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The Rise of the UAE and the Meaning of MbZ

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Brief Analysis

On an evening during Ramadan in 2012, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (MbZ) asked a group of statesmen, including sheikhs from al-Nahyan, intellectuals, and newspaper writers: “What if the UAE was attacked in its own backyard? What if Abu Dhabi is targeted by military action from a big hostile country with regional ambitions, and at the same time the enemy has moved its agents to wreak havoc inside the country, what should be our reaction? What would be the right decision to make?”

Several of the attendees gave various answers, while the rest preferred to listen to the opinion of the Sheikh, who said: “We will pound the capital of the enemy without hesitation, and we will eliminate the agents in the blink of an eye, and we will protect our homeland.”

In the past several weeks, the UAE has witnessed two historic events that have received global coverage alongside the country’s major peace deal with Israel. First, there was the launch of the “Hope” probe to Mars, followed by the successful splitting of the atom at the Barakah nuclear power plant—the first nuclear power plant in the Arab world. These two developments were planned and announced years in advance, but the roots of the vision yielding these two major developments span decades. In a country as young as the UAE, a Union that will celebrate its fiftieth birthday next December, these technical achievements are particularly significant.

The United Arab Emirates has taken a hard road to these historic achievements, running on a clear vision and a long-term strategy that has required much blood, sweat, and tears to bring the UAE up to the level of countries that are capable of protecting themselves. That the UAE has made this progress with international legitimacy is also noteworthy: Abu Dhabi has strong alliances with major regional and international powers, and thus friends who would react in the case of an attack upon the UAE.

A Country Capable of Self Defence

Since the 1990s, the UAE has been a steadfast member of a number of UN military peacekeeping missions. There, Emirati troops have acquired field skills, determined their strengths and weaknesses, and received first-class training. The 2015 Operation Decisive Storm to liberate Yemen, in which the UAE was the second-most important force and closest ally for Saudi Arabia, [added further depth](#) to the military role that the UAE has built for itself. Through this alliance, the UAE has been monitoring its security capabilities, measuring its potential, discovering its mistakes, and reassessing its experiences.

August 2 marked the thirtieth anniversary of Saddam Hussein's Iraq invasion and subsequent attempted annexation of Kuwait. Now known as "the first Gulf War," at the time it was simply known "the Gulf crisis." While the war divided Arabs generally, the Gulf Arab states held together as one bloc against the occupation. Kuwait, small and rich, had supported Saddam in his war against Iran, but the country was the embodiment of the English proverb, "*Weakness invites the predators.*" It was easy prey for a hungry and wounded dictator emerging from a devastatingly long war with Iran. In a moment of desperate miscalculation, Saddam committed one of the biggest follies of modern era.

One analyst I spoke to recalled that this horrifying moment in the tragic modern history of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was also a moment of great enlightenment for MbZ, providing a lesson that has remained with him for the past thirty years. He took the full measure of the UAE's lot as a small country surrounded by bigger ones; the large states will tend to dominate the course of politics through geography and demography, facts that generally determine the destiny of nations.

But this does not always have to be the case. The Sheikh has since endeavored to build a country that can stand on its own two feet, beginning with the development of a strong arm and top-tier air forces trained to the highest standards along with the localization of the Emirati defense industry.

In this context, the Kuwaitis tell a joke that illuminates the attitude driving the Emirati focus on defense. Two Kuwaiti tourists are in Cairo on the day of the Iraqi occupation of their country. After getting quite drunk and returning to their separate hotel rooms, one hears the news of the Iraqi invasion on the radio. He rushes to his friend's room and knocks on the door, shouting: "Did you hear that! Kuwait occupied Iraq!" His drunk friend replies: "I know it very well, we are small but fierce." In essence, MbZ intends to realize this image of the small but fierce nation, ensuring that history does not repeat itself.

Filling A Vacuum of Regional Leadership

In 2011, as the Arab Spring peaked—proving the most devastating political earthquake in contemporary Arab history—Arab regimes fell, and Egypt, the largest Arab country, was on the verge of sliding into chaos. At a time when a number of presidents and leaders were living in anxiety, overwhelmed by uncertainty and doubt and fear, there was one Arab leader who saw that moment as a sad variation of the Kuwait crisis, with the same roots and consequences. This foresight has helped Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi become the visible and influential Arab leader over the last decade.

