The Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy

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Introduction

The foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates has one fundamental goal: the enhancement through its dealings with foreign governments, individuals and organizations of the prosperity, stability, power and independence of the country and its citizens. In this general sense, UAE foreign policy is similar to that of other countries. There are, however, two factors that distinguish UAE foreign policy, both in conception and in execution. First, policy is affected, and to some extent restricted, by a unique set of objective circumstances: the size and composition of its population, its geographical location and its natural resources and wealth. Secondly, since the seven-member UAE federation was established in 1971, it has been presided over by the same leadership, permitting the bringing of an unusual – and admired – degree of both experience and consistency to bear in terms of its foreign policy.

Throughout the last three decades, the continuity and consistency of foreign policy has reflected the perceptions held by the leadership of the world about them and of the best interests of country and people. Choices made in the sphere of domestic policy have also had an impact on foreign policy. This can be seen, for example, in the competing claims for expenditure of the defence budget and economic and social development and in the adoption of the choices of conciliation rather than confrontation as an approach to the resolution of disputes.

This chapter will examine the objective conditions within which the UAE leadership operates and the choices that have been made, in order to show the fundamental characteristics of the UAE’s foreign policy.

Objective Conditions

There are several objective conditions which make the United Arab Emirates unique, and these affect its foreign policy, in some ways providing it with options not open to other, less wealthy states, but in other ways restricting its options.

First, the UAE is one of the world’s major producers of hydrocarbons. Its proven recoverable oil reserves are estimated at 98.8 billion barrels, the third largest in the world, and nearly three...
times those of the whole of North America, while its proven recoverable reserves of natural
gas are estimated at 6 trillion cubic metres, the world’s fourth largest.¹

The production of over two million barrels of oil a day makes the country one of the key members
of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), while it is also a major gas exporter.
Although oil and gas now account for only 30–35 per cent of Gross Domestic Product, (the
percentage fluctuating in line with changes in the world oil price), the resulting revenue still gives
the UAE one of the highest per capita incomes. This wealth has a direct impact on the country’s
foreign relations. Other countries both need its oil and gas and desire access to its petro-dollars,
whether for inward investment or as payments for their goods and services.

Secondly, situated in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula, with its northern coastline on
the Arabian Gulf and its eastern coast on the Gulf of Oman, the country strategically commands
the Straits of Hormuz, through which the bulk of the world’s oil exports pass every day. Even
if the Straits themselves were closed by the actions of other powers, UAE territory could be
used to provide entrance to and exit from the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Complementing this
factor, the UAE is also ideally situated to provide a key transit point for the import and re-
export of goods, not just within Arabia, but in the whole north-western arc of the Indian Ocean
and, overland, into the emerging economies of Central Asia. In recent years, Dubai, the UAE’s
commercial centre, has become the region’s leading entrepôt. Thus the accident of geography
has made the UAE of significance well beyond its borders.

While the country is rich in reserves of oil and gas, however, it has few other natural
resources. Although, as a result of a cautious and successful policy of investing much of its
oil revenues, the UAE has foreign reserves unofficially estimated at well over US $150 billion,
use of these to finance current expenditure is tightly restricted. In consequence, the country’s
prosperity is heavily dependent on fluctuations in the international oil market, although it is
better equipped to cope with a period of low oil prices than any other major producer.

Moreover, the UAE’s population is small in comparison with many of its neighbours, both
in the Arabian Gulf and in the broader area of the north-west Indian Ocean. Its wealth and
size are also important factors in the formulation and execution of its foreign policy.

UAE Interests and Priorities

The interests and priorities of the United Arab Emirates in foreign policy derive from these
conditions, but they also reflect the views of the country’s leadership.

First, the key priority, naturally, is that of seeking security and stability within the immediate
region of the Arabian Gulf, including both the states of the peninsula and the two other littoral
states, Iraq and Iran. Continued tension in the area over the last 30 years, including two major
armed conflicts, has left the UAE with no choice but to focus on affairs close to home.

It has done so within the framework of its second key priority, which is the promotion of
close ties with the other states of the peninsula, with whom it shares religion, history, language,
culture and tribal and other affinities, as well as systems of government (with the exception
of Yemen). The outcome of these affinities, sufficiently strong to override the real differences
that do exist, has been the creation of the (Arab) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This body,
officially established at a summit held in the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi in 1981, represents
to a very considerable degree the implementation by its members of a common approach to the challenges posed by tensions emanating from elsewhere in the Gulf.

The Arab identity of the United Arab Emirates is also of importance. It is reflected in the country’s approach towards the rest of the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, with whom the promotion of relations represents a third main foreign policy priority. Intimately related with this, of course, is the Israel–Palestine conflict, perceived as an issue of dispossession, as well as one of territorial occupation and the violation of basic human rights.

A fourth strand in the country’s foreign policy derives from a feeling of identification with fellow Muslims around the world. This can be detected both in the country’s extensive programme of development assistance and emergency aid and in the concern shown when fellow Muslims are perceived as being ill-treated by others. This was demonstrated particularly clearly in the cases of Afghanistan in the 1980s and Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s.

These priorities, apart from the first one of simple self-defence, reflect the impact of the commonly held beliefs and value systems of the leadership and the people of the UAE. These may be briefly summarized as a sense of Arab identity, a belief in Islam, and, arising directly from the latter, an underlying unselfish and humanitarian approach.

Beyond these, however, the UAE’s foreign policy interests also reflect its economic interests. The securing of stable long-term customers for its oil and gas exports, the identification of safe destinations for its foreign investments and the stimulation of trade in order to strengthen the country’s position as a commercial entrepôt are all concerns that influence foreign policy. The logic of the international economy also dictates that the UAE’s major commercial partners include countries which are not only themselves concerned to support the stability and security of the Emirates, but are also able and willing to provide the means to this end, through defence agreements and arms sales. Thus the development of relations with the Western industrialized nations has long been a key component of UAE foreign policy. In recent years, emphasis has also been placed on the development of commercial and political links with Russia and other successor states of the Soviet Union.

