

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty: British Imperial Sovereignty versus a Sheikh's Local Autonomy in the Trucial States in 1931

Nicole J Crisp

On January 31, 1931, Sheikh Sultan bin Saqar of Sharjah surrounded the office and home of the British Resident Agent in Sharjah accompanied by 'Abdur Rahman, a local slave owner, and an armed group. They demanded the return of 'Abdur Rahman's slaves, who had appealed to Khan Bahadur 'Isa bin Abdul Latif, the Resident Agent, for manumission a few weeks earlier and were staying in 'Isa's residence pending the receipt of their manumission certificates and transport to Bahrain. In response, the British, coordinating their efforts with the India Office in London, ordered Sheikh Sultan to pay a fine of rupees and guns as well as turn 'Abdur Rahman over into their custody. If the Sheikh failed to meet these demands, the Political Resident in Bushire threatened to have two British ships, HMS *Hastings* and HMS *Folkestone*, bombard a tower on the outskirts of Sharjah. Ultimately, the Sheikh paid the fines, and 'Abdur Rahman remained out of British custody despite the additional fine paid by the Sheikh. The tower near Sharjah remained standing and the manumitted slaves traveled to Bahrain.¹

British control in the region emerged, via a legal frame work developed by several treaties between the British and the Sheikhdoms. These treaties limited the autonomy of the Trucial sheikhs while simultaneously increasing British claims over the region.² Despite the lack of outright colonization of the Trucial States,³ these treaties allowed

¹ 'File 5/168 IV Manumission of slaves on the Arab Coast: individual cases' (711-921/1006) British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/208, in *Qatar Digital Library*

<https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_10000000193.0x0000b5>

² For more on the concept of 'legal imperialism,' see Lauren Benton, "From International Law to Imperial Constitutions: The Problem of Quasi-Sovereignty, 1870-1900" *Law and History Review* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 595-619, and Turan Kayaoğlu, *Legal Imperialism: Sovereignty and Extraterritoriality in Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), particularly the introduction.

³ The Trucial States (also known as the Trucial Coast or Trucial Oman), now the United Arab Emirates, were sheikdoms in the eastern Arabian Peninsula. From 1820 to 1971, these sheikdoms held a position, through the signing of various treaties with the British Empire a "states in special treaty relations with Britain" as opposed to outright colonies. These treaties afforded the British a certain amount of sovereignty over the region while still allowing the Trucial sheikhs to

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

the British to bring the Sheikhdoms under a form of legal imperialism that connected them to their Empire. In Uzi Rabi's words, "the British maintained control of external relations of the Gulf states, they in fact kept out of internal administration as far as possible."⁴ This autonomy was further codified in the formal procedure for the manumission of slaves in the Trucial States which allowed for sheikhs to advise the Political Resident regarding a particular case, stating that "certificates are granted by . . . the Resident after investigation . . . by the Native Residency Agent, and after consideration of the views of the Sheikh concerned when such are put forward."⁵

Focusing my study on this single case from early 1931 documented within the manumission records of the British India Office, I argue that the conflict described within demonstrates issues of sovereignty and authority between the sheikh of Sharjah and the British Political Resident in Bushire (in modern day Iran) stemming from the treaties signed between the two political actors. In the anti-slavery clauses of these treaties, Britain held the right to manumit slaves hailing from the Trucial States. However, in the case under review, the enactment of this right led to push back from the sheikh and a slave owner in the form of armed protest outside the British Resident Agent's home in Sharjah. This, in turn, led the British to demand restitution in the form of fines, threatening to destroy a nearby tower if left unpaid. This case also demonstrates the role of the Resident Agent as an inter-state intermediary whose position can be described as trans-jurisdictional as he often worked in favor of the local slave owners within the Trucial states as much as he worked for and was considered an advisor by British officialdom in the Persian Gulf. The issue in this case was then not so much the fact that the sheikh knew there were slaves in Sharjah or that he was not within his rights to petition the British regarding an ongoing manumission case. Instead, the issue appears to have been the threat of force in storming 'Isa's residency that prompted a response from British officials beyond a strongly-worded letter. As the captain of the HMS *Hastings* related in his report on February 11th, the Sheikh's actions were

retain local autonomy. See Glen Balfour-Paul, *Then End of Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Relinquishment of Power in Her Last Three Arab Dependencies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 101-2. In 1949, the Gulf states became known as "British Protected States."

⁴ Uzi Rabi, "Britain's 'Special Position' in the Gulf: Its Origins, Dynamics and Legacy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (May 2006): 354.

⁵ "Manumission of Slaves, Part II: Notes for Guidance on Arabian Shores of the Persian Gulf," in Anita L.P. Burdett, ed., *The Slave Trade into Arabia: 1820-1793*, vol. 5, 1900-1923 (Cambridge: Archive Editions, 2006), 177.

“intended as a challenge to the British position - a deliberate “try-on” to see what will happen.”⁶ Thus, we can see in the 1931 incident how the British and Sheikh Sultan made competing claims to control over the issue of slavery in Sharjah as well as the impact of international pressure on the British regarding the abolition of slavery.

In the Trucial States, pearl diving, which had been a staple of the economy for centuries, remained a prime reason for the continuance of the slave trade in the Gulf. This industry experienced a boom in demand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries driven by a fashion trend of pearl jewelry that started among the upper classes in Europe in the and later in United States. By 1900, the annual export of pearls from the Persian Gulf reached almost 1.5 million pounds.⁷ But this boom was not set to last. The demand for Gulf pearls dwindled following Kokichi Mikimoto’s development of pearl farming in 1894 in Japan. The Depression of 1929 further exacerbated the decline to the point that the annual export value of the pearl trade shrunk below the value they had before the mid-nineteenth century pearl boom.⁸

Yet even through the 1930s, pearl diving continued to be a common occupation for slaves in the Trucial States, and most slaves who appealed to the British for manumission were pearl divers.⁹ Some slaves worked exclusively as divers while others were household slaves loaned out to *nakhudas*, captains of the pearling boats, during the diving season.¹⁰ This season typically began in June and ended in September and lasted approximately 120 days. This was occasionally shortened if the month of Ramadan occurred in the summer during which time diving was forbidden. The daily dives started roughly one hour after sunrise and concluded one hour before sunset with a one-hour break in the early afternoon for coffee and prayers. Dives took place quickly and frequently. According to Frauke Heard-Bey, “each diver would dive up to sixty times [a day], staying submerged usually for less than one and a half minutes.”¹¹ Every morning before sunrise, the divers, under the watchful eye of their *nakhudas*, opened the oysters and collected the pearls.

⁶ ‘File 5/168 IV’, 783.

⁷ Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (Dubai, Motivate Publishing, 2005), 183.

⁸ Matthew S. Hopper, “East Africa and the End of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade,” *Journal of African Development* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 62.

⁹ Matthew S. Hopper, “Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873-1939,” *Itinerario* 30, no. 3 (2006): 83.

¹⁰ Heard-Bey, 152.

¹¹ Heard-Bey, 184.

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

Gulf slavery, exemplified in this case by pearl diving, was one of the main reasons for British intervention in the region as it was connected with what the British deemed “piracy” in the Gulf. British power in the Persian Gulf in the 1930s can best be described as an “enclave of imperial control.” According to Lauren Benton, legal authority on the sea largely developed out of attempts to curtail piracy in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in the late early modern period. Prior to this, ships were considered their own jurisdictional zone and not a part of the purview of legal regimes on land although rulers were able to enforce some trade regulations. Taking this shift into account, Benton argues that “empires did not cover territory evenly but composed a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces, a tangle of strings” and that focusing solely on territorial holdings “obscures considerable variation across imperial holdings.”¹² In fact, it was “piracy” itself that drew the British East India Company (EIC) into the Gulf.¹³ The repeated piracy from the Arab side of the Gulf led the EIC to attack Ras al-Khaimah in 1819 and burn hundreds of ships docked there as well as even more ships along what the EIC considered the “Pirate Coast.” Following this, the Persian Gulf became a part of the growing Pax Britannica in the Indian Ocean world.

Following the suppression of piracy, the British signed the 1820 General Treaty for the Cessation of Plunder and Piracy by Land and Sea with several of the Gulf sheikhs. By 1843, Britain executed exclusive treaties with the sheikhs of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Ras al-Khaimah, Umm al-Quwain, and Sharjah, made perpetual in 1853, and developed the “Trucial System.” British administration of these treaties was largely held in the position of the Political Resident, an official who resided in the British Agency at Bushire. Initially, he worked under the auspices of the Directors of the EIC. Following the Company’s absolution in 1848, he reported to the Government of India which, in turn, answered to the India Office in London. While Bahrain and Kuwait both received their own Agencies, Britain opted from the 1820s through 1949 to use a Persian “Native Agent,” also known as the Residency Agent, stationed in Sharjah

¹² Lauren Benton, “Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 4 (October 2005): 700.

¹³ Both Benton and Balfour-Paul note that the label of piracy was very much dependent upon the ‘eye of the beholder.’ Balfour-Paul presents several arguments against considering the mariners from the Arab coast as pirates, the important point here is that the EIC labeled them as such. See Balfour-Paul, 98-100.

to represent their interests in the Trucial States. By 1908, British power in the region had grown to the point that one Foreign Office memorandum proudly stated that “the ascendancy of Great Britain in the Persian Gulf was not merely a question of theory, it was a statement of fact.”¹⁴ This ascendancy came with the continued allowance of local autonomy, as well as the continued withholding of Trucial sheikhdom sovereignty by the British.¹⁵

Yet, the Trucial States cannot be considered actual colonies or even protectorates of the British Empire as a result. As Glen Balfour-Paul describes it, their “status was uniquely curious, even by imperial Britain’s standards of curiosity” and were most commonly described until 1949 as “states in special treaty relations with Britain.”¹⁶ On the whole, the British held largely to a doctrine of non-interference in the inner workings of the sheikhdoms as long as their interests, foremost the protection of the waterways linking India to the rest of the Empire, were taken care of. In this, Britain did not enact a systemized plan to colonize the Trucial States. So long as their own interests were met, the British had no incentive to act more intrusively in the region, even to more completely abolish slavery as was one of their stated goals. However, growing international concerns regarding the abolition of slavery, as well as Britain’s position as one of the leading world empires at the turn of the century, would complicate this standard of non-interference.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, international attention towards the abolition of slavery grew tremendously, via abolitionist movements and the increasing ascendancy in a supra-state international order. Following the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade, abolitionist turned their attention to slave trafficking and ownership in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Britain’s intervention in the Gulf region, also occurred under the auspices of abolishing slave trade in the Indian Ocean. This intervention also allowed the British an opportunity to protect their own economic and political interests. In 1822 Sultan Sayyid

¹⁴ *Memorandum respecting British interests in the Persian Gulf*. 12 Feb 1908 (FOCP 4920), qtd. in John C. Wilkinson, *Arabia’s Frontiers: The Story of Britain’s Boundary Drawing in the Desert* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 81. Wilkinson describes the contestations of the Arabian Peninsula between the British and Ottoman Empires which continued even after 1908. However, on the whole, the Foreign Office assessment of British power rings true and most of the issues did not involve the Trucial States.

¹⁵ Balfour-Paul, 1.

¹⁶ Balfour-Paul, 101-2. In 1949, the Gulf states became known as “British Protected States.” See Balfour-Paul, 102, for a description of the differences between a Protected State and a Protectorate.

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

Sa'id al-Busaidi agreed to end the export of slaves from Oman and Zanzibar, and the slave trade was formally abolished in 1873, following the separation of Oman and Zanzibar into separate sultanates. However, British interest in ending slavery in the Gulf was half-hearted at best.¹⁷ As Johan Mathew notes, what was “to be the culmination of Britain's abolitionist mission . . . proved to be mere window dressing” because even the attempts within the international arena to abolish slavery were thwarted or circumscribed by the British who were more interested in maintaining their supremacy over the region than the actual manumission of slaves in the Gulf.

After facing mounting pressure from abolitionist societies, the League of Nations in 1922 pushed its member nations to investigate the state of slavery in their holdings and report back. However, the member nations were reluctant to provide this information and, when the League developed the Temporary Slavery Commission in 1924, the major colonial governments including Britain ensured that it would not cause any major upheavals in the status quo. The majority of the experts who formed the Commission were former colonial officers. The British representative to the Commission, Sir Frederick Lugard, served as the first Governor of Northern Nigeria and later Governor-General of Nigeria as a whole. Lugard's interests were not focused on the end of slavery and the slave trade, but rather in using the Commission to get international recognition of British authority in the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ Lugard thus successfully got the Commission, as well as the League and its member nations, to codify the authority of the British to manumit slaves in the Persian Gulf. Despite the attempts to curtail the effectiveness of the Commission, Lugard aided in passing the Slavery Convention in 1926. While the 1926 Convention in and of itself was “a paper tiger” for its lack of a specific timeline, it did have the effect in keeping slavery as a focal point of international attention.¹⁹

By the early 1930s, the procedure for manumission petitions in the Persian Gulf was relatively straightforward and systematic. Slaves would present themselves to a British official, commonly the Resident Agent in Sharjah or a British administrator in Muscat, while others swam out to a British ship to appeal to its captain. The appeal would be processed by

¹⁷ Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 54.

¹⁸ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 237.

¹⁹ Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Problem* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 130.

the Political Resident and, in most cases involving the Trucial States, 'Isa bin Abdul Latif would investigate the claims of the slaves. The main point of this investigation was to ensure that those seeking manumission were truly slaves and not simply free people trying to escape their debt.²⁰ When the slaves of 'Abdur Rahman appealed to 'Isa for their freedom, the normal manumission procedures appeared to have been followed.²¹

On January 7th, 1931, 'Isa forwarded the appeals of three slaves to the Political Resident in Bushire, Patrick Stewart. At this point 'Isa had already completed his investigations into their claims and recommended them for manumission. He further recommended they be relocated to Bahrain for their own safety. On January 20th, Stewart responded by granting all three manumission certificates and directing 'Isa to send them onward to Bahrain. This seemingly typical manumission case took a violent shift on January 31st when, after the HMS *Hastings* and HMS *Cyclamen* had left Sharjah, 'Abdur Rahman bin Muhammad and Shaikh Sultan bin Saqar arrived. As 'Isa described in a telegram to the Political Resident:

'Abdur Rahman bin Muhammad and Shaikh Sultan bin Saqar forcibly demanded the return of their slaves at the Agency quarters. They of course did not get them. At night the aforesaid persons raided the Agency quarters along with their party of men, so as to get ahold of the slaves. Some of the Arab (people) admonished them and so they returned to the house of the Shaikh. We are in trouble by the action of 'Abdur Rahman bin Muhammad and the Shaikh.²²

In response on February 8th, Stewart ordered the captain of the nearby HMS *Hastings* to investigate the situation in Sharjah and warn the Sheikh of the potential consequences of his actions. 'Isa then provided Stewart with written testimonies from some of the men who stopped 'Abdur Rahman and Sheikh Sultan's assault on his residence. In addition to these testimonies, 'Isa reiterated his worries regarding his safety in Sharjah. 'Isa also forwarded letters he received from other concerned parties in the Trucial States including the Mesopotamia Persia Oil Company located in

²⁰ Hopper, "Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery," 83.

²¹ The entirety of the documents related to this specific case are contained within 'File 5/168 IV Manumission of slaves on the Arab Coast: individual cases' (711-921/1006) British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/208, in *Qatar Digital Library*.

²² File 5/168 IV, 727.

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

Dubai and the Sheikh of Dubai. Further, 'Isa sent Sheikh Sultan a copy of a letter the Sheikh had signed in 1927 where he agreed that he and his brothers would "abstain from all that will displease . . . Isa and should anything unpleasant be done by ourselves or by our dependents towards him we shall be entitled to such punishments as the British government" would impart.²³

Here, it is important to keep in mind the role of 'Isa as the Resident Agent, an inherently tenuous position in Sharjah. 'Isa was not "native" to one of the Trucial Sheikhdoms but rather, as was typical of the Resident Agents in Sharjah, originally hailed from Persia on the opposite shores of the Gulf. Thus, he can be considered a "double foreigner" in Sharjah on the basis of his Persian roots. and as a representative of the British government This status left him in a precarious situation amongst the locals. Hopper describes 'Isa as being in "the unenviable position of being the sole representative of British authority on the Arab coast between Muscat and Bahrain."²⁴ The above case also demonstrates the extent of the danger 'Isa faced in executing his duties as Resident Agent. He made sure the British were aware of this threat to his life and occupation in early 1931, stating at multiple times that "if no punishment is inflicted [on Sheikh Sultan] for this latest affront, his position will become so insecure that he will be unable to remain at Sharjah."²⁵

As a result, it is not surprising that 'Isa often acted in his own interests rather than that of the British. Slave owners often used bribes to ensure that 'Isa would return their slaves to them, either by not reporting the slaves' petitions to the Political Agent in Muscat or the Political Resident in Bushire or by arguing that the slaves were not slaves but instead free people seeking absolution from their debt bondage. Knowledge of 'Isa's "corruption" was so that some slaves travelled over 200 miles to Muscat to petition the Political Agent directly. Even the British appeared to be aware of 'Isa's double dealing as in the case of Thani bin Miftah in 1928. Thani travelled to Muscat to appeal for manumission, arguing that going to the Residency Agent was not an option because 'Isa would have simply accepted money from Thani's owner and returned Thani to him. 'Isa claimed that, Thani was a free man working as a pearl diver attempting to escape from his debts. Ultimately, the Political Resident dismissed 'Isa's findings and provided Thani with a manumission certificate.²⁶ This implicit acknowledgement of 'Isa's

²³File 5/168 IV', 765.

²⁴ Hopper, "Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery," 82.

²⁵ 'File 5/168 IV', 783.

²⁶ Hopper, "Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery," 82.

“corruption” on the part of the British may have stemmed from an awareness of the tenuous position of the Resident Agent, a lack of interest on the part of the British in enforcing its manumission procedures more strenuously, or the Political Agent may have simply not believed Thani. Whatever the case, it is clear that Thani’s claims did not cause any major concerns on the part of the British regarding ‘Isa’s fitness as Resident Agent. Regardless of how well he represented British interests in the Trucial states, however, ‘Isa was inherently reliant upon the British for authority as well as protection.

On February 11th, the captain of the HMS *Hastings* reported back to Stewart regarding Sheikh Sultan’s “direct challenge to [the] British” and stated that ‘Isa again brought up his concerns regarding his safety.²⁷ Stewart responded the same day, asking what course of action ‘Isa recommended. ‘Isa suggested that:

1. The Sheikh and ‘Abdur Rahman should apologize to him onboard the HMS *Hastings*.
2. The Sheikh should pay a fine of 3,000 rupees and 300 rifles.
3. If the Sheikh did not comply with these demands, then a defensive tower on the edge of Sharjah should be destroyed.

On the 17th of February, Stewart sent a memorandum to the Government of India, under the leadership of Viceroy Lord Irwin, and copied Secretary of State for India William Wedgwood Benn informing them of the incident. In it, he argued that:

It is essential to show [the] Trucial Shaikhs that we will brook no interference with slaves attempting to obtain freedom and expect them to fulfill their treaty obligations, and also will punish severely any insult to [the] Residency Agent. His safety in this primitive part of the world depends entirely on our support. I met him yesterday in Khassab [Musandam, Oman] and he informed me personally that he considered it would be unsafe for him to continue to reside in Shargah unless serious notice was taken of [the] incident.”²⁸

²⁷ ‘File 5/168 IV’, 769.

²⁸ ‘File 5/168 IV’, 779.

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

Stewart supported 'Isa's recommendations and suggested that 'Abdur Rahman should be taken into British custody onboard the *Hastings*. One week later, Stewart received approval from both the India Office as well as the Government of India to go ahead with his proposed course of action. On February 25th, the captain of the *Hastings* delivered the British ultimatum to Sheikh Sultan. The Sheikh initially refused. However, after the slaves had been moved to Bahrain on February 27th, the Sheikh delivered 2,000 rupees and 100 rifles to the *Hastings* while still refusing to hand over 'Abdur Rahman. Stewart also appears to have backed off of his requirement that 'Abdur Rahman be taken into British custody and required only that the Sheikh pay an additional fine of rupees and weapons. On March 3rd, he sent a telegram to the captain of the *Hastings* stating that he wished to "congratulate [him] on [the] successful result of action taken by [him] at Sharjah."²⁹

The rather anticlimactic resolution of this case is understandable in context. From 1820 onward, practically every treaty the British executed with the Trucial sheikhs contained anti-slavery clauses. In one treaty from 1856, they "promised to seize and deliver up to the British . . . any slaves which were brought into their territories."³⁰ However, British officials working in the Gulf acknowledged that regardless of the treaties and their work to manumit slaves when possible, the Trucial sheikhs largely turned a blind eye to slavery. Further, the British also did the same. Only when British sovereignty in the region was threatened that conflicts with the Trucial States arose. In a memorandum written in 1934, one British official related the story of one slave seeking manumission: "His masters took him to Debai [sic] where the slave trade should not exist according to the treaty of the Ruler of that State with the British Government. His masters it would appear took advantage of the fact that the Debai State would not interfere . . . and kept him in their service."³¹ In July 1925, the Political Resident at Bushire sent the Sheikh of Dubai a forceful letter after a slave petitioning for manumission claimed to have been kidnapped into slavery from her home in Dubai. The letter read, in part, "It appears from this that your officials are not sufficiently wide awake . . . [or] they do not inform you of affairs as they ought to. This is, my friend, a state of affairs which . . . will encourage slave trade to be

²⁹ 'File 5/168 IV', 829.

³⁰ Heard-Bey, 290.

³¹ 'File 5/168 V Manumission of slaves on Arab Coast: individual cases' (405/569), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/209, in *Qatar Digital Library* <https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000193.0x0000b6>

carried on in your town . . . and thus an article of your treaty with the High Government will be violated.”³² The Sheikh replied with a letter of apology and promised to do better in eradicating slavery in Dubai in the future. The matter was considered resolved at this point.

In this case, we can see how British power in the region to end slavery was fairly circumscribed for a variety of reasons. Many British officials of the region saw slavery as a part of Arab culture and abolition would only be possible through force or the region becoming more “civilized”. In 1929, the Persian Gulf Division’s Senior Naval Officer, Captain Hector Boyes, explained that because “Arabs will not do any work of a ‘labouring’ kind... [any] attempt to compel Arabia, in its present state of development, to give up slavery could perhaps be compared with attempting to compel Glasgow to give up the use of mechanical apparatus and whiskey.”³³ British officialdom also took pains to ensure that their role in manumitting slaves was limited to solely the presentation of a manumission certificates and security of their freedom. One memorandum, attempting to dispel rumors that a manumission certificate granted the holder British citizenship, made explicitly clear that “The British Manumission Certificate is nothing more than it purports to be . . . and the bearer of one is only entitled to our assistance in the case of interference with his liberty.”³⁴ Finally, the British attempted to suppress the Gulf slave trade based on techniques that proved effective in ending the Atlantic slave trade. However, Mathew argues, Gulf slave trade was organized around “an improvised slave traffic built on personal networks easily eluded efforts to suppress a systematic market-centered slave trade.”³⁵ This distinction between the Atlantic and Gulf slave trading systems rendered British attempts ineffective at best as they tried to combat slave trading in the Gulf by utilizing the same methods they had used in the Atlantic. Moreover, British anti-slavery patrols in the Gulf were not well-equipped and were often non-existent.³⁶

Ultimately, according to Hopper, given the impotent nature of the British anti-slavery measures, “the final impetus for ending the east African slave trade” which supplied slaves to the Gulf was not the result

³² ‘File 5/168 IV’, 89.

³³ Captain Hector Boyes, Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf Division (HMS *Triad*) to Commander in Chief, East Indies Station, 12 Sept 1929 (IOR L/PS/12/4091), qtd. in Hopper, “Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery,” 81.

³⁴ “Manumission of Slaves,” 179.

³⁵ Mathew, 59.

³⁶ Hopper, “East Africa,” 42.

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

of “direct British intervention.”³⁷ These outside events included Portuguese efforts to manumit slaves in Mozambique and the decline of demand for slaves following the rise of the Japanese pearling industry. Furthermore, it is important to remember that British interests in the Trucial States were more focused on securing their own interests as opposed to the enforcement of the abolition of slavery. In describing British imperial aims in the region, Rabi argues that, , in the Gulf, so long as British interests were protected, Britain saw no need to enact an outright territorial conquest as seen in its colonial holdings.³⁸ As such, Hopper describes the British situation as “a conflict between the objectives of liberal politics and liberal economics.”³⁹ Liberal politics demanded the end of all slavery and slave trading while liberal economics saw that, in order to maintain peaceful relations with the Trucial Sheikhs, the pearl diving industry should be allowed to continue despite its structural reliance on slave labor. Thus, the British emphasized manumitting slaves as opposed to the outright abolition of slavery as this allowed them to stay largely uninvolved in the Trucial states except where their interests were threatened.

Despite the context of eradicating slavery in the Persian Gulf, the incident in Sharjah of early 1931 can be better described as a chaffing of a limited local autonomy against the seemingly overbearing British hegemony in the region. It is likely no coincidence that the Sheikh and ‘Abdur Rahman enacted their siege of ‘Isa’s residence just after the HMS *Hastings* and HMS *Cyclamen* left port. Without an actual British military presence in Sharjah, they likely sensed an opportunity to force ‘Isa to return ‘Abdur Rahman’s slaves. When the plot failed, the British gained the time needed to respond to this threat to their regional power. Even still, the Sheikh held out to the proverbial eleventh hour to pay the fine of guns and rupees. The British likely realized that, given the time lapse of over a month since the incident occurred, ‘Abdur Rahman had fled Sharjah and they chose not to force the issue. We can perhaps even draw a comparison between Sheikh Sultan’s contestations against British enforcement of their treaties and how the British attempted to limit the power of the League of Nations in enforcing international anti-slavery conventions and in investigating the current state of slavery in their holdings. The anti-slavery forces at work in the first half of the twentieth century must be seen as not only causing issues regarding the sovereignty of powerful nations like Britain and the growing ascendancy of a supra-

³⁷ Hopper, “East Africa,” 62.

³⁸ Rabi, 354.

³⁹ Hopper, “Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery,” 77.

national order, but also a context in which regional issues over sovereignty between a powerful nation and an autonomous but subordinate local power. In this specific case, we see this issue of sovereignty play itself out, not through outright territorial conquest or absorption of a new colonial holding, but rather through the enactment of the terms of the treaties signed between the British and the Trucial Sheikhs. As such, British sovereignty in the Gulf region can be best described as a form of legal imperialism in which the Trucial States formed an enclave of British imperial power.

Nicole J Crisp is a first-year PhD student in Middle Eastern History at the University of Arizona. Her research interests focus on trans-imperial cultural contacts in the early modern Mediterranean, specializing in Europeans in the Ottoman Empire. Specifically, she is studying the cross-cultural connections that were fostered between the British and Ottoman Empires as the result of the British Levant Company's trade in the Mediterranean. She has previously received a Master's degree in History from the George Washington University as well as Bachelor's degrees in History and Anthropology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Slaves, Sheikhs, and Sovereignty

Bibliography

Primary Sources

'File 5/168 IV Manumission of slaves on the Arab Coast: individual cases'
British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers,
IOR/R/15/1/208, in *Qatar Digital Library*.
<http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000193.0x000b5>

'File 5/168 V Manumission of slaves on the Arab Coast: individual cases'
British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers,
IOR/R/15/1/208, in *Qatar Digital Library*.
<http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000193.0x000b5>

"Manumission of Slaves, Part II: Notes for Guidance on Arabian Shores of the Persian Gulf." In *The Slave Trade into Arabia: 1820-1793*. Vol. 5, 1900-1923, edited by Anita L.P. Burdett, 174-182. Cambridge: Archive Editions, 2006.

Secondary Sources

Balfour-Paul, Glen. *The End of Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Relinquishment of Power in her Last Three Arab Dependencies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Benton, Lauren. "From International Law to Imperial Constitutions: The Problem of Quasi-Sovereignty, 1870-1900." *Law and History Review* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 595-619,

—— "Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 4 (October 2005): 700-724.

Heard-Bey, Frauke. *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2004.

Hopper, Matthew S. "East Africa and the End of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade." *Journal of African Development* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 39-65.

— “Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873-1939.” *Itinerario* 30, no. 3 (2006): 76-94.

Kayaoğlu, Turan. *Legal Imperialism: Sovereignty and Extraterritoriality in Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and China*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Mathew, Johan. *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism Across the Arabian Sea*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Miers, Suzanne. *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Problem*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003.

Pedersen, Susan. *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Rabi, Uzi. “Britain’s ‘Special Position’ in the Gulf: Its Origins, Dynamics, and Legacy.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (May 2006): 351-364.

Wilkinson, John C. *Arabia’s Frontiers: The story of Britain’s Boundary Drawing in the Desert*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1991.