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Women in Diplomacy in the Gulf Region

Iran and the UAE in Comparative Perspective

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Summary

Scholarship on women in diplomacy has largely centred on Europe, North America and international organisations, leaving the area known as ‘the Gulf’ as an unexplored area. To address this gap, the article uses feminist institutionalism and Feminist Foreign Policy Analysis to compare women’s representation in diplomacy in Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Both countries are patriarchal, authoritarian and illiberal states with legacies of entrenched gender inequality, and the percentage of women ambassadors representing both countries is well below the global average. However, while in Iran only a handful of women ambassadors have ever been appointed, in the UAE, the percentage of women ambassadors almost doubled between 2018 and 2025. The article deploys a most similar systems logic to reveal conditions under which women’s representation in diplomacy can be strengthened in two Gulf countries that are patriarchal, authoritarian and with legacies of entrenched gender inequality. It

argues that Iran is a case of ‘patriarchal exclusion’ while the UAE is a case of ‘state-managed inclusion’, and it explains why exclusion persists in Iran but inclusion became possible in the UAE. The findings advance our understanding of women’s representation in diplomacy beyond the West.

Keywords

women – diplomacy – ambassadorships – Iran – United Arab Emirates

1 Introduction

Women’s under-representation in senior diplomatic roles is apparent: in 2024 women held only 23.4 per cent of ambassadorships worldwide.¹ Further, that percentage has shifted slowly over the past two decades.² Ambassadors lead a country’s representation abroad or to an international organisation and play an important role in implementing foreign policy. Ambassadorships are prestigious posts, and the apex of a diplomatic career.³ The under-representation of women at that level signals that there are numerous obstacles to women’s diplomatic careers, and that women are excluded from multiple diplomatic exchanges and negotiations around the world.⁴ The traditional image of the diplomat as a man still seems to reflect reality.⁵

There is variation across the world, however: in Europe and the Americas, the percentage of women ambassadors is higher than the world average (29 per cent), whereas the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has the lowest percentage of women ambassadors at 11 per cent.⁶ Indeed, this has been the case for a while: in 2014, women constituted only 6 per cent of ambassadors from countries in the Middle East.⁷ These figures reflect the under-

1 Towns and Niklasson 2025.

2 Towns and Niklasson 2025; Chehab 2025.

3 Towns and Niklasson 2017, 522.

4 Smith and Kozielska 2024.

5 Enloe 2014, chapter 5.

6 Chehab 2025.

7 Towns and Niklasson 2017, 530. The definition of MENA in the GenDip database (Niklasson and Towns 2023) encompasses Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Egypt, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

representation of women in government in the region, with only 14.2 per cent of Cabinet ministers. Within the MENA region, the countries of the Gulf generally have even lower percentages of women ambassadors (only Iraq, with 12.7 per cent, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with 13 per cent, have more women ambassadors than the MENA average).⁸

This article delves into trends to find out ‘where are the women’ in diplomacy in two patriarchal, authoritarian and illiberal countries in the Gulf region with legacies of entrenched gender inequality: Iran and the UAE. It takes up the call to trace where the women are in the field of diplomacy, especially outside the context of developed states in the West.⁹ We then seek to conceptualise the different approaches towards women’s representation in diplomacy and uncover the factors that explain the variations in representation that we found in relation to the two case studies.

In part 2, we summarise the lessons from the literature on Feminist Foreign Policy Analysis (FFPA), feminist institutionalism and women/gender in diplomacy, especially in the Middle East and Gulf regions. The literature on women in diplomacy in the MENA region points to cultural and institutional barriers that keep women’s representation in diplomacy low, especially at the most senior levels (such as that of ambassador). While the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity can explain this, the cases of Iran and the UAE help us reveal the causal mechanisms suppressing women’s representation in diplomacy, evaluate how generalisable they are and explore their implications for theory. In this vein we seek to explain the puzzle of why the pattern of low representation nonetheless changes in some cases, as in the UAE, while other countries, such as Iran, remain immune to dynamics of change.

We set out our research design and methodology in Section 3. Building on lessons from the FFPA and feminist institutionalist literature, we use three broad factors to try to explain the patterns we see in the Gulf region: domestic political factors; external pressures; and the role of individual foreign ministers and leaders. In Section 4, we establish the trends in two Gulf countries: Iran and the UAE. Iran had only one woman ambassador in 2025 (1 per cent of the total), a percentage that has hardly changed since the 1979 Iranian revolution, while 13 per cent of the UAE’s ambassadors were women, a percentage that has doubled since 2018, when only 7 per cent of the UAE’s ambassadors were women.¹⁰ The article is the first study to trace where women ambassadors and deputy ambassadors have been posted, and our cases demonstrate sharply

8 Towns and Niklasson 2025.

9 Aggestam and Towns 2019, 18.

10 Chehab 2025.

different approaches to women's participation in diplomacy. Thus, the UAE's approach is conceptualised as a case of 'state-managed inclusion' whereas Iran is conceptualised as a case of 'patriarchal exclusion'. In Section 5, we explore the reasons for the differences between these two cases. The two countries are similar in terms of being patriarchal, authoritarian and illiberal states with legacies of entrenched gender inequality, yet there has been an increase in women's representation in senior diplomatic posts in the UAE and hardly any progress at all in that respect in Iran. Hence, deploying a most similar systems logic, we argue that our three factors help explain why the UAE might be conceptualised as a case of 'state-managed inclusion' whereas Iran is a case of 'patriarchal exclusion'. We show that 'state-managed inclusion', as in the case of the UAE, can lead to greater representation of women in senior diplomatic roles.

Where a state and/or its foreign minister or other leaders desire to strengthen women's representation in diplomacy, even in countries with entrenched gender inequality, such progress is possible without altering the underlying social and cultural norms. Conversely, apart from instances where expedient considerations shaped responses to external pressures and the personal agenda of foreign ministers temporarily punctured the predominant trend, patriarchal exclusion has been consistent in Iran, resulting in the severe suppression of women's representation in diplomacy. While the empirical data on ambassador and deputy ambassador appointments and the explanatory variables for the variations are bound to the two cases studies, our conceptual-analytical framework is generalisable. Future research may deploy our conceptions of 'state-managed inclusion' and 'patriarchal exclusion' to understand the under-researched issue in the debate on women in diplomacy in patriarchal authoritarian and illiberal states with legacies of entrenched gender inequality in the MENA region and beyond, such as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Oman, Qatar or Saudi Arabia.

2 Lessons from the Literature

The growing literature on FPPA, feminist institutionalism and gender and diplomacy offers a number of findings that help to explain variations in representation.¹¹ The newly emerging theoretical subfield of FPPA analytically reconciles feminist International Relations literature and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA),

11 Aggestam and Towns 2018; Cassidy 2018; McCarthy 2014; Sluga and James 2016; Stephenson 2024.

which is ‘multi-layered and conceptually complex, examining the many agents and institutions, cultures and identities, interests and perceptions that influence foreign policies’.¹² The FFPA lens draws attention to the role that particular foreign policy actors, such as foreign ministers, as well as (progressive or conservative) cultural norms, civil society actors and external pressures, could play in the strengthening or blocking of women’s representation in diplomacy. A feminist institutionalist approach emphasises that diplomacy is still gendered, and progress has been slow in terms of shifting the gender balance within diplomatic services.¹³ The legacy of bans on women entering the diplomatic profession lingers. Most outright bans were lifted between the 1920s and 1950s, but they were often replaced by bans on married women diplomats, which in many countries were lifted only from the 1970s.¹⁴ This ‘pipeline problem’ has resulted in continuing under-representation, as gendered diplomatic services may discourage or exclude women from entering or progressing in diplomatic careers.

