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**A Turn towards Greater Independence:
the Assertive Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates**
**Review of the book *New Order in the Gulf: The Rise of the UAE* by Dina Esfandiary,
I.B. Tauris, London 2022**

In 2022, a book was published by Dina Esfandiary, an expert who deals in her publications with topics related to the security and foreign policy of the Gulf states and inter-state relations and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East¹. The monograph consists of eight chapters. In the most recent publication, the author's central focus is on the United Arab Emirates and the notion of assertiveness, which has evolved with the change in the foreign policy of the Abu Dhabi authorities as a result of key developments in the second decade of the 21st century. Although the analysis begins with the outbreak of the events of the Arab Spring, the time span is not precisely defined. It can be assumed that it ends in 2022 due to the events described in the pages of the following chapters of the book. The introduction clearly outlines the purpose of the analysis, the hypotheses and considers the key variables influencing the choices made by policymakers in Abu Dhabi. The structure of the paper is carefully designed, with arguments chosen appropriately for each issue, making the publication clear and accessible to any reader wishing to deepen their knowledge of Middle East issues.

The book is a good source for gaining an understanding of contemporary developments in the Gulf, where the UAE's position has been strengthening over the years. It takes as its basis for analysis the definition of assertiveness, which, in its simplest terms, means making a state more active on the international stage while representing a bolder stance². It should be noted here that the term "assertiveness" has also appeared in other publications on Arab states³, demonstrating that the current attitude of the UAE authorities is recognised by an increasing number of scholars working on the subject. Three have

¹ Cf. Dina Esfandiary, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/who-we-are/people/dina-esfandiary> (date accessed: 27.01.2024).

² D. Esfandiary, *New Order in the Gulf: The Rise of the UAE*, I.B. Tauris, London 2022, p. 7.

³ *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, Kh.S. Almezaini, J-M. Rickli (eds.), Routledge, London 2017; Kh. Al-Suwaidi, *The UAE after the Arab Spring: Strategy for Survival*, I.B. Tauris, London 2023.



been identified as the decisive events spurring changes in Abu Dhabi's foreign policy: the Arab Spring, the pivot to Asia by the United States, and the nuclear agreement with Iran⁴. It is difficult to disagree, especially as these are the defining moments of the contemporary regional order.

The following chapters of the book delve into the problems affecting the region. The analysis begins with a chapter on the events of the Arab Spring and the consequences for the Middle East. What is most apparent in this part of the book is the dynamics of the events taking place among Arab states and the impact on their foreign policy strategies. In my view, this is one of the dominant features of the region, i.e. it is difficult to maintain a consensus if each state perceives threats differently, as can be seen in the provision of support to various military groups and state leaders. Following the same pattern, the phenomenon is discernible in the relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, especially between the two dominant ones, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, a state that is small but has great ambitions. As summarised in this chapter, in the wake of the challenges and threats that emerged after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the UAE leadership has begun to increase its presence in the region, but without considering the interests of other states, especially its allies and friends⁵, which at the same time points to the book's guiding idea of increasing assertiveness.

In the following analysis, Dina Esfandiary makes an attempt to argue that the UAE, as a result of the ensuing events, has changed its stance to a more assertive one. Among the facts, we find expert opinions pointing to the negative trend of the gradual departure of the security guarantor, the US, from the Middle East, which has had an impact on the change in UAE foreign policy⁶. The focus has been on the role of the US in the region, but one gets the impression that it has been portrayed in grey colours. Although there has been a perceived shift in the US attitude towards the region, it remains a key player, particularly with the escalating conflict currently taking place between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip (since October 2023). The US theme is also linked to the conclusion of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, enabling Tehran to gradually emerge from regional isolation. The third chapter features the repeated use of the term "fear", which clearly dominated the mood of the monarchy. It does not only refer to concerns about Iran's growing ambitions but also about Saudi Arabia's possible dominance in the Gulf and the previously mentioned unstable US position in the region. The focus on Iran is rightly placed, as contemporary events show it to be an extremely important state in the region, especially in view of its complex relations with Middle Eastern players and beyond.

We encounter a detailed analysis of the UAE's foreign policy in the light of assertiveness in the second part of the book. It must be acknowledged that Dina Esfandiary has meticulously analysed the UAE's potential, especially in the military field. The political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural planes in which Abu Dhabi is also increasing its influence have not been overlooked, noting the greater emphasis on the use of soft power tools in the last few years, which is also considered a major change. A noteworthy fact is the inclusion of diversification of strategic partners, especially China and Russia, which clear-

⁴ D. Esfandiary, *New Order in...*, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 25–26.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 35–41.

ly indicates greater assertiveness in the face of an alliance with the US⁷. The role played by the UAE is placed in a broader context by considering the other Gulf monarchies and their path to becoming more assertive.

In her publication, Esfandiary touched on many of the issues and challenges facing the UAE. There are also obstacles that the authorities in Abu Dhabi have to face on their way to success. What has been highlighted, especially by experts, is the UAE's ability to adapt and change its strategy quickly when the situation demands it. As one might guess, the implementation of the monarchy's ambitious plans is dependent on maintaining a good image and not getting involved where interests conflict with the UAE's strategy. The expert cited the example of the interventions in Yemen and Libya,

[...] when the interventions were not as successful as hoped, then the UAE's ability to rapidly change course was a success. This provided it with the confidence to continue its assertiveness [...]. The fact that the UAE could involve itself in these arenas, sometimes openly against the objectives of its allies and partners, and still not suffer any significant adverse consequences, meant that it stood to gain from the continuation of its assertiveness⁸.

As it turns out, it is not only the UAE that wants to be assertive in its policies but also the other small states in the Gulf, especially Qatar. According to the author, these states

are pursuing their interests irrespective of what their allies and partners want. This means multiple centers of decision-making emerged in the region, making matters more unpredictable. It also increased the fault lines in the region, opening up the possibility of disagreements and tensions between more states⁹.

A clear example of this is the diplomatic blockade of Qatar (2017–2021), demonstrating the divergent interests of the various Arab states. If this attitude, despite the end of the dispute, persists in the long term it will be difficult to maintain order in the region.

I share the author's view that the main reason for increased assertiveness by UAE policymakers is the uncertain attitude of the US toward the region¹⁰. The lack of stability has led to a diversification of strategic partners, which include China and Russia. Maintaining correct diplomatic relations with as many countries as possible is intended to enhance the country's security and contribute to greater benefits not only politically but also economically, a current example of which is the UAE joining the BRICS group in early 2024¹¹. The trend of increasing assertiveness is likely to continue in the long term, Esfandiary said¹².

In conclusion, Dina Esfandiary's publication is a relevant resource for understanding UAE foreign policy based on a growing assertive stance. The key developments shaping the decisions of the Abu Dhabi authorities are covered, and both the achievements and the problems and challenges to be faced as a result of playing an increasing role in the region

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 82–83.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 97.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 113.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 121.

¹¹ Iran became a member of BRICS too, while the authorities in Riyadh have not yet decided on joining the group.

¹² Ibidem, p. 123.

are highlighted. Expert opinions are a valuable resource that adds to the relevance of the analysis. The issue of the Abraham Accords is also addressed in the publication, however, it could have been expanded more, given the impact their conclusion had on the balance of power in the region.

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