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A History of The United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

The United Arab Emirates, an impressive tapestry of ancient heritage and modern ambition, stands as a shining example of transformation on the Arabian Peninsula. Though only officially united as a nation since 1971, the story of the Emirates stretches back millennia, encompassing early human settlements, flourishing civilizations, and the persistent dynamism of its desert, coastal, and mountain communities. The history of the UAE is not merely a tale of cities rising from the sand, but rather a deeply woven narrative shaped by traditions, migrations, struggles, and external influences.

For over a hundred thousand years, people traversed and settled along what is now the southeastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. They left traces of their lives in stone tools, tombs, pottery, and intricate irrigation systems—evidence of adaptation and ingenuity in a challenging environment. Cultures such as Magan, Umm Al Nar, and Wadi Suq thrived by harnessing trade networks that stretched from Mesopotamia to the Indus Valley, and by innovating means of survival in barren landscapes. These early chapters of Emirati history reveal a society in constant contact with neighbors near and far.

With the arrival of Islam in the 7th century, the region underwent a pivotal transformation, affecting not only spiritual beliefs but also social organization, trade networks, and cultural practices. The rule of successive caliphates, the rise and fall of port cities, and contact with distant lands via maritime routes left enduring legacies on Emirati society. The strategic geographic location of the Gulf attracted traders, travelers, and empires, integrating the local communities into a bustling, cosmopolitan web of exchange.

The age of European expansion brought new challenges and opportunities. The Portuguese, Dutch, and British all left their mark on the Arabian Gulf, drawn by its lucrative trade and valuable nautical corridors. Tribal confederations—such as the Bani Yas and Al Qawasim—consolidated their power during periods of regional turbulence, setting the stage for both resistance and accommodation to foreign powers. The British, focusing on securing trade routes and maritime stability, established a protectorate that lasted for over a century and a half, giving rise to administrative and geopolitical changes which would directly impact the region's path to unity.

The discovery of oil in the 20th century marked an era of rapid transformation, bringing unprecedented prosperity but also ushering in social and cultural upheaval. Visionary leaders like Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum engineered a peaceful transition from fragmented sheikhdoms to a single

federation, guiding the UAE onto the world stage. Economic diversification, cultural revival, and progressive modernization became hallmarks of the young nation's identity, setting it apart as a leading power in the region.

This book offers a comprehensive exploration of the UAE's history—tracing its roots from prehistoric settlements through the rise of emirates, British influence, the oil boom, and onward to the nation's vibrant present. Through twenty-five chapters, this work endeavors to present the resilience and creativity of its people, as well as the enduring interplay between tradition and modernity. It is a chronicle not only of rulers and events, but also of cultural currents, innovations, and the ongoing journey that continues to define the United Arab Emirates today.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Environment of the Emirates

Nestled in the southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the land that would become the United Arab Emirates presents a fascinating study in contrasts. It is a place defined by vast stretches of arid desert, a lengthy and intricate coastline, and rugged mountain ranges that punctuate the eastern landscape. Bordered by Saudi Arabia to the west and south, Oman to the east and northeast, and sharing maritime boundaries with Iran and Qatar, the UAE occupies a strategically significant position overlooking the southern reaches of the Arabian Gulf and the vital Strait of Hormuz. Its total area is approximately 83,600 square kilometers, though the precise boundaries have historically been subject to some dispute. The largest emirate, Abu Dhabi, constitutes the lion's share of this territory, accounting for around 87 percent of the total landmass.

The coastline along the Arabian Gulf stretches for over 650 kilometers, characterized by low-lying plains, tidal flats known as *sabkhas*, and numerous islands. These islands, some natural and others remarkably man-made, dot the shallow waters and have played a role in the region's history, offering shelter and strategic points. While the Gulf coast is extensive, it traditionally lacked natural deepwater harbors, necessitating dredging and modern engineering to create the large ports seen today. In contrast, the UAE's eastern coast, facing the Gulf of Oman, is considerably shorter—around 70 kilometers—and more rugged, backed by the imposing Hajar Mountains. This eastern seaboard features small bays and inlets and provides the UAE with its only direct access to the Indian Ocean.

