

# **Saudi-Emirati Rivalry and The Distribution of Regional Powers in The Middle East**

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## **Abstract:**

The Arab Spring revolutions led to anxiety in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These countries shared economic interests and aimed to limit Iranian influence and secure international maritime trade routes. However, competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE intensified in 2019, with the UAE withdrawing military power from Yemen and Libya, adopting strategic policies, and signing the Abrahamic Accord. While Saudi Arabia took diplomatic initiatives to change the international perception of itself, including opening communication with the Syrian regime, normalizing diplomatic relations with Iran, and calming escalation in Yemen through the 2019 Riyadh Agreement.

This study aims to demonstrate the impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the Middle East region's power balance.

**Key Words:** Saudi Arabia- United Arab Emirates- Rivalry- Yemen- Red Sea.

## **Introduction**

In December 2010, the Arab Spring revolution began in Tunisia, after Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself in protest of the treatment he was subjected to by the Tunisian police. The anti-democratic revolutions spread to the countries of North Africa and the Middle East and included Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. The Arab Spring revolutions ended badly in several countries, including Libya, Yemen, and Syria.<sup>1</sup>

The Arab Spring revolutions led to anxiety in the Arab Gulf countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which shared a single policy based on economic interests and included resistance to political Islam

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<sup>1</sup> Kali Robinson and Will Merrow, “**The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What’s the Legacy of the Uprisings?**”, Council on Foreign Relations, December 2020, Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings>

movements and the growing democratic movements based on those revolutions, and an attempt to limit the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East. Securing international maritime trade routes in the region.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the policy of the two countries was common on various issues, including trying to curb the Houthis in Yemen, helping Bahrain eliminate Shiite demonstrations, in addition to severing diplomatic relations and imposing an economic blockade on Qatar.

Despite this, the competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE began in 2009 after the UAE rejected the monetary union project for the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council countries, but the competition was within the framework of allied competition or soft competition.<sup>3</sup>

But the intensity of this competition increased in 2019, after both countries began to change their foreign policy to suit their economic interests, while the UAE withdrew its military power from Yemen and Libya and reduced its connection with the military barracks in Eritrea and Somalia, and adopted a strategic policy in the straits and signed the Abrahamic Accords with Israel in 2020. Saudi Arabia took diplomatic initiatives to change the negative international perception of it, including opening the door to communication with Bashar al-Assad's regime, normalizing diplomatic relations with Iran using Chinese mediation, and also seeking to calm the escalation in Yemen through the 2019 Riyadh Agreement.

In this context, this study seeks to demonstrate the impact of the rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the balance of power in the Middle East region.

## **Second: The research problem**

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<sup>2</sup> Steinberg, G., "Regional power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi is no longer Saudi Arabia's junior partner.", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2020. Pg. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Arash Reisinezhad and Mostafa Bushehri, "The Hidden Rivalry of Saudi Arabia and the UAE", Foreign Policy, January 2024, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/25/the-hidden-rivalry-of-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae/>

The rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates began as an alliance rivalry in 2009, but the dispute between the two countries has escalated in recent years over several files, the most important of which are foreign investment and influence in global oil markets, the Yemeni and Sudanese files, as both countries seek to strengthen and diversify oil resources. They have no influence outside the oil field, through economic aid and investments granted to the two countries in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, restoring diplomatic relations with Iran, and intervening in regional conflicts in Lebanon, Yemen, and Sudan.

Thus, the main question of the study becomes: **What is the impact of the Saudi-Emirati competition on the distribution of regional powers in the Middle East?**

This main question branches out from a group of sub-questions:

- What are the reasons for the Saudi-Emirati competition?
- What differences exist in Saudi and Emirati foreign policy after 2019?
- What is the role of the Saudi-Emirati rivalry in Arab conflicts?
- What is the impact of the Saudi-Emirati competition on the distribution of power in the Middle East?

### **Third: Methodology**

The study relies on the descriptive analytical approach to reveal the impact of the Saudi-Emirati rivalry on the distribution of regional powers in the Middle East:

#### **The descriptive-analytical approach:**

The descriptive analytical approach aims to describe and study phenomena accurately, not to express them in qualitative and quantitative ways, and to clarify the relationship between research variables and the extent of that relationship, while analyzing the reasons behind that phenomenon to reveal the nature of the phenomenon and analyze the degree of its connection to other phenomena.

