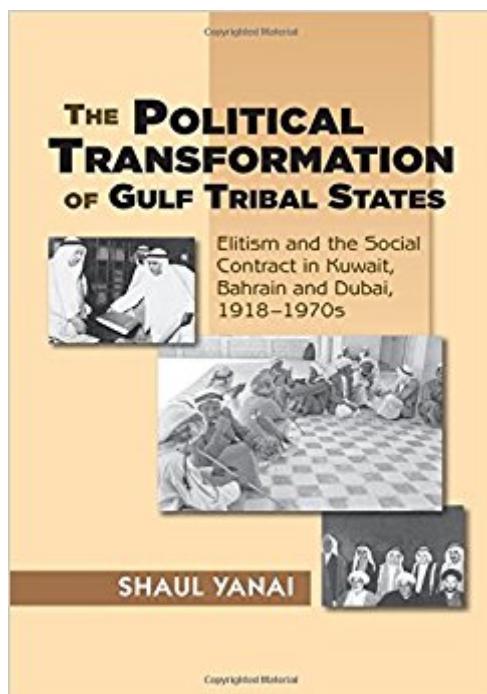


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The Political Transformation Of Gulf Tribal States: Elitism And The Social Contract In Kuwait, Bahrain And Dubai, 1918-1970s



Synopsis

The reform movements and attempts to establish parliamentary institutions in the Persian Gulf states of Kuwait, Bahrain and Dubai between the First World War and the independent era of the 1970s were not inspired by western example or by any tradition of civil representation. The move to a parliamentary system not only represented a milestone in the history of the region, creating a legacy for future generations, but was a unique transition in the Arab world. The transformation of these states from loose chiefdoms of minimal coherence and centralization, into centralizing and institutionalized monarchies, involved the setting up of primary institutions of government, the demarcation of borders, and establishment of a monarchical order. As this new political and social order evolved, ideas of national struggle and national rights penetrated Gulf societies. Gulf citizens who had spent time in Arab states, mostly in Egypt and Iraq, took part in the genesis of a public Arab-Gulf national discourse, enabling the Gulf population to become acquainted with national struggles for independence. As a result merchants of notable families, newly educated elements, and even workers, began to oppose the dominance of the rulers. Both the rulers and the commercial elites (including members of the ruling families) tried to formulate a new and different social contract with the rulers seeking to entrench their political power by using new administrative means and financial power. Opposition against this current crystallized in 1938 among the ranks of the commercial oligarchy as well as within the ruling families. In spite of its failure to create its own political institutions, the oligarchy remained the foremost social and economic class. But the ruling families could no longer treat national oil revenues as their private income, and they began to channel part of these funds to public needs. The most important consequence of the '1938' movement was the formation of a new social contract between the two traditional power centers: the governing structures were fitted into the political and economic reality brought about by the oil wealth, but remained essentially tribal and committed to the power division between the major Gulf families.

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