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United Arab Emirates, a country on
the rise

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Abstract:

The centre of gravity in the Middle East has shifted towards Arabian Peninsula countries and, within this geopolitical scope, the UAE is a regional actor taking very bold steps in the international sphere. Given that it is a growing economy, its strategy is based on deploying a policy of alliances to promote cooperation and ensure the connectivity of its productive sectors in different geographical areas. Its economic figures leave no room for doubt: it is the seventh country with the largest oil reserves worldwide and ranks tenth among the world's leading economies. Israel's Barak air defence system has just been installed to protect its basic resources and infrastructures; a major reorientation away from relying on Israel to safeguard vital infrastructure. On the other hand, the close relationship it maintains with China, its main trading partner, definitively distances it from the possibility of acquiring F-35 aircraft.

Keywords:

United Arab Emirates, Israel, China, Air Defence System.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Emiratos Árabes Unidos, un país en alza

Resumen:

El centro de gravedad en Oriente Medio se ha inclinado hacia los países de la Península Arábiga y, dentro de este entorno geopolítico, Emiratos Árabes Unidos es un actor regional que adopta medidas muy audaces en la esfera internacional. Dado que es una economía en crecimiento, su estrategia se fundamenta en el despliegue de una política de alianzas para favorecer la cooperación y asegurar la conectividad de sus sectores productivos en diversos espacios geográficos. Sus cifras económicas no dejan lugar a dudas, es el séptimo país con las mayores reservas mundiales de petróleo y se encuentra en la décima posición de las principales economías del mundo. Para la protección de sus recursos básicos e infraestructuras, acaba de instalarse el sistema israelí de defensa aérea Barak lo que supone una importante reorientación al depender de dicho Estado para salvaguardar las infraestructuras vitales. Por otro lado, la estrecha relación que mantiene con China, su principal socio comercial, le aleja definitivamente de la posibilidad de adquirir los aviones F-35.

Palabras clave:

Emiratos Árabes Unidos, Israel, China, Sistema de Defensa Aérea.

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Introduction

The centre of gravity in the Middle East has shifted towards Arabian Peninsula countries: a homogeneous group of six monarchies, associated in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), and Yemen, a republic and the most historically complex country in the region.

In the region as a whole, stable borders were finally delimited in 2000 and Saudi Arabia covers almost all of the space with direct access to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. In contrast, five of these states have exclusive access to the Persian Gulf coastal area: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE (United Arab Emirates), and Oman.



Figure 1: Arabian Peninsula The World Factbook 2021. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 21/10/2022)

This paper attempts to take a closer look at the UAE, whose political authorities were only recently established as an independent entity, and now present a strong leadership within a decentralised model of federation.

While Saudi Arabia is the hegemonic force in the region, the UAE is also a regional actor taking bold steps in the international sphere. The secondary intention of this scheme is to set out its aspirations or basic propositions.

It was the first Arab country to recognise the State of Israel, an event that took place on 13 August 2020 in Washington. One of the reasons was possibly internal, such as the project to form a grand bargain between the three religions with the aim of limiting political Islam¹. In any case, as the Abraham agreements were US-driven, the UAE hoped to obtain the sale of F-35 aircraft in return, which has so far failed to materialise.

Arabian Peninsula countries actually have a less hostile relationship with Israel than those of Syria or Iraq and, given the region's increased geopolitical weight, moderate and balanced dynamics with Israel are likely to predominate. The GCC is made up of geopolitically stable countries and polarisation is neither on their agenda nor in their interest.

The signing of the Abraham Accords implies recognition of the State of Israel. The other signatories are Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Saudi Arabia and Iran will not legitimise it. Saudi Arabia as it is basically associated with being the seat of Islam's holiest shrines with the prerogative of preserving Islamic heritage. It is also of interest to millions of Muslims around the world as a destination for Muslim pilgrims and is responsible for leading the five daily prayers. Iran, due to its propaganda of mobilising anti-Zionism and maintaining a destructive dynamic against Israel.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	2,150,000
Republic of Yemen	527,968
Sultanate of Oman	309,500
United Arab Emirates	83,600
Emirate of Kuwait	17,818
State of Qatar	11,493
Kingdom of Bahrain	707
<i>Area in km² of the Arabian Peninsula countries. Prepared by author</i>	

Geographical conditions

As the fourth largest Arabian Peninsula country, the UAE consists of the seven emirates of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Dubai, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al Quwain.

