

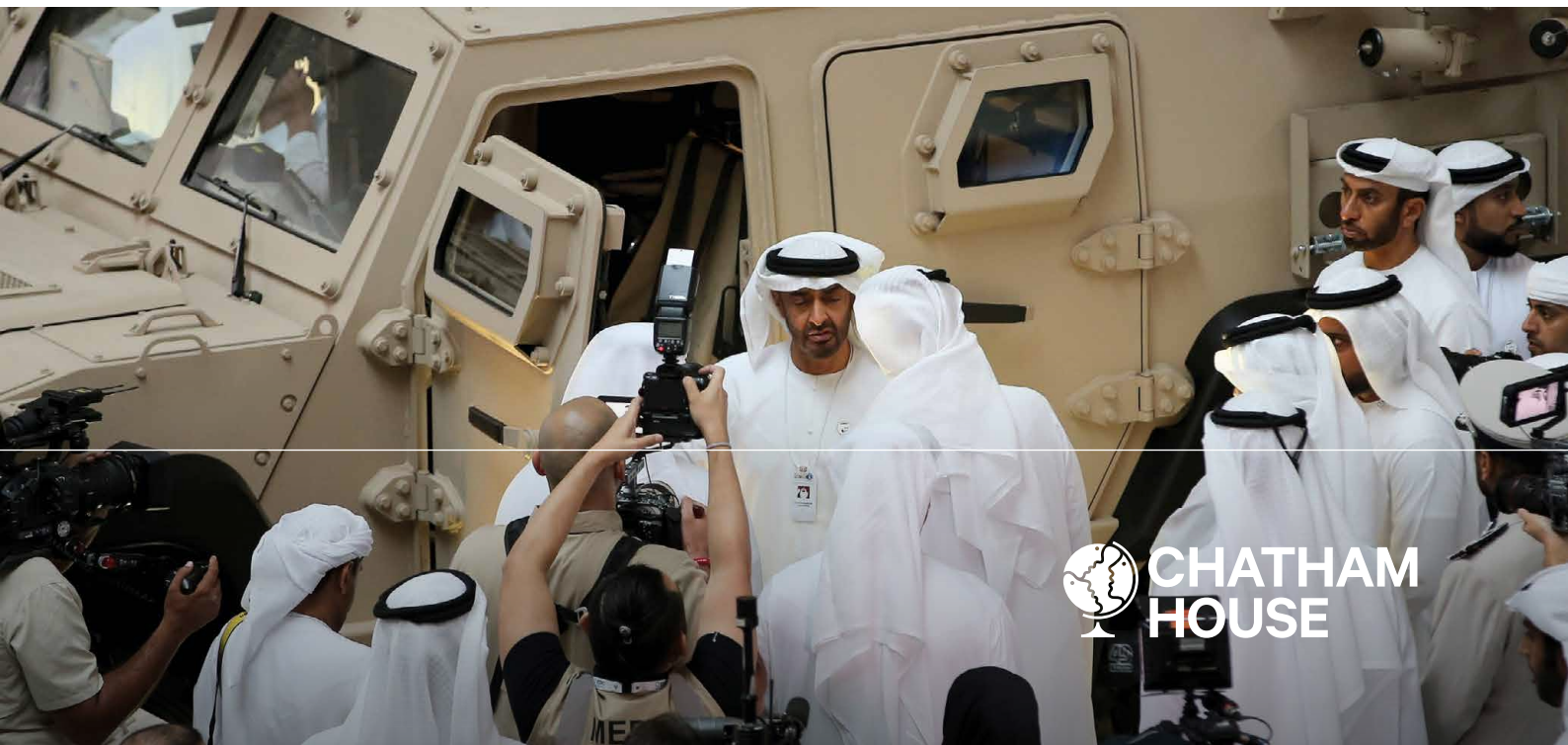
Research Paper

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# Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy



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## Summary

- The UAE has emerged as an influential player in regional power politics over the past decade, in a shift from a previously conservative foreign policy focused on self-preservation.
- Often, UAE foreign and national security policy is analysed in the West on the basis of certain initiatives – its support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya, for example, or for secessionists and other groups in Yemen; or its role in the 2017 Qatar crisis – that seemingly point to an overall strategy or set of intentions. Rarely are its policies studied through a more comprehensive survey of its activities in multiple countries in the ‘neighbourhood’ where it is most visibly engaged.
- This paper, researched and written as part of a Chatham House project to address this gap in analysis of the UAE’s foreign and national security policy, sheds light on Abu Dhabi’s ambitions to play a key role in shaping political and governance structures across the region in line with its own model, and in securing trade routes in its wider neighbourhood as an economic hub linking East Africa and South Asia.
- The ‘UAE model’ integrates economic openness, strong governance and service delivery, and a relatively secular and liberal (for the region) social environment, combined with a closed political system that polices speech and is built around an entrenched security state. Just as important is a rejection of any political or religious ideology that might challenge the supremacy of the state and its leaders.
- UAE officials perceive that transnational, political Islamist ideologies promoted by Iran and the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and its boosters – including but not limited to Qatar and Turkey – pose an existential threat to its broadly secular approach to government as well as to the stability of the so-called ‘status quo’ powers in the region, and act as a driver of regional radicalism. However, Abu Dhabi has been far more assertive against the Brotherhood and its purported backers, and much more cautious in its approach to Iran.
- Abu Dhabi, the biggest and wealthiest of the seven emirates, increasingly sets the direction of travel for the UAE at home and abroad. The evolution of the ‘UAE model’ is chiefly associated with Abu Dhabi’s crown prince and de facto leader, Mohammed bin Zayed – or MbZ.
- While MbZ and his trusted inner circle share a worldview, they are not necessarily operating from a strategic masterplan. A very small group often makes policy choices that are tactical and reactive, and such ad hoc decision-making can lead to overcorrection and missed opportunities.
- Western policymakers tend to be dazzled by the UAE’s perceived liberalism, and by its officials’ ability to literally and figuratively speak their language. They need to better acquaint themselves with the ‘UAE model’ in all its aspects, and get to grips with the reality that Abu Dhabi expects to be treated as an equal. Dealing with the UAE as a robust and mature partner will also mean demonstrating a greater willingness to push back.

# 1. Introduction

The rise of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a geopolitical force across the Middle East and North Africa has been as precipitous as it has been surprising. Where less than half a century ago there was pessimism among local and international observers that the new federation would survive into the new millennium, the UAE, and Abu Dhabi – its biggest and wealthiest emirate – in particular, have over the past decade come to play an increasingly visible role in shaping the politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Most Western policymaking establishments engaged in the MENA region have struggled to keep up with the pace of change.

For much of its first few decades as a nation state, the UAE operated a conservative foreign and national security policy that was largely predicated on ensuring survival in the face of internal and external threats to the fragile unity and territorial integrity of the federation. While internal threats have faded, perceived existential vulnerability to regional currents continues to drive policy. Perhaps the most important difference between the federation's approach to external affairs in its early years and its current posture is a clear sense of self-assurance and ambition among a new generation of leaders – and a growing perception among this group that the UAE is being left to fend for itself in a deeply turbulent region. The crown prince and de facto ruler of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan – or MbZ – and a trusted inner circle of advisers, many of them his full brothers, have consolidated power internally, and built a strong security and military apparatus capable of warding off most (although not all) internal and external threats, and have since 2011 operated an increasingly activist foreign and national security policy abroad. Whereas his father, Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, aspired to build a model of Arab statehood in the UAE, many observers believe MbZ wants to export his own model.

In 2017 researchers at Chatham House undertook a project to examine the UAE's foreign and national security policy, including through interviews with UAE officials, regional and Western policymakers, and others. The research, which was completed in late 2019, sheds light on Emirati ambitions to play a key role in shaping regional political and governance structures, under the umbrella of regional Saudi–Emirati (and, to an extent, Egyptian) leadership, with the UAE at times fashioning itself as the 'intellectual architect', as one interviewee put it, of a new model for country-level and regional security built around the federation's own internal structures. This 'UAE model' integrates economic openness, strong governance and service delivery, and a relatively secular and liberal (for the region) social environment, combined with a closed political system that polices speech and is built around an entrenched security state; and, just as important, a rejection of any political or religious ideology that might challenge the supremacy of the state and its leaders.

The UAE has been much more visibly activist in its foreign policy across a MENA region embroiled in deepening turmoil since the Arab uprisings of 2011, during which period the US has been perceived by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to be retrenching from its past role as regional security guarantor. In this context, Emirati officials say they can no longer assume that the federation will be able to sustain its past trajectory towards becoming a rare locus of stability while operating a non-interventionist foreign policy. After years of mounting regional disorder and failed Western intervention in the Middle East, epitomized by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the model offered by the modernizing leadership in Abu Dhabi is an attractive one to Western policymakers who have long hoped for regional

powers to play a more assertive role in stabilization and securitization in their neighbourhood. Diplomats, policymakers and politicians are also encouraged by time spent with Emirati counterparts who – literally and figuratively – speak their language, and in the safe, orderly and cosmopolitan metropolises of Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

A principal driving force in the UAE leadership's approach to the region is as much what it stands against as what it stands for. MbZ and his inner circle perceive that transnational, political Islamist ideologies promoted by Iran and the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and its boosters, including but not limited to Qatar and Turkey, pose an existential threat to the stability of so-called 'status quo' powers in the region, and act as a driver of regional radicalism. As one interviewee for this paper described it, the UAE's overriding threat perception can be summarized as 'Iran and the Ikhwan'.

**Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and his inner circle perceive that transnational, political Islamist ideologies promoted by Iran and the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and its boosters pose an existential threat to the stability of so-called 'status quo' powers in the region, and act as a driver of regional radicalism.**

Yet as this paper demonstrates, Abu Dhabi is aggressive in its attempts to uproot the Brotherhood but more cautious in its efforts to counter Iranian influence and expansionism, largely through support for coercive sanctions of the kind pursued by the Trump administration. In June 2017 the UAE was a key player in the blockade of Qatar, accusing its smaller Gulf neighbour of supporting terrorism. Yet after a series of attacks, purportedly by Iran, on oil tankers off the coast of Fujairah in the Gulf of Oman, in May 2019, the UAE refused to attribute blame. The US, in the midst of a campaign – which the UAE had hitherto backed – of 'maximum pressure' against Tehran, blamed these attacks, as well as others targeting Saudi oil facilities and US military bases in Iraq, on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The UAE has quietly stepped up its diplomacy with Tehran since mid-2019, hoping to avoid becoming embroiled in a regional conflagration.

Despite its rapid ascent to regional prominence, Abu Dhabi's growing regional role is neither widely nor well understood, in part because it is in a state of near-constant evolution. Western officials often fall into a trap of hearing what they want to hear from their Emirati counterparts, rather than carefully parsing the meaning of what is being said. The UAE approach to internal governance is not necessarily transferable to other countries with limited resources and large, diverse populations. It is financially burdensome and complex to implement in countries with larger and less homogeneous indigenous populations than the UAE's. It also brings with it many challenges to partner countries whose ostensible values include freedom of speech and a free press. The UAE's human rights record is poor, and its 'liberalism' or 'moderation' has as much in common with the authoritarian models of China or Russia than it has with Western democracies. Notwithstanding its call to religious moderation, in practice it engages in tactical alliances with violent hyper-conservative religious groups abroad, and there is clear evidence of a preference for strongmen leaders over well-developed institutions of state.

