

Introduction

The greetings between the smiling Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and the UAE Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed (MBZ), in November 2020, just after signing an agreement that marked a turning point for Greek Emirati relations, revealed the closeness between two countries with apparently few interests in common. Far from being an isolated case, the Emirati presence in the Eastern Mediterranean has been expanding in parallel with the growing tensions with Turkey, over the last few years. Thus, the growing defence ties with Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and France¹ are intended to satisfy several objectives.

First, the UAE has sought to forge a coalition to contain Turkey, whose foreign policy was deemed too assertive, as it increasingly meddled in several of its Arab neighbours' internal affairs. Among the most recent Turkish military actions in the region, it is worth mentioning (1) the multiple operations in northern Syria, such as Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, and Operation Spring Shield; (2) the intervention in Libya in support of the Government of National Accord; (3) the fight against the PKK in northern Iraq, which has resulted in various incursions over the last few years; (4) the alleged meddling in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, according to a report by a UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries²; and (5) the constant duels around the East Mediterranean, with vessels from the Turkish Navy coming dangerously close to Greek, French, Italian and Egyptian vessels. Abu Dhabi seems to have assumed that increased pressure will dampen Turkish assertiveness in the region. The challenge presented by Turkey is compounded by the UAE's fear to political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, a phenomenon that has found refuge and support in Turkey, during the past few years.

Second, the UAE intends to preserve a stable and conducive environment to develop its commercial, political, and military ties with the countries of the region. In particular, the safety of the sea lanes is a priority for Abu Dhabi. In 2018 alone, the volume of trade between the UAE, on the one hand, and Europe and North America on the other,

¹ We could add Israel to the list, but that is a very particular case that would deserve a whole analysis on its own.

² "Mercenaries in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone must be withdrawn – UN experts", *OHCHR*, November 11-2020. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26494&LangID=E>, Accessed on April 25-2021

exceeded \$100 billion³, most reaching its destination by sea through the Suez Canal and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Third, it is speculated that these efforts to strengthen diplomatic and security ties with countries in the Eastern Mediterranean are seeking to support the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF) initiative and the Eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline. These two initiatives, apart from excluding Turkey, could eventually replace a large part of Qatari gas exports to Europe⁴, although other experts question their economic sustainability^{5,6}.

A caveat before starting it is crucial to understand that the confrontation with Turkey is not the only factor that directs Emirati foreign policy. Therefore, some of the agreements and contracts that will be mentioned here may or may not have been produced with Turkey in mind. In any case, this article tries to capture the main moves in Emirati defence and foreign policy that could have some sort of connection with Turkey. Even if a certain Emirati initiative for military cooperation with a Mediterranean country has not been produced with the goal of containing Turkey, its consequences will inevitably affect the perceptions and behaviour of Ankara.

Developing interoperability: joint military exercises

To improve military interoperability with its allies, provide training to its own troops, and lately, to send a message to Turkey, the UAE has attached increasing importance to the performance of joint military exercises with its regional partners, in three main locations: Greece, Egypt and the UAE itself. Some of them have been land-based exercises, whereas others have been hybrid, or taken place offshore, in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Gulf. They also varied in length, lasting between a few days (e.g.:

³ "United Arab Emirates", *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, 2019. Available at: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/are?yearSelector1=exportGrowthYear25>, Accessed on April 17-2021

⁴ DORSEY, James. "UAE targets Turkey and Qatar in the Mediterranean", *Besa Center*, July 15-2020. Available at: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/uae-targets-turkey-qatar/>, Accessed on December 11-2020

⁵ ENES, Yavuz. "Is the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline project feasible?", *TRT World*, January 24-2020. Available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/is-the-eastern-mediterranean-pipeline-project-feasible-33209>, Accessed on April 02-2021

⁶ "EastMed pipeline viability under scrutiny", *Ekathimerini*, March 13-2021. Available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1157014/eastmed-pipeline-viability-under-scrutiny/>, Accessed on April 03-2021

Eagle Salute 2016)⁷, to a whole month (e.g.: Night Eagles 2019)⁸.

Only between 2018 and 2020, the UAE has completed at least 10 different joint military drills in the three locations I mentioned⁹, with a long list of Middle Eastern, European, and American partners: Greece, Cyprus, Italy, France, Israel, the UK, the US, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Sudan and Kuwait.

Out of all exercises, most were multilateral, like Iniohos 2019, Arab Shield 1 or Medusa 2020. Still, some exercises involved only one partner, specifically Egypt, France, or Greece. Coincidentally, these three countries that, at some point, performed bilateral exercises with the UAE, are also among the most frequent participants in its multilateral drills. The following drills are especially significant for symbolic and strategic reasons.