Finally, the formulation and practice of the UAE’s foreign policy reflects the recognition that the country’s size and location require it to work, wherever possible, in collaboration with others. Both in the bi-polar world that existed until the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the uni-polar world that has since emerged, the UAE’s foreign policy has reflected its belief in the necessity of supporting and working with and through international organizations, whether regional, such as the League of Arab States, or global, like the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The pursuit of consensus, conciliation and cooperation is fundamental through the sphere of foreign policy, as, indeed, it is in the domestic sphere.

**Continuity in Style and Substance**

The federation of the United Arab Emirates was formally established on 2 December 1971, bringing together seven emirates which had previously been in treaty relations with the United Kingdom and were known as the Trucial States. The Constitution, initially provisional, but adopted as permanent in 1996, provides for the highest authority in the country to be the Supreme Council of Rulers of the emirates, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ra’s al-Khaimah,
Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain and Fujairah. The Supreme Council is declared to be ultimately responsible for foreign policy.

In practice, however, the rulers have agreed since 1971 that the formulation and execution of foreign policy should be undertaken by the President, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, although their views and interests, and those of their emirates, are, of course, part of the overall equation. Also ruler since 1966 of Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s largest oil producer, Sheikh Zayed was a key architect of the federation and was elected by his Supreme Council colleagues as its first President, a post to which he has been re-elected at successive five-yearly intervals. In consequence, there has been a consistency in the determination and guidance of UAE foreign policy over a period of some three decades, something that is decidedly unusual in the volatile Middle East. The wealth of experience gained by Sheikh Zayed over the period has been matched by a steady growth in his own reputation as a statesman, and his views are widely sought after, such that the UAE’s own international status is enhanced by the reputation of its President.

President Sheikh Zayed has stamped his own distinctive style on the foreign policy of the UAE Government, as well as on its domestic policy. Instinctively a conciliator and a peace-maker, and with a long record of being prepared to utilize the resources at his disposal for the benefit not only of the people of the Emirates, but also for those in need elsewhere, he is, at the same time, a stout defender of the rights of those he feels to be disadvantaged or dispossessed. Charismatic and determined, with over half a century of experience in government, Sheikh Zayed derives his ultimate legitimacy as President and ruler from the respect and support he has won from his people.

It is important to note that, while the continuity in UAE foreign policy that has been evident since 1971 may be most immediately recognizable through the person of the President, its most visible exponent, it reflects an underlying broad national consensus. Both published and oral evidence suggests that foreign policy is not a topic of serious adversarial debate within the Emirates.

In the years since the UAE was established, a national ethos has emerged in both domestic and foreign policy that resembles closely the style and beliefs of the President himself. Insofar as foreign policy is concerned, this ethos has the following basic characteristics.

Firstly, the UAE seeks to avoid rushed or impulsive decisions. Issues and options are carefully reviewed before action is taken. Moreover where inaction or silence are perceived as being in the country’s best interests, such an approach is adopted even if the UAE’s friends or allies might prefer a different approach. Action for the sake of being seen to act, or statements for the sake of mere public effect, is disdained.

In general, the UAE adopts a policy of promoting conciliation, cooperation and consensus, seeking, wherever possible, to defuse confrontation and conflict. Although most clearly enunciated by the President, the basic elements of this approach, which is also visible in domestic policy, can be traced back to the nature of the country itself. Society in the Emirates is essentially tribal in nature, although in recent decades an overlay of modern development and administrative structures has partially obscured this fact. Tribal society in the Arabian Peninsula, heavily influenced by Islam, is essentially communal, requiring consultation and consensus in order to be able to survive. The dictum crudely enunciated by former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill that ‘Jaw-Jaw (talk-talk) is better than War-War’ is equally apt as a description of UAE domestic and foreign policy.
At the same time, however, the UAE has shown that it is quite prepared to act swiftly when the situation requires, and to stand alone on controversial issues if the country’s foreign policy establishment believe that it is right to do so. In August 1990, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the UAE was among the first Arab states to support a swift international military response. Later in the decade, however, the UAE adopted an approach that was clearly distinct from that of its GCC colleagues on the issues of continued United Nations sanctions against Iraq and on opening the way for it to be accepted back into the broader Arab fold.

Thirdly, in line with its generally conciliatory philosophy, the UAE tends to be tolerant of different lifestyles and approaches as long as these do not threaten the basic values of the country and its people. Indeed, as President Sheikh Zayed has stated, Islam is a religion of tolerance, not of intolerance, where the holding of different views is recognized as a right. This is particularly visible in UAE domestic policy. As stated earlier, a majority of the population of the country are not citizens, but temporarily resident expatriate workers. Many are from countries whose social and political norms, values and customs and religious beliefs differ radically from those of the traditional and conservative Muslim society of the UAE.

Within the country, all may practice their customs and beliefs without hindrance, provided that these do not conflict openly with prevailing national norms. Thus while Islam is the national religion, Christian churches can be found in the major population centres, often built with government assistance. Muslim dietary rules are not applied to non-Muslims. One basic, though unstated, pre-condition of this tolerance, however, is that expatriate communities must recognize that disputes between their countries of origin will not be permitted to spill over into the UAE. The two largest communities are Indians and Pakistanis, but, despite the conflicts between those states, it is rare that there is any evidence of tension between the communities residing in the Emirates. Such an approach in domestic policy has implications for foreign policy as well. Thus India and Pakistan, two large and important neighbours with whom the UAE maintains close and friendly relations, have also sought to ensure that their disputes are not echoed among their communities in the UAE.

At a more general level, the belief in tolerance, coupled with a firm opposition to extremism, particularly of a religious origin, can also be traced clearly in the UAE’s foreign policy. Sheikh Zayed has, for example, been one of the most active among Muslim leaders in calling for a dialogue between Islam and Christianity as well as in condemning extremists using – or misusing – religion. The relevance of religion to UAE foreign policy is clearly indicated in its position on the future of Jerusalem. Thus Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan noted in mid-2000 that ‘Jerusalem is not only an issue for the Palestinians and Arabs, but is a sacred place for all revealed religions’ (i.e. Islam, Christianity and Judaism).

