

The Uae's Architecture of Influence: Nodal Expansionism Through Strategic Nodes, Centrifugal Actors, And Geoeconomic Networks

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the multilayered influence strategy developed by the United Arab Emirates across the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea basin, and Europe despite its limited demographic and geographical capacity. It seeks to explain how the UAE integrates military, financial, logistical, and diplomatic support for non-state and centrifugal actors with its port, energy, investment, and technology networks. Employing a qualitative research design covering the 2011–2026 period, the study analyses Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya through structured, focused comparison and process tracing. UAE-linked port, logistics, infrastructure, and natural-resource investments in Africa, together with its artificial intelligence, renewable-energy, and advanced-technology investments in Europe, are examined through document analysis and source triangulation.

The findings indicate that the UAE has developed a form of *network-centred power projection* based not on conventional territorial control but on strategic nodes, local partnerships, long-term concessions, and economic interdependence. Although this model provides operational flexibility and extensive geographical access, it also generates political and diplomatic costs arising from the growing autonomy of local partners, the weakening of central state authority, and countermeasures by regional competitors. The study further argues that the Abraham Accords did not initiate this strategy but accelerated it by linking Emirati capital and regional networks with Israeli technological and security capabilities and the broader strategic support of the United States. Likewise, the relative weakening of Iran's proxy architecture has not resulted in its direct replacement by UAE-backed actors; rather, it has increased the regional salience of an alternative influence model combining security, capital, infrastructure, and technology. The UAE's rise is therefore conceptualised as a network-centred form of ecopolitical expansion.

KEYWORDS: United Arab Emirates, network-centred power projection, centrifugal actors, proxy relations, port geopolitics, ecopolitical influence, Abraham Accords, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has, within little more than half a century, transformed from a Gulf federation with a relatively small population and limited territorial size into one of the key hubs of global finance, energy, transportation, and logistics networks. Today, the UAE can no longer be understood merely as a rentier state defined by substantial oil and natural gas revenues. It has also emerged as an increasingly assertive regional power whose influence extends across the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea basin, and North Africa through its sovereign wealth funds, state-linked enterprises, port operators, overseas investments, military capabilities, and relationships with non-state actors. According to World Bank data, the country's gross domestic product reached approximately USD 552 billion in 2024, while the International Monetary Fund has highlighted the significant diversification of the UAE economy through the expansion of non-oil sectors, infrastructure investment, financial services, tourism, and foreign trade.¹

The UAE's rapid transformation cannot be adequately explained by the discovery of oil alone. The country's political and economic rise was made possible by the centralised management of hydrocarbon revenues, the use of these revenues for state-building through infrastructure development and social policy, the establishment of a functional division of roles among the individual emirates, and the conversion of accumulated economic resources into long-term global investments. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the UAE is not a unitary emirate governed exclusively by the Al Nahyan family, but a constitutional federation composed of seven emirates, each with its own ruling dynasty and local government. Nevertheless, the Al Nahyan

¹ World Bank. (n.d.). *United Arab Emirates*. World Bank Open Data. Retrieved August 5, 2026, from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/AE>

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leadership of Abu Dhabi, which commands the largest share of the federation's hydrocarbon reserves and financial resources, has occupied a central position both in the formation of the federal state and in the formulation of its foreign policy. The fact that the presidency of the UAE has been held by the rulers of Abu Dhabi since the establishment of the federation in 1971 constitutes an important institutional manifestation of this political predominance. At present, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan serves simultaneously as President of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Abu Dhabi.²

The origins of the Al Nahyan family can be traced to the Bani Yas tribal confederation, which was historically concentrated around the Liwa Oasis. The political foundations of the emirate began to take shape when the family and affiliated communities settled on Abu Dhabi Island in the late eighteenth century. The decisive turning point in the formation of modern Abu Dhabi, however, came with the discovery of oil in 1958 and the first export of crude oil in 1962. Following Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan's accession as Ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1966, oil revenues were channelled into the construction of schools, hospitals, housing, roads, and public institutions. Abu Dhabi also emerged as the principal financial contributor to the development of the other Trucial States. Under the leadership of Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai, six emirates established the United Arab Emirates on 2 December 1971, while Ras Al Khaimah joined the federation in 1972.³

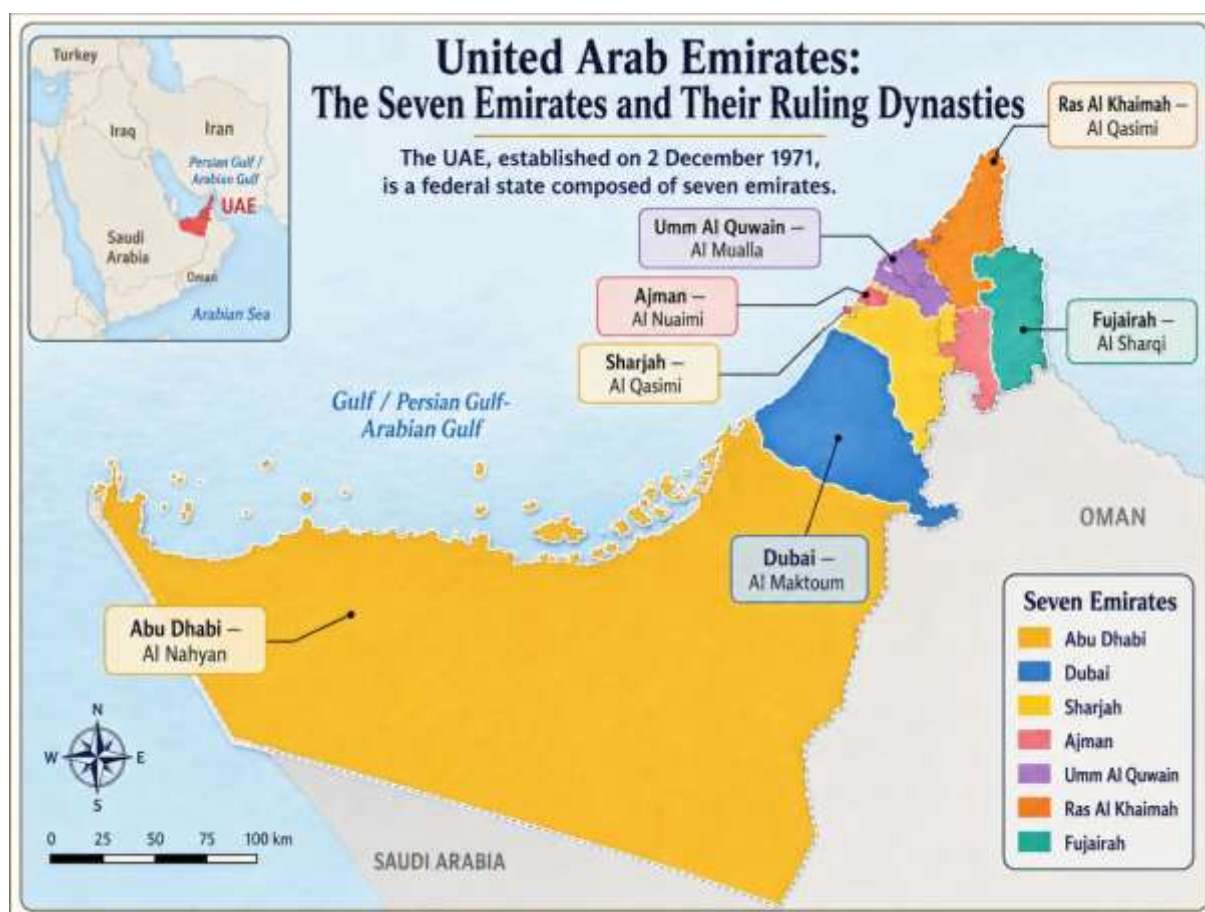


Figure 1: The Seven Emirates and Ruling Dynasties of the United Arab Emirates

Source: Prepared by the author using official UAE sources.

The economic model of the newly established federation was built on the complementarity between Abu Dhabi's hydrocarbon wealth and Dubai's strengths in trade, transportation, and entrepreneurship. While Abu Dhabi channelled its oil revenues into state-building, security, development, and the accumulation of long-term financial reserves, Dubai expanded its international commercial connectivity through ports, free zones, aviation, tourism, finance, and re-export activities. The federal structure, by allowing a degree of policy differentiation, institutional experimentation, and limited economic competition among the emirates, has been regarded as an important factor in the UAE's non-oil diversification. The establishment of the Abu Dhabi

² United Arab Emirates Government. (n.d.). *Fact sheet*. The Official Platform of the UAE Government. Retrieved August 5, 2026, from <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet>

³ Abu Dhabi Residents Office. (n.d.). *History of Abu Dhabi*. Abu Dhabi Government. Retrieved August 5, 2026, from <https://adro.gov.ae/en/About-Abu-Dhabi/History-Of-Abu-Dhabi>

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Investment Authority in 1976 further laid the institutional foundations for transforming current oil revenues into globally diversified assets held for the benefit of future generations. ⁴

Over time, this economic model evolved into a key instrument not only of domestic development but also of foreign policy. State-linked enterprises, investment funds, banks, development institutions, port operators, and energy companies increasingly came to function as institutional extensions of the UAE's international influence. As a result, the country's power has come to depend less on the size of its armed forces or the amount of territory under its direct control than on its ability to shape capital flows, trade routes, ports, logistics hubs, and local political partnerships. In the literature, this model has been conceptualised as that of a "nexus state" or as "a form of network-centred statecraft" in which the boundaries between diplomacy, investment, corporate activity, and security policy have become increasingly permeable. ⁵

Figure 2 illustrates the substantial expansion of the United Arab Emirates' economic presence in Africa, both in terms of investment volume and geographical reach. Between 2012 and 2022, of the USD 101.9 billion in foreign direct investment directed to Africa by Gulf Cooperation Council countries, USD 59.4 billion originated from the UAE. At the country level, Egypt stands out with USD 69.8 billion in investment, followed by Mauritania with USD 34 billion, South Africa with USD 24 billion, Tunisia with USD 9 billion, Morocco with USD 4.6 billion, Algeria with USD 3 billion, Nigeria with USD 2.6 billion, and Somaliland with USD 1.7 billion. This distribution indicates that Emirati capital has been particularly concentrated in strategic markets across North Africa, West Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Southern Africa.

The UAE's investments in Africa extend beyond the pursuit of financial returns. Investments in ports, logistics hubs, energy, mining, and infrastructure are closely linked to strategic trade routes along the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic coast. These investments can therefore be understood not only as part of the UAE's economic diversification agenda, but also as components of a broader strategy aimed at cultivating long-term influence over maritime transport routes and regional trade networks.

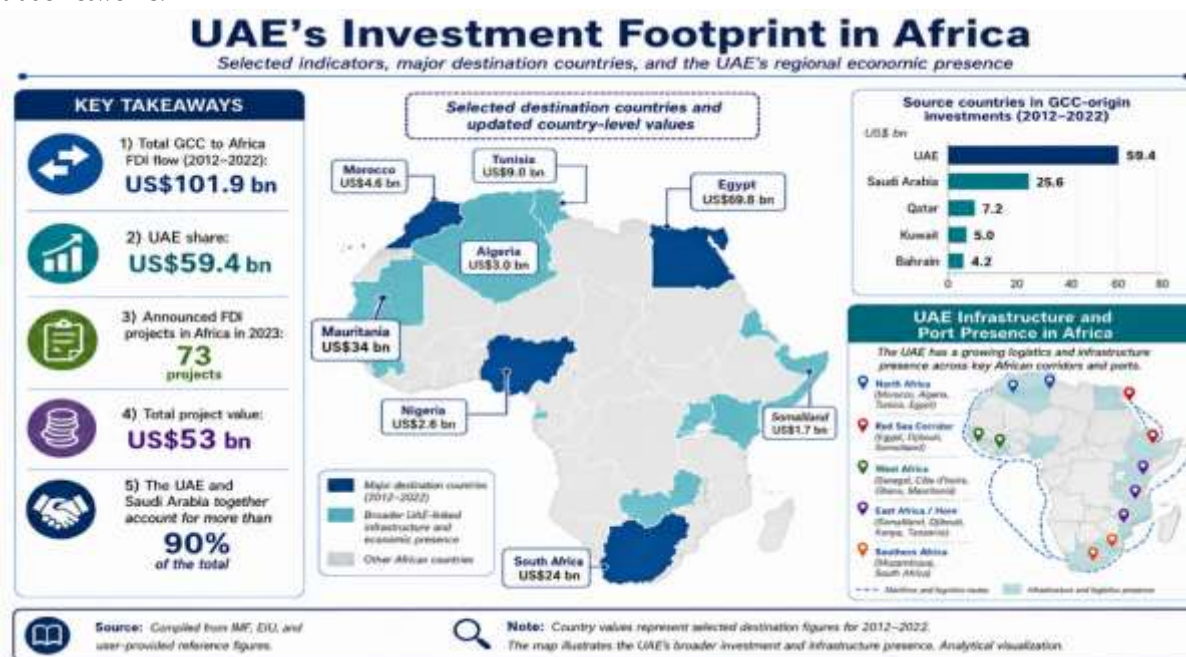


Figure 2. The UAE's Investment and Port Network in Africa

Source: Prepared by the author based on IMF, EIU, and relevant investment data.

