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The Buraimi Crisis:

The Anglo-American Rivalry in the Arabian Peninsula, 1949-1955

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“I want to tell you that in the Middle East our great enemies are the Americans”, Enoch Powell (1912-1998) who had spent considerable time during the Second World War in North Africa, had told Anthony Eden (1897-1977), former Secretary of Foreign Affairs and future British Prime Minister in the late 1940s.¹ For much of the late 1940s and up to the 1960s, this period of the Cold War in the Middle East was defined mainly not by rivalry and competition between the US-led Western bloc and the USSR, but by a rivalry between the two primary components of the Western bloc itself—the United States as the rising “anti-Imperialist” superpower and Britain attempting to preserve its crumbling empire.² The case study of the Buraimi crisis of the 1950s presents an opportunity to discuss the rivalry between these two powers and its long-term impact on the political structure of the region using a clear example of

¹ James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 11.

² Ibid.

direct competition between them during the early Cold War period, with local actors as proxies supported by rival oil companies backed by the two powers. The Buraimi war also acts as one of the last wars in the Arabian Peninsula with elements remnant of the traditional power-structure, which saw the frontiers of a ruler's authority being secured by allegiance on part of settlements and Bedouin tribes and not geographic borders or territorial nationalism.³ The competition over which territory belonged to which ruler and which oil field would be subject to exploitation by which company, British or American, would see the accelerated adoption of political institutions of European conception. These institutions would contribute greatly to the rise of the territorial state and authoritarianism in modern state structures in the Arabian Peninsula. The impact of these institutions on state structure in Arabia will be argued looking first at the historical context followed by two important institutions that act as foundation stones for the modern state in the Arabian Peninsula, the establishment of borders, and the control of oil companies.

In 1933, Saudi King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud) (1876-1953), granted an oil concession to Standard Oil of California (Socal) that would join other American oil companies Texaco, Mobil, and Esso to create the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO).⁴ This followed Socal's 1932 discovery of oil in Bahrain.⁵ Prior to this, the prevalent opinion was that the Arabian Peninsula held no commercial quantities of oil.⁶ After the discovery of oil, the British-owned Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), fearing its monopoly over Middle Eastern oil would be threatened, competed for the concession in eastern Arabia with

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans* (London: Saqi Books, 1974), 50.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Socal.⁷ Such began the American presence in the Arabian Peninsula, where prior to this Britain and consequently British oil companies such as the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and IPC operated undisputed; primarily in areas under the jurisdiction of rulers that enjoyed British protection on the Gulf coast, Oman, and Southern Yemen and neighboring Iraq and Iran where they held monopolies on the exploration and exploitation of oil.⁸

Oil production and exploration largely ceased during the period of the Second World War.⁹ However, as a result of the war effort and the increased presence of the United States in the Middle East, disputes between Britain and the United States erupted. Most prominently, American interest in Arabian oil was growing.¹⁰ At the same time, Britain had been using funds from the American Lend-Lease program and American-funded but the British dominated the Middle East Supply Center to bolster its own position in the Middle East, providing aid to rulers such as Ibn Saud.¹¹ London also funded the construction of oil facilities and airfields in the Middle East without utilizing the infrastructure to support the war-effort, while the United States supplied two-thirds of the fueling effort.¹² British propaganda in the region also suggested that it was the Americans who were pushing for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, while

⁷ Michael Quentin Morton, *Buraimi: The Struggle for Power, Influence and Oil in Arabia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 12.

⁸ James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 48.

⁹ Khaldoun Nassan Al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: A Different Perspective* (Routledge, 1990), 78-79.

¹⁰ Osamah F. Khalil, "The Crossroads of the World: U.S. and British Foreign Policy Doctrines and the Construct of the Middle East, 1902-2007," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (May 2014): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht092>.

¹¹ James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 35.

¹² *Ibid*, 45.

Britain presented itself as a defender of Arab interests.¹³ This led the Americans to the conclusion that the British were attempting to bolster their influence at America's expense, to get a stake in the American dominated Saudi oil industry and leave little room in the region for America's influence in the future, expecting them to return to pre-war isolation or so they suggested.¹⁴ Despite that suggestion, British Foreign Office officials in a letter reflected on American interests in Saudi Arabia based on a secret report they had managed to obtain from the US War Department. The report outlined America's post-war interest in Saudi Arabia, mainly access to oil reserves of strategic importance in the case of a future war with the USSR, and the possibility of the Persian Gulf becoming a hub for the American Pacific Fleet.¹⁵ This primary document shows that Britain's anti-American propaganda in the region was based on the legitimate assumption that America intended to maintain an influence in the British-dominated Middle East. As such, it tried to maintain its power by preventing any opportunity for another foreign actor to establish a base of influence.

