

Family Guidance as an Institutional Mechanism for Family Reconciliation: Evidence from the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines family guidance as an institutional mechanism for resolving marital and familial disputes, with particular reference to the experience of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It investigates how governmental and civil-society institutions contribute to family reconciliation, prevent avoidable litigation and divorce, and strengthen family cohesion and long-term social stability.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a descriptive-analytical case-study approach. It analyzes the institutional measures, counseling mechanisms, and family-reform initiatives implemented in the UAE at governmental and community levels. The analysis is organized around two principal dimensions: the role of governmental institutions in providing family guidance and reconciliation services, and the complementary contribution of civil and community organizations.

Findings: The analysis indicates that the UAE has developed a multidimensional framework for family guidance that combines preventive counseling, early intervention, reconciliation procedures, legal and social support, and community-based awareness initiatives. Governmental institutions provide an organized framework through which family disputes may be addressed before developing into formal judicial conflicts. Civil and community institutions complement these measures by promoting family education, psychological support, social awareness, and a culture of dialogue. The effectiveness of this framework derives from institutional coordination and from treating family stability as an essential component of social development and human-capital formation.

Research implications: The UAE experience provides a valuable institutional model for examining the relationship between family counseling, alternative dispute resolution, social policy, and sustainable development. Further comparative and empirical research is required to evaluate the effectiveness of

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specific counseling programs and their influence on reconciliation, divorce, domestic conflict, and family well-being.

Practical implications: Arab countries may benefit from establishing integrated family-guidance systems that combine legal, psychological, social, and educational interventions. Such systems should prioritize early intervention, professional counselor training, institutional coordination, accessible services, and the resolution of disputes outside adversarial court proceedings whenever legally and socially appropriate.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing family guidance not merely as a counseling service but as an integrated mechanism of social reform. It highlights the distinctive interaction between governmental and civil-society institutions in the UAE and demonstrates how family reconciliation may serve broader objectives related to social stability, quality of life, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Family guidance; Family counseling; Family reconciliation; Family disputes; Reform mechanisms; United Arab Emirates; Social stability

Introduction

The family is the cornerstone upon which the structure of society is built. It is the foundation of its progress and prosperity. The more cohesive and healthier the family is, the stronger the fabric of society becomes, the firmer its pillars, the more mature its ideas, and the better preserved its religion and identity. This also leads to societal stability, a better quality of life, and an enduring sense of security. This is the result of a series of integrated and mutually influential interactions between the health and cohesion of the family on the one hand, and the overall stability and flourishing of society on the other.

However, the family may be shaken by conflicts and crises that disturb its emotional core, threaten or destroy its stability, sow resentment within hearts, and create alienation among its members. This weakens its bonds, scatters its thoughts, and marks a critical turning point in its path—disrupting its functions and distancing it from its mission and reason for existence. This is especially true in today's world, which is witnessing a wave of rapid globalization aimed at uprooting cultural constants and values, distorting beliefs, stripping away cultural references, and erasing identity—posing a serious threat to the future of the Arab family. Arab societies have recorded alarming rates of divorce and domestic violence, with numbers rising significantly each year. This is despite the fact that most family disputes leading to separation stem from issues that could be resolved without resorting to courtrooms—adversarial spaces that, once entered, make it difficult to reunite the family again. These alarming indicators have compelled many countries to urgently seek proactive solutions to rebalance family dynamics, address the disruptions affecting them, and steer families toward psychological and behavioral stability.

This objective has been pursued by enacting comprehensive measures and policies at both governmental and civil levels aimed at raising family awareness, alongside the need to modernize personal status laws and legislation. It also involves learning from best practices in the field of family reform, guidance, and counseling—especially within the Arab world—where family education has now become a vital social necessity. This is particularly urgent in light of the significant rise in divorce rates across Arab countries (Khalifa, 2019), which have reached between 40% and 42% in several states (Ahmad & Abdel Fattah, 2022, p. 748). One of the most prominent examples of a nation that has paid exceptional attention to institutionalizing family counseling and activating its role is the

United Arab Emirates. The country aims to empower families to perform their functions effectively in light of various and rapid socioeconomic changes, which in turn positively impacts the quality of human capital. This also ensures the enhancement of social, psychological, economic, and health-related functions, thereby facilitating the achievement of sustainable development and securing long-term social stability.