A second major transformation in the UAE's foreign policy occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings. During the federation's formative period, the country pursued a comparatively cautious, conciliatory, and low-profile foreign policy. After 2011, however, it adopted a more proactive posture encompassing a wide range of instruments, from military interventions and support for proxy actors to economic pressure and port investments. Academic studies suggest that this shift was driven by a set of mutually reinforcing objectives, including containing political Islam—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—balancing Iran's

⁴ Young, K. E. (2021). Federal benefits: How federalism encourages economic diversification in the United Arab Emirates. In *Oil and the political economy in the Middle East* (pp. 145-163). Manchester University Press.

⁵ Young, K. E. (2017). New perspectives on UAE foreign policy. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7(1), 81-82.

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regional influence, securing influence over strategic ports and maritime routes, and safeguarding the country's long-term economic prosperity.⁶

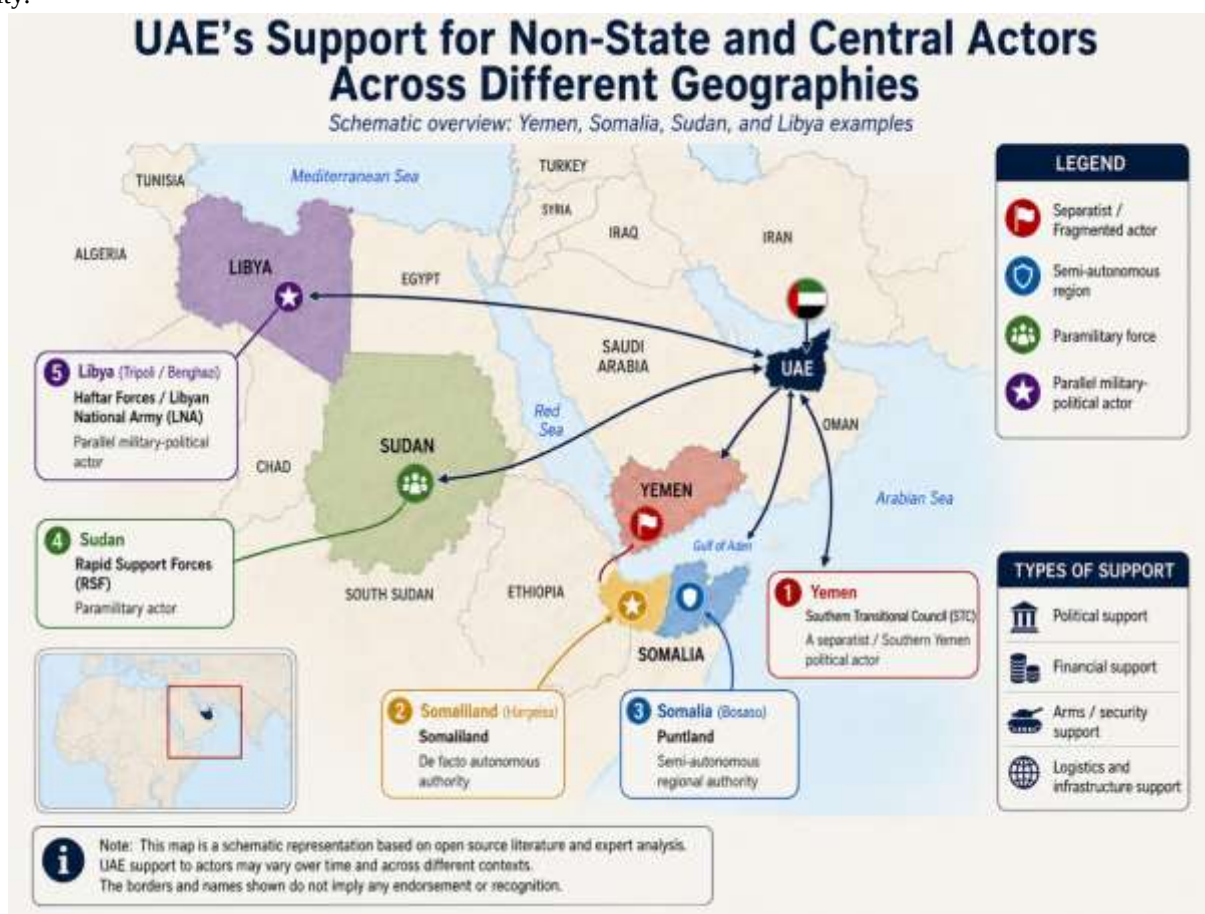


Figure 3. Non-State and Centrifugal Actors Supported by the UAE Across Different Geographical Contexts

Source: Prepared by the author based on open-source literature, international reports, and relevant country studies.

One of the most controversial features of this new foreign policy approach is the UAE's engagement, particularly in weak or conflict-affected states, with sub-state, paramilitary, autonomist, or secessionist actors rather than exclusively with central governments. Prominent examples include the Southern Transitional Council in Yemen, which advocates the restoration of an independent South Yemen; the self-declared Somaliland administration and the highly autonomous region of Puntland in Somalia; the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar in Libya; and the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, which have challenged the military authority of the central state. Andreas Krieg conceptualises this pattern of relationships—whereby such actors remain dependent to varying degrees on the UAE's financial, military, and logistical support while retaining the capacity to pursue their own local agendas—through the notions of an “axis of secessionists” and “weaponised interdependence.” From this perspective, Abu Dhabi derives strategic depth, access, and plausible deniability by constructing a decentralised network that grants local actors a degree of operational autonomy rather than relying on direct and continuous control.⁷

Within this framework, it would be analytically insufficient to characterise the UAE's foreign policy as a conventional form of expansionism based on territorial occupation or formal annexation. Rather than exercising direct rule over territory, the model examined here rests on shaping networks composed of strategic nodes, ports, trade corridors, financial flows, and local armed actors. In this article, “**network-centred expansionism**” refers to a state's capacity to generate durable influence in other countries through economic dependencies, infrastructure investments, non-state partnerships, and security relationships without formally extending its sovereign territory. Used in this sense, expansionism is treated not as a predetermined normative judgement, but as an analytical concept that can be examined through observable instruments, mechanisms, and patterns of influence. Accordingly, the article is guided by the following central research question:

How does the United Arab Emirates combine its support for non-state and centrifugal actors with port, logistics, and strategic investment networks to establish spheres of influence across the Middle East and Africa?

⁶ Almezaini, K. (2017). 11. The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy Since 2011. *Summary Reports*, (19), 21-23.

⁷ Krieg, A. (2025). How Abu Dhabi built an axis of secessionists across the region.

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The article proceeds from the premise that the UAE's policies in Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya should not be understood as a series of isolated interventions. Rather, they are embedded within an integrated model of power projection that combines economic statecraft, the use of proxy actors, port geopolitics, and relationships with local political elites. The central argument of the study is that the UAE has developed a new form of regional expansion that relies on control over strategic nodes rather than conventional territorial domination, influence through intermediaries rather than direct occupation, and networks of capital, infrastructure, and interdependence rather than a permanent military presence.

Focusing on the 2011–2026 period, the study examines the cases of Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya through a structured comparative case analysis. Across each case, the analysis compares the nature of the local actor engaged by the UAE, the forms of support provided, port and logistics investments in the respective context, underlying economic interests, maritime trade routes, and the implications of these relationships for the sovereignty of the central state. Given that some allegations concerning UAE support have been denied by the parties involved or remain contested across different sources, open-source evidence is cross-checked against United Nations reports, court documents, corporate statements, investment data, and academic studies. Rather than adopting the “*axis of secessionists*” thesis uncritically, the article seeks to assess the cases and mechanisms through which this framework provides explanatory value.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Early scholarship on the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) portrayed the country as a small state with limited military capabilities and demographic weight, one that relied heavily on Western partnerships for its security and pursued a cautious approach to foreign policy. Within this body of literature, the foreign policy of the Sheikh Zayed era was explained through such instruments as conciliatory diplomacy, foreign aid, Arab and Islamic solidarity, economic incentives, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. While Almezaini identifies foreign aid as one of the UAE's principal foreign policy instruments, linking the pursuit of identity, national interests, and international visibility, Korany and Dessouki argue that the country compensated for its limited military power through “constructive engagement” and its financial capacity. This perspective rests on the assumption that the UAE was not a power seeking to directly shape the regional order, but rather an actor that adapted to the existing order and generated influence through its economic resources.⁸

Nevertheless, the literature that emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings largely converges on the view that UAE foreign policy underwent a marked transformation. Almezaini explains this shift as the product of an intersection between the perception of the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated political movements as threats to regime security and the emergence of regional power vacuums. Ulrichsen likewise demonstrates that, following the Arab uprisings, the UAE moved beyond the structural constraints typically associated with small states and became directly involved in political transformations in Yemen, Libya, and North Africa. Borck, meanwhile, argues that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar all embraced a discourse of “stability,” yet differed substantially in how they defined its content, giving rise to intense competition for regional influence. Taken together, these studies attribute the UAE's interventionist foreign policy not solely to the perceived threat from Iran, but also to opposition to political Islam, concerns over regime security, the pursuit of a preferred regional order, and threat perceptions at the leadership level.⁹

This transformation has also been examined through the literature on small-state power projection and middle-power behavior. Scholars emphasize that the UAE has been able to generate influence far beyond what its physical size would suggest by leveraging its financial resources, centralized decision-making structure, modernized armed forces, sovereign wealth funds, and state-linked companies. More recent studies indicate that the Emirati leadership no longer views the country as a passive “small state,” but rather as a middle power capable of shaping the regional order. This capacity, however, derives not from a large national manpower base, but from the conversion of capital into military technology, foreign personnel, local partners, and international networks. The UAE's rise is therefore explained less by the accumulation of conventional military power than by its ability to translate financial capacity into instruments of security and foreign policy.¹⁰

At the center of the literature examining the UAE's relations with non-state actors are the concepts of “proxy warfare,” “surrogate warfare,” and the externalization of security assistance. Krieg argues that, in order to overcome its demographic and military manpower constraints, the UAE has provided local armed actors in Yemen and Libya with training, weapons, financing, intelligence, and diplomatic legitimacy. Within this model, the supported groups are not proxies that can be fully controlled in the conventional sense, but rather “surrogate” actors with their own social constituencies and political objectives. In Yemen, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and affiliated security forces, and in Libya, the forces led by Khalifa Haftar, have enabled the UAE to constrain its regional rivals and sustain its influence on the ground while limiting its direct military presence. At the same

⁸ Almezaini, K. S. (2012). *The UAE and foreign policy*.

⁹ Almezaini, K. (2017). 11. The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy Since 2011. *Summary Reports*, (19), 21-23.

¹⁰ Krieg, A. (2022). The UAE's ‘dogs of war’: Boosting a small state's regional power projection. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33(1-2), 152-172.

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time, however, these studies demonstrate that the actors receiving such support have gradually acquired greater autonomy, undermined central states' monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and complicated post-conflict state-building.¹¹

A significant portion of the existing literature on proxy warfare focuses on Yemen and Libya. Studies on Yemen demonstrate that, alongside its objective of countering the Houthis, the UAE has sought to secure access to Yemen's southern coastline, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Gulf of Aden; constrain political Islamist actors such as the al-Islah Party; and establish a security order in the south aligned with its interests. The literature on Libya, meanwhile, emphasizes that the UAE has regarded Haftar not merely as a military ally, but also as a regional partner capable of countering the Muslim Brotherhood and balancing Türkiye's influence. At the same time, there has been criticism of approaches that conceptualize the Libyan conflict solely as a proxy war among external powers. These critiques underscore that local militias and political actors are themselves capable of leveraging external sponsors in pursuit of their own objectives and that, consequently, such relationships should not be understood as a one-directional form of patron-proxy dependency.¹²

The cases of Sudan and Somalia, however, have not been theorized with the same degree of intensity. Studies on Sudan have largely focused on the war economy of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the gold trade, and regional networks of support, while the literature on Somalia has concentrated on the implications of relations established with Somaliland and Puntland for federal sovereignty. These actors differ considerably in their legal and political status: Somaliland is a de facto administration claiming independence, Puntland is an autonomous federal member state, and the RSF is a paramilitary force competing with the central state. Accordingly, classifying all of these actors as "separatist" is analytically misleading. A more comprehensive approach is to examine the UAE's relations with centrifugal actors that operate beyond the authority of central governments and contribute to the formation of alternative spheres of sovereignty.

