

United Arab Emirates' Armed Forces in the Federation-Building Process: Seeking for Ambitious Engagement.

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the complex relation between United Arab Emirates (UAE) and their armed forces. While in the Seventies the process of state-making was primarily rent-driven, deeper federation-building efforts has now been focusing on modern integration among the seven armed forces. From a domestic perspective, this strategy has enhanced Abu Dhabi's neo-patrimonial supremacy on the military system. Armed forces play also a crescent role in the new UAE foreign policy, oriented towards "ambitious engagement" through defense expenditure, cooperative security with Western powers and Nato, regional military assertiveness in the Middle East. Moreover, UAE armed forces and the domestic arena have a circular relation, since pilots and soldiers, due to their commitment abroad, have been gradually becoming vectors for UAE federal consciousness, fostering collective identity and so contributing to enhance Abu Dhabi's political weight within Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Through qualitative analysis, this paper problematizes the role and evolution of UAE armed forces, in a framework of complex realism.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, armed forces, foreign policy, neo-patrimonialism, Persian Gulf Cooperation Council.

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United Arab Emirates' Armed Forces in the Federation-Building Process: Seeking for Ambitious Engagement.

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Introduction

This paper investigates the complex relation between United Arab Emirates (UAE) and their armed forces. In the first and second paragraphs, it contends that while in the Seventies the process of UAE state-making, following the 1971 unification, was primarily rent-driven, deeper federation-building efforts, from the Nineties till now, has been focusing on modern integration among the seven armed forces. This strategy has enhanced the primacy of Abu Dhabi *élite* within the federation, balancing geographical areas and tribal clans in military ranks and so allowing al-Nahyan royal family to exert a neo-patrimonial supremacy on the military system. The third paragraph deals with the crescent role of the armed forces in acting UAE foreign policy, while the historical nuclear deal between Iran and the group of 5+1 can reshape geopolitical alignments in the region. As a matter of fact, Emirates external projection is performed through huge defense

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expenditure, cooperative security with Western powers and NATO, regional military assertiveness. As a small state, United Arab Emirates are not interested in open competition with Saudi Arabia, even though they experienced quarrels (border disputes) and now seem to play in a similar ideological-rhetorical field, both against Qatar's pro-Muslim Brotherhood foreign policy. Nevertheless, an increased political-military proactivity at a regional level could also empower UAE's weight inside Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and it has been already differentiating -although softly- UAE foreign policy approach from the Saudi one. In the fourth and last section, this paper hypothesis that armed forces -and especially air forces- have been gradually becoming a vector for United Arab Emirates federal identity, through recurrent engagement in peace support operations and the introduction of conscription for the army. As this research frames, Abu Dhabi's aim is to foster and convey, through the military tool, a sense of group-ness and belonging to a federal "state-tribe". In fact, even though local tribal affiliations are still strong, the huge demographic imbalance between nationals and expatriates have been shaping, in the perception of UAE citizens, a unique sense of privileged minority inside the federation, which could bring to the empowerment of UAE collective identity. Combining previous literature and press documents within a framework of *complex realism*,¹ this paper problematizes the role and evolution of UAE's armed forces, since the federal unification till now, analyzing how the military dimension has been impacting on federal foreign policy. With this purpose, the concept of *ambitious engagement* is here introduced to define UAE external behavior after 2011 uprisings, with the aim to update the previous notion of *constructive engagement*.

1. Armed forces in the looser-federation.

In 1971, the Arabian shaykhdoms (the so-called Trucial States) created the federation of the UAE (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah,

1. As outlined by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebush, this foreign policy analysis approach is built upon realist concepts (i.e. state centrality, balance of power, military dimension), but takes also into consideration political culture, identity and role expectations, as suggested by constructivism. See Ehteshami A.-Hinnebush R., 2013, "Foreign policy-making in the Middle East: complex realism", in Fawcett L. (ed), *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 225-244.