Despite the lack of geographical depth and the limited population density, MbZ has striven to make the UAE into a regional super-power. In this project, he has found success through creating many of the policies the region has followed in recent years, sticking to a clear political vision and forging alliances—both with neighbors and powerful outside actors like the United States—[to pursue common interests](#).

Domestically, MbZ has sought to transform the country into an inspirational hub for urbanization and a model that appeals to youth both regionally and abroad, with his personal and political focus on science, education, technology, and financial services.

Kissinger saw the 19th century German Foreign Minister Otto von Bismarck as one of the greatest "idealistic" politicians in his interpretation of history, state interests, and political choices: politics was nothing more than

choosing the least evil solutions or choosing the least bad choices.

However, according to Kissinger, Bismarck was unable to use his insights to shape Europe's subsequent trajectory from the end of the nineteenth century until the First World War, and in the twenty years that followed, Germany adopted an even worse series of half-measures and compromises that inevitably led to the Second World War.

While this description of Bismarck is only a partial portrayal of the changes taking place in the UAE, it is certain that other Arab countries can learn much from this case of non-traditional leadership by examining 'the meaning' of Mohammad bin Zayed. The aphorism that "Those who do not invade are invaded" may seem more fit to the classic wars of ancient times, but for small states these truths remain timeless—there is always need to push predators away from their land and people to protect them from being swallowed up.

In the twenty-first century, in light of the resurgence of traditional civilizations and their aspirations to have a greater role in shaping world politics as superpowers through "spheres of influence," small states are even more vulnerable. The lessons of the past must be applied proactively in this era when the Arab world appears to be tilting towards utter disintegration.

The UAE is determined to buck these trends, and it signaled this determination in August when the UAE announced a peace agreement with Israel on the condition of a halt to settlements. One of Israel's most prominent columnists, Haviv Rettig Gur, characterized the move in *The Times of Israel* as the UAE showing the way towards peace in Palestine, writing: "The Emirati initiative demonstrates one thing above all: if [the Palestinians] wish to change Israeli policy and behavior, they must convincingly explain to Israelis that a withdrawal is not the catastrophe-in-waiting that so many expect. The Palestinians must give the Israelis something to lose, or rather something to gain that might justify the risk of abandoning some significant portion of the West Bank highlands."

Given these major developments, the summer of 2020 can be described as the moment when the UAE "arrived" as a regional power on the Arab political scene, though this is the result of a long process, with a number of decisions regarding geopolitics, resource markets, demography, and other factors coming together over time.

Nobody can predict the future exactly, but great historians can set conditions that must be met for the rise of nations: strong armies in the field, the ability to counter challenges and make difficult decisions, knowledge of one's own limits, and the ability to learn from failures and successes.

The UAE today sees itself in that image and as a rising benevolent regional power, betting on science, technology, social peace, coexistence, prosperity, development and stability, all matched with the hard power capacity to defend itself and its interests. This self-image seems unsatisfactory to a number of Western observers and analysts, who begrudge the "loud" moves of Emirati diplomacy and intervention to bring stability in various parts of the Middle East, though these observers often fail to identify an alternative.

Emiratis will respond to their critics by emphasizing that, first and foremost, they have succeeded in their goal of establishing and preserving the United Arab Emirates. The UAE has excelled in establishing good governance based on harmony and accord that has its roots in hundreds of years of managed tribal alliances, and this has proven to be the most enlightened and inspiring Arab model for the younger generation. Every year, Abu Dhabi and Dubai compete with the world's cities [in terms of the best quality of life](#).

And in the face of a Turkish government fueled by Ottoman nostalgia, the UAE has been its most effective counterweight—really its only counterweight—among the Arabs. The Ottoman path led the Turks down a dark tunnel ending in destruction and downfall, and it will again. For all these reasons, it is not premature to say that we, the Arabs, should study the "meaning of Mohammed bin Zayed" and study it well. ❖



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