- 1) Iniohos: this drill, which has taken place annually since 2015 in Andravida (Greece), is a two-week medium-scale exercise, which brings together aircraft from Greece, Cyprus, the UAE, Israel, Italy, the US, and the UK¹⁰, although yearly participation may vary slightly. Its uniqueness lies in the capacity to attract countries from America, the Mediterranean, and the Gulf. Iniohos also offers one of the largest exercise areas in Europe attracting up to 80 fighter jets in 2019¹¹, and its highly competitive environment is said to provide a unique training experience¹².
- 2) Medusa 2020: welcoming France, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and the UAE, this exercise in Egyptian waters attracted key players in the anti-Turkey alignment, with the French and the Emiratis as full participants for the first time. A mixture of

⁷ *Egypt, UAE, and US conclude Red Sea naval exercise*, Ahram Online, March 24-2016, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/195795/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt,-UAE-and-US-conclude-Red-Sea-naval-exercise.aspx&p=DevEx,5067.1>, Accessed on November 30-2020

⁸ *Egypt and UAE end 'Night Eagles' military drills*, Egypt Today, November 02-2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/77412/Egypt-and-UAE-end-%E2%80%9CNight-Eagles%E2%80%9D-military-drills>, Accessed on November 30-2020

⁹ When it comes to bilateral drills, I only considered military drills that included the UAE and, at least, an allied country from the Middle East or the Mediterranean. Therefore, I have included bilateral exercises between the UAE, on the one side, and France, Greece, or Egypt, on the other. I haven't included bilateral exercises between the UAE and the US, because the US isn't a Middle Eastern or Mediterranean ally.

¹⁰ The 2021 edition also witnessed the participation of Spanish fighter jets.

¹¹ STORTI, Gianluca, Iniohos 2019, May 22-2019, <http://foto.poork.pl/en/fotoreportaze/iniohos-2019/>, Accessed on April 14-2021

¹² During the Iniochos 2021 edition, celebrated in April, the Emirati ambassador in Greece, Sulaiman Hamid Al Mazroui, visited the air base in Andravida and met with Greece's General Floros. See: *UAE ambassador visits Andravida air base in Southern Greece, meets with General Floros*, Greek City Times, April 21-2021, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/04/21/uae-ambassador-visits-andravida/>, Accessed on April 21-2021

amphibious operations, asymmetric threat and real fire drills, the exercise saw the participation of warships, helicopters, fighter jets and more than 2,000 personnel¹³. What makes it even more remarkable, is that it took place at a time of high tensions between Turkey and its regional foes, and reportedly witnessed a brief confrontation with a frigate of the Turkish navy that tried to enter the area of manoeuvres¹⁴. Turkey understood the message from Medusa 2020 and its Defence Ministry spokeswoman reacted with a statement saying, “another exercise has been added to the countries that have united against Turkey, such as Greece, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, the Greek Cypriots and France, and since August they have been conducting successive exercises in the Mediterranean and trying to increase tensions”¹⁵.

- 3) *Sword of Arabs*: the second time that six Arab states conducted military drills, after Arab Shield 1¹⁶, this sophisticated exercise was hosted by Egypt in its largest military base in the northwest part of the country. It saw the participation of Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Sudan, the KSA and the UAE¹⁷, and aimed toward unifying operational concepts between Arab armies and improving interoperability in naval, air and land operations. Perhaps more importantly, this was one of the largest military drills to date in Egypt¹⁸, hinting both at a willingness to unify Arab forces and a rejection of Turkey’s actions in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa.

¹³ *Multinational aeronautical training exercise ‘Medusa 2020’ wraps up Monday*, In-Cyprus, December 5-2020, <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/multinational-aeronautical-training-exercise-medusa-2020-wraps-up-monday/>, Accessed on December 09-2020

¹⁴ Antonopoulos, Paul, *Turkish navy humiliated by Egypt when attempting to interrupt MEDUSA 2020 exercises*, Greek City Times, December 09-2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/12/06/turkish-navy-humiliated-medusa-2020/>, Accessed on December 09-2020

¹⁵ Antonopoulos, Paul, *France and UAE to participate in MEDUSA Exercises with trilateral alliance for the first time*, Greek City Times, November 29-2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/29/france-egypt-medusa-exercises/>, Accessed on November 30-2020

¹⁶ CAFIERO, Giorgio; BIANCO, Cinzia; *‘Arab Shield 1’: The birth of an Arab NATO?*, MEI, November 13-2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/arab-shield-1-birth-arab-nato>, Accessed on April 14-2021

¹⁷ ELEIBA, Ahmed, *Egypt hosts ‘Sword of Arabs’ military exercise in Marsa Matrouh*, Ahram Online, November 22-2020, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/394317/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-hosts-Sword-of-Arabs-military-exercise-in-Ma.aspx>, Accessed on April 14-2021

¹⁸ Maat Group, *سيف العرب.. أكبر مناورات عسكرية في مصر.. هل اقترب حلم القوة العربية المشتركة؟*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXMO76Ej6Qc>, Accessed on December 14-2020



Figure 1. UAE joint military exercises between 2014-2021. Source. WAM News Agency.

Date	Location	Name of the drill	Participants
April 2021	Greece	Iniohos 2021	UAE, Greece, Israel, USA, Spain, France, Cyprus
December 2020	Egypt	Medusa 2020	UAE, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, France
November 2020	Egypt	Sword of Arabs	UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan
September 2020	Greece	Joint Air Force training	UAE, Greece
November 2019	Egypt	Night Eagles	UAE, Egypt
June 2019	Egypt – Red Sea	Eagle Salute – Eagle Response 2019	UAE, USA, Egypt
April 2019	Greece	Iniohos 2019	UAE, Greece, USA, Israel, Italy, Cyprus
March 2019	UAE	Hamimat 10	UAE, France
November 2018	Egypt	Arab Shield 1	UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan
April 2018	Egypt – Red Sea	Khalifa 3	UAE, Egypt
March 2018	Greece	Iniohos 2018	UAE, Greece, USA, Israel, Italy, UK, Cyprus
December 2017	UAE	Flag 4	UAE, USA, France, UK
March 2017	Greece	Iniohos 2017	UAE, Greece, USA, Israel, Italy
March 2017	UAE	Zayed 2	UAE, Egypt
April 2016	UAE	Khalifa 2	UAE, Egypt
March 2016	Egypt – Red Sea	Eagle Salute 2016	UAE, Egypt, USA
December 2014	UAE	Arrows of Righteousness	UAE, Egypt
March 2014	UAE	Zayed 1	UAE, Egypt
June 2014	Egypt	Khalifa 1	UAE, Egypt

Table 1. List of UAE joint military exercises between 2014-2021. Source. WAM News Agency.

UAE defence ties

Joint military drills are only one piece of the Emirati strategy to set up a network of countries willing to contain Turkey. In addition to those drills, the UAE relies on three additional components to strengthen this informal alliance. First, mutual defence pacts,

to strengthen ties with specific countries. Second, meetings and high-level dialogues with its Mediterranean partners, particularly regarding security and defence. Third, the cultivation of military-industrial ties between the UAE and some of its Mediterranean partners. Although such cooperation is not always explicitly intended to counter Turkish military assertiveness, it is contributing to that goal indirectly as well by strengthening the UAE. For example, between 2007-2016, four of the top ten arms suppliers to the UAE were Mediterranean countries, with France and Italy leading the way¹⁹.

Greece

Already in 2016, Greece and the UAE had signed a Military Cooperation Program, which included information exchanges and cooperation in operational and individual training²⁰. This program was renewed in 2017 and 2019. Shortly after, in the face of spiralling tensions with Turkey, the UAE, Greece and Cyprus had their first trilateral meeting in November 2019, where their respective foreign ministers addressed the challenges in Syria, Libya and Turkey²¹.

The year 2020 was a watershed period for Greek Emirati relations: it all started with a visit of the Greek Prime Minister to Abu Dhabi, where he met with MBZ to discuss Turkish provocations in the region²². A couple of weeks later, the Greece-UAE Strategic Cooperation Forum was held in Athens, where security issues were also addressed²³. In the summer, the Emirati defence minister Al-Bowardi called his Greek counterpart to explore new avenues of military cooperation and to confront regional threats²⁴.

¹⁹ "Under the radar. The UAE, arms transfers and regional conflict", *Pax*, September 2017. Available at: <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/media/files/pax-report-under-the-radar--arms-trade.pdf>, Accessed on November 24-2020

²⁰ "Greek and UAE armed forces sign military cooperation deal for 2017", *Tornos News*, November 25-2016. Available at: <https://www.tornosnews.gr/en/greek-news/politics/20900-greek-and-uae-armed-forces-sign-military-cooperation-deal-for-2017.html>, Accessed April 13-2021

²¹ "UAE, Cyprus, Greece FMs hold first trilateral meeting", *In-Cyprus*, November 17-2019. Available at: <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/uae-cyprus-greece-fms-hold-first-trilateral-meeting/>, Accessed December 16-2020

²² "Meetings of PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Abu Dhabi, UAE", *Prime Minister*, February 04-2020. Available at: <https://primeminister.gr/en/2020/02/04/23206>, Accessed on November 25-2020

²³ "Greece-UAE broader strategic cooperation forum in Athens on Wednesday", *Ekathimerini*, February 17-2020. Available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/249638/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-uae-broader-strategic-cooperation-forum-in-athens-on-wednesday>, Accessed on November 25-2020

²⁴ "UAE, Greece discuss strengthening military cooperation", *MEMO*, June 26-2020. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200626-uae-greece-discuss-strengthening-military-cooperation/>, Accessed on November 25-2020

With Turkey's controversial gas exploration in the background, the UAE sent four F-16s to Crete in August, to send a message of support to its ally and to participate in a military exercise with the Greek Air Force over disputed waters in the Eastern Mediterranean²⁵. Shortly thereafter, the UAE Chief of Staff visited Greece and held talks with his Greek counterpart and the defence minister, further strengthening security cooperation²⁶. This series of meetings culminated in the visit of the Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis to Abu Dhabi in November 2020, where both countries upgraded their ties through a new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership²⁷. Although the pact aims to reinforce political, economic, and cultural cooperation, the crucial element lies in the mutual defence clause, and in the additional plans to expand joint military training. Clearly aimed at Turkey, this agreement complements a tripartite military cooperation agreement signed by Greece, Cyprus, and Israel in September 2020²⁸.

Under this strategic partnership, Emirati personnel will receive training from the Greek aerospace company Hellenic Aerospace Industries and will reside at the Armor Training Center in Avlona, located just 180 km from Turkey²⁹. The agreement will also facilitate the stationing of armed forces in the counterpart's territory, as well as the exchange of classified information³⁰. What is most significant about this agreement is that Greece has signed it with a non-NATO partner, due to concerns caused by Turkey, a NATO partner.

Cooperation does not stop there. Although military-industrial ties between Greece and the UAE often go unnoticed, a 2018 report by the Hellenic Ministry of National Defence³¹

²⁵ "UAE sends four F-16 jets to support Greece against Turkey", *Eurasian Times*, August 26-2020. Available at: <https://eurasianimes.com/uae-sends-four-f-16-jets-to-support-greece-against-turkey/>, Accessed on November 24-2020

²⁶ "UAE's military chief visits site of exercises with Greece", *The National*, September 23-2020. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-s-military-chief-visits-site-of-exercises-with-greece-1.1082072>, Accessed on November 25-2020

²⁷ NEDOS, Vassilis. "Greece, UAE commit to mutual defense assistance", *Ekathimerini*, November 23-2020. Available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/259450/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-uae-commit-to-mutual-defense-assistance>, Accessed on November 25-2020

²⁸ "Greece-Cyprus-Israel sign the tripartite military cooperation program for 2021", *Greek City Times*, September 09-2020. Available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/09/09/greece-cyprus-israel-sign-the-tripartite-military-cooperation-program-for-2021/>, Accessed on April 14-2021

²⁹ NEDOS, Vassilis. "Greece and the UAE sign mutual defense clause", *Greek City Times*, November 24-2020. Available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/23/greece-uae-mutual-defense-clause/>, Accessed on November 25-2020

³⁰ NEDOS, Vassilis. "Greece and the UAE sign mutual defense clause", *Greek City Times*, November 24-2020. Available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/23/greece-uae-mutual-defense-clause/>, Accessed on November 25-2020

³¹ "Hellenic Defense Industries Catalogue 2018", *Hellenic Ministry of National Defense – General Directorate for Defense Investments & Armaments*, June 2018. Available at: <http://www.gdaee.mil.gr/images/PDF/HELDIC%202018.pdf>, Accessed December 13-2020

revealed that the UAE has been purchasing weapons and equipment from various Greek suppliers over the past few years. Specifically, it has purchased ammunition and missiles from Hellenic Defence Systems, patrol boats from Norsafe Hellas SA, night and thermal scopes from Theon Sensors SA, and aerospace products and services from Hellenic Aerospace Industry, among others.

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- **2016, 2017, 2019, Military cooperation agreements**
 - **2019, First trilateral meeting between UAE-Greece-Cyprus**
 - **2020, UAE-Greek Cooperation Forum in Athens**
 - **2020, UAE sends jets to Greece**
 - **2020, Greek PM visits Abu Dhabi and signs the comprehensive strategic partnership, including a mutual defense clause**



Figure 2. UAE-Greece relations.

France

France is probably the European partner that has traditionally had the closest defence ties with the UAE. Almost three decades ago, the UAE signed a defence cooperation agreement in 1995, by which France pledged to protect the UAE in case of aggression³². In 2008, Paris and Abu Dhabi renewed their relationship by signing a new mutual defence agreement, which allowed France to establish a naval, land and air base in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, with some 700 troops³³.

A decade later, and against a background of shared hostility towards Turkey, the fruits of multiple meetings between high-level officials came to light with the new defence

³² THIÉBAUD, Eva. "Unworthy agreement between France and the UAE", *Orient XXI*, September 10-2020. Available at: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/unworthy-agreement-between-france-and-the-united-arab-emirates.4129>, Accessed on November 26-2020

³³ JARRY, Emmanuel. "France, UAE sign military and nuclear agreements", *Reuters*, January 15-2008. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-sarkozy-gulf-idUSL1517472620080115> Accessed on November 26-2020

agreement signed in 2019, during the visit of French Defence Minister Florence Parly to UAE. This agreement formalized the exchange of liaison officers, strengthening military cooperation and improving operational communication³⁴. Alarmed by the Turkish offensive in Libya, and by its gas exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Paris and Abu Dhabi continued to strengthen their collaboration. In January 2020, France applied for admission to the EMGF as a full member³⁵, and it was finally accepted in March 2021³⁶. Meanwhile, the UAE gained access to the forum^{37,38} as an observer state in December 2020, in an apparently coordinated action and with a view to reinforcing a regional convergence hostile to Turkey.

In April 2020, the French Defence Minister held talks with her Emirati counterpart about the Libya and Eastern Mediterranean portfolio³⁹, while former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash did the same with his French counterpart in June, to assess efforts to contain Ankara's influence in Libya⁴⁰. Three months later, the French Foreign Minister received the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah bin Zayed in Paris, where, once again, they discussed the same subject⁴¹. In August,

³⁴ "UAE and France sign military cooperation agreement", *The National*, November 24-2019. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/uae-and-france-sign-military-cooperation-agreement-1.941953>, Accessed on November 26-2020

³⁵ "France asks to join East Mediterranean Gas Forum", *Reuters*, January 16-2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-gas/france-asks-to-join-eastern-mediterranean-gas-forum-idUSKBN1ZF1V2>, Accessed on December 17-2020

³⁶ "France joins the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum", *Econostrum*, May 10-2021. Available at: https://en.econostrum.info/France-joins-the-Eastern-Mediterranean-Gas-Forum_a921.html#:~:text=The%20member%20states%20of%20the,States%20as%20a%20permanent%20observer.&text=The%20Forum%20also%20appears%20as,ambitions%20in%20the%20Eastern%20Mediterranean., Accessed on May 21-2021

³⁷ The status of the UAE membership in the EMGF isn't clearly defined. Some news agencies, like Reuters, announced in December 2020 that the UAE had joined the EMGF as an observer member. But in March 2021, some other media platforms reported that the Palestinian Authority had vetoed the UAE's membership. See: QASSEM, Jaffar. "Palestine vetoes UAE membership in EastMed Gas Forum", *Anadolu Agency*, March 10-2021. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/palestine-vetoes-uae-membership-in-eastmed-gas-forum/2171449>, Accessed on May 21-2021.

³⁸ "Egypt says UAE joins East Mediterranean gas forum as an observer", *Reuters*, December 16-2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-emirates-gas-int-idUSKBN28Q29M>, Accessed on May 21-2021.

