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**Emirati three-tiered state power projection: military, economic
and soft tools of statecraft in the Middle East, Africa, and Beyond**

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Executive Summary

The arrival of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan (MbZ) in power has brought stark changes in Emirati foreign policies. The proliferation of conflicts, transnational threats and powerful non-state actors have dramatically impacted the international relations of the Middle East towards a highly competitive and hostile landscape. These shifts in the regional system, along with the perception of US decline and call for burden-sharing have pushed the UAE to extend well beyond its borders and have broadened MbZ' ambitions towards achieving regional primacy in this new post-Cold War security architecture. The United Arab Emirates ("UAE") has relied on three main approaches by which it has been able to project its power regionally and internationally: its military power, its economic power, and its soft power. By leveraging on these three tools of statecraft, the UAE has tremendously expanded its influence in the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, the Levant, North Africa, and West Asia, with varying implications for regional stability and international relations. Drawing on realism, international political economy, and constructivism, this paper seeks to conceptualize Emirati full state power projections and understand how these different sources of influence have intervened together in pursuit of vital foreign policy objectives. This paper puts forward the hypothesis of a multifaceted statecraft in concentric circles to examine Emirati three-tiered power projections. This conceptualization of the UAE's power projections will go beyond providing a theory of Emirati state power by offering an inter-theoretical lens to understanding current regional developments through the prism of the overly ambitious Emirati leadership. This will include analyzing the driving motivations behind the UAE's interventions and Gulf states' competition, as well as the implications on regional relations and for the international community. Ultimately, this paper aims to assess the depth and breadth of Emirati influence in the Middle East and Africa and examine whether the UAE model is as unique as it appears to be by analyzing it through other Gulf states' interventionism in the region amid intensifying competition for regional influence.

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, Arab Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, have pursued more independent and proactive security policies in the Middle East and wider African region ("MEA"). Enormous oil wealth and the accumulation of military might have enabled Gulf states to play an active regional role, though only rather recently. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in particular, a new generation of leadership has also contributed to a change in foreign and military policy. Thus, in a departure from past policy, Gulf states have established a strong military and economic presence and a broader soft power in the MEA.

In the case of the UAE, the arrival of Mohammed bin Zayed ("MbZ") played an important role in the reformulation of Emirati foreign policies. While Emirati unilateralism is a relatively recent phenomenon, Emirati interventionism and expansion actually extends over the past 50 years and has been gradual and progressive. Since the establishment of the federation in 1971, the UAE, under the auspices of the United States, have extended their areas of interests beyond the Arabian Peninsula, to the Balkans, West Asia, and the broader Middle East. From 2011, the UAE began to engage with the world more independently, supplying economic aid, arming and financing paramilitary groups, and establishing naval bases, ports and economic zones across the MEA, in a way that sometimes goes beyond its political weight. Additionally, the UAE has cleverly engaged in a state-branding strategy to increase its legitimacy domestically and improve its regional and international reputation. Emirati soft power has been particularly diverse, employing a wide range of public, cultural, and media diplomacy tools. These fervor endeavors reflect a larger change in Emirati foreign policies within a volatile region, brought by four major developments on the domestic and regional levels: the massive wealth generated

by the oil boom; the new Emirati leadership since 2004; a perceived decline in American primacy and its call for burden-sharing in the Middle East; and finally increased regional instability and uncertainty, notably since 2011 Arab uprisings and the subsequent rise of transnational Islamist groups. These factors have contributed to a gradual but significant reformulation of the UAE's foreign policy, which not only included a change in the means used to achieving foreign policy goals, but also in the identification of pressing problems and goals. This has emboldened MbZ to pursue an ambitious and pragmatic foreign policy agenda that views the UAE as playing a leading role in the stabilization of the MEA aimed at securing domestic stability and regional primacy, as well as containing the rise of political Islamist groups boosted by Turkey and Qatar.

All these events demonstrate that the UAE is no longer a secondary player in the Middle East and that it is not a powerful state in a conventional sense. Despite its small size and population, the UAE have behaved in a way characteristic of a quasi-regional hegemon, but its foreign policy reflects features of a regional middle power. Middle powers are neither great nor small in terms of capacity and influence and they demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system¹. Stuye de Swielande identifies and explains five characteristics of middle powers: capacities, self-concept, status and regional and systemic impact². In reference to these characteristics, the Emirates have gained autonomy and influence, and accumulated all kinds of capabilities—military, economic, and soft power—cleverly leveraging these strengths to expand, and at times overextend, their presence in the MEA. This research has found that the UAE has garnered a middle-range economic and military power, and its small size has had a limiting impact on the reach of the Emirates' power projections in the past decade. Second, the UAE have successfully grown independent of regional and international allies, such as the United States and Saudi Arabia, diversifying its partnerships and developing “fluid and shifting informal alignments” that have allowed it to pursue foreign policy objectives in autonomy. Despite this hedging strategy, the United States is likely to remain a core strategic partner of the Emirates, as a primary defense and security ally. Lastly, over the past 50 years, the UAE have broadened its appeal in different regions by pursuing soft power, successfully developing itself as an important player and gaining influence both at the regional level (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and some Horn of Africa countries), and at times at the international level (the United States—as the Trump administration has resolutely supported MbZ's agenda). More interestingly is how these different capabilities and tools of statecraft have intervened together and overlap to achieve vital foreign policy goals. Indeed, some aspects of the UAE's hard power have been transactional—through its financial support for foreign mercenary fighters, the same way that its economic power has been driven by geopolitical considerations. These two capabilities—military and economic power—have participated in the UAE's soft power by reinforcing its legitimacy and credibility on the world's stage. More interestingly, these overlapping and fluid tools of statecraft do not seem unique to the UAE model. In fact, several GCC states' role in the region have evolved, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These states have employed similar strategies leveraging economic, military, and soft power to gain greater regional influence.

This evolution in Gulf states' power and policies call for a re-examination of current theories on Gulf states' behavior and security strategies. Specifically, this calls for new insights about

¹ Eduard Jordaan, (2003), “The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers”, in *Politikon*, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 165-181.

² Tanguy Struye de Swielande, “Middle Powers: A Comprehensive Definition and Typology”, in Tanguy Struye de Swielande et al. (eds), (2019), *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century. New Theories, New Cases*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.

the configuration of Emirati power and its increasing interventionist foreign and security policies in the MEA. A conceptualization of the UAE's full state power projection is essential to capture the growing and extent of Emirati influence in the world and how the UAE's different tools of statecraft interact with one another in pursuit of MbZ' agenda, as well as their levels of success, and their implications on regional relations and stability. This topic is particularly significant because there has been a relative absence of analysis of Gulf states interventionism that cuts across different regions. African and Middle Eastern specialists often do not collaborate on issues and traditionally work as separate fields. As a result, previous research on Emirati interventionism have focused either on West Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, or on East Africa. Additionally, despite being a current topic that has attracted a lot of attention, there are very few studies that reviews all of the three tools of statecraft that the Emirates have used to project power. Although recently Emirati military power and economic diplomacy have been assessed conjunctly, Emirati efforts to garner soft power is often left out and analyzed separately. This choice prevents a proper assessment of Emirati state power and how its ambitious three-tiered power projections form a coherent strategy towards achieving vital foreign policy goals. This paper therefore adopts a cross-regional and inter-theoretical analysis to conceptualize the full nature of Emirati power, understand Emirati foreign policy choices, and shed light on the various political, economic, and diplomatic levers used to serve its geopolitical ambitions and their limits. This study will also evaluate whether the Emirates' three-tiered power projections is a unique model in the region and how successful this concept of a multifaceted statecraft has been across the MEA.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper will argue that following shifts at the domestic, regional, and international levels, the Emirati leadership has sought to shape the region's future by relying on three types of power projections: its military, economic, and soft powers. This paper will also argue that MbZ is the driving force behind the UAE's proactive, interventionist, and pragmatic agenda, which offers a stark contrast to his predecessor's more idealistic and reactive policy. This paper relies on three main theories to analyze different aspects of Emirati power and its unique characteristics and state behavior. Drawing on realism, international political economy, and constructivism, this paper seeks to conceptualize Emirati three-tiered power projections through the lens of MbZ' broad foreign policy ambitions. This inter-theoretical and cross-regional conceptualization will provide readers insights into the driving motivations behind the UAE's intervention and a comprehensive framework to understand current regional developments amid intensifying intra-Gulf competition.

This paper primarily builds on current policy papers, scholarly work, and media articles regarding Emirati interventions and investments in West Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and North Africa. Media analysis has therefore predominantly been used to draw conclusions on Emirati state power, utilizing both English and Arabic outlets. This includes mainstream media sources, as well as Internet forums and blogs, think tanks research papers, scholarly articles or books, academic papers, WikiLeaks reports on MbZ and the UAE, and local media—particularly from Al Jazeera Arabic and Sky News Arabiya. Due to the vast number of media articles written on UAE interventionism, the author has not been able to review all of them and has limited the paper to the main, most recent and publicized Emirati initiatives. Since the beginning of the global pandemic in March 2019, there has been many different policies the UAE has developed, which has posed a challenge for the author as Emirati state power projections have resultantly evolved. Finally, the author has also conducted 10 interviews to complement media research. Participants have varied backgrounds, as US former government officials, military officers and experts, professors, academics, and other policy

practitioners or advisors with different regional expertise. These interviews have been essential in providing a more nuanced account of Emirati state power projections as Western and Emirati media have significantly overstated the UAE's capabilities and power.

This paper will start by reviewing the literature on Gulf states' behavior and security strategies to understand how Emirati state power has been previously conceptualized and how the regional environment has shaped their foreign policies and vice versa. The literature review will help determine which factors have pushed the UAE to expand its influence across the region and will provide a multi-level analysis of Emirati new foreign policy agenda and the correlating rise of MbZ in power. Second, this paper will examine Emirati military power, evaluating its defense capabilities, projection, and efficiency. Third, Emirati economic diplomacy will be studied to understand how oil rents and the use of sovereign wealth funds have expanded Emirati regional influence and supported their foreign policies. Finally, this paper will look at recent Emirati efforts to gain soft power and how they have both strengthened domestic legitimacy and international reputation for the Emirates. Readers will notice that these three different levers overlap to form an increasingly integrated strategy to promote regional stability and development.

Literature Review

This section will reflect on the literature of Gulf states' security strategies and decision-making, providing an overview of Small States behavior, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), and the concepts of "personalistic leadership" or "Prince States". This literature will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the different conceptualization of Emirati power and behavior and how various changes at the domestic, regional, and global levels have impacted the UAE's articulation of its foreign policy and security agenda. This literature review will also place the evolution of UAE security policies into historical perspective, examining four major developments that have gradually increased Emirati interventionism into a fully-fledged three-tiered power projection.

Small States Behavior: Examining States' Power in the International System

Traditionally, states characterized as small are often perceived as being weak. This is not only due to their small size, but also due to the hegemony of larger states³. Because of their size, it is assumed that small states rarely use hard power because of their limited military capabilities. Instead, it is the pursuit of soft power that has allowed them to play influential roles in the international system. However, these traditional assertions and the idea that small states are confined to the margins of international relations have given way to evidence that many small states exert more influence than their size suggests⁴. Indeed, the rise of globalization and capitalism has allowed small states to expand their influence beyond their territories and pursue proactive strategies to become influential actors in different regions, shaping a multiplicity of outcomes in the international order. After the oil discovery, several small Gulf states, like Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE extensively used these newly acquired financial resources to fund their assertive and interventionist policies in countries that were politically and economically weaker⁵. The UAE and other small Gulf states became known for being wealthy, hydrocarbon

³ Khalid S. Almezaini, and Jean-Marc Rickli, (2016), "[Small States in the Gulf](#)," In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁴ For more information, see: Khalid S. Almezaini, and Jean-Marc Rickli, (2016), "[Small States in the Gulf](#)," *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁵ Emma Soubrier, (2016), "[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#)," In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

producers, big spenders domestically and internationally, and chiefly, for being excessively dependent on oil rents, constituting about 30% of GDP for the UAE⁶. This dependence on fossil fuels shaped the development pathways and rapid modern state-building of GCC countries, especially following the 1973 oil boom. In fact, both Qatar and the UAE have used this economic wealth to achieve broader political objectives. The UAE have pursued both hard and soft power articulating their policies “in relation to the global distribution of power, but also primarily to the regional balance of power.”⁷ As Emma Soubrier writes, despite its size, the “UAE does not consider itself ‘small’ in any sense and have shaped their strategies toward the world accordingly.”⁸

Following the Arab uprisings, the UAE have sought to contribute to the reconstruction and maintenance of the region’s security and stability. While initially relying on the United States’ security umbrella, the UAE have significantly increased its domestic and regional activities, exhibiting unique state power characteristics in the behaviour of small states that are worth exploring. In fact, few generalizations on small states are correct, especially for Gulf states, and the UAE challenges many realist theoretical assumptions on small states’ power and security options. In many cases, “it is assumed that small states cannot combine both autonomy and influence due to lack of resources.”⁹ These strategies are usually restricted to great powers who are the only ones able to guarantee their security while having the power to influence the international system. The UAE and Qatar, however, have remarkably harnessed their economic resources and achieved both regional influence and relative autonomy, relying on a smart power strategy. Hence despite being small in geography and demography, the UAE has garnered tremendous influence—showing that absolute power, defined in real terms, is not a requisite, but that perceptions of power is actually more important than the former. Overall, small states theory fails to capture the Emirates’ power or explain current dynamics related to the balance of power in the Middle East. For example, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are much bigger states, with a larger wealth, however their state power has failed to translate on the international scene. The UAE despite its size has a much more proficient military and has invested more financial aid in the region (and the largest recipient of this aid is Egypt). Therefore, state power cannot be only defined by population or territorial size because the UAE has achieved certain capabilities that bigger regional states have not acquired, and Emirati capabilities reflect more the features of a middle power. So, how did the UAE carved themselves a bigger role to become a regional middle power and key emerging actor in the world? This same question could be applied to Kuwait and Qatar as well who have exhibited similar unique behaviours as small states. In order to understand this particularity, it is important to delve deeper into the regional dynamics and to examine the distinctive trajectory of small Arab Gulf states’ power and foreign policies in the Middle East, such as the UAE’s.

Regional Security Complex Theory: Examining States’ Power from a Regional Perspective

⁶ Crystal Ennis (2018), “Reading entrepreneurial power in Qatar and the UAE” Leiden University, Netherlands; OPEC, (2020), “[UAE facts and figures](#)”

⁷ Emma Soubrier, (2016), “[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#),” In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁸ Emma Soubrier, (2016), “[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#),” In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁹ Emma Soubrier, (2016), “[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#),” In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group

Historically, Arab Gulf states' security strategies had little to do with gaining more power on the international stage: they pursued neutral and cautious strategies governed by US' policies and security umbrella and had few local capabilities to defend themselves. However, this has drastically changed in the past decade. The perceived decline in American primacy, rise of powerful non-state actors like ISIS, and the renewal of massive popular protests in Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iran can be indicative of a transitional phase in the current order, with shifting alliances in the regional balance of power. These shifts have transformed regional politics from a system organized around and against a US-managed security architecture into a multipolar system lacking norms, institutions, or balancing mechanisms to constrain conflict and the use of force¹⁰. Bolstered by these changes at the international and regional systems, Arab Gulf States have, as Emma Soubrier writes, "moved onto assertive and competing power plays which are in turn deeply reshaping the conduct of international relations within the Gulf region, in the broader MENA region, and beyond."¹¹ This means not only that Gulf states' security threats perceptions have increasingly been regional in nature, tied to neighbouring states' capabilities, but that in response to those threat perceptions, Gulf states have intervened across the MEA and forged new alliances with local powers in competition for regional influence. In this post-Cold War security architecture, regionalist approaches have gained more traction as Middle Eastern states assume greater responsibilities in their security environment to defend and assert their own interests. Such regionalist approach helps to investigate the effects of domestic, regional, and international dynamics on Gulf states', and particularly the UAE's state behaviour, decision-making, and the reformulation of its foreign policy.

The regional security complex theory ("RSCT"), as developed by Buzan and Wæver (1996), examines states' power from a regional perspective, evaluating the balance of power, security interdependence, and mutual relationships among regional states¹². According to this theory, states are primarily concerned with the capabilities and intentions of their neighbour and so processes of securitization are more intense between actors inside the security complex than with global powers, which are outside of it. RSCT serves as a useful framework to reconcile different levels of analysis and analyze the interaction between the global system, the regional structure, and domestic context¹³. This allows for a deeper understanding on how shifts at these different levels have pushed the UAE to articulate its foreign policy agenda in a particular way. The continuous instability and hostile environment that characterize the Middle East have shaped the evolution of the modern federation of the UAE and progressively expanded its foreign policy. In the past 50 years, the UAE has remarkably adapted to shifts in the regional order and the international system, with MbZ playing a leading role in enacting Emirati foreign policy change. The UAE has become more assertive and active than ever before, using both soft and hard power to maintain domestic stability in a volatile region, secure its trade, and expand its regional influence. In light of these changes, scholars have sought to identify key moments marking plausible turning points in the UAE's policies and power projections. Four main events stand out as decisive crossroads for the trajectory of UAE's power and foreign policy behaviour: the 1970s oil wealth boom, the post-2003 perceived decline in American primacy, the 2004 generational change in Emirati leadership, and the heightened instability and

¹⁰ Project On Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), (March 2019), "[Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East](#)"

¹¹ Emma Soubrier, "Global and regional crises, empowered Gulf rivals, and evolving paradigm of regional security," In *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, POMEPS.

