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Beyond Fraternity: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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In honor of the 86th Saudi National Day in September, the Vice President of the United Arab Emirates and ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum announced that Al-Sufouh Street, one of Dubai's major thoroughfares, would be changed to "King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud Street."¹ This symbolic gesture, one that has become a ritual in recent years, illustrates the growing political affinity and military coordination between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These growing ties are emerging during a period of rapid change for the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States since the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals.²

For decades, the relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE have had a clear dynamic: paternal oversight of the smaller, more modern and relatively less conservative upstart by the larger, longer established, and more devout. Due in part to a history of mistrust and competition between the two ruling families - Al Nahyan and Al Sa'ud - relations have not always been smooth, with the UAE repeatedly asserting its independence in an attempt to garner more respect and be seen as an equal rather than a junior partner. Nevertheless, since 2011, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been actively collaborating on regional security issues. Both personal dynamics and broad regional developments have contributed to this partnership. As a result of the growing cooperation, the nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE appears to be moving from "paternal" to "fraternal."³

This change can be partly attributed to a generational shift in operational leadership in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman, the king's 31-year old son, is playing an outsized role in Saudi policy-making. The Deputy Supreme Commander of the

UAE's military is 55-year old Mohammed bin Zayed, who plays an increasingly central role in Emirati decision making.⁴ These two men represent a new generation of leadership in their countries, and appear to have established a close working relationship.

Nevertheless, increased Saudi-Emirati cooperation predates King Salman and Prince Mohammad coming to power in Saudi Arabia in January 2015. The shift towards greater Saudi-UAE cooperation originated in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals. It was rooted in the shared perception that the U.S., under President Barack Obama, was pursuing a more passive military policy in the Gulf; that Iran was increasingly "meddling" in the internal affairs of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen; and that radical Sunni Islamism presented a domestic threat to the legitimacy of the ruling families in both countries.

The Arab Spring led to greater military collaboration between the UAE and Saudi Arabia: their forces deployed together under a joint command in Bahrain in 2011 to provide support to the ruling Al Khalifa family, which was facing a popular uprising; they also supported many of the same rebel groups in the Syrian and Libyan wars; and, they have combined their military efforts in Yemen. In many of these instances, their collaboration extended far beyond the agreements called for by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The Peninsula Shield Force, the joint military force of the GCC established in 1984, was ineffective and essentially untested until the 2011 intervention in Bahrain, where forces were dispatched "to maintain order and security."⁵ Approximately 1,000 Saudi troops and 500 Emirati police officers formed the majority of the force. This was the first public military collaboration between the two states, and was seen as a "crucial milestone for military cooperation."⁶

In 2013, the Gulf Academy for Strategic and Security Studies, a defense think-tank charged with the development of a regional security doctrine, was established, with headquarters in Abu Dhabi,⁷ as was a GCC police command, referred to as GCC-POL, with the aim of developing an Interpol like force. The Saudi decision to support the UAE's hosting of both bodies was a clear attempt to temper concerns raised during ongoing parallel negotiations for a GCC monetary union and address the "tremendous worry that Saudi Arabia will dominate the body."⁸ Moreover, the two countries also expressed their commitment to establishing a combined military taskforce that was described as a "Gulf NATO."⁹ Pledging a combined 100,000 soldiers to the initiative, they hoped that the force would enable the GCC to be included in global talks with Iran, from which the group has been historically excluded. Thus far, these pledges and commitments remain on paper.

While institutional progress may be slow, joint Saudi-UAE military operations are taking place, particularly in Yemen, albeit with mixed results. The operation began in March 2015 with the aim of rolling back gains made by the Houthi rebels and restoring control to the internationally recognized Hadi government that had been pushed out of power. The broader Saudi goal was to send a message to Iran that it would not be allowed to establish a military presence on Saudi Arabia's southern border.

The Saudis reportedly deployed 150,000 troops, while the Emiratis have not disclosed the size of their deployment in Yemen.¹⁰ Despite the joint effort, the military effectiveness of the Saudi and Emirati forces has been uneven at best.¹¹ The relationship was tested when 45 Emirati military personnel were killed in a single rocket attack in September 2015.¹² This was the largest single deadly attack on Emirati soldiers ever to take place. In June 2016, the UAE announced the withdrawal of its forces from Yemen.¹³ Nevertheless, there were reports that UAE forces were continuing to fight on the ground in southern Yemen in August 2016.¹⁴

Saudi Arabia has also supported the UAE's active intervention in Libya. While Qatar has backed Islamist rebel groups in Libya, the UAE has supported the more secular groups supporting the elected government in order to prevent groups aligned with either the Muslim Brotherhood or the Islamic State (IS) from seizing power. In August 2014 the UAE launched airstrikes on rebel targets in Tripoli,¹⁵ which was the first time the UAE had undertaken a military operation without formal international approval. Beyond such direct action, the UAE is reported to have violated a UN arms embargo¹⁶ on arms supplies to rival combatants in the Libyan conflict, and media reports even claim that the UAE attempted to influence UN mediation efforts through a program of bribery aimed at high level officials.¹⁷ The UAE's multidimensional involvement in Libya has received strong political backing and diplomatic support from Saudi Arabia, owing to their shared interests in preventing an Islamist government in Libya and limiting Qatar's regional influence. This was made most clear through the establishment of a joint Saudi-UAE high-level committee focused on coordinating regional efforts, with Libya said to be "topping the agenda."¹⁸

Despite the lack of any decisive military victories the Saudis and Emiratis do not seem discouraged,¹⁹ and even floated the idea of sending their troops into Syria in February 2016. They both issued public statements within days of each other that contained similar language.²⁰

Increasing Saudi-UAE defense cooperation is unlikely to alter the military balance in the Gulf in the short-term. Nevertheless, it is an important political development for several reasons. First, it indicates that there is a new generation of leadership in Saudi Arabia and the UAE that feels confident enough to use military force to project power beyond their borders and advance their interests. Second, the strong working relationship between Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Emirati Prince Mohammed bin Zayed has contributed to the deepening of the two states' military coordination in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Since its independence in 1971, the UAE's relations with Saudi Arabia were plagued by mistrust that was the product of a long history of conflict during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well the legacy of mutual suspicion that was rooted in a longstanding territorial dispute over the Buraimi Oasis. Nevertheless, in recent years, a shared threat perception and a new generation of leadership have led the two states to build a stronger foundation for future coordination and collaboration.

More broadly, will Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to expand their partnership and policy coordination independent of the GCC, or will they attempt to use their combined weight to create more effective multilateral institutions within the GCC framework? The very question exposes the GCC's institutional weakness. As long as unanimity, rather than a majority, is required in GCC voting on important matters (Articles 9 and 13 of the Charter),²¹ the Saudi-UAE partnership will likely work in parallel to, rather than through, the GCC.²²

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