

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Sheikh Zayed ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Yesterday evening my time, as Americans went to the polls, news broke of the death of Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahayan, the Emir of Abu Dhabi and President of the United Arab Emirates. Jordan immediately declared a National Day of Mourning, closing all government offices and schools (returning a gesture Sheikh Zayed made when Jordan's King Hussein died in 1999).

I'm taking the time to write this on the day after the election because Zayed was one of the pivotal figures of the modern Middle East. He was 86, born into the ruling family of an obscure, shockingly poor emirate in the Persian Gulf. In Zayed's youth the area's main source of income came from pearl diving, an industry that died suddenly in the 1930s when a Japanese entrepreneur figured out how to culture pearls. His family had ruled Abu Dhabi since the 1790s. In 1966, after 20 years as governor of the oasis of Al-Ain, he conspired with the British to overthrow his xenophobic older brother, Shakhbut, who had been emir for 38 years. Shakhbut, among other things, was refusing to spend the oil money that had begun to flow into Abu Dhabi's coffers a few years earlier. Abu Dhabi controls 10% of the world's oil and 4% of its natural gas.

When the British withdrew from the Gulf in 1971 Zayed was the prime mover in assembling the United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven nominally independent states in the southern Gulf. He was 'President' of the UAE because the other six emirs 'elected' him to that post every five years. This is hardly surprising since Abu Dhabi dwarfs the other six in terms of both land and wealth. A western ambassador once described the purpose of the UAE's federal government as "giving chunks of Abu Dhabi's money to the other six emirates".

The conventional wisdom in 1971 was that the UAE would soon fall apart, its bits likely to be swallowed by Oman, Saudi Arabia and Iran. One of the main reasons why that never happened was that Zayed and his counterpart in Dubai, the late Sheikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al-Makhtoum, worked to ensure that the oil money made their country an open and tolerant place. Abu Dhabi became an important cog in the world oil industry while Dubai set off on its path to becoming one of the world's great trading centers. Roads, hospitals and airports were built to rival those of any place else in the world.

Zayed was a champion of Arab nationalism: a vocal (and financially generous) supporter of the Palestinians and one of the driving forces behind the Arab oil embargo of 1973. But he always remained one of the West's greatest friends in the region. He joined the 1991 US-led coalition to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, dispatched one of the largest contingents of international troops sent to Kosovo and allowed the Emirates to become a frequent port of call for the US Navy. Only this week the UAE became the first Gulf state to appoint a woman to its cabinet.

He did all this while remaining very much a tribal leader of an earlier generation. Everyone

who ever met the man seems to have been impressed by his sharpness of mind and his grasp of foreign affairs – so far removed from the desert world where he came of age – yet he also remained functionally illiterate. I vividly recall watching his painful efforts to read a simple three-sentence statement at the ceremonial closing of a Gulf Summit in 1991.

On the day of a presidential election we Americans often pride ourselves on having been blessed with an extraordinary generation of leaders at the founding of our nation. Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid were the key members of such a generation, shepherding their small country through 250 years worth of technological growth in barely two generations. Theirs remains a singular accomplishment.

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