

# MIDDLE EAST

## The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival

**Christopher M. Davidson.** Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO & London, 2005. pp. 332. Notes. Glossary. Bibliog. Index. Hb. US \$59.95. ISBN 1 5882 6274 5

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been one of the most remarkable polities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At its birth in 1971 few would have predicted its fortunes. Not all of the seven emirates seemed to be committed to the confederation, and indeed one of the emirates, Ras al-Khaimah, delayed joining up for a few months. Monarchy was unfashionable and the survival of Nasserism posed an ideological threat to the distributive capitalism that characterised the UAE.

Dr. Davidson of the University of Durham has spent time in the Emirates, teaching at the English-medium Zayed University in Abu Dhabi. Many of his sources, referring to public opinion and social prejudices, are laconically described as based on “personal interviews”. The book is a political scientist's analysis of the achievements and challenges of the country. He traces some of the features of the contemporary UAE political culture to the years before oil wealth. The paramount dominance of the ruling families was derived from legitimacy conferred by the “truce” treaties with the British, going back to the early 19th century. These treaties “effectively froze a snapshot of local power struggles and stabilized formerly elastic territorial boundaries”. The Gulf was part of a wider Indian Ocean world and the presence of large numbers of non-nationals from south Asia is nothing new. Nor is the nature of the “rentier state” whereby the government has an income not dependent on taxing its citizens. The families had long obtained rent from guano-collecting expeditions, fishing licences and airport landing rights from Imperial Airways.

Since independence the ruling families have concentrated on consolidating their power and wealth, but, at the same time, have legitimised that authority by providing a sophisticated welfare state and hand-outs to nationals. The country relies on professional services from northern Arabs and Europeans and on Asian immigrant labour. Colossal disparities of wealth and the denial of basic human rights to immigrant workers are accepted because the vast majority of non-nationals in the UAE are better off than they would be in their own countries. Even taxi drivers from the North West Frontier and Bangladeshi labourers are able to send remittances to their families back home. There is no shortage of people wanting to work in the UAE.

The book assesses the effectiveness of the federation. Local loyalties are strong, and people from the northern Emirates who work in the capital, Abu Dhabi, will prefer to return home every weekend. Each state clings on to its legal and economic identity. Buses take passengers from Abu Dhabi to Dubai but are not permitted to return with passengers from Dubai to Abu Dhabi. Dubai has been allowed to go over the top with its flamboyant and hedonistic consumerism and Sharjah has been able to see itself as the cultural and educational centre. The charisma of the late Shaikh Zayed, backed by untold wealth, has allowed Abu Dhabi to secure the adherence of the smaller emirates. Dissidents, if they are non-nationals, are

speedily and ruthlessly deported; if they are nationals, ignored or co-opted into the system. Most people are happy making money or enjoying themselves.

Davidson brings out the astuteness, vision and dynamism of some of the members of the ruling families. Tactical concessions have been made, opportunities seized. Shaikh Muhammad bin Rashid Al Maktum and Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (or Nuhayyan, as Davidson transliterates the name) have both called for a greater openness in the press, and have embraced the information revolution. But the pace of change has led to cultural dislocation. An Arab-Islamic identity is asserted though it has only been in the last half century that there has been any significant cultural orientation towards Cairo or Damascus, instead of Iran and India. The Arabic language is seen as under threat. In 1999 a survey indicated that 47 percent of the students preferred English as their exclusive medium of instruction, more than twice the number of those who preferred Arabic. English is the language of the private sector, of hotels and the expanding tourist industry.

This volume is an admirable survey of the lights and shades of the Emirates. A tendency to use some of the jargon of the social sciences may puzzle the general reader who would otherwise understand much about an Arab country where the development over the last generation has been exciting and where things, against all the odds, work well and where the future continues to look promising.

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