



United Arab Emirates: A Ministry of State for Happiness to move society forward and guide public policy

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the only federation in the Arab world, grouping together seven emirates¹ for a population of 9.8 million, of which around 12% are UAE nationals. The country is dynamic (GDP growth of 2.7% in 2016) and prosperous (GDP per capita of US\$ 38,032 in 2016). Among OPEC Member Countries, it ranks fourth in terms of oil production (2.8-3 million barrels per day) and seventh for oil reserves worldwide (98 billion barrels).² The UAE boasts a multicultural society and a diversified economy (notably in the tourism, finance, services, real estate, air transport and international trade sectors), and has shown resilience in the wake of lower oil prices.

The public sector, which employs 97% of young Emiratis,³ is focused on the future. 2015 was declared the “Year of Innovation” in all ministries, and that year, the government decided to devote 1% of the federal budget to innovation, with a new government agency dedicated specially to this issue.⁴ The UEA hosts the World Government Summit⁵ and works closely with the OECD on innovation issues.⁶ The country aims to be resolutely modern, and appointed a woman as Minister of State for Happiness in February 2016.

A Ministry of State for Happiness in the UAE: a paradox?

In February 2016, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai and Prime Minister of the UAE, appointed women to head three newly-created ministries: Happiness, Youth Affairs, and Tolerance. This move originated with increasing awareness of the importance of youth satisfaction (50% of the UAE's population is under 30⁷ and young people in the Arab world feel more anxious and stressed than in any other region⁸), of the need to create a legal framework for tolerance, and of the impact happiness has on economic growth.⁹ According to the NGO Human Rights Watch, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE) often uses its affluence to mask the government's serious human rights problems”.¹⁰ Indeed, the country is often criticised for civil rights violations and failing to respect women's rights. However, “the monarchy remains one of the most advanced in the region in terms of political openness and human rights”¹¹ and attitudes are changing to a certain extent in the country.¹² This ministerial overhaul shows a determination for renewal, and this initiative (fairly uncommon in the world¹³) deserves recognition.

¹ Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain.

² <http://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/File/438015>

³ <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/emirats-arabes-unis/presentation-des-emirats-arabes-unis/>

⁴ <http://politiques-innovation.org/linnovation-dans-le-secteur-public-aux-usa-aux-eae-au-danemark-et-en-france/>

⁵ <https://worldgovernmentsummit.org/>

⁶ https://www.oecd.org/governance/observatory-public-sector-innovation/blog/page/excitingannouncementscallforinnovationsinnovationaward.htm?lipi=urn%3Ali%3Apage%3Ad_flagship3_detail_base%2BfHJNzTA6Ti6%2BYTuLSvA%3D%3D

⁷ <http://www.defimode.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/FICHE-EMIRATS-ARABE-UNIS-2014.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.emirates247.com/news/government/uae-national-charter-of-happiness-2016-05-12-1.629843>

⁹ <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/details/news/why-ministers-for-happiness-tolerance-youth-and-the-future>

¹⁰ <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/301957/politique/emirats-arabes-unis-bonheur-tolerance-coup-de-com/>

¹¹ <https://www.populationdata.net/pays/emirats-arabes-unis/>

¹² http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/emirats-arabes-unis-la-question-de-la-femme-progresse-21-07-2016-2055863_24.php

¹³ Only Venezuela has created a “Vice Ministry of Supreme Social Happiness”, while Bhutan has implemented an economic indicator used nowhere else in the world: global national happiness (GNH).

Nevertheless, as noted by James Lynch (Deputy Director of the Global Issues Programme at Amnesty International), this announcement must be followed by tangible measures.¹⁴

Far-reaching changes expected in government

The appointment as Minister of State for Happiness was given to Ohoud Al Roumi, who is also the Director General of the Prime Minister's Office. The Minister of Youth Affairs is Shamma Al Mazrui, a young graduate of the University of Oxford (22 years old at the time of her appointment). The Minister of State for Tolerance is Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, the former Minister of International Cooperation and Development. In all, eight new ministers joined the cabinet, including five women. This ministerial overhaul coincided with a series of measures to cut public spending (following the decline in oil prices), with several ministries being merged and most public services being privatised. The new public policy priorities also involve climate change and education.

The UAE's "priority No. 1"

According to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Ministry of State for Happiness will be responsible for implementing public policies that create "social well-being and satisfaction" for individuals.¹⁵ Moreover, from the outset, he stated: "Happiness is not just a wish in our country. There will be plans, projects, programmes and indices." This commitment gave rise to a National Happiness and Positivity Programme,¹⁶ with a charter that established a framework for the government as a whole. These two texts lay out a series of measures:¹⁷

- appointing CEOs for happiness and positivity in all federal government entities
- setting up Happiness and Positivity Councils in federal government entities
- creating "happy and positive offices" to foster a positive work environment
- allocating mandatory time to happiness and positivity activities
- launching studies, surveys and reports to assess happiness
- adopting norms and standards applicable to all public sector entities (with a special guide for this purpose)

The first year of the Ministry's existence, the minister carried out various projects: launching a national study to assess employee well-being (14,000 people surveyed),¹⁸ training for some 60 "Chief Happiness and Positivity Officers",¹⁹ studying a shorter work day,²⁰ initiating a discussion of happiness within the World Government Summit,²¹ and creating a "Friends of Happiness" platform.

According to the United Nations' *World Happiness Report*, the UAE is the happiest country in the Gulf region and ranks twenty-first worldwide.²² The UAE endeavours to position itself as a pioneer in promoting happiness at regional and global levels. More recently, numerous initiatives were launched. A partnership with researchers got under way, with the Ministry for Happiness signing an agreement with United Arab Emirates University to create a centre for happiness research. This centre is tasked with publishing scientific articles and advising the government.²³ Lastly, the UAE is attracting many international scientists working on the science of happiness. For example, in March, Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs was appointed as chairman for the World Happiness Council, whose main purpose is to draft an annual *Global Happiness Report*.²⁴

This wide range of measures attests to the UAE's commitment to well-being and positivity. Now it must deliver actual social advances in order to convince the international community.

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14 <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/301957/politique/emirats-arabes-unis-bonheur-tolerance-coup-de-com/>
15 http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2016/02/11/les-emirats-arabes-unis-nomment-une-ministre-du-bonheur_4863712_3218.html
16 <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/minister-of-happiness-launches-seminars-2016-06-28-1.634344>
17 <https://government.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/government-of-future/happiness>
18 <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/uae-gov-t-launches-first-nationwide-survey-measure-happiness-655273.html>
19 <http://www.tdg.ch/monde/Soixante-fonctionnaires-du-bonheur-diplomes-aux-Emirats/story/20437222>
20 <http://www.wam.org.ae/en/details/1395302616506>
21 <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/dubai/happiness-only-way-to-move-forward>
22 <http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2017/>
23 <https://www.uaeu.ac.ae/en/news/2017/march/happinesscenter.shtml>
24 <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/dubai/uae-takes-happiness-global-1>