

The UAE Under Attack: A Foreign Policy Test

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January 2022 was an exceptional month in Abu Dhabi's history. For the first time, this peaceful city suffered casualties as a result of a direct airstrike on two strategic sites – a petroleum storage site and Abu Dhabi International Airport.¹ The January 17 attacks, associated with the Houthis in Yemen, were followed by several failed attempts to attack the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) capital again. After the initial shock, the UAE launched an international campaign, calling for a multinational response.² And indeed, a chain of Arab leaders arrived in Abu Dhabi through the same airport that was attacked just a few days earlier.³ The goal of their visit was clear – to express their full support and affirm their countries' solidarity with the UAE, its leaders, and its people. For the UAE, these high-level visitors reinforced the Emirati message that it was not alone on this front. The expressions of solidarity with the Emiratis transcended the region - leaders from around the world reached out to the Emirati leaders with messages of support and through other diplomatic channels.

Under Mohamed bin Zayed ("MbZ") Al Nahyan's leadership, the UAE has become a central and influential player in the region. His late father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, laid the foundations for the UAE's stability and influence through his

¹ The UAE denied a Houthi-claimed drone attack on Abu Dhabi's international airport in 2018 - Dion Nissenbaum and Benoit Faucon, "[Houthis Fired Drones and Missiles in Abu Dhabi Attack, Investigation Finds](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2022.

² Mohamed Hatem and Bashir Hassan, "[Breaking: UAE Calls for UN Security Council Meeting on Houthi Terrorist Attacks in Abu Dhabi](#)," *WAM - Emirates News Agency*, January 18, 2022.

³ "[Mohamed Bin Zayed Receives President Sisi upon His Arrival to the UAE](#)," [Arabic], *Al-Khaleej*, January 26, 2022; "[Mohamed Bin Zayed Receives the King of Bahrain and Discusses with Him Brotherly Relations and Developments in the Region](#)," [Arabic], *Al-Ittihad*, January 25, 2022.

nation-building and state-building methods. Sheikh Zayed's foreign policy approach was based on friendship with regional countries and "bandwagoning" to avoid political or military clashes with potential powerful opponents.⁴ Since the 2000s, Sheikh Mohamed has led the country to a more pivotal position by investing his efforts on the UAE's regional and international relations. In contrast to his father, MbZ shaped his foreign policy with a proactive, avantgarde, and sometime aggressive line. Abu Dhabi's participation in the wars in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan is only one aspect of the country's focus on projecting power abroad. Another aspect of MbZ's leadership has been spearheading peace processes. The UAE brokered talks between Ethiopia and Eritrea,⁵ the Taliban and the US,⁶ and initiated the Abraham Accords with Israel,⁷ which are just three examples of the UAE's efforts to generate influence through soft power as well.

The balance between hard and soft power in the UAE's foreign policy has significantly changed twice over the last decade. When the Arab Spring erupted in 2010-2011, the UAE was deeply invested in soft power ventures, from the DP (Dubai Port) World's global expansion to sponsoring prestigious sports clubs and promoting the Emirates brand in western Europe, as well as granting generous aid packages to Arab countries and promoting its vast humanitarian aid missions worldwide.⁸ Thus, the UAE's decision to intervene in the wars in Syria (2014), Libya (2014), and Yemen (2015) was a turning point in the UAE's approach to power projection. The second shift in how the UAE used power began in the summer of 2019 when the UAE decided to withdraw its forces from Yemen and commence negotiations with Iran. In the summer of 2020, the UAE announced the Abraham Accords, and a few months later it reconciled with Qatar and later Turkey, after years of competition and hostility. Thus, the UAE has seemingly restored its inclination to soft power in the last two years, yet, this time, from a stronger position. The Emirati foreign policy expert

⁴ Dogan-Akkas defines the term *bandwagoning* as "a pragmatic alignment with the leading hegemon of the region – in other words, the source of danger." Betul Dogan-Akkas, "The UAE's Foreign Policymaking in Yemen: From Bandwagoning to Buck-Passing," *Third World Quarterly*, 42.4 (2021), 717–35.

⁵ Maggie Fick and Alexander Cornwell, "[In Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, UAE Lends a Helping Hand](#)," *Reuters*, August 8, 2018.

⁶ Brett Samuels, "[Taliban Meeting US Representatives in UAE on Monday](#)," *The Hill*, December 17, 2018.

⁷ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, "[The Two Pillars of the Abraham Accords](#)," *Middle East Institute*, August 12, 2021.

⁸ Osman Antwi-Boateng and Amira Ali Alhashmi, "The Emergence of the United Arab Emirates as a Global Soft Power: Current Strategies and Future Challenges," *Economic and Political Studies*, 2021, 1–20.

