

The Gulf's Sheiks Buy the Sorbonne

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From our editor-at-large in Abu Dhabi

In a side lane bordered by palm trees extending from the noisy Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Avenue in Abu Dhabi, the weaving of BMWs and Mercedes is intense. At each arrival, sweating chauffeurs rush to open doors. Wearing their best black abayas, Amina, Shahad and other passengers softly glide along the red carpet covering the sidewalk. On October 8, the Université Paris-Sorbonne-Abu Dhabi opened. "This is our first day of classes," whispers Fatma, very proud to be one of the first to have registered. Eight hours by plane from the Latin Quarter in Paris, on the shores of the Persian Gulf, the Sorbonne has inaugurated a campus abroad under its name. A first in its 750 years of history! And the first time that France has created a university extension. In the Middle East, this role has traditionally been filled by the Catholic Church, in particular the Jesuits with the prestigious Saint-Joseph School in Beirut. The President of the Sorbonne, Jean-Robert Pitte, arriving from Paris, crosses the air-conditioned hall. "Yesterday evening, I had a long discussion with the sheikh at the iftar, the meal that marks the end of the Ramadan fast each evening," he confides before grasping the microphone. Supported by this modern prince who heads one of the planet's richest nations, this geography professor launches into a rather modern speech for this region. "The entire world is watching us, as you are writing a page of the history of the relationship between the Islamic and Western world," he tells the students. "Our professors will teach you how to analyze. You will be free to think. Contrary to George Bush's beliefs, we are going to prove that there are no good or evil civilizations, that Islam is not a war machine." The applause barely ceases when a student asks for the date planned for the delegate elections. "This is like the Sorbonne during the 'CPE' crisis," Jean-Robert Pitte answers, amused. "Will we be able to study in Europe?" asks Jinane. "Of course, your diploma will give you access to other European universities," the President answers. Alanoud al-Sabah smiles: like the majority of other students, this Koweiti princess learned French during her vacations in Divonne-les-Bains (Ain) where many rich Gulf families live. She continues, "I was supposed to study in the United States, but September 11 2001, plus the attacks in London changed everything. Our parents made us come home. I then saw an ad on the television for Abu Dhabi's Sorbonne. I jumped at the chance. It's the same teaching as in Paris, in a family atmosphere. Instead of being 26,000, there will be only 170 of us." For €6,315 per semester (€162 per year in France), the Gulf's elite did not hesitate. Such is the case of Nasser al-Zaabi, a powerful businessman in Abu Dhabi, who accompanied his 18 year old daughter, Fatma. "I am so thankful to our sheikh and government. We are developing very rapidly," he adds, pointing to the endless construction sites in the desert. "Building skyscrapers is easy. Changing mentalities is less so. That is what the Sorbonne will help us with." To hear him speak, the sheiks did not buy the Sorbonne like one buys a McDonald's franchise. Taking advantage of Beirut's decline and the uncertain future of Cairo, Abu Dhabi, a provincial city in the Gulf, wants to revolutionize the 21st century by becoming a regional center for the French-speaking world. The fact that the subjects taught by the Sorbonne do not lead to employment is of little note. "Black gold" brings in billions of dollars and the sheikh can concentrate on culture, museums and education. Envious of Dubai, who has achieved world renown with its ski slopes in the middle of the desert, he has partnered with prestigious names such as the Louvre and the Sorbonne. He has also asked the Louis-le-Grand, Normale Sup and Central schools to help him create engineering departments. He has invested in attracting professors from Paris. Through **Pascal Renouard de Vallière, a French lobbyist close to royal Gulf families**, his ambassador in Paris met Jean-Robert Pitte for the first time at a conference led by Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of the Egyptian president, at the Sorbonne in June 2004. Six months later, Jean-Robert Pitte was invited to Abu Dhabi. In September 2005, he presented the project to his board of directors: "It took some discussions. Some were reticent about being present in a Muslim country; others thought it

would cost a fortune as we can't even afford erasers in Paris! When I told them the sheikh would pay for everything, including the salary of professors to replace expatriates, and that the classes would be secular and identical to those in Paris, the 'yes' vote won the day." Gilles de Robien, Minister of Education, then accelerated the legal structuring of the operation. With the promise of better pay than in France - the exact amount of the salaries is a secret - seven professors agreed to relocate. Renowned professors, such as Pierre Brunel, a Arthur Rimbaud specialist, for their part, will visit for a few days. Between now and 2007-2008, these volunteers will have a home: a replica of the Sorbonne, with a local interpretation of the chapel's dome, will arise from the sand near the airport. Cost of the project: €25 million. Jean-Robert Pitte knows that some people at the Sorbonne are counting on this turning into a fiasco. Obstacles abound. Used to living separately, students are going to experiment with mixed gender classes. The women are ready for this move, seeking to emancipate, but the men, less so. Professors will also need to make efforts. At the end of the first class in philosophy, the professor had already discouraged some; he had presented his class in French without interruption. "The hardest thing will be to stay," Jean-Robert Pitte recognizes. "Abu Dhabi is an experiment for the Sorbonne before we expand to Greece, Korea, Japan and China." Outside, the night is falling. The muezzins' chants escape from the mosques. Jean-Robert Pitte returns to France, but will return for the official inauguration on November 18.