



EXPORTING AUTHORITARIANISM

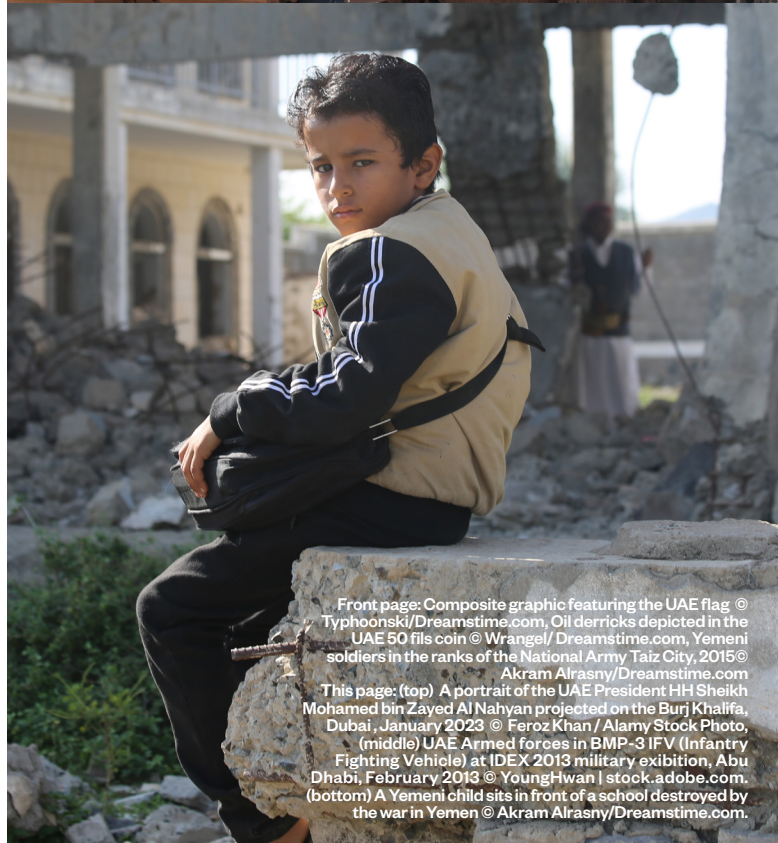
A briefing on the UAE's interventionist foreign policy

