



“The Strategic Alliance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE”

By Simone van Slooten

Under the supervision of Professor Stéphane Lacroix

Sciences Po

Spring 2019

This paper has received the *Kuwait Program at Sciences Po*

Student Paper Award

The copyright of this paper remains the property of its author. No part of the content may be reproduced, published, distributed, copied or stored for public or private use without written permission of the author. All authorisation requests should be sent to program.kuwait@sciencespo.fr

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates: A Strong Front Showing Cracks?

The Middle Eastern countries situated in the Persian Gulf¹ are characterised by oil-driven economies, autocratic monarchical rule and wealth. The Gulf countries consist of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman. The countries are Islamic countries, in which Sunni Muslims make up the majority, except in Bahrain, which has a Shiite majority, and Oman, which is predominantly Ibadi. Since 1981, they have been united in a regional organisation known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which was created as a result of regional insecurities and in particular by the onset of the first Gulf War between Iraq and Iran.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the two powerhouses of the GCC and the wider region, touting the highest population numbers, most extensive militaries, and political clout. In the past decade, they have often worked closely together in political and military coalitions, especially since the onset of the Arab Spring protests in 2011. The two 'partners in crime' have joined forces in Syria, Libya, and Egypt for example, and the most recent example is the military offensive against the revolutionary Houthi forces in Yemen.² Furthermore, since 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have, alongside Bahrain and Egypt, enforced a strict blockade on Qatar, who they accuse of supporting terrorism.³

An interesting dimension is brought by the onset of two younger crown princes, the Saudi Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud (MBS) and the Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan (MBZ). These two crown princes, seen as the key drivers behind Saudi and Emirati foreign policy and military interventions, have changed the course of the two countries in the past few years.

Despite the seemingly flawless alliance front that Saudi Arabia and the UAE like to create for the world, cracks may already be visible in the façade. Historical border disputes, power

¹ Gulf countries prefer to refer to the body of water as the Arabian Gulf, but in the world it is generally recognised as the Persian Gulf, which is why I will employ this term in the essay.

² Ellen Lust, *The Middle East* (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2017, fourteenth edition), p. 1432.

³ Patrick Wintour, "Gulf plunged into diplomatic crisis as countries cut ties with Qatar," *The Guardian* (5 June 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>.

struggles for regional dominance and differing strategies in the military interventions all point in this direction. The quick-tempered pace of crown princes MBS and MBZ may push the conflict between the countries even further, as they aspire to dominate the region with their own country.

Therefore, this essay will investigate the strategic alliance between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, drawing on historical instances as well as present case studies. It will argue that the two allies are not as united as they like to make the world believe, but despite their differences, their common interests weigh heavier and the alliance is unlikely to crumble. Part I of the essay will give a historical background of the GCC and the two countries in particular, examining the similarities and differences. Part II will scrutinise the historical border disputes between the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Part III will then move to the present, where the alliance will be analysed in light of two case studies. Lastly, Part IV considers the new era brought by MBS and MBZ and explores the potential implications for the endurance of the alliance and the power dynamics in the region.

Part I: A Historical Background

The Gulf countries and the GCC

The Gulf countries are marked by limited political rights for citizens and autocratic governing styles. Of the six GCC countries, only Kuwait was marked as 'partly free' by Freedom House in 2018,⁴ due to the limited influence of the Kuwaiti parliament in decision-making processes. Consequently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are still seen as 'not free', since their citizens are unable to elect their rulers and play a limited role in political participation. Nevertheless, the Gulf regimes only sparingly resort to plain coercion (incl. jail and torture) on citizens, and instead rely on smaller doses of constant repression,⁵ superseding the need for more egregious forms of repression.

While the GCC was imagined as a Gulf counterpart of the EU,⁶ it has not lived up to these expectations in its almost 40 years of existence. This is predominantly caused by the individual rulers' attachment to their own authority, which they are not willing to give up, especially since it "[...] would amount to surrendering it to Saudi Arabia, given that Saudi is [...] the largest member of the GCC."⁷ It does not have a monetary union, after UAE backed out of this idea in 2009, and despite the existence of a unified military command, domestic or bilateral military action is still dominant.⁸

The UAE

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Fujairah, and Umm al Quwain) which have around 9 million inhabitants, the large majority of which are expatriates. Elections for a limited number of seats in the federal

⁴ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018" *Freedom House* (2018) <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

⁵ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1030.

⁶ Seraj Assi, "The EU and the GCC: Two unions with similar aspirations, but very different realities," *The New Arab* (11 July 2017) <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/7/11/eu-and-gcc-no-union-too-sacred-to-fail>.

⁷ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1036.

⁸ Brahim Saidy, "The Gulf Cooperation Council's Unified Military Command," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (8 October 2014) <https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/10/the-gulf-cooperation-councils-unified-military-command/>.

advisory body are held,⁹ but in practice the executive, legislative and judicial power rests with the hereditary rulers of the emirates, as political parties are banned. Though the seven emirates are ruled by individual monarchies, the federation is dominated by Abu Dhabi, whose ruling family controls the position of president, and Dubai, who puts forward a vice-president.¹⁰ Furthermore, civil liberties of citizens, such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are highly restricted. Historically, the UAE were under British influence, after the British signed anti-piracy treaties with the sheikhdoms in the 1820s.¹¹ After the “Truce of 1853”, the emirates were referred to as the Trucial States. Despite the calls from the Gulf rulers to the British not to leave, the UAE became independent in 1971 after domestic economic pressure drove the British to withdraw.¹² Nevertheless, the two countries have maintained a close relationship ever since.

The foreign policy of the UAE is characterised by constructive engagement, based on compromises, negotiations, reasonableness and a delicate balance of the needs of each emirate.¹³ Despite its small size, the UAE’s foreign policy, marked by quiet diplomacy and foreign aid, has helped it survive in the region’s turmoil.¹⁴ Under the rule of Sheikh Zayed, who was in power from independence until 2004, the foreign policy was influenced by Arabism and Islam at first, which partially gave way to the influence of cultural factors and security issues at a later stage.¹⁵ Since then, the UAE’s foreign policy goals have become more ambitious, and the country has taken a more central role in the region and even internationally.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy led by the Al Saud family, which has been ruling the country since 1932. Forming a coalition with the Wahhabist movement on the Arabian Peninsula,

⁹ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1021

¹⁰ Khalid S. Almezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign aid, identities and interests* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012): p. 25.

¹¹ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1037-1038.

¹² Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1015-1016.

¹³ Abdul-Monem al-Mashat, “Politics of Constructive Engagement: The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates,” in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* eds. Baghat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008): p. 458.

¹⁴ Almezaini, p. 21.

¹⁵ Almezaini, p. 50.

the Al Saud family unified the country and named it after itself, intimately linking its legitimacy with the unity of the State and the obedience of its people for decades to come. It is one of the world's premier oil exporters and heavily relies on the revenues for its economy. The country is ruled with an iron fist by the extensive royal family, though the Shura Council, an advisory body to the King, plays a marginal role.¹⁶

The country finds itself at the crossroads of its orthodox religious establishment, the *ulama*, and its Western ally the United States (US). The *ulama*, which has been an indispensable part of the legitimacy of the ruling family,¹⁷ stands in juxtaposition to the modernising and interventionist influence of the US. Even though the Saudi regime and the Salafist-Wahhabi movement were once nearly synonymous with each other, they have started to move in opposite directions as the Saudi regime consolidated its modernising efforts. Since the 1990s, the religious movement has started to challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi regime itself, breaking with its politically passive nature from earlier decades.¹⁸

Since crown prince MBS's rise in the ranks, Saudi Arabia has begun efforts to diversify its oil-based economy. Furthermore, the crown prince has attempted to portray a more modern and progressive development in his country, while also cracking down on critical voices in the elite and wider population, manifesting his newly acquired power.¹⁹

Key similarities and differences

Security interests

In a region marked by political turmoil, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have converged with respect to their security interests. Especially since the revolutionary sentiments of the Arab Spring, and the unrest seen in neighbouring Bahrain, the two countries have started to work

¹⁶ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1184-1185.

¹⁷ Baghat Korany and Moataz A. Fattah, "Irreconcilable Role-Partners? Saudi Foreign Policy between the Ulama and the US," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* eds. Baghat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008): p. 344.

¹⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, "The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and The Power," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2016): 1-9, p. 4.

¹⁹ Adel Abdel Ghafar, "Muhammed bin Salman and the push to establish a new Saudi political order," *Brookings Institute* (9 November 2017) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/11/09/muhammed-bin-salman-and-the-push-to-establish-a-new-saudi-political-order/>.

closer together to prevent similar uprisings domestically.²⁰ Moreover, the policies of both countries have become increasingly militarised, as evidenced by the military interventions in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen.²¹ Furthermore, the regional penetration of arch enemy Iran in neighbouring countries, as well as the threat of terrorist attacks launched by the Islamic State, have intensified the Saudi and Emirati participation in counterterrorism and security efforts.²² Nevertheless, the Emirati action is driven even more by the fight against Islamism, due to domestic vulnerabilities related to the federal system.²³

Function of Religion

Islam plays a central role in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The countries' legal systems are built on Islamic values and the religion constitutes the main 'national' character of the citizens.²⁴ The two holy sites of Islam in Saudi Arabia have been one of the key factors that have influenced the national character of the country. Religion has a less prominent role in politics in the UAE than in its Saudi counterpart, where the creation of the State was closely tied to the alliance of Al Saud family with the Wahhabi religious establishment, resulting in a privileged political role.²⁵

The countries' attitude vis-à-vis Islamism, or 'political Islam', exposes a divergence. Comparing the extent to which reactionary Islam is shaping or constraining modernisation and reforms shows that Saudi Arabia and UAE are on opposite ends of the spectrum.²⁶ Whereas Saudi Arabia, due to its own relation with the Wahhabi religious establishment, can be seen to have some measure of sympathy for Islamist movements, it will only support those who are politically conservative and who oppose revolutionary initiatives.²⁷

²⁰ Noura S. Al Mazrouei, "The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Border Dispute in the 21st Century," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 157-172, p. 157.

