



**“From soft power to sharp power? The United Arab Emirates’
religious policy and the promotion of a moderate Islam”**

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From soft power to sharp power? The United Arab Emirates' religious policy and the promotion of a "moderate Islam"

The 2019 edition of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, held in Abu Dhabi, offer an eloquent insight of the UAE's religious strategy. Professor of philosophy and Islamic thought, Aref Ali Nayed highlighted during the Forum's concluding remarks that *"there actually is a problem of translation (...). In Arabic, tolerance is a give and take: communities must be respectful of each other as communities. But communities also need to be respective of the society they are living in. (...) And yet, some Islamist discourses have introduced a wrong idea: in order to be a proper Muslim, somehow you would need to disrespect your nation state. But you can only serve your Umma if you are good to your country"*¹. The Libyan scholar, ranked among the world's 500 most influential Muslims², is also the chairman of the UAE-based Kalam Research & Media Center, and was, above all, Ambassador of Libya to the UAE between 2011 and 2016. The rather bourgeois background he grew up into has allowed him to develop a strong network in Libya, which he put at the service of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Zayed³ in order to promote a *"traditionalist form of Islam"* curtailing the rise of what he calls *"fascist political Islam movements"*⁴. Such views, of which Nayed is not the sole proponent, acutely illustrate the Forum's main purposes: allowing the UAE to appear as a liberal *"oasis of religious tolerance"*⁵, promoting a legitimist and neo-traditional form of "moderate" Islam aiming at countering the influence of political Islam in the region, and serving as a foreign policy tool aligning with the UAE's political agenda. Gathering more than 700 Arab and Muslim scholars each year, the FFPMS is presented as a *"response to the unprecedented violence and devastation spreading throughout the Muslim world"*⁶ establishing *"that the real Islam is a religion of peace and justice"*⁷.

Launched in 2014, the Forum is only one of the pillars of the UAE's religious foreign policy, which promotes a "moderate" form of Islam advocating for tolerance. Defined as the *"willingness to accept behavior and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them"*⁸, tolerance is conveyed in several Emirati official statements and documents. In the Dubai Declaration, signed during the 2018 World Tolerance Summit, tolerance is for instance intended as *"the respect and appreciation for the rich variety of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human"*⁹.

¹ Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, 6th edition, recording available on Youtube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au3LGtuPjPk>

² The 500 Most Influential Muslims is an annual publication launched in 2009. The publication is managed by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, Jordan in cooperation with the Saudi-funded Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University.

³ "Badeel Haftar... Aref al-Nayed arrâb al-dawr al-Imârâti al-jadid fi Libya", *Sasapost*, published November 27th 2019.

⁴ BOBIN, Frédéric, "Aref Ali Nayed : « La sécurité libyenne est menacée par le Qatar, la Turquie et l'Iran »", *Le Monde*, published August 28th 2018.

⁵ LACROIX, Stéphane, "The United Arab Emirates. when religious tolerance serves political intolerance", *Site du Centre de Recherches Internationales (CERI) de Sciences Po*, March 21st 2019.

⁶ KAICIID Dialogue Center, official website, available at : <https://www.kaiciid.org/dialogue-knowledge-hub/calendars/almanac-of-ird-events/forum-promoting-peace-muslim-societies>

⁷ Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, official website, available at: <https://peacems.com/ar/about-us/brief/>

⁸ Definition issued from the online Cambridge English Dictionary, available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/tolerance>.

⁹ World Tolerance Summit, official website, available at: <http://www.worldtolerancesummit.com>.

Indeed, the UAE's history appears rooted in interfaith dialogue and cooperation: Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism all had a foothold in the Emirates largely before it gained independence in 1971, as the oil industry absorbed the arrival of expatriate engineers, administrators, and workers¹⁰. Pre-Islamic Nestorian ruins have even been discovered in Sir Bani Yas, an island located off the coast of Abu Dhabi¹¹. As the UAE progressively imposed itself as a global economic hub, expatriates markedly outnumbered Emiratis, who only account for 12,5% of the population according to the country's last official census¹². Home to more than 200 nationalities, the UAE have therefore progressively branded itself as a beacon of cultural and religious dialogue, as well as peaceful coexistence. But this image does not operate in a vacuum: it is related to UAE's economic model -- a liberal, open and globalized economy, eager to attract investors and expatriates in a secure and peaceful environment¹³.

Such benefits for the UAE's influence and attractiveness on the international stage easily explain why has the federation started to develop a comprehensive religious policy¹⁴. In addition to launching the FPPMS in 2014, the UAE created a Ministry for Tolerance and Coexistence in 2016, declared 2019 as the year of tolerance, founded temples for Hindu and Sikh expatriates and, more notably, announced the construction of the Abrahamic Family House – a massive complex composed of a mosque, a church, and the first synagogue of the UAE, along with Pope Francis' first ever trip to the Arabian Peninsula.

But this promotion of a moderate and tolerant Islam is not just an end in itself¹⁵. In fact, tolerance mainly appears here as a “*top-down imposed*”¹⁶ and external concept, a geopolitical tool allowing the UAE to portray itself as the most natural ally of the West in the region, notably on the issue of counterterrorism¹⁷. Drawing on this position has enabled the UAE to advance its religious and political agenda in the region and beyond. The initiatives in favor of religious tolerance have indeed multiplied in the wake of the Arab uprising - a real trauma for Abu Dhabi who feared their contagious effect¹⁸. The UAE have therefore emerged as a leader of the Arab counter-revolution, focalizing on the Muslim Brotherhood - a popular political alternative to the authoritarian order the uprising sought to sweep away¹⁹. The organization has consequently

¹⁰ LUCK, Taylor, “Can religious tolerance help an aspiring Muslim power?”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, published June 11st, 2019.

¹¹ FAHY, John, “The international politics of tolerance in the Persian Gulf”, *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 46, n°4, 2020, pp. 311-327.

¹² The UAE Governmental Portal, official website, accessible at : <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix>.

¹³ CAFIERO Giorgio, KRISTIAN Alexander, “The Notion of Tolerance in Emirati Foreign Policy”, *International Policy Digest*, published January 29th 2020.

