

UAE: The next fifty

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Few countries can look back to their first fifty years of statehood with such satisfaction as the UAE, and even fewer can look forward to the next fifty years with such confidence. Indeed the first fifty years can be seen as being the process of laying the foundations of what is yet to come. The future has risks and uncertainties, but the UAE is well prepared to face them.

Making predictions about the future in such unpredictable times as we are living in may be presumptuous. But a look back at the past, and a clear headed assessment of the present, may tell us a lot about the future. Since its foundation in 1971, the UAE has developed a high level of resilience. It is on the cutting edge of innovation and creativity. It is on its way to creating sustainable prosperity that can withstand global shocks and challenges. Yet it also faces unprecedented levels of risk and unpredictability. The wisdom of Sheikh Zayed – the country's founding father - needs to continue guiding its leaders, whilst agility and adaptability need to characterise its tactics.

Resilience

Given the historical uncertainties that characterised the process of establishing the UAE it is no wonder that some at the time doubted its capacity to survive, let alone become a global hub and a regional leader. The country has come a long way in the process of ensuring its resilience. Its armed forces have evolved from the modest beginnings of the Trucial Oman Scouts into an agile force equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry. The country's economy, which has long stopped depending solely on the production of hydrocarbons, has also shown resilience: overcoming the economic crisis of a decade ago, and currently well on its way to absorbing the shocks of the pandemic.

For a country that has gone through the deep social changes that the UAE has experienced in the last five decades the issue of social resilience is also relevant. The social pressures of such a tumultuous change could easily have swept away the country's social fabric, but it did not.

These three areas: defence, economy and social fabric will remain the tripod on which future resilience needs to be build.

Defence, Peace and Security

The Gulf region is a difficult neighbourhood. The history of the wider Middle East since the end of WWII has been one of constant wars and crisis. The UAE has no choice but to invest in its defence. But it also needs to lead when it comes to developing a new regional security architecture for the region. This will be the agenda for the next decade or two, perhaps more. In the past the UAE has shown a capacity to think ambitiously. The 'Abraham Accords' are a case in point. It has also shown that it is willing to act decisively if necessary. The challenge going forward is to strike the right balance between the various tools – defence capability, security policy, cutting edge diplomacy and preventive intervention.

What the UAE has not done – or at least not done enough – in the last five decades is to invest in peace, and this has been a missing dimension from its diplomatic tool box. On the other hand it has all the attributes to do so: it is a well respected member of the international community as its recent election to the UN Security Council has shown; it has, over the years, built good-will across the world through

its humanitarian assistance; it is a country whose ideology is tolerance, and that should threaten no one; and it is a global hub where nations come together in harmony - nothing could symbolise this better than the current EXPO2020 in Dubai. But in the process of putting more effort in peace the UAE needs to up its game. It needs to develop centres of excellence to research topics, issues and regions to build the necessary expertise. It should be welcoming much more, and in a much more structured way, international governmental and non-governmental organisations engaged in building peace and preventing conflict from across the world; and it should be a leading light when it comes to innovative peace-keeping. This is a global mission the UAE is able to fulfil in the future.

Prosperity and Innovation

Throughout its fifty years of existence the UAE has been a prosperous nation. It is easy to dismiss this as being the result of revenue from the export of hydrocarbons. Certainly that helped but it is only part of the story. Dubai's success has been built primarily on trade and services. Diversification from oil revenue dependence has been an objective of the government for a long time, and to support this the country has developed respect for the rule of law, and intolerance to corruption. Elderly UAE citizens still remember the poverty of the pre 1960s. That has motivated them to support the process of change over the years, despite the fact that it had its social costs. But this generation will soon die out. Young Emiratis cannot imagine the past so vividly and risk complacency. The antidote which the UAE government has deployed to eradicate this risk is the emphasis on excellence and innovation – two words that have come to characterise its approach to the economy, and indeed to life in general. The mission to Mars on the cutting edge of science and exploration was a vivid depiction of this approach.

The prosperity of the UAE going forward is going to be dependent on the ability of its citizens to embrace excellence and innovation. For this to happen there need to be more investment in education and human resources. There also needs to be a clear understanding of where the untapped resources of the country are, and to make sure that they can be properly exploited. The UAE's investments across the world are now also an important part of its wealth. That makes the UAE a stakeholder in global processes, but also makes it vulnerable to global risks and challenges. Climate change, environmental dilapidation and economic turbulence are not problems in far away countries but are relevant much closer to home. But the global mentality that has characterised the UAE in the past will serve it in good stead going forward.

Nation, Citizenship and national cohesion

Finally, the third area where resilience is necessary is in the process of national cohesion. Seven emirates that were often at odds with each other in 1971 came together to form one nation. The political process has endured despite all predictions it will fall apart soon after its foundation. But the more amazing success of the past has been the emergence of a national cohesion that was not forged by coercion or totalitarianism, but that emerged by and large organically. This is the strength of the future, but it should neither be taken fore-granted, nor should one assume that there will not be forces that will try to undermine it. For those who look at the UAE from outside, and who do not understand how the process of state-building has evolved, the country may look like an anachronism. The fact that it has worked successfully tells us that the process is more organic and enduring. But the leadership of the UAE does not have the luxury of being static. The country's governance model needs to continue evolving, taking into account the increased population, the better educated citizens, and the size and diversity of the resident non-citizens for many of who the UAE is the country of their birth and their future.

The UAE's emphasis on tolerance and inclusivity has in the past served it in good stead. The fine balance struck over the last fifty years needs to be maintained and fine-tuned. The wisdom of Sheikh Zayed, the founding father of the UAE, who managed to inspire his fellow rulers on the importance of forging together this new nation, remains as valid in 2021 as it was in 1971. On it the next five decades of success needs to be built.

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