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THE ROLE OF UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IN PALESTINIAN DEVELOPMENT

FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE AND POTENTIAL FOR PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT¹

ABSTRACT Drawing upon the foreign policy change theoretical framework, the article discusses potentialities for the United Arab Emirates pragmatic involvement in the (re)construction of the Gaza Strip after the war initiated in October 2023 by Hamas, and more broadly, in possible future Palestinian state- and nation-building. It analyses relevant Emirati internal reforms, foreign policy evolution, history of relations with the Palestinians, including regional context and development aid, as well as Emirati war-time agency. The findings relate the change of Emirati foreign policy to the renewal of its leadership and regional developments, yet without a redefinition of its fundamental goals. Said change involves a regionalisation effort meant at promoting stability, cooperation and peace within the nation-states' based system, including the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: development cooperation, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, regional integration, state- and nation-building, United Arab Emirates

¹ The initial assumptions of the research outline were presented by the author on 01 March 2024 at Gdańsk University during the first Middle East Congress, with the author's participation cofinanced by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Poland subvention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hamas's 07 October 2023 terrorist offensive and the ensuing war created a disruption rendering return to the *status quo* impossible. Yet, prospects for the two-state solution remained murky, depending on: political changes in Israel; a fundamental reform of the Palestinian Authority (PA); and continued involvement of the international community. Attitude of moderate Arab states emerged as a potentially decisive factor; they were encouraged to and eventually declared their willingness to engage in post-conflict Gaza Strip and Palestinian state-building overall. In the process, Egypt and Saudi Arabia emerged as the leaders of the Arab states coordinating preparation of a joint Arab proposal for the Gaza Strip's 'day after'.

This article's starting point are the following observations:

- On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the forces most strongly opposing a peaceful two-state solution are those motivated by religion understood in an extremist way. This is contrary to internal and foreign policy interests of the moderate Arab states, pursuing policies of de-radicalisation of religious messages internally and inter-religious dialogue in external relations, necessitating their interest and involvement.
- One of the motivations of the Arab states in normalising relations with Israel was the desire to increase own influence on the Palestinian cause in the context of tensions in relations with the PA. The war did not stop the normalisation, yet enforced the linkage between it and the Palestinian cause. Arab Gulf states formulated clear conditions for their participation in Gaza rehabilitation, addressed both to Israel and the Palestinians and meant for a durable two-states solution, guaranteeing long-term return of political and financial investments.²
- Regional reconciliation is fragile, and the *detente* did not prevent Iran and its violent Islamist allies from taking over and instrumentalising the Palestinian issue. This counters the interests of the Palestinian people, the two-state solution, internal political stability and external security of moderate Arab states. Involvement of Iranian proxies Hizballah and Houthi, Iranian propaganda championing Palestinian terrorism (at the expense of more moderate forces) and lastly direct Iranian attacks on Israel trigger them to act.

Possible increased engagement in Palestinian cause can thus be seen as a part of the process of Arab states increasing responsibility-taking and proactiveness, in the era characterised by focus on nascent regional cooperation as a necessity for sustainable development.

1.1. Research field conceptualisation

This article concentrates on the evolution of moderate Arab states' attitudes towards the Palestinian issue in the context of post-Arab Spring regional cooperation processes and is concerned with the following questions:

² T. Lazaroff, "Blinken: Arabs Won't fund Gaza Rebuilding without Path to Palestine Statehood," *Jerusalem Post*, 16 January 2024, at <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-782467>, 27 September 2025.

- What are the manifestations of pragmatic commitment of the Arab states to the Palestinian cause (understood as a desire for a two-state solution)?
- Under what circumstances did this engagement increase and decrease?
- How do they determine and condition the need for such involvement?

The following assumptions are conjectured:

- Moderate Arab states' policy towards the Palestinian issue is determined by regional thinking based on interlinked: acceptance of an existing states system, including Israel; a desire to strengthen own national states; and a search for a durable solution to the Palestinian problem.
- The conditions for pragmatic Arab engagement in Palestinian state- and nation-building are: viability of two-state solution; diplomatic involvement of the US and the EU; reforms of the PA towards greater legitimacy and effectiveness; elimination, sidelining or de-radicalisation of Islamists.

This article focuses on actual Gulf states' capabilities to pragmatically and effectively engage in possible future Palestinian state- and nation-building. It concentrates on the case study of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) foreign policy towards the Palestinian issue. The main focus is the foreign policy change process. While tracing the reasons, mechanics and contents of this change, answers to the following additional questions are sought:

- Is there a change in UAE's foreign policy and is it durable or incidental?
- What are UAE's capabilities of actual contribution to Palestinian state- and nation-building?

UAE is chosen as a case study as a regional champion of internal reforms and its related activist turn in foreign policy.

1.2. Plan, methodology and sources

While using case study process-tracking methodology, the research applies a state-centred perspective, pertaining to the phenomenon of 'foreign policy change' and focus on national interest, international cooperation, economic development and regionalisation. It is of an inductive nature, aiming at formulating hypotheses based on empirical findings. The issue of actual Emirati aid to the Palestinians remains under-researched in particular, thus the article aims to contribute by shedding some light on it, despite source limitations.

The article recounts existing literature (*Literature Review*) on foreign policy change processes, UAE's reforms and historical approach towards the Palestinian issue. The article's main body (the *Discussion*) bases on contemporary think-tanks' analyses, press materials and official documents. It tackles three issues: UAE's Palestinian policy as compared to the Arab mainstream; potentialities emerging from the UAE's foreign policy change related to prospective engagement in Palestinian state- and nation-building; and the post-October 7 Emirati policy regarding the issue. Findings, as drawn from *Discussion*, are presented in *Conclusions*.

Bearing that the years of Hamas rule brought the Gaza Strip to the state of economic and social disorder already before the October 7 war, the author proposes to

refer to the 'day after' efforts as '(re)construction'; simple 'reconstruction' would not suffice nor be desired.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Foreign policy change – conceptualization

The waning of the Cold War contributed to theoretical reflection on the processes of foreign policy change.³ Hermann's⁴ decision-making model accentuated four 'change agents': leaders; bureaucracy; domestic restructuring; and external shock. It proposed a scale of possible changes, ranging from a quantitative adjustment; through a qualitative change of methods and means of achieving the goal; to a change in definition of a problem and a goal; up to a change in international orientation as such. Of importance is the category of *learning*, in particular in the context of *failure* in solving 'complex, ill-defined problems'.⁵ Gustavsson,⁶ argued that analyses *should focus on the simultaneous occurrence of changes in fundamental structural conditions, strategic political leadership, and the presence of a crisis*. The decision-maker perceiving the external or internal environment fluctuations and working institutionally to respond was at the centre of the model emphasising *the importance of political agency and crisis situations, drawing on insights generated from domestic reform politics*.⁷ Both Gustavsson⁸ and Eidenfalk⁹ refer back to R. Kingdon's 1984 work *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (Boston: Little Brown) underlining the dynamic leaderships' ability for initiating change through creating and using '*windows of opportunity*'. This ability depends on the leader's predispositions: beliefs, motives, decision style, interpersonal style, interest and training in foreign affairs and is closely connected to decision-making externalities.

2.2. Regional cooperation in the Middle East

The Middle East was often called a 'region without regionalisation': despite a high level of 'region-ness' (commonalities of language, culture, religion, high density of social linkages); irrespective of global processes, inspiring regionalisation elsewhere; and

³ J. Eidenfalk, "Towards a New Model of Foreign Policy Change," *Australasian Political Studies Association Annual Conference*, Newcastle 2006, p. 1, at <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uow.27801798.v1>, 27 September 2025.

⁴ C. Hermann, "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1990), pp. 3, 5, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ J. Gustavsson, "How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?," *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1999), p. 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-86.

⁹ J. Eidenfalk, "Towards a New Model of Foreign Policy Change"..., p. 7.

despite external powers' encouragement – no institutionalised and effective regional co-operation emerged.¹⁰ Academic literature is dominated by studies describing the region as an anomaly, where even imagining regionalisation is 'utopian'.¹¹ The League of Arab States (LAS) was not meant for integration, but rather sustenance of existing states and ruling elites.¹² Since the LAS associated the notion of cooperation with pan-Arabism which assumed liquidation of the existing states' structures, it created a conceptual stumbling block precluding regionalisation. Furthermore, actual conflicts and tensions between monarchies and republics, pro-Soviet and pro-Western countries, animosities regarding borders and international and internal controversies surrounding ethnic and religious minorities deepened the gap between rhetoric of Arab unity and reality. Pan-Arabism, as an identity discourse, proved more divisive than conducive to cooperation. Its demise allowed for creation of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), a more effective, subregional institutional framework centred on a *rather pragmatic understanding of 'Arabness'*.¹³

The post-Arab Spring literature notes the region started to self-organise, though not within the existing institutions, as the LAS proved too diversified while the GCC suffered from own internal tensions. Del Sarto and Soler i Lecha¹⁴ and Grabowski (2020)¹⁵ found that the post-Arab Spring effort to mobilise these institutions failed to produce significant regional cooperation. Friedman¹⁶ argued that Middle Eastern regionalism shall be evaluated *by the functional integration it produces rather than the institutions it proliferates*. Instead of co-operation within existing structures, this regionalism crystallised as a varied geography of alignments of states. Middle Eastern regionalisation could thus be understood as Farrell's¹⁷ 'new regionalism': *a reaction to the diverse aspects of global processes, following from the internal dynamics of the region, and the motivations and strategies of regional actors*, and taking different forms in different regions. Fragmentation was superseded by reconciliations: of Qatar with the rest of the GCC; Turkey with Arab Sunni states; Turkey and Arab Sunni states with Israel. The new regional

¹⁰ M. Valbjørn, "North Africa and the Middle East", in T. Börzel, T. Risse (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford 2016, pp. 249-270.

¹¹ S. Lindholm, M. Schulz, "The Middle East: Regional Instability and Fragmentation", in M. Farrell, H. Björn, L. Langenhove, *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*, London 2005, pp. 187-201.

¹² M. Valbjørn, "North Africa and the Middle East...", p. 253.

¹³ C. Harders, M. Legrenzi, "Introduction", in C. Harders, M. Legrenzi (eds), *Beyond Regionalism? Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East*, Berlin–Ottawa 2008, p. 9.

¹⁴ R.A. Del Sarto, E. Soler i Lecha, "The Mirage Of Regionalism In The Middle East And North Africa Post-2011," *MENARA Working Papers*, no. 18 (2018), p. 2, at https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_18.pdf, 19 October 2025.

¹⁵ W. Grabowski W., "Political Regime Type and Regional Cooperation – a Case Study of Arab States," *Przegląd Strategiczny*, vol. 13 (2020), pp. 199-213.

¹⁶ B. Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Reluctant Regionalism," *ORBIS*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2023), p. 170.

¹⁷ M. Farrell, "The Global Politics of Regionalism: An Introduction," in M. Farrell, B. Hettne, L. Langenhove, *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*, London 2005, p. 2.

co-operation groupings and projects included infrastructural investments, such as electricity interconnectors. New institutional forms emerged, including East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the Red Sea Council. As predicted by del Sarto and Soler i Lecha,¹⁸ bilateral relations deepened (ie. Egypt with UAE, Saudi Arabia or Jordan) and new regional powers emerged (UAE).

As for the UAE, lessons learned from own state-building and GCC – initiated largely due to Iranian threat, yet developed exponentially in economic terms – seem to inform approach towards regionalisation. According to Hedges,¹⁹ the UAE *saw the Arab Spring as a prime opportunity to increase its influence and construct new narratives about itself in the region*. The Emirates' focus on countering terrorism, visible since 2001, was enhanced; the creation of Hedayah Countering Violent Extremism Centre, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, the Sawab Centre *to counter Daesh propaganda and discourse* followed. Libya (UAE as part of NATO's Unified Protector Operation), Somalia (use of private military contractors to counter pirates' activities) and Yemen (countering the Huthi rebellion, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) were the primary arenas of UAE's engagement.²⁰ The Emirates also helped to stem Bahraini riots in 2011.

2.3. UAE internal and foreign policy reforms

Hellyer²¹ proclaimed UAE foreign policy as admired for its consistency (*in style and substance*) throughout three decades under President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan. Strategic location and hydrocarbons-related wealth accompanied by lack of other resources and small population were the objective baseline conditions. Foreign policy aims followed: a struggle for security and stability, and good regional relations (within GCC in particular); cementing the Arab-Muslim identity; and developing economic cooperation with the West. As for policy instruments, Hellyer²² underlined a general tendency towards restraint in words and action, while noting certain activism: political, humanitarian and military engagement in peacekeeping in Somalia and former Yugoslavia (Bosnia, Kosovo). While religious extremism did not take root in the UAE, the Emirates supported Arab states endangered by Islamic terrorism. Hellyer²³ also highlighted humanitarian motives and the importance of the UAE's tensions with Iran, including over three islands occupied by it.

¹⁸ R.A. Del Sarto, E. Soler i Lecha, "The Mirage Of Regionalism...", pp. 10, 14.

¹⁹ M. Hedges, "Small State Security Engagement in Post-Arab Spring MENA: The Case of The United Arab Emirates," *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2021), p. 412.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ P. Hellyer, "The Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy," in I. Al Abed, P. Hellyer, *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*, Bookcraft 2001, pp. 161-178.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

2.3.1 Internal change

Vast literature on the UAE's internal policy changes identifies three dominant issues: education – organisation and curriculum; public administration – management and governance; and interlinked economic reform. They aim at a new, globally competitive economic model, in which well-trained citizens (opposite to foreign workers) find productive jobs. 'Modernised' and 'neoliberal' are oft-used adjectives. References to the Arab Spring and change of leadership, with new-generation leader Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan taking over effectively in 2014, are frequent, even if reform processes often started earlier.

Examples include Khalid and Sarker²⁴ who discussed Emirati experiences in boosting innovation in public management, incentivised by: 2008 global financial crises; the desire for a more globally competitive economy; the need to tackle bureaucracy, enhanced service quality and the application of new technologies. The result is improved governance, citizen satisfaction and an administration enabling economic development. Sarker et al.²⁵ highlighted the *UAE government's strong commitment to reforms, as well as its ability to implement those reforms effectively*, with political leadership instrumental in implementing public management changes. The model of this *development-focused clientelist state* is, according to authors, exportable to other countries.

Junaibi²⁶ discussed a knowledge-based economy as among the principles of the UAE Vision 2021. Diversification of economy, educational reform and youth's work-related expectations were researched by Cairns and Dickson.²⁷ Resilience prospects in the context of the oil-price fluctuation were dealt with by Mahmah and Kandil.²⁸ Krzymowski²⁹ analysed Emirati social and economic, including urban, ecological and cultural developmental programmes in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The research testified to a high level of ambition matched by achievements in terms of modern technologies and innovation in government; education; transport; health; climate. Siddiqui and Afzal³⁰ found certain deficiencies

²⁴ S. Khalid, A.E. Sarker, "Public Management Innovations in the United Arab Emirates: Rationales, Trends and Outcomes," *Asian Education and Development Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2019), pp. 405-415.

²⁵ E. Sarker, T. Ahmad, A. Syed, I. Rezaul, "Uncovering the Interplay between Political Will, Public Management Reforms, and Outcomes: A Study of the United Arab Emirates," *Administrative Science Management Public*, no. 40 (2023), pp. 58.

²⁶ J. Junaibi, "Knowledge Economy and the Global Islamic Economic Indicators in the United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 17 (2018), pp. 7309-7312.

²⁷ D. Cairns, M. Dickson, "Exploring the Relations of Gender, Science Dispositions and Science Achievement on STEM Career Aspirations for Adolescents in Public Schools in the UAE," *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2021), pp. 153-165.

