



The UAE as a Leading Force in the Arab World

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Author: Uzi Rabi

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I was delighted to hear that Prof. Uzi Rabi's book about the United Arab Emirates (hereinafter – UAE) had been published. I consider Uzi Rabi a leading scholar on the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The publication of this book is extremely timely—on the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 (joined first by Bahrain and later also by Morocco and Sudan). The Israeli public's interest in the Arab Gulf states, which differ in many ways from the rest of the Arab world, has naturally

grown since these accords were signed. Rabi's book is designed precisely for this purpose—to satisfy the curiosity of Israeli readers and fill in the gaps in their knowledge about a unique country like UAE.

Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE Crown Prince until 2022 and now the country's President, surprised many in August 2020 when he announced his intention to institute diplomatic relations between his country and Israel. He thereby leapt ahead of other Arab leaders who had refrained from taking this step for over 25 years. This is not the only sphere in which UAE took the lead. Despite being quite a young country—having achieved independence in 1971 when Britain relinquished its hold on the Gulf—it has many extraordinary achievements to its credit, not only in comparison with other Arab countries, but also as a global leader in environmentally friendly energy, civilian nuclear power, defense industries, and cyber and space technologies. UAE is also the sole example in the Arab world of a prosperous federation. It is a union of seven emirates (Abu-Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah, and Ras Al Khaimah), each of which is led by a different ruler but at the same time is subordinate to a federal superstructure.

The ratio between its population (about 1.5 million citizens) and the oil reserves on its territory (approximately 100 billion proven barrels of oil) make UAE one of the world's richest countries in per capita GDP. This wealth, together with its leadership ambitions, has helped UAE establish itself as a leading force. While previously showing restraint in managing its foreign relations and remaining in the shadow of its neighbor Saudi Arabia, following the "Arab Spring," the UAE now strives to act as a central player in several regional arenas. Its small army, the best trained and equipped army in the Arab world, has been directly and indirectly involved in conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, Libya, and Afghanistan, as well as in the campaign against the Islamic State. The goal

of the government in Abu Dhabi is to influence the regional order through the construction of military bases and ports, financial support, support for proxies, and the establishment of alliances, even if informal ones. One of the main tools at UAE's disposal is diplomatic involvement. The Abraham Accords and the détente in UAE's relations with Iran and Turkey in recent years demonstrate that its leadership is ruled by pragmatism and realistic thinking.

With his typical care and attention to detail, Rabi discusses the questions that have engaged the Arab Gulf states since their founding, especially the appropriate use of their enormous oil profits to maintain their legitimacy at home and as a strategic tool in foreign policy and a means of enhancing foreign support for them—formerly by the UK and now by the US.

Israeli readers interested in the history and cultural milieu of UAE will find what they are seeking, and more, in Rabi's book. It delves deeply into UAE's history and the underlying tribal roots behind the founding of what is today a modern prosperous country. With his typical care and attention to detail, Rabi discusses the questions that have engaged the Arab Gulf states since their founding, especially the appropriate use of their enormous oil profits to maintain their legitimacy at home and as a strategic tool in foreign policy and a means of enhancing foreign support for them—formerly by the UK and now by the US. The Arab Gulf states, UAE among them, have thus far achieved outstanding success in these efforts, even in the shadow of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War (the occupation of Kuwait), the Arab Spring upheaval, and the tension now pervading the Gulf region in their relations with each other and with Iran.

UAE is also unique within the Gulf region itself, despite the tendency, even among scholars, to lump the six Arab Persian Gulf monarchies together in analysis and commentary. Although

these countries have a good deal in common—they are all absolute monarchies, Sunni Arab, pro-Western, and oil producers—they are not homogenous. Each of them has chosen its own unique path, depending, *inter alia*, on the natural resources available to it, its territory, its demographic composition, and its ability to defend itself against internal and external threats.

Uzi Rabi has a reputation as a good storyteller; readers will find it difficult to put this book down. He treats them to a wealth of information about UAE history, with great historical and cultural depth. In the first two chapters, Rabi discusses the tribal origins of contemporary UAE society and the beginnings of the federation that was founded as soon as the British withdrew from "East of Suez." The third and fourth chapters describe how the new federal state was shaped by the upheavals in the Persian Gulf, from the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War to the September 11, 2001 attack in the U.S. I found the fifth and sixth chapters extremely interesting because they deal with the background to the Abraham Accords and UAE's current strategy in the Middle East.

The book is mostly historical and is therefore suitable for readers wishing to enhance their understanding of the tribal foundations underlying the societies in the Arab peninsula, which are the basis of the modern Gulf state. He writes, "We have dealt with the complexity and unique patterns characterizing the process of founding countries in places where tribes were extraordinarily influential" (p. 13). Understanding UAE's unique features and analyzing how it has behaved in responding to its challenges is no less important, however, and possibly more so. Furthermore, understanding the political direction in which UAE is headed is important to Israel because of UAE's political, economic, and military importance in the Middle East and because it is blazing a trail for others to follow. Over the years, UAE has consistently been one step ahead of its large western neighbor, Saudi Arabia, in many respects, including in its

political maneuvers. The hope is that Riyadh will follow Abu Dhabi's example by instituting full diplomatic ties with Israel.

The October 7, 2023 tragedy was a wakeup call for Israel with respect to its misreading of the region in which it is located. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding was that Israel usually tends to analyze situations from a *realpolitik* perspective, while ignoring the cultural dimension of agents—whether countries or entities—in the region, even if some of them are currently inclined towards peace. The analysis that Rabi presents to Israeli readers is of great importance and stands out because of the scarcity of studies on the Gulf countries in Hebrew and by Israeli scholars. Despite the great significance of the Gulf theater and its unique features, certainly in comparison with the rest of the Arab world, few Israeli scholars have researched the salient countries—a field pioneered in Israel by the late Prof. Joseph Kostiner, who Uzi Rabi and I were privileged to have as a teacher and colleague. The Gulf theater is currently playing a crucial role in determining the Arab agenda. It is the most stable and most wealthy region in the Arab world; these countries have the means to exert influence not only on their poorer Arab neighbors, but also in the global arena and on the world's leading powers.

UAE cooled its relations with Israel following the war in Gaza due to negative public sentiment in the Gulf and in the Arab world in general during the war. Also prompting this change is the Israeli government's policy in Judea and Samaria, especially its statements about annexation there. At the time of writing, however, UAE was maintaining its relations with Israel—a considerable achievement in itself. Furthermore, some of the damage caused to relations between Israel and UAE is reversible and dependent on when and how the war in Gaza really ends.

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The public aspect of relations between Israel and UAE, i.e. the normalization process, will continue to be sensitive to developments in both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli-Iranian conflict; *inter alia*, it will be substantially affected by Arab public opinion. In contrast, the clandestine security aspect of the relations between the two countries is based primarily on the long-term strategic interests of UAE and Israel and is therefore more durable. For Israel, the Arab Gulf in general is a source of strategic opportunities—security and technological cooperation and an economic presence in a blossoming region—but also a source of challenges. Understanding the differing interests of each country in the Gulf and the ability to adjust Israeli policy to rapid changes in this region are an essential condition for preserving and strengthening these relations.

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