¹⁴ In speaking about foreign policy, we are referring to the formal policies of a state which affect various dimensions of its relations with other states and nonstate actors. Religion as the other half of our topic is also a multifaceted phenomenon. As Fox and Sandler suggest, religion is a source of world views and values, as well as a source of identity and legitimacy. In sum, the concept of religious strategy encompasses the efforts by the state to harness the power of religious symbols and authority in the service of both internal and external political objectives, see FOX, Jonathan, SHMUEL Sandler, *Bringing Religion Into International Relations*, New York, Palgrave, 2004 ; BELLIN, Eva, “Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics”, *World Politics*, vol. 60, n°2, pp. 315–347.

¹⁵ HAMID Shadi, MANDAVILLE Peter, “Islam as statecraft: how Governments use Religion in Foreign Policy”, *Brookings Institute*, November 2018.

¹⁶ CAFIERO Giorgio, KRISTIAN Alexander, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ LACROIX, Stéphane, “The United Arab Emirates. when religious tolerance serves political intolerance”, *Site du Centre de Recherches Internationales (CERI) de Sciences Po*, published March 21st 2019.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

been labelled as “terrorist” by the UAE in 2014²⁰, though its campaign against the Brotherhood originally aims at imposing a new ideological model for the region, marginalizing political Islam, ensuring regime legitimacy²¹ and maintaining its authoritarian grip over the country. Blaming a certain interpretation of Islam in the name of religious tolerance further deflects attention from the UAE’s political intolerance on the domestic side²². In the wake of the Arab uprisings, the country’s civil society has indeed been crushed by unprecedented repression, with lots of activists allegedly belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood heavily jailed²³.

A savvy blend of economic liberalism and political ultra-authoritarianism²⁴, the UAE’s political model aims at strengthening its reputation as a progressive state that helps counter extremism²⁵, as well as one of the West’s most natural allies in the region. Such comments corroborate Aref Ali Nayad’s conclusive remarks, uttered during the FPPMS’ 2019 edition: tolerance is both a give and take – meaning that religious diversity and tolerance exclude any expression of dissent²⁶ or political pluralism in the Emirati context.

While there is a large body of literature on the politics of tolerance in the liberal West, scarce attention has been paid to how political discourses of tolerance have been designed, implemented, and mobilized in non-liberal contexts, and how these discourses integrate into international relations²⁷. This paper thus aims at understanding the drivers of the UAE’s religious strategy, its components (discourses and narratives, figures, networks) and its objectives. It will argue that this strategy doesn’t only support the UAE’s multifaceted openness but serves as a fully-fledged geopolitical tool, promoting a “moderate” form of Islam to marginalize regional foes, while consolidating authoritarianism on the domestic side.

I. The UAE’s religious policy serves as a major soft power tool enhancing its position as the Middle East’s liberal haven

The politics of tolerance: an integral part of the UAE’s economic model

²⁰ “UAE lists Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group”, *Reuters*, published November 15th 2014.

²¹ KRIEG, Andreas, “On the sinister objectives of Abu Dhabi’s ‘crusade’ against political Islam”, *Middle East Eye*, published January 21st 2020.

²² LACROIX, Stéphane, “The United Arab Emirates. when religious tolerance serves political intolerance”, *Site du Centre de Recherches Internationales (CERI) de Sciences Po*, published March 21st 2019.

²³ KRIEG, Andreas, “On the sinister objectives of Abu Dhabi’s ‘crusade’ against political Islam”, *Middle East Eye*, published January 21st 2020.

²⁴ LACROIX, Stéphane, *Ibid.*

²⁵ WORTH, Robert F., “Mohammed bin Zayed’s Dark Vision of the Middle East’s Future”, *The New York Times*, published 22nd January 2020.

²⁶ “Hazimat qanuniya li-Ikhwan Libya did Aref al-Nayidh”, *Al Arab*, published June 27th 2020, available at <https://alarab.co.uk/هزيمة-قانونية-لإخوان-ليبيا-ضد-عارف-النايذ>

²⁷ FAHY, John, “The international politics of tolerance in the Persian Gulf”, *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 46, n°4, pp. 311-327.

The UAE's narrative of liberalism and openness strategy is, in part, related to its economic model, that of a globalized economy aiming at attracting investors and expatriates in a welcoming environment. The UAE has indeed made a name for itself starting from the end of the 80's thanks to state-of-the-art infrastructure and a business-friendly environment²⁸, embodied by the region's first and largest free zone, Jebel Ali, which offered foreign businesses 100% ownership, full repatriation of profits, and excellent services in a tax-free environment²⁹. Fuelled by Abu Dhabi's oil reserves and Dubai's entrepreneurial reputation, the UAE became in the 2000's the Arab world's most globalised and third-largest economy behind Saudi Arabia and Egypt³⁰. This economically liberal model thus seems to have been a relative success, given the UAE's considerable growth rate as well as its economic diversification - greater than that of its neighbouring oil states³¹.

But attracting foreigners was, for the UAE, originally more of a necessity than a choice³². In the wake of its independence, the small Emirate critically lacked human resources in various sectors. Immigrants of all origins and qualifications thus came from everywhere³³. But as compared to other countries of the region who were confronted with the same phenomenon, such as Qatar, the UAE have been religiously tolerant for a long time, and not only of Christians³⁴. Other faith groups, including Shi'as, Sikhs, Baha'is, Hindus, and Jews, had been living peacefully in the UAE and even thrived³⁵. For instance, the UAE opened its first church in 1965, while Qatar didn't follow suit until 2008³⁶.

Furthermore, orthodox economic literature further shows that tolerant countries tend to attract more immigrants and attain a greater concentration of talented workers, with higher levels of economic development, which makes them more competitive³⁷. But promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue also provides for a safer society – a critical determinant when it comes to attracting foreign investments. As a result, the UAE wants to be viewed internationally as a secure destination for foreign investments, given the fact that a significant proportion of its gross national product (GNP) now comes from non-oil sectors³⁸.

One of the pillars of this strategy lies in the promotion of tolerance and especially religious minorities' rights protection via international conferences. In January 2016, the UAE therefore organized, along with Morocco, the Conference for the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Lands in Marrakesh. It resulted in the famous Marrakesh Declaration—

²⁸ ARDEMAGNI, Eleonora, "Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean", *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, Analysis No. 321, 13th April 2018, p. 4.

²⁹ MILLER Rory, VERHOEVEN Harry, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and strategic realignment in the Gulf", *International Politics*, vol. 57, 2020, pp. 13-14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ LACROIX, Stéphane, "The United Arab Emirates. when religious tolerance serves political intolerance", *Site du Centre de Recherches Internationales (CERI) de Sciences Po*, published March 21st 2019.

³² Interview with David Roberts.

³³ MOKHEFI, Mansouria, "L'immigration maghrébine au Qatar : Quelles perspectives ?", *Notes de l'IFRI*, Mars 2014.

³⁴ BASKAN, Birol, "The Pope, the UAE, and the Muslim Brotherhood", *Middle East Institute*, published February 13rd 2019.

³⁵ The early migration of Indian workers has for example led to the emergence of an educated middle class, working in both the private and the public sector, see LUCK, Taylor, "Can religious tolerance help an aspiring Muslim power?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, published June 11st, 2019 ; Interview with a former French diplomat at the French Embassy in Qatar.

³⁶ LUCK, Taylor, "Can religious tolerance help an aspiring Muslim power?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, published June 11st, 2019.

³⁷ HONG Gahye, KIM Eunmi, "How to attract talented expatriates : the Key Role of Sustainable HRM", *Sustainability*, vol. 11, n°19, 2019, pp. 53-73.

³⁸ CAFIERO Giorgio, KRISTIAN Alexander, "The Notion of Tolerance in Emirati Foreign Policy", *International Policy Digest*, published January 29th 2020.

the purpose of which was to “alleviate Western concerns over the fate of non-Muslims in Muslim societies”³⁹. The event reinvested central themes in Islamic tradition such as the Charter of Medina, a document recalling Prophet Muhammad’s shelter contract with the people of Medina after the 622 exile – these themes being adapted in light of present-day minority issues, interfaith dialogues and counter-extremism efforts⁴⁰. In 2018, Dubai went further by starting to host the World Tolerance Summit, in conjunction with UNESCO’s International Day for Tolerance (16 November). Its first session attracted 1866 participants from 105 countries around the world⁴¹.

This strategy has been enshrined in international rankings, in which the UAE reaches the top scores. The UAE was indeed ranked 1st on the regional tolerance index in 2016 and came 3rd in the world, according to the Global Social Tolerance Index⁴². Other indexes where the UAE is featured include the Global Competitiveness Index 2019 (25th), 2019 Human Development Index Ranking (35th) and the 2019 Global Innovation Index (36th), all taking into account religious freedom⁴³. It is worthwhile noting that Abu Dhabi doesn’t shy away from putting these rankings at the forefront to support its religious policy : the FPPMS’ preliminary speeches often recalls them, whereas some are displayed on the Ministry of Tolerance’s website⁴⁴.

While it is difficult to precisely gauge what religious tolerance has done for the UAE’s economy, it is possible to assume that its cultural and religious diversity has bolstered the Emirates’ image of openness and tolerance. In that sense, the UAE’s religious policy epitomizes Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, defined as the ability to get what you want through attraction or cooptation rather than coercion or payment⁴⁵. But it isn’t only geared towards individuals: **promoting religious tolerance through a moderation discourse plays a decisive role in improving the biased Western perception of the Emirates.**

A bulwark against extremism: the UAE, counterterrorism, and the West

Gulf efforts to promote tolerance usually resort to a common repertoire: holding international conferences, welcoming interfaith delegations or establishing high-profile institutions geared towards the protection of tolerance and dialogue⁴⁶ and the fight against counterterrorism. **But the UAE has particularly found in the political narrative of**

³⁹ PISANI, Emmanuel, “La Déclaration de Marrakech du 27 janvier 2016”, *MIDÉO*, vol. 32, 2017, pp. 267-293.

⁴⁰ KOURGIOTIS, Panos, “Moderate Islam’ Made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment”, *Religions*, vol. 11, n°43, 2020.

⁴¹ AL-SHAIBANI, Hamad, “The UAE Embodies an Urban Model of National Unity and Tolerance”, *International Institute for Tolerance*, published May 26th 2019.

⁴² Based on the World Values Survey, it incorporates gender, minority, immigrant, and religion tolerance dimensions. It is however important to note that this index is not official: the Global Social Tolerance Index is an independent initiative developed in ZANAKIS, Stelios, NEWBERRY, William, “Global social tolerance index and multimethod country rankings sensitivity”, *Journal of International Business Studies*, vol.47, n°5, 2019, 480-495.

⁴³ JEONG, Hae Won, “Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy in the UAE”, *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*, published March 5th 2020.

⁴⁴ UAE Ministry of Tolerance, official website, accessible at :<https://www.mof.gov.ae/en/About/GovernmentInitiatives/Pages/uae-year-of-tolerance.aspx>

⁴⁵ NYE, Joseph, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, vol. 80, 1990, pp. 153-171.

⁴⁶ FAHY, John, “The international politics of tolerance in the Persian Gulf”, *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 46, n°4, pp. 311-327.

“moderate Islam” a powerful tool of representation, wherein misconceptions about Islam might be dispelled, extremism disavowed and ties with the West strengthened⁴⁷. As a matter of fact, its emphasis on tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue can clearly be traced to 9/11, which two Emirati hijackers carried out along 17 other individuals, coming mainly from Saudi Arabia. Abu Dhabi has sought to seize this opportunity, creating centers and institutions focusing on fighting radicalization and violent extremism.

Founded in 2012, the Hedayah Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism is an acute example of this strategy. Chaired by Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, member of the UAE’s Federal National Council for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, it gathers experts from around the world “to enhance understanding and share good practices (...) and to promote tolerance, stability, and security”. The center has developed partnerships with other centers and think-tanks focused on counterterrorism, but genuinely became active once the UAE became involved in the fight against ISIS. In 2015 was further launched the Sawab initiative, “a new digital communications hub to counter extremist propaganda” and “correct the wrong ideas”, in collaboration with the United States⁴⁸.

