

American Foreign Policy Council

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,927,482

Area: 83,600 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Emirati 19%, other Arab and Iranian 23%, South Asian 50%, other expatriates (includes Westerners and East Asians) 8%

Religions: Muslim (official) 76%, Christian 9%, other (primarily Hindu and Buddhist, less than 5% of the population consists of Parsi, Baha'i, Druze, Sikh, Ahmadi, Ismaili, Dawoodi Bohra Muslim, and Jewish) 15%

Government Type: Federation of Monarchies

GDP (official exchange rate): \$375 billion (2015 est)

Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated January 2017)

OVERVIEW

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the United Arab Emirates has been identified as significantly, if indirectly, involved in Islamic terrorism. Two of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were residents of the UAE, while another had lived there.¹ A decade-and-a-half after those attacks, much of the Arab world remains in a state of upheaval. The government of nearby Bahrain faces the challenge of its Shi'a majority's demands for greater political power, which have engendered a harsh response and occasional violence. In neighboring Yemen, the UAE has committed military, advisory, and economic support to the government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in its struggle with Houthi-led forces and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Yet the UAE, to all appearances, remains calm. This is due in large part to the cultural setting in which the interpretation and practice of Islam have evolved in the country, as well as to the nature of its leadership since independence in 1971. The founding father of the UAE, and its president until his death in 2004, Zayid bin Sultan Al Nahyan,

promoted and personified a conservative but moderate interpretation of Islam, which helped legitimize government efforts to check and contain Islamic extremism. Since 9/11, the UAE has devoted serious efforts to countering Islamic terrorism, the extreme forms of belief that promote it, and the financial support that facilitates it.

Although concerns remain, the country's continued forceful actions to counter Islamic extremism have minimized the possibility of terrorist plots being carried out from or through the UAE, and constrained terrorist financing operations. At various times between December 2011 and November 2016, about 150 Islamists were arrested. They were described in government statements as belonging to an "al-Qaeda cell," and threatening militant attacks. The various charges were alleged violations of Article 180 of the UAE's penal code, which prohibits "establishing, instituting, founding, organizing, administering or joining an association or any branch thereof, with the aim of overthrowing the regime of the State."² A 2014 anti-terrorism law further updated national legislation, originally formulated in 2004, allowing expanded use of the death penalty.³ It seems clear that the arrests and convictions stemmed more from the government's fear of the popular attraction of political Islam in the wake of the Arab Spring than from evidence of an explicit plot to overthrow the government. Since 2011, the government has energetically suppressed manifestations of dissent, criticism, and calls for political reform.⁴

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The activity of Islamists in the UAE has historically been constrained by several factors. Islam in the UAE is generally moderate and non-political in nature, and the government closely monitors Muslim organizations, especially those with political agendas. Furthermore, the largest segment of Muslims in the country is South Asian expatriates, who have been drawn there for job opportunities and are subject to expulsion for any behavior deemed threatening to state security. Finally, astute government distribution of the country's vast hydrocarbon wealth has been effective in blunting the kind of discontent that might promote grassroots adherence to Islamism that challenges the writ of the state.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has had an Emirati presence since before the UAE's independence in 1971. In the 1950s and 1960s, educated, professional MB members fleeing Gamal Abdel Nasser's repression in Egypt filled many public and private positions, especially in educational and judicial institutions, gaining significant influence in the UAE in subsequent years.⁵ By the 1990s, however, whatever influence

