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**Changes in United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy: Significance for  
Israel and the Region**

**Yoel Guzansky**

**The foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates, which has featured involvement in various theaters in the Middle East over the past decade, is evolving in accordance with changing conditions and circumstances. The country's foreign policy goals remain unchanged – preserving and strengthening its relations with the United States – as have the threats, headed by Iran and Turkey. It appears, however, that for the UAE, assertiveness is yielding to greater pragmatism. This change in policy reflects above all an effort to adapt to the policy of the new US administration on key Middle East issues, principally Iran, and a desire to offset consequent losses. This applies especially to matters involving the UAE image, damaged by involvement in Yemen and Libya, and to its close relations with Saudi Arabia. The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the fall in the price of oil, have increased the economic pressure on the UAE, and contributed to its need to turn inward. It is possible that the country's leadership realizes that the freedom of action it enjoyed under the Trump administration has narrowed, and that it must adapt itself to the changing situation. For Israel, the question is to what extent the UAE should be considered a key element in the anti-Iran front, especially given the Iranian-Saudi dialogue and the implications of the emerging changes in the region for the chances of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.**

The foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates, which has featured involvement in various theaters in the Middle East over the past decade, is evolving, as it adjusts to changing conditions and circumstances. The foreign policy goals of the federation remain unchanged – first and foremost preserving and strengthening its relations with the United States – as has its designation of leading external threats, Iran and Turkey. The UAE's regional assertiveness appears to be moving toward a more cautious and pragmatic approach, and more attention and resources are channeled to other issues. Instead of striving to shape the environment, the UAE is now responding to it.

The UAE's small population (only around one million of its nine million residents are citizens), together with its huge oil reserves (approximately 100 billion proven barrels of oil), makes it one of the world's wealthiest countries in terms of per capita GDP. This

wealth, combined with its leadership ambitions, has helped the UAE, which is celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence, acquire a leading role in the Arab world in many spheres, among them renewable energy, civilian nuclear power, defense industry, cyberspace, and outer space. Following the regional upheaval, the UAE, which had previously displayed moderation and restraint in its foreign policy and allowed others to take the lead, tried to assume the role of an important player in a number of Middle East theaters. The UAE's small army, the best trained and equipped of all the Arab armies, became involved in conflicts in Yemen and Libya and in the campaign against the Islamic State. The goal of the government in Abu Dhabi was to help shape the regional order through construction of military bases and ports, financial support, diplomatic involvement, support for proxies, and consolidation of alliances, however loose they may have been.

Recently, however, there has been a clear change in the UAE's regional policy. One prominent expression of this change is the reduction of its involvement in areas of conflict. The UAE withdrew most of its ground troops from Yemen in 2019, and starting in 2020 cut back on its military involvement in Libya, while continuing its low signature involvement and supporting local factions in these theaters. In early 2021, it was reported that the federation was also reducing its military presence in Eritrea and Somaliland in the Horn of Africa. Another possible shift in its policy is the willingness to increase its involvement and its investments in Hamas-controlled Gaza. In addition, there was a change in the top leadership at the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs in early 2021. Two new state ministers were appointed: Shakhboub bin-Nahyan, former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in place of Dr. Anwar Gargash, a spokesman for UAE's regional activism, and Khalifa Shaheen Almarar, a former Ambassador to Syria, Turkey, and Iran, was appointed Minister of State, signaling adjustments in UAE's policy toward those countries. The changes may also be related to the dynamic between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the two main emirates in UAE. In this context, it is possible that UAE Vice-President, Prime Minister, and Dubai Emir Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, who was not among the advocates of the regional assertiveness propounded by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and acting ruler Mohamed bin Zayed, has increased his influence.

The adjustments in UAE foreign policy are also reflected in the country's relations with both Saudi Arabia, its ally, and with Iran, its enemy.

*Relations with Saudi Arabia:* The Gulf states has remained stable, and continues to lead the Arab agenda. The respective foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE, however, sometimes conflict with each other's interests. In the past decade, they shaped regional developments and processes, among them aiding the rise to power of Egyptian President

el-Sisi, the war in Yemen, cooperation with the Trump administration, and the boycott against Qatar. It was also reported that their respective acting leaders, Mohammed bin Salman and Mohamed bin Zayed, shared close relations and a common outlook. In the past, tension between the states surfaced surrounding border disputes, due to the location of oil and gas fields, and regarding leadership in the Arab world and on the Gulf Cooperation Council. In public, however, the two countries strive to give the impression that all is well. Furthermore, it is natural for allies to have different emphases and constraints guiding their policies toward various theaters and countries, such as Saudi Arabia's greater sensitivity with respect to normalization with Israel. In addition, UAE policy toward Iran began to exhibit a reconciliatory attitude already in 2019, and UAE withdrew most of its forces from Yemen, leaving Saudi Arabia alone in the campaign against the Houthis. The UAE renewed its relations with the Assad regime, and apparently Riyadh is now eager to do the same. In tandem, the reconciliation agreement with Qatar signed in January 2021 signaled a change in Saudi policy, despite some opposition from the UAE, which still regards Qatar and political Islam as a threat.

*Relations with Iran:* From the federation's perspective, Iran is the main threat to regional stability, but the UAE takes care to maintain proper trade relations with Iran, which remains one of its important trading partners. Before President Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran, the volume of trade between the UAE and Iran totaled \$13 billion. Following the attack on Saudi Arabia's diplomatic missions in Iran in 2016, many Arab countries closed their diplomatic missions in Iran; the UAE left its embassy in Iran open. In 2019, the UAE launched a dialogue with Iran, following the Iranian attacks on ships in the Gulf beginning in May 2019. The UAE took this step out of concern about an Iranian attack on the one hand and doubt about a US commitment to the UAE's defense on the other, following the lack of any American response to the attacks. At the same time, the federation announced the withdrawal of its forces from Yemen, where it had borne the main burden of land warfare against the Iran-supported Houthi rebels. The trend toward reconciliation with Iran was continued, including the signing of a memorandum for stepping up coordination in shipping, unfreezing funds of Iranian investors in banks in UAE, visits to Iran by senior UAE officials, and provision of medical aid to Iran during the Covid pandemic. While concerned about the talks between the United States and Iran on a return to the nuclear agreement, fearing that this will increase Iran's regional influence, the UAE is likely to profit from the removal of sanctions against Iran, because it will increase the volume of trade between the two countries.

### **Significance for the Region and Israel**

The UAE's need to adjust its policy has resulted above all from the change of administrations in the United States and the policy adopted by President Joe Biden on

leading issues, headed by Iran. The UAE likewise recognized its power limitations, and therefore strove to offset its losses, especially those involving the damage to its image from its involvement in Yemen and its close relations with Saudi Arabia. It is possible that the UAE leadership realizes that the freedom of action that it enjoyed under the Trump administration has narrowed, and that it must adapt itself to the changing situation. The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the fall in the price of oil, have increased the economic pressure on the UAE and contributed to its need to turn inward and chart a new course.

The reduction of the UAE military presence in various regional theaters does not indicate that it has abandoned its foreign policy goals. It is possible, however, that it will use different means from now on. In Yemen, for example, the UAE is still committed to separatists in the south and controls militias and armed groups, and at the same time is cooperating with the United States in the battle against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. In addition, although the UAE has reduced its military presence in Libya, or possibly for this very reason, Abu Dhabi has tightened its security cooperation with Greece against Ankara's regional ambitions. It therefore follows that the UAE is likely to continue its efforts to exert its influence on the Arab agenda, using a variety of other means. In some of the regional "projects" in which the UAE was involved in recent years, however – the boycott against Qatar, the war in Yemen, and the war in Libya – little success has been achieved. At the same time, the threats from Iran have increased, while the Biden administration is showing great interest in a dialogue with Iran, in particular a return to the nuclear agreement. Thus changes in UAE policy that were visible even before Biden entered the White House are expected to continue during his term in office in the coming years.

Understanding the political direction in which the UAE is headed is instructive for Israel, not only as a country of political, economic, and military importance in the Middle East, but also because the UAE often charts a course for other countries. For example, the UAE usually takes the lead ahead of Saudi Arabia in its political maneuvers – as in the recent contacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which followed a UAE-Iran dialogue. Israel must therefore take into account a possible change in the UAE role as an element in an anti-Iran front, especially given the additional cracks emerging in this front – above all the Iranian-Saudi dialogue. In an era of liquid alliances and changing loyalties, Israel must be attentive to the unfolding changes, and consider how it might be affected by them, for example, regarding the future of the normalization process, mainly, but not only, with Saudi Arabia.