



# Expo 2020, Cultural Diplomacy, and the UAE's Pursuit of Soft Power

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Expo 2020, Cultural Diplomacy, and the UAE's Pursuit of Soft Power

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## Abstract

This thesis explores how World Expos, and Expo 2020 Dubai specifically, have been utilized by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to further its soft power goals. The UAE has evolved from a fledgling nation established in 1971 to an aspiring global soft power in 2023. UAE foreign policy has emphasized cultural diplomacy from its inception, culminating in its present-day nation-branding as a global connector and bridge between East and West. This connector function, facilitated by its cultural diplomacy initiatives, is a cornerstone of present-day UAE foreign policy and is wholly complementary to the UAE's economic interests. This thesis explores UAE participation in World Expos, and particularly the hosting of Expo 2020 Dubai, as integral to and a catalyst for the development of the UAE approach to cultural diplomacy, as well as its soft power strategy.

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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

From October 2021 through March 2022, the United Arab Emirates hosted its first World Expo in the emirate and city of Dubai. Though they are global mega-events with a long and illustrious history, no World Expo had until 2021 been held in an Arab country, and it was a milestone for the UAE to host. Despite delaying the opening by nearly a year due to Covid-19 (still not enough to avoid the pandemic entirely), Expo 2020 Dubai ended its run in March of 2022 with every evidence of success. Two top-line indicators: the Expo saw twenty-four million visitors,<sup>1</sup> just shy of its original twenty-five million target; and on an investment of \$7 billion,<sup>2</sup> it drove an estimated foreign direct investment of \$33.2 billion,<sup>3</sup> with the UAE ranking 14<sup>th</sup> globally on Kearney's FDI Confidence Index in 2022.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Over 24 million visits as Expo 2020 Dubai connects minds and creates the future,” Expo 2020 Dubai, 2 Apr. 2022. <https://www.expo2020dubai.com/en/news/stories-and-articles/over-24million-visits#:~:text=Stories%20%26%20Articles-,Over%2024%20million%20visits%20as%20Expo%202020,minds%20and%20creates%20the%20future&t ext=After%20182%20days%20of%20unforgettable,achieved%20when%20humanity%20comes%20together>.

<sup>2</sup> “Party's over: Dubai's much-awaited Expo 2020 finally comes to an end,” *The Economic Times*, 31 Mar. 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/partys-over-dubais-months-long-expo-2020-finally-comes-to-an-end/articleshow/90571528.cms>.

<sup>3</sup> “Expo 2020 success, tech infra investments lift UAE to top of regional FDI confidence index: report,” *Arabian Business*, 10 Apr. 2022. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/abnews/sunday-expo-2020-success-investment-in-tech-infrastructure-lift-uae-to-the-top-of-the-regional-fdi-confidence-index-report>.

<sup>4</sup> “2022 Kearney FDI Confidence Index,” Kearney. <https://www.kearney.com/foreign-direct-investment-confidence-index>.

Yet no matter the potential advantages driven by tourism and economic gain, the UAE's decision to host the World Expo was also about acquiring favorable global opinion and soft power. World Expos emphasize the intersection between art, science, and culture – an intersection which lies at the core of soft power.

In a discussion of the UAE's quest for soft power, it makes sense to start with the present – the UAE was ranked #10 globally in 2023 in the Global Soft Power Index,<sup>5</sup> representing an improvement of five places from its rank of #15 in 2022 and making it the only Middle Eastern country to ever enter the top ten. It is natural to conclude that cultivating its soft power was likely a core goal for the UAE, and that its approach had paid off. And indeed, the UAE has demonstrably made soft power a focus in its strategic planning. Why would it do this, in all probability at the expense of other initiatives?

Soft power is the ability of a nation state to obtain what it wants from other states through “soft” means, such as positive public opinion, strong relationships, and overall goodwill of the international community. Soft power is pivotal to international relations and can bestow both a measure of global legitimacy and an aura of establishment. Particularly for a young nation, or a small nation – and the UAE is both – it represents access to a level of global importance which it would otherwise not gain via its hard power, i.e., military strength, alone.

In addition, there is a structural component particularly relevant to the UAE as a small, wealthy monarchy. The UAE's governance system centralizes power and authority with a small number of elites, often family members. This centralized power is funded and enabled by crude oil and hydrocarbon revenues, the ample supplies of which are used

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<sup>5</sup> Brand Finance, “2023 Global Soft Power Index,” <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/>

to power large investments such as: majority stakes in sports teams; experimental architecture such as the Burj al Arab and Burj Khalifa; cultural initiatives with global entities like NYU Abu Dhabi, the Sorbonne, and the Louvre; and not least, mega-projects such as Expo 2020 Dubai.

The concentration of the Emirati governing elite facilitates quick decision-making and implementation; the wealth of this elite provides cushion for failures. As a result, a small group can rapidly make critical decisions capable of turning the nose of the national ship, while also allowing for more vanity projects than would be possible in another governance system. While some of those projects may be beneficial to the entire population, some are not successful, or benefit only small groups. If a group of Emirati elites were to pursue international status above all else, they would have an advantage, given the narrowness of the power funnel in the UAE. Therefore, status-seeking and the pursuit of soft power by elite Emiratis has a more discernible impact on national decisions and projects than status-seeking by elites of other nationalities.

Hosting a World Expo in 2020 was just one element of the UAE's soft power strategy, and the decision to host was made by the concentrated group of elites in power. As this thesis will describe, however, the UAE's history of involvement with World Expos makes it clear that the decision to bid for Dubai to host has roots deeper than the current group of elites, extending back generations to before the foundation of the nation, and shows that for decades it has been fundamentally intertwined with both **how** the UAE chooses to communicate itself internationally, as well as **what** it says about itself. Therefore, the Expo is separate from and must be considered independently of other, less long-term, mega-projects and large investments made by the UAE.

In 2017, four years after the bid was won to host a World Expo in Dubai and three years before it was scheduled to start, the UAE launched both a Soft Power Strategy and a Soft Power Council. Although Expo 2020 Dubai was not explicitly mentioned, it was positioned to address each of the four strategic pillars in the Soft Power Strategy, which were:<sup>6</sup>

- Develop a unified direction for economy, humanities, tourism, media, and science;
- Promote the UAE's position as a gateway to the region;
- Establish the UAE as a regional capital for culture, art, and tourism;
- Establish its reputation as a modern and tolerant country that welcomes all people from across the world.

Given the clear correlation of the World Expo to the UAE's self-proclaimed Soft Power Strategy and considering the significance of the investment (in context: the Expo cost \$7B, while the entire federal budget of the UAE in 2021 was \$15.9B<sup>7</sup>), the event was demonstrably a top priority for the government in the delivery of its soft power goals.

The primary channel via which the UAE worked to achieve its soft power goals during the Expo was cultural diplomacy. In this thesis, cultural diplomacy is used to refer to the inter-relationships and exchange of cultural information (for example, the art, science, and technology pillars of the World Expo) between countries. Expo 2020 Dubai

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<sup>6</sup> UAE Government Portal, “The UAE Soft Power Strategy,” <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/strategies-plans-and-visions-until-2021/the-uae-soft-power-strategy>.

<sup>7</sup> UAE Government Portal, “Federal Budget,” <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/finance-and-investment/federal-finance/federal-budget>.

was remarkable in the lengths to which it took inclusivity – more countries participated in the UAE Expo than any other in history, along with many governmental, semi-governmental, and non-governmental international organizations. This inclusivity, which was a reference to and offshoot of the UAE's stated values of tolerance, openness, and connection, was the foundation from which the UAE pursued its ultimate goal of soft power.

The UAE's involvement with World Expos, and its use of the World Expo format to further its national ambitions, extends deep into its history. It extends so far into its history that its involvement with World Expo events pre-dates its existence as a country. The World Expo platform is arguably the single most important, consistent, and resource-intensive attempt by the UAE to exercise its cultural diplomacy muscle and achieve soft power on an international stage.

Despite this, there is little to no research on either the use of World Expos by the UAE to further its soft power goals, or the significance of the utilization of the World Expo platform within the context of the UAE's rapid development. This thesis aims to address these gaps, and as such requires investigation into elements beyond the immediate circumstances surrounding the 2020 Expo. The objective of this thesis is to provide a holistic view of the UAE's use of cultural diplomacy in World Expos since 1970 to achieve its goals of international recognition and soft power.

In the exploration of this topic, other elements must be covered to place the subject in the appropriate historical and theoretical contexts. These elements include the exploration in chapter 1 of the UAE's overall approach to foreign policy, cultural diplomacy, and soft power, as well as its stated goals in these areas. Chapter 2 provides

the historical context of the UAE as a country, illustrating its position when it decided to undertake its first World Expo participation in 1970, as well as its historical approach to foreign policy and international relations. In chapter 3, the significance of World Expos to cultural diplomacy and soft power on a global level is highlighted, focusing on Expos in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular the enormous impact they had on Western societies. Chapter 4 details other Arab nations' participation history in World Expos, as the UAE's most relevant peer group. From here, we segue to a closer examination of UAE participation in select Expos from 1970 to 2020, namely Osaka in 1970, Shanghai in 2010, and Milan in 2015. Chapter 5 places emphasis on discussing the UAE's self-presentation to the world through design, architecture, content, and involvement of its citizenry to convey cultural messages and a national narrative, and the implications of this on its soft power ambitions. In chapter 6, Expo 2020 Dubai is examined from bid to execution, including its temporal, economic, and cultural significance to the UAE, and the ways in which it enabled the UAE to progress its soft power goals. Finally, scenarios are laid out for the future of cultural diplomacy and the pursuit of soft power by the UAE.

In the absence of a robust external scholarship, this research required extensive use of UAE official government sources, local Emirati media, and locally published materials such as memoirs and histories. To examine the legacy of World Expos and western participation in the events, global sources from original documents published at the time of the Expos, academic studies, and regional and global media were used. For the in-depth study of UAE and other Arab participation in World Expos throughout the event's history, source documents such as Expo content were consulted, in addition to local, regional, and global media, and academic scholarship where available.

A note on terminology: throughout this document, reference is made to “World Expos.” These mega-events, which began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, have undergone various phases and naming conventions – the first event was called “The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations”; in 1893 the event hosted in Chicago was called “The World’s Columbian Exposition”; France named their events “Expositions Universelle”; and in the United States, many events were called “The World’s Fair”. Standardization to “World Expo” has been used throughout this thesis to refer to these events as a group in a more simple and convenient manner.

### Defining Cultural Diplomacy and its Relationship to Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy refers to the practice of engaging with foreign states and cultures to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried note that often, the term is used to describe a policy that communicates pieces of a nation’s history or culture to serve the overarching objectives of that nation’s foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> As a key element of foreign policy, it can be used to advance a variety of objectives, from economic development to security. Yet it may not always be a direct tool of foreign policy, in many instances aiming to create goodwill and positive sentiment in general, rather than to achieve any specific objective. As such, cultural diplomacy can take many forms, and is flexible, lending itself to the needs of any national or geopolitical circumstance.

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<sup>8</sup> Jessica C. E. Geinow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, “The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power, Distance, and the Promise of Civil Society,” in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, ed. Jessica C. E. Geinow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried (Berghahn Books, 2010), 13.

Moreover, cultural diplomacy does not exist in a vacuum – it should be defined and contextualized within the overall structure of foreign policy, which also includes public diplomacy. If foreign policy is the sum of all a nation does to impact and expand its influence beyond its borders, public diplomacy is the sum of what the state does to influence public opinion of itself beyond its borders.<sup>9</sup> Public diplomacy includes all government-funded programs intended to influence public opinion abroad – this can include TV, radio, films, written materials, live speeches, conferences, and more. Cultural diplomacy is more specific than public diplomacy, with the potential to cover the same topics, but usually fulfilling a more specific role – the use of cultural ideas, as well as the exchange of people, ideas, and information to increase understanding of a nation.<sup>10</sup> Raymond Cohen famously stated that diplomacy is the engine room of international relations.<sup>11</sup> In that analogy, cultural diplomacy represents a small but significant portion of the machinery that keeps the foreign policy ship on course.

Cultural diplomacy can take many forms, from cultural exchange programs to hosting international events. It is recognized by many nations as being critical to national goals; for example, the exchange of ideas and information via cultural channels exemplifies the strategic imperatives of US public diplomacy noted by US Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes in 2005: to offer a vision of hope, isolate and

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<sup>9</sup> Geinow-Hecht and Donfried, “The Model of Cultural Diplomacy,” 14.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia P. Schneider, “Cultural Diplomacy: Hard to Define, but You’d Know It If You Saw It,” *Brown Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (Fall / Winter 2006): 191–192. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590653>

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Cohen, “Putting Diplomatic Studies on the Map,” *Diplomatic Studies Program Newsletter*. Leicester: Centre for the Study of Diplomacy, May 4, 1998.

marginalize violent extremists, and foster a sense of common interest and values.<sup>12</sup> Much research has been done on American cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, specifically the use of music, modern art, and literature to spread American culture and its accompanying values.

In particular, “jazz diplomacy” and rock ‘n’ roll took center stage in US efforts to woo the world in the years following World War II. These forms of music were compelling on an artistic level while also carrying an anti-establishment message (particularly in the case of rock ‘n’ roll), which subtly communicated the freedom of lifestyle and creative pursuit in America. It was an evolution of the idealized American way of life, which had been the primary content of Hollywood exports for decades. Along the same lines, the US sent full symphony orchestras around the world in the 1950s to demonstrate an American predilection for classical music.<sup>13</sup> In addition to music, art and sport were also both foci of cultural export and diplomacy during the Cold War years. In this way, American culture grew to become one of the most powerful ideological tools in the Cold War – it provided global audiences a visceral experience of the stark differences in culture and approach to life between the Eastern bloc and the United States.