The objectives of the descriptive analytical method can be defined in:

By using the descriptive analytical approach, information can be collected to explain the phenomenon accurately and determine the true causes of the phenomenon. Identifying the problems existing in the phenomenon, and trying to find the best solutions available to those problems.

The approach seeks to find and clarify the relationship between variables by focusing on the statistical numbers associated with the phenomena.

The descriptive analytical approach will be applied in this study by studying the reasons for the competition between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates using the available data and determining the impact of this competition on the distribution of regional powers in the Middle East region.

### **Determinants of The Rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates**

Despite the joint membership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council and the long history of harmonization of the two countries' foreign policies within the framework of their role in the Middle East region, in recent times the Saudi-Emirati competition based on economic interests have become more intense.

Therefore, we will delve into the political and economic reasons for the Saudi-Emirati rivalry, which is based on the differences in the foreign policies of both countries.

#### **First: The reasons for the Saudi-Emirati Rivalry**

The study will analyze the reasons for the Saudi-Emirati rivalry in terms of the history of the competition between the two countries and the economic reasons for the rivalry.

##### **1) The history of the Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Emirates:**

Despite the long history of the stronger alliance between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, whether within the framework of the two countries' foreign policies or within the framework of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Organization, this strong alliance has begun to turn into a soft competition between the two countries in recent times.

The Saudi-Emirati interests were common in the resistance to political Islam movements and the growing democratic movements in the Middle East and North African countries, especially after the Arab Spring revolutions, and the attempt to limit the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East, and secure international maritime trade routes in the region.

In this context, the two countries cooperated to eliminate Shiite protests in Bahrain through the Joint Peninsula Shield Forces of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council in 2011, in addition to the two countries' cooperation with Egypt and Bahrain in severing diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposing an economic blockade on it in 2017 after accusing Qatar of supporting groups Political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, created a political and military alliance between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in light of the division of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council and a deviation in the political decision-making mechanism of the Council, in addition to the cooperation of the two countries in resisting the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>4</sup>

The competition began slightly when the UAE withdrew from forming the monetary union and adopting a unified currency among the countries of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council, due to the choice of Riyadh instead of Abu Dhabi to be the headquarters of the central bank.<sup>5</sup>

Their differing strategies for dealing with regional conflicts, their escalating economic competition, and their individual attempts to expand their political influence abroad were all signs of escalating rivalry between them. This included the divergence of Saudi and Emirati policies in Yemen after 2019 and the attempt

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<sup>4</sup> Abdullah Baabood, "The Future of the Gulf Cooperation Council Amid Saudi-Emirati Rivalry", Carnegie Middle East Center, October 2023, Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/12/18/ar-pub-91288>

<sup>5</sup> داليا مرزبان, "الإمارات تنسحب من اتفاق الوحدة النقدية الخليجية", رويترز, مايو ٢٠٠٩, تاريخ الولوج: ٢٥ أبريل ٢٠٢٤, متاح على: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSCAE54J0Z1/>

of both countries to gain the upper hand in Sudan. The rapprochement. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, the Emirati-Israeli rapprochement within the framework of the Abrahamic Accords, and both countries' efforts to advance their economic interests individually.<sup>6</sup>

## 2) The economic reasons for the Saudi-Emirati Rivalry

Both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates are seeking to diversify their economies beyond oil, which has created a kind of economic competition between both countries, while the economic status of the Emirates has increased as an economic center for investments in the Middle East, and it has provided a suitable environment and policies to attract foreign business and investments, and the country has become a center for regional headquarters for companies. International and multinational companies also seek to consolidate their role in international trade as a connecting point between Africa and Asia, through its control of the main ports on the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa as part of the port chain strategy.<sup>7</sup>

