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Arabia Incognita: An Invitation to Arabian Peninsula Studies

Sheila Carapico

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For further information:

Mediterranean Programme
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
European University Institute
via dei Roccettini, 9
50016 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
Fax: + 39 055 4685 770
<http://www.iue.it/RSC/MED>

ARABIA INCOGNITA: AN INVITATION TO ARABIAN PENINSULA STUDIES*

It's time to think about the Arabian Peninsula as bounded by the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea as well as the Persian Gulf, a place that is part island and part crossroads. In this essay I attempt to look beyond the oil wells and shopping malls of the Gulf and the mythic figure of the desert tribesman to see the whole Peninsula — in its commonalities, its dualism, and its diversity. My purpose is to invite scholars to recognize the Peninsula as a sub-region of the Arab world, comparable to North Africa (the Maghrib), the Nile Valley, and the Arab East (the Mashriq), a large area with a significant population and distinctive, shared, yet varied cultural and historical experiences. This means, among other things, bridging the gap between Gulf Studies and Yemeni studies in the hopes of finding in the whole something missing from separate examination of its parts. In venturing to describe the Arabian Peninsula in terms unfettered from standard nation-building narratives and exclusivist citizenship criteria, I hope to begin to identify common some political movements, including, perhaps a few that “leaked” from the Gulf into southern Oman, Yemen, southwest Saudi Arabia, and/or points overseas; or seeped back in the other direction.*

I. The Peninsula

The Arabian Peninsula is a sub-continent. To the west it faces Egypt, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa across the narrow Red Sea. Its southern tip, Bab al-Mandab, nearly touches East Africa in what is now Eritrea. To the south Arabia opens to the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. It is bound on the east by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and its easternmost point at the Strait of Hormuz is very near historical Persia, now Iran. To the north it faces Mesopotamia and, across a desert, Palestine and the Mediterranean.

In times past, as historical maps show, most of the Arabian population clustered along the western edge of the peninsula, between the southwest mountains and the Red Sea. South of the Tropic of Cancer (which cuts the Peninsula almost in half) mountain-trapped Indian Ocean breezes created Arabia's most hospitable environment for crops, livestock, and people. Once home to the Queen of Sheba, famed for its frankincense and later its coffee, this zone was known to the Romans and later to European cartographers as *Arabia Felix*, in contrast to the *Arabia Deserta* of the north and east. Several ancient

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cities flourished and died in this relatively verdant region, their remains subsequently covered by sand; over the centuries others endured, or emerged, as centers of religious scholarship or of trade. Today's Arabian Arabs, even those whose contemporary citizenship identifies them with the eastern shores of the Persian Gulf, trace their roots to western or southern parts of the Peninsula. Notwithstanding the image of the desert-dwelling nomad, most were settled people living all or part of the year in farm communities or small towns.

A map from 1712, depicting "desert" and "happy" Arabia, for instance, indicates the higher density of named settlements in the west-southwest reaches of the Peninsula, especially the mountainous regions. From north to south a dotted line of towns links Jerusalem with the Indian Ocean. According to another, more detailed, full-color Century Atlas of 1897 map entitled "Part of Turkey in Asia, Arabia, Oman and Aden," whereas Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, and Baghdad had populations over 100,000, in the Peninsula only the holy city of Mecca, the nearby Red Sea port of Jiddah, and Basra on the Persian Gulf coast of what is now Iraq had over 50,000 inhabitants. Sana'a, Aden, and Muscat were thought to have populations in the 25,000-50,000 range. The whole Peninsula was marked ARABIA: regions identified are the Hijaz stretching from the Sinai Peninsula to Jiddah and Mecca, Asir south of that, and then Yemen; Hadramawt in the south; Oman and al-Hasa in the east, and the Nejd in central Arabia, surrounded by desert. Of these, only Oman was marked in large letters as a nation on this late eighteenth century rendering, although elsewhere it appeared as "Muscat and Oman," or occasionally Hormuz.

Arabia has its own vernaculars, traditions, and traits. Arabian Arabic is distinguished from Levantine and African dialects by pronunciation of all the consonants and a tendency toward classical constructions as in "*Li madha*" and "*ghadan*". These permeate both everyday speech and characteristic poetic forms. Among the obvious still-thriving customs of the Peninsula are the "*diwan*" (also in Kuwait as *diwaniyya*, and by other local expressions elsewhere), where men sit on cushions in a rectangular room or tent and counsel the host on business or politics. Virtually every man in the Peninsula wears a moustache if not a goatee; for reasons ecological as well as religious, the vast majority of women cover their heads outdoors. Until quite recently, caravans of people and goods connected weekly markets throughout the Peninsula in a concentric network of interlocking circles. Tribal organization, values of honor, and the concept of "protected" holy sites are more or less shared throughout Arabia. In many ways, then, folks "speak the same language". Shared ecology, history, and even identity are part of an Arabian commons. Contemporary border guards, passport authorities and national icons notwithstanding, definitions of who is Saudi, Omani, Yemeni, or Sharjahi are of only shallow lineage. Governments who

discourage archaeological excavation know exceptions to their teleological national myths lie close beneath the surface.