¹² Barry Bizan, and Ole Wæver, (2003), *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press

¹³ Emma Soubrier, (2016), "[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#)," In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

uncertainty, especially post-2011 Arab uprisings, of the region. Without undermining the importance of these moments in Emirati political history, this research highlights that a dynamic analysis of these factors is essential to capture the changes but also continuity in Emirati foreign policy, and to understand the nature, sources, and consequences of such changes. Static theory, while being easier to prove, is insufficient, reductive, and often obsolete in characterizing the evolution of Emirati state power and the reformulation of its foreign policy.

1970s-2000s: The UAE and The Oil Wealth Boom

Since the discovery of oil in the 1970s, Gulf states have played an increasing role in regional politics, forcing the international system to incorporate them in global governance. The oil boom, rise of capitalism, and globalization were significant in expanding the role of the Emirates from a small to a middle power as the country accumulated large sums of wealth in the 1970s and 2008. Massive export revenue from oil and gas—and high oil prices connected to the 2008 financial crisis—subsequently allowed the small Gulf states to increase military spending, create competing financial free zones, modern cities, and reconstruct their national identity. The new inflow of money was significant in allowing the UAE to conduct influential foreign policies in the weaker Arab republics, like in Egypt. It also increased Emirati political capabilities and power projections, allowing the UAE, like Qatar and Kuwait, to diversify and expand their political influence in different regions. As Karen Young writes, “this was a confidence-building period in the Gulf ... (and) it enabled the UAE to carve out a secular political identity in opposition to the Saudi model, with the financial resources to bolster its international standing institutionally and to project soft power.¹⁴” During this period of state-development and consolidation, the UAE initially focused on the development of their hard-power capabilities, favoring military build-up, to gain credibility as a fragmented nation that was surrounded by several expansionist and much larger powers. However, it became increasingly clear that their security policies eventually combined both hard and soft power—credibility and legitimacy¹⁵. Emirati investment in their armed forces, as well as their willingness to participate in peacekeeping operations between 1990s and 2010s, crucially enhanced their prestige, reputation within the international community and hence the political cost of violating their territorial integrity, which strengthened their own security. This two-tiered military doctrine, developing both hard and soft power, differentiated the UAE early on from its regional neighbours, particularly from Qatar who did not develop a military capability of its own. Indeed, because of its smaller wealth and more homogenous population, Qatar mostly relied on the US and France for security guarantees and its survival strategy centred primarily on soft-power capabilities, through state-branding efforts and media influence to acquire legitimacy internationally. In the early 2000s, Emirati state-building strategies further evolved due to changes in the regional balance of power, in particular changes in the rules of the political game and the emergence of a new security dilemma.

A Perceived Decline in US Primacy since 2003: US-UAE relations

The second factor that must be examined in the context of regional security comes at the international level. For the past four decades, and some would argue even longer than that, the

¹⁴ Karen E. Young, (2016), “The Interventionist Turn in Gulf States’ Foreign Policies,” *The Arab Gulf States Institute*.

¹⁵ Emma Soubrier, (2016), “[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#),” In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

United States played a pivotal role as an external actor in the Middle East¹⁶. Following the end of the Cold War and the US-led operation Desert Storm that evicted Iraq from Kuwait in 1990, the US was the hegemon of the region. As a small state with limited demographic and military capabilities during the first decades of its state-building and consolidation, the UAE first relied heavily on security arrangements with Western states, particularly with the US from 1980s onwards, for its survival and security. The necessity of this alliance for the continued existence of the UAE was apparent at its founding¹⁷. In the north, the Buraimi dispute of 1950-61—a struggle between Abu Dhabi, Oman, and Saudi Arabia endured where Saudi Arabia refused to recognize the UAE until the 1974 territorial agreement. In the south, Iran seized the islands of Abu Musa and Tunbs, claimed by Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah, following British withdrawal from the Gulf region. Due to long-running intra- and inter-border disputes, there was a lot of fear within the Emirati leadership regarding the survival of the federation and concerns that the individual emirates would eventually be absorbed by their bigger, more aggressive, and expansionist neighbors (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq)¹⁸.

However, after the end of the Cold War, regional developments transformed this dynamic. Indeed, while still maintaining an overwhelming presence in the region, the US' inability to translate capabilities into outcomes, as well as its declining military interventions and recent unreliable diplomatic commitments, have led regional states to assume greater responsibilities in their security environment and to defend and assert their own interests¹⁹. After the failed American experiment of the war against terror and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, successive US administrations have attempted to limit and withdraw their military engagements in the trouble spots of the Middle East. US' pivot to Asia, its decreased dependence on Gulf energy supplies, tacit embrace of the 2011 Arab uprisings, and its 2015 nuclear deal with Iran further reinforced Gulf states' doubts on the reliance of US policy²⁰. To be sure the US still remains a dominant actor in regional relations, but it is rather in front of US unpredictability that Arab regimes "no longer (saw) the US as a reliable guarantor of regime survival or their foreign policy interests."²¹ In this new context, Gulf Arab states, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, have re-oriented their foreign policies towards proactive interventionism, pursuing their own security interests and projecting their power to become key stakeholders in the stabilization or development of the Middle East, however they viewed it. This contributed, as Islam Hassan writes, to the "UAE's strategic reformulation of its foreign policy, including a disposition towards using military means, the orientation towards other regions, the pursuit of new security partners, and if necessary, the employment of a go-it-alone security approach."²² To counterbalance their dependence on Washington, the UAE have broadened their diplomatic relationships and diversified their alliances, building relationships with China, Russia, and the EU as a strategic hedge in this new security dilemma in the Persian Gulf²³. Strategic hedging serves to diversify a country's network of allies, partners, and friends, ultimately preventing it

¹⁶ Dr Christian Koch, (September 2019), "The evolution of the Regional Security Complex in the MENA region," *Emirates Diplomatic Academy*, EDA Working Paper.

¹⁷ Author Interview, Western diplomat, April 2021

¹⁸ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#)," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

¹⁹ POMEPS, (March 2019), "[Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East](#)"

²⁰ Islam Hassan, (2020), "In Pursuit of Security and Influence: The UAE and the Red Sea," In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East*

²¹ Marc Lynch, (2018) "[The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today's Middle East](#)," *Foreign Affairs*

²² Islam Hassan, (2020), "In Pursuit of Security and Influence: The UAE and the Red Sea," In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East*

²³ Marc Lynch, (2018) "[The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today's Middle East](#)," *Foreign Affairs*

from becoming excessively dependent on any one single power²⁴. Since the Arab uprisings, hedging has been a primary strategy of Emirati foreign policy practice as a way to lessen its dependence on the US and to avoid being engulfed in regional conflicts, like the Saudi-Iran rivalry. This new security dilemma and increased perception of US decline also coincided with a generational change in leadership in the Persian Gulf. In the case of the UAE, the new leadership brought new motivations and ambitions that particularly distinguished the Emirates in the region, especially from Qatar. This factor led to a significant reformulation of Emirati foreign policies, and notably of its military strategy, which not only provided a change in the identification of threats, but also in the means used to combat those threats.

2004, A Change in Leadership: Prince States theory and Personalistic Leadership

A major shift in the foreign policy took place in 2004 after the death of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, the country's founding father. During the long years of Sheikh Zayed's rule, 1971-2004, the UAE's foreign policy was more idealistic than realistic, and more reactive than proactive. Under Zayed, the main focus was to ensure the sustainability of the federation by maintaining the unity of the UAE and seeking regional and international recognition of the nascent union²⁵. The arrival of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan (MbZ) in power in 2004 is seen as a driving force of the significant changes in Emirati foreign and security policies, especially of its military strategy. Under MbZ, the UAE has adopted a more active and assertive foreign policy to maintain domestic stability, secure its trade, and expand its regional influence in an increasingly uncertain and volatile region. In terms of policy- and decision-making, most Gulf monarchies are highly personalized, meaning that power is centralized around the King or in the case of the UAE around Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ). Prince-states theory argues that the most important factor shaping Gulf states strategies is their leaders' perceptions of the external environment, and their international and domestic entanglements²⁶. Ultimately, threat perceptions and the priorities of MbZ shaped Emirati survival strategies and foreign policy behaviour since its ascendance to power. In the face of new regional and security challenges, MbZ' background and worldviews were critical in shaping the UAE's foreign policy agenda. We can identify both internal and outward changes in the way the UAE's leadership conducted its decisions and policies. Internally, as the federation of the UAE developed and consolidated, authority centralized around Abu Dhabi, specifically on the Bani Fatima and third son of Sheikh Zayed— Mohammed bin Zayed. Outwards changes revolved around the increasing international posture and interventionist behaviour the UAE adopted in its foreign policy approach amid the increasing regional instability of the Arab uprisings.

In the early years of the federation, the UAE operated a conservative foreign and national security policy that was largely predicated on ensuring survival in the face of internal and external threats to the fragile unity and territorial integrity of the federation. At that time, there was no unified voice or policy in the UAE. Each emirate had its own governance, administration, and separate management. Hence, early attempts to formulate a unified foreign policy position were undermined by tensions between the seven member emirates, and immediate security threats concerned the much bigger and expansionist regional powers (Iraq,

²⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, (August 18, 2020), "[The Changing Balance of Power in USA-UAE Relations](#)," *Al-Sharq Strategic Research Forum*.

²⁵ Islam Hassan, (2020), "In Pursuit of Security and Influence: The UAE and the Red Sea," In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East*

²⁶ Emma Soubrier, (2016), "[Evolving foreign and security policies: a comparative study of the Qatar and the UAE](#)," In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Taylor & Francis Group.

Saudi Arabia, and Iran). While internal threats have lessened, perceived existential external threats continue to drive the UAE's policy²⁷. One of the most important differences between the federation's approach to external affairs in its early years and its current posture is a clear sense of self-assurance and ambition among a new generation of leaders – and a growing perception that the UAE can only rely on itself to confront the profound regional turbulations²⁸. Nonetheless, Mohammed bin Zayed would not have been able to drive a more aggressive approach to regional affairs had he not first established a formidable standing in Abu Dhabi and across the UAE. As Peter Salisbury writes:

“The first son born to Fatima, Zayed’s third and reputedly favourite wife, who is often referred to as the ‘first lady’ of Abu Dhabi or ‘mother of the nation’, and third born of Zayed’s 19 sons, MbZ was seemingly groomed for power from an early age by both his mother and father, as were his five full brothers, referred to collectively (including MbZ) as the ‘Bani Fatima’, or ‘children of Fatima’²⁹.”

MbZ was educated in Morocco and trained as a helicopter pilot at the UK's Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He primarily served in the Air Force and held various commanding positions in the 1980s and 1990s, including Chief of Staff in 1992 at the age of 32, and he became Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces following his father's death in 2004³⁰. In 2004, he became the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, confirming his precedence over Sheikh Zayed's second son, Sheikh Sultan, and preventing any potential inter-family dispute. Observers commonly referred to MbZ as a promising young leader, who was energetic, modern, and perceptive, with a strong willingness to learn—setting him apart from other Emirati royals³¹. Sheikh Mohammed was also central to the modernization of the UAE armed forces and became known for his large-scale improvements in UAE military and a key decision-maker on all arms purchases and defense cooperation decisions³².

The centralization of authority around Abu Dhabi grew progressively as existential regional threats emerged in the 1990s (from Iraq) and in the early 2000s, after the 2008 financial crisis. Lesser developed and affluent emirates realized that they needed to maintain close working relations to maintain their security interests and along the years ceded their autonomy and security powers to Abu Dhabi³³. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Dubai and Abu Dhabi grew far more powerful than the other emirates as they were richer and had gained a degree of international prestige by their oil wealth and commercial influence respectively. The uneven distribution of natural resources, as well as significant divergences in their physical environment and demographics, meant that the other emirates have had to rely on federal (mainly Abu-Dhabi-funded) support and on direct support from Abu Dhabi and Dubai for their security and development³⁴. In 1990, Dubai's and Abu Dhabi's power further grew politically

²⁷ Author Interview, one former Western diplomat, April 2021.

²⁸ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), “[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#),” *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

²⁹ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), “[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#),” *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

³⁰ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

³¹ Author interview, one former Western diplomat, April 2021.

³² Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

³³ Author interview, one former Western diplomat, April 2021.

³⁴ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

as external security threats emanating from Iraq rose and increased the need for political and security consolidation of the UAE. Indeed, prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and even more so after the invasion, there were serious concerns within the seven emirates regarding a potential military confrontation with Iraq, that had been a traditional pillar of power in the region for many decades³⁵. Additionally, the financial crisis of 2008-9 hit Dubai hard, leading Abu Dhabi to extend a \$20 billion aid package to refinance its debt³⁶. In exchange, Dubai reportedly ceded some foreign policymaking and authority to Abu Dhabi, further cementing the Bani Fatima and consolidating MbZ's rise to power and his position of dominance over UAE's security and foreign affairs. When Sheikh Khalifa's, the oldest son of Sheikh Zayed, health declined rapidly from the early 2010s onwards, MbZ was described by Western officials as the 'de facto ruler' of Abu Dhabi and thus the most powerful figure in the UAE.

The UAE's increasingly active foreign and national security policy abroad constitutes a major outward shift in the UAE's posture and state behaviour. This shift entailed not only a change in the identification of problems and goals, but also in the means and methods of UAE's foreign policy. Beginning under Zayed, with the encouragement of the United States, the UAE progressively expanded its regional interests well beyond its borders, participating in six US-led coalitions across the Balkans, Africa, West Asia, and the Levant. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, this interventionism became more unilateral, as the UAE pursued more assertive foreign policies to defend its own security interests, with less considerations for the US interests. Ultimately, MbZ's perception of US' decline in the region, combined with the Trump administration's resolute support for MbZ' vision and regional policy, have broadened the Emirati leader's ambitions in actively participating in the reshaping of the region's future. Its good relations with the Trump administration have tremendously benefited the Emirati leadership, allowing the UAE to intervene across the MEA. For the Emirati leadership, "Iran and the Iqwan" were the gravest concerns for the UAE, especially after 2011, as Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood began entrenching their role in the region through, respectively, the sponsorship of armed groups (in Libya, Syria, and Yemen) and popular protest movements (in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen)³⁷. According to Emirati officials, the UAE's response to regional events was not "*a brash or opportunistic attempt to establish itself as a regional power broker; rather, it was a defensive reaction to the growing influence of its rivals, and to the US's perceived to be stepping back from its role as a guarantor of regional stability and security, and did not either support or actively called for the removal of UAE and US regional allies in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.*"³⁸ Hence, the centralization of power around Abu Dhabi and the Bani Fatima, as well as MbZ's ambitious visions for Emirati foreign policies were critical in the development of the Emirates' three-tiered power projections and the deepened securitization of the country.

Heightened Regional Volatility Since 2011

Lastly, a major shift took place in the UAE's foreign policy in front of the increasing instability, volatility, and uncertainty at the regional level, especially after the Arab uprisings, which became a principal driving force in the UAE's leadership approach to the region³⁹. MbZ and

³⁵ Office of the Historian, "[Milestones: 1989-1992. The Gulf War, 1991](#)," US Department of State.

³⁶ Reuters (March 16, 2014), "[UAE, Abu Dhabi roll over \\$20 billion of Dubai's debt](#)"

³⁷ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#)," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

³⁸ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#)," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

³⁹ Ebtessam Al Ketbi, (November 19, 2020), "[Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords](#)," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 14:3, 391-398.

his inner circle perceive that transnational political Islamist ideologies promoted by Iran and the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, mainly Qatar and Turkey, pose an existential threat to the stability of its regime and the region, and act as a driver of regional radicalism⁴⁰. Fear of spillover effects rose significantly when four “presidents for life” in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen were unseated and local Islamists started becoming politically active⁴¹. In March 2011, more than 100 activists submitted a petition to the UAE government demanding an elected parliament with legislative powers⁴². Particularly worrying to the Emirati leadership was the idea that the Muslim Brotherhood would export the revolution to the relatively less developed and affluent emirates using its ties to the local Al-Islah Islamist movement, especially after the former’s successes in Egypt. As Kristin Coates Ulrichsen argues, the Arab uprisings “had a longer tail impact on the Gulf than they did at the time.”⁴³ In confronting these regional threats, the UAE adopted a proactive approach that would prevent their effects from spilling over into its territory by shaping the pace and direction of political change in states where protests broke out. The UAE devised a two-pronged policy: promotion of stability, moderation, and development at home⁴⁴ and combatting Islamists abroad, including in faraway regions, such as the Levant, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and East Africa.⁴⁵ The objective of preserving the stability of the nation and the integrity of its development model had become inseparable from the task of ensuring regional stability. In other words, its foreign policy approach became increasingly consistent with its domestic policy.

