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## The UAE's Foreign Policy Strategy in the Syrian Crisis, 2011–2024

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### Abstract

The wave of Arab uprisings in 2010 reshaped the Middle East's regional order, prompting the United Arab Emirates (UAE), an emerging regional power, to adopt an active role in the Syrian crisis. Prior to 2011, the UAE maintained close ties with the Assad government, investing heavily in Syria. However, in 2012, as the crisis escalated, the UAE severed diplomatic relations with Damascus and supported opposition groups. Between 2012 and 2014, the UAE pursued an aggressive policy aimed at toppling Assad, but from 2018 onward, it shifted toward de-escalation and normalization of relations. This shift, marked by the reopening of the UAE embassy in Damascus and reciprocal high-level visits, is analyzed through the lens of pragmatism. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach and drawing on library

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and electronic sources, this article examines the reasons behind this policy shift, positing that regional and international political, economic, and security considerations were the primary drivers of this pragmatic turn.

Pragmatism in international relations prioritizes policies that maximize national interests without being constrained by abstract principles. In recent years, the UAE has sought to project itself as a pragmatic, interest-driven actor, engaging with diverse regional and international players.

The UAE's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis from 2011 to 2024 can be divided into three distinct phases. In the first period, the UAE adopted an aggressive stance aimed at overthrowing Assad, aligning with U.S. policies. Politically, it closed its embassy in Damascus and supported the "Friends of Syria" group and the Syrian National Coalition. UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed called for Assad's ouster in 2013, while Mohammed bin Rashid, Ruler of Dubai, predicted Assad's downfall in 2014. Militarily, the UAE provided over \$1 billion in funding through operations like "Timber Sycamore" and participated in the MOC operations room, supporting armed groups such as the Free Syrian Army. Economically, Abu Dhabi hosted conferences like the 2012 "Partnership for Investment in Syria's Future," backing anti-Assad businessmen.

This aggressive policy was rooted in pragmatism, as the UAE sought to enhance its regional influence and emerge as a key power. Cooperation with allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the U.S. aimed to counter Iran's influence and the Axis of Resistance. The UAE perceived Iran as a geopolitical, nationalist (Arab-Persian), and sectarian (Sunni-Shia) threat. Politically and militarily, Abu Dhabi supported Assad's opponents to advance these objectives.

The entry of Russia into the Syrian crisis in 2015 and the reduced likelihood of Assad's ouster prompted the UAE to retreat from its confrontational stance. Abu Dhabi withdrew from the anti-ISIS coalition and refrained from condemning Russia's actions. Anwar Gargash, noted that Moscow was targeting a common enemy (ISIS). The prolonged crisis and the failure of opposition groups increased the UAE's costs, leading it to redirect resources to conflicts in Yemen and Libya. During this period, the UAE softened its critical rhetoric and began to view Assad as part of a potential resolution to the crisis.

From 2018, the UAE adopted a pragmatic approach, reopening its embassy in Damascus. Improved relations were evident through official visits, the resumption of flights, and enhanced intelligence and economic cooperation. In 2020, Mohammed bin Zayed announced UAE support for Syria's COVID-19 response, including aid shipments. In 2021, Abdullah bin Zayed visited Damascus, signing agreements for solar power investments. Assad's visits to the UAE in 2022 and 2023 marked a turning point. The UAE also played a pivotal role in Syria's reinstatement in the Arab League, advocating for regional stability. In 2024, Hassan Ahmed Al-Shehi was appointed UAE Ambassador to Damascus.

The UAE's shift toward normalization from 2015 was driven by multiple factors. Politically, the UAE sought to shape Syria's future and curb the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, which it viewed as a regional security threat, considering Assad a preferable alternative to jihadist groups. Security-wise, the UAE aimed to reduce Iran and Turkey's influence in Syria through diplomacy rather than confrontation, believing closer ties with Damascus would limit rivals' leverage. Additionally, the UAE pursued an independent stance from Saudi Arabia to assert geopolitical primacy. Economically, the UAE sought opportunities in Syria's reconstruction, capturing 14% of Syria's foreign trade by 2021.

Overall, the UAE's relations with Syria from 2011 to 2024 underwent significant shifts. Initially, the UAE cut ties and backed Assad's opponents aggressively. However, from 2015, due to the opposition's failures, Russia's intervention, and high conflict costs, the UAE pivoted toward de-escalation. The reopening of its embassy in 2018, reciprocal visits, and support for Syria's Arab League reinstatement reflected a pragmatic approach. Following Assad's ouster in 2024, the UAE maintained ties with the new government but remained wary of Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood's growing influence. These shifts, aligned with pragmatism, underscore the UAE's flexibility in pursuing national interests, countering rivals, and asserting a pivotal regional role.

Assad's fall, however, presented both opportunities and challenges for the UAE. While it achieved its goal of distancing Syria from Iran, the rise of

Turkey and Qatar as key backers of Syria's new leadership—aligned with the UAE's regional rivals—poses challenges. Abu Dhabi views the dominance of ideologically driven Islamist groups, particularly those linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, as a significant threat, potentially sparking new competition with Turkey.

**Key words:** Syrian crisis, United Arab Emirates, pragmatism, Middle East.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.