

Making Sense of the UAE's Latest Leadership Appointments

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Brief Analysis

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed's recent decisions aim to refresh the image of UAE leadership, ushering in the next generations of rulers.

On March 29, UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, announced several [new appointments \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-appoints-vice-president-crown-prince-abu-dhabi-2023-03-29/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-appoints-vice-president-crown-prince-abu-dhabi-2023-03-29/) that placed members of the al-Nahyan branch in top leadership roles, including the designation of a second Vice President. Of these selections, naming Sheikh Khaled, the eldest son of the President, as the Crown Prince was the most noteworthy and long-awaited—almost a year since Sheikh Mohammed's ascension to the presidency. Crucially, this decision, while integrated with a Gulf-wide trend to take succession to the next generation—bar Kuwait, for now—also eliminates second guesses in identifying the country's next prospective leader.

Since independence, the presidency has been the mainstay of Abu Dhabi, though the lingering question remained as to whether the baton would be passed laterally or linearly. Nevertheless, the Federal Supreme Council—composed of the rulers of the seven emirates—maintained their consensus on the tradition of Abu Dhabi inheriting the mantle of leadership. Emirati interlocutors unanimously explain that the president's legitimacy is derived from this common consent and acceptance, and Sheikh Mohammed's [emirate-to-emirate tour \(https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-president-visits-rulers-of-the-emirates-1.1654255583542\)](https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-president-visits-rulers-of-the-emirates-1.1654255583542) as the country's new head of state last June was one indication of the respect for this tradition.

Credentials of the New Crown Prince

Educated at the American University of Sharjah before obtaining his doctoral degree from the Department of War Studies at King's College London, Sheikh Khaled bin Mohammed later oversaw national security issues and became the Deputy National Security Advisor in January 2017. Beyond his portfolio of hard politics, Sheikh Khaled remains heavily invested in boosting entrepreneurship and strengthening industrial sectors. In 2019, he launched the [Hub71 \(https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/khalid-bin-mohamed-bin-zayed-launches-hub71-investment-\)](https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/khalid-bin-mohamed-bin-zayed-launches-hub71-investment-)

fund-to-support-tech-startups-vz54hteh) investment fund, a platform to support new tech start-ups, before announcing a green energy venture in 2021 that brought together the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) with the Abu Dhabi National Energy Company (TAQA).

Although his influence is partly derived from his emirate of birth, it has long been evident that the trajectory of Sheikh Khaled's responsibilities was pointed toward a federal role. In June 2022, he launched the **Abu Dhabi Industrial Strategy** (<https://added.gov.ae/Media-Center/Business-News/Khaled-bin-Mohamed-bin-Zayed-launches-Abu-Dhabi-Industrial-Strategy>), meant to accelerate business growth by employing new technologies and creating over 13,000 skilled jobs for Emiratis by 2031. The strategy not only supports **Operation 300bn** (<https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/industry-science-and-technology/the-uae-industrial-strategy>), the UAE's overall industrial roadmap, but also follows up on a career-building programme (<https://www.mediaoffice.abudhabi/en/government-affairs/on-the-directives-of-khaled-bin-mohamed-bin-zayed-new-government-led-career-building-programme-launched/>) led by Sheikh Zayed in December 2021 aimed at upskilling young Emiratis. In a **Twitter thread** (<https://twitter.com/KhalifaBushhab/status/1642490643594493955>) by Khalifa al-Suwaidi, a research fellow at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA), he attributed the importance of the newly appointed Crown Prince to overseeing "the transformation of Abu Dhabi's bureaucracy into a technocratic system."

Does a Second Vice-President Dilute Dubai's Role?

While many analysts equated the latest appointments with the consolidation of Abu Dhabi's power in the Federation, local commentators refuted such an assessment. Speaking to **CNBC** (<https://www.cnbcm.com/2023/03/30/uae-leader-breaks-with-tradition-appoints-son-as-crown-prince-.html>), Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a professor of political science at Emirates University, flatly said that such an evaluation was "nonsense." The "division of labor," he explained, "has been clear from day one." The state lies in Abu Dhabi's domain, whereas the government falls within Dubai's remit. Granted, within the federal setup, Abu Dhabi holds the **majority** (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1141229/uae-estimated-petroleum-oil-reserves-by-emirate/>) of the UAE's oil reserves and accounts for the largest percentage of the country's land area by far. However, two key trends in governance persist. First, the paramount leader still requires the assent from the rulers of the other emirates seated in the Supreme Council. Second, Dubai not only remains firmly as the country's economic capital, but also retains a pivotal voice constitutionally. According to **Article 49** (https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004.pdf), decisions on substantive matters are "taken by a majority of five members, provided this majority includes the votes of the Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai."

In this light, naming the President's brother Sheikh Mansour as an additional Vice President equally required constitutional ratifications **green-lit** (<https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303143508>) by the Supreme Council members. Mansour—no stranger to the Cabinet, having previously served as Deputy Prime Minister and overseen presidential affairs—also chairs Mubadala, Abu Dhabi's second largest sovereign wealth fund. His experience is deemed vital in attracting investments as the UAE targets the **doubling of GDP** (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2204626/business-economy>) by 2031.

Yet Sheikh Mansour's promotion in no way diminishes Dubai's role, nor the authority of the already-sitting Vice President Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, also the Prime Minister and the ruler of Dubai. In a personal conversation with the former Chief Financial Officer of the emirate Nasser al-Shaikh, he explains that both state-level and emirate-level affairs require Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's attention. Sheikh Mansour, married to the Dubai leader's daughter, can be expected to lighten his father-in-law's demanding federal workload. With Dubai setting out a **\$8.7 trillion economic objective** (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2226701/business-economy>) by

2033, its ruler will have his hands full and will need the help of his two sons as deputy rulers (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/dubai-ruler-appoints-first-second-deputies-dubai-media-office-2023-04-28/>). Ahmed bin Mohammed, also Chairman of the Dubai Media Council, now joins his brother as second deputy ruler.

Having seen the rulers of Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah shine in the limelight at the 2022 China-Middle East Summit and the 2023 World Government Summit respectively, it is likely that Sheikh Mansour will take the wheel henceforth for such public appearances. His first international task as Vice President was to travel to London for the coronation of King Charles III — a strong indication of the assignments to come.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed's Brothers

The President's brothers, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed and Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed, are now accorded fresh titles as Abu Dhabi's deputy rulers. The former was also recently appointed chair of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) in March, what *The Financial Times* (<https://www.ft.com/content/9f965e4f-2447-4f28-8b18-75ddeee36c3e>) describes as consolidating the emirate's "role as one of the few global locations of excess capital." Beyond symbolism, the elevation in status of Tahnoun and Hazza is a recognition of their efforts in undertaking the national security portfolio. Both brothers, alongside the newly minted Crown Prince, have served in the Abu Dhabi Executive Council and will continue to do so, gaining invaluable experience in the process.

Rejuvenating the Monarchy

While the highly anticipated announcement revolved around the heir apparent in Abu Dhabi, the new additions to the UAE's leadership constitute an important injection of energy. As the two foremost personalities, the President and Prime Minister, move into their sixties and seventies, there is an imperative not only to shift towards leadership transition, but also to introduce younger personalities and, by extension, dynamism to the ruling circles. A senior Emirati academic, speaking to the author on the condition of anonymity, remarks that these developments constitute a resilient monarchical concept that allows for a delegation of authority, contrary to what scholarship describes as an outdated form of government. Crucially, these leadership shuffles reflect an agency from the top that carefully considers the delicate balance within the federal framework. ❖

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