Scientific Research Publishing

Advances in Historical Studies, 2025, 14(4), 280-301
https://www.scirp.org/journal/ahs
ISSN Online: 2327-0446
ISSN Print: 2327-0438

Protector of the Gulf

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How to cite this paper: Andrews, I. (2025). Protector of the Gulf. *Advances in Historical Studies, 14,* 280-301.
https://doi.org/10.4236/ahs.2025.144016

Received: March 23, 2025
Accepted: September 20, 2025
Published: September 23, 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the early nineteenth-century conflict between the British Empire and the Qawasimi in the Persian Gulf, framed as a campaign against piracy. While British accounts portrayed the Qawasimi as pirates threatening maritime trade, recent historical scholarship has challenged this characterization, questioning both the legitimacy of the accusations and the definition of piracy itself. The paper examines the intricate and often complex relationship between piracy, empire-building, and state legitimacy. It argues that the British use of the term "pirate" functioned as a rhetorical and legal tool to justify military intervention and the eventual incorporation of the Gulf into Britain's informal empire. The study situates the Qawasimi episode within a broader imperial pattern of criminalizing non-conforming political entities, highlighting how piracy and empire have historically mirrored and competed with one another. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that examining piracy not as a fixed legal category but as a politicized construct offers deeper insight into imperial motivations and the transformation of the Gulf's political landscape during this period.

Keywords

Piracy, Empire, Power, UAE, British, Gulf, Protector, Qawasimi, Imperial, Rover, Corsair, Frigate, Napoleonic

1. Introduction

From 1800 to 1820, the British were heavily engaged in the Persian Gulf, with British vessels allegedly being attacked by Qawasimi pirates. This eventually led to two punitive missions spearheaded by the Royal Navy and supported by various elements of the British Army and Bombay Marine. The result of this interaction led to the Persian Gulf being incorporated into the informal Empire, or at least being significantly within the Empire's sphere of influence. However, relatively recently, historians have begun to question whether the Qawasimi were indeed

pirates and guilty of the accusations made against them. Furthermore, probing these exchanges raises important issues about what a pirate actually is, or more precisely, how pirates, state-making, and empire-building have historically been dynamically interrelated (Travers, 2009). Understanding how they relate allows us to contextualise the events of the Gulf in the early nineteenth century and hopefully reconcile some of the disparate narratives of writers on the subject (Lampe, 2010).

The word "pirate" originates from the Greek word meaning "robber" or "taker." However, it was not until Cicero, a prominent Roman statesman, first associated the term with the stigma of "the enemy of mankind" that this meaning became established (Starkey, 2010). The 1820 treaty signed by the British and Gulf Arab sheikhs uses the same phrase. The historian Patricia Risso stipulates that one of the main factors that have contributed to the disgust of pirates is that the sea is already a perilous place where people are in harm's way. For others to rob in this hostile environment purposely seems to go beyond the pale in terms of morality (Risso, 2001). Indeed, this is the sentiment echoed by the British at the time towards the Qawasimi (Davies, 1997). This paper concerns the British Empire in the Persian Gulf; however, to gain worthwhile insights, it is essential to understand how empires have historically related to pirates. This paper aims to demonstrate that the episode with the Qawasimi fits within a familiar pattern. Typically, as empires reach a specific size, they begin to become concerned with piracy or other derogatory terms for groups that do not conform and are deemed a threat (De Souza, 1996). For an empire, the next usual course of action is suppression, followed by incorporation. In many cases, pirates and empires share numerous attributes; in fact, they are competitors, albeit of different standings. Indeed, there are often occasions when empires have been referred to as pirates or vice versa. It is typically only when one group is in a dominant position that the term "pirate" is used. There is a significant problem with the definition of pirate that is irreconcilable. According to maritime law, piracy is for private ends, not for state or political purposes (Pennell, 2001). The problem arises in determining whether they act out of private interest. The Qawasimi were supported by states and acted out of political interests, but at least some of their actions could be considered acts of piracy. It is imperative to focus on the actions of the Qawasimi, while examining the validity of those accusations.

It is primarily imperial powers that use the term "pirate." The British did this to justify their power and ultimately to reorganise the Gulf in a way that suited them. This paper will focus on why imperial powers act in specific ways, how the British Empire engaged with the societies in the Gulf, and ultimately, how the Gulf was integrated into the Empire (Hayhurst, 2014). However problematic or even confusing the term pirate is, it is undoubtedly not redundant because its use informs us as much about the imperial power as the "pirates" themselves. This paints a malevolent picture of the British Empire. However, many of the tribes willingly bowed down to the Empire to suit their interests. Moreover, when rulers

and historians have justified that Britain has been the arbiter and protector of the Gulf, allowing the populace to live in peace and engage in unhindered commerce, they have a point (Rabi, 2006). This paper argues that the relationship between the Qasimi and the British fits into a classic pirate/empire archetype, with implications for how power is wielded.

2. Were the Qawasimi Pirates?

This chapter provides a brief synopsis of the history and culture of the Gulf, setting the context for the alleged acts of piracy that will be explored in this chapter. Furthermore, it will examine whether these actions occurred and, if they did, whether they would be classified as piracy. The Gulf has always had a large amount of trade travelling through it due to its strategic position between the Middle East and India. Traditionally, the Gulf had to rely on certain goods being imported, such as wood; however, other goods, like dates and fish, were abundant in the area (Davies, 1997). Perhaps the most prized commodity, and certainly one that travelled through the avenues of international commerce, was pearls. Until pearls were farmed, the Persian Gulf was the principal location for pearl diving and selling. This made the pearls themselves incredibly sought after and helped the Gulf become a lucrative hub. The Gulf was a difficult place to live, however. Scorching summers in the desert often drove people to desperation in their quest to survive. This also meant that numerous groups vied for supremacy in the region. The importance of European markets in this area should also not be underestimated. In-demand merchandise, such as Persian rugs, dates, and gems, all originated from or passed through the Gulf (Wilson, 1926). Groups such as the Utub from Kuwait and other tribes dominated the northern edge of the Gulf. If one were able to control the straits of Hormuz, a narrow corridor only twenty kilometres wide at its shortest, one could effectively control commerce over a vast region.