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain its economic weight and leadership in the region, and in this context, Saudi Arabia sought to attract foreign investments and expand the tourism field on the Mediterranean coast to achieve the Saudi Vision 2030. The economic goals of Saudi Arabia in that vision consist of making Saudi Arabia the heart of the Arab world. And the Islamic Bank, transforming its economy into a global investment weight and making it a commercial meeting point between Asia, Africa, and Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The two countries also disagreed on their role within the framework of OPEC Plus, especially in their vision of the amount of oil production. While Saudi Arabia seeks to reduce OPEC oil production, the UAE seeks to increase production rates.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Baabood, **Ibid**

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Reed, “**Behind the Clash at OPEC: Growing Competition in the Gulf**”, The New York Times, July 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/06/business/Saudi-Arabia-UAE-OPEC.html>

The difference in economic interests between the two countries has created a rivalry between them, while the two countries seek to make each of them into a global economic center of gravity. The UAE is still at the forefront of attracting foreign direct investment in the Middle East region, according to the World Investment Report for 2023 issued by the United Nations. In the United Arab Emirates, the flow of foreign investment in the Emirates increased, achieving the highest rate in the history of the Emirates, while the rate of foreign investment in Saudi Arabia decreased by 59%.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken several precautions to attract foreign investments, represented by restrictions on imposing customs duties on goods produced in free zones, including the forty free zones located in the Emirates. Customs duties will also be imposed on companies with 75% foreign workers, in addition. For goods manufactured with Israeli investments.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, it restricts cooperation between Saudi government bodies and foreign companies with regional headquarters outside Saudi Arabia, in its effort to attract foreign companies to move their regional headquarters to Saudi Arabia. It is also working to establish an airline to expand transportation services and also aims to make the country one of the best global air transport lines.<sup>12</sup>

While the UAE sought to resist Saudi efforts by allowing foreigners full ownership of economic activities, launching 50 new economic initiatives, and amending the rules and laws related to foreign residency.<sup>13</sup>

## **Second: Differing foreign policy between Saudi and UAE:**

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<sup>10</sup>United Nations, “**World Investment Report 2023**”, Un Trade and Development, Available at: <https://unctad.org/publication/world-investment-report-2023>

<sup>11</sup> أسباب, "زعامة اقتصادية لا تقبل القسمة: التنافس السعودي الإماراتي يعيد ترتيب المشهد خليجيا", مآلات الشرق الأوسط, العدد ٢٢, سبتمبر ٢٠٢١, ص ٦-٣, متاح على:

<https://www.asbab.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Although the Saudi-Emirati rivalry is essentially a competition to achieve economic interests, with both countries seeking to diversify domestic sources beyond oil, the foreign policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates was in agreement, as the two countries sought to protect the movement of trade and to restrict the democratic and political Islam movements in the country. The region, and restricting Iranian influence.

Therefore, after the Arab Spring revolutions, both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates took a foreign policy to achieve their common interests, starting with the two countries' participation in the "Decisive Storm" military operations against the Houthis in Yemen to control Iranian influence. Both countries also participated in severing diplomatic relations with Qatar. In 2017, because they were accused of supporting political Islam movements, they also sought to strengthen Hezbollah in Lebanon by pressuring Prime Minister Saad Hariri. In 2017, the two countries also withdrew their diplomatic representatives from Lebanon and imposed a travel ban on their citizens.

However, the foreign policy of the two countries differed after the Emirati agenda in Yemen changed, reduced the number of its ground forces, and sought to control the southern strategic maritime sites, while Saudi foreign policy remained constant to restore the government of Abd al-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

After the widespread international criticism that the foreign policies of the two countries attracted, each of them sought to re-evaluate their foreign policy.

