

**Speech**

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**Mr President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates**

Allow me to begin by congratulating you, Ambassador Šuc, on your recent appointment as President of this Council. I wish you success in this important role.

I am honoured to return to Geneva to introduce the United Arab Emirates' third Universal Periodic Review report.

I would like to thank the President of the Council, the Troika, and the states represented here today for the opportunity to have a constructive dialogue about the progress the UAE has made since our last review.

The UAE strongly supports the Universal Periodic Review process, which gives us an excellent opportunity to reflect on our progress.

Over the years, we have found it to be an immensely helpful mechanism for assessing how we can continue to consolidate our progress in advancing our human rights laws and practices.

We remain fully committed to this process.

**Mr President,**

I am pleased to introduce our delegation, which is comprised of officials from across the federal government who have worked diligently to support the compilation of the UAE's national report on human rights.

Since the UAE's last review five years ago, our national UPR committee has developed a plan to implement the outcome of the review and has met regularly to assess progress.

We have found this comprehensive approach beneficial, as it has developed expertise on human rights issues across the government.

The UAE’s civil society has been an integral part of this process.

The final report that we submitted to the Human Rights Council in October 2017 also reflects their views on our progress and challenges, as well as their input on how our country can continue to achieve its human rights goals.

Some of our civil society groups were able to join us in Geneva this week. I am pleased to welcome the General Women's Union, the Ewaa Shelters for Victims of Human Trafficking, the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, the Emirates Red Crescent, and the Emirates Human Rights Association.

**Mr President,**

We take pride in the progress we have made since our last review, to promote and protect human rights in the UAE. The steps we have taken are set out in detail in our national report.

**But the overarching message I want to convey to you today is that the reason the UAE is committed to advancing human rights is not only that it is a moral imperative; we also recognise that it is critical for our stability and our place in the world.**

**This is because it is vital to our own *domestic* *security and way of life* that the UAE does not allow extremist and hateful ideas to get a foothold in our society.** **The advance of human rights is a powerful antidote to these pernicious influences.**

For the politics of division, based on ethnicity, religion, or even gender, has no place in the UAE which was founded on the idea of tolerance, of collaboration, of openness.

A nation that could stay true to its Arab, Muslim identity whilst at the same time embracing the modern world.

This was the vision and the legacy of our founding president, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

In a region that is beset with conflict, sectarianism and extremist ideas that seek to take societies backwards rather than forwards, we know we need to work hard every day to protect and promote this legacy.

**And I would argue that through its commitment to advancing human rights, the UAE can also contribute to the *stability* *of the wider* *region,* by sending a message of hope and tolerance and opportunity that transcends our national borders.**

This stance requires that we are robust in standing up to those who seek to enhance their own power through stoking division and hatred.

But we know from our work combatting extremist propaganda that it is not enough simply to point out the flaws in their arguments. People also need to be able to see a hopeful alternative.

This is why it matters that in the Arab Youth Survey, the UAE is consistently identified as the nation most young Arabs would like their country to emulate. And let us remember that the Arab world is demographically young. Because we are looked at as a model, it is especially important that we actively promote our message of tolerance.

In addition, we have a great opportunity to show what can be achieved in an Arab country by empowering women.

The position of women is under threat in many countries in our region, but not in the UAE.

In short, this is why it is vital for the UAE’s and the wider region’s stability that we continue to advance the cause of human rights.

**Mr President,**

This is the overall context in which I encourage you to view our efforts on human rights. For we are proud of what we have achieved and the open, tolerant and prosperous society that we have built.

Today, the UAE is a bastion of stability, where people from around 200 nationalities live peacefully in social and religious harmony; a modern and tolerant Arab, Muslim nation, where people of non-Islamic faiths have built 83 places of worship to practice their religions.

As a result of this progressive outlook, the UAE has an open and dynamic economy, the second largest in our region. And it continues to have one of the highest levels of human development indicators in the Arab world.

**But despite the UAE’s overall positive human rights record, we know that our work is not done. We acknowledge that genuine challenges remain, and that our approach to human rights is necessarily an evolving one.**

Therefore, during the UAE’s second UPR, we accepted, in whole or in part, 107 recommendations. Since the adoption of our second human rights report in June 2013, we have achieved considerable progress in implementing the vast majority of these recommendations.

Our national report presented to the Council last October attests to the considerable work that has taken place over the last five years.

It details the UAE’s efforts to protect and promote human rights in key thematic areas covered by the recommendations. These include: promoting civil and political rights, increasing workers protection, combatting human trafficking, and empowering women and youth.

In my limited time today, I would like to highlight a few of the specific advances that have been made in these areas.

**Mr President,**

**The rise of extremist forces over the last few years has presented dilemmas that are not particular to our region alone.**

**Governments around the world are grappling with the challenge of how to protect their societies from genuine security threats while safeguarding fundamental rights.**

We are committed to finding the right balance between protecting our legitimate need for security and preserving our reputation as an open society.  We will do so strictly within the framework of our constitution and laws, while respecting international human rights principles.

