

The Duality of the Saudi-Emirati Relations: Competition over Nation-Building Policies and the Yemeni Civil War*

YOSHIDA Tomoaki**

Abstract

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) now have a track record of working together to counter domestic and international threats stemming from the 2011 anti-government uprisings in the Middle East. This cooperation has included coordinated military interventions. Prior to the 2011 uprisings, relations between the two countries were often noticeably strained due to issues like border disputes and their differing levels of enthusiasm regarding moves to deepen integration between Gulf Cooperation Council member states. Shared security threats have been seen, however, as having led to a thaw in their bilateral relations.

Since the 2011 uprisings, the two countries have built up a relationship that is now described as an alliance. There were, however, reports in July 2021 of a deterioration in their bilateral relations, with economic factors and behind-the-scenes political rifts cited as causes. This paper examines the historical duality of competitive and cooperative dynamics in their bilateral relationship, and concludes that the following three key factors have contributed to a deterioration in the two countries' relations:

1. Efforts to curb threats stemming from the 2011 uprisings;
2. Differing stances on support for proxy forces in the Yemeni civil war, and the degree of success the two countries respectively achieved with their interventions in said war; and
3. The UAE's emergence as a political and military power, along with increasing economic competition between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The second and third are new factors contributing to intensification of the competitive nature of their bilateral relations and they can also be seen as having damaged Saudi Arabia's standing as a dominant regional power.

Introduction

The 2011 anti-government uprisings (the so-called "Arab Spring") led to protest movements, civil wars, and regime changes, causing structural shifts in the security environment and international relations in the Middle East. The resulting destabilization of governing systems led to the fall of the region's traditional military powers, such as Syria, Egypt, and Libya, and it was Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Iran and other Gulf states, that rose to fill the power vacuum.

* Originally published in Japanese in *Anzenhoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security & Strategy], vol. 4, no. 2 (March 2024). Some parts have been updated.

** Research Fellow, Security and Economy Division, Security Studies Department, NIDS

Saudi Arabia and the UAE both pursued two key foreign policy shifts in response to threats arising from the 2011 uprisings. The first of these shifts was the adoption of a more aggressive foreign policy that involved utilization of their military forces. Eman Ragab describes this change as “militarization.”¹ Prior to the uprisings, the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE primarily relied on diplomacy and economic measures. The “militarization” of their foreign policy has therefore had an impact on the security environment of the Middle East.

The second shift involved changes to their bilateral relations. Despite the cooperative security relationship that the two countries have today, their bilateral relations have historically been conspicuously marked by discord over border disputes dating from the years before the UAE gained independence as well as friction over deepening integration between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. Noura Al Mazrouei argues that despite their various points of conflict, the security threats posed by the 2011 uprisings led to a thaw in their bilateral relations,² where they set aside their disputes in favor of transforming the relationship into an alliance to counter internal and external threats.

Although the two countries have been perceived as allies since the 2011 uprisings, reports of deteriorating relations emerged in July 2021. It was reported that the direct cause for this was conflict over economic policy relating to production cuts by OPEC and OPEC+ (a group consisting of OPEC countries plus other countries including Russia), but tensions over intervention in the Yemeni civil war have also been cited as a contributing factor.³ Meanwhile, some, like Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a former advisor to an Emirati crown prince, have claimed that the relationship had not actually deteriorated in the first place.⁴

What factors define Saudi-Emirati relations, and why was the relationship considered to have deteriorated in 2021? Based on the assumption that the relationship is dualistic in nature, with both cooperative and competitive aspects, this paper presents the hypothesis that it was the intensification of political, military, and economic competition that caused the relationship to deteriorate. To support this hypothesis, Section 1 provides a historical overview of bilateral relations from the point when the UAE gained its independence in 1971, analyzing how Saudi-Emirati relations changed from the 2011 uprisings onwards. Section 2 examines how joint military intervention in Yemen, led primarily by Saudi Arabia, resulted in damaged Saudi prestige and worsened Saudi-Emirati relations.⁵ Section 3 discusses the two countries’ efforts to strengthen their military forces and the overlap between the two oil-producing nations’ economic development policies, which brought into focus the increasingly competitive nature of their relationship.

¹ Eman Ragab, “Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring,” *The International Spectator*, vol. 52, no. 2 (June 2017), pp. 37–53.

² Noura S. Al Mazrouei, “The Revival of the UAE-Saudi Arabia Border Dispute in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2 (January 2017), pp. 157–172.

³ The following article is an example of this: Charles W. Dunne, “The UAE-Saudi Arabia Rivalry Becomes a Rift,” Arab Center Washington DC, July 6, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-uae-saudi-arabia-rivalry-becomes-a-rift/>.

⁴ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Twitter Post, July 18, 2023, https://twitter.com/Abdulkhaleq_UAE/status/1681289070486462465?s=20.

⁵ In this paper, the author has defined the word “*ishin*” (status) as “a position or hierarchical rank within a community,” and posits that countries seek to enhance their “*ishin*” relative to specific other groups. Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 33.

In the conclusion, this paper highlights the three factors that contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations:

1. Efforts to curb threats stemming from the 2011 uprisings;
2. Differing stances on support for proxy forces in the Yemeni civil war, and the degree of success the two countries respectively achieved with their interventions in said war; and
3. The UAE's emergence as a political and military power, along with increasing economic competition between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

These factors likely diminished the momentum for enhancing bilateral relations, and caused tensions in competitive areas to become more prominent.

1. Transformation of Saudi-Emirati Relations due to the 2011 Uprisings

(1) Border Issues and the UAE's Sovereignty as a Small State, and the Iranian Threat

When discussing the bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two historically significant issues—border disputes and the sovereignty of the UAE as a small state—cannot be overlooked. With regard to border disputes, Saudi Arabia had harbored ambitions over the Buraimi oasis,⁶ which straddles what is now the border between the UAE and Oman, from before the UAE's establishment, as shown by the Buraimi Crisis of 1952.⁷ As has been pointed out by Murakami Takuya, the small emirates that now make up the UAE perceived the Wahhabist and expansionist House of Saud as a security threat.⁸ Following the UK's "East of Suez" withdrawal, which began in 1968, the threat from Saudi Arabia, with its vastly larger territory and population, became even more immediate.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE was initially strained due to unresolved border issues, with Saudi Arabia withholding diplomatic recognition of the UAE until the signing of the Treaty of Jeddah in 1974, which defined their shared border. The agreement led to the establishment of diplomatic relations and granted Saudi Arabia control over several areas in the southern part of the Qatar Peninsula, as well as 80% of the oil interests in the Shaybah oil field.⁹ The border demarcation was largely carried out in a manner that reflected the power imbalance between the two nations, and the same power imbalance is also believed to have shaped their asymmetrical bilateral relations up until the 2011 uprisings. When Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan became UAE president in 2004, the UAE sought partial revisions to the Treaty of Jeddah,¹⁰ indicating the UAE's perception that the treaty disproportionately favored Saudi interests. Saudi

⁶ Fātima al-Sāyigh, *al-Imārāt al-'Arabīya al-Muttaḥi da: Min al-Qabīla ilā al-Dawla* (al-'Ayn: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jāmi'ī, 2000), p. 260.

