

## **UAE's Regional Wars**

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The Arab Spring was a turning point for the future of many nations in the region. Among other things, it has set a question of legitimacy for the Gulf monarchs and threatened their autocratic rulers. Although the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was considered one of the vulnerable states, its rentier status involving a social contract between the rulers and the ruled gave their emirs a sort of legitimacy as leaders. Abu Dhabi's emirs chose to confront the menace by pushing to a "counter-revolution" policy interfering in the internal affairs of other states. Its wealthy status as an oil producer and exporter country, and its presence in the GCC, in addition to its alliance with USA gave the small emirate leverage to advance its foreign policy by interfering in the Libyan war, showing its muscles in the Yemeni war and maintaining its strategic alliance with Egypt. Besides its counter-revolution policy fearing the emergence of "political Islam" to power, the Emirate faces a continuing challenge in its foreign policy represented by Iran's occupation of three UAE islands in the Arabian Gulf: Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and the increasing regional threat posed by this Shiite state.

### **Domestic Challenge**

The rise of "political Islam" to power in Egypt and Tunisia following the Arab spring had feared the Emirates. The UAE leadership was always threatened by "Al Islah" party the Emirati branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Christopher Davidson stated in his book, "After the Sheikhs" that up until 2003 senior members of the Abu Dhabi ruling family were holding meetings with Brotherhood representatives, trying to establish a set of compromises; however, UAE past concessions granted to the Muslim Brotherhood were reversed after Al Qaeda violent campaign in KSA, with hundreds of teachers, academics and ministry employees being fired in 2006 from their jobs on the ground of Islamist affiliations<sup>1</sup>. In one of the Wiki leaks cables, Abu Dhabi's crown prince Mohammad Bin Zayed assumingly told US officials that he was against democratic reforms and in case there would be an election in Dubai tomorrow, the Muslim brotherhood would take over. Moreover, a report published by the "Middle East Eye" talked about an attempt coup by a senior prince Cheikh Hamdan Bin Zayed in collaboration with Al Ishah organization in Emirates to overthrow the country's leaders and transform the autocratic Gulf state into a constitutional monarchy. The Emirati leaders prevented this coup plot and a large number of

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, C. (2013). *After the Sheikhs*. p.194.

Islah activists were arrested and jailed.<sup>2</sup> In July 2013, 68 Islamists were jailed after being accused of a plot to overthrow the UAE's government. In January 2014, a court in Abu Dhabi convicted 30 people over links to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood party a crime in the UAE laws<sup>3</sup>

## **UAE's Wars**

The UAE has been waging its propaganda war against Muslim Brotherhood (MB) on multiple levels. Its media campaign also targeted Qatar as a major supporter for MB and its branches in different countries. The UAE supported the establishment of the Muslim Council of Elders (MCE) to counter Sheikh Qaradawi's International Union of Muslim Scholars as well as Qatar's support for political change in the Middle East and North Africa. This council promotes a tolerant Muslim teachings and a tradition of obedience to the ruler rather than an activist Salafism that intends to return the Muslim world to the time of Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, the Emirates backed Human Rights groups to distort the image of Qatar and to polish its own. These groups are usually based in Norway and France and the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD) based in Oslo is considered a good example. In addition, UAE tied up with a lobbying firm, "Camstoll Group" to promote anti-Qatar stories in American media.<sup>4</sup> A leaked document obtained by Daily Mail reveals that the UAE rulers signed a contract with London political lobbying firm Quiller Consultants to pursue their goal in advocating against Qatar and the MB.<sup>4</sup> UAE leadership role didn't only focus on the lobbying firms in UK, but used its soft power in order to pressure London not to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood. According to the Guardian, "The United Arab Emirates threatened to block billion-pound arms deals with the UK, stop inward investment and intelligence cooperation if David Cameron did not act against the Muslim Brotherhood."<sup>5</sup>

UAE and Egypt fearing the emergence of an Islamic rule in Libya started a proxy war against Islamists supported by Turkey and Qatar. They supported General Haftar in a bid to establish his power all over the Libyan provinces by supplying him with military aids and intelligence

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<sup>2</sup> Donaghy, R. (2015). In the United Arab Emirates, a palace coup foiled. *Middle East Eye*.

<sup>3</sup> UAE arrests: 41 accused of plotting 'caliphate'. (2015). *BBC News*.

