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The UAE Shift in Policies - Causes and Effects

Adam Al-Tayeb

Over the past decade, since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the UAE has adopted a policy of setting fires everywhere in response to the waves of change that swept the Arab region, lest their repercussions would affect its ruling tribal regime.

The policy adopted by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the de facto ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, sought to besiege political Islam groups and spar with the countries that support it, such as Turkey and Qatar, and even clash with them, which led to political and strategic repercussions on the Middle East, some of which extended beyond the region.

However, since early 2021, a UAE different policy has emerged in most files that Abu Dhabi was actively involved in.

For example, the state of dissatisfaction that Mohammed bin Zayed used to show towards the reconciliation with Qatar undertaken by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman turned into a state of enthusiasm, where he sent the UAE National Security Adviser Tahnoun bin Zayed to Doha to meet with Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, during a private visit to Doha to deliver a message from Mohammed bin Zayed¹.

Prior to Sheikh Tahnoun's visit to Doha, the UAE's National Security Adviser had made a similar visit to Ankara, during which he met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan - the stubborn regional rival of the UAE - in order to the page and let bygones be bygones, starting a new policy and a different relationship mainly based on economic cooperation, not political competition.

In Libya, Abu Dhabi no longer throws its heavy support behind retired Major General Khalifa Haftar, albeit ostensibly, as it used to be in the past, where the UAE has not been involved in the recent developments related to the political process that began with the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Geneva in February 2021.

¹ The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On, Foreign policy, January 2021, [link](#)

Also, the Emirati role in Yemen witnessed a shift compared to the past situation, as Abu Dhabi decided to withdraw its forces from there, and contented itself with supporting some loyal factions, after its elite forces had directly been involved in the conflict, with formation of military militias and supporting the southern separatists against the north and the Yemeni Al-Islah (reform) Party.

First: Reasons for changing the UAE policy

1- The bombing of Saudi oil refineries with Iranian drones:

In September 2019, unidentified drones, reportedly Iranian or at least backed by Iran, targeted Saudi oil facilities in the Abqaiq and Khurais regions, which led to disrupting oil exports for several days. The UAE realized that this incident was a message from the Houthis or Iran to the effect that vital and economic facilities in the UAE are not far from being targeted, as happened with Saudi Arabia.

Prior to this incident, the Abu Dhabi airport and some nuclear facilities under construction had been targeted by Houthi drones. All this prompted the UAE decision-makers to recalculate the situation, realizing that the UAE military involvement outside its borders may expose the country to being targeted militarily, plunging it into battles that exceed its political and military potentials and capabilities.

In addition, the strategy of escalation adopted by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi had been met with some rejection by his internal partners, particularly Prince Mohammed bin Rashid, the ruler of Dubai, who used to disagree with Bin Zayed's harsh policy in a number of files, including Yemen and the Qatar blockade².

As a result, the UAE started to assess its regional military interventions, which led to a shift in its policy, where it announced cessation of its military operation in Yemen. Abu Dhabi also sent [Tahnoun bin Zayed on a secret visit to Iran](#) to calm the atmosphere after the escalation between Tehran and Washington during Trump's reign, specifically in 2019, when there was a possibility that the United States would launch a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities³.

² Yemen's Houthis threaten to attack United Arab Emirates targets, Reuters, SEPTEMBER 18, 2019, [link](#)

³ EXCLUSIVE: UAE's secret mission to Iran, Middle East Eye, 13 October 2019 [link](#)

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2- Decline of the Saudi-UAE-Egypt alliance:

Following the military coup in Egypt in 2013, and perhaps months earlier, an alliance was formed, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia and some Egyptian army commanders to overthrow the government of late President Mohamed Morsi. Subsequently, the leader of the military coup, Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, joined this alliance, which was also supported by Israel, the spearhead of the counter-revolutions against the Arab Spring. This alliance had an influential role in Yemen, and to some extent in Syria. As for Libya, the alliance contributed to fueling tribal conflicts and mixing political and military cards, by supporting retired Major General Khalifa Haftar.

Years after the emergence of the alliance, coordination between its parties turned into a competition between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in many files, especially the economic one, which was revealed by the dispute over the UAE's share in OPEC. The differences between the key parties to the alliance caused a significant decline in Abu Dhabi's influence in the region, compared to the immediate post-coup period in Egypt.

Saudi Arabia almost unilaterally negotiated with Qatar and concluded the Al-Ula agreement that put an end to the Gulf crisis. As a result, Doha cooperated with Cairo to facilitate a ceasefire between "Israel" and Hamas, at a time when Abu Dhabi was altogether marginalized. Saudi Arabia sought to boost its relations with Qatar, which culminated in the establishment of the Saudi-Qatari Cooperation Council. Also, Doha's relations with Washington were enhanced, where the latter considered the former an important partner and a reliable mediator in the region.

3- Biden's access to the White House and shift in US strategy

The departure of former US President Donald Trump from the White House represented a major blow to the UAE's regional and international ambitions. After Mohammed bin Zayed had been relying on the special relations with decision-making circles in Washington, things became more difficult with the advent of Democratic President Joe Biden, who was not enthusiastic about Abu Dhabi's policy in the region, like his predecessor Donald Trump, in many files, most notably the Arab normalization with Israel, or the so-called "Abraham Accords"⁴. Also, the policy of expanding settlements pursued

⁴ Israel, UAE ministers in US as Biden seeks to expand normalization. france24, 13/10/2021, [link](#)

by Israel in the last decade has not been welcomed by the leaders of the Democratic Party, especially in light of the growing role of the progressives in the Democratic movement in general, led by [Senator Bernie Sanders](#), who has long expressed his dissatisfaction with Tel Aviv's policy towards the Palestinians, which was largely evident during the latest Israeli aggression on Gaza, against the backdrop of targeting the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in occupied Jerusalem⁵.

In addition, there is a change in Washington's policy in the region, as it shifted its attention from the Middle East to Central Asia due to the growing influence of China, which has become of great concern to the United States. Biden believes that confronting China is one of the most important priorities of his administration at the current stage, intensifying all efforts to obstruct China's rise.

The Middle East region has not become a priority for the new US administration, which made the Emirati position less strong than it was during the Trump era. On the other hand, major regional powers in the Middle East, such as Turkey and Iran, in addition to Russia, have had an opportunity to play greater regional roles in light of the American preoccupation with China, which prompted Abu Dhabi to halt its impulsive policy and reduce its geostrategic ambitions, which it used to adopt during Trump's reign⁶.

4- US withdrawal from Afghanistan and return of Taliban

The departure of the Biden administration from Afghanistan has given the Taliban movement great power in the country, following the collapse of the army of the Afghan government, which cost the United States more than \$80 billion in 20 years. Also, the success of the Taliban fighters in controlling the capital, Kabul, within hours - sent a message to countries that rely on the United States, including the UAE, to recalculate their foreign adventures to maintain their own national security⁷.

On the other hand, the effective role played by Qatar and Turkey - the regional rivals of the UAE - in the Afghan crisis, and the American praise messages for Doha and Ankara - gave them a new push in confronting the UAE role in the region, especially in Central Asia. In light of Washington's new

⁵ Bernie Sanders: The U.S. Must Stop Being an Apologist for the Netanyahu Government, nytimes.15/05/2021, [link](#)

⁶ The "new normal" in US-China relations: Hardening competition and deep interdependence, Brookings, August 12, 2021, [link](#)

⁷ Surprise, panic and fateful choices: The day America lost its longest war, Washington post, August 28, 2021, [link](#)

approach to shift its attention to Asia to confront Chinese expansion, this means that US cooperation with Qatar and Turkey may witness a major growth in the coming period. In addition, the presence of Turkey and Qatar in Afghanistan has become a necessity, in light of the American escalation against Iran, and its unwillingness to leave Afghanistan an arena for the expansion of Tehran and Moscow's influence there⁸.

5- Regional powers' trend towards de-escalation:

The regional countries in general, including the UAE, are heading towards de-escalation, in light of the shift in the United States foreign policy, focusing away from the region and its conflicts. Therefore, the UAE, as well as the rest of Washington's allies, are increasingly suspicious of the United States' commitment to support them in the face of regional threats. Even during the reign of the Trump administration, a close ally of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Washington's partners were stunned by the lack of US military response to Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities. With the advent of the Biden administration, the UAE has become aware of the danger, which led the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, to explicitly ask the US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan to conclude a bilateral security agreement to be approved by the Congress to ensure that future bilateral relations would be more stable⁹.

The de-escalation that the world witnessed in 2021, starting with the Gulf crisis, through the tense relations between Iran and the US, up to the crisis between India and Pakistan over the disputed Kashmir region - prompted the UAE to reconsider its offensive policy and resort to soft power, primarily economy, to cooperate with regional rivals rather than conflict with them, especially during the tenure of US President Joe Biden¹⁰.

Second: Repercussions and Results

In light of the shift in the UAE's foreign policy, many important regional files in which it was involved may witness a change in the coming period, albeit not a radical change.

⁸ From Zero-sum Conflicts to Zeroing of Problems: UAE Adopts a New Regional Approach, Asbab Center, October 2021, [link](#)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Winners and Losers from the Return of the Taliban, Asbab Center, August 2021, [link](#)

1- Calm in a stressful environment

Despite the change in the UAE's foreign policies and its abandonment of adventures and zero-sum conflicts, its vision of the region's future, and its definition of allies, competitors and threats, as well as its ideological biases, have not changed. In light of this, the shift in the Emirati policy can be considered a little more than a mere tactical measure, but it is still much less than a strategic shift in the state's regional policy objectives¹¹.

2- The UAE regional rivals and allies still remain

Tahnoun bin Zayed's "conciliatory" moves do not necessarily mean switching allies and rivals, despite the change in some regional alliances. The UAE considers itself an important player, not only in the Gulf and the Arab region, but also in the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Within this strategic vision, political Islam, Iran and Turkish influence fall within the circle of UAE regional threats, and Qatar emerges as a competitor, while Saudi Arabia, Egypt and "Israel" remain as allies, despite some contradictions and rivalries from time to time¹².

This shift in the UAE's regional approach came in response to an assessment of the risks represented primarily in the doubts about the extent of the United States' commitments to the UAE and the region in general, and did not come as a result of redefining rivals and allies, or changing the country's strategic goals. Therefore, the UAE has modified its approach to managing regional competition only, not its long-term goals, in order to avoid the risks of being directly targeted.

3- Pursuit to play the role of mediator

The strategy on which Abu Dhabi builds its foreign policy is mainly based on playing a role in the spheres of influence, presenting itself as a player that cannot be ignored in the important files. Hence, Abu Dhabi has sought to play the role of mediator in important files such as the current conflict between Morocco and Algeria over the Sahara region, the recent crisis between the Gulf states and Lebanon following the comments of Minister of Information George Kordahi on Saudi intervention in Yemen, and perhaps the political dispute in Sudan between the civilian and military components after

¹¹ Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future, NYTimes, Jan. 9, 2020, [link](#)

¹² Turkey's views on Sheikh Tahnoun's visit, Tactical Report, 20/08/2021, [link](#)

the “coup” carried out by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan against his partners from the civil movement on 25 October 2021.

Conclusion

The year 2021 has witnessed a clear calm in a large number of regional files, in which the UAE was involved, due to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed's adventures, in light of unlimited US support that reached its maximum during the era of former President Donald Trump. Accordingly, the unprecedented Gulf crisis has been resolved and the dispute between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council was removed. Also, the Libyan conflict has almost reached a stage of final solution, after the UAE withdrew from the scene, albeit temporarily, and formation of a government of national unity, pending presidential elections for the first time since the outbreak of the Libyan revolution¹³.

The conflict in the Horn of Africa also witnessed a remarkable calm. The UAE withdrew from the bases it was building in the port of Assab in Eritrea, after its withdrawal from Yemen, which led to the disappearance of calls for secession that the pro-Abu Dhabi groups in Aden used to reiterate, with noticeable absence of their effectiveness compared to the past period¹⁴.

All these changes occurred due to the political and military repositioning of the UAE in the region following the important changes that occurred during the year, most prominently the access of US President Joe Biden to the White House.

Finally, it seems that the shift in the UAE foreign policy is only dependent on external variables, not based on a real Emirati desire. Therefore, in absence of such variables, Abu Dhabi is likely to return to its old policy of involvement in regional conflicts, which had caused several regional disasters.¹⁵.

¹³ UAE Steps Back From Wars as Biden Reasserts Mideast Role, Bloomberg, February 28, 2021, [link](#)

¹⁴ The Horn of Africa and the Gulf: Shifting power plays in the Red Sea, the Africa report, November 2020, [link](#)

¹⁵ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies.