

Introduction

This study is the result of international scientific cooperation between the Institute of Regional and Global Studies, the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies at the University of Warsaw and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain (Abu Dhabi). The cooperation started in 2008 and is continued until today [Dudek, Łęcka 2013]. The Polish side proposed joint research within the framework of the so-called development of desert areas, and the UAE side proposed the Liwa Oasis as a particularly valuable and interesting area for each member of the Bani Yas tribe, where emirs of Abu Dhabi and Dubai have their beginnings.

The fieldwork took place in two stages: in February / March 2009 and was repeated in 2012. The international team established that the primary objective of the project is to prepare the assessment of socio-economic situation in the oases, to identify directions of development planning and to evaluate the relationship between man and the natural environment.

The project was financed mainly from funds of its own participants, with the support of the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain, the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, the University of Warsaw, University of Warsaw Foundation and the publishing grant of Warsaw University Press.

From the UAE, the project was headed by Robert M. Arthur, a geographer, specialist in Geographical Information Systems (GIS). He served as both the substantive and organizational head.

On the Polish side, the project was headed by Izabella Łęcka, a geographer, specialist in regional geography of developing countries.

In 2009, the 13-member team consisting of specialists in climate, agriculture, transport, spatial planning, GIS and environmental protection held a study visit to Liwa. The expedition had the nature of a 2-day field trip, supplemented in the next few days with a more detailed study. The triple Polish team (Anna Dudek, Izabella Łęcka and Marcin W. Solarz) remained in Liwa for three days and carried out a preliminary inventory of the local problems, worth doing in-depth research. The result of this study visit was a session: “Development in the Desert. Field Research in Oasis: United Arab Emirates Case” organized in 2010 by the Institute of Regional and Global Studies at the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES 3) in Barcelona, hosted by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) and the University Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). The discussion among international experts helped refine the concepts of the planned next phase of the future studies in Liwa.

The proper research took place on 6–20 February 2012. The research team consisted of 7 Polish members from the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, the University of Warsaw, with a collaboration of Robert Arthur from the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain. Participants of this study are the authors of the texts listed below, devoted to the Liwa Oasis.

The fieldwork in the Liwa area was possible thanks to accommodation in the guesthouse which belongs to the local administration. A well-developed local transport, serving immigrants working in agriculture, allowed navigating of over 100-km-long group of oases.

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For the first time the name of the Bani Yas tribe was mentioned by the Venetian traveller Gasparo Balbi in 1580, when he described the gulf coast from Qatar to Ras Al Khaimah. The Bedouin of the Bani Yas essentially led a nomadic life, but some of them settled permanently in Liwa, seasonally dealing with coastal pearl fishing [Lienhardt, Al Shahi 2001].

The contact of the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula and Europe was initiated in the sixteenth century by Portuguese traders, who, however, did not intervene in the life of local rulers, especially those living in the desert. But this trade with the coast allowed, however, for economic and social development of the Liwa Oasis, supporting the growth of the political importance of the Bani Yas tribal confederation. A group of the Bani Yas consisted of tribes: Al Bu Falah (Al Nahajjan), Al Bu Falasah (Al Maktoum), Al Hamelia, Al Romaithi, Al Mazroui, Al Sibusi, Al Marar, Al Muhairi, Al Mehairbi, Al Qubaisi [*Bani Yas Tribes...*]. In time, the leading group became Al Bu Falah, derived precisely from Liwa.

Until the discovery of oil, oases such as Liwa and Al Ain were much more active and wealthier than the city of Abu Dhabi. In particular, they better handled the crisis of the 1930s associated with the introduction of artificial pearls by the Japanese. After that, families involved in fishing and trading of natural pearls in Abu Dhabi rapidly began to grow poor and come back to the oases, also to Liwa. In the early twentieth century, the number of the Bani Yas was estimated at approximately 12,000, including 2,000 who led a nomadic life. Approx. 5,000 people lived in the Liwa Oasis at that time [Heard-Bey 2004: 27].

The discovery and exploitation of crude oil since 1962 resulted in an increase of wealth of the country; moreover, poor expanses of green areas in the oases changed to the lush gardens at a significant cost. Sheikhs declare: “We value our environment, because it is an integral part of our country’s history and heritage” [Wells 2011: 54].

One of the first explorers of the Arabian Peninsula was a young geologist Tom Barger, who spent the years 1937–1940 in the Rub ‘al Khali Desert (Empty Quarter). During his trip he wrote detailed letters to his wife, which today are one of the very few early reports on these lands [Barger 2000].

Among the most famous people who have gone down in the history of exploring this area was Wilfred Thesiger, the British traveller and explorer, who in the 1940s explored the vast spaces of the Rub ‘al Khali Desert. During his first expedition in 1946, he did not arrive at oasis by himself, but his envoys bought there food (flour,

dates, sugar, coffee, tea) for further weeks of travelling. They described the oasis as a mosaic of palm groves, villages and wells [Thesiger 2010: 137–141].

During the second expedition, Thesiger saw only the western part of the oases – Qutuf and Dhaufir. He had no money to see more places to the east. In his reports Thesiger wrote about well-maintained date palm groves at the foot of the dunes, and huts fenced around. Fences were also placed on the tops of the dunes to prevent the movement of sand. Besides palm trees, nothing else was cultivated there, probably because of the high salinity. People were not friendly to strangers at all. In 1948, they discouragingly shouted to Thesiger, “do not come back” [O’Sullivan, 2009: 12]. He nevertheless repeatedly returned, enchanted by this place.