²¹ Eman Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE After the Arab Spring," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (2017): 37-53, p. 39.

²² Tally Helfont, "A More Forward Role for the Gulf? Combatting Terrorism at Home and Abroad," *Orbis* 62, no. 3 (April 2018): 454-472, p. 456-457.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 458.

²⁴ Almezaini, p. 23.

²⁵ Lust, p. 1033.

²⁶ Rashed Lekhraibani, Emilie Rutledge and Ingo Forstenlechner, "Securing a Dynamic and Open Economy: The UAE's Quest for Stability," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 2 (2015): 108-124, p. 112.

²⁷ Frederic Wehry, "The Authoritarian Resurge: Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (2015): 71-85, p. 72.

Conversely, the UAE is vehemently opposed to any form of political Islam, interpreting it as a risk for the legitimacy of the rulers and a driver of popular pressure to reform the system.

System

Another difference between the two States is to be found in the political system. Though both countries consist of monarchies, the Emiratis have seven different ruling families, all of whom have a say – certain emirates more than other – leading to a more consensus-based and constructive engagement domestically and internationally. Conversely, Saudi Arabia – more specifically the Al Saud family – being the largest country in the region and a key ally of the US, feels capable of a more brazen domestic and foreign policy, which might be related to the fact that the family does not have to consider different parts of a federation like the UAE is forced to.

Part II: Saudi-Emirati Border Disputes

As aforementioned, the UAE was brought under the British sphere of influence in the 19th century, forming the 'Trucial States' in 1853. The British and the Ottoman Empire signed two conventions in 1913 and 1914 establishing boundaries between the Ottoman province and the sheikhdoms protected by the British.²⁸ After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of Saudi Arabia, the British argued that it was the successor-State and therefore had to respect the boundaries.²⁹ Nevertheless, this argument did not have basis in international law and the borders remained disputed until the British forcefully pushed back the Saudis in 1955 and unilaterally declared the border between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi.³⁰ In 1968 Britain announced it would withdraw from the UAE in 1971.

After the UAE's independence, it had to withstand Saudi interference in its domestic relations with the objective of undermining them.³¹ The newly formed UAE was not yet recognised by Saudi Arabia, and the latter showed itself willing to use military force to destabilise the federation.³² The disputed border revolved around Khor al-Udaid, an inlet at the Qatari border. While the UAE claimed that its border extended to this location, the Saudis maintained that it was the only country with a land border with Qatar, meaning that Emiratis had to pass through Saudi territory to reach Qatar.³³

In 1974, the two countries finally signed a treaty delineating their boundaries, the Treaty of Jeddah, which became public only in 1995.³⁴ Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi signed the treaty primarily to ensure the UAE's survival in the region.³⁵ Nevertheless, the treaty put the UAE at a significant disadvantage, since it granted Saudi Arabia a coastline of fifteen miles east of Khor al-Udaid, directly contradicting the UAE's claim. Conversely, the UAE still shows the

²⁸ Noura Saber Al Mazrouei, *The UAE and Saudi Arabia: Border Disputes and International Relations in the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016): p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 6-7.

³¹ Emirate Ras al-Khaimah only joined the UAE in 1972, allegedly after having experienced a great deal of Saudi interference.

³² Ibid. p. 8.

³³ Ramin Seddiq, "Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (15 March 2001), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/border-disputes-on-the-arabian-peninsula>.

³⁴ Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, *Treaty of Jeddah* (21 August 1974), United Nations Treaty Series 17333, no. 1-30250, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2017333/i-30250.pdf>.

³⁵ Al Mazrouei, "The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Border Dispute in the 21st Century," p. 158.

territory as its own on its maps and national ID cards. Furthermore, the agreement gave Saudi Arabia the right to all income from the Shaybah-Zarrarah oil field in the disputed area.³⁶ Though the Emiratis have attempted to renegotiate this last point, Saudi Arabia has firmly maintained that it is non-negotiable.³⁷ Tensions have risen several times, for instance in March 1999, when the UAE boycotted a Saudi-led meeting of GCC oil ministers and instead organised an inauguration of the Shaybah oil field by crown prince Abdullah.³⁸ Furthermore, when the UAE pulled out of the GCC Monetary Union in 2009, Saudi Arabia responded by closing the Saudi-UAE border at Al Ghwaifat, preventing UAE citizens from entering.³⁹

Even though the UAE-Saudi border disputes have not been settled and continue to be a stumbling block for better relations between the two countries, since the instability of the Arab Spring, the rise of Islamic State, and the increasing penetration of Iran in the wider region, the UAE and Saudi Arabia seem to have put these border disputes on the back burner in favour of increased security cooperation. Indeed, the countries announced a new military and political alliance in late 2017,⁴⁰ which calls into question the functioning and necessity of the GCC.

³⁶ Seddiq, "Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula".

³⁷ Al Mazrouei, "The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Border Dispute in the 21st Century," p. 161.

³⁸ Seddiq, "Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula".

³⁹ Al Mazrouei, "The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Border Dispute in the 21st Century," p. 168.

⁴⁰ Patrick Wintour, "UAE announces new Saudi alliance that could reshape Gulf relations," *The Guardian* (5 December 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/05/uae-saudi-arabia-alliance-gulf-relations-gcc>.

Part III: The Saudi-Emirati Alliance in Qatar and Yemen

This part will scrutinise the Saudi-Emirati alliance in light of their cooperation in enforcing a blockade on Qatar and the Coalition against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. Though other contexts could be explored, such as Syria and Egypt, this current paper does not allow for an extensive analysis of these interesting cases.

Qatar

Qatar, situated between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has attempted to distinguish itself from its neighbours since its independence. The country is ruled by the Al Thani dynasty and has one of the highest *per capita* incomes in the world. Furthermore, the country's rulers adhere to the same sect of Islam as Saudi Arabia, namely Wahhabism. Nevertheless, Qatar has gone its own way, embracing a less rigid interpretation while also embracing political Islam around the world through its support for Islamist movements,⁴¹ the very thing that worries the Saudis and Emiratis. Whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE are conservative and define themselves largely through their opposition to Iranian influence and Muslim Brotherhood activity, Qatar has embraced Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and even the Taliban.⁴² It supported the Egyptian fraction of the Brotherhood and its president Morsi with \$8 billion, which did not protect it from the Egyptian army taking over power with Al-Sisi.⁴³

The coordination of actions taken against Qatar for these reasons by Saudi Arabia and the UAE can be seen on several occasions. Firstly, in March 2014, the two countries, alongside Bahrain, withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, stating as a reason Qatari meddling in internal affairs.⁴⁴ More specifically, the three States denounced Qatar's

⁴¹ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1055.

⁴² Joshua S. Krasna, "It's Complicated: Geopolitical and Strategic Dynamics in the Contemporary Middle East," *Orbis* 63, no. 1 (2019): 64-79, p. 74.

⁴³ Simeon Kerr, "Fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsi is blow to Qatari leadership," *Financial Times* (3 July 2013) <https://www.ft.com/content/af5d068a-e3ef-11e2-b35b-00144feabdc0>.

⁴⁴ BBC News, "Gulf ambassadors pulled from Qatar over 'interference'," *BBC News* (5 March 2014) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26447914>.

support for domestic Islamist movements and its news network Aljazeera.⁴⁵ After nearly eight months of dispute, the four countries set aside their differences – though superficially – and the ambassadors returned to Doha.⁴⁶

Illustrating the unfinished business and remaining grievances, the 2017 blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cite similar concerns as the 2014 incident, and add new allegations of Qatar's sponsoring of terrorism. The blockade and diplomatic crisis commenced in June 2017, when the group issued an ultimatum with thirteen demands that Qatar had to comply with in two weeks.⁴⁷ Among the demands were the closure of Aljazeera, suspension of contact with the Muslim Brotherhood and support for the Al-Nusra front in Syria, hand-over individuals accused of terrorism, and dissolution of commercial and diplomatic ties with Iran.⁴⁸

The alliance between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the context of Qatar has so far held strongly. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the areas of Wahhabist Islam, the position in the regional and international community, and the disagreement over the preferred way of dealing with Iran has resulted in a hegemonic struggle,⁴⁹ in which the UAE has unequivocally sided with its Saudi neighbour due to its fear for the stimulation of Islamist sentiment domestically. Since these issues are not likely to disappear in the near future, both countries are adamant on undermining Qatar's position in the region and its ties to Iran and political Islam, despite the arguable failure of the blockade's achievement of these objectives.

⁴⁵ David D. Kirkpatrick, "3 Gulf Countries Pull Ambassadors From Qatar Over Its Support of Islamists," *The New York Times* (5 March 2014) <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/middleeast/3-persian-gulf-states-pull-ambassadors-from-qatar.html>.

⁴⁶ Reuters, "Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain end rift with Qatar, return ambassadors," *Reuters* (16 November 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-summit-ambassadors/saudi-arabia-uae-and-bahrain-end-rift-with-qatar-return-ambassadors-idUSKCN0J00Y420141116>.

⁴⁷ Wintour, "Gulf plunged into diplomatic crisis as countries cut ties with Qatar," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>.

⁴⁸ Alberto Negri, "Gulf Regional Crisis: Qatar-Saudi Arabia Rivalry, Tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* (2018): 244-246, p. 246.

⁴⁹ Samuel Ramani, "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears," *The National Interest* (11 December 2017) <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-saudi-uae-alliance-could-be-weaker-it-appears-23606>.

