



Dubai Ports World

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.

April 2006

The British-based shipping company, P&O, for years has been managing seaports around the world including several major ones in the United States. An Arab corporation, Dubai Ports World, gained ownership, and all hell broke loose. Quite suddenly and, initially, much to the world's amusement, US congressmen went into Keystone Cops gyrations claiming this change in ownership would open a gateway for terrorism and undermine the nation's security.

Remember, these are the same congressmen who demand the world open up to American capital investment and management, American goods and services, American-style democracy, American culture. Now, they tell us, only Americans may run American ports! P&O is a foreign company, for goodness sake, yet its management raised no congressional red flags. (Or should that be 'red herrings'?)

For years American enterprise has largely conceded the field of seaport management to foreign companies. There are only two relatively small companies in the United States in any position to fill the bill. Adding to the vaudevillian farce atmosphere, congressmen portrayed Dubai as a country that exported terror and was friendly to Islamist extremism, dredging up that several of the perpetrators of the 9/11 holocaust had at one time or another lived in Dubai and, furthermore, members of the Bin-Lâdin family were welcomed there.

None thought to mention that the 9/11 perpetrators, to a man, had also found welcome (and even pilot training) in the United States, that the Bin-Lâdin family has vast holdings in America and is still warmly welcomed, and that even 'Usâmah Bin-Lâdin and his group were trained, equipped and heavily supported by the United States during the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. By the record, wouldn't an American-run administration of US ports be at least as much a security risk?

The cast of characters in this farce includes both Republicans and Democrats who, for very different motives, to be sure, have found opportunistic and common cause to stand against a rump-president, a president who, perhaps for the first time in his lackluster and bumbling career, has quite inadvertently found himself to be on the right side of an issue. It's very difficult not to use some rude language when speaking about the American Congress these days. 'Dubya', for his part, is used to that by now, and may even be resigned to going down in history as America's least laudable president. But this congress is bidding fair to be known as America's least laudable of congresses. And well deserved that would be!

*

Here's a thumbnail history lesson that Congress ought to have generated all on its own with only a nickel's investment. I give it for free.

When the family of Muhammad Ibn-Sa'ûd took over Eastern Arabia in the 18th century, they cut a deal with the followers of a fugitive mullah, Shaykh Muhammad bin-'Abd-ul-Wahhâb, and turned over ideological control and much of the legal structure of their country to the congenitally fanatic family of 'The Shaykh' and their attendant Muslim clergy. In effect, it established the so-called 'Wahhâbî' ideology. From that beginning and its Egyptian spin-off, the Muslim Brotherhood, comes what is now being called the Islamist movement with its fanatical fringe. Seeing it as a potent counterweight to Communism, American policy encouraged the budding modern Islamists during the Cold War, and the movement spread far and wide, not least of all in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But we get ahead of ourselves.

Before the discovery of oil, the Âl Sa'ûd's primary sources of revenue were from religious pilgrims headed for Mecca and Madînah, some commercially lucrative Bedouin banditry, desert animal husbandry, and subsistence farming in small oasis villages scattered through the highland region called 'Najd'. On a world scale it was all very, very 'small potatoes' were it not for the fact that the British East India Company needed free access to the Arab Gulf and the trade that flowed up the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and also across the interior deserts from staging points like Kuwait. The upshot was that, by the early 18th century, the power these Sa'ûdîs had to deal with was British. But it wasn't until the early 20th century, most of two centuries later, and in a new Wahhâbî incarnation, that the Sa'ûdîs established a working relationship with the British (and, soon thereafter, with the Americans).

But in the mid- to latter-1700s the Gulf's coasts, on both the Persian and the Arabian side, were in rapid economic and political flux. An Arab tribal confederation known as the Qawâsim controlled many of the key ports. They were clients of the last great Persian overlord, Nâdir Shâh, but they also arranged an alliance of convenience with the Wahhâbî power in Sa'ûdî Arabia and, through piracy, served its interests.

Unfortunately for the Qawâsim a new maritime power was rising in the Gulf. The 'Utûb, or 'wanderers' as they were known, had migrated out of a drought-plagued Najd in the early 1700s and settled along the Gulf coast, especially on the peninsula of Qatar, whence fanning out they acquired skills as seafarers, ocean-roving traders and ship builders of exceptional skill. In the mid-1700s they coalesced in the undeveloped port of Kuwait under the leadership of three main families — the Âl Sabâh (paramount shaykhs of Kuwait itself), the Âl Khalîfah (eventually rulers of Bahrain), and the Âl Jalâhimah (who came to govern Râ's-ul-Khaymah).

