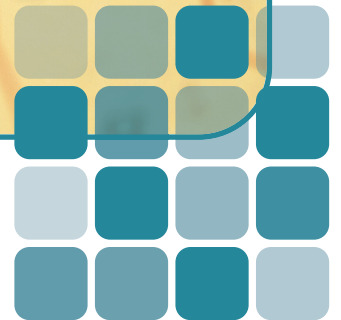


EMIRATES OF CRISIS: WHY IS MOROCCO BLACKLISTED?



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Table Of Contents

Introduction	3
Smear Campaigns	3
Growing Enmity	4
Leaving the Emirates Alone.....	5
Conclusion	7
Endnotes.....	9

With the Arab revolutions that erupted in the late 2010s, the overthrowing of dictators such as Mubarak of Egypt and Zeynel Abidin bin Ali of Tunisia had shocked the Gulf. In addition, Obama's silent reaction deepened the concerns among Gulf rulers about a crisis in regime security.

Introduction

The recent foreign policy assertiveness of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has contributed to chaos and caused instability not only in the Middle East¹ but also in the other regions of the world. Over the last years, the UAE have backed separatist movements in southern Yemen², opened a new chapter by establishing a new relationship with the brutal Assad regime³, taken responsibility for the coup in Egypt by financing it⁴, launched a shameless pro-Israeli campaign in the Arab world at the expense of betraying the Palestinian cause⁵, and defended Khalifa Haftar, who has been trying to topple the legitimate government in Libya, which was recognized by international community⁶. These are only small portions of the UAE's aggressiveness in the region. Why has the UAE transformed its foreign policy? Even though it is not a regional power, the UAE has had to adopt a new foreign policy mentality due to developments that took place after 2010.

With the Arab revolutions that erupted in the late 2010s, the overthrowing of dictators such as Mubarak of Egypt and Zeynel Abidin bin Ali of Tunisia had shocked the Gulf. In addition, Obama's silent reaction deepened the concerns

among Gulf rulers about a crisis in regime security. In this sense, the Gulf countries have developed a new policy without completely abandoning their close cooperation with the US. Accordingly, Gulf countries, which deepened their relations with actors such as England, France, China and Russia, increased their military capacities and started to become detached/free actors. In this sense, while Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen in 2015, the UAE started to carry out many unilateral activities in the region. Although it is claimed that the UAE's recent activism has been shaped by the US, the fact that Abu Dhabi is getting closer with the Assad regime and Iran from time to time seems to refute this claim. Therefore, the UAE intends to punish all actors acting against Abu Dhabi's interests. After Qatar and Turkey, Morocco is the latest target of the UAE's unusual foreign policy tools.

Smear Campaigns

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been trying to manipulate the course of action in the region.⁷ Both have backed, shaped and consolidated anti-revolutionary movement after the 2010s. Moreover, they have been targeting pro-democratic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and countries such as Turkey. In addition to this, recently they have also launched a smear campaign against Qatar. Their social media trolls have claimed that a coup attempt has happened in Doha, removing Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani from power. As it turned out, this story was fabricated. It is logical to say that these troll armies have been used as a weapon by Arab authoritarian regimes especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁸ Just as Saudi Arabia has done, the UAE have instrumentalized social media trolls. Abu Dhabi attacked the Moroccan administration with its funded social media accounts. In this sense, a smear campaign was launched against the Moroccan government and



Prime Minister Saadeddine El-Othmani. The content of this smear campaign was the new type of coronavirus (Covid-19).⁹ Throughout the smear campaign, an attempt was made to convey the message that Morocco's struggle with coronavirus failed. The Othmani government was accused of failing to respond adequately to citizens' needs during the pandemic.¹⁰ Moreover, allegations were made regarding that the country was against the hunger crisis. The purpose of all these unfounded claims was to open the gap between the people and the Moroccan government, which was not on the radar of the UAE. Despite the baseless propaganda, the Moroccan people stand by the prime minister and the government on social media. Many activists also defended the government against this fraudulent campaign of the UAE. Where is the real mainstay of the

crisis? Why did the UAE put Morocco on its target board?

