

Speaking With Their Own Voices

Speaking With Their Own Voices:
The Stories of Slaves in the Persian Gulf
in the 20th Century

By

Jerzy Zdanowski

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5884-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5884-7

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INTRODUCTION

On the 8th of June 1907, a man of approximately 30 years of age appealed at the British Political Agency in Kuwait, stating that his name was Abdullah and he had been a slave for the previous three years in the house of a Kuwaiti by the name of Abdulaziz bin Fahad. He claimed that he had been abducted from Abyssinia and brought over land to Jeddah, Mecca, and finally Kuwait. Abdullah's master had married him to a female slave, with whom he had a son. The petitioner stressed that a year before, the French Consul at Berbera in Somaliland had set him free, and his manumission papers had been left behind in Berbera. His master, however, had persuaded him to return with the false promise that he would be a free man and allowed to work to support his wife and child. As soon as he reached Kuwait, his master reinstated him as his slave and decided to sell him. Abdullah asked the British Agency to help him flee Kuwait and return to Berbera where he had a sister, among other relatives. However, he failed to produce any evidence to corroborate his story. S.G. Knox, the British Political Agent in Kuwait, summoned Abdulaziz bin Fahad, a man around 60 years old, who came at once. After hearing Abdullah's statement he had decided that the story regarding the French Consul was a lie, but that the claim was otherwise true. Abdulaziz, however, claimed that the man had previously been a trusted servant but had proved to be dishonest, thus he had him removed from his property. As nothing further seemed to be required, the Agent proposed that the two simply parted ways. Abdulaziz bin Fahad, however, requested the divorce of Abdullah from his wife, also Abdulaziz's slave. Abdullah agreed to do this in the presence of two witnesses.¹

The compromise above solved the problem, but it put the British official in a delicate position. Great Britain had no Slave Treaty with the Sheikh of Kuwait and granting manumission certificates in Kuwait could be seen as interfering in local law. It was always the custom with regard to the manumission of slaves to inform the territorial authorities of all events

¹ "Copy of a letter No. 275, dated the 8th June 1907, from the Political Agent, Kuwait, to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Bushire," India Office Records (hereafter as IOR): R/15/1/213 5/183 (D 31) *Manumission of slaves at Kuwait, 22 Oct. 1907-21 April 1909.*

pro forma, and in response the Sheikh of Kuwait would summon the subjects concerned for an interview process. The British Agent always applied for a joint hearing to be held and was represented by himself or a representative. If the case was a clear incidence of true slavery and cruelty, the Agent asked the Sheikh for acquiescence in issuing a manumission certificate. Otherwise, the Sheikh possessed the power to return a slave back to his master. The general instruction to British Agents in Kuwait discouraged allowing local slaves to take refuge at the British Agency, and told them to refer all refugee slaves directly to the Sheikh.²

Knox was sure that in the instance of Abdullah, after the referral of his case to the Sheikh, he would be returned to his master. He did not complain of ill-treatment and had no serious fear of harm coming to him. Furthermore, he appeared to be dishonest. Throughout the case his master behaved with the “the utmost moderation and liberality.” The British Agent even admitted that Abdullah was better dressed than his master. Therefore, the best resolution would be to grant a manumission paper to Abdullah upon his arrival at Bushire, on the Persian coast, and to encourage Abdullah not to pass back through Kuwait. A decision was reached to send Abdullah on the H.M.S. *Lapwing* to the British Residency in Bushire with a letter requesting that a standard manumission certificate be granted to him. However, the story does not conclude there. Abdullah was evidently not interested in obtaining his liberty from the Political Resident at Bushire. He informed Knox that he had some business to do in Kuwait and therefore did not want to leave Kuwait until autumn, when he would sail on one of the trading ships. The British official informed the slave that if he stayed in Kuwait he would be in danger of re-enslavement and that he must not complain to the Agency again as he had been given a fair chance of obtaining his freedom. Nevertheless, Abdullah stood by his decision to remain for some months in Kuwait.³

² “Copy of a letter No. 1960, dated the 8th September 1907, from the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Bushire, to the Political Agent, Koweit,” IOR: R/15/1/213 5/183 (D 31) *Manumission of slaves at Kuwait, 22 Oct 1907-21 April 1909*.

³ “Copy of a letter No. 282, dated the 10th June 1907, from the Political Agent, Koweit, to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Bushire,” IOR: R/15/1/213 5/183 (D 31) *Manumission of slaves at Kuwait, 22 Oct. 1907-21 April 1909*.

There was no recourse other than referring the case to the Sheikh. However, the case settled itself, for Abdullah, of his own free will, returned to his master and no longer desired a manumission certificate.⁴

This story reflects the nature of slavery in the Persian Gulf during the early 20th century in terms of it being a relatively soft type of slavery, the complex strategies of slaves hoping for freedom, the attitudes of their masters, the policies of local Rulers, and British involvement in the eradication of slave traffic and trade.

This book pertains to slavery and manumission in the region of the Persian Gulf during the first half of the 20th century. The British in Egypt, Hejaz and elsewhere employed the practice of liberating slaves. Furthermore, the release of slaves was a part of Islamic teaching and Islam prescribed several methods of manumission. However, the situation in the Gulf during the first half of the 20th century was unique, as a slave who applied for British manumission had to produce a written statement describing the circumstances of their enslavement as well as the reasons that they were absconding from their masters. Over the course of my research, I discovered approximately 1,000 statements produced by slaves in the archives of the India Office in London. Analysis of these statements sheds light on various aspects of social, economic and political life on the shores of the Persian Gulf. It allows us to answer some questions fundamental to understanding the history of Arabian Peninsula societies, in particular the role of slave labour in the pearl industry, and the nature of slavery on the Arabian shore; also the social practice of slavery as it conformed to the religious norms of the region, and, during the period concerned, the British system of manumission and attempting to eradicate slavery in the region.

