

# Egypt and the United Arab Emirates: Roots and Growth of an Emerging Arab Military Ecosystem

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Almost everywhere in the Middle East, the military or military-allied entities play prominent roles in governance. As Kamrava notes: “The very genesis of most modern MENA [Middle East and North African] states can be traced back to the armed forces”.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true in Egypt, which has been under military leadership since 1952, and to some extent in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which was once dubbed ‘Little Sparta’ by then United States (US) Secretary of Defense James Mattis in 2011 for its close working relationship with US and NATO forces.<sup>2</sup> Many ‘authoritarian’ states have benefitted from a very permissible environment during the post-9/11 Global War on Terrorism to justify their actions and regime legitimacy through a predominant counterterrorism discourse. In the context of 9/11, the Arab uprisings, and its economic Vision strategy, the UAE has developed close ties with the US, advanced a vehemently anti-Islamist approach, and is developing its military-industrial capacity necessary to contributing to its national defence, as well as arms sales and state autonomy. However, a multitude of jostling interests (threats and opportunities) presented at the domestic, regional, and international levels have obscured or turbo-charged prevailing foreign policy trends primarily concerning the balance between ideology versus pragmatism.<sup>3</sup>

From very different starting points, the militarization of foreign policy in Egypt and the UAE has caused these states to become leading arms importers globally between 2017 and 2021.<sup>4</sup> The UAE’s EDGE Group (a technology and defence conglomerate including 25 companies engaged in military and civilian products) has achieved great progress in a short amount of time and entered the world’s top 25 largest arms-producing and military services companies in 2019.<sup>5</sup> Such an achievement reflects the fact that the UAE military-industrial complex is in service to the country’s overarching economic interests as well as geostrategic ones, and has the potential to shape the Arab military economic ecosystem for

1 Mehran Kamrava, “Military Professionalism and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (1), Spring 2000: 68-69.

2 Kenneth M. Pollack, “Sizing Up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE Military Effectiveness,” AEI, October 27, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/sizing-up-little-sparta-understanding-uae-military-effectiveness/>

3 Robert Mason, “The Future of Egypt: Status Quo, Incremental Growth or a Rapid Ascent Back to Regional Leadership?,” *Middle East Policy*, XXIII (2), Summer 2016: 76-94; Robert Mason, “From ‘Relative Autonomy’ to ‘Relational Autonomy’: A Reappraisal of GCC State-Building and Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Arabian Studies*, forthcoming.

4 Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021”, March 2022, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs\\_2203\\_at\\_2021.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf)

5 Lucie Béraud et al, “Mapping the International Presence of the World’s Largest Arms Companies,” December 2020, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/sipriinsight2012\\_mapping\\_the\\_international\\_presence\\_of\\_the\\_worlds\\_largest\\_arms\\_companies.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/sipriinsight2012_mapping_the_international_presence_of_the_worlds_largest_arms_companies.pdf)



many years to come. Egypt on the other hand, which has striven for military self-sufficiency in the second half of the twentieth century, reflecting its experience of working with the Soviet Union and the US during the Cold War, has remained a ‘third-tier’ arms producer. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have financed Egypt’s arms deals with Russia to the value of \$2 billion in 2014 as part of their efforts to shore up the Egyptian regime.<sup>6</sup> Evidence such as this shows how these Arab Gulf States can have a multiplier effect beyond their so-called ‘bailout diplomacy’<sup>7</sup> to regional allies (providing financial or in-kind support to states facing financial stress) when they share a similar threat perception and/or other interests.

Given their comparative strategic outlook and overlapping security interests, Egyptian and UAE military-industrial bases are set to coalesce around core components such as firearms and ammunition. While defensive partnerships are to be expected, such close cooperation also has the potential to impact state and regional norms concerning political pluralism, and towards non-traditional security threats such as irregular migration,<sup>8</sup> climate change, and food security, as well as policy priorities and prescriptions in fragile states across the region and beyond. This includes Egypt, where its economic weakness and high-stakes arms relationship with the US translates into an opportunity for the UAE to consolidate and extend its influence in the Egyptian political economy in much the same way that Qatar attempted to do in 2012/13. In such states, a more robust Western partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that targets more systemic and common regional issues could enhance security for all.

