Arabia without Sultans Revisited

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For an author to revisit a book he wrote a quarter of a century, and a half lifetime ago, is a perilous undertaking. *Arabia without Sultans* was conceived of, and written, in the early 1970s, and published in 1974 in Britain, in 1975 in the US, and subsequently, in Arabic, Persian, Japanese and, in part, Turkish translations.[1] It ranged from overviews of national histories in the Peninsula and Iran, through a discussion of revolutionary and opposition movements, to accounts of two visits to the guerrilla areas of Dhofar in Oman, in 1970 and 1973, then held by the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Occupied Arab Gulf (PFLOAG). The context of those years needs little summary: globally, the final death throes of the European empires, the rise of the revolutionary movement in Indochina, the conflict between Russia and China for influence in the third world; regionally, the crisis of the Arab nationalist movement that followed the defeat in the 1967 war, the consolidation of a new pro-western bloc headed by Saudi Arabia and Iran, the rise of a revolutionary movement in South Arabia, beginning with the Yemeni revolution of 1962, leading on to the anti-British guerrilla movement in South Yemen between 1963 and 1967, and the outbreak of guerrilla war in Dhofar province in 1965.

Arabia partook not just of the perspective, but also of the tone and language of the revolutionary left of this epoch: in this sense it is a document of its time. It did, on a number of issues, notably nationalism and "underdevelopment," seek to distance itself from prevailing views on the left. For example, in regard to the Gulf it took issue with the Arab nationalist categorization of Persian immigrants as agents of the Shah's expansionism, while on the Arab-Israeli question it argued, against most current opinion, for a two state solution. On underdevelopment, it sought, under the influence of the writings of Bill Warren and others, to argue for the possibilities of economic and political development under capitalism, rather than, as the dependency school of Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin did, assert that no such development was possible. It nonetheless was part of the Marxist perspective of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It reflects some of the rhetorical delusion of that outlook, above all an uncritical attitude to armed struggle in general and the potential of the Dhofar guerrillas in particular.

Yet in other respects, this Marxist approach, and the critical perspective of that period, is valid for the present. *Arabia without Sultans* sought to analyze the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, within a global context, that of imperialist military strategy on the one hand, and the political economy of oil on the other. Not only was this an attempt to break with particularist views of why individual states had the politics they did—tribal oligarchies in the oil-producing Arabian states, militarized monarchy in the case of Iran—it sought also to sweep aside the mystical exoticism that had long beset analysis of the Arabian Peninsula. The title of the book suggested this anti-mystification project. This was Arabian society in the context of capitalist development and exploitation, in the context of local elites seeking to maximize their positions within a global market. Here three points of difference with other writing may be noted.

First, in contrast to later critiques of imperialist myth (most notable, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the approach it has propagated) which focussed on the cultural and symbolic, the analyses of my generation sought to explore the material—the economic, social, political—factors underlying international structures of domination.

At the same time, this global market was analyzed not merely as a force for underdevelopment and impoverishment (as was represented by the dependency theory of Frank, Amin and Baran), it was, I tried to argue in a theme developed in my later work on Iran, also a force for development and one that stimulated the emergence of new political and social forces.

Second, *Arabia without Sultans* aimed to locate the politics of specific states, Arab and Persian, within a broader regional whole. The radical movements of South Arabia had, above all, to face the enmity of the dominant conservative state, Saudi Arabia, joined in the late 1960s by an ever more assertive Iran. At the same time, the emergence of a radical left in the two Yemens and in Oman reflected the weakening of Egyptian domination over Arab nationalism as a whole.

Third, as part of the demystification of Arabian society, *Arabia* sought to look at the growth of social and political struggles within these states. It showed how, far from being separated from global and regional forces, the politics of these countries, and of South Arabia in particular, reflected the very intense and belated impact of the forces that had been shaping the Middle East and the third world generally over previous decades. The detailed histories of opposition and radical movements in the Yemens, Oman, the Gulf states and Iran were designed, beyond providing a record in solidarity, to demonstrate how far social conflict had already become the impetus for change in these countries. The final theme related social conflict from below with the formation of state systems as well as

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dominant classes and the elites, tied to the international capitalist system and, simultaneously, consolidating a domestic base to appropriate the revenues oil was providing.

