

Military Bases in the Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT *The United Arab Emirates is one of the leading countries in the Middle East in terms of active foreign policy. One of the most striking instruments of Emirate's active foreign policy is the establishment of military bases abroad, which are located notably in the Horn of Africa. These bases are considered a sign of the UAE's increasing military activities and its willingness to use hard power. This study, therefore, aims to make sense of why the Emirati leadership has pursued such an aggressive foreign policy that involves the use of military capacities. While the study focuses on understanding the foreign policy dynamics of the UAE, it also aims to analyze the real motivations behind the Emirati leadership's decision to establish military bases.*

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the leading Gulf countries in terms of oil resources. The country has pursued an active foreign policy on both regional and global scale, especially in the post-Arab uprisings period. The UAE government has established close relations with leading international actors such as the U.S. and Israel, and has started to play an active role in Middle East politics through its alliances and activities at the regional level. This policy activism, however, has been criticized by many experts who argue that Abu Dhabi's foreign policy initiatives far exceed its real capacity.

Despite these criticisms, the Emirati leadership is generally regarded as having a solid foreign policy agenda. The main figures of this foreign policy activism are Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and Vice-President Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. With the leadership of these two important figures, the country aims to become an important regional actor with the capacity to fight against terrorism, secure the global energy supply, and confront

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achieve its foreign policy objectives. The country has focused on establishing military bases in order to make use of its hard power capabilities. Concentrating especially on the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean region, these activities have continued systematically since 2014. During the past few years, the UAE has established military bases on Socotra and Perim Island in Yemen, the Somaliland and Puntland regions in Somalia and the port city of Assab, Eritrea.

By establishing military bases, the UAE aims to become a strong regional player, particularly in the Gulf of Aden. The country also aims to strengthen its geopolitical influence through strong military presence in one of the strategic locations of international trade. The military bases also serve the Emirati leadership in their aim to successfully compete with regional players such as Turkey, Qatar and Iran, countries that have already established strong relations with regional actors in the Horn of Africa. The UAE administration believes that having a military presence in the wider region will strengthen its position in regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League. Finally, being able to use hard power will allow Abu Dhabi to confront militant organizations such as the Houthis, ISIS and al-Qaeda. Before exploring the military bases established by the United Arab Emirates in detail, it would be helpful to examine the transformation of the Emirati foreign policy. This will provide a basis for better understanding the military base activities of the UAE.

The Transformation of the UAE's Foreign Policy

The United Arab Emirates has been under the Western security umbrella throughout its modern history. Particularly, the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK) provided the Emirati leadership with a solid alliance that could protect the Gulf nation from external and domestic threats. In the post-Gulf War period, the military and political influence of Western actors in

the effects of the international economic crisis.¹ The UAE government has utilized various instruments in order to successfully implement its foreign policy. These tools are diplomatic relations, financial assistance, investment, humanitarian aid and, most strikingly, the use of hard power.²

Military bases are the new tools the Emirati leadership is using to



The map shows five military bases of the UAE along the Gulf of Aden. Shutterstock (Modified)

the region became definite, while the transport of energy from the Gulf region, to both Asian and Western markets, continued at an increasing rate.³ Having a considerable surplus in the budget through oil exports, the UAE drew global attention with huge domestic projects, while trying to take precautions against potential threats by creating a significant budget for armament. During the 2000s, the Emirati leadership invested heavily in weapons and military equipment, mostly from the U.S. and the UK, to bolster its own capabilities to fight against regional and international threats.

The Arab revolutions that started in 2010 ushered in a new era for the Middle East and led many countries to become more cautious in their regional activities. There was a significant change in the UAE's foreign policy in the post Arab uprisings era.⁴ The Emirati leadership interpreted the Arab revolutions as a direct threat to the survival of its own regime; it was at this time that the UAE started to adopt a much more active and hard-liner foreign policy. As the Arab revolutions progressed, the UAE administration increased its activity in the region considerably, and started to use both hard power and soft power capabilities in line with its economic, political, military and religious-ideological objectives.⁵

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the regional status quo would continue. It attempted to prevent democratic transformations from taking place in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. Another reason for the change in the UAE's foreign policy was the perception among the Gulf States that the U.S. was 'abandoning' its responsibilities to the GCC region and normalizing relations with Iran. This was particularly visible with the negotiations between the U.S. and Iran during the Obama Presidency.⁶

