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Survival strategies in the Middle East: Foreign policy in the service of regime security. The cases of Egypt and UAE.

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Executive Summary

This article examines the domestic make-up of two authoritarian states in the Middle East, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, in order to assess its impact on foreign policy decision-making. By analysing the constellations of ruling elites and authoritarian government coalitions, this analysis identifies the domestic factors that shape both countries' foreign policies. The convergence of fears of Islamist movements and the spectre of domestic unrest form a common thread, prompting both states to adopt securitised approaches and prioritise (regional) stability as a linchpin for regime survival. In the pursuit of regional stability, the motivations driving Egypt and the UAE, while superficially convergent, reveal nuanced differences rooted in each state's distinctive authoritarian structures.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag werden die innerstaatlichen Strukturen zweier autoritärer Staaten im Nahen Osten, Ägypten und die Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate, auf ihren Einfluss auf die außenpolitische Entscheidungsfindung untersucht. Durch die Analyse der herrschenden Elitenkonstellationen und der autoritären Regierungskoalitionen werden die innenpolitischen Faktoren identifiziert, die die Außenpolitik der beiden Länder prägen. Die Angst vor islamistischen Bewegungen sowie das Schreckgespenst von Unruhen im eigenen Land ziehen sich wie ein roter Faden durch die Außenpolitik beider Staaten. Sie sind daher auf Sicherheit bedacht und betrachten (regionale) Stabilität als Dreh- und Angelpunkt für das Überleben ihrer Regime. Die Motive, die Ägypten und die Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate in ihrem Streben nach regionaler Stabilität antreiben, sind zwar oberflächlich betrachtet konvergent, offenbaren jedoch nuancierte Unterschiede, die in den spezifischen autoritären Strukturen der beiden Staaten begründet sind.

Keywords:

authoritarianism, foreign policy decision-making, foreign policy analysis, Middle East and North Africa, regime security, regime type

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Authoritarian systems often operate in a shroud of secrecy, making it difficult to gain insight into their decision-making processes. This inherent opacity, combined with a prevailing climate of fear and repression among potential sources, complicates the assessment of how these states operate and perpetuates a simplistic view of authoritarian leaders ruling with very limited checks on their power (Ahram & Goode 2016). In states where a single person or small group holds centralised power, the outward appearance of unilateral decision-making can be deceptive. Beneath the surface, complex power negotiations and dynamics are at play. Foreign policy decision-making is no exception.

Although, there is abundant literature on the International Relations of the Middle East, there are hardly any analyses that "unpack" the black box of the authoritarian state. In the context of ongoing major power shifts in the MENA region, it seems imperative to better understand the domestic factors that shape foreign policy making. This policy analysis examines the cases of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While both countries represent very different types of authoritarianism, they also share some important similarities. In both cases, foreign policy is the domain of a rather small decision-making elite, and foreign policy is closely linked to concerns about regime stability. Egypt is considered to be one of the pillars of the Pax Americana in the region. The country's regional engagement has traditionally been in line with US interests. However, this has increasingly changed under President al-Sisi's military regime. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), on the other

hand, is a small but increasingly active relatively new regional player. The federal monarchy - a unique political regime form - has been involved in various regional crises such as Sudan, Yemen, and Libya. They are also an important supporter of the al-Sisi regime in Egypt and yet, their interests in these conflicts diverge at times.

This policy analysis identifies the governing elite coalitions and their interests, the decision-making mechanisms, and the motivations behind the foreign policy behaviour of the two states. In this policy analysis, we seek to unravel the enigma of authoritarian decision-making and shed light on the intricacies that lie beneath the surface.

Foreign policy making in authoritarian systems

In authoritarian systems, foreign policy decisions are shaped by complex power dynamics involving politically relevant elites from economic, political, and social backgrounds. Elite constellations in authoritarian states extend beyond the nominal holders of decision-making positions to include business tycoons, military leaders, journalists, and heads of intelligence services (Roll 2018). Which elites wield the most influence in foreign policy decision-making depends not least on the type of regime in question (Geddes, Wright & Frantz 2014). Authoritarian systems differ from each other as much as they do from democracies. While a strong leadership personality is inherent to most authoritarian regimes, any authoritarian rule must take various factors into account. This includes the

authoritarian social contract with society and the consideration of the interests of various power centres, factions, and stakeholders. Usually, authoritarian government and the lack of political participation are traded for prosperity and security (Slater 2010). Foreign policy decisions that jeopardise this trade-off can have fatal consequences for the regime and the leader personally.

Foreign policy decision making in authoritarian systems, therefore also involves negotiations with politically relevant elites. Different from democracies these negotiations exclusively take place behind closed doors and are usually limited to a close circle with direct access to the leader (Williamson & Magaloni 2020, Anderson 2019, Weiss 2013, Lee 2010, Perthes 2004). The outcome of these negotiations can be a complex web of compromises and strategies that ultimately determine the course of a nation's foreign policy. Understanding these intricacies is essential to understanding the nuances of authoritarian governance and its impact on foreign policy behaviour. The smaller the decision-making environment, the greater the influence of the idiosyncratic character traits of ruling elites, as they are less exposed to other perspectives and more able to shape a nation's trajectory as they see fit (Quansheng 1992). Decision-making mechanisms and the composition of the politically relevant elites are predetermined by the type of the authoritarian regime.

In absolutistic monarchies as well as "presidential monarchies", primordial ties with the ruling families play a central role. Clientelist wealth distribution is used to consolidate and secure power through divide and rule domestically. Externally,

alliances with strong regional and international powers aim to safeguard regime survival (Frisch 2011). In dominant party regimes, high level functionaries of the ruling party are usually involved in decision-making mechanisms. In military regimes, such as Egypt, the politically relevant elites are strongly dominated by members of the armed forces.

Most authoritarian regimes are characterised by a degree of informality. This is more the case with personalist regimes and monarchies than with party dictatorships. Informality has served the leaders as an instrument to keep processes opaque and the politically relevant elite dependent on them. Rather often, official institutions and offices do not match with the real power structures (Perthes 2004). However, while informality must be considered as an important factor, it co-exists with formal institutions (Karmel 2022). This duality underlines the complexity of authoritarian foreign policy, where the appearance of authoritarian personalized rule conceals a nuanced web of influence, negotiation, and governance.

None of these authoritarian regimes can completely ignore public opinion. But unlike democracies, they have repressive tools to shape and control discourse and contain opposition. Public contestation plays a more pronounced role in competitive authoritarian systems (Levitsky & Way 2002) with limited pluralism and regular elections.

Finally, foreign policy decision-making in authoritarian states is also shaped by international factors (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2002). All states,

regardless of their internal structure, have strategic interests to pursue and are situated in a geopolitical environment that shapes their decision-making. Historically grown state identities in relation to the geopolitical environment also shape foreign policy decisions in the MENA region (Lynch 1999). Most authoritarian regimes have propagandistically linked the fate of the regime to that of the state, putting them in a position where their foreign policy must conform to the overarching (historical) goals of the state. Moreover, research shows that authoritarian systems tend to provide economic and military support to other authoritarian governments in times of crisis if they perceive them as similar to themselves (Odinius & Kuntz 2015). This reflects the authoritarian leaders' fear of being ousted, which also compels them to pursue foreign policies that help their supporting crony network prosper by attracting foreign direct investment or securing favourable trade agreements.

Understanding foreign policy in an authoritarian context hence requires acknowledging the multifaceted nature of power dynamics, the influence of economic, political, and social elites, and the co-existence of formal and informal structures within the state apparatus. While authoritarianism appears monolithic on the surface, the subtleties of power and behind-the-scenes negotiations ultimately determine a nation's approach to the world stage.

Back to the Future: Egyptian foreign policy making under President al-Sisi

Egypt under al-Sisi has undergone dramatic autocratisation. The regime has been characterised by an excessive use of repression against oppositional groups, civil society and activists, as well as restrictions on media. Nonetheless, elections are held for window-dressing purposes (Freedom House 2023a). In the presidential elections of December 2023, al-Sisi was re-elected with 89.6 per cent of the votes (Reuters 2023).

While the armed forces have always been a key pillar of the authoritarian Egyptian state, under al-Sisi the military has taken centre stage (Joya 2020). Although, Egypt has formally remained a presidential republic, the military has taken full control of politics and economy. The Constitution of 2014 has solidified the army's status. Ever since, the minister of defence must be a member of the military and approved by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) (Egyptian Constitution, Article 234). This is the only key political position that the President can't appoint at will. The new constitution, and the amendments of 2019, have elevated the army to a status beyond political reach. The army's budget is secret and not subject to any civilian control. Moreover, army owned companies enjoy generous tax exemptions (El-Haddad 2020, 8).

While democratic institutions and the civil state do formally still exist, military cadres dominate all relevant political decision-making mechanisms. The influence of the armed forces has meanwhile permeated all levels of the Egyptian state. The

army controls promotions in all government-related positions and requires mandatory military academy training for all new employees even down to the head teachers at state schools (Middle East Monitor 2023). This promotes a military mindset at all levels, aimed at ensuring societal control and loyalty to the regime. Crucially, the constitutional amendments of 2019 have abolished the remaining checks and balances. President al-Sisi is now responsible for appointing chief judges and the public prosecutor, as well as selecting one-third of the members of a new parliamentary chamber, the Council of Senators (Reuters 2019). The power shift to the military has reduced the role of parliament and ministries. They are often lacking any real decision-making powers (Springborg 2017, 492f.).

Firmly in the saddle?

While the power has gravitated from the civilian, political to the military sphere, it is important to highlight that the Egyptian army is not a homogeneous and unitary actor. The Egyptian army traditionally comprises an opaque structure of co-existing units, special forces, and boards. The only military unit under the president's direct control is the Republican Guard, which is a rather small force. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) which played a crucial role in the transition after President Mubarak's fall has continued to exercise ultimate control over the armed forces. Therefore, al-Sisi is to a certain extent dependent on the cooperation of the senior military officers.

Al-Sisi as former head of the Military Intelligence has tried to balance out the powers of the SCAF

and other military circles by uniting all three branches of the Egyptian intelligence services under his authority (Battera 2021, 70). This represents a level of control over the secret services unprecedented in modern Egyptian history. This hegemonic position allows al-Sisi, unlike his predecessors, to do without a centralised ruling party.

Besides creating a power balance within the military realm, a unified intelligence also serves to better control civil protests which are, based on the assessment of the Mubarak regime's fate, deemed to be the greatest challenge for regime security. Al-Sisi expanded and upgraded the General Intelligence Directorate (GID). It has eclipsed Military Intelligence in its former pre-eminent status. The portfolio of the Military Intelligence, which is controlled by the Ministry of Defence, has been reduced. Meanwhile, the GID stands under the direct authority of the President (Springborg 2020). Al-Sisi also oversaw the rebuilding of the National Security Agency (NSA) after its predecessor, the State Security Investigations Service (SSIS), was purged and downsized after the 2011 revolution. The NSA, mainly tasked with domestic repression and surveillance, is under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. Interior Minister Mahmoud Tafiq previously headed the NSA and had already worked in the ranks of the SSIS under Mubarak. The rebuilding of the NSA enabled the rehabilitation and return of many of the old Mubarak-era security cadres who are now indebted to al-Sisi (Walsh 2017).

All three branches of the intelligence have also increased their influence on the deep state under al-Sisi by acquiring companies, media institutions

and paramilitary forces. For example, the Falcon Group, largest security provider in Egypt, is under the control of the Military Intelligence. The group is headed by mafia figure Sabri Nakhnoukh, who was pardoned from a 28-year prison sentence by the Egyptian president in 2018 (El-Hamalawy 2023, Hassan 2023). Eagle Capital, belonging to the GID, owns the United Media Services which has 14 Egyptian television channels and seven newspapers in its portfolio (Badr 2021, Springborg 2020).

Al-Sisi's comprehensive restructuring of the deep state also serves the purpose of avoiding the perceived pitfalls that led to the fall of the Mubarak regime in 2011 (Sayigh 2023). Criticised for its relatively greater social and political freedoms and perceived over-dependence on the US, the Mubarak era is seen as a cautionary tale. Al-Sisi's response has been a deliberate effort to diversify international support while increasing domestic surveillance and repression. Initially characterised by a revisionist stance that addressed Egypt's regional decline and countered the democratic momentum of the Arab Spring, his regime has undergone a transformation. Having successfully consolidated its authority both domestically and internationally, the ruling elite has shifted from a revisionist agenda to a defensive posture aimed at maintaining the existing status quo. The highly conservative/revisionist nature of al-Sisi's regime clashes with his promise to deliver the 'new Egypt'. The mega-projects can therefore be interpreted as a way of reconciling this contradiction. Moreover, the construction of the New Administrative Capital some 60 kilometres east of Cairo

should be seen as a move to keep the masses away from the centres of power, another lesson from the Mubarak era (le Monde 2023).