In contrast to most writing on Arab politics, *Arabia without Sultans* sought to reconfigure not just the analysis of Arab politics as a whole, but also that of the Arabian Peninsula, to argue that along with Egypt and Palestine the popular movements of the Peninsula needed to be taken into account. Here, however, history was to overtake it. For the revolutionary pivot of the book, the guerrilla movement in Dhofar, was in the year after *Arabia* was published, crushed by an Omani state reconsolidated after the coup of 1970, and by a combination of British, Iranian and Jordanian intervention. PFLOAG, now known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO), was forced into exile in South Yemen, and, by the early 1980s, had withered to a small group of Libya-based emigres. Social and regional tensions continued in Oman, but were apparently unrelated to PFLO activities. The regime in the neighboring People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was put on the defensive. It was forced to compromise with Saudi Arabia in 1976, frustrated in its attempt to promote revolutionary change in North Yemen in 1978-1982, weakened by a series of bloody internal divisions in 1978 and 1986, and finally, in 1990 rushed into a catastrophic union with the more populous North. The subsequent fate of these movements I have charted elsewhere.[2] Suffice it to say that, in the face of external pressure and internal divisions alike, the South Arabian revolutions were, from the mid-1970s, forced into a retreat from which they never recovered.

The regional focus of the book involved two other themes that have, in subsequent years, taken an unanticipated path. The crisis of Arab nationalism, above all the impact of the crisis of Nasserism after 1967, was to find expression in a bifurcation of radical sentiment, on the one hand into a militaristic rendering of Arab patriot themes in the regime of Saddam Hussein, and, on the other, into the Islamist current which, while borrowing theme and organization from the radical left, was to present itself as an alternative to the discredited secular ideologies of communism and nationalism. It was evident to me soon after it was published that, given its aspiration to regional analysis, *Arabia* should have included more extensive analysis of Iraq: the rise of Baghdad's aspirations to regional leadership and then, in 1990, its attempt to impose unity by tanks in Kuwait was to produce a fundamentally different map of regional politics. Baghdad had always viewed the revolutions of South Arabia, within which a pro-Iraqi Ba'th component was virtually absent, with suspicion. Its settlement with Oman in 1975, following on its peace with the Shah, facilitated the defeat of the guerrilla movement and its hostility to Moscow led it into open dispute with the People's Democratic republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1978-80.

On the other hand, Iran, which had aspired to regional domination in the early 1970s, was convulsed by the revolution of 1978-9 and the emergence of the Islamic Republic. For all its evocation of Persian chauvinist themes, the Akhundi[3] regime in Tehran marked a radical break with the past politics of the region. The causes of that revolution lie, as much as anything, in the impact on Iran of those global factors identified as having so convulsed the Arabian Peninsula. Not only did Iran inspire new, Islamist opposition movements in the Arabian Peninsula, but it became involved, from 1980 to 1988, in the war with Iraq that brought tensions between Arabs and Iranians to a pitch of confrontation hitherto unseen in the region. One of the themes of *Arabia without Sultans*—the need to see the politics of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran as interlocked, and to reject ethnic hostility between Arabs and Iranians—was to receive cruel confirmation in the events of the 1980s. The costs of these new interethnic, and inter-confessional animosities, fueled by the shortsighted calculations of competing radical regimes, will take many years to overcome.

Finally, *Arabia without Sultans* was located in the context of the cold war, a global process of political, strategic and ideological rivalry that, while it did not determine all regional politics, did serve to shape, inspire and alarm regional political forces.[4] That it was never purely an East-West process was evident in the Arabian Peninsula, where intra-western (US versus British) and intra-eastern (Soviet versus Chinese) rivalries had their impact. The cold war, however, did shape the politics of the Peninsula and the Gulf. Its end, in 1989 to 1991, facilitated the union of North and South Yemen, and, in a contradictory way, encouraged Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait can be seen both as a *result* of the end of the cold war, in that he feared US and Soviet pressure on Iraq to follow the regimes in eastern Europe, and as a consequence of his *failure* to realize the cold war had ended. He seems to have believed that Soviet and third world pressure would prevent a US counterattack.