³⁹ "UAE Defence official, French armed forces minister discuss defence cooperation", *Pakistan Point*, April 21-2020. Available at: <https://www.pakistanpoint.com/en/story/899131/uae-defence-official-french-armed-forces-minister-disc.html>, Accessed on December 01-2020

⁴⁰ FENTON-HARVEY, Jonathan. "What drives the foreign policy alignment btw France and the UAE?" *Al-Sharq Strategic Research*, July 05-2020. Available at: <https://research.sharqforum.org/2020/07/05/what-drives-the-foreign-policy-alignment-between-france-and-the-united-arab-emirates/>, Accessed on December 01-2020

⁴¹ "UAE-French FMs discuss Libya", *Libya Review*, September 23-2020. Available at: <https://libyareview.com/6742/>, Accessed on December 01-2020

French Rafale fighter jets flew to Crete, coinciding with the four F-16s sent by the UAE to Greece at a time of high tension with Turkey⁴².

True to the frenetic pace of encounters, Parly met with MBS and other senior defence officials in November 2020 to review defence cooperation, while the Emirati Defence Minister met with the French ambassador to the UAE to explore new avenues of military cooperation⁴³. A follow-up meeting was held in January 2021, when Le Drian, France's Foreign Minister, hosted his Emirati counterpart to address the UAE-France Strategic Dialogue⁴⁴. In the short term, it appears that this alliance will remain strong, as both countries share numerous security interests, and are seeking to cultivate relations through frequent meetings and forums for dialogue.

Paris has helped arm the small federation. The Paris-based Naval Group, for example, closed a contract in 2019 to sell two Gowind corvettes worth \$ 850 million to the UAE, jointly built with the Abu Dhabi Ship Building Company⁴⁵. Other defence companies are investing in long-term joint programs: the aerospace group Thales announced in 2021 the launch of a Radar Center of Excellence, with the aim of turning the UAE into an exporter of state-of-the-art radars⁴⁶. Along the same lines, the French multinational aerospace company Safran SA announced that it plans to establish a similar centre focused on optronics, which are systems made up of radars, lasers and other tools to detect and track targets⁴⁷.

Dassault Aviation, another French aerospace company, is refurbishing 30 Mirage 2000-9 fighter jets, which the UAE bought from France in 1998⁴⁸. It also announced that it would

⁴² "French Rafales join Crete while UAE fighter jets trap the Turks", *Bulgarian Military*, August 22-2020. Available at: <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2020/08/22/french-rafales-join-crete-while-uae-fighter-jets-trap-the-turks/>, Accessed on December 01-2020

⁴³ "Al-Bowardi discusses cooperation with French ambassador", *Emirates News Agency*, November 16-2020. Available at: <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302870428>, Accessed on December 03-2020

⁴⁴ BASHIR, Hassan; MOHAMED, Hatem. "Abdullah bin Zayed, French FM discuss bilateral ties, global developments", *WAM*, January 21-2021. Available at: <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302903404>, Accessed on January 22-2021

⁴⁵ MACKENZIE, Christina. "UAE, naval Group quietly cut \$850 million deal for Gowind ships", *Defense News*, June 10-2019. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2019/06/10/uae-naval-group-quietly-cut-850-million-deal-for-gowind-ships/>, Accessed on November 26-2020

⁴⁶ ABUBAKER, Rasha; ALGHOUL, Rola. "Tawazun Economic Council, Thales Emarat Technologies launch Radar Centre of Excellence", *The National*, February 22-2021. Available at: <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302912309>, Accessed on February 22-2021

⁴⁷ "UAE, France bolster defense Cooperation", *Defense Aerospace*, November 19-2019. Available at: <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/article-view/release/207668/mbda-to-open-missile-engineering-center-in-uae.html>, Accessed on December 02-2020

⁴⁸ DONALD, David. "UAE signs up for Mirage upgrade", *AIN Online*, November 18-2019. Available at:

build a Flight Testing Center in Abu Dhabi, while MBDA France unveiled plans to establish the first missile engineering centre of the entire region in the UAE⁴⁹. New joint projects between MBDA and Tawazun emerged from IDEX 2021, to develop smart guided weapons systems⁵⁰. At the government level, the French public procurement agency and Tawazun agreed to establish a joint committee to promote research and development in defence technologies⁵¹.



Figure 3. UAE-France relations.

Egypt

Another very close partner of the Emiratis in the Mediterranean is Egypt. Egypt-UAE relations are tremendously warm, with around 15 bilateral visits since 2014: MBZ has visited Egypt ten times, while Sisi has travelled to the UAE five times⁵². The interests between both countries largely overlap in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, where the UAE has operated from Egyptian bases. For example, there are rumours that the attack on the Turkish air base of Al-Watiya in July 2020 was carried out by Emirati Mirage

<https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2019-11-18/uae-signs-mirage-upgrade>, Accessed on November 26-2020

⁴⁹ "Tawazun Economic Council to establish four new regional centres in UAE", *Tawazun*, November 16-2019. Available at: <https://www.tawazun.ae/tawazun-economic-council-to-establish-four-new-regional-centres-in-uae/>, Accessed on December 02-2020

⁵⁰ ALFAHAM, Tariq. "Tawazun, MBDA to cooperate on Smartglider development", *WAM*, February 22-2021. Available at: <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302912384>, Accessed on February 25-2021

⁵¹ "UAE, France bolster def Cooperation", *Defense Aerospace*, November 19-2019, Available at: <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/article-view/release/207668/mbda-to-open-missile-engineering-center-in-uae.html>, Accessed on December 02-2020

⁵² OMRAN, Hagar. "UAE, Egypt's Strategic ally for 47 years", *Daily News Egypt*, December 02-2018. Available at: <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2018/12/02/uae-egypts-strategic-ally-for-47-years/>, Accessed on November 26-2020

fighter jets, operating from the Egyptian base of Sidi Barrani⁵³. A shared concern about Turkey's intervention in Libya, and the controversial maritime borders delimitation between Ankara and Tripoli have been a recurring topic of conversation in the meetings between MBZ and Sisi. As part of its strategy to strengthen Egypt's role as a stable anchor during the Arab world, the UAE announced in November 2019 an investment deal valued at \$20 billion⁵⁴.