¹ Idea developed by Alberto José Ucelay (Conference of 21 September 2022). Current Director General for the Maghreb, Mediterranean and Middle East, and Ambassador to the UAE (2016-2021).



Figure 2: United Arab Emirates. The World Factbook 2021. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 21/10/2022).

Borders were first demarcated under British intervention but continued after the creation of the Federation, not without territorial disputes between the emirates².

The emirate of Abu Dhabi occupies 87% of the area, the second is Dubai while the emirate of Ajman is the smallest.

Saudi Arabia's border with the UAE was agreed in 1974 and the two border on the east along 530 km. Borders with Qatar and Oman are 19 km and 450 km. Along the Persian Gulf, it has 1,400 km of coast and, together with Oman, dominates the southern part of the Strait of Hormuz through the Musandam Peninsula³.

Finally, 97% of its territory is desert because the Rub' al Khali, also known as the Great Sandy Desert or the Empty Quarter, stretches uninterrupted for 2,400 km across most of the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula and is shared by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Yemen.

² The British High Commissioner in Baghdad began the first border demarcation in 1922 in the so-called Uqair Convention. (Cfr. KHADER, Bichara. *El mundo árabe explicado a Europa*. Icaria, 2010; VV. AA. *Piratas, treguas y fronteras. Historias del colonialismo británico en el Golfo pérsico* [Vanguardia Dossier]. Abril/junio de 2010, pp. 73-83).

³ MINISTRY OF INFORMATION. *Oman in History*. Sultanate of Oman, 2016.

Early political structures and today's leadership

The most extensive historical references⁴ are to the Al Nahyan and Al Maktoum families, both belonging to the Bedouin tribe of Bani Yas, which was based in the Oasis of Al Liwwa. Members of both families migrated in 1770 to Abu Dhabi, where they established a port, and by 1830, the Al Maktoum family separated and moved to Dubai. However, some rulers were not attracted to these small coastal towns and continued to reside in oases until 1960 when oil production led to these towns transforming into cosmopolitan cities.

In the 18th century, the Al Qasimi tribe emerged with authority over the territories of Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah. From that century onwards, it was able to develop a significant naval force until the British burned its ships and the town of Ras al-Khaimah in 1819.

There is little historical evidence of the three other emirates: Fujairah, Umm al Quwain and Ajman. Fujairah in particular is dominated by members of the Al Sharqi tribe.

In 1892, this group of small states signed a series of agreements with the British government for protection in exchange for securing British interests in their territories. They thus became the so-called Truce States.

Today, the UAE is made up of seven independent hereditary principalities or emirates, which united to form a single country in 1971.

The most important political figures are the leading members of the ruling families in each emirate: Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, Al Nuaimi in the Emirate of Ajman, the Al Maktoum family in Dubai, Al Qasimi in Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah, Al Sharqi in Fujairah, and finally Al Mualla in Umm al Quwain.

However, the viability of the unit had an uncertain beginning. Saudi Arabia did not recognise the new Federation until the border dispute over the Al Buraimi oasis was resolved in 1974. Iran and Oman also had similar conflicts. A major insurgent movement from Oman also threatened its stability through the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Persian Gulf, which sought to establish of a republican regime in the UAE.

The first of the events that contributed to its consolidation was the Iranian revolution, which, together with revenues from the discovery of oil, allowed this small state to strengthen its position among the surrounding countries.

⁴ METZ, Helen Chapin (ed.). *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies* (3.^a ed.). Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., 1994, pp. 225-277.

From the outset, the most representative leaders for coordinating the centre and its components have been the Al Nahyan and Al Maktoum families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai simultaneously, the emirates that share the most important positions in the Federation. However, all seven emirates are represented in the Supreme Council, and each has the power to develop economic programmes, agreements, concessions and oil exploration with the companies it deems appropriate.

The most powerful emirate and the largest contributor to the Federation's budget is Abu Dhabi. The Al Nahyan family holds the presidency of the Federation's Supreme Council, a position currently occupied by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) who ascended to the emirate in May 2022, following the death of his father.



Figure 3. Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Photograph published in *Atalayar* (accessed 21/10/2022).

Dubai's Al Maktoum family serves as Prime Minister and Vice President in the Federal Supreme Council. Muhammad ibn Rashid Al Maktoum has been Emir of Dubai since 2006 and in the Federation government he is Prime Minister, Vice President and Minister of Defence.



Figure 4. Muhammad Ibn Rashid Al Maktoum.

Photograph published on Wikipedia (accessed 21/10/2022)

The smaller emirates have less influence. The Al Qasimi tribe of Sharjah is the more important of the two sovereign families. However, due to its high level of expenditure, until the 1990s it only managed to survive thanks to financial support from Abu Dhabi and the mediation of Dubai. It is notable that the Ras al-Khaimah family has developed a historical hostility towards Britain. In fact, in 1971 it rejected its mediating role in the conflict with Iran over two Persian Gulf islands and its leaders have preferred education in the US.

The strength and consolidation of political power in the emirates is quite possibly thanks to economic figures. It is the seventh country with the world's largest oil reserves, and in the first half of 2022, oil-producing countries experienced a surplus as a result of higher prices.

Moreover, the International Monetary Fund's latest publication 'World Trade Growth 2022 and 2023' states that the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula have achieved 25% more GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in the current year than last year.

In this way, and still lagging behind the US, China, Japan, Germany, the UK, India, France, Canada and Saudi Arabia, the UAE is ranked tenth among the world's main economies.

Technological change also favours political consolidation and, to sustain continued progress, Abu Dhabi and Dubai established two space agencies between 2006 and 2014. With support from Japan and the United States, it is part of the Mars expeditions and in 2020 it launched its first spacecraft to the international station⁵.

Foreign relations

In domestic politics, therefore, governmental stability is the dominant pattern, and this basis⁶ of solid leadership, consensus and compromise among political elites has provided a favourable context for a subsequent change in foreign policy action.

In the past, the UAE has shown restraint and moderation, but now the country is witnessing a momentous shift in its international policy, in which it is playing a very active and bold role. As for Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, his prestige is rising.

⁵ The capabilities of the UAE space programme can be found in the publication: 'An International Perspective on Planetary Protection Policies' (Presentation) Author(s): Cara P. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey Trauberman, Rachel Lindbergh, Lincoln M. Butcher, Jericho Locke and Bhavya Lal Institute for Defense Analyses (2020), pp. 8-9. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27011> Accessed: 07/11/2022.

⁶ In 2021, the UAE celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence and the birth of the Federation.



Figure 5: Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Published in *Atalayar* (accessed

Given that it is a growing economy, its strategy is based on deploying a policy of alliances to promote cooperation and ensure the connectivity of its productive sectors in different geographical areas.

Specifically, its sovereign wealth funds are considered the UAE's arm for investment in the international sphere⁷.

Simultaneously, it is developing a progressive soft power strategy that manifests itself in the rise in cultural institutions⁸, hosting sporting events, promoting peace initiatives and, with regard to the war in Ukraine, economic aid for humanitarian purposes.

⁷The UAE has an economic ecosystem of investment groups (AbuDhabi investment firm, Dubai Holding, Sharjah Asset Management) and financially strong export credit agencies (Etihad Credit Insurance), which are backed by its sovereign wealth funds (Masdar). These agents invest worldwide in a multitude of sectors (infrastructure, renewable energies, consumer goods, tourism, science, technology, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, minerals, petrochemicals, etc.).

⁸ The Arab world is made up of 22 states and Arabic is the main language spoken. The largest book fair in the Arab world and the International Film Festival were held this year in the Emirate of Sharjah. In Abu Dhabi, the archaeology of the emirates' fishing and maritime activity is on display at the Sheikh Zayed Maritime Heritage Museum and the Gulf's first natural history museum is being planned. The Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies has also been held in Abu Dhabi since 2014, bringing together 30 organisations from 60 countries. Since 2003, the Abu Dhabi International Hunting and Equestrian Exhibition (ADIHEX), considered the largest exhibition in the Arab world, has been held in Abu Dhabi. Seven million foreign visitors visited the Expo in Dubai this year.

