

Book Review

The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, by Rosemarie Said Zahlan,

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مراجعة كتاب

"صناعة دول الخليج الحديثة؛ الكويت والبحرين وقطر والإمارات العربية المتحدة
وسلطنة عمان" لروزماري سعيد زحلان

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In this volume, published first in 1989 by Unwin Hyman, Rosemarie Said Zahlan presents detailed historical accounts of the making of the modern Gulf States. Her coherent and detailed narrative touches on historical, political, and social facets of the state-building process of these States, making the volume a useful reference for interdisciplinary research on their modernization process.

The volume's main themes are twofold, which Zahlan lays out in the introduction. The first is "the overwhelming influence of the past on current events in the Gulf States."¹ In particular, she argues that "the gloss of material modernity has hidden the essential characteristics of contemporary Gulf society. Underneath the modern structures, the old political order, which was hastily shrouded once oil wealth became available, has remained largely intact."² The second theme concerns "the paramount importance of international forces in the creation and shaping of the modern Gulf States," which includes the roles played by Britain and the United States in the Gulf region.³ Throughout the volume, her investigation centres on these themes and provides extensive evidence, which is adequate to convince readers of her analysis. Notably, there is also a latent message she implicitly delivers: It was not only oil that played a principal role in the modernization of the Gulf States. Various non-oil factors, such as internal dynamics within the ruling families, complex state-society relations, and international forces, also intricately contributed to this process. This underlying message becomes overt as the readers continue through the volume.

Aside from the introduction, the volume consists of 10 chapters. Chapter 1 places the Gulf region in a historical perspective by covering a long period of history from the ancient time of Dilmun to the period of the Gulf States' treaty relations with Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this chapter, Zahlan situates the Gulf region in relation to ancient external powers such as the great civilization of Sumer, the Abbasid caliphate, the Portuguese, and the British at different stages in history. In Chapter 2, she focuses on the twentieth century and pays particular attention to the following three factors: the Gulf States' relations with Britain, the discovery of oil, and the rulers' positions. Relying on abundant historical evidence, she seeks to convince readers why the intermeshed influence

1- Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman*, (New York :Routledge, 2016), p. x.

2- Ibid, p. 67.

3- Ibid, p. xi.

of these three factors is particularly significant in the emergence of the modern Gulf States. It is also in this chapter that readers start to recognize that it was not only oil that contributed to the creation of the modern Gulf States. With the three factors in mind, she then offers a historical account of each of the Gulf state's modern state-making process in Chapters 3 – 4 and 6 – 9. In Chapter 5, which is particularly interesting, she illustrates how some of the Gulf States' old political traditions survived the rapid modernization process enabled largely—albeit not solely—by the discovery of oil in the twentieth century. Some of the examples she provides in this regard are the retention of ultimate decision-making power by the ruling families⁴ and the dominant presence of ruling family members in the newly established ministerial positions despite the modernization of the old system of rule.⁵ These factors provide historical evidence in favour of her argument that "the role of central authority has survived almost intact,"⁶ thereby relating the chapter to the first main theme of the volume: the survival of old systems. Lastly, in Chapter 10 she analyses the impact of regional politics (e.g., the 1981 formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war) and non-regional superpowers (e.g., Britain and the United States) on the creation of the modern Gulf States. At the end of the chapter, she concludes that the Gulf States have retained their political systems and boundaries despite the political turbulence in the Gulf region over the last quarter of the twentieth century. This observation adds further evidence concerning the survival of their old political systems and the paramount influence of international forces on their process of state modernization.

After reading the volume, the reader is more aware of the aforementioned underlying message that Zahlan attempts to deliver in this volume: Oil was not the only contributor to the creation of the modern Gulf States. This analytical approach that looks beyond oil is certainly this volume's great strength. This is not to suggest, however, that oil played an insignificant role. As Zahlan points out, oil wealth enabled such rulers as Sultan Said bin Taymur of Oman (1932-70) to develop the country's infrastructure, education, and government institutions after their oil discovery in 1964.⁷ Nevertheless, the story is more complex if

4- Ibid, e.g., see p. 70.

