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Illustration by Rachel Handley

Absentee mayor: Miami's Francis Suarez blurs line between public duty, pursuit of wealth

By Sarah Blaskey, Joey Flechas, Tess Riski and Susan Merriam

When Miami residents ask where in the world their mayor is, the answer is: It's anybody's guess.

Once a regular presence, Mayor Francis Suarez now rarely attends commission meetings. His office frequently sits empty. His mayoral calendar is often marked busy with no further details, sometimes for weeks at a time.

As it turns out, Suarez is often not in the city he was elected to lead. The mayor spent at least 85 days outside Miami in 2022, including about half those days abroad, primarily in the Middle East, according to a Miami Herald analysis of city records. He spent almost a week in Qatar,

two weeks in Saudi Arabia and a few days in the United Arab Emirates. He's on track to be out of town just as much in 2023.

Suarez won't give any specifics about what he's been doing in the Middle East, who he's been meeting or who's been footing the bills. The only thing he'll say is that he travels a lot for his work as a private attorney for an international law firm, the most lucrative of 14 side jobs that have transformed him from a debt-ridden city commissioner into a multi-millionaire mayor.

His penchant for secrecy — in particular Suarez's refusal to name his legal clients — makes it nearly impossible to identify potential conflicts of interest between his public office, where his annual compensation is \$130,000, and his much more lucrative private business endeavors.

On any given day, Suarez fluidly toggles between his public and private roles, according to the mayor's office. That can make it difficult to know whose interests he is representing when he is spending his time abroad mingling with members of Arab royal families, and others seeking inroads to Miami.

Suarez says he maintains a wall between his duties as a part-time mayor and his outside work. Still, his mayoral actions appear to at times benefit if not his personal clients, those of Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, the firm where Suarez works, which has attorneys and offices all over the world. The firm says that is "false."



Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, right, joined soccer star David Beckham, a registered city lobbyist, at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 semifinal match between France and Morocco at Al Bayt Stadium on Dec. 14, 2022 in Al Khor, Qatar. Charlotte Wilson/Offside Offside via Getty Images

But one thing is clear: The already blurry lines separating Suarez's duties as mayor and his personal financial interests get hazier the farther he gets from Miami.

Suarez's boss at the law firm, founder and chairman John Quinn, praised Suarez, saying "the mayor is a charismatic lawyer" who the firm sends to the Middle East and elsewhere to "serve clients and grow our business."

While on one Middle East trip to Qatar, Suarez attended a World Cup semifinal match with soccer star David Beckham, who, with the mayor's help, had just secured city approvals for a multi-million dollar stadium deal for his Major League Soccer team.

Miamians found out their mayor was overseas when Beckham snapped a selfie with Suarez and posted it to Instagram with text reading: "Miami Boys in town." State ethics investigators are now examining whether Beckham gave Suarez a free ticket, which would be illegal since Beckham is a registered city lobbyist.

Following Beckham's no-bid deal that the mayor helped broker in closed-door meetings with other commissioners, international superstar Lionel Messi came to play for Miami, igniting an explosion of interest in Major League Soccer — a client of the firm where Suarez works.

A Quinn Emanuel spokesperson said the firm worked with outside ethics counsel to develop guidelines that "draw a clear line of separation between his mayoral and law firm roles."

"Mr. Suarez and our entire firm have been vigilant in complying with them," the spokesperson said, adding that the firm never sent Suarez to Qatar and that none of the firm's clients — which include FIFA, soccer's world governing body — had provided the game tickets.

Whether on city business or not, Suarez typically travels with tax-funded police officers acting as bodyguards, whose receipts, travel itineraries and other records create the only paper trail of his whereabouts when he's not in Miami. The Herald reconstructed Suarez's travels through those records.

The records tell the story of an absentee mayor who was out of town for a third of all city meetings, leaving critical decisions in the hands of a dysfunctional cadre of city commissioners — one of whom was slapped with a \$63.5 million civil judgment for using his public office to harass his enemies, and another who was recently charged with bribery and removed from office.

Although Suarez says the city doesn't pay for his travel costs, taxpayers have spent at least \$164,579 on travel-related expenses sending officers out of town with the mayor, including times when he is traveling on private business — a practice sharply criticized by one former police chief and a city commissioner newly elected on a platform of reform. That number includes things like hotels, airfare and meals. Salary costs are separate.

Traveler's Name: Pierre Cazassus IBM#: 27885 Title: Sergeant-at-Arms
Division: COP Section: City Hall Unit: _____ Extension: 6100
Destination: Dubai and Saudi Arabia
Departure Date: 03/21/2022 Return Date: 03/31/2022
Purpose of Travel: To provide dignitary protection for the Honorable Mayor Suarez.

Traveler's Name: Brett Preshong IBM#: 27573 Title: Sergeant-at-Arms
Division: COP Section: City Hall Unit: _____ Extension: 6100
Destination: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Departure Date: 10/20/2022 Return Date: 10/31/2022
Purpose of Travel: To provide dignitary protection for the Honorable Mayor Suarez.