With such a level of investment flows originating in the Gulf, and in the UAE, it is understandable that Egypt has referred to the security of its allies in the Gulf as an extension of its own national security. Indeed, Abdelfatah el Sisi has repeatedly asserted that Gulf security represents a red line and an integral part of Egypt's national security and that he would therefore support his allies in the Gulf against any regional threat⁵⁵. This rhetoric resembles that of a mutual defence pact, without being formally so, making it difficult to know how far Egypt is willing to go to defend its Gulf partners. For example, following the attacks in Abqaiq (Saudi Arabia), in September 2019, the Egyptian response consisted of issuing a mere condemnation of the aggression and some words of support for its Saudi ally⁵⁶. On the other hand, it is also true that Egypt's priorities are better aligned with those of the UAE, than Saudi Arabia, when it comes to Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In any case, both countries need each other: Egypt urgently needs Emirati investment, and the UAE needs Egypt to contain Turkey and protect its growing interests in the Mediterranean. In short: there is no formal defence clause between Cairo and Abu Dhabi, but there are sufficient reasons to believe that, in the event of an attack, both partners will behave as if there was one.

⁵³ ATAMAN, Muhittin. "The meaning of the al-Watiya air base attack", *Daily Sabah*, July 08-2020. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/the-meaning-of-the-al-watiya-air-base-attack>, Accessed on December 17-2020

⁵⁴ FOULY, Mahmoud; AL-AZRAK, Emad. "Egypt-UAE huge investment deal reflects Cairo's strategic significance to Gulf states: experts", *Xinhua*, November 17-2019. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/17/c_138560802.htm, Accessed on November 30-2020

⁵⁵ FOULY, Mahmoud; AL-AZRAK, Emad. "Egypt-UAE huge investment deal reflects Cairo's strategic significance to Gulf states: experts", *Xinhua*, November 17-2019. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/17/c_138560802.htm, Accessed on November 30-2020

⁵⁶ "Egypt strongly condemns terrorist attack on Saudi Aramco plants", *Egypt Today*, September 16-2019. Available at: <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/74773/Egypt-strongly-condemns-terrorist-attack-on-Saudi-Aramco-plants>, Accessed on April 14-2021



Figure 4. UAE-Egypt relations.

Cyprus

The UAE's relationship with Cyprus, although relatively recent⁵⁷, has received a lot of attention from Abu Dhabi's defence officials. As their respective air forces improved their interoperability during the annual exercises at Iniohos, high-level defence officials met several times throughout 2018⁵⁸ and 2019⁵⁹. In November 2020, the Emirati defence minister called his Cypriot counterpart to address security issues in the Eastern Mediterranean⁶⁰. Shortly after, the Cyprus-UAE cooperation committee convened for the first time to institutionalize cooperation in various fields, including security and defence⁶¹. The results did not take long to materialize, and in January 2021, both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation, to carry out joint manoeuvres and training programs in the future⁶². A week later, the Cypriot Foreign

⁵⁷ The UAE opened an embassy in the Republic of Cyprus in Julio, 2016. See: "New UAE embassy opens in Cyprus", *The National*, July 12-2016. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/new-uae-embassy-opens-in-cyprus-1.160768>, Accessed on April 14-2021

⁵⁸ ALFAHAM, Tariq. "UAE ambassador meets Cypriot defence minister", *Emirates News Agency*, May 18-2018. Available at: <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302689944>, Accessed on November 29-2020

⁵⁹ "UAE's international peacekeeping efforts praised by Cyprus and Greece", *The National*, November 16-2019. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-s-international-peacekeeping-efforts-praised-by-cyprus-and-greece-1.938441>, Accessed on November 26-2020

⁶⁰ "Cyprus and UAE defence ministers discuss enhancing bilateral cooperation", *In-Cyprus*, November 09-2020. Available at: <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/cyprus-and-uae-defence-ministers-discuss-enhancing-bilateral-cooperation/>, Accessed on November 25-2020

⁶¹ "Cyprus: Cyprus-UAE joint cooperation committee convene for the first time", *Independent Balkan News Agency*, November 11-2020. Available at: <https://balkaneu.com/cyprus-cyprus-uae-joint-cooperation-committee-convene-for-the-first-time/>, Accessed on November 26-2020

⁶² ISMAIL, Esraa; ALGHOUL Rola. "UAE, Cyprus, sign MoU on cooperation in defence field", *WAM*,

Minister travelled to Abu Dhabi to strengthen coordination with the UAE and jointly face new developments in the Eastern Mediterranean⁶³.

- 2018 – 2021, Iniochos joint military exercises
- 2018 and 2019, High-level meetings of defence officials
- 2020, Joint Committee on UAE-Cyprus Cooperation
- 2021, MoU in defence cooperation



Figure 5. UAE-Cyprus relations.

Forums, conferences and multilateral institutions

These bilateral ties that have been presented have a much bigger impact in regional dynamics when they are also institutionalized in intergovernmental forums and organizations. While it is true that the UAE is not a dominant player in all such forums, its presence largely determines the rhetoric towards Turkey. In this context, Abu Dhabi is benefitting from the Cairo-based EMGF, formed in 2020 by Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, Israel, Italy, and Jordan⁶⁴. The UAE's entry in late 2020⁶⁵ as an observer state in the EMGF might seem strange, but the absence of Turkey is noteworthy. Presented as a cooperative platform to deal with energy issues, Ankara perceives the EMGF as a hostile and

January 12-2021. Available at: <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302900927>, Accessed on January 12-2021

⁶³ "Cyprus: Christodoulides on a two-day working visit to UAE and Saudi Arabia", *Independent Balkan News Agency*, January 18-2021. Available at: <https://balkan.eu.com/cyprus-christodoulides-on-a-two-day-working-visit-to-uae-and-saudi-arabia/>, Accessed on January 23-2021

⁶⁴ QANDIL, Ahmed. "East Med Gas Forum turns into regional organisation, in blow to Turkey", September 23-2020. Available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/east-med-gas-forum-turns-regional-organisation-blow-turkey>, Accessed April 15-2021

⁶⁵ "Egypt's Sisi, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed agree on continuing joint confrontation against threats to region's security", *Ahram Online*, December 16-2020. Available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/397013.aspx>, Accessed on December 17-2020

unrealistic initiative that aims to exclude Turkey⁶⁶. The Emirati presence becomes even more relevant, after the Emirati sovereign wealth fund Mubadala signed an MoU with the Israeli company Delek Drilling to buy a 22% stake worth \$1.1 billion in the Tamar gas field, near Israel⁶⁷.

In February 2021, Athens hosted the first edition of the Philia Forum, welcoming representatives from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Cyprus and France, to discuss peace and stability in the region⁶⁸. Apart from addressing the challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Cypriot dispute and various energy issues, the Philia Forum sent a clear message of unity, from countries willing to defend their interests against Turkey. Also in February 2021, the International Defence Exhibition & Conference 2021, the largest exhibition of its kind in the region, took place in Abu Dhabi. This biannual macro event is a unique opportunity to strengthen security and defence ties with partners from all over the world. In this edition, MBZ, the defence minister, and other top Emirati officials seized the opportunity to receive representatives from Greece⁶⁹, Cyprus⁷⁰, Egypt⁷¹ and France⁷², but not from Turkey.

More recently, in April 2021, the foreign ministers of Israel, Greece, Cyprus and the UAE met in Cyprus to bolster their strategic interests in the region⁷³ while, in a curious coincidence, their respective air forces participated in the joint military exercise Iniochos

⁶⁶ SIDERIS, Spiros. "Turkish Foreign Ministry reacts to the signing of the EMGF", *Independent Balkan News Agency*, January 17-2020. Available at: <https://balkaneu.com/turkish-foreign-ministry-reacts-to-the-signing-of-the-emgf/>, Accessed on April 15-2021

⁶⁷ "UAE's Mubadala signs MoU to acquire Delek's stake in Israeli gas field", *Offshore Technology*, April 27-2021. Available at: <https://www.offshore-technology.com/news/mubadala-mou-delek-stake-tamar-gas-field/>, Accessed on May 10-2021

⁶⁸ ALFAHAM Tariq; MOHAMED, Hatem. "UAE condemns foreign interventions in internal affairs: Reem Al Hashemy", *WAM*, February 11-2021. Available at: <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302909478>, Accessed on February 12-2021

⁶⁹ "Greece and UAE seek to deepen defense relationship", *Greek City Times*, February 22-2021. Available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/02/23/greece-uae-defense-relationship/>, Accessed on April 15-2021

⁷⁰ "Idex 2021: Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed meets Serbian and Cypriot defence ministers", *The National*, February 23-2021. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/idex-2021-sheikh-mohamed-bin-zayed-meets-serbian-and-cypriot-defence-ministers-1.1171743>, Accessed on April 15-2021

⁷¹ "Egypt's defence minister meets counterparts, military equipment companies' chiefs in IDEX 2021", *Egypt Today*, February 25-2021. Available at: <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/99032/Egypt-s-defense-minister-meets-counterparts-military-equipment-companies-chiefs>, Accessed on April 15-2021

⁷² "His highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed receives President of Tatarstan, French Minister of Armed Forces", *MOFAIC*, February 23-2021. Available at: <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2021/2/23/23-02-2021-uae-presidents>, Accessed on April 15-2021

⁷³ "UAE, Israel, Cyprus, Greece foreign ministers to meet Friday", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 16-2021. Available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2922336/uae-israel-cyprus-greece-foreign-ministers-meet-friday>, Accessed on April 21-2021

2021.

Other Mediterranean actors?

Although Abu Dhabi has also increased security cooperation with other Mediterranean countries, such as Israel, Italy and Spain, it would not be appropriate to include them in this informal axis hostile to Ankara. While it is true that the UAE could try to widen the rift between Israel and Turkey, this will not be an easy task, given that Turkey and Israel have common interests in Syria (containing Iran and weakening the Assad regime) and Israel would not want to ruin its relationship with Ankara.

Italy and Spain have warmer ties with Turkey for various reasons. La Moncloa is aware of the delicate position of Spanish banks, which hold \$64 billion in Turkish debt, more than all the Turkish debt held by France, Italy, the United States and Germany⁷⁴ together. Italy, for its part, has shared interests with Turkey in Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia⁷⁵. This partially explains why neither Madrid nor Rome have been very enthusiastic in their condemnation of Ankara's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and have done their best to avoid sanctions within the EU.

Final thoughts

After seeing how the UAE has strengthened its relations with various Eastern Mediterranean countries, with the aim of isolating Turkey, we present three possible short-term scenarios, with their respective probability levels.

1) UAE-Turkey reconciliation

Over the past few months, various trends have emerged that could allow for a convergence of interests between Turkey and the UAE. The Arab quartet's reconciliation

⁷⁴ ANTONOPOULOS, Paul. "Have Spanish and Italian banks guided their countries policies toward Turkey?" *Greek City Times*, September 16-2020. Available at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/09/16/has-spanish-and-italian-banks-guided-their-countrys-policies-towards-turkey/#:~:text=The%20most%20exposed%20banks%20in,billion%20and%20%2421%20billion%2C%20respectively>, Accessed on April 10-2021

⁷⁵ TANCHUM, Michaël. "Libya, energy, and the Mediterranean's new 'Great Game'", *Real Instituto Elcano*, September 23-2020. Available at: http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari110-2020-tanchum-libya-energy-and-the-mediterraneans-new-great+game, Accessed on February 02-2021

with Qatar, formalized at the Al-Ula summit, has eased tensions in the Gulf, and has had positive spill over effects, with some signals of reconciliation between Turkey, on the one hand, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the other. As a consequence, it would not be unreasonable to think that the UAE could follow in the footsteps of its allies, especially after an Emirati minister said in January 2021 that the UAE wants to normalize relations with Turkey within a framework of mutual respect for sovereignty⁷⁶. The possibility of European sanctions on Ankara, and the new Biden administration, less permissive than the previous one, have influenced this change of direction in Ankara's foreign policy.

Furthermore, the replacement of Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash, whose rhetoric towards Turkey has traditionally been inflammatory, could indicate a willingness by the Emirati elite to make a clean slate of its foreign policy, Dr. Krieg argues⁷⁷. Finally, in May 2021, a new Turkish ambassador took office in the UAE, after a friendly telephone conversation between their respective foreign ministers⁷⁸. That said, it is unlikely that Abu Dhabi and Ankara fully reconcile. For such a thing to happen, both would need to address certain fundamental points of disagreement.

2) Low-intensity tensions

Most likely, low-intensity tensions will continue, mainly due to (1) a core ideological disagreement about the role of political Islam, embodied in the Muslim Brotherhood, and (2) a dynamic of geopolitical competition that has entrenched itself in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa⁷⁹. Until these frictions are resolved, an honest and lasting reconciliation will be unlikely.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey has exploited this low-intensity confrontation to strengthen a narrative of foreign interference as the source of all ills in the country. Meanwhile, the UAE has instrumentalized the confrontation to strengthen its ties with

⁷⁶ OKUDUCI, Idris. "UAE wants to normalize relations with Turkey: Minister", *Anadolu Agency*, January 11-2021. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/uae-wants-to-normalize-relations-with-turkey-minister/2105471>, Accessed on April 12-2021

⁷⁷ CAFIERO, Giorgio. "A cabinet reshuffle and the centralisation of power in Abu Dhabi", *TRT World*, February 18-2021. Available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/a-cabinet-reshuffle-and-the-centralisation-of-power-in-abu-dhabi-44279>, Accessed on February 19-2021

⁷⁸ "Turkey's new ambassador to the UAE takes office", *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 03-2021. Available at: <https://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/turkeys-new-ambassador-to-the-uae-takes-office-164432>, Accessed on May 10-2021

⁷⁹ AYDINTASBAS, Asli; BIANCO, Cinzia. Useful enemies: How the Turkey-UAE rivalry is remaking the Middle East, *ECFR*, March 15-2021. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/useful-enemies-how-the-turkey-uae-rivalry-is-remaking-the-middle-east/>, Accessed on April 02-2021

European countries and with the US, at a time in which Ankara is losing sympathy among some of its Western allies.

3) Tensions taken to the extreme

It is highly unlikely that tensions between the UAE and Turkey escalate to an extreme level, as such a rivalry would consume both countries' energy and attention, at a time when they grapple with far more pressing issues. Ankara, apart from facing the coronavirus pandemic, must also pay attention to the critical situation in Idlib, the fight against the PKK, and the dire economic situation. While it is true that the confrontation can be instrumentalized to divert attention from domestic problems, it is most likely that, if such an escalation of tensions were to occur, it would be rhetorical and limited. Abu Dhabi, for its part, would not want to further tarnish its reputation, a few months before the start of the Expo 2020⁸⁰ in Dubai.

To reach a durable solution, the UAE must try to understand Turkish threat perceptions in the region, considering more empathetically the Turkish position in the Eastern Mediterranean. Rather than fuelling the confrontation by strengthening military ties with Turkey's neighbours, the UAE should take a conciliatory approach, and seek inclusive solutions that address Ankara's worries. A successful reconciliation between Doha and Abu Dhabi could facilitate this process. On the other hand, Turkey should also avoid actions that may unnecessarily increase tensions, to understand Emirati perceptions about the danger posed by political Islam.

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⁸⁰ Due to the pandemic, the Expo will be celebrated between October 01-2021 and March 31-2022.