In this context, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken a new direction in its foreign policy that combines the use of military force with diplomatic initiatives, especially after the attacks on some Saudi oil sites in 2019, which Iran was accused of carrying out in light of the weak position of the United States of America.<sup>14</sup>

Although Saudi Arabia will not abandon its ally, the United States of America, and then the United Kingdom and France, it has sought to expand the sources of its

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<sup>14</sup> بي بي سي نيوز، "الهجوم على منشآت نفط سعوديتين: الأمم المتحدة والاتحاد الأوروبي يطالبان بضبط النفس وعدم التصعيد"، بي بي سي نيوز، سبتمبر ٢٠١٩، متاح على: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-49705011>



international alliance to include China and Russia through several diplomatic initiatives, including Saudi Arabia normalizing diplomatic relations with Iran through Chinese mediation. It has also sought to calm the situation in Yemen, through the Riyadh Agreement, 2019. Saudi Arabia also began to adopt Jordan's initiative to reconnect with the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates sought to take a new, less assertive approach away from the military force in accordance with the zeroing the problems policy, and it focused its foreign policy on protecting maritime navigation and preserving the influence it gained from its foreign policy before 2019. In this context, the UAE reduced the number of its military forces was then completely withdrawn from Yemen. It also dismantled its military ties in Eritrea and Somalia and reduced its military presence in Libya.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, UAE foreign policy was following what is known as “straits diplomacy” or the “port chain” policy. This policy consists of three foundations: the basis of the pragmatic and institutional dialogue on the security of maritime navigation, maritime navigation, and increasing geographical and economic investments around waterways. The UAE has participated in the International Alliance for the Security and Protection of Maritime Navigation to protect maritime navigation and international trade in the Strait of Hormuz. The UAE has also organized the Indian Ocean Dialogue to calm the situation regarding attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz. The UAE has invested in expanding the port of Berbera and establishing a new trade route for sea freight and railways. Iron to connect the Gulf countries and Europe.<sup>17</sup>

In 2020, the UAE joined the Abrahamic Accords to normalize diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel, and three other Arab countries joined the agreement: Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. This agreement encouraged the policy of straits

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<sup>15</sup> Dr Tobias Borck, “**Kingdom of Change: Saudi Arabia’s Evolving Foreign Policy**”, RUSI, June 2023, Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/kingdom-change-saudi-arabias-evolving-foreign-policy>

<sup>16</sup> Eleonora Ardemagni, “**UAE’s Foreign Policy: From Militias in the Rimland to Straits Diplomacy**”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2021, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85676>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

diplomacy, so that the UAE seeks to open investment projects in Israeli ports and open a port in the Gulf of Aqaba, despite American pressure on Saudi Arabia, but it refused to join the agreement.<sup>18</sup>

### **The repercussions of the Rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.**

After studying the reasons for the competition between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whether through the historical framework of the rivalry, the type of this rivalry, and clarifying the foreign policies of both countries within the framework of this rivalry, the repercussions of this rivalry on the Middle East region must be studied.

Therefore, we will delve into the repercussions of the Saudi-Emirati rivalry on the Arab conflicts in Yemen and Sudan. We will also delve into the impact of the competitive policies of both countries on the distribution of regional powers in the Middle East.

#### **First: The role of the Saudi-Emirati rivalry in the Arab conflicts: Yemen and Sudan.**

The study will analyze the Saudi-Emirati rivalry within the context of the Arab conflicts in Yemen and Sudan.

##### **1) The Saudi-Emirati competition in the Yemeni conflict:**

After former President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down from his presidential position in 2012, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi was elected to head the transitional government. The transitional government sought to expand political participation to include excluded groups such as women, youth, and minorities, but Ansar Allah forces, a movement affiliated with the Houthi forces, rose to power. Backed by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, they staged an armed coup against the government in 2014, precipitating its governmental institutions, including the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

security forces; The government-in-exile exercised limited control over some security forces.<sup>19</sup>

In January 2015, after a conflict between the Houthis and the government, the Houthis consolidated their control over the capital and placed Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and several government members under house arrest. The Hadi government decided to resign rather than submit to Houthi control. The following month, the Houthis issued their constitutional declaration and established governing bodies. This sparked mixed popular reactions and international condemnation.

On the Saudi side, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's view of the Yemeni crisis was that its strategic interest in securing stability in Yemen and preserving the legitimate, popularly elected national government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi was to directly secure the southern border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and eliminate Iran's regional expansionist ambitions. And combating terrorism and Houthi threats.

