British position on the war, and second, a propaganda campaign to influence and have a better grasp over public opinion. The Publicity Office aimed to reduce any harm to British prestige among the public that could fuel future upheavals.<sup>30</sup>

The British government succeeded in adopting the Gulf Sheikdoms Emergency Law (1939), through which British political agents, together with local rulers, imposed laws, regulations, and legal penalties on individuals, extending their authority to include both internal<sup>31</sup> and external affairs of the region. Punishments ranged from fines and imprisonment to death sentences. British officials at this early stage

<sup>23</sup> "Letter from the Political Resident in Bushire to the Secretary of State for India," 28 April 1939, Coll 30/160(S) C.I.D. Sub Committee for Questions Concerning Middle East: Measures to Influence Minor Powers and Arab States Whose Assistance Might be of Value in Time of War, IOR/L/PS/12/3896A, QDL.

<sup>24</sup> IOR/L/PS/12/3896A.

<sup>25</sup> See: "Memo by Admiramade with Covering Note by Sir R. Wemys: Petroleum Situation in the British Empire," 30 July 1918, GT 5267 War Cabinet, CAB 24/59, CAB.

<sup>26</sup> "Minutes by Eric Beckett about War Emergency Legislation," 10 November 1937, Coll 30/160(S) C.I.D. Sub Committee for Questions Concerning Middle East: Measures to Influence Minor Powers and Arab States Whose Assistance Might be of Value in Time of War, IOR/L/PS/12/3896A, QDL.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> IOR/L/PS/12/3896A.

<sup>29</sup> "Letter from India Office in London to the Political Agent in Bahrain," 26 May 1940, File 28 / 7 I War: Propaganda: Local Opinion, IOR/R/15/2/687, QDL.

<sup>30</sup> For further discussion, see: File 28 / 7 I War: Propaganda: Local Opinion, IOR/R/15/2/687, QDL.

<sup>31</sup> IOR/R/15/2/726, QDL.

of the war aimed to prevent Britain's enemies from using the Gulf lands or its ports, thus preventing them from crossing and settling in the region.

On the policy side, political residents were asked to monitor the regional shortages and trade to guarantee a better supply of civilian imports. Political residents started a reporting system recording the total amount of supplies in tons needed for each of the Gulf ports, the amount that was set for distribution on the smaller harbours and villages, details of the importing ports and customs houses, and finally, the name of the consignor and consignee by steamer and by dhow.<sup>32</sup>

The reporting system was never successful. Many political residents who were to implement the system knew little about regional social and economic affairs, local language and culture. For instance, many of these residents did not see the difference between the food consumed by the public and the palace. They also did not understand the number of dependencies per village leader or tribal ruler, which could run into the hundreds. That is why the political residents, several times before submission, amended much of the information received from local merchants, rulers, and local customs houses for reporting.<sup>33</sup> As a result, many reports used to draw the British austerity measures were inaccurate.

However, the British government continued to implement this system. British agents were allowed to introduce a shipping space serving each of the Gulf Sheikdoms. Each Gulf Sheikdom received a quota that complemented the records. British agents also prevented regional re-exports, cutting Gulf ports from their regional re-export.<sup>34</sup> The purpose was to hold rulers responsible for the local market's imports and to prevent exports to neighbouring commercial ports.

A nation-based quota system was introduced to supplement the port space. Local merchants were required to acquire special licenses for civilian imports before shipping their consignments to the region.<sup>35</sup> The licenses covered almost 2000 commodities from Ceylon, Burma, and India. However, these licenses were burdensome for many local merchants, who had to wait for days, if not weeks, for their consignments to pass the customs houses. Many merchants even complained that this system, besides limiting their supply channels to three regions from the Indian Ocean, required payment of extra tariffs and sometimes bribes to get their licenses. Others complained that the weather ruined the consignments languishing in the customs houses. These complaints were not heard by the British representatives in the Gulf, and the matter quickly turned into a wide regional crisis.

These British measures, particularly the rationing of Gulf imports and exchange between regional ports, exacerbated the crisis already afflicting the people of the Gulf, due to the cessation of the commercial fleet operating in the Indian Ocean. Not all ports surrounding the Gulf Sea had access to Indian Ocean markets and ports. Many of the smaller and less fortunate Gulf ports and harbours had limited storage space and old docks and lacked customs offices. Some Gulf sheikdoms were entirely dependent on the pearl trade economy, with a minimal level of re-export. For example, a large number of merchants in al-Ahsa used the regional port of Bahrain, before the development of the port of Ujair. Similarly, the small islands of Hengam or the villages of Fars, for example, were supplied by the larger Gulf ports of Dubai, Muscat, and Kuwait. Thus, once the British agents stopped regional re-export

<sup>32</sup> "Letter from the Ministry of Economic Warfare to the British Consulate General in Bushire," 27 January 1941, File 34 / 3 Imports and Exports of goods, IOR/R/15/4/14, QDL.

<sup>33</sup> "Memorandum from the Political Agent in Sharjah to the Political Agent in Bahrain," 1 May 1942, File 34 / 3 Imports and exports, IOR/R/15/4/13, QDL.

<sup>34</sup> IOR/R/15/4/13.

<sup>35</sup> "Telegram from the Political Agent in Bahrain to the Political Resident in Bushire," 3 January 1944, File 29 / 22 I Cereals for Sharjah and Dubai, IOR/R/15/2/781, QDL; "Memorandum from the Political Agent in Bahrain to the Advisor to the Bahrain Government," 17 September 1941, File 34 / 3 Imports and exports, IOR/R/15/4/13, QDL.

operations, these merchants were unable to supply their villages, and locals suffered from shortages of supplies in their markets.

## A British Manmade Crisis

Regardless of the dire implications of these regional policies, British agents measured their successes without considering the welfare of the region's populations. That is why, by the end of 1942, all of the regional distribution channels were blocked. British commercial and political reports from the Gulf from 1941 to 1944 did not mention regional trade. That was a good indication for the British officials that the local port spaces were prepared and organized: they were ready to proceed with the planned rationing system.

In late 1942, the Gulf States became part of the Middle East Supply Centre (MESC) to guarantee supplies to the region and economic transformation after the war.<sup>36</sup> Under MESC supervision, Gulf rulers were asked to issue ration cards to each household under their port space. These cards included a written total quantity of rationed foodstuffs that the household was entitled to purchase; each adult was the equivalent of two children. People were then asked to acquire their supplies from any authorized local shop. Although the plan seemed plausible, British agents soon discovered that even basic rations were hard to guarantee during the war. Gradually, the rice, the most essential item, was replaced with mixed cereals, which ended with the limited supply of wheat mixed with barley and millet.<sup>37</sup>

Still, the political agents were ready to introduce the last of the wartime measures with the food companies. By the end of 1943, local rulers, with the support of British agents, established food companies in the region.<sup>38</sup> The idea was to allow the ruler to control the civil supplies and maintain their port spaces even after the war. The assumption was that if the ruler was the sole buyer and supplier of essential foodstuffs, competitive bidding and the resulting price rises could be avoided, and the imports would be better managed.<sup>39</sup> The ruler had to appoint suppliers for each food company item and a distributor from the community. These suppliers and distributors were then given the purchasing order from the ruler. Initially, the food companies covered grain and sugar; later they also offered tea, coffee, fats, and textiles.

After the war, the people in Gulf Sheikhdoms experienced little if any improvement in their socioeconomic status. It was becoming evident that the British austerity measures had failed to have a long-term impact, or even, alleviate the region's prolonged economic decline. In contrast, locals claimed that it was the worst economic downturn in the region's history.

A large part of the austerity shortcomings in the Gulf was the fact that the British officials planning these policies overlooked or ignored the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions beyond the war. They did not consider the economic problems that had caused regional disasters in the first place. By the time austerity was to be implemented, the Gulf was already reeling from the collapse of the pearling economy. Hence, after austerity was implemented, locals lost income due to the decline of the pearling economy and wartime shortage of supplies.

<sup>36</sup> "Telegram from the Secretary of State for India to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf," 12 January 1944, Ext 329 / 43 Shipment of Food to Persian Gulf States, IOR/L/PS/12/786, QDL. For further discussion, see: Paul Kingston, *Britain and the Politics of Modernization in the Middle East, 1945-1958* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 12-27.

<sup>37</sup> "Intelligence Summary of the Political Agent in Bahrain," October 1943, Coll 30 / 52 (2) Persian Gulf, Diaries: Bahrain News and Intelligence Reports, IOR/L/PS/12/3768, QDL.

<sup>38</sup> "Notes by the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf in Bushire," 12 February 1944, File 29 / 3 I Food Supplies – Food Control and Rationing and General, IOR/R/15/2/766, QDL.

<sup>39</sup> Eckart Woertz, *Oil for Food: The Global Food Crisis and the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2013), pp. 35-62.

Another shortcoming was that austerity measures were unsuited to the region's economic activities and resources. The MESC policy was designed for the large Middle Eastern countries of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, which enjoyed considerable agricultural and industrial output. Hence, it managed supplies by creating a commercial space in each country and encouraging domestic self-sufficiency.

However, when the MESC was to be implemented in the Gulf, British officials were surprised to learn that there was barely any agricultural or industrial output. The vast deserts of the Gulf were not meant for agriculture, and even the dates grown on plantations were exported. The limited labour force, trained to serve as divers or sailors learned very little about industrialization. People in the region imported almost all of their supplies, including staples like rice and sugar. As a consequence, the idea of a strict commercial space was unrealistic for a region whose people had historically crossed and recrossed the sea and land in search of resources and opportunities.

Another great difficulty was the lack of understanding of local affairs among the British officials who implemented these policies. Historically, Gulf economic and political relations were founded on networks of social and kinship ties. Rulers and tribal leaders had always leveraged their financial resources to maintain power. That is why the networks of dependency formed the backbone of Gulf economies and political stability. So, when local rulers ruled their port space, they constantly considered all of their dependencies, even if they lived hundreds of kilometres away or in a different jurisdiction.

However, many of the British officials were uncomfortable with the fluid nature of Gulf economies because it limited the reporting system and their ability to have an accurate quota system, both of which were threats to their strategic power. In fact, many of the quota reports were amended, cutting off a vast number of dependencies from each Sheikdom. Thus, many locals were left without any supplies, causing a decline in socioeconomic conditions among the inhabitants of the small villages across the Gulf.

Due to these shortcomings of austerity in the region, the economic cycle was halted with no functioning economy. As early as 1942, locals reported dreadful food shortages. Although these food shortages were less serious in the large port cities of Kuwait and Muscat, they were acute in the small ports of the lower Gulf. Residents of small villages and islands reported famine, which a British official confirmed. A report issued by a British agent in Bahrain described people "eating grass" and "dying of starvation", while another report cited famine in at least seven Persian villages that had benefitted from trade with the larger ports.<sup>40</sup>

Some locals claimed that, beyond 1942, they were surviving on nothing but dates.<sup>41</sup> Other food items were unavailable via commercial routes, and many grains were only available for the palace. Even the tiny quantities available for public consumption were sold at inflated prices, meaning that locals who had lost their pearling incomes could seldom afford them. Eventually, the people ended up with rationed wheat, a grain that nobody in the region knew how to prepare, much less had the equipment to do so. A British report called the mixture of cereals "almost unpalatable" because the people in the Gulf did not consider millet suitable for human consumption.<sup>42</sup>

After the war, many Gulf merchants that had historically established themselves as intermediaries between the Gulf and Indian Ocean ports were squeezed out of this role. The Gulf port space and the ban on regional re-exports across the ocean curtailed their role as local brokers. They were also banned from

<sup>40</sup> "Memorandum from the Political Agent in Sharjah to the Political Agent in Bahrain."

<sup>41</sup> al-Fares, p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> "Intelligence Summary of the Political Agent in Bahrain."

the distribution of commodities due to the newly formed food and textile companies. In short, wartime measures lacked long-term plans for the region, largely because they were focused on securing supplies, not on strengthening the economic system. That is why, once the war ended, supplies did not return to prewar levels and the people of the region could not escape the economic crisis.

## Conclusion

World War II was a phase of hardship in Gulf history. For many locals, the hardship associated with the *Drought Years* was limited to the years of the war, when Britain introduced austerity measures. For others, it began with the collapse of the pearling economy in the 1920s. From a broader perspective, it was a phase of economic transformation that pronounced the end of an economic era in the region.

With the onset of World War I, Gulf societies began witnessing a difficult economic transformation that announced the end of an economic era in the region's history and the beginning of another that transformed them from being agents of the Indian Ocean pearling and trading activities to being directly engaged in the global economy through modern oil-based industries. The hardship associated with the economic crisis and the collapse of the pearling economy, which never recovered, accelerated the nascent transformation toward modern oil industries.

In fact, the collapse of the pearling economy coincident with the commercial decline during World War II presented one of the most important pillars of this large economic transformation. It is also related to the complex networks of dependencies that formed the Gulf economies and enabled the transmission of this crisis to the entire economic system. Hence, even after the war, Gulf merchants failed to resume commerce, and locals were reluctant to participate in traditional economic activities.

Nevertheless, British advisers strongly fortified the economic crisis. While their overarching aim was to secure British interests in the region during the war, one cannot ignore the fact that British officials interfered in the region's internal affairs through modernization reforms in the economic system, controlling port operations, market supplies, and people's movement, as well as initiating state institutions.

Throughout the war, British officials failed to engage with the local rulers and merchants to design a policy framework that corresponded to the region's internal dynamics. Instead, they dealt with the war in terms of modern economic institutions replacing what they believed were primitive dependency networks. It appears that Britain drew uniform austerity measures across their spheres of influence, regardless of the local dynamics of each territory. In a sense, British agents in the Gulf transmitted many policies developed by British agents elsewhere without any amendments. Consequently, these policies failed simply because market conditions for self-sufficiency in economies that must import vital commodities such as grain, textiles, and labour – as the Gulf did – do not exist.

Still, this study offers glimpses into the links between the global history and the Gulf. We can relate the experience of Gulf people and trading houses during the war with their counterparts at Africa or East Asia. That is because during the war many nations suffered from the British austerity measures and the Indian Ocean wartime difficulties.

Austerity also had specific implications in the Gulf. Among the many regions that underwent austerity measures during the war, the Gulf was one of the few that witnessed no increase in self-sufficiency. Gulf economies remained dependent on imports, with no agricultural or industrial output surge. Part of the failure of Gulf countries to achieve the intended objectives of British policies was the lack of agricultural production and the scarce population in the region. Locals were neither trained nor ready to engage in new



economic activities. Hence, many were excluded from economic engagement and depended on British rationing cards throughout the war.

In short, studies on Britain's role in shaping the Gulf's modern history have often neglected austerity as a topic. Further studies are needed to investigate how austerity shaped the Gulf's experience with the British Empire and to compare the experiences of the Gulf with those of other regions across the Indian Ocean like west Africa and India. Local and British resources present a wealth of knowledge regarding the Gulf's history, which remains under investigated – just like the *Drought Years*.

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Faozi Al-Goidi\*

## 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 مجالاً 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 مجالاً لإعادة النظر في تاريخ الخليج واختبار ملاءمة «المشيخة البحرية» مصطلحاً بديلاً من «القرصنة»؛ وذلك بما يحمله في طياته 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 borders and 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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;<sup>3</sup> Lincoln Payne, who demonstrated how maritime powers have shaped the course of world history;<sup>4</sup> and Geoffrey Till, who argued that control of the seas remains a decisive factor in shaping world powers, even in the modern era.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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,

<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Uṣūl al-Niẓām al-Siyāsī: al-Juz' al-Awwal: Min 'Uṣūr mā Qabl al-Insān ilā al-Thawra al-Faransiyya*, Mujab al-Imam and Mu' in al-Imam (trans.) (Doha: Muntada al-'Ilaqat al-'Arabiyya wa-l-Dawliyya, 2016), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Riyadh, *al-Uṣūl al-'Āmma fī al-Jiyūghrafīyā al-Siyāsīyya wa-l-Jiyūbūlītīkiyya* (Cairo: Mu' assasat Hindawi, 2014), p. 147.

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

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Portuguese ships were fitted out with heavy cannons, which gave them superiority in naval battles.<sup>9</sup> To reinforce their control over maritime trade, the Portuguese also imposed a navigation permit system<sup>10</sup>, while building a network of forts at strategic ports to secure trade routes.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

### 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 Gastra, *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.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Murad, *Širā' al-Qiwā fi al-Muḥīṭ al-Hindī wa-l-Khalīj al-'Arabī: Judhūruh al-Tārīkhīyya wa-Ab'āduh* (Damascus: Dar Dimashq, 1984), p. 178.

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

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

<sup>11</sup> Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion 1400-1668* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 64-67.

<sup>12</sup> *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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

### ***"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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 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-Mujtama' wa-l-Dawla fi al-Khalij wa-l-Jazira al-'Arabiyya (Min Manzūr Mukhtalif)* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Sultan al-Qasimi, *al-Qawāsīm wa-l-'Udwān al-Birīṭānī (1797-1820)* (Sharjah: Mansurat al-Qasimi, 2012), pp. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Despite this disagreement among Western historians, many Arab researchers have adopted the "piracy" hypothesis, engraining it in the Gulf consciousness as a historical fact.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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,<sup>22</sup> which has enjoyed wide popularity in the Gulf,<sup>23</sup> 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,<sup>24</sup> 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,<sup>25</sup> 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,<sup>26</sup> which forbade British captains from opening fire on Arab vessels, even if they approached them, emboldened Arab tribes to engage in

<sup>19</sup> Mikhin Leonovich, *Ḥilf al-Qawāsīm wa-Siyāsāt Birīṭāniyā fī al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī fī al-Qarn al-Thāmin ‘Ashar wa-l-Niṣf al-Awwal min al-Qarn al-Tāsi ‘Ashar*, Samir Najmuddin Sattas (trans.) (Dubai: Markaz Jum‘a al-Majid li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Turath, 2009), pp. 172-173; Natalia Nikolaevna Tomanovych, *al-Duwal al-Awrubbiyya fī al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī min al-Qarn al-Sādis ‘Ashara ilā al-Qarn al-Tāsi ‘Ashar*, Samir Najmuddin Sattas (trans.) (Dubai: Markaz Jum‘a al-Majid li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Turath, 2006), pp. 15-17.

<sup>20</sup> See: Hasan bin Muhammad al-Thani, "Istrāṭijiyat Mawqī‘ Qaṭar wa-Dawruhu fī Ṣirā‘ al-Qiwā al-Khalījīyya fī ‘Ishrīniyyāt al-Qarn al-Tāsi ‘Ashar," *Riwaq al-Tarikh wa-l-Turath*, no. 10 (June 2020); Jamal Zakariya Qasim, "Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," *Hawliyyat Kullīyyat al-Adab*, Ain Shams University, vol. 9 (1964); Hayat al-Bassam, *A‘māl Raḥma bin Jābir al-Baḥriyya fī al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī Bayn al-Qarṣana wa-l-Intiqām* (Riyadh: Dar al-Shibl, 1993); Abdullah al-Khalifa, "Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima," *Majallat al-Wathīqa*, vol. 30, no. 60 (July 2011); Yusuf al-Abdullah, "Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima wa ‘Ilāqātuh bi-l-Qiwā al-Siyāsiyya fī al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī," *Majallat Waqa‘i ‘Tarikhīyya*, Faculty of Arts, University of Cairo, vol. 52, no. 9 (January 2008); Fa‘iq Tahbub, *Tārīkh al-Baḥrayn al-Siyāsī* (Kuwait: Manshurat Dhat al-Salasil, 1983); Ahmad Mustafa Abu Hakima, *Tārīkh Sharqay al-Jazīra al-‘Arabiyya*, Muhammad Amin (trans.) (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, n.d.).

<sup>21</sup> Qasim, p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> Abdul Aziz Al Mahmoud, *al-Qurṣān* (Doha: Bloomsbury, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> In a clear indication of its popularity, the novel has gone through six printings. See: "Riwāyat ‘al-Qurṣān’ Tusajjil A‘lā Mabī‘āt fī Sūq al-Kutub al-Qaṭariyya," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21/10/2012, accessed on 15/4/2022, at <https://acr.ps/1L9zOki>

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

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> Lorimer identifies the first incident of piracy in the region as the 1778 Qawasim seizure of a British East India Company vessel.<sup>28</sup> However, British archival documents reveal that the Sheikh of the Qawasim, Saqr bin Rashid al-Qasimi,<sup>29</sup> justified this action by asserting that the seized ship was not flying the British flag, but rather the flag of the Imam of Muscat,<sup>30</sup> with whom the Qawasim were at war.<sup>31</sup>

In a similar vein, historian Nicholas Tarling argues that the colonial use of the term “piracy” was widespread in the Malay Islands,<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> was inspired, in part, by the model of the Italian maritime republics<sup>35</sup> 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

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>28</sup> 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).

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> The Imam of Muscat was Ahmad bin Sa’id 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.

<sup>31</sup> R/15/1/32, 27/4/1824, pp. 97-100.

<sup>32</sup> i.e. Southeast Asia; that is, present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and their environs.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1963), p. 20, quoted in May Muhammad al-Khalifa, *Muhammad bin Khalifa 1813-1890 CE: al-Ustura wa-l-Tarikh al-Muwazī* (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 1996), p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> This term has been used elsewhere to refer to a merchant who owns ships for hire. See: “Bayt Abū Dāwūd ... min Mashykhāt al-Bahr 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.

<sup>35</sup> 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,<sup>36</sup> al-Qawasim,<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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,<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, the

<sup>36</sup> 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 ‘Arab al-Huwala* (Kuwait: al-Amin li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi’, n.d.).

<sup>37</sup> The Qawasim are an Arab tribe that formed emirates along the Omani coast in modern times. See: al-Qasimi.

<sup>38</sup> al-Khalifa, “Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima,” p. 260.

<sup>39</sup> Anders Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 72-77.

<sup>40</sup> 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).

<sup>41</sup> 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 Wathā'iq Būmbāy: Silsila Jadīda Raqam (24) ‘Ām 1856*, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani (trans.) (Doha: Markaz Hasan bin Muhammad li-l-Dirasat al-Tarikhīyya, 2017), p. 436; al-Khalifa, “Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima,” p. 260.

<sup>42</sup> R/15/1/25, 8/4/1822, pp. 37-39.

land-based sheikhdoms relied more on fixed resources, such as agriculture and herding.<sup>43</sup> In the case of ibn Jabir, he relied on maintaining maritime trade routes, pearl fisheries, and the imposition of tributes,<sup>44</sup> 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 ‘Utba tribal confederation (the ‘Utub), a branch of the large ‘Aniza tribe that inhabits central Arabia. Notably, the current ruling families of Bahrain (Al Khalifa) and Kuwait (Al Sabah) also descend from the Bani ‘Utba 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,<sup>45</sup> and accounts suggesting he was in his seventies when he passed away,<sup>46</sup> he was most likely born between 1756 and 1760<sup>47</sup> in al-Qurain (present-day Kuwait).

Most historians agree that the ‘Utub, 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.<sup>48</sup> The ‘Utub 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 ‘Utub 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.<sup>49</sup>

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 ‘Adhbi (Rahma’s father) would oversee maritime affairs.<sup>50</sup> 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

<sup>43</sup> al-Naqib, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> R/15/1/22, 9/4/1820, pp. 72-73.

<sup>45</sup> R/15/1/40, 14/12/1826, pp.129-131.

<sup>46</sup> al-Bassam, p. 66.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Qasim; al-Khalifa, “Tārīkh Raḥma bin Jābir al-Jalāhima.”

<sup>48</sup> Abd al-Aziz al-Rashid, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* (Beirut: Manshurat Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, 1978), p. 106; Abu Hakima, p. 74; Yusuf al-Qina’i, *Ṣafahāt min Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* (Cairo: Dar Sa’d Misr, 1946), p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> al-Qina’i, p. 8; Abu Hakima, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas, p. 305.

political power,<sup>51</sup> while others believe that repeated attacks on Kuwait by the neighbouring Bani Ka'b emirate on the Shatt al-Arab,<sup>52</sup> 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<sup>53</sup> via "piracy". However, Abu Hakima's interpretation reflects a colonial narrative, one that will be deconstructed below.

### *The Rise of the Maritime Sheikdom (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.<sup>54</sup> 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<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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 'Utub with the exception of the Jalahima".<sup>57</sup> 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 like 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.<sup>58</sup> The description indicates that what happened was not piracy, but a war between ibn Jabir and the people of Bushehr.<sup>59</sup> 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,

<sup>51</sup> al-Rashid, p. 108.

<sup>52</sup> Abu Hakima, p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>54</sup> Lorimer, Part VI, p. 1199.

<sup>55</sup> 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.

<sup>56</sup> R/15/1/10, 22/4/1808, pp. 212-213.

<sup>57</sup> Lorimer, Part VI, p. 1198.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> 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?<sup>60</sup>

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.<sup>61</sup> 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<sup>62</sup> in cooperation with the Imam of Muscat, which resulted in the destruction of the Qawasim fleet and the port of Ras Al Khaimah.<sup>63</sup>

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 'Utub, Lorimer wrote, "Rahmah ibn Jabir began to commit increasingly serious atrocities".<sup>64</sup> Though the 'Utub 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".<sup>65</sup> 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".<sup>66</sup>

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

<sup>60</sup> al-Bassam, p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> 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.

<sup>63</sup> al-Qasimi, p. 103.

<sup>64</sup> Lorimer, p. 1200.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup>

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,<sup>71</sup> and distance himself from the Wahhabis, who were on the verge of defeat.<sup>72</sup>

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.<sup>73</sup> 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,<sup>74</sup> causing the entire venture to fail.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>68</sup> R/15/1/10, 22/4/1813, pp. 212-213.

<sup>69</sup> Lorimer, p. 1201.

<sup>70</sup> al-Bassam, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> 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.

<sup>72</sup> al-Abdullah, p. 202.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, p. 435.

<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> This episode reveals that Britain viewed ibn Jabir as a chieftain on par with the Gulf chieftains who had signed the agreement which 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.<sup>76</sup> One of the most important Najdi sources<sup>77</sup> 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”.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup>

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.<sup>81</sup>

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

<sup>75</sup> Thomas, p. 436.

<sup>76</sup> Uthman bin Abdullah bin Bishr, *Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd* (Riyadh: Dar al-Malik Abd al-Aziz, 1982), p. 320.

<sup>77</sup> 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: *Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd* by Uthman bin Abdullah bin Bishr (d. 1873), *Tārīkh Najd* by Husayn bin Ghannam (d. 1810), *Lam‘ al-Shihāb fī Sīrat Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhāb* by Ibrahim bin Isa, and *Tārīkh ibn La‘būn* by Abdullah bin Muhammad bin La‘būn (d. 1976).

<sup>78</sup> bin Bishr, p. 52.

<sup>79</sup> Lorimer, p. 1200.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

eulogized by several local poets and scholars after his death,<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup>

In the book *al-Khabar wa-l-'Ayān 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*.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> The book states that ibn Jabir did not own warships, instead relying on small ships used for pearl-diving and fishing.<sup>86</sup> 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.<sup>87</sup>

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.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup> 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.

<sup>82</sup> See: Hamad Khalifa Abu Shihab, *Turāthunā min al-Shi'r al-Sha'bī* (Riyadh: Mu'assasat al-Ittihad li-l-Sahafa wa-l-Nashr, 1980).

<sup>83</sup> al-Abdullah, p. 202.

<sup>84</sup> Khalid al-Faraj, *al-Khabar wa-l-'Ayān fī Tārīkh Najd*, Abdullah al-Shuqair (ed.) (Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Ubaykan, 2000), p. 243.

<sup>85</sup> 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.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>87</sup> Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Ghani, *Biriṭānyā wa Imārāt al-Sāhil: Dirāsa fī al-'Ilqāt al-Ta'āhudiyya* (Beirut: 'Adnan li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 2017), p. 160.

<sup>88</sup> R/15/1/16, 9/6/1815, pp. 92-96.

<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup>

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.<sup>91</sup>

### *Rahmah on the Qatari coast*

Ibn Jabir established his first base in Khor Hassan, in al-Khuwair, a village on Qatar's western coast.<sup>92</sup> 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,<sup>93</sup> 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 Jabir's location due to its natural inaccessibility.<sup>94</sup>

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,<sup>95</sup> 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,<sup>96</sup> 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,<sup>97</sup> without clarifying the nature of these circumstances.

<sup>90</sup> 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/ynzzflj9>

<sup>91</sup> al-Bassam, pp. 58-65.

<sup>92</sup> Lorimer, p. 862.

<sup>93</sup> R/15/1/12, 15/1/1811, pp. 19-20.

<sup>94</sup> Abu Hakima, p. 151.

<sup>95</sup> Hasan bin Muhammad al-Thani, *Lamahāt min Tārīkh Qaṭar* (n.c.: n.p., 2006), p. 135.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>97</sup> *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-Maqtā' (1815).<sup>98</sup> 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.<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> 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.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Muhammad al-Nabahani, *al-Tuḥfa al-Nabahāniyya fī Tārīkh al-Jazīra al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dar Iḥyā' al-'Ulum, 1999), p. 100.

<sup>99</sup> R/15/1/10, 22/4/1808, pp. 212-213.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> 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.

<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

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.<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup> Lorimer, and those who quote him, have portrayed this operation as an act of piracy.<sup>107</sup> 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.<sup>108</sup> For ibn Jabir, this alliance proved equally advantageous, as the Egyptian forces helped in subjugating Dammam, Qatif, and Uqair. Afterward, Ibrahim Pasha allowed

<sup>103</sup> al-Bassam, p. 63.

<sup>104</sup> Abu Hakima, p. 57.

<sup>105</sup> Ann B. Campbell, *Tārīkh al-Qaṭīf al-Siyāsī fī Mudhakkirāt al-Muqīm al-Siyāsī al-Birīṭānī fī al-Khalīj al-'Arabī*, Jalal al-Ansari (ed.) (Beirut: al-Dar al-'Arabiyya li-l-Mawṣū'at, 2020), p. 31.

<sup>106</sup> Majid Shibr, *al-Qabā'il wa-l-Širā'āt al-Siyāsīyya wa-l-Qabaliyya: al-Imārāt, Qaṭar, al-Baḥrayn, al-Mantiqa al-Sharqiyya fī Taqārīr al-Ḍubbāt wa-l-Mu'tamadīn al-Birīṭāniyyīn* (Beirut: Isdarat Bayt al-Warraq, 2010), p. 467.

<sup>107</sup> Lorimer, p. 1203.

<sup>108</sup> Qasim, p. 179.

him to rebuild his castle in Dammam and fortify it with cannons.<sup>109</sup> After successfully subjugating the coast extending from Al-Ahsa to the vicinity of Kuwait, ibn Jabir began inciting Ibrahim Pasha to invade Bahrain.<sup>110</sup> 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.<sup>111</sup> 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,<sup>112</sup> 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.<sup>113</sup> 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.

<sup>109</sup> Shibr, p. 468.

<sup>110</sup> Campbell, p. 31.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> 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).

<sup>113</sup> 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.<sup>114</sup>

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.<sup>115</sup> 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<sup>116</sup> reached its gates.<sup>117</sup>

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 Sheikdom

### *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.<sup>118</sup> 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

<sup>114</sup> 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.

<sup>115</sup> R/15/1/28, 19/10/1822, pp. 227-240.

<sup>116</sup> 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.

<sup>117</sup> Qasim, p. 51.

<sup>118</sup> 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.<sup>119</sup> A decade later, Captain John Malcolm estimated the island’s annual pearl exports at nearly 1 million rupees,<sup>120</sup> 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.<sup>121</sup>

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,<sup>122</sup> 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:

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

<sup>120</sup> Lorimer, p. 164.

<sup>121</sup> William Palgrave, *Wasaf al-Jazīra al-‘Arabiyya wa Sharqihā*, Sabri Hasan (trans.) (Cairo: al-Majlis al-‘A’la li-l-Thaqafa, 2001), p. 248.

<sup>122</sup> 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-Zabba' [Queen of Palmyra], famed for her words "By my own hand, not 'Amr's!" [*bi-yadī lā bi-yadī 'amr*], 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.<sup>123</sup>

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",<sup>124</sup> 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, showing that 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 'Amr'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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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> al-Abdullah, p. 212.



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Yasmeen Qadan\*

## Star-Tied Water: Tracing Life in a Colonized Palestinian Village During the Anthropocene\*\*

### ماءٌ مُتَنَجَم: تتبُّع الحياة في قرية فلسطينية مستعمرة في زمن الأنثروبوسين

**Abstract:** This article traces practices that sustain the continuity of life in Palestinian villages, approaching practitioners intimately through a methodology of slowness. It examines the Anthropocene as an embodiment of accelerated time deeply intertwined with modernity, colonialism, and capitalism. It argues that resistance to this acceleration emerges through the sensory environment and the relationality between all its components, from the earth to the sky and stars, to the blood in our veins. Focusing on the practice of star-tying water, this article explores an alternative trajectory of interconnected movement between the environment and the body, allowing for contemplation of the surrounding space and the identification of practices that bridge past, present, and future.

**Keywords:** Palestinian Village; Slowness; Anthropocene; Colonialism; Acceleration; Sensory Environment; Star-tied Water.

**الملخص:** تتبَّع هذه الدراسة الممارسات التي تُحقق استمرارية الحياة في القرية الفلسطينية، من خلال الاقتراب الحميمي من الممارسين، ومنهجية البطء، حيث يجري تفكيك عصر الأنثروبوسين الذي يشكّل تجلياً لزمن التسارع الذي يتركز على تمفصل «الحدائثة/ الاستعمار/ الرأسمالية». وتكمن محاولة صدّ هذا التسارع في البيئة الحسّية، أي من خلال لمس العلائقية بين كل مكونات البيئة؛ بداية من الأرض، ووصولاً إلى السماء والنجوم، ومروراً بالدم في عروقنا. فالماء المتنجّم، الذي تبحث فيه هذه الدراسة، يعطينا إمكانية تتبُّع مسار آخر للحركة الرابطة بين البيئة والجسد، والتأمل في المكان كله حولنا، ورصد الممارسات التي تصل بين أزمنة الماضي والحاضر والمستقبل.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** القرية الفلسطينية؛ البطء؛ الأنثروبوسين؛ الاستعمار؛ التسارع؛ البيئة الحسّية؛ الماء المتنجّم.

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## Introduction

In the context of colonized Palestine, environmental studies remains trapped in a paradigm of colonial “loss” – the disastrous theft of an environment – and solutions grounded in scientific studies and developmentalist approaches. These approaches, however, are part of the same epistemological framework, rooted in the coarticulation of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism,<sup>1</sup> which ultimately sustain and perpetuate the colonial structure.

A few historical attempts, such as the writings of Tawfiq Canaan,<sup>2</sup> have sought to explore the ancient relationship between Palestinian peasants and the environment that they inhabit, particularly the environmental signs (stars, animals, plants, rocks, water) he identifies as markers of changing weather, predictors of crop quantity and quality, or indications for the timing of ploughing or harvesting. However, these studies have often been used to frame Palestinian peasant practices as static, consigning them to the realm of “tradition” or “heritage”, thereby questioning the vitality of Palestinian villages today.

This article challenges such assumptions, arguing that Palestinian villages remain dynamic and alive. To understand the changes within these villages, the practices of Palestinian peasants, and their relationships with their environment, it is necessary to move beyond the confines of “heritage” studies, which overlook the everyday lived practices within the landscape and the ways the environment itself changes.

Therefore, this article revolves around the “sensory environment”, examining the meanings attributed to this environment as a form of local knowledge deeply embedded in daily life. This knowledge is experienced in multiple, varying, and contradictory ways, shaped by a particular temporality that interacts with colonial time on various levels. Furthermore, the article explores life as experienced through the landscape and dwelling practices within a Palestinian village under colonial rule and military occupation in the era of Anthropocene. The “environment” is thus framed as part of the local and changing sensory knowledge embedded in the practices and experiences of dwelling in the village.

Dwelling, as used in this study, extends beyond the act of living in a material space. It also encompasses the complicated interactions between people and their environment and the meanings that they ascribe to their life experiences. It involves understanding how people perceive their reality through their relationship to their environment on various levels: the material environment (the structures, materials, and landscapes that people interact with, such as homes, tools, and the natural world); practice (daily routines, rituals, and activities pursued within the dwelling space, such as cooking, farming, or simply moving through the neighbourhood or street); and meaning (rooted in the cultural, social, and subjective importance attributed to the dwelling space, based on the relationship with ancestors and land, religious beliefs, and individual memories).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The tripartite structure of modernity, colonization, and capitalism, which underpins the redefinition of the environment in the Palestinian context, is rooted in the co-articulation of progress, speed, value, consumption, violence, and attrition. These components are not discrete. This structure was built by imposing categories that legitimized a continuous, accelerating process of destruction of colonized bodies and environment.

<sup>2</sup> Tawfiq Canaan, “Folklore of the seasons in Palestine,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 3 (1923), pp. 21-35; Tawfiq Canaan, “Plant-lore in Palestinian Superstition,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 8 (1928), pp. 163-203. We might also add the work of the journal *al-Turāth wa-l-Mujtamaʿ* (*Heritage and Society*), founded by the Inash Alusra Association in the early 1970s, which drew heavily on Canaan’s work and published translations of many of his articles as well as other heritage and folklore pieces. See: *Inash Alusra Association*, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdnatmyz>

<sup>3</sup> For more on the anthropological concept of dwelling, see: Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement: Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2001); Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking: In Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 145-161; Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).



The article focuses on the different dwelling practices in a Palestinian village in the era of capitalist and colonial acceleration.<sup>4</sup> It proceeds from the premise that Palestinians experience a temporality that, while slower than the rapid pace of capitalist-colonialist acceleration, is also more expansive. This temporality stretches from the stars to the earth, down into the deep waters around them and into their bodies. The article traces “lived life” in contrast to the concept of the Anthropocene, which proposes an environment doomed to decay and extinction under the weight of contemporary capitalist-colonialist discourse. It reaffirms the continuity of the past, present, and future of the Palestinian peasant and village through an approach of “slowness”, akin to Walter Benjamin’s tortoise,<sup>5</sup> against the hegemonic acceleration.

I draw on stories from my village (al-Jarushiyya) and the practices I have observed both within and beyond my family through a slow, auto-ethnographic methodology within the contradictory context of an accelerating time, which generally ignores – or extinguishes – the daily sensory connections we experience. One of the stories I explore is my mother’s evening ritual of placing water on the windowsill to “tie” it to the stars [*tanjīm al-mayy*]; this “star-tied” water can then be used for medicinal purposes. Such practice has been characterized as one of many long-extinct “traditions”. However, I suggest that these practices differ in their temporality depending on who knows them, who lives through them, or who approaches them slowly.

“Star-tying” water is linked not only to healing but also to marital and reproductive relations that bring together an environmental as a “whole”: water, plants, stars, blood. All the stories revolve around relationships within the village, which are based, in essence, on the changes of the natural landscape brought about by the great fissure that has occurred under colonialism/capitalism. Through these stories, the study argues that, despite the pressure of accelerating time, the changing practices of dwelling sustain sensory/existential links with the lived environment in the “now”, intermingling with the hybridization imposed by material or capitalist/colonial “values”.

## The Anthropocene: Epistemological Coarticulation of Modernity, Colonialism, and Capitalism

The concept of the “Anthropocene” encompasses a discourse in which environmental threats are heightened, accompanied by calculations that claim to quantify the planet’s remaining time.<sup>6</sup> The term was coined by meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Paul J Crutzen, in a study titled *Human Geology*, in which he argued that humanity’s profound impact on the earth’s surface marked a rupture from the preceding Holocene era.<sup>7</sup> According to Crutzen, the Anthropocene began in the 18th century with the advent of the steam engine. The term itself means “the era of humanity”, and geologists distinguish it from previous eras by examining the earth’s stratigraphy and the changes in strata that reflect the profound biological, environmental, atmospheric, tectonic, or chemical transformations occurring on or near its surface.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This paper is based on capitalist-colonial acceleration in Palestine, from British colonialism to the present time. British colonialism intensified Ottoman land laws, which created five categories of land, to legally designate agricultural land, rationalize farming, and facilitate the collection of taxes without having to rely on the local customary law of the *hamūla* and the ties of kinship and solidarity. According to Marxist structuralism, British exploited this law to introduce capitalist production via European-Jewish capital investments, land purchases from absentee landlords, and reclassification of “dead lands” to build settlements, creating markets for their products, which destroyed local Palestinian agricultural produce value. Cash-based economies led to peasant indebtedness and wage labour, and generated surplus value for European-Jewish settlements and a capitalist mode of production. This also deepened class divisions and empowered local elites (landowners), who themselves exploited the same property law. See: Talal Asad, “Class Transformation under the Mandate,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 53 (December 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in: Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-1940, Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (eds.) (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 2003), pp. 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Brannen, “The Anthropocene is a Joke,” *The Atlantic*, 13/8/2019, accessed on 20/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2avcuujz>

<sup>7</sup> Alem Grabovac, “al-Insān am al-Ṭabī‘a: Taṣawwur al-Anthrūbūsin,” *Fikr wa-Fann*, no. 99 (2012), p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Noel Castree, “An official welcome to the Anthropocene epoch – but who gets to decide it’s here?,” *The Conversation*, 30/8/2016, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/cz9ymakw>

While Crutzen marked the beginning of the Anthropocene in the 18th century, this remains a subject of debate. Geographers Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin have suggested 1610 as the beginning of decisive man-made change, while another group of scientists argue that the Anthropocene began in 1950, coinciding with what Crutzen termed the “great acceleration” – a period marked by rapid population growth, the spread of single-use plastics, intensive fertilizer use, and the spread of nuclear radiation. Since the mid-20th century, profound transformations have reshaped the global system and patterns of human occupation, extending beyond the volatility of the modern geological age. These changes are not driven by natural disruptions but by human activity itself. Moreover, geological processes themselves are taking place at accelerating rates, with each geological era becoming shorter than that which preceded it.<sup>9</sup>

This article examines how the Anthropocene shapes the political and social-meaning environment when modernity, colonialism, and capitalism are co-articulated. The meaning of the “era of the human” is rooted in the Cartesian division between nature and human, and a temporal framework defined by the control of nature, particularly when modernity was implemented through the development of depletive practices toward resources on earth. The meaning also extends to the consolidation of a western colonialist discourse based on the continuous accumulation of capital at an accelerating pace. The Cartesian model reinforced teleological and instrumental logic that became a banner under the modernity/colonialism/capitalism trifecta.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, deconstructing the concept of “acceleration” as an *analytical* rather than simply a *descriptive* tool allows for a clearer understanding of the Anthropocene as a continuous temporality of modernity/colonialism/capitalism. Hartmut Rosa argues that rather than viewing modernity as a process of “rationalization”, it is better understood as being driven by a process of social acceleration. In this context, the crises of late modernity are regulated by the logics of “escalation” and “de-synchronization”: the idea that the future will be faster than any previous time has become axiomatic in both futurist thinking and so-called “futurology”.<sup>11</sup>

The burning of fossil fuels in the late 18th-century England to generate heat, energy, and motion stands as one of the defining features of the modern world. Clean, dynamic, and accelerating modernity would have been impossible without the burning of vast quantities of fossil fuels.<sup>12</sup> Coal-powered steam engines produced colossal factories and cities and, through the invention of the railway, a machine dependant speed that restructured the material and social worlds.<sup>13</sup> In a stark casting of speed and modernity, Paul Virilio writes in *Speed and Politics* that modernity is not an industrial revolution but a revolution of speed, in that it is based on changing the way we interact with and perceive time and space through continuous and rapid movement that leaves no room for people to tarry or to slow down without being excluded from the system.<sup>14</sup> The concept of “speed” extends beyond the material acceleration of transport; it also encompasses the temporal acceleration of both the present and the future. This acceleration is embedded in the principle of progress in a linear temporal direction for those who own the means of this acceleration.

Nature, however, has been unable to rid the world of the gasses and waste generated by this material acceleration with the same speed. This imbalance has led to what Rosa calls “desynchronization”. Whenever systems, actors, or processes are linked and one is accelerated, the other appears slow and is perceived as

<sup>9</sup> Judy Wajcman & Nigel Dodd, *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Henryk Skolimowski, *Eco-Philosophy* (London: Marion Boyars, 1980); Jean-Jacques Mikhalof, “Heidegger: Mufakkir al-‘Awda ilā al-Warā’,” *al-Ittiḥād*, 6/8/2020, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdfudu9k>; Omar Mheibel, *Ishkāliyyat al-Tawāṣul fī al-Falsafa al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu‘āṣira* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Arabiyya for Science and Disagreement Publications; the Arab Cultural Centre, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Wajcman & Dodd, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, Marc Polizzotti (trans.) (Los Angeles: Semiotex, 2007).

a break or an obstacle. Desynchronization, therefore, enters a state of tension,<sup>15</sup> and almost all dimensions of what we call “environmental crises” can be interpreted as problems of desynchronization.

In this context, Jason Moore recasts the concept of the Anthropocene as the *Capitalocene* – the age of capital – since capital is the driving force behind environmental destruction, fundamentally altering the balance of the geological age.<sup>16</sup> The principle of acceleration depends on the transformation of nature, including gas, water, oil, and, most importantly, land, into a “value”. The land is a fundamental source of capital accumulation and the backbone of capitalism. Through the development of colonial practices driven by teleological and instrumental logic, and the system of categorization of the other, natural extraction and exhaustion of societies have been accelerated ever since the 17th century.

The essence of capitalism lies in the categorization of the “other” within a racial system that deems them unqualified to assess ownership and in need of tutelage. This system legitimizes violence and permits genocide in pursuit of territorial control.<sup>17</sup> These colonial practices developed across colonized societies, where administrative and technical mechanisms were applied to measure and privatize land, to impose a general logic of “private property”, displacing inhabitants while allowing large companies to control land and introduce a homogenous agriculture designed to serve the demands of the market.<sup>18</sup>

In Palestine, this process unfolded with the implementation of the Land Law(s) under British colonialism and the expropriation of the land in favour of Zionist settler groups. With the 1948 Nakba, this approach escalated into a project where genocide became fundamental to the expropriation of land from Palestinians.<sup>19</sup> Here, violence is an intrinsic characteristic of this process, which accompanied the rupture between human and nature within the coarticulation of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism. However, contemporary *environmental* violence is distinct in its invisibility; it transcends across time and space. This slow violence<sup>20</sup> seeps into the earth and into bodies for its effects to become visible. In the colonized global south, where the victims are not homogenous, capitalism rests upon this violence. Crucially, slow violence does not impact all bodies or lands equally, but rather targets the land and the bodies of the colonized poor – contrary to the generalized “we” of the Anthropocene discourse.

The question of the Anthropocene arises within a broader inquiry – not solely about the environment, but about what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a “collision”: Anthropocene warming brings into view the collision – or the running up against one another – of three histories, that, from the point of view of human history, are normally assumed to be working at such different and distinct paces that they are treated as processes separate from one another for all practical purposes: the history of the Earth system; the history of life, including that of human evolution on the planet; and the more recent history of the industrial civilization (for many, capitalism). Humans now unintentionally straddle these three histories that operate on different scales and at different speeds.<sup>21</sup>

The language we use to speak about the climate crisis itself is confused by the problem of determining what is human and non-human in time. Through environmentalist language the climate is envisioned as a beast that suddenly gobbles up life. Through this language as well, the carbon cycle is understood as life

<sup>15</sup> Wajeman & Dodd, pp. 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (New York: PM Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Tania Li Murray, “After the Land Grab: Infrastructure Violence and the Mafia System in Indonesia’s Oil Palm Plantation Zone,” *Geoforum*, vol. 96 (2018), pp. 328-337.

<sup>19</sup> For more, see: Muhammad al-Sayyid Salah al-Din, “Mulkiyyat al-Arāḍī fī Falasṭīn fī Awākhir al-‘Ahd al-‘Uṭhmānī,” *Shu‘ūn Falasṭīniyya*, no. 95 (October 1979); Sabir Musa, “Nizām Mulkiyyat al-Arāḍī fī Falasṭīn 1917-1937,” *Shu‘ūn Falasṭīniyya*, no. 101 (April 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 443-467.

<sup>21</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Anthropocene and the Convergence of Histories,” in: Clive Hamilton, François Gemenne & Christophe Bonneuil (eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 44-56.

consuming, while “earth” time is defined as the earth’s ability to dispose of it. François Hartog responds to this claim, arguing that the Anthropocene is the product of a presentism that elides the power of historicity: time is stopped in the present by putting the societies of the past in the service of the present moment, and as a result, our connection with the past is erased through the power of the two spectres of memory and heritage to reproduce modernist time.<sup>22</sup>

In the Palestinian context, Ruba Salih responds to this closing sentence by referring to the political rupture between Palestinian refugee and the nature stolen from them. Political refuge created a physical and metaphysical state in linking bodies to Palestinian nature, particularly trees. Refugees sought to grow trees that reminded them of their villages, such as orange, olive, lemon, and fig trees, wherever they found space to do so in their refugee camps. These trees became a living bridge between past, present, and future. Moreover, stories of refuge always incorporate memories of trees in Palestinian villages, making them enduring markers of both loss and the ongoing hope of return.<sup>23</sup>

There is a certain specificity to local Palestinian temporality, when compared with the global temporality of the Anthropocene. This specificity is rooted in the complexities of what Elias Khoury terms the ongoing “Nakba trajectory”,<sup>24</sup> which constitutes a continuous structure of unceasing appropriation of bodies, land, trees, and all constituents of the environment, to expand the colonial occupation and the apartheid wall.

If “Nakba Time” is particular to Palestinians, it nevertheless remains inseparable from the broader structure of global time from which the defeated, the tortured, and the Global Southerners are excluded. This raises the urgent question of liberating the present time from this comparison of a “relational history” with the Zionist enemy.<sup>25</sup> It thus becomes essential to clarify the various perspectives of another time(s), ones that diverge from the grand chronological or progressive historical trajectories.

## The Sensory Environment Through a Methodology of Slowness: Attempts to Repel Acceleration

This section rebels against acceleration through a methodology of slowness which rests centrally on a sense of the “now”. Within this methodology, the body takes its time within the environment to receive and create a relationship with sensory signals – contrary to the imposed tempo of capitalist-colonialist acceleration. It does this by exploring the possibility of sustaining environmental relationality within the complexities of time and its various episodes. To think about the “now” and the space necessary to feel it, I turn to intellectual ideas that have created the possibility of seeing a gap within accelerating time through a coarticulation between present, past, and future, which allows for life satisfaction rooted in sensory experience, emotion, and the layered textures of memory, and in a practice within the act of dwelling.

One of the central ideas is Walter Benjamin’s proposition on the ability to perceive colours overlapping between past, present, and future,<sup>26</sup> and the ability to move a hand or eye slowly to feel the various temporalities. Benjamin, through his reading of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (Angel of History),<sup>27</sup> warns that

<sup>22</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Ruba Salih & Olaf Corry, “Displacing the Anthropocene: Colonization, Extinction and the Unruliness of Nature in Palestine,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2022), pp. 381–400.

<sup>24</sup> Elias Khoury “al-Nakba al-Mustamirra,” *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, no. 89 (Winter 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Abdulrahim al-Shaikh, “al-Zaman al-Mawqūt: Nakbat Falastīn wa-Masārāt al-Taḥrīr,” *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, no. 118 (Spring 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Howard Caygill & Alex Coles, *Introducing Walter Benjamin* (London: Icon Books, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Paul Klee’s *Angel of History* was central to Benjamin’s article on the concept of history. See: Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Simon Fraser University*, accessed at: <https://tinyurl.com/5m3zp2d7>

we are moving forward on the timeline of modern capitalism. His contemplations on time are generally framed around the idea of “empty” or “homogenous” time,<sup>28</sup> which he suggests will drive humanity to destruction and catastrophe, because it is necessary to entrench the break with the system of eternal repetition of modernity and capitalism. He was not only warning of crisis,<sup>29</sup> but also repelling this accelerating repetition that propels us toward catastrophe. If this modern/colonial/capitalist time, which accumulates in our bodies, makes us the most important means of its survival and existence, then how can bodily movements be so different as to prevent the catastrophe, and move at a different speed from that of this catastrophe?

For Benjamin, the “now” is what links slowness to the sensory (experience). His central project thus revolves around the problematics of reading time through the historical process of modernity: “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now”.<sup>30</sup> In other words, his critique of history and the historian centres on the acts of separation imposed on the past, present, and future. He believes that bourgeois “historicism” reduces the past to a typical, clichéd narrative of events: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger”.<sup>31</sup> Benjamin argues that any approach to history should be a political intervention, a continuous activation of the past in the present through the sensory experience, through this intersection and interaction between the “then” and “now” within a visible record that forms the dialectical image.<sup>32</sup>

Inspired by Benjamin, I view space as a trigger for remembering (deliberate memory) which emerges in the present with experience, forming a direct intersection with the past, each illuminating the other. This renders deliberate memory a historical method, one through which we can restore those whom bourgeois history – the “history of the victors” – has consigned to oblivion. It is precisely through this practice that we can begin to liberate the future from catastrophic linear time. The “now” for Benjamin differs from the presentism described in the first section of this study. What Hartog means by presentism is not the present as current moment, but rather a present intensified by the exploitation of the past, depriving us of perception – it is the product of the same forces Benjamin critiques: modernity/colonialism/capitalism.

Benjamin also conceives of the “now” as a space for sensory practice: a time in which we feel, where we perceive the details of a place, its furnishings, and the way our bodies move through it and within it. It is the time that connects slowness to sensory perception. As he puts it: “the force exerted by the country lane varies according to whether one walks along it or flies over it in an aeroplane. [...] The person in the aeroplane sees only how the lane moves through the landscape, unwinding in conformity with the laws of the surrounding terrain. Only someone walking along the lane will experience its dominion and see how, from the self-same countryside as for the flyer is simply the unfolding plain, at every turn it summons up distances, views, clearings, and outlooks”.<sup>33</sup> This observation highlights how we live through unexpected or undisciplined movement, and how this momentary unexpectedness can form a plurality of meanings that can only emerge through embodied experience.

This brings us to a Palestinian practice discussed by Raja Shehadeh: the *sarḥa*, a form of walking or moving on the land. The word originally referred to allowing one’s flocks or herds to roam freely, but over time, it has come to signify a form of roaming across the hills as part of one’s relationship to Palestinian land and environment. It carries a specificity related to time and intention: a person who goes on a *sarḥa*

<sup>28</sup> Wajeman & Dodd, pp. 34-36.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., thesis XIV.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., thesis VI.

<sup>32</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (London: Polity, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (trans.) (London: NLB, 1979).



roams without a particular destination for several days or even weeks, unbound by the constraints of time or place, seeking nourishment for the soul and spirit. The *sarḥa* is thus a sensory experience, one shaped by the various colours and smells of the hills, which differ between day and night and across changing seasons. It is a state that requires a decision to let go so completely that Shehadeh describes as a unique Palestinian form of trance.<sup>34</sup>

Shehadeh's own journey begins with *sarḥas* of this kind through the memory of his grandfather, the Judge, Saleem, who loved coming to Ramallah in the hot summers to go on *sarḥa* with his nephew, Abu Ameen, leaving behind the humid coastal city of Jaffa and the colonial administration that Saleem served but whose policies he hated.<sup>35</sup> This memory extends across multiple temporalities that Shehadeh takes up sensorially and politically, connecting past, present, and future. This brings us to Henri Bergson's idea of the senses as a memory that is not limited to the past but is linked necessarily to sense and feeling in the present through consciousness of existence. In this consciousness, there is a form of waiting through which one builds the bridge between past and future. It is memory which attempts to preserve the past – which it leans on – and anticipate the future – which it turns on. The future is only created when some part of it is prepared in the present. This process constitutes the continuity of life by connecting past, present, and future, without division.<sup>36</sup>

Drawing on Bergson's "consciousness" and "waiting", we can refine our thesis by suggesting that consciousness embodies the "now", while waiting functions as a methodology of slowness. This creates a different rhythm of momentary experience that disrupts speed. However, this disruption becomes even more complex for body movement when linked to the productive and consumptive processes. This is what drew Benjamin to the figure of the *flâneur*,<sup>37</sup> a character Baudelaire used to express his hostility to the project of modernist progress.<sup>38</sup> The critical and grand observations made in the (incomplete) *Arcades Project* by Benjamin, as well as his other related writings, put us in a sensory state of awareness of the accumulated observations he recorded by activating all the senses in order to block acceleration through intimacy.<sup>39</sup> Benjamin worked these observations into his essay "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century",<sup>40</sup> in which he describes how historical or social time loses its meaning for the *flâneur*. He remains detached from the pressures of modernity and capitalist consumerism in the arcades of Paris. Though a product of his era, he exists outside its dominant rhythms – the productive process – or rather, defiantly slower than it. In 1840, the phenomenon of the *flâneur* who wandered the arcades of Paris, accompanied by tortoises, emerged. The tortoise, in this practice, limited the rhythm of walking within the place, as Benjamin puts it: "if they had succeeded, progress would have been forced to accommodate to this rhythm".<sup>41</sup>

The *flâneur* touches, sees, tries to experience the city, and attunes to its details, yet remains invisible at the same time.<sup>42</sup> His discovery of place unfolds through an unplanned walking in urban space with no aim or destination, producing a sensory map.<sup>43</sup> In this way, the *flâneur* offers us an alternative sense of movement of a layered life, one that does not fall under the acceleration that causes change, requires consumption, or remain static like "heritage" or nostalgia. Therefore, despite the criticisms of postcolonial studies against

<sup>34</sup> Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, intro.

<sup>36</sup> Henri Bergson, *Collected Works* (New York: Shrine of Knowledge, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Harward Eliand & Kevin Mclaughlin (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 346.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 416-418.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, "Central Park," pp. 30-31.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 417.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

the *flâneur* – as a product of colonialism produced by a process of “othering” – and colonial expansion in the form of cosmopolitanism within a modern city such as Paris<sup>44</sup>, I take the symbolic resistance of the *flâneur* who is opposed to and slower than progress and capitalist consumption, to represent what I refer to as “slowness”. This is what inspired Benjamin to adopt the *flâneur* as a dream to stop the catastrophe.

What distinguishes the *sarḥa* in the Palestinian hills for Shehadeh and the *flâneur* for Benjamin is their exploration of how the body can experience a sensory state far removed from the dichotomies of the urban and the rural, or how this sensory state comes as a romanticized vision of “nature”, rather considering it an idea that creates relationality through a rhythm of the “now”, allowing us to own this state wherever we live. Perhaps the similarity between *flâneur*’s wanderings and Shehadeh’s *sarḥas* is that the former was an attempt to alienate the ugliness of consumer cities, where bodies are transformed into commodities, while the latter considers the *sarḥa* a complex and difficult sort of training for a reclamation of the Palestinian self under Zionist colonialism, which seeks to kill off the hills and the natural landscape as Palestinian. It is therefore necessary to ask: If the “now” grants us a heightened sensory conscious of existence, then what does the methodology of slowness reveal about the relationality of water and stars, or the perception of movement?

## Stars and Water: Relationality and Temporality

The relationality of water and stars is deeply rooted in the vast, unbounded expanse of the environment, our relationship with it, and the difficulty of controlling it and regulating its rhythm. What is interesting is how we perceive this relationality and grasp this relationship between water, stars, and bodies in dwelling practices and everyday life through intimacy and slowness in the context of the Palestinian village.

For years, my mother<sup>45</sup> has made sure to place a bottle of water on the windowsill at night. Often, she would ask me to do it, casually reminding me to “put the water on the windowsill so it gets star-tied”. Without question, I followed her instructions, never pausing to consider the connection between her body and the “star-tied” water. Curious, I began to wonder whether my mother was alone in this practice, since it is a custom pursued in private space. Over time, I realized that many women in the village observe the same ritual, that star-tying water does not have a repetitive, daily role, but rather is connected to situations in which my mother and the women around her believe that star-tied water holds a role in healing the body.

It is through this star-tying practice that I began my research into environmental ontology<sup>46</sup> to explore the dwelling practices that the coarticulation of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism seeks to smother and separate from our bodies, preventing us from experiencing the fulfilment of the “now” and observing the details around us.

Amid the bitter journeys between checkpoints, the sight of expropriated land transformed into settlements, the relentless killing and imprisonment of Palestinian bodies, the struggle to survive in a distorted economy, the fractures of ultra-divisive political discourse, and the appropriation of basic life resources (like wells in the villages<sup>47</sup>, I attempted to understand how the wheel of Palestinian continuity, rooted in the environment, continues to turn – through intimacy and the stories of place. A relational

<sup>44</sup> Jacob Edmund, “The Flâneur in Exile,” *Comparative Literature Review*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2010), pp. 376-398.

<sup>45</sup> My mother’s practice of “star-tying” water extends from the early 1980s to the present. She learned it from her mother and grandmother, meaning that this tradition goes back, at least, to the 1930s.

<sup>46</sup> This section of the study draws on my doctoral thesis, which was titled *al-Uṅṭūlūjya al-Bī’iyya fī Zamāniyyat al-Fallāḥ al-Falaṣṭīnī: Masārāt al-Ḥaraka fī al-Mu’āsh al-Yawmī*.

<sup>47</sup> Anas Ibrahim, “al-Sayṭara al-Isrā’īliyya ‘alā al-Miyāh... Yanābī’ al-Daffā al-Gharbiyya ka-Mawāqī’ Irtikāz li-l-Mumārasāt al-Istiyāniyya,” *MADAR*, 23/8/2021, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc24f7dk>; Taysir Jabbara, “al-Sayṭara al-Ṣuḥyūniyya ‘alā al-Miyāh fī Filasṭīn,” *Reports and Follow Ups*, Palestinian Research Centre, 12 December 2022, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/e5ew58ks>

ontology grounded in the land, through the intersection of the material, the spiritual, the environmental, and the cultural, produces universal knowledge inseparable from the experience of dispossession, one that challenges colonial violence that severs people from their land and erases their existence. As Winona LaDuke writes, “native communities are not in a position to compromise, because who we are is our land, our trees, and our lakes”.<sup>48</sup> In accordance, I present the practice of “star-tying” water as a part of a local knowledge that links the material to the spiritual via the environment.

This exploration of the environmental whole emerges in an attempt to live the relationship between past and present inherent in “star-tying” water and other customs that intertwine water and stars, passed down through my family and village. By “environmental whole”, I refer to a type of relationality that connects all living and non-living things – on and within the earth – to the sky and the vast expanse in between.

