UNITED ARAB EMIRATES - ISRAEL RAPPROCHEMENT: A RATIONAL CHOICE OF EMIRATIS

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ABSTRACT

When the UAE and Israel decided to normalize diplomatic relations, later known as the Abraham Accords, the decision sparked global controversy, especially from Islamic countries. One of the countries which vehemently condemned this deal was Iran. Iran viewed the agreement as a form of betrayal of the Palestinian struggle. However, based on an analysis using the Balance of Threat theory, this article concluded that Iran had in fact caused UAE's decision to normalize relations. It was because Iran, through its superiority of aggregate power, geographical proximity, and offensive policy character, presented a serious threat to the security of the UAE. Thus, the normalization of relations with Israel was the best and rational choice for the UAE in dealing with the Iranian threat. Through this normalization, the UAE has gained a new partner to jointly counterbalance Iran's power and help in efforts to strengthen its own defense forces.

Keywords: Abraham Accords, United Arab Emirates, Israel, Balance of Threat.

INTRODUCTION

August 13, 2020 became a historic and shocking day for the international public, especially the Islamic world. The international public was stunned by the decision of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country located in the Middle East region with 76.9 percent of the population being Muslims (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2018), to normalize relations with Israel. This agreement was then formalized a month later, on September 15, 2020, with the signing of the Abraham Accords in Washington, D. C. The signing location underscored the role of the United States as the initiator of the agreement. The normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel took place through the signing of the Abraham Accords (Fulton & Yellinek, 2021; Gorbiano, 2020; Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

The agreement of the UAE and Israel to normalize diplomatic relations garnered different reactions from countries in the Middle East and the Islamic world. On the one hand, several Islamic countries voiced their support for the agreement, which was seen as an advance in creating stability in the Middle East. Countries such as Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan supported the agreement. They even followed the UAE to normalize their diplomatic relations with Israel (Egel et al., 2021). However, on the other hand, there were also Islamic countries and Muslim-majority populations which criticized the agreement. For example, the strong statement by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who threatened to close the Turkish embassy in the UAE (Butler & Gumrukcu, 2020). The attitude of rejecting and criticizing the UAE's agreement was also indicated by Iran, Pakistan, Algeria, and of course, Palestine (Al Jazeera, 2020; Behravesh, 2020; Ferziger, 2021; Hashim, 2020; Widyakuswara, 2020).

Palestine also delivered a narrative condemning the agreement. Various elements of the Palestinian people stated that the agreement was the greatest form of betrayal and could not be accepted from a country trusted to be friendly. A senior and respected Palestinian politician, Hanan Ashrawi, openly called the Abraham Accords, a form of betrayal. The religious dimension, the concept of brotherhood among Muslims or *ukhuwah al-Islamiah*, was also part of the narrative conveyed by the Palestinian people in condemning the Abraham Accords (Smith & Jabari, 2020).

The reaction against the normalization of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel conveyed by Middle Eastern countries, and the Islamic world was predictable. It was because the decision of the UAE was considered contrary to the discourse, aspirations, and agreements of the Islamic world. The discourse developed in the Islamic world viewed that it violated Palestinian sovereignty and refused to recognize Israeli sovereignty as long as Palestine has not been separated from the Israeli occupation (Hitman & Zwilling, 2022; Rubenstein & Barton, 2005; Yegar, 2007).

The achievement of the Abraham Accords agreement, which is a sign of normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, is also contrary to the attitudes and agreements of international and regional organizations originating from the Islamic world, of which the UAE is also a part. For example, The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) firmly rejected the normalization of relations with Israel as long as the Palestinians have not received their rights and sovereignty (Nabulsi, 2020). In addition to the OIC, the Arab League had a similar policy through the Arab Peace Initiative, which was agreed in 2002 and confirmed in 2007, that they would only normalize the relations if Israel recognized Palestinian sovereignty per the 1967 borders (Podeh, 2014; Quamar, 2020). With reference to these anomalies, the factors encouraging the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel were of interest to study.

LITERATURE ON THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

The literature that discussed the Abraham Accords could generally be grouped into two. The first group of studies consisted of literature explaining the factors driving the UAE's willingness to normalize relations with Israel. Through the literature in this group, the decision of the UAE to normalize relations with Israel came from within and outside the country. The driving factor for normalization originating from within the UAE was that the community's resistance to the possibility of normalization was not too high, which was revealed through the analysis of social media discourses (Hitman & Zwilling, 2021).

In addition to factors originating from within, the first study group also argued that factors outside the UAE drove the decision to

normalize relations with Israel. Most of the literature in this group assumed that the political and security dynamics in the Middle East were the driving force for normalization. According to Fulton and Yellinek (2021), it was the most significant driving factor for the normalization agreement (Fulton & Yellinek, 2021). There were at least two things highlighted by the literature on this group, namely the Arab Spring and the shift in focus of the United States to East Asia. The democratization wave in the Middle East, known as the Arab Spring, forced countries in the Middle East – including the UAE to change the character of their foreign policy to be more proactive in protecting their interests (Quamar, 2020). The change in the focus of the United States' foreign policy to the Asian region, especially East Asia, had raised concerns for the UAE about its regional security stability. The condition subsequently forced the UAE to find new partners to counter a threat (Ketbi, 2020; Quamar, 2020).