Another factor that is of importance in the determination of the UAE’s foreign policy is its structure as a federal state. Under the terms of the Constitution, the conduct of foreign policy is the prerogative of the Federal Government. At the same time, however, the individual emirates may have interests of their own that impinge on foreign policy, and which are taken into account in policy formation. These may include, for example, commercial relations or border issues, while two of the emirates, Sharjah and Ra’s al-Khaimah, have a direct interest in a long-running dispute with Iran over the latter’s occupation in 1971 of three UAE islands.

Finally, over the last three decades, the United Arab Emirates has become a major donor of development assistance and emergency relief aid. While there is no formal connection
between the financial assistance and political issues, the reputation of the UAE as an important donor state does have a significant impact upon its standing in the international community. Much of the assistance is given on state-to-state level, or through support for the programmes of international agencies, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, to which the UAE is one of the leading donors.

The Conduct and Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy

The implementation of the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates takes place within the objective conditions and interests described above. The way in which it is carried out is best examined on a geographical basis, beginning in the immediate region. It should, however, be noted that both the conduct of foreign policy and its geographical perspective have not been static over the course of the last three decades. While this can, to a considerable extent, be ascribed to the necessity to adapt to a changing global community, (such as in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union), it also reflects a growing confidence. By 1999, for example, the UAE was actively engaged – in a military as well as a political sense – in the conflict in former Yugoslavia, while relations with South Africa were surprisingly close, given its distance from the Emirates and the fact that the two states apparently had little in the way of common interests. Neither region was significant in terms of the UAE’s foreign policy initiatives even a decade earlier. UAE foreign policy has, therefore, not only responded to changes in the international environment, but has also been prepared to take new initiatives as a result of the growing organizational and political maturity of the state itself.

The origins of UAE foreign policy can be traced back to the period prior to the establishment of the state in 1971. Under the terms of the various agreements between the seven states and Britain, in particular the so-called ‘Exclusive Agreement’ of 1892, the rulers of the emirates assigned to Britain the right to represent them in their foreign relations. This, however, never resulted in a severing of traditional relations with other states in the region, while, from the 1950s onwards, following the British withdrawal from India and a consequent lessening of the UK’s direct involvement in the area, those states of the Gulf that were still in treaty relations with Britain, including the emirates, began to revive their active involvement in foreign affairs. Thus, for example, Sheikh Zayed visited Jordan in 1968, on which occasion he met for the first time with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, while Abu Dhabi also developed relations with Kuwait and, further afield, with Egypt.

The evolution of UAE foreign policy in the first years of the federation derived directly from the foundations laid before 1971, and contributed, *inter alia*, to the early focus on regional affairs.

The Gulf Cooperation Council States

Relations with the five other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been a central feature of UAE foreign policy, pre-dating the formation of the Council itself in 1981. The commonality of history, language, culture and other factors has already been referred to. As the UAE’s nearest neighbours, along with non-Arab Iran, these states are, naturally, of major importance to the Emirates.
Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar all shared with the seven emirates a common history of a close relationship with the United Kingdom. Indeed the agreements between Britain and Qatar and Bahrain were virtually identical to those with the component emirates of the UAE. When, in February 1968, Britain announced its intention of leaving the Gulf by the end of 1971, UAE President Sheikh Zayed, then only ruler of Abu Dhabi, and his colleague Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai (and UAE Vice-President from 1971 to 1990), took the initiative in launching a campaign for a federation between the states of the lower Gulf. This initially included Qatar and Bahrain as well as the seven emirates, and it was not until the summer of 1971 that the former decided to opt for a separate international status. When they did so, Sheikh Zayed stated (and subsequently reiterated) that the door remained open for Qatar and Bahrain to join the federation if they wished to do so. Although they did not, it is arguable that the way in which the UAE successfully established itself as a federation in the 1970s helped to pave the way for the formation of the larger, looser GCC in 1981.

A focus on good relations with Oman also predated the formation of the federation. Abu Dhabi and Oman had collaborated during the 1950s in their response to a border claim from Saudi Arabia (see below), while the first agreement on their mutual borders was signed before 1971. With Kuwait, further away, relations in the period immediately prior to federation were less intimate, although Kuwait was a major contributor to the Trucial States Development Fund and financed many of the UAE’s first schools, while Kuwaiti leaders played an active and constructive role in the negotiations between the emirates that led up to the establishment of the UAE.

Relations with Saudi Arabia in the pre-federation period were more complex. Unlike the rest of the members of the GCC, Saudi Arabia had no special historical relationship with Britain. At the same time, Saudi Arabia claimed territory that was traditionally part of Oman and Abu Dhabi, in particular in the west and south of Abu Dhabi and in the oases of Al Ain, part of Abu Dhabi, and Buraimi, part of Oman. Efforts by Saudi Arabia to enforce its claim had led to a rupture of diplomatic relations between Britain and Saudi Arabia in the 1950s.

While Saudi Arabia welcomed the British announcement of its plans to withdraw from the Gulf, it declined initially to recognize the federation of the United Arab Emirates, pending a resolution of the territorial issue. An early foreign policy priority for President Sheikh Zayed was, therefore, the ending of this border dispute. In 1974, following an exchange of visits, an agreement was initialled which involved, inter alia, the cession by Abu Dhabi of some territory in the west of the country to Saudi Arabia. Diplomatic relations were established and in subsequent years, while territorial issues have on occasion affected relations between the UAE and its two landward neighbours, they have not prevented development of relations in other spheres. By the end of 1999, the country’s land borders had been effectively agreed and demarcated.

The immediate impetus for the formation of the GCC was the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq the next year. Relations with Iran had already been adversely affected by the Iranian occupation, in 1971, of the UAE islands of Greater and Lesser Tumb, part of Ra’s al-Khaimah, and by the imposition on Sharjah, by threat of force, of an unequal Memorandum of Understanding that allowed an Iranian military presence on a third island, Abu Musa.