The UAE: a regressive and menacing actor in regional affairs

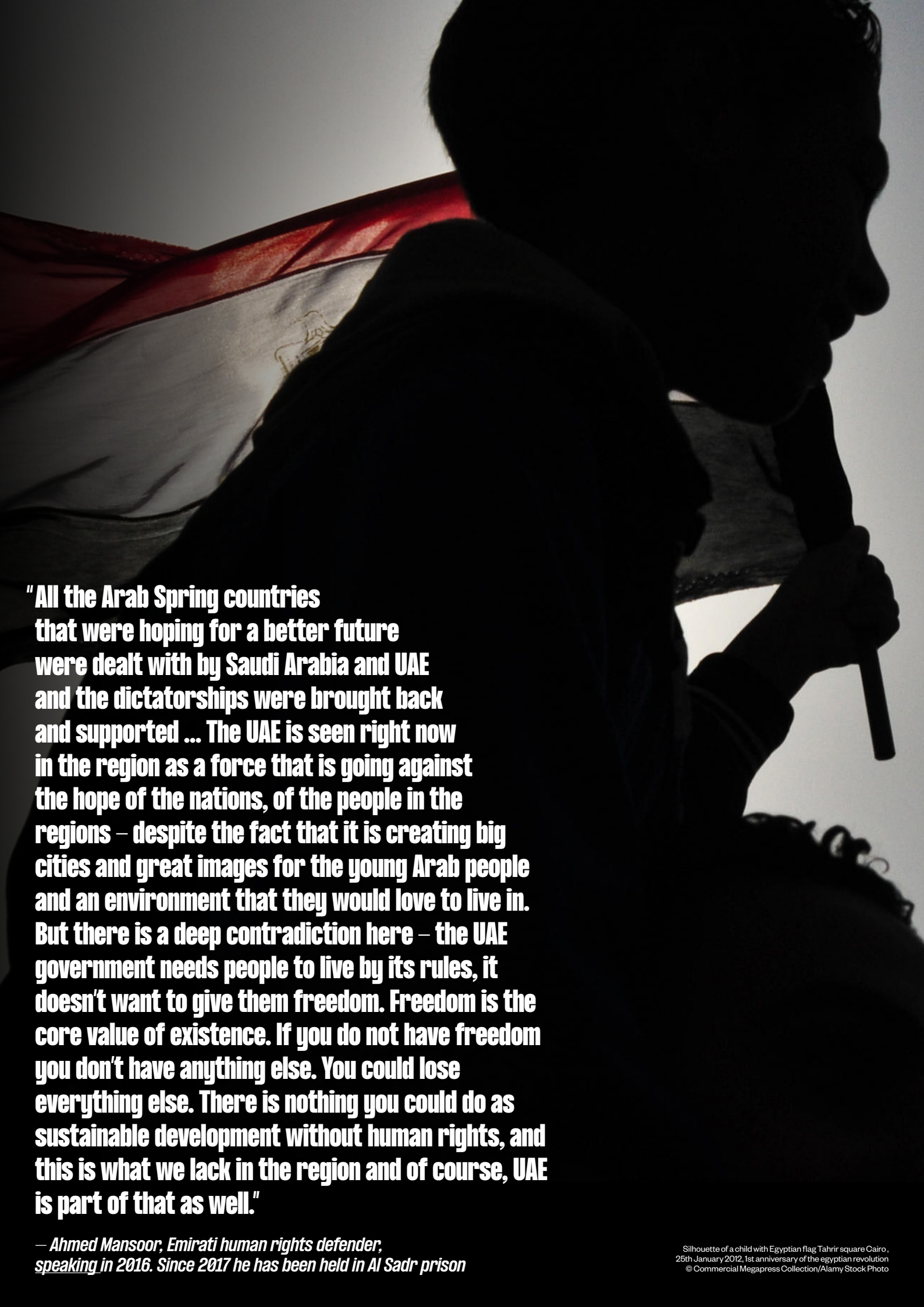
Over the last decade the UAE's authoritarianism, underpinned by its massive fossil fuel revenues, has turned it into a deeply repressive surveillance state. It operates a highly sophisticated and well-resourced public relations operation to maintain the illusion that it is progressive and tolerant. Western governments, reliant on the country's fossil fuels and related investments, seek close collaboration with Abu Dhabi and provide it with weaponry and military backing.

This human rights brief – designed to provide important context for COP28 participants – explores the UAE state's authoritarian foreign policy. Not content with brutally repressing domestic critics of its own regime, it uses its boundless financial resources – generated by extraction and export of fossil fuels – to export its model of 'authoritarian stability', backing violent and repressive actors across the globe. It has emerged as a major regional power with increasing global influence.

UAE ruler Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) has moulded the country in his image and has assumed the role of its protector-in-chief, highlighting the threat posed to the UAE and regional stability by Iran and political Islam. In terms of its international relations, the UAE has adroitly hedged its bets. MBZ has maintained deep military and economic alliances with western powers, while forging ever closer ties with China, Russia and Israel. The UAE placates its traditional western allies through the purchase of billions of dollars of the most sophisticated military hardware and the deployment of well-resourced lobbying and sophisticated PR operations, and MBZ still sees the United States as the ultimate guarantor of UAE security. At the same time, he has cultivated strong trade and security ties with China, which is building a military base in the UAE, and has been credibly accused of assisting Russia's war in Ukraine. Domestically, the UAE pursues increasingly authoritarian governance consistent with the ideological visions of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, and abroad it engages in the type of aggressive militarism more readily associated with colonialist superpowers. In accomplishing this balancing act, the UAE has become a profoundly regressive and menacing actor in global affairs, notably in the Middle East.



Front page: Composite graphic featuring the UAE flag © Typhoonski/Dreamstime.com, Oil derricks depicted in the UAE 50 fils coin © Wrangel/Dreamstime.com, Yemeni soldiers in the ranks of the National Army Taiz City, 2015 © Akram Alrasny/Dreamstime.com
This page: (top) A portrait of the UAE President HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan projected on the Burj Khalifa, Dubai, January 2023 © Feroz Khan / Alamy Stock Photo, (middle) UAE Armed forces in BMP-3 IFV (Infantry Fighting Vehicle) at IDEX 2013 military exhibition, Abu Dhabi, February 2013 © YoungHwan J stock.adobe.com, (bottom) A Yemeni child sits in front of a school destroyed by the war in Yemen © Akram Alrasny/Dreamstime.com.