the organization exercised had largely dissipated. The Emirati government sought to curb the MB's influence in education by forcing those members employed by the Ministry of Education to renounce the Brotherhood or find employment elsewhere. In 1994, Al Islah, the UAE branch of the MB, was officially proscribed. In 2003, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, and senior MB leaders failed to strike a deal to permit the group to operate in the UAE in exchange for renouncing allegiance to its supreme guide and agreeing to halt political activities. Later the same year, UAE authorities initiated transfer of teachers associated with the MB out of the education system and, from 2006, hundreds of expatriate MB members, many in education, were deported.⁶ Subsequently, the 2008 defeat of the Brotherhood's candidates in the Kuwaiti parliamentary elections reflected a general setback for the group's attempts to gain a foothold in the Gulf, even as it continued to flounder in the UAE. An Islamist commentator lamenting negative developments for the Brotherhood observed that, in the UAE, "despite some interesting developments among the cadres and the youth of the MB, intense security obstacles prevented them from doing much by way of renewing their thought or engaging in popular actions."⁷ Indeed, indications are that the UAE government views the Brotherhood as a political entity whose true aim is to establish a theocracy; thus, the organization is outlawed.⁸ In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, the UAE felt very threatened by the Egyptian MB's perceived attempt to incite Islamist activity in the UAE. While Mohammed Morsi was president of Egypt (June 2012 to July 2013), relations between the two countries remained strained, on account of the Egyptian government's then-prevalent Brotherhood sympathies. As a result, the UAE gave financial aid to President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, after his overthrow of Morsi.⁹

In November 2014, the UAE released a list of some 83 organizations it had designated as terrorist groups. (The exact number varies slightly in various reports.) A number of allegedly MB-linked organizations were included. Among these were two U.S. groups, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim American Society (MAS). The UAE, like its Gulf Arab neighbors, has been concerned that the MB is seen as a legitimate political force in the West. Their action against CAIR and MAS was meant to give support to those in the U.S. government who view negatively those groups, alleged to support the MB, and who wish to officially designate the MB as a terrorist organization. (In 2014 and again in 2015 there were unsuccessful attempts in the U.S Congress to pass legislation calling for President Obama to designate the MB as a foreign terrorist organization. Donald Trump had promised to do so during his presidential campaign and, during his first days in office was being urged to make good on his promise).¹⁰ In June 2016, the UAE Federal Supreme Court convicted a group of four Emiratis and 15 Yemenis (the numbers vary slightly in different reports) of setting up a branch of the MB in the UAE. While one report maintained that the accused intended to overthrow the government, the gener-

ally light sentences received by the accused suggest that, though the actual threat was slight, the government continues to feel the need to counter any perceived challenge from the MB.¹¹

Al-Islah

Al-Islah, also known as the Reform and Social Guidance Association, is the largest and best-organized opposition group in the UAE. It was originally founded in 1974 as a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to promoting sports and cultural activity as well as charitable work. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the group adopted a political reform agenda. In recent years, the government has moved to curb its influence by prohibiting *al-Islah* members from holding public office and other prominent positions. The government now views *al-Islah* as a security threat.¹² As of 2012, the organization was estimated to have as many as 20,000 UAE residents affiliated with it.¹³ From December 2011 through 2012, UAE officials, convinced that *al-Islah* was actively working with the MB, especially in Egypt, to challenge the country's political system, arrested a number of the group's members.¹⁴ The crackdown culminated in arrests at the end of 2012 of members of an MB "spy ring" alleged to be collecting secret defense information and contemplating actions calculated to lead to regime change in the UAE. The forceful reaction of the government reflected its fear that Egypt's MB-dominated government was seeking to destabilize the Gulf monarchies by spreading its populist form of political Islam.¹⁵

The November 2014 list of "terrorist" organizations outlined by the UAE government, and continued arrests of suspected extremists, suggests that, well after the fall of President Morsi and the repression of the MB in Egypt, the UAE continues to perceive *Al-Islah* to be a political threat.¹⁶ However, the UAE appears to lack an internal consensus as to *al-Islah's* true identity; analysts cannot agree on whether it is a chapter of the MB, a group that embraces a similar ideology without organizational links, or is simply deeply influenced by the Brotherhood.¹⁷ These competing views complicate governmental responses to the group. The Emirati government fears that *al-Islah* could become an analog to the MB in Egypt, though it is probably more accurate to characterize the organization as non-revolutionary and focused on the reform and restructuring of government. *Al-Islah's* base has been in Ras al-Khaimah and the other northern emirates, where resentment of the much greater wealth and opportunities in Abu Dhabi and Dubai can fuel Islamist impulses.¹⁸

Al-Qaeda

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 highlighted links between the UAE and al-Qaeda. Two of the operatives who carried out the attacks were Emiratis, another had resided there during the planning of the attacks, and the planners had frequently transited the UAE. A further connection stems from the UAE being one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan during its time in power (the others were Pakistan and Saudi Arabia).