Until the mid-eighteenth century, Persia had a tight grip over the area, and the ruler, Nadir Shah, had specifically sought to strengthen Persia's naval power in the Gulf (Wilson, 2011). Since the assassination of Nadir Shah, a significant vacuum was left, however. This, as well as the departure of the Portuguese, who had been the prominent colonial power until the beginning of the eighteenth century, led to an increasingly fragile political situation. Another reason, perhaps, that the Gulf is not more prominent in world history is that the confusing array of rulers over the region has been challenging to catalogue or even comprehend. The first notable account of piracy dates back to the tenth century, as recorded by a traveller named Ibn Hawqal (Pierzchała, 2016). There were probably more pirates before, but this was the first prominent example. The Gulf's politically fragmented nature, as well as its numerous small harbours and hiding places, meant that the area was popular among pirates. As British commerce increased in the area, correspondingly, they became more enmeshed in the Gulf. The British already had issues with pirates from Bahrain and Basra, but the most serious problem was piracy from the Musandam Peninsula, close to where the Qawasimi originated. It was not just

what was going on in the Persian Gulf that was our concern, however. The seas adjacent to them and who controlled them also had significant ramifications, as pirates raided them as well. The waters of Oman and the Indian Ocean had become vitally important to the British at the dawn of the nineteenth century, as they were on the route from India to Britain (Onley, 2011). Vast amounts of commerce were exchanged between the two countries, as well as with other countries. Not only that, but communication from Whitehall to the Bombay government travelled this route (Sinha, 2014). It was, therefore, of paramount importance that these sea lanes were kept safe in friendly hands.

The Qawasimi were a tribe originating from Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah, located at the southern end of the Gulf Peninsula. They were principally engaged in palm farming, pearling, commerce and diving (Lorimer, 2003). They also had various bases and tributaries on both sides of the Gulf. Between 1770 and 1790, the Qawasimi had been at war with the Al Busaid dynasty over the ownership of the coast between Abu Dhabi and Ras Mussandem. Between the early 1800s and 1820, a series of alleged attacks by Qawasimi against British vessels occurred, which led to two punitive expeditions (Davies, 1997). After this time, the pirate coast, now known as the UAE, had become pacified, no longer a burden but indeed an informal part of the British Empire (Onley, 2011). The naming of the Qawasimi is slightly misleading, as it would only refer to the head of the tribe, the Qawasim, and his immediate family, who were named (Lorimer, 2003). The current heads of the Qawasimi, who are descended from the tribe in question, are in a relatively small number. This suggests that two centuries ago, there would not have been many of them either (Suzuki, 2018). So even though they were called Qawasimi or Joesammee by the British, it was only the head of the family who went by this name.

Due to the current political and religious boundaries, it is tempting to presume a long-standing schism between Iranian and Arabian influences; however, historically, it appears that the Gulf had a culture all its own (Clark, 2017). Kingdoms on the Persian side of the Gulf, although vassals of Iran, often acted independently and would speak the area's Arabic dialect. Another factor of cultural influence came from the sea. Because of the region's maritime connection, these areas would have more contact with the Indian subcontinent than with Bagdad, for example (Sweet, 1964). This is reflected in the Arabic language of the region, which borrows heavily from Indian vocabulary. The presence of an Arabic newspaper in Bombay demonstrates the cultural links between the two areas (Clark, 2017). When the Wahhabi influence became prominent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, differences between religions became more pronounced, adding complexity to the political situation (Money, 1811).

The two geographical sides of the Gulf were interconnected in many ways. The Southern side has had a larger population than the Persian side. The reason for this was the maritime trade that brought the nomadic tribes from the interior of the Arabian peninsula to the coast. There was a thriving culture and a constant

movement of people between different areas of the Gulf. Like a game of musical chairs, the time when nation-states formally emerged and passports were issued was when the music stopped. With the Gulf countries becoming independent from the British relatively recently, there have been attempts by Gulf historians to reconcile their history. So, allegations of piracy are a highly contentious issue and have been refuted (Al-Qasimi, 2016).

Setting the Scene for the Qawasimi

From perusing firsthand accounts of the British, it is clear that the Qawasimi are often referred to as pirates. The phrase is used repeatedly in the correspondence of the time to attribute actions to the Qawasimi (Bruce, 1820). Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether they were guilty of the acts for which they were accused and, if so, whether these acts constitute piracy. One of the criteria for piracy is if their actions fit the British legal definition. However, as Davies points out, the definition of what constitutes a pirate is contentious (Davies, 1997). Furthermore, Davies asserts that the concept of piracy is not relative; its definition changes dramatically over time and does not directly translate into other languages (Davies, 1997). Specific incidents of maritime violence will be examined, and what the Qawasimi did, as well as their motivations, to ascertain whether or not they were "pirates". Like all historical studies, a significant amount of time has elapsed since the events in question, and the only available evidence is British. More specifically, there is a lack of evidence that identifies the Qawasimi as being culprits of what they were accused of (Risso, 2001).

The lack of primary evidence and British understanding of the Gulf could lead the contemporary reader to question the British certainty that it was one particular tribe committing these acts of maritime violence. In a letter to the captain of *HMS Hesper* in 1812, for example, William Bruce requests that Captain Prior survey the bottom end of the Gulf, as the ship Duncan had alerted to possible pirate harassment (Bruce, 1812). The exact details of the harassment are absent, however. Some facts are indisputable, however. The British faced violent attacks in and around the Persian Gulf. People were killed, goods were stolen, and ships were plundered. Numerous accounts from multiple sources corroborate that British ships were attacked (Davies, 1997). The attackers, then, were not just a figment of the British imagination, as Al-Qasimi stipulates (Al-Qasimi, 2016). Specifically, the numerous surviving accounts from members of the Royal Navy, residents of Bushir, and the Bombay government testify to this. The problem is that the exact details are needed to confirm it was the Qawasimi. Some accounts appear to have been exaggerated.

