

SHEIKH SHAKHBUT AND THE GREAT DECLINE

Inheriting a powerful and prosperous sheikhdom, hegemony over their neighbours, and a strong relationship with their British protectors, the children and grandchildren of Sheikh Zayed bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan nonetheless dragged Abu Dhabi into a mire of internal discord, poverty, and isolation. Their capital, which began the twentieth century as the most populous settlement in the lower Gulf, soon descended into obscurity and what had once been a thriving economy became an increasingly marginalized backwater. Decades of successful expansionism were coming undone as the ruling family's authority shrank so much that it commanded little authority beyond the most historic of its ancestral homes. By the mid-1960s, long after their more progressive and commercially-minded Bani Yas relatives in Dubai and the Qawasim of Sharjah had assumed leading roles in regional affairs, residents of Abu Dhabi found themselves on the sidelines of both important Gulf-wide political developments and a massive economic boom prompted by the discovery and exploitation of some of the world's largest oil reserves. In some ways, the sheikhdom's economic downswing was inevitable given the precariousness of its pearling industry and the impact of international recession. But even with the arrival of oil wealth little improved, as the Al-Nahyan still lacked a forward-thinking leader capable of harnessing the new economic opportunities and overcoming the factionalism that threatened to tear the monarchy apart.

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The early successions

The many wives of Sheikh Zayed bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan—most of whom hailed from different Bani Yas sections or different tribes—underpinned the strength of his rule and the stability of Abu Dhabi during the nineteenth century. These marriage alliances served to appease previously hostile powers, often allowing the Al-Nahyan to wrest tribal loyalties away from other powers. They also provided Zayed with many sons: he had more than even the legendary Sheikh Shakhbut bin Diab Al-Nahyan.¹ Upon reaching maturity, these sons served as trusted lieutenants, often being deputized by Zayed and travelling on his behalf, thus extending his authority across scattered territories. After his death in 1909, however, the enormous hidden cost of having had such an extended family became apparent. With so many potential successors—most being only half brothers to each other and having grown up in separate households under different ‘maternal blocs’ backed by the tribe or family of their mothers’ fathers—the sons of Zayed were faced with dynastic crisis.

The obvious candidate to take control was Zayed’s eldest son, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. With his mother²—who was probably Zayed’s original wife³—being the daughter of the Manasir chief and considered to be Zayed’s ‘first lady,’⁴ and with he himself having taken a Manasir wife,⁵ Khalifa undoubtedly enjoyed strong maternal backing and a strong tribal pedigree with links to the Al-Nahyan’s longest serving allies. Moreover, his aforementioned role in returning the Qubaisat to Abu Dhabi and his help with founding new settlements at Buraimi added further legitimacy to his claim, as did earlier visits to Bahrain and Muscat in place of his father.⁶ He was duly encouraged by the Bani Yas elders to occupy the ruler’s fort, but unexpectedly—and tragically for the sheikhdom’s stability—he refused to succeed, perhaps having been discouraged by his mother and wife on the grounds of personal safety. After all, with the exception of his father, every ruler of Abu Dhabi since Isa bin Nahyan in the eighteenth century had either been killed in office or forcibly ousted.

The mantle of rulership was therefore passed down to Zayed’s second eldest son, Sheikh Tahnun bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. With a pure blooded Al-Nahyan mother⁷—the daughter of Zayed’s predecessor,

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Sheikh Said bin Tahnun Al-Nahyan—and with a Dhawahir wife, Tahnun enjoyed some legitimacy amongst his father's allies, but was soon considered a weak and ineffectual leader. Probably suffering from polio, he failed to sire any sons and died of ill health in 1912.⁸ The elders were again faced with a dilemma⁹ and approached Khalifa for a second time. With Khalifa resolute,¹⁰ Zayed's third and fourth sons were considered—Sheikhs Said and Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. Both were the offspring of an Al-Bu Falah wife, the daughter of one of Zayed's most trusted advisors.¹¹ Hamdan, the younger of the two full brothers was deemed more popular and was duly installed.