Some Western policymakers, and even some of the UAE's regional allies (including Saudi Arabia), have latterly been unsettled by the UAE's increasing confidence in its ability to influence facts on the ground abroad without consultation to international norms or frameworks. Others question its commitment to its alliances. Yet they little understand how these decisions are made in Abu Dhabi. In fact, while the UAE may have ambitions towards shaping regional order, there does not appear

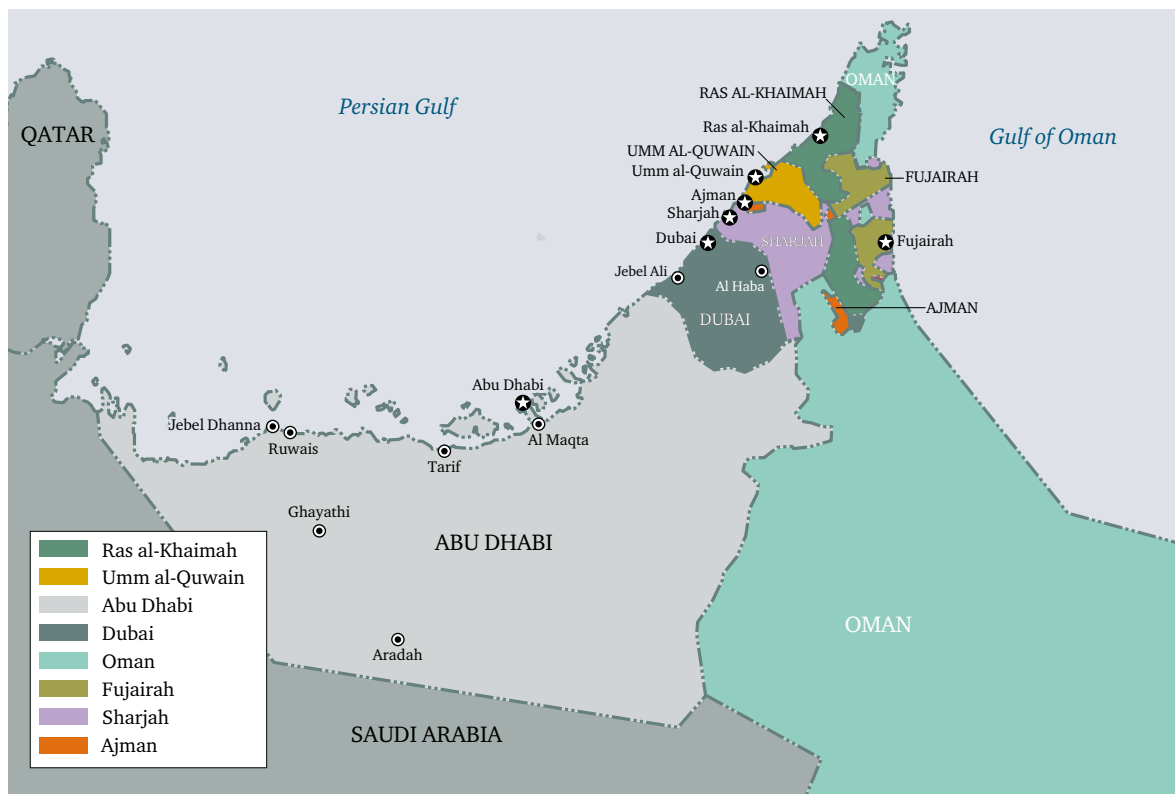
to be a masterplan for achieving its overall end goals. Instead, a small circle often makes ad hoc, tactical decisions under pressure, and at times jumps from crisis to crisis, creating sudden policy vacuums and prompting occasional overcorrections in response to rapidly unfolding events. Faced with pressing economic concerns at home, and ongoing struggles to find reliable regional allies, the federation's Western allies – the US and the UK in particular – have arguably overlooked the more problematic aspects of UAE foreign policy in the hope of sustaining an important relationship, particularly given the UAE's deepening ties with rival powers like Russia, China and even India. UAE officials meanwhile express frustration at times that they are treated by their Western counterparts as subcontractors rather than true partners, making cooperation and debate among equals more difficult.

As Mohammed bin Zayed's UAE becomes an increasingly important – and visible – player in regional geopolitics, its activities and close relationships with Western capitals are likely to come under mounting scrutiny abroad. This research paper attempts to give an overview of the changing face of Gulf and UAE foreign policy under MbZ, particularly since the 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2011. It discusses the UAE's overarching strategy, its tactics, and likely future trends in UAE-driven regional initiatives. It was researched and mostly written in 2017–19 and is based on desk research, interviews and travel to Dubai, Yemen, Abu Dhabi and Washington, DC.

## 2. The UAE's Foreign and National Security Policy in Historical Context

The UAE's foreign and national security policy has undergone a series of shifts since the federation's establishment in 1971, driven by regional developments, internal political calculus and the personalities of its leaders. Early attempts to formulate a unified foreign policy position were undermined by tensions between the seven member emirates: the so-called Trucial States had a long history of infighting before the formation of the UAE, and Ras al-Khaimah did not become a full member of the union until 1972. The agreement to create the federation was perceived by Western observers as being as much a security pact between leaders of tiny emirates surrounded by powerful regional forces, as a commitment to the de facto political union it has become.

Map: The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar





Expansionist and more powerful, Saudi Arabia and Iran were the main strategic risks to the UAE, led by the president and architect of the federation, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan.<sup>1</sup> The repercussions of the so-called 'Buraimi dispute' of 1950–61 – a struggle between Abu Dhabi, Oman and Saudi Arabia over territory in the west of Abu Dhabi – endured. Saudi Arabia, viewed as an emerging, expansionist power, refused to recognize the UAE until the dispute, and other outstanding boundary issues, were eventually settled in 1974.<sup>2</sup> To the south, Iran seized the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, claimed by Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah, in 1971 just as British forces were departing the area.<sup>3</sup> A legacy of British imperial influence and long-running internecine border disputes, meanwhile, are two Omani enclaves within the UAE's borders; as well as an enclave-within-an-enclave, territory belonging to Sharjah that sits within an Omani enclave in turn encircled by the emirates of Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca the same year, led to fears among the Gulf monarchies that their rule could be overturned not just by the Arab nationalism and socialism they had battled in previous decades, but also by political Islamism.<sup>4</sup>

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In an interview published in 2009, Zaki Nusseibeh, for many years the translator for Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan – who was emir of Abu Dhabi from 1966 and president of the UAE from 1971 until his death in 2004 – noted:

There was a lot of skepticism about whether this place would survive. All the journalists I took around then, the editors, the visiting dignitaries – they all looked at the Emirates and said it would not survive ... They thought that the individual emirates would be absorbed by their bigger neighbors. You must remember, we had revolutions all around us – there was Communism and Marxism, and simply bigger neighbors like Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup>

From the time of the establishment of the UAE until his death in 2004, Sheikh Zayed, an iconic figure in the UAE and across the region, spearheaded the federation's approach to international relations, although many emirates maintained their own links with other countries of the region.<sup>6</sup> As recalled by officials and business figures who worked with him, Sheikh Zayed's approach to foreign policy was in large part driven by a mix of idealism and pragmatism.<sup>7</sup> Zayed aspired to promote a form of Arab nationalism through multilateral organizations similar to the UAE's own federation like the Arab League and later the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hellyer, P. (2001), 'The Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy', in Al Abed, I. and Hellyer, P. (eds) (2001), *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*, London: Trident Press.

<sup>2</sup> Rugh, W. A. (1996), 'The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates', *Middle East Journal*, 50(1): pp. 57–70.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Mazrouei, N. S. (2015), *Disputed Islands between UAE and Iran: Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb in the Strait of Hormuz*, GRM Paper, Cambridge: Gulf Research Centre Cambridge.

<sup>4</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2011), *The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai\\_iran.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai_iran.pdf) (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Shainin, J. (2009), 'Zaki Nusseibeh Before and After', *Bidoun Magazine*, Summer 2009, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/zayed-zaki-nusseibeh> (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah and Umm al-Quwain all have relatively strong trade and social ties to Iran, while the ruling families of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, both al-Qasimis, are widely held to have a close relationships with Riyadh.

<sup>7</sup> Author interviews, two UAE officials, three Western officials, two business leaders, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Janardhan, M. S. (2004), 'UAE: Sheikh Zayed's Demise Marks an End and a Beginning', Inter Press Service, 8 November 2004, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2004/11/uae-sheikh-zayed-demise-marks-an-end-and-a-beginning/> (accessed 15 May 2020).



### Box 1: The Structure of Government in the UAE

The UAE is made up of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. The ruler of each emirate is a member of the UAE's Supreme Council, and each technically has an equal vote on decisions made by the council, although in practice Abu Dhabi and Dubai – the largest, most populous and wealthiest members of the federation – have effective veto power and dissent is rare.<sup>9</sup> The Supreme Council elects both the president and prime minister. By protocol and tradition, the president is the ruler of Abu Dhabi and the prime minister is the ruler of Dubai. The current president is Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the emir of Abu Dhabi, while the prime minister is Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the emir of Dubai. Sheikh Mohammed, who as prime minister selects a cabinet that is approved by the president and the Supreme Council, is also vice-president. Most key roles in cabinet are filled by officials from Abu Dhabi.<sup>10</sup>

The UAE also has a Federal National Council, an elected body made up of a 50:50 mix of appointees selected by the emirs and elected members.<sup>11</sup> Abu Dhabi and Dubai each has eight seats on the council, Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah six each, and Ajman, Umm al-Quwain and Fujairah four each. Each emirate has its own government and budget, and pays a fixed proportion of revenues to the federal government, with Abu Dhabi and Dubai the biggest contributors. In September 2019 the government approved a 60 billion dirham (\$16.4 billion) annual budget for 2019–21, a record high and an almost 50 per cent increase in spending compared with a decade earlier. Most spending goes to social development programmes, with dispersal focused on the less wealthy and less developed so-called 'northern emirates'.<sup>12</sup>

At the time of its foundation, the UAE was militarily weak relative to most of its neighbours, a vulnerability laid bare by the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.<sup>13</sup> The UAE's economy was – and remains – heavily dependent on the movement of maritime trade, which, as the 'tanker war' of the late 1980s demonstrated, is highly vulnerable to regional conflict.<sup>14</sup> (This vulnerability was once again highlighted in May 2019 by a series of attacks on ships off the coast of the UAE, allegedly perpetrated by Iran.) Sheikh Zayed argued for a doctrine of mediation over conflict, and of multilateralism. Along with his Kuwaiti counterpart, Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah (Kuwait's emir in 1977–2006), he was instrumental in the formation of the GCC in 1981, but he at times took a contrary position to other GCC states on regional events, maintaining for example a position of relative neutrality during the Iran–Iraq war, likely a response to the UAE's fragile position and the close trade ties between some of the emirates and Iran.<sup>15</sup> The UAE was one of only three countries to recognize Afghanistan's Taliban regime after its formation in 1996; and Zayed called for sanctions against Iraq to be eased in the late 1990s, citing the suffering of the Iraqi people.<sup>16</sup> Zayed actively attempted to prevent the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum of Dubai is said to have offered Saddam Hussein asylum in the emirate, with Sheikh Zayed's blessing.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, C. M. (2009), *Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond*, New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>10</sup> United Arab Emirates (2020), 'The UAE Cabinet', <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/the-uae-cabinet> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>11</sup> United Arab Emirates (2020), 'The Federal National Council', <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/the-federal-national-council> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Zacharias, A. and Saadi, D. (2018), 'UAE Cabinet approves Dh60bn federal budget for 2019 development', *The National*, 30 September 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-cabinet-approves-dh60bn-federal-budget-for-2019-development-1.775425> (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2011), *The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [https://carneгиеendowment.org/files/dubai\\_iran.pdf](https://carneгиеendowment.org/files/dubai_iran.pdf) (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ottaway, D. (1982), 'Arab Gulf States Take Neutral Stance on Iran-Iraq War', *Washington Post*, 1 June 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Hellyer (2001), 'The Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy', in Al Abed and Hellyer (eds) (2001), *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*; Reynolds, R. (2019), 'Sheikh Mohammed offered Saddam Hussein asylum in 2003, he reveals in new autobiography', *The National*, 14 January 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/sheikh-mohammed-offered-saddam-hussein-asylum-in-2003-he-reveals-in-new-autobiography-1.813014> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Author interviews, one UAE official, one Arab adviser, two former diplomats, February 2017–June 2019.

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After Zayed's death, divisions reportedly emerged both within the Al Nahyan and between Abu Dhabi and the emirates' other ruling families over the pace and extent of change in the UAE. Such tensions initially impeded the formulation of a coherent foreign policy in the post-Zayed era.<sup>18</sup> Dubai, which developed as a major trade hub in the 2000s, also began to pursue a more visibly independent foreign policy course in this period, under the leadership of Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Dubai's crown prince and subsequently, from 2006, ruler.<sup>19</sup> The more recent trend towards a more cohesive and assertive attitude to external affairs is closely associated with the rise of Mohammed bin Zayed, the current crown prince of Abu Dhabi.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Almezaini, K. S. (2011), *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid, Identities and Interests*, Abingdon: Routledge.

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## 3. After Zayed: The Rise of MbZ and the Bani Fatima

Mohammed bin Zayed would not have been able to drive a more aggressive approach to regional affairs had he not first established a formidable standing in Abu Dhabi and across the UAE. Often referred to as MbZ in Western circles (those close to him sometimes call him Abu Khaled or 'bu Khaled), he was educated in Morocco and at the UK's Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and is a trained pilot.<sup>20</sup> The first son born to Fatima, Zayed's third and reputedly favourite wife, who is often referred to as the 'first lady' of Abu Dhabi or 'mother of the nation', and third born of Zayed's 19 sons, MbZ was seemingly groomed for power from an early age by both his mother and father, as were his five full brothers, referred to collectively (including MbZ) as the 'Bani Fatima', or 'children of Fatima'.<sup>21</sup>

MbZ was appointed chief of staff of the UAE armed forces (then the Union Defence Force) in 1993, as part of a reorganization that saw a number of Zayed's sons assigned senior government roles. (This period is sometimes described by contemporary observers as one of 'internship' for the next generation of UAE rulers, as many of the non-royal advisers who had risen to senior positions in the early decades of the federation were eased out.<sup>22</sup>) Although technically subordinate to the defence minister (the emir of Dubai) and the supreme commander and deputy supreme commander of the armed forces (respectively the emir and the then crown prince of Abu Dhabi) – he led the modernization of the armed forces, pushing for large-scale arms purchases and multiple defence pacts with both Western powers and Russia, deepening relationships catalysed by the Iranian revolution and the Iran–Iraq war, and given urgency by Iraq's recent invasion of Kuwait.<sup>23</sup> He also promoted the professionalization of the military, particularly the Special Forces within the Presidential Guard, and the development of a domestic arms manufacturing programme. He reportedly became his father's principal security adviser.<sup>24</sup>

While other GCC states also accelerated their defence spending after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in part to ensure that they would be protected by the militaries of the nations they purchased those arms from, the UAE was marked out by its willingness to build its own working military, and to send troops into active conflict zones. Already, in 1991, the UAE had participated in the US-led aerial campaign against Iraqi forces in Kuwait, and sent ground troops to participate in the liberation of Kuwait City.<sup>25</sup> During the first decade of MbZ's military leadership, Emirati forces participated in operations in Somalia, Kosovo and, after 9/11, Afghanistan<sup>26</sup> – where UAE Special Forces were the only Arab force

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<sup>20</sup> Gulf States News (2014), 'The Bani Fatima: at the centre of power', 10 February 2014, <https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/The+Bani+Fatima+at+the+centre+of+power.aspx?date=20140210#> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Author interview, one UAE adviser, one former Western diplomat, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Knights, M. and Mello, A. (2016). 'West of Suez for the United Arab Emirates', War on the Rocks, 2 September 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Author interview, former military adviser to the UAE, September 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Nakhi, I. M. (1993), *The Gulf War: UAE Participation in That War*, USAWC Military Studies Program Paper, Pennsylvania: US Army War College, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a264530.pdf> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>26</sup> See United Nations Peacekeeping (1999), Somalia - UNOSOM II: Facts and Figures, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/past/unosom2facts.html> (accessed 15 May 2020); Al Nowais, S. (2019), 'Special Report: The day Emirati troops came to help war-torn Kosovo', *The National*, 28 July 2019, [thenational.ae/uae/special-report-the-day-emirati-troops-came-to-help-war-torn-kosovo-1.891416](https://thenational.ae/uae/special-report-the-day-emirati-troops-came-to-help-war-torn-kosovo-1.891416); Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, Washington DC (2011), 'UAE Special Forces continue participation with ISAF mission in Afghanistan', <https://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/uae-special-forces-continue-participation-isaf-mission-afghanistan> (accessed 15 May 2020).

permitted to operate alongside their US counterparts.<sup>27</sup> The UAE armed forces acquired a reputation among Western military officials as being the most capable and best trained in the Gulf, and among the best in the Middle East.

Widely seen as a competent leader, MbZ became crown prince of Abu Dhabi in 2004, after the death of Sheikh Zayed and the elevation of his elder half-brother Khalifa to the position of Abu Dhabi emir and president of the UAE. Zayed had designated MbZ to succeed Khalifa as crown prince shortly before he died.<sup>28</sup> His elevation was interpreted in some circles as a marker of the rise of the Bani Fatima, who by this stage played visible roles across defence, intelligence, foreign affairs and economic policy, having been among the most successful of the next-generation 'interns'. Advocates for rapid change in Abu Dhabi and a less risk-averse approach to management of state resources and foreign policy, this group reportedly faced resistance from more conservative branches of the family.<sup>29</sup>

**The Bani Fatima rose to positions of prominence in key state functions, including foreign policy formulation and oversight of security not just in Abu Dhabi but across the federation.**

The Bani Fatima also rose to positions of prominence in key state functions, including foreign policy formulation and oversight of security not just in Abu Dhabi but across the federation. Abu Dhabi's reach across all aspects of government the UAE arguably grew after the financial crisis of 2008–09. In 2009 Dubai was forced to ask Abu Dhabi for a bailout worth an estimated \$20 billion.<sup>30</sup> In exchange, Dubai reportedly ceded some foreign policymaking and some security powers to Abu Dhabi.<sup>31</sup> A major government reshuffle in 2011 largely cemented the Bani Fatima and MbZ's consolidation of power in Abu Dhabi, leaving the crown prince and his inner circle in a position of dominance over the UAE's security and foreign affairs portfolios.<sup>32</sup> Dubai had hitherto been seen as a 'balancing force' within the UAE, and capable of dissenting when its royal family did not agree with Abu Dhabi's regional policies.<sup>33</sup>

From the early 2010s onwards, MbZ was described by Western officials as the 'de facto ruler' of Abu Dhabi. Sheikh Khalifa, whose health had declined rapidly in the decade since he succeeded Zayed as ruler of Abu Dhabi and UAE president, suffered what is believed to have been the first in a series of strokes in 2014.<sup>34</sup> Although MbZ does not hold a formal cabinet post in the UAE government, the crown prince is chairman of the equally – if not more – powerful Abu Dhabi Executive Council, and it is now widely understood that he is indeed de facto ruler of Abu Dhabi and thus the most powerful figure in the UAE. Functionally, MbZ acts as chief executive officer of both Abu Dhabi and UAE

<sup>27</sup> Author interview, two former US defence officials, April 2017, September 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Author interview, two former Western officials, one UAE official, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Davidson, C. M. (2006), 'After Shaikh Zayed: The Politics Of Succession In Abu Dhabi And The UAE', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, 13(1), <https://mepc.org/journal/after-shaikh-zayed-politics-succession-abu-dhabi-and-uae> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Reuters (2014), 'UAE, Abu Dhabi roll over \$20 billion of Dubai's debt', 16 March 2014, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-emirates-dubai-debt/uae-abu-dhabi-roll-over-20-billion-of-dubais-debt-idUKBREA2FOBZ20140316> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Author interviews, two Western diplomats, one local, one regional observer, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> A less publicized but nonetheless significant shift came with the death, in 2010, of Sheikh Saqr al-Qasemi, the ruler of Ras al-Khaimah, who had resisted both Abu Dhabi's centralizing tendencies and the vilification of the Muslim Brotherhood. (Sheikh Saqr rejected, for example, attempts to disband al-Islah, the UAE branch of the Brotherhood.) His son and successor, Saud, has adopted a position much closer to that of Abu Dhabi, and he has been an open critic of the Brotherhood since his accession to power. See Freer, C. (2015), 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Emirates: Anatomy of a crackdown', *Middle East Eye*, 17 December 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/muslim-brotherhood-emirates-anatomy-crackdown> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>34</sup> *The National* (2014), 'Sheikh Khalifa stable after recovering from stroke', 25 January 2014, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/sheikh-khalifa-stable-after-recovering-from-stroke-1.686381> (accessed 15 May 2020).

federal government, working with a small cadre of domestic and international policy advisers. He is the director of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, the UAE's offset programme, and the Abu Dhabi Education Council. And, perhaps most importantly, he is deputy supreme commander of the UAE military and leads the UAE Presidential Guard.

As power in the UAE has become more centralized, and in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, the federation has arguably taken a turn towards deeper securitization and authoritarianism, jailing dissidents and stripping some of their citizenship. While Western officials have largely argued that UAE's internal affairs are its own concern, the treatment of foreign citizens has at times acted as a sharp reminder of their different worldview. In May 2018 UAE security services arrested a British PhD candidate, Matthew Hedges, accusing him of spying for UK intelligence services. Hedges, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in November that year but pardoned shortly afterwards, maintains that he was conducting legitimate academic research on the UAE's national security strategy; and the UK has confirmed that he was in no way connected to its intelligence services.

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## 4. Threat Perception: Iran and the Ikhwan

Understanding the UAE's foreign policy requires an understanding of the factors decision-makers in Abu Dhabi perceive as defining the UAE's national interest, and the highest priority risks to domestic and regional security. When asked to define the biggest policy concerns for MbZ and his inner circle, interviewees point to a keen focus on two issues, neatly summed up by one Western official as 'Iran and the Ikhwan'.<sup>35</sup>

### Iran

MbZ, like his father, has long feared an attack on the UAE by Iran. On the basis of long-term dealings with the crown prince, one former senior Western diplomat described him as being 'obsessed' with the idea of an Iranian attack on the UAE, potentially in retaliation for US or Israeli action against Iran's nuclear assets.<sup>36</sup> US diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks in 2010 support this portrayal.<sup>37</sup>

This fear of Iranian attack is not irrational. MbZ was 10 years old when, in 1971, Iran under Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, seized Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands, just days before the formal establishment of the UAE.<sup>38</sup> He was 18 years old when the Shah was overthrown and the new leadership in Tehran urged uprisings against Arab monarchs – particularly concerning given the large number of Iranian expatriates in Dubai and elsewhere in the emirates.<sup>39</sup> Publicly, Sheikh Zayed maintained a somewhat neutral stance during the Iran–Iraq war, and interviewees underscore that MbZ observed the impact of the 'tanker war' phase of the conflict on the Gulf trade routes that are vital to the UAE's economy.<sup>40</sup> One of Abu Dhabi's oil platforms was damaged by an Iranian missile in 1987 (reportedly an unintended strike for which Iran later offered compensation).<sup>41</sup> Regional insecurity was heightened in 1990 by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait – an eight-hour drive north along the Gulf coast from Abu Dhabi. (Before the invasion, Saddam Hussein had lambasted not just Kuwait but also the UAE for their oil production policies.<sup>42</sup>) And with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a bulwark – of sorts – against Iran was removed and replaced with a chaotic internal conflict. These combined experiences are said to have instilled in the now crown prince a sense of the federation's deep precariousness within the region.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Author interview, Western official, June 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Author interview, Western official, February 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Wikileaks (2009), 'MbZ Hosts Gulf Security Dinner with Isa Asd Vershbow And PM A/S Shapiro', 23 July 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI746\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI746_a.html) (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Hellyer (2001), 'The Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy', in Al Abed and Hellyer (eds) (2001), *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*.

<sup>39</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2011), *The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai\\_iran.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai_iran.pdf) (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Author interview, UAE official, June 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmadi, K. (2012), *Islands and International Politics in the Persian Gulf: The Abu Musa and Tunbs in Strategic Context*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>42</sup> Ibrahim, Y. M. (1990), 'Iraq Threatens Emirates And Kuwait on Oil Glut', *New York Times*, 26 July 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/26/world/iraq-said-to-prevail-in-oil-dispute-with-kuwait-and-arab-emirates.html> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Author interview, place and date of conversation withheld to protect interviewee identity.

Beyond the strategic threat posed by Iran, MbZ is also said to be concerned that the UAE's sizeable Iranian and Shia population (some 5–8 per cent of the UAE's population is of Persian descent)<sup>44</sup> could be turned against the state. Abu Dhabi has quietly worked to reduce certain emirates' economic ties with Iran, including Dubai's role as a financial hub for sanctions-busting Iranian businesses, and Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah's purported lucrative smuggling trade, albeit with limited success.<sup>45</sup> A US record of a discussion with MbZ and the ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid, in 2006, as later published by WikiLeaks, noted that both men 'believed that with the Shia tradition of veneration of religious figures, Iraqi Shia loyalties were more to their religion and, by extension, to Iran, than to their own country'.<sup>46</sup> Mistrust of Iranian intentions was deepened by the 2011 protest movement in Bahrain, which was led by Shia political groups.

While the crown prince is a vocal advocate of a robust stance towards Tehran, his approach – and that of his inner circle – is in practice more nuanced and perhaps more pragmatic than Iran's other regional rivals. According to multiple Western officials who have met with MbZ over the past decade and more, the crown prince is convinced that, for example, a pre-emptive Israeli or US strike against Iran would almost certainly lead to retaliatory action against US allies, with the UAE likely to be the first among these.<sup>47</sup> Iran's nuclear programme, and the likely fallout – literal and figurative – from a conflict involving nuclear weapons, is also high in the minds of UAE policymakers. As Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador to the US, told *The Atlantic* in 2010:

I think we are at risk of an Iranian nuclear program far more than you [the US] are at risk. At 7,000 miles away, and with two oceans bordering you, an Iranian nuclear threat does not threaten the continental United States ... I think out of every country in the region, the U.A.E. is most vulnerable to Iran. Our military, who has existed for the past 40 years, wake up, dream, breathe, eat, sleep the Iranian threat. It's the only conventional military threat our military plans for, trains for, equips for, that's it, there's no other threat, there's no country in the region that is a threat to the U.A.E., it's only Iran.<sup>48</sup>

The UAE was a vocal critic of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the Iran nuclear deal since disavowed by President Trump – and lobbied against it in Washington. The strength of the UAE's objection to the deal, in the telling of UAE officials, was in part at least that Abu Dhabi had not been consulted on its contents before they were at an advanced stage,<sup>49</sup> and that the UAE felt like an 'afterthought' to the Obama administration.<sup>50</sup> More recently, the UAE's compliance with strengthened US sanctions on Iran in 2019, part of the Trump administration's campaign of 'maximum pressure' against Tehran, had a substantial negative impact on its trade with Iran: by July of that year it was anticipated that trade with Iran would drop by half over the course of the year.<sup>51</sup> Abu Dhabi has grown increasingly concerned by the Iranian response to the US campaign, and has worked to prevent regional tensions from boiling over. When, in May 2019, a series of explosions on oil tankers off the coast of Fujairah were attributed to Iran by the US, Abu Dhabi said that it did not

<sup>44</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2011), *The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai\\_iran.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai_iran.pdf) (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Author interviews, local observer, November 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Wikileaks (2006), 'General Abizaid Meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Dubai Crown Prince', 2 January 2006, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DUBAI10\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DUBAI10_a.html) (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Author interviews with two current and one former Western official, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Goldberg, J. (2020), 'UAE's Ambassador Endorses an American Strike on Iran', *The Atlantic*, 6 July 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/07/uaes-ambassador-endorses-an-american-strike-on-iran-contd/59257/> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Author interviews, UAE officials, April 2017, March 2018, September 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> England, A. and Kerr, S. (2019), 'US sanctions put chill on Iranian trade with UAE', *Financial Times*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/bbe3c99a-ae9-11e9-8030-530adfa879c2> (accessed 15 May 2020).



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have evidence that definitively proved who was behind the attacks.<sup>52</sup> Reports subsequently emerged of senior UAE officials travelling to Tehran to discuss potential de-escalation mechanisms.<sup>53</sup> Following a purported Iranian attack on vital Saudi oil production infrastructure in September 2019, and again after the killing by a US airstrike, in January 2020, of General Qassem Soleimani, who as commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force had led Iran's asymmetrical warfare campaign in the region, the UAE made public calls for a de-escalation.

### The Ikhwan

Where Abu Dhabi's stance towards Iran is carefully calibrated, its approach to the Muslim Brotherhood is more direct. MbZ is said to regard political Islamism as a tool used by regional rivals including Iran, Qatar and Turkey to project their own power and weaken Gulf monarchies and secular republics alike.<sup>54</sup> Linked to this, the crown prince and the other Bani Fatima consider the Brotherhood in particular to be the gravest threat to the UAE's domestic security and to long-term regional order. Whereas Iran will remain a strategic threat regardless of its leadership, and rapid regime change could prove as costly as maintenance of the status quo, the Brotherhood, as UAE officials see things, can still be prevented from attaining power and directing state policy.

Whereas Iran will remain a strategic threat regardless of its leadership, and rapid regime change could prove as costly as maintenance of the status quo, the Brotherhood, as UAE officials see things, can still be prevented from attaining power and directing state policy.

MbZ's Abu Dhabi has a history of conflating the Brotherhood with more extreme ideologies of the kind espoused by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Some Emirati officials describe the Brotherhood as a 'gateway drug' to radicalism.<sup>55</sup> (UAE officials are also quietly critical of Saudi Arabia's promotion of ultra-conservative Salafist doctrine abroad from the late 1970s onwards.<sup>56</sup>) The role of two UAE nationals in the 9/11 attacks on the US is said to have hardened the stance of both Abu Dhabi and Dubai against any form of ideology that invokes religion in its call to violent action, and in particular against its own indigenous Brotherhood organization, al-Islah.<sup>57</sup> Both MbZ and Mohammed bin Rashid have argued that education and economic development are tools for combating extremism, and have been advocates for Western-style secular private education institutions in the emirates. Al-Islah was technically disbanded in the mid-1990s.<sup>58</sup> In 2011–12 the UAE conducted a wave of arrests of members of Islah-linked as well as pro-democracy student activists who it perceived

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<sup>52</sup> Nissenbaum, D. (2019), 'U.A.E. Stops Short of Directly Accusing Iran Over Attacks on Ships', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-stops-short-of-directly-accusing-iran-over-attacks-on-ships-11559871239> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>53</sup> In discussions with diplomats, individuals with ties to Tehran and other regional observers, several rounds of Emirati visits to Tehran were confirmed. Iranian officials told the UAE in early meetings it could not 'have it both ways', in the words of one interviewee, simultaneously pushing the U.S. to action and invoking brotherly relations with Iran. Officials in Tehran are said to believe Emirati actions since May 2019, including a drawdown of forces in Yemen, came in response to Abu Dhabi's risk assessment of the impact of a regional conflict, and its desire to have its strongest forces available at home in the event of further escalation. UAE officials dispute this analysis.

<sup>54</sup> Author interviews, two Western officials, two UAE officials, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Author interview, UAE official,

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> In 1994 authorities in Dubai removed al-Islah's board of directors and placed members under supervision. The group continued to operate in Ras al-Khaimah, and had a strong presence in university campuses across the federation. See Krieg, A. (ed), (2019), *Divided Gulf: Anatomy of the Crisis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

as wanting to overthrow the emirates' royal families.<sup>59</sup> In 2014 the UAE designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, along with the local al-Islah, in a list that included Lebanese Hizbollah and a number of Al-Qaeda branches.<sup>60</sup>

The exact roots of MbZ's deep enmity towards the political Islamist movement – which US diplomats say MbZ 'posit[s] as the UAE's mortal enemy' – is not entirely clear.<sup>61</sup> The Brotherhood gained a foothold in the UAE in the 1970s and 1980s through an influx of teachers and technocrats from Egypt and Sudan (apparently including MbZ's personal tutor Ezzedine Ibrahim) and students returning from education abroad, particularly in Kuwait.<sup>62</sup> The group's teachings became particularly influential among groups in Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah, leading to tensions between these emirates and Abu Dhabi.<sup>63</sup> Sheikh Zayed is nonetheless said to have initially advocated tolerance towards Islamist groups.<sup>64</sup> Explanations of MbZ's virulent hatred of the group variously include an assassination plot against the crown prince and his family in the 1990s, a planned coup in the mid-1990s, protests in 2011, the discovery of Brotherhood cells in the military, and MbZ's own flirtation with the group in his youth. In the words of one official, echoed by other interviews:

Mohammed bin Zayed was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, by their ideology, but he realized that they wanted to steal his loyalty from the country ... [His father] Zayed did not build the country for this to happen. [He] values loyalty, patriotism, nationalism above all other things.<sup>65</sup>

Explaining their current stance, Emirati officials emphasize that, in 2011, they saw Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood entrenching their role in the region through popular protest movements (in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen) and through their sponsorship of armed groups (in Libya, Syria and Yemen).<sup>66</sup> Thus, in their telling Abu Dhabi's response to regional events was not a brash or opportunistic attempt to establish itself as a regional power broker; rather, it was a defensive reaction to the growing influence of its rivals, and to the US's perceived stepping back from its role as a guarantor of regional stability and security, particularly after the Obama administration either did not support or actively called for the removal of UAE and US allies in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.<sup>67</sup>

One UAE official noted:

Since 2011, our leadership has been increasingly worried about threats to our model of stability, good governance, and a balanced, tolerant approach to religion in our region and beyond. New threats emerged, and the dynamics of our security relationships had changed. So, there was a realization that you have to match your internal approach with your international approach and be consistent.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Abu Dhabi regarded the 2011 uprisings as an attempt by Qatar to further its regional influence by sponsoring Brotherhood-affiliated groups across the region and sowing dissent and feeding misinformation to local and international audiences via Al Jazeera's Arabic and English-language channels. MbZ and his inner circle had long been suspicious of Qatar's regional and international agenda, a mistrust compounded by tensions that predated Doha's emergence

<sup>59</sup> See Freer, C. (2016), *The Changing Islamist Landscape of the Gulf Arab States*, AGSIW Paper, Washington, DC: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, <https://agsiw.org/changing-islamist-landscape-gulf-arab-states/> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Reuters (2014), 'UAE lists Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group', 15 November 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uae-politics-brotherhood/uae-lists-muslim-brotherhood-as-terrorist-group-idUSKCN0IZ00M20141115> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Wikileaks (2009), 'Strong Words in Private from MBZ at IDEX -- bashes Iran, Qatar, Russia', 25 February 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI193\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI193_a.html) (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Author interviews with three Western officials, one regional observer and two UAE officials, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Author interview, UAE official, April 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Author interview, UAE official, May 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Author interview, UAE official, April 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Author interviews, four UAE officials, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Author interview, UAE official, February 2019.

as an active foreign policy player in the mid-2000s.<sup>69</sup> An already brittle relationship between Abu Dhabi and Doha, according to one Western diplomat, ‘was effectively broken by Qatar’s role in Egypt and Tunisia and Yemen and even in Libya, where the UAE and Qatar both went after Gaddafi but ended up at each others’ throats’.<sup>70</sup> Abu Dhabi, in the same diplomat’s account, became increasingly frustrated during this period with its Western allies’ apparent indifference to what it saw as Doha’s regional meddling, leading Abu Dhabi, along with Riyadh, to break ties with Qatar in 2017:

There was a lot of lobbying in London and Paris and Washington for people to ‘do something’ to stop the Qataris, and I think they [the UAE] still see a bit of a double standard in that the Qataris got to do what they liked but when they have intervened since then they have gotten a bad time of it in the Western press and from Western politicians. But then, they have also gotten away with a lot since, including the blockade of Qatar of course.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> See Salisbury, P. (2017), ‘Qatar is determined to stand up to its Gulf neighbours – but at what price?’, *New Statesman*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2017/07/qatar-determined-stand-its-gulf-neighbours-what-price> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>70</sup> Author interview, Western diplomat, October 2018.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

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## 5. Assessing UAE Foreign and National Security Policy Since 2011

Often, UAE foreign and national security policy is analysed in the West on the basis of a series of anecdotal initiatives: its support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya, for example, or for secessionists and other groups in Yemen, or its role in the 2017 Qatar crisis. Rarely are its policies studied through a more comprehensive survey of its activities in the multiple countries in its ‘neighbourhood’ where it is most visibly engaged.

Based on behaviour, investment and anecdotal evidence provided by interviewees who contributed to the research for this paper – set out in the summary table below – three broad priorities emerge: thwarting the Muslim Brotherhood and its perceived backers, Turkey and Qatar; expanding trade through partnerships and investment in ports infrastructure, and protecting trade routes; and building ‘balanced’ relations with the major global powers, with the goal of diversifying the federation’s strategic relations beyond the traditional regional security guarantor, the US.