Alongside the threat of the Arab uprisings and political Islamist groups is the intensifying intra-Gulf competition and regional proxies. From 2011, the UAE focused its resources on resisting a multitude of regional threats, from the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the outbreak of fighting in Yemen, Lebanon, and Libya, to the signing of the Iran nuclear agreement. The protracted GCC crisis involving Qatar since 2017 further exacerbated tensions and divided the region along two axes: Qatar and Turkey vs Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have accused Qatar of regional meddling, sowing dissent, and feeding misinformation to local and international audience through its Al Jazeera channels during the uprisings, and have attempted to isolate Qatar without much success. The alignment of Qatar with Turkey, and its broad regional agenda supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and popular protests has been particularly problematic for the UAE, which in contrast has adopted a more secular political identity and has ferociously opposed any political Islamist movements. Under these circumstances, Gulf states have competed for power and influence in East Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as in countries affected by a “second wave” of the Arab uprisings, namely in Sudan and Algeria late 2018, and in Iraq and Lebanon in late 2019. Overall, the changes in Emirati foreign policy witnessed post-2011 reflected a holistic shift in

⁴⁰ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), “[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy.](#)” *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

⁴¹ Yasmina Abouzzohour, (March 8, 2021), “[Heavy lies the crown: The survival of Arab monarchies, 10 years after the Arab Spring.](#)” *Brookings Institute*.

⁴² Islam Hassan, (2020), “In Pursuit of Security and Influence: The UAE and the Red Sea,” In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East*

⁴³ Kristin Coates Ulrichsen, (February 15, 2021), “[How Have the Arab Uprising Fragmented the Gulf.](#)” *Al Sharq Strategic Research*.

⁴⁴ Ebtesam Al Ketbi, (November 19, 2020), “[Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords.](#)” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 14:3, 391-398

⁴⁵ Islam Hassan, (2020), “In Pursuit of Security and Influence: The UAE and the Red Sea,” In *Water and Conflict in the Middle East*

the country's perception of itself and the region as a whole⁴⁶. Leaders in the UAE, headed by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, realized that the changing dynamics in the region required a change in foreign policy not only through the increased use of hard power, but also soft power.

Altogether, these four events show the remarkable evolution of a small state dependent on foreign powers for territorial integrity to an ambitious middle power, re-organizing its posture and approach to the world and formulating a proactive and assertive foreign policy aimed at shaping regional outcomes. It has become increasingly evident that the UAE is no longer a secondary player in the Middle East given its substantial changes in its political approach. This statement also applies to other small Gulf states, particularly Qatar, who also has exhibited a unique small states behaviour. Additionally, the historical overview of Emirati state trajectory shows that the current Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi played a significant role in the reformulation of Emirati foreign policies and power projections. Since the rise of MbZ in power, the UAE has pursued a more proactive foreign and security policy and has emerged as a key actor on the world's stage, due to their economic significance, increased political clout, relative autonomy, and large regional influence across the MEA. Furthermore, the UAE's approach to power has also been unusual, and this has distinguished the UAE from other regional actors. None of the other regional states (big or small) have developed the capacity to harness all three types of power—military, economic, and soft power—at the same extent and reach as the UAE. What is interesting though is that other Gulf states have successfully harness economic and soft power, and it seems that only their hard power capabilities and strategy will vary depending on the country's characteristics. These findings call for a re-examination of traditional theories on state power. Realism, international political economy, and constructivism alone cannot capture what is going on with small Gulf states', and particularly the UAE's power in the Middle East as it has developed economic, military and soft tools of statecraft conjunctly.

The conceptualization of power has generally been placed at the center of debates of international relations theory. Scholars of Middle Eastern politics have tended to rely on "theoretical pluralism" to analyze regional affairs and developments. This kind of "scholarly eclecticism" is even more important today, post-Arab uprisings, with the decline of traditional pillars of power and the rise of non-state actors and transnational networks. As Curtis R. Ryan highlights "the many regional and global changes have not led to the apparent triumph of any particularly approach but have rather underscored the salience of multiple international relations theory perspectives." The UAE is a perfect case study to understand how different theoretical concepts of power have overlapped when understanding Emirati power. Analyzing only one aspect of its strength, whether it is defined in realist terms or other, would be incomplete and lacking other critical aspects of its capabilities and influence. Ultimately military capabilities, financial resources, and ideology have all played an important role in Gulf states' and particularly in the UAE's power projections and security policies, so power should be conceptualized through an inter-theoretical lens of realism, international political economy, and constructivism. This research paper puts forward the hypothesis that Emirati state power should be conceptualized in concentric circles as its military, economic, and soft power projections are closely connected and all converge into a unified strategy aimed at strengthening Emirati reputation abroad, as well as its credibility and legitimacy. These three different components of power should be seen as one entity of multifaceted statecraft. The UAE's economy has been the rock strategy from where other aspects of power have emerged (economic diplomacy, military strategy, soft power). This economic power has been crucial

⁴⁶ Ebtesam Al Ketbi, (November 19, 2020), "[Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords](#)," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 14:3, 391-398.

for the UAE to carve themselves a bigger role in the region, from a small to middle state power. In the same way, by deploying its military capabilities, the Emirates have pursued soft power, and Emirati combined military and economic strength has shaped their soft power.

The following sections will now examine the nature, depth, and breadth of Emirati state power and its three-tiered power projections. The UAE has relied on three tools of statecraft to assert themselves in the regional and international system, employing a multitude of military, economic, and diplomatic levers that have characterized the multifaceted power of the UAE across the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. Although the author has chosen to analyze these different aspects of power separately, the following sections aim to demonstrate how they have increasingly converged into an integrated national strategy which mutually consolidates all three aspects of Emirati state power.

I. Realism: Military and Security Power Projection

According to realists, Emirati military capabilities and presence makes the UAE a key regional actor and powerful state. A strong state is one that is able to wage war by mobilizing its resources to ensure its survival and to defend its territory against an external threat, which the UAE has done with a relatively high degree of success. It is nonetheless important to note that military capacity is contingent upon population and territorial size. The bigger a state is, the larger its military or the wealthier it is to invest in its military. This point is critical to understanding the UAE's military power. As we will see, there is no doubt that the UAE's armed forces are proficient—they are the most competent regionally and, in some cases, outperform smaller Western states and NATO allies, but this capacity is limited due to its state's small size. In that respect, the UAE have at times overextended themselves and it is likely they will retrench in the coming years to re-align their interventions to their actual military capabilities, as it has done during the Yemen conflict. Overall, the Emirates have relied on two different strategies to project themselves militarily. In addition to its direct military presence, capabilities, and interventions across the MEA, Emirati military power can also be attributed to its network of political-military alliances and informal relationships with foreign militaries and mercenary groups, such as with the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces. Drawing on realist approaches to state power, this section seeks to characterize the evolution and nature of Emirati military power. By looking into these two different tools of statecraft, it will analyze the extent and potency of Emirati direct and indirect military operations, how the UAE have used their military capabilities, and the implications on the balance of power among intensifying regional competition and rivalry between Gulf states.

A) Assessing Emirati Military Effectiveness, Defense Capabilities, and Armed Force Deployments

Boasting a population of just under 10 million, the UAE modern armed forces is composed of approximately 63,000 active-duty officers⁴⁷—at a higher per-capita service rate than the United States—among which are currently deployed in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, and in the Gulf of Aden⁴⁸. As of 2020, the Emirates fields an air force, navy, and army, as well as other key combat commands and specialized branches such as the Presidential Guard and the Joint Aviation Command (JAC). Its leaders study at prestigious academies around the world and foreign advisors provide advice, counselling and technical knowledge⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ CIA World Factbook, "[United Arab Emirates](#)," last updated April 7, 2021.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Pollack, (October 2020), "[Sizing Up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE military effectiveness](#)," *American Enterprise Institute*

⁴⁹ Christian H. Heller, (September 17, 2019), "[Little Sparta's Big Ambitions: The Emirati Military Comes of Age](#)," *Real Clear Defense*.

Its growing military presence in the MEA are the result of years of dedicated investment and demonstrate ambitions surpassing the federation's short history. In recent years, the armed forces of the Emirates have earned the reputation as the best in the Arab world. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis went so far as to characterize the UAE as "Little Sparta", inferring that it had considerable military prowess relative to its size. This reputation is the result of its close security cooperation with the US, diversified security partnerships, willingness to deploy its capabilities beyond its borders, and substantial investment in its military both financially and culturally. However, as Dr Kenneth Pollack writes "there is considerable variance across the force, and only a small percentage falls into the highest-quality categories."⁵⁰

Emirati Military Cooperation with the US and Rising Unilateral Interventionism

The UAE has been one of the only Arab states willing to deploy their military capacities abroad and have extensively done so across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East since the establishment of its modern armed forces in 1976. This is, according to several military experts⁵¹, one of the main reasons why the Emirates have been relatively more proficient than its neighbors. The UAE's training and real-life combat experiences, especially alongside the US, is particularly unique in the region (at the exception of Jordan) and has successfully translated into increased military effectiveness. The 1991 Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq were key signals to the Emirates that they had to be strong and self-reliant militarily, leading MbZ to pursue a broad program of modernization and professionalization of its armed forces. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Emirati military operations focused on peacebuilding and its forces only intervened within Western-led Peace Support Operations⁵². In fact, the UAE is only one of three countries and the only Arab nation to participate with the US in six international coalitions over the last 30 years: Somalia (1993-94), Bosnia-Kosovo (1999-2001), the 1990 Gulf War, Afghanistan (2003-), Libya, and the fight against ISIS and other terrorist groups⁵³. Western military experts and Western media have regularly commented on the growing military prowess of the UAE⁵⁴. For example, in 2014, the UAE's participation in US-led aerial campaign against ISIS in Syria was described by Western military officers as the most effective and capable air force among Gulf countries and carried out the most sophisticated airstrikes⁵⁵. In general, although Emirati footprint was small, wherever they joined international coalitions, they developed legitimacy and credibility with the local population by using religion, Arabic, and money to finance critical civilian infrastructures, such as mosques, schools, or wells for drinking water. This helped reduce the widespread local suspicion of the often-heavy-handed NATO forces⁵⁶. Taken altogether, Emirati willingness to engage and enduring involvement has made the UAE the most important US military partner in the Arab world⁵⁷. The US has even allowed certain UAE elements to

⁵⁰ Kenneth Pollack, (October 2020), "[Sizing Up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE military effectiveness.](#)" *American Enterprise Institute*

⁵¹ Author interview, one Middle East political-military expert, one Western military officer, April 2021.

⁵² Eleonora Ardemagni, (October 22, 2020), "[The UAE's Military Training-Focused Foreign Policy.](#)" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

⁵³ Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, "[UAE-US Security Relationship](#)"

⁵⁴ Kenneth Pollack, (October 2020), "[Sizing Up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE military effectiveness.](#)" *American Enterprise Institute*; and Kenneth Pollack and Joseph W. Rank, (August 30, 2020), "'Little Sparta' and the Good Problem of capable Allies," *Lawfare*, Foreign Policy Essay.

⁵⁵ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁵⁶ Frank Gardner, (September 23, 2003), "[How the UAE emerged as a regional powerhouse.](#)" *BBC News*

⁵⁷ Kristin Ulrichsen, (2017), "[Security.](#)" In *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policy-Making*, Routledge London.

work alongside US forces in high-risk missions, an incredibly rare situation considering the UAE is a non-NATO partner and Australia is the only other partner that has been afforded such trust⁵⁸. This situation occurred for example in Afghanistan, in the early-2010s, when UAE F-16s provided close air support to US troops under attack.

Since MbZ became the de-factor ruler of the country, the UAE began intervening unilaterally and expanding its regional reach, in locations such as Yemen, Libya, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa. The UAE began openly taking sides in the region's civil wars, directly intervening in regional conflicts, establishing military and naval bases across the Red Sea, and supplying armed groups throughout the region in support of its foreign policy goals. MbZ's military vision is the driving force behind the UAE's unilateralism and foreign policy agenda, which has primarily been articulated towards fighting Islamist political groups. In terms of its military policy, this has translated into increasing defense cooperation with friendly regional regimes, such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt, and opposing rival states perceived as hostile due to their Islamist affiliations, like Qatar or Turkey. 2015 marked an important rupture in the UAE's foreign policies, as they tested their ambitions as a middle power firstly by joining the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and then by intervening by proxy in Libya. In both arenas, the Emirates displayed a tactical and goal-oriented pragmatism, through limited deployment, strong proxies, and through the support of trusted regional allies⁵⁹. Furthermore, Emirati operations in Yemeni southern coastal areas and in Eastern Libya are a cornerstone for the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and provide geostrategic depth to the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, East Africa, the Sahel, and West Africa. Ultimately, Emirati interventions and influence in those areas worked to carve out a platform for military power projection, with underpinning geopolitical interests at the maritime level bridging Emirati commercial and military ambitions.

UAE in Yemen

The UAE was Riyadh's principal coalition partner on the ground. In Yemen, the UAE mostly deployed ground forces (US-trained special forces of the Presidential Guard), with limited bombing operations. Emirati ground-led operations aimed to secure areas occupied by AQAP or the Houthis. One of its most prominent operation was Golden Arrow, organized to retake Aden from its Assab base in Eritrea. Later, the UAE would help train, equip, and deploy local militias to retake other southern governorates⁶⁰. The Emirates' also hosted many Southern Yemeni tribal chiefs. Abu Dhabi's support for local forces produced most battlefield successes against the Houthis in Yemen, and its allies in the south went on to form a powerful new political bloc. In the north, tribal-Islamist forces backed by Riyadh were much less successful. Overall, the UAE's reputation was burnished by its involvement in Yemen, with emphasis on its military prowess, but it was also significantly tarnished by the high civilian casualties and worsening of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Emirati decision to involve itself in the war in Yemen had a lot to do with the MbZ-MbS (Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman) relationship-building, reversing the trend of Iranian expansionism (Yemen was a big redline being in the UAE's backyard). However, this decision was also primarily driven by the desire to test out Emirati military capabilities and ambition as a middle power. The UAE charted its own course in Yemen,

⁵⁸ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁵⁹ Eleonora Ardemagni and Federica Saini Fasanotti, (July 31, 2020), "[The UAE in Libya and Yemen: Different Tactics, One Goal](#)," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*.

⁶⁰ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#)," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

primarily focusing on counterterrorist activities and developed a quiet campaign against Islah, a Yemeni Islamist party and Salafi movement. The UAE sponsored militias and primary allies were southern secessionist groups who opposed the Hadi government and quietist Salafist forces. Overall, Emirati intervention in Yemen has led to a growing anti-UAE sentiment not just in the Houthis-controlled northwest and Islah-dominated north, but also among many southerners and internationally. General public opinion remained highly skeptical of UAE's positive role. In fact, the UAE was accused of orchestrating an assassination campaign against religious leaders in the southern city of Aden, and of overseeing the arbitrary detention and torture of people in areas under control of its local allies⁶¹. According to Human Rights Watch "UAE backed forces have used excessive force during arrests and raids, detained family members of wanted suspects to pressure them to "voluntarily" turn themselves in, have arbitrarily arrested and detained men and children and forcibly disappeared dozens⁶². In early 2019 the UAE was accused, along with Saudi Arabia, of inadvertently supplying US arms to Al-Qaeda and the Houthis. A CNN report stated: "*Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners have transferred American-made weapons to al Qaeda-linked fighters, hardline Salafi militias, and other factions waging war in Yemen, in violation of their agreements with the United States.*"⁶³

While demonstrating an impressive deployment capability, its forces on the ground only involved a couple thousands of troops and its military presence was consistently reduced from 2019 until their full withdrawal. The UAE still maintains and remains the most powerful player in the southern regions of Yemen, due to the establishment of Emirati supported local militias⁶⁴. Despite demonstrating impressive military capability, notably in the length of its deployments and improved logistics capabilities, their intervention mostly hurt the UAE's international reputation and soft power.

Emirati Substantial Military Investment and Diverse Defense Partners

Another key aspect of the UAE's military power projection is its substantial investment in its military and wide range of military partners and defense partnerships. This has enabled the UAE Armed Forces to build themselves up to their current high-capacity level, acquiring the world's best weaponry while maintaining autonomy and independence by not relying solely on the US or any other one partner. The UAE defense spending has been substantial, making the UAE the top 5 countries globally for defense spending. In 2014, the UAE's average military expenditure as a percentage of government spending was 17%, reaching approximately \$25.5 billion⁶⁵. In terms of defense equipment, the UAE has long been one of the world's largest importers⁶⁶. Between 2012 and 2016, the UAE was the world's third largest conventional arms importer, accounting for 4.6% of the world's total. A large portion of its budget has also gone toward developing its own military technologies. Since 1971, the largest proportion of the defense acquisition budget has been directed towards air and air-defense forces, followed by land forces, and finally, naval forces—which explains why Emirati air force has acquired an outstanding capability, while Emirati naval forces are comparatively weaker. Over the years,

⁶¹ Rosto, A. (2018), "A Middle East Monarchy Hired American Ex-Soldiers to Kill Its Political Enemies. This Could Be The Future Of War,"

⁶² Human Rights Watch (June 22, 2017), "[Yemen, UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces](#)"

⁶³ Elbagir, N., Abdelaziz S., Abo El Gheit, M., Smith-Spark, L. (February 5, 2019), "Sold to an ally, lost to an enemy," *CNN News*

⁶⁴ Eleonora Ardemagni and Federica Saini Fasanotti, (July 31, 2020), "[The UAE in Libya and Yemen: Different Tactics, One Goal](#)," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*.

