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From Crisis to Cohesion: the UAE's Strategic Push for Family and Demographic Reform

*Summary: facing a demographic imbalance and declining fertility rates that threaten national security, the UAE established the Ministry of Family Affairs in December 2024 to centralise family policies, enhance reconciliation services, and foster cross-sector partnerships aimed at strengthening Emirati families.*

We thank Christopher M. Davidson, former reader in Middle East politics at Durham University, for today's newsletter.

The United Arab Emirates' establishment of a new Ministry of Family Affairs in December 2024 marked a strategic response to the intertwined demographic challenges threatening the nation's social fabric and long-term stability. Led by Sanaa bint Muhammad Suhail, a Swiss-educated technocrat, the ministry aims to reverse declining fertility rates, strengthen family cohesion, and mitigate divorce trends—issues framed as critical to national security given the Emirati population's small size relative to expatriates. While early initiatives show promise, bureaucratic complexity and cultural shifts nonetheless pose significant hurdles.

### *Demographic crisis and national security imperatives*

The UAE's [native population](#) of 1.44 million Emiratis now constitutes just 11.5 percent of total residents, with expatriates dominating at 88.5 percent. This increasingly precarious imbalance has intensified the long-running concerns about cultural preservation and economic sovereignty, first voiced in the early 1990s. Compounding this, the fertility rate among Emiratis plummeted from 5.4 children per woman in 2012 to 1.49 by 2022—far below the [replacement rate of 2.1](#). Simultaneously, divorce rates are still believed to be worryingly high, regardless of methodologically unsound [official statistics](#) and recent initiatives such as Abu Dhabi's "Reconciliation is Better" program. These trends risk accelerating population aging and—at a critical juncture—eroding the

traditional family structure, which the Emirati leadership views as the ["foundation of societal strength"](#).

In this context, the new ministry has been concentrating on three key areas: fertility rate enhancement; divorce prevention; and child welfare. So far, there appears to have been some steady progress, including:

- Centralisation of family policies: previously fragmented across the seven emirates, initiatives like [marriage grants](#) (increased to AED 90,000 which is approximately GBP £18,300) and fertility awareness campaigns now operate under a more cohesive federal framework. The former—previously in the hands of emirate-level authorities and wealthy ruling family members—are seen as making it easier and more attractive for young Emiratis to marry and start families, while the latter have been focused on providing better information on reproductive health, fertility preservation options, and the importance of early family planning.
- Expansion of reconciliation services: building on Abu Dhabi's existing program, the ministry has been trying to [replicate this model nationally](#) through the widespread appointment of certified family counselors. In addition, there has been a new emphasis on premarital counselling as a core preventive measure and as some suggest, a much stronger focus on 'love matches', rather than *de facto* arranged marriages. By mandating or strongly encouraging couples to attend counseling sessions before marriage, the ministry claims to equip them with better conflict resolution skills, more realistic expectations, and a deeper understanding of marital responsibilities.
- Cross-sector partnerships: collaborations with health and education authorities have already facilitated [prenatal care subsidies](#) and workplace flexibility pilots to support young families. Many Emiratis view these as early victories, not least as examples of different government agencies managing to coordinate and cooperate.



*While initial progress has been made, the Ministry of Family Affairs faces significant challenges including emirate-level autonomy, cultural shifts, and economic pressures that could hinder its long-term success [photo credit: @HamdanMohammed]*

#### *Persistent challenges and bureaucratic complexities*

Despite such efforts, the leadership has privately identified three major obstacles which are thought to still undermine the ministry's potential:

- Emirate-level autonomy: Abu Dhabi's Judicial Department (ADJD) already claims to have resolved [a significant number of family disputes internally](#), while Dubai's Social Development Authority runs parallel child protection services. Harmonising these systems without undermining local expertise remains contentious.
- Cultural resistance: delayed marriages (the average age is now 29 for Emirati women) and individualism, fueled by social media, are clearly in conflict with the UAE's traditional family models. A 2022 University of Sharjah study found that 41 percent of young Emiratis were already [prioritising career over early marriage](#), while on the basis of anecdotal indications the situation in the biggest cities is even more pronounced.

- Economic pressures: high housing costs (the current average is about AED 1.2 million for a fairly basic villa) and stagnant wages have forced 33 percent of Emirati newlyweds to delay childbearing, according to [recent Federal National Council reports](#).

### *The road ahead*

The Ministry of Family Affairs represents the UAE's most concerted effort to date to align demographic trends with national security priorities. By addressing fertility and divorce through a mix of financial incentives, cultural advocacy, and service integration, it aims to stabilise Emirati family structures, and has made a fairly good start. However, its future success undoubtedly hinges on its ability to navigate emirate-specific governance models and reverse deep-seated socioeconomic shifts—tasks requiring sustained political will and intergenerational patience. As the ministry continues to develop and leadership determines the best path forward, the UAE's ability to balance federal oversight with local innovation will be crucial in shaping its demographic future. Ultimately, the choices and aspirations of young Emiratis—guided by their own perceptions and ambitions—will play a decisive role in this outcome.

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