National Identity in the UAE

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Series Introduction

In the past few years, many things have changed in the Gulf region. Oil prices have collapsed since mid-2014, the United States has redefined its policy towards the region and Turkey is emerging as the dominant power in the Middle East. Against this background, the aim of the UAE series of papers is to provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary understanding of how the country is responding and adapting to the new reality. The papers cover different aspects of the UAE such as the economy, demographics, society, technology, foreign policy and security.

Abstract

Over the past half century, a strong national identity has developed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), shaped by distinctive nationwide experiences of modernisation and transformation. This identity emerged first in the 1970s as UAE citizens reacted to the enormous changes wrought in the first decade of independence. By the early 2000s, an "Emirati" identity appeared, shaped by a new phase of the country's development and hyper-globalisation. At each stage, national identity has drawn from or reacted to local, pan-Arabist, Indian Ocean and khaleeji (Gulfi) networks and connections. This examination of Emirati national identity challenges several common tropes about the UAE and the Arab Gulf states.

V isitors and new expatriates in the United Arab Emirates often have a difficult time resolving an apparent paradox. Founded in 1971, the UAE is a rapidly developing nation with a hyper-modern architecture that in many places overwhelms any sense of belonging to an organic historical tradition. Yet the strength of an Emirati national identity is highly visible both in daily life and official discourse. Car parades at annual National Day celebrations attract raucous crowds, and thousands of Emiratis participate in heritage festivals — all voluntarily. In conversations with Emiratis, one can sense a genuine pride in national belonging.

This seeming paradox challenges the notion that national identity is rooted in stable ways of life with an immediately apparent connection to the past — an assumption this article aims to question. Only recently have scholars moved beyond the old tropes of understanding Emirati identities as shaped primarily by tribal origin or emirate of citizenship, as fundamentally dichotomous (i.e. modernity vs tradition), or as primarily transactional and dependent on wealth distribution by a rentier state.

The origins of Emirati national identity lie in the collective experience of modernisation in the late 20th-century UAE. This identity should be understood not as a fixed set of beliefs or symbols, but as a

constantly evolving conversation about what it means to be Emirati.[1] Over the 1970s, the new UAE saw the emergence of a political–legal term — *al-muwatin* or "the national" — as a category of both political–territorial space and personhood. Beginning in the late 1990s, "Emirati" gradually became the most common signifier of national identity. This article briefly traces the history of identities in the modern UAE and places them in their local, regional, and global contexts.

The Trucial States Between the Indian Ocean and the Arab Middle East

Prior to independence, the seven emirates that make up the UAE were under British protection, a status dating from 1819, when the British imposed maritime truces upon "pirates" from Gulf coastal towns.[2] These truces were eventually extended to land, giving the region its various names: Trucial States, Trucial Oman, Trucial Coast, or Trucial Sheikhdoms. In Arabic, the region was known as *Sahil Oman,* the Oman Coast. A British Political Resident settled disputes between various sheikhdoms but the British impact on daily life in the Trucial States was light. So too was the cultural impact of the Arab Middle East. While Arabic was always the primary language of the Trucial States, Arabism as a politicised identity emerged in the 1950s. Shortwave radio brought Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's speeches to the Gulf; many Trucial States' subjects worked in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, where they encountered Egyptians, Palestinians and other non-Gulf Arabs. Likewise, Egyptian and Palestinian teachers in the Trucial States brought Arab nationalist ideas with them. Popular demonstrations welcomed Arab League delegations to the Trucial States in 1964 and 1965, worrying the British diplomats stationed there. For the older generation of Emiratis and other Gulf Arabs, Nasser was a hero; even today, many streets and neighbourhoods in the UAE take their names from Arab nationalist icons.[3]

Yet a radical and exclusivist Arabism never took deep root in the Trucial States or UAE; the country's older ties to the Indian Ocean world and the Gulf littoral meant that Arabism did not reflect the lived experience of cosmopolitan Gulf societies. Coastal towns on the Arab and Iranian sides of the Gulf in some respects had more in common with each other than with their respective hinterlands, although these commonalities along the Gulf littoral did not take on a "national" character.[4] These *khaleeji* (Gulfi) networks extended in turn throughout the western Indian Ocean, as far as Zanzibar and Kerala, and also overland into present-day Oman; families left coastal towns during summer for the date harvest in inland oases, and inland villagers traded in coastal markets.[5] As a result, many Emirati citizens trace their ancestry to East Africa, South Asia, Balochistan, Oman, Yemen and Iran. Daily interactions and kinship ties with non-Arabs blunted Nasserism's appeal.