Branding itself as a bulwark against extremism and terrorism, the UAE has developed a fully-fledged religious discourse of moderation by which the West distinguishes between good Muslims and bad Muslims. Former Emirati ambassador to the US, Youssef al-Othaiba was one of the men in charge of conveying this new narrative about the Emirates as a tolerant Middle Eastern partner that shares US security concerns⁴⁹⁵⁰. And it seems to have worked : Former President Donald Trump’s speech at the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh in May 2017 – which is one example among others - doesn’t show anything else, as the latter praised the counterterrorism initiatives of Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Such empirical findings seem to corroborate what the few research conducted on this subject has shown. Turan Kayaoglu argues that “Islamic actors initiate interfaith dialogue to signal their moderate stance to powerful others who are concerned with Islamic radicalisation and violence”⁵¹. Anelle Sheline follows in her footsteps, emphasizing that the political discourse of moderate Islam in the Muslim world is shaped according to US interests. Promoting moderation is thus regime survival tactic, designed to “enhance international standing and ensure foreign support”⁵².

The conjunction of economic liberalism and interreligious dialogue has thus allowed Abu Dhabi to further enhance its regional position and to become one of the natural interlocutors of the West. But speaking to the West in its own terms also enables the UAE to reach a less transparent objective : conveying a new religious model, and marginalizing the Emirate’s *par excellence* nemesis – political Islam.

⁴⁷ WARREN, David, *Rivals in the Gulf*, New York, Routledge 2021, p. 41.

⁴⁸ Sawab Center, Twitter account, available at : <https://twitter.com/sawabcenterfr>

⁴⁹ KRIEG, Andreas, “Nevermind Russia, the UAE has united with AIPAC to capture Washington”, *Middle East Eye*, March 13rd 2018.

⁵⁰ This narrative is displayed in several official documents and statements: the UAE Embassy in Washington displaying on its website that “the UAE has a new vision for the Middle East region—an alternative, future-oriented model that supports moderate Islam, empowers women, embraces diversity, encourages innovation and welcomes global engagement. These values have been ingrained in the UAE’s DNA since the country’s founding in 1971”.

⁵¹ KAYAGOLU, Turan, “Explaining Interfaith Dialogue in the Muslim World.” *Politics and Religion*, vol. 8, n°2, 2015, p. 237.

⁵² SHELINE, Anelle, “Middle East Regimes are Using ‘Moderate’ Islam to Stay in Power”, *Washington Post*, published May 12nd 2017.

II. Winning the cultural, ideological and political battles: promoting a moderate understanding of Islam enables the UAE to fight political Islam and maintain domestic authoritarianism

The UAE's par excellence nemesis: the Muslim Brotherhood

Although it has been put forward in the wake of the Arab spring, the UAE's enmity towards political Islam goes all the way back to the 70's⁵³, when the local Muslim Brotherhood group, Islah, was founded in Dubai. The group soon consolidated both its institutional and grassroots influence, albeit against a background of increasing violence originating from Islamist activists. Although no connection between those attacks and Islah was proven⁵⁴, the UAE security apparatus clamped down on the group, notably after Egyptian president Husni Mubarak's 1995 assassination attempt by Islamist activists, some of whom allegedly had links to al-Islah⁵⁵. In the meantime, the Sahwa movement had become more and more vocal in Saudi Arabia, criticizing the regime for allowing US soldiers on Saudi soil during the Gulf war⁵⁶. Demands of pluralism and democracy would broach the Monarchy's legitimacy – and lead to the crushing of the movement.

Such episodes have convinced Abu Dhabi's elite of the existential threat represented by political Islam to its regime's stability, and the necessity to annihilate it – which is where the UAE's religious strategy plays a role⁵⁷. As early as the 80's, Abu Dhabi gently encouraged the promotion of a quietist, neo-traditional and apolitical Sufism⁵⁸. Promoting this "moderate" form of Islam enabled the UAE to appear as frequentable while imposing a counter-ideological to that of the Muslim Brotherhood's political Islam⁵⁹⁶⁰. To counter political Islam's influence and appeal in the region, the UAE strove to adopt an assertive strategy that follows three pillars: positioning itself as the beacon of tolerance and counterterrorism in the Muslim world, building a network of religious institutions to spread its version of Islam, and co-opting religious leaders who tend to espouse the UAE's religious strategy⁶¹. This strategy has therefore been equated by some as an Emirati tool of "sharp power"⁶², a revisited concept of Joseph Nye's soft power.⁶³

Institutionalizing tolerance to marginalize the potential of political Islam

⁵³ Interview with David Roberts; Interview with Emma Soubrier; ROBERTS, David, "Qatar and the UAE : Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring", *Middle East Journal*, vol.71, n° 4 , 2017, pp. 544-562

⁵⁴ AL-NOQAIDAN, Mansoor, "Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi al-Imarat: Al-Tamaddad wa-l-Inhisar" in *Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi al-Khalij*, ed. by Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre Dubai, 2012, p. 61.

⁵⁵ ROBERTS, David, "Qatar and the UAE : Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring", *Middle East Journal*, vol.71, n° 4 , 2017, pp. 544-562.

⁵⁶ LACROIX, Stéphane, *Awakening Islam : the Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁵⁷ ULRICHSEN, Kristian Coates, "Using Religion for Geopolitical Ends in the Gulf Disputes between Abu Dhabi and Qatar", Berkley Center, August 31st 2020.

⁵⁸ Interview with David Roberts; ROBERTS, David, *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ KRIEG, Andreas, "On the sinister objectives of Abu Dhabi's 'crusade' against political Islam", Middle East Eye, published January 21st 2020.

⁶⁰ This threat perception was reinforced thanks to the rising inequalities between Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and the Emirates of the North – who could provide for potential mobilization reappropriated by Islamist movements.

⁶¹ AL-ANANI, Khalil, "The UAE's Manipulative Utilization of Religion", *Arab Center Washington DC*, published September 29th 2020.

⁶² KOURGIOTIS, Panos, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment", *Religions*, vol. 11, n°43, 2020.

⁶³ NYE, Joseph, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited", *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 14, n°4, 2019, 7-21.