In its immediate neighbourhood, the Persian Gulf, it shares the same geographical space with Iran and the restoration of bilateral relations has been its main move. After six years of estrangement, one of the situations that could have caused it is Iran's support for the Houthis, which Iran denies, but the fact is that on 17 January this armed group attacked an energy facility near Abu Dhabi⁹.

Relations with Oman and the war in Yemen are the most important geopolitical challenges in the Arabian Sea.

Oman is of vital importance in boosting trade relations and, in fact, the UAE is the world's third largest investor. Last September, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding in sixteen areas, the most important of which is the project to create a joint railway company to connect the port of Sohar to the Emirati rail network. Indeed, the port of Sohar is located on the Omani coast of Al-Batinah, a geographical area of great interest for long-distance maritime transport.

Yemen is a strategic area on trade routes and the UAE is particularly interested in Aden, where there are serious insecurity problems. It supports the internationally recognised authority, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), and is training one of its armed groups operating in the south, the Giant's Brigades, led by Abed al Rahman Abu Zara. It should be noted that the Houthi militias have recently been designated as a terrorist group by the PLC. However, unlike Saudi Arabia, it also supports the Southern Transitional Council.

Meanwhile, in the Red Sea, its attempt to mediate in the Sudanese political crisis with the aim of building a port terminal has failed. In fact, the UAE withdrew from the mediation body, which includes the UK, Saudi Arabia and the US, on 8 September.

Regarding the Mediterranean corridor, it has strong economic ties with Turkey and Egypt on bilateral trade and industrial investment projects. However, the most profound changes have in fact been brought about by relations with Israel. The emirates want Israeli universities to establish bases and also intend to cooperate and invest in the development of the field of space, satellite, cyber and artificial intelligence. On the other hand, Israel's innovation (high-tech) sector comprises 50% of its economy, and close to a thousand Israeli companies have set up in Dubai. Possibly branches of Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, Israel's third largest defence company, or BetterSeeds, a research company. In fact, last October, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) installed a

⁹NASSER, Afrah. «¿Hay un final a la vista para la guerra de Yemen?», *Afkar Ideas*, issue 66 (21 June 2022, pp. 38-40. Available at: [¿Hay un final a la vista para la guerra de Yemen? | Política Exterior \(politicaexterior.com\)](https://politicaexterior.com)

Barak Air Defence System in the UAE, although it is not yet known which version has been deployed.

Finally, in a more distant geographical area, bilateral relations with Germany and Russia are important, although China is its main trading partner and its technological presence is increasing.

In contrast, there is a conflict of interest with the United States. On the one hand, the US refuses to include the Houthis on its list of terrorist organisations because it wants to resume talks on Iran's nuclear programme. On the other, the UAE has not joined the pressure strategy against Russia or the sanctions regime¹⁰.

Conclusions

The physical elements¹¹ that have a decisive influence on its territory are the presence of a large desert area, a coastal area on the Persian Gulf and, in terms of border, it does not border unstable countries.

In terms of size, it is not a very large country and for this reason it is estimated to need a very active policy of international partnerships in order to secure and increase its state revenues.

The Persian Gulf is an exceptional physical environment with invaluable assets and the world's largest oil reserves. However, the UAE does not have a stronghold in the Strait of Hormuz, where navigation is mediated by several Iranian islands such as Greater and Lesser Tunb (Tunb al Kubra and Tunb al Sughra)¹².

The rail link to the Omani port of Sohar is considered to be a strategically important objective, at least for container transport, even if it is not possible to avoid the obligatory passage through Hormuz for other types of goods.

Finally, with the development of its space capabilities it can broaden its territorial base through action in another type of geographical space: outer space.

Secondly, historical background concludes:

¹⁰ Russian oligarchs fleeing the sanctions regime have settled in Dubai, and overall, tourism from Russia has increased by around half a million tourists.

¹¹ PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, José Luis. «Estrategia y geografía: la geoestrategia», en AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico, GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Andrés y FELIÚ BERNÁRDEZ, Luis (eds.). *Estrategia, una forma de pensar: evolución del pensamiento estratégico*. Sílex, 2021, pp. 101-134.