The intention of this book is to provide the slaves with a direct voice and present in full several hundred of their statements. A striking aspect of the majority of studies on slavery is that they provide us with excellent statistics, describe the mechanism of enslavement, the slave trading routes, and the economic and social conditions of enslaved people, but throughout these studies the slaves remain anonymous. Anonymity of slaves in the records is repeatedly stressed in many historical studies, articles and publications. The novelty of this book is in presenting the issue of slavery in the words of the slaves themselves. They are no longer anonymous, but

⁴ “Copy of a letter No. 374, dated the 14th June 1907, from the Political Agent, Kuwait, to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Bushire,” IOR: R/15/1/213 5/183 (D 31) *Manumission of slaves at Kuwait, 22 Oct. 1907-21 April 1909*.

known by the names given in their statements, which were made at various British Agencies in the Persian Gulf. The procedure of manumission by the British in the Gulf required that applicants for a certificate of freedom produce written statements describing the circumstances of their enslavement and the reasons that they had absconded from their masters. These procedures were instated to secure social and political stability in the region, which was vital for British interests in the East. As a result, we have at our disposal a vast amount of material on slavery. Thus, in comparison with other studies on slavery in the Arab world, this book is unique by virtue of its exposing the life stories of several hundred slaves, no longer held in silence and speaking on their own behalf, unlike in most studies on slavery.

The statements are presented to readers in five sections, each titled according to the manner of enslavement, ethnic affiliation and sex of the applicants for freedom. Each section begins with a short introduction and then multiple statements, with commentary, are provided.

The narration begins with some general issues relating to slavery in the region of the Arabian Peninsula as well as the Persian Gulf, and the British manumission policy in the Persian Gulf. The narration accentuates the fact that slavery was an integral part of the social system in these Arabian societies. As for the British policy of manumission, it incorporated two goals: making African and Asian people free, and strengthening political positions in the region.

Chapter II concerns the kidnapping and enslavement of people in various places in Arabia. The majority of these people were Africans and children kidnapped while their parents were on pilgrimage. The next group was composed of Yemenis who were abducted by Bedouins. These stories refer to the slave trade, slave traffic between Africa and Arabia and between the Western and Eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula; they also refer to local economic systems and social relations.

Chapter III presents a group of slaves born into slavery. In the period under discussion, they were the most numerous and common, present in almost every household. The statements of these people exemplify relations between slaves and their owners and explain the reasons that they absconded from their masters. They often refer to the position of slaves according to Islam and to the social practice, which was in many cases contradictory to those religious norms.

Chapter IV pertains to male slaves. They were labourers in households and palm-tree gardens, porters, and camel-drivers as well as cattle herdsman. Some of them were allowed to work on their own and share profits with their masters. The stories reveal the system of the slaves'

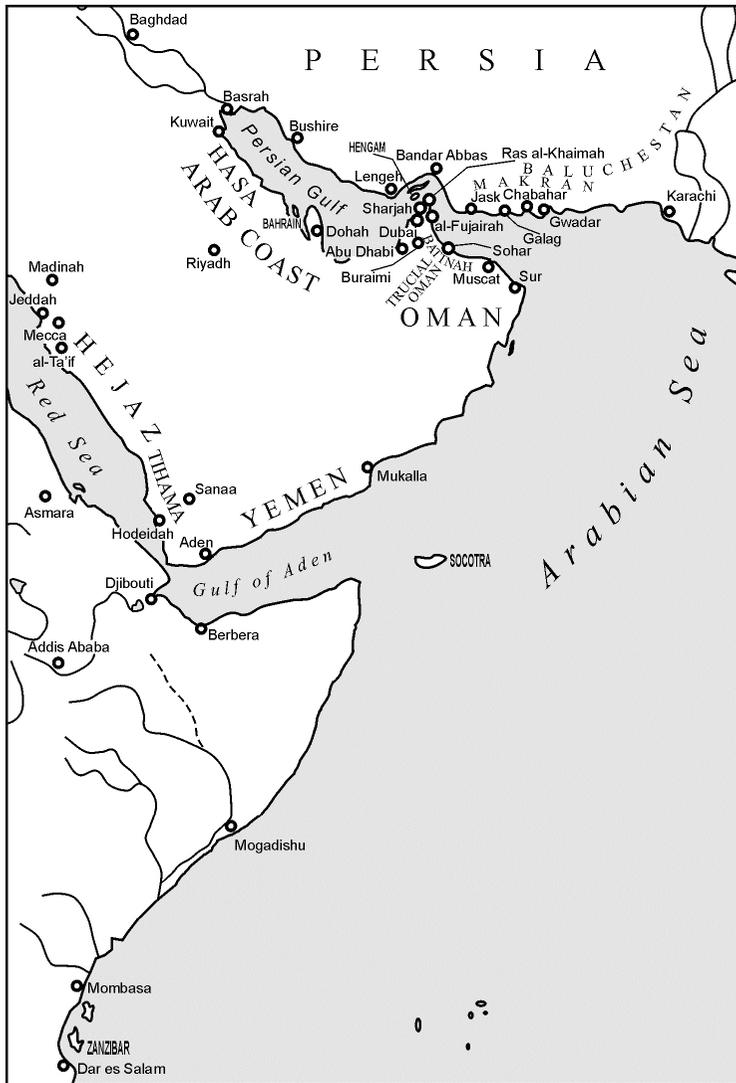
rights and the masters' obligations towards the slaves. However, the majority of slaves were actually divers. Pearl-diving was the primary industry and the core of the social system. Around four hundred and fifty male applicants for manumission were divers and this occupation was dominant among male slaves. They described the pearl-diving system, including the question of debts, and the position of slaves engaged in diving. Periodically, multiple statements refer to the same applicant due to doubt imposed by British Agents about the reliability of information found in a statement. Occasionally, there were lies within the stories told to British officials, due to strategies adopted by the slaves. Many free divers fabricated stories about being slaves to avoid paying debts to the merchants who invested in pearl diving. The material contained in statements by slave divers allows for argument against the common opinion that all divers engaged in pearl diving were slaves.

Chapter V is about female slaves. There were approximately three hundred women asking for manumission. They generally claimed to be servants and only a few declared that they had been their masters' concubines. Sexual relations between slave girls and their masters were common according to indirect information. Special attention is given in this chapter to the issues of secondary marriages and concubinage and the position of offspring born to a slave mother and a free father. Some females mentioned quarrels between themselves and the wives of their masters, as well as hostility towards them from their masters' wives based upon jealousy. The statements provide proof that they were beaten, divorced against their will and separated from their children. Separation from their children was the main cause of female slaves absconding.

Chapter VI deals with the Baluchi people of Persian Baluchestan, called Makran. This country became the main supplier of slaves to Arabia during the 1930s. They were free people, but of a lower class, kidnapped from their villages, sold by petty headmen or by their families in a time of famine. The enslavement of free Muslims was a contradiction to the Law of Islam and some *mullas* of Makran gave frequent remonstrance, but the local rulers ignored them.

This book is based upon archival material contained within the India Office Records archives kept in the British Library. The documents used in this study were produced by the Political Residency of the Persian Gulf in Bushire, the locations of its Agencies being Bahrain, Kuwait, Sharjah and Muscat; by the Government of India, which was responsible for the administration of the Persian Gulf; and by the India Office in London. The records of the British Residency in the Persian Gulf are available in the reference section R/15/1 followed by the Agencies: Bahrain, R/15/2,

Sharjah, R/15/4, Kuwait, R/15/5 and Muscat, R/15/6. I am grateful to the British Library for granting me permission to transcribe the statements into my text.



The Arabian Sea Region



The same certificate - English part

CHAPTER ONE

SLAVES' PRESENCE IN THE PERSIAN GULF AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Slaves were imported to the Persian Gulf mainly from East Africa. Estimates of the total number of slaves kidnapped or bought in East Africa in the 19th century and then exported abroad vary significantly. Most estimates of the number of slaves who passed from the coast of Zanzibar to various points North each year for the period between 1800 and 1870 range from 6,000 to 20,000. Between 1870 and 1876, the year the slave trade was abolished in Zanzibar, 300,000 slaves were sent to the island and to Arabia, the Persian Gulf and India. These figures give the total of East African Arab slaves as 1,257,100.¹ Higher estimates reported that over two million slaves were sent abroad from Zanzibar between 1830 and 1873, when the export of slaves by ship was forbidden.² The second source of slave import was the upper Nile valley and Abyssinia. Approximately half a million people from these regions were taken to Egypt, and another half a million to ports on the Red Sea for export to Arabia and the Persian Gulf. The great majority of these slaves were youths under fifteen years of age, and most of them were girls. European travelers recounted in their diaries that slaves were to be seen practically everywhere in Arabia. Jean Louis Burckhardt, who travelled with a slave caravan from Shendi to Suakin in the early 19th century, stated that some 5,000 slaves passed through these towns annually. He admitted that slave girls were commonly prostituted by the slave traders.³ In 1838, for instance, an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 slaves were arriving in Egypt alone each year, and while some of them were bound for domestic service

¹ See M. Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World*, (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), firstly published as *L'Esclavage dans le monde arabe* (Paris: Edition Robert Laffont, 1987), 187-6.

² See G. Campbell, "Introduction," in G. Campbell (ed.) *Abolition and its Aftermath in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.

³ See Gordon, *Slavery*, 184-5.

there, or for export to undertake similar service, others were destined for use as concubines, construction and factory workers, porters, dockers, clerks, soldiers, and cultivators.⁴ Charles M. Doughty, who travelled to Central Arabia in the 1880s, recounted that African slaves were brought up to Arabia every year with *hajj*. He met many slaves from Abyssinia who told him that “in their country were trunks of wild coffee-trees great as oaks”.⁵

In the 19th century, slaves came to the Persian Gulf primarily from East Africa via the Omani ports of Sur and Muscat, and to a lesser degree via the small Arabian ports of Sharjah, Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah. Direct slave trading between the Persian Gulf ports of Bandar Abbas, Lingeh (Lengeh), Ras al-Khaimah and Basrah also occurred. Many slaves were eventually taken to Turkey, Persia, Sind, and the territories on the Western coast of India. Male slaves were used in a great variety of ways; as soldiers, farm labourers, crop workers, irrigation canal workers, pearl divers, fishermen, maritime sailors, dock workers, porters and domestic servants in towns and villages on the both sides of the Gulf. The role of imported female slaves was the same as it had been in previous centuries; they functioned as domestic servants or concubines.⁶

They served ordinary people as well as Sheikhs and rulers. In 1928, a slave called Abdullah bin Said reported to the British Agency in Bahrain and declared that he was born in Nubia and kidnapped by slave dealers when he was two years old, and then brought to Mecca. He was bought and sold several times, but ended up in the service of Sharif Hussain of Mecca. He was a shepherd, a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. He gave ill-treatment as his reason for running away from his master.⁷

The estimations of J. Lorimer, made in 1904, show that the African presence in the Persian Gulf littoral varied from one per cent in Basrah to 11 per cent in Kuwait, 25 per cent in Muscat and Matrah and 28 per cent on the Trucial Coast. The total number of slaves can be estimated as

⁴ R. Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2001), 60.

⁵ Ch. M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, with an Introduction by T. E. Lawrence, vol. I–II, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979, first published in 1888), vol. I, 603; vol. II, 250, 289.

⁶ Abdul Sheriff, “The slave trade and its fallout in the Persian Gulf,” in G. Campbell (ed.), *Abolition*, 104-5.

⁷ “Statement of slave Abdullah bin Said, about 30 years of age, recorded at the Political Agency, Bahrain, on the 3rd March 1928,” India Office Records: R/15/1 204 5/161 III *Manumission of slaves in Bahrain: individual cases, on the 28th of Dec. 1924-14th of Dec .1929* (hereafter cited as IOR:).

36,880 out of a total of 253,000, which gives the average percentage of 14.5 per cent for the region (including Basrah, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Trucial Coast, Lingeh, and Muscat and Matrah).⁸ Ricks gives lower proportions; in his view, between 1722 and 1902 the African population of East African origin constituted 6.3 per cent of the total population. On the other hand, Austen's opinion is that the general rate of slaves for the region was 10 per cent.⁹

The emancipation of this African population had been practiced according to Islamic teachings since the very beginning of Islam. Although Islam did not abolish slavery, it recommended freeing slaves as an act of piety and charity.¹⁰ A man who emancipated a slave and gave him a manumission certificate was considered a man of exceptional piety. The freed slaves enjoyed the legal rights of free-born people, but their former masters remained their patrons. Manumission was accomplished by a formal declaration on the part of the master and recorded on a certificate which was given to the freed slaves.

Manumission was practiced before pilgrimage.

Statement made by Belal bin Khamis aged about 30 years. Recorded on 19th Rabi-al-Thani 1344 (= 6-11-25) at Sharjah

I and my mother were inherited by his daughter Muzah. My mother died about 10 years ago and I remained with the said woman. When she wanted to go on pilgrimage she called a priest and asked him to write a manumission certificate for me. He wrote the certificate on which the *Qadhi* of Debai and other people wrote their evidence.¹¹

⁸ Calculations of Abdul Sheriff based on Lorimer estimations, Abdul Sheriff, "The slave," 111. See J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and the central Arabia*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, Parts 1-2, 1908-1915), Part 2: *Geographical*, 2228-2236.