⁶⁵ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company; SIPRI (2020), "[Military Expenditure Database: 1988-2019](#)"

⁶⁶ SIPRI, (2020), "[Trends in International Arms Transfers](#)"

its multibillion-dollar defense contracts with the US have soared alongside MbZ's influence in Washington.

To reduce its dependence on the US and gain more strategic autonomy, the Emirati armed forces have adopted an approach of multi-country sourcing of weaponry. This has allowed the Emirates to possess one of the most modernized forces in the region by accumulating highly advanced equipment from all around the world, whether they are missile defense systems (American THAAD and Russian Pantsir-S1), fighter jets (US Lockheed Martin F-16s and French Dassault Mirage), drones (Chinese Wing Loong 1), warships (French Baynunah corvettes) or tanks (French-built Leclerc tanks)⁶⁷. In fact, the UAE have sourced their defense equipment from dozens of countries, both from the top exporting countries such as France, the US, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Russia, as well as smaller nations like Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Finland, Indonesia, New Zealand, and North Korea⁶⁸. This multiple-country sourcing strategy has been in part spurred by the perception of US disengagement from the region and by the US' restrictive arms sales approach that has presented a degree of risk to the UAE. In fact, the US has occasionally refused to sell equipment to the UAE, such as a portable surface-to-air missile (SAMs) and UAV technology, and it has sometimes only agreed to provide a downgraded export version and/or restrictive conditions to protect its own interests⁶⁹. As a result, the UAE has pivoted towards the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), as well as countries closer to home, such as Egypt and Turkey⁷⁰. Overall, this strategy has contributed to the significant interest in and continued support for the UAE by global powers and their recognition of the Emirates as a meaningful and major actor on the world's stage, empowering the UAE in a number of ways⁷¹. First, it has broadened the number of lobbyists promoting the UAE's military capabilities. Western officials and military officers have been the first to coin the UAE's military prowess, which has garnered significant media attention around the UAE and its capabilities. The Emirates' nickname as 'Little Sparta' is only but one example of such promotion, contributing to the reinforcement of the UAE's soft power as a capable, credible, and legitimate security partner. Second, it has strengthened Emirati influence and economic leverage over its partners, especially if the UAE is a main client. In fact, seeing eye-to-eye on the Iranian threat and on the benefits of arms sales has brought the UAE closer to the Trump Administration, who even had a direct line of contact to MbZ through the president's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner. Donald Trump became the first and most staunch supporter of the UAE's agenda, increasing the UAE's influence in Washington. Finally, this defense procurement strategy has empowered the UAE by giving them more room to maneuver and independence in their military and political decisions⁷². In fact, it has provided better weapons packages for the Emirates in terms of prices or conditions as the UAE can choose from its wide range of weapons suppliers. According to a long-time observer of the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince: "avoiding 'all eggs in one basket' was an imperative for the UAE leadership in spite of the desire for the best quality product. The operating principle is that the

⁶⁷ Frank Slijper, (September 2017), "[Under the radar: The United Arab Emirates, arms transfers and regional conflict.](#)" PAX

⁶⁸ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁶⁹ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁷⁰ Emma Soubrier (March 24, 2020), "[Gulf Security in a Multipolar World: Power Competition, Diversified Cooperation.](#)" AGSIW.

⁷¹ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁷² Emma Soubrier (March 24, 2020), "[Gulf Security in a Multipolar World: Power Competition, Diversified Cooperation.](#)" AGSIW.

UAE must have ‘tentacles’ in multiple international arenas.⁷³ Ultimately, for the UAE, the more countries it buys from, the more foreign support it can potentially attract, which enhances not only its military power but also its soft power. According to Ambassador Michele J. Sison: “the UAE is by no means a US-only (or even US-dominated) defense market... the US is actually under-represented in the Army and Navy procurement arenas (of the UAE)”⁷⁴. This multi-pronged “defense diplomacy” has aimed to maintain a qualitative edge over potential adversaries and allowed the UAE to balance against regional threats—amid intensifying competition with Iran, Turkey, and Qatar. Lastly, but perhaps more importantly, MbZ’s defense approach goes well beyond defense spending. New partnerships have indeed brought commercial contracts of all sorts, developing trade ties and energy security, and helping the Emirates to diversify their economy way from oil with the development of a national defense technological and industrial base⁷⁵. This diverse investment portfolio can also be seen as a way to keep US interest in UAE security.

MbZ-led Military Reform to Improve Culture and Military Effectiveness

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan is viewed as central to the modernization of the UAE Air Force and Air Defense in the second half of the 1980s, and the entire UAE Armed Forces after 1991⁷⁶. Sheikh Mohammed developed early on a reputation as an “arch modernizer and highly capable administrator.”⁷⁷ He is viewed as engaged, dynamic, and a “pivotal figure on all major UAE arms purchases and defense cooperation decisions.”⁷⁸ According to a WikiLeaks report in 2009, MbZ has long been recognized as the UAE’s most influential security policy maker⁷⁹. In 1997, the Director of the Political and Military Affairs Section at the US Embassy in Abu Dhabi reported that MbZ had become known for his “pursuit for large-scale improvements in the UAE military and is the key decision-maker in the multi-billion-dollar UAE Armed Forces procurement and modernization program.”⁸⁰ In addition to his large defense procurement strategy, MbZ developed a state-wide reform to improve Emirati military culture. In 2014, MbZ’s leadership introduced a universal conscription for men aged 18-30 to serve between nine months and two years, depending on their education level, and inaugurated women’s voluntary enrollment for nine-month terms, extending these two twelve-month terms in 2016⁸¹. This has vastly expanded the potential pool of recruits and the military’s ability to pinpoint the kinds of people it wanted, enhancing Emirati self-reliance in the military arena in the context of rising geopolitical threats⁸². Conscription has been an effective tactic to

⁷³ WikiLeaks, US Ambassador to the UAE Michele J. Sison, (October 2, 2006), “[UAE Defense Spending](#)”

⁷⁴ WikiLeaks, US Ambassador to the UAE Michele J. Sison, (October 2, 2006), “[UAE Defense Spending](#)”

⁷⁵ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁷⁶ Athol Yates, (2020), *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates*, Modern Military History, Helion & Company.

⁷⁷ Kristin Ulrichsen, (2017), “[Security](#),” In *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics and Policy-Making*, Routledge London.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Katzman, (September 4, 2020), “[The United Arab Emirates \(UAE\): Issues for U.S. Policy](#),” Congressional Research Service.

⁷⁹ WikiLeaks, Richard Olson, US Ambassador to the UAE, (August 31, 2009), “Mohamed Bin Zayed,” https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUDHABI862_a.html

⁸⁰ Van der Meulen, “The Role of Tribal and Kinship Ties in the Politics of the United Arab Emirates”

⁸¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, (April 25, 2018), “Building New Gulf States Through Conscription,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76178> ; Melissa Dalton, Hijab Shah, (January 12, 2021), “Evolving UAE Military and Foreign Security Cooperation: Path Forward Military Professionalism,” Carnegie Middle East Center, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/01/12/evolving-uae-military-and-foreign-security-cooperation-path-toward-military-professionalism-pub-83549>

⁸² Jon Alterman and Margo Balboni, (2017), “Citizens in Training: Conscription and Nation-Building in the United Arab Emirates,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180312_Alterman_UAE_conscription.pdf

boost loyalty and patriotism, promote a stronger sense of shared Emirati identity and teach values such as work ethic, discipline, critical thinking, and creativity—all of which are skills critical to advance Emirati military effectiveness and improve its military culture⁸³.

To conclude on Emirati direct military power projections, the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, MbZ, should be seen as the driving factor behind the UAE's interventionism. In fact, the UAE's military strategy and interventionism should be viewed as a continuation of Sheikh Zayed's vision and emirate-level military strategy. It is in this sector that MbZ has been the most influential in determining the Emirates' course and military power projection. His particular vision for the UAE's military power projections has indeed contradicted other members of the Emirati royal family beliefs, who do not support the proactive intervention and military adventurism of the UAE, particularly in Yemen and Libya. These interventions are perceived as fruitless, expressing Emirati limits and clear inferiority against foreign powers, and that the UAE should rather invest in other projects.

B) Emirati Network of Military-Political Alliances: The UAE's Indirect Military Power

Emirati military power is also attributed to the UAE's network of political-military alliances and personalistic relationships, which have supported the country's foreign policy agenda and worked with or on behalf of the UAE to counter its security threats. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why the UAE has been increasingly confident and assertive militarily, such as in Yemen and Libya, as it has relied on the skills and sure-footedness of its diplomats, establishing strong direct relationships with heads of state instead of government-to-government relations. The Emirati leadership relies on a small circle of influential and talented technocrats, tasked with sustaining Emirati global diplomatic engagements, collecting and transmitting information to understand the impact of UAE decisions and advise the Crown Prince on policy options⁸⁴. As Peter Salisbury writes: "*Emirati diplomats abroad often lead relatively small teams who are deeply embedded in the political systems in which they operate, supported by a similarly skilled team of strategic communications workers.*"⁸⁵ The UAE is not scared to act as an operator in its own right to regional and international allies. For example, Youssef al-Otaiba, US Ambassador to the UAE, has had a crucial role in advocating for the Emirati position, with quite a lot of success with the Trump administration which allowed the UAE to maintain a strong influence in Washington and dampen controversies related to Emirati actions⁸⁶. This informal diplomacy has also been referred to as 'WhatsApp diplomacy'. Other emerging alliances include MbZ's relationship with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Libyan General Khalifa Haftar, Egyptian President Fatah Al-Sisi, Sudanese mercenary force leader Hemedti, as well as with Eritrea's military leadership, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese leader Xi Jinping, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Although economic ties are an important component of all these relationships and new informal alliances, there appears to be a preference for and stronger link with military-affiliated leaders, whose model of authoritarianism closely aligns with the UAE's own internal workings. These new political-military alliances have helped the UAE balance against Qatar and Turkey's growing presence

⁸³ Kenneth Pollack, (October 2020), "[Sizing Up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE military effectiveness.](#)" *American Enterprise Institute*.

⁸⁴ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy.](#)" *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

⁸⁵ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy.](#)" *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

⁸⁶ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy.](#)" *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

and their Islamist agenda. Qatar's tremendous Islamist soft power influence has especially been perceived as a critical threat to the UAE, which has fed the intensifying rivalry between Qatar and the UAE. Among these various emerging alliances, a visible manifestation of the UAE's indirect military power projection and influence has been its relationship with Sudanese General and leader of the Rapid Support Forces Mohammed Hamdan Dagallo, commonly known as 'Hemedti'. The following section will discuss the role of the RSF in Emirati military power projections, as well as MbZ' ties to Libyan General Khalifa Haftar.

Cash and Gun Diplomacy in Libya and Sudan

Emirati investment in its hard power has been imbued with clientelist and transactional relations. To limit the deployment of its own troops, the UAE has opted for providing financial support, military equipment and training, and gone as far as hiring foreign militaries and militias to fight its wars and support its strategic vision. This 'cash and gun diplomacy' has built a network of military alliances and operates in the background by relying on external clients with compatible strategic mindsets. This has allowed the UAE to secure its geopolitical and maritime security interests, "moving their pawns on the Middle East chessboard" from a distance⁸⁷. This strategy has also been referred to, by Emma Soubrier, as transactional hard power. It is important to note that this strategy is certainly not an Emirati-only tool for military power projection, in fact, it has been a favorite tool for mostly all of the other Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

UAE in Sudan: Strong ties to the Rapid Support Forces

Sheikh Zayed views Hemedti as a key ally to realize his regional ambitions and secure his interests. MbZ has been a main client and patron of the Rapid Support Forces ("RSF"). When the RSF joined the Saudi coalition in Yemen in 2015, both Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the UAE lavished Hemedti with money, weapons, and military advice. Other than Yemen, the RSF has also been deployed in Libya on behalf of MbZ to support the Libyan National Army chieftain Khalifa Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in 2019. In 2019, the UAE and KSA have pledged \$3 billion in aid to Sudan—pocketed by the RSF, and the UAE have sold over 1,000 armoured vehicles to the RSF⁸⁸. These weapons have been directly used by the RSF to commit human rights violations against civilians, including during the June 3 Khartoum massacre in 2019 where the RSF killed, tortured, and raped hundreds of protesters⁸⁹. The RSF has also been involved in arms smuggling and human trafficking across Egypt, Libya, CAR, and Chad, exacerbating ongoing wars and instability in those countries. Because of this, top EU officials have urged to re-define the role of Sudan's security agencies, notably the RSF, especially as the US removed Sudan as a state-sponsor of terrorism.

Additionally, Dubai has provided a safe haven for gold smuggling money-laundering for the RSF. Since South Sudan gained independence in 2011, and Sudan lost most of its oil reserves, gold became increasingly important for the Sudanese government⁹⁰. In need of foreign currency, the country has become more and more dependent on gold, its biggest export product since 2012. Since the April 2019 revolution ousted Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir, armed

⁸⁷ Emma Soubrier, (Winter 2020), « [Ambitions Émiriennes sur la Région : Avancer Ses Pions En Contournant Les Récifs des Révolutions](#), » Cairn.info, L'Harmattan, *Confluences Méditerranée*, No 115, p 173-184.

⁸⁸ Global Witness, (April 5, 2020), "[How the RSF got their 4x4 Technicals: The open source intelligence techniques behind out Sudan exposé](#)"

⁸⁹ Global Witness, (December 9, 2019), "[Secret documents reveal financial network supporting Sudan's most powerful militia – responsible for the Khartoum massacre](#)"; Global Witness, (December 9, 2019), "[Exposing the RSF's secret financial network](#)"

⁹⁰ The International Peace Information Service (IPIS), (July 30, 2020), "[Briefing: Opportunities and Risks for Responsible Source of Gold From Sudan](#)"

groups and warlords took control over Sudanese gold mines and Sudan's gold trade became central in the country's power politics⁹¹. The RSF controls the Jebel Amir mines in Darfur, the most lucrative gold mines in the country, as well as a major Sudanese gold trading company called Al Gunade and other mines in South Kordofan. Global trade data from 2018 shows that the UAE is by far the largest importer of Sudanese gold in the world, importing 99% of Sudan's gold export⁹². Between 2012 and 2019, UAE-based gold refiner Kaloti acquired large amount of Sudanese gold bought from the Jebel Amer mines in Darfur. In 2019, Kaloti purchased gold from mines occupied by another armed group, the Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid, which has also engaged in killings, kidnapping, torture, extortion, and forced labour⁹³. These illicit gold revenues have enriched Hemedti and his militia group, increasing the RSF's military power and financial independence and supporting its human rights violations. The RSF was rich enough to pledge over \$1 billion to help stabilize the Sudanese Central Bank in the aftermath of the economic crisis that ousted President Bashir. A report from Global Witness reveals that in 2018 alone, over 270 international companies likely sourced gold from Kaloti or purchased products containing gold refined by Kaloti, including Amazon, Starbucks, Sony, Disney, and HP⁹⁴. The Emirati (and Saudi) supported RSF and its subsequent increasing political, military, and economic influence pose serious consequences for the future of Sudan and the stability of neighbouring countries in the Middle East. With the Sudanese economy on the brink of collapse and a civilian population unequipped in front of the RSF, Hemedti's continued role in Sudan has worsened the country's humanitarian situation, forcing more than 11,000 people to flee as refugees into neighbouring Chad since December 2019 and displacing around 46,000 people inside the country, according to the UNHCR. Overall, the UAE and KSA's intervention in Sudanese politics have been met with fierce local hostility and criticism.

UAE In Libya

Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) is seen as the main patron of Khalifa Haftar, providing significant air and logistical support. Since April 2019, Khalifa Haftar has led an offensive on Tripoli, portraying himself as a bulwark against Islamist groups, like the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda. This has earned him immediate support from Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia who view political Islamism as a threat to their regime security. Between 2014 and 2019, Haftar forces have received attack helicopters, armoured vehicles, and aircrafts from the UAE, which has allowed him to make key advances in Tripoli. The UAE has also operated from a military base in eastern Libya⁹⁵. On the other side, Turkey and Qatar have supplied Salafi armed groups with small arms, including machine guns, automatic rifles, and ammunition⁹⁶. In 2011, the UN imposed an arms embargo on Libya in response to gross systematic violation of human rights and escalating violence among the two parties. UN effort to stop international meddling has proven challenging as the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt have repeatedly violated the embargo to support their local ally. Gulf states' competition and 'cash and gun diplomacy' have had devastating consequences in the country, exacerbating tensions and Libya's acute economic crisis. In July 2020, the UAE was accused of instructing eastern

⁹¹ Patrick Smith, (January 13, 2021), "[Sudan: Hemedti and the ^16 billion annual gold exports to the UAE](#)," The Africa Report

⁹² Comtrade data from 2018, countries importing gold (commodity code 7108) from Sudan.

⁹³ Global Witness, (July 16, 2020), "[New Global Witness investigation reveals how one of the world's leading refiners, Switzerland's Valcambi, sources from UAE's Kaloti, which is linked to Sudanese 'conflict gold'](#)"

⁹⁴ Global Witness, (July 16, 2020), "[New Global Witness investigation reveals how one of the world's leading refiners, Switzerland's Valcambi, sources from UAE's Kaloti, which is linked to Sudanese 'conflict gold'](#)"

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, (April 29, 2020), "[Libya: UAE Strike Kills 8 Civilians](#)"

⁹⁶ James Risen, Mark Mazzetti, and Michael S. Schmidt, (December 5, 2012), "[US-Approved Arms for Libya Rebels Fell Into Jihadis' Hands](#)," *The New York Times*

forces to halt oil production—a blockade that has cost the Libyan economy billions and has severely affected the population that relies on oil income distribution for subsistence⁹⁷. Haftar’s forces have widely been criticized of committing war crimes, including the torture, summary execution, and desecration of enemy fighters’ corpses. According to the US government, as of June 2020, the conflict has yielded 3,000 casualties, including hundreds of civilians, and 28,000 internally displaced people⁹⁸. Overall, the UAE’s economic influence in Libya and strong ties to General Haftar have attracted worldwide criticism and intense scrutiny from Western media and international organizations to investigate the UAE’s human rights record. Emirati violation of the UN arms embargo have delegitimized Emirati policies in Libya internationally, although they have not been met with actionable measures on the part of the US or European governments.

Summary

Emirati military capabilities can be viewed as having, as Kenneth Pollack describes: “a sharp, strong spearpoint, but the shaft remains a work in progress.”⁹⁹ Essentially, the Emirates have a strong military proficiency and presence across the MEA, leveraging both its armed forces and its network of political-military alliances, to project power and build credibility. However, size matters in military force and so the UAE’s hard power has been limited by this. In some respect they have overextended themselves and will likely retrench in the coming years to re-align their interventions to their actual military capabilities, as they have done in Yemen and with its limited three-month deployment in Syria. Overall, Emirati footprint remains quite small, involving only a couple thousands of troops on the ground acquiring advanced capability that is being deployed worldwide. The UAE has garnered tremendous influence through its allies on the ground that have crucially helped the UAE maintain a strong presence in Yemen and Libya. Thus, one can view the UAE’s hard power capabilities more of an image than an actual force structure capability. The deployment of a transactional hard power clearly demonstrates that the perception of Emirati military power has actually been more important than absolute military power, defined in real terms. Still, the role of MbZ’ personalistic military relationships should not be overestimated as the RSF ultimately withdrew from Libya and only constitutes a small aspect of Emirati military structure and arsenal. However, these new informal alliances have contributed to heightened regional instability with the rise of transnational security threats, such as human trafficking, arms smuggling, terrorism, and the multiplication of insurgencies.

II. International Political Economy: Financial Power and Economic Interventionism

For international political economists, power is defined in terms of financial and natural resources. According to this view, Gulf states are new powerbrokers in the global economy: their transnational networks of capital, considerable financial flows, large commodities, and high number of foreign and expatriates’ workers makes them highly consequential in regional affairs and gives them a distinctive role in the international community. Particularly, the power of GCC states is tied to their capital accumulation and investments in urban infrastructure and in the banking industry across North Africa and the Levant, which has well expanded beyond

⁹⁷ Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neriah, (March 3, 2020), “Libya’s Field-Marshal Khalifa Haftar—the Returnee,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*

⁹⁸ Congressional Research Service, (June 26, 2020), “[Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy](#)”

⁹⁹ Kenneth Pollack, (October 2020), “[Sizing Up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE military effectiveness.](#),” *American Enterprise Institute*

the Arab world, to states in the Horn of Africa, and through international trade alliances with China and Russia¹⁰⁰.

A) Assessing Emirati Global Economic Weight and Geostrategic Importance

The UAE has the seventh-largest oil reserves possessing about 6% of the world's proven oil reserves, granting it with great economic weight and financial importance and making it a major player in the globalized economy¹⁰¹. The UAE became known for being wealthy, hydrocarbon producers, big spenders domestically and internationally, and chiefly, for being excessively dependent on oil rents, constituting about 30% of GDP¹⁰². This dependence on fossil fuels shaped the development pathway and rapid modern state-building of the Emirates, especially following the 1973 oil boom. In addition to its large oil resources, the UAE also overlooks three important waterways: the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Strait of Hormuz, and has economic and military presence in the Red Sea where it operates near the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. This crucial seaway access and oil deposits have characterized the major geopolitical importance of the UAE in the world. The UAE shares territorial rights over the waters of the Strait of Hormuz with Iran and Oman¹⁰³, granting these states great power over one of the most important maritime chokepoints in the world that carries a third of global maritime oil trade, as well as one third of the globe's liquefied gas trade¹⁰⁴.

Another important aspect of the UAE's economic power is its port infrastructure and logistics network. Historically the Emirates have relied on their marine resources for economic development and prosperity. They were valued for their shipbuilding, fishing, and availability of pearl oysters, as well as being a route for global trade¹⁰⁵. After the discovery of oil, maritime life continued to play a central role in the UAE's economy and society. Given the UAE's geostrategic location, maritime ports and city logistics have been critical to transform the UAE into a regional gateway to trade and a re-export zone for commodities on the Europe/East Asia trade route. This maritime influence should also be understood as part of Emirates' need to ensure uninterrupted shipping in the Gulf waters for the population's survival, due to its primary dependence on external food. Dubai's Jebel Ali port is ranked among the top ten container ports internationally by traffic, and its operating conglomerate, Dubai Ports World ("DP World") is one of the leading port operators that dominates the market internationally, with global assets in a network of more than 70 terminals across 30 countries in the world¹⁰⁶. To further develop the logistics facilities at the Jebel Ali port, the airport was also dramatically expanded, and Emirates Airways was established, as well as railroads and sea transport facilities in order to take advantage of Dubai's location between Europe and the emerging markets in East Asia. The UAE have also established free trade zones, notably de Jebel Ali free trade zone in Dubai, to project territorial sovereignty in a turbulent regional geostrategic context. The Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone is one of the most successful zones in terms of attracting foreign firms, investment, and commercial activity. By the late 1990s it had attracted over 2,000 international companies, created 35,000 jobs (admittedly mostly for non-citizens who

¹⁰⁰ Adam Hanieh, (2018), "Framing the Gulf," In *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East*, Cambridge University Press

¹⁰¹ U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), (May 6, 2020), "[Country Analysis: United Arab Emirates](#)"

¹⁰² Crystal Ennis (2018), "Reading entrepreneurial power in Qatar and the UAE" *Leiden University, Netherlands*; OPEC, (2020), "[UAE facts and figures](#)"

¹⁰³ Ticket to Know, (August 27, 2019), "[The Strait of Hormuz Explained](#)," *YouTube*

¹⁰⁴ John Letzing, (2019), "[Why is the Strait of Hormuz so Important?](#)" *World Economic Forum*

¹⁰⁵ Abu Dhabi Culture, "[Maritime Life: Sailing the Seas](#)"

¹⁰⁶ Rafeef Ziadah, (2018), "[Transport Infrastructure and Logistics in the Making of Dubai Inc.](#)," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

are paid significantly less than citizens), and generated \$4 billion in exports¹⁰⁷. The UAE's implementation of liberal trade policies, lower external tariffs, and its participation in the World Trade Organization have supported its greater regional and international economic integration. With the substantial internationalization of its global logistics industry and maritime port public-private partnership arrangements, Dubai's regional influence and independence significantly increased¹⁰⁸. These characteristics have led international political economists to portray the United Arab Emirates as one of the most powerful states in the regional system of the Middle East and a powerful emerging actor on the world stage.

Given this global economic weight, the political importance of the UAE (and GCC states) has also accrued through rivalries and shifting alliances with regional powers such as Iran and Israel, through interventions in Syria, Yemen, and other Arab states, and the relationship of the Gulf to major international actors in the Middle East¹⁰⁹. GCC states specifically Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have emerged as activist states in their interest and willingness to intervene both militarily and financially in the politics of neighbouring Arab states. Indeed, the Emirates have used their economic wealth to broaden its role in the region from a small to a middle state power that aspires towards regional supremacy. It enabled the UAE to carve out a secular political identity in opposition to the Saudi model, with the financial resources to bolster its international standing institutionally and to project soft power. This is not surprising considering “size is, to a great extent, a matter of self-perception”⁴. In fact, despite large US military investments in the Middle East, the US' power is perceived to be declining in the region because it failed to translate its policy objectives into outcomes⁵. The UAE, in contrast, has been heavily invested in the MEA, supplying economic aid to various Middle Eastern states, and establishing ports and economic zones across the Red Sea near the Bab al-Mandab Strait. These policies have successfully translated into outcomes, which in turn, have increased the UAE's financial power and its soft power through a clever use of its economic diplomacy. Emirati economic diplomacy and tools of statecraft have often been characterized as a “two-headed” power structure with Abu Dhabi and Dubai having specific identities and priorities. In fact, while Dubai's leaders look at their partnerships and investments through a commercial lens, prioritizing business relations above politics, Abu Dhabi's economic policies are primarily politically motivated and aimed at expanding regional influence and containing political Islamist groups and Iran. Throughout the years, this has manifested in contrasting “foreign policy dynamics”¹¹⁰, for example in their differing relationship towards Iran. This hybrid approach is distinctively unique to the UAE and has given the Emirates more room to maneuver and independence from its larger neighbor. Nonetheless, rather than being a problem as Emma Soubrier notes, “there have been increasing elements of the two emirates' specific approaches consolidated within a unified strategy”¹¹¹. Even so, Emirati economic statecraft has not been clearly divided between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, often both commercial and political interests converge and sometimes Abu Dhabi has put a check on Dubai's ambitions to pull back from certain ventures. Overall, we can distinguish three main categories of financial aid and intervention, as delineated by American Enterprise Institute's Gulf Financial Aid and Direct Investment Tracker: (1) foreign direct

¹⁰⁷ Rafeef Ziadah, (2018), “[Transport Infrastructure and Logistics in the Making of Dubai Inc.](#),” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

¹⁰⁸ Rafeef Ziadah (2017), “[Constructing a logistics space: Perspectives from the Gulf Cooperation Council](#)”, 36: 666-682, SAGE Journals

¹⁰⁹ Adam Hanieh, (2018), “Framing the Gulf,” In *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East*, Cambridge University Press.

¹¹⁰ Emma Soubrier, (February 19, 2021), “[What's Behind the UAE's 'Shuffle' Diplomacy?](#),” AGSIW.

¹¹¹ Emma Soubrier, (February 19, 2021), “[What's behind the UAE's Shuffle Diplomacy?](#),” AGSIW.

investment (from both private and public sources), (2) official development aid and assistance, and (3) central bank deposits, grants, or special directed funds. The coordination of this three-level economic statecraft has wielded significant influence for the UAE and served larger foreign policy goals.

B) Understanding Emirati Economic Statecraft and Economic Diplomacy

Since the discovery of oil, the UAE have been active donors, using financial aid and humanitarian aid as a quiet tool of their foreign policies objectives, driven by political, economic, and ideational factors, across the Middle East and Africa¹¹². During the oil price hike between 2002 and 2006, the UAE nearly doubled its annual oil revenue average to approximately US \$327 billion per year. This capital boosted the UAE's capacity to use its economic resources as a tool at the international level. For example, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, as well as other Gulf-based sovereign wealth played a significant role during the 2008 financial crisis global crisis, providing liquidity to US firms such as Merrill Lynch and Citigroup at the onset of the crisis and later accounted for a third of the emergency funding to European governments to avert financial collapse in the fall of 2008¹¹³. This was a rare moment where the UAE engaged as an "equal player" alongside larger states. In this way, the UAE was able to build its influence through participation and integration in the world order and engagement with international financial institutions (especially the International Monetary Fund). At the same time, it attracted partnerships with the fastest-growing economies in Asia and Latin America as a means of diversifying its alliances.

Since the arrival of MbZ in power, the UAE have increasingly embraced an aggressive investment and development model for the broader Middle East, expanding influence north to Jordan and Egypt, south to Yemen, and southwest in the Red Sea basin and Horn of Africa, seeking political influence through economic statecraft. Because of such diversified strategy, the UAE's economic influence has been more spread out across the region, in contrast to Saudi Arabia for example who has mostly only two main recipients of Saudi aid (see pictures below from American Enterprise Institute's [Gulf financial aid tracker](#)). The idea that the "UAE must have 'tentacles' in multiple international arenas" applies as much to its defense strategy than its investment strategy and soft power strategy. This has given the UAE more political leverage in the recipient countries, but also it has reinforced the prestige of the UAE through its key humanitarian role and substantial foreign aid investments¹¹⁴. Indeed, the UAE has become a leading foreign aid donor and has used its financial resources to gain friends among recipient countries. In 2016, the UAE was the world's third-largest donor of humanitarian aid relative to Gross National Income. In 2015, the total stock of UAE investments abroad reached \$63 billion¹¹⁵. In 2018, it was among the top five humanitarian assistance state-donors in the world in terms of US dollars and since then, there has been a constant growth of the share of humanitarian aid as part of the country's foreign aid. In 2018, Emirati humanitarian and development assistance constituted 18% of Emirati overall foreign aid¹¹⁶. For the UAE, the overwhelming priority has been a coordinated business and security ambition: what strengthens the position of the state, while also providing a quality investment? As Professor Karen Young

¹¹² Karen E. Young, (2017), "A New Politics of GCC Economic Statecraft: The Case of UAE Aid and Financial Intervention in Egypt", *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7:1, 113-136.

¹¹³ Ebtessam Al Ketbi, (November 19, 2020), "[Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords](#)," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 14:3, 391-398.

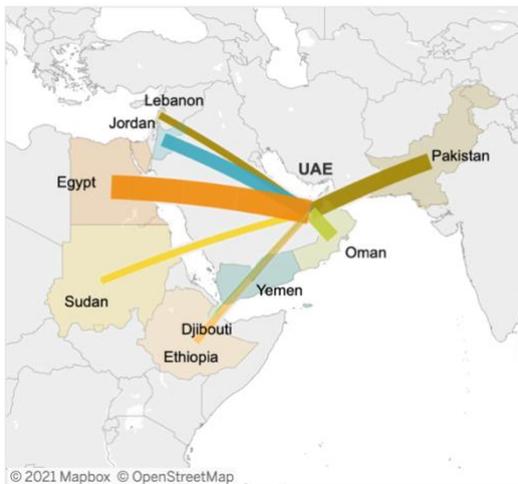
¹¹⁴ Khalid S. Almezaini, (2012), "The motivations and purposes of UAE foreign aid" In *The UAE and foreign policy foreign aid, identities and interests*, Routledge.

¹¹⁵ OECD Library, (2020), "[Development Co-operation Profiles: United Arab Emirates](#)"

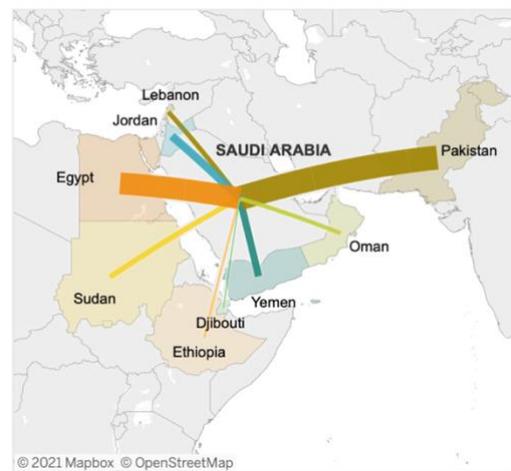
¹¹⁶ OECD Library, (2020), "[Development Co-operation Profiles: United Arab Emirates](#)"

writes “when state and economic interests dovetail, we see the hallmark of Arab Gulf state economic statecraft.¹¹⁷” The driving factor of the UAE aid and investment strategy is its return on investment, including market access, market dominance, priority over regional rivals and forward-looking opportunities to make profitable long-term partnerships and alliances. Economic statecraft for the UAE and the wider Gulf therefore critically serves as a long-term investment strategy in alliance-building, primarily with states having similar ideologies. For the UAE, its economic statecraft is devoted at securing maritime geopolitical interests and at limiting the activism of political Islamist groups¹¹⁸. Overall, the result of Emirati economic statecraft has placed the UAE as an emerging global power, as a regional gateway to larger markets, with political influence developed across different regions.

United Arab Emirates



Saudi Arabia



following Source: American Enterprise Institute, (2021), *The Gulf Financial Aid Tracker* 10 Horn of Africa. This will provide deeper knowledge into the overlap between Emirati economic and military power, as the UAE has relied on its wealth not only to become a powerful economic actor globally but also to expand its military operations in the MEA.

