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Environmental Mastery of the Biopolitical: Water and the Birth of the Modern al-Sabah State

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Environmental Mastery of the Biopolitical:
Water and the Birth of the Modern al-Sabah State

The ascension to power of Shaykh Mubarak al-Sabah in 1896 has been treated by many historians as the beginning of the modern Kuwaiti state. With the bloody murder of the Shaykh Muhammad and his brother Jarrah, leadership of the al-Sabah family fell without further contention into Mubarak's lap. In the cosmopolitan, trade driven urban society that characterized the port city of the nineteenth century, however, this transition of power meant little to the merchant families that operated as Kuwait's de facto government. Similarly, a narrative familiar to states' across the broader Gulf region, the discovery of oil in 1938 and its later commercial export in 1946 is often treated a historical rupture point through which a previously medieval Kuwaiti society was transformed over night into a modern state. Referred to as Gulf exceptionalism, this model of understanding Kuwaiti history is, as argued by Farah al-Nakib in his 2016 *Kuwait Transformed*, an ineffective approach as it largely ignores both the political and social processes at work in the pre-oil urban center. The Kuwaiti state that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be understood in neither terms of monarchical sovereignty nor material wealth but rather through an exploration of the processes of governance in which the rational of state was fundamentally renegotiated.

While the development of the state in Kuwait is best understood as a historically extended process, individual episodes nevertheless provide indications of its direction. Departing from the poles of Mubarak's accession to power and the discovery of oil, the 1912-1923 project of establishing a permanent supply of fresh water speaks to the development of a state rooted in environmental mastery, the language of expertise, and a self conscious awareness of the biopolitical. Concerning itself with "economic observations, of the problems of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration" the category of "bio power" deals with population as a mass

category that can be arranged and rearranged at the discretion of the state.¹ In the case of Kuwait, the development of the biopolitical was inextricably linked to environmental mastery. This rational of governance defined the period of urban development discussed by al-Nakib, however its birth far preceded oil era modernization in the advent of the Kuwait water scheme in 1912.

Aimed at extending al-Sabah power over the endemic condition of water scarcity, the scheme redefined the category of population in terms of its material requirements and enforced a biological discipline derived from the state's ownership of "the right to make live and let die".² Similar to developments identified in John Willis's "Governing the living and the dead: Mecca and the emergence of the Saudi biopolitical state", the rational of the al-Sabah governance became an "administration of and intervention in human life" rooted in the goal of environmental mastery.³ The biopolitical and environmental rational of the Kuwaiti state was thus well defined well before the discovery of oil in 1938.

The histories dealing with the foundation of the modern Kuwaiti state in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries leave much to be desired. Most speak in terms of biography and, focusing on the contributions of their respective subjects, largely ignore the broader historical processes at work in their time period. Such is the case with the biographies dealing with Mubarak al-Sabah, the Shaykh's whose reign (1896-1915) brought Kuwait under the protection of the British empire and created a rational of governance that would define the character of the al-

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. pg. 139-140

² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, Ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. David Macey, New York City: Picador, 2003. pg. 240

³ John M. Willis, "Governing the Living and the Dead: Mecca and the Emergence of the Saudi Biopolitical State", *The American Historical Review*, Volume 122, Issue 2, 1 April 2017, pg. 350

Sabah state. The works dealing with Mubarak, namely the biographies written by Souad al-Sabah and B.J. Slot, are well chronicled but limited in their emphasis on monarchical power as the sole determinate of the character of the state. The former author, positioned in close proximity to her subject matter through bonds of kinship, writes with intimate knowledge of Mubarak that is pervaded by hints of sentimentality and therefore reads as hagiography; Souad's biography of Mubarak is useful for its chronology of events but must nevertheless be considered with skepticism due to its unequivocal praise for its rather complicated subject matter.

Slot's biography of Mubarak, while free from the conflicting interests of family bonds, runs into a similar problem in that it is ultimately a celebration of Mubarak's policies with a special focus on how they affected the British. In a sense Slot's work actual benefits here from its western leaning perspective as it deals with Mubarak as an embodiment of a political process through which the backwater port town of Kuwait was transformed into a government well positioned in the colonial game of the late nineteenth twentieth centuries. While this approach can be congratulated for its identification of this historical process, it nevertheless only considers Kuwait's importance as derived from its position within the broader British empire. Similarly, Salwa Alghanim's *The Reign of Mubarak al-Sabah*, while in title a biography of the Shaykh, looks almost exclusively at British political interests—such as the conflict in Nadj and the Baghdad railway project—at the expense of internal Kuwaiti perspectives and considerations. These works thus focus on the creation of modern Kuwait through the agency of Mubarak as an individual monarch; what they overlook, however, is the development of a more deeply rooted historical processes that redefined the rational of the state.

Slot and Alghanim's biographies of Mubarak, in their primarily western orientation, speak to the other central shortcoming in the histories of Kuwait: a predisposition towards discussing British imperial objectives as oppose to the development of the Kuwaiti state. The chief writer in this camp is the journalist turned historian H.V.F Winstone, whose works *Kuwait: Prospect and Reality* and *Captain Shakespear: a Portrait* look at the development of the British protectorate in Kuwait and its position in regards to the empire's broader colonial ambitions in the Gulf. These works, while orientalist in tone, are not without their place in the historiography of Kuwait, the former dealing extensively with the region's history prior to Mubarak and the latter sketching an image of one of the central British figures at work in Kuwait throughout 1909-1915. While Winstone's biography of Shakespear provides an admittedly entertaining portrait of the relationship between the Political Agency and Mubarak, his work characterizes Kuwait's state building process as occurring along a linear trajectory under the auspices of the British empire, a narrative that places the lion share of agency on its western actors while largely ignoring the complexities of Mubarak's political vision and the deeper historical processes at play.

Amidst this generally lacking scholarship, al-Nakib's *Kuwait Transformed* serves as virtually the only analytical history of Kuwait. Maintaining the centrality of figures such as Mubarak, al-Nakib deals with Kuwait in terms of the economic, social, and spacial transformations that characterized the development of the state following the discovery of oil in 1938. The key element of the history is preserved—the development of the modern al-Sabah government—however the narrative is expanded to include both human and nonhuman actors. Al-Nakib does an excellent job, for example, in bringing attention to the tension between Kuwait's traditionally dominant merchant elite and the rapidly developing al-Sabah state through focusing on the ways

in which the urban reorganization of oil era modernization served as a precursor to redefining social boundaries. The defining success of *Kuwait Transformed* is its engagement with the discourse of Gulf exceptionalism that had hitherto dealt with oil era modernization as a force acting upon a society characterized as a blank slate; what al-Nakib skillfully demonstrates is the fact that the preexisting social paradigms, contained within functioning urban landscapes, negotiated with and often pushed back against projects of modernization.

While *Kuwait Transformed* is of seminal importance to the trajectory of Gulf histories, it nevertheless falls into a problem al-Nakib actual identifies in his introduction: the tendency to deal with the Gulf in terms of the “temporal bifurcation” of pre-oil verses post-oil.⁴ Al-Nakib argues against this perspective in terms of Gulf exceptionalism yet nevertheless characterizes the discovery of oil as a rupture point in which the oppositional historical spheres of pre-oil/cosmopolitan society and modern/state government are cleanly and definitively divided. In a consideration of the socio-spatial history of Kuwait this approach may be apt, however in looking at the broader process of governmentality it becomes apparent that this distinction often obscures more than it clarifies.

In terms of identifying a single development that fundamentally changed the position of the state in Kuwait and the Gulf region as a whole, the discovery of oil is undoubtedly a productive candidate. While Kuwait’s first commercial export of oil in 1946 and the subsequent generation of virtually limitless wealth would provide the al-Sabah with the material agency required to reshape Kuwait’s urban, economic, and social paradigms, dealing with this period as a rupture

⁴ Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. pg. 20

point ignores the processes already at work in the preceding decades. Chief among these processes was that of governmentality, generally defined by Foucault as the ongoing definition and redefinition of what constitutes the state and over what categories the state extends control. In the case of early Kuwait, that is, the period prior to the ascension of Mubarak, this process was largely stunted; the al-Sabah family were equals amongst equals and the merchant elite constituted the backbone of the urban center's economic and social order. With this in mind, the position of the al-Sabah was not one of sovereignty as its primary operation was to settle disputes amongst the merchants. Relegated to a strictly juridical function, the rationale of the al-Sabah prior to Mubarak was in essence to maintain the status quo. This is not to say that the processes of governmentality were not in motion but merely to suggest that they were slow, nuanced, and driven by agents outside the typical confines of prince and principality. It was with the rise of Mubarak in 1896 that Kuwait saw this process redefined as the al-Sabah family began to renegotiate its position in relation to the material, territorial, and social categories that would eventually constitute the beginnings of a "modern" state. Herein it is useful to consider Foucault's identification of the various entities over which the state attempts to extend authority:

"wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, ect.; men in their relation to that other kind of things; customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, ect.; lastly, men in their relation to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortunate such as famine, epidemics, death, ect."⁵

⁵ Foucault, "On Governmentality," pg. 93

This description subdivides the “complex composition of men and things” into three categories: the material and economic, the social and cultural, and what would become the biopolitical.⁶

With this in mind, al-Nakib’s focus on the socio-spatial sphere does an excellent job of demonstrating the intersection of the social and material categories yet fails to extend its purview beyond the considerations of oil and urban development. The key factor that is missing here is that of environment, a category that encompasses the material sphere and precedes the development of the biopolitical.

The rational of state that focuses on “a hold of life and death” through environmental mastery is illustrated in Willis and Toby Jones’s analysis of Saudi Arabia.⁷ While the former focuses on the development of the biopolitical in relation to Saudi policing of religious practices on the Hajj and the Ikhwan’s destructions of the tombs of the Prophet’s family in Medina, Jones’s 2010 *Desert Kingdom* discusses the ways in which environmental conditions—namely water scarcity—were manipulated in the Saudi state building process. Jones’s work opens up an examination into the connection between environment and state power in the Gulf that had previously been absent amidst an overwhelming focus on oil era modernization. In demonstrating the centrality of foreign expertise in the pursuit of environmental mastery, Jones’s argument focuses on control of water as a method of both building “a social foundation of support” and establishing “a means of discipline and control”.⁸ Breaking with the pre verses post oil orientation of Gulf history, Willis and Jones introduce new conceptual frameworks through which considerations of

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷ Willis, pg. 396

⁸ Toby Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. pg. 9

environment and biopolitics can be synthesized in order to produce a more complex understanding of state development in Kuwait.

While Jones's work represents the first substantial foray into the environmental history of the Gulf, his examination of water as linked to political development was nevertheless preceded by Karl Wittfogel in his 1957 hallmark work *Oriental Despotism*. An exploration into the material side of governmentality as linked to environment, *Oriental Despotism* focuses on the importance of centralized, bureaucratic organization in the development of large-scale irrigation and agriculture in arid, water-scarce regions. Arguing that despotic, authoritarian states—"hydraulic civilizations"—develop organically in environmentally harsh regions, Wittfogel's work tends heavily towards determinism and focuses on topics irrelevant to the case of Kuwait. With this in mind, the position of water in the pre-Mubarak state can be seen as largely antithetical to Wittfogel's model of a hydraulic civilization: the "strategic means of production"—in the case of Kuwait access to wells and control of water importing *dhow*s—were firmly controlled by the merchant class, the distinction between the "periphery" of private ownership and the "core" of state power was essentially inverted, and the al-Sabah were largely "politically impotent" in comparison to the merchant class.⁹ Mubarak's rise to power would begin a renegotiation of these paradigms and would push the structure of the state towards Wittfogel's model. Nevertheless, while the character of Wittfogel's despotic government may have spoken well to Mubarak's political intentions, the realities of Kuwait's political development were far more complicated. The intrusion of Wittfogel's theories into an analytical history of Kuwait are thus warranted not only by what they explain but also by what they fail to explain.

⁹ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. Vintage Books, 1981. pg. 3

While flawed in certain regards, Wittfogel and al-Nakib nevertheless speak to the first two categories within Foucault's process of governmentality: the extension of the state over the material, territorial, and environmental realm and its subsequent extension into the social and cultural realm. In the case of Kuwait these developments were not necessarily serial, Mubarak and the al-Sabah had off an on success in consolidating social control before and after the advent of oil era wealth and modernization, a reality made manifest by the water scheme discussed in this thesis. The development of governmentality in Kuwait was thus far from linear and cannot be thought of in terms of pre and post oil eras; rather it was a dynamic process in which the struggle between the merchant elite and the al-Sabah family defined the character of the state as it developed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The key process in the development of the state that is lost to Wittfogel's model and ignored by al-Nakib is the creation of Foucault's third category of governmentality—the biopolitical—that began during Mubarak's quest to supply the Kuwaiti population with a reliable source of potable freshwater. Herein, Willis's discussion of the biopolitical rational of the Saudi state coupled with Jones's focus on environment as linked to social discipline and political control largely parallel the narrative of Kuwait's pre oil process of modernization. While ultimately culminating in failure, the Kuwait water scheme represented the beginnings of a process in which “the biological came under State control” as the al-Sabah sought to extend power over the endemic condition of water scarcity.¹⁰ The goal of this development was to position the power to “make live and let die” within the lap of the al-Sabah, by which the individual subject would become “neutral” and derive its right to either life or death through its relationship to the state.¹¹

¹⁰ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg. 240

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 241

With this in mind, the development of the biopolitical would entail a complex marriage between environmental mastery—a feat not fully accomplished until oil era modernization—and foreign expertise. Mubarak’s enlisting of British aid, embodied by figures such as Captain William Shakespear and the Geologist Edwin H. Pascoe, became of central importance as it introduced a language of statistics and demographics that dealt with Kuwait in terms of a population in need of a resource on a mass scale. The objective of supplying water for Kuwait in the early decades of the nineteenth century was thus a key step in the broader process of governmentality as it produced a demographically oriented language of science and expertise that characterized population—a massified quantity of life and death—as the object of the state.

The early settlement of Kuwait was in part prompted by water scarcity. As a variety of tribes migrated out of central and southern Arabia fleeing severe drought, straying groups from the Bani ‘Utub tribal federation came across “a spacious bay with a nearby freshwater supply” and established a small fort at the head of the Persian Gulf around 1716.¹² Herein the early development of Kuwait was defined almost exclusively by human relationships with the environment; just as the migration of the Bani ‘Utub from Hidar in southwestern Nadj was necessitated by a lack of water and agricultural resources, so too was their settlement eventually prompted by the presence of potable water near Kuwait bay.¹³ With this in mind, the nearby “freshwater supply” referenced by al-Nakib as an impetus for settlement actually refers to several different sources; on land the early Kuwaiti’s had access to the Al-Shamiyya, Hawalli, Keifan, and Al-Norga

¹² Al-Nakib, pg. 21

¹³ Jacqueline Ismael. *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982. pg.20

wells—which were often brackish and fairly unreliable—and by sea could collect sweet water from the nearby Failaka Island.¹⁴ While certainly a step up from the harsh conditions of Nadj, the unreliable sources of water and aridity of the region nevertheless proved challenging and encouraged the growth of very specific forms human relations and social institutions.

