



The UAE's Military Strategy and Middle East Regional Order: A Critical Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract: The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as one of the most strategically active small states in the Middle East, combining military modernization, alliance-building, counterterrorism cooperation and humanitarian-security engagement to project influence beyond its demographic size. However, the literature on the UAE remains fragmented across separate discussions of military capability, foreign policy activism, strategic partnerships and soft power. This article critically reviews the scholarship on the UAE's evolving military strategy and examines how it relates to broader questions of regional order in the Middle East. It focuses on four interconnected dimensions: military modernization and technological advancement, security alliances and strategic partnerships, counterterrorism and security operations besides humanitarian and peace-making roles. The article argues that these dimensions should not be treated in isolation, as together they constitute an integrated strategic posture through which the UAE seeks to enhance deterrence, protect national interests, expand regional influence and project legitimacy. Drawing on Balance of Power Theory and Collective Security Theory, the article develops a conceptual framework for understanding the UAE's strategic behaviour while also identifying the limits of both approaches when applied to a small but ambitious state operating in a volatile regional environment. Rather than presenting original empirical findings, the article advances a mixed-methods research agenda to examine how these dimensions shape elite and expert perceptions of the UAE's role in regional order. The article contributes by synthesizing previously disconnected strands of scholarship, clarifying key conceptual distinctions and offering a more coherent analytical foundation for future empirical research on the UAE's military and strategic rise.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, military strategy, military modernization, regional order, balance of power, strategic alliances, Middle East security

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a significant puzzle in contemporary Middle East politics. Despite its relatively small population and limited territorial scale in comparison with larger regional actors, the UAE has developed a level of military capability, diplomatic activism and strategic reach that exceeds conventional expectations of small-state behavior. Over the past two decades, and especially after the Arab uprisings of 2011, the UAE has shifted from a largely defensive security posture to a more proactive and regionally consequential strategic role (Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).



This transformation has unfolded within a regional environment defined by state fragility, proxy wars, interstate rivalry, violent extremism and uncertainty surrounding the long-term commitment of external great powers to Middle East security. The fragmentation of several Arab states, the growing influence of Iran, the persistence of conflict in Yemen and Libya, and the continued relevance of transnational militant networks have created both risks and opportunities for strategically ambitious states (Beck, 2020; Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024). Within this context, the UAE has attempted to position itself not merely as a security-dependent Gulf monarchy but as an increasingly capable actor able to shape regional outcomes through a combination of military power, strategic partnerships and selective soft-power instruments (Krieg, 2022; Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).

This evolving role is visible in several interrelated developments. These include sustained investment in advanced military technology, deepening defense cooperation with external partners, active participation in coalition warfare and proxy environments, efforts to expand domestic defense-industrial capacity, and the increasing use of humanitarian and peace-support initiatives as part of wider statecraft (Guéraiche, 2022; Krzymowski, 2022; Roberts, 2020; Soubrier, 2025). Together, these developments suggest that the UAE has sought to construct a strategic identity centered on deterrence, professionalism, influence and legitimacy.

At the same time, the rise of the UAE as a regional security actor raises important analytical questions. Does the UAE function primarily as a status quo balancer in the Middle East or as an interventionist small state pursuing selective regional influence? Do its military and security policies enhance regional stability or do they also contribute to militarization, escalation and deeper geopolitical competition? How should scholars understand the relationship between military modernization, alliances, counterterrorism and humanitarian engagement in the UAE case?

Although scholarship on the UAE has expanded considerably, it remains analytically fragmented. Some studies focus on force development and military professionalism, while others examine alliance politics, regional interventionism, counterterrorism or humanitarian diplomacy (Guéraiche, 2022; Krieg, 2024; Krzymowski, 2022; Roberts, 2020). Fewer studies integrate these dimensions within a single analytical framework to explain how the UAE's military strategy relates to broader questions of regional order.