Ajman, ‘Umm al-Quwain, Fujairah, while Ra's al-Khaimah joined in 1972): United Kingdom had just withdrew from the Gulf. Notwithstanding the invitation, Bahrain and Qatar refused to join the new federation. In a context of state making without war making,¹ the institutional consolidation of United Arab Emirates was essentially rent-driven. After the pearl sector collapse in the Thirties, the discovery of oil assured to the new city-states revenues from natural resources, so allowing the allocation of rent through welfare policies. Soon, the rent-welfare pattern became the pillar of the Arab Gulf region and, in this case, of the UAE; the purpose was also to amalgamate composite communities based on the dichotomy between coastal merchants and inner tribes. For instance, the al-Nahyan dynasty, rulers of Abu Dhabi, and the al-Maktoum ones, rulers of Dubai, both belong to the Bani Yas tribal confederation, proceeding from the Aneza (Najd area). However, al-Nahyan are characterized by deep *bedu* linkages, with respect to the *hadhar* al-Maktoum, historically commercial-oriented. In the Seventies, while the rent was the first vector of the federation, armed forces were really little affected by the gradual integration process. In 1976, a presidential decree promulgated by *shaykh* Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the charismatic Abu Dhabi ruler, established unified armed forces: in fact, since 1971 to 1976, each emirate had conserved its own military structures, so led by seven different emirs. The decision to unify armed forces was taken after a technical report elaborated by Saudis, Jordanians and Kuwaitis officers: this group of experts recommended Abu Dhabi ruler to continue with his military integration project on federal base, in order to empower defense capabilities and coopt paramilitary groups, such as tribal militias. However, new armed forces were meant to reproduce power imbalances among emirates, due to pre-existent structural asymmetries in territorial size, percentage of native population and armies capabilities. This is why, despite formal military unification, Dubai, Ra's al-Khaimah and Sharjah

1. Schwarz defines “rent driven” the construction of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, in contrast with the European experience theorized by Charles Tilly, where the war acted as the foundational element of nation-states (to summarize, “the state made the war and the war made the state”). Cfr. Schwarz R., “Does War makes states? Rentierism and the formation of states in the Middle East”, 2011, European Political Science Review, 3, 3, pp.419-433.

obtained from Abu Dhabi, the natural leader inside UAE, to conserve partial military autonomy.¹ Moreover, in that moment, Sharjah and Ra's al-Khaimah were engaged in a harsh power struggle within the al-Qasimi ruler dynasty. Until the Nineties, regional command systems (formally abolished in 1978) allowed spaces of influence to the middle-size emirates of the federation.² At the beginning, United Arab Emirates political architecture appeared as a "looser federation", where the lack of full military integration highlights "the consensus-oriented approach to governance"³ embodied not only by shaykh Zayed, but then also by shaykh Khalifa, who understood the political necessity to avoid impositions from above to the rest of the federation. Since the start of the project, Abu Dhabi and Dubai didn't share the same view on how the federation should be: while the first looked at UAE as led by one-guiding emirate (Abu Dhabi of course), Dubai intended the federation as a *primus inter pares* agreement among emirates. Thus, tribal consensus has always been crucial, also for the al-Nahyan, in order to control the society, constructing supremacy day by day, with the purpose to become the federal hegemon.⁴ Even for these reasons, armed forces didn't play a significant role in the first UAE federation-building phase, from 1971 to the Nineties. Then, something began to change, probably due to the raising power of a new generation of princes⁵ and the ascendance of a new, Western-educated *élite* of technocrats, together with the

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1. For size (87% of UAE territory), oil/gas resources, national population and military corps. Abu Dhabi army was created by British officials in 1965 (air forces in 1968), while the second army to be organized, the Dubai one, followed only in 1971. Moreover, Abu Dhabi troupes helped Omani Sultan's levies to quell Dhofar uprising between 1971-74.
 2. West military command was led by Abu Dhabi, the central by Dubai and the northern one by Ra's al-Khaimah.
 3. Kupchan C.A., *How Enemies Become Friends. The Sources of Stable Peace*, 2010, Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp.333-4.
 4. "Le patrons politiques trouvent dans ce réseaux de solidarité (le tribus, le clans, le communautés), un moyen de contrôle de la société et même de modification de ses équilibres bien plus efficace quel les instruments □modernes□ d'encadrement comme le partis de masse ou la surveillance policière". Picard E., *Le liens primordiaux, vecteurs de dynamiques politique*, in Picard E. (ed), *La politique dans le monde arabe*, Paris, Armand Collin, 2006, pp.55-77.
 5. With regard to this point, Maestri underlines the strength of the informal political alliance between the Emir of Dubai, *shaykh* Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum (already federal defense minister) and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, *shaykh* Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, an alliance aimed to foster the liberalization and modernization process against royal conservatives. Cfr. Maestri E., 2009, *La regione del Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Sviluppo e sicurezza umana in Arabia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, p.88.

convergence of security and economic interests between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, especially after the latter financial crisis in 2008.

2. The Security Sector and Abu Dhabi's neo-patrimonial centralization.

In 1997, al-Maktoum family allowed the integration of Dubai's military structures into the federation: a decision probably due to the decline of oil resources, that weakened the resistance of small emirates (as Ra's al-Khaimah), so producing a snowball effect in favor of military integration. Therefore, the creation of unified armed forces could start, under the general headquarter in Abu Dhabi, paving the way not only for the modernization and partial professionalization of the UAE military system, but also for the supremacy of al-Nahyan family (and in particular of Bani Fatima clan) upon the security sector.¹ So, after 1997, armed forces became the vector of United Arab Emirates federation building, even if -we have to remind- this was a top-down, complex process, which was intertwined with the establishment of a centralized, neo-patrimonial network led by Abu Dhabi rulers and, especially from 2004, by *shaykh* Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan (president of UAE and commander of the armed forces) and his half-brother *shaykh* Mohammad bin Zayed. In the Gulf monarchies, security sector is the pillar of royal patronage networks: this creates obstacles for the complete professionalization of armed forces and for security sector reform, because structural reforms could bring to the fall of the whole authoritarian systems. In a perspective of internal geopolitics, the presence of Bani Yas (the al-Nahyan and al-Maktoum tribal confederation²) was balanced, within army ranks, with the inclusion of militaries belonging to the al-A'in group (as the prominent Bani Ka'ab), proceeding from eastern areas of UAE, as the contested Buraimi oasis. The cooptation of peripheral, small emirates inside new military apparatus produced, as a consequence, the

1. Bani Fatima are the five sons of the UAE founder and his favorite wife, Fatima: the eldest is Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Abu Dhabi crown prince and vice commander of the armed forces. Inside al-Nahyan family, Bani Fatima clan exerts a tight control on security sector and signature of arms contracts.

2. According to data collected for 1968 UAE census, Bani Yas tribal confederation encompasses about 40% of Abu Dhabi population and 50% of those of Dubai.

incorporation of tribal clans from the northern federation, boosting al-Nahyan's patronage wire on the territory -not without resistances- and also increasing the number of nationals in the armed forces (because at least 61% of Emiratis nationals comes from the north) even among officers.¹ UAE's state development is built on a peculiar relation of balance and dependence among emirates, which underlines a structural, recognized complementarity within the federation (especially from a security point of view), till to establish a system of pyramidal clientelism², with Abu Dhabi at the top of the imagined pyramid. Through military integration, Abu Dhabi has been achieving a better level of military interoperability among emirates if compared with the past, prioritizing the development of modern air forces, which are now, together with Omani pilots, the most effective of the Gulf monarchies (the only, for instance, able to strike against moving targets and operate air refueling).³ Obviously, as the other GCC monarchies, United Arab Emirates can't still be self-sufficient in terms of security and they need the engagement of external security providers, primarily the United States. Abu Dhabi fostered the beginning of a national military-industrial complex of private and mix companies, under the oversight of Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan; a project aimed to develop local expertise in manpower formation and arms maintenance. Abu Dhabi's neo-patrimonial rule on the security sector in the United Arab Emirates started and enhanced in a federal framework of late-rentierism. In this scenario, natural rent continues to be a key element of state-society relations, even though federal economy, acting and attempting to attract globalized investors, is now

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1. In the Nineties, the national population was distributed as follows: Abu Dhabi 27%, Dubai 11%, Ra's al-Khaimah 23%, Sharjah 18%, Fujairah 13%, 'Umm al-Quwain 5%,Ajman 2%. See Van der Meulen H., *The role of Tribal and Kinship Ties in the Politics of United Arab Emirates*, 1997, Thesis, Medford, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, cit. in Gervais V., *ibid*.
 2. See Hasbani N., 2011, *La politique de defense des Emirats Arabes Unis au sein des enjeux géopolitiques du Golfe arabo-persique*, Doctoral thesis, Université de Paris 8- Vincennes Saint Denis, U.F.R. Institut français de géopolitique, March, available from <http://www.1.static.e-corpus.org> Accessed April 24, 2015.
 3. Instead of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Cfr. Wehrey F., 2014, "Gulf Participation in the Anti-Islamic State Coalition: Limitations and Costs", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis*, September 23, available from <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis> Accessed October 3, 2014.

energy-driven and no more energy-centered. Oil and gas revenues are so invested in efforts of economy diversification, moving towards patterns of post-oil economy (as already is in Dubai, financial and re-export hub in the Middle East). Thus, military industry is one of the main sectors where revenues and foreign direct investments (FDI) can be successfully channeled and attracted. In fact, as I will analyze, defense expenditure represents a significant component of UAE foreign policy, with the purpose to shape a recognizable profile of external projection in the region and within the GCC.

3. Armed forces as foreign policy drivers.

Due to geographical position and small territorial-demographic size, UAE foreign policy is predominantly about containment of Iran,¹ the external Gulf rival or, in some historical phases, the perceived enemy, but is also concerned to limit and erode the superpower of Saudi Arabia, the main ally and sometimes uncomfortable internal Gulf rival. Moreover, Hormuz strait gives to the federation the projection on a commercial, energetic choke-point without pairs in the Middle Eastern region. As a matter of fact, Abu Dhabi's border disputes with Iran (Abu Musa and Tunb islands) and with Saudi Arabia (the contested Buraimi oasis) hasn't been officially solved yet and remained, in both cases, sensitive diplomatic issues. Notwithstanding the UAE have usually aligned with Saudi Arabia in recent times, especially against Qatar's pro-Muslim Brotherhood foreign policy. If compared with the *Wahhabi* kingdom, Emirates are a small state with a deficit of power which causes a weak ability to mobilize material and relational resources.² Nevertheless, "UAE and Qatar, in many ways, do not fit the defined model" of small states; instead, they show what can be called civilian power, as a combination of personal and state-owned wealth and stability along with strategic and clever use of these assets.³ Contemporary literature on United Arab Emirates foreign policy stresses at least two dominant features. Firstly,

1. Bandar-e Abbas Iranian main navy base is located just in front of UAE's coasts.

2. For the general concept of small states, see Rickli J.M., "European Small States' Military Policies after the Cold War: From Territorial to Niche Strategies", 2008, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, September, 21, pp.307-325.

3. Cfr. Mehran Kamrava on International Power Realignment in the Gulf, 2009, Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Center for International and Regional Studies, News & Events, March 10, available from <http://www.cirs.georgetown.edu/events-cirs> Accessed May 11, 2015.

the decision-making process in a federal state must take into account, with regard also to foreign policy, the interests of all member states: this was true until 2008. However, after Dubai financial crisis in 2008 -which was overcome thanks to Abu Dhabi intervention- Dubai has progressively renounced to its own, commercial-oriented foreign policy, sometimes not overlapped with the Abu Dhabi one, with particular reference to Iran.¹ Then, it is not by chance that UAE harshened their position against Iran before the signature of the historical nuclear deal between Teheran and the group of the 5+1, till to support openly the Saudi sectarian narrative. Secondly, some authors argued that United Arab Emirates foreign policy of “constructive engagement” develops into four, intertwined circles. The Gulf circle, with a strong reference to the Gulf Cooperation Council; the Arab circle, through the Arab League and the support for the Palestinian cause; the Muslim circle, as a founding member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), but especially with the role of many Islamic charities on the ground; and the international circle, based on a strong set of alliances with United States, United Kingdom and France.

Marking a difference with Riyadh.

After the Arab uprisings in 2010-11, United Arab Emirates’ external projection has assumed a more proactive attitude if compared with last decades. This has probably been caused by the enhanced perception of (structural) security dilemmas which affect the country: for instance, the crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood groups operating in the Emirates, which is combined with the anti-*Ikhwan* policies enacted by UAE in the whole Middle East, in particular in Egypt and Libya. In the UAE, since 2011 till now, Abu Dhabi-led foreign policy in MENA countries has been characterizing for a deep counter-revolutionary connotation, coupled with a new seek for regional leverage, out of the traditional Arabian peninsula’s borders, mixing money and selective military power. The couple “*counter-revolution* and

1. Dubai and Sharjah guest a significant Shia community, partially of Persian origins (about 17% of the overall population), and share strong commercial ties with Iran. Around 20% of Emirati population is Muslim Shia. With respect to Abu Dhabi, Dubai’s attitude towards Teheran has always been friendlier. In 1980-88, during Iran-Iraq war, Abu Dhabi, Ra’s al-Khaimah and ‘Ajman supported Iraq, while Iran was sustained by Dubai, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain.

regional leverage through foreign aid policy”, proper to define the current United Arab Emirates’ external posture, can almost be overlapped with the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. In fact, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have played, until now, the same match in the region, becoming (together with the smaller Bahrain) the bulk of GCC counter-revolutionary efforts with regard to the so-called Arab springs. Nevertheless, the complex military dimension of foreign policy -a variable not directly linked with an offensive use of force- distinguishes Emirates external behavior from the Saudi one, shaping a distinctive, more nuanced and sophisticated kind of foreign projection. For instance, Abu Dhabi has chosen not to be at the forefront on the Syrian file, differently from Riyadh and Doha, which were engaged there in a deep intra-Sunni rivalry within Assad’s opponents. The current centrality of the military dimension in UAE foreign policy-building is emphasized by at least three recognizable trends: rising defense expenditure, cooperative security alongside Western powers, increasing military assertiveness in the Arab world. While the first and second trends can be considered stable during the last decade, even though they are now showing a growth, the last one is a new outcome.

Military expenditure and cooperative security with NATO.

In 2014, United Arab Emirates’ military expenditure reached 5,1% of the GDP; during 2005-2009, UAE accounted for 57% of the volume of imports of major conventional weapons.¹ Arms purchase is already a tool of foreign policy, because it bonds allies in a mutual partnership based on convenience, with the suggestion of further investments in the future, exerting leverage on partners. It is not by chance that, with the exception of Russia, the main UAE’s armies suppliers are also their strongest international allies and security providers, as United States and France.² Washington, London and Paris signed defense agreement with the Emirates; in particular, France -who opened in 2009 a permanent military

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1. 4,7% of GDP in 2012, 2013 estimate is not available. Cfr. SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, available from <http://www.sipri.org> Accessed May 14, 2015; Solmirano C.-Wezeman P.D., *Military Spending and Arms Procurement in the Gulf States*, 2010, SIPRI Fact Sheet, October, available from <http://www.books.sipri.org> Accessed on April 2.
 2. According to SIPRI, between 2005-2009, United States provided 60% and France 35% of the overall UAE arms import, especially Patriot surface-to-air missile systems and F-16 combat aircraft (from US) and Mirage combat aircraft (from France). Russia started to export air defense systems in 2007. See Solmirano C.-Wezeman P.D., *ibid*.

base in Abu Dhabi- has a formal, written commitment to protect UAE in case of external aggression¹. Despite other Gulf monarchies (as Saudi Arabia), Abu Dhabi leadership has demonstrated to be focused not only on the purchase of heavy, expensive weapons, but to be also aware about the necessity to improve communication, radar and intelligence systems, anti-ballistic defense, plus local expertise and skills. Since the Nineties, United Arab Emirates has been frequently involved in UN or NATO-led peace support operations, even out of the Middle Eastern region,² with the purpose -at the same time- to enhance international alliances and domestic military know-how. In Afghanistan, about 1200 Emiratis militaries were engaged, from 2006 to 2013, in full combat operations against Talibans alongside Jordanian special forces in Kandahar, one of the most dangerous areas of Afghan's insurgency.³ Moreover, UAE are the GCC member most committed with NATO in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI),⁴ a practical, bilateral cooperation framework established in 2004, focusing on defense transformation, military-to-military cooperation, intelligence-sharing, training courses.⁵ UAE are the first Arab country to have sent an Ambassador to the NATO Headquarter (HQ) in Bruxelles (2013) and are co-founding member of the new NATO Interoperability Platform, launched during the summit in Wales.⁶ On February 2015, an inter-ministerial delegation from United Arab Emirates visited NATO HQ, discussing how to develop the Individual

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1. See the interesting analysis of Cher-Leparrain M., 2014, "Le coût prohibitif des ventes d'armes françaises dans le golfe. Faut-il assurer la défense de monarchies de la région?", *Orient XXI*, June 17, available from <http://www.orientxxi.info/magazine> Accessed June 28, 2014.
 2. As in Somalia (1992), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (ISAF 2003), Lebanon (2006).
 3. See among others Chandrasekaran R., "In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta'", 2014, *The Washington Post*, November 9, available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com> Accessed November 15, 2014.
 4. As showed by a NATO Defense College research in 2008, ICI states participated in 57 cooperation initiatives (UAE 25, Qatar 13, Bahrain 12, Kuwait 7). Cfr. Razoux P., "What future for NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative?", 2010, NATO Defense College Research Paper, January, n°55, p.3. In 2014, NATO Defense College in Rome and the UAE Ministry of Defense signed an agreement for education, research and training.
 5. Saudi Arabia and Oman don't take part in it, even though they often participate in ICI informal events and public diplomacy. Cfr. "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI): reaching out to the broader Middle East", 2011, November 18, available from <http://www.nato.int> Accessed March 12, 2015. See also Gaub F., *The Odd Couple: NATO and the GCC*, in Alcaro R.-Dessi A. (eds), *The Uneasy Balance. Potential Challenges of the West's Relations with the Gulf States*, 2013, Institute for International Affairs, IAI Research Papers, Rome, pp.113-126.
 6. The summit was held in Wales, on September 4-5, 2014. Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco are the other Arab members.

Partnership and Cooperation Programme, in ICI framework. Therefore, constant engagement in cooperative security, as already designed by NATO Lisbon's Strategic Concept in 2010,¹ is also a way to tighten and deepen UAE's relation with the United States, increasing not only the regional weight of the federation, but even the strength of Washington's committed to Emiratis external defense.² Al-Dhafra air base is a fundamental facility for the United States in the Gulf. As the UAE ambassador in the United States recently highlighted in a conference at the Atlantic Council, "we have fought alongside US troops in six wars" and we deserve "some sort of recognition and some kind of process", in order to upgrade a "gentleman's agreement with the United States about security" in "something in writing...institutionalized".³ Now that United States seem partially to disengage from the Gulf and the perception of threats coming from Iran and the domestic realm rises, United Arab Emirates have begun to use their military power in the region, with an assertive attitude.