Chief among these social developments was the prominence of a developing merchant class that constituted the backbone of the Kuwaiti economy as, with little arable land, the newly established urban center would come to rely almost exclusively on outside trade. While the territory's inability to sustain agricultural production may have facilitated this development, the emphasis on trade in Kuwait can also be seen as resulting from “the town's position as the obvious trading post for interior Nadj and Qasim”.¹⁵ The natural harbor of Kuwait was thus essential to the establishment of the early town as it linked the backwater port to a broader system of trade and would later prove a source of further economic development with the advent of the pearling boom in the late nineteenth century. With the merchants establishing commerce as the center of activity in nascent Kuwait town, groups of Bedouin nevertheless retained their pastoral mode of production and continued to roam the desert and “carry their water on camelback, make goatskin containers to keep water, make cheese from camels milk, and tents ropes, and clothes from their hair”¹⁶. While there was some interaction between these two diverging groups—the Bedu would come to town to sell their wares and pick up the odd job—this early division would prove important as it set up a clear center of power defined against a population existing on the periphery,

¹⁴ Souad al-Sabah, *Mubarak al-Sabah: The foundation of Modern Kuwait*, London: I.B Tauris & Co, 2014. pg. 102

¹⁵ H.V.F Winstone, *Kuwait: Prospect and Reality*. London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1972. pg. 57

¹⁶ Yousuf Abdulmoati, *Kuwait in the Eyes of Others: Features and Characteristics of Kuwait's Society before Oil*, trans. Elsayed Issawi Ayoub, Kuwait: Center for Research and studies on Kuwait, 2003.pg. 62

a dynamic that would later allow for political upheaval in the late 1890's. However, while Bani 'Utub would continue to partake in limited pastoral production and play an important part in the transformations to come the nature of Kuwait was, at the onset, decidedly urban and trade based.

In the case of early Kuwait, "Society [was] shaped as counter point of the two dominant themes of its environment--the desert and the sea".¹⁷ Not only was this true of the trade that stemmed from Kuwait bay but also of the nascent political structures that the Bani 'Utub brought with them from Nadj. A system that relied on "a significant level of communal cooperation", the early tribal structure of the Bani 'Utub was in part decentralized and derived from the harshness of their environment yet nevertheless contained a form of socio-political organization.¹⁸ It was a system in which "kinship ideology served as both the legitimation of cohesion and cleavage in the continuous competition for scarce resources", and thus facilitated both segmentation and mutual dependence.¹⁹ The environmentally derived necessity of cohesion, paired with the town's later focus on trade, would facilitate the growth of a "traditional social quality of commercial exchange" that would prove one of the defining features of Kuwaiti society up into the twentieth century.²⁰

With this in mind, the historical political position of the al-Sabah family in Kuwait is difficult to ascertain. The story of the al-Sabah ascension to prominence is something of Kuwaiti mythos that has, in all probability, been largely blown out of proportion in more recent history. While the particulars of this narrative are elusive, it is clear that sometime in the mid eighteenth

¹⁷Jacqueline Ismael, *Kuwait: dependency and class in a rentier state*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993. pg. 17

¹⁸ Al-Nakib, pg. 14

¹⁹ Jacqueline Ismael. *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982. pg.18

²⁰ Al-Nakib, pg. 153

century two of the major families within the Bani ‘Utub tribal conglomerate—the al-Jalaahmeh and al-Khalifah— left Kuwait for al-Zubarah in modern day Qatar, leaving the al-Sabah as the de facto political authority. Organized along lines of kinship, the social structure of the Bani Utub was one in which the paramount Shaykh was chosen “upon tribal consensus” and held “no mystified or special powers over tribal affairs”.²¹ As such, while the departure of other prominent families may have strengthened al-Sabah prestige, their position of “first in rank” was still derived the Shaykh’s ability to effectively lead and was thus beholden to a more egalitarian system of social and political organization.²²

While the al-Sabah had some social importance, applying the labels of government or sovereigns would be problematic given the decidedly non-hierarchical nature of their position. First and foremost, the commonly told story of the al-Sabah rise to power is of a tribal consensus to rally behind one family in a time of dire need and impending warfare as, in the face of an impending raid, Sabah I is said to have been chosen to lead the counter attack. While the credibility of this story is suspect—it seems more likely that, as the “poorest of the important families”, the al-Sabah were less tied down in trade and thus better positioned to settle business disputes— it nevertheless characterizes the elevated position of the al-Sabah as stemming from the consent of the collective.²³ The role of the al-Sabah was, in essence, markedly removed from what we might consider a government in that:

²¹ Ismael, *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective*, pg.18

²² Slot, pg. 7

²³ Al-Nakib, pg.23

“the objective of the exercise of power is to reinforce, strengthen and protect the principality, but with this last understood to mean not the objective ensemble of its subjects and territory, but rather the prince’s relation with what he owns, with the territory he has inherited or acquired, and with his subjects”²⁴

The position of “the Prince” in Foucault’s notion of what he termed a “medieval” governmental structure is thus one of ownership and control over the territory, material wealth, and population of the state. Throughout the first two centuries of Kuwaiti history, the al-Sabah had no such claim of control but were rather considered equals amongst equals, their position being primarily centered around settling trade disputes.

With this in mind, the mantle of power and right to governance in early Kuwait was ultimately shared by the merchant elite who—controlling and managing both wealth and natural resources—were the de facto rulers charged with the task of ensuring “that the greatest possible quality of wealth [was] produced, and the people [were] provided with sufficient means of subsistence”.²⁵ In part this prestige can be attributed to the wealth the merchant class had acquired through the pearling trade which—taking off in the late nineteenth century—sparked both economic and demographic growth and, subsequently, increased organic urban development. However, even before this economic boom the position of merchant authority was inextricably linked to access and control over the three major wells which developed into a system of in which ownership was neither explicitly individual nor public but rather occurred along lines of kinship.²⁶

²⁴ Foucault, “On Governmentality,” pg.90

²⁵ Ibid., 94

²⁶ Laurent Lambert. “Water, State Power, and Tribal Politics in the GCC: The Case of Kuwait and Abu Dhabi”. Occasional Paper No. 15. University of Georgetown, 2014. pg. 4

While this liminal form of ownership was an important derivative of political power, in practice this water was often shared in times of drought in order to facilitate a system of reciprocity that further entrenched the merchant elite into the core of Kuwaiti society. The prestige of families such as the al Ghanim, Al Marzouq, and Al Sager was thus materially derived and socially reinforced through forms of charity ranging from the distribution of water to the maintenance of public spaces such as the market (*suq*).²⁷

With essentially unhindered access to Kuwait's material wealth, the merchant class constituted the "managerial bureaucracy" that Wittfogel, in his characteristically Marxian rhetoric, identified as the ruling class in hydraulic societies.²⁸ While the early Kuwaiti power structure was as such in part derived from its material and environmental realities—Ismael's dichotomy of the desert and the sea—it was nevertheless quintessentially lacking the depth of centralized technical apparatus that defined Wittfogel's "Oriental Despotism". Perhaps the most notable contrast between Wittfogel's normative asiatic model and the case study of Kuwait can be found in the relationship between the core and the periphery. For Wittfogel, the primary central power was defined as a despotic, centralized government whereas the merchants in Kuwait ultimately represented an informal system based along interpersonal channels of face t face interaction. As noted by Nakib, "the realities of economic scarcity, coupled with the absence of a bureaucratic state, contributed to the complexity of urban life by necessitating the creation of formal and informal networks of cooperation and mutual support".²⁹ The complicated nature of this relationship is well reflected in Laurence Lambert's definition of Restricted Communitarianism. Coined in Lambert's article "Water, State, Power, and Tribal Politics in the GCC", the system of Restricted

²⁷ Al-Nakib, pg.55

²⁸ Wittfogel, pg.6

²⁹ Al-Nakib, pg.15

Communitarianism entailed a form of private property in which wells were nominally possessed along lines of kinship yet in practice shared in times of need in order to facilitate a system of altruistic reciprocity. The bonds of mutual reliance fostered by this practice, in which “wealthier families often paid for shared resources” extended far beyond the distribution of water—Nakib’s example being the house of Yousif bin Issa al-Qina, where food was regularly prepared for the poor—and facilitated a kind of practical charity necessary for survival in Kuwait’s resource scarce and uncertain environment.³⁰ The practices tied up within the system of Restricted Communitarianism are those that al-Nakib laments in *Kuwait Transforms* as, in the face of urban planning and modernization, they would rapidly give way to more impersonal and mechanized forms of economy. The destruction of “charity...both widespread and patchy” and the creation of “more economically rational” institutions of social welfare identified by al-Nakib serve as an indication that the al-Sabah government in the later 1950’s already had a well developed sense of the biopolitical sphere, an understanding derived in part from experience dealing with the water question.³¹

While the system of ownership surrounding the three major wells speaks to the early relationship between access to water and Kuwait’s nascent political structure, the proximity of sweet water from the Failakah Island would prove instrumental in the commercialization of water imports and, subsequently, would open the stage for Mubarak’s later power grab. With the growing population of the urban center, Kuwait became increasingly “dependent for its water supply upon the island of Failakah” and began to step up its imports by using boats traditionally employed in

³⁰ Al-Nakib, pg.83

³¹ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.244

the town's primary economic activity of pearling.³² According to Souad al-Sabah, it appears that sometime in the later seventeenth century a particularly enterprising merchant by the name of Muhammed al-Yaquob, seizing upon the opportunity of a lull in the pearling season, took his *dhow* to the Island of Faw and began the practice of importing and selling water. While this story does not quite fit into the timelines established by other historians—as Ismael refers to using water from the Failakah island as early as 1716—it nevertheless marks a turning point at which water became more heavily commercialized. It is difficult to gauge the implications of this development in regards to Lambert's analysis of Restricted Communitarianism; while it is probable that the transition to a more explicitly market based economy would have reshaped the old system of reciprocal altruism, it seems that the imported water flowed within the traditional channels of disruption, brought to the market by donkey and sold next to brackish water from the wells. Regardless of the social implications, however, this reinvigoration in water imports marks the transition from tribal lines of kinship and reciprocity to a more market based system that, by the time of Mubarak ascension to power, was a fairly well established institution.

With the rise of this market system the occupation of selling water became a more formalized occupation termed *Kanadira*.³³ While this trade intensified over the following decades, expanding sources to include the Shatt al-Arab, it remained largely subjugated to the pearling trade that relied upon the same *dhow*s during the *ghauss*, or pearling season. Furthermore, even in the pearling off season, weather conditions often made trips to these sources untenable, rendering the import of water infrequent at best. Thus while the water trade only provided a temporary and limited amount of actual material wealth—sources from later British sailors indicate

³² John Gordon Lorimer, 1870-1914. *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf: 'Oman, And Central Arabia*. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1915. pg.1006

³³ Lambert, pg.6

that the practice of taking sweet water from the Failakah island had been abandoned by the early nineteenth century—the practice had two lasting repercussions: the replacement of the tribal kinship system with a more monetized, market based economy and the further entanglement of that economy in regional affairs.³⁴ In regards to the former development, Kuwait's increasing population coupled with the severe draughts experienced in 1906-1907 led to a spike in demand for water that the merchants were more than happy to fill; herein the sale of water became an industry of capital and labor costs that developed the trade into a more robust economic endeavor. The asking price of water hereby became determined by the costs attached to importing rather than by seasonal need and the merchants engaged in the enterprise, more than ever seeking to turn a profit, became increasingly competitive. In addition, the voyages up the Shatt al-Arab exposed the merchants to both the hazards and opportunities of piracy and smuggling. An early example of this can be seen in the rise of Kuwaiti smuggling which sought to avoid the 5-8% custom imposed by the Turks, an activity that tended to spike in periods in which prices of water brought in through land caravans were raised.³⁵ While this practice of importing may have only had limited political implications for the *kandadira* of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kuwait's budding reliance on external sources of water would later place the al-Sabah in the turbulent and ever shifting conflict of regional influence between the British, Russian, German, and Ottoman Empires.

The processes of development at play in Kuwait during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occurred along three different trajectories: one external, in which outside trade drew the attention of larger regional players, and two internal with the development of the

³⁴File 53/47 (D 43) Kuwait Water Supply' [58v] (139/486), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/511, in *Qatar Digital Library*. Folio. 93

³⁵ Lorimer, pg.1527

water market and turbulence within the yet politically impotent al-Sabah family. In essence these various changes were gradients of the same process of governmentality; the merchants continued to extend their prestige over economy just as the al-Sabah, later with the British assistance, sought to legitimize their claim to sovereignty, to link “prince and [] principality”.³⁶ While seeming to occur in separate spheres, these diverging developments were set along a path for collision. While the nature of Kuwait’s urban center continued to develop as a reflection of its environmental and economic realities—its major public spaces comprising of the *suq* (market) and the *sahel* (seafront)—the last decade of the 19th century would also see the renegotiation of more traditional forms of governmental power. With the ascension of Shaykh Muhammad in 1892, a leader generally characterized as “weak and indecisive”, the territorial security of Kuwait began to break down with the increasing frequency of raids from both outside bedu tribes—namely the Shammar and Dhafir—and bedu from within Kuwait—the Mutair and the Northern Ajman.³⁷ Unable to protect his subjects from the bedu’s racketeering and extorting of *khawah*, Muhammad allowed for the already weak position of the al-Sabah to further deteriorate. Furthermore, the influence of Yusuf bin Abdullah, an advisor who seemed to harbor desires to rule in Muhammad’s stead, pushed Kuwait towards the clutches of Turkish influence from which it had traditionally remained largely independent.

In the context of Muhammad’s weak leadership and the generally “turbulent times” an alternative ruler arose in the figure of Mubarak al-Sabah. Half brother to Muhammad, Mubarak embodied all the traits missing in Kuwait’s current ruler: “he was physically tough from desert

³⁶ Foucault, “On Governmentality,” Pg.90

³⁷ Winstone, *Kuwait: Prospect and Reality*, pg.68

life, proud and independent in spirit, a man capable of quick decisions followed by effective action”.³⁸ While Winstone’s account of Mubarak is characteristically described in a language of colonial grandeur and adventure, the more reliable biographical evidence surrounding Mubarak seems to ultimately confirm this appraisal; throughout Mubarak’s reign he was almost hyperactive, playing every side of the imperial game, engaging in warfare in Nadj, consolidating his control over the merchant class, and ensuring the al-Sabah’s total control over Kuwait through extending power over its material wealth. In order to begin this state building process, Mubarak would inaugurate his reign in violent coup d’état and a general purging of all Turkish influence within Muhammad’s court.