Family First

Al-Sisi has increasingly tended to appoint friends and family members into key positions not only the top ranks of the armed forces but also within the intelligence services. Abbas Kamel, nicknamed "the president's shadow" for his close relationship with al-Sisi, and Mahmoud al-Sisi, the president's eldest son, now serve as the director and deputy head of Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate. These two also largely drafted the 2019 amendments to the 2014 constitution, which, expanded al-Sisi's influence over the judiciary and legislature and allowed him to run for another term (Reuters 2019).

His son Hassan al-Sisi and daughter Aya al-Sisi also hold high positions within the GID (Egypt Watch 2020). Their brother, Mustafa Al-Sisi, has been moved from Military Intelligence into a senior position at the Administrative Control Agency (ACA). The ACA has gained extensive authority to investigate, confiscate evidence, and pursue corruption cases in nearly every sector except the military. Al-Sisi also designated his brother Ahmed to lead the unit within the Central Bank responsible for probing money laundering. In this role, he has the capability to oversee the movement of funds, whether public or private, entering and exiting the country (Springborg 2020). The appointment of family members to senior positions in the intelligence services and the state indicates al-Sisi's distrust of the generals.

Full war chest, empty pockets

The shifts in power within the Egyptian state from a civilian to a military elite has also led to a reshuffling of the economic sphere. The economically influential entrepreneurs of the late Mubarak era are still important, but they have been politically side-lined. While their interests once shaped economic policy decisions, they have become highly dependent on the allocation of public contracts by the military elite (Günay 2019, Adly 2017). Al-Sisi's provision pact is with senior members of the military rather than the country's economic elite.

Army-owned companies operate on an uneven economic playing field. They benefit from army networks, preferential treatment in public procurement and an abundance of cheap conscript labour. This gives them the ability to drive any adversary out of the market (Noll 2017). The military's heavy involvement in the Egyptian economy, excessive arm purchases for no apparent strategic reason, and Al-Sisi's penchant for costly mega-projects with questionable revenue prospects (which do however directly feed into the military economy) are exacerbating the country's worsening debt crisis (Köhler 2020, Ottaway 2022, Mansour 2023, Cook 2023). Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two main regional allies, have become increasingly reluctant to finance al-Sisi's house of cards with blank cheques. The economy has been the major weakness, endangering regime security.

Who makes foreign policy?

When it comes to foreign policy decision-making, the only politically relevant actors in al-Sisi's regime are loyal, high-ranking military and intelligence officers. Through frequent rotation by presidential decree, al-Sisi has ensured that loyalists occupy all these key positions. The Foreign Ministry under al-Sisi is mainly limited to the implementation of foreign policy decisions that are taken elsewhere. It is in charge of the country's diplomatic outreach and lobbying efforts, but the military/intelligence sector calls all the shots (Ghafar 2023).

While the informality of the system makes it almost impossible to pinpoint exactly who is part of the real foreign policy decision-making circle, spy chief Abbas Kamel is very likely part of it. He oversees the conflicts in Sudan, Libya and Gaza. Kamel is sent abroad regularly to convene with allied parties of the regime such as General Burhan in Sudan and General Haftar in Libya (Intelligence Online 2023). Also, the president's eldest son, Mahmoud, likely forms part of the decision-making circle as he is one of the closest advisors to al-Sisi, is in a central position of power as deputy head of the GID and is also sent abroad regularly to negotiate with foreign leaders (Walsh 2018, Hamamdijan 2020, Halabi & Arbid 2022)

As the military is one of the few institutions in Egypt that allows for upward social mobility, most senior officers share a similar background, coming from modest upbringings. This contrasts with diplomats and civil servants in the Foreign Office, who tend to come from upper-class backgrounds. As

Janis (1982) suggests, such a homogeneous decision-making circle leads to a high pressure for conformity among its members. This 'groupthink' dynamic discourages the expression of dissent and might lead to ill-considered decisions, as policy alternatives are likely to be overlooked. It also leads to the adoption of a simplistic in-group and out-group mentality, which further limits sophisticated and open deliberation.

The homogenous composition of the decision-making circle suggests a bias towards foreign policies that reflect a security mindset. In fact, contemporary Egyptian decision-making is characterised by the dominance of the lens of securitisation (Rutherford 2018). As a result, Egypt's foreign policy under al-Sisi has undergone the most relatively significant change of the last 40 years. Egypt's shifting strategic alignment towards Russia and China, the declining relevance of its traditional strategic partnership with the United States, and its recent assertiveness on key regional issues are clear indications of this trend (Selim 2022). Al-Sisi seeks to diversify international partnerships. After all, al-Sisi and the military witnessed that a close partnership with the US did not save President Mubarak from being overthrown. The focus on regime security has instigated a notable departure from Egypt's historical role as a regional mediator. The regime's foreign policy is driven by security concerns. This has entailed a militarization of Egyptian foreign policy, including military involvement in Sudan and Libya. Diplomacy is reduced to an accessory of military and security driven foreign and regional policies.

Domestic foundations, regional impact

Egypt's recent foreign policy behaviour can be explained by several factors closely linked to the idiosyncrasies of its regime. These include 1) a homogeneous decision-making elite united by a security-oriented mindset; 2) the partly self-inflicted dire financial situation; 3) al-Sisi's legitimacy as the country's saviour and protector; 4) the provision pact with the higher echelons of the military and the intelligence services; 5) the regime's aim to lastingly eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the region; 6) the prevention of mass uprisings.

The country's foreign policy towards its neighbours is focused on securing its borders to deliver on the promise of stability, while operating with limited manoeuvrability to avoid alienating key donors. In Libya, al-Sisi has been supporting General Haftar, who effectively controls Cyrenaica and therefore the border to Egypt. This policy is in line with the UAE's position on Libya, which is currently Egypt's most important financial donor, apart from the IMF. Furthermore, General Haftar is combating radical Islamists in Libya, which contributes to Egypt's internal security and the security of Al-Sisi's regime. With regard to the civil war in Sudan, Egypt supports the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in their struggle against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This policy also acknowledges the security concerns that the Al-Sisi administration takes into special consideration when making foreign policy decisions. The Egyptian military has established ties with its counterpart, the SAF, which could provide greater stability along the country's southern border than the rebel

forces of the RSF. Furthermore, Kairo is worried about the RSF's close ties to Ethiopia (Amin 2023), as there is an ongoing dispute over the construction and filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Egypt views as an "existential threat" (State Information Service 2021). The regime considers water and grain security to be of critical importance, as these factors are closely linked to potential domestic unrest.

Furthermore, if the RSF were to gain control over the Sudanese-Egyptian border area, there is a possibility that it could increase the risk of radical Islamists and individuals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood entering Egypt, due to the rebel group's connections to these circles. Egypt can't however support the SAF openly as this would endanger its crucial relationship to Abu Dhabi which provides the RSF with resources in their own economic interest, most notably the gold trade. Open support for the SAF would also pit Egypt against General Haftar, another supporter of the RSF. Egypt's decision to severely limit the entry of Palestinian refugees into Northern Sinai from the Gaza strip is also based on concerns over border security and the potential influx of radical Islamists and individuals connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Sisi must strike a delicate balance regarding the Israel-Gaza conflict. On the one hand, Hamas is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and Cairo aims to prevent significant disagreements with its ally, Israel, as well as the wider Western community. On the other hand, al-Sisi must convey messages of support to the Palestinian people in response to domestic pressures.

The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) only emerged in 1971 when the informal British protectorate of the so-called Trucial Sheikdoms ended. The six sheikdoms (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah and Umm Al Quwain) united under a federal monarchy, to which Ras Al Khaimah joined a year later.

Ever since, the UAE has represented a unique system of government unlike any other in the world, uniting seven authoritarian absolute monarchies under a federal monarchical state. The federal state is de facto headed by the Emir of Abu Dhabi, while each emirate enjoys a high degree of autonomy. Historically, there has been a tension between the decision-making freedom of each emirate and the federal state. While Dubai has been a proponent of strong autonomy, Abu Dhabi has traditionally strived for the strengthening of the federal state level. The UAE's inter-state system has been strongly shaped by tribal traditions, norms, negotiation, and power sharing mechanisms. This has favored the predominant role of the royal families and has prevented strong opposition movements (Herb 2009). The UAE's political regime has been bolstered by massive fossil resources. Gas and oil revenues have enabled a generous welfare-state, stability, mega-projects, and the predominance of the ruling families. In the domain of foreign policy, the UAE has long been hesitant. Traditionally, the United Arab Emirates mainly followed Saudi Arabia's lead in regional affairs. This has changed in recent years. The UAE

has increasingly assumed a more pro-active foreign policy role in the region. This chapter examines the composition of the foreign policy elite, their motivations, and interests and how this reflects into foreign policy behavior. How does a federal absolute monarchy conduct foreign policy, who are the decision-makers when there are seven rulers, what are their interests, and what is the extent of other groups' influences?

Domestic Power Dynamics

The extended royal families dominate not only political, but also economic life. The royal families rule through the Federal Supreme Council, which is the highest political institution in the federation (UAE Government 2023). However, power is not evenly distributed among the emirates. Abu Dhabi and Dubai, due to their larger populations and economies, enjoy de facto veto powers and they occupy powerful federal positions. The emir of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, presides the council, while the emir of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, heads the cabinet and serves as prime minister. These positions are de facto reserved for the rulers of both emirates (Foley 1999, Ulrichsen 2020). Abu Dhabi, which owns the largest fossil resources, is the economically most powerful emirate, this translates into the political role of its ruling family in the federal state. Abu Dhabi's dominant position was further strengthened after Abu Dhabi's economic bailout of Dubai following the 2008 financial crisis. Subsequently, Abu Dhabi has further advanced

federalization (Barbuscia et al. 2020). A clear indication that economic power is the deciding factor in domestic power distribution (Euronews 2023).

The Foreign Policy Elite – Bani Fatima

The political elites in the UAE consist of the royal dynasties of the emirates. They all participate in UAE domestic policy (Ulrichsen 2020, UAE Government 2023). In contrast, the UAE's foreign and security policy is dominated by Abu Dhabi's political elite. Within Abu Dhabi's royal family, the five brothers of Sheik Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) play a crucial role. Together with MBZ they form the Bani Fatima, the six sons of Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan's¹ favourite wife Fatima Bint Mubarak Al-Kitbi (Pendleton et al. 2022, Steinberg 2020). The brothers' network of Bani Fatima holds key positions such as the national security advisor, intelligence chief, foreign minister, and president of the UAE. The family network is headed by President Sheik Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who is also the final decision-maker on foreign policy. Although foreign policy is so concentrated in the hands of the president and the Bani Fatima, President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan still consults with the other rulers when making decisions (Krasna 2023). However, the rulers of the other emirates have little influence on foreign policy decisions, accepting the status quo because of Abu Dhabi's economic subsidies to the smaller emirates (Davidson 2007).

¹ The founder of the UAE and its first president

Tribal structures and the nation state

The UAE nation-state has successfully navigated the integration of tribal influences into its modern governance structures. The enduring presence of tribalism in the contemporary era can be attributed to its adaptability and its ability to foster robust bonds of solidarity (*asabiyya*). These characteristics render tribalism an instrumental tool in the realm of statecraft. However, tribal affiliations can also fragment the national population, creating factions and exposing segments of the population to external political influences beyond the boundaries of state sovereignty. The dynamics between tribalism and nationality often emerge as competing forms of identity (Al-Etaibi 2022). This issue of identity is exacerbated by the UAE's predominantly foreign-born population. For these reasons, the UAE has opted for a universal identity: modernity (MacLean 2021).

Tribal affiliations are key to the political power structures within the UAE as the example of the Zaab tribe shows: in the late 1960s this tribe was added to the Al-Nahyan's circle of allies, lending its name to a district in the city of Abu Dhabi. Moreover, its members took up a significant number of foreign ministry jobs, having previously been loyal to, and located in, Ras al-Khaimah, an emirate ruled by a branch of the al-Qassimi (Patrick 2013). Tribal negotiations often involve collective decision-making, where consensus and consultation among tribal leaders are essential. These traditional principles of (power) bargaining persist in the UAE's internal politics, where the Abu Dhabi ruling family collaborates with the other emirs and sheikhs to foster consensus in collective decision-

making, preferring a collaborative approach over unilateral action.

Foreign Policy Interests

The UAE are an authoritarian system where public opinion is widely controlled and opposition and political contestation are repressed. Given the dominance of the royal families at all political and economic levels, there is little pressure from other interest groups on UAE foreign policy making. As a result, UAE foreign policy is heavily influenced by the interests and needs of the ruling elite. The relatively closed nature and small size of the elite also has some disadvantages. As in Egypt, they all come from the same socio-economic background and are primarily motivated by ensuring the survival of the regime and the dominance of the royal families. This could foster groupthink and a lack of diversity in policy choices.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) plays an important role in regional cooperation. The interests of other GCC states influence the UAE's foreign policy in terms of its economic and political involvement in the region (Baabood 2023a).

In addition to regional geopolitical issues, most members of the GCC share concerns about the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE has made efforts to limit and counter the influence of Islamist groups abroad, such as its support for the overthrow of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Morsi in Egypt, as well as keeping al-Sisi's regime afloat by supporting al-Sisi with billions of dollars (Critchlow 2013, Reuters 2020). The UAE have also supported anti-Islamist

forces in Libya and Yemen (Steinberg 2020, Heibach 2021, Ardemagni 2019).

The UAE have remained stable, with little to no signs of political unrest (BTI 2023). This is largely due to the effective suppression of political and religious opposition to an extent that opposition is effectively non-existent (Freedom House 2023b). Stability also stems from the rentier system. In return for economic wealth, modernisation and rising living standards from the UAE's, and especially Abu Dhabi's, vast fossil resources, the monarchies have gained and maintained legitimacy (Sim 2020). States that depend on the rentier system can only maintain political legitimacy if they are able to deliver economic benefits to their citizens, which in the case of the UAE means maintaining its economic well-being in the long term (Beblawi 1987). This explains why maintaining its economic well-being has been a major driver of UAE's foreign policy, as the elite's legitimacy depends on it.

In other words, the UAE's foreign policy is heavily influenced by its interests in the global fossil markets. Oil and gas production is a major flashpoint, with Saudi Arabia keen to keep prices high to maximize profits and the UAE, conversely, keen to keep production high to maximize revenues. These tensions have led to an internal elite debate over whether to stay in or leave the OPEC, and threaten to undermine economic and political cooperation in the GCC (Baabood 2023a, Said & Kalin 2023). It has paved the way for increased political and economic rivalry with Saudi Arabia. The President and Abu Dhabi have a far greater interest than Dubai in keeping its revenues high, as Dubai has completely moved away from hydrocarbons,

which also explains why the UAE has been more willing to jeopardize its relations with the Saudis, as Abu Dhabi has a greater stake in the oil and gas market.

Maintaining the rentier state

However, the elites are more than aware that dependency on oil and gas income is an unsustainable revenue source, since the global economy is transitioning towards green energy, and UAE's fossil fuel production cannot last forever. To maintain long-term economic growth the UAE has invested billions in transitioning from a fossil-dependent economy towards a more diversified economy, through a wide range of policies such as industrialization and attracting foreign investments and businesses (UAE MFA 2023).

This has led to an economic policy that welcomes foreign business and investment and ensures a business-friendly environment in the UAE to stimulate economic growth, resulting in the UAE becoming an international hub for business and finance (UAE MFA 2023). In addition, geopolitical stability is good for business and trade, which has led the UAE to pursue friendlier relations with Iran and Israel, although geopolitical concerns about Iran remain (Reuters 2022).

The leadership in the UAE has developed a grand vision of becoming a major economic and trade hub between the African and Asian markets, the so-called "string of ports" strategy. The UAE aims to achieve this by connecting East African and South Asian trade flows and securing its trade routes and key ports in the region (Kirmanj and Tofik 2023). These interests directly led the UAE to

change its involvement in Yemen when it withdrew from the Saudi-led intervention and pursued its interests by supporting the anti-Houthi/Islamist southern secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC). The UAE prioritized its strategic interests in southern Yemen to secure key ports, effectively putting the UAE and Saudi Arabia on opposing sides of the conflict and further deteriorating its relations with the Saudis (Baabood 2023b, Jalal 2020). Concerns high on the agenda after the Red Sea crisis following the Israel-Hamas war 2023. In short, the economic interests of the political elite are a determining factor in the UAE's foreign policy, motivated by the interest in maintaining the rentier state and securing its legitimacy in the long term, thereby ensuring its long-term survival.

Looking Forward

In the long run, however, the future of UAE foreign policy will depend on Abu Dhabi's ability to diversify its economy away from fossil fuels, its ability to maintain political and regional stability, and the survival of the rentier state. With the global economy committed to a green transition and gas and oil reserves set to run out in the future, a successful economic transition is critical to the future of the UAE's political leadership. As we have seen in the past, domestic power relations between the emirates have been influenced by economic factors. If Abu Dhabi fails to transition, the economic balance of power will begin to shift in favor of Dubai, which has already successfully transitioned its economy. Dubai's leadership may challenge the status quo and seek greater political influence, including in foreign policy, although dominance remains unlikely.

If the rentier state collapses, the UAE leadership and its foreign policy may lose its political legitimacy, thus endangering regime security, the most important predictor of UAE foreign policy. Maintaining the rentier system has led the UAE leadership to seek to diversify its economy, open its economy to attract foreign businesses and investment, as well as to secure its economic interests abroad through both economic and hard power means. Maintaining political and regional stability is also key to the regime's survival. The UAE's efforts to achieve stability can be seen in its regional interventions against the Muslim Brotherhood. Here, the UAE has made a clear and committed effort to combat these groups to protect itself from what the leadership perceives as a major threat to its regime. In short, regime survival is the main driver of UAE foreign policy, which is guided by the Abu Dhabi elite led by the president.

From within to beyond

The foreign policy trajectories of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are intricately woven into the fabric of their respective domestic landscapes. The convergence of fears of Islamist movements and the spectre of domestic unrest form a common thread, prompting both states to adopt securitised approaches and prioritise (regional) stability as a linchpin for regime survival. In the pursuit of regional stability, the motivations driving Egypt and the UAE, while superficially convergent, reveal nuanced differences. The UAE, operating within a rentier state system, seeks stability and economic expansion to sustain and future-

proof its economic model. Conversely, Egypt's quest for stability is rooted in a military mindset among the politically relevant elite, with President al-Sisi's legitimacy closely tied to his promise to protect the nation. This difference in motivation also leads to a different ranking of priorities. While in the case of the UAE, economic interests trump the quest for regional security when these two axes conflict (as evidenced by its siding with insurgents in Yemen and Sudan), the opposite is true for al-Sisi's regime.

At the heart of both governance structures are family ties, which serve as a linchpin in decision-making circles. This familial centrality extends beyond domestic affairs and permeates the formulation of foreign policy, where personal relationships play a central role in shaping diplomatic strategies. In both countries, these close-knit, homogeneous decision-making circles, while fostering cohesion, also make them susceptible to groupthink and other negative effects of a lack of opinion plurality. This marks a notable departure from foreign policy decision-making processes in democratic countries. Unlike the pluralistic deliberation characteristic of democracies, decision-making in Egypt and the UAE lacks genuine discourse within institutional frameworks. Familial ties take precedence over democratic principles, and the absence of a participatory approach means that foreign policies are more reflective of the needs and interests of the ruling elite than the diverse perspectives of the citizenry. Nevertheless, the interests of the elite and the population are more closely aligned in the rentier state of the

UAE than in the military-economy focused al-Sisi regime.

Economically, both Egypt and the UAE have significant sectors under the direct control of the ruling elite, blurring the lines between political power and economic interests. This symbiotic relationship ensures that the ruling families have significant influence over key industries. However, the nature of the ruling elites differs significantly, and this is reflected in their economic foreign policy. The UAE's long-ruling monarchical families are concerned with the distribution of wealth among the emirates to ensure that everyone stays on board, in contrast to Al-Sisi's crony networks with the upper echelons of the military, having a much narrower target audience. As a result, the UAE is looking for policies that will boost the overall economic performance of the country, while Egypt's concerns are more critically focused on fostering the shadow economy of the military and intelligence services.

In essence, the foreign policies of Egypt and the UAE emerge as a reflection of their unique domestic dynamics, coupled with pressures emanating from the international sphere.

Effectively engaging with countries like Egypt and the UAE requires the EU and Austria to grasp the nuances of their political landscapes. Diplomatic strategies must not only consider the formal structures but also factor in the influence wielded by informal networks. A keen understanding of the internal dynamics shaping foreign policy decisions is imperative. Correctly identifying the key pillars on which a regime within an authoritarian system

is built and depends upon, also provides decision-makers with a degree of predictability about a country's foreign policy trajectory. While it remains true that authoritarian systems with very limited checks and balances can be prone to erratic international behaviour driven by poorly deliberated decisions by the state leadership, the example of the recent foreign policy of Egypt and the UAE reveals a causal chain from regime structure to foreign policy decision-making, implying the feasibility of predictability. Understanding the domestic composition of authoritarian states also allows European actors to assess the needs, desires and red lines of their counterparts and thus tailor

their policies accordingly. Given the security-oriented mindset of the decision-making elite, the EU and Austria will predictively fail to set common initiatives with the Egyptian leadership that counteract its security needs. Conversely, the regime's dependence on foreign funding can certainly be seen as a hook for external actors. Given the UAE's reliance on the rentier system, supporting initiatives that move beyond oil-dependent revenues and overall economic growth can contribute to long-term stability and fruitful cooperation.

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