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The Muslim Brotherhood on Trial in the UAE

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Brief Analysis

Washington should encourage the UAE to publicly present its evidence against the local Brotherhood group al-Islah, several of whose members are being tried for subversion.

On April 16, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan -- in line to be the next president of the United Arab Emirates -- will meet with President Obama at the White House to discuss the two countries' "strong and enduring ties" and "common strategic interests for the Gulf region and broader Middle East." One topic sure to be at the forefront of their minds is the UAE's recent security actions targeting the local Muslim Brotherhood group al-Islah ("Reform"). Ninety-four individuals -- most of them al-Islah members arrested over the past year -- are on trial for coordinating with foreign groups and plotting to seize power, among other charges, and the crown prince is widely conjectured to be at the center of the clampdown.

A LONG AND TANGLED RELATIONSHIP

Al-Islah has long been entwined in the UAE's national affairs, and the Brotherhood's presence stretches back a decade before the Emirates became an independent state. In the late 1950s and 1960s, Egyptian Brotherhood members escaping Gamal Abdul Nasser's crackdown arrived in the Gulf and were originally embraced there. The region's rulers regarded them as a convenient counterweight to Arab nationalist sentiment, which they saw as a growing threat at the time. The influential Egyptians steadily recruited locals, and in 1974 -- three years after the UAE's independence from Britain -- Emiratis formed al-Islah with the approval of Dubai ruler Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum.

Al-Islah members gained considerable influence in the new state during the 1970s and 1980s, with many assuming

high posts in the education and justice sectors -- including the cabinet-level position of education minister -- and crafting the nation's curriculum. By the 1990s, they dominated student governments, the teachers association, and the jurists association, using these venues to pursue the organization's interests, according to one prominent local analyst. As al-Islah's influence flourished, UAE authorities came to regard the Brotherhood as a creeping Islamist threat contradicting the government's more tolerant view of Islam and its role in the state. In the early 1990s, an Egyptian investigation conducted with Abu Dhabi's approval found that one of the UAE group's committees had made contributions to individuals belonging to an Egyptian terrorist organization.

Since then, the government has made intermittent but considerable efforts to restrain al-Islah's growth, proselytization, and foreign links, including by directly engaging its members. For example, in 2003, the soon-to-be crown prince met with local Brotherhood education-sector employees, reportedly urging them to choose between renouncing their Islamist ideology, ceasing the public propagation of their ideas, or remaining affiliated with the Brotherhood but transferring out of the education sector. The meetings concluded without agreement, and the government eventually transferred many such individuals to other ministry posts to decrease their influence on young Emiratis.

CURRENT CRACKDOWN

Today, UAE anxieties about al-Islah are linked to the Islamist ascendance across the Middle East in the wake of the Arab uprisings, especially with regard to Egypt, the Brotherhood's birthplace and nucleus. Abu Dhabi is concerned that al-Islah seeks the same political goal the Brotherhood achieved in Egypt -- to assume power following the government's overthrow. Last week, outspoken Dubai police chief Gen. Dahi Khalfan alluded to government evidence that the group has been plotting to topple Gulf rulers, and that the individuals currently on trial had reached an advanced stage in their seditious plans before being detained.

The ninety-four suspects include individuals who have demanded the release of the "UAE 7" -- a group of al-Islah members who were stripped of their citizenship in December 2011 for allegedly posing a security threat and detained in April 2012 -- as well as their supporters, family members, others who have expressed nonconforming views, and the UAE 7 themselves. Many prominent figures are among them: Hamad Roqait, an al-Islah cofounder from Sharjah; Essa al-Suwaidi, former director of the Abu Dhabi educational zone; Ahmed bin Ghaith al-Suwaidi, a senior civil servant and renowned economist; and bloggers Khalifa al-Nuaimi, Rashid al-Shamsi, and Omran al-Radhwan. The Suwaidis, Shamsi, and Nuaimi belong to some of the UAE's largest and most influential tribes. Lawyers Mohammed al-Mansoori, Mohammed al-Roken, and Salim al-Shehhi are also on trial. Roken is one of the country's most prominent human-rights lawyers and helped defend two of the "UAE 5" (charged in 2011 with publicly insulting authorities and eventually pardoned) as well as the UAE 7. Shehhi was detained upon arriving at the state security prosecution office to represent Roken.

Al-Islah's popular base lies in Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and other poorer northern regions of the UAE. The group -- whose membership may be as high as 20,000 out of a population of just over one million Emirati citizens -- has received special treatment by local leaders there, and many of those on trial hail from these areas. Northerners complain of high unemployment, poor public services and infrastructure, and lack of opportunity -- circumstances that have been an important aspect of revolutionary fervor in other Arab states. They also witness the glaring discrepancy between their living conditions and the glitz and glitter of Abu Dhabi and Dubai to the south. Beyond specific threats, the government's targeting of al-Islah in these regions may represent a more general effort to nip expression of discontent in the bud. Not even royal status provides protection in such cases -- al-Islah chairman Sheikh Sultan bin Kayed al-Qasimi, cousin to the ruler of Ras al-Khaimah, was detained in April 2012 and is also on trial.

ASSESSING THE THREAT

A climate of secrecy and intimidation has hung over the trial thus far. International legal observers and foreign media are banned from attending and reporting firsthand on the proceedings -- only government-sanctioned local media are permitted. Last month, an Emirati whose father is among the defendants was arrested for tweeting "falsehoods" about the trial in violation of a new law banning such activity; on April 8, he was sentenced to ten months in jail for his actions. Public information on the charges is limited as well. According to a report by four human-rights groups, the central piece of evidence is a confession by Ahmed bin Ghaith al-Suwaidi, extracted by torture during a year in solitary confinement at a secret location.

In this climate, it is impossible to assess whether the government faces a real threat of subversion from the defendants and, if so, the extent of it. The modus operandi of other Brotherhood branches in the region offers few lessons about al-Islah's activities. On one hand, most branches accept the common leadership of the Egyptian Brotherhood's "general guide." On the other hand, national chapters generally operate in a way that they find appropriate for their own local conditions, and they sometimes differ in their political views. Although branches consult with each other and occasionally cooperate in fundraising, they remain loosely linked.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The trial's outcome will have important implications, especially if the tribunal convicts the defendants of sedition. A guilty verdict that includes public display of convincing evidence would stigmatize al-Islah locally and internationally, emboldening the government to take future action against the group with strong foreign support. Without such evidence, however, a conviction would leave Abu Dhabi vulnerable to international charges of suppressing peaceful calls for reform. Some of those on trial were among the more than 100 Emiratis who signed an unprecedented petition to President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan and the country's Federal Supreme Council on March 9, 2011, as Arab uprisings began to sweep the region. The petition called for holding comprehensive elections and granting full legislative authority to the Federal National Council, currently an advisory body that is partially elected by a select, government-sanctioned list. Supporters and family members of the petition signers are also on trial.

Whatever the verdict, al-Islah will likely intensify its political activities. Accordingly, Washington should encourage Abu Dhabi to strengthen its own position at home and abroad by publicly presenting evidence of the alleged crimes.

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