Growing Enmity

There are reasons behind the UAE's targeting of the Morocco. Firstly, the reaction of King Mohammed VI to Arab revolutions did not satisfy the Gulf countries but the people of the Morocco and the Muslim Brotherhood. Adopting a new constitution and holding democratic elections¹¹, which paved the way for the Islamist Justice and Development Party, triggered the responses from the Gulf. In this sense, \$5 billion in economic aid was offered to Morocco to constrain the influence of Islamist party. Saudi Arabia offered the GCC to integrate Morocco and Jordan as the new GCC members in order not to shatter the so-called monarchical excep-

tionalism during the Arab revolutions. Although there was a concrete financial support to Morocco from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the Rabat administration has never taken the same train with the UAE.¹² For example, King Mohammed VI was not in favor of Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Rather, he protested the decision and became the opposite side of the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, respectively Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) that are in favor of this decision. In this sense, being against that decision, the Rabat administration was trying to bypass the MbS and MbZ by dealing with those, elites who are against Trump's unlawful decision. This also triggered the hatred of MbS and MbZ toward Morocco.

In February 2019, the adventurist policymakers (MbS and MbZ) instrumentalized al-Arabiyya's documentary to depict Morocco as an illegitimate power over the Western Sahara. This was the latest straw for Rabat. It recalled its ambassador from the UAE on 16 March 2020. To respond to it as a retaliating move, Morocco's latest ambassador to the UAE Mohammed Ayet Ali returned to the home. Moreover, the Moroccan government did not make an appointment to its embassy in the UAE long time.

The UAE's victimization of Morocco should be read as a continuation of a process. The stance of the Rabat administration on at least three regional issues led the UAE to pursue harsh policies against Morocco. All these issues are related to the UAE's war on political Islam.

On the other hand, the UAE invested more in Mauritania's port and military facilities to shatter the interest of Morocco. This was the reason why the foreign minister of Morocco bypassed the UAE during his Gulf tour in 2019.¹³

Leaving the Emirates Alone

It is noteworthy that this crisis has not occurred suddenly. The UAE's victimization of Morocco should be read as a continuation of a process. The stance of the Rabat administration on at least three regional issues led the UAE to pursue harsh policies against Morocco. All these issues are related to the UAE's war on political Islam.

The UAE started its war against political Islam by targeting Qatar and Turkey first. It is suggested that the two actors have somehow supported or demonstrated an affinity to the Muslim Brotherhood. While Doha has been welcoming one of the important religious figures of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al-Karadawi, Istanbul hosts many Egyptian politicians and activists. For gaining a victory against the struggle of political Islam, the UAE is supposed to defuse Turkey and Qatar's sway. In this sense, as far as Morocco's relations with Qatar and Turkey continues, the Rabat administration will be a target of Abu Dhabi. Morocco's decision to not participate in the embargo launched against Qatar resulted in Abu Dhabi's radical policy towards the Rabat administration. Therefore, due to tolerance for the Muslim Brotherhood or its affiliations in the country, it could be concluded that Morocco has been stuck between Saudi Arabia/the UAE block and Qatar.¹⁴ Moreover, Morocco went so far as to offer aid to Qatar, which the Moroccan Foreign Ministry explained as follows: "This decision was made in conformity with Islamic precepts that call for solidarity and mutual aid between Muslim people, notably during this holy month of Ramadan."



Therefore, an unnamed crisis shows up. In this sense, the Rabat administration did not join the blockade rather it declared neutrality and offered mediation between Qatar and the coalition led by the UAE-Saudi Arabia. The subsequent visits of King Mohammed VI to Qatar also increased the tension. Moreover, Morocco has helped Doha to deal with the food security challenges due to the blockade. Over and above this, Morocco has joined military exercises with Qatar in March 2020. Morocco had considered that the GCC crisis would negatively affect the internal politics of Morocco in which the Islamists are playing a crucial role.¹⁵ Therefore, not being a target of the Islamist critics and rebellion, Morocco chose to be targeted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As a result, the UAE is very uncomfortable with Morocco taking an independent stance in the Gulf crisis.