In terms of religion the Peninsula is both unified by Islam and divided along sectarian lines. With only handfuls of Jews remaining in a few Yemeni villages and towns since the founding of the state of Israel, and no indigenous Christian minority, Arabia is Islamic: it is the birthplace of Islam, home to its holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Such homogeneity notwithstanding, the Peninsula also hosts considerable doctrinal diversity in the form of several distinct schools of thought whose philosophies of governance differ from one another and from the great Islamic empires centered in Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo. Both Shi'a and Sunni schools of Islam are represented. Each Arabian denomination makes a plausible historical and doctrinal claim to authenticity based on propinquity and/or ancestry to the Prophet, his family, or his disciples. But they differ on many matters, especially regarding governance. Among the Shi'a Muslims, Bahrainis, for geo-historical reasons, were closest to Persian Twelvers whose practices are anathema to some other Arabian sects. Shi'a Ibadis established one sort of imamate in what is now Oman, and Zaydi Shi'as had a different imamate in Yemen. Yet like the Hijaz, both Oman and Yemen had large Sunni populations. Innumerable Shaf'ai sultans built palaces along the Gulf of Aden, in Hadramawt, Abyan, and Lahij, and saints tombs dotted the landscape. Always a minority sect, Isma'ilis inhabited ghetto enclaves in the mountains of Najran and Yemen, internally isolated perhaps but not quite cut off from the Agha Khan's transnational establishment. Wahhabis displaced some but not all customary religious ideas and practices when they mastered the vast, unevenly-populated land mass that is now the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Peninsula's experience with imperialism was very different from the Arab Mediterranean encounter. Whereas North Africa, the Nile Valley, and the Mashriq were experienced first-hand the imperial designs of Ottoman Turks and Western colonial powers Britain and France, only a few coastal districts of Arabia were subject to direct foreign domination for very long. Whereas cityscapes and legal systems were redrawn and rewritten in the Arab north, in Arabia this was not the case. Whereas European wars spilled over into North Africa and the Holy Land repeatedly throughout history, for Arabians the Crusades and two World Wars were distant battles that tended, if anything, to boost trade. Seaside Portuguese forts and trading stations were short-lived. Ottoman influences on law, governance, and architecture in the Arab Mediterranean drifted south from historic Palestine along the Red Sea coast into the Hijaz, Asir, and Yemen, and from Basra along the upper Persian Gulf coastal region of al-Hasa. But the Turkish legacy is modest in comparison with Syria or Egypt. The Hejaz railroad was never built. When the Ottoman empire was carved up after World War I, the League of Nations mandate system authorized

France and Britain to administer the Fertile Crescent region where they helped establish contemporary Syria, Lebanon, Israel/ Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. But the Peninsula, never thoroughly Ottomanized, and not among the spoils of its defeat, escaped the mandate system. Only the contemporary state of Kuwait on the upper Persian Gulf coast was carved out from what had been the Ottoman province of Basra by the United Kingdom, first as a protectorate and then under British mandatory authority for Iraq.

Spared the full-blown colonial occupation that befell many Asian and African neighbors and the transformative impact of Ottoman and Western European rule on the Arab north, the Peninsula was nonetheless hardly immune to foreign domination. Britain secured protectorate treaties with potentates in Muscat and the upper Gulf as early as 1800, initially in order to quell pirate attacks on her ships and later at least in part to suppress the slave trade. Over the course of the next century the British presence along Arabia's southern and eastern coasts filled out to include one colony and a string of protectorates. The United Kingdom installed a fueling post at Aden, a small town astride a natural harbor overlooking the mouth of the Red Sea, in 1839. During the next several decades Ottoman influence in North Yemen, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the exigencies of British rule in India, and London's interests in the Persian Gulf all increased Aden's strategic value. Eventually the port city became the only full-fledged British Crown Colony in the Arab world. Elsewhere, however, Europeans "protected" but did not occupy Arabia. Apart from Aden and Kuwait, in lieu of direct administration Britain recognized the titular independence of dozens of local shaykhs, sultans, and amirs along the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf coasts. Oman and the small city-principalities of the Gulf, enriched in the twentieth century by oil, survived to found modern nation-states, while the South Arabian Protectorates later became part of South Yemen and ultimately united Yemen. The protectorate relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom lasted a short twelve years, replaced by a "treaty of friendship" in 1927. London administered Kuwait, though indirectly, until 1961, and Aden until the radical South Yemeni revolution succeeded in late 1967. And British officers maintained a high profile in Omani military and foreign affairs through the seventies. The myth of Arabian isolation from the forces of international power politics fails the test of historical scrutiny.

On the other hand, Arabia sustained what might be called relative autonomy from the West until fairly recently. Notwithstanding Britain's substantial role in carving out the tiny sovereignties of the once pirate-ridden Trucial coast and the subsequent influence of Anglo-American oil companies in the political development of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies, the Peninsula absorbed fewer European languages, ideas, and elements of material culture than most of its Arab, African and Asian neighbors. Apart from handfuls

of appointed Agents or Residents, and again unlike the Arab north, India, or coastal Africa, few Westerners made homes anywhere in Arabia. None of its cities had a real European quarter. Even in colonial Aden, a major port and naval installation, there were hardly any actual settlers; it was no grand colonial city for English families but rather a collection of Arab, African, and South Asian communities clustered around the harbor and the military base. Later on, oil companies set up their own suburban-style camps for foreigners to establish an extra-territorial lifestyle apart from Arabian society. Officer training and petroleum business surely required English as a second language in the Gulf, but on the whole colonial education scarcely took root. Christian missionaries never gained a footing. The petroleum industry would transform the Gulf in many ways, but because it utilized imported labor, capital, and technology to pump oil from deserts to tankers, it did not disrupt existing social relations as deeply and directly as French rule in North Africa or British administration of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. Hardly anybody adopted Western dress.

In terms of Western knowledge, too, whereas the Mediterranean region and the Tigris-Euphrates basin had been thoroughly surveyed, mapped, and excavated, Arabia was, in cliché terms, veiled against the Western gaze. Much of what we know about Arabia through the middle of the twentieth century still comes from personal diaries of intrepid travelers like Gertrude Bell, Harold Philby, Wilfred Thesiger, Sir Richard Burton, Freya Stark, and Amin Rihani. Arabian spoken dialects went unrecorded until later. Except for the Qu'ran and Hadith, few writings made it into translation. Even today, compared with the rest of the Middle East where antiquities are valued national treasures of international interest, little is known of Arabian archaeology, of the “lost” cities and empires whose remains show up on high-resolution satellite images.