The use of cultural diplomacy backfires when it is clear to one party that the other is doing it for purely ameliorative or manipulative reasons. Therefore, cultural diplomacy, by providing content to the framework of public diplomacy within the larger boundaries

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Gienow-Hecht, “US Cultural Diplomacy,” *Transatlantic Cultures*, January 1, 1970, <https://www.transatlantic-cultures.org/pt/catalog/us-cultural-diplomacy>.

of foreign policy, is no substitute for the policies themselves. It is an avenue by which relationships can be forged and strengthened alone. By this logic, it should be pursued separately from policies, particularly short-term policies – it is a long-term and difficult to measure tactic. Cynthia Schneider summarizes the capabilities of cultural diplomacy as follows:

- It is a two-way street;
- It operates in the long-term;
- It does not explain or compensate for unpopular policies;
- It can increase understanding between different peoples and cultures;
- It can divert or entertain while communicating aspects of culture, such as diversity, opportunity, individual expression, freedom of speech, and meritocracy;
- It can open doors between diplomats and host countries, even when relations are strained;
- It cannot be effectively measured; it makes a qualitative, not quantitative, difference in relations between nations and peoples;
- It works best when it caters to the interests of a host country or region;
- It needs to be creative, flexible, and opportunistic.<sup>14</sup>

In short, cultural diplomacy lends itself to the development of relationships between countries that extend beyond the transactional nature of trade; it provides nations

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<sup>14</sup> Geinow-Hecht and Donfried, “The Model of Cultural Diplomacy,” 20.

the flexibility to connect on human grounds even when the relationship may be otherwise strained.

This thesis will note in later chapters ways in which the UAE used Expo 2020 Dubai to complement and further its soft power objectives around normalization of relations with unfriendly nations and neighbors, using the inherently connective nature of the World Expo as a means by which to mend fences in its own backyard.

### The Emirati Focus on Cultural and Digital Diplomacy

In the words of the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC), cultural diplomacy "includes, but is not limited to, the exchange of ideas, art and language for the greater purpose of creating understanding between nations and people."<sup>15</sup> The UAE's Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy (OPCD) adds further detail when it notes it is devoted to "international cooperation through ... the promotion of the UAE culture."<sup>16</sup> MOFAIC's website states that the UAE's view of cultural diplomacy leads it to support "dialogue, education and cultural exchange in the service of improved mutual respect, international collaboration and global prosperity."<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, the MOFAIC website also calls attention to potential risks and perils of pursuing cultural diplomacy in the modern world, saying technology has "enabled an unprecedented exchange of ideas ... disseminating information detrimental to stability

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<sup>15</sup> UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, "Cultural and Public Diplomacy," <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/the-ministry/the-foreign-policy/cultural-and-public-diplomacy>.

<sup>16</sup> Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy. <https://opcd.ae/>.

<sup>17</sup> UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, "Cultural and Public Diplomacy."

and peace.”<sup>18</sup> This is particularly significant as MOFAIC goes on to note that the UAE’s core values, stemming from its founding President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, are tolerance, peace, and stability. Quoting Sheikh Zayed, MOFAIC states: “Our [foreign] policy is based on the principles of legitimate rights, justice and peace, and is driven by our faith that peace is an urgent need for humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

It is a strong position for MOFAIC to assume. As the official foreign policy arm of the UAE, it is warning that globalization and technology pose risks to the UAE’s core values of stability and peace, while also acknowledging that technology and globalization present the widest and most expedient channels for the achievement of cultural diplomacy goals. It is a delicate and complex position, which has not been adequately recognized in the literature surrounding the topic of cultural diplomacy in the UAE.

The warning from MOFAIC highlights changes to public and cultural diplomacy spurred by technology – specifically, the Internet and social media. So-called “digital diplomacy” has resulted in shifts in the discourse, which previously occurred along relatively inflexible lines between diplomats and the domestic media; diplomats and the international media; and diplomats and the public.

Adesina notes that the definition of the term *digital diplomacy* is not agreed and can refer to differing concepts.<sup>20</sup> Manor and Segev classify it as the use of Internet-based communication tools, especially social media platforms, by a nation in order to achieve

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Olubukola S. Adesina, Foreign Policy in an Era of Digital Diplomacy, *Cogent Social Sciences* 3 (2017) 3–5, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2017.1297175  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23311886.2017.1297175?needAccess=true>.

its policy goals.<sup>21</sup> Lewis narrows it to the use of digital communication by diplomats to communicate with the public.<sup>22</sup> Others, for example Hanson, adopt a broad approach, defining it as the use of the Internet to work towards and achieve diplomatic objectives.<sup>23</sup> As a whole, however, it is agreed the use of technology and the Internet in public and cultural diplomacy has become indispensable. This observation is underscored, ironically, by MOFAIC's warning appearing on its website.

Digital diplomacy has many advantages: it enables instant communication with the ever-growing global percentage of people with access to a smartphone; it provides the ability for people to communicate directly with the state, rather than via an intermediary, or possibly not at all; and it can have little to no cost attached to it. Compared to the traditional processes and channels of diplomacy – i.e., communications to embassies in foreign countries, meetings out of the public eye, meetings held in the presence of media for dissemination in full or in part, and of course international conferences, workshops, and other forums – digital communication is faster, more efficient, more wide-reaching, and less expensive.

Criticisms of digital diplomacy abound, of course. The 2010 WikiLeaks incident, in which tens of thousands of diplomatic and sensitive state messages were published online, struck fear into the hearts of governments around the world. Hacking is a real

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<sup>21</sup> Llan Manor and Elad Segev, "America's Selfie: How the US Portrays Itself on Its Social Media Accounts," in *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, ed. Cornelius Boja and Marcus Holmes (London: Routledge, 2015), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Dev Lewis, *Digital Diplomacy*. Retrieved from <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/digital-diplomacy-2/> (2014).

<sup>23</sup> Fergus Hanson, "Baked in and Wired: eDiplomacy@State." Foreign Policy Paper Series no 30, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, October 25, 2012), 2.

concern and is ever harder to control. Cybercrime continues to become more complex and difficult to prevent, with a 15.1% increase in cyberattacks and data breaches in 2021 from 2020.<sup>24</sup> So, too, is the relative anonymity of the Internet, in which accounts are created specifically to propagate information leaks and inaccurate news items, or to troll state officials. Not least, competent use of social media is a tough ask for some diplomats, and it raises the risk of a public blunder significantly, posing a risk to their personal and professional reputations.

Digital diplomacy via social media, when controlled by a media-savvy government, also poses risks to the public. In these instances, digital diplomacy can become another opportunity for state control to be exerted. For instance, Nayib Bukele, the El Salvador President, successfully took control of all official El Salvadoran social media accounts in 2021, standardizing their branding and messaging, and utilizing them in a cohesive social media strategy, which some characterize as being equally intended to control the country's formal institutions.<sup>25</sup> Whether it is interpreted as a potentially over-reaching use of power to control media or as merely a well-executed branding exercise, this event makes clear the impact digital diplomacy can have on the subjects of a government. In El Salvador there is the additional significant point that the social media takeover impacted not just domestic El Salvadorans but changed the face of the country in the eyes of its large and economically influential diaspora, many of whom live in the

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<sup>24</sup> Chuck Brooks, "Alarming Cyber Statistics for Mid-Year 2022 That You Need to Know," *Forbes*, June 3, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chuckbrooks/2022/06/03/alarming-cyber-statistics-for-mid-year-2022-that-you-need-to-know/?sh=324791117864>.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Gonzalez Ormerod, "The El Salvador President is Remaking the Government's Social Media in His Image," <https://restofworld.org/2021/el-salvador-digital-coup/>.

United States, and almost all of whom use social media as a key channel of communication.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter II.

### Foreign Policy in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a small nation in the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, a group of six states in the Arabian Gulf comprising the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. On occasion these nations are conflated – in particular, the UAE and Saudi Arabia tend to share headlines, with even their leaders receiving similar monikers from the media: Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) in KSA, and Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) in the UAE. Yet the UAE's history and approach to its statehood is unique and puts it in a league of its own within both the GCC as well as the Arab world – and beyond.

#### The Century Prior to Formation

The United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven distinct emirates (the only federation in the GCC), was officially formed in 1971. Prior to this, Abu Dhabi – which forms over 80% of the total land of the UAE, and whose leader Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan was the face of the initiative to unite – remained one of the Trucial States, technically still under British protection.

During the century leading up to 1970, the economy of the Bedouin-dominated Gulf coast area underwent several major changes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economy was defined by managing what agriculture was possible in the desert (date palms, camel husbandry), and sea-based occupations (fishing, pearl diving). Bedouins did not live year-round in any location, as they had to continuously move based on the season. A lifestyle shift occurred for some Bedouins as pearl diving became more lucrative. Rather than

migrating back and forth between the Liwa, where the palms were, and the coast for pearl season, some families who owned boats and could afford to wait out the low season began to build permanent houses and live in Abu Dhabi year-round.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1930s, the introduction of cultured pearls decimated the market for natural pearls (in addition to the global depression, which truncated leisure and luxury share of wallet). As a result, pearl diving was no longer as profitable. This was a blow to the economies of the sheikhdoms of Abu Dhabi and Dubai – but the bad luck did not last long. Oil was discovered in the Trucial States in the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> However, in Abu Dhabi, newfound oil wealth was hoarded by the ruler at the time, Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan al Nahyan.<sup>29</sup> Whether intentionally, or more innocently trying to be a good steward of valuable resources without guidance on how to best use them, Sheikh Shakhbut hoarded the emirate's newfound oil wealth, spending sporadically and inefficiently with little real benefit to his people. An illustrative example from a memoir of the time describes how electricity did not come to the town of Abu Dhabi (outside the palace / some of the oil facilities) until 1967, once Sheikh Shakhbut's brother, the soon-to-be-President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, took power.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout Sheikh Shakhbut's long reign, Abu Dhabi and the other Trucial States were under the protection of the British empire. This became particularly significant once

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<sup>27</sup> Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2018), 200.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Q. Morton, "The Abu Dhabi Oil Discoveries," GEO Ex Pro. Accessed May 10, 2021. <https://www.geoexpro.com/articles/2011/03/the-abu-dhabi-oil-discoveries>.

<sup>29</sup> Mohammed Al Fahim, *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* (Abu Dhabi: Makarem, 2013), 86.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 116.

oil was discovered, which brought not only wealth but also visibility and vulnerability to the small tribal groups populating the area. As a British protectorate, the Trucial States had been shielded from their own vulnerability, but it was felt acutely when in January 1968 Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that the UK would completely withdraw its military from the Gulf by the end of 1971.<sup>31</sup> Sheikh Zayed redoubled efforts to bring together the disparate sheikhdoms into a single, unified federation, and on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1971, the United Arab Emirates was officially formed. Pertinent to this study of World Expos is the fact that in 1970, the emirate of Abu Dhabi was already out on the world stage, betting on the Expo in Osaka as a means to establish its name in a global forum, and to facilitate both political and cultural diplomacy.

### The UAE's Foreign Policy Approach

As a brand-new nation in 1971, the UAE counted a friend and ally in Great Britain, given the amicability of its transition from a protectorate to a sovereign state. It also benefited from international recognition of its existing and promised oil wealth. However, the UAE government faced the challenging task of establishing international relationships around the globe while still managing the challenges of its regional neighbors, as well as the seven disparate sheikhdoms within its own borders.

The United States was among the first to recognize the independence of the UAE and supported it in theory – not least due to the importance of its oil reserves. US companies began to bid on oil contracts in the UAE in the 1970s and 1980s, though initially most of these contracts went to French, British, and South African countries,

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<sup>31</sup> Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States*, 337.

whose governments lobbied harder on their behalf.<sup>32</sup> For the US, the UAE's strategic location next to Saudi Arabia, with whom the US had just concluded an agreement to price all oil in US dollars, was also a reason to be supportive.

The UAE was in no position to reject the US offer of friendship; however, Sheikh Zayed was critical of the United States' backing of Israel, and it was not until the Gulf War in 1990-91 that the United States' relationship with the UAE grew deep roots. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq galvanized the UAE to action – it shared the American perception of an Iraqi threat and agreed on the need to confront it militarily. As a result, the United States established a strong military presence which it has fostered ever since in the matter of Arabian Gulf security. In 2009, the United States assisted the UAE in the development and establishment of a nuclear energy program to increase its capacity of energy production, providing a model of Middle Eastern cooperation with the West on peaceful nuclear technology.<sup>33</sup> The result of this bilateral program is the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant in Al Dhafra, in the emirate of Abu Dhabi – established in 2012 and commencing operations in 2020, it provides nearly 25% of the energy-hungry nation's power requirements.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to Western nations, the UAE government was also occupied with working to create strong regional ties. Then as now, in a region rife with regular crises and an uncertain future, the UAE's position as a micro-state with enormous natural

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<sup>32</sup> William A. Rugh, "The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 1 (Winter, 1996), 57-70, 68.

<sup>33</sup> Abdulla Al-Suwaidi, "The United Arab Emirates at 40: A Balance Sheet," *Middle East Policy* 18 (Winter 2011): 44-58, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Emirates Nuclear Energy, Corporation, Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant ([enec.gov.ae](http://enec.gov.ae))

resources placed it in an interesting position. In the two decades following the UAE's establishment as a nation, it faced numerous regional crises: Iranian occupation of three UAE islands (Tunb Islands and Abu Musa) in 1971; in October 1973, the Arab-Israeli war and oil embargo; the Camp David Accords in 1978; the Iraq-Iran war between 1980–1988; and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990–1991). Moreover, twelve years after Iraq invaded Kuwait, America invaded Iraq. All these events presented a clear challenge, and it was imperative for its own security that the UAE formed close ties within its region as well as internationally. As a small nation without significant military power, the UAE tended to choose the path of constructive engagement, avoiding the role of aggressor until after the death of its founding president Sheikh Zayed in 2004.

The UAE's diplomatic priorities and connections fall into four circles, according to Korany and Dessouki: in addition to the international circle already mentioned, they highlight the Gulf circle, the Arab circle, and the Islamic circle.<sup>35</sup> The Gulf circle comprises the UAE's closest neighbors in the Arabian Gulf and is represented by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC has provided the UAE with the means to settle border disputes with Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. It also provides economic and political strength against Iran, its regional adversary. Moreover, the GCC allows a voice for the smaller countries in the region, which might otherwise be consumed by the relative size and power of Saudi Arabia.

