



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Quick Facts

Population: 9,992,083 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 83,600 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Emirati 11.6%, South Asian 59.4% (includes Indian 38.2%, Bangladeshi 9.5%, Pakistani 9.4%, other 2.3%), Egyptian 10.2%, Philippine 6.1%, other 12.8% (2015 est.)

Government Type: Federation of monarchies

GDP (official exchange rate): \$382.6 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2020)

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, citizens of the UAE were found to be significantly involved in Islamic terrorism. Two of the 9/11 hijackers were UAE residents, while another had lived there.¹ Nearly two decades on, the UAE remains outwardly calm. The interpretation, practice, and religious leadership of Islam in the UAE have evolved in the country since its independence in 1971. The founding father and 33-year leader of the UAE promoted a conservative (but moderate) interpretation of Islam, which helped legitimize government efforts to contain Islamic extremism. Since 9/11, the UAE has seriously attempted to counter Islamic terrorism, the extreme forms of belief that promote it, and the financial support that facilitates it.

The country's continued forceful responses to Islamic extremism have minimized the possibility of terrorist plots being carried out from or through the UAE. However, it seems clear that the arrests and convictions of Islamists stem more from the government's fear of popular attraction to political Islam than from evidence of an explicit plot to overthrow the government. Since 2011, the Emirati government has energetically suppressed any dissent, criticism, or calls for political reform.² The UAE considers Iran and its Arab world proxies, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its affiliates, to be existential threats, and has pursued an increasingly assertive policy to counter them, as reflected in its leading role (in concert with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt) in efforts to isolate Qatar, as well as the country's intervention in Yemen.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamists in the UAE have historically been constrained by several factors. First, Islam in the UAE is generally moderate and apolitical in nature, and the government closely monitors Muslim organizations (especially political ones). Furthermore, the largest segment of Muslims in the country is South Asian ex-

patriates, who are drawn there by job opportunities and subject to expulsion for any politically threatening behavior. Finally, astute government distribution of national wealth has been effective in blunting any discontent that challenges the state.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has maintained a presence in the UAE since before the country's independence in 1971. During the 1960s and 1970s, MB members fleeing Egypt found public and private sector jobs in the Emirates, especially in educational and judicial institutions. The MB thus gained significant influence in the UAE in subsequent years.³ By the 1990s, however, that influence dissipated as the UAE government forced MB members employed by the Ministry of Education to renounce the Brotherhood or be fired. In 1994, al-Islah, the UAE branch of the MB, was formally outlawed. In 2003, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi (and *de facto* ruler of the UAE), failed to strike a deal with senior MB leaders which would have permitted the group to operate in the UAE in exchange for a cessation of its political activities. Later the same year, UAE authorities forced MB associated teachers out of the education system, and, after 2006, hundreds of expatriate MB members were deported from the country.⁴ An Islamist commentator observed at the time that “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.”⁵ The UAE government outlawed the Brotherhood as a political entity because of its perceived intention to establish a theocracy.⁶ In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, the UAE felt threatened by the MB's attempts to incite Islamist activity in the UAE. While Mohammed Morsi was president of Egypt (2011-2013), relations between the two countries were strained due to the Egyptian government's prevailing Brotherhood sympathies. However, the UAE began giving financial aid to Egypt anew after Morsi was overthrown.⁷

In November 2014, the UAE released a list of approximately 83 designated terrorist groups (the exact number varies slightly in various reports), some of which were allegedly linked to the MB. Among these were two U.S. groups, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim American Society (MAS). UAE action against CAIR and MAS was meant to support U.S. government officials who wished to designate the MB as a terrorist organization.⁸ In June 2016, the UAE Federal Supreme Court convicted a group of Emiratis and Yemenis of setting up a branch of the MB. While sentences for the offenders were light, one report suggested that the government continues to feel challenged by the MB.⁹

