

Linda Blandford

OIL SHEIKHS

**Inside the supercharged world
of the petrodollar**



OIL SHEIKHS

One summer in the early '70s, a chauffeur spent two months driving a Saudi Arabian prince around in his brand new £12,000 Rolls Royce Corniche. On the day His Highness left, that chauffeur drove him to the airport. He checked him in and asked what he was to do with the car. 'Keep it,' came the answer.

To the prince it was a gesture in keeping with his culture; largesse to those who serve well. To the chauffeurs of London it was something to dream about. To the gaping airline staff, it merely confirmed the image of Arabs as idiots with too much money.

Exchange Rates

For the sake of continuity (inflation etc.), I have found the available rates of exchange in the middle of buying and selling prices for the time I was in Arabia (i.e. 17 November 1975).

£1 sterling is equal to:

Saudi Arabian riyal 7.25

Bahraini dinar 0.809

Kuwaiti dinar 0.601

Qatari riyal 8.09

United Arab Emirate dirham 8.09

Chronology

[AD]

- c. 571 birth of Muhammed
- 622 flight of Muhammed from Mecca to Medina (the Hegira) – commencement of Arab calendar
- 632 death of Muhammed, beginning of Caliphate
- c. 638–643 Arab (Muslim) conquest of Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt
- c. 661–715 conquest of Spain, North Africa and Central Asia
- 1099 fall of Jerusalem to Crusaders
- c. 1498 Vasco da Gama sails round Cape of Good Hope – European fleets first appear in Red Sea
- 1516 Ottoman victory over whole of Caliphate
- 1744 alliance between Muhammed bin Saud, petty chief in Najd, and al-Wahhab, puritanical Muslim revivalist
- 1766 al-Sabah family arrives in Kuwait
- 1789 al-Khalifa family arrives in Bahrain
- 1798–1839 British treaties of protection with Gulf sheikhdoms
- 1803–05 Wahhabis capture Mecca and Medina from Ottomans – al-Saud family power begins
- 1901 Ibn Saud captures Riyadh
- 1917 King Husein and Lawrence of Arabia lead Arab revolt against Ottomans
- 1917 Balfour Declaration
- 1919–30 battles for control of Saudi Arabia between King Husein of the Hijaz and Ibn Saud and Wahhabis
- 1922 Oil struck in Saudi Arabia
- 1927 Ibn Saud king of Saudi Arabia
- 1930–38 Oil struck in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar
- 1933 American oil company concession agreement with Saudi Arabia
- 1948 state of Israel recognised by UN
- 1949 Sheikh Rashid becomes ruler of Dubai

x/Oil Sheikhs

- 1953** death of Ibn Saud
- 1960** OPEC formed
- 1961** Kuwait becomes independent sheikhdom
- 1964** King Saud deposed – brother Faisal becomes king
- 1966** Sheikh Zayyid becomes ruler of Abu Dhabi
- 1967** Aden becomes communist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
- 1970-1** British withdraw from the Gulf
- 1971** Bahrain and Qatar become independent sheikhdoms
- 1971** United Arab Emirates formed by federation of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain and Fujairah
- 1971** Sheikh Sultan becomes ruler of Sharjah
- 1972** Ras al-Khaimah joins UAE
- 1972** Sheikh Khalifa becomes ruler of Qatar
- 1975** Assassination of King Faisal – brother Khaled succeeds

Acknowledgements

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I doubt that I would have finished it without the encouragement of Christopher Falkus (in particular), Susan Loden, George Seddon, Pearson Phillips, Tony Smith, Lynn Harrell and Mrs E. Pendlebury. I would also like to thank Andrew Barrow who helped me with research in London.

That I started it at all is due to Larry Hughes of William Morrow, whose idea it was, to Giles Gordon, who persuaded me to do it and to the *Observer* newspaper, who gave me leave of absence at short notice.

Many people helped me in London, New York and the Arab countries I visited. They are too numerous for me to name them and I know that most of them would rather I did not. I am grateful to them all.

I am especially grateful to my parents. I understood their concern and appreciated their interest.

L.B.

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Prologue

The task of the poet, in Arab tradition, is to eat at the great man's table and after dinner to compose a eulogy. He honours his host's beauty and heroism and makes no mention of warts or deficiencies.

I lost no opportunity while I was researching this book to explain that I am no traditional poet, merely a curious journalist.