In this context, our main focus rests on ensuring effective enforcement of the comprehensive rules we have in place for the protection of the rights of all those accused of crimes.

Since our last review, the UAE Government has paid significant attention to developing best practice resources and training for law enforcement.

At the same time, the UAE will continue to strengthen national institutions that effectively protect and promote human rights.

We are pleased to inform the Council that the UAE will form a national human rights institution under the Paris Principles this year.

With regard to expanding political participation, we began a gradual process in 2005. Since then we have held three elections to the Federal National Council, our national assembly.

Both women and men participate in the electoral process, and the Council has expanded over the last decade. This process has also led to the election of several women to the Council, and to the appointment of the first female speaker in any Arab parliament.

**Mr President,**

**The empowerment of women is key to the promotion of human rights, both in the UAE and across our region.**

**This is not only for the benefit of women themselves, but for the wider good that comes from empowering women; whether that be in tackling extremism or making societies more prosperous, or more tolerant.**

In the UAE, we see the empowerment of women in every aspect of civic, economic and political life, as one of our greatest achievements.

We are proud that the UAE is among the highest-ranked countries in the Arab world on gender equality, according to the UN’s Gender Inequality Index.

Today, women occupy two thirds of jobs in the federal government - one of the highest percentages worldwide, and there are nine female ministers in the UAE’s Cabinet.

More than seventy percent of Emiratis in federal higher education institutions are women; women have been certified as fighter pilots in the UAE Air Force, and almost half of the Emirati scientists and engineers who are working to send a space probe to Mars, are women.

In 2014, we issued a Cabinet decision that mandates the inclusion of women in the governing boards of all government bodies, institutions and companies.

We are determined to continue this course. This is why the UAE adopted a National Strategy for the Advancement of Women for 2015 to 2021, which has set strategic goals for achieving further equality in the work place.

The UAE's efforts to advance women’s empowerment are also reflected in many of our international initiatives.

The UAE has been a core supporter of UN Women since its foundation, and we were honoured to serve a second term on the Executive Board of UN Women from 2016 to 2018.

We are especially pleased to have opened a liaison office for UN Women in Abu Dhabi in 2016.

At the UN, the UAE has taken a decisive stand for women’s rights in the education field and we have spearheaded partnerships in support of the ‘Women, Peace and Security’ agenda.

These are all examples of our government’s ongoing commitment to the empowerment of women, which I believe could be one of the most important catalysts for change in our region.

**Mr President,**

**The UAE is also proud of the fact that people from many different countries and backgrounds live and work side by side harmoniously in our country, with their rights fully protected.**

**This is important, both because this melting pot of communities is fundamental to our way of life but also because it stands as a powerful example to the region of tolerance and openness.**

Indeed, the UAE is grateful for the contributions of millions of foreign workers to our economic success story.

And this is a mutually beneficial relationship. In 2016, more than 43 billion US dollars in remittances flowed from the UAE back to workers’ home countries, with the largest shares going to India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Bangladesh.

However, we recognize that the success of this model depends on us continuing to exert all efforts to safeguard the rights of foreign workers living in the UAE.

Since our second UPR, we have expanded workers’ rights and protections with new legislation, and more intensive enforcement. New reforms particularly benefit domestic and construction workers, who make up a significant portion of the workforce.

Reforms in 2016 to the UAE's Labour Law allow workers more flexibility in changing employers. We have also enacted several measures, including establishing service centres in workers’ home countries, to help ensure that all workers understand the terms of their contracts before coming to the UAE, and to be able to prevent unscrupulous employment agencies from taking advantage of workers in their countries of origin.

In 2017, the UAE also adopted legislation to provide greater protection for domestic workers, and brought them under the oversight of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization.

**Additional protections have also been put in place to combat human trafficking.**

The UAE's National Committee on Countering Human Trafficking has continued to implement an integrated national strategy to tackle this horrific violation of basic human rights.

The Committee releases annual reports, which highlight the progress achieved in our anti-trafficking efforts, as well as the remaining challenges.

The UAE’s strategy to end human trafficking is perhaps the most robust in the region. Over the last years, we have strengthened law enforcement and our ability to provide support to survivors of human trafficking.

The UAE achieved important progress last year, when we amended our Federal Law on combating human trafficking to enhance protection for survivors and increase penalties for those found guilty of this crime.

Other highlights include major media campaigns to enhance public awareness about human trafficking; and continued efforts to develop training and best practice resources for law enforcement.

These reforms place the UAE at the forefront of regional efforts to both protect workers’ rights and combat human trafficking.

**Mr President,**

**Ours is a region where youth unemployment stands at almost 30 percent and in which young people are particularly vulnerable to the forces of extremism.**

**In this context, it is vital that we provide young people with opportunity and a strong voice in our societies, and that we build towards a future that will meet their aspirations.**

Reflecting the high priority the UAE places on this, in 2016 the first ever Minister for Youth was appointed to the UAE Cabinet and a Youth Council was established to communicate young people’s ideas to the government.

