

# The strategic extension of the United Arab Emirates: Determinants, objectives and some implications for the Horn of Africa

By Jamal MACHROUH

## I Summary

Increasingly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) strengthens its position within the Arab region that is of strong geopolitical attributes. There has never been as much diplomatic and military activism in the UAE's history as in the last decade. Such a situation raises major questions about the nature and the impact of the new strategic extension of the country. This article aims at discussing the determinants and objectives of the new strategic positioning of the UAE. A special focus will be given to the projection of the UAE's "blue power" in the region of the Horn of Africa.

## I. Determinants of the strategic extension

Several factors could explain the current strategic extension of the UAE, with three being considered the most significant.

### 1. The geographical factor

Napoleon Bonaparte said that, "The foreign policy of States lies in their geography". Indeed, geography, a constant element of foreign policy, puts the UAE at the center of regional and global issues. Due to the strategic location of the country, the UAE finds itself obliged to take a position in a number of strategic issues that deeply affect the Arab region and particularly the Gulf.



<https://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/>.

This Gulf region is full of risks and conflicts that threaten the security and stability of most of the States within it, and the delivery of the energetic products on which the global economy and the world trade rely on. It is also an area of business opportunities and commercial exchanges that arouses the envy of many regional and global powers.

Taking into account the density of the geopolitical events and the speed of the strategic changes in the region, one can assume that the UAE is bound to “pedal” tirelessly and continuously to maintain balance. More than a mere choice, the new diplomatic activism of the country forms an indispensable condition to defend its strategic interests.

## 2. The geo-economic factor

Trade and prosperity: two vital elements that shape the identity of the UAE. A brief history review shows that policy makers in the country have always shown a preference for economic considerations. Typically, the country used to stand away from the classic pattern of the other Gulf States that mainly tended to privilege political considerations. In fact, the birth of the Federal union of the UAE emanates from a deep vision in favour

of common prosperity and shared wealth between the seven entities that form it.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of trade and business in the strategic thinking of the Emirates is supported by the notable performances of the economy of the country. If the UAE is regarded as one of the main producers and exporters of oil and gas, it should be noted that this sector’s revenues only account for about 40% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Indeed, the country’s economy doesn’t only rely on its energetic resources but has also embarked on a vast program aiming to diversify its economy. Thanks to a successful economic transition, the country is seen today as a hub of business opportunities on the global scale. Undoubtedly, Dubai is considered to be the flagship of this economic performance.

Through its diplomatic activism, the UAE tries to pave the way for the development of its national economy in order to succeed in the economic take-off and full integration into the world economy. In this context, the UAE joined the World Trade Organization<sup>2</sup> and signed free trade

1. The seven constituent monarchies that compose the federation of the UAE are: Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain.

2. The UAE has been a Contracting Party of the GATT since March 1994 and a Member of WTO since April 1996.

agreements with a number of business partners such as Morocco.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The strategic factor

Search for strategic balance in a region crossed by wars and torn by religious issues constitute a fundamental concern for the UAE's foreign policy. The country's foreign policy is driven by the constant desire to save national independence by a game of influence and alliances. Based on this policy, the country is striving to prevent any hegemonic inclination in the region.

Nevertheless, the presence of multiple competing regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Turkey) and global dominant powers (USA, Russia) complicates the strategic regional order and forces the UAE to deploy constant and consistent efforts to stimulate the required conditions for a regional balance.

It is not surprising to note that the diplomatic and military activism recently expressed by the UAE is related to the increasing risk of hegemonic attempts in the region. Indeed, the Emiratis' suspicions of actors threatening the balance in the region is not limited to foreign powers such as Iran and Turkey but also to states that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council— such as Qatar.

## II. Objectives of the strategic extension

Four major objectives seem to lead the current strategic extension policy of the UAE: countering the hegemonic aspirations of Iran, weighing on the evolution of the Arab Spring, balancing and strengthening the Gulf Cooperation Council and building a “blue power” in the African Shores.

### 1. Countering the hegemonic aspirations of Iran

Iran represents a difficult and hostile neighbour for the Emiratis. “UAE leaders, as do most of the other GCC leaders, consistently assert that the perceived threat

3. The Free trade agreement between Morocco and United Arab Emirates was signed in 2001 and entered into application in 2003.

from Iran is a core UAE foreign policy and defense interest”.<sup>4</sup>It's worth noting, that this perceived threat didn't start with the Islamic revolution but is rooted deep in history. Since the proclamation of the Union, the Shah of Iran took possession of the island of Abu Musa and the Lesser Tunb and Greater Tunb, giving the tempo of what would be the nature of the relationship between the two States.<sup>5</sup>With the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the relations between the two states fell into more tension and mistrust. The fact remains, however, that the attitude adopted by the UAE regarding the “Iranian expansionary policies” was based on the preference of negotiations and diplomatic means to the detriment of any direct or open confrontation.

However, two main factors will push the UAE to change their political doctrine vis-à-vis Iran.

The first factor is the significant progress made by the Persian neighbour in the nuclear and the ballistic fields. In the Emiratis' perception, any progress made by Iran in these two fields induces more risks for the Gulf monarchies' core security. To some extent, the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action<sup>6</sup>signed in July 2015 by the group of 5 plus one and Iran upon its nuclear program was a big shock to the Emiratis. The feeling was that “America” under the Obama Administration “betrayed” their Gulf friends. In the Emiratis' view, the Iranian nuclear deal reinforces the Mullah's' regime and immunizes Iran against any external action. The agreement simply implies that there is a lessening of any possible external pressure that would be directed against Iran to force it to make concessions such as surrendering the UAE's islands.<sup>7</sup> It also means that Iran will have more tools and leverage to strengthen their its foreign agenda and allies in the region.

The second factor is the intensifying control of Iran over the Arab States surrounding the Gulf. Within a few years,

4. The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy, Karim Sadjadpour, The Carnegie paper, July 2011, p. 11

5. “One of the most persistent sources of bilateral tension between the UAE and Iran has been over ownership of the islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa. These islands are strategically important to both countries because of their proximity to key shipping lanes”, in “The Battle of Dubai The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War”, Karim Sadjadpour, July 2011, the Carnegie papers, P. 10

6. See the text of the agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action) : [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran\\_agreement/iran\\_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf)

7. It must be noted however that “the U.S. position is that it takes no position on the sovereignty of the islands, but supports the UAE's call to negotiate the dispute”, The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy, op cit, p. 11

four Arab states have fallen into the hands of pro-Iranian regimes namely Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. There is a kind of Iranian strategy that aims to encircle the countries of the Gulf through a ring of “satellite states” led by Shiite governments. The “Shiite Crescent” theory seems to take shape quickly. But Yemen, the last Arab country to fall under Iranian dominance, presents heavy political value for at least two reasons: firstly, Yemen is a country that is geographically situated in the Gulf region and shares boundaries with Saudi Arabia; secondly, Yemen controls the access to Bab-el-Mandeb, a strait that connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and commands a vital shipping lane.

Consequently, the UAE have broken with their diplomatic “phlegm” and developed a proactive and comprehensive strategy to face the Iranian expansion in the region. A variety of means and levers have been activated by the Emiratis: a huge policy of lobbying, oil and gas policy to reduce the Iranian capitals, diplomatic offensive to isolate Iran as well as military actions to blur the advance of the Iranian allies and weaken their positions,<sup>8</sup> including ground forces to fight pro-Iranian Shiite groups. These efforts have helped stop the progression of Houthis in Yemen. This constitutes a kind of first step for the UAE in the long process of “Defeating the Iranian hegemonic project” over the region. This huge and unprecedented military activism led General Matis, who would become the American Secretary of Defense, to describe the UAE as the “Little Sparta” of Middle East.

## 2. Weighing on the evolution of the Arab Spring

The UAE has positioned itself clearly and firmly against the dynamic of the Arab Spring. Today, the country is one of the flag-bearer of the fight against the Muslim brotherhood who are deemed by the Emiratis to be the main beneficiaries of such a dynamic, if not its main instigators. It is worth noting that the UAE’s strategic decision-making puts the Muslim brotherhood and Daech on a similar level as correlates to their perceived status as an imminent strategic threat to the political stability

8. The latest alliance treaty signed by UAE was with France. It’s worth noting that in terms of article 4, France is bound to participate in the defense of the security, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the independence of the UAE. This strong engagement is an exception giving the fact that France deleted such a clause in the partnership signed with African countries like Togo, Cameroun, Gabon and Central African Republic. None of this agreement includes a military assistance clause. Rapport du Sénat Français, N° 724, Nathalie Goulet, Session du 06 Juillet 2011.

of the Gulf monarchies. Thus, the UAE would formally and publicly support the overthrowing of President Morsi’s regime in Egypt and the backing of the military regime of Al-Sisi.

In this open struggle, the UAE deployed substantial means and tools, including massive financial aids to stabilize the regime of Al-Sisi in Egypt and prevent its collapse; bombings by squadrons of the Emirates Air Force on positions held by Daech in Libya and Syria and their participation in the “shield forces of the peninsula” played a decisive role in the stabilization of the Sunnite Bahraini regime against the Shiite population’s demonstrations.

At the same time, the UAE aimed strengthening the Arab monarchies’ regimes situated outside the Gulf by inviting Jordan and Morocco to integrate the Gulf Cooperation Council. The objective is to keep the two monarchies away from any risk of regime change that could be driven on the wave of the Arab spring. If Jordan welcomed strongly the Emiratis’ initiative, Morocco showed some reluctance. Morocco was more in favour of a strong and deep partnership than a mere and complete adherence to the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia seemed more in line with the Moroccan position than the Emirati one. In that sense, a strategic partnership between the Gulf Cooperation Council and the two Monarchies was agreed upon with an annual aid of one billion dollars for each State renewed for five years.