A high-contrast, black and white silhouette of a child's head and shoulders in profile, facing right. The child is holding a flag, which is partially visible as a bright, glowing shape behind their head and shoulders. The background is a plain, light color, making the dark silhouette stand out.

"All the Arab Spring countries that were hoping for a better future were dealt with by Saudi Arabia and UAE and the dictatorships were brought back and supported ... The UAE is seen right now in the region as a force that is going against the hope of the nations, of the people in the regions – despite the fact that it is creating big cities and great images for the young Arab people and an environment that they would love to live in. But there is a deep contradiction here – the UAE government needs people to live by its rules, it doesn't want to give them freedom. Freedom is the core value of existence. If you do not have freedom you don't have anything else. You could lose everything else. There is nothing you could do as sustainable development without human rights, and this is what we lack in the region and of course, UAE is part of that as well."

— Ahmed Mansoor, Emirati human rights defender, speaking in 2016. Since 2017 he has been held in Al Sadr prison



(top) Mena Solidarity Network placard protesting Hemedti, London, June 2019 © r. Avpics / Alamy Stock Photo (bottom) Egyptian military stands watch as bulldozers dismantle Cairo's Al-Nahda square protest camp after Egyptian security forces dispersed supporters of Egypt's ousted President Mohamed Morsi © UPI/Alamy Stock Photo



Backing authoritarians across the Arab world

When people across the Arab world rose up against their corrupt and repressive rulers in 2011, MBZ was horrified by the implications, believing that the only winners of the protest movements would be the Muslim Brotherhood – with its links to the UAE’s rival Qatar – or Iran. The UAE leadership has defended its subsequent financial or military support for authoritarian governments by arguing privately or publicly that they were pushing back against Qatari, Iranian, Turkish, or simply “Islamist” influence. In the last two years, the UAE has made moves to ease tensions with some of these regional adversaries, but despite this there has been no let up in the UAE’s support for other autocratic regimes.

EGYPT: A journalist who secured a rare interview with MBZ for a New York Times profile argues that Egypt was “the first great success of M.B.Z.’s counterrevolutionary campaign” and became the template for his foreign policy. It was his money – largely from fossil-fuel revenues – that allegedly funded the 2013 military ousting of Mohamed Morsi, Egypt’s first freely elected president, and the installation of Abd el-Fattah el-Sisi, whose security forces massacred at least 900 people in a day shortly after the coup. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have poured billions of dollars into backing Sisi and his ruthless regime – \$114 billion in a decade – as he has set out to

destroy both the Muslim Brotherhood and the country’s protest movement.

LIBYA: MBZ has thrown his weight behind “strongman” warlord Khalifa Haftar, accused of war crimes including torture and indiscriminate bombing, in his bloody and prolonged conflict with the country’s internationally-recognised government. In 2021 a UN investigative committee found that the UAE had funnelled arms to Haftar’s forces, breaching a UN embargo and directly undermining UN-led peace talks. Leaked emails show that as early as 2015 Emirati officials knew precisely how and when they were violating arms embargoes. The UAE also trafficked Sudanese men into the country to fight as mercenaries, under the false pretence that they were going to work as security guards in the UAE. Abu Dhabi has also worked closely with the mercenary Russian Wagner Group in Libya, with Emirati drones and jets coordinating with Wagner forces on the ground, where the Wagner group was found in 2022 to have planted banned landmines and booby traps around Tripoli. Intelligence reports have noted that the UAE may have been providing direct finance to Wagner.

SUDAN: In 2019, when long-time ruler Omar Bashir was forced from power by pro-democracy protesters, there were reports that the UAE had orchestrated his ouster, after which the UAE acted quickly to shore up the military – under the guise of “stability” – and undermine civilian rule. That summer the UAE and Saudi Arabia agreed to provide the military with \$3 billion in aid. At the same time, the UAE tied themselves closely to General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as “Hemedti”), the commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which was formed from the Janjaweed militia that terrorised Darfur and in which he was a leader. Thousands of RSF fighters, including children, were sent to Yemen to fight on behalf of Saudi and Emirati overseers. Hemedti meanwhile got rich through selling millions of dollars of Darfur-mined gold through Dubai markets. In early 2023 Hemedti launched an all-out assault on army units loyal to Sudan’s military ruler General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. In a conflict that has seen horrendous abuses committed by both sides, hundreds of civilians were killed and thousands injured, with more than 300,000 people displaced. It soon transpired that Hemedti’s forces were trained by the UAE’s ally Khalifa Haftar, and were armed by the Wagner Group.