This article addresses that gap through a critical review of the literature and by developing a research agenda for future empirical analysis. It argues that the UAE's military strategy is best understood as a multidimensional strategic posture composed of four interconnected pillars: military modernization and technological advancement, security alliances and strategic partnerships, counterterrorism and security operations, and humanitarian and peacemaking roles. These pillars together shape not only the UAE's material capabilities, but also perceptions of its role in regional order.

The article proceeds in six parts. Following this introduction, the next section presents the problem statement and research objectives. The article then reviews the literature on the UAE's evolving military strategy and its relationship to regional order. This is followed by a theoretical framework drawing on Balance of Power Theory and Collective Security Theory. The article then presents a conceptual framework, formal propositions and hypotheses, and a proposed mixed-methods research design. A discussion section interprets the implications of the review for the study of small-state strategy and regional order before the conclusion summarizes the paper's contributions and identifies directions for future research.

2. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

2.1 Problem Statement

The growing strategic role of the UAE has attracted increasing scholarly attention, yet the existing literature remains conceptually and analytically fragmented. Studies on the UAE often focus separately on military modernization, alliance formation, interventionism, counterterrorism or humanitarian diplomacy, without adequately explaining how these dimensions interact as part of a broader strategic posture. As a result, the literature tends to describe the UAE's rise in sectoral or issue-specific terms rather than as an integrated strategy linked to regional order.

A second problem lies in conceptual ambiguity. Existing studies frequently conflate the notions of regional balance of power, regional stability and the UAE's contribution to regional order, even though these concepts are related but distinct. A state may enhance deterrence and balancing without necessarily promoting stability, just as it may project legitimacy without reducing regional tensions. Without clearer conceptual distinctions, it becomes difficult to assess the UAE's strategic role with analytical precision.

A third problem concerns methodology. Much of the current literature is descriptive, policy-oriented or case-specific. There remains limited effort to develop a systematic empirical framework through which scholars can examine how informed actors perceive the UAE's military strategy and its implications for regional order. Consequently, the field lacks an integrated research agenda capable of moving beyond descriptive accounts toward more rigorous comparative or mixed-methods inquiry.

This article responds to these gaps by synthesizing the literature, clarifying the conceptual terrain and proposing a framework for future empirical investigation.

2.2 Research Objectives

This article has four objectives:

1. To critically review the literature on the UAE's evolving military strategy in relation to Middle East regional order.
2. To identify and synthesize four major dimensions of the UAE's strategic posture: military modernization, security alliances, counterterrorism and security operations, and humanitarian and peacemaking roles.
3. To clarify the conceptual distinction between regional balance of power, regional stability and perceptions of the UAE's strategic role.
4. To develop a conceptual and methodological research agenda for future empirical study of how informed actors perceive the UAE's contribution to regional order.

2.3 Research Questions

The article is guided by the following questions:

1. How has the literature explained the UAE's rise as a strategic and military actor in the Middle East?
2. What are the principal dimensions of the UAE's military strategy identified in existing scholarship?
3. How do these dimensions relate to wider debates on regional balance of power and regional order?
4. How can future research more systematically examine perceptions of the UAE's role in regional order?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The UAE as a Strategic Actor

The UAE occupies a distinctive place in Gulf and Middle East politics. Although it does not possess the demographic scale of Egypt, the ideological reach of Iran or the territorial magnitude of Saudi Arabia, it has nevertheless emerged as a strategically consequential actor. This rise is not simply a product of wealth. Rather, it reflects a deliberate effort to convert economic resources into military capability, diplomatic leverage and international partnerships (Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).

Abu Dhabi's predominance within the federation, combined with hydrocarbon wealth and deep integration into global markets, has enabled the UAE to invest heavily in force modernization, defense-industrial development, organizational professionalism and external security partnerships. The significance of these developments lies not only in material accumulation, but also in the political identity they help produce. The UAE has sought to present itself as a modern, capable and reliable security actor in a region marked by persistent uncertainty (Altiok & Bakir, 2025; Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).

