

# Making the UAE's Mark on the International Stage

An Interview with Her Excellency Lana Zaki Nusseibeh,  
Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations



H.E. Lana Zaki Nusseibeh

**EDITORS' NOTE** Lana Nusseibeh was appointed Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations in New York in September 2013. She was recently appointed co-facilitator of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the UN General Assembly by the President of the General Assembly, and previously co-facilitated the review process of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). She serves as co-chair of the Friends of the Future of the UN (FFUN), an informal group of UN Permanent Representatives working to strengthen the UN's capacity to deliver on its priority mandates. Prior to her appointment

as Permanent Representative to the UN, she served in a number of capacities within the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, most recently launching the Ministry's Policy Planning Department and serving as its first Director for three years. Previously, she served as the Head of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) Campaign Task Force at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and as Director of Research and Communications for the Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs. Ambassador Nusseibeh received a Bachelors and Masters in History from the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, and a Masters with distinction in Israeli and Jewish Diaspora Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

**There has been much debate over the years with regard to the UN remaining impactful. From your vantage point, do things need to change to make sure the UN does fulfill its role?**

This is a question that a country like the UAE thinks about extensively. A number of small- and middle-sized countries rely on the UN for just that – having the kind of impact on the international stage that isn't possible when we're not a huge player but want to contribute and make our presence felt.

The UN is a unique place with 193 countries coming together, discussing the key issues. It has that universal applicability that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

If we were to start today and say we wanted to create something like the United Nations, it would not happen. The conditions were unique in the post-World War era in 1945 that led to the communal will to create the UN. We have to understand the uniqueness of that period, which we cannot replicate, and the UN still does essential work today.

That is my starting point in terms of how the UAE sees the UN – it's an essential part of the international order along with the Bretton Woods institutions. It helps balance and equalize the hubris of great powers in a way where the vote of every member state counts, and every voice matters.

I have developed a huge amount of additional admiration and respect for this establishment in the three years I've been here because I think it does really unique work.

Also, we tend to forget that the UN is many different things. When people talk about it, do they mean the funds, programs, and agencies that are spread out around the world, helping people in need, the field workers, and the humanitarian aid responders? Or do they mean the Secretariat

headed in New York? Or do they mean the missions posted to the UN that are in essence part of the family of the United Nations?

We forget that there is a tension among the different UN agencies and bureaucracies and member states, and because of their competing interests, the UN is a difficult organization to make work efficiently.

When we talk about the UN as an organization that is 'fit for purpose', we talk about a place that, in many ways, is going to function like an efficient company should function, with clear reporting lines, clear mandates for the CEO and COO, a clear budget, and the rest. But we're talking about national governments, and they also have national priorities and agendas, so they may limit the ability of the UN to be effective, because they all make demands on the organization.

If we had a UN that was entirely empowered to act independently based on the facts and evidence before them, there would be a different structure today than the one that exists.

Having said that, the uniqueness is that it is a member state driven organization and we're part of that family. It is almost like any other family – we want to take the whole package and make it work.

In our view, the choice of the next Secretary-General was going to be a decisive factor in terms of whether the UN is going to survive the coming decade and reshape itself as more fit for purpose.

Undoubtedly, the institution has come under a lot of criticism over the past decade, and that is in part due to what is seen as a crisis of leadership in the UN itself. There has also been a crisis of direction, and an inability to be flexible in order to cope with what is an increasingly fractured global world order and relationship among great powers. When the Security Council, which is the main organ mandated to protect international peace and security, is at the mercy of great power relationships and bilateral relationships, then we do not see any forward movement. That is when we really need the Secretariat, the Secretary-General's good offices, his envoys, and the other agencies to kick in and try to compensate for this protraction in the Security Council that sometimes stops necessary work from being done.

In today's world, we are seeing crises and conflicts that are lasting longer than ever before. We have never had to cope with a system where the average duration of displacement of refugees is no longer how we understood it in the 1960s – and now exceeds 17 years.

How do we re-gear an organization to cope with a challenge like the refugee crises? These are displaced people who are moving and then having to rebuild their lives in countries that are carrying the burden of that for decades.

We are also talking about an increased number of conflicts around the world characterized by a plethora of non-state actors, who are not governed by the rules of the international order, nor by the diplomatic rules we all commit to in various conventions and bilateral relationships.

How do we govern that aspect when a lot of conflict is fueled by non-state actors who do not abide by the international system and want to overthrow it – the anarchists, in essence?

We are struck by the fact that issues like climate change and migration are increasingly becoming issues of peace and security, not issues of development.

Also, development – that essential Holy Grail that countries all aspire to – has become very much a secondary track while we scramble to resolve conflicts and crises.

This is where the UN can come in. The UN needs to look at the development sector and at access for things like education and technology – the things that will actually bring the rest of the world up to the same level the developed world has achieved.

In order to do this, it needs to adapt and become more nimble and flexible. Recently, we appointed a new Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres.

What was revolutionary about this process is that we had public dialogues with the candidates running for the position for the first time in the history of the UN. During these dialogues, member states and civil society organizations were able to ask candidates questions about their platforms.

This public process put pressure on the Security Council, in a unique and interesting way, to pick the candidate who performed the best, which is what they did. The candidate, Guterres, fit the criteria that a number of countries were looking for – a great communicator with a deep knowledge of and history with the UN, who had previously carried the international weight of being a prime minister.

There is a lot of excitement at the UN that this leadership change, coupled with the fact that member states are keen to see the UN engage in a reform process, will herald the reform of the UN that we have all been looking for – to make the organization more fit for purpose.

The UN does important work for real people on the ground. We often think it is very siloed, but it is the funds, programs, and agencies on the ground around the world that really impact the lives of people.

The UN has another essential mandate. When relations between certain member states break down, the fact that they can talk to other states here in a safe space where all states are equal – regardless of whether they have diplomatic relations with each other – is an essential component of international order and one that most of us recognize as something we ought to preserve.

Many countries are very invested in this coming period. Member states have to enable the next Secretary-General and his team to enact those reforms that are so desperately needed in the organization.

Guterres has that agenda in mind and we are looking forward to working with him to achieve it.

**With so many competing interests, are you optimistic that there can be common ground?**

We have to live in the world that we exist in and not the world we imagine. Having said that, my country and I are optimistic. We are barely over 40 years old – founded in 1971 – and yet we have managed to achieve an enormous amount in a really short space of time by being aspirational.

In 1971, when the federation was formed and the British protectorate dissolved and they told us they were withdrawing, a number of regional countries, including international partners, told us the federation would never survive and be able to form a nation because we were too disparate and divided, and we did not have enough resources, nor have a history.

Against all odds, the country was formed – and our founders were visionary leaders. It took the drive of a leader, the aspiration of the people around him, and ambition and hard work from both. Today we have an incredibly successful model in the region. We have the second-largest economy in the Arab region; we have over 200

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nationalities residing in the UAE, coexisting peacefully; we have a fantastic array of industries that are non-oil based; over 70 percent of our graduates are women; and we have women as equal partners in that society and it has always been that way from the beginning.

Youth make up a huge portion of the 390 million people of the Middle East and North Africa. Half of those people are under the age of 25, and the big challenge for countries in our region is what we offer youth to give them the alternative vision to the one being propagated by the extremists like ISIS and Da'esh, and other groups that will come after them, or have come before them.

For a young Arab that has just graduated from a university, two of the cities in the Arab world that they want to live and work in are in the UAE – Abu Dhabi and Dubai. That is a huge achievement in just over 40 years.

Countries do have national agendas and priorities, but most countries understand that the UN is a really important place if it is allowed to work. It is a critically important place for our collective good, security, and development.

While we find there are certain issues where there is give-and-take and negotiation, we also find there is an underlying sense of urgency that we need to make the organization succeed, and that we need to allow the UN to do its job to maintain peace and security, and development for all.

It is difficult, but we feel it is doable.

**Will you talk about the key issues for the UAE?**

We try to add substantive input on issues we see as key to the development of the global order. In many ways, it is not difficult to see in our priorities at the UN a reflection of our strategies at home.

We believe, for example, that renewable energy and climate change is a fundamental global issue, and we were a very active player in the climate-change negotiations. We host IRENA, the International Renewable Energy Agency, which is headquartered in Abu Dhabi and is closing in on near universal membership. We have a number of developments in the UAE that show the role that we wish to play on that file internationally.

As a hydrocarbon economy, it is pretty unique in our part of the world to have been at the forefront.

One of the other priorities is women's empowerment. We very much believe that the inclusion of women and their full participation in all aspects of society is not just cosmetic. This is fundamental to our peace and security. We practice this at home with women ministers, including our youth minister who is 22 years old.

We are very active on the Women Peace and Security agenda, which is a work stream at the UN. We do not see women's rights only as human rights, but we see women's involvement in society as a fundamental component of peaceful, secure, and stable societies.

We believe that and practice it at home, so we also preach it abroad because we understand that the inclusion of women in societies around the world will have ripple effects for those economies.

A recent McKinsey study showed that if women were fully incorporated in society in the Middle East and North African region, GDP could grow by 47 percent or by over \$2 trillion U.S. dollars. For those who are skeptical about the benefits of women participating fully in society in the Middle East, we have the business case as well.

We have done a lot of work at the UN with the Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security headed by Ambassador Melanne Verveer, who was Hillary Clinton's global ambassador for women's

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issues. We work to leverage and amplify that foreign policy perspective at the UN.

Obviously, regional issues feature strongly in my daily work. We are a region that is undergoing much change and transition. We are a region that is also facing a number of challenges in terms of external actors that are trying to influence the course of events in the region. At the same time, we are trying to develop and become a stable and profitable society. It is a very difficult transition period and, given the intractability in state-to-state relations, many people are relying on the UN to take up these files and move them forward. We have seen that in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, which has been a tragedy that is now in its fifth year with horrific numbers of people displaced and otherwise impacted.

These conflicts also take up much of the work in New York of a member state mission from that part of the world. This is always going to be a key part of our portfolio.

Beyond that, the third pillar is that we try to contribute to the UN in terms of making it work more efficiently.

I have just been appointed by the president of the General Assembly to co-facilitate a UN reform process known as the GA Revitalization, which aims to consider how to make the General Assembly a more effective organ, especially in light of the stalemate in the Security Council in certain files. It is a really exciting portfolio because member states genuinely want to see a strong General Assembly. This is an organ that is, in some countries' views, underutilized as a place to do business at the UN.

Last year, I co-facilitated a review process of the World Summit on the Information Society, which was focused on IT and the future of Internet governance. For the UAE as a media, technology, and innovation hub, this is an important topic. It was quite difficult to manage this process, because we had so many world views represented in one room negotiating an outcome document on the future of Internet governance. We had the full gamut of perspectives – from those who believe national security must be the final trump card in any framework to those who believe that access and the freedom of the Internet was the golden chalice. We had to corral 192 member states to agree on a text. Many people predict in situations like this that the process will fail. However, we managed to deliver an outcome document that satisfied the member states and included the voices of civil society and the Internet community, who obviously are very important stakeholders.

We participate in these processes because we have an interest in the subject, but we also want to contribute positively to the agenda of the UN.

Working in this environment is also a great personal development experience for the UAE diplomats posted here, because it trains them in negotiation skills and the art of diplomacy. I see training UAE diplomats as one of my personal objectives.

As diplomats in the Mission to the United Nations, they are likely to learn more in three years than they will in a 10-year bilateral posting to certain countries. This is simply because the UN has all of the issues in one place, they are exposed to all country positions, so they will learn everything from international relations to national positions to the full gamut of topics, both old and new, because we are always dealing with new issues as they emerge.

Part of my mandate is to ensure that the diplomats who go back to the capital and go on to serve in other countries are fully exposed to the

full university that is the UN and are able to serve our country as a result of that in so many different ways.

**Did you know early on that public service and this type of work was what you wanted to do?**

I do not think I expected to be where I am at the UN. I am incredibly honored to be doing this job, and it is possibly the most exciting job I have ever done or will ever do.

I do have a family history that has been entirely dedicated to public service, so I grew up in that environment.

I tried to chart a different course for myself but when it is in the blood, it draws one back in.

I do not see it so much as being a diplomat or ambassador – I really see it as what I can do to help my country build, grow, and represent itself in international organizations.

**Is there a different feeling being the first woman ambassador to the UN from the UAE?**

I am one of 37 women ambassadors at the UN. Women's empowerment has never been a topic of conversation in the UAE – it just is, so there is nothing special for me about being a woman ambassador to the UN. It is not unique in my country.

**When there is so much to do, are you able to reflect on the wins during the process and celebrate them or does it always come down to what has to be done next?**

We are in a country that is in a difficult part of the world, and when our neighbors around us are facing challenges, when our leadership work far harder and more hours than I can pull together in a day, it is difficult to pause. If we imagine having a big radar board or situation room in the foreign ministry and we are looking to see where around us is continually flashing in our part of the world, the whole board is always flashing.

Some of these are systemic, deep-rooted challenges and some of these are urgent top-priority challenges that are constantly happening and we have to try to respond to them.

That was the point of the Policy Planning Department that I helped establish in the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The unit reports to the Foreign Minister Shiekh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and its inception was his idea. The aim of the department was to have a place where we could almost separate some of the thinkers from that department away from the relentless churn of the rest of the ministry, the different departmental issues, their geographical focus, and create the space for that deep reflection.

We managed to do a lot of that and to present scenarios for three or five years down the line and predict, in some cases, that there would be instability in some of the countries in the region that we are seeing insecurity in today.

We really see the value in creating a space for certain people to be segued away from the day-to-day operations and focus on the horizon and long-term planning.

Unfortunately, much of what we see in the crises unfolding around the world is almost a necessity of first response.

When we understand the flow of history, it helps one slow down and not see every current development as completely unique and new. Instead, we can try to understand where we have been before and dealt with similar challenges. We have to take the time to draw the right lessons and apply that learning and knowledge to any given situation. ●