The Arab circle has historically been a key area of focus for the UAE. During Sheikh Zayed's rule, he was clear in his support for Arab causes, including the

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<sup>35</sup> Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillel Dessouki, "Politics of Constructive Engagement: The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 457–480.

Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation: the UAE financially supported the first and second intifadas, and opposed the Camp David accords in 1978, as well as the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979. Zayed was clear in his opinion: “bilateral treaties with Israel will not guarantee legitimate rights of the Palestinians and will not help them liberate their land.”<sup>36</sup> This initial resistance to Israel based on the Palestinian cause continued after Zayed’s death in 2004, and made the Abraham Accords in 2020, in which relations between Israel and the UAE were normalized, all the more surprising to some observers. It was not a surprise to others, however: the UAE and Israel had been collaborating on areas of spyware, drones, weapons, and cybersecurity for years prior.<sup>37</sup> The Abraham Accords enabled further overt expansion of this exercise, with the ability to openly disclose collaboration in this area, as well as others. The deepening of diplomatic and trade ties with Israel also provided another powerful potential ally within the UAE’s home region, enabling it to diversify its strategic alliances away from reliance on the United States and Europe, in line with its economic courting of China and continuous development of relationships with China and Russia.

In the Islamic circle, the UAE has attempted to constructively influence the larger Islamic world, outside its home region of the Gulf. Of greatest note is the charitable aspect – the UAE has set up charities such as the Zayed Foundation, the Red Crescent, the Islamic Solidarity Fund, and Dubai Cares, which provide financial assistance at scale to Islamic countries around the world, especially those in Asia and Africa. The UAE, as well as other member GCC states, use its economic resources to contribute to these

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>37</sup> Elham Fakhro, “An Open Affair: As the UAE and Israel Normalize Ties, Gulf Actors Respond.” *Jadaliyya*. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41608>

charities, with the UAE ranking as one of the ten largest donor states in 2015, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>38</sup>

The UAE has used its foreign policy to establish strong connections in its immediate region, the wider Arab region, and internationally. Internationally, the connections have been based on quiet diplomacy, as well as on its relatively strong economic power – it has relied more on diplomacy and charity to establish influence, rather than on military support or direct appeal to citizens of other countries. Even its humanitarian causes are executed in conjunction with the UN or other state-level bodies. This is a rational approach for a micro-state with limited human resources – no matter the level of economic resources, a small population limits the speed with which international relationships can be forged.

In recent years, the UAE has taken a leading role in both de-escalations of regional tensions, exemplified by Abu Dhabi's work to normalize relations with Syria, as well as its starring role in the milestone Abraham Accords, which normalized relations with Israel. Pre-dating these actions, however, were a few key developments in the years leading up to 2020 – years in which the UAE shifted some of the focus of its foreign policy approach towards soft power and cultural diplomacy.

In 2017, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Vice President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, established the UAE Soft Power Council, a body charged with the implementation of the Soft Power Strategy, also launched in 2017. The UAE's Soft Power Strategy aims to “enhance its reputation and status regionally and globally, instigate cooperation between public and private sector entities within the country

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<sup>38</sup> The Official Portal of the UAE Government, *The UAE's Aid to Foreign Countries*.

through soft power initiatives and projects, and submit reports periodically to the UAE Cabinet on all progress and implementation.”<sup>39</sup> With the establishment of this council, Emirati diplomacy and foreign policy took a definite and deliberate turn toward the pursuit of the status of soft superpower. This pursuit entailed the development of a narrative for the UAE as a hub for science, art, and technology, and a culturally diverse, tolerant Arab nation capable of spanning the multi-faceted divide (geographical, political, cultural) between East and West.

This emphasis on soft power also complements the UAE’s overall economic goals. Much of its economy (the success of which is sometimes referred to as the “Dubai factor”) rests on the ability for foreign nations to trust the UAE as a culturally and ethnically diverse place of business, where respect for a common business code supersedes any differences in gender, religion, belief structures, etc. Cultivating the soft power currency of tolerance as a means to becoming a soft superpower wholly complements the UAE’s overall economic goals, as the perception of tolerance provides it positive global media coverage, enhances its touristic appeal, and makes it the most attractive business destination in the region. The focus on tolerance and soft power may also provide cover for the UAE’s increasingly interventionist role in hard power / military activities – since the Arab Spring shook the confidence of GCC monarchies in 2011, the UAE has taken a stronger role in regional affairs, entering the conflict in Yemen, supplying military equipment to the Libyan National Army, and showing willingness to support Assad in Syria (counter to the position taken by Saudi Arabia).

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<sup>39</sup> WAM (Wakalat Anbaa al-Emarat). “UAE launches Soft Power Strategy to consolidate its reputation regionally and globally.” 27 September 2017, <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302634954>.

Following the launch of the Soft Power Strategy and Council in 2017, the year 2018 was declared the Year of Zayed (honoring the UAE's founder, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan), and 2019 the Year of Tolerance. The themes given to these three years, in the lead-up to the World Expo in 2020, are significant. After the public announcement of the national aspiration to soft power, the following year was marked in honor of the founding father of the country, turning the spotlight from an external focus (soft power) to an internal one (Emirati identity and history).

Among the distinguishing factors of the UAE's urban planning is its segmentation into commercial enclaves, with defined "cities" such as Media City, Internet City, and Healthcare City representing economic free zones in which relevant entities can operate under favorable terms. Legally, too, Dubai has set aside an area governed by British law – its financial center, DIFC. This was done to promote trust in the country's financial systems (though it is not exclusively financial – wills can also be registered in DIFC, as a matter of British law), and has the effect of setting up an entirely separate judiciary system within Dubai. Though this fragments the judiciary landscape in the UAE, it has cemented Dubai's status of regional legal and financial hub, particularly for international companies wary of dedicating resource in emerging markets.

The number of commercial enclaves in Dubai is mirrored by the number of social enclaves. The country's expatriate population is approximately 90% of its total, with many living in areas populated primarily or exclusively by others of their own nationality. Moreover, the societal segmentation can be seen manifested in other ways as well: income brackets, religions, job types, skill levels, and family status are all identifiable groups within the UAE. As the population continues to grow and the

economic landscape shifts, rapid growth and diversification throws up unique challenges for the government to solve, not least the fragmentation borne of continued segmentation in the expatriate population.

The local Emirati population is segmented as well: by historical tribe, religious group (at times), proximity to power and authority, etc. In addition, their status as a group comprising <10% of the total country population opens up the potential for unrest, based on vulnerability, uncertainties of their role within an evolving society, and growing alienation from their native culture due to the dizzying rate of change to which they have been subjected for the past three generations.

Viewed in light of this deepening fragmentation in the society of the UAE, the move from an externally focused soft power pursuit to one more internal and more fundamentally Emirati makes sense. The drive to soft power was softened by dedicating the year of 2018 to focus on Sheikh Zayed and the values espoused by him, i.e., the legacy values which created the country in 1971. This sent a clear message to the Emirati population that heritage continued to matter and was the foundation upon which current decisions were being made; solidified the lionization of Zayed as a great leader; and provided the expatriate population a single point of reference around which the year was based, creating a calmer, more centered, and more domestically cohesive nation brand. It also was a brand which welcomed everyone – all could share in the celebration of Sheikh Zayed, his legacy, and his success. This overt openness foreshadowed the theme of the next year, tolerance.

At the end of 2018, in November, a World Tolerance Summit was held, ushering in what would be the Year of Tolerance in 2019. During this year, the UAE began to

forge and wield tolerance as a geopolitical tool – in most cases used to support its soft power goals. Pope Francis made the first-ever papal visit to a GCC country in February 2019. The trip was heralded by UAE media as a prime example of the religious tolerance valued so highly by UAE leadership. It was also a jewel that year in the UAE's cultural diplomacy and soft power crown, laying a firm foundation of the country as a focal point for global culture and the possibility of constructive discourse between cultures and societies, even when – maybe especially when – there might otherwise be tension or discord. Seen in this light, the Abraham Accords in 2020 were a very natural continuation of this strategy, bringing together Arab countries with Israel to achieve common priorities of economic health and regional security.

In the space of 50 years, the UAE evolved from a fledgling state, looking for friends in its region and beyond, to a nation crafting a narrative for itself of a soft power capable of acting as a nexus for connection, and facilitating the healing of global rifts. An optimistic approach indeed, and one that relies on – in fact, is built on – cultural diplomacy to achieve its objectives.

### Chapter III.

#### World Expos as a Means of Cultural Diplomacy and Link to Soft Power

World Expos, with their history dating back to 1851, enormous popularity, and near-total global participation (over two hundred participants, including nations, multilateral organizations, businesses, and educational institutions, were present at Expo 2020 Dubai<sup>40</sup>), provide an ideal vantage point from which to examine cultural diplomacy and soft power. They provide a platform for countries to showcase their culture and achievements to the world, and an opportunity for nations to build relationships with each other and to promote peace and understanding, building soft power via the development of goodwill and relationships both at a state level with other participants, as well as directly with the public, given the significant visitation at these events.

Among the primary objectives of cultural diplomacy is to promote the culture of a nation, create a positive impression, and thereby enable it to achieve its political goals. The traditional foci of World Expos – art, culture, and technology – lend themselves perfectly to the pursuit of cultural diplomacy. Nations, particularly host nations, have long used the global platform of World Expos to present themselves in a favorable light, both to their own populations and to the rest of the world. The six-month duration of the events provides a unique opportunity to craft a sustained, rich national narrative – which can and often does take significant liberties with reality.

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<sup>40</sup> Bureau International des Expositions. *Expo 2020 Dubai*. <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/2020-dubai>.

Since London's Great Exhibition in 1851, World Expos have been used to, among other things, message a national narrative for the host country, as well as for each participating nation.

The earliest Expos, in the mid to late 19th century, celebrated progress facilitated by the Industrial Revolution, with mechanical wonders and architectural marvels such as the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower. They also functioned as agents of globalization, bringing pieces of other cultures to the host country at a time when few of the visitors would ever experience such vastly diverse ways of life directly. In the 20th century, as the United States began hosting more Expos, its national capability of mass production came to the fore in the arena of consumer products (and technology, in the latter half of the century). Expos were the launchpad for the ice cream cone (1904), nylon stockings (1939), live television (1939), the mobile phone (1970), touchscreens (1982), and more.

In more recent Expos there have been fewer product launches, possibly due to accelerating business cycles, which do not wait for an Expo to come around once every five years. Instead, recent World Expos have tackled major world issues – Milan 2015 was focused on the challenge of sustainable agriculture,<sup>41</sup> while Shanghai 2010 focused on making cities better for their inhabitants.<sup>42</sup> Dubai 2020 had a program called Expo Live, which provided funding to 140 global entrepreneurs and innovators attempting to solve global problems.<sup>43</sup> Her Excellency Reem al Hashimy, UAE Minister of State and

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<sup>41</sup> Bureau International des Expositions. *Expo 2015 Milan*. <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/2015-milan>.

<sup>42</sup> Bureau International des Expositions. *Expo 2010 Shanghai*. <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/2010-shanghai>.

<sup>43</sup> Expo 2020 Dubai. *Expo Live*. <https://www.expo2020dubai.com/en/understanding-expo/expo-initiatives/expo-live>.

Director General of Expo 2020 Dubai, said during the launch of the Expo's flagship Sustainability Pavilion that “while 2020 may be remembered as a year that changed us forever, it has also given us a tremendous opportunity to come together as a global society and find answers to our most pressing challenges. This remains the focal purpose of Expo 2020 Dubai and the vision of the UAE’s leadership....”<sup>44</sup>

The concept of World Expos is constantly evolving, and central to the concept of the modern Expo is national messaging. National messaging has been used in Expos to create cultural affinity and a sense of global belonging. For the host nation, messaging is directed primarily internally, as most of the visitors are domestic. For participating nations, the messaging is to foreigners, especially those from the host country. In both categories, the UAE (host of Expo 2020) is an outlier from past host nations, as the population of the UAE is both small and exceptionally diverse. In a World Expo, each nation can present an idealized view of itself, as well as its future – and in recent Expos, there has been an emphasis on creating a globally relevant idealized view of the future.

World Expos are fascinating in the sheer immensity of their aspirations. The organizing body since 1931, the Bureau Internationale des Expositions (BIE), calls World Expos “a global gathering of nations dedicated to finding solutions to pressing challenges of our time by offering a journey inside a universal theme through engaging and immersive activities.”<sup>45</sup> The BIE goes on to claim that World Expos “welcome tens of millions of visitors, allow countries to build extraordinary pavilions and transform the

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<sup>44</sup> Inayat Ur-Rahman, “Reem Al-Hashimy: A Charismatic Figure Who Made It Possible,” *Gulf Today*. <https://www.gulftoday.ae/business/2021/09/30/a-charismatic--figure--who-made--it-possible>.

<sup>45</sup> “A Short History of Expos.” Official Site of the Bureau International des Expositions. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/about-world-expos>.

host city for years to come.”<sup>46</sup> It is spine-tingling in its ambition: World Expos set out to do nothing less than change the world as a whole, the countries that participate, and the cities which host.

Whether World Expos achieve these lofty goals is up for debate, particularly in recent decades and particularly in the United States. The lack of general US interest in recent World Expos prompted *Time* magazine to ask in 2014 “What happened to the World’s Fair?... How did the global cultural events that inaugurated broadcast television (New York 1939), built the Eiffel Tower (Paris 1889), and introduced the world to the Ferris wheel (Chicago, 1893) disappear?”<sup>47</sup> The answer given in the same article is that World’s Fairs have not gone anywhere, but that American appetite for them has evaporated. Among the reasons cited for the lack of interest is a smaller scope and a new focus on solving problems, rather than celebrating success in the manner of early World’s Fairs.<sup>48</sup> This analysis is easily disproven by looking at some of the very real problems tackled by early World’s Fairs – for example, the “War of the Currents” between Nikola Tesla (AC system) and Thomas Edison (DC system), which was hotly contested, and culminated in a competition to light the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago.<sup>49</sup> Tesla won the battle, with immediate result – it is clear that attempting to solve problems is not a valid reason for lack of American interest in modern-day World Expos. Moreover, if Americans have lost

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Harry Swartout. “What Ever Happened to the World's Fair?” *Time*, 14 Apr. 2014, time.com/79600/the-fall-of-the-fair/.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Bureau International Des Expositions. “Illuminating the White City: Tesla vs. Edison at Expo 1893 Chicago.” [www.bie-paris.org/site/en/blog/entry/illuminating-the-white-city-tesla-vs-edison-at-expo-1893-chicago](http://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/blog/entry/illuminating-the-white-city-tesla-vs-edison-at-expo-1893-chicago).

interest in them, that is a localized phenomenon – the visitor data for recent World Expos (below table) show that in the recent past, Expos have routinely received over twenty million visits throughout the course of their six-month duration.

Expo	Year	Visitors
Chicago (US)	1893	Twenty-seven million (43% of US population at the time) <sup>50</sup>
Hanover (Germany)	2000	Twenty million <sup>51</sup>
Aichi (Japan)	2005	Twenty-two million <sup>52</sup>
Shanghai (China)	2010	Seventy-three million <sup>53</sup>
Milan (Italy)	2015	Twenty-one million <sup>54</sup>
Dubai (UAE)	2020 (2021)	Twenty-four million

To contextualize, annual visitors to Disneyworld's Magic Kingdom in Orlando numbered twenty-one million in 2019.<sup>55</sup> This makes the average daily visits for a

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Pappas, *Flying Cars, Zombie Dogs, and Robot Overlords: How World's Fairs and Trade Expos Changed the World*. Kindle version, 2017. Loc 202 / 3979.

<sup>51</sup> Exhibitor magazine. “Do you Know Expo?” <https://www.exhibitoronline.com/topics/article.asp?ID=1943>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> David Barboza. “Shanghai Expo Sets Record with 73 Million Visitors.” NYTimes.com. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/03/world/asia/03shanghai.html>.

<sup>54</sup> European Commission. *Evaluation of the EU Participation in World Expo Milano 2015 – Final Report*. Directorate-General Joint Research Centre Task Force “Expo 2015”, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Statista.com. “Attendance at the Magic Kingdom theme park (Walt Disney World Florida) from 2009 to 2019 (in millions).” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/232966/attendance-at-the-walt-disney->

standard six-month Expo (even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) double that of pre-pandemic Magic Kingdom.

Notably, there has been an eastward movement of World Expo host cities— the last major Expo in the US was held in 1982 in Knoxville, TN, and the last major Expo in North America was Vancouver, in 1986.<sup>56</sup> These were both specialized Expos; to get to the last World Expos, you have to dig back to 1962 Seattle and 1967 Montréal (the famous 1964 World’s Fair in New York is not recognized by the Expo organizing body). Since then, Expos have moved eastward to Europe (Seville, 1992; Hannover, 2000; Milan, 2015), Asia (Osaka, 1970; Aichi, 2005; Shanghai, 2010; forthcoming Osaka, 2025), and the Middle East (Dubai, 2020).

Hosting an Expo provides an opportunity for the host country and the participants to offer up a specialized national vision of the future across culture, art, and technology – how this information is presented can influence how visitors to the Expo think of that nation. Charles Pappas, senior editor at Exhibitor magazine and author of *Flying Cars, Zombie Dogs, and Robot Overlords: How World’s Fairs and Trade Expos Changed the World*, posits that beginning with the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and stretching through to Expo 2010 in Shanghai, World’s Fairs occupy a critical position of cultural and political importance, with a focus on the outward messaging and narrative: “Countries and cities alike used them as debutante parties to announce their arrival as superpowers or to vindicate their persistence as empires...each of those expos was an

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world-magic-kingdom-theme-park/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20attendance%20at%20the%20park%20was%2020.96%20million.&text=The%20most%20visited%20theme%20park.park%20was%20around%2020.4%20million.

<sup>56</sup> Bureau International des Expositions. “All Specialised Expos.” <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/all-specialised-expos>.

alpha-male display of its host city's cultural muscle and sponsoring country's economic potency. Each offered a vision of the future that was always deeply seductive and sometimes dangerously skewed.”<sup>57</sup>

It is clear how important a role World Expos have played in western nations, and to the development of western societies. The first Expo, the Great Exhibition in London, served as a mechanism for Great Britain to flex its cultural might: in 1851, it was as an industrial powerhouse; enormously powerful; the seat of an uncontested global empire. The Great Exhibition, with its exotic imports from foreign lands, innovative technology, and shimmering, all-glass Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, were a triumphant exclamation point on the announcement of British progress and supremacy. Interestingly, the cultural foci of World Expos evolved as they moved from nation to nation – France, the next country to host after Britain, made the fateful decision to build the Eiffel Tower as the hallmark of its Expo. Never intended to be a permanent fixture, and initially ridiculed by Parisian elites, it has become the single most notable feature of the city of Paris and is quite possibly the first example of global city branding. The World Expo resulted in not just a global infatuation with the image of Paris via the Eiffel Tower, but also – unintentionally, perhaps unhappily for some – the re-formation of the actual city of Paris for its own inhabitants.

As World Expos moved from Europe to the United States, they took on even more of an exhibitionist quality, as Americans brought their own brand of commercialism and mass standardization to the Expos. American culture seeped through the events held in

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<sup>57</sup> Pappas, *Flying Cars*, Loc 192 / 3979.

the US – they were grand (e.g. the White City in Chicago), they were multi-cultural (e.g. the notable Lebanese presence in New York, described fully in the following chapter), and they were full of products, technology, and innovation (e.g. the many “global first” products which debuted at American Expos, listed above). The one thing all these Expos, and others held in the West between 1851-1970, had in common was the spectacular attendance they drove. Each Expo was a nation unto itself, not just in terms of the growing number of international participants, but in terms of the number of people who attended, which was regularly close to or (as in the case of Montréal, 1967) exceeded the total population of the country in which it was held. There was no question that World Expos were cultural dynamos, enormously significant in both impact and reach.

## Chapter IV.

### Arabs at Expo: Content and Cultural Messaging at World Expos

Given the UAE's positioning of itself in the 2017 Soft Power Strategy as a gateway to the Arab region, it is instructive to understand how its Arab peers participated in Expos throughout history. We will then explore the UAE's own representation in World Expos as both participant and host.

All nations aspire to stand out and appeal to visitors during the course of a World Expo, enhancing their image and reputation – in the case of the UAE, it is associated closely with many of its neighbors, such as Saudi Arabia, and so the challenge was to stand out without losing its regional focus; to become the cultural leader in the region – not coincidentally, this is also one of the objectives of the 2017 Soft Power Strategy.

The Great Exhibition of 1851, brainchild of Prince Albert, enjoyed enormous success, set a benchmark for future exhibitions, and through its ambitious size and design lionized the achievements of the British Empire. In this inaugural exhibition, cultural transmission was rustic, and focused mostly on bringing items from cultures around the world for visitors to look at, or in some instances touch, feel, smell, and taste.

Egypt and Tunisia both had exhibits in the Exhibition but represented themselves very differently. In the catalogue of the exhibition, nearly 400 items from Egypt are listed, and 103 from Tunisia.<sup>58</sup> Egypt's contributions were perhaps more impressive – they included minerals; agricultural products such as dates, olives, and raw sugar; textiles

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<sup>58</sup> Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015009221915&view=1up&seq=328&q1=tunis>.

from simple cotton to fine silks, including clothing; leather and leather products, such as camel saddles; a set of 165 books from Boulaq Press, Egypt's oldest printing house, as well as some novelties, such as ostrich eggs (it is unclear if these hatched during the Exhibition). Tunisia was represented primarily by textiles, many of them silks, sent by a single exhibitor, His Highness Mushir Basha, Bey of Tunis. The Victoria and Albert Museum purchased 17 of the textiles exhibited by Tunisia, the first items the museum acquired from Africa.<sup>59</sup> However, in a style ahead of its time, the Tunisian exhibit sought to replicate the experience of being in an open-air market by setting up a large tent lined with furs, textiles, perfumes, and other display items in the center of the exhibit, a clear differentiator from the more standard exhibition style used by Egypt.

The Expo in 1867, held in Paris, brought the world the Eiffel Tower, for which it is best remembered (though at the time it was not a particularly popular idea, and a 1,000-foot tall guillotine was a competing concept). It was also the first participation of Morocco in a World Expo, which brought a bold approach, one that was in a way an extension of Tunisia's market stall of 1851. Omitting anything related to commercial, industrial, or agricultural arenas, Morocco and Tunisia (as neighboring pavilions) designed ornate, royal tents. The tents had soft couches with thick carpets, and Moroccan décor. A striking feature was a white marble fountain, with colorful inlaid tiles. Orientalism was perhaps courted in these pavilions via their lush richness and

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<sup>59</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum. Textile Collections.  
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/tunisian-textiles-at-the-great-exhibition/>.

experiential focus. One visitor noted that they represented “a type of dwelling where art was not excluded...from everyday activities.”<sup>60</sup>

The World’s Fair in New York, 1939, was the first to have a future-focused theme: “The World of Tomorrow.” Timing was not on the Fair’s side, however, as World War II started four months into the Fair’s run – with it came a theme change to “For Peace and Freedom.” Lebanon made its first appearance independent from France at New York in 1939, to the delight of the Lebanese immigrant population in the US. *Al-Hoda*, the leading Lebanese newspaper in the US, ascribed great significance to participation in the Fair, saying it put Lebanon “among the free and independent nations of the world for the first time in modern history.” The Lebanese pavilion proved a hit. New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, when viewing a diorama of Byblos, said, “When I look at Byblos thousands of years ago, and then look at many of the streets of New York, I am ashamed.”<sup>61</sup> Cedar branches were brought into the pavilion, filling it with the scent of Lebanon – some Lebanese Americans were so overcome with emotion that they kneeled to kiss the branches, in tears. The Lebanese pavilion, in the remarkable setting of immigrant-full New York City, provided an opportunity for the state of Lebanon to bring cultural diplomacy to its own children, part of a diaspora in a changing world.

If the 1939 World’s Fair had begun just as World War II roared to life, the 1958 World Expo heralded the beginning of a historic era of peace and prosperity in Western Europe. The focus was now riveted on the future, with a theme of progress. The Expo

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<sup>60</sup> UC Press E-Books Collection, 1982-2004.  
<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft8x0nb62g&chunk.id=d0e2815&toc.depth=100&oc.id=d0e2091&brand=ucpress>.

<sup>61</sup> “They Went to the Fair.” *Aramco World*.  
<https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/197304/they.went.to.the.fair.htm>.

emphasized new technologies such as automation, computers, and nuclear energy – as Cold War tensions simmered, the USA and USSR pavilions took on a newly significant role in relation to one another. Arab countries were represented in a joint pavilion, halfway between the USA and USSR (a meaningful placement, as it would be today): Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria shared the exhibition space, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was also part of a ceramic mural depicting the Arab world as “the cradle of civilization.”<sup>62</sup> The Arab pavilion in 1958 focused on efforts made by the states involved to raise the standard of living for their citizens, with Syria singled out by the *New York Times* as the apparent leader of industry.<sup>63</sup>

Initially the 1967 Expo was to be held in Moscow, to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution. However, when the Soviets were forced to cancel due to “various reasons,” it was awarded to Canada instead. Expo 67 became the most successful World Expo in history, with fifty million visitors hosted by a country with a population of twenty million.<sup>64</sup> Kuwait and Algeria both participated for the first time as a part of the Arab Pavilions complex, along with the United Arab Republic.<sup>65</sup> Algeria’s pavilion was serene, simply designed with marble and tile. It focused on Algerian history and culture, with films about its history and development of agriculture and technology, as well as art. Kuwait’s pavilion was much like Algeria’s in design and illustrated the

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<sup>62</sup> *New York Times*. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1958/05/24/issue.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Bureau Internationale des Expositions, “Expo 1967 Montreal,” <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/1967-montreal>.

<sup>65</sup> Jeffrey Stanton, “Arab Pavilions” (1997), <https://www.westland.net/expo67/map-docs/arabpavilions.htm>.

country's relationship with oil. It also had a model of a desalination plant. However, due to regional tensions, the Kuwaiti pavilion was closed just a month into the six-month Expo, limiting its exposure to attendees.

In 1992, Seville hosted the World Expo. It was initially intended to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' arrival in America, jointly held with Chicago. Due to costs, however, Chicago elected to withdraw, and it became a solely Spanish Expo.<sup>66</sup> In the 1992 Spanish Expo, Oman made its debut World Expo appearance. Oman imported a large, heavy cedar door, and its exhibit was steeped in the scent of frankincense to set a traditional tone for the exhibit.<sup>67</sup> The focus of the Omani pavilion was on its history as a seafaring nation (and its most famous sailor, Sinbad), but also included traditional industries such as woodcraft and pottery, as well as a “renaissance dome,” which was home to a presentation slightly ahead of its time in its focus on helping visitors connect how Oman evolved from an ancient nation to a modern one.

The 2010 Expo in Shanghai served to breathe new life into the institution of World Expos. The Chinese government's wholehearted support of the Expo netted seventy-three million visitors, with a vast majority being Chinese. Some of the Arab pavilions, such as KSA and UAE, were among the most popular in the entire event, with lines of up to eight hours regularly snaking around the site to get into the pavilions. This was Bahrain's inaugural Expo – it had a compact pavilion, which took visitors on a journey from past to present to future and had a focus on Bahraini artisanship (jewelry /

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<sup>66</sup> Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seville\\_Expo\\_%2792](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seville_Expo_%2792). What does the Wikipedia article cite as its source of information?