⁹ See Th. M. Ricks, "Slaves and Slave Traders in the Persian Gulf, 18th and 19th Centuries: An Assessment," in W. G. Clarence-Smith (ed.), *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London and Totowa, N.J.: Frank Cass, 1989), 60; R. Austin, "The 19th Century Islamic Slave Trade from East African (Swahili and Red Sea Coast): A Tentative Census," in W. G. Clarence-Smith (ed.) *The Economics*, 21-44; Abdul Sheriff, "The slave," 112.

¹⁰ See *Sahih Muslim being Traditions of the Saying and Doings of the Prophet Muhammad as Narrated by His Companions and Compiled under the Title Al-Jami'-us-Salih* by Imam Muslim rendered into English by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1976), vol. II, Chapter DXCI, 790; Vol. III, Chapter DCLXII, 882.

¹¹ IOR: R/15/1/208 5/168 IV *Manumission of slaves in Arab Coast: individual cases, 19 Feb. 1925 to 18 March 1931*.

Slaves born of their masters were often manumitted “in the name of God”.

Statement made by Khamis bin Johar in Debai aged about 21 years. Recorded on 14th Dhil-Qadeh 1345 (= 6th June 1925)

My mother Maryam, daughter of Mubarak, was purchased by my master Said bin Hazim resident in Debai from some Sudanese. My master had sexual intercourse with my mother and when it was found that she was pregnant he married her to his negro, namely my father Johar. My mother gave birth to me in Said's house and when I was 12 years old Said bin Hazim freed me with my mother for the sake of God.¹²

However, it was common that even when manumission was proved to have occurred in a local Sharia Court, heirs of the late master ignored it and tried to re-enslave people.

Statement made by Almas of Suwahil, aged 38. Recorded at Sharjah on 27th Shaban 1343 (= 23-3-25)

When I was 8 years old a man of Suwahil kidnapped me and sold me to a man of Khazrah of Batinah named Said. I remained with him for 3 years then he sold me to a man of Umm-ul-Qaiwain named Matful. The man engaged me in diving and after some years my master Matful died and I was transferred to his son Khalifah. Two years after the death of his father Khalifah invited a party of men of Umm-ul-Qaiwain, and asked them to give evidence to the fact that he has manumitted me for the sake of God and no one should molest me. Khalifah died and after his death his brother claimed to Hamad bin Ibrahim, Chief of Umm-ul-Qaiwain that I was his slave. The Sheikh directed us to the Sharia for a decision. My manumission was proved in Sharia Court and Sheikh Hamad heard the witnesses himself and signed the decision of the Sharia Court. Now my master's brother is always threatening to re-enslave me. I am taking refuge with the High British Government and beg them to be kind enough to favour me with a Government Manumission Certificate so that I may be safe from threats and molestation.¹³

Heirs sometimes made use of the fact that the manumitted slaves did not have a certificate from the Sharia Court.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Statement made by Ismail bin Mubarak, aged about 22 years. Recorded at Sharjah on the 12th October 1939

My mother Tuffaha was originally from Suwahil (South East Africa) and was bought by Fatimah bint Sharif of Ras al Khaima. Fatimah got my mother married and I was born. She then manumitted my mother who remained in her service as a free woman and not a slave. When Fatimah died my mother started serving Ali al Sharif, brother of Fatimah. I was brought up in Ali's house and when my age was 15 he started sending me diving with different people. He took my earnings. Three months ago when I was at the diving bank Ali al Sharif died. On return my mother informed me of Ali's death and also told me that Ayshah, sister of Ali, intends to sell me and my mother on the ground that we were slaves of her brother. As my mother had no manumission certificates from Fatimah I ran away from Ras al Khaima to Sharjah in order to take refuge at the Government House and beg to be released from slavery.¹⁴

It was a common practice to permit secondary marriages with slave girls, and the offspring of these relations were free children with full rights just like those who were born of free mothers. The mother of such a child (known as *umm walad*) could not be sold and was supposed to be freed on the death of her master.¹⁵ In the case of a slave who was *umm walad*, Islamic law also required the freeing of her children after the master's death. This method of emancipation was called *mudabbar*. A *mudabbar* slave received his master's assurance that, on his death, he or she would be freed. After such an assurance was given the *mudabbar* slave could not be sold, but he or she continued to work for the master, and his/her property was, at least from a legal point of view, at the master's disposal. A master could still enjoy sexual relations with a female slave who was *mudabbar*. There were, however, several caveats. A man could retract his last testament, if he wished, including the provision to emancipate a slave. A slave could not be made *mudabbar* unless he/she fell within a third of the estate over which the testator had powers of independent allocation. A debtor whose assets would not cover his debts was not eligible to free a slave. And again, if someone part-owned a slave (when ownership was shared between two or more people) and he freed the slave, the latter did not become free until due compensation was paid to the co-owner.¹⁶

¹⁴ IOR: R/15/1/207 5/161 VI, 168 IX, 179 II *Political Agency, Kuwait, to The Political Secretary to H.E. The High Commissioner, Kuwait, 13 May 1921.*

¹⁵ See B. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East. An Historical Enquiry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8–9.

¹⁶ See H. J. Fisher, *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa*, (London: Hurst, 2001), 74.

Although British officials reported several times that manumission was not practiced in the local societies, the statements prove otherwise. Slaves were manumitted by their owners on many occasions, but wills to that effect were commonly ignored by the heirs. However, the Islamic emancipation of slaves aimed to regulate patron-slave relations but not to eradicate slavery as a social institution. At the turn of the 20th century, it was the British Government who played the principal role in Persian Gulf affairs. By that time British domination in the region was firmly established. Russia, Germany and France had been eliminated as threats to British domination in the region and the commanding position of the British Political Resident was undisputed. The chief British institution in the region was the British Residency in Bushire on the Persian coast. Its history goes back as far as 1763, when the East India Company completed a trade agreement with the Sheikh of Bushire.¹⁷ By 1825, agencies were established in Bahrain, Muscat, Shiraz, Mughu, and Sharjah. Additional agencies were opened in Lingeh, Kermanshah, Basidu, Gwadar and Kuwait.¹⁸

With this political presence, British ideas on slavery and manumission had been brought to the region. The slave trade maintained by the British Empire throughout the 18th century was eventually abolished by the 1807 Act. While the trade was later condemned by many, including George Canning, who denounced it as the “scandal of the civilized world”,¹⁹ by the time Parliament outlawed participation in the slave trade, British slavers “had probably shipped more than 2.6 million captive Africans to the Americas”.²⁰ The British government made great efforts to eradicate

¹⁷ “CXXIV Extract of a letter from Commission and Instructions to Mr. William Andrew Price, Provisional Agent of Persia, dated 22 January 1763,” in J. A. Saldanha (ed.), *The Persian Précis*, vol. 1 *Selections from State Papers, Bombay, regarding the East India Company’s connections with the Persian Gulf, with a summary of events, 1600-1800*, (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908), 162–3.