Based on these vital considerations, the central research problem of this study is framed in the following question: What are the institutional, legal, and community measures adopted by the United Arab Emirates in the field of family counseling as an effective mechanism for social reform?

Measures Taken by Government Institutions in the United Arab Emirates in the Field of Family Counseling as a Mechanism for Reform

The United Arab Emirates is widely recognized as one of the leading Arab countries in establishing both official and non-official institutions specialized in family counseling and marital guidance. The governmental ecosystem operates cohesively across executive ministries, specialized funds, and judicial departments to provide comprehensive support networks for families. Below is an analytical examination of the primary governmental bodies involved in family reform:

Measures Taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, and the Marriage Fund Foundation

Measures Taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs

The Ministry of Social Affairs (now integrated into the Ministry of Community Development) has implemented a comprehensive portfolio of activities and strategic initiatives, all aimed at supporting family stability and strengthening cohesion among all family members (Albrithen, 2023, pp. 230–243). Among the most notable of these initiatives are the launch of electronic family counseling platforms, toll-free telephone counseling helplines (Mustafa, n.d., p. 58), and the nationwide community campaign titled "My Family, My Nation." Key flagship projects spearheaded by the Ministry include:

The Family Counseling Offices Project. The Ministry exercises close administrative, ethical, and professional oversight over licensed family counseling offices throughout the country, ensuring rigorous adherence to scientific standards, practitioner credentials, and complete confidentiality (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

The Smart Family Happiness Advisor Project. This project represents one of the most prominent initiatives of the second edition of the Dubai 10X Initiative, implemented jointly by the Community Development Authority and Dubai Courts in collaboration with relevant government entities. The project introduces an advanced model for utilizing artificial intelligence technologies to meet family needs by providing family counseling services around the clock. These services are delivered with high efficiency, based on accumulated empirical expertise, advanced scientific frameworks, and complete confidentiality (Community Development Authority, 2019). The project aims to provide a 24/7 intelligent family advisor for all family members, offering them tailored social counseling services, actionable plans for social training and rehabilitation, and regular follow-up on their cases to ensure enduring stability and provide timely support when needed (Al-Ain News, 2019).

Measures Taken by the Ministry of Interior

The Ministry of Interior gives paramount importance to the family by establishing the Social Support Centers in 2005 as a pioneering community-policing initiative within the Abu Dhabi Police General Headquarters. The primary objective was to support police stations in resolving familial and

neighborhood conflicts that do not require formal judicial prosecution, elevate public awareness, and organize specialized workshops and lectures to enhance legal and social literacy.

These Social Support Centers encompass various specialized divisions: a department for family disputes and domestic violence, a department for children and youth affairs, a department for school-related behavioral problems, a department for crime victims, and a department for community affairs. All of these divisions operate across three main strategic axes: (a) handling minor disputes amicably outside formal criminal dockets; (b) providing comprehensive psychological and social support to victims, especially vulnerable women and children; and (c) preventing crime proactively through community outreach and education. Family disputes constitute the vast majority of cases handled by these centers. Additionally, the centers are entrusted with sensitive judicial and rehabilitative responsibilities, including supervising child custody visitations in non-hostile environments, enforcing court rulings related to marital and personal status matters, caring for released juvenile offenders through psychological and social follow-up programs, and providing specialized support to recovering substance abusers and their families in close coordination with relevant health and social authorities (Khalifa, 2019).

Measures Taken by the Marriage Fund Foundation

The Marriage Fund Foundation is tasked with providing proactive guidance and counseling to support family formation and build a cohesive society through structured educational programs, pre-marital counseling, and financial grants. The Fund devotes special attention to young citizens preparing for marriage and newlyweds by organizing national awareness campaigns and striving to rationalize marriage expenditures. Its operational strategy relies on two core pillars:

The Preparation Program ("I'dad"). A mandatory series of training and psycho-educational courses designed for individuals preparing for marriage who benefit from the state marriage grant. The curriculum is grounded in the fundamentals of marital compatibility, family leadership, emotional intelligence, financial management, and constructive conflict resolution, ensuring a stable and cohesive Emirati family.