The UAE has first established a religious network of institutions and initiatives in order to support its religious and political agenda in the region and beyond⁶⁴. At the forefront of these figures the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (FPPMS), created in 2013 and led by famous Sufi Mauritanian Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, whom Islam scholar Usama Al-Azami dubbed “counter-revolutionary Islam’s most important scholar”⁶⁵. The Forum gathers religious scholars from all over the Muslim world - particularly by those who are in line with the UAE’s domestic and regional policies - and was originally thought as a counterweight to the Qatari-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), founded in 2004 and starring the well-known Yusuf al-Qaradawi who headed it until 2018⁶⁶. Interestingly, Bin Bayyah was the vice president of the IUMS, until he resigned in September 2013 and was co-opted by Abu Dhabi as one of the spearheads of its religious strategy. According to the FPPMS’s website and available documents, its ambitions to promote the values of peace, tolerance, solidarity, justice, to counter religious violence⁶⁷. Officially sponsored by UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Forum features other famous Imams such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, a leading yet controversial American scholar known for his closeness to the former Trump administration⁶⁸. The annual convention, which is attended by both scholars and officials coming from all parts of the world, provides an acute overview of institution’s quietist and apolitical stance. At the 2014 inaugural forum, Bin Bayyah thus spoke of the religious obligation for subjects of Muslim states to be obedient to their rulers, while highlighting that calling for democracy in the Arab world was “essentially a declaration of war”⁶⁹. The Forum has further made major leeway abroad, opening local branches and organizing youth programs to expand its outreach, such as in Morocco⁷¹.

The other major religious institution is the Muslim Council of Elders (MCE), which was created in July 2014 and is based in Abu Dhabi. Led by Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyeb, it includes several other religious figures including Sheikh Sharif Ibrahim Saleh Al-Hussaini and Muhammad Quraish Shihab among others⁷². The MCE’s primary objective is stated in the front page of its official website : “bring[ing] the Islamic nation together by extinguishing the fire that threatens Islam’s humanitarian values and principles of tolerance, and putting an end to the sectarianism and violence that have plagued the Muslim world for decades”⁷³. The appointment of Ahmed al-Tayyeb, a close to al-Sissi and known for his anti-

⁶⁴ Mark Leonard and al. have identified the institutionalization of international networks as one of the components of public diplomacy, see LEONARD Mark and al, *Public Diplomacy*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002.

⁶⁵ E-mail exchange with Usama al-Azami

⁶⁶ AL-AZAMI, Usaama, “UAE’s forum for ‘promoting peace’ is another cynical PR initiative”, *Middle East Eye*, published December 10th 2018.

⁶⁷ Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, official website, accessible at <https://peacems.com/about-us/brief/goal/>.

⁶⁸ ESSA, Azad, “Hamza Yusuf and the struggle for the soul of the western Islam“, *Middle East Eye*, published August 8th 2019.

⁶⁹ Statement available on Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah’s website (in Arabic), see : <http://binbayyah.net> ; AL-AZAMI, Usaama, *Ibid*.

⁷⁰ The Forum’s political instrumentalization may further be illustrated considering the selective engagement of its representatives and leaders. Indeed, there is no record of any criticism related to Jamal Khashoggi’s murder or to the Saudi-UAE involvement in Yemen. But the 2018 attacks on the Pittsburgh synagogue have led to a quick response with Hassan Yusuf posting a letter of solidarity with the Jewish community on his Instagram account a few days later. See RAZA Hamzah, “Peace Forum is Just the Tip of the Iceberg of Some American Muslim Ulama Undermining Their Followers”, *Muslim Matters*, published December 17th 2018 ; AL-AZAMI, Usaama, *Ibid*.

⁷¹ <https://twitter.com/isoueda/status/1022565868008562690>

⁷² AL-ANANI, Khalil, “The UAE’s Manipulative Utilization of Religion”, *Arab Center Washington DC*, published September 29th 2020.

⁷³ Muslim Council of Elders, official website, accessible at : <https://www.muslim-elders.com/en>

Brotherhood views⁷⁴, as head of the institution, is no coincidence: the MCE's promotion of a "moderate form of Islam" aims at legitimizing it as the only tolerable form of Islam, consolidating the UAE's religious credentials and promotion of interfaith dialogue and tolerance.

Both institutions embody the UAE's armory for religious legitimation against Qatari-based organizations and media outlets⁷⁵, such as Al Jazeera and the aforementioned IUMS⁷⁶. Such involvement is instrumental in maintaining the UAE's political grip and influence in the region, but also abroad. Indeed, the UAE's ties with Al-Azhar culminated in a coordinated effort from Egypt, the UAE and Russia to promote moderate Islam and counter the influence of political Islam during the Grozny conference held in Chechnya in August 2016⁷⁷. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, a personal friend of Mohammed bin Zayed, called for a return to a more tolerant version of Islam that rejected political activism – a scantily hidden criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated organizations⁷⁸. Notable was the absence of other Islamic streams, such as the Salafi one – causing outrage among Wahhabi Ulamas – as well as the fact that the Abu Dhabi-based Tabah foundation organized this conference. The event represents, according to Kristin Smith Diwan, "a concrete expression of the new Emirati-Egyptian-Russian axis seeking to neutralize political Islam and counter Islamic extremism with support for more tolerant Sunni traditions"⁷⁹.

Another dimension of this strategy lies in relation building. According to Leonard⁸⁰, this process is led by the mediation of key figures (religious leaders; scholars, thinkers, and politicians) at the level of the populations. In this sense, the UAE has co-opted several Sufi figures and leaders and supported them financially as to promote their message and activities⁸¹. In addition to the aforementioned names, the UAE expanded its influence to include other figures⁸² than only Sufi sheikhs, such as Sheikh al-Habib Ali al-Jifri, a Yemeni Sufi scholar who founded the Abu Dhabi-based Tabah Foundation in 2005, and Egypt's former Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa, a staunch supporter of President Abdelfattah Al-Sisi⁸³. More recently, the UAE started to support new preachers and religious personalities such as Jordan-born Salafi preacher Waseem Yousef, a staunch advocate of UAE foreign policy^{84 85 86}.

⁷⁴ Membership to the organization was further forbidden by Al Azhar's International Fatwa Center in 2020 : see "Al-Azhar yafti bi harma-t al-indhimâm li-jamaât al-ikhwân", Middle East Online, published 21st December 2020, available at : <https://middle-east-online.com/الأزهر-يقتي-بحرمة-الانضمام-لجماعة-الاخوان>

⁷⁵ AL-AZAMI, Usaama, "UAE's forum for 'promoting peace' is another cynical PR initiative", *Middle East Eye*, published December 10th 2018.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ CAFIERO, Giorgio, "Islam in the UAE's Foreign Policy", *Politics Today*, published March 6th 2019.

⁷⁸ KRIEG, Andreas, "On the sinister objectives of Abu Dhabi's 'crusade' against political Islam", *Middle East Eye*, published January 21st 2020.

