



## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (13)

### ***The UAE's Role in Syria's Stability***

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## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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## **Introduction**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has pursued a careful policy towards the Syrian conflict based on keeping Syrian state institutions intact and simultaneously supporting Syrian people's aspirations. In order to maintain this balance, Abu Dhabi has relied in part on a legacy of pragmatic relations with Damascus since the 1990s. This legacy allowed Abu Dhabi to resume its diplomatic ties with Damascus with the aim of drawing it closer to its Arab neighbours when Iran's influence over the country's decision-making increased. In order to keep its engagement constructive, the UAE has utilised humanitarian aid since 2011 to support the Syrian people in refugee camps outside the country and within Syria especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The UAE however faces challenges from regional and international actors involved in the Syrian conflict.

### **1. Abu Dhabi and Damascus' fluctuating legacy**

The relationship between the UAE and Syria has not been linear. Multiple players and political factors have influenced the nature and direction of the relationship since the 1980s. The strong influence of Russia in Syria and the alliance between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the US in the Syrian conflict has increased fundamental differences between the two countries. During the Iraq–Iran war, the UAE supported Iraq while Syria sided with Iran. A decade later, a turning point that positively transformed the relationship between the two countries occurred during the Iraq invasion of Kuwait. Damascus' anti Baghdad stances brought the UAE and Syria closer as both countries supported Iran and Kuwait against Iraq. Consequently, Syria was among the few Arab countries that participated in the international coalition to liberate Kuwait.<sup>1</sup>

As Damascus continued its animosity toward Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, this opened the door for a pragmatic relationship with both Kuwait and the UAE. The GCC needed support from other Arab States, which they had not fully secured up to that point, so any contribution from Syria was welcomed. Damascus also benefited from the support it gave to Kuwait. Resumption of communications with Washington led to President Hafez al-Asaad being granted a billion dollars' worth of arms made available through a variety of back doors channels, mostly Gulf Arab states.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>CNN, The Gulf War, 2001, retrieved on May 2020

<https://web.archive.org/web/20080317110507/http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/gulf.war/facts/gulfwar/>

<sup>2</sup> John Pilger, John Pilger reveals how the Bushes bribe the world from Russia to Iran, New Statesman, 23 SEP 2002, retrieved on May 2020  
<https://www.newstatesman.com/node/192550>

Key differences between the UAE and Syria still exist, such as Hezbollah, which is designated as a terrorist organisation in the UAE, but is a close ally of Damascus. Despite such differences the two countries managed to maintain a common ground. The UAE supports the restoration of the Golan Heights to Syria from Israel; Syria supports the return of the UAE's three occupied islands from Iran; while both support the independence of Palestine. A fluctuating relationship continued between the UAE and Syria from the 1990s, only to turn sour from 2011 as Syria's uprising morphed into a civil conflict involving external actors.

## **2. The UAE balances on the Syrian conflict**

The UAE's policy towards Syria has transformed since 2011. The constant change in contexts and actors dictated a redirection of policies and choices more than merely a change in guiding lines. The UAE's main objective in Syria since the 2011 uprising has been the return of peace and security to Syria, underpinned by economic recovery. Anwar Gargash, the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, reflects Abu Dhabi's position on Syria. "Our position on the Syrian crisis is very clear: a few years ago, we had a choice — to support Bashar Assad or the opposition, which was joined by jihadists and even many terrorist elements, and we chose to be somewhere between. We confirm the need for a political solution in Syria. It is impossible to achieve stability in this country through a military solution".<sup>3</sup>

The UAE's provision of humanitarian aid for the Syrian people in refugee camp in Jordan and Turkey was the first phase of its involvement in the Syrian crisis. Earlier in 2013, when the security situation deteriorated in Syria, Shaikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE's Foreign Minister, declared that "the UAE will continue its support for the Syrian people and their legitimate aspirations to restore security and stability to the country." He made this remark in his meeting with Ahmed Al Jarba, President of the Syrian National Coalition, during a meeting for the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.<sup>4</sup> The UAE's balanced position on Syria was consistent with many countries, including other countries in the GCC, namely Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.<sup>5</sup>

This policy was reiterated in January 2014 in the statement of Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the country's Prime Minister. "We should help but not interfere."

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<sup>3</sup> Sputnik, "The Syrian crisis can only be resolved through political means, by a peaceful transfer of power, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said." Sputnik, 10 APR 2018, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804101063407594-syria-crisis-not-military-solutions/>

<sup>4</sup> WAM, "UAE reaffirms support for Syria", Gulf News, 25 SEP 2013, Retrieved on May 2020. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-reaffirms-support-for-syria-1.1235296>

<sup>5</sup> Gulf News Report, "No Peace as long as al Assad stays, Mohammad says" Gulf News, 13 January 2014, Retrieved on May 2020. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/no-peace-as-long-as-al-assad-stays-mohammad-says-1.1277068>

Simultaneously, the UAE was firm in its rejection of oppression. “If you kill your people you can’t stay”, said the UAE’s PM in the same statement. The threat of ISIS, however, compelled the UAE and other regional actors (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar) to join the US in the airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targets inside Syria in September 2014<sup>6</sup>. This was welcomed by all parties, including Damascus.

