



An Arab Spring Model

by Jonathan Aitken

DISCUSSING POLITICS AND RELIGION in the United Arab Emirates, arguably the richest and most tolerant country in today's Middle East, is a surprisingly hopeful experience.

The national capital, Abu Dhabi, is a calm crossroads of Arabia. No protest marches, few traces of Islamic militancy, welcoming to Christians, friendly with the U.S., well governed internally, and peaceful in its external relations. The UAE is not Utopia but it works.

Abu Dhabians are proud of their Bedouin heritage so they are not exactly Washington's kinda guys as those showy Qataris up the road pretend to be with their U.S. CENTCOM military base and American-style campuses. But nor are UAE people religious zealots like their Saudi and Iranian neighbors. Christian churches, Hindu shrines, Sikh temples, and places of worship for all faiths flourish here.

Like everywhere else in the Gulf, the UAE is not a Western-style democracy. But the ruling families of these Emirates are benign and generous paternalists, so anti-government demonstrations aren't on anyone's agenda. Seen in the round, this is a moderate country in everything it does, other than to keep on piling up the enormous riches it earns from pumping 2.5 million barrels of oil a day. So what can be learned here about the region's strategic trends in the post-Osama bin Laden phase of the Arab Spring?

Abu Dhabi is a good listening post, full of expatriates from Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the surrounding Gulf states. Middle East government bigwigs, or at least mid-wigs, pass through here regularly. They usually come to talk about money because this country, with a population of only 1.2 million citizens, has fewer commitments and greater oil and cash reserves than any other OPEC member. With this wealth is coming increasing influence, but it is not the influence of hard-line religion.

There are plenty of mosques in the UAE, but the local mullahs are moderates too. Their non-political preaching is said to date from an episode more than 20 years ago when some incendiary Islamist gave a fire-and-brimstone sermon in which he denounced all foreigners for their non-Muslim beliefs and demanded dress codes compelling Western women to wear long dresses and veils.

When the founder and first president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed, heard about these vapors he summoned the angry mullah to tell him that this was a multi-ethnic country of tolerance that would not countenance such hostility in the name of religion. The preacher refused to back down. Sheikh Zayed is reported to have sent for a pair of scissors, saying: "If you won't cut out your extremism, then I will have to cut off your beard." Snip, snip, went the president's scissors as the mullah's hirsute bush of facial hair cascaded to the floor. This was a humiliation equivalent to the public unfrocking of a Christian clergyman. There has been no political troublemaking at Friday prayers in the UAE ever since.

This and other examples of the late Sheikh Zayed's wisdom as a ruler are being increasingly talked about amidst the neighboring turbulences of the Arab Spring. One of the reasons why the protest movements have not surfaced here is that the UAE does not discriminate against different ethnic or religious groups. This has been the most serious mistake of Bahrain's Sunni rulers, who treated their Shia subjects badly for decades and have reaped a whirlwind of uprisings as a result. The Sunnis of Saudi Arabia have narrowly avoided the same error. Although the majority of Saudis do not love their minority Shia brothers, at least the government does not mistreat them.



Much of the credit for handling the Shia sensitively should go to Prince Mohammed bin Fahd, the governor of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. He is another wise moderate among Gulf leaders. When he was appointed to his post 30 years ago, the Shia, who make up about a third of the population of the province, were in a mood of seething discontent as a result of harsh repression by the outgoing governor. The situation in religious terms was not unlike the Catholic-Protestant tensions in Northern Ireland in the 1960s.

Prince Mohammed, the son of the late King Fahd, cut the Shia some slack. He also opened the purse strings of development in their towns and cities. Most important of all he has governed fairly. However, there are still grumbles that top posts like ambassadorships and senior ministerial appointments are Shia-free zones.

The contrast between the treatment of the Shia of Bahrain and the Shia of Saudi Arabia has meant the difference between near-revolution and near-calm. Tremors of the Arab Spring have been felt in the desert kingdom. But fortunately for the Al Saud monarchy, and for the industrialized world that imports more than 8 million barrels a day of its oil, there seems to be no likelihood of a Saudi political earthquake. The moderate Eastern Province governor has done a good job. So has his boss, King Abdullah, who in February announced \$34 billion worth of projects and job creation schemes. Evidently the checkbook is mightier than the baton round.

Another sign of the times is the Gulf's positive reaction to the elimination of Osama bin Laden. Long before the Navy SEALs got him, his hero status at home had crumbled. So had al Qaeda's effectiveness as a terrorist organization, not least because of the patient cooperation between the CIA, the FBI, and the intelligence services of friendly Gulf states. Now the prestige of the U.S. is riding high in the region. Respect for American valor and values is back.

AS THE ARAB SPRING slows down into the long hot Arabian summer, events are changing opinions in the Middle East.

The thuggery of the Syrian regime has disgusted even those who wished Bashar al-Assad well, for it is seen as terrorism in another form.

The triumph of the SEALs in Abbottabad is regarded as rough justice but right justice. Closure on bin Laden brings vicarious credit to the Arab governments that have been faithful allies of the U.S. in the

secret struggle against al Qaeda. The Pakistanis, long mistrusted, are even more despised for their duplicity.

In other hotspots, Bahrain is still a powder keg but a sideshow. Saudi Arabia is quiet. The *ulema* (priesthood) and the *muta'wa* (religious police) are quieter still.

In Egypt and Tunisia the feeling is growing that the Islamist movements are overplaying their hands. Their violence against Christians is unpopular with mainstream public opinion, particularly with the young.

Oman has had minor demonstrations, but the combination of the checkbook and a popular ruler in Sultan Qaboos should ensure stability.

No one quite knows how Egypt is going to work out, but both there and in Tunisia the feeling is growing that the Islamist movements are overplaying their hands. Their violence against Christians, which this column reported on last month, is unpopular with mainstream public opinion, particularly with the young. Whatever the problems are in the different countries of the area, the politics of religion no longer seem to be the solution.

Maybe these shifts in opinion can be interpreted as a turning of the tide, beginning to flow in the direction of moderation and tolerance. The United Arab Emirates, having practiced these virtues throughout its 40-year existence, is starting to look like a role model for the children of the Arab Spring. ❁

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