

From the Abraham Accords to the War in Yemen: The United Arab Emirates and the Iranian Threat

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The United Arab Emirates, Israel's central partner in the Gulf, sees Iran as the main threat to its national security. The challenge that Iran poses to the UAE includes the threats, either direct or by means of proxies, of a kinetic attack on strategic targets, the potential use of subversion and terror, and control over Emirati territory. The UAE has reacted by developing a range of defensive responses, while simultaneously seeking to maintain open economic and diplomatic ties with Iran as much as possible. The UAE's current efforts to draw closer to Iran are also designed to balance its image as an intelligence and operational aide of Israel. Israel must consider that the UAE role in the so-called front against Iran might change, particularly in view of emerging cracks in the front, and particularly if and when there is a nuclear agreement between Iran and the world powers.

The United Arab Emirates, Israel's central partner in the Gulf, sees Iran as the main threat to its national security. The challenge that Iran poses to the Emirates includes the threat of a direct kinetic attack on strategic sites, above all its oil and desalination facilities; the indirect threat of action by Iranian proxies (Houthi rebels in Yemen); the potential of subversion and terror (perhaps based on the sizable Iranian community in Dubai); and a threat involving the de-facto control of Emirati territory – the occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands. Against this background, the UAE has developed a range of defensive responses while simultaneously seeking to maintain open economic and diplomatic ties with Iran as much as possible, as a kind of insurance policy.

Since the UAE is an international financial center, its geographical proximity to Iran and the historical relations between Dubai and Iran have helped make it Iran's main trading partner (excluding oil; with oil, China is Iran's main trading partner). Before the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2018, reported trade between the countries amounted to some \$13 billion (there is also substantial illegal trade between the two). The UAE openly supported the withdrawal of the United

States from the agreement and cooperated with the campaign of US pressure on Iran, and accordingly the scope of its annual trade with Iran fell to \$7 billion. Moreover, despite the economic blow, the UAE supported, with some exceptions, the sanctions imposed on Iran and even occasionally increased the speed of its own oil production in order to compensate for the Iranian oil deficit on the markets. At the same time, while the UAE is worried by the contacts between the US and Iran on a possible return to the nuclear deal, which could strengthen Iran's regional influence, it would likely gain from the removal of the sanctions on Iran by expansion of the trade between them.

In 2016 the UAE was careful to maintain an open diplomatic channel with Iran and even kept its representation in Tehran open when many other Arab countries closed their offices following the attacks on the Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran. A pivotal change occurred in 2019, when the UAE engaged in dialogue with Iran after Iranian attacks on tankers in the Gulf. The UAE move arose from fears of an Iranian attack on Emirati targets. The trend toward rapprochement intensified when the UAE announced the withdrawal of its forces from Yemen, and included the signing of a memorandum on increased coordination between the countries coast guards, the unfreezing of Iranian deposits in Emirati banks, and the transfer (together with Kuwait and Qatar) of medical aid to Iran to help in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meetings between senior officials from both sides were also upgraded. After his visit to Dubai in November 2021, where he met Anwar Gargash, the senior advisor of the Emirati President and Minister of State Khalifa Shaheen, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani said that Iran and the UAE had decided to launch a new chapter in their relations. In December 2021, Tahnoun bin Zayed, the UAE advisor on national security and brother of the acting ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed, met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, expressed the hope that the visit would be a "turning point" in relations, and invited Raisi to the Emirates.

The threat posed by Tehran to Israel and to the United Arab Emirates has drawn the countries closer over the years, even if Israel stresses the Iranian nuclear threat while the UAE sees Iran as a would-be hegemon seeking to impose its will on the whole region. The UAE also points to the missiles and

unmanned aircraft held by Iran and its proxies as its most challenging threat in the current period.

The ties with Israel embody many benefits for the UAE: coordination at the political-strategic level on shared matters of interest; cooperation at the intelligence-operational level to deal with concrete threats; security technology from Israel that the UAE needs, particularly in light of the holes in its anti-missile defenses. Moreover, links with Israel and its capabilities could add considerably to UAE deterrence in the eyes of Iran.

For its part, Israel has worked to establish a broad regional front against Iran with the pragmatic Arab countries, although there are a number of cracks in this front, including the clear reluctance of the Gulf states to be perceived as a kind of Israeli "base" within reach of Iran. As soon as the Abraham Accords were announced, senior Iranian officials sent explicit threats to the UAE. For example, the editor of the conservative daily *Kaihan*, who is close to the Supreme Leader, wrote that the UAE's betrayal of the Palestinians makes it a "legitimate and easy target." Iran also reportedly planned to attack Emirati diplomats on African soil.

The current efforts by the UAE to draw closer to Iran are intended inter alia to balance this problematic image of an intelligence and operational aide of Israel, particularly with the understanding that Iran's status in the region could improve if a new nuclear deal is reached. Iran did not need the normalization agreements to know about the security cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors, or that that it is the target of this cooperation. But the Accords made the Israeli presence in the Gulf official, overt, and another potential excuse for an attack by Iran.

Against the background of the ongoing war in Yemen, in early 2022 the tension between the UAE and Iran increased when the Iranian-supported Houthis launched a number of attacks on UAE targets, in response to the effective pressure exerted on them in Yemen by the Saudi army (from the air) and militias loyal to the UAE (on the ground). Following these attacks, it was reported in early February that the United States will send air and naval forces to help UAE defense, and that it will consider returning the Houthis to its list of foreign terror organizations. It is not clear if there was any direct Iranian involvement in the attacks, but it seems likely that Iran approved them in advance. Iran has an interest in maintaining good relations with its

Arab neighbors, including the UAE, but continues to threaten them covertly by means of its proxies. Indeed, it was the Houthis who took responsibility for the Iranian attack on Saudi oil installations in 2019.

Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE would prefer a diplomatic solution to the tension with Iran, they are concerned over the possibility of a new nuclear deal, because it will probably not include reference to Iranian subversion in the region, to terror, and to the issue of Iran's missiles and drones. On the one hand, the Sunni monarchies would be happy if "someone" would do the job for them and inflict serious and long-term damage on Iran's nuclear program; on the other hand, they understand that they are in the line of fire and an almost certain target for Iranian attack in response to any attack on its nuclear facilities; hence their efforts to maintain reasonable relations with Iran.

Conclusion

An understanding of the political direction taken by the United Arab Emirates is important for Israel, not only because it is a key country in political, economic, and military terms in the Middle East, but also because it charts a course for others. For example, the UAE is generally ahead of Saudi Arabia in its political maneuvers: consider the recent contacts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which occurred after the Iran-UAE dialogue. Israel must take into account a possible change in the UAE role in the regional front against Iran, particularly in view of additional cracks appearing in this front, and particularly if a new nuclear deal is reached with Iran. In the age of fluid alliances and changing loyalties, Israel must pay attention to regional dynamics and examine, for example, if and how they will affect further normalization processes in the region – mainly but not only with Saudi Arabia.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen