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The Political Complex

This book is concerned with the traditional society of the Trucial Coast of Oman, more particularly in its political aspect, and with the government of shaikhs as it has existed there over the last two centuries. The society of the Trucial Coast is a small one and the style of government has been highly personal and, in that sense, simple. Excepting for the wider culture of Arabia and of Islam, the society has borrowed relatively little from the outside until very recent years. Foreign models and foreign ideologies have played no part in forming its dominant institutions. As the title of heads of state, shaikh, in these little principalities suggests, their form of government is connected with the institutions of the bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. And bedouin form an important and formidable part of the population. But something beyond tribal institutions has needed to develop, since a large part of the population has traditionally been made up of settled people in coastal towns and villages who depended for their living on the sea. The centres of government of the Trucial shaikhs have been the coastal towns.

Foreign protection and the extent of local autonomy

The maritime activities of the people were not restricted to local waters. Apart from ordinary local fishing, they were engaged in pearl fishing in the open seas of the Gulf and active in trade carried by their own boats over the whole area of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. These wider activities along a major trade route brought them into political contact and conflict with overseas powers. Similarly on the land side, not only the bedouin and oasis villagers but also the maritime people of the coast were engaged with other powers of the interior. On neither side has the Trucial Coast ever been a place of geographical isolation. It has,
however, until recent years, been too poor to offer any great rewards to conquerors. Moreover, the mobility of its population, both maritime and bedouin, and the complexity of its position between conflicting land and sea powers have made it difficult to govern from outside.

Nevertheless, in the course of the nineteenth century, a situation developed in which the Trucial States were isolated, under British protection, from international politics whilst preserving their autonomy in internal affairs. The sequence of events which led up to this situation has elements of consistency, but it is far beyond the scope of this book to try to discuss it analytically. The facts derive from a far-flung and complex history of international as well as local relations. An outline of the events leading up to British involvement in the area will show something of the size of the subject. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the French were already in contact with people from Muscat through slave trading in Mauritius, and Napoleon sought to establish a position in Muscat itself in order to assist his projected conquest of India. Muscati trade, however, depended heavily on India, and the British were able to forestall Napoleon and constrain the Imam of Muscat and Oman to make a treaty with them excluding the French. Sir John Malcolm, the British negotiator, had pointed out to the Imam that his government had the power to close all the ports of India to Muscati shipping. But because of internal rivalries the Imam and his successor were insecure in their own territory. Moreover, Wahhabis from the interior of Arabia were pressing into Oman and also into what was subsequently to be called the Trucial Coast. The Jawasim of the coast provided a sea force which extended Wahhabi power beyond the land base of this politico-religious movement and threatened both Muscati and British shipping. In order to support the Imam and to protect their interests in the trade route, the Bombay Government mounted an attack on the Jawasim in 1809–10, followed by another and more thorough expedition in 1819–20. Upon this latter expedition there followed a peace treaty which was to form the foundation of British relations with the shaikhs of the Trucial Coast.²

Thus, in combination with their susceptibility to pressure from the interior, it was the aggressive maritime activities of some of the people of the Trucial States, in the days when that name was yet to be invented and the area was called the Pirate Coast, which started a chain of events that was to preserve the states, in a more traditional political form than they might otherwise have had, up to the year of completing this book, 1971. The expeditions from India, aimed at suppressing piracy and protecting British shipping in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, led to series