⁷⁹ DIWAN SMITH, Kristin, "Who Is Sunni?: Chechnya Islamic Conference Opens Window on Intra-Faith Rivalry", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, published September 16th 2016.

⁸⁰ LEONARD, Mark and al, *Public Diplomacy*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002

⁸¹ KOURGIOTIS, Panos, "Moderate Islam' Made in the United Arab Emirates: Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Containment", *Religions*, vol. 11, n°43, 2020.

⁸² AL-ANANI, Khalil, "The UAE's Manipulative Utilization of Religion", *Arab Center Washington DC*, published September 29th 2020.

⁸³ KOURGIOTIS, Panos, *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ "Wasseem Yussuf yuhani' al-Imarât wa Israi'il 'ala al-injâz al-'adhim", *Zaman al-Wasl*, published August 14th 2020, available at : <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/126879>

⁸⁵ In line with the aforementioned ranking politics, Al-Buti was awarded the Dubai International Holy Quran Award's "the Islamic Personality of the Year" in 2004, whereas Ahmed al-Tayyeb was awarded the same prize in 2013 along with the Sheikh Zayed Book Award's "Cultural Personality of the Year" prize in April 2013.

⁸⁶ None of these Ulamas however come from the UAE. Such observation could indicate the UAE's lack of human resources as well as the willingness to exploit these scholar's stardom and international stature. But some have

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the Abraham Accords have impacted UAE support among religious scholars. In the wake of the UAE's normalization with Israëï, two key personalities have resigned from the FPPMS: Muslim-American activist Aisha al-Adawiya and Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, the latter saying the normalization "was a stab in the back of Palestinian and Muslims, and a betrayal for Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem"⁸⁷. Even Hamza Yusuf, the Forum's vice president, distanced himself from the statement, asserting that he did "not engage in or endorse geopolitical strategies or treaties" and that his "allegiance is and has always been with the oppressed peoples of Palestine, whether Muslim, Christian or otherwise"⁸⁸. These examples highlight what Yahya Birt calls the high price of government patronage as Ulamas generally have to openly support or maintain silence about autocracy at home, while speaking of democracy, pluralism, and minority rights to Western audiences"⁸⁹.

When religious tolerance meets domestic political intolerance

Used as a geopolitical sharp power tool by the UAE via the organization of international conferences and the co-opting of religious figures, the promotion of a moderate Islam becomes a "not-so-quietist" counterweight to political Islam⁹⁰. Furthermore, it provides a moral justification for repressing the political opposition, equating political Islam with terrorism – a critical element of Abu Dhabi's communication argument towards the West⁹¹. The UAE indeed took serious measures to clamp down on the movement, stripping 6 Brotherhood members of their citizenship in 2011, while launching a wave of arrests in March 2012. In parallel, the UAE raised an aggressive campaign against the organization, presenting it as a security threat for the Gulf, and accusing it of nurturing transnational loyalties and promoting violence. This accusative campaign eventually led to the UAE's declaration of the Brotherhood as terrorist organization in November 2014^{92 93 94}. Abu Dhabi went as far as to legally target religious non-governmental organizations and register Islamic associations tolerated in the West, accusing them of connivance with violent Islamist ideas and beliefs⁹⁵.

also pointed at the UAE's possible fear to endow itself with a fully-fledged class of Ulamas that could potentially become autonomous. Interview with David Roberts; Interview with Courtney Freer.

⁸⁷ FAROOQ, Umar, "Grand Mufti of Jerusalem resigns from UAE peace forum over Israel statement", *Middle East Eye*, published August 26th 2020.

⁸⁸ DORSEY, James, "UAE recognition of Israel dents Emirati religious soft power", *WION News*, published September 10th 2020.

⁸⁹ BIRT, Yahya, "Blowing in the Wind : Trumpism and Traditional Islam in America", *Medium.com*, published Feb 14th 2017.

⁹⁰ KRIEG, Andreas, "On the sinister objectives of Abu Dhabi's 'crusade' against political Islam", *Middle East Eye*, published January 21st 2020.

⁹¹ Scholarship on foreign policy indeed argue that domestic factors can be a powerful driver of foreign policy, see NONNEMAN Gerd, (ed.), *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2005. The regional and international levels are far from irrelevant, but it is the impact of the threats, opportunities, and trends emanating from them that is important.

⁹² BASKAN, Birol, "The Pope, the UAE, and the Muslim Brotherhood", *Middle East Institute*, published February 13rd 2019.

⁹³ In that sense, the UAE could better be compared to the Chinese model, that rests on soft power campaigns – ecological issues, climate change – while crushing political dissidents, civil society and ethnic groups on the domestic side.

⁹⁴ The UAE's efforts to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood have also played out in the West, particularly in the United Kingdom. Former UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash made a speech before Conservative party-close Policy Exchange in July 2018, in which he qualified the Muslim Brotherhood as a "gateway drug to jihadism of all kinds", see CAFIERO, Georgio, "The UAE Campaign Against Political Islam: Implications For London", *Lobellog*, published December 27th 2018.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

In a nutshell, determining what “moderate” Islam is enables the UAE to equate political Islam with the most extreme and violent movements so as to discredit the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates before the international community – especially the West. Acting as a countermodel, the UAE portrays itself as the exact opposite – a tolerant and religiously peaceful state, a portrait bolstered by the Pope’s recent visit to the UAE. But this image also endows the UAE with a religious justification to its foreign policy objectives.

III. This “geopolitics of tolerance” provide the UAE’s political agenda with powerful religious justifications – which are however not exempt of contradictions

Vindicating foreign policy choices with religious justifications: the cases of Qatar and Israel

The Qatar Blockade, triggered on June 5th 2017 at the UAE’s initiative, is one of the most acute illustrations of how the UAE builds political rivalries on a religious discourse. Accusing Qatar of being linked with terrorist and extremist groups, and to threaten Gulf security, the UAE has sought to use its network of scholars and institutions to cover this politically contentious decision under the mantle of the promotion of “moderate islam” and counterterrorism.