Notably absent is any appetite for direct confrontation with Iran, the main regional rival for Saudi Arabia – and a chief preoccupation of policymakers in Washington. The UAE advocates for policies aimed at creating ‘behaviour change’ in Tehran; and as already noted has lobbied against the JCPOA and supported the Trump administration’s campaign of ‘maximum pressure’ through sanctions. Whereas Saudi Arabia has worked to counter Iranian influence in Syria and (to a lesser extent) Iraq by backing local fighters and tribes fighting against the Assad regime and militias backed by Tehran, the UAE has avoided becoming caught up in either conflict. Indeed, only in Yemen has the UAE directly involved itself in a regional conflict involving Iran. The UAE ‘took a look’ at what was happening in Syria in 2011–12, according to one Western intelligence official, but chose not to engage fully and has since moved to rebuild its relationship with the Bashar al-Assad regime.<sup>72</sup> Remarks made by UAE officials and Western diplomats support this commentary, and indicate that Abu Dhabi assessed that other Gulf states were already backing multiple groups that it saw as being political Islamist and/or extremist.<sup>73</sup> In Iraq, the UAE has supported initiatives to develop the local police force, and was involved in the campaign to defeat ISIS in 2016–17, but chose not to embroil itself in local politics.<sup>74</sup> One former diplomat summed up the UAE’s quietly pragmatic approach to Iran thus:

The UAE doesn’t like Iran and sees it as a malign presence in the region, but it doesn’t think it has the military capability to ‘push back’ against Iran and foresees brutally nasty consequences for its economy if it really messes with the Iranians. So it encourages pressure but doesn’t actually want to see a war with Iran across the region.<sup>75</sup>

In some contexts, the UAE has been willing to compete for influence with Iran in ways that it is not willing to do with the Muslim Brotherhood. Abu Dhabi perceived a strong Iranian influence on Sudan but, along with Saudi Arabia, deepened its ties with Khartoum after 2015 while seeking military support for the Yemen war, tying the relationship to a Sudanese downgrade in relations with Iran.

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<sup>72</sup> Author interview, Western intelligence official, May 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.; and author interview, UAE official, June 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Author interview, New York, February 2019.

Sudanese forces were for a time among the largest contingents of foreign troops – if not the largest – operating alongside the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, while Khartoum has publicly severed its relations with Tehran.<sup>76</sup> When, in 2019, mass protests broke out in Sudan, the UAE played a key role in both the ouster of then-president Omar al-Bashir and the formation of a new military junta before supporting (under some duress from the US) the creation of a unity government.<sup>77</sup> Since the 2019 uprising, Khartoum has drawn down almost all of its forces from Yemen.

**The Horn of Africa is increasingly the site of a series of overlapping competitions for influence between the Gulf states and their regional rivals that has seen alliances shift repeatedly over the past few years.**

The Horn of Africa is increasingly the site of a series of overlapping competitions for influence between the Gulf states and their regional rivals that has seen alliances shift repeatedly over the past few years. Before 2015, for example, Eritrea was accused of working with Tehran.<sup>78</sup> Asmara also had good relations with Doha. But when, in 2015, a dispute between the Dubai ports operator DP World, the UAE leadership and Djibouti left the UAE without a naval base in the Horn of Africa, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi approached the Eritrean leadership with an offer of economic support and political reintegration after years of international isolation, in exchange for the use of the largely inactive Assab naval base.<sup>79</sup> The subsequent agreement gave the UAE a new foothold in the Horn and arguably eased the influence of its rivals.<sup>80</sup>

The UAE's position in Eritrea and the rest of the Horn of Africa also points to the emirates' growing interest not just in the Arab world or the Middle East, but its wider 'neighbourhood'. The UAE's neighbourhood can be roughly defined as the Middle East and North Africa, and the western half of the Indian Ocean: in particular the waterways of the Gulf of Suez, the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, the Strait of Hormuz, and the wider Arabian Sea (stretching to western India and Pakistan). Indeed, the ambition of the UAE's present leadership looks less like 'Little Sparta' – the term attributed to former US defence secretary James Mattis – than that of a modern-day, Arabian Peninsula version of the Venice of the 15th and 16th centuries: a tiny, rich and well-governed trading nation using its resources to protect its interests and project power, and to balance out larger and better-financed rivals alike, as much out of (perceived) necessity as ambition.

The UAE depends on the flow of trade through the western Indian Ocean both to export oil and to sustain its lucrative position as an international trade hub.<sup>81</sup> The regional re-export market is particularly important to Dubai's economy.<sup>82</sup> UAE officials worry that Iran or another rival power could cause irreparable damage to the emirates' oil exports and wider trade by closing the Strait

<sup>76</sup> Aboueldahab, N. (2019), 'Sudan's protesters can help alleviate Yemen's tragedy', Brookings Institution, 31 May 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/05/31/sudans-protesters-can-help-alleviate-yemens-tragedy/> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>77</sup> Abdelaziz, K., Georgy, M. and El Dahan M. (2019), 'Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir was destined to fall', Reuters, 3 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-bashir-fall/> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Stratfor (2012), 'Eritrea: Another Venue for the Iran-Israel Rivalry', 11 December 2012, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/eritrea-another-venue-iran-israel-rivalry> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>79</sup> Cornwell, A. and Frick, M. (2018), 'In peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, UAE lends a helping hand', Reuters, 8 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-eritrea-emirates-insight/in-peace-between-ethiopia-and-eritrea-uae-lends-a-helping-hand-idUSKBN1KT1QX> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>80</sup> Author interview, New York, November 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Ardemagni, E. (2018), *Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean*, Analysis No. 321, Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analisi321\\_ardemagni\\_12.04.2018\\_0.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analisi321_ardemagni_12.04.2018_0.pdf) (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>82</sup> Oxford Business Group (2019), 'Dubai's initiative to boost export and re-export trade', 18 April 2019, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/dubai%E2%80%99s-initiative-boost-export-and-re-export-trade> (accessed 15 May 2020).

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of Hormuz, which it borders, or the Bab al-Mandab between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea – the gateway to the Gulf of Suez and European markets – the eastern side of which was controlled by Yemen’s Houthis between late 2014 and mid-2018 before UAE-backed forces seized swathes of coastal territory from them.<sup>83</sup>

Abu Dhabi and Dubai are also focused on diversifying their economies by investing not just in their own trade and travel hubs, but also in those across the region. The two emirates are keenly aware of the potential of their neighbourhood, the economies of which are major targets of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (which has already arrived in Abu Dhabi in the form of a \$300 million investment in Khalifa Port).<sup>84</sup> As described by several figures interviewed as part of the research for this paper, this has led to a dual approach of looking to develop potential trade hubs in the neighbourhood while restricting the sphere of influence and potential area of activities of Iran, Qatar and Turkey.<sup>85</sup> There is a perception – which neither Abu Dhabi nor Dubai will confirm – that the UAE’s two centres of political and economic power are increasingly in lockstep on these issues. Between them, the two emirates now hold military and economic positions in Mukalla, Aden and Mokha (Yemen), Bossaso (Puntland/Somalia), Berbera (Somaliland/Somalia) and Assab (Eritrea) ports. Qatar and Turkey have been limited to interests in Mogadishu and Sudan.

Sometimes, this strategic/economic competition produces entirely unforeseen consequences. In 2017, for example, in response to the Arab Quartet’s blockade, Qatar withdrew its peacekeepers from border areas between Djibouti and Eritrea, sparking fears of a military confrontation between Djibouti and Ethiopia on one side and Eritrea on the other.<sup>86</sup> Abu Dhabi’s subsequent move to forge relations with Addis Ababa enabled it to play an intermediary role between Ethiopia and Eritrea, preventing a conflict that would have disrupted its activities in Assab and hence Yemen, ultimately leading – in the telling of several diplomats – to the UAE-brokered peace deal between the two countries the following year.<sup>87</sup>

In sum, the UAE’s foreign and security policy can be seen as prioritizing the protection of vital trade corridors while enhancing trade ties, extinguishing support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamist groups, building alliances abroad, and mitigating the threat of Iranian expansion without provoking a direct confrontation.

The UAE’s actions in this context point to a growing sense within the core circle of decision-makers that they stand as equals with other players in the region, and that they cannot count on support from the traditional guarantors of regional security. Abu Dhabi has developed a greater tolerance for risk and, as has also been said of Iran, has developed an ease in dealing in chaos if this serves its longer-term interests.<sup>88</sup> It appears to see the power struggle with the Brotherhood in particular as a zero-sum game in which there can be only winners and losers, and has come to accept that achieving its desired outcomes may well take decades, a time horizon far longer than any Western policymaking cycle. ‘The endpoint is so important and they believe in it, and it negates all the unintended consequences, in the view of one analyst. ‘No matter how we get there, it’s OK.’<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> International Crisis Group (2018), *How to Halt Yemen’s Slide into Famine*, Middle East Report N.193, International Crisis Group, [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/193-how-to-halt-yemens-slide-into-famine\\_0.pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/193-how-to-halt-yemens-slide-into-famine_0.pdf) (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>84</sup> Shepard, W. (2017), ‘Next Up On China’s Maritime Silk Road: Abu Dhabi’, *Forbes*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/08/02/next-up-abu-dhabi-chinas-maritime-silk-road-breaks-into-the-middle-east/#44d5786e9bbe> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>85</sup> Author interviews, two Western diplomats, one local, one regional observer, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Author interviews, two Western diplomat, one East African official, June 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Author interviews, two Western diplomats, one local, one regional observer, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Author interview, Western analyst, July 2018.

## 6. Stretched to Capacity? A Small Circle of Decision-makers

The strong point of view expressed by Emirati leaders, and the clarity with which they pronounce on regional matters, often leads to a sense that Abu Dhabi is working from some form of master plan formulated by the Bani Fatima – i.e. that its policies are shaped by a long-term strategic vision. Yet this may be misleading, or at least conflates a broad vision for the region with a carefully defined strategy.

From the full set of interviews with UAE officials, foreigners who have worked for the UAE government, analysts, diplomats and other foreign officials with experience of working in the UAE, a picture of MbZ's governing style has emerged in the research process for this paper. The crown prince relies on a small inner circle of trusted advisers – about a dozen people in total, in many accounts – to provide him with policy options and to make the case for their individual points of view. This process includes input from diplomats working abroad – who can give a sense of the likely impact of decisions in foreign capitals – and research and analysis commissioned from UAE ministries and the constellation of consultancies, think-tanks and research centres that have taken root in the UAE over the past decade.

Most prominent among these advisers are four of MbZ's full brothers: the ministers of foreign affairs (Abdullah) and presidential affairs (Mansour), national security adviser (Tahnoun) and intelligence chief (Hazza). Hamdan, the eldest of the Bani Fatima who was once seen as the *de facto* leader of the group, has been somewhat marginalized since the mid-2000s for reasons that remain opaque and are the subject of wide speculation. Members of the Bani Mouza – the sons of another of Sheikh Zayed's wives – also hold key roles both at the federal level and within the Abu Dhabi Executive Council. Particularly influential are Saif bin Zayed, the interior minister, and Hamed, the managing director of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority. The rise of the Bani Fatima has coincided with an easing-out of the old guard from key ministries – many of them tied to Sheikh Khalifa – and the recruitment of a new cadre of civil servants whose outlook transcends tribalism and political loyalty. One UAE official commented:

Part of our approach to grappling [new regional realities] has been a growing empowerment of experts and technocrats in our government. Our leaders take a much more balanced, deliberate, consultative approach than they are sometimes given credit for by outside observers.<sup>90</sup>

The priority for MbZ is to have competent individuals in key positions. 'Sheikh Mohammed invests in individuals who can achieve impact as much he does institutions that can implement,' according to one formerly UAE-based consultant who cited as examples Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador to the US, along with figures like Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, the CEO and managing director of Mubadala Investment Company, Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund, and chairman of City Group, the holding company for Manchester City and other football clubs, which has become an important instrument of the UAE's 'soft' power.<sup>91</sup> Ali al-Shamsi, the UAE's intelligence chief, also

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<sup>90</sup> Author interview, senior UAE official, May 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Author interview, UAE-based consultant, September 2018.



plays an important role.<sup>92</sup> Some observers argue, however, that there is a distinction between the relative influence of the Bani Fatima, other royals and the so-called *muwathafeen*, or ‘employees’ of the al-Nahyan.<sup>93</sup>

The UAE also relies on external talent to fill capacity gaps of the kind that are common in young and fast-developing countries. The higher reaches of the UAE military include Mike Hindmarsh, the commander of the UAE Presidential Guard (which includes the country’s Special Forces, which have played a key role in military operations abroad). In the economic field, Maurizio La Noce, the former CEO of the oil and gas division of Mubadala, is said to be an important confidant of the crown prince. Furthermore, the Bani Fatima have come to rely on a number of ‘fixers’, as described by one former consultant: individuals with ties to influential figures and groups abroad. Perhaps most prominent among these is Mohammed Dahlan, the former security chief of Gaza, who is now an ‘adviser’ to MbZ. As one Western official put it, Dahlan is ‘seemingly everywhere right now’, from Gaza, Egypt and Libya to Serbia and Somalia.<sup>94</sup>

Diplomats, UAE officials and others have all observed that a core challenge for Abu Dhabi is that the number of people involved in decision-making is very small and thus at times overstretched: a consensus figure is that around 10–20 people are positioned to propose and debate policy with MbZ, who is in practice the ultimate decision-maker. ‘The decision-makers don’t get much sleep,’ in the words of one UAE official.<sup>95</sup> This can create policy vacuums, and a sense of disconnect among civil servants whose job it is to work on research, analysis and policy formulation.<sup>96</sup> Particularly when Abu Dhabi is dealing with multiple crises, its way of operating tends to become more tactical and reactive.

