

FULL SPEED AHEAD: HOW OUR FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE TAUGHT US ABOUT THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' PLANS FOR ITS FUTURE

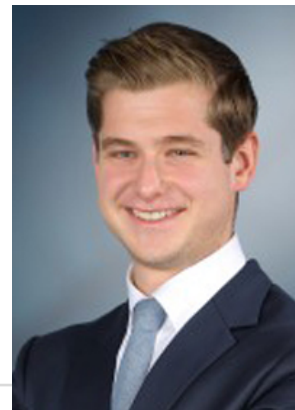
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ABSTRACT

When we applied to Fulbright in late 2020, we weren't sure if we'd be even able to go, with the pandemic surging around the world. Luckily, we not only made it to the UAE, we were able to witness the country's reopening and research how it implements its full speed-ahead strategic vision, while becoming friends who built off each other's insights developing a close friendship lasting beyond our Fulbright year.

Keywords: Dubai • Covid-19 • tourism • crisis management • nation



THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IN THE PAST YEAR

Living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), you understand how fast some things change. In the past year alone, during our Fulbright experience, we witnessed the passing of legislation that is irreversibly transforming the country's traditional socio-economic composition. Since the summer of 2021, the UAE has switched the weekend from Friday-Saturday to Saturday-Sunday, allowed 100% onshore corporate ownership to investors and entrepreneurs in almost all sectors, decriminalized possession of marijuana, legalized relationships among the unwed and recognized children born out of the marriage and instituted a swathe of new visas that allow expats to stay without corporate sponsorship, among others. On the political front, it has hosted meetings with high-level officials from Iran, Israel, Qatar, and Syria, underscoring the country's push to turn the page on the period in which those relationships were marked by blockades, mistrust, and serious threats to national sovereignty, all while bracing for a change of leadership upon the death of the country's ruler, Sheikh Khalifa, in May 2022.

Yet, everything has not changed this fast. Even now, change is specific to certain parts of life. There are several reasons for a whirlwind of reform the past year – normalization with Israel in 2020 coupled with a perceived US retreat and de-prioritization of the region inevitably meant that momentum would grow towards shifting alliances. Intensifying competition from Saudi Arabia for global talent created the need for policymaking to be more nimble

and agile. Meanwhile, the pandemic impacted humanity, and each country leveraged its sovereignty to respond appropriately. Through our Fulbright research, we observed that two themes added color to the UAE's experience, regardless of the causes of changes in legislation and society. First, decisions are made top-down. There is no activism, lobbying, or grassroots movements that impact policymaking. That is not to say that leaders do not consult extensively with industry experts by mobilizing their in-country army of expat professionals, nor consider diverse public stakeholders before deciding a path. Nevertheless, policymaking decisions and power are concentrated in hereditary monarchies. Second, everything is carried out in a federal scheme, including groundbreaking legislation, responses to crises, mammoth events, and the like. The country is a federation of near-absolute monarchies that turned 50 during our Fulbright. The Emirates never had to fight for independence from a colonial power (it was not a colony but a British protectorate) and therefore the UAE has no legacy of colonial struggle. Instead, each emirate is granted broad autonomy but reports to authorities in Abu Dhabi, the wealthiest emirate and largest by land and oil wealth.

While Tomas' research focused on the UAE government's response to the pandemic, Cole concentrated on the country's national brand strategy with Dubai's Expo 2020 as its most recent manifestation. Even though we explored what appeared to be unrelated on the surface, we continuously built off each other's insights. Both topics were mandated by government officials and demonstrated the tension between Abu Dhabi's priorities and those of the other emirates.

UAE'S CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Examining the UAE's policymaking process during crises, including the pandemic, was not meant to place value judgments on particular courses of action or benchmark the country vis-à-vis other global responses. Rather, the aim was to showcase the characteristics, motivations, and rationales that explain the leadership's navigation of the country through times of stress. As a 50-year-old country, UAE has experienced three major crises – the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s that led to a severe economic contraction, the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The latter two could be considered existential threats: the global financial crisis threatened to break the federation while the first phases of the pandemic felt like the end of times. Underlying these crises is another simmering yet omnipresent existential threat – the fact that the land of the UAE cannot support a larger population without modern infrastructure and facilities. As such, this is constantly on the leadership's mind as it grapples with how to grow and develop the country sustainably, including a purposeful and articulated national brand strategy meant to attract talent, business, and tourism through megaprojects such as Expo 2020 Dubai.

Against this backdrop appears the first defining characteristic of the UAE's crisis management – that, over time, a lack of regular change in leadership has created deep institutional knowledge that is leveraged and expanded with each period of tumult. The UAE has had three presidents since its inception. Zayed al Nahyan and Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan served as presidents for 33 and 17 years, respectively, and Mohammed bin Zayed became ruler in May 2022. Other emirates experience similar ruler longevity. Beyond the monarchs themselves, their ministers and cabinet members stay long-term, and the government agencies don't experience the kind of revolving door employment customary in frequent executive leadership changes. Tangible outcomes of this dynamic include creating agencies, particularly during the financial crisis, whose leadership was the same when the country confronted its next problem, the pandemic. The National Emergency, Crisis, and Disaster Management Authority (NCEMA) was created in 2012 after the financial crisis. Its mission was to develop a national plan for responding to emergencies while clarifying the roles of the state and private sector in achieving disaster reduction goals. When the pandemic struck, it was instrumental in the rapid development and expansion of systems to scale-up response protocols that allowed for wide-scale testing, surveillance, clinical trial development, internal collaboration, and vaccine distribution. Alongside the Covid-19 Command and Control Center (CCC), it liaised with state authorities, healthcare providers, and volunteers to prioritize providing treatment where most required. Its efforts are partially responsible for achieving significant population vaccine buy-in and one of the first vaccination rates over 90%.

Government responses are buttressed by existing public-private partnerships that allowed for rapid cooperation and strategic implementations during the pandemic. Existing partnerships in the healthcare sector were critical. It is illustrated by the government's ties, often through its holding companies, with institutions like the Cleveland Clinic and New York University, which have branches in Abu Dhabi. While the UAE has a government-funded health service, it is increasingly complemented by a growing private health sector, and collaborations that create a nexus between healthcare and complementary industries like research and academia are even more useful for countering informational silos. This translated into a unified federal response in the pandemic's early months, followed by a policy bifurcation starting in the summer of 2020 between Abu Dhabi and the other emirates. Dubai, for example, opened its borders to tourists in July 2020, while Abu Dhabi created a hard border with the rest of the country to insulate itself. We witnessed this border that extended into our Fulbright a year later first-hand, where the hour-long drive from Dubai to Abu Dhabi meant passing through a security checkpoint with armed guards ensuring each entrant was vaccinated or had

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been PCR tested in a specific duration (testing period requirements fluctuated over time). Abu Dhabi kept closed for longer because it contains a higher percentage of local Emiratis among its population than the other emirates, which have higher rates of comorbidities than their expat counterparts. Furthermore, Abu Dhabi could wield its oil-financed deep pockets to sustain itself. Dubai, on the other hand, is more reliant on tourism and capital flows, therefore incentivizing it to open much sooner. This policy split tested the federation by allowing different emirates to meet their priorities but establishing a hard border within the country.

FROM THE PANDEMIC TO THE MEGA EVENTS: EXPO 2020

Dubai's pandemic response was bolstered by a robust tourism strategy inviting visitors to the world's first post-lockdown mega-event. Without sharing the same oil wealth as Abu Dhabi, Dubai has continually focused on its brand image to invite tourists, investors, and consumers to the emirate. Expo 2020 Dubai, the latest iteration of the World's Fair, is a capstone to the emirate's recent branding efforts. Expo 2020 Dubai was the first mega-event of its kind to take place in the MENA region. The event occurred at an important moment in the nation's history, with the UAE celebrating its 50th anniversary. By extension, the event was critical for UAE's national branding and soft power efforts.

World expos have long served as an important tool for nation branding. Expos naturally encourage many visitors from around the world and provide opportunities for future development and investments in the host country. Under the motto "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future," Expo 2020 Dubai focused on worldwide progress in three thematic areas: sustainability, mobility, and opportunity. These themes are apparent in Dubai's branding efforts, as displayed through Expo 2020. First, the UAE positions itself and Dubai, in particular, as crossroads of the world. Dubai's strategies and hosting mega-events aided its quest to connect the global East and West. Second, the nation highlights hidden aspects of its heritage that may otherwise be disregarded. Branding policies highlight Arabian hospitality, tolerance, co-existence, and a distinct Emirati culture. Third, the UAE promotes its vision for the future as a country always planning and moving towards the future.

In accordance with the first theme, Expo's layout mirrored medieval maps that customarily showed Jerusalem as the meeting point of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Similarly, it positioned Dubai as this same meeting point as a global hub of the twenty-first century. Instead of three central continental petals, Expo split country pavilions into the event's main theme: mobility, opportunity, and sustainability. The UAE pavilion was centrally located and manifesting how the country sees its place in the world. Expo 2020 Dubai further highlighted lesser-known aspects of the nation's heritage through architectural elements and spatial design. In re-branding these aspects for Expo 2020, event planners featured a primordial history of Dubai that

contrasts with today's hyper-modern city image and represents it as classically "Arabian." For example, Al Wasl Plaza, the center point of the Expo grounds, was named after the Arabic word for "connection." The domed trellis of the Plaza was inspired by an ancient gold ring found at Saruq Al Hadid, an important archaeological site in Dubai.

Expo 2020 also strengthened Dubai's position as a global trade, investment, and tourism hub. While its long-term impact remains to be seen, event planners anticipate that Expo would accelerate the UAE's efforts to diversify its economy, support the growth of a knowledge-based economy and smart connectivity, and provide a stimulus for cultural life. Indeed, 24 million visitors contributed to overall growth in the UAE's post-pandemic tourism sector. Q1 2022 saw six million visitors to the country's hotel establishments (spanning 25 million hotel nights), which reflected a growth of 10% compared to the same pre-pandemic period in 2019. Dr. Ahmad Belhoul Al Falasi, Minister of State for Entrepreneurship and Chairman of the UAE Tourism Council, noted the role of Expo 2020 as "one of the best years in terms of economic growth in general and tourism in particular" for the UAE.

Real estate and other economic records indicate a strong pandemic recovery bolstered by Expo 2020. Since winning the Expo 2020 bid, the UAE received investments worth \$37 billion. The country is expected to receive another \$8 billion in investments because of Expo 2020, representing a total investment of \$43 billion. At the end of 2021, the volume and value of transactions were the highest since 2013. The Investment Corporation of Dubai (one of Dubai's sovereign wealth funds) announced revenues of over \$46 billion and reported a net profit of \$2.75 billion in 2021, up 25% compared to the prior year and resulting in part by the positive impact of the hosting of Expo 2020.

DUBAI'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS INVITE A FRIENDLY COMPETITION

The success of Dubai's branding efforts has inspired development across the Gulf, wherein regional leaders seek to follow Dubai's lead. Saudi Arabia has announced progress on the hyper-futuristic city of Neom, which will purportedly be bigger than Dubai and have more robots than humans. Many undertones and overt messages in Neom advertisements position it as a global competitor to Dubai, especially using the "smart city" terminology. Likewise, Saudi recently launched a bid to host Expo 2030 in Riyadh. The proposal received support from UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed.

Although publicly united under a federal umbrella, a spirit of 'one-upmanship' exists between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi has lacked the same level of diversification as Dubai because of the plentiful oil reserves. As such, Abu Dhabi attempts to outpace Dubai with high-end cultural tourism, featuring international museum branches like the Louvre and Guggenheim museums. This friendly competition encourages economic development and advancement around the Gulf while encouraging Dubai's continuous transformation.

OUR FULBRIGHT ENDS, BUT OUR EXPERIENCES IN UAE CONTINUES

The UAE's dynamic and ever-changing environment piqued our interest in the region to the point where we both decided to continue our careers in Dubai in ways that further Fulbright's mission of building mutual understanding and advancing knowledge worldwide. Cole now works at the American management consulting firm Kearney, based in Dubai, with projects around the Arab Gulf that focus on implementing the countries' strategic visions. Tomas is now with Gulf Intelligence, a Dubai-based strategic advisory that provides thought leadership solutions to the regional energy sector with an emphasis on companies looking to implement sustainability strategies for the first time. The local expertise we acquired through our Fulbright research served as a launchpad for our respective positions, and we continue to build off each other's experiences and insights through the friendship we cultivated during the program.

NOTES

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Tomas Valdes and Cole Grumbach in the United Arab Emirates

BIOGRAPHY

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