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Christopher Davidson's Dubai: the Vulnerability of Success. This is long over due: there was a gap in the literature about Dubai and its star appeal in the region, and beyond. I don't know who Davidson is but he certainly knows the terrain better than anybody, although I don't think that his command of Arabic is good because there are errors in words and there was little use of Arabic sources although a handful was cited in the bibliography. And his lack of Arabic command made him miss an important element: the story of Dubai and its appeal in the Arab world, and the role of Dubai in the music and sleaze culture of present-day Arab world. But Davidson's knowledge is quite impressive and he knows the details of dynastic struggles and geneological origins. But some sections about successions reads like those tedious sections of the Old Testament: and billy bob had four sons, Bob, John, etc. The book was banned in UAE from what I read and the author does not pull any punches--I can't believe that I used an American cliché--although he is not a progressive when it comes to gender or workers' rights. In fact, he is quite a reactionary on the latter subject: "While it is certainly important that all workers are treated humanely and that the emirate conforms to international labor conditions, many of the new ILO conventions that the federal government rather hurriedly and perhaps unwisely agreed to in 2002...have led to the creation of several informal and worryingly confrontational workers' associations that the police do not yet seem to know how to control...the new ILO-inspired relaxations have been responsible for a huge upsurge in serious and violent harbor actions, many of which have delayed the completion of construction projects...Incited to violence by a number of ringleaders, over 2,500 workers went on a rampage." (pp. 186-187) You see my point? He is really hostile to workers for some reason. There was little attention to gender and their roles. He said

that some of the women from Thailand or Chia who married UAE nationals must have been ("some of whom have undoubtedly worked as prostitutes in Dubai" (p. 205) prostitutes. How does he know? He is most insightful on succession question and foreign policy, and he makes this observation about UAE intellectuals: "Rather disappointingly, most of these erstwhile intellectual opponents of the regime seem to have appeased the establishment, with the Sharjah family having switched to a more moderate stance, and with both of the lecturers now writing wholly complimentary pieces on the successes of Dubai's development and the ruler's "futuristic vision for Dubai as an international hub that keeps a delicate balance between modernity and the city's Arab and Islamic identity...Dubai has always been a symbol of peaceful coexistence and interfaith tolerance and will remain so under the visionary leadership of Sheikh Muhammad." To illustrate the extent of this volte-face it should be noted that the PhD thesis written by one of these academics in the mid-1980s had decried the political dependency of the hereditary ruling families."(p. 215) You read about Dubai in the 1950s and the fires of radicalism and Arab nationalism. Back then, Lebanese used to smuggle communist literature into Dubai (p. 46); now, Lebanese smuggle prostitutes. Times have changed. The author is very knowledgeable of the nuanced and less nuanced differences of policies of the various emirates of the UAE, which some people miss (like Dubai took a position toward the Iran-Iraq war that was different from that of Abu Dhabi). I also miss the times of intrigues and plots between the various families. On the few references to Israeli wars and bombings, the author strikes me as insensitive, to say the least. HE refers to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as (" 'Peace for Galilee' invasion" p. 170) and calls the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 as "Israeli bombings of Hizbullah towns in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley". (p. 171) What are Hizbullah towns? Is Tyre a Hizbullah city too? And he does not seem to understand the homosexual question (or the same-sex-sex question) in the Islamic context. He also talks about ""openly homosexual men walking around shopping mall" (p. 199.) What are "openly homosexual men"? Do they wear special hats? Despite all this and more, this book fills a need in Middle East studies. We need to add it to the list of books we use in courses dealing with contemporary Middle East politics.

Posted by As'ad at 12:27 PM