Further, women – and especially women who are also from under-represented minority backgrounds – may still face outright bias and discrimination.¹⁵ As researchers examining this matter from a feminist institutionalist perspective have shown, women can face ‘glass ceilings’, biases that inhibit their progression to leadership roles within foreign ministries or diplomacy, and they can also bump into ‘glass walls’ that limit their roles to less prestigious missions or to so-called soft portfolios such as development or women’s issues.¹⁶ They can face sexism or harassment in their postings abroad,¹⁷ which can discourage women from entering the profession and thus prevent a pipeline of women progressing in diplomatic careers. The perceived work–life imbalance entailed by diplomats’ work can also affect women’s diplomatic careers.¹⁸

Although there is still work to be done to explain variations, the countries that have the highest percentage of women ambassadors seem to be those with high levels of gender equality, though this does not hold in all such cases. Further, those countries with the lowest percentage of women ambassadors tend to be those with low levels of gender equality, though again, there are vari-

12 Aggestam and True 2025, 2; Kaarbo and Thies 2024, 2.

13 Jezierska and Towns 2025.

14 Kreft, Niklasson and Towns 2022.

15 Barrington 2020; Kostadinova 2022; Pruitt and Dawuni 2021.

16 Calin and Buterbaugh 2019; Towns and Niklasson 2017.

17 Canan Sokullu and Karanis Ekşioğlu 2023; Mooney and Hodgson 2023.

18 Fellegi, Kočí, and Benešová 2023.

ations.¹⁹ Small ‘micro’ states – those with a population under 100,000 – tend to have higher representation of women in diplomacy.²⁰ Several countries that have declared they will pursue a feminist foreign policy (FFP) have included a commitment to improve the representation of women in their own diplomatic services, but whether this has yielded actual change requires further research.²¹

There are also patterns of inequality apparent in postings, with women posted to countries that are more gender equal and less likely to serve in countries with ‘more economic clout’ or affected by conflict.²² They may also be more likely to be posted to countries that are considered to be ‘family-friendly and safe destinations’.²³

Research by Jeziarska and Towns argues that there are institutional changes in ministries of foreign affairs that can bring more women into diplomacy, though diplomacy remains ‘predominantly masculinized’.²⁴ The institutional changes include ‘affirmative action and active recruitment efforts by ministries of foreign affairs’, the ‘self-organization of female diplomats into formalized women’s diplomatic networks’, the creation of gender focal points within ministries and of ambassadors for gender equality, and the adoption of an FFP.²⁵ Importantly, these changes rely on institutional will and leadership, and a context (domestic and within the ministry) supporting such changes. As FFPA highlights, individual leadership matters: foreign ministers and other senior diplomats can help to foster change that strengthens women’s representation in diplomacy, and such change can both reflect and filter through to foster an institutional culture within foreign ministries that is more supportive of women’s diplomatic careers.

To what extent are similar factors at play in the MENA region? There have so far only been a few studies on women in diplomacy in the MENA region, leaving the Gulf comparatively absent (with no research on Iran). Niklasson and Towns have found that countries of the MENA region, widely considered to be less gender equal than many other states, also have very low percentages of women ambassadors, but those women ambassadors tend to be sent to host countries that have high levels of gender equality, and to countries that have declared an FFP.²⁶ They suggest that states ‘stigmatized as patriarchal,

19 Niklasson and Towns 2023.

20 Niklasson and Towns 2023, 6.

21 Green, Kozielska and Smith 2023.

22 Kreft, Niklasson and Towns 2022.

23 Chehab 2025, 7.

24 Jeziarska and Towns 2025, 89.

25 Jeziarska and Towns 2025, 81–87.

26 Niklasson and Towns 2023.

traditional, and illiberal may have more incentive to use women female ambassadors to signal policy alignment', that is, 'alignment with "modern" values or the liberal order more broadly', which echoes Mnakri's findings.²⁷ Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum also find Turkish women diplomats are 'overall more likely to be assigned to missions in countries with higher levels of gender equality' and to international organisations.²⁸ This finding points to the importance of the external context, coupled with attention to a country's 'brand', in prompting an increase in women's representation in diplomacy.

However, as feminist institutionalism argues, there are continuing institutional and cultural barriers impeding women's involvement in diplomacy. Although, for example, Türkiye 'was among the leading countries also in the introduction of women to diplomacy' – with the first woman diplomat appointed in 1932, and with women increasingly making their presence felt within the Turkish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in the 21st century – women diplomats still face structural barriers which include patriarchal norms within Turkish society and masculine attitudes within the MoFA, particularly with respect to the role of women in the family.²⁹

The case of Israel reveals similar cultural and institutional barriers affecting women's diplomatic careers, though these are lessening somewhat. Aran and Brummer examine the data on representation with respect to Israel, finding that about 17 per cent of ambassadors or heads of mission were women in 2021, with some growth in the number of women holding strategically important ambassadorships.³⁰ They argue that the 'pipeline problem' helps to account for this under-representation, as few women were recruited from the 1970s to the 1990s. Thus, the number of women eligible for senior roles is correspondingly low.³¹ Only in 1998 did the Ministry for Foreign Affairs seek parity in recruitment. But further, 'deeply seated social norms of male chauvinism, too, have constrained the progress of women'.³² While overt chauvinism has died down due to the implementation of gender equality laws in the 1990s, latent male chauvinism persists. Another factor inhibiting women's careers in the Israeli diplomatic service is the lack of support for 'trailing partners', which creates particular difficulties for women diplomats.³³ Aran and Brummer find that the

27 Niklasson and Towns 2023, 8; Mnakri 2023.

28 Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum 2018, 97–98.

29 Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum 2018, 91–93, 99–101. See also Canan Sokullu and Karanis Ekşioğlu 2023.

30 Aran and Brummer 2024, 370.

31 Aran and Brummer 2024, 370.

32 Aran and Brummer 2024, 371.

33 Aran and Brummer 2024, 371.

progress that has nonetheless been evident in terms of increasing women's representation in senior diplomatic roles has been due to the institutionalisation of the goal of reaching parity in representation, and the appointment of a gender equality officer within the foreign affairs ministry, tasked with encouraging women to apply for senior positions.³⁴

Elsewhere in the Middle East, institutional and societal norms still play a particularly significant role in limiting women's diplomatic careers. Al Hassanieh's doctoral dissertation specifically explores the representation of women in politics and diplomacy in the Middle East region and includes case studies on Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. She finds that hegemonic masculinity in patriarchal society, as well as gender-based biases, norms and stereotypes, result in women's lack of representation in diplomacy.³⁵ Her thesis demonstrates that the different political governance systems (authoritarian, hybrid and so on) in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia impact in different ways on women's representation in politics and diplomacy.

The literature on women in diplomacy in the MENA region thus demonstrates the pervasive cultural and institutional obstacles that limit women's representation in diplomacy, especially at senior levels. In the next section, we use the lessons from the FPPA and feminist institutionalist literature to set out three broad factors that may explain how women's representation in diplomacy can nonetheless be strengthened, but also why those obstacles remain stubbornly in place.

3 Research Design and Methodology

The still limited literature on women in diplomacy in the MENA region points overwhelmingly to the impact of patriarchal societal norms, male chauvinism and gender-based biases on the representation of women in diplomacy. In the next sections, we explore the situation in two Gulf countries within the MENA region, Iran and the UAE, which are cases that have not been studied in depth (or at all with respect to Iran). Both countries are patriarchal, authoritarian and illiberal states with entrenched legacies of gender inequality. At the same time, Iran is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of women ambassadors, while UAE is one of those with the highest in the Gulf region. Moreover, the UAE has seen growth (if uneven) in women's diplomatic repres-

34 Aran and Brummer 2024, 372.

35 Al Hassanieh 2023, 94.

TABLE 1 Iran and the UAE in comparison

	Iran	UAE
Rank in 2024 Gender Gap Index ^a	143 (of 146)	74 (of 146)
Political system	Theocratic republic	Federal monarchy
Freedom House rating 2024 ^b	11 out of 100 (not free)	18 out of 100 (not free)
Percentage of women in parliament as of 1 January 2025 ^c	4.9%	50%
Percentage of women in Cabinet as of 1 January 2025 ^d	10%	20%
Percentage of women ambassadors, 2025 ^e	1%	13%

a World Economic Forum 2024.

b Freedom House 2025.

c UN Women 2025.

d UN Women 2025.

e Chehab 2025, 13–14.

entation over the past decade, while the situation in Iran has worsened since 2019.³⁶ Because data on women's representation in diplomatic services is often unavailable (as in the case of Iran), we focus on women serving in the (visible) senior roles of ambassadors and deputy ambassadors. Advancement to such senior levels also reveals the extent of the barriers that women diplomats face: the fewer the barriers, the more women are represented in senior positions.

Thus, these cases are useful to address an under-researched issue in the debate on women in diplomacy: under what conditions can women's representation in diplomacy be strengthened or weakened within patriarchal, authoritarian and illiberal states? We deploy a most similar systems logic design, which is well suited to comparing women's representation in the UAE's and Iran's foreign policy and diplomatic sectors. The two states share important structural and regional similarities – location in the Gulf, resource-rich economies, authoritarian centralised executives, key strategic geopolitical roles and limited pluralistic political competition – and both have entrenched gender inequality (see Table 1). At the same time, they differ in terms of the representation of women in senior diplomatic roles. This enables clearer causal

36 Towns and Niklasson 2025.

inference about which factors drive and inhibit women's representation in diplomacy within otherwise comparable systems.

In each case, we consider the following factors, drawing on FFPA and feminist institutionalism, which may explain different outcomes in women's representation in diplomacy:

- domestic political factors such as the role of civil society organisations or the extent of public protests or opposition to the regime, which could prompt either progressive or repressive responses in terms of fostering women's representation;
- external pressures including the state of relations with major powers, which could prompt a desire to improve the country's international image, for example, by appointing more women ambassadors especially to countries with higher levels of gender equality;³⁷
- the role of individual foreign ministers or leaders, who can be important in generating change,³⁸ including through the use of 'ascriptive elitism', or the practice of appointing members of selected families at the top of the social scale to positions in government.³⁹ Political appointments of ambassadors, particularly to prestigious posts, is a common practice and can contribute to the politicisation of diplomacy,⁴⁰ but it may also be a relatively easy way to appoint women as ambassadors. Appointing women from elite families could improve women's representation in diplomacy in contexts in which opening up the diplomatic service to women is either precluded or a very gradual process, and it also rewards elites close to the regime.

Our analysis is based on a wide data set concerning the details, which are presented for the first time in this article, of women ambassador and deputy ambassador appointments. The data is collected from official statements by Iran's and the UAE's MoFAs, speeches delivered by ambassadors, and reports by the media and national and international organisations. We verified the information by triangulating it with biographical details of women ambassadors, sometimes very limited, which we obtained from the official websites of both countries' MoFAs, media sources, personal LinkedIn and Instagram accounts, and the official websites of the foreign ministries in host countries. Once we had compiled a list of names of women ambassadors, we searched for them alongside calendar years to confirm the dates when the ambassador held the position and in which location/s. For information on the numbers of

37 Niklasson and Towns 2023, 8.

38 Brummer 2024.

39 Pinto 2012, 2–3.

40 Niklasson and Jezierska 2024.

ambassadors and their postings, we used the data set compiled by the GenDip project at the University of Gothenburg and the Women in Diplomacy dashboard of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy.⁴¹

4 Where Are the Women?

4.1 *Iran*

The gender imbalance in Iranian diplomacy is stark: it is among the few countries with almost no women's participation in diplomacy, which underscores significant barriers in representation.⁴² This reflects the situation in Iranian political life more generally: Iran ranks 14th in the region and 143rd globally in political empowerment according to the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index, with men holding over 94 per cent of political and diplomatic roles.⁴³ Although women constitute 61 per cent of university enrolments,⁴⁴ they are under-represented in the workforce and largely absent from key political and decision-making roles, including diplomacy, where their presence remains minimal despite limited increased visibility in managerial and ministerial positions.

Information on the placement of women in senior diplomatic roles is publicly available, but information on the percentage of women at various levels within the foreign ministry is not – so it is not possible to discern the extent of the 'pipeline problem' is shaping women's representation in senior roles.

Iran has appointed a grand total of six women ambassadors, one before the 1979 revolution and five afterwards (with one appointed to two different ambassadorships), only one of which is currently in post, and three deputy ambassadors, of which two are currently in post (see Table 2).

In Iran, there are clear institutional barriers to the representation of women in diplomacy. Prior to 1956, women were barred from working in the MoFA. After that, they could be employed in administrative roles, with the first breakthrough being the hiring of three women – Ghamar Kani, Maryam Khazaeli and Parveen Monajem Bashi – in 1956. Women were restricted to administrative roles until 1964, when Nasrin Hekmati and Shirin Tahmaseb Virani (Hunter) became the first women to pass the diplomatic service entry exam. However, Hekmati later left for further studies in the US, while Virani contin-

41 Towns and Niklasson 2025; Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy 2024.

42 Anwar Gargash Academy 2024.

43 World Economic Forum 2024.

44 UNESCO 2023.

TABLE 2 Women ambassadors and deputy ambassadors appointed by Iran

Name and posting	Location	Period of ambassadorial appointment
Ambassador Marzieh Afkham	Slovenia	2025–present
Ambassador Masoumeh Abad	Finland	2023–2024
Ambassador Dr Afsaneh Nadipour	Denmark	2020–2024
Ambassador Foruzande Vadiati	Finland and Estonia	2019–2023
Ambassador Homeira Rigi	Brunei	2018–2023
Ambassador Marzieh Afkham	Malaysia	2015–2019
Ambassador Dr Mehrangiz Dowlatshahi	Denmark	1975–1978
Deputy Ambassador Mansoureh Sharifi Sadr	Tokyo	2008–2011
Deputy Ambassador Zahra Ershadi	United Nations	2021–present
Deputy Ambassador Afsaneh Ebrahimi	Brunei	Currently serving

ued her diplomatic career in London and then Geneva before moving to the US.⁴⁵ Subsequently, women such as Zohreh Farshid, Nahid Mehrad, Victoria Basiri Tehrani and Parveen Shibani joined the ranks, although their numbers remained limited. By 1967, the MoFA had employed five women diplomats and 75 women in administrative roles.⁴⁶

The socio-political landscape of pre-revolution Iran, which was shaped by the Pahlavi regime's modernisation efforts, significantly advanced women's rights. The White Revolution of 1963 brought landmark reforms, granting women suffrage and access to higher education and professional fields, including diplomatic positions.⁴⁷ These changes paved the way for leaders such as Mehrangiz Dolatshahi, director of the advisory committee on international affairs of the Women's Organization of Iran, president of the International Council of Women (1973–1976), the first women's affairs minister (1976) and an advocate for women's rights, to rise through Iran's political ranks.⁴⁸ She was elected as a member of parliament (Majlis) in 1963 for three terms. She played a vital role in supporting and advancing family protection laws (1967) and advocating for women's political participation.⁴⁹ Her eventual appointment as Iran's