US President Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945), in order to curb Britain's influence in an area he saw as part of America's sphere of interest, would extend Lend-Lease aid directly to Saudi Arabia and declare that Saudi Arabia's defense was vital to the defense of the United States.¹⁶ A meeting between Roosevelt and the British ambassador Lord Halifax (1881-1959) in Washington, would see the President present a map he himself had drawn of the Middle East and

¹³ Ibid, 36.

¹⁴ Ibid, 41.

¹⁵ Coll 6/57 'U.S.A.: Saudi Relations with U.S.A.' [36r] (71/132), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/12/2124, in Qatar Digital Library, https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100040065588.0x000048.

¹⁶ James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 36.

declare that Iranian oil belonged to the UK, Saudi oil belonged to the US, and Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil would be shared between the two.¹⁷ This led to two weeks of tense correspondence between Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965), in which the British assured the United States that they were not attempting to intrude on American interests in Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ In essence what occurred was a general demarcation of the Middle East's oil supplies between the two powers. Such was the context that would define the rivalry between the two powers after the war.

The Buraimi oasis would be the site of the first proxy conflict between Britain and the United States in the Arabian Peninsula. Buraimi was an oasis of nine villages, considered a strategically vital fortress for whoever wanted control over the region of Oman (south-eastern Arabia, today the United Arab Emirates and eastern Sultanate of Oman) owing to its strategic location between the coast, Hajar mountains, and the desert.¹⁹ The presence of potential oil reserves only increased its importance.

The Buraimi Crisis began in 1949, when multiple parties of American oil explorers protected by Ibn Saud's men began operating in the Dhafra desert, south of Qatar and east of Buraimi.²⁰ This would see the British Political Agent lodge a formal complaint to the company, but a response was given that the complaint should be taken with the Saudi government as the company was not the concerned party in the border dispute.²¹ In 1952, Saudi Arabia appointed a

¹⁷ Ibid, 49.

¹⁸ Dianne Kirby, "Separate Agendas: Churchill, Eisenhower, and Anglo-American Relations, 1953–1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 242-243, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_r_00674, 242.

¹⁹ Michael Quentin Morton, *Buraimi: The Struggle for Power, Influence and Oil in Arabia* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 2.

²⁰ Shamsa Hamad Al-Dhahiri, "Sheikh Hazza'Bin Sultan Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (1905-1958) Representative of the Ruler of Abu Dhabi in the Western Region," *Liwa Journal of the National Archives* (2014), 35.

²¹ Ibid.

governor Turki Al Utaishan (1911-1985) supported by the local tribes who occupied much of the oasis; ARAMCO would also issue maps which supported Saudi Arabia's claims to the territory.²² After failure in negotiations and international arbitration, fighting broke out in 1954, and in 1955 the British led its established local army known as the Trucial Oman Scouts in expelling the Saudis from Buraimi, and drawing on a map their own line in the sand.²³ The line was drawn in favor of the Emir of Abu Dhabi's territorial claims, and more importantly in the IPC's oil interests vis-a-vis ARAMCO. It would also be a rebuke of the traditional system of political allegiance of tribes forming political boundaries in favor of geographically delineated borders.²⁴ President Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969), partly as a result of the British action in Buraimi, would in 1956 condemn the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of the Suez, a continuation of the Anglo-American rivalry in the region.²⁵

While it would be easy to simplify demarcation by suggesting that oil fields belonging to this polity or the other belong to one of the two powers, the concept of political boundaries in Arabia was different to those of European conception. Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb describes it as "the natural state system" and explains that unlike societies where an "agricultural bond...ties the farmer to the land" geographically; in Arabia a society where nomads roamed featureless deserts, where merchants could transfer their wealth, and seamen and laborers could sell their labor to other oases and ports, what defined boundaries was political allegiance of people to a ruler and

²² Fatma Al-Sayegh, "The UAE and Oman: Opportunities and Challenges in the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Policy* 9, no. 3 (2002):128, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4967.00075>.

