

The Art of Balancing Politics and Culture in the Emirate of Sharjah

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Abstract

This paper charts the development and evolution of the emirate of Sharjah into the cultural hub of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It traces this transformation primarily through the lens of the emirate's premier cultural product, the Sharjah Biennale, and how this large-scale festival for contemporary art gave birth to the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), now one of the most influential actors in cultural policy making within the UAE. One of the central paradoxes raised by this paper is how to classify arts and culture organizations like the SAF that operate autonomously from traditional government bureaucracy but still receive financial support from them. The Biennale and the SAF are representative of interesting trends in the Gulf region, whereby arts and culture organizations are observed to be headed by members of the ruling family and operate outside of traditional bureaucratic power structures. The questions stemming from these observations revolve around the degree to which such organizations are able to maintain a progressive programmatic policy and whether they detract from or complement traditional government structures charged with formulating cultural policy.

Introduction

Since the establishment of the United Arab Emirates federation (UAE) in 1971, the emirate of Sharjah has gained a reputation as the cultural emirate of the country, in addition to being recognized as a cultural center throughout the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Though much smaller and less wealthy than Abu Dhabi or Dubai, the importance Sharjah has placed on cultural policy has had significant positive repercussions both inside and outside the UAE. The emirate has left its imprint on the country's cultural landscape from a tangible vantage point, evidenced by the building of museums and other cultural assets. But it has also influenced the landscape of cultural policy, from less visible but equally important perspectives. Sharjah pioneered a model for how arts and culture organizations like the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) engage with and receive support from the state (in this case the emirate government). This associational model has been replicated in other emirates like Abu Dhabi, eager to jumpstart its own cultural development, and is representative of the relationship arts and culture organizations maintain with states across the Arab Gulf states. The success of Sharjah's cultural policy has also given the emirate a stake in the UAE's soft power tool box, specifically in regard to how the country uses culture to advance its agenda in regional and international affairs. It was Sharjah that elevated the country's profile in the MENA arts scene as well as the global contemporary art world. Writing in *Globalization and the Gulf*, John W. Fox and Nada Mourtada-Sabbah contend that "Sharjah has consciously attempted to develop, advance, and enhance its identity as the educational and cultural center of the Gulf and perhaps even more broadly, of the Middle East."¹ Analyzing the evolution of Sharjah's cultural policy through the lens of its primary arts and culture organization, the Sharjah Art Foundation, and its premier cultural product, the Sharjah Biennale, offers an insight into how cultural policy is made in the UAE and the ramifications associated with the model the emirate employs.

That Sharjah plays host to over fifty percent of the UAE's museums is a testament to the central role cultural policy has occupied and the high priority it has been given in the emirate's development strategy since 1971. Much of Sharjah's tangible cultural capital, particularly museums and art spaces, is concentrated in a restored heritage quarter, known as the Heart of Sharjah. On a research visit to the emirate in May of 2016, the author had the opportunity to directly observe how it has created a 'cultural district' in this area, with major public institutions like the Sharjah Art Museum and Museum of Islamic Civilization grouped with important organizations like the Sharjah Art Foundation and Emirates Fine Arts Society. As Fox and Mortada-Sabbah note, Sharjah has reaped international awards and accolades for fostering the development of education and cultural arts and making a conscious effort to preserve and restore historical areas. It was designated a "cultural capital of the Arab world" by the Arab League in the early 1990s and by UNESCO in 1998.² Interestingly, the contemporary art collection housed in the Sharjah Art Museum was "mostly acquired by the museum during international biennales."³

Of all the cultural organizations operating in Sharjah, perhaps none deserves more recognition for its contribution to developing the cultural arts, as well as enabling the preservation and restoration of historic buildings, than the Sharjah Art Foundation. Although officially founded in 2009, well after Sharjah's recognition as a cultural capital by the Arab League and

¹ Fox and Mourtada-Sabbah, "Heritage Revivalism in Sharjah," 268.

² Ibid.

³ Boumansour, "The Role of Museums in Emirati Culture," 22.

UNESCO, the Foundation, under the leadership of its founder, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, has transformed the cultural landscape of the Emirates and spearheaded the UAE's foray into the contemporary art world. The important role the Foundation has come to play in the UAE has largely been achieved through its stewardship of the Sharjah Biennale, a major festival of contemporary art held in the emirate every other year.

