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Middle East

Rivals in the Service of Empire: Abu Dhabi, Qatar and the United States

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The two emirates have comparable demographic features—3.8 and 2.8 million inhabitants, respectively, with nationals representing only a small minority (20% for Abu Dhabi, 12% for Qatar). They are each hugely rich. In 2023, Abu Dhabi had a GDP of $310 billion in current USD, which equates to a GDP per capita of $81,579. [1] That same year, Qatar reportedly had a GDP of $234 billion, or $83,571 per capita. [2] Institutionally, both states have sovereign wealth funds at their disposal for managing "surplus" receipts from hydrocarbon exports. Abu Dhabi, in fact, has three, the largest of which, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, retains total assets with an estimated value of $993 billion. [3] If smaller, the Qatar Investment Authority, with a balance sheet showing assets worth $526 billion, is a power within global financial markets all the same. More generally speaking, the economic behavior of the two emirates is quite similar as well. Dominated by rentier logic and a shared "devotion to the empire of capital", both are key contributors to the insertion of the GCC in the circuits of global and regional capitalism. [4]

In certain fundamentals, Abu Dhabi and Qatar also pair when it comes to matters of security. Like many others in the GCC, they each allocate staggering amounts to military expenditure. Per capita spending on this line item was $3,562 in Qatar for 2023 and $2,080 for the UAE, Abu Dhabi contributing the lion's share in the latter case. For the sake of comparison, Iran's figure for 2023 is estimated at $85. Israel's per capita military expenditure in that same year, boosted by its war on Gaza, reached $2,120 while Russia, also at war, topped out at $524. The United States, the one big state able to keep up with the GCC's military prodigality on a per capita basis, clocked in at $2,666. [5]

Both Abu Dhabi and Qatar are also tightly militarily linked to the Western geopolitical bloc. Most of their military imports come from the United States and Europe, France being the main supplier from Europe. In addition to making their ports available to the US Navy, both play host to the US Air Force (USAF) and cover much of its local operating costs to boot. 5,000 US personnel are currently in the UAE at Al Dhafra Air Base, where USAF Central Command stages its 380th Air Expeditionary Wing. Meanwhile,10,000 US personnel are based at Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base, the single largest US military installation in the Middle East, home to the Forward Headquarters of US CENTCOM and USAF Central Command's 379th Air Expeditionary Wing. For their troubles, each of the emirates has also recently managed to institutionalize defense cooperation with the United States. In 2019, under the Trump administration, the UAE's longstanding engagements with Washington were upgraded into a Defense Cooperation Agreement. Not to be outdone, Qatar got itself formally designated by the Biden administration in 2022 as a "major non-NATO Ally of the United States".

The Gazan Crucible

Despite their many commonalities, Abu Dhabi and Qatar famously split course when it comes to foreign policy. The divergence traces back to the rule of Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani in Doha and the rise of Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. The former was Emir of Qatar from 1995 until 2013, after which he handed over the emirate to his son Tamim. The latter was named Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi in 2004, became de facto ruler of the emirate in 2014, and officially succeeded his long-ailing elder brother as Emir of Abu Dhabi and President of the United Arab Emirates in 2022. [6] And as Israel's war on Gaza attests, the foreign policy contrast remains very stark. Qatar is playing a key role in organizing negotiations between Hamas, Israel, Egypt and the United States over a ceasefire and exchange of captives. Meanwhile, the UAE has been actively involved in preparing for the "day after" in coordination with Israel and the United States. [7] Reporting indicates that the day being envisioned is one where a new Palestinian administration—a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority (PA), in the words of US president Biden—will take over in the Strip under Israeli and US control, with forces from the UAE, Egypt and Morocco deployed as

peacekeeping troops. [8]

In an immediate sense, the different roles adopted by the two emirates in Gaza are informed by the different relations each holds with Palestinian actors. Qatar has long since been a major funder of the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip and, in the interest of maintaining close ties to the organization, hosts the movement's political leadership in exile. Contrarily, Abu Dhabi has long since sought advice from another Palestinian forced abroad: Hamas's one-time archenemy Mohammed Dahlan. [9]

At a deeper level, however, antithetical attitudes to the Islamic fundamentalist regional and international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), of which Hamas was the original Palestinian branch, pertains. Matters of religion and culture do factor in here, at least to a degree. Sunni Qataris subscribe to a rigoristic Salafi version of Islam known as Wahhabism. While undoubtedly softer than the Saudi version (prior to Mohammed bin Salman's ascent), Qatari Wahhabism would rank as more rigorist than the UAE's mainstream brand of Sunni Islam. The ideological religious affinity between each of the Saudis and Qataris, on the one hand, and the MB, on the other, may contribute to explaining the fact that one state succeeded the other in the role of main sponsor to the organization. Hamad bin Khalifa stepped in to assume that role after Riyadh turned on the Brotherhood in retaliation for its opposition to the US intervention against Iraq in 1990.

Explanation by religious affinity is of limited value, however. It begs the question of why would little Qatar take the huge risk of provoking its much bigger and more powerful Saudi neighbour in rescuing those that the latter wanted to punish? Why would it almost recklessly engage in regional politics through its sponsorship of the MB's regional network and enhance the latter's regional influence through Al Jazeera, the satellite TV network that is basically a political joint venture between Qatar and the MB? The contrasting attitudes to religion of Abu Dhabi and the MB may likewise contribute to explaining the antipathy between them. But this again is an explanation of limited value, especially that the Saudi kingdom has enforced until 2017 an interpretation of Islam that was significantly more rigoristic than those of both Qatar and the MB – and yet, the UAE maintained fraternal relations with its Saudi neighbour.

A more significant variable than religion in explaining the break between Abu Dhabi and Qatar over the MB are political discrepancies. Upholder of a highly illiberal form of authoritarianism, Mohammed bin Zayed champion hierarchical, anti-democratic governance as being most suitable for the Middle East. He regards the Brotherhood—a political movement that fights for power at the regional level—as a source of instability and disruption. [10] Though hardly being more liberal at home, Hamad bin Khalifa, on the other hand, has seen in his sponsorship of the MB a means to greatly enhance Qatar's political clout, seizing the opportunity created by the Saudi break with them.

Of course, Abu Dhabi and Doha bump heads in fields far beyond Gaza—and on issues well beyond the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood. Their scraps can be understood as a function of contrasting strategies. As a rule, Qatar actively hedges its political risks by nurturing relations with the widest possible range of political forces. These include state and non-state actors, as is evinced by Doha's engagements with everyone from Israel and the United States to Iran, its regional allies, and fundamentalist extremists such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. As a second rule, Qatar tends to be militarily restrained when acting outside its borders. Mindful to keep a low profile, its forces have only ever participated in operations when part of wider GCC or US initiatives. [11] By contrast, the UAE has won the nickname of "Little Sparta" in Pentagon circles for its military effectiveness [12]—effectiveness which eventually translated to boldness and aggressiveness in intervening in the wider neighborhood. If slightly more cautious in recent years, the adoption of the maverick's posture, which has frequently brought the UAE into alliance with Vladimir Putin's Russia, is a direct product of Mohammed bin Zayed's leadership. Today, its effects are most easily observed in the UAE's support for Russia's favored client in Libya, Khalifa Haftar, and in the multifaceted assistance being offered the Rapid Support Forces of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (aka Hemedti) in Sudan [13].

Underlying Causes of Rivalry

All of which leaves our initial question open: from whence do these differing options in foreign policymaking come?

When all is said and done, one needs to attribute a great deal to the personalities and ambitions of the two architects of contemporary foreign policy in Qatar and the UAE: Hamad bin Khalifa and Mohamed bin Zayed. The weight these individuals bring to bear derives, in the first instance, from the autocratic character of both states' political regimes. It is also born of two factors specific to the regimes' rentier nature. The first factor is patrimonialism. [14] In the UAE and Qatar, enlarged family rule supersedes any traditional "class" domination: the local capitalist class—more precisely, the fraction of it that does not belong to the ruling family—is entirely subservient to those ruling families. The second factor is the economic security provided by natural resources, hydrocarbons especially. This peculiarity grants individual rulers considerable discretion in that it (partially) frees them from the imperative of "economic rationality", an imperative which constrains those governing ordinary capitalist states.

And yet, while relatively liberated from economic dictates, the rulers of Qatar and the UAE are subject to a powerful non-economic constraint in conducting their affairs. Standing at the helm of very rich but small states, they are vulnerable and prone to attract hostile designs. As such, both regimes need the protection of a major power – even to hedge against their own GCC big brother, the Saudi kingdom, whose territorial ambitions they fear. As a point of fact, both the UAE and Qatar owe their independent existence to British domination of the Gulf. Without it, there is little doubt that the Saudis would have annexed their territories to the kingdom they built a century ago by way of military expansion. The waning of British hegemony in the Gulf after the closure of the Suez Canal in 1967 naturally prompted a search for a new protector, the need for which was made undeniable after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Insofar as a US military intervention was what it took to restore the Kuwaiti Emir on his throne, it was a foregone conclusion that the United States would become the regional hegemon that both Abu Dhabi and Qatar deem indispensable to court. Indeed, courting Washington is the two emirates' only significant common foreign policy denominator.

An Antagonism of Use to Empire

The next question needing answering concerns what the triangular relationship between the UAE, Qatar, and the United States means for regional and global affairs. What service, if any, does Washington derive from having these two rivals each call for protection? What do their engagements with the hegemon reveal about Washington's own regional political choices and trajectory?

One must begin by considering how the UAE and Qatar's are inserted into the regional hegemonic system run by Washington. The two emirates are imbricated, to different degrees, within the dissensus that animates the American foreign policy community and divides ruling circles. Contrarily to the old view that foreign policy tends to be bipartisan in the United States, there have always been important differences in the field, either between Democrats and Republicans, or transversally, between various opinion or pressure groups and lobbies from across the partisan divide. The heated debate about NATO's future and engagement with post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s offers one emblematic instance of how differing foreign policy views clash within the US establishment. [15] Discord towards the upheaval that shook the Middle East and North Africa starting from 2011 offers a second. In the latter case, the differences between Abu Dhabi and Qatar would coincide with differences within the US establishment.

The UAE and Qatar represented and vouched for the two alternatives that Washington ultimately considered in confronting what came to be known as the Arab Spring. Qatar backed the option of containment through co-optation by means of the Muslim Brotherhood. [16] Abu Dhabi (and the Saudi kingdom), meanwhile, stumped for more

classically-styled conservative counter-revolutions, except in Libya, where Gaddafi had long been a thorn in the side. [17]

The Obama administration clearly favored the Qatari option. It relied on Doha to mediate with local MB branches in the countries affected by the regional shockwave and delegated Qatar the task of convincing the movement to collaborate with Washington. Everywhere it could, the administration also encouraged compromises between old regime forces and the opposition in which the MB played a leading or hegemonic role. This policy achieved some success in Morocco and Yemen (and later in Tunisia). It failed most spectacularly in Egypt, where the military overthrow of the democratically elected MB president in 2013, one year only after his election, signaled the defeat of the Qatari option. [18] The Trump administration, contrarily, preferred and advanced the UAE-Saudi axis. Trump's first presidential visit abroad was to Riyadh, where Washington's Arab allies gathered to meet him in May 2017 along with rulers of other Muslim countries. Two weeks after that visit, the Saudi-UAE axis mobilized a regional boycott of Qatar, aggravated by a blockade of the peninsula, which ended only two weeks before Donald Trump relinquished power in January 2021 in favor of Obama's former vice-president Joe Biden.

The coincidence between intra-GCC differences and differences among US ruling circles has translated into different alignments of GCC players in US domestic politics. Doha's relation with the Obama administration was much warmer than Abu Dhabi's and Riyadh's, a difference compounded by differing attitudes towards Iran. Whereas Qatar welcomed the nuclear deal that the Obama administration concluded with Tehran in 2015, the Saudi and Emirati rulers resented it. Conversely, the Abu Dhabi-Riyadh axis rejoiced when Donald Trump entered the White House. The axis is even suspected of helping him get into office via illicit financial support. [19] The Biden administration has blurred the lines, rekindling the privileged relationship with Qatar. Overall, it is a safe guess that both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, like the Israeli government of Benyamin Netanyahu, wish for Donald Trump to win the presidential election in November while Doha certainly favors Kamala Harris.

Regardless of how the camps align within Washington, the fact is that both Abu Dhabi and Qatar play useful roles for the United States. The two emirates' sharp contrast in foreign policy strategy is, in fact, a boon for Washington's policy in the extended Middle East. After all, their opposing stances widen the range of options that Washington can take advantage of in the region. Even while sidling up to the UAE, Trump could still lean on Qatar to mediate the negotiations with the Taliban which ultimately allowed the United States' withdrawal from the Afghan quagmire. As discussed at the outset, the Biden administration is relying on both Qatar and Abu Dhabi in dealing with Israel's onslaught on Gaza. On balance, then, the two emirates' following of divergent paths affords an opportunity-enhancing complementarity to the United States. Their rivalry actually buttress---es US hegemonic interests.

Source: Noria

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[1] According to the UAE's official government portal: [https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-seven-emirates/abu-dhabi=> https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-seven-emirates/abu-dhabi].On the whole, the World Bank reported a GDP of $504 billion for the United Arab Emirates (UAE, the Abu Dhabi-led federation) in 2023.

[2] Bank Audi, "Qatar Economic Report: May 2024", Report (2024).

[3] Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute, “Top 100 largest sovereign wealth fund rankings by total assets”, Report (2024).

[4] See: Colin Powers, “Capital’s emirates”, Sidecar: New Left Review (May 29, 2024). Adam Hanieh, Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East (Cambridge University Press: August 2018).

[5] International Institude for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 124:1 (2024).

[6] The two positions have been paired since the establishment of the UAE constitution in 1971, which marked the termination of British administration of the so-called Trucial States.

[7] Barak Ravid, “Scoop: U.S., Israel and UAE held a secret meeting on Gaza war ‘day after’ plan”, Axios (July 23, 2024).

[8] Andrew England and Chloe Cornish, “UAE willing to join a multinational force for Gaza”, Financial Times (July 18, 2024).

[9] As head of the PA’s security forces, Dahlan, in collaboration with the George W. Bush White House, organised and directed the failed attempt to oust Hamas from power in Gaza by force in 2007. Upon later falling out with PA president Mahmoud Abbas over succession plans, Dahlan took refuge in Abu Dhabi, where he has since served as a key adviser to Mohamed bin Zayed. See: David Rose, “The Gaza bombshell”, Vanity Fair (April 2008). Adam Rasgon and Patrick Kingsley, “A Palestinian exile champions an Arab vision for Gaza”, New York Times (February 14, 2024).

[10] See: Staff writer, “UAE and the Muslim Brotherhood: a story of rivalry and hatred”, Middle East Monitor (June 15, 2017).

[11] Qatar participated in the NATO-led anti-Gaddafi campaign in 2011 and initially joined the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015. It withdrew from Yemen in 2017 after it got boycotted by a range of GCC as well as other Arab and Muslim states led by the UAE and the Saudi kingdom trying to force it to severe its relations with the MB.

[12] Kenneth Pollack, “Sizing up little Sparta: understanding UAE military effectiveness”, Report: American Enterprise Institute (2020).

[13] Abu Dhabi took part in the Saudi intervention in Yemen from the start. In 2018, it attempted to take control of the Yemeni island of Socotra, strategically located in the pathway to the Red Sea. This attempt was thwarted by Saudi counter-intervention on the island, forcing Abu Dhabi to backtrack. Two years later, the UAE completed its troops’ withdrawal from Yemen.

[14] Gilbert Achcar, “The crisis is permanent: Middle East and North Africa after 2011”, Against the Current (2024).

[15] Gilbert Achcar, The New Cold War: The United States, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine (Saqi Books: 2023).

[16] The MB rapidly came to the fore in 2011, taking over the leadership of uprisings in most countries where they burst out, Bahrain excluded. Even though the Brotherhood did not initiate any of those uprisings, it managed to get to take the reins as the most powerful organised force in the opposition, benefitting from funding and media backing from Qatar.

[17] The UAE and Saudi states played a key role in helping the Bahraini monarchy quell the uprising that threatened its throne, whereas Qatar was suspected of sympathizing with the opposition. The UAE and the Saudi kingdom were later led to support Syria’s opposition when the civil war took a sharp sectarian character in that country. Riyadh—for which Sunni anti-Shia sectarianism had been the main ideological tool in countering the appeal of Iran’s Islamic Republic—could not avoid standing with the Sunni opposition against the Iran-backed Alawi-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad. In both Libya and Syria however, the GCC political rivals ended up supporting rival factions of the opposition: Abu Dhabi vs. Qatar in Libya and the Saudi kingdom vs. Qatar in Syria. Riyadh chose to remain on the sidelines in Libya while Abu Dhabi kept mostly aloof in Syria.

[18] Gilbert Achcar, Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprisings (Saqi Books: 2016).

[19] The UAE’s ambassador in Washington played a key role in linking up with the Trump campaign, which is why Abu Dhabi had the most privileged relation of all Arab governments with the Trump administration. The foreign policy achievement which Donald Trump is the proudest

of—which conveniently took place amid his 2020 presidential campaign, thus boosting it is t---he Abraham Accords that led to the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Israel and each of the UAE and Bahrain, soon followed by Morocco and the Sudanese military junta. Abu Dhabi was the architect of this achievement.

Staff writer, “Report: Saudis, UAE funneled millions to Trump 2016 campaign”, Al Jazeera (February 25, 2020).