## 3. Balancing and strengthening the Gulf Cooperation Council

If there is one concept that qualifies best the UAE’s diplomatic doctrine, it would certainly be the permanent quest for balance in a region marked by a perpetual process of decomposition and re-composition. Being in the center of a “gun powdered area” where several powerful States struggle to assert their dominance and impose themselves as the “Hegemo” regional power, the country has always strived to maintain a good degree of independence and freedom of action.

Since its foundation, forty-eight years ago, the UAE had to face a number of hegemonic aspirations over the region. This was mainly the case of the two regimes outside the Cooperation Council of the Gulf, namely Iran and Iraq. Through their enjoyment of a high energetic, demographic and historical attributes, the two States,

through varying degrees and different methods, have succumbed to the temptation of dominance and expansion. In each case, the line of conduct adopted by the Emiratis' strategic decision-makers consisted in working with all possible means to foil any attempt to break the regional balance or to undermine the territorial sovereignty of the neighboring States.

Today, it is clear that the quest for balance is also observed within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Certainly, the relations with member States are and remain united by a spirit of fraternity and solidarity. However, the competition for leadership between some States of the Council remains a real issue. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia had always shown aspirations to exercise the role of incontestable leader in the Gulf.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Qatar, during the last two decades, has been pursuing a diplomatic, economic and cultural strategy which enables it today to be an indispensable player in the region.

The position held by the UAE towards the two contenders differs by its nature but converges through its objective. The dynamics that drives the relationship with Saudi Arabia is part of the logic of cooperation and distribution of roles even if they are sometimes punctuated by significant divergences. For example, if the Emirates, in the war against the Houthis in Yemen, rallied to the coalition led by Saudi Arabia, they did not hesitate to suspend their participation as a sign of protest. The Emiratis are also accused of conducting a division plan of Yemen by backing the independent groups in the south which goes in contradiction with Saudi Arabia's policy in the region. Clashes between groups backing by each of the allied Gulf monarchies were also reported.

Instead, the dynamic that characterizes the relationship with Qatar is part of the logic of confrontation. In fact, the Emiratis have always seen the role played by the Qataris on the regional scene in an unfavourable light. The Emiratis have expressed firm and open dissatisfaction with the support of the Muslim brotherhood pursued by Qatar and blamed it for having close links with Iran and Turkey. The tensions between the two States reached their climax in the summer of 2017 when the Emirates

joined the Saudi-led coalition –cutting diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposing sanctions against it.

Yet, the objective that drives the attitude of the UAE towards Saudi Arabia and Qatar remains the same: establishing and preserving the balance within the Gulf Cooperation Council – far from any hegemonic inclination.

#### 4. Building a blue power on African Shores

One of the most significant characteristic of the new UAE foreign policy is its projection in the African continent. This Gulf country is adopting an ambitious plan of implementing strategic depth in Africa along with the projection of its blue power on the African shores. While the scope of this projection covers different parts of the continent, the Horn of Africa is a fundamental priority. There are at least five reasons why the Maritime zones of this region matter for the Emirates. First, the Horn of Africa is located near the Arabic Peninsula, with only 35 km separating the two regions. Second, the Emiratis' presence in the shores of the Horn of Africa enables them to conduct military strikes on Yemen from a near distance which gives the UAE a strategic and competitive advantage over its rival, Iran, that backs the Houthis. Third, the Horn of Africa's shores control the access to a number of strategic areas such as the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Moreover, two African countries in the Horn of Africa, namely Djibouti and Eritrea, control the access to the strategic Bab-el-Mandeb Strait located between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The UAE growing military influence in the region gives it important levers to conduct counter-piracy operations and preserve the freedom of navigation in this vital waterway. Last but not least, the countries located in the Horn of Africa are considered to be amongst the poorest ones in the world. This makes them more vulnerable to the economic offers and pressures of the rich Gulf country.

9. Hasbani noted that "UAE, like other small Gulf States, has reason to fear the hegemony of their Saudi neighbor who dominate the region economically..., demographically..., geographically...and ideologically". Nadim HASBANI, La politique de défense des Emirats Arabes Unis au sein des enjeux géopolitiques du Golfe arabo-persique, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis, mars 2011, p 256

### The UAE “Navy Belt” in the Horn of Africa’s shores<sup>10</sup>



The map drawn by the author shows that the UAE has built a kind of “navy belt” in the Maritime Zones of the Horn of Africa. This “navy belt” links the Yemini Island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden to the Port of Hodeida in the Red Sea. It includes a number of other strategic navy bases in the region, like the Assab Base in Eritrea, the Berbera Base in Somaliland and the Perim Island base in the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. The Emirati “navy belt” in the Horn of Africa shores gives the UAE a strategic card in the global battle against its rival Iran, and constitutes a demonstration of the strategic plan, blue power, that the Emiratis aim to achieve.

10. Map drawn by the author

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