45 Encyclopedia.com n.d.

46 Nik Tabae 1967.

47 Bakhshizadeh 2018.

48 ICW 2013; Sami'i 1984.

49 Mofakham 2021.

first woman ambassador to Denmark (1975–1979) symbolised a groundbreaking shift, opening new pathways for women in public and international roles.⁵⁰ However, the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic interrupted this gradual progress. After 1980, Iran's theocratic and conservative governance model significantly shaped women's representation; the new revolutionary regime imposed strict limitations on women's public and political roles. Thus, it created a gender-based framework that curbed their rights and halted their participation in Iran's foreign service, from which women were excluded until 2008.⁵¹

Mansoura Sharifi Sadr was the first woman appointed post-1979, as deputy head of Iran's embassy in Tokyo (2008–2011), and later served as Director General of Women and Human Rights at the MoFA. In a move designed to respond to domestic political unrest and improve Iran's state branding globally while catering to conservative demands, Hassan Rouhani's administration (2013–2021) then took a significant step. It appointed the first woman to a senior role in the MoFA, signalling a potential shift towards reintegrating women into high-ranking diplomatic positions.⁵²

In 2015, in an unprecedented move, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif appointed Marzieh Afkham as Iran's first female ambassador to Malaysia, marking a significant milestone for women in Iranian diplomacy after the revolution in 1979.⁵³ Afkham, whom Abbas Araghchi (Iran's foreign minister since August 2024) describes as a seasoned and highly experienced professional, had a long tenure within the MoFA, including serving as the ministry's first female spokesperson.⁵⁴ In 2018, despite not having prior diplomatic experience, Homeira Rigi became the second female ambassadorial appointment by Rouhani's administration, serving in Brunei until 2023.⁵⁵ The first two post-1979 women ambassadors were thus appointed to represent Iran in Sunni Muslim-majority states.

Foruzande Vadiati then served as Iran's ambassador to Finland (2019–2023).⁵⁶ Prior to the ambassadorship, she held positions as Director General of Human and Women's Rights at the MoFA and as a counsellor at Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations (2014–2018). During her tenure in Finland,

50 Iran Wire 2023; Kadivar 2010.

51 Iranian Diplomacy 2023; Moghadam 2013.

52 Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2022; Fararu 2022.

53 Kamali Dehghan 2015; McAllester 2015.

54 Kangarlou and Simpson 2013.

55 IRNA 2019.

56 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020.

Vadiati was also accredited as Iran's non-resident ambassador to Estonia.⁵⁷ Afsaneh Nadipour was the fourth female ambassador appointed by the Rouhani administration, serving in Denmark.⁵⁸ She previously served as assistant to Foreign Minister Zarif in citizens' rights (2018–2020), and as a minister-counsellor at Iran's permanent mission to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague (2015–2017).⁵⁹

Masoumeh Abad, author of *'I'm alive'*,⁶⁰ was the first woman ambassador of the conservative administration of President Ebrahim Raisi and Iran's fifth woman ambassador since the 1979 revolution, serving as ambassador to Finland (2023–2024). She was a member of the fourth Islamic City Council of Tehran and its Director of Health Division. During her time with the Red Crescent during the Iran–Iraq War, Abad was captured by Iraqi forces and was held captive for three years and six months.⁶¹ More recently, Marzieh Afkham's appointment as ambassador to Slovenia – following her earlier tenure as ambassador to Malaysia and her role as the MoFA's first female spokesperson – represents another rare but highly selective instance of women's presence in Iran's senior diplomatic ranks.⁶²

In line with the findings of Niklasson and Towns, three of the most recently appointed ambassadors represented Iran in countries that are among the most gender equal in the world: Finland and Denmark.⁶³

Over the past decade, the MoFA has appointed five women as ambassador plenipotentiary, shifting the diplomatic landscape of Iran. Three of the ambassadors – Marzieh Afkham, Afsana Nadipour and Foruzande Vadiati – were from the cadre of the MoFA, chosen by Foreign Minister Zarif, and appointed by the government for international missions.⁶⁴ Homeira Rigi and Masoumeh Abad, however, were appointed as ambassadors by the administrations of presidents Rouhani and Raisi, respectively, despite having no prior diplomatic experience.⁶⁵ And since 2021, Zahra Ershadi has served as deputy permanent representative to the United Nations.⁶⁶ Her appointment may indicate some pres-

57 Helsinki Times 2020.

58 Iran Front Page 2020.

59 Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen 2020.

60 Tehran Times 2023; Alef News 2023.

61 ISNA 2023.

62 President of the Republic of Slovenia 2025.

63 Niklasson and Towns 2023.

64 Hamshahri 2024; Newsin 2019.

65 Tabnak 2019; ISNA 2023.

66 Tehran Times 2024.

ence of women in Iran's international diplomacy, but it does not represent a broader trend. Rather, it reflects the ability of individual politicians, Zarif in this case, to generate a degree of change in women's representation in foreign policy but also its limits as progress in Iran remains slow, limited and uneven.⁶⁷ Thus, in terms of women's diplomatic appointments, Iran exhibits a clear trend. The modest rise in women's representation prior to 1979 was stopped and consistently suppressed following the Islamic Revolution. Individual appointments of women diplomats, which began in 2008 partly in response to domestic pressures, were very few and far between and did not reflect a change in the overall trend.

4.2 *The UAE*

In comparison with Iran, the UAE has appointed more women ambassadors (see Table 3).

To date, sixteen women have served as UAE ambassadors, with Dr Hissa Abdulla Al Otaiba and Najla Al Qassimi being the first women ambassadors, appointed in 2008 to Spain and Sweden, respectively. Dr Al Otaiba held her post in Spain in addition to other appointments: ambassador to the Principality of Andorra (2010–2019); the first female and Arab ambassador to the Holy See (2010–2022); the Netherlands (2019–2022); and Switzerland since 28 June 2022. Before becoming ambassador, she held several roles at the United Nations Development Programme.⁶⁸ Following Al Qassimi's ambassadorship in Sweden,⁶⁹ she was appointed as the UAE's ambassador to Portugal (2014–2016).⁷⁰

Hafsa Al Ulama, the UAE's third woman ambassador, was appointed as the UAE's first ambassador to Montenegro (2010–2017)⁷¹ and Kosovo (non-resident, 2015–2017),⁷² Brazil (2017–2020) and non-resident ambassador to Guyana. Al Ulama's last appointment was to Croatia (non-resident, 2021–2022) and Germany (2020–2022), which represented the first appointment by the UAE of a female ambassador to a country with economic and diplomatic 'clout'. Prior to becoming ambassador, Al Ulama was managing director of Abu Dhabi Capital Group and held significant positions in the Ministry of Economy and Planning

67 Towns and Niklasson 2025; IRNA 2024.

68 Manhom 2024; Diplomat Magazine 2019; Emirates News Agency 2010; Holy See Press Office 2022; UAE MoFA 2022.

69 Hamid and Arafah 2008.

70 Dubai Public Policy Research Centre 2025; Emirates News Agency 2014.

71 Government of Montenegro 2024.

72 President of the Republic of Kosovo 2015.

TABLE 3 Women ambassadors appointed by the UAE

Name of ambassador and posting	Location	Period of ambassadorial appointment
Fatima Khamis Al Mazrouei	Norway	2023–present
	Denmark	2025–present
Hanan Khalfan Al Alili	Latvia	2017–present
Dr Hissa Abdullah Al Otaiba	Spain	2008–2019
	Andorra (non-resident)	2010–2019
	Holy See	2010–2019
	Netherlands	2019–2022
	Switzerland	2022–present
Najla Al Qassimi	Sweden	2008–2012
	Denmark (non-resident)	2010–2013
	Finland (non-resident)	2010–2013
	Portugal	2014–2016
Nabila Al Shamsi	Montenegro	2020–present
	Kosovo (non-resident)	2021–present
Noura Mohammed Abdul Hamid Juma	Latvia	2024–present
Hafsa Al Ulama	Germany	2020–2022
	Croatia (non-resident)	
	Brazil	2017–2020
	Guyana (non-resident)	
	Montenegro	2010–2017
Lana Nusseibeh	Kosovo (non-resident)	
	First female ambassador to the United Nations	2013–2024
Mariam Al Kaabi	First female ambassador to Egypt and permanent representative to the League of Arab States	2022–present
Hend Mana Saeed Al Otaiba	First female ambassador to France	2021–2024
Dr Eman Ahmad el Salami	Tunisia	2022–present
	Poland	2021–2022
Rawdha Mohamed Al Otaiba	Costa Rica	2022–present
HE Amna Mahmoud Fikri	Finland (non-resident)	2022–present
	Estonia (non-resident)	2024–present