Regional military assertiveness.

From 2011 Arab uprisings till now, UAE have carried out four military operations, all crucial to define their current Middle Eastern foreign policy. In March 2011, 700 Emirates policemen were deployed in Manama, under the request of Bahraini king, with the purpose to help local army to settle the Shia protest, which was calling for equal

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1. Cooperative security for collective defense and crisis management, see NATO, Active Engagement, Modern Defense: Strategic Concept, November 2010, available from <http://www.nato.int> Accessed March 17, 2015.
 2. Emirates have also recently shown to be "dialectic allies" of the United States. After the disappearance of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kassasbeh, then burned to death by the so-called Islamic State, UAE suspended their airstrikes between Syria and Iraq, demanding to the Pentagon improvements in search-and-rescue measures, claiming for instance the use of V-22 Osprey helicopters for fast rescue of in-danger pilots. Cfr. Cooper H., 2015, "United Arab Emirates, Key U.S. Ally in ISIS Effort, Disengaged in December", The New York Times, February 3, available from <http://www.nytimes.com> Accessed on March 4, 2015.
 - 3 See Kumar Sen A., "With an Eye on Iran, Gulf Countries Seek US Security Guarantee", 2015, Atlantic Council, May 7. The public conference quoted was held at the Atlantic Council, Washington, May 7, with the title "The Road to Camp David: The Future of US-Gulf Partnership". However, US-GCC summit in Camp David on May 14 showed that this was not the case, since no written agreement was signed, but was released only a joined politically-binding statement on mutual defense cooperation.

opportunities with respect to the small ruling Sunni minority.¹ In September 2014, UAE air forces joined the international coalition led by the United States against the so-called Islamic State (IS), bombing between eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq; Emirati planes are second only to U.S. air fighters in the number of sorties flown.² After the impressive murder of a Jordanian pilot by “IS”, UAE and Jordan hit Jihadi positions in the Mosul area, as retaliatory measure. In August 2014, UAE unilaterally stroke against Jihadi militias -with the logistic support of Egypt- in Tripoli, Libya,³ so attempting to actively support Tobruk recognized government. In March 2015, United Arab Emirates engaged with the Arab Sunni air military coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, against Shiite militias in Yemen (some of them, the Houthis, also backed by Iran), supporting the legitimacy of Abdu Rabu Mansur Hadi’s *interim* presidency; here, since summer 2015, UAE’ units have been revealing fundamental to organize the coalition’s land intervention to support and coordinate Yemeni regular forces.⁴ As in a mosaic, every military intervention sheds light on a feature, a detail of United Arab Emirates foreign policy: counter-revolutionary intent (Bahrain, Yemen), cooperative security with Western allies (“Islamic State”), regional military assertiveness connected with anti-Muslim Brotherhood policies (Libya), transnational containment of Iran (Yemen). Moreover, Abu Dhabi is one of the main sponsors, together with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, of the Arab joint military force organized by the Arab League, to be deployed against emergency threats, as terrorism. As a matter of fact, Sunni Arab coalition which intervened in Yemen against Shiite militias can be considered the air-vanguard of the project. During the

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1. Were also deployed about 1000 soldiers of the Saudi National Guard, “pres de 800 militaires jordaniens revêtus de l’uniforme bahreïnien”, plus a Kuwaiti warship to patrol the coasts. Dazi-Héni F., *Le Conseil de Coopération du Golfe: une coopération de sécurité et de défense renforcée?*, 2011, Sciences Po-CNRS CERI, September.
 2. Cfr. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), “Douglas Barrie, Arab air power and Operation Inherent Resolve”, 2014, Manama Dialogue blog, December 6, available from <http://www.iiiss.org/en/manama-s-voices> Accessed March 2, 2015.
 3. See McGregor A., “Egypt, the UAE and Arab Military Intervention in Libya”, 2014, *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, vol.12, issue 17, September 5.
 4. Cfr. Browning N., “Arab Solidarity, fear of Iran bring hi-tech Gulf troops to Yemen desert”, *Reuters*, September 16, 2015, available from <http://www.uk.reuters.com> Accessed September 16, 2015; Barthe B., “Au Yémen, les pays du Golfe combattent au sol”, *Le Monde*, September 17, 2015, p.3.

first Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, a conference organized on October 2014 by the Emirates Policy Centre (EPC) to discuss regional issues, EPC underlined that “United Arab Emirates, GCC states and their strategic depth are not recipients of regional and international powers impact only, but are regional and international actors as well”, a statement that synthetizes the new Emiratis approach to foreign policy.¹