Statements issued at the time of the creation of the GCC specifically stressed that it was not a political or military alliance, but rather one concerned with economic issues, an approach that was presumably designed, in part, by a simple desire for caution while a major military
conflict was raging in the immediate neighbourhood. Over the two decades since it was established, however, the GCC has made considerable progress in a wide range of fields. In the spheres of foreign policy and defence, this has taken place particularly since, and in response to, the invasion of one of its members, Kuwait, by Iraq in 1990. Progress in the economic sphere has been slow but steady, with the UAE actively working for an improvement of links between member states and for a lowering of the tariff barriers between them.

Despite the closeness of its relations with its GCC partners, the UAE has on occasion taken a distinctively separate approach as a result of differing political and economic objectives. Thus at the December 1996 GCC summit meeting, the UAE declined to agree to proposals backed by other members for the introduction of a common tariff policy. This would have meant an increase in tariffs, with a consequent adverse impact upon the country’s vitally important import and re-export business. Not until late 1999 was an agreement finally reached, which was deemed by the UAE to offer a better protection of its interests.

On occasion, the adoption of a separate stance by the UAE has reflected the distinct moral principles of its leadership, rather than a calculation of political interests. Thus in the late 1990s, the country took a lead in calling for a re-assessment of United Nations sanctions against Iraq, despite opposition from its GCC partners, humanitarian concerns about the plight of the Iraqi people overriding more purely political considerations. Humanitarian concerns also provided the fundamental impetus of the UAE’s approach to the crises in Bosnia and Kosovo, caused by the impact upon local Muslims of Serb actions. Further details can be found below, in the sections dealing with these aspects of foreign policy.

**Iraq**

Since the establishment of the UAE in 1971, its policy towards Iraq has undergone significant changes. From the outset, the UAE sought to establish cordial relations with Iraq, not only a fellow member of the Arab League, but also the most powerful Arab state in the Gulf, as well as being a fellow member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Indeed, relations pre-dated the formation of the federation in the sphere of oil policy, since Abu Dhabi, the largest UAE producer, had joined OPEC several years earlier – an important example of the way in which activity in foreign affairs pre-dated the formation of the federation. Abu Dhabi later yielded its own membership in favour of the federation.

While ties were built up with Iraq, however, they never became as close as those with other Gulf Arab states, because of the radically different nature of the Iraqi political system. Indeed, in the early 1960s, Iraq had questioned Kuwait’s right to an independent existence following termination of the latter’s treaties with Britain, while in the late 1960s, opposition movements in a number of other Gulf Arab states received covert support from Baghdad. At the same time, however, the UAE, like other Gulf Arab states, saw Iraq as a counterweight to non-Arab Iran, whose relations with the Emirates were adversely affected by its occupation of UAE islands immediately prior to the establishment of the federation.

When the Iran–Iraq war began in 1980, the UAE remained formally neutral, although political support was given to Iraq through the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The ‘tanker war’ which flared up in 1983 between the two warring parties caused considerable alarm in the UAE because it threatened to harm the country’s oil exports, and did, in fact, spill over into some damage to UAE offshore installations, helping to reinforce the UAE’s sympathy for Iraq.
After that conflict ended, in 1988, ties with Iraq remained friendly until early in 1990, when Iraq’s President, Saddam Hussein, began a campaign of public criticism of both the UAE and Kuwait over oil policy, in particular their adoption of a production strategy designed to maintain stable prices. Baghdad perceived this, falsely, as being calculated to have an adverse impact on attempts to rebuild its economy after the war with Iran.

As the criticism mounted, particularly against Kuwait, the UAE, unlike other states in the region, as well as the major global powers, correctly interpreted Baghdad’s approach as a threat to regional stability.

Following the invasion of Kuwait on 3 August, the UAE demonstrated its commitment to the GCC principles of collective security. It was among the first Arab states to recognize publicly the necessity for a military response. It joined the United Nations-backed coalition of countries, providing military units to the allied armies and also making its territory available for use by other participants in the coalition, including both Arab and Western countries. UAE ground units were among the first Arab forces into Kuwait in early 1991, while the UAE air force flew numerous sorties in the air war.

Subsequent to the defeat of the Iraqi forces in Kuwait, the UAE stressed its continued support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. It remained, however, committed to the principle of collective security within the GCC states and when, in October 1994, Iraqi troops moved towards the Kuwaiti border, the UAE sent ground forces to Kuwait as a tangible indication of its support.

Unhappy about the impact of sanctions on Iraq, because of the fact that their impact was primarily felt by the people of the country, the UAE acknowledged that the fundamental responsibility for their distress lay with the Iraqi leadership. During the 1990s, the UAE became increasingly uneasy about the continuation of sanctions, however. Four major factors played a part in the emergence of this uneasiness.

First, on simple humanitarian grounds, the UAE was concerned about the suffering of the Iraqi people. Secondly, in the UAE’s view, the sanctions themselves were obviously, and increasingly, ineffective. Thirdly the UAE, with its traditional advocacy of conciliation within the Arab world, was concerned about Iraq’s continuing estrangement. Finally, the UAE recognized that, whatever current problems may exist, Iraq will remain a major player in Gulf affairs, with a significant role to play and with whom the UAE must deal. On that basis alone, it is in the UAE’s interests to take steps to escape from the impasse that prevailed throughout the 1990s.