TABLE 3 Women ambassadors appointed by the UAE (*cont.*)

Name of ambassador and posting	Location	Period of ambassadorial appointment
Dr Nariman Mohammed Sharif Abdulla Al Mulla	Armenia	2023–present
Ameirah Al Hefiti	Netherlands	2024–present
Ghasaq Yousif Abdullah Shaheen	Sweden	2025–present

and at Citibank UAE, where she became the first Emirati woman to be appointed the bank's vice president.⁷³

Lana Nusseibeh, the fourth appointment since 2008, served as permanent representative to the UN (2013–2024) and as a non-resident ambassador to Grenada in November 2017, having filled several roles within the UAE MoFA, including serving as its first director for three years.⁷⁴

In 2017, Fatima Khamis Al Mazrouei was appointed as the fifth ambassador and first UAE woman ambassador to Denmark;⁷⁵ in 2023 she was appointed ambassador to Norway, and in 2025 she became non-resident ambassador to Denmark. Since she began her diplomatic career in 2001, she has represented the UAE at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank and served as a junior diplomat at the UAE's embassy in Washington, DC.⁷⁶ Thus, in both Iran and the UAE, the initial inclusion of women in the diplomatic corps began in 2008 and continued into the next decade.

However, in contrast to Iran, in the UAE there has been a significant further uptick in the appointment of female ambassadors since 2020. Nabila Al Shamsi was appointed as the UAE's ambassador to Montenegro (2020) and non-resident ambassador to Kosovo (2021).⁷⁷ In addition, Hend Mana Saeed Al Otaiba was appointed as the UAE's first female ambassador to France in July 2021, which was the second appointment to a country with economic clout and diplomatic prominence. Prior to her ambassadorial appointments, she filled

73 Hilotin 2003; Guyana President's Office 2017; Diplomat Magazine 2020; The National 2020; President of Croatia Office 2021.

74 Wycombe 2021; UAE MoFA 2024f.

75 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2022, 274.

76 UAE Ambassadors Biographies 2018; UAE MoFA 2023, 2025c.

77 UAE MoFA 2021.

several roles at Abu Dhabi Media.⁷⁸ In 2021 Dr Eman Ahmad el Salami was appointed as ambassador to Poland (2021–2022) before being appointed as the UAE's ambassador to the Republic of Tunisia. Prior to that she was the director of the Strategy and Future Department at the MoFA.⁷⁹

Thus, by 2021 the total number of UAE women ambassadors had increased to eight. In 2022 another four women ambassadors were appointed. Hanan Khalfan Al Alili was appointed as the UAE's ambassador to Latvia, having previously served in several roles in the UAE MoFA including consul general to Milan (2013–2017) and in the UAE's embassy in Finland.⁸⁰ Mariam Al Kaabi was appointed as the first Emirati women ambassador to the Republic of Egypt and permanent representative to the League of Arab States. She had previously served in leading positions in the MoFA, especially in the European and African divisions.⁸¹ Rawdha Mohamed Al Otaiba was appointed ambassador to Costa Rica in December 2022, having had twenty years of prior diplomatic experience, including serving as the deputy head of mission in the United Kingdom.⁸² Dr Nariman Mohammed Sharif Abdulla Al Mulla was appointed as ambassador to Armenia on 21 June 2023.⁸³

In 2024 three more appointments were made. Amna Mahmoud Fikri was appointed as non-resident ambassador to Finland and Estonia, alongside her role as economic advisor to Minister of State Ahmed Al Sayegh,⁸⁴ having served in several leadership roles in the Economic and Trade Affairs Department.⁸⁵ Noura Mohammed Abdul Hamid Juma presented her credentials to the president of Latvia on 13 August 2024.⁸⁶ Prior postings over the previous fifteen years included consul-general in Milan, consul-general in Shanghai, serving in the Office of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and roles in the UAE government and the charity sector.⁸⁷ Ameirah Al Hefeti was appointed as ambassador to the Netherlands after serving several years representing the UAE in the UN and in the UAE MoFA.⁸⁸ In 2025, Ghasaq Yousif Abdullah Shaheen was appointed as ambassador to Sweden.

78 Minthe 2021; Al Otaiba 2020a, 2020b.

79 UAE MoFA 2025a.

80 UAE MoFA 2024a.

81 UAE MoFA 2024b.

82 UAE MoFA 2024c.

83 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2023.

84 UAE MoFA 2024d.

85 Guess Saudi Arabia 2024.

86 UAE MoFA 2024e.

87 UAE MoFA 2025b.

88 UAE MoFA 2024h.

The UAE began appointing female ambassadors in 2008, and in contrast to the Iranian case, the findings show that these appointments began a trend rather than reflecting an isolated event. By December 2025 the number of female ambassadors had steadily increased to sixteen, doubling since 2018, with women also being appointed to countries with economic clout and diplomatic prominence such as France and Germany. In addition, the list of ambassadorships held by women (Table 3) shows clearly that women have been posted predominantly to European countries, with only a handful of exceptions – ambassadorships to Brazil, Egypt, the UN, Tunisia and Costa Rica – which are part of the post-2018 expansion. Thus, this pattern conforms to that identified by Niklasson and Towns in that women have been posted to countries with higher levels of gender equality.⁸⁹ And as Chehab has noted, they have also been posted to countries that are considered ‘family-friendly and safe destinations’.⁹⁰

In addition, as of December 2025, there were currently eleven women serving as deputy ambassadors or consuls general (see Table 4), indicating a burgeoning pipeline of future women ambassadors. Again, though, the pattern of locations is similar in that they could be considered postings in relatively safe destinations. However, it is notable that several of the posts where women are serving (see Table 4) are in relatively powerful countries, including China and the US.

5 Why Is There Low Representation and Why Might That Improve?

5.1 *Iran*

A gendered analysis of Iran’s diplomatic landscape reveals the significant challenges women face in a system deeply shaped by the intersection of religion, politics and gender, highlighting the structural barriers still limiting women’s participation in diplomatic and foreign policy decision-making. The case of Iran shows that domestic political factors have prompted repressive responses in terms of fostering women’s representation; that external pressures have had a limited impact on the appointment of women ambassadors; and that an individual foreign minister is responsible for most of the (limited) progress in appointing women ambassadors and deputy ambassadors.

89 Niklasson and Towns 2023.

90 Chehab 2025, 7.

TABLE 4 Women consuls/consulars general/deputy ambassadors (UAE)^a

Name of diplomat	Role	Location	Date of appointment (if available)
Alia Al Suwaidi	Deputy chief of mission	UAE Embassy in Washington, DC (US)	Not identified
Amna Ali Hamad Bin Zaal Al-Mheiri	Consul general	UAE Consulate General in New York (US)	August 2021
Noura Ahmed Helal Khalfan Al-Mazrouei	Consul general	UAE Consulate General in Los Angeles (US)	Not identified
Nariman Al Mulla	Consul general	UAE Consulate General in Melbourne (Australia)	Not identified
Amina Al Hamadi	Deputy ambassador	UAE Embassy in Beijing (China)	Not identified
Muna Al Maaeni	Chargé d'affaires and deputy head of mission	UAE Embassy in Tokyo (Japan)	Not identified
Sandra Oweida	Deputy chief of mission of the UAE to the Kingdom of Belgium, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, and the European Union	UAE Embassy in Brussels (Belgium)	August 2022
Shaima Salem Alhebsi	Chargé d'affaires and deputy chief of mission	UAE Embassy in Jakarta (Indonesia)	Not identified
Niloofer Al Bastaki	Deputy head of mission	UAE Embassy in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia)	Not identified
Heba Aljneibi	Deputy head of mission	UAE Embassy in Oslo (Norway)	July 2016
Mahra Ali Al Shaya	Deputy head of mission	UAE Embassy in Bucharest (Romania)	16 March 2021

a Sources: Websites of the relevant UAE embassies.

5.1.1 Deeply Rooted Patriarchy: Women Framed as Security Threats

In the decades following the revolution of 1979, Iranian women lost many of the rights and privileges they had gained before the revolution, leading to a marked regression in their empowerment, both in public life and within the diplomatic sphere. Despite their central role in the 1979 revolution, women were swiftly recast as a 'security threat' to the ideological purity and stability of the new Islamic state.⁹¹ The regime imposed a restrictive gender order, curtailing women's civil and political rights, mandating veiling, limiting career opportunities and excluding them from positions such as president, minister and diplomat in an effort to construct the 'ideal Islamic woman' aligned with the state's values.⁹² These changes restructured and institutionalised a patriarchal system that codified gender discrimination under theocratic rule and reinforced male dominance in governance.⁹³

While the formal inclusion of women in Iran's diplomatic corps did not materialise until 2008,⁹⁴ in 1989 efforts were begun to integrate women into other political roles across the successive governments spanning various political factions. Several factors facilitated the very gradual re-inclusion of women in Iran's political sphere, including the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988, shifting national focus from survival to reconstruction and creating an opening for broader socio-political reforms.⁹⁵ Additionally, the leadership transition following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 helped soften some of the ideological rigidity of the revolution's early years.⁹⁶

However, despite the gradual and limited inclusion of women in politics since the 1980s – as ministers, vice-presidents and members of parliament – their exclusion from ambassadorial roles persisted until 2015, when Marzieh Afkham became Iran's first female ambassador. In this regard, the regime's limited appointments of women to diplomatic roles from 2008 to 2023 discussed earlier were reactive rather than transformative. Specifically, they should be seen against the highly securitised regional and global contexts Iran faced – marked by sanctions, international resolutions targeting Iran's nuclear programme, Israeli threats and the 'maximum pressure' campaign by the United States – combined with internal activism, such as the 'One Million Signature Campaign' (2006–2008) and movements such as the 'Green Movement'

91 Kamrava 2024; Tajali 2012.

92 Rezaei-Rashti, Mehran and Abdmolaei 2019; Bakhshizadeh 2018; Najmabadi 1991.

93 Hoodfar and Sadr 2010; Hoodfar 1999.

94 Iranian Diplomacy 2013, 2023.

95 Moghadam 2013.

96 Kian-Thiébaud 2005.

(2009),⁹⁷ which compelled the Iranian state to recalibrate its approach.⁹⁸ Yet these openings remained limited, with women's participation tightly managed and framed as symbolic compliance rather than genuine structural reform.⁹⁹

Thus, although Afkham's and later ambassadorial appointments signalled a shift in state attitudes and policies towards women in diplomacy and briefly raised expectations for broader inclusion, they were ad hoc measures rather than transformative steps.¹⁰⁰ The hopes for increased women's representation in Iran's diplomatic corps proved short-lived, as women's participation in foreign policy decision-making remained highly constrained, reflecting the enduring structural barriers of Iran's patriarchal and security-driven political order.¹⁰¹

5.1.2 Limited Progress under Different Administrations

Most female ambassadorial appointments occurred under President Rouhani, with Mohammad Javad Zarif as Foreign Minister, marking a brief phase of pragmatic openness.¹⁰² In contrast to the UAE, however, 'ascriptive elitism' does not apply here because, unlike in the UAE, Iran's political system does not rest on the executive, legislative and judicial authority of hereditary rulers. Rather, access to senior positions is mediated through ideological alignment, revolutionary credentials, clerical and institutional networks, and factional affiliation. Thus, the few women appointed are not predominantly from one or more elite families. Rouhani's recalibration of Iran's foreign policy – centred on engagement and diplomacy – coincided with institutional reforms that strengthened the MoFA.¹⁰³ In line with Rouhani's broader objective of projecting a rational, moderate and professional image of the Islamic Republic, Zarif called for a 'structural, thematic, and bureaucratic revolution' centred on merit-based diplomacy. Within this context, he emphasised the inclusion of qualified women in senior diplomatic roles as part of his broader vision for a more professional and technocratic foreign service.¹⁰⁴ In interviews, including the ISNA (2016) interview cited in *Iranian Diplomacy* (2017), he explicitly supported appointing women to ambassadorial positions as part of his vision for a professional and representative foreign service.¹⁰⁵ While these efforts reflec-

97 Centre for Human Rights in Iran 2018.

98 Heidari and Jamshidi 2016, 210.

99 Saeidi 2022, 310.

100 Kamali Dehghan 2015; Samanian 2013.

101 Fazaeli 2018.

102 Faghihi 2015.

103 Yazdani 2019; Wright 2015.

104 *Iranian Diplomacy* 2017.

105 *Iranian Diplomacy* 2017; Boroujerdi 2019.

ted the potential of ministerial agency aligned with favourable institutional conditions, progress remained constrained by the ideological and patriarchal boundaries of the Islamic Republic.

Under the Pezeshkian administration (July 2024–present), besides the appointment of Marzieh Afkham as ambassador in March 2025 – the first female ambassador during this period – and that of Farzaneh Sadegh-Malvajerd as Minister of Roads and Urban Development and the first female government spokesperson, no other female ambassadors were appointed. Dr Afsaneh Nadipour, who served as ambassador to Denmark (2020–2024),¹⁰⁶ and Masoumeh Abad, who served as ambassador to Finland (2023–2024),¹⁰⁷ were both replaced by male ambassadors. Thus, the already limited presence of women in Iran's foreign service was further diminished, reflecting the fragility of these openings and Iran's deeply entrenched masculine power structure. This under-representation continues to marginalise women from substantive international roles and decision-making positions, highlighting the systemic barriers to gender equality within Iran's diplomatic sphere.

While some Middle Eastern governments have implemented limited quotas and achieved modest increases in women's representation, Iran continues to rank among the lowest in terms of female ambassadors.¹⁰⁸ This under-representation reflects a foreign policy apparatus shaped by a religious-patriarchal gender regime and a security-driven logic that treats diplomacy as an extension of ideological defence. Iran's refusal to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its failure to adopt a National Action Plan for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325, which calls for the increased participation of women in peace and security processes, further demonstrate its reluctance and non-commitment to align with global gender norms. Even recent initiatives – such as the establishment of the Women Diplomat Association – serve largely cultural or symbolic purposes, offering little substantive commitment to advancing women's representation in diplomacy.¹⁰⁹

5.2 *The UAE*

Examining the period since the UAE appointed its first woman ambassador in 2008 reveals certain trends. Domestic political factors have played less of a role compared with the case of Iran, while external pressures (a desire to improve

106 IRNA 2024.

107 Tehran Times 2026.

108 Niklasson and Towns 2023.

109 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Islamic Republic of Iran 2022.

the country's international image) and the role of individual foreign ministers play a much more prevalent role in the UAE case.