Yemen

A stark contrast with Qatar, Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the world and has known a conflicted history, finding itself partly under British rule and uniting as one Yemen in 1990, led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁵⁰ The country's population is grossly made up of the Zaydi Shiite Muslims, primarily found in northern mountain areas, and the Shafi'i Sunni Muslims, residing in southern and coastal areas.⁵¹ The population has resorted to civil war before the Arab Spring of 2011, when revolutions began anew, voicing discontent with the Saleh regime. After several months of protests, Saleh agreed to step down and his vice-President Hadi took over – through the facilitation of the GCC – to reform the political system in Yemen.⁵² Nevertheless, several groups in the country, the Shiite Houthis and Al-Qaeda affiliates, contested his authority, and after Saleh returned as an ally of the Houthis, the country descended into a political crisis. In September 2014, the Houthis took Sana'a and Hadi was forced to flee to Aden.⁵³ On March 25th 2015, he fled to Saudi Arabia, after which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and a coalition of seven other Arab States launched a military intervention, operation Decisive Storm.⁵⁴ Another key reason for the intervention was the perceived Iranian support for the Houthis, which was unacceptable for Saudi Arabia.⁵⁵ Though Iran has fervently denied its participation, the Houthis have used Iranian-made missiles during the fighting.⁵⁶

Even though Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the main players in the Coalition, ideological divisions have emerged between the partners. Since the beginning of the intervention, the UAE has had four security dimensions: regime stability, counterterrorism, local training and humanitarian assistance.⁵⁷ The UAE has three central missions that diverge

⁵⁰ Reuters, "Timeline: Yemen's slide into political crisis and war," *Reuters* (17 June 2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-timeline/timeline-yemens-slide-into-political-crisis-and-war-idUSKBN1JDOBX>.

⁵¹ Lust, *The Middle East*, p. 1445-1446.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 1431.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 1431-1432.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1432.

⁵⁵ Megan Spacia, "How Yemen Became a Humanitarian Nightmare: Untangling a Complex War," *The New York Times* (13 June 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/world/middleeast/yemen-war-explainer.html>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Eleonora Ardemagni, "UAE's Military Priorities in Yemen: Counterterrorism and the South," *ISPI Commentary* (28 July 2016): 1-3, p. 1.

from its support for the Saudi-led Coalition: first, to counter political Islam in any form; second, to control the Red Sea coastline, which is of strategic importance; third, develop and strengthen its own special forces in order to supervise proxy troops.⁵⁸ To this end, it has dedicated ground troops, mainly consisting of Special Forces, which have trained troops in the South of Yemen meant to crush the Al Qaeda presence in the region.⁵⁹ Thus unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE has a clear strategy, training and funding private armies to crush jihadists and al-Islah affiliates. Furthermore, in the South it has partnered with a separatist movement opposed to the Houthis and the Hadi government, building what is essentially a parallel state including military camps and secret detention centres.⁶⁰ While Saudi Arabia has not committed ground troops, it is concerned by the influential role of the UAE in Yemeni territory, by the Emiratis' military presence on strategic Socotra Island in the Red Sea, and by their increasing role in naval security in the Red Sea as well as the Arabian Sea.⁶¹

On a deeper ideological level, the UAE rejects Saudi Arabia's sectarian approach to conflicts in the region, preferring instead a foreign policy vision that prioritises secularism and the creation of non-ideological coalitions.⁶² Consequently, the conflict between Saudi and Emirati approaches centres on the disagreements à propos the threat posed by Shia actors and the political legitimacy of religious extremist groups. The UAE is vehemently opposed to collaboration with factions from al-Islah, the Yemeni sympathiser of the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia has made frequent use of its alliance with the party.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war," *The Guardian* (21 December 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/21/yemen-uae-united-arab-emirates-profiting-from-chaos-of-civil-war>.

⁵⁹ Bel Trew, "Inside the UAE's war on al-Qaeda in Yemen," *The Independent* (15 August 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/uae-yemen-civil-war-al-qaeda-aden-dar-saad-gulf-saudi-arabia-conflict-a8492021.html>.

⁶⁰ Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war," <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/21/yemen-uae-united-arab-emirates-profiting-from-chaos-of-civil-war>.

⁶¹ Zachary Laub, "How the UAE Wields Power in Yemen," *Council on Foreign Relations* (22 June 2018, interview with Neil Patrick) <https://www.cfr.org/interview/how-uae-wields-power-yemen>.

⁶² Ramani, "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears," <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-saudi-uae-alliance-could-be-weaker-it-appears-23606>.

⁶³ Ibid.

This has resulted in inefficient warfare, to say the least. For example, UAE-backed forces fought fighters loyal to Hadi, whom are backed by Saudi Arabia, at bases and facilities in Aden.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the contrasting objectives are visible in the city of Ta'iz, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE are fighting the Houthis, but through supporting different militia. While Saudi Arabia has backed fighters aligned with al-Islah, the UAE uses the Abu al-Abbas Batallion, whose leader was placed on the United States' terror list for having links to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.⁶⁵ These two militias have begun to battle each other for power in Ta'iz, weakening the Saudi-UAE alliance against the Houthis significantly and contributing to a military stalemate.

However, the Emiratis might be warming up to al-Islah, as illustrated by a recent meeting between MBZ and the heads of the party in Abu Dhabi.⁶⁶ This development might signal that the Emiratis and Saudis are devising a method to end the war in Yemen, which will be challenging given the intractability of the conflict.

In conclusion, the Saudi-UAE alliance has been strong in the context of the blockade of Qatar. The partners share the same objectives to rein in Qatar's support for Islamist movements and counter its relationship with Iran, and given the assertive foreign policies of MBS and MBZ, they will likely continue to oppose Qatar in this way. Furthermore, the blockade and demands have largely been written off as hypocritical in the international community, and loosening the reins might entail a huge blow to the credibility of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which they naturally want to avoid.

In Yemen, the collaboration has been rockier, due to objectives that only overlap partially and support for divergent local proxies that counter the effectiveness of the fight against the Houthis. Nevertheless, since the start of the intervention, the conflict in Yemen has unravelled even further, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE are looking for a way out without losing face or leaving potential security hazards in place. Therefore, it is in both their

⁶⁴ Daniel Byman, "Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Have a Disastrous Yemen Strategy," *Lawfare* (16 July 2018) <https://www.lawfareblog.com/saudi-arabia-and-united-arab-emirates-have-disastrous-yemen-strategy>.

⁶⁵ Sudarsan Raghavan, "In ancient Yemeni city, violence turns inward," *The Washington Post* (6 December 2018) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/12/06/feature/the-merchants-of-despair/?utm_term=.70a1047b10ca.

⁶⁶ Hussein Ibish, "There's Actually Hope for an End to the Yemen War," *Bloomberg* (16 November 2018) <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-11-16/yemen-war-u-a-e-and-saudi-arabia-look-for-a-way-out>.

interest to remain united in a strong alliance, especially to counter Iran's increasing sphere of influence.

Part IV: The New Era of MBS and MBZ

The rise of crown princes MBS and MBZ has had important implications for the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively, and has potentially signalled a new era for the two States, in which they both aim for the most influential position in the wider region.

MBS has fundamentally changed the functioning of the Kingdom since his rise in the ranks four years ago, including challenging the alliance between the al-Saud family and the Wahhabi religious establishment, the very foundation of Saudi Arabia.⁶⁷ Since then, the crown prince has tightened his grip on the security apparatus and has sent important warning signals, if not purged, the high elite of individuals and rivals with mass economic and political power.⁶⁸ While MBS is still young and can take more time for his goals, the social fabric of the Saudi state is more conservative and marked by bureaucratic and theological inertia, and the rapid change that MBS wants to effect can have an unsettling outcome for the country.⁶⁹

MBZ, twenty years older than MBS, has exercised influential positions in the UAE for a longer period of time. He became crown prince of Abu Dhabi in 2004 and deputy supreme commander of the UAE armed forces in 2005. Furthermore, after the 9/11 attacks, which featured two Emirati hijackers, a government crackdown on Islamists and in particular on al-Islah took place, which included a ministerial purge.⁷⁰ MBZ derived much of his power and his central position in decision-making in this process, becoming the major player in security and foreign policy.⁷¹

The two crown princes are also close allies themselves. For instance, MBZ played an important role in presenting MBS as the desirable candidate for the Saudi crown in both Saudi and international circles – particularly aiming to convince Washington of his

⁶⁷ Helfont, "A More Forward Role for the Gulf? Combatting Terrorism at Home and Abroad," p. 457.

⁶⁸ Ufuk Ulutas and Burhanettin Duran, "Traditional Rivalry or Regional Design in the Middle East?" *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 81-105, p. 86.

⁶⁹ Simon Mabon, "It's a Family Affair: Religion, Geopolitics and the Rise of Mohammed bin Salman," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 51-66, p. 63.

⁷⁰ Helfont, "A More Forward Role for the Gulf? Combatting Terrorism at Home and Abroad," p. 458.

⁷¹ Ibid.

suitability.⁷² The triangle US-UAE-Saudi Arabia has solidified with the Trump presidency, which has pursued warmer relations with MBS and MBZ than undertaken during the Obama era.⁷³

The new foreign policy

The era of MBS and MBZ power has been marked by assertive and aggressive interventions in the region, often with military means. The atypically assertive intervention in Yemen has illustrated “[MBZ’s] willingness to use force decisively when confronted with a problem related to regional security.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, neither the Saudis nor the other Gulf States deployed their military forces in such a proactive and aggressive manner as in the large offensive operation in Yemen, which marks a new era in Saudi foreign policy with long-term implications for larger Gulf politics.⁷⁵ However, the world already got a sneak peek of this decisive use of force when Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened militarily in Bahrain in 2011 after the onset of popular protests demanding a change of the Al Khalifa regime.⁷⁶ This event warned regional neighbours and set a precedent that was repeated in 2015 with Yemen.

Furthermore, MBS and MBZ have also encouraged the expansion of their spheres of influence into East Africa, which is of strategic relevance. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made use of military bases and ports in countries such as Djibouti, Eritrea and the self-declared republic of Somaliland to launch strikes into Yemen.⁷⁷ The two allies want to appear as a “regional stabilizing actor and peace-broker in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa [...] skilfully combining each other’s relations and assets in the Horn.”⁷⁸ Their role in the rapprochement of Eritrea and Ethiopia may have positive stabilising effects, but their battle for hegemonic influence – as opposed to Qatar and Turkey, for example – can

⁷² Ulutas and Duran, “Traditional Rivalry or Regional Design in the Middle East?” p. 86

⁷³ Mabon, “It’s a Family Affair: Religion, Geopolitics and the Rise of Mohammed bin Salman,” p. 58.

⁷⁴ Helfont, “A More Forward Role for the Gulf? Combatting Terrorism at Home and Abroad,” p. 458.

⁷⁵ May Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 125-141, p. 126.

⁷⁶ Rex Brynen, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012): p. 79.

⁷⁷ International Crisis Group, “The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa,” *Crisis Group* (6 November 2018) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/united-arab-emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa>.

⁷⁸ Camille Lons, “Saudi Arabia and the UAE Look to Africa,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (23 October 2018) <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77561>

have further destabilising effects and lacks a durable long-term strategy.⁷⁹ Therefore, one of the principal motives for expansion of influence into the Horn of Africa is to counter other regional powers from filling the space before the Saudis and Emiratis can do so. This trend has increased even more since the fallout between the two allies and Qatar in 2017.

Thus, both MBS and MBZ have launched ambitious projects, fundamentally changed the foreign policies of their countries and are underway to alter the social norms in tandem with this. However, since it is clear that both crown princes want to assert the status of their own State, and aspire to be the greatest player in the wider region, how will this affect their alliance? Only one player can be the dominant one – which has up until now been Saudi Arabia – and continuing developments might strain their relationship. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the two crown princes also help and support each other in their respective positions and policies. Maybe, then, the ‘brotherly competition’ will not have a grave effect on their alliance and they will work out a method to share power at the top.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has argued that the political and military alliance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE is not without flaws or hiccups, but has remained of a solid character. This stability is caused by the partners' shared interests, which have taken precedence over their internal disagreements. Security threats in the region linked to Islamist movements, the increasing manifestation of Iran on the regional stage, and popular calls for democratic liberalisation have all presented incentives for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to deepen their strategic cooperation in order to retain their authority and regional power. The blockade enforced on neighbouring Qatar since June 2017 is an expression of the robustness of the Saudi-UAE alliance, showing no cracks in the front as they continue to espouse anti-Qatar terminology and according behaviour.

Nevertheless, the internal divergences risk harmful consequences in the longer term. This can be seen most pointedly in the context of the military intervention in Yemen, where Saudi and Emirati objectives are not fully aligned and which has resulted in an ineffective war effort in a practical sense and a potential destabilising factor for years to come. Furthermore, the existing dispute between Saudi Arabia and the UAE relating to their border delineations at Khor al-Udaid and control of profitable oil fields, though a mostly dormant issue at the time of writing, has the potential to cause future disagreement, which can undermine the solidity of the alliance in its turn.

The rise in the ranks of the younger generation has produced crown princes MBS in Saudi Arabia and MBZ in the UAE, signalling an ambitious, bold, and potentially reckless turn of policies and strategies. The two friendly princes have so far deepened the strategic alliance of their countries, launching their participation into new regional initiatives and interventions, whether positive for the longer term or not. Despite their friendly demeanour in their bilateral relations, both aspire to be the leader in the relationship and in the wider region, which can result in friction in the alliance.

It remains to be seen what the next decade of the Saudi-UAE alliance will bring, given the youthful and expansionist spirits of the crown princes. Their modernisation efforts, their war on global Islamist movements and on archenemy Iran, and the militarisation of their increasingly ambitious foreign policies could mean the loss of popular and international

support and domestic stability, or the further consolidation of their dominance in the Gulf region and the autocratic ruling style of their nations.

Bibliography

Abdul-Ahad, G. "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war," *The Guardian* (21 December 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/21/yemen-uae-united-arab-emirates-profiting-from-chaos-of-civil-war>

Al-Mashat, A.M. "Politics of Constructive Engagement: The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* eds. Baghat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008)

Almezaini, K.S. *The UAE and Foreign Policy: Foreign aid, identities and interests* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012)

Al Mazrouei, N.S. "The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Border Dispute in the 21st Century," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 157-172

Al Mazrouei, N.S. *The UAE and Saudi Arabia: Border Disputes and International Relations in the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016)

Ardemagni, E. "UAE's Military Priorities in Yemen: Counterterrorism and the South," *ISPI Commentary* (28 July 2016): 1-3

Assi, S. "The EU and the GCC: Two unions with similar aspirations, but very different realities," *The New Arab* (11 July 2017) <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/7/11/eu-and-gcc-no-union-too-sacred-to-fail>

BBC News. "Gulf ambassadors pulled from Qatar over 'interference'," *BBC News* (5 March 2014) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26447914>

Brynen, R, Moore, P.W., Salloukh, B.F. and Zahar, M.J. *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012)

