

SUDDEN SUCCESSION



Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

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E D I T O R S



MbZ and the Future Leadership of the United Arab Emirates

IN PRACTICE, Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, is already the political leader of the United Arab Emirates, even though the federation's president, and Abu Dhabi's leader, is his elder half-brother Sheikh Khalifa. This study examines leadership in the UAE and what might happen if, for whatever reason, Sheikh Muhammad, widely known as MbZ, does not become either the ruler of Abu Dhabi or president of the UAE.





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Formation of the UAE

The UAE was created in November 1971 as a federation of six emirates—Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Fujairah, Ajman, and Umm al-Quwain. A seventh—Ras al-Khaimah—joined in February 1972 (see table 1). The UAE’s two founding leaders were Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan (1918–2004), the ruler of Abu Dhabi, and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum (1912–90), the ruler of Dubai. Their sons and grandsons are now key players in the country’s future.

In past centuries, the southern Gulf region was regarded by British officials as the “Pirate Coast,” a

moniker that persisted until 1853, when Britain and regional sheikhs signed the Treaty of Maritime Peace in Perpetuity and subsequent accords that handed responsibility for conduct of the region’s foreign relations to Britain. When about a century later, in 1968, Britain withdrew its presence from areas east of the Suez Canal, it initially proposed a confederation that would include today’s UAE as well as Qatar and Bahrain, but these latter two entities opted for complete independence.

Abu Dhabi dominates the UAE in both geographic size and economic might, boasting more than 90 percent of the federation’s oil reserves, amounting to

slightly less than 6 percent of the world's total. Most other emirates, Ajman being the smallest, have little or no oil—with each individual emirate bearing responsibility for energy resources within its borders.¹ Geographically, the UAE is notable for having several emirates that maintain enclaves inside the territory of others, reflecting tribal and migratory grazing origins. Since the UAE's founding, the presidency has been held by the ruler of Abu Dhabi, with the prime ministry initially held by the crown prince of Dubai (1971–79) and thereafter by Dubai's ruler.

Notionally, the seven member emirates are equal in status, as implied by the Fujairah ruler's attendance as UAE representative at the March 2019 Arab League summit in Tunis. The reality is different. Only Dubai can even half-challenge the will of Abu Dhabi. And Abu Dhabi sorts out Emirati political crises, as in the 2003 removal of the crown prince of Ras al-Khaimah, who challenged his father's decision to replace him with a younger half-brother, a decision enforced with the deployment of armored vehicles from Abu Dhabi.

The Emirati capital, at independence, was still a small fishing village; oil had only been discovered in 1958. Now, along with Dubai, it is an iconic Gulf city-state. Under MbZ, the top decisionmaker in both

Abu Dhabi and the UAE, the transformation has continued. The UAE armed forces have been vastly strengthened and, along with diplomacy, have made the country a regional player.

Theory of Presidential Succession

Presidential succession in the UAE is regulated by Articles 51 through 54 of the country's constitution, a document regarded as “temporary” in 1971 and made permanent in 1996. Article 51 does not “assign” the UAE presidency to Abu Dhabi, as is sometimes wrongly assumed by observers, but rather notes that “the Supreme Council of the Union shall elect from among its members a President of the Union and a Deputy”; the Supreme Council consists of the rulers of each of the seven emirates or their designated representatives. Meanwhile,

- Article 52 stipulates a five-year term of office for the president and deputy;
- Article 53 requires the Supreme Council to meet within one month after the death or resignation of a president to elect a successor; and
- Article 54 outlines the responsibilities of the president.²

TABLE 1. Land area, population, and oil reserves in the seven emirates

EMIRATE	LAND AREA (SQ. MI.)*	EST. POPULATION (2018)†	OIL RESERVES (2017)††
Abu Dhabi	26,000 (67,340 km ²)	3,230,000	90 billion barrels
Ajman	100 (260 km ²)	540,000	small/none
Dubai	1,588 (4,114 km ²)	3,320,000	4 billion barrels
Fujairah	560 (1,450 km ²)	250,000	small/none
Ras al-Khaimah	650 (1,684 km ²)	390,000	0.1 billion barrels
Sharjah	1,000 (2,590 km ²)	1,510,000	1.5 billion barrels
Umm al-Quwain	277 (720 km ²)	80,000	small/none

* Source: UAE government, <https://www.government.ae/ar-ae/about-the-uae/the-seven-emirates>.

† Source: “United Arab Emirates Population Statistics,” Global Media Insight, <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/>. Figures include expatriates.

†† Source: “United Arab Emirates—Oil and Gas Field Machinery Services,” Export.gov, <https://www.export.gov/article?id=United-Arab-Emirates-Energy-Power>.