Unlike the first study group that provided an understanding of the factors driving the birth of the Abraham Accords agreement, the second group consisted of literature explaining the impact of the Abraham Accords. The UAE's courage to normalize relations with Israel had undoubtedly gone through a well-thought-out profit-and-loss calculation. Through normalization, the UAE was considered to maximize its military strength through access to the latest weapons from the United States. In addition, it could also increase the leverage of the UAE against Israel, especially in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020). The Abraham Accords was also believed to be pushing the UAE closer to the ambition to become an influential player in world politics (Canal Forgues Alter & Janardhan, 2021). There was also literature in this study group presented using the perspective of the United States. The Abraham Accords was seen as favoring the United States in its competition with China (Syed & Ahmed, 2021). The United States could take advantage of the presence of this new alliance axis in the Middle East to stem the spread of China's influence in the Middle East (Güney & Korkmaz, 2021).

The previously mentioned literature discussing the agreement on normalizing relations between the UAE and Israel provided a sufficient basis for research by the author. The literature provided the author with an overview of the positive impacts of the normalization agreement, an understanding of the factors driving the creation

of normalization, and an overview of the security dynamics in the Middle East region. However, the literature did not provide a detailed explanation regarding the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel and the threat presented by Iran. This article focused on dissecting the relationship in between the threats presented by Iran and the UAE's decision to normalize relations with Israel.

Presence of Threats as a Driving Force for Alliance Creation

International relations scholars are familiar with this form of cooperation between countries, namely alliances. Alliances can be interpreted as a form of cooperation in the defense sector. Various experts agree that states form alliances as a strategy to ensure their survivability amid an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 1990; Walt, 1985; Waltz, 1979). However, despite having similar views on the usefulness or function of alliances, international relations experts also have different views on several aspects related to the existence of alliances.

One of the most striking differences could be seen when they tried to explain the factors driving the formation of alliances. Mearsheimer (1990) and Waltz (1979) claim that states form alliances because they are driven by the need to create a balance of power with the enemy. However, for Stephen Walt (1985), the alliance is formed not because of considerations of the balance of power, but the balance of threat. According to Walt (1985), countries will tend to form alliances with other countries with similar perception of the source of the threat. In other words, the presence of threats is a driving factor for countries to form alliances.

Due to the balance of threat argument focusing on the threat aspect, Walt then explains the determinants of the threat itself. According to Walt (1987), there are at least four things that determine the formation of threats which are also variables in the theory of Balance of Threat, namely aggregate power, offensive power, geographic proximity, and offensive intentions. The determinants of aggregate power, according to Walt, cannot be separated from the ownership of resources by a country. In various works of literature, the aggregate power of a country can be seen from economic prosperity, military power, and population (Priess, 1996; Walt, 1987). The greater the resources a country has, the greater the threat that can be posed to other countries (Walt, 1987).

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The second determinant of threat is offensive power. Walt defines offensive power as the ability of a state to threaten the safety or sovereignty of another country at a reasonable cost. Offensive power cannot be separated from the possession of offensive weapons. The greater the number of offensive weapons the country has, the greater its threat (Walt, 1987). The third determinant conveyed by Walt is the geographical location of the country. According to Walt, countries will be more threatened by the ones that are geographically close together than those far apart. It is because the country's power of projecting or performing a degree of power will decrease as the distance increases (Walt, 1987). The last threat-forming determinant conveyed by Walt is offensive intentions. Offensive intentions can be illustrated by whether the country issues policies that provoke other countries. According to Walt (1987) and Pape (2005), this last determinant is even viewed as the one that can significantly impact the perception of a country's threat.

The Balance of Threat theory proposed by Stephen Walt (1987) was used to explain the UAE's decision to normalize relations with Israel. In conducting the analysis, this research employed the determinant variables forming the threat offered by Walt. However, this study's determinants of offensive power were combined into the aggregate power variable. This was because the variable is closely related to one of the indicators of aggregate power, namely military power. In addition, this merger is commonly conducted by various experts, including Walt himself in his writings (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008).

RESEARCH METHOD

The present qualitative research employed a case study approach. With reference to Cristopher Lamont, it was based on data collection and analysis involving non-numerical data which was expected to provide understanding and rationalization concerning a phenomenon in the scope of international politics. Correspondingly, the case study approach is widely used in international relations as it seeks to explain the reasons for a specific phenomenon (Lamont, 2015).

Researchers administered an internet-based research technique to collect the present study's data to obtain information; for example, by accessing official government websites, online news agencies, online journals, and others. In the era of globalization complemented by

advancements in information and communications technology, many researchers prefer internet-based research because there are various accurate information and state official statements which can be used as reference sources (Lamont, 2015).

The secondary data in this research were the results of analyzing information released by several credible institutions such as International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), IHS Jane's, and Nuclear Threat Initiatives. By tapping into the open data released by these institutions, the author developed a dataset to be examined in this article. The defense budget data and gross domestic product used to analyze the aggregate power variable between the UAE and Iran were obtained from the IISS Military Balance publication from 2010 to 2019. The researchers also employed the publication to build a dataset regarding both countries' ownership of weapons technologies. Research, development, test and evaluation (RDT&E) budget information was acquired from IHS Jane's database. Iranian missile launch test statistics were gained from the publication of Nuclear Threat Initiatives. After collecting all necessary data, the researchers analyzed and classified them into specific sections in this study. Data analysis will be carried out by using triangulation techniques to clarify and cross-check the data obtained on the research variables and indicators. Furthermore, the author will describe the causal mechanism between variables so that the research questions can be addressed scientifically.

RESULTS

Iran – UAE aggregate power

As Walt wrote in his book, a country's presence and degree of threat cannot be separated from its aggregate power. Aggregate power itself can be seen from economic prosperity, military power, and population (Walt, 1987). The level of progress or economic prosperity is indeed believed to be one of the determinants of military spending, which undoubtedly leads to the development of the country's defense forces (Kollias et al., 2004).

To determine the level of the economic prosperity of a country, a clear assessment indicator is needed. Various literature in economic and development studies often use the value of gross domestic product

(GDP) as an indicator of prosperity (Dynan & Sheiner, 2018; Priess, 1996). GDP is used as an indicator of the level of progress and strength of a country because it includes various things that reflect welfare (Dynan & Sheiner, 2018).

Since GDP is often used as an indicator of a country's economic progress and strength, a comparison of the GDP of the UAE and Iran was included in this article. Based on GDP data released by the IISS Military Balance, from 2010 to 2019, Iran's GDP value was inclined to stagnate. This can also be known by comparing the value of Iran's GDP in 2010 and 2019. In 2010, the value was recorded at US$393.31 billion, while in 2019, it was US$397.13 billion. Although it had increased in 2016 and 2017, Iran's GDP decreased again in 2018.

Iran's GDP in 2010–2019 was considered to fluctuate, while the case was different in the UAE. The GDP of the UAE in the same span of 10 years had consistently increased, quite significantly. In 2010, the GDP value of the UAE was US$278.38 billion which increased to US$377.89 billion in 2019. The increase in the value of the UAE's GDP, which almost reached US$100 billion, was equivalent to an increase of 35.75percent. Nevertheless, Iran's GDP was still superior to the UAE.

Figure 1

Comparison of GDP between UAE and Iran
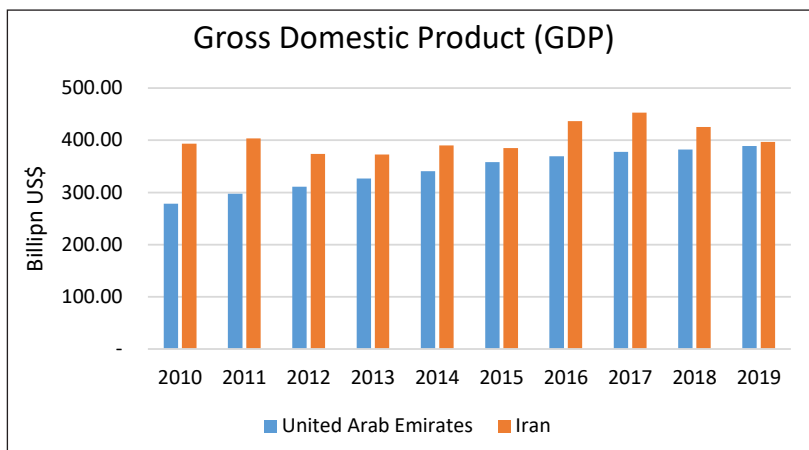
Source: Author's calculation based on IISS Military Balance data.

As mentioned earlier, the aggregate power of a country can be measured not only by its level of prosperity or economic progress but also by its military power. The military power of a country can be seen through at least three aspects, namely the defense economy, defense technology, and the number of military personnel. The first aspect, the defense economy, is essential and greatly affects military power because efforts for conducting military build-up requires a budget, in this case, the defense budget (Fernandez-Osorio et al., 2019; Prezelj et al., 2015).

In comparing the defense budget between the UAE and Iran during the period from 2010 to 2019, we can see a pattern which is almost similar to the GDP comparison between the two countries. Iran's defense budget tended to fluctuate during the 2010–2019 period. After experiencing a significant jump in 2012, almost touching 150 percent of increase compared to the previous year's budget, Iran's defense budget later experienced a significant decline. The fluctuations and the downward trend in Iran's defense budget value could not be separated from the imposition of economic sanctions by the international community, especially the United States and its allies (Dizaji & Farzanegan, 2021; Farzanegan, 2022).

In contrast to Iran, the UAE had a defense budget that consistently increased and even tended to be significant in those years. The UAE's defense budget in 2019 increased by more than 200 percent compared to 2010. The UAE's defense budget in 2010 was recorded at US$8.65 billion, while in 2019, it increased to US$21.51 billion.

An important finding when comparing the value of the UAE's defense budget with that of Iran was that in the 2010–2019 period, the comparison of the defense budget between the two countries had a different phase. The first phase occurred from 2010 to 2014, when Iran's defense budget was superior to the UAE. The second phase began in 2015 when the UAE had a larger defense budget than Iran. In 2015, the UAE's defense budget reached US$17.29 billion or an increase of US$2.89 billion compared to 2014. On the other hand, Iran's defense budget in 2015, which was US$14.2 billion, decreased as much as US$1.7 billion from 2014. Iran's defense budget was only able to outperform the UAE again in 2017 when its defense budget reached US$21 billion—US$5.1 billion higher than the 2016 budget.

Figure 2

Comparison of Defense Budget between UAE and Iran
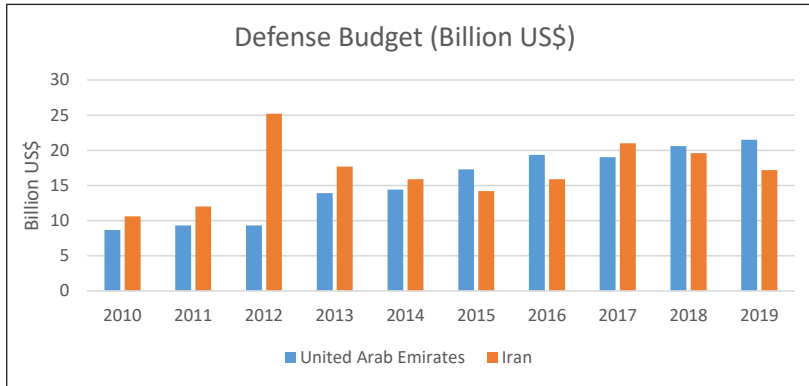
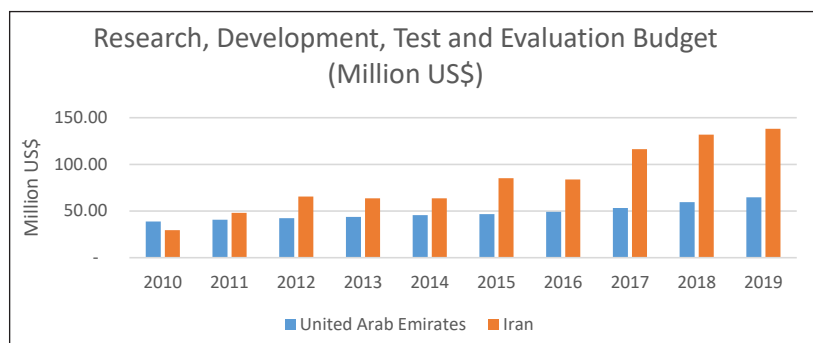*Source: Author's calculation based on IISS Military Balance data.*

However, the fact that the UAE's defense budget had outperformed Iran's in recent years did not negate Iran's threat, especially when the two countries' RDT&E budgets were taken into consideration. The RDT&E budget is becoming increasingly important and interesting to compare, considering that various countries in the world including the UAE and Iran are currently trying to build the capacity of their respective national defense industry (Bitzinger, 2013; Bitzinger & Kim, 2005; Borchert, 2018). The development of the national defense industry's capacity is intended to achieve defense autarky or at least reduce the dependence on weapons from other countries. Defense autarky, for some experts, is a condition that must be achieved by the state so that its power is credible and free from the influence and pressure of weapons-producing countries (Bitzinger, 2017; Krause, 1991; Neuman, 2010).

Besides encouraging defense autarky, the value of the RDT&E budget allocated for developing the domestic defense industry can also encourage the growth and progress of the country's economy. This is because the domestic defense industry can create jobs and trigger industrialization to provide benefits from selling weapons to other countries (Benoit, 1978; Bitzinger, 2003; Cheng & Chinworth, 1996; Willett, 1997). In other words, the RDT&E budget is also related to the previous aggregate power, namely economic prosperity.

Based on data obtained from Jane's Defense Budget document, Iran's RDT&E budget was still far ahead of the UAE. In 2010, the UAE's RDT&E budget value was greater than Iran's. Nevertheless, since 2011, Iran's RDT&E budget value had outperformed the UAE. Since 2017, the value of the UAE's RDT&E budget had not reached 50 percent of Iran's budget. For example, Iran's RDT&E budget in 2019 recorded US$138.02 million, while the UAE only amounted to US$64.84 million.

Figure 3

Comparison of Defense RDT&E Budget between UAE and Iran

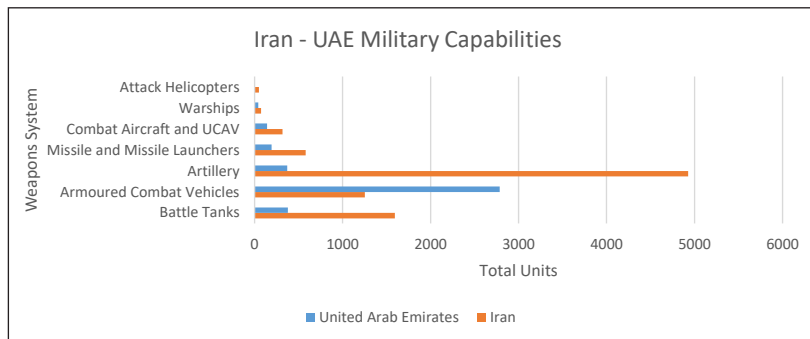*Source: Author's calculation based on I Jane's data.*

The second aspect that can describe a country's military power is, of course, weapons. The ownership of weapons is indeed one of the most frequently used benchmarks of state power. Therefore, it is not surprising that every country is always trying to acquire the latest weapons (Gindarsah et al., 2021; Waltz, 2001). It is inseparable from the use or function of the weapons technology itself. It is not only used when war occurs but also serves as a deterrence effect (Ladwig, 2015; Rhodes, 2000).

In assessing the threat that Iran posed to the UAE in terms of weapons, the comparison of the capabilities of the two countries was based on the total units of weapons owned, especially the offensive weapons. The United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) have classified the major conventional arms into seven categories. With reference to IISS Military Balance and UNROCA categorization data, Iran seemed far superior to the UAE.

Iran outperformed the UAE in almost all categories. Iran's superiority was mainly seen in the artillery, battle tanks, and attack helicopters categories. Furthermore, as a country that only bordered directly with Iran in the ocean area, to be precise in the Persian Gulf, the balance of power between the two countries was also not in favor of the UAE. This was because the three categories of weapons systems that were most likely to be deployed in the event of war include combat aircraft, warships, and missiles, which were operated mainly by Iran. In the combat aircraft, the number of the UAE combat aircraft fleet did not reach 50 percent of the Iranian combat aircraft fleet. The UAE operated 141 combat aircrafts, while Iran operated 316 units. More severe conditions occurred in the missile and missile launchers category; the UAE only had 194 units while Iran had 580 units. In the warship category, the UAE's fleet was only 43 units, while Iran operated 74 units, including 17 submarines.

Figure 4

Comparison of Military Capabilities between UAE and Iran

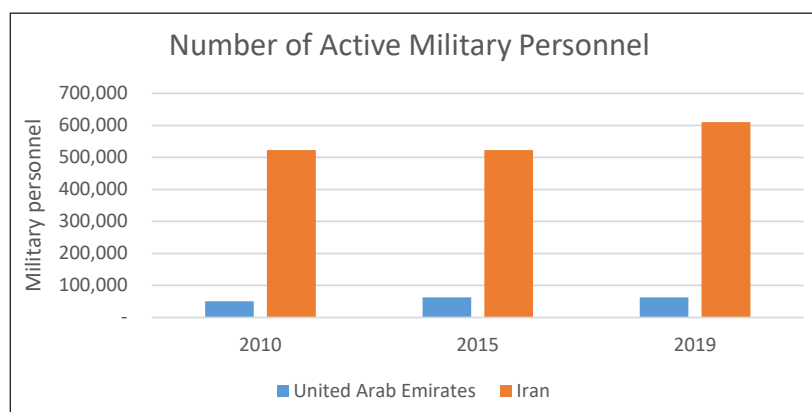*Source: Author's calculation based on IISS Military Balance data.*

The strategic missiles exacerbated Iran's threat to the UAE through its offensive weapons. As widely known, Iran had ambitions to become a world strategic missile power. Based on data from the IISS Military Balance, by 2020, Iran had more than 300 cruise missiles with a range of up to 2,000 kilometers. For example, the Shaheen-2 missile with a range of up to 2,000 kilometers, the Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 missiles with a range of 300 kilometers and 500 kilometers, respectively (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020). Thus, it was not difficult for Iran to attack the UAE with its cruise missiles that could reach up to Israel and parts of Europe (Centre for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2021).

In addition to the economic aspects of defense and weapons, the country's military capabilities can also be reflected through military personnel. Some scholars of strategic studies argue that victory in war will only be achieved by those having more troops (Delbrück, 1985; Matthews & Yan, 2007; Mearsheimer, 1989; Posen, 1993). Based on the data on the number of troops from the UAE and Iran published by IISS Military Balance, Iran had a clear advantage over the UAE. Iranian military forces were about 1,000 percent greater than the UAE. In 2019, the Iranian military forces stood at 610,000, while the UAE only had 63,000 troops.

The condition that the number of troops of the UAE was far adrift compared to Iran could not be separated from the availability of human resources, in this case, citizens. The overall population of the UAE in 2019 was 9.77 million, while the population of Iran in the same year was 82.9 million (IISS, 2020). It is even worth remembering that the population of the UAE, which was already very far from Iran, were mainly expatriates who were not citizens of the UAE. Citizens of the UAE in 2010 were only 947,997 people (United Arab Emirates Government, 2021), and it was estimated at 1.15 million people in 2021 (Global Media Insight, 2021). Therefore, in terms of military personnel and national population, according to Walt, as an indicator of aggregate power, Iran was superior to the UAE.

Figure 5

Comparison of Military Personnel between UAE and Iran

Source: Author's calculation based on IISS Military Balance data.

Iran: The devil next door for the Emirates

The geographical proximity factor, according to Walt, is also one of the forming determinants of threat perceptions. Walt states that countries geographically close together will present a more significant threat than countries geographically far apart. According to Walt, it is because the ability to mobilize troops or the strength of a country will decrease with each additional distance (Walt, 1985, 1987). Walt's view is by no means new or unique. Various experts and other works of literature state that the conflict possibility of two countries that are adjacent or directly adjacent will be greater than countries that are far apart (Diehl, 1985; Garnham, 1976; Götz, 2016; Russett, 1967; Starr & Most, 1976, 1978).