Although without valuable Manasir connections, Hamdan could nevertheless still call upon powerful Bani Yas relatives, as he had married the daughters of a leading member of the Suwdan section¹² and of a wealthy Dubai-based member of the Al-Bu Falasah section.¹³ Immediately after his succession he had also married Tahnun's widow, thereby bringing his line closer to the Dhawahir.¹⁴ In some ways Hamdan's rule was successful, as he managed to solve a number of territorial disputes including a conflict between a number of small Hinawi tribes¹⁵ and the Al-Bu Shamis (Al-Shamsi) section of the Ghafiri Naim tribe. He also forged a useful alliance with the Al-Mualla rulers of Umm al-Qawain, but wisely refrained from joining them in an attack on Sharjah that would have incurred the wrath of Britain and likely drawn Abu Dhabi into a prolonged tribal war.¹⁶ By the early 1920s however, he was struggling. Having supported and harboured two exiled, conspiratorial cousins of the increasingly powerful Wahhabi ruler, Abdul-Aziz bin Saud Al-Saud,¹⁷ he had increased the threat of renewed Wahhabi invasion and had broken the 1892 agreements that had guaranteed Britain exclusive control over all foreign affairs. Although a crisis was averted, following the arrival of a British warship that pressured Hamdan into expelling the fugitives,¹⁸ he had by this stage also begun to face strong domestic opposition to his economic policies. Heavily criticized by his younger brothers for not paying out sufficient subsidies to either themselves or the Al-Nahyan's key allies,¹⁹ and resented by Abu Dhabi-based merchants for having raised taxes, Hamdan was backed into a corner. Many of his subjects left the sheikhdom, and although he visited them in person and persuaded them to return, they remained disgruntled.²⁰ With the pearling

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industry having been in steady decline ever since the First World War and with the subsequent fall in international demand, there was little else Hamdan could do to ameliorate the situation.

The fratricides

In 1922 three of Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan's younger brothers—including two full brothers, Sheikhs Hazza and Sultan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, and a half brother, Sheikh Saqr bin Zayed Al-Nahyan—conspired to overthrow him. Sultan, who had emerged as the most powerful of the three, murdered Hamdan with the direct assistance of Saqr, and seized control of the ruler's fort.²¹ Perhaps encouraged by materialistic wives,²² the two usurpers raided the treasury only to be disappointed to find Hamdan's coffers almost empty.²³ Despite the atrocity, Sultan was able to garner some support.²⁴ Hamdan's family posed no further threat, having already fled to Dubai to join their maternal Al-Bu Falasah relatives.²⁵ Moreover, Abu Dhabi residents were keen for a change in leadership given their economic circumstances, and Sultan had gained reluctant approval for his succession from Khalifa—his non-ruling eldest brother.²⁶ Many also had respect for Sultan's earlier marriage to a daughter of the Qubaisat: this was thought to symbolize the full re-integration of the previously secessionist section into Abu Dhabi politics. Indeed, Sultan's wife—Sheikha Salama bint Buti Al-Qubaisi—soon became regarded as an astute *eminence grise*.²⁷

Within a year, Sultan was already in difficulty. The region-wide pearling recession was deepening and he had no way of raising the additional revenues needed to restore former subsidies. Opposition within the family increased,²⁸ and in 1926 his earlier co-conspirator, Saqr, seized an opportunity to shoot both Sultan and one of his sons—Sheikh Khalid bin Sultan Al-Nahyan—after a large family dinner. Khalid was wounded and managed to escape to his Qubaisat relatives, but Sultan—who had been hit in the back—died.²⁹ Having killed two of his siblings, Saqr was disreputable, and many considered him to be something of an outsider given that his mother was from the Al-Bu Falasah and the maternal side of his family dwelt in Dubai.³⁰ To make matters worse, in his state of weakened legitimacy,

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he invited foreign interference in Abu Dhabi's affairs by offering tributes to Wahhabi agents in return for support.³¹ This was the first time an Al-Nahyan ruler had paid the Wahhabis since the reign of Sheikh Said bin Tahnun Al-Nahyan in the 1840s.

Disgusted by his fratricidal younger siblings, this was the point when Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan decided finally to intervene in politics. Khalifa was pressed into action sooner than expected: in 1927 he uncovered a Saqr-engineered plot to have both himself, his only son—Sheikh Muhammad bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan,³² and Sultan's second eldest son—Sheikh Hazza bin Sultan Al-Nahyan,³³ assassinated. He quickly formed a secret pact against Saqr that included members of the Al-Bu Shaar (Al-Shaari) section of the Manasir³⁴ and even Saqr's disillusioned youngest son, Sheikh Muhammad bin Saqr Al-Nahyan. Employing a Baluchi-origin servant from Sultan's remaining household staff, the group ordered Saqr's assassination to take place on New Year's Day, 1928.³⁵ Although this attempt was unsuccessful, with Saqr managing to escape, the Al-Bu Shaar later caught up with him and executed him.³⁶

Khalifa accepted full responsibility for the latest killing³⁷ and banished Saqr's children from Abu Dhabi.³⁸ With Khalifa's wife reluctant to have their son appointed ruler for the same reasons that she had discouraged her husband from succeeding in 1909, Khalifa nevertheless installed Muhammad bin Khalifa as a temporary caretaker in the ruler's fort and backed him with a powerful contingent of Manasir. Deciding to restore Sultan's bloodline, of which Muhammad had promptly married into by taking Sultan's daughter as a wife,³⁹ Khalifa proceeded to contact the exiled sons of Sultan. The third of these, Khalid, had sought sanctuary immediately after his father's death in the interior, under the protection of the sheikh of Al-Ihsa.⁴⁰ While the two eldest and the youngest—Sheikhs Shakhbut, Hazza, and Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan respectively—had fortuitously left Abu Dhabi ten days before the killing⁴¹ and were being sheltered in Buraimi by their grandfather's elderly wali: Ahmad bin Muhammad Al-Dhaheiri.⁴²