TUNISIA: Long seen as the flawed “success story” of the Arab Spring, Tunisia was for ten years governed by democratically elected governments, dominated by the moderate Islamist Ennahda party – which the UAE ideo-

logically opposed and also viewed as too closely influenced by its rival Qatar. In the late 2010s, the UAE actively sought to pull Tunisia away from Qatar and into its orbit. In July 2021, President Kais Saied froze parliament and dismissed the prime minister, in a move widely seen as a coup. Emirati media called the move “brave”, having played an important role boosting Saied’s agenda as he confronted his Ennahda rival Rashid Ghannouchi. The UAE quickly issued its support for this anti-democratic move, and has strongly backed Saied as he has steered the Tunisian state towards authoritarianism, cementing his power with a new autocratic constitution in 2022. In 2023 he had Ghannouchi arrested.

Conflict and crimes against humanity

YEMEN: The UAE has been a key driver of the catastrophic Yemen conflict since 2015 when, as part of the Saudi Arabia/UAE-led coalition, it launched airstrikes on the region’s poorest country in an attempt to dislodge the Houthis, who had taken control of large parts of the country and had links to Iran. As the conflict developed into what the UN eventually described as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, the UAE developed its own strategic goals, which included extending its influence along the country’s coastlines, which sit alongside crucial Red Sea shipping lanes, and supporting the US in its “War on Terror” by combatting militant Islamists operating in Yemen. The UAE put troops on the ground in Yemen’s south, west and east and backed militia groups, as part of a bespoke security apparatus. By 2017, numerous reports of serious abuses by UAE forces and their militias described how countless people with no proven connection to terrorist groups were being detained, abused or disappeared. They were held in a network of secret prisons where, according to the Associated Press, former inmates described being crammed into shipping containers smeared with faeces, blindfolded for weeks on end, beaten, rotated on a spit and sexually assaulted, among other abuses. Meanwhile UAE-funded American mercenaries carried out assassinations on behalf of Abu Dhabi. UAE forces have largely withdrawn from the country, but Abu Dhabi continues to back a range of different Yemeni military leaders and fighting forces in the country, who themselves continue to abuse, detain and disappear people.

ETHIOPIA: The UAE provided crucial assistance to Abiy Ahmed’s Ethiopian government in its brutal assault on the Tigray region, during which civilians were



People displaced by the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, Nov 2021 © Erberto Zani / Alamy Stock Photo

subjected to what human rights groups called a “re-entless campaign of ethnic cleansing” – forced out of their homes by unlawful killings, sexual violence, mass arbitrary detention, pillage, forcible transfer, and the denial of humanitarian assistance. A UN Commission of Inquiry found in 2022 that there were reasonable grounds to believe that Ethiopian government forces and their allies had committed crimes against humanity in Tigray. The Emiratis trained the Ethiopian Republican Guard and provided crucial military support at the start of the war, with dozens of cargo flights dispatched from a UAE military base in Fujairah. While other countries attempted to negotiate an end to the conflict, UAE national security adviser Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan authorised Emirati drone strikes that took out Tigrayan artillery and weapons depots.

SYRIA: MBZ has arguably done more than any other leader to rehabilitate the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, who in a conflict marked by crimes against humanity, has presided over the destruction of large parts of his country, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and the displacement of millions more. As early as 2018, the UAE re-opened its embassy in Damascus – a significant diplomatic boost to Assad – framing this as a move to counter Iranian influence. In 2021, Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Foreign Minister and brother of MBZ, used a joint press conference with Sergei Lavrov to call for US sanctions on Syria to be lifted. In 2022, Abu Dhabi hosted Assad on an official visit, his first to an Arab country since 2011, and repeated the invitation a year later. The culmination of these efforts came in 2023, when Assad was invited to the Arab League meeting in Riyadh, and the UAE issued him with an invitation to COP28.

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(top) Donald Trump meets with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, May 15, 2017, in Washington, D.C. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead), (middle) Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan meeting with Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg, Russia, Oct 2022 © www.kremlin.ru, (bottom) Activist holds a poster with the image of Jamal Khashoggi demonstrating in front of the Mandala Monument, Makassar, Indonesia, 2018 © Herwin Bahar/Dreamstime.com.



