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The Evolution of the “Neo-Traditional National State” Model in Confrontation with the “Islamic Caliphate Revival” Model (With an Emphasis on Religion-State Interaction in the United Arab Emirates)

*Ali Ghorbanpour Dashtaki

Associate Professor of the Department of Political Science and Economics, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran.

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Extended Abstract

The contemporary Islamic world is currently navigating a profound ideological and structural competition between divergent models of governance, each attempting to redefine the intricate relationship between religion, the state, and the multifaceted demands of modernity. This research focuses on the emergence and consolidation of the “Neo-Traditional National State” model, particularly as manifested in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has positioned itself as a sophisticated alternative to the “Islamic Caliphate Revival” model advocated by various Salafist and political Islam movements. Historically, the failure of secular Arab nationalism and the subsequent vacuum left by the decline of Pan-Arabism led to the rise of utopian movements that envisioned a return to the early Caliphate as a solution to social and political crises.

Ali Ghorbanpour Dashtaki, PhD.

Address: Associate Professor of the Department of Political Science and Economics, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran.

E-mail: a.ghorbanpour@hsu.ac.ir

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Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda, and more recently ISIS, capitalized on this vacuum, proposing a model where Sharia precedes the state and an exclusionary “Ummatic” identity replaces national sovereignty. In direct contrast, the UAE has sought to transcend this dichotomy by synthesizing tradition with functional modernization. The core objective of this study is to analyze how the UAE has successfully navigated the constraints of radical Salafist ideology to establish a governance structure that achieves high levels of economic development and functional legitimacy while remaining anchored in indigenous traditions. To facilitate this analysis, the research employs the theoretical framework of Imre Lakatos’ “Research Programs,” which allows for a structural deconstruction of these governance models into a “Hard Core” of non-negotiable principles and a “Protective Belt” of flexible auxiliary hypotheses. In the case of the UAE’s neo-traditionalist model, the hard core is defined by national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the preservation of a patriarchal, sheikhly governing structure, while the protective belt is composed of a pragmatic and tolerant interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence known as *Fiqh al-Maqasid* (the Jurisprudence of Higher Objectives).

This Lakatosian framework reveals that while the caliphate model possesses a rigid hard core predicated on the absolute primacy of (text) over the state, the UAE model utilizes *Fiqh al-Maqasid* to ensure the state’s survival and prosperity. This jurisprudential paradigm, heavily influenced by the Maliki school and the writings of Imam Al-Shatibi, focuses on the “Higher Objectives” of religion—namely the preservation of life, intellect, religion, property, and lineage—rather than a literalist adherence to historical legal forms. A pivotal figure in this intellectual project is Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, whose “Neo-Traditionalist” discourse provides the theological justification for the state’s policies. Bin Bayyah’s philosophy advocates for a “Theology of Obedience” and *Fiqh al-Waqi* (the jurisprudence of reality), which emphasizes that scholars should renounce direct political interference to maintain social order and prevent (*fitna* or chaos). By establishing institutions like the “Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies” and the “Emirates Fatwa Council,” the UAE has effectively centralized religious authority, creating a defensive layer that protects the state from the encroachment of radical political Islam while simultaneously legitimizing its

modernization agenda. This approach has facilitated the transition of the state's legitimacy from a purely ideological or charismatic basis to a "functional" or "performance-based" legitimacy. In this model, the government's authority is sustained by its tangible success in delivering economic growth, attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and transforming the nation into a global hub for logistics, aviation, and technology.

Furthermore, the research highlights that the UAE's "strait diplomacy" and strategic foreign policy, exemplified by the Abraham Accords in 2020, are not merely political calculations but are presented through a neo-traditionalist lens as religious imperatives for peace and the preservation of human life. The state utilizes concepts like the "New Alliance of Virtue" (Hilf al-Fudul al-Jadid) to frame international cooperation and interfaith dialogue as traditional Islamic values, thereby mitigating the internal friction often caused by rapid globalization. However, the study identifies several critical structural risks that could challenge the long-term viability of this model. The reliance on a top-down, authoritarian-consultative (Shura-based) structure may eventually face pressure from the rising civil demands of an increasingly educated and globally-connected domestic population. There is also the persistent risk of a "neo-fundamentalist" backlash; if the state is perceived as disregarding traditional "red lines" of Islamic identity in its quest for secular efficiency or regional normalization, it could trigger a reactive radicalization within certain social segments. Additionally, the unique demographic composition of the UAE, where a vast expatriate majority resides alongside a native minority, presents ongoing challenges for the preservation of a cohesive national identity amidst the forces of radical secularism or religious conservatism.

In summary, the UAE's evolution into a neo-traditional national state demonstrates a successful integration of religious tradition and modern governance, offering a functional alternative to the institutional failures of radical political Islam. The model proves that religion, when interpreted through the lens of *Maslahah* (public interest) and *Fiqh al-Maqasid*, can serve as a catalyst for national development rather than an obstacle. Nevertheless, the sustainability of this program depends on the state's ability to manage the delicate equilibrium between its "Hard Core" of patriarchal sovereignty and its "Protective Belt" of

religious flexibility. The findings suggest that for the neo-traditional model to remain progressive, it must continue to evolve its consultative mechanisms to accommodate emerging civil expectations while maintaining the theological rigor required to sustain its legitimacy within the broader Islamic world. This research provides a theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between religion and the state in newly developing Islamic nations, concluding that the survival of such models hinges on their capacity to balance national interests with religious heritage in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, neo-traditionalist national state, jurisprudence of objectives.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.