At the same time, the literature cautions against equating activism with stabilization. Policies that increase deterrence and strategic reach may also deepen regional rivalry, intensify proxy competition, and generate perceptions of overextension (Ahram & Alaaldin, 2022; Darwich, 2020). This tension remains central to the literature.

3.2 The UAE, Regional Order and the Balance of Power

A substantial strand of scholarship situates the UAE within broader regional power politics. From this perspective, the UAE seeks to contribute to a favorable regional balance by strengthening deterrence, resisting hostile or revisionist actors and aligning with like-minded powers. In this reading, the UAE's strategic behavior must be

understood against a backdrop of rivalry involving Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Türkiye and other influential actors operating within a fragmented regional system (Beck, 2020; Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024).

Military modernization is central to this posture. Investments in advanced air power, missile defense, naval assets, cyber capabilities, special forces and unmanned systems have expanded the UAE's deterrent profile and operational range (Krieg, 2024; Roberts, 2020; Soubrier, 2025). These capabilities serve not only territorial defense, but also signal resolve, enhance coalition participation and improve the UAE's credibility as a regional security partner (Mason, 2018).

The literature also highlights the importance of coalition politics. Strategic cooperation with the United States, France, the United Kingdom and other Western actors has enabled the UAE to amplify its influence and compensate for structural limitations associated with small size (Jones, 2025; Lawale & Ahmad, 2021; Mason, 2018). In this sense, alliances function as force multipliers.

However, the literature is more divided on whether these developments enhance stability. Some accounts suggest that Emirati activism contributes to order by deterring threats, supporting partners and reinforcing cooperative security arrangements. Others argue that its involvement in conflicts such as Yemen and Libya has contributed to escalation, fragmentation and the prolongation of instability (Ahram & Alaaldin, 2022; Darwich, 2020; Krieg, 2024). Accordingly, balance of power and regional stability should not be treated as synonymous.

3.3 Military Modernization and Technological Advancement

One of the most developed themes in the literature concerns the UAE's sustained military modernization. Scholars broadly agree that the UAE has invested heavily in technologically advanced systems and force structures, especially in air power, special operations, intelligence and networked command capabilities (Altiok & Bakir, 2025; Roberts, 2020; Soubrier, 2025). This reflects a strategic logic of compensating for limited manpower through technology, training and organizational effectiveness.

The modernization effort has involved large-scale procurement from external suppliers while also seeking to reduce long-term dependence through indigenous defense-industrial growth. Local production, joint ventures and efforts in aerospace, unmanned platforms and defense manufacturing point to a wider ambition to combine security policy with strategic autonomy and industrial development (Roberts, 2020; Soubrier, 2025).

The literature generally treats technological upgrading as a source of deterrence, operational flexibility and prestige. Advanced capabilities allow the UAE to participate more effectively in coalition operations and strengthen its image as a capable and reliable actor (Krieg, 2024; Mason, 2018). Yet there are also limits. Modernization does not automatically translate into strategic success, nor does it eliminate dependence on foreign technical support, logistics and political approval. Moreover, reliance on high-end systems may generate new vulnerabilities, including cyber risks and maintenance dependency (Altiok & Bakir, 2025; Greene, 2022; Sharma et al., 2020).

3.4 Security Alliances and Strategic Partnerships

A second major theme concerns the importance of alliances and strategic partnerships to the UAE's security posture. As a relatively small state in a volatile environment, the UAE has historically depended on external security relationships. More recent scholarship suggests, however, that these ties have evolved from straightforward dependence into more strategic and diversified partnerships that provide both protection and room for maneuver (Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).

The UAE's partnership with the United States remains especially significant. Access to American training, intelligence, operational coordination and military technology has substantially strengthened the UAE's military effectiveness and strategic confidence (Lawale & Ahmad, 2021; Mason, 2018). Additional ties with France, the United Kingdom and other actors have helped diversify its security relationships and reinforce its broader international position.

The literature suggests that these alliances serve several functions at once. They enhance deterrence, improve interoperability, increase operational credibility and position the UAE as a cooperative contributor to regional and global security. At the same time, they also create tensions. Strong partnerships do not guarantee full policy convergence, and diversified alignment raises questions about hedging, strategic autonomy and the limits of alignment in an increasingly multipolar order (Bin Huwaidin, 2024; Lawale & Ahmad, 2021).

3.5 Counterterrorism, Security Operations and Regional Activism

Counterterrorism has become a central component of the UAE's strategic identity. The literature often depicts the UAE as a state that has invested significantly in intelligence, internal security and participation in regional and international anti-terror cooperation (Greene, 2022; Miller, 2022). This reflects the broader Middle East environment, where terrorism, insurgency, militia activity and fragile statehood intersect with interstate rivalry and ideological contestation.

From one perspective, the UAE's counterterrorism engagement strengthens its reputation as a security provider. By participating in anti-terror coalitions and building intelligence and security capacity, it projects itself as a responsible and capable actor. Yet the literature also shows that counterterrorism in the region cannot be understood purely in technical or operational terms. It is often entangled with regime security, the politics of political Islam and efforts to shape local or regional political outcomes.

The Yemen case illustrates this complexity. Emirati involvement there has been interpreted both as a counterterrorism effort and as part of a broader strategy of influence projection, local partner-building and coalition politics (Darwich, 2020; Krieg, 2024). Similar ambiguities emerge in discussions of other conflict settings. Thus, future research must examine the conditions under which UAE security activism is perceived as legitimate stabilization rather than selective interventionism.

3.6 Humanitarian, Peacemaking and Soft-Power Security Roles

A growing body of work examines the UAE's use of humanitarian aid, development assistance, disaster relief and peace-support roles as part of its wider strategic posture (Chaziza, 2025; Guéraiche, 2022; Krzymowski, 2022). These activities are frequently interpreted as instruments of soft power, enabling the UAE to project an image of modernity, responsibility and constructive engagement.

In strategic terms, such roles broaden the set of tools through which the UAE engages regional and international audiences. Humanitarian and peace-support activity may strengthen bilateral relationships, reinforce legitimacy and help offset reputational costs associated with harder forms of security activism (Chaziza, 2025; Guéraiche, 2022; Krzymowski, 2022). At the same time, these roles are not politically neutral. They may also serve strategic purposes by generating goodwill, expanding influence and embedding the UAE more deeply in post-conflict environments.

Future research should therefore examine how such activities are interpreted by different audiences. They may be seen as genuine stabilization, strategic branding, or influence-building, depending on context.

3.7 Gaps in the Literature

The literature reveals five major gaps. First, it remains fragmented across separate strands on modernization, alliances, counterterrorism, interventionism and humanitarian diplomacy. Second, much of it is descriptive rather than analytically integrative.

Third, key concepts such as balance of power, regional stability and perceptions of strategic contribution are often conflated. Fourth, relatively few studies propose systematic empirical designs for assessing how the UAE is perceived by informed observers.

Fifth, the UAE case remains under-integrated into wider debates on small-state strategy, hybrid power projection and regional order.

These gaps justify the development of a more coherent theoretical and conceptual framework.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Conceptual Clarification

Three concepts require clear distinction.

Regional balance of power refers to the distribution of capabilities and alignments such that no single actor can readily dominate the regional system.

Regional stability refers to the relative absence of major escalation, chronic insecurity or systemic breakdown.

Perceptions of the UAE's strategic role refer to how informed actors interpret the UAE's behavior, such as viewing it as stabilizing, balancing, interventionist or strategically constructive.

This article treats the third concept as the most appropriate dependent construct for future empirical work. The proposed framework therefore aims not to directly measure the UAE's objective effect on the regional balance of power, but to examine how informed actors perceive the relationship between its military strategy and regional order.

4.2 Balance of Power Theory

Balance of Power Theory suggests that states seek to prevent domination by stronger or threatening actors through capability accumulation, alliance formation and balancing behavior (Walt, 1985). In the UAE case, this helps explain why a relatively small state would invest heavily in advanced military capabilities and strategic partnerships. Such behavior can be understood as an effort to offset structural vulnerability and improve strategic standing in a competitive regional environment (Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).

This theory is especially useful for analyzing military modernization, deterrence and alliance formation. However, by itself it is less well suited to explaining why the UAE combines hard power with humanitarian and legitimacy-building practices.

4.3 Collective Security Theory

Collective Security Theory emphasizes security cooperation among states in response to common threats and broader concerns for order (Sperling & Webber, 2019). This perspective helps explain why the UAE has embedded itself in coalition frameworks, counterterrorism networks and wider security cooperation arrangements. It also illuminates the UAE's effort to portray itself as a responsible contributor to regional and international stability (Jones, 2025; Miller, 2022).

However, this theory also has limitations in the Middle East context, where regional security cooperation is uneven, threat perceptions vary and coalitions are often selective and interest-driven. As such, Collective Security Theory captures only part of the UAE's strategic logic.

4.4 Integrated Analytical Logic

Taken together, Balance of Power Theory and Collective Security Theory provide a useful combined framework. The first captures deterrence, capability accumulation and strategic balancing. The second captures coalition participation, counterterrorism cooperation and legitimacy through security contribution. The UAE's strategy appears to combine both logics: it seeks to protect itself and shape the regional balance through hard power while also embedding itself in cooperative security arrangements and projecting legitimacy through humanitarian-security engagement.

5. Conceptual Framework, Propositions, and Hypotheses

5.1 Conceptual Framework

The article proposes that four dimensions of the UAE's military strategy shape perceptions of the UAE's role in regional order.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the UAE's Military Strategy and Perceptions of Regional Order

Independent Strategic Dimensions

-
1. Military Modernization and Technological Advancement
 2. Security Alliances and Strategic Partnerships
 3. Counterterrorism and Security Operations
 4. Humanitarian and Peacemaking Roles

↓ influence through

Mediating Strategic Mechanisms

-
- Deterrent credibility

- Operational professionalism
- Alliance leverage and interoperability
- International legitimacy and soft-power reinforcement

↓ shape

Dependent Construct

Perceptions of the UAE's Role in Regional Order

- Stabilizing actor
- Regional balancer
- Security provider
- Interventionist or influence-seeking actor

↓ linked to

Broader Perceived Outcome

Perceived Contribution to Regional Stability and Order

5.2 Research Propositions

P1: The UAE's military modernization strengthens perceptions of the country as a credible regional security actor.

P2: The UAE's security alliances strengthen perceptions of its strategic relevance and balancing capacity.

P3: The UAE's counterterrorism and security operations shape perceptions of regional order in both positive and contested ways.

P4: The UAE's humanitarian and peacemaking roles strengthen perceptions of legitimacy and constructive regional engagement.

5.3 Formal Hypotheses for Future Empirical Testing

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Expected Relationship
H1	Military modernization and technological advancement	Perceptions of the UAE as a credible regional security actor	Positive
H2	Security alliances and strategic partnerships	Perceptions of the UAE as a regional balancer and strategically relevant actor	Positive
H3	Counterterrorism and security operations	Perceptions of the UAE's contribution to regional order	Positive, but potentially contested
H4	Humanitarian and peacemaking roles	Perceptions of the UAE's legitimacy and constructive regional role	Positive

5.4 Hypotheses Development

H1: Higher levels of perceived UAE military modernization and technological advancement are positively associated with perceptions of the UAE as a credible regional security actor. This hypothesis follows from balance-

of-power logic, which suggests that advanced military capabilities enhance deterrence, prestige and strategic credibility (Mason, 2018; Roberts, 2020).

H2: Stronger perceived UAE security alliances and strategic partnerships are positively associated with perceptions of the UAE as a regional balancer and strategically relevant actor. This reflects the idea that alliances increase interoperability, access to resources and strategic influence, particularly for smaller states (Lawale & Ahmad, 2021; Walt, 1985).