²³ *Ibid*, 129.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ Tore Tingvold Petersen, "Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East: The Struggle for the Buraimi Oasis, 1952-1957," *The International History Review* 14, no. 1 (1992): 87-88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1992.9640608>.

not ownership over geographical boundaries.²⁶ J.B Kelly et al. furthers this argument by claiming that a ruler's claim over a territory comes from his authority or influence over its inhabitants.²⁷ Allegiance was not to a territorially defined state or polity as presented in the European conception with words used to describe them such as an emirate or sultanate, but to the tribal ruler who may be in effect independent or pledged in allegiance to another ruler. The establishment of delineated borders brought about several implications. The British had already established a system of protecting rulers in treaty relations with them from their competitors and made British recognition a key element to a ruler's independence vis-a-vis other rulers, at least in Oman and the Trucial Coast.²⁸ This resulted in leadership freezing in the hands of rulers and their families who had established treaty relations with Britain and the permanent power of specific families who would become ruling houses.²⁹ Consequently, this was exemplified in the establishment of geographical borders based on access to oil fields, where the area within these borders would now be considered the domain of a specific ruling family. Political allegiance, instead of being connected to people subject to constant shifts and changes, was now made geographically permanent. It was no longer the case of a tribe shifting allegiance to another ruler, but anyone within these lines in the sand was subject to the ruler to whom it belonged. Political allegiance as such was replaced by the concept of citizenship to those within these geographical borders. This change severely impacted the strongest of traditional forms that limited a ruler's authority, the act of secession. Where previously a tribe, even if a ruler's position was permanent

²⁶ Khaldoun Nassan Al-Naqeeb, *Society and state in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: a different perspective* (Routledge, 1990), 89.

²⁷ John Barrett Kelly and Douglas Dodds-Parker, *Eastern Arabian Frontiers* (Faber & Faber, 1964), 18.

²⁸ Khaldoun Nassan Al-Naqeeb, *Society and state in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: a different perspective* (Routledge, 1990), 58.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 59.

as a result of British protection, could switch allegiance to another ruler or in an area free of foreign interference, declare its own independence; now a ruler was protected from that threat by delineated boundaries. Where once merchants and laborers took their wealth and labor to other ports or settlements, the concept of citizenship and territorial nationalism restrained that and tied their allegiance to a specific “state”, a territorial entity rather than to an individual ruler.³⁰ This bound people to a land, rather than to ties between people and allegiances that may shift.

In Buraimi this political allegiance of tribes was key to the various rulers’ claim over the territory. Included were British-protected rulers the Emir of Abu Dhabi who controlled six of the nine villages owing to the virtue of their inhabitants’ loyalty, the tribes of the Dhawhir and Bani Yas primarily, and the Al-Bu Sai’idi Sultan of Muscat and Oman officially three.³¹ The reality was that the Sultan held little influence beyond Muscat itself and the coast, relying on the verbal allegiance of independent leaders which he could do little to ensure their loyalty, while the rival Ibadhi Imam held influence among tribes deeper inland and within the confines of the Hajar mountains.³² In Buraimi, according to correspondences belonging to the India Office Records, British oil men could rely on little protection from the Sultan’s men and had to cooperate with local sheikhs of the Nua’im, Al Bu Shamis, and Bani Ka’ab tribes who did not recognize the Sultan’s authority over them. In addition, they had to pay them for concessions on oil exploration on top of that offered to the Sultan.³³ These primary correspondences display the hindrance that

³⁰ Ibid, 60.

³¹ Michael Quentin Morton, *Buraimi: The Struggle for Power, Influence and Oil in Arabia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 39.

³² Ibid, 40.

³³ File 38/15 Oil concessions in Arabia and the Gulf (Muscat) [99r] (197-201/224), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/2/870, in Qatar Digital Library, https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100025657240.0x0000c6.

the political structure of the region played in the exploitation of oil. It was an expense subject to shifting change, especially considering that among these local rulers in Buraimi, the American-backed Ibn Saud's influence was increasing. They paid him their *zakat* (compulsory charitable payment in Islam and in this case a sign of political submission), which would be the key component of Ibn Saud's claim to the oasis and surrounding desert and the American owned-ARAMCO's claim over its oil.³⁴