A second strand of the literature on the UAE's activities in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea examines security policies alongside port and infrastructure investments. Shama and Hassan interpret the UAE's presence in Berbera, Bosaso, Assab, and other coastal locations as part of an emerging maritime strategy that combines security and economic interests around the Bab al-Mandab. The concept of "security interdependence between the Gulf and the Horn of Africa" further suggests that competition among the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, and Iran has transformed the two regions into a single interconnected security space. Within this framework, port operations, military facilities, financial assistance, and relations with local authorities are not treated as separate or unrelated activities, but rather as distinct instruments serving the same broader pursuit of regional order.¹³

Henderson's concept of the "nexus state" provides one of the principal frameworks for explaining the role of the UAE's transport and logistics companies in foreign policy. According to Henderson, the global expansion of state-owned enterprises such as DP World has not only contributed to the diversification of the UAE economy but has also enhanced the country's strategic relevance within the international system. The networks created through ports, terminals, free zones, and logistics corridors have generated a reciprocal relationship between commercial interests and federal foreign policy. From this perspective, the UAE's power derives not from controlling vast territorial spaces, but from positioning itself at strategic nodes through which global flows of goods and capital circulate.¹⁴

Similarly, Ziadah's concept of "circulating power" and her infrastructural approach demonstrate that maritime transport networks constitute not merely economic infrastructure, but also instruments of political power. Ports regulate the circulation not only of commercial goods, but also of military personnel, security equipment, food supplies, and humanitarian assistance. The UAE's port investments in Africa are significant not only in relation to the country's objectives of food security and economic diversification, but also for facilitating access to crisis-affected regions and establishing long-term relationships with local authorities. Stambøl and Berger conceptualize these dynamics in terms of "transnationally entangled (in)securities," arguing that the boundaries between economic infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, and security interventions are becoming increasingly blurred.¹⁵

Studies examining Emirati engagement in Africa from the perspective of development assistance likewise demonstrate the extent to which economic interests and foreign policy have become intertwined. Guéraiche explains the increase in the UAE's aid to Africa after 2013 as the result of a combination of economic opportunities, security concerns, and a new approach to international cooperation. Within this literature, foreign aid is understood not as a neutral or purely humanitarian instrument, but as a foreign

¹¹ Tholens, S., & Al-Jabassini, A. (2024). (Re) ordering the Mediterranean: The evolution of security assistance as an international practice. *Mediterranean politics*, 29(4), 433-453.

¹² Kaussler, B., & Grant, K. A. (2022). *Proxy war in Yemen*. Taylor & Francis.

¹³ Shama, Nael, and Islam Hassan, 'In Pursuit of Security and Influence: The UAE and the Red Sea', in Marcus Dubois King (ed.), *Water and Conflict in the Middle East* (2020; online edn, Oxford Academic, 21 Jan. 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197552636.003.0008>, accessed 5 Aug. 2026.

¹⁴ Henderson, C. (2017). The UAE as a nexus state. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7(1), 83-93.

¹⁵ Stambøl, E. M., & Berger, T. (2023). Transnationally entangled (in) securities: The UAE, Turkey, and the Saharan political economy of danger. *Security Dialogue*, 54(5), 493-514.

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policy mechanism that facilitates trade, investment, political access, and security partnerships. In this way, port investments, development assistance, and diplomatic relations together constitute a mutually reinforcing model of economic statecraft.¹⁶

At the same time, a critical strand has emerged within the literature on ports and infrastructure that challenges UAE-centric explanations. These studies argue that portraying African countries as passive objects of great-power competition overlooks the bargaining capacity and agency of local actors. Djibouti's unilateral termination of the Doraleh Port concession demonstrated that host states can exercise choice among competing investors and seek to reassert sovereignty over critical infrastructure. The literature on the "race for ports" in Africa further emphasizes that, while large-scale infrastructure projects may contribute to development, employment, and connectivity, they can also generate problems related to indebtedness, environmental degradation, external dependence, and the alienation of coastal areas from local communities. UAE investments should therefore be examined not solely through the lens of Abu Dhabi's strategic objectives, but also in relation to the political elites and development preferences of host countries.¹⁷

The academic literature on UAE investments in Europe is more fragmented than the scholarship on Africa and the Red Sea. Existing studies have largely focused on sovereign wealth funds, the energy transition, corporate acquisitions, and the shift toward a knowledge-based economy. The foreign policy dimension of these investments, however, has yet to be examined in a sufficiently systematic manner. The UAE's growing engagement in Europe in sectors such as artificial intelligence, data centers, life sciences, advanced chemicals, and renewable energy suggests that the strategy pursued in Africa—centered on access to resources, ports, and markets—continues in Europe through the acquisition of technology, knowledge, and institutional expertise. European investments should therefore be understood not merely as a means of portfolio diversification, but also as instruments of economic statecraft that reinforce the UAE's post-oil economic model and deepen its strategic interdependence with Western states.

The growing literature on the Abraham Accords examines the rapprochement between the UAE and Israel through the transformation of the regional security architecture. Fakhro and Baconi argue that Israel and the UAE have developed a shared security outlook shaped by common concerns regarding Iran, political Islam, regime security, and the management of domestic dissent. Dana contends that the accords rendered previously developed security ties more visible and institutionalized, while accelerating cooperation in defense technologies, cybersecurity, intelligence, and economically strategic sectors. By contrast, some studies characterize the accords not as a fully established military alliance, but rather as a flexible framework for security and economic cooperation. The persistence of bilateral relations even after the outbreak of the Gaza war suggests that normalization rests not merely on a temporary convergence against Iran, but on deeper and more enduring economic and security interests.¹⁸

Despite this, there remains limited engagement between the literature on the Abraham Accords and studies examining the UAE's ports and relations with non-state actors in Africa. Scholarship on normalization has largely focused on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the balancing of Iran, and the emergence of a new regional security architecture, whereas the literature on Africa has concentrated on ports, investments, and competition in the Red Sea. The ways in which Israel's technological, intelligence, and defense capabilities may complement the UAE's capital, port infrastructure, and networks of local partners have not yet been sufficiently explored. This gap calls for examining the Abraham Accords not so much as a development that initiated the UAE's existing expansionary policy, but rather as an accelerator that enhanced the capacity and international legitimacy of networks that had already been established.

Comparative studies of Iran's proxy network and the UAE's strategy of relying on non-state actors also remain relatively limited. In the existing literature, Iran's "Axis of Resistance" is generally analyzed through the lenses of ideology, forward defense, opposition to the United States and Israel, and its relationships with Shi'a armed groups, whereas the UAE's network is more commonly examined in relation to opposition to political Islam, port security, commercial interests, and authoritarian stability. The two models display certain similarities in their provision of financial and military support to local actors, their cultivation of plausible deniability, and their exploitation of spaces where state authority is weak. A key distinction, however, lies in the nature of the actors on which they rely: whereas the Iranian model is rooted primarily in ideological and social movements, the Emirati model depends more heavily on military elites, secessionist administrations, and commercial-logistical structures.

In this context, the article does not advance the argument that UAE-backed networks emerged from scratch following the weakening of Iran's proxy structures. The UAE's networks in Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and other arenas had already begun to take shape before Iran experienced its recent regional setbacks. Nevertheless, the relative weakening of Iran's traditional proxy architecture has increased the regional weight of UAE-centered networks that are broadly aligned with the United States and Israel.

¹⁶ Guéraiche, W. (2022, May). Between foreign policy and development assistance: The UAE international cooperation in Africa. In *Forum for Development Studies* (Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 211-232). Routledge.

¹⁷ Larsen, J. (2024). Djibouti first: local agency and the geopolitics of ports in infrastructure-led development. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 18(4), 513-533.

¹⁸ Fakhro, E., & Baconi, T. (2022). A shared vision: Security convergence between the Gulf and Israel. *Journal of Palestine studies*, 51(3), 50-55.

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The key question, therefore, is not whether the UAE is directly “replacing” Iran’s proxies in their entirety, but rather how an alternative architecture of influence—built around capital, ports, technology, and centrifugal actors—is gaining prominence at a time when Iran-centered ideological networks are in relative decline.

A central limitation of the existing literature is its tendency to treat the UAE’s military interventions, relations with non-state actors, investments in Africa, port strategy, technology investments in Europe, and the Abraham Accords as largely separate fields of inquiry. This article, by contrast, brings these instruments together under the framework of network-centered security and geoeconomic power projection. It examines, on the one hand, the UAE’s local partnerships in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia and, on the other, its African ports, logistics corridors, investments in natural resources, and technology partnerships in Europe as components of the same strategic system. From this perspective, the article argues that the UAE is not constructing an empire based on territorial annexation in the classical sense; rather, it is developing a fragmented yet interconnected informal sphere of influence through non-state actors, strategic infrastructure, capital, and technology.

Drawing on the existing literature, this study makes three original contributions. First, rather than generalizing the concept of the “separatist actor” across all cases, it employs the broader category of centrifugal actors, encompassing separatist, autonomous, paramilitary, and parallel military-political authorities. Second, it does not treat military and economic instruments as analytically separate; instead, it examines how port investments and support for local armed actors complement one another within the same geographical spaces. Third, the UAE’s rise is situated within the broader context of the relative decline of Iran’s proxy architecture, the Abraham Accords, the strategic umbrella provided by the United States, and the UAE’s expanding security and technology ties with Israel. In doing so, the article conceptualizes the UAE not merely as an interventionist small state or a global investor, but as a geoeconomic power that integrates security, capital, infrastructure, and technology within a single foreign policy network.

METHOD OF STUDY

This study is designed as a qualitative, explanatory, and multi-case research project aimed at accounting for the regional and global influence strategy developed by the United Arab Emirates since 2011. Its central research question is how the UAE combines its support for non-state and centrifugal actors with networks of ports, logistics, investment, and technology to establish durable spheres of influence across different geographical contexts. Accordingly, the study examines the UAE’s security policies and economic activities not as two separate domains of foreign policy, but as mutually reinforcing instruments of the same strategy of power projection.

The analytical framework of the study consists of two levels. At the first level, the analysis focuses on the UAE’s relations with separatist, autonomous, paramilitary, or parallel military-political actors in Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya. At the second level, it examines ports and logistics corridors in Africa, investments in energy and mining, and investments in technology, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and advanced industries in Europe. By integrating these two levels within a single research design, the study seeks to identify the conditions under which military-security and economic instruments converge around the same geographical and political objectives. In this respect, the unit of analysis is not individual investment projects or armed groups, but rather the mechanisms of influence established by the UAE within a particular country or around a strategic node.

Research Design and Case Selection

The study employs a structured, focused comparative case-study method. Under structured comparison, the same set of analytical questions is applied to each country case, while the focused dimension refers to examining only those actors, investments, and forms of interaction that are directly relevant to explaining the study’s central argument. The cases are selected not for purposes of statistical representativeness, but through purposive and theoretical sampling designed to capture the diversity of the UAE’s foreign policy instruments and the variation in their outcomes.

Yemen represents the UAE’s relationship with an explicitly separatist movement as well as the dynamics of UAE–Saudi rivalry; Somalia illustrates port-centered influence exercised through an unrecognized administration and federal member states; Sudan captures the intersection between a paramilitary actor, the gold trade, and the war economy; and Libya represents a proxy relationship conducted through a parallel military-political authority. Countries such as Eritrea, Djibouti, Chad, and Ethiopia are not treated as independent core cases, but rather as supplementary cases used to illuminate the logistical and regional linkages of these networks.

A similar purposive selection strategy is applied in the geoeconomic analysis. The African cases are selected on the basis of the scale of UAE investment, their position along port and transport corridors, access to natural resources, and the nature of the political relationship established with the host state. Egypt, Mauritania, the South Africa–Mozambique corridor, North African countries, Somaliland, Senegal, Tanzania, the Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Djibouti are examined according to these criteria. The European cases of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, by contrast, are selected to assess the extent to which UAE capital serves functions related to the acquisition of technology, knowledge, energy-transition capabilities, and institutional expertise, in contrast to the more port-, market-, and resource-centered strategy pursued in developing regions.

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Temporal and Geographic Scope

The study focuses primarily on the period from 2011 to 2026. The year 2011 is taken as the starting point because, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, UAE foreign policy began to shift from a cautious and relatively low-profile posture toward a more interventionist orientation. Nevertheless, the period from 1971 to 2010 is incorporated as historical background in order to explain the development of the UAE's federal structure, economic capacity, and state-linked investment institutions. The year 2020, when the Abraham Accords were signed, is treated not as a separate starting point but as a critical juncture at which previously established security and economic networks accelerated and became further institutionalized through relations with Israel and the United States.

The study's primary geographical focus encompasses the Middle East, the Red Sea basin, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. European countries are also included in order to provide a comparative dimension through which to assess the UAE's global economic influence and its post-oil strategy of technological acquisition. Accordingly, the study does not seek to compile a comprehensive global inventory of all UAE foreign investments; rather, it aims to explain those geographical arenas in which the UAE's capacity to generate security and geoeconomic influence is most clearly manifested.

Data Collection and Sources

The research is based on the systematic examination of primary and secondary open-source materials. Primary sources include reports of United Nations Security Council Panels of Experts, sanctions and arms embargo documentation, judgments and decisions of the International Court of Justice, official statements by the states concerned, intergovernmental agreements, investment contracts, and corporate reports. Annual reports, press releases, and project announcements issued by state-linked entities such as DP World, AD Ports Group, ADQ, Mubadala, Masdar, ADIA, and XRG are used to identify the sector, scale, duration, and geographical location of investments.

Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic studies, books, think-tank reports, and reporting by reputable international news organizations. Investment data are compiled from sources including the IMF, the World Bank, UNCTAD, fDi Markets, and the EIU, as well as from official institutions in host countries and corporate disclosures. With regard to allegations concerning support provided to non-state actors, no conclusions are drawn on the basis of a single source. Instead, source triangulation is conducted across UN documentation, academic research, field-based reports, official statements, and independent journalism. Claims denied by the UAE government or by the actors concerned are explicitly identified as such, and unverified assessments are not presented as established facts.

To avoid conflating different investment indicators, the study distinguishes between foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, FDI stock, announced project value, investment commitments, and realized investment. Figures are reported in nominal US dollar values as stated in the original sources, and direct comparisons are made only between indicators representing the same type of data and covering comparable time periods. Figures that include joint ventures, planned projects, or investments that have not yet been completed are classified as "announced investment" and are not interpreted as realized capital inflows. Maps and infographics, meanwhile, are used not as evidence of causality, but as supplementary analytical tools for visualizing the geographical distribution of investments and strategic linkages.

Operationalization of Key Concepts

The study's core concept, *network-centered expansionism*, is defined as the UAE's capacity to generate durable influence without formally annexing the territory of other states, through partnerships with non-state actors, security relationships, investments in strategic infrastructure, economic dependencies, and long-term concessions. This concept is examined through four observable indicators:

1. The establishment of sustained relationships with local armed, autonomous, or centrifugal actors;
2. The acquisition of access to strategic nodes such as ports, airports, economic zones, mining sites, or trade corridors;
3. The combined use of financing, investment, military training, logistics, and diplomatic legitimation;
4. The ability of the influence thus established to persist even after a reduction in direct military presence.

The concept of the "centrifugal actor" is employed in recognition of the fact that not all of the entities examined in this study are separatist. The category encompasses separatist movements, de facto autonomous administrations, paramilitary forces, and parallel military-political authorities that operate outside the effective control of the central government and create alternative spheres of sovereignty or security. This framework makes it possible to compare the Southern Transitional Council, Somaliland, Puntland, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the Haftar-led structure within a common analytical framework while preserving their distinct legal and political characteristics.

Geoeconomic influence, meanwhile, is operationalized as the use of economic instruments to generate political access, strategic positioning, technological acquisition, and international bargaining leverage beyond their immediate commercial returns. The geoeconomic character of an investment is assessed according to whether it is undertaken by a state-linked entity, directed toward a strategic sector or transport node, creates a long-term concession or partnership, and has implications for the UAE's security or diplomatic relations with the host country.

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Analytical Process and Criteria for Assessing Success

For each security-related case, the study seeks to answer the following questions: Who is the local actor with which the UAE has established a relationship, and what is its legal status? What forms does the support provided take—military, financial, political, diplomatic, or logistical? Which ports, resources, or transport routes are associated with the actor in question? With which regional or global actors is the UAE competing in the country concerned? What consequences does the relationship have for the sovereignty of the central state and the country's political integrity? To what extent does the local partner remain responsive to UAE influence, and to what extent does it act autonomously?

Process tracing is employed to reconstruct the sequence of developments within each case and identify plausible causal linkages. The UAE's intervention, changes in the capacity of the local actor, access to strategic locations, responses by rival states, and the resulting political outcomes are traced chronologically. This makes it possible to distinguish whether the strengthening of a local actor can be attributed primarily to UAE support or whether it has also been shaped by civil-war dynamics, other external sponsors, and local social alliances.

The success of UAE policy is assessed across three distinct dimensions. *Operational success* is measured by the extent to which the supported actor enhances its military and institutional capacity, establishes control over a particular area, or enables the UAE to maintain access to strategic nodes. *Political success* refers to Abu Dhabi's capacity to influence national decision-making processes, peace settlements, or the regional balance of power. *Strategic sustainability* is assessed in terms of whether the influence acquired can be maintained over time, taking into account host-state responses, the growing autonomy of local partners, countermeasures by rival powers, and the diplomatic, legal, and reputational costs that may arise. This distinction prevents tactical gains achieved on the ground from being automatically equated with long-term political success.

In the geoeconomic cases, emphasis is placed on the strategic function of an investment rather than on its financial scale alone. The analysis considers the maritime basin and overland corridor to which a port or infrastructure project is connected, whether it facilitates access to hinterland markets, its position within energy or critical-mineral supply chains, the duration of the concession, and its effects on the host state's relations with the UAE. In the case of investments in Europe, additional criteria include access to technology transfer, research capabilities, renewable-energy expertise, artificial-intelligence infrastructure, and advanced industrial know-how

Causality Regarding Iran's Proxy Network and the Abraham Accords

The study does not test the relationship between the decline of Iran's proxy architecture and the rise of UAE-backed networks as a direct process of "replacement." Chronologically, a significant portion of the UAE's networks in Yemen, Libya, and the Horn of Africa had already been established before the recent weakening of Iran-backed actors. The analysis therefore does not assume that Iran's decline gave rise to Emirati networks; rather, it examines whether that decline increased the relative importance and room for maneuver of networks that the UAE had already established.

Similarly, the Abraham Accords are treated not as an independent initiating cause, but as an intervening variable capable of accelerating existing security, technology, and investment relationships. The study compares the periods before and after the accords in terms of defense cooperation, technology transfer, diplomatic legitimacy, and the convergence of strategic interests in third-country contexts. Rather than assuming that the United States and Israel directly support all of the UAE's local partners, their role is assessed in terms of the conditions through which they have expanded Abu Dhabi's military capabilities, technological resources, and international room for maneuver.

Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

To enhance the reliability of the research, a source hierarchy and cross-validation strategy are employed. Although official documents and United Nations reports are given priority, the study recognizes that these sources are not entirely independent of the political positions of the institutions that produce them. State and corporate statements are used primarily to establish the existence of a particular investment or activity, while assessments of its impact and effectiveness are cross-checked against independent academic research and field-based studies. Evidence that does not conform to the study's central argument is also incorporated into the analysis. The termination of the port concession in Djibouti, Saudi Arabia's efforts to constrain UAE-backed forces in Yemen, Türkiye's role in halting Haftar's advance in Libya, and delays affecting some major investment projects are treated as counterexamples that reveal the limits of the UAE's strategy of influence.

The principal limitation of the study stems from the opaque nature of decision-making in the UAE's external security policy and the fact that support for non-state actors is often conducted covertly. As a result, direct documentary evidence covering all dimensions of patron-proxy relationships is not always available. Comparability is further constrained by differences in the periods and methodologies used to compile investment data, the fact that not all announced projects are ultimately realized, and the variation in project values reported across different sources. The study's reliance on open-source materials rather than fieldwork and interviews also limits the extent to which the perceptions of local actors can be incorporated into the analysis. Moreover, because the cases are selected purposively, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to UAE foreign policy as a whole. Instead, the

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study seeks to achieve analytical generalization by identifying recurring mechanisms across different geographical contexts and explaining how the UAE integrates its security and economic instruments.

Through this methodological framework, the study moves beyond approaches that portray the UAE either solely as an interventionist power supporting non-state actors or merely as a global economic investor. By examining military partnerships, port concessions, financial investments, and technology relationships as different components of the same network, the research comparatively assesses not only the UAE's capacity to generate influence, but also the costs, constraints, and long-term sustainability of this model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Power Projection through Non-State Actors: The UAE's Strategy of Regional Influence

The foreign policy pursued by the United Arab Emirates in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings has moved beyond conventional forms of diplomatic influence and has increasingly been built around relationships with local armed groups, autonomous administrations, separatist movements, paramilitary forces, and de facto regional authorities. Abu Dhabi's engagement with these actors extends well beyond the provision of weapons, training, or financial assistance. Port operations, airports, trade corridors, mining and agricultural investments, security companies, and diplomatic connections together constitute a broader infrastructure of influence that complements military support. The UAE's foreign policy model can therefore be conceptualized as a form of network-centered power projection that seeks to control strategic nodes through local actors rather than through direct occupation or formal annexation. A defining feature of this network—described in parts of the literature as a “separatist axis”—is that local actors retain a degree of autonomy while becoming increasingly dependent on Abu Dhabi for financing, logistics, external legitimacy, and access to international markets.¹⁹

The objectives that the UAE seeks to achieve through this policy can be grouped under four broad headings. First, it aims to construct a regional order conducive to monarchical regime security by preventing the Muslim Brotherhood and politically affiliated movements from gaining power. Second, it seeks access to ports and logistics hubs located along critical maritime routes such as the Bab al-Mandab, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Third, as a state with a limited population, the UAE seeks to outsource security functions to local partners in order to reduce its own military casualties and political costs. Fourth, it aims to enhance its bargaining leverage vis-à-vis major powers by positioning itself as an indispensable mediator, financier, or security provider in regional crises. This model enables the UAE to exercise influence across a broad geographical space with a relatively low profile, a degree of plausible deniability, and comparatively limited costs. At the same time, however, its principal vulnerabilities stem from the ability of local partners to pursue their own interests, Abu Dhabi's limited capacity to exercise full control over these actors, and the tendency of supported structures to further weaken state authority.²⁰

1.1. Yemen: Separatist Partnership and Divergence with Saudi Arabia

Yemen constitutes one of the clearest examples of the UAE's strategy of projecting influence through non-state actors. In 2015, Abu Dhabi joined the Saudi-led coalition with the stated objectives of halting the advance of the Houthis, limiting Iranian influence in Yemen, and combating al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Within a relatively short period, however, the UAE's objectives began to diverge from Riyadh's priorities. While Saudi Arabia supported the preservation of the internationally recognized central government, the UAE trained, equipped, and supported the institutionalization of separatist and Salafi forces in southern Yemen. Established in 2017, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) became the principal UAE-backed actor seeking to restore the independence of the former South Yemen. At the same time, the UAE regarded the al-Islah Party, which it viewed as affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, as a threat comparable in seriousness to the Houthis.²¹

This policy generated significant tactical gains for the UAE. Emirati-backed forces established a strong presence in Aden, Shabwah, Socotra, and various parts of Yemen's southern coastline, while Abu Dhabi was able to preserve its influence in southern Yemen through local partners even after reducing its direct military presence from 2019 onward. In particular, the security network established around ports, islands, and maritime routes helped prevent the UAE's military drawdown from immediately translating into a loss of influence. According to an assessment by the Brookings Institution, Abu Dhabi emerged as the dominant external

¹⁹ Salisbury, P. (2020). *Risk perception and appetite in UAE foreign and national security policy*. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

²⁰ Salisbury, P. (2020). *Risk perception and appetite in UAE foreign and national security policy*. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

²¹ Juneau, T. (2025, March 26). *External intervention and damages to human security in Yemen*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/external-intervention-and-damages-to-human-security-in-yemen/>

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actor in southern Yemen. At the same time, however, the presence of the STC did not strengthen Yemen's central authority; on the contrary, it contributed to further fragmentation within the anti-Houthi camp.²²

The Yemen case also clearly exposed the strategic divergence between the UAE and Saudi Arabia. While Riyadh sought to preserve Yemen's formal unity and support the Saudi-aligned Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), Abu Dhabi developed its influence in coastal areas through the STC and other local formations. In Hadramout, two distinct spheres of influence emerged: Saudi Arabia exercised greater influence over the interior and tribal networks, while the UAE maintained stronger influence along the coast, over ports, and among STC-affiliated forces. Saudi Arabia's support for the Hadramout National Council (HNC) and the Homeland Shield Forces has been interpreted as a balancing effort aimed at constraining Emirati influence.²³

By the end of 2025, the STC's expansion into Hadramout and al-Mahra had brought what had previously been a form of managed competition closer to an open Saudi-Emirati confrontation. This advance was perceived as a direct threat to Saudi border security and to Oman's interests in eastern Yemen, bringing Saudi-backed forces and UAE-backed groups into direct confrontation. Recent assessments suggest that this rupture did not amount to the complete erosion of Emirati influence in Yemen, but rather exposed the limits of Abu Dhabi's proxy network. The UAE succeeded in establishing durable local partnerships and securing strategic access points in southern Yemen; however, it was unable to translate these gains into a unified and stable political order. Its strategy also generated tensions with Saudi Arabia and Oman and contributed to the further fragmentation of Yemen. Accordingly, the UAE's performance in Yemen may be assessed as high in operational terms, but limited in political and strategic terms.²⁴

1.2. Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland: Circumventing Sovereignty through Ports

In Somalia, the UAE's policy has been based on establishing direct relations with federal member states and de facto autonomous administrations rather than primarily engaging with the Federal Government of Somalia. Abu Dhabi has developed security and investment ties with Somaliland, Puntland, and, to a lesser extent, Jubaland, while securing long-term concessions at the ports of Berbera and Bosaso through DP World. The investment in the Port of Berbera in Somaliland has integrated port operations with road infrastructure, an airport, security cooperation, and a trade corridor extending into Ethiopia. Relations established with the Port of Bosaso and security forces in Puntland have provided the UAE with an additional point of logistical access along the southern shore of the Gulf of Aden. This approach has brought the UAE into competition with Türkiye and Qatar. Türkiye has become one of the Federal Government of Somalia's most important security partners, training Somali forces through the TURKSOM military training facility in Mogadishu, providing military equipment, and expanding cooperation in the field of maritime security. Qatar has likewise generally supported an approach centered on a strong Somali federal government. The UAE, by contrast, has not regarded the concentration of authority in the central government as conducive to its interests and has instead favored a more fragmented political order that expands the room for maneuver of the federal member states and Somaliland. Somalia has thus become an arena of competition between the Türkiye- and Qatar-backed approach centered on the federal government and the UAE's strategy of cultivating influence through subnational and regional authorities.²⁵

A positive dimension of the UAE's policy in Somalia, from Abu Dhabi's perspective, is the potential of investments in ports such as Berbera and Bosaso to enhance trade capacity, transport infrastructure, and local economic activity. At the same time, however, the fact that these agreements were concluded by bypassing Mogadishu demonstrates that economic investment cannot be analytically separated from questions of political sovereignty. The Federal Government of Somalia regarded agreements concluded with Somaliland in particular as incompatible with Somalia's territorial integrity and, in January 2026, terminated certain security and defense agreements with the UAE on sovereignty grounds. Thus, while Abu Dhabi achieved significant gains at the level of local partnerships and strategic ports, its approach also generated a crisis of confidence in its relations with the Somali state.²⁶

The Somaliland case represents a particularly notable example of the convergence of UAE and Israeli interests in the post-Abraham Accords period. On 26 December 2025, Israel recognized Somaliland as an independent and sovereign state, with Israeli officials explicitly linking the decision to the spirit of the Abraham Accords. Somaliland, in turn, expressed its willingness to join the accords. From Israel's perspective, Somaliland's proximity to the Bab al-Mandab, the security of maritime routes, and the monitoring of Houthi and Iran-linked activities are of strategic importance, while for the UAE, Berbera has long constituted a key

²² Juneau, T. (2025, March 26). *External intervention and damages to human security in Yemen*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/external-intervention-and-damages-to-human-security-in-yemen/>

²³ Jalal, I. (2024). Saudi-Emirati divergences lead Hadhramawt to a crossroad.