History of Presidential Succession

To date, only one presidential succession has occurred in UAE history, when the founding president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, died on November 2, 2004, age eighty-six. Sheikh Zayed had become ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1966 and in 1969 had named his oldest son, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, to be his crown prince and eventual successor. In November 2003, when his health was failing, Sheikh Zayed also named his third-oldest son, Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed, as deputy crown prince, clearly signaling the direction he wished the eventual succession pathway in Abu Dhabi to follow.³ A year later, Sheikh Khalifa duly succeeded his father as ruler of Abu Dhabi and MbZ was elevated to crown prince of Abu Dhabi. At the federal level, Sheikh Khalifa was “elected” UAE president by the Supreme Council of rulers on November 3, 2004, after a day on which the vice president (and ruler of Dubai), Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum, had formally held the title of “acting president.”

Main Players

Listed by descending age, the following are the key figures in the UAE's various succession scenarios:

- **Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1948). President of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi since Sheikh Zayed, the nation's founder, died in 2004, he has suffered several strokes and is rarely seen in public except in carefully staged photographs. Footage of him receiving Ramadan greetings in May 2019 shocked observers for its unguarded portrayal of his physical and mental decline.
- **Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum** (born 1949). Known as MbR, he is prime minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai. One of his wives, Haya, is the half-sister of Jordan's King Abdullah, although widespread reports say she has separated and is living in exile in London. One of his daughters is married to Prince Nasser bin Hamad al-Khalifa, a son of the king of Bahrain.
- **Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1961). The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, known as MbZ, attended Britain's Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, an experience that bred in him animosity toward Britain. He is trained as a military helicopter pilot and served as the UAE armed forces chief of staff in the 1990s.
- **Hazza bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1963). A national security advisor to Sheikh Khalifa since 2006 who now focuses on domestic issues, he is a full brother to MbZ.
- **Saif bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1968). A deputy prime minister since 2009 and minister of interior since 2004, he is a half-brother to MbZ.
- **Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1968). National Security Advisor since 2015, he is U.S. educated and regarded as highly capable even as he keeps a low profile. He is a full brother to MbZ.
- **Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1970). A deputy prime minister since 2009, as well as minister of presidential affairs, he is owner of the Manchester City Football Club and runs the state-backed Mubadala Investment Company. He has emerged unscathed from continuing litigation related to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad affair, a multibillion-dollar scandal linked to a Mubadala subsidiary.
- **Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1972). The UAE foreign minister since 2006, known as AbZ, he is a full brother to MbZ.
- **Khaled bin Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1982). The eldest son of MbZ, he has served as deputy national security advisor since 2017.
- **Hamdan bin Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum** (born 1982). The crown prince of Dubai, he is known as Fazza, writes poetry, is active in sports, and uses social media, particularly Instagram.
- **Maktoum bin Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum** (born 1983). The third son of MbR, he serves as the deputy ruler of Dubai.

- **Dhiyab bin Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan** (born 1989). The second son of MbZ, he served in the UAE armed forces in Yemen in 2015.

The Emergence of MbZ

In succession matters within Abu Dhabi, MbZ overtook his older half-brother Sheikh Sultan bin Zayed al-Nahyan in the 2000s and subsequently consolidated political authority. By about 2009, he had become the de facto ruler of Abu Dhabi and later of the UAE, with President Khalifa effectively a figurehead. From the 1990s onward, MbZ rose as the dynamic modernizer of Abu Dhabi, similar to MbR's role as driver of Dubai's development as crown prince (1990–2006), and as ruler since then.

MbZ and MbR forged a close personal and professional relationship and became the two architects—albeit in different ways—of the UAE's political and economic emergence as a regional power in the 2000s. MbZ especially was entrusted with the sensitive task of organizing the policy response to the September 11, 2001, attacks, in which two UAE citizens were among the hijackers. He did so in ways that exceeded his then position as armed forces chief of staff.⁴

While MbZ rose to prominence because of a ferocious work ethic that produced results, he also benefited from a powerful support base within the al-Nahyan ruling family in Abu Dhabi. Unlike Sheikh Khalifa, who was an only child by Sheikh Zayed's first wife, Sheikha Hassa bint Muhammad bin Khalifa al-Nahyan, MbZ was the oldest of six powerful sons borne by Sheikh Zayed's favorite wife, Fatima bint Mubarak al-Ketbi. Fatima remains revered as "Mother of the Nation" fifteen years after Zayed's death.⁵

The sons of Fatima, or Bani Fatima, became a cohesive power bloc among the nineteen sons of Sheikh Zayed,⁶ especially as they began to hold senior emirate- and federal-level government posts in the 2000s. By 2009, members of the Bani Fatima occupied a multitude of key positions in the federal UAE government, including minister of presidential affairs

and deputy prime minister (Mansour bin Zayed), minister of foreign affairs (Abdullah bin Zayed), and national security advisor (Hazza bin Zayed).

