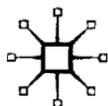# THE POLITICAL CULTURE
OF LEADERSHIP

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THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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To David, Douglas, and Nicholas

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PREFACE

This book examines the political culture of leadership in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the last two centuries—roughly between 1800 and 2006—as local states evolved from largely egalitarian societies into states with power in the hands of a few ruling families. Although the people of these seven emirates, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharja, Ajman, Um al Qaiwain, Ras al Khaima, and Fujaira, shared a common culture, historically they occupied different niches in the complicated ecosystem of the Gulf, and therefore experienced political and economic pressures in unique ways. As a result, rulers differed in political objectives, even while drawing on similar strategic approaches.

Political culture consists of the shared values, norms, expectations, approaches, and conventions that shape political practice, and allow its meanings to be communicated to others of similar view. The approach used here to study political behavior relies on typical techniques of anthropology, personal observation, comparison during the same and different time periods, and holism—a perspective that examines any and all detail that sheds light on the subject matter. The anthropologist's job in this case is to identify the recurrent themes in political leadership and extrapolate back to conceptual frameworks that may have inspired them. The aim is to fill a middle ground in research between one that focuses on global forces shaping history and politics, and one that examines limited groups in restricted time frames. Both kinds of study are valuable, but it is also important to understand the "worldview" that informs the actions of leaders.[1]

Two conversations with Emiratis encouraged me to start this task. One was a discussion between an Emirati scholar and members of a delegation from a prestigious U.S. think-tank. The Americans were seeking academic cooperation and funds for a Gulf studies program. After listening to the particulars of the program, most of which involved studies of regional security and strategic oil interests, the Emirati scholar commented wryly, "But your analyses have nothing to do with the way politics work here." No one

from the delegation responded, nor was it likely they understood what he meant. The second comment occurred in a discussion with an Emirati professor about the personal networks and connections that underlie Emirati politics. He concluded enthusiastically, "That's the way politics work but nobody writes about it."

Clifford Geertz once said that "In attempting to answer grand questions . . . the anthropologist is always inclined to turn toward the concrete, the particular, the microscopic . . . (hoping) to find in the little what eludes us in the large, to stumble upon general truths while sifting through special cases" (1968: 4). This study is no exception. Much of the interpretation is based on personal observation and interviews over the last 40 years, much of it spent in residence in Arab countries. The detailed historical information comes from British Foreign Office records, which lamentably are the main primary source for the period before 1972. There are difficulties in depending on these foreign sources. Most importantly, they are only glimpses of the complex social life that existed at the time and therefore do not provide the fertile data fields anthropologists enjoy when immersing themselves in local societies. More seriously, the view is through the eyes of outsiders who often do not understand local culture as well as they might. Critics have claimed quite rightly, that too much of the history of the UAE relies on foreign sources. This is undeniable, but even these critics recognize that there are few other accessible options. What makes the British records useful is that resident officers tried to record the actions of rulers as accurately as possible even when they themselves were not certain of what it was they were observing. This often forced them to delve into local relationships and motivations in trying to understand unfolding events. [2]

My information also comes from several careful histories written about the UAE by Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, Frauke Heard-Bey, Rosemarie Zahlan, HH Shaikh Sultan al Qassimi, Donald Hawley, B.J. Slot, and J.B. Kelly. These authors have drawn heavily on archival materials of the British, Dutch, and to lesser degree, other nations. There would be no point in trying to replicate their work. But I do refer to them frequently to report leaders' activities and the local contexts that shaped behavior during certain periods.

Theoretical inspiration comes from some of the great writers on tribal structures Lancaster writing on the Rwala, Madawi al Rashid writing on Saudi Arabia, Barth on the Pathans, and others. Metaphorical help comes from the creative thinker, Fuad Khuri, who brings to the description of Middle Eastern societies insights into their essential natures. And of course the great Arab sociologist Ibn Khaldun always provides cogent insights,

many of which remain fresh even after seven centuries. The recently published work of Peter Lienhardt provides a model for what I consider useful insights into the workings of politics in the UAE. Closely in contact with the Abu Dhabi ruler, Shakhbut Nahyan, he draws nuanced conclusions from firsthand information.

Evidence for marriage patterns comes from genealogical information, the core of which is found in the genealogies published by the UAE documentation Center in Abu Dhabi. The problem with these genealogies from the perspective of understanding the role family plays in political culture is that females do not appear in the official record. As a result I spent a great deal of time trying to reconstruct marriage links and identifying female children who are part of the invisible record. This information was gathered painstakingly from several sources, including British Foreign Office documents. Though incomplete and sketchy, the information is reasonably accurate since the writers had no conceivable purpose other than to inform themselves about family members of public personalities. I also added recent wives and children from living people during my residence in the country. Overall I collected a large amount of genealogical data covering two and in some cases three centuries. But inevitably there are gaps. Often, too, there are contradictions in published works, and outright mistakes that cannot be resolved at this time. I recognize my limitations in this respect and consider this a work in progress that others will correct and build upon.

The details of royal marriages have significance since marriage was and remains an important tool that rulers use to promote their political interests. One cannot of course be certain that a particular leader chose a specific bride for a specific political reason, but if he furthered his interests at the time, it is likely that a political motive existed. Almost certainly his constituents assumed it did. These connections are sufficiently important to risk being wrong occasionally, since little other information exists to reliably inform us about what local people were thinking.

A final difficulty in obtaining information is local sensitivity on two points, first, reluctance by Emiratis to discuss past animosities among groups, including murders, tribal conflicts, and disloyalties, and second, an aversion to naming female family members.[3] These sensitivities have several implications. First, information of this kind is difficult to collect from many people, especially males who are the most reluctant to divulge such information. Second, historians writing about the UAE often consciously avoid any but the most occasional mention of these subjects, downplaying the considerable role women played in the country's history. Finally, the element of privacy and courtesy in writers' reticence raises the question of how to present crucial information. Should one avoid mentioning unpleasant aspects of

tribal relations, such as the consequences to family branches that unsuccessfully challenged rulers? Should one omit naming women or the role they played in local politics? Would leaving out this information not support the myth that women are "invisible" in Arab society? In the end I concluded that the information in both cases is too important to omit, yet at the same time I regret any discomfort it causes Emiratis.[4]

A number of people have been helpful in answering questions about current and past ruling family members. I would like to acknowledge their assistance but due to the sensitivities mentioned above I will not include names. I want also to thank Rachel Navarre for help in computerizing the maps and genealogical trees, and the Middle East Institute for providing me with the status of Adjunct Scholar while I was completing the manuscript.

I do not pretend to know everything one would like to know about how political relationships work in the UAE—the culture is extremely and I believe intentionally, opaque and difficult to understand—but I do feel the time is ripe to publish the outlines of personal politics in this interesting region of the world. The definitive study will one day be written by an Emirati—but sensitivities are still such that it is too early for that to happen.

Note on usage and organization: I have simplified both the transliteration of Arab names and the use of titles. For the most part the shortest spellings are used that reasonably convey the Arabic sounds to an English reader. Thus "Nahayyan" becomes "Nahyan." "H" at the end of a word is dropped as in "Sharja" instead of "Sharjah," or "Fujaira" instead of "Fujairah." Rather than prefixing a title, such as "Shaikh" used in the UAE for male members of ruling families[5] to every mention of a ruler, as common politeness requires, I have often dropped the title. The term "ruler" did not technically apply to paramount leaders until the British recognized them as such. Therefore for much of the early period, the terms "paramount chief," "chief," "shaikh," and "leader" are more appropriate when referring to headmen of tribes. Even when "shaikh" became a common honorific for a ruler, there were still elders and ruling family members, even small boys of ruling families, addressed as "shaikh." The term has no real exclusionary meaning in the UAE but probably reveals what was once more true than now that chiefs were only "first among equals."

In naming people I have usually dropped the "*al*" meaning "the" to denote family or tribal collectivities. For simplicity I have also dropped the *"bin"* (son of) and *"bint"* (daughter of) that connects parts of names; for example Hussa bint Muhammad bin Khalifa becomes Hussa Muhammad Khalifa. Finally, for those not familiar with the way names are assigned in the Arabian peninsula, it is relatively simple to locate people on genealogical charts once full names are known since the names themselves give a full

account of a person's patrilineal descent. Thus Zaid Sultan Zaid I Khalifa is Zaid, son of Sultan, grandson of Zaid I, and great grandson of Khalifa. When it is useful for the sake of clarity to refer to a person by more than one of his or her names I have done so. All these shortcuts may raise the eyebrows of purists but I believe they will make for a more readable text.

I have also used anthropological abbreviations to designate the relationships of people when it is important in understanding the context. The abbreviations are straightforward and easy to decipher, for example MoBr is mother's brother, FaBrSo is father's brother's son. The designations are important since the quality of relations with paternal and maternal kin is expected to be different.

I have found no satisfactory way of talking about the people of the interior of Arabia when, as frequently happened, they influenced events in the Trucial States. They can only correctly be called Saudis during the two periods when the Saud family were rulers of the Nejd from 1745 to 1881 and after Abdul Aziz Saud regained the rule from the Rashidi clan in the early-twentieth century. British records frequently refer to the people of the interior as Wahhabis after the religious reformer Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–1787). His followers in collaboration with the House of Saud mounted military activities to spread religion and the political ambitions of the Saud family. I have used the terms of my sources, even though in certain periods they are technically incorrect.

The book is organized in three parts The first introduces the topics covered by the book, suggests the reasons it is important to study them in the UAE context, and describes the factors that in lieu of government institutions, shape political actions, including the economic and political contexts, and the local culture or worldview. Three models are presented that describe people's expectations about the conduct of personal relations—in the tribe, the family, and with "outsiders." Although the models are "real" at an abstract level, it is important to see how they are used in the political context.

The second part consists of case studies of individual emirates, describing their leaders' political behaviors over two centuries. Material has been selected (to the extent it is available) to show the relationships of the chiefs with their kin, their constituents, other leaders, and the British. The details in the tradition of anthropology serve as the data—in effect as a "village," where we can observe and extract from leaders' behavior, the patterns of political culture. Each case concludes with a discussion of how a particular emirate's experience adds to our knowledge of political culture. The third and final part of the book draws conclusions about political culture and tribal leadership in the UAE, and suggests how they may be understood in terms of prevailing models of personal relations.