

WEEKEND REVIEW

Through tinted glasses

By Joseph E. Kechichian, Special to Weekend Review

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Christopher Davidson, a fellow at the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Durham University and former assistant professor at Shaikh Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates, did not set out to pen a modest book.

His second contribution on the UAE, he contends, is "to offset the current imbalance resulting from the preponderance of Dubai-related hagiographies, conventional narratives, and other state-sanctioned materials" (page 2).

Yet the best parts of the book are its historical details and rich discussions on various families and the roles that the latter played in the introduction of Arab nationalism to the area (chapters 1 and 2).

Indeed, this is the result of an abundance of high-quality literature on the Lower Gulf, which the author relies on generously.

Davidson thus provides a most useful narrative on the foundations of Dubai as a free port, which literally set the stage for its later successes and which may also be the source of some of its shortcomings.

The English reader will be fascinated by the introduction of Iranian and Indian immigrations to Dubai that enhanced everyone's prosperity.

One also learns minutiae on how the Al Maktoum ruling family managed to tie various loose ends that allowed for the present affluence.

Still, Davidson is highly critical of the real estate boom, which he perceives as being superficial, and is highly suspicious that Dubai and the entire federation are

politically stable (chapter 5).

For the author, this paradox is best explained by "young nationals unfit for meaningful employment", which necessitates an "increasing number of skilled and educated foreigners flooding into the emirate" (page 178).

Davidson does not consider Dubai to be "a cosmopolitan city" because, he claims, "despite the government's efforts to create centres for multicultural understanding ... most ethnic groups prefer to remain distinct, each with their own social networks, clubs and community centres".

As such, he underlines rather harshly, "Dubai society continues to feel somewhat disharmonious (and at times racist)" (page 192).

Though Davidson concludes that "the emirate would seem unlikely to become a melting pot comparable with other international metropolises" (page 192), his rationales are complex (poor education, lack of freedoms, past financial scandals, political unrest, etc.) and somewhat repetitive.

In presenting Dubai's weaknesses, he posits: "in addition to concerns over its development model, misgivings among its national and expatriate populations and its reliance on the stability of its closest neighbours, Dubai's future success is also endangered by a rising level of security threats, both external and internal" (page 263).

Whatever successes were recorded in recent years, Davidson argues, "attracted the attention of both international criminal and terrorist organisations, many of which have exploited the emirate's geographic location, laissez-faire attitudes and impressive infrastructure to set up various smuggling, gunrunning, human trafficking and money laundering operations" (page 263).

What follows this missive are minute details, most of which are hearsay and

part of the rumour industry that thrives on portraying Arabs in general and wealthy Emiratis in particular, as buffoons.

In fact, if my calculations are correct, Davidson has based his narrative on 323 anonymous "personal interviews" (since this is repeated in the plural throughout the notes, I assume there were more than one each time, which would mean that he relies on at least 646 individuals, certainly a gargantuan accomplishment).

Still, and except for Lord Richard Luce, none are named, although there are seven notes that refer to interviews with members of leading families.

Some of Davidson's quotations are comical and though space is limited, the following is a good example.

He reports that Washington opted not to launch cruise missiles against a suspected Osama Bin Laden base in Afghanistan in 1998 because "a C130 transport aircraft with UAE markings had landed at the camp's airstrip", and that American "decision-makers were concerned that such an attack might compromise a UAE Shaikh or other senior UAE official" (page 293).

The footnote for this revelation reads: "Personal correspondence, March 2007."

The reader has no idea who this correspondence is with, even if Richard Clarke, the National Security Council counterterrorism coordinator of the United States, told the 9/11 Commission that he tipped off a senior Emirati official about a CIA plan to bomb a royal falconry camp in Afghanistan where the UAE visitor was staying (<http://www.gulfnews.com/www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>, pages 137-139).

Many foreigners fall in love with Dubai, praise its liberalism and benefit from its many opportunities before eventually choosing to subject it to severe scrutiny.

Somehow, the love-hate relationship tilts

towards more critical assessments, without realising that such criticisms may be accurate for any major city.

Davidson sees a lot of smuggling, arms trading and prostitution, without once pointing out that London, Paris, Washington, Moscow and countless others are the real beneficiaries of such excesses.

No one is perfect and it behooves objective assessors to differentiate the wheat from the chaff.

Dubai may well have to double its recent efforts to curb illegal activities, including money laundering, and along with other federation members, is in the process of adopting new laws.

Still, all is not trivial in this analysis, as Davidson warns those who "grossly underestimate the UAE's ultimate expendability" should Western powers come to terms with Iran (page 275).

Under such circumstances, perhaps Dubai's development efforts are not such a mistake after all, as the UAE gradually acquires the wherewithal to ride out future crises.

Dr Joseph A. Kechichian is an author, most recently of Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008.