Limited direct European cultural penetration should not be confused with detachment from the rest of the world, however. Throughout its history Arabia was a hub of international travel and visitation, with pilgrims and migrants and immigrants from and to Asia and Africa. Persians and East Africans always crossed over, while Arabs traveled in the other direction. Arabian merchants traded northward to Iraq and Palestine, westward across the Red Sea, eastward with Persia and Asia Minor, and seaward with India and Southeast Asia. Some travelers were not merely adventurers and traders but colonists and missionaries “in their own right”. Omani princes and princesses commanded palaces and slaves in Zanzibar, Lamu, and elsewhere along the East African coast, where their influence was considerable and multifaceted. There were Hadrami administrators in the Nizam of Hyderabad, on the Indian subcontinent. Hadrami missionaries settled extensively in Indonesia, where their descendents remain prominent in modern political, economic, and cultural life. There were Arabian investments and newspapers in Singapore, Jakarta, and South Africa. Hejazi,

Asiri, and Yemeni entrepreneurs founded companies in Asmara, Port Sudan, and elsewhere in the Red Sea. Sufi orders as far afield as Senegal trace their roots to Arabia. A great deal of social, political, religious, intellectual, and legal history remains to be written on these overseas activities, including but also beyond their slave-trading. But we already know that families from the Peninsula established themselves abroad as rulers, teachers, and merchants, diffusing Arabic words, concepts, and customs along with Islam throughout the vast Indian Ocean basin. Their influences in law, language, literature, and ethnic-national myth-making have been as deep as they are far-flung.

Cultural and even political influences also flowed inward from abroad, in myriad ways. Many of the traces of Arabian transnationalism are physical, linguistic, or material. The Red Sea coast or Tihama shares many features with the Swahili coast, among them conical mud-and-thatch huts arranged in outdoor corrals; colloquial use of a "*mim*" instead of a "*lam*" (as in "*am-bab*"); Abyssinian breeds of goats, cattle, and poultry; feminine dress (until quite recently) featuring long colorful skirts and halter tops; and male apparel including a white wrap-around skirt, white coat, and straw skull-cap. Tihami people physically resemble East Africans. By the same token, along the southeast-facing coast there are many traces of Asia, from the human faces to the flight patterns of migratory birds and many elements of material culture. Along the southern coast and indeed throughout southern Arabia many men wear a *futa*, a colorful Indonesian sarong. My Omani cookbook has little in common with standard Mediterranean Arab fare, but instead comes from the Indian Ocean basin: for instance, lentils are called "*dal*" not "*adas*". Carved wooden doors and other embellishments reminiscent of the Indian sub-continent are characteristic of Arabian port cities. While in contrast with the Mediterranean Arabian Arabic remained relatively unsullied by European neologisms, expressions and constructions were shared in another oceanic basin, among Arabic, Persian, Swahili, Pashtu, and Urdu. (While I am by no means qualified to challenge the linguists' discrimination between Semetic and Indo-European languages, the distinction seems to my political scientists' ear to obscure their mutual commonalities, which go beyond only religious expressions to trade terms, common nouns, and common law.

Logically, with so much intercourse, there must have been many political cross-currents as well, that mostly remain to be discovered. Aden's colonial government was administered via India for a long time and later from Kenya, thus filtering its experience with English rule through the Raj and East Africa, and also laying yet another conduit of political and legal contact. We know that at least some of these contacts had direct political consequences. For instance, in the late eighteenth seventies, Dhofaris rebelling against the Omani sultan rallied around a religious leader with ties to the mixed Arab community in India. Later,

a politically significant Islamic League – cousin to a prominent movement still active in Pakistani politics today — was founded in Aden in the nineteen forties by a subcontinent Muslim businessman. Some Aden revolutionaries adopted the Gandhi-esque hunger-strike. A kind of Islamic identity connected to the Hadramawt was part of the Indonesian independence movement, and is now reflected in the ethnic nationalism of Aceh and other Indonesian regions. A similar, but not identical identity rooted partly in ties to western Arabia stirred anti-Ethiopian passions in Eritrea. And so forth. Apart from South Yemen, men and some women from the Peninsula experienced anti-colonial, “third world” style politics not as a movement in their homelands but from their positions as landowners, merchants, and students in places like Singapore, Bandung, Cairo, Hyderabad, and Asmara. Then, when the combined effects of the 1967 closure of the Suez Canal, British withdrawal later the same year, and the 1969 triumph of the revolutionaries effectively closed Aden down for business, its migrant merchants and laborers either returned to their homes in Pakistan, Somalia, and so forth, or relocated to the Gulf.

II. The Gulf

American research agendas in the Arabian Peninsula have been so shaped by “*realpolitik*” that instead of thinking in terms of the whole Peninsula, we typically refer to “the Gulf”. “The Gulf” for the Persian Gulf can refer to the larger region including now-hostile Iran and Iraq, but also often is shorthand for the Gulf Cooperation States (GCC), a pro-American military alliance comprised of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the several city-states of the United Arab Emirates. The Gulf is where American interests are. “The Gulf” also refers to what Gause called the oil monarchies, and, by logical extension, to the citizen-subjects of those kingdoms. Within the territory governed by GCC governments — one of which, Saudi Arabia, covers well over half the Peninsula's land mass — “the Gulf” refers specifically to al-Hasa in eastern Arabia, the strip of Persian Gulf coast where most of the oil is pumped and shipped. This Gulf has spanky-clean, brand-new cities built and maintained by a large cadre of international labor migrants. The center of cent-com, the US Central Command, the Gulf is the zone whose stability the Gulf War of 1991 was fought to protect and will be preserved presumably at all costs. And within the Arab world, the Gulf is indeed a zone of tranquility, order, and cleanliness. Even its searing heat and bitter dryness are mitigated by profligate air conditioning and green-gardening.