On the ideological front, this region has seen the collapse not just of a strategic ally, the Soviet Union, but of a broader belief in the possibility of social and economic progress and the legitimacy of struggling for it. The guerrillas of Dhofar, based in mountains that even in 1970 had been only partly touched by the Arabic language and by the Islamic religion, were, trying to bring the modern ideas of progress, including those relating to women, to the general population.

Arabia without Sultans can certainly be defended as a global, regional and country-specific account of the evolution of politics in the Peninsula and Iran up to the early 1970s. Yet many other books on aspects of the story have been published since and provide, in varying degrees, amplification and correction to my own early attempt. With the passage of time, and the many dramatic twists in the politics of the region sketched above, it may appear that the original agenda of *Arabia without Sultans* has become obsolete in some ways. I would argue, however, that much of this agenda remains

valid, and in some ways even more so than in the early 1970s. The issue of oil's impact, political and social, on the state systems and class structures of these societies is as vital as ever. It is being posed even more sharply by the end of the long years of revenue surplus: in Oman and Bahrain, Kuwait and most of all, in Saudi Arabia, the regimes face real choices, based on political calculations, of where to spend revenue and how to mobilize their societies more effectively to meet the needs of coming years. The politics of the Peninsula remain dominated by the question that lay also at the heart of *Arabia without Sultans*, that of relations between the oil-producing monarchies headed by Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and the poorer but more populous Yemen on the other. Relations between Riyadh and Sana'a remain as difficult as ever, a point of which the rulers in both capitals remain acutely aware even as they seek to disguise it.

The politics of these countries, although influenced by external factors, remain, to a considerable extent, subject to the ebb and flow of domestic forces, some in relatively open political systems, such as Kuwait and Yemen, some behind the opacity that dominates Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states. This is as true for the conflicts between rival factions and personalities among elites as it is for the conflict between the regimes as a whole and the social forces that, directly or indirectly, challenge them. No one contemplating the last two years of struggle in Bahrain, or the rivalries between princely and merchant forces in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, could doubt the continued importance of these factors. The issue is not, as it was in the early 1970s, of armed revolution, but rather of finding a means, through political pressure from within and without, of democratizing these states and distributing their wealth in an equitable and constitutional manner.

Finally, I would argue against much contemporary opinion in both the Middle East and the west for the validity of a little paragraph in the introduction to the book; one not much noticed at the time, except by the Arabic translator who saw fit to insert a footnote disclaiming responsibility for it. This paragraph stressed the need for "a theoretical break with religion." Precisely because of the prevalence of Islamist thinking, its use by ruling elites, and its compatibility with economic development, "it is essential," the text continued, "to supersede Islam with materialist thought." I would argue that the events of the past 25 years have underscored its validity: Islamist ideologies have indeed been able to flourish alongside economic development, but they have equally served to confuse, divide and divert the peoples of this region. This has been the case with the obscurantist and authoritarian variant of Saudi Arabia, copied to varying degrees by other Gulf regimes, as well as with the demagogic and self-defeating rhetoric of the Islamic Republic of Iran. ■

Endnotes

1 Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans* (London: Penguin, 1974). *Arabia without Sultans* was later published by Random House in the US in 1975. Subsequent translations appeared in Arabic (Kazima: Kuwait), Persian (Kitabsira: Tehran) Turkish (Evren Yayinlari) and Japanese (Hosei University Press). In a 1977 *New Yorker* article, Joseph Kraft reported that he found a room full of unread copies in the Saudi Foreign Ministry.

2 *Mercenaries in the Persian Gulf: Counter-Insurgency in Oman* (Nottingham: Russell Press, 1979) provides an analysis of the factors leading to the defeat of the guerrillas in Dhofar. *Soviet Policy in the Arc of Crisis* (Washington: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981) includes analysis of the 1978 crisis in Aden. *Revolution and Foreign Policy: the Case of South Yemen, 1967-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) takes the PDRY story through the intra-party war of 1986. "The Third Inter-Yemeni War and its Consequences", *Asian Affairs*, London, June 1995 chronicles the defeat of the Yemeni Socialist Party by the northern regime.

3 In Farsi, *akhund* means clergyman; see Fred Halliday, "Post-akhundism in Iran," *Index on Censorship* 4/1997, p. 39.

4 For a retrospective assessment, see my recent "The Middle East, the Great Powers and the Cold War," in Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).