In one of our conversations about star-tying water, my mother told me that its fundamental purpose is healing. For her, this practice is not limited to water alone but to any drinking liquid that can be exposed to the stars for healing. This means that the connection between stars and water, or any other liquid, gives it a curative power that extends to the bodily healing. For example, she would also place an egg with lemon juice under the stars as a remedy for kidney stones. This power of healing is believed to not be limited to bottled water or lemon juice but also to rain, or, as peasants call it, “sky water” [*mayyit al-samā*] or “mercy water” [*mayyit al-rahma*].

For star-tying to work, the water must be removed before being touched by the morning sun. Otherwise, it will spoil and become poisonous. When I asked my mother how she had learned this custom, she said: “by believing in God”. She then added: “Actually, I saw my mother and grandmother doing it – and I trust their experience in life”. This made me think about intimacy as a foundation of the continuity of this custom – how it has been passed down from my mother’s grandmother to my grandmother, to my mother, and now to me. My mother added: “Nowadays, people do not have wells anymore, so they ask one another about rainwater, because that has healing properties too – it comes from the hand of Our Lord”. This indicates that despite the rupture caused by the acceleration of time, attempts to modernize place and “its infrastructure of concealed sanitation”, modern political-economic theory, the water crisis, and the decline of well-digging in new houses in the village, people in Palestine still ask about and actively seek rainwater for healing. Through this question, the dialectic of continuity forms and the sensory links are established. They move to search for rainwater or star-tie water so that they can claim the agency to re-establish their links with nature, both land and sky, and with intimate stories that bring closer those who have left them. These details lead to a process of healing that extends to more than one individual body.

The relationship between water and the stars is discussed in Canaan’s project on Palestinian peasantry, where he documents numerous practices as part of his ethnological study in the first half of the 20th century. Here, I trace some of the signals of the sensory environment that Canaan sought to preserve within his collection of amulets and talisman, whose stories he recorded from their peasant owners. This collection shows his hesitancy to understand cultural meanings beyond the strictures of “scientific” orientalist power, particularly its German variant.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Winona LaDuke, *The Winona LaDuke Reader: A Collection of Essential Writings* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, Inc, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>49</sup> In 2023-2024, as part of its pedagogical programme, the Birzeit University Museum assembled a group of anthropologists, sociologists, and historians to re-read the works of Tawfiq Canaan – most of whose collection of amulets and charms, more than 1,400 pieces, are held by the museum. The group attempted to understand Canaan’s intellectual trajectory by linking his texts to various items from his collection. While Canaan was clearly anxious that the peasantry was dying as a result of the project of colonial-modernist advancement, his works also show a hesitancy: a contradiction between his role as a doctor and his interest in all the forms of healing that lived with the peasantry on and within their bodies, above their heads, and beneath their feet. See: “Majmū’at Tawfiq Kan’an li-l-Ḥujub wa-l-Tamā’im al-Filasṭīniyya,” *Birzeit University Museum*, accessed on 20/10/2024 at: <https://tinyurl.com/78hhpv73>

One of Canaan's detailed works is a 1929 study on the meanings of water among Palestinians, titled "water and 'the water of life' in Palestinian beliefs", which reflects the sacrality of water across millennia, a sacrality that continues and is still practiced by Palestinians. Canaan documents various rituals relating to purity in monotheistic religions or to popular beliefs about water's supernatural powers, such as its ability to drive away the evil spirits that gather around dwellings, or the belief that the living and the dead share the water that comes from the village well (according to the story, spirits are set free every Friday to go to the well and drink from it).<sup>50</sup>

Canaan also records the myth of the "four rivers" which connect heaven to earth, one of which is believed to flow through Jerusalem. Endowed with a sacred quality, these rivers can cure or give life to anyone who drinks from them. Even beyond the three monotheistic religions, Canaan notes that this story is similar to legends on the four rivers found in the culture of the Ancient Egyptians and the Japanese.<sup>51</sup> He also references the belief that the power of water increases after being exposed to the stars at night, and that it is essentially used to activate healing powers. Canaan also references drinking water from the "bowl of fear" [*tāsat al-rajjā* or *tāsat al-ra'ba*]. I revisit the same ritual here, albeit in a different form, of the curing of extreme fear – another practice that illustrates the relationality between water and stars.

Growing up in our household, I often watched my father<sup>52</sup> practice the custom of drinking water from the "bowl of fear". I remember drinking from it myself, and I saw him offer it to many others. The "bowl of fear" functions through a range of temporal, spiritual, collective, and environmental meanings that shape its use and significance. While it is found in Palestinian villages, it is not privately owned; rather, it belongs to the community. A single bowl would circulate among the homes of the village whenever it was needed. Moreover, its curative power was contingent upon specific conditions, most of which had to do with the stars. I heard about some of these conditions from my father, while others I learned from Canaan, who seems to have been very influenced by the "bowl of fear". He dedicated multiple studies to it, including a detailed piece titled "Arabic Magic Bowls".<sup>53</sup>

Canaan says that the stories peasants tell about the "bowl of fear" are rooted in their belief that a moment of fear provides the perfect opportunity for evil spirits to enter the body, because it is at its weakest. The "bowl of fear" is thus used to expel these spirits and restore the body to health.<sup>54</sup> Most magical or medicinal bowls rely on the alignment of the stars (the 12 signs of the Zodiac) or certain planets and their names (the moon, the sun, Mercury). If these alignments are not literally present, the user might, for example, draw 12 circles around the bowl to symbolically represent the signs. Canaan notes that the stars hold deep significance in "Oriental life": "it is thought that everyone has a special constellation – the one that governed the month when he was born – which rules his life. The conjunction of this with other signs or planets brings him good or bad fortunes. One must always know his own stars".<sup>55</sup> Since precise knowledge is difficult to attain, drinking water from bowls surrounded by those stars allows an individual to absorb their power. For this reason, they are filled with clean, "pure" water, rainwater, water from the Zamzam Well in Mecca, or, in some cases, from the Nile River.

The movement of the star-tied water bowl, as well as the movement of people with it, is tied to a specific time and a specific sensory map of healing. It is always transferred between different dwellings at night. My father once told me that it can only be moved when the moon is waning, as this was when the bowl held the

<sup>50</sup> Canaan, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-68.

<sup>52</sup> My father died in 2014 at the age of 55. He was a metalworker. From childhood, I saw him practice many forms of healing practice either at home or at my grandmother's house.

<sup>53</sup> Tawfiq Canaan, "Arabic Magic Bowls," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 16 (1936), pp. 79-127.

<sup>54</sup> Tawfiq Canaan, "Tasit ar-Radifeh (Fear Cup)," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, vol. 3 (1923), p. 130.

<sup>55</sup> Canaan also notes common expressions used by Palestinians to indicate that someone is unlucky: "his star is weak" [*najmuh da'if*], "his ascension is weak" [*tāl'uh da'if*]. Ibid., p. 129.

greatest energy. In contrast, when the moon is full, the light emanating from it would reduce the bowl's energy. One can imagine a map tracing the movement of people as they ask about which dwelling is hosting the bowl at the moment someone falls ill, how it travels with them, is received, used, and then passed on again under the cover of night. Through this movement, healing becomes a collective, solidaric practice.

Peasants are always careful to properly protect the bowl. For example, it is always wrapped in clean white cotton and stored in a dark place, shielded from exposure. Anyone who touches it must be clean. The individual in need keeps the bowl in their house for one, two, or three nights – sometimes slightly longer, depending on the time required for their recovery. Whoever takes the bowl must return it to the house from which they borrowed it, or else inform them that they have given it to another needy person.<sup>56</sup> Canaan notes that some bowls are engraved with the movements of the stars at the time of their manufacture. There are bowls, for example, that bear markings that were carved or moved “in the ascent of the Leo or the Scorpio.”<sup>57</sup>

Through all this, we see how Palestinians perceive their environment. Even the “now” is experienced through a different temporality, one measured through the age of the stars and their movement and alternation in the sky. Water does not move on its own. It does not merely flow horizontally through bodies and across the earth, but also vertically. Indeed, it has numerous thresholds and openings along lines and arcs that form part of the network of life between elements of the environmental whole. Colonialism, in its relentless effort to remove water from Palestinians' lives, has not been able to explain the meaning of this relationality because it cannot perceive or understand it. If colonialism wants to advance, modernity/colonialism/capitalism time must kill these tricky lines that existential movement follows in accordance with various temporalities.

Through the movement of water and the stars in the process of healing, we can perceive deliberation and slowness. It is neither a rapid movement nor the time that can be regulated through acceleration. It rather has its own temporality. It is present in many dwellings and still lives in and with us. If we think once more about the footsteps of the *flâneur*, beyond the consumption and speed of the city, as well as the footsteps of Shehadeh on his Palestinian *sarḥa*, seeking environmental and familial connections in hills marred by settler-colonial practices, we discover that they are both seeking a healing of a different kind, a healing concealed in the sensory connection, in the connection of the body to the environment, without separation.

### The Bowl of Fear<sup>58</sup>



Source: Tawfiq Canaan Collection, Birzeit University Museum, Palestine

<sup>56</sup> After my father's death, we found many medicinal implements of this kind that he used. In the storeroom, there was a contract with one of his teachers, who he had borrowed these implements from Abu al-Farhani, from Tulkarm camp. The implements were returned to him in full.

<sup>57</sup> Canaan, “Arabic Magic Bowls,” p. 122.

<sup>58</sup> The bowl, dating back to 1920, is engraved with carvings of the 12 Signs of the Zodiac. In the middle, there is a six-line imprint, two intertwined circles, and two human figures.



## Conclusion, from the Beginning: Re-reading the Landscape/Village Through the Sensory Environment

Modern/colonial/capitalist time has caught Palestinian studies in an epistemological trap with respect to understanding place and its temporality. This includes Canaan's writings, which are hunted by fear of the "progress" that will kill off the peasants. Similarly, much of the scholarship on Palestine has tethered the Palestinian existence to Nakba, defeat, the destruction of villages, and the expulsion of their inhabitants. These writings often focus exclusively on what Zionist colonialism has destroyed, and in doing so, we fall into the dichotomy of defeat and victory.<sup>59</sup>

This epistemological trap has reinforced a scholastic impulse to "save practices from oblivion", which operates on the assumption that the village has been defeated, has died, and that our remaining duty is to preserve its memory through landscape names, reducing it to nothing more than a cultural representation. In this framing, the village is transformed into a representation of something dead, whose meanings have become ossified and frozen in a sort of aspic, with no prospect for change or multiplicity of meaning. This logic extends beyond Palestine to global understandings of the environment, which has increasingly been reduced to "heritage"; a museum piece or a visual sign stored away under the pretext of safeguarding collective memory and protecting it from the future.<sup>60</sup> This "museumification" blinds us to the invisible normal: a life with special daily or temporal details between day and night, like windows with star-tied water and other customary tasks that form the lived continuity of places.

It is necessary to "re-read" the natural landscape through the concept of dwelling, which carries temporal meanings, particularly in relation to the continuing, non-compulsory rhythm of daily movement. This article is grounded in a subjective reflection on my life as a daughter of a Palestinian village, al-Jarushiyya. I remember waiting for my grandmother as she watered the *bayyāra* [orange grove]. In the early 1990s, the *bayyāra* was cut down due to rising water prices. Yet, it lives on in memory, as it once bore witness to my parents' wedding, where they stood embraced by the trees and the oranges they bore.

This loss of the *bayyāra* may have been the first moment that led me to search for my relationship with the changing space around me – how the rhythm of our lives shifts with the water and trees. When orange trees were replaced with olive trees, the temporality of the trees attached to the houses became linked to the olive season rather than the orange season. And just as the season changed, so too did the language of the trees and the movement of the body.

The olive season carries its own language particular to caring for the earth and the cycle of "visits" of the tree each year, which differs from that of the orange. Orange trees are watered twice a week in the summer and left alone during the winter, while olives rely exclusively on rainwater. The environmental relationship here began with my feelings of loss – as a movement – and then my feelings of a changing way of movement and of the senses with the change in the type of tree.

The entire village has thus changed – the movement of people between the trees, the vital seasons, the colour, the smells, and the expected harvest. Despite this difference, I found myself unsettled with the way many studies depicted the village as a fixed. I had seen the village changing, and with it the sensory state, with the changes of trees, the new roads, the expansion of the buildings, and the ever-growing number and diversity of stories. This is what I refer to as "re-reading" the village as a landscape through the sensory environment of dwelling.

<sup>59</sup> Rana Barakat, "Writing/ Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2017), pp. 349-363.

<sup>60</sup> Hartog, pp. 312-314.

Tim Ingold's "dwelling perspective" is the basic precondition of existence, shaped by performance of daily activities. Living beings create and transform the environments they inhabit and change and transform along with them.<sup>61</sup> Ingold proposes that dwelling allows us to replace the concept of "place" as a mere geographical space, a "fixed" and "horizontal" existence, with that of "variable" time. Indeed, we can go beyond this, through the relational network within the temporality of the same landscape.

Dwelling is about the intimate and continuous connections between beings and things, which form landscapes and places and bind nature and culture over time. What "dwelling" offers is an understanding of how we *repeatedly* encounter places and construct a memory and an affection for them. For this reason, dwelling is closely linked to notions of home, the local, and a deep attentiveness toward nature and the environment. Accordingly, dwelling is rooted through the act of living in a place, generating a perspective through which we can read nature, landscape, and place.<sup>62</sup>

The temporal dimension is fundamental to understanding landscapes of practice. Temporality is inherent in the movement of events, rather than transcending them. Time and practice are inseparable and cannot be approached merely as history or as a series of distinct events that took place in successive periods of time. Temporality is more accurately the "continuity" of time, a process that arises alongside the activities of dwelling. It is the rhythmic resonance embedded within the diverse tasks that shape natural scenes. It is not responsibilities or duties but rather the people's attempts to carry out tasks beyond the rigid dictates of the clock. It forms "social life" and acts as its vector.

Colonialism violently fissures the temporality of the landscape, and rhythms are forcibly altered. At times, the landscape may not withstand the processes of expropriation and destruction. But the existential relationship, which comes through the relationality between all constituents of life in Palestine, means that we must resist the imposed dichotomy of defeat and victory and elevate the intimacy of our stories, our environment, and our places.

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<sup>61</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> Paul Cloke & Owain Jones, "Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset," *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2001), pp. 649-666.

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## The Litani as a Link: Toward a Better Reconstruction in Lebanon\*\*

### الليطاني نهرًا جامعًا: نحو إعادة بناء فضلى في لبنان

**Abstract:** This study addresses the vital importance of the Litani River in Lebanon and the environmental challenges resulting from its severe pollution. An estimated 40 million cubic metres of untreated sewage is dumped into the river annually, exacerbating its deterioration. The study argues that Lebanon's water crisis is deeply rooted in political fragility, inadequate governmental response, the sectarian political system, the aftermath of the civil war, and pervasive poverty. The study emphasizes the urgent need for sustainable development and balanced reconstruction in Lebanon, advocating for integrated solutions and effective water and land governance. The study highlights the importance of effective use of natural resources and the adoption of innovative technologies to bolster resilience against climate change. Proposed measures include remote sensing, improved rainwater collection, and enhanced soil humidity.

**Keywords:** Litani River; Lebanon; Pollution; Water Management; Governance.

**الملخص:** تتناول هذه الدراسة الأهمية الحيوية لنهر الليطاني في لبنان، وتعالج التحديات البيئية الناجمة عن التلوث الشديد في النهر، حيث يُلقى فيه سنويًا نحو 40 مليون متر مكعب من مياه الصرف الصحي غير المعالجة. وتحتاج الدراسة في أن الهشاشة السياسية، والاستجابة الحكومية غير الكافية، والنظام السياسي الطائفي، والحرب الأهلية، والفقر المدقع، كلها عوامل أسهمت في مفازمة أزمة لبنان المائية. وتؤكد الدراسة أنه ثمة حاجة ملحة إلى تنمية مستدامة وإعادة إعمار متوازنة في لبنان، من خلال تطبيق حلول متكاملة وحوكمة ذات فاعلية بالنسبة إلى الماء والأرض. وتبرز أهمية الاستخدام الفعّال للموارد الطبيعية وتبني تقنيات مبتكرة لبناء مرونة تجاه تغير المناخ؛ مثل خدمات الاستشعار عن بُعد، وتحسين جمع مياه الأمطار، وتعزيز رطوبة التربة.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** نهر الليطاني؛ لبنان؛ التلوث؛ إدارة المياه؛ الحوكمة.

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It is no exaggeration to say that the Litani River has become a channel transporting poison between different villages and cities located in its basin. Along the river course there are tremendous accumulations of solid wastes, sewage and industrial outfalls, as well as an intolerable odour.<sup>1</sup>

To rule a country, first rule its waters.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction : An Overview of Water Management Challenges

Lebanon has a Mediterranean climate, characterized by abundant rainfall along its coastal plains and moderate precipitation in the interior. On average, it receives 661 mm of precipitation per year, a figure significantly higher than that of most countries in the region.<sup>3</sup> However, economic and political mismanagement has depleted the country's relatively abundant water resources, degraded the natural environment, particularly rivers, including the Litani, and jeopardized human food and water security.

This study argues that sustainable recovery in Lebanon could begin with effective governance of water resources, implemented through community-centred schemes. These include reducing wastewater discharge into the Litani, promoting regenerative agriculture, and improving environmental education. Rebuilding social trust is also essential and can be achieved through cooperative and integrated water resource management. Ultimately, agreeing on goals such as clean water and an ecologically sound river system can bind people together as they pursue their intertwined interests.

The Litani is to Lebanon what the Nile is to Egypt: it is the country's largest river in terms of size, length, and basin extent. Its flow amounts to approximately 750 million cubic metres (m<sup>3</sup>), with a basin covering 2,110 square kilometres (km<sup>2</sup>), equivalent to one-fifth of Lebanon's total landmass of 10,452 km<sup>2</sup>. The river feeds Lake Qaraoun, the country's largest lake, with a capacity of 220 million m<sup>3</sup>. Spanning 174 km, the Litani passes through several climatic zones, and supplies water to nearly one million people.<sup>4</sup> Its basin is home to Muslims and Christians of all denominations, living in 246 cities, towns, and villages across four governorates.

The volume of water discharged from the Litani Basin constitutes 24% of Lebanon's net rainfall, representing more than 30% of all inland river runoff.<sup>5</sup> The ecological significance of the river's basin is heightened by its role in sustaining Lebanon's largest wetlands, located in the Kafir Zabad and Ammiq regions. The latter, near the river's source, is a remnant of a much larger network of marshes and lakes that spread across the Bekaa Valley. The late Kamal Salibi, a renowned historian and professor at the American University of Beirut,<sup>6</sup> said the name "Bekaa" [*biqā'*] refers to areas or "spots" of water in the valley through which the Litani flows. Although the Ammiq has greatly diminished in size, it remains Lebanon's last significant wetland and serves as a vital stopover for birds migrating between Europe and Africa.

Over the past five decades, Lebanon has endured a protracted civil war, several wars with and invasions by Israel, direct and indirect foreign intervention by various countries (most notably Syria, Iran, and Saudi

<sup>1</sup> Mouin Hamzé & Amin Shaban (eds.), *The Litani River, Lebanon: An Assessment and Current Challenges* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> A saying by Xi Jinping. See: "Taming the Waters: China's Grand Canal is Full for the First Time in Decades," *The Economist*, 14/5/2022, accessed on 6/12/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3uJ5tDA>

<sup>3</sup> FAO, *The State of Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture in The Near East and North Africa Region*, Summary Report (Cairo: 2022), accessed on 4/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/47tTw30>

<sup>4</sup> Hussam Hussein et al., "Syrian Refugees, Water Scarcity, and Dynamic Policies: How Do the New Refugee Discourses Impact Water Governance Debates in Lebanon and Jordan?," *Water*, no. 12 (January 2020), p. 325; Talal Darwish et al., "Sustaining the Ecological Functions of the Litani River Basin, Lebanon," *International Journal of River Basin Management*, no. 21 (February 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Hussein et al., p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Kamal Salibi, personal interview, American University of Beirut, 3/6/1998.

Arabia), domestic political deadlock, and a demographic shift since 2011 driven by the massive influx of refugees from the Syrian Civil War. Since 2019, Lebanon has also suffered a full-scale economic collapse. The local currency has lost 90% of its value and corruption has permeated every aspect of life. Compounding this crisis, a massive explosion of more than 2,500 tonnes of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut port in 2020 claimed hundreds of lives, caused severe damage to many homes and businesses, and completely destroyed the country's main grain silos.<sup>7</sup> In the fall of 2022, political bickering once again prevented parliamentarians from reaching consensus and electing a president, leaving the post vacant until January 2025 – an all-too-familiar situation in recent decades.<sup>8</sup> Over the decades, these challenges have gradually but dramatically undermined the role of Lebanon's central government and reduced its ability to provide basic services such as water and electricity, which remain erratic and irregular, particularly in rural areas.

Lebanon has long been wedged between complete anarchy and a façade of order. This political fragility is interconnected with the country's high degree of institutional and social vulnerability. According to the World Bank, the government's "inadequate" political responsiveness stems primarily from "a lack of political consensus over effective policy initiatives" and "political consensus in defence of a bankrupt economic system, which benefited a few for so long".<sup>9</sup> While institutions continue to function, the services they provide are diminished by severe budget cuts. Over time, sectarian leaders and the Lebanese public have devised coping methods and frameworks that have weakened government institutions, pushing them to the brink of collapse.

Some companies have exploited the country's economic and social collapse to maximize profits by evading the costs of safe waste disposal, instead dumping it into the natural environment, including the Litani. Sami Alawieh, director-general of the Litani River Authority, highlights that sewage and pollutants from factories, food processing plants, towns, villages, and hundreds of refugee camps all flow through the cities of Baalbek and Zahleh, as well as the villages of the western Bekaa Valley, ultimately contaminating Lake Qaraoun. Alawieh estimates that these pollutants amount to one million cubic metres per year.<sup>10</sup> Such blatant violations of environmental laws are facilitated by the protection extended to industrial pollutants by local or national political leaders. Meanwhile, many towns, villages, and unplanned refugee camps lack sewage systems. In other words, Lebanon's institutions have been hollowed out to the point that the state's functions are little more than an empty shell.

Since 2019, Lebanon's economy has deteriorated to the point that public utility firms can only intermittently supply water and fuel, forcing many residents to buy water by the tanker. The price of drinking water has surged rapidly and dramatically, increasing nearly sixfold by 2022 compared to 2019 levels. Most households now purchase bottled water for drinking, because of the dubious quality of tap water. For a family of five consuming a total of ten litres of water per day, this translates to an annual bill of around USD \$261, a significant financial burden for many families. This figure does not include the cost of water needed for cooking and cleaning.<sup>11</sup> The World Bank estimates that, since 2020, the cost of tankered water has increased by around 35%, whilst the price of bottled water has nearly doubled.<sup>12</sup>

In parts of Lebanon, public utilities have nearly ceased to provide water and electricity, to the point that the country's only airport, Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport, has been plunged into darkness on

<sup>7</sup> Samar Al-Hajj et al., "Beirut Ammonium Nitrate Blast: Analysis, Review, and Recommendations," *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol. 9 (June 2021).

<sup>8</sup> "Chronology of Events: Lebanon," *Security Council Report* (New York: 2022), accessed on 5/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Rdj4f4>

<sup>9</sup> "Lebanon Economic Monitor: Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3)," *World Bank* (Spring 2021), accessed on 5/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/49TjluN>

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Abdallah, "Why Lebanon's Largest Artificial Lake is Turning Green," *Al-Monitor*, 20/8/2019, accessed on 6/12/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40Rg2Ap>

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, "Lebanon's Water Infrastructure Struggles on, but Remains on the Brink," 21/7/2022, accessed on 6/12/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/47sh9sx>

<sup>12</sup> "Lebanon Economic Monitor."

several occasions, as have some traffic lights in the nearby capital Beirut. Meanwhile, civilian passenger planes have been struck by stray bullets,<sup>13</sup> and untreated municipal and industrial waste is routinely dumped into Lebanese rivers, including the Litani.

Historically, the government has largely neglected economic development in southern Lebanon, encouraging the rise of paramilitary groups and deepened political instability. Several factors have exacerbated this neglect.

First, Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing political system was for many years dominated by Sunni and Maronite political and economic elites, who often believed that the Shiites (mainly concentrated in the south) needed to prove their identity as Arabs and Lebanese<sup>14</sup> before the central government would invest in development projects in their areas.

Second, Palestinian militants based in the south and beyond engaged in a low-intensity war with Israel for two decades, discouraging the government from committing to development projects that could be easily destroyed in subsequent rounds of violence. Furthermore, when Palestinian militants left the area in the early 1980s, they were replaced by Hezbollah, an armed Shiite movement that has established a stronghold in the south and engaged in several destructive wars with Israel.

Third, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) deepened social rifts, weakened national institutions, and marked the beginning of a steady erosion of the Lebanese state's presence and authority. At this stage, Israel created the Christian-led South Lebanon Army (SLA), which controlled a so-called "security belt" along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Israel's expansion northward and occupation of 20%-40% of Lebanon's territory between 1978 and 2000 exacerbated Lebanese fears about the motives of their occupiers regarding the country's water resources. The move appeared to reinforce claims that Israel viewed the Litani as its natural northern border.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the Israeli military imposed harsh restrictions on access to the Litani Basin and prevented investigative journalists and academics from conducting field visits, fuelling suspicions that Israel was concealing its activities in the area.<sup>16</sup> This iron curtain on information resulted in extensive media attention in Lebanon to Israel's perceived ambitions regarding the Litani. Reports included data and maps showing points where the river was being diverted, as well as reference to a United Nations report, academic testimony in the United States of House of Representatives, and comments by Lebanese MPs and government officials. Concern reached such a level that Lebanese officials and the Secretary-General of the Arab League have spoken of Israel's "greed" and ambitions to divert the waters of southern Lebanon.<sup>17</sup>

The environmental degradation of "Lebanon's Nile" is so severe that it seems the Litani has lost its strategic significance; it is now rare to encounter articles in the Lebanese press on the once-hot topic of Israel's "plans" for the Litani. Discussions of this issue, once frequent, have nearly disappeared, except for occasional mentions in politically charged opinion pieces published by Iranian-backed media outlets. At a 2016 academic conference on the Litani organized by the Beirut Arab University and attended by Lebanese officials, including then-Environment Minister Mohamad Machnouk, this author argued that the Litani has become so polluted that even if Lebanon offered it to Israel on a silver platter, Israel would reject it. These

<sup>13</sup> "Middle East Airlines Plane Hit by Stray Bullet While Landing in Beirut, no Injuries," *Reuters*, 10/11/2022, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/4a3LFL7>

<sup>14</sup> Linda Sayed, "Sectarian Homes: The Making of Shi'i Families and Citizens under the French Mandate, 1918-1943," PhD. Thesis, The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Columbia University, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> "The Current Situation in Israel," *Central Intelligence Agency* (US), ORE 68-49, 18/7/1949.

<sup>16</sup> Hussein Abdulmunim Amery, "A Popular Theory of Water Diversion from Lebanon: Towards Public Participation for Peace," in: Hussein Abdulmunim Amery & Aaron T. Wolf (eds.), *Water in the Middle East: A Geography of Peace* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), pp. 121-149.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

views were based on field observations, both visual and olfactory, as well as academic research. Notably, no one at the conference challenged the comment.

## Corruption and Excessive Pollution

Corruption is a major cause of insecurity and instability. When left unchecked and unpunished, it creates nationwide frustration and fuels public anger, undermining trust in government institutions and pushing people toward idealistic solutions – or even violence. They have little faith in the state institutions that have consistently failed to provide security or even the most basic services.

In response to state and institution failure, Lebanese in many communities and villages have raised funds both locally and from relatives abroad to buy generators, dig wells, acquire ambulances, and set up health clinics. Such socio-economic adaptations have fostered a greater sense of autonomy and changed the public's political ethos, further widening the gap between citizens and the central government. As institutions have crumbled, an atomized survival strategy has emerged, with individuals and communities each developing their own coping mechanisms to survive.

The long, gradual brain drain from Lebanon, due largely to corruption, insecurity, and state failure, has accelerated into a mass exodus.<sup>18</sup> This bodes ill for the Lebanese government's ability to recruit skilled professionals capable of leading its water and environmental institutions and formulate a vision for sustainable management of the country's rivers, particularly its largest, the Litani.

In 2021, the World Bank warned that “[t]he breakdown in sanitation services risks intensifying the spread of water-borne diseases, adversely impacting an already vulnerable public health”.<sup>19</sup> A year later, in the autumn of 2022, Lebanon suffered an outbreak of cholera. While this was linked to the war and instability in neighbouring Syria, it was also the result of Lebanon's deteriorating infrastructure, poor water management, and economic collapse.

To prevent future outbreaks, the country needs well-maintained water pumping stations and wastewater treatment plants. This has been difficult to achieve, as the government lacks the funds to secure adequate fuel supplies. UNICEF's Representative in Lebanon said his office had “been warning for more than a year on the inevitable collapse of the water infrastructure as the electricity shortage is making it impossible to pump sufficient water and therefore putting the health of millions of people, particularly children, at risk”.<sup>20</sup>

Today, the Litani is severely polluted due to lack of sanitation facilities in the villages along its banks. An estimated 40 million m<sup>3</sup> of untreated sewage are dumped into the river annually.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, raw industrial wastewater from paper and battery factories in the town of Zahleh, as well as sugar factories along the Ghazayel River (a tributary of the Litani), further exacerbates the contamination. However, since farming remains the main economic activity for Litani Basin residents, the excessive use of agricultural chemicals has caused residues to seep into the soil, polluting both surface and groundwater resources.<sup>22</sup> Studies have shown that groundwater in the Bekaa Valley is heavily polluted with nitrogen-based fertilizers, of which Lebanon consumes about 1,816 tonnes annually, more than Syria, which consumes 1,422 tonnes annually.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Samia Nakhoul & Issam Abdallah, “Hundreds of Disillusioned Doctors Leave Lebanon, in Blow to Healthcare,” *Reuters*, 12/11/2020, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3MYSkwl>

<sup>19</sup> “Lebanon Economic Monitor.”

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF, “UNICEF Is Actively Supporting the Lebanese Government Fighting the Cholera Outbreak,” 26/10/2022, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3T0t1xE>

<sup>21</sup> Hamzé & Shaban (eds.).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; FAO.

Since the end of the civil war in 1990, residents in the western Bekaa district at the upper end of the Litani Basin (including towns such as Bar Elias and Qaraoun), have reported a marked increase in cancer cases, which they attribute to pollution in the river.<sup>24</sup> The constant, cumulative inflow of pollutants has rendered Litani's water highly toxic,<sup>25</sup> and the authorities responsible for enforcing environmental laws remain largely absent.

In 2016, the Bekaa branch of Beirut Arab University hosted a workshop addressing the environmental crisis afflicting the Litani. During the event, then-Environment Minister Mohamad Machnouk publicly stated that the perpetrators of most major environmental violations have “political cover” (i.e. de facto immunity) that prevents his ministry from stopping them. None of the Lebanese present batted an eyelid: the minister had merely confirmed something that is already widely known.

The Lebanese government and foreign aid agencies have launched and funded numerous programmes to tackle the pollution of the Litani and Lake Qaraoun. For example, the Ministry of Environment has led a multi-ministerial committee tasked with cleaning up the river, supported by the United Nations Development Programme and funded in 2016 with a USD \$55 million loan from the World Bank.<sup>26</sup> However, I conducted field visits between 2019 and 2022, which revealed that little progress had been made to implement this plan.

To rebuild sustainability, Lebanon must prioritize the restoration of its water resources and social interconnectivity – beginning with its rivers, foremost the Litani. Ecological interdependence includes both “biotic and abiotic flows”, with the latter encompassing “the spread of fire or sediment and nutrient transport in waterways”, as well as tools, expertise and “flows of information and resources that enable active collaboration”.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of socio-ecological connectivity reflects the “inherent interdependence and feedbacks” between humans and environmental resources “in a network across space and through time”.<sup>28</sup> This notion applies to resources such as habitats, water flows, and shared social spaces, and can be approached at the hyperlocal level or more broadly, depending on the issue under analysis.

Lebanon's recovery must be grounded in a comprehensive plan and the formulation of a renewed social contract. Inter-communal cooperation can build interdependence and help restore social trust. Restoring the Litani could serve as a cornerstone for the socio-political reconstruction of a country devastated by wars and corruption, empowering a population that has long suffered from gross neglect by the central government.

The river system connects people, rural and urban, from various economic, ethnic, religious, social, and other groups. The “degree and nature of hydrological connectivity” fluctuates according to the form and extent of human activities, as well as the forces of nature. Human activities modify environmental interconnectedness on local, regional, and global levels. Though occurrences such as toxic pollution can disrupt such interconnections, actions such as removing physical obstructions from rivers can improve them.<sup>29</sup>

In the autumn of 2019, Lebanon was gripped by months of mass protests, which had at their heart “the request to establish a new social contract between the state and its citizens. As such, an important policy issue

<sup>24</sup> Hamzé & Shaban (eds.).

<sup>25</sup> Rodayna Raydan, “As Lebanon's Electricity Crisis Deepens, Water Becomes Scarcer,” *Al-Monitor*, 12/6/2022, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40Y3MxO>

<sup>26</sup> Hamzé & Shaban (eds.).

<sup>27</sup> Clare E. Aslan et al. “Coupled Ecological and Management Connectivity Across Administrative Boundaries in Undeveloped Landscapes,” *Ecosphere*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>28</sup> Monika Egerer & Elsa Anderson, “Social-Ecological Connectivity to Understand Ecosystem Service Provision across Networks in Urban Landscapes,” *Land*, vol. 9, no. 12 (December 2020), p. 530.

<sup>29</sup> Y. Zhang et al., “The Concept, Approach, and Future Research of Hydrological Connectivity and its Assessment at Multiscales,” *Environmental Science Pollution Research*, no. 28 (August 2021), pp. 52724-52743.



facing Lebanon in this current moment is how to strengthen the national social contract, within a context of a fractured state and national identity, poor governance, and broken infrastructure.”<sup>30</sup> The country’s new social contract must be based on socio-religious coexistence, transparency and judicial independence, social protection for workers, environmental safeguards, and more. However, such an ambitious task will take time, and neither the Lebanese people nor their water systems can afford to wait for these complex political issues to be resolved. NGOs can play a vital role by engaging directly with local communities in the Litani Basin to facilitate cooperation around shared interests, a seed that could eventually grow into a cornerstone of national reconstruction.

In a recent article, Sami Zoughaib argued that

the near total absence of the state on the social level led to a proliferation of informal channels of assistance aiming to cover the gaps. These informal channels are, by and large, community-based and lack a central policy design [... Rather, they are] localized interventions from political or religious actors using politically affiliated municipalities, religious institutions, and other organizations affiliated with these actors.<sup>31</sup>

Zoughaib argues that such efforts could be financed through donations from wealthy members of political parties and institutions, both in Lebanon and from the diaspora. He proposes an alternative approach involving “localized donor-led interventions implemented by international organizations or by domestic non-state actors”. Zoughaib also proposes an approach that bypasses bankrupt and dysfunctional government institutions.<sup>32</sup>

Over the past three decades, the agricultural sector’s share of the Lebanese job market has steadily declined, dropping to just 11% by 2019. Similarly, the share of the agricultural sector in the national economy had been in decline until 2019, when it suddenly jumped from 3.2% of GDP to 8.9% in 2020.<sup>33</sup> However, this dramatic reversal coincided with the onset of the country’s economic collapse and an unprecedented banking crisis. Today, an estimated 31% of household income in the Litani Basin comes from agriculture, reflecting the widespread availability of agricultural products and services.

## Building Back Better at the Community Level

Lebanon must transition toward environmentally and economically sustainable, socially viable development, as well as better reconstruction. This can be achieved through integrated solutions that embrace inclusive and sustainable water and land governance frameworks. Efficiently utilizing natural resources while minimizing their negative environmental impacts is crucial for building resilience to climate change. This could be supported by adoption of innovative technologies for better resource management, such as remote sensing, improved rainwater harvesting, and enhanced soil moisture.<sup>34</sup> As Egerer and Anderson argue, linkages between human actors are “a component of sustainability and resilience as connections between people decreases social isolation and fragmentation, which may contribute to communities’ resilience to change and promotes positive environmental transformations.

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF & ILO, “Towards A Social Protection Floor for Lebanon, Policy Options and Costs for Core Life-Cycle Social Grants,” *Policy Note* (Beirut: March 2021), accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GfHOgf>

<sup>31</sup> Sami Zoughaib, “Distorted Social Contract: The Dangerous Trajectory of Social Protection Systems in Lebanon,” *The Policy Initiative*, 4/11/2022, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3N1FQUz>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The World Bank, “Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, Value Added (% of GDP) – Lebanon,” *World Bank National Accounts Data and OECD National Accounts Data Files* (2022), accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46ATvJc>

<sup>34</sup> FAO, “The State of the World’s Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture - Systems at Breaking Point,” *Synthesis Report* (Rome: 2021), accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/47OVSJt>

Much like ecological connectivity, increasing social connectivity requires balancing tensions with diversity and limiting trade-offs, and can be explicitly linked to the physical environmental structure, which determines how people move and interact across a landscape”.<sup>35</sup>

NGOs could help Litani Basin residents from diverse religious and economic backgrounds by dedicating resources to fostering inter-communal collaborations, facilitating agenda-setting, and mediating productive meetings. Small-scale projects could be implemented to educate and inspire residents about the benefits of sound waste collection, sorting, and disposal practices. Some riparian villages have open-air tips close to the river or on its floodplain, highlighting the need to prioritize such measures to reduce pollution both in these areas and further downstream. NGOs could also engage farmers in dialogue about the efficient use of agrochemicals and introduce alternative methods such as organic, no-till, and regenerative agriculture. Educational extension programmes could also work with local individuals trusted by the community, such as religious clerics, *mukhtars* (community leaders) and scholars.

Furthermore, supporting water conservation and storage schemes could help bolster Lebanon’s water and food resilience. Today, the country stores only 6% of its total water resources, far below the average of 85% in the MENA region.<sup>36</sup> Financing the construction of water reservoirs and rainwater harvesting facilities could help secure a more stable water supply, which would improve the lives of ordinary people, particularly farmers living in the Litani Basin.

Establishing the physical infrastructure and human capacity to collect and treat wastewater in areas of the Litani Basin currently lacking such facilities would greatly improve the river’s water quality. This, in turn, would support the broader recovery of the waterway. As Anawar and Chowdhury argue, “polluted river water can be remediated by either in-situ water treatment or pollution control at the source point”.<sup>37</sup>

Another key challenge is that developing countries with high external debt, such as Lebanon, often struggle to secure the financing needed to place their economies on a sustainable path.<sup>38</sup> In 2022, Lebanon’s sovereign debt was equivalent to a staggering 179.2% of GDP,<sup>39</sup> a figure exceeded by only three other countries.

Water management projects that require significant financial investment could be addressed through a “debt-for-nature swap”. This mechanism involves forgiving a portion of a developing nation’s foreign debt, such as Lebanon’s, in exchange for local investments in environmental conservation measures.<sup>40</sup> Such an approach not only alleviates the burden of public debt but also encourages investment in “projects linked to nature protection within the debtor country.”<sup>41</sup> Debt-for-nature swaps have been successfully implemented in the Seychelles, the Philippines, Costa Rica, and elsewhere.

Such deals can also be reconceptualized as “debt-for-climate swaps”. While conventional agriculture is a major source of carbon emissions, regenerative agriculture can sequester carbon, which helps mitigate

<sup>35</sup> Egerer & Anderson.

<sup>36</sup> The World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Deliberate Depression*, Document of the World Bank (Fall 2020), accessed at: <https://bit.ly/40RR97L>

<sup>37</sup> Hossain MD Anawar & Rezaul Chowdhury, “Remediation of Polluted River Water by Biological, Chemical, Ecological and Engineering Processes,” *Sustainability*, vol. 12, no. 17 (August 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Igor Lukšić et al., “Innovative Financing of the Sustainable Development Goals in The Countries of the Western Balkans,” *Energy, Sustainability and Society*, vol. 12 (February 2022).

<sup>39</sup> Marc Jones, “Foreign Creditors Urge Lebanon to begin Debt Restructuring Talks,” *Reuters*, 21/9/2021, accessed on 4/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46vEOay>

<sup>40</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “OECD Stat,” 2001, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3SWqe8C>

<sup>41</sup> Lukšić et al.

climate change while enhancing the productivity and resilience of cropland in a warming world.<sup>42</sup> This arrangement could benefit both creditor and debtor (Lebanon), and the international community.

Collaborative water management among stakeholders from different religious and economic backgrounds, coupled with good governance of the Litani, could promote economic growth, reduce poverty, tackle inequalities in water distribution, and protect the environment. Cooperation on better management of the Litani could also build stronger cultural and social bonds of trust among communities, united by their shared dependence on and the tragedy of its degradation.

Historically, Lebanon's small size has posed a challenge in supporting its population, making it a major exporter of human capital. Economic crises (since 2019, for instance) have further accelerated emigration rates. For example, data from 2021 showed a population decline of 0.8%.<sup>43</sup> The sheer size of the Lebanese diaspora indicates an overseas resource that could finance the rehabilitation of the Litani Basin.

Emigration from Lebanon is so prevalent that between 30% and 50% of the population now resides outside the country.<sup>44</sup> Generous remittances from migrants have long helped their relatives survive a decade and a half of civil war, economic downturns, and, more recently, the near-total collapse of the economy.<sup>45</sup> In 2022, remittances accounted for 38% of the country's GDP, or about USD \$6.8 billion.<sup>46</sup> Well-coordinated plans to develop the agricultural sector and population centres in the Litani Basin would likely attract foreign investment, particularly from the Lebanese diaspora.

Tangible progress in rehabilitating the Litani could inspire a shift in public perception toward supporting change in the region, although positive reforms will take time to be accepted and embraced. Lebanon's natural environment, above all the Litani, has paid the price for decades of political and security crises that eroded the country's national institutions. Restoring the health of the Litani requires the initiation and support of a small, community-based projects that foster unity and collaboration, and a gradual process of reconstruction through regenerative agriculture.

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<sup>42</sup> Nuna Teal & Karl Burkart, "Regenerative Agriculture Can Play a Key Role in Combating Climate Change," *One Earth* (June 2023), accessed on 6/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/47NyY57>

<sup>43</sup> The World Bank, "Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, Value Added (% of GDP) – Lebanon."

<sup>44</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> "Demand Lifts Lebanese Real-Estate Prices," *The Daily Star*, 25/11/2010, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40V4Rqd>; Hussein Abdulmunim Amery & William P. Anderson, "International Migration and Remittances to A Lebanese Village," *The Canadian Geographer*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1995), pp. 46-58.

<sup>46</sup> Kareem Chehayeb, "Lebanon's Financial Pains Eased by Remittances Over Holidays," *Associated Press*, 22/12/2022, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/4aaEwJg>; "Remittances Grow 5% in 2022, Despite Global Headwinds," *Press Release*, The World Bank, 30/11/2022, accessed on 6/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Gj9UaK>

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INTERVIEWS



## “Jerusalem should be open and available to all”: A Conversation about *Jerusalem Story* with Kate Rouhana\*

”القدس يجب أن تكون للجميع“: حوار مع كيت روحانا عن  
”القدس: القصة الكاملة“

**Abstract:** In this interview, Kate Rouhana, Founding Director of *Jerusalem Story*, sheds light on the website’s mission to offer in-depth research, analysis, and coverage of the Palestinian community in Jerusalem. The site blends rigorous research with journalistic and personal narratives, offering a comprehensive account of the city’s realities. Rouhana emphasizes that while Jerusalem is a cherished world heritage site that should be accessible to all, the on-the-ground reality is starkly different. The city was seized by Israel, and subsequent planning and policy decisions have been driven by an officially sanctioned demographic agenda, one aimed at maintaining a Jewish majority through settlement expansion and land confiscation. Against this backdrop, *Jerusalem Story* seeks to document and amplify the lived experiences and voices of Palestinians in the city.

**Keywords:** *Jerusalem Story*; Kate Rouhana; Palestinians; Jerusalem.

**المخلص:** في هذه المقابلة، تُسلط كيت روحانا، المديرية المؤسّسة لموقع «القدس: القصة الكاملة»، الضوء على رسالة الموقع المتمثلة في تقديم أبحاث وتحليلات وتغطية معمقة للمجتمع الفلسطيني في القدس. يمزج هذا الموقع بين البحث المتأني والسرد الصحافي والشخصي، مُقدِّمًا سردًا شاملًا لواقع المدينة. وتؤكد روحانا أنّ القدس على الرغم من أنها تُعدّ موقعًا تراثيًا عالميًا ينبغي أن يكون متاحًا للجميع، فإنّ الواقع على الأرض مختلف عن ذلك كليًا. فقد استحوذت إسرائيل على المدينة، وأتخذت قرارات التخطيط والسياسات بناءً على أجندة ديموغرافية مُعتمدة رسميًا، تهدف إلى الحفاظ على أغلبية يهودية من خلال التوسع الاستيطاني ومصادرة الأراضي. لذا، يسعى موقع «القدس: القصة الكاملة» إلى توثيق التجارب المعيشية للفلسطينيين في المدينة وإبراز أصواتهم.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** القدس: القصة الكاملة؛ كيت روحانا؛ الفلسطينيون؛ القدس.

\* Kate Rouhana is a writer, editor, researcher, and instructional designer. She has lived and worked as a journalist and researcher in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine several times throughout her life. Her writing has been published in *The Nation*, *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, *South-North News Service*, *New Outlook Magazine*, and various US newsletters and magazines. She has edited numerous books on Middle Eastern topics. She holds an MA in Middle Eastern Studies and a BA in International Relations, both from Harvard University.



## What is Jerusalem Story?

*Jerusalem Story* is a website that aims to tell the story of a unique city through a seldom-used lens – that of the city’s large and diverse Palestinian community. This community, which makes up nearly half of the city’s population, has deep historic roots in Jerusalem and holds the strongest attachment to and love for their city. Yet, it has been subjected to unrelenting efforts to erase its presence in, and potential claim to, the city – past, present, and future – to cement Israel’s claim of sole sovereignty over a “united Jewish Jerusalem”. These efforts, targeted through an overriding demographic imperative to maintain a Jewish majority to ensure control over the city, started decades ago and have taken myriad highly destructive forms, continuing to the present day, as is openly acknowledged by Israeli officials and decision-makers, and as our work amply documents.



## Why focus on Jerusalem and its people?

Jerusalem is holy to billions of Muslims, Christians, and Jews around the world. It is a cherished world heritage site that should be open and available to all. Today, however, although Jerusalem is known as the “holy city” or the “city of peace”, the reality on the ground is starkly, darkly different. To understand what is happening in Jerusalem today, here is a little history.

Jerusalem was conquered by force by Israel in two stages, in 1948 and in 1967. In the first stage, involving 84% of the city’s area, almost all of the 75,000 Palestinian residents living there and in the 40 or so surrounding Arab villages were ethnically cleansed by Zionist forces pre-1948 and the Israeli army after that. Although Jerusalem had been designated for international status in the United Nation’s 1947 Partition Plan for Palestine, Israel seized this area, incorporated it into its state, and rapidly passed laws stripping its Palestinian population of citizenship. It seized all property and assets of Palestinians, banned their return, and made them stateless refugees. The city was thus emptied of Palestinians and divided. Israel

renamed this part of the city “West Jerusalem”. Many refugees ended up in the remaining 11% or so of the city, which Jordan annexed for the next 19 years and became Arab Jerusalem. In 1967, Israel occupied the rest of the city, defeating Jordan, and illegally imposed its laws in violation of international law. It also tripled the size of the newly occupied area, which it renamed East Jerusalem, unilaterally enveloping 28 Palestinian villages.

A rushed census found that although tens of thousands had been displaced out of the city, the newly occupied area still had nearly 66,000 Palestinians.<sup>1</sup> This was enough to radically alter the city’s demographic balance overnight: from 1% Palestinian in West Jerusalem before the 1967 War to 26% Palestinian in West and East Jerusalem after it.<sup>2</sup>

For the state, this posed an increasing existential threat: the possibility of losing control of the city if its Palestinians became a majority. From this point on, planning and policy decisions in Jerusalem were driven by an officially determined demographic imperative: to keep the Palestinian population contained at 26.5% or less.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Palestinians make up at least 40% of Jerusalem’s residents; mostly likely closer to 50%. Of those, 99% live in East Jerusalem, where they comprise at least 61% of the residents.<sup>4</sup> These data cause Israeli state officials alarm. They are not shy to declare their intent to Judaize Jerusalem and maintain all of it under permanent Israeli control. In their eyes, the two most essential requirements for achieving this goal are maintaining a Jewish demographic majority and building settlements for Jews to seize and keep the land.

Hence, Jerusalem is a city whose officials are openly committed to removing as many of the native Palestinians who had lived in the city for centuries before Israel was founded and were citizens before 1948 by any and all means possible. Those who remain should be subjugated and Israelized, rendered docile and compliant within a state defined as exclusively for the Jews where others have no rights or political power and should not expect to get any.

Urban planning thus becomes a clear and explicit matter of causing one community (Jews) to thrive and flourish, while another (Palestinians) is continually controlled, surveilled, presumed to be hostile, and sent the unmistakable message that they are unwelcome interlopers – with every bureaucratic procedure, even the most mundane. Need to renew your driver’s license? Prove to the Ministry of Interior that your “centre of life” has been in Israel for the past seven years. Cannot prove it with the copious documentation required? Sorry, your legal status is revoked, and you must leave the city immediately.

In its relentless and ongoing attempts at removal and erasure of Palestinians on the one hand, and total dominance for Jews on the other, Israel has targeted the Palestinian community’s institutions, leadership, economy, societal fabric, educational system, language, history, culture, cemeteries, and much more. Anything that supports a potential Palestinian national claim to the city – past, present, or future – is ferociously targeted and often criminalized.

<sup>1</sup> Joel Perlmann, “Volume 6,” in: *The 1967 Census of the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Digitized Version* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, November 2011-February 201) [digitized from Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, “Census of Population and Housing, 1967 Conducted in the Areas Administered by the IDF,” vols. 1-5 (1967-1970), and “Census of Population and Housing: East Jerusalem, Parts 1 and 2” (1968-1970); [www.levyinstitute.org/palestinian-census](http://www.levyinstitute.org/palestinian-census)], p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Michal Korach & Maya Chosen, *Jerusalem Facts and Trends 2021: The State of the City and Changing Trends* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2021), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Inter-ministerial Committee to Examine the Rate of Development for Jerusalem, Recommendation for a Coordinated and Consolidated Rate of Development, Jerusalem, August 1973, p. 3. [Hebrew]

<sup>4</sup> Omer Yaniv, Netta Haddad & Yair Assaf-Shapira, *Jerusalem Facts and Trends 2023: The State of the City and Changing Trends* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2023), pp. 112-115.

*Jerusalem Story* aims to shine a light on these dystopian realities, and, in so doing, to bear witness and attempt to restore an extremely endangered community back into its own story. In the wake of Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, and its emptying of swathes of the West Bank in recent months, Jerusalem's Palestinians are imperiled.



## What does Jerusalem Story offer to its audience?

*Jerusalem Story* offers in-depth research, analysis, and coverage of the story of the Palestinian community of Jerusalem. The site has a mix of research and more journalistic and personal features, so viewers can read both side by side: comprehensive, dispassionate facts alongside personal stories, interviews, case studies, and visuals that help bring those facts alive. Likewise, the site takes a multimedia approach, almost like an online museum, and offers print, stunning photos (including photo essays and photo albums), graphics, illustrations, videos, and interactive maps.

The site has a variety of sections. The website's starting point is called The Big Picture. In an animated display of powerful images overlaid with narrative text, The Big Picture pulls all the key points of our *Jerusalem Story* into one introductory highlights presentation.

The next section is comprised of themes and their subtopics, where content is organized around a specific key topic such as What Is Jerusalem? Who Are the Palestinians in Jerusalem? The West Side Story, Precarious Status, Land, etc. Each topic has its own landing page and menu for easy access.

Next is Jerusalem Notebook, our blog. In it, we feature all manner of stories about the Palestinian community of Jerusalem – from character or organizational profiles to interviews to historical sketches of landmarks and traditions, book reviews, and more.

We also have a Biographies section. Here we profile Palestinian Jerusalemites – past and present; famous and obscure – whose lives and stories have helped shape the larger *Jerusalem Story* and the story of their community within it over time.

Our Quick Facts section is a large set of FAQs about the *Jerusalem Story*. Where relevant, each Quick Fact is linked to a topic.

Our Lexicon offers clear and helpful definitions of the many terms that are unique in this arena, given its rootedness in many languages, as well as the legal, military, and technical jargon that has emerged over the decades of military occupation.

Finally, we have compiled a database of Palestinian organizations on the ground. This effort is important insofar as the Israeli authorities have made massive efforts over the decades to decapitate this community by closing down its institutions, and the ones that remain face countless challenges. Our database makes them and their work more accessible to users worldwide.



## How is Jerusalem Story different from other mainstream media initiatives that cover Jerusalem?

The mainstream media uncritically accepts the hegemonic Israeli narrative about Jerusalem, which views the entire city as a Jewish one that will belong solely to Israel in perpetuity. As for the native Palestinians, they are depicted as “aliens” who apparently just arrived in 1967 when Israel occupied the east side of the city. Israel does its best to erase the unpalatable history of how West Jerusalem came to be exclusively Jewish and integrated into the State of Israel. This produces analyses and reporting that whitewash and erase the vital history of one half of the city’s population. *Jerusalem Story* aims to report on the city as it really evolved over recent history and as it truly is today, integrating the lived realities and voices of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians whose ancestors built and cherished their city and whose roots in it and rights to it should be, in any normal city, a matter of pride and honor, not a target for criminalization and erasure. It also shines a spotlight on the persistent and aggressive Judaization of a city that is holy to many religions – a world treasure.

## Who contributes to Jerusalem Story?

We work with contributors around the world. The core team is mostly but not entirely Palestinian, and based both in the city and abroad, in various countries. Beyond the core team, we have a diverse network of freelancers developing content with us, including scholars, researchers, writers, photographers, video editors, graphic designers, and more.



MANA

ARAB OPINION  
INDEX ANALYSIS

Adel Maalel\*

## Social Media's Socio-Cultural Impacts: An Analysis of the 2022 Arab Opinion Index\*\*

### آثار وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي من الناحيتين الاجتماعية والثقافية: قراءة في نتائج المؤشر العربي 2022

**Abstract:** This article examines the socio-cultural impacts of social media in Arab public opinion. The analysis is based on the results of the eighth Arab Index survey, conducted in 2022 by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in 14 Arab countries. The survey revealed that over two-thirds of respondents consider social media to have a positive societal and cultural impact, albeit to varying degrees. Positive sentiments were more prevalent in the Nile Valley and the Levant, while the Maghreb and the Arab Gulf exhibited more scepticism, placing them in the middle of the opinion spectrum. However, the responses also reflected a nuanced contradiction. While respondents acknowledged the importance of these platforms in various areas, they simultaneously recognized their negative impact.

**Keywords:** Arab Public Opinion; Arab Opinion Index; Social Media; Socio-Cultural Impact; Arab Countries.

**ملخص:** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل اتجاهات الرأي العام في المنطقة العربية نحو الآثار الاجتماعية والثقافية لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، استنادًا إلى نتائج الاستطلاع الثامن للمؤشر العربي الذي نفذته المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات ميدانيًا في 14 بلدًا عربيًا عام 2022. ويبيّن الاستطلاع أنّ أكثر من ثلثي المستجيبين العرب يرون أنّ وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تؤثر إيجابيًا في المستوى الثقافي والاجتماعي بدرجات متفاوتة، مع ارتفاع النسبة لدى المستجيبين في إقليميّ وادي النيل والمشرق العربي مقارنةً بالمغرب العربي المتشكك في هذا التأثير والخليج العربي الذي يتوسط الترتيب، من دون أن يعني ذلك غياب الآثار السلبية، إذ تكشف إجابات المستجيبين عمّا قد يبدو تناقضًا مرئيًا بالجمع بين تأكيد أهمية هذه الوسائل في جوانب متعددة، وتأكيد آثارها السلبية أيضًا.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الرأي العام العربي؛ المؤشر العربي؛ وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؛ الآثار الاجتماعية والثقافية؛ البلدان العربية.

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## Introduction

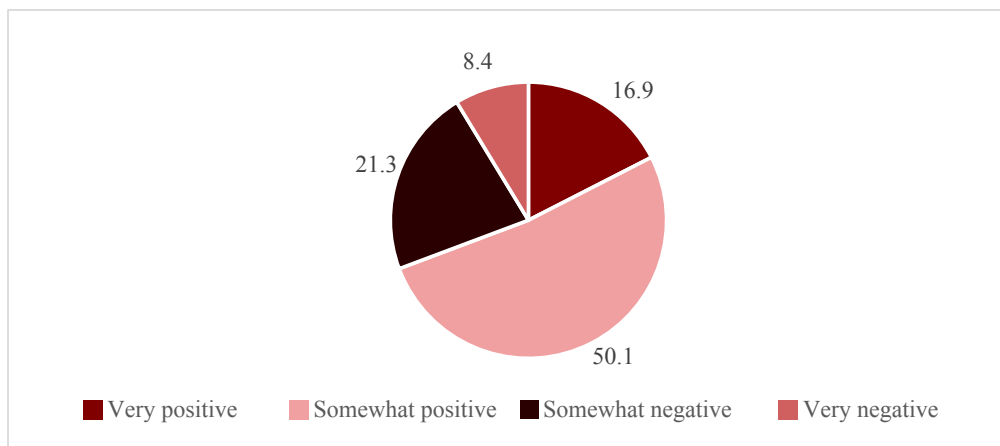
There has been much research on the effects of social media on society, including Arab societies. According to the DataReportal Index, five Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Lebanon, and Oman) ranked among the top ten globally in social media usage rates in 2023.<sup>1</sup> However, social media engagement varies among Arab countries, reflecting a “digital gap” shaped by disparities in access to digital technology, particularly between countries with plentiful economic and technological resources, and those plagued with weak infrastructure or political unrest.<sup>2</sup>

How does Arab public opinion trends reflect social media’s impact on society? To explore this issue, I draw on the findings of the eighth Arab Opinion Index survey, conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies across 14 Arab countries between May and December 2022. With a sample of 33,300 respondents, this survey provides a comprehensive and diverse representation of public opinion in the region, while also accounting for the sociocultural and economic disparities among various countries.<sup>3</sup>

## Public Opinion on Social Media’s Impact on Society: Social Determinants

“Do you believe that social media’s impact on society is very positive, somewhat positive, very negative, or somewhat negative?” The 2022 Arab Index findings show that over two-thirds of respondents considered social media’s impact on their societies as positive in varying degrees. Nearly 17% (approximately one-fifth) viewed its impact as very positive, while half of respondents viewed it as somewhat positive. In contrast, those who viewed its impact as very negative or somewhat negative made up no more than one-third of the respondents, thus indicating an overall welcoming response to the impact of social media in public opinion.

**Figure (1): Social Media’s Impact on Society (%)**



At the country level (Figure 2), Mauritania, Egypt, Kuwait, and Palestine registered the highest percentages of positive responses of social media’s impact, reflecting a clear sense of optimism in these societies. In contrast, Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, and Libya exhibited the lowest levels of optimism, highlighting a clear disparity in Arab public opinion. This disparity is particularly pronounced between populations of different subregions: the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan) and the Levant (Iraq, Jordan,

<sup>1</sup> “Digital 2023: Global Overview Report,” *Report, We Are Social & Meltwater*, 2023, p. 169, accessed on 21/8/2024, at: <https://t.ly/On82e>

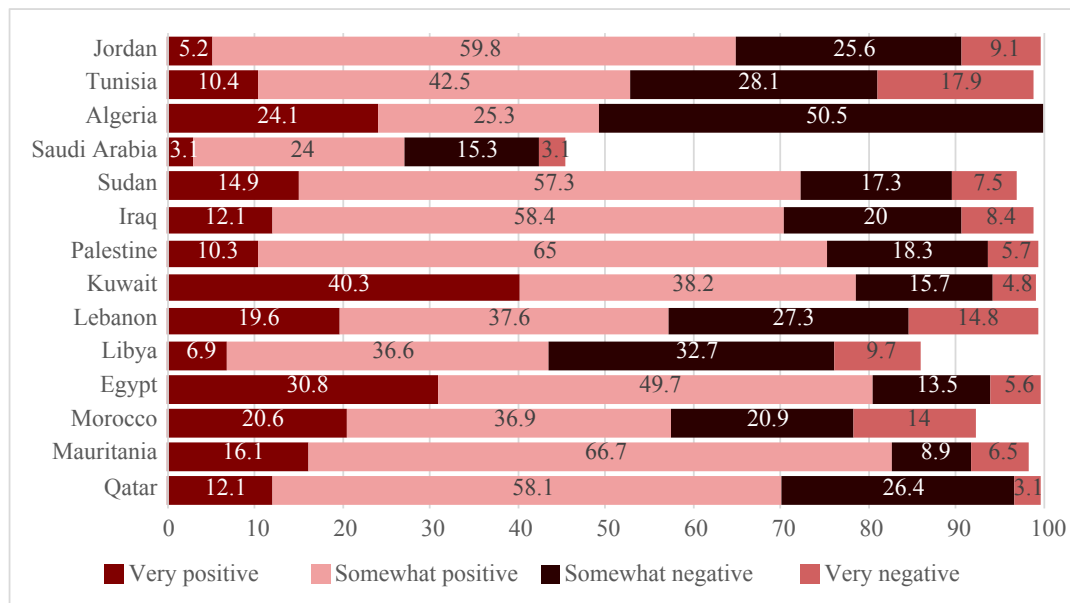
<sup>2</sup> Hicham Raïq, “The Digital Divide and Political Apathy: A Multivariate Logistic Regression Analysis of a Sample of Arab Opinion Index Data,” *Al-Muntaqa*, vol. 5, no. 2 (September/October 2022), p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> To view the Arab Index reports and data, see: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Arab Index 2022, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: <http://tinyurl.com/2p8zwtyny>

Palestine, and Lebanon) appeared more optimistic about the impact of social media; the Gulf region (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar) fell in the middle of the ranking; and the Maghreb (Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) expressed greater scepticism (with the exception of Mauritania, which registered a more positive attitude, as indicated above). Notably, three of the four countries with the most negative perceptions of social media's impacts (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Lebanon) belong to the Maghreb, suggesting that public opinion trends are not solely shaped by country-specific factors, but also by regional dynamics.