Abu Dhabi's Preeminence

At the federal level, three separate developments after 2009 cemented the position of Abu Dhabi and MbZ across the UAE, while also centralizing power in ways that threatened to upset the balance between each individual emirate and the federal authorities.

The first development involved the curbing of Dubai's longstanding effective domestic policy autonomy over fallout from the 2009 debt crisis and a \$20 billion "bailout" from Abu Dhabi. The second was the hardline state security response to the Arab Spring, even though the transnational political upheaval barely touched the UAE. Related actions were orchestrated in Abu Dhabi but rolled out across all seven emirates. And the third development centered on the increasing withdrawal of President Khalifa from public life, a trajectory more or less sealed by a stroke in January 2014, after which he was not seen again for more than two years.

By 2016, MbZ was being treated as de facto head of state domestically as well as internationally and had assumed center stage in policymaking at the emirate and federal levels. The earlier-noted video coverage from spring 2019 visibly demonstrated the unlikelihood that President Khalifa, given his ill health, will ever return to public life.

Succession Scenarios

Two main possible outcomes await MbZ: one in which he ascends to lead his emirate alone and a second in which he becomes leader of Abu Dhabi and the whole UAE.

Outcome 1: Ruler of Abu Dhabi but Not President of the UAE

Although a split like this would end nearly fifty years of tradition, this premise has only been tested once—in 2004—and is not, as noted earlier, enshrined in the UAE's constitution.

Regionally, MbZ has courted controversy through his close relationship with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, known as MbS, and missteps in the two countries' four-year military campaign in Yemen. In economic terms, the UAE-led blockade of Qatar initiated in summer 2017 has harmed Dubai, and Abu Dhabi's consolidation of federal control has engendered emerging signs of discontent in Sharjah, Fujairah, and Ras al-Khaimah.

Should President Khalifa pass away or resign, the rulers of the seven respective emirates, including Khalifa's successor as ruler of Abu Dhabi, would meet within a month to elect a president from among them (see table 2). The critical question in such a scenario would be whether four votes could be mustered to block a candidacy favorable to Abu Dhabi, and whether Abu Dhabi could successfully pressure the far less politically and economically powerful emirates to fall in line.

In the face of any deadlock or tension, an alternative succession scenario could see the vice president—serving in any case as acting president, just as Sheikh Maktoum did for one day in 2004—elevated to serve a five-year term as UAE president. Muhammed bin Rashid would be in his early seventies as this scenario unfolded, and as a figure admired across the Arab world for his vision and leadership in Dubai, he might be viewed as a “safe pair of hands” in the immediate term.

Outcome 2: Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE

Should the next ruler of Abu Dhabi also become UAE president, the emirate's leadership would have to confront the question of whether succession should continue to move among the sons of Sheikh Zayed or proceed to the next generation (see table 3). When he appointed MbZ deputy crown prince in 2004, Sheikh Zayed indicated his preference for lateral succession but left open the question of what would happen after that. Many in Abu Dhabi are mindful of the risks of a “Saudi-style” lateral process, which has resulted in a series of aged monarchs and postponed for many years the inevitable shift to a

new generation. At roughly the same moment when the Saudis finally changed course by swiftly appointing MbS as crown prince, a decision by Abu Dhabi to keep passing rule from brother to brother would carry some irony.

Who Eventually Succeeds MbZ?

Any further talk of succession in the UAE must include a scenario in which MbZ passes from the scene. In such a case, one of his sons or brothers, whether half or full, could assume power.

One of His Sons?

The elevation in 2015 of MbZ's oldest son, Khaled, to director of the State Security Department was not considered a success, with questions arising over Khaled's work ethic and ability to carry out his duties. Attention may now turn to the de facto leader's second-oldest son, Dhiyab, who now holds positions of prominence as chair of Etihad Rail and the Abu Dhabi Department of Transport. In a broader sense, disappointment at Khaled's underperformance has raised questions about the eventual transition of authority to a younger generation of Emirati royals. Similar concerns have surfaced in Dubai with MbR's sons, including Dubai crown prince Hamdan bin Muhammad al-Maktoum.

One of His Full Brothers?

Given worries about the younger generation, continued lateral succession in Abu Dhabi among the sons of Sheikh Zayed would entail a number of options.

Sheikh Hazza, a full brother to MbZ and the third oldest of the Bani Fatima, was once considered a likely candidate for crown prince after his brother became Abu Dhabi's ruler. But Hazza was sidelined in 2015, after being replaced as national security advisor by Sheikh Tahnoun, another of the Bani Fatima, who was given the portfolio with broad authority over international affairs. He now is regarded as a figure of importance internationally. Hazza's responsibilities, as noted earlier, shrank to a focus on domestic issues, and he has a very low public profile, with correspondingly little interaction with foreign officials or visiting dignitaries.

TABLE 2. Rulers of the seven emirates

EMIRATE	NAME OF RULER	AGE
Abu Dhabi	Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan	70
Ajman	Sheikh Humaid bin Rashid al-Nuaimi	88
Dubai	Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum	69
Fujairah	Sheikh Hamad bin Muhammad bin Hamad al-Sharqi	70
Ras al-Khaimah	Saud bin Saqr al-Qasimi	63
Sharjah	Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad al-Qasimi	79
Umm al-Quwain	Saud bin Rashid al-Mualla	67

According to numerous media reports, MbZ and Sheikh Tahnoun were together at a controversial meeting in the Seychelles at which the creation of a back channel between the incoming Trump administration and the Kremlin was reportedly discussed. This drew the attention of U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller during his investigation into foreign interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Tahnoun subsequently visited Washington during Saudi crown prince MbS's stay in 2018, and again in 2019. MbZ visited Washington in 2017, before the Qatar rift, but has not returned. While Tahnoun clearly appears to

have the confidence of MbZ and is indisputably a part of Abu Dhabi's inner circle of power brokers, his reputation for operating in the shadows could be counted against him. Like Hazza but for different reasons, he does not cultivate a strong public profile.

Other members of the Bani Fatima group, such as Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed and Hamdan bin Zayed, the ruler's representative in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, are not widely considered to have the leadership qualities to become serious candidates for succession. Instead, if succession—in the absence of MbZ—does go to one of the Bani

Table 3. Wives and sons of Sheikh Zayed

	ALIA	HASSA	FATIMA	SHEIKHA	FATIMA	AISHA	MOZA AL-KHAILI	MOZA	AMNA
1948		Khalifa							
1955				Sultan					
1961					Muhammad				
1962					Hamdan				
1963					Hazza				
1965						Saeed			
1966									Isa
1968					Tahnoun	Nahyan	Saif		
1970					Mansour	Falah	Hamad		
1971						Dhiyab	Ahmed		
1972					Abdullah				
1973							Omar		
1977							Khaled		

Fatima, the most likely candidate may well be Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed, the UAE minister of presidential affairs and deputy prime minister since 2009.

These two federal-level positions have given Sheikh Mansour a decade of involvement at the highest echelons of UAE policymaking, rather than just in Abu Dhabi, and he has also developed international cachet through his ownership of the Manchester City Football Club and chairmanship of the Emirates Investment Authority. Perhaps most notably, in 2005 Mansour married Manal bint Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum, a daughter of the ruler of Dubai, making the couple and their five young children symbols of the dynastic linkage of the al-Nahyan in Abu Dhabi and the al-Maktoum in Dubai. This connection could gain added significance in any scenario whereby tension between the two emirates called for mutually acceptable “compromise” around a candidate for rulership in Abu Dhabi and the presidency of the UAE.

One of His Half-Brothers?

Should succession in Abu Dhabi pass laterally to a brother outside the Bani Fatima group, the prime candidate would appear to be Sheikh Saif bin Zayed, who has served as UAE minister of interior since 2004 and, like Mansour, as deputy prime minister since 2009. Sheikh Saif is well known both in Abu Dhabi and across the UAE, seen as capable and proficient, and possesses the charisma and experience required of a successful leader. Saif would likely continue the UAE’s security-centric approach to domestic and regional affairs but without the martial quality that has become associated with MbZ and generated a degree of pushback from other emirates and neighboring states.

Tremors in National Unity

Whoever takes power in a prospective future that excludes MbZ, various contingencies will be key, including whether MbZ has departed consensually or otherwise.

If one MbZ legacy is the regional projection of power far beyond UAE boundaries, another may be backlash from his attempts to consolidate power in

Abu Dhabi over the objections of other federation members. Abu Dhabi’s influence across the UAE has undoubtedly been a constant since 1971, but much of the country’s first decade was consumed by bitter arguments among the seven emirates over constitutional issues and divisions of responsibility between the federal and emirate levels.⁷ Although UAE-wide constitutional issues were officially settled in the late 1970s, signs have emerged, as Sheikh Zayed’s rule recedes into history, that the unifying bonds he forged have become increasingly frayed.

Thus far, tensions have largely remained beneath the surface, away from public view, as with the defection of a son of Fujairah’s ruler in 2018.⁸ But should they become more visible in anticipation of what could be decades of presidential rule for MbZ, the resulting unease could precipitate calls for a consensus candidate, as outlined earlier.

Implications for the United States

The impact of UAE succession on U.S. interests will likely hinge on how contentious the transition ends up being. A worst-case scenario could entail MbZ asserting Abu Dhabi’s control over the UAE, including by quashing expressions of discontent. This could do great damage to the federation and lead Dubai to attempt to distance itself from Abu Dhabi, perhaps in loose alliance with other emirates. The credibility of the UAE as a strong, stable, and reliable U.S. partner would be called into question should Abu Dhabi respond to pushback from other emirates with suppression, including the use of force.

A scenario in which one of MbZ’s brothers, not MbZ himself, succeeds Sheikh Khalifa as ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the UAE would likely result in UAE policymaking continuity, albeit in a less decisive manner than the worst-case scenario just described. Alternatively, a scenario in which MbR rises from the UAE vice presidency to become president could be construed as a compromise solution. It might, in turn, lead to a federal reassessment of the country’s regional affairs posture, while opening a window for a more restrained Abu Dhabi to rebuild relations with its fellow emirates.

As to this foreign policy posture, MbZ has been the driver of the UAE's engagement in the following theaters abroad:

- Sudan, since 2019
- Qatar, since 2017 (adversarially)
- Yemen, since 2015
- Horn of Africa, since before 2015
- Libya and Egypt, since 2011

Without MbZ, a similarly assertive application of UAE military and diplomatic power will no longer be certain.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, the UAE has been involved in security cooperation and development projects with Bahrain since the country's 2011 demonstrations. In Oman, the discovery of at least two UAE-linked spy rings since 2011 has prompted whispers about potential meddling in a future transition once Sultan Qaboos bin Said (b. 1940) leaves power.

The level of cross-emirate support for such policies, both among the citizenry and elites, is hard to gauge.

But MbR, the Dubai ruler, seldom refers to them, suggesting dissent to some. His reserve also functions as a reminder of the perceived economic cost to Dubai of the rift with Qatar, reflecting a view MbR is widely believed to hold. Dubai's principal economic foundation is its historical and current trading relationship with Iran, with which it maintains close logistical links. The increased pressure from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh on other Gulf states to reduce their links with Iran, as well as the U.S. reimposition of sanctions on the Islamic Republic, has harmed this relationship.⁹

UAE and Saudi policy is today almost in lockstep, at least publicly, an apparent result of the close relationship between MbZ in Abu Dhabi and MbS in Riyadh. Such views, at least in terms of the regional threat posed by Iran, appear to mesh with those of U.S. president Donald Trump and his senior advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, as well as recently reelected Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. This general harmony may please the current U.S. administration, but it may not survive if and when these key Gulf personalities leave the scene.

Notes

1. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief: United Arab Emirates," Mar. 21, 2017, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.php?iso=ARE>.
2. Constitution of the United Arab Emirates, available at <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ae/ae030en.pdf>.
3. Simon Henderson, "The UAE After Sheikh Zayed: Tensions Between Tribe and State," PolicyWatch 916, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Nov. 16, 2004, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-uae-after-sheikh-zayed-tensions-between-tribe-and-state>.
4. "Leadership Looks Beyond 11 September Crisis Management," *Gulf States Newsletter* 26, no. 683, April 2002, 11–12.
5. Muhammad bin Zayed's position, in this regard, is comparable to that of the emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud—both also sons of favorite wives of the previous head of state.
6. Of whom seventeen are living, after the deaths, both in aircraft incidents, of Nasser bin Zayed in June 2008 and Ahmed bin Zayed in March 2010.
7. As detailed extensively in an eyewitness account of the formation and early years of the UAE by a member of the Council of Ministers: see Abdullah Omran Taryam, *The Establishment of the United Arab Emirates, 1950–1985* (London: Croon Helm, 1987).
8. David Kirkpatrick, "Emirati Prince Flees to Qatar, Exposing Tensions in UAE," *New York Times*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/world/middleeast/emirati-prince-qatar-defects.html>.
9. Tuqa Khalid and Andrew Torchia, "In Dubai, U.S. Sanctions Pressure Historic Business Ties with Iran," Reuters, Nov. 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-dubai/in-dubai-us-sanctions-pressure-historic-business-ties-with-iran-idUSKCN1NO14Y>.

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