To tackle the issue, President Sheikh Zayed suggested that an all-inclusive Arab summit be held, prior to which ‘the Arabs must open their hearts to each other, and be frank with each other about the rifts between them and about their wounds. They should then come to the summit, to make the necessary corrections to their policies, to address the issues, to heal their wounds, and to affirm that the destiny of the Arabs is one’.4

UAE foreign policy with relation to Iraq continued to diverge slowly from that of its GCC partners during the late 1990s, despite implicit criticism from, in particular, Kuwait. While continuing to implement sanctions, the country took steps to provide humanitarian assistance to Iraq, both through the UAE Red Crescent Society and through other means, such as the introduction of a weekly ferry service between Dubai and Basra. In early 2000, the UAE restored diplomatic relations with Baghdad and embassies were re-opened in both capitals.
In August 2000, Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Sultan bin Zayed Al Nahyan made a first formal call by the UAE for the lifting of sanctions, telling a visiting American envoy: ‘The suffering of the Iraqi people has gone beyond the limits of human tolerance. It is high time for the human conscience to move to alleviate the plight of the Iraqi people’.5

Iran

Relations between south-eastern Arabia, including the United Arab Emirates, and Iran have been of long standing, and commercial and political links, as well as ties between the two peoples, can be traced back for thousands of years, with the waterway of the Arabian Gulf having facilitated interchange between the two peoples. During periods when Iran has been administered by a strong centralized government, it has tended to adopt an expansionist policy across the Gulf, while when Iran has been weak, south-east Arabian states have extended their influence to the northern side of the waterway.

As the Trucial States moved towards establishment of the United Arab Emirates in 1971, their northern neighbour was unquestionably the most powerful state in the Gulf, the recognition of this being an important factor in the determination of UAE policy.

UAE policy towards Iran has always sought the promotion of cordial ties, the impetus for this not only being a matter of wishing to establish good relations with a powerful neighbour but also being motivated by extensive commercial ties and links between the populations on each coast.

Early attempts to implement this policy, however, were adversely affected by the renewal of territorial claims by Iran to three of the UAE’s Gulf islands, Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. While these claims had been muted and effectively abandoned for several decades, due in part to diplomatic support from Britain for the two emirates with whom it was in treaty relations, the announcement by Britain in 1968 that it was to leave the Gulf by the end of 1971 prompted Iran’s Shah not only to revive the claim, but also to make it clear that he would secure his objectives by force, if necessary. Thus two months before the date set for the British withdrawal, the Shah stated: ‘we need them (the islands); we shall have them; no power on earth shall stop us’.6

At the end of November 1971, hours before the formal British withdrawal, Iran invaded the Tunbs, killing a number of policemen and expelling the population of Greater Tunb, which fled to Ra’s al-Khaimah. In the case of Abu Musa, the ruler of Sharjah was persuaded by the threat of Iranian invasion to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), under which Sharjah and Iran instituted an administrative division of the island. Neither side relinquished their claim to sovereignty, although the threat of coercion from Iran was in contravention of international law.

The Iranian move was stoutly protested by the newly formed UAE, which promptly arranged to take the issue of the islands to the United Nations, where the Security Council debated and condemned the Iranian action on 9 December 1971.

During the course of the 1970s, the UAE continued to assert its right to the three islands, although without progress in reaching a resolution, since Iran declined to concede that any issue of sovereignty was at stake. Despite this, however, relations with Iran expanded, particularly in the commercial field, while the strong alliance between the Shah of Iran and the United States at least provided some guarantees of regional stability.
This process was interrupted by the success of the Islamic revolution against the Shah in 1979, and, with its northern neighbour in turmoil, the UAE was concerned to insulate itself against the possibility of insecurity in the Gulf. From 1980 to 1988, Iran was primarily concerned with the prosecution of its war with Iraq and fortified the three occupied UAE islands and used them as military bases, this use being in contravention of the Memorandum of Understanding on Abu Musa.

During the 1990–1991 crisis caused by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Iran was openly critical of the participation of the GCC states, including the UAE, in the Western-led alliance first to contain Iraq and then to free Kuwait. In the post-war period, Iran stepped up the process of rebuilding its military capabilities, not only obtaining weapons of mass destruction, but becoming the first state in the Gulf to obtain submarines.

In mid-1992, however, the issue of the three occupied islands came unexpectedly to the fore. Iran, which controlled Abu Musa’s only useable port, introduced a new rule that anyone disembarking on the island, even persons en route to the UAE side, required Iranian visas. In particular, UAE civil servants, such as teachers, were refused landing permission.

The step, which was clearly in contravention of the Memorandum of Understanding, was viewed by the UAE as evidence of an Iranian intention to extend control over the whole island, particularly in view of a continuing programme by Iran of building military and administrative installations on the island. Responding quickly, the UAE sought and obtained diplomatic support from the GCC and the League of Arab States and, after a short while, the Iranians backed down.

Subsequent years saw a significant change in UAE policy on the issue of the islands. Whereas prior to 1992, the Government of the Emirates was content to restate its right to ownership of the three islands in international bodies, in order to ensure that the issue remained on the world agenda, it now embarked upon a proactive approach, emphasizing its claim to sovereignty, and seeking support from other countries both multilaterally and through organizations such as the United Nations, the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. By the end of the 1990s, the UAE had won overwhelming support from the international community for its desire that the issue be resolved.

The UAE has consistently emphasized that it will pursue its attempt to regain the islands only through peaceful means. While confident of the legitimacy of its claim, the UAE has put forward two suggestions on ways to bring the dispute to an end. In late 2000, these had yet to make any progress.

The first was that of direct bilateral negotiations with Iran on the issue of sovereignty, offered with no pre-conditions except that agreement should first be reached on a time limit for the discussions. This approach foundered on the Iranian refusal even to acknowledge that an issue of sovereignty existed, despite the fact that its control of the islands was founded in the military occupation of 1971.

The second option reflects in the eyes of the UAE Government both its respect for the principles of international law and its desire that the issue no longer be permitted to impinge on the development of its relations with Iran.

This option is that the issue of the ownership of the islands be judged either by international arbitration or by reference to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In making this proposal, the UAE declared that it would accept any ruling to emanate from this process as binding.
Iran declined to accept this suggestion, although it had itself suggested this approach after the First World War, when the government in Tehran first began to claim all three islands. International arbitration or reference to the ICJ can only be effective if both parties are in agreement. In consequence, in the UAE view, a resolution of the dispute can now be achieved only when there is a change of policy in Iran.