⁷ An incident in 1952 where Saudi forces occupied the area of Hamasa in the Buraimi region.

⁸ Murakami Takuya, "Arabia Hanto Shokoku—Chuto Chiiki Chitsujo ni Okeru Taito [The Rise of Arabian Peninsula States in the Regional Order of the Middle East]," in *Chuto no Aratana Chitsujo* [The New Order of the Middle East], ed. Matsuo Masaki, Okanouchi Tadashi, and Kikkawa Takuro (Kyoto: Mineruba Shobo [Minerva Shobo], 2016), pp. 201–220.

⁹ Horinuki Koji, "Wangan Shokoku ni Okeru Kokkyo to Kokka no Sonritsu Kozo: UAE no Kokkyo Mondai no Tenkai wo Jirei ni [The Framework of Statehood and Borders among Gulf States: Using Developments in UAE Border Issues as a Case Study]," *Kokusai Seiji* [International Relations], no. 162 (December 2010), pp. 56–69.

¹⁰ Noura S. Al Mazrouei, *The UAE and Saudi Arabia: Border Disputes and International Relations in the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

Arabia refused to renegotiate the treaty, however, and tensions escalated, with an armed clash breaking out between the UAE Navy and the Saudi Coast Guard in 2010. Thus the border issues remain unresolved and continue to be a historical point of contention in their bilateral relations.

The UAE has sought to maintain its autonomy from Saudi Arabia, a dominant regional power, as can be seen in the UAE's stance on deepening integration between GCC member states. Based on the Unified Economic Agreement, the GCC has advanced economic integration of member countries through initiatives such as the establishment of a uniform customs tariff. Progress toward deeper integration has stalled, however, with the UAE explicitly opposing the introduction of a common currency. At a GCC summit in December 2011, Saudi Arabia proposed that the GCC had reached the stage where member states should move from cooperating to forming a union.¹¹ Only Bahrain indicated support for this proposal. The UAE opposed it, likely due to concerns, shared by other GCC members, over the extent to which the formation of such a union would deepen regional integration compared with the current GCC framework and by extension, the extent to which it would impact their sovereignty. For smaller states like the UAE, further integration with Saudi Arabia, the overwhelmingly dominant GCC member state, would mean being subjected to even greater Saudi influence. The union proposal was effectively frozen due to the opposition to it from the UAE and other smaller states.

Although there has been discord between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over border issues and regional integration, they have also faced a common security threat in Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran have competed for regional supremacy in addition to clashing over issues like the treatment of the Shia population in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and the Arab population in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan Province. Despite being an oil-producing region, Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province has been politically and economically marginalized due to it being a Shia area, leading to periodic outbreaks of anti-government protest since the time of the Iranian Revolution. While the Shia population in the UAE is not a point of contention, territorial disputes between the UAE and Iran persist. Immediately before the UAE gained independence in 1971, the Imperial State of Iran (pre-revolution Iran) occupied the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. Iranian Navy and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps bases were later established on Abu Musa.¹² Iran continues to maintain effective control over these islands, as evidenced by the 2022 opening of an air route between Tehran and Greater Tunb.

Iran's policy of "exporting the Islamic Revolution" has also come to pose a serious threat to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 1979, the year of Iran's Islamic Revolution, the six countries that would later form the GCC met in Taif, to discuss the threat posed by this policy of exporting the Islamic Revolution and to affirm their shared interest in coordinating on security countermeasures. This meeting laid the groundwork for the formation of the GCC in 1981 and the establishment in 1986 of a joint GCC military force called the Peninsula Shield Force. While the GCC later became

¹¹ Murakami Takuya, "Ikinai Anzen Hoshō Kyōryoku no Shinten wo Meguru GCC Kakkoku no Fukyōwaon [Discord among GCC Member Countries over Progress with Regional Security Cooperation]," *Ajiken Warudo Torendo* [Ajiken World Trends], no. 224 (May 2014), p. 28.

¹² "Tasyīr Awwal Riḥla Jawwīya bayn Ṭahrān wa Maṭār Īrānī Jadīd Uqīm fī Jazīra Mutanāzī 'alay-hā ma' al-Imārāt," *al-Jazīra*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2022/2/20/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%B1>.

more focused on economic cooperation up until the uprising in Bahrain, which is discussed below, it was originally established with security cooperation against Iran and Iraq in mind.¹³ Thus, the bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while marked by competition involving territorial disputes and disagreements over the issue of regional integration, has also involved cooperation in responding to the common threat posed by Iran.

(2) Coordinated Responses to Internal and External Threats

As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is asymmetrical, and discord over a wide range of issues such as border disputes and regional integration were not infrequent. Although these competitive aspects of the relationship were conspicuous, the spread of the uprisings across the Middle East in 2011 led both nations to pursue military cooperation, including coordinated armed interventions. In other words, they shelved their disputes in favor of forming an alliance to counter internal and external threats. The results of regime changes and coordinated interventions within various Middle Eastern countries had varying impacts on the countries concerned. Below, after an explanation of the two threats that prompted these coordinated interventions, there is a summary of the two major cases of cooperation between the two countries (see Table 1).