In the context of Iran and the UAE, it can be said that Iran posed a massive threat to the UAE. Based on the arguments presented by Russett (1967) and Garnham (1976), countries having direct borders are more likely to conflict with each other. Iran itself is a country that has a direct maritime border with the UAE. The two countries are only separated by the Persian Gulf. In fact, as one of the largest cities of the UAE, Dubai is only about 100 miles from Iran (Faucon et al., 2020). The trip between these two countries only takes about an hour by airplane (Distance Calculator, 2021).

The close distance between the UAE and Iran could be even closer. In other words, the boundaries of the two countries are still subject to change as a result of the ongoing territorial disputes between the UAE and Iran. The UAE claimed to have sovereignty over three islands in the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran de facto controlled, namely Abu Musa, Lesser Tunb, and Greater Tunb. Greater Tunb Island is only about 31 kilometers from Qeshm Island, Iran's sovereign territory, Lesser Tunb Island is 44 kilometers from Qeshm Island, and Abu Musa is only about 50 kilometers from Iran's Sirri Island (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2016).

Figure 6

Map of United Arab Emirates

Source: Nations Online Project.

Iran's Offensive Intentions: Making it Worse for the Emirates

According to Walt, the last determinant that can form the perception of threat is the offensive intention of a country. According to Walt, countries behaving aggressively will encourage other countries to balance (Walt, 1985). This argument is based on the understanding that the state will feel more threatened when another state behaves aggressively. To find out whether a country is offensive can be determined by looking at whether there are provocative or even confrontational actions or policies made.

In the context of this article, Iran's offensive intentions can be seen in several cases. First, as mentioned, Iran and the UAE have a dispute regarding the sovereignty of the three islands around the Strait of Hormuz. The empirical fact that the three islands are de facto under Iranian control is seen by the UAE as an illegitimate occupation. The UAE also viewed Iran as often taking provocative actions regarding

the three islands (Buderi & Ricart, 2018). For example, the visit by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the island of Abu Musa in 2012.

His visit was later criticized by Abu Dhabi and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The criticism was against the visit calling it a provocative act and a "flagrant violation" of UAE sovereignty (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2012; Gulf News, 2012; Khaleej Times, 2012). Despite the criticisms from various parties, Tehran remained unmoved and even issued threats against Abu Dhabi. Tehran had threatened to cut diplomatic ties with Abu Dhabi if it continued to claim sovereignty over the three islands around the Strait of Hormuz (Karimi, 2012).

Iran's offensive intentions were not solely related to the sovereignty dispute over the three islands around the Strait of Hormuz. In recent years, Iran had carried out several military actions that were provocative and confrontational. One of the provocative actions was to hold a large-scale military exercise in the Strait of Hormuz in August 2018 (Fruen, 2018). This action was provocative for two reasons. First, this military exercise was held abruptly and carried out earlier than the usual exercise held at the end of the year. Second, related to the military exercise that seemed abrupt and out of the ordinary, many oil tankers could not pass through the Strait of Hormuz. This resulted in the disruption of the world's crude oil supply. Several parties stated that Iran deliberately carried out these war games to show that it could close access to the Strait of Hormuz at any time, the impact of which would be detrimental to the world.

A year before the UAE decided to normalize relations with Israel, Iran again took even more confrontational actions. There were at least two events related to Iran's confrontational actions in 2019. First, the attack on four tankers docked in the port of Fujairah, UAE. The UAE, together with Saudi Arabia in presenting the results of their investigations before the UN Security Council, stated that the attack was a coordinated action and required advanced technology, therefore the state most likely carried it out as an actor (News Wires, 2019; Tawil, 2019). Although the UAE had never officially named Iran behind the attacks, various parties including the White House national security adviser, John Bolton believed the "state actor" was Iran (France24, 2019; Marcus, 2019; Tawil, 2019; The Guardian, 2019).

Not long after the attack on the tankers docked in the UAE, Iran again launched a provocative and confrontational action. This action was

even more daring and hostile. Iran had publicly shot down a US RQ-4A Global Hawk drone in the Strait of Hormuz. This attack drew criticism from the United States, which stated that Iran carried out illegal attacks in international airspace (Karimi & Gambrel, 2019). However, Iran did not budge and stated that the attack was legitimate because the US drone had violated Iran's sovereignty (Berlinger et al., 2019; Karimi & Gambrel, 2019). The provocative and confrontational actions carried out by Iran even against the United States, indicated that Iran had a policy of an offensive character.

However, apart from the provocations carried out by Iran, which seemed sporadic, some provocations had been going on for a long time. This provocation was related to Iran's ambition to develop cruise and ballistic missiles. Based on the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) data, Iran had been aggressively testing domestically produced cruise missiles since 1991. Since then, Iran had conducted a test firing of cruise missiles 157 times. The data also showed that the intensity of the test firing of cruise missiles carried out by Iran had seen an increasing trend, especially since 2010. Missile test-firing during the first quarter of 2020 was the second occurrence since 1991, after the 2001 test-firing.

Besides the increasing number of test firings of cruise missiles, Iran had also made the Strait of Hormuz, which was very close to the UAE, a test site in recent years. The selection of the Strait of Hormuz as a test location based on NTI data began in 2015. In 2015, four Iranian cruise missile tests were fired in the Strait of Hormuz (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2021). The provocations and developments in Iran's cruise and ballistic missile capabilities have long caused concern in Abu Dhabi. For example, the statement by Yousef al-Otaiba, the Ambassador of the UAE to the United States, in July 2010.

> Absolutely, absolutely. I think we are at risk of an Iranian nuclear program far more than you are at risk. At 7,000 miles away, and with two oceans bordering you, an Iranian nuclear threat does not threaten the continental United States.… **I think out of every country in the region, the UAE is most vulnerable to Iran**. **Our military, which has existed for the past 40 years, wake up, dream, breathe, eat, sleep the Iranian threat**. It's the only conventional military threat our military plans for, trains for, equips for, that's it, there's no other threat,

there's no country in the region that is a threat to the UAE, it's only Iran. So yes, **it's very much in our interest that Iran does not gain nuclear technology**" (The Atlantic, 2010).

Figure 7

Number of Iranian Missile Tests
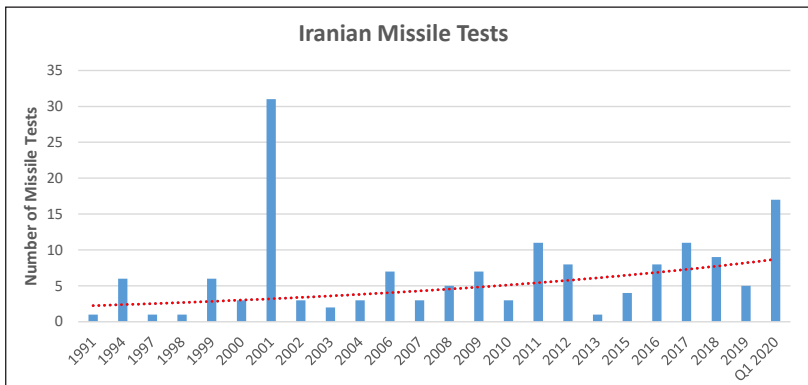
Source: Author's calculation based on Nuclear Threat Initiative data.

Iran's offensive intentions could also be seen in the conflict in Yemen. Iran's support for the Houthi rebel group, which is the opponent of the coalition forces of UAE and Saudi Arabia, was an indicator of Iran's offensive intentions. The UAE views the Houthi rebel group as a proxy for Iran to expand its influence in the Middle East and replace the role of the UAE and Saudi Arabia (Han & Hakimian, 2019; Kirmanj, 2020; Quamar, 2020). Moreover, the UAE has long believed that Iran has ambitions to become a hegemonic power in the Middle East and would do whatever it takes to achieve this goal (Sadjadpour, 2011).

So, Why did the UAE Normalize Relations with Israel?

As per various empirical data mentioned previously, the author needed to underline several things. First, Iran showed the superiority of aggregate powers over the UAE. Second, the distance between Iran and the UAE, which is only separated by the Strait of Hormuz or the Persian Gulf, allowed Iran to display its strength and troops more easily. This situation further increased the threat presented to

the UAE. Third, since the last few years, Iran had not hesitated to show a tendency to carry out provocative and confrontational actions. Therefore, by referring to the argument of the Balance of Threat theory, it can be concluded that Iran presented a serious threat to the security of the UAE.

Recognizing the existence of Iran as a source of threat, the UAE needed to take a stand to counter it. Based on the argument presented by Walt, the rational attitude or policy for the UAE to do was to conduct security cooperation or alliances with other countries that also viewed Iran as a threat (Walt, 1985). Although expressly denied by the UAE, the decision to normalize relations with Israel could be understood as a rational and not surprising decision to confront Iran. However, it is necessary to understand that although there was never a written agreement between the UAE and Israel to form a security alliance until this day, it does not undermine the framework of arguments drawn up from the Balance of Threat perspective.

Two theoretical reasons formed the basis for the author's belief that the absence of formal alliances did not necessarily undermine the argument of this article. First, as mentioned by Walt, the alliance is basically not close to formal alliances, rather in the form of informal alliances (Walt, 1987). Second, along with the development of the discourse on alliances, we recognize the emergence of the concept of quasi-alliance (Aini & Kurniawan, 2021; Kliem, 2020; Tziarras, 2016). According to Tziarras (2016), security alliance cooperation does not have to be based on a formal defense pact agreement between the countries involved. This agreement is driven by a common perception of threats. In fact, referring to Kliem (2020), quasi-alliance can be hinged on more accessible relations between the countries involved such as dialogues, operations, and joint military exercises. Kliem (2020) also states that the presence of the same threat perception will strengthen the solidity of the quasi-alliance.

In addition to the basis of the theoretical argument, the author's belief that the absence of a formal alliance between the UAE and Israel did not undermine the logic of the argument based on empirical facts. Ever since normalization was carried out, relations between the two countries have been close, especially in the defense sector. Cooperation and closeness in terms of defense aspects since normalization between the UAE and Israel can be seen in several

instances. One of them was the cooperation on the cyber security aspect. Not long after the normalization of relations, the UAE and Israel agreed to exchange information or intelligence related to the cyber activities of the Hezbollah—an Iranian-backed militia group in Lebanon that frequently attacked Israel (Soliman, 2021). In addition to the intelligence sharing, the involvement of the UAE in two joint military exercises with Israel, namely the air force military exercise and the military exercise in the Red Sea (Al Jazeera, 2021a, 2021c).

Pertaining to the main argument in this article, the author presented several reasons to explain the rationale of normalizing relations between the two countries. As mentioned, when a country faces a threat presented by another country, the threatened country will tend to form defense cooperation with another country(s), especially those with similar threat perception. Israel had publicly stated earlier that Iran was one of its biggest threats in the region (Chubin, 2014; Porter, 2015).

Second, the decision of the UAE to normalize relations with Israel has a positive impact on efforts to build its defense forces. The development of defense forces carried out by the UAE itself cannot be separated from the needs related to the threat presented by Iran. As stated earlier, until today, Iran's strength is superior to the UAE; therefore, the UAE needs to build its strength. The development of defense forces carried out by the UAE is through acquiring weapons from other countries and developing tdomestiktic defense industry.

In the context of the acquisition of weapons from other countries, the normalization seems to have paved the way for the UAE to acquire various cutting-edge weapons technologies from the United States. For example, the dynamics involved in the UAE's desire to buy F-35 fighter jets from the United States. The F-35 fighter jet itself is a fifth-generation fighter jet and has stealth capabilities made only for certain alliance countries or strategic partners of the United States. Even for the Middle East region, the United States had only sold the F-35 to Israel to maintain its superiority over other countries in the region. Following normalization, the United States approved the UAE's plan to purchase the F-35 (Mehta, 2020; Reuters, 2021b). Although it was not evident, Israel chose to remain silent on the F-35 sales deal. Despite the delay in selling the F-35 under President Joe Biden, recent developments has suggested that the deal would go ahead (Gambrel, 2021; Reuters, 2021a).

In the context of weapons development by the national defense industry, the normalization agreement also provided opportunities for developing the UAE's domestic defense industry. So far, Israel has been seen as having reasonably capable defense industries. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), three Israeli defense industries—Elbit Systems, Israel Aerospace Industries, and Rafael Advanced Defense Systems are among the world's top 100 (SIPRI, 2019, 2021). Since the normalization of relations took place, there have been at least two defense industry cooperation agreements between the two countries, namely cooperation in the development of unmanned anti-drone and unmanned vessel with antisubmarine warfare (ASuW) capabilities (Al Jazeera, 2021b; Helou, 2021).

Third, the decision of the UAE to normalize relations with Israel as an effort to balance the threat from Iran is quite rational because it is difficult to rely on fellow Gulf countries and Islamic countries. This is because there are divisions or differences in views of the Middle East and Gulf countries concerning the Iranian threat. Not all Gulf or Islamic countries view Iran as a threat. As mentioned, countries such as Oman and Qatar have relatively positive relations with Iran. The two countries also share similar perceptions and adopt a relatively softer stance than the UAE regarding Iran's aggressiveness (Bahi, 2017).

Fourth, this article argues that the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel cannot be divorced from Washington's decision to shift its foreign policy focus to East Asia. The United States' decision to shift its focus to East Asia has caused disappointment from various political leaders in countries which have been known to be close to Washington, including the leader of the UAE. On one occasion, the then Crown Prince of the UAE – Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan stated that Washington had become a party that could not be trusted, especially to become a security guarantor amid Iran's increasing assertiveness (Gause, 2019; Hokayem, 2021). Doubts about the United States' commitment to continue to act as a security guarantor in the region may also increase, given that Washington no longer has a high degree of dependency on oil supplies from the Middle East as the United States' domestic oil production has increased. According to Klare (2017), this weakens the Middle East's attractiveness to the United States compared to East Asia.

Fifth, as previously mentioned, the UAE and Iran are geographically very close and are only separated by the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait

of Hormuz, is one of the most crucial choke points for world trade routes, especially crude oil. Crude oil is one of the leading export commodities of the UAE, with export values reaching more than 40% of the UAE's total exports each year (Trading Economics, 2022). The UAE was driven to look for new partners to balance Iran or even, a new security guarantor as it is cognizant of the strategic value of the Strait of Hormuz for its economy, along with the shifting focus of the United States' foreign policy to East Asia (Alhalwany, 2021). In view of these considerations, the decision to sign the Abraham Accords with Israel, which possesses powerful military capabilities as a new ally of the UAE, is a rational choice.

CONCLUSION

The decision of the UAE to normalize relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords had attracted the attention of numerous parties. The international community manifested various reactions, especially the Middle East and Islamic countries. Those against the Abraham Accords, viewed the UAE's decision as shocking and it signified a betrayal towards Palestine. However, this decision basically could not be separated from the threat factors posed by Iran. Iran has power superiority compared to the UAE, exacerbated by its geographical proximity and increasingly aggressive behavior. Therefore, with reference to the Balance of Threat argument, the policy taken by the UAE was the best choice on the menu. Through normalizing relations, the UAE would get a commensurate new partner in Israel as a balancing strategy against Iran, reinforcing its strategic cooperation with the United States, and assisting in efforts to build its strength amid the divisions in the Middle East.

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