The election of President Khatami in Iran in 1998 was followed by attempts by Iran to improve relations with the GCC states. These attempts caused some concern in the UAE that the issue of the islands might be pushed aside. Following extensive diplomatic consultation with the other GCC states, however, there was a re-affirmation of the long-existing policy that an improvement of relations with Iran should await signs of progress in resolving the dispute. At the December 2000 GCC summit, the (GCC) Ministerial Council was assigned the responsibility of exploring all peaceful means to bring about the end of the occupation, thus making the issue one of relations between the GCC and Iran, rather than simply UAE and Iran.

Evidence of a change in policy was still lacking by late 2000, with Iran continuing to develop its installations on Abu Musa and still declining even to concede that an issue of sovereignty and occupation was involved. The UAE has continued to assert its desire for a peaceful solution to the problem and to suggest either bilateral negotiations or international arbitration or adjudication. There was, however, little sign of a concrete change in the Iranian approach, with the government in Tehran still declining to acknowledge the existence of any issue of sovereignty and continuing to strengthen its physical presence on the islands themselves.

The Arab world and the Islamic world

Further afield than the Arabian Gulf, the maintenance of solidarity within the Arab world as a whole is an important tenet of UAE foreign policy. In the process of policy formulation, the UAE Government seeks wherever possible to take into account issues deemed as being of significance for the whole of the Arab world, consulting with other Arab governments where appropriate.

Thus while issues directly affecting the Gulf remain central to UAE policy, the broader issue of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the future of the Palestinian people is also of major significance. Links were established by Abu Dhabi with Jordan in the early 1960s, prior to the formation of the UAE, which provided important support, including the seconding of personnel for the establishment of the nucleus of the UAE’s armed forces; later in the decade links were also established with the Palestinians.

Although distant from the area of direct conflict, the UAE perceived the Israel–Palestine issue as a matter that directly impinged upon its interests, both its support for the broad concept of Arab nationalism and its support for the principles of the defence and restoration of human and civil rights. The occupation of the Arab land of Palestine was, of course, something of particular interest to the Emirates, which also had part of its territory occupied by a foreign power.

Recognizing the paucity of its own human resources, the UAE did not participate with military units in the most recent of the Arab–Israeli wars, in October 1973. It did, however, play an important economic and political role through its initiation of an embargo by Arab oil-producing states on the supply of oil to countries perceived as being aligned during that conflict with Israel. At the time, the rationale of the embargo was defined by
President Sheikh Zayed as being intended to show that ‘Arab oil is not dearer than Arab blood,’ or that a loss of oil revenues was a small price to pay when other Arab countries were suffering heavy human losses.7 Although the initiative led directly to a major increase in oil prices and the emergence of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as the key determinant of prices, this was a by-product of the initiative, rather than its original objective.

The UAE also became a major contributor of financial aid to the Palestinians and to the Arab front-line states of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, the aid being disbursed both through the Abu Dhabi Fund for Arab Economic Development (ADFAED), later renamed the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD), and through direct bilateral government channels.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the UAE supported the Arab consensus on the Palestinian issue. Thus, despite its close ties with Egypt, it broke diplomatic relations with Cairo following the visit to Jerusalem by President Anwar Sadat and the subsequent peace agreement in 1979, although it was later to be among the first of the Arab states to call for a re-admission of Egypt into the broad Arab fold.

Support for the Palestinians per se has also been a significant component of UAE policy since the establishment of the federation in 1971. Implementation of this policy has, of course, evolved in response to changing circumstances. Having initially supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in its confrontation with Israel, the UAE later extended its backing to the process of negotiations between Israel and the Arab states and the Palestinians that commenced in Madrid in October 1991 and out of which later emerged the Oslo Accords. In so doing, the UAE made clear its support for the principle of ‘land for peace’ and for the implementation of a solution in accordance with international legitimacy.

While many Arab states, including the UAE, had reservations about the concessions made by the Palestinian leadership in the Madrid and Oslo agreements, the UAE noted that since the PLO was internationally acknowledged as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, it was for that leadership to determine its own course. This approach was to prevail throughout the 1990s. Only on the issue of Jerusalem did the UAE elaborate its own view, emphasizing that the future of the city should take into account not only its territorial status but also its status as a city holy to Muslims and Christians.

On the wider question of the establishment of normal relations between Israel and the Arab states, the UAE has adopted a clearly distinguishable approach. Both Jordan and the Palestinians reached agreements with Israel in the period 1991–1995, following Egypt in bringing to an end the state of hostilities. In association with this process, the United States exerted diplomatic pressure on other Arab states to normalize relations with Israel, and, in particular, to cease implementation of the Arab economic embargo on Israel and on companies dealing with it.

At a meeting in 1994, the GCC states, including the UAE, agreed to suspend the secondary and tertiary aspects of the boycott, but declined to lift the primary boycott, that of a ban on dealings with Israel itself. Subsequently Qatar and Oman made steps towards a cessation of the primary boycott. The UAE, however, declined to do so, insisting that a full normalization of relations must await the conclusion of a satisfactory overall peace agreement between Israel and all its neighbours, including a just and lasting resolution of issues relating to the Palestinians, including the right of return of the refugees and the establishment of an independent, sovereign
Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Thus when, in 1998, Qatar hosted an international economic conference designed to promote links between the Arab states and Israel, the UAE Government openly opposed the conference, declined to participate and instructed UAE commercial organizations not to attend.

More broadly, since 1971, UAE foreign policy towards the Arab world has focused, wherever possible, on the resolution of inter-Arab differences and on working for a consensus approach. This reflects to a considerable extent the personal philosophy of President Sheikh Zayed who has offered his own good offices as a conciliator and mediator on a number of occasions with some success. This approach, it should be noted, does not imply a belief in an unattainable unanimity of policy. Thus Sheikh Zayed has openly called for amendment of the charter of the League of Arab States in order that majority decisions can be taken. Nor has the approach meant that the UAE has overlooked actions by other Arab states which it believes to have impinged directly on its own national interests. The support perceived as being offered by Jordan, Yemen and Sudan to Iraq at the time of the 1990–1991 Gulf conflict, for example, led to a freezing of relations for some time, although by the mid-1990s, they began once again to become warmer.