The explanation for this trend lies in the complex social and political experiences that countries in the region underwent during the Arab Spring of 2011, when social media played a dual role.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, it served as a powerful tool for self-expression and mobilization against ruling regimes. On the other, it became a vehicle for spreading rumours and misinformation, contributing to political and social instability in the affected countries.<sup>5</sup> This instability, in turn, exacerbated economic problems, such as rising unemployment and living costs, prominent themes on social media platforms, thus fuelling pessimism and frustration among the region's populations.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, even in countries like Tunisia, where scepticism toward social media was most pronounced, the overall attitude toward social media remained predominantly positive. Thus, despite regional disparities, nearly all Arab countries (except Libya) continue to maintain a relatively favourable perception of social media and its growing role as well as its societal impact.

**Figure (2): Social Media's Impact on Society by Country (%)**



An analysis of the Arab Index results (Figure 3) shows no significant correlation between age and opinion on the impact of social media, as the percentages remain nearly identical across age groups. This challenges the common assumption that older individuals,<sup>7</sup> particularly the elderly, tend to view modern technology and social media as harmful to younger generations and something to be avoided. On the contrary, the proportion of respondents over 55 who held a positive view of social media's impact differed from that of younger age groups by a mere five percentage points.

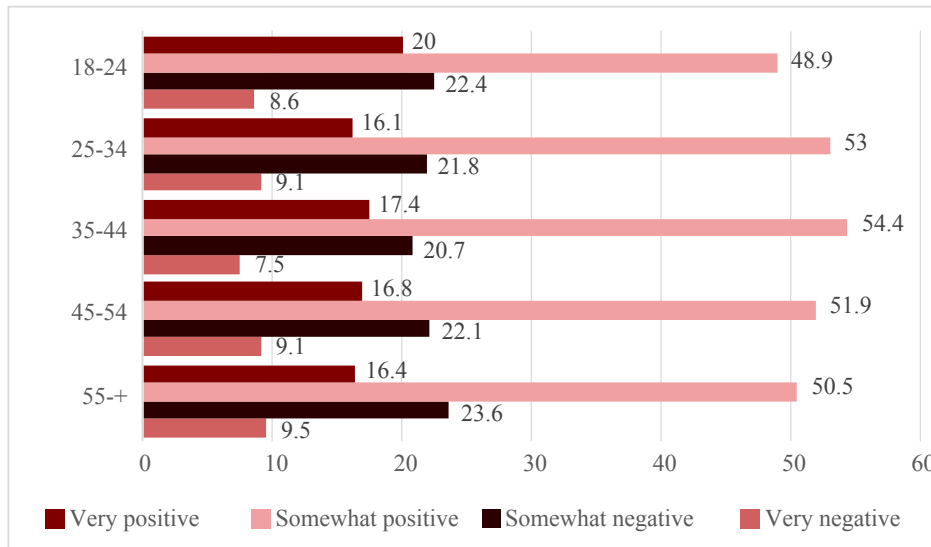
<sup>4</sup> Julius Kalaine Larama, "The Influence of Social Media on Conflict: The Case of the Maghreb Countries in North Africa," Master's Thesis, University of Nairobi, Kenya, 2014, pp. 61-63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Aly Reham & César A. Alfonso, "Self-Immolation in the Arab World after the Arab Spring," in: César A. Alfonso, Prabha S. Chandra & Thomas G. Schulze (eds.), *Suicide by Self-Immolation: Biopsychosocial and Transcultural Aspects* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), pp. 122-124.

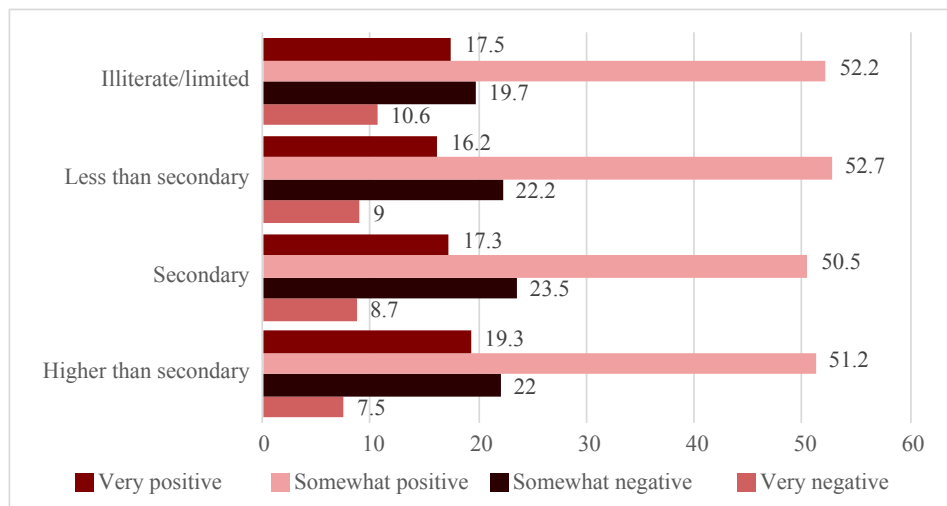
<sup>7</sup> Comunello Francesca et al., "'Youngspaining' and Moralistic Judgements: Exploring Ageism through the Lens of Digital 'Media Ideologies'," *Ageing & Society*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2022), pp. 946-948.

**Figure (3): Public Opinion on Social Media’s Impact on Society by Age in Arab Countries (%)**



Similar to the age variable, public opinion on social media’s impact on society showed no notable differences based on educational level (Figure 4). Perceptions among individuals with secondary education closely mirrored those of individuals without an education. The differences between these two groups have not exceeded three percentage points, in contrast with differences of up to five percentage points observed in some age groups. Although educational level plays an important role in areas such as how to participate in the electoral process,<sup>8</sup> it had no palpable impact on people’s assessments of the influence of social media. This suggests that opinions on social media’s impact are not explicitly affected by individuals’ educational level.

**Figure (4): Popular Assessment of Social Media’s Impact on Society According to Educational Level (%)**



When looking at gender (Figure 5), the difference between male and female views of social media’s impact on society appear minimal and sociologically insignificant. Men were more likely to see social media’s impact as positive (69.5%) than women (68.9%), by less than one percentage point. Similarly, under the “somewhat negative” category, the gap between the two groups was just one percentage point, reinforcing the notion that gender plays a negligible role in shaping opinions on social media’s influence.

<sup>8</sup> Kien Le & My Nguyen, “Education and Political Engagement,” *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 85 (2021).



**Figure (5): Popular Assessment of Social Media's Impact on Society According to Gender (%)**

## Public Opinion on Social Media's Positive Impact on Society: Various Dimensions

This section explores the various dimensions of positive views regarding social media's effect on society. The selection of these dimensions is primarily based on the questions posed in the eighth Arab Opinion Index, whether directly or indirectly.

In response to the question, To what extent do you agree with the statement: "Social media posts offer users beneficial knowledge and cultural input"?, knowledge and cultural information emerged as key positive dimensions of social media, as identified by respondents. Beyond the survey, this claim finds support in real-world observations, particularly on platforms like X (formerly Twitter). However, due to character limits, posts on X tend to be concise and fragmented. In contrast, Facebook's vast numbers of pages and groups provide richer and more comprehensive information across various fields, from the natural sciences to the social sciences and humanities.

In most cases across social media platforms, however, the reliability of such posts remains a critical concern, often lacking proper sources and references. While wide circulation can amplify the reach of information, it does not necessarily equate to credibility or value. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, fallacies and rumours about the vaccine spread on social media.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, over 60% of respondents in most Arab countries (with the exception of Morocco and Saudi Arabia)<sup>9</sup> affirmed that social media provides valuable knowledge and cultural input. In some countries, such as Qatar, Libya, and Iraq, agreement with this statement exceeded 80%. Even in the countries with the lowest percentage of agreement, most respondents were inclined to agree. This reinforces the assertion that Arab respondents generally see social media platforms as a valuable source of knowledge and cultural input.

**Table (1): Agreement with the Statement "Social Media Posts Offer Users Beneficial Knowledge and Cultural Input" (%)**

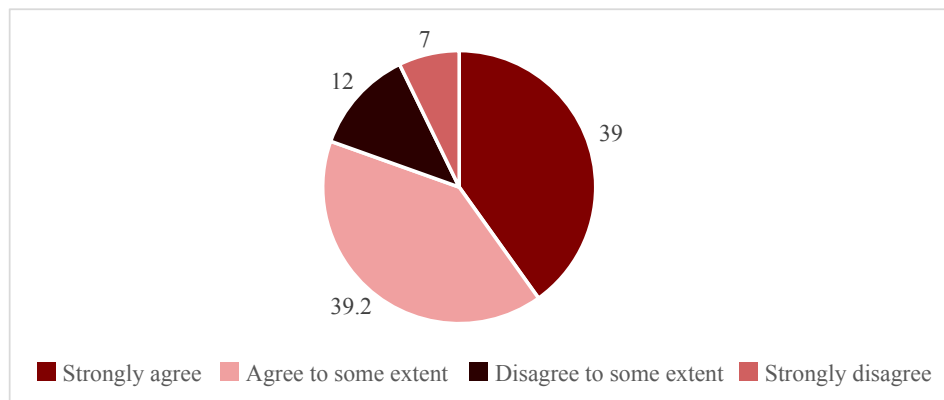
Country	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Jordan	21.6	50.5	17.0	9.4
Tunisia	26.1	36.8	15.2	15.9
Algeria	28.4	45.7	19.3	1.5

<sup>9</sup> This high percentage does not necessarily mean that the individuals who made up the sample ignored the misinformation and fallacies one finds on social media, as will be clear in the next section on negative dimensions.

<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	15.6	34.9	10.8	8.5
<b>Sudan</b>	30.2	36.9	13.9	9.1
<b>Iraq</b>	41.8	40.3	11.3	6.6
<b>Palestine</b>	13.6	57.6	20.8	4.9
<b>Kuwait</b>	21.0	46.3	21.5	9.3
<b>Lebanon</b>	28.4	41.5	18.3	8.4
<b>Libya</b>	50.5	32.7	6.7	4.0
<b>Egypt</b>	30.9	46.3	15.9	5.4
<b>Morocco</b>	21.8	34.1	22.9	15.1
<b>Mauritania</b>	15.4	62.7	18.4	2.8
<b>Qatar</b>	24.5	60.7	11.1	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>45.9</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>7.4</b>

The high percentage of respondents who agreed that social media has brought people in Arab countries closer together aligns with the overall positive views of its societal impact. Over two-thirds of respondents felt that social media has successfully bridged people across the Arab region, effectively transforming the Arab world into a “small village”. Obviously, this is not exclusive to the Arab world, but what is unique to Arabs is the presence of a shared single language across the entire region, its diverse dialects notwithstanding, as well as common cultural foundations, including religion, a shared history, and shared societal values.

**Figure (6): Agreement with the Statement “Social Media Has Brought People in Arab Countries Closer Together” (%)**

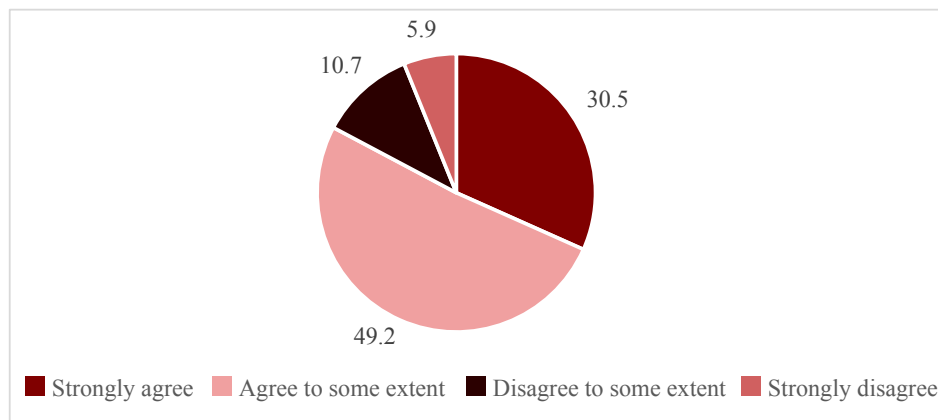


Regardless of the overall nature of social media content, many people view these platforms positively because they provide them with a space to express their opinions on their countries' public affairs. Similar to the previous question, which received over two-thirds agreement, this question also garnered widespread approval, reflecting the general Arab confidence in social media's positive impact. These findings align with studies on the role of social media during the Arab Spring, which emphasized its effectiveness in enabling people to protest against the repressive authorities and in facilitating popular mobilization. This role was clearly visible in the spread of hashtags such as #Tunisia, #Sidi Bouzid, and #Tahrir Square, along with the circulation of videos of Mohamed Bouazizi, and many others.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Mareike Transfeld & Isabelle Werenfels, *#HashtagSolidarities: Twitter Debates and Networks in the MENA Region* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik-SWP-Deutsches, 2016), pp. 5-9.

During the Arab Spring, social media was still finding its feet in the Arab region, suggesting that its reach and effectiveness have expanded significantly since then. This development can be attributed to several factors, particularly to the major improvement in internet accessibility over the years. At the time, many Arab countries, particularly those with limited incomes, had weak internet coverage, and the cost of smart devices and internet subscriptions was high.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, government censorship was (and in many cases, remains) intense, imposing tight restrictions on the online content available and making free access to social media platforms often challenging and risky, carrying potential legal consequences.<sup>12</sup> Despite these obstacles, social media plays a pivotal role today, even if expression of opinions on public affairs remains limited, hence its growing impact on public life in the Arab region.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure (7): Agreement with the Statement “Regardless of the Overall Nature of Social Media Posts, These Platforms Are Good Because They Allow People to Express Their Opinions on Public Affairs in Their Countries” (%)**



## Public Opinion on Social Media's Negative Impact on Society: Various Dimensions

This section examines public opinion on the negative impacts of social media, as reflected in the eighth round Arab Index survey. These impacts manifest in three areas. The first is the danger social media may pose to cultural values and local traditions, raising fears of cultural identity erosion due to the exposure to content that may clash with societal values and hierarchies. This is supported by Idris al-Ghazwani in his analysis based on the conceptual and theoretical framework of renowned sociologist Manuel Castells. al-Ghazwani notes that social media can “undermine hierarchical social relations and traditional class categories, as the culture of multimedia and the internet has become the alphabet of our contemporary world”.<sup>14</sup> The second is its impact on children, who are at a critical stage of growth, and may be exposed to inappropriate content that could negatively affect their psychological and social development. Lastly is its role in disseminating false and misleading rumours and reports on a broad scale, which may sow chaos and destabilize societies.<sup>15</sup>

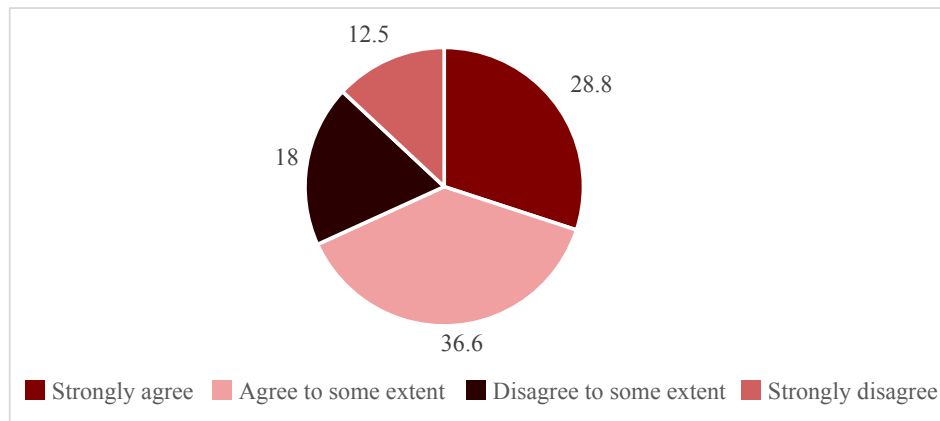
<sup>11</sup> Ghareeb Edmund, “New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assessment,” *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2000), pp. 415-416.

<sup>12</sup> Repressive authorities in the Arab world have acquired a new and diverse arsenal of censorship and prosecution tools, as well as armies of social and AT bots which cooperate with various platforms to block content that may pose a threat to them.

<sup>13</sup> Noha Fathy, “Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age: Enhanced or Undermined? The Case of Egypt,” *Journal of Cyber Policy*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2018), pp. 102-111.

<sup>14</sup> Idris al-Ghazwani, “Manuel Castells wa Mafhūm Mujtama’ al-Shabakāt min al-Mujtama’ ilā al-Shabaka: Naḥw Muqāraba Ta’wiliyya li-l-Hawiyya wa-l-Sulṭa fi ‘Aṣr al-Ma’lūmat,” *Omran*, vol. 9, no. 33 (2020), p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> Fox Jo, “Fake News’ -- the Perfect Storm: Historical Perspectives,” *Historical Research*, vol. 93, no. 259 (2020), pp. 172-177.

**Figure (8): Agreement with the Statement “The Culture of Our Country Is Being Undermined by Social Media Posts” (%)**

While social media can help enrich users' knowledge and culture, nearly 70% of respondents viewed social media as a threat to culture due to its potential impact on local customs and traditions. Therefore, respondents believe that social media helps to educate but could also lead to the loss of cultural identity. This pessimistic outlook stems from the exposure to content that differs from users' traditional culture.<sup>16</sup>

About 90% of respondents agreed that social media poses a danger to children and adolescents, approaching 100% in some countries, such as Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia, and Libya. As shown in Table 2, in six out of 14 surveyed countries, the percentage exceeded 90%, while in five countries, the percentage was below 85%. However, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Morocco, these differences were relatively minor. This concern can be attributed to the vulnerability and impressionability of children. In worse-case scenarios, this danger may go beyond cultural influence to include children's physical, moral, and psychological well-being and safety. Therefore, many countries have imposed monetary penalties on social media companies that fail to implement adequate safeguards for child protection to shield them from harmful content and “unethical” practices.<sup>17</sup>

**Table (2): Agreement with the Statement “Social Media Has Come to Pose a Danger to Children And Adolescents” (%)**

Country	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Jordan	78.2	17.5	2.8	1.0
Tunisia	82.1	11.4	1.7	3.2
Algeria	67.2	29.0	-	-
Saudi Arabia	34.2	23.7	8.5	6.1
Sudan	45.2	30.8	6.9	8.1
Iraq	74.9	18.4	3.1	3.4
Palestine	74.2	18.9	3.4	1.4
Kuwait	43.5	26.3	16.9	12.2
Lebanon	66.9	22.2	6.8	2.9
Libya	81.2	12.4	1.2	1.7
Egypt	50.3	29.2	11.1	8.2

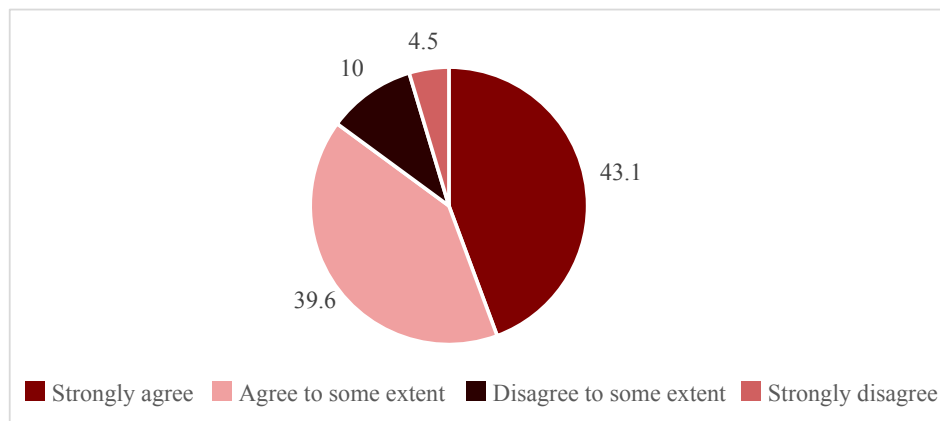
<sup>16</sup> Abdullah bin Ali bin Muhammad al-Farisi & Fatima bint Musa al-Ballushi, “Darajat Ta’thir Wasā’il al-Tawāṣul al-Ijtimā’ī ‘alā al-Huwiyya al-Thaqāfiyya Ladhā Ṭalabat Mu’assasāt al-Ta’līm al-‘Āli wa Subul al-Wiqāya min Ta’thirihā Ladayhim,” *al-Majalla al-Arabiyya li-l-Ulum al-Tarbawiyya wa-l-Nafsiyya*, vol. 8, no. 38 (2024), pp. 511-516.