On June 5, 2017, the UAE joined Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt in isolating Qatar by denying it territorial access, citing Qatar's support for the MB and its constituent movements. Qatar maintains that MB engagement can defuse extremism, while the UAE sees the MB and other Islamists as undercutting their embrace of tolerance and modernity.¹⁰ Qatar-UAE tensions heated up when U.S. intelligence revealed that the UAE government had hacked Qatari government news and social media sites in order to post controversial, false quotes attributed to the emir of Qatar.¹¹ At the same time, the UAE announced that a former MB member had confessed that the Qatari government supported UAE destabilization.¹² For the U.S., this dispute unfortunately reduces counterterrorism cooperation in the Gulf.¹³ The UAE eased trade restrictions on Qatar in February 2019, following complaints from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and increased political tensions.¹⁴

Al-Islah

Al-Islah is the largest and best-organized opposition group in the UAE. It was founded in 1974 as a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting sports, cultural activity, and charitable work. In recent years, the government has curbed 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.¹⁵ By 2012, some 20,000 UAE residents were estimated to be affiliated with al-Islah.¹⁶

From December 2011 and throughout 2012, UAE officials arrested a number of Al-Islah members,

convinced that the group was actively working with the MB to challenge the UAE's political system.¹⁷ The crackdown culminated in the arrest of MB "spy ring" members allegedly collecting secret information and plotting to overthrow the Emirati regime. The forceful reaction of the government reflected its fear that Egypt's then-Brotherhood-dominated government was seeking to destabilize the Gulf monarchies by spreading its populist form of political Islam.¹⁸

The UAE government's subsequent November 2014 list of terrorist organizations, together with its continued arrests of suspected extremists, suggest that the UAE perceives al-Islah as a continuing political threat.¹⁹ However, the UAE lacks internal consensus about al-Islah; 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 an entity deeply influenced by the Brotherhood.²⁰ The Emirati government fears that al-Islah could become an analog to the MB, though it is probably more accurate to characterize the organization as focused on non-revolutionary governmental reform. Al-Islah's base is located in the northern emirates, where resentment of the wealth and opportunities found in Abu Dhabi and Dubai has fueled social grievances.²¹

Shortly after the appearance of news media reports in late 2018 that the UAE had hired a team of American and Israeli mercenaries to assassinate senior members of Yemen's al-Islah branch, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, met with *al-Islah* leaders to establish a rapprochement. To some extent, the rapprochement reflects U.S. pressure on the UAE and Saudi Arabia to seek a negotiated peace with their opponents in Yemen.²² At the same time, al-Islah's public split with the MB is meant to secure protection for it in southern Yemen.²³ However, given the ideological differences between the UAE government and al-Islah, a long-term consensus seems destined to fail.

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 resided in the UAE during the planning of the attacks. Furthermore, the UAE was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Since 9/11, there have been no al-Qaeda attacks carried out in the UAE or launched from its soil, but numerous threats of varying credibility have been reported. Additionally, the presence of al-Qaeda operatives in the country has been established conclusively. In November 2002, the suspected ringleader of the October 12, 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen, was captured in Dubai. The same year, a considerable number of al-Qaeda fighters who were captured in Afghanistan were discovered to be UAE nationals. Welfare associations in Dubai and Fujairah encouraged young men to join terrorist groups and were accused of funding radical groups in South Asia. Arrests occurring in 2004 suggested that Dubai continued to serve as a waypoint for al-Qaeda operatives.²⁴ In July 2005, a new group calling itself "The al-Qaeda Organization in the Emirates and Oman" demanded that UAE rulers immediately dismantle U.S. military installations located in the country.²⁵

In 2008, the British government warned of possible terrorist attacks in the UAE, likely connected to threats from al-Qaeda.²⁶ In 2009, UAE authorities broke up a major terrorist ring which had been plotting against targets in Dubai.²⁷ In September of the same year, a Saudi tip led to the interception in Dubai of explosives which al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operatives had placed on UPS and FedEx flights.²⁸ However, no reports of al-Qaeda activity in the UAE have been issued in years.

