

## **THE UAE'S SECOND HALF CENTURY: BUILDING FORWARD TO WHAT?**

**By David Pollock**

On this occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence for the United Arab Emirates, a quick look back and forward is cause for both celebration and reflection. Progress over the past half century is impressive, especially given the initially low expectations and the tough neighborhood in which the country finds itself. At the moment of its independence, outsiders could be forgiven for wondering if these seven emirates would even stay united, let alone cohere into a fully functional state. That moment, moreover, was instantly clouded by Iran's occupation of three strategic islands – Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb – claimed by the newly sovereign Arab country. And its economy was still dormant; this was two years before the first giant surge in global oil prices, during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

The next decades witnessed a steady succession of other grave challenges. In the foreign policy and security sphere: the 1978 “Islamic” revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq war throughout the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's occupation of nearby Kuwait in 1990, the specter of jihadi terrorism before and after 9/11 and the rise of Daesh, and Iran's continuing interference in its Arab neighbors. In the domestic Arab arena, the uprisings and civil wars of the entire last decade, often entangled with the Muslim Brotherhood or like-minded movements, rocked the surrounding region. And from an economic standpoint, the rollercoaster of spiking and collapsing energy values meant continual uncertainty and urgent adjustments.

Nevertheless, the UAE not only survived but thrived throughout this typically turbulent Mideast period. It largely managed to avoid direct entanglement in major regional conflicts. It maintained domestic tranquility. And almost uniquely among the so-called “oil-cursed” Arab states, it systematically diversified its economy, adding a conglomeration of world-class assets and activities in non-energy sectors including trade, transport and logistics, finance, tourism, technology, and more.

In recent years, the UAE veered somewhat from this path by extending its military interventions around the region, earning it for a time the affectionate American nickname “Little Sparta.” It participated, on a small but politically symbolic scale, in the (ultimately ill-fated) American expedition in Afghanistan. Its armed forces ventured as far afield as Libya, and as close to home as Yemen.

Lately, however, the UAE has voluntarily cut back on such endeavors, and opted instead to focus its foreign policy in a sharply contrasting direction: regional peacemaker. About a year ago, it signed the Abraham Accords peace agreement with Israel. Remarkably, this has not provoked a quarrel with Iran. And it may yet bring some practical benefits to the Palestinians as well.

In the past year, equally important, the UAE has reached out intensively to many other erstwhile regional rivals: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Qatar, and even Syria. The alacrity and agility of these calculated shifts is quite remarkable. And the prospects for success in navigating all these strong cross-currents, while not assured, appear reasonably promising.

But where to go from here, over the coming half century? As Muslims say, Muhammad was the last prophet; so one must be very humble about trying to predict long-term futures -- especially in his volatile native region! Let us then simply analyze the opportunities and challenges ahead, in both the foreign and domestic spheres.

First, in its foreign policy, the UAE will need to balance its relations with competing, and even conflicting, regional powers. The most obvious case in point involves Iran and Israel. This is a difficult task for any country right on Iran's borders; yet it is not an impossible one, as the (admittedly imperfect) analogy of Azerbaijan attests. Might the UAE actually be able, over the very long term, to help deconflict these two outside archrivals? The benefits for the entire region and indeed the world would be immense. For the foreseeable future, however, this may be a problem that can only be managed, rather than resolved.

On the global level, the UAE will strive to balance its relations with the leading international actors. Here the clearest case involves the U.S. and China. From today's vantage point, it seems most likely that the former will remain the key security ally for the UAE, while the latter gradually becomes an increasingly important economic partner. The trick will be to ensure that these two relationships can coexist. Questions and perhaps crises over this issue will almost certainly recur. Yet overall it appears plausible, as Emirati officials insist, that their country can sustain separate but nearly equally good relations with both the U.S. and China – just so long as the irreducible security requirements are respected.

Finally, on the internal front, the long-term opportunities and challenges are likewise twofold. First is the matter of intensified economic diversification, as the world slowly transitions away from fossil fuels. The UAE, as noted above, is already well ahead of the curve on this trajectory, although more effort will be required. The key point in this context is precisely that this will be a very long-term process, probably lasting the whole next half-century of Emirati independence. That is not a guarantee of success, but it vastly improves the odds.

Second, and closely related to this question, is the set of long-term global environmental, technological and other transnational concerns, whether of climate change, public health, migration, artificial intelligence applications, and beyond, into yet-uncharted territory. The UAE's own cutting-edge status on some of these issues, and its emerging international partnerships on others, place it in a relatively good position to meet this challenge as well.

Yet the larger question will be whether, over its second half-century, the UAE can contribute to solving these global problems even beyond its national borders. Here two often overlooked facts point in a positive direction. One is that, during the long global transition toward lower

carbon emissions, one of the most effective bridging steps would be to move the major emitters like China and India away from coal – by substituting oil and even more so natural gas.

Two is that the high-level human capital amassed by the UAE, both among its citizens and among its far larger community of expatriate workers, is a necessary if not altogether sufficient condition for addressing any future scenario. Balancing tolerance and technology, natives and neighbors, will be a constant issue. Yet if the UAE continues to welcome engagement on that very human level, it stands a good chance of keeping its place in the next half century as a contributor of a decent life, not only for its own population, but for humanity as a whole.

