

The UAE After Sheikh Zayed: Tensions Between Tribe and State

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Brief Analysis

The formal succession has been smooth so far, but many questions remain about how the ruling family will handle major regional decisionmaking in practice.

The November 2 death of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan -- president of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and ruler of its largest emirate, Abu Dhabi -- had been widely anticipated, and the succession of his eldest son, Khalifa, to both positions has been smooth and faster than expected. Yet, filling the gap left by the man whom local newspapers describe as "visionary" and "sage of the Arab world" is likely to challenge both the al-Nahyan family and its relations with the ruling families in the other emirates.

Continuing Zayed's Legacy

Zayed's triumph was to take his emirate -- which consisted of just a few mud houses before oil was discovered in 1958 -- into the twenty-first century while avoiding the turbulence that has plagued the Persian Gulf region in recent decades. By creating the UAE in 1971, Zayed protected Abu Dhabi (of which he had become emir in 1966) and the different tribes in other member emirates from the regional power vacuum created by the withdrawal of the longstanding British military presence. With control over nearly a tenth of the world's oil reserves (mostly concentrated in Abu Dhabi) and an indigenous population of less than one million, Zayed had the wealth to buy success. The future of the UAE will depend on his sons' ability to maintain family unity and convince the other emirates that it is worthwhile to remain in the union.

Some of the omens are not good. According to the BBC, Khalifa, the new ruler, "lacks his father's charisma." For many years after being named crown prince in 1969, he was referred to by expatriates as "the clown prince." In his fifties and having already suffered at least one stroke, Khalifa faces a challenge from his younger brother Muhammad, whom Zayed named deputy crown prince in 2003. A few weeks after that appointment (which included

the stated assumption that Muhammad would become crown prince when Khalifa became ruler), Muhammad was named deputy chairman of the Abu Dhabi executive council. Both appointments had the effect of sidelining Zayed's second son, Sultan, the deputy prime minister, whose government appointments followed a dissolute youth.

Muhammad is the oldest son of Zayed's fourth wife, Fatima. She is the only wife who holds official status in the UAE government, with the title "President's wife" and the role of chairwoman of the UAE General Women's Union. Fatima's other sons include Hamdan, the effective foreign minister, Hazza, the head of the State Security Organization, and Abdullah, the minister of information, making her family a formidable sub-group.

Opposition from Dubai

Within the UAE, the main rival to Abu Dhabi's continued authority is the emirate of Dubai. With comparatively few oil reserves, Dubai has been forced to develop itself as a commercial center, expanding a port that has historically served as a major trading link with Iran. The emirate also has significant industrial assets, including an aluminum smelter and the Jebel Ali industrial zone and port (the latter much visited by the U.S. Navy).

Dubai's rivalry with Abu Dhabi has sometimes been intense. In the late 1970s, when Zayed made a military appointment that Dubai's al-Maktoum family thought belonged to them, military units took up opposing positions. Nowadays, Abu Dhabi seems envious of Dubai's entrepreneurship. A new seven-star hotel is nearing completion in Abu Dhabi, only the second such rated hotel in the world; the other is in Dubai.

U.S.-UAE Relations

In recent years, the United States has developed good relations with the UAE. In 2000, for example, Washington announced the sale of eighty F-16 fighters worth \$6.5 billion to the emirates. The relationship has not always been good, however. In 1973, the UAE was the first oil exporter to announce an embargo on sales to the United States. Abu Dhabi's ruling family and state institutions were also major shareholders in the criminal Bank of Credit and Commerce International, and were slow to take action when reports of bad management began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, as one of the provisions of the F-16 sale, Washington had to grant a waiver of sanctions to excuse Dubai's earlier independent purchase of Scud missiles from North Korea. In 2003, relations were strained by the activities of a local think tank, the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up, which hosted anti-Semitic speakers and used anti-Semitic language on its website. After U.S. government protests, the think tank was closed. And earlier this year, the Harvard Divinity School returned a \$2.5 million donation given by Zayed for a professorial chair because of protests regarding his links to anti-Semitism.

Prospects and Problems

The future course of politics in the UAE is likely to be opaque, with any differences between personalities sorted out behind closed doors. The ruler and deputy ruler of Dubai (brothers Maktoum and Hamdan bin Rashid) care little for administration; by family agreement, their brother Muhammad effectively runs the emirate. Many observers expect that his namesake in Abu Dhabi will emerge in an equivalent role; indeed, they hope he does because the two Muhammads are said to like each other and work well together.

But a small example of what might go wrong occurred in June 2003, when the ruler of Ras al-Khaimah, the third largest emirate, suddenly switched the title of crown prince from one son to another. The ruler had been increasingly concerned by his eldest son's antipathy toward U.S. intervention in Iraq and his daughter-in-law's support for women's rights. The demotion provoked street protests, including gunfire, around the walls of the ruler's palace by supporters of the deposed prince; military units from Abu Dhabi had to intervene to restore order (for more on this incident, see [PolicyWatch no. 769 \(/node/8922\)](#)).

In the worst case, the member emirates of the UAE could become dissatisfied with Abu Dhabi and seek alternative

leadership or a breakup of the union. There is also a danger that Iran, which occupies three islands that the UAE considers to be its territory, might take advantage of any fragility. Accordingly, Washington may need to use its good offices to ensure cool thinking in the wake of Zayed's death. Sending Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to the UAE on November 5 was a good first step.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute and author of the Institute Policy Paper [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy \(/node/9075\)](#) (2003). ❖

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