<sup>4</sup> Rose, D. (2015). Cameron and the Arab Sheiks' web of influence that infiltrated Britain: The shadowy nexus of PM's cronies that secretly lobbied for Middle East paymasters. *Mail Online*.

<sup>5</sup> Ramesh, R. (2015). UAE told UK: crack down on Muslim Brotherhood or lose arms deals. *The Guardian*.

backing. In an interview to BBC, General Khalifa Haftar confirmed the support provided to him by UAE and Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Intelligence and news reports stated that Abu Dhabi and Cairo launched airstrikes against the Islamists militias in the Libyan Capital in the end of August 2014 to strengthen Haftar's position.<sup>7</sup> On the political level, the job offer to Bernardino León, the UN peace mediator in Libyan civil war and a former Spanish foreign minister, as a director general of UAE's diplomatic academy a state-backed think tank to promote the UAE's foreign policy and strategic relations and train its diplomats raised the question of his neutrality during his mediation role in the Libyan civil war. This appointment may indicate his prejudice to the UAE supported General Haftar during the peace negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

In Egypt, the rises of Muslim Brotherhood to power in addition to the election of Muhammad Mursi were considered a major threat to the counter-revolutionary states. For this reason, Abu Dhabi, alongside with its gulf allies supported the military coup executed by General Abdel Fatah Sisi on the 3rd of July 2013. Following the coup, UAE, KSA and Kuwait acknowledged General Sisi as the legitimate president of Egypt and promised to increase their support to Egypt. Their words were put into action by pledging a \$12bn (£7.7bn) aid to the Egyptian government.<sup>9</sup> In 2014, KSA and UAE ensured more financial aid to boost Egypt's economy and support the incoming government of ex-Field Marshal Abdulfattah El-Sisi. Abu Dhabi contributed \$4.9bn to support Egypt's economy seeking to help Sisi's government and preventing MB from re-building their political strength on the back of a weak economy.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the aids were not only focused to direct financial funds but also seeking more investments in the Egyptian economy. The investment projects include 50,016 houses for low incomes Egyptians families in addition to schools and well equipped clinics. Besides, UAE promised to build four new bridges in the most condensed areas in major Egyptian centers.<sup>11</sup> Prince Mohammad Bin Zayed also shared a common enemy with the Egyptian regime represented by the Muslim Brotherhood's affiliated group Hamas listed as a terrorist organization in UAE. Abu Dhabi's role in Gaza can be directly linked to Sheikh Abdullah's Bin Zayed advisor, Mohammad Dahlan, a former Fatah member

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<sup>6</sup> Libya's Haftar confirms military support for Operation Dignity from Egypt and UAE. *Middle East Eye*.

<sup>7</sup> Gearan, A. (2014). Egypt and UAE strike Islamist militias in Libya. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>8</sup> Ramesh, R. (2015). UN Libya envoy accepts £1,000-a-day job from backer of one side in civil war. *The Guardian*.

<sup>9</sup> Hearst, D. (2015). Why Saudi Arabia is taking a risk by backing the Egyptian coup. *The Guardian*.

<sup>10</sup> Critchlow, A. (2014). Saudi and UAE ready \$20bn boost for Egypt's El-Sisi. *The Telegraph*.

<sup>11</sup> Almezal, M. (2015). UAE delivers hundreds of development projects in Egypt. *Gulf News*.

expelled from the party and Gaza and now lives in the UAE. Many reports mentioned that the Emirati leadership alongside Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel sharing the same enemy “ Hamas” were working together in 2014’s war on Gaza. Israel’s Channel 2 claimed according to local Arabic daily (Al Sharq) disclosed details of secret discussions between the UAE’s foreign minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman, in Paris at the end of June 2014. The news information revealed that Al Nahyan was willing to fund Israeli’s Gaza offensive to destroy Hamas since it had close links to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> A retired Egyptian General Samir Hassan has revealed details of an Egypt-UAE conspiracy to overthrow the Hamas-led government in Gaza. He proclaimed that Al-Sisi had met with Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed and Mohammed Dahlan and a total of \$750 million has been allocated for the plot.<sup>13</sup>

Since the Yemen is positioned in the Arab Gulf, its political developments have an important interest to the GCC countries. The Yemeni uprising boosted the positioning of the Muslim brotherhood backed parties into power. Al Islah party, affiliated by MB’s ideology, became a major player in the government that succeeded the Yemeni uprising in 2011. As its counter-revolution strategy to restore dictator generals as leaders for the Arab states, Abu Dhabi played a major role in helping Ahmad Saleh, son of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, to build an alliance with the Houthis in a bid to destroy Al Islah bases in Yemen and an attempt to return to power.<sup>14</sup> MEE’s sources claimed that a secret Emirati delegation met in August 2014 Saleh along with two Houthi leaders, Saleh Habri and Muhammad Mouftah in Yemen. UAE aimed to use Saleh’s connections among tribal leaders and army chiefs to allow the Houthis seize for the North Yemeni regions and to control Al Islah party branches and the “Iman University” linked to Abdul Majid Zandani and the MB. This operation was totally implemented; however the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia changed the alliances in Yemen and lately led to the coalition military intervention in Yemen against Houthis and Saleh.<sup>15</sup> The emerging threat of the

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon, J. (2014). United Arab Emirates Secretly Offers Funding for Israel’s Operation Protective Edge to Defeat Hamas. *Dr. Rich Swier*.

<sup>13</sup> Egypt and UAE plot to topple Hamas. (2015). *Middle East Monitor*.

<sup>14</sup> Hearst, D. (2014). Was the UAE behind the Houthi takeover of Sana’a?. *Middle East Eye*.

<sup>15</sup> Almuselmi, F. (2015). Tadahroj Al Yemen Ila AlJahim ... Safakat "Saleh" w "Hadi" Alseriya: Alsaytara Aala Sanaa. *New Khaleej*. (Yemen’s rolling to hell.. the secret agreement between “Saleh and Hadi: The Control over Sanaa)

expansionist Iran in the Gulf and the Saudi Kingdom reshuffle switched UAE's priorities between fighting the political Islam movements in Yemen into fighting the Iranian expansion.

In Syria, UAE as part of the GCC took a position against Bashar El Assad and asked him to leave his presidential position. On the other hand, many reports revealed that the Emirati leadership is covertly supporting Al Assad. After the Syrian revolution, Emirates hosted Bashar al-Assad family in Dubai with a number of key members of his regime. Politically, the New York Times revealed that UAE companies are providing Bashar Assad's regime with its needs of oil, especially for jet fuel.<sup>16</sup> Wiki leaks documents also noted that Mohammed bin Zayed stated to John Kerry, US Secretary of State that the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad is the best option for Syria. Emirates are also helping the Syrian businessmen to evade US sanctions, with more than \$ 22 billion smuggled from Moscow to Abu Dhabi, after the imposition of international sanctions on the Syrian regime. The prominent Syrian businessman and cousin of Syrian President, Rami Makhlouf, owns companies and accounts worth hundreds of millions of dollars in the UAE.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of the Arab Spring in Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Tunisia, and Libya may be the biggest challenge that Abu Dhabi's leadership is facing since UAE's independence in 1970.

### **The Iranian Threat**

Emirati officials consistently declare that Tehran poses the greatest threat to their national security in private and increasingly even public statements. As Anwar Gargash current minister of state for foreign affairs, noted more than a decade ago, "Despite the great shift from monarchic to a revolutionary republican system, Iran's hegemonic goals in the area have neither shifted nor changed."<sup>18</sup>

The underlying essential participation of UAE in the decisive storm campaign in Yemen was to prevent the worst-case scenario of Iran using this failed state to destabilize Saudi Arabia's and the Gulf Security. On the 5th of September 2015, a tragic event in Marib occurred, when the UAE forces lost 46 soldiers in a single day. A month later, UAE also confirmed the loss of four

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<sup>16</sup> Davis, J. (2014). U.S. Penalizes Companies for Providing Fuel to Syrian Forces. *The New York Times*.

<sup>17</sup> Houroub Al Imarat Al Kharijiya. (2015). *Gulf Studies*.