Travelling in the 1950s, Julian Walker [1999], a young British diplomat in his first foreign trip, noted that little has changed since Thesiger’s relation.

Captivated by the remains of a local construction, in 2009–2013 Sandra Piesik (with Polish originality) reconstructed a traditional hut made of palm leaves (Arish) in Liwa. Supported by Sir Wilfred Thesiger’s photographs from the years 1945–1950 and memory of Bedouin women from Al Mazroui family, in 2011 she started the Liwa Arish House Project in the village Mougab, where these houses were still standing until the 1980s. In April and May 2012, Sandra Piesik organized an exhibition of the Arish-type houses in the Royal Geographic Society in London, which used 4,000 palm leaves and was visited by 5,000 people [Collins 2011].

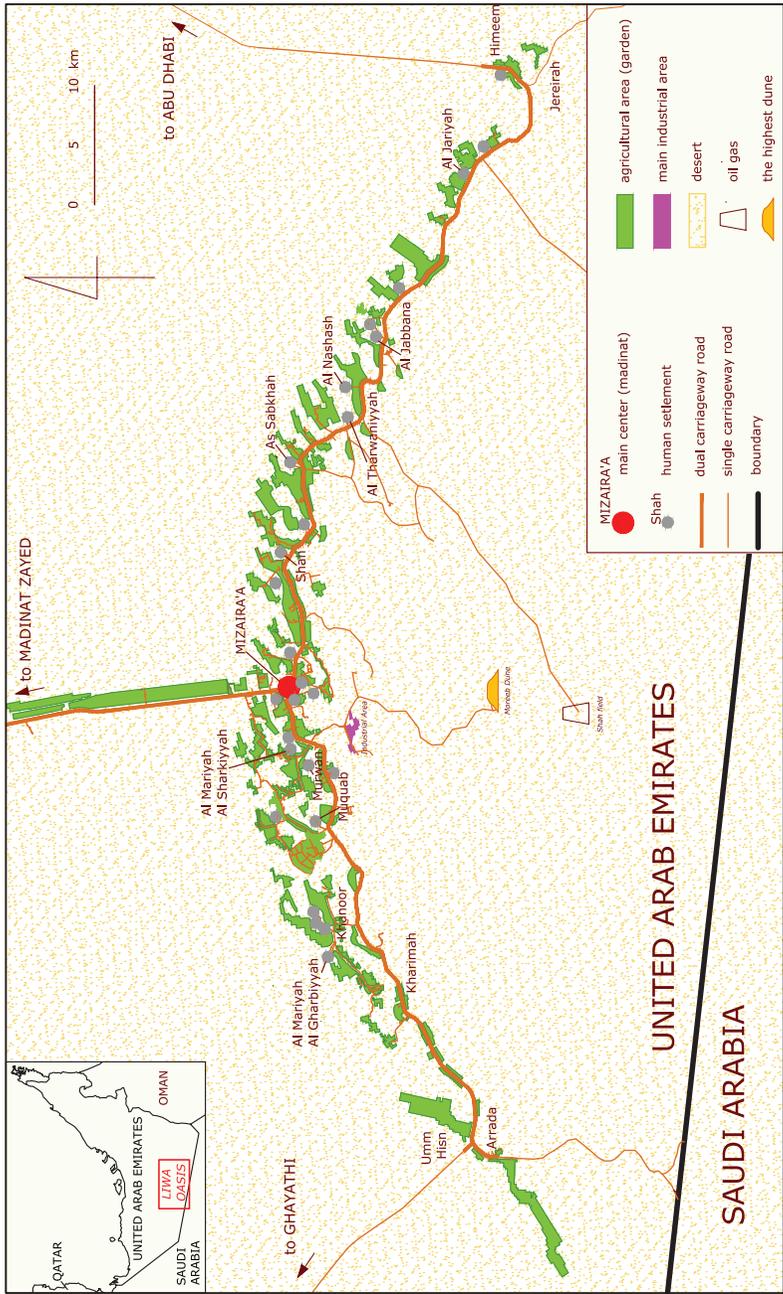
Liwa is not the only name for this group of oases. Both Barger and Walker talked about the Liwa Oasis, assigning it a different name. Jiwa Oasis in Barger’s notes is the same place as Liwa Oasis in Walker’s book. Jiwa was the name adopted by the Murra tribe, and Liwa is the name used by the Manasir and Awamir [Barger 2000: 38].

The hearse guide from the Murra tribe said to Barger that people in this oases are “like rabbits, attacked by hawks from the top and wolves from the bottom, have to pay palm tax to Sheikh of Abu Dhabi and camel tax to ibn Saud” [ibidem: 75]. The guide said that for many years the oases belonged to both Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi.

Frauke Heard-Bey, who for nearly 40 years worked at the Centre for Documentation and Research in Abu Dhabi (now: The National Centre for Documentation and Research), spent the longest time studying the Liwa Oasis. In October 1969 and February 1974 she visited Liwa and described it in the article *Development Anomalies in the Bedouin oases of Al Liwa* [1974]. Since then, however, much has changed there.

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Source/źródło: United Arab Emirates detailed map [2012].

Figure 1. Liwa Oasis, United Arab Emirates **Rycina 1.** Oazy Liwa, Zjednoczone Emiraty Arabskie