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Bahrain 1920-1945: The British, the Shaikh, and the Administration

In the first half of the twentieth century, Bahrain found itself at a crossroads of regional power, colonial ambition, and emerging modernity. Between 1920 and 1945, the archipelago experienced a profound transformation under the intertwined influence of the British Empire and the ruling Al Khalifa family. This era, marked by the establishment of a formal British Residency, the reign of Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa, and the gradual shift from pearl diving to oil exploitation, set the stage for Bahrain's eventual path toward independence. This article explores the complex dynamics of Bahrain's administration during this pivotal period, examining how British oversight and local leadership negotiated authority, economic development, and social change.

Historical Context Before 1920

Before the twentieth century, Bahrain's political landscape was dominated by tribal affiliations and a semi autonomous relationship with the Ottoman Empire and, later, the British. The island's strategic position on the Persian Gulf made it a coveted maritime hub for trade, pearling, and naval power. In 1820, the British signed the Treaty of 1820 with local rulers, establishing a protectorate that granted Britain control over Bahrain's foreign affairs while allowing internal autonomy. By the late nineteenth century, the British had solidified their presence through the establishment of a Consular Mission and the appointment of a British Resident in 1900, who served as an advisor and liaison between the Shaikh and the Empire.

Despite these ties, Bahrain's internal administration remained largely traditional. The Shaikh exercised authority through a council of tribal leaders, known as the **Shura**, and relied on local customs and Islamic law to govern. The economy was still heavily dependent on pearling, with the island's workforce engaged in the seasonal dive, trade, and processing of pearls. However, the global decline of the pearl market in the early 1900s began to erode Bahrain's economic stability, prompting the need for new sources of revenue and modern administrative structures.

The British Residency and Administrative Reforms (1920-1930)

Establishment of the British Residency

In 1920, the British formally established a Residency in Bahrain, marking a significant shift in the island's governance. The Residency was headed by a British Resident, a diplomatic official who advised the Shaikh on matters ranging from foreign policy to internal administration. While the British retained ultimate control over Bahrain's external affairs, the Residency's influence extended into domestic policy, particularly in areas such as taxation, trade regulation, and public health.

The Resident's role was to ensure that Bahrain's governance aligned with British interests, especially in safeguarding maritime routes and securing strategic footholds in the Persian Gulf. This arrangement allowed the British to exert indirect control while preserving the appearance of Bahraini sovereignty. The Resident also facilitated the introduction of administrative reforms that aimed to modernize the island's bureaucratic structures.

Modernization of Governance

One of the first reforms introduced by the British was the establishment of a civil service system. Previously,

administrative tasks were performed by tribal leaders and local notables. The new system introduced a hierarchy of officials—**Governing Officers**, **Administrative Assistants**, and **Clerks**—who were appointed based on merit and loyalty to the Shaikh. This professionalization of the civil service helped streamline decision-making processes and reduce the influence of tribal rivalries in governance.

In addition to bureaucratic changes, the Residency introduced standardized procedures for taxation and revenue collection. The British advocated for a more systematic approach to levying taxes on trade, land, and personal income. This shift was crucial for generating a stable revenue stream that could fund public works and support the growing administrative apparatus.

The Reign of Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa (1923-1942)

Early Years and British Influence

Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa ascended to the throne in 1923, inheriting a nation in transition. His reign coincided with the consolidation of British administrative influence, and he quickly learned to navigate the delicate balance between maintaining traditional authority and accommodating foreign oversight.

Shaikh Isa was a pragmatic ruler who recognized the economic potential of Bahrain's natural resources. He worked closely with the British Resident to explore avenues for diversification beyond pearling, laying the groundwork for future oil exploration. The Shaikh also prioritized social reforms, such as establishing schools and improving public health infrastructure, which were often supported by British funding and expertise.

Economic Diversification and the Pearl Decline

By the late 1920s, the global decline in pearl prices had severely impacted Bahrain's economy. The British, aware of the island's vulnerability, encouraged the Shaikh to seek alternative sources of income. This period saw the initial stages of oil exploration, with the British-backed companies conducting exploratory drilling in the early 1930s. Although commercial oil production did not commence until 1932, the groundwork laid during the 1920s was instrumental in securing the necessary infrastructure and expertise.

Simultaneously, the British administration introduced measures to stabilize the pearling industry. These included better regulation of pearl trade, improved market access, and the establishment of a pearl exchange. While these efforts could not fully compensate for the industry's decline, they provided a temporary buffer that allowed Bahrain to transition toward a more diversified economy.

Social Reforms and Education

Education became a priority for the Shaikh during his reign. With British support, the first modern schools were established in Bahrain, offering instruction in Arabic, English, and Islamic studies. The introduction of formal education helped cultivate a new generation of Bahrainis who were better equipped to engage with both local administration and the broader global economy.

Public health initiatives also received attention. The British Residency facilitated the construction of hospitals, the introduction of vaccination programs, and the establishment of a public health department. These efforts significantly reduced mortality rates and improved overall quality of life for Bahrain's residents.

Oil Discovery and Its Impact (1932-1945)

Discovery of Commercial Oil Reserves

In 1932, the first commercial oil well was struck in Bahrain, marking a watershed moment for the island's economy

and its relationship with the British. The discovery was largely driven by the British-backed Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) and other foreign enterprises that had been granted exploration rights by the British administration.

The oil boom ushered in a new era of economic prosperity. Revenues from oil exports surged, allowing the government to invest in infrastructure, education, and social services. Moreover, the increased economic activity attracted a workforce from neighboring regions, contributing to Bahrain's demographic diversity.

Administrative Adjustments in the Oil Era

With the influx of foreign oil companies, the British Residency's role expanded to include oversight of industrial operations. The Resident was tasked with negotiating contracts, ensuring compliance with British regulations, and mediating disputes between the oil companies and local stakeholders. This arrangement reinforced the British influence on Bahrain's economic policy while maintaining the façade of local sovereignty.

The Shaikh's administration also adapted to the new economic realities. The government introduced a new revenue system that allocated a portion of oil profits to public projects, such as road construction, water supply systems, and educational facilities. This reallocation of funds helped modernize Bahrain's infrastructure and improve living standards for its citizens.

World War II and Strategic Importance

During World War II, Bahrain's strategic location in the Persian Gulf became increasingly important to the British. The island served as a naval base and a critical supply point for the Royal Navy. The British Residency played a pivotal role in coordinating the island's contributions to the war effort, which included the construction of a naval air station and the expansion of port facilities.

While the war strained Bahrain's resources, it also accelerated industrial development. The increased demand for oil and the necessity of maintaining secure maritime routes led to further investment in infrastructure and the expansion of the civil service. The war also prompted the British to consider the long-term political status of Bahrain, setting the stage for post-war discussions on self-governance.

Administrative Evolution and the Road to Self Governance (1945)

Post War Reassessment

By 1945, the end of World War II prompted a reassessment of colonial policies worldwide. In Bahrain, the British Residency began to consider the feasibility of granting greater autonomy to the island's administration. Discussions between the British Resident, the Shaikh, and local leaders focused on balancing the benefits of continued British oversight with the growing demand for self-determination among Bahrainis.

During this period, the Residency introduced reforms aimed at strengthening local governance. These included the establishment of elected councils in certain urban areas, the expansion of local judicial bodies, and the promotion of Bahraini participation in the civil service. These measures were designed to cultivate a sense of ownership among Bahrain's populace while maintaining stability.

Key Agreements and Treaties

In 1945, a series of agreements were signed between the British government and the Bahraini monarchy, outlining the framework for a more collaborative administrative relationship. These agreements, often referred to as the "Bahrain Administrative Agreements," clarified the roles of the British Residency, the Shaikh's government, and local institutions. They also set the stage for future negotiations regarding Bahrain's political status and economic

independence.

While the agreements did not immediately grant full independence, they marked a significant shift toward greater local control. The British acknowledged the importance of Bahraini participation in decision making processes, a sentiment that would resonate in the decades that followed.

Socio Cultural Transformations (1920-1945)

Urban Development and Modernization

The economic boom, especially from oil revenues, accelerated urban development across Bahrain. Traditional villages began to transform into bustling towns with modern amenities such as paved roads, electricity, and telecommunication networks. The Residency's support in building infrastructure—roads, bridges, and public buildings—helped integrate the island's various regions and fostered a sense of national identity.

Women's Roles and Education

While the period was marked by significant progress, women's roles in Bahraini society remained largely traditional. However, the introduction of formal education gradually opened new opportunities for women, especially in teaching and nursing. British influence introduced the concept of gender equality in education, leading to the establishment of girls' schools and the promotion of female literacy.

Religious and Cultural Preservation

Despite modernization, Bahrain maintained a strong commitment to preserving its Islamic heritage. The administration, both British and Bahraini, supported the construction and restoration of mosques, the promotion of Islamic scholarship, and the organization of religious festivals. These efforts reinforced cultural cohesion amid rapid social change.

Legacy of the 1920-1945 Administration

The administrative period from 1920 to 1945 left an indelible mark on Bahrain's political, economic, and social trajectory. The British Residency's role in shaping governance structures, fostering economic diversification, and initiating social reforms set the foundation for Bahrain's eventual emergence as a modern state.

Key legacies include:

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