

# The UAE and the End of the Middle East

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**The recent agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates to normalize relations is another milestone in the transformation of the Middle East, which began ten years ago, and which has completely shifted the political, economic and military balance in the region. The core concern of the Emirates and their allies is the containment of political Islam and the irreversible embedding of the Arab states in a global modernity. However, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia are not at all liberalizing their political order, but rather restoring the state as an all-encompassing power without having to define a future Islamic or Arab ideal state. Instead, the Gulf regimes are transforming the state into a postmodern Leviathan that nips any political claim to Islam in the bud.**

## *The Emirates and the Muslim Brotherhood*

In the early 1990s, the Emirates broke with the organizations of political Islam affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. A generation earlier, the Brotherhood had tried to gain a foothold in the Gulf countries, where new educational institutions and other organs of state administration had been then established. The Muslim Brotherhood and its Emirati offshoot, the al-Islāh party, soon posed a real threat to the survival of the Federation of Princes in the Gulf. The Brotherhood found its main support among students from abroad who were preparing for careers within the Federation, and among Emiratis who reinterpreted their Wahhabi-Puritanian tradition as an instrument of political opposition. In 1994, the government banned the al-Islāh party. Under the rule of Zāyid bin Sultān Āl Nahyān (1918-

2004), the government did not take any further measures to reintegrate oppositional Emiratis. The fact that two of the 19 assassins of September 11, 2001, came from the UAE and 15 from Saudi Arabia gave the then crown prince and president's representative Khalīfa bin Zāyid the means to take action against the Muslim Brotherhood, who, at that time, counted nearly 2,000 foreigners as alleged members in the UAE. It is unclear how many Emiratis actually joined the al-Islāh party, founded in 1974, and whether it really had an armed formation at its disposal, as analysts claim today. Observers estimated that there would be up to 20,000 activists in 2011. In 2013, 11 foreigners and 100 Emiratis were taken to court for membership in a banned organization and conspiracy against the state. One year later, the government declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

The UAE authorities had already tightened the screws in 2011. In the euphoria of the Arab Spring, the al-Islāh party had launched a petition for an elected parliament with executive powers and met with some response from those Emiratis who did not belong to the Arab state elite. This is made up of those about 7 % of the population whose ancestors had already lived in one of the principalities before 1920 and whose citizenship the state cannot withdraw their citizenship. The situation is different for the 3% of the population who have Emirati citizenship, but whose ancestors immigrated after 1920, mostly from Iran or India. Prominent representatives of al-Islāh had their citizenship revoked in 2011.

The al-Islāh party maintained to portray the interests of a civil society governed by principles of an Islamic order. For the Supreme Council of the Federation, to which the princes of the seven union states belong and which Khalīfa Bin Zāyid, the Emir of Abū Dhabi (Zaby), presided, such demands were tantamount to mutiny. In his view, only the state was representative of the nation against which the Muslim Brotherhood had conspired. By subordinating their loyalty to a "foreign power," the Muslim Brotherhood would undermine the state order. Moreover, they would incite the people to rebel against the status of subjects of the princes with their propaganda.

#### *The emirs' fear of Behemoth*

The emirs see themselves as an organ of an absolute state embedded in a court, which the Old Arab nobility belong to. State and court together represent the nation. The other nationals are merely subjects. The foreigners, who make up 90 % of the population of nearly 10 million people, are usually subject to a personal relationship with nationals as servants, workers, pensioners or

entrepreneurs. The state has assumed the right and tasks of a self-governing civil society, usually providing these services by paying pensions to its employees.

This system does not provide for a civil society. The state punishes any attempt to mobilize the subjects by means of a political public sphere in order to create social equality of rights with minority protection as a conspiracy against the nation. This naturally corresponds to the logic of such a Leviathanian system, in which solely the state power and the court of the state elites represent the nation, and in which the state alone creates and controls the institutions of a civil order. The state elites understand the people as a community of subjects, mercenaries, and servants, and see in them a constant threat: it takes little to turn the people into a monster, a rebellious behemoth who wages war of all against all.

The events of the Arab Spring 2011/2 and the following years of crisis and war were in the eyes of the Emirati elites a clear indication of how quickly and unexpectedly the people can mutate into Behemoth. It was above all the Muslim Brotherhood and other organizations of political Islam that released Behemoth among the people. With the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in 2014, the threat has become even greater. In fact, the I.S. justified its legitimacy in many areas with dissident doctrines of the Wahhabi tradition, which also plays a major role in shaping the domestic Islamic order in the Emirates and which has so far served as a moral bond between nation and people.

#### *The UAE's raison d'état*

This determines the UAE's raison d'état: the union state and the seven principalities are supposed to form a latent power in the form of Leviathan that nips any attempt to unleash the people's Behemoth character in the bud.

Foreign and domestic political measures are subject to this goal. They therefore form a strategic alliance: the goal is to strangle mutinies in Arab countries as well, so that the spark of rebellion does not reach the Emirates. The Emirati state representatives consider any attempt to subject state and society to an Islamic order to be mutiny.

They see themselves exposed to such a threat in two ways. On the one hand, by the tradition of political Islam, embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and protected by Qatar and Turkey; on the other hand, by the tradition of political Shia, which is dominated by Iran. In Libya, the government in Tripoli is considered the agency of the Muslim Brotherhoods and Turkish imperialism; in Yemen, the situation is more complicated: on the one hand, the Emirates are feuding with Ansār Allāh, which wants to transform the Zaydite tradition in the country into an agency of Iran-orchestrated political Shia. On the other hand, president al-Hādī's government still supported by Saudi Arabia is considered unreliable because it still seems to be dependent on the network of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, whose political party is also called al-Islāh. Therefore, the UAE supports the South Yemeni separatists, who in turn have declared war on the Muslim Brotherhoods in Yemen.

The mentor of this policy is Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Zāyif Āl Nahyān, who is also deputy commander-in-chief of the Emirates' armed forces and who has effectively replaced his older brother Khalīfa, who is no longer able to hold office after a stroke. For him it is a foregone conclusion that in free and fair elections in the Middle East no one would elect democrats, but Islamists or terrorists. This is exactly what the rulers at the Saudi royal court in Riyadh fear. They had initiated a similar transformation of the state order eight years ago.

To make matters more difficult, however, until recently the ruling system in Saudi Arabia rested on a dualism of politics, embodied by royal power, and of social control, embodied by Wahhabi institutions. To achieve the position of a Leviathan, the Saudi state must therefore eliminate this dualism and remove all political power from the Wahhabi tradition. The goal of transformation in Saudi Arabia is to establish a post-Wahhabi order in the form of a "Saudi nation."

#### *A new strategic partnership*

In order to prevent a mutiny in their own country, which would almost inevitably lead to the establishment of an Islamic Leviathan according to the will of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the eyes of the emirs, the Arab rulers should establish a broadest possible front against potential allies of the mutineers. These are, on the one hand, the Emirate of Qatar and Turkey and their local allies in Libya, Yemen and Syria. Almost even more important is the front against Iran, which as an immediate neighbour of the Emirates poses a constant threat. It is a realistic scenario that in the event of a war with Iran, the Emirates could become a battlefield. However, the strategic threat is not the only issue. No less significant is Iran's potential to mobilize its clientele in the Gulf States in moments of crisis and thus destabilize the political order of the principalities. The Emirates are also considering the possibility of a tactical alliance between Iran and Turkey.

To prevent this risk, the UAE and Israel have been working for almost ten years to improve their already "robust" relations. On August 13, U.S. President Donald Trump presented an agreement between Israel and the UAE in the White House to normalize their relationship, which probably David Kushner gave the lofty name "Abraham Accord". Naturally, Trump and his entourage presented the agreement

between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Zāyid as his work, to which he had already committed the "leaders of the Arab world" at the 2017 summit in Riyadh. In reality, however, the Emirates in alliance with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and probably Kuwait as well, may have been considering the option of normalizing their relations with Israel as early as 2012. A first highlight was the visit of the Israeli Minister of Culture and Sports, Miri Regev, to the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi on October 29, 2018.