²⁴ Young, M. (2025, December 19). *Where might developments in Yemen lead?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/12/where-might-developments-in-yemen-lead>

²⁵ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025, July 8). *Mapping Gulf state actors' expanding engagements in East Africa*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/gulf-state-actors-east-africa/>

²⁶ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025, July 8). *Mapping Gulf state actors' expanding engagements in East Africa*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/gulf-state-actors-east-africa/>

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node in its port, trade, and security networks. At the same time, the available open-source evidence does not conclusively demonstrate that Israel's recognition decision was directly orchestrated by the UAE. What can be identified, therefore, is not a proven joint command mechanism, but rather an emerging strategic convergence of interests in the fields of maritime security and regional influence.²⁷

1.3. Sudan: The RSF, the Gold Economy, and Regional Polarization

In Sudan, the principal actor associated with the UAE is the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Rather than constituting a separatist movement, the RSF is a paramilitary organization with its own military, economic, and administrative networks that challenges the central state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. UN documentation, field-based research, and various international reports have raised allegations that the UAE has provided the RSF with weapons, financing, and logistical support. Abu Dhabi, however, rejects these allegations and maintains that its engagement in Sudan is limited to humanitarian assistance and diplomatic efforts aimed at mediation. Accordingly, in academic terms, UAE support should not be presented as an uncontested or definitively established fact, but rather as a relationship supported by substantial documentary and investigative evidence while remaining explicitly denied by Emirati authorities.²⁸

The UAE's interests in Sudan lie at the intersection of the gold trade, agriculture and food security, Red Sea ports, maritime routes, and opposition to political Islam. The RSF's gold production and trading networks have played a central role in financing the war, while the UAE has become one of the principal external markets for Sudanese gold. This economic relationship has contributed to a war economy that cannot be considered entirely separately from allegations of military support. Through its relationships in Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Libya, the UAE has also developed a broad sphere of economic and logistical connectivity around Sudan. In Sudan, Egypt stands out as one of the principal actors opposing the UAE's position. Cairo regards the Sudanese military as the institution representing the country's territorial integrity and institutional continuity and supports the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have also, to varying degrees, moved closer to the SAF or adopted approaches that prioritize preventing the disintegration of the central state. Saudi Arabia has simultaneously assumed a mediation role through the Jeddah talks, while remaining concerned about the possibility of the UAE securing a permanent port presence and an enduring sphere of influence on the Red Sea. Sudan's war has thus become one of the clearest arenas of regional competition between the UAE and Egypt and, increasingly, between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.²⁹

The overall success of the UAE's policy in Sudan remains contested. The RSF has established a significant military and economic foothold in Darfur and other parts of western Sudan, thereby providing Abu Dhabi with a local partner potentially capable of shaping Sudan's future political trajectory. However, the RSF has failed to establish control over the country as a whole, while the prolongation of the war has inflicted considerable reputational costs on the UAE and prompted the Sudanese authorities to accuse Abu Dhabi directly of being a party to the conflict. Sudan's case against the UAE before the International Court of Justice was removed from the Court's List in May 2025 on the grounds that the Court lacked jurisdiction. This decision did not constitute an exoneration of the UAE on the merits of the allegations. Sudan therefore represents a case in which the UAE has gained short-term military influence while simultaneously incurring significant long-term diplomatic, legal, and reputational costs.

1.4. Libya: Parallel Sovereignty through Haftar's Forces

In Libya, the UAE's principal partner has been Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) under his leadership. Haftar's movement is not formally separatist; nevertheless, by establishing its own military, administrative, and economic institutions in eastern Libya, it has created a parallel sphere of authority that rivals the Tripoli-based government. The UAE's financial, military, and logistical support, together with assistance from Egypt and Russia, contributed to Haftar's ability to develop air capabilities, gain access to heavy weaponry, and consolidate disparate militias in eastern Libya under a more centralized command structure. Türkiye has been the UAE's principal rival in the Libyan theater. Ankara supported the Tripoli-based, internationally recognized government through military advisers, strategic cooperation arrangements, and the provision of military equipment, while Qatar remained politically and diplomatically aligned with the Tripoli camp. Türkiye's intervention in 2019–2020 prevented Haftar from capturing Tripoli, thereby thwarting one of the UAE's most ambitious objectives in Libya. Haftar nevertheless retained substantial influence across eastern and southern Libya, meaning that the UAE's strategy did not fail entirely; however, Abu Dhabi fell short of its broader objective of shaping the country as a whole through its local ally. Years of violations

²⁷ Marchal, R. (2026). The Recognition of Somaliland by Israel as an Indicator of a Geopolitical Dynamic between the Horn and the Gulf. *Les Analyses du CERI*, 20-pages.

²⁸ United Nations Security Council. (n.d.). *Reports: Panel of Experts on the Sudan*. Retrieved August 5, 2026, from <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1591/panel-of-experts/reports>

²⁹ Soliman, A., & Baldo, S. (2025). Gold and the War in Sudan. *Chatham House*.

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of the arms embargo and continued external intervention have, in turn, entrenched Libya's division between two rival centers of political authority.³⁰

By 2025 and 2026, Türkiye's efforts to deepen its relations with the authorities in eastern Libya also suggested that Haftar was unwilling to remain dependent on a single external patron. Similarly, the UAE has at times sought to position itself not merely as a military backer but also as an intermediary capable of engaging with competing camps, including by facilitating economic understandings between Tripoli and the eastern authorities. These developments demonstrate that proxy actors are not simply direct extensions of their patron states; rather, they can cultivate relationships with multiple external actors in order to enhance their own legitimacy and bargaining capacity. In Libya, the UAE's strategy can be considered significant insofar as it contributed to transforming Haftar into a durable veto player, but limited in terms of unifying the country, establishing a stable political order, and excluding rival external powers.³¹

1.5. Eritrea, Chad, and Other Logistical Nodes

The UAE's proxy strategy is not limited to the direct provision of support to local armed groups. The facility at Assab in Eritrea became a major logistical hub during the Yemen campaign, supporting the deployment and operation of aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, and naval assets. Berbera in Somaliland, Bosaso in Puntland, air facilities in Egypt and Libya, and transport nodes in Chad have similarly been characterized not as permanent conventional bases, but as flexible forward operating locations that can be expanded, scaled back, or converted to civilian use in response to operational requirements. This network enables the UAE to maintain a relatively low-visibility military presence while linking multiple theaters of conflict. Ethiopia is also one of the UAE's key partners in the Horn of Africa. Abu Dhabi's investment and financial support for Ethiopia intersect with the development of the Berbera–Ethiopia corridor. This growing relationship has heightened Somalia's sovereignty concerns while also reinforcing Egyptian suspicions toward the UAE, particularly in the context of the Nile dispute and Ethiopia's pursuit of access to the sea. Abu Dhabi's networks therefore extend beyond bilateral relations with individual states, linking the crises in Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Yemen as interconnected components of a broader Red Sea security system.³²

1.6. From Emirate to Empire?

It is difficult to characterize the UAE's foreign policy practice as an empire in the classical sense. Abu Dhabi does not formally annex the territories of other states, establish an extensive colonial bureaucracy, or exercise absolute administrative control over the actors it supports. Nevertheless, the network formed through ports, military facilities, corporate concessions, financial dependencies, and local armed partners gives rise to the appearance of an informal or networked empire. Sovereignty in this configuration is neither continuous nor directly exercised across territory; rather, it is fragmented and functional, concentrated around strategic nodes. Abu Dhabi's objective is less to govern an entire country than to secure access to a port, airport, mining site, border crossing, or local decision-maker.

The notion of a transformation “from emirate to empire” can therefore be employed as an analytical metaphor rather than as a legal or historical classification. The structure created by the UAE resembles maritime commercial empires that connected trading posts, coastal cities, and local clients more closely than it does the classical land-based empires. Yet the geographical breadth of the network should not be equated with the strength of centralized control. The rupture with Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Haftar's cultivation of alternative external partners in Libya, Somalia's termination of agreements with the UAE, and the diplomatic and legal costs arising from Sudan demonstrate that the UAE is capable of expanding its reach without necessarily being able to control the outcomes of that expansion.

1.7. The Abraham Accords: Not the Beginning of a New Policy, but Its Accelerator

The UAE's policy of relying on non-state actors predates the Abraham Accords. Its support for Haftar, forces in southern Yemen, and actors in Puntland and Somaliland had already taken shape several years before 2020. The Abraham Accords therefore cannot be regarded as the starting point of this strategy. Their principal significance lies instead in creating a new strategic environment in which the UAE could connect its existing networks of influence with Israel's capabilities in intelligence, cybersecurity, surveillance technologies, and the defense industry, as well as with Israel's diplomatic influence in Washington. The opening of Israel's first national defense-industry pavilion in Abu Dhabi by the Israeli Ministry of Defense in 2023, the significant share attained by Abraham Accords countries in Israeli defense exports in 2024, and, most recently, the deployment of Iron Dome

³⁰ Lacher, W. (2024). Social cleavages and armed group consolidation: the case of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 47(9), 1065-1089.

³¹ Lacher, W. (2024). Social cleavages and armed group consolidation: the case of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 47(9), 1065-1089.

³² Todman, W. (2018, November 20). *The Gulf scramble for Africa: GCC states' foreign policy laboratory*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-scramble-africa-gcc-states-foreign-policy-laboratory>

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air defense systems in the UAE amid the U.S.–Iran war all indicate the progressive institutionalization of the security dimension of normalization.³³

The accords have also provided the UAE with additional political legitimacy in its relations with the United States. Washington has viewed Israeli–Emirati normalization as part of a more integrated regional security and economic order and, through initiatives such as I2U2 and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), has positioned the UAE as one of the central nodes of an emerging regional connectivity architecture. The U.S.–UAE strategic partnership has deepened across the fields of defense, trade, energy, space, and diplomacy. These developments, however, do not imply that Washington directly supports all aspects of Abu Dhabi's proxy policies. The United States sought to constrain the offensive on Hodeidah in Yemen, supported the UN arms embargo on Libya, and has at times expressed concerns regarding the UAE's local partners. It is therefore more accurate to conceptualize the U.S. role not as direct sponsorship of Emirati proxies, but as a broader strategic umbrella that enhances the UAE's military capabilities, diplomatic assurance, and international freedom of maneuver.³⁴

Israel's recognition of Somaliland at the end of 2025 is particularly significant in terms of extending the geopolitical implications of the Abraham Accords beyond the Middle East into the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. The fact that the recognition decision was explicitly framed in the spirit of the Abraham Accords, together with Somaliland's stated willingness to join the accords, indicates the deepening of Israeli diplomatic and strategic engagement in a region where the UAE has long maintained an economic and security presence. The accords have therefore evolved beyond a mechanism of bilateral normalization into a broader framework for an expanding regional network structured around maritime security, the containment of Iran, strategic ports, and the incorporation of new diplomatic partners.³⁵

1.8. Are UAE-Backed Actors Replacing Iran's Proxy Forces?

The weakening of Iran's proxy network has increased the regional significance of the network of non-state and centrifugal actors that the UAE had previously established. Supported by Abu Dhabi's expanding strategic ties with the United States and Israel, this network has increasingly emerged as an alternative proxy architecture—one that competes with the Iranian model while remaining broadly aligned with the Western security system. There are notable structural similarities between the Iranian and Emirati models. Both states seek to avoid the costs associated with direct military occupation, enhance the capabilities of local armed actors, generate forms of interdependence between patron and proxy, and rely on distributed networks that make the attribution of responsibility more difficult. In both systems, proxies are not entirely passive instruments; they possess their own social constituencies, economic interests, and political objectives. Iran's network has capitalized on weak state structures and internal conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, while the UAE's network has done so in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa.³⁶

Nevertheless, the two models differ significantly in their objectives and ideological foundations. Iran's network has been shaped around revolutionary ideology, Shi'a political identity, opposition to Israel and the United States, and a strategy of “forward defense.” The UAE's network, by contrast, is grounded less in ideological mobilization than in opposition to political Islam, the security of trade routes, access to ports, natural resources, and a conception of authoritarian stability. While Iran-backed groups tend to portray themselves as anti-Western resistance movements, the UAE's partners are more commonly legitimized as counterterrorism forces, regional security actors, federal administrations, or authorities capable of providing stability. This distinction has contributed to the UAE facing considerably less sanctions pressure and political coercion from Western states than Iran.