There can be drift, too, on some issues. In Libya, for instance, UAE ally Khalifa Haftar’s advance on Tripoli in mid-2019 may have come as a result of Saudi and US encouragement, and Abu Dhabi was, by multiple accounts, caught somewhat unawares. On other matters there has been overreaction. For example, when the Somali authorities impounded UAE funds in Mogadishu in April 2018, the UAE effectively pulled out of the country and doubled down on its relationships with the breakaway provinces. With hindsight, many Emirati officials now reportedly concede that this was an overreaction, and one that handed the advantage to the UAE’s rival, Qatar.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Author interviews, two Western diplomats, one regional observer, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Author interview, former royal court adviser, May 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Author interview, Western official, September 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Author interview, senior UAE official, May 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Author interviews, three Western officials, two analysts, three UAE officials, February 2017–June 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

Summary table: The UAE and its neighbourhood: foreign and national security policy in aspect

Country	Thematic area	Nature of ruling government	Relationship with central government	Military position	Economic position	Chief rival(s)	Key local allies	Alignment with other regional/international players	Alignment with Western governments
<b>Afghanistan</b>	Counterterrorism cooperation	Internationally backed, nominally technocratic government	Good	Small special forces contingent operates alongside US forces	Some investments	AQ/ISIS	US and Afghan government. Contacts with Taliban leadership	Close alignment with US/international interests	
<b>Algeria</b>	North Africa	In transition after 2019 protests bringing about resignation of long-time President Bouteflika	Growing ties between Abu Dhabi and ruling elite	No military presence	No major investments	AQ/ISIS		Close alignment with Egypt across North Africa	
<b>Bahrain</b>	Gulf/Iran/Arab uprisings	Sunni monarchy with close ties to Saudi Arabia	Increasingly close ties with the ruling Al Khalifa	Sent forces as part of Peninsula Shield power projection in 2011; no military presence	Growing investments in infrastructure	Shia-led parties, alleged Iran-backed militants	Al Khalifa family	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Djibouti</b>	Trade		Deteriorated rapidly after 2015–16 dispute over ports, military basing	No military presence	DP World pushed out of port in 2016	Muslim Brotherhood	No major allies	Increasingly important player in the Horn of Africa	Increasingly important player in the Horn of Africa
<b>Egypt</b>	Arab uprisings/Muslim Brotherhood	Military establishment-led government run by elected president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	Close ties with Sisi government, some tensions over failed government reforms	Close military cooperation; UAE special forces have a small footprint in Sinai	Wide-ranging investments including in New Administrative Capital project	Muslim Brotherhood, AQ/ISIS.	Regime	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	Cooperation with US military across the region
<b>Eritrea</b>	Horn of Africa	Authoritarian government	Attempting to rehabilitate international reputation alongside Saudi Arabia; helped mediate pact with Ethiopia	Military/naval/air base at Assab port, key logistical hub for operations in Yemen	Intention to invest	Iran-linked political insiders	Regime	Working to rehabilitate Eritrea internationally	Working to rehabilitate Eritrea internationally

Country	Thematic area	Nature of ruling government	Relationship with central government	Military position	Economic position	Chief rival(s)	Key local allies	Alignment with other regional/international players	Alignment with Western governments
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Horn of Africa	Authoritarian government	Improving; helped mediate pact with Eritrea	No military presence	Seen as a major potential market	Muslim Brotherhood	Regime	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Iran</b>	Iran	Islamic Republic with elected president overseen by Supreme Leader, key role for military establishment	Abu Dhabi is a strong critic of Tehran, and lobbied against Iran nuclear deal in 2016	No military presence	Major trade partner	Regime	No notable allies	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Iraq</b>	Iran/counterterrorism	Internationally backed government led by Mustafa al-Kadhimi	Cordial; Abu Dhabi sees Baghdad as too closely aligned with Tehran	Some support for police force	Some investments	AQ/ISIS	US/government	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Jordan</b>	Model for military, counterterrorism	Monarchy with close ties to Saudi Arabia, key regional US ally	Close ties between King Abdullah and MbZ; some tensions over Muslim Brotherhood presence	Close military cooperation	Major trade partner	Muslim Brotherhood	Regime	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Kuwait</b>	Regional alliance	Monarchy with strong role for parliament	Good – although not great – relations	No military presence	Limited trade, cross-country investment	Muslim Brotherhood	Regime	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Libya</b>	Arab Spring/Muslim Brotherhood/terrorism	Rival governments, internationally backed Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli	UAE officially recognizes GNA but actively supports its rival, the east-Libya-based LAAF	UAE allegedly supports and advises LAAF	No major investments	Misrata-based Islamist factions, AQ/ISIS	LAAF, affiliated Salafist groups	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, France; Washington sceptical of Russian role; has allegedly violated UN sanctions regime	
<b>Morocco</b>	Regional alliances/Arab uprisings/Muslim Brotherhood/Counterterrorism	Monarchy with strong role for parliament, elected government	Growing tensions between King Mohammed and MbZ	No military presence	Large-scale investment in real estate	Muslim Brotherhood	Monarchy/business elite		

Country	Thematic area	Nature of ruling government	Relationship with central government	Military position	Economic position	Chief rival(s)	Key local allies	Alignment with other regional/international players	Alignment with Western governments
<b>Oman</b>	Historical tensions	Autocratic monarchy	Long-standing tensions following earlier border dispute	No military presence	Strong cross-border trade	Regime	Alleged ties to some members of royal family, military establishment		
<b>Qatar</b>	Historical tensions/Muslim Brotherhood	Autocratic monarchy	Severed ties in 2017	No military presence	Trade cut off, other than Dolphin gas pipeline	Regime/Muslim Brotherhood	n/a	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, in defiance of Western allies	
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	Historical tensions/Muslim Brotherhood	Autocratic monarchy	Close ties between MbZ and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS); tensions between civil services	No military presence	Deepening trade ties	'Conservative forces'	MbS and inner circle	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US	
<b>Somalia</b>	Horn of Africa/Muslim Brotherhood	Elected president in Mogadishu, effectively autonomous governments in Somaliland, Puntland	Deep tensions between federal president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ('Farmaajo') and Abu Dhabi; deepening ties with autonomous regions	UAE was training special forces, military presence in Somaliland/Puntland	DP World investment in Puntland, Somaliland ports	Muslim Brotherhood, AQ/ISIS/al-Shabaab	Local political, armed actors; Puntland and Somaliland governments		
<b>Sudan</b>	Horn of Africa/Muslim Brotherhood/Iran	Military led transitional government	Key backer of military junta, later supporter of civilian-military government	Sudanese forces work alongside UAE military on the ground in Yemen	Large injections of capital into Sudanese economy since 2019 uprising	Muslim Brotherhood	Military junta	Closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, US pushback against support for regime	
<b>Syria</b>	Arab uprisings/Iran	Authoritarian government	First Gulf state to reopen its embassy in Damascus, closed since 2012	No military presence	UAE firms reported to be considering investments	Muslim Brotherhood, AQ/ISIS, Iran	Assad regime	Increasingly carving own path	

Country	Thematic area	Nature of ruling government	Relationship with central government	Military position	Economic position	Chief rival(s)	Key local allies	Alignment with other regional/international players	Alignment with Western governments
<b>Tunisia</b>	Arab Spring/ Muslim Brotherhood	Elected coalition government led by Elyes Fakhfakh	Deepening tensions between Tunis and Abu Dhabi over role of Muslim Brotherhood	No military presence	No major investments	Muslim Brotherhood	Anti-Muslim Brotherhood forces	Increasingly carving own path	
<b>Turkey</b>	Muslim Brotherhood	Increasingly authoritarian elected government with Muslim Brotherhood ideology	Deep tensions, particularly since 2017 coup attempt in Ankara	No military presence	Strong trade ties, despite political tensions	Muslim Brotherhood	Military allies	Unclear	Unclear
<b>Yemen</b>	Arab Spring/ Muslim Brotherhood/ terrorism/Iran	Internationally recognized President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi based in Riyadh; prime minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed; northwest of country, including Sanaa, controlled by Houthi rebels	Deep tensions between Abu Dhabi and President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, particularly since August 2019 fighting in Aden	Key player in Saudi-led coalition; main external player on the ground in south Yemen	Investment in power generation, telecommunications	Muslim Brotherhood, AQ/ISIS/Houthi rebels, Iran	Southern separatist, salafist groups	Increasingly carving own path	Wariness among some over role

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## 7. Emerging Alliances

Among the greatest shifts in UAE foreign policy over the past decade has been in Abu Dhabi's relationship with Riyadh, which has transformed from one of quiet mistrust to a close – if nuanced – working relationship.

As is discussed elsewhere in this paper, the UAE had long regarded Saudi Arabia as being among the greatest threats to its national security. '[W]hile publicly expressing close ties with Riyadh, the UAE privately regards the Kingdom as its second greatest security threat after Iran,' US diplomats noted in a 2009 diplomatic cable.<sup>98</sup> The cable, later published by WikiLeaks, noted heightening tensions between the more assertive Bani Fatima and Saudi Arabia under the then King Abdullah. MbZ is said to have had a strained relationship with Mohammed bin Nayef, Saudi Arabia's powerful deputy interior minister and subsequently interior minister. In another cable, US diplomats reported that MbZ had raised the possible repercussions in the event of state collapse in Saudi Arabia with them – a possibility that had been mooted in the context of running battles between Saudi state forces and Al-Qaeda cells in previous years.<sup>99</sup>

*After 2011 the UAE and Saudi Arabia became more closely aligned, initially as a response to the Arab uprisings, and subsequently through the strong relationship between MbZ and Mohammed bin Salman.*

After 2011, however, the UAE and Saudi Arabia became more closely aligned, initially as a response to the Arab uprisings, and subsequently through the strong relationship between MbZ and Mohammed bin Salman (commonly referred to as MbS), who since his father's ascension to the throne in 2015 has become the centre of gravity in Saudi political life, assuming a role similar to MbZ's own in the UAE. 'The boss talks to him regularly, and I think he values his counsel,' said one Emirati official who also made the case that MbZ has been particularly influential when it comes to his Saudi counterpart's views on the Muslim Brotherhood, which MbS is said to have seen as a potential ally during the early days of his father's reign.<sup>100</sup> In 2018 the inaugural meeting was held of the Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council,<sup>101</sup> co-chaired by the two crown princes, which builds on an earlier security cooperation pact to deepen administrative ties between the two countries.

Operationally, however, some Saudi officials quietly say that they struggle with their Emirati counterparts, particularly on critical issues such as Yemen.<sup>102</sup> And indeed, there has been a clear change in the discourse around MbS and Saudi Arabia since 2018, with talk of the 'UAE model'

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<sup>98</sup> Wikileaks (2009), 'A Long Hot Summer for UAE-Saudi Relations', 15 October 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI981\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI981_a.html) (accessed 15 May 2020). 'This is based on historic enmity between the tribes of the Najd and the Maliki Bedouin/merchants of the UAE, as well as deep-seated if rarely articulated anxiety about what might happen if Saudi Arabia came under a more fundamentalist regime than the Sudairi/Abdullah [i.e. the incumbent] reign,' the author adds.