The Biennale is now over twenty-three years old, having been established in 1993 and organized for many years by Sharjah's Department of Culture and Information. Although initially focused more regionally, the Biennale was transformed and oriented toward a more international audience under the stewardship of Sheikha Hoor, the daughter of the ruling emir, who took over management of the event in 2003. It is something of a paradox that the takeover of the Biennale by Sheikha Hoor resulted six years later in the establishment of the Sharjah Art Foundation. Understanding why the Foundation emerged from the Biennale is an important question addressed in this paper. An analysis of the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Biennale as its chief enterprise presents a unique opportunity to explore how cultural policy is made in Sharjah and render a more complete picture of how cultural organizations operate in the UAE. Mapping the evolution of the Biennale and the Foundation can also offer insight about common cultural policy practices across the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

This paper argues that the unique relationship Sharjah's government maintains with the SAF and the Biennale requires new ways of looking at how arts and culture are supported by the state. In some ways, Sharjah's model corresponds to the archetypes originally proposed by Harry Chartrand and Claire McCaughey in *Who's to Pay for the Arts?: The International Search for Models of Support*.⁴ The relationship between the emirate government and the SAF bears strong resemblance, at least on the surface, to the 'patron' model, where the government seeks to foster excellence through the funding of arm's length arts councils. Yet Sharjah also diverges from the more Western-centric approach of these archetypes and expands and builds upon them in important ways. This particular model of support for arts and culture must be analyzed in the context of a non-Western, non-democratic society characterized by a highly unique demographic composition where the proportion of expatriate residents far outweighs the citizen population.

Determining how to classify the SAF, in terms of this relationship, also raises the policy question of how flexible the Foundation can be in using the Biennale to push the boundaries of contemporary art. Despite operating with a considerable degree of autonomy, the Foundation receives a significant amount of its funding from the Sharjah's Department of Culture and Information. How is the SAF's pursuit of excellence in art impacted by its proximity to the emirate's government? The Foundation's leadership, under the daughter of the ruling Sheikh, also connect it to Sharjah's ruling family, placing it not in a hierarchy but rather in parallel alignment with traditional, bureaucratic institutions like the Ministry of Culture and Information, or the Sharjah Museums Department, which dominate the public cultural landscape in the emirate. This raises the question of how to conceptualize and subsequently classify the Foundation. Is it public or private? State or non-state? Does its support for artists qualify it as civil society or do its links to government and the state argue against this? Most critically, how much flexibility does the Foundation have to maintain progressive programmatic policies in light of its unique relationship to the state? Attempting to answer these questions through the lens of the Sharjah Art Foundation and its Biennale will allow for a greater understanding about how cultural policy is constructed in the UAE.

⁴ Chartrand and McCaughey, "Who's to Pay for the Arts?"

Significance of Sharjah

The salience of this paper's focus on Sharjah is justified from a few key vantage points. From a high altitude, the view of the cultural landscape in the UAE is dominated by a number of high-profile projects that are for the most part concentrated in the larger and wealthier emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Abu Dhabi in particular, as the largest and wealthiest of the seven emirates, has the means and motivation to promote a particular vision of culture in the UAE. Yasser El Sheshtawy, a professor of architecture at UAE University in Al Ain, has written extensively on the development of cultural infrastructure in Abu Dhabi in an effort to unpack the meaning behind the Emirate's cultural policy ambitions. In an article on "The Production of Culture: Abu Dhabi's Urban Strategies," he investigates the emirate's aim to become a globally significant city. The act of creating cultural infrastructure will help transform it into a center for culture on the local, regional, and global levels.⁵ Nowhere is this potential for impact more apparent than a major initiative to build a cultural district on Saadiyat Island (the Island of Happiness). To realize this cultural mega-project, the government has partnered with global cultural institutions such as the Louvre, Guggenheim, and British Museum to build satellites of the two former institutions as well as a national museum focused on the country's founder that will be curated by the latter. According to El Sheshtawy, Abu Dhabi's impetus to develop cultural infrastructure rests on perceived return on investment at the global, regional, and local levels.⁶ On a global level these institutions will diversify the economy and draw foreign talent. From a regional perspective, focusing on culture legitimizes the city and elevates the Gulf as a "competitor to the Arab world's traditional centers."⁷ And finally on a local level, the emirate expects that these institutions will 'affirm Emirati identity' in the context of a demographic imbalance where the majority of expatriates outweighs the citizen population.⁸

By any measure, these projects, only one of which (Louvre Abu Dhabi) is nearing completion, have dominated international headlines about culture in the UAE and have encouraged a notion originating in the West that the UAE is focused on importing culture.⁹ Major Western media outlets such as The New York Times and The Guardian regularly feature pieces profiling these major cultural mega-projects.¹⁰ The long, drawn out development of these cultural mega-projects, and the scrutiny applied to them by international media, risks overshadowing the remarkable contribution to the UAE's cultural landscape made smaller, less resource-rich emirates like Sharjah. In other words, Sharjah's narrative of cultural development, and what it deems as being important to the county's cultural identity and landscape, risks being minimized and subsumed by its much larger and wealthier neighbor.