5- Ibid, e.g., see p. 69.

6- Ibid, p.77.

7- Ibid, p. 113.

we turn to, for example, Abu Dhabi. In spite of the discovery of oil there in 1958, Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan (1928-66) was "reluctant to allow the sudden prosperity to alter the traditional way of life."⁸ What he feared most, according to Zahlan, was "the disintegration of the social fabric of Abu Dhabi in the face of such as extraordinary windfall [of oil wealth]."⁹ This tells us that even the story surrounding oil was not simple—not all rulers rushed to invest their oil wealth to create a modern state.

Zahlan also reveals contributing factors besides oil, which help the readers to grasp a more complete picture of the making of the modern Gulf States. One example is the ruling families' internal dynamics, particularly their contests for power, which had an impact on (the delay of) the modernization process. This is exemplified by Kuwait, in which the rivalry within the ruling Al-Sabah family during the reign of Sheikh Abdallah al-Salim (1950-65) "contributed to political unrest in a county undergoing change in every sphere."¹⁰ In Sharjah, endless intrigues within the ruling family after the death of Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr (1803-66) reduced the Emirate to "a mere fraction of its former size."¹¹

Another way in which Zahlan's analysis goes beyond oil is to shed light on the role of sub-state actors' agency. In Kuwait, it was leading merchants whose calls for greater political participation contributed to Sheikh Ahmad al-Jabir's (1921-50) recognition of the establishment of the National Legislative Council in the late 1930s.¹² In Bahrain, it was the 1938 labour movement, the Higher Executive Committee, and the Committee for National Unity, among others, whose calls for greater political participation, the end of British involvement in Bahrain's internal affairs, and better labour conditions characterised the turbulent state-society relations in the making of modern Bahrain.¹³ Moreover, she even touches on the important roles of valiant Gulf women whose position has been "the subject of considerable misinterpretation in the West."¹⁴ Some of them stabilized the internal feud among the male members of the ruling family. The brief story of Sheikha Salamah bint Butti, mother of the then-new ruler Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan

8- Ibid, p.93.

9- Ibid, p.93.

10- Ibid, p. 34.

11- Ibid, p. 98.

12- Ibid, p. 28.

13- Ibid, pp. 55-57, 64.

14- Ibid, p. x.

(1928-66) of Abu Dhabi, who persuaded all her sons not to commit fratricide to end the repeated *coups d'état* within the ruling family, is one such example.¹⁵

The significant influence of international forces on the shaping of the modern Gulf States should not be overlooked either, and her extensive historical evidence on this topic is one of the other strengths of this volume. For example, at the regional level, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war (and the 1979 Iranian Revolution) led to the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in which Saudi Arabia played a leading role.¹⁶ At the state level, the 1971 departure of the British from the Gulf region accelerated the Gulf States' modern state-formation process. The formation of the UAE in 1971 is one of many examples in this regard.¹⁷

The above observations lead to the volume's aforementioned underlying message: various oil and non-oil factors intricately contributed to the making of the modern Gulf States. The author delivers this message with strong historical evidence, while not derailing from the volume's main themes.

There are, however, a few shortcomings in this volume. One of them is that Zahlan seems to be careful not to be too critical on the Gulf States. This makes her narrative seem somewhat subjective. In addition, the volume would have been an even more valuable and useful academic source by virtue of the addition of a more complete list of references, which would help the readers to identify relevant primary sources.

That said, even decades after its first publication and her passing in 2006, the volume continues to shine today because it reminds us of the complex nature of the Gulf States' modern state-making process and the salience of the interdisciplinary analytical approach to this topic.

15- Ibid, p. 92.

16- Ibid, pp. 135-142.

17- Ibid, pp. 58-59, 93-94.