<sup>18</sup> Sadjadpour, K. (2011). The Battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War. *The Carnegie Papers*.

more soldiers in an attack in Aden.<sup>19</sup> Analysts were posing a question about the reason why would a small emirate wage a war in Yemen against the Houthis and pay a heavy price although they aided the Zaydi militias and Ali Abdullah Saleh few months earlier? The death of King Abdullah and the ascendance of King Salman marked a shift in the Saudi Arabia's foreign policy priorities. During the ascendance of King Salman to power, the Houthis kept on advancing towards Aden and Bab El Mandeb straight. Saudi Arabia, alongside several states, announced the decisive storm to support forces loyal to Yemen's President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and help them retake full control of the country. This Saudi shift closed Abu Dhabi's space for maneuvering and obliged it to strongly participate in this war. On August 3 2015, a large force of Southern resistance fighters backed by the coalition with the deployment of 1500 Emirati personnel seized control of Aden base. The UAE army, successfully aiding in liberating Aden and other southern areas, has proven to be one of the Gulf's most effective military forces, said Michael Stephens, research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, UAE showed many signs in their willingness to continue their military role in Yemen. Stratfor has detected an Emirati naval presence in the Eritrean port of Assab and the pan-Latin American channel TeleSUR reported that up to 800 Colombians will "take up frontline positions" in the southern port city of Aden, which is currently the scene of a power battle between coalition forces and rival militant factions separately linked to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>21</sup> UAE had a long history in recruiting Colombians for military and security usage.<sup>22</sup> Dr Anwar Gargash, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs statement summarized the reason for UAE's Yemen intervention in few words: "The security of the Gulf cannot be broken, and the security of Yemen is part of this security."<sup>23</sup> Yemen is considered as the backyard of Saudi Arabia. Sanaa's fall in the Iranian hands will not only pose a shock to the Saudi's security but also UAE. Abu Dhabi's political leaders are sending with the Saudis a message to their number strongest ally USA that they are capable to fight without their direct support. This message is essential in a period of US disengagement from the region after Obama's administration signature of a nuclear deal with Iran. Al Islah role in liberating Yemen in addition to the peace

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<sup>19</sup> Abdullah, A. (2015). Why the UAE is fighting in Yemen. *Gulf News*.

<sup>20</sup> McLoughlin, P. (2015). The Yemen war and the UAE's charm offensive. *Al-Araby*.

<sup>21</sup> The Emirati Navy Arrives in Eritrea. (2015). *EastAFRO.com*.

<sup>22</sup> Donaghy, R. (2015). Hundreds of Colombian mercenaries to fight for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. *Middle East Eye*.

<sup>23</sup> Salem, O. (2015). The National. *UAE military intervention in Yemen was 'inevitable'*.

negotiations between the different Yemeni parties which will discuss the status of Saleh may lead to disputes between the Gulf allies.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Abu Dhabi emirs' skeptical role in supporting the Southern Yemeni separates and the rise of AQAP in southern Yemen may challenge its relation with KSA and make their mission in Yemen more difficult.

## **Conclusion**

After discussing UAE's role in the different Arabian countries we can conclude the following:

First, the Arab Spring became an existential threat for Abu Dhabi's leadership. Emirates, along other Arab monarchies, survived the Arab Spring storm by countering the revolutions. Al Zayed emirs absorbed the internal danger by calming the citizens in providing them with benefits or very limited reforms. Externally, they launched several soft wars previously to diminish the effect of the Arab Spring.

Second, Political Islam basically represented by the Muslim Brotherhood remained a threat for the Emirate. Abu Dhabi will keep on paying for loyalties (research centers, human rights agencies, and PR institutions) in order to lobby against Qatar as a main supporter for MB in the region.

Third, although UAE is trying to build an offensive and somehow an independent foreign policy, it remains a small country, geographically in Iran's line of sight and dependent on outside partners for its security mainly USA. Theoretically, Abu Dhabi will work to further progress on GCC's integration aiming for a collective security.

Fourth, UAE's interventions in Yemen and previously in Bahrain were in the aim to protect the collective gulf security threatened by Iran. Although UAE is in a fierce war against the political Islam, it has no choice but to stand by Saudi Arabia in its time of need. Yemen was the place to draw the line to Iran by the GCC. Given that KSA is the core state in the Gulf; its instability will cause a negative domino effect on all GCC countries including the United Arab Emirates.

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<sup>24</sup> Abdlsalam, M. (2015). Allmarat Kalika Mn Tatawourat Al Yemen w Tadaam Enfisal Alshamal aan AlJanoub. *Arabi* 21. (UAE is worried about the Yemeni's crisis and supports the Southern and Northern separation)



Fifth, UAE will have to balance its challenges between countering the political Islam and facing the Iranian threat. After the Saudis neutralized their relations with some of the Muslim Brotherhood factions in the region, the Kingdom-Emirate relations may witness a challenge especially in planning the future of political solutions in Yemen and Syria.