¹² Iran and the UAE are member states that have signed but not yet ratified the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The standard form of political organisation in the regions now comprising the emirates was tribalism¹³, with three Bedouin societies, Bani Yas and Al Sharqi, based in oases, and a third, the Al Qasimi tribe, with a preference for the development of naval power.

Because of the desert-like nature of their settlement, it was difficult for them to display power, conquer or dominate. In fact, the minor emirates failed to establish a dominant leadership and this may explain the lack of historical records.

However, the Al Qasimi tribe was able to establish wider trade relations because of its access to the sea.

The Bedouin tribal societies Bani Yas and Al Sharqi have disappeared¹⁴ but the current dynasties or lineages maintain their culture and traditions as an essential component of their identity.

In the current political system, leadership as a strategic centre of gravity¹⁵ is stronger than a Federation might indicate:

Progress towards unity was initially difficult, but the international context and high oil revenues accelerated the union's development.

In a very short time, there has been a transformation from a basis of territorial fragmentation into tribal groups to another form of cohesive state.

The Federation has incorporated institutions to coordinate the centre and the emirs recognise the superiority of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which represent the centralised authority.

¹³ Tribal societies are extensively studied in Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (Deusto, 2016)

¹⁴ Bedouins are generically defined as nomadic camel-herding tribes of the Arabian Desert. They fought each other over rights to wells and pastures, and controlled everything that moved or had to cross the desert, such as traffic between oases, villages and towns, and pilgrim caravans. They also extorted money from weaker villagers, peasants and tribesmen, and Bedouin raiders only had to win the desert to go free. Inhabitants of towns and cities recognised their superiority.

Their economic system essentially depended on the camels they bred, but the introduction of mechanical transport drastically altered the basis of their economy by eliminating the dependence of men in the towns and villages on camels. The southern tribes in the Rub-Al-Khali had no animals other than camels, and those with livestock did not live in the desert because of the scarcity of fodder (THESIGER, Wilfred. *Arenas de Arabia*. Península, Barcelona, 1998).

¹⁵ PRATS MARÍ, José María. «Del siglo xx al XXI. Centros de gravedad, la teoría de los anillos concéntricos de Warden y la doctrina del dominio rápido», en AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico, GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Andrés y FELIÚ BERNÁRDEZ, Luis (eds.). *Estrategia, una forma de pensar: evolución del pensamiento estratégico*. Sílex, 2021, pp. 339-361.

Hereditary leaders in their territories have the capacity to manage their natural resources, but they are not a destabilising force and future conflicts are not seen as possible.

The royal families of the seven emirates are very large, with many key administrative and decision-making positions supervised and controlled by their members. These rulers can develop the infrastructures and technological changes they choose to plan without environmental, social or other constraints.

However, revenues from hydrocarbon reserves are diversified into other productive sectors and reverted to society and the population, urban classes with high purchasing power.

Political power is ultimately considered to be strong and for the time being there are no conflicting social classes or pressure groups.

Finally, the UAE is undoubtedly a country on the rise. It has gained weight in geopolitical leadership in the region and beyond.

In reality, the rise of power in the international sphere has come about thanks to political stability, sovereign wealth funds and the presence of financially powerful actors. It is the seventh country with the world's largest oil reserves and ranks tenth among the world's economies.

Relations with Israel are of paramount importance to protect its core resources and infrastructure and the Barak air defence system preserves these centres of gravity¹⁶. However, technological dependence represents a major reorientation in terms of relying on the state to safeguard the vital infrastructure on which the economic power of the Emirati state rests.

On the other hand, support for Israel is taking the form of the presence of Israeli companies in the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and incidents against Israeli citizens, most likely coming from Iran, may increase.

With respect to Iran, a new stage of normalisation of relations has begun, ensuring stability in the Persian Gulf, although the two states will continue to clash in Yemen, a territory that is essential for the security of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

¹⁶ In the aforementioned article by José Maria Prats Marí, the third and fourth circle or ring is formed by basic resources or main production nuclei and major infrastructures and communication routes.

Finally, the UAE is likely to obtain defence material from China and Israel for its war effort. In fact, the close relationship it maintains with China, its main trading partner, definitively distances it from the possibility of acquiring F-35 aircraft.

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