



The Arab Gulf States  
Institute in Washington  
Building bridges of understanding



## The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy

Hussein Ibish



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## Executive Summary

Confronted with serious challenges, but also blessed with remarkable assets, the United Arab Emirates has developed a distinctive, and in some ways unprecedented, national security strategy. The UAE is one of the smaller countries in the world, especially demographically, with only about 1.5 million citizens, but is one of the wealthiest per capita. It is the seventh largest international petroleum producer, and possesses about 6 percent of the world's proven oil reserves.<sup>1</sup> It is also located in a highly strategic and volatile neighborhood, along the southeastern coast of the Gulf, bordering Saudi Arabia and Oman. Its northernmost point thrusts into the waters near a crucial maritime chokepoint, the Strait of Hormuz, and is separated from Iran by a narrow body of water.

Given its geography, demography, and natural resources, the UAE has had to cope with extraordinarily complex security concerns, and has both limitations and assets that are extremely unusual. From the time of its formation in 1971, the UAE's national leadership recognized that the country's biggest challenge was how to overcome its relatively small population. It sought to do this through careful long-term planning, including systematic economic and military development; investing in the country's human capital, increasingly including women, in all sectors; developing technological solutions and innovations; and importing foreign labor. From its earliest days, the UAE sought to use its financial resources and the soft power of aid and development to build international friendships, promote its perspectives, defend its interests, and enhance its reputation, particularly in Arab and Muslim countries.

The UAE has quietly built its own independent defense capabilities. Over the decades, it has methodically constructed relatively small but sophisticated military assets such as its air force, special forces, and high-tech offensive and defensive weaponry. As this military capability has grown, the country has become more willing to use force, usually in conjunction with some set of allies, to secure its vital interests. And it has deployed these hard power capacities hand in hand with its more traditional soft power approaches. It is also at the beginning stages of developing its own domestic defense industry.

The UAE has carefully nurtured a set of crucial strategic and military alliances, especially with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council members, as well as the United States. The country seeks to do what it can for itself, but recognizes that much of what it needs to accomplish to secure its vital interests will have to be conducted in collaboration with others. The formation of the GCC in 1981 was a direct response to the security crisis facing the Gulf Arab countries due to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1981. The focus of the GCC and its members, including the UAE, at the time of the council's founding until the present day has been the defense of regional security, and stability in the face of threats emanating from Iran and regional conflicts. In important respects, the UAE has developed into Washington's most important Gulf Arab ally, with close military and intelligence cooperation reflecting the trust and respect the Emirati military has earned from senior U.S. commanders.

The UAE's increasing willingness to act militarily to secure its interests is perhaps best reflected in the intervention in Yemen that began in 2015, which is primarily led by Saudi Arabia in the north and the Emirates in the south. To support this campaign, and more broadly acquire greater strategic depth, the UAE has recently established military bases in the Horn of Africa, most notably at Assab in Eritrea. To sustain this strategic expansion, and build on its logic, the UAE will almost certainly have to develop greater bluewater naval capabilities in the coming decades.

In addition to its conventional military capabilities, the UAE is deeply committed to counterterrorism and counterradicalization efforts. Much of its military campaign in southern Yemen focuses on counterinsurgency operations against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and other extremist groups, and the UAE was an early and enthusiastic participant in the air war in Syria against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. The UAE takes the hardest line of any Arab government, with the possible exception of Egypt, against Islamists in general, seeing them all as part of a continuum of radicalism. It does not conflate the Muslim Brotherhood with al-Qaeda and ISIL or pro-Iranian Shia militias, but it does regard them all as different iterations of extremism to be categorically opposed.

In addition to counterterrorism and counterradicalization initiatives, the UAE is investing heavily in cybersecurity, using technology to combat both cyber criminals and, at times, domestic political dissidents. Human rights organizations have raised concerns regarding some of these cases.

This paper tracks the evolution of the Emirati national security strategy as it has emerged in these contexts, emphasizing the following key points:

- Mobilizing all its human and natural resources, as well as technology, to compensate for the country's modest size and small population
- Building its military and other national security-related infrastructure, including cybersecurity
- Seeking strategic depth through overseas military installations and the forward deployment of assets and capabilities
- Emphasizing the centrality of its strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia
- Maintaining close ties with the United States
- Engaging with the global economy and many aspects of emerging globalized culture
- Opposing all forms of radical Islamism
- Making a determined effort to limit the expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab world
- Using "soft power," such as humanitarian or development aid and investments, at times in conjunction with "hard power," to promote its interests
- Maintaining and developing its crucial alliance with GCC member states, other Arab countries, and international partners

This study outlines how these ambitious national security strategy pillars developed and are being pursued. In the process, it examines why the UAE is convinced it has few alternatives to playing a disproportionately significant economic, diplomatic, political, and military regional role, and how it is acting on that conclusion. And, finally, it assesses the impact this growing Emirati role and influence is having on a range of Middle Eastern dynamics, and where the UAE fits in the strategic landscape of this unsettled but still crucial region.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the small Gulf Arab country of the United Arab Emirates has become increasingly prominent, playing major roles in a series of dramatic regional developments. From the battle to unseat the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya, to the struggle in Syria against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, to the dramatic Arab intervention in Yemen, the UAE, a country of just 1.5 million citizens, has seemingly suddenly and out of nowhere begun to play an important regional role not just at the economic, diplomatic, and political registers, but also in military and strategic terms. Yet this perhaps unexpected and arguably even incongruous role for such a small state was, in fact, long in the making. For many years the UAE steadily built its military and strategic strength and positioned itself to play a proactive and dynamic role in defining and defending its national and regional interests.

This path began in earnest following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the UAE's active, if low-key, participation in the anti-Taliban campaign in Afghanistan that followed. As the country developed its capabilities and gained experience, the political earthquake of the Arab Spring uprisings, beginning in Tunisia at the end of 2010, rocked the region. This created a range of challenges and opportunities for the UAE and left a relative paucity of leadership in the Arab world that the Gulf Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had no choice but to fill.

This paper examines the development of the UAE's national security strategy from the establishment of the federation to the present day. It attempts to summarize, contextualize, and encapsulate the growth and aims of one of the most important and dynamic growing powers in the Gulf region and the broader Middle East. This is particularly important as the UAE's role and significance is likely to grow in the coming years.

## The National Security Profile of the UAE

### Core National Realities

The United Arab Emirates is one of the world's smaller countries, both territorially and demographically, but also among its wealthiest per capita. In possession of an estimated 8.1 percent of the world's proven remaining petroleum reserves,<sup>2</sup> it is the fourth largest international oil exporter.<sup>3</sup> But with a very small landmass and population with which to defend that colossal resource – and in the context of a highly unstable and volatile Middle East – the UAE has steadily and systematically crafted a proactive strategy, in partnership with key regional and international allies, to ensure its security and stability. As an integral part of this national approach, the UAE has nurtured the most open and tolerant society in the Gulf



Arab region, allowing the free practice of all religions and increasingly integrating women into social and political leadership roles and the workforce. Because national security is seen as inextricably tied to economic and social development, the UAE government has attempted to pursue all three aims through complementary and, insofar as possible, coordinated policies.

To this end, the UAE has methodically built a disproportionately powerful and technologically advanced military, especially its highly-regarded air forces, potent special forces, and technologically sophisticated weapons. As these capabilities have developed, the UAE has increasingly used its military muscle and other resources to defend and advance its national interests, rather than relying on, and hence deferring to, larger neighbors or global powers. Added to this military strength are formidable capabilities in “soft power,” which it uses to promote its interests and project its influence through global aid, and in public diplomacy through its substantial international profile in fields such as education, science and technology, sports, culture, and the arts.

The UAE is a country<sup>4</sup> of just 32,300 square miles, consisting entirely of land, which is mostly arid, and no rivers, but with two major oases and a 819-mile coastline. There are at least 10 million<sup>5</sup> people living in the federation, but estimates of the percentage of non-citizens, primarily of South Asian origin, among the UAE's population run as high as 85 percent.<sup>6</sup> This high percentage of foreign national residents, and their uneven distribution in the federation, involves several issues closely related to the UAE's long-term internal security concerns. Like several other Gulf Arab countries, the UAE has been willing to accept a far larger percentage of foreign workers than countries with developed industrial economies. This reflects its need for an imported workforce and its ability to pay these workers. However, while these foreign residents contribute enormously to the UAE's economy, society, and culture, and many of the professionals among them enjoy an enviable lifestyle, some among the lower socioeconomic strata remain marginalized.

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*Abu Dhabi is by far the largest of the emirates territorially and possesses about 94 percent of the country's oil reserves.*

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The UAE has moved further<sup>7</sup> and faster than many of its neighbors in liberalizing restrictions on resident foreign nationals by, for example, allowing foreign workers to change jobs<sup>8</sup> without permission and leave the country without obtaining exit visas.<sup>9</sup> But it is still extremely difficult for non-Emiratis, even if both they and their parents were born in the country (some cases now into a third generation), to become citizens, except through some narrow paths, such as marriage or the direct awarding of citizenship by the government. The challenge of hosting a large, permanent resident expatriate population is a crucial issue facing the country. Eventually, the UAE must decide what is to be the future of families that have effectively immigrated without any plausible path of repatriation. This constitutes a major long-term question for the country's social, economic, and political stability, as well as its internal security policies.

This large population of foreign nationals, and their uneven distribution throughout the country, is also partially a reflection of differences within the UAE's federation. Most expatriates live in the country's two major power centers: oil-rich and politically dominant Abu Dhabi and the commercial and financial hub Dubai. Between them, these two emirates lead federal decision making, particularly regarding national security and foreign policy. Abu Dhabi is by far the largest of the emirates territorially and possesses about 94 percent of the country's oil

reserves. Hence it is the primary financier of the UAE, and has a decisive role in shaping many national policies, especially regarding international relations and security, primarily with the close cooperation and consent of Dubai, and secondarily the rest of the emirates.

The other five, more northerly emirates, are, to varying degrees, less cosmopolitan and urban, and tend to be more socially and religiously conservative. Since the country's founding in 1971, the UAE government, particularly the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, has emphasized utilizing technology, foreign labor, and other means to make up for its relatively sparse population. And the rulers of Dubai have long pursued a dynamic strategy to develop their emirate's status as a global commercial and financial center to make up for its relative lack of material resources and small population. While some of the other emirates, most notably Sharjah, are starting to come into their own economically, culturally, and politically, as a federation the UAE remains, and is likely to continue to be, largely dominated at the national level by decision making in Abu Dhabi, in close consultation with Dubai.

## Key Partnerships

The centerpiece of the UAE's foreign policy and national security strategy is its membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council. The UAE joined Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman to establish the council in 1981. There were many reasons for these Gulf Arab monarchies to come together in a loose regional union, including geographical contiguity, linguistic and cultural affinities, family ties, common histories, and a variety of shared economic, political, and security interests. Regional stability, the maintenance of international order, and the protection of the status quo were, and still are, the GCC's main strategic goals.

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The proximate cause for the creation of the GCC was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which meant the largest power in the Gulf region, Iran, was no longer a part of the same U.S.-led, pro-Western camp in the Middle East and the world as the Gulf Arab countries. Even under the shah, Iran had been regarded by the Gulf Arab countries with some suspicion because of its size and power, territorial claims<sup>10</sup> on Bahrain and three islands bitterly contested with the UAE, and its character as a Persian, non-Arab, and Shia power. Sustained attempts by the shah to claim, and even seize control of, Bahrain between 1968 and 1970, which were rebuffed by the United States, marked a low point in Iranian-Gulf Arab relations before the Islamic Revolution and continue to cast a shadow to this day.

After the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini these suspicions grew into a sense of alarm among the Gulf Arab countries, including the UAE, that has steadily intensified since. The Gulf Arab countries fear that Iran is determined to spread its influence and impose its hegemony in the Middle East, the Gulf region in particular, by exporting its revolution, promoting and exploiting conflict, sowing instability and sectarian divisions, and creating or supporting a range of armed nonstate actors and militias. Moreover, they believe these concerns have been fully vindicated by Tehran's consistent policies over almost four decades since the revolution.

This sense of vulnerability at the time of the GCC's founding was significantly exacerbated by the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 with its uncertain outcome and potential for regional destabilization.

As Abdulkhaleq Abdulla notes, given “the turbulent regional events of 1979-80... the typically recalcitrant and normally conservative Arab Gulf States took less than three months (February-May 1981)” to conceptualize, structure, and establish the GCC. He adds that “Such extraordinary speed is practically unheard of in the history of regional integration and is particularly uncharacteristic of the rulers of the six Gulf Arab states whose normal tendency is to procrastinate on a decision with potential ramifications on their sovereignty.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the foundational impulse for Gulf Arab solidarity of the council – which was for its members to circle the wagons in the face of shared security threats, above all those emanating from Iran and stemming from regional conflicts – remains the GCC's highest priority.

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of the UAE's partnership with Saudi Arabia for its national security strategy.<sup>12</sup> While many analyses of UAE security doctrine tend to focus on undeniably vital ties with Washington, relations with Riyadh are even more important for the UAE, particularly in the post-Arab Spring era of regional instability and increased rivalry with Iran. The two countries spearheaded the intervention in Yemen, the most ambitious military campaign in both of their histories. They joined the rest of the GCC states in agreeing at council summits in 2014 and 2015, respectively,<sup>13</sup> to establish and then reaffirm their commitment to create a joint military command.<sup>14</sup> The planned GCC naval force is anticipated to be based in Bahrain, with an additional “Gulf Academy for Strategic and Security Studies” in Abu Dhabi.<sup>15</sup>

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There are limits to how far the UAE is willing to take its partnership with Saudi Arabia, however. It joined with the other GCC states, except Bahrain, in expressing serious reservations about a 2011 Saudi proposal,<sup>16</sup> which was repeated in 2012, to politically integrate the GCC members in a new and much closer political confederation. This disinclination to complete political unity notwithstanding, military and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia remains at the heart of the UAE national security strategy.

There is a misguided tendency outside of the Gulf Arab countries to view the GCC member states as a single, homogenous, integrated polity, at least insofar as foreign policy, and often defense and national security, is concerned. Although Saudi Arabia exercises a disproportionate influence, the six GCC countries all have their own national interests and priorities that inform what are sometimes substantially different, and even occasionally conflicting, perspectives and policies. Each GCC member state's foreign and security policy – except for Bahrain, which now usually follows Riyadh's lead on international relations – must be evaluated on its own terms rather than via sweeping generalizations about the council as a whole. Hence the need for a sustained focus on the specifically Emirati view of national security and regional stability, and the policies that have emerged, and are continuing to develop, based on country-specific priorities that are the bedrock on which the superstructure of the UAE's GCC and other alliances are built.

The UAE is also a long-standing and highly-valued partner of the United States. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the UAE has arguably become Washington's closest Gulf ally, with extensive military and intelligence cooperation, and deep economic ties as the largest U.S. export market in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> The U.S. motivation for maintaining a strong relationship with the Gulf Arab countries stems from two primary considerations. First, many of these countries, including the UAE, are major energy producers that collectively possess a significant percentage of the world's proven oil and natural gas reserves.<sup>18</sup> Second, but closely related, these countries are strategically located in the Gulf region: The majority of the world's exported petroleum must pass through the Gulf waters en route to the global marketplace and many of the most significant U.S. trading partners, particularly in South and East Asia. This oil has long been the metaphorical lifeblood of the international economy.

Therefore, despite consistent claims to the contrary, the strategic significance of the Gulf Arab countries to the interests of the United States as a global power, and to the stability of the international economic and political system, is essentially unaffected by increasing U.S. energy independence. The United States is still the primary guarantor of a global system that depends on oil being produced in these countries, sold at a reasonable rate, and safely shipped through the Gulf waters that surround the GCC states. Other key U.S. concerns, including terrorism, Israeli security, and a range of European interests including the flow of refugees, mean that Washington still regards the Middle East as central to U.S. national security. What the UAE offers the United States in achieving these vital policy goals is outlined in detail throughout this paper.

Yet an apparent consensus has developed in Washington, with the strong backing of the American public, in favor of limiting military interventions in the Middle East and especially avoiding any repetition of nation-building experiments such as those undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan. The stated commitment of the administration of former President Barack Obama during his second-term to a "pivot to Asia," and implicitly away from the Middle East,<sup>19</sup> generated a widespread perception among Washington's Gulf Arab partners that the United States was less ready to act, especially militarily, as the guarantor of the regional order than it has been in the past. Hopes run high in the Gulf, including the UAE, that the administration of President Donald J. Trump will play a more robust and proactive role, but that remains to be seen, and rhetoric so far suggests a continued emphasis on more self-reliance from U.S. allies.

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This greater emphasis on burden sharing means that, for Washington, the role of its Arab partners becomes even more important to the realization of regional policy goals in the Middle East, while ironically, the United States assumes less of a central role for the Gulf states and their national interests. U.S. calls for burden sharing when it comes to Gulf and Middle Eastern regional security are, for reasons of their own, already being met by countries such as the UAE. In its own way, therefore, it has been crafting and implementing an increasingly proactive role in securing its national interests through both hard and soft power initiatives and by seeking greater strategic depth. This approach simultaneously addresses both Emirati security imperatives and Washington's evolving expectations.

## Expanding Regional Role

The growing Emirati willingness to use military force, as well as more traditional tools of Gulf Arab statecraft such as soft power, is reflective of all these developments. The most dramatic and far-reaching instance of this new approach has been the intervention in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia in partnership with the UAE, which is playing a key role with significant numbers of troops in the south of the country. The United States has been privately far more skeptical about the intervention than it has been publicly willing to acknowledge.<sup>20</sup> Similar doubts apply to some of the UAE's other activities in Libya and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the United States has urged the Gulf states to become and remain involved in the military confrontation with ISIL, particularly in Syria, and the UAE was a prominent early participant in the campaign.

Burden sharing in the present moment, therefore, is considerably more meaningful in practice than the largely symbolic and politically-driven Emirati military contributions, for example, to the U.S.-led campaign in Kosovo, and the 1990-91 Desert Storm operation to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. This new level of security self-reliance presents both significant challenges and opportunities for Washington. On the one hand, the proactive military engagement by some Gulf Arab countries such as the UAE in defense of their national interests realizes a long-standing U.S. goal that its allies do more to defend themselves instead of relying on Washington. On the other hand, it inevitably signals a greater independence of decision making by the UAE and others, albeit with a continued expectation of U.S. support, as illustrated by the mission in Yemen. Therefore, the gain of having Gulf Arab partners take action and risk lives in pursuit of Gulf and regional security comes, at least to some extent, at the concomitant cost of diminished U.S. influence over the decision making by those partners.

## Historical Background and National Leadership

The UAE was founded as a confederation of seven emirates as the last phase of British colonialism faded in the Middle East at the end of the 1960s. In 1968, Britain announced that it would no longer guarantee security for its former protectorates in the Gulf region.<sup>21</sup> In 1971, the six Trucial States – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, and Umm al-Quwain – formed the United Arab Emirates, and in 1972 Ras al-Khaimah joined the confederation. Matteo Legrenzi holds that the formation of the UAE was an experiment that ultimately led to the formation of the GCC itself, although he focuses more on disputes between local rulers than on areas of agreement.<sup>22</sup> Bahrain and Qatar were invited to join the UAE in the early 1970s, but they declined, illustrating early limitations to the appeal of creating larger federated structures among the small Gulf polities. Legrenzi and others suggest that Ras al-Khaimah was, at least initially, essentially coerced into joining the UAE.<sup>23</sup>

But the consolidation of the national confederation following independence was neither quick nor simple. As Kristian Coates Ulrichsen argues, “the general direction throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s was towards gradual and incremental cooperation as the very *idea* of the UAE became more deeply embedded in everyday life.”<sup>24</sup> “No one factor in itself led to the widespread acceptance of the Federation,” he adds. Instead it was accomplished by “the passage of time and generational change” along with “steady leadership” and a willingness to compromise, “the utilization of Abu Dhabi’s oil reserves for the Federation,” and external

threats as demonstrated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless it took more than 20 years, beginning in 1976, to fully unify all of the defense forces of the emirates into a single, integrated national armed force. And it "remained a contentious issue throughout the 1980s" during which most of the practical steps for military integration were performed.<sup>26</sup>

The crucial figure in this slow-motion state formation process was the long-standing ruler of Abu Dhabi and the first president of the UAE, Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, who presided over the development of the country until his death on November 2, 2004. His eldest son, Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, succeeded him in both positions. The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (MbZ), holds the title of deputy supreme commander of the UAE forces and, as such, is the de facto minister of defense. The ruler of Dubai traditionally serves as the federation's prime minister and vice president. Since January 2006, Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum (MbR) has held these positions, as well as the honorary post of defense minister. Under MbR's rule, Dubai has become a global hub and major cosmopolitan center for commerce and culture.<sup>27</sup>

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Perhaps the crucial figure in shaping and directing the UAE's evolving foreign and domestic policies has been MbZ. He is widely credited with giving the UAE's policies their overall coherence and guiding vision for at least the past 20 years. Along with the foreign minister (and his full brother), Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, MbZ has, in practice, been charged with crafting and executing UAE foreign policy.<sup>28</sup> The Economist credits him with having "greater UAE-wide power" than the sheikhs of the other emirates "by virtue of his dominant influence over policymaking in Abu Dhabi and the importance of Abu Dhabi within the federation."<sup>29</sup> He has been described as a "president in waiting" for the UAE,<sup>30</sup> a role he may to a large extent already be playing, given the illness of his brother, the titular Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the Federation Khalifa bin Zayed, especially when it comes to shaping policies and maintaining crucial relationships, domestically, regionally, and internationally. MbZ and MbR are reputed to have built a close personal, as well as political, relationship and their partnership has helped guide national policy during the period in which the UAE has emerged into regional and international prominence.

Another notable feature of power structures and decision making in the UAE is the extent to which MbZ has concentrated power in the hands of some of his closest male relatives. His five full brothers all have leading roles: the aforementioned Abdullah bin Zayed; Hazza bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the deputy chairman of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council (the emirate's governing body); National Security Advisor Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan; Hamdan bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the ruler's representative in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi (in effect, the mayor); and Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, minister of presidential affairs and a UAE deputy prime minister. Among MbZ's half-brothers who are closely allied to him are: Saif bin Zayed al-Nahyan, interior minister and another deputy prime minister, and Hamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, chief of the crown prince's court and managing director of Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority. In addition, MbZ's son, Khalid bin Mohammed al-Nahyan, was appointed deputy national security advisor in early 2017, and appears to be being groomed for a future senior leadership role in his generation. In effect, MbZ's brain trust controls the

key positions at the federal and Abu Dhabi emirate level. In a further extension of this process, he has recently appointed a long-time trusted aide, Sultan Al Jaber, to lead the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, which administers the country's oil and gas resources.

The UAE national confederation is officially governed by the Federal Supreme Council, which is a formal consultative assembly of the rulers of all seven of the UAE's emirates.<sup>31</sup> However, in practice, there is little question about the actual distribution of power in the country. This is hinted at in the structure of the partly-elected and partly-appointed Federal National Council, in which Abu Dhabi and Dubai each have eight seats, Ras al-Khaimah and Sharja hold six, and the remaining three emirates have four. The national domestic agenda was generally outlined by the comprehensive and ambitious Vision 2021 program.<sup>32</sup>

## Social Contract and National Identity

This concentration of national power within and close to the ruling family of Abu Dhabi has profound implications for strategic thinking and national security decision making for the UAE. It means that, in effect, the government must balance a delicate series of interdependent and interlocking mutual interests within ever-expanding concentric circles, beginning with the Nahyan family itself, and the interests of the rest of the Abu Dhabi elite, then accommodating the interests more broadly of the Abu Dhabi emirate, then those of the ruling families and elites of the other emirates, particularly Dubai, and finally incorporating the federal national interest as a whole based on the concerns of the citizenry. Because of this governing system and de facto social compact, and because it is structured as a confederation, UAE leaders have been increasingly trying to promote a hegemonic ethos of federal national identity and patriotism among the UAE's citizens.

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The weakness of so many national identities – and the concomitant strength of regional, ethnic, religious, and other subnational identities, or in the case of Islamist and pan-Arab ideologies, supranational affiliations – is one of the key features of the crisis of the modern Arab state. For a confederation such as the UAE, this is particularly a challenge. It is essential, particularly if the country is preparing to mobilize citizen-based military forces that must fight and potentially sacrifice their lives for the country, that the people primarily identify as Emirati, rather than with any specific emirate or, still more dangerously, in pan-Islamic or pan-Arab nationalist terms. Upon independence from Britain, the UAE formed itself largely out of necessity. As a relatively recent political construct it is, in Benedict Anderson's definitive description of modern national consciousness, an "imagined community." The UAE leadership has therefore increasingly seen the programmatic nurturing of national identity and consciousness as a key factor of political stability and security.

The country's Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development<sup>33</sup> is primarily oriented toward promoting national identity,<sup>34</sup> especially among youth, through a variety of programs, festivals, and cultural initiatives, including an annual conference on the subject.<sup>35</sup> In making this task the focus of the ministry, the UAE president declared that, "He who has no identity does not exist in the present, and has no place in the future."<sup>36</sup> This goes at least somewhat beyond most normative contemporary articulations of patriotism, and suggests that, just

as for the Emirati individual, for the state itself the development of a firm national identity is an urgent and existential imperative. The UAE's Vision 2021 National Agenda emphasizes the development of "happiness" and "social and family cohesion" as its two most important key performance indicators, with the latter defined as a "sense of belonging and national identity of citizens... specific to [the] UAE." Second only to "happiness," national identity is performance-indexed above other key goals including human development and social and family cohesion.<sup>37</sup> The government of Dubai is using its formidable Electricity and Water Authority to administer a National Identity Committee to promote this identification,<sup>38</sup> and the Abu Dhabi government's Education Council has made the promotion of national identity and culture a key feature of school curricula.<sup>39</sup>

This emphasis on promoting a hegemonic UAE national identity and pushing back against potentially competing sub- and supra-national affiliations is viewed by the Emirati authorities as an essential feature of the country's national security strategy, though still a work in progress. It is not only preparing the public for national service and sacrifice, as has been the case in Yemen, it is also fending off powerful, and in some cases potentially dangerous, competing affiliations that have undermined and fragmented other Arab states that until only recently appeared to be relatively cohesive.

The fundamental, although implicit, social contract in the UAE is a familiar one in the contemporary Gulf region. The government provides social services, employment, and security to its citizens in exchange for de facto political consent by the governed, though not through internationally normative democratic processes. Instead, consent is sought and measured in a complex and nuanced manner, through partially elected representative bodies like the Federal National Council; gauges of public opinion and satisfaction such as polling; and the institution of the open majlis, a (usually weekly) social gathering that allows the citizenry direct and personal access to the country's leadership in a traditional household setting. This combination of political representation, efforts to track and take into consideration public sentiment, and the personal interactions of the majlis is frequently conceptualized as a specifically Emirati political hybrid that allows for popular input and provides a measure of accountability.

However, formal political rights for UAE citizens are limited. Political parties are not permitted, and many civil liberties – such as freedoms of speech, assembly, and association – are significantly circumscribed. The country scores poorly on indexes such as Freedom House's Freedom in the World reports, in which the UAE is consistently listed as "not free."<sup>40</sup> Yet there is no evidence of widespread dissatisfaction among the population. To the contrary, on other indexes, such as the U.N. World Happiness Report, the UAE ranks very well. In the 2017 report, the UAE ranked 21st in the world. Emirati leaders frankly state that the country does not aspire to become a Western-style democracy.<sup>41</sup> Anwar Gargash, minister of state for foreign affairs, wrote in 2012: "The UAE's end goal is not a liberal multiparty system," and that the focus instead was on good outcomes of governance within a structure of stability. "Our gradual



approach should be judged in its entirety," he continued, claiming "it enjoys the support of the majority of our citizens."<sup>42</sup> The threat of domestic political unrest on a large scale is, therefore, quite implausible under current circumstances.

As budgets have tightened for many energy-exporting economies, some roughly analogous regional social contracts between the rulers and the ruled are proving more difficult to sustain, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia with large populations. While the UAE is also facing increasing financial constraints, its bigger problem is the opposite: how to deal with the consequences of policies designed to overcome a small population, in particular, developing a sustainable long-term approach to managing the large number of non-nationals in the country, a substantial number of whom were born and raised in the UAE, and have few meaningful ties to any other society. Expatriate workers with families abroad who intend to return home one day have one set of expectations, whereas people born and raised in a society in which they expect to remain can develop very different aspirations.

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How to secure the UAE's vital national interests with such a small citizenry has been a long-term social, economic, political, and, indeed, national security challenge for the UAE from its founding. The key leaders of the UAE, particularly in Abu Dhabi, but also Dubai, sought solutions through a combination of maximizing domestic human resources, importing labor and expertise, and harnessing technological solutions to compensate for limited manpower.

UAE leadership has increasingly viewed the education and promotion of women in the workplace as essential rather than optional. UAE women's education, employment, and workplace participation began in earnest in 2005, with a program based on Civil Service Law, Articles 55 and 56, which provided for extensive maternity leave and eliminated gender-based discrimination against women in the public sector, the primary employer of Emiratis.<sup>43</sup> The following year, some women were enfranchised (voting rights for Emirati men are also restricted to a limited, albeit growing, portion of the citizenry) and allowed to run for office in elections. The UAE government has also funded and promoted programs<sup>44</sup> for women in science, technology, engineering, and math, and a General Women's Union<sup>45</sup> and Dubai Women's Establishment,<sup>46</sup> which seek to promote women's education, employment, and gender equality.

The progress for Emirati women appears impressive. According to Kenneth Katzman, "Observers say the UAE is perhaps the only country in the Middle East where women are fully accepted working in high-paying professions such as finance and banking."<sup>47</sup> In the 2011 and 2015 Federal National Council elections, only one woman was elected. However, in 2011 six women were among the 20 appointed members and this was increased to eight in 2015. Amal Al-Qubaisi became the first woman to serve as the Federal National Council's deputy president in 2011,<sup>48</sup> and, in a significant breakthrough, rose to the presidency and the speaker's chair in 2015.<sup>49</sup> She is the first female leader of a national assembly in the Arab world. The last Cabinet reshuffle, in February 2016, resulted in nine women serving among the 29 ministers,

including the then-22-year-old Shamma bint Suhail bin Faris al-Mazrui who was, appropriately enough, made minister for youth.<sup>50</sup> The country also now has four women judges and two public prosecutors, as well as other judicial officials.<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, Emirati women still remain under the supervision of male relative “guardians,” in many cases even their own sons, from whom they need permission to remarry after divorce, among other essential life decisions.<sup>52</sup> The country therefore faces continued tensions between the need to maximize its human capital, both male and female, and some conservative social traditions that continue to restrict women’s options and participation, particularly in the lower socioeconomic strata. There appears to be widespread agreement in the UAE that there is more work to be done to mobilize the underutilized human capital of the female Emirati population at all levels of society.

## Emergence as a Regional Power

In the immediate aftermath of its establishment in 1971, the UAE did not play a major military role in the region. Its armed forces developed slowly, and they initially focused on the most basic aspects of national security. In the 1970s and 80s, Arab strategic thinking, including in the Gulf region, generally regarded Iran and Israel as posing the primary security challenges. The UAE-Iranian dispute over three Gulf Islands (outlined below), helped reinforce the idea that Iran constituted the primary security challenge for the UAE. This thinking was abruptly and dramatically complicated by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Along with its fellow GCC members, the UAE had been strongly supportive of Iraq during its conflict with Iran in the 1980s. Iraq under Saddam Hussein had been viewed as a crucial bulwark against potential Iranian threats including direct aggression, the use of proxies, and destabilization. Given the invasion of Kuwait, however, this view was radically altered on several counts, and the whole idea of an exclusive reliance on external bulwarks was called into question. The UAE contributed a modest number of ground and air forces to the U.S.-led Operation Desert Storm, which drove Iraqi occupation forces out of Kuwait in January-February 1991.<sup>53</sup>

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The period following Desert Storm initiated a UAE military development drive principally guided by MbZ that has continued, and gained steam, since. The country also became increasingly involved in military efforts by U.S.-led international coalitions in numerous conflicts, including Somalia in 1992, the Balkans in the late 1990s, Afghanistan beginning in 2003, and the anti-ISIL coalition launched in 2014.<sup>54</sup> The UAE was also involved in the U.S.-led campaign to help overthrow Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, contributing six F-16s and six Mirage fighter jets to NATO’s efforts to enforce a no-fly zone and attack regime assets.<sup>55</sup> While many observers have speculated that participation in these coalition efforts was designed primarily to increase military ties with the United States and gain more influence in Washington, it is increasingly evident that there has been a conscious effort on the part of the UAE’s political and military leadership to prepare the country for greater independent military capability and position it to play a much more prominent regional role.

Since 2011, these policies have begun to demonstrate their effectiveness as the UAE, despite its relatively small territory and population, has been emerging as a growing hard power, as well as soft power, player in the Middle East. Ulrichsen persuasively argues that the UAE's turn toward greater power projection during the 2000s and beyond coincided with two factors that "eroded many of the constraints hitherto imposed on 'small states.'" The first is "the emergence of the multiple poles of geo-economic gravity and centers of influence" that "opened up new possibilities for new coalitions of states," and the second is innovations in information and communication technologies that "created opportunities for new actors to stake an international role disproportionate to their geographical or population size."<sup>56</sup> Added to these factors was the increasing vacuum of leadership in the Arab world, particularly following 2011, all of which prompted and facilitated the improbable rise of the UAE as a significant player in the Gulf region and beyond.

### Three Watersheds: Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait, 9/11, and the Arab Spring

The determination to pursue this more independent and proactive national security strategy derives mainly from two key events subsequent to the early alarms sounded by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait: the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States and the eruption in 2011 of the Arab Spring and the subsequent destabilization of much of the Middle East. Both developments, in different ways, were viewed with deep concern by the UAE leadership and strategic decision-making circles, and highlighted potential national vulnerabilities to terrorism, and regional, and even internal, political destabilization. These three watersheds – the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, 9/11, and the Arab Spring – shaped the contours of present-day Emirati national security strategy by defining the core threats the country believes it must overcome: external invasion by large neighbors, radical Islamist terrorism, and domestic political upheaval. These threats are not mutually exclusive and several nightmare scenarios might include more than one of them simultaneously.

In contrast to the Saudis and some of their other neighbors, who experienced a brief period of denial following the 9/11 attacks, UAE leaders immediately identified al-Qaeda and similar groups as a looming threat to their own security, particularly since two of the hijackers were Emiratis and a third resided in the UAE.<sup>57</sup> (Saudi Arabia was fully awakened to the direct al-Qaeda threat to its own domestic security somewhat later, by terrorist attacks inside the kingdom in 2003.)<sup>58</sup> The UAE had been one of only three countries to extend diplomatic recognition to the Afghan Taliban government, but, tellingly, acted even sooner than its Saudi partners in breaking these relations following the 9/11 attacks. On September 22, 2001, the UAE became the first country to cut existing diplomatic relations with Kabul after the Taliban refused international demands to extradite Osama bin Laden to "a fair international trial."<sup>59</sup> Three days later, Saudi Arabia followed suit, and broke relations with the Taliban, but made no specific mention of bin Laden in its statement.<sup>60</sup> This marks one of the first instances in which the UAE took a dramatic international step significantly in advance of its traditionally dominant Saudi partner.

Another key impact of the 9/11 attacks was the significant expansion of the UAE's diplomatic corps and international representation. This was partly due to natural growth in the diplomatic profile of a relatively young state. But the 9/11 attacks galvanized the UAE leadership's perceptions of diplomacy and statecraft in international relations. Before that, the emphasis had been on personal relations between key Emirati leaders, particularly from Abu Dhabi, with crucial foreign heads of government and other important officials. The UAE says it has now established diplomatic relations with 189 countries,<sup>61</sup> and has diplomatic staff operating in 82 embassies and four diplomatic missions, increasing from under 70 total foreign missions before 2000. The emphasis on shifting from a personalized, leadership-based approach to an institutionalized diplomatic model was supported by the establishment in July 2015 of an Emirates Diplomatic Academy<sup>62</sup> to train the country's international representatives.<sup>63</sup>

There has also been a significant gender-inclusion component to these dramatic post-9/11 diplomatic reforms. The UAE diplomatic corps is now 20 percent women, whereas there had been no Emirati female diplomats prior to 2001.<sup>64</sup> The UAE government says 166 women now work in the diplomatic and consular corps at the Foreign Ministry's headquarters, and 29 women serve in diplomatic missions overseas.<sup>65</sup> These include ambassadors to Sweden, Spain, and Montenegro, a consul in China, and the consul general in Milan, Italy. Since 2013, Lana Nusseibeh has served as the UAE's permanent representative to the United Nations.<sup>66</sup>

The 9/11 attacks also prompted a wave of reforms within the UAE aimed at countering extremism and fighting radicalization. The Ministry of Education undertook a thorough curriculum overhaul in spring 2002, designed to root out the promotion of extremist attitudes.<sup>67</sup>

Despite criticism that the reforms were "un-Islamic," the government persisted. In 2003, 170 Muslim Brotherhood members in the UAE,<sup>68</sup> including 83 employees in the Ministry of Education,<sup>69</sup> were transferred to other jobs pursuant to a crackdown

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on Islamists and an effort to stamp out extremism. According to Christopher Davidson, in 2006 "hundreds of teachers, academics and [education] ministry officials" were "fired from their jobs on the grounds of Islamist affiliations," or being part of "an underground movement in the UAE trying to promote their own strict view of Islam."<sup>70</sup> In the early years following its establishment, the UAE had to rely on foreign teachers from other Arab states, particularly Egyptians, Tunisians, and Palestinians, many of whom had Islamist leanings. This left a legacy in pockets of Emirati society of precisely the kind of extremism that the UAE came to dedicate itself to defeating.

The program of "Emiratization" of the teaching faculty in government-run schools, cast as part of the national security and counterterrorism agenda particularly after the 9/11 attacks, is projected to reach 90 percent UAE teachers by 2020.<sup>71</sup> The general goal has been to consistently increase the representation of both Emirati nationals and vetted foreign nationals in the school faculty so as to ensure that students are not indoctrinated with extremist views. Yet, despite these efforts, in 2014 the Sharjah Education Council still complained about the difficulties it was having in recruiting UAE nationals as educators in its schools.<sup>72</sup> In June 2016, the UAE minister of education was still announcing curriculum changes focused on promoting "tolerant and moderate religious teachings," indicating continued room for improvement.<sup>73</sup>

A U.S. State Department cable from 2005, released by WikiLeaks, described extensive efforts by the UAE government to eliminate extremist and radical preaching in mosques in the country, stating “the UAE has been an outspoken critic of terrorism since well before 9/11, and the current crop of younger leaders who succeeded the late Sheikh Zayed has every intention of combating local extremism, whether it manifests itself in the schools, the mosques, or elsewhere.”<sup>74</sup> A subsequent cable from 2009 described in detail the UAE government’s efforts “to rein in Islamic discourse to prevent radical views from poisoning the social or political climate,” although it expressed concern that radicalism might be simply driven underground.<sup>75</sup> A 2014 State Department report<sup>76</sup> also described the UAE government’s efforts to provide “guidance” to clerics to deter radicalization in mosques and other Muslim institutions.<sup>77</sup> In 2015, the UAE General Authority on Islamic Affairs and Endowments issued a list of strategic goals that emphasized its policy of “instilling values of moderation and tolerance in society,” through promotion of these attitudes within and via the country’s religious institutions.<sup>78</sup>

Existing UAE government suspicions of Islamist movements, and the politicization of Islam in general, as outlined in more detail below, were hardened by the 9/11 attacks into what quickly became the ongoing policy of intractable opposition. Unlike some of its neighbors and partners, the UAE does not focus on distinctions between more and less extreme radical Islamists, or between groups that engage in violence and those that merely espouse elements of Islamist ideology. The UAE instead emphasizes the continuum of beliefs, and the shared basic assumptions, that link all the radical Sunni Islamist groups, from the Muslim Brotherhood to al-Qaeda and ISIL, most of which are also shared by Shia extremists such as Hizballah and various Iraqi militia groups. Therefore, all such groups, and those that sympathize with them, whether or not they directly engage in violence, are liable to be regarded or officially designated as terrorist organizations by the UAE government. This antipathy toward all radical Islamists, virtually without exception, is unique to the UAE in the GCC, but is shared by, and allows for a strong sense of common purpose with, Egypt and some other Arab countries. The UAE has been careful not to allow its differing perspective on the role of religion in politics to disrupt its key strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia. Yet the UAE is convinced that Islamism and Islamists pose an existential threat, in the form of domestic subversion, regional destabilization, or mass terrorism.

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Indeed, the UAE’s partnership with Saudi Arabia, already very strong due to a range of common interests and their existing GCC alliance, was further solidified in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The UAE and Saudi Arabia reacted with alarm to the February 11, 2011 downfall of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, which seemed to combine a whole series of potential threats in one overwhelming political crescendo. First was the prospect of a wave of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes that could destabilize Arab republics, and even spread to monarchies like themselves. Second was the prospect, temporarily realized by the rise of Ennahda in Tunisia and, worse, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, of revolutionary Islamist governments in Arab republics. Third were the negative consequences of the withdrawal of Egypt from the international stage as it turned inward. The loss of Egyptian leadership in the

Arab world, combined with the fragmentation of Iraq and the ostracizing of pro-Iranian Syria, meant the full weight of Sunni Arab leadership in a chaotic region was increasingly falling on the Gulf Arab states. Moreover, with Egypt otherwise occupied, Iraq in chaos, and Syria firmly in Tehran's camp, the rise of Iran as a regional power seemed inexorable. Finally, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were appalled at what they saw as Washington faithlessly casting aside Mubarak, a long-standing and reliable Arab ally. Their confidence in Washington's determination and reliability were deeply shaken.

This profound regional instability, coming only 10 years after the calamity of 9/11 and the full-fledged emergence of radical Islamist terrorism, unified the UAE and Saudi Arabia around a set of foreign policy imperatives. They determined to support other struggling Arab states, especially fellow monarchies, including Morocco and Jordan; combat the prospect of Muslim Brotherhood governments emerging or prevailing in post-revolutionary Arab societies; push back against the spread of Iranian influence in the Middle East; and work to rebuild their relationships with the United States or, if necessary, begin to develop alternatives to an excessive reliance on Washington's protection. Not all the Gulf Arab countries shared this agenda. Qatar, with its long history of support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement saw in the Arab Spring an opportunity for its Islamist clients to ride a "green wave" of popularity to power in much of the Middle East. The resulting dispute within the GCC ultimately came to an angry boil in 2014, as outlined below. And although Qatar and Saudi Arabia have developed a substantial rapprochement of late, the UAE's partnership with Riyadh to promote these goals remains the centerpiece of Emirati strategic planning.

## The UAE's International Debut: Afghanistan

Participation in the intervention in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks was a turning point for the UAE's military ambitions and capabilities, as well as a kinetic expression of a national antipathy toward radical Islamism in the forms of both al-Qaeda and the Taliban (despite, as noted, its diplomatic relations with the Taliban). As Karen Young outlines, military spending by Gulf countries increased steadily between 2000 and 2009 as the financial resources to pay for this expanded capability became available.<sup>79</sup> Growing GCC interventionism, therefore, has been closely linked to economic expansion. And, at least in the case of the UAE, the recent downturn in global energy pricing and markets has resulted in only modest belt-tightening<sup>80</sup> on defense spending,<sup>81</sup> which is estimated to total \$19.76 billion for 2017.<sup>82</sup>

The UAE was the first Arab country to become involved in the Afghan war following 9/11. Its participation in that campaign, especially by its special operations forces, beginning in 2003, initiated a process that, by greatly enhancing military capabilities, made steady progress toward the current policy of relatively robust interventionism. According to The Washington Post, after 2003, "the UAE kept elite ground troops in Afghanistan for 11 years, conducting raids and training Afghan commandos in cooperation with U.S. Special Operations forces."<sup>83</sup> Initially, the UAE mission in Afghanistan was primarily humanitarian, as the Emiratis constructed mosques and clinics, although UAE forces occasionally engaged in military action against the Taliban.<sup>84</sup> However, in 2003, the UAE contributed 1,200 military personnel,<sup>85</sup> including special forces,

to the international effort in Afghanistan, and the mission continued until 2014. The UAE contributed six F-16s to the NATO-led stabilization mission based in Kandahar, Afghanistan from 2012-14.

In 2008, the BBC reported that this UAE military “deployment has been kept so secret that not even their own countrymen knew they were here.”<sup>86</sup> In the early stages of developing its international military profile, the government apparently believed that a gradual development of social and political attitudes to support such a policy was required, though by now the concomitant risks, and even sacrifices, appear to be widely accepted among the Emirati citizenry. The ongoing costs of this involvement were dramatically brought home to Emirati society in January when five UAE diplomats, including the ambassador to Afghanistan, Juma al-Kaabi, were killed in a bomb attack while they were visiting a provincial governor’s office in Kandahar.<sup>87</sup> As with the

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Yemen intervention, there is no indication that such losses, which are new to UAE society, have undermined Emirati determination to continue these military campaigns or the overall willingness to continue to develop and use a potent national military force. Indeed, such shared sacrifices may be contributing to the development of a stronger national identity, especially among the younger generation that is now subject to conscription.

From the outset, a key purpose of the Afghan campaign for the UAE was to gain practical battlefield experience. The Washington Post reported that “to U.S. military officials, the [UAE Afghanistan] mission was about more than altruism. ‘For them, Afghanistan was all about another country: Iran,’ said a senior U.S. officer involved in Middle East operations, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. ‘They want to be ready in case they really have to fight a war.’”<sup>88</sup> Apparently, the Americans were impressed. The Post report noted the “UAE pilots were deemed by NATO officials to be so skilled that they were permitted to fly hundreds of close air-support missions to protect coalition ground forces.”

## Military Preparedness

### Personnel and Weaponry

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the UAE was the 15th largest military spender in the world in 2013,<sup>89</sup> and estimated to be the world’s third-largest military importer in 2015. It is also the fourth largest spender on U.S. military goods and services in the Middle East, acquiring about 70 percent of its arms transfers from Washington. The UAE had a \$22 billion annual defense budget in 2014, the most recent year for which official statistics are available.<sup>90</sup> In June 2014, the UAE introduced mandatory national conscription for males aged 18-30. Male citizens who have completed high school must serve<sup>91</sup> for nine months, and those who haven’t must serve for two years. National service is optional for women, but those who do volunteer must also serve for nine months. This is an unusual move in the contemporary Gulf Arab political context, in which ruling families have typically sought to minimize social burdens placed on citizens. In 2014, The Washington Post reported that senior U.S. officers,

apparently including Defense Secretary James Mattis, then-CENTCOM commander, dubbed the UAE “Little Sparta,”<sup>92</sup> because of its outsized martial prowess and effectiveness, and growing commitment to security independence through military preparedness.

These senior U.S. military officers were reportedly particularly impressed by the skills and commitment of Emirati combat pilots, whose ranks include at least four women. The UAE Air Force,<sup>93</sup> which is the most significant part of the country's armed forces, includes<sup>94</sup> 4,500 active duty service personnel. The centerpiece of the air force is its 70 F-16 combat aircraft. According to Defense Industry Daily<sup>95</sup> in 2014 these F-16s were a “half-generation ahead of the F-16 C/D Block 50/52+ aircraft that form the backbone of the US Air Force.” William D. Hartung<sup>96</sup> notes that of the UAE's “138 fighter planes, 78 are U.S.-supplied F-16s and 60 are French Mirage-2000s.” He adds that the UAE military uses “Sidewinder,<sup>97</sup> AMRAAM, and Maverick tactical missiles” and “relies heavily on U.S. equipment for airlift, with 6 C-17s and 4 C-130H's.” It also possesses 60 Apache<sup>98</sup> attack helicopters, as well as additional Blackhawk<sup>99</sup> and Chinook<sup>100</sup> helicopters for security and defense transport. The UAE's growing international military commitments and overseas bases, as detailed below, require a new level of attention to, and spending on, logistics support and supply chains, especially by airlift, such as C-17 tankers, and naval transport capabilities.

The UAE hosts the Gulf Air Warfare Center<sup>101</sup> at its Al Dhafra Air Base, operated jointly by the UAE Air Force and Air Defense and the U.S. Air Force Central Command, as well as an Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center at Al Bateen airbase. Al Dhafra is home to some 3,800 U.S. military personnel and 60 U.S. surveillance, refueling, and fighter aircraft which, the U.S. Air Force says, have conducted “daily operations inside of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.”<sup>102</sup> It is the only overseas airbase to host the United States' “fifth-generation” F-22 Raptor stealth fighter jet.<sup>103</sup> The UAE and some of its GCC partners have repeatedly attempted to purchase the cutting edge F-35 fighter jets,<sup>104</sup> but this has been blocked, principally because of the ongoing U.S. commitment to Israel's Qualitative Military Edge in the Middle East. Russian media reports in February claimed that the UAE and Moscow<sup>105</sup> had agreed to the sale of a unspecified number of Sukhoi Su-35 Flanker-E fighter jets<sup>106</sup> and to jointly develop the UAE's own “fifth-generation fighter”<sup>107</sup> in the coming decade, presumably as an alternative to the U.S. F-35s.<sup>108</sup>

Most of the UAE's officer corps are graduates of respected international military academies, such as Britain's Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and about 800 are trained or educated in the United States each year. In 2013, the total active manpower of the UAE military was 44,000, according to an estimate by the International Institute for Strategic Studies,<sup>109</sup> although current figures are thought to be closer to 70,000. There are also approximately 51,858 recruits in the reserve and paramilitary forces. Some of these are foreign nationals,<sup>110</sup> which raises many complex issues about the advisability and effectiveness of their deployment in combat situations. In addition to national conscription, the UAE has sought to address its military manpower shortfall by using private security firms and mercenaries. The UAE has acknowledged that in the past it has employed, for military training and support services, a private U.S. security company (based in Abu Dhabi) called Reflex Responses,<sup>111</sup> which was founded and operated by the controversial<sup>112</sup> former Blackwater security chief Erik Prince<sup>113</sup> (who is apparently no longer involved with the company), and another private U.S. firm, Knowledge International.<sup>114</sup>



The UAE, whose overall military assets are less centered on U.S. procurements than some other Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, does not currently primarily rely on U.S. manufactures for its land forces.<sup>115</sup> The country possesses at least 545 tanks (over 380 of them French Leclercs), 370 French armored personnel carriers, and 390 Russian armored fighting vehicles.<sup>116</sup> However, the UAE is scheduled to purchase 4,569 U.S.-made Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles,<sup>117</sup> designed to withstand attacks by weapons such as roadside improvised explosive devices. These vehicles will greatly increase the capacity of the UAE land forces and their sale will give the United States a significant stake in this sector of the Emirati defense market for the first time. In addition to its existing 2204 armored fighting vehicles, the UAE also maintains over 117 self-propelled guns, between 93-105 TOW artillery, and over 54 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems.

UAE naval forces<sup>118</sup> include over 2,500 sailors, between 11<sup>119</sup> and 14 corvettes<sup>120</sup> (some of which are domestically-made)<sup>121</sup> and 10 submersibles, 34 costal defense crafts, two mine warfare crafts, and 28 amphibious vehicles.<sup>122</sup> In 2017 it contracted with local, French, and Dutch firms to commission a powerful offshore patrol vessel.<sup>123</sup> It also agreed to a multimillion dollar purchase of Raytheon's Block 2 rolling airframe missiles which can protect naval vessels from "anti-ship missiles, helicopters, aircraft and surface craft."<sup>124</sup> And it has contracted with the French-based Thales company to develop electronic and anti-submarine warfare capabilities for its naval forces.<sup>125</sup>

These defensive naval procurements follow the October 2016 missile attack<sup>126</sup> on a UAE high-speed logistics vessel off the coast of Yemen, for which Houthi rebels claimed responsibility.<sup>127</sup> With its already potent air and special forces, and given the demographically-imposed limitations on its potential troop strength, developing naval forces is the logical next move for the UAE military. The need for a truly effective bluewater force that can project Emirati naval power far from its own shores is becoming essential given the war in Yemen and other military commitments in the Red Sea, East and North African coastal areas, and the Indian Ocean, as well as the development of UAE military bases in the Horn of Africa and Libya, as detailed below. Therefore, a rapid qualitative and quantitative expansion of the UAE's deep sea naval forces can be expected to top the country's military development agenda in the coming decade and beyond.

In recent years, the UAE has consistently been the GCC's second largest purchaser of U.S. weapons, after Saudi Arabia.<sup>128</sup> The UAE committed to acquiring \$10.4 billion in U.S. defense equipment and services from 2007-10.<sup>129</sup> In 2000, the UAE purchased 80 F-16 aircraft for more than \$8 billion.<sup>130</sup> In 2013, it obtained an additional 30 F-16s and related air-to-ground munitions.<sup>131</sup> The United States has sold the UAE more than \$600 million worth of Joint Direct Attack Munition kits and precision guided bombs,<sup>132</sup> as well as telemetry missiles and bunker buster bombs for its F-16 program. In 2010, the United States agreed to sell the UAE \$5 billion worth of AH-64 Apache helicopters<sup>133</sup> (28 of the craft remanufactured to Block III configuration).<sup>134</sup> In February 2016 the State Department approved a possible sale to the UAE of 8 AN/AAQ-24(V)N Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures equipment, and logistics support valued at \$225 million<sup>135</sup> and in May 4,000 AGM-114 R/K Hellfire Category III Missiles and equipment, training, and support costing \$476 million.<sup>136</sup> In January 2016, Lockheed Martin was awarded a contract for 12 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems valued at just under

\$143 million.<sup>137</sup> And in July 2016, the State Department approved the sale of \$785 million in munitions and support for the UAE military.<sup>138</sup> The UAE operates several U.S.-made drones,<sup>139</sup> including the unarmed Predator X-PUAV, as well as the Scan Eagle and Integrator UAVs.<sup>140</sup>

The United States has long sought to convince the Gulf Arab states of the need to develop a coordinated and integrated Gulf-wide ballistic missile defense system. This aim is one of the key factors that informed the creation of the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum, and has been a mainstay of U.S.-GCC joint statements following summit meetings. However, the lack of transparency, information sharing, integration, and interoperability between (and even sometimes within) GCC member states' military and intelligence establishments has been thus far an insurmountable obstacle. The December 2013 Presidential Determination permitting weapons sales to the GCC as an integrated entity, rather than simply bilaterally with its member states, was an effort to promote this agenda.

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The UAE has been Washington's main Gulf Arab partner in this missile defense initiative.

In a key step in 2010, the UAE became the first country to purchase the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense System for \$7 billion.<sup>141</sup> The country also hosts the Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center,<sup>142</sup> a training facility established to promote GCC cooperation on developing more coordinated missile defenses across the board. In addition, the UAE has purchased \$9 billion worth of PAC-3 Patriot anti-missile weapons,<sup>143</sup> and \$737 million worth of Avenger and vehicle-launched Stinger surface-to-air missiles,<sup>144</sup> as well as an additional \$445 million for Surface-Launched Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles.

As noted, the UAE has been careful not to rely exclusively on the United States as an arms supplier. In the first six months of 2016, it agreed to purchase \$111 million in Canadian naval training and helicopter simulators,<sup>145</sup> \$35 million in remote-controlled weapons systems from Georgia,<sup>146</sup> \$352 million in Italian military drones,<sup>147</sup> and \$41 million in Finnish armored vehicles.<sup>148</sup> It has also purchased 40 Polish Rosomak armored vehicles<sup>149</sup> for almost \$42 million.<sup>150</sup> At its 2017 IDEX military exhibition, the UAE agreed to buy \$700 million in Russian anti-armor missiles,<sup>151</sup> \$235 million in Swedish airborne surveillance systems,<sup>152</sup> and \$490 million<sup>153</sup> in locally manufactured Maximus Air cargo planes. In the waning months of 2015 alone, the UAE agreed to a striking variety of international defense procurements ranging from Anglo-Italian search and rescue aircraft,<sup>154</sup> long-range German torpedo vessels,<sup>155</sup> Indonesian assault rifles and ammunition,<sup>156</sup> and Swedish radar aircraft surveillance systems.<sup>157</sup> So, despite the UAE's close military ties to the United States, and marked preference for Washington as an arms supplier, the country is exploring options and alternatives regarding a wide range of military requirements.

The UAE has also been making a concerted effort to develop its own domestic defense manufacturing industry. According to Florence Gaub and Zoe Stanley-Lockman,<sup>158</sup> "The UAE is serious about using its defence industry to enhance its operational capabilities."<sup>159</sup> They further observe that "since the signing of a MoU between three state-owned investment firms ... in April 2014, the UAE has made significant strides to become the leader of indigenous Arab defence industry development."<sup>160</sup> Their important study of Arab defense industries adds

that “the most important signal that the UAE is serious about its DTIB [Defense Technology Industrial Base] came in December 2014, when it was announced that it would consolidate the majority of its productive, existing companies into a new firm: the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC).”<sup>161</sup> For example, in 2013, the UAE-based Al Jaber Land Systems company launched what it billed as “the biggest MLRS in the world, the Jobaria MCRL,” with four launchers mounted on trailers, and in 2017 added a smaller, twin-launcher, 300mm MLRS, that can be towed by smaller trailers.<sup>162</sup> In 2017, the UAE agreed to buy an additional 400 locally-manufactured Rabdan armored personnel carriers<sup>163</sup> for \$658.8 million.<sup>164</sup>

## Key Military Partnerships

The most important military partnership for the UAE other than the United States is with its five fellow GCC member states, particularly Saudi Arabia. While greater integration among GCC military structures remains largely aspirational, GCC members have taken steps, however tentatively, to realize this goal. At a December 2014 summit in Doha, the council agreed to establish a Bahrain-based joint military command and naval force, as well as a military and strategic academy to be based in Abu Dhabi.<sup>165</sup> However, it remains to be seen whether the historical pattern, in which GCC member states base their security strategies around bilateral relations with the United States rather than within a more integrated GCC military structure, will continue.

The former commander of U.S. military forces in the Middle East, Anthony Zinni, told The Washington Post that the U.S.-Emirati defense partnership is “the strongest relationship that the United States has in the Arab world today.”<sup>166</sup> At the December 2016 Manama Dialogue, then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter said that the UAE has a “truly excellent bilateral relationship” with Washington and added, “The UAE not only acquires effective capabilities; it puts skin in the game. This makes the UAE a key partner for the United States.”<sup>167</sup> The partnership was reinforced during the initial months of the Trump administration, with Mattis and MbZ meeting in Abu Dhabi in February and stressing strategic cooperation and stronger bilateral relations.<sup>168</sup> U.S.-UAE intelligence ties are said to be among the best the United States has in the Arab world.

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UAE officials have frequently expressed the desire for an enhanced military relationship with the United States, including streamlined arms purchasing abilities. There has been some consideration that the UAE might be classified as a “Major Non-NATO Ally” but Kenneth Katzman suggests<sup>169</sup> that the country would prefer “legislation that would declare the UAE a key US defense partner.”<sup>170</sup> In 2013, the UAE established a Joint Strategic Military Dialogue with the United States to improve the integration of military resources.<sup>171</sup> According to Katzman, this involves “joint US-UAE planning [regarding how to respond] in case of attack on the UAE.”<sup>172</sup>

Along with the other GCC states, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the UAE undertook a policy of seeking much closer military cooperation with the United States due to perceived threats from both Iraq and Iran. Under current arrangements, about 5,000 U.S. military personnel are based in the UAE.<sup>173</sup> A series of bilateral joint exercises with the U.S. military continued in December 2016, with the Iron Claw II drill<sup>174</sup> in Abu Dhabi, and

similar preparedness exercises with Britain<sup>175</sup> and France<sup>176</sup> have been conducted in recent months. In January, MbZ visited India<sup>177</sup> and signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement<sup>178</sup> with New Delhi that includes defense and security undertakings as well as trade and energy provisions, building on existing Indo-Emirati dialogue and further diversifying the UAE's international partnerships.

The deepwater port off the coast of Dubai, Jebel Ali, is reportedly the busiest port of call for the U.S. Navy in the world and the only port in the Gulf deep enough to berth advanced U.S. aircraft carriers.<sup>179</sup> Military cooperation since 2009 has also included Emirati Air Force personnel participation in the annual Desert Falcon<sup>180</sup> and Red Flag military exercises<sup>181</sup> held at Nevada's Nellis Air Force Base.

Despite the persistence of a central role for bilateral security relations with the United States, there have been recent instances of increased intra-GCC military cooperation. Most GCC states participated in the March 2011 Peninsula Shield intervention in Bahrain, with the UAE dispatching a force of 500 police officers to the effort.<sup>182</sup> In addition, the UAE has observer status in NATO<sup>183</sup> and attends its summit meetings.<sup>184</sup> In February, the UAE announced its intention to "take a more active support role for Nato ... and help to compensate for the US's reduced Middle East focus." It also hosts a significant French military presence – including naval facilities, air installations, and housing for approximately 400 French personnel – called a "Peace Camp."<sup>185</sup>

In support of its regional military role, the UAE has participated in numerous joint campaigns in recent years, including the U.S.-led effort against ISIL in Syria; the broad Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, to intervene in Yemen; and more focused and limited military actions, such as the 2014 joint air raids with Egypt against Islamist militias in Libya. Other major military exercises the UAE armed forces have joined in 2016 include Desert Tiger 2 joint military exercises with Malaysia,<sup>186</sup> Desert Eagle II joint air exercises with India,<sup>187</sup> and the Khalifa II joint military and naval exercises with Egypt.<sup>188</sup> In April 2016 it hosted the Desert Flag military exercise with forces from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Morocco, the United States, France, and Britain.<sup>189</sup> The largest the UAE joined was the massive Northern Thunder military exercise in the Saudi desert in which an estimated 350,000 troops from 20, mostly Muslim-majority, states participated in March 2016.<sup>190</sup> The exercise and its participants overlapped significantly with the Saudi-led, 39-member-state Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism<sup>191</sup> that was established in December 2015 and in which the UAE also participates. It is made up of mostly Sunni Muslim-majority states and has been denounced as "sectarian" by Iran,<sup>192</sup> Iraqi Shia politicians,<sup>193</sup> and others.

## Relations with Iran

### Sources of tension

Along with its GCC partners, the UAE regards Iran as its pre-eminent security challenge. Unlike the others, however, the UAE has an ongoing territorial dispute with Iran, Iranian claims on Bahrain having been formally renounced by both the shah and the Islamic Republic. Three Gulf Islands – Abu Musa, Tunb, and Lesser Tunb – are claimed by both the UAE, particularly

by Ras al-Khaimah, and Iran. As Karim Sadjadpour notes, these islands are considered strategically important to both countries because of their proximity to key shipping lanes.<sup>194</sup> They were seized by Iran in 1971 and remain under Tehran's control. In a 1971 memorandum of understanding, Sharjah agreed to "joint ownership of the territories with an Iranian military presence" on them, effectively ceding the islands to Iran on the eve of the creation of the UAE.<sup>195</sup> Abu Dhabi never accepted this as a legitimate agreement. Disputes regarding the implementation of the agreement flared in the 1990s, as a series of mediation efforts failed.<sup>196</sup>

In one of the strongest exchanges on the issue, UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed in April 2010 called Iran's control of the islands "shameful" and compared the situation to Israel's occupation of Arab territories seized in the 1967 war, although he added "I am not comparing Iran to Israel."<sup>197</sup> Iran responded that the islands are an "indispensable" part of its national territory and accused the GCC of interfering in its internal affairs.<sup>198</sup> Despite such heated rhetoric, however, the situation has never deteriorated into violence or armed conflict. The UAE, GCC, and Arab League position is that the dispute should be resolved either by the International Court of Justice or some form of international or U.N. arbitration. Iran insists that the islands are simply a part of its sovereign territory. These claims were starkly underlined in April 2012 when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited one of the islands amid considerable controversy,<sup>199</sup> and when the commander in chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other officials followed in the subsequent month to establish a naval base near,<sup>200</sup> and discuss tourism on,<sup>201</sup> one of the islands. The issue thus remains a consistent source of bilateral tension and an obstacle to improved relations.

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Like its fellow GCC members, with the partial exception of Oman, the UAE has serious objections to many aspects of Iran's regional policies, particularly what are seen as encroachments of its influence into the Arab world. The UAE has expressed grave concern about Iranian "interference" and the activities of its clients and proxies in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and elsewhere. Moreover, the UAE is particularly concerned about Iran's missile capabilities, well within striking range of all of the Emirates and its strategic resources.<sup>202</sup> These issues, rather than the islands territorial dispute or the nuclear issue, most strongly animate tensions between the UAE and Iran. Along with its GCC partners, the UAE has been a party to various Arab efforts to confront and roll back Iranian influence in these areas, and to press Iran to moderate its regional approach. Despite these and other bilateral tensions, Iran has consistently been one of the UAE's main trading partners in recent decades.

The UAE response to the international nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),<sup>203</sup> announced on July 14, 2015, was essentially pragmatic. During the talks, the UAE expressed serious reservations about a potential nuclear agreement, and even anger at the U.S. refusal to include Iran's regional policies among the issues being negotiated. However, along with its GCC partners, the UAE finally endorsed the negotiations at the May 14, 2015 Camp David summit with Obama.<sup>204</sup> The United States, in turn, reiterated its commitment to Gulf security and its opposition to Iran's destabilizing regional policies, and provided other assurances.

## Prospects for Improved Relations

Moreover, after the JCPOA was announced, and following a U.S.-GCC foreign ministers summit meeting in Qatar on August 3, 2015 the UAE, along with the rest of the GCC, endorsed the agreement as a group.<sup>205</sup> Like its Gulf partners, the UAE emphasized the need for Iran to amend its regional behavior, but seemed to hold out more hope than Saudi Arabia, for example, that the agreement might actually serve to reduce regional tensions. In fact, the UAE was quicker than most of its GCC partners to unilaterally endorse the agreement, which it did almost right away. On the date it was announced, a UAE official said that the agreement could be the basis for “a new page” in the relationship,<sup>206</sup> provided that Iran changed its regional conduct. Following the election of Trump, who had strongly condemned the JCPOA during his campaign, the UAE joined other GCC members in urging Washington to strictly enforce rather than abrogate the agreement,<sup>207</sup> presumably because unilaterally renegeing on the deal would play directly into the hands of hard liners in Tehran and allow Iran to resume nuclear development without a credible threat of the return of comprehensive international sanctions.

Emirati hopes for an improved relationship with Iran appear to be more than pro forma expressions of responsible diplomacy. The UAE, particularly Dubai, might have reaped significant economic gains from sanctions relief as Iran implemented the agreement. The sanctions on Tehran had significantly damaged the UAE's strong trading relationship with Iran.

From 2010 onward, trade with Iran fell from \$23 billion to \$4 billion annually,<sup>208</sup> since the UAE scrupulously imposed the sanctions outlined in U.N. Security Council resolution

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*The UAE still accounts for some 80 percent of GCC trade with Iran.*

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1929.<sup>209</sup> The UAE still accounts for some 80 percent of GCC trade with Iran.<sup>210</sup> Emirati investors are also hoping to participate in the reconstruction and revamping of the Iranian energy infrastructure, which promises to be an enormous source of revenue. Dubai, in particular, is host to an estimated 400,000 expatriate Iranians,<sup>211</sup> which is itself an expression of the deep links between the two countries.