I scattered letters of intent across Arabia like confetti. They contained a variation on the statement, and I quote, 'there is a need to explain, in personal and human terms, a world that is concealed from us by ignorance, self-interest and even fear.'

The ignorance is largely of the Arabs' making. They don't encourage independent Western journalists, except by express invitation. The Herculean task of squeezing a visa out of Saudi Arabia nearly put an end to the whole enterprise. The self-interest is ours. In the West (I say after browsing through ten years' of press coverage of the area), we look to the oil-rich Arab nations only for what they can best do to serve our purposes. The fear really got going after the Middle-East war in October 1973, oil embargoes and price rises. Western industrialised societies discovered that they were vulnerable. Oil sheikhs have been accorded the blame for practically everything bad that has happened to us since and were hated as our new overlords.

Bemused by political causes, pros and cons and prognoses of oil reserves, some of us wanted to know who these people were. I had the chance to go and find out. Horrendous tales of corporation presidents having nowhere to sleep prepared me for a life of physical misery; I was also acutely aware that I couldn't afford to pay for hotel accommodation if I found it. I asked some governments to bale me out of this predicament. 'If you could help . . .' I said, not specifying, but hinting hard. By the way of

an insurance policy, I had stand-by sofas belonging to acquaintances' acquaintances and a conviction that 'something would turn up'.

This conviction is shared by every journalist who has spent enough years travelling. I've landed in too many countries without a suitcase or a contact (one newspaper expected me to bring my passport to work every morning as a matter of course). Naturally I assumed that 'something will turn up'. It always has. Arabia was no different only more generous. In the desert in the old days they offered the traveller coffee, food, a bed and wouldn't murder him for three days. After that he was on his own. For weeks I was given hotel rooms, cars and hospitality such as I have met nowhere else in the world. The trip cost Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah (the seven oil autocracies most of us mean when we say 'Arab oil states') a considerable amount of money. Gulf Air gave me free tickets. I'm not playing poet when I say that I, for one, found travelling with them almost trouble free (Saudia is another story) despite the ominous warning from their London office: 'You're seeing us at our best here.'

Someone has asked me how I met the people you'll meet in this book. I can't explain. It's that optimism again. For sanity's sake, every journalist has to believe that there are people all over the world wanting to be friendly enough to make an assignment possible. (Sanity? There are only two clichés known to good news editors: 'Don't complain, don't explain' and 'There's no such word as can't'.)

Two problems haunted the trip. Firstly, I expected regimented programmes of desalination plants and experimental farms and had no intention of going along with them. There were no such programmes: I was allowed a freedom that I'm told is unique.

The other problem never went away. In order to get there at all one fact had to be concealed. My being Jewish turned out to be something of a strain. But it was what made the journey personally important. I felt that it mattered for me, and others like me, to accept and understand the Arabs, not as 'Arabs' with all the emotive connotation of the word, but as human beings.

Human beings don't lend themselves to eulogies, even in the countries that this book is about. These countries are the ones that give rise to the stereotype of the oil-rich Arab getting down from the camel and into the Cadillac, off-loading his wealth around the world. They're the ones with almost feudal autocratic rulers, plus so much oil and so few people that they have large petrodollar surpluses.

Of the other oil giants, Iran is Muslim but not Arab; Iraq is socialist. They both have nearly forty million people apiece. The significance of these differences became more apparent as I went along.

I didn't set out to complete a definite analytical survey. Each person and each group of people in this book represents one aspect of their country's rich society. All I've tried to do is to work out what those Arab sheikhs are doing in London, their new gathering centre: I wanted to clamber into the walled gardens of Arabia and find out what life feels like to the men, and particularly the women, who are trying to get by on those oil millions.

I've done what I wanted, but I fear that despite all my attempts to explain this book as I went along, Arabs still regard a journalist as a modern poet and therefore a eulogist. That's one responsibility I can't accept. One responsibility I did accept, however, was the confidence of certain individuals who talked to me. In some cases I have had to change names and camouflage identities. I hope the words speak for themselves.

History: 571 and all that

What the average Westerner could dredge up from memory of Arab history can be summed up as: crusades, caravanserai, camels and corsairs.

For centuries, the Arab world never meant much more to Europe than a wave of foreigners (invaders or pirates) splashing on its shores. Otherwise it was just a land block between the old world and the fabled wares of China and India. It was always on the way