Byman, D. "Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Have a Disastrous Yemen Strategy," *Lawfare* (16 July 2018) <https://www.lawfareblog.com/saudi-arabia-and-united-arab-emirates-have-disastrous-yemen-strategy>

Darwich, M. "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 125-141

Freedom House. "Freedom in the World 2018" *Freedom House* (2018) <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

Gause, F.G. III. "The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and The Power," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2016): 1-9

Ghafar, A.A. "Muhammed bin Salman and the push to establish a new Saudi political order," *Brookings Institute* (9 November 2017) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/11/09/muhammed-bin-salman-and-the-push-to-establish-a-new-saudi-political-order/>

Helfont, T. "A More Forward Role for the Gulf? Combatting Terrorism at Home and Abroad," *Orbis* 62, no. 3 (April 2018): 454-472

Ibish, H. "There's Actually Hope for an End to the Yemen War," *Bloomberg* (16 November 2018) <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-11-16/yemen-war-u-a-e-and-saudi-arabia-look-for-a-way-out>

International Crisis Group. "The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa," *Crisis Group* (6 November 2018) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/united-arab-emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa>

Kerr, S. "Fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsi is blow to Qatari leadership," *Financial Times* (3 July 2013) <https://www.ft.com/content/af5d068a-e3ef-11e2-b35b-00144feabdc0>

Kirkpatrick, D.D. "3 Gulf Countries Pull Ambassadors From Qatar Over Its Support of Islamists," *The New York Times* (5 March 2014) <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/middleeast/3-persian-gulf-states-pull-ambassadors-from-qatar.html>

Korany, B, and Fattah, M.A. "Irreconcilable Role-Partners? Saudi Foreign Policy between the Ulama and the US," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* eds. Baghat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008)

Krasna, J.S. "It's Complicated: Geopolitical and Strategic Dynamics in the Contemporary Middle East," *Orbis* 63, no. 1 (2019): 64-79

Laub, Z. "How the UAE Wields Power in Yemen," *Council on Foreign Relations* (22 June 2018, interview with Neil Patrick) <https://www.cfr.org/interview/how-uae-wields-power-yemen>

Lekhraibani, R, Rutledge, E, and Forstenlechner, I. "Securing a Dynamic and Open Economy: The UAE's Quest for Stability," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 2 (2015): 108-124

Lons, C. "Saudi Arabia and the UAE Look to Africa," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (23 October 2018) <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77561>

Lust, E. *The Middle East* (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2017, fourteenth edition)

Mabon, S. "It's a Family Affair: Religion, Geopolitics and the Rise of Mohammed bin Salman," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 51-66

Negri, A. "Gulf Regional Crisis: Qatar-Saudi Arabia Rivalry, Tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* (2018): 244-246

Ragab, E. "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE After the Arab Spring," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (2017): 37-53

Raghavan, S. "In ancient Yemeni city, violence turns inward," *The Washington Post* (6 December 2018)

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/12/06/feature/the-merchants-of-despair/?utm_term=.70a1047b10ca

Ramani, S. "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker Than It Appears," *The National Interest* (11 December 2017) <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-saudi-uae-alliance-could-be-weaker-it-appears-23606>

Reuters. "Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain end rift with Qatar, return ambassadors," *Reuters* (16 November 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-summit-ambassadors/saudi-arabia-uae-and-bahrain-end-rift-with-qatar-return-ambassadors-idUSKCN0J00Y420141116>

Reuters. "Timeline: Yemen's slide into political crisis and war," *Reuters* (17 June 2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-timeline/timeline-yemens-slide-into-political-crisis-and-war-idUSKBN1JD0BX>

Saidy, B. "The Gulf Cooperation Council's Unified Military Command," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (8 October 2014) <https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/10/the-gulf-cooperation-councils-unified-military-command/>

Seddiq, R. "Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (15 March 2001), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/border-disputes-on-the-arabian-peninsula>

Spacia, M. "How Yemen Became a Humanitarian Nightmare: Untangling a Complex War," *The New York Times* (13 June 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/world/middleeast/yemen-war-explainer.html>

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. *Treaty of Jeddah* (21 August 1974), United Nations Treaty Series 17333, no. 1-30250, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2017333/i-30250.pdf>

Trew, B. "Inside the UAE's war on al-Qaeda in Yemen," *The Independent* (15 August 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/uae-yemen-civil-war-al-qaeda-aden-dar-saad-gulf-saudi-arabia-conflict-a8492021.html>

Ulutas, U, and Duran, B. "Traditional Rivalry or Regional Design in the Middle East?" *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 81-105

Wehry, F. "The Authoritarian Resurge: Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (2015): 71-85

Wintour, P. "Gulf plunged into diplomatic crisis as countries cut ties with Qatar," *The Guardian* (5 June 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>

Wintour, P. "UAE announces new Saudi alliance that could reshape Gulf relations," *The Guardian* (5 December 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/05/uae-saudi-arabia-alliance-gulf-relations-gcc>