The Gulf has been constructed, in both image and concrete, by the GCC governments and their external clients. In addition to forming a military alliance, the monarchies on the western edge of the Persian Gulf define themselves as a unique cultural sub-region within the larger Arab and Islamic context. Its

exceptionally strong traditional cultural values are, according to the various official myths of the Gulf's dynasties, the values of the desert and of the Qu'ran, rendered iconographically in items such as the immaculate off-white *dishdasha*, stylized camel racing, miniature coffee-cups, opulent gold jewelry, aqua-blue prayer rugs, and garish modernistic public art. Each GCC administration defines its own people and national character in impeccably tailored ways to verify the privileges via patrimonial lineage to ruling families and male citizens. So the people of the Gulf are the descendants of the Arabian founders of the modern Saudi and Kuwaiti and emirate states, including sons and daughters who may be part Asian or African; they are to be clearly distinguished from the "others," the outsiders or "immigrants" and stateless persons whose numbers would otherwise overwhelm the "indigenous" population.

Imported or "alien" labor was indispensable to the physical fabrication of The Gulf. During the oil boom, as we know, veritable armies of Arabs, Asians, and Westerners flocked to The Gulf to share — as wage-earners, as entrepreneurs, and as sub-contractors — in its heretofore unimaginable wealth. Palestinian engineers, Pakistani shop-keepers, Yemeni drivers, and Indonesian maids, among others, eagerly embraced a second-class but still very lucrative alien political status. After the Gulf War of 1990/91, a couple of million Arabs who had been living in the Gulf for periods ranging from a few months to many years were expelled on suspicion of sympathy with Iraq. Many if not all of them returned to Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, other sending countries, and perhaps the Occupied Territories. The sudden forced and reduced remittance earnings of hundreds of thousands of migrants had political repercussions for Yemen, Jordan, and other parts of the Arab world. Some Arabs who vacated professional posts and technical positions were replaced by Gulf Arabs, but many jobs were filled by even more Asian temporary laborers. Since 1991, remittances from the Gulf have become more important to Indonesia, Pakistan, and other Asian countries.

Individual sojourners are temporary workers remitting their earnings to families in the countries to which they will eventually return. But defining a whole vast labor force simply as migrants and foreigners, as the Gulf governments would have us do, is downright misleading on several counts. For one thing, more liberal citizenship criteria in the Gulf might have absorbed some of the pressure on Israel to accommodate stateless Palestinians. Secondly, as the work of Eng Seng Ho has recently suggested for Yemen, it ignores the long-standing connections of Indian, Pakistani, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Philippine Muslims to the Peninsula — through Arabian ancestors, family names and relatives; in the local histories of their communities; or in contemporary business connections, labor contracts, and religious institutions. Third, it renders the working class, who are the numeric majority in the Gulf cities and oil fields

and the basis of its physical existence, politically irrelevant. Finally, it fails to take into account the naturalization of hundreds of thousands of Yemeni entrepreneurs and politicians who are immigrants, not migrants. From the nineteen sixties through the nineties Yemeni dissidents of various stripe — from sultans to socialists — have found political refuge in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, or the Emirates. Whether for historical, political or economic reasons, many individuals hold dual citizenship; many if not most Gulf families trace their lineage to Yemen; and many Yemeni families have Gulf kinfolk. Like the physical frontiers, the identity boundaries are fuzzy.

As scholars we are urged by our own countries' economic and strategic interests and by the self-characterizations of the Gulf states to seek and describe stability, predictability, and prosperity. As Okhrulik has observed, governmental and corporate funding is available for academic centers, programs, conferences, and publications on the Gulf. The extent that GCC states tolerate, or even fund, Anglo-American scholarship, it is under the rubric of "Gulf Studies," preferably economic and strategic studies utilizing aggregate data. Gulf and foreign scholars and journalists are each proscribed in various ways from pursuing serious independent research in fields including archaeology, political history prior to the emergence of the current dynasties, religious diversity, local administration of justice, immigrant communities, and gender relations. For all these reasons, too many scholars, both Western and Arab, accept at face value the notion that the Gulf, so utterly modern in many respects, is governed by "traditional" values that are those of the "pure" desert-born Islamic and tribal culture carried from Mecca and the Rub al-Khali to the new cities and dynasties of the Persian Gulf coast. In this Arabia, the players are merchants, kings, and Bedouin. This sets the stage for the passage quoted by Vitalis and al-Rasheed from Peterson's 1991 article: "All too often, new writing consists of a rehash of stories already told"... and fails to "move beyond the comfortable horizons of country studies and political analysis". Vitalis and al-Rasheed add: "the basic narrative of state formation itself was not questioned".