The increased Iranian influence in Syria rose imperatives for more Arab presence in Damascus. By 2016, the UAE believed that Syria needed to re-establish ties with its Arab neighbours, and to regain its status as a member of the Arab League. The UAE’s posture towards the Syrian crisis was reflected when Abu Dhabi offered to host peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. More steps towards normalisation with Damascus were taken, with the aim of incentivising president Bashar al-Assad to distance Syria from Iran.<sup>7</sup> Abu Dhabi believes its proximity to Damascus would facilitate mediation and reduce the influence of both Iran and Turkey.

Despite opposition from the United States, the UAE re-opened its embassy in Damascus in late 2018. The embassy had been closed since the early months of Syria’s conflict.<sup>8</sup> The UAE’s national day was celebrated in the newly opened embassy in Damascus. During the celebrations, the UAE’s Chargé d’Affaires in Damascus hoped that “security and stability (would) prevail throughout the Syrian Arab Republic under the wise leadership of President Bashar Al-Assad”. The UAE official added that “Syria-UAE relations are solid, distinct and strong.” Syria’s deputy foreign minister Faisal Maqdad in return said “we cannot forget that the United Arab Emirates stood by Syria in its war against terrorism”.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the development of events in Syria, the UAE was ahead of many countries in emphasising the importance of encouraging stability, security, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as an independent Arab country.

### **3. UAE’s hard positioning in a conflicting regional and international scene on Syria**

The UAE’s position overlaps partly with regional and international players, yet not it is not identical to any. The support of the US and the European Union (EU) for the opposition

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<sup>6</sup> Martha Raddatz, et. al., “Airstrikes ‘successful’ Against ISIS Targets in Syria, US military Says”, abc News, 23 SEP 2014, Retrieved on May 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-airstrikes-syria/story?id=25686031>

<sup>7</sup> Hassan Hassan, “Syria: Assad has decisively won his brutal battle”, The Guardian, 30 DEC 2018, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/30/syria-year-cemented-assad-victory-trump-us-troops>

<sup>8</sup> Reuters Damascus, “UAE reopens Syria embassy in boost for Assad”, Reuters, 27 DEC 2018, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates/uae-reopens-syria-embassy-a-boost-for-assad-idUSKCN1OQ0QV> and

Reuters Beirut, “UAE embassy in Damascus to reopen today”, Al Arabiya, 27 DEC 2018, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2018/12/27/UAE-embassy-in-Damascus-to-reopen-today.html>

<sup>9</sup> Reuters Damascus, “UAE praises Syria’s ‘wise leadership’, cementing ties”, Reuters, 3 DEC 2019, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-emirates-relations/uae-praises-syrias-assad-for-wise-leadership-cementing-ties-idUSKBN1Y7100>

was not enough for them to win over Damascus, yet the escalation of the conflict made it hard to reverse course. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, it was clear to the UAE that US and EU participation in finding a resolution would be limited. The US involvement was limited to countering terrorism and preventing the use of chemical weapons by carrying out airstrikes, in addition to coordinating, arming and training a specific faction under the Free Syria Army.

Russia's efforts to protect Syrian state institutions and balance Iran and Turkey in Syria are appreciated in Abu Dhabi. Since 2017, Russia has directed operations and coordinated between the different parties that support president Assad, resulting in successfully re-establishing authority of Damascus over major cities and nearly two-thirds of its population.<sup>10</sup> Syrian government forces have recovered most of the country's territory since Russia intervened militarily in 2015, tipping the war in Damascus's favour.<sup>11</sup>

China has kept a relatively low-profile in supporting the regime in Syria. However, Chinese support for Assad is embodied by Beijing's votes in the UN Security Council, where their position remains consistent in supporting the government and emphasising the need for political transitions.<sup>12</sup> On May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Russia and China boycotted the UN Security Council meeting on chemical weapons in Syria<sup>13</sup>. China has been clear that it wishes to be seen as an economic partner in future reconstruction efforts, including port development, thereby securing a place for Beijing in the East Mediterranean region.

The UAE believes that Turkey, an aspiring regional hegemon, is interested in weakening Damascus's central authority to consolidate its influence and empower its Syrian opposition allies and proxies. However, Turkey's ambitions in northern Syria are limited by the presence of Russia. This has forced Ankara to delicately balance its relationship with Russia in the context of their operations to control northern Syria. The UAE's support for Damascus is perceived to reduce the influence of foreign powers, including Ankara. Turkey, however, is an important neighbouring country to Syria with essential historic and economic links, but any future relationships between the two countries should be in line with the international norms of non-interference in internal affairs and adherence to respect state sovereignty on its territories.