Many of the Bani Yas elders, including those of the influential Suwdan section, pressed Khalifa to appoint Hazza, believing him to be the most capable candidate.⁴³ The British appeared to favour the simpler

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customs of primogeniture, perhaps in reaction to the bloody episodes of the past six years.⁴⁴ Leaning towards this second option, Khalifa's secretary wrote to the older Shakhbut and encouraged him to return to Abu Dhabi and take over from Muhammad.⁴⁵ After being installed in the fort, Shakhbut's succession went smoothly and was followed by his three brothers swearing an oath of fidelity to their still influential mother, Salama. They promised to support Shakhbut and never resort to fratricide.⁴⁶ Britain then backed this by issuing a public statement that killing one's brother was ungodly and that the Political Resident would gladly assist the trucial rulers in bringing such activities to an end.⁴⁷ Much to the population's relief, the length of Shakhbut's ensuing reign was to bring at least some degree of political stability to Abu Dhabi—at least on the surface. However, as opportunities eventually turned to threats he soon began to make enemies.

Sheikh Shakhbut's opportunities

Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al-Nahyan had inherited all of the economic problems that his father and uncles had tried to grapple with before him. The decline in pearling that had begun during Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al-Nahyan's tenure had continued unabated. And by the mid-1930s, with a full-scale global depression and a looming Second World War likely to involve most of the first world pearl-purchasing economies, the industry had all but closed down. Exacerbating the problem and preventing any future resuscitation of the activity was an increase in international competitors and their implementation of techniques and technologies not available to Abu Dhabi's merchants.⁴⁸ Sheikh Zayed bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan may have managed to survive the described economic isolation first imposed on the lower Gulf by the British in the 1890s, but at that time conditions were far more forgiving. Shakhbut's merchants, in contrast, had to contend with Mediterranean pearlers who had access to bleaching and drilling equipment to produce better-looking specimens,⁴⁹ and Japanese pearlers who had begun to develop pearl farms in order to harvest large quantities of cultured pearls at a low cost.⁵⁰ The situation became so bad that Gulf pearling crews often returned home to find either no merchants waiting for them or to be offered very low pric-

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es.⁵¹ Soon, pearling expeditions ceased completely, as most had previously been financed by merchants who took loans from Indian moneylenders—the former of which had fallen into heavy debt by this stage while the latter had mostly left Abu Dhabi or were charging prohibitively high interest rates.⁵² By the end of the Second World War the British estimated the trade to be worth less than one tenth of its value before the 1920s.⁵³

In parallel to these developments, there was also considerable frustration over Abu Dhabi's failure to negotiate air landing rights with Britain. Unlike the pearling downswing, this was something that Shakhbut could have done something about, and such an income stream would have softened the impact of recession. With longer range aircraft and new air routes between Europe and India,⁵⁴ Britain's Imperial Airways sought to add to its existing facilities in Oman,⁵⁵ and the towns of the lower Gulf were well positioned to serve as alternative refuelling bases.⁵⁶ With the exception of Abu Dhabi's Bani Yas island—which was used by the British only for emergency landings⁵⁷ and paid Shakhbut a very small rent⁵⁸—almost all of the region's air landing revenue had been secured by Sharjah and Dubai. Since 1930 the ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr Al-Qasimi, had been receiving 500 rupees per month and a further five rupees for every aircraft that landed.⁵⁹ Likewise, in 1937 Sheikh Said bin Maktum Al-Maktum of Dubai had arranged for Imperial Airways to land flying boats on the Dubai creek⁶⁰ in return an annual fee of 5000 rupees.⁶¹

Similarly, by the late 1930s there had been concern that Shakhbut was not moving quickly enough to secure oil exploration concessions. Although he had no real option other than to sign with Petroleum Concessions Ltd.—a subsidiary of the British-backed Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC)⁶²—given the ongoing British restrictions on foreign relations,⁶³ other rulers nevertheless wasted no time in extracting substantial rent from the IPC.⁶⁴ At least some of this was being channelled into developing their sheikhdoms, often by installing basic infrastructure, while nothing was happening in Abu Dhabi. Notably in 1937 the ruler of Dubai had concluded a twenty-five year deal that gave him 60,000 rupees upon signing followed by an annual income of 30,000 rupees. A massive 200,000 rupees would then be paid upon discovery.⁶⁵

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In 1939, the mood in Abu Dhabi changed. Shakhbut finally met with the IPC and agreed to a seventy-five year concession.⁶⁶ Given the relatively large size of the sheikhdom, he was given a much greater signing up fee of 300,000 rupees, and then began to receive an annual income of 115,000 rupees. In 1950—with Britain having relaxed some of its exclusivity restrictions⁶⁷—Shakhbut followed this up with a concession with the Superior Oil Company of California that provided him with a signing on fee of 1.5 million rupees and an annual income of one million rupees until oil was discovered.⁶⁸ And in 1953 he signed a similarly lucrative deal with the D'Arcy Exploration Company⁶⁹ to set up the Abu Dhabi Marine Areas Company (ADMA) to explore for offshore oil.⁷⁰ Throughout this period Abu Dhabi's residents were optimistic that this enormous new stream of wealth would soon elevate their sheikhdom from its bankruptcy and poverty. Indeed, there were some glimmers of hope. In 1952 Shakhbut had financed the building of a bridge at Maqta to link Abu Dhabi to the mainland,⁷¹ and by 1962 he had constructed two desalination plants and a power station.⁷² As a further improvement to the sheikhdom's water supply he built a pipeline from Buraimi to Abu Dhabi, although in many ways he was fortunate that this was a success, as he had refused to pay for a geological survey.⁷³ In 1965, much to Britain's delight, he also set up an Abu Dhabi Defence Force. Unlike the British-officered Trucial Oman Scouts that had been established in 1956 to provide protection for the oil companies,⁷⁴ this new force would be entirely funded by Shakhbut.⁷⁵

Sheikh Shakhbut's troubles

Despite these massive oil-related revenues and Abu Dhabi's huge potential, it soon became apparent that the early optimism was misplaced. For several reasons Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al-Nahyan was reluctant to spend. He had lived through the recessions of the 1920s and 1930s and favoured thriftiness on the grounds that he would be more capable of offsetting any future economic decline. Prophetically perhaps, he also feared that any rapid oil-financed development would have far-reaching socio-cultural consequences for Abu Dhabi, predicting that the resulting changes would soon erode the

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traditional way of life. With this line of thinking he was, however, in the minority. Consequently the final fifteen years of his reign were dominated by a pitched struggle between his own conservatism, the more adventurous members of his family, and what remained of the sheikhdom's business class.

In the early 1950s Shakhbut had banned all new construction, including roads, and he required prospective builders to seek his permission—which was rarely forthcoming.⁷⁶ Moreover, reminiscent of his nineteenth-century predecessors—who often prevented their subjects from building stone houses lest they became independent forts⁷⁷—he blocked the importation of construction materials. Although for his personal benefit he spent money on expanding the ruler's fort,⁷⁸ and his house was the only residence in Abu Dhabi to benefit from air-conditioning.⁷⁹ At about this time he also began to obstruct the entry of foreign merchants. When the Bahraini entrepreneur Muhammad Kanoo visited Shakhbut in 1958, Kanoo was deliberately kept waiting before eventually being pressed for an enormous 20 percent share of all profits.⁸⁰ In contrast the rulers of Dubai and Sharjah quickly developed mutually beneficial arrangements with the reputable and experienced Kanoo Group.⁸¹ Shakhbut's protectionism even extended to merchants from other trucial sheikhdoms. At one point, only a couple of Dubai-based businesses were allowed to open branches in Abu Dhabi each year, and even these were charged 'entrance fees.'⁸² It would seem that Shakhbut had earlier caught members of his own merchant community in correspondence with their Dubai counterparts, and he feared this would lead to external interference in Abu Dhabi's affairs.⁸³

Shakhbut also had a strong distrust of banks and modern accounting. Dubai and Sharjah had been hosting banks since the 1940s,⁸⁴ and Britain put pressure on Abu Dhabi to do the same. However, when a Dubai-based team from the British Bank of the Middle East (BBME) was finally granted permission to visit Abu Dhabi in 1958, Shakhbut reportedly refused to sign any of the contracts that had been drawn up and 'exasperated all concerned.'⁸⁵ Although—after a year of further negotiations—a branch was finally opened in Abu Dhabi and Shakhbut accepted the services of a personal financial advisor,⁸⁶ it soon became clear that the bank's methods were not understood by the

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ruler. On one occasion he had ordered a large consignment of rifles and an electricity generator, and had taken out a loan to pay for them. But when BBME officials oversaw the delivery they soon realized that Shakhbut had no intention of actually honoring any of the payments. He did not appreciate the concept of a loan and had assumed that the goods were to be a personal gift from Britain. When confronted, Shakhbut accused the officials of trying to steal money from him, and then blamed and fired his financial advisor. Only following the intervention of the British agent was Shakhbut persuaded to at least pay for the generator, if not the rifles. It was felt that unless such a compromise was reached then Shakhbut would have definitely expelled all BBME personnel from Abu Dhabi.⁸⁷