²⁸ A. Mahmah, M. Kandil, "The Balance between Fiscal Consolidation and Non-Oil Growth: The Case of the UAE," *Borsa Istanbul Review*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2019), pp. 77-93.

²⁹ A. Krzymowski, "Sustainable Development Goals in Arab Region – United Arab Emirates' Case Study," *Problemy Ekorozwoju*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2020), pp. 211-220.

³⁰ S. Siddiqui, M. Afzal, "Sectoral Diversification of UAE toward a Knowledge-Based Economy," *Review of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2022), pp. 177-193.

in the sectoral diversification of the UAE towards a knowledge-based economy in terms of knowledge production in higher education and research institutions. Shadab³¹ proved the nexus *between export diversification, physical and human capital, imports, and economic growth in the UAE*. Aminjonov (2021:2400) demonstrated strong resolve behind Emirati energy transition, motivated by manifold environmental, economic and geopolitical reasons, including the desire for independence from imported Qatari gas and willingness to become a technological leader in sustainability. Bridging economy and societal affairs, Mason (2018:105)³² wrote how *the UAE clearly recognizes that young talent is important in the post-Arab Spring environment. Giving youth a seat at the decision-making table reflects a concern about their possible disenfranchisement and attraction to other political groups such as AlIslah, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood*.

Litz and Blaik³³ analysed Emirati education reforms, which *promoted bilingual (English/Arabic) and imported curricula, the modernization of school systems, privatization, standardization, accountability, school choice, and assessment reform*, bringing mixed results, in particular, reproduction of inequalities. El Shishtawy and Ozgen³⁴ discussed education reform (*a vigorous social-engineering project*) in the context of economic diversification, boosting productiveness, private sector employment and promotion of entrepreneurship, and tackling 'rentier mentality'.

Additionally, Ozgen and el Shishtawy³⁵ studied in detail the UAE's religious education contents, finding that *it promotes loyalty rather than radicalism (...) is used as a pedagogic tool by the state to advance national interpretations of Islam in support of domestic and international policy objectives*. With efforts to restrict Islamist influences since the 1990s, a strong linkage was made between the education sector, state-building and -legitimation. Following the 9/11 attacks, 2002, 2011 and 2016 saw curriculum overhauls eliminating intolerant contents and balancing local traditions and modernisation. Teaching materials define adherence to Islam through *moderation, tolerance and positivity*.³⁶ Furthermore, *The Emirati national identity forged through the textbooks is a composite one that is rooted in a primordial Arabo-Islamic past and a modern progressive*

³¹ S. Shadab, "The Nexus between Export Diversification, Imports, Capital and Economic Growth in the United Arab Emirates: An Empirical Investigation," *Cogent Economics and Finance*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2021), p. 1.

³² R. Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification? The Broadening Influence of United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy through Effective Military and Bandwagoning Strategies," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2018), p. 105.

³³ D. Litz D., R. Blaik, "Incongruencies and Detrimental Effects of Neoliberal Education Reform in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)," *International Journal for Leadership in Learning*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2023), p. 237.

³⁴ H. El Shishtawy, I. Sharif, Z. Ozgen, "Working for God (and Country): Religious Education and Economic Diversification in the United Arab Emirates," *Gulf Studies*, vol. 8 (2023), pp. 383-396.

³⁵ Z. Ozgen, H. El Shishtawy, "Meaning of a Textbook: Religious Education, National Islam, and the Politics of Reform in the United Arab Emirates," *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2021), p. 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

*future*³⁷ of development, productivity and science. One textbook was cited as saying *intolerance and extremism (...) transforms man into an enemy of his homeland, society and relatives ... Muslims have experienced in the hands of extremists the most heinous of crimes – terrorism, murders, violation of honour, looting, diffusion of ignorance, chaos and destruction*.³⁸

Last but not least Samaan³⁹ analysed the UAE national security sector reform, highlighting that the process is highly dependent on foreign expertise and cements sectors' ties to the Western counterparts. Shadab⁴⁰ concludes that *the UAE serves as a successful model of economic diversification, becoming one of the largest financial, business, and tourist hubs in the world and has also managed to emerge as the fastest growing investment destination in the Middle East*.⁴¹

2.3.2. Evolution of foreign policy

Impacts of Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan's rise to power and of the Arab Spring are also recognised by literature dealing with the UAE's foreign policy. Mason⁴² explained how this small state became a regional power, struggling for stability against existential threats of Iran and radical Islam. Fulfilment of the UAE's aims vis-à-vis these threats, in particular challenges stemming from Qatar and Yemen, were aided by political and military cooperation with the US and Saudi Arabia. The author underlined how radical Islam is on a collision course with the Emirati state's foundations and legitimacy, as it *does not recognize secularism, tribal dominance (including patronage networks that co-opt) or good governance practices*.⁴³ The UAE's foreign policy instruments included the development of security industry, the projection of military power, and targeted foreign aid. Dogan-Akkas⁴⁴ focused on engagement in Yemeni civil war (against Houthi rebellion) as a manifestation of foreign hyper-activity while Juneau⁴⁵ explained it through regional factors, underlining the fear of the Muslim Brotherhood and the change of leadership. Both attached importance to the close relationship between Emirati and Saudi rulers. Juneau⁴⁶ furthermore accentuated the uncertainty regarding the

³⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁹ J.L. Samaan, "Indigenous Military Reforms from the Outside: The Paradox of the UAE Armed Forces Modernisation," *Defence Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2024), pp. 65-83.

⁴⁰ S. Shadab, "The New Arab Gulf: Evaluating the Success of Economic Diversification in the UAE," *Gulf Studies*, vol. 8 (2023), p. 414.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 422.

⁴² R. Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification?...", pp. 96-109.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 100.

⁴⁴ B. Dogan-Akkas, "The UAE's Foreign Policymaking in Yemen: From Bandwagoning to Buck-Passing," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2021), pp. 717-735.

⁴⁵ T. Juneau, "The UAE and the War in Yemen: From Surge to Recalibration," *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2020), pp. 183-208.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

commitment and quality of the American presence among factors activating Emirati foreign policy. Yet, the Emiratis downscaled participation as the situation in Yemen proved difficult to solve while the military and diplomatic costs mounted, endangering the UAE's internal stability. Additional literature compared Emirati and Saudi policies in Yemen and showed how health diplomacy furthered Emirati international status during COVID-19 pandemic.

Another example of the UAE's proactive regional policy is the normalisation process with Israel. Authors located the shift within Emirati mixed neorealist and neo-liberal foreign policy, with a tendency to prefer the latter, focusing on soft power cooperation in the quest for realising *internal interests of status, stability, and empowerment*.⁴⁷ Thus, normalisation was a part of the foreign policy reform initiated by the new rulers, Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, begun in 2004, and had less to do with tackling the shared threat of Iran than with pursuit of a new vision of a region and most importantly, the UAE's place within it. The same authors' analyses of UAE's representatives' UN speeches showed how concern over the Iranian threat, regional conflicts and Islamic terrorism was coupled with such issues as UAE foreign aid, development, climate change, international systems reform; and eventually also a vision for peace among Abrahamic religions coupled with regional economic and technological cooperation as well as tolerance, stability and peace. This was bridged by the enhancement of Christian and Jewish religious rights in the UAE.

2.4. UAE's capacities for external agency: developmental cooperation

Gulf states are recognised donors since the rise of their oil wealth. The UAE launched an aid cooperation programme upon its 1971 independence, with the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development established to finance strategic infrastructure projects across the world. Researchers characterised it as disproportionately focused on Arab and Muslim states; unconditional; untied to trade; and untransparent.⁴⁸ Shushan and Marcoux⁴⁹ characterised the 1978-87 Emirati aid as largely devoted to governmental administration and civil society, therefore distinguishing itself from other Gulf donors concentrated on transport/storage; energy; and water/sanitation.