¹⁸ See J. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj. Merchants, Rulers and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66-93.

¹⁹ See: D. Miliband, “Foreword,” in K. Hamilton and P. Salmon (eds.), *Diplomacy and Empire. Britain and Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807–1975*, (Brighton, Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), VII.

²⁰ D. Richardson, “The British Empire and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1760–1807,” in P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. II, *The Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 441–64. Cited after: K. Hamilton and F. Shaikh, “Introduction,” in Hamilton, Salmon (eds.), *Diplomacy*, 2.

the slave trade through administrative, military and diplomatic means. The Foreign Office's Slave Trade Department and the Admiralty adopted tactics that would stop trafficking in different parts of the world, including East Africa and the Near and Middle East. After World War I, Britain tried to secure treaties and other measures aimed at suppressing the slave trade, pressing the League of Nations to officially abolish slavery. Despite passionate humanitarian arguments from abolitionist societies, groups and individuals, including prominent campaigners such as William Wilberforce,²¹ slavery remained problematic for British policymakers. The slave trade persisted as demand for slaves remained high in Brazil, Cuba and the south of the United States, where cotton was produced. As K. Hamilton and F. Shaikh point out, "British governments had in any case an economic interest in ensuring that a highly profitable trade should not simply pass into the hands of foreign competitors".²²

K. Hamilton and F. Shaikh also expressed the opinion that "nowhere did the British find it more difficult to reconcile their humanitarian aspirations than with the perceived strategic needs in the Near and Middle East".²³ It was in the British interest to preserve the Ottoman and Persian empires as bulwarks against the expansion of the Russian empire. Yet the pressure of the abolitionist campaigners on the British government continued. On the 6th of August 1897, in the House of Commons, Mr. Thomas Bayley M.P asked the Secretary of State of India whether there existed treaties between Her Majesty's Government and Arab Chiefs in the Persian Gulf under which the British authorities agreed to surrender fugitive slaves. Lord George Hamilton replied that he was not aware of any treaties of the character described, but that certain difficulties had arisen in dealing with slave traffic in certain harbors of the Sultan of Muscat and in the Persian Gulf. In the meantime, the British Political Residency in Bushire in the Persian Gulf reported to the India Office that slaves taking refuge in the British Agency in Muscat, on board H. M's ships, or in the Agencies on the Trucial Coast as well as in the Residency were invariably given manumission certificates.²⁴ The discussion which followed was provoked by the news that once in Muscat, even slaves whose release was not provided for under the conditions of the agreements

²¹ W. Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigners*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 142–68.

²² Hamilton, Shaikh, "Introduction," 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ "Enclosure. Question in House of Commons on the 6th of August 1897," IOR: R/15/1/201 5/74 *Practice attributed to British authorities of surrendering fugitive slaves, 18 Sept. 1897 to 14 May 1900.*

with the Sultan were, in practice, always released whenever their cases were brought to the British representative's notice, while on the Arab Coast and Bahrain, slaves who had been born in slavery, or who had been imported prior to the execution of the agreements with the Sheikhs, were returned to their masters. On the 11th of August *The Times* published an article under the heading "The Surrender of Fugitive Slaves" in which H. Allen, the Secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, referred to the Parliamentary report of the 6th of August. The Secretary claimed that according to his well-informed correspondent in the Persian Gulf, the practice of the British officials in this region was to give up fugitive slaves and that this was in accordance with British treaties with the Sultan of Muscat and other Sheikhs of the Arabian coast. The author appealed for the discontinuation of this practice.²⁵

However, to the advantage of the British government, the preservation of the Arabian littoral Sheikhdoms' authority in the Persian Gulf guaranteed this territory would not fall to other European rivals, safeguarding the route to India. Consequently, the anti-slavery measures were a compromise between moral abolitionist ideas and political actions aimed at preserving the Empire. M.S. Hopper defines the dilemma of the British policy in the Persian Gulf as a conflict between the objectives of liberal politics and liberal economics, stressing that "in 1900 at least 1,000 enslaved Africans were still annually imported to the Omani port of Sur".²⁶ Indeed, the slave trade in this region, dominated by the British and referred to as 'British lake', persisted for decades after it was officially abolished by treaties with the Sultans of Zanzibar and Muscat in 1873. M.S. Hopper explains this as a consequence of the booming global market for pearls and the increased consumption of dates, two products essential to the economy of the Persian Gulf. The growing market increased the demand for slaves, who were needed to provide these products, and as a result the "suppression of the slave had by the end of the century yielded to other priorities".²⁷ It must be added, however, that by the late 1920s the situation had changed dramatically due to a global economic crisis. Starting in the early 1930s, the import of slaves decreased and the number of applicants for manumission by the British increased.²⁸

²⁵ "Enclosure. *The Times*, 11th August 1897," IOR: R/15/1/201 5/74.

²⁶ M.S. Hopper, "Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873-1939," *Itinerario*, Vol. XXX (2006), no. 3, 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

²⁸ See J. Zdanowski, *Slavery in the Gulf in the First Half of the 20th Century. A Study Based on Records from the British Archives*, (Warsaw: ASKON, 2008).