Some *jihadi* internet forum discussants have suggested that al-Qaeda's failure to strike the UAE reflects a lack of popular local support for such an action. This is due, in part, to the non-militant nature of Emirati fundamentalists.²⁹ The government has likewise taken measures to counter extremism, including launching a public awareness campaign about the dangers of violent extremism.³⁰

The UAE, in partnership with the U.S., is combating AQAP in southern Yemen through military, economic, and humanitarian support (the U.S. intelligence community has regarded AQAP as the most dangerous al-Qaeda affiliate since that organization's 2009 attempt to bomb an airliner *en route* to De-

troit). The UAE has focused its efforts in southern Yemen, while Saudi forces have concentrated their efforts on the anti-Houthi campaign in the north of the country. 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, and a significant number of those migrants subsequently joined the UAE's security forces.³¹

Since 2016, the UAE has aligned itself with U.S. counterterrorism aims. As U.S. drone attacks against AQAP increased, the UAE expanded its military activities in southern Yemen. UAE troops, or forces trained by them, took control of ports, airfields, and bases along Yemen's southern coast. By August 2018, the UAE had trained 60,000 Yemeni soldiers, half of whom were engaged in counterterrorist actions.³²

The Islamic State (IS)

The UAE has been an active partner in the struggle against IS. UAE contributions to the anti-IS coalition were dramatically underscored in 2014, when a female Emirati pilot flew in the first wave of U.S.-led air attacks against IS targets in Syria.³³ In response, IS promised retaliation against Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

In the years since, Emirati authorities have moved against manifestations of IS in the country. In January 2016, the self-proclaimed leader of ISIS in the UAE, Mohammed al Habashi al-Hashemi, was put on trial in the UAE Federal Supreme Court, charged with planning several terrorist plots, including an attack on the November 2014 Formula One race in Abu Dhabi. In May 2016, he was sentenced to life in prison.³⁴ In March 2016, the same court sentenced 38 defendants to prison terms of varying length for association with terrorist groups and for plotting terrorist attacks, in the UAE. The court also ordered the dissolution of the Shabab al Manara group, with which the defendants had been linked.³⁵

The Emirates also play an important role in the "war of ideas" against IS, and – in coordination with the U.S. – the UAE's Sawab Center counters ISIS propaganda efforts online.³⁶ As with threats from al-Qaeda, the UAE seems reasonably protected from IS due to vigilance and general financial prosperity.

However, threats do exist. In February 2016, an ISIS sympathizer was detained for allegedly planning to detonate a grenade in a Dubai restaurant.³⁷ In August 2017, Lebanese-Australian ISIS operatives unsuccessfully attempted to place an explosive device on a flight from Sydney to Abu Dhabi.³⁸ Furthermore, money has been smuggled through Dubai to IS.³⁹

In November 2018, the UAE and Saudi Arabia reportedly sent military advisers and troops to north-east Syria to support the Kurdish YPG as it battled IS (although neither government confirmed the reports). This reflects fears shared by the UAE and Saudi Arabia of Turkish action against the Kurds and the extension of Turkish influence into post-war Syria.⁴⁰ On December 27, 2018, the UAE announced the reopening of its embassy in Damascus. With the prospect of unchecked Turkish and Iranian influence after President Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, the UAE and other Arab states have begun to reengage with the Assad regime.⁴¹

The Taliban and Haqqani Network

The U.S. government believes that the Taliban and affiliated Haqqani Network are funded in part by donors in the UAE, drawing support from the local Pashtun community there.⁴² The Taliban is known to extort money from Afghan businessmen based in the UAE.⁴³ The size of both voluntary contributions and forced aid is still unknown at this time. However, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the former Afghan Taliban leader who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in May 2016, is known to have frequently visited the UAE to raise funds for Taliban operations.⁴⁴

The Haqqani Network and the Pakistani Taliban are both on the UAE's list of banned terrorist organizations.⁴⁵ However, evidence suggests that these classifications do not seriously impede the groups' movements in the country, even though these elements remain an indirect threat to the Emirates. In February 2017, the UAE ambassador to Afghanistan died of wounds sustained in a terrorist attack in Kandahar the preceding month. The provincial police chief blamed the attack on the Haqqani Network.⁴⁶ In April 2018, Afghanistan accepted an offer from the UAE to boost its small troop presence to train Afghan re-

cruits and to participate in operations against insurgents. Such operations would comprise actions against the Haqqani Network, its Taliban allies, and the IS.⁴⁷ As the U.S. pursued peace talks with the Taliban starting in late 2018, the UAE sought to play a helpful role. In December 2018, Abu Dhabi hosted talks between U.S. and Afghan Taliban officials, including Pakistani participants.⁴⁸

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)

LeT developed out of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement, which has roots in both the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent.⁴⁹ LeT reportedly receives large amounts of money from Gulf-based networks, including funders in the UAE. Additionally, funds have apparently been sent from the UAE to LeT operatives in India.⁵⁰ There likewise appears to be a link between the UAE and LeT's terrorist activities carried out in India; an investigation of the 2003 Mumbai bombings revealed a connection between UAE LeT operatives and cells in India. Other urban terrorist attacks in India revealed a similar link. The November 2014 list of terror organizations outlawed by the UAE included LeT, and the UAE has worked closely with India to counter terrorist groups, notably the Indian Mujahedeen, which is closely linked with LeT. Intelligence sharing between the two countries led to the UAE turning over to the Indian government key Mujahedeen operatives who had been hiding in the Emirates. Among the Gulf countries, the UAE is prominent for the number of LeT and other terrorist suspects that have been extradited to India.⁵¹

The Houthi Movement

A leading risk assessment organization has asserted "there is a moderate risk of terrorist attacks against Emirati airports, ports and energy infrastructure" after a Houthi operative attacked an airport in Dubai with a drone in July 2018.⁵² Beyond these dangers, the UAE perceives Yemen's Houthis to be a serious national security threat, fearing that they might provide Iran, which is currently supporting Houthi-led forces throughout the southern Gulf, with a greater opportunity to destabilize the Arabian Peninsula.⁵³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Population estimates for the UAE in 2019 vary somewhat, but the World Bank's figure of 9,682,000 appears to align more accurately than others with the UAE's official figures from 2017.⁵⁴ Native Emiratis represent only 11.6 % of the total population. South Asians account for 59.4%, with Indians alone accounting for 38.2% of the country's people.⁵⁵ Citizens are overwhelmingly Muslim, with Sunnis representing 85% of Emiratis, while Shias comprise the remaining 15%, and Islam is the religion of 76% of the population.⁵⁶ Most Sunni Emiratis adhere to the Maliki school of Islamic law, which is officially recognized in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The Hanbali school predominates elsewhere, except in Fujairah, where the Shafi'i school holds sway.⁵⁷

The UAE constitution guarantees freedom of worship and declares all persons equal 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. During the year 2017, construction was underway on multiple houses of worship. 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." Religious groups have reported a "high degree of acceptance and tolerance for diverse religious views." At the same time, anti-Semitic publications continued to be available.⁵⁸ In May 2017, a multi-faith government sponsored group, the Forum for Promoting Peace, received an American Caravan for Peace delegation, comprising Muslim, Christian, and Jewish clergy, to discuss fostering tolerance and the role of religion in public life.⁵⁹ Since 2008, Dubai's small Jewish community has maintained a (previously secret) synagogue. The synagogue went public in December of 2018; this,

as well as the diplomatic visits made by high profile Israeli officials (including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) to Oman and the UAE in the preceding months, represented a thawing of relations between Israel and the Gulf states.⁶⁰ The UAE featured a dramatic visit by Pope Francis in February 2019, during which he celebrated Mass for more than 100,000 congregants.⁶¹ Attitudes toward Islamic groups in the UAE are difficult to discern since there is no significant, direct popular participation in government. While the constitution mandates freedom of speech, public assembly and association are still subject to government approval. Although the Emirati 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 must be assessed mainly by inference, rather than by consideration of explicit expressions of opinion.⁶²