Equally worrying for the sheikhdom's merchants and other residents was Shakhbut's opposition to the establishment of a proper municipality office in Abu Dhabi. Again, such an office for basic record-keeping and town management had existed in Dubai and Sharjah for years. In 1959 a Dubai national employee of the BBME⁸⁸ was asked by the British to help Shakhbut's youngest son, Sheikh Sultan bin Shakhbut Al-Nahyan, to set one up. When Shakhbut visited the site of this much-needed development he reportedly became so suspicious of all the written records he saw that he ordered the two men to purchase petrol from the souq and burn the office down, and never to open it again.⁸⁹ He also ordered that maps of Abu Dhabi were not to be produced, or if they were, then they were to feature no English. This made it difficult for the standardization of place names and indeed for the safe movement of visitors around the sheikhdom.⁹⁰

Thus, by the mid-1960s, with ever greater numbers of oil company personnel arriving in Abu Dhabi, neither the town nor its merchants were able to capitalize on the situation as they lacked both the basic physical infrastructure and the necessary financial and commercial organization. A second power station project had been initiated due to chronic energy shortages in the sheikhdom, but remained incomplete on account of Shakhbut's reluctance to continue funding it.⁹¹ And although the IPC was permitted to construct another desalination plant, the labour contract had to be awarded to a Dubai-based company, given the lack of basic equipment in Abu Dhabi.⁹² Indeed,

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the oil companies had to purchase the bulk of their supplies in Dubai and then transport them to Abu Dhabi or its outlying islands.⁹³ British firms alone were thought to be losing 1,000 pounds sterling a month due to Abu Dhabi's inactive economy.⁹⁴ As a prominent businessman recalls, this was incredibly frustrating, especially when the exploration companies arriving in Abu Dhabi had to source their goods from elsewhere: '...the people of Abu Dhabi could see them importing cars, trucks, materials, and equipment but since nothing was being bought here, there was no benefit to the local economy. The local merchants could not provide the needed products and services nor could they accommodate the increasing number of oil workers because they lacked capital and were forbidden from building anything.'⁹⁵

Disgracefully, Abu Dhabi was also lagging far behind its neighbours in basic social services. More than a decade after Shakhbut had signed the first concessions there was still no formal education system in the sheikhdom, thus delaying the emergence of a skilled indigenous population that could participate in the new industries. Shakhbut was scathing of the schools that had opened up in the other sheikhdoms, believing them to create unnecessary problems. In the early 1950s, when approached by the new ruler of Sharjah—Sheikh Saqr bin Sultan Al-Qasimi—for advice on how to settle a dispute concerning whether or not the sons of an exiled man should be permitted to remain in a Sharjah school, Shakhbut bragged that such a complication would never arise in Abu Dhabi because there was not even a single school.⁹⁶ Although Shakhbut eventually agreed to open a small school in 1958—Al-Falahia School—its administrators immediately encountered another problem: their ruler refused to employ foreign teachers or to accept the same Kuwaiti and other Arab curricula and teaching materials that had been offered to and used by the schools in Dubai and Sharjah.⁹⁷ At this stage there were only a handful of Abu Dhabi men who could qualify as teachers and no textbooks were available, so Al-Falahia had to close the following year.⁹⁸ Even when it reopened in 1961—along with another school in Al-Bateen—the new teachers were only allowed to teach subjects that related directly to Abu Dhabi, and no international history or geography lessons took place.⁹⁹

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Perhaps most tragically, Shakhbut also remained uninterested in introducing any kind of modern healthcare provision for his people. When a team of doctors arrived at Britain's behest from India in 1956, their suggestion of opening a new hospital in Abu Dhabi came to nothing.¹⁰⁰ And incredibly—after Britain had eventually forced the issue and dispatched the necessary construction materials for a new hospital in 1962—the packing cases remained untouched on the beaches for the best part of a year.¹⁰¹ Incongruously, although probably unbeknownst to most of his subjects at the time, during this period Shakhbut's sons and daughters were paid to travel to India for medical consultations,¹⁰² British doctors were flown in to treat Sheikha Salama bint Buti Al-Qubaisi—his elderly mother,¹⁰³ and he himself went to the United States to have treatment for an eye condition.¹⁰⁴ And a little later, while on a visit to Jordan he had donated over £700,000 for various projects, most of them healthcare-related—more than had ever been spent on social services in Abu Dhabi.¹⁰⁵

In terms of region-wide cooperation, by the early 1960s Shakhbut's miserliness was also impacting on Abu Dhabi's relations with its neighbors. A proposal for Abu Dhabi to join a trucial postal system was immediately vetoed by Shakhbut, despite being favoured by all of the other rulers and seemingly without disadvantages.¹⁰⁶ Most controversially for the merchant community, an offer in 1966 from Dubai and Qatar for Abu Dhabi to join their new joint currency—the riyal—was also rejected, even though it would have undoubtedly facilitated trade between the three sheikhdoms.¹⁰⁷ Instead Shakhbut preferred to replace the rupees and talas that had been circulating in Abu Dhabi with Bahraini dinars, even though Bahrain could offer no meaningful currency cooperation.¹⁰⁸

This track record of obstinacy greatly harmed Abu Dhabi's standing with Britain, which had understandably begun to channel its resources into those sheikhdoms where they would be most welcomed and most properly harnessed. Since 1952 there had existed a Trucial States Council presided over by the British agent in Sharjah which, among other responsibilities, supervised the aforementioned Trucial Oman Scouts.¹⁰⁹ By the early 1960s, with Britain increasingly keen to foster a greater sense of community amongst the trucial sheikhdoms in the eventuality that the declining British Empire would someday need to

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withdraw from the Gulf, the chairmanship of the Council was allowed to rotate amongst the rulers and a Trucial States Development Fund was established.¹¹⁰ Predictably, when the Council's first five year plan for allocating this fund was announced in 1961, very little was earmarked for Abu Dhabi. In contrast Dubai, Sharjah, and Ra's al-Khaimah were assisted in setting up agricultural trials stations, touring doctor services, and scholarship schemes for students to study abroad.¹¹¹ Britain tried again and again to bring Abu Dhabi closer to the Council, but often Shakhbut failed to attend its scheduled meetings, or if he did he would remain obstreperous. The British agent even admitted that 'with Shakhbut present in meetings it is impossible to get many progressive ideas debated as he continually says that things are alright as they are now.'¹¹² Believing that Shakhbut could be made to feel more of a stakeholder if Abu Dhabi were a contributor to the development fund, Britain encouraged him to allocate at least some of his oil concession wealth to the project. But again cooperation was unforthcoming, with Shakhbut only agreeing to supply four percent of the fund's budget.¹¹³ Nevertheless, at least this was something, and British administrators soon realized the irony of the situation: Shakhbut's meager contribution to the fund was still much more than he was spending on his own sheikhdom's development. Therefore the poorer sheikhdoms began to benefit from Abu Dhabi's potential oil wealth much earlier than Abu Dhabi's own population.¹¹⁴

Dissatisfaction and emigration

Unsurprisingly, Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al-Nahyan's reign was increasingly undermined by emigration. Immediately after his succession a number of Bani Yas families—including those from the Sudan section who had hoped for Sheikh Hazza bin Sultan Al-Nahyan to become ruler—left Abu Dhabi and settled in Qatar.¹¹⁵ Throughout the 1930s and the Second World War many more families departed, often simply to escape the difficult conditions of the recession.¹¹⁶ But, unforgivably for Shakhbut, even during the early years of Abu Dhabi's oil boom the sheikhdom's population continued to shrink. As more and more residents realized that their ruler's attitudes were preventing any real prospect of economic recovery, they opted to move to those

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towns that were already prospering under much more astute leadership. Moreover, it was not only economic concerns that prompted these departures. Many were also appalled by some of the political views being expressed by Shakhbut and his brothers.

Since the early 1950s, and especially following the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, Arab nationalist sentiments had been filtering into the lower Gulf.¹¹⁷ Spreading most rapidly through the region's schools, most of which were populated by expatriate Arab teachers—many of whom were Egyptian, Iraqi, or Syrian—such views soon began to take hold amongst the indigenous population.¹¹⁸ If anything, the rulers of Sharjah and Ra's al-Khaimah embraced Arab nationalism: even if it risked their ultimate demise as traditional monarchs, a closer association with the Jamal Abdul Nasser administration and the Arab League was thought to offer an escape route for the Qawasim sheikhdoms from centuries of British control and humiliation. They accepted Arab League seed money, allowed Egyptian agents to enter,¹¹⁹ and even set up an Egyptian educational office.¹²⁰ The reaction in Dubai was more subdued, as the Al-Maktum family unquestionably continued to benefit from Britain's presence—both politically and economically. Nevertheless, since 1953 there had been an active 'National Front' of sympathizers in Dubai,¹²¹ and although they were at times a considerable nuisance to the new ruler¹²²—Sheikh Rashid bin Said Al-Maktum—they were tolerated and eventually co-opted.¹²³ Conversely, in Abu Dhabi Shakhbut's citizens were discouraged from even discussing Arab nationalism. This was a cause for concern for the Political Resident who believed Shakhbut's stance was becoming dangerous: the latter needed to allow his people to at least feel involved in the politics of the wider Arab world. While the Resident had few doubts that the Al-Maktum family also wished for the demise of Nasser's movement,¹²⁴ at least they were not quite as brazen as the Al-Nahyan. He reported to London that the 'rulers of Abu Dhabi clearly welcomed Britain's intervention in Suez, and were hoping that Nasser would be taught a lesson and removed completely.' It was also reported that Shakhbut's youngest brother—Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan—had remarked to the British agent that 'Britain should do to Cairo what the Russians have done to Budapest.'¹²⁵

These economic and political grievances, which were often combined with a personal quarrel with Shakhbut, cost Abu Dhabi some

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of its most notable families. In the 1950s a number of the Mazari (Al-Mazrui) Bani Yas section departed for Dubai,¹²⁶ while many from the Qubaisat and Rumaithat sections moved to Qatar.¹²⁷ In the mid-1960s about one hundred disgruntled Dhawahir opted to live under King Faisal bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud.¹²⁸ Another great loss to the sheikhdom was the astute Mani bin Otaibah Al-Murur from the Marar section¹²⁹—one of Abu Dhabi's most distinguished figures. The capital's population was thought to have contracted to just 4,000, with only eight small retailers left in the souqs.¹³⁰ And the population of the entire sheikhdom was thought to number less than 17,000.¹³¹

Instability and Saudi-Wahhabi interference

Even in the diaspora communities, many remained committed to returning to Abu Dhabi. For this to happen, Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al-Nahyan needed to be overthrown, or at least sidelined by a more energetic relative. The first public challenge came in the 1930s—somewhat unexpectedly—from the ostracized sons of the deceased Sheikh Saqr bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. After Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan had expelled them from Abu Dhabi in 1928, Saqr's offspring had moved with their families to Dubai, where they lived in ignominy with their Al-Bu Falasah grandmother.¹³² Mindful of the influence that marriages had played during the fratricides, Shakhbut had then ensured that none of Saqr's five sons could marry back into the Al-Nahyan bloodline,¹³³ and insisted that no Al-Nahyan boys took the name 'Saqr.' He also ordered that any of Saqr's relatives who did visit the capital had to leave before sunset.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, in 1938, the eldest and third eldest of Saqr's sons—Sheikhs Diab and Zayed bin Saqr Al-Nahyan—moved to Bahrain, where they established contact with agents of Abu Dhabi's historic Wahhabi rivals in an effort to launch a coup against Shakhbut.¹³⁵

Although the plotters failed to win full support, by the early 1950s they were in a much stronger position, courtesy of a renewed Wahhabi interest in the lower Gulf. By this stage under the overlordship of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and backed by the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO)—the operating company of Saudi's American oil concession holders: Standard Oil of California and the Texas Oil

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Company—the Saudi-Wahhabis hoped to end permanently Al-Nahyan sovereignty over the disputed Buraimi settlements and at the same time extend the territory of their concession. Undoubtedly, they were catalyzed by reports that Britain's Iraqi Petroleum Company had begun prospecting close to Buraimi, thus raising expectations that there was a major onshore oilfield in the vicinity. A 'lost' Saudi exploration party on the border with Abu Dhabi was encountered in 1948,¹³⁶ and in late 1952, following a failed peace conference in Dammam, the situation deteriorated further. Saudi Arabia's Turki bin Utaishan arrived in Hamasa—one of the Buraimi villages that had remained on the periphery of Sheikh Zayed bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan's increasing influence in the 1890s. Turki brought with him an armed force of forty soldiers in addition to money, food, and presents for the local notables.¹³⁷ Proceeding to marry the daughter of the chief of the Al-Bu Shamis section of the Naim,¹³⁸ he then proclaimed himself governor of Buraimi.¹³⁹ Although Britain's Trucial Oman Levies—the predecessors of the Trucial Oman Scouts—were deployed and the trespassers were expelled, with Turki being shot by a British officer,¹⁴⁰ the situation remained tense.

In 1954, Saudi Arabia altered its strategy and began to pursue legal action, having astutely co-opted the sons of Saqr and other disgruntled families for its purposes. ARAMCO's research department in Dhahran had been compiling a history of tax payments in the lower Gulf, with the intention of proving that for much of the nineteenth century the residents of Buraimi had been in tributary relations with Wahhabi agents.¹⁴¹ Shakhbut and the British soon realized that Saudi Arabia was also bribing several of the tribes in Buraimi, and had managed to gain an oath of loyalty from twenty-eight tribal leaders.¹⁴² These even included members of two sections of the Al-Nahyan's long-serving Manasir allies—the Al-Bu Mundir¹⁴³ and the Al-Bu Rahmah¹⁴⁴ (Al-Mundiri and Al-Rahmi)—who were concerned that Shakhbut had stopped distributing the subsidies and gifts they were accustomed to.¹⁴⁵ Diab and Zayed bin Saqr—both still in Bahrain—were then asked to present evidence in favour of Saudi Arabia to international investigators, and were rewarded with funds to carry out Shakhbut's assassination.¹⁴⁶ Fortunately for Shakhbut the plot failed on both counts. When the tribunal was held in Switzerland later that