Additionally, British anti-slavery measures were affected by the nature of slavery in the Islamic world. Many scholars have highlighted that, unlike the slavery practiced in the Caribbean and southern regions of the United States, slavery in the Islamic world was, in general, domestic rather than economic. Slaves were an integral part of the household and thus their personal status was regulated by Islamic law. Slaves were protected from abuse, and the possibility of changing their status as slaves was proscribed by Islam and observed by free people.²⁹

Until the end of World War I the Arabian Peninsula was nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, all treaties concluded by British governments with Sultans applied in Arabia. At the end of January 1847, due to instigation by the British government, a decree was promulgated by the Sultan of Turkey under which Turkish merchant vessels were prohibited from engaging in the slave trade. Earlier, in 1812, the Pasha of Baghdad had issued an order to hand over any native of India kidnapped and brought to Turkish Arabia to the British Agency in Basrah. These regulations were confirmed in a treaty completed in Constantinople on the 25th of January, 1880. With this agreement the Turkish government took steps to prohibit the import of African slaves into any part of the Ottoman dominion, and not to allow the export of such. British cruisers were authorized to visit, search and detain merchant vessels suspected of being involved in the African slave trade, and these rights were to be exercised in the Red Sea, in the Gulf of Aden, on the coast of Arabia, in the Persian Gulf, on the East coast of Africa and in Ottoman waters where there were no constituted authorities. This treaty was brought into operation by means of an Order in Council on the 26th of August 1881.³⁰

The position of the British Government in regard to slavery in the Persian Gulf can be described as uncompromisingly hostile to the slave trade and averse to slavery as an institution. From 1800 through to the 1920s the policy of the British Government on the littoral of the Persian Gulf was consistently to avoid any interference in the affairs of the hinterland. In the early part of this period they were solely concerned with making the seas safe for commerce, decreasing piracy, and at a slightly later stage, suppressing the slave trade. As time went on and the strategic importance of the Gulf area, particularly from the Indian standpoint,

²⁹ See Lewis, *Race*; J. Hunwick, "Islamic Law and Polemics over Race and Slavery in North and West Africa (16th–19th Century)," in S. Marmon (ed.), *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 43–68; S. Miers, "Slavery: A Question of Definition," in G. Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in the Indian Ocean and Asia*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 4–5.

³⁰ Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. I, Part II, 2482.

became greater, the British authorities consolidated their relations with the rulers of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Muscat, and with the Trucial Sheikhs, by concluding with them treaties on decreasing piracy. These treaties also covered slavery. The first agreement on the slave trade in the Persian Gulf was the General Treaty of 1820, signed with the Sheikhs of Trucial Oman. It was laid down in the 9th Article of this Treaty that the abduction of slaves from the coasts of Africa or elsewhere, and the transporting of slaves in ships was plunder and piracy, and that the subjects of the signatories would refrain from doing anything of this nature.³¹ New agreements with the Sheikhs of Ajman, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Umm al-Qaiwain and Ras al-Khaimah were signed in 1839, 1847, 1856 and 1873, under which these five Trucial Sheikhs committed to the prohibition of the export of slaves, from anywhere, on board vessels belonging to themselves and their subjects, and consented to the detention, searching, and – when in breach of the agreement – confiscation of such vessels by British cruisers.³²

On the 4th of September 1822 the first treaty regarding the suppression of slavery was concluded with the Sultan of Muscat. It prohibited the sale of slaves to Christian nations by his subjects. It also empowered the British Government to employ an agent within the Sultan's dominions to watch the trade. On the 17th of December 1839 the Sultan of Muscat authorized the detention and search by British governmental cruisers of Omani vessels suspected of being engaged in the slave trade. Until 1856 the Sultan ruled both Oman and Zanzibar. After the death of Sayid Sa'id these two territories became separate Sultanates. As a result the old agreement was revised, and in 1873 new agreements with the Sultan of Zanzibar and the Sultan of Muscat were taken. Vessels engaged in carrying slaves were declared liable to be confiscated by British officers and courts, and the closure of all public markets for slaves was declared by

³¹ "Major-General Sir W.G. Kerr to the Bombay Government, on the 11th of April 1820," in J.A. Saldanha, *The Persian Précis*, vol. 2 *Précis of Correspondence regarding the Affairs of the Persian Gulf, 1801-1853*, (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908), 107-113.

³² The texts in *Treaties, Agreements, and Engagements Between the Honorable East India Company and the Native Princes, Chiefs, and States, in Western India; the Red Sea; the Persian Gulf, etc. and also Between Her Britannic Majesty's Government, and Persia, Portugal, and Turkey, compiled under instructions from the Government of Bombay by R. Hughes Thomas, Uncovenanted Assistant to the Chief Secretary, with notes and memoranda by the compiler*, (Bombay, printed for the Government at the Bombay Education Society's Press 1851), 26-31; R. Hughes Thomas (ed.), *Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, NS xxiv*, (Bombay: Bombay Education Society Press, 1856), 669-70, 671-8.

the Sultan of Muscat. But the most remarkable provision of the Treaty of the 14th of April 1873 was that all persons thereafter entering the Sultan's dominions were free. In Zanzibar, the complete abolition of the slave trade was declared on the 5th of June 1873.

On the 31st of May 1861 the Sheikh of Bahrain subscribed to the three agreements accepted by the Sheikhs of Trucial Oman and agreed, in consideration of protection that was to be afforded him by the British Government, to abstain from slavery and other unlawful practices by sea.

By 1900 no agreement on the subject of slavery was obtained from the Sheikhs of Qatar or Kuwait, or from that of Hasa. The latter province was a dependency of the Wahhabi Emirate of Nejd, and the former two were under the influence of the Turkish Government. The Sheikh of Qatar concluded a treaty with the British Government on the 3rd of November 1916, under which he accepted obligations similar to those of the other Trucial Chiefs. It was agreed, however, that he and his subjects would be allowed to retain black slaves already in their possession, on the condition that their treatment was satisfactory. No formal engagement yet existed in the case of Kuwait, but the degree of control and influence exercised in that Emirate by the British Government was regarded as sufficient to enable the imposition of effective checks on slave traffic within its boundaries.³³

The suppression of the traffic in slaves in Persia was governed by the British-Persian Convention of the 2nd of March 1882. The Persian government agreed to take steps toward the suppression of the trade, and allowed the British to search, detain, and bring any Persian merchant vessels engaged in carrying slaves to trial before the nearest Persian authorities. The measures taken under the Convention resulted in the reduction of the slave trade on the Persian littoral to relatively insignificant dimensions. The extent, however, to which slave traffic between Persia and the Arab Coast continued to persist was considered disquieting by the Government of India, and the possibility of its revival on a larger scale was very real. The lack of effective control by Persia of Persian Baluchestan was especially dangerous and resulted in a small but regular amount of traffic from that area.³⁴

Between 1884 and 1908 dozens of Arab vessels were stopped and searched in the Persian Gulf by the British.³⁵ Certain questions relating to

³³ See *The Persian Gulf. Historical Summaries 1907-1953*: vol. II *Historical Summary of Events in the Persian Gulf Shaikhdoms and the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, 1928-1953*, (Gerrards Cross: Archive Editions, 1987), 135.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 136-7.