<sup>99</sup> Wikileaks (2009), 'MBZ Meeting with Senior Advisor on Iraq Jeffrey', 15 October 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05ABUDHABI4308\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05ABUDHABI4308_a.html) (accessed 15 May 2020). 'One of the reasons the UAE maintains close ties with the Saudi royal family is because "anybody who replaces the Al Saud would be a nightmare," MbZ said, adding, "we have to help them help themselves."

<sup>100</sup> Author interview, UAE official, April 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Saudi Arabia Ministry of Economy and Planning (2020), 'The Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council', [https://www.mep.gov.sa/en/Pages/KSA\\_UAE.aspx](https://www.mep.gov.sa/en/Pages/KSA_UAE.aspx) (accessed 22 Feb. 2020).

<sup>102</sup> Author interview, Saudi official, October 2018.

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dampened and Emirati officials more willing to express frustration with Riyadh – notably, for example, after the assassination of the Saudi journalist and *Washington Post* commentator Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in October 2018. By mid-2019 divergent UAE and Saudi positions in Libya, Sudan and, most importantly, Yemen had become increasingly visible, in the telling of regional officials and Western diplomats. An escalation of violence in southern Yemen, in which UAE-backed secessionists captured the port city of Aden, was regarded by many as a potential breaking point. The UAE subsequently drew down its presence in Yemen in response to criticisms from the internationally recognized Yemeni government and, likely, a desire to concentrate its military resources at home amid rising US–Iran tensions. The relationship between the two crown princes was still said to be cordial, and it was seen as likely that both sides would make efforts to repair the relationship. Senior Emirati leaders feel that they have ‘no choice’ but to continue to bet on MbS, and thus to support his present role and future reign, considering him the one best able to shift Saudi Arabia towards greater social and economic openness and less religiosity.<sup>103</sup>

Other key partners for the UAE include Egypt and Jordan. Yet the emirates have apparently met some resistance from the deeply entrenched military-political elite in Egypt, who were not receptive to UAE attempts to help build internal capacity or even disperse Gulf-pledged funds for projects that would help boost the Egyptian economy in the wake of the 2013 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi.<sup>104</sup> Officials in Amman, for their part, have at times quietly complained to Western counterparts that the Gulf states’ approach to regional political competition – including the UAE’s – is proving dangerously destabilizing, particularly since 2017 in the context of the rift within the GCC.<sup>105</sup> Tensions with Amman are also reported to have grown in 2019 since Haya bint al-Hussein, a sister of King Abdullah of Jordan, and wife of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, fled the UAE for London, where she has levelled a series of explosive claims against the Dubai leader.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps the reason the UAE is confident in its ability to ruffle the feathers of its allies from time to time is that it can rely on the skills and sure-footedness of its diplomats – especially on the front line – and its strong direct relationships with heads of state rather than government-to-government relations.

Perhaps the reason the UAE is confident in its ability to ruffle the feathers of its allies from time to time is that it can rely on the skills and sure-footedness of its diplomats – especially on the front line – and its strong direct relationships with heads of state rather than government-to-government relations. Emirati diplomats abroad often lead relatively small teams who are deeply embedded in the political systems in which they operate, supported by a similarly skilled team of strategic communications workers. And the willingness of senior UAE figures to engage directly with their counterparts abroad, what one diplomat formerly based in Abu Dhabi referred to as ‘WhatsApp diplomacy’, also plays an important role in sustaining engagement.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Author interview, two Western officials, May, July 2019.

<sup>104</sup> In the telling of two consultants involved in this process, the entrenched elite in Cairo was not pleased with the young Emirati technocrats who were sent to implement new practices that would have eroded patronage networks within the Egyptian civil service, like contract awards to key allies.

<sup>105</sup> Author interviews, two Western officials, one regional observer, July 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Author interview, Western official, March 2019.



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According to one former senior US national security policymaker, in line with comments from other Western diplomats and officials: ‘The UAE is very, very smart about how the US works, and is not scared to act as an operator in its own right in DC.’<sup>108</sup> The same official pointed to the role of Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE’s ambassador in Washington, who is often depicted there – by government officials and lawmakers alike – less as a foreign diplomat and more as a trusted adviser. One analyst who regularly briefs lawmakers and officials in Washington noted: ‘It is not rare for me to talk to people about an issue where the UAE is involved and hear “Well Yousef says ...” – he is ubiquitous.’<sup>109</sup> Otaiba is said to have been one of the first foreign diplomats in Washington to establish a line of contact with the Trump administration, through the president’s son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner. (Kushner himself would later be criticized for his relationship with MbS – a relationship that Otaiba helped foster.) Moreover, as a former foreign affairs adviser to MbZ, Otaiba is understood to have a direct line to the crown prince.

This, in the view of one analyst based in the Gulf region, is in keeping with the UAE’s broader approach to the conduct of diplomacy and foreign policy – using a select group of smart, capable people who are trusted by MbZ and his inner circle to collect and transmit information:

They want to take the Otaiba model and export it to all most important embassies. It gives you a window into how they want to frame their relationships. They have to be in control at all times.<sup>110</sup>

And this personality-centric way of working may also explain why Otaiba was able to maintain his position in Washington in 2017 despite the opprobrium directed towards him personally as the Qatar crisis, in which he was seen as having played a key role, deepened. (He has been accused by his detractors of driving anti-Qatar sentiment in Washington, in part by sponsoring think-tanks, events and other activities that promote a UAE world view.)

At times, the UAE has been accused of overstretch, and some of its more activist tendencies have attracted controversy among the UAE’s Western partners when they impact on their own politics. Reported meetings between Russian intermediaries and representatives of then-president-elect Trump brokered by the UAE and Erik Prince, the founder of the private security group Blackwater, were scrutinized as part of the Mueller investigation into alleged Russian influence-gathering efforts.<sup>111</sup> MbZ is also reported to have met with Trump shortly after his election in 2016, flying to the US without informing members of the outgoing Obama administration.<sup>112</sup> And indeed, MbZ’s Abu Dhabi has been unafraid to take action that is not directly in keeping with international norms, including those agreed on by the UN Security Council (although this of course is no different from the way some Security Council members themselves act). Its support for the rebel Libyan military leader Khalifa Haftar – who is battling rival militias and military units allegedly backed by Qatar – runs counter to the Security Council position on the political process in Libya, and could contravene an increasingly scrutinized Security Council arms embargo.<sup>113</sup> The construction of the UAE military base around the Eritrean deep-water port at Assab, and Abu Dhabi’s reputed ties with Eritrea’s military leadership,

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<sup>108</sup> Author interview, US official, May 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Author interview, Western analyst, September 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Author interview, Western analyst, July 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Gambrell, J. (2019), ‘Powerful Emirati Crown Prince Entangled by Mueller Report’, Associated Press, 19 April 2019, <https://apnews.com/bbdc17a88bf54f968495c1212a509a02> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Reuters (2015), ‘U.N. wants clarification of report UAE broke Libya arms embargo’, 12 November 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-emirates-un/u-n-wants-clarification-of-report-uae-broke-libya-arms-embargo-idUSKCN0T209N20151113> (accessed 15 May 2020).

may also be in breach of Security Council sanctions – as may be the use of Sudanese soldiers, equipped and possibly given additional training by the UAE, in the Yemen war.<sup>114</sup> UAE officials concede that they are being forced to deal with mounting international media scrutiny.<sup>115</sup>

Amid a perceived US drawdown in the region, and mounting scrutiny of the UAE in the Western press, Abu Dhabi is also building its economic and diplomatic relations with other global powers, most notably Russia, China and India. MbZ's relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin has been a source of intrigue and speculation in Western diplomatic circles since the mid-2010s. Xi Jinping made a state visit to the UAE in 2018 – the first by a Chinese premier in almost three decades – and MbZ made a reciprocal visit to China the following year. MbZ is also understood to have built a strong relationship Narendra Modi since the latter became India's prime minister in 2014. While economic ties are an important component of all these relationships, Western diplomats and regional observers note that there appears to be a particular commonality between MbZ and Putin, whose model of authoritarianism more closely aligns with the UAE's own internal workings. However, when pressed on what model the UAE sees as best matching its own aspirations, an official says:

While we are constantly honing our processes, we are also confident in our system. We know that there are other systems that work for other countries, but in our situation we need to deliver for our people in a different way, with different expectations for success as a government. We strive to be a constructive and principled partner in the region and the world, and I think we have slowly built that reputation.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Kirkpatrick, D. (2018), 'On the Front Line of the Saudi War in Yemen: Child Soldiers From Darfur', *New York Times*, 28 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/africa/saudi-sudan-yemen-child-fighters.html> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>115</sup> Author interview, UAE official, February 2019.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

## 8. Case Study: The UAE and Yemen

Along with its support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya, perhaps the most visible manifestation of the UAE's more assertive foreign/national security policy in the region has been its involvement in the Yemen war. Whereas in Libya the UAE is one of a number of parties supporting Haftar, in Yemen Abu Dhabi was for a number of years the main backer of southern secessionist and Salafist forces in the south of the country. As in other cases described in this paper, while the UAE's involvement in Yemen might appear to be part of a comprehensive regional strategy, it has also in many ways been developed through tactical circumstances rather than careful planning. The sudden drawdown of forces in mid-2019 in response to international media criticism of its role and the heightened threat of a regionalized war with Iran also demonstrates the speed with which decision-makers can adjust their approach.

### **Before the Arab uprisings: business as usual**

Before 2011, the UAE had a relatively conventional relationship with the Sanaa regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was seen as an ally – albeit not always a trustworthy one. One of Zayed's early overseas initiatives was a project to rebuild Yemen's Mareb dam, in what is said to be the al-Nahyans' ancestral homeland. Saleh came to power as the project gathered momentum in 1978. Southern Yemeni merchants, particularly those from Hadramawt province in the east, had long cultivated business links in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and many more southerners left for the emirates after the socialist takeover in South Yemen in the 1960s, taking up positions in business, the police and the emirates' militaries.

From the early 2000s, the UAE became more involved in discussions around security sector reform in Yemen, with the emergence there of a new military and security elite clustered around members of Saleh's family. Economic ties also grew, as liberal-minded economic officials and the 'young reformers' close to Saleh's son Ahmed Ali (who also led the elite Republican Guard, the main beneficiary of the Jordanian training scheme) moved to open up Yemen's economy. In 2008 DP World, the Dubai ports operator, entered into a joint venture with the Yemeni state-owned Yemen Gulf of Aden Ports Company to run the port of Aden, as part of an ambitious regional expansion drive through which DP World also took over management of Djibouti port.<sup>117</sup> According to one former Yemeni diplomat with ties to the Saleh family, relations before the 2011 uprisings were 'normal' for the region, adding that Ahmed Ali, who in the years before the 2011 Arab uprisings was being prepared to succeed his father, while encouraging economic reform in Yemen, enjoyed a particularly close relationship with MbZ and his inner circle.

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<sup>117</sup> The deal caused some controversy at the time because it was not tendered publicly, as had been the plan for Aden. Instead, DP World entered into a second joint venture with Saudi Arabia's Bugshan Group to form Dubai Ports Investments Aden, which was incorporated in Yemen and as such could enter into the wider joint venture agreement with minimal public scrutiny. The agreement was dissolved in 2013 by President Hadi, who argued that DP World had not met the terms of the deal.

## The Arab uprisings and Islah

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings spread quickly to Yemen, with large protests erupting against the Saleh regime. Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party, which has a Muslim Brotherhood wing, joined the protests. Al Jazeera covered the uprising intensively (as it did the other uprisings in the region), leading Saleh to blame Qatar for the unrest. The protests swiftly descended into running street battles between Saleh loyalists and Islah supporters and allies, and by the end of 2011 Saleh had effectively been pushed out. He formally ceded power to his vice-president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, under the terms of a transition agreement brokered by the GCC; the deal was largely overseen by Saudi Arabia and the UN.

Three activists who were involved in the 2011 uprisings describe being invited during the transition to meetings at the UAE embassy in Sanaa, where they were encouraged to engage in anti-Islah activities.<sup>118</sup> The focus at the time, they say, was limited to ensuring Islah did not become the dominant political player in Sanaa. By the account of one northern Yemen activist who became a regular visitor to the embassy:

The main thing was that you attack Islah. If you did that, there was going to be plenty of support. It was very clear from early on that they did not want Islah in power, and in 2012, 2013 there was a feeling that that was a possibility.<sup>119</sup>

When, in 2014, the rebel Houthis began to make their way from their northern heartlands south towards Sanaa, the UAE position was unclear. It was widely speculated at the time that President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi was attempting to set Islah and the Houthis against one another in the hope that they would both be terminally weakened – an approach that may have been attractive to Abu Dhabi. The Houthis entered Sanaa with relative ease in September 2014, however, and Islah-linked military and police units and militias chose to stand down after Hadi refused to declare war on the Houthis or send loyalist military units into battle with them, effectively handing the group – and their quiet backer, former president Saleh – control of the capital.