Trump Card

In late 2022, according to the Washington Post, the US National Intelligence Council produced a confidential report for US policymakers on “the UAE’s bid, spanning multiple U.S. administrations, to exploit the vulnerabilities in American governance”. The UAE’s involvement in US politics was most heavily documented through the period of Donald Trump’s Presidential candidacy and administration.

By 2016, MBZ had become frustrated with the Obama administration. He employed lobbyist George Nader, a convicted sex offender, to get close to the Trump campaign and simultaneously to illegally funnel money into the Clinton campaign. In August 2016 Nader told Donald Trump Jr that the UAE and Saudi Arabia wanted his father to win the presidency. In the wake of Trump’s victory, Nader visited the White House at least 13 times to meet then-chief strategist Steve Bannon. In January 2017 Nader set up a secret meeting in the Seychelles, with MBZ in attendance, in an attempt to create a backchannel between Trump and Putin.

At this time the high-profile UAE Ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, was becoming close to Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner – by early 2017 the two were “in almost constant phone and email contact”. MBZ reportedly claimed that he had US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson fired in 2018, after Tillerson had blocked UAE and Saudi plans for a military assault on Qatar in 2017. According to the New York Times, Otaiba was said to have known about Tillerson’s sacking well in advance. Crucially, it was also the UAE Ambassador who helped to forge a personal relationship between Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohamad bin Salman (MBS) and Jared Kushner. After the 2018 murder by Saudi assassins of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Kushner ensured support for MBS in the White House and offered him advice on how to weather the storm.

Abraham Accords

In 2020, the UAE normalised relations with Israel via the Abraham Accords, abandoning the long-held collective policy position by the vast majority of Arab states that a full Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement was a precondition for any Arab state to enter into formal relationships with Israel. As analysts from the European Council on Foreign Relations put it, “in flipping the order by putting regional peace before Palestinian peace, the UAE is removing a key incentive Israel may have had to end its

occupation.” The Accords have effectively led the UAE to recognise Israel’s illegal settlements, described by the UN Security Council as “a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace”. Israeli goods produced in illegal settlements such as the West Bank and the Golan Heights are now marked for sale as “Israeli goods” in the UAE, despite a 2016 UN Security Council resolution calling on all states to distinguish between Israel and its occupied territories. Under the banner of the Abraham Accords, a raft of joint UAE-Israel military and technology projects have been announced, including one between the Israeli defence firm Rafael and Group 42, an Emirati tech firm. Group 42 is chaired by the UAE’s national security advisor, and is best known as the company behind ToTok, the widely downloaded Emirati messaging app that turned out to be a spying tool. Deepening ties with Israel has provided the UAE with access to some of the most sophisticated Israeli surveillance technology, notably NSO’s Pegasus. According to former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, one of the primary factors driving the UAE’s decision to normalise ties with Israel, was that they also believed it would open the door to them purchasing F-35 jets from the United States.

Financing the French far right?

In June 2014 a secret meeting took place at the home of far-right Front National leader Marine Le Pen in a Paris suburb, according to French investigative online

newspaper Mediapart. At this meeting a high-ranking member of the Emirati intelligence service promised Le Pen “we will help you” with her presidential campaign, as part of the UAE’s campaign against Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. The next year, according to Mediapart, the UAE secretly paid for Le Pen to visit Egypt, where she met the Prime Minister and decried the influence of political Islam.

In 2019, Mediapart went on to reveal that the finances of Le Pen’s party - by then renamed the Rassemblement National - had been saved in 2017 by a mysterious 8 million euro loan. The loan was made through UAE bank Noor Capital, founded by former Oil Minister and presidential adviser Mana Al Otaiba, the father of the current UAE Ambassadors to Washington and Paris. The funds enabled Le Pen’s party to pay its remaining bills from the 2017 presidential election, as required under French electoral law.



(left) An Air Force F-35 Lightning II aircraft, Feb. 24, 2022, photo taken by US Air Force, Senior Airman Joseph Barron, the appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement, (right) Marine Le Pen, France’s Front National leader in the traditional Jeanne d’Arc march © agefotostock/Alamy Stock Photo.



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This briefing was developed by **FairSquare**
and written by James Lynch.