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THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

ALEXANDER MELAMID

A visit to the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, formerly known as “Trucial Oman” or the “Pirate Coast,” during the winter of 1996–1997 permits an updating of my earlier work (Melamid 1953, 1973, 1989). Great Britain was an established colonial presence in the gulf in 1820, having signed a series of agreements with the sheikhs of the individual tribes that, augmented by treaties on preserving a maritime truce, earned the area the name of “Trucial States” or “Trucial Coast.” In addition, Britain was allowed to handle foreign relations for the area because of the Perpetual Maritime Truce that the Arab rulers had signed with the British in 1853. The frequently warring tribal groupings mostly constituted themselves into emirates during the early twentieth century. The united emirates are: Abu Dhabi—which includes the oasis of Buraimi, adjoining Al-‘Ayn, and is the largest and the leader of the group—Dubayy, Sharjah, ‘Ajmān, Umm al Qaywayn, and Al Fujayrah. Following the British political and military withdrawal of 1971, these formed a federation called the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with Abu Dhabi City as the capital (Figure 1). The emirate Ra’s al Khaymah joined in 1972. Qatar and Bahrain decided to stay outside this federation and became separate states. The UAE was soon internationally recognized and became a member of the United Nations, the Arab League, the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council, and other international organizations. It has embassies and other representations in New York, London, and most Middle Eastern and South Asian countries.

The UAE, which comprises approximately 84,000 square kilometers and almost 2.4 million people (MP 1995), is strategically located along the southern approaches to the Strait of Hormuz, a vital transit point for crude oil. Both internal and external disputes with neighbors have by and large ceased, permitting oil development and giving the country regular and substantial revenues. The boundary with Oman, however, is not defined, and the Abu Dhabi–Saudi Arabia border-dispute settlement of 1974 has not yet been ratified (CIA 1997). Uniquely among states of the world, offshore rights belong to the individual emirates and not to the federation. Arbitration was required to determine boundaries both with respect to territorial seas and the outer Persian Gulf waters. Dubayy and several of the other emirates now produce oil offshore, and others are expected to follow.

The inhabitants of the UAE include local Arab tribesmen who in the main hold government jobs. In addition, at least two-thirds and perhaps, as suggested by the U.S. Department of State (1991), up to 90 percent of the workforce are immigrants from other parts of Arabia—mainly Yemen—or, more importantly, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and, recently, Afghanistan. Immigration is strictly controlled by permits that are issued only upon proof of employment and housing. In Abu Dhabi City taxi driving is reserved for local tribesmen and is regarded as an aid to their sed-

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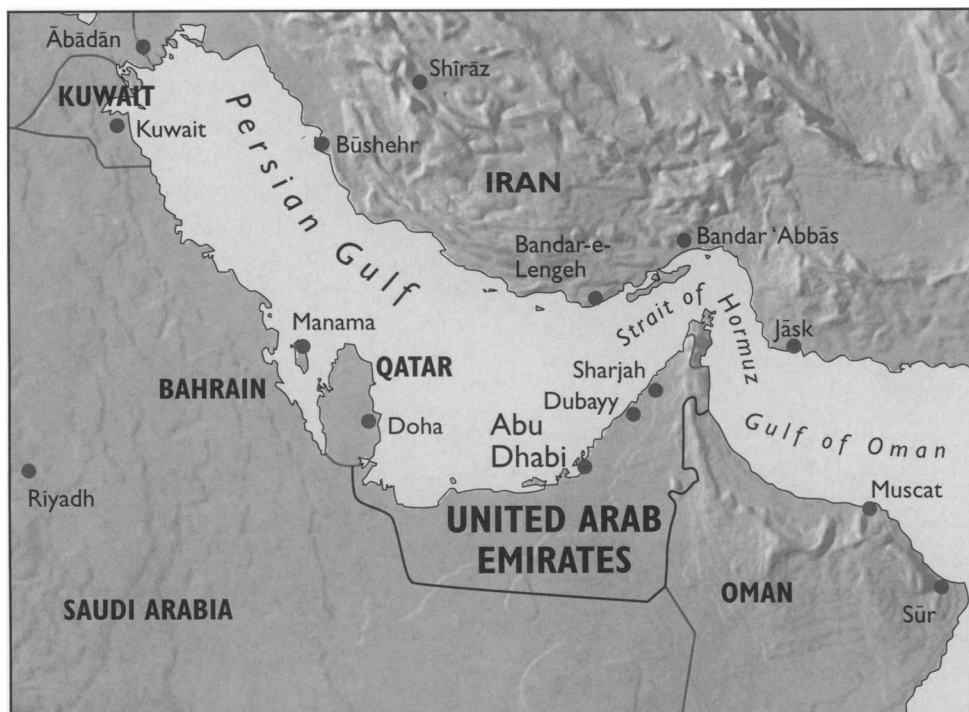


FIG. 1—The United Arab Emirates. *Base map source:* Mountain High Maps. (Drafted by the University of Nevada Cartography Laboratory)

entarization. Other emirates do not have this rule and permit immigrants to drive taxis.