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<sup>10</sup> Seth Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory?", Combating Terrorism Center, Oct 2019, Vol 12, Issue 9, Retrieved on May 2020. <https://ctc.usma.edu/russias-battlefield-success-syria-will-pyrrhic-victory/>

<sup>11</sup> Reuters, "UAE praises Syria's Assad for 'wise leadership', cementing ties" 3 DEC 2019, Retrieved on May 2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-emirates-relations/uae-praises-syrias-assad-for-wise-leadership-cementing-ties-idUSKBN1Y7100>

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "China plays the long game on Syria" Middle East Institute, 10 FEB 2020, Retrieved on May 2020 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-plays-long-game-syria>

<sup>13</sup> AFP, "Russia and China boycott UN Security Council meeting on Syria", The National, 13 May 2020, Retrieved on May 2020. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/russia-and-china-boycott-un-security-council-meeting-on-syria-1.1018597>

Iran's increasing political and military influence in Damascus is of concern for many countries, not only Abu Dhabi but also for Russia and Israel. US sanctions and COVID-19 have limited Iran's influence. Recent Israeli intelligence reports have claimed that, since the beginning of May 2020, "Iran is dramatically reducing its military presence in Syria for the first time since the beginning of the civil war nine years ago."<sup>14</sup> Iran has denied this assessment. Yet, Iran's decreasing influence in Damascus has been seen as the outcome of the solidification of Russia's influence <sup>15</sup>.

Iran is expected to continue to be an important actor in Damascus, but it should not be the only ally to Syria. This explains the UAE's promotion of the return of Syria to its Arabic neighbourhood, to reduce the influence of Iran, even if eliminating it proves difficult. By realising the importance of increasing dialogue with Damascus, some countries including the UAE, Bahrain, Greece, and Cyprus have initiated a new rapprochement towards Damascus.<sup>16</sup>

The future of the economic reconstruction efforts will have to address essential issues prior to any commitments from external partners including security, stability, reconciliation, legal and structural reforms. Any efforts made will not be successful without the participation of traditional economic structures in Syria. The most important step at the moment is to create a safe environment to encourage both Syrian and foreign businessmen to re-invest in Syria.

The UAE's experience with Iraq has been a lesson for Abu Dhabi. Although there was the political will to participate in the reconstruction effort, support was limited to trade exchange between the two countries with a trade balance of \$11 billion in 2016.<sup>17</sup> In the Iraq reconstruction conference in 2018 in Kuwait, the UAE pledged \$5.5 billion for private investments in Iraq in addition to the country's pledge.<sup>18</sup> The amount was not fully used due to legal and structural factors in Iraq. In the case of Syria, there is a similar situation regarding private investment, plus the fact that the US has imposed economic sanctions on Damascus.

## **Conclusion**

A new reality is developing in Syria, with Russia and China as the main actors, aiming for stabilisation and opening new opportunities to support post-war reconstruction. The UAE

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<sup>14</sup> Anshel Pfeffer, "Iran is pulling its troops out of Syria, claims Israel", The Times, 7 May 2020, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/israel-claims-victory-as-iran-pulls-troops-from-syria-0j9ncqwf5>

<sup>15</sup> Kamal Alam, "In the Chair of Syrian Geopolitics, Russia Remains Dominant" RUSI, 15 May 2020, Retrieved on May 2020.

<https://rusi.org/commentary/chaos-syrian-geopolitics-russia-remains-dominant>

<sup>16</sup> Kamal Alam, "In the Chair of Syrian Geopolitics, Russia Remains Dominant" RUSI, 15 May 2020, Retrieved on May 2020

<https://rusi.org/commentary/chaos-syrian-geopolitics-russia-remains-dominant>

<sup>17</sup> UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, "9th session of UAE-Iraq Joint Cooperation Committee concludes today in Abu Dhabi", 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct 2017. Retrieved on 15 June 2020 <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/MediaHub/News/2017/10/3/03-10-2017-UAE-Iraq>

<sup>18</sup> Gulf Business sourced from Reuters, "Kuwait, UAE, Saudi pledge billions for Iraq's reconstruction", 14<sup>th</sup> Feb 2018, Retrieved on 15 June 2020. <https://gulfbusiness.com/kuwait-pledges-2bn-iraqs-reconstruction/>

believes that these new developments would promote regional stability and reduce tensions in Syria. However, international efforts are needed to mediate as a next step to facilitate reconciliation. In this context, the UAE has made significant efforts to restore its relationship with Syria, encouraging other Arab states to follow, and allowing Damascus to regain its authority over all Syrian territories.