The UAE still claims that this does not mean military cooperation. Nevertheless, hardly anyone believes this, because the protection of the Israeli nuclear shield only offers advantages to the principalities. The potentates can assume that in the event of a war with Iran, they do not have to fear collateral damage from Israeli or American nuclear weapons as allies.

#### *Winners only*

The Emirati press cheered the agreement: Israel would have access to a gigantic Gulf economy and to a partnership with the most developed Arab country. The UAE will have access to Israel's advanced technology, from agriculture to the military. Even the Palestinians will only benefit from the agreement, despite the government's de facto termination of relations with the UAE in 2012. The agreement with the UAE would have led to the freezing of Israel's annexation of the West Bank border areas. In addition, for Palestinian civil society and youth, a business relationship between Dubai and the West Bank would bring enormous economic benefits that would lift them out of their decades-old plight.

No less euphoric was the reaction of the press in Israel: "Mabruk and mazel tov to all Muslims and Jews in this new era of peace," was

headline in the Jerusalem Post on August 15. In the same newspaper, one commentator speculated that the Peace to Prosperity Plan presented by Trump on January 28, 2020, was actually only a means of exerting pressure to win the UAE over to normalization: The Israeli government would have exerted increasing pressure on the UAE with a US-sanctioned annexation of the West Bank border areas. Only when the annexation was imminent and after the director of the Israeli secret service Mossad in Abu Dhabi had signalled on August 5 that Israel would freeze the annexation in the event of a contractual arrangement with the Emirates, the Emirates would have agreed to the agreement.

#### *The dissolution of the Middle East*

Apparently, there is actually much more to this agreement, called "Abraham Accord". "And there are things happening that I cannot talk about, but they are extremely positive," murmured U.S. President Donald Trump when he presented the agreement on August 13. Everything points to the fact that the agreement is intended to be the basis for a regional political reorganization in the Middle East. While after September 11, 2001, US strategists tried to define a New Middle East as the greater geopolitical area in which neo-liberal orders were to be established, it is becoming apparent that the UAE, and with it Bahrain, Kuwait and then Saudi Arabia, will bid farewell to the old Middle East. Their model is their future partner Israel, which does not define itself as part of a Middle East, but as part of a global West. The Gulf States have precisely such an interpretation in mind. With their withdrawal from the Middle East, they would necessarily realign the network of political and cultural ties in the Arab world.

Accordingly, the Gulf countries are conjuring up a new Arabism to replace the Islamism of past decades. This is not a resumption of the

nationalist utopias of the 1960s, but rather a nostalgia framed in a retrotopia. The rebranding of Arabism serves to liberate the Arab world from the negative image of the Middle East, to mark its membership in a global modernity and to dissolve the semantic uniformity of the Middle East. Political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood are widely regarded as embodiments of the old Middle East and as chalk-eating Behemoth, Iran and Turkey as the bankruptcy trustees of the Middle East. The states of the Arabian Peninsula and, in their wake, their allies Egypt, Jordan and Sudan now see themselves as the nucleus of a new Arab order that helps to secure their place in a global modernity.

### *The new heirs of the Middle East*

Iran and Turkey share the Middle Eastern inheritance. They dress themselves in the robes of political and cultural nostalgia. The Turkish president Erdoğan is carefree in his neo-Osmanism and hopes for a large following among the Arab population. The Iranian leadership is counting on the pathos of a Shiite-Islamic retrotopia of suffering and resistance. It is controversial whether Libya, Yemen and the three countries of the Fertile Crescent, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq will belong to the new Arab bloc led by the Emirates and Saudi Arabia or whether they will remain in the Middle East under Iranian or Turkish patronage.