Finally, the UAE leadership has consistently offered support to fellow Arab leaders faced with violence emanating from fundamentalist religious groups, although the UAE itself has fortunately been spared from this phenomenon. Describing such groups as ‘terrorist’, Sheikh Zayed has noted: ‘These people have nothing whatsoever that connects them to Islam. They are apostates . . . We see them slaughtering children and the innocent. They kill people, spill their blood and destroy their property, and then claim to be Muslims’.8

UAE foreign policy has involved the recognition of a Muslim dimension to international affairs beyond the Arab world, and the country has been an active participant in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and its associated agencies. This began in the 1990s to become a significant factor in foreign policy formulation, although it should be noted, inter alia, that President Sheikh Zayed has been more vocal than any other Muslim leader in calling for a dialogue between Islam and Christianity. Thus UAE diplomacy became actively engaged in issues relating to conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, (see below). It also actively demonstrated its concern for the suffering of fellow Muslims in Chechnya, during the conflict in the late 1990s that resulted from the Chechen attempt to secede from the Russian Federation, dispatching humanitarian assistance to the Chechens.

The UAE’s involvement, in accordance with the humanitarian aspects of its foreign policy, was additionally stimulated by its belief that the international community was displaying double standards by failing to take action to alleviate the sufferings of the Bosnian and Chechen Muslims while condemnation swiftly followed upon any attack by Muslim Arabs and Palestinians against Israel.

Following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the UAE developed increasingly close relations with the Muslim states of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. These relations included both the development of bilateral trade and UAE investment, both public and private. More generally, however, while displaying sympathy for fellow Muslims, by mid-2000 the Emirates’ foreign policy showed little sign of a specifically Muslim content.
South Asia

South Asia, broadly defined as the countries of the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan, has a special place in UAE foreign policy, both for economic and political reasons, particularly with relation to India and Pakistan. Moreover, from 1820 until 1947, British relations with the Trucial States were administered through the imperial government of India.

Links between the Gulf and the subcontinent can be traced back for around 5000 years, with evidence of extensive trade between the Gulf coast and the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley, while in the period prior to the discovery of oil, India and Pakistan were the key trading partners of the emirates of the southern Gulf coast.

While seeking to maintain good relations with both states, the UAE has also recognized that relations between the two have the potential to cause insecurity within the north-west Indian Ocean, most recently in connection with the dispute over Kashmir and the detonation by both countries of nuclear devices in 1998.

The UAE Government has also paid close attention during the 1980s and 1990s to the situation in Afghanistan, although the conflicts in that country have prevented the development of relations. The UAE offered political support to the insurgency against the Soviet-backed Communist regime, which collapsed in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and was one of the few states to grant recognition to the Taliban administration that emerged out of the subsequent civil war, on the basis that it controlled around 90 per cent of the country’s territory. The UAE was thus able to offer itself as a means of diplomatic communication with the otherwise largely isolated Taliban.

Beyond the Region

Beyond the region, relations with Britain have played an important part in UAE foreign policy, because of the historical relationship between the two countries, and because of the involvement of Britain in negotiations leading to the creation of the federation. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the terms of the 1892 Exclusive Agreement between Britain and the rulers of the individual emirates specifically stated that the former would be responsible for the foreign relations of the latter.

The establishment of the UAE in 1971 coincided with the withdrawal of Britain from ‘East of Suez’, the culmination of a gradual process that had begun with the independence of India and Pakistan, and Britain’s privileged political, military and commercial position in the Arabian Gulf faded as other major industrial powers, in particular the United States, France and Japan, expanded their involvement in the region.

This process was stimulated by two important factors. First, the explosion in world oil prices that followed the 1973 Arab–Israeli war prompted the UAE, and other Gulf states, to embark on a major programme of economic development that offered considerable opportunities to firms from the industrialized powers. At the same time, there was a recognition abroad of the increasing importance of the OPEC group in the world economy, both as suppliers of crude oil and as the owners of substantial reserves that were invested, and often managed, in the financial markets of the industrialized world.

Questions of regional security then came to the fore with the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran which removed the monarchy in 1979. While, prior to that date, the United States had
been content to rely upon Iran, its strongest ally in the region, the change prompted a more visible military presence both from the United States and from its British and French allies.

During the Iraq–Iran War from 1980 to 1988, the ‘tanker war’ against commercial shipping, carried out by both parties, had a direct impact upon the interests of the UAE because of the reliance of its economy on maritime trade. Whereas during the 1970s, the UAE vocally advocated that the Gulf should be kept free of the presence of military forces from outside the region, during the 1980s the policy changed, reflecting recognition by the UAE of the role played by Western navies in maintaining the freedom of passage for shipping both inside the Gulf and through the strategic Straits of Hormuz.

The process of acceptance of a Western military umbrella as a guarantee for regional security was completed as a result of the 1990–1991 Gulf War, when not only did the UAE participate in the allied coalition that freed Kuwait, but also welcomed Western military forces onto UAE territory. Following the war, defence cooperation agreements were concluded with the United States, Britain and France. All also played a part in the UAE’s extensive military procurement programme, with American and French manufacturers winning the largest share.

Relations with the United States, in particular, developed strongly during the latter part of the 1990s, a process facilitated by the gradual movement towards a settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict. With its strong support for the Palestinians, the UAE continued, however, to criticize the American government for what it perceived as its failure to adopt an even-handed approach on the issue.

While at the end of the 1990s, relations with the United States were probably closer than with any other country outside the Gulf region, the foreign policy establishment of the UAE remained aware that the perception by the United States of its own interests was a central component of this relationship, and that the perception itself might change. In particular, it recognized that a coming to an end of the mutual hostility between Iran and the United States that had commenced in 1979 could have a significant impact on US perceptions of its national interests in the region.

Beyond its relations with individual countries, the United Arab Emirates has, throughout its existence, devoted considerable attention to structures designed to strengthen international collective security, whether through established organizations or through temporary coalitions. In each case, humanitarian issues provided the essential motivation. This aspect of its foreign policy can be traced back to the 1970s, when the UAE provided a contingent for the short-lived Arab Deterrent Force stationed in Lebanon during that country’s civil war.