"Qiyam al-ittihad" — the Founding of the Federation

When the British withdrew from the Gulf in 1971, a federation of seven emirates was established, with Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi as president. Much ink has been spilt about the mechanics of keeping seven emirates together in a unified federation, the survival of which was doubted by many early

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[1] For another example of this dynamic in the Arab world, see James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9–10.
[2] The term "piracy" is contested in this context. See for example Sultan al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 1986).
[3] Talal Al-Rashoud, "Icon of Defiance and Hope: Gamal Abdel Nasser's Image in Gulf History", *Mada Masr*, 28 November 2020, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/11/28/opinion/u/icon-of-defiance-and-hope-gamal-abdel-nassers-image-in-gulf-history/
[4] William O Beeman, "An Anthropological View of the Khaleejis: their Evolution and Way of Life", in *The Persian Gulf in History,* ed. Lawrence G Potter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147–148; Frederick F Anscombe, "An Anational Society: Eastern Arabia in the Ottoman Period", in *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf,* ed. Madawi al-Rasheed (London: Routledge, 2005), 21–38.
[5] William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster, *Honour is in Contentment: Life Before Oil in Ras al-Khaimah and Some Neighboring Regions* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

observers. Furthermore, most commentary has been dominated by rentier theory — the idea that oil-funded patronage is the primary source of Gulf citizens' political allegiances. In its purest form, rentier theory claimed that the development of nationalist narratives would be unnecessary for rulers' political survival.[6] Nevertheless a new national identity took root fairly quickly over the next decade.

Political analyses of the UAE tend to emphasise divisions rather than commonalities between the emirates. In discussions of identity, this tendency obscures more than it illuminates. Early analytical frameworks took for granted that the emirates were discrete political entities, each with its own history, economy, and territorial identity.[7] In general, a tripartite division emerged: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and the five poorer "northern emirates".

From a grassroots perspective, however, the citizens of the new federation had much in common. While analysts focused on inter-emirate boundaries, for example, the Trucial States and surrounding regions were in fact tied together by dense networks of kinship and trade that crossed modern boundaries. Citizens of different emirates had similar (though unequal) experiences of modernisation.

The most powerful force behind the formation of a national identity in the UAE was the collective experience of modernisation. Emiratis usually call this *qiyam al-dawla (the founding of the state)* or *qiyam al-ittihad* (the founding of the federation), terms that are shorthand for the broader processes of transformation. The new state brought a national network of paved highways, suburban housing with electricity and plumbing, healthcare, education and salaried employment. The automobile became the main mode of transportation. Foreign workers arrived not only from the Indian Ocean littoral and Iran but also from other Arab countries and the West, bringing profound cultural changes and dislocations. English became the country's *lingua franca*. Worn previously by only a few, the white *kandoora* for men and black *abaya* for women became the standard "national dress" by the late 1970s, visually differentiating UAE citizens from the large foreign population. The social bonds developed in walkable, close-knit neighbourhoods (the *freej*) before *qiyam al-dawla* were strained as UAE nationals moved to government-built *sha'abiya* homes[8] in new suburbs built for automobiles. This process took place with astonishing speed from roughly the mid-1960s to the late 1970s.

Inequality and the Emergence of *Al-muwatin*

Early development in the UAE was profoundly unequal, and the first widespread popular expression of national identity was found in protests against that inequality in 1979. Abu Dhabi and Dubai boomed, and Sharjah showed great promise but the four northern emirates lagged. By the end of the decade, the north was deep in debt. Brownouts and blackouts were common and rural areas lagged in receiving electricity and modern plumbing. Inflation was severe. *Sha'abiya* houses would eventually become a nostalgic symbol of early modernisation but complaints about their slow distribution and poor construction were common in the 1970s.[9]

In early 1979, a constitutional dispute between the governments of Abu Dhabi and Dubai over the command structure of the UAE military touched off a public conversation about the degree to which the UAE state should be centralised under Abu Dhabi's leadership; or, conversely, whether each emirate should be able to pursue its own development trajectory, as Dubai wanted. Pan-Arabist members of the Federal

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[6] Giacomo Luciani, "Allocation vs Production States: A Theoretical Framework", in *The Rentier State,* ed. Giacomo Luciani and Hazem Beblawi (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 75.

[7] See, among others, Muhammad Morsy Abdullah, *The United Arab Emirates: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates: A Political and Social Survey of the Trucial States* (London: Macmillan, 1978); and K G Fenelon, *The United Arab Emirates: An Economic and Social Survey* (London: Longman, 1976).

