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The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues For U.S. Policy



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Synopsis

The UAE's relatively open borders and economy have won praise from advocates of expanded freedoms in the Middle East, but have also produced financial excesses, social ills such as human trafficking, and opportunity for UAE-based Iranian businesses to try to circumvent international sanctions. The social and economic freedoms have not translated into significant political change; the UAE government remains under the control of a small circle of leaders who allow citizen participation primarily through traditional methods of consensus-building. To date, these mechanisms, economic wealth, and reverence for established leaders have enabled the UAE to avoid wide-scale popular unrest. Since 2006, the government has increased formal popular participation in governance through a public selection process for half the membership of its consultative body, the Federal National Council (FNC). But, the leadership has resisted any dramatic or rapid further opening of the political process and has suppressed Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamists and secular opposition activists, drawing criticism from human rights groups. Very few policy changes are anticipated should UAE President Shaykh Khalifa bin Zayid Al Nahyan leave the scene unexpectedly. He suffered a stroke on January 24, 2014, leaving his younger brother Shaykh Mohammad bin Zayid, who already had substantial governing responsibilities, in charge. The UAE has been a significant U.S. partner in Gulf security. A 1994 U.S.-UAE defense cooperation agreement (DCA) provides for U.S. military use of several UAE facilities, and about 5,000 U.S. military personnel are in the UAE at those facilities. The UAE was the first Gulf state to order the most sophisticated missile defense system sold by the United States, demonstrating its support for U.S. efforts to assemble a regional missile defense network against Iran's missile force. The UAE has helped the United States weaken Iran economically by implementing financial and economic sanctions against Iran, but the UAE has also maintained trade and commercial ties with Iran in part to avoid antagonizing that large neighbor. UAE-Iran trade, which includes the reexportation of U.S. products to Iran, has sometimes led to leakage of U.S. and other advanced technologies to Iran. The UAE has used a November 24, 2013, interim nuclear agreement between Iran and the international community to try to resolve outstanding disputes with Iran. Yet, suggesting continued wariness of Iranian ambitions in the Gulf, the UAE has sought U.S. assurances that the Iran nuclear negotiations will not cause the United States to reduce its commitment to the security of the Gulf states. On other foreign policy issues, the UAE has become increasingly assertive in recent years. The UAE has deployed about 250 troops to Afghanistan since 2003 and pledges to keep some forces there after the existing international security mission there ends in 2014. In 2011, it sent 500 police to help fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state

Bahrain confront a major uprising by its Shiite majority; UAE pilots flew combat missions against Muammar Qadhafi of Libya; and the UAE joined the GCC diplomatic effort that brokered a political solution to the unrest in Yemen. The UAE is financially backing armed rebels in Syria, and it is giving substantial aid to the transitional government of Egypt that followed the military ousting of President Mohammad Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader. The UAE and several other Gulf states have expressed concerns about Qatarâ™s opposition to the Egyptian militaryâ™s crackdown against the Brotherhood. The UAE also donates large amounts of international humanitarian and development aid.

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