The experience of the Qawasim family of Sharja and RAK was quite different from the Nahyans or Maktums. They started as a major maritime power in the Gulf in the eighteenth century with interests on both Persian and Arabian shores. The Qawasim were gradually contained and diminished in the nineteenth century and by the twentieth century their territories were ruled separately by various branches of the family or lost altogether to non-Qawasim chiefs. These events reduced their once proud empire to political and economic insignificance in comparison with Abu Dhabi. These consequences resulted from a number of factors including their maritime activities that inevitably put them in conflict with powerful foreign powers; the uncompromising stance some Qawasim leaders took regarding the British; competitive family lineages unable to consolidate their
interests behind single strong leaders; and the accident of location with no windfall of oil to provide an alternative means of livelihood and power.

In the eighteenth century the Qawasim ruled most of the northern portions of the Trucial States not controlled by Oman. Their capital was the port of RAK, conveniently located near the mouth of the Persian Gulf and only a short distance by sea to the Persian coast. Their other main port of Sharja was located on an inlet near the then edge of Abu Dhabi territory. Virtually all the territory between RAK and Sharja was controlled by the Qawasim. By the nineteenth century, when their locus of relations turned to other Trucial States, Sharja became a more convenient center for their activities. Today Sharja and RAK are ruled independently by separate branches of the Qawasim family. Both are now small emirates with limited political and economic power. In land mass, Sharja and RAK occupy roughly 1,000 (3 percent) and 660 (2 percent) square miles of the UAE. RAK has two major land units, one on the Persian Gulf coast that extends into the Hajar mountains, and the other adjacent to Fujairah and Oman with no outlet to the Gulf of Oman. Sharja has six land units including several on the coast of Oman and one it administers with Fujairah. In population, Sharja is the third largest with 636,000 (16 percent) and RAK the fifth largest with 195,000 (5 percent) compared with Abu Dhabi’s 1.6 (40 percent) and Dubai’s 1.4 million (35 percent). Without significant oil resources, RAK now depends for its income on cement and gravel industries, shipbuilding, fishing, and subsidies from Abu Dhabi. It has recently

Figure 7.1 The Early Qawasim Chiefs and Rulers of Sharja and RAK up to 1866