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David Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History*, I.B. Tauris, 2014, 352 pp., \$25.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781780769660.

David Commins's *The Gulf States: A Modern History* is an ambitious attempt to examine the Gulf, also known as the Persian Gulf and, by some, the Arabian Gulf, holistically. A Professor of History at Dickinson College, Commins weaves together sources from history and political science, canonical and more recently published, seamlessly into an effortless primer on Gulf history.

In the past, regional studies of the Gulf focused only on the Arab side, rarely if ever incorporating Iran/Persia into the analysis.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, most authors specialize narrowly on a particular country, city, or region, or in a compressed timeframe,<sup>2</sup> though there are notable exceptions.<sup>3</sup> The wonderfully rich and varied cultures and histories of the region create a certain challenge: How to bring the different periods, places, and themes together while providing depth and clarity for readers? Commins succeeds. *The Gulf States* covers a wide chronological expanse, 1500–present, and a broad swathe of territory. Commins includes both the Persian and Arab coasts of the Gulf as well as the upper (Basra) and lower (Oman) portions of it in a single book, making this an excellent introduction to the region and its politics. Further, he helps the reader navigate

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates: A Political and Social History of the Trucial States* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978); Muhammad T. Sadik and William P. Snively, *Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates: Colonial Past, Present Problems, Future Prospects* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972); and J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Allan J. Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai: City as Corporation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Jim Krane, *City of Gold: Dubai and the Dream of Capitalism* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2009); Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Pascal Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil Urbanism and Road Revolt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For example: Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010); miriam cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2014); and Lawrence G. Potter, *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

between the traditional conceptions of the Gulf as a place filled with extravagant wealth or interminable poverty.

Commins first guides the reader through two background chapters, introducing the Gulf and its general history to 1500. The book then presents a more focused and detailed chronological account. In his introduction, he introduces three key premises to his approach: diversity, mobility, and the diffuse nature of power in the Gulf. Commins affirms that the Gulf is diverse—demographically, politically, economically, and terrestrially. He then cautions readers to remember that the population is mobile, making it difficult to connect specific people to a single city until the twentieth century when states attached significant benefits to citizenship. These ideas help reinforce the Gulf as a connected and transnational region even before the oil boom of the later twentieth century. He then explains that despite this connectedness, the Gulf was rarely controlled by a single power. The area was difficult to conquer and rarely have the states been incorporated into a single empire. This provided him with a specific challenge. Unlike other regions, there is no super-narrative to provide coherence for smaller stories. He therefore chose to not only order each chapter chronologically, but within each chapter, he utilized a geographic organization, dealing with each polity in turn. The themes from the introduction as well as the introductions to each chapter help provide coherence to this narrative that otherwise could easily have been lost.

This approach enabled Commins to delve more deeply into the areas that are better represented within Gulf Studies literature and to navigate the multiple and competing periodizations of the region's history. As the chapter titles suggest, the political narrative drives this book forward. Social and economic aspects of Gulf history are less regularly addressed, but are present when reflected in the wider Gulf Studies literature. While some might find this frustrating, the purpose of the book is to make the reader want to learn more about the Gulf and it succeeds admirably in doing that.

As noted above, each chapter proceeds chronologically. Further, each chapter has a theme. The themes become more specific and address shorter periods as the book continues: Chapter 3 describes the “Muslim and European Empires, 1500-1720”; Chapter 4 addresses “An Era of Political Turbulence, 1720-1820”; Chapter 5 explores “The Era of British Supremacy, 1820-1920”; Chapter 6 establishes “The Formation of Modern States, 1920-56”; Chapter 7 assesses “The Gulf in the Era of Arab Nationalism, 1956-71”; and Chapter 8 charts “Affluence, Revolution and War 1971-91.” The final chapter investigates the “Years of Deepening American Intervention.” Commins leaves the reader with a brilliant conclusion that highlights the nuances of the contemporary power structure and an outline of the area's strengths and weaknesses after the year 2000.

Although periodization could lead to a disjointed narrative, Commins's chapter introductions provide an important framework for readers. For instance, in Chapter 4, his introduction illustrates the important shifts between 1720 and 1820. This era is typically characterized as an era in which many of the Arabian Peninsula powers experienced their rise and the European companies became significant players in the region as a whole. He situates this expansion within the context of Safavid and Ottoman weakness. He then proceeds to explain this shift in each area: Iran, the Ottoman Empire, the European Companies and Arab Sheikhs, the First Saudi Emirate, etc. In each section, he is constantly reaffirming the themes of diversity, migration, and power diffusion, while also highlighting that each polity had its own unique experience.

Perhaps his greatest achievement in this book is his choice to integrate all sides of the Gulf. He addresses how the governments of Iran/Persia, Iraq, and the Ottoman Empire have been important players in Gulf politics and moves the conversation beyond the

indigenous Arab rulers. Because of his decision to articulate a more inclusive narrative, Commins is able to tell a fuller and more contextualized story about the Gulf and its politics in a way reminiscent of Fernand Braudel's approach to the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> Even when it feels as though he has moved too far inland and away from the Gulf coastline, he deftly helps the reader return to these distant issues' effects on the Gulf and its stability. Most notably this happens in Chapter 7 when discussing Iran. The narrative wanders to domestic Iranian politics, quite far from the effects of the chapter's subject, Arab nationalism. Arab nationalism was not a current that affected the non-Arab populations of Iran, but Iran still experienced significant turbulence that connects these domestic issues to the wider unrest spreading throughout the region.

Commins's second great achievement is the overall readability of the book. Although it tells multiple threads that diverge and converge periodically, he presents compelling stories that retain much of the area's historical richness. This rhetorical device keeps readers interested in the material.

Despite these triumphs, the book's organization could be frustrating to some readers who want an overarching narrative or a single power to drive the story forward. Typically, Gulf history is taught as a series of foreign invasions, culminating in the creation of many Protectorates or areas of influence. This is a result of both the availability of British sources and the interest of British officials in recording their roles in history.<sup>5</sup> Commins's worked to remedy historical imbalances that privilege the British role in the Gulf and moderate or ignore the autonomy of the sovereign leaders of smaller states. Despite being a conscious decision, it does occasionally leave the reader wanting more and being dissatisfied with what Commins offers. This is especially the case as regards the Trucial States, today's United Arab Emirates. He dedicates comparatively little time to these as independent and sovereign states than to some of the other small emirates of the Arabian coast, like Qatar or Bahrain.

Despite these drawbacks, *The Gulf States* succeeds in moving the discussion of Gulf studies beyond oil, shaikhs, and camels, towards a fuller and more diverse narrative. Instead of seeking to impose an ill-fitting coherence onto the region, his narrative allows for the region's many historical trajectories to co-exist simultaneously. He encourages readers to investigate further and that is ultimately what a book like this should do.

Victoria Hightower  
Assistant Professor of History  
University of North Georgia

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<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vols. 1 and 2, trans. Sian Reynolds (NY: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance: Donald Hawley, *The Trucial States* (London: Michael Russell Publishing Ltd., 2000 [first edition 1970]); Edward Henderson, *This Strange and Eventful History: Memoirs of Earlier Days in the UAE and Oman* (London: Quartet Books, 1988); Charles Belgrave, *The Pirate Coast* (New York: Roy Publishers, Inc., 1966); and Julian Walker, *Tyro on the Trucial Coast* (London: Memoir Club, 1999).

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