H3: More extensive perceived UAE counterterrorism and security operations are positively associated with perceptions of the UAE's contribution to regional order, although these effects may remain contested across different audiences. This hypothesis reflects both cooperative-security and critical perspectives, recognizing that counterterrorism can be interpreted as either stabilization or interventionism (Darwich, 2020; Miller, 2022).

H4: Stronger perceived UAE humanitarian and peacemaking engagement is positively associated with perceptions of the UAE's legitimacy and constructive regional role. This reflects the idea that humanitarian-security engagement can reinforce soft power, international legitimacy and perceptions of responsible statehood (Chaziza, 2025; Krzymowski, 2022).

6. Proposed Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods design is the most appropriate approach for future empirical work because the subject combines measurable perceptions with complex strategic interpretation. Quantitative methods can identify relationships among the main constructs, while qualitative inquiry can clarify how and why these perceptions are formed.

6.2 Quantitative Component

The quantitative component should employ a structured survey targeting approximately 200 to 300 informed respondents from academic, diplomatic, strategic and policy communities with expertise in Gulf and Middle East security. A stratified purposive sampling approach would ensure representation across analysts, scholars, former military personnel, diplomats and policy practitioners.

The survey should measure five constructs:

1. perceptions of UAE military modernization and technological capability,
2. perceptions of the strength and value of UAE security alliances,
3. perceptions of UAE counterterrorism and security operations,
4. perceptions of UAE humanitarian and peacemaking roles, and
5. perceptions of the UAE's role in regional order.

Each construct should be operationalized through multiple Likert-scale items. Content validity should be assessed through expert review, while reliability and construct validity should be tested using Cronbach's alpha, exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis where appropriate. Depending on sample adequacy, the hypotheses could be tested using multiple regression analysis or structural equation modeling.

6.3 Qualitative Component

The qualitative component should include 12 to 20 semi-structured interviews with selected regional analysts, former officials, security specialists, and scholars.

These interviews would explore:

1. how respondents define the UAE's strategic role,
2. whether modernization is seen as defensive, status-driven, or interventionary,
3. whether alliances are perceived as enabling autonomy or dependence,
4. whether counterterrorism is viewed as legitimate security provision or selective intervention, and

5. whether humanitarian roles increase legitimacy or function as strategic image management.

Interview data should be coded thematically with reference to the conceptual framework while remaining open to emergent themes.

6.4 Documentary Triangulation

To strengthen analytical validity, future research should triangulate perception-based evidence with documentary and secondary data, including:

1. official speeches and policy statements,
2. defense procurement and military expenditure trends,
3. coalition participation records,
4. think-tank assessments, and
5. major regional and international security reports.

This triangulation would improve the connection between discourse, capability and strategic behavior.

6.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Given the sensitivity of defense and security issues, future research must ensure informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization where necessary and secure data management. The proposed design also has limitations. Perceptions do not directly measure objective regional outcomes; respondents may carry institutional or ideological biases; and access to elite informants may be uneven. These limitations should be explicitly acknowledged in any eventual empirical article.

7. Discussion

The review conducted in this article suggests that the UAE's military strategy should not be understood through a single lens or reduced to a single policy domain. Rather, it reflects a multidimensional strategic posture in which military modernization, alliance-building, counterterrorism engagement and humanitarian-security activities are mutually reinforcing.

This finding has several implications for scholarship on the UAE, for the study of Middle East regional order and for broader international relations debates on small-state agency.

First, the literature indicates that the UAE has moved beyond the traditional image of the small Gulf monarchy as primarily dependent on external protection. Instead, it has developed a model of strategic activism in which material capability, external partnerships, and international image are combined to produce disproportionate regional influence. This does not mean that the UAE has escaped structural constraints. Its power remains conditioned by alliance networks, access to advanced technology and a highly volatile regional environment. Nevertheless, the case shows that small states can exercise meaningful regional agency when they effectively combine wealth, strategy, and institutional ambition.

Second, the review highlights the importance of distinguishing between capability, strategy and perception. Much of the existing literature documents the growth of the UAE's military and diplomatic profile, but fewer studies adequately separate what the UAE can do, what it intends to do and how others interpret those actions. This distinction is especially important because the same strategic behavior may generate divergent interpretations. Military modernization may be seen as deterrence by some observers and as militarization by others. Counterterrorism may be understood as legitimate security provision or as selective interventionism. Humanitarian engagement may be interpreted as constructive soft power or as strategic reputation management. For this reason, a perception-centered research agenda offers an especially valuable bridge between descriptive and explanatory scholarship.

Third, the article underscores the need to disentangle regional balance of power from regional stability. The literature often slides between these two concepts, yet they are not identical. A state may contribute to balancing against a rival power while simultaneously intensifying militarization or entanglement in conflict zones. In the UAE case, this means that claims about stabilization must be treated cautiously. The UAE may enhance deterrence and

alliance coordination while also becoming more deeply involved in regional struggles that carry destabilizing effects. This conceptual distinction is essential for more rigorous scholarship.

Fourth, the review suggests that the UAE's humanitarian and peacemaking roles should not be treated as analytically separate from its military strategy. Rather than viewing them simply as benevolent add-ons, they should be understood as part of a broader repertoire through which the UAE seeks to convert material capability into political legitimacy. In this respect, the case contributes to wider debates about how states combine hard power and soft power in contemporary security environments. The UAE appears to be pursuing a hybrid model of strategic influence in which legitimacy-building complements deterrence and projection.

Fifth, the discussion points to the limitations of relying on a single theoretical perspective. Balance of Power Theory captures the UAE's investment in capabilities, deterrence and alignment, but it cannot fully explain humanitarian-security engagement and legitimacy-building. Collective Security Theory captures cooperative dimensions of the UAE's behavior, but it does not fully account for the selective and interest-driven nature of regional coalitions. The UAE case therefore benefits from a combined framework, though even this combined approach should eventually be supplemented by scholarship on small states, hedging, soft power and hybrid regional activism.

Finally, the review reveals an important methodological opportunity. Because the field remains dominated by descriptive and policy-oriented studies, there is considerable room for systematic empirical work. A mixed-methods approach centered on informed perceptions, supported by documentary triangulation, would allow future researchers to move beyond impressionistic claims and better assess how the UAE's strategic posture is interpreted by key audiences. This would contribute not only to Gulf studies but also to broader efforts to understand how middle and small powers shape regional politics under conditions of fragmentation and uncertainty.

8. Conclusion

This article has critically reviewed the literature on the UAE's military strategy and examined its significance for broader debates on regional order in the Middle East. The review shows that the UAE has developed a multidimensional strategic posture that combines military modernization, security alliances, counterterrorism and security activism, and humanitarian-security engagement. Taken together, these dimensions have enabled the UAE to project influence beyond its demographic size and to position itself as a capable and increasingly consequential regional actor.

At the same time, the literature does not support a simplistic characterization of the UAE as either a straightforward stabilizer or merely an interventionist small state. Its strategic behavior may enhance deterrence, alliance coordination and perceptions of capability, while also contributing to militarization, proxy entanglement and contested judgments regarding its regional effects. The article therefore argues that the study of the UAE must move beyond descriptive narratives and conceptual conflation.

The article's main contribution lies in three areas. First, it synthesizes a fragmented literature into a more coherent analytical structure. Second, it clarifies the distinction between regional balance of power, regional stability and perceptions of strategic role. Third, it proposes a conceptual framework and mixed-methods research agenda for future empirical investigation.

Future scholarship should test this framework through systematic data collection and comparative analysis. Doing so would not only deepen understanding of the UAE case, but also enrich wider international relations debates concerning small-state agency, strategic adaptation, hybrid power projection and the relationship between military capability and political legitimacy in contemporary regional security environments.

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