Since 2024, Iran's Axis of Resistance has suffered significant military and political setbacks: Hamas and Hezbollah have been weakened, the allied regime in Syria has collapsed, and Iran's deterrence capacity has increasingly come into question following the military operations conducted against Iran by Israel and the United States in June 2025 and again in 2026. Nevertheless, the axis has not disappeared entirely. The Houthis and armed groups in Iraq have continued to develop new forms of cooperation, demonstrating the network's capacity to adapt to changing regional conditions.

It would therefore be misleading to speak of a single proxy space that has been completely vacated by Iran and subsequently filled by the UAE. A more accurate assessment is that the relative weight of the UAE–Israel-linked security architecture has

³³ Israel Ministry of Defense. (2023, February 14). *Israel Ministry of Defense inaugurates first-ever national pavilion at Abu Dhabi defense exhibition* [Press release]. <https://mod.gov.il/en/press-releases/press-room/israel-ministry-of-defense-inaugurates-first-ever-national-pavilion-at-abu-dhabi-defense-exhibition>

³⁴ Blinken, A. J. (2025, January 14). *Secretary Antony J. Blinken: “Toward the promise of a more integrated Middle East”* [Speech transcript]. U.S. Department of State. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/office-of-the-spokesperson/releases/2025/01/secretary-antony-j-blinken-toward-the-promise-of-a-more-integrated-middle-east>

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2026, May 18). *President Isaac Herzog receives diplomatic credentials of new ambassadors, including first-ever ambassador of Somaliland* [Press release]. <https://embassies.gov.il/nepal/en/node/10320>

³⁶ Mansour, R., AlShakeri, H., & Haid, H. (2025). The shapeshifting ‘axis of resistance’. *Chatham House*, 12.

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increased as the Iran-centered network has declined, while the two networks continue to operate across different geographical arenas, through different local actors, and with distinct narratives of legitimacy.³⁷

In conclusion, the UAE's policy of relying on non-state actors has transformed the country into a regional power capable of generating influence far beyond what its geographical size would suggest. Abu Dhabi has acquired significant leverage along Yemen's southern coastline, over the eastern authorities in Libya, across ports and federal member states in Somalia, and within Sudan's war economy and paramilitary networks. Yet this influence has not produced durable political orders. On the contrary, in several cases it has contributed to deeper state fragmentation, generated tensions with Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, Egypt, and the Federal Government of Somalia, and imposed reputational costs on the UAE at the international level. Accordingly, the overall performance of this strategy may be assessed as high in operational terms, moderate in political terms, and uncertain with regard to long-term strategic sustainability. The UAE is not evolving into a "classical empire"; rather, it is constructing an "informal empire of influence" built around ports, investments, forward military positions, and local partners. The Abraham Accords did not initiate this process, but accelerated it by connecting the UAE's existing networks to Israel's security capabilities and the strategic umbrella provided by the United States, while simultaneously extending their reach across a broader geographical space.

2. THE UAE'S GEOECONOMIC POWER PROJECTION THROUGH CAPITAL, PORTS, AND TECHNOLOGY

The second pillar of the UAE's external influence strategy consists of integrating capital exports and strategic infrastructure investments with broader foreign policy objectives. In this study, geoeconomic influence is understood as the use of economic instruments not merely to generate commercial returns, but also to shape interstate relations, secure access to strategic transit points, establish long-term ties with local decision-makers, and enhance international bargaining leverage. Unlike conventional forms of development assistance, the UAE pursues this strategy through state-linked entities such as ADQ, Mubadala, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), International Holding Company (IHC), Masdar, XRG, ADNOC's international investment arm, DP World, and AD Ports Group. In this way, diplomacy, investment, energy, port operations, and logistics are integrated within a single foreign policy ecosystem.

Within this structure, Abu Dhabi-based funds tend to concentrate on energy, critical minerals, advanced technology, agriculture, real estate, and large-scale infrastructure, while Dubai-based DP World connects ports, free zones, and land-sea logistics corridors. AD Ports Group, meanwhile, has secured long-term concession agreements along the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic coast. These companies clearly pursue commercial objectives; however, the geographical selection of investment locations, the duration of their agreements, and the spatial overlap between their investments and the UAE's security policies suggest that their activities are not entirely detached from broader state strategy. DP World's investment of \$3.1 billion in its global infrastructure network in 2025, including in Africa and Europe, together with AD Ports Group's integration of ports, industrial zones, maritime transport, and digital customs services within a single platform, indicates that the UAE is increasingly seeking to build integrated trade corridors rather than merely acquiring or operating individual facilities.³⁸

2.1. Africa: From an Investment Destination to Strategic Depth

Africa represents, for the UAE, far more than an arena for market diversification; it is a sphere of strategic depth where energy, food security, critical minerals, renewable energy, maritime transport, and political influence intersect. According to estimates based on fDi Markets data, Emirati companies announced projects worth approximately \$110 billion in Africa between 2019 and 2023, of which around \$72 billion was concentrated in the renewable energy sector. However, announced project value should not be equated with realized investment or actual capital flows. Some large-scale projects may remain at the memorandum-of-understanding stage, experience delays, or ultimately be cancelled. Accordingly, the country-level figures presented below indicate the UAE's announced investment appetite and strategic orientation rather than, in every case, the value of investments that have been fully realized.³⁹

Egypt: A Strategic Hub at the Intersection of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal

Egypt has emerged as the UAE's most significant investment destination in Africa, with approximately \$66 billion in announced project value between 2017 and May 2026. The most prominent example of this concentration is the \$35 billion package announced by an ADQ-led consortium for the Ras El-Hekma development. Of this amount, \$24 billion covers the acquisition of development rights for the coastal area, while the remaining \$11 billion involves the conversion of existing UAE deposits in Egypt into investments in development projects. The Egyptian state retains a 35 percent stake in the project, while total investment is expected to exceed \$150 billion over time. The UAE's engagement in Egypt extends well beyond real estate and tourism. AD Ports

³⁷ Mansour, R., AlShakeri, H., & Haid, H. (2025). The shapeshifting 'axis of resistance'. *Chatham House*, 12.

³⁸ DP World. (2025). *The smarter trade report: Annual report and accounts 2025*. <https://www.dpworld.com/en/investors/annual-report-2025>

³⁹ Savage, R. (2024, December 24). UAE becomes Africa's biggest investor amid rights concerns. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/24/uae-becomes-africa-biggest-investor-amid-rights-concerns>

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Group is developing a \$200 million multipurpose terminal at the Port of Safaga on the Red Sea, while also expanding into cruise and ferry terminal operations in Safaga, Hurghada, and Sharm el-Sheikh. In addition, a 50-year land-use agreement has been signed for the development of a 20-square-kilometer industrial and logistics zone near Port Said. Taken together, these investments provide the UAE with a multilayered presence at both the Mediterranean and Red Sea approaches to the Suez Canal, spanning sectors from tourism and industry to container shipping and logistics. Egypt therefore serves the UAE both as a means of supporting the economic stability of a closely aligned government and as a platform for securing a durable position along one of the most critical corridors linking European and Asian trade.⁴⁰

Mauritania: Green Hydrogen and an Energy Corridor to the Atlantic

At the center of the approximately \$34 billion in announced investment in Mauritania is a green hydrogen project planned by Masdar, Egypt-based Infinity, and Germany's Conjuncta. The project aims to harness the country's extensive solar and wind resources to produce green hydrogen and ammonia for export via the Atlantic to international markets, particularly Europe. Mauritania's iron ore reserves, low population density, and geographical proximity to Europe further enhance its attractiveness within emerging green steel and hydrogen value chains. At the same time, the \$34 billion figure reflects a memorandum of understanding and a long-term project projection rather than a finalized investment commitment. Reports that the project has faced delays due to demand and financing conditions, together with indications that an Emirati-linked investor has withdrawn from the process, illustrate that not all large-scale UAE investment announcements in Africa ultimately translate into implementation. The Mauritania case therefore highlights both the UAE's ambition to secure an early position in the future value chains of the energy transition and the implementation risks associated with large-scale green hydrogen projects.⁴¹

South Africa and Mozambique: Industry, Finance, and the Cape of Good Hope Route

Announced Emirati investments in South Africa amount to approximately \$24 billion. The country's sophisticated financial system, mining capacity, industrial infrastructure, and central position within the logistics networks of Southern Africa make South Africa a regional economic anchor for the UAE. Emirati interest extends beyond the South African domestic market to transport corridors reaching inland countries such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Eswatini, as well as to the maritime route around the Cape of Good Hope. When security disruptions intensify around the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, the route around southern Africa provides an alternative artery for global trade. Mozambique constitutes a complementary component of this strategy. DP World has launched a \$165 million expansion program aimed at doubling the capacity of the Maputo Container Terminal. Maputo's rail and road connections link South Africa's industrial centers and landlocked countries in the wider region to the Indian Ocean. The UAE's engagement with South Africa should therefore be assessed not merely in terms of the aggregate value of investments within a single country, but through cross-border logistics systems such as the Maputo–Johannesburg corridor.⁴²

Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria: A Production and Energy Belt Close to Europe

In the western part of North Africa, announced Emirati investments amount to approximately \$9 billion in Tunisia and \$7 billion in Morocco. From the UAE's perspective, these countries are important because of their proximity to European markets, relatively developed manufacturing infrastructure, renewable energy potential, tourism sectors, and their position within Atlantic–Mediterranean connectivity. Morocco's role as a commercial bridge between West Africa and Europe, Tunisia's integration into European production chains, and Algeria's energy resources offer the UAE distinct investment opportunities across the region. The objective in this part of North Africa is not limited to acquiring access to coastal facilities. Rather, the UAE seeks to participate in production networks located close to European markets through investments in renewable energy, automotive and aerospace supply industries, fertilizers, tourism, and financial services. Thus, while Emirati engagement in sub-Saharan Africa is more heavily oriented toward ports and raw-material corridors, its investments in North Africa increasingly target industrial, energy, and service hubs with close access to Europe.⁴³

Somaliland: The Convergence of Port Investment and Political Influence

⁴⁰ AD Ports Group. (2026, April 6). *Noatum Ports Safaga Terminal—Egypt receives STS and RTG cranes, enhancing connectivity across the Red Sea* [Press release]. <https://www.adportsgroup.com/en/news-and-media/2026/04/06/noatum-ports-safaga-terminal--egypt>

⁴¹ Mahjoub, H. (2025). The emerging sub-imperial role of the United Arab Emirates in Africa. *Trans National Institute*. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-emerging-sub-imperial-role-of-the-united-arab-emirates-in-africa>.

⁴² Li, R., & Wu, B. (2025). The United Arab Emirates' Africa strategy: aims, approaches, and implications. *China International Strategy Review*, 7(1), 138-157.

⁴³ Li, R., & Wu, B. (2025). The United Arab Emirates' Africa strategy: aims, approaches, and implications. *China International Strategy Review*, 7(1), 138-157.