<sup>67</sup> “Twelve Pavilions Represent Arabs at Seville’s Expo ’92.” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. <https://www.wrmea.org/1992-july/twelve-pavilions-represent-arabs-at-seville-s-expo-9.html>.

cultural relics) – as with many country pavilions at Shanghai 2010, the Bahrain pavilion relied heavily on touchscreen technology for interactive exhibits.

Throughout the course of Arab participation in Expos, we can see some similarities. Arab nations, no matter when they first participated in Expos, followed an essentially identical trajectory. The first years of participation were focused on simple cultural transmission, the direct relation of tangible pieces of culture, such as arts, textiles, products, and architecture. Content at the beginning of the participation in an Expo is minimal and basic – soft power objectives of influencing and deal-making take a back seat to more foundational goals of increasing visibility and, in the most sophisticated cases, laying the groundwork for future activities. The national story is rarely woven into these first Expos – this is true across all Arab states, from Egypt and Tunisia’s simple offerings in the Great Exhibition of 1851 to the emotional attempt to bring a piece of Lebanon to New York City in 1939. As the nation becomes more familiar with the framework of World Expos, content gradually becomes more sophisticated, for example the incorporation of the Arab area as the cradle of civilization in 1958 – this was a nascent effort to tell a story about the culture and the legacy of Arab countries, rather than simply bringing pieces of them to show and tell during an exhibition.

The UAE was no exception to this Expo growth path. In 1970, the mud fort in Osaka served to channel simple parts of Emirati culture (forts; jewelry; camels; coffee; music) for the primarily Japanese fairgoers to see. It was a large diorama, cultural immersion that was fascinating for visitors who had never had exposure to Arab culture before, and to whom it must have been mesmerizingly exotic. By 1992, the UAE still had

not quite lifted itself from this performative interpretation of the Expo assignment, building yet another fort in Seville, and re-enacting a local souk, or marketplace, as its primary exhibition. That rapidly changed, however, as the UAE took great strides toward cultural complexity in Shanghai 2010 – the content became the star of the show, and the age-old fort was rejected in favor of a modern building inspired by sand dunes. By 2010, it was clear that the UAE had graduated from the introductory phase of Expo participation and was focused on the conscious building of its own image. Despite evolution within other Arab countries, none moved as quickly as the UAE towards use of the World Expo format as a method of polishing its own national image and pursuing soft power goals.

## Chapter V.

### The UAE as a Participant of World Expos

The UAE's participation in World Expos overlaps in a fascinating, but not altogether unexpected, way with the development of the UAE as a nation. Hosting a World Expo has long been used as a method of announcing states' aspirations on the international scene, dating back at least to Chicago in 1867, where the organizers did everything in their power to help the White City to "out-Eiffel Eiffel."<sup>68</sup> Although there is a long history of the use of Expos as a kind of debutante ball for young and emerging states, it is still significant and somewhat ground-breaking that the first Expo in which Emiratis participated was not actually under the UAE banner: it illustrates the ambition of an as-yet unformed nation to introduce itself on a global stage, and may be the very definition of soft power aspiration.

Osaka, 1970

In its inaugural World Expo, Abu Dhabi – which would become the capital of the UAE within a year – created a replica of an Arabian mud-brick fort, of the type commonly found in Al Ain (a small city in eastern Abu Dhabi, and home to the Al Nahyan ruling family). The pavilion was designed by an Egyptian city planner, Abdulrahman Makhlof, who had worked on much of the city plan for Abu Dhabi.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Los Angeles Herald*, 1891. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=LAH18911017.2.5&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-----1>.

<sup>69</sup> "The Arabs at Osaka," *AramcoWorld*. archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/197004/the.arabs.at.osaka.htm.

The pavilion itself featured two minarets, one cylindrical and the other square. There were two central parts of the exhibit, which was providentially located near the center of the Expo: a carpeted room, and in the cylindrical tower, brass Arab lanterns that hung down from a stained-glass ceiling.<sup>70</sup> It was not elaborate. *Aramco World*, reporting on the “Arabs at Osaka,” noted Abu Dhabi’s contribution was “simple...a memorable display...a symbol of the bright future awaiting Islam and the Arab world.”<sup>71</sup>

Rashid Abdullah al Nuaimi, who led the UAE Expo trip to Osaka, told Abu Dhabi newspaper *The National* in 2014 that “We finished all our money, but I took some coffee pots with me to Japan and started selling coffee for a dollar each to make some money. People started to come and buy our ‘Arabic coffee.’ Gradually, delegations started to come and were encouraged to support us.” This pavilion, according to al Nuaimi, cost the Abu Dhabi government 1.5 million dirhams in 2014 currency, or approximately \$400,000.<sup>72</sup>

The contents of the pavilion were simple and sparse – there were cultural shows, such as dancing and music. As noted above, resources for the pavilion were limited, and along with neighbors Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Abu Dhabi focused on showcasing the history of its land and people, rather than hewing to the overall Expo theme of “Progress and Harmony for Mankind”, which saw many countries put forward futuristic concepts

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<sup>70</sup> Shireena Al Nowais. “A Look Back at the UAE’s First Foreign Pavilion at Expo ’70 in Japan.” *The National*, The National, 27 Apr. 2014, [www.thenationalnews.com/uae/a-look-back-at-the-uae-s-first-foreign-pavilion-at-expo-70-in-japan-1.270436](http://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/a-look-back-at-the-uae-s-first-foreign-pavilion-at-expo-70-in-japan-1.270436).

<sup>71</sup> “The Arabs at Osaka,” *Aramco World*.

<sup>72</sup> Shireena Al Nowais. “A Look Back at the UAE’s First Foreign Pavilion at Expo ’70 in Japan.”

and pavilions.<sup>73</sup> The Expo in Osaka, the first to be held in Asia, had a record-breaking (at the time) 64 million visitors, mostly Japanese – a record that would hold until the next Expo hosted in Asia: Shanghai, 2010.<sup>74</sup>

By far the most notable aspect of the Abu Dhabi participation in Osaka 1970 was, simply, that it participated at all. Abu Dhabi was at the time a small town of 62,000 people,<sup>75</sup> not yet a city; it had only gotten widespread electricity coverage three years prior; it was at the time politically embroiled in negotiations to form a nation out of disparate and not altogether friendly sheikhdoms. The effort to put Abu Dhabi into a World Expo taking place in Asia, given competing priorities at the time, was enormous, and implies a great deal of value attached to participation in a World Expo by the Abu Dhabi government, led by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan.

In 1970, the message from Abu Dhabi to the world was not much more complicated than “we exist”, and the cultural transmission which took place was simplistic, to say the least. And yet, its coffee and music were popular with the Japanese and international fairgoers; its mud brick pavilion was providentially located in the center of the Expo; and in a sea of ultra-modern futuristic concepts, it was unafraid to enter the Expo at a different stage of national evolution from most other participating countries. Even though its narrative was basic, Abu Dhabi’s implicit announcement of international intentions via the channel of the World Expo signaled a confident, forward-looking entity with tenacity to spare. Moreover, it signaled the Abu Dhabi government’s interest in

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<sup>73</sup> Bureau Internationale des Expositions. “Expo 1970 Osaka: the Story of Japan’s First World Expo.” [www.bie-paris.org/site/en/focus/entry/expo-1970-osaka-the-story-of-japan-s-first-world-expo](http://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/focus/entry/expo-1970-osaka-the-story-of-japan-s-first-world-expo).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> MacroTrends. “Abu Dhabi, UAE Metro Area Population 1950-2021.” [www.macrotrends.net/cities/22632/abu-dhabi/population](http://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22632/abu-dhabi/population).

acquiring soft power, obtained via the currency of cultural diplomacy, communicated via the platform of the World Expo.

As the UAE continued participating in World Expos, its commitment to the use of the events as a method of obtaining soft power currency increased in both intensity and sophistication. By Expo 2010 in Shanghai, while the UAE's presentation was virtually unrecognizable compared to the mud brick fort and \$1 coffee of 1970, much of the core narrative of optimism, confidence, and its significance as an entity on the global stage was the same.

### Shanghai, 2010

For its pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, the UAE tapped a foreign architect for the design, choosing Foster + Partners, a leading global architectural firm based in the UK. The selection of this firm sent an important message regarding the country's priorities: Foster + Partners describes itself as keeping "sustainability...at the heart of everything we undertake...."<sup>76</sup> By 2010 it had been ranked "World's Most Admired Architect" for four years running – and would keep the title for the next five years.<sup>77</sup> Norman Foster, the founder of the firm, is responsible for the design of some of the world's most recognizable modern buildings, including The Gherkin in London. Choosing a prestigious firm such as Foster + Partners to design its World Expo pavilion in 2010 was a strong signal from the UAE that it was seriously courting global

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<sup>76</sup> Foster + Partners. "Our Approach: Foster + Partners." [www.fosterandpartners.com/studio/our-approach/](http://www.fosterandpartners.com/studio/our-approach/).

<sup>77</sup> Karissa Rosenfeld. "Foster + Partners Remain World's 'Most Admired Architect.'" ArchDaily, 9 Jan. 2015, [www.archdaily.com/585632/foster-partners-remains-world-s-most-admired-architect](http://www.archdaily.com/585632/foster-partners-remains-world-s-most-admired-architect).

recognition via the channel of the World Expo, and the firm's dedication to sustainable builds signaled the UAE's readiness to step into a global leadership role on more than just construction.

Expos provide an ideal opportunity to showcase a national focus on innovation and design, both in terms of content as well as architecture. Particularly in large Expos where visitors will not see the contents of all pavilions, the external architecture plays a critical role in cultivating interest. Moreover, building a state-of-the-art Expo pavilion, given its small size and location in a temporary international area, is less of a financial commitment for participating countries, which may make it easier to take design risks and use the pavilions to make a national statement. The UAE was perfectly positioned in 2010 to make the most of this opportunity – its iconic tower, the Burj Khalifa, had opened in 2009 to great fanfare as the tallest building in the world. A decade earlier, the Burj al Arab, a distinctive sail-shaped tower in the sea, had opened, and Dubai in particular had developed a global reputation for experimental architecture.<sup>78</sup> Foster + Partners' mandate was to design a pavilion for the World Expo, but given the circumstances, it was also crafting a message about how the UAE saw itself as a nation, both in relation to the host country China, as well as the rest of the world.

Foster + Partners' design for the pavilion was undeniably modern but used an age-old theme for a country comprised in large part of desert. Rather than using the theme of forts, as all UAE Expo pavilions had until 2010, F+P chose sand – the pavilion was made of golden glass, in the shape of two sand dunes, 20 meters tall. With 3,000

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<sup>78</sup> "Sand and Freedom." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 28 Nov. 2005, [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/nov/28/architecture](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/nov/28/architecture).

square meters of exhibition space, it was among the largest pavilions in the Expo, and among the most popular, with lines of up to 5 hours to enter – a local Shanghai magazine placed it #1 on its list of must-see pavilions.<sup>79</sup> The exterior of the pavilion, with its clean, elegant lines and golden glass that glowed in the sun, was evocative of sand dunes and the natural landscape of the UAE. It echoed skyscrapers and urbanization, but was also an attempt to emulate nature, and implied an emphasis on sustainability and living with the land. It represented a move away from the forts that had been the preferred design until 2010 – even a simplistic fort is a manufactured structure that overlays nature, while the 2010 pavilion in many ways sought to soften the edges of the UAE’s growing reputation for rapid urbanization and big shiny towers.

The pavilion’s content, too, acknowledged but de-emphasized the rapid urban development of the UAE. The content revolved around two centerpiece films: first, visitors saw a story of the UAE’s development, told by a man who has taken his son into the desert to connect him to the past. In this video, while the son is ever-more excited by the list of achievements and buildings in the UAE in the recent past (“we have the world’s tallest building, and the Palm, and incredible hotels, and the metro”), his father tempers it with a reminder of the deeper values of the nation: “we have so much to be proud of. But you know, it’s not just technology and new buildings that say we have come a long way...the more things change and move on, the more we have to remember where we have come from. Some of the greatest things were created by nature, not by

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<sup>79</sup> WAM (Wakalat Anbaa al-Emarat). “UAE Pavilion Rated ‘Top Pavilion’ at Expo 2010.” *Khaleej Times*, 28 July 2010, [www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/uae-pavilion-rated-top-pavilion-at-expo-2010](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/uae-pavilion-rated-top-pavilion-at-expo-2010).

man.”<sup>80</sup> The father gives his son pearls that he says were originally the result of his own father’s hard work as a pearl diver and tells the boy to get some sleep: “tomorrow, we head for the city.”<sup>81</sup> The video has moments of advertising, with shots of glamorous hotels, but ultimately the message is about maintaining a national sense of self in a rapidly changing environment. Rapid change can be destabilizing whether it is positive or negative – a message that surely would have resonated with the majority Chinese audience at Expo 2010. It is not clear whether this video enjoyed much airtime domestically within the UAE, but one cannot help but wonder if it was designed for an Emirati audience as well as a foreign one. It is a unique challenge to craft the story of a society while nearly all the key players are still alive to comment on it. The relocation of the pavilion to the UAE, and its placement within the UAE (discussed later), indicates that the content of Expo Shanghai was also likely directed to a domestic audience.

The other show was an animated short film called *Dream Journey*.<sup>82</sup> This film centers around two children, an Emirati boy and a Chinese girl – they are texting each other as modern-day pen pals, with Rashid (the boy from the first video, who received the pearls from his father) telling the girl about the wonders (“pearls”) of the UAE. She says she wishes she could see it for herself – and as animated characters, they travel together across the UAE. Again, the focus first is on nature, as they fly over the Gulf, entering the

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<sup>80</sup> FilmsonUAE. “In the Blink of an Eye.” YouTube, 25 Jan. 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ24C3zZZTM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ24C3zZZTM).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> FilmsonUAE. “Dream Journey from the UAE Pavilion at Expo 2010 Shanghai.” YouTube, 21 Jan. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3UILJKlqio](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3UILJKlqio).

UAE via the mangroves of Abu Dhabi, skimming over groups of indigenous flamingoes and dolphins.