Searching for a collection of Arabian Peninsula maps to study for this paper, I came across a wonderfully produced full-color compendium of maps entitled *The Gulf in Historic Maps 1493-1931*. The editor, Sultan Bin Muhammad al-Qasimi, had collected and arranged chronologically a couple hundred maps featuring the Gulf. Most were originally Arabian Peninsula maps; others depicted Persia, Asia, Asia Minor, or the Near East. On each extra-large glossy page is reproduced a miniature of the original map along side an enlargement of The Gulf – from what is now Kuwait to what is now Oman. This rendering literally crops, squares, and enlarges the Gulf from the larger Peninsula, setting it apart, and situating it in the foreground. Historically European cartographers rarely mapped the Persian Gulf as such. Nor is the Gulf

depicted or marked as a territorial region on old maps in such a way as to identify the area that is now identified as the Gulf by another name. Instead cartographers drew the Peninsula, or Arabia, as it was often called. The modern map collector, identified as “the ruler of Shariqah,” consciously choose to de-emphasize these original renderings in favor of a sharp-edged rectangular zone that had no separate entity until the advent of the modern oil industry, but which has been depicted in countless maps published in newspapers, magazines, and books in the past several decades. Maps, conferences, scholarly volumes, list-serves, academic appointments, and other depictions reify the cropped, enlarged, sharp-edged conceptualizations of The Gulf.

III: Dualism

Obviously wholeness is not the same as one-ness. Above and beyond the diversity of the Peninsula, the oil industry has shaped The Gulf not as a geographic region but as a global sub-station where international banks, five-star hotels, Ruby Tuesday's, and the Dubai Airport are among the many indicators of a globalized economy. For all its political and ideological introversion, The Gulf's economy is highly extroverted. Little endures of a local economy once comprised of pearls, fish, lamb, leather, wool, ships, crafts, mud architecture, and weekly markets, all replaced by replicas reproduced offshore: for instance, “traditional” silver jewelry on sale in Oman consists largely of Indian knock-offs. Anyway these are bought mostly by tourists or those locals whose taste is so utterly Westernized that they admire the “ethnic” look in fashion and home furnishings. Meanwhile day-to-day consumption in the Gulf is comprised almost exclusively of imported commodities: hennas, food-stuffs, and electronics from Asia, European leatherwear, American name-brands. Cities sprang from the desert while existing villages and markets were deserted, repositioned, and rebuilt from scratch. A few old towns may eventually be preserved, like Williamsburg. In the newly assembled environments, some features — like wide motor-roads, huge parking lots, strip-mall commercial development, suburban housing developments, pansy-gardens in traffic medians — look like Arizona or Florida. Others, such as grandiose mosques, kitschy road-art, and fields of curiously camel-like oil-pumps, apply exotic materials and labor to modernize local culture. Finally, and reflecting its internal bifurcation, a striking feature of The Gulf is its multilingualism: Arabic is the language of the local elite, but the streets are a polyglot of Urdu and other Asian languages, while the *lingua franca*, needed even for ordinary shopping, is English.

The whole Peninsula is not like that. Whereas Gulfi men virtually all wear each country's subtly distinguished *dishdasha*, south of the Tropic of Cancer men don individualized, rough-and-ready outfits variously combining white robes, plaid futas, fatigues, sports jackets, assorted headgear, and side-arms. In

the Gulf the Arabian curved dagger is a public art icon; in Yemen it is an item of everyday sartorial expression. Whereas Gulf architecture is sleek and linear, Yemeni buildings are crooked and organic. Even new Yemeni construction features indigenous flourishes such as arched stained glass windows. Whereas Gulf streets are lined with lawns kept trim by Asian gardeners, Yemeni streets are lined with garbage. What was once the coast of Desert Arabia is luxurious; Happy Arabia is now squalid. The Gulf imports labor from Yemen and other parts of the Third World; Yemen receives Horn of Africa refugees. Southern Arabians throng to the Gulf; few Gulfis set foot in Yemen. The GCC states remain aid donors, funding humanitarian relief and development projects in the poorer Arab countries, Africa, and Asia, though less generously than in their days of greatest affluence; Yemen begs for this and other foreign aid.

Whereas the Gulf has traffic circles, Yemen has traffic jams. Gulf police direct cars; in Yemen they man checkpoints. In striking contrast to the Gulf, Yemen's popular markets are filthy, chaotic, bumpy, and tangled. Yemen is kaleidoscopic; the Gulf is monochrome. If Oman, with its gentility and its unmarried, English-educated sultan, is "queer," Yemen, with its polygamous military leader and gun-toting tribesmen, is "macho". The GCC and its member states have been remarkable for their internal political order and stability, whereas from the nineteen fifties through the nineteen nineties South Arabian politics were convulsed by coups, assassinations, and civil wars. The Gulf is silent; the un-Gulf is noisy. The Gulf's domestic politics are domesticated, whereas Yemen's are feral. The Gulf is pacified; the periphery is raucous. The Gulf is a vital American interest; Yemen is a backwater. The Gulf is good for business; Yemen is good for ethnography.

Both underdevelopment theory and post-modern cultural studies tell us that wealth and impoverishment, orderliness and chaos are not two different conditions of separate places but two parts of one condition. This was the lesson of neo-Marxism and it is the lesson of postmodernism as well — dualism is their common thread or insight. Within the Peninsula, the Gulf is cosmopolitan core, while the Arabia Felix of old is the periphery. While by now even Dhofar and Asir, the parts of Oman and Saudi Arabia furthest from the Gulf, have been Gulf-ized to some degree, Yemen, with well over half the citizen population of the Peninsula, is increasingly under-developed economically and politically. If the Gulf is a world unto itself, Yemen is very much part of the Third World. Yet whereas a dependency model assumes Third World nations are linked to a Western or Northern cosmopole, Yemen's fate has been tied to a Saudi star. Until newly-unified Yemen's defiant stance on the 1990/91 Gulf war, Sana'a and to some extent even Aden relied on Gulf largess to pay government bills, and on migrant remittances of Saudi riyals to offset its otherwise untenable balance of payments.

Politically events in Arabia's two largest countries always seem intertwined, at least as viewed from the south, for it is difficult to explain much that happens in Yemen without looking at Saudi policies. The Kingdom has been actively engaged in domestic Yemeni politics since the last open clashes between them ended in a tentative border agreement in 1934. Although many details remain obscure, close Saudi involvement in Yemeni politics over the years is a matter of public record: supporting the imams against Egyptian-backed republican officers in North Yemen after 1962, granting asylum for deposed sultans and businessmen who fled South Yemen's revolution after 1967, arming the North against the South in the late seventies and early eighties, opposing Yemeni unification in 1990, and not-so-covertly backing Southern secession in 1994. The Saudi government, other Gulf governments, and individual princes variously paid subsidies to a range of Yemeni tribes, individuals, and regimes in an elaborate pan-Arabian system of clientage. In this manner the most powerful men in Yemen in the year 2001 owed their rise to national leadership during the late seventies to Saudi patronage. At that time, the standard maps of the Kingdom shown with television news broadcasts had no southern border, and indeed save for a tiny stretch inland from the Red Sea no formal boundary had ever been drawn.

This is not the place to recount every intrigue, rumor, and conspiracy theory blaming turmoil in Yemen on the machinations of Saudi Arabia, much less to also consider the flow of funds from other Gulf monarchs, individual investors, and erstwhile alternative sources of support from the Iraqi, Libyan, or Soviet governments. One might venture to speculate nonetheless that the intensity and persistence of Saudi interference attest to a strong abiding interest in Yemeni affairs by the Saudi state as such and by individuals within the Saudi government. Surely the Kingdom looked askance at the Zaydi imams who offered a doctrinal alternative but felt a genuine threat from the officers who declared a Yemen Arab Republic in 1962 and even greater hostility from the leftist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Even so, the level and complexity of Saudi involvement in Yemeni domestic politics goes beyond pure self-preservation. At times it seemed that Saudi princes and politicians are playing out their own internal power struggles by factional proxy in Yemen.

During the nineteen eighties and nineties, radical Saudi-educated clerics enjoyed a particular sort of patronage from the Kingdom that took shape in the context of great oil wealth coupled with avid anti-communism. Through a polemical, generous policy of foreign aid for religious education in Muslim countries, Saudi sources financed a number of influential new religious institutions: an ultra-conservative College of Shari'a at Sana'a University, many mosques, a string of parochial boys' schools, dozens of charitable community

centers, and other Islamic establishments. The brand of Islam taught in these institutions, referred to by its proponents as “*salafi*,” contrasted sharply with Yemeni Zaydi and Shafa’i traditions. *Salafi* refers to the disciples of the prophet and also implies pure or puritanical, what is often called a “strict” or “fundamentalist” Islam. This neo-fundamentalism is modeled on the beliefs of the Wahhabi ideologues who inspired the religious doctrines of the modern Saudi state. Proponents of austerity, salafis consider mosque decoration idolatrous, coffee a drug, many folk practices sinful, and non-Muslims evil.

Neo-Islamist schools and mosques preaching a version of Islam usually very different from that practiced locally were endowed in many parts of Africa and Asia, and supplied with Arabic-speaking teachers and preachers from Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Yemen, and elsewhere. A puritanical neo-fundamentalism spread via parochial education in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Palestinian refugee communities, Egypt, Algeria, Somalia, Senegal, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Even before the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan intensified this movement’s militancy, a new brand of Wahhabi-style puritanism was spreading south into Yemen. Full veils, full beards, and fire-and-brimstone sermons on cassette tape became all the rage in the eighties. In some respects this was a new Arabian Islamic missionary movement, financed through a combination of foreign aid and private philanthropy. In Asia it became an outright *jihad*, financed and conceived by the Saudi government, Pakistani intelligence, and the CIA, to drive Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Young men recruited from among Gulf migrants and students at fundamentalist academies abroad volunteered for guerrilla warfare against the Communist infidels. Their much-celebrated victory over Soviet forces – widely seen as having brought down the mighty USSR — further glamorized Islamic fundamentalism and militancy. The repercussions of this romanticized *jihad* have been felt from Algeria to Ache.

Although the neo-fundamentalist ideology, to use Olivier Roy’s apt term, claims to represent a traditional or pure form of Islam originating in the holy land of Mecca and Medina, its actuality it was forged in the political circumstances of the nineteen seventies and eighties to be anti-Communist first and anti-Shi’a secondly. Take the issue of gender policy, for instance. The Soviet-supported Afghan government of the nineteen eighties, like the Socialist Party-state in South Yemen, promoted women’s professional education and participation (if mainly in medicine and education) and relative equality under the law. In reaction against this state feminism, the anti-Communist propaganda of the mujahideen held that Communism destroys the family; under Communism women and children are public property; under Communism no man knows who his children are. Twist this propaganda to its logical extreme and you get the Taliban gender policy (shut females in the house) and the family values rhetoric Afghan-Arab returnees wield against Yemeni socialists.

By comparison, the merely segregationist gender policies of the Gulf are a bland irritation; there, there was never any risk of Communism. Likewise, the Taliban inherited a fear of Iranian influence reflected in rabidly anti-Shi'a programme.

Al-Jizira

What then of an Arabian identity, rather than a Gulf identity? As the only Gulf state whose territory stretches the full breadth of the Peninsula, Saudi Arabia is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is very much a Gulf monarchy, and a proponent of a separate Gulf identity as well as a military alliance. And it is the *status quo* power. On the other hand the Kingdom has both "Saudi" and "Arabia" in its name, identifies itself with all of Arabia, and is viewed by all its neighbors as having hegemonic designs. So Riyadh sometimes appropriates the whole sub-continent in its self-exposition through films, maps, and photo-books, but at the same time along with its GCC allies the House of Saud also insists that Gulf politics are uniquely insular. For their part, many in the Saudi opposition in exile, writing from England, Egypt, or Pakistan, now routinely refer to *al-Jazira* as a single political unit. Then again, others, rather perversely, speak of the Peninsula as comprised of "greater Hijaz" and "greater Yemen". Whereas Saudi dissidents praised female participation in Yemen's historic 1993 elections, calling them an example for the entire Peninsula, Riyadh dismissed the whole exercise — the parliamentary elections as such, as well as women's registration as voters or candidates — as "un-Islamic". The official line here is that Saudis may influence Yemenis, but not the other way around.

Dissent, by definition, resides abroad. Yet social movements cultivated explicitly for export have come back to haunt the Gulf. Neo-fundamentalists challenge princes to practice the asceticism, puritanism, and Islamic xenophobia preached for the Afghanistan *jihad*. Usama bin Ladin is probably but one among many maverick commanders ensconced, like the Marlon Brando figure in the *Heart of Darkness* film rendition *Apocalypse Now*, in camps in Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and other chaotic regions of the Indian Ocean basin. A series of attacks on American targets — the World Trade Center, American forces at Khobar, the Cole in Aden, embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salam — have been launched under the slogan of removing foreign troops from the Arabian Peninsula. Both the guerrilla methods and the neo-fundamentalist discourses of this resistance movement have been inspired by the anti-Soviet crusade..

Although it is currently by far the single most salient threat to stability in the Gulf, this particular Frankenstein's monster or Pandora's box, the new Islamic *jihad*, is not the sole product of policies and conditions that export politics. Within the Peninsula, the flow of petro-currencies to Zaydi royalists,

some Yemeni nationalists, selected Nasirists, certain Socialists, die-hard tribalists, Islamists of various stripe, and avid red-baiters revealed both the extent of engagement in internal Yemeni politics and the range of political sympathies among wealthy Gulf donors. Philanthropy, charity, foreign aid and outright patronage became vehicles of influence and outlets for political energies. In this manner overt politics suppressed in the Gulf leaked into Yemen, often like oil on smoldering embers. As the twentieth century closed, even while negotiating a boundary that might insulate the Kingdom from the Brandos and Bin Ladins in its unruly populous periphery, Riyadh was also offering Saudi citizenship to thousands of Yemenis in the Hadramawt, Shabwa, Sa'da and other border areas. Subsidies continued to flow to selected tribal, religious, and military leaders, although most official government assistance was suspended on account of Yemen's recalcitrant position on the Gulf war. Dubai, Oman, and other parts of the Gulf, meanwhile, absorbed the left-leaning, Socialist-led segment of the Yemeni political elite exiled after 1994. So there is also, again, a backwards leakage, or political re-absorption. Political and religious tendencies suppressed in the Gulf — including traditions associated with sufism, the Isma'ili sect, Shi'a and Sunni folk Islam, and militant salafism as well as modern ideologies like feminism or Ba'thism — find open expression in Yemen. In 2000 the Saudi government executed several individuals Najran prosecutors said were Yemeni "sorcerers" but local Isma'ilis said were mosque preachers. The government blamed the ensuing public protests on the Yemeni leaders of the trans-border Yam tribe.

Reverse leakage along overseas financial conduits is less obvious but cannot be entirely ruled out. Though peaking in the late seventies and early eighties, the great petro-dollar recycling of the past quarter century reached Eritrean rebels, various Palestinian groups, the African National Congress, Indonesian separatists, Somali factions, Chechyn nationalists, Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims, Sudanese Islamists, and Nigerian ethno-religious movements — to name only a few of the places where such funds seem to have made some difference recently. Channeled through both public and private means, such overseas aid is not by definition more sinister than, say, American aid to Israel, the Contras, the mujahideen, or Jonas Svimbi's Angolan rebels; whether it damages long-term foreign policy objectives is a matter of conjecture. In the absence of formal asylum policies or minimal academic and press freedoms, such financial interventions may have few if any domestic political repercussions. It is difficult to tell, since neither Gulf scholars nor their Western counterparts have analyzed these networks carefully.

Besides mutual absorption along a porous frontier Yemen and active engagement in neighborhood and even global affairs, the "politics of the outside" has another dimension. Enabled by wealth and motivated by hellish

summer weather, the Gulf elite holds dual residence in the posher districts of London, Washington, Cairo, Beirut, Rome, and other cosmopolitan cities. So much that is forbidden in the Gulf — politics, publications, alcohol, strip-shows, cocktail dresses — is available in the home-away-from-home. The Gulf's sons and sometimes daughters can escape intellectually when they study abroad in England, America, or Egypt. These outlets then serve as a shock absorber for the Gulf itself, effectively sanitized from either debauchery or dissonant information. As Mamoun Fandy and others have reported, the advent of cyberspace affords yet another opportunity for political protest to surface offshore.

In short, "The Gulf" is not an island, nor is it, as its name literally implies, an empty space. All geo-cultural markers — "The West," the "Middle East," and "black Africa," and for that matter so too Saudi Arabia and Canada — are human constructs. But "the Gulf" is of more recent coinage and cynical device than most. As scholars I think we are missing something by always separating Yemen from the Gulf and never looking at the Peninsula as a whole. The relatively recent works that do so are amazingly few, and focussed largely on military or security issues: Halliday's *Arabia Without Sultans*, Kelly's *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West*, Peterson's *Defending Arabia*. Gause and others have examined Saudi-or GCC relations with Yemen. We have several studies of Yemeni labor migration to the Gulf, Chaudhry's comparison of the freewheeling Yemeni and highly restricted Saudi investment environments, Schofield's work on the Peninsula's boundaries, and Jayyussi's translations of Arabian literature. The last English-language history of Arabia was published by Kamal Salibi in 1980. There seems not to be any solid historical or ethno-religious account of medieval and/or modern Islam specifically in Arabia. Nor are there guides to the Peninsula's many, mostly un-unearthed, architectural sites. Apart from several issues of *Arabian Studies* mostly dealing with narrow Orientalist matters, we have very few have edited volumes or sections of edited volumes devoted to Arabia or the Peninsula — in part, because we rarely have conferences or panels or even conversations between Gulf Studies and Yemeni studies. According to Okruhlik and other scholars in the Society for Gulf Studies, this is a matter of explicit policy on the part of monarchs none too keen to open their societies to academic scrutiny and opposed to any insinuation of similitude between themselves and their messy southern neighbor.

