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**ARTICLE**

# A Tolerated Terror: Rahmah bin Jabir and the Age of Revolutions in the Gulf, 1760-1830

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## Abstract

Rahmah bin Jabir (c. 1760-1826) is one of the most frequently mentioned persons in British sources from the Gulf in the first decades of the nineteenth century. He is also found throughout important Arabic-language chronicles. Despite his prominence in the sources, however, scholars have paid him relatively little attention, in either English or in Arabic. Though often cast as a pirate, this article argues that Rahmah bin Jabir was a political entrepreneur critical to shaping the international order of the Gulf in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reading against the grain of the colonial archive and synthesizing British sources with Arab chronicles, this article brings to life a textured political imaginary of the Gulf in the global age of revolutions, using Rahmah to weave overlapping political agendas between different emerging states, including the Omanis, the Saudi-Wahhabis, the Bahrainis, the Qataris, and the British. I suggest that Rahmah stands as one figure through whom historians can continue piecing together an age of revolutions in the Gulf that is more than Europe's emergence into modernity, one that highlights a complex and vibrant history of negotiation, endurance, and resiliency.

**Keywords:** Gulf; Arabian Peninsula; Indian Ocean; Rahmah bin Jabir; Piracy; Oman

## Introduction

In 1816 the English author and traveller James Silk Buckingham sailed into the Persian port of Bushire, home of the East India Company's Residency for the Gulf. Bushire had been home to the Company's Residency since 1775, a hub for managing political and commercial affairs between Arabia, Persia, and South Asia.[1] When Buckingham anchored, a grand fleet of warships occupied the harbour, the shore bustling with its several thousand sailors and crew. Yet, neither the ships, their sailors, nor even their cargoes belonged to the Company. They belonged, rather, to a fleet commanded by Rahmah bin Jabir, leader of the Al-Jalahimah, a powerful family group in Arabia. Roving the seas from his base in Al-Khuwayr, on the northwest tip of present-day Qatar, Rahmah was integral to imperial politics in the Gulf and western Indian Ocean in the first three decades of the nineteenth

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[1] For a global history of the Gulf and its ports, see the forthcoming Allen James Fromherz, *The Center of the World: A Global History of the Persian Gulf from the Stone Age to the Present* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024). On the British residency system in the Gulf, see James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

century.[2] This was a period of immense transformation in the Gulf. Rahmah manipulated and exploited different social groups and political agendas to remain a major actor. Though Rahmah is one of the most frequently mentioned persons in sources from the Gulf in this time, he has been almost entirely overlooked in its historiography, in English and in Arabic. This article places Rahmah centre stage.

During his stay in Bushire, Buckingham met with Rahmah several times. Writing a memoir years later, he recalled Rahmah as "the terror of the Gulf…the most successful and the most generally tolerated pirate, perhaps, that ever infested any sea."[3] In one sense, Buckingham's description reflects an Orientalist imagination. Later in the same passage, he described Rahmah as scarred from battles, a tawdry figure who picked vermin from his skin as he ate. Rather than being cast aside, however, these dramatic stereotypes can prompt a deeper level of historical inquiry.[4] That Buckingham, on one hand, fell into hackneyed fantasy about vermin-infested, battle-scarred pirates yet simultaneously qualified Rahmah as not only "successful" but also "tolerated" highlights a historical puzzle at the core of Rahmah's life that speaks to multiple overlapping historiographies. The description of Rahmah as a tolerated terror reflects how the British struggled to understand him. As a tolerated terror, Rahmah was more than a mere pirate: he was a political entrepreneur helping shape the entwined political, economic, and social dimensions of imperial transformations in the Gulf in the early nineteenth century.

Rahmah navigated his *own* confederation's political and economic agenda while also navigating between other emerging states and empires, including the Omanis, the Saudi-Wahhabis, the consolidation of Al Khalifah rule in Bahrain, the beginnings of modern Qatar, and increasing British influence. As Buckingham observed, Rahmah could have been a pirate in a strict sense: he plundered ships and shipping on the seas. As such, he was a terror to many Gulf peoples. Though renowned for his violence, however, Rahmah was also tolerated, moving between alliances with the Omanis, the British, and the Saudi-Wahhabis.[5] Tracing Rahmah's flows between friends and foes can help historians begin to piece together the entwined emergences of Arab Gulf states in this time, including the present-day Saudis, Omanis, Bahrainis, Kuwaitis, and Qataris, and to see the Gulf as part of the global age of revolutions. The histories of these states tend to focus almost exclusively on their contemporary manifestations, but Rahmah helps us see how we trace the emergence of states already in this period.[6]

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[2] This article uses the dates 1770-1830 because they coincide with Rahmah's birth around 1760 and his death in 1826, which falls squarely within the global age of revolutions. This article departs from understanding Arabia and the Gulf against the larger interconnected backdrop of the Indian Ocean, adding to a dynamic trend in Gulf studies and Indian Ocean studies. For an overview of this trend see Fahad Ahmad Bishara, "The Many Voyages of *Fateh Al-Khayr*: Unfurling the Gulf in the Age of Oceanic History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 1–16.

[3] James Silk Buckingham, *Travels in Assyria, Media, and Persia,* 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: Colburn, 1830), 122; Sir Charles Belgrave, *The Pirate Coast* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1966), 126.

[4] This article builds on, in part, Bose's call to dive beneath the veneer of "piracy" and instead uncover deeper historical dynamics. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 43.

[5] Lauren Benton, "Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 4 (2005): 700–724; Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

[6] For critical overviews of the literature on the Arab Gulf states, see, in addition to the Bishara article previously cited, Rosie Bsheer, "W(h)ither Arabian Peninsula Studies?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, ed. Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2021), 384–408; Sheila Carapico, "Arabia Incognita: An Invitation to Arabian Peninsula Studies," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 11–33; Allen James Fromherz, "Introduction: World

## Rahmah, Piracy, and Gulf Historiography

We can try to peer into the Gulf through Rahmah's eyes, but we can only see bits and pieces. Piecing the picture together requires a synthetic approach, reading colonial archival sources against the grain and in conversation with other types of sources, like Arabic-language chronicles. Rahmah left behind very few sources from his own pen. Most of what we know about him comes from British sources, most of which are East India Company records. In addition to Buckingham's memoir, the diaries of Francis Erskine Loch in the Scottish National Archives contain information about Rahmah.[7] Those diaries form the basis of Charles Belgrave's work on the Gulf in this period, *The Pirate Coast,* essentially just a summary narrative of the diaries.[8] Belgrave's title reflects a core dimension of this article's argument. Belgrave's categorical reduction of this space and its history to a "pirate coast" reflects a difference between the ways twentieth-century historians and British colonial officials imagined this space through the lens of their imperialist glasses, and the ways in which peoples – British or otherwise – understood this space in the first decades of the nineteenth century and those preceding it. In fact, scrutiny of British sources from during Rahmah's life demonstrates that they did not entirely view him as a pirate, for which they had a legal vocabulary, but instead viewed Rahmah as something of a political entrepreneur with whom they had to work.

Rahmah can thus add to our literature on microhistory, even global microhistory. His life is like a keyhole through which we can peer to make claims about this history that speak to many different debates.[9] Rahmah's shifting affairs with the Omanis, the British, the Saudi-Wahhabis, and with others helps us reassemble local, regional, and global dynamics placing the Gulf as an important space in the vast modern history of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans coming to meet. We can piece together what little fragments of his life we have for seeing the interplay of the mutually determinative actions of Gulf peoples and Europeans. Yet the actions of local peoples, even ostensible pirates like Rahmah, are not important merely because in causing trouble for empire they helped consolidate that empire.[10] To be clear, this article does not seek to provide a meaning of piracy or its legal transformations in this time and space. Such work has been done.[11] Instead, it puts aside understanding Rahmah as any sort of pirate and thus takes a mostly overlooked historical figure, central to sources from the period under study, to piece together a more textured, multivocal history of politics and empire in the Gulf.

In his two volume Arabic-language history of the Gulf, A.M. Abu Hakimah was among the earliest historians to discuss Rahmah and the Al-Jalahimah, who ultimately came to settle in present-day Qatar. Abu Hakimah did not use the phrase, but his framework for understanding Rahmah, his political contestations and use of force, and the movements of his followers can be read as part of what historians commonly refer to as the age of revolutions. Abu Hakimah began a lengthy section on Rahmah by noting how

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History in the Gulf as a Gulf in World History," in *The Gulf in World History: Arabia at the Global Crossroads* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[7] NRS (National Records of Scotland) GD1/633/3.

[8] Belgrave, *Pirate Coast.*

[9] Tonio Andrade, "A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 4 (2010): 573–91; Jan de Vries, "Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano," *Past & Present* 242, no. Supplement 14 (2019): 23–36.

[10] Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[11] In addition to works subsequently cited, for analysis of what was or was not considered piracy and how the concept of piracy changed over time especially in the Indian Ocean and Gulf, see Charles E. Davies, *The Blood-Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797-1820* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 63–70.

the "controversy" or "debate" (*al-jadal*) surrounding him in his lifetime mirrored larger political, commercial, and social transformations in the Gulf during the "anxious era" in which he lived.[12] Indeed the era was an anxious one – turbulent even, an apt space for seeing an age of revolutions. At least some in the Gulf at this time understood it this way. Francis Warden, secretary of the Bombay Government, observed in 1819 how "complicated interests" and many "Powers" had "contended for superiority" in Arabia and the Gulf, all part of "various revolutions."[13]

In the global age of revolutions, world historian Sujit Sivasundaram shrewdly centred the Indian Ocean, and also the Gulf, as makers of world history and the modern condition.[14] He insisted that peoples in these spaces were "critical" in shaping the age of revolutions because of a wave of "indigenous agency."[15] Sivasundaram's concept of "indigenous agency" added another layer to factors he had previously claimed made the Gulf an apt space for the age of revolutions: namely, a reconfiguration of Eurasian empires and the rise of a new style of European imperialism and trade. I am inspired by his idea of indigenous agency in the sense of focusing on local, non-European peoples in highlighting a "tangle of political possibilities."[16] In many ways, Rahmah brings to life the idea of indigenous agency. In an Indian Ocean setting, Rahmah's mobility between points in the Gulf is precisely what made him indigenous to it, mobility being a key factor of indigenous Indian Ocean peoples more than rootedness to a particular place.[17] However, Rahmah's political mobility, his veritable political entrepreneurship, was also a form of mobility revolutions in the Gulf, not just a physical mobility. As such, Rahmah highlights the Gulf as a space in the age of revolutions because he helped forge "a reconfiguration of political organization," in which new forces found their way often acting as independent states.[18] Rahmah and his Al-Jalahimah followers were one of those new forces.

Centring Rahmah in this framework does more than just add a new character to an already diverse list. It prompts us to question some basic historiographic and methodological assumptions. Although Sivasundaram's work joins a wide literature contesting the picture of a unidirectional rise of British Empire, the main theme of much of this literature remains explaining non-European peoples and their actions in the context of the British Empire, the seemingly inexorable ascension of which is taken as an analytical point of departure.[19] Reading through Rahmah might prompt historians to see other possibilities, one of local endurance and resiliency, and a broader arc in which the British might have reached a certain apex but also inevitably crumbled. During Rahmah's life, British hegemony was never preordained, and it was only one among countless futures. In fact, the British struggled hard from 1760 to 1830. Reorienting our

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[12] Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Abū Ḥākimah, *Tārīkh Al-Kuwait*, vol. 2 (Kuwait: Kuwait Government Press, 1973), 46.

[13] As quoted in Sujit Sivasundaram, "Closed Sea or Contested Waters? The Persian Gulf in the Age of Revolution," in *Facing Empire: Indigenous Experiences in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Kate Fullagar and Michael A. McDonnell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 128.

[14] Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). See also Clare Anderson, "The Age of Revolution in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea: A Maritime Perspective," *International Review of Social History* 58 (2013): 229–51. For a work seeking to expand the age of revolutions beyond its conventional Atlantic context, and to which Sivasundaram was responding in centering the Gulf, see David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[15] Sivasundaram, *Waves*, 1, 3, 131.

[16] Sivasundaram, "Closed Sea or Contested Waters?," 110.

[17] Sivasundaram, *Waves*, 3.

[18] Sivasundaram, *Waves,* 3.

[19] As Sivasundaram puts it, "The Gulf should occupy a central place in the story of the transformations of the revolutionary age as also the narrative of the steady but uneven rise of Britain," *Waves,* 123.

starting point away from explaining the ultimate rise of British supremacy to explaining the rise of states and new political groups in the Gulf intervenes in multiple fields and scales of history. In specialized terms, taking the rise of British supremacy as a starting point for explaining this history has led to an overwhelming focus on the Al Qawasim and British victories over them, eliding a more horizontal and equitable history of British relations with Rahmah.

The debates at the core of how historians conceive of Rahmah and Gulf history in this period stem from the issue of piracy. Specialists of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula history have sought to nuance our understanding of piracy in the region and its connected spaces. One historian argued that the distinctive nature of pirates was their "*indiscriminate* seizure of seaborne or coastal property, under threat or use of force."[20] Piracy was thus a subset of maritime violence, distinct from state-based naval warfare because of its indiscriminate nature. There might have been such indiscriminate use of force at times throughout Gulf history, but Charles Davies wrote a detailed monograph charting nearly every maritime act of violence in the Gulf between 1797 and 1820 to argue that ostensibly piratical acts were highly discriminatory acts of maritime violence, entwined with landed affairs and part of political, commercial, and social ruptures in the Gulf in this period. The reasons certain human groups turned toward maritime plunder were often highly idiosyncratic, but they nonetheless can be read as part of political agendas in the earliest iterations of emerging modern states.[21] The assumption that piracy was a subset of ostensibly legitimate naval warfare entwined with state-based political contention is rooted in twentieth-century colonialist discourses. In the Gulf's age of revolutions, contestation took many forms, but especially in the Gulf at this time, maritime violence and the processes of negotiating those acts of violence were bound up with state formation, as will be shown.[22] Centring Rahmah in the Gulf and reading the colonial archive in conversation with Arab chronicles reflects a deeper understanding of maritime order, sovereignty, and state formation in the Gulf at this time than many historians have depicted.

## The Gulf Through Rahmah's Eyes

Though Rahmah might never have referred to himself as a political entrepreneur, this label is not entirely a historian's abstraction. Enterprise was fundamental to his life. He was born around 1760 in present-day Kuwait and lived until his death at sea in 1826. His family, the Al-Jalahimah, were part of the Al-ʿUtub confederation, along with the Al

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[20] Patricia Risso, "Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 2 (2001): 293–94. Risso did not cite J.L. Anderson but uses the same conceptualization, almost verbatim. See J.L. Anderson, "Piracy and World History: An Economic Perspective on Maritime Predation," *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2 (1995): 175–99.

[21] Davies's conceptualization is similar to how Marcus Rediker demonstrated a "political arithmetic" of piracy as maritime violence. See Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 27. His synthesis of maritime and landed affairs in exploring the concept of piracy is similar to conclusions drawn by Marc Hanna in an Atlantic context. See Mark G. Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). On different manifestations of piracy reflecting local often idiosyncratic issues, see John Coakley, Nathan C. Kwan, and David Wilson, eds., *The Problem of Piracy in the Early Modern World: Maritime Predation, Empire, and the Construction of Authority at Sea*, Maritime Humanities, 1400-1800 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

[22] Davies, previously cited, shows this textured portrait of piracy, but so did Risso. See Patricia Risso, *Oman and Muscat: An Early Modern History* (New York: Croon Helm, 1986). For a similar framework see also Lakshmi Subramanian, *The Sovereign and the Pirate: Ordering Maritime Subjects in India's Western Littoral* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Khalifah and Al Subah families. The Al-ʿUtub confederation left the Najd region of present-day Saudi Arabia in the late sixteenth century and settled along the coasts of the present-day states of Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar.[23] Though they came from Arabia's interior, for these people the sea was integral. The sea shaped the economy of Arabia's interior, connecting Arabia to the economies of East Africa and South Asia through the Gulf and the Red Sea. As one local chronicler described, as soon as the Al-ʿUtub families arrived on Arabia's coast they acquired ships and "took to the sea."[24] By 1760 when Rahmah was born, his predecessors had reinvented themselves as "seafarers and fishermen," navigating and commanding merchant fleets as "shaikh entrepreneurs."[25] The world into which Rahmah was born was thus one that was thoroughly terraqueous, to borrow a phrase from historian Alison Bashford: a world defined by interlinked commercial affairs between land and sea and one characterized by a tangible "commercial spirit" forming transnational networks of trade.[26]

Rahmah began his career by raising and selling horses.[27] The horse trade was one of the leading trades in the Gulf, connecting it with Persia, the Levant, and South Asia. It was also becoming a dynamic trade with newly arriving Europeans, like the British who established their Residency in Bushire when Rahmah was around 15. Although the British had begun arriving in increasing numbers after 1765, the most significant transformation affecting the Gulf in Rahmah's youth would have been increasing Omani state power.[28] Amidst increasing Omani power, the Al Khalifah spurned Rahmah's family, most likely over property rights. This sparked a political feud that lasted until his death. Enraged by the Al Khalifah of Bahrain and squeezed by the Omanis, Rahmah used whatever wealth he had accrued through horse trading to invest in a ship, likely a simple *dhow,* and convinced twelve men to join his proposed venture plundering Gulf shipping. The plunder was so successful that he was soon able to invest in a three-hundred-ton warship manned by several hundred loyalists. By the height of his career when Buckingham met him in Bushire, he commanded dozens of similar ships and a coalition of more than five-hundred families.[29]

One reason for Rahmah's success is that his power and prestige were untethered to any permanent political alliance. He began his career of maritime plunder fighting against the Al Khalifah of Bahrain, and, though his allegiances would subsequently shift, they would remain his enduring enemy. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Rahmah bet on the success of the First Saudi State's rapid rise, allying with them, at least nominally embracing Wahhabi ideology, and agreeing to plunder shipping for them. By 1816, he had renounced his alliance with the Saudi state and begun working for the British. He

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[23] For a general overview of this history see Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Abū Ḥākima, *A History of Eastern Arabia, 1750-1800: The Rise and Development of Bahrain and Kuwait* (Beirut: Khayats, 1965).

[24] Ḥusayn Khalaf al-Shaykh Khazʿal, *Tārīkh Al-Kuwayt al-Siāyāsī*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub, 1962), 41. For more on the movement of the Utub peoples and the historic interconnections of Arabia's interior with the broader Indian Ocean world, see the forthcoming Nicholas P. Roberts, "Oceanic Wahhabism," *Journal of World History* 36, no. 1 (March 2025).

[25] Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf: 1745-1900*, SUNY Series in the Social and Economic History of the Middle East (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 25–27. For a broader history of this, see also Abū Ḥākima, *Eastern Arabia.*

[26] Mohamed A. Al-Freih, "The Historical Background of the Emergence of Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Al-Wahhāb and His Movement" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Los Angeles, CA, University of California Los Angeles, 1990), 214; Fattah, *Politics of Regional Trade*, 2.

[27] Belgrave, *Pirate Coast*, 122-123, 127.

[28] The idea of a "pass" system – controlling maritime space and forcing ships to pay duties at certain ports – had antecedents in the Indian Ocean world long before Europeans arrived after 1500. See John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47.

[29] Belgrave, *Pirate Coast*, 122-123, 127.

agreed not to attack British ships in the hope they would seize Bahrain from the Al Khalifah. By this time, he had also begun working with Saʿid bin Sultan, leader of the Omani Empire. In turn, he joined Omani-British campaigns against the Al-Qawasim based in Ras al-Khaimah. By 1819, his fortunes had shifted yet again, and he began working for the Persian governor of Fars, focused entirely on taking Bahrain. By 1820, Rahmah had established his headquarters in Bushire adjacent to the British Residency. When the British Resident William Bruce asked him to sign on to a newly written treaty for the suppression of maritime violence, Rahmah declined, haughtily proclaiming that he was no longer interested in assisting the British, for he was now entirely a servant of the Persian Emperor and his deputies.

Amidst this, the British were not the only ones in the first decades of the nineteenth century employing the vocabulary of sovereignty, maritime order, and violence on behalf of political agendas. They were also not the only ones using violence to remake the worlds in which they lived. The height of Rahmah's career in the first three decades of the nineteenth century overlapped with the reign of Saʿid bin Sultan in Oman. At times, Rahmah and Saʿid worked closely together. There is a letter from Saʿid recorded in Ibn Ruzayq's chronicle of the Al Busaid Dynasty, a core source for Omani, Arabian Peninsula, and Gulf history. Saʿid wrote this letter to his uncle, governor of the major port of Suhar on Oman's coast, in 1806, just after seizing power. Saʿid wrote that there was no avoiding war with the Al-Qawasim, based in Ras al-Khaimh and Khor Fakkan of the present-day United Arab Emirates, because their leader Sultan bin Saqr had attacked the Omanis, thus becoming their "enemy." Saʿid clarified why: Sultan had "corrupted" the sea (*afsadda ṭarīq al-baḥr*). How had Sultan corrupted the sea, spoiling some degree of assumed maritime order in the Gulf? He had not ceased in "forcibly" taking ships belonging to Omanis, which Saʿid identified as his subjects or constituents. Saʿid then further drives his point, concluding that Sultan and his Qasimi followers were enemies of the Omanis because their goal was corruption of the sea by means of plunder and murder ( *fasād al-baḥr bi-an-nahb wa-al-qatl).*[30]

Rahmah came of age in the second half of the eighteenth century in the Gulf when the Omanis had exerted significant efforts in establishing a Muscat-dominated maritime order. As one historian put it, the rise of Omani dominance in the Gulf across much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "had been accomplished at the expense of others."[31] The Omanis claimed many parts of the Gulf as part of their area of influence, including Gwadar in present-day Pakistan; Chahbahar, Hormuz, Bandar Abbas, and Qeshm in Iran; and Bahrain.[32] There was some understanding of state power. To maintain their maritime order in the Gulf, for example, Sultan bin Ahmad – Saʿid's father – invested heavily in expanding the Omani navy and established a pass system forcing all non-Omani vessels – European or otherwise – to anchor in Muscat and pay customs duties. Once a captain paid those duties, an Omani convoy sailed with the ship to its destination in the Gulf.[33] Already by the end of the eighteenth century, then, the institutional arrangements of maritime commercial affairs in the Gulf were subsumed within ideas of state power.

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[30] Ḥamīd ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ruzayq, *Al-Fatḥ al-Mubīn Fī Sīrat al-Sādah al-Būsaʿīdiyīn*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamīd Ṣāleh and Muḥammad bin Mubārik Al-Salīmī, 6th ed., vol. 2 (Muscat: Wizārat al-Turāth wa al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 437; Ḥamīd ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ruzayq, *History of the Imāms and Seyyids of ʿOmān: From A.D. 661-1856*, trans. George Percy Badger, Cambridge Library Collection (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 293.

[31] R.D. Bathurst, "The Yaʿrubi Dynasty of Oman" (Doctoral dissertation, Oxford, Oxford University, 1967), 191, Bodleian Library (Department of Western Manuscripts).

[32] Ibn Ruzayq, *Al-Ṣaḥīfah Al-Qaḥṭānniyah*, 5:345.

[33] This was not an imitation of the Portuguese *cartaz* system, for there had existed protective pass systems in Muslim Indian Ocean societies dating to at least as early as the twelfth century. See Bhacker, *Trade and Empire,* 33, 214 n. 19.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the relatively tiny island of Bahrain was at the heart of many political disputes in the Gulf. These disputes would shape Rahmah's life. Indeed, they continued to shape the Gulf well into the nineteenth century. In 1711 the Omanis invaded Bahrain and wrested control from the Persians – one factor contributing to the fall of the Safavids.[34] Bahrain was strategically located with deep harbours. It was also rich in date palm groves and access to pearls. After the 1711 assault, the Omanis reportedly instituted high taxes on local merchants. The Omani imposition ruptured Bahrain's social fabric, causing many families indigenous to the island to leave. The German-Danish explorer Carsten Niebuhr visited Bahrain in 1763 and noted how previously, Bahrain had been home to nearly four-hundred flourishing towns and villages. By the year he visited, however, he estimated about sixty.[35] Another European visitor, Alexander Hamilton, observed how so many merchants had fled Bahrain, especially those involved in the pearl trade, that the island was left basically destitute.[36]

The exodus of Bahrain's elite opened it to the Al Khalifah, who sought to take Bahrain to mitigate Oman's grip on Gulf commerce. In 1766 they settled in Zubarah, present-day Qatar, where they could more strategically control pearling and other seafaring trades, including the horse trade.[37] Around the same time, the Al-Jalahimah began leaving present-day Kuwait because of disagreements over property rights, and they began settling alongside the Al Khalifah in Zubarah, soon leading to disputes.[38] Under the leadership of Rahmah's father, Jabir, the Al-Jalahimah thus left Zubarah and settled in Ruways, in the present-day United Arab Emirates. The Al Khalifah's position in Zubarah was strengthened by a Persian occupation of Basrah from 1775 to 1779, causing many of Basrah's elites to flee and settle under the Al Khalifah.[39] This emigration of Basran elites to Zubarah and the power monopoly the Al Khalifah held over the pearl trade angered the Persians, who launched a series of assaults on Zubarah and Bahrain aimed at coopting the pearl trade and other maritime commerce for themselves, reducing the Al Khalifah's autonomy.[40]

The Persian assaults unified the Al Khalifah and Al-Jalahimah, who seem to have agreed to set aside their disputes in favour of joining against increasing Persian encroachments. And it was here that Rahmah rose to a leadership position over the Al-Jalahimah, fighting alongside his Al Khalifah counterparts. Under Rahmah's leadership, the Al-Jalahimah and the Al Khalifah raided Bahrain, forcing the Persians to flee. In the aftermath of the Persian evacuation, Rahmah and the Al Khalifah fell into greater dispute over what was most likely the division of property and resources on the island. Rahmah left no records of what happened, but the slight – perceived or real – marked the beginning of his

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[34] For a local Bahraini account of this, see Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., "The Autobiography of Yūsuf Al-Baḥrānī," in *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 216–23, a translation of Yūsuf Al-Baḥrānī, *Luʾluʾat Al-Baḥrayn Fī al-Ijāzāt Wa-Tarājim Riḥāl al-Ḥadīth* (Najaf: Maṭbaʿat al-Nuʿmān, 1966), 442–49.

