

NEAR IN FEAR AND FAR IN ASPIRATION: CONVERGENCES AND DIFFERENCES OF THE KSA-UAE ALLIANCE

ANALYSIS



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Abstract: The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are often portrayed by the media and analysts as a single regional power group. Although the alliance is not at stake, it has a much more complex nature than is most commonly represented. The two Gulf monarchies show different stances and preferences on a variety of regional issues. As a consequence, the relationship's structure is volatile. Through the analysis of the drivers behind the strategic alliance between KSA and the UAE, the article seeks to highlight the factors that determine convergence and softening as well as divergence.

Introduction

The so-called Arab Quartet, a coalition comprising the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE, Emirates), Egypt, and Bahrain, is often described by media and analysts as a cohesive and monolithic bloc. In the multipolar Middle East, characterized by rivalries based less on identity politics and more on power competition, the Quartet faces rivals - Turkey, Iran, and Qatar - to shape the future regional order. But, is it appropriate to refer to a bloc or does the coalition represent an oversimplification while the reality presents many differences and even some cleavage? While such predominant reading is not entirely wrong, it has several shortcomings. Indeed, coalition members differ on a variety of regional issues. Leaving aside Bahrain, which appears to be the most passive and subordinate to coalition logic, the differences concern the other three Quartet members. Despite remaining engaged with the UAE and KSA, Egypt has launched an aligned but increasingly autonomous regional policy.¹ The prospect of a significant increase in revenues from hydrocarbon exports has revived Cairo's ambitions.² Egypt, thanks to Zohr, the largest gas field in the Mediterranean Sea, is a candidate to become the future energy hub between the southern and the northern Mediterranean shores.³

A different discourse concerns the long-lasting alliance between the two coalition pillars, KSA and the UAE. Although the alliance is not at stake, it has a much more complex nature than is most commonly represented. The unalterable picture with which the relationship between the UAE and KSA is often presented, even by regional rivals, does not reflect the reality. The relationship's structure is volatile. In the last decade, their positions have gotten closer yet farther away while remaining firmly tied to each other. Determined by a multiplicity of intertwined factors, this trend has mirrored the dynamics of the accordion. This paper aims to understand the drivers behind the strategic alliance between KSA and the UAE by focusing on the factors that determine convergence and softening as well as divergence. Among the questions that the research seeks to answer, should we consider the tie between the UAE and KSA as a firm and lasting alliance? Or should we consider the cleavages as indicators of an intra-alliance rift? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this alliance?

Should we consider the tie between the UAE and KSA as a firm and lasting alliance? Or should we consider the cleavages as indicators of an intra-alliance rift?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this alliance

To answer these questions, the study examines the changes that have taken place at the international and regional level, with particular emphasis on how the agents (states, policy-makers, or leaders) perceive these changes. The agent-structure dynamic is interpreted through the perspective of Giddens' structuration theory, according to which the agents and the structures are interrelated and mutually constructed.⁴ The studied hypothesis is that the main factor that favors the consolidation of the relationship lies in the perception of insecurity prevailing within the two Gulf monarchies in the post-Arab uprising era. Further, the assumption is that the ambitions of the leaders and different preferences in the shape of the regional order have contributed to an increase of diverging points.

1. When change generates insecurity: the 2011 watershed

The premise is that the relationship and the alignment between KSA and the UAE are not entirely new. Historically, the two monarchies have shared a common approach to regional security. A mutual commitment formalized by the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was supported by the then Emir of Abu Dhabi Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Contrary to popular belief, the relationship between the two monarchies has never really been asymmetrical. The main concern of Emirati leaders has always been the status within the regional and global hierarchy.⁵ Over the years, the UAE has worked to achieve a higher status through a two-fold policy: the politics of constructive engagement in regional disputes⁶ and a complex aid program, which allowed this small country to construct an image of financial generosity at regional and international levels.⁷ Emirates, while maintaining a strong link with Riyadh, has continued to operate autonomously, in pursuit of a greater international footprint. Evidence of the extent to which the UAE has always jealously maintained its autonomy from the Saudis' approach was the position adopted towards Iran in the mid-2000s. The UAE maintained a neutral position on Iran's nuclear program, giving Tehran the benefit of the doubt. The Emirati attitude towards Iran reflected the strategy of 'constructive engagement' sought by the Emir Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, characterized by policies that sometimes appear to be contradictory because they were conducted within a framework of local rivalries,

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particularly between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Since the formation of the UAE in 1971, the domestic political dynamics have been marked by the rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Evidence of this was the legal clause included in the Emirates constitution (Article 9) which provided the construction for a neutral capital city: Al-Karama. Abu Dhabi became the provisional capital until 1996 when an amendment removed Article 9, certifying the Emirate as the political heart of the country. Dubai, meanwhile, with lower oil reserves, has invested heavily in trade and the development of its port, becoming the UAE's economic core.⁸ An important aspect from a political point of view is that the Dubai port has historically served as a major trading link with Iran. Therefore, in addition to a long-standing rivalry, the different interests of the two Emirates have led to conflicting regional preferences.⁹

From KSA's angle, the scope of ambition is traditionally quite different. Since its intervention in the Yemeni civil war, the so-called Arab Cold War (1962-70),¹⁰ Riyadh has had the ambition to take lead of the Arab world. The Iranian revolution and the processes of sectarianization of regional politics following the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003) have reconfigured Saudi aspirations by turning them into a quest for leadership of the Sunni world.¹¹ For many years, oil and Islam (Wahhabism) were the pillars of Saudi policy, the main purpose of which was to contain Iranian influence. Up to 2011, Riyadh adopted an attitude of 'cautious diplomacy' marked by a greater use of diplomatic and financial tools rather than military ones. Indeed, KSA avoided confrontational policies with its rival and conducted a foreign policy based on preserving stability and status quo in the region, while pursuing its interests through financial means, known as Realpolitik.¹² In the eighties, economic resources more than ideological ones motivated KSA and the other Gulf monarchies to back the Iraqi war against Iran, albeit in a discordant manner.¹³ At the beginning of the new millennium, the shared dependence on the US security umbrella and a concern with the enlargement of the Iranian sphere of influence was the ground around which KSA and the UAE further strengthened their ties. However, the two US wars in Afghanistan (2002) and Iraq (2003) left a power vacuum that favored the expansion of the Iranian regional leverage. Indeed, although KSA-Iraq relations were practically

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non-existent, Saddam Hussein's regime was the main obstacle for the spread of the Islamic Republic's influence in the Gulf and beyond. As the Iranian presence in the area grew, the two Gulf monarchies were faced with a two-fold challenge in terms of both the balance of power in the region and the transnational ideological threat posed by the spread of revolution and political Shiism.

The situation dragged on until 2011 and deflagrated in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Indeed, 2011 was a watershed for the two Gulf monarchies, which shared a common perception of a growing insecurity. Since that moment, KSA and the UAE have stepped away from conciliatory foreign policy and embraced a more assertive approach. The different approach to regional disputes revealed the intention of both the two actors to defuse potential threats. Therefore, the issues to be addressed are **i.** what has generated insecurity in the two Gulf monarchies to push them towards an increasing alignment of their regional policies?, and **ii.** what prompted them to change their approach to the regional issues by adopting a more interventionist approach?

Several factors contributed to increasing the security concerns of the two Gulf monarchies. The 2008 financial crisis accelerated the transition from the brief unipolar American interlude to a new global order marked by the emergence of China. The Obama administration's introduction of a new agenda ('pivot to Asia') led to the downsizing of the US military presence in the region, as evidenced by the withdrawal of troops from Iraq. The decrease of US strategic interest in the Middle East's issues persuaded several stakeholders to change their approach to one of security. KSA and the UAE chose to diversify their international partnership, forging relations with both China and Russia, and to enhance their defensive capabilities.¹⁴

The transformation was boosted by regional developments too. The outbreak of the Arab Uprisings intensified concern within the two Gulf monarchies. The KSA-UAE fear that the upheavals might expand and threaten their domestic stability was compounded by the activism in Turkey and Qatar that tried to benefit from the revolutionary wave. Indeed, the increasing convergence of interests and the common revisionist approach to the regional order's structure and norms has brought Turkey and Qatar closer together, leading to an alignment based on the support of Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt. The Saudi royal family, led by King Abdullah, has feared that Islamist movements could challenge the Kingdom's claim to be the protector of Islam.

For the Emirates, on the other hand, the developments of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia hit a sensitive nerve: political Islam. The legitimacy of the Emirates' political system is granted by the mix of dynastic loyalty and economic power and only partially based on religion. The UAE's official religion is Islam, the country has Sharia courts, and Emirati rulers sometimes use religious language as the glue among the five less wealthy Emirates - Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain - where the Islamic social practices are more widespread. The regime's institutional character is one of the factors that lead the UAE to consider any form of political Islam, above all the local al-Islah party,¹⁵ as a threat to the regime's survival.¹⁶ Furthermore, the instability generated by the 2011 protests and the outbreak of various civil conflicts contributed to changing the nature of the Middle East order. Formerly influential states such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq have lost importance and become subject to the influence of other regional actors. These processes have prompted the creation of three rival poles – the Saudi-led bloc or Arab Quartet (KSA, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain), the Iran-led Shia bloc (Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and the Assad regime) and the Qatar-Turkey bloc – to project power and influence onto weak and disputed states, reproducing a new version of what Raymond Hinnebusch calls a regional system of “fragmented multipolarity.”¹⁷ Therefore, the regional system has become much more open to political power competition. While Iran's growing influence and aggregate power constitute the main threat perceived by KSA, the rise of political Islam and the increase in power of its main backers, Turkey and Qatar, triggered the perception of insecurity in the UAE.

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In the months following the outbreak of the revolts, the primary interest of the two monarchies was to halt the spread of instability and support ‘friendly’ regimes. This approach did not prevent the UAE and KSA from trying to take advantage of the situation, especially to the detriment of Iran. The two Gulf monarchies, pursuing a sectarian approach to the Syrian conflict, increased their support to the Sunni groups active in opposition to the al-Assad regime.¹⁸ In Syria more than elsewhere, Riyadh chose, at least initially, to align its policies with those of Turkey and Qatar in the name of intra-Sunni solidarity.¹⁹ The early alignment camouflaged different agendas as evidenced by the choice to support different local actors on the ground.²⁰ Abu Dhabi agreed, lukewarmly, with the Saudi choice. The Emirates, indeed, had believed that Turkish presence in the Levant is undue meddling in Arab affairs.²¹ This position was later also assumed concerning the Turkish intervention in Libya.²² However, at the time, the UAE decided to support Riyadh’s position.

2. Determinants behind the interventionist approach into regional issues

Between 2013 and 2015, the international and regional contexts changed further. The US conciliatory approach towards Iran, formalized by the nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), confirmed the fears of the two Gulf monarchies. The KSA-UAE long-standing convergence of interests with the American ally began to falter.²³ Furthermore, the prospect of a democratic candidate, Hilary Clinton, did not suggest any possible future change to the Obama administration’s strategic approach to the region. The increase in feelings of insecurity drove the two Gulf monarchies to strengthen their bilateral cooperation outside the traditional institutional framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Moreover, the deposition of the Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent rise of the General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, to whom the two Gulf monarchies gave financial support,²⁴ increased the KSA-UAE belief that they could reconfigure the regional order according to their preferences. Driven by the aim of minimising threats to their domestic stability by

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tackling them far from their own soil, the UAE and KSA advanced an assertive agenda built on a growing capacity to project power and intervene - also militarily - across the region. In other words, the latest international and regional developments persuaded both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to transform their regional approach by assuming an interventionist attitude. As a consequence, the UAE and KSA shifted their containment policy into a more active rollback one against the potential threats. Saudi and Emirati leaders decided to increase military and political coordination and developed a strategy to counter what they perceived as Iranian 'expansionism' in the wider region²⁵ and to confront transnational political movements. As a consequence, in place of their prior 'quiet diplomacy,' there was an increasing show of assertiveness and muscle flexing in response to security concerns.

This change resulted in the 2015 decision to intervene militarily in the Yemen civil war. In March, KSA launched an attack on Yemen under the name 'Operation Decisive Storm' with the announced aim of restoring the legitimate government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi after the Houthis had gradually taken control of the capital Sana'a in a coup d'état. The Saudi intentions were that the operation should have lasted only a week, especially thanks to the large coalition assembled by Riyadh.²⁶ The military intervention in Yemen also led to the enlargement of the competition grounds beyond the traditional regional borders. Although the quest for influence by Middle Eastern actors has long since increased interactions with the Horn of Africa (HOA) countries,²⁷ the worsening of the Yemeni crisis has heightened the geostrategic relevance of the Red Sea arena.²⁸ The main threat perceived by both allies, the UAE and KSA, was the Iranian influence on the western shore of the Red Sea, from where Tehran was able to supply the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Therefore, in order to cut off the supply lines and push Iran out of the area, the Sunni powers began to invite the support of the HOA countries.²⁹ Since the launch of 'Decisive Storm,' the two Gulf powers have invested more than 2 billion dollars in the HOA, expanding their leverage and military presence on the Red Sea's western shore. As a result, some countries traditionally aligned with Tehran, such as Eritrea and Sudan, broke relations with Iran, and chose to actively support the Saudi-led coalition. After 2015, all the HOA states, some openly (Eritrea, Sudan) and some less so (Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia), aligned themselves with the Sunni powers.

These changes in leadership were accompanied with a change in the decision-making process, which shifted from a consultative system to a more centralised process. The individualization of the power by Mohammed Bin Salman in Riyadh and by Mohammed Bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi has increased the weight of the so-called idiosyncratic variable in the foreign policy decisions of the two states

Behind the KSA-UAE shift in approach, there were also domestic determinants often underestimated. Besides the common concern generated by the downsizing of the US military deployment and the shake-up of regional balances with the rise of Islamist movements, there has also been the rise of new in-house leadership that has strengthened the alignment of KSA-UAE, and that has prompted the adoption of a more interventionist policy. Between 2011 and 2015, the simultaneous rise of the young Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and the crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) in Abu Dhabi began. Changes in the Saudi leadership began with the death of King Abdullah and the ascendance of King Salman to the throne, who then appointed his son Mohammed Bin Salman as deputy crown prince.³⁰ The then Minister of Defence Mohammed Bin Salman launched his speedy climb up the royal hierarchy, which led him to become next in line for the Saudi throne in 2017. Likewise, Mohammed Bin Salman has steered the country's foreign policy, enhancing its military capabilities and its willingness to intervene in regional issues.³¹

Mohammed Bin Zayed's course was longer. By the late 2000s, Mohammed Bin Zayed had become the *de facto* center of influence and authority, first within Abu Dhabi itself and then, in the 2010s, across the UAE as a whole.³² The rise of Mohammed Bin Zayed coincided with a change in the Emirates' inner power relations in favour of Abu Dhabi.³³ Abu Dhabi is not only the political heart of the Emirati federal state but also the promoter of a hard-line towards Iran. It holds an attitude of rupture compared to the preferences of Dubai, the financial core of the state. Dubai historically has promoted a soft policy towards Tehran both for commercial interests and due to the presence of a large Iranian diaspora. Under the guidance of Abu Dhabi and the tutelage of its crown prince (Mohammed Bin Zayed), the UAE adopted regional interventionism and increased its power projection by opening military bases functional to its regional aims.³⁴ The strategic outposts serve both for competing with other regional players that

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are active in the area, such as Turkey and Iran, and for strengthening the position of the UAE within regional organisations such as the GCC and the Arab League.³⁵ Since 2015, both crown Princes can be considered as *de facto* rulers of the two countries. The two, like most of the regional leaders, share a personalist conception of power and an overall vision for the regional future. Additionally, Mohammed Bin Zayed and Mohammed Bin Salman enjoy a relationship of mutual esteem that has inevitably given the KSA-UAE alignment a deeper dimension.³⁶ These changes in leadership were accompanied with a change in the decision-making process, which shifted from a consultative system to a more centralised process.³⁷ The individualization of the power by Mohammed Bin Salman in Riyadh and by Mohammed Bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi has increased the weight of the so-called idiosyncratic variable in the foreign policy decisions of the two states.