Additionally, the British referred to the perpetrators as Joesmee pirates. However, they may not have necessarily been Joesmee/Qawasimi, and their motivations for attacking may not have made them fit the definition of pirates. The British were being attacked but could not provide evidence to prove who it was. When faced with this bewildering situation, the British may have reacted by ascribing a

simplistic explanation for their terror. They used a vilifying term instead of acknowledging the confusing nature of the threat. The British labelled the threat piracy. The cities at the bottom of the Gulf became "piratical ports" according to Bruce, writing from *HMS Eden* in 1820 (Bruce, 1820). When Rear Admiral Drury wrote about the attacks ten years previously, he referred to a port as a "nest of pirates" (Drury, 1810). It is clear that the highest ranks in the Bombay Government and the Royal Navy are disgusted by the Qawasimi; they openly use emotive language to describe them, usually reserved for pests. This exhibits a strong reaction to the idea of the Qawasimi and pirates in general. The use of this language may have led, or at least made it easier, for the British to attack the Qawasimi (Al-Qasimi, 2016).

Despite the lack of evidence, the Qawasimi cannot be wholly exonerated from the charges levelled against them. Six factors will be examined in detail later that are supported by even the most ardent defenders of the Qawasimi, which, when combined, make it highly likely that the Qawasimi were guilty of at least some of the deeds they were alleged to have committed perpetrated. Firstly, they had many large, powerful boats that were capable of overpowering most commercial British vessels (Sweet, 1964). Secondly, the fact that they had these boats indicates they were probably used for violence (Al-Qasimi, 2016). Thirdly, they had bases scattered all over the Gulf and operated in the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean (Suzuki, 2018). The first three points demonstrate that they had the means. Fourthly, the British and Qawasimi were not well acquainted and had conflicting assumptions. This is perhaps the most important aspect, as the Qawasimi considered themselves custodians of the same territories despite their differences and differences in their approach to governance (Onley, 2009). This made a confrontation increasingly likely. Fifthly, they were influenced by the Wahhabi sect. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wahhabism was a far more aggressive and expansionist force than it is currently. The Wahhabi also encouraged raiding infidels' loot and giving a share to the Suad. As the Qawasimi were associated with the ideology back then, it makes it likely they would target a non-Wahhabi group. Finally, some accounts name them as instigators. Even if some of the allegations are exaggerated or erroneous, the sheer volume of them makes it likely that at least some are true. This is significant because the alleged acts of piracy were the justification for the punitive attacks in 1809 and 1819. It is furthermore illustrative of how empires, consciously or unconsciously, have used the justification of piracy as a tool to expand (De Souza, 1996).

The tribes of the Gulf were constantly raiding each other, and over the eighteenth century, the infighting grew in regularity and lethality. Two key groups emerged: the Utub in the north, from Kuwait to Bahrain, and the Qawasimi in the south (Onley, 2009). Before the nineteenth century, the principal form of transport for the Arab mariners was small dhows. The Europeans who observed these crafts were initially unimpressed and perceived them as unthreatening (Sweet, 1964). During the eighteenth century, the tribes became more aggressive

towards each other as they competed for resources. Correspondingly, the dhows evolved to become larger and more menacing. The European vessels that traversed the Gulf required additional armour and personnel to counter this threat. These are vessels the Qawasimi had in abundance, as Al-Qasimi attests to (Al-Qasimi, 2016). These vessels had the speed, offensive ability and numbers to attack the vessels they were accused of attacking. The Qawasimi typically raided with a crew of about 500 to 600 (Peterson, 2016). Despite the ambiguities surrounding the guilt of the Qawasimi actions, it cannot be denied that there was a level of ruthlessness in Gulf culture, as evident from the accounts of how tribes warred with one another. This offers some credence to the notion that at least some of the accounts were credible. The tribes involved did not view this as piracy, primarily because there was no direct translation of "pirate" into Arabic; instead, it was the maritime extension of Bedouin power struggles that would typically be conducted in the desert. However, when the British became enmeshed in this brawl, they viewed the actions taken against them as "piracy".

Not only did the Qawasimi have the craft, but they also seemed to exert power over the sea from key ports. The mouth of the Persian Gulf was strewn entirely with bases. It is easy to assume that to have achieved this domination of the Southern end of the Gulf, and the Qawasimi conceivably would have engaged in aggressive action at some time or another. There were considerable gaps in British intelligence on the Gulf at this time due to ignorance, and the situation was also constantly changing (Davies, 1997). The lower end of the Gulf was largely unknown to the British until after 1820.

The extent to which the Qawasimi controlled the southern end of the Gulf allowed them to project sea power and conduct raids against the British.

3. Events

During this period, numerous alleged piratical episodes were attributed to the Qawasimi. The British claim that around ninety British vessels had been captured by the Joasmee or Qawasim during this period, between 1797 and 1820 (Davies, 1997). There is ample evidence that an episode in 1778 was an actual instance of Qawasimi piracy, as letters from the residents of Birshir and the Sheikh of the Qawasimi tribe corroborate this (Suzuki, 2018). However, the episode is the only provable instance where the Qawasimi committed the crime, as there were other pirates in and around the area. This was demonstrated in 1805 when *HMS Fox* destroyed the pirate village of Dwarka and reclaimed British property that had been stolen (James, Brassey, & Toogood, 1905).

It is wholly conceivable that some of the alleged piratical episodes within this vicinity attributed to the Qawasimi could have been perpetrated by the Dwarka or other groups, including the Omanis (Buckingham, 1830). Another potential candidate for the attacks was a character called Rahmah ibn al-Jalahmah (Lampe, 2010). Rahmah was based in Qatar and was an infamous "pirate" in the region, even wearing an eyepatch. Because of the formal agreements he had with the Brit-

ish, he was perceived as being unthreatening and even accepted (Al-Qasimi, 2016). However, the British ignorance of the area and the fact that he had conducted acts of maritime violence make Rahmah a suspect for the attacks.

The first apparent incident of piracy involved the Viper in 1797. The ship was anchored in Bushire when a flotilla of Qawasimi dhows allegedly attacked it. The Viper was attacked by Sheikh Salih, the nephew of the Qawasim Ruler, Saqr, in one version of the events (Peterson, 2016). Initially, he requested the supplies from the crew so that he could attack the Soore Arabs. However, his promise went unfulfilled and instead attacked the Viper, apparently killing half of the crew. The Sheikh of Ras al Khaimah, Sheikh Saqr bin Rashid, apologised for the incident and offered compensation. This highlights the difficulty in attributing piracy to the ship's crew or to whom they report, as well as the changeability of their relationship. In the same year, the Bassein was attacked by the Qawasimi. It was attacked by about twenty Dhows and taken to Ras al Khaimah (Kelly, 1968). Again, the Sheikh apologised for the incident, explaining that the boats had been attacked by dhows from Lingha (Al-Qasimi, 2016). During these two incidents, the Qawasimi were at war with Muscat, and it is easy to understand why the British were caught in the crossfire. The attack on the Viper and Bassein have contrasting interpretations. Writing in 1819, FB Warden of the East India Company, attributes the attacks to the Omanis. It was not until much later that the attacks were recognised as being Qawasimi. Although the Omanis were allied with the British, it is plausible that Omani vessels could have attacked British ships. The fragile nature of the Gulf offers a convincing explanation as to why a craft associated with the Omanis might attack a British craft, one of their allies (Suzuki, 2018).

The early 1800s witnessed a rise in maritime conflict in the Gulf, driven by political instability and cultural misunderstandings between local powers, such as the Qawasim and the British. The frequency and ferocity of the attacks seemed to heighten during the early 1800s. The rise in attacks can be partly attributed to the ongoing changes in the political situation (Peterson, 2016). Sultan bin Ahmad on the Omani side perished in battle against the Qawasim in 1804, which may have emboldened the Qawasim due to the Omanis' inability to counter them (Kelly, 1968). In 1803, a storm forced the Alert onto Sheik Shu'aib, an island in the Gulf. It was alleged that a few hundred of the locals ransacked the wreck and took the booty.

Furthermore, the Sheik of Nakhilu is purported to have made off with the provisions of the boat, leaving a scant amount of food for the forty-odd survivors. The Sheik argued later that any ship that becomes wrecked is the property of the place it lands, as was customary in the culture of the area. This is an excellent example of the misunderstandings that can arise when two groups follow different sets of rules. Sweet stipulates that it was nescience to blame for the Qawasimi not understanding British laws of the oceans (Sweet, 1964). When these two cultures collided, their lack of mutual understanding is what explains their differences and tensions.

Furthermore, Davies maintains that there is a distinction between plunder and piracy in and of itself. So, if we were to apply British nautical law, this episode would be categorised as plunder. However, the lack of agreed-upon rules between the relevant parties means the Sheikh's actions in the Alert episode could be deemed as ignorance.

The letter of the commander of the Trimmer vividly describes the vessels in pursuit. The trimmer was forced to expel crates of sugar to lighten the ship. However, this did not work, and the boat was captured. The letter of the Shannon also provides the exact details of the time and place, but it is still unable to provide convincing evidence that it was the Qawasimi (Lorimer, 2003). Davies argues that the incident involving Ahmed Shah had a certain level of notoriety because it was British-owned and flew British colours. The *Shah* had been involved in a storm and was severely damaged. Sheik Abdullah bin Ahmed boarded the vessel and assured the captain that he would be able to look after him. It became apparent that this was a ruse, however, and most of the treasures from the boat were seized by the Sheik. Captain Herriman did not let the Sheik take the treasured government's packet of three hundred pounds, however. When the Resident visited Charak in 1816, he pressed the Sheikh on the issue of the recovered booty. The Sheikh was obstinate in insisting that he should keep the lion's share of it. The Qawasim were responsible for taking some of the spoils of the ship, however, as Davies notes. Nevertheless, the impression we get from these acts of sabotage may be skewed. There may have been indiscriminate attacks against other nations, but because of the lack of reliable records being kept, it appears that the piratical attacks were focused on British vessels (Davies, 1997).

There were attempts in the early 1800s by Britain to come to mutual agreements with the tribes of the Gulf. A treaty was signed in 1806 between the Qawasimi, the British, and the Omanis, resulting in a decline in piracy in the Gulf region. Additionally, the presence of *HMS Fox* and eight other boats in the Gulf may have deterred the Qawasimi from attacking British shipping (Lorimer, 2003). However, it appears on the surface that certain parties have found loopholes within the treaty. After 1806, correspondingly, more piratical activity was conducted on the Indian Ocean (Peterson, 2016). Also, not long after the treaty, hostilities resumed between the Omanis and the Qawasimi. The removal of the British Naval force spelt the resumption of episodes of piracy.

In 1808, it was alleged that the Qawasimi attacked the British schooner Sylph, a British eight-gun schooner, as reported by the ship's Captain Graham. In this attack, thirty people were purported to have been killed. This case differed in that it involved a company vessel, not just one flying under British colours (Davies, 1997). The Sylph was being escorted by *HMS Neriede* and *Saphire*. Brydges, who was an envoy to the court of Tehran, recounts that when *Neriede* feinted fleeing, the two Qawasimi vessels unknowingly pulled up on either side of the Royal Navy vessel. At this, the Neirade opened fire on both broadsides and sent the two dhows to the bottom of the sea floor (Brydges & Jones, 1834). This would have conceiv-

ably been one of the first instances in which the Qawasimi came into conflict with a Royal Navy vessel. Nonetheless, the *Sylph* case is an oddity, as it was the first time a British vessel was attacked in such an unprovoked manner, although it is unclear whether it was the Qawasimi (Davies, 1997).

Another reason for assessing the Qawasimi's piracy is that it was used as justification for the punitive attacks. The ship, the *Minerva*, was attacked by a few dozen dhows. The one woman aboard was taken as a prisoner and later held for ransom. Out of the crew of seventy, half were killed, according to one survivor's account (Low, 2012). Davies maintains that the government of Calcutta had already decided to attack Ras al Khaimah before the attack on the *Minerva*. Nonetheless, the attack cemented the British resolve. Sultan Al-Qasimi further argues that the Qawasimi were innocent of attacking the *Minerva*. Proof of this is that the differing accounts surrounding the *Minerva* lead us to question the validity of all of them (Al-Qasimi, 2016). Al Qasimi asserts this is symptomatic of all accounts made of the Qawasimi piracy. The differing accounts certainly arouse suspicion; nevertheless, this fact still does not discredit the allegations to the extent that we can say with certainty that nothing occurred. With the specific example of the Minerva, Al Qasimi compares one story, where the crew were chopped up and thrown overboard, to another account, where the crew were merely circumcised and compelled to convert to Islam. Al-Qasimi concludes that the second version of events is not as serious as the first, and as the two versions contradict each other, they are both dubious. Al Qasimi writes that the British provided false accounts to tarnish the reputation of the Qawasimi (Al-Qasimi, 2016). As previously mentioned, there appears to be a limited understanding of the Qawasimi situation. It took two punitive missions before the two parties found accord.

Al Qasimi wishes to further discredit British accounts by questioning the sanity of a particular British Resident, Seton, whose surviving letters are numerous and are the subject of Sultan Al Qasimi's doubts. Al-Qasimi points out that Seton's letters to Malcolm document the slightest rumour around the Gulf, of which the Sheikh regards many rumours to be inconsequential (Kaye, 1856). Furthermore, the Sheikh points out that Seton passed away soon after; therefore, he questions whether he was of sound mind. This line of reasoning aims to discredit Seton's letters entirely. A common problem for the historian of piracy is its inherent duplicity. When Sheikhs were questioned about events that occurred, they often proclaimed innocence and expressed friendship towards the British. This leaves the waters very muddy indeed. Adversely, it is wholly conceivable that if the Qawasimi were pirates, they would employ deception because pirates, by their nature, are deceptive. It is also possible that the Sheikhs, and indeed they may have practised what is now referred to as plausible deniability. They may have encouraged acts of violence but did not give specific orders or wish to know the exact details of encounters.

The Wahhabi

One criterion for determining whether the Qawasimi were pirates is to examine

their motivations. To qualify as a pirate in the agreed definition, one has to act purely out of self-interest or out of malice. (Al-Qasimi, 2016). Trying to prove these things is fraught with difficulties, however. There is ample evidence to back up the fact that British ships were attacked. However, it is difficult to know by whom and why is even harder still. A significant factor that may have contributed to the raiding of the Qawasimi was their adherence to a particular religious doctrine. Some understandings of Islam have prescribed raiding the infidel and giving an unfavourable rate of exchange when trading (Onley, 2011). Of the captured goods, one-fifth should be given to the dominant house, and the remaining four-fifths may be kept. Although the Gulf was predominantly Muslim, these strict interpretations were not typically implemented, as evidenced by the trade with Hindu merchants (Sweet, 1964). However, with the rise of the Wahhabi and their strict interpretation of Islam, it is entirely plausible that if they had sway over the Qawasimi, they would encourage the kind of maritime violence that was witnessed at the time.

The Wahhabi connection has implications for the kind of terms we use. It is alleged that the Qawasimi were religiously motivated and took orders from the Wahhabi, but to what extent is a contentious point amongst historians of the subject (Brydges & Jones, 1834). This is pertinent because if the Qawasimi were working for a bigger organisation or were religiously motivated, they would technically be privateers or Jahidis, not pirates. Furthermore, the fact that the British always labelled the Qawasimi pirates may be because they had no desire for a confrontation with the Wahhabi. The Wahhabi had been a growing force emanating from central Arabia since the early 18th century. At the turn of the nineteenth century, it was making significant inroads into parts of the Persian Gulf (Brydges & Jones, 1834). The extent of Wahhabism's influence on the Qawasim was a significant factor, one that the British were acutely aware of at the tim. This wariness meant that the Qawasim and the entire Gulf area were treated with kid gloves to a certain extent. This governance contrasts with the way India was treated during the same period (Mehr, 1997). The British wanted the Persian Gulf to be peaceful and friendly; however, they realised the religious element was a contentious issue and wanted to interfere as little as possible.

The spread of Wahhabism had not only religious implications but also political ones. Before, the tribes would form loose alliances with whomever they perceived to be the most potent force, and the Sheikh would be the head of the tribe, but Wahhabism aimed to unite the tribes under one system decreasing the tribal head's authority. This could potentially make it more difficult for the British to come to agreements with individual tribes. Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab was born to a Saudi family in the early 18th century (Davies, 1997). He sought to promote a stripped-down Islam that was unshackled by the perceived demoralising influences that came after. The Wahhabi faith was backed by the House of Suad, who provided military support. They had begun making incursions into the Persian Gulf by the start of the nineteenth century. The Saudis attacked Bani Yas

island about one hundred and fifty kilometres from the Qawasimi town of Sharjah, and in 1800, they were nearing the stronghold of Ras al Khaimah. The impact of the Wahhabi has ramifications for the topic of this paper. One, it affected how the British would deal with the Qawasimi and would colour the way the British would treat the area from then on. The other is more questionable: how the Qawasimi were involved or at least how much the Wahhabi were influencing the actions and decisions of the Qawasimi. The British knew them to be religious and ruthless.

There are good reasons why the British and the Saudis would want to avoid an all-out confrontation with each other. The British strength was on the sea, whilst the Suad strength was in the desert. Both had interests in each other's sphere of influence, and a conflict between them would be mutually unfavourable. The British did not want to become embroiled in a land war in a vast, unknown, and hostile desert area. Nonetheless, they were wary of each other and viewed each other suspiciously. Also, the Suad could threaten the British at multiple locations. A conflict with the Wahhabi could potentially cause restlessness in territories Britain already held. What perhaps illuminates Britain's quandary was David Seton's enthusiasm for confronting the Saudi threat, compared to the Supreme Government's reluctance to engage in any conflict with the Wahhabis. Furthermore, Britain was only willing to commit to what it could afford. Ultimately, the British were keen on keeping the sea lanes safe. Despite a reluctance to openly clash, there were a few points of convergence where the British and Suad interests were at odds. Most notable was Oman. Because Oman refused to bow down to pressure from the Wahhabis, it was regarded as hostile (Jones & Ridout, 2013). This factor is a bone of contention with a very real political element, as Britain was Oman's ally. From the surviving British correspondence from Chief Secretary Warden to Captain Wainwright, there is a weariness about becoming embroiled with the Suad (Marshall, 1829). Also, Wainwright was not ordered to engage the Wahhabi directly, only if they threatened the Omanis. Before Wainwright sailed into the Gulf, he went to Muscat to bolster the defences in case of a Saudi attack (Al-Qasimi, 2016).