Since 9/11, there have been no attacks carried out in the UAE or launched from its soil by al-Qaeda, but fairly numerous and credible threats have been reported, although not always with a high level of certainty. However, the presence of al-Qaeda operatives has been established conclusively. In November 2002, the suspected ring-leader of the team that had attacked the *USS Cole* in 2000 in Aden, Yemen was captured in Dubai. The same year, credible reports claimed that a considerable number of al-Qaeda fighters captured in Afghanistan were UAE nationals, and that welfare associations in Dubai and Fujairah had been encouraging young men to join terrorist groups. These associations were also accused of sending money to radical groups in Afghanistan and South Asia. Arrests occurring in 2004 suggested that Dubai continued to be a waypoint for al-Qaeda operatives.¹⁹ Then, in July 2005, a new group calling itself “The al-Qaeda Organization in the Emirates and Oman” issued a strong threat against rulers in the UAE, demanding that U.S. military installations in the country be dismantled immediately.²⁰

In 2008, the British government issued warnings of the risk of terrorist attacks in the UAE, likely connected to threats from al-Qaeda.²¹ Then, in 2009, American officials confirmed a report that UAE authorities had broken up a major terrorist ring in Ras al-Khaimah that spring, which had been plotting to blow up targets in Dubai. In September of the same year, a Saudi tip led to interception in Dubai of explosives, which operatives of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed to have placed on UPS and FedEx flights.²² In 2010, there were reports that a network of “semi-legal” mosques dominated by Salafi preachers posed a *jihadi* threat, and there was a purported threat from al-Qaeda. The reports, though coming from backers of Shaikh Khalid bin Saqr Al Qassimi, who is contesting the succession as ruler of Ras al-Khaimah, appeared credible. These occurrences indicate that al-Qaeda still has links to the UAE. Despite some initial press speculation that members of an alleged MB spy ring arrested in December 2013 had links to al-Qaeda, no subsequent reports, official or otherwise, have given any credence to that idea.²³

Despite these plots and threats, no terrorist group has succeeded in carrying out an operation in the UAE to date, and al-Qaeda is no exception. Some *jihadi* internet forum discussants have suggested that al-Qaeda’s failure to strike the UAE reflects lack of popular support for the organization, owing in part to the non-militant nature of Emirati fundamentalists, which in turn constrains al-Qaeda’s ability to recruit locals.²⁴ The government, for its part, has taken measures to counter extremism, including a public awareness campaign conducted by religious authorities about the dangers of violent extremism.²⁵ On December 15, 2012, in Abu Dhabi, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan opened the International Center for Excellence in Countering Violent Extremism (ICECVE), also called the Hedayah (Guidance) Center. Deputy Under Secretary of State William Burns represented the U.S. at the center’s launch. The center’s creation was an outgrowth of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) created by the U.S. Department of State in September 2011, which comprises some 30 countries and seeks to help its mem-

bers develop research and training in counter-terrorism. The center has, since then, promoted cooperation among members of the GCTF on issues relating to violent extremism, perform research and issue studies on the subject, and offer assistance in capacity building to counter threats. In May 2015, Hedayah initiated implementation of a four year STRIVE Global Program funded by the EU and aimed at increasing the capacity of state and non-state actors to challenge effectively radicalization and recruitment leading to violent extremism. In December 2016, Hedayah and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) held an international research conference in Jakarta, Indonesia to bring together researchers in the field of countering violent extremism (CVE) to share their recent research findings.²⁶

While the threats from militant Islamist groups on Emirati soil appear slight at present, the activities of AQAP in Yemen are of great concern. The UAE, in partnership with U.S. special forces, is combatting AQAP in southern Yemen through military, economic, and humanitarian support. The UAE has focused its efforts in the southern parts of Yemen, while Saudi forces have concentrated their efforts on the anti-Houthi campaign in northern Yemen. The UAE has a unique rapport with the tribes in southern Yemen, as many southern Yemenis fled the civil war in the 1960-70s and settled in the UAE. A significant number of those migrants subsequently joined the UAE's security forces.²⁷ Beyond these ties, the UAE perceives the Houthis to be a serious national security threat, fearing that they might provide Iran, which is currently giving the Houthi-led forces considerable support, with a greater opportunity to destabilize the Arabian Peninsula.²⁸

The Islamic State (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Daesh)

The UAE has also manifested its new regional assertiveness in its participation in the struggle against the Islamic State, or ISIS, now the world's leading Islamic terrorist organization. UAE participation in the anti-ISIS coalition was dramatically announced in 2014, when a female Emirati pilot flew her F-16 in the first wave of U.S.-led air attacks against ISIS targets in Syria.²⁹ In response, ISIS has promised action against Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and a handful of incidents have lent at least some credence to the threat. In January of 2016, the alleged leader of ISIS in the Gulf was put on trial in the UAE Federal Supreme Court, and the following month an ISIS sympathizer was detained for allegedly planning to detonate a grenade in a Dubai restaurant.³⁰ Also in February 2016, the same court sentenced four Emiratis to death in absentia for joining ISIS and fighting among its ranks in Syria.³¹ Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that money has been smuggled through Dubai to ISIS.³² In coordination with the U.S., the UAE has taken a significant initiative in the social media front of the struggle with ISIS by establishing the Sawab Center in Abu Dhabi, designed to counter ISIS propaganda efforts online.³³ As with threats from al-Qaeda, the UAE seems reasonably protected from those of ISIS by its vigilance and its generally contented population enjoying the benefits of the country's great wealth.

The Taliban and Haqqani Network

Islamist activity involving South Asian residents in the UAE is significant, and reportedly has included support of terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. In October 2008, for example, national authorities uncovered a plot involving several individuals, including an Afghan, to provide funds to the Taliban. The U.S. government believes that the Taliban and the affiliated Haqqani Network are funded in part by donors in the UAE, drawing their support from the large Pashtun community there. The Taliban is also known to extort money from Afghan businessmen based in the UAE.³⁴ However, the size of both voluntary contributions and forced aid is still unknown at this time.

The Haqqani network and the Pakistani Taliban are both on the UAE's list of banned terrorist organizations, which was issued in November 2014.³⁵ There is evidence to suggest that these classifications do not seriously impede the groups' movements in the UAE. Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the former Afghan Taliban leader who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in May 2016, frequently visited the UAE to raise funds for Taliban operations.³⁶

Lashkar-e-Taiba

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) developed out of the *Al-e-Hadith* movement, which has roots in both the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent.³⁷ The Pakistan-based Islamist LeT reportedly received large amounts of money from Gulf-based networks, including funders in the UAE.³⁸ There likewise appears to be a link between the UAE and the LeT's terrorist activities carried out against India; an investigation of the 2003 bombings in Mumbai revealed a Dubai connection, through which *Lashkar-e-Taiba* operatives in that emirate colluded with cells in India. Other urban terrorist attacks in India revealed a similar link. An important part of the equation is the set of operational ties between the Student Islamic Movement of India and militant student groups in the UAE, as well as elsewhere in the Gulf. The November 2014 list of terror organizations outlawed by the UAE included *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, and the UAE has worked closely with India to counter terrorist groups, notably the Indian Mujahdeen, which is closely linked with LeT. Intelligence sharing between the two countries led to the UAE turning over key operatives of the Mujahideen who had been hiding in the Emirates to India.³⁹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Estimates of the UAE's population vary greatly. The UN's 2016 estimate is over 9 million while, for the same year, the CIA's estimate is just under 6 million. Native Emiratis are in a decided minority, about 19%, while South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Bengalis), account for 50%, Iranians and other Arabs make up 23%, and Westerners and East Asians account for the remaining 8%. Citizens are almost exclusively Muslim, and Islam is the religion of 76% of the entire population.

Christians represent 9% of the population, and Hindus and Buddhists are the largest religious groups among those that comprise the balance.⁴⁰ The UAE constitution guarantees freedom of worship and declares all persons equal before the law without discrimination on the basis of religious belief. The State Department has reported that “Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples operated on land donated by the ruling families... Other minority religious groups conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference.” The report added that “Within society there was tolerance for non-Muslims, including for holiday celebrations and traditions, although there was pressure discouraging conversion from Islam.”⁴¹ Sunni Emirate adhere to the Maliki school of Islamic law, which is officially recognized in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the Hanbali school that predominates elsewhere (except in Fujairah, where the Shafi’i school holds sway).⁴²

Attitudes toward Islamic groups in the UAE are difficult to discern since there is no significant direct popular participation on their part in government. While the constitution mandates freedom of speech, public assembly and association are still subject to government approval. Although the press is among the freest in the Arab world, it exercises self-censorship on sensitive issues, and the broadcast media are government-owned. Thus, attitudes concerning Islamic groups and their activities can be assessed mainly by inference rather than by consideration of explicit expressions of opinion.⁴³

Moreover, the identification of Islamist groups is itself somewhat problematic, because there is considerable overlap in the missions of organizations, notably in the areas of philanthropic and religious concern. Curiously, the government identifies fewer than three percent of associations in the UAE as religious.⁴⁴ Many of the groups placed under the headings “cultural,” “folklore,” and “human services” are to one degree or another Islamic in orientation.

The sampling of Islamic groups examined below is broadly representative of those that are active in the UAE. This stratum includes both organizations that are part of native Emirati society and those that belong to various expatriate Muslim communities. To the extent that UAE organizations are identified with the promotion of Islamic objectives, they generally reflect the conservative nature of Islam in the country. However, differences exist; organizations in Dubai tend to reflect the cosmopolitanism of that emirate, with its very large expatriate population, including more than 150,000 from Europe and the United States, while in Abu Dhabi they exhibit a generally more conservative nature in keeping with its character, and in Sharjah they reflect the ruler’s commitment to upholding the strong Islamic norms of that emirate.

Emirati Islamic groups

The Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation was launched in 2007 by the prime minister and ruler of Dubai, who also serves as vice president of the UAE, with a personal donation of a \$10 billion endowment (one of the largest charitable dona-

tions in history). The Islamic component of the foundation's mission is not explicit, but it is nonetheless significant. A central element of the foundation is the Bayt ul-Hikma, designed to disseminate knowledge in the Arab world and named for the House of Knowledge that represented the apogee of Islamic science and learning in the Abbasid Empire of the Middle Ages.⁴⁵

In Abu Dhabi, the more modestly funded Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Charitable and Humanitarian Foundation was established in 1992 with a \$100 million endowment. Its mission is more overtly aimed at advancing Islamic goals than that of the Al Maktoum Foundation, and includes the support of mosques, educational and cultural institutions, and the financing of both Emiratis and other Muslims in performing the *Hajj*. The foundation supports humanitarian projects, including a camp and hospital for Syrian refugees in Jordan, and assists low income Emiratis and others in building, refurbishing, and maintaining housing.

The Tabah Foundation is a non-profit institution established in 2005 in Abu Dhabi that seeks to promote a more effective contemporary Islamic discourse to advance Islamic values and counter negative images of Islam. Funded by various institutions and individuals in the UAE, Tabah entered into an agreement with the *Diwan* (Council of State) of the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, to develop the Zayed House for Islamic Culture, and it established a media department, comprising both a television and documentary film division.⁴⁶

Islamic groups serving the Indian and Pakistani communities in the UAE

The very large Indian and Pakistani communities in the UAE are served by numerous organizations, each associated with varying degrees of Islamic activity. While Indians clearly constitute the largest single community in the UAE, estimates of their number vary. In 2011, there were some 60 social and voluntary organizations serving the predominantly Muslim Indian community.

By contrast, there are few Islamic organizations in the Pakistani community in the UAE. Most Pakistani organizations in the country are business or financial associations or are devoted to providing aid to earthquake and flood victims in Pakistan. However, there is an Ismaili Centre in Dubai, dedicated in 2003 by the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismaili community, whose followers in the UAE are Pakistani and Indian expatriates. The site for the center was a gift of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai. The Ismaili Centre, which opened in 2008, is meant to serve, in the tradition of Muslim piety, by promoting enlightenment and mutual understanding among the various elements of the Muslim world community. To that end, it carries out a program of cultural and educational activities.⁴⁷

As the above descriptions suggest, there is little if any political aspect to the missions and activities of the Islamic organizations in the UAE, both those serving the Emirati

community and those serving the large expatriate Muslim communities. None could be characterized as extreme in any sense. All would appear to fit well within the mainstream of moderate Islamic activity.

Sporadic signs of extremist activity do exist, however. In April 2010, the Federal Supreme Court sentenced five UAE nationals and an Afghan on charges of funding the Taliban, and government officials indicated that those individuals had also planned to establish an al-Qaeda network in the UAE. At the end of that year, two Pakistanis were put on trial, charged with collecting money and recruiting individuals for al-Qaeda.⁴⁸ The scope of terrorist linkage with South Asia would appear to be limited, and, as noted above, anti-terrorist cooperation between India and the UAE has been strengthened. Also, as noted earlier, the UAE has taken the fight to AQAP. While that organization's stated threats against the UAE should not be lightly dismissed, they do not currently constitute a credible danger.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The government of the UAE funds or subsidizes the majority of Sunni mosques in the country, while about five percent are privately endowed. It employs all Sunni *imams*, and provides guidance to both Sunni and Shi'a clergy. Shi'a mosques are considered private, but may receive funds from the government upon request. The Shi'a community is largely concentrated in the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, with the bulk of its members in the former.⁴⁹ A number of new mosques have been built, or are under construction, throughout the country. Notable among them are mosques in Fujairah and Ajman. The Shaikh Zayed Mosque of Fujairah, completed in January 2013, although located in one of the smallest and poorest of the emirates in the UAE, is the second largest in the country, accommodating 28,000 worshippers. Funded by the Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Charitable and Humanitarian Foundation of Abu Dhabi at a cost of \$52.1 million, it follows in the mold of its namesake, the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, as an expression of local pride and the ruling family's commitment to Islam. By contrast, the much more modest mosque opened in Ajman in 2011 (designed to hold 1,500 worshippers) is being funded by a donation from Hamad Ghanem Al Shamsi, a member of a distinguished and wealthy Ajman family. In 2015 and 2016, 10 new mosques, all of modest size, were built in Ajman.⁵⁰

In December 2010, plans for four new Shi'a mosques were unveiled by the Khoja Shi'a Ithna-Ashari Jamaat (KSIMC) of Dubai, a private Shi'a religious philanthropy, with the sites for the structures provided by the government of Dubai. Typical of KSIMC activities was a 2013 seminar aimed at developing leadership skills. The members of the Shi'a community, through a Shi'a endowment fund known as the Awqaf Al Jafferiah, raised the funds to construct the mosques.⁵¹ While there is no evidence to suggest that Shi'a (or Sunni) mosques have any connection with political or extremist motives, in 2012 a Khoja Shi'a *madrasa* in Dubai was closed and Shi'a mosque activities were restricted. The UAE government gave no explanation for these

actions. These events came in the wake of numerous deportations of Shi'as from the UAE, including long-term Lebanese residents, who were forced to leave the country over fears of possible Hezbollah connections.⁵²

From its birth in 1971, the UAE has been supportive of moderate, apolitical Islamic activities, while opposing those that might pose a threat to the government. Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the father of the UAE and its president from inception until his death in 2004, embodied that philosophy both in his rule and in his personal life. He was generous in his support of religious leaders, thus arming himself and the state against attacks from secular or religious quarters. The chief threat to the UAE in the first years of its independence was secular radicalism in the region, especially as given expression by the Marxist government of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), or South Yemen, and the guerrilla movements supported by the PDRY in their efforts to overthrow the government of the Sultanate of Oman, the UAE's immediate neighbor. Because of Zayed's close and positive relations with the UAE religious leadership, and the lack of extremist Islamic activity in the UAE before the events of September 11, 2001, the UAE's connections with those events was shocking and deeply embarrassing to Zayed and the UAE government.

Post-September 11th, the government reacted promptly (albeit cautiously) to the threat posed by al-Qaeda. While the generally moderate nature of Islamic belief and practice in the UAE precluded broad support for the ideology of al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, popular antipathy for some U.S. government actions in the Middle East has somewhat complicated the government's cooperation with the United States against Islamic terrorism.⁵³ In 2002, under Zayed's leadership, a contingent of UAE troops was deployed to Afghanistan to help in the struggle to unseat the Taliban, whose government the UAE had recognized before 9/11. Also in 2002, UAE authorities announced that they had arrested Abd al-Rahim al-Nashri, the apparent mastermind behind the October 12, 2000 attack on the *USS Cole* in Aden.⁵⁴

In the past few years, the UAE has taken significant steps to counter Islamic terrorism, generally winning praise from the U.S. government for its efforts. While the general tendency of the UAE's rulers has been to co-opt potential troublemakers, the State Department noted that the UAE's preferred approach was to deny extremists a foothold, rather than permit their participation in the political process.⁵⁵ Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed also cited a threat from Islamic extremism to the country's educational system, and sought to counter this by devoting considerable resources to modernizing curricula. While, in the past, UAE funds given for house construction and humanitarian programs in Gaza may have ended up supporting activities of Hamas, including terrorism, there is evidence that the UAE's position on Hamas has dramatically shifted. The UAE was reportedly aware in advance of Israel's 2014 offensive against Gaza and urged the elimination of Hamas because of its close ties with the MB. Recent UAE support for housing in Gaza has been coordinated with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).⁵⁶

There is also concern that the UAE, while acting promptly when provided with evidence of a terrorist threat, does not have a proactive strategy for dealing with it.⁵⁷ In the past two years, however, UAE counter-terrorism measures have been robust. State Department reports have summed up UAE anti-terrorist activity by observing that “the UAE has arrested senior al-Qaeda operatives; denounced terror attacks; improved border security; instituted programs to counter violent extremism; investigated suspect financial transactions; criminalized use of the Internet by terrorist groups; and strengthened its bureaucracy and legal framework to combat terrorism.”⁵⁸ Recently, the UAE demonstrated its cooperation with the U.S. on this front when it accepted 15 detainees from the Guantanamo Bay prison, the largest such transfer during Barack Obama’s presidency. In the UAE, the released detainees will be put in a rehabilitation program modeled after a Saudi program designed to de-radicalize the former prisoners.⁵⁹

The UAE has exhibited considerable concern over the threat of Shi’a extremism, prompted largely by fears of infiltration by Iranian agents and Iran-linked sleeper cells that could sabotage critical UAE sectors, including energy and transportation. The existence of both was reportedly revealed in 2007 by a former Iranian consul in Dubai. Actions were taken in 2009, not against Iranians but against Lebanese accused of links to Hezbollah, Lebanon’s powerful Iranian-supported militia. The UAE deported 44 Lebanese men, who had worked both in the public and private sectors, for sending small amounts of cash to groups affiliated with Hezbollah. The UAE Foreign Ministry said that the deportations were for violations of a type “that harms the security of the UAE.” The UAE remains very concerned about a possible threat from resident Shi’as, especially those from Lebanon. This will continue to be the case as long as Hezbollah and Iran continue actively to support the Assad government in Syria, and as the Sunni-Shi’a divide grows more pronounced and dangerous in the Middle East.⁶⁰

Another area of concern is the flow of money from private donors to support extremist Sunni groups fighting in Syria, like the Islamic State of Iraq, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, and *Ahrar al-Sham*. While some of the funds are specifically targeted at assisting militias, much of the money is raised under the guise of humanitarian assistance. A Gulf-based organization, the Ummah Conference, recruits Muslim (Sunni) volunteers for Syria. Former senior military officers from the UAE head the UAE branch of the organization.⁶¹

The case of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), which was infiltrated and used for criminal money laundering and terrorist financing before its collapse in 1991, foreshadowed the complex and difficult problems that gained prominence after 9/11, when the UAE, with U.S. support and urging, tackled the problem of the financing of Islamic terrorism. Al-Qaeda was able to use a correspondent banking network to transfer funds from the Dubai Islamic bank to accounts in the United States for use by the 9/11 hijackers.⁶² After 9/11, the UAE Central

Bank took steps to counter money laundering. While refusing to ban the traditional *hawala* system of money exchange in wide use between South Asian expatriates in the UAE and their home countries, it imposed strict regulations on it. In 2004, the bank hosted the Second International Hawala Conference to discuss with delegates from around the world more effective monitoring of informal money flows.⁶³ While the UAE's efforts against money laundering and terrorist financing have been significant, cause for worry remains. Particular attention focuses on Dubai and its large Free Trade Zone, because of its potential facilitation of a variety of criminal and terrorist activities, including the use of front companies, fraud, and smuggling, as well as exploitation of the *hawala* and banking systems. In 2011, the UAE reported that there had been a significant increase in the number of suspicious activity reports submitted by companies to the central bank for 2010 as compared to 2009. While this very likely reflected an improvement in the monitoring of money-laundering practices, the volume itself was cause for concern.⁶⁴ In 2013, the U.S. continued to press the UAE on greater coordination of sanctions against illicit financial transactions. American concerns reflect the UAE's large financial services sector and its proximity to Iran. Thus, the U.S. has closely scrutinized the operations of UAE financial institutions and, in 2012, took strong actions against two financial service companies with ties to Iran, pursuing them for alleged sanctions violations.⁶⁵ In July 2012, the UAE Central Bank issued regulations that made *hawala* registration mandatory with sanctions for non-compliance. Moreover, the public was cautioned about dealing with unlicensed charities.⁶⁶ In October 2014, the U.S. and the UAE established a joint financial counter-terrorism task force. In presenting the initiative, David Cohen, the U.S. Treasury Department undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, stated that: "we have a very good close relationship with the Emiratis in combating terrorist financing..."⁶⁷ At the same time, concerns remain about the UAE serving as a haven for funds connected with terrorist activity. This was underscored in a news report concerning a Taliban bombing in Kandahar that killed five UAE diplomats. The report noted that "Dubai has come under scrutiny as a haven for money funneled out of Afghanistan."⁶⁸

The UAE has perceived the Islamist threat in two ways— as the specifically terrorist threat of al-Qaeda and ISIS and as the broad populist threat represented by the MB and Iranian Shi'ism. Cooperation with the U.S. in combatting terrorism and drying up its sources of financing has been increasingly close and effective. There have been no reports of terrorist incidents in the UAE for the past several years. While some concerns remain, especially with respect to laundering and transfer of funds supporting terrorism, the UAE's success in countering terrorism has been impressive. The greater concern in the UAE today is with the impact of the Arab spring and the events it has set in motion. The rise to power of the MB in Egypt was alarming, especially because of the influence that the MB had exercised in the UAE in earlier years and because of the existence of an MB affiliate in the UAE, al-Islah. This accounts for the increased crackdown on dissent and the wide-ranging government identifi-

cation of “terrorist” organizations, even including two U.S. NGOs. It also explains the expulsion of foreign NGOs working to help build civil society in the UAE, like the NDI and the Gallup Organization. At the same time, fear of Iranian actions and influence, given the UAE’s proximity to Iran and its considerable Shi’a minority, has led to harsh treatment of expatriate Shia’s, especially those from Lebanon, because of possible links to Hezbollah. These perceived threats have also led to a more assertive role in the Middle East region, including active cooperation with the U.S. against ISIS and against al-Qaeda and the Houthi-led forces in Yemen.

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