4. Armed Forces as tool of UAE’s collective identity.

In the Middle East, war doesn’t make states and especially it doesn’t construct strong states. Nevertheless, war helps to foster a sense of belonging to a peculiar community and, in this sense, it is a formidable driver of national identity and self-consciousness. In the case of United Arab Emirates, I can’t avoid to remark two points. First, the federation doesn’t engage in regular, classical war among armies, but only in wide peace support operations (i.e. Afghanistan, Kosovo), NATO-led military interventions (Libya 2011), unilateral air-strikes (Libya 2014), Arab-Sunni military interventions (Yemen), “police-style” operations (Bahrain). Second, UAE are a “work in progress nation”: they are a federation of small emirates, ruled by a “dominant social coalition” which encompasses tribal chieftains, rich merchants and Western-educated technocrats.² Despite of common religion, language, culture, tribal loyalties tend to prevail with respect to UAE national identity, which remains weak in each emirate, especially in the relation between coastal and inner lands.³ Paradoxically, the presence of a huge number of expatriates in the United Arab Emirates (employed in particular in the army, in the navy and in the private sector) has been fostering the development of a national sense of belonging. In fact, the “population imbalance” between nationals and expatriates has nourished, in the eyes of UAE citizens, firstly the perception and then the awareness of being “a minority in their own country”, till to look at themselves as a “completely undisputed class of privileged few”.⁴ Between United Arab Emirates’ armed forces and the domestic arena exists a circular relation. Armed forces, in particular air forces, are -as I said before- a

1. Cfr. Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate 2014, Events Details, available from <http://www.epc.ae> Accessed May 24, 2015.

2. Lawson F.,1993, “Neglected Aspects of the Security Dilemma”, in Bryner R.-Korany B.-Noble P., *ibid.*, pp.100-126.

3. Cfr. Kupchan C.A., *ibid.*, p.335.

4. Heard-Bey F., “The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society”, 2005, *Middle East Journal*, 59, 3, Summer.

central actor of current Emirates foreign policy: through the active engagement in peace support operations and regional coalitions, this external military projection fosters the formation of a sense of federal belonging. This could feed the raise of an Emiratis collective identity, since it conveys a feeling of group-ness and unity: the image of UAE's pilots committed in military interventions abroad helps to strengthen self-consciousness, as the collective mourning for national "soldiers martyred in Yemen" has been doing.¹ As stresses by shaikh Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum during the 39th anniversary of the unification of the Armed Forces "the building of our Armed Forces was the most important chapter of our great national epic...at the heart of the process of building the state and society".² This is the rhetoric used to address with the military system. In fact, intervention "is triggered by perceived threats, but it is also about branding, identity-construction":³ it is not by chance that national voluntaries join air forces due to their prestige, while the federal army and naval forces need still to rely predominantly on foreign soldiers.

Militaries as identity-mobilizers.

The impact of foreign military engagement on the rise of UAE federal identity can be seen as a bottom-up dynamic, because it emerges, in a horizontal way, at popular level. On the other hand, Abu Dhabi institutions are attempting to operationalize and maximize this phenomenon through top-down measures, in order to enhance intra-federal ties and so UAE collective identity. In 2014, the introduction of military conscription by the federation⁴ was presented as an effort to "dynamize the nation", also boosting a sense of commitment into national security among nationals. In the Arab states, national security encompasses regime security: in practice, they are overlapped,

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1. On September 4, 2015, 45 Emirati soldiers were killed in the area of Mareb, central Yemen, by a Houthi's missile. See Khaleej Times, 2015, "UAE salutes 45 soldiers martyred in Yemen", September 5, available from <http://www.khaleejtimes.com> Accessed September 13, 2015.
 2. Gulf News, 2015, "Building of Armed Forces most important chapter of UAE history: UAE vice President", May 5, available from <http://www.gulfnews.com> Accessed May 20, 2015.
 3. Cfr. London School of Economics and Political Sciences, LSE Middle East Centre, 2014, The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States, Workshop Summary, March 26.
 4. The law establishes compulsory draft for male citizens between 18-30 years, for a period of service from nine months till two years. For women, draft is voluntary. See Cher-Leparrain M., 2014, Deux monarchies du Golfe instaurent un service militaire obligatoire, Orient XXI, February 19, available from <http://www.orientxxi.info> Accessed March 7, 2014.

“making them difficult to disentangle”.¹ Therefore, promoting a feeling of federal engagement through the armed forces it is a way, for Abu Dhabi leadership, to protect regime security, especially in this unstable regional scenario, after Arab uprisings, the spread of jihadism and the rise of the Iranian transnational role. UAE media are increasingly covering news about their armed forces, highlighting the positive effects on Emirates self-perception.² Many national media underline that the involvement of young citizens in the armed forces it is also a way to prevent Jihadi radicalization among them, so promoting “a strong sense of belonging” and shaping “collective identity”. At the same time, others emphasize the healthy impact of draft on youth life-style, in order to avoid sedentary diseases and emotional imbalances³, till to picture military service as something “cool” and “fashionable”. Notwithstanding the introduction of military conscription, UAE traditional pattern of security is no meant to change: national population is too little to become a game-changer in the military system and rulers prefer to rely on foreign soldiers. In the Gulf monarchies, keeping small armies has always been an effective coup-proofing strategy, in order to avoid or settle potential threats coming from military ranks. Thus, the introduction of compulsory draft would act, in Abu Dhabi’s intentions, as an *identity-mobilizer*, helping United Arab Emirates to cope with a raising troubled regional landscape; due to the low percentage of nationals, this political choice should be able to maximize positive effects (contributing to the enhancement of federal identity), minimizing instead risks related to the increased involvement of citizens in political and military affairs. In this way, military conscription is an example of “*conservative reformism*”: a counter-revolutionary measure within an unstable Middle Eastern environment, aimed to strengthen royal political authority, fostering a *rally around the flag* national feeling among citizens.

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1. Bryner R.-Korany B.-Noble P. (eds), 1993, *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, p.27.
 2. As one young soldier says, conscription “makes me pride to live here”. Cfr. *The National*, 2015, “National service will help the country”, Letters to the Editor, Mar 30, available at <http://www.thenational.ae> Accessed April 3, 2015.
 3. See among others Almazouri A., “Military Service is a good start towards a healthy life-style”, 2015, *The National*, March 29, available at <http://www.thenational.ae> Accessed Apr 3, 2015.

Conclusions.

When it started in the Seventies, United Arab Emirates federation-building process was primarily rent-driven. From a military point of view, UAE were a “looser federation”, due to the fact that military integration among emirates was only formal and not substantial. The rivalry between the two biggest federation’s emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, marked the decision-making process of the UAE; for instance, there was no unified foreign policy, since Dubai followed commercial-oriented relations with Iran, while Abu Dhabi was much closer to the issue of the islands contested with Teheran. Only in the Nineties, when a different regional context and new generation of princes raised, armed forces became to acquire a crescent role within the federation-building process. In this sense, armed forces can be considered late federation-builders, because they were used by al-Nahyan rulers to centralize Abu Dhabi’s governance on the other emirates (as the inner competitor Dubai), through a neo-patrimonial network linking the security sector with the royal family, especially the Bani Fatima clan. Moreover, tribal presence inside military ranks was balanced, in order to increase territorial loyalty and the number of nationals involved in the army. Nowadays, armed forces are a vector of UAE foreign policy: this trend has been strengthening after 2011 *thawrat* and the empowerment of Iran’s transnational leverage in the Middle East. Thus, Abu Dhabi -now the main foreign policy master in the federation- has begun to engage in counter-revolutionary efforts (together with Saudi Arabia) through foreign aid and the military tool (i.e. Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen). The centrality of the military dimension in the current United Arab Emirates external projection can be identified in at least three dynamics: increased military expenditure, cooperative security with Western powers and NATO, raising military assertiveness within the Arab system. Nevertheless, the level of military integration among UAE emirates -and also among GCC countries- remains incomplete: acquire better interoperability will be the first challenge of the future. Between United Arab Emirates’ armed forces and the domestic realm exists a circular relation. UAE’s armed forces, especially air forces, contribute to enhance a sense of federal belonging and self-consciousness, through active engagement abroad. At the same time, UAE institutions are attempting to maximize this

bottom-up, popular phenomenon, introducing top-down measures (as military conscription) aimed to shape a shared, collective identity, coping with *intermestic* security threats.¹ In this way, armed forces perform as identity-mobilizers, playing also a role of conservative reformism. Looking at UAE foreign policy posture since 2011, it is possible to argue whether this external projection could be still considered an example of constructive engagement² or, better, of *ambitious engagement*, combining counter-revolutionary efforts with rank aspirations, especially now that the historical Iranian nuclear deal marks a new geopolitical phase for the region. The passage from “constructive” to “ambitious” is emphasized by shaykh Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum’s words, when he affirmed that “without providing reasons of self-strength, the talk of peaceful coexistence, good neighborliness and problem-solving by dialogue has no value, weight or context”.³ Without any doubt, such new approach is more Emirates, prestige and military-centered, with respect to the previous one.

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 3. Cfr. Al-Khoori A., 2015, “*UAE Armed Forces have positive role in regional justice, Dubai Ruler says*”, *The National*, May 5, available from <http://www.thenational.ae> Accessed May 18, 2015.

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