Secondly, the fluctuation in the position of Morocco to the coalition has raised the concerns in Abu Dhabi. In 2019, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Burita gave an interview to Qatar-based Al Jazeera television. For the first

time in the interview, he officially announced that Rabat left the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen and this was a quantum leap that paved the way for the UAE to take a stance against Morocco. Morocco became one of the first countries to leave the Saudi-UAE coalition with this step. The UAE may think that other states may leave the coalition after Morocco, so the coalition may be questioned. There have been concerns over the integrity of the coalition. The UAE already has cracks in the coalition with Saudi Arabia in terms of the territorial integrity of Yemen.¹⁶ Therefore, the separation of Morocco from the coalition made the UAE very uncomfortable. Although these actors are not considered so important in the mobilization of the coalition, the coalition is an important tool for covering the UAE's illegitimate activities in Yemen such as backing the separatists. So, the departure of Morocco from the coalition is a serious challenge to the interests of the UAE.

Thirdly, Morocco's stance on the Libyan war disturbed the UAE. Morocco also does not approve of the destructive role of the UAE in

“The UAE has been positioning itself as an organizer of the Middle Eastern politics due to its appetent moves. Viewed from the other way around, it disarranged the regional order.”

Libya. The Rabat administration hosted and supported the Skhirat Agreement, signed in 2015.¹⁷ Clashing parties were brought together at the political table with the agreement. Democratic elections were aimed to be passed from a military solution to a political solution. With this agreement, three legitimate actors were created in the Libyan crisis: The Tobruk-based House of Representatives, the Government of National Accord and the High Council of State.¹⁸ Therefore, by hosting such a kind of agreement, the Moroccan government played crucial role in the Libya game to the contrary to the interest of the UAE. In

other words, the Moroccan government did not support the UAE agent, Khalifa Haftar.¹⁹ To the contrary, it backed the legitimate actors. Therefore, having been supported by the UAE, Haftar came under the control of the legitimate powers which are endorsed by Turkey. Hence, even though the UAE has invested much to him, it was unable to make Haftar a legitimate actor. On the contrary, the UAE had to be a mere spectator of this event. Therefore, Morocco settled on the UAE's target board due to hosting and supporting the agreement. With this agreement hosted by Morocco, Haftar's plan to invade Libya has been disrupted.

Conclusion

The UAE has been positioning itself as an organizer of the Middle Eastern politics due to its appetent moves. Viewed from the other way around, it disarranged the regional order. In this sense, Abu Dhabi gambled on several regional issues. Struggling with the political Islamist movements is among the top issues that the UAE has been investing in. In this context since



the Arab revolutions, the Abu Dhabi administration has formulated its foreign policy perspective on the assertiveness. Whatever has been experienced in the context of the UAE foreign policy should be seen from this point of view: war against political Islam. In this sense if any regional actor did not join to the UAE faces the crisis. The latest victim of this serious crisis is Morocco. The Moroccan government has been pursuing a neutral policy towards regional issues. This non-participation of Morocco to the UAE led chaos block has irritated the MbZ. Therefore, the UAE has started to attack Morocco. The silence of Morocco on regional issues and its absence in the UAE axis led Abu Dhabi to reach its target. In this sense, the political attitude of Morocco in the blockade of Qatar has activated the attacks of the UAE. Due to the support of Rabat administration to the Muslim Brotherhood, Morocco became the target of the UAE. Secondly, the de-

cision of Morocco for leaving from the coalition in Yemen has boosted the tension. In this sense, the UAE has decided to punish Morocco. Lastly, the stance of Morocco on the Libyan civil war has facilitated the unnamed war led by the UAE against her. The Rabat administration did not back Khalifa Haftar, but it backed the legitimate actors in Libya. In 2019, Saudi Arabia was also attacking to Morocco due to its grey stance. From the perspective of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Morocco must choose black or white never grey. By blacklisting Morocco, the UAE has also sending the message to the other North African countries²⁰ such as Algeria and Tunisia: either you are with me in the war against political Islam or you are the enemy. Even if the Covid-19 epidemic has harshly damaged the economy of the UAE, Abu Dhabi has not abandoned its adventurist policy which is beyond its depth.

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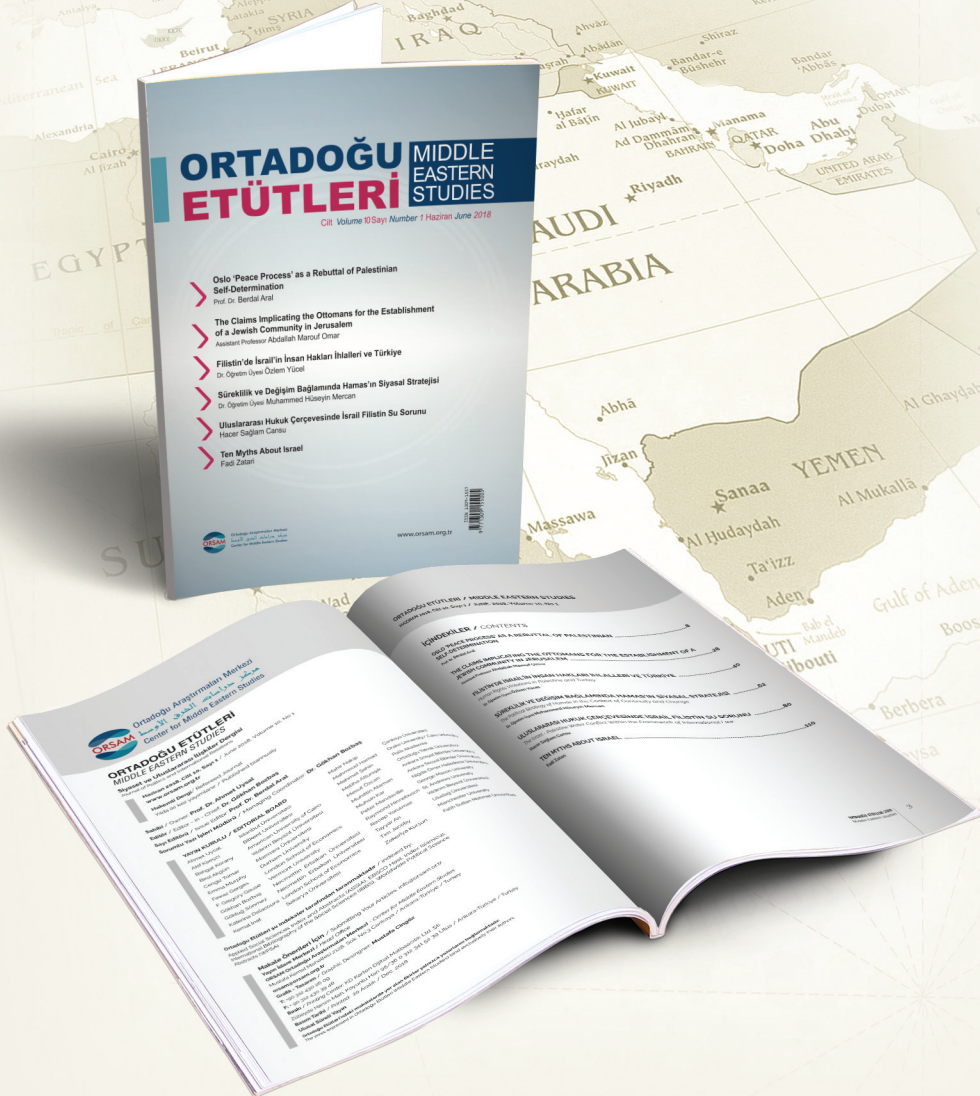
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