

Sheikh Zayed

The Urbanized Arab Emirates

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A video records the late Sheikh Zayed, the first president of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, in his majlis talking to a group including Mohammed Khalifa Al Habtoor, then the speaker of the Federal National Council. I recall vividly watching that video, as I was a teenage student in Paris then. Sheikh Zayed, wearing his golden embroidered bisht, a sort of cape worn by the heads of tribes in the Gulf, was saying,

'I swear by God Almighty that I don't understand how there are [UAE citizens] in apartment buildings who are still renting. From Abu Dhabi, from Dubai, from Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah ... how is it possible that they are living in rented apartments? How does a ruler have the right to let a citizen live in rent? ... How many times have I asked you to write down who doesn't have anything ... who doesn't have any farmland, or real-estate or any other income ... to write their names down and give them to me. There are citizens with no farms and no real estate?!'

That was 1998. Today, nationals living in rental flats is a well-known phenomenon. Even the shared 'bachelor flats', more commonly associated with expatriates from developing countries, might also be homes to Emiratis. Oil reserves have not brought inordinate and immediate wealth to everyone. When Sheikh Zayed officially became President of the UAE in December 1971, there were 180,000 UAE inhabitants. That was a manageable number for distributing the new nation's newfound wealth. Of a total population of six million, UAE nationals today are said to make up 923,000, a figure many nationals believe is inflated. What is certain, however, is that many more Emiratis today live in an urban environment when they once lived in a rural environment.

More than a decade after Sheikh Zayed's surprise at learning that Emiratis are forced to live in rented accommodations, the urbanization of Emirati culture is only gaining momentum. More



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHT6Gqi-GJw&feature=related>

so than ever, Emiratis from the other emirates are forced to commute to the urban centers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Sixty years ago, Emiratis could live in poorer but self-sustaining communities dotted along the Gulf coast and further inland in the oases; now it is difficult for smaller settlements to offer the kinds of resources that the new, larger cities can. Emiratis attracted to jobs in Abu Dhabi and Dubai find themselves commuting for hours or living in rental flats during the week and seeing their families on weekends.

Abu Dhabi, now more than Dubai, stands to gain, or possibly lose the most from the continuing influx of foreigners searching for a better opportunities within its bounds. By learning from Dubai, the pioneering city in this regard, Abu Dhabi can employ a preemptive rather than reactive effort to preserve Emirati identity. There is the argument that by embracing globalization, Emirati culture can be preserved. It is too soon to tell if this is true. However, it is likely that as the emirate forecasts a population boom (mostly by foreign immigration) only parts of Emirati culture will survive in this rolling cultural experiment. It seems ironic that the city, presumably working so hard to provide a higher standard living for its people, is becoming so expensive that many of its inhabitants including Emirati nationals – those it says it is keen to protect the most – are forced to live outside it.