Ebtesam Al-Ketbi associates the motivation to act in both directions with the regional vacuum created by the US. The Biden administration's policy in the Middle East leans on the expectation that regional players will take the lead in addressing regional challenges.⁹

Traditional International Relations (IR) literature categorizes small states with small populations like the UAE as marginal powers within both regional and global systems.¹⁰ According to this approach, small states will be more focused on overcoming their relative weakness at the expense of their attention to foreign relations. These arguments have been challenged by the cases of Qatar and the UAE. For the last two decades, these two small states have demonstrated their ability to use their power to great effect in both the international and regional systems, despite their size.¹¹

On the hard power axis, the UAE compensated for its small size by developing a modern military with well-trained and patriotic combat troops, local proxies, and foreign mercenaries. On the soft power axis, the UAE overcame its smallness by cultivating networks of local and regional alliances that it uses during military campaigns, and which serve as corresponding political-diplomatic channels for every mission. In Yemen, for instance, the UAE created partnerships with the local West Coast Forces and the Giants Brigades (Brigades al-ʿAmalaqah). In addition, it initiated a power-sharing government in Yemen in 2019 – a move that Saudi Arabia and other coalition members backed.¹² The UAE's foreign policy has matured from 2011 to 2021. Instead of leveraging its economic power alone, as it did at the beginning of the

⁹ Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, *The UAE Power-Building Model and Foreign Policy Shifts* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Policy Center, March 21, 2021).

¹⁰ Michael I Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1981); Tom Crowards, "Defining the Category of "Small" States," *Journal of International Development*, 14.2 (2002), 143–79.

¹¹ Crystal A Ennis, "Reading Entrepreneurial Power in Small Gulf States: Qatar and the UAE," *International Journal*, 73.4 (2018), 573–95; Rory Miller and Harry Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," *International Politics*, 57.1 (2020), 1–20; Ahmed M Abozaid, "The Rise of Small States in the Arabian Gulf: The Case of UAE and Qatar: A Historical Sociology Perspective," *Journal of Rising Powers and Global Governance Volume*, 1.2 (2020), 7–41; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring," Discussion Paper, Durham University, 2012.

¹² Eleonora Ardemagni and Federica Saini Fasanotti, "[The UAE in Libya and Yemen: Different Tactics, One Goal](#)," *ISPI (Italian Institute for International Political Studies)*, July 31, 2020.

previous decade, the UAE now acts to promote diplomatic solutions for complicated regional challenges, using its prestige and MbZ's ambitious style as part of its diplomatic toolbox. The Abraham Accords with Israel, and rapprochement with Iran, Qatar, and Turkey demonstrate the proactive, flexible, pragmatic, and trailblazing line that the UAE uses to enhance its influence. A significant sign of the UAE's leadership position today lies in its ability to sweep other GCC states along in the wake of its pioneering moves, such as the Abraham Accords (Bahrain fully followed and Saudi Arabia passively accepted) and the Saudi engagement with Iran that followed the UAE's reconciliation with Tehran.

The recent Houthi attacks on Abu Dhabi are a reminder that the UAE will continue to need its hard power, but it will be used with more restraint and complemented with soft power. Instead of maintaining a large Emirati force on the ground, the UAE is projecting its influence in Yemen through its support for local forces fighting the Houthis,¹³ and by reshaping Yemen's political system with its allies in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ Apparently, though, when the Emirati-backed forces gained control over strategic oil fields and infrastructures in Shabwah and Marib, it was one-step too much for the Houthis.¹⁵ In response, the Houthis began targeting Abu Dhabi. In the past, the UAE had suffered casualties in Yemen and absorbed minor damage against its ships; the January attacks were the first significant instance of casualties on the Emirati homefront as a result of its involvement in Yemen. The nature of the attacks was understood by the Emirati leadership as a direct threat to its sovereignty.

The attacks on Abu Dhabi are a test for Emirati foreign policy. UAE foreign policy employs a combination of soft and hard power to proactively prevent conflict at home, whereas in this case, the UAE is forced to react to these Houthi attacks within its borders.¹⁶ In addition, the Emirati decision-makers are now at a crossroads. By attacking Houthi and perhaps Iranian targets in response, the UAE will most likely break from its policy of reconciliation initiated more than two years ago. Moreover, it might expose itself to further escalation on multiple fronts. On the other hand, enhancing its dialogue with Iran to avoid further confrontation could be perceived as weakness, and it may send the wrong message to sub-state actors, like the Houthis or

¹³ The UAE's support is expressed by supplying weapons, training, logistical assistance, salaries, military advisers, etc.

¹⁴ Ibrahim Jalal, "[The UAE May Have Withdrawn from Yemen, but Its Influence Remains Strong](#)," *Middle East Institute*, February 25, 2020.

¹⁵ Saeed Al-Batati, "[After Liberating Shabwa Province, Government Forces Seize Control of New Areas in Marib](#)," *Arab News*, January 11, 2022.

¹⁶ Yoel Guzansky, "The United Arab Emirates: Proactive in War and Peace," *INSS Insights*, 1370 (2020).

the Muslim Brotherhood. The Emirati foreign policy is known for its well-planned and forward-looking character. The Houthi attacks on the Emirati capital have forced Abu Dhabi to consider breaking from its foreign policy pattern of proactive preventative security.

Looking at the bigger picture, the UAE has maintained its ranking as the most stable country in the Middle East since 2014,¹⁷ according to the Fragile States Index. In 2021, the UAE was ranked 151st out of 179 countries.¹⁸ Despite its relatively small size and its low proportion of citizens to foreign nationals, the UAE continued to demonstrate the capability to project power beyond its borders. While defining the UAE as a regional power or as a hegemon may be subject to different interpretations, the country has proven its ability to achieve much more than one would expect based on the size of its territory and citizen population.

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¹⁷ And one of the three most stable Arab counties since 2006, competing with Oman and Qatar.

¹⁸ Fragile State Index, "[Country Dashboard - United Arab Emirates](#)," *The Fund for Peace*, 2022.