

The United Arab Emirates - A study in survival

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The United Arab Emirates - A Study in Survival

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Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005, Pp.xi + 333, Glossary, abbreviations and acronyms, appendix, bibliography, index, \$59.95 (hardback). ISBN 1-58826-274-X

The United Arab Emirates - A Study in Survival is an important book about a topic that still receives surprisingly little attention from scholars of the modern history of the Middle East - how the sleepy, under-developed Shaikhdoms of the lower Gulf were transformed into the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - one of the most stable and successful examples of Arab political union. A product of fieldwork and archival research in both the UAE and the UK, the book is an expansion of the body of empirical language provided by existing works on the subject, written by scholars such as Jill Crystal, Sheila Carapico, Michael Herb and others. Drawing on two main schools of thought - the dependency and modernization theories - the book aims to explore the many contradictions that characterize the UAE and its position within the international system.

All five chapters of the book are clearly to the point. The first chapter provides a detailed historical background, tracing the recent history of the lower Gulf region, the British involvement in the area, and the establishment of the UAE. In many ways the lower Gulf was doomed to a future of peripheralization given the region's scant geographical resources, yet despite these conditions there were important signs of indigenous socioeconomic development. Working within a dependency framework, the chapter explores the UAE's inherited situation, including its historic reliance on foreign labour, foreign technology and the export of a single primary product. At the same time, this chapter makes non-Gulf readers acutely aware of how differently one can understand the familiar when it is examined from another point of view. This is particularly fascinating with respect to the tension between the contrasting circumstances of the existing local systems and preferences such as the emphasis on consultation and the British encouragement of greater regional security. As such, the chapter offers a key to understanding the political legacy of the Arab Gulf states.

Chapter two - 'The Survival of Monarchy' - builds on the insights of the first chapter by exploring how traditional capitalist structures were not swept away during the oil era, but rather were incorporated and made functional, thus facilitating a relatively smooth transition for the new state without any significant break from the past. Working within a combination of rentier-dependency models, the chapter illustrates how the tiny federation has managed to secure both political stability and much needed sources of non-democratic legitimacy. The chapter also explores how the UAE's polity and its traditional monarchies have managed to

circumvent what Davidson describes as 'the Shaikh's Dilemma' of assimilating new groups alongside old ones by carefully combining traditional sources of legitimacy with structural and material resources. The polity has continued to draw upon sources of personal legitimacy and fostered a patrimonial-client system of privileges and loyalties. Personal authority has remained a key component of the UAE's legitimacy formula even during an era of rapid population growth and urbanization.

Chapter three focuses on the UAE's efforts to reduce some of the most obvious weaknesses of their dependent economies in order to improve its long-term situation. The UAE has experienced the modest growth of its non-oil-related industries and in some cases has managed to encourage the transmission and domestic substitution of foreign technologies. The process, however, was far from smooth. The reader will learn that despite its best efforts, the UAE has remained heavily oriented toward consumption rather than production. Moreover, there has been the continuing concern of regional disequilibrium, with the wealth and development gap between the oil-producing emirates and the other emirates. What the chapter shows, and this is where its importance lies, is that a number of what Davidson depicts as 'internal pathologies'- the allocative nature of the state, the consumerist mentality of the rentier population, the mismanagement of resources and a lack of transparency - could have been responsible for the disparities within the federation. It concludes that both present and future attempts to modify features of socioeconomic development will continue to be undermined by the hidden costs of the UAE's political instability and the persistence of traditional forces.

The final chapters (the fourth and fifth) focus on these more deeply entrenched disadvantages which have made legal-rational objectives difficult to achieve. It becomes clear how reinvigorated neo-patrimonial networks, bureaucratic self-interests, and differing client elite orientations have frequently subverted the policy implementation process and at times undermined the planners' attempt to alleviate some of the UAE's pressing problems. The UAE's decision-making structure at the federal level is still dominated by hereditary rulers and their appointees in what appears to be a hybrid neo-patrimonial government of seemingly modern institutions grafted onto powerful traditional authorities. Thus while the federation has certainly strengthened in recent years, it is nevertheless still more accurate to consider the UAE as something of a loose confederation. Although the chapter covers mainly familiar ground the author offers many new insights. He emphasizes, for example, the way the increasing struggle over the future of Emirati development between the reformers ('new rentiers') and conservatives ('old rentiers') highlights the non-homogeneous nature of the UAE's client elite. A number of controversial issues, such as foreign property ownership and foreign direct investment have led to protracted disputes between those attempting to liberalize the economy and foster the growth of non-oil-related activities and those attempting to preserve the status quo and safeguard what they believe to be the UAE's national interests.

In what could be considered one of his main concluding remarks, Davidson suggests that whereas the first wave of globalization may have reinforced dependency structures and problems, there are clear indications that something of a second wave may well lead to liberalizing reforms, a more diverse economy, and a stronger civil society.

Davidson offers a convincing and well-balanced portrait of a society caught between the comfort of tradition and the uncertainty of modernity introduced by oil wealth. Having drawn (perhaps too heavily) on 'grand theories', the book is compiled in a manner that should appeal

to academics, less to a wider readership. It is indispensable, however, for any university-level course on Gulf history and deserves to be on the bookshelf of any serious Gulf scholar.

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