The Youth Advisory Council. An innovative institutional mechanism designed to conduct regular consultative dialogues with young citizens. This council enables the Fund to identify emerging youth concerns, marital expectations, and social trends. These empirical insights are directly integrated into the Fund's strategic policies, operational work plans, marketing campaigns, and awareness lectures, ensuring that state programs remain responsive to contemporary youth culture. As the first project of its kind in the UAE, it fosters leadership skills in family governance among young people, provides a participatory model for civic engagement, and assists the Fund in conducting empirical research, collecting field data, organizing mass weddings, and engaging youth in ongoing educational workshops (Khalifa, 2019).

Measures Taken by the Ministry of Justice, the Dubai Judicial Institute, and the Community Development Authority

Measures Taken by the Ministry of Justice

In 1998, a dedicated Family Guidance Department was established under the Department of Justice in the UAE with the goal of reuniting families and resolving marital and personal status disputes amicably (Family Guidance in the UAE, 2023). This institutional framework has been continually modernized through several major legislative and administrative procedures:

The Ministry of Justice issued Ministerial Decision No. 1 of 2011, which comprises 32 detailed articles establishing the regulatory framework for family guidance committees across the nation's

Sharia courts. Under this regulation, specialized committees for family reform and guidance handle all issues falling under the Personal Status Law. The mediator's core responsibility is to manage constructive, objective negotiations, helping disputing parties communicate positively, analyze the root causes of conflict, and select mutually acceptable solutions with maturity. Furthermore, mediators employ advanced communication techniques—such as active listening, body language interpretation, cognitive reframing, neutral summarization, and preserving the dignity of all parties—to cultivate an environment of mutual respect, psychological safety, and trust (Khaled, n.d., p. 152).

The law mandates the establishment of one or more Family Guidance Committees in every Personal Status Court, operating under the direct supervision of specialized judges (Abdulrahman, 2023). The committee is tasked with examining personal status disputes (excluding urgent interim petitions) and providing formal advisory opinions to trial judges upon request. This framework solidifies the practice of amicable dispute settlement, investigates emerging social phenomena, and builds effective partnerships between judicial entities and civil institutions (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

The Family Arbitration Initiative and Mandatory Pre-Litigation Conciliation. Family guidance and reform offices serve as a mandatory alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism prior to traditional litigation. Under Article 16 of the Explanatory Memorandum of Federal Law No. 28 of 2005 on Personal Status, divorce proceedings and marital claims cannot be entertained by the Personal Status Court unless they have first been referred to and processed by the Family Guidance Committee (Abdulrahman, 2023; Al-Harbi, n.d., p. 25). Conciliation sessions are conducted either in-person or via secure remote communication technology. The arbitrator's primary duty is to resolve discord and achieve marital reconciliation. The process begins with a judicial appointment order, after which arbitrators contact both parties to schedule structured hearings. If reconciliation is achieved, an official settlement agreement is drawn up, signed by both spouses, and ratified by the competent judge. Under UAE law, this ratified reconciliation agreement carries the absolute force of an executive writ (executive order) and cannot be appealed except for substantive violations of law. If reconciliation proves unattainable, the committee issues an official certificate permitting the matter to proceed to judicial litigation, while archiving cases that remain unpursued for two months (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

Significantly, family guidance in the UAE is considered an integral matter of public order; failure to submit a family dispute to the family guidance committee prior to filing a lawsuit constitutes grounds for the absolute legal nullity of any subsequent judicial ruling (Yahya, n.d., p. 22). Furthermore, the Family Guidance Department of the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department offers its conciliation services universally to all residents, irrespective of religious or cultural affiliation (Family Guidance Program, n.d., p. 5).

The Family Program for Divorce Requests. Adopted by the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department in 2020 as the first system of its kind in the GCC region, this program incorporates multimedia workshops, self-reflection working papers, and interactive group discussions. Empirical studies indicate that this program yields substantial benefits for families, notably decreasing post-separation animosity and minimizing subsequent legal litigation over custody, child support, and visitation rights (Family Guidance Program, n.d., p. 7).

Measures Taken by the Dubai Judicial Institute and Dubai Courts

The Dubai Judicial Institute has pioneered professional standards by qualifying family arbitrators with specialized expertise in Islamic Sharia and contemporary family law through the "Family Arbitrators Qualification Diploma." Organized in collaboration with the Dubai Women's Renaissance Association, the diploma is instructed by a select body of senior judges, clinical trainers,

and legal experts who integrate Quranic conciliation principles with the established traditions and modern realities of Emirati society (Khalifa, 2019).

The experience of the Dubai Courts represents a landmark innovation in judicial administration. It redefined the traditional role of the court, transforming it from an adversarial litigation arena into a therapeutic "social clinic" and educational institution. This unique model facilitates direct communication between disputing spouses without the intermediation of adversarial lawyers, fostering rapid settlements and producing agreements with immediate executive enforceability. The program addresses marital disputes both before and after divorce, is open to all nationalities residing in the emirate, and extends its scope to disputes among extended family members. It also provides pre-marital compatibility guidance for newlyweds, which contributed directly to reducing the divorce rate among newly married couples from 16% to 6% (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

The Dubai Courts family guidance program operates on an integrated electronic platform linked with all judicial departments—from initial digital case intake to automated statistical reporting, legal notices, and case analytics. It also maintains specialized digital counseling portals and social columns. The remarkable professionalism of this program has earned it global recognition, with 12 Arab and international judicial bodies benchmarking its mechanisms. Key empirical achievements include: (a) a 23% reduction in the overall volume of personal status lawsuits; (b) a 33% reduction in divorce cases, establishing the Emirate of Dubai as having the lowest divorce-to-marriage ratio in the UAE and the Arab region; (c) operational cost savings of 2.1 million AED annually by eliminating eight redundant administrative and judicial posts; and (d) multi-channel service delivery via telephone, internet portals, and in-home visits when necessary (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.). Furthermore, this initiative sparked positive institutional synergy with the Human Rights Care Department at Dubai Police, deploying trained social guides across police stations to mediate family disputes (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

Measures Taken by the Community Development Authority (CDA)

The Community Development Authority in Dubai sets overarching social policies, quality standards, and regulatory licensing criteria for social care providers, striving to elevate service standards across Dubai and empower citizens. CDA's strategic vision focuses on fostering a leading social sector that drives sustainable development, enhances national identity, and promotes community happiness (Community Development Authority in Dubai, 2023).

The Wafaq Project. A national community project executed under the CDA, offering specialized marriage facilitation and marital counseling services exclusively for Emirati citizens. The initiative is strategically aimed at adjusting demographic balances, mitigating the social complexities of marriage to foreign nationals, and reinforcing cultural continuity. The service is provided completely free of charge at all stages, from registration through final conciliation (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

Measures Taken by the Supreme Council for Family Affairs and the Family Development Foundation

Measures Taken by the Supreme Council for Family Affairs (Sharjah)

In the Emirate of Sharjah, the Supreme Council for Family Affairs works to advance family welfare, empower family members to attain social security, and reinforce the functional role of the family in contemporary society, while maintaining firm adherence to Islamic values and cultural heritage (Women's Section, n.d.).

Measures Taken by the Family Development Foundation (Abu Dhabi)

The Family Development Foundation (FDF) in Abu Dhabi is an autonomous, non-profit governmental organization dedicated to instilling core cultural and religious values to guarantee family continuity and social resilience. FDF focuses heavily on women's empowerment, child development, and the design and execution of specialized family development programs that align with the national social policy of the UAE (Family Development Foundation, n.d.).

Measures Taken by Civil and Community Institutions in the United Arab Emirates

Alongside government agencies, civil society organizations in the UAE play an indispensable complementary role in delivering preventive, educational, and crisis-intervention counseling services, creating a cohesive societal safety net for families.

Initiatives of the General Women's Union

Under the leadership of the General Women's Union, several pioneering initiatives have been launched in close institutional partnership with judicial and Sharia authorities:

The Vision Office Initiative ("Maktab Al-Ru'yah"). This vital initiative focuses on cultivating constructive family dialogue, fostering positive communication between separated parents, and providing a psychologically safe, supportive environment for child visitation and custody handovers—completely replacing the stressful atmosphere of police stations or courtrooms. The office also conducts exploratory and analytical field studies to assess the psychological and health needs of children from divorced families (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

Toll-Free Hotline and Email Counseling Services. Launched in 2008 in direct institutional collaboration with the Fatwa Department of the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department, these services provide free, immediate, and strictly confidential Sharia, legal, and psychological advice via telephone hotlines and dedicated digital inquiry systems (Al-Mahrazi, n.d.).

The Wathiq and Wafa Project. A structured social education program consisting of two core tracks: (a) educating divorced couples on co-parenting and shielding children from the adverse emotional impacts of divorce, and (b) delivering comprehensive pre-marital preparation curricula for youth.

The "Know Your Rights" Legal Encyclopedia. A specialized legal literacy compendium published in partnership with the Judicial Department and distributed free of charge to educate families on their rights and responsibilities under personal status legislation.

Role of Women's Associations, Family Counseling Centers, and Independent Practitioners

Civil society engagement in family guidance is further enriched through multiple specialized channels (Government of the UAE, 2023):

Women's Associations Across the Emirates

Operating across all emirates, accredited women's associations provide localized family guidance, parenting workshops, and crisis-intervention services, assisting individuals in fulfilling their social roles and overcoming familial conflicts.

Independent Family Counseling Centers

Specialized non-profit and private centers established specifically to diagnose marital dysfunction, offer clinical psychological therapy, and deliver structured reconciliation programs under state regulatory standards.

Independent Certified Counselors and Volunteers

A growing network of certified social workers, psychologists, and legal consultants who operate voluntarily within community networks, offering grassroots mediation and preventive counsel outside formal institutional settings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Synthesis of Findings

The experience of the United Arab Emirates in the field of family counseling represents a pioneering regional and international benchmark. The empirical evidence and institutional mechanisms examined in this study demonstrate that adopting family counseling as an official, mandatory instrument of social reform is an indispensable strategic imperative for securing marital stability, social cohesion, and sustainable human development. The UAE's multidimensional strategy—integrating smart AI-driven counseling, transforming judicial courts into therapeutic social clinics, establishing specialized police social support centers, and mandating pre-litigation conciliation—has achieved tangible and substantial outcomes: reducing divorce rates by up to 33%, dropping personal status lawsuits by 23%, saving millions in judicial operating expenditures, and safeguarding children from domestic trauma.

Family guidance in the UAE is recognized not merely as an auxiliary welfare service, but as an essential branch of swift justice and preventive social medicine. This distinguished model offers valuable institutional insights that can inspire legal and social reform throughout the Arab and Islamic world.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice (Algerian and Regional Context)

Given the scarcity of empirical and applied studies examining the efficacy of family guidance offices in Algeria and neighboring Arab countries, and drawing upon the successful institutional practices of the UAE model, this study proposes the following actionable recommendations:

1. Prioritizing the Family in National Human Development Strategies: Formally recognize the family as the primary nucleus of society and the foundation of human capital investment, integrating family cohesion metrics into national development plans.

2. Establishing Academic Programs and Research Centers: Create specialized graduate programs (Master's and Ph.D.) and dedicated research centers in family counseling, marital therapy, and mediation within accredited national universities.

3. Standardizing Professional Training and Licensure: Design accredited continuous professional development curricula for family counselors, social workers, and Sharia arbitrators in collaboration with judicial and academic institutions.

4. Decentralizing Family Counseling into Community Settings: Expand family guidance centers across all provinces and municipalities, establishing accessible community-based branches outside formal judicial courthouses to eliminate social stigma.

5. Modernizing the Legal and Ethical Framework: Enact comprehensive legislation that formally defines, licenses, and regulates the family counseling profession, establishing strict ethical codes, practitioner standards, and client confidentiality protocols.

6. Mandating Multidisciplinary Pre-Litigation Conciliation: Establish multidisciplinary family conciliation committees within every family court—comprising qualified specialists in Islamic Sharia, family law, clinical psychology, and social work—requiring mandatory referral prior to any judicial litigation.

7. Granting Legal Enforceability to Reconciliation Accords: Confer the legal status of an executive writ (enforceable order) upon officially ratified reconciliation agreements, making them immediately binding through judicial execution circuits without further litigation.

8. Establishing a Central National Family Authority: Create a dedicated government agency responsible for overseeing family counseling centers and embedding family welfare goals into overarching national public policies.

9. Founding Professional Associations for Practitioners: Establish an independent professional association or syndicate for family counseling practitioners to monitor professional ethics, oversee licensing, and track evolving societal transformations.

Declarations

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