The federation consists almost entirely of desert that can be crossed only by camels and four-wheel-drive vehicles. For this reason the emirates and the federation had to construct about 800 kilometers of paved roads since World War II. This connects all seven emirates in the federation. Rainfall at Sharjah was measured at 103 millimeters per year over a thirty-year period, which is typical for almost the whole country and insufficient for the growth of vegetation, because temperatures are high throughout the year. The summer months are uncomfortable, for the temperature frequently reaches 47°C and the humidity is high. The winter months—from about November to March—are pleasant, however, with temperatures ranging around 20°C . This permits some limited winter grazing of sheep and camels in the northern part of the UAE, which must be supplemented by fodder grown in oases or imported. The southern part of the federation is not grazed. These winter months also attract tourists from the northern part of the Middle East and Europe to the wide beaches near the big hotels of Dubayy and Abu Dhabi.

Throughout the centuries the inhabitants made a living from the sea. Since time immemorial a major activity had been pearling, mainly during the winter months, and piracy, in the absence of much seaborne trade—hence the old appellation “Pi-

rate Coast.” About 1930 the introduction of cultured pearls from Japan ruined local pearl production within a few years, and the inhabitants endured a period of misery. Geologists suspected the presence of oil underground, and the cessation of disputes among the emirates as well as with Saudi Arabia permitted the signing of concession agreements for oil production. The first such agreement was concluded in 1937, and exploration began in earnest after World War II. Although the first well drilled—in 1961—was dry, subsequent wells proved productive. Oil exports commenced in 1962, exceeded 50 million tons annually in 1971 and about 2 millions barrels per day in 1990 (U.S. Department of State 1991). The resulting revenues give the United Arab Emirates the highest per capita income of any country in the world, according to local estimates, and have permitted significant economic development despite the paucity of other resources.

Although small oases are scattered throughout the UAE, the only significant one is Buraimi, a town split between Oman and the UAE and adjoining the city of Al-‘Ayn in Abu Dhabi. In the oasis date trees supply food, fodder is grown, and bananas and vegetables have also been cultivated in recent years. This oasis receives its water from aquifers in the foothills of the Hajar Mountains, which are primarily located in the sultanate of Oman. Underground canals called *qanats* or *aflaj*, probably constructed during a period of Persian rule about 1000 B.C., according to local archaeologists, tap these aquifers. Oil revenues enabled the cementing of the qanats in recent years. Today, these qanats also supply the city of Dubayy, on the coast.

There is evidence of historic but no longer extant settlements on the coast and of other settlements, such as Jebel Hafit near Al-‘Ayn, most of which are believed to date from the Stone Age. These settlements arose where the sands of the interior deserts meet the coastal sand dunes, a geomorphic and hydrologic contact that made possible an accumulation of perched freshwater underground and so encouraged people to live there. Today this water is no longer sufficient, even where it is supplemented with qanat water. For this reason seawater is now distilled into sweet water, using local natural gas as fuel. These distillation plants also generate electricity, making the installations very efficient. Thus oil and gas keep the economy of the country going. The desert is ameliorated by trees irrigated with wastewater, originally distilled but remnant from other uses. For these reasons the UAE, especially its cities, is greened by the plantation of many trees. Especially near the seashore, the private gardens of villas add to the region’s greenness.

Three coastal settlements—Sharjah, Dubayy, and Abu Dhabi City—have developed into major cities. All have airports; the latter two are used for international flights and offer outstanding duty-free shopping, attracting charter flights from eastern Europe. Sharjah was originally the major center of the UAE and its administrative hub where foreign representatives resided. Today Dubayy and Abu Dhabi City have overtaken Sharjah and assumed its functions, and Sharjah is only a small city with a population of 330,000 (UAE 1997, population est. 1992).

Dubayy, aided by the early construction of a water supply from Buraimi, became the major commercial center, with many local and foreign businesses, such as trad-

ing enterprises and construction firms. After World War II the port of Dubayy was improved by the construction of piers that reach nearly 3 kilometers into the gulf. A recently built dry dock fills the western side of the port. The former Dubayy Creek has been largely filled in except for its lower 5 kilometers, which are used by local vessels and yachts. With the promotion of Abu Dhabi City as capital, Dubayy lost some of these commercial functions and today has a population of just over 500,000. Abu Dhabi City is slightly larger, with 841,000 inhabitants, and is growing rapidly (UAE 1997, population est. 1992).

Both cities have many high-rise buildings designed by prominent architects, mainly Italian or Swiss. Much undeveloped land left is to accommodate future urban growth; traffic flows smoothly along the wide streets; and parking space is ample. However, there is no regular transport system by buses, their function having been taken over by taxis. Hotels abound, some of them run by international chains such as Sheraton, Hilton, Marriott, Howard Johnson, and Rotana, the Middle East's first hotel chain. Accommodation for immigrant workers is also available. Restaurants serving Arab, Indian, or Western food dot the city. Indoor and outdoor cinemas cater to the multilingual population.

Today the United Arab Emirates presents a good image of people of diverse cultural backgrounds living together harmoniously. All this is supported by revenues from oil and gas production, which flow to the population at large and not just to a few individuals or families.

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