

THE CREATION OF QATAR

Rosemarie Said Zahlan

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ROSEMARIE SAID ZAHLAN

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Rosemarie Said Zahlan



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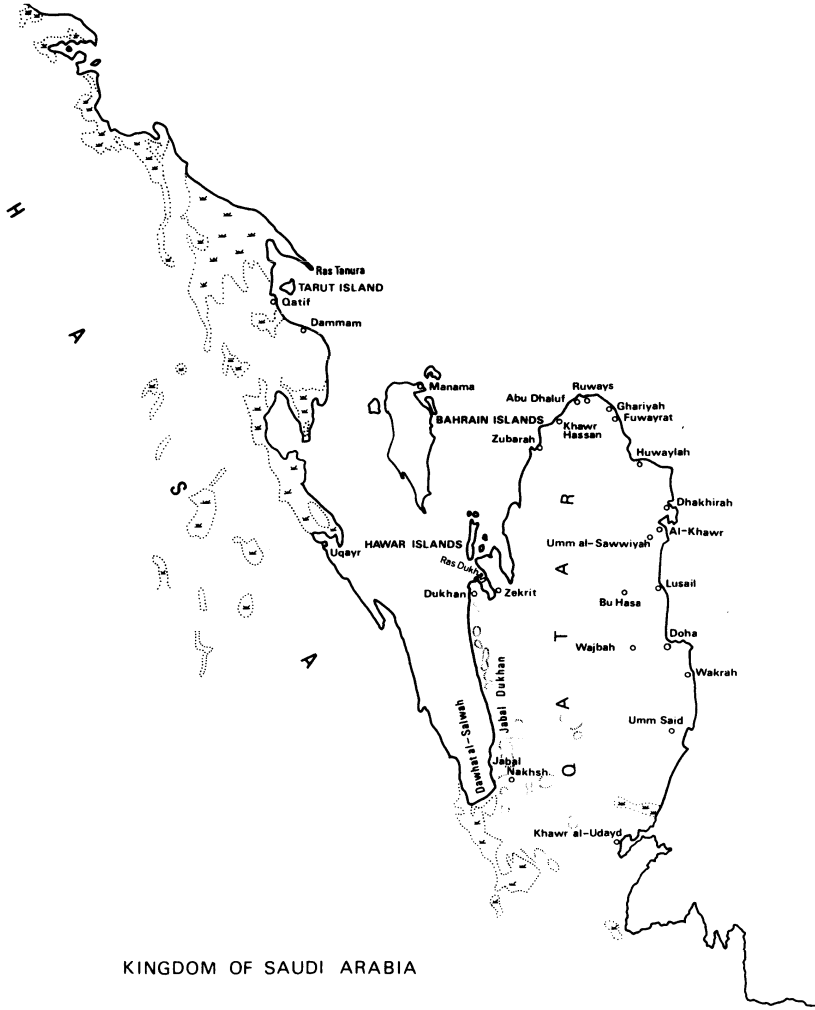
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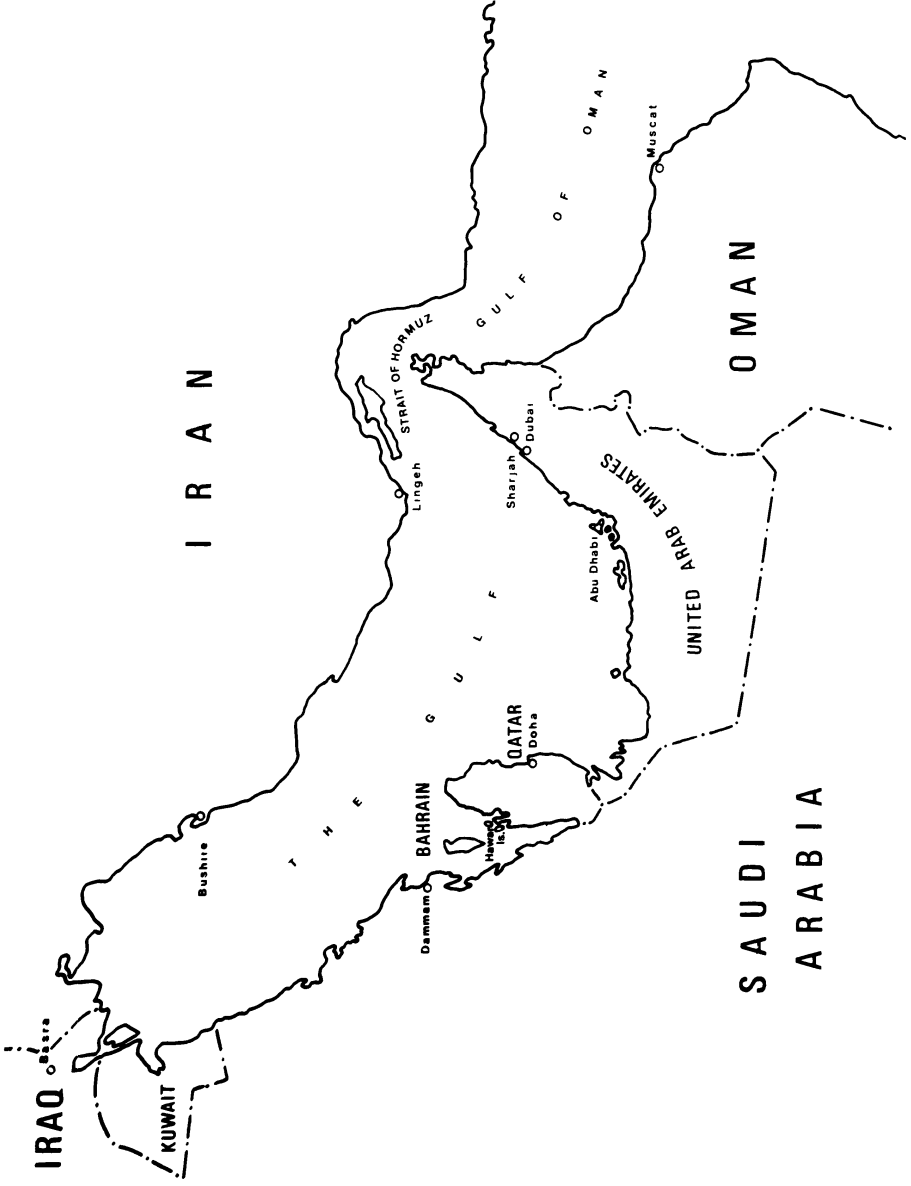
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KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA



IRAQ

KUWAIT

IRAN

BAHRAIN

QATAR

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

SAUDI ARABIA

OMAN

Bushire

Dammam

Hamad

Doha

Sharjah

Dubai

Muscat

Lingeh

STRAIT OF HORMUZ

P E R S I A N G U L F

G U L F O F O M A N

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*13 Elms Lea Avenue
Brighton, Sussex
November 1978*

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PREFACE

What was undoubtedly the first mention of Qatar in the Western media appeared on 24 January 1935 in the *Daily Express* (Britain). Three days later, a similar article, obviously inspired by the same source, appeared in *The People*. Both articles pictured the ruler of Qatar as a fabulous 'Sheik of Arabia': they gave Arabian Nights accounts of the eighty-odd members of his beautiful harem, his 'piles of pearls', the breathtaking qualities of his court and his romantic country complete with four thousand slaves. Nothing could have been further from reality, as the following pages will clearly illustrate.

Although the articles do not seem to have created more than a ripple of interest outside a restricted circle of British officials, they were in fact a direct outcome of the Anglo-American rivalry that had recently developed over the acquisition of an oil concession in Qatar. The British government, in treaty relations with Qatar, only allowed its ruler to sign a commercial agreement with a British-controlled company. The rival US company retaliated by leaking the information to the press in order to draw attention to the Gulf states in deliberate opposition to the British policy of suppressing all information on the region.

The articles were the last to appear on Qatar in many years. It was only when oil in sizeable quantities began to be exported and when Qatar gradually began to take its place amongst the sovereign states of the world that some literature on it started to reappear. But the reasons for this can once again be linked to Qatar's large petroleum resources, almost as if that fact alone were the *raison d'être* of the small state on the western shores of the Gulf.

There can be no doubt of Qatar's present economic importance. It is a supplier of energy, and its indigenous population has the third highest *per capita* income in the world; in 1978, this figure stood at \$11,400 (roughly £5,700) with \$2 billion its oil revenue that year, to say nothing of its vast reservoir of associated and unassociated gases.¹ Oil production itself reached over two and a half billion barrels in 1977, practically all of which was exported, the United States being the single largest importer. Over and above these facts, the government of Qatar is in the process of expanding and diversifying its economy. For this, it has to rely heavily on foreign, mostly Western, technology and manpower, skilled and otherwise. Furthermore, until it becomes more

self-sufficient, Qatar will have to continue to depend on considerable importation of food and commodities. In 1976 this amounted to approximately \$1.3 billion or £650 million² for a total population of around 220,000. The bulk of these goods came from Western countries, thus increasing the importance of Qatar to these states.

These statistics amply illustrate Qatar's recent and remarkable prosperity but in themselves they tell us nothing of the structure and maintenance of Qatari society. To date there has been virtually no literature that seeks to understand and explain Qatar's evolution through its history. Such information as exists is scant and not readily available; by and large, it is also unreliable. It is noteworthy that much less has been written on Qatar than on any other Gulf state, where the literature is already sparse. This work is an attempt to restore the balance at least in some small part.

The main thrust of this work is to provide the reader with a description and identification of the processes and forces that contribute to change and continuity in Qatari society. For this, a study of the history of Qatar during the past two centuries is essential, with emphasis not only on its own internal development, but also on its relationship with its closest neighbours, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as well as with the Ottoman Empire and Britain. It has been compiled largely from the material available at the India Office Records (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) in London together with the few existing Qatari chronicles. The former is still one of the greatest sources for the history of the entire Gulf region, although the information on Qatar is scanty compared with other places. An attempt is then made to determine the inner logic of the Qatari political and social structure and how it has evolved over the years. It will be shown how the same society that exhibited great fortitude in the face of economic and political hardship could have an equally great capacity to adapt to new levels of prosperity.