Islamic Groups Supporting Emirati populations

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 in the form of a \$10 billion endowment. The Islamic component of the foundation's mission is not explicit, but is nonetheless significant. A central element of the foundation is the *Bayt ul-Hikma*, named for the House of Knowledge that represented Islamic science and learning in the Abbasid Empire of the Middle Ages.⁶³ In 2017, the Foundation's name was changed to Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation.⁶⁴

In Abu Dhabi, the Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Charitable and Humanitarian Foundation was established in 1992 with a \$100 million endowment. Its mission is overtly aimed at advancing Islamic goals: it includes support for mosques and educational and cultural institutions and financing for both Emiratis and other Muslims in performing the Hajj. The foundation also 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.⁶⁵

The Tabah Foundation is a non-profit institution that seeks to promote a more effective contemporary Islamic discourse, to advance Islamic values, and to 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 to develop the Zayed House for Islamic Culture. It also established a media department with a television and documentary film division.⁶⁶ In 2015, the Foundation's Tabah Futures Initiative established a partnership with Zogby Research Services to explore the attitudes of millennials in the Arab world toward religion and religious leadership. During 2017 and 2018, the foundation supported programs focused on the junction of religion, the public space, and regional and global affairs. Projects included studies of Islamic education in the UAE, religious identity and Egyptian youth, and the experiences of American Muslim youth.⁶⁷

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The UAE government funds or subsidizes the majority of Sunni mosques in the country (about 5% are privately endowed). It employs all Sunni *imams* and provides guidance to both Sunni and Shi'ite clergy. Shi'ite mosques are considered private, but may receive funds from the government upon request. While no evidence suggests that Shi'ite (or Sunni) mosques have any connection with political or extremist motives, in 2012 a Khoja Shi'ite *madrassa* in Dubai was closed by the government with no explanation. These events followed numerous deportations of Shias from the UAE, who were forced to leave over possible connections to Hezbollah.⁶⁸

The UAE has historically supported moderate, apolitical Islamic activities while opposing any politically threatening ones. Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan embodied that philosophy. He was generous in his support of religious leaders, 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 regional secular radicalism.

Following the September 11th terrorist attacks, the government reacted promptly (albeit cautiously) to the threat posed by al-Qaeda. While the generally moderate nature of Islam in the UAE precluded broad support for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, popular antipathy for some U.S. government actions in the Middle East complicated the government's cooperation with the United States.⁶⁹ In 2002, a contingent of Emirati 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.⁷⁰

The UAE has won praise from the U.S. governments for its efforts to counter Islamic terrorism. While the general tendency of the UAE's rulers has been to co-opt potential troublemakers, the U.S. State Department noted that the UAE's preferred approach was to deny extremists a foothold rather than to permit their political participation.⁷¹ Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed sought to counter Islamic politics in the educational system by devoting considerable resources to modernizing curricula. While UAE funds given for house construction and humanitarian programs in Gaza may have previously ended up supporting Hamas, there is evidence that the UAE's position on the group has dramatically shifted. The UAE had forewarning of Israel's 2014 offensive against Gaza and pushed for action against the group because of its close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. Recent UAE support for housing in Gaza has been coordinated with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).⁷² A strained relationship between the crown prince, who allegedly called the Palestinian Authority (PA) a "hodgepodge of failure and corruption," and PA President Mahmoud Abbas led, in 2016, to the UAE's withholding of hundreds of millions of dollars of aid to the PA. The estrangement is reflected in Abbas's expulsion of former senior Fatah senior official, Mohammed Dahlan, in 2011. This violated a promise to the crown prince, who had urged Abbas to heal his rift with Dahlan. The latter then moved to the UAE, where he has developed a close relationship with the crown prince and undertaken activities that suggest an ambition to become head of the PA.⁷³