English and Arabic sources concur that piracy occurred between 1790 and 1819 but disagree about which specific acts constitute piracy, as conflicts obscured which acts were piratical (Risso, 2001). For instance, the Wahhabis were becoming a more prominent force or influence in the early 1800s, which would have changed the nature of the conflict. It was also during this time that the number of piratical incidents intensified. Risso argues that the rise of maritime violence in the early 18th century was due to the Wahhabi influence on the Qawasimi (Risso, 2001). Brydges views the Qawasimi as a maritime extension of the Wahhabi land Empire and their acts of piracy as a logical application of the Wahhabi doctrine (Brydges & Jones, 1834). He further argues that the Qawasimi were allies of the Wahhabi and accuses the Qawasimi of depredations in the southern part of the Gulf. Brydges discussed his meeting with the Ottomans, who were keen to unite against

the Wahhabi threat. He seems intent on linking the Qawasimi as direct vassals of the Wahhabi when other historians have argued the link is tenuous, or at least highly changeable (Jones & Ridout, 2013). Brydges frames the narrative as an inevitable future confrontation with the British and Wahhabi. Risso, Suzuki, and Brydges's recognition that Wahhabi had a significant role to play in Qawasimi's maritime violence contrasts with several historians who argue that the Wahhabi had minimal influence (Risso, 2001). Lorimer insists that the Qawasimi acted of their own volition, not at the orders of the Wahhabi (Lorimer, 2003). Why the Imperial authors chose not to infer Wahhabi influence on Qawasimi behaviour may be because of a lack of evidence, or perhaps they decided to follow a narrative that mirrored the foreign policy of the era, which was to avoid confrontation with the House of Saud. After 1820, the Suad was always in a position to potentially offset Britain's perceived main adversary, which meant Britain tried to maintain friendly relations with them. This became a formal agreement in 1915 (Goldberg, 1985).

Ultimately, it may have been the temporary demise of the Wahhabi that emboldened the British to launch the final attack in 1818. The British were made aware that in April 1818, the Saudis had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Ibrahim Pasha. When the Bombay Government learned of this, they decided to launch a major offensive against the Qawasimi (Onley, 2009). Despite Britain coming out of the Napoleonic war victorious and arguably the most powerful nation on earth, it is highly doubtful whether she would have launched the last punitive mission against the Qawasimi had not the Wahhabi threat been neutralised. Furthermore, following the Wahhabi fate, an agreement would most likely appear more attractive to the Qawasimi. Despite the variety of historians' perspectives on the Wahhabi influence, it is highly plausible that the relationship was changeable, as the historical facts seem to indicate. Historian Max Boot, writing about more recent piratical episodes, remarks that most pirates are usually supported by a larger, more "credible" power (Boot, 2009). Furthermore, any anti-pirate operations by one party typically run the risk of an all-out war. The Qawasimi episodes appear to correlate with this evaluation. This was partly due to the changing relationship the Qawasimi had with the Suad and the reluctance of Britain to confront the Suad directly. Religious fervour probably played a part in the alleged practical acts, and Wahhabism may have exacerbated this. However, the extent to which this was the case is disputable.

4. The Punitive Missions

The British conducted two primary operations against the Qawasimi in 1809 and again in 1819 (Pierzchała, 2016). Following this, a series of treaties cemented the British position as the arbiter in the Gulf. Qawasimi piracy ceased to be an issue. It is essential to note that the British did not wish to dominate the Gulf, as some absolutist writers argue; instead, they sought to maintain a peace that suited them. This peace meant ensuring that India, Britain's most prized overseas possession,

remained safe and lucrative and also preventing competitors from encroaching on Britain's sphere of interest (Davies, 1997). In the eighteenth century, the British were not overly interested in the Persian Gulf. It increasingly became apparent, however, that having a "friendly" Gulf was necessary to ensure safe shipping to and from India. The British were not overly concerned with governing the Gulf; instead, they preferred it to be arranged in a way that suited British interests. In the British mind, the only way to guarantee this was to rid themselves of the pirate threat. The only solution seemed to be launching attacks against the pirate ports and destroying their vessels (Onley, 2009). The punitive attacks are the most controversial events, and the absolutist historians single out these attacks as violent actions of a repressive empire, as they argue that the Qawasimi were innocent of the charge of piracy (Al-Qasimi, 2016). This paper aims to prove this incorrect; however, there were other reasons the British wished to attack the Gulf. She sought to remove French influence from the Gulf and also aimed to curb the impact of the Wahhabis in the area (Low, 2012). Malcolm considered turning the island of Karrak into a British base aboard *HMS Doris* for these purposes before the suppression mission (Kaye, 1856). The punitive missions were conducted to draw the Gulf into Britain's sphere of influence. Whether the Qawasimi were attacked only to protect what Britain already had, this still had the effect of expanding the Empire. Again, this self-serving expansion is a shared characteristic of pirates and empires, and the British punitive operations are evidence of this.

In October 1809, an expedition set off from Bombay with Captain Wainwright as commodore of the fleet sent to the Persian Gulf with the express intention of eliminating piracy there (Davies, 1997). The ship that he captained was *HMS Chiffone*, which had originally been a French vessel commandeered off the Seychelles. Along with the *Chiffonne* was *HMS Caroline*, a bomb ketch, and the company ships *Mornington*, *Aurora*, *Nautilus*, *Ariel* and *Fury* (Wainwright, 1810). Unfortunately, the bomb ketch exploded en route to the Gulf (Davies, 1997). When the British reached Muscat, the locals informed them that the Qawasimi had been warned of the British force approaching (Al-Qasimi, 2016). The information about the British attack meant that a large number of Qawasimi vessels were able to evade the British attack and hide in the Gulf's interstices (Pierzchała, 2016). Knowing that the Qawasimi had been informed, Captain Wainwright decided to attack small bases first before striking the main base at Ras Al Khaimah. By November 11, they had reached Ras Al Kheimar and launched an attack on November 13th. A detachment of marines under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Lionel Smith attacked the town with cannon and muskets (Marshall, 1829). The troops who entered the city found a great deal of the loot that the Qawasimi had taken (Marshall, 1829). As mentioned before, Wainwright's referring to the pirate bases as "infested" infers that it was only proper to eradicate the infestation, which is precisely what the punitive mission set out to achieve. By all accounts, Wainwright's actions were justified to the extent that they eventually created a stable, protected area where commerce could be conducted relatively safely.

The British attack in 1809 was a setback to the Qawasimi, but not enough to cripple them completely. Furthermore, the British were unable to devote as large a force as they would have liked, the reason being that they were still at war with the French and were also cautious about confronting the Wahhabis (Lorimer, 2003). The 1809 punitive mission was a failure in that it did not stop future "pirate" attacks from occurring. For the following decade, there were continued attacks on shipping. In 1811, there was an upsurge in piracy, and the Qawasimi began to regroup. At this particular time, British commitments in the Napoleonic War in Java left British trade vulnerable, as the Royal Navy lacked the resources to protect shipping effectively around the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean (Das & Das, 2016). Due to this perceived threat, the second expedition was launched in 1819, a decade after the 1809 attempt. Over ten years, the situation in the Gulf had undergone drastic changes. The Wahabi threat had considerably dissipated due to the Egyptian Army quashing them in the area. Furthermore, Britain no longer had to contend with France as a competitor in the Gulf. Britain had defeated the Gurkhas, Pindaris and Mirathi, so it had the resources on hand to devote a much larger force against Qawasimi (Pierzchała, 2016).

The attack was to consist of three Royal Navy craft: *HMS Liverpool*, *HMS Eden* and *HMS Curlew*. A half-dozen company cruisers and approximately three thousand land forces were also involved in the attack (Bose, 2009). The objective of this mission was to destroy the pirates while avoiding any encroachment on land territory (Pierzchała, 2016). By November 25, *Liverpool* reached Ras al-Khaimah. The remainder of the force resupplied on Qeshm and joined them, attacking on December 2, backed by Omani ships and ground forces. The ground forces consisted of the 65th and 47th foot soldiers (Woodman, 2005). The mission in 1819 was deemed a success, and many Qawasimi vessels were destroyed. General Kier wrote that the Qawasimi had probably been informed of current European warfare tactics, as evidenced by their digging trenches and constructing batteries. Kier also noted that one of the Europeans, the Qawasimi, had probably helped them prepare the defences. According to the absolutist authors of the subject, the British conducted punitive missions to eradicate any competition, thereby dominating trade in the Gulf and the wider area. The British are accused of using violence for their benefit. The punitive attacks were so heinous because they were justified on the premise that the Qawasimi were pirates, which the absolutists argue is false. Al-Qasimi points to the fact that there were no piratical attacks committed in 1818, and this is given as the principal reason why the British punitive attacks were so undeserved (Al-Qasimi, 2016). In effect, the absolutists are accusing the British of being pirates. The British acted out of self-interest. The men whose job it was to safeguard Britain's financial interests were the same men who decided to launch the punitive missions. A justification for the attacks was retribution for the British attacks on their shipping.

The British employed maritime violence to achieve their objectives, and Pax Britannica was a byproduct. What made Britain different from the Qawasimi was

that it was too large in terms of the size of its fleet and hegemony to be considered pirates. Ultimately, the Qawasimi and the British Empire were akin. The violence and motivations attributed to the Qawasimi that led them to become pirates could equally be applied to the British. Likewise, they also gave the central positive aspect of piracy and empires: Protection. One justification for the punitive attacks is that whatever the British did worked, as there were arguably positive outcomes. An examination of the timeline strongly suggests that the British were effective in their action. The story of the suppression of piracy and the subsequent peace that followed arguably presents a strong case in favour of Britain as an effective guardian. It was apparent that random factors were at play, explaining the relative harmony that followed. This peace was brokered as much by the threat of force and the treaty as by the grace shown afterwards by Commander Kier (Lorimer, 2003). Much to the dismay of his superiors, Kier released the captured sheikhs and left certain parts of Qawasimi's property alone. It was perhaps this act that cemented the area as a part of Britain's sphere of influence. The Arab tribes perhaps appreciated the attributes of strength and generosity the British demonstrated.

Aftermath of the treaty

After the hostilities had ceased, the sheikhs and the British signed the General Treaty of Peace, which, as the name suggests, was a settlement offering mutual protection and an end to piracy (Risso, 2001). This also had another benefit, as they formed the Trucial Coast (later to become the UAE) and utilised the arrangement with the British to be protected from the potentially encroaching Saudi power. In the peace treaty, Article Nine forbade both slavery and piracy. The terms were included together as being illegal, although piracy itself was not properly articulated in the treaty (Mirzai, 2016). Additionally, the treaty prohibited the importation of certain types of wood from India. This was to prevent such craft from being built that had beleaguered British shipping before. Qawasimi ships were allowed favourable conditions when trading at British-owned ports, however (Alpers, 2013).

The way the 1820 treaty describes Qawasimi piracy is somewhat inaccurate, as there is evidence that the sheikhs present at the signing questioned the document's allegations (Al-Qasimi, 2016). The treaty of 1820 encapsulates the British attitude towards piracy. In this document, signed by Sheikhs, is the definition of piracy as "in the way of plunder and piracy and not of acknowledged war, he shall be accounted an enemy of all mankind". This is a rather vague definition of piracy, however, and also quotes Cicero (Schillings, 2017). Suzuki notes that the definition in the treaty differs from the current British definition (Suzuki, 2018). Despite the vagueness and the righteous tone of the British, the treaty was signed. Al Qasimi's criticism of the document itself is accurate. Despite the treaty's shortcomings, it led to a relatively productive future that proved mutually beneficial. In fact, according to the commercial figures, after the 1819 mission, Arab traders were better off than the British, who fared better when "pirates" were active for at least two decades. This peace was imposed by Britain not out of benevolence but

out of self-interest. Britain seemed to hit the right tone and was not a tyrannical arbiter.

5. Relationship between Piracy and Empire

Piracy and state-making are intrinsically related, and the object of this paper is to ascertain whether and how the relationship between the Qawasimi and the British fits into this model. Piracy is a term used by empires to vilify their competitors, but it is soon forgotten if both parties come to a resolution (Denemark, 2017). Perhaps more importantly, how the British and Qawasimi were to collaborate for each other's benefit. The two most divergent lines of narrative of the era are the imperialists and the absolutists. One argues that an imperial power justifiably controlled an area out of benevolence (Davison & Kelly, 1969). The absolutists, however, claim that the imperial power exploited the tribes in the Gulf for its benefit (Al-Qasimi, 2016). Perhaps a far more realistic model, however, is of two powers competing for hegemony, and when one wins, the junior party is not entirely snubbed out but rather amalgamated. The Qawasimi and the British both engaged in maritime trade and wished to extend it. They both offered protection in return for money. They employed violence as a means of coercion. They were both in a prime position at one time. Britain did take on some of the characteristics of pirates because, as Denemark and Tilly argue, states and pirates are sometimes indistinguishable in terms of their behaviour (Tilly, 2017).

Along similar lines, Janice Thomson's book Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe examines the contributory nature of piracy (Thomson, 1996). Like Tilly, this book opens with the question of why modern nation-states have a monopoly on violence, with a few exceptions. In medieval states, the agents responsible for wielding violence were numerous, including mercenaries and pirates (Tilly, 2015). Thomson acknowledges that our modern order of centralised violence is not regular. Over the evolution of our current system, groups have typically resisted the domination of the central state before eventually becoming amalgamated (Thomson, 1996). Like medieval European states, the Gulf states and tribes, prior to the advent of imperialism, also had a history of violence, which was considered the norm and included pirate attacks. It was not until Britain drilled down in terms of the punitive attacks that the Gulf tribes were forced to concede to Britain's near monopoly of violence.

One of the most pertinent features of what both Britain and the Qawasimi offer is protection. As Tilly maintains, protection takes on different meanings depending on the circumstances. Protection can mean safety or something more ominous. If a party can offer protection from violence from other parties, it is legitimate. Whereas, if a party threatens violence on the condition that payment is not made, they are engaging in an illegitimate act: a protection racket (Tilly, 2017). This appears to be a clear-cut definition. However, both states and criminal enterprises have taken on both attributes at one time or another (Denemark, 2017).

This blurs the lines between legitimate and illegitimate authority, as well as between empires and pirates. Onley poses the question of whether Britain was a protector of the Gulf or whether protection was imposed upon them. He concludes that it was both, and if one examines the evidence from both sides, a compelling case can be made for this (Onley, 2009). Onley points out that the harsh environment of the Persian Gulf, coupled with Bedouin culture, meant that tribes were constantly seeking protection—something they had been doing long before European powers entered the Gulf. Bedouin tribes would often pledge their loyalty to the strongest tribe or the tribe that could guarantee protection.

Additionally, it was customary for tribes in the Gulf to pay huwah, some of the money the weak give to the strong in return for protection (Khuri, 1985). Taxes would also be demanded to ensure safe passage or taxation on goods. Understanding the cultural context allows us to comprehend the initial rise of the Qawasimi, the conflict between the Qawasimi and the British, and the eventual dominance of the British. The Qawasimi would guarantee protection to its tributaries and came into conflict with the British because of a conflict of understanding about authority (Onley, 2009). The Qawasimi dependence on Wahabi protection also coloured the power relationship (Sweet, 1964). What appears to have happened in the case of the Gulf is that instead of pledging allegiance to another tribe, they did it to the British. This is entirely normal in the context of Bedouin behaviour. The notion of a nation-state was alien to the Bedouin, but it is wholly conceivable that Britain was perceived as another tribe by the Gulf tribes. The British demonstrated they could offer protection, so the Qawasimi eventually became protected. However, it was by no means a smooth transition (Onley, 2009).

Protection is also important because it facilitates economic activity. A strong yet resigned protector means traders can engage in commerce unhindered and perhaps even flourish. (Denemark, 2017). Piracy is primarily influenced by economic factors, which have historically opened up new markets in previously unexplored areas, contributing to globalisation. The example Denmark references is the Vikings. In addition to raiding and plundering, pirates also engaged in commercial activities to varying degrees. Denemark argues that pirates do more to spread free trade and commerce than to restrict it (Denemark, 2017). One example is the Vikings, who introduced the practice and, indeed, the concept of markets to Ireland. Likewise, the Qawasimi prior were involved in trade; they were not merely predatory but also contributed to the commercial activities of the area. The trade conducted with India, along with Qawasimi's protection of the pearling industry, is a testament to this. The inhabitants and powerful maritime tribes of the Gulf were not principally violent attackers but were also involved in economic activities such as pearling and trading with India (Sweet, 1964).

Some of the other notable positive attributes of pirate societies include their ability to foster social cohesion. Leeson, in The Invisible Hook, categorises piratical societies as developing their democratic systems and cultures. Perhaps the necessity to act in unison forced these small societies to create progressive forms of

government. The examples of pirate society that Leeson gives are predominantly European; nevertheless, there are noticeable parallels between his focus and the area that is now the UAE (Leeson, 2011). An aspect of Arab Gulf sheikhdoms is that they are relatively egalitarian economically, or at least individuals were not taxed and were free to engage in trade. This may explain why the area was a notorious hub for commerce. After 1820, the Qawasimi, although not in a dominant position, continued to engage in trade and collaborated with the British. The 1820 treaty stipulated that Qawasimi vessels were to have free access to all British-owned ports and were offered British protection. Furthermore, Al Qasimi in *The Myth* goes to lengths to demonstrate that the Qawasimi were primarily interested in commercial ventures (Al-Qasimi, 2016). Thereafter, the British in the Gulf were keen to emphasise how they had helped the Gulf to become a trading hub. With British protection, vibrant trade was facilitated (Onley, 2009).

6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that the relationship between the Qawasimi and the British in the Gulf fits into a familiar, symbiotic relationship between pirates and empire. Whether the Qawasimi were truly pirates can only be explained by examining the historical, cultural, and economic context of the Gulf region, where trade, pearl diving, and power struggles shaped life and created conflict. British concerns over maritime security in the early 19th century, combined with the fragmented political landscape, led to the labelling of the Qawasimi as pirates—an interpretation that modern Gulf historians challenge. The two major British military campaigns against the Qawasimi in 1809 and 1819, while framed as efforts to suppress piracy, were primarily driven by British imperial interests in securing trade routes to India and eliminating rivals (Keynes, 1950). Although the British justified their violence through vague definitions of piracy, the resulting peace treaties—though self-serving—ultimately stabilized the region and laid the foundation for the Trucial States under British protection. The British and Qawasimi were not simply enemies but rival powers that used similar tactics—protection, violence, and commerce—to assert authority and gain influence in the Gulf (McNeill, 2012). Rather than being mere outlaws, the Qawasimi were integrated into a broader system of trade and protection. The British, often behaving like pirates themselves, imposed their power through violence, ultimately reshaping Gulf politics and economics in their favour. Understanding the societal and power dynamics between empires and pirates may offer us a clearer perspective on our current situation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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