Although its role in international peacekeeping was initially confined to the Middle East, there was a marked change following the experience of the 1990–1991 Gulf War. In the early 1990s, for example, the UAE responded to an invitation from the Secretary General of the United Nations to provide units for the UNISOM II peacekeeping operations in Somalia, which had already received development assistance from the Emirates. Although UAE peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and Somalia were under different umbrellas, both countries were fellow-members of the League of Arab States. Following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the UAE extended its peacekeeping further afield. With only minimal economic ties with the Balkan states, the UAE had previously paid little attention to the region, although Yugoslavia did maintain an embassy in the UAE capital. Following the eruption of the conflict in Bosnia, however, the area rapidly became a focus of UAE foreign policy involvement.
As with Lebanon and Somalia, humanitarian concerns were of major importance. In the case of Bosnia, the perception by the UAE was also that the failure of the international community, in particular Western Europe and the United States, to intervene and the imposition of an arms embargo both on the Serbian government and on Bosnia was permitting the killing to continue. President Sheikh Zayed made impassioned appeals for an end to the killing:

*It is as if the United Nations has been turned into stone, with no feeling or compassion for the agony of the Bosnian people. We call upon all people with a conscience, those who believe in justice and abhor aggression and unjust wars, to stand up against the horrors being perpetrated against the innocent people of Bosnia–Herzegovina. The world has to move forcefully to put an end to this horrifying tragedy. Governments must move now to enable the people of that besieged country to defend themselves. The right of self-defence is the most basic human and elementary right.*

With no sign of prompt international intervention, the UAE openly announced its intention of breaking the arms embargo, and began to assist the Bosnian government to replenish its military arsenal. This, in turn, contributed to a stabilization of the military situation and to Bosnia’s eventual survival. The UAE then provided substantial financial and humanitarian assistance to help the country rebuild.

The UAE’s active interest in the Balkans was again stimulated by the conflict in Kosovo, whose autonomous status within Serbia had been abolished in 1989. Early in 1998, the Serbian government launched major offensives against the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo, who, like the Bosnians, were also Muslims. While again calling for international intervention, the UAE, through its Red Crescent Society, commenced a major programme of humanitarian assistance. This was complemented by the establishment of relief centres in adjacent areas of Albania, where the UAE Armed Forces re-built an abandoned Second World War airstrip to facilitate the flying in of relief supplies.

When in early 1999, forces from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commenced a campaign of aerial bombardment to persuade the Serbian government to cease its offensive designed at expelling the Albanian population of Kosovo, the UAE was among the first non-NATO states to express support for the operation.

Once the bombing campaign was over and Serbian forces had withdrawn, political responsibility for Kosovo was assumed by the United Nations, while peace-keeping operations were undertaken by a special international force, KFOR. The UAE was the only Muslim state to offer to participate in KFOR, as well as being the only country outside NATO, apart from Russia. The commitment, made initially for a two year period, was the first operational deployment of UAE forces outside the Middle East region. Through it, the country demonstrated its willingness to extend its active participation in global issues well beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

**Conclusion**

A review of the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates since its establishment in 1971 demonstrates that certain issues and interests have remained central throughout the period. Not surprisingly, several of these are related to the Arabian Gulf region, the preservation of whose
political security and stability is an essential component of the security of the UAE itself.

During that period, the UAE has succeeded in remaining relatively insulated from the impact both of major political changes in the region and of two major armed conflicts.

At the same time, changes in the global arena, in particular the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a uni-polar world have had a direct impact on the involvement of other, much larger, powers in the Gulf area.

In response to these changes, the way in which the UAE has pursued its foreign policy interests within the region has itself changed. It is, however, possible to detect throughout the same essential themes identified earlier as the major components of policy. That there has been a broad consistency is attributable to the way in which the country has enjoyed a stable leadership since 1971.

When the UAE was established, its view of international affairs was fairly narrowly confined to the Gulf and the broader Arab region. Gradually, however, its political horizons expanded, a process that markedly accelerated during the 1990s. As a result, by the year 2000, the country was projecting the pursuit of its political interests far further afield than would have been anticipated a few years earlier.

It has been able to adopt this approach with some success, and has, in the process, been recognized as a state with a real, albeit limited, role to play in international affairs, and one which, moreover, is prepared to take concrete action in support of its views. That, in turn, has been of considerable benefit in winning widespread support for its own position on key regional issues.

It is now possible to distinguish a characteristic style in the way in which the UAE pursues its foreign policy objectives. That style has been established by President Sheikh Zayed but now transcends personalities and has become a fundamental component of the nature of the state.

* The structure of this chapter draws to a considerable extent upon a review of UAE foreign policy by William A. Rugh, published, as ‘UAE Foreign Policy’, in Ghareeb, E. and I. Al Abed. (eds), Perspectives on the United Arab Emirates, London, Trident Press (1997) pp 159–175. The debt owed to him is gratefully acknowledged. The author also benefited from access to material prepared by Francis Matthew, Managing Editor, Gulf News, for the UAE Ministry of Information and Culture. The author is also grateful to Ibrahim Al Abed, Adviser, UAE Ministry of Information and Culture, for his comments on early drafts of this chapter. A colleague of the author for more than 25 years, he has been invaluable in shedding light on the nuances and processes determining the evolution and implementation of the country’s foreign policy.

2 ‘Islam is the religion of tolerance and forgiveness, of advice and not of war, of dialogue and understanding… A Moslem should know what are the true teachings of Christianity, and a Christian should know what are the true teachings if Islam. Sincere people from both sides should enter into dialogue, and should not leave the floor to the extremists who are there amongst both Christians and Moslems. A true dialogue between religions is the real deterrent and a strong defence against fundamentalists and extremists.’ Emirates News, 17 October 1995, quoting a speech by Sheikh Zayed to foreign ambassadors presenting their credentials.
3 Statement by UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, cited by Emirates News Agency, WAM, 5 August 2000 (‘UAE extends full support to the Palestinian position’).
5 WAM, 13 August 2000.