

Public Diplomacy in Leadership Discourse: A Thematic Analysis of UAE Leaders' Speeches Since the Union

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Abstract:

Public diplomacy engages foreign publics through dialogue, cultural exchange, and relationship-building, with leaders' speeches serving as strategic instruments to convey national identity and values. Using the Golan's Integrated Public Diplomacy Model, this study conducts a thematic analysis of political speeches of five leaders of the UAE since its establishment in 1971. The analysis revealed three dominant themes: foundational values and national identity, social and ethical priorities, and human capital and future vision. The findings demonstrate that the speeches of UAE leaders transcend domestic communication, projecting an image of unity, tolerance, humanitarianism, and youth empowerment to global audiences. Through these discourses, the UAE promotes peace, cultural openness, and innovation. The UAE's leaders have helped cultivate a distinct international image and foster long-term diplomatic relationships. This approach underscores how leadership communication serves not only domestic purposes but also as a strategic instrument of national soft power and a broader public diplomacy tool.

Keywords: public diplomacy, soft power, thematic analysis, leadership discourse, UAE

1- Introduction

Public diplomacy enables states to communicate with foreign publics through cultural, educational, and strategic engagement, extending beyond formal diplomatic channels. Unlike traditional diplomacy, it builds relationships, shapes perceptions, and projects values through both state and non-state actors (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Yun & Toth, 2009; Anholt, 2015). Since the Union, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has integrated public diplomacy into its foreign policy vision, guided by the founding principles of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan: peaceful coexistence, tolerance, respect for diversity, and cooperation. These values have helped position the UAE as an inclusive and globally connected country, hosting over 200 nationalities and achieving a leading position in soft power indices (Nusseibeh, 2025).

Despite extensive research on soft power, nation branding, trade, and innovation in the UAE (Abdulla, 2014; Guéraiche, 2019; Al Suwaidi, 2021; Denwood, 2022; Pakin-Albayrakoğlu, 2023), the role of leadership discourse as a strategic tool of public diplomacy

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has received little attention. This gap in the literature is particularly noteworthy given that the UAE has made significant investments in public diplomacy. As my research focuses on analysing leaders' speeches, it aims to address this overlooked dimension and contribute to a deeper understanding of how leadership speeches play as a key tool in public diplomacy.

This study addresses this gap by analysing 18 speeches delivered by five UAE leaders since the Union. These leaders are the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (founder and first President, 1971-2004), the late Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan (second President, 2004-2022), H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (third President, 2022-present), H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Vice-President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai), and H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi (Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah).

Guided by Golan's Integrated Public Diplomacy Model (2013), it explores: (1) how these speeches function as instruments of public diplomacy and (2) how they align with mediated, nation branding, and relational levels of engagement. Using thematic analysis, three dominant themes emerge: foundational values and national identity, social and ethical priorities, and human capital with a future vision, demonstrating how leadership discourse projects the UAE's values and strengthens its global partnerships.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is a key tool for governments to engage foreign publics (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Yun & Toth, 2009; Grigorescu & Fawaz, 2014; Anholt, 2015; Hunt, 2016). Hunt (2016) notes that Gullion first defined it in 1965 as influencing foreign attitudes to shape international policy. Traditionally, it focused on one-way dissemination of information for advocacy. Contemporary public diplomacy has shifted toward interactive two-way communication, with migrants often acting as informal ambassadors exposed to a nation's soft power abroad (Anholt, 2015). This transition, driven by communication technologies and wider public participation, broadened engagement beyond state actors (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). Today, public diplomacy includes cultural and educational exchanges that promote national image and economic, cultural, and linguistic interests (Grigorescu & Fawaz, 2014). As the concept has evolved, scholars now distinguish between positive and negative public diplomacy: positive public diplomacy seeks to highlight a state's achievements, values, and contributions to the international system, while negative public diplomacy aims to discredit rivals by downplaying their actions or portraying them as threats to global or regional stability (Salman & Burton, 2025). Effective public diplomacy depends on listening, credible messaging, dialogue, and collaboration among governmental and non-governmental actors to build trust, mutual understanding, and long-term relationships (Ross, 2003; Cull, 2010).