Traveler's Name: Alexander Lamprou IBM#: 3872 Title: Sr. Sergeant-at-Arms
Division: COP Section: City Hall Unit: _____ Extension: 6100
Destination: Doha, Qatar
Departure Date: 12/13/2022 Return Date: 12/19/2022
Purpose of Travel: To provide dignitary protection for the Honorable Mayor Suarez.

*Travel request forms from the entourage of police officers who provide Miami Mayor Francis Suarez with dignitary protection on his travels.
Miami Police Department*

But Suarez defended the practice, telling the Herald that, thanks to his travels, “the world now sees Miami as a thriving, dynamic, and innovative place.”

“I have balanced my work on behalf of the community and my private obligations to the best of my ability in compliance with the rules set forth for elected officials,” he said.

Still, one of Suarez’s other side gigs has already led to trouble.

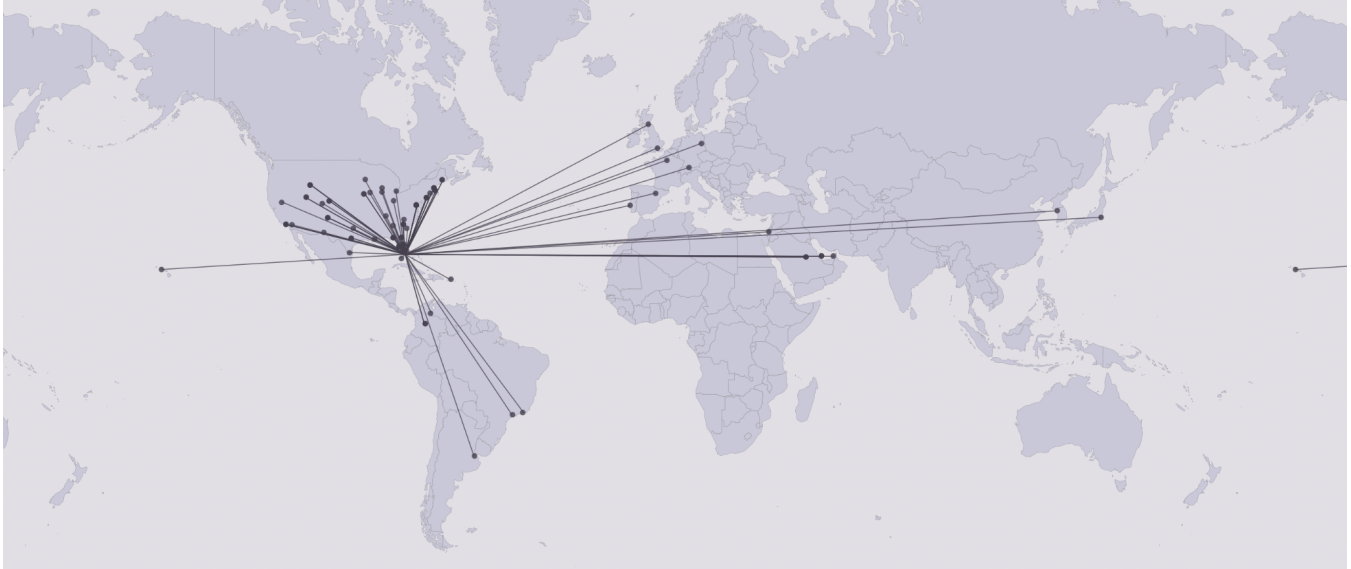
He is under federal investigation for his \$10,000-per-month contract with a developer who used the mayor’s office to fastrack a building project.

Where in the world is Francis Suarez?

While some details of the mayor’s travels have been previously reported, an analysis of data compiled from the police records obtained by the Herald provides the most comprehensive picture yet of how the mayor spends his time when he is not at City Hall.

However, the mayor recently made a trip to Saudi Arabia without his city security detail. That and any other unaccompanied trips are not included in the data.

Although he says he is serving the taxpayers as traveling salesman for Miami’s charms, constituents told the Herald of times where they wished he’d been here to help with local issues.



This map shows all the locations Suarez has traveled to as mayor with his police security detail , according to forms the officers filed at the time.

Suarez was meeting with FIFA officials in Qatar, sources say, and literally riding a camel at the invitation of an ambassador in early 2021 as the city's COVID-19 state of emergency entered its second year. He was in Dubai last year when the City Commission passed a controversial redistricting plan. And he was at the World Cup in Qatar when the American Civil Liberties Union sued the city over that redistricting plan, saying it amounted to racial gerrymandering. Qatar on the day the American Civil Liberties Union sued the city for racial gerrymandering.

Nova Southeastern University law professor Bob Jarvis, who specializes in ethics, is skeptical that the mayor's presence would have made a difference.

"As a weak part-time mayor, I'm not sure voters can expect him to really do anything, and it does not appear that he needs to be in City Hall to not do anything," Jarvis said.

But Coconut Grove resident Nathan Kurland remembers being disappointed that Suarez did not attend the city meeting where he and other residents spoke out against the redistricting plan, which he worried would disenfranchise Black voters from the neighborhood.

"I think that he chose a poor time to be absent from the city of Miami," Kurland said.

On March 24, 2022, the day of the contentious vote, Suarez was in the United Arab Emirates — where Quinn Emanuel represents several sovereign wealth funds and other government entities — signing a non-binding memorandum of understanding with Emirati officials alongside the crown prince of Dubai.

The Dubai government celebrated the sister city agreement on social media. But Suarez's Instagram focused on a different proclamation signed that day — one in which the mayor designated March 24 as Miami's official "flan day." His Instagram post featured footage of a

local flan-related event with a video of Suarez taking a bite of the dessert spliced in.

Suarez's office did not promote the Miami-Dubai agreement in City Hall, leaving City Manager Art Noriega's administration unaware of the memo for more than a year — until the Herald asked for a copy.

The agreement explains that Miami and Dubai will plan mutually beneficial projects in sectors such as tourism, public safety and business promotion. Asked for specifics, the mayor's communications director, Stephanie Severino, said that such agreements "are not intended to have immediate, measurable benefits."

"The purpose is to agree to foster relationships," she said.

The UAE leaned on its new relationship with Miami at least once, emails show.

In August, officials in the UAE Embassy reached out to the mayor's office for help setting up a "couple of engagements with the private sector in the city of Miami."

Saeed Mubarak Al Hajeri, an assistant minister in the UAE department of foreign affairs, was planning to visit Florida in September, the embassy officials explained in an email to the mayor's senior aide, Jeremy Schwarz.

"Who would be helpful to engage with?" the mayor's aide replied, asking that the embassy "please advise on next steps."

The response included a list of four Miami powerbrokers, including Citadel hedge fund chief Ken Griffin — a Quinn Emanuel client with whom Suarez had recently forged a relationship. According to the email, the Emirati official wanted to explore the potential of a "future collaboration" with the billionaire and gauge Citadel's interest in opening an office in the UAE.

Citadel spokesperson Zia Ahmed said neither Griffin nor his firm was contacted by the mayor's office.

"With respect to your other ridiculous questions," Ahmed wrote, "we're under no obligation to discuss the meetings our employees have or our business strategy with the Miami Herald."

Hidden costs of travel

The city does not pay for any of Suarez's international excursions, according to a statement from the mayor's office. But, in fact, the taxpayers still pick up significant costs.

Some of Miami's top police officers — a highly trained group known as sergeants-at-arms — were there to protect Suarez during his international jaunts. The city pays their salary and

benefits, as well as their meals for every day they are away. Sometimes the city also covers the bill for hotels and flights

When he travels for Quinn Emanuel, the firm or its clients cover the cost of Suarez's travel, as well as the airfare and hotels for his security detail, according to statements from Quinn Emanuel and the mayor's office.

In cases where Suarez traveled abroad solely as mayor, his expenses were covered by "the entity inviting the mayor to engage," or the bill was picked up by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, where Suarez served a term as president, according to the mayor's office. The mayor's office attributes his significant uptick in travel, in part, to his work for the U.S. Conference of Mayors. But the organization did not respond to questions about which of Suarez's trips it had funded.

Although he's not the first Miami official to travel with armed officers, Suarez dramatically expanded the program after becoming mayor. Often, records show, Suarez is accompanied by two — and sometimes even three — cops when he leaves town.

Police Chief Manny Morales defended the program, citing "a concerning escalation in harassment and threats towards public servants across our nation." He said the level of protection is in "alignment with national best practices."

But his predecessor, former Chief Jorge Colina, who was promoted to top cop early in Suarez's tenure, is critical of the program, which he says puts Miami officers in jeopardy because they "have absolutely no jurisdiction outside of the city of Miami."

To Colina, the biggest concern is "what happens if you have to use your firearm?"

Colina said he raised his concerns with Suarez but was overruled, and records show the former chief ultimately signed off on dozens of security details that traveled with the mayor.

Looking back, Colina said the benefits did not outweigh the costs.

"Let's be honest. There's no need to go to Qatar or Saudi Arabia and take a sergeant-at-arms," he said. "No one is going to recognize him and harm him because he's the mayor of Miami."

From strong mayor to absentee

Those close to Suarez say the mayor's approach changed markedly between his first and second terms.

Before Suarez, Miami mayors — who have a veto but not a vote on the City Commission — often watched meetings from the audience. After he was first elected mayor in 2017, Suarez

had a seat added for himself next to the city manager on the dais.

“He knew people by name. He had their phone numbers,” said Mike Hernández, a political analyst for Telemundo who worked on Suarez’s first commission campaign in 2009. “I think he’s moved away from that style.”

The shift happened after Suarez proposed changing the city charter to give himself more executive powers, converting his position into one charged with running the city’s day-to-day business. But voters rejected the proposal and, over time, the mayor became less of a presence at City Hall, located in the old Pan Am airline headquarters at Dinner Key. He took on additional private work, spent more time abroad, his net worth ballooned and he ran — briefly — for president.

“It seemed like he had his eye on Washington,” Hernández said, “instead of Pan American Drive.”