Table 1. 2011 Uprisings and Coordinated Saudi-Emirati Interventions

Location	Event	Result
	Saudi-Emirati response	
Egypt	Morsi regime established	Military regime remains in power
	Aid for post-coup Sisi regime	
Bahrain	Anti-government protests spread	Suppression of anti-government protests
	Deployment of military and police forces	
Iraq (areas under ISIS control)	Rise of ISIS	ISIS loses control over territories
	Participation in Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS/ creation of Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition	
Syria	Expansion of anti-government uprisings/outbreak of civil war	Assad regime remains in power
	Support for anti-government forces	

(Source) Compiled by author based on various materials

a. Islamism and Iran as Factors Encouraging Saudi-Emirati Cooperation

Previous studies have identified Islamism and Iran as common threats to Saudi Arabia and the UAE that were amplified by the 2011 uprisings.¹⁴ From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, the rise of Islamist movements other than Wahhabism was a significant concern, leading to Saudi Arabia tightening restrictions on the Sunni Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵ For

¹³ Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁴ John Calabrese, "The 'New Normal' in Saudi-UAE Relations: Tying China in," Middle East Institute, February 3, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-normal-saudi-uae-relations-tying-china>; Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, "United Arab Emirates," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2018, https://ecfr.eu/special/battle_lines/uae.

¹⁵ Saudi Arabia accepted members of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt in the 1950s as part of Saudi opposition to the Nasser regime. The Saudi government had already started to crack down on Muslim Brotherhood

Saudi Arabia, a state with Wahhabism as its ideological grounding, the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood was perceived as being part of an influx and internal expansion of unofficial Islamist ideologies.¹⁶ As Wahhabism is integral to the Saudi regime, the rise of Sunni Islamist movements other than Wahhabism signifies the emergence of forces that challenge the regime's legitimacy from an Islamist perspective.

The UAE's opposition to Islamism, and particularly its opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, is partly due to its transnational nature. Historically, the UAE has not faced large-scale internal forces opposing the ruling regime, and this calmness of internal politics in the country has contributed to its stability. Matthew Hedges claims that this stability was established through economic development during the tenure of the UAE's first president, Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and that the 2011 uprisings posed a serious threat to the UAE's authoritarian regime, which had thus far retained its position through maintaining political calmness.¹⁷ While the protests in the UAE were smaller in scale than in other countries, in March 2011, a group of Islamists and liberals submitted a petition demanding political reforms.¹⁸ In December that year, members of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations who had moved to the UAE and become naturalized citizens, including some who were signatories to the petition, had their UAE citizenship revoked. The government of the UAE continued to allege, from the following year onwards, that the Muslim Brotherhood was operating a military wing with the aim of establishing an "Islamic government" in the country, and in 2014 the UAE government designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.¹⁹

As for the threat posed by Iran, in 2011, Saudi Arabia saw protests by Shia residents in the Eastern Province. Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, a prominent Saudi Shia cleric, led non-violent protests while calling for democratic elections. The Saudi government responded with moves to suppress the protests, including the arrest of al-Nimr, and by employing sectarian discourse to prevent expansion of the anti-government movement into other parts of the country.²⁰ In 2016, the Saudi government executed al-Nimr, triggering the widely-reported attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran and the subsequent Saudi severing of diplomatic ties with Iran.

In the UAE, a shift in internal dynamics emerged shortly before the 2011 uprisings. The so-

members even before the 2011 Arab Spring, however, because some individuals who had been influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood began to call for political reform.

¹⁶ Takao Kenichiro, "Saudi Arabia ni Okeru Isuramu Shugi no Kyogo—'Koshiki' Isuramu Shugi ni Yoru 'Hikoshiki' Isuramu Shugi no Fujikome [Islamist Competition in Saudi Arabia: Containment of 'Unofficial' Islamism by 'Official' Islamism]," in *Arab no Haru* "Igo no Isuramu Shugi Undo [Islamist Movements from the "Arab Spring" Onwards], ed. Takaoka Yutaka and Mizobuchi Masaki (Kyoto: Mineruba Shobo [Minerva Shobo], 2019), p. 159.

¹⁷ Matthew Hedges, *Reinventing the Sheikhdome: Clan, Power and Patronage in Mohammed bin Zayed's UAE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁸ Horinuki Koji, "UAE ni Okeru Seiji Kaikaku Undo to Taisei no Kiki Ninshiki—2011 Nen no Kenpakusho Jiken wo Jirei ni [Political Reform Movements in the UAE and the Regime's Risk Perception: Using the 2011 Petition Incident as a Case Study]," in *Arab no Haru to Arabia Hanto no Shorai* [The Arab Spring and the Future of the Arabian Peninsula], ed. Sato Kan Hiroshi (Chiba: Ajia Keizai Kenkyujo [Institute of Developing Economies], 2012), pp. 1–14.

¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that it is generally believed that the Muslim Brotherhood did not have enough power to overthrow the regime. Ingo Forstenlechner, Emilie J. Rutledge, and Rashed Alnuaimi, "The UAE, the 'Arab Spring' and Different Types of Dissent," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 4 (December 2012), pp. 54–67.

²⁰ Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011-2012," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 628–659.

called “Dubai crisis” of 2009 diminished the political influence, within the UAE, of Dubai, which is home to around 600,000 Iranians and had built up relatively good relations with Iran. Tensions between the UAE and Iran were heightened further in 2012 after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the island of Abu Musa. As the above shows, despite the differing contexts, Saudi Arabia and the UAE found common ground in viewing Islamism and Iran as threats, and this consequently strengthened the cooperative aspects of their bilateral relations. While Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as the primary threat through the lenses of domestic political risks and the struggle for regional hegemony, however, the UAE was more focused on the threat posed by Islamism as a challenge to the calm stability of its political order. This divergence in their perception of whether Iran or Islamism was the greater threat could be said to have later influenced their differing approaches to the Yemeni civil war.

b. Egypt

In Egypt, the military regime of Hosni Mubarak collapsed in 2011, opening the way for the first steps toward democratization. The various youth movements that had played key roles in the anti-government protests that year did not go further than calling for the fall of the regime, however, leaving the Muslim Brotherhood under President Mohamed Morsi to take on the actual running of Egypt’s government following the elections. Morsi’s administration engaged in and won a power struggle with the military, the traditional holders of power in Egypt, and enacted a constitution deeply rooted in Islamic values.²¹ Morsi also appears to have sought to build a new relationship with Iran, participating in a Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran. Such shifts in Egypt’s foreign policy direction were not seen favorably by Saudi Arabia, which had developed close ties with Egypt following the public exposure of Iran’s nuclear development program.

Morsi’s regime worked to implement Islamic policies, but was unable to sufficiently address the economic and social problems that had been an important factor behind 2011’s anti-government uprising. With the regime unable to address Egypt’s mounting problems, in 2013, the youth-led group Tamarod spearheaded anti-government protests.²² These protests gained support from secular forces, the military, and other forces opposed to the Morsi regime. After Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi issued an ultimatum to Morsi, the military took power through what was effectively a coup d’état. Sisi then revised the constitution to strengthen the interests of the military and moved to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE welcomed these developments and provided substantial economic aid to Egypt.²³ One could say that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were thus able to capitalize on the Egyptian coup as an opportunity to suppress the threat of Islamism through support for the Sisi regime.

²¹ Yokota Takayuki, “Ejiputo Musurimu Dohodan no ‘Zasetsu’—Posuto-Isuramu Shugi kara no Ichikosatsu [‘Setback’ For the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: An Investigation From the Perspective of Post-Islamism],” *Kokusai Anzenhoshō* [Journal of International Security], vol. 43, no. 3 (December 2015), pp. 29–42.

²² Yokota Takayuki, “Ejiputo—Futatsu no ‘Kakumei’ ga Motarashita Kyoza no Saiko [Egypt: A Reexamination of the Illusion Created by Two ‘Revolutions’],” in “*Arabu no Shinzo*” ni Nani ga Okite Iru no ka: *Gendai Chuto no Jitsuzo* [What Is Happening in the “Heart of the Arab World”: The Reality of the Modern Middle East], ed. Aoyama Hiroyuki (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten [Iwanami Shoten, Publishers], 2014), pp. 1–28.

²³ The aid provided to Egypt by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait after the coup d’état amounted to 41.8 billion US\$ (in 2013), which corresponds to 14.4% of Egypt’s GDP for that year.

c. Bahrain

Bahrain was the only GCC member country where the 2011 uprisings became large in scale. The possibility of monarchies being overthrown due to the spread of anti-government movements within GCC countries was a significant concern for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which maintain non-democratic monarchies. Although Bahrain has a Shiite majority, it is ruled by a Sunni royal family: the House of Khalifa.²⁴ Once the uprisings spread into Bahrain, protests led by the Shiite population broke out. Initially, protesters called for the resignation of the prime minister and the introduction of a parliamentary cabinet system, but their demands gradually become more radical, with calls for the overthrow of the regime. The Bahraini government saw the protests as a conspiracy by Iranian-backed Shiite forces and moved to repress them militarily while simultaneously seeking to resolve the situation through dialogue with the Shiite political party, Al-Wefaq. Al-Wefaq condemned the government's use of force, however, and all of the party's members resigned from parliament, preventing resolution through dialogue.

Faced with the expansion of the anti-government movement, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the king of Bahrain, requested an intervention from the GCC. In response to this request, the GCC deployed the Peninsula Shield Force, with personnel centered on a core of 1,500 Saudi troops and 500 UAE police officers. This intervention, along with the Bahraini government's further strengthening of its crackdown, including the imposition of martial law, caused the anti-government uprising in Bahrain to die down. In 2013, the UAE provided Bahrain with financial support, announcing an economic aid package worth 2.5 billion US\$ in response to Bahrain's ongoing financial difficulties. One could say that Saudi Arabia and the UAE successfully prevented the collapse of Bahrain's monarchy through efforts to suppress the anti-government uprising and provide economic assistance. Sakanashi Sachi analyzed Saudi Arabia's perception of the Iranian threat in this case, noting that they believed that, while Iran must certainly have been involved, they managed to cover up their involvement, and that only amplified the Saudi perception of Iran as an unfathomable threat.²⁵

As we have seen so far, Saudi Arabia and the UAE acted in concert to respond to changes triggered by the 2011 uprisings impacting the countries of the Middle East, or, at the very least, they refrained from actions that would harm each other's policies. Despite their previous disputes over border issues and autonomy, changes in international relations in the early 2010s created strong incentives for cooperation, leading to the establishment of a kind of alliance. Since the intensity of the threats and the intensity of the incentives for cooperation are presumably proportional to each other, the weakening of threats stemming from the 2011 uprisings, due to interventions by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and other factors, could be said to have reduced their incentive to cooperate.

²⁴ Shia residents in Bahrain society are generally oppressed, including being unable to take on positions in public security organizations like the police force. Justin Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

²⁵ Sakanashi Sachi, "'Arab no Haru' e no Taio ni Miru Iran Taigai Seisaku no Genjo [Iran's Current Foreign Policy as Seen in its Response to the 'Arab Spring']," in *Chuto Chiiki Chitsujo no Yukue—'Arab no Haru' to Chuto Shokoku no Taigai Seisaku* [The Future of Regional Order in the Middle East: The "Arab Spring" and the Foreign Policies of the Countries of the Middle East], ed. Tsuchiya Ichiki (Chiba: Ajia Keizai Kenkyujo [Institute of Developing Economies], 2013), p. 76.

2. Growing Competition Relating to the Yemeni Civil War

(1) Discord over Support for Proxy Forces

In the cases discussed in section 1, Saudi Arabia and the UAE conducted interventions in a coordinated manner. On the surface, this is also true of their intervention in the Yemeni civil war, where the UAE intervened as part of the Saudi-led coalition forces. Upon closer inspection, however, the Saudi-Emirati intervention in Yemen differs from their joint interventions in other countries. This section will examine the rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE regarding their support for Yemeni proxy forces, and will also analyze the respective outcomes of their military interventions.

Aiming to eliminate the armed Zaydi group known as the Houthis, which had toppled the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition that included the UAE and on March 26, 2015, began launching air strikes. The Houthis are thought to be supported by Iran, while the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was ousted by the Houthis, was established with backing from the GCC. Yemen being a neighbor of Saudi Arabia provided further incentive for the coalition forces to launch a full-scale offensive against the Houthis, including air strikes; land, sea, and air blockades; and troop deployments. While these efforts succeeded in retaking southern areas like Aden, a stalemate ensued on the frontlines near the former borders of what was once South Yemen (the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) and North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic).

While there was cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the fight against the Houthis, the two countries pursued different strategies when it came to supporting anti-Houthi factions within Yemen. Saudi Arabia primarily backed the Hadi regime and the political party that supported his regime, Al Islah. Saudi Arabia justified its military intervention by claiming it was based on a request for assistance from Hadi. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's support for Al Islah had a deeper historical background. The Al Islah party was formed in 1990 through an alliance of powerful northern tribes, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, and some of the more radical Sunni Islamists.²⁶ Saudi Arabia had already cultivated good relations with these various factions separately, for instance, using its ties with Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, to proselytize Wahhabism in northern Yemen. Saudi Arabia had also supported the Islamic Front (a predecessor of the current Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated faction in Yemen) in suppressing an uprising by the leftist National Democratic Front in North Yemen in 1978. Saudi Arabia also deployed Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Egyptian and Sudanese citizens, whom they had allowed into Saudi Arabia, to Yemen to engage in educational activities (see footnote 14).²⁷ With regard to radical Sunni Islamists, Saudi Arabia sought to weaken leftist forces in post-unification Yemen through its backing of Iman University, which was headed by Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, a figure designated as an international terrorist for the support he provided to Al Qaeda. Given these

²⁶ Although Al Islah is commonly separated into tribal and Sunni Islamist factions, Jillian Schwedler, using the example of Yemen's largest Hashid tribal confederation leader, Abdullah al-Ahmar, pointed out that it is not entirely possible to divide members into two distinct tribal and Islamist groups. While I am in agreement with this observation to a certain degree, my arguments in this paper are based on the idea that, by focusing on the places of origin, power bases, and ideologies of the three founders of the party, Al Islah can largely be divided into two groups with either tribal or Sunni Islamist tendencies. Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 71.

²⁷ Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: The Road to War* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 130.

historical ties and Al Islah's consistent support for the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni civil war, Saudi Arabia took the unusual step of backing the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, even though it regards the group as an enemy domestically as well as in countries other than Yemen.

In contrast, the UAE questioned Hadi's leadership qualities, doubting his ability to govern effectively merely by issuing directives from Riyadh. The UAE also chose to maintain its enmity toward the Muslim Brotherhood and instead supported other factions. Specifically, the UAE backed the Southern Transitional Council, a secessionist group in southern Yemen, along with local armed factions supporting the Council, and the National Resistance Forces, which consisted of supporters of Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. The UAE's support for the Southern Transitional Council, in particular, led to intensified friction between the Hadi regime and the Council, an outcome that conflicted with Saudi Arabia's intervention policy in Yemen.

The Southern Transitional Council is led by Aidarus Al-Zubaidi, a former governor of Aden who was dismissed by Hadi. Although Hadi and Al-Zubaidi are both from southern Yemen, they are political enemies. This enmity dates back to the infighting that broke out in 1986 within the Yemeni Socialist Party, the ruling party in South Yemen prior to unification with North Yemen. The Zumra faction, which centered on Hadi and others from the Abyan and Shabwah governorates, were defeated in the conflict and fled to North Yemen. Meanwhile, the victorious Tughma faction, which was centered on people from the Dhale and Lahij governorates, maintained their dominance until the unification of North and South Yemen. Amid the declining political influence of southern Yemen in elections following unification, Ali Salem al-Beidh, a leading figure of the Tughma faction, staged an uprising in Aden in 1994 in an attempt to achieve the secession of the south. Hadi, who was then the defense minister for unified Yemen, played a key role in suppressing the ensuing civil war, and this historical enmity has continued to be a source of conflict.²⁸

Relations between the Southern Transitional Council and Al Islah are also hostile, with the abovementioned 1994 civil war being one factor behind this. Because Al Islah contributed to the suppression of the uprising and allegedly carried out attacks on Sufi sites and looting in the south under a fatwa issued by al-Zindani,²⁹ Al Islah poses a serious threat to political forces in the south.³⁰ Based on this perception, the Southern Transitional Council labeled Al Islah a terrorist organization, grouping it with Al-Qaeda and the Houthis. Reflecting the influence of the UAE, their supporter, the Council has also pursued the elimination of Al Islah-affiliated forces stationed in southern Yemen. Al-Zubaidi is thought to harbor personal animosity toward Al Islah, likely stemming from his involvement with Al-Beidh's secessionists as a soldier during the 1994 civil war.³¹

Antagonism between the Southern Transitional Council and the Hadi regime, along with Al Islah, persisted even after the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement, which called for the formation of a coalition government involving the Council and the Hadi regime. It took over a year to form

²⁸ There are said to be a large number of supporters of the Southern Transitional Council in the Dhale Governorate, while there are a large number of supporters of the Hadi regime in the Abyan Governorate.

²⁹ Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*, p. 136.

³⁰ Fatima Abo Alasrar, "A Fractious Unity: Conflict Dynamics in Yemen's South," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, September 13, 2019, <https://agsiw.org/a-fractious-unity-conflict-dynamics-in-yemens-south/>.

³¹ "Man Huwa 'Aidarūs al-Zubaydī?" *al-Jazīra*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2017/5/14/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%88-%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A>.

the coalition government, and little progress was made with the integration of military and security forces that was set forth in the agreement. According to Paragraph 3 of Annex II of the Riyadh Agreement³² all forces of both the Hadi regime and the Southern Transitional Council, except for the First Presidential Protection Brigade, were supposed to be relocated outside the Aden governorate. As of October 2022, however, Southern Transitional Council-affiliated forces were still stationed there.³³ As can be seen from the above, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreed on the need to curb the expanding influence of Iran and the Houthis, they were at odds over which anti-Houthi factions to support.

(2) Saudi Intervention in the North and UAE Intervention in the South, and the Dominance of the UAE's Proxy Forces

Saudi Arabia and the UAE primarily focused their interventions in different areas of Yemen. Saudi Arabia focused on the northern regions and areas near the Saudi-Yemen border, as well as providing support on the frontlines in the Marib governorate, which was said to be the last stronghold of the Hadi regime. Saudi Arabia's primary objective was, of course, to eliminate the threat to its borders and territory by eliminating the Houthis. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, who had just recently assumed the post of defense minister, also sought to use the intervention in Yemen as an opportunity to showcase his capabilities and establish a track record ahead of his ascension to the throne.³⁴ Neither the Saudi forces nor the Yemeni government forces were, however, able to achieve any significant results in the Saada governorate and other northwestern parts of Yemen, the stronghold of the Houthis, a group that has mastered guerrilla warfare tactics through training with Hezbollah. From the perspective of the crown prince's efforts to establish a track record as well, the growing humanitarian toll due to the Saudi Air Force's lack of capabilities and shifting strike targets, conversely fueled criticism of the Saudi intervention as inhumane. On top of this, in 2019, the Houthis launched their "Operation Victory from God," inflicting massive losses on the coalition forces.³⁵ The Houthis also carried out cross-border attacks using drones and missiles, causing damage within Saudi territory. Given that Saudi Arabia had initially estimated that the conflict with the Houthis would be resolved within six weeks when they intervened in 2015, the country ended up paying a far higher cost than anticipated without seeing results.³⁶

³² For the provisions of the Riyadh Agreement, I referred to the following source: "Naṣṣ Ittifāq al-Riyāḍ bayn al-Ḥukūma al-Yamanīya wa al-Janūbī (Wathīqa)," *al-Anāḍūl*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D9%86%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9/1636458#>.