As the commercial fortunes of the 'Utûb grew they inevitably came into conflict with the Qawâsim, their Persian overlords and their Wahhâbî allies. They also wanted to

maintain their distance from the crumbling Ottoman Empire, and they joined up with the Omanis and the British East India Company in hopes of achieving all these goals. If one can ever really tease them apart, it was essentially an alliance of commerce against politics (both, of course, driven by greed).

Cutting to the chase, the ‘Utûb eventually succeeded in their aspirations. In 1818 the Wahhâbîs were suppressed for a time, and the various ‘Utûbî great families went their separate ways. Beyond Kuwait, the loose ‘Utûbî maritime nexus established itself in Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven-state federation known since 1971 as the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The pre-oil revenue sources of these maritime Gulf city-states were (not in order of priority) piracy, smuggling, pearling, transit traffic and the Indian Ocean trade, both east with India and west with Africa.

In 1747 Nâdir Shâh died and Persia broke up in chaos. The Qawâsim lost out disastrously. They’d backed the wrong horse. At the same time the ‘Utûb were establishing themselves. With a little help from their friends in Oman, the British also succeeded in booting the Portuguese and French out of the commercial-colonial-imperial sweepstakes in the Persian/Arab Gulf, the Indian Ocean and India itself. As British colonial administration took over from the East India Company (1834 onward), resources to repress piracy and the slave trade became more robust, and eventually the ‘Utûbî states (as well as Oman) cut deals with the British to pave the way for their eventual prosperity and independence in the modern era.

Furthermore — and I can’t stress this enough — given their broad horizons and wider cultural awareness that went right along with their sprawling interests and commercial acumen, these states were never fertile ground for narrow Wahhâbî propaganda and, after 1912, resisted their bloated and frequently bellicose Sa‘ûdî neighbor as best they could. (Britain helped them do so at crucial junctures.) Before the term ‘globalization’ was coined, the ‘Utûb were globalists.

*

British and other western imperial structures eventually broke down in the wake of World War Two. Gulf oil became the prize for international power politics. The British Prime Minister in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Harold Macmillan, urged that the United States pick up the British mantle of world dominance, which, then, it did. For the Gulf it was more important that America became the arbiter of the petrochemical industry and its main customer. The US Dollar became the world’s coinage. Oil came into play in Bahrain and Iran in the 1930s. In 1952 Kuwait began to export oil. Sa‘ûdî Arabia was swift on its heels. While oil was discovered in modest amounts in the Emirates in 1958, its bonanza didn’t come in until the late-1960s. Oman became a player with modest reserves a decade later. And the world was forever changed.

Fabulous oil reserves were found in Abû-Dhabî. The other six far smaller emirates of the UAE benefited as partners in the political federation but also produced

their moderate share of ‘black gold’. It was Dubai, however, that really smelled out the money trail. It converted itself quickly into the Gulf’s laissez faire capitol, and saw its future in unfettered capitalism. That meant open access, open ports, open economy, and, before anyone could predict, it became the world’s quintessential traffic jam. People from 165 nationalities now reside in that small emirate — 80% or more of its total population. As with any boomtown, there are the fortunate and the exploited. Open borders and liberal regulations make Dubai the destination for thousands of aspirants drawn by a no-holds-barred economic and social life. They see their financial futures assured by Emirates gold. Some ... the relatively few ... realize their aspirations. Thousands of others — the vast majority — are ground down under the modern world’s equivalent of slavery. The soulless expression of Dubai’s dervish dance is unfettered consumerism, rampant laissez faire. Everybody plays.

Having grabbed the moneymaker by the throat, the managers of Dubai’s prosperity have pressed on to diversify their holdings on a global scale. And one of those new holdings has been the British-based global company, P&O. At the pinnacle of this economic, cultural and social bacchanal are a group of very cool, canny and calculating ... ‘Utûb. Does that come as a surprise?