2.2 Tools of Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy employs two distinct approaches: tough-minded and tender-minded (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). Tough-minded public diplomacy relies on persuasion and propaganda to shape foreign attitudes, prioritising political information delivered rapidly through media such as television, newspapers, and radio. Conversely, tender-minded diplomacy emphasises long-term mutual understanding through credible cultural interactions, focusing on truthfulness rather than propaganda. It employs slower, relationship-building tools like academic exchanges, films, language instruction, artistic events, and exhibitions. In this

context, festivals serve as instruments of public diplomacy by facilitating communication with publics and enabling the engagement of both state and non-state actors (Pantoja et al., 2025). Likewise, cultural and artistic events, including exhibitions and performances, have been strategically employed as effective tools of public diplomacy to enhance a country's international image and advance its national interests (Baritci & Duman, 2025). Hunt (2016) expands on public diplomacy's toolkit, highlighting methods like cultural exchanges, training, seminars, exhibitions, missions, sponsored visits, speeches, broadcasting, media relationship management, and digital engagement through the internet, social media, and mobile platforms.

2.3 Public Diplomacy and Related Terms

Public diplomacy is a multidisciplinary field of study (Huijgh, 2016). Thus, this section clarifies the relationship between public diplomacy and related terms such as nation branding, soft power, and cultural diplomacy.

2.3.1 Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding

Public diplomacy and nation branding are closely related (Melissen, 2005). Public diplomacy focuses on building trust and enhancing a nation's identity and reputation through relationships with other nations and targeted groups, often political and cultural elites (Molleda & Kochhar, 2019; Public Diplomacy & Nation Branding, 2012). Nation branding, by contrast, targets broader domestic and international audiences, mobilising citizens as ambassadors to foster pride and influence global opinion through events, exhibitions, and cultural exchanges (Donfried, 2017; Szondi, 2008). It applies branding techniques to shape perceptions and promote economic, political, and social goals, requiring sustained effort and resources, with success depending on tangible achievements rather than messaging alone (Anholt, 2015). While public diplomacy increasingly involves non-state actors such as NGOs, artists, and businesses for authenticity (Copeland, 2016), nation branding tends to rely on strong governmental coordination to ensure consistent and coherent representation (Szondi, 2008; Lee, 2012).

2.3.2 Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

Public diplomacy is a key component of soft power (Melissen, 2005). Soft power is the ability to achieve outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, rooted in culture, political values, and legitimate policies. Its strategic use predates public diplomacy, as evidenced by Cold War ideological campaigns by global powers (Nye, 2008; Melissen, 2005). Nye's concept shaped public diplomacy research, shifting focus from state-to-state interaction to building relationships with foreign publics through engagement (Golan, 2013). Modern public diplomacy integrates soft power tools such as cultural and educational exchanges, aid, and language programs to foster credibility, influence perceptions, and attract global audiences.

2.3.3 Public Diplomacy and Cultural Diplomacy

Deibel and Roberts (1976) note that public diplomacy programs can present a nation's society to foreign publics through cultural communication, which includes cultural diplomacy and cultural relations. Pajtinka (2014) defines cultural diplomacy as diplomatic activity based on cultural exchange, promoting a country's national culture and language internationally as part of its soft power and foreign policy objectives. Similarly, Enaifoghe and Makhutla (2020) describe cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool that introduces a state's culture to global audiences through art forms such as dance, music, murals, literature, theatre, and film. Such efforts foster peace, security, cohesion, and trust between nations. Therefore, strategic cultural

initiatives at both national and international levels are essential for strengthening relationships and advancing foreign policy goals.

2.4 Geopolitical Contextualization of the UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a relatively young nation-state that has undergone rapid transformation from a traditional society to a globally influential country over the past five decades (Morton, 2016). Situated on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, it borders the Arabian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. The UAE is a constitutional federation of seven emirates with Abu Dhabi as the capital, Arabic as the official language, and Islam as the state religion. Established on December 2, 1971, under Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1918–2004), revered as the “Father of the Nation,” the presidency later passed to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan (2004–2022) and is now held by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (since May 14, 2022) (“Fact Sheet,” 2024).

The UAE’s foreign policy emphasises moderation, peaceful coexistence, and global cooperation, promoting dialogue-based conflict resolution and making generous contributions to international aid. Economically, it has shifted since the late 1950s from dependence on oil to diversification. While Abu Dhabi holds the majority of the country’s oil reserves (“Fact Sheet,” 2024), Dubai has developed into a hub for trade, tourism, and finance (Morton, 2016). Major investments in infrastructure and renewable energy enhance competitiveness. A member of OPEC since 1967, the UAE ranks first in sustainability among OPEC states with a score of 71.9%, highlighting its diversification and commitment to balanced energy development (Ecer et al., 2019; OPEC, 2025).

Globally, the UAE ranks 10th in the Global Soft Power Index 2024 for the second year, performs strongly in labor market resilience (“Global Labour Resilience Index (GLRI),” 2024), and holds the world’s most powerful passport (“United Arab Emirates Passport Dashboard,” 2025). Hosting Expo 2020 and attracting over 200 nationalities further underscores its international influence (“Facts and Figures,” 2023; Mansoor, 2022).

2.5 The Implication of Public Diplomacy in the UAE

Guéraiche (2019) highlights the UAE’s distinctive foreign policy, blending traditional Arab values with modern innovation rather than imitating Western models. Abdulla (2014) traces its evolution from Sheikh Zayed’s focus on national identity rooted in Arab heritage and Islam to a post-Zayed era of economic expansion and engagement with powers such as China, India, and Brazil, supported by the “Brand UAE” initiative. Pakin-Albayrakoğlu (2023) notes that UAE diplomacy prioritises trade, foreign expertise, and technological partnerships, while Jeong (2020) identifies it as an innovation hub in AI and the smart economy. Denwood and Cox (2022) stress that people-to-people connections underpin its public diplomacy, as seen in Expo 2020 Dubai, which hosted 20 million visitors from 192 countries. Since the 1980s, Dubai and Abu Dhabi have built global visibility through tourism, cultural attractions, and mega-events (Zeineddine, 2017; Zeineddine & Nicolescu, 2018), alongside soft power initiatives in tolerance, cultural diplomacy, and humanitarian aid (Al Suwaidi, 2021; Gołębiowski, 2020; Lootah, 2021a, 2021b; Krzymowski, 2022).

3. Theoretical Framework

Golan’s (2013) integrated public diplomacy model explains how governments interact with foreign publics through three interconnected levels: mediated, nation brand and

reputation, and relational. Together, these levels foster sustained positive engagement between states and international audiences (Golan, 2013; Golan, 2015; Golan & Yang, 2015).

The mediated level adopts a short- to medium-term perspective, focusing on shaping how a nation is framed in international news and social media. Its goal is to influence foreign public opinion by projecting the country's agenda and viewpoints. Since most foreign publics rely on global media for information, states invest in broadcasting and digital platforms to reach them.

The nation brand and country reputation level involves a medium- to long-term approach, using tools such as information subsidies and speeches to promote a coherent image. While initially one-way, this stage increasingly integrates interactive new media to strengthen a country's image and reputation. Anholt's concept of competitive identity is central here, encouraging nations to build a holistic and evolving brand. Achievements at this level rely on effective mediated communication.

The relational level is long-term and centres on building and sustaining relationships with foreign publics. These relationships involve governments as well as corporations and NGOs. By deploying soft power tools such as cultural exchange, humanitarian aid, and development programs, states aim to deepen mutual understanding. The strength of these bonds depends on effectively communicating national values, culture, and policy priorities over time.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, utilising thematic analysis with a descriptive approach to address the study questions. For further clarification, the researcher follows a methodological procedure that determines the population and sample, as well as the research design.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify key themes in data and use them to address the research problem. It encompasses both semantic themes, which capture explicit meanings, and latent themes, which explore underlying ideas and assumptions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The process involves six stages: familiarisation, coding, generating, reviewing, defining themes, and writing the report (Scharp & Sanders, 2019; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). This method helps compare data, reveal insights, summarise key points, and produce a structured analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). This study employs thematic analysis to examine UAE leadership speeches since the Union, explores its role as a public diplomacy tool and its alignment with Golan's model.

The population of this study includes all press releases and speeches by the UAE's leadership (Rulers of the seven Emirates) since the union. 18 speeches were analysed, including the 1971 Union declaration and speeches by five leaders: 4 speeches of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (founder and first President), 2 speeches of the late Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan (second President), 7 speeches of H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (third President), 2 speeches of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Vice-President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai), and 2 speeches of H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi (Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah). In qualitative content analysis, there is no fixed rule for determining sample size; adequacy depends on the research scope and the richness of information required (Bengtsson, 2016). Methodological studies show that code saturation—identifying major categories—may occur after around nine units, while meaning saturation—capturing depth and nuance—often requires

16–24 (Hennink et al., 2017). By analyzing 18 speeches, this study falls within that range, ensuring both thematic breadth and sufficient depth to explore the subtleties of UAE leadership discourse.

Since public diplomacy focuses on communicating with foreign publics, the analysed speeches relate to the UAE's internal and external policies, as well as its openness to foreign publics working and living in the UAE, as stated in the leadership speeches. These speeches were collected from the National Library and Archive, which was founded in 1968 and is in charge of preserving and documenting the UAE's history and heritage ("National Archives, " 2023), the official website of H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the Ruler of Sharjah, Emaratallyoum newspaper website, Khaleejtimes newspaper website, and YouTube.

5. Results

Drawing on the methodology, thematic analysis identified three core themes emerging from the 18 speeches, collectively capturing the UAE's strategic vision, cultural values, and future aspirations. These themes are: national identity, social and ethical priorities, and human capital and future vision.

5.1 National Identity

This theme identity reflects the principles guiding the UAE's public diplomacy discourse. It highlights the UAE's policy foundations, recognition of Sheikh Zayed's pivotal role, and a national identity grounded in unity, respect, and a future-oriented vision.

5.1.1 The Principles of the UAE's Policy

This theme includes four sub-themes: the drivers behind the establishment of the UAE's union, the UAE's internal policy, the UAE's external policy, and the UAE's future vision.

5.1.1.1 The Drivers Behind the Establishment of the UAE's Union

The 1971 declaration of the Union emphasised that the country was founded in an atmosphere of sincere brotherhood, mutual trust, and a deep concern for the will of the people of the Emirates. The late Sheikh Zayed, the founder of the UAE, explained that citizens were informed they would benefit from the union, which would secure their livelihood, luxury, and advancement. He repeatedly emphasised that a sincere promise from the leadership was the key to the Union's success.

5.1.1.2 The UAE's Internal and External Policy

The 1971 declaration outlined internal policy goals: to preserve independence, sovereignty, security, repel aggression, protect rights and freedoms, promote cooperation among Emirates, and ensure prosperity and a better life for all. Reflecting these principles, the UAE president, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in his 2022 inaugural address, said:

“The people of the UAE and their empowerment have been and continue to be the focus of attention of our blessed country, at the top of its priorities since its inception, and the approach of citizen comfort, happiness and care will remain the basis in all our plans for the future, Allah willing.”

His Highness reaffirmed that the UAE would continue to follow the vision and values of the late Sheikh Zayed and the founding leaders, keeping history, identity, and cultural heritage at the centre of future plans.

Related to the UAE's external policy, the 1971 declaration also affirmed support for Arab and Islamic causes, friendship with all nations, peaceful resolution of disputes, and openness to the accession of other Emirates and Arab states. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed reinforced this approach in 2022:

“We extend the hand of friendship to all countries in the region and the world that share our value of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect to achieve progress and prosperity.”

His Highness described the UAE's external diplomacy as based on credibility and constructive cooperation, which have strengthened global relations since its establishment.

5.1.1.3 The UAE's Future Vision

H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed placed strong emphasis on a future vision that prioritises leadership, empowering Emiratis, and cooperation with other nations. His Highness emphasised continuity with the founders' approach, which is rooted in wisdom and the preservation of history and heritage. His Highness stated:

“Our responsibility is to secure a bright future for present and future generations... We must redouble our efforts to preserve the country's position and achievements. Our first and last goal is the UAE and its people.”

This vision also aims to enhance global partnerships, peace, stability, and humanitarian work in line with Sheikh Zayed's legacy.

5.1.2 Appreciation of Sheikh Zayed's Role in the Union by UAE Leadership

The UAE leaders consistently honour Sheikh Zayed's foundational role. In 2022, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed affirmed that Sheikh Zayed laid the nation's solid foundations. Similarly, in 2010, H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member, Ruler of Sharjah, described Sheikh Zayed as a star and a man with the energy of men and formed a nation, and said:

“I say that he is the nation. Through him, he moves this young country to the forefront of countries in the world, raising it day after day, and through his wise policy, this country gains all honesty, all loyalty, and all love from all countries on this earth.”

At the 2013 World Government Summit, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid highlighted Sheikh Zayed's resilience, noting he “never avoided a challenge... always overcame hurdles,” a spirit that continues to guide the UAE. In addition, H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi urged families to pass on Sheikh Zayed's values by documenting his principles as a moral legacy. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed affirmed the UAE's commitment to Zayed's humanitarian vision, pledging aid to all communities regardless of religion, race, or colour.

5.2 Social and Ethical Priorities

This theme underscores the UAE's leadership's commitment to fostering a cohesive, respectful, and morally grounded society. It focuses on appreciation for residents in the UAE, the value of moral education and ethics, and the role of science and culture as pillars of progress.

5.2.1 Appreciation for Residents in the UAE

The UAE's leaders have consistently acknowledged the essential role of residents in the national growth. The late Sheikh Zayed, when informed that 80% of the population was foreigners, emphasised kindness and respect for residents and said:

“Sustenance is Allah's sustenance... and what will come to us from Allah is welcomed.”

In 2024, on the UAE's 53rd National Day, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed expressed his deep appreciation for the valued role of the country's residents, acknowledging them as people who regard the UAE as their second home and have consistently contributed to its building and development since the union.

This inclusive vision was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed assured residents of full support, reinforcing their status as integral to the community. Reflecting these values, the UAE launched the 10-year golden visa in 2020. H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, underscored the leadership's commitment to retaining talented residents, said:

“We want the minds and talents to stay and continue with us in the process of development and achievements.”

5.2.2. The Emphasis on Upbringing and Ethics

H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed often highlights the importance of upbringing and ethics. In a 2022 meeting with Emirati youth at Qasr Al Bahr, he repeated that upbringing is what separates successful from unsuccessful generations, stressing the need to prepare youth to carry the nation's flag forward.

Similarly, at the 2018 seminar, The Global Role of Emirati Youth in Abu Dhabi, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed highlighted:

“We want to send a positive message about the UAE's reputation. We are trying to send a message with what it means regarding our customs, traditions, meanings, morals, and ethics, which we were raised on.”

He added that these values represent the essence of religion and recalled the Prophet Mohammed's saying that he came to perfect good morals. This, His Highness explained, reflects the deep-rooted customs, traditions, and literature of Arabs, which form a unique cultural richness.

5.2.3 The Importance of Science and Culture

Science and culture have always been priorities for the late Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, and H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi. The late Sheikh Khalifa, the second president of the UAE, stressed that no nation can face modern challenges without enlightenment through science and cultural progress.

In 2022, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed told Emirati youth that knowledge is the key to advancement and that education defines the success or failure of generations. Similarly, during the 27th National Day in 1998, Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi declared:

“We must arm the youth with science and knowledge and raise their cultural level to match them with the most advanced, developed, and cultured nations.”

Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi also emphasised the UAE's interest in creativity in literature and the arts, making the nation a hub for scholars and writers while preserving its history, antiquities, and heritage.

5.3 Human Capital and Future Vision

This theme underscores the UAE leadership's forward-looking approach to national development, rooted in the belief that people are the nation's most valuable asset. The analysis of speeches highlights a strong emphasis on the permanence of work, productivity, and strategic investment in Emirati youth.

5.3.1 The Permanence of Work and Productivity

The late Sheikh Khalifa clarified that the greatness of the achievement and the magnitude of the effort exerted in the past period require more work and duties in all work and production sites to advance the construction we have achieved together.

Similarly, in his 2022 inaugural address, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed called for maximum effort to achieve exceptional progress, noting that the UAE's greater ambitions and a bright future for current and future generations depend on the work done today. His Highness said,

"Today, we must redouble our efforts to preserve the country's position and its gains. Our first and last goal is the UAE and its people."

In 2022, during a meeting with Emirati youth at Qasr Al Bahr, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed emphasised that each generation passes the flag to the next, and that hard work is what distinguishes a successful generation, urging the youth to work diligently to become productive and capable leaders.

5.3.2 The Investment in Emirati Youth

The UAE leadership places strong emphasis on empowering Emirati youth as the foundation of the nation's future, the leadership prioritises equipping young people with knowledge, education, and culture. As H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi highlighted in his speech on the 27th National Day in 1998:

"We must arm the youth with science and knowledge and raise their cultural level to match that of the most advanced, developed, and cultured nations."

Similarly, at the 2018 Global Role of Emirati Youth seminar in Abu Dhabi, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed stressed that national progress relies on skilled Emirati cadres and continuous investment in people to serve the nation. Also, in 2022 at Qasr Al Bahr, His Highness stressed that building nations depends on youth rather than money.

6. Discussion

This section clarifies how the speeches of the UAE leaders function as tools of public diplomacy and the alignment of these speeches with Golan's Integrated Public Diplomacy Model.

6.1 The Function of the UAE Leaders' Speech as a Tool of Public Diplomacy

The speeches of UAE leaders serve as a key instrument of public diplomacy, conveying the nation's identity, values, and global vision. Grounded in the 1971 Union declaration and the legacy of Sheikh Zayed, they promote unity, peaceful coexistence, and international cooperation. These speeches also humanise diplomacy through messages of ethics, inclusion, and humanitarianism, while highlighting investment in youth, education, and long-term development. Together, they present a consistent and credible image of the UAE as a modern, responsible nation, demonstrating how leadership speeches shape international perception and advance the country's soft power strategy.

The UAE's public diplomacy stems from the 1971 Union declaration and the late Sheikh Zayed, highlighting unity, citizen-focused governance, coexistence, and international cooperation. These values, echoed by H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, guide national identity and have evolved from identity-building to global branding (Abdulla, 2014). Presidential speeches articulate this unified vision, supporting scholarship that links effective public diplomacy to credibility and policy alignment (Ross, 2003; Cull, 2010). The 1971 declaration stressed that the Union rests on brotherhood, mutual trust, and the people's will. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed reaffirmed this vision of unity:

"The people of the UAE and their empowerment have been and continue to be the focus of attention... the approach of citizen comfort, happiness and care will remain the basis in all our plans for the future."

The speeches emphasise the UAE's peaceful foreign policy, rooted in the 1971 declaration that committed to cooperation, rejected force, and promoted peaceful dispute resolution, an approach that H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed continues to uphold through coexistence and mutual respect. In the early years, this was vital for reassuring neighbouring states that the Union was not formed at their expense. Such messages align with Nye's (2008) concept that peace and legitimacy strengthen diplomatic appeal. Historical continuity further strengthens credibility. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed repeatedly cited the late Sheikh Zayed's legacy:

"We will continue following the approach, wisdom, and vision and drawing lessons from the late Sheikh Zayed and the founders in leadership and will."

UAE leadership speeches emphasise humanising diplomacy through ethics, inclusion, and humanitarianism. From the late Sheikh Zayed to H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, they project a diplomatic image of moral responsibility, diversity, and care. The UAE consistently ranks among the world's leading foreign aid donors, with significant contributions to global COVID-19 relief through the Hope Consortium (The United Arab Emirates' Government portal, 2025; Abu Dhabi Media Office, 2025). These practices lend credibility to the humanitarian rhetoric in leadership speeches. Humanitarian aid to all, regardless of religion or nationality, reflects Signitzer and Coombs's (1992) "tender-minded diplomacy," while inclusivity, as shown in the 53rd National Day speech, aligns with Yun and Toth's (2009) sociological globalism.

Leadership speeches also stress moral education and ethics. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed emphasised that upbringing is a key factor distinguishing successful generations from unsuccessful ones and underscored the importance of promoting a positive image of the UAE through its customs, traditions, values, morals, and ethics. These messages, grounded in cultural authenticity, reflect the views of Ross (2003) and Nye (2008) that credibility enhances

attraction. Similarly, the humanitarian ethos is evident in H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed's emphasis on extending support to communities worldwide, regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity.

Speeches also emphasise investment in people and planning for the future. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed stated on assuming the presidency:

“Our responsibility is to secure a bright future for present and future generations... we must redouble our efforts to preserve the country's position and achievements.”

Youth empowerment is presented as a central priority, with an emphasis on sustained investment in Emirati youth and the empowerment of future generations as a core focus of all future plans. This discourse is reinforced by concrete initiatives, such as the creation of the Federal Youth Authority in 2018 and the appointment of Shamma Al Mazrui as the world's youngest minister at the age of 22, as well as long-term strategies like Vision 2071, which institutionalize the rhetoric of youth empowerment (Federal Youth Authority, 2025; Ministry of Community Empowerment, 2025). These ideas reflect Cull's (2009) concept of the “new public diplomacy,” which centres on long-term relationship-building through education and training. Importantly, future planning is consistently linked to cultural heritage, ensuring that the UAE's history, identity, and traditions remain integral to shaping its future vision. As Szondi (2008) notes, successful nation branding combines history with modernity to project a coherent global identity.

6.2 The Alignment of the UAE Leaders' Speeches with Golan's Integrated Public Diplomacy Model

Golan's (2013) integrated public diplomacy model explains how states engage foreign publics through mediated, nation branding, and relational levels. Applying this model to UAE presidential speeches shows how they shape perceptions, build the national image, and foster long-term relations. These speeches target global as well as domestic audiences, aligning with the mediated level, which uses media and digital platforms to influence international opinion.

From the outset, the UAE has been attentive to how it presents itself. The 1971 Declaration of the Union described the country as being built on sincere brotherhood, mutual trust, and deep concern for achieving the will of the people. Although this was a domestic declaration, its framing had international resonance. Building on this foundation, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed often links current policies to the vision of the founding leaders, stressing peace, mutual respect, and cooperation and stated:

“We extend the hand of friendship to all countries in the region and the world that share our value of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.”

The UAE's emphasis on humanitarianism also strengthens its mediated diplomacy. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed's pledge that the UAE would help communities without regard to religion, race, or colour was not only a policy statement but a reinforcement of the UAE's image as a compassionate global actor. Similarly, when H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid announced the Golden Visa, he described it as recognition:

“We want the minds and talents to stay and continue with us in the process of development and achievements.”

This inclusivity is mirrored in practice through the Golden Visa programme and the UAE's hosting of Expo 2020 Dubai, which attracted over 20 million visitors from 192 countries, turning speeches about openness into lived experiences of public diplomacy (The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2025; Expo 2020 Dubai, 2022).

Beyond short-term impressions, the speeches reflect Golan's nation brand and country reputation level, which seeks to build a lasting image. Central to this is the legacy of the late Sheikh Zayed. Leaders, including H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, and H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, describe Sheikh Zayed as a symbol of wisdom, generosity, and vision. These references unify the nation and build an international image. Another key element is inclusivity. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed often acknowledges the contributions of residents, calling them part of the UAE's people and describing the country as their second home. This appeals globally and supports the UAE's attraction of investment, talent, and tourism. Combined with an emphasis on science, culture, and innovation, expressed by the late Sheikh Khalifa, this image presents a modern state. Finally, the relational level appears in affirmations to continue Sheikh Zayed's legacy through humanitarian aid, education, and cultural exchange.

This relational approach is also evident in how leaders discuss the future. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed frequently states:

“Our responsibility is to secure a bright future for present and future generations.”

This vision resonates with both citizens and international partners. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed's compassionate response during the pandemic and H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's Golden Visa initiative illustrate efforts to build lasting relationships worldwide. These actions go beyond immediate policy, creating bonds grounded in shared values and mutual benefit. Examples include the UAE's large-scale COVID-19 vaccine distribution through the Hope Consortium, as well as cultural projects like the Louvre Abu Dhabi. These initiatives operationalise the leadership's discourse, fostering relational capital with global publics (Gołębiowski, 2020; Al Suwaidi, 2021).

7. Conclusion

This study analysed 18 speeches delivered by UAE leaders since the Union to examine how leadership discourse functions as a tool of public diplomacy and how it aligns with Golan's Integrated Public Diplomacy Model. The analysis revealed three dominant themes: foundational values and national identity, social and ethical priorities, and human capital with a future vision.

The findings demonstrate that UAE leaders use their speeches to promote unity, tolerance, humanitarianism, and youth empowerment, projecting a credible and forward-looking image of the nation. These speeches operate across Golan's three levels: mediated communication, shaping global perceptions; nation branding, reinforcing achievements, heritage, and openness; and relational engagement, emphasising peace and long-term partnerships.

In summary, the UAE's presidential discourse emerges as a deliberate, values-driven instrument of public diplomacy that combines cultural authenticity with soft power to enhance the nation's reputation and strengthen its international relationships.

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