As the military operations in Yemen protracted, the two partners have widened their sphere of action along the Red Sea. Although the search for alliances and political support between KSA and the UAE seemed to be driven by the same rationale as a result of the strong personal ties between the two ruling figures, a more careful analysis highlights significant differences. During this phase, some traits of a discrepancy between KSA and the UAE emerged for the first time. The two Gulf monarchies were driven by joint goals, but they differed substantially in their strategic priorities. While from Riyadh's angle, the presence in the Red Sea and the HOA was part of the broader rollback strategy against Iran, for Abu Dhabi the engagement in the area was intended to counter the growing Turkish influence and the protection of its economic interests among the so-called geopolitics of the ports.³⁸

3. If preferences show divergences: the case of Yemen and Sudan

Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election once again changed the outlook of the two Gulf monarchies. The choice of the new US administration to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA) and to increase sanctions against Tehran transformed Mohammed Bin Zayed's and Mohammed Bin Salman's perceptions of the surrounding environment from threatening to permissive. Trump's Middle East policy represented a significant change from that of Barack Obama's. While the Obama administration's approach towards the new UAE and KSA interventionism was quietly supportive,³⁹ the regional agenda implemented by the Trump administration was aimed to bolster KSA-UAE and to isolate Iran.⁴⁰ As of 2017, the US facilitated the alignment of the KSA-UAE axis with Israel. The growing convergence among the three regional stakeholders has been advocated by Trump's administration, especially by Jared Kushner, based on common interests: counter the spread of political Islam and Iranian influence. Concerning the relationship with the KSA-UAE axis, both Washington and Tel Aviv viewed Mohammed Bin Zayed as a more reliable and more presentable partner than Mohammed Bin Salman. These beliefs have risen since the Jamal Khashoggi case and also reflected the shift in the internal equilibrium within the same KSA-UAE axis. Despite Emirates' willingness and ability to always preserve a degree of autonomy in their policy's choices, up until 2015, Riyadh was undoubtedly the driving force of the strategic relationship. Afterward, Mohammed Bin Zayed's political maturity, his ability to forge diplomatic relations, especially in Washington, and his considerable leverage towards Mohammed Bin Salman, favoured the reversal of the relationship. At the beginning of 2017, Emirates could no longer be considered the junior active partner of KSA.⁴¹

Washington's different approach to the Middle East order and leadership changes within the two monarchies had the UAE and Mohammed Bin Zayed lead the alliance. The change became evident in the spring of 2017 when KSA, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt announced that they had cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar and were putting it under an effective

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embargo. Although Riyadh had long expressed disappointment with Qatar's pro-active regional policy, perceived as an outrage to its leadership in the Arabian Peninsula, the decision to break ties with it was also strongly backed, if not driven, by Abu Dhabi.⁴² A measure of the divergent attitude toward Doha is a recent Saudi attempt to revive dialogue with both Qatar and Turkey.⁴³

In 2017, KSA-UAE were annoyed for years by the network of Qatari Islamists allies (including the Muslim Brotherhood) that formed the basis of Qatar's influence in the region and alignment with Turkey. Besides, the Emirates viewed Qatar as the main competitor in the race to become the economic centre of the region.⁴⁴ The GCC split brought Turkey and Qatar closer together. As a consequence, the intra-Sunni competition, as in 2015, shifted into the HOA. KSA-UAE began to pressure the HOA countries aligned with them to break off relations with Qatar. However, with the exception of Eritrea, the other countries decided not to take sides as they had long established good diplomatic and economic relations with Doha and its Turkish ally. Even though Ethiopia has never taken sides openly, it has begun a process of convergence with the Arab Quartet's positions, driven not by ideological beliefs but by strategic and economic interests. Thanks to the leverage gained in Addis Ababa and Asmara, the KSA-UAE axis was able, with Kushner's support, to launch the normalization process between the two historical enemies. Besides being a diplomatic success of the two Gulf monarchies, the agreement signed in Jeddah allowed the Arab Quartet to expand its sphere of influence in the HOA, a mosaic to which a new tile would soon be added: Sudan.

Although Omar al-Bashir continued to maintain good relations with both KSA-UAE and Turkey-Qatar for as long as possible, his overthrow and the rise of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) have reshuffled alignments, bringing Sudan under the Arab Quartet's influence. Despite the efforts of KSA, the UAE, and Egypt to avoid openly disregarding the will of the Sudanese people, their financial and diplomatic support has shown the Quartet's interest in seeing Sudan's military regime maintain tight control over the country's political transition.⁴⁵ The three states initially acted decisively in Sudan, driven by fear that a truly democratic revolution there could trigger popular protests in their backyard. However, this has recently changed – or so it seems – with the drafting of a constitutional declaration aimed at paving the way for a transition to civilian rule. The Quartet's decision to soften the hard-line and lead from behind might be determined by the reputational costs of the long-lasting protests.

The last few months have highlighted how the axis between KSA-UAE, whilst not at risk, presents an open debate and even several disagreements, and, above all different, preferences in the post-intervention stages. In other words, if the intention to intervene resolutely in different scenarios stems from a shared perception of the threat, the aspiration to configure the regional agenda according to the mutual preferences shows divergences. The cases of Yemen and Sudan are illustrative of this.

In Yemen, disagreements between the two Gulf monarchies date back to the early stages of the war, as both countries disagreed that Houthis, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), or ISIS represented the biggest security threat.⁴⁶ Over the conflict, the Emirates have increasingly prioritized their national interests. This has led the UAE to adopt a different strategy and increased the divergence with Riyadh. The UAE's behavior is warranted by the fact that the objectives of the two Gulf monarchies in Yemen, especially in the South, have been dissociated.⁴⁷ The cleavages increased after the signature of the Riyadh agreement (2019). The deal, signed between the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, established the start of a power-sharing path within a unified Yemen. The agreement itself was an attempt by the two allies to present a united front after months during which both had pursued an independent agenda in the conflict.

KSA had supported the Hadi government and the integrity of Yemen. The UAE, on the other hand, had consolidated its relationship and presence in the south by becoming a leading actor in both security and humanitarian aid.⁴⁸ The rising tension escalated into multiple armed clashes between Hadi's forces and the STC, backed by the UAE, especially around Aden. What worries the STC and Abu Dhabi is the involvement of al-Islah, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, within the Yemeni central executive. Nowadays, despite KSA-UAE's efforts to find common ground and dispel doubts about their cooperation, the coalition remains very precarious and unstable. Regardless of their different views on the al-Islah forces, considered a partner for Riyadh and a threat to Abu Dhabi, it is their

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geopolitical ambitions that determine a cooling-off of the relationship between KSA-UAE. For the UAE, Yemen is increasing space where it is extending its power. Within the framework of the maritime power projection and mercantilist strategy, the so-called 'string of ports', the south of Yemen, and notably Aden, are fundamental pawns for the control of one of the two access gates to the Red Sea (Bab-el Mandeb).⁴⁹ The other gateway, the northern one, is secured both by the presence of Egypt and by the recent increase of the UAE's footprint in Port Sudan.⁵⁰

As in Yemen, the KSA-UAE axis has also shown evidence of misalignment in Sudan. Once the shared target to reduce the influence of Qatar and Turkey and avoid the rise of Islamist movements was achieved, the divergences among the two partners emerged. There are signs of disagreement and strain between KSA and the UAE over the post-crisis political agenda. In this case, Riyadh is not closed to the involvement of Islamist political representatives within the future Sudanese institutions. Quite the contrary, Abu Dhabi resolutely supports the army and in particular General Mohammed Hamedti. Emirates considers the emergence of a political Islam-inspired group to be dangerous for regional stability. In Sudan, compared to Yemen, the third member of the so-called Quartet, Egypt, is also deeply concerned.

For historical reasons, geographical proximity, security concern, and political ambitions, Egypt carefully monitors Sudanese developments. The Egyptian government looks suspiciously at Hamedti and it cultivates a strong relationship with General Abdelfattah al-Burhan who also enjoyed excellent relations with KSA. Riyadh and al-Burhan boosted relations during Operation 'Decisive Storm,' when the General was coordinating the Sudanese troops sent in support of the Saudi-led coalition. The rivalry between the two generals has grown in recent months and they might affect relations amongst the three Arab partners.⁵¹ Furthermore, over the past two years, the UAE seems to

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move towards narrower national interests, proposing itself as the best partner for the stabilization of the region, even if this means cutting losses and moving forward without Riyadh. Undoubtedly, part of the UAE's power depends on its strong relationship with KSA—a relationship that has allowed Abu Dhabi to develop its hyperactive foreign policy unhindered over the years. Although it is not possible to argue that there might be contrasting behaviour, it is clear that both countries tend to pursue an independent agenda from their ally. This trend has been illustrated by the Saudi decision to launch the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, bypassing the UAE despite it being one of the most involved stakeholders.⁵² Although the Saudi choice has been justified by the fact that the Emirates is not a Red Sea coastal state, it seems to reflect Riyadh's desire to enjoy unquestioned leadership within the new organization.

Even the stance that the two Gulf monarchies have adopted in the wake of the recent US presidential elections would seem to distance each other. There has been growing concern in Riyadh that the Biden administration may assume a less tolerant attitude towards Prince Mohammed bin Salman's methods.⁵³ The comeback on the political scene of the Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz,⁵⁴ and the attempts to ease tensions with Turkey and Qatar would seem to be two significant clues.⁵⁵ In Abu Dhabi, on the contrary, there would seem to be a rush to exploit the free rein guaranteed by Trump's presidency. Hence, the Emirates has been accelerating its plans for normalization with Israel as well as for the sake of building a new alignment as demonstrated by the joint drills with Russia.⁵⁶

This trend has been illustrated by the Saudi decision to launch the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, bypassing the UAE despite it being one of the most involved stakeholders

Conclusion

As seen, there are divergences within the KSA-UAE strategic alliance. The different perceptions of what poses as an existential threat and regional ambitions are determinants of some misunderstandings and strain between the two allies. The differences between the two Gulf monarchies in their security threat assessment have led them to diverging preferences. This trend has been evident in both Yemen and Sudan, where KSA and the UAE have different attitudes towards Islamist movements. In the same way, the geopolitical ambition of the two monarchies has led KSA and the UAE to adopt independent agendas, which aroused the ally's suspicion and annoyance. While the reports of a cautious opening of Riyadh to Qatar, through Kuwaiti mediation, has concerned Abu Dhabi,⁵⁷ the lightening of pressure towards Iran by the Emirates has upset KSA.⁵⁸ The political aspirations of the two countries reflect the ambitions of the two leaders. However, both Mohammed Bin Salman and Mohammed Bin Zayed are fully aware of how important the KSA-UAE alliance is for the stability of both monarchies. For this reason, whenever the interests of one state collide with those of the other, the two leaders use the personal relationship to de-escalate tensions and strengthen the alliance. This was illustrated when in August 2019 Emirati warplanes attacked Hadi forces loyal to the Saudi-backed in Aden.⁵⁹ Another factor to consider is the balance within the alliance, where it seems to be increasingly improper to consider the Emirates as Riyadh's junior partner. The UAE as small states have a greater dynamism and more adaptable policy behaviour. Likewise, as shown by the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Israel (Abraham Agreements), Abu Dhabi is able to embark on policies and make decisions that would have excessively high political costs for Riyadh. As a result, in a fluid international arena, the UAE would probably be able to achieve greater gains than their allies, both KSA and Egypt, and it would also be the driving force behind the so-called Arab Quartet. Finally, considering the signs of cleavage between the UAE and KSA as evidence of an intra-alliance rift would be misleading. The KSA-UAE relationship is extremely tight and, notwithstanding the existing differences, there is still a mutual awareness of the alliance's importance for the security of both. It could therefore be argued that, if ambition drives the two allies apart and diverge on specific issues, security concerns, and the perception of insecurity, bring them closer together.

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