Less than 48 hours after the announcement of the blockade, the FPPMS issued a very critical statement geared towards Qatar. Entitled “a call to the Qatari government to change its ways and correct its mistakes”, the statement argued that “the Forum has followed with extreme unease the activities of the Qatari government in ripping apart Arab ranks, rebelling against the Gulf family, and insulting the generous faith of Islam by supporting terrorist groups, inciting political instability in safe countries, and inflaming sectarian conflict”⁹⁶. It is interesting that these accusations are in line with those of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, conveyed in the different statements made by their Ministries of Foreign Affairs as well as in the set of 13 demands conditioning the lift of the sanctions on Qatar.

Unsurprisingly, the statement starts with a reference to the UAE as “a country of tolerance and peace-making”⁹⁷. Much more symbolic is the fact that the statement appeared on the UAE’s state-owned Emirates News Agency before its publication by the forum^{98 99}. The UAE’s campaign gained further heft thanks to the support of Egyptian and Saudi religious bodies, but also of the aforementioned Muslim Council of Elders¹⁰⁰, which condemned Qatar’s alleged funding of terrorist organizations and threatening of the region’s security¹⁰¹.

Nevertheless, none of the scholars associated with the FPPMS have expressed their stance on the matter. Neither its president, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah – whose personal website hosts no mention of the FPPMS’s statement – nor its vice president Hamza Yusuf. But this is not to say that the Al Nahyans do not exert discipline over them. David H. Warren indeed argues that the UAE leadership has more subtle means of discipline available to them, in

⁹⁶ Translation of the statement from the Forum Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies regarding the Blockade of Qatar Issued on June 7th 2017, <https://twitter.com/PPeaceNews/status/872415235512172545>

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Emirates News Agency statement, published June 7th 2017, accessible at <http://wam.ae/ar/details/1395302617984>.

⁹⁹ AL-AZAMI, Usaama, “Gulf crisis: How autocrats use religious scholars against Qatar“, *Middle East Eye*, published August 9th 2017.

¹⁰⁰ DIWAN SMITH, Kristin, “Qatar Crisis Stirs Islamic Debates“, *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, published September 20th 2017.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

contrast to states such as neighboring Saudi Arabia where recalcitrant ‘ulamā’ are imprisoned or executed¹⁰².

Using these institutions as communication outlets is all the more critical for the UAE because it lacks a tool like Qatari channel Al-Jazeera, which would prove valuable for shaping Arab and Western public opinion and driving the international community’s attention away from the wars in Yemen and in Libya^{103 104}.

Another stark illustration of the use of religion for external policy objectives lies in the conclusion of the rather controversial Abraham Accords, which have sparked scathing criticism from all parts of the Arab world. The UAE have indeed relied on their religious strategy to present its normalization with Israel as a concrete translation of its tolerant foreign policy¹⁰⁵. Such political move was soon justified by Islamic precedents, Abdullah bin Bayyah highlighting in several statements the continuity of the Abraham accords with the "the many examples of cases of reconciliations and peacemaking in accordance with the public good and circumstances", such as the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah by the Prophet Muhammad with idolaters in Mecca in 628^{106 107}.

But the UAE’s religious network and institutions have also been used as tools of public diplomacy. The FPPMS published a now-deleted statement arguing that normalization “has stopped Israel from extending its sovereignty over Palestinian lands” and “was a means to promote peace and stability across the world”¹⁰⁸. Far from being odd, such statement reveals the fact that the FPPMS has been a discreet forum of discussion with Israeli and Zionist organizations, under the premise of tolerance, and with the purpose of attracting Jewish, Israeli and Zionist organizations in order to strengthen ties with the Jewish civil society and prepare the normalization with Israel¹⁰⁹.

Again, it is interesting to notice that this decision was far from generating a staunch support from UAE-backed ulamas. As recalled earlier, some members of the Forum’s board complained that the statement has been published without discussions during an official meeting¹¹⁰. Vice-President Hamza Yusuf, who has come in for harsh criticism for appearing as one of the signatories of the FPPMS’ statement, said that he “did not engage in or endorse geopolitical strategies or treaties”, and that “[his] allegiance is and has always been with the oppressed peoples of Palestine”¹¹¹. Drawing on Yusuf’s example, Aisha al Adawiyah went a

¹⁰² WARREN, David, *Rivals in the Gulf*, New York, Routledge 2021, p. 41.

¹⁰³ SAMUEL-AZRAN, Tal. “Al-Jazeera, Qatar and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy”. *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 59, pp. 1293–1311.

¹⁰⁴ This proved to be one of Abu Dhabi’s biggest weaknesses, with Al Jazeera constantly releasing videos about the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the “world’s worst humanitarian crises” see GATHMANN, Sandra, “Why is Yemen at War?” *Al Jazeera English*, published November 3rd 2019.

¹⁰⁵ AMASHA, Muhammad, “The UAE-sponsored “Islams” : Mapping the Terrain”, *Maydan*, published September 15th 2020.

¹⁰⁶ WARREN, David, “The modernist roots of Islamic autocracy : Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah and the UAE-Israel Peace Deal”, *Jadaliyya*, published September 17th 2020.

¹⁰⁷ WINTER, Ofir, “Islam in the Service of Peace: Religious Aspects of the Abraham Accord”, *Institute for National Security Studies*, published September 6th 2020.

¹⁰⁸ FAROOQ, Umar, “Prominent American activist resigns from UAE peace forum over Israel statement”, *Middle East Eye*, published August 24th 2020.

¹⁰⁹ FAROOQ, Umar, “Influential Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf criticized for backing UAE-Israel deal”, *Middle East Eye*, published 21st August 2020.

¹¹⁰ DORSEY, James, “UAE recognition of Israel dents Emirati religious soft power”, *WION News*, published September 10th 2020.

¹¹¹ See Hamza Yusuf’s Facebook account page : <https://www.facebook.com/shaykhhamzayusuf/>

step further by qualifying this decision as a “breach of trust”, clarifying that she was a “staunch supporter” of the Palestinian people¹¹².

A strong policy showing cracks? The contradictions of the UAE’s religious strategy on the ground

A powerful justificative narrative, the UAE’s religious policy isn’t exempt of blatant contradictions. As realpolitik hits back on the ground, the UAE can go as far as backing the most violent groups, including Salafis and Jihadis, as long as it contributes to curbing the influence of political Islam.