*

The Gulf Wars brought in a new dynamic, but before those wars happened and before the Soviet synthesis unraveled, we must remember that the Soviet Union was driven out of Afghanistan by the Mujâhidîn and other American-sponsored forces, the al-Qâ‘idah group of ‘Usâmah Bin-Lâdin prominent among them. In the chaos that followed the Soviet withdrawal there emerged seemingly out of nowhere (in fact, out of the hundreds of Sa‘ûdî-sponsored Wahhâbî madrassahs in Pakistan) a relatively disciplined force calling itself The Students (the Tâlibân) and it gradually established some semblance of order. I remember quite clearly how the first Tâlibân official delegation was warmly received in the United States and at the United Nations.

It was during that brief honeymoon that Dubai recognized the new Tâlibân government in Afghanistan. And the reasons were simple: An inordinate number of Afghan citizens resided and worked in Dubai and the government needed leverage to keep them in line. They were potentially volatile people. The second reason was that the move was good for business ... or so it seemed at the time. In other words, Dubai acted on its fundamental premises and not as an ideological partner with the Tâlibân.

With a wide-open laissez faire governing philosophy, legislating against extremism in a country like Dubai is difficult. That doesn’t make Dubai an ally of extremists. The governments of the Gulf states (historically, the ‘Utûb) and Sa‘ûdî Arabia are between a rock and a hard place. Fanaticism is in the air, not just in the Muslim world but the world over, not just among Muslims but among Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Shintos as well. It is even found among those with what we might dub ‘secular religious’ loyalties. At the moment it has an intense focus in the Middle East and among Muslims, to be sure. That current focus has explanations, but it is in fact a pandemic infecting the

human spirit that rivals any disaster ‘bird flu’ might come to pose, and every bit as deadly. The regimes in the Gulf, now thoroughly alarmed, are working to neutralize the Muslim version of the virus. One way of doing that is by protecting liberal freedoms. (‘Dubyah’, listen up!)

For the record and for good or ill, the ‘Utûbî states, Sa‘ûdî Arabia and Oman have been staunch allies of the United States ever since oil became the dominating factor. In two Gulf wars they have provided the American military with facilities and full cooperation in the endeavor to protect America’s oil supply. In the teeth of an Islamist groundswell, Dubai, the other states of the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Sa‘ûdî Arabia and Oman have not wavered. And this solid gold record is what makes the hysterical reaction of the US Congress so incredible.

Only two factors can explain the congressional hysteria we’ve witnessed. First, there is a blanket American paranoia concerning all things Muslim, and Dubai is a Muslim country (a bit loose in the joints, but still Muslim). Second, there is a widespread American anti-Arab xenophobia, and Dubai is an Arab country its overwhelmingly foreign population notwithstanding. Bigotry (not the record and certainly not any sense of justice) has inspired irrational behavior not just in one or two people, but in a body of elected officials charged with maintaining good governance and protecting the sanity of the American republic. And in this they have proven to be blatantly dishonest stewards. They have made the American republic a laughingstock among the nations. ‘Dumbed-down’ is a currently used epithet that comes to mind to describe America’s highest governing body.

*

A final footnote: American credentials among the ‘Utûb — from Kuwait to Bahrain to Qatar to the Emirates and even to Oman (although the Omanis are not ‘Utûb) — were established by the modest but magnificently staffed Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America (known in the Gulf starkly as the American Mission). During the century and a half before oil prosperity came to afflict the Gulf, missionaries established hospitals and schools in the Gulf that either still exist as in Bahrain, or are warmly remembered as in Oman and Kuwait. Even ‘Abd-ul-‘Azîz Âl-Sa‘ûd, founder of the present Sa‘ûdî dynasty, publicly declared that he had granted American companies concessions to develop oil on his land because he knew in these missionaries a people of moral integrity, religious devotion and honor. That reputation was affirmed in Qatar and the Emirates where the Mission was well known. When Kuwait first launched its aid mission to the then-struggling Emirates and other needy countries in the early 1960s, Kuwait’s ruler, Shaykh ‘Abd-Allâh as-Sâlim Âl Sabâh, instructed those who would implement the aid mission that their specific model was to be the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America.

I hold no torch for Dubai. I agree with a good friend who knows it very well: Dubai has having fallen thrall to Mammon. But then can’t one say the same about the United States and any number of countries where consumerism is the functioning

religion? So that's not the issue at all, is it? What explains the recent histrionics of the American Congress is mass bigotry pure and simple. Not only have these congressmen betrayed their trust as elected officials, they have also betrayed the hard-won and devoutly pursued historical heritage of America in the Gulf and in the Muslim world as a whole. And that makes one weep ... bitterly.

And I greet you from the lands of the morning.