[35] Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia and Other Countries in the East*, vol. 2 (London: T. Vernor, 1792), 152; also cited in Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 52.

[36] Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, ed. William Foster, vol. 1 (London: The Argonaut Press, 1930), 50; also cited in Cole, *Sacred Space*, 52.

[37] Zāmil Muḥammad al-Rashīd, *Suʿūdī Relations with Eastern Arabia and ʿUmān, 1800-1871* (London: Luzac & Co., 1981), 34; Muḥammad bin Khalīfa Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Tuḥfah Al-Nabhānīyah Fī Tārīkh Al-Jazīrah Al-ʿArabīyah*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār Maṭbaʿa Al-Maḥmūdīyya li-l-Nashr, 1924), 121.

[38] R. Hughes Thomas, ed., *Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government: No. XXIV* (Bombay: Bombay Education Society's Press, 1856), 363.

[39] Thomas, 363; al-Rashīd, *Suʿūdī Relations*, 35.

[40] al-Rashīd, *Suʿūdī Relations*, 35; J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 26.

career marauding the Gulf seeking the ultimate ouster of the Al Khalifah.[41] As one local chronicler put it, Rahmah grew to be "precious" to his followers, his prestige among them stemming from his constant and categorical defiance of the Al Khalifah and their hold over Bahrain.[42]

Yet the stakes for Bahrain were not just relegated to the Al Khalifah and Al-Jalahimah. Tied up with control of the island were the ambitions of both the Omanis and the Saudi-Wahhabis – a rivalry Rahmah exploited. In 1800, the Omanis again attacked Bahrain, prompting the Al Khalifah to ally with the Saudis to help drive the Omanis from the island in 1802.[43] Around the same time, the Saudis had also allied with the Al-Qawasim, a group based mostly out of Ras al-Khaimah. In 1804, a group of Qasimi fighters killed Omani leader Sultan bin Ahmad Al Busaid at sea, leaving a relative void in Oman's ability to project force in the Gulf until 1806, when Saʿid bin Sultan seized power. It was also around this point – at some point in the first decade of the nineteenth century – when Rahmah at least nominally embraced Wahhabism and allied with the First Saudi State.[44] By 1810, Wahhabi theologians had given Rahmah the title *shaykh al-bahr,* or leader of the sea.[45] Rahmah was a critical ally for the Saudis because his maritime plunder provided their expanding state with revenue and resources, including ships. As Charles Davies noted, the Saudis' need for revenue was made explicit when they explained their motives to the British in the region.[46] Rahmah's maritime victories ultimately garnered him more approbation from the Saudis, who also came to lionize him as being their "warrior of the sea" [*muḥāriban fī al-baḥr*].[47]

However tenuous, the alliance between Rahmah and the Saudis began an even more tumultuous decade in the Gulf. Rahmah was at the centre of the drama. By 1810, the Al-Qawasim, some of whom had also embraced Wahhabism and allied with the Saudis, had begun ransacking Omani and British shipping. Yet the Al-Qawasim, as a categorical unit, did not plunder either Omani or British shipping. Certain factions within the broader family group did, but these acts were thoroughly discriminatory, with carefully chosen targets on behalf of political agendas. Sultan bin Saqr, the leading Qasimi chief, once wrote to William Bruce in Bushire to explain these complexities. He explained that attacks on British shipping came from one Qasimi chief: his uncle Hasan bin Rahmah. While Hasan was acting under Saudi orders, Sultan noted how he had ordered his followers not to attack British shipping. He closed his letter by confirming his commitment to the Omanis and their British allies.[48]

Around the same time, Rahmah also wrote to Bruce, confirming that neither he nor his followers were behind attacks on British shipping. As with Sultan bin Saqr, Rahmah also described the attacks as coming from Hasan bin Rahmah. Bruce considered both letters and combined the information in them with other sources, then wrote a letter directly

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[41] Sources agree that this marked the beginning of the feud between Rahmah and his Khalīfah counterparts, though the exact reasoning slightly differs. Al-Nabhānī alluded to a personal disagreement between Rahmah and his counterpart, which could certainly have been an expression of what British sources recount, which was a more formal disagreement over the division of Bahrain's property and resources. See Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Tuḥfah Al-Nabhānīyah*, 138; Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, 27; al-Rashīd, *Suʿūdī Relations*, 37; Thomas, *Selections*, 363.

[42] Al-Nabhānī, *Al-Tuḥfah*, 138.

[43] ʿUthmān ibn ʿAbd Allāh bin ʿUthmān Ibn Bishr, *ʿUnwān Al-Majd Fī Tārīkh Najd*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Riyadh: Maṭbūʿāt Dārat Al-Malik ʿAbd Al-Azīz, 1982), 258.

[44] We do not have any writings from Rahmah about his own spiritual or theological beliefs. We know he embraced, in some form, even if only on paper, Wahhabism and allied with its movement because of how Wahhabi sources lauded him as one of their own.

[45] Davies, *Blood-Red Arab Flag*, 245.

[46] Davies, 245 n. 48.

[47] Ibn Bishr, *ʿUnwān Al-Majd,* 2:52.