Emirati Foreign Aid and Port Deployment Strategy in the Horn of Africa

Over recent decades, the Horn of Africa has become a region of increasing geostrategic and economic importance, as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have sought to establish long-term military and/or commercial presence to cement their status as regional powers¹¹⁹. The Red Sea basin has also emerged at the heart of global geostrategic competition among China, Europe, the United States, and Russia. Intra-Gulf rivalries have spilled over, exacerbating pre-existing divisions, destabilizing local political dynamics, and raising questions about whether Gulf Arab states’ engagement has a positive role in the region. As Gulf states have taken a bigger role in the region particularly in maritime security, there has also been a growing interest in basing in the Horn of Africa, with UAE operating militarily in Assab, Saudi Arabia in Djibouti, Turkey in Suyacin (off the coast of Sudan), and Qatar in Mogadishu. As such, the dual approach combining military strategy and economic diplomacy has been widely used by the Arab Gulf states. Economic-geopolitical and military-political

¹¹⁷ Karen E. Young, (2015), “[The New Politics of Gulf Arab State Foreign Aid and Investment](#),” In *Mapping GCC Foreign Policy: Resources, Recipients and Regional Effects*, Blogs LSE Publications Middle East Centre.

¹¹⁸ Karen E. Young, (2015), “[The New Politics of Gulf Arab State Foreign Aid and Investment](#),” In *Mapping GCC Foreign Policy: Resources, Recipients and Regional Effects*, Blogs LSE Publications Middle East Centre.

¹¹⁹ Taimur Khan, (November 26, 2018), “[Gulf Strategic Interests Reshaping the Horn of Africa](#),” *Arab Gulf States Institute*

interests have converged to project power on all front, using hard power capabilities, economic wealth, but also soft power tools to pursue specific foreign policy objectives.

In the case of the UAE, it has been the most active Gulf country in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. Its engagement in the Horn of Africa is as much driven by political and geostrategic interests, as it is motivated by economic, commercial, and maritime security interests. Indeed, the Horn of Africa has one of the highest growths in the world, pushing Gulf states to take advantage of these growing business opportunities, especially in areas where they have expertise, like in infrastructure development. For the Emirates, whose economy has been built on shipping, transport and logistics, ports development makes sense as an investment strategy. The leadership views Emirati long-term military, strategic, and commercial presence in the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea corridor, and Strait of Hormuz as critical for cementing its status as a regional power¹²⁰. Indeed, the UAE depends on the flow of trade through the western Indian Ocean to export oil and sustain its lucrative position as an international trade hub. Maintaining maritime security and freedom of transport in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf has thus been critical not only to secure its food provisions, considering it depends 90% on food imports, but also in securing an international role, both of which have been crucial calculations in the UAE's investment strategy in this region. Abu Dhabi and Dubai are keenly aware of the potential of the Horn of Africa, which have pushed them to invest in their own trade and travel hubs, as well as those across the region to diversify their economies¹²¹. This has led to a dual approach of looking to develop potential trade hubs in the neighborhood while restricting the sphere of influence and potential area of activities of Iran, Qatar, and Turkey. The UAE has strengthened its commercial ties with Eritrea, Somaliland, Somalia, and Yemen, developing local port infrastructure, investing in African markets, and establishing economic zones in Horn of Africa countries. DP World, an Emirati majority-owned global port operator, has become a primary investor in the Horn of Africa, concluding multimillion-dollar commercial agreements with these countries that has allowed the UAE to manage key ports in the Red Sea. Ultimately, ports and trade infrastructure will connect fast-growing Africa to Asian markets via hubs in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, which will position them as key regional players.

Since 2015 however, the political motivations have gained greater importance due to the conflict in Yemen and growing tensions with Iran. Emirati port deployment strategy became an intrinsic part of their political and national security strategy, aimed at forging new alliances that will help build their military capabilities against external threats. The UAE is a particular case in point, as it has deployed Sudanese troops (16,000) to Yemen¹²². Because of the war and the perceived growing threat from Iran, the UAE began establishing military bases near the Bab Al-Mandab Strait ("BAM"), in Assab, Eritrea; Berbera, Somaliland; Bossaso, Somalia; and in Socotra Island, Yemen. This has granted the UAE with exceptional access to the BAM, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. The UAE has also provided military assistance to these countries and reportedly trained and equipped local coastguard, police, counterterrorist personnel, and security services. This military presence has supported the UAE effort in the war in Yemen, providing easy access for troop deployment and has helped develop Emirati naval capabilities towards maritime security.

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Dickinson, (2018), "[Gulf Strategic Interests Reshaping the Horn of Africa](#)," video accessed on *The Arab Gulf States Institute*.

¹²¹ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#)," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

¹²² Annette Weber, (2018), "[Gulf Strategic Interests Reshaping the Horn of Africa](#)," video accessed on *The Arab Gulf States Institute*.

This hard power projection through military intervention and cooperation has been accompanied by vast economic diplomacy and state branding through soft power. The UAE has been using port acquisition and largescale infrastructure projects carried out by DP World as a soft power tool to establish itself as an essential partner in supply chains and maritime trade passing through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and a key actor on the West Indian Ocean trade route¹²³. By maintaining maritime-mercantile leverage over alternative shipping lanes and reducing the country's dependence on the Strait of Hormuz, the UAE aspires to wield political influence in the neighborhood and position itself as a pivotal regional diplomatic player. DP World further secures UAE interests by building and operating dual-use facilities capable of accommodating an Emirati dual naval and/or air force presence alongside its strategic foreign port concessions¹²⁴. In doing so, DP World has been an indispensable partner for the UAE's military and foreign policy ambitions. This is not surprising considering the major stakeholder of DP World is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai and Prime Minister of the country¹²⁵. Between the two emirates, the UAE holds military and economic positions in Mukalla, Aden and Mokha (Yemen), Bossaso (Puntland/Somalia), Berbera (Somaliland/Somalia) and Assab (Eritrea) ports. In contrast, Qatar and Turkey have been limited to interests in Mogadishu and Sudan¹²⁶. Through this force projection, the UAE has cemented a national brand that had been developing for quite some time, but was taken to the next level, mixing economic and military power projections to establish themselves as an indispensable partner and regional security actor, furthering their soft power. These developments should nevertheless be put into perspective as the UAE leadership has mentioned possibly retrenching from the Horn, due to overextension and capability limitations, as well as the lesser priority of the region following Emirati withdrawal from Yemen.

Summary

The UAE's substantial financial resources have fundamentally helped the country carve itself a broader role in the region from a small to middle state power that aspires towards regional supremacy. This has formed the UAE's rock strategy from where it has been able to finance its economic diplomacy, cash and gun diplomacy, and security-related soft power (which will be discussed in the following section). The UAE's diversified investment strategy has allowed the country to have broad economic and political influence spread out across different regions: in North Africa (Libya, Egypt), West Asia (Oman), and East Africa (Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia). Overall, Emirati economic diplomacy has successfully increased the UAE's state power while supporting its security-military goals and enhancing its soft power.

III. Constructivism: the UAE's Quest for Legitimacy and Soft Power Projection

According to constructivist theorists, power is not conceived in terms of material resources alone, but in terms of tacit legitimacy, authority, representational force, and perceptions of power. Emphasizing the agency of individuals, constructivists argue that power is established through actors' interactions and communication, which allow their identity or ideology to become visible on the international system, and in turn, authorizes, legitimizes, and empowers

¹²³ Taimur Khan, (November 26, 2018), "Gulf Strategic Interests Reshaping the Horn of Africa," *The Arab Gulf States Institute*; Stasa Salacanian, (December 17, 2020), "[The UAE's Military Driven Foreign Policy Approach](#)," *Inside Arabia*.

¹²⁴ Ayse Kocak, (February 18, 2020), "[Dubai Ports World as the UAE Foreign Policy Tool](#)," *Clingendael Institute*.

¹²⁵ Stasa Salacanian, (December 17, 2020), "[The UAE's Military Driven Foreign Policy Approach](#)," *Inside Arabia*.

¹²⁶ Peter Salisbury, (July 2020), "[Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy](#)," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Middle East and North Africa Programme.

a state¹²⁷. This type of power is a weapon of influence and control, and has commonly been referred to as soft power. Joseph Nye, American political scientist and former Clinton administration official, was the first to put forth the concept of soft power. Nye defined soft power as the ability “to get others to do what they otherwise would not”¹²⁸. This noncoercive power, as he viewed it, had four main channels through which states can reflect their soft power, namely “public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchanges, and assistance.”¹²⁹ Essentially, if a state’s culture, ideology, and policies are attractive, others will be more willing to follow, which forms the backbone of the US soft power with its liberal democratic politics, free market economics, US pop culture and Hollywood. Crucially, soft power is not simply a form of ‘nation branding’¹³⁰. Soft power aligns more with strategies of ‘public diplomacy’, which involves creating and maintaining mutual understandings, long-lasting relationships, and active cooperation. Public diplomacy is about exercising influence through the development of positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable. Nation-branding efforts, in contrast, focus simply on ‘raising awareness of a country’, informing others of national uniqueness. At its core, communication and persuasion are key aspects of soft power. They are designed to influence the public and media agendas and engage with the public and elites in other countries, offering foreign policy advantages outside the traditional diplomacy track¹³¹. Although the concept of soft power has primarily been used in academic circles and was never formulated explicitly in policy circles, the UAE is one of the first state to do so. In 2017, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai launches the UAE Soft Power Council to formulate comprehensive and multivariate soft power strategy in science, culture, media, technology, the economy, and humanitarian work¹³². This multivariate strategy has formed the cornerstone of the UAE’s soft power, pursuing various avenues in future technologies, AI, space, media, among others to enhance its reputation abroad. In 2020, the UAE has been named the leading soft power nation in the Middle East – ranking 18th across the world – in the ‘Global Soft Power Index’ by Brand Finance¹³³. Although it is unclear whether the survey is biased or influenced by the Emirati government, it nevertheless reflects a growing awareness on the part of the Emirati leadership of its legitimacy and reputation abroad, eventually making it a central component of its national strategy. This was most likely caused by the wide success Qatar has had with its soft power strategy, considering its significant media influence through Al Jazeera and the wide legitimacy it gave Qatar at the local level when it supported and provided a platform for the popular protests across the region. Drawing on the Qatari model of soft power, the UAE has sought to develop its own soft power at times borrowing from the Qatari playbook, when it adopts regional mediation, and others diverging from Qatar by pioneering new initiatives in the region, through for example the Abraham Accords and the UAE’s virus diplomacy. At the same time, the Emirates’ soft power strategy has been crucially accompanied by a massive promotion campaign of the UAE. The Emirates have funded think tanks, social media influencers, hired public relations and strategic communications firms, like the UK-based Portland

¹²⁷ Stefano Guzzini (2005), “The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Analysis,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, SAGE Publications, 33: 3, pp. 495-521

¹²⁸ Eric Li, (August 20, 2018), “[The Rise and Fall of Soft Power](#),” Foreign Policy

¹²⁹ Joseph S Nye, (2011), “Power and foreign policy,” *Journal of Political Power*, 4:1, pp. 9-24.

¹³⁰ Paul Michael Brannagan, Richard Giulianotti, (September 2018), “[The soft power—soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar](#),” *International Affairs*, 94: 5, pp 1139-1157

¹³¹ Tarek Cherkaoui, (2018), “[Qatar’s public diplomacy, international broadcasting, and the Gulf crisis](#),” *Rising Powers Quarterly (Public Diplomacy of Rising and Regional Powers)*, 3: 3, pp. 127-149.

¹³² The United Arab Emirates’ Government Portal, (May 1, 2021), “[The UAE Soft Power Strategy](#)”

¹³³ See Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index: <https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/>; The National, (September 27, 2017), “[UAE Soft Power Council discusses ways to expand global message](#).”; and Gulf News (September 26, 2017), “[UAE’s Soft Power Strategy discussed](#).”

Communications company, and established personal relationships with Western officials, like Jared Kushner and President Trump, which all have participated in the large lobbying effort on behalf of the UAE. This promotion campaign forms an intrinsic part of the Emirates' soft power strategy.

Much of the following discussion on Emirati soft power will analyze the combination and overlap between military and economic power in shaping Emirati soft power and will show how Emirati armed forces and economic wealth have been deployed to serve critical soft power goals. This section will also discuss Emirati cultural and media diplomacy, which has been a relatively new phenomenon in Emirati foreign policies and is primarily where Qatari and Emirati soft power converge in their strategy of "being friends with everyone" and of regional mediation.

A) Humanitarian Diplomacy: Emirati Shifting Priorities Towards Human Security

The pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on the world, but even more so for Gulf countries. Covid has directly impacted tourism and international supply chains and prompted a global decline in oil demand and prices, with significant impact on regional economies and people's livelihoods.¹³⁴ The pandemic has also shown the vulnerabilities of these economies in front of pressing environmental challenges brought by climate change. In fact, rising temperatures and severe humidity caused by global warming could render the region inhabitable in just over three generations¹³⁵. Natural disasters almost tripled between 1980s and 2010s, compared to a global trend that has "only" doubled over the same period¹³⁶. Another important threat is linked to flooding and rising sea levels, which puts at risk the safety and living standards of the population, as well as existing port infrastructure and coastal cities that are critical to the commerce that flows in and out of the region¹³⁷. These threats pose serious questions to the sustainability and survival of GCC states in terms of food, water, energy, and other human security concerns. The UAE has been at the forefront of global responses to climate change and the pandemic, which has showcased Emirati leadership and its capacity to adapt quickly with high levels of preparedness¹³⁸. The tangible implications of the pandemic have also shown how problems related to public health and climate change are intrinsically connected to the security and politics of these Gulf states. In the case of the UAE, the cabinet reshuffle in July 2020¹³⁹ points to the leadership' recognition of these new emerging threats

¹³⁴ Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), "[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)"; and The National (January 10, 2021), "[Coronavirus Latest: UAE Passes Vaccine Milestone With More Than One Million Shots](#)"

¹³⁵ Jeremy S. Pal and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, (2016) "[Future Temperature in Southwest Asia Projected to Exceed a Threshold for Human Adaptability](#)," *Nature Climate Change*; John Schwartz, (October 27, 2015) "[Deadly Heat Is Forecast in Persian Gulf by 2100](#)," *The New York Times*; and George O. Odhiambo, (September 2017) "[Water Scarcity in the Arabian Peninsula and Socio-Economic Implications](#)," *Applied Water Science* 7, no. 5: 2,479-92

¹³⁶ Andrea Zanon, (November 7, 2013), "[The Threat of Natural Disasters in the Arab Region: How to Weather the Storm](#)," *World Bank Blogs*,

¹³⁷ Mohamed El-Raey, (January 2010), "[Impact of Sea Levels on the Arab Region](#)," University of Alexandria and Regional Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Arab Academy of Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Project: [Comparison of Various Techniques for Satellite Data](#).

¹³⁸ Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), "[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)"

¹³⁹ In July 2020, the UAE has fundamentally restructured its cabinet as a response to the rising multifaceted and complex challenges tied to COVID-19 and climate change. Ordered by Dubai ruler and UAE Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, this cabinet reshuffle includes: the creation of a Ministry of Industry and Advanced Technology, the merging of the Ministry of Energy and Industry with the Ministry of Infrastructure, and the appointment of three Ministers of Economy. For more information, see: Albright Stonebridge Group (July 9, 2020), "[ASG Analysis: UAE Government Reshuffle – Priorities and Directions for the Future](#)".

and Emirati shifting priorities towards “increased digitization, economic reprioritization, ... and an emphasis on food security and self-reliance.¹⁴⁰” This signals a step further in the federation’s consolidation of an integrated multifaceted foreign policy strategy aimed at tackling various security challenges¹⁴¹. Indeed, the UAE has deployed both military and economic tools of statecraft to help combat critical human security threats, significantly reinforcing Emirati soft power and reputation as a global, influential, and responsible state actor. We can identify three broad recent trends in Emirati human security strategy: its virus diplomacy—notably with China, efforts towards food and water security, and renewable energy projects which has been important to achieve economic diversification.

UAE’s Virus Diplomacy

The UAE has sought to broadcast itself as a top humanitarian provider. The country has been a critical actor in the global cooperation and solidarity during the pandemic crisis, providing billions of dollars in international aid through its government and through funds controlled by royal family members and other elites, such as the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD). Overall, the speed at which responses were implemented were astonishing in comparison to other regional states, and despite serious domestic economic challenges, the country has donated to multiple international initiatives and participated in vaccine trials¹⁴². In doing so, the country has sought to satisfy the needs of its citizens and expatriates and was able to play a leading role in providing the vaccine to other countries in the region. For example, the UAE has aided WHO’s vaccine distribution efforts by offering donations and logistical support. Notably, Dubai’s International Humanitarian City (“IHC”) was a hub for relief efforts to numerous countries in the region and beyond, not simply in support of the World Health Organisation (WHO), but also of the World Food Program, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Federation of Red Cross in order to respond to other emergencies than COVID-19¹⁴³. Dubai’s launch of the Vaccine Logistics Alliance has accelerated the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines around the world from the Emirates through a public-private partnership that combines the global reach of Emirates airline with DP World’s worldwide network of ports and logistics operations, along with the infrastructure of Dubai Airports and International Humanitarian City. In November 2020, Abu Dhabi has launched the Hope Consortium, a supply chain solution and logistics grouping with the capacity to distribute more than six billion doses worldwide¹⁴⁴. Companies in neighbouring Dubai have also formed an alliance to move two billion doses of vaccines around the world this year, focusing on emerging markets¹⁴⁵. Emirati aerospace manufacturer Strata, which used to make airplane parts, was also transformed to manufacture N95 masks to stop the spread of the coronavirus¹⁴⁶. These efforts have positioned the UAE as an entrepreneurial state, which seek to harness the

¹⁴⁰ Albright Stonebridge Group (July 9, 2020), “[ASG Analysis: UAE Government Reshuffle – Priorities and Directions for the Future](#)”.

¹⁴¹ Emma Soubrier (February 19, 2021), “[What’s Behind the UAE’s ‘Shuffle’ Diplomacy?](#),” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*.

¹⁴² Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), “[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)”; Mona Ali, (December 29, 2020), “[Vaccine Diplomacy: In 2021, the UAE will become the new vaccine hub of the Middle East](#),” *Observer Research Foundation*

¹⁴³ Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), “[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)”; IHC, (September 13, 2020), “[The International Humanitarian City in Dubai’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).”

¹⁴⁴ Etihad, (November 26, 2020), “[Abu Dhabi launches the Hope Consortium for a full global vaccine distribution](#).” *AGSIW*; Emma Soubrier, “[The UAE’s Message of Hope, Delivered With a Soft-Power Focus and Some Strategic Hedging](#),” *AGSIW*

¹⁴⁵ Sylvia Westall, Adveith Nair, and Farah Elbahrawy (March 28, 2021), “China Picks UAE to Make Millions of Vaccines, Boosting Gulf Ties,” *Bloomberg*

¹⁴⁶ Emma Soubrier, (November 19, 2020), “[Redefining Gulf Security Begins by Including the Human Dimension Human Security](#),” *AGSIW*.

best of the private sector for the national good. This private-public sector collaboration has been a crucial soft power tool, employed by many other small Gulf states, in particular Qatar. These efforts have helped promote domestic commercial expertise and reputation abroad and have come to transform the views of these states as useful and supportive strategic partners or a go-to government in specific issue areas, such as defence, security, and trade. For both the UAE and Qatar, it has successfully converted their soft power resources into outcomes, enticing others through their attractive policies and achievements, and further empowering these states in the international system.

Another aspect of Emirati virus diplomacy strategy is its port and rail infrastructure that have been instrumental in the rapid distribution of and fair access to vaccines, as an import and transport network¹⁴⁷. Currently, the UAE is leading the world in terms of rolling out the vaccine, delivering close to 80,000 shots in a single day and has given over one million shots so far. The UAE has also one of the highest rates of screening per capita worldwide, as well as top clinical centers that offer almost any services provided elsewhere¹⁴⁸. Such international engagement has transformed the UAE into a regional hub in global vaccine production and distribution through the strengthening of its collaborations with pharmaceutical giants like Sinopharm, Moderna, and Pfizer. Aside from its collaboration with international organizations, the Emirates have also developed strong partnerships with different foreign powers to promote the development, production, and distribution of the vaccine worldwide. A main and much publicized Emirati collaboration has been its growing partnership with China, but it has also increased its health cooperation with Russia, Israel¹⁴⁹, South Korea¹⁵⁰, Malaysia¹⁵¹, among others. The UAE is one of the first countries to collaborate with China (and Russia) in their vaccine trials. It has been part of the Phase III trials for the vaccine made by Chinese company Sinopharm since July 2020¹⁵². The UAE and China have created a joint venture to produce up to 200 million doses annually. The Emirates have already set up production locally at a smaller scale, becoming the first nation to develop a vaccine production facility¹⁵³. The UAE was also the first country (before China itself) to approve the Sinopharm vaccine in December 2020 and due to its accessibility and cheap price has significantly contributed to global recovery efforts not only in the Middle East, but to many African and Asian countries as well¹⁵⁴. Shortly after the approval, an Emirati flight transported the first shipment of 100,000 doses of the Chinese vaccine to Egypt¹⁵⁵, portraying the crucial role vaccines will play in regional post-pandemic foreign policy. MbZ has been in contact with numerous leaders offering aid and medical assistance to support efforts to combat the virus, including with Italy, Croatia, Greece, Serbia,

¹⁴⁷ Rob Bailly and Robin Willoughby, (November 2013), "[Edible Oil: Food Security in the Gulf](#)," *Chatham House*

¹⁴⁸ Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), "[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)"; The National (January 10, 2021), "[Coronavirus Latest: UAE Passes Vaccine Milestone With More Than One Million Shots](#)"

¹⁴⁹ For more information, check: Moran Zaga, (October 2, 2020), "[The Potential for Israel-UAE Cooperation](#)," Blogs LSE Publications; Reuters, (August 24, 2020), "[UAE, Israel health ministers agree to enhance cooperation on health](#)"

¹⁵⁰ Trade Arabia, (September 9, 2020), "[UAE, South Korea agree cooperation in 10 new sectors](#)."

¹⁵¹ The National, (December 29, 2020), "[King of Malaysia pledges to work closely with UAE against COVID-19 pandemic and boost growing trade](#)."

¹⁵² Middle East Eye, "[Why the UAE adopted China's COVID-19 vaccine](#)"

¹⁵³ Sylvia Westall, Adveith Nair, and Farah Elbahrawy (March 28, 2021), "China Picks UAE to Make Millions of Vaccines, Boosting Gulf Ties," *Bloomberg*

¹⁵⁴ Mona Ali, (December 29, 2020), "[Vaccine Diplomacy: In 2021, the UAE will become the new vaccine hub of the Middle East](#)," *Observer Research Foundation*

¹⁵⁵ Middle East Eye, "[Why the UAE adopted China's COVID-19 vaccine](#)"

Pakistan, Seychelles, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan¹⁵⁶. Considering the increased risk of pandemics due to climate change, this capability of deploying and distributing vaccines will be critical in decades to come. In addition to vaccine collaboration, there has also been a notable increase in cooperation with China on health technologies and associated artificial intelligence projects, which have been central to the UAE's pandemic response¹⁵⁷.

On the domestic level, the UAE has taken a blended civilian-military approach to catalyze economic recovery and support its population's safety¹⁵⁸. The UAE's security apparatus has been central to its pandemic response as Emirati military personnel have helped deliver critical care supplies, transported critically ill patients to hospitals, and ensured border security amid the pandemic¹⁵⁹. By leveraging its transportation capacities, Emirati armed forces have helped ensure essential medical supplies and supply chains were maintained. For example, the UAE Air Force transported WHO supplies and personnel from Dubai to Teheran to help them combat COVID, carrying dozens of tons of assistance and medical equipment¹⁶⁰. Abu Dhabi's Civil Defense plan has also implemented decontamination programs and enforced strict lockdown protocols. Additional steps taken by the military to contain the virus include massive testing, contact tracing, communication medical support, and maintenance of public order.

Ultimately, the UAE has leveraged various levers and resources to shape its virus diplomacy. Its approach to the global pandemic has enhanced the reputation of the UAE within international audiences as a responsible and highly capable state that has a stake in world affairs.

Emirati Investment in Renewable and Clean Energy

The rising global environmental challenges and limits to its oil fields have pushed the UAE to diversify its economy away from oil and emerge as a regional hub for trade, travel, tourism, finance, healthcare, and education. The development of renewable and clean energy has been one of the key pillars of the UAE's economic diversification strategy. The UAE has been involved both in changing its energy mix at home and investing in solar and wind projects abroad. In September 2016, the UAE ratified the Paris Agreement on climate, being the first country in the Middle East to do so, demonstrating its leadership role on climate change in the region. Following the signing of the agreement, the UAE restructured its government departments and created a Ministry of Climate Change and the Environment to increase efficiency towards a green economy and economic sustainability¹⁶¹. In 2015, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan announced a \$81.7 billion fund in science and technology innovations, of which \$54.5 billion was earmarked for renewable and alternative energy. The UAE has also

¹⁵⁶ Theodore Karasik, (April 21, 2020), "[Lessons the US can learn from the UAE about decontamination of COVID-19](#)," *Atlantic Council*; Kenneth Katzman, (April 15, 2021), "[The United Arab Emirates \(UAE\): Issues for US Policy](#)," Congressional Research Service, Report RS21852; Diana Galeeva, (April 5, 2020), "[The UAE's response to the Covid-19 Outbreak in Iran](#)," *Blogs LSE Publications*

¹⁵⁷ Emma Soubrier, (November 19, 2020), "[Redefining Gulf Security Begins by Including the Human Dimension Human Security](#)," *AGSIW*.

¹⁵⁸ Theodore Karasik, (April 21, 2020), "[Lessons the US can learn from the UAE about decontamination of COVID-19](#)," *Atlantic Council*

¹⁵⁹ Anjana Sankar, (November 16, 2020), "[Over 30,000 UAE Armed Forces personnel vaccinated against Covid-19](#)," *Khaleej Times*; Emma Soubrier, (July 7, 2020), "[UAE Security Apparatus Central to Its Pandemic Response](#)," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*.

¹⁶⁰ Elham Fakhro, (April 20, 2020), "[COVID and Gulf Foreign Policy](#)," *International Crisis Group*; Anjana Sankar, (November 16, 2020), "[Over 30,000 UAE Armed Forces personnel vaccinated against Covid-19](#)," *Khaleej Times*.

¹⁶¹ US-UAE Business Council, (January 2017), "Renewable and Alternative Energy in the UAE: Overview and Opportunities for Business"

hosted the world's leading international renewable energy body, the IRENA, and is also home to Masdar, the country's future energy company. Masdar has been the main body supporting Emirati clean energy investments and soft power. Masdar has financed green projects across the MENA and around the world, and has built Masdar City, a sustainable and economic free-zone in Abu Dhabi. Masdar City has widely been publicized as a greenprint for cities of the future advance clean energy deployment and sustainable real estate. The nucleus of Masdar City is the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology—an independent, research-driven graduate university that works closely with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It is important to note that these various investments have primarily relied on foreign expertise and been led by foreign companies and workers, notably US companies like CH2M Hill and SolarOne. Overall, the UAE has both steadily developed nuclear and solar power to reduce its dominant fossil-fuel powered energy at home and made broad investments in solar technology abroad¹⁶². For example, in 2013, Masdar, in partnership with Total and Abengoa Solar, constructed the largest renewable energy project in the Middle East, generating enough electricity to power 20,000 homes. Dubai has also adopted its own emirate-level vision—the Dubai Clean Energy Strategy 2050—in which it aims to transition to 75% in clean energy production, as opposed to 0.23% in 2015 by expanding solar energy¹⁶³. Masdar has also made major investment in solar power around the world and funded diverse solar energy projects, such as Jordan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Morocco, in the Pacific, and in several African nations. Masdar has also invested heavily in international wind projects. It has notably invested in Jordan's wind farm, the region's first utility-scale wind power project, and also in British wind farms, as well as other smaller-scale projects in the Pacific islands¹⁶⁴. Additionally, many leading businesses have also begun embracing solar power. For example, DP World announced it would install 88,000 solar panels in Jebel Ali Free Zone and Mina Rashid, providing energy for the equivalent of 3,000 homes. Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) also aims to build Dubai's first fully solar-powered hotel, Hotel Indigo Dubai.

Emirati Innovations in Food and Water Security

A third major initiative the UAE has undertaken in the last decade is its innovations in food and water security. The UAE has broadcasted itself as a leading nation in climate change, securing its population needs and other nations' as it increases its global investments in wind, solar energy, and agri-technologies well beyond the Middle East region. These initiatives and the promotional arsenal advocating for the UAE have served to boost Emirati public image and international standing. However, these investments should also be viewed as part of larger strategy to secure domestic stability and the economic wellbeing of the country and its people. Indeed, the environmental geography of the UAE makes it particularly vulnerable to economic disruptions as the UAE relies 90% on food exports. Extreme heat (reaching up to reaching 50°C with 100 percent humidity), very low annual rainfall (78mm), and quasi-absence of arable land (constituting only 0.5% of the landmass) limit Emirati capacity to cultivate and store food¹⁶⁵. Aside from the difficulties of producing food locally, freshwater access in the UAE is scarce and costly to produce. In fact, due to water scarcity, staple crops such as wheat and rice are not commercially cultivated in the UAE due to their water-intensive requirements. Because of these limitations and its desert landscape, securing food and water for the country in the

¹⁶² Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the United Arab Emirates, (2019), "Understanding and Managing the Complex Interactions Between Water, Energy, and Food"

¹⁶³ US-UAE Business Council, (January 2017), "Renewable and Alternative Energy in the UAE: Overview and Opportunities for Business"

¹⁶⁴ US-UAE Business Council, (January 2017), "Renewable and Alternative Energy in the UAE: Overview and Opportunities for Business"

¹⁶⁵ Switzerland Global Enterprise, (2020), "[Food Security in the UAE: AgTech Opportunities](#)"

context of rising environmental challenges and climate change is paramount for the sustainability (both physically and politically) of the UAE. The Emirati leadership has launched a multitude of programs to reduce desertification and develop renewable-powered desalination. The use of treated wastewater will increasingly be employed to limit the depletion of groundwater¹⁶⁶.

In particular, the UAE have turned to agricultural technology to strengthen their food security. Abu Dhabi has invested in local food production, that aims to reduce the quantity of soil and water needed to grow produce. In March 2019, the Abu Dhabi government launched the “AgTech” initiative, led by the Abu Dhabi Investment Office to develop projects regarding algae-based biofuels, indoor farming technology, precision agriculture and ag-robotics¹⁶⁷. For example, Red Sea Farms’ greenhouses use saltwater for evaporative cooling and have managed to reduce the consumption of fresh water to around 30 litres per kilogram of tomatoes¹⁶⁸. Similarly, the Dubai-based Biosaline Agriculture strives to introduce resource efficient, climate-smart crops and technologies that are best suited to regions affected by salinity, water scarcity, and drought¹⁶⁹. Other investments in biotechnologies and agritech include developing crop yields in sandy soils and non-arable land, LED lights managed commercial indoor farms, and genetic phenotyping and organoleptic research¹⁷⁰. These efforts aim to modernize and leverage smarter and more efficient technologies along with more suitable crop variations. Furthermore, the UAE have recently turned to high-tech development, like Big Data, AI, smart city infrastructure, 3D printing and robotics to pioneer its AgTech sector and become a world-leading hub for innovation-driven food security. In this domain, the opening of relations with Israel will continue to drive innovation in the Emirates and will create new opportunities for cooperation, given Israel’s numerous innovative start-ups in the food technology and agricultural technology sectors.

This multivariate strategy and human security approach in public health, clean energy, food and water security have not only changed the landscape of the UAE, diversifying its economy and attracting foreign direct investment and tourism worldwide, but have also reinforced the image of the UAE as a business hub at the forefront of new technologies leading the region in climate change solutions. This human security diplomacy has been critical to enhancing the UAE’s global reputation abroad. It has advanced the UAE’s position as a gateway to the region, as a major stakeholder and contributor to the world, and a responsible state that is engaged, prepared, and responds quickly to pressing transnational challenges. The UAE has leveraged its humanitarian, economic, and scientific diplomacy to support the development and stabilization of the region, exporting its model of development to many other countries around the world.

B) Cultural and Media Diplomacy: Enhancing UAE’s Global Reputation and International Engagement

¹⁶⁶ Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the United Arab Emirates, (2019), “Understanding and Managing the Complex Interactions Between Water, Energy, and Food”

¹⁶⁷ Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the United Arab Emirates, (2019), “Understanding and Managing the Complex Interactions Between Water, Energy, and Food”

¹⁶⁸ Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), “[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)”; The National, (January 10, 2021), “[Coronavirus Latest: UAE Passes Vaccine Milestone With More Than One Million Shots](#)”

¹⁶⁹ Arab Gulf States Institute, (December 2020), “[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)”; The National, (January 10, 2021), “[Coronavirus Latest: UAE Passes Vaccine Milestone With More Than One Million Shots](#)”

¹⁷⁰ Arab Gulf States Institute, “[UAESF 2020: Resilient Economies, Resilient Societies](#)” AGSIW.

UAE-Israel Normalization: National Discourse Promoting Tolerance and Pluralism

The Abraham Accords have reinforced the UAE's soft power in various ways, especially in the eyes of Washington, private sector businessmen, and of the wider international public. Although the agreement has reinforced all three aspects of Emirati state power through increased defense cooperation with Israel, closer bilateral business ties, and renewed Arab-Israeli rapprochement, the Abraham Accords have primarily been used to broadcast the UAE as a tolerant and pluralistic state. Prior and after the signing of the deal, the Emirates significantly leveraged its media arsenal to promote their activities and prepare the public for the announcement. Ultimately, it has enabled the UAE to position itself as both a beacon of religious tolerance and a protector of Palestinian interests.

