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*A critical comparative review of the social, economic,
and political changes in Bahrain after the discovery of oil*

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Political and Social Change in the Arabian Peninsula
J.E. Peterson

Reading paper: A critical comparative review of the social, economic, and political changes in Bahrain after the discovery of oil

Books reviewed: Rumaihi, M.G. Bahrain: Social and Political Change since the First World War. London: Bowker, 1976.

Rumaihi, M.G. Beyond Oil: Unity and Development in the Gulf. London: Al Saqi Books, 1986

Article: Heard-Bey, Frauke. Social Changes in the Gulf States and Oman. Asian Affairs (London), Vol. 3, No. 3 (October 1972), pp. 309-316.

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Introduction

The present reading paper aims at reviewing, critically assessing, and comparing three academic works of two different authors. Rumaihi's book *Bahrain: Social and Political Change since the First World War*. London: Bowker, 1976¹ will serve as the foundation of the paper while Rumaihi's later book *Beyond Oil: Unity and Development in the Gulf*. London: Al Saqi Books, 1986² will be used as a source of comparison and juxtaposition. The aim is to pinpoint a shift in the author's perception, from relatively positive to explicitly negative, of the changes that shaped Bahrain's modern history. Frauke Heard-Bey's *Social Changes in the Gulf States and Oman*. *Asian Affairs* (London), Vol. 3, No. 3 (October 1972), pp. 309-316 is used as an 'external' reference on relevant issues. The author of the present paper is entirely relying on the suggested reading material and is thus not assessing Rumaihi's arguments against other authors or writings.

The limitations faced by the author of the reading paper can be roughly divided into two groups – internal and external, although those are strongly related and sometimes overlap. On one hand, the lack of a substantial background in Gulf history and development, as well as in Arabic language, may be seen as internal limitations. The limited information on Mr. Rumaihi's background; the reliance on Arabic sources in his bibliography (transliterated but not translated in English) as well as the fact that '*Beyond Oil*' was originally written in Arabic and then translated into English on the other hand, may be seen as external limitations. Distortions are, therefore, not excluded although controlled for.

Background matters

Personal background can be seen as either positively or a negatively influencing impartiality. Being an 'insider' to a certain topic, issue, region may give an edge, but it may as well question the argument rendering it biased. The author of the books under review, Mohamed Ghanem al Rumaihi³ is Arab, born in Kuwait. He is a professor of political sociology at the Kuwait University focusing his research on political sociology, social change in the Arabian Gulf region, and the Changing culture of Arab world. Born in 1942, he is 'a child' of the turbulent transition period to modernity in the Gulf region. Thus, he not only has

¹ Hereafter referred to as '*Bahrain*'.

² Hereafter referred to as '*Beyond Oil*'.

³ Information on Rumaihi: <http://www.un.org/ga/president/61/follow-up/thematic-civilizations/akumaihi.shtml>;
<http://fikrconferences.org/en/dr-mohamed-al-rumaihi>

an 'insider's perspective' but also the perspective of a direct 'witness' of the changes that shaped the Arab Peninsula. He contributes articles to various Arab newspapers and magazines and is himself the editor of a couple, particularly of *Al Arabi* – an influential magazine in Kuwait, and in the whole region as well, that focuses on culture, literature, art, politics and society in the Arab world. Pan-Arabism is strongly sustained by *Al Arabi*. Rumaihi, himself, pays due attention to Pan-Arabism/ Arabic Nationalism in both books subject of this paper. Alongside his academic work, Rumaihi also took part in the political life of Kuwait serving as a member of various Committees within Kuwait government Departments (1994-97), especially in the areas of education and culture.

Mrs. Frauke Heard-Bey⁴ is a historian and political scientist who extensively worked on social and political development in the Gulf region. She was born in Berlin in 1941 but spent most of her adult life in Abu Dhabi. Mrs. Heard-Bey is married to a British engineer, David Heard, who participated in oil exploration in Abu Dhabi and later became the representative of Abu Dhabi Petroleum Company. Thus, when reviewing Ms. Heard-Bey's writings, it is worth measuring her arguments against this background while also bearing in mind British influence in the Gulf region (especially in terms of oil exploration).

