Jun-2006

Reflections on a Fulbright Year in Bahrain

Philip Tabakow
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol25/iss1/7

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Dilmun is also mentioned in *The Sages of Cilician*, the world’s oldest literary text, as being associated with Enki, the god of wisdom and water, and Gildagum, King of Uruk. Because of the many fresh-water springs in Bahrain (the word “Bahrain” means “two seas” in Arabic), ships traveling eastward from the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers always stopped here to gather supplies of “sweet” water and fresh vegetables. Remarkably, off the coast of Bahrain, springs of potable water even rise up out of the salt waters of the Gulf like geysers.

Ancient Dilmun featured one of the world’s largest necropolises with an estimated 200,000 grave mounds, most dating back to the third and second millennia B.C. Though urban development has taken its toll, it is still possible today (as my wife and I have done near our home in A’Ali) to walk through extensive areas of these rounded earth and stone covered burial mounds, most plundered in the long past of their rock-lined central chamber’s contents.

Bahrain converted to Islam in the 7th century, and, in more modern times, was conquered by the Portuguese in 1521 (who left behind a large fort—now completely restored—at the northern coastline). Eventually over the course of the next two centuries, Bahrain came under the control of the king of Persia, who politically supported the archipelago’s Shia majority. However, in the late 18th century, Bahrain was conquered by tribes associated with the Sunni Al Khalifa family, who soon entered into a treaty relationship with the United Kingdom—and Bahrain became a British protectorate. In 1971, still under Al Khalifa family rule, Bahrain became a fully independent nation.

**CONTEMPORARY BAHRAIN**

In 1952 Bahrain became the first Arab Gulf country to discover recoverable commercial quantities of oil. However, since Bahrain’s supply of oil is quite small—especially by Gulf standards—the country was soon forced to diversify its economy. Fortunately, Bahrain’s long history as a trading center and its well-educated population made the transition to a more diversified economy possible. Nevertheless, according to recent statistics, production of petroleum and petroleum processing still account for 60% of export receipts, 60% of government revenues (with no taxes of any kind in Bahrain), and 30% of GDP.

Of Bahrain’s total population of about 700,000 people, approximately 450,000 are Bahraini citizens. Compared to most Gulf countries, yet with Saudi Arabia a special case, this ratio of citizens to expatriate workers is quite high. Bahrain is also distinguished from other Gulf countries by its Shia religious majority. Not surprisingly, from time to time in recent history, Bahrain has been claimed by both Iran and Iraq—the only two in Bahrain’s population (citizen and non-citizen) was Muslim (Shia and Sunni), 9% were Christian, and 9% practiced Orthodox or Middle Eastern religions.” Unlike neighboring Saudi Arabia, Bahraini women—though many wear the traditional black abaya and hijab—vote, drive automobiles, and are free to work in most occupations. Despite its official designation as an Islamic Arab country, any newcomer soon becomes aware that Bahrain is a racially, religiously, and culturally diverse society. Approximately two-thirds of Bahrain’s population is of Arabian descent, most of the other third, including immigrants and guest workers, come from Iran, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. English is widely spoken by Bahrainis of all backgrounds, and, in most respects, Bahrain is a sophisticated and cosmopolitan country. Specialty stores Bourj. Just recently, the first Formula 1 Grand Prix Auto Race of the 2006 season drew large numbers of international visitors and celebrities to the Bahrain International Circuit.

Based on a constitution promulgated on February 14, 2002, Bahrain is now a constitutional hereditary monarchy, with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa as head of state. The prime minister (King Hamad’s uncle) and cabinet are appointed directly by the king. There is a bicameral legislature consisting of a Shura Council, whose members are appointed by the king, and a House of Deputies, whose members are directly elected to serve four year terms. Political parties are banned, but “politically-oriented societies” are allowed. Given this system, the legislature and the structures against political parties, effective political control still remains securely within the Al Khalifa family.
Reflections on a Fulbright Year in Bahrain

Philip Tabakow

STARTING WITH A LITTLE BAHRAIN GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Before applying for a Fulbright Lecturing Award in American Literature at the University of Bahrain, before Michael Jackson’s media-hyped relocation to the kingdom, I, like most Americans, was only vaguely aware of the existence of a small island country called the Kingdom of Bahrain located somewhere in the Middle East. Now, after my family and I have been living in Bahrain for seven months (without so far having spotted Mr. Jackson at the Seaal Mall), we’ve learned a lot about both Bahrain and the whole Middle East. In fact, our children, Alexis, 15, and Nicholas, 14, are among the very few Americans attending St. Christopher’s, a British curriculum school, with a truly international student body.

The Kingdom of Bahrain, rather than being a single island, is an archipelago of thirty-three islands which lay due east of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf (sometimes called the Arabian Gulf here). Only three of the islands are inhabited: Bahrain Island, Muharraq (where Bahrain International Airport is located), and Sitra. These three populated islands are connected by causeways, as is Bahrain Island itself, to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia by the twenty-six kilometer King Fahd Causeway. Bahrain is a narrow, low-lying desert country, with a total area of only about 700 square kilometers. Not long ago, our daughter Alexis trekked with classmates across the entire width of the main island at its narrowest point (about 20 kilometers). The highest elevation in the country at 124 meters is Jebel ad Durkhan (“Mountain of Smoke”) in the central desert region of Bahrain Island near Sakhir, where the main campus of the University of Bahrain is located.

Despite its small size, Bahrain has a long, complex, and important history. It was the seat of the ancient civilization of Dilmun (see Geoffrey Bibby’s Looking for Dilmun) which served as an important link between the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. One cuneiform tablet dated to 3100 B.C describes Dilmun as a paradise where the inhabitants “were eternally young and suffered no illness” and “where the raven did not create and vultures and lions did not devour their prey” —a veritable Eden.

Dilmun is also mentioned in The Songs of Gilgamesh, the world’s oldest literary text, as being associated with Enki, the god of wisdom and water, and Gud 가능한, King of Uruk. Because of the many fresh-water springs in Bahrain (the word “Bahrain” means “two seas” in Arabic), ships traveling eastward from the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers always stopped here to garner supplies of “sweet” water and fresh vegetables. Remarkably, off the coast of Bahrain, spring-fed potable water even rose up out of the salt waters of the Gulf like geysers.

Ancient Dilmun featured one of the world’s largest necropolises with an estimated 200,000 grave mounds, most dating back to the third and second millennium B.C. Though urban development has taken its toll, it is still possible today (as my wife and I have done near our home in A’Ali) to walk through extensive areas of these rounded earth and stone covered burial mounds, most plundered in the long past of their rock-lined central chamber’s contents.

Bahrain converted to Islam in the 7th century, and, in more modern times, was conquered by the Portuguese in 1521 (who left behind a large fort—now completely restored—on the northern coastline). Eventually over the course of the next two centuries, Bahrain came under the control of the king of Persia, who politically supported the archipelago’s Shia majority. However, in the late 18th century, Bahrain was conquered by tribes associated with the Sunni Al Khalifa family, who soon entered into a treaty relationship with the United Kingdom—and Bahrain became a British protectorate. In 1971, still under Al Khalifa family rule, Bahrain became a fully independent nation.

CONTEMPORARY BAHRAIN

In 1952 Bahrain became the first Arabian Gulf country to discover recoverable commercial quantities of oil. However, since Bahrain’s supply of oil is quite small—especially by Gulf standards—the country was soon forced to diversify its economy. Fortunately, Bahrain’s long history as a trading center and its well-educated population made the transition to a more diversified economy possible. Nevertheless, according to recent statistics, production of petroleum and petroleum processing still account for 60% of export receipts, 60% of government revenues (with no taxes of any kind in Bahrain), and 30% of GDP.

Of Bahrain’s total population of about 700,000 people, approximately 450,000 are Bahraini citizens. Compared to most Gulf countries (with Saudi Arabia a special case), this ratio of citizens to expatriate workers is quite high. Bahrain is also distinguished from other Gulf countries by its Shia religious majority. Not surprisingly, from time to time in recent history, Bahrain has been claimed by both Iran and Iraq—the only two of the region’s two predominantly Shia Middle Eastern countries. Since Bahrain is ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family, no current figures on exact Shia/Sunni percentages seem to be available. Estimates, however, suggest that 60% to 80% of its Muslim citizens are Shia. In fact, Wikipedia claims that “according to the 2001 census, 81.2% of Bahrain’s population (citizen and non-citizen) was Muslim (Shia and Sunni), 9% were Christian, and 9.8% practiced other Asian or Middle Eastern religions.” Unlike neighboring Saudi Arabia, Bahrainis women—even many wear the traditional black abaya and hijab—vote, drive automobiles, and are free to work in most occupations.

Despite its official designation as an Islamic Arab country, any newcomer soon becomes aware that Bahrain is a racially, religiously, and culturally diverse society. Approximately two-thirds of Bahrain’s population is of Arabian descent, most of the other third, including immigrants and guest workers, come from Iran, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. English is widely spoken by Bahrainis of all backgrounds, and, in most respects, Bahrain is a sophisticated and cosmopolitan country.

Specialty stores flourish. Just recently, the first Formula One Grand Prix Auto Race of the 2006 season drew large numbers of international visitors and celebrities to the Bahrain International Circuit.

Based on a constitution promulgated on February 14, 2002, Bahrain is now a constitutional hereditary monarchy, with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa as head of state. The prime minister (King Hamad’s uncle) and cabinet are appointed directly by the king. There is a bicameral legislature consisting of a Shura Council, whose members are appointed by the king, and a House of Deputies, whose members are directly elected to serve four year terms. Political parties are banned, but “politically-oriented societies” are allowed. Given this governing structure and the structures against political parties, effective political control still remains securely within the Al Khalifa family.

As a Fulbright Lecturer, I am teaching a course this semester entitled “Diverse Voices in Recent American
**The Growth of Nonprofits: A Reality Check**

Michael L. Jones

Wouldn’t it be nice to keep all of your income rather than giving up some of it to the government in the form of taxes? You can’t legally get out of your responsibility to pay taxes, but there are organizations often referred to as “nonprofits” in the economy that are free from paying taxes. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) calls them Exempt Organizations since they are exempt from paying most types of taxes. You have probably encountered one or more of these nonprofits recently. Organizations such as churches, the Boy Scouts, the Campfire Girls, your local museum and the public library are likely to be nonprofits. So how many nonprofits are there in this country? First consider how many nonprofits might exist nearby. Perhaps you would guess that there are about a thousand nonprofits in your state. If your state is somewhat representative of the remainder of the states than there would be approximately 50 times a thousand or 50,000 nonprofits in the country. You would be underestimating by a very large amount! The IRS granted tax exempt status to 53,086 organizations in 2003 alone. There are currently over 1.4 million tax exempt organizations in this country at this time according to the database kept by the IRS (not including many churches).

Nonprofits are organizations that are formed with the intention of providing some good or service without the promise of monetary rewards like a private business enterprise. Organizations intent on making the owner or owners rich are considered “for-profits.” It seems counter to economic theory that someone would create a nonprofit organization since the motivation of financial reward has been removed. However, there are other things besides wealth creation motivating some people to pursue nonprofit status. Of course Carnegie's benefit of the public and no individual owns or benefits from those investment returns. Of course Carnegie’s motivation might not have been totally unrelated to taxes. The first exemption from income taxes was instituted in the first federal income tax rules under the Tariff Act of 1894. Carnegie wrote his opinion essay in 1889, just five years before. He would have known as his “Gospel of Wealth” (Carnegie, 1899) where he discussed the three options people like him have in disposing of excess wealth. One could leave the wealth to family, which he considered to be a huge mistake. A better solution was to bequeath the wealth for specific public purposes after the person died, but he considered this option disgraceful. The best option was to use the wealth for the greater good during the life of the possessor. To this end Andrew Carnegie created a foundation to administer the use of his great wealth for purposes he deemed important in solving the problems between rich and poor and return his wealth to the “mass of their fellows in the forms best calculated to do them lasting good.” Such an organization today would be exempt from paying income taxes on gains made by investing the wealth so long as the organization provided an adequate amount of goods or services for the benefit of the public and no individual owns or benefits from those investment returns. Of course Carnegie’s motivation might not have been totally unrelated to taxes. The first exemption from income taxes was instated in the first federal income tax rules under the Tariff Act of 1894. Carnegie wrote his opinion essay on wealth in 1899, just five years before. He would have very likely been involved in discussions among the politicians and wealthy in this country debating the need for taxation to provide for expanded government funding.

In addition to being exempt from taxes, some nonprofits (not all) also get an additional special consideration from our system regarding taxes. Some nonprofits, often known as charities, can receive contributions and the contributors get a tax deduction for the gift.

---

**Poetry**—a course developed in conjunction with “The Diverse Voices in American Literature” Symposium being hosted by the American Studies Center March 27-29, 2006. Other English Department courses I’ve offered during the year range from a senior-level research paper writing course to a course in Modern European Drama to a “Special Author” course on the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

My wife Dr. Mary Tabakow, an Adjunct Assistant Professor for the 2005-06 year, has also been teaching literature courses, and together, we believe that we are making a significant contribution to the Department of English Language and Literature. As well as teaching scheduled courses for the department, we have been offering a non-credit creative writing workshop for UOB students interested in writing poetry, fiction, drama, and literary non-fiction in English. This may be the first time such an opportunity has been presented at the University of Bahrain, and the students have responded enthusiastically to it. We are also serving on the organizing committee for a creative writing student competition—part of the UOB Arts College Cultural Festival being held in April.

In addition, along with Dr. Hillis, my wife and I represented UOB and the American Studies Center at the first International American Studies Conference ever to be held in the Middle East in December 2005, which was hosted by the American University of Beirut. In a related context (as part of the department’s eventual goal of gaining international accreditation), I have also submitted a report evaluating the curriculum of the UOB Department of English Language and Literature’s program in relation to comparable U.S. and Middle Eastern programs. These varied teaching, research, and service opportunities have made this an exciting and professionally satisfying year for my wife and me at the University of Bahrain. And it has been especially rewarding to have had the chance to work with the many Bahraini students who are so welcoming, so interested in what we have to bring to them, and so eager to share their own cultural experiences. We learned an enormous amount from them lasting good.” Such an organization today would be exempt from paying income taxes on gains made by investing the wealth so long as the organization provided an adequate amount of goods or services for the benefit of the public and no individual owns or benefits from those investment returns. Of course Carnegie’s motivation might not have been totally unrelated to taxes. The first exemption from income taxes was instituted in the first federal income tax rules under the Tariff Act of 1894. Carnegie wrote his opinion essay on wealth in 1899, just five years before. He would have very likely been involved in discussions among the politicians and wealthy in this country debating the need for taxation to provide for expanded government funding.

In addition to being exempt from taxes, some nonprofits (not all) also get an additional special consideration from our system regarding taxes. Some nonprofits, often known as charities, can receive contributions and the contributors get a tax deduction for the gift.

---

**Reflections on a Fulbright Year in Bahrain**

Philip Tabakow

Dr. Tabakow at Bahrain Portuguese Fort overlooking the Dilmun excavations.