The Emirati government narrative has primarily posed itself as a new mediator in the Palestinian conflict, claiming credit for stopping a potential violent escalation of the Arab Israeli conflict by suspending Israeli annexation plans of Palestinian territories. However, this campaign has largely failed to convince the Arab street as the deal largely brushes off the Palestinian question and mostly officializes an already existing informal relationship between the two by strengthening their cooperation in various sectors. This narrative nevertheless has been extremely successful in the eyes of the wider international community, in particular in the US. Emirati Arabic media such as Al Bayan, highlight the “positive political and diplomatic efforts made by the UAE to bring Arab peace and re-establish stability in the region.¹⁷¹” Specifically, it discusses the need to seek permanent solutions to this crisis by rethinking previous approaches to peace and that the Abraham Accords is a bold move and realistic and pragmatic policy towards achieving a two-state solution¹⁷². The Emirati government frames the Accords as creating a conducive environment to break the deadlock in the political process and relaunch credible peace negotiations based on international law that involves both parties to the negotiating table¹⁷³. The UAE's humanitarian contributions to Palestine, amounting to \$840 million between 2013-2020, is often praised in media articles, as well as the leadership role of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed who is viewed as critical at spreading a culture of peace and love among the peoples of the world¹⁷⁴. Emirati media narratives have also criticized the actions of Iran, Qatar, and Turkey whose sponsoring of “terrorist organizations” have prevented the resolution of the conflict by exacerbating regional tensions.

Not surprisingly, Qatari and Palestinian media have themselves also criticized the UAE's move, viewing it as a stab-in-the-back and betrayal to the Palestinian cause that will gradually isolate the Palestinians and push their issue further to the sidelines¹⁷⁵. Al-Quds Palestinian newspaper has also shed light on the UAE's promotion efforts to popularize the deal in countries that have been the most impacted by the Arab protests. It denounces notably Emirati propaganda machine that has spent enormous sums on misleading normalization media campaigns publishing non-political content that showcases Israel as a developed country that can help its Palestinian neighbor, portraying an overly cheerful picture away from the Israeli occupation, crimes against Palestinians, and the historical Israeli-Palestinian hostility. Indeed, the Emirati News Media Academy, launched by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai, recently established a qualitative training program called “NextNasDaily” for video filmmaking skills, led by a Palestinian-Israeli content maker. In collaboration with social media companies like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, the program has hired

¹⁷¹ Al Bayan Newspaper, (December 4, 2020), “الإمارات تدعو إلى تكثيف العمل لإنهاء الصراع الفلسطيني الإسرائيلي”

¹⁷² Al Bayan Newspaper, (August 13, 2020), “الإمارات ودعم فلسطين.. دبلوماسية واقعية تصعق المتاجرين بالقضية”

¹⁷³ Al Khaleej, (February 8, 2021), “الإمارات: موقفنا ثابت بدعم دولة فلسطينية على حدود 67”

¹⁷⁴ Al Bayan Newspaper, (August 13, 2020), “الإمارات ودعم فلسطين.. دبلوماسية واقعية تصعق المتاجرين بالقضية”

¹⁷⁵ Al Jazeera Arabic, (September 20, 2020), “اتفاق التطبيع الإماراتي/البحريني مع إسرائيل وتدابيرته على الفلسطينيين”

Palestinian youth to advance Israeli values, promote the Abraham Accords, and softly influence its staff in support of the deal¹⁷⁶. This is only one example of the larger trend signaling the growing information war among Gulf states, notably between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, to control the media narrative, influence local populations, and reinforce their reputation more broadly. In the case of the UAE this media narrative has sought to broadcast the country as an embodiment of the principles of tolerance and coexistence, while starkly denouncing political Islamist groups and their state backers.

Despite this overwhelming media narrative, the emphasis on the Palestinian question serves mostly as to avoid regional and international backlash, especially in countries who have or are experiencing popular protests. Even though the Emirates do not require popular support to implement its policies, the government places much importance on the reputation and perceptions of the UAE both locally and at the state-level, seeking to be viewed as a positive actor that is playing a leading role in the stabilization of the region. This sentiment is also very much viewed in alignment with the political situation in the US. Indeed, the agreement has also enabled the UAE to further distinguish itself from the Saudi approach to regional affairs, which has been a primary target of Democratic disapprobation. Furthermore, considering Biden's criticism of Emirati policies before his inauguration, the desire of being on the good side of the incoming administration was at the forefront of MbZ' strategic calculations¹⁷⁷. MbZ considered this move critical to enhancing ties with the United States, maintaining bipartisan support in Washington, raising the relationship to the "special club" of strategic partners like Israel, and pursuing a diplomacy of influence in Washington. This significantly enhanced the UAE's influence in the US, with Trump as a main lobbyist and supporter of the UAE's foreign policy agenda¹⁷⁸. The privileged access of the Emirati ambassador, Youssef Al Otaiba, to Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner helped persuade the US president to adopt the Emirati narrative. In April 2017, for instance, the Trump administration added the Muslim Brotherhood to the US list of terrorist organizations, which has been perceived as a main regime security threat by the Emirati leadership.

Additionally, the accord has supported the Emirati goal to extend strategic and economic ties with other significant powers. In this regard, the deal can be seen as a hedge against the US shift and perception of decline in the region, with the UAE looking for a new relationship with Israel. In this view, the Abraham Accords were fundamentally transactional in nature. It supported the UAE economic diversification effort, granted the UAE with the long-sought F-35 jet, and helped push forward all of the UAE's strategic visions by accessing a highly skilled labor and collaborating with Israel on matters on technology, science, health, among others. This not only reinforces the image of the UAE as a pluralistic and tolerant state that is willing to work with a Jewish country and leans towards a moderate Islam, but it also perpetuates and reinforces the UAE model as an innovative country who seeks to be at the forefront of future technologies and human security. Taken all together, the Abraham Accords is in line with the new Emirati Soft Power Policy strategy in all its aspects (military, economic, and soft power).

UAE as Regional Mediators? Using the Qatari Playbook of Soft Power Strategy

¹⁷⁶ Al Quds Newspaper, (September 15, 2020), "القصة الكاملة لمحاولة الإمارات إغراق الشباب العربي في مستنقع التطبيع مع (إسرائيل- فيديو هانت)"

¹⁷⁷ Try Ananto Wicaksono, (November 8, 2020), "[What a Joe Biden Win Means for the Abraham Accords](#)," *Geopolitical Monitor*.

¹⁷⁸ Nabeel Khoury, (August 13, 2020), "[Will US-brokered agreement between UAE and Israel be a regional gamechanger?](#)" *Atlantic Council*.

Using the Qatari playbook, the UAE have carved themselves a new role as a peace broker. The UAE's normalization with Israel was previously discussed, but the Emirates have also played a highly visible role alongside their Saudi counterpart in mediating the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia¹⁷⁹. After the culmination of a year of back-channel talks, the two Gulf countries have helped make peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia—a two-decade-old conflict—and improve these countries' relations with Egypt amid the dispute on Nile water supplies. Driven in part by a desire to tap into Ethiopia's growing economy and by a fear that rivals such as Iran and Qatar could gain a foothold in the Horn of Africa, the UAE has increasingly asserted themselves in the region for more than a decade enjoying “unchallenged influence in Eritrea”¹⁸⁰. Yet, the role as a regional mediator in the Horn has traditionally been played by Qatar, who brokered a deal between Eritrea and Djibouti and went as far as sending Qatari observers on the disputed border¹⁸¹. Qatar's display of its constructive role in the region sent signals to other Gulf states of the tremendous impact and influence that Qatar had garnered in terms of regional integration and connectivity across the Red Sea.

The UAE's latest mediation initiative is arguably its most ambitious one. The Emirates brokered negotiations between India and Pakistan, leading the two rivals to respect their 2003 ceasefire agreement, despite heightened tensions between them. The UAE is hoping to facilitate an exchange of ambassadors between New Delhi and Islamabad and restore trade links between the two countries¹⁸². More ambitious still, the UAE aims to secure a viable understanding on Kashmir, which has been the flashpoint for several wars since India and Pakistan became independent from Britain in 1947¹⁸³. Considering the two countries are nuclear armed, the repercussions of a faceoff could be devastating. The latest round of tensions began in 2019 when 40 Indian soldiers were killed in a suicide bomb attack by a Pakistan-based terrorist group in Kashmir. India retaliated by launching air strikes inside Pakistan. Since then, relations have been at their worst, with little progress toward peace and near military confrontation until the Emirati-brokered détente. In many ways, the Emiratis are uniquely qualified to mediate between the two countries. The country has strong trade and commercial ties to both and is home to millions of Indians and Pakistani expatriate workers¹⁸⁴. Furthermore, the South Asian peace initiative plays into other key Emirati foreign policy objectives. The first of it is to restore legitimacy after tarnishing its reputation in the wars in Yemen and Libya. Its footprint has attracted worldwide criticism and skepticism of the UAE's positive role in the region, which in part pushed the Emirati leadership to withdraw from both arenas. The Kashmir issue has been a consistent rallying cry for extremist groups and insurgencies, as well as a source of hostility between India and Pakistan. If the UAE secures a lasting peace on India-Pakistan disputed claims on Jammu and Kashmir, its credentials would be significantly boosted. Second, this reinforces its image as a tolerant and pluralistic country. Indeed, the India-Pakistan conflict is rooted in mistrust between Hindus and Muslims. This engagement is therefore in line with Emirati other efforts to promote religious tolerance and co-existence, particularly between Jews, Catholics, and Muslims. It supports in the same way Emirati fight against Islamist extremists, as Kashmir issue has fueled radical Islamist organizations like Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban. Overall, Emirati increasing mediatory role fits into a clear pattern

¹⁷⁹ International Crisis Group, (November 6, 2018), “[The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa](#)”

¹⁸⁰ Maggie Fick, Alexander Cornwell (August 8, 2019), “[In peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, UAE lends a helping hand.](#)” *Reuters*.

¹⁸¹ International Crisis Group, (September 19, 2019), “[Intra-Gulf States Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact.](#)” Middle East Report No 206

¹⁸² Sudhi Ranjan Sen, (March 22, 2021), “[UAE brokering secret India-Pakistan peace roadmap: Officials.](#)” Bloomberg

¹⁸³ Hussein Ibish, (March 28, 2021), “The UAE Is Seeking a New Role As Peacemaker,” *Bloomberg Opinion*

¹⁸⁴ Hussein Ibish, (March 28, 2021), “The UAE Is Seeking a New Role As Peacemaker,” *Bloomberg Opinion*

seen in the UAE's foreign policy over recent years: an active global engagement through its hard, economic, and soft powers. In this new power projection, the goal of the UAE is clear: surpass its neighbors and become the number one regional power in the Middle East, seeking to distance itself from the Saudis while learning and borrowing from the Qatari model that has accumulated huge successes for the tiny country.

Summary

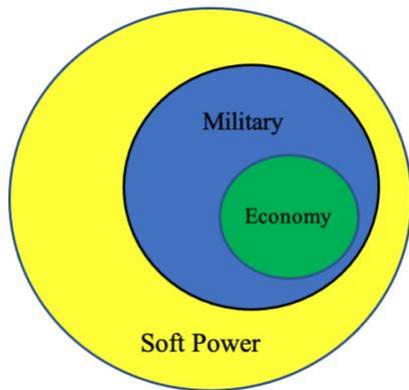
In just the last five years, the Emirates have launched a wide range of initiatives that point to a larger shift in the UAE's priorities, with growing emphasis on soft power. The global pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerabilities of GCC economies. With the instability of oil prices and tourism disruption hitting Dubai hard, the Emirates have launched new strategic visions aimed at diversifying their economy. More focus will be on economic sustainability and human security as climate change has posed serious challenges to the survivability of the UAE and wider Gulf region. Overall, the UAE have engaged in very positive trends, with cooperation on a regional and international level, enhancing its soft power. The Abraham Accords will also reinforce these initiatives, bringing new prospects for cooperation in renewable energy, future technologies, and medical research. Finally, in the quest for international recognition as a global power contributing towards peace and stability, the UAE has learned and borrowed from the Qatari playbook, intensifying tensions between the two amid competition for regional influence. While the UAE have demonstrated a positive and constructive role—engaged in humanitarian aid, an ally against terrorism and climate change, and a peacemaker—the media often whitewashes the UAE, helping the autocratic oil-rich state obscure its darker side. Indeed, while projecting an image of moderation, tolerance, and stability abroad, the UAE has arbitrarily arrested, detained, and tortured any individual critical of the regime at home¹⁸⁵.

IV. Conclusion—Conceptualizing State Power in Concentric Circles: Economic, Military and Soft Tools of Statecraft, A Unique Model?

Although the author has chosen to analyze these different tools of power projections separately, this paper has sought to demonstrate that the Emirates' military strategy and economic diplomacy are closely connected, and they are both intrinsically tied to the quest for soft power. The UAE's port deployment strategy in the Horn of Africa, their cash and gun diplomacy in Yemen and Libya, as well as their humanitarian diplomacy are clear indications that military, economic, and soft power overlap and ultimately, aim to enhance a view of the Emirates as a core strategic partner that is capable, responsible, and has authority and influence. One should note also that these three different power capabilities—hard, economic, and soft power—have all defended different aspects of state power¹⁸⁶. Hard and military power has advanced Emirati credibility, with a focus on state-building and armed forces' development. Economic power is significant in reinforcing Emirati autonomy from and influence on its neighbors and foreign powers with its substantial financial resources. Finally, its soft power has supported Emirati legitimacy worldwide through state-branding efforts on the regional and international front. This overlap in the Emirates' power projections can be conceptualized in concentric circles, as depicted in the picture below. The UAE's economic power has been the rock strategy from which Emirati three-tiered power projections have emerged. Indeed, the Emirates have used their economic wealth to carve themselves the role of what would be better qualified as middle power, financing their economic, military, and public diplomacy efforts to project power. In

¹⁸⁵ For more information, see: Corporate Europe Observatory, (December 17, 2020), "[United Arab Emirates' growing legion of lobbyists support its 'soft superpower' ambitions in Brussels](#)"

¹⁸⁶ Emma Soubrier, (2017), "Evolving Security and Foreign Policies: A Comparative Case Study of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates," In *The Small Gulf States*, by Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli, Routledge.



the same way, by deploying its military capabilities, the Emirates have pursued soft power, and both hard and economic power are all tied to soft power. As such, the tools on which the UAE have relied to project power are blurred together as these three aspects of power have been deployed jointly and essentially for soft power purposes. These three tools of statecraft have increasingly formed a unified national strategy to achieve regime security, regional supremacy, and world recognition. This integrated national strategy has consolidated the role of the UAE's military, economic and soft power conjunctly. Ultimately, these

tools of statecraft are all about solidifying the UAE's status through long-term diplomatic relationships and systems across various sectors. This has helped build a strong and unprecedented position for the UAE on a regional and global scale, in line with MbZ's vision of making the UAE a global example of prestige and excellence. This three-tiered level power projections however have not always been as coherent and integrated as the Emirati government has claimed it to be and as it is now. The integration of this three-level power projection is a very recent phenomenon that has developed only in the last five years. Even today, the UAE's national strategy is not fully integrated as there are still some divergences between a UAE federal-led strategy and an emirate-level one, especially when it comes to differences between Abu Dhabi's and Dubai's decision-making approaches. Finally, these three-tiered power projections are primarily a hedging strategy to diversify the UAE's partnerships and build autonomy and influence in multiple international arenas. Indeed, MbZ does not want to put all his eggs in one basket, instead he has sought to develop a new Emirati national-brand identity based on a well-balanced, multivariate, and ubiquitous Emirati capability.

The study of the UAE's state power has also shown stark similarities with other small Gulf states' security strategies and power projections. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has also projected themselves in a three-tiered approach, launching the coalition in Yemen, sponsoring various groups across the region in a similar manner than the UAE, and pursuing broad modernization reforms to gather soft power and global reputation, especially since the rise of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The reliance on economic power to finance other power projections is assuredly an archetype model for oil rentier states, showing that the UAE's model of power projections is not unique in the region. Qatar is the most illustrative case of this. In many ways, Qatar itself has relied on the same strategy to build itself a strong reputation as a credible and legitimate ally both regionally and internationally. In fact, Qatar has the same economic and soft power pillar in its power projections, however it is in the second pillar, military power, that Qatar seems to slightly differ from its Emirati neighbor. Indeed, Qatar's military strategy has primarily relied on the US and France for security guarantees, and has not, like the UAE, built its own hard power capabilities. Primarily, Qatar's military power projection has been tied to its role as a regional mediator and as a sponsor for Islamist armed groups and local allies throughout the Middle East and Africa. This last point is particularly interesting because in the last year the UAE has retrenched militarily from various arenas, reducing its hard power capability projection but still maintaining significant influence through a cash and gun diplomacy that sponsors local allies and proxy militias. The UAE has also attempted to replace Qatar as a new regional mediator, which means that Emirati and Qatari military power projections, as they have evolved today, are almost indistinguishable. It seems that the first and second level of power projections (military and economic power) can change

and adjust depending on the needs of the state, as the UAE and Qatar have done. However, the third-level soft power projection cannot be interchanged as Emirati and Qatari power projections are fundamentally based on their state-brand image and if they lose their influence or international reputation, they will revert to being small states, losing their autonomy and influence. This also gives these states more room to maneuver as they can change gears relying more on hard or economic power to project soft power depending on the regional context and their interests.

To conclude, these trends indicate that the state power theory of concentric circles is compatible across different cases and can therefore be applied to many of the Gulf Arab states, like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. If this research is continued in a post-doctoral study, this hypothesis will need to be further examined, particularly whether this theory is specific to small rentier Gulf states, or whether this conceptualization of state power can be applied to other countries in other regions. Additionally, it would be interesting to review whether the literature provides more information on this concept of a ‘multifaceted statecraft’.