Accounts of Mubarak’s ascension to power vary in intensity and interpretation. While more conservative historians such as Slot insist upon a rather bland description of the event, narrating simply that “Muhammad and his younger brother Jarrah were killed and Mubarak, Sabah’s third son, took power”, histories from writers such as Winstone and Alghanim are more straight forward in their suggestion of Mubarak’s culpability³⁹. Despite Slot’s insistence that “the plethora of different versions renders certainty impossible” and that “Historians are neither policemen or judges” it seems safe to say Mubarak was indeed responsible for the murders—a conclusion supported not only by the vast majority of Kuwaiti histories but also by Lorimer’s more contemporary account in the *Gazetteer*.⁴⁰

If Winstone, Lorimer, and Alghanim are to be taken over Slot, Mubarak, accompanied by his son Jabir and several Ajman bedu tribesmen, set out on the evening of May 17th, 1896 in order to fall upon Muhammad in his sleep. Familiar with the layout of al-Sabah households, the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69

³⁹ Slot, pg.67

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 67

band stealthy ascended the stairs so as to avoid causing alarm and, coming upon the roof, shot Muhammad in his sleep at “point blank range”.⁴¹ With this primary objective achieved, Jabir preceded to Jarrah’s apartments where he is said to have killed his uncle by sword and then continued to search the house for Yusuf who was either never present to begin with or managed to escape. This account is almost certainly dramatized, however the end result was beyond dispute; Mubarak had established himself as the unopposed leader of Kuwait and addressed his subjects the following morning as such: “Muhammad and Jarrah my brothers died last night, and I rule in their stead. If any man has anything to say, let him stand forth and say it.”⁴² The room fell silent.

Quickly accepted by the majority of Kuwaitis, Mubarak’s ascension to power marked a turning point in Kuwait’s foreign policy. Where Muhammad, influenced by his advisors, had gradually tended towards Turkish authority, Mubarak adopted a policy aimed at playing every side against one another. Within the context of the Gulf at the turn of the century, this strategy would necessarily aim at courting multiple powers. While as of 1899 Kuwait was officially—albeit secretly—under British protection, Mubarak was nevertheless characteristically multifaceted in his courtship of other powers. The emergence of the Russian cruiser *Gilyak* in Kuwait in 1900, and the preceding visits from the *Varyag* (1901), the *Askold* (1902), and the *Boyarin* (1903), for example, speaks to the competitive colonial atmosphere that developed in the region in contention with nominally British and Ottoman spheres of influence⁴³. Thus while the pres-

⁴¹ Winstone, *Captain Shakespear: A portrait*, pg.70

⁴² *Ibid.*, 71

⁴³ William Facey and Gillian Grant. *Kuwait by the First Photographers*, London: I.N Tauris, 1999. pg. 32-34

ence of the British warship *The Pomone*, stationed in Kuwait harbor, might have suggested British supremacy in Kuwait, Mubarak, “sensibly seeing his options open, gave the Russians an especially warm welcome”.⁴⁴

While Mubarak’s goal may have been to achieve the greatest amount of independence possible within his colonial context, he nevertheless became inextricably bound up within the British side of alliances. This was in part a reaction to the Ottoman and German interests in the region which pivoted upon a plan to construct a rail line from Baghdad to Kuwait, a project that would almost certainly have obstructed Mubarak’s control by reasserting Ottoman authority in the Gulf. It also may have stemmed from the nature of British interests in Kuwait that—compared to those of the Ottomans—afforded the al-Sabah a freer hand in managing their internal affairs. Perhaps the most important factor, however, was the conflict in Nadj and Mubarak’s animosity towards the Ottoman backed Rashidi faction. Sensing the British interest in deterring Ottoman influence wherever possible, Mubarak probably tended towards the British in order to turn the tides in regional conflicts.

The nature of British influence in Kuwait was also complicated by the ambivalence of the British themselves. Denying Mubarak’s first plea for Protectorate status, the British initially saw Kuwait as an origin for piracy occurring along the Shatt al-Arab that targeted both British and Ottoman ships indiscriminately. For Mubarak this was problematic as—not only did it place him on thin ice with both regional powers—it represented his incomplete control over his own population and, furthermore, resulted in the piracy of Kuwaiti merchant ships carrying water imports and other goods. In addition to the issues of piracy, the British were from the onset incredibly

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34

weariness of Mubarak's intentions; while the Shaykh was in many cases adept at playing the colonial game, instances throughout 1897-1899 led the British to suspect that "Kuwait, in theory an independent principality, had fallen greatly under Turkish influence".⁴⁵ Thus despite Mubarak's request for protection, the Shaykh's frequent flying of the Turkish flag and refusal to board the R.I.M.S *Lawrence* for a discussion concerning the Protectorate "lest by doing so he should give offense to the Turkish authorities" suggested to the British the hazards of granting such an arrangement.⁴⁶ It was under these circumstances, in which both British and Ottoman ships frequented Kuwait bay and the court of the al-Sabah, that the British denied Mubarak's initial plea for protection in 1897.

The later change in the British policy towards Kuwait followed M.J. Meade's replacement of Captain David Wilson as Political Resident in Bushire, a transition that marked a shift towards a more proactive policy in the Gulf. Perhaps in part prompted by the "Russian Threat", the British reversal of policy in 1899 had at its heart the desire to expand the Empire's sphere of influence while simultaneously attempting to put a cap on the ever-present issue of piracy. The initial secrecy with which this task was performed further speaks to the controversial nature of the move which, if made public, would have escalated tensions amongst the Ottomans, British, and Russians. Leaving under the guise of a "hunting trip" on the evening of January 20th, 1899, Meade reached Kuwait with the goal of establishing a treaty that would mimic previously established arrangements with the Sultan of Muscat as well as the six rulers of the Trucial states. Herein, the treaty with Kuwait proves a notable example of the British tendency to transplant

⁴⁵Lorimer, pg.1020

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg.1021

older policies into a context in which they did not quite fit. As such, many colonial administrators were highly critical of the arrangement, Lord Curzon himself reflecting:

“It seems to me that we are now in the quaint situation of having admitted and denied the suzerainty of the sultan, both accepted and repudiated his sovereignty, both assured and given away the independences of the Shaikh”⁴⁷

While Curzon was perhaps correct in identifying the ambiguous political terrain the treaty laid out, the “independence” and “sovereignty” of Mubarak was, by 1899, fairly well established. With most of the Kuwaiti’s accepting the Shaykh as “a lesser evil” to Ottoman rule, Mubarak’s only substantial opponents—Yusuf and the sons of Jarrah and Muhammad—were in exile and had largely failed to garnish any political support.⁴⁸ Early plans to oust Mubarak through Ottoman support had died in the cradle and Yusuf’s courtship of British authority had fallen on deaf ears. With his territory thus relatively secured from outside threat, Mubarak could turn to the more pressing obstacle in the way of his consolidation of power: the merchant elite.

Kuwait’s transformation from a small center of trade to a strategic political outpost walked hand and hand with Mubarak’s ascension to power. While the consolidation of state authority was far from complete and would ultimately be achieved through domestic rather than international projects, the colonial context in which Mubarak fought to establish his reign would nevertheless have important repercussions on the later development of Kuwait. First and most important to the politically hyperactive Mubarak, the alliance with the British—and by extension

⁴⁷ Facey and Grant, pg. 36

⁴⁸ Solt, pg. 78-79

rejection of the Ottomans—would place Kuwait in a broader system of alliances that would further entangle its foreign policy with the conflict in Nadj and situate it more broadly in the colonial game preceding World War I. Secondly, the triumph of British influence over its Russian and Ottoman competitors would envelope Kuwait in a network of administration and bureaucracy that increasingly tied the Gulf to the empire in India—a development that would be critical in Kuwait’s later pursuit of technological expertise and infrastructural development. Finally, the presence of a line of British political agents in Kuwait would both strengthen and undermine Mubarak’s claim to authority as, while on one hand providing an edge over the merchant elites, the British would come to produce a body knowledge over Kuwaiti territory that would largely leave scientific authority in the grasps of the empire. Regardless of the dynamic of shared power implicit in the present of empire, however, the language of expertise produced by the presence of the British would nevertheless extend the purview of the al-Sabah state over the developing category of the biopolitical.

If this early period of colonial maneuvering could be said to have had a climax, it would undoubtedly be found in the spectacle of Lord Curzon’s landing in Kuwait in 1903. While in immediate political terms this visit served as “setting the seal upon the protection and overlordship of British power” it can also be understood in terms of its immense symbolic importance.⁴⁹ For the British this moment marked a self conscious reassertion of its colonial mission in the most high minded of terminology, referred to by Curzon as an continuation of “the most unselfish page in history”.⁵⁰ Putting aside these delusional colonial overtones, Curzon’s mission did mark the beginning of a new order, albeit it one of material and technological exchange rather than of

⁴⁹ Sugata Bose. *A hundred horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. pg.38

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg.37

ideological supremacy. For Mubarak, this episode represented the introduction of a foreign power which, while preoccupied with spectacle and dubious political designs, was nevertheless capable of providing the Shaykh with the expertise needed to continue his consolidation of power. The colonial chapter of Kuwait's history was thus one of both international entanglement and internal development and, while they often tripped over each other's feet, the two ultimately walked hand and hand towards the same goal.

British policy in Kuwait was from the onset shaped by the complicated colonial terrain that was characteristic of the gulf in the early twentieth century. While Curzon's voyage in 1903 was symbolic of a more aggressive policy in the region, the office of political residence in Kuwait nevertheless retained some of the hesitance of the pre-protectorate area. The first political resident in Kuwait, Major S.G Knox, was emblematic of this more hands off mode of operation and policy of non-intervention. With instructions that Mubarak "should be watched closely, and persuaded only as a last resort", Knox's position in Kuwait was less centered around the internal affairs of the city itself and more interested in "the two great powers of central Arabia": the Al-Saud and Al-Rashid.⁵¹ With this in mind, the British and al-Sabah spheres of power and influence remained largely ambivalent to one another throughout the first six years following Curzon's voyage, with Knox interested primarily in the affairs of Nadj and Mubarak focused on the consolidation of power against the merchant elite.

This somewhat distant relationship would be fundamentally changed in 1909 when Knox was replaced by Captain William Shakespear. An example of the kind of "Englishman Kipling delighted to picture", Shakespear would become emblematic of Curzon's vision of late British

⁵¹ Winstone, *Captain Shakespear: a Portrait*, pg.66

imperialism; he was an administrator with a plethora of skills and interests who, while ingratiating himself well amongst his Arab hosts, nevertheless served the often covert designs of the British policy in the gulf. While scholarship on Shakespear, primarily Winstone's biography, presents a somewhat hagiographical and romanticized image of the Captain, it would be unfair to discredit the incredible importance he played in the early political and infrastructural development of Kuwait. Winstone's assertion that "Shakespear came like a whirlwind" is thus hard to contest as his assignment as political agent marked the beginning of the two projects that would fundamentally shape Kuwait's domestic and foreign policies for decades to come: the pursuit of water and oil.

Unlike his predecessor, Shakespear's intervention in local affairs would put him in close personal contact with Mubarak. While the two would ultimately come to play against one another's interests, namely through Shakespear's secretive search for oil in 1913, the surface level of their relationship was one of mutual admiration. Winstone's account of the first meeting between the two, while marked by the author's romanticized and somewhat racist language that lamented the passing of high British colonialism, speaks—somewhat unintentionally—to the nature of their connection:

"Mubarak glared ferociously at the newcomer. His spotted kaffiya framed his face and shoulders and Shakespear observed the furrowed brow, large semitic nose which twitched ever so slightly, cultured mustache, well trimmed and hennaed beard, tight-drawn lips and strong, assertive chin: it was the face of a decisive and cunning man, clever perhaps and cruel. In turn the Shaykh directed his fierce and distrustful gaze at the tall, inscrutable Englishman who stood before him, the waxed military mustache rivaling his own in its shaping, the high forehead, straight nose and

jutting chin portraying quick intelligence and seriousness of purpose. Like all men brought up in the desert tradition, Mubarak seldom permitted himself or those around him the undignified assurance of a smile, but the stern face softened, the arrogant, piercing stare relented, when he was pleased. He rose to greet the new political Agent and offered him a seat at his side.”⁵²

Reading like literature, Winstone’s portrait of the scene holds within it some abstractions of the true nature of Mubarak and Shakespear’s relationship. The two were undoubtedly possessed by a “seriousness of purpose”, however they were also both double dealing and distrustful. As pillars of authority they would work well with one another, similar as they were in their possession of almost manic energy, but would in essence pursue ultimately conflicting ends. There was thus a surface to Mubarak and Shakespear’s relationship—in which the latter would praise the former’s policy of ruling with a “strong first” and political prowess—that was undercut by currents of hidden political maneuvering.⁵³

Aside from providing a better political match to Mubarak, Shakespear’s assignment to Kuwait had important techno-political implications. With a vast sea of expertise and capital at their finger tips, the British would introduce a scientific language of governance that would fundamentally reshape the ways in which authority operated in the hitherto decentralized Kuwaiti power structure. Contributing to the later wheels of modernized urban development discussed by al-Nakib, this rhetoric dealt with the category of population in terms of a political problem and was in essence an early manifestation of the developing sphere of the biopolitical. Shakespear can hereby be seen as a figure that both represented the broader “the mechanisms, techniques, and

⁵² Ibid., pg.69

⁵³ Souad, xiv

technologies of power” tied up within empire, as well as an agent of expertise on the ground.⁵⁴

An “expert land surveyor”, Shakespeare’s knowledge of “the techniques of geography” would prove important in the impending years as he would become instrumental in what was to be known as the Kuwait water scheme. Far preceding the discovery of oil and urban development of the late 1940’s through 1960’s, this project took the process of governmentality in the direction of environmental control; it was aimed at solving a problem that had plagued Kuwait since its foundation in 1716 and, in so doing, extended the reach of the state over the “right to make live”.⁵⁵ While ultimately culminating in failure, the existence of this project disrupts the traditional narrative of pre versus post oil development in demonstrating that the processes of governmentality were well in motion throughout the reign Mubarak. As such, the presence of the water scheme was positioned within the context of Mubarak’s power struggle with the merchant elite, a conflict that represented a new kind of state clashing with an older form of governance. While the first official mention of this plot appears in a letter from Shakespeare to Percy Cox in 1912, the plan on Mubarak’s end was thus deeply rooted in a process of governmentality that mirrored Wittfogel’s identification of core versus periphery.

