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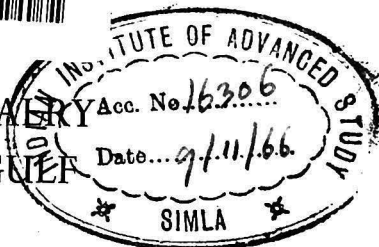


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7/10/83

ARAB-PERSIAN RIVALRY IN THE PERSIAN GULF

By JOHN MARLOWE



(Address given to the Royal Central Asian Society on July 23, 1963.)

ABOUT eight years ago, various countries in the Arab world began to print maps in which they called the area that has always been known as the Persian Gulf the "Arabian Gulf". This was not a mere matter of nomenclature—it was a symptom of a rivalry which was rooted in history, a rivalry between two different races, two different religions, two different cultures. Very soon, the practice of referring to the "Arabian Gulf" became almost obligatory in all Arabic-speaking countries. Newspaper articles, speeches and books always made a point—a rather provocative point—of referring to the Arabian Gulf, and this habit was objected to by Persia, which understood clearly that it was not a simple matter of nomenclature. Today this habit of calling the Persian Gulf the "Arabian Gulf" has hardened into a convention, and I think that if you write a letter to Kuwait with "Persian Gulf" on it there is a fairly good chance of its not being delivered. Similarly, if you write a letter to Iran with "Arabian Gulf" on it there is a fairly good chance of its not being delivered.

This renewed Arab interest in the Persian Gulf coincided with, and was caused by, three specific developments. The first, in chronology, was the gradual end of the British naval and military hegemony in the Persian Gulf which had lasted for some 150 years, during which time it had virtually turned the Persian Gulf into a British lake. That moment in 1946 when India and Pakistan became independent within the Commonwealth marked also the beginning of a British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, and the creation of a power vacuum there. The second development was the great increase in importance of the oil resources of the area to the economy of the West, together with the fact that the Persian Gulf was the principal channel of export for the oil produced there. The third development was the rise of that dynamic phase of Arab nationalism which we associate with the name and career of Gamal Abdul Nasir. Those were the three circumstances, coming approximately together, which led to the renewal of Arab interest in the affairs of the Persian Gulf.

As I have said, Arab-Persian rivalry was not a new thing; its roots lay deep in history. The Persian civilization became intermingled with the Arabic civilization as a result of the Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century A.D., and the fact that certain Arab marks were left on Persia rather accentuated this rivalry than otherwise. Within a hundred years or thereabouts the Persians had again become virtually independent, militarily and

politically. But the Arab conquest had left its mark behind; there was the Arabic alphabet, and a large number of Arabic words imported into the Persian language. More importantly, there was the Moslem religion, which, subsequently and characteristically, the Persians started to wear with a difference, as a result of the process by which Shi'ism became the state religion of Persia. After Persia's liberation there was a long history of struggle between her and the orthodox Islamic world; a long history of fighting, not with the Arabs but with Sunni Islam, a struggle which for the greater part of the time, and certainly from the sixteenth century onwards, was with the Ottoman Empire. The continual wars in which Persia and the Ottoman Empire were locked during these centuries impoverished and enfeebled them both. These wars ended in 1847 with the Treaty of Erzurum, which stabilized the land frontier between the two empires from Mount Ararat to the Persian Gulf.

While the Persians and the Ottoman Turks had been fighting each other on land, the Persian Gulf had come under the control of the Western powers, beginning in the sixteenth century with the Portuguese, when Albuquerque came round the Cape route and occupied Hormuz. The Portuguese were superseded about 100 years later by the English and the Dutch; then the French came along. The Persian Gulf was therefore to all intents and purposes under the naval control of one or other of the Western great powers from the sixteenth century onwards. At about the beginning of the nineteenth century Great Britain established her own hegemony, after having gradually eliminated the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French. The British put down piracy and the slave trade and established what were virtually protectorates over all the Arab sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf. After the Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907 they also had what amounted to a British protectorate in South Persia, and after the first World War Iraq came under a British mandate. Saudi Arabia too, before it became an important oil producer, was to a very large extent a dependent State of Great Britain—to a greater extent at that time even than during the nineteenth century. The Persian Gulf had become a British lake, where the *Pax Britannica* ruled.

