

Commins, David: *The Gulf States. A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris 2012. ISBN: 978-1-84885-278-5; 320 S.

Rezensiert von: Annika Kropf, Wien

Among the recently published modern histories of the Gulf states, David Commins' (Dickinson College, Pennsylvania) book is probably the most ambitious one. „The Gulf States. A Modern History“ sets out to cover the smaller Gulf states as well as Iran, Iraq, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The attribute „modern“ does not seem to limit his framework either: After a short glance at the first settlements in the region, he starts with early Islamic times and works his way chronologically through the centuries to the present.

The first chapter deals with the schism of the Shia and the Sunna and the first caliphs, followed by short accounts of the Umayyads and Abbasids. The scope of this historical introduction illustrates quite well what Commins identifies as a problem of Gulf history: „While the Gulf has witnessed a parade of empires, it has never spawned its own major power.“ (p. 2)

After the gradual decline of Abbasid power, this becomes even more pronounced in the third chapter, when the Ottomans rose to power and the Portuguese attempted to control trade in the Gulf. Portuguese power peaked in 1600, just before the British and the Dutch East India Companies established trading posts.

The fourth chapter deals with the heterogeneous influence of the Ottomans on the Gulf, but also Great Britain's slow rise to power after a period of difficulties that had discouraged the Dutch. The era of turmoil between 1720 to 1820 also saw the rise of the Qajars in Persia as well as the foundations of various local dynasties which, partly, rule up to date. In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism became a major religious movement.

From 1820 to 1920 (chapter 5) Britain finally secured her power by treaties which laid the foundations for the Trucial system. In this context, Commins also dedicates several pages to slavery and its importance for the Gulf economies. While he had hitherto used empires and foreign powers of influence to

structure his chapters, he now refers to the precursors of the Gulf countries today.

This tendency continues in chapter 6 (1920-56), which deals with state formation after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Increasingly, Commins discusses political and social developments within the single countries, but also border conflicts which were exacerbated by oil discoveries and the oil concessions.

From 1956 to 1971 (chapter 7), the region underwent deep changes due to the rise of Arab nationalism, which inspired a series of revolutions in Iraq and fear in the other monarchies. This period saw more movements for popular participation, but also threats from other regional powers like Egypt. Partly as a reaction, the governments initiated developments plans from above and turned citizenship into a privilege by distributing oil income. Labour migration started to change the demographic landscape of the Gulf.

The early 1970s (chapter 8) changed the appearance of the region within a few years. In Oman Sultan Qaboos deposed his father and ended the Dhufar conflict. Britain had announced her retreat from the region and seven of the now independent emirates sought more security by forming the United Arab Emirates. Qatar and Bahrain could have joined in as well, but decided against, one reason being the potential preponderance of the extremely oil rich emirate of Abu Dhabi.

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by two natural resource windfalls (1973/74, 1979-81), but also by the drop of the oil price in the mid-eighties. The income from oil was mainly spent on modernization which came along with a better standard of living but also with Islamist critique. Furthermore, two events shook the region heavily: The Iranian revolution stirred unrest through the age-old transnational Shia-networks. In 1980, conflicts with Iraq caused a devastating war between the two old rivals which did not end until 1988. Economically and financially weakened by the war, Saddam Hussein nevertheless invaded Kuwait in 1990 and may have thought to get away with this. However, he provoked an unforeseen coalition of Arab and Western powers.

In his ninth and last chapter, Commins explains how Saddam Hussein managed

nonetheless to stay in power until 2003 and how terrorism was instrumental in the decision to overthrow him. The account of the aftermath of the war is both a description of US American rising involvement in the Gulf and its underlying miscalculations. Hitherto suppressed Iraqi groups started to fight each other and the „occupation“.

In Iran, the dire economic situation after the war against Iraq called for pragmatic reform, but reform was mostly blocked by conservative clerics. The rift between reformers and religious hardliners dominates not only Iran, but other Gulf states, too. Rulers are faced with an Islamic but also a liberal opposition and both demand more participation. Apart from Kuwait, however, elected representatives have not reached a true say in politics.

David Commins' detailed and profound knowledge pervades the entire book. To be sure, he deals a lot with rulers and struggles for succession, but also with economic, religious and social issues. The discussion of religious currents and ideologies prepares the reader for a deeper understanding of the various predicaments in the region. Moreover, Commins does not miss to include ongoing scholarly debates such as the often assumed „decline of the Ottoman empire“. Altogether he offers a comprehensive state of the art.

What could be the advantage of a book covering eight countries and fourteen centuries compared to modern histories with a smaller scope? Naturally, it seems to be an advantage to have all in just one book, but this comes at a price: the narrative is dense and rather hard to read. This is especially true for the first half of the book, while the chapters on the recent past are less concentrated. Only very few direct quotes enliven the text: In total, Commins' book only contains six notes and a comparatively short bibliography with the major publications on the Gulf.

Yet, such a comprehensive approach could yield similarities and recurrent themes in the Gulf which would go unnoticed in separate histories. Given the regional repercussions of many events, most notably Arab nationalism and the Iranian revolution, it was more than once of advantage to have the view on the entire region. Furthermore, Commins in-

deed carves out several commonalities and continuities although he does so in an unsystematic way: Usually, there is one summarizing paragraph at the beginning of each chapter, while the amount of details would justify a summary at the end of each chapter. It is only in his final conclusion that Commins names three common threads: the importance of trading, multilingualism and migration, while the latter has shifted from the traditional nomadism to labour migration. Contrasting with these continuities are the stunning social and economic developments namely the affluence, the welfare systems and the rapid educational progress.

At the very end, Commins provides a summary on three levels. On the global level, the USA have replaced Great Britain as the most important external power. On the regional level, Iran and Iraq, hitherto the leading powers, face competition from Saudi Arabia. On the national level, the rentier system prevails but to a different degree and the bargain for participation is ongoing.

To sum up, it requires concentration and endurance to read these 300 pages, but especially those readers who are familiar with one or two Gulf countries only will certainly benefit a lot.

HistLit 2012-3-006 / Annika Kropf über Commins, David: *The Gulf States. A Modern History*. London 2012, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 03.07.2012.