We have also adopted a National Strategy for Youth Empowerment, and the Ministry of Education has a five-year strategic plan to develop an innovative education system that will enable young people to meaningfully participate in a world-class, knowledge-based economy.

And as a reflection of our concern for the future of youth in the wider region, we also recently announced a commitment to promote computer-coding skills to reach out to one million Arab youth, who will contribute to the region’s development.

We have taken these steps because we believe in the importance of involving young people early on in conversations about the future. Our goal is to ensure that young Emiratis are equal partners in building our modern Arab society, and are well equipped to understand the issues that our increasingly interconnected world is facing.

**Mr President,**

**The promotion of tolerance and the rejection of extremism is fundamental to the advancement of human rights in the UAE and the wider region.**

The UAE is deeply concerned by the rise in divisiveness and polarization in the Arab world.

We have unequivocally decided that prejudice has no place in our country.

For this reason, in 2015 we enacted a new Anti-Discrimination Law, which bans all forms of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, or ethnic origin as well as the incitement of religious hatred.

Taking this further, the UAE has adopted a National Tolerance Programme and launched the world's first ‘Tolerance Charter’.

The UAE has also been at the forefront of the fight against extremism in the region. On the one hand, we support efforts to drive Da'esh from Iraq and Syria, and lend our support to fighting Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia.

On the other hand, we promote and empower moderate voices both at home and abroad, through initiatives such as the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, and the Muslim Council of Elders.

The UAE is fighting dangerous ideologies online too. Since 2015, the Sawab Centre in Abu Dhabi, a joint initiative by the governments of the UAE and the United States, has been working hard to counter Da’esh and other extremist groups’ online propaganda. With almost 3 million followers, Sawab has become one of the most successful initiatives of its kind in the world.

**Mr President,**

**At the same time, we have worked hard to mitigate the terrible humanitarian consequences of the extremism and sectarianism that afflict our region.**

The UAE believes that we must stand together to help those in need, and is committed to improving human rights situations through the provision of humanitarian and development assistance to countries in the region and beyond.

The UAE continues to be one of the most generous donor countries in the world. In 2016, the UAE distributed over 4.2 billion US dollars of official development assistance to people worldwide, and maintained its ranking as the world’s largest donor in proportion to its gross national income.

Much of this has been provided to alleviate the suffering of people in the Middle East and North Africa.

The UAE is deeply concerned about the refugee crisis, and continues its commitment to alleviating the plight of Syria’s refugees. Since the onset of the crisis, the UAE has welcomed over one hundred and thirty thousand people fleeing the violence in Syria, and has recently pledged to take in 15,000 more Syrians in need of assistance.

In Yemen, the UAE and the Arab coalition continue to make every effort to support and deliver humanitarian assistance and to protect civilians during its operations.

Under extremely challenging circumstances, the Coalition is working hard to reinstate the legitimate government of Yemen, while tackling a very difficult humanitarian challenge.

Since the conflict escalated, the UAE has provided over 2.5 billion US dollars in aid to Yemen. With our partners, we have brought food, water, health and other life-saving services to millions of people across Yemen, and we have been able to reconstruct and open a number of schools and medical centres in the liberated governorates of Yemen.

However, ultimately the humanitarian challenges can only truly be addressed by negotiating inclusive political settlements to the region’s civil wars.

That is why the political resolution of crises in Syria, Yemen, and Libya is of paramount importance.

And, for the sake of human rights and peace and for wider stability in the Middle East, we must advance the rights of the Palestinian people, who have suffered for too long.

The UAE will continue to provide development and humanitarian assistance to Palestine. But we are alarmed about recent statements relating to the status of Jerusalem, and urge progress on ensuring the rights of Palestinians to an independent state, which would have a positive impact on many other challenges in the region.

**Mr President,**

**It has been a privilege for me to lay out some of the progress the UAE has made on human rights since 2013. Piece by piece, we have developed a comprehensive strategy to advance the cause of human rights in the UAE.**

Our commitment is clearly reflected in the various strategic initiatives adopted by the UAE Government since our last UPR, which are set out in our national report. Together these lay down a positive pathway to the future.

For in undertaking these wide-ranging strategic initiatives, we are collaborating with our young people to prepare for a future world in which they can continue to prosper in an open, tolerant, and innovative society.

This is a proactive approach based on the UAE's strong belief that instability is deeply rooted in hopelessness, disengagement and lack of opportunity, and that extremist ideas feed off this. In a region in which this too often describes young people’s experiences, the UAE is committed to remaining a beacon of hope and stability.

That is why we will continue to develop our human rights framework in accordance with international standards and in response to the needs of our fast-developing nation, in a manner that accords with our culture and traditions.

And that is why we will continue to work hard to empower women and youth, protect the rights of workers, promote tolerance and combat discrimination.

For the UAE believes that fostering human rights is central to achieving stable, open, tolerant and future-oriented societies. This is what our region needs more of and what the UAE will work tirelessly every day to continue to be.

I now look forward to hearing your views.

Thank you.