³³ Brian Carter, "Understanding Military Units in Southern Yemen," *Critical Threats*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2022-12-14-FINAL-ORBAT-Text-for-PDF.pdf>.

³⁴ Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*, p. 54.

³⁵ According to Houthi media reports, the operation resulted in 500 coalition force members being killed and 2,000 being taken captive. "'Amaliya al-Shahīd Abū 'Abd Allāh Ḥaydar: Mu'ashshirāt al-Naṣr Talūḥ fī al-Ufq," *Anṣār Allāh*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/282747>.

³⁶ Gregory D. Johnsen, "The End of Yemen," *Brookings*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-end-of-yemen/>.

In contrast, UAE forces, operating primarily in southern Yemen and the western coastal regions, achieved greater success, including the recapture of Aden in July 2015 and Mocha in January 2017, in spite of the stalemate on the frontlines. This earned the UAE a reputation for performing more effectively in the conflict than Saudi Arabia.³⁷ The UAE was seen to have worked toward achieving its goals in Yemen, which were said to include:

1. Maintaining its status as a reliable ally of Saudi Arabia and the United States;
2. Weakening the Muslim Brotherhood; and
3. Seizing control of coastal areas and logistics networks to serve as commercial and logistics hubs.³⁸

To achieve these goals, the UAE trained local armed groups such as the Shabwa Defense Forces, Hadramawt Elite Forces, and Security Belt Forces to combat the Houthis and terrorist organizations. Since the Houthis had withdrawn from the region that was formerly South Yemen within about six months from the start of the intervention in March 2015, the main focus in the southern areas shifted to establishing and maintaining security through counterterrorism operations, with less emphasis placed on fighting the Houthis. With members well-versed in the geography and tribal dynamics of the region, the local armed groups achieved significant success in defending the areas under their control, maintaining security, and carrying out counterterrorism efforts.³⁹ Many of these groups supported the Southern Transitional Council, however, and their involvement in expelling the government forces from Aden in 2019 could be said to have exacerbated internal conflict among the anti-Houthi factions. In addition to supporting the southern secessionist forces, the UAE also backed the National Resistance Forces and an armed Salafist group called the Southern Giants Brigades, both of which played a central role in the 2018 operation to recapture the city of Al Hudaydah. Following the UAE's military withdrawal in 2019 and the stalemate on the frontlines caused by the Stockholm Agreement, the National Resistance Forces came to control the west coast region.⁴⁰ While forming an alliance with the National Resistance Forces, the Southern Giants Brigades successfully expelled the Houthis from the Shabwah governorate in 2022. This difference in the successes among their proxy forces contributed to the diverging assessments of the interventions by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

As we have seen, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE were aligned in their efforts to combat the Houthis, they diverged sharply in their approaches to supporting Yemeni proxy forces such as Al Islah. This divergence was rooted in Yemen's internal divisions, which contributed to ongoing infighting among the local anti-Houthi proxy factions. The disputes among these factions indirectly

³⁷ Zoltan Barany, *Armies of Arabia: Military Politics and Effectiveness in the Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁸ Gregory D. Johnsen, "The UAE's Three Strategic Interests in Yemen," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, February 24, 2022, <https://agsi.w.org/the-uaes-three-strategic-interests-in-yemen/>.

³⁹ For example, in 2015 Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took advantage of the chaos of the civil war to take over Mukalla, the capital of the Hadhramaut Governorate. They remained in control for roughly a year, but were eventually driven out by UAE forces and the Hadhramaut Elite Forces.

⁴⁰ Yoshida Tomoaki, "Junigatsu Futsuka Kakumei no Shippai to Iemen Kokumin Teikogun no Shincho—Junan na Seizon Senryakuka de no Nishi Kaigan Chiiki Shihai [The Failure of the December 2 Revolution and Expansion of the Yemeni National Resistance Forces: Control of the West Coast Region under a Flexible Survival Strategy]," *Chuto Kenkyu* [Journal of Middle Eastern Studies], no. 548 (September 2023).

benefited the Houthis, complicating Saudi Arabia's efforts to achieve its goal of eliminating the Houthis. While Saudi Arabia had also aimed to establish a track record for its crown prince through the intervention, the UAE (and its proxies) were evaluated as having been more successful, and the failure of the Saudi intervention presumably damaged the crown prince's reputation and undermined Saudi Arabia's standing.

3. Competition over Nation-Building Policies

(1) The UAE's Transformation into "Little Sparta"

As discussed in the previous section, the UAE conducted its intervention in Yemen in a manner that demonstrated a degree of autonomy, even acting against Saudi interests at times. Horinuki Koji points out that the UAE's independent foreign policy stems from its efforts to expand its diplomatic and economic presence on the global stage, and the fact that it now sees itself as a major power of sorts.⁴¹ One factor contributing to this newfound sense of itself as a major power is the UAE's political and economic reforms. This section will look at the reforms that the UAE and Saudi Arabia have each implemented under their respective new leaders, with particular focus on comparing their efforts to bolster their military capabilities.

Since its founding in 1971, the UAE has had a relatively weak sense of national identity, with tribalism and other sources of identity proving stronger, much like in other Arab countries.⁴² Of the UAE's seven emirates, the five collectively known as the "northern emirates" are weaker both politically and economically than the two other emirates: Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Many of the signatories of the petition mentioned in part (2) of section 1 were people hailing from these northern emirates.⁴³ In light of these circumstances, the UAE, particularly Abu Dhabi and Dubai, have placed great importance on fostering a national identity and pursuing socio-economic development in order to secure political stability. A country's military can be utilized as a means to nurture national identity, and the UAE, for example, introduced conscription in 2014, and established a "Commemoration Day" holiday to memorialize the soldiers who died during the UAE's abovementioned intervention in the Yemeni civil war. In terms of military leadership training, the UAE also founded a National Defence College in 2013, with John Ballard, formerly of the United States Marine Corps, serving as president.

In addition to fostering a national identity, since its military deployment to Lebanon with the Arab Deterrent Force in 1976,⁴⁴ the UAE has worked to strengthen its military capabilities through overseas deployments and the elite training of its Presidential Guard.⁴⁵ By deploying military personnel to participate in operations with groups like the International Security Assistance Force

⁴¹ Horinuki Koji, "Arabū Shuchokoku Rempo—Saikin no Seiji Henka [United Arab Emirates—Recent Political Changes]," *Chuto Isuramu Shokoku Seiji Hendo Detabesu* [Political Changes in Middle Eastern/Islamic Countries (database)], August 30, 2021, <https://dbmedm06.aa-ken.jp/archives/653>.

⁴² Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy," *Issue Papers* (The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington), April 6, 2017, p. 10.

⁴³ Horinuki, "UAE ni Okeru Seiji Kaikaku Undo to Taisei no Kiki Ninshiki [Political Reform Movements in the UAE and the Regime's Risk Perception]," p. 9.

⁴⁴ Shu'ba al-Mathaf wa al-Tārīkh al-'Askārī, *al-Qūwāt al-Musallaḥa li Dawla al-Imārāt: Tārīkh wa Muhāmm* (Mudīriyya al-Tawjīh al-Ma'nawī, 2007), p. 48.

⁴⁵ The Presidential Guard has enhanced its status as an elite force by recruiting a large number of foreign nationals, including the appointment of Mike Hindmarsh, a former member of the Australian military, as a commander.

in Afghanistan, the UAE has gained knowhow through collaboration with advanced Western militaries. The key figure driving this strengthening of military capabilities is Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who has effectively been managing national affairs since 2014, when the then-ruler of Abu Dhabi, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, suffered a stroke. Zoltan Barany notes that the UAE military is now considered the most capable among the Gulf Arab states, largely due to Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's ongoing involvement since his time as crown prince.⁴⁶ Through policies such as the above, the acquisition of a large amount of Western military equipment, and their intervention in the Yemeni civil war, the UAE's military has come to be regarded as the most advanced among Arab countries, earning the UAE the nickname "Little Sparta."⁴⁷

While the UAE has been praised for its successful efforts to strengthen its military, Saudi Arabia has also been pursuing military reforms under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This has partly been driven by the crown prince's desire to establish a track record for himself as defense minister, then as deputy crown prince, and later as crown prince (after being promoted in 2017), and also by the growing necessity for Saudi Arabia to maintain combat-ready military forces in light of its intervention in the Yemeni civil war. With regard to the crown prince's desire to establish a track record for himself, the "Vision 2030" growth strategy, the implementation of which he spearheads, includes the localization of defense production as a goal, and Saudi Arabia is pursuing the domestic development of ballistic missiles and drones in partnership with China and other countries. With regard to the Saudi need for combat-ready forces, in 2018, it replaced several key military leaders, including the chairman of the general staff and the commanders of the land and air forces. While no public reason was given, these dismissals were seen as part of the wider military reform effort.⁴⁸

Neil Patrick, who has analyzed Saudi military reforms, offers a sharply critical view of their outcomes. He argues that Saudi military reform has been driven by the crown prince's political motivation to consolidate power, and that for the Saudi military to become a truly integrated force, command authority over overall operations needs to be delegated to specific general officers.⁴⁹ He also criticized the newly introduced system in which the head of joint operations reports only to the crown prince, bypassing the chief of staff, as being problematic for the advancement of cross-service coordination.⁵⁰ In terms of practical battlefield experience prior to the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war in 2015, Saudi Arabia's military had engaged the Houthis in battle during the 6th Saada war in 2009.⁵¹ At that time, the Saudi military failed to effectively respond to Houthi cross-border attacks, and this failure, along with the failure to learn from the lessons of that conflict, contributed to Saudi Arabia's failed intervention in Yemen. As a result, the Saudi military has been

⁴⁶ Barany, *Armies of Arabia*, p. 264.

⁴⁷ Athol Yates, *The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates* (Warwick: Helion & Co, 2021).

⁴⁸ "Saudi King Sacks Military Chiefs in Major Shake-Up," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/27/saudi-king-sacks-military-chiefs-in-major-shake-up>.

⁴⁹ Neil Patrick, "Saudi Defense and Security Reform," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 31, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76487>.

⁵⁰ Neil Patrick, "Saudi Arabia's Elusive Defense Reform," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 14, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/80354>.

⁵¹ Between 2004 and 2010, the Saleh regime conducted a total of six separate counterinsurgency operations against the Houthis. While the government forces held the upper hand initially, the two sides gradually became more evenly matched. During the Sixth Saada War, the Houthis launched cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia, which was supporting the Saleh regime's forces.

mockingly referred to as the “Kabsa Army.”⁵² With regard to military leadership training, it was not until November 2022 that an aide to the minister of defense announced that the establishment of a National Defense University was imminent, nine years behind the establishment of the UAE’s National Defence College.⁵³ Thus, while both the UAE and Saudi Arabia pursued strengthening of their military capabilities under their respective new leaders, the UAE’s military has been rated more highly. This disparity in evaluation has presumably been damaging to the standing of Saudi Arabia as a leading power in the region and the prestige of the crown prince, who had set out reform initiatives like Vision 2030. Factors contributing to the difference in the outcomes of their military reforms include the timing of the rise to power of the Saudi crown prince and the UAE’s Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and the political motives behind Saudi Arabia’s military reforms, which were driven by the crown prince’s quest to consolidate power.

(2) Overlap in Saudi and Emirati Economic Growth Strategies

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE came to the fore over economic matters during discussions about adjusting oil production level reductions at an OPEC+ meeting in July 2021. The UAE expressed dissatisfaction with cuts proposed by Saudi Arabia at the meeting, arguing that its share of the production cuts was disproportionately large.⁵⁴ Since Saudi Arabia leads OPEC, the UAE’s rejection of the Saudi proposal was met with astonishment. Toyoda Kohei notes that the UAE is rushing to increase oil production driven by concerns about fossil fuels becoming stranded assets due to global decarbonization efforts.⁵⁵ David Ottaway also suggests that the UAE is prepared to challenge Saudi Arabia’s leadership within OPEC, signaling a shift in the two countries’ traditionally asymmetric relationship.⁵⁶

Competition arising from the overlap in the two countries’ respective growth strategies is a key factor in the economic discord between them. Since the announcement of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 strategy in 2016, the kingdom has been implementing a raft of economic policies aimed at reducing its dependence on oil. The sectors of focus in the strategy, such as finance and tourism, are the same industries that the UAE has been developing under the “Abu Dhabi Vision 2030” plan, which was announced in 2008. Thus, as both countries seek to diversify away from

⁵² “Kabsa” is a mixed rice dish topped with meat that is popular in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. It is said that around one in five Saudi adults is obese, and Kabsa is sometimes used as a symbol of unhealthy eating habits in Saudi Arabia, as is suggested in the article below. The term “Kabsa Army” is a satirical expression used to mock the Saudi military by suggesting that they are unfit for combat due to obesity. “Swapping Kabsa for Kale: Saudis Embrace Healthy Eating,” *France 24*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230301-swapping-kabsa-for-kale-saudis-embrace-healthy-eating>.

⁵³ As of the time of writing (early July 2023), Muhammad Al-Ruwaili, commander of the Armed Forces Command Staff College of Saudi Arabia, also serves as director of the country’s National Defense University.

⁵⁴ Fuji Kazuhiko, “UAE no ‘Hanran’ de Ashinami ga Midareru OPEC Purasu—‘Kyocho Gensan’ Goi ni Itarazu, Genyu Kakaku ga Ohaba Geraku no Kanosei mo [Unity of OPEC Plus Disrupted by UAE ‘Revolt’—No Agreement Reached on ‘Coordinated Production Cuts’ Potentially Results in Significant Drop in Oil Prices],” Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry, July 19, 2021, <https://www.rieti.go.jp/jp/papers/contribution/fuji-kazuhiko/283.html>.

⁵⁵ Toyoda Kohei, “Fukuzatsukasuru Chuto no Enerugi Senryaku—Suiso Jigyo ni Kansuru Mittsu no Shiten [The Increasing Complexity of Middle Eastern Energy Strategies—Three Perspectives on the Hydrogen Business],” *Chuto Kyoryoku Senta Nyusu* [Japan Cooperation Center for the Middle East News], March 2022, <https://www.jccme.or.jp/11/pdf/2022-03/josei03.pdf>.

⁵⁶ David Ottaway, “Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Turn Rival Allies,” Wilson Center, July 20, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabia-and-united-arab-emirates-turn-rival-allies>.

oil, they could be said to be increasingly competing in overlapping fields to establish themselves as economic hubs of the Middle East. Amid this competition, Saudi Arabia has also been actively promoting policies to attract businesses to its own territory, such as making it a condition that companies bidding on government procurement contracts establish their regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷ This policy of encouraging firms to shift their Middle East headquarters to Saudi Arabia from elsewhere could be said to present a challenge for the UAE, which, with its smaller population, has relied heavily on attracting foreign companies to support its economic development and diversify away from oil.

As discussed above, while moving to advance its military strengthening efforts and other domestic reforms ahead of Saudi Arabia and in doing so boosting its international presence, the UAE has also challenged the direction taken by Saudi Arabia in OPEC+, where Saudi Arabia maintains the leadership role. On the other hand, as Saudi Arabia works toward economic diversification, it is increasingly coming into competition with the UAE due to their overlapping growth strategies. This has brought back into focus the competitive aspects of their relationship, which had been simmering under the surface since the 2011 uprisings. This renewed rivalry is not, however, driven by older factors such as border disputes or differences over deeper integration between GCC member countries, but rather by new factors like the rise of the UAE and economic competition.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, analyzing the relationship's evolution from a historical perspective. Traditionally, relations between the two countries have been characterized by a duality: on the one hand, there are competitive elements stemming from border disputes and the UAE's desire to maintain its autonomy; on the other hand, there are cooperative aspects, particularly security cooperation aimed at countering Iran. As internal and external threats intensified in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, the cooperative elements of the relationship grew stronger with both countries setting aside their disputes, to the extent that the two countries were considered allies. Through their interventions in countries that became politically destabilized as a result of the uprisings, both countries sought to contain the threats posed by Islamism and Iran. While they succeeded in quelling these threats in strategically important neighboring countries like Egypt and Bahrain, the very act of mitigating the threats could also be seen as having weakened the factors motivating them to cooperate in the first place.

Despite their alliance, new sources of conflict began to emerge within Saudi-Emirati relations. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia supported the Hadi regime and Al Islah, while the UAE backed other factions. Notably, the UAE's support for the Southern Transitional Council intensified political divisions within Yemen, leading to infighting among anti-Houthi factions and undermining Saudi Arabia's aim of eliminating the Houthis. In addition to the conflict between proxy forces, the higher regard shown to the accomplishments of the UAE military during the intervention compared to those of Saudi Arabia's forces also damaged the standing of Saudi Arabia, who led the intervention,

⁵⁷ "Chiiki Tokatsugaisha (RHQ) Raisensu Fuyo ga 70 Sha Cho ni [Number of Regional Headquarters (RHQs) Granted Licenses Now Exceeds 70]," *Bijinesu Tanshin* [Business Briefing], Nihon Boeki Shinko Kiko [Japan External Trade Organization], November 16, 2022, <https://www.jetro.go.jp/biznews/2022/11/9f1f9349fcc8ecd.html>.

and also damaged the personal prestige of the crown prince.

In addition to the intervention in Yemen, in this paper I also analyzed the competitive dynamics relating to the domestic policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both countries have pursued nation-building strategies of strengthening their military capabilities and advancing economic development. While the UAE has made notable progress in enhancing its military capabilities, earning it international acclaim, military reforms have been less successful in Saudi Arabia, where they are largely seen as a means to gain the upper hand in internal power struggles. By making advances in this way, the UAE has reduced the historical asymmetry in their relationship with Saudi Arabia, further undermining Saudi Arabia's standing as a regional power. With regard to economic development, Saudi Arabia has implemented a range of initiatives under their Vision 2030 strategy aimed at boosting non-oil revenues. This has led to economic competition with the UAE, and particularly Dubai, which has been a pioneer in economic diversification away from oil dependence. As has been discussed above, following the successful stabilization of threats in troubled neighboring countries other than Yemen, the bilateral relationship appears to have shifted from one marked more by cooperation, to one marked more by competition. The factors driving this competitive dynamic are, however, distinct from the factors that were in place prior to the 2011 uprisings; presumably now centering on issues such as how their divergent threat perceptions led them to support different proxy forces in the Yemeni civil war, and the emergence of the UAE as a political and military power.

(National Institute for Defense Studies)