Contemporarily, literature shows the UAE as among the top world donors quantitatively and qualitatively. Increased transparency allowed researchers to tap in. Young⁵⁰

⁴⁷ D. Traub, R. Cohen, C. Kertcher, "The Road to Normalization: The Importance of the United Arab Emirates' Neoliberal Foreign Policy in the Normalization with Israel: 2004-2020," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2021), p. 60.

⁴⁸ E. Neumayer, "Arab-Related Bilateral and Multilateral Sources of Development Finance: Issues, Trends, and the Way Forward," *World Economy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2004), pp. 281-300.

⁴⁹ D. Shushan, C. Marcoux, "The Rise (and Decline?) of Arab Aid: Generosity and Allocation in the Oil Era," *World Development*, vol. 39, no. 11 (2011), p. 1976.

⁵⁰ K. Young, "A New Politics of GCC Economic Statecraft: The Case of UAE Aid and Financial Intervention in Egypt," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2017), pp. 113-136.

detailed Emirati aid to Egypt, underlining the policy aim of *advancing the twin goals of state-led capitalism and a regional vision of secular Arab leadership* as well as the importance of *linking Emirati domestic economic interests and security interests, particularly on counter-terrorism and weakening extremist ideologies*⁵¹ represented in Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood. In the author's view, the UAE *sees a developmental strategy in its own success of state-led capitalism, fueled by real-estate projects and centered on a political orientation that is informed by Islam, but secular in presentation*.⁵² In addition, the UAE's aid seeks a return on investment (mutual economic benefit, typical for South-South developmental cooperation) as well as international prestige. Mason⁵³ called foreign aid a *cornerstone of UAE foreign policy* and the prime source of its soft power. Almezaini⁵⁴ analysed the UAE's decision to embed its aid in broader South-South cooperation framework, expanding activities beyond the traditional Arab/Muslim recipients and highlighting extensive communication and recipient's self-reliance. This was associated with the creation of new national aid coordination bodies.

Almatrooshi,⁵⁵ in turn, highlighted Islamic values of *cooperation, solidarity and hospitality* alongside Bedouin traditions as those underlying aid effort. The article also contextualised aid through the UAE's foreign policy assumptions such as respect for international law and principles of non-interference, but also the firm stance *against extremism and terrorism in all its manifestations and (...) promotion of compassion, tolerance and inclusion*.⁵⁶ It presented linkages between aid and national development strategies, statistical data and institutional structures such as the multiannual international aid plans adopted since 2016. Of particular note, importance of technical cooperation alongside financial assistance is underlined: *In developing the country, the government and people of the UAE have accumulated a wealth knowledge and expertise that could be valuable for other developing nations as they aim to grow and prosper*.⁵⁷

Cochrane⁵⁸ studied Emirati aid as South-South cooperation, focusing on the largest recipients Egypt, Yemen and Serbia. In the statistics presented, 7 recipient nations are mentioned, none of them 'Palestine', plus an 'other' category. In Egypt and Yemen, the fact that *rather than being responsive to unrest per se, the UAE acted upon specific windows of opportunity to stabilize ideologically allied governments*⁵⁹ is noted.

⁵¹ Ibid., 113.

⁵² Ibid., 116.

⁵³ R. Mason, "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification?...", p. 106.

⁵⁴ K. Almezaini, "Implementing Global Strategy in the UAE Foreign Aid: from Arab Solidarity to South – South Cooperation," *Vestnik International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2018), pp. 579-594.

⁵⁵ B. Almatrooshi, "The UAE's Foreign Assistance Policy and Its Contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals," *Open Journal of Political Science*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2019), p. 671.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 672.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ L. Cochrane, "The United Arab Emirates as a Global Donor: What a Decade of Foreign Aid Data Transparency Reveals," *Development Studies Research*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2021), pp. 49-62.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

Krzymowski⁶⁰ located Emirati aid as part of the 2017 Soft Power Strategy and nation branding efforts. While providing a detailed historical background, this author contextualised the rise of Emirati aid through an overall shift in the UAE's international environment triggered by the external events of 2001 (9/11) and 2011 (Arab Spring – with Egypt, Yemen and Syria among the largest recipients in the following years). Of note, in 2013, the Ministry of International Cooperation and Development was created and headed by a woman (as noted by Cochrane,⁶¹ Emirati Official Development Aid rose by 600% that year alone). Furthermore, one of the UAE's Foreign Aid Policy 2017–2021 goals is a region characterised by stability, peace, and prosperity. Lastly, Alkhaldi et al.⁶² documented the UAE's leadership in the fields of health and climate change assistance. Many authors acknowledged Palestinians as among the top recipients of this aid. No concrete information was published, however, and statistical data provided by Krzymowski⁶³ did not position 'Palestine' among the largest beneficiaries.

2.5. UAE and the Palestinian issue

Hellyer⁶⁴ highlight that the UAE was not part of repeated wars launched by Arab states aiming to annihilate Israel, however, it initiated the 1973 oil embargo on nations trading with Israel and provided vast aid to the emerging Palestinian movement and Arab states encircling Israel. The UAE followed the Arab consensus regarding the issue, including support for the Madrid conference and Oslo peace process. In the 1990s it distanced itself however from Qatar's and Oman's cautious steps towards reconciliation with Israel.

As showed by Podeh,⁶⁵ the Emirates remained on the sidelines of peace negotiations, which were primarily bilateral (Israeli-Palestinian), with regional dimension initially concentrated on the Levantine neighbourhood (the Madrid process) and then limited to occasional participation of Egypt, Jordan or Saudi Arabia. Mason⁶⁶ underlined the role that Hamas victories at the Palestinian arena played in building up the UAE's weariness of Islamists movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (followed by revolution in Egypt in 2012).

⁶⁰ A. Krzymowski, "Role and Significance of the United Arab Emirates Foreign Aid for Its Soft Power Strategy and Sustainable Development Goals," *Social Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 48 (2022), pp. 1-18.

⁶¹ L. Cochrane, "The United Arab Emirates as a Global Donor...", p. 60.

⁶² M. Alkhaldi, I. Azaad, I. Ghach, T. Sahar, W. Okasha, M. Albada, C. Ahmad, A. Takshe, "Analysis of the United Arab Emirates' Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals with a Focus on Global Health and Climate Change," *International Journal of Health Governance*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2023), pp. 357-367.

⁶³ A. Krzymowski, "Role and Significance of the United Arab Emirates Foreign Aid...", p. 13.

⁶⁴ P. Hellyer, "The Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy...", pp. 163, 172-173.

⁶⁵ E. Podeh, *Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Texas 2015.

⁶⁶ R. Mason R., "Breaking the Mold of Small State Classification?...", p. 99.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. General remarks

The UAE's independence (1971) came at a particular moment relative to the Palestinian issue, following two Israeli-Arab wars (1948, 1967) and in a wake of the third one (1973). The UAE were not yet independent when other Arab states rejected the 1947 UN partition plan and subsequently (post-1948 war) pursued the 'Palestinian cause' through perpetuation of Palestinian non-citizenship, discrimination and dispossession within Arab states. The issue – defined at the time as equivalent to Israel's destruction – was instrumentalised for domestic and foreign policy purposes. This was the phase of creation of the Palestinian problem, while the ostensible Arab support was cynical in nature. Following the 1973 war, the Palestinian issue started to supersede the broader Israeli-Arab conflict in the international arena. During this consolidation phase, resulting from Israel's 1967 conquest of the Gaza Strip from Egypt and the West Bank from Jordan, and the 1973 military failure of the Arab states, Palestinian national identity solidified, challenging the pan-Arab narrative. Yet, as Karsh⁶⁷ observed, pan-Arabism still sabotaged Palestinian nationalism:

By refusing to recognize Palestinian nationalism (or for that matter any other Arab state nationalism) and insisting on its incorporation into a wider Arab framework, Arab intellectuals, rulers, and regimes disrupted the natural national development of this community. They instilled unrealistic visions, hopes, and expectations in Palestinian political circles at key junctures. The consequence has been to deny Palestinians the right to determine their own fate.