## Civil war: happenstance success

In March 2015 Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a 10-country military coalition, including the member states of the GCC other than Oman. Operation 'Decisive Storm' was initiated by a blistering aerial campaign against Houthi–Saleh military positions, but did not at first prevent the rebels and loyalists of the former president from gaining more ground. The Saudi intervention reportedly came as a surprise to many of the kingdom's allies, who were given around 24 hours' notice of the campaign. In the telling of one Western official: 'They were not quite as surprised as us, but it still took them aback that they were suddenly part of this military coalition.'<sup>120</sup> Yet the UAE was to become Riyadh's principal coalition partner on the ground, even if the two rarely worked in lockstep. Abu Dhabi's support for local forces produced the majority of battlefield successes against the Houthis in Yemen, and its allies in the south went on to form a powerful new political bloc. In the north, tribal–Islamist forces backed by Riyadh have been less successful. The UAE's military reputation has been enhanced by its involvement in Yemen, but this was in reality more by happenstance than based on carefully calibrated strategy.

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<sup>118</sup> Author interviews, three 2011-era Yemeni activists, August 2018–January 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Author interview, 2011-era Yemeni activist, October 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Author interview, Western official, April 2017.

When the war broke out, the key fronts were in Mareb, Aden and Taiz. A major issue for the coalition in the early days of the conflict was understanding exactly who was fighting on the ground, in Aden in particular. Although the Hadi government claimed to be in control of the ‘Southern Resistance’, the task of defending the south was undertaken by a mix of local southern secessionist and Salafist fighters with limited support from Hadi. Operations to oust the Houthis from Aden and the wider south were largely conceived of, planned and executed by the elite, US-trained Special Forces unit of the UAE Presidential Guard. Later, the UAE would help train, equip and deploy forces to help retake other southern governorates.

The UAE’s decision to involve itself in the war in Yemen was seen as being part of a wider campaign of relationship-building between MbZ and Saudi Arabia’s then newly installed defence minister, MbS. But UAE officials claim that a big part of the calculation was the ambition to reverse the trend of Iranian expansionism in the region. A foothold for Iran on the Arabian Peninsula was also a step too far, according to one Emirati diplomat:

A lot of the decision to go to Yemen was to do with Iran. The way we see the last 20 years is of Iranian expansion. They had three capitals [Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus] and Yemen was next. And Yemen was a big red line. We couldn’t allow this to happen in our back yard. Our presence in Yemen isn’t about Saudi Arabia *per se* but the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia.

All the same, the UAE has charted its own course in Yemen since the Houthis’ ouster from the south. Indeed, by 2016 the UAE appear to have effectively decided that its main focus would be counterterrorism initiatives and a quiet campaign against Islah, only returning to the forefront of the wider war in early 2018. In the interim, the UAE focused on building up local forces that it sponsored on the ground. Its primary allies were southern secessionist groups who came into mounting conflict with the Hadi government, as well as quietist Salafist forces. The UAE’s continued presence on the ground in southern Yemen, and its sponsorship of local groups, had several overlapping effects. It helped foster rivalry between the Hadi government and the secessionist forces the UAE sponsors, resulting in a battles for control of Aden in January 2018 and again in August 2019. It has empowered Salafist forces there that stand accused in some cases of ties to Al-Qaeda. And, particularly in US military circles, it has burnished the UAE’s reputation as a capable military force. Meanwhile, it has also led to growing anti-UAE sentiment not just in the Houthi-controlled northwest and the Islah-dominated north, but also among many southerners.

Before 2011, Abu Dhabi was unused to having its actions scrutinized with any regularity in Washington or London. But its involvement in Yemen, along with Libya, has changed that, and not everyone within the UAE system was ready for the shift.

The Yemen war also played into Abu Dhabi’s attempts to build national identity within the UAE itself, even after a Houthi attack in Mareb in September 2015 that left 45 Emirati soldiers dead, just a year after a new national service law had introduced mandatory military service for Emirati men under 30 years of age.

A key lesson for the UAE in Yemen meanwhile has, according to one official, been the need to improve its strategic communications.<sup>121</sup> Before 2011, Abu Dhabi was unused to having its actions scrutinized with any regularity in Washington or London. But its involvement in Yemen, along with Libya, has changed that, and not everyone within the UAE system was ready for the shift.<sup>122</sup> Even if Abu Dhabi can convince policymakers and other officials of the UAE's positive role – as it has seemingly done in Washington, for instance – general publics in the West generally remain highly sceptical.

This lesson was learned particularly acutely in 2018, when UAE-backed Yemeni forces pushed up the western Red Sea coast towards the port city of Hodeida, eventually encircling it despite UN-led attempts to prevent a battle for this vital trade hub (on which an estimated 11 million Yemenis depended). The US intervened both to prevent an assault and to push the Hadi government into accepting a deal – the Stockholm Agreement of December 2018 – to demilitarize Hodeida. Having argued for years that it could win the battle for Hodeida, the UAE only came to realize both the likely scale of the military challenge and the public relations fallout in the event of a fight for Hodeida. In a clear demonstration of the speed with which UAE decision-makers can adjust strategy, by mid-2019 the Emirati forces had begun dismantling their presence on the Red Sea coast. Whereas when the demilitarization was first proposed Abu Dhabi had been against it, six months later it would claim that the drawdown was in support of the Stockholm Agreement.

Even as the UAE began to formally withdraw from Yemen, its local allies attracted controversy. In August 2019 secessionist forces of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces initiated a battle for Aden that resulted in a complete takeover of the city, and attempts by STC-affiliated forces to push into government-held territory in neighbouring Shabwa and Abyan governorates. A subsequent fightback by government of Yemen forces was undertaken with alleged support from Riyadh, bringing Saudis and the Emiratis into what some speculated was in effect a proxy war in Yemen, although both countries deny this.

### Box 3: A troubling record on domestic and regional human rights

'The United Arab Emirates' intolerance of criticism continued in 2018,' Human Rights Watch stated in its 2019 *World Report*: 'The government continues to arbitrarily detain and forcibly disappear individuals who criticize authorities.'<sup>123</sup>

Both Human Rights Watch and the UN Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)<sup>124</sup> have highlighted the case of prominent pro-democracy activist Ahmed Mansoor, who in 2018 was sentenced to 10 years in prison for 'insulting the "status and prestige of the UAE and its symbols," including its leaders, and seeking to damage the UAE's relationship with its neighbors by publishing false reports and information on social media,' Human Rights Watch said, citing the local newspaper *The National*.

As regards its involvement in Yemen, the UAE has been accused of orchestrating a programme of assassinations against religious leaders in the southern city of Aden, and of overseeing the arbitrary detention and torture of people in areas under control of its local allies. According to Human Rights Watch: '[UAE-backed] forces have

<sup>121</sup> Author interview, UAE official, February 2019.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Human Rights Watch (2019), *United Arab Emirates: Events of 2018*, World Report 2019, New York: Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates> (accessed 14 Apr. 2020).

<sup>124</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2019), 'UAE: UN experts condemn conditions of detention for jailed activist Ahmed Mansoor', 7 May 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24571&LangID=E> (accessed 15 May 2020).

used excessive force during arrests and raids, detained family members of wanted suspects to pressure them to “voluntarily” turn themselves in, arbitrarily arrested and detained men and boys, detained children with adults, and forcibly disappeared dozens.<sup>125</sup>

In October 2018 BuzzFeed News released a report on the activities of Spear Operations Group, a US-registered security firm whose founder, Abraham Golan, was extensively interviewed for the piece.<sup>126</sup> He claimed to have been engaged by the UAE to execute a series of assassinations targeting clerics and others affiliated with Islah, including Anssaf Ali Mayo, the leader of Islah in southern Yemen: ‘There was a targeted assassination program in Yemen ... I was running it. We did it. It was sanctioned by the UAE within the coalition.’<sup>127</sup>

In early 2019 the UAE was accused, along with Saudi Arabia, of inadvertently supplying US arms to Al-Qaeda and the Houthis. In a February 2019 report for CNN, it was stated: ‘Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners have transferred American-made weapons to al Qaeda-linked fighters, hardline Salafi militias, and other factions waging war in Yemen, in violation of their agreements with the United States.’<sup>128</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Human Rights Watch (2017), ‘Yemen: UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces’, 22 June 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/22/yemen-uae-backs-abusive-local-forces> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>126</sup> Roston, A. (2018), ‘A Middle East Monarchy Hired American Ex-Soldiers To Kill Its Political Enemies. This Could Be The Future Of War’, BuzzFeed News, 16 October 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/aramroston/mercenaries-assassination-us-yemen-uae-spear-golan-dahlan> (accessed 15 May 2020).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Elbagir, N., Abdelaziz, S., Abo El Gheit, M., Smith-Spark, L. (2019), ‘Sold to an ally, lost to an enemy’, CNN, 5 February 2019 (accessed 15 May 2020).



## 9. Conclusion

The UAE is a rare example of a state-building project in the Middle East that has seen resource wealth, geostrategic position, institutional development, and a political and economic vision for the future melded to produce both economic development and soft and hard power projection. In many ways, the current group of decision-makers in Abu Dhabi may be victims of their own success: they have built such a commanding position so quickly that they are often overstretched as they attempt to meet new challenges head on.

There is also a risk of hubris born of overconfidence. The UAE's problem in the future, in the view of one diplomat interviewed as part of the research that has informed this paper, is that it 'has never lost' in the past two decades, and has escaped meaningful censure abroad even when its actions have been impulsive and destabilizing to its partners' interests. And there have been costs at home, too. In particular, the Yemen war has seen Emiratis (most of them from the poorer northern emirates) brought home in body bags, while the UAE economy – Dubai's in particular – has suffered as a result of the blockade of Qatar and the Trump administration's campaign of 'maximum pressure' against Iran.

**The UAE's preference for developmental autocracies led by strongmen who command strong security apparatus and repress free speech is modelled on Abu Dhabi's own evolution. But there is no guarantee that this model is replicable or sustainable.**

The UAE's vision for the region is also quite different from most Western governments' idea of what is needed to build a stable and secure future for the Middle East and North Africa. The UAE's preference for developmental autocracies led by strongmen who command strong security apparatus and repress free speech is modelled on Abu Dhabi's own evolution. But there is no guarantee that this model is replicable or sustainable. Indeed, where it has been piloted in poorer and more populous countries – in Egypt since 2013, for example – the cracks have started to show. Western governments are also well aware that the UAE is increasingly focused on building relationships with the West's geopolitical rivals, like Russia and China, in an attempt to balance both economic and political interests.

Capacity constraints at the senior decision-making level in the UAE are also cause for concern, leading at times to tactical, short-term decisions that are often retrospectively recast as strategy. Like the break with Mogadishu, such decisions can have damaging legacies. So too is the willingness at times to act like a start-up, moving fast and breaking things, particularly given Emirati policymakers' lack of willingness to acknowledge their past missteps. This may be changing, as UAE officials claim, but the Bani Fatima still struggle to deal with increased public scrutiny and will need to learn that strategic communications only go so far.

Western governments still have an opportunity to influence Abu Dhabi, but should bear in mind that they are no longer in a position to explain the way the world works to its leaders, who describe their Western interlocutors as being, at times, patronizing on issues the latter do not fully understand. The UAE increasingly sees its relationship with the West as one of equals, and Western diplomats would do well to recognize this. They should also understand that, while the UAE has institutions of state,

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it is individuals who need to be lobbied and convinced on key policy issues. The UAE's allies should also understand where their leverage lies, and be willing to use it. Notably, the UAE is acutely aware of its international image. It has attempted to isolate Qatar, has been accused of funding coups abroad, and has attempted to influence Western governments, including the US, outside of conventional diplomatic channels. But there has been no punitive response, in part because of Western fears over the loss of an important partner. But if they believe that the UAE is a robust and mature partner, they will have to be more willing to push back.

## About the Author

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