In the past, trade between the UAE and Iran was so robust that a 2009 report from the Institute for Science and International Security even claimed that Tehran used UAE-based companies to evade sanctions and detection, and purchase components for improvised explosive devices that were sent to allied militias in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.<sup>212</sup> However, some UAE officials have publicly worried that this large community could prove a security problem in the event of heightened tensions or conflict.<sup>213</sup> One of the most optimistic assessments of the potential windfall from the nuclear agreement was an International Monetary Fund prediction in August 2015 that Iran's reintegration into the global trading system could add \$13 billion to the UAE economy, particularly that of Dubai.<sup>214</sup>

However, with the agreement's implementation, the promise of greatly expanded trade with Iran has not yet materialized for the UAE. Emirati firms have been reluctant to re-engage in the Iranian market because of ongoing non-nuclear U.S. sanctions and banking regulations, as well as the potential for sanctions “snapback” if Iran does not fulfill its commitments. These concerns were exacerbated by the diplomatic crisis between the Gulf states and Iran following the execution of a prominent Saudi Shia dissident, Nimr al-Nimr,<sup>215</sup> and subsequent

mob attacks against Saudi diplomatic installations in Iran in January 2016.<sup>216</sup> The UAE joined other Gulf and Arab states in recalling their ambassadors from Tehran,<sup>217</sup> and downgrading diplomatic relations following the attacks. In announcing these moves, the UAE Foreign Ministry cited a broader context of tensions based on what it called “continuous Iranian intervention in Gulf and Arab affairs ... that has reached unprecedented levels in the recent period.”<sup>218</sup> Such tensions have continued to grow. Katzman even reports that UAE officials have said that they rejected direct requests by Obama “during the April 21, 2016 US-GCC summit to increase [the UAE’s] diplomatic and economic engagement with Iran.”<sup>219</sup>

The diplomatic crisis regarding the Saudi Embassy attack, along with the escalation of the conflict in Yemen, set the stage for rhetorical attacks between the UAE and its Gulf allies and Iran. UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed explained his country’s attitude at an Arab League meeting, saying, “Iran has to decide what kind of neighbor it wants to be: a good neighbor or a chaotic neighbor and so far it behaves like the latter.”<sup>220</sup> Not surprisingly, Dubai’s outspoken security chief, Lieutenant General Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, took the hardest line among prominent UAE officials, suggesting that all commercial ties with Iran should be cut and the public should avoid buying Iranian products.<sup>221</sup> Tensions with Iran were further exacerbated in March 2016 when the UAE, along with the other GCC states,<sup>222</sup> and later most of the Arab League,<sup>223</sup> designated Lebanon’s Hizballah, a close ally and key asset of Iran, as a terrorist organization and criminalized support for it.<sup>224</sup> It also barred UAE citizens from traveling to Lebanon,<sup>225</sup> for which tourism is a major source of foreign exchange, and downgraded its diplomatic relations with the country<sup>226</sup> after Beirut refused to support an Arab League statement backing Saudi Arabia in the dispute following the embassy attack.<sup>227</sup> This tense atmosphere, combined with concerns about ongoing and potential snapback sanctions, has inhibited Emirati trade with Iran. Indeed, UAE imports from Iran actually fell by 15.8 percent from March to August 2016.<sup>228</sup>

There have been some new investment projects, nonetheless. The Emirati Rotana hotel group is planning to open three new hotels in Iran’s second largest city, Mashhad, by 2018, as well as two additional upscale hotels in Tehran.<sup>229</sup> Network International, a major UAE payment processing firm, is reportedly negotiating with a number of Iranian banks for potential contracts.<sup>230</sup> The Ras al-Khaimah-based RAK Ceramics has expressed an interest in expanding some of its manufacturing operations to Iran.<sup>231</sup> And the Dubai-based Yellow Door Energy company, which specializes in solar power, has reportedly expressed an interest in financing solar power plants in Iran.<sup>232</sup> However, these commercial initiatives, many of which remain in the negotiations phase, are the exceptions during a period in which the expected uptick in UAE-Iran commerce does not appear to have materialized, and in some cases has even fallen off.

An increase in trade between the UAE, particularly Dubai, and Iran remains a potential vehicle for improving relations between the countries, but it is evident that any such expansion is contingent on more favorable international and regional political and diplomatic conditions. As long as tensions remain as high as they have been, particularly given the perceived Iranian role in stoking the war in Yemen, it is hard to imagine a major increase in such commerce.

Moreover, as with many vital matters between the two countries, the presence of a large Iranian community in the UAE is perceived as both a potential benefit in terms of commerce and a potential threat in terms of security.

This pattern of perceiving both security challenges and economic opportunities regarding its powerful Persian neighbor is typical of the complex Emirati attitude toward Iran, which is somewhat more nuanced than those of some of the other GCC states. And yet even as the UAE tends to look for opportunities for improvement, Iran remains the principal Emirati national security concern. This was amply reflected in an April 2016 Wall Street Journal commentary by UAE Ambassador to Washington Yousef Al Otaiba who wrote that although perhaps no country “has more to gain from normalized relations with Tehran” than the UAE, “sadly ... the Iran we have long known—hostile, expansionist, violent—is alive and well, and as dangerous as ever.”<sup>233</sup> And in a March 2017 follow-up he noted that “Iran’s hostile behavior is only growing worse.”<sup>234</sup>

## The Growing Emirati International Military Role

### Yemen

The UAE has a long history of only undertaking military actions in collaboration with the United States or its fellow GCC states. However, since the wave of unrest in the Middle East in early 2011, the UAE has been increasingly willing to turn to military force to defend its interests with multiple partners and as far afield as Libya. In these military actions, and other aspects of its more assertive regional behavior, the UAE has been primarily challenging two major regional forces: Iran and its proxies, and radical Islamist groups, especially those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, its role in Yemen and some other Arab states has been criticized as sectarian, and its strong relationship with the Egyptian government led by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as “undemocratic” and “counterrevolutionary.”

By far the most significant military action undertaken in its history has been the UAE’s participation in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen that began in March 2015 against targets associated with the Zaydi Shia rebel Houthis.<sup>235</sup> In August 2015, the UAE dispatched a brigade of approximately 3,000 ground forces, along with armored vehicles, to expand what had been up to that point an air campaign. On September 5, however, the UAE faced the human cost of its new military profile for the first time: 52 Emirati soldiers were killed in an attack by Houthi forces near Marib.<sup>236</sup> This loss was particularly painful given the UAE’s introduction of national service conscription in 2014. The experience, which is unprecedented for the country since its independence, has had an enormous impact on national consciousness and identity.<sup>237</sup> The UAE had never lost more than a handful of military personnel in all its conflicts combined until this incident. The loss did not, however, appear to create a public backlash against the intervention. The attrition continued, with an estimated 80 UAE troops lost in ground combat, and four more killed in air crashes in less than a month in May and June 2016.<sup>238</sup>

Nonetheless, the UAE appeared to grow increasingly skeptical about how much more could be accomplished in the battle against the Houthis and their allies, particularly in southern Yemen where their military efforts were concentrated. In the waning months of 2015 there were



increasing signs that the Emiratis were interested in drawing down the military effort and concentrating instead on ending the conflict and pursuing humanitarian aid and reconstruction. Moreover, in February 2016 MbZ met with Lisa Monaco, then-chief of counterterrorism policy for the White House, and reportedly agreed to refocus coalition efforts on the battle against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>239</sup> which had significantly expanded its size and capability, capitalizing upon the civil conflict, particularly in the south. By April 2016, the UAE had assembled a team of 2,000 Yemeni fighters dedicated to combating AQAP.<sup>240</sup> According to Michael Knights, the force eventually grew to at least 12,000 men who took part in missions designed to deny AQAP access to strategic territory in Yemen.<sup>241</sup>

In June 2016, Gargash, was widely quoted as saying that, for the Emirates, “the war [in Yemen] is over.”<sup>242</sup> However, this was quickly contradicted<sup>243</sup> and clarified,<sup>244</sup> with the country recommitting itself to both the coalition and the counterinsurgency against AQAP. Numerous U.S. officials lavished praise on the UAE’s counterinsurgency efforts in southern Yemen,<sup>245</sup> and in addition to military efforts the country has spent more than \$400 million in humanitarian aid and reconstruction. Yet, as Kyle Monsees and others point out, the challenge facing the UAE-led coalition counterinsurgency program against AQAP in Yemen is a familiar one: how to foster and promote effective local governance institutions that can survive when the outside force pulls back, as counterinsurgency doctrine holds it eventually must.<sup>246</sup> This always risks recreating the very vacuums of power, authority, law and order, and social services that insurgents and extremists exploited in the first place.

While the UAE is committed to trying to square this circle, it is already facing the same challenges that larger and more established powers have confronted in their own counterinsurgency programs, and the extent to which it can resolve them remains to be seen. Additionally, some observers such as Peter Salisbury have noted that the Yemen campaign, and the UAE’s shift in focus to AQAP and away from broader coalition goals, potentially exposes fault lines, or at least divergent goals, between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.<sup>247</sup> Courtney Freer has suggested that continued Emirati opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, contrasted with de facto Saudi support for pro-Brotherhood factions in Yemen, may be the driving force in emerging differences between the two powers regarding their joint intervention in the country.<sup>248</sup>

The Yemen conflict has illustrated the chronic problem of manpower facing the UAE military, and among the solutions attempted to address this was the reported introduction of approximately 450 Colombian and other mercenaries by the UAE. The New York Times reported that hundreds of Colombians and others were selected for a sudden deployment to Yemen from a brigade of 1,800 Latin American mercenaries being trained in the UAE.<sup>249</sup> This revelation is a barometer of several key factors for the UAE in Yemen: the determination of the country to use force when needed to achieve its goals, the difficulties facing such a military force starved of manpower because of a small population, and the willingness of the country to tap its financial assets in pursuit of foreign policy goals.

However, the UAE appears to be increasingly able to draw on U.S. support for the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign in southern Yemen. The Trump administration is carrying out greatly intensified air and drone strikes,<sup>250</sup> and expanding the range of authorized military targets and applying new rules of engagement allowing for greater levels of anticipated civilian losses in several parts of Yemen.<sup>251</sup> Moreover, the controversial

raid on an AQAP compound on January 28<sup>252</sup> in which several civilians and a Navy SEAL were killed was carried out by a combined unit of U.S. and UAE special forces.<sup>253</sup> With Trump's focus on counterterrorism, the UAE may experience an even greater level of U.S. cooperation in southern Yemen in the coming years.

Another important and underappreciated aspect of the UAE's intervention in Yemen has been its willingness to accept prisoners released from the U.S. military detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Over the years, the UAE has taken in Guantanamo detainees released by the United States on four occasions. The first was an Emirati citizen released in 2008, followed by five Yemenis released in 2015 and 15 more in August 2016. The last of these was reportedly the biggest release from the Guantanamo detention center by the Obama administration. An additional three Guantanamo prisoners, one of whom is a Yemeni national, were released to the UAE by the Obama administration during its final days in January.<sup>254</sup>

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But, as Sigurd Neubauer points out, by specifically accepting released Guantanamo detainees of Yemeni origin, the UAE is also probably trying to strengthen its hand with local southern Yemeni tribes and their fighters who are crucial constituencies in the struggle against AQAP.<sup>255</sup> Insofar as the UAE can present itself as helping to secure the release of these detainees, it might be able to increase its credibility with, and influence over, these crucial Yemeni constituencies that will ultimately have to choose sides between the UAE and its allies in the legitimate Yemeni government on the one hand and AQAP and its allies on the other. Therefore, accepting the released Yemeni Guantanamo detainees should be seen as an integral part of not only securing relations with the United States but also promoting the crucial UAE-led counterinsurgency operation in southern Yemen.

## Libya

One of the most dramatic illustrations of how far the UAE is willing to go in its new, proactive, and assertive hard power security posture was its collaboration with Egypt in attacks against Islamist forces in Libya in 2014. The strong relationship between Egypt and the UAE is based on shared antipathy toward the Muslim Brotherhood. The two countries carried out joint bombing raids against Islamist militias associated with this common enemy.<sup>256</sup> The UAE's involvement in the international campaign in Libya in 2011 set the stage for the later action in 2014 in coordination with Egypt against Islamist targets. However, unlike the campaign against the Qaddafi regime, the 2014 joint UAE-Egypt airstrikes in Libya were disapproved of by the United States, on the grounds that they would not contribute to enhanced national stability or conflict resolution.<sup>257</sup> The UAE did not appear to be either persuaded by Washington's arguments or deferential to its views, again illustrating its increasing independence in pursuit of its own national interests.

The UAE and Egypt are also widely assumed<sup>258</sup> to be supporting the anti-Islamist forces of Libyan Gen. Khalifa Hifter.<sup>259</sup> He is the most powerful commander in the east of the country and has refused to back the Government of National Accord because of the inclusion of hard-

line Islamist groups in its coalition. The UAE has been accused of donating armored personnel carriers and military vehicles to his forces.<sup>260</sup> The publication Emirati Affairs has suggested that French counterinsurgency efforts in Libya, allegedly paid for by the UAE and backed by Egypt, are now so extensive that they are “draining state coffers.”<sup>261</sup> The French forces have been reportedly operating effectively in support of Hifter’s militia,<sup>262</sup> even though he has thus far declined to cooperate with the internationally established government and is pursuing what amounts to an independent campaign against Islamist and other forces for control over territory and oil resources.<sup>263</sup> His military activities, while on the one hand being one of the few effective counterweights to armed extremism, are also frequently cited as a significant political obstacle to the unity government’s efforts to assert its control throughout Libya.

## ISIL

The UAE is also a core member of the U.S.-led coalition to “degrade and ultimately defeat” ISIL, and in the early part of the campaign conducted and even led airstrikes against the group in Syria. The UAE has not taken military action in Iraq. By the end of 2015, the UAE had conducted the second largest number of airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria,<sup>264</sup> trailing only the United States, and is the only Arab country the United States has authorized to command such airstrikes. Emirati bombing raids against ISIL targets were particularly noted because of the poetic justice in the key role played by the country’s first woman combat pilot, Major Mariam al-Mansouri,<sup>265</sup> in attacking a terrorist group that has specialized in systematic rape and institutionalized sex slavery. Citing concerns for the safety of its personnel following the capture and murder by ISIL of a Jordanian pilot, the UAE suspended airstrikes in Syria in December 2014 and reportedly resumed them in February 2015 following both political pressure from Washington and the creation of new search and rescue capabilities by the coalition.<sup>266</sup>

However, there have been no specific reports of actual UAE airstrikes against ISIL in 2016 and 2017, with the coalition citing,<sup>267</sup> but not enumerating, Emirati operations in Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve in its most recent public reports. As an August 2016 British House of Commons briefing paper aptly put it, “There has... been little coverage of UAE’s active participation since” the February announcement, although the report does imply there has been some recent or ongoing UAE activity “contributing to air operations in Syria.”<sup>268</sup> The March 2017 update to the report adds, without additional detail or citations, that, “participation by Saudi Arabia and UAE [in recent air combat against ISIL in Syria] is, however, considered to have been minimal.”<sup>269</sup> But the UAE continues to receive significant credit for its other contributions to the campaign against ISIL, including co-chairing the anti-ISIL “Coalition Communications Working Group”<sup>270</sup> and hosting the Sawab Center, which is a hub for countering ISIL’s online and social media propaganda.<sup>271</sup>

Also in February 2016 the UAE joined Saudi Arabia<sup>272</sup> in offering to contribute ground forces to a potential coalition offensive against ISIL in Syria.<sup>273</sup> Both countries stressed that any such intervention must come in the context of a coalition decision, therefore requiring U.S. leadership. The U.S. and coalition response has been unenthusiastic, requesting greater air support instead. U.S. Special Presidential Envoy to the Coalition Brett McGurk told a Senate hearing on June 28, 2016 that “We would like to see countries participate in the air campaign,”

but that “In terms of ground capability, I think our focus on empowering local actors to liberate their own territory is the most sustainable strategy for defeating ISIL, and will remain our fundamental approach.”<sup>274</sup> It is unclear whether either side expects the other to call its respective bluff, or whether each may be deliberately offering and requesting precisely what the other doesn’t particularly want.

The Gulf states’ apparent growing disenchantment with the campaign against ISIL in Syria may be linked to the perception that the U.S. and coalition emphasis on combating it comes at the expense of efforts to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular, but also Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE, believe that the long-term strategic balance of power in the Middle East for the coming decades will likely be determined by the outcome of the Syrian conflict.<sup>275</sup> If Iran – supported heavily by Russian airpower – can prevail, largely by overseeing the survival and continuation of the Assad regime, the Gulf states believe it will be very difficult to prevent a further expansion of Tehran’s influence. If, on the other hand, Iranian influence in Syria can be at least contained, if not rolled back, it will be much harder for Tehran to continue to expand its influence in the region and become a direct menace to Gulf societies with significant Shia populations such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and, potentially, Kuwait. The Gulf states have argued<sup>276</sup> that the coalition should confront<sup>277</sup> both ISIL and Assad simultaneously, and have been dismayed that the concentration of attention on combating ISIL as a singular priority, along with other factors, appears to have greatly strengthened the regime’s hand against mainstream rebel forces.<sup>278</sup>

Similarly, the UAE and other Gulf states were never directly involved in the battle against ISIL in Iraq, in part because they have diplomatic ties to the Baghdad government. This makes direct intra-Arab military engagement within what is, at least theoretically, sovereign Iraqi territory politically and diplomatically problematic in a way that does not apply to Syria, whose regime has been deemed illegitimate by the Arab League. The UAE effort to rebuild relations with Iraq began with the restoration of full diplomatic ties in June 2008,<sup>279</sup> and the return of its ambassador to Baghdad. This was followed in July by the dismissal of \$7 billion in Iraqi debt,<sup>280</sup> including interest and arrears, and a high-level Emirati delegation to Iraq led by the Abu Dhabi crown prince.<sup>281</sup>

Relations soon cooled, however, as dismay grew over what were perceived to be irresponsibly sectarian policies by the government of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The campaign against ISIL is therefore further complicated because the Gulf Arab states, including the UAE, do not fully trust<sup>282</sup> the government of current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.<sup>283</sup> Indeed, they have at times viewed it as virtually another Iranian asset despite Abadi’s efforts to keep Tehran at “arm’s length,”<sup>284</sup> specifically to reassure the Gulf and other Sunni Arab states.<sup>285</sup> As Abadi is being threatened by a credible challenge from Maliki, however, the Gulf Arab states have been trying to develop closer ties to Abadi, seeing him as preferable to Maliki. The outreach to Baghdad is also an effort to position the GCC countries to have as much influence in Iraq as possible in the aftermath of the campaign to drive ISIL out of Mosul and other key strategic areas.<sup>286</sup>

Simply put, the UAE is highly reluctant to support any policy it believes is likely to directly or indirectly strengthen Iran’s position in the region, and it fears that the single-minded focus on combating ISIL, especially in Syria but also in Iraq, could have that effect. The UAE argues

that if the interests of the Sunni Arab majority in Syria and minority in Iraq are not sufficiently protected, it will be impossible to defeat extremist groups that, however falsely, have been able to claim to be the last line of existential defense for these embattled communities. Simply focusing on ISIL, without addressing the legitimate grievances of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis, they fear, will both play into Iranian hands and fail to destroy the influence and appeal of the extremists.

## Syria

Like other Gulf countries, the UAE has been widely criticized for not accepting Syrian refugees.<sup>287</sup> However, the country claims to have taken in more than 100,000 Syrians since the start of the conflict,<sup>288</sup> bringing the total of number of Syrians resident in the UAE to 240,000,<sup>289</sup> although it mostly declines to categorize them as “refugees.” After being roundly criticized, the Gulf states explained that, because they do not classify the Syrians they have admitted as refugees, these migrants are not calculated in the international refugee statistics, making it appear that the Gulf states have not opened their doors to any Syrians. Yet in international perceptions the original accusation appears to have stuck more than the rather technical semantic explanation.<sup>290</sup> The notion that the Gulf states, including the UAE,<sup>291</sup> have not accepted any Syrian refugees plays into the stereotype of wealthy but miserly small, oil-rich countries.<sup>292</sup> A great deal of the soft power and humanitarian spending by the UAE and its GCC allies, outlined below, is designed to offset this long-established stereotype, which persists not only in the West but in parts of the Arab and Muslim worlds as well. This impression is a political and public diplomacy challenge for the Gulf states, including the UAE, both globally and closer to home.

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Unlike Turkey and its GCC partners, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or even the United States, the UAE has not been involved in directly arming or funding Syrian rebel groups. Instead, it has positioned itself as a key supplier of humanitarian aid, particularly in Jordan and parts of southern Syria.<sup>293</sup> The UAE has publicized<sup>294</sup> extensive humanitarian aid efforts<sup>295</sup> to help Syrian refugees,<sup>296</sup> including funding a refugee camp in Jordan for more than 4,000 people and spending hundreds of millions of dollars on relief. According to Syrian conflict specialist Hassan Hassan, the UAE role in Syria has been mainly supportive of U.S. and Jordanian efforts, and largely restricted to such humanitarian funding (which can, in some cases, free up resources for other purposes, thereby having an indirect effect on the balance of power in the conflict).<sup>297</sup> In addition, the UAE has joined Egypt in trying to promote non-Islamist political forces within the Syrian opposition as an alternative to increasingly influential Islamist and even extremist groups.<sup>298</sup>

The UAE has been a strong opponent of the brutal dictatorship of Assad, but it has also, unsurprisingly, been more alarmed than some of its GCC partners at the rise of hard-line Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict. The UAE appears to be reluctantly growing more sympathetic to the idea,<sup>299</sup> which is spreading among global and Middle Eastern powers, that the continuation of the conflict is unacceptably destabilizing to the region. Among several

concerns, the most disturbing is the rising power of Salafist-jihadist groups including ISIL and al-Qaeda, the latter of which is represented in the ranks of the armed opposition by the group now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which emerged after a series of rebranding efforts designed to obscure its al-Qaeda identity. (For most of the conflict it was marketed as Jabhat Fatah al-Nusra.) Numerous countries have quietly concluded that this makes the war itself, within which extreme forces on all sides have flourished, even more dangerous than the survival of an odious regime which is dependent on Iranian and Hizballah support and caters to their needs.

Several other Arab League member states such as Egypt and most of the North African countries appear to have become convinced that the war must end, even with the regime unaltered and essentially victorious.<sup>300</sup> That is a noxiously bitter pill since the Assad regime's core survival strategy during the first six months of 2011 was plainly based on policies and narratives designed to systematically promote a brutal sectarian conflict, and especially an opposition defined and dominated by the most extreme groups.<sup>301</sup> Yet the idea that ending this devastating and highly destabilizing conflict has become an overriding imperative – even if that comes at a high political cost for Gulf Arab interests and delivers a significant victory to Iran and its allies – does seem to be taken increasingly seriously by many key stake holders, arguably including Washington and Ankara.

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*Even more significant strategic depth is being pursued via the expansion of the UAE's military presence in the Horn of Africa.*

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This perspective has gained even more ground as al-Qaeda's standing in the opposition has been greatly strengthened following the military and political disaster for the mainstream opposition when the Assad regime, backed by Russian, Iranian, and Hizballah forces, recaptured eastern Aleppo and other key strategic areas in December 2016.<sup>302</sup> Emirati policy toward Syria remains nuanced and maintains a clear and principled opposition to the Assad regime. Yet the argument that ending the Syrian conflict should have priority above all other concerns does appear to be having some impact on Emirati strategic analysis, certainly in comparison to how the equation is calculated in Riyadh and Doha.

## Strategic Depth

In recent years, the UAE has also attempted to enhance its strategic depth in several directions, particularly vis-à-vis Iran and its allies, by expanding its regional presence and through other means. For example, in order to secure its oil exports from any Iranian threat, particularly the prospect of Tehran moving to seal the Strait of Hormuz,<sup>303</sup> the UAE has constructed the Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline,<sup>304</sup> which travels to the Gulf of Oman port in Fujairah emirate, presumably beyond the reach of any potentially plausible Iranian disruption. The UAE is also reportedly building a major oil refinery nearby and may be considering a second pipeline to this relatively secure port.<sup>305</sup>

But even more significant strategic depth is being pursued via the expansion of the UAE's military presence in the Horn of Africa. After years of seeking a military presence that would link forces based in the Gulf region with those in the Red Sea and beyond, the UAE established a military base, the first outside of its own borders, in Eritrea. By November 2015, numerous

reports held that Emirati, and possibly Saudi, forces were operating out of the Assab base on the Eritrean coast,<sup>306</sup> which the UAE has rapidly developed out of virtually nothing into an air, naval, and training center.<sup>307</sup> A U.N. report notes that the UAE signed a 30-year lease for the base,<sup>308</sup> following a rancorous breakdown of negotiations for a similar site in Djibouti and the rupture of diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>309</sup> This expansion is most directly linked to the campaign in Yemen,<sup>310</sup> since Emirati special forces reportedly used this base to train some 4,000 Yemeni fighters who took part in the retaking and stabilization of the city of Mukalla from AQAP.<sup>311</sup> Assab served as the primary base for the UAE-led campaign to oust the Houthi rebels from Aden, as well as for key naval blockades in the campaign in southern Yemen. Hundreds of Sudanese soldiers taking part in the Yemen intervention were deployed by the UAE via Assab.

UAE assets stationed at Assab<sup>312</sup> reportedly include at least nine Mirage 2000-9 fighters<sup>313</sup> and a range of other military aircraft; Leclerc tanks; Apache, Blackhawk, and Chinook helicopters; infantry fighting vehicles; and howitzer artillery.<sup>314</sup> According to IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, the high-speed Emirati logistics catamaran, the Swift, that was attacked by Houthi rebels on October 1, 2016, was reportedly docked, possibly for repairs, at Assab following the attack, along with six Baynunah-class corvettes and two landing craft.<sup>315</sup> This vessel has reportedly made multiple trips between Assab and Yemen since 2015.<sup>316</sup>

Alex Mello and Michael Knights have described the rapid and impressive Emirati development and use of the Assab base in some detail, including the expansion of the airfield and the construction of a significant deepwater port.<sup>317</sup> The base has already been used by the UAE to train Yemenis to combat the Houthi alliance and terrorist groups. Moreover, as Mello and Knights point out,<sup>318</sup> "Whereas the entire Emirati homeland's littoral is within the range of Iranian missiles, Assab provides depth that might allow a reserve force of Emirati surface combatants, aircraft, and even submarines to remain active and able to interdict Iran's coastline and shipping during an extended war."

These same considerations apply to other UAE assets in the Horn of Africa. Since at least 2012 the UAE has been supporting a maritime police training facility in Puntland.<sup>319</sup> The project was initially criticized as a mercenary operation involving shady security companies, including one operated by Eric Prince.<sup>320</sup> However, this was merely an initial Emirati foray into the area. In December 2016, the UAE signed a renewable 25-year contract for the establishment of an air and naval base at Berbera on the coast of Somaliland,<sup>321</sup> which is apparently now under active construction.<sup>322</sup> This new base has reportedly hosted UAE Mirage 2000 fighter jets since September 2016. Just over three miles away from the base is the port at Bossaso on the Gulf of Aden. Both the Berbera base and the Bossaso port are very near to the Yemeni coast, and the distance can be crossed in three hours or less.<sup>323</sup>

In February, Dubai Ports World signed a 30-year deal<sup>324</sup> to operate the Bossaso port.<sup>325</sup> Although it is not primarily a military facility, its management role adds greatly to the Emirati presence near the crucial Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a potential chokepoint at the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula between Yemen and the Horn of Africa and a vital link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Iran's growing ties to the Yemeni Houthi rebels gives it potential access to a second globally significant maritime chokepoint in addition to the Strait of Hormuz. The efforts by the UAE and Saudi Arabia – which, among other things, is operating

a large new facility of its own in Djibouti – to expand their military and commercial footprints in this region are, therefore, in part a refusal to cede a potentially vital strategic frontline to Tehran and its allies. This imperative is grounded in immediate realities – given what a U.N. report describes as the “Houthi expansion in Bab al-Mandab” and the militia’s increasingly capable and aggressive naval activities – as well as a range of alarming potential scenarios.<sup>326</sup>

The UAE’s expansion into the Horn of Africa is therefore not only crucial to the war in Yemen. It also helps the UAE to develop strategic depth amounting to a conventional “second strike” capability against Iran, or at least strategic reserves beyond the reach of Iranian forces. These bases will allow UAE forces – and their Saudi counterparts that are also developing their own presence in the Horn of Africa – to better protect the “exposed underbelly” of the Gulf region and have more direct access to its southernmost areas such as Oman. They could help the UAE more directly combat extremist groups such as Al Shabab in Somalia, pirates, and other security threats emanating from this region that have security implications that reach all the way to the Gulf. The UAE military presence in the Horn of Africa also contributes to the Gulf Arabs’ long-term food security agenda. The security consulting firm Stratfor argues that, “From across the Red Sea, Arab states see stretches of arable land that could feed their people as well as the large workforce needed to farm that land,” and that this is a significant factor in the effort to develop a greater Emirati and Saudi military, commercial, and political presence in the area.<sup>327</sup>

In a similar, though more modest, development, in 2016 the UAE appeared to be constructing a new airbase in Libya,<sup>328</sup> at Al-Khadim Airport, not far from Benghazi, and has reportedly already deployed some of its warplanes there. These aircraft are apparently actively supporting anti-Islamist fighters in Libya loyal to Hifter and the government in Tobruk (the country has at least three regimes operating in different areas and with divergent constituencies, ideologies, and foreign backers). However, the presence in Libya of Emirati military installations gives the UAE additional strategic depth, adding to the assets in the Horn of Africa region, and providing greater regional and international reach and heft. The drive to develop greater strategic depth in east and north Africa – in areas that are relatively distant from, yet strategically and politically important to, the UAE – reflects its international ambitions, long-term planning, and sophisticated strategic thinking.

## Soft Power and Financial Clout

As it has expanded its regional and international profile, the UAE has increasingly deployed its financial muscle, particularly through development and humanitarian assistance programs, to promote its interests and project influence beyond its borders. The tools of soft power are particularly attractive to a small and vulnerable country that needs, insofar as possible, to minimize conflict with neighbors and maximize friendly relations with potential rivals. The UAE has sought to use its financial, humanitarian, and media muscle to push back against Islamist groups and promote alternatives in the Arab world.

The UAE deployment of aid and development as tools of statecraft and soft power influence was one of its earliest foreign policy practices. Dating back into the 1980s, the UAE sought to use aid to develop key international relationships and enhance its image through public



diplomacy, utilizing its financial resources to achieve a range of both principled and pragmatic goals. For example, extensive Emirati aid to Pakistan in the 1980s was indirectly tied to the military training, expertise, and manpower that Pakistan contributed to the fledgling UAE armed forces during a crucial period in its development. This was not an overt, or even implicit, quid pro quo, but rather a parallel and complementary exchange of resources in an overall context of alliance and mutual support.<sup>329</sup>

The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development was established almost immediately upon independence in 1971, but it is an Abu Dhabi, not federal, institution. Over the course of its history, the agency says it has delivered “\$16.6 billion to 415 projects across 69 countries, including \$5.6 billion in long-term loans, and \$11.2 billion in government grants.”<sup>330</sup> As Ulrichsen notes, from its earliest days the UAE’s “aid and development assistance was rooted in religious principles of charitable giving and humanitarian concerns, as well as a practical attempt to prevent conflicts from escalating and posing a threat to the regional status quo.”<sup>331</sup> Support for development and humanitarian aid has long been seen by the UAE as an important means of promoting its status quo-oriented agenda, especially in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and helping friendly governments manage social and economic challenges. Key recipients historically have been Muslim countries long plagued by extremism and conflict such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, and less affluent Arab countries such as Jordan and Egypt. The UAE also has a long track record of material support for Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority.

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Indeed, prior to the development of its military capabilities that began in earnest in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11, foreign aid was the UAE’s primary means of projecting influence and securing its international interests. Now, the hard and soft power approaches are often deployed in a parallel and complementary manner, with Emirati charities and aid agencies focusing on support for countries such as Libya and Yemen where UAE military actions are also taking place. Ulrichsen argues that “UAE involvement in Afghanistan ... featured a mixture of hard (military), soft (humanitarian) and also smart power, the latter in the form of assistance with a range of investment and security initiatives.”<sup>332</sup> Because of this parallel approach, “by 2009 fully 14 percent of the UAE’s foreign aid budget was earmarked for Afghanistan,” including funding for “six medical clinics, 11 schools, 38 mosques, a hospital and facilities for displaced persons.”<sup>333</sup> This mixture of hard, soft, and smart power projection capabilities reflects the UAE’s strategic sensibilities and the country’s development of a range of foreign policy and security options.

For example, in 2014, the UAE spent \$422.3 million in Syria, mainly in the south in conjunction with U.S. and Jordanian humanitarian efforts;<sup>334</sup> \$509.8 million in Morocco, a key monarchy and ally; \$124.9 million in Palestine; and \$23 million in Iraq. In 2014, the UAE granted approximately \$67 million to Yemen. But by the end of 2015, with the military intervention well under way, Yemen had become the biggest recipient of UAE financial aid (with the possible exception of Egypt), with \$627 million spent there, in comparison to \$134 million in Syria, \$59 million in Iraq, and less than \$1 million in Palestine.<sup>335</sup> The trend continued in 2016, with Yemen receiving \$1.2 billion in UAE financial aid, Syria getting \$67 million, and Iraq receiving only \$6 million.<sup>336</sup>

According to Ulrichsen, “The UAE... was more careful than Saudi Arabia to cast its actions [in Yemen] within the framework of a broader humanitarian concern with an emphasis on post-conflict reconstruction and recovery. Significant amounts of Emirati aid arrived in southern Yemen within months of the UAE deployment and dozens of rebuilding projects were started, including the restoration of the power grid in Aden and the reconstruction of 154 schools as well as other initiatives that covered the training of local police and the partial restoration of health services in the city.”<sup>337</sup>

The Yemeni aid and development programs are therefore tied at least as much to Emirati policy goals as they are to any objective calculation of need.<sup>338</sup> Most notably, they are offsetting damage done by the conflict and preparing the groundwork for the withdrawal of UAE forces from southern Yemen and the restoration of local governance and authority.<sup>339</sup> The programs are also a crucial aspect of the counterinsurgency program against AQAP that is being led by Emirati forces in Yemen, which will require a massive aid and reconstruction program in order to succeed.

## Emirati Soft Power in Egypt

Given the relative failure of Islamist movements in many Arab societies – particularly after the military-led July 2013 ouster of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, a leading Brotherhood figure – the UAE felt vindicated in its skepticism about the institutional and political competence, and potential sustained electoral power, of such organizations. However, Islamist parties remain viable, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia where they have moderated toward a post-Islamist stance, and more hard-line groups continue to be influential in areas of conflict such as Syria and Iraq, where in some cases they enjoy growing political and military clout. Moreover, for complicated reasons of its own, Saudi Arabia has softened its previously hard-line position against Brotherhood organizations, at least in part to secure the broadest possible Sunni Muslim coalition against Iran.<sup>340</sup> Therefore, the UAE remains alarmed by the continued political viability of Islamist groups like the Brotherhood, and continues to be one of the strongest voices against self-described jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIL. Soft power has been a crucial aspect of UAE foreign policy from its earliest days, and particularly its efforts to combat the influence of Islamist and jihadist political movements in the Arab world.

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*In recent years Egypt has been a primary recipient of UAE financial aid, assistance, and investment.*

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Because they regard Egypt as a crucial Arab state and vital bulwark against the spread of Iranian influence and the rise of Islamist movements, the UAE and Saudi Arabia strongly supported the ouster of Morsi. Both countries pledged and delivered billions of dollars in financial support for the new Egyptian government led by Sisi shortly after he took office. The UAE and Saudi Arabia felt it was essential to financially support Sisi’s government so that it would be perceived as effective by the public and protected from popular criticism that would inevitably accompany any drastic shortfall in the Egyptian treasury’s ability to meet its responsibilities. Therefore, in recent years Egypt has been a primary recipient of UAE financial aid, assistance, and investment. This has taken the form of direct grants, no-interest loans,

humanitarian and development projects, and infrastructure programs. In March 2015, UAE Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Mohammed bin Rashid tweeted that the UAE had provided Egypt with up to \$14 billion in support over the previous two years.<sup>341</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Morsi's downfall the UAE provided the new Egyptian government with a generous \$3 billion aid package, including a \$1 billion direct grant and \$2 billion in interest-free deposits to the Central Bank of Egypt.<sup>342</sup> Around the same time, the UAE also sent Egypt seven shipments of fuel valued at \$225 million. This was quickly followed up with an additional pledge of \$2 billion in September 2013 in further deposits and grants.<sup>343</sup> In November, the UAE provided over \$98 million to pay for 135 water sanitation projects in Egypt.<sup>344</sup> In 2014, UAE aid to Egypt was estimated by Egyptian officials to total about \$3.21 billion.<sup>345</sup> That same year the UAE government pledged another \$4 billion in support for Egypt, evenly split between investments and central bank deposits designed to support the country's cash reserves.<sup>346</sup>

More recently, as with Saudi Arabia, the UAE's support for Egypt has shifted away from direct cash transfers to support the central bank toward investments and dedicated infrastructure programs. For example, in 2015 the UAE invested \$1.5 billion in a series of infrastructure projects throughout Egypt including schools, health centers, housing, transportation, and power capacity development.<sup>347</sup> Nevertheless, in many cases, promises of additional support for Egypt's treasury have not been met. During the 2015 economic conference in Sharm el Sheikh, the UAE repeated its promise to deposit \$2 billion in the central bank and invest \$2 billion more in other parts of the economy.<sup>348</sup> However, there are strong indications that, in actuality, direct Gulf support for the Egyptian central bank and its cash reserves dropped off in 2015-16. In March 2016, Egypt devalued its currency, at least partly as a consequence of the slowdown in Gulf states' support for its cash reserves, and diminished remittance payments from Egyptian workers in Gulf economies suffering from the crisis in energy revenue.<sup>349</sup>

Egypt has not been able to recover its foreign exchange reserves to pre-2011 levels, despite \$6 billion in direct financial support from the Gulf states.<sup>350</sup> In August 2016, the UAE promised to deposit another \$1 billion in the bank to shore up foreign-exchange cash reserves.<sup>351</sup> Yet despite ongoing Gulf support for Egypt's economy, direct support for the central bank has weakened and greater conditions are being placed on such support, prompting Egypt to approach the IMF for a \$12 billion loan.<sup>352</sup> Nonetheless, the Gulf states, particularly the UAE, regard Egypt as both "too big to fail" and too important to the ongoing struggle against Iranian influence and the threat from radical Islamists to be completely abandoned or allowed to collapse.

As another crucial part of its efforts to push back against radical Islamism, the UAE has been a major supporter of the moderate Sunni Al-Azhar University, one of the most credible institutions of traditional Islam in the Arab world. That work began in earnest immediately after the election of Morsi in 2012, when the UAE signed a memorandum of understanding with the university to fund multiple projects costing millions of dollars, presumably as a preliminary step to offset the use of the Egyptian government by the Brotherhood to promote its socially conservative and politically revolutionary brand of Islamism.<sup>353</sup>

In addition, in 2013, the UAE established the Sheikh Zayed Center for Arabic at the university,<sup>354</sup> which was estimated to be educating 1,200 students from 102 countries. The UAE further promised to fund the education of more than 31,000 foreign students from around the world studying at the university.<sup>355</sup> And in September 2015, the university inaugurated a UAE-funded health service department to meet the needs of 350,000 people associated with the educational institution.<sup>356</sup> In August 2015, the UAE and the university unveiled a plan to directly use the university to combat extremism, including by revising curricula, promoting “real” Islamic values, and funding “peace caravans” of Al-Azhar scholars to Western countries.<sup>357</sup> Finally, to further institutionalize its ties to the university, a satellite campus of Al-Azhar, the first of its kind outside of Egypt, is planned for the UAE.<sup>358</sup>

The UAE’s support for moderate versions of Islam as represented by Al-Azhar is complemented by its relatively open and supportive attitude toward non-Muslim religious minorities both in its own society and regionally. The UAE is notably tolerant of not only non-Muslim monotheistic practices, such as those of Jews and Christians, but also of other faith traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>359</sup> As part of its efforts to promote its own vision of a more open, globally engaged, and tolerant Arab world, particularly as opposed to more inward looking and suspicious attitudes promoted by Islamists and other religious conservatives, the UAE has built strong ties to the Egyptian Coptic church. For example, in January 2016, the UAE Office for Social Development and Infrastructure Projects in Egypt announced a number of programs intended to aid the Coptic church’s programs in the country.<sup>360</sup>

## Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood

### The Growth of a Hard-Line Stance

One of the UAE’s most far-reaching regional policies is its opposition to Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and efforts to instead promote pro-Western and moderate policies in the Arab world. Along with Saudi Arabia, it viewed the Arab Spring uprisings not as a hopeful moment of popular awakening but as the precursor to regional chaos and an opportunity for Islamist groups to seize power. Whether the UAE should feel vindicated by subsequent developments, or has deliberately contributed to a chaotic, sectarian, and “counter-revolutionary” dénouement to the uprisings, is a contentious issue among scholars and commentators in both the Arab world and the West.

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*For many years, key leaders in the UAE supported the Brotherhood and allowed it to flourish within the country’s federal system, before a broad crackdown began in the 1990s.*

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The UAE has long distinguished itself in the Gulf region, and the Arab world more generally, by its marked antipathy toward Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, even as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both been amending their policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood, and apparently moving closer<sup>361</sup> together after years of disagreement on the topic, the UAE’s policies appear unchanged and still steadfastly opposed to the Brotherhood. But it was not always so. For many years, key leaders in the UAE supported the Brotherhood and allowed it to flourish within the country’s federal system, before a broad crackdown began in the 1990s.

For example, the Brotherhood branch in Dubai, which was founded in 1974, “received support from Emirates leader and Vice President Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum, signaling the government’s willingness to patronize an Islamist group as a bulwark against Arab nationalism.”<sup>362</sup> Moreover, he promoted the establishment of Brotherhood branches in Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. For his part, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Zayed bin Sultan, in the late 1970s gave the Brotherhood land on which to establish its headquarters in his own emirate.<sup>363</sup> As Freer points out, Emirati leaders became increasingly uncomfortable with the outspoken social conservatism of the Brotherhood, and its growing political assertiveness. As the organization gained ground in student councils and professional associations, she notes, “perhaps fearing that the Emirati Brotherhood could gain a broader following in a political bloc, as in Kuwait, the government resolved to squash it before it could influence politics on an institutionalized level.”<sup>364</sup>

As the UAE’s antipathy toward the Brotherhood was developing in the 1990s, its attitudes were greatly influenced by Egyptian allegations that purported to demonstrate the international agenda of the organization and its goal of promoting a transnational “Islamic state” (which, the UAE believes, renders the group subversive to any existing country). Indeed, precisely this perception – that the Brotherhood seeks to eliminate all the existing states in the Arab, and perhaps even the broader Muslim, world and replace them with a supranational Islamic entity – continues to inform the UAE understanding of the nature and role of this movement. Yet within the federal structure of the UAE, parts of the Brotherhood, especially in Ras al-Khaimah, for several years managed to remain active and independent with the support of the local emir.<sup>365</sup> After the 9/11 attacks in the United States, however, whatever space had been preserved for the Brotherhood to remain openly active in the UAE was rapidly shut down.

## Categorical Rejection of Politicized Islam

The Emirati perspective on Islamists in general, including the Muslim Brotherhood, was summarized in an address by Gargash at a strategic forum in Abu Dhabi at the beginning of November 2015. He said, “The UAE believes that extremist ideologies and terrorism are two faces of the same coin, which mutually reinforce the other and contribute to instability. The battle against extremism and terrorism is not just a physical one. It is also more importantly an ideological, intellectual, and societal one.”<sup>366</sup> Therefore, the UAE considers radical Islamists, by definition, to be a threat. It rejects the notion that groups that preach an extremist ideology, even if they abjure violence of all kinds, as most Muslim Brotherhood parties (except Hamas) at least claim to, should be distinguished from violent terrorist organizations. Instead, it sees the two as symbiotic. It does not believe in “moderate” iterations of political Islamism, seeing the entire movement as a spectrum of intensifying radicalism, and rejects Islamism simply as a regional and global menace.

This absolutist antipathy carries through to organizations that are deemed sympathetic to Brotherhood causes or ideologies, including some in Europe and the United States. For example, two U.S. organizations – the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Muslim American Society – were included in a November 2014 list of groups designated by the UAE

government as terrorist organizations. The U.S. government has reportedly questioned the designation, which it does not share.<sup>367</sup> The UAE has not removed these groups from its list despite numerous complaints and objections.

Divisions within the GCC over the Muslim Brotherhood led to a major rift within the council when the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014.<sup>368</sup> They cited Qatar's alleged interference in their internal affairs, strongly implying<sup>369</sup> they were also protesting Doha's support for the Brotherhood in the Gulf region and the broader Middle East. Relations were finally restored in November 2014<sup>370</sup> after Qatar agreed to "bring the country in line with the rest of the GCC with regards to regional issues" – apparently meaning it would significantly attenuate its support for Brotherhood groups, especially in the Gulf region – and pledged noninterference in "the internal affairs of any of the other GCC countries."<sup>371</sup> But this contretemps, by far the most severe internal dispute in the history of the GCC, illustrated how deep tensions run over the issue.

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*Riyadh has been seeking to broaden the Sunni coalition against Iran and its allies as much as possible, and no longer perceives the Brotherhood as a major political threat in the region.*

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Since then, Saudi Arabia<sup>372</sup> and Qatar<sup>373</sup> have been moving closer together on several key issues, especially more compatible policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Riyadh has been seeking to broaden the Sunni coalition against Iran and its allies as much as possible, and no longer perceives the Brotherhood as a major political threat in the region. Qatar, for its part, appears to have realized that gambling entirely on the rise of Brotherhood-affiliated parties in the region was a miscalculation and seems to be expanding its range of clients to include different groups, including more traditional Arab nationalists, some leftists and others it previously either ignored or supported tepidly.

These divergent perspectives have led to some differences with Riyadh in approaches to regional conflicts. For example, in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia has sought to use the influence of Muslim Brotherhood-related groups and figures to bolster its allies, the UAE has avoided doing so. While their overall goals in Yemen and Syria remain the same – the restoration of the Hadi government in Sanaa, and regime change in Damascus, respectively – increasingly divergent attitudes toward some Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, have led the UAE to pursue divergent tactics and cultivate different allies than Saudi Arabia.

## Regional Implications

Syria is a clear example of how this has played out regionally, where Saudi Arabia and Qatar have backed a series of Islamist groups with money and weapons, while the UAE has provided some diplomatic and nonlethal support but essentially kept such groups at arm's length and has followed the lead of Washington and Amman. Even the United States under Obama, following the Arab Spring uprisings, was apparently more willing than the UAE to distinguish between relatively moderate and more radical Islamists, laying out the requirements that the former groups must meet to be considered legitimate political actors. As noted, so far as the UAE is concerned, the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization. Obviously, its attitude is hardly more sympathetic to more radical Salafist groups, let alone Salafist-jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda or ISIL. Yet it is strongly opposed to both the pro-Iranian policies

and exceptionally brutal conduct of the Assad dictatorship. This has left the UAE little room for engagement in the Syrian conflict as it has played out on the battlefield, and even at the negotiating table.

This continued antipathy toward Islamists has been a key factor in consolidating the strong alliance between the UAE and the current Egyptian government, which share the same highly antagonistic attitude toward the Muslim Brotherhood. It informed their joint bombing attack in 2014 against Islamist targets in Libya, and continued support for Hifter. It has also meant that both Egypt and the UAE have very poor relations with Hamas (the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood), although neither, especially the UAE, has particularly warm ties to the Palestinian Authority under President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas and others have for several years promoted a conspiracy theory that claims that the UAE is seeking to overthrow him in favor of the former Fatah leader in Gaza, Mohammad Dahlan, who lives in the UAE and has good relations with its leadership.<sup>374</sup> The conspiracy theory became even more implausible with the alleged participation of former Palestine Liberation Organization Secretary General Yasser Abed Rabbo and former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.<sup>375</sup> The UAE attitude toward the Palestinian issue is defined by a continued commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state, combined with strong antipathy toward Hamas because of its Muslim Brotherhood-orientation. There is no evidence the UAE believes it could or should decide who will be the next Palestinian Authority president or Palestine Liberation Organization chairman.

The UAE believes that it represents a forward-looking, modernizing, and moderate Arab approach, while the Islamists, including the Brotherhood, represent a backward, obscurantist, and extremist agenda. Others, however, see the UAE position as representing the interests of monarchists as opposed to republicans (which almost all Islamists are), and even as the cutting edge of a “counterrevolutionary” reaction to the Arab Spring.<sup>376</sup> The greatest weakness of this once-pervasive and still-persistent counterrevolution narrative is that it necessarily accepts the implicit or explicit claims of Islamist groups to authentically or legitimately represent either Arab “revolutions,” or the Arab popular will in general, or both.

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The UAE's perspective completely rejects such claims, and instead stresses what it sees as the shared set of core commitments and continuity between all the radical Islamist groups despite their differences, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Khomeini-inspired Shia Islamists, Salafist groups, and Salafist-jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIL. It does not conflate them, but it does view them all as different manifestations of the same essential problem. It sees them as springing from common origins, and opposes them all, categorically and without compromise. The UAE is not exactly secular in the Western sense, but it is (literally) militantly anti-theocratic. This profound opposition to the politicization and radicalization of Islam in all of its varieties is among the most important principles guiding the UAE's domestic and foreign policies.

## Cybersecurity

### Perceptions of Vulnerability

The UAE is particularly concerned about cybersecurity. The government, private sector, and other key elements of Emirati society believe they are vulnerable to malicious cyberattacks usually directed against Western states and more fully developed economies. Indeed, the UAE's new Cyber Security Center alleges that the country is now the second most targeted in the world, following the United States, and is under constant threat from criminals, intelligence agencies, terrorist groups, and hacking collectives such as Anonymous.<sup>377</sup> State-owned energy companies are believed to be particularly vulnerable. In 2015, a Kaspersky Security Bulletin Overall Statistics Report ranked the UAE at the 19th most vulnerable country in the world.<sup>378</sup> The report showed that 2 million residents of the country had been targeted, and that 20 percent of them believe that their personal information was compromised after engaging with an online vendor.<sup>379</sup> The cybersecurity firm Dark Matter reported that the UAE is the subject of 5 percent of all global cyber attacks and that such attacks have increased by 500 percent over the past five years.<sup>380</sup>

At a 2016 forum on cybersecurity in the UAE hosted by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and Raytheon Corporation, many experts suggested that, despite progress, the country's defenses remain inadequate.<sup>381</sup> To address these and other threats, the government plans to double its spending on internal security from about \$5 billion to more than \$10 billion in the next 10 years, with a significant percentage dedicated to cybersecurity.<sup>382</sup> Moreover, it plans significant initiatives in public education and the development of local expertise through the establishment of a cybersecurity academy, among other long-term projects.