[8] A *sha'abiya* or "folk" home was typically a minimalist structure comprised of a series of rooms built around a courtyard.

[9] Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Transformations: the Emirati National House", National Pavilion United Arab Emirates la Biennale di Venezia, 2016; Mohammed Al-Mansoori, "Government Low-Cost Housing Provision in the United Arab Emirates: The Example of the Federal Government Low-Cost Housing Programme" (PhD diss., University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1997).

National Council (the UAE's appointed parliament) and the Cabinet published a memorandum supporting the Abu Dhabi position.[10] The memorandum argued that the UAE's growing pains and inequalities could be traced to the lack of central planning, inefficient bureaucracy and continued divisions between emirates. It proposed the creation of a unitary administrative state, abolition of internal borders, and elimination of foreign influence in the UAE military, banking, oil and business sectors. A single budget and central bureaucracy, in its view, would enable the equal distribution of resources and benefits throughout the country based on the shared identity of UAE citizenship.

The memorandum stated that the citizen (*al-muwatin*) was to be developed intellectually, economically and politically, and that human development should be the cornerstone of the new nation; citizenship was to be both a legal status and a territorial national identity. But, true to its authors' pan-Arabist leanings, the memorandum did not specify any common UAE culture beyond a nod to membership in a broader Arab and Islamic world. This vagueness was matched by official state policies. From its founding, the UAE was ideologically oriented towards the Arab Middle East while retaining its commercial connections to the Indian Ocean world and Iran. It took a leading role in the Arab oil embargo of 1973–1974 and Sheikh Zayed regularly invoked pan-Arabist rhetoric; at the first anniversary of the UAE's founding he said, "We want a wider union", holding open the door for other states to join the federation.[11] Even two decades later, it was difficult to distinguish a particular UAE cultural identity from a broader Arab–Islamic identity.[12]

In March and April 1979, popular demonstrations took place across the UAE in support of the memorandum. Thousands marched, suggesting that the memorandum's critique of the UAE's modernisation was widely shared among UAE citizens who could be mobilised behind a vision of a unified state and shared national political identity.

Soon afterwards, a compromise between Abu Dhabi and Dubai was reached that maintained the constitutional status quo: the seven emirates would remain autonomous entities rather than be absorbed into a central government. Nonetheless, planning and policy has become more centralised over the subsequent decades. Dubai retains its independence as a quasi-city-state, although, in the wake of its bailout by Abu Dhabi in 2009, even that status has been somewhat diminished.

While the memorandum and marches themselves have been almost entirely forgotten by UAE citizens and residents, they signalled that a national identity had indeed taken root.

Globalisation and the Emergence of the *Emirati*

Sometime in the 1990s, a new word appeared — "Emirati". The word's exact origins are obscure, but by the 2010s "Emirati" came to connote a common UAE national identity and culture. "Emirati" is more territorially specific and less legalistic than *al-muwatin*. Its emergence coincides with the rise of a new generation born after *qiyam al-ittihad*, the passing of the founding generation of the UAE and of pan-Arabism in the region, and increasing centralisation of the state in Abu Dhabi's hands. All of this happened in the context of a development boom in the 2000s and 2010s as dramatic as that of the 1970s. Free trade zones and parastatal development corporations represented a new style of urban development, as Dubai and Abu Dhabi became global hubs for tourism and logistics.

During this period of hyper-globalisation, national processes of integration have further shaped Emirati identity. Since 2011, major infrastructure improvements in the north have virtually eliminated the earlier problems and dramatically improved access to jobs in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, making mobility between

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[10] The politics of the memorandum are discussed in Michael Herb, *The Wages of Oil: Parliaments and Economic Development in Kuwait and the UAE* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[11] *Al-Ittihad*, "Hadafna ittihad awsaʿ fi-l-mintaqa," 3 December 1972, 1.

[12] Sally Findlow, "The United Arab Emirates: Nationalism and Arab-Islamic Identity", Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2000.

the emirates much easier and safer. Emiratis moved from *sha'abiyat* to villas in newer and even more distant suburbs (with few foreign neighbours), replicating and magnifying the original move from the *freej* to the *sha'abiyat*. The new suburbs integrate citizens from different parts of a specific emirate; one's neighbours are not necessarily from the same village or extended family. The military, UAE University and public sector employment offices have, for decades, been "melting pot" spaces where Emiratis from around the country interact. Regional dialects have faded as a common accent has emerged. All of these factors have contributed to the emergence of a common Emirati public sphere.[13]

The Emirati Public Sphere

Globalisation has been accompanied by a booming interest in Emirati heritage. It is a mistake to imagine an Emirati identity divided between "modernity" and "tradition". Instead, it is more productive to think of these categories as two sides of the same coin — as concepts around which conversations about Emirati national identity can revolve.

As with other national identities, Emirati identity is contested and debated. These conversations take place on social media, in newspapers, in university classrooms, and anywhere else Emiratis meet, regardless of their emirate of origin — another reason why the older "Abu Dhabi vs. Dubai vs. the rest" framework is now outmoded, at least when describing grassroots discourse. Perhaps the only touchstone agreed upon by all is allegiance to the late Sheikh Zayed, the founder of the federation; Zayed's legacy is invoked to a variety of sometimes contradictory purposes but always serves to signify the speaker's allegiance to the Emirati nation. Among older generations especially, narratives of Emirati-ness in general and Zayed's life in particular, are informed by a deep sense of nostalgia for lost simplicity. This serves as a politically safe way to critique contemporary UAE society — whether rampant consumerism, loss of old lifeways, or the massive foreign population. Much energy is spent discussing proper behaviour in public spaces, especially when wearing the easily identifiable national dress around foreigners.[14] Marriage to foreigners remains a potent source of cultural anxiety; the *sunduq al-zawaj* (Marriage Fund) founded in 1992 aims to encourage Emiratis to marry other citizens and raise modern families.[15] Only recently has citizenship been offered to children of Emirati mothers and non-Emirati fathers. Some claim "pure Emirati" status to differentiate themselves from their fellow citizens whose ancestors migrated from places now outside UAE borders.[16] For them, national identity is territorial and exclusive, rejecting pan-Arabism, the cosmopolitanism of the pre-oil Gulf and Indian Ocean, and indeed anything outside UAE borders. For others, these broader histories offer a rich source from which to challenge exclusivist notions of Emirati-ness.

The UAE state puts much effort into promoting a common Emirati heritage, a difficult task, given the diversity of the citizen population. While there is a general sense that bedouin culture predominates in public representations of Emirati identity, state-sponsored heritage festivals have, over the past decade, become somewhat more inclusive. The popular Qasr al-Hosn Festival in Abu Dhabi is organised around four natural environments of the UAE — the desert, mountains, oases, and coast — and how people eked out a living in each region before *qiyam al-ittihad*. The overwhelming focus is on material culture, reinforcing the rags-to-riches modernisation narrative. Notably absent, however, are any mention of links with the non-Arab

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[13] Anna Zacharias, "UAE's Shehhi dialect at risk of disappearing, scholars say", *The National,* 17 May 2013, https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-s-shehhi-dialect-at-risk-of-disappearing-scholars-say-1.651911

[14] Martin Ledstrup, "Everyday Nationhood and Interaction in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah", *Journal of Arabian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017), 179–194.; Rana AlMutawa, "Glitzy' Malls and Coffee Shops: Everyday Places of Belonging and Social Contestation in Dubai", *Arab Studies Journal* 28, no. 2 (2020), 44–75.

[15] Paul Dresch, "Debates on Marriage and Nationality in the UAE", in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf,* eds. Paul Dresch and James Piscatori (New York: I B Tauris, 2013), 247; Samyah Alfoory, "The UAE's Thirty Year Battle against Out-Marriage: A Gendered National Project", 2014, https://www.academia.edu/19511459/The_UAEs_Thirty_Year_Battle_against_Out_Marriage_A_Gendered_National_Project.

[16] Jane Bristol-Rhys, *Emirati Women: Generations of Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 209–210.

world — which may speak to those of *ajam* (Persian), Baloch or African ancestry — or of any tribal names: state-sponsored heritage celebrations focus on the national. Tribal, local, and transnational histories, traditions and identities are largely preserved by families and local associations but there is little question that those individuals consider themselves Emirati. If anything, they tend to push against ideologies of "pure" Emirati identity and seek a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be a UAE national. But they do not seek to change or reform the state itself and in that sense, tribal and other subnational identities are depoliticised; the importance of the histories, traditions and identities they uphold lies primarily in the cultural sphere.

Conclusion

Although the 1979 memorandum and subsequent protests failed to achieve any constitutional reform, the memorandum authors' vision to some extent prevailed in the long run. Government functions became more centralised and resources are more equitably distributed than in the 1970s, although there is still progress to be made. A robust Emirati national identity has taken shape — celebrated, debated and shaped by ordinary citizens and the state alike.

About the Author

Dr Matthew MacLean is an independent scholar based in Brooklyn, New York.