In the post Arab-revolutions era, the UAE pursued an aggressive foreign policy against countries and groups that could pose threat to its regime survival. Countries like Turkey and Qatar and groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Houthis can be considered among the targets of UAE antagonism in the post-Arab uprisings period. The Muslim Brotherhood particularly bore the brunt of Abu Dhabi's hostile policies. Considering these countries and groups as major rivals in the regional power struggle, the Abu Dhabi administration took steps to quell the influence of these actors in the region. The Emirati leadership organized and funded the military coup in Egypt that toppled democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi, and declared the Muslim Brotherhood movement a terrorist organization in the post-coup period. The UAE also followed hostile policies against Turkey and Qatar. According to claims made frequently on international media, the United Arab Emirates, directly or indirectly, supported the military coup attempt in Turkey that took place on July 15, 2016.⁷ Finally, the Emirati policy also targeted the tiny Gulf nation Qatar. During the summer of 2017 together with Saudi Arabia, the UAE led the political and economic blockade on Qatar, in order to force Doha to stop its active foreign policy.

While practicing these policies, the UAE has not refrained from using its economic and military power. This was clearly visible in the countries' policies in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria.⁸ Abu Dhabi has continuously supported the Yemeni forces that fight against the Iran-backed Houthis and the Libyan groups in Tobruk, led by General Khalifa Haftar, who seeks to establish

a military regime by overthrowing Libya's internationally recognized central government. In both cases the Emirati intervention took the form of military support such as operations, weaponry and equipment. The Emirati army also took part in Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis in Yemen. These developments reveal that the Emirati foreign policy increasingly employs hard power capabilities.

The United Arab Emirates has also adopted the policy of establishing military bases as a new instrument of foreign policy in the recent period. The main motivations of this policy are becoming an effective actor in regional politics, fighting against the Houthi threat in Yemen, and creating a secure corridor for oil export in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. By establishing these bases, the UAE aims to become a strategic regional player by creating of a safe passage for energy supply from the Middle East to the world. The UAE, which produces two million barrels of oil per day, aims to maintain its export level by establishing a secure environment in Bab al-Mandab for the flow of oil, mostly to European markets.

In line with this target, the UAE has increased its activity in the region and carried out strategic moves like establishing military bases on the islands of Socotra and Perim in Yemen, the port town of Assab in Eritrea and the Puntland and Somaliland regions in Somalia. Through these military bases, the UAE administration aims to become an influential actor in the Horn of Africa by having a military presence in the Gulf of Aden, the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Red Sea. The Emirati leadership also aims to influence the region through political, military and economic means.⁹ Therefore, it should be emphasized that these military bases established by the UAE are clear indicators of the transformations that have been taking place in the Emirati foreign policy.

Military Bases in Yemen: Socotra and Perim Island

Yemen has been struggling with political instability since the start of the popular uprisings in 2011. The country has witnessed the intervention of external actors since the post-revolutionary period, which has contributed significantly to the continuation of instability and violence. Despite the election of Mansour Hadi as president, a power struggle still rages between the Iran-backed Houthis and the groups supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. President Mansour Hadi's cooperation with regional actors such as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi has led Yemeni politics to be more open to the intervention of external actors.

In addition to the instability caused by the intervention of external actors, Yemen also faces threats from radical groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. This

conflict creates an environment of increasing disagreement between the political parties in Yemen, which deepens the atmosphere of insecurity in the country.

Due to the continuing instability in the country and the Houthi threat to Yemen's political leadership, the Hadi Administration has continued its close ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Emirati regime sought to exploit the weakness of the Hadi government and showed a strong support for Operation Decisive Storm. The UAE has aimed to increase its regional influence by engaging in the conflict in Yemen.

Another reason for Abu Dhabi's presence in Yemen is the security of the transition routes through the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. For this reason, the UAE administration decided to build military bases on Perim Island in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and on Socotra Island, which is located at the eastern entrance of the Gulf of Aden. With these two military bases, the UAE aims both to increase its area of influence in the region and to make an important move toward becoming a strategic actor in a corridor that hosts an important share of the global energy trade.

The Bab al-Mandab Strait is seen as an important transit point for global trade, especially for the European, Middle Eastern and Asian markets. Eight percent of global trade passes through the Strait from Asia to Europe and vice versa. The strait is also a crucial location for the Middle Eastern energy exports. Oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports from the Gulf countries to Europe are transported through Bab al-Mandab, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Imports from European countries to the Gulf region follow the same route in the opposite direction. The Bab al-Mandab Strait witnesses the passing of 25,000 oil ships and 4.8 million barrels of oil per day.

The United Arab Emirates is one of the leading oil-exporters of the Gulf region. The country has 97 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, which constitutes nearly ten percent of the global oil market. This makes the UAE the seventh largest country in the world in terms of oil exports. Therefore, it is of great importance for the UAE to secure the Bab al-Mandab Strait from any threats that could harm the safety of the oil trade. In order to eliminate possible threats to this sea route, the UAE government has been following a more active policy of intervention in the region.

The Bab al-Mandab Strait draws particular attention thanks to the strategic importance of its location. The countries that have coastline on the Bab al-Mandab Strait are Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea to the west, and Yemen to the east. The countries located on the western shores of the strait have experienced political instability and violence for the past decades. Since 2011, Yemen

has also been experiencing violence and conflict as a result of power struggles within the country. The ongoing civil war in Yemen makes for a serious level of uncertainty on the eastern shores of the strait. In addition to the civil war between the Hadi government and the Houthis, militant groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS have increasingly strengthened their presence in the country.

Given the importance of the Bab al-Mandab Strait for the UAE's economic activities, the country has taken a particular interest in the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The Emirati administration focuses on preventing possible negative outcomes of the instability there. The UAE also supports certain political and social groups as well as military actors in the country in order to have influence in Yemeni politics. In addition, the Emirati government employs various financial, political, and military instruments,¹⁰ the most striking example being the UAE's military activities. In order to realize its foreign policy objectives, the UAE has established two military bases on the Yemeni islands of Socotra and Perim. The establishment of these military bases will make Abu Dhabi an important actor in regional and global politics. It is believed that the military presence of the UAE on these two islands will significantly affect the country's role in regional politics.

The Socotra Island Military Base

Socotra Island is located at the meeting point of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. There are two other islands named Kilmia and Samhah in close proximity to the island of Socotra. The island has a population of around 50 thousand and a surface area of 3,796 km². Due to its strategic location, the island has attracted the attention of regional and international actors. The UAE has been particularly interested in conducting activities on the island.

Following his election to the Yemeni presidency, Mansour Hadi decided to hand over Socotra Island to the UAE government for a 99 years period. Following an agreement signed in 2014; the UAE administration invested in the development of Socotra's infrastructure, and increased its activities on the island. The UAE has also provided humanitarian assistance to the population of the island, and has established new telecommunication infrastructure in cooperation with companies based in the Emirates. Emirati companies have also established fishery factories in order to support the local economy, and are making ongoing investments in order to develop tourism on the island.

Over the past three years, the UAE government has increased its military operations on Socotra Island, mainly due to the increasingly fragile security



The UAE government has long-term plans that can be realized with the establishment of a military base on Socotra Island



Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan attends an emergency meeting of the Arab League discussing the measures to be taken against Iran.

KHALED DESOUKI / AFP / Getty Images

environment in the Gulf of Aden. In addition to other security-oriented policies, the UAE government decided to establish a full-fledged military base on Socotra Island in order to confront the security challenges in the region. Considering its long-term agreement with the Hadi government and the UAE's strategic objectives, it can be observed that the UAE government has long-term plans that can be realized with the establishment of a military base on Socotra Island.

In 2014, the UAE military started to carry out infrastructure and construction activities on Socotra Island in order to establish the military base. Accommodations and training facilities were set up and the construction of an airbase was completed in a short period of time. The UAE administration announced on May 15, 2017 that it had completed the establishment of the military base on the island of Socotra. Abu Dhabi announced that the military base would host 5,000 military personnel with all necessary equipment. By establishing a military base on this island off the Gulf of Aden, the UAE administration aims to be an influential actor in a region crucial for international maritime transport, and to create a new front that could help the Emirati leadership confront the problems that could result from increasing instability in Yemen.

The people of the island, however, are cautious about the activities of the UAE in their homeland. Local activists have accused the UAE of conducting excavation and construction activities without permits from the Sanaa govern-

Perim Island, which still maintains its geopolitical importance in present times, has attracted the attention of regional actors, including the UAE, due to the deepening of the civil war in Yemen

ment. They argue that these activities do not respect the historical values of the island. Emiratis have also been accused of trying to find precious metals on Socotra. Despite the lack of media coverage of these events, Socotra locals have been trying to voice their discomfort through social media. The UAE government has worked to silence the opposition to its activities on Socotra Island. In order to appease the people of Socotra, Abu Dhabi announced a number of concessions to the Socotra nationals in UAE territory.¹¹

The Perim Island Military Base

Perim is a volcanic island located at the meeting point of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Red Sea. Because of its nature the island is not suitable for human settlement. However, with its 13-square-kilometer-long strategic location, the island has been very important for both regional and international actors that aim to be influential in the region. For this reason, Perim Island had been subject to political disagreement throughout history. The Ottomans, France and Britain have all engaged in disputes over Perim Island. The island was occupied by Britain between 1857 and 1967 before becoming a part of southern Yemen, a country that was established in 1967. Perim Island, which still maintains its geopolitical importance in present times, has attracted the attention of regional actors, including the UAE, due to the deepening of the civil war in Yemen.

Because of its involvement in Yemeni politics, the UAE wanted to establish a military base on Perim Island. The Emirati leadership initiated the establishment of this military base at the beginning of 2017. Abu Dhabi and the Hadi government had conducted negotiations as to how to proceed with the establishment of the military base; following the approval of the government in Sanaa, the UAE started preparations.

Although not officially disclosed by Yemen or the Emirati authorities, international observers and regional experts have indicated that the Abu Dhabi administration has begun building a base for military purposes.¹² According to a report issued by *IHS Jane's*, in accordance with the agreement between the Yemeni government and Abu Dhabi, the UAE military is constructing a runway of 3,200 meters, suitable for the landing and take-off of military aircraft.¹³ The details of this military base and on-going construction work have

been confirmed by satellite images published by the Airbus Space and Defence company.

The UAE's main objective in establishing a military base on Perim Island is to ensure the safety of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which is a vital passage for commercial activities through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Opening a new sea and air front to fight with the Iranian-supported Houthis is also an objective.¹⁴ In 2015, the island was the scene of intense clashes between Coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the Houthis, and both groups made intense efforts to seize the island. The Yemeni army and Coalition forces have had difficulty in dominating the island and preventing the occasional assaults of the Houthis.¹⁵ Following intense fighting however, Yemeni forces captured the strategic Perim Island.¹⁶

The United States and Israel are among the countries most supportive of the UAE's military activities in the region. Washington and Tel Aviv are considered strategic partners for the Emirati leadership.¹⁷ This alliance bloc, which includes Saudi Arabia and Egypt as well, has developed a foreign policy framework based on the use of hard power in the Middle East and has begun to pursue an active policy on military interventions. The UAE's construction of a military base on Perim Island is of great importance in terms of the strategic capacity superiority that these actors are trying to establish in the region.

On the other hand, some global actors who are disturbed by the UAE's base construction have objected that the activities on the island could pose a threat to international trade. In a statement made by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Perim Island military base was built in the context of an agreement signed between the UAE, Egypt and the United States, indicating that the base was a source of concern and it would adversely affect international trade.¹⁸

Military Bases in Somalia: The Somaliland and Puntland Regions

The Horn of Africa has been on the rise in terms of importance on the global political and economic scene. The region is an important location, particularly for the oil and natural gas exporting countries of the Gulf regions. As the region hosts a considerable amount of global trade, its strategic importance has become increasingly visible for international actors. For this reason, as one of the leading oil exporting countries of the GCC, the UAE started to show interest in establishing relations with the countries or regions that are located in the Horn of Africa. By establishing political and economic relations, the Emirati leadership has aimed to become a strategic player in the region. In this context, the UAE has provided humanitarian and financial as-

sistance to countries like Somalia as part of its active foreign policy in the Horn of Africa. However, Somalia's existing good relations with Turkey and Qatar have prevented Abu Dhabi from sustaining close relations with the Mogadishu government.

Following the election of Muhammad Abdullah Fermacu as President of Somalia in February 2017, relations between the UAE and Somalia evolved in a more negative direction. The Fermacu Administration failed to secure the privileges demanded by Abu Dhabi and tensions were further exacerbated. Following the deterioration of relations between Somalia and the UAE, Mogadishu's relations with Turkey and Qatar became even closer. As a result of this close cooperation, Turkey's largest military base abroad opened in Somalia in 2017. This further distanced the Emirati leadership from Mogadishu. With no other option at hand, the Emirati leadership sought alternative actors with whom to cooperate, and finally decided to establish relations with the autonomous northern regions of Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland.

The UAE government started its cooperation with Somaliland and Puntland by providing financial assistance and investment in these regions. During meetings with representatives of these regions, the Emirati leadership emphasized their willingness to conduct military activities in both areas. Following negotiations, the Somaliland and Puntland administrations accepted the Emirati's offers to establish military bases in their territories. By establishing military bases there, the UAE administration aimed to create a new area of influence in the region. During recent years, Abu Dhabi has signed agreements to establish bases for military purposes in the cities of Bosaso, Puntland and Berbera, Somaliland.¹⁹ The UAE's actions can be considered a sign of Abu Dhabi's willingness to be an active player in the politics of the Horn of Africa.

These developments in the northern regions of the countries have caused serious discomfort for the central government of Somalia.²⁰ This is mainly because of the fact that Somaliland and Puntland are not internationally recognized regions and they do not have the legitimacy to sign agreements with other countries. Therefore, the Somalia government has opposed Abu Dhabi's attempt to establish military bases there, arguing that the agreements signed between the UAE and the autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland are contrary to international law.²¹ In a move to show its disapproval, Somalia's parliament held a vote on March 12, 2018 to ban the UAE's state-owned ports operator from the African country. An overwhelming majority of 168 members of the 170-seat parliament voted for the cancellation of all agreements signed by DP



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has continued its military activities in these regions. Keeping this background in mind, it will be useful to take a closer look at the UAE administration's military bases in Somaliland and Puntland.

The Somaliland Military Base

The Somaliland region has land borders with Djibouti and Ethiopia and a sea border with Yemen through the Gulf of Aden. The self-declared autonomous region is located at the meeting point of Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. Somaliland is considered to be an autonomous region of Somalia at the international level. However, the regional government declared its independence just before civil war began in the country in 1991. The Somaliland administration has historically sought international recognition for the continuation of the Somaliland State that existed in 1960. Despite its unsuccessful attempts to be recognized internationally as an independent state, the region has been de facto independent in domestic politics since 1991, although it has border and legitimacy problems with the central government in Somalia and its eastern neighbor, the Puntland region.

Due to its strategic location, the Somaliland region has attracted the attention of international actors in recent years and its regional government in Hargeshia has started to follow an active foreign policy. The region has attracted the particular attention of countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and has begun to develop relations with both regional and international actors.

For many years, the Arab countries of the Gulf region have not developed diplomatic relations with the autonomous regions in Somalia. The main reason for this was the fact that these countries had been in favor of the unity of Somalia state. As a result, the Gulf States have not recognized the autonomous regions in Somalia as independent states. Nevertheless, since 2009, the UAE has begun to establish political and economic relations with Somaliland, independently of the Mogadishu government. The main instruments that the UAE has utilized in this relationship include humanitarian aid, financial investments and

World and Somaliland and Puntland's regional administrations to operate the ports of Berbera and Bossaso. The lawmakers of Somalia contend that the activities of the UAE in the country are considered a threat to Somalia's sovereignty, independence, and unity.²²

Despite Mogadishu's domestic and international efforts to halt the UAE's projects, the Emirati army

military activities.²³ In order to reveal the close relationship between the UAE and Somaliland, this article will focus on the establishment of the military base in the port city of Berbera.

The agreement to establish a military base in Somaliland was signed in February 2017 between Somaliland President Ahmed Muhammad Silano and Emirati officials. The agreement allows the UAE to establish a military base in Somaliland; it was subsequently passed by the local government with the approval of 144 of 148 deputies in the Somaliland parliament.²⁴ It was announced that the base would be established in Berbera, a historically important port city in Somaliland. While Berbera had been known as one of the most important ports in the region in the past, it had lost its significance throughout the years. However, due to its strategic location near the mouth of the Gulf of Aden, Berbera is considered a perfect spot for the establishment of a military base. A military base here would help secure the trade routes in the Gulf of Aden and provide logistical support to the Yemeni forces that fight against the Iranian-backed Houthis.²⁵

According to sources, the Somaliland administration has signed a 25-year agreement with the UAE for the Berbera military base that is planned to be built on an area of 40 km². Its main objectives are cooperation between the UAE army and Somaliland security units and the protection of the Somaliland region from external threats. Following the signing of the official agreements, air, land and naval forces of the Emirati army are reported to have transferred to Berbera.²⁶ It is believed that the construction of some sections of the base is completed, and that construction activities are continuing in order to complete the base according to initial plans.²⁷

Speaking to the Somaliland Parliament about the base, President Silano stated that the base would serve the interest of Somaliland and create employment opportunities for the people of the region. During the construction of the base, the Emirati company DP World invested \$440 million. DP World President Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem emphasized that this investment will make the Berbera port more attractive commercially. Somaliland Foreign Minister Sa'ad Ali Shire also said that the base in Berbera would be used only in the interests of Somaliland and its allies.²⁸ Ali Shire said that the UAE could use the military base in Somaliland for "training, surveillance and other military purposes."²⁹

The UAE's presence in Somaliland is important for countries that plan to invest in this region. This particularly applies to the Western allies of the UAE. With the military presence of the UAE, western companies are much more likely to consider investment opportunities there. The UAE's military activities are also vital for the security strategies of Abu Dhabi's regional and international allies.

With the military base in Puntland, the UAE aims to protect the political and economic interests of the region by securing the entrance of the Gulf of Aden

This is why countries like the U.S. and Israel support the Emirate's military activities; these countries consider Emirati military presence an important asset to fight terrorism originating in the region. They also consider the Emirati policies as part of a balancing act against China's growing influence in Africa.³⁰

The establishment of the military base in Somaliland caused widespread reaction both inside and outside Somalia. The Mogadishu government raised its voice against the base, arguing

that the region does not have the legitimacy to sign an agreement with another country to allow them to operate a military base. It is also argued that the UAE's operations against the Houthis will cause Somaliland to be drawn into the conflict in Yemen.³¹ In a statement made by the Houthis on December 2017, if Somaliland continues to host the Emirati military base, the region will be a legitimate target for them to attack.³²

International media has also covered the UAE's activities in Somaliland. Many reports have argued that the UAE has been playing a destructive role in Somaliland politics by dragging the region into wider conflicts. Somalia's government also expressed its discomfort with the UAE and argued that Abu Dhabi is intervening in the domestic affairs of the country.³³ Protests were organized in Somalia and elsewhere against the UAE's establishment of a military base in Somaliland. The UK was scene of some protests led by the Somalian diaspora, who protested against the Emirati activities in Somaliland with banners stating, "Emirates, Berbera is not for sale."³⁴

The Puntland Military Base

The Puntland region is located in northern Somalia and has hundreds of kilometers of coastline on the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Following negotiations and consultations among the regional leaders, the region declared its semi-autonomous status in 1998. Following this announcement, a local parliament was established and the region was named the Puntland State of Somalia. Presidential elections are held every four years. As one of the poorest regions in Somalia, Puntland consists of seven administrative units: Ayn, Bari, Sanaag, Karkaar, Nugaal, Mudug and Sool. Except for Ayn and Sool, all of the other administrative units have coasts on the Gulf of Aden or the Indian Ocean. Puntland has been visible in international media since 2009 due to numerous pirate attacks on vessels sailing through the Indian Ocean, which became a source of concern for the international community. Because of the pirate attacks, the Puntland region is considered a threat to international commercial activity.³⁵



Dubai's ruler and Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, al-Maktoum, welcomes Egypt's President Sisi at the opening of the World Future Energy Summit on January 19, 2015.

KARIM SAHIB / AFP / Getty Images

The pirate attacks and the strategic location of the region have attracted the attention of many international actors, leading to increased interest in the Puntland region. One of the countries that have shown interest in the region is the United Arab Emirates, and its government has become involved in economic and humanitarian aid activities in the Puntland region. In 2015, the UAE-based Divers Marine Company and the Puntland administration agreed on a huge renovation project that would double the capacity of the port in Bossaso, the most important port city in the region.³⁶ The expansion of the port capacity at Bossaso, the economic center of the Puntland region, is important not only for the region but also for other neighboring countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan and Kenya.³⁷

The UAE has also focused on conducting military activities in the Puntland region. As the region is located on a strategic coastal line, the Emirati army decided to establish a naval base in Puntland. Following negotiations with the regional government, the UAE started its construction activities to establish the military base.³⁸ The base will allow the UAE to play a more active role in ensuring the security of the international trade routes in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. With the military base in Puntland, the UAE aims to protect the political and economic interests of the region by securing the entrance of the Gulf of Aden. Abu Dhabi's primary motivation is to neutralize potential threats to the region, particularly from Yemen. The Emirati army

The main motivation for the Eritrean government was to establish strong regional alliances in order to balance the rising strategic importance of its neighbor, Djibouti

Puntland as well as on the islands of Socotra and Perim are vital decisions for Emirati foreign policy.

It is also important for the Abu Dhabi administration to ensure the safety of oil exports, which play a vital role in the country's economy. In relation to this, it is also important to establish secure routes for international trade through Bab al-Mandab. The Emirati government also aims to diversify its income sources. They consider these military bases and port expansion projects as new instruments to benefit the country financially. Creating new income areas through these investments and becoming a more effective actor in the African market can also be seen as an important motivation for the UAE.

Finally, the Emirati regime considers Somalia as a venue for competition with its regional rival, Turkey. Ankara's close cooperation with Somalia has disturbed the UAE and the Emirati regime wanted to give a response to both governments. Following Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Somalia in 2011, Turkey's interest in the country increased significantly.³⁹ This collaboration bore fruit in 2017, when Turkey opened its largest military base abroad in the Somalian capital, Mogadishu. Following the opening of the Turkish base, the Emirati approach to Somalia turned tougher. The Emirati regime supported Somaliland and Puntland in their quest for independence, and followed policies that antagonized Somalia.

The Military Base in Eritrea: Assab

Located at one of the most strategic crossing points in the world, Eritrea is situated between Sudan in the west, Ethiopia and Djibouti in the south, and the Red Sea in the east. The country has control over the Dahlak Islands, an archipelago in the Red Sea, and some of the smaller Hanish islands. Given this strategic position, Eritrea's importance is derived from its location, which has attracted the interest of many regional and international countries. The country is located on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the meeting point of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Among other important spots, one of the most important locations in the country is the important port city of Assab.

The United Arab Emirates was the one of the leading countries to show interest in establishing relations with the Eritrean government. The UAE leadership intensified its contacts with the Eritrean government in 2015, seeking more effective support for their coalition in the war against the Houthis in Yemen. Asmara welcomed Abu Dhabi's rapprochement proposal and hosted a delegation from that country in May 2015. The main motivation for the Eritrean government was to establish strong regional alliances in order to balance the rising strategic importance of its neighbor, Djibouti.

During negotiations between Emirati officials and the Eritrean government, the UAE's intention of establishing a military base in the country was made public. It was understood that the purpose of the visit by the Emirati officials was to determine the location of the military base planned by the UAE. The delegation visited Assab and the Dahlak islands; following further discussions, the UAE decided to establish the military base in the port city of Assab.

It is claimed that the Eritrean government has leased the Assab base to the UAE for 30 years for military base activities. Eritrean government, however, denied claims about the lease of Assab base to the UAE.⁴⁰ Despite the announcements of Eritrean government, Abu Dhabi began building the base in September 2015.⁴¹ The facility was made ready for use in a short period of time, being the first military base of the UAE abroad.⁴² The base centered on the unused runway and other facilities of the Assab Airport. Existing buildings there were transformed into units that could host military personnel. The port was also expanded to allow bigger military vessels and submarines to dock.⁴³ It has been announced that the Assab base is being used for both naval and air forces and serves as a new front in the battle against the Houthis in Yemen.⁴⁴ The base will also host Emirati training activities for Eritrean military personnel.⁴⁵

From 2016 onwards, the UAE air force began to use the Assab military base intensively. The naval base also began to host the vessels of the UAE and other coalition forces.⁴⁶ International observers shared satellite images of the work on the Assab base and identified aircraft such as Apache helicopters, Mirage war jets, C-130 Hercules aircraft and C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft deployed in Assab.⁴⁷

The military base in Eritrea is important for the Abu Dhabi administration in several respects, the first being related to the war in Yemen. It is believed that the Gulf of Aden plays a crucial role in the shipment of Iranian weaponry to Houthi forces in Yemen. With the establishment of the Assab base, the UAE plans to prevent Iranian activities in the Gulf of Aden.⁴⁸

Another reason for the UAE's interest in establishing a military base in Eritrea is its rivalry with Qatar. Doha had developed a close relationship with Eritrea and

had made huge investments in the country, especially during the 2000s. Qatar had also been financially supporting the Eritrean government. Having played a mediating role in the border dispute process between Eritrea and Djibouti, Qatar has sought to be an important actor in the region. However, the difficulties faced by the mediation mechanism in this process caused tension in the relations between Eritrea and Qatar. The Emirati leadership seized the opportunity to establish close relations with the Eritrean government; the UAE's rise in Eritrean politics was therefore meant to reduce the influence of Qatar in the region.

Conclusion: The Future of the UAE's Policy of Establishing Military Bases

The United Arab Emirates started to pursue an active foreign policy with the Arab revolutions that started in Tunisia in December 2010, taking a bold stance against the transformations in the region. The UAE supported the military coup in Egypt in 2013 and became involved in conflicts like Libya and Yemen. The main reason for this support was the UAE's interest in maintaining the status quo in regional politics. In order to reach that goal, the Emirati leadership tried all possible means. This attitude of the Emirates has had repercussions both at the political and social level. It can be argued that by siding with the autocratic and oppressive regimes in the Middle East, the UAE may have alienated the public in the Arab world. Personal observations and social media responses are the main sources for this claim, as there is a lack of credible studies on the image of the UAE in the Arab world. Groups and organizations that have popular support in the Arab world view the UAE as an actor that does more harm than good for the Arab nations. Therefore, there is a question of the credibility of the Emirati regime in the eyes of the Arab public. A similar dynamic can be seen at the political level as well. By supporting authoritarian regimes, the UAE is considered as a non-democratic and unreliable actor by the leading powers of the region such as Turkey, Iran and Qatar. Despite these negative attitudes, the Emirati leadership has continued its policy of guardianship of the status quo in the region.

While supporting groups that represent the status quo in the Middle East, the UAE has followed an active foreign policy in order to help establish itself as a strong strategic actor in the region and its wider neighborhood. To this end, apart from employing instruments such as loans, credits, humanitarian aid, media and international pressure groups, the Emirati leadership has also utilized means that are considered hard power instruments. The main instrument in this regard is the establishment of military bases in strategic places around the Middle East. The UAE has established five military bases in the past couple of years. These bases are located in Yemen's Socotra and Perim islands, the Somaliland and Puntland regions of Somalia and the port city of Eritrea, Assab.

It can be argued that there are five major motivations for the Emirati leadership to establish the military bases in the Horn of Africa region. First, the UAE aims to become an influential player in regional politics. The increasing military presence of the Emirati army will give the UAE the necessary power to play the role of a regional actor. By establishing the military bases in the region, the Emirati leadership also aims to fight against the Houthi threat in Yemen. The second motivation is the UAE's willingness to successfully confront the security threats in the region. One of the main threats to Emirati interests in the region is the presence of armed, violent actors such as the Houthis, al-Qaeda and ISIS.



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Another motivation for the UAE is to secure an international trade route that is vital for the transfer of the Gulf's oil and gas, particularly to Western markets. By establishing bases around the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the UAE aims to become a strategic regional player by ensuring safe passage for the energy supply from the Middle East to the world. The UAE, which produces two million barrels of oil per day, aims to maintain its export level by establishing a secure environment in the region.

Protecting the interests of its regional and international allies is another reason for the Emirati leadership to increase its military activities. During the past couple of years, the relationship between the UAE and global actors such as the U.S., the UK and Israel have deepened. The cooperation between these actors has spread to areas such as security and defense. Therefore, the Emirati military presence in the region also serves the interests of the countries that have close relations with Abu Dhabi.

Finally, regional political rivalries have been also an important factor motivating the UAE to increase its military activities in the region. There are three major rivals for Abu Dhabi: Turkey, Qatar and Iran. The Emirates consider Iran as one of the main threats to its regional ambitions, while Abu Dhabi competes with Turkey and Qatar for power. By establishing new military bases in the region, the Emirati government aims to establish long-running security cooperation in order to prevail over the ambitions of its political opponents.

Despite the visible success in the UAE's policy of establishing military bases and increasing its influence in the region, the Emirati leadership also faces challenges from regional and international actors. First of all, there are a number of disagreements between the Emirati and Saudi leadership, which cause uncertainty in their alliance. Although they act together in many regional is-

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sues for the sake of common interest, the two Gulf States have differing agendas. This is particularly evident in the case of Yemen. Therefore, there is a high likelihood of a clash in the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Secondly, regional actors have challenged the Emirati policy of expansion in the region. Countries like Turkey, Qatar, Iran and Ethiopia have responded to the Emirati policies through different mechanisms such as financial assistance, investment and human-

itarian aid. Turkey has established a military base in Somalia and plans to establish a base on the Sudanese island of Sawakin.

The third challenge of the Emirati government is the local reaction against the military bases. Countries and local populations in these regions are concerned about Abu Dhabi's motivations for establishing these military bases. Although the Emirati leadership can provide financial assistance to the people of these regions, it cannot prevent negative perceptions of the bases. Therefore, the Emirati leadership faces difficulty in confronting the negative public reaction against its military activities. Considering these challenges, it is not clear whether the policy of opening military bases will successfully fulfill the foreign policy objectives of the UAE. ■

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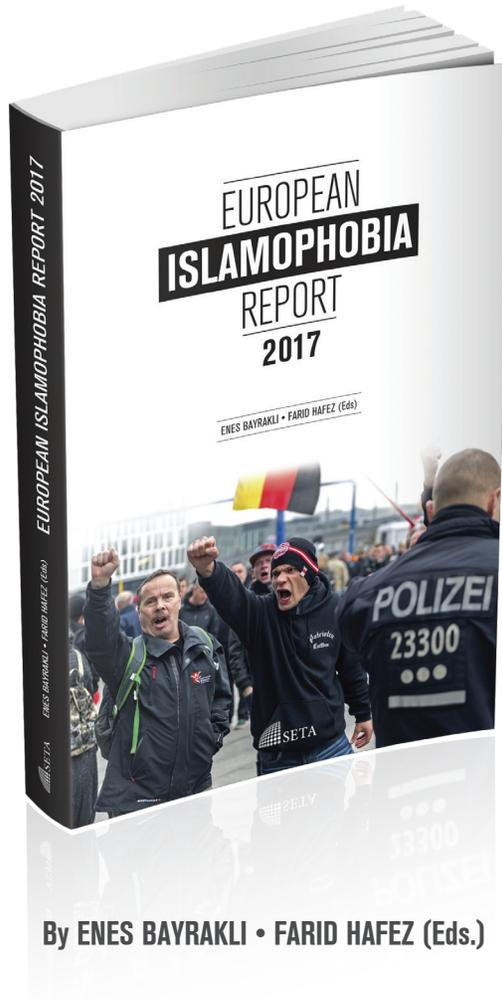
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EUROPEAN ISLAMOPHOBIA REPORT 2017



By ENES BAYRAKLI • FARID HAFEZ (Eds.)

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