## Egypt

The Egyptian state has been dominated by the military since the 1952 military coup. The militarization of Egyptian policy and its effects have become synonymous with regime identity and survival, state structure (including serving the economic demands of a privileged military elite), and sustaining, in some form, the traditional role that Egypt has played in Middle Eastern affairs as a regional power. As a result, there has been a determination to sustain a high level of arms imports along with policies that lead to a persistent narrowing of the political economy in which military interests dominate over a broader, more inclusive, and resilient economy. The opportunity cost of this strategy is two-fold. First, the Egyptian government has breached constitutionally guaranteed spending on health and education (a minimum of 3 to 4 percent).<sup>9</sup> Even with appropriate funding, systems are yet to be fully formed or structured. For example, the education system, including apprenticeships, is not developed in line with a specific industrial strategy. Second, free military labour skews economic opportunity for others. Cheap or free military labour assembles imported kits or other non-military-related products ranging from

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6 Khalil Al-Anani, “Sisi Intensifies Arms Imports to Secure External Support for His Policies,” Arab Center Washington D.C., 28 February 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/sisi-intensifies-arms-imports-to-secure-external-support-for-his-policies/>

7 “Gulf Bailout Diplomacy,” International Institute of Strategic Studies, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2023/11/Gulf-Bailout-Diplomacy/>

8 The term is used to cover all forms of irregular migration, including asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people, victims of trafficking, and unaccompanied children.

9 Michelle Dunne et al, “Ten Years After Mubarak’s Fall, What is Egypt’s Biggest Challenge?,” POMED, February 21, 2021, <https://pomed.org/publication/ten-years-after-mubaraks-fall-what-is-egypts-biggest-challenge/>



beauty products to tables.<sup>10</sup> The military is also highly involved in agriculture, including massive greenhouse projects and fish farming.<sup>11</sup> The lack of historic investment or privatisation has impacted the country's ability to attract major foreign direct investment into industries beyond core areas such as energy and real estate.

Despite multi-billion-dollar aid and investments from GCC states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait since 2013, the Egyptian economy continues to face a number of challenges, such as high unemployment, foreign currency shortages, and high public debt. Egypt has been in regular contact with the IMF and secured a 46-month, \$3 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement in December 2022. A return to a fixed exchange rate in February 2023 and over-investment in mega-projects have contributed to high inflation and low foreign currency reserves.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the IMF saw fit to increase the EFF from \$3 billion to \$8 billion in March 2024.<sup>13</sup> As part of the privatisation program agreed with the IMF, the UAE stands to gain a greater foothold in the Egyptian economy. Abu Dhabi wealth fund ADQ is investing \$35 billion, including in a large Mediterranean resort called Ras El-Hekma,<sup>14</sup> making UAE-Egyptian security cooperation in eastern Libya all the more important for safeguarding the UAE's Egyptian assets. Egypt struck another \$8 billion deal with the European Union (EU) the same month as the IMF deal, part of the EU's 'strategic partnership' with Egypt to stem migration into Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Migration is evidently viewed through a securitized lens in Brussels and has been a significant point of leverage for states in the Southern Neighbourhood. Stemming migrant flows has been the basis for similar EU deals with Turkey and Libya, both deals openly criticised by non-governmental organisations for their poor protection of human rights.<sup>16</sup> Egyptian migration into Europe has risen massively from 6,616 in 2021 to 26,512 in 2023, in some cases overtaking migration from Afghanistan and Syria.<sup>17</sup> Amid a worsening economic outlook in Egypt, unemployment has been cited as the predominant push

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- 10 Florence Gaub and Zoe Stanley-Lockman, "Egypt: The Assembler," *Defence Industries in Arab States: Players and Strategies*, Chaillot Papers, March 2017: 31, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_141\\_Arab\\_Defence.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_141_Arab_Defence.pdf)
  - 11 Yezid Sayigh, "Retain, Restructure, or Divest? Policy Options for Egypt's Military Economy," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, January 31, 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/01/31/retain-restructure-or-divest-policy-options-for-egypt-s-military-economy-pub-86232>
  - 12 "Arab Republic of Egypt: First and Second Reviews Under the Extended Fund Facility, Monetary Policy Consultation, and Requests for Waiver of Non Observance of a Performance Criterion, and Augmentation and Rephrasing of Access-Press Release; and Staff Report," *IMF Staff Country Reports*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2024/04/26/Arab-Republic-of-Egypt-First-and-Second-Reviews-Under-the-Extended-Arrangement-Under-the-548335>
  - 13 Samy Magdy, "IMF Confirms Increasing Egypt's Bailout Loan to \$8 Billion," *AP News*, March 30, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/egypt-economy-imf-bailout-loan-e8bc6d1383e8d9b0dc325086c121a12b>
  - 14 Mirette Magdy and Michael Gunn, "UAE's \$35 Billion Egypt Deal Marks Gulf Powers' Buying Spree," *April 27, 2024*, [https://uk.news.yahoo.com/uae-35-billion-egypt-deal-040122680.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb2ov&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAHU9jYXz w-iTbHtaCOckVoroYSZp-aeJ\\_K447Fsu6z7Jdyfmb1Nzh5Q\\_93UzP98BWHRYsYk-Tq9ytG\\_2oXUrnriCbouWwxA23BN7yS62G13rrpiNewSGbyqPDUPLefAwYw\\_nm6NFwgoMYogu528GD\\_AwrAnMOM158-roOI1La6m13](https://uk.news.yahoo.com/uae-35-billion-egypt-deal-040122680.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb2ov&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHU9jYXz w-iTbHtaCOckVoroYSZp-aeJ_K447Fsu6z7Jdyfmb1Nzh5Q_93UzP98BWHRYsYk-Tq9ytG_2oXUrnriCbouWwxA23BN7yS62G13rrpiNewSGbyqPDUPLefAwYw_nm6NFwgoMYogu528GD_AwrAnMOM158-roOI1La6m13)
  - 15 Patrick Werr, "EU Pledges Billions of Euros for Egypt as it Seeks to Curb Migration," *Reuters*, March 17, 2024, [EU pledges billions of euros for Egypt as it seeks to curb migration](https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-bolster-egypt-ties-with-billions-funding-2024-03-17/) <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-bolster-egypt-ties-with-billions-funding-2024-03-17/> | *Reuters*
  - 16 Elodie Thevenin, "Between Human Rights and Security Concerns: Politicisation of EU-Turkey and EU-Libya Agreements on Migration in National Parliaments," *European Security*, 30 (3), 2021: 464-484.



factor.<sup>18</sup> In 2023, around 30 percent of Egyptians lived below the poverty line, defined by the Egyptian government as LE 735 per month<sup>19</sup> (about \$15 per month). With a large informal economy representing fifty percent of the size of the total economy<sup>20</sup>, an additional percentage (perhaps up to 60 percent of the total population in 2019<sup>21</sup>) is estimated by the IMF to be fluctuating in and out of poverty.