What then might be the agenda for Arabian studies? The standard Gulf or Saudi history has a tranquility that might be fruitfully complicated by an updated account that includes peasant politics as well as the political engagements of Arabians (Omanis and Yemenis in particular) in movements that swept the whole Afro-Asian region, with notable connections to Zanzibar/ Tanzania, Pakistan, and Indonesia in at mid-century, and to Afghanistan, Indonesia,

Somalia, Sudan, and Senegal today. A new social history might call more attention to certain kinds of “racial” (by American categories) diversity and multi-culturalism that are buried under the GCC states’ narrow definitions of citizenship. If there is an Arabia, one might ask, then who are the Arabians, or perhaps the Arabian peoples – in the Peninsula, and in the diaspora?

A second question is whether there are political trends across the Peninsula in the twentieth century that can be written about cogently. In addition to tribalism and political Islam, there may be parallels to the processes some of us have studied in Yemen, including both customary and novel activities in the sphere beyond any state, above the family, and outside the business sector: participation in formal organizations, material contributions to social services, intellectual production, and organizing or attending special events. Such activities are not constant but sporadic, responsive, and opportunistic, depending on broader circumstances.

In the absence of central states until well into the twentieth century, the institutions of what I have elsewhere called a “primordial civic realm” provided basic services to urban and rural communities through religious, trade, municipal, and tribal mechanisms. Such mechanisms, including *waqf*, tribal subscriptions, municipal and market taxes, and other forms of philanthropy and communal action functioned in Arabian cities and towns until at least mid-century when oil-enriched governments began constructing welfare states. More modern sorts of civic activism gained momentum in Aden during the anti-colonial movement, when labor unions and political parties galvanized public involvement among a mixed Arab, Asian, and African population. Self-help provided basic services in republican North Yemen at a time when government, lacking either a tax base or rents, was hardly capable of building roads, schools, water projects, or other infrastructure. The rest of the Peninsula may have been spared wars of independence, labor militancy, and the need for community auto-taxation. Moreover, the monarchies have more successfully restricted the parameters of political and civic space, outlawing political parties and articulation of non-ruling interests. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf seem to have produced special kinds of civic activism for export, such as expatriate presses, investments in overseas *waqf*, patronage of political and religious institutions abroad, and so forth. More research is needed to understand the channels whereby contributions from governments, businesses, and families in the richest part of the Arab world reached needy Palestinians during the current *intifada*, for instance. Connections – institutional, political, financial — between the *jama’aiyyah khairiyyah al-islam* in Kuwait and Yemen and perhaps elsewhere are yet to be documented. The vast grant-making networks of private petro-dollar foundations such as al-Haramayn to Islamic causes in many Afro-Asian communities needs close investigation. And so forth.

In the aggregate, perhaps such channels will be illuminated as conduits of political electricity.

Some movements inside the GCC states – the Dhofar rebellion backed by then-revolutionary South Yemen, and more recently Isma’ili activism in Najran said to originate inside northern Yemen, to cite just two examples – are so subaltern that it is easy to see them as marginal to Omani or Saudi national politics. Nonetheless, in a larger context we might see a version of political pluralism/ cultural diversity that disappears beneath the monotone merchants-and-princes view of the Gulf. Political Islam itself, in the varying conceptions of regimes, counter-elites, exiles, and radical militants, is hardly monolithic; it has its own kind of pluralism and diversity, with sectarian and political divisions cross-cutting current boundaries and political arrangements. Ignoring these evidently led the American Central Command to overlook potential resistance to its presence in the region coming not from Iran or Iraq but from within Arabia itself. Even as scholars and policy analysts attempt to understand this particular threat to American interests, neither local affinities nor potentially larger movements along the lines of pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, or pan-Arabian identities are too far-fetched to be investigated.

The notion – one might say, the identity – of *al-Jazira* or “the Peninsula” is gaining renewed currency within the region itself. This seems partly, perhaps, a quest to define a media market for publications and broadcasts, as in the popular new satellite news broadcast network from Qatar called *al-Jazira*. Here from a smaller Gulf emirate comes the address to a regional audience and a regional identity, potentially pan-Arabian and pan-Arab. Indeed there is anecdotal evidence that the wide popularity of *al-Khalij* or *Khaliji* (The Gulf or Gulfi) as commercial brand-names, which probably reached a saturation point anyhow, has given way to *al-Jazira*. This presumably reflects a shift in official discourses as well as consumer preferences. But the opposition-in-exile have also appropriated the notion of the Peninsula, as in the short-lived publication by the London-based Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights called *al-Jazira al-‘Arabiyya*. Within the Peninsula, the notion of *al-Jazira* can have both hegemonic and subversive implications. Arabian Studies is not necessarily either one or the other. Nor is it by definition an Orientalist inquiry, although it may seem so because so little work has been done since the heyday of Orientalism. Instead, looking across the Peninsula may help us to unearth the territory that has remained for too long *Arabia Incognita*.

Prof. Sheila Carapico
University of Richmond, USA
email: scarapic@richmond.edu

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European University Institute
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