This evolved slowly. Territorial disengagement from Palestinian territories by Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1988) was coupled with eventual Arab recognition of Palestinian national rights. Still, refusal by some (the UAE not among them) to accept the Palestine Liberation Organization's decision to recognise Israel and embark on the two-state peace efforts implied a refusal to honour decisions made by the Palestinian national movement.⁶⁸ Simultaneously, support for the creation of a Palestinian state in line with the two-state solution, implied acknowledgement of Israel's existence. Thus Palestinian state-building efforts began with the 1993 Oslo process that created the PA as a nucleus for the future independent government, gradually assuming responsibility for governance over more than 90% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the limited territories they lived on. Yet the Palestinian state- and nation-building crumbled due to internally- and externally-oriented violence, corruption and incompetence of leaders, in addition to difficulties stemming from the division of territory and ongoing Israeli control – in spite of unprecedented amounts of foreign aid received. National identity suffered under the rulers' populist spin. Hamas imbued Palestinianism with *jihadist* mentality, as pan-Islamism already took over pan-Arabism as a new

⁶⁷ E. Karsh, "Why the Middle East Is So Volatile," *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2000), p. 19.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

ideology contesting nation-states in the Middle East and trying to enforce 'unity' upon the region's diversity.

Still at the height of the peace-process, the phase of the conflict's regionalisation followed, wherein a peaceful resolution of the conflict was meant to lead to the normalisation of Arab relations with Israel. Middle Eastern regionalisation efforts became associated with the Israeli-Arab peace process (the Madrid conference) and, also failing, top-down projects inspired by the European Union (Barcelona process, Union for the Mediterranean) or the US (the Greater Middle East).

Pan-Arabism faded as it did not recognise the validity of nation states, which it saw as artificial creations, while pan-Islamism was widely rejected by the states' ruling elites. Recognition of the states' identity paved the way to regional peace and cooperation. Thus, a linkage also emerged between the willingness to engage behind a creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and the individual states' efforts to consolidate own, specific nationalisms. These are based on Arab and Muslim identities, understood in ways that do not espouse territorial expansion and do not undermine the region's nation-states existence, topped with so-far suppressed historical and cultural traits that legitimise national uniqueness. Morocco ('berberism'), Jordan (unification beyond the Bedouin/Palestinian division), Egypt ('new pharaonism'), Saudi Arabia (recognition of pre-Islamic heritage) and the UAE (as shown above), are prime examples.

Otherwise, decline in Israeli-Palestinian process coincided and was interlinked with disruption of regionalisation processes in the Levant (caused *inter alia* by the fact that Western-led regionalisation efforts undermined Arab states' regimes with demands for democratisation) and the rise of pan-Islamic movements that challenged the nation states. Arab, including the UAE's, policies towards the conflict stuck to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) paradigm coupling Palestinian state creation within the 1967 borders with recognition of Israel. At the same time, some signs of 'Israelisation' phase of the Palestinian issue emerged: with peace negotiations bilateral and failing, while the region dealt with pressing concerns (economic, political and human development crises, Libyan and Syrian civil wars, expansion of ISIS), the issue seemed to be perceived at times as a largely Israeli problem. With tense relations with Palestinian rulers, moderate Arab states' support comprised mainly of speech acts. While consistent in their backing for a two-state solution, they were often critical of the Palestinian movement, disappointed with the policies employed by the PA and reluctant to invest. Financial aid was scarce, and active state-building (infrastructural investments, technical aid) almost non-existent. The Palestinian state remained a Western project, and derailed. Increased Arab cooperation with Israel since the 2010s did not amend the Arab-PA or Israel-PA dynamics. And lastly, the PA's diplomatic boycott of Israel translated into rejection of regional cooperation projects, to its own detriment.

3.2. Contemporary UAE policy

Such a boycott happened also to projects led by the UAE or with its active participation: the 2019 Manama Peace to Prosperity Workshop that outlined Arab economic

aid for the Palestinian state-building; Emirati material health aid sent to PA during the COVID pandemic; or the Project Prosperity meant to provide the Palestinians with Jordanian solar energy and Israeli desalinated water.

While pursuing regional importance and national security and economic interests, UAE's normalisation with Israel was yet still aimed at supporting the Palestinian cause, despite Emirati uneasy relationship with PA rulers and their despise for Hamas. It meant to abolish the threat of an Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank and to mobilise the PA towards more pragmatic and region-oriented thinking. Normalisation gained pace under the Israeli government headed by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid (June 2021-December 2022), with the majority of their coalition supporting the two-state solution, an Israeli Arab party in its ranks, and positive steps taken towards the PA. Equally, the progress dulled after the takeover by the extreme-right government under Benjamin Netanyahu, with its anti-two-state platform and actual policies undermining such a solution. Emirati consternation translated into public condemnations, cancellation of numerous political and pragmatic cooperation platforms, and activities as a rotating member of the UN Security Council.⁶⁹

As Zaga⁷⁰ concludes, since independence *the UAE has been endorsing the Arab League and the GCC decisions regarding Israel, has historically supported various regional peace initiatives*, in particular API, while perceiving *the resolution of the conflict as a source for regional stability and as a way to eliminate radical movements operating in the region*. Emirati hawkish approach (...) to radical Islam led to a distinction between its relations with the Fatah and its relations with Hamas. The UAE has an embassy in the PA, yet at the same time, UAE-hosted Palestinian opposition leader, Mohammed Dahlan, originating from the Gaza Strip, rose to become the UAE leadership's top advisor on Palestinian affairs. Emirati involvement in Palestinian internal politics is on the rise since 2015, seeking to *induce moderate and pragmatic politics in Gaza*.⁷¹ Yet even earlier there was a focus on the Strip and a willingness to engage there following the Israeli 2006 withdrawal.⁷²

Said Dahlan, in his February 2024 interview for New York Times, discussed the *no Abbas, no Hamas* principle for a post-war Gaza, indicating demand for a renewed PA; and the possibility the UAE would not only provide (re)construction and development aid, but also send troops to help maintain security in the Gaza Strip, if invited by the PA.⁷³

⁶⁹ G. Murciano, "Leveraging Friction: Using Israel's Tensions with Normalization Countries to Engage Them in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking," *MITVIM Policy Paper*, April 2023, at <https://mitvim.org.il/en/publication/leveraging-friction-using-the-israeli-governments-tensions-with-normalization-countries-to-engage-them-in-israeli-palestinian-peacemaking/>, 27 September 2025.

⁷⁰ M. Zaga, "Israel and the United Arab Emirates: The Axis of Precedents," in R. Kibrik, N. Goren, M. Kahana-Dagan, *Israel's Relations with Arab Countries: The Unfulfilled Potential*, 2021, p. 75, at <https://mitvim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Israels-Relations-with-Arab-Countries-The-Unfulfilled-Potential-January-2021-Eng.pdf>, 27 September 2025.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁷² B. Ravid, *Trump's Peace: The Abraham Accords And The Reshaping Of The Middle East*, [n.d.] 2023, p. 180.

⁷³ A. Rasgon, P. Kinsley, "A Palestinian Exile Champions an Arab Vision for Gaza," *New York Times*, 14 February 2024, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/14/world/middleeast/mohammed-dahlan-interview-gaza-uae.html>, 27 September 2025.

At the same time, the UAE joined and at times even initiated bottom-up regionalisation, participating actively in GCC, the Red Sea Council, co-establishing I2U2 (economic partnership between India, Israel, the UAE and the U.S, focusing on water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology), and engaged in the Negev Forum (gathering Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, UAE, and the US, meant for pragmatic projects regarding health, regional security, education and tolerance, water and food security, tourism, energy). The UAE was also interested in joining EMGF; this was however blocked, notably, by the PA.

Zaga⁷⁴ details the *educational and cultural evolution within the UAE* that included such relevant activities as the launch of the Ministry of Tolerance in 2016, 2019 Year of Tolerance, creation of the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi (hosting prayer houses of three monotheistic religions), the Pope's visit; the inclusion of Holocaust teachings in the curriculum; investment in technological sectors; support for Sharaka, an NGO *working to shape a new Middle East, built on dialogue, understanding, cooperation and friendship*; hosting, in June 2023, a workshop for think-tanks from the entire region entitled 'New Regionalism in the Middle East'; and promoting regional reconciliation in its foreign relations overall. Prominent Emiratis are furthermore engaged in MENA2050, gathering representatives from the entire region in a pragmatic (knowledge-based, practitioners-involving) quest for trust-building and regional cooperation.⁷⁵ On the governmental level, Emirati engagement in pursuit of regional peace can be traced back at least to a secret, regional part of the American envoy John Kerry's initiative that built on API; and a less secret framework elaborated by former envoy for the Middle East peace 'Quartet' Tony Blair in 2014-16.⁷⁶ The UAE's active pursuit of a regional solution was primarily aimed at addressing two key issues: the Iranian threat and the Palestinian question.

3.3. Emirati aid for the Palestinians

In the 1990s, the UAE was not a typical Arab actor as it provided notable financial support to the PA. As Rubin⁷⁷ noted,

It is startling to realize that of \$2 billion pledged to the PA internationally, 50 percent came from Europe, 25 percent from the United States, 10 percent from Japan, and only 5 percent (\$125 million) from the Arab world (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) [yet] even they give less than formerly contributed.

The 2009-21 annual aid reports published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁷⁸ and

⁷⁴ M. Zaga, "Arab Modernizers," *Sapir*, Winter 2024, at <https://sapirjournal.org/friends-and-foes/2024/03/arab-modernizers>, 27 September 2025.

⁷⁵ MENA 2050, at <https://www.mena2050.org/>, 27 September 2025.

⁷⁶ B. Ravid, *Trump's Peace...*, p. 273.

⁷⁷ B. Rubin, "Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the Arab States," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, no. 4 (1998), at https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria198_rubin.html, 27 September 2025.

⁷⁸ *UAE Annual Foreign Aid Reports*, at <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/The-Ministry/UAE-International-Development-Cooperation/Annual-Foreign-Aid-Report>, 27 September 2025.

covering entire development aid ecosystem (the government, numerous foundations and associations) demonstrate that there actually were numerous projects, even if mostly humanitarian, rather than developmental, for the 'Palestinian Territories' (PTs). The status of this recipient in comparison to others varied through 2009-13 (between the 1st and 10th spot) showing fluctuating attention. Since 2014, no ranking of recipients is published. While every report claims that Palestine was among the top five recipients, the published data point to further places at times. Yet, reports usually contain sub-sections devoted to Palestinian case among few countries discussed in detail (except 2020-21), testifying to the political importance of this recipient.

Qualitatively, in 2009 Mohammed Bin Rashid Establishment's aid went to a large extent to Palestinians. Aid to PTs was donated mostly by the government (for whom this was the largest recipient) of which 2/3 went to the PA, largely *intended to support government and civil society*. In 2010, Zayed Foundation founded health and education projects. The 2011 report mentioned housing, roads, electrical, transportation and water infrastructure projects alongside educational ones, including higher medical education. Since 2012, the recipient has been identified as 'Palestine', possibly following the decision of the UNGA to assign the PA with non-member observer status. That year was marked by a large transfer of financial aid to the PA; the report also noted *programs and activities specifically targeting the Palestinian areas of Jerusalem* (annexed by Israel) while *the Dubai Police extended law enforcement training to 19 Palestinian officers*. The 2014 report described humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip: *rebuilding housing (...) completing the construction of a number of primary schools, universities and water wells*. The Emirates Red Crescent was the largest donor. The 2015 report highlighted *11.4 million (USD 3.1 million) 'Rebuild Palestine. Start with Education' initiative (...) supporting nearly 2,600 students and 100 teachers from the Zaitoun Elementary School and Beit Hanoun Preparatory School for girls complementing annual contribution of AED 55.1 million (USD 15.0 million) initially pledged in 2015 to fund salaries of more than 800 teachers and operating costs of 20 [UNRWA] schools and sponsorship of SOS Children's Villages in Rafah*. The 2017 report highlighted stipends for law students while *Education, social services sector, as well as health were the consistent top supported sectors*. In 2018 and 2019 large contributions were made to the PA budget, and education sector again. Each annual report documented aid to UNRWA and Palestinian 'refugees' in the region. Overall, the aid was sustained, yet fluctuating, in particular in terms of budgetary support for the PA. Sector-wise, the most highlighted aid was for education and health. Otherwise, information shared was quite general. No particular 'Palestinian' project was furthermore described at the time of writing in the Emirati MFA website section devoted to project evaluation reports.

On a broader level, the UAE's 2017-2021 Policy for Foreign Assistance prioritises the UAE Technical Assistance Programme (UAETAP) based on a *recent experience in developing and diversifying its economy* and the UAE located among *global leaders in trade and logistics, finance, tourism, renewable energy, infrastructure, and public sector effectiveness*. UAETAP priorities are transport and infrastructure, going in tandem with large investment projects. The overall ambition is broader, aiming to cover *five*

*priority areas where the UAE has comparative advantages and unique expertise: mobility and infrastructure development, energy and sustainability, government effectiveness, services (including finance, free zones, telecoms and tourism), and women and girls' empowerment, which is cross-cutting. The strategy furthermore describes the Emirati stabilisation offer in post-conflict areas, related to the political process to reduce violence, countering violent extremism, establishment of basic services and demining. 'Three global thematic programs' are envisioned in the fields of transport and urban infrastructure, government effectiveness, and empowerment and protection of women. On the latter, the Policy describes Emirati achievements in women empowerment for sustainable development and initiatives to combat gender-based and sexual violence.*⁷⁹

Importantly, Emirati activism in foreign relations is complex: humanitarian and even developmental actions often accompany military interventions. As Gökalp (2020) observed, *from an Emirati point of view, there is a strong association between those efforts to tackle religious fundamentalism and Iranian influence and to promote security, stabilization and reconstruction in war zones where the UAE security forces. (...) The practices of humanitarian action have been embedded into military operations of intervention and stabilization (...) in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya and Yemen.*

This *modus operandi* makes good use of high Emirati capabilities in terms of logistics (commercial, military, humanitarian). The UAE is also experienced in working in multi-donor frameworks.⁸⁰ Of note, since the 2004 Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference & Exhibition takes place annually; its acronym sounds (intentionally?) like an alternative to *jihad*, or a positive interpretation thereof (DIHAD).

3.4. Addressing the post-October 7 reality

While Emiratis were engaged in Palestinian state- and nation-building to a limited extent to date, they do have experiences of working with Palestinian partners that could be useful in case the peace process is revived. Certain capabilities were already discussed in the context of the post-war Palestinian future. Neumann and al-Omari⁸¹ highlighted Emirati curricula reform emphasising diversity. They stated that it *should play a direct role in providing technical assistance to the PA* for an educational reform that could be *a foundation for other reforms needed to create a stable, economically viable PA while also addressing the problem of incitement.* As for the latter, the internal drive against radicalism, towards peace education and cultural diversity is also reflected in amended Emirati

⁷⁹ UAE AID, *Promoting Global Peace and Prosperity UAE Policy for Foreign Assistance 2017-2021*, at www.mofaic.gov.ae, 27 September 2025.

⁸⁰ D. Gökalp, "The UAE's Humanitarian Diplomacy: Claiming State Sovereignty, Regional Leverage and International Recognition," *CMI Working Paper*, no. 1 (2020), at <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7169-the-uaes-humanitarian-diplomacy-claiming-state-sovereignty>, 27 September 2025.