Egypt is also a transit and recipient state, accommodating 9 million people from 133 countries, or almost ten percent of its population in 2022.<sup>22</sup> The rise in recent years has been driven mainly by refugees fleeing conflict in Sudan (4 million), Syria (1.5 million), Yemen (1 million), and Libya (1 million).<sup>23</sup> The combination of source and transit status, and other security interests associated with the Suez Canal, Camp David compliance, the stabilisation of Gaza (rather than any serious attempts by the US to advance the two-state solution), intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism interests (although this is a divisive term, especially within authoritarian contexts), have all been key determining factors in EU and international cooperation with Egypt as a partner. The size and positioning of Egypt between the Middle East, Africa and Europe is bound to reinforce President Sisi's alleged belief that Egypt is too big to fail.<sup>24</sup> However, there appears to be no appetite in the EU (Egypt's largest trading partner) or the UK to address the root causes of migration in Egypt such as advancing a Marshall Plan for Egypt and the wider Middle East.<sup>25</sup> The West lacks the kind of economic resources to impact in this way beyond the billions of dollars wasted in attempts to shape the region through military intervention and in some cases, military adventurism. The calculation in Western capitals no doubt also considers that such massive foreign assistance would likely fail without substantial economic reforms

17 "Analysis: the EU's Big Bet on Egypt Comes with a High Price and High Risks," Euronews, March 18, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/07/21/1188582560/egypts-vanishing-village-men-risking-it-all-to-get-to-europe>; Aya Batrawy, "Egypt's Vanishing Village Men: Risking it all to get to Europe," NPR, July 21, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/07/21/1188582560/egypts-vanishing-village-men-risking-it-all-to-get-to-europe>

18 Amr Adly, "Crowding Egypt's Private Sector In, Not Out," Carnegie Middle East Center, 8 May 2023, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/05/08/crowding-egypt-s-private-sector-in-not-out-pub-89640>

19 "32.5 Percent of Egyptians Live Below Poverty Line: CAPMAS," Ahram Online, July 30, 2019, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/341838/Business/Economy/-percent-of-Egyptians-live-below-poverty-line-CAPM.aspx#:~:text=Chairperson%20of%20Egypt%27s%20Central%20Agency%20for%20Public%20Mobilization,27.8%25%20in%202015%2C%20with%20a%204.7%20percent%20increase.>

20 Nahla Abdul-Ezz, "Egypt's Massive Informal Economy: Transitioning to Formality," Ahram Online, September 23, 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1202/423530/AlAhram-Weekly/Economy/Egypt-s-massive-informal-economy-Transitioning-to-f.aspx>

21 Ruth Michaelson and Menna Farouk, "Inflation, IMF Austerity and Grandiose Military Plans Edge More Egyptians into Poverty," The Guardian, May 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/08/inflation-imf-austerity-and-grandiose-military-plans-edge-more-egyptians-into-poverty>

22 IOM, "IOM Egypt Estimates the Current Number of International Migrants Living in Egypt to 9 Million People Originating from 133 Countries," 7 August 2022, <https://egypt.iom.int/news/iom-egypt-estimates-current-number-international-migrants-living-egypt-9-million-people-originating-133-countries>

23 Ibid.

24 Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," CRS Report for Congress, September 30, 2021: 25, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33003/115>

25 Robert Mason, "What Happened to the Middle East Marshall Plan?," Open Democracy, November 7, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/what-happened-to-middle-east-marshall-plan/>





being implemented, without additional buy-in from the GCC donor states, or absent long-term indigenous industrialization plans.

The economic impact of Covid-19, Russia's war in Ukraine (which has further affected Egyptian food security, notably wheat imports), and the war in Gaza all add to the public policy and potential national security burden. Whilst the Gaza war makes Cairo more relevant in international diplomatic circles, it also creates real prospects for further socioeconomic instability, especially in 2024 when Israeli incursions or invasion into Southern Gaza could cause Palestinian refugees to breach the Egypt-Israel border and flee into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

In line with national security considerations influenced by regime role conception, historic experience and geopolitical dynamics, a major element of Egyptian foreign policy focus has been to attract and sustain arms imports. Egypt has benefitted from substantial sovereign military aid (especially from the US since the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty) through the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. This financing mechanism has been used for the Egyptian procurement of weapons systems and services, including major defence systems such as the F-16 fighter aircraft, and has totalled \$84 billion since 1946.<sup>26</sup> As a Major non-NATO ally, Egypt also benefits from the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program through which military equipment excess to US requirements is transferred to Egypt at little or no cost.<sup>27</sup> The program is so ingrained in the Egyptian political economy that when a portion of it became conditioned on human rights progress, as was the case during the Biden administration, it led the Egyptian government to seek a workaround which culminated in a scandal. In November 2023, Senator Bob Menendez, while serving as the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is alleged to have acted as an agent of the government of Egypt by Federal prosecutors 'with respect to foreign military sales and foreign military financing'. Menendez is also accused of communication with then-Secretary of the Treasury and then-Secretary of State to advance Egypt's perspective on its number one foreign policy issue, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). He stated in a letter his concern and interest 'to significantly increase the State Department's engagement on negotiations surrounding the [dam]'.<sup>28</sup> It is doubtful that any impact will be felt in US-Egypt relations before an official investigation has run its course and before the presidential election in November.

Canada and Germany have also more closely linked their arms sales policies with human rights elements in their respective foreign policies and suffered for their pro-human rights positions even from allies such as France. For example, President Macron publicly criticised then German Chancellor Angela Merkel of "demagoguery" for her criticism of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.<sup>29</sup> European competition over the lucrative arms exports to the Middle East is a key issue in this respect. France has gained inroads into the Middle East arms market in recent

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26 Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations": 33.

27 Ibid: 34.

28 Erica Orden, "Menendez Accused of Acting as Foreign Agent for Egypt While Helming Senate Foreign Relations Committee," Politico, December 10, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/12/menendez-accused-of-acting-as-foreign-agent-for-egypt-while-helming-senate-foreign-relations-committee-00121225>

29 "Pure Demagoguery': Macron Clashes with Merkel Over Saudi Arms Exports After Khashoggi Murder," The Local, October 26, 2018, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20181026/pure-demagoguery-macron-clashes-with-merkel-over-saudi-arms-exports-after-khashoggi-murder/>



years including a 2015 deal to provide tactical surveillance unmanned aerial systems for the Egyptian armed forces.<sup>30</sup> The same year France supplied 24 Rafales along with Russia which supplied 50 MiG-29Ms.<sup>31</sup> Egypt then purchased an additional 30 Rafale fighters in a 2021 deal, worth \$4.5 billion, but 85 percent financed by various French banks.<sup>32</sup> Russia also transferred two dozen Su-35 advanced multi-role fighter jets to Egypt by 2023.<sup>33</sup> Such deals reflect Egypt's interest in diversifying arms suppliers and enhancing its qualitative military edge in order to achieve greater autonomy over its security and political decision making.

Western states in particular recognise that there is no appetite in Cairo for accepting conditionality.<sup>34</sup> The Egyptian approach is supported by a persistent anti-colonial, nationalist and to some extent, religious discourse, reinforced by negative historic episodes such as Western support for Israel during the 1967 and 1973 conflicts, and especially the Suez Crisis in 1956 in which Britain, France and Israel were explicitly allied against Egypt. President Sisi notably pushed back against criticism of his regime, including on human rights grounds, when he spoke at the first European Union and Arab League Summit in Egypt in February 2019. He stated, "You are not going to teach us about humanity" and "Respect our values and ethics, as we do yours".<sup>35</sup> This disassociation with European values and ethics could be one of the more damaging and long-term aspects of militarized foreign policy and authoritarianism within international relations, as Western states seek to consolidate the liberal international order. Similarly, the numerous examples of double standards and Islamophobia prevalent in Western foreign policy towards the Middle East have done nothing to advance a durable and long-term compact.

Egypt continues to balance internationally for greater autonomy and is aware, like the UAE, of the changing international balance of power in which blocs such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) may play an increasingly important role in global governance (Egypt, and the UAE began membership proceedings in February 2023). Egypt recognises opportunities presented by rising powers such as China, which has helped finance Egypt's new capital project, provides drones to the Egyptian Air Force, may provide critical 5G technological infrastructure through Huawei (although the US has warned against it), and has assisted in the transfer of satellite technology for remote sensing applications.<sup>36</sup> Russia's \$25 billion loan to finance the construction and operations of a Russian-made civil nuclear power plant raises questions about how international financing meets the needs of states in the global South, exacerbated by the costs (and

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30 Florence Gaub and Zoe Stanley-Lockman, "Annexes: Egypt": 73.

31 Bradley Bowman, Jared Thompson and Ryan Brobst, "Egypt's Transition Away from American Weapons is a National Security Issue," Defense News, May 25, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/25/egypts-transition-away-from-american-weapons-is-a-national-security-issue/>

32 Michel Cabriol, "Egypt: A Contract (Rafale) May Hide Other Orders (Spy Satellite, MRTT)," La Tribune, May 6, 2021,

33 Darek Liam, "Egyptian Air Force MiG-29 Deliveries Completed, Su-35 Deliveries Begins," Military Africa, July 1, 2021, <https://www.military.africa/2021/07/egyptian-air-force-mig-29-deliveries-completed-su-35-deliveries-begins/>

34 A view communicated to the author by Egyptian diplomats during an EU – League of Arab States policy event he convened in Cairo, 13 May 2019.

35 Declan Walsh, "Egypt's el-Sisi Welcomes European Union Leaders, but Not Their Scolding on Rights," The New York Times, February 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/25/world/middleeast/sisi-egypt-european-union.html>



opportunity costs) of militarization, including an element of dependency going forward. As such, Russia engages similarly to the US in vying for influence in Egypt, akin to the rationale of the Cold War, rather than addressing wider socio-economic concerns shared by the majority of ordinary citizens.

The lack of information and openly accessible informed opinion from local experts in areas such as migration and terrorism, coupled with a generally securitized environment and lack of state-society connectivity and forums, means there is generally a predetermined policy approach in effect. Indeed, some analysts suggest that counterterrorism in the Sinai is being pursued primarily with regime survival or longevity in mind.<sup>37</sup> The combination of instability and crises in Libya, Sudan, and Gaza gives Egypt some further agency but also has the potential to further threaten Egyptian national security. These theatres of conflict have created the perfect conditions for a securitized discourse to be credible and effective in supporting regime survival objectives. Anecdotally, regional instability appears to have supported the belief, at least in the Egyptian middle class, that President Sisi can provide the greatest degree of national security in a third term. Other forms of development remain largely suspended and pending more conducive macro-economic and security conditions.

## The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE is intriguing because its symbiotic link with Egypt and other like-minded states is coming into greater focus over time, in particular UAE support for the status quo in Egypt. This mainly includes a shared anti-Islamist outlook between President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and President Sisi, alongside the leverage that Egypt holds in certain areas as previously discussed. This section covers the militarization of UAE foreign policy as part of its search for national security and as a function of regime security, particularly during regional escalation following the onset of the Arab uprisings.

For decades, UAE foreign policy strategy included an emphasis on embedding its forces in NATO coalitions to advance operational experience. The UAE has continued to attract the US and some European states to military bases in the UAE, such as the French Camp de la Paix in 2009, to help guard against a perceived existential threat posed by Iran. This threat has been consistently felt since Iran occupied three islands in 1971 (Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb islands that are still claimed by the UAE), following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. The Gulf Cooperation Council, established in 1981 to provide collective security, partially realised through the establishment of the Peninsula Shield Force – just 10,000 troops in 1984 – has never achieved its full potential in terms of collective defence. Instead, bilateral relations were preferred mainly with the US, which was seen as the preeminent security guarantor during the 1990/91 Gulf War and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The UAE has built on its several decades of close cooperation with the US, including following 9/11 when an international centre to counter violent extremism, Hedayah, was established in Abu Dhabi in 2012. The UAE supported NATO operations in Libya and the Western

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36 Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations": 20; "Egypt, China Completes Testing of Egyptsat 2 Satellite," Daily News Egypt, June 25, 2023, <https://www.dailynewsegyp.com/2023/06/25/egypt-china-completes-testing-of-egyptsat-2-satellite/#:~:text=Al-Mashat%20noted%20that%20the%20Satellite%20Assembly%2C%20Integration%20and,are%20being%20implemented%20with%20two%20grants%20worth%20%2492m.>

37 Khalil Al-Anani, "Insurgency in Sinai: Challenges and Prospects," Arab Center Washington DC, 10 June 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/insurgency-in-sinai-challenges-and-prospects/>



campaign against Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. In support of this latter endeavour, the UAE set up the Sawab Center in 2015, a bilateral partnership with the US to counter ISIS messaging online.<sup>38</sup>

Monarchical threat perception peaked during the Arab Spring from 2011, as Islamist groups were vying for influence in weak or weakened states such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. The UAE also sought to mobilise Western opinion against groups that could threaten its regime security. Where there was resistance to that agenda, arms deals have been used to exert influence.<sup>39</sup> The Emirates has also been adept at using a variety of assets to offset its military force weaknesses, including employing mercenaries or other surrogates in Somalia, Yemen and Libya.<sup>40</sup> Beyond withdrawal from Yemen at the end of 2019, the UAE has continued to exert residual influence through relations with the Southern Transitional Council as well as through a number of bases around the Arabian Peninsula, including on Socotra Island, that continue to serve its economic and national security interests. The UAE also took a leading role in supporting a boycott of Qatar (the so-called GCC crisis 2017-21) given Doha's support for Islamist groups, which was and remains fundamentally in opposition to the UAE's preference for secular and socially liberal authoritarian systems.

Given the perceived uneven US policy response towards President Mubarak in Egypt, as well as on a multitude of other regional issues, including inaction over more recent incidents affecting Gulf security;<sup>41</sup> the UAE has broadened its search for allies and security. For example, the UAE benefits from security, intelligence, and technological association with Israel, and by extension, a closer relationship with the US, especially through the Abraham Accords signed in 2020. This effort was accompanied by a new de-escalation strategy that focused on diplomacy and economic cooperation with Qatar, Iran, and Turkey in line with the imperatives of its economic diversification process or Vision strategy. Post-Brexit, the UK was invited to open a military site at Al Minhad in 2024, building on close economic and political links. Close economic and emerging security relations with China, especially the importation of 'dual use' and 5G technology, appear to have formed part of a wider deal with the Biden administration, leading to greater collaboration with US information technology companies. For example, Microsoft has since invested \$1.4 billion in the UAE's G42 for AI development.<sup>42</sup>

The UAE military-industrial complex has been rolled out quickly through acquisitions and consolidation. This element of production is likely to constitute the 'militarization'

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38 U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2021: United Arab Emirates," <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/united-arab-emirates#:~:text=The%20UAE%20hosts%20the%20Sawab%20Center%2C%20a%20bilateral,for%20countering%20violent%20extremism%20based%20in%20Abu%20Dhabi>.

39 Randeep Ramesh, "UAE Told UK: Crack Down on Muslim Brotherhood or Lose Arms Deals," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/06/uae-told-uk-crack-down-on-muslim-brotherhood-or-lose-arms-deals>

40 Andreas Krieg, "The UAE's 'Dogs of War': Boosting a Small State's Regional Power Projection," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 33 (1-2), 2022: 152-172.

41 See Robert Mason, "United States: Partisan Politics, Carte Blanche and Policy Variation," *Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates: Foreign Policy and Strategic Alliances in an Uncertain World*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023: 125-145.

42 "Microsoft Invests \$1.5 Billion in Abu Dhabi's G42 to Accelerate AI Development and Global Expansion," *Microsoft*, April 15, 2024, <https://news.microsoft.com/2024/04/15/microsoft-invests-1-5-billion-in-abu-dhabis-g42-to-accelerate-ai-development-and-global-expansion/>





dimension in UAE foreign policy over the coming years. Joint ventures with Russia, such as the Su-75 Checkmate stealth fighter, are particularly important for the UAE. These partnerships enable the UAE to resist US pressure and create leverage for negotiating further deals, including the suspended talks with the US on the F-35 stealth fighter jet.<sup>43</sup>

The UAE's focus on counterterrorism has been nuanced and has fluctuated over the past years. It has shifted from direct intervention in support of allies and in conflict zones to advance its interests, to a more recent focus on Gulf and wider regional de-escalation. The UAE remains economically and diplomatically active in Yemen, Sudan, Somaliland, Libya, and elsewhere, working through intermediaries and economic channels to address a range of threats and secure influence in the neighbourhood. Following Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with worldwide partners, the UAE is well placed to convert economic relations into hard power potential, options, and alliances. Whilst prominent as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council during 2022-23, including its rotating presidency in June 2023, as well as membership in other forums, the UAE is advancing both its hard and soft power influence simultaneously. The UAE elite interest remains in tackling Islamist groups and growing autonomy through military-industrial developments, economic statecraft, and arms imports. Increasingly, UAE arms exports may give it greater sway among like-minded states and non-state actors seeking a range of options and support.

## Conclusion

The impacts of Egyptian and UAE militarized foreign policies are diverse in different states. For example, the UAE (along with Saudi Arabia) helped bring peace to the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict but can further complicate conflict-ridden states such as Libya and Sudan. Egyptian and UAE preferences and securitized responses to a range of economic, diplomatic, and political challenges have rarely been engaged with and dealt with decisively, whether on issues such as socio-economic development, political Islam, the GERD, or Gulf security. The Arab military ecosystem which was once dominated the Arab Organization for Industrialization (AOI) is taking on a new form: trickle-down hardware, ideologically defined military engagement, and mobilisation around a unified vision of security and control. This model is becoming increasingly prevalent in parts of Africa and the Middle East. In conflict situations in Libya, Sudan, and Gaza, robust diplomacy is required to bridge the gap between securitized and historically sensitive issues and durable long-term political solutions.

Whilst a re-evaluation of European state and EU policies could finally address some of the root causes of poverty, radicalisation, and rising levels of migration from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel, the economic rationale of European state arms sales/energy calculations and recent NATO military interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan have not been conducive to supporting the idea of selfless state-building. Billions of dollars have been wasted in advancing military solutions to what are predominantly, political, and socioeconomic challenges. Close elite-led Egypt-UAE relations are growing along with regional resistance to Western-centric interests, including an openness to working with Russia and China. This is coupled with their outsized influence over weak actors in North

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<sup>43</sup> Nomaan Merchant, "UAE Suspends Talks on \$23 Billion Weapons Deal with US," Defense News, December 14, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2021/12/14/uae-suspends-talks-on-23-billion-weapons-deal-with-us/#:~:text=The%20United%20Arab%20Emirates%20has%20suspended%20talks%20on,a%20key%20U.S.%20ally%20in%20the%20Persian%20Gulf>



# PRISME

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Africa, the Horn of Africa, and potentially, the Sahel. As Egypt and the GCC states seek to pursue de-escalation in support of their respective Vision strategies, it presents the EU and European states with a prime opportunity to engage to help mitigate worsening soft security issues such as climate change (as evident from floods across the GCC states in April 2024), water insecurity, and migration. These issues and others have the potential to amalgamate to create further challenges in the Mediterranean and Gulf going forward. Much of the assertiveness and militarization in Egyptian and UAE foreign policy continues to hinge on the international context. This includes convergence over common interests and the shape and form of diplomacy and conditionality (led by the US and European states), versus opportunities presented by growing great power competition. Egypt, the UAE, and others may also benefit from any further *carte blanche* and transactional policies that may emerge if there is a second Trump administration in 2025.



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## PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

## SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.