They fly past traditional dhow boats on the water, sails bending into the wind, showcasing the inspiration for the Burj al Arab tower. They descend over the desert, past camels, and into a luxurious modern resort modeled on an Arabian palace. Jumping into the water, they encounter sea-life, and Rashid dives for a pearl to give to the girl – when a shark appears they jump away from the glass, as they are now in the Dubai Mall aquarium. They run through the mall, and into the old souk (market) in Bur Dubai, and then out again to take an aerial tour of the city. Only then does the Burj Khalifa appear, and the other urban hallmarks of the city. They fly past these briefly, see a Formula1 race and a football match in Abu Dhabi, and then return as evening sets in to a traditional, cultural milieu. They ride on horses to an ancient fort, where there is a traditional celebration, complete with hair dancers, falcons, and fire.<sup>83</sup> They start their journey with nature, move to manufactured development, and end with tradition and culture. Notably, screen time for the manufactured highlights in the film is outweighed 2:1 by natural and cultural elements.

These two videos, rather than being separate, tell a connected story. By 2010 the UAE had undergone at least one major shift: its founding President, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, died in 2004. The young country had come into immense wealth and had recently lost its most respected leader and statesman. The content at the Expo in Shanghai walked a fine line between respecting the importance of tradition and culture, and acknowledging the necessity of moving forward to embrace new opportunities.

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<sup>83</sup> FilmsonUAE. “Dream Journey.”

The first video concerns the older generation (those from Sheikh Zayed's time) handing down experience and wisdom to the younger generation. The second follows that younger generation and its developing story (global; youth-oriented; diverse in gender and nationality) within the scope of the development of the UAE as a nation. The story is globally inclusive, and there is a focus on the bond between the UAE and China – in fact, the UAE and China, personified by their characters, spend much of the short film holding hands. The UAE presented its relationship to China in the second film as young, dynamic, and powerful. Perhaps this overt linkage to China should not be a surprise, given its increasing importance to the UAE as a strategic trading partner within the then-new Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>84</sup> The Expo being hosted by China in 2010 was ideal timing for the UAE, which was increasingly relying on the Chinese as both a trading and strategic partner.

There were numerous mentions in local UAE media about the general lack of Chinese knowledge regarding the GCC region and the UAE: “We’re mysterious to them,” said one Emirati Expo 2010 volunteer.<sup>85</sup> The combination of a strategic trading interest and a lack of knowledge in China about the UAE is significant, and the *Dream Journey* film provides evidence that the UAE very specifically courted Chinese favor via its content. However, the narrative of the UAE pavilion at Expo 2010 was not purely about introducing the UAE to seventy million potential tourists or currying Chinese national favor as a trade partner. These films comprise the Emirati contribution to a

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<sup>84</sup> “UAE Foreign Trade in Figures.” Santandertrade.com, [santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/united-arab-emirates/foreign-trade-in-figures](http://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/united-arab-emirates/foreign-trade-in-figures).

<sup>85</sup> Daniel Bardsley. “Volunteers Build Bridges at Shanghai Expo.” The National, The National, 9 May 2010, [www.thenationalnews.com/uae/volunteers-build-bridges-at-shanghai-expo-1.536210](http://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/volunteers-build-bridges-at-shanghai-expo-1.536210).

global event, carefully crafting a story of the national progress of the UAE, targeting the entire world as an audience. They are also, to a degree, about Emirati national identity, and attempted to shape the Emirati view of the future at a critical juncture after Sheikh Zayed's death.

The UAE pavilion in Shanghai was dismantled at the end of the Expo and re-built on Saadiyat Island (in Arabic, *Island of Happiness*), off the coast of Abu Dhabi. In doing so, the UAE became the first country to move an Expo pavilion after the event.<sup>86</sup> This move helped to maximize return on investment for an expensive six months, and it was a sustainable option for managing the pavilion after the event closed (though sustainability was not yet a stated priority), but there was also a cultural motivation linked to the national narrative. Saadiyat Island houses many of the cultural institutions of the UAE, including the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Zayed National Museum. Of the national museum, Sheikh Sultan bin Tahnoon al Nahyan, chairman of TDIC (developer of Saadiyat Island) said: “A national museum inherently presents a national story...reflecting the way in which cultural identities have changed and evolved over time...”<sup>87</sup> It is clear that Saadiyat Island was developed with nation-building and narration in mind – not merely for tourists, but for citizens and residents as well. And this is the location that was chosen to place the UAE pavilion after the event, evidence of the importance of the story told at Expo to the story being told domestically.

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<sup>86</sup> Anna Seaman. “UAE’s Shanghai Expo Pavilion Coming to Saadiyat Island.” *The National*, 9 Jan. 2011, [www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-s-shanghai-expo-pavilion-coming-to-saadiyat-island-1.578475](http://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-s-shanghai-expo-pavilion-coming-to-saadiyat-island-1.578475).

<sup>87</sup> “Out of the Sand, a New Vision for a Nation.” *The National*, 26 Nov. 2010, [www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/out-of-the-sand-a-new-vision-for-a-nation-1.521750](http://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/out-of-the-sand-a-new-vision-for-a-nation-1.521750).

In a nutshell, the story written by the UAE about the UAE in 2010 was not about flashy buildings or great wealth, at least not completely; it was about a country less than forty years old (but a society far older), trying to manage rapid change with wisdom and ambition, reaching out to the world and specifically to China, and looking to the future with great optimism.

Milan, 2015

The 2015 Expo in Milan was focused on sustainable agriculture, with the theme “Feeding the planet, energy for life.” By 2015, the UAE was the World Expo heir apparent, having won the bid to host Expo 2020 in Dubai two years prior. Again, the UAE chose to work with Foster + Partners on the design of the pavilion – the agency by that time was in its 9<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of “World’s Most Admired Architect” status.<sup>88</sup> As the next host, the UAE enjoyed a large and central location within the Expo site in Milan, and chose to focus on food security as a theme.<sup>89</sup> Specifically, the UAE focus was on how to manage agriculture in an inhospitable climate, and brought forward the issue, similar to its narrative in 2010, of how rapid change had been for the UAE since its formation. Salem al Ameri, the Commissioner General for the UAE Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015, noted that the aridity of the UAE’s climate had clashed with the growth aspirations of the nation, and that the UAE faced many challenges regarding food

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<sup>88</sup> Karissa Rosenfield. “Foster + Partners Remain World’s ‘Most Admired Architect,’” *ArchDaily*, 9 January 2015, <https://www.archdaily.com/585632/foster-partners-remains-world-s-most-admired-architect#:~:text=A%20global%20survey%20conducted%20by,largest%20practice%20in%20the%20world>.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Croucher, “UAE to Focus on Food Security at Milan Expo 2015,” *The National*, 17 Sept. 2013, [www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-to-focus-on-food-security-at-milan-expo-2015-1.322263](http://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-to-focus-on-food-security-at-milan-expo-2015-1.322263).

security from its inception as a country of 225,000 people in 1971 to over nine million in 2015.<sup>90</sup>

Foster + Partners' design for the pavilion in Milan was linked to its design for Shanghai but was far more intricate. While the theme remained based on sand, Foster + Partners created a series of textured panels from scans of the desert outside of Al Ain, which, once constructed, formed 12-meter high walls.<sup>91</sup> These walls were set up in parallel, with a narrow channel between, so that visitors walked a path through undulating sand dunes upon entry to the pavilion – the material of the panels was fully recyclable.<sup>92</sup>

After entering through this channel, visitors were guided up a ramp to a large golden drum, which housed the cinema. Once visitors had seen the film in the cinema, they moved out to the end of the exhibition, a green oasis filled with plants native to the UAE. The pavilion was designed in collaboration with Masdar City, a purpose-built carbon-neutral development outside of Abu Dhabi, in part for local partnership on sustainability aspects but also to ensure a smooth transition after the event. Much as in Shanghai, the UAE pavilion was not discarded but rather re-installed domestically for the “legacy” period, this time in Masdar City.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ramola Talwar Badam, “UAE Pavilion to Take Prominent Position at next Year’s Milan Expo,” *The National*, 14 Jan. 2014, [www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/uae-pavilion-to-take-prominent-position-at-next-year-s-milan-expo-1.250758](http://www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/uae-pavilion-to-take-prominent-position-at-next-year-s-milan-expo-1.250758).

<sup>91</sup> Foster + Partners. [www.fosterandpartners.com](http://www.fosterandpartners.com). “UAE Pavilion Milan Expo 2015: Foster + Partners.” Projects | Foster + Partners, [www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/uae-pavilion-milan-expo-2015/](http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/uae-pavilion-milan-expo-2015/).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Badam, “UAE Pavilion to Take Prominent Position at Next Year’s Milan Expo.”

In 2015 as in 2010, the UAE's focus on the external design and architecture of the pavilion was marked. Given the sustainability theme of the overall Expo, maintaining the pavilion theme of sand dunes again took a nature-based approach, with the additional focus on UAE flora and agriculture, such as date palms. The design downplayed the urban elements of the country in favor of its natural characteristics. Its bold design won Exhibitor Magazine's award for 'Best Exterior Design' at the Expo.<sup>94</sup>

Content in 2015 took an individualized approach, with Emirati volunteers handing out iPads at the beginning of the exhibition journey, on which visitors could choose their preferred language for the duration of the exhibition. These iPads, along with the many volunteers stationed throughout the pavilion, then allowed visitors to take self-guided tours and focus on interactive exhibits at their leisure.<sup>95</sup> Throughout the exhibit a 75-meter digital *falaj* (traditional Emirati irrigation system) provided a trail to follow, in addition to interactive exhibits about date palm cultivation – it was also functional, as the screens that made up the *falaj* were iPads which had been used and returned by visitors.<sup>96</sup>

A key part of the visitor experience in the UAE pavilion was the opportunity to interact with the volunteers, young Emiratis whose role was to perform traditional acts of hospitality, tell stories, and discuss elements of modern-day life in the UAE. Though it was not reported as such, it may have in part been a reaction to the lesson from China regarding the overall global ignorance about the UAE and its culture. In 2015, a team of

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<sup>94</sup> Foster + Partners. "UAE Pavilion Milan Expo 2015: Foster + Partners." [www.fosterandpartners.com/](http://www.fosterandpartners.com/).

<sup>95</sup> FilmsonUAE. "UAE PAVILION FILM EXPO 2015 MILANO." YouTube, 21 Jan. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqyKcvystH8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqyKcvystH8).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

four hundred Emiratis staffed the pavilion over the course of the six months of the event, all between the ages of 20 to 35.<sup>97</sup> These volunteers represented all seven emirates comprising the UAE and received training not just for the event in 2015, but also for the event to be hosted by Dubai in 2020. The volunteers / ambassadors proved instantly popular in Milan: reportedly the women quickly had to learn the Italian phrase “Non toccare per favore” – *no touching please* – due to the closeness of visitors when taking selfies.<sup>98</sup> 400 young people from a country with a national population of approximately 1 million<sup>99</sup> is not a small number and it was a concerted nation-wide initiative to form the group of volunteers for the Expo.

The push for incorporating volunteers at the 2015 Expo benefited not only interactivity with visitors at the Expo, but also began to develop a national experience base for the upcoming Expo 2020 in Dubai. The media narrative around these volunteers focused on the benefits they gained from the experience, and the increased esteem in which they held their own country based on the experience of presenting it to a global audience. Among the comments from volunteers in Milan, one woman said, “I’m proud to represent the UAE and tell people about our achievements...I tell them about our suffering before and our achievements now.”<sup>100</sup> The narrative of successful navigation

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<sup>97</sup> Daniel Bardsley. “Pavilion Proves a Culture Club.” *The National*, 2 May 2015, [www.thenationalnews.com/uae/pavilion-proves-a-culture-club-1.122437](http://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/pavilion-proves-a-culture-club-1.122437).

<sup>98</sup> Ramola Talwar Badam. “Selfie Overload as Volunteers Prove to Be as Popular as UAE Pavilion Itself,” *The National*, 17 July 2015, [www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/selfie-overload-as-volunteers-prove-to-be-as-popular-as-uae-pavilion-itself-1.637692](http://www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/selfie-overload-as-volunteers-prove-to-be-as-popular-as-uae-pavilion-itself-1.637692).

<sup>99</sup> Global Media Insight. “UAE Population Statistics 2021.” <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/>.

<sup>100</sup> Daniel Bardsley, “Old Hands’ Steer Ship at Milan Expo,” *The National*, 2 May 2015, [www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/old-hands-steer-ship-at-milan-expo-1.112004](http://www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/old-hands-steer-ship-at-milan-expo-1.112004).

through rapid development was alive and well via the volunteers. Volunteers also found themselves correcting many misconceptions about the UAE, much like the Shanghai volunteer who noted that Emiratis were “mysterious” to the Chinese – in Milan, the questions were about women’s rights, religion, and education. One volunteer summed it up: “It was important to help them understand the freedom we enjoy, give them answers so they could understand.”<sup>101</sup>

The domestic drive to spur interest in volunteering at the Milan Expo illustrates the importance to the UAE of developing a base of young people who understood the Expo and could provide valuable knowledge in the planning for the UAE’s own Expo five years later. It also created an opportunity, via the training for the event, to further cement the narrative about the development of the UAE, and its rise in short order from a period of “suffering.” Finally, the national reporting on the volunteers’ experience served to make clear to Emiratis the number of misconceptions which existed about the UAE, and the gap between how Emiratis see their country and how other nations see it.

In many ways the story about the UAE told at Milan 2015 was much the same as the story told in Shanghai 2010 (with echoes of the first message in Osaka 1970) – the UAE remained a modern, dynamic country navigating the difficulties accompanying rapid development without losing touch with its cultural roots. However, the emphasis on personal interaction with volunteers is a differentiator – the UAE’s approach in 2015 was far more individualized, placing people together for one-on-one conversations and connections. Just as important, the UAE used the opportunity to expose a number of its

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<sup>101</sup> Ramola Talwar Badam, “Emirati Volunteers Dispel Visitors’ Misconceptions at Milan Expo,” *The National*, 10 July 2015, [www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/emirati-volunteers-dispel-visitors-misconceptions-at-milan-expo-1.79824](http://www.thenationalnews.com/business/travel-and-tourism/emirati-volunteers-dispel-visitors-misconceptions-at-milan-expo-1.79824).

youth to the concept of volunteering, make them aware of global perceptions of the UAE, and strengthen the national narrative on a domestic level.

### Summary of UAE Expo Participation

World Expos have held a position of significance to the UAE in communicating a cultural narrative, both internationally and domestically. Participation in World Expos have provided the UAE with a way to reach tens of millions of people around the world to display and communicate its culture – in other words, direct cultural diplomacy. This can be seen across three parameters:

**Timing of the Expos:** this was most relevant in 1970, when the UAE was not yet a country but used the Expo in Osaka to announce itself on a world stage; and 2020, which the UAE combined with its Golden Jubilee (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the federation) and successful Mission to Mars in 2020 as a celebration of nationhood and progress.

**Architectural Design:** design of its Expo pavilions has been of paramount importance to the UAE in all instances of participation. Architectural design evolved from a simple but, given the circumstances, resource-intensive replica fort in Osaka 1970 to the progressively grander, prestigious, and award-winning pavilion designs of Shanghai in 2010 and Milan in 2015. The UAE used Expos to capitalize upon and exercise its prowess in experimental architecture, with the grand ambition and scale of the Expo 2020 site in Dubai serving as the architectural capstone. We also saw an evolution from historical inspiration (the fort of 1970) to designs that emulated and evoked nature (sand dunes in Shanghai; the *falaj* in Milan; the falcon shape of the UAE pavilion in Dubai). This evolution toward nature downplays the importance of the UAE's skyscrapers and

urban development in the values of the country, and establishes a foothold in nature, which is often associated with past generations, hardship, and wisdom. Evidence for the importance of the architectural design to the national narrative is provided in the post-Expo relocation of the pavilions from both Shanghai and Milan back to the UAE.

**Content:** Content in the Abu Dhabi pavilion in 1970 was sparse, and like the pavilion itself, focused on directly relaying the culture and history of Abu Dhabi. By 2010, the content was far more sophisticated, and aimed at favorable portrayals of the UAE, both as a standalone nation and in relation to the host country, China. The UAE's content portrayed the UAE / China relationship as close, fun, and powerful. In Milan 2015, the introduction of volunteers made the delivery of content personal and more human. It also allowed the volunteers the ability to go off script to answer questions, potentially establishing closer connections with the international audience, as well as developing a base of well-informed UAE nationals. Expo 2020 Dubai engaged the domestic population on an unprecedented scale, with community engagement programs targeting schools, residents, and nationals, both for volunteering and professional opportunities.

## Chapter VI.

### Expo 2020 Dubai and the UAE as Host

At Expo 2020 Dubai, held in 2021 due to a Covid-related delay, the UAE used the World Expo as an opportunity to celebrate nationhood and progress during its Golden Jubilee (50th anniversary of the federation). Expo was a coming-out party of sorts in 1970 for the UAE, and 50 years later, served as a milestone to mark and highlight progress. Again, as in 1970, the World Expo provided a stage for the UAE to present itself to the world and acted as a catalyst for the UAE's foreign policy, cultural diplomacy, and soft power development.

Expo 2020 Dubai was the first World Expo to be held in the Middle East and formed a critical component of the foreign policy strategy for the UAE and the GCC region. Among the most striking examples of this was the decision to use the Expo as a channel for the normalization of relations with Israel – the announcement of Israeli Expo participation in April 2019<sup>102</sup> significantly pre-dated the official announcement of the normalization agreement in August 2020.<sup>103</sup> At the launch of the Israeli pavilion, Israel's Tourism Minister Yoel Razvozov underscored the significance of the event: “For the first time in history, the Expo fair is being held in an Arab country. It is also the first time there is an Israeli pavilion in a major fair on Arab soil. It is one of the most sound and robust steps towards cooperation between the United Arab Emirates and Israel in

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<sup>102</sup> “Israel to take part in Expo 2020 Dubai.” *Khaleej Times*. 27 Apr 2019. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/world/israel-to-take-part-in-dubai-expo-2020>.

<sup>103</sup> Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington DC. “The Abraham Accords: A Warm Peace Transforming the Middle East.” <https://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/abraham-accords-warm-peace-transforming-middle-east>.

history.”<sup>104</sup> Expo was without a doubt used as a tool to advance the UAE’s strategy of tolerance and regional soft power via the cultivation of diplomacy and normalization of relations with an old enemy.

There were critics of the UAE’s appointment as host of the Expo. Three weeks before the event opened in October 2021, legislators in the EU Parliament passed a resolution demanding the immediate release of Emirati activist Ahmed Mansoor, along with human rights lawyer Mohammed al-Roken and economist Nasser bin Ghaith. All three were imprisoned for crimes ranging from social media posts critical of the government (bin Ghaith) to insulting the prestige of the UAE (Mansoor) and attempting to overthrow the government (al-Roken).<sup>105</sup> This resolution was approved within the Parliament by a vote of 383 for, 47 against, with 259 abstaining.<sup>106</sup> The EU Parliament resolution also called for EU members to boycott the Dubai Expo, however despite strong support of the resolution’s demand for the release of the activists, the boycott seemed to hold little sway, as 192 nations ultimately participated in the Expo – Afghanistan was the only country which did not participate.<sup>107</sup> As with China’s hosting of the Expo in 2010, global concerns with the host country’s human rights record appeared to come second to the importance of participation in the event.

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<sup>104</sup> Staff, “Expo 2020 Dubai: Israel Opens Pavilion with Glittering Show,” *Khaleej Times*, 8 Oct 2021. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/expo/expo-2020-dubai-israel-opens-pavilion-with-glittering-show>.

<sup>105</sup> Staff, “EU Parliament urges UAE to free imprisoned human rights activists,” *Al Jazeera*, 17 Sep 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/17/eu-parliament-urges-uae-to-free-imprisoned-human-rights-activists>.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> “From Yemen to Syria, world’s problematic politics loom at Dubai Expo 2020,” *Business Standard*, 4 Oct 2021. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/from-yemen-to-syria-world-s-problematic-politics-loom-at-dubai-expo-2020-121100400739\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/from-yemen-to-syria-world-s-problematic-politics-loom-at-dubai-expo-2020-121100400739_1.html).

Dubai won its bid to host Expo 2020 against Sao Paulo, Brazil; Yekaterinburg, Russia; and Izmir, Turkey in November 2013.<sup>108</sup> Dubai's winning bid had the theme "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future," referencing the necessity of global cooperation and visitation to make the Expo a success, given its domestic population of under ten million.

This theme also highlights the identity the UAE was building for itself as a soft power bridge between east and west, not simply in terms of geography but also in terms of culture, religion, and society. The UAE, and Dubai in particular, positioned itself as a central, ideal meeting point for the world, a place where Israel and Palestine could and would exist side by side, and, therefore, where any geopolitical deals were possible.

It is no small feat that the UAE managed to keep both Palestine and Israel involved in the Expo; Palestine, which had already committed to participation, pulled out when Israel's inclusion was announced. After rounds of negotiations, Palestine elected to stay in the Expo – and during the event had a large, elegant pavilion built for it by the host country, with a more central location and more spacious interiors than Israel. There were no protests reported throughout the six months of the event related to either Palestine's or Israel's participation.

In addition to the overall theme of "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future," Dubai put forward three sub-themes as concrete points of inquiry: Mobility, Sustainability, and Opportunity. These sub-themes dictated the organization of the Expo site itself, which was split into three sections, one per sub-theme. Country participants

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<sup>108</sup> Caroline Massie, "Dubai Wins World Expo 2020 Bid with HOK Design," *Architect*, 6 Dec. 2013, [www.architectmagazine.com/design/exhibits-books-etc/dubai-wins-world-expo-2020-bid-with-hok-design\\_o](http://www.architectmagazine.com/design/exhibits-books-etc/dubai-wins-world-expo-2020-bid-with-hok-design_o).

(over 190 countries are confirmed to participate) were divided across the three sections, with participant pavilions focusing in some way on the sub-theme of their section. The site itself was physically (from the air, as many drone photos and videos showed) in the shape of a flower with three petals, one for each of the sub-themes, arranged around a central open-air dome called Al Wasl Plaza – in Arabic, Connection Plaza. In all, the site comprised an incredible 4.38 square kilometers, making it twice the size of Monaco.<sup>109</sup>

The visitation goal for the event was twenty-five million visits (not visitors: this allowed for multiple visits for domestic visitors in particular). As noted earlier, this is approximately the average across previous World Expos. However, most World Expos have been held in countries with much larger domestic populations (for example, the United States and China), so the UAE initially planned to pull in a significant number of international visitors to achieve this target. In 2019, the forecasted split between international and domestic visits was fourteen million international to eleven million domestic.<sup>110</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic posed a serious challenge to international numbers, given the difficulties faced fighting the disease by some of the key UAE tourism source markets, such as China and India.<sup>111</sup>

Meeting a high target of visitation was crucial, given the importance of the tourism market to the UAE, its economic goals which would be bolstered by tourism, and

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<sup>109</sup> Esha Nag, “Expo 2020 Dubai in Numbers,” *Expo2020-Visit-the-Expo –Gulf News*, 18 Apr. 2021, [gulfnews.com/expo-2020/visit-the-expo/expo-2020-dubai-in-numbers-1.1571313704473](http://gulfnews.com/expo-2020/visit-the-expo/expo-2020-dubai-in-numbers-1.1571313704473).

<sup>110</sup> Dominic Dudley, “The \$33B Question: Can Dubai Make a Success of Expo 2020?” *Forbes Magazine*, 15 May 2019, [www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/05/15/dubai-expo-2020/?sh=6658230c556b](http://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/05/15/dubai-expo-2020/?sh=6658230c556b).

<sup>111</sup> James Pearson et al., “India's COVID Surge Could Have a Huge Impact on UAE Aviation,” *Simple Flying*, 22 Apr. 2021, [simpleflying.com/india-covid-surge-uae-aviation/](http://simpleflying.com/india-covid-surge-uae-aviation/).

the ultimate soft power goal of developing a perception of the UAE as the regional cultural capital. Moreover, the size of the site demanded a large number of visitors to make it appear populated in media footage and for visitors; among the many challenges was the fact that there were over two hundred pavilions on the site which could swallow visitors, making the site seem empty even if that was not the case. Among the drivers for requiring a crowd: the event needed to look well-attended on regional and global media to maintain the appearance of success.

One of the ways the UAE attempted to pull visitors to the site was a tried-and-true method it had used in past World Expos, as well as with its iconic towers, the Burj al Arab and the Burj Khalifa: futuristic, experimental architecture from the world's top designers. The Expo 2020 site was an architect's playground, with top architects such as Foster + Partners, Grimshaw Architects, and Santiago Calatrava contributing designs for the host country, including a falcon design for the UAE Pavilion, complete with wings that lifted and lowered throughout the day.

The UAE showcased its strength in design and architecture by purpose-building a small city in the desert, including the attendant required development of roads, metro links, and utilities to a previously barren area. Yet in the spirit of its pavilions in Shanghai and Milan, the UAE's home Expo relied heavily on natural elements for its design. The site is in the shape of a three-petaled flower; the UAE Pavilion is a falcon; there is a story of a local ghaf tree found during construction in the most inhospitable of conditions, which has been wound into the Expo 2020 apocrypha. The tree, of course, has been preserved. It was named Salama and given a gender as well as a backstory – she

represents the wisdom of nature and has been observing the progress of the UAE over the past decades.<sup>112</sup>

The timing of the 2020 Expo had particular significance to the UAE. The first Expo in which the UAE participated was in 1970 – the 2020 Expo (though delayed to 2021 due to Covid-19) marked a half-century since the UAE’s first participation. Hosting provided the country with a six-month window to publicly highlight its achievements since 1970. Moreover, as discussed earlier, 1970 was a milestone year for the country – it was the eve of the UAE’s inception. If the World Expo in 1970 provided an almost-born country with the opportunity to declare its existence to the world, hosting the World Expo in 2020 allowed the young but now well-established nation to celebrate, both internationally and domestically, how far it had come. 2021 was the UAE’s Golden Jubilee, which was heavily celebrated at Expo, particularly on the country’s National Day (2 December).

In July 2020, the UAE successfully launched an unmanned probe on a two-year journey to map the atmosphere of Mars, labelled “the first Arab interplanetary mission.”<sup>113</sup> This expansion of the UAE into space was heavily referenced at Expo 2020 – and it, too, coincides with the nation’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of inception. Since the World Expo is aligned with the birth of the UAE, it will forever provide a natural reference point when reviewing the UAE’s history.

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<sup>112</sup> WAM (Wakalat Anbaa al-Emarat), “Video: Ghaf Tree ‘Salama’ Preserved at Expo Dubai 2020 Site.” *Khaleej Times*, 11 May 2019, [www.khaleejtimes.com/news/general/video-ancient-uae-symbol-preserved-at-expo-dubai-2020-site](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/general/video-ancient-uae-symbol-preserved-at-expo-dubai-2020-site).

<sup>113</sup> UAE Space Agency. <https://www.emiratesmarsmission.ae/>

Much of Expo 2020’s content for which the UAE was directly responsible seemed designed with children in mind – for example, the Sustainability Pavilion, built and curated by the Dubai Expo organizing committee, was described as a “journey for our planet and our shared future,”<sup>114</sup> asking visitors to take action throughout to fight climate change. The content was aimed at children and adolescents – almost every review of the pavilion on TripAdvisor, while positive, mentioned its suitability for families and children.<sup>115</sup> Perhaps this is not surprising; the UAE’s demographics are youthful, with 27% of the population under the age of 25 in 2018.<sup>116</sup>

Expo 2020 Dubai was explicit about placing an Emirati stamp on the Expo using cultural media. For example, traditional Emirati storytelling was a regular facet of the host country exhibitions. Among the areas where this was most noticeable was in content aimed at youth / child visitors. Expo 2020 Dubai set up the Expo School Programme, which reaches out to all public and private schools across the UAE to organize Expo trips, conduct initiatives, and provide learning materials related to World Expos.<sup>117</sup> Schoolchildren were a key visitor group to the Expo, and programs were put in place to allow children to join an opera, sing with a national choir, develop entrepreneurial ideas,

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<sup>114</sup> “Terra - The Sustainability Pavilion.” Terra - The Sustainability Pavilion | Expo 2020 Dubai, [www.expo2020dubai.com/en/understanding-expo/participants/special-pavilions/sustainability](http://www.expo2020dubai.com/en/understanding-expo/participants/special-pavilions/sustainability).

<sup>115</sup> “Expo 2020 Dubai - 2021 All You Need to Know BEFORE You Go (with Photos).” Tripadvisor, [www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g295424-d19719336-Reviews-or5-Expo\\_2020\\_Dubai-Dubai\\_Emirate\\_of\\_Dubai.html#REVIEWS](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g295424-d19719336-Reviews-or5-Expo_2020_Dubai-Dubai_Emirate_of_Dubai.html#REVIEWS).

<sup>116</sup> “UAE Population Statistics 2021.” Global Media Insight.

<sup>117</sup> Expo 2020 Schools Programme. <https://schools.expo2020dubai.com/>

undergo leadership training, and conduct Model UN-esque knowledge sessions in Expo's Next Gen World Majlis.<sup>118</sup>

Complementing this focus on schools were the Expo 2020 mascots: there were two primary mascots, a boy named Rashid and a girl named Latifa. Along with these two primary mascots were three extra-terrestrial robot mascots, one for each petal of the site. As cartoons, the mascots naturally appealed to children, but in addition to this, the mascots were adapted to an animated show shown via the Schools Programme as well as on social media. As a result, the mascots were built out as characters and took on more significance. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed al Maktoum (chairman of the higher committee for Expo 2020), at the launch of the mascots, alluded to this as integral to the meaning of an Emirati Expo: “[Rashid and Latifa] have been thoughtfully created to reflect the tradition of storytelling that is core to the region...they speak a universal language of ambition and aspiration.”<sup>119</sup> Latifa, 8, is an aspiring inventor, and looks to science for answers. Her brother Rashid, 9, feels strongly about the environment, and loves poetry. They are part of a story that Expo 2020 told children across the UAE in advance of the event about what it means to be Emirati, what the UAE stands for, and where the UAE has come from. It is very similar to the stories told by the films in Shanghai, and the volunteers in Milan – but aimed towards children throughout every school in the UAE.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Sarah Diaa. “Latifa and Rashid -- Official Mascots of Expo 2020.” *Expo2020-Experience-the-Uae –Gulf News*, 18 Apr. 2021, [gulfnews.com/expo-2020/experience-the-uae/latifa-and-rashid---official-mascots-of-expo-2020-1.66701072](http://gulfnews.com/expo-2020/experience-the-uae/latifa-and-rashid---official-mascots-of-expo-2020-1.66701072).

Expo 2020 targeted both domestic groups of Emiratis and expatriate UAE residents. The Expo Emiratisation Programme brought UAE nationals into the planning and delivery of the Expo in a number of ways: as temporary employment for government workers, who will be put on leave from their usual jobs; as fresh graduates with no experience; or as interns.<sup>120</sup> Expo 2020 also put a focus on hiring Emirati “People of Determination,” the UAE designation for those with physical handicaps.<sup>121</sup> This professional development of young Emiratis was aimed at creating a knowledge and resource base for future events, helping UAE nationals become mega-event professionals. It was also a channel to deliver the Expo’s message to the Emirati population: the UAE occupies a special place in the world. Led by Dubai, it is the place where global values, priorities, and desires intersect. It placed the UAE at the center of the world for the benefit of its citizens.

Finally, the Expo 2020 Volunteer Programme was a massive undertaking, aimed at residents and nationals alike. While 400 volunteers were used to man the UAE Pavilion in Milan, Expo 2020 Dubai activated 30,000 volunteers over the six months of the event.<sup>122</sup> These volunteers all received training in the event, and it was pitched to the wider population of the UAE as an opportunity to help in “creating a meaningful legacy for the UAE and the world.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Expo Emiratisation Programme. <https://ptluat.expo2020dubai.com/en/programmes/emiratisation>

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> “Expo 2020: Volunteers Can Register till March 31.” *Khaleej Times*, [www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/expo-2020-dubai/expo-2020-volunteers-can-register-till-march-31](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/expo-2020-dubai/expo-2020-volunteers-can-register-till-march-31).

<sup>123</sup> Expo 2020 Volunteers. <https://ptluat.expo2020dubai.com/en/programmes/volunteers>



## Chapter VII.

### Conclusions

In summary, throughout this thesis we have seen a story develop about the origin, role, significance, and use of World Expos in the UAE as an aspect of the country's soft power goals.

The history of the UAE's formation, culminating in the British departure from the Gulf in 1971, illustrates the urgency behind the creation of the nation, and its need to quickly establish regional and global relationships. The UAE's approach to foreign policy shows the strength of its legacy ties to Western allies; challenges with other regional powers, namely Iran; and attempts to influence the Gulf, other Arab states, other Islamic states, and wider global areas. Additionally, its increasing emphasis on soft power is clear, including the intersections and complementary nature of its business-first approach with its soft power aspirations. The potential for the soft power strategy to provide a friendly face to its increasingly interventionist hard power approach is also well noted.

The cultural significance of World Expos as a global, though primarily western, event throughout history has been illustrated. As a result, these events have had significant influence since their inception, and their ability to affect nations' soft power standing is known. Throughout the history of World Expos, but particularly since 1970, Arab nations have been active as participants in the events. Their participation has followed a standard trajectory: introductory years of participation comprise simple content and presentation, focused on the transmission of legacy cultural elements. As participation continues, stories become richer and begin to incorporate elements of past, present, and future, describing a journey rather than a single cultural moment in time. The

UAE, though not among the first Arab participants in Expo, was the fastest Arab nation to evolve, and developed its narrative quickly, moving from a basic mud fort in Osaka 1970 to making complex diplomatic, social, and economic overtures to China by Shanghai 2010. Not surprisingly, the UAE was the first Arab nation to host a World Expo, developing a custom-made city in order to host, replete with the experimental architecture for which it is known. Moreover, the UAE Expo seamlessly integrated the content of its soft power strategy, particularly the strategy's backbone concept of tolerance. Saudi Arabia is now bidding for the World Expo in 2030, with the Expo 2020 Dubai blueprint (and UAE support for the bid) in hand.

From the standpoint of timing (first participation pre-formation, in 1970; hosting in 2020, to mark 50 years of the nation), the UAE has made clear the significance of the World Expo to its story, both as a nation and as a part of the international diplomatic community. It has leveraged one of its most famous calling-cards, experimental architecture, to develop its brand as a young, forward-looking country at the forefront of modern urbanization. And its content has been focused on its core soft power messages, namely: a focus on tolerance and inclusivity; a focus on youth; and particularly for its domestic population, a focus on the importance of legacy and tradition. The UAE's messaging via World Expos has evolved from a purely external message in 1970, to a message directed specifically to the Chinese market in 2010, to a more nuanced and domestically aware message in Milan 2015, to finally an assertively Emirati message and tone in its own hosted Expo in 2020.

## Where the UAE Goes from Here

As evidenced by its rapid climb to #10 in the 2023 Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index, the UAE has made strides in establishing itself as among the most formidable soft power players in the Middle East. It has used this image and position to begin building itself into a diplomatic soft superpower, using its unique position to engage equally with the west and the east. The narrative it employs to further these goals and deepen its international niche is of a country in which secular values of peace and tolerance can and do supersede cultural and religious differences, while simultaneously celebrating its own religion and tradition. This narrative, in theory, addresses both the challenge of keeping up old allies such as the US and the UK with rhetoric and actions around tolerance, while solidifying bonds with new allies, such as China and Russia, with a business-first view which does not exclude trade or the development of strong relationships even, as with Russia, in the face of otherwise far-reaching global sanctions.

In this effort, Expo 2020 Dubai was a strong tool to further its geopolitical agenda, given the Expo's global reach and focus on the pillars of art, science, and technology, all key aspects of cultural diplomacy and soft power. The UAE maintains strong relations with its GCC neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, but also courts the favor of eastern and western powers. In the west, the US and France are notable, given the significance of the US as its first major international ally, and France given the push to jointly establish cultural institutions such as the Sorbonne and the Louvre in the UAE. Eastern nations occupy equal importance, such as Russia (long a crucial tourism market for the UAE), China, a key trading partner, and India, perhaps the UAE's longest-running strategic partner and source of a majority of its expatriate workforce. The UAE's focus is

on establishing an image of itself as a country focused on security and prosperity above all else.

The focus on diplomacy and soft power is, as previously discussed, complementary to the UAE's economic goals, and is therefore likely to continue as the backbone of the UAE approach to foreign policy. The UAE has prioritized the security of its borders and the health of its economy as its top concerns, and as a small state is electing to focus on soft power as an essential component of its capability to influence. As a result, the UAE has reaffirmed its commitment to a business-first approach, prioritizing solid trade ties and relations with countries across the global and political spectrum, from Russia and China to France and the UK. The intermingling of economic and geopolitical goals will continue to be a visible and central part of the UAE's cultural diplomacy both internally and globally, doubling down on the message that whatever a country's position may be on political issues, it is no bar to a trade relationship (at a minimum) with the UAE. This has already been seen with the UAE's extravagant outlay on its pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai, in which content was focused to a great extent on the positive and emerging relationship between the UAE and China. In future, in World Expo participation and beyond, we should expect to see the UAE court eastern powers as much as it does western powers.

Examples of the UAE's foreign policy approach of emphasizing a business-first mindset from the past three years are readily available: normalization of relations occurred with former enemy Israel, in part to enhance trade opportunities in cybersecurity, technology, and other sectors; bilateral relations were revived with Turkey; and a somewhat icy peace with Qatar was restored in 2022, just before the FIFA World

Cup was to take place, bringing millions of visitors in to Doha (many of whom would also use the opportunity to visit UAE cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi).

In the most optimistic scenario, which is the scenario voiced by Expo 2020, over the next decade these bilateral relationships will flourish without causing degeneration in other global relationships; the UAE will continue to develop at pace; and it will continue to develop its reputation as a global mediator and connector – this is the vision conveyed by Expo 2020 Dubai.

In a less optimistic scenario, a number of challenges could arise, some born of the very relationships the UAE has been cultivating since 2020. One example: an increasingly friendly relationship and trade alliance with Israel could stick in Saudi Arabia's throat, putting a wedge between the two most powerful Arab Gulf states and chipping away at their special relationship, causing regional strife and tension. Another possibility: Saudi Arabia, in the execution of its own ambitious plans to evolve by 2030, may put the UAE at risk with its choices of investments and foreign policy, or by worsening authoritarian policies, which taint the region as a whole, and which the UAE could not denounce at risk of alienating its most powerful regional ally. A third but by no means final possibility: escalating tensions between the US / Europe and Russia / China erupt in war or come close enough to it that the UAE risks trade boycotts and sanctions from one side or the other. It may become impossible for the UAE to continue acting as the cultural bridge between global factions if the factions truly have no desire for a bridge. Or, perhaps more likely, if the economic bridge of products and services continues but there is no appetite for cultural exchange. The UAE's soft power strategy is to an extent dependent on the continuation of a global community, which wants

connection in the first place. If connection is no longer valued, the strategy must be revisited and re-configured.

In the UAE, some things have not changed since Expo 2020 was won in 2013 and closed in 2022: central among these is the demographic split of the country. With over 90% of the population hailing from other countries and working in the UAE as expatriates, domestic cohesion remains a top priority for the UAE as a nation – this will remain a policy focus. The UAE's remittance economy is among the most valuable in the world, with many people earning and sending money back to their families in their home countries. Maintaining a positive view of the UAE for those countries is important to keep the flow of migrants robust, as is maintaining a positive view of the UAE for primary tourism markets, given the reliance of the economy on tourism revenue. As a result, the onslaught of messaging about the UAE as a multicultural, tolerant, safe place will likely continue, in the absence of major shifts such as the global war scenario described above. The establishment over the past one to two decades of cultural outposts such as NYU Abu Dhabi, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the Sorbonne were milestones in the UAE's attempts to establish soft power and strengthen cultural ties with key markets (in these instances, the US and France) – a natural development would be the continuation of this with other strategic partners, but with a stronger focus on non-western strategic partners, such as India and China.

The other side of the demographics coin is the relatively small number of Emiratis in the UAE. Not only is effort required to maintain the cohesion of social groups and cultures with the UAE, but a great deal of resource must be applied to the maintenance of a strong cultural identity of the local Emirati population. In addition to sponsoring

international cultural projects with allies like China in the UAE, the next decade will probably see a stronger focus on UAE nationalism, both at home and abroad. The next step for the UAE is likely to be not just playing the role of cultural facilitator and meeting host, as it did at Expo 2020 Dubai; the UAE will likely focus on assertively exporting its culture globally, building a national narrative befitting a soft superpower. Perhaps upcoming cultural initiatives, even if done in partnership with other nations, will be Emirati-led, consistent with the approach of moving from importer of other cultures to exporter of its own culture.

The ultimate goal, at the extreme end of the brand-building soft power spectrum, is to be a category-killer on an international level. In practice this means that rather than trying to live up to the title of “the Switzerland of the Middle East,” with the western centricity that implies, the UAE would become a point of reference in the blueprint for other nations around the globe. For example, Kazakhstan could be termed the UAE of CIS, given the similarities in its governance model and natural resources; or El Salvador might vie to be the Dubai of Latin America by becoming a mecca for regional youth and prioritizing the establishment of a business hub. Should this transpire, the UAE’s status would be cemented as a soft superpower – and given its record of marking significant national milestones with World Expos, it might even decide to host another Expo to celebrate the occasion.

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