5.2.1 State-Led Inclusion amid Deeply Seated Patriarchal Social Norms
An important suppressing factor has been deeply held social and cultural patriarchal norms about what roles women should play in society, which date back to the UAE's pre-independence period.¹¹⁰ Deeply seated cultural and patriarchal norms persisted during the first decade following the UAE's independence in 1971,¹¹¹ while women also remained under-represented in public decision-making.¹¹² Moreover, women faced formidable obstacles to gaining full education prior to the 1980s and to entering the workforce prior to the 1990s. Thus, women were de facto barred from entering the foreign service, even if a formal ban did not exist as it did in Iran, which created a severe pipeline effect. Thus, prior to 2001 there were no women in the UAE's diplomatic service,¹¹³ and, as we have seen, the first woman ambassadors, Dr Hissa Abdulla Al Otaiba and Najla Al Qassimi, were only appointed in 2008.

However, unlike Iran, where state intervention prolonged the exclusion of women from the diplomatic service, the Emirati state sought to reverse the trend by challenging the patriarchal social norms of secluding women, preventing them from completing their formal education and excluding them from the workforce. This was not driven by a liberal impulse, democratisation or grassroots demands. In fact, UAE leaders have long argued that Western-style democracy is unnecessary in the UAE as its citizens can express themselves through other channels, and that it would aggravate schisms among tribes and clans, cause Islamist factions to become radical and open UAE politics to regional influence.¹¹⁴ Thus, 'political parties are banned, and all executive, legislative, and judicial authority ultimately rests with the seven hereditary rulers'.¹¹⁵ The UAE still ranks rather low at 74th place in the Global Gender Gap Index, though Iran is ranked considerably lower at 143rd.¹¹⁶

Rather than being propelled by liberal trends or an ethos of promoting women's rights, other considerations drove the state-led encouragement of

110 Forster 2017, 39; Pinto 2012, 1, 20–21.

111 Krane 2009, 39–46.

112 Forster 2017.

113 Katzman 2015, 7–8.

114 Katzman 2015, 3; Katzman 2016, 3.

115 Freedom House 2024.

116 World Economic Forum 2024, 12.

women's education and their integration in the workforce. One was the state's need to shore up its legitimacy in the immediate aftermath of independence. In this context, enlisting women's support – through the education system and socio-economic integration – was deemed important. Their pivotal role in the family meant that they had a unique ability to instil in their kin support for the newly founded federation. Another consideration emanated from the small size of the UAE's indigenous population following independence – approximately 181,000 citizens – and the lack of local expertise required for state and nation building. Educating women and integrating them into the workforce was viewed as essential for addressing this resource deficit.¹¹⁷ In later decades, as the UAE developed its economy, promoting women's participation was linked to diversifying the economy away from oil, attracting investments and growing tourism,¹¹⁸ which aligned well with state and nation building. Both factors – the desire to legitimise a young state and having a small indigenous population – were absent in the Iranian case.

State-led reforms during the 1980s and 1990s were designed to support women completing their formal education and integrating them in the workforce.¹¹⁹ These reforms were buttressed by a raft of institutions set up by the state, such as the Sharjah Businesswomen Council (2002), the Dubai Women's Establishment (2006), the Women Leadership programme (2010) and the General Women's Union founded in 1975.¹²⁰ Legal changes, such as the law requiring companies to have at least one woman on the board and the establishment of the Gender Balance Council in 2015, which was tasked with implementing the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women 2015–2021, reinforced the trend.

The state led on enhancing women's political participation, as manifested in the growing number of women serving in the Federal National Council (FNC), the UAE's 40-member advisory body that can debate laws and review government policies but cannot legislate independently or remove ministers.¹²¹ Since 2006, members of the FNC have been elected through what might be termed limited elections in that the size of the electorate and the number of electable – as opposed to appointed – FNC seats is determined by the UAE's leadership. Within this framework, the number of women occupying seats in the FNC has increased from eight (one elected and seven appointed) in 2006 to twenty (or

117 Pinto 2012, 44.

118 Williamson 2022, 345.

119 Forster 2017, 54; Pinto 2012, 29–30, 36–37.

120 Abdulkadir and Muller 2020, 16, 20; General Women's Union 2025.

121 Katzman 2024.

50 per cent) in the 2019 elections following a presidential decree issued in 2018 that half of the seats in the FNC should be occupied by women.¹²²

The confluence of state-led measures created the conditions that allowed women to enter the diplomatic service in the first place. This progression indicates that the timeline involved in women becoming appointed as ambassadors corresponds with the period when women were permitted to enter the educational and professional domains in the UAE, as discussed earlier. The link between state intervention and the slow but steady rise in the number of women serving as ambassadors and heading more significant diplomatic missions is not only reflected in the data; it is also acknowledged by ambassadors themselves. As Ambassador Hafsa Al Ulama candidly commented in an interview to the *Berliner Zeitung* during her aforementioned term as ambassador in Germany, the UAE government ‘is more progressive than many families’ and ‘without [government] intervention it can take one hundred years to achieve gender equality’.¹²³ Thus, in the UAE we observe elite-driven, state-managed inclusion of women, whereas in Iran we have identified patriarchal exclusion with elite intervention being episodic, personalised and politically constrained.

5.2.2 Ascriptive Elitism and State Branding

The pipeline factor only partially explains why the UAE only began appointing women ambassadors in 2008.

When looking at the sixteen women ambassadors appointed by the UAE, one of the conspicuous attributes is the relatively high presence of the Al Otaiba family – including ambassadors Dr Hissa Abdullah Al Otaiba, Hend Mana Saeed Al Otaiba and Rawdha Mohamed Al Otaiba – comprising 25 per cent up to 2024 and 19 per cent since Hend Al Otaiba’s ambassadorship in Paris ended in 2024. This finding points to a further factor shaping the dynamics of women’s representation at the ambassadorial level, namely, what Pinto refers to as ‘ascriptive elitism’ – the practice of appointing members of selected families at the top of the social scale to positions in government – which is absent in the Iranian case.¹²⁴ This finding has significant bearing on how we understand the drivers behind the slow but steady rise in women’s diplomatic representation in the UAE. Appointing women as ambassadors in the UAE on the basis of ascriptive elitism reflects selection due to family status, lineage or social connections rather than a normative impulse reflecting a policy-driven effort to

¹²² Katzman 2015, 8; Katzman 2016, 12; Katzman 2020, 4–5.

¹²³ Both 2021.

¹²⁴ Pinto 2012, 2–3.

promote gender inclusion, or an achievement-based system recognising individual merit and qualifications. This driving factor, which is specific to the UAE, derives from the domination of seven hereditary families in defining and shaping the state. This is not the case in Iran, where elite recruitment and access to senior positions are shaped by ideological-institutional loyalty, revolutionary credentials, factional networks and regime alignment rather than hereditary lineage.

We now turn to examine the impact of an enabling factor that, unlike the pipeline effect, state-led inclusion and 'ascriptive elitism', does not directly affect the dynamics of low women's representation in the UAE's ambassadorial corps. Instead, its significance lies in enabling – rather than directly shaping – the incipient trends of the UAE increasing the number of women ambassadors and the importance of the missions they head.

This enabling factor is the image the UAE seeks to project externally of a moderate Muslim-majority country that highlights women's participation in the founding of the state and fosters women in leadership positions.¹²⁵ To achieve this goal – which Iran has also sought to do, though only partially and haphazardly, under Rouhani and Zarif – the UAE government has focused on making women's roles visible by providing historical information about their role in the founding of the UAE, highlighting examples of women's leadership and their economic benefit to the country.¹²⁶ For example, the UAE's permanent committee for human rights has issued publications celebrating the contributions of women to politics and the economy while highlighting the UAE's improving performance in various international gender equality indexes.¹²⁷ The UAE's embassies around the world, including in Washington, DC, N'Djamena and China, to name but a few examples, have done the same.¹²⁸ Hence, the image of the UAE as a moderate, leading Arab Middle Eastern state committed to empowering women has gradually become a staple of the UAE's public diplomacy.

How influential this factor is for women's representation in the UAE's diplomatic corps is difficult to quantify. However, the image of empowering women and the growing number of ambassadors, including in important missions, are mutually reinforcing, which has been recognised and promoted by UAE ambassadors. For instance, in 2021, while serving as the UAE's ambassador to Germany, Hafsa Al Ulama stated: 'these are exceptional moments for women in the UAE

125 Pinto 2010, 25–30, 104; Williamson 2022, 335.

126 Williamson 2022, 339.

127 UAE Permanent Committee for Human Rights 2025.

128 UAE Embassy in Washington 2022; UAE Embassy in N'Djamena 2021; Chinadaily.com 2022.

as we celebrate our 50th anniversary ... The UAE's track record of empowering women is a story to be told globally and an example to be followed around the world.¹²⁹ Similarly, during her term as permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh underscored the UAE's leadership in empowering women in the Arab Middle East on several public occasions.¹³⁰ Furthermore, in a special statement summarising Ambassador Nusseibeh's achievements during her long term at the UN, the UAE's MoFA underscored her diplomatic work in promoting women. Accordingly, it highlighted the UNSC resolutions that she championed during the UAE's 2022–2023 UNSC membership. During this period, the UAE co-penned Resolution 2686, which acknowledged for the first time that hate speech, racism, gender discrimination and disinformation contributes to the outbreak, escalation and recurrence of conflict. In addition, the UAE co-penned Resolution 2681, which condemned the Taliban's decision to ban Afghan women from working for the UN in Afghanistan.¹³¹ The orientation towards strengthening women's representation in diplomacy is also apparent in the women in diplomacy research programme of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA),¹³² which is tightly linked to the UAE foreign ministry and aims to train diplomats and advance the UAE's foreign policy.¹³³ However, promoting an image of women's empowerment in the UAE's foreign policy may remain a patriarchal façade unless women's actual representation and advancement into senior decision-making roles continue to grow substantively.

6 Conclusion

This article examined a geographic area that is nearly absent from the literature on women's representation in diplomacy: the area known as 'the Gulf'. The trends concerning the representation of women at the deputy and ambassadorial levels in Iran and the UAE, and the roles they play, reveal some interesting findings in comparative perspective and in relation to FFPA and feminist institutionalism. The representation of women in Iran's diplomatic sphere, particularly at the ambassadorial level, remains a contentious issue within the broader debate on gender inclusion in governance. Over the past two decades, despite

129 AKH 2024.

130 Permanent UAE Mission to the UN 2016; Gulf Today 2021.

131 UAE MoFA 2024g.

132 Chehab 2025.

133 Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy 2024.

a few women holding senior diplomatic roles, the Iranian regime's approach towards women's representation in diplomacy has been one of 'patriarchal exclusion'. Thus, any limited progress seems to have been driven by expedient responses to external pressures – such as global sanctions, international resolutions and security concerns – and internal activism, rather than by a genuine commitment to gender equality. While more moderate administrations have achieved modest gains, these have remained symbolic and temporary, reflecting tokenistic gestures rather than structural reform.

Moreover, the Iranian state has consistently framed women as destabilising forces, particularly when they challenge the regime's gender norms. This resistance dates back to the earliest days of the Islamic Republic, when women protested the mandatory hijab law on 8 March 1979, and subsequently to landmark movements such as the One Million Signature Campaign (2006–2008) and the 2009 Green Movement, in which women played a central role in political dissent. Consequently, women have been framed as a national security threat by the Islamic Republic's political establishment, which resulted in the violent suppression of the 'White Wednesdays' campaign in 2016 and the 2022 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests. Thus, on balance, we identify Iran as a case of 'patriarchal exclusion', resistant to both domestic feminist agency and international gender norms when it comes to women's representation in diplomacy. Viewed through an FFPA lens, Iran exemplifies how authoritarian systems instrumentalise gender to preserve ideological authority rather than advance genuine empowerment. The prospects for strengthening the representation of women in Iranian diplomacy remain weak and clearly depend on deeper societal and governmental reforms.

In the case of the UAE, we have seen a slow but steady trend towards increasing the number of women appointed as ambassadors and deputy ambassadors, and the importance of the missions in which they serve, which to date have included France and Germany. This modest yet consistent trend does not emanate from a commitment to women's rights per se, nor does it stem from a feminist agenda. Rather, in the case of the UAE, it stems from a patriarchal-dominated approach towards women as a resource for the UAE's state, nation building and external image, which has involved educational, economic, political and social reforms designed to increase the integration of women, including in the highest diplomatic ranks. Accordingly, we identify the increase in women's representation in the UAE's diplomatic corps as a case of 'state-managed inclusion'.

Another factor shaping the dynamics of women's representation on the ambassadorial level has been 'ascriptive elitism', as evidenced by the high presence of the Al Otaiba family in the diplomatic corps. Admittedly, as we pointed

out, this factor affected the internal composition of the sixteen serving ambassadors rather than levels of representation. However, 'ascriptive elitism' was found to have been absent from the Iranian case; unlike the UAE, Iran's political system is shaped by ideological-institutional loyalty, factional alignment and revolutionary credentials. Our analysis also revealed that the UAE has sought to project an image of a moderate Arab state committed to empowering women, which has become a staple of the UAE's external image and public diplomacy. This enabling factor and the growing number of women ambassadors in the diplomatic corps are mutually reinforcing. This chimes with Niklasson and Towns' finding that states 'stigmatized as patriarchal, traditional, and illiberal may have more incentive to use female ambassadors to signal policy alignment with "modern" values or the liberal order more broadly'.¹³⁴ At the same time, the findings presented in relation to the case of the UAE are inconsistent with some of the findings in the broader literature. For example, in the post-2020 period, a trend of appointing women to states with low standards of living, such as Egypt and Tunisia, seems increasingly apparent.

The UAE also presents an interesting puzzle. State-led reforms have been designed to integrate women in all spheres of life, and the state uses rhetoric that strongly supports the promotion of women. As we have seen, the share of woman ambassadors has gradually risen, reaching 13 per cent in 2025.¹³⁵ Our research has shown that the pipeline effect and the limited pool of women appointed as ambassadors prior to 2020 proved to be decisive factors. In addition, we have shown that deeply rooted social and cultural norms suppressing women's progress have been weakened, but they have not disappeared altogether. Therefore, it is likely that as the state continues with its 'state-led inclusion' approach towards integrating and promoting women, women currently serving in the UAE's lower diplomatic ranks will progress to ambassadorial level and the gap between men and women on this level will continue to shrink only if patriarchal norms recede. Otherwise, the slow but steady increase in women obtaining ambassadorial roles may result merely in masking patriarchy.

This article shows that under certain conditions women's representation in the most senior diplomatic roles can improve, even in patriarchal, authoritarian and illiberal countries, largely through political appointments of ambassadors. Thus, individual foreign ministers and leaders who wish to strengthen women's representation could use political appointments to do so (though this

134 Niklasson and Towns 2023, 8.

135 Chehab 2025.

can have knock-on effects in terms of the morale of career diplomats). In countries in which a limited number of elite families exercise considerable influence, those political appointments are likely to come from that social milieu. As in the case of the UAE, progress in ambassadorial appointments under such conditions in other countries may not lead to the disappearance of social and cultural patriarchal norms. Our findings could be used to help explain progress, and the lack of it, in other countries with similar social and political structures in the Gulf and wider MENA region, as well as beyond it.

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