While Mubarak and the British were rethinking ways in which to control the Kuwaiti population through environmental mastery, so too were the merchant elite rethinking their practices in response to the turbulent atmosphere of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While water had always been scarce in Kuwait, it seems that the period between 1900-1910 was characterized by draught and an unusually high demand for potable water—in all probability an indication of the steadily growing pace of population growth that began in the 1890’s. In order to

⁵⁴ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.240

⁵⁵ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.241

meet these rising demands, merchant ship owners sought to step up their imports from nearby sources, a notable case occurring in 1909 when Muhammad al-Yaqoub brought a sizable load in from the Shatt al-arab. While little is known about al-Yaqoub, mentioned only briefly by Souad, his access to a *dhow* would suggest that he was either a ship captain or an upper class merchant footing the bill for such a voyage. Ushering in a renewal of interest in commercial imports, al-Yaqoub's mission was less of an innovation and more of a repurposing of older methods of sale as he ultimately relied on routes established in the past as well as the tradition methods of distribution. For whatever reason, however, the documentation of al-Yaqoub's import is followed by a plethora of sources suggesting increased activity in the market of water imports. Similarly, a British correspondence between Captain Shakepsear and Percy Cox— then political resident in the Persian Gulf— mentions the reopening of wells for brackish water sold “not infrequently at the rate of 1\$” per Kerosene tin. This uptick in activity was probably a result of population growth, however it is also possible that episodes of draught and severe heat, such as those experience in 1907 and 1908, might have again plagued Kuwait. While it is difficult to pin down exactly why this resurgence took place—the sources from the water scheme folio leaving little indication other than general observations of population growth—it is clear that both on ground and at sea, the traditionally undermentioned business of selling water experienced a revival.

On one hand this wellspring of sources could simply be attributed to the prying eyes of the recently arrived British, however it seems that the content of the sources imply an actual renewal of interests amongst Kuwaiti merchants and, subsequently, the Shaykh. In al-Souad's biography of Mubarak, she mentions in passing the Shaykh's purchasing of a steamer from India with the intention of providing water to the public. The ship, purchased from the British and renamed *The Sa'id*, utilized a steam engine and was outfitted with “a sizable reservoir designed

specifically for water transportation”, technology that would significantly improve the vessel’s reliability as opposed to the sail *dhow*s owned by the merchants.⁵⁶ It was the first government owned ship in Kuwaiti history. What is missing from Souad’s cursory documenting of the event, however, are the political and economic nuances that drove the Shaykh’s decision. As the demand for water began to expand in the early twentieth century, the merchant *dhow* owners seized upon an opportunity to once again extend their influence over the public through manipulation and control of the economy. As the Shaykh’s central political goal of the early twentieth century revolved around undercutting the merchant elites’ social and economic influence, Mubarak’s purchasing of the *Sa’id* must be considered in relation to the changing position of the water economy. Mubarak’s intervention into trade was not in itself a significant departure from the traditional paradigms of the Kuwaiti power structure, the al-Sabah were, after all, initially only one among many families of merchants. The specific targeting of water, however, was an important development for several reasons; not only was it an essential resource but it represented an endemic condition over which mastery had never been established.

With this in mind, the fact that the *Sa’id* could “ensure regular deliveries” to the *suq al-ma*—previously funded by the merchants’ unreliable sail based *dhow*s—speaks to Mubarak’s broader strategy of utilizing British capital and expertise in his power struggle with the merchant elite.⁵⁷ The introduction of one reliable ship was by no means a solution to the water problem, however its example serves as a microcosm of the processes developing under Mubarak and the British that tended towards systemization in an attempt to wipe out the “various anomalies” present in al-Nakib’s depiction of an “organic” society.⁵⁸ In the al-Sabah’s transformation from

⁵⁶ Souad., pg.103

⁵⁷ Ibid., pg.103

⁵⁸ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.241

equal among equals to what might be considered a monarchical government, the quintessential step required not only an extension of control over territory and material wealth but a redefinition of the methods associated with dealing with these categories. In order to control population, the al-Sabah would have to provide a level of security and reliability untenable to the decentralized merchant elites. This struggle was ultimately a rehashing of Foucault's question of "how to introduce [the] meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state", however it involved the additional challenge of competing with private property owners that, as of yet, were anything but political impotent.⁵⁹ With the introduction of the technologically superior *Sa'id* to the competitive arena of the water market, Mubarak thus established the al-Sabah as a managerial entity capable of administering resources to the public with greater efficiency than the merchant elites. Mubarak's quest for political power, while multifaceted and attentive to a plethora of different arenas both internal and external to Kuwait, can here be said to have identified the "quota and criteria" through which it could dismantle the prestige of its merchant competitors: the reliable supply of freshwater.⁶⁰

While the introduction of *The Sa'id* marked an important chapter in the al-Sabah's quest of supplying water to Kuwait, it was in itself an inadequate innovation. Although boasting an impressive "300 ton capacity", equal to roughly 18,000 kerosine tins, *The Sa'id* was only one ship in a sea of water scarcity.⁶¹ In a correspondence between Shakespear and Cox on the topic of providing water for Kuwait, the Captain accurately assessed that: "within only one trip in three or four days, which is the utmost she can attempt, her presence will not go far towards alleviating

⁵⁹ Foucault, "On Governmentality," pg.90

⁶⁰ Wittfogel, pg. 26

⁶¹ "Kuwait Water Scheme," Folio.25

the present difficulty, even assuming her to work regularly without delays or break downs”.⁶²

Thus while Mubarak’s first move against the merchants may have been an aggressive display of his financial and technological backings, his decision to compete in the business of importing water was still tied to the same game with the same rules; while technologically advance, the steamer still relied on an economy dominated by the merchants with channels of distribution well beyond al-Sabah control. In order to fully undermine the centuries long history of merchant prestige, Mubarak would have to fundamentally change the name of the game by employing the technological expertise of his colonial backers.

In a letter to Cox dated the 19th of November, 1912, Captain Shakespear outlined the standard fair of water scarcity issues in Kuwait: the frequent shortages, the unreliable potability of brackish water, and the civilian “faute de mieux” to the older wells.⁶³ Mubarak, Shakespear explains, harbored a desire to satiate the needs of his people and had accordingly requested assistance in developing such a project. While somewhat critical of the Shaykh—who no doubt had “an eye to profit himself”—Shakespear’s attitude in this first letter is one of characteristic enthusiasm as he quickly identifies the project as an “Opportunity of a life time”.⁶⁴

While it would perhaps be unfair to dismiss Shakespear’s altruistic sentiments towards the Kuwaiti public, the documented rational behind his enthusiasm for the scheme was derived entirely from imperial interests. First and foremost, the construction of a reliable water supply under British auspices would place a portion of Kuwait’s material and territorial wealth under their indirect control as, regardless of Mubarak’s political sovereignty over the project, any technical administration would necessarily be at the hands of British agents and employees. With this

⁶² Ibid.,

⁶³ Ibid.,

⁶⁴ Ibid., Folio.17-19

in mind, Shakespear's intention of "running the town's entire water supply as a government concern" not only speaks to the Captain's interest in assuring the British position in Kuwait but also of the pivotal role expertise would come to play in defining the category of population as the target of government.⁶⁵ Furthermore, British centrality in managing material wealth in Kuwait would also afford valuable opportunities to search for other resources, namely oil. Herein the nature of the nascent Kuwaiti state of the twentieth century was divided amongst competing interests; as Mubarak and the merchants sought to dominate the state politically—thus concerning themselves with establishing managerial power over population—the British sought to extract valuable resources from Kuwaiti territory. In essence these competitive governmental goals seem fundamentally oppositional as the interconnected relationship between territorial sovereignty and control of population suggest that British management of material resources would disrupt Mubarak's claim to power. To utilize Foucault's rubric for the development of governmentality:

"The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities"⁶⁶

Mubarak thus sought control over a population and utilized as his preferred tool of pacification the material necessity of fresh water and its increasingly lucrative ties to the market economy.

The British, seeking a different kind of material wealth through territorial control and expertise,

⁶⁵ Ibid.,

⁶⁶ Foucault, "On Governmentality," pg.100

stood to place themselves a ring above Mubarak by administering the managerial side with employees to “remain indefinitely in charge” of the project.⁶⁷ Considering Mubarak’s aim of preventing nongovernmental entities “from crystallizing into independent bodies”, the courting of British intervention was a dangerous move as it threatened to introduce yet another actor in opposition to the absolute authority of the state. Furthermore, Shakespear’s interest in the water scheme, while partially concerned with the political position of the empire, had at its heart a much more material interest: the acquisition of early concession of oil rights. If using Foucault’s model, in which social and political control are derived from territorial and material control, the relationship established in the water scheme with the British was irreconcilable with Mubarak’s broader political project.

Here lies one of the instances in which Foucault’s definition of governmentality—catered as it was to the development of the sixteenth century European state—fails to explain the complexities of state development in Kuwait and the gulf region as a whole. While it is arguable that the British political position displaced the authority of the al-Sabah, it seems rather that the relationship was largely amenable to both governments’ goals: the British strengthened their position in Gulf and, later in the 1940’s acquired the resource they were after while Mubarak in turn acquired the financial backing and expertise required to extend the control over the nascent al-Sabah state over the Kuwaiti population. The major contribution of the water scheme was thus not centered around the actual success of achieving environmental mastery—that would come later with wealth from commercial oil exports— but rather in its the creation of a political language that reoriented the rational of government.

⁶⁷ “Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio. 26

Exactly one week after Shakespear's initial outlining of the opportunity, Percy Cox forwarded to "The Secretary to the Government of India" a more comprehensive plan of what exactly the water scheme would entail. Emphasizing the need for a "Geological Expert" and recommending a man by the name of Mr. G.E Pilgrim, Cox's confidential correspondence mentions the desire to obtain a "concession for the minerals in Kuwait Territory, in which the oil deposits which are known to exist would be included", almost as an after thought.⁶⁸ The scant attention given to this detail, which in Shakespear's vision made up the core objective of the scheme, can perhaps be attributed to the fact that oil was not indeed confirmed to exist in the area surrounding Kuwait. While Shakespear was himself an amateur surveyor, as of 1912 there was no existing geological evidence that confirmed the presence of oil in Kuwait. Composed in the absence of this technical data, Cox's outline demonstrates the British tendency to rely on past imperial experiences to inform current projects, a strategy that should be familiar considering Curzon's 1899 treaty with Mubarak. With this in mind, every detail outlined in Cox's letter—from the suggestion of Pilgrim, who worked on a previous 1905 survey in the gulf, to his recommendation of the Anglo Persian Oil company, responsible for a desalinization plant in Abadan— speaks to a previous British experience.⁶⁹

While glossing over the key British interest in obtaining oil, Cox's communiqué was important to the early development of the Kuwait water scheme as it outlined the two methods thought suitable for providing a reliable source of drinking water: the boring of artesian wells and the construction of a desalinization plant. The former of method, that of boring new wells, was a tried and true method and, considering the existence of already established wells, seemed

⁶⁸ Ibid., Folio. 23

⁶⁹ Ibid., Folio. 25

at the time an attractive prospect. Desalination was in essence the polar opposite considering, as of 1912, the method was only just beginning to be used on a mass scale and was even then a tricky process. From the onset of the project, Cox and Shakespear accordingly favored the former option for several reasons; first and foremost, according to Shakespear's assessment, that:

“the existence of fresh-water springs under the sea at various places along the coast, and the absence of any running water on the land-surface draining the flat deserts of the west and south would argue that there must be water-bearing strata below that from which the existing shallow surface-wells draw their meagre supplies.”⁷⁰

His technical wherewithal again coming in handy, Shakespear's backing of the artesian method made sense on an intuitive level; as Kuwait town had relied on the existence of water-bearing strata in the past, it seemed likely that—with the help of British technology and expertise—this source could be tapped with increased efficiency. In addition to the probability of finding water reservoirs, another appealing aspect to artesian boring was the price tag. The “drilling machinery” necessary to penetrate 400 to 500 feet in depth would only cost around 500£ with each subsequent boring coming at a diminished price.⁷¹ In addition, the need to survey for water aquifers would provide the British with a window of opportunity to search for oil. Desalinization would not only forgo this opportunity but would cost a minor fortune, requiring not only a heavy initial cost but also the recurring expense of fuel and maintenance. Despite the Shaykh's apparent blasé attitude towards the cost of his water supply, the immense attention given to price was in part

⁷⁰ Ibid.,

⁷¹ Ibid.,

oriented around the resale value of the water which would need to undercut the 1 1/4 annas per Kerosine tin—roughly 4 gallons—of Shatt al-Arab imports.

Finally, Cox's outline was important as it outlined the extent of control the British would enjoy over the construction and operation of whichever option was chosen. With essentially free reign over construction, the British would provide their "own officers to remain indefinitely in charge" with "the enterprise to continue in Government's hands".⁷² The price of the water produced would hereby be attached to a fixed rate capable at the very least of making the plant self supporting, the "profit or loss owing to fluctuating demanding demand falling on Government".⁷³ Having thus outlined the parameters of the Kuwait water scheme, Cox concluded his letter with a strong recommendation of backing the Shaykh in this lucrative enterprise. With the two most viable methods of obtaining a reliable water supply outlined and briefly spoken for, the communiqué was dispatched from Bushire on the 26 of November. Cox, commenting upon the Shaykh's "enlightened [] public spirit" urged in the last paragraph that "the project [] be taken in hand at as early a date as possible" given the increasingly potency of water scarcity as related to Kuwait's ever increasing population.⁷⁴ Arriving in Simla on December 9th, the letter—and by extension the viability of the scheme as a whole—would however face an unexpected obstacle: the slow lines of imperial communication.

