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THE EMIRATES OF ABU DHABI AND DUBAI: CONTRASTING ROLES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Almost everything is remarkable about the United Arab Emirates (UAE), from its enormous oil wealth and tiny indigenous population to its record-breaking socio-economic development, resting awkwardly astride one of the region's most opaque and constricted political systems. Most extraordinary of all, however, at least in terms of immediate impact and sheer visibility, is the stark contrast between the UAE's two most powerful constituent members, the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai; a contrast made particularly spectacular given that their eponymous cities are just a 90 minute car journey apart. The skylines of both cities are dominated by modern steel and glass skyscrapers, but Dubai has always held the edge and can now boast some of the world's tallest and most innovative buildings, the flagship properties of many prestigious international hotel chains and real estate developers, man-made islands rising out of the sea, and enormous artificial lakes and canals. Moreover, while Abu Dhabi continues to exude a certain sleepiness and still retains many of its Arabic and Islamic traditions and customs, Dubai is well on its way to becoming the 'Las Vegas of the Middle East': it is regularly visited by millions of sun seeking and bargain hunting tourists, is home to thousands of prostitutes, turns a blind eye to public homosexuality, is awash with alcohol and narcotics, is perfectly tolerant of beachwear being paraded down the streets, and has long since adopted English as its lingua franca. By outlining their differing histories and leadership, their geographical variances, and of course their crucial disparity in oil reserves, this article will highlight the very distinct development strategies employed by the two emirates and demonstrate how these have led to markedly different roles within the highly flexible UAE federation and within the international system. Finally, the respective advantages and disadvantages of these strategies will be considered, in addition to the long-term political ramifications of such divergent paths for the survival of the UAE's non-democratic and extremely delicate 'ruling bargain' between its rulers and citizens.

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Notes

1. Presidential Court Center for Documentation and Research, Qasr al-Hosn: The History of the Rulers of Abu Dhabi, 1793–1966. Abu Dhabi: Motivate Publishing, 2001, p. 179.

2. Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, The United Arab Emirates: A Modern History. London: Croom Helm, 1978, p. 104.

3. Personal interviews with Frauke Heard-Bey, Abu Dhabi, January 2004; also see ibid., p. 181; and Presidential Court Center for Documentation and Research, Qasr al-Hosn, p. 201.

4. Rosemarie Sa'id Zahlan, The Origins of the United Arab Emirates. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, p. 12.

5. Frauke Heard-Bey, From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates. London: Longman 1996, pp. 189–191.

6. Ibid., p. 245.

7. Muhammad al-Fahim, From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi. London: Center of Arab Studies, 1995, pp. 32, 38.

8. See Christopher M. Davidson, The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005, p. 158; and ‘The Reason for the Iran Connection’, Gulf News, 21 August 1981, quoting D.K. Chaudhry, the general manager of the Sharaf Shipping Agency.

9. Hendrik Van Der Meulen, ‘The Role of Tribal and Kinship Ties in the Politics of the United Arab Emirates’. PhD thesis, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1997, p. 86.

10. Presidential Court Center for Documentation and Research, Qasr al-Hosn, p. 224.

11. Ibid., p. 242.

12. Al-Fahim, From Rags to Riches, p. 43.

13. Personal interviews, Abu Dhabi, February 2005.

14. Al-Fahim, From Rags to Riches, pp. 86–87.

15. Shakhbut had long been distrustful of merchants since having caught the potentially cessionary Otaibi family of merchants corresponding with the ruler of Dubai during the tribal wars of the 1940s, see Derek Hopwood (ed.), The Arabian Peninsula:

Society and Politics. London: Allen and Unwin, 1972, p. 206; and Presidential Court Center for Documentation and Research, Qasr al-Hosn, pp. 246–247.

16. Salaries for these teachers and maintenance costs for schools were channelled through the Kuwaiti-backed Gulf Permanent Assistance Committee, see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p. 44; and Presidential Court Center for Documentation and Research, Qasr al-Hosn, pp. 246–247.

17. These families included members of the Sudan clan and the Qubeisat, see Presidential Court Center for Documentation and Research, Qasr al-Hosn, p. 235.

18. Personal interviews, Abu Dhabi June 2005.

19. Al-Fahim, From Rags to Riches, p. 94.

20. Personal interviews, Dubai, March 2005.

21. John Duke Anthony, The United Arab Emirates: Dynamics of State Formation. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2002, p. 82.

22. The dredging operation was undertaken by the British Consultancy firm Halcrow's and the Austrian engineering company Austrian Ast.

23. These being the Trucial States Council and the Trucial States Development Office – both forerunners of post-1971 federal institutions.

24. Given the presence of these foreign experts, Dubai's rulers were able to discuss projects informally with the foreigners and witness their achievements first-hand, see Heard-Bey, From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates, p. 265.

25. The Saudi link would seem to have its roots in the 1989 Sharjah banking scandal, when the emirate's government defaulted on loans in excess of $500 million, bringing four commercial banks close to collapse. Saudi Arabia intervened with a ‘strings attached’ rescue package. For more information see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 79, 216; and Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates. London: Oxford Business Group, 2000, pp. 71–72.