³⁵ Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. I, Part II, 2514-6.

the meaning and application of agreements and legal enactments were, however, discussed from time to time. In particular, subsidiary matters connected with anti-slavery proceedings provoked various disagreements between the main British institutions responsible for preventative operations, but in general the anti-slavery actions of the British at the turn of the 20th century in the area were quite effective – slave trafficking was lessened. However, on the 26th of November 1927, P.E. Percival, Judicial Commissioner of Sind, informed the Secretary of Government in Bombay that the traffic of slaves was still common in the Persian Gulf and that there were organizations for securing slaves from India, including British Indian subjects, to work as pearl divers in the Persian Gulf. Indian slaves who had been recovered from slavery stated that in Dubai there were up to 1,500 other slaves employed as pearl divers, and that the majority of them were of African origin. The matter was brought to the notice of the British government and the question of slavery in the Persian Gulf was reported in the House of Commons the same month by Sir Austen Chamberlain. The enquiry that followed showed that slave divers were mostly born slaves and not captured ones.³⁶

According to the statistics provided by J. Lorimer, the setting free of slaves by British officials in the region started in 1852, and between then and 1908, 693 slaves were rescued at sea and 1,853 released on their demand. Among the latter group there were two types of slaves: those released under the treaty as ‘recently’ imported by sea, and domestic slaves released but not under the treaty. There were, however, very few domestic slaves among those emancipated before 1908, as the custom to manumit domestic slaves was a rather new phenomenon in the Gulf. It first became socially acceptable in Muscat in the 1890s. It happened on occasion that, with the consent of the Sultan, domestic slaves who were proven to have been badly treated, or whom no owner appeared to claim, were manumitted, and if they were returned to their masters they received a guarantee of kind treatment. An attempt to introduce manumission of domestic slaves to the Trucial Oman in 1899 failed when the Sheikh of Sharjah declined to entertain a proposal on the subject by the British Resident in the Persian Gulf, on the ground that his subjects would demand compensation of him for every slave manumitted. In Bahrain, an attempt was also made to obtain from the leading tribal chiefs written agreement that they would not buy, sell or give away slaves, but the chiefs were not amenable to persuasion, and the project was abandoned.

³⁶ “From P.E. Percival, Judicial Commissioner of Sind, to the Secretary to Government, Home Department, Bombay, 26th November 1927,” IOR: R/15/1/229 5/196 I *Slave Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 6 January 1927 to 25 November 1929*.

However, the Government of India authorized the Political Agent in Bahrain to manumit slaves, taking responsibility upon himself and with the consent – which might be withheld – of the Sheikh of the island. These instructions permitted the emancipation of domestic slaves when they were abused and no sufficient guarantee was offered for their subsequent good treatment.³⁷

Up until 1924, the number of applications for manumission submitted by slaves annually to the British Agencies in the Persian Gulf was not substantial. However, it increased sharply after 1925. Altogether, between 1906 and 1949, a minimum of 960 statements were made by slaves at the British Residency in Bushire (7 applications) and the Agencies in Bahrain (284 applications), Kuwait (3), Muscat (246), and Sharjah (400). The total number also includes 15 that were made at the British Consular Agencies in Bandar Abbas (7), Basidu (7) and Lingeh (1), and two made by people picked up by British military ships patrolling the Persian Gulf. Two statements were made in Dubai in a special case of two Indian boys who were kidnapped and brought to the port, then recovered by the local Indian community. One case of a slave from Dubai but of Abyssinian origin was also recorded by the British.³⁸

Producing a statement was an integral requirement of the process of manumission that the slaves had to go through. Each statement begins with the place of birth and origins of the slave. Then a life story, and reason for running away from the master, are narrated. The statement ends with the request to be granted a certificate of manumission. The applicants were illiterate, so when reporting at an Agency they were describing their situation orally and in most cases in Arabic, and their words were written down by assistants to the British official. Then the applicant put his or her thumb mark on the document and the statement was translated into English. The statements made at Sharjah, in front of a British Official who was either a native or an Indian subject, were sent for further consideration either to the Agency at Bahrain, or to the Residency at Bushire.

The first statement found in the records was made by a man called Ambar, his father's name unknown. He was a born slave of African origin, from Lingeh on the Persian coast. At 12 years old he had been sold by his

³⁷ Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. 1, Part I, 2514–6.

³⁸ My calculations, based on the India Office Records, prove that altogether 960 people were manumitted by British officials in the Persian Gulf between 1921-1949 – see J. Zdanowski, *Slavery and Manumission. British policy in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf in the first half of the 20th century*, (Reading: Ithaca, 2013), 110-1.

first master and had since had three more masters. He was a diver and, as stated at the British Residency in Bushire, he simply desired to be free.³⁹

The latest dated statement was made at the beginning of October 1949, and this case was symbolic in the sense that it encompassed the whole long story of the liberation of slaves in the Persian Gulf through the granting of manumission certificates. It was made in Muscat by another man of African origin called Zaid bin Marzooq, who had been kidnapped ten years before in Makran. He was a born slave and claimed, as did the majority of petitioners, to have been ill-treated and “engaged ceaselessly in work, day and night, without pay or sufficient food”. As well as this, his master had often beaten him for no reason. Shortly after he made his statement at the Political Agency in Muscat, he was convicted by the Sharia Court for stealing a rifle and sentenced to two months imprisonment. Apparently he ran from his master because of the theft and omitted that fact in his statement. Nevertheless, he was granted a manumission certificate because the policy of the British authorities was that nothing should hamper a human being’s desire to be free.⁴⁰

The slaves’ statements show that there were two principal groups of slaves on the Arabian coast; imported ones, and those born there. 529 slaves out of 960 who applied for manumission declared themselves to be Africans and they were the most numerous among applicants, but only 121 of them were born in East Africa (‘Swahil’, East Africa and Zanzibar), and only six in Abyssinia. The others were born in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula and Persia. There were 37 applicants who claimed to be Abyssinians and the majority of them were born in different places in Abyssinia, including Addis Ababa. One of them stated:

Statement of Othman bin Jarka, aged about 25 years, born in Addis Ababa, Abyssinia, Sharjah, 26th July 1938

I was born at Addis Ababa in Abyssinia. I am about 25 years old. When I was about 12 years old I was kidnapped /.../ and brought from Addis Ababa to a place called Taqri in Aden. After four days I was taken in a boat to Midi where we arrived after about seven days. After my arrival at Midi, the man who kidnapped me from my country sold me to another man of Midi named Aman. /.../ I remained in his service for about a month and

³⁹ “Statement of a slave named Ambar, dated the 26th of January 1906,” IOR: R/15/1/203 5/194 I, 195 I, 179 III, 169 II, 104 IV *Kidnapping of individuals; manumission of slaves at Kuwait and Bushire; miscellaneous slavery cases, 26 Jan. 1906 to 24 July 1942.*

⁴⁰ “Statement of Zaid bin Marzooq, age about 30 years recorded at the British Consulate, Muscat, the 2nd of October 1949,” IOR: R/15/6/416 13/1 *Applications for manumission in Muscat, 10 Jan. 1949 to 30 Nov. 1949.*

after that my master Aman sold me to Ibrahim. /.../ Ibrahim brought me from Midi on camel to Hasa. The journey took nearly 20 days. At Hasa I remained in the house of Ibrahim seven days and after that he sent me with certain cameleers whose names I do not know to Qatar. In about five days we reached Qatar from Hasa. When I arrived at Qatar, the cameleers sold me to Hamad bin Muhammad of Liwah. My master Hamid took me from Qatar to Liwah. I served him four years and then my master took me to Abu Dhabi and mortgaged me to a woman of that place named Maryam bint Muhammad. I remained in her service for about three years. As my master was unable to redeem me from the woman Maryam bint Muhammad, the latter sent me from Abu Dhabi to Dubai with a Bedouin named Sa'id bin Sikan who sold me to Khamis bin Rashid of Dubai. I served my master for about four years during which period he used to send me for diving. This year I fell sick after summer Quffal but for the last two days he has been pressing me to go diving. I therefore ran away.⁴¹

Interior Oman sent its own slaves to the Trucial Coast and Batinah because of drought and a diminishing capacity to support its population. The territory was derelict and poverty stricken. General drought had made half of its date groves either uncultivable or able to yield only an impoverished harvest, and had driven a third of its population abroad. Zanzibar and the Trucial Coast were the chief destinations of those who had left, Batinah a distant third. Not only Batinah and Interior Oman but also the Ja'alan were left to minister to the needs of the pearl fisheries. Here the slaves were African or Abyssinian. Slaves from Yemen were brought to the Gulf via Central Arabia.

Statement of slave Faraj bin Muhammad aged about 25 years, recorded at the Political Agency, Bahrain on the 12th of July 1933

I was born in Zabid (Yemen). My parents were free people. I left Zabid for Hodeidah searching for work. One day, while I was walking outside Hodeidah, a band of Yemeni robbers kidnapped me and took me to Midi on Yemen coast. At Midi, they sold me to one Muhammad bin Ali Al Aqşam of Abu Arish. I remained with him for one month. Later on he sold me at Sabia to one Abdul Aziz bin Duham of Shaqra in Nejd, who took me with him to Mecca. I remained with him for about four months. He then sold me to one Muhammad Ali Al Qarrah who at once sold me to my present master Muhammad bin Nasir Al Khalifah who took me to Ain Dar within Hasa Territory. I used to go diving and earn for my master. He took

⁴¹ IOR: R/15/1/211 5/168 VII *Manumission of slaves in Arab Coast: individual cases, 28 July 1938 to 28 June 1939.*

all my earnings and did not give me anything. He was not giving me even sufficient food and clothing.⁴²

Among those who were brought from Hejaz to the Gulf as a consequence of war were some soldiers from the defeated parties.

Statement of slave Abdullah bin Hasan, aged about 30 years, recorded in the Political Agency, Bahrain, 30th May 1936

I was born in a village named Nasbah in Hejaz. My father was a slave but my mother was a free woman. When I was about 15 years old, I was taken to Mecca together with a number of others and recruited in the army which the Sherif mobilised against Ibn Saud during the Turubah fighting. We marched towards Turubah but we were defeated. Consequently I was captured by the Akhwan, taken to Riyadh and handed over to King Ibn Sa'ud. I was immediately sold to one Abdullah bin Aifan, a Nejdi of Shaqrah who brought me to Hasa and then to Damman and sold to Rashid bin Sa'id Dosiri. I have since been in the service of my master. I used to go diving and earn for him.⁴³

People in the Yemen were also enslaved as a consequence of the wars.

Statement of slave Marzooq bin Hassan aged about 27 years, by appearance he looks to be an Arab, Bahrain, 22nd October 1927

I was born at Sabiya near Yeman. When I was six years old I was caught by the Bedouins and brought to a place known as Hay and sold me to Irabhim Sam. He sold me to Yahaya bin Maqbool for 500 dollars. Five years later he resold me to Sayed Ali bin Idris, an Egyptian resident of Jaizan for 650 dollars. Two years ago Imam Yahaya raided this place and my master ran away leaving me alone in the house. I was made a prisoner of Imam Yahaya's men and was taken to different place for sale. I was sold at Bisha to Abdulla bin Mamar for 400 dollars, six months later he resold me to Reyad and he gave me to Ibn Saud who handed me over to Abdul Aziz Qassab. He sent me to his brother Abdulla Qassebi at Jubail, who sold me to *nakhuda* Rashid bin Ali of Jubail. He arranged for my marriage and gave me one abba as dowry and engaged me as a diver for this year. I ran from him at Moharraq owing to his gross ill-treatment.⁴⁴

⁴² IOR: R/15/2/1828 *Political Agency, Bahrain, Slavery: Manumission Certificates, 20 March 1939 to 21 Feb. 1940.*

⁴³ IOR: R/15/2/1826 *Political Agency, Bahrain, Slavery: Manumission Certificates, 20 Dec. 1934 to 27 Sept. 1939.*

⁴⁴ IOR: R/15/1/204 5/161 III *Manumission of slaves at Bahrain: individual cases, the 28th of Dec. 1924-14th of Dec. 1929.*