Furthermore, Qatar is viewed within the context of the entire Gulf region. Whenever possible, reference is made to a similar characteristic or incident in another part of the Gulf littoral. The pattern of Qatar's various relationships with its neighbours is also examined in order to gain a perspective of the region as a whole. Finally, the prospects for Qatar in the year 2000 will be presented as a logical continuation of past and current trends.

Notes

1. 'Qatar', *Financial Times*, 22 February 1978.
2. Ragei el Mallakh, *Qatar: Development of an Oil Economy* (London, 1979).

1 INTRODUCTION

1. Geography and Physical Characteristics

The location and geographical features of Qatar have played a predominant role in the shaping of its political and social characteristics. A narrow limestone peninsula around 22,000 square kilometres in area, Qatar juts out midway onto the Arab (western) coast of the Gulf, around 30 kilometres south of the Bahrain islands. The peninsula is largely desert with undulating rock rising out of it, making the soil generally unfit for anything but nomadic pastoralism; in fact, until the discovery of oil enabled limited agricultural activity to be financed, the only natural vegetation in Qatar, apart from a few date gardens, was coarse grass and occasional stunted brushwood. To the north, east and west, Qatar is bounded by the sea. The southern boundary, by contrast, remained undefined until the 1930s; it was closely connected with prevailing political conditions in the central and eastern part of Arabia until the delimitation of boundaries became an imperative adjunct to the acquisition of concessions by the oil companies. At the base of the eastern side of Qatar is Khawr al-Udayd, a creek that forms the boundary with the neighbouring shaykhdom of Abu Dhabi, and at its western base is Dohat al-Salwa, a bay that divides Qatar from the Hasa province of Saudi Arabia.

Qatar has generally been regarded in European literature as desolate and forbidding. Palgrave, for example, saw it as 'a miserable province' and was depressed by what he described as 'miles on miles of low barren hills, bleak and sun-scorched, with hardly a single tree to vary their dry monotonous outline'.¹ This attitude was reflected by many others, and has persisted because of the long isolation of Qatar which has only recently started to be lifted.

Placed in the context of the Arab shaykhdoms of the Gulf, however, Qatar is only strikingly different in one respect: it has never had any permanent inland settlements. All towns and villages have been coastal, with pearling, fishing and sailing the only occupations of the inhabitants. In the Trucial States, by contrast, the large inland oases – such as Buraimi (Al-Ain) in Abu Dhabi, and Dhayd in Sharjah – have provided an added dimension to the political, social and economic structure of the states in which they exist. The tribes living there have often had a powerful impact on those of the coast; the agricultural community,

rudimentary though its methods might be, differs substantially from the seafaring people of the coast, providing them with necessary products they would otherwise have to import. The only Trucial State with no such oases or inland towns is Dubai. Although Dubai is much smaller than Qatar, consisting primarily of Dubai town, a strong affinity between the two places has grown up over the years. Marriage between their ruling families and a unified currency, the Qatar-Dubai riyal,² are but two recent examples of this.

The absence of inland settlements has made Qatar dependent commercially and politically on its neighbours. Most food has always had to be imported, together with such essential materials as wood for ships. Pearls, its main commodity until the advent of oil, were exported to Bahrain and Lingeh across the Gulf on the Persian coast where many Arabs were engaged in trade. The fact that its southern border was contiguous with the Arabian mainland made it susceptible to the political ramifications that accompanied the bedouin tribes in their inland wanderings to the various wells that dot the desert. Above all, its central location on the Arabian coast of the Gulf very often made it an outpost and a convenient place of shelter in the rather stormy political life of the Gulf states.

An examination of the map of Qatar will reveal much of its political and economic evolution during the past two hundred years. Largely because of geographic proximity, its longest and most historic links have been with Bahrain. During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Al-Khalifah, emigrants of the Utub tribe from Nejd, migrated from Kuwait and settled in the town of Zubarah, on the west coast of the peninsula. Until then, the only settled places were the villages of Huwaylah, Fuwayrat and Doha on the east coast.³ After the founding of Zubarah, a number of villages sprang up along the west coast.

In 1783, the Utub conquered Bahrain, thus establishing the rule of Al-Khalifah which continues until today. During the next century, events in Qatar became closely tied to the affairs of Bahrain, and the shaykh of Bahrain became the accepted suzerain of Qatar. Throughout that time, the villages on the eastern and western coasts of the peninsula developed in different directions. The west coast remained linked to events in Bahrain: around 1842, for example, an exiled member of the Al-Khalifah rebuilt Zubarah, which had gone into decline, in order to launch an expedition against Bahrain. The east coast, by contrast, developed away from Bahrain.

The eastern towns and villages were practically the only inhabited