Following the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as Minister of Defense, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia established a coalition consisting of nine countries: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan in March 2015 and launched a military operation, Operation Decisive Storm, aimed at restoring the government. The ousted Yemeni president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, is internationally recognized. As Houthi forces advanced in the southern city of Aden, the Saudi-led coalition launched air strikes in response to a request from President Abd Rabbuh Mansour.<sup>20</sup>

The United Arab Emirates is the second largest country in terms of military participation in Yemen after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as the number of

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<sup>19</sup> United States Department of States, “**Yemen 2015 human rights report**”, United States department of state bureau of democracy, 2016, page 1, Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/253167.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp, “**Yemen: civil war and regional intervention**”, congressional research service, March 2017, page 1

Emirati soldiers participating in the military operations reached 3,500 soldiers and 3,000 members of the air and naval forces.<sup>21</sup>

The Emirati agenda in Yemen changed in 2018, which led to a gap in the Saudi-Emirati alliance in general and in Yemen in particular, due to the divergence of interests between the two countries for several reasons, Saudi foreign policy towards the Yemeni conflict remained constant, which is to restore the recognized Yemeni government. It was an international campaign by Abdul Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. The negative international media campaign led to Saudi Arabia and the Yemen war in 2018, and the UAE government realized through it that its war in Yemen within the framework of the coalition did not provide it with many achievements while costing it financial, military, human, and media burdens.<sup>22</sup>

The UAE government's dissatisfaction with not obtaining an equal place in the leadership of the coalition also played an important role in the discrepancy between these interests, as while there was Emirati control over most of the ground attacks inside Yemen at the request of the Kingdom as it is the leadership of the coalition, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has always been the first party responsible for high-level cases ignores the interests of the UAE in that role.<sup>23</sup>

In this context, the UAE sought to form a new foreign policy towards Yemen and aimed to control strategic maritime sites and shipping lanes in Yemen and implement the "Port Chain" strategy. To achieve these goals, the UAE:<sup>24</sup>

- 1- It finances a network of local militias to act as its agents in Yemen.
- 2- It rejected the president's government formation, which included the Yemeni Islah Party, a party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia was ready to cooperate with them.
- 3- It reduced the number of its ground forces inside Yemen.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Knights, "Lessons From the UAE War in Yemen", Lawfare, August 2019, Available at: <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/lessons-uae-war-yemen>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> عبدالله باعبيدو، " حار وضوابط وأسلحة: المصالح البحرية الإماراتية والسعودية في النزاع اليمني"، مركز مالكوم كير-كارنيجي، مايو ٢٠٢٣ متاح على: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/05/18/ar-pub-89794>

- 4- It increased its financial support to its agents in Yemen.
- 5- It supported the Southern Transitional Council, a popular and influential secessionist organization in southern Yemen, which was able to control Aden from the Hadi government.

In the end, the UAE was able to control the southern Yemeni ports and coasts and the surrounding areas. However, it withdrew all its military forces from Yemen in 2019, but the militias supported by the UAE remained in conflict with the government forces supported by Saudi Arabia, which led to Saudi Arabia forming its militias. To limit Emirati influence, Saudi Arabia also sought to calm the situation with the Southern Transitional Council, which resulted in the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019, which made the Council part of the new formation of the Yemeni government. Aden was also returned to the government at the request of Yemen, and thus the UAE became influential within the Yemeni government formation.

## **2) The Saudi-Emirati Rivalry in the Sudanese conflict:**

In 2018, political unrest began in Sudan following demonstrations of rising bread prices in the context of the economic crisis. The demonstrations intensified in 2019, and the Sudanese army ended the rule of Omar al-Bashir. The security forces arrested Abdullah Hamdok and many civilian leaders, and the conflict officially began in April 2023 between the army. Sudanese and the Rapid Support Forces. Despite the efforts of the civil forces, they tried to employ the Rapid Support Forces.<sup>25</sup>

Within the framework of the strategic quest to control the water crossings in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, and the attempt to control the relationship between Sudan and the political Islam movements supported by Qatar and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were allies of the Bashir regime in the context of its