26. For a limited discussion see Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates, p. 21.

27. This share amounts to nearly 100 billion barrels, the fourth highest in the world. See Van Der Meulen, ‘The Role of Tribal and Kinship Ties’, pp. 76–78; and CIA World

Factbook. New York: CIA, 2005.

28. The CIA's 2005 estimate being $25,200, CIA World Factbook.

29. This is the author's estimate based on the last official figure of 3.5 million listed in a 2003 UAE Central Bank report.

30. See Dubai Municipality, Results of Income and Expenditure Survey. Dubai: Administrative Affairs Department, Statistics Center, 1999, p. 133; and Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 145–146.

31. This is the author's estimate based on personal interviews in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, 2004.

32. For a general discussion of the reluctant transferral of powers to the federal government, see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 199–208. For a specific discussion of control over oil policy and the ineffectiveness of the federal ministry see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 204–205.

33. Abu Dhabi's stake is around 92.2 percent, with Dubai having 4 percent, Sharjah 1.5 percent and Ra's al-Khaimah 0.4 percent, see Van Der Meulen, ‘The Role of Tribal and Kinship Ties’, p. 77.

34. These are the author's estimates; also see Van Der Meulen, ‘The Role of Tribal and Kinship Ties’, p. 268.

35. Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p. 168.

36. Najat Abdullah al-Nabeh, ‘The United Arab Emirates: Regional and Global Dimensions’. PhD thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1984, p. 49.

37. Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates, p. 47.

38. The conduit being Financiera Avenida, personal interviews, London, January 2004.

39. Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates, p. 31.

40. Economist Intelligence Unit, United Arab Emirates. London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2000, p. 47.

41. The Samsung-ADIA complex, despite suffering a major fire in 2004, was completed in late 2006, and now easily eclipses the Hilton's Burj Baynunah to become Abu Dhabi's

tallest building.

42. Personal interviews, Abu Dhabi, June 2005.

43. Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates, p. 43.

44. Personal interviews, Abu Dhabi, June 2005.

45. Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates, pp. 90–91.

46. ‘Abu Dhabi Shipbuilding Profits Rise’, Gulf News, 2 August 2005.

47. Al Sharan International Consultancy, United Arab Emirates Country Report. Dubai: Al Sharan International Consultancy, 2001, pp. 14–15.

48. Dubai's aluminium capabilities fall under the auspices of DUBAL – a semi-government parastatal.

49. Oxford Business Group, Emerging Emirates, pp. 90–91.

50. Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p. 125.

51. Dubai Department of Ports and Customs, ‘Dubai: Non-oil Foreign Trade’, in Dubai Department of Economic Development, Development Statistics. Dubai: DDED, 2002, p. 109.

52. Personal interviews with Frauke Heard-Bey, Abu Dhabi, January 2004.

53. Dubai Department of Industry, ‘Jebel Ali Free Zone’, in Dubai Department of Economic Development, Development Statistics, p. 241.

54. Ibid., p. 255.

55. Economist Intelligence Unit, United Arab Emirates, p. 5.

56. Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p. 139.

57. Kevin Fenelon, The United Arab Emirates: An Economic and Social Survey. London: Longman, 1973, pp. 80–83.

58. ‘Bridging the Gap’, Middle East Economic Digest, 8 March 2002, p. 4.

59. For a more detailed, albeit now slightly dated discussion see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 229–232.

60. Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, ‘Hotels and Tourists’, in Dubai Department of Economic Development, Development Statistics, pp. 167, 172.

61. Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p. 167.

62. Ibid., p. 134.

63. Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, ‘Hotels and Tourists’ in Dubai Department of Economic Development, Development Statistics, p. 167.

64. Ibid., p. 171.

65. Ibid., p. 172.

66. Personal interviews with members of the UAE Ministry of Finance and Industry, Abu Dhabi, January 2004.

67. Personal interviews with members of the UAE Ministry of Planning, Abu Dhabi, January 2004.

68. For a discussion of duplication of investments see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 166–167.

69. Business Monitor International, The UAE Quarterly Business Forecast Report. London: Winter 1997, pp. 5–6.

70. See Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 162–163. For a discussion of the Emiratization strategy see pp. 144–154.

71. ‘Bridging the Gap’, pp. 27–30; and see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p. 199 for a discussion of Dubai's troubled federal budget contributions.

72. ‘Bridging the Gap’, pp. 27–30.

73. Ibid. and personal interviews at the Al-Maktoum Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, Dundee, July 2002.

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75. Economist Intelligence Unit, United Arab Emirates, pp. 4–5.

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77. For a full discussion see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, pp. 65–118.

78. For a discussion of ‘new rentiers’ see ibid., p. 225.

79. Ibid., pp. 73–77.

80. Ibid., p. 252.

81. Ibid., pp. 81–82.

82. Ibid., p. 81.

83. Ra's al-Khaimah born and Al-'Ayn educated Marawan al-Shehhi was a UAE national. Personal interviews, undisclosed locations, October 2003. Also see Davidson, The United Arab Emirates, p.80; and ‘Fingers Point at Iraqi Leader as Evidence Grows’, The Daily Telegraph, 1 December 2001.

Additional information

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