Two letters were sent from Bushire on the 26th of November, one to Shakespear and Mu-
barak in Kuwait confirming the transmission of their request, the other to Foreign Department in
the British summer capital in Shimla, India. Herein the tracking of events becomes complicated

⁷² Ibid.,

⁷³ Ibid.,

⁷⁴ Ibid.,

as, while Cox's confidential message—received as early as December 9th— was clearly addressed to Shimla, the next surviving letter dispatched by Cox was not received until the 5th of January, 1913. Whether this delay can be attributed to the change of office or slow lines of communication, Cox's January 5th communique reveals a marked, if not politely subdued, tone of impatience concerning his request for “an early and favorable decision”.⁷⁵ A response came to Cox four days later in the form of a forwarded weekly message between the Viceroy to the Secretary of State dated December 19th requesting “early sanction” for the dispatch of a Geologist.⁷⁶ This January 9th telegram, itself a forwarded copy of a communication from the previous December, is followed by a gap of sources presumed simply to be another delay on the part of the British administration in India, a conclusion derived from Cox's January 26th telegram that urged that the “decision may be expedited” for fear that any further delay may be “apt to be misunderstood by the Shaykh”.⁷⁷

While the sources in the water scheme folio cannot explicitly speak to the Shaykh's reception of this delay, it seems safe to induce from the circumstances surrounding the growing demand for a freshwater supply that the slow British maneuverings were inconvenient to say the least. As mentioned in Cox's original November 26 communication, the months of April and May brought a spike in demand for water as the merchant *dhow*s would leave for the pearling season. Despite the best efforts of *The Sa'id*, the absence of imported water created by this departure would inevitably leave the town to “suffer to a degree not experienced hitherto from the want of water”.⁷⁸ While the severity of this statement should be tempered by a recognition of

⁷⁵ Ibid., Folio.34

⁷⁶ Ibid., Folio.38

⁷⁷ Ibid., Folio.43

⁷⁸ Ibid., Folio.25

Cox's benefit in linking a sense of urgency to his request, the general gist of his assessment was probably accurate as water from the increasingly depleted and brackish wells—in small part supplemented by the efforts of *The Sa'id*—was little help to Kuwait's growing population, a phenomenon ironically facilitated by the very *dhow*s that would be leaving the population high and dry come April. Thus despite his best efforts of buying into imports from the Shatt and recruiting outside expertise, Mubarak still operated within the contentious economic and political waters dominated by the merchant elite. The economic agency of the merchants, ever drawing power and authority away from the emerging political center of the al-Sabah, had hereby facilitated the growth of a population its trade could no longer sustain. The already endemic condition of water scarcity was thus more acutely felt than ever. Through his inability to keep the “nonbureaucratic and private sector of society supremely weak” due to the lack of a coherent “bureaucratic managerial policy”, Mubarak was in effect competing against the traditionally unplanned Kuwaiti economy identified by al-Nakib.⁷⁹ The process of centralizing power would hereby become a process of dismantling the organic trade practiced by the merchants in favor of a planned economy—a development that would rely heavily on the process of normalizing knowledge over population and its material requirements.

With essentially no noticeable progress made amongst the British administration in India throughout December and January, Cox, Mubarak, and Shakespear's optimism of having the projected completed as early as April or May yielded to the realities of imperial communication and indecision. It was not until February 6th that the project began to show signs of life with a telegram to Kuwait from Cox communicating that “arrangements for despatch of geologist are

⁷⁹ Wittfogel, pg.9

being expedited” and that a confirmed date of departure would soon be relayed.⁸⁰ The Geologist selected—Edwin Pascoe—was a member of the Geological Survey in India with past experience of surveying for oil and was to be relayed from Bombay to Kuwait on February 19th via “the slow mail” from Bushire.⁸¹ A surprising departure from the hitherto established pattern of British operations, it seems that Pascoe in fact arrived in Bushire on schedule after a brief stop in Karachi on February 15th and was ready to continue his journey to Kuwait to meet Shakespear. Time, however, was now of the essence as Shakespear himself was soon to depart on a “touring” that would be made difficult if “caught by the hot weather”.⁸² The communications left by Shakespear and the biography written by Winstone are silent as to what this touring actually entailed, however it was likely one of several forays into Nadj. The efficiency of Pascoe’s transit thus did little to rectify the long delays of communication in India and with only a slight window between the Pascoe’s scheduled arrival on the 19th and Shakespear’s departure on the 22nd, any further delay would make a meeting between the two improbable and their ability to survey together neigh impossible.

While these circumstances were unfortunate for the British, they are beneficial to the modern onlooker as they necessitated the production of written communications left by Shakespear for Pascoe that contained telling information. In fear of not being present for Pascoe’s arrival, Shakespear left several documents outlining the details of the project. The first of these documents was Shakespear’s own amateur observations on Kuwait’s geology that—while perhaps inferior to those of a professional—were nevertheless quite detailed in recording the locations of the existing sources of well water as well as the particular needs and preferences for any new

⁸⁰ “Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio. 44

⁸¹ Ibid., Folio.51

⁸² Ibid., Folio.60

boring sites. While these letters show the centrality of environmental expertise in their own right, their strictly scientific language is reinforced by mention of the British imperial agenda. In Shakespeare's first document, intended to reach Pascoe in Bushire through Cox, the agent mentions "the imperative need for discretion" lest the Shaykh discover the British's secret objective of surveying for oil.⁸³ Acknowledging the likely presence of "a man from the Shaykh", Shakespeare instructed Pascoe to go through a series of extraneous motions when surveying for oil—namely through collecting various unnecessary soil samples—so as to "avert possible suspicion" from any local onlookers.⁸⁴

The importance behind the British ability to survey, collect data, and map out the geology and cartography of Kuwait extended beyond the colonial ambition of securing oil; it spoke to a form of governance that was derived from the production of scientific knowledge. Relating to Foucault's model of governmentality, the production of expertise embodied by the various British surveys would extend the purview of the al-Sabah state over the categories of territory, material wealth, and, by extension, social and political control. This is a complicated level of development to attribute to the nascent Kuwaiti state for several reasons, the first of course being that Mubarak himself had not yet established any kind of centralized or autocratic power over Kuwait city, let alone the surrounding territories and wells traditionally governed by bonds of kinship. In essence, British aid at this stage of the project was confined strictly to abstract, statistical knowledge that, as of yet, had little consequence to the Kuwaiti population on the ground. However, the shift towards dealing with the needs of human subjects through their relation to their "geographic, climatic, or hydrographic environment" nevertheless indicated a systematization

⁸³ Ibid.,

⁸⁴ Ibid.,

and “massifying” of knowledge that would set the stage for later development.⁸⁵ Furthermore, if, as Wittfogel argues, “the effectiveness of man’s compensating action depends on the ease with which a lacking natural factor can be replaced,” then the production of knowledge over the extent of the lacking factor would mark a key step in the development of the state in its administrative capacity.⁸⁶

While Foucault and Wittfogel provide useful tools in understanding the development of the al-Sabah government during the early twentieth century, their frames of reference often obscure as much as they clarify. Foucault’s exploration of Machievellian principles, while largely transplantable to Kuwait, must be used with caution provided their intended European orientation. Similarly, the grand scale of Wittfogel’s *Oriental Despotism*, which speaks to a trend amongst any state existing within a cumbersome environmental nexus is helpful as a partial theoretical framework however should not be taken to its deterministic conclusions. With this in mind, the specific historical processes at work in early twentieth century Kuwait were more complicated than the theoretical archetypes suggested by Foucault and Wittfogel. The knowledge, technological expertise, and bureaucratic capabilities of the British did extend their sphere of influence into a realm traditionally held by the sovereign and this designation did disrupt the coherence of the topdown, autocratic approach of government sought by the al-Sabah, at least for a brief period. However, the lack of British interest in Kuwaiti politics paired with Mubarak’s primary focus of undercutting the merchant elite created an odd union in which the pursuit of a reliable water source became centered around creating a specific type of government—one that planned and excised authority according to mass categories such as population. The character of

⁸⁵ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.244

⁸⁶ Wittfogel, pg.13

this government is manifested and attested to by al-Nakib's account of the modernization projects throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and the subsequent social and urban planning that manipulated population and citizenship to serve the ends of the state. This method of governance, while mastered with oil era wealth, was born in the language of the water scheme.

With this in mind, Foucault's assertion that "To govern [] means to govern things" still applies, however Mubarak's object of governance was comprised of categories both material and abstract. While his pursuit of absolute power over his population—primarily through the economic suppression of the merchant elites and the subsequent cooption of their social influence—was Mubarak's chief objective, his means of achieving this goal were both economic, in the control of material wealth, and corporal, in the targeting of an essential resource and cooption of the right to make live and let die. With this in mind, despite the ulterior motives of Shakespear and the empire, the relationship between the British and the al-Sabah was a union in which the former, in exchange for a raw commodity, lent the latter the technological expertise needed to cultivate a kind of hydraulic state that suppressed lingering bids for power along the peripheries. While this arrangement would complicate the strict, top down framework of government, it would not explicitly contradict Foucault's model of governmentality as the power of the al-Sabah over its subjects would still be derived from the latter's exclusion from control over territorial and material wealth.

The correspondence left for Pascoe in Shakespear's quarters reemphasized the need for discretion, particularly given his assessment of the locals as being "extraordinarily ignorant and

consequently exceedingly suspicious of motives”.⁸⁷ However, largely in line with Cox’s November 26 communique to India, Shakespear’s notes to Pascoe mention the search for oil as something of a side bet and primarily focus on outlining the particulars of the water scheme:

“If your investigation for water can give you an idea of the other resources of the neighborhood, well and good, but I would deprecate any special efforts to arrive at an estimate of these other resources, at least at the present time”⁸⁸

Thus we see a rift in the objectives of the British Empire. On one hand, Percy Cox’s agenda in Kuwait was fairly explicitly centered on the discovery of oil and the acquisition of early concessions rights. In part, this can be linked to Cox’s direct communication with the empire in India—or, in a sense, the empire as a larger bureaucratic entity. With this audience in mind, it is no surprise that Cox would feel compelled to pitch the Kuwait water scheme on the grounds of its more lucrative prospects, whether they be the acquisition of oil or the opportunity for a technological endeavor with potential applications elsewhere in the empire. In regards to the latter point, the correspondences between Cox and the government in Shimla are pervaded by the suggestion that whatever method be chosen to provide fresh water for Kuwait could be further replicated in surrounding territories. This mindset, oriented towards the development of the region as a whole, would prove an important factor in the scheme as the debates to come would largely revolve around the viability of the two diverging methods of artesian boring and desalination—the former approach being suggestively better suited “for experiments at other places such as Bushire,

⁸⁷ “Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio.68

⁸⁸ Ibid., Folio.70

Bahrain and Bandar Abbas, where a somewhat similar though less acute difficulty in the provision of a good water supply also presents itself'.⁸⁹ With this in mind, the side of communication often weighted down by its own immensity of bureaucratic apparatus was operating on a much larger playing field than recognized by the Shaykh.

Shakespear, on the other hand, and while clearly aware of the broader British colonial interests, was evidently more interested in the realization of the project in the specific Kuwaiti locality. In a sense this seems strange and almost out of character for the ambitious model of empire painted by Winstone; Shakespear was, after all, positioned in Kuwait to keep an eye on the internal tensions of Nadj and, furthermore, had demonstrated in his letter to Pascoe his complicity in the water scheme's secondary objective of obtaining oil. His true sentiments lying mute amongst the plethora of formal imperial communications, Shakespear's own private thoughts and intentions regarding the project remain absent in any written source. Whether an extension of his hyperactive personality or a reflection of a genuine interest in the project, Shakespear's commitment to the water scheme is beyond doubt and made manifest by his actions, from his urgent and repetitive pleas for expediency on behalf of the Empire to his personal surveying of the Kuwaiti territory in preparation for Pascoe. The centrality of Shakespear's role in this project cannot be overemphasized and would only be further illustrated by the problems faced after his untimely departure.

In regards to Shakespear and Mubarak's dynamic and active roles in the Kuwait water scheme, it is easily to overlook and ignore the immensely important nonhuman actors at play in the backdrop. The first, somewhat intuitive given the object of the project, can be seen the actual

⁸⁹ Ibid.,

need for freshwater. In a sense this material lack is not explicitly nonhuman; it involves the Kuwaiti population, their ability to live as biological beings, and their interaction with their surrounding territory. With this in mind, the harsh aridity of the Gulf—lacking the required resources for an expanding population—is itself an agent worthy of consideration as it embodies an “endemic” condition acting upon the population of Kuwait. While the implications of this condition are paramount to an analysis of Mubarak’s early state building process, let us for now focus on the response to this *lack* that came within the technological expertise of the British empire. Similar to the position of the environment, technology as an agent is not explicitly nonhuman as expertise is contained within and exercised through the agency of individuals and human institutions. With this in mind the narrative of the water scheme is peppered with individuals whose claim to expertise could cast them as representatives of this agency; Shakespear, while admittedly an amateur, was capable of producing a preliminary survey just as Pascoe’s report would later illustrate his own depth of knowledge and expertise. The fact that both of these men operated within the context of the larger institution of empire, itself inextricably linked to an empirical and categorical approach to knowledge, thus further populates the narrative with representatives of technological expertise.

For all the planning, attention, and urgency that characterized the numerous sources detailing Pascoe’s actual arrival in Kuwait, the following correspondences are relatively sparse and generally mute as to the experience itself. Arriving on February 20th, Pascoe reportedly stayed a little over fortnight “in and around Kuwait”, surveying during the day and probably spending his evenings in Shakespear’s apartments.⁹⁰ The sources are silent as to whether or not Shakespear was present at this time, although his notes and mention of an imminent departure would suggest

⁹⁰ Ibid., Folio. 90

that he was abroad. At this point the chronology of events becomes complicated as, in contradiction of the timeline laid out by Pascoe, the next communication departed Calcutta dated April 3rd and contained an in-depth report of the geology of Kuwait and its implications for artesian drilling. Whatever the reason for the mix up in dates, this correspondence is of paramount importance as it illustrates the interplay between the scientific language of technology and the seemingly altruistic considerations of Kuwait's suffering population. Pascoe's report begins with a cataloging of the geological features of Kuwait in so far as their potential as indicators of water aquifers. The "Kubbar and Quarain Islands" are identified as "disappointing", bearing no evidence of the existence of a "submarine spring" suggested by the report of the passing HMS *Lawping*, which identified a "patch of fresh water" about "four and-a-half miles east-south-east of this island"⁹¹. The geological feature identified only as "Mr. Pilgrim's Fars" are similarly written off given their potential for being permeated "with rock-salt, gypsum, and reh", a testimony to the fact that "the water of the upper part of the Persian Gulf is said to be actually saltier than that of the ocean".⁹² While the prospects of finding fresh water in these aquifers appears bleak, especially considering the already brackish waters of Kuwait's functioning wells, Pascoe concedes that "it is not unlikely" for some water bearing beds to be found in the Bakhtiari Sandstones, although "evidence to go upon is meagre in the extreme".⁹³ Pascoe concludes the technical element of his report with the opinion that: "under ordinary circumstances, one would be very loath to advise such an expensive operation as boring on such scanty data".⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Folio. 93

⁹² *Ibid.*, Folio. 91

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Folio. 92

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*,

Pascoe's report is thus of a geology largely lacking in the prospects of obtaining potable water. The Islands off the coast of Kuwait, long said to have been sources of "sweet water" revealed no evidence of underwater aquifers, just as the sandstone conglomerates surrounding Kuwait city to the interior towards the Nadj demonstrated the same problems faced by the town's current wells. Despite the failure to find lucrative sources of water, Pascoe's report nevertheless reflects the extension of a kind of scientific knowledge over Kuwaiti territory in which—through the language of "forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures"—British expertise attached an empirical dimension to the environment of Kuwait and, in so doing, claimed the power of knowledge over its material realities, regardless of how sparse they may have been.⁹⁵ For the British, this level of empiricism was far from groundbreaking and afforded little immediate power and authority, however, in relation to Mubarak's broader state building process, this development could not have been more transformative.

In Foucault's lecture "On Governmentality", he identifies the territory and its associated wealth as the first object over which a Prince extends their control, often through developing apparatuses linked to specific "set[s] of analyses and forms of knowledge". Given his European orientation, Foucault never explicitly focused on the kind of apparatuses identified by Wittfogel which had at their heart the objective of controlling and manipulating the environment. Regardless of this mismatch of subject matters, the two theorists were nevertheless in agreement with their identification of the link between territory—in regards to associated resources such as water—and the processes of governmentality and state building. For Wittfogel the connection was fairly straightforward in that regions suffering from water scarcity organically developed the

⁹⁵ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.250

kind of despotic governments capable of constructing centralized apparatuses capable of environmental engineering. For Foucault, however, the social element of this relationship is far more developed in that, while government concerns itself with objects, territory, and the material realm, its goal is nevertheless to control the social aspects of population through its links with these categories. In the case of Kuwait this process is embodied within Mubarak's competition with the elites, which sought as its end the control of a market that previously contributed to the social balance between a more general population and the merchant class. While this social relation may have been the initial goal, the entrance of British expertise changed the terminology of the process and produced a biological component of political control.

Herein the nonhuman actors of the narrative become central. Water, as a material both scarce yet essential for life, can hereby be categorized as an endemic issue or, to use Foucault's terms, "the form, nature, extension, duration, and intensity of the illness prevalent in a population."⁹⁶ Its absence is a check on the right "right to live" of the bodied individual, and the inability of the informal Kuwaiti economy to properly deal with this condition left a gap in governance that the al-Sabah sought to fill. The language employed by the agents of expertise thus targeted two problems: that of water scarcity and that of population as mass category. In essence this approach was antithetical to the traditional lines of mutual reliance and face to face interaction that characterized al-Nakib's depiction of pre-oil Kuwait which represented the spotty, decentralized system of charitable distribution. Contrary to the traditional pre versus post oil frame of understanding, the "massifying" effect of governmentality was thus present from the onset of the water scheme.⁹⁷ In addition, Pascoe's identification of the "crying necessity of the people", paired with

⁹⁶ Ibid., pg.243

⁹⁷ Ibid.,

his estimate of a population ranging from “40,000 to 50,000”, indicated the necessity of an apparatus capable of providing water—the lack of which suggestively entailing a check to the population as a whole.⁹⁸ The demographically oriented language of this report demonstrates the ways in which the needs of a population became calculated and dealt with as mass categories, a development that would provide the state with the knowledge of power required for urban planning, modernization, and social engineering.

Pascoe’s report, although ultimately inconclusive in its essential purpose, serves as a pivotal point in the development in the Kuwait water scheme. While British expertise had been present on the scene for some time now, the actual measurements and precision of geological knowledge achieved by the report clarified the realities of the situation. The assertion made by Pascoe that the government continue with the project of artesian boring, despite the method’s seemingly dismal prospects of success, was essentially a reiteration of the initial set of problems facing Kuwait: the “crying necessity” for water paired with apparent lack of ground water sources. While the British government would share in Pascoe and Shakespear’s determination to get the project off the ground, they would ultimately seek an expansion in the range of knowledge associated with the project. With this in mind, while the communications following the survey would resume their frustratingly slow pace, they would facilitate a proliferation in the scope of scientific knowledge, redefine the rational of expertise, and contribute to a debate over methods that would ultimately find a champion in the process of desalination.

The prospect of using a condensing plant to satiate the growing Kuwaiti population’s need for water was not new; Shakespear, in his various probings with the Anglo Persian Oil

⁹⁸ “Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio.92

Company, had mentioned in several correspondences the possibility of desalination as opposed to artesian boring. The change brought about by Pascoe's report—and a subsequently better understanding of Kuwait's geology—was thus to reintroduce the concept as a more viable option and spur a more vigorous debate as to which method was to be used. With this in mind, the benefits for the previously favored method of boring were part and parcel with its downfalls. The fact that “drilling would be undertaken more or less blindly” with no particular location being “preferable to any other” meant, to the optimistic Pascoe at least, that the site could be chosen according to convenience and with close proximity to the urban center.⁹⁹ In addition, the materials needed for a trial boring were not only cheap and available by rental, but could be used in other nearby areas of interest—namely Bushire and Muscat, the latter identified by Pascoe as holding the potential for producing “water in quantity”.¹⁰⁰ The prospect of simply exporting “the whole apparatus”, and by extension the British political opportunity in Kuwait, “to other gulf ports where the water-supply question [was] a chronic source of difficulty and anxiety”, must have been attractive indeed to an empire with growing attachment to the wider geopolitical sphere of the Persian Gulf.¹⁰¹ This process not only speaks to the scope of British interests in the region but further illustrates the extent to which the nominally independent Shaykhdoms became “informally positioned within the British Empire” through the functioning of the government in Shimla.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Ibid., Folio.92

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Folio.96

¹⁰² James Onley. *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. pg.20

While the method of boring may have been attractive due to its political possibilities, it was nevertheless severely hindered by a plethora of downsides. First and foremost, the process of making the trial borings was “a delicate operation” and accordingly demanded “experienced supervision”¹⁰³. In a sense this flaw was inherent to any operation conducted under the auspices of British expertise, however in the case of boring the price of labor would add considerably to the operation’s price tag—a factor that had previously been attractive owing to the low cost of the equipment. Pascoe’s report calls for 30£ per month for “Canadian Driller’s wages” in addition to 5£ required for room and board, as well as 2£ per month for each of the “seven native laborers” required to assist each worker. While by no means a departure from the expected discrepancy in salary between skilled and unskilled laborers, this detail provides an easily visible example of the material inequalities between those with expertise and those without. While Pascoe’s report expounds upon the price of labor at some length, his estimated cost of paying the workers came only to the total of around 100£ per month, a seemingly small amount when considered against Shakespear’s estimates of the 700£ needed for “Casing and lining”, the 1200£ for the “Derrick Rig, tools, oil engine”, and the 100£ for transportation and “Miscellaneous”.¹⁰⁴ Pascoe’s perhaps overinflated assessment of the cost of labor paired with Shakespear’s need to make his own estimate for the cost of boring—a response to the fact that the Anglo Perisan Oil Company could not furnish the government with any precise quote—speaks to the most basic hurdle facing the method of boring: the uncertainty surrounding the existence of substantial aquifers in the first place. In the presence of this unknown quantity it was not only impossible to effectively estimate the financial cost of the project but also to even so much as hazard a guess as to its time frame as

¹⁰³ “Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio.96

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Folio.121

its efficiency would depend “entirely on the soil or rock encountered, the number of stoppages to shut off salt water met with, accidents to tool ect.”¹⁰⁵

The numbers game of determining cost would only become more complicated when compared against the risks of failure and economic viability of actually being able to sell the water produced—difficulties that were inherent to both methods. What ultimately proved the downfall for the method of boring, however, was not uncertainty over calculations of cost, but uncertainty over calculations of production versus the requirements of the population. While it is unclear where exactly Pascoe came up with the numbers, his report estimates the Kuwaiti population as numbering between forty and fifty thousand and “increasing rapidly”.¹⁰⁶ Upon the estimate of requiring “1 to 2 gallons per head”, Pascoe hereby calculated the required supply of water as being in the ballpark of “80,000 to 100,000 gallons daily”, an amount that would require a sizable series well to say the least. While Pascoe’s estimates were, at face value, calculations that cast doubt over the prospect of artesian boring, they were also important as they revealed the introduction of rhetoric wielded by “demographers”, a language that dealt with “economic and political problems” in “statistical terms” and thereby shifted the process of governing individuals to a process of organizing quantities—a numbers game.¹⁰⁷ With this in mind, the Kuwaiti population as a statistically compiled quantity multiplied by its gross estimated material requirements can be seen as “biopolitics’ first objective of knowledge and the target it [sought] to control”.¹⁰⁸ Another instance of the “massifying” element of Foucault’s biopolitical, the language of expertise

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Folio.120

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Folio.96

¹⁰⁷ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.243

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pg.243

manifested within the water scheme would later be mirrored in Kuwait's more general modernization movement discussed by al-Nakib in which the old cosmopolitan port town would be transformed into a depersonalized urban void.

It was amongst this context of uncertainty regarding the prospects of boring that the option of constructing a desalinization plant became more attractive. Defined generally as the “process of removing dissolved solids, such as salts and minerals, from water” desalinization is essentially the method through which ocean water is converted to potable fresh water—a process lucrative for arid port cities such as Kuwait.¹⁰⁹ Despite having been around for sometime—the first recorded instance being in the “sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when sailors such as Sir Richard Hawkins reported that their men generated fresh water from seawater using shipboard distillation during their voyages”—the notion of using desalinization as method of providing water for an entire community was largely unheard of in the early 20th century.¹¹⁰

The British administrators' seemingly ready availability of knowledge concerning this method is thus somewhat perplexing as the process was, at least by any practical concerns, fairly obscure at this time—the first facilities capable of producing water in large quantities in fact be those build throughout the Arabian peninsula and the Dutch colony of Curacao in the 1920s.¹¹¹ The presence of this process as a concept in Kuwait during the 1910s serves as something of a case study, a precursor to desalination's viability in other later contexts as its goal was and is essentially to respond to regions undergoing a certain set of afflictions, namely: “increased demand for fresh water by population growth” particularly, “in arid climates and other geographies with

¹⁰⁹ Jane Kucera. *Desalination: Water from Water, Global Water Availability*, John Wiley & Sons, 2010. pg.3

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*,

limited access to high-quality, low-salinity water” undergoing “the per capital increase in demand for fresh water due to industrialization and urbanization that out paces availability of high-quality water.”¹¹² As one of the earliest regions considered for the construction of such a plant, Kuwait can hereby be seen as an essential part of the broader history of desalinization.

With such a context in mind, the Kuwait water scheme becomes less of an isolated project and rather a dynamic piece in the ongoing construction of government and social transformation that characterized Kuwait in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mubarak, as the Shaykh residing over Kuwait throughout most of the period of the water scheme, was of course a major actor in this transformation; his consolidation of power, battle with the merchant elite, and alliance with the British were all defining steps towards the al-Sabah hegemony of power that would finally be achieved with the discovery of commercial amounts of oil in 1938.¹¹³ However even with the depth of historical change embodied by Mubarak—undoubtedly a figure of unequivocal importance to the water scheme, the Shaykh of 1896 to 1915 was nevertheless only a piece of Kuwait’s broader transformation from a small yet prosperous port town to a major urban center. In his seminal work *Kuwait Transformed*, Farah al-Nakib ultimately identifies the same historical process, marking the discovery of oil as rupture point in Kuwaiti history that separates the pre-oil community from its modernized urban present.

While this time frame is appropriate for al-Nakib’s focus on the socio-spatial changes undergone by Kuwait during the modernization plans of the 1950s and 1960s, this pre-oil versus post-oil designation draws attention away from the transformations at play as early as 1890 and

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 4

¹¹³ Al-Nakib, pg.93

reflects al-Nakib's tendency to view Kuwaiti history in terms of two dichotomous and oppositional phases. With this in mind, the "period of unprecedented economic and demographic growth from the 1890s until around 1920" was not only the driving factor behind the necessity for the water scheme but was part and parcel with the developments discussed in *Kuwait Transformed*. Herein the material realities of the scheme, the early character of desalinization, and the socio-spatial developments identified by al-Nakib become intertwined, events that influenced one another in their overlapping development. The modern al-Sabah government and the Kuwaiti state defined by social engineering, urban planning, and biopolitical control thus preceded the discovery of oil, as manifested by the implicit goals of the water scheme.

While the easy availability of the concept of desalination is a cause for some confusion, the uncertainty of what a desalinization plant would actually look like on the ground speaks to the novelty of the process at the time. In terms of cost alone, Pascoe's report could only estimate the actual construction of the plant as running from 2000£ to 3000£ and, as to the working cost, Pascoe himself admitted "I have no idea".¹¹⁴ In addition, the yield of the plant was estimated at around "36,000 gallons per 24 hours", an estimate that deterred Pascoe and later Shakespear from recommending desalination as it was seen to only have the potential of solving a small portion of the problem.¹¹⁵ While later inquiries would contradict these estimates—which would prove to be leagues short in both the price and capability of the proposed plant—the strong tendency present in Pascoe's survey and Shakespear's later report is a backing of artesian boring. The logic here seems sound; desalination was an unproven method, more expensive, and lacking the capability to produce the full amount of water required whereas boring was at least a

¹¹⁴ "Kuwait Water Scheme," Folio.96

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Folio.97

gamble that could payoff and would prove useful in other contexts. In addition, the factor of operating cost—an unknown quantity for desalination—was of key importance: it determined the price at which the water could be sold, the willingness and ability of the Kuwaitis to purchase the water, and by extension the viability of the enterprise as a whole. With this in mind the problem was simple: artesian boring was—if successful—capable of producing water that would be “cheap and plentiful” whereas desalinization could not.¹¹⁶

While the practical and material considerations behind the water scheme could be debated and controlled by the British, the factor of time was beyond their manipulation and dead set against them. In addition to Shakespear’s admonition that delay could offend and discourage the Shaykh, the British now had to contend with the “precarious state of Shaikh Mubarak’s health” that was already in decline by 1913. The true extent of this problem would only become clear in the difficulties faced after the death of Mubarak in 1915, however Pascoe’s report nevertheless saw the Shaykh’s declining health as an appropriately constricting time frame and sought “that some permanent arrangement may be made in his life-time”.¹¹⁷ An even more pressing threat, however, resided in the seasonal climate of Kuwait, which experienced the hottest months between May 1st and October 15th—a period of time in which the desperate need for water would be at its most severe. While Shakespear’s initial request for a fresh water supply had suggested the project be completed by April or May—the time at which the pearling boats departed and left the Port high and dry—no tangible progress had been made by the time Pascoe’s report reached Bushire on April 29th.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Folio.96

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*,

It was thus that, after approximately six months of British planning, the steadily increasing Kuwaiti population entered into the hottest half of the year in the warmest inhabited region on the planet without an adequate water supply. For the potential catastrophe suggested by this statement, the sources on water scarcity at the time are silent. It could be, on one hand, that the Summer of 1913 was not in fact as devastating as the British imperial correspondences might suggest; while the population *was* growing and sources of potable water *were* being depleted, it seems unlikely that the veteran desert society would meet the hot season with surprise at their situation—the years 1907 and 1908 had experienced similar draughts without giving way to major upheavals. There is probably a kernel of truth in this analysis, however it seems more likely that the secondary sources, concerned with the political power of the al-Sabah and the cunning of Shakespear and the British political agents, simply did not focus on the plight of the Kuwaiti people. The documents pertaining to the water scheme and the sources detailing the transformation of Kuwait under the al-Sabah are silent on the conditions of the Summer of 1913, however an examination into other Arabic language sources would no doubt contribute a better understanding of the lives of the Kuwaiti people throughout this period.

Following Pascoe's report completed in April, a long silence ensued in which the water scheme appears, amongst its many uncertainties and poor timing, to be dead in the water. A second report, dated May 7th, however, resumes the process of the water scheme's hidden object: the search for oil. Forwarded from H. H Hayden, director of the Geological survey of India to the Secretary to the Government in Shimla, this correspondence skips over the Political agent in Kuwait as well as the Resident in Bushire, indicating an administrative severance that would ultimately lead to the project's separation from Shakespear and Mubarak's search for a water supply. While this letter makes the growing apart of the previously linked objectives, its importance

is nevertheless extremely important to the process of governmentality that encompassed the social, political, and technological developments that transformed Kuwait throughout the twentieth century. Unlike Pascoe's search for water, the survey for oil proved incredibly promising, "the ochreous sandstone, sadly clays of variegated colours" all indicating the extension of "Dr. Pilgrim's 'Fars' Series" into Kuwaiti territory.¹¹⁸ Herein Pascoe's preoccupation with the aforementioned Fars that seemed inconsequential when considered amidst the project of finding water can be seen as stemming from the geologist's ulterior objective as the feature suggested the extension of an "oil belt" similar to that seen previously in Persia.¹¹⁹ Considering that the "age of the beds is favorable", Pascoe concluded his report with the observation that the "chances are not unfavorable and that an oil company would not require much inducement to test it, if protection and permanency of concession were guaranteed".¹²⁰ This suggestion of obtaining a concession rights would prove a reiterated ceremony in the Gulf throughout the decades to come and in the case of Kuwait would solidify the position of the al-Sabah over their traditionally autonomous population of merchant ship owners and Bedouin nomads. As identified by al-Nakib, this transformation would demolish the "checks and balances of medieval society" by providing the Shaykh's with near unlimited wealth, a development that would emancipate them from any concern of the merchant elites.¹²¹ Contrary to al-Nakib's assertion that this sole development spurred "a period of enormous state-building and centralization"¹²², however, the water scheme under the

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Folio.102

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Folio.103

¹²¹ Al-Nakib, pg.91

¹²² *Ibid.*,

reign of Mubarak initiated the processes of governmentality which not only established a “government of things” in regards to material wealth but further reshaped the rational of the state.¹²³

Amidst the uncertainty of Pascoe’s first report, a second team of surveyors was sent under Admiral Slade “with a competent selection of Geologists and Oil Experts” to further examine the prospects of obtaining both oil and water.¹²⁴ With the exception of a few brief correspondences pertaining to further speculation as to the comparative costs of boring and desalination, the mention of this second mission, dated November 9th, is the first development in the water scheme since Pascoe’s report was received in early May. While it is uncertain as to why these lines of communication broke down, the advent of the second survey reflects the British hesitation of “pursuing the negotiations further” with such little promising evidence.¹²⁵ Similar to Pascoe’s first survey, however, Slade’s mission would once again prove inconclusive, a development that impressed upon the British the reality of the situation.

While the surveys did solidify the question of obtaining a water supply in Kuwait as existing between the options of artesian boring and desalination, they also served as moments of proliferation in the scope of British expertise; not only did this period see the Kuwaiti territory quantified and categorized, but the various letters and missions introduced a wide range of voices on the scene, ranging from experts such as Pascoe and Admiral Slade on the ground to more elusive, behind the curtains figures such as Mr. Pilgrim and Mr. Shaw—in all probability personal contacts of Shakespear within the Messrs, Strick, Scott LLC. As representatives of various Brit-

¹²³ Foucault, “On Governmentality,” pg.95

¹²⁴ “Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio.126

¹²⁵ Ibid.,

ish apparatuses, such as the Geological Survey and the Anglo Persian Oil Company, these figures contributed to the emergence of a biopolitical sphere that was concerned with population “only at mass level”.¹²⁶ As opposed to the “realities of economic scarcity, coupled with the absence of a bureaucratic state”¹²⁷ that led to al-Nakib’s identification of a more personalized and individual socio-political structure, the process of this form of expertise was one in which “bodies [were] replaced by general biological processes”, namely through their relation to the aforementioned conditions of scarcity¹²⁸. Thus in seeking to extend the authority of the sovereign over the resources that provided the right to live, Mubarak and his British backers fundamentally reshaped the nature of Kuwait’s economic, political, and social makeup. The water scheme may have only been one facet of the general state building process that began in Kuwait in the 1890’s, however it was the component that extended the reach of the biopolitical and defined the rational of the modern state.

With the question of oil now separated from the Kuwait water scheme and the prospects of artesian boring diminishing with every new report, the proponents of desalination became more vocal. In a January 7th communication from the Secretary to the Government in India to the Political resident in Bushire, the stance of the former was made known: “Owing to the uncertainty of obtaining potable water by boring and to the very large cost involved, the Government of India are of opinion that experiments in this direction should not be made”.¹²⁹ Boring, as far the Government in India was concerned, should be taken off the table in favor of a desalination

¹²⁶ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.248

¹²⁷ Al-Nakib, pg.15

¹²⁸ Foucault. *Society Must be Defended*, pg.248

¹²⁹“Kuwait Water Scheme,” Folio.136

plant. The plans for such a project, estimated by Shakespear in a letter send to H.W Lorimer on January 12th, outlined the need for “Sextuple plant” capable of producing somewhere between 400-450 tons of water per 24 hours, the efficiency rate being somewhere in the ballpark of “one ton of coal to produce 28 tons of distilled water”¹³⁰. The cost of such a project was estimated at this time to be in the area of 9000 pounds, however later estimates would be much higher. This communication features an exactitude of estimation that—while Shakespear may have been an adept surveyor—would have been far beyond his realm of expertise, a detail that suggests the continued presence of a third party figure. While this communication is silent as to such an individual, it is probable that Shakespear was accompanied by a representative of the Messrs, Strick, Scott LLC, the only player in the region likely to have any knowledge on the inner workings of a desalination plant.

Another appealing aspect of Shakespear’s report was the seemingly straight forward time frame of the project. While unforeseeable difficulties and the outbreak of the War would delay the construction of the plant considerably, the initial estimate was that it “would require six months to deliver the plant and another 2 or 3 months to erect it exclusive of the necessary buildings”.¹³¹ While eleven months may not seem an exactly spritely pace, the concrete timeline was a departure from the abstract language of the previous communications; it proposed a solid framework and schedule through which action could actually be taken. This can be attributed to Shakespear’s position in Kuwait as, on the ground as oppose to an office far of in India, he would have been more acutely attuned to the British position vis-à-vis the Shaykh, whose mounting impa-

¹³⁰ Ibid., Folio.132

¹³¹ Ibid., Folio.134

tience had previously been mentioned. Shakespear's letter to Lorimer is not silent of this increasingly frustrated opinion, as shown in his lament: "I wish Government would give some hint as to their attitude towards the scheme, as it seems such an important one politically for us as well as economically for the place".¹³² This comment provides insight into the British point of view which was that Kuwait's development was a primarily economic development. In regards to Mubarak's extension of influence over the merchants this is essentially true, however it suggests that the British may have been ignorant—or perhaps apathetic—to the political and social implications of this process. In addition this letter is the first instance of Shakespear's frustration infiltrating an official communication. While this sentiment would become much more prevalent amongst the later administrators of the project due to the almost comical frequency of complications, for Shakespear it foreshadowed a disillusionment with the British administration in the Gulf that would only be further inflamed during the War.

Despite the support of the two most authoritative actors in the Kuwait water scheme, the option of using desalination faced immediate backlash from the Resident in the Gulf. The first point of objection was to the project's immense cost, which the Resident took to be around 13,000-15,000 £ in addition to "recurring or working expenditure" which would inevitably be "very heavy".¹³³ The issue of cost would then, the Resident argued, compromise the economic viability of the project as the price of water would be driven up and "it is much to be doubted whether half the population (possibly 2/3rds) of Kuwait will want to pay that price".¹³⁴ The remaining competition from the merchants' water trade and the old Al-Shamiyya, Hawalli, Keifan, and Al-Norga wells extended beyond simple economic considerations and into preferences of

¹³² *Ibid.*,

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Folio.138

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*,

taste. The prospect of drinking still water, or “dead-water”, was, as one can imagine from the morbid terminology, not looked upon favorably by the Kuwaitis who preferred the relative safety of brackish water “with a bite to it”.¹³⁵ The narrator of this letter seems to sympathize with this preference—although not for reasons of sanitation—and rather humorously states, “Then too, if you had the choice of sweet Shat-al-Arab water & condensed water, you would probably prefer the former”.¹³⁶ Far from simply providing a shred of individual voice in the sea of otherwise monotonous administrative language, this conceals a detail that would prove the achilles heel of the project as a whole: it mentions a concern with the quality of the water produced by desalinization.

Another key argument promoted in this correspondence is its reiteration of the benefits of artesian boring. Herein the narrator is evidently more concerned with broader British interests, stating that “sooner or later experimental borings will have to be made in the Gulf region”, and thereby suggests that tests in Kuwait could be applicable to a wider context. While this concept of replicating local experiences and applying their results throughout the empire was not a new idea amongst the correspondences in the Kuwait water scheme, it nevertheless illustrates the conflicting interests that had and would continue to obstruct the actual completion of the project. With the empire in India tentatively singing off on the method of desalination, the continued interest in artesian boring would only facilitate a debate between the Political Residency in Bushire and the actors on the ground in Kuwait.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*,

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*,

While the method of proving water would not firmly be decided upon until much later, the consensus between Shakespear and the India office had set the wheels in motion for the construction of a desalination plant. The actual construction of the plant would not begin for several years, in part slowed down by the War and the British blockade of the Gulf, and in the interim the correspondences predominantly revolved around acquiring a more precise estimate as to the cost of the project and, as desalination on a mass scale was a relatively new concept, the particulars of how it would actually work. Throughout this period the sources become somewhat jumbled; entire months go by with little to no communication, names and dates go missing, and turnovers in the British administration introduce new actors with varying degrees of agency and interest in the project. Perhaps the most important change in this period was the departure of Shakespear and the appointment of Colonel W.G Grey and later D.V. McCollum to the position of Political Agent in Kuwait. It is difficult to assess the extent of any individual's importance to the water scheme being as it was situated amidst the powerful currents of late British imperialism and the processes of governmentality. Nevertheless, Captain Shakespear was an indisputably unequivocal figure in the project of the Kuwait water scheme. While in a sense an extension of the British empire, Shakespear—from leading the charge of secretly surveying for oil to supporting the method of desalination—often operated with the independent judgement of an individual; he was better attuned to issues on the ground than any other other single British actor and, as such, defined the path that the project would follow. Shakespear's departure from Kuwait would ultimately bring him to fight alongside side Faisal and Husayn in Nadj during the War, an appointment that stemmed from his primary objective in Kuwait and served as a fitting conclusion to his career. It was here that, after a year of fighting, Shakespear became separated from his forces in the battle of Jarrab and “alone on [a] hilltop...armed only with a revolver...went on firing at

point blank range” into an oncoming Rashidi assault.¹³⁷ Shot multiple times in the leg, arm, torso, groin, and head, Shakespear died alone in the desert on January 24, 1915, thus ending the career of the “buccaneering Victorian adventurer”.¹³⁸

While the Shakespear’s absence in the later sources can be explained by his departure from Kuwait, the diminishing references to Mubarak are harder to explain. In part this can be attributed to the fact that the period covered by the sources extends far beyond the Shaykh’s reign, which ended on November 28th, 1915 as a result “of Malaria aggravated by his bad heart”.¹³⁹ The jumbling in the order of the sources is impossible to explain and the wide gaps in correspondence shift nonchalantly from dealing with Mubarak to his son and heir Salim. Similar to the departure of Shakespear, however, Mubarak’s death was of key importance to the future of the project as—like his British associate—he embodied broader historical processes while simultaneously operating in a distinctly individual manner. Not only was the water scheme Mubarak’s brainchild, but the whole process of state consolidation and governmentality can be seen as beginning under his reign. Mubarak’s long struggle with the merchant elite conditioned him to understand the intimate links between territory, wealth, and state control; his project of finding a reliable source of fresh water—thus extending the state over the biopolitical—was an extension of this knowledge that would largely be ignored by his son and heir Salem.

As the familiar actors disappear in the increasingly chaotic piles of imperial correspondences the narrative of the water scheme becomes less centered around the voices of individual agents and more oriented towards institution, estimates, and technical data. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact timeline, it becomes apparent through various documents that the LLC

¹³⁷ Winestone, *Captain Shakespear: a portrait*, pg.208

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pg.209

¹³⁹ Slot, pg. 415

Messrs, Strick, and Scott—a company probably previously in contact with Shakespear— was chosen to pound out the details of the endeavor. It is here that the sources reveal a more specific plan through a refinement in their exactitude of language: the plant is estimated to require a “100x100” plot of land, 50,000 to 100,000 gallon tanks made of galvanized iron, and at least 20 days a month to operate. As a repetitive back and forth over these numbers goes on for several years, the issue of cost remains essential.

In determining the viability of the plant as an economic endeavor, the transactions of the water market are more closely analyzed: it is estimated that, although the “rate of sale per kerosine oil tin of water in Kuwait varies according to the season and quantity available”, the average asking price for a kerosine tin of runs between 1 1/4 and 1/4 As.¹⁴⁰ The supply of water from external sources is also targeted by this production of knowledge however proves a much more difficult statistic to grasp as the “1,000 tins” carried in by the merchant *dhow*s also varied according to season, the only real constant being the monthly voyages of *The Sa'id*. The difficulty in compiling this information with any exactitude speaks to the “traditional social quality of commercial exchange” identified by al-Nakib that, based on interpersonal and face to face interactions, ultimately resisted the imposition of the “massifying” project of biopolitics.¹⁴¹ What these somewhat hazy estimates did reveal, however, was a general trend in which, regardless of the seasonal fluctuation in the cost of water, there was a constant period in the summer in which “demand greatly exceeds the supply”.¹⁴² While this detail could have been intuitively derived from Mubarak’s very desire to build the plant and the gradually rising population, it was important as it identified the target of the project as the reoccurring *lack* of an essential resource—an endemic condition

¹⁴⁰ “Kuwait water scheme,” Folio.158

¹⁴¹ Al-Nakib, pg.153

¹⁴² “Kuwait water scheme,” Folio.158

previously beyond the control of any single actor. Mubarak's strive to remedy this condition again speaks to an attempt to extend the control of the emerging al-Sabah state over the right to live and, in so doing, assert absolute control over Kuwait's social and economic structures.

Al-Nakib's dichotomy of pre-oil versus post-oil Kuwait, while occasionally over generalized, is a useful tool of analysis for political change as it identifies the discovery of oil as paradigm shift in which, almost over night, the al-Sabah gained access to the wealth needed to complete their consolidation of power. In projecting this identification on an analysis of Kuwait throughout the 1910's, al-Nakib's argument is essentially correct in that the lack of financial independence was the major barrier between Mubarak and absolute political control. The water scheme emphasizes this point as it illustrates alternative method by which Mubarak sought to extend the authority of the al-Sabah—in this case through the creation of the biopolitical—that was accordingly impeded by financial concerns. As such, despite Mubarak's apparent mentality of sparing no expense, the issue of his actually being able to pay for the construction of the plant was an essential concern for his British backers. With the immense price tag attached to desalination, a solution was proposed in which the British would loan Mubarak the capital needed to get the project off the ground and then be subsequently reimbursed in incremental payments from the profits of the water sold. The issue of the cost of the plant, which determined the viability of successfully selling the water, was thus a key concern for the British position despite the fact that many seemed to overlook it. With the estimates available at the time, Messrs calculated that the proceeds from the plant could pay off the loan in roughly two years. This arrangement—which essentially involved transferring large sums of money between the Shaykh, the LLC, and the British government—was agreed upon with little resistance and would later prove to be another of the project's central difficulties.

While the preliminary estimates from the LLC, reaching Bushire on February 4th, 1914 and Shimla a shocking two months later in April, were chiefly concerned with managing the financial side of the project in regards to the Kuwaiti economy, issues as to the technical side of the plant were also addressed. The metal building materials for the working quarters, for example, proved to be of much concern due to the climate of the region and, as identified by a representative from the LLC, “would be perfect hell in hot weather”.¹⁴³ A similar issue applied to the material for the tanks, which, also made of metal, would be unable to keep the water cool enough to sell—an issue complicated by the fact that sea temperatures in the summer were already relatively high and would only be raised by the condensing process. The presence of this condition would only further diminish the chances of being able to successfully sell the water at a profit, a failure that would leave all parties involved “up a bit of a tree”.¹⁴⁴ These technically oriented issues only served to reinforce doubts over the economic viability of the process, prompting the representative from the LLC to suggest at least attempting a trial boring.

In the midsts of mounting doubts over the viability of desalination, the correspondences between the LLC in Muhammerah, the Residency in Bushire, the agent in Kuwait, and the Government of Shimla become a disjointed circulation of conflicting estimates—predominantly concerned with the aforementioned issues of financing—in which little actual progress is made. In part this can be attributed internal resistance amongst the British officers, many of whom still promoted artesian boring, while others suggested various alternatives such as the use of a “Mansfield water finder”.¹⁴⁵ While this contraption is difficult to find information on and was likely a

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Folio.160

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Folio.162

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Folio.166

technological dead end, the mention of such a tool indicates a proliferation in technology oriented around searching for water—suggesting a context in which the use of desalination on a mass scale would be developed and perfected.

Despite the many uncertainties, ranging from the economic and technical viability of the plant to the costs and financing of the project as a whole, it was in this period that the first draft agreement was produced. Although this draft would be revised and reproduced several times, the copy sent to Kuwait on March 8th, 1915 provided a general outline of what the project would entail: the company would build, maintain, and run the plant, the British would loan the capital to Mubarak needed for the initial cost of construction, and the Shaykh would repay the loan incrementally with profits from selling the water. The price attached to the project in this draft was 9862£, however would later be upped to 12,312£. While the folio does not contain a copy of the contract with Mubarak's name in ink, references from later correspondences indicate that the agreement was signed on March 16th, only six months before the Shaykh's death. Thus while Mubarak would never see the actual construction of the plant, Pascoe's desire to find a permanent arrangement within the Shaykh's lifetime was ultimately completed, a success that would not befall the rest of the project.

The years between 1915 and the end of the War in 1918 are largely lacking in meaningful progress, the only real developments being a continuation of the back and forth estimates of the project's cost. After the long period of inactivity the necessary arrangements for the shipping of the plant were finally completed in April of 1918 and, miraculously, the plant seems to have been constructed by November of the same year. Somewhat ironically, however, the plant was

unable to operate due to a missing shipment of oil from the company valued at 7,000 rupees, apparently “owing to the War and to other causes”.¹⁴⁶ This dilemma in all probability resulted from the blockade of the Gulf and, while seemingly a minor hiccup considering the immense effort that had already been put into the project, would only continue to spiral out of control and ultimately lead to a breakdown in relations between Shaykh Salem and Messrs, Strick, Scott, & Co. Already in violation of the contract signed with Mubarak promising that “the plant will start continuous work within days” of its construction, the company continued to delay another shipment of oil and further claimed their wartime loses as numbering as high as 75,000 rupees.

Needless to say these complications were not well received by the new Shaykh who was already reluctant to be held to a contract signed by his father. While a new contract was drafted and signed in October of 1918, Salem nevertheless came to “heartily detest [the] water plant and [the] great difficulty being experienced”.¹⁴⁷ In addition to the issues on the company’s side, which were in fact in violation of both agreements, the Shaykh was also facing internal economic problems “owing to small customs profits” and thus feared the prospect of having to pay for the loses of the LLC. The financial issues facing Salem again reflect the paradigms of pre-oil Kuwait identified by al-Nakib in which the al-Sabah’s lack of economic independence kept the developing state in check, a condition from which the the later Shaykh Abdullah would eventually be emancipated in his negotiation of a 50-50 concession deal with the British.¹⁴⁸

As the relations between Salem and the representatives of Messrs, Strick, Scott continued to sour, the British empire found themselves playing the position of mediators and—considering the breach in contract and general obstinance of the latter entity—would ultimately be

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Folio.290

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Folio.306

¹⁴⁸ Al-Nakib, pg.91

fairly sympathetic to the Shaykh. The most substantial instance of the empire's grace towards their increasingly displeased patron would come in a communique between the political Resident in Baghdad and the government in India on November 18th, 1918 in which, considering Kuwait's contributions during the war and declines in trade caused by the blockade, the empire resolved to "forego repayment of the original loan".¹⁴⁹ The amicability of this move reflected the British desire to resolve the conflict as directly as possible and push the project forward at any cost, a goal that had less and less support from the other parties involved.

Despite the administration in Baghdad and India's optimistic thought that simply assuming the cost of the plant would constitute "a satisfactory solution of a thorny problem", the development of the project continued to face issues primarily on behalf of the LLC. After the long awaited delivery of the oil required to operate the plant arrived as late as May of 1919, the plant's first trial run proved a disastrous failure and "worked day and night from Wednesday (4th June) to Monday (9th June) and within this period did not make more than 400 tons salty water".¹⁵⁰ The timing of this failure only exasperated the worsening relations between British and Salem, as, amidst tensions caused the plant's disappointing performance, the Political agent McCollum left on other business without "settling the matter" with Salem.¹⁵¹ To add insult to injury, the LLC refused to take the Shaykh's word that the plant had not functioned properly and—in a rather humorous use of their expertise—dispatched "some of [their] leading men to taste the

¹⁴⁹"Kuwait water scheme," Folio.306

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., Folio.344

¹⁵¹ Ibid., Folio.350

water” who subsequently “pronounced that it was salty”.¹⁵² Thus with the plant’s failure to produce potable water in the quantities guaranteed by the contract and the perceived neglect of the British political agent, Salem staunchly refused to take ownership of the plant.

An untimely silence followed in communications from the LLC in which the Shaykh continued to reassert to the British his refusal “to pay a single rupee more”.¹⁵³ While the British continued in their best efforts to reassure Salem, the LLC’s long silence was broken with an attack on the Shaykh claiming not only that his behavior was “not in accordance with the terms of the Contact concluded with his Father” but further that this perceived breach would necessitate the company to “temporarily withdraw the Staff from the Kuwait Plant”.¹⁵⁴ While the company had hitherto been slow in following up on their promises, the workers were removed with uncharacteristic speed on August 14th, 1919—less than a month after the threat was first issued. While this move was in part prompted by a desire to save money on wages while the plant remained inactive, the company’s aggressive stance towards Shaykh, condemned even by the British administration, only further damaged their standing in the eyes of the Salem. As such, the company’s dispatch of the engineer Major Henderson later that month did little to remedy the situation with Salem, who dismissively declared that “all our hopes are gone”.

While it is dangerous to speculate, it seems fair to posit that part of the issue facing this break down in relations stemmed from Salem’s desire to simply rid himself of a project he had little interest in, being as it was his Father’s vision and not his own that tied him to the contract. This is not to discount the failures of Messrs, Strick, Scott, & Co., whose initial shortcomings in both delivering the plant and following the contract caused hostilities in the first place, however

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, Folio.344

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, Folio.376

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Folio.384

as the project moved forward and glimmers of progress appeared it would become clear that Salem had made up his mind to abandon the plant regardless of any renewed potential for success. With Mubarak gone, it seemed that al-Sabah interest in the plant was largely absent.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the water scheme's failure was that after Salem had visibly lost the motivation to continue, progress was made that could have potentially resulted in a functioning plant, albeit one that would have worked at a diminished capacity. After another substantial gap in activity that left the plant inactive for three years, the arrival of a representative from Messrs, Strick, Scott marked a last breath attempt to make the necessary repairs. At first the developments seemed to follow in suite with the generally disastrous downward trend of the project, as indicated by the Political agent's declaration that "Up to present all the work that has been done on the Water Plant has been destructive".¹⁵⁵ After stripping away linings and removing apparently extraneous parts, however, the engineers managed to solve the problems facing the water's potability and thus only had to contend with the plant's capacity of production. While the plant's yield of a meagre 100 tons of water a day was less than a forth of the amount originally promised, it seems that as of April 12th things were looking "much more promising".¹⁵⁶ As work continued throughout the summer, however, both the Shaykh and the LLC continued to lose interest in the success of the project, the latter facing much larger financial problems that would later lead to its liquidation. Amidst the general atmosphere of failure, the continued hostilities between all parties involved, and the "angry wires" passing back and forth between London and the LLC, an agreement was reached in which the project was to be scrapped in the event that the plant was not fully operation by September 30th.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., Folio.428

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., Folio.430

The last trial run was conducted the day before the deadline and, while the plant continued to produce potable water, its yield remained far under that promised in the initial contract. After over a decade of planning, construction, and disappointment, this inadequate performance hammered the last nail in the coffin of the Kuwait water scheme, as indicated by a report from McCollum that the “firm has quite made up its mind that this is to be the last trial, and I think the Shaikh has too”.¹⁵⁷ With Messrs, Strick, Scott now in the full process of liquidation and Salem eager to simply “get rid of it”, the plant was to be disassembled and removed from Kuwait.¹⁵⁸ Having failed to deliver on their contract, the company was “prepared to pay [Salem] a lump sum cash down in full and final settlement” and made a last ditch effort to sell the functioning plant to Salem at a “greatly reduced price”.¹⁵⁹ Although the plant was capable of producing 100 tons of potable water, Salem flatly rejected the deal. The Kuwait water scheme was officially scrapped.

With the failure of the desalination plant, the water question in Kuwait fell into obscurity amidst the larger transformations brought about by the discovery of oil and the subsequent period of modernization and urban development discussed by al-Nakib. Once the al-Sabah acquired the immense material wealth brought about by Shaykh Abdullah’s 50-50 concession deal with the British, however, the process of governmentality begun by Mubarak was finally free to fully extend itself upon Kuwaiti society with shocking totality. Completely independent from the checks to power previously imposed by the merchant class, the al-Sabah used their wealth to redefine both the urban and social makeup of the old port town, creating a modern urban center through

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., Folio. 448

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., Folio.460

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., Folio.472

social engineering that centralized power within the grasps of the state. Wittfogel's model described in *Oriental Despotism* was now more applicable than ever with the development of a strong core government with power derived from its ability to master the environmental hardships of the arid, water scarce Kuwaiti territory. Even al-Nakib's account of the plethora of urban development projects acknowledges that the "most symbolic project of this period was the large water-supply system designed by Swedish architect Sune Lindström" that created a cluster of six water towers, the tallest structures in the modern city.¹⁶⁰

Representing "an irreversible break with the hardships of the past", the desalination plants designed by Lindström ultimately succeeded where the early water scheme had failed.¹⁶¹

While a successful solution to the water question was only reached after the advent of oil era wealth, the water scheme of 1912-1922 reflected a redefinition of the rational of the state. Where once the al-Sabah presided over Kuwait as "equals amongst equals", the ascension of Mubarak marked a reawakening in the processes of governmentality through which a self-conscious and nascent state sought to exert itself over the traditionally decentralized, merchant run Kuwaiti population. Prompted by the need to combat the influence of the *dhow* owning elite, Mubarak's government targeted not only the material economy of his territory but its environmental scarcities as well. The identification of water as an endemic condition over which the state could extend itself was thus the birth of the biopolitical sphere in Kuwait as it marked the beginning of a project in which the al-Sabah would target "the effects of the environment" in their relation to the mass category of population as a political and biological problem.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰Al-Nakib, pg.116

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pg.117

¹⁶² Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pg.245

The import of expertise from representatives of the British empire was of paramount importance to this process as it introduced the scientific language through which knowledge of both population and environment could become systematized. While the body of knowledge produced by the surveys of Shakespear and Pascoe were conducted in the pursuit of a project that ultimately failed, they nevertheless created the tools of the biopolitical that were “continuous [and] scientific” and constituted the “right to make live”.¹⁶³ The form of governmentality created by the water scheme thus extended into and largely defined the era of modernization identified by al-Nakib in which families were uprooted and reorganized in accordance to the state’s political objectives. It was a process in which the urbanity of mutual dependence and cooperation was replaced by a “technology of security” that would become synonymous with a “technology of discipline” embodied within the welfare state.¹⁶⁴ The transformation of Kuwait’s social structure can hereby be seen as the result of the al-Sabah state’s ability to replace the patchy channels of charity championed by the merchant elite with a systematized approach of resource and population management.

The process of governmentality that began under Mubarak and the biopolitical language produced by the water scheme predate the historical rupture point typically identified as the discovery of commercial quantities of oil in 1938. As such, the development of the modern Kuwaiti state can be attributed to a much deeper historical process than those offered by the narratives of Gulf exceptionalism and the “temporal bifurcation” of pre-oil verses post-oil eras.¹⁶⁵ Mubarak’s focus on the environmental scarcities of his territory and the character of government thereby produced marked the creation of a self conscious state concerned both with the management of

¹⁶³ Ibid., pg.240

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., pg.249

¹⁶⁵ Al-Nakib., pg.20

its material resources and its population. The socio-spatial transformations of oil era modernization were thus extensions of a project rooted in the language of technology and expertise that indicated the emergence of the biopolitical state decades before the arrival of Kuwait's first petrodollars.

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