

The UAE's Stability from an Outsider's Perspective / Dr. Moran Zaga

The United Arab Emirates was different in the landscape of the Middle East from its very beginning. Being the first and only federation in the Arab world, the UAE is today among the 30 most stable countries in the world and the most stable country in the Middle East, according to the Fragile State Index of 2020. Many tend to explain this stability in the oil's blessing of the country. However, this approach cannot explain the lack of stability in Libya and Iraq, which were also blessed in this resource. So what is the secret of the UAE's success? And how do we see this stability from an outsider's perspective? In my research, I refer to three main pillars of strength that the UAE possesses: continuity, flexibility and legitimacy.



Continuity

The drawing of Middle East borders in the 1920s had overridden traditional cultures and socio-political structures. The modern states introduced not only new divisions but also totally different political models, based on Western heritage. Some would claim that this decolonization process has left its remarks on the regional conflicts to this day. These conflicts, though, had never been part of the modern UAE.

The UAE's federal structure is probably one of the most brilliant ideas in the region's history. By drawing internal borders, each sheikhdom was able to preserve its own territory and identity. The national identity that was created in 1971 added another layer of identity and belonging. Yet, instead of overriding the primordial political and social systems, the modern country fully embraced them. The sheikhdoms continue to play an important role in the modern state structure and contribute to its stability.

Flexibility

From all of the Arab countries, the UAE has likely the most skillful ability to foresee the future, plan, and change over time. The 2030 vision that was initiated by the crown prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, aims to reduce the country's centralised political and economic systems. The way to do so, according to that strategy, is through hybridic and diversified systems that decentralize the sources and power.

The federal system is one example of hybridity, but there are many more. The Federal National Council (FNC) brings democratic principles into a monarchic regime. The FNC itself forms a hybrid system in which half of its members are being elected and half nominated. The Emiratization project is another project that proves that local identity can be strengthened while the country continues to be an international hub. Hybridity and flexibility are also evident in the economic sphere. Various economic models were intertwined into the rentier state model much before the regional awareness to post-oil era. In the past two decades, new economic sectors and new domestic sources of income emerged, such as the VAT. The country developed a diversified

economy and built a civil nuclear plant that reduces the need for fossil fuels in its domestic electricity generation mix. The hybrid approach comprises an important tool for coping with changing realities. Diversification plays an important principle in major policy decisions and shapes the UAE's self-sufficiency.



Legitimacy

Continuity and flexibility might sound opposites, but their combination is the key to achieve domestic and international legitimacy. According to the ASDA'A survey of 2020, the UAE is the country that Arab youth would most like to live in and it's the no. 1 country they would like to emulate. This legitimacy affords a great deal of confidence for the country to act and to make bold steps. These steps were seen both in soft power and hard power actions that the UAE initiated, mostly in the last 3 years. The Abrahamic Accords exemplify that confidence, that cannot be made without a solid legitimacy.

To conclude, continuity, flexibility and legitimacy are the three factors that make the UAE such a stable country in the Middle East. Instead of taking its economic advantages as granted, it planned a well-thought and long-term strategies. Those who understand this nature of the UAE, can see why the year of 2020 was named: Year of preparation.



On a personal note, I'd like to congratulate the United Arab Emirates for its 49 anniversary. May this new partnership open the minds and hearts of all peoples in our region for generations to come.

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