Traditional forms of dissidence with delineated geographical borders would become restricted; this opened the door for different forms of dissidence. Local opposition movements formed, influenced by new concepts such as Arab nationalism or even communism, and that was usually met with repression. An example of this is the insurrections and opposition movements in Dhofar and South Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁵ In the context of the Cold War, this provided an opportunity for the USSR to gain ground through support for these revolutions. Previously those who dissent could just "leave" and pledge allegiance to a different ruler more to their liking. A ruler who wanted to maintain his influence over tribes who provide him fighting men or prevent individuals from seceding elsewhere taking their wealth with them, had to make concessions and meet some of their demands or else face the consequences. Borders, which implied the establishment of territorial states resulted in increased power for the ruler in the form of the governments that now governed these states. The traditional means in which a ruler's authority could be checked was not developed into the new state structure, and only the ruler's traditional authority was maintained, paving the way for an authoritarian state structure.

³⁴ Michael Quentin Morton, *Buraimi: The Struggle for Power, Influence and Oil in Arabia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 43.

³⁵ Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans* (London: Saqi Books, 1974), 184.

This was not necessarily a bad thing for the populace at large considering the benefits that came after. The rival oil companies established by the Americans in the case of ARAMCO and the British in the case of the IPC subsidiaries in the smaller Gulf states would see increased revenues for the rulers, until full nationalization in the 1970s and the 1980s.³⁶ These companies set the infrastructure necessary for the revenue of these states and the basis for the birth of an unparalleled welfare state (no taxes, free education, housing, and the like).³⁷ Most importantly, it allowed these states to respond to dissent with the carrot rather than the stick, though the stick was used when necessary. Bedouin tribes shed their nomadic character and settled in new or long-established settlements. While borders may have increased a ruler's authority at the expense of traditional means of limiting that authority, the American and British oil companies gave the ruler the ability to control dissent in a way that brought much material benefit to their people at large. As Dickson mentions, generosity is also a key trait of a ruling figure in Arab particularly Bedouin society, in order for him to maintain his influence as a "father of his people".³⁸ Nothing gave a ruler more of an ability to display their generous reputation than the income that came with the oil, unprecedented in history. This influence allowed for a smooth transition into a more authoritarian state structure with little to no dissent, though not everywhere.

In South Yemen where borders were established and there was not much oil revenue to go around, and the new form of dissent grew too much to control through traditional means, that resulted in rulers being overthrown and a communist independent South Yemen backed by the

³⁶ Khaldoun Nassan Al-Naqeeb, *Society and state in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: a different perspective* (Routledge, 1990), 79-80.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Harold P. Dickson, *The Arab of the Desert a Glimpse into Badawin Life in Kuwait and Sau'di Arabia* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), 195.

USSR and Nasserist Egypt was established.³⁹ According to Halliday, that was a direct threat and setback to both the influence of the United States and the United Kingdom in a region where both were contenting over.⁴⁰ In the wealthier Gulf states, while issues related to the authoritarian state structure continue to present themselves and even increase in light of the need to diversify income away from oil, it also brought about political stability. A stability that the traditional system of checking a ruler's authority did not have, with constantly shifting allegiances and rivalries leading to wars and turbulence between tribes and rulers. Without this political stability the economic and infrastructural development seen in the Gulf states today would not have been realized.

All in all, the Anglo-American rivalry in the Middle East during the early Cold War accelerated the adoption of changes to the traditional political structure. Borders and oil companies that came along with the rivalry would create a more authoritarian state structure in Arabia in the form of the territorial state delineated by access to oil and ruled by ruling families. This largely replaced the traditional structure of political allegiance on part of inhabitants of settlements and tribes to a ruler who competed with other rulers for influence and authority. While the changes brought along more political stability and material benefit to many of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, it also created a system of governmental power with ineffective or non-existent checks on a government's authority. This was exemplified by the Buraimi Crisis of the 1950s, and the clash that had occurred between the traditional system of political allegiance and the interests of oil companies as a result of larger Great Power proxy

³⁹ Stephen Blackwell, "Pursuing Nasser: The Macmillan Government and the Management of British Policy Towards the Middle East Cold War, 1957–63," *Cold War History* 4, no. 3 (2004): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468274042000231169>.

⁴⁰ Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans* (London: Saqi Books, 1974), 184, 227.

warfare and rivalry. Overall, this would see the spread of the territorial state to Arabia, with borders largely based on access to oil resources as a consequence of this rivalry between oil companies.

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