The UAE-U.S. partnership in combating Islamist extremists in Yemen has been extended to Somalia, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. The UAE's military reach has likewise been greatly expanded through the construction of bases in Africa.⁷⁴ The UAE, drawn by the struggle against al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa, has become one of several regional contenders for military and commercial positioning. It competes with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and China.⁷⁵

Aspects of the UAE's initiatives combating Islamic extremism can be problematic for the U.S., however. For example, the UAE has embraced autocratic rulers such as General Khalifa Haftar in Libya, to whom it has given military support in contravention of a UN arms embargo.⁷⁶ Yemeni President Abed Rabbi Mansour Hadi is currently prevented from leaving Saudi Arabia at the UAE's request after Hadi resisted Emirati efforts to establish areas of permanent influence in southern Yemen.

The UAE has built its own military bases in Hadramawt and it has carried out military operations without coordinating with Yemen's national government.⁷⁷ The UAE continues to purchase weapons from non-American sources (especially Chinese armed drones).⁷⁸ Further, the UAE (and Saudi Arabia) have transferred American-made weapons to militias linked to AQAP in an effort to buy their loyalty, breaking the terms of their arms sales agreements. Abu al-Abbas, a Yemeni warlord, fundraiser for al-Qaeda, and possible IS member, revealed that the UAE had provided him with support. The UAE reportedly works with Islamic fundamentalists in southern Yemen as a counterweight to its opponents; however, this potentially opens the way for AQAP to infiltrate UAE forces.⁷⁹ In early 2019, General George Votel, then head of U.S. Central Command, called for an investigation into weapons transfers after CNN discovered that U.S. weaponry provided to the UAE and Saudi Arabia was being used by Iran-linked militias and al-Qaeda.⁸⁰ The resulting information has led to congressional opposition for the UAE-Saudi coalition, as reflected by legislation passed by the U.S. Senate. This legislation was passed in the House as well, but is

expected to meet a presidential veto.⁸¹

There is also concern that the UAE does not have a proactive strategy for dealing with a terrorist threat.⁸² Since 2015, however, UAE counter-terrorism measures have been robust. U.S. State Department reports observed 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.”⁸³ In mid-2016, the UAE accepted 15 detainees from the Guantanamo Bay prison, the largest such transfer during Barack Obama’s presidency. The released detainees were put in a de-radicalization and rehabilitation program.⁸⁴

The U.S. and UAE have cooperated on several initiatives to prevent radicalization and to counter violent extremism. 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, in 2012.⁸⁵ The center’s establishment stemmed from the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) created by the U.S. Department of State in September 2011. The GCTF promotes cooperation between its thirty member countries, performs subject matter research, and assists members in countering threats.⁸⁶ In May 2015, Hedayah initiated the Strengthening and Resilience to Violence and Extremism program (STRIVE), funded by the EU and aimed at increasing the capacity of state and non-state actors to challenge violent extremism.⁸⁷ In March 2019, STRIVE joined ICECVE and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in launching the Counter Extremism Hub, a global CVE web portal designed to bring together all relevant actors in the field of CVE.⁸⁸

The “Sawab” (Correctness) Center, a joint UAE-U.S. initiative to combat online extremist Islamist propaganda, has sponsored more than 30 social media campaigns since its founding in July 2015.⁸⁹ The center has more than four million social media account followers.⁹⁰

The UAE remains concerned about a possible threat from resident Shias, especially those from Lebanon. This will continue as long as Hezbollah and Iran actively support the Assad government in Syria, and as the Sunni-Shia divide grows more pronounced and dangerous.⁹¹ This has led the UAE and Saudi Arabia to seek cooperation with Israel in opposing Iran and its affiliates. The UAE has purchased considerable military equipment from Israel and agreed to establish an Israeli diplomatic mission in Abu Dhabi, accredited to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).⁹² In July 2018, the Israeli Air Force hosted a UAE military delegation to review operations of the IAF’s F-35 fighter jets, which the UAE seeks to purchase.⁹³ In early 2019, at UAE-funded camps in the Negev Desert, Israeli officers trained foreign mercenaries, including Colombians and Nepalese, to participate in the fighting in Yemen.⁹⁴

At the same time, the UAE has pursued ties with Iraq and the powerful Iraqi Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who maintains independence from Iran, in hopes of diminishing Iran’s influence on Iraq’s Shi’a community.⁹⁵ In November 2018, Iraqi President Barham Salih visited the UAE to discuss improved bilateral ties. The UAE has committed \$50.4 million to rebuild the Grand Al Nuri Mosque in Mosul which was destroyed by ISIS in 2017.⁹⁶

Another area of concern is the flow of money from private donors to support extremist Sunni groups fighting in Syria, like IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham. While some of the funds are specifically given to assist militias, much of the money is raised under the guise of humanitarian assistance. A Gulf-based organization, the Ummah Conference, recruits volunteers for Syria. Former senior UAE military officers lead the UAE branch of the organization.⁹⁷

The U.S. has closely scrutinized UAE financial institutions and, in 2012, pursued two financial service companies with ties to Iran for sanctions violations.⁹⁸ In July 2012, the UAE Central Bank issued regulations that made *hawala* registration mandatory with sanctions for non-compliance. Moreover, the public has been cautioned against dealing with unlicensed charities.⁹⁹ In presenting a joint financial counter-terrorism task force between the U.S. and the UAE, then U.S. Undersecretary of Treasury for Terrorism

and Financial Intelligence David Cohen stated that the U.S. has “a very good close relationship with the Emiratis in combating terrorist financing...”¹⁰⁰

However, concerns about the UAE serving as a haven for illicit funds remain. The UAE’s main financial hub, Dubai, has garnered a reputation for housing Taliban money leaving Afghanistan.¹⁰¹ The city’s large Free Trade Zone facilitates criminal and terrorist activities through front companies, fraud, smuggling, and banking system exploitation. In March 2018, the UAE enacted new regulations to raise the standards of exchange house operations and to restrict trade-related and other transactions in an effort to mitigate illicit financial behavior.¹⁰² In May 2018, American and Emirati officials sanctioned several Iranian companies and officials who were operating an illegal financial network in the UAE through the Quds Force and regional Iranian proxies.¹⁰³

The UAE has perceived Islamism in two ways—as the terrorist threat of al-Qaeda and ISIS and as the broad populism represented by the Brotherhood and Iranian influence. Cooperation with the U.S. in combating terrorism and terror 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, 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 set in motion. The rise to power of the MB in Egypt was alarming to the Emirates, especially because of domestic Brotherhood and al-Islah influence. This accounts for the increased crackdown on dissent and the wide-ranging government identification of terrorist organizations. At the same time, fear of Iranian actions and influence, given the UAE’s proximity to Iran and its considerable Shi’ite minority, has led to harsh treatment of expatriate Shi’as because of possible links to Hezbollah. These perceived threats have also led to a more assertive role in the Middle East, including active cooperation with the U.S. against ISIS, *al-Qaeda*, and the Houthi-led forces in Yemen.

The expanded and more aggressive UAE efforts to counter Islamist threats may bring enhanced risk of retaliatory terrorist attacks. Additionally, the UAE’s push against Qatar has split the Gulf Cooperation Council, potentially compromising the effectiveness of regional cooperation against the threats of Islamic extremists.

ENDNOTES

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6. Samir Salama, “Muslim Brotherhood is Political and not Religious,” *Gulf News*, September 22, 2008.
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