⁸¹ N. Neumann, G. al-Omari, "Reforming the Palestinian Authority A Roadmap for Change," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policy Notes*, 22 July 2024, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reforming-palestinian-authority-roadmap-change>, 27 September 2025.

school curricula, simultaneously encouraging curiosity, tolerance, Emirati national identity and patriotism (IMPACT-se). This counters pan-Islamist and pan-Arab agendas and supports the vision of a region in which particular states grow within a peaceful, development-oriented, cooperative environment. It also constitutes a resource of experience, based on which the Palestinian school curriculum could be reformed.

In 2018, the Emirates declared readiness to cooperate with the US in building Strip's infrastructure, despite the danger it could be damaged in renewed fighting.⁸² The policy reversal since – towards normalisation with Israel, a quest for a durable solution and actual conditioning of investments on durable peace – is worth noting. The conditions for increased Emirati engagement in the Palestinian arena include: a credible political horizon for a two-state solution, with post-war Gaza Strip under Palestinian control; and elimination of Hamas and other Islamists and/or Iran-supported forces, in order to break the cycle of violence and loss of resources devoted to humanitarian and developmental causes.⁸³ Zaga⁸⁴ outlines, in addition, determinants related to the Israeli internal governance, underlining opportunities that could emerge if anti-Netanyahu opposition returned to power. Crucially, Emirati participation in post-war effort is seen as desirable by numerous Israeli stakeholders.⁸⁵

In fact, the UAE engaged unprecedentedly in providing on-the-spot humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip since October 7 war began, a presence clearly enabled by the UAE's ties with Israel. The UAE became the sole state having such a quality presence, operational humanitarian capabilities and impact, while also excelling quantitatively when it comes to the aid volume. They created six water desalination facilities, producing around 1.6 million gallons of water daily, covering the needs of over 600,000 Palestinians. They set up two field hospitals, a 150-bed one on land, in Rafah, and a 100-bed floating one. They also provided tens of thousands of tons of humanitarian aid, including through air (through Jordan), land (12 warehouses in the Egyptian city of Al Arish) and sea (American floating pier),⁸⁶ initiated a project to repair sewage networks in Khan Yunis; and evacuated hundreds of sick and wounded civilians from the Strip, through Israel, for treatment in Emirati hospitals. Emiratis furthermore initiated and assisted construction of a water pipeline from a desalination facility in Egypt to the al-Mawasi area on the coast of the southern Gaza Strip (Emirates News Agency 2025).

⁸² B. Ravid, *Trump's Peace...*, p. 75.

⁸³ J. Hannah, "The Day After: A Plan For Gaza," *Gaza Futures Task Force*, February 2024, pp. 32, 54, at <https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Gaza-Futures-Task-Force-Report.pdf>, 27 September 2025.

⁸⁴ M. Zaga, "Arab Modernizers..."

⁸⁵ BICOM, "Israeli Ideas for the Day After in Gaza," *Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre*, 26 April 2024, at <https://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/israeli-ideas-for-the-day-after-in-gaza/>, 27 September 2025.

⁸⁶ A. Al-Shouk, "UAE-Built Desalination Plants Deliver 130 Million Gallons of Clean Water to Gaza Strip," *The National*, 8 June 2024, at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uae/2024/07/08/uae-built-desalination-plants-deliver-130-million-gallons-of-clean-water-to-gaza-strip/>, 27 September 2025.

The engagement was also visible in public relations sphere. In July 2024, Financial Times published an opinion piece by assistant minister for political affairs and special envoy of the UAE's minister of foreign affairs, Lana Nusseibeh. Herself of Palestinian descent, Nusseibeh⁸⁷ called for amending the *trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict towards the establishment of a Palestinian state that lives in peace and security with the state of Israel. A first step in such an effort is to deploy a temporary international mission that responds to the humanitarian crisis, establishes law and order, lays the groundwork for governance and paves the way to reuniting Gaza and the occupied West Bank under a single, legitimate Palestinian Authority.*

Nusseibeh conditioned Emirati participation in such a force on a formal invitation by the (reformed) PA. This points not only to unwillingness to be perceived as a subsidiary of either Israel or international community (against the Palestinian will), but also a history of political tensions with the PA and uncertainty regarding the PA's governance abilities. Arab pressure so far did not result in significant reforms, causing Emirati irritation.⁸⁸

While not an official document, Nusseibeh's article is in line with a proposal for post-war peace policy outlined by a group of Arab states (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan) in April 2024 and presented within their 'contact group' with the US. Nusseibeh⁸⁹ stated furthermore: *The countries in the region can and must contribute significantly, for peace between Palestinians and Israelis is first and foremost in our own interest.* This testifies to the depth of the change in approach to regional affairs by the Emirati ruling elites, including the projected Emirati role in the regional order, based on recognised nation states, rejection of extremism, and linkages of cooperation.

The above was further confirmed by an August 2024 publication by the Emirati Policy Center, characteristically entitled *The UAE and 'The Day After' in Gaza: The Road to Sustainable Regional Peace*. It underlined the UAE's contribution to the Palestinian arena and highlighted engagement principles of *full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, ensuring Palestinian self-governance in the Gaza Strip and establishing a clear political path leading to a two-state solution.* It furthermore echoed Nusseibeh in proposing a temporary international mission for the Strip, using very similar language to the quote above, and highlighting initial diplomatic engagements related to the initiative.⁹⁰ The Emirates were furthermore among the states behind the US President Donald Trump's "Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict", finalized

⁸⁷ L. Nusseibeh, "UAE: A Temporary International Mission is Needed in Gaza," *Financial Times*, 17 July 2024, at <https://www.ft.com/content/cfef2157-a476-4350-a287-190b25e45159>, 27 September 2025.

⁸⁸ B. Ravid, "'Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves': Emirati-Palestinian Shouting Match Blew Up Blinken Meeting," *Axios*, 6 June 2024, at <https://www.axios.com/2024/06/06/uae-palestinian-fight-blinken-meeting>, 27 September 2025.

⁸⁹ L. Nusseibeh, "UAE: A Temporary International Mission..."

⁹⁰ E. Al-Ketbi, "The UAE and 'The Day After' in Gaza: The Road to Sustainable Regional Peace," Emirates Policy Center, 9 August 2024, at <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/the-uae-and-the-day-after-in-gaza-the-road-to-sustainable-regional-peace>, 27 September 2025.

towards the end of September 2025. The plan contained numerous issue points raised above (including provisions for Hams disarming and abandoning role in governance, Palestinian-led management of the Strip, international stabilization forces, Israeli army withdrawal, aid and reconstruction, PA reform, path to Palestinian statehood) although remained general and to be tested after the initial withdrawal and hostage release phase. The Emirates appeared to have taken a back stage, with Egypt, alongside Muslim-Brotherhood affiliated Qatar and Turkey leading at this phase of deconfliction at least. Still, UAE participated in crucial meetings, emphasising its humanitarian aid so far (*USD 1.8 billion in assistance since the start of the war (...) life-saving aid and medical assistance delivered through 8,000 trucks, hospital treatment for nearly 75,000 patients, and the operation of six desalination plants supplying two million gallons of clean water daily*) and concentrating its future commitments on enhancing this aid (*extending water pipelines and adding new tankers and distribution points; increasing bakeries to 50 and community kitchens to over 100, producing about 25,000 metric tons of food monthly; boosting medical aid with new supply deliveries, vaccination drives, and maternal care clinics; and, ahead of winter, deploying more tents, caravans, and shelters*) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025). In a less formal setting, UAE representative spoke of the need to disarm Hamas as a *shared regional priority linked with commitments to peace and a two-state solution* while non-committedly addressing the prospect of *Arab and Muslim forces securing borders and supporting reconstruction* in post war Gaza Strip (The Washington Institute 2025). The actual operationalization modes of the stabilization mission, and possibilities for Emirati participation therein, remained unclear at the time of writing (Magid 2025). Seen as among the main potential sponsors of Strip's reconstruction, Emiratis maintained leverage for their interests and demands to be met, yet their determination to be involved while balancing against the Qatari-Turkish Islamist axis – remained to be tested.

War-time poll carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research showed almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of Palestinians rejected a vision *in which the US and an Arab coalition comprising Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan would develop a plan that would strengthen the PA, restore negotiations based on the two-state solution, and bring about an Arab-Israeli peace and normalization*. They widely perceived Yemen and Hizballah as most approved regional partners; and backed regional peace only when the alternative presented was a total regional war.⁹¹ Still, another PCPSR⁹² poll mapped out incentives that could convince the Palestinians to a peace package permanently ending the conflict, thus providing substance for diplomatic efforts. Palestinian public opinion tends to fluctuate significantly from poll to poll, and circumstances changed in the course of 2025 while no poll judging the Trump peace plan was available at the time of writing. Yet Palestinian and regional public opinion remained of concern. Conspiracy theories

⁹¹ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Public Opinion Poll Results*, no. 92, 26 May-1 June 2024, at <https://pcpsr.org/ar/node/986>, 27 September 2025.

⁹² Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Palestinian-Israeli Pulse: A Joint Poll*, 12 September 2024, at https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Summary%20Report_%20English_Joint%20Poll%2012%20Sept%202024.pdf, 27 September 2025.

and condemnation that emerged around the abovementioned Emirati sewage project in the Strip⁹³ testify to the entrenchment of a paradigm weaponising and therefore cultivating Palestinian suffering, and possible reputational challenges ahead of deeper UAE's engagement.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As foreseen by theoretical assumptions, Emirati internal and foreign policy evolution was connected to renewed leadership and external shocks. It was marked by a quantitative adjustment and qualitative change in the methods and means of achieving the goals, which remained relatively constant. However, a new set of regional aims emerged. Regarding the Palestinian issue, the change also implied a certain redefinition of a problem. Here, the category of learning is relevant: insolvability of the problem through traditional means enforced paradigm reversal, i.e. normalisation with Israel. Domestic reforms enhanced the Emirati agency and ingenuity towards regional issues. 'Using windows of opportunity' is a phrase used often in research on Emirati policy change, in line with the theoretical assumptions.

Evidence points to a change in the Emirati posture towards the Palestinian issue, from a distant observer to an active contributor. It allows us to pose a hypothesis that war intensified this change. It can be hypothesised that this direction is durable since it is embedded in stable, long-term, objective national interests and the leader's regional vision; barring unforeseen, extreme circumstances (such as Palestinians' expulsion from the Strip, Israeli annexation of territories, regime change in Iran). The Hamas terrorist offensive was detrimental to Emirati national interests. The increasing conjunction of the Palestinian cause with Iranian interference and *jihadist* ideology directly endanger not only Emirati vision of regionalisation, but also: the UAE's own security; fundamentals for its economic standing and modernisation; and social cohesion.

Analyses of the history of the Emirati involvement in the regional sphere, and in the Palestinian question in particular, shows that as a late-comer and a geographically distant state, the UAE is not that burdened by a difficult history of Arab-Palestinian relations. The contemporary heritage of UAE's development aid allows for a hypothesis that the UAE has significant capabilities for actual contribution to Palestinian state- and nation-building in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Emirati disillusionment with Palestinian political elites and condemnation of terrorism goes hand-in-hand with the support for eventual Palestinian state as a part and parcel of a vision for a region composed of cooperating nation states, in contrast to a pan-Islamist vision of individual states' dissolution. Partnerships launched within the internal reforms and flexible

⁹³ N. Zbeedat, "How an Emirati Sewage Project in Gaza Set Off Pungent Conspiracy Theories Online," *Haaretz*, 2 February 2025, at <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2025-02-02/ty-article/.premium/how-an-emirati-sewage-project-in-gaza-set-off-pungent-conspiracy-theories-online/00000194-b7b8-d667-a5bf-f7fd38470000>, 27 September 2025.

geography of UAE's regional cooperation indicate that in the case of Palestinian state- and nation-building, Emirates could be open to formats gathering diverse stakeholders, based on their practicality.

Contemporary Emirati developmental cooperation program, while not new, links issues of economic development, regional cooperation and deradicalisation. Emirati experiences in combining security engagement, anti-*jihadism* activities, humanitarian and developmental aid, and cooperation with other donors, could possibly be replicated in Palestinian territories, Gaza Strip in particular. Here, stabilising security situation should be coupled with civilian relief and development. Importantly, Emirati aid already prioritises enhancement of recipient's self-reliance and contains a significant component of technical aid, both conducive to responsible, sovereignty-enhancing nation- and state-building processes.

Even if at the time of writing, Emirati engagement in providing security, (re)construction and development in the Strip remained largely a policy proposal, mere emergence of this debate testifies to the depth of change in Emirati foreign policy and its regional standing. The list of the UAE's potentialities includes: peace-keeping (expeditionary forces, training Palestinian forces); infrastructural development (marine port, natural gas off-shore depot, artificial islands; territorial corridor Gaza Strip – West Bank; urban development throughout the territories); technical assistance for institutions, in particular public administration (for civil servants to be able to serve the population and alleviate economic growth), health systems, policing and counterterrorism, entrepreneurship, as well as women's rights and empowerment (in particular in the Strip, after almost 20 years of institutionalised deprivation through laws based on a radical interpretation of Islam). Emirati experiences with empowering youth are also crucial bearing in mind the Palestinian demography, and an urgent need for youth activation for actual state- and nation-building. This demands educational frameworks to train the workers of tomorrow's Palestinian economy, but also – deradicalising parts of the population and constructing a new national narrative to allow the future Palestinian state to live in peace alongside Israel. As a regional stakeholder the UAE could be legitimate in proposing state- and nation-building process remaining in harmony with Arab culture and Islamic religion, therefore increasing ownership and sustainability of the process. Economic and infrastructural projects initiated and supported by the UAE could also become a backbone for regional, multi-stakeholder interconnectivity, crucial for maintenance of durable peace. The UAE's engagement also has the potential to alleviate the religious aspect of the conflict through interreligious dialogue, with positive regional externalities. War-time Emirati projects in the Strip show an unprecedented willingness and readiness to engage. Yet the conditions the UAE pose testify to a cautious, mature regional policy design.

Thinking of a possible post-war Emirati engagement in Palestinian state- and nation-building shall nevertheless be not only visionary but also realistic. Palestinian territories will compete for international resources with Lebanon and Syria. It seems UAE remain cautious about engagement in peace-keeping, policing, counter-terror operations. Palestinian national identity born out of dispossession and violent struggle

contrasts with the UAE's post-independence marked by oil-based economic wealth, rapid modernisation since 2004, and distinct identity: future-oriented yet maintaining Bedouin heritage and moderate Islam. Emirati oil-wealth-based rent-based economy is not equivalent to Palestinian decades-old aid dependence, while Islamism in the UAE was never close to creation of violent militias, not to speak of a terror army alike Hamas. There is no space for a simple transfer of solutions due to cultural, social and economic differences. Usefulness of Emirati experiences stems from recent internal reforms, characterised by a shift away from fossil fuels as a prime source of income towards economy based on services and technologies; limited internal liberalisation meant at increasing social mobility, encouraging tourism and foreign human capital; and consolidation of authorities' legitimacy and power through deradicalisation of Islam and regional cooperation. It appears that these experiences have only a limited applicability to the Palestinian case taken at face value. Still, they could be adapted to the specific needs within a mutual-learning process that could be mediated by other Southern donors, Palestinian diaspora in the UAE (around 100,000 people), and even Israeli Arab community. Furthermore, bearing in mind the history of Emirati relations with the PA, a serious reform of the PA and Emirati-Palestinian trust-building is a precondition for development aid related to core state- and nation-building issues to be possible and effective.

On a more general level, this study confirmed assumptions regarding: linkage between policy towards the Palestinian issue and regional thinking based on acceptance of an existing nation-states system; concern with ties between the Palestinian national movement and Iranian Islamist, revisionists agenda, that undermines this system; and continued importance of a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with active engagement of pragmatic regional actors dependent on a set of considerations that they can control to a limited extent only.

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