Dominating the interior is the arid desert, which covers approximately 80 percent of the UAE's land area. In the south and west, the landscape transitions into vast, rolling sand dunes that merge with the Rub' al Khali, the legendary Empty Quarter, which is the largest continuous sand desert in the world, stretching across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen. These immense dunes, some reaching heights of 250 meters, create a landscape of stark beauty and isolation. Other significant desert areas include the Al Khatim Desert between Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, known for its large dunes, and the Al Marmoom Desert, which is now a conservation reserve. The desert terrain is a mix of sand sheets, towering dunes, and rocky outcrops known locally as *burqas* and *mesas*.

The eastern edge of the country is defined by the Hajar Mountains, a formidable range shared with Oman that runs from the Musandam Peninsula down towards the east coast. These "Stone Mountains," or "Rocky Mountains" as their name translates,

represent the highest elevations in the eastern Arabian Peninsula, with peaks rising to around 2,000 meters (6,500 feet) and beyond in Oman. The mountains offer a dramatic contrast to the surrounding desert and coastal plains, featuring rugged terrain, deep valleys (known as *wadis*), and a slightly cooler climate due to the altitude. The geology of the Hajar Mountains is complex, reflecting millions of years of tectonic activity where the Arabian Plate interacts with the Eurasian Plate.

The climate of the UAE is predominantly arid and hot, with intensely hot and humid summers and mild, pleasant winters. Average maximum temperatures in July and August can soar above 48°C (118.4°F) on the coastal plains, making life undeniably challenging. The coastal regions also experience high humidity, particularly during the late summer months due to a southeastern wind known as the *sharqi*. Winter months, from December to March, bring much more comfortable temperatures, averaging between 10°C and 24°C. Rainfall is generally sparse and inconsistent, averaging between 100 to 200 mm annually, although the mountainous areas can receive significantly more, sometimes up to 350 mm. When rain does fall, particularly in the coastal regions, it can occur in short, torrential bursts that may lead to flash floods in the wadi beds, which are otherwise dry for most of the year. The region is also prone to occasional, sometimes violent, dust and sandstorms, locally known as *shamal* winds, which can severely reduce visibility and add another layer of challenge to the environment.

Despite the harsh and arid conditions, the land and marine environments of the UAE support a surprising diversity of life, adapted to survive in extreme temperatures and limited water availability. The desert, while seemingly barren, is home to resilient plant species like the Ghaf tree, with its incredibly long roots, and various desert shrubs that can tolerate the dry conditions. Animal life in the desert includes the Arabian oryx, sand gazelle, fennec fox, and a variety of reptiles such as the Egyptian spiny-tailed lizard and the Arabian sand gecko. Many desert animals are nocturnal, a clever adaptation to avoid the scorching daytime heat.

The mountainous regions, with slightly more rainfall and cooler temperatures, offer a different habitat. Wadis within the Hajar Mountains, particularly those with permanent water sources fed by groundwater, support a richer biodiversity and have historically been crucial for settlements and agriculture. These wadis are home to unique native species, including a variety of fish and the endangered Arabian Tahr.

The coastal and marine ecosystems are particularly vibrant. The waters of the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, despite being shallow and subject to high temperatures and salinity, teem with life. Over 500 species of fish inhabit these waters, alongside marine mammals such as dugongs and various dolphin species. Sea turtles, including the green and hawksbill turtles, nest on the UAE's beaches and islands. Coastal areas feature important habitats like mangrove forests (*qurms*), which serve as crucial nurseries for marine life and provide natural protection against erosion. Salt plains and

wetlands also contribute to the varied coastal landscape and ecosystems.

Access to water has always been a defining factor in the human history of this arid land. Before modern desalination technologies, communities relied on scarce groundwater resources, accessed through wells and ingenious traditional irrigation systems known as *falaj*. Groundwater remains a significant resource, though much of it is saline, and unsustainable abstraction has led to declining levels and quality in some areas. Oases like those in Al Ain and Liwa, fed by underground water, were historically vital centers for settlement and cultivation in the desert interior.

The diverse topography and environments—from the extensive coastline and islands to the vast deserts and the rocky mountains—have shaped the patterns of human settlement, the development of livelihoods, and the interactions between different communities throughout history. The challenges posed by the arid climate and the limited freshwater resources have fostered resilience and innovation among the inhabitants, influencing everything from traditional architecture to agricultural practices and trade networks. This natural setting provides the fundamental backdrop against which the rich and complex history of the United Arab Emirates has unfolded over millennia.

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