[48] British Library (hereafter BL), IOR/R/15/1/19, Sultan bin Saqr to Bruce, 21 December 1816, ff. 2r.

to Hasan. However, Hasan was livid when he received the letter. He excoriated Bruce for speaking to him on account of Rahmah bin Jabir. "You speak to me on authority of Rahmah bin Jabr [sic]," Hasan opined, demanding that Bruce never again write to him in such a way. He continued, explaining his disagreements with Rahmah: "First because he reverted from the true faith to the worship of Idols, and secondly because he is a man of no Character, full of deceit and treachery, performing wicked actions and attributing them to others to remove the imputation of guilt from himself..."[49]

Hasan's letter reveals the complicated political landscape of the Gulf in the first decades of the nineteenth century, far from something as simple as an ostensible pirate's den subordinate to a rising British empire. It reveals a relative parity in political affairs and power. It also reflects Rahmah's shifting allegiances amidst it all. In scorning Rahmah because he had turned toward "idols," Hasan was referring to the fact that, by 1816, Rahmah had reneged on his political alliance with the Saudis. Hasan was extending the basic Wahhabi tenet of accusing all non-Wahhabis of idolatry. By 1816 when the letters were written, Rahmah had actually begun working with the Omanis and with the British against the Al Qawasim, even agreeing not to plunder any Omani vessels.[50]

Most likely, Rahmah began working with the Omanis in 1814, when Sa'id bin Sultan had begun planning an assault against Bahrain to pre-empt Persian encroachment.[51] Ultimately, the Persians never attacked Bahrain, but the potential threat was enough that Sa'id had written to the British, instructing them that "it would not become" them to resist or stymie any Omani use of force against the Persians. This was apparently enough to cajole Rahmah into disavowing his alliance with the Saudis and instead begin working with the Omanis. Yet, despite Hasan's statements, there is no indication that Rahmah ever disavowed Wahhabi ideology. Even after Rahmah stopped working with the Saudis in terms of plundering Gulf shipping, Wahhabi chroniclers lauded him, celebrating his violence and his poetry in the same pages.[52]

Rahmah remained highly discerning in his use of force. On one occasion, for example, the Persian vessel *Ahmed Shah* was sailing under the command of a British officer and, therefore, under British flag. Rahmah was nearby and he sailed toward the *Ahmed Shah.* The British officer ordered his crew to fire upon Rahmah's ship, but, because he saw the British flag, Rahmah did not return fire. The British gunmen missed and the ships came abreast each other. To the British officer's surprise, Rahmah came up on deck, invited him aboard, and introduced him to a senior deputy of the Persian Governor of Bushire, whom Rahmah was escorting home. Rahmah knew Bushire was also home to the British Residency. In the presence of the Persian deputy, Rahmah assuaged the British officer's anxiety, sneering that he would not attack any British vessels since they "were only to be considered as the servants of the King of Persia."[53]

We do not know the details of how the Persian deputy arranged for his transportation with Rahmah. That he was aboard Rahmah's vessel sailing in the Gulf, however, reveals something important about the details of this period. Rahmah had an impressive degree of social capital. He might not have had a formal, written treaty with the Persians, but he was understood in this time and space to be the leader of some form of political entity, dare we call it an emerging state, that negotiated with other states and was also able to project power and use force, either against other states or on their behalf. It is, in fact, an overstatement for Rahmah to have characterized the British as servants of Persia, but it

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[49] BL, IOR/R/15/1/18, Hasan bin Rahmah to Bruce, received 27 November 1816, ff. 80v–81r.
[50] Davies, *Blood-Red Arab Flag*, 193–94.
[51] Davies, 201.
[52] Ibn Bishr, *'Unwān Al-Majd*, 1982, 2:53.
[53] BL, IOR/R/15/1/13, Smee to Bruce, 20 June 1813, ff. 136 2.

also is revealing. This was a person at the heart of international affairs in the Gulf speaking to the British in a way that reflects the relative parity of the time, far from a space of domination and subordination.

Indeed, Rahmah beguiled the British. They understood the power he held in the Gulf, but they also acknowledged his discerning use of violence and force. He did not plunder British vessels.[54] He once seized a Basran ship and, after boarding it, saw that it was carrying horses belonging to the British. He at once brought the ship to shore and, knowing that his own ships were far less likely to be attacked at sea, instructed his own sailors to bring the horses directly to Bombay.[55] Already by 1810 the British were debating how to approach Rahmah and manage their affairs with him. That year, the Persians had attacked some of Rahmah's ships. In response, Rahmah rallied some of his Saudi-allied Qasimi partners to join him in attacking the Persians. Rahmah's combined forces defeated the Persians and, because their headquarters was hosted by the Persians in Bushire, the British Resident "strongly advocated" that they punish Rahmah. Yet the Bombay Government dismissed the Resident's argument, stating that Rahmah had never actually attacked a British vessel. The Bombay Government noted, moreover, that Rahmah was also allied with the Saudis, with whom the British sought to avoid any conflict – on land or at sea.[56]

By 1814, the discourse had shifted. Rahmah had soured on his relationship with the Saudis and was actively seeking to forge stronger relations with the British. In August that year, he asked the British for a formal "Pass and Certificate" to sail to Bombay and visit none other than the Governor General there. The British consented.[57] There are no sources indicating what came of Rahmah's meeting with the Governor General. It is possible that the two never actually met. It is remarkable, however, that the British extended an audience for Rahmah with their highest-ranking official in the entire Indian Ocean region. One reason why the British might have understood the necessity of working with Rahmah was that, by 1814, he was becoming a strong partner of Saʿid bin Sultan and the Omanis.

Just after he wrote to the British about visiting the Governor General, Rahmah went to Muscat to meet with Saʿid. Though he welcomed Rahmah, Saʿid was cautious. A local agent for the British in Muscat during the meetings described how Rahmah's overtures to Saʿid seemed dubious, arguing that Rahmah would not abide by any allegiance longer than was convenient.[58] Rahmah had his own independent political agenda, including social and commercial dimensions, and he represented this agenda on behalf of a larger confederation of his followers. Even while Rahmah was in Muscat negotiating stronger relations with the Omanis, a competing power in the Gulf, Rahmah did not seek to minimize the independence of his own goals. On one occasion when he was in Muscat, he noticed a ship anchored in the cove under British flag. Rahmah knew the ship and, though the ship was anchored under British flag, insisted that it was owned by an Arab whom he regarded as an enemy. Rahmah vowed to Saʿid in that moment that, if he were to meet her at sea, he would attack the ship. But Rahmah then went on to describe how he would not just destroy the ship. He might keep the ship as his own, but he told Saʿid that, "The English property and subjects onboard would be carefully forwarded to their places of destination."[59]

This was a careful, discriminatory use of power. It reflected concerns at the heart of international affairs in the Gulf in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In some

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[54] Thomas, *Selections*, 522.

[55] BL, IOR/R/15/1/14, Rahmah bin Jabr to Bruce and Bruce to Bombay, 27 October 1814, ff. 122v-124; Thomas, 523.

[56] J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf: ʾOman, and Central Arabia*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1915), 649.

[57] BL, IOR/R/15/1/14, Rahmah bin Jabr to Bruce and Bruce to Bombay, 7 August 1814, ff. 99-100.

[58] BL, IOR/R/15/1/14, Bruce to Bombay, 15 December 1814, ff. 127v.

[59] BL, IOR/R/15/1/14, Bruce to Bombay, 15 December 1814, ff. 127v.

respects, Rahmah acted as though he was the most autonomous, powerful figure in the Gulf. He had been granted a formal, personal audience with the Governor General of Bombay, and he was meeting with the leader of the Omani Empire, all while pointing out ships in the harbour that he would freely attack if he chose. There was no other person in the Gulf who acted in this way. That is not a historian's interpretation: the British acknowledged this. "This conduct of Rahmah's appears very extraordinary," confessed a seemingly exasperated William Bruce, the British Resident in 1814. "And I am at a loss how to account for it," he added.[60]

As Bruce suggested, the British had every reason to be at a loss of how to explain Rahmah's conduct. The British knew how to deal with pirates. They had entire legal compendiums legitimating using the full weight of their military powers against pirates and piracy. Indeed, the British launched multiple major expeditions against those whom they deemed pirates. They never did so, however, against Rahmah or the Al-Jalahimah. Not long after his meeting with Saʿid in Muscat, in January 1815 Rahmah seized the *Darabee,* a ship he recognized as property of his Qasimi enemies. As with previous incidents, when Rahmah boarded the ship, he discovered that its cargo was British owned. He confiscated it, loaded it on his own ship, and took it to Muscat. Then, he sent a dispatch to William Bruce in Bushire instructing him that if the British wanted to recover their cargo, it would be waiting for them in Muscat, where they could go get it. As for the ship, Rahmah stated that he would be keeping the *Darabee* as his own.[61]

In 1817, Rahmah moved his headquarters to Bushire, adjacent to the British Residency. British officials there adamantly protested, but their superiors in the Bombay Government ordered those in Bushire to treat Rahmah with utter deference. One dispatch instructed Bruce, the Resident in Bushire, to provide Rahmah with "personal attention and friendship."[62] It is worth thinking about these instructions. Here was a leading Arab leader with a history of maritime violence whose home was part of the ostensible "pirate coast," ordered by the highest-ranking British officials in the Indian Ocean to be treated with "personal attention and friendship." This is especially remarkable because it was when the British, having settled violent uprisings in the Gurkha War of 1814-1815 and the Maratha War of 1817-1818, had ordered all British ships in the Indian Ocean not otherwise engaged to sail for the Gulf to settle the "pirate" threat once and for all.[63] And as British ships in the Gulf increased and they prepared for a combined Omani-British naval expedition to destroy piracy in the Gulf, Rahmah was centre-stage in its planning. The British did nothing until they first secured Omani cooperation, and one of the first things Saʿid bin Sultan did in planning his contributions to the expedition was secure Rahmah's cooperation.[64]

The combined expedition targeted the Al-Qawasim of Ras al-Khaimah. It devasted the port and its surroundings.[65] Sacking Ras al-Khaimah led to the general subjugation of the Al-Qawasim and a sharp decline in their maritime autonomy at sea. With Omani cooperation, the British wrote a treaty for maritime security, to which the leading Qasimi leaders acceded. The treaty called for a "cessation of plunder and piracy by land and sea" and enforced a new set

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[60] BL, IOR/R/15/1/14, Bruce to Bombay, 16 December 1814, ff. 128r.

[61] BL, IOR/R/15/1/16, Bruce to Bombay, 15 April 1815, ff. 34v.

[62] BL, IOR/R/15/1/19, Bombay to Bruce, 30 December 1816, ff. 8 3.

[63] Kelly, 135, 138.

[64] BL, IOR/R/15/1/19, Bombay to Bruce, 9 October 1819, ff. 128v, ff. 130r; BL, IOR/R/15/1/19, Jukes to Bruce, 3 November 1819, ff. 134r; Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, 1:658–59; Thomas, *Selections*, 188; Patricia R. Dubuisson, "Qāsimī Piracy and the General Treaty of Peace (1820)" (Master's thesis, Montreal, McGill University, 1975), 47.

[65] The 1819 expedition against Ras al-Khaimah has been well covered in the literature. See Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, 1:667; Davies, *Blood-Red Arab Flag*, 8. See also the discussion in Sivasundaram, *Waves,* and the forthcoming Nicholas P. Roberts, *A Sea of Wealth: The OMani Empire and the Making of an Oceanic Marketplace* (Oakland: University of California Press, August 2025).

of rules and norms for the Gulf. The treaty forbid any Qasimi peoples from maintaining vessels armed for war. It also required them to dismantle their forts were dismantled. Under the treaty, every Qasimi ship was required to sail under a new flag, carry identification identifying the ship, and a pass noting details of the ship's itinerary. Rahmah bin Jabir never signed the treaty. There is no indication that either the Omanis or the British ever approached him to sign it. By 1820, Rahmah had ensconced himself as a decisive political actor in the Gulf. Far from acting outside the law and international order, he helped forge it. Peering into the age of revolutions in the Gulf through Rahmah's eyes helps piece together a more textured political imaginary than has been portrayed. Rahmah's relations with the British and others in the Gulf reveals a time in which the British understood themselves not as hegemons nor even as "weak hegemons," but rather as one group among others in a thoroughly contested space.[66]

The National Museum of Qatar houses two copies of letters Rahmah wrote to British officers the year before his death. In 1825, Rahmah was attempting to consolidate his position once again over Qatif, an eastern region of the Arabian Peninsula, described as a "considerable seaport town" almost directly across from Bahrain.[67] Rahmah had previously established one of his primary forts in Qatif, and now, after an Egyptian-Ottoman army had smashed Saudi resistance, he was seeking to reassert himself over the territory. Yet the British, under the direction of Ephraim Stannus, Resident at Bushire from 1823 to 1826, were pressuring Rahmah to cease. Rahmah refused, and he wrote to Stannus in unsparing terms. If the British were seeking peace, he instructed, then they should understand that peace had conditions. And as he declared to Stannus, he would be an arbiter of those conditions.[68] His actions against Qatif, Rahmah explained how, in his view, his actions against Qatif were justified and legitimate. They were not, as he stated, plunder (*nahb*).[69] He understood himself as leading a confederation of peoples whose rights to this space were well known. And Qatif was important for his confederation, he noted, because it was a critical source of revenue. The commercial flows that girded his confederation, as with the politics and economy of the Gulf more broadly, were maritime. Rahmah asserted for the British that he would continue to defend those who moved about by sea and ended by differentiating himself from other types of Arab leaders. He was not just a ruler of a country. He was a ruler of country and of sea (*balad wa baḥr*).[70] Rahmah died in a battle at sea with the Al Khalifah months after writing the letter just cited.

## Conclusion

Today, Rahmah bin Jabir remains something of a legendary figure in the Gulf. He is frequently the subject of conversation and debate on Arabic social media and the subject of some popular historical fiction.[71] Though born in present-day Kuwait, the Qataris claim him as their own, with an exhibition for him in their national museum. Whether considered Kuwaiti or Qatari, that some Arabs today are debating him as part of their states'

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[66] Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

[67] Thomas, *Selections*, 18.

[68] Rahmah bin Jabir to Colonel Stannus, dated Rabi al-Awwal 25, 1241/6 November 1825. National Museum of Qatar, Gallery 8, Building the Nation.

[69] Rahmah bin Jabir to Colonel Stannus, dated Rabi al-Awwal 21, 1241/2 November 1825. National Museum of Qatar, Gallery 8, Building the Nation.

[70] Rahmah bin Jabir to Colonel Stannus, dated Rabi al-Awwal 25, 1241/6 November 1825. National Museum of Qatar, Gallery 8, Building the Nation.

[71] As one example, Rahmah is the main character of the historical fiction novel in both Arabic and English *The Corsair* [*Al-Qurṣān*]: Abdulaziz Al-Mahmoud, *The Corsair*, trans. Amira Noweira (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013); ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Āl Maḥmūd, *Al-Qurṣān* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011).

historical legacies reflects an important dimension of the Gulf from around 1770-1830. Rahmah was part of a world in which local peoples were forging the beginnings of what would ultimately become many of the Arabian Peninsula's present-day states. Rahmah might never have identified himself on behalf of a particular national identity, but his diplomatic dealings, his discriminating use of force, and his political and commercial ties were all ingredients for any state-building process. In the fields of Middle East studies and world history, Arabia and the Gulf have tended to be overlooked, most especially across the hundred years from 1750-1850. There is dynamic and exceptional work on the Gulf before the contemporary era. Much of Gulf history, however, tends to be overwhelmed by the contemporary-era historiography. Gulf studies tends to be overwhelmingly viewed through the prism of contemporary geopolitics and security studies.

Rahmah, however, is one figure who can help add to dynamic work on the Gulf and Western Indian Ocean showing more entangled, textured histories, histories that nuance our understandings of the British Empire as much as the emergences of Gulf states and societies. There is an entire history to why James Silk Buckingham qualified his description of Rahmah as a tolerated terror. While Buckingham reflexively labelled him a pirate – though qualified – Buckingham's counterparts in the British government and East India Company knew him as something more, though they struggled to conceptualize it. This is not a historian's abstraction. The British Resident William Bruce made this clear, when he admitted that Rahmah's conduct was "extraordinary" and that he did not know how to describe it. The British knew how to describe piracy; they perhaps struggled more to describe the emergence of states and political actors who used the very presence of the British to augment their own agencies.

Understanding Rahmah as a political entrepreneur thus helps elucidate his strategic manipulation of power in the Gulf in the first half of the nineteenth century. He not only raided ships and plundered their cargoes – he also actively engaged with various regional powers through protracted negotiations and sometimes even influencing them. Understanding him as a political entrepreneur does more than correct the notion that he was a pirate; indeed, this article has shown that in his own lifetime the British understood him as something different from a pirate. The lens of a political entrepreneur might better capture Rahmah's life as one of seeking to build and shape the political order around him, rather than merely disrupt it. Rahmah thus helps historians continue to show a more textured, horizonal and entangled Gulf in which the British can be clearly seen as understanding themselves as one actor among many others in what remained a contested political and commercial world.[72] As Rahmah shows, local peoples continued to shape their own worlds into the third decade of the nineteenth century, and arguably longer. Rahmah's life and the worlds he moved between make tangible a classic characterization of the age of revolutions: a thickening of commercial ties leading to greater interpenetration of states, societies, and empires and of collaborations as well as collisions among their agents.[73]

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[72] This statement is not an entirely new understanding of the period. It harkens to an older debate about an earlier period, before 1750, in which Sanjay Subrahmanyam labeled the Indian Ocean arena an "age of contained conflict" in which actors competed, sometimes quite violently, but violence nonetheless remained bounded without one clear hegemon. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500-1650*, Cambridge South Asian Studies (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 252. Subrahmanyam was responding to Holden Furber's contention that the period and space might be interpreted as an age of "partnership." The immediate point here is that Subrahmanyam's idea of contained violence might be extended further into the nineteenth century. See Holden Furber, "Asia and the West as Partners before 'Empire' and After," *Journal of Asian Studies* XXVIII, no. 4 (1969): 711–21; Blair B. Kling and Michael N. Pearson, eds., *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1979).

[73] Armitage and Subrahmanyam, *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, xix.

By now, many historians have acknowledged the problems with the label of piracy. A vast literature has shown how often it was superfluously applied by European imperial agents – some of whom, of course, were historians – to groups or persons resisting or existing in opposition to European imperial agendas.[74] The British labelled such persons *hostis humani generis* – enemies of mankind. For the British in the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, Rahmah was no such thing. He was, in fact, a partner – as this article has shown, the British might never have fully understood Rahmah, but they nonetheless worked with him. Rahmah thus opens a window into seeing a difference between how British officials in the first decades of the nineteenth century conceived of this space versus how, in the twentieth century, this space was depicted as part of an imagined *Pax Britannica.* This period of Gulf history has already been understood as a period of political turbulence. It is also conventionally followed by an era of British hegemony beginning already in 1820.[75] One point of this article has been that paying more attention to local persons and reading their histories in English-language sources more critically might allow historians to revise their understanding of nineteenth-century Arabian peninsula and Gulf history in ways that texture the notion of British supremacy.

Buckingham's notion of a tolerated terror makes tangible the conceptualization of Rahmah as a political entrepreneur, a person who strategically moved between political alliances to maintain his own agency and the agencies of his followers. In this global age of revolutions, Rahmah was one central actor. Historians of the Gulf might begin to borrow more from the framework of an age of revolutions to extend the histories of the region's present-day states earlier, and beyond what tends to remain an imperialist tribes-oil-religion framework holding that the space's modern history begins in the twentieth century. As suggested in this article, the peoples with him Rahmah interacted in the Gulf were taking part in broader processes that can be seen as the earliest iterations of state formation, within the even broader context of an age of revolutions. Rahmah stands as one more figure through whom historians can continue piecing together an age of revolutions that is more than Europe's emergence into modernity, one that highlights a complex and vibrant history of negotiation, endurance, and resiliency.

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[74] Stefan Eklöf Amirell, Hans Hägerdal, and Bruce Buchan, eds., *Piracy in World History*, Maritime Humanities, 1400-1800 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

[75] David Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); James Onley, "Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820-1971: The Politics of Protection," *Center for International and Regional Studies* Occasional Paper No. 4 (2009): 1–54.