In Libya, staunch UAE support to Marshall Khalifa Haftar is in line with this objective – but in sharp contradiction with the promotion of peace and tolerance in Muslim societies and abroad, the latter having strong ties to Salafi organizations that are part of the forces fighting under his command in eastern Libya¹¹³. Furthermore, it is longer a secret that the UAE have been backing Madkhali-Salafi militias, followers of an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim doctrine. The head of the group, Rabi’ Al Madkhali, has issued a fatwa backing Khalifa Haftar in 2017, arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood is “more threatening for the Salafis than could the Jews or the Christians be”¹¹⁴ – an argument in line with Haftar’s willingness to crush any of his political opponents.

Whereas in Libya the UAE is one of a number of parties supporting Haftar, in Yemen Abu Dhabi was for a number of years the main backer of secessionist and Salafist forces in the south of the country¹¹⁵. Although the UAE’s withdrawal has provided an exit strategy, it does not fully curtail Emirati influence on the ground¹¹⁶. The UAE have thus backed several Salafist groups led by Adil Abduh Fari al-Dabhani, more commonly known as “Abu al-Abbas,” in the city of Taiz in southwest Yemen, to fight on its behalf¹¹⁷. The latter further publicly acknowledged UAE support to its militia in a December 2018 interview¹¹⁸. In Aden, the UAE supported Vice-President of the Southern Transitional Council Hani ben Brik, a controversial Salafi preacher accused of orchestrating the assassination of dozens of political opponents and religious figures in the region. An Associated Press investigation further proved the existence of secret UAE deals with Al-Qaida fighters, “paying some to leave key cities and towns and letting others retreat with weapons, equipment and wads of looted cash”¹¹⁹.

Arriving in Yemen, the UAE’s fought for two primary objectives : winning the civil war against the Houthis, Iranian-backed Shiite rebels, and countering violent extremist groups, notably AQAP and ISIS with the US¹²⁰. But unsurprisingly, one of its underlying objectives,

¹¹² See Aisha Al Adwiya’s Facebook account page : <https://www.facebook.com/aisha.aladawiya/>

¹¹³ SALAH ALI, Ahmed, “Haftar and Salafism: A Dangerous Game”, *Atlantic Council*, published June 6th 2017.

¹¹⁴ “Addressing the Rise of Libya’s Madkhali-Salafis”, *International Crisis Group*, MENA report n°200, April 25th 2019.

¹¹⁵ SALISBURY, Peter, “Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy“, *Chatham House*, July 1st 2020.

¹¹⁶ BASKAN, Birol, “The Pope, the UAE, and the Muslim Brotherhood”, *Middle East Institute*, published February 13rd 2019.

¹¹⁷ ALJAMRA, Helal, “Saudi and Emirati Duplicity Over Yemeni Militant Abu al-Abbas Raises Questions”, *Inside Arabia*, published October 25th 2018.

¹¹⁸ RAGHAVAN, Sudarsan, “The U.S. put a Yemeni warlord on a terrorist list. One of its close allies is still arming him”, *Washington Post*, published December 29th 2018.

¹¹⁹ MICHAEL, Maggie, “AP Investigation: US allies, al-Qaida battle rebels in Yemen”, Associated Press, published August 7th, 2018.

¹²⁰ JALAL, Ibrahim, “The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong”, *Middle East Institute*, published 25th February 2020.

especially starting from 2016¹²¹, was the neutralization of the influence of Islamist political party Al Islah.¹²² These choices reveal considerable strategic differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE : Abu Dhabi's prime objective is to counter political Islam in any of its forms, while Riyadh's primary objective is to fight the Houthis, both of which are seen as existential threats to each of the player¹²³.

In sum, the tolerance narrative does not resist field investigation, considering the alien alliances and partnerships formed by the UAE with Salafis and/or violent groups and organizations. The politics of tolerance may thus very well be a way for the UAE to build a tolerant narrative that diverts the attention of the international community off the UAE's military involvement in Yemen and in Libya, as well as its political authoritarianism on the domestic side.

Conclusion

This essay argued, despite what one could originally think, that the UAE's religious strategy does not operate in a vacuum. One of the pillars of the UAE's branding strategy, aiming at "overcoming smallness"¹²⁴, it displays a rather astute image of tolerance and multiculturalism that fosters its image as a beacon of liberalism, in a region where Islam is often seen as a liability. This religious strategy draws on a reticular network of institutions, scholars, and events allowing the UAE to forecast its influence in all parts of the world. Consubstantial to the promotion of a "moderate Islam" is the institutionalization of a fully-fledged counter-terrorist policy, legitimizing the Emirates in the eyes of the West by speaking the same political language. Such status finally provides the Emirati leaders with a justification to reach their primary objectives: curtailing the influence of political Islam, imposing a counter-revolutionary political model acting as a counterweight to the Arab spring, and diverting the attention of the international community off the UAE's involvement and influence in Libya and Yemen – despite its official withdrawal in 2020. While the UAE strives to advance its political goals, soft power and small state dynamics are directed towards the strengthening of the UAE's reputation as a progressive state that helps the Arab region counter-extremism. But it remains to be seen whether this reputation will sustain over the upcoming years.

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¹²¹Ibrahim Jalal explains it with "the appointment of Lt. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar — who is widely perceived to be pro-Muslim Brotherhood — as the replacement for Vice-President Khaled Mahfoudh Bahah, who was a consensus figure locally, regionally, and internationally, prompted the UAE to reassess its Yemen policy", see *Ibid.*

¹²² MICHAEL, Maggie, *Ibid.*

¹²³ Therefore, while the UAE is categorically opposed to collaboration with factions from al-Islah and prefers resorting to the Abu al-Abbas Battalion, Saudi Arabia doesn't deprive itself from backing fighters aligned with al-Islah. Both groups have been battling against each other for the control of the city of Taiz, thus weakening the UAE-Saudi coalition.

¹²⁴ MILLER Rory, VERHOEVEN Harry, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and strategic realignment in the Gulf", *International Politics*, vol. 57, 2020, pp. 13-14.

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INTERVIEWS

This paper also draws on several interviews and/or e-mail exchanges with scholars (Courtney Freer, Stéphane Lacroix, David Roberts, Usama al-Azami) and professionals (2 former diplomats working at the French Embassy in Qatar, 1 former diplomat working at the French Embassy in the United Arab Emirates). This paper does not reflect the opinions of any of these individuals and institutions.