

ACADEMIA

Accelerating the world's research.

Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond

el-Sayed el-Aswad

**Want more papers like
this?**

[Download a PDF Pack of
related papers](#)

[Search Academia's catalog of
22 million free papers](#)



Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond

Christopher M. Davidson

New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 244p. \$35.00.
(ISBN:13 9780231701068.)

Review by

el-Sayed el-Aswad, Ph.D.

United Arab Emirates University

This book aspires to be a rich, interdisciplinary and multidimensional work dealing with the hybrid socio-economic and political system of Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. It charts Abu Dhabi's trajectory from its origins as a desert sheikhdom of the eighteenth century to its current pre-eminent status. In addition to a short introduction, the book is divided into seven chapters. There is no defined methodology; rather the work relies on an eclectic approach in addressing various topics. Essentially, internal forces impacting Abu Dhabi's formation and development are given more attention than external forces.

The first two chapters, offering an extensive survey of the history of Abu Dhabi as well as other emirates, deal with the dynamic structures of dominant tribes as well as the establishment of tribal rulers in the region, particularly the Al-Nahyan dynasty, from the eighteenth century to the present. The focus on extensive and lengthy lists of names of rulers and their tribal allies (both male and female), that while interesting, make it difficult for the lay reader to understand the main objective of the whole argument.

The author, in chapters three and four, explicates the core factors that have enabled the UAE in general and Abu Dhabi in particular, to be one of the most impressively vibrant economies in the Arab world. These factors include immense oil wealth, Sheikh Zayed's leadership, the establishment of a federation after the British withdrawal from the region, generous distributions of the wealth to nationals, the removal of all forms of taxation, the placement of key representatives of powerful, loyal families and clans in government and parastatal or private company positions, artful diplomacy, and the adoption of novel sectors. These sectors comprise high technology, a pioneering renewable energy plan, and heavy industries, including an aerospace



industry, shipping industry, various military manufacturers, extensive real estate projects, tourism, green industries and other areas of non-oil diversification. In brief, with astute management and strong government backing, Abu Dhabi (and the UAE) has emerged as the pre-eminent regional power surviving the recent global recession.

The book's shortcomings include sweeping generalizations based on impressionistic and judgmental views. On the one hand, the author mentions the economic gap between Abu Dhabi and other less fortunate emirates where families whose combined household income falls below \$2800 per month are eligible for social security benefits. On the other, he states, "in many ways the entire national population forms a natural upper class" (p. 131). Such crude generalization puts the author's scholarship into question. Furthermore, it is not accurate to state that Abu Dhabi has never experienced a large influx of foreigners as per Dubai, Sharjah and other nearby settlements (p. 111). There is no statistical data in the book to support such a claim. The author discusses the relationship between Abu Dhabi and Dubai as based on competition and not on cooperation. He indicates that Dubai, being shortsighted, began diversification without a plan, but that Abu Dhabi, with its long-term "Plan 2030", has initiated strong infrastructure projects, thereby avoiding the mistakes of Dubai. In discussing real estate projects, for instance, he recounts, "it is notable that the authorities have been keen to market Abu Dhabi real estate in a more discreet fashion: rarely will one see large advertisements featuring alcohol imbibing western or Levantine women in revealing attire—as is often the case in Dubai—but rather scenes depicting family life, perhaps with small children and modestly dressed women covering their hair" (p. 87).

The book is insensitive to social values, customs and religious beliefs that are viewed by the author as tools legitimizing the political system (p.135). Even local dress, such as men's white dishdasha and women's abaya to cover their clothes and shaila to cover their hair, is depicted as a modern creation of the allocative state confirming the nationals' unified identity. It is difficult to accept that the deeply seated socio-cultural heritage of indigenous people is a modern creation needed to legitimize the politics of the newly born state.

The issue of human rights discussed in the last chapter (Unresolved Problems) represents the author's own bias. He unsubstantially claims that the region has a long history of slavery, or enslaving alien and powerless people. Such a statement, applicable also to Western society from the 16th century until the mid 19th century, is



baseless with regard to the contemporary emirates. Another example of contradictory statements is evident in the author's argument that "in recent years there has been considerable pressure placed on the federal government to take action on the use of Pakistani child camel jockeys" (p. 164). In another statement the author points out that in early 2005, a new law was introduced to ban child camel jockeys.

When discussing the contemporary emirate of Abu Dhabi, the author in various parts of the book insists upon addressing it as a "sheikhdom", a term that was frequently used in reference to a nineteenth-century truce between Britain and Arab sheikhdoms or Trucial states. To advance his political ideology, the author criticizes Abu Dhabi's moral and financial support of Palestine and Arab states confronting Israeli aggression (p. 162). He depicts such support as anti-Semitic action. Certain terminologies such as "tribal capitalism" and "modern slavery" have been coined without definition or clarification. The author either presumes that the reader is familiar with such terminologies or leaves it to the reader to infer their meanings. In addition, the book suffers from occasional typographical errors and inconsistency of citation.

Despite these shortcomings, the book opens a window to rethink issues on the effectiveness of the hybrid socio-economic and political system pertaining to Abu Dhabi and the UAE.



Copyright of DOMES is the property of Global Information Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Abu Dhabi is a new economic superpower that will soon wield enormous influence across both developing and developed worlds. The principal emirate of the United Arab Emirates federation commands over 8 percent of global oil reserves, has nearly \$1 trillion in sovereign wealth funds to invest and is busily implementing a thoughtful economic master plan. Overall, Davidson's work is interesting and informative. It is a must read for those interested in Middle Eastern geopolitics and oil. That aside, students of history, the oil business and those of a curious disposition fascinated by the Emirates might find it well worth their while to pick this title up. Read more.

2 people found this helpful. The author of *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* traces Abu Dhabi's transformation from a modest 18th-century emirate to its present position: burgeoning cultural center, holder of close to a trillion dollars in sovereign wealth and more than eight percent of world oil reserves, about to implement new economic initiatives and become an important factor in both first and third world economies. He describes the system of "tribal capitalism" created by the ruling family to align old political allegiances with modern engines of growth, and also considers coming challenges to the emirate's success. But that oil is running out. For the first time, local politicians are asking themselves a big question: What does prosperity beyond oil look like? In 2011, oil exports accounted for 77 percent of United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s state budget. As of this year, the country has 98 billion barrels of oil left. Last month, Abu Dhabi's policy makers invited researchers and practitioners together to explore alternative, more resilient and diverse economic models. The UAE imports more than 80 percent of its food, and the value of this will increase from \$3 billion in 2011 to \$8.4 billion by 2020 to meet growing demand. Dubai relies on desalination plants for 98.8 percent of its water supply, paying about \$6 for every cubic meter of water. [Abu Dhabi] provides both a solid historical and social background of the UAE capital and a detailed snapshot of its current economic and political situation. (Middle East Policy Journal). A tour de force. the narrative is excellent, the style is highly readable and the information by and large is priceless. (Jean-Francois Seznec International Affairs 1900-01-00). Review. Abu Dhabi is a fine combination of history, anthropology, economics, and political science. The best thing I have yet read on the country, adequately portraying its strengths while also pointing to its critical shortcomin Abu Dhabi owns more than 8 percent of the world's oil reserves, has close to one trillion dollars to invest in sovereign wealth funds, and is about to implement a masterful set of economic initiatives A rising economic power, Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates, is poised to become a major player in the fortunes of both Third. and First World countries. Similar to "Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success", "Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond" is a relatively short book that provides an overview of Abu Dhabi's history, socioeconomic and political environment. The author is a scholar well-versed in the politics of the UAE, and manages to deliver a solid book that readers interested to learn more about the UAE as a whole, and Abu Dhabi in particular, will find particularly useful.