Sources matter

Examination of the sources of an academic work is two-fold – first, it allows for determining the depth and comprehensiveness of the research, and second – it gives insight into the level of reliability and coherence. Both Rumaihi's books present a mixture of primary (archives/ governmental ordinance/ correspondence/ speeches) and secondary (other academic writings) sources. It should be noted that in '*Beyond Oil*' secondary sources seem to be predominant with the focus on, as in '*Bahrain*', Arab authors. Furthermore, '*Beyond Oil*' relies extensively on Rumaihi's earlier research. Working with primary sources, especially referring to early 20th century, may prove to be very complicated - access might be restricted and records might be missing, non-existing, destroyed, etc. In '*Bahrain*' Rumaihi relies heavily on archives – Indian Office Archives, British Foreign Office Records, Government of Bahrain Official Publications. He uses detailed citations specifying years, catalogue numbers, and departments. Another source of information is official correspondence between (and

⁴ Information about Heard-Bey: <http://www.fraukeheardbey.com/>

within) British (Political Agent, Political Resident, Foreign Office) and Bahrain officials (the Sheikh). Some of the correspondence has been made available by the people directly involved in it. In addition, Rumaihi prepared field research interviewing local Bahrainians of different status and group (class) affiliation. Being an article in a periodic journal Mrs. Heard-Bey work is not that 'demanding' with regard to sources but this may be explained by the strict requirements related to publishing an academic work into a periodic journal.

Bahrain's development path – the beginning

In '*Bahrain*' Rumaihi's embarks on a journey. A journey that would take him from the time of Bahrain's (modern) formation (the movement of tribes), through the development of more complex economic activities, which would produce existential social, economic, cultural, and political changes, to its modern market economy-oriented state. This is a transition, and historically speaking, a very rapid shift from an agricultural society based on pearl fisheries, agriculture, and (traditional) trade to a modern society using technologies and Western know-how in mastering oil production. However, those changes, or as Rumaihi would later refer to in '*Beyond Oil*' as 'challenges', were not internally initiated – they were an intricate, and very much explosive, mixture of external influence (British) and gradual rise of internal social and political awareness. Change in Bahrain started before oil but was very much triggered by the prospective of its discovery, and penetrated all walks of life after oil

Bahrain is presented as a land of colliding interest because of its geographical location which provides for agricultural development and links with the outside world. The traits of Bahrain's modern history can be traced back to 1782 and the settlement of Utub tribes to the island (from the hinterland to the coast). It was considered a land secured from the raids of Wahhabis, which at that time dominated the eastern part of Arabia. Al Khalifa, one of the tribes, made its way towards becoming the ruling family of Bahrain. Tribal conflicts (conflicts within the ruling family⁵) triggered by volatile inter-tribe allegiances⁶ (especially in terms of the possession of power); external attempts (Arab: Wahhabis, Omanis; non-Arab: Persians⁷;

⁵⁵ After Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammad al Khalifah (Al Fatih) – his two sons – Salman and Abdullah started an internal fight over who should be in power. This provoked a bloody conflict. The British intervened and ended the conflict by deporting Abdullah who would prove a disturbing element in the future.

⁶ As Rumaihi argues in '*Beyond Oil*', British would exploit internal tribal disagreements and conflicting allegiances.

⁷ As Rumaihi points out, Persia played an important role in Bahrain's development. Its claim for Bahrain's territory, although never acquiring the form of a military campaign, were considered the most serious and withstanding ones. Those claims were settled in 1957 when the Arab League recognises Bahrain as an independent Arab state.

Turks) of annexation of the island⁸, and the British power and influence were to substantially mark Bahrain's development path. There is a clear causal relationship between the above-mentioned – whenever there was an internal turmoil within the ruling family, usually contestation of power, there was a decrease in strength that would allow for the other two to occur. Internal strife would threaten stability which would immediately trigger *external* interference (Britain – economic interests) into Bahrain's *internal* affairs.

Rumaihi's narrative goes through a vast amount of detailed information about the historical background of Bahrain. Indeed, overwhelming and confusing at times. The historical approach of presenting facts in a very detailed way (ex. pearl fishing) creates a kind of a reading fatigue and does not always serve as supporting the author's main point. In '*Beyond Oil*' on the other hand, there is less of a historical overview, and whenever there is such, it is highly nuanced by the author's assessment and critical judgement. This later book reveals a change in Rumaihi's view of the sources, triggers and effects of this development. It should be noted that there is a gap of 10 years between '*Bahrain*' and '*Beyond Oil*'. In this period the Gulf experienced two oil price extremes, namely in 1974 (price soar up) and in the early 1980s (price sunk). In addition, the effects of external influence started being seen as creating cultural assimilation. Fear of a future without oil, and without British 'protection' for that matter too, would also become alarming. The main burden has fallen on the shoulders of the ruling elites in whose capacity many had doubts. Rumaihi is indeed proving a different point in '*Beyond Oil*' – that of the need for unification of the region. However, in doing so he turns his argument of 'changes' to one of 'challenges' with respect to what happened in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of Bahrain after the discovery of oil.

Main forces behind Bahrain's development

External Influence (British)

Going back to the sources of development, one that is undoubtedly of utmost importance is British influence in the Gulf. Britain was a long established commercial power in the region. The British-French rivalry for supremacy led to Britain's direct political involvement in the Gulf in 1798⁹. As Rumaihi points out in '*Beyond Oil*', British would intentionally fragment Arab societies, cut their traditional trade routes (making them

⁸A typical feature of Al Khalifa's way of ruling was its ability to forge useful and timely alliances playing one force against another.

⁹The agreement with the Imam of Muscat (Oman).

dependent on foreign goods), and fiercely work towards establishing States (in the Western sense) based on territorial integrity and sovereignty. British greater involvement in the region, and particularly in Bahrain, was determined by the gradual expansion of its interests beyond commerce – WWI (military bases) and the prospect of oil discovery. From the first agreement between Bahrain and Britain in 1816 on, the latter would steadily set foot into Bahrain's state administration (Political Agent, Advisor to the Sheikh, officials at various high-level state posts) and leave a strong mark on its reforms (pearl fishing, police, legal system (law codification/courts), health, education).

In '*Bahrain*' Rumaihi's critique with respect to the British influence is mild and usually in the form of direct quotations from official correspondence or speeches inferring British vested interest. On the opposite side of the spectrum of criticism is '*Beyond Oil*' where Rumaihi uses a sharper language providing direct qualifications: '*Western imperialist power well aware of the economic potential of the Gulf region*' (British). Logically, the periods in which he divides the history of social, economic, and political development of Bahrain are 1) *pre-colonialism* (coherent social order) and 2) *post-colonialism* (oil and British influence). By contrast, '*Bahrain*' proposes 4 periods of political changes: 1) the 1918-1929 (the period of major reforms – the shift from the old traditional to the new modern order); 2) 1930s (political awareness and increase in political demands); 3) 1940s and 4) 1950s (social and political conflict). Interestingly, a closer look at this division and the changes introduced may suggest that the political reforms that took place in the first period were either too difficult for the society to absorb, too alienated from its needs or too far from its capital crafted. The conclusion Rumaihi arrives at in '*Beyond Oil*' seems to favour the latter explanation.

The British would be the ones initiating the administrative reforms in Bahrain in the 1920s in the area of pearl fisheries. Later on literally all reforms that would take place – *inter alia*, education, health, justice, and labour - would require the blessing of the British. Understandably, this would trigger dissatisfaction within the Bahrainian society left unheard of its demands, and would accumulate dissatisfaction culminating in massive strikes and riots in the 1950s.

The Discovery of Oil – and the changes it brought about

Bahrain was relatively wealthier than the rest of the Gulf countries before the discovery of oil. Logically, the differences became even more evident after its discovery and exploitation. Drilling started in 1931 and in 1934 Bahrain exported its first tanker of crude oil.

In 1936 the first oil refinery in the Gulf region was opened. Alongside wealth, Bahrain became more dependent on the outside world being abruptly pushed into the international market. The oil industry led to the decline in traditional (agricultural) economic activities (mentioned above). As Rumaihi argues in *'Beyond Oil'* *'the 'modern economic sector entirely replaced the previous dominant modes of production'* leading to a complete dependence on oil revenues, which were distributed by the ruling family. Ideas and impetus for economic diversification were non-existent. Societal structures and social relations were the first to be affected by this change. The complication of economic activities meant complication of social relations and required new policies and enforcement mechanisms. Oil companies, owned and predominantly ran by foreigners (British; US, consortiums) (Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO)), needed administrative structure capable of ensuring the necessary conditions for them to operate - regulation of land property, revenues, taxes, infrastructure building, labour market regulations, etc. In return, oil companies created employment opportunities¹⁰ thus increasing the standard of living for many Bahrainians. These opportunities would not be left unexploited and the security of having a fixed, regardless of size, wage triggered massive immigration to the place the economic activities took place - towns and cities, (urbanisation) leading to overpopulation and depopulation in the cities and in the countryside, respectively.