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year,¹⁴⁷ Abu Dhabi found broad support, and although Saudi Arabia was permitted to install a police post in Buraimi, it survived less than a year.¹⁴⁸ Similarly unsuccessful with their attempted coup, Diab and Zayed failed to find sufficient accomplices in Abu Dhabi.¹⁴⁹ Their anticipated Manasir support failed to materialize, with the Al-Bu Mundir chief actually betraying their intentions to Shakhbut.¹⁵⁰ With little choice but to resume their exile, they fled to Saudi Arabia.¹⁵¹

Family pressure and dynastic discord

Although surviving these hazardous external challenges to his authority, the latter years of Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al-Nahyan's reign were if anything even more unstable, with new threats beginning to emerge from within the inner sanctum of his family. By 1960 Shakhbut's extreme parsimoniousness had led him to cut back on the personal allowances given to key Al-Nahyan figures. Foolishly this retrenchment extended to influential relatives of Sheikh Muhammad bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan, who had held the fort for him in 1928, and even to Shakhbut's two surviving brothers, Sheikhs Khalid and Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan (Sheikh Hazza bin Sultan Al-Nahyan having died in 1958).¹⁵² Only following their mother's personal intervention were the allowances restored,¹⁵³ but even this was deemed an insufficient gesture as the payments were not enough to keep up with his siblings' legitimate expenses. In particular, Zayed, who had been serving as Shakhbut's wali in Buraimi since taking over the position from Ibrahim bin Uthman in 1946, complained that he was unable to meet his daily costs—including the vital provision of subsidies to local tribal chiefs—and therefore had to rely on gifts from their mother's Qubaisat family.¹⁵⁴

Conceivably unable to find any alternative solution, and remaining adamant that he did not actively seek to oust Shakhbut, Zayed began a low intensity campaign to undermine privately his brother's credibility in front of the still powerful British agent. While the official and semi-official histories¹⁵⁵ of this episode tend to depict Zayed as merely seeking a way to help Shakhbut, it is also possible to interpret his conversations as being subtle suggestions that he was a capable yet peaceful ruler-in-waiting who was backed by the whole of his family

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and would be far more compatible with British interests than his predecessor. In 1962 Zayed had candidly discussed his difficulties with the agent, who then reported back to the Political Resident¹⁵⁶ that 'he [Zayed] was consistently bitter about Shakhbut, and openly so... he said that his brother has set his mind absolutely against development plans.'¹⁵⁷ In a separate conversation that same year with an employee of the agent, Zayed had then related an entire argument he had had with Shakhbut during which he had told his brother that 'under your rule there is complete chaos, and as you are unwilling, at any time, to take advice, the only alternative is to leave things in your hands.'¹⁵⁸ Significantly perhaps, Zayed afterwards asked the employee to relate the content of their conversation to the agent.¹⁵⁹

In yet another of these frank conversations with agency staff, Zayed had shared details of more of the quarrels that had taken place between himself and Shakhbut. Zayed claimed he had told his brother that 'if you are sincere in your desire to work for the people in the state, you should not only seek but also take the advice of the [British] agent,' before Shakhbut then criticized him for spending money on irrigation and agricultural projects in Buraimi. Zayed then recounted the rather troubling statement made by his brother that if he [Shakhbut] were to prepare a budget for development it would mean that 'the people would be aware of the ruler's income, which would be very shameful and could not be countenanced.'¹⁶⁰

More seriously, during a personal meeting with the British agent in mid-1966 Zayed described an incident in which he—together with Khalid and Muhammad—had collectively pressed Shakhbut once more about setting up a proper budget, but that Shakhbut had then accused them of forming a league against him. This conversation no doubt gave the impression that the whole Al-Nahyan family was united against Shakhbut.¹⁶¹ In the summer of that year Zayed travelled to London, ostensibly to seek medical treatment for one of his sons. But while he was there he also met with Foreign Office officials. Although a transcript of the contents of this meeting does not exist, it has been reported that Zayed again made it clear that he had the full support of all the Al-Nahyan against Shakhbut. The meeting seemed to have taken place at Zayed's behest and—importantly—the Trucial States agent himself was present, also happening to be visiting

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London at that time.¹⁶² It is believed that Zayed then had a follow-up meeting with British agents at a hotel in Kuwait to discuss the same matter.¹⁶³ After returning to Abu Dhabi Zayed reported to the agent that he still found Shakhbut uncompromising. Furthermore, he emphasized that a number of tribal leaders in Buraimi were prepared to take matters into their own hands if nothing happened soon.¹⁶⁴ According to the agent, Zayed gave the impression that he was concerned that Shakhbut would be in personal danger from these men if there was no abdication.¹⁶⁵