Another element of significance in this story revolves around the model Sharjah has pioneered for the UAE as well as other states in the Gulf in terms of how cultural policy is formulated and implemented. The close affinity between the Sharjah Art Foundation and the state (emirate government in this context) is mirrored in other culturally-influential emirates such as

⁵ El Sheshtawy, "The Production of Culture," 133.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tharoor, "The Louvre comes to Abu Dhabi," December 2, 2015.

¹⁰ Vogel, "A New Art Capital," December 4, 2014.

Abu Dhabi, where the Sheikha Salama Foundation and Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation have grown and begun taking on important roles in cultural policy making.

The interdependence between arts and culture foundations and the royal families within the UAE can be placed in a larger, Gulf-wide context that attests to major cultural organizations and projects maintaining close ties with the ruling families of the state. What are the implications of this kind of relationship in terms of organizational sustainability and the maintenance of progressive programmatic policies? This question is addressed later in this paper.

The link between ruling families and arts organizations also reveals a significant aspect that cannot go overlooked: the role of women in founding and leading some of the UAE's most recognizable arts and culture institutions. In all three of the most culturally-influential emirates, women have largely dominated the cultural landscape and played a fundamental role in shaping cultural policy. Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi's leadership of the Biennale, and subsequently the Sharjah Art Foundation, is mirrored by the roles that Sheikha Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan and Sheikha Lateefa Bint Maktoum have played in Abu Dhabi and Dubai respectively. All three of these women come from the ruling families of their respective emirates, and have founded major cultural initiatives, such as the Sheikha Salama Foundation in Abu Dhabi and Taskheel in Dubai. The implications of these women's role, particularly that of Sheikha Hoor, will be a theme revisited later on in this paper.

The Sharjah Biennale

In order to lay the groundwork for an analysis and classification of the Sharjah Art Foundation, it is necessary to flesh out the concept of a biennale. What is a biennale and why was it chosen as the vehicle for Sharjah's cultural ambitions back in 1993? How did its change in management and reorganization in 2003 lead to the formation of the Sharjah Art Foundation?

A *biennale* is literally an event that takes place *biennially* or every other year. While this definition could apply to countless types of events and happenings around the world, it has a specific meaning in the art world. In a dissertation on "Becoming Global: Contemporary Art Worlds in the Age of Biennials Boom," Joe Martin Lin-Hill explores the phenomenon of "global proliferation in recent decades of international large-scale perennial contemporary art exhibitions — 'biennials' as they are generically known — and the increasingly unified global contemporary art world they have instantiated."¹¹ This statement of purpose in the abstract of Mr. Lin-Hill's dissertation helps to frame the purpose and function of a biennale. The time connotation implied in the word 'biennial' may refer to the event happening every other year, but it is also conflated with the notion of being 'perennial,' continually recurring without end. While the Sharjah Biennale is just over 23 years old, and part of the 'boom' witnessed in biennials since the 1980s, the format and archetype actually originates with the Venice Biennale, which was first held in 1895.

Biennials are also global in their scope, as implied by Mr. Lin-Hill's thesis on their proliferation. The Sharjah Biennale is thus not an isolated event but one of many that occur around the world. Their scope is also defined by content in addition to space; 'international' and 'contemporary art' as remaining keywords are the bread and butter of biennials. What links them together is their focus on the category of contemporary art and embrace of international artists

¹¹ Lin-Hill, "Becoming Global," vii.

defined by this category. While *international contemporary art* could be further deconstructed, what is important here is that this event typology must be large in scale in order to be defined as a *biennial*. According to the Sharjah Art Foundation's own literature, "Biennale's are held not to depict concepts but to provide a space in which disparate yet related events can take place. Biennials play the same role as festivals and expos: they respond, to some extent, to cultural concerns."¹²

What might some of these cultural concerns be? Frederica Martini makes the argument in *Just Another Exhibition: Histories and Politics of Biennials* that the cultural stakes of a contemporary biennale revolve around the potential for cultural diplomacy and urban planning concerns, especially pertaining to urban regeneration and renewal.¹³ Martini highlights some of the original aspects of the Biennale model that remain salient for cities today. Venice was the first city to pioneer the biennial as a vehicle mixing city branding and marketing with internationalism, all packaged together in a spectacular, large-scale event. This is what is meant by the potential for cultural diplomacy; Biennales offer a way for a city, or state for that matter, to accrue and demonstrate cultural soft power. While these concerns no doubt played into the calculus of government officials who made the decision to launch the Sharjah Biennale in 1993, the emirate diverged in an important way from the Venice model. Lin-Hill contends that the biennials elevated a peripheral or alternative narrative of art and history — "stories of art from beyond the Euro-American mainstream" — by seeking to "define a regional identity and presence within an exhibitionary representation of the global (that is, alongside artists from the so-called 'center(s)'), an effective curatorial formula that is now commonplace in regions around the world."¹⁴ By its mere existence, the Sharjah Biennale participated in the process of "correcting and decentralizing the cartography"¹⁵ of the contemporary art world. Lin-Hill adds the caveat that the growth of Sharjah's profile in this world has much to do with its "high visibility as a 'global signifier,'" observing that this applies as much to the city itself as the biennial it hosts.¹⁶

Writing in *The Economics of Cultural Policy*, David Throsby makes a similar argument that "the cultural identity of a city may also be enhanced through the staging of artistic events and festivals."¹⁷ He cites longstanding festivals in Beirut, Edinburgh, and Salzburg as being "inextricably bound up with the image of those cities."¹⁸ For over two decades, the Sharjah Biennale has symbolized Sharjah's identity as the 'cultural emirate' at the cutting edge of contemporary art. In an introduction to the 11th Biennale, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi writes that from 2003:

The Sharjah Biennale has examined contemporary culture and its place in the United Arab Emirates. Over the past ten years, the Biennale has offered a critical lens to explore, reflect and reconsider questions that are relevant today. Sharjah's focus on culture and education has fostered the organic growth of cultural activities, creating an ideal environment for both the production of contemporary art and the engagement of audiences. Within this context, the Biennale has become a public platform for debate

¹² "Foreword," *Toward a New Cultural Cartography. Sharjah Biennale 11*.

¹³ Martini and Martini, "Just Another Exhibition," 121.

¹⁴ Lin-Hill, *Contemporary Art Worlds*, 52-53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Throsby, *The Economics of Cultural Policy*, 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

among the more than 900,000 people of different backgrounds who constitute our local community.¹⁹

The forward penned by Sheikha Hoor firmly places the Biennale in the context of the SAF's larger mission within the UAE, to grow cultural programming and activities and create a climate conducive to the production of art and its consumption by engaged audiences. Over the two decades since its inception, the Sharjah Biennale has evolved considerably, and has in some ways reflected the changing shape and nature of biennales from the 20th to the 21st century. During the years that the Biennale was overseen by Sharjah's Department of Culture and Information it adhered to the traditional format first pioneered by the Venice Biennale and other large-scale international exhibitions like the World's Fair, as a space for featuring artists and their work as representatives of various countries. The Biennale was first held in Sharjah's Expo Center, further emphasizing the country-focused and World's Fair-like approach to the first iterations of the biennale. This approach shifted fundamentally in two important ways when the organization of the Biennale moved from the hands of government bureaucracy and underwent significant reorientation by Sheikha Hoor. It was transformed into a multidisciplinary platform for experimentation and new commissions driven primarily by a diversification in programming through the inclusion of film, performance, music, and publications. Venue selection for the Biennale has also undergone diversification. While the Sharjah Expo Center is still used to host Biennale installations, numerous institutions and spaces across the emirate participate in hosting aspects of the event. The shift in organizational management successfully transformed the Biennale from a traditional exhibition format to a vibrant space for the discourse, discussion, and debate of developments in the contemporary art world.²⁰

The SAF's formation in 2009 was catalyzed by a recognition that the introduction of "several initiatives that run along the same awareness lines the Biennial took, like the Production Programme, the March Meeting and the Residencies" were "somehow separate from the main Biennial programme,"²¹ and required a new way of organization and management. "In turn, and in order not to burden the Biennial with these prosthetic projects" and "hence sidetrack it from its main undertaking being a laboratory and a place for experimentation, we established the Sharjah Art Foundation which functions as an umbrella for all these distinct yet interconnected projects and programmes."²²

SAF's Organizational Position

With what we know about Biennials and some of the core mission tenants of the SAF, how do we conceive of and classify the Foundation in an organizational context? This was one of the first questions put to the representative of the Foundation during the author's field research in May of 2016.²³ In her view, the SAF is a semi-government organization. Since its formal inception in 2009 it has become more independent from government, evidenced by independent control over its budget. Although it still receives substantial financial support from the emirate

¹⁹ Al Qasimi, "Introduction," 14.

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

²¹ Gioni, "Sharjah 10: interview with Jack Persekian," March 26, 2011.

²² Ibid.

²³ Author Interview with SAF Representative, May 2016.

government, the Foundation no longer directly reports to the Ministry of Culture and Information. It has a direct line to the Ruler given the founder's status as his daughter and one of the most well recognized and influential members of the Al Qasimi family. The SAF's autonomous status means it does not have to fight for budgets or the maintenance of particular programs, such as those geared for education, which other ministries and agencies within government have to contend with on a regular basis.

This informal commentary on the status and outlook of public support for the Foundation should be placed in the context of a report commissioned by the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research on the status of state-funded philanthropy in the UAE. The policy paper, which looks at state-supported foundations across a variety of sectors in the Emirates, including the SAF and Sheikha Salama Foundation, notes that the majority of foundations operate without an endowment, meaning that they must "spend time being concerned with the financial situation of the country or shifting policy priorities."²⁴ The representative kept emphasizing what made Sharjah so different and distinguished it from other emirates, if not other city-states in the region. What it boils down to, she said, is having a ruling family supportive of arts and culture, which prioritized and invested in this sector from the moment Sharjah became part of the UAE federation in 1971. The legacy of the Biennale along with the high concentration of museums in the emirate reveals the clear existence of a mandate and mission to support and develop the arts and culture sector, and perhaps most importantly the shared perspective that other sectors would suffer if this mandate were not upheld. It is important to stress that this perspective is shared by the emirate government and important cultural actors like the SAF for the present moment—in other words, there is little to no daylight between their positions on the priority and importance the development of the arts and culture sector should be vested with.

The concluding remark made during the interview with the SAF emphasized again the role that 'personal interest' plays in how cultural policy gets developed in Sharjah. Such interest is not uniformly distributed across the emirate. It is a fortunate and almost ideal situation that the Ruler, Sheikh Sultan, has both used his power to advance the emirate's claims on culture, and also delegated a portion of his control over programmatic policy to his daughter's foundation. However, the sustainability of this situation is far from assured. The representative from SAF presented a revealing case study for how quickly the winds could change. She pointed out the power dynamic over cultural policy in Qatar that orbits between the Ruler, Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani, and his sister, Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani. The recent transfer of power in Qatar from the Father Emir, Sheikh Hamad, and his young son, Sheikh Tamim, has resulted in a much more restrained foreign policy in addition to a program of fiscal responsibility that has impacted Qatar's activist cultural policy. With an acquisition budget of over \$1 billion, Sheikha Al Mayassa literally runs culture in Qatar. Although the final impact is far from clear, there have been cutbacks and downsizing within Qatar's arts and culture sector. The system in the Gulf countries is that the government makes crucial decisions on the support of cultural policy, and they are about political, not cultural, power. The SAF representative went as far as stating that much of policymaking is still about families—still tribal, still personal. The sustainability of the arts and culture sector, and of prioritizing cultural policy, depends on those who are in power. If it were another ruler, or ruler-daughter/ruler-sister combination, might it be different? This appears to be what is meant by the role of "personal interest" in cultural policy

²⁴ Ridge and Kippels, "What is the Status of State," 8.

making.

Might the expediency created by delegating programmatic policy to a more streamlined and autonomous entity end up militating against a decrease in ‘personal interest’ by those who wield power? One might assume that delegating an important policy role to a family member would undermine the role of traditional bureaucracies and structures of power. While Sharjah’s Ministry of Information and Culture, along with organizations like the Sharjah Museums Department, wield considerable control and influence over cultural policy, the most influential organization in terms of visibility and influence over programmatic policy is the Sharjah Art Foundation. Far from undermining the authority of these bodies or subsuming their functions, the SAF actually strengthens and complements them. The SAF, as a semi-governmental organization with near full autonomy, will always adhere to its core mission that “supports the flourishing arts environment in the Gulf by nurturing artistic opportunities and actively pursuing both a regional and international program of cultural collaboration and exchange.”²⁵

In this sense, the SAF has an interest in maintaining its intimate relationship and alignment on policy with government entities to ensure that they continue to advance its agenda in government circles and influence decision makers with real political power. Foundations across the Gulf like the SAF may do more to enhance cultural policy sustainability than is expected, it should be noted that the relationship between foundations and government is far from seamless. The policy report from the Sheikh Saud Foundation notes that, “Foundations mentioned challenges related to maintaining long-term, beneficial relationships with other institutions” and characterized their collaboration “with other foundations, ministries, and government bodies as difficult, yet necessary.”²⁶ Such “partnering challenges” are attributed to competing mandates over areas where local, state-funded, and even federal organizations operate. The policy report concludes by recognizing that further research is needed “on how to bring the entities together as well as how to clarify the responsibilities and mandates of individual foundations in relation to other government entities.”²⁷

States and Cultural Policy

The precise tradeoff made in having cultural policy diffused over both traditional government entities and state-funded philanthropic foundations needs to be further assessed. A more precise indicator might be found in looking at how economic incidents, such as the global recession of 2008, impacted the level of state funding for these foundations. On the other hand, it does not appear that Sharjah or the other emirates have witnessed the kind of public struggle witnessed in neighboring Qatar. There are clear strengths and weaknesses associated with the semi-governmental model embodied by the SAF. The Foundation’s autonomy strengthens the cultural identity of the emirate, with national and international recognition, and has considerable influence to shape programmatic cultural policy. Yet receiving the majority of its budget from government coffers may put it at the mercy of bureaucrats who do not maintain as much of a personal interest. The role of women can once again be reflected on in this organizational context. The family-tribal state has empowered a female member of its own, along with her enterprise, not

²⁵ “About Us,” Sharjah Art Foundation.

²⁶ Ridge and Kippels, “What is the Status of the State,” 9.

²⁷ Ibid.

so much to circumvent traditional institutions of government but to provide a model that can achieve greater results and deliver on cultural policy aims in a more effective and expedient way.

Building on the theme of the Foundation's organizational autonomy is the question of how much flexibility the SAF is able to assert in order to maintain a progressive programmatic policy in the context of its unique relationship with the emirate government. This question was touched upon in the course of the research I conducted at the SAF in May of 2016. While Sharjah is known to be one of the more conservative emirates in the UAE, evidenced most commonly by its ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol, this outlook is juxtaposed with a willingness to push boundaries when a purpose is to be found. Sharjah's long relationship with the contemporary art world also means that it has featured and showcased art that has not been seen in neighboring emirates like Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Such resistance to self-censorship is a product of the intrinsic value of art inculcated in the community over the years. According to an official at the SAF, there is an awareness in the community of the valuable role that contemporary art plays, to the extent that nudity, say in the context of an exhibition on Egyptian surrealism, would not be objected to as long as it took place in a museum and not in a public space. The official contrasted Sharjah's nuanced approach to controversial forms of art with strategies taken by other states in the Gulf such as Qatar, where she noted that anger in the community was fomented over the Qatari state's choice of public art.

This sort of reaction happens when the community playing host to the works feel they were not involved—that a top-down decision was made to host and feature the works in a public space. In contrast to cities like Doha or Abu Dhabi, people in Sharjah are used to it, she said, and readily make the connection between displays of art and the SAF, seeing it as part of their city. She conceded, however, that such acceptance and perspective on the display of controversial artwork did not come overnight. In fact, the re-engineered Biennale that debuted in 2003 under Sheikha Hoor's leadership was not without controversy. Despite having existed for a decade, it took time for the new Biennale to become an accepted part of the cultural fabric in Sharjah.²⁸ My interview with the SAF indicated that this was primarily accomplished through audience development and engagement. Building a local audience for the newly revamped Biennale required ensuring free public access as well as marketing art exhibitions and cultural events in a plethora of local languages, such as Urdu and Farsi, which characterize the emirate's diverse composition. Education was also a key component, with programming for children being recognized as a policy that could lead to a 'chain of interest' extending and engaging families and friends.

Despite the success achieved by the Biennale and the SAF in public outreach there have been incidents that deserve mention and analysis. According to an article on the *Art of the Uprisings in the Middle East*, published in *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, "a fine line exists between art that is seen as current, edgy, and innovative (and thus highly marketable) and art that outrages either public sensibilities or the ever-anxious political authorities."²⁹ Sharjah's balancing act between maintaining a traditional, conservative society and a cultural identity that embraces contemporary art tipped the scales during the 2011 Biennale, which coincided with the period known as the Arab Spring, where numerous states around the MENA region were rocked by political and social turbulence. Controversy erupted over the work of an Algerian artist, Mustapha

²⁸ Author Interview with SAF Representative, May 2016.

²⁹ Tripp, "Art of the Uprisings," 196.

Benfodil, which was removed from the show and subsequently led to the dismissal of the Biennale's artistic director, Jack Persekian. Titled *Maportaliche/It has no importance*,

The artwork in question comprised a number of headless mannequins, dressed as two teams of footballers confronting each other in a public space. They wore shirts inscribed with explicit sexual and religious slogans mixed together accompanied by a soundtrack blaring out the shouts and slogans of protestors from the uprisings across the Arab world.³⁰

According to the artist himself, the work was intended to be a reflection on the Algerian civil war, where Islamic extremists had weaponized rape and murder against the female civilian population. Regardless of the particular historical memory evoked by the work, this seems to be a case of a work being exhibited in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Authorities rationalized the removal of the piece by referring to the very public nature of the site and the outrage it was causing to people wandering around with their families or on their way to and from the mosque."³¹

From the artist's viewpoint, however, public outrage and ensuing controversy had been misdirected toward a perceived affront to Allah when in fact the work had sought to condemn the god the armed factions of Islamic extremists had claimed to associate with during the Algerian civil war. The soundtrack to the work, featuring the chants and slogans of the Arab uprisings, may have been what tipped the balance and caused the authorities to remove it from the show. Such a move, curtailing the expression of a contentious piece of art, would not have been unprecedented at the time. The Gulf monarchies had banded together in unprecedented ways to prevent the popular uprisings across the region from spilling over into the Arabian Peninsula. The ultimate expression of this came in the form of the GCC's intervention into Bahrain in 2011 with the Peninsula Shield Force—comprised primarily of Saudi and Emirati forces—that crushed the popular uprising in that country. Backpedaling on a progressive programmatic policy that had allowed for the featuring of Benfodil's piece was a short step for authorities who intervened on a far greater scale in other dimensions and areas.

However, the step taken by authorities to dismiss the artistic director of the Biennale, Jack Persekian, seems to run counter to the "air of calm, indeed motionless normality" that authorities "were so keen to project."³² A 2011 news clip entitled "Biennial chief sacked over one work," published in *The National*, Abu Dhabi's English-language newspaper, conveys the Director's shock though offers little in the way of commentary and investigative analysis of what led to the dismissal, which is not entirely unsurprising for a newspaper maintaining close ties to the state. In no uncertain terms, the Director is quoted:

It was very, very abrupt. It completely knocked me over. It was the result of people objecting to the content of one artwork. It was foolish of me, I had not looked at it carefully because I couldn't, and there were so many works and things to produce... a million things I didn't go through. I'm not in the habit of checking everything, and people just didn't like what they saw in that work and took it out on me personally.³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 197.

³³ Simpson, "Sharjah Biennale Chief Sacked," April 7, 2011.

Although declining to name the artwork that had led to the controversy, the article notes that his dismissal had been announced by Sharjah's official news agency, WAM, "which said the move had been made on orders of Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah."³⁴

It is interesting to contrast the statements released by the SAF and the Biennale's curators following the incident. The New York Times painted a more complete picture of the controversy, referencing the SAF's statement that "Mr. Persekian's job was 'no longer tenable' as a result of 'the public outcry over the work' and that Benfodil's piece had been 'removed from the biennial 'because leaving it on view was too risky from a legal and cultural standpoint.'"³⁵ A counter statement released by "the biennial curators who chose Mr. Benfodil's work defended Mr. Persekian, who was not involved in the selection of the piece, and said the installation was not intended to be offensive."³⁶ While the curators contended that the work was a tribute to the victims of religious extremists who used religious texts to justify their crimes during the Algerian civil war, they conceded that they had "misjudged the limits of the tone with which to address sensitive topics and the importance of carefully contextualizing art work."³⁷

Some important insights about Sharjah's ability to maintain a progressive programmatic cultural policy can be gleaned from this story. The fact that the removal of the artwork came from emirate-level authorities and the dismissal of the artistic director from the Ruler himself suggests that the controversy quickly came into the awareness of national, federal-level authorities. Sheikh Sultan himself sits on the Federal Supreme Council comprising all seven of the Emirates' rulers. Any public perception that the uprisings had reached the UAE at such pivotal moment in time required an immediate and forceful response by public authorities. In this case, the family-state conduit between government and arts and culture organizations was quickly transcended to enforce change from the top down.

Conclusions

The initiative taken by this paper to explore the nature of the Sharjah Art Foundation's relationship with the state, primarily through the lens of the emirate's premier cultural product — the Biennale — has offered up some new ideas about the ways that states support arts and culture organizations. The SAF is definitely an embodiment of the arm's length principle for support of the arts. The emirate also exemplifies some of the key traits associated with the patron model or archetype role the state can play in supporting arts and culture. However, the evolution of the Biennale and growth of the SAF suggest a need to re-evaluate these models in a different regional context. It is important to recognize that the "arms-length principle" as applied in the UAE diverges fundamentally from its public purpose in Western Europe or the United States. "The principle is the basis of a general system of 'checks and balances' deemed necessary in a pluralistic democracy to avoid undue concentration of power and conflict of interest."³⁸

The application of this principle to the support and funding of arts and culture

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kennedy, "Sharjah Biennial Director Fired," April 7, 2011.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Chartrand and McCaughey, "The Arm's Length Principle," 7.

organizations is not exceptional, especially in a Western context, but serves to show how it is applied to the cultural sector of public policy. Does the “arms-length” principle as applied in the UAE uphold a “system of checks and balances” or curtail the “undue concentration of power and conflict of interest?” There are a couple of ways to read this. On the one hand, delegating a substantial role in cultural policy making to the SAF ‘keeps it in the family,’ so to speak, and thus perpetuates concentration of power in the hands of the emirate’s ruling family. On the other hand, from a national-federal perspective, Sharjah may be looking to preserve the role it has played as a cultural hub within the UAE. In a way, the SAF along with the other cultural resources Sharjah has nurtured over time help to safeguard and fortify its jurisdiction in the national cultural landscape, which has become more competitive as Abu Dhabi and Dubai channel resources into their own cultural projects.

The mandate and autonomy granted to the SAF has allowed it to pursue excellence in the arts and exist to promote “art for art’s sake.” The Sharjah Biennale represents the crowning achievement of this arrangement as a cultural product that continues to push the boundaries of contemporary art while maintaining close ties to the local community and acting as a vehicle for the repurposing of heritage structures in Sharjah as art spaces. The success of the Biennale, measured by its national impact and international recognition, attests to how effective this policy has been for the emirate. One of the weaknesses associated with a policy designed to extend family control to arts and culture foundations manifests in the tenuous nature of their ability to maintain a progressive programmatic policy. In the case of the Biennale, and the SAF as its parent organization, the policy model shields them from bureaucrats and ministry officials who may have little “personal interest,” ensures judgement about the arts continues to emanate from field professionals, and enables the Foundation to act as the principal advocate and promoter of the arts to both government and the general public.³⁹ The policy model does not completely free the organization from “political directives and pressures,” as evidenced by the incidents that took place at the 2011 Sharjah Biennale in the midst of the popular uprisings that rocked the socio-political climate in the Middle East. In this case, authorities quickly transcended that autonomy in the name of national security, and the family conduit was used to quickly enact change from the top.

Nonetheless, the family-state model of support for arts and culture organizations has made great strides toward the empowerment of women. The growing importance of the SAF, its sister foundations in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and other Gulf emirates, and the audiences they have worked to build, is reflective of demographic and economic trends in the Gulf indicating a rapidly growing highly educated population where women take on an increasingly important role in political and economic life.⁴⁰ The proliferation of arts and culture organizations like the SAF throughout the UAE and the other Arab Gulf states is indicative of the vibrancy being witnessed in the region’s arts and culture sector. With economic diversification and imperatives on the horizon for many Gulf governments, it is an open question whether the current relationship between the state and arts and culture organizations will change over time. For Sharjah and the SAF, it is clear that the bond between the organization and the state is one of identity. From the time of federation Sharjah has focused on culture and made it a critical component of its development strategy. This has cemented its role within the UAE as a leader and trend-setter in cultural policy. The emirate must maintain relevance in the national cultural landscape increasingly

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

cluttered by the products and projects produced by Abu Dhabi and Dubai's drive for cultural influence. These are the stakes of the cultural map within the Emirates and the fine art Sharjah must master in its relationship with the arts and culture sector as time goes on.

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