<sup>17</sup> Samantha Murphy Kelly, “Outside the US, Teens’ Social Media Experiences Are More Tightly Controlled,” *CNN*, 13/2/2024, accessed on 21/8/2024, at: <https://rb.gy/8mtd7n>

<b>Morocco</b>	31.4	32.6	18.6	12.8
<b>Mauritania</b>	32.9	53.8	11.2	1.9
<b>Qatar</b>	71.3	23.0	4.9	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>61.2</b>	<b>24.2</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>4.8</b>

The matter of fake news and misinformation received wide attention in academic spheres when Republican candidate Donald Trump entered the presidential race and was accused of spreading false news.<sup>18</sup> However, fake news and rumours are a problem not confined to the US; 85% of respondents agreed that social media has become a source of rumours and a means for promoting fake news. Although respondents recognized the important role social media plays in amplifying their voices, they also expressed widespread concern about its potential to spread rumours and misinformation in various areas. At first glance, such news may appear harmless. However, it can fuel tensions and exacerbate political instability, particularly in Arab countries already grappling with political or economic instability.<sup>19</sup> Even in more advanced and relatively stable countries, fake news has serious repercussions, as in the UK, where fake news claimed that an illegal Muslim immigrant was involved in a stabbing incident, triggering an escalation in hate speech, riots, and acts of violence against places and people connected, even remotely, to Islam.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure (9): Agreement with the Statement “Even Though Social Media Allows People to Express Their Opinions on Public Affairs, It Has Become a Source of Rumours and Fake News” (%)**



## Conclusion

Although the majority of Arab respondents across various social groups share a positive view of social media, this view is complex and nuanced. On the one hand, social media is seen as a means for expanding knowledge, fostering cultural interaction, and bridging distances across the Arab region. On the other hand, there are concerns about its negative impact on cultural identity and fears of the spread of rumours and misinformation. An analysis of Arab public opinion trends reveals a multidimensional reality wherein users benefit from these platforms, yet remain cautious about their potential negative influence on societal values and daily lives.

Additionally, the 2022 Arab Index was followed by the 2023-2024 Gaza War, which has generated discussions about the censorship and restriction of pro-Palestine content on various social media platforms.

<sup>18</sup> Allcott Hunt & Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2017), pp. 211-213.

<sup>19</sup> Abdeljabbar Boutamin, “al-Akhbār al-Zā’ifa ‘Abr al-Fisbūk Athnā’ al-Hīrāk al-Sha’bī fī al-Jazā’ir,” PhD Dissertation, University of Constantine 3 - Saleh Boubnider, Faculty of Media, and Audiovisual Communication Sciences, Algeria, 2023, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> “Southport Stabbing: What Led to the Spread of Disinformation,” *Al Jazeera*, 2/8/2024, accessed on 14/8/2024, at: <https://rb.gy/f7zlf1>



As a result, supporters of the Palestinian cause have been forced to look for loopholes within these platforms by, for example, avoiding certain expressions, using symbolic representations, or integrating Palestinian content into other unrelated content such as songs.<sup>21</sup> Such developments may have reflections on the results of the next round of the Arab Index for two reasons: the inability of social media to bring about palpable change despite its role in spreading the truth; and the controversy surrounding the role of social media in light of accusations that Meta is shadow banning and fixing the algorithms of pro-Palestinian content, while promoting the Israeli narrative. X has also been subject to scrutiny in light of Elon Musk's amplification of far right voices since purchasing the platform. These factors deepen users' doubts and fears concerning the impact of social media on their reality and identity, particularly after its failure to meet the challenge posed by the Palestinian cause that so profoundly resonates with Arab peoples.

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<sup>21</sup> Miranda Kharsa, "How Palestinian-Identifying Users Balance Identity Disclosure and the Threat of Censorship on Instagram," PhD. Dissertation, University of Michigan School of Information, Michigan, 2024, pp. 24-26.

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BOOK REVIEW  
ESSAYS



AS-SAGHIRA BEN HAMIDA, *Tārīkh al-Baḥr fī Tūnis wa-Dhākiratuh fī al-Fatra al-Ḥadītha: Bayn al-Manṭūq wa-l-Maktūb* [The History and Memory of the Sea in Modern Tunisia: Between the Oral and the Written] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), pp. 271.

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The history of the sea has long captivated researchers, from Carthaginian experts<sup>1</sup> to scholars of the colonial period and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Research on the early modern period explored piracy, prisoners, and maritime spoils. Over time, however, research expanded to maritime trade, smuggling, maritime navigation, local fishing, the role of the sea in Tunisians' daily lives, and the official naval fleet of the Regency of Tunis.<sup>3</sup>

The modern era in Tunisia is defined by two significant developments. The first was the rivalry between two major Mediterranean powers, the Ottomans and the Spanish who sought to expand their territories and assert dominance over the region, thus fuelling piracy during the latter half of the 16th century, with the Tunisian coast serving as a crucial launchpad. The second began with the 1881 French occupation of Tunisia in 1881, exposing the disparities in terrestrial and maritime military technologies in favour of the European colonial powers.

As-Saghira Ben Hamida's work explores the relationships between Tunisia's coastal communities and their surroundings, and their contribution in developing or importing local maritime technologies.

Traditionally, research on the region's modern history has relied on a variety of sources, primarily archival documents, newspapers, and periodicals, along with biographies, histories, and Arab and foreign travelogues. However, Ben Hamida explores the sea through a combination of historical records and fieldwork, including observation and interviews with individuals working in the maritime sector.<sup>4</sup> Through this methodological diversification, the author was able to exceed the limits of the modern period and trace the continued use of ancient maritime techniques and vernacular vocabulary, preserved by memory and still in use today.

The book is divided into three sections, each further subdivided into two chapters. The first section examines the sea and Tunisia's maritime communities.<sup>5</sup> The second explores the history of maritime

<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Hassine Fantar, "Les divinités marines chez les phéniciens-puniques," in: Pierre Chantraine (dir.), *l'école pratique des hautes études*, 4ème section, Sciences historiques et philologiques (Paris: Centre de recherche et d'histoire et de philologie, 1965), pp. 547-549; Mohamed Hassine Fantar, "La Tunisie et la mer," *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, no. 7 (1997), pp. 79-88; Abdelhamid Barkaoui, *La marine carthaginoise: Approche des activités militaires des carthaginois sur mer depuis les origines jusqu'en 146 Av. JC* (Tunis: l'or de temps, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Abdelwahed al-Mokni, "al-Ma'arik wa-l-Sariqat al-Bahriyya bi-Sāhil Šafāqis fī al-Fatra al-Mu'āsira," in: Abdelhamid Fihri (ed.), *A'māl al-Nadwa al-Dawliyya al-Insān wa-l-Baḥr; May 7-8-9, 1999* (Sfax: Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities; Cercina Center for Research on Mediterranean Islands, 2001); Samir Borchani, *Mīnā' Šafāqis khilāl al-Fatra al-Isti'māriyya* (Sfax: Taparura Publishing House, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Taoufik Bachrouch, *Course et corsaires en Tunisie dans la première moitié du 17ème siècle* (Tunis: Edition arabesques, 2020); Leila Zaghdoud, *al-Bahriyya al-Tūnisīyya fī Qarn 1782-1881* (Tunis: Kalma for Publishing and Distribution, 2022); Farid Khacharem, *al-Ḥayāh al-Yawmiyya bi-Jihat Šafāqis khilāl al-Niṣf al-Thānī min al-Qarn al-Tāsi 'Ashar* (Sfax: Mohamed Ali Publishing, 2022), p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> The historian of the modern period generally relies on traditional research sources and makes little use of interviews and surveys, given the temporal distance from the period being examined and the lack of access to people who took part in the events concerned.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Hamida, pp. 25-95.

technologies, both local and imported.<sup>6</sup> The third presents the author's fieldwork findings, laying out the spoken and the everyday verbal lexicon.<sup>7</sup>

The author divides the Tunisian coast into three fishing zones, based on their natural characteristics, marine resources, and the predominant fishing techniques. The first zone comprises the northern coastline, extending from Tabarka through Bizerte to Cape Bon. The second covers the eastern coast, from the southern Gulf of Hammamet to the beginning of the Mahdia coast. The third encompasses the Gulf of Gabès.

The author stresses the importance of geographical and natural factors in attracting human settlements to the coast, emphasizing how marine topography facilitates navigation and anchorage of ships.<sup>8</sup> These communities actively harnessed their environmental resources to develop maritime technologies, leading to the emergence of "an integrated system known as the marine fishing system, which unites 'sailors' together with their marine environment and the methods they use to exploit it".<sup>9</sup>

These diverse maritime communities can be categorized into two main groups. The first consists of local coastal populations that have inhabited Tunisia's shores since antiquity, later reinforced by the arrival of Arab Muslims. Over time, they established many coastal cities, some arose as extensions of naval military outposts and caravansaries. These settlements gradually evolved into urban centres, where residents relied on both land and sea to sustain economic activity.<sup>10</sup>

Among these communities were the inhabitants of the Kerkennah and Djerba islands in the Gulf of Gabès, renowned for their seafaring expertise. They engaged in piracy, fishing, and maritime trade, while also mastering various sea-related professions and crafts, including *reyasa* [ship piloting], shipbuilding, and the manufacture of fishing traps designed for the region's shallow waters.<sup>11</sup> Many studies have highlighted this unique feature of the Gulf of Gabès, known for its undersea terraces interspersed with valleys.<sup>12</sup>

Natural and human factors alike have contributed to the invention of local fishing techniques and boats. Residents resorted to palm trees, olives, sedge grasses, and clay to build trapping systems like the *charfia* and *damassa*, as well as boats such as the *ashtam*, one of the oldest known vessels in the Kerkennah archipelago. The author also addresses communities that depended on lakes, notably the Lake Bizerte and the Bibane Lagoon, where traditional fishing methods were practiced until the late 19th century, when foreign powers began exploiting these resources.<sup>13</sup>

The second type of community consists of foreign settlers. The Middle Ages mark the roots of external ambitions to exploit Tunisia's marine resources, particularly the coral reefs surrounding the Tabarka Peninsula. As early as the 12th century, European powers sought agreements that would grant their merchants access to these coral fields.<sup>14</sup> The first to benefit were Genoese merchants, whose influence expanded in the 17th century, thanks to an investment policy based on populating Tabarka with Genoese immigrants and those from other Italian cities.

Foreign dominance over the coral trade intensified in the 18th century when a French rival emerged, challenging the Genoese monopoly. This shift ultimately led to the decline of the Genoese firm, prompting

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-142.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-230.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> See: Moncef Bourbou, *al-Masālik al-Baḥriyya al-Wāqī'a 'alā al-Sāhil al-Janūbī li-Jazīrat Jirba Khilāl al-Fatra al-Wasīta al-Muta'akhhira: Wāqī' al-Jughrāfiyā al-Ṭabī'iyya wa-Waqā'i' al-Tārīkh al-'Askarī*, in: Salem Mokni (ed.), *Min Sirt al-Ṣughrā ilā Sirt al-Kubrā*, Vol. 1 (Sfax: Aladdin Bookstore, 2019), p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Hamida, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

Genoese residents to abandon Tabarka and relocate to Bizerte to work. As a result, the exploitation of coral remained largely under the control of foreign companies, with little participation from Tunisians in this vital maritime activity.<sup>15</sup>

Ben Hamida's book also examines the large-scale exploitation of tuna fisheries, which began in the 19th century. Tuna fishing waters were spread across different areas along the Tunisian coast, including Monastir (north of Mahdia), Kelibia (in the Gulf of Hammamet), and Bizerte.<sup>16</sup> Italians, and to a lesser extent the French, gradually imposed their control over tuna fishing by securing multiple agreements with the Tunisian state between 1826 and 1877. These agreements ultimately allowed them to monopolize specific marine activities with high economic returns. By the 19th century, the influence of foreign communities had reached its peak, driven by the growing European population in Tunisia.<sup>17</sup>

Maritime communities, over time, developed a range of techniques. The first pertains to marine fishing methods and techniques, including the traditional *tila* trap used in deep waters along the northern coast. In contrast, fishermen in the Gulf of Gabès use various types of fixed traps such as the *cherfia*, designed to exploit the region's shallow water and tidal movements.<sup>18</sup>

Tunisian coastal communities adapted fishing techniques to the species they targeted, such as pot traps for octopus and floating *damasa* nets designed to catch jumping fish like mullet. However, the 19th century saw a pivotal shift in fishing methods, as expatriate communities introduced imported technologies to meet growing export demands. While these foreign innovations aimed to boost production, they often overlooked the particularities of the maritime domain or local fishing customs.<sup>19</sup>

The second class of technology relates to navigation and its associated tools, with a focus on boat parts and related implements, such as *qlā'*, *qarbuṣ*, *miqdhāf*, among others. Ben Hamida examines their manufacturing and maintenance processes at dedicated workshops (*manāshir*), and describes locally sourced materials traditionally used in their construction.<sup>20</sup> She also showcases the diversity of local vessels, such as the *lūd* and *ṣandal*, alongside foreign-origin boats that were used on Tunisian coasts, such as the *mistico*, *kānūṭa*, *shabbāk* and *sākālūfā*.

As the author notes, the presence of so many varieties of foreign vessels along the Tunisian coast raises the question: does this stem from the local community's openness to foreign innovations, or is it due to the decline of endemic manufacturing and production techniques, which rendered local actors unable to keep up with technological developments?

While a book of this scope could not on its own address all aspects of the topic, the author has done well to address her research questions and to present an account of the various techniques of fishing and navigation present in Tunisia. Despite the difficulty of addressing the topic and the range of vocabulary at play, the examples the author presents and analyses demonstrate her extensive knowledge of extant sources and research, which she reinforced through extensive field visits along the coast, and through witnessing the daily life of the Tunisian seaman.<sup>21</sup>

However, the author provides only a brief discussion of the daily lives of maritime communities, particularly regarding sailors' clothing and food. Yet, the particular nature of maritime activity has influenced

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> Farid Khacharem, "Madkhal li-Dirāsāt al-Ṣayd al-Baḥrī al-Taqlīdī bi-Khalīj Qābis Khilāl al-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Aṣhar," in: Mekni (ed.), p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Ben Hamida, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 150.



not only technological advancements but also the culinary and sartorial traditions of coastal communities. This impact is evident in Tunisia's diverse contemporary cuisine, where seafood remains a staple in many households.

The author presents a comprehensive inventory of vernacular maritime terminology, which she refers to as "the fisherman's narrated memory".<sup>22</sup> She traces the temporal and spatial evolution and geographic distribution of sea-related terms throughout the modern period, documenting elements of contemporary maritime vocabulary, and comparing them to the historical terminological corpus. This comparative analysis highlights both the continuities and variations in maritime discourse across Tunisia's different coastal regions.

Building on her previous research on the Gulf of Gabès region,<sup>23</sup> the author compiles two extensive glossaries documenting the region's most significant maritime terminology. The first, on navigation, catalogues 492 terms related to boats, maritime workers' ranks, and different wind directions. The second, devoted to fishing, includes 504 phrases, for a total of 996 entries making up the contemporary maritime vernacular used by Tunisia's sailors today.

However, the researcher overlooks a vital source integral to the daily verbal repertoire and collective memory of sailors: the colloquial proverbs, poems, and folk songs that circulate within the coastal communities under study.

Furthermore, while Tunisia was well-known for its tuna<sup>24</sup> and sponge<sup>25</sup> fisheries, these industries did not really thrive until the 19th century. This raises questions about their failure to flourish during the medieval and early modern periods, as well as the inability of coastal communities to advance their production techniques – issues that the book does not sufficiently address.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> As-Saghira Ben Hamida, "al-Muṣṭalaḥ al-Baḥrī al-Manṭūq bi-Sāḥil al-Janūb al-Sharqī li-l-Bilād al-Tūnisiyya: Namūdhaj li-Istiqrā' al-Marāji' al-Tārīkhiyya wa-l-Iqtisādiyya wa-l-Ijtimā'iyya," Master's thesis, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sfax, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Ganiage, *Une entreprise italienne de Tunisie au milieu du XIX e siècle* (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1960), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Khacharem, "Madkhal li-Dirāsāt al-Ṣayd al-Baḥrī al-Taqlīdī bi-Khalīj Qābis Khilāl al-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Aṣhar," p. 62.

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المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) is an independent social sciences and humanities institute that conducts applied and theoretical research seeking to foster communication between Arab intellectuals and specialists and global and regional intellectual hubs. The ACRPS achieves this objective through consistent research, developing criticism and tools to advance knowledge, while establishing fruitful links with both Arab and international research centers.

The ACRPS encourages a resurgence of intellectualism in Arab societies, committed to strengthening the Arab nation. It works towards the advancement of the latter based on the understanding that development cannot contradict a people's culture and identity, and that the development of any society remains impossible if pursued without an awareness of its historical and cultural context, reflecting its language(s) and its interactions with other cultures.

The ACRPS works therefore to promote systematic and rational, scientific research-based approaches to understanding issues of society and state, through the analysis of social, economic, and cultural policies. In line with this vision, the ACRPS conducts various academic activities to achieve fundamental goals. In addition to producing research papers, studies and reports, the ACRPS conducts specialized programs and convenes conferences, workshops, training sessions, and seminars oriented to specialists as well as to Arab public opinion. It publishes peer-reviewed books and journals and many publications are available in both Arabic and English to reach a wider audience.

The ACRPS, established in Doha in autumn 2010 with a publishing office in Beirut, has since opened three additional branches in Tunis, Washington and Paris, and founded both the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. The ACRPS employs resident researchers and administrative staff in addition to hosting visiting researchers, and offering sabbaticals to pursue full time academic research. Additionally, it appoints external researchers to conduct research projects.

Through these endeavours the ACRPS contributes to directing the regional research agenda towards the main concerns and challenges facing the Arab nation and citizen today.



The Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) is an independent institute for learning and research in the fields of Social Sciences, Humanities, Public Administration and Development Economics in Doha.

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The DI seeks to establish an intellectual hub that will benefit the Arab region in particular. The DI supports academic research that deals with Arab issues, in an atmosphere of institutional and intellectual freedom.

The DI works in cooperation with the ACRPS and the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic Language to facilitate its students and faculty members in their research of the most important current issues related to the Arab world and the wider international community. The involvement of students in the most important research projects is at the heart of the DI's interests.

The DI adopts Arabic as its official and primary language for education and research. English serves as an accompaniment to Arabic, with both languages used in presenting and research.

# UPCOMING CONFERENCES

## The Iranian Studies Unit Annual Conference

The Iranian Studies Unit is holding its annual conference titled “Iran and the Changing Strategic Landscape of the Middle East”, examining the various aspects of Iranian foreign and security policies in relation to its immediate environment and the rest of the Middle East, particularly Iran’s regional position amidst Israel’s war on Gaza, Iranian relations with regional non-state actors, the “Axis of Resistance”, Iran’s relations with GCC states, and the impact of regional developments on Iran’s domestic politics.

17-18 September 2025

## The Eastern Coast of the Gulf and Its Arabs

The Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Unit, in partnership with the Hassan Bin Mohammed Center for Historical Studies, are jointly organizing a conference titled “The Eastern Coast of the Gulf and Its Arabs: Their Lives and Migrations From a History and Social Sciences Perspective”, examining the complexity surrounding the Gulf’s eastern coast, beginning with the name of the geographical region and extending to the delineation the region’s physical borders, the history of Arabs and sheikhdoms presence in this region, and the migrations between this region and the western Gulf coast.

11-12 October 2025

## The Annual Conference for Historical Studies

The ACRPS is holding the Annual Conference for Historical Studies titled “The History of Hajj in Islamic Countries: Sources, Developments and Challenges”, examining eight themes related to the history of the Hajj: Sources for Writing the History of the Hajj; Organizing the Hajj in Islamic Countries; Hajj Routes; The Hajj in Times of Epidemic; The Hajj in war time; The Hajj as a Political, Economic, and Social Phenomenon; The Hajj and Colonialism; The Hajj as a Space for the Transmission of Ideas.

January 2026



### COVER ARTWORK

“Sea” (2022)

Oil on canvas, 90\*130 cm, by **Ribal Molaab**

Visual Artist from Lebanon who studied at the Mozarteum University Salzburg, Austria. He later moved to Vienna to study a master’s at the University for Music and Performing Arts. He was appointed as the artistic director of “SUMITO” Art and Music Association in Switzerland. He is the founder of “Molaeb Festival for Chamber Music and Fine Arts” in Lebanon. His paintings have been exhibited in New York, Tokyo, Fukuoka, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Amman, Beirut, London, Paris, Antibes, Madrid, Amsterdam, Geneva, Basel, and Zürich.