Unfortunately, seizing the opportunity of working in modern economic sectors turned out difficult for the average Bahrainian lacking education and skills thus failing to meet the specific requirements of oil work. Consequently, the need for establishing a modern system of education and training emerged. Such a system would allow Bahrainians to be competitive on the labour market and would limit, if not cease, the influx of foreigners going straight to the oil fields and oil companies. This trend inflicted fear and resentment in the Bahrainian society. However, this opening for the outside world, as Rumaihi points out, had its positive impact on the Bahrainian society for it allowed Bahrainians to wonder, to share and compare ideas, views, cultures, to crave for information and knowledge – education.

The system of education, alongside the system administering it grew exponentially during 1920s – 1970s. However, the British dominance, in the field caused serious problems and led to massive strikes. In *'Bahrain'* Rumaihi sees educational reforms and changes as relatively positive – leading to higher political and social awareness – creation of clubs and societies (catalysts for political ideas), newspapers, radio and TV stations; and to the emancipation of women. In general, broadening the horizon of people. In *'Beyond Oil'*,

¹⁰ The major employers in Bahrain in the first years of oil were BAPCO and the government.

however, education is seen as a tool for manipulation, as highly underdeveloped, especially in terms of curriculum, and as not emancipating women much. Modern education starts penetrating the country, with the division of primary and secondary schools, in the 1940s but was then available only to pupils coming from rich families. Possibilities for higher education were non-existent. Education was not compulsory – a fact that leads Rumaihi to the conclusion that Bahrain's development would have been different had the education, at least primary one, been made mandatory. In addition, there was a serious discrimination between Sunnis (in the leading position) and Shi'a (Baharna) communities (tribes). This gap between the two groups has actually marked the entire transformation period in Bahrain and, moreover, was one of the main obstacles to development.

The education system placed a huge burden on Bahrain's ruling elite exposing the sharp discrepancy between demand and ability to supply. Mrs. Heard-Bey notes that at some point, Bahrain had more graduates than the labour market could absorb. Furthermore, the main change introduced by both the new employment possibilities and the expanding education was that of raising living standards thus increasing social expectations of the role of the state as protecting those standards. Thus, formation of new institutions was to be initiated. It led to some level of political modernisation, but the transformation period was marked by corruption, repressions, and uneven distribution of wealth. Education led to social awareness, consequently political awareness - accumulation of grievances for the unsatisfied demands which culminated in strikes (students and oil workers – massively in the 1950s but also some prior to this period – 1940s). However, those strikes suffered from severe lack of organisation and coherent leadership and were thus vulnerable to repressions from the ruling elite. Moreover, British were not supportive of any of the demands of the protesters and instead of serving as a mediator, they were aggravating the situation. Opposition during the 1940s and 1950s was tireless, forming different bodies that would direct the grievance of the people straight to the ruling elites. Political repressions (arrests; deportation; exile) turned opposing from exile (as Abdul Wahab al Zayani and Ahmed bin Lahij) into one of the few possible ways to bypass terror at home. If by the 1950s Bahranian strikes and protests lacked any firm ideology, this period would allow 'grand ideologies' to find their way to the country (communism, Pan-Arabism (Ba'athism)). Moreover, given the increase in information exchange and communication advances, events from all around the Arab world would create repercussions in Bahrain.

If development is to be thought of as a package of important changes, the question about who is to 'unpack' those changes becomes highly pertinent. Rumaihi examines in depth the complex structure of Bahrain's society both prior and after the discovery of oil in order to illustrate more clearly the level and direction of the change. Initially, Bahrain's society had a tribal structure. There were basically two groups – the ruling elite and their allied tribes, and the others (peasants) – small merchants, pearl-divers, and farmers. Tribes were either Sunni or Shi'a. Sunni/ Shi'a gap in Bahranian society would prove to be a serious obstacle to development. However, that gap would eventually be decreased, yet not closed, through education and political awareness and participation (1940s and 1950s).

After the discovery of oil Bahrain experiences a certain restriction on the powers of the ruling family (oil revenues in banks as assets) and a multiplication of social classes. There was the upper middle class - big merchants and contractors (re-exportation and wholesale); small merchants (retail), public officials, doctors, teachers formed the core of the middle class, and workers formed the lower part. Thus, there was certain realignment in power structures. The ruling family continued to be in a leading position but it had more demands to at least listen to. Each class had its own demands responding to its needs and grievances. For example, the working class, as rapidly expanding, strived for trade unions which to protect their right and ensure minimum working standards. However, there were as well differentiations within the classes.

The working class was not a homogeneous entity – Bahranians and foreigners, either skilled or unskilled workers. Logically, demands within this class would diverge. Moreover, one should continuously keep in mind the Sunni/ Shi'a gap when examining Bahrain's social development. The example that Rumaihi provides is the Shi'a struggle for equality, inter alia, in the courts. Alongside being directly supervised, even governed by the British, the courts were dominated by Sunnis officials and given the lack of law codification – by the Sunnis interpretation of 'law'. Rumaihi even makes a vague proposition that tribal form of government is probably more suited for Bahrain respecting religious and cultural differences. Interestingly enough, this inclination to long for the past but not invoking it in its entirety can be observed in both of Rumaihi's books. Heard-Bey adds to the debate by implicitly referring to the same idea by noting that there was a new social 'stratigraphy' (the concepts of the state, the leader, the law, the administration) in the Gulf States based on *external values*.

Here we find another difference in Rumaihi's perception of Bahrain. In '*Beyond Oil*' classes' differentiation turns to have negative connotation and delivering a strong anti-capitalist message. The classes are divided (having the same sub-elements as in '*Bahrain*') in two major groups: that of the 'mercantile capitalists' and of the 'direct consumers'. People are reduced to happily accepting what they are given, supposedly corresponding to what they need, and are expected to express gratitude, arguably in the form of obedience, in return.

Conclusion

'*Bahrain*', is Rumaihi's PhD thesis at the University of Durham and the research process was financed by the Kuwait University where the author is currently teaching political sociology. Consequently, it was reviewed and edited predominantly by British academics (the acknowledgement part is mainly dedicated to Durham professors). In addition, although Rumaihi clearly states in the introduction of the book that he embarks on assessing, measuring and critically examining the changes "that took place in Bahrain after WWI in the social, economic, and political sphere", the book turns out to be more historically-oriented and to a lesser extent critical. Rumaihi's '*Beyond Oil*', on the other hand, reveals a substantially different approach.

A logical continuation of '*Bahrain*' and accounting for the changes that took place after its publication (1976-1986), the main argument in '*Beyond Oil*' is that development and unity are inextricably linked. Here the author is more, at times overly, critical of the abrupt changes that took place in the Arab Peninsula after the discovery of oil. He sees those, in sharp contrast with '*Bahrain*', as having irreversibly fragmented and alienated Arab societies substituting their traditional culture with Western type of values, principles, and modes of governance. This argument is supported by Frauke Heard-Bey in her article on *Social Changes in the Gulf States and Oman* where she points out that industrialisation has produced an 'uneven distribution of new wealth' which 'causes society to split up and adopt new ways of life'. In '*Beyond Oil*' Rumaihi takes a wider sample looking at changes that took place in the wider Arab Peninsula (Gulf States) and not focusing entirely on one single country because, as Frauke Heard-Bey notes, although there are similarities between the Gulf States, all of them had a different development pace very much depending on their internal organisation and the distribution/hold of wealth by the ruling family.

Thus, Rumaihi argument (in '*Bahrain*') that Bahrain's development in the selected time-span (WWI and after till Bahrain's independence) is symptomatic of that of the other traditional societies in the 'area under the impact of oil', seems to not be firmly grounded. For one thing, as Mrs. Heard-Bey holds, Bahrain was the country that started its development earlier than any other of the Gulf State. Thus, when Oman was accelerating the building of its infrastructure (airports, ports, schools), Bahrain embarked on elaborating those already existing facilities. Furthermore, given the differences in relative wealth in the latter – both before and after the discovery of oil, one type of development, although possessing certain similarities, cannot be automatically extrapolated to the whole region and used as a benchmark. Dubai and Bahrain were rivals in terms of modernity. However, Dubai's development did not (initially) depend that heavily on oil revenues but benefited from its traditions in and knowledge of trade.