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<sup>25</sup> سكاى نيوز العربيه, "تسلسل زمني.. سنوات الصراع السياسي في السودان", سكاى نيوز العربيه, أبريل ٢٠٢٣, متاح على: <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1613642-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84-%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86>

ending of Sudanese-Iranian relations and Sudan's participation in the military coalition, Operation Decisive Storm, in Yemen. The two countries pumped investments into Sudan, and the UAE also sought to ease the sanctions imposed on Sudan by the United States of America, which were imposed in the context of the relationship between Sudan and Al-Qaeda, in addition to the Sudanese government's violations of human rights in Darfur.<sup>26</sup>

The Sudanese civil war poses a threat to the security of the Horn of Africa, which threatens Saudi and Emirati interests. The relative proximity between Saudi Arabia and Sudan is a threat to the security of the Kingdom's Red Sea coasts, through which Saudi Arabia seeks to expand its tourism sector, and is also a threat to the NEOM project in the northwest of the Kingdom. When the war affects the Kingdom's investments in the Sudanese agricultural sector and its project for a railway line extending to Chad.<sup>27</sup>

While the war has negatively affected the UAE, which is Sudan's largest trading partner, especially in the field of importing gold, it also constitutes an obstacle to the UAE's efforts to impose its control over the water ports in the Red Sea, as the UAE signed a deal to build and operate a port on the Red Sea and an economic zone in Abu Turban.<sup>28</sup>

Although the Saudi-Emirati efforts towards the Sudanese crisis are the same, which is to achieve stability in Sudan to protect their interests in the region, they differed over control of Sudan's resources, energy, and logistical gates on the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. In this context, the UAE sought Russia to support the commander of the Rapid Support Forces, Muhammad. Hamdan Hemedti, through the Wagner Group, and the UAE also provided humanitarian aid to Sudan.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jihad Mashamoun, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE on Edge as Generals Battle It Out in Sudan", Middle East Council on Global Affairs, May 2023, Available at: [https://mecouncil.org/blog\\_posts/saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-on-edge-as-generals-battle-it-out-in-sudan/](https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-on-edge-as-generals-battle-it-out-in-sudan/)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> AFP, "Sudan inks \$6 bln UAE deal for new Red Sea port", Alarabiya News, December 2022, Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/12/13/Sudan-inks-6-bln-UAE-deal-for-new-Red-Sea-port>

<sup>29</sup> Talal Mohammad. "How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy War", Foreign policy, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/12/sudan-conflict-saudi-arabia-uae-gulf-burhan-hemeti-rsf/>

While Saudi Arabia supported the Sudanese army led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Saudi Arabia sought to sponsor ceasefire talks in Jeddah with the United States of America and provided humanitarian aid and evacuations of civilians. Egypt also provided assistance, especially air support, to the Sudanese army, in an attempt to regain the army's control. Completely on the state.<sup>30</sup>

In the end, both countries seek the stability of Sudan, but the outcome of the civil war in Sudan will affect the extent of Saudi or UAE control over Sudanese resources, especially the interests resulting from Sudan's logistical location on the Red Sea.

### **Second: The impact of the Saudi-Emirati competition on the distribution of power in the Middle East.**

In 2010, China officially entered the race for international economic leadership when it became the second-largest economy after the United States. Experts even predicted that it would win that race and become the largest economy in 2027, which led to a change in American foreign policy during the era of US President Barack Obama. "Toward Asia", and launched the Trans-Pacific Partnership Initiative (TPP) with Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Singapore, Australia, Vietnam, Peru, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, and Mexico as a means of containing China's growing international economic influence. The United States has also deployed military personnel in Australia as a deterrence mechanism.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the new US policy that seeks to focus on the Chinese threat, and its attempt to reduce the American role in the Middle East, by trying to coordinate with Qatar and Turkey because of their strong influence in the region, it has moved towards improving relations with Iran through the Iranian nuclear program (5+1), which It includes the countries of the United Nations Security Council, in addition to Germany, as a way to achieve a balance of power with the Gulf states, in

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "1949-2023 U.S.-China Relations", Council on Foreign Relations, Accessed at: 17 March 2024, Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>

addition to securing its allies in the region after opening Iranian factories to international inspection.<sup>32</sup>

The Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, saw the Iranian nuclear agreement as a sign of the United States' abandonment of the Gulf states, especially since they were excluded from the negotiating table with Iran, and that in this way, Iranian behavior would become more reckless in interfering in the affairs of the Middle East, which led to them adopting firm policies based on intervention. They also established military bases in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, and a diplomatic break with Qatar due to its support for political Islam movements, in an attempt to enhance its regional and global influence and ensure that the regional power system remains as it is.

After Donald Trump assumed the presidency of the United States of America, he unilaterally withdrew from the Iranian nuclear agreement in 2018, which deepened the Gulf states' concern about the United States' failure to adhere to international agreements. From this framework, in addition to the policies of the United States under the administration of President Barack Obama, the Gulf states sought to Diversify their alliances and deepen their relationship with China and Russia.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of achieving its economic interests in making Abu Dhabi a commercial meeting point between Asia and Europe, the UAE deepened its economic relationship with China and also carried out strategic cooperation with Russia in Libya, Syria, and Sudan. The UAE joined the Abrahamic Accords with Israel, in order to achieve its control over the Red Sea ports. In Yemen, Sudan, and Somaliland, it opened investment projects in Israeli ports and opened a port in the Gulf of Aqaba. It also sought to calm the situation in the Strait of Hormuz.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia refused to join the Abrahamic Accords, despite American pressure, and strengthened its relationship with China, as Saudi Arabia supplied 16% of oil imports to China to become the largest supplier of crude oil to

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<sup>32</sup> BBC, "Iran nuclear deal: What it all means", BBC News, November 2021, Accessed at: 27 April 2024, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



China. It also sought to normalize its diplomatic relationship with Iran through China, and it also restored relations. Diplomacy with Qatar sought to calm the situation in Yemen in the Riyadh Agreement.<sup>34</sup>

In January 2024, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Iran joined the BRICS group, which includes the countries of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The group seeks to give greater representation to emerging economies away from the control of Western countries. China and Russia also seek to expand their influence in the Middle East and Africa through the group.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, the conflict in Syria and Libya has strengthened Russian relations in the Middle East with the UAE, Turkey, and Iran, while the American withdrawal from the region has strengthened its relationship with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Israel. China has also strengthened its economic relations with all influential powers in the region, including Turkey. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and Iran, where the percentage of China's exports to Middle Eastern countries increased in 2022 by an increase of 37.6% to reach 278 billion dollars.<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly, the Saudi-Emirati competition has directly affected the distribution of power in the Middle East, as it led to the deepening of Chinese and Russian influence in the region. It also led to calming the Iranian-Saudi conflict, expanding the Israeli sphere of influence, and introducing Israeli investments into the Gulf. The UAE also began to exit the cloak of Saudi influence has become an influential role in the movement of commercial shipping in the region through its influence in southern Yemen and the seaports in Sudan, its investment relationship with Israel, and its investment in expanding the port of Berbera and establishing a new commercial route for sea freight and railways to connect the Gulf states and Europe.

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<sup>34</sup> Steven A. Coe, "Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East", Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021, Pg. 11

<sup>35</sup> بي بي سي, "ما هي مجموعة البريكس وما هي الدول الجديدة التي ستتنضم إليها؟", ديسمبر ٢٠٢٣, تاريخ الولوج: ٢٦ أبريل ٢٠٢٤, متاح على: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c13ygyp4y3vo>

<sup>36</sup> د. عماد الأزرق, "الصين ودبلوماسية الأزمات في الشرق الأوسط", مركز المعلومات ودعم اتخاذ القرار, مارس ٢٠٢٤, متاح على: <https://www.idsc.gov.eg/Article/details/9105>

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, although the Saudi-Emirati competition did not add new powers to the Middle East, it directly affected the form and distribution of the powers that already existed in the region, as the competition strengthened Russian influence and Chinese influence in the Middle East. Also, within the framework of this competition, Israeli influence expanded to enter into the Gulf market, especially the UAE and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia sought to calm the situation with Iran to focus on its strategic and economic goals and achieve its 2030 vision.

Although the Saudi role is considered the most powerful and influential Gulf role in the region, the UAE has emerged in the field of regional influence away from Saudi policy and has a more effective role, especially related to commercial navigation in the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean.