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ABU DHABI, 1761-1963

By J. E. H. BOUSTEAD

(Based on an address given to the R.C.A.S. on September 5, 1962)

IN order to give you all a clearer picture of the country which I am about to discuss, I am putting on the screen a map of South-eastern Arabia and another map showing you in more detail the geographical features of Abu Dhabi.

The area of the State itself comprises some 40,000 square miles, mainly of rolling dune country rising in the south-west in the area shown as the "Liwa", into a sand sea of high dunes running up to 600 or 800 feet, whence the dunes merge to the south-west into the wastes of the Empty Quarter.

Some 100 miles south of Abu Dhabi lies the Oasis of Buraimi, which has been in dispute since 1955.

Abu Dhabi, which is situated between the States of Qatar and Dubai on the Trucial Coast, has exercised sovereignty for many years along the coast to Khaur al-'Udaid and in the desert hinterland where the Oases of Liwa and Buraimi are to be found. Buraimi Oasis and its surrounding region lies at the north-western corner of the territory of the State of Muscat and Oman, and the Sultan of Muscat and Oman alongside the Shaikh of Abu Dhabi has long claimed and exercised sovereignty in parts of that region through his Wali at Sohar and the Paramount Shaikh of the Na'im tribe in Buraimi Oasis. The Shaikhdom of Abu Dhabi is in special treaty relations with the United Kingdom, which conducts its foreign relations.

The village of Abu Dhabi was first settled 200 years ago, in 1761, when some Bani Yas bedu discovered that there was drinkable water there. Before that there had been no settlements anywhere on the coast between Doha in Qatar and Sharjah. The inhabitants of the Abu Dhabi deserts had lived as semi-nomads in the interior, with gardens watered by the Liwa wells and grazing their flocks between Buraimi and eastern Saudi Arabia. It was only during the eighteenth century that the Bani Yas started turning to fishing and pearling as alternatives to their traditional occupations of date growing and herding. Once Abu Dhabi had been established, however, the Bani Yas emerged quickly from obscurity.

In 1793, about the time of the French Revolution, only thirty years after the site was found to contain water, the Ruling Family moved from the Liwa and established themselves in Abu Dhabi. Pearling thereafter became the summer occupation of the Liwa bedu, with the pearling season finishing just in time for the bedu to return to their gardens for the date harvest. In the winter, they again left the Liwa wells to graze their flocks. This cycle has continued ever since. Life in Abu Dhabi has, in fact, changed very little during the past 200 years.

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By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Abu Dhabi was starting to expand its influence both to the east in the Buraimi area and to the west towards Qatar, and from about 1820 until the present day the principal concern of the successive rulers of Abu Dhabi has been to preserve and consolidate the position which their predecessors had established during the first decade of the century.

The special relations of the British Government with the Rulers of Trucial Oman grew out of the efforts made by the British Government from the beginning of the nineteenth century—first, to put an end to frequent attacks on commerce in the Persian Gulf by pirates from Arabian ports; secondly, to put an end to tribal wars and piracies on the pearl banks, which extend all along the southern part of the Gulf, from Sharjah, in the east, to well past the islands of Bahrain, in the west. Before 1820, the whole coast between Ra's al-Khaimah and the Qatar peninsula was known as the "Pirate Coast", because its harbours and waters were infested with pirates. From that date onwards, however, by a long succession of Treaties and Maritime Truces, culminating in the Treaty of Perpetual Peace of May 4, 1853, the British Government gradually succeeded in establishing peace and order on the pearl banks, and on the trade routes of the Gulf. Indeed, from 1853 onwards, the name "Pirate Coast" began to give place to the name "Trucial Coast" or "Trucial Oman". These Treaties were signed by all the Ruling Shaikhs of the Pirate Coast, and by the Shaikh of Bahrain; and the Treaty of 1853 included an express stipulation that the "perfect maritime truce then established for evermore" should be watched over, and enforced by, the British Government.

The Ruler of Abu Dhabi, as one of the Trucial Shaikhs, was a signatory of each of the Maritime Treaties. He was the westernmost of the Trucial Shaikhs.

In 1855 the most notable of all the Abu Dhabi Rulers succeeded to the Shaikhdom. This was Zaid bin Khalifa, who ruled for fifty-four years until 1909. During Zaid's period as the Ruler, Abu Dhabi's position in Buraimi was firmly consolidated, the Saudis were finally thrown out not to return for eighty years, and Abu Dhabi emerged as the most powerful of the Trucial States.

When Zaid succeeded to the Shaikhdom, he had two main enemies. The first of these were the Saudis who had returned to Buraimi in 1853. Zaid eventually managed to eject them sixteen years later in 1869. Following their expulsion, Zaid also undertook, in return for a yearly payment, the task of protecting the Sultan's interests in the Buraimi area. It is from this time that the permanent division of the Oasis dates. It is, incidentally, a curious and almost inexplicable fact about Abu Dhabi history that for the past 100 years the Abu Dhabi Rulers and the successive Sultans have remained continuously on cordial terms. Despite Abu Dhabi's influence and power in the Buraimi area, which has usually far outweighed that of the Sultan, Abu Dhabi has never tried to expand at the Sultan's expense, but has always maintained the *status quo* and protected the Sultan's interests.

Abu Dhabi's other enemy when Zaid took over was the Jasimi shaikhdom based on Sharjah and controlling most of the north-eastern peninsula

and southwards at least to Buraimi. Like Zaid, the Sharjah Ruler was a powerful personality, and again like Zaid he ruled for a very long time—from 1800 to 1866. Fortunately for Zaid, the Sharjah Ruler, Sultan bin Saqr, divided his shaikhdom among his sons when he died and Jasimi influence quickly declined. An interesting sidelight on Zaid's character was an incident just after Sultan bin Saqr's death, when Zaid proposed to the new Ruler of Sharjah, Khalid bin Sultan, that instead of waging war against one another to settle their differences, the two of them should meet in single combat. Shaikh Khalid agreed to this, but was killed by Shaikh Zaid in the encounter that followed.

There were no significant developments in Abu Dhabi history from the time Zaid expelled the Saudis in 1869 until his death in 1909. Tribal feuding and fighting continued, but had little effect on the course of events. When Zaid died, his eldest son, Khalifa, the father of Shaikh Mohd. bin Khalifa, who lives in Buraimi now, did not want to become the Ruler, and for the next twenty years Zaid's other sons squabbled and fought for succession. Three successive Rulers were killed during this time by rival members of the family and bloodshed only stopped when the present Ruler, Shakhbut, a grandson of Shaikh Zaid, became the Ruler in 1928. Life in Abu Dhabi was much the same during the first fifty years of this century as it had been in the last. In the 1920's and 30's attention was diverted for a while by signs of renewed Saudi interest, shown by forays of tax collecting parties into the Buraimi area and the Liwa. In 1937, oil first became a factor in Abu Dhabi affairs when Shakhbut signed an exploration agreement with the P.D.T.C. Oil Company. Inter-tribal fighting went on throughout this time, the last major war taking place as recently as 1945 to 1948, when Abu Dhabi and Dubai fought one another up and down the coast. The Second World War, like the First, made almost no impact on Abu Dhabi, the only tangible effect being a certain amount of rationing.

It was only after the last war that Britain started to take any great interest in what happened inside the Trucial States. Hitherto, we had limited our interest to seeing that peace was kept at sea, and had left the shaikhdoms free to fight and feud as they liked. The first British Political Agent was only appointed in 1948 and it is from this time that Abu Dhabi's development can really be said to have started.

Tribal feuding and raiding, as well as slave-trading through the flourishing Buraimi markets, was finally put an end to by the forming of the Trucial Oman Levies in 1951. Since then there has been peace in Abu Dhabi, but in 1952 there occurred a Saudi incursion into Buraimi and a force under Turki bin Attaishan occupied the Sultanate village of Hamasa. The Ruler of Abu Dhabi's brother, Shaikh Zaid bin Sultan, and his representative in the oasis became the rallying point for the tribes around it who were exposed to Saudi subversion. In the event this had little effect in the Abu Dhabi sector of Buraimi, and in November 1955 the T.O.S. expelled the Saudis from Buraimi. A number of local inhabitants, almost all from the Sultanate sector, who had been involved with the Saudis, left with them and are still in Saudi Arabia.

The one really significant development since the expulsion of the

Saudis has of course been the discovery of oil which, in due course, will inevitably lead to the final break-up of the traditional way of life in Abu Dhabi and its emergence as a relatively modern state.

I feel that you would like to hear something of the life and background of the Ruler and his family and this will come more alive if you see their pictures on the screen. (*The family were then shown on the screen.*) I am sure you will all realize the psychological difficulty for a Ruler in Shaikh Shakhbut's position, who for the past fifty-seven years has been living in a bedouin economy, when he found himself suddenly confronted, like someone who has won the football pools—with millions of pounds per annum coming into the kitty.

The sudden boom with the advent of oil in Abu Dhabi has brought a spate of traders: managers of trading companies and banks, and business tycoons of all sorts from England, from Europe and from all over the Middle East.

The result of all this has been, of course, to arouse in the Ruler the in-born suspicion which is a part of the make-up of the desert bedu who have lived during the past centuries in a milieu of intrigue and tribal jealousies and feuds. It would be impossible to cast all this away, and it must inevitably influence the Ruler in dealing with foreigners who are clearly out for gain. Further, he is temperamentally nostalgic for the past years of bedouin life, which he appears to be loath to abandon.

His second son, Shaikh Sultan, knows some English, but his education in both Arabic and English has been somewhat circumscribed.

I am now going to discuss the Present and the Future, the basis of which is the finding of oil by land and sea.

The first oil land concession was an agreement made with P.D.T.C. in 1939, who explored the whole territory and the sea. Operations were held up by the war, but in March 1953 a special sea-bed concession was signed with the D'Arcy Exploration Company, who became A.D.M.A. in 1954 and the shares were held in the proportions two-thirds B.P. and one-third *Compagnie Française des Pétroles*.

As a result of the activities of Abu Dhabi Marine Areas on their Das Island sea base, some eighty-five miles north-west of Abu Dhabi, ten oil wells were bored and production started in July 1962 when the first tanker, *British Signal*, left Das Island with 50,000 tons of oil.

In the meantime, the Petroleum Development (Trucial Coast) Limited's activities have resulted in six oil bearing wells out of some twelve sunk in Murban field, some seventy miles west of Abu Dhabi.

The question of finding an oil terminal is not an easy one as, if the terminal were put in Abu Dhabi, it would have to be some thirteen miles off shore. This would entail great difficulties in filling the tankers in the frequent violent storms which occur throughout the Gulf in the winter months. It is therefore probable that the oil terminal will be built some seventy miles west of Murban, where deep water allows the approach of tankers to within one mile off the shore where there is a sheltered spot for the terminal. By the end of 1963, the Ruler will be drawing some seven million pounds income, which will be increasing steadily by some six or seven million pounds a year. On a rough estimate, in five years time, *i.e.*

by 1967, he will be having some £30 million a year income for a population of some 15,000 people, a phenomenal income *per capita* for a state.

In December 1961 the Ruler agreed to an overall survey of the island being carried out by two distinguished firms of Consulting Engineers: Messrs. Scott, Wilson Kirkpatrick and Partners and Sir William Halcrow and Partners. After some months of working separately, the firms agreed to combine and they produced an overall development plan in accordance with the terms of reference given to them both for the island and its approaches. This plan, which is admirably clear and comprehensive, covers the construction of roads, a marine area, a power station, an airport, plan for water distillations, a water survey and plans for residential, commercial and municipal areas. The plan envisaged an expenditure of some twenty-four million pounds during the course of the next five years under the direct supervision of the Consulting Engineers acting for the Ruler. They are now known as "Abu Dhabi Consultants". To date the Ruler has agreed to a part of the initial bridging scheme, entailing the expenditure of some £600,000 on a temporary jetty and main roads across the area.

An equally important aspect is that of forming a government for the Ruler and of setting up departments and of devolving the financial responsibilities on to a Finance Department, and the creation of a budget covering all departments of Government. Little progress has so far been achieved in this direction.

In the interior, it is foreseen that Buraimi will gain in importance annually as an agricultural area capable of producing both fruits and vegetables for an annually increasing population and as a residential area during the terribly oppressive summer months on the coast.