### Legal Regulation of Internet Use

Internet access and activities in the UAE are primarily regulated by Federal Law No. 2 of 2006, which, among other things, protects information privacy and restricts access to a number of prohibited websites as well as the use of the Internet to "display contempt" for religious ideas and symbols.<sup>383</sup> This legislation was augmented by Federal Law No. 5 in 2012, which criminalizes a range of online activities, particularly under the rubric of "invasion of privacy,"<sup>384</sup> including many activities common to social media usage around the world, and empowers the police, via a new cyber crime unit, to surveil usage and enforce these restrictions. It establishes criminal liabilities for such offenses and includes extraterritorial provisions that could hold people in other countries accountable for violations committed in the UAE. Article 28 of the decree mandates criminal penalties for those who "incite actions that endanger state security or infringe on public order," and Article 30 allows for potential life sentences for advocating the overthrow of the government through online activities. These regulations and other aspects of the telecommunications sector and information technology are largely enforced by the UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.<sup>385</sup>

The national security implications of cyber threats are regulated by Federal Law Decree No. 3 of 2012,<sup>386</sup> which led directly to the establishment of the National Electronic Security Authority the agency charged with protection of the country's cyberspace, particularly in the military



and intelligence sectors. NESA operates under the supervision of the UAE Supreme National Security Council and administers the Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Policy<sup>387</sup> and Information Assurance Standards initiatives crucial to the country's National Cyber Security Program.<sup>388</sup> In 2014, the country reportedly established a cyber command within the General Headquarters of the national armed forces that runs in parallel to NESA and specifically serves the military.<sup>389</sup> At the subfederal level, some of the Emirates have their own independent cybersecurity initiatives, such as Dubai's Center for E-Security aimed at thwarting cyber crimes and protecting key industries such as the financial services sector.<sup>390</sup> A July 2016 federal decree mandates that the use of virtual private networks (VPN) and proxy servers to prevent surveillance of Internet use is subject to substantial fines in the UAE.<sup>391</sup>

## Malware and Surveillance

Some of the UAE's more aggressive internal cybersecurity policies have been criticized by human rights activists and international organizations. The UAE government uses malware to fight criminals and terrorists, but also to engage in domestic espionage, a practice that came under particular scrutiny in summer 2016. Critics charge that the government has sometimes used malware and other electronic technologies for the inappropriate and even abusive electronic surveillance of dissidents and political opponents.<sup>392</sup> The UAE government has reportedly spent millions of dollars on such malware in recent years.

The Citizen Lab group based at the University of Toronto alleged that an Israeli company, Pegasus, was paid \$10-15 million for spyware that was deployed against a noted dissident, Ahmed Mansoor.<sup>393</sup> Although the group said they could not definitively prove that the UAE government was behind the hacking attacks against Mansoor's electronic devices, they believed they have a solid circumstantial case.<sup>394</sup> Mansoor was one of five dissidents jailed in 2011 for circulating a pro-democracy and anti-government petition. He was reportedly arrested again in March<sup>395</sup> and accused of spreading false information online and traducing the reputation of the state.<sup>396</sup>

In the context of this hacking case, Amnesty International said that the UAE "has taken some of the most dramatic [technological] steps to shut down individual human rights activists and dissenting voices," because it is "highly sensitive" about its international public image.<sup>397</sup> Ironically, hacked emails from a firm called the Hacking Team suggest that the UAE government paid the organization over \$600,000 for spyware aimed at just over 1,000 people,<sup>398</sup> although these contracts apparently ended in 2015 (perhaps in part because the Italian government revoked the firm's global license). The company's only more extensive patron was the government of Morocco. Bill Marczak of Citizen Lab said that, while the UAE could not be compared to the United States or Russia in the use of spyware to monitor online activities, "they're clearly moving up the food chain."<sup>399</sup>

As its economy continues to grow, and international profile expands, the UAE is likely to face an ever-growing threat from cyber attacks by criminals, terrorists, and others. As with its larger and more established counterparts, particularly in the West, the UAE is likely to continue to struggle with trying to identify the appropriate balance between law enforcement and security on the one hand and individual rights and freedoms on the other. Widespread recent reports of the troubling use of malware against dissidents, combined with other human rights and civil

liberties concerns outlined below, suggest that the UAE may be moving faster in developing effective cybersecurity technologies than it has been in developing safeguards for individual rights.

## Counterterrorism and Human Rights

### Counterterrorism Achievements

Counterterrorism and counterradicalization are major concerns for all states in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf monarchies, which are directly threatened by a variety of extremist groups, including Sunni Salafist-jihadist groups such as ISIL and al-Qaeda, pro-Iranian Shia extremist organizations such as Hizballah, and, as mentioned from the perspective of the UAE, the Muslim Brotherhood as well. Because it takes probably the most expansive view of what constitutes terrorism and extremism of any of the Gulf states, and arguably of any Arab state other than Egypt, the UAE has adopted an internal and regional stance that sets for itself a particularly broad and extensive counterterrorism agenda.

In addition, the UAE has had to deal with foreign espionage activities, including the high profile assassination of a Hamas operative by Israeli intelligence agents. On January 19, 2010, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh<sup>400</sup> was assassinated in Dubai by Israeli agents travelling with forged passports from several European countries<sup>401</sup> and Australia.<sup>402</sup> The assassination was ultimately solved by the Dubai police (apparently to the surprise and dismay of Israel's Mossad).<sup>403</sup> But it demonstrated how the UAE could become a proxy battleground for two forces – Israel and Hamas – with which it does not maintain any formal relations.

The most recent State Department Country Report on Terrorism (2015) praises UAE counterterrorism capabilities and efforts, citing “its firm counterterrorism stance through implementation of strict counterterrorism laws and a strong counterterrorism partnership with the United States.”<sup>404</sup> It notes that “The UAE was a vocal and active participant in counterterrorism efforts at both the regional and international levels,” and praised its support for “Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which it hosts in Abu Dhabi,”<sup>405</sup> and “the Sawab Center in Abu Dhabi, a new social media platform focused on countering ISIL's radical narratives and online propaganda.” It also specifically lauded numerous “instances of effective Emirati action to disrupt terrorist financing.”<sup>406</sup>

There have been a number of high profile counterterrorism prosecutions and convictions in the UAE recent years. In December 2014, 15 people were convicted and sentenced for supporting extremist groups, including al-Qaeda, in Syria.<sup>407</sup> In July 2015, the UAE executed a woman, Alaa al-Hashemi, for the stabbing murder of American teacher Ibolya Ryan and subsequently planting a homemade bomb, allegedly due to extremist beliefs.<sup>408</sup> Her husband was also charged with terrorism-related offenses, including appointing himself the “emir” of ISIL in the UAE.<sup>409</sup> In March 2016, a highly publicized trial of 41 defendants accused of trying to set up an ISIL-style government in the UAE led to 11 life sentences, numerous lesser sentences, and seven acquittals.<sup>410</sup> In June 2016, 19 men were sentenced to prison sentences for activities supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist groups in Yemen and attempting to overthrow the government in the UAE.<sup>411</sup> In February 2016, a Sudanese man was arrested on

charges of planning to kill foreigners by exploding a bomb in Abu Dhabi.<sup>412</sup> In January 2016, a Palestinian man was heavily fined and sentenced to five years in prison for posting online videos in support of ISIL.<sup>413</sup> Currently, 23 men are still being tried in the UAE courts for joining or supporting al-Qaeda.<sup>414</sup>

## Prosecutions and Human Rights Concerns

Counterterrorism activities in the UAE are largely governed by Federal Law No. 7 of 2014,<sup>415</sup> in addition to the cyber crime law previously cited, which describes the nature of terrorism-related offenses and the appropriate penalties under law. While praising the UAE's counterterrorism efforts, the 2015 State Department report also expresses concern that "aspects of the law are overly broad and can be interpreted to criminalize atheism, peaceful critiques of Islam, and other forms of protected religious speech and expression." Human Rights Watch found the law potentially abusive toward polytheism, atheism, and other religious beliefs,<sup>416</sup> and a coalition of Arab human rights nongovernmental organizations worried that anti-terrorism provisions would be used to crack down against dissidents and human rights activists.<sup>417</sup> The UAE has mobilized its domestic intelligence, legal, and law enforcement capabilities to successfully contain the threat of terrorism within the country, as well as the activities of international terrorists, but has also at times used counterterrorism legislation for inappropriate or repressive purposes.

As in the 2016 trial of the 41 defendants, there have been a number of other high profile acquittals, strongly suggesting that a reasonable measure of due process attends these proceedings. However, some of these acquittals led to additional accusations of mistreatment in custody. A particularly high profile case involving defendants accused of financing extremist groups in Libya, including a Canadian man, Salim Alaradi,<sup>418</sup> and two Libyan Americans, Kamal and Mohamed Eldarat, is a noteworthy example.<sup>419</sup> In May 2016, the men were acquitted of all charges and released after over 500 days in jail,<sup>420</sup> but they alleged that they had been abused during their incarceration, even though they were ultimately exonerated.<sup>421</sup> UAE officials denied the accusations and pointed to the acquittals as evidence that the suspects had been treated fairly and given due process.<sup>422</sup>

In recent years there have been a number of other controversial detentions by the UAE in the course of its counterterrorism activities. Human rights groups criticized a 2011 crackdown on NGOs associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE.<sup>423</sup> The government had accused the organization of violating the terms of association and engaging in illicit political activities. Another controversial instance involved the detention of a group called the UAE 5,<sup>424</sup> including the aforementioned Ahmed Mansoor, who were dissidents accused of "publicly insulting" government officials and using a banned political forum.<sup>425</sup> They were arrested in April 2011 and released the following November. Rights groups have suggested that their primary offense was circulating a pro-democracy petition. They were widely deemed by human rights groups to be "prisoners of conscience,"<sup>426</sup> and although they were convicted and sentenced to two or three years each, they were pardoned the next day by the UAE president and released.<sup>427</sup>

Other controversial cases include three sisters who were jailed for three months for tweeting in behalf of their brother, who was one of the defendants in a 2013 mass trial of 94 political activists accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and planning to overthrow the

government.<sup>428</sup> Other detentions that have drawn international attention include Mohammed al-Roken (another of the 94 alleged subversive Muslim Brotherhood supporters),<sup>429</sup> and ongoing cases involving one of the UAE 5, Nasser bin Ghaith (who is also accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE), and the Jordanian journalist Tayseer al-Najjar (who expressed support for Hamas and was critical of Egyptian and Emirati policies toward Gaza), both of which are deemed to be nonviolent, political dissent cases by some international human rights groups.

The UAE has also been criticized for closing the offices of some pro-democracy European groups,<sup>430</sup> such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation,<sup>431</sup> and U.S. organizations including the National Democratic Institute<sup>432</sup> as well as the more academic RAND Corporation.<sup>433</sup> In addition, a number of Western and Arab journalists and academics have been denied entry into the country in recent years.<sup>434</sup> In its response to the criticism by human rights groups, the UAE denies allegations of torture and abuse, and points to frequent acquittals as evidence of due process and fairness. In dealing with U.S. criticism of overzealousness or abuses in counterterrorism cases, the UAE acquired a talking point of its own in June 2016 when a UAE businessman, Ahmed al-Menhali, was hospitalized following a confrontation with local Ohio police who were investigating groundless allegations he was “a supporter of ISIL.”<sup>435</sup>

## Conclusion

The UAE emerged as a state late in the process of global decolonization, gaining independence in 1971 at precisely the moment that the energy resources of the Gulf region began paying off dramatically for these previously isolated and impoverished societies. Under the leadership of oil-rich Abu Dhabi, and, as time passed, with increasing input from a global market-savvy Dubai, the UAE quickly grew in stature and influence from humble origins to regional influence. Yet from the outset it has been guided by a keen understanding of the limitations imposed on its strategic options by its relatively small landmass and population. Therefore, it has continuously sought to maximize the power of its human potential, including promoting the education and integration into the workplace of women, and to find technological solutions that, in spite of its small population, enable it to address a variety of economic and security challenges.

By the early 1990s the UAE was a bona fide, if still minor, player in the Gulf region, especially with regard to certain forms of soft power projection. The following decade proved transformative. When the Arab Spring uprisings rocked the Middle East to its core starting in the final weeks of 2010, the UAE had already developed enough military, financial, diplomatic, and cultural capacity to make it unquestionably a key player in the GCC and even a significant actor in the Arab world. A decade of turmoil fragmented previously leading Arab states such as Iraq and Syria, and turned the once-mighty Egypt inward, leaving the de facto leadership of the Arab world to the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia but crucially buttressed by the UAE.

In a Middle East increasingly divided along sectarian lines, and with the Sunni-majority Arab world facing an ascendant Iran that, along with its close-knit alliance of regional proxies, persists in trying to significantly expand its regional influence, the UAE was propelled into an internationally significant role for which, especially given its modest geographic and

demographic size, it seems unsuited and might have preferred to avoid. But given its vital national security and economic interests – and since it has positioned itself, along with Egypt, as a leading Arab state opponent of radical Islamism – the UAE has found itself in a position of regional and international consequence that few would have anticipated as recently as 15 years ago.

The UAE is fortunate that its economic and military planning since independence has gone a long way toward maximizing the ability of the country to play an outsized regional role. Yet it remains fundamentally a vulnerable state, albeit one that possesses an unusual broad set of assets through which to protect its national interests and secure its future. The UAE's increasingly assertive national security doctrine and military posture – whether undertaken in concert with allies such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt, or even unilaterally – is therefore likely to persist, and is more likely to expand than contract. The country's keen sense of the interconnectedness of the region in which it lives is largely an asset. The UAE has long been the Gulf state with arguably the strongest commitment to international engagement, through its use of aid and development and through Dubai's increasingly global commercial ambitions.

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threatened by the instability that surrounds it. The UAE's official attitude toward radical Islamism is sometimes criticized as too sweeping. But it is based on a strong sense that the only way to ultimately defeat extremism is to draw a bright line between a healthy and appropriate sphere for, and interpretation of, religion (which the UAE characterizes as essentially a return to traditional Sunni Muslim distinctions between civil and religious authority), and what it views as an inappropriate, combustible, and ultimately uncontrollable blend of politics and religion.

One argument, embraced by some of the UAE's GCC partners, is that more moderate forms of Islamism are the proper, and perhaps only viable, corrective to the most extreme groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL among Sunnis and Hizballah among Shias. The implicit response built into the UAE's policies, and not infrequently expressed in its official rhetoric, is that such distinctions simply play the Islamists' game and concede too much to extremism. The Emirati approach is not to quibble with radical Islamists, and pick and choose when and where religion should be folded into politics, but to instead assert that the entire project of politicizing Islam and Islamizing politics in the Arab world is wrongheaded and invariably leads to disastrous consequences.

The UAE's core national security doctrines, given how they have emerged since independence and in the context of the region's ongoing spasm of chaos and violence, will almost certainly continue to draw on this core assumption. That will not prevent the UAE from working closely with GCC partners like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait that take a different view regarding the proper relationship between religion and politics, or the nature and identity of terrorist groups. But it does mean that the UAE will continue to offer a distinctive and compelling

national voice, and a not insignificant regional force, that rejects all forms of radical Islamism and promotes the separation of civil and religious authority as the wisest and most historically authentic Arab and Muslim attitude.

As the human rights issues cited illustrate, the UAE continues to struggle with the balance between national security and individual liberties. This conundrum is familiar to almost all the postcolonial states of Asia and Africa, and, especially in the age of terrorism, is increasingly a problem for established Western democracies as well. The UAE is not ready to tolerate sustained and aggressive political dissent, even if it is nonviolent, or other provocations that, by emerging international standards, would generally be regarded as protected and legitimate speech or activities.

As numerous acquittals in high profile counterterrorism cases demonstrate, the UAE does afford defendants in national security cases a reasonable measure of due process. Yet there have been several instances over the past few years that seem to be, at best, overzealous, if not abusive, prosecutions and detentions, and troubling accounts of mistreatment of prisoners. The national security of even a small and vulnerable state like the UAE might be best ensured by developing and upholding rigorous standards for investigating, prosecuting, and punishing counterterrorism cases, and sharply distinguishing between genuine subversion versus legitimate political dissent. Such an approach would also be more consistent with the values of tolerance, openness, and moderation that the UAE champions in many of its other policies.

As it continues to flex its new military muscles beyond its borders, the UAE will draw key lessons not just from its own experiences, but also those of larger, more established powers regarding successful counterinsurgency, avoiding quagmires, striking an appropriate balance between risks and benefits, and wisely gauging what kinds of military actions serve, rather than harm, a long-term political objective. The UAE has built an impressive and potent, if relatively small, high-tech military and very well-regarded and effective air and special forces. This outsized military muscle and the country's financial clout combined with chronic regional instability, ongoing Iranian efforts to expand its hegemony, and the paucity of leadership in the Arab world all virtually ensure that the UAE will continue to play a regional and international role that seems disproportionate to its modest geographic and demographic size.

The emerging Emirati security strategy outlined in this paper is a logical consequence of the country's evident vulnerabilities combined with a range of options and capabilities that are extremely unusual for such a small state. The UAE has been well-served by several decades of developing its military capabilities and partnerships, and, crucially, practical battlefield experience. The key elements of the UAE's national security doctrine are maintaining the key strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia; nurturing a close relationship with, but not overreliance on, the United States; maximizing engagement with the global economy; developing a strong national security technology capability, especially regarding intelligence and cybersecurity; exerting staunch opposition to all varieties of radical Islamism; confronting Iran's aggressive regional agenda; using financial resources to project its influence regionally and internationally; maintaining a strong partnership with its GCC allies; and seeking greater strategic depth through a variety of means. This is unquestionably an ambitious agenda. It is

also, perhaps, unavoidable for a small and wealthy, and hence potentially vulnerable, country that is seeking to chart its own course and determine its future in a region where – for all actors, whether large or small, rich or poor – uncertainty has become the only constant.

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