This state of affairs did not last long; by the end of the second World War the whole picture had been radically changed. The end of the British hegemony in the Persian Gulf coincided with the end of the specific British interest in India. The building up of our influence in the Persian Gulf had from the end of the eighteenth century onwards been dictated by our Indian Empire. The suppression of piracy, the establishment of our interest in Persia as well as over the Arab sheikhdoms, had usually been at the instigation of the Indian Government and had frequently been brought about by the Indian Government. Generally speaking, British policy in the Persian Gulf had been an appendage of British-Indian policy, and, up to the beginning of the first World War, the Persian Gulf had been primarily regarded as the western approach to India.

Developments after the second World War had a revolutionary effect on the whole political situation in the Middle East. The link between the Persian Gulf and India had been broken, but something just as important to Great Britain—and more important to the West as a whole—had taken

its place. For the first time since Sinbad the Sailor went on his expeditions from Basra, the Persian Gulf had become, in its own right, a place of immense economic importance; its significance did not merely derive from its geographical position on the route to India.

I will not produce statistics about the importance of Persian Gulf oil to the Western world, which is very well known to this audience. Immediately after the second World War the principal oil resources then being exploited were in Persia. By far the oldest established oilfield in the Persian Gulf is on its eastern side. Oil production in Persia began in 1908; Persia had something like twenty years' start over any of the other states in the Gulf. It was only after the second World War that the oilfields of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, etc., began to assume any considerable importance. The result of the denunciation of the Anglo-Iranian oil agreement in 1952 and the virtual stoppage of oil exports from Iran for about two years was that a very great fillip was given to oil production in the new fields on the Arabian side of the Gulf—in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc. When oil exports from Iran were resumed, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had established themselves as the two most important oil exporters in the Gulf area, with Iran taking third place. That, of course, has always been a sore point with Iran, and is perhaps one of the more important features of this growing rivalry between Iran and the Arab world.

The first point, then, the one condition which made the rise of Arab-Persian rivalry possible, was the withdrawal of the British hegemony. The second point is oil itself, in which both the Persians and the Arabs have an interest. The third concerns Arab political unity.

When one talks of the Arabs and the Persians having "an interest" one is already talking about different things. On the eastern side of the Gulf is Persia, which is a single State—a single, politically unified State with a single policy. On the other side of the Gulf are a number of States: Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Abu Dhabi and the various Arab sheikhdoms, which have no political unity whatever. They are all Arab; that is, they share a common language and a common religion and to some extent they have common political aspirations. These political aspirations are at present identified with the achievements of Nasir. The concept of Arab unity has of course existed for the last sixty years or so but it has never come to fruition, and I think it is a mistake to suppose that unity between peoples with a common language and with common traditions is an inevitable process. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it does not. It happened in Germany, it happened in Italy, but it did not happen in South America and it did not happen in classical times with the Greek City States. Whether or not it happens is largely a matter of historical accident, and whether or not it will happen in the Arab world depends I think very much on whether or not anyone will be strong enough to make it happen. In my view the lesson of history is that when it does happen, it does so as a result of strong leadership, as when Germany was unified under the leadership of Bismarck. Whether or not it will happen under Nasir would be most unwise for me to attempt to prophesy, and I am certainly not going to do so. A few weeks ago it seemed a good deal more likely than it does now.

In the Arab world at present there are two opposed forces. One might be called "Nasirism"; the other is the Ba'ath party. Both of them want the same things—both want social reform, both want unity, both want neutralism. But they disagree as to the ways of attaining these things, and, just as heretics are always regarded as being more wicked than infidels, they seem to dislike each other (recently, at all events) very much more than people sometimes do who have totally different aims.

The Persian attitude towards Arab unity is quite a simple one; they are "agin' it". And I think one must appreciate and understand that attitude, having regard to the fact that the Persian economy is very largely dependent upon oil, that their oilfields are in South-west Persia, and that the Persian Gulf is the only channel by which the oil can be exported to the markets of the world. The Persian Gulf is absolutely vital to them; that is something that we as a maritime nation can appreciate. Already they have had bitter experience of maritime interference from an Arab State in the matter of the Shatt al Arab, and I think it might be as well to digress for a few minutes in order to explain the position with regard to the Shatt al Arab, for that shows in miniature the position in the Persian Gulf as it is seen both by the Persians and by the Arabs.

I referred earlier to the Treaty of Erzurum which fixed the boundary between what was then the Ottoman Empire and Persia from Mount Ararat to the head of the Persian Gulf. The Shatt al Arab is the river made by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and it runs for 150 miles or so down to the head of the Persian Gulf. According to the Treaty of Erzurum in 1847 the boundary between Turkey and Persia was the low-water line on the Persian side of the Shatt al Arab, which meant in effect that the navigable stream of the Shatt was in Turkish hands.

At that time Persia had no serious interest in navigation on the Shatt and the Turks had, because their port of Basra was on the Shatt. This boundary was confirmed by an International Boundary Commission in 1914, and after the war, when Iraq inherited what had been the Turkish territory of Mesopotamia, they also inherited this boundary. By that time Persia herself had a considerable interest in navigation along the Shatt al Arab because her oil had been discovered, and the refinery at Abadan—which is about halfway along the Shatt al Arab—was halfway between the sea and Basra. Abadan had therefore become as vital to Persia as Basra was to Iraq. But, in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Erzurum and the subsequent boundary commission, the navigation channel up the Shatt al Arab was in the hands of Iraq, and it has remained in the hands of Iraq ever since. This has always been a source of grievance to Persia and gives point to the fears which the Persians undoubtedly feel about the possible implications of Arab unity as regards their own position on the Persian Gulf. Two years ago the refinery of Abadan was almost closed as a result of a dispute between the Iraqi and Persian governments over the question of berthing at Abadan. The details of that dispute are immaterial here, but the point is that the Iraqis had used their rights over the navigation channel of the Shatt al Arab to apply economic sanctions to Persia, and they applied them so effectively that after two months or so of diplomatic wrangling, during the course of which the Abadan refinery was more or

less closed, the Persians gave way. The dispute was over the question of whether the Iraqi port authority or the Persian port authority should get the revenues from berthing tankers at Abadan—and the Persians had to give way.

In my view the Persian attitude towards Arab unity is dictated by the fear lest what has happened on a small scale in the Shatt al Arab might be applied on a large scale to the whole of the Persian Gulf. In other words, if some form of Arab unity should come about (a federation or a confederation of Arab States) on the other side of the Persian Gulf—whether under the domination of Nasir or of the Ba'athists—and if, instead of there being a number of small and more or less independent States on the other side of the Gulf, there should be a powerful, potentially hostile single power (that is to say, an Arab State or an Arab Union), then I think the Persians would see such a development as an extremely serious one for them. It can hardly be wondered at therefore that Persian diplomacy, and Persian policy generally, is wholly opposed to the possibility of any form of Arab unity, and that when any form of Arab Union appears to be at all likely the Persians are apt to become very alarmed indeed. They derive their alarm first from the obvious facts of the situation, secondly from their experience in the Shatt al Arab, and thirdly from the openly expressed attitude of Arab Nationalists, who, as shown unmistakeably in this matter of nomenclature, regard the Persian Gulf as an Arab lake.

How important is all this? If all these dreams of Arab unity should fade away, as they have done so often in the past, then Persia has not much need to fear what goes on on the other side of the Gulf. But it is interesting to trace the chain of events over the last few years, from the time when this practice of calling the Persian Gulf the Arabian Gulf came into vogue in the Arab countries. Anyone watching reactions in Persia would have noted, first of all, that the claim to Bahrain, which the Persians had originally put forth in 1927 and had never pushed very seriously, now began to assume more importance, on the general principle that if the Arabs were making an advance in one direction Persia must make one in the other. At the same time, Persia began consciously to cultivate her relationships with both Saudi Arabia and with the various independent sheikhdoms on the Arab side of the Gulf, because it was obviously to her interest that they should remain independent and should not become merged in any sort of Arab Union. Persia had a vested interest in the *status quo* in the Persian Gulf, that is to say a vested interest in the maintenance of the existing sovereignty of the various Persian Gulf sheikhdoms.

The next event—which came from the Arab side—was in 1959, when Qasim had a tremendous brainstorm and claimed a Persian city well on the Persian side of the Shatt al Arab. That died down after a bit, but in February 1961 came the trouble over berthing at Abadan. Just before that, in the summer of 1960, diplomatic relations between Persia and Egypt were broken off and have not, I believe, been renewed since. The ostensible reason for their breaking off highlighted another nagging source of friction. The Arabs were always trying to get the Persians to join with them in their boycott of Israel, and trying to get the Persian Government to see that no Persian oil ever went to Israel. The Persian Government,

although it went some way towards conciliating the Arabs by having only a modified form of diplomatic relations with Israel, would never meet the Arabs by forbidding oil exports from Iran to Israel.

(I am saying Iran and Persia not on any particular principle but differently. The country was called Persia in England until 1935, when Reza Shah decreed that it should be known as Iran. This was the date when the Anglo-Persian Oil Company changed its name to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Since then the present Shah has indicated that he is prepared to accept either version. We never, incidentally, call Persian cats Iranian cats, and we normally call Persian carpets Persian and not Iranian.) In the summer of 1961 came Qasim's claim to Kuwait. I am sure we all remember the outline of the events at that time. The immediate effect of Qasim's claim was to demonstrate that, although our political influence was being gradually withdrawn, the British were still a considerable power in the Persian Gulf. It also demonstrated, or appeared to demonstrate, that Nasir's schemes for Arab union were virtually at an end. All this arose, you will remember, from the fact that England's treaty with Kuwait in 1899 had been superseded by an agreement whereby Kuwait assumed her sovereign independence. Iraq objected to this, and claimed Kuwait as part of Iraq on the ground that it had once been part of the old Ottoman vilayet of Basra.

Qasim failed to make good his claim, either by military force or by any upsurge of feeling in his favour in Kuwait. The Sheikh of Kuwait invoked British assistance, which was given to him. Without formally dropping his claim, Qasim took no further steps to pursue it and in due course the British military force was replaced by an Arab League military force and there was tremendous argument in the Arab world over the question of whether Kuwait should be admitted first to the Arab League and then to the United Nations. As a result of these quarrels, Britain had again been able to intervene effectively in the internal affairs of the Arab States, and it looked as though the whole project of Arab unity had once more fallen to the ground. This, of course, was welcome to Persia, and the months after the failure of Qasim's claims to Kuwait were a period of *détente* in relations between Persia and the Arab world.

At the beginning of 1963 the confused series of events taking place in Syria and Iraq once more raised the whole question of whether or not there was going to be some form of Arab unity, expressed in some kind of Arab Federation. Among the various things that have been happening in the Arabian Peninsula is the civil war in the Yemen. Whatever the ultimate result, the Yemen will certainly emerge from the Middle Ages into at least the nineteenth, and possibly into the twentieth, century. That war has had repercussions in Saudi Arabia and it would appear that Saudi Arabia also is at last emerging from her old patriarchal system into something like a modern state. Developments such as these in the two hinterland States of the Arabian Peninsula are going to have repercussions on the sheikhdoms also, and whatever may result from the long feuds connected with the internal politics of Syria and Iraq and the confused ideological battles between Nasir and the Ba'athists, the tendency seems in general to be towards unity, though it may take a very long time.

Let us now look for a moment at these two forces confronting one another in the Persian Gulf. The British presence has been almost removed, and its replacement by a physical Russian presence seems unlikely owing to strategic and political developments in the cold war. There are two different races, with different languages, different cultures, a long history of what you might call bad-tempered neighbourhood behind them and now their rivalry over oil. There are also differences in international politics in that whereas Persia has, for a number of reasons but mainly because of its proximity to Russia, aligned itself with the West, the apostles of Arab unity on the other hand have committed themselves to neutralism. That is a considerable point of difference. After listening to Arab Nationalists one might be inclined to say that the confrontation between Arab Nationalism and the Persian State is also a confrontation between progress and reaction, but that is not entirely true. Although the hallmarks of Arab unity are certainly nationalism, neutralism and social reform, it would not be correct to say that a hallmark of the Iranian State is any form of social reaction. Where the social reform content of Arab Nationalism (and this is common both to Nasirism and to the Ba'ath) is revolutionary in the sense that it aims at achieving social reforms by overturning the previous social order—overturning the Hashimites in Iraq, overturning Farouk in Egypt—though not necessarily by violence, there is a different sort of social reform going on in Persia. I should like to end my talk by referring very briefly to this, for it seems to me that, although it is too early to talk of success, it is a phenomenon which is, so far, unique. Social reform all over the Arab world is being brought about at various paces and with varying degrees of success, as a result of revolution. Now in Iran there is this attempt, which is unique in the Middle East, to bring it about by a process of evolution. Social reform in Iran, as in the Arab countries and indeed everywhere else including most European countries, is bound up with land reform. If, then, in Iran an attempt is being made to bring about this basic social reform by evolutionary methods—that is to say, without a political revolution aimed at overturning the existing source of power—it seems to me to be something to be watched with interest and with sympathy. I believe it has a powerful enough momentum not to be stopped even if anyone wanted to stop it, and it will be interesting to see if it will succeed, and how far it will succeed.

In my opinion it is not true that in the Persian Gulf a socially progressive force of Arabism faces a socially reactionary force in the Persian State. A revolutionary force faces an evolutionary force, but if Arab unity comes about the Arabs and the Persians must learn to coexist; it would be a terrible tragedy if there were to be a sort of junior cold war in the Persian Gulf. I think Persia has some genuine fears, which I have tried to outline and explain, and I think also that if any form of confederation of Arab States comes about it would be lack of statesmanship not to recognize those fears. It will be one of the problems Arab statesmen will have to face.

Meanwhile, the amount of diplomatic influence which can be exercised either by the Arab States on Persia or vice versa is negligible. Persia is not in a position to take sides in the struggle for unity in the Arab world, although it is natural that she should use such influence as she can against

the achievement of any such unity. In the event of unity in one form or another being achieved, a *modus vivendi* between Persia and whatever form of Arab union may emerge must be found. Summing up, the points at issue are rivalry over oil, and the neutralism which is bound to be a mark of whatever Arab union there may be versus the Western Alliance policy of Persia, which presumably will still be maintained. Both these points are of vital concern to the West. If there were to be any blockade of Persian oil, for instance, obviously we should have to interest ourselves. Moreover, if there were any large-scale dispute between the Arab world and the Persians, the fact that Persia is allied to the West would mean that the West would be involved; the West is therefore inescapably interested in trying to ensure that there will be no such trouble.

REPORT OF DISCUSSION

The meeting was thrown open for discussion or for contributions and an Arab member of the audience, Mr. HAZIM EL KHALIDI, said: No Arab geographer in the past has ever mentioned the words "Arabian Gulf". The Gulf was always known as the "Persian Gulf". The words "Arabian Gulf" came from Bahrain in the early thirties when the Bahrainis, being naturally very upset by the claims of Persia over their islands, began to use the teasing words "Arabian Gulf". The Bahrainis had very close relations with Iraq, and through the latter the term spread over the whole Arab world. We all remember that the relations between Persia and Egypt were very close; so close, indeed, that the Shah married the sister of King Farouk. In modern times relations became estranged only after the Abadan crisis and the championship which the speaker commented upon — of one side for neutralism, and of the other for alliance with a certain political grouping of the West. However, on analysing the problem, we find that certain other things also contributed. When D'Arcy first went to extract oil from the Persian Gulf area the first person with whom he made contact was an Arab sheikh, Sheikh Khazal. In accordance with the 1837 Treaty of Erzurum, Arabistan belonged to Persia, but Persia had no influence over it. The natural market for Arabistan tribes was Basra, and therefore their Arab identity continued. It was only when the Persian Government began oppressing the Southern Persian Arab tribes that Arab antagonism began to grow. The Ommanis up to about the time of the Treaty of Constantinople controlled most of the southern side of present-day Persia. The entire population of Southern Persia is bilingual. They are Arabic-speaking, and those who speak Persian, as some do in Bahrain, also speak Arabic and most of them trace their ancestry to Arabia. There is certain evidence in Arab history that these tribes were actually put there as a matter of policy in the ninth century in order to keep the northern Persians away from the Gulf and so protect the Indian and Chinese maritime trade. Historically, however, the Gulf has always been truly known as the Persian Gulf.

Mr. A. H. T. CHISHOLM said that although D'Arcy had been responsible for the discovery of oil in the Gulf he had not, in fact, been in Persia and had never therefore met Sheikh Khazal. With regard to the oil

rivalry between the Iranians and the Arab States he asked how the lecturer reconciled that rivalry, not only with Iran's membership of the organization known as OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) but with the leading part it played in that organization, one of whose specific objects was to prevent oil rivalry between its members. Replying, the lecturer agreed that OPEC was a conscious attempt by both Iran and the Arab oil-producing countries to see that oil rivalry was not developed to their mutual disadvantage, and said he thought that in the future OPEC might prove to be the means of overcoming that rivalry, and a signpost showing how common interests over oil might be extended to common interests in other directions.