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Announced Emirati investments in Somaliland amount to approximately \$1.7 billion. At the center of this engagement is DP World's planned investment of up to \$442 million in the Port of Berbera. Following the initial phase of expansion, the port's capacity is expected to increase to as much as two million TEUs, while the adjoining Berbera Economic Zone is being developed on the model of Jebel Ali. The integration of Berbera with an overland corridor extending into Ethiopia is intended to transform the port into an alternative gateway not only for Somaliland but also for landlocked Ethiopia. The economic and political dimensions of the Berbera investment cannot be considered in isolation from one another. Owing to its proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden, the port provides the UAE not only with commercial access but also with greater security and logistical room for maneuver. Abu Dhabi's decision to conclude agreements directly with the internationally unrecognized Somaliland authorities has, in turn, prompted sovereignty objections from Mogadishu. Although the Federal Government of Somalia declared in 2026 that agreements concluded with the UAE were invalid, DP World maintained that its operations in Berbera would continue under the existing contractual framework. This illustrates how economic concessions can simultaneously strengthen the capacity of subnational authorities while generating tensions with the central state.⁴⁴

Senegal: West Africa's Emerging Deep-Water Gateway

The Port of Ndayane in Senegal represents one of the UAE's largest single port investments in Africa. The project's current investment value is approximately \$1.2 billion, and the port is planned to have an annual handling capacity of 1.2 million TEUs. As the Port of Dakar approaches the physical limits of further expansion, Ndayane is intended to position Senegal as one of West Africa's principal deep-water and transshipment hubs. The Senegal investment demonstrates that the UAE's port strategy is not based solely on the domestic market of the coastal host state. Ndayane is being developed as a regional gateway capable of facilitating access to Mali, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and other markets across the Sahel. In this way, the port investment provides Emirati companies with long-term institutional access to regional trade flows, customs procedures, warehousing, and overland transport networks.⁴⁵

Tanzania: A Corridor Extending from the Indian Ocean into the African Hinterland

DP World has committed more than \$500 million to modernize Terminal 1 at the Port of Dar es Salaam under a 30-year build-operate-transfer (BOT) arrangement. Dar es Salaam serves as a major maritime gateway not only for Tanzania, but also for Zambia, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The investment therefore extends beyond increasing the capacity of a single port; it is aimed at securing a strategic position along the trade corridor linking the Indian Ocean with the African hinterland. The Tanzania case illustrates the importance the UAE attaches to inland connectivity in its port investments. When ports, railways, warehousing facilities, customs systems, and digital trade platforms are developed in an integrated manner, the operating company is able to influence not only the terminal at which vessels berth, but also the broader route through which goods move from production centers to their final markets.⁴⁶

Republic of the Congo and Angola: Atlantic Resource Corridors

AD Ports Group has secured a 30-year concession, extendable by a further 20 years, for a new multipurpose terminal at the Port of Pointe-Noire in the Republic of the Congo. The company is expected to invest more than \$500 million over the concession period, including approximately \$220 million in the initial phase. Pointe-Noire is one of the principal Atlantic gateways not only for the Republic of the Congo's oil and mineral exports, but also for the wider Central African region. In Angola, meanwhile, an initial investment of \$250 million is planned for the modernization of the Port of Luanda during the first three years, with total investment potentially reaching \$380 million over the concession period. These investments reflect the UAE's broader effort to position itself along logistics corridors linking the copper-, cobalt-, oil-, and other raw-material-producing areas of Central Africa to the Atlantic coast. Unlike direct ownership of natural resources, port concessions generate economic influence over the transportation, storage, and movement of these commodities into international markets.⁴⁷

Djibouti: The Limits of Geoeconomic Expansion

The case of the Doraleh Port in Djibouti demonstrates that the UAE model does not invariably produce successful outcomes. The long-term concession agreement between DP World and the Djiboutian government was unilaterally terminated by the government in 2018, after which the terminal was brought under state control. While the Djiboutian authorities justified the decision on the grounds of economic independence and sovereignty, international arbitration rulings were issued in favor of DP

⁴⁴ Kassim, M. G., & Osman, A. I. (2026). The impact of Bab al-Mandab and the strait of Hormuz on Somalia's ports and maritime security. *Journal of Transportation Security*, 19(1), 7.

⁴⁵ DP World. (2026, July 27). *DP World completes dredging ahead of schedule at Senegal's Port of Ndayane* [Press release]. <https://www.dpworld.com/en/news/dp-world-completes-dredging-ahead-of-schedule-at-senegals-port-of-ndayane>

⁴⁶ DP World. (n.d.). *Dar es Salaam*. Retrieved August 5, 2026, from <https://www.dpworld.com/en/ports-terminals/dar-es-salaam>

⁴⁷ AD Ports Group. (2023, June 20). *AD Ports Group signs a 30-year extendable concession agreement to manage and operate a multipurpose terminal in Congo's Pointe-Noire Port*. <https://www.adportsgroup.com/en/news-and-media/2023/06/20/adpg-signs-a-30-year-extendable-concession-agreement-with-republic-of-the-congo>

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World. The expanding presence of Chinese companies in Djibouti's ports and free zones has also led the dispute to be interpreted within the broader context of China–UAE competition. The Doraleh case illustrates how long-term concessions can generate concerns in host states regarding dependency, monopoly, and sovereignty. Thus, although Emirati capital offers significant advantages in terms of speed, financing capacity, and operational expertise, changes in domestic political conditions, nationalist reactions, and the involvement of competing major powers can constrain the long-term sustainability of such investments.⁴⁸

2.2. Beyond Africa: The UAE's Global Port Belt

The UAE's port strategy extends well beyond Africa. In Pakistan, AD Ports Group secured a 50-year concession for a container terminal at the Port of Karachi and announced plans to invest \$220 million during the first ten years. This was subsequently followed by additional agreements covering general cargo and bulk cargo terminals. Owing to Karachi's role in connecting the Indian Ocean with Pakistan's hinterland, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, the port is regarded as the maritime gateway to a broader logistics system that the UAE describes as the "Middle Corridor."

In Syria, DP World has launched an \$800 million investment program under a 30-year concession to modernize and operate the Port of Tartus. AD Ports Group, meanwhile, has acquired a 20 percent stake in the Latakia Container Terminal alongside the French shipping company CMA CGM. Through its presence in both Tartus and Latakia, the UAE is thus establishing a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of Syria's post-war economic reconstruction, while also gaining access to a new maritime node linking Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. These investments suggest that the UAE is seeking not to control a single uninterrupted maritime route, but rather to establish alternative and mutually reinforcing transit nodes. Facilities such as Karachi, Berbera, Dar es Salaam, Safaga, Tartus, Ndayane, and DP World London Gateway are located across different maritime basins, yet increasingly function as nodes within the same global logistics network. DP World's operations across more than 80 countries and its network of over 60 ports and terminals have enabled the UAE to emerge not merely as a state that exports goods or capital, but also as an actor with a significant role in managing the infrastructure through which global trade circulates.⁴⁹

2.3. Europe: Capital in Exchange for Technology and Strategic Partnership

Whereas the UAE's investments in Africa are concentrated largely on ports, energy resources, agriculture, minerals, and access to emerging markets, its investments in Europe serve a different strategic function. For the UAE, Europe represents a source of advanced technology, artificial intelligence, life sciences, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, chemicals, and institutional expertise. Within this framework, Emirati capital serves not only to generate financial returns, but also to secure access to the knowledge, patents, human capital, and corporate partnerships required for the country's post-oil transformation.

United Kingdom: Finance and the Energy Transition

Under the Sovereign Investment Partnership established between the UAE and the United Kingdom in 2021, Mubadala committed £10 billion in investment over a five-year period. The program has focused on technology, infrastructure, the energy transition, healthcare, and life sciences, with Mubadala allocating £800 million specifically to the life sciences sector. This model directly connects Emirati capital with the United Kingdom's research universities, biotechnology companies, and public investment mechanisms. In the energy sector, Masdar and Iberdrola have undertaken a €5.2 billion joint investment in the East Anglia THREE offshore wind farm off the coast of the United Kingdom. With a planned capacity of 1.4 GW, the project is expected to supply electricity to approximately 1.3 million households. These investments demonstrate that the UAE's engagement in the United Kingdom extends beyond the acquisition of real estate or financial assets and increasingly involves participation in the core infrastructure underpinning the country's energy transition.⁵⁰

France: Artificial Intelligence and Digital Sovereignty

The artificial intelligence partnership announced between France and the UAE in 2025 represents one of the most ambitious Emirati technology investments in Europe. The agreement encompasses the establishment of a one-gigawatt AI campus and data center in France, the procurement of advanced semiconductors, talent development, and the creation of sovereign cloud infrastructure. The projected investment associated with the initiative has been estimated at between \$30 billion and \$50 billion. From the UAE's perspective, the investment in France serves a dual strategic function. On the one hand, Abu Dhabi gains access to Europe's AI computing capacity and highly skilled human capital; on the other, it establishes an independent partnership channel with Europe amid the intensifying technological competition between the United States and China. France, for its part, aims to leverage its low-carbon nuclear electricity to power data centers and address Europe's shortfall in artificial intelligence

⁴⁸ World Bank Group. (n.d.). *Doraleh Container Terminal, Djibouti*. Public-Private Partnership Resource Center. Retrieved August 5, 2026, from <https://ppp.worldbank.org/transportation/doraleh-container-terminal-djibouti>

⁴⁹ DP World. (2025, July 13). *DP World to develop Syria's Tartus Port under landmark 30-year deal* [Press release]. <https://www.dpworld.com/en/news/dp-world-to-develop-syrias-tartus-port-under-landmark-30-year-deal>

⁵⁰ Department for International Trade. (2021, September 16). *UAE to invest £10 billion in priority UK industries* [Press release]. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uae-to-invest-10-billion-in-priority-uk-industries>

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infrastructure. The investment should therefore be understood not merely as a transfer of capital, but as part of a mutual pursuit of digital sovereignty.⁵¹

Germany: Advanced Materials and Energy Security

The UAE’s most significant investment in Germany is the €14.7 billion investment in Covestro, the chemicals and advanced materials producer, by XRG, ADNOC’s international investment company. Covestro’s high-performance polymers, which are used across the automotive, construction, electronics, and energy sectors, are closely aligned with the UAE’s ambition to evolve from a hydrocarbon producer into an investor in value-added industries and advanced materials. At the same time, the investment provides Abu Dhabi with direct access to European industrial technology and research capabilities. Masdar’s 476 MW Baltic Eagle offshore wind project, developed with Iberdrola, further illustrates Emirati interest in Germany’s energy transition. The UAE’s engagement in Germany therefore follows two parallel tracks: on the one hand, channeling revenues generated from conventional energy into advanced chemicals and materials; and, on the other, acquiring a stake in renewable-energy infrastructure.⁵²

Spain: A Renewable Energy Portfolio

In 2024, Masdar acquired a 49.99 percent stake in 48 solar power plants owned by Spain’s Endesa, with a combined capacity of two GW, for €817 million. The total enterprise value of the assets was reported at €1.7 billion, and battery storage capacity is expected to be added to the portfolio at a later stage. In 2025, Masdar announced a further €184 million investment for a 49.99 percent stake in four additional solar power plants with a combined capacity of 446 MW. With its substantial solar energy potential and infrastructure integrated into the European electricity market, Spain serves as an important base within the UAE’s renewable energy portfolio. The objective extends beyond generating returns from electricity production to developing institutional capabilities in large-scale solar power, battery storage, and participation in European energy markets.⁵³

Italy: Artificial Intelligence, Space, and Critical Raw Materials

In 2025, Italy and the UAE announced an investment framework of up to \$40 billion covering areas such as artificial intelligence, data centers, space research, renewable energy, and rare earth elements. In the same year, Abu Dhabi-based G42 and Italy’s iGenius formed a partnership to develop one of Europe’s largest artificial intelligence computing infrastructures and a supercomputing center. The Italian case demonstrates that Emirati capital engages with European countries not only through corporate acquisitions, but also through intergovernmental strategic packages. By bringing defense, energy, technology, and critical raw materials within the same framework, these investment commitments contribute to transforming economic relations into a broader foreign policy partnership.⁵⁴

Table 1. The UAE’s Geoeconomic Areas of Interest and Strategic Objectives by Region

Region	Principal Instruments	Investment	Core Strategic Objective
North Africa	Coastal cities, real estate, energy, industrial zones, and port investments		Securing access to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean; establishing production and logistics hubs close to the European market; supporting the economic resilience of governments closely aligned with the UAE
Horn of Africa and Red Sea	Ports, free and economic zones, overland corridors, airports, and security cooperation		Securing strategic access around the Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden; reaching landlocked markets such as Ethiopia; integrating maritime security with political influence

⁵¹ Présidence de la République. (2025, February 6). *Dîner de travail avec Son Altesse Cheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, président des Émirats arabes unis*. Élysée. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/02/06/diner-de-travail-avec-son-altesse-cheikh-mohamed-bin-zayed-al-nahyan-president-des-emirats-arabes-unis>

⁵² ADNOC. (2026, February 6). *UAE and Germany deepen energy ties as German chancellor visits ADNOC HQ* [Press release]. <https://adnoc.ae/en/news-and-media/press-releases/2026/uae-and-germany-deepen-energy-ties-as-german-chancellor-visits-adnoc-hq>

⁵³ Masdar. (2024, July 25). *Masdar partners with Endesa in €1.7 billion renewable energy transaction in Spain* [Press release]. <https://masdar.ae/en/news/newsroom/masdar-partners-with-endesa>

⁵⁴ Fonte, G., & Armellini, A. (2025, February 24). *Italy’s Meloni bags UAE investment pledge worth \$40 billion*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uae-plan-40-billion-investments-italy-pm-meloni-says-2025-02-24>

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Region	Principal Investment Instruments	Core Strategic Objective
West and Central Africa	Deep-water ports, mining, energy, logistics hubs, and transport infrastructure	Participating in Atlantic trade routes; gaining access to the Sahel and the African hinterland; securing a position along export routes for critical minerals and energy resources
East and Southern Africa	Port modernization, rail and road links, renewable energy, and logistics corridors	Securing access to Indian Ocean and Cape of Good Hope routes; linking inland markets to coastal terminals; diversifying routes against risks originating in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal
Europe	Artificial intelligence, data centers, life sciences, advanced chemicals, renewable energy, battery technologies, and strategic corporate partnerships	Accessing advanced technology, patents, human capital, and institutional expertise; accelerating post-oil economic diversification; deepening political and economic partnerships with Western countries
South and West Asia	Long-term port concessions, digital trade systems, free zones, and integrated logistics services	Strengthening connections between the Indian Ocean and Central Asia; expanding influence within supply chains; establishing alternative and mutually complementary trade corridors

Source: Prepared by the author based on the UAE's regional investment instruments and strategic objectives

2.4. Overall Assessment of Geoeconomic Influence

The geographical pattern of UAE investment varies across regions while remaining grounded in a common strategic logic. In Africa, the UAE provides rapid financing to high-risk, capital-constrained markets and, in return, secures port concessions, coastal land, energy projects, mining partnerships, and long-term commercial access. In Europe, by contrast, the same capital is directed toward advanced technology, artificial intelligence infrastructure, renewable energy, life sciences, and advanced industrial companies. In other words, Africa provides the UAE with access to resources, markets, and strategic geography, while Europe offers technology, institutional expertise, and international legitimacy.

The principal strengths of this model lie in the UAE's substantial financial capacity, rapid decision-making, and the ability of state-linked companies to operate in coordination with diplomatic policy. The integration of port investments with free zones, overland corridors, energy facilities, and digital customs systems enables the UAE to generate an economic sphere of influence extending well beyond any single physical asset. At the same time, however, the gap between announced projects and realized investments, local concerns over sovereignty, social and environmental consequences, changes in political regimes, and competition with China, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Western states create significant vulnerabilities. The delay of the Mauritania project and the crisis surrounding the expropriation of the Doraleh terminal in Djibouti provide concrete illustrations of these limitations.

Overall, the UAE's economic foreign policy is better understood not as conventional capital export, but as a form of network-centered geoeconomic power projection. Rather than seeking to govern entire countries, Abu Dhabi and Dubai position themselves at strategic nodes along trade routes, in port cities, energy hubs, technology companies, and local decision-making networks. The relationships with non-state actors examined in the first part of the article and the investments analyzed in this section should not be regarded as separate dimensions of UAE foreign policy. The Port of Berbera in Somaliland, Red Sea terminals in Egypt, gold and logistics networks surrounding Sudan, and security relationships along Yemen's coastline demonstrate how economic and military instruments can reinforce one another within the same geographical spaces. The UAE's rise should therefore be understood not simply as an expansion "from emirate to empire," but as the construction of a dispersed yet interconnected system of influence built through networks of capital, infrastructure, technology, and security.

FINDINGS

The principal finding of this study is that the UAE's external influence is based not on conventional territorial control, but on securing access to strategic nodes and exercising functional influence over them. Abu Dhabi operates through networks that connect ports, airports, trade corridors, energy and mining sites, and local political and military partners. UAE foreign policy can therefore

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be characterized as a form of network-centered power projection that generates influence through economic dependencies, infrastructure investments, security relationships, and long-term concessions rather than through direct occupation or formal annexation.

A comparison of the cases of Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya demonstrates that the UAE engages with actors of different legal and political statuses in pursuit of broadly similar objectives. The Southern Transitional Council represents a separatist movement; Somaliland, a de facto administration claiming independence; Puntland, an autonomous federal member state; the RSF, a paramilitary force; and the Haftar-led structure, a parallel military-political authority. Because these actors operate outside the effective control of central governments and create alternative spheres of security and sovereignty, they can be analyzed under the broader category of "centrifugal actors." At the same time, however, these entities are not passive proxies entirely controlled by the UAE. They retain their own social constituencies, political objectives, and capacity to cultivate relations with other external actors.

The case analyses reveal that the UAE has achieved significant gains at the operational level but has struggled to translate these gains into durable political orders. In Yemen, Abu Dhabi established substantial influence along the southern coastline and over strategic islands, yet experienced a serious strategic divergence with Saudi Arabia. In Somalia, it developed a strong port network through Berbera and Bosaso, while simultaneously generating a sovereignty dispute with Mogadishu. In Sudan, influence was cultivated through the RSF and the gold-centered war economy, but at mounting diplomatic and legal cost. In Libya, Haftar became an enduring actor across the east and south of the country, yet the UAE was unable to shape Libya as a whole in accordance with its preferences. The overall performance of this strategy can therefore be assessed as high in operational terms, limited in political terms, and uncertain with regard to long-term strategic sustainability.

A further finding of the study is that the UAE's security policies and economic investments do not operate independently of one another. The Port of Berbera and the UAE's relationship with the Somaliland authorities, the Sudanese gold trade and the war economy surrounding the RSF, and local partnerships along Yemen's coastline and the Bab al-Mandab corridor represent different manifestations of the same strategic logic. State-linked funds and companies complement military and diplomatic instruments, extending Emirati influence beyond the limits of direct military presence. This demonstrates that the UAE generates influence not only through armed actors, but also through capital, infrastructure, and logistics systems.

The geographical orientation of the UAE's geoeconomic engagement varies by region. In Africa, investments are concentrated in ports, coastal cities, energy, agriculture, critical minerals, and land-sea corridors, providing access to resources, markets, and strategic maritime routes. In Europe, by contrast, artificial intelligence, data centers, renewable energy, life sciences, and advanced industries occupy a more prominent position. Put differently, Africa provides the UAE with geographical access and resources, whereas Europe offers technology, institutional expertise, and international legitimacy. Nevertheless, the delay of the Mauritania project and the termination of the Doraleh Port concession in Djibouti demonstrate that financial capacity does not automatically translate into durable influence.

Finally, the findings indicate that the Abraham Accords did not initiate this strategy, but rather accelerated it by connecting the UAE's existing security and investment networks with Israel's technological and defense capabilities and the broader strategic support provided by the United States. Similarly, the decline of Iran's proxy network does not mean that UAE-backed actors are directly replacing Iranian proxies. A more accurate interpretation is that, as the Iran-centered ideological network has weakened in relative terms, an alternative architecture of influence—built around Emirati capital, ports, technology, and centrifugal actors and more closely aligned with the Western security system—has gained greater regional significance. Overall, the UAE is not evolving into a classical empire; rather, it is constructing a fragmented yet interconnected informal sphere of influence through networks of security, investment, infrastructure, and technology.

CONCLUSION

This study has addressed the question of how the United Arab Emirates, despite its limited demographic and geographical capacity, has been able to construct a broad sphere of regional and global influence by examining its security and economic policies within a single analytical framework. Its central conclusion is that UAE power does not rest on territorial occupation, direct rule, or a permanent military presence in the classical sense. Rather, Abu Dhabi combines its relationships with non-state and centrifugal actors with ports, logistics corridors, energy and mining sites, long-term investment concessions, and technology partnerships in order to exercise functional influence over strategic nodes. From this perspective, UAE foreign policy can be conceptualized as a form of network-centered power projection in which security policy and economic statecraft operate as mutually reinforcing instruments.

The cases of Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya demonstrate that the UAE engages not only with separatist movements, but also with a diverse range of actors that create alternative spheres of security and sovereignty outside the effective control of central authorities. The Southern Transitional Council, Somaliland, Puntland, the Rapid Support Forces, and the Haftar-led structure

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do not belong to the same legal or political category. Nevertheless, all of these actors provide Abu Dhabi with forms of local access, operational flexibility, and low-visibility influence that formal state-to-state channels cannot always offer. The study therefore finds that, rather than categorizing all such entities as “separatist,” the concept of “centrifugal actors”—encompassing separatist, autonomous, paramilitary, and parallel military-political authorities—offers greater analytical explanatory power.

The comparative case analysis further demonstrates that the UAE has achieved substantial operational gains through this strategy, while encountering considerable difficulty in translating those gains into durable and stable political orders. In Yemen, despite establishing influence along the southern coastline, on strategic islands, and around key transit points, the divergence with Saudi Arabia exposed the limits of the Emirati-backed network. In Somalia, the UAE established a strong commercial and logistical position through Berbera and Bosaso, but at the cost of a sovereignty crisis with Mogadishu. In Sudan, influence generated through the RSF and the gold economy produced significant diplomatic, legal, and reputational costs for the UAE. In Libya, Haftar was transformed into a durable regional veto player, yet Türkiye's intervention and local balances of power prevented Abu Dhabi from shaping the country as a whole in accordance with its preferences. The overall success of UAE policy can therefore be assessed as high at the operational level, limited at the political level, and uncertain in terms of strategic sustainability.

This conclusion also demonstrates that local actors are not passive instruments entirely controlled by the UAE. While the supported entities benefit from Emirati financing, military capabilities, and diplomatic connections, they retain their own social constituencies, political objectives, and external relationships. This autonomy provides the UAE with a degree of flexibility by making the direct attribution of responsibility to Abu Dhabi more difficult, yet it also limits the UAE's ability to control developments on the ground. The geographical expansion of the network should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that Abu Dhabi exercises an equally centralized and continuous form of control. The UAE can strengthen its local partners, but it cannot determine all of their decisions, alliances, or long-term political orientations.

The economic dimension of the study demonstrates that state-linked companies and sovereign wealth funds function not merely as commercial entities, but also as institutional extensions of UAE foreign policy. In Africa, priority is given to ports, coastal cities, energy resources, critical minerals, agricultural land, and land-sea corridors, whereas in Europe the focus shifts toward artificial intelligence, data centers, life sciences, advanced chemicals, renewable energy, and strategic corporate partnerships. This differentiation indicates that the UAE does not apply a uniform investment model across different geographical contexts. Africa provides the UAE with access to resources, markets, food and energy security, and strategic maritime routes, while Europe offers technology, human capital, institutional expertise, and international legitimacy for the country's post-oil transformation.

The significance of port investments extends well beyond the commercial capacity of individual facilities. The integration of ports with free zones, roads, railways, storage facilities, energy infrastructure, and digital customs systems enables the UAE to position itself not only at the point where goods reach the sea, but throughout the circulation chain linking production centers to international markets. The connections between Berbera and Ethiopia, Dar es Salaam and the African hinterland, Ndayane and the Sahel, and Maputo and South Africa's industrial heartland illustrate this strategic approach. At the same time, delays affecting projects in Mauritania and Djibouti's termination of the Doraleh Port concession demonstrate that substantial financial capacity does not automatically translate into durable influence. Host-state sovereignty concerns, domestic political reactions, and the entry of competing investors constitute important constraints on the UAE model.

One of the study's key findings is the integration of security and economic instruments. The Port of Berbera and the UAE's support for the Somaliland authorities, local partnerships in Yemen and the Bab al-Mandab corridor, and the Sudanese gold trade and the war economy surrounding the RSF are not independent developments. In these cases, ports and investments provide economic resilience to security relationships, while local partnerships facilitate the political and physical access required for commercial activities. The UAE can therefore sustain its influence through companies, financial relationships, infrastructure concessions, and local actors even in circumstances where it reduces its direct military presence. Emirati economic foreign policy should consequently be understood as more than conventional capital export; it functions as a mechanism for generating geoeconomic influence.

Within this framework, the notion of a transformation “from emirate to empire” can be employed only as an analytical metaphor. Unlike classical empires, the UAE does not annex extensive territories, establish colonial administrations, or exercise absolute administrative control over local actors. Nevertheless, the network formed by ports, military and logistical facilities, financial dependencies, corporate concessions, and local partners creates an informal sphere of influence. In this system, influence is exercised not continuously across a territorially contiguous space, but in a fragmented and functional manner over selected nodes such as ports, airports, trade corridors, energy hubs, and local decision-making networks. The UAE's rise should therefore be understood not as the formation of a classical empire, but as the emergence of an informal architecture of influence linking strategic points of access across multiple geographical arenas.

The Abraham Accords likewise represent not the beginning of this strategy, but a critical juncture that accelerated existing networks and endowed them with additional capabilities. A significant share of the UAE's relationships in Yemen, Libya, and the

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Horn of Africa had already been established before 2020. Following the accords, however, Emirati capital and logistical reach could be connected more openly with Israel's capabilities in defense technology, intelligence, and cybersecurity. The United States, meanwhile, functions less as a sponsor directly managing all of the UAE's proxy relationships than as a broader strategic umbrella that expands Abu Dhabi's military, diplomatic, and technological room for maneuver. Normalization therefore did not create the UAE's existing strategy; rather, it enhanced its technological capabilities, international legitimacy, and capacity to operate in third-country contexts.

The article's central argument regarding Iran is also supported by the findings, although it requires a more cautious formulation. It cannot be argued that UAE-backed actors are directly replacing Iran's proxy forces or occupying all of the spaces vacated by Iranian influence. A significant part of the Emirati network was established before Iran's more recent regional decline. Nevertheless, the relative weakening of Iran's ideological and military proxy architecture has increased the regional significance of the UAE's model of influence, which is built around capital, ports, technology, and centrifugal actors and is more closely aligned with the United States and Israel. What is occurring, therefore, is not a complete process of replacement, but a relative shift in power between two networks grounded in different objectives and sources of legitimacy. Whereas the Iranian model relies on ideological mobilization and a strategy of forward defense, the Emirati model operates through the security of trade routes, opposition to political Islam, access to natural resources, and a conception of authoritarian stability.

In conclusion, the UAE has overcome many of the structural constraints traditionally associated with small states by integrating capital, technology, infrastructure, and local partnerships within a single foreign policy system. Yet the flexibility of this model is also a source of vulnerability. The growing autonomy of local partners, sovereignty-related reactions from central governments, counter-interventions by rival regional powers, unrealized investment projects, and mounting legal and reputational costs all constrain the long-term sustainability of Emirati influence. The UAE's rise should therefore be understood not as a process of establishing unlimited dominance, but as a form of power projection shaped by the tension between extensive operational reach and limited political control. The country's